June 2015

NATO-Ukraine relations: The background

NATO and Ukraine have deepened their cooperation since first establishing contact in the very first days of Ukrainian independence. Ukraine is the only NATO partner to have contributed actively to all NATO-led operations and missions. Ukraine is now facing serious challenges and NATO is offering political support and helping the country reform, better provide for its security, and strengthen its democratic institutions. NATO has stressed that the full implementation of the Minsk agreements is the path to peace for Ukraine and underscored Russia's significant responsibility to act on this.

2014-2015: NATO enhances support for Ukraine

At the Wales Summit on 4-5 September 2014, NATO Heads of State and Government met with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, expressing support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. They adopted a strong joint statement condemning Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and its deliberate destabilisation of eastern Ukraine.

This unified message was reinforced at subsequent meetings of NATO Foreign Ministers in December 2014 and May 2015. Expressing concern about Russia's "ongoing and wide-ranging military build-up in Crimea," Allies strongly condemned Russia's aggressive actions and continued violation of international law. They urged Russia to end its political, military and financial support for the militants, withdraw its forces and military equipment from Ukrainian territory and along the Ukrainian border, and fully support a political solution of the conflict."

Allies are continuing to strengthen cooperation with Ukraine as it pursues deep and comprehensive reforms, including through its Annual National Programme (ANP). The NATO Foreign Ministers, meeting on 13 May 2015, welcomed the steps Ukraine has taken in promoting key constitutional reforms and reconciliation. They encouraged the Ukrainian Government to continue and accelerate reform efforts.

In response to the conflict, NATO has also significantly stepped up its practical assistance to Ukraine. Immediate actions help Ukraine address the current conflict, and long-term measures build capacity, develop capabilities and contribute to a deep reform of the armed forces and security sector.

At the Wales Summit, Allies agreed to establish a series of concrete measures, including Trust Funds, to help Ukraine strengthen its ability to defend itself. The Trust Funds provide support in the areas of Logistics and Standardization; Command, Control, Communications and Computers; Cyber Defence; Military Career Management; Medical Rehabilitation. Extensive work is underway to implement the first Trust Funds projects.

NATO is actively helping Ukraine strengthen its institutions and reform its security and defence sector. Ukrainian forces are continuing to improve their ability to work with NATO militaries by taking part in the Partnership Interoperability Initiative.

NATO and Ukraine are also cooperating to better address civil emergencies. In 2014, Ukraine became the largest beneficiary of NATO grants for scientific collaboration (NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme - SPS). NATO has also helped coordinate humanitarian and medical aid for internally displaced persons. Ukraine will host a civil emergency exercise, within the Partnership for Peace framework, in September 2015. And an SPS flagship project to support humanitarian de-mining in Ukraine is now underway.

Many Allies are also offering training, humanitarian, medical and other non-lethal aid bilaterally. Allies have deployed additional support to the NATO Liaison Office in Kyiv and sent advisors to the Government of Ukraine.

2014: The Russia-Ukraine crisis

When Russia launched its illegal military action against Ukraine, the North Atlantic Council met in emergency session to discuss the implications. On 2 March 2014, the Council stated that "NATO Allies will continue to support Ukrainian sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and the right of the Ukrainian people to determine their own future, without outside interference," and agreed that "military action against Ukraine by forces of the Russian Federation is a breach of international law and contravenes the principles of the NATO-Russia Council and the Partnership for Peace." The same day, they held an emergency session of the NATO-Ukraine Commission.

On 5 March 2014, Following a NATO-Russia Council meeting on the crisis, Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen announced that NATO Allies had decided to reinforce their support to Ukraine through enhanced political dialogue, further exercises, and building the capacity of the Ukrainian forces.

On 1 April 2014, the foreign ministers of NATO Allies and Ukraine issued a joint declaration condemning Russia's actions and agreeing on concrete measures to enhance Ukraine's ability to provide for its own security.

On 28 August 2014, NATO's Allied Command Operations released new satellite imagery showing Russian combat forces in military operations inside Ukraine's territory.

On 29 August 2014, an extraordinary session of the NATO-Ukraine Commission was held at Ukraine's request. A statement by the NATO Secretary General said that Russian forces "are engaged in direct military operations inside Ukraine" and Russia continues to supply the separatists with heavy weaponry. Allies urged Russia to "cease its illegal military actions, stop its support to armed separatists, and take immediate and verifiable steps towards de-escalation."

On 29 December 2014, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko signed a law cancelling Ukraine's non-bloc status. He has indicated that a referendum would be held if Ukraine were to apply for NATO membership.

2010: Partnering in exercises and operations

In 2010, Ukraine adopted a non-bloc status but decided to maintain practical cooperation with NATO.

Ukraine joined NATO's exercise "Steadfast Jazz" and became the first partner country to contribute a ship to the counter-piracy Operation Ocean Shield. NATO continued to support Ukraine's defence and democratic reforms.

At the Lisbon NATO Summit on 20 November 2010, Allied leaders expressed their respect for Ukraine's "non-bloc" policy.

2008: The Bucharest NATO Summit

At the NATO Summit in Bucharest on 3-4 April 2008, Alliance leaders declared that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations. We welcome the democratic reforms in Ukraine and Georgia".

2002-2008 Strengthening the partnership

In May 2002, then-president Leonid Kuchma announced his country's aspiration to join NATO. The same month, and in that context, NATO foreign ministers meeting in Reykjavik decided to "give new impetus and substance to our partnership with Ukraine" and encouraged it to carry out the reforms this entailed.

In the following years, NATO agreed to an action plan of cooperation with Ukraine, signed an agreement on the provision of strategic airlift, and established trust funds to dispose of excess munitions and small arms.

Following the "Orange Revolution" of 2004-05, NATO and Ukraine launched an intensified dialogue on cooperation. Ukraine contributed ships to the counter-terrorist Operation Active Endeavour and troops to ISAF in Afghanistan.

1997: The NATO-Ukraine Charter on a Distinctive Partnership

On 9 July 1997, NATO and Ukraine signed a charter establishing a distinctive partnership.

The Charter set out a wide range of areas for potential cooperation, including civil emergency planning, military training and environmental security. It established the NATO-Ukraine Commission where NATO Allies would regularly work with Ukraine to develop deeper cooperation.

After signing the Charter, cooperation proceeded quickly: NATO established trust funds to help dispose of toxic waste and to retrain former military officers, advised Ukraine on reform and democratic oversight of the defence and security forces and invited it to participate in NATO-led exercises. Ukraine contributed forces to the NATO-led missions in Afghanistan and Kosovo.

1994: The Partnership for Peace

At the Brussels Summit of 11 January 1994, NATO decided to launch "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) programme to transform the relationship between the Alliance and participating states. The Summit declaration stressed the importance of the Alliance's relationship with Russia and Ukraine.

All partners subscribed to the founding principles of the PfP, including "to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, to respect existing borders and to settle disputes by peaceful means." They also committed to protecting and promoting "fundamental freedoms and human rights and safeguarding freedom, justice and peace through democracy." Ukraine joined the PfP on 8 February 1994, and shortly after deployed troops to the NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Bosnia.

1992: The first outreach

Just four months after Ukraine's declaration of independence, NATO invited its representative to an extraordinary meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, the forum bringing together NATO and the states of the former Warsaw Pact.

All participants in the meeting declared their determination to "work together towards a new, lasting order of peace in Europe through dialogue, partnership, and cooperation".