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NODAL DEFENCE AND UKRAINE'S NATO ASPIRATIONS

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This article describes how Ukraine is applying for NATO membership at a time when the European security architecture is becoming more fragmented. Specifically, as much as NATO continues to provide a coherent, multilateral framework that organises European security relations, various bilateral and 'minilateral' security formats have proliferated across the continent, while different members of this alliance system have come to prioritise certain defence ties over others. Paradoxically, this fragmentation allows Ukraine to pursue additional avenues through which it can embed itself in the Euro-Atlantic security community.

The European security community is fragmented. Although the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continues to provide an essential multilateral framework for defence cooperation on the continent, its need for consensus and respect for state sovereignty leave it exposed to decision-making paralysis. Held up by Turkey and Hungary, Sweden's protracted admission into NATO is a case in point. Since at least the end of the Cold War, however, members of the Euro-Atlantic community have been fashioning alternative platforms, to coordinate their foreign and defence policies outside of traditional alliance structures like NATO. Bilateral and so-called 'minilateral' arrangements have proliferated, with countries sometimes opting to prioritise relations with like-minded countries, whether due to sharing aligned strategic interests, a particular (sub)regional identity, or both.

This fragmentation marks the context in which Ukraine is making its current bid to become a member of NATO. What is commonly understood is how division within the Alliance has prevented Ukraine from receiving full support in its

membership aspirations. Certain allies worry about how Russia would react. Others are wary of how they might be called upon to fight Russia on Ukraine's behalf, so long as combat operations continue and Ukraine's territorial integrity remains under attack. Whatever the validity of these concerns, they have sufficient representation within NATO that it cannot achieve the necessary consensus for Ukraine to become a member.


What is less well understood is that this fragmentation within the European security community paradoxically makes Ukraine able to cultivate various defence linkages, so as to improve its own alliance potential. In this essay, I explore how this is happening. I first explain how the U.S.-led military alliances in Europe and in East Asia have been organised since their inception early in the Cold War era. I then proceed to describe how those very alliance structures have changed to acquire 'nodal defence' characteristics. Thereupon, I explain how Ukraine can situate itself in the emerging nodal defence alliance system that is coming to characterise the European security architecture.

How U.S.-Led Military Alliances Have Been Structured

Military alliances offer one instrument that states use to enhance deterrence and to achieve collective defence against an external threat. These arrangements involve two or more states centred on a formal treaty that is primarily focused on defence cooperation.¹ Once averse to making politico-military commitments to other states, the United States determined shortly after the Second World War that it needed to construct military alliances around the world, to contain the Soviet Union and the spread of communism.

Many of those alliances still exist today. NATO was the main military alliance that brought together Western Europe, whereas the United States concluded mostly bilateral alliances with countries in East Asia. The pattern of alliance formation thus looked differently in the Euro-Atlantic and what we now call the Indo-Pacific. NATO exemplified a multilateral arrangement whereby its members not only have formal equality with one another, but also have direct and strong security connections between them. In contrast, the alliances that the United States has maintained in East Asia make up what scholars call a 'hub-and-spokes' system.² In this arrangement, although the United States has strong direct connections with its allies via its individualised treaties with each one, those allies are largely disconnected from one another and have no military commitments to the other nations. Plainly put, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand each have an alliance with no other country but the United States.

Australia is part of a trilateral military alliance with New Zealand and the United States, but New Zealand's anti-nuclear policies make the bilateral relationship between the other two allies much more comprehensive.



Certain allies worry about how Russia would react. Others are wary of how they might be called upon to fight Russia on Ukraine's behalf

Yet the standard description of Europe as comprehensively multilateral and East Asia as 'hub-and-spokes' may be outdated. In East Asia, for example, U.S. allies are talking to one another more and more, even going about military exercises together, as well as making commitments to consult with one another in view of security threats that they commonly perceive. At a leadership summit brokered by U.S. President Joe Biden in the summer of 2023, Japan and South Korea announced a commitment to consult trilaterally with the United States.³ Indeed, the United States has been expanding security ties with countries outside of those alliances. Japan and Australia are part of the Quadrennial Security Dialogue with the United States and India. The United States uses naval facilities located in Singapore – a country that self-identifies as neutral – to provide logistical support to the U.S. Seventh Fleet as well as to U.S. P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft.⁴ Of course, the level of defence cooperation across U.S. allies

1 Alexander Lanoszka, *Military Alliances in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, UK: Polity 2022.

2 See Y. Izumikawa, Network Connections and the Emergence of the Hub-and-Spokes Alliance System in East Asia, *International Security*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2020, pp. 7-50.

3 «Commitment to Consult.» White House, 1.08.2023, [<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/commitment-to-consult/>]

4 H. Meijer and L. Simón, Covert Balancing: Great Powers, Secondary States and US Balancing Strategies against China, *International Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 2, 2021, pp. 463-481.

and partners in the Indo-Pacific should not be exaggerated. The region remains fragmented. U.S. allies vary in their threat assessments, particularly over China. No East Asian version of NATO appears likely to form any time soon.



Despite the multilateral coherence that NATO offers, this military alliance lives side-by-side with a suite of other security arrangements that focus to some extent on security and defence policy

If East Asia evinces greater connectivity amid continued fragmentation, then Europe arguably features greater variability in connectivity within the multilateral security framework that NATO provides to many countries there. NATO remains pre-eminent – its *raison d'être* rekindled, with deterrence and defence returning to the top of the agenda after Russia initiated its military aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Sweden and Finland saw in NATO membership a stronger source of security than that which the European Union itself could provide, and so began making moves to accede to the Alliance shortly after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁵

Despite the multilateral coherence that NATO offers, this military alliance lives side-by-side with a suite of other security arrangements that focus to some extent

on security and defence policy. Those arrangements vary tremendously in their institutional depth and the importance they attach to military cooperation. Exhibiting the greatest degree of institutionalisation is the European Union. Though not a military alliance per se, and not understood as such by its members (especially by neutrals Austria, Ireland, and Malta), one of its chief pillars is the Common Security and Defence Policy, which aims partly at crisis management and strengthening military interoperability among EU members. Article 42.7 of the Treaty of Lisbon is a mutual defence clause, albeit one that respects the pre-existing defence policies and alignments of members.⁶ The CSDP offers the framework for improving structural integration amongst the 26 member-states via the Permanent Structure Cooperation (PESCO). Those 26 member-states themselves differ considerably in their engagement in PESCO projects, with, as of 2019, France being involved in the greatest number and Ireland in the smallest number.⁷

Other organisations, centred usually on subregions, have become part of the security ecosystem in Europe after the Cold War. Established in 1991, the Visegrád Four (V4) comprises the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Although the effectiveness of the V4 has varied over time, the four did stand up a regiment-sized EU Battlegroup in 2016 and 2019.⁸ Formed on the initiative of the Polish and Romanian leaders not long after Russia's seizure of Crimea, the Bucharest Nine involves East Central European countries

5 K.K. Elgin and A. Lanoszka, Sweden, Finland, and the Meaning of Alliance Membership, *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2023, pp. 33-56.

6 E. Perot, The Art of Commitments: NATO, the EU, and the Interplay Between Law and Politics Within Europe's Collective Defence Architecture, *European Security*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2019, p. 52.


7 K. Juhász, Evaluating Hungary's Participation in the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy, *Polish Political Science Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, p. 54.

8 Z. Kříž, S. Brajerčíková, and J. Urbanovská. Defense Co-Operation Between Germany and the Visegrad Countries, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2018, pp. 354-371.

and serves to catalyse NATO's force posture along the so-called Eastern flank. France and the United Kingdom signed the Lancaster House Treaties in 2010, to develop the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force, to produce complex weapons systems such as those to replace Storm Shadow/SCALP-EG air-launched cruise missiles, and to go about nuclear stockpile stewardship.⁹ Bringing together the Nordic and Baltic countries under British leadership, the Joint Expeditionary Force focuses on building military interoperability and force readiness, especially in the maritime domain. In the mid-2000s, the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden established the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) grouping, which allows for deeper coordination as regards procurement and training and exercises. Since 2022, they have shared access to each other's air space and military infrastructure. They are now planning to engage in joint air defence.¹⁰

Nodal Defence as an Emerging Alliance Structure

These changes together suggest that many European countries are joining in defence cooperation in various formats, some of which may overlap. NATO remains the bedrock of alliance cohesion for most members of the Euro-Atlantic community, but the proliferation of different bilateral and 'minilateral' initiatives suggests that NATO should not be the only avenue for such cooperation, and that countries might be working to deepen certain connections amongst themselves.



Nodal defence is a type of alliance system whereby countries vary in their security linkages with one another, with treaty alliances being one important conduit for defence cooperation but not the only one

This emerging pattern of defence cooperation is not one of strictly multilateral entities of the sort that the Cold War NATO typified, or the hub-and-spoke system that characterised U.S. alliance relations in Cold War East Asia. In previous work, Luis Simón, Hugo Meijer, and I advance the thesis that a nodal defence system may be materialising into formation.¹¹ Nodal defence is a type of alliance system whereby countries vary in their security linkages with one another, with treaty alliances being one important conduit for defence cooperation but not the only one. In a nodal defence system, allies and partners might have differing relationships with the United States in its role as security guarantor. Connectivity across the system thus varies. Smaller groupings of states within a larger network could privilege specific tasks or threats, and so build institutional arrangements or coalitions around themselves. Given that international institutions tend to endure, however they might differ in terms of their vigour,¹² nodal defence is not necessarily a transitional alliance structure.

Although Europe and East Asia were home to different types of alliances during the Cold War, there is now a convergence –

9 A. Pannier, *Rivals in Arms: The Rise of UK-France Defence Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, McGill-Queen's Press: Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON 2020.

10 «Nordic Countries Plan Joint Air Defence to Counter Russian Threat,» Reuters, 24.03.2023, [https://bit.ly/4gxx0ji].

11 For a fuller discussion, see L. Simón, A. Lanoszka, and H. Meijer. Nodal Defence: The Changing Structure of US Alliance Systems in Europe and East Asia, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2021, pp. 360-388.

12 See J. Gray, Life, Death, or Zombie? The Vitality of International Organizations, *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-13.

albeit a very incomplete one – on an alliance structure that has these nodal defence characteristics.

At first blush, several global developments seem, all at once, to be encouraging fragmentation in Europe and greater connectivity in the Indo-Pacific. The first relates to the strategic posture of the United States. It has enjoyed a preponderance of military and economic power since the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed. Some scholars like Stephen Walt argue that its dominant position has meant that the United States no longer needs the highly institutionalised military alliances of the Cold War to ensure its own security.¹³ In their place, the United States would prefer more flexible, ad hoc coalitions on a needs basis so as not to be tied down by those commitments.



***Ukraine is not at all a stranger
to these shifting dynamics
that are reshaping the
European security architecture***

Of course, U.S. military alliances like NATO and those in East Asia have not only survived into the present, but also, confounding expectations, they have seen even more institutional development after the Cold War.¹⁴ Nevertheless, because the United States can afford to be much more selective in its international engagements, states might doubt whether it will remain

a reliable ally. Such worries may be most acute in Europe, considering that Republican and Democrat U.S. leaders have asserted that the Indo-Pacific is their main foreign policy priority, in light of the rise of China and its growing assertiveness in various territorial disputes with U.S. allies and partners in that region.¹⁵ Accordingly, rather than putting all their faith in one institution, however robust it might sometimes appear, U.S. allies and partners have been developing multiple vectors of security cooperation amongst themselves, to build capacity and resilience.

The second factor relates to globalisation. Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane observed in the late 1970s that complex interdependence were coming to characterise world politics. Multiple channels of action between societies have now opened up and grown in volume. Those policy issues that attract the attention of governments have since become more numerous and more intertwined than before.¹⁶ Although military force may now be less effective as a tool of statecraft, uneven economic interdependencies and social linkages could still provide new sources of conflict that states in turn could leverage.¹⁷ Security challenges might not necessarily be coming from other states, not least because violent non-state and transnational actors pose a highly lethal and, at times, well-organised threat. Problems of a transnational character thus require concerned states to mobilise their resources and to coordinate with one another.

13 S.M. Walt, Alliances in a Unipolar World, *World Politics*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2009, pp. 86-120.

14 On NATO specifically, see S.A. Johnston, *How NATO Adapts: Strategy and Organization in the Atlantic Alliance Since 1950*, Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 2017.

15 L. Simón, Balancing Priorities in America's European Strategy, *Parameters*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2016, pp. 13-24.

16 R. O. Keohane and J. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, Little, Brown and Company: Boston 1977.

17 See H. Farrell and A. L. Newman, Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion, *International Security*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2019, pp. 42-79.

How Ukraine Can Thus Position Itself

Ukraine is not at all a stranger to these shifting dynamics that are reshaping the European security architecture – it has in fact been an active participant. Besides being involved in the Partnership of Peace initiative created by NATO after the Cold War ended, and aspiring to join the European Union since 2014, Ukraine has cultivated security linkages with a select set of partners. The most notable of them is the Lublin Triangle, a tripartite pact involving Lithuania and Poland that aims to improve cooperation across a wide series of policy domains. One tangible manifestation of this cooperation has been the establishment of the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade in 2009, which achieved full operational capabilities in early 2017.¹⁸ Although its size is modest, with 4,500 military personnel drawn from the three participating countries, the brigade has served as a vehicle for staff training and courses, multinational exercises, and the transmission of NATO standards and practices.

Still, the strategic priority for Ukraine is to become a fully-fledged member of NATO. It has stepped up its ties with NATO and its members, as evinced by the receipt of large amounts of military assistance via bilateral and multilateral channels since 2022, as well as the establishment of the NATO-Ukraine Council at the 2023 Vilnius Summit. Unfortunately for Ukraine, because the Alliance is a consensus-based organisation, any one member can easily hold up a country's accession for any reason. That Hungary and Turkey resisted the timely ratification of Sweden's accession protocols for so long is indicative of the difficulties that Ukraine might well face.

Whatever its status with NATO, Ukraine must foster defence and foreign policy connections as much as possible, to become even more embedded within the Euro-Atlantic security community. The fragmentation that marks the European security architecture paradoxically offers Ukraine various opportunities to do so. Had NATO been the 'only game in town', Ukraine would have found it much harder to make those connections.


One vector for intensifying cooperation is indeed with the European Union. Again, it is not a military alliance per se. As Justin Tomczyk notes, in its bid to join the EU, Ukraine will need to harmonise its judiciary and regulatory frameworks.¹⁹ In so doing it will also need to align itself in areas covered by Chapter 31 of the EU membership acquis, which addresses foreign, security, and defence policy. Going about policy congruency in these areas may not help Ukraine in the current war with Russia, but the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy does provide the framework for deepening cooperation on issues relating to arms trafficking, criminal and terrorist networks, and those attacks on political institutions that are oftentimes associated with hybrid warfare. Ukraine has developed so much significant expertise in addressing such attempts at subversion from Russia that it can be an invaluable partner.

A second vector involves tightening bilateral ties with G7 countries and any like-minded partner of political and military importance. The series of bilateral security agreements that Ukraine signed over the course of 2024 are an important step in this direction. Of course, these agreements do not constitute military alliances in the substantive sense

18 The Grand Hetman Kostiantyn Ostrojski Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade, *History*, 21.08.2019 [<https://litpolukrbrig.wp.mil.pl/en/pages/history-2019-08-21-3/>]

19 See J. Tomczyk, Security Through Other Means? Prospects for European-Ukrainian Defence Integration, *UA: Ukraine Analytica*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2023, pp. 3-11.

of the term: they involve no binding legal obligations. Some of these agreements are stronger than others. Yet they provide a key basis for expanding not only military or, for that matter, foreign policy cooperation, but defence industry cooperation as well. These assurances are thus much more robust than those ill-fated ones that characterised the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, precisely because they lay the groundwork for industry to be involved in Ukrainian defence.²⁰



Whatever its status with NATO, Ukraine must foster defence and foreign policy connections as much as possible, to become even more embedded within the Euro-Atlantic security community

Yet another vector involves trilateral, or 'minilateral', initiatives. The Lublin Triangle with Poland and Lithuania remains important, given those countries' own military and technical assistance to Ukraine, as it defends itself against Russia. However, the joint initiative with the United Kingdom and Poland is worth revitalising. Poland's inclusion adds an economy to scale, to the cooperation outlined in the UK-Ukraine Security Agreement.²¹ Of course, deepening ties between Poland and Ukraine may not be conflict free, as recent controversies over agriculture and even historical memory have shown. Nevertheless, shortly after re-entering office following the October 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland, Polish

Prime Minister Donald Tusk personally pledged his intent to make Ukraine's military needs a major priority in his foreign policy agenda.²² Given their common interest in advancing maritime security in and around the Black Sea, Ukraine can build upon ongoing efforts to protect shipping and to clear mines with Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey.

In isolation, none of these efforts will bring about NATO membership. They are not substitutes in any shape or form for a robust military alliance such as the latter. In combination with one another, however, these efforts can move the needle and shift the balance of probabilities that Ukraine will have the support and confidence of the Alliance to become a formal member. If NATO membership remains elusive, then these efforts will solidify Ukraine's credentials as a security partner for a large and meaningful constituency within the Euro-Atlantic security community.

A Role for Ukraine to Play

President Joe Biden asserted that «NATO is stronger than it's ever been» during his visit to Warsaw in February 2023.²³ With the recent addition of Finland and Sweden, defence spending trending upwards across the Alliance, and the concerted effort to bolster the multinational presence in the Baltic region, Biden may have been correct. Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has indeed rejuvenated the Alliance by demonstrating the need to take conventional deterrence and collective defence seriously again. NATO remains critical to European

20 Mykhailo Soldatenko, «Getting Ukraine's Security Guarantees Right,» *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 8.07.2024 [<https://bit.ly/3P6PxBQ>]

21 P. Biskup, J. Rogers, and H. Shelest, «The Trilateral Initiative: Rekindling Relations between Britain, Poland and Ukraine,» *Council on Geostrategy Primer*, February 2023 [<https://bit.ly/4gJSGmU>]

22 P. Dickinson, «New Polish PM Donald Tusk Vows «Full Mobilization» of West to Help Ukraine,» *Atlantic Council*, 12.12.2023 [<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/new-polish-pm-donald-tusk-vows-full-mobilization-of-west-to-help-ukraine/>]

23 K. Hooper, «In Poland, Biden says 'NATO is stronger than it's ever been', *Politico*, 21.02.2023. [<https://www.politico.com/news/2023/02/21/biden-duda-nato-poland-europe-trip-00083743>]

security, giving it a great deal of coherence, but the fact remains that European countries are dividing their foreign policy and defence attention across many bilateral, 'minilateral', and in the case of the EU, multilateral arrangements.

The European security architecture may yet continue to fragment in this way. Allies are working more with those that they see as more like-minded than the rest, thus improving their coordination and building their capacity to address specific security challenges that they deem to be the most important to them. An alliance structure that takes on nodal defence characteristics seems to be emerging. That the European security architecture is fragmented in this way, with NATO still providing the necessary coherence, allows Ukraine to insert itself in different formats, so that it can improve its alliance potential, and to ensure its security

well into the future. If all that existed for Ukraine was indeed NATO, then Ukraine would experience greater difficulty in trying to embed itself in the Euro-Atlantic community. Ironically, for Ukraine, the good news in Europe's fragmenting security order is that it can still avail itself of the many opportunities that exist for forging strong and enduring relationships with key parts of the Alliance.

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