

THE FUTURE OF UKRAINE'S DEFENSE⁽¹⁾



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In the run-up to the Washington summit in July, NATO is preparing the "Mission for Ukraine," including a \$100 billion of military assistance over five years, and a takeover from Ramstein group of arms deliveries. While the move is labelled "unprecedented" by Western press, it also reflects the fear from Ukraine that NATO is substituting money for the real prize: an invitation to membership, which would be on par with the political decision by the EU last winter to start accession negotiations.

In fact, the financial package is strengthening an earlier apprehension by Ukraine's defense expert community: that numerous bilateral security agreements signed in recent months with Ukraine will serve for the West as

an "excuse" to dodge the subject of NATO accession altogether.

Furthermore, financial and military aid creates a one-way street where Ukraine is a poor cousin recipient, while Kyiv is striving to project the image of a military industrial partner looking for joint projects which would strengthen its defense capacities in the short-run, its sovereignty and its role as a guardian of European security in the long-run. Yet,

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despite a growing number of military industry delegations and MOUs (memoranda of understanding) between Ukrainian and Western defense companies, only Rheinmetall has signed an actual JV production agreement in Ukraine.

Ammunition and air-defense systems remain Ukraine’s most pressing need and are in the lowest supply. This is why the Czech initiative after the Weimar meeting in March supported by several EU states to find and fund 800 000 artillery rounds, including outside the EU, was a welcome show of support for Kyiv, especially as the US has remained inactive since last October. So is the latest European Parliament initiative this week, led by the MEP and former Belgian PM Guy Verhofstadt to block the Council’s budget implementation until more Patriot missiles are delivered to Ukraine.

In addition to the need for more ammunition and air defense, Ukraine needs Western partners to start implementing the sanctions, which today are so impotent that Russia-made rockets and drones are stuffed to the brim with Western components. Instead, on March 22, the day when Ukraine experienced the heaviest Russian missile and drone attack so far, inca-

pacitating half of its energy infrastructure, the US made a “historic” phone call to Kyiv to ask Zelensky for an end in bombing Russian refineries.

Ahead of the Washington summit, what Ukraine fears most is the vagueness of Vilnius, when the US was hiding behind Europe’s back. The “open door” policy does not answer Ukraine’s aspirations, as Kyiv knows all too well that doors can open to air the room, without letting anyone in. The rhetoric about Ukraine becoming a NATO member only after the end of the war is also unacceptable to Kyiv, as it has been used by Russia since 2014 to make the war last, indefinitely. What Kyiv is looking for is NATO membership, not any new form of partnership, an “enhanced opportunity” or any other wiggle language. It is the difference between a promise and a commitment, and a test for the Alliance, watched closely by Moscow and Beijing. ■