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Review article

## UKRAINE BETWEEN NATO AND RUSSIA

### *Abstract:*

In the past two decades, Ukraine has significantly deepened its relations with NATO. Following Russia's seizure of Crimea and instigation of conflict in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas in 2014, Ukraine's interest in NATO entry has particularly intensified. According to public opinion polls in Ukraine, membership in the Alliance is critical to the country's security. On the other hand, Russia presents the further expansion of NATO to the east as the main threat to its national security. The current developments on the ground and the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia will affect NATO's attitude towards Ukraine's membership prospects in the Alliance. The potential for further escalation of the war in Ukraine is significant, although it is more likely that the war will flare up and target Ukrainian forces and the civilian population, but the likelihood of the involvement of the Western Allies in the conflict is also more certain. Ukrainian authorities will have to limit their expectations for NATO membership and focus only on maximum cooperation with the Alliance.

*Keywords:* conflict, international security, NATO, threat

## Introduction

After seceding from the USSR in 1991, Ukraine has been in constant contact and building good relations with its Western allies. This implies cooperation with institutions such as NATO, with which Ukraine has established a loyal partnership. Interest in becoming a member of the Alliance increased after the Russian aggression and annexation of Crimea in 2014, seeing NATO as a means of protecting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Despite the current conflict and Russia's military aggression and occupation of Ukrainian territory, Kyiv has expanded its practical cooperation with NATO. On March 2, 2022, the UN General Assembly voted 141 in favour of a resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces, underscoring Russia's increasing isolation globally. Only five countries - Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea, Syria and Russia - objected. This vote was a positive signal for Ukraine and its Western allies, who have argued throughout the crisis that Russia's actions are not only a challenge to European security, but also globally challenge the principles of sovereignty and non-use of force contained in the UN Charter.

After secession and independence in 1991, Ukraine began the process of establishing positive relations with Western countries and institutions. In December 1991, Ukraine became a member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, established to encourage cooperation between NATO and the former Soviet states. In January 1994, Ukraine became the fourth country to join the Partnership for Peace, which NATO established to develop individual relationships between the Alliance and interested countries aimed at strengthening peace and security in Europe.

In 1994 and 1995, NATO considered the issue of enlargement. The former members of the Warsaw Pact sought NATO membership and thus a new security architecture was being built in the entire Euro-Atlantic space. The goal was to ensure increased stability and security for all in the Euro-Atlantic area, building a free and united Europe. (NATO, 1995)

During the period of NATO expansion, there was dissatisfaction and concern among the Ukrainian government about their country's place in the future European security architecture. The alliance, in parallel with the expansion and building of cooperative relations with Russia, also strengthened the cooperation with Ukraine. (Pifer, 2017)

From the Russian side, there were no signals of a cooperative relationship, especially after the expansion of NATO in 1999 and 2004, including the admission of the three Baltic States. Moscow has made clear its negative view of any further NATO expansion, stating that it will oppose any attempt by a former Soviet state to join NATO. It was clear that Russia was dissatisfied with the security architecture that had evolved over the past three decades, especially with the enlargement of NATO and the EU. These developments were interpreted by Russia as hostile to Russian interests and as a military threat, ignoring the reduction in the number of allied forces and the steps that the Alliance had taken

to reduce the causes of disruption of relations. NATO has made it clear that it has no intention or reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of the new members, and will carry out collective defence missions without adding new forces. (NATO, 1997)

In 2014, NATO began deploying its forces in Poland and the Baltic states. The reason was the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. According to the statements of the Russian leaders, „NATO-Russia relations are disturbed by this, the concern is great and the sphere of Russian influence in the post-Soviet states is disturbed.“(Kramer, 2008) Russia’s goal is to destabilize Ukraine, to prevent it from being a Western-oriented state that will be part of the Western security architecture, considering it as an existential threat to the Russian system, thereby further changing the NATO-Russia balance to the detriment of Russia.

After the Maidan riots in 2014, in which around 100 people died, the president of Ukraine, Yanukovich, fled Kyiv. An interim president and acting prime minister were immediately appointed, whose priority was to sign the association agreement with the EU. Soon after, Russian military forces seized Crimea, the conflict in Donbas began, and the authorities in Ukraine were intensively considering NATO membership. Regulation of cooperation between NATO and Ukraine followed, through the adoption of annual national programs to set out the areas of cooperation and the reforms that Ukraine will implement to align with NATO standards. In order to improve interoperability between the military forces of Ukraine and NATO, funds were established through working groups to support defence, emergency situations, command, communications and cyber security.

With assistance from the Alliance, Ukrainian armed forces have participated in various NATO-led operations, beginning with peace support operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the mid-1990s. Since then, Ukraine has been among the most active partners, contributing Ukrainian military personnel to NATO’s command in Afghanistan, Iraq and Operation Active Effort. Ukraine became the first partner to participate in NATO’s standing rapid reaction force, with its own strategic airlift units.

In June 2020, Ukraine became part of the Partnership for Enhanced Opportunities program of the Alliance. The program aims to deepen cooperation with selected partners who have participated in NATO-led missions in the past and want to improve their interoperability with Alliance forces. (NATO, 2020) Political elites in Ukraine are committed to rapprochement with NATO, and Russia aggression further strengthened this attitude. The majority of Ukrainians consider full integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions as the only reliable guarantor for the security of their country.

Ukraine’s entry into NATO is in the interest of the Alliance, or rather, the greater number of the leaders of the Alliance. NATO’s border, in this case, would move to the east, and this would reduce the pressure of Poland and Romania, it would also provide the Alliance with additional military capabilities with an expanded zone of security and stability and strengthened NATO’s presence in

the Black Sea region. However, there is also a serious problem here, and that is Russia. There is little likelihood of securing a consensus within the Alliance for Ukraine's entry into NATO, as Ukraine's admission to NATO under the current circumstances would immediately trigger the issue of Article 5 of the treaty. According to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, all members agree that an armed attack against one or more of them, whether in Europe or North America, will be considered an attack against all of them. Under the agreement, each ally will assist the attacked member by taking whatever action it deems necessary, including the use of armed force. (NATO, 1949) This article of the agreement would be a headache for some of the NATO countries like Hungary and Turkey, but at the same time countries like Spain, Portugal or Slovenia and Croatia have no interest in automatically finding themselves at war with Russia.

### **Cooperation between NATO and Ukraine**

A strong and independent Ukraine is vital to the stability of the Euro-Atlantic allies. Relations between NATO and Ukraine date back to the 1990s and have since developed into one of NATO's most essential partnerships. Since 2014, following the Russian annexation of Crimea, cooperation has intensified in specific areas, and with the start of the invasion in 2022, NATO and allies have provided several levels of support.

Dialogue and cooperation began in 1991, when independent Ukraine joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, and later in 1994 with the Partnership for Peace program. In addition, these relations were strengthened by the signing of the Special Partnership Charter of 1997, which established a commission for the promotion of cooperation. (Schmies, 2021)

Since 2009, the process of Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine has been monitored, including reforms within the framework of the Annual National Program. Cooperation has deepened over time and is mutually beneficial, with Ukraine actively contributing to NATO-led operations and missions. Priority is given to supporting comprehensive security and defence sector reforms, which are vital to Ukraine's democratic development and strengthening its defence capability.

Since the NATO Warsaw Summit in July 2016, NATO's practical support for Ukraine has been set out in the Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine. In June 2017, the Ukrainian parliament adopted a law-making NATO membership a strategic goal of foreign and security policy, and in 2019, the corresponding amendment to the Constitution of Ukraine entered into force. In September 2020, President Volodymyr Zelensky approved the new National Security Strategy of Ukraine, which envisages the development of partnership with NATO, with the ultimate goal being membership in the Alliance.

In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea, since 2014 NATO has increased its support for development and capacity building in Ukraine. Allies have unanimously condemned and do not recognize Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and its destabilizing and aggressive activities

in eastern Ukraine and the Black Sea region. NATO has increased its presence in the Black Sea and strengthened maritime cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia. But at the same time, no efforts have been made to implement the Minsk agreements, as Sindy Wittke explains they were flawed and failure-prone. (Wittke, 2019)

NATO strongly condemned Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the illegal attempt to annex four regions of Ukraine - Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson and Zaporozhye through referendums. It seriously undermined international security and stability. NATO and all its allies called on Russia to immediately end the war, withdraw all its forces from Ukraine and start diplomatic activities. The Alliance has clearly declared itself to be on Ukraine's side while continuously providing maximum support for the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders.

In parallel with its political support, NATO has significantly increased its practical assistance to Ukraine. In the immediate aftermath of Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO foreign ministers agreed to take measures to strengthen Ukraine's ability to strengthen its own security. They also decided to further develop their practical support for Ukraine, based on the significant improvement of existing cooperation programs, as well as the development of new programs. At the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, the Alliance's measures in support of Ukraine became part of the Comprehensive Assistance Package, which is designed to support Ukraine's ability to ensure its own security and implement broad reforms based on NATO standards. NATO has been helping Ukraine transform its security and defence sector for years, providing strategic-level advice through the NATO Office in Ukraine and practical support through a range of capacity-building programs and initiatives. Through these programs and advice, NATO has significantly strengthened the capabilities and resilience of Ukraine's security and defense sectors, as well as its ability to counter hybrid threats. The alliance has also provided extensive support for capability development, including through training, education and the provision of equipment.

At the NATO Summit in Madrid in 2022, the allies agreed to provide even more support to Ukraine. These include initiatives to provide Ukraine with immediate, short-term, military assistance, as well as structures to strengthen NATO's long-term support. NATO has delivered projects that provide support in a number of areas including: combat rations, fuel (including jet fuel), army boots, medical supplies (including first aid kits and pharmaceuticals), military training equipment, explosive ordnance disposal equipment and anti-drone equipment. Additional projects are in various stages of development and implementation, including support to Ukraine in the area of C4 (command, control, communications and computers). In the longer term, the Alliance is working to support Ukraine's efforts on its reform path. This will be achieved through initiatives to further strengthen and modernize Ukraine's defence and

security institutions, by transitioning from Soviet-era equipment to modern NATO equipment and standards, increasing interoperability with allied forces.

In parallel, NATO allies have significantly increased their bilateral support and provision of arms, equipment and training, helping Ukraine to uphold its right to self-defence, which is enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Allies also provide substantial financial and humanitarian assistance, including by housing millions of refugees in countries across the Alliance. NATO allies have agreed to step up and maintain their support as long as necessary for Ukraine to ultimately win this war.

NATO's support for Ukraine and activities in partnership with the country did not start in 2014 or 2022 - practical cooperation between NATO and Ukraine has been going on since the 1990s. Over the years, Ukraine's cooperation with NATO has been mutually beneficial and covered a wide range of activities - from building Ukraine's capacities and interoperability with NATO forces, to promoting reforms in the Ukrainian defence and security sector, to supporting non-military activities such as cooperation in scientific research and public diplomacy. Cooperation between NATO and Ukraine in the field of defence and security sector reforms is more extensive than with any other partner country. The NATO-Ukraine Joint Working Group on Defence Reform was established in 1998 under the auspices of the NATO-Ukraine Commission. It carries out initiatives in the areas of civil-military relations, democratic oversight and civilian governance of the armed forces and other security sector agencies, defence planning, policy development, strategy and national security concepts. This task force allows Ukraine to draw on the significant experience and expertise of allied countries and serves as a tool through which allies can channel aid. It also provides an institutional basis for NATO's cooperation with ministries and agencies engaged in the implementation of defence and security sector reforms in Ukraine. These include the National Security and Defence Council, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, the National Guard, the Border Service, the Security Service of Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament of Ukraine), and others.

### **NATO-Russia relations**

With the new European architecture created after 1991, NATO's intention was to begin building a new European defence system, involving new European states, the transatlantic link through which the security of North America is permanently tied to the security of Europe. NATO's role was confirmed and directly related to the security of the transatlantic community, which was facing a new world order and new threats and challenges. An additional challenge for the Alliance was the opening of the door to the countries of Eastern Europe, the former Soviet countries, but also to Russia. NATO had a mandate to deter the rise of militant nationalism and provide a basis for collective security through an adequate process of democratization of newly independent European states. During the disintegration process of the former Yugoslavia which was followed by war, NATO had a role to support the efforts of the United Nations, to provide

crisis management measures in order to end the conflicts. It was clear that the post-Cold War world would be a source for the emergence of new unstable states and regions, affecting European security with the possibility of conflict transmission. In its attempts to resist and prevent new threats and challenges, the North Atlantic Alliance became an alliance that promoted democratic values and principles, which at that time were much needed on the European continent.

NATO-Russia relations were the basis of the new Euro-Atlantic security structure, and its establishment implied active Russian participation. (Morrison, 1995) In the Strategic Concept of the Alliance it is emphasized that "Russia plays a unique role in Euro-Atlantic security". (NATO, 1999) It is emphasized here that it is necessary to ensure the expansion of NATO without conflicts, for Russia to come to terms with Ukrainian independence and of course to be a powerful factor of stability in Europe. Russia belongs to NATO's zone of interests, in terms of avoiding the emergence of a new conflict, preserving peace in Europe and substantially reducing the arsenal of nuclear and conventional armaments.

NATO's political interests in relation to Russia are related to its internal democratic transformation. (Kugler, 1996) The democratic transformation of Russia will reduce its imperialist ambitions and ensure the stability of the entire former Soviet space. NATO's relations with the countries of the former Soviet space had to be built, but the interests of Russia should also be taken into account. However, it was proven that the democratic reforms in Russia were not in the direction of the expectations of Western European countries as well as the United States, so the policy of cooperation between NATO and Russia proved to be unsustainable. So, from the cooperation, which was at its highest during the time after September 11 and the military campaign against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, slowly after Iraq, but predominantly after the intervention of Russia in Georgia and the defence of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, NATO-Russia relations they moved into rival relations. The climax followed in 2014 with the Maidan protests and the change of government in Ukraine.

If the main goal of Russia-NATO cooperative relations was the long-term maintenance of peace in Europe, then the main goal of the special relations between Ukraine and NATO was the integration of Ukraine into Europe and the Euro-Atlantic security structure, as a full member of NATO, which was unacceptable to Russia.

The commitments that Russia made under the Minsk agreement to end the war in Donbas were not fulfilled, but neither were the commitments made by Ukraine. (Sindy Wittke, 2019)

It can be said that since the 1990s NATO allies have been making efforts to make Russia a NATO partner and ally. Russia on the other hand, to the detriment of some of its interests, tacitly agreed with the policy of the NATO alliance (Libya). However, the Ukrainian crisis that began in 2014 has worsened relations between Russia and NATO to the point where they have gone from potential allies to enemies. According to the rhetoric of NATO officials, the

security paradigm from the time of the Cold War has returned, when the then USSR was highlighted as the greatest security threat to the European states.

### **Strengthening the Ukrainian identity**

The process of de-Russification encouraged the Ukrainian people to build their identity around their history, culture and language. During the Soviet period they were marginalized, but even after three decades of Ukrainian independence, they failed to produce effective strategies for popularizing the Ukrainian identity, and at the same time many citizens are influenced by the narrative of the superiority of Russian culture.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine went through several stages of building its new, post-Soviet identity. The first, only partial phase of dismantling the communist legacy came in the 1990s of the last century. State symbols were then established, some Soviet monuments were removed, and communist ideology was dropped from school and university curricula. The so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 was the first mass popular uprising after independence and represents a period of conscious creation of Ukrainian identity. The state has strengthened its policy of remembrance in honour of events and persons that were silenced during the Soviet period, especially the period of the Great Hunger. Many World War II leaders were awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine have been arguing for a long time about the myths about the heroes who fought against Nazi Germany during the Second World War. It is about the most lukewarm 25 leaders who manage to defeat and prevent the advance of Hitler's tank units. Russia insists that these are Russian heroes because Ukraine was part of the USSR at that time, but the facts indicate that these are Ukrainians who, on the one hand, are against the idea of Ukraine being part of the USSR, but on the other hand, actively and successfully oppose the forces of Nazi Germany. (Zita Ballinger Fletcher, 2022, Ian Garner, 2022) In 2006, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory was founded, which is an institutional mechanism for implementing the government's vision of memory policy.

With the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas region, the Ukrainian authorities launched a comprehensive effort to promote Ukrainian as an official language, nurture historical traditions in educational institutions, the country's independence from Russia in a religious dimension, and the creation of an autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2018. These policies, together with the public mobilization caused by the need to resist the aggressor, accelerated the formation of a political nation composed of citizens of various nationalities who declared belonging to the Ukrainian state.

As a result of their effective resistance, the Ukrainian people began to look to their own history and folk mythology as a source of courage, love of freedom and belonging to Europe. The majority of citizens consider it important to cherish the historical memory and the slogan "Glory of Ukraine – glory to the heroes" from the Second World War, which has become a common greeting in



the media and the political sphere. Institutions, non-governmental organizations, activists and artists stepped up their activities to popularize Ukrainian history, symbols and cultural achievements: the National Opera of Ukraine declared 2023 the year of Ukrainian music, and in addition to state institutions, universities, private art galleries and individual artists organize various artistic, cultural and historical projects as they capitalize on the interest in Ukraine abroad. (Interfax-Ukraine, 2023)

The scale and brutality of the Russian invasion also prompted the Ukrainian people to assert their own identity as a matter of national security. The uncertain nature of Ukrainian identity as well as distrust in the state and its institutions are part of the factors that facilitated Russia's dominance over Ukraine.

But the war encouraged the Ukrainian people to mobilize society, and the hatred towards Russia accelerated the Ukrainization on the linguistic level. A huge number of Ukrainians who previously spoke Russian on a daily basis, after February 24, 2022, use the Ukrainian language in public communication and in private life. These processes were also observed after the events of 2014, but the current war gave them an additional powerful full impetus. This trend, although it poses difficulties for a large number of people and causes tensions in families, is irreversible because the youngest generations are already fluent in the Ukrainian language. The use of the state Ukrainian language in public institutions, at official meetings and celebrations was regulated by a law that was often violated, today it is used to the maximum and illustrates the general change of attitudes. The conviction that it is necessary to build a new identity that will not be close to the Soviet or Russian one, based on Ukrainian history, its language and culture, an identity that will unite different social groups. However, there are certain criticisms and disagreements about the degree and speed of de-Russification in individual spheres.

The dire military conditions encountered led to much greater public involvement in initiatives to defend the country and strengthen its stability. Citizens, non-governmental organizations and local government structures have shown enormous potential for self-organization, involvement in combat operations and assistance to the army. Many volunteers, including those returning from abroad, head to the front on their own initiative. However, these campaigns would not be possible without the mobilization of the entire society, which, despite its impoverishment, contributes maximally to the support of the Ukrainian army.

The period spent in combat actions and military circumstances was a time of consolidation of the Ukrainian government and increased confidence in the state, but also expectations that the leaders will provide effective defence of the country, implement systemic reforms and eradicate corruption, which in turn should pave the way for Ukraine's membership in the EU.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine helped to accelerate and complete the process of transformation of the Ukrainian identity and the shaping of the

nation. The past years of war, followed by a comprehensive de-Russification of life in all areas, hastened the return of Ukrainians to their native history, culture, language and symbols, seen as part of the wider European context. These trends are constantly present and have consolidated the vast majority of Ukrainians, regardless of which region they live in, what age they are, and what language they communicate. Decolonization is taking place among the Ukrainian people, rejecting faith in Russian supremacy and in the cultural ties that bind the two peoples. However, for all this they are paying a high price, as Ukraine faces demographic decline, economic crisis, impoverishment of people and war trauma.

### Conclusion

The end of the Cold War and the role of NATO on the European continent fundamentally changed the geopolitical landscape of modern Europe. NATO was victorious in this struggle, as it proved its effectiveness and sustainability and enabled it to gain military and strategic advantages. An arms race was put to an end, which significantly strengthened the military security of the member states of the Alliance. In the end, the result was the conclusion of agreements in the field of conventional arms control and transparency in the military sphere. In this way, an internationally legal mechanism was created to maintain military-strategic stability and military security in Europe. NATO was at an advantage due to the reduction of the threat from the East. By reducing the threat from the East, NATO's external defence function was called into question. The new geopolitical situation required new approaches to the realization of the Alliance's internal functions. Most likely, Ukraine will play the key role in the realization of this task, which concerns European security, which NATO faces in Europe. The specific partnership between NATO and Ukraine indicates that the tasks of European security will be solved jointly. NATO will not give up its support for Ukraine, through which it counts on achieving stability in the Eastern European and Black Sea sub-regions. With its geopolitical location, Ukraine could have a stabilizing effect on the Caucasus and Black Sea regions, Belarus, Russia, Moldova, and the European part of the former Soviet space. However, developments in these regions contributed to these zones becoming zones of rivalry between NATO and Russia. Russia has consciously reduced its influence in Central Europe, and has concentrated its efforts on maintaining full control over parts of the former Soviet space.

It is more than obvious that the security of Central and Western Europe cannot be stable if Eastern Europe is destabilized.

The possibility of the war in Ukraine escalating and a clash between NATO and Russia is real. In order to put an end to the conflict, in which both sides, Russia and Ukraine, have diametrically opposed sporting interests, it is necessary either for one side to capitulate (which is currently impossible) or for peace to be achieved, through negotiations led by a third independent powerful actor (except China, which at least for now does not show serious interest in

ending this war, such a state or a third international actor does not have the capacity). According to what was explained, the conflict will continue, and depending on the military assets that will be used in the conflict, the possibility of escalation of the conflict exists.

As for Ukraine's membership in NATO, for the time being, Ukraine does not meet many of the criteria required by NATO. It has neither the economic nor the financial capacities to realize its contribution to the collective defence and security of the Alliance, and in order to fulfil that goal it needs to enormously increase the defence budget. Therefore, the answer lies in the very "specific partnership" of Ukraine and NATO and the introduction of the country into the Euro-Atlantic security structure. If NATO expansion is intended to ensure security and strengthen young democracies in the countries of Eastern Europe, then Ukraine is at the top of the list, because it has the greatest lack of security and democracy.

Realistically, to assess the depth and permanence of the social changes taking place in Ukraine, military operations and mobilization need to end. A number of factors will affect the stability of Ukraine: economic (rebuilding the country, creating jobs and providing living and housing conditions), social and societal (demographic decline and war trauma) and political (government policy in the areas of language, history and memory), but also the international context, that is, the chances for real integration with the EU. It is clear that the war will last, with the possibility of new social divisions emerging, and the processes of identity building, although driven by turning points in history, are inherently long-term and fluctuating.

At the same time, each of these events and subsequent generational changes have steadily drawn Ukraine further from its Soviet past and from Russia itself. Ukraine's clear determination to gradually slip out of the post-Soviet zone controlled by Moscow was one of the reasons for the successive stages of the Russian invasion. Moscow is trying to recapture the country and hinder its Euro-Atlantic course. Contrary to the intentions of the aggressor, the Ukrainian state and society were encouraged to continue the changes and consolidate the Ukrainian identity. Returning to the pre-war state of relations with Russia is impossible, and neither will the Ukrainians give up the affirmation of their own identity.

Despite the fact that Russia's power has de facto decreased, and the sanctions have slowed down and reduced its economic growth without causing changes in the behaviour of Russian foreign policy, Moscow still manages to somehow keep the situation in Ukraine in the status quo. If the conflict escalates, it will be horizontally directed at the Ukrainian armed forces and civilians, expanding the conflict to include other actors, specifically the United States and NATO. This assumption presents the most serious dilemma for policymakers in the EU and the US, who are trying to help Ukraine while avoiding the start of a major war.

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