

The West and Ukraine: agreements on security cooperation

Justyna Gotkowska, Krzysztof Nieczypor, Jakub Graca

The United Kingdom and Ukraine signed a ten-year agreement on security cooperation on 12 January. This is the first document of this kind signed following the declaration made by G7 countries in July 2023, in which they announced the launch of negotiations to formalise long-term bilateral security commitments and arrangements to support Ukraine. In the near future other countries are likely to sign similar agreements. However, London's actual commitments to provide military support to Kyiv are limited to the current fiscal year and will maintain the current level of assistance. The implementation of these and other agreements in the coming years will depend not so much on formal provisions as on the political will of the signatories.

This agreement is important to Ukraine, as are the concrete declarations by London on military aid for this year, given the increasing difficulties Kyiv faces in obtaining support from its Western partners. The Ukrainian government sees this and future agreements as a transitional stage on its way to NATO. Considering the disagreement among the allies over Ukraine's NATO membership, these agreements may however turn out to be the only legally binding documents of Western countries' commitments to providing Kyiv with military support.

Western discussions on Ukraine's security

The Western debate on ensuring Ukraine's post-war security in the long-term began after Russia launched the invasion. Three main models were discussed. The first envisaged NATO membership for Ukraine, meaning that the Alliance would become involved in its defence in the event of a new Russian attack. The second concept was focused on security guarantees from the major Western countries involving their engagement in Ukraine's defence if Russia attacked again; this was also discussed as a step preceding NATO membership. The third one, known as the 'Israel model', assumed that Ukraine would remain outside NATO but would be rearmed in the short and long-term to such an extent that its military capabilities would deprive Russia of any chance of victory and thus deter it from further aggression.

The declaration that Ukraine would join NATO in the future was reiterated at the Vilnius summit in July 2023, but Kyiv did not receive a formal invitation to the organisation. The United States and Germany were among the countries which opposed it, postponing the decision until the end of the war. Informally, Washington and Berlin have not ruled out the scenario where Ukraine's future NATO membership depends on peace negotiations with Russia. Western countries have also been unwilling to provide formal security guarantees to Kyiv, as these would imply a commitment to becoming involved in a conflict against Russia.

In turn, the 'Israeli model' was also out of the table since the Western strategy for arming Ukraine, shaped by Washington and Berlin, has so far involved supplying weapons to maintain its current level of military effort but not significant quantitative and qualitative increases. Such an approach will not deter Russia from continuing its present invasion or launching a new one in the future.

Since no groundbreaking decision on NATO membership was made the major Western countries under pressure from Kyiv agreed to sign bilateral agreements regarding long-term arms deliveries. On the sidelines of the Vilnius summit, the G7 members (the US, Japan, Germany, UK, France, Italy and Canada) signed a declaration envisaging the start of negotiations on bilateral agreements in this regard. This document speaks in clear terms of "security commitments and arrangements" and not "security guarantees". According to the declaration, these commitments would cover the following: arming the Ukrainian Armed Forces to defend itself now and deter Russian aggression in the future; strengthening Ukraine's economic stability and resilience; and providing the technical and financial assistance to implement the reforms essential for Kyiv's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The document has opened up the way for other countries to join this format and negotiate similar agreements with Ukraine.

Bilateral commitments for long-term support

The first country to start negotiations with Kyiv was the US, the UK being the second. Subsequently, 24 countries have announced their readiness to join the G7 framework. These include, among others, the Baltic and Nordic countries, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Romania, as well as the Benelux countries, Spain and Portugal. Negotiations with Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the US, Canada, Japan, Lithuania and Romania are underway.

The UK was the first to sign an agreement on security cooperation with Ukraine based on the G7 declaration, which happened during Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's visit to Kyiv on 12 January. The document covers various areas and is not limited to military support; it also includes provisions regarding non-military security cooperation (for example, protection of critical infrastructure, cyber security, and combating propaganda & organised crime), fiscal support and the reconstruction, political and humanitarian cooperation, reforms, including security sector, governance, anti-corruption, and cooperation in the event of future armed attack.

As regards defence and military cooperation, London has promised to continue deliveries of arms and military equipment (particularly air defence, artillery, long-range firepower and armoured vehicles) and advising Ukraine's defence ministry. It has emphasised the desire to strengthen the Ukrainian military capabilities covering control of its airspace, mine clearance, maritime ISR, patrols, coastal defence, developing interoperability with NATO, border protection and defence, its fortification, and medical training.

The agreement refers to ongoing discussions on capability coalitions. The UK has confirmed that it will lead maritime security coalition alongside Norway, and will make significant contributions the air, air defence, artillery and armour coalitions. It is also working with the US to develop the governance framework for such coalitions. The UK wants to increase their involvement in developing the Ukrainian defence industrial base. The provisions of the agreement entitled "cooperation in the event of future armed attack do not obligate the UK government to become directly involved in repelling Russian aggression on

Kyiv's side.

The agreement has been signed for a term of ten years, although when it comes to military support, concrete financial commitments are limited only to the fiscal year 2024, which in the UK begins in April. In practice, they only confirm the current level of deliveries. London intends to allocate £2.5 billion for military aid to Ukraine this year. The agreement also states that it has provided £2.3 billion annually for this purpose over the last two years. The agreement commits the UK to long-term support, but its financial details will probably be determined annually, depending on the budgetary, economic and political situation and the perception of those currently in power as to whether further assistance is needed.

Ukraine's perspective

The format and scope of the Ukrainian-British agreement will likely be used as a template for other countries that are currently in negotiations with Kyiv. Similar agreements will probably be signed in the near future, primarily with Canada and France, with whom negotiations seem to be the most advanced. On 8 January Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky appointed a special fifteen-member delegation for this purpose led by Andriy Yermak, the Head of the Office of the President. London's long-term commitment to support Ukraine in the war against Russia "for as long as it needs" and the guarantee of financial assistance in 2024 are crucial for Kyiv, given the fact that it has been finding Western support more and more difficult to receive.

The agreement does not contain any formal 'security guarantees' for Ukraine, but during a joint press conference with Prime Minister Sunak President Zelensky still used this term to overstate the nature of the British commitments. He did this deliberately; since signing the G7 declaration Kyiv has consistently used the term 'security guarantees' when referring to future bilateral agreements. This is a way to reassure the Ukrainian public and to encourage the signatories to make far-reaching promises. This stems from Ukraine's disappointment with the lack of a formal invitation to NATO during the Vilnius summit. It may also be an attempt to blur any connotations with the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which is viewed by the Ukrainian public as a disgrace, and to give more significance to agreements based on the G7 declaration.

Ukraine does not view its agreement with the UK as an alternative option to its future membership in NATO, but rather as a temporary solution which Western countries can offer in the current wartime conditions. The Ukrainian public and political elites consider the Alliance the only credible structure that can guarantee security to their country. According to public opinion polls conducted during the last six months, between 77% and 89% of Ukrainians support NATO accession, and 54% believe that integration with NATO is more important than EU accession. President Zelensky confirmed this on the eve of signing the agreement, expecting "real steps that will bring Ukraine closer to membership" during the NATO summit scheduled to be held in Washington this July.