

## Policy Position

# To guarantee its security, the EU should arm Ukraine through a self-defence agreement

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Current security guarantees for Ukraine range from unavailable to ineffective, writes Sascha Ostanina. She proposes a middle-ground solution to provide collective security for Ukraine through a binding self-defence agreement between the EU and Ukraine. Such an agreement would provide Ukraine with access to weapons and ammunition in the event of Russian aggression.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems to prove that Germany and France were wrong: NATO enlargement to the East mitigates, not increases, the risks of confrontation with Russia. [Ukraine had claimed as much](#) when seeking accession to the military alliance in 2008. Its argument, supported in the US and deeply understood in Eastern Europe, [had fallen on deaf ears in Germany and France](#).

NATO's decision to reject Ukraine's membership bid demonstrated that NATO was not willing to extend its deterrence beyond the already established eastern frontier. In this environment, where any potential boots-on-the-ground commitment remains out of the country's reach, what security guarantees can help Ukraine protect its sovereignty in the interim period?

### Security guarantees for Ukraine: between unavailable and ineffective

Russia's partial occupation of Ukraine's territories ensures that Ukraine cannot join any alliance with a mutual defence clause in their treaties. This includes NATO and the EU, as accession to them requires a candidate country to fully control its territory. Moreover, any assistance envisioning a boots-on-the-ground commitment will remain unavailable for Ukraine. In theory, the EU could extend its mutual defence clause, [Article 42.7](#), to offer an undefined obligation of "aid and assistance" [to Ukraine as a future member state](#). However, the EU has tested this cause only once so far, when France requested EU help in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks. As a result, [Germany and the UK had to step up their military actions](#) in Iraq and Syria.

Another proposal floated regarding possible Western security guarantees for Ukraine is the idea of limited security assurances with no binding power. For Ukraine, such proposals are reminiscent of a similarly ineffective replica of the [1994 Budapest Memorandum](#), under which the US, the UK, and Russia had agreed to ensure Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity after its nuclear weapons relocation to Russia. After two Russian invasions, Ukraine will not repeat the mistake of trusting non-binding agreements. Moreover, existing formats of Western military aid, such as weapons donations and training courses for the Ukrainian military, are already more effective than any non-binding alternatives.

### **Security guarantees via a binding self-defence agreement**

Considering these shortfalls, a middle-ground solution that provides credible, collective security for Ukraine should be developed. Effective in deterring Russian military attacks, such a solution must avoid the risks of boots-on-the-ground deployment from NATO or EU member states while not falling into the trap of empty promises.

This balance could be achieved through a binding self-defence agreement between Ukraine and its allies. This agreement must guarantee that Ukraine would immediately gain access to supplies of weapons and ammunition and provide military training in the event of Russian aggression. In practical terms, Ukraine should sign such a self-defence agreement with the EU, which has been prevented so far by the EU's inability [to integrate its national defence markets](#).

The reason for emphasising the EU is two-fold. First, [the US already leads](#) in the ranking of military aid suppliers to Ukraine and can promise little more, especially in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election. Second, a self-defence agreement with Ukraine will benefit the EU defence industry. Since 2022, European defence producers have not seen significant increases in procurement or in the number of joint EU defence developments despite increased EU-27 defence expenditures. Of €100bn defence allocations, [78% of weapons acquisitions by EU countries](#) have come from non-European manufacturers. 63% have [come from the US alone](#). An EU-Ukraine binding self-defence agreement should stipulate that European defence manufacturers must produce weapons and ammunition supplies for an attacked Ukraine.

### **Sharing the responsibility of European defence in Ukraine**

When designing an EU-Ukraine self-defence agreement, it should be ensured that the European security responsibility is shared among the EU and its member states. This will mitigate the risks of one signatory limiting their engagement in the agreement. At the EU level, two key actions can be taken. First, the Union should merge its military aid mechanisms, such as the [Act in Support of Ammunition Production](#) (ASAP) and the [European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act](#) (EDIRPA) or their future iterations, with weapons systems and ammunition promised to Ukraine under the self-defence agreement. Their merging can also increase the impact of EU procurement initiatives on the structure of the European defence market to go beyond the current [narrow focus of arsenal replenishment](#). Second, the EU can oversee a military training programme, for instance, by extending or, if required, re-launching its current [EU Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine](#). A unified administrative supervision of these two functions would also contribute to the gradual alignment of EU aid measures to Ukraine, EU joint procurement projects, and EU training.

At the national level, [EU member states should ensure the production](#) of weapons systems and ammunition for Ukraine. The key European defence manufacturers, [Germany](#), [France](#), and Italy, can lead specific flagship projects envisioned in the EU-Ukraine self-defence agreement. Germany, for instance, could be in charge of ensuring supplies of [short- and medium-range air defence systems](#) to Ukraine. However, these countries must not hijack all ensuing defence contracts for their domestic manufacturers but involve other Central and Eastern European member states in their execution. After having donated their Soviet-era legacy military equipment to Ukraine, these countries [need to replenish and modernise](#) their defence forces. Opening production and maintenance hubs in Eastern Europe will also reduce the number of intra-EU border crossings, which currently [delay logistics between the EU and Ukraine](#) for multiple days. Such pan-EU defence production cooperation would have the added benefit of [increasing the interoperability](#) between EU member states' armies and their interoperability with the Ukrainian military. This interoperability, i.e., the ability to operate together, will be useful when Ukraine joins the EU.

The EU-Ukraine self-defence agreement should also capitalise on new Ukraine-based subsidiaries of European defence manufacturers. For instance, Germany's arms manufacturer Rheinmetall is forming three joint ventures with Ukraine [to gradually locate maintenance, assembly and production](#) of weapons and armoured vehicles in the country. Similarly, German drone manufacturer Quantum Systems has announced the opening of [a Ukraine-based research and development centre](#). The EU should permit Ukraine-based subsidiaries of European defence companies to [compete equally in the EU's ASAP and EDIRPA aid mechanisms](#). Consequently, Ukraine will also be able to maintain its pool of military labour force with unique first-hand experience in fighting a conventional peer-to-peer war.

### **No substitution for NATO or EU membership**

A binding self-defence agreement between Ukraine and the EU is not a substitution for NATO or EU membership, nor should it prevent [the development of other mechanisms](#) to help Ukraine defend itself. However, an EU-Ukraine agreement can benefit all its signatories as long as other measures remain unavailable. Ukraine will be ensured a long-term stable supply of [weapons systems and ammunition](#) to offset Russia's superior industrial base. EU member states will increase the interoperability between their national armies and give their defence manufacturers [more extensive planning horizons](#). This will further widen the scope of the EU's crisis management measures.

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