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## Joining the Dots: Security Guarantees for Ukraine

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### SYNOPSIS

*Deterrence lies behind the idea of “security guarantees” for Ukraine. By assessing how deterrence works, this paper looks at the problems with such “security guarantees”.*

### COMMENTARY

One sticking point that has come up in the complicated discussions between the United States, Ukraine, Russia, and Ukraine’s European supporters — though from media reports, there is a lot talking past each other as opposed to negotiations per se — is the idea of “security guarantees” for Ukraine.

According to Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, security guarantees [for](#) Ukraine “must be comprehensive and must include weapons, as well as economic and political support”. A manifestation of such would involve the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), “or a reliable alternative” that “figuratively speaking, NATO must be built in Ukraine”, and if “there’s a contingent, then the size of this contingent, where it will be deployed, from which countries, and how and with what it will be armed must all be clearly defined”. This being the case, “it is crucial not to lose the United States in one form or another.”

On the other hand, Pete Hegseth, the US secretary of defense, has [ruled](#) out the deployment of US troops, while US president Donald Trump emphasises that the United States “would have security in a different form” via “workers” in Ukraine, “digging”, with reference to the potential minerals deal between the United States and Ukraine.

Conversely, the United Kingdom’s prime minister, Keir Starmer, has [stressed](#) his country’s “intention to provide ‘robust and credible’ security guarantees to prevent

Russia from attacking Ukraine”, including building up “Ukraine’s own defences and armed forces and be ready to deploy as a ‘coalition of the willing’ in the event of a peace deal to help secure Ukraine”.

For all the dancing around the issue, these “security guarantees” are essentially [premised](#) upon collective defence.

This is what I like to call the “musketeer principle” — “all for one and one for all”, based on the novel *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas. Basically, under the idea of collective defence, a military attack on one is seen as an attack on all, such that all will come to that one’s aid.

Collective defence, operationalised in an alliance like NATO, is thus about a group of states coming together to deter a potential aggressor. Deterrence is key to the “security guarantees” which Ukraine is asking.

### **How Deterrence Works**

Deterrence is a specific function of the exercise of power, with power classically defined as the notion that one has the ability to get another to do what one wants the other to do. In terms of deterrence, this power particularly manifests in preventing the other from doing something that one does not want the other to do.

Deterrence is thus a form of coercion, with a peaceful employment of the threat or use of force, oxymoronic as this may sound. Deterrence is therefore mostly about the capabilities of the military, and the credibility of the threat, and not to be confused with the credibility of the military, which is merely capability.

Conventionally, military deterrence has two broad forms, via punishment or denial, which work differently. Punishment fundamentally changes the cost-benefit calculus of the potential adversary. It increases costs, offsetting the potential gains achieved. Conversely, denial is about averting a victory by the potential adversary, thereby reducing the potential adversary’s calculation of the probability of success.

Two other ideas about deterrence have become more popular recently: (i) deterrence through resilience; and (ii) integrated deterrence, which the Biden administration’s [National Defense Strategy](#) underscored as entailing “working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of US national power, and our network of Alliances and partnerships”.

Here, resilience can be [seen](#) as “the dynamic ability to anticipate and respond proactively to potential threats by learning and adapting”. However, rather than a completely novel form, resilience is related to deterrence by denial. By becoming more resilient, the probability of the potential adversary achieving its goal is lowered. Clearly, resilience needs to be credible too, but this is different from the credibility of a deterrent threat simply adding to capability.

With regard to US integrated deterrence, throughout the Biden administration, there was little specificity. It appears to be a blend of US military power, coupled with its non-military levers, added to strengthening US relationships with its collective defence

treaty allies as well as other like-minded partners in terms of security, with deterrence directed in a generic manner rather than targeted towards particular parties, though naturally, China and Russia come to mind.



As efforts to end the war in Ukraine continue, Europe should consider another approach to security.  
*Image source: Lauren Hurley / No 10 Downing Street, [OGL 3](#), via Wikimedia Commons.*

### **Whiter Deterrence and Ukraine's Security Guarantees?**

Overall, where does the above leave Ukraine in terms of deterring Russia in the event of a ceasefire, truce, or peace?

As a start, Ukraine has [proven](#) to be resilient over the three years of war. Whereas Russia had clearly [underestimated](#) Ukraine in 2022, its assessment of Ukraine's military capabilities since then, albeit boosted by US and European aid, is likely to have changed radically. Internally, therefore, Ukraine's deterrent in this regard is not comparable to the situation in 2022.

Nevertheless, Ukraine is also asking for external security guarantees to increase the credibility of a future deterrent against Russia. Joining NATO would expand such credibility tremendously and is Ukraine's ideal goal.

However, when Russia is strongly suggesting that NATO membership for Ukraine is its red line, this also becomes a huge gamble in terms of risk and potential escalation. It is therefore not surprising that the Biden administration "[silently opposed extending a NATO invitation to Ukraine](#)", while the Trump administration "has made its opposition public".

Even assuming that Europe is willing to enter into a separate collective defence treaty with Ukraine without the United States — and this is a big assumption despite all the European rhetoric about "security guarantees to Ukraine" — is European capability and credibility enough to deter Russia through either punishment or denial? Ukraine itself does not [think](#) so.

Given the problems with deterrence in this situation, instead of harping on "security guarantees", another approach to security must be found. One way, perhaps, is to convince Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, of the common security of Europe — that the "[avoidance of war, particularly nuclear war, is a common responsibility](#)".

While this is by no means an easy task, it is arguably fitting that the “common security” concept [“originated in Europe as a response to the overall East-West rivalry”](#) during the Cold War. It is no fail-safe either.

Ultimately, there are no “guarantees” to security, but it behoves all to try their best.

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