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Executive Summary

Ukraine does not yet have a Membership Action Plan, though it does have increasingly close ties with NATO, both on an organizational level and in terms of bilateral relations with member states. In recent years, Ukraine has made clear its desire to join NATO and NATO has made clear its desire to see Ukraine receive a Membership Action Plan and join the alliance. Russia has consistently expressed its opposition to Ukraine joining NATO. Russia has also taken measures to ensure its security in the face of what it perceives are threats from NATO and its expansion. The issue of Ukraine receiving a Membership Action Plan has been and continues to be a source of friction and potential conflict escalation.

What is a MAP and why is it significant?

A Membership Action Plan (MAP) is a critical formal step in the process for a country joining NATO. Since the implementation of the MAP in April 1999, following the Washington NATO Summit, every country which joined NATO has customarily received a MAP. NATO has pledged that Ukraine would join the Alliance, first in 2008 and has renewed that promise since then. Russia has asked for guarantees that Ukraine would not be given a MAP and would not be welcomed into NATO. NATO has refused to comply with Russia's demand.

Achievements in NATO-Ukraine relations

Ukraine joined the Partnership for Peace, a program through which European and Eurasian states can develop their respective relationships with NATO, focusing on their own priorities, in 1994. It was the first of the CIS states to do so, followed soon after by Russia. In 1997, the NATO-Ukraine Commission, the body responsible for directing and developing the NATO-Ukraine relationship, was established. Ukraine made an official bid to join NATO's MAP at the 2008 Bucharest Summit. This bid was ultimately rejected, notably because France and Germany opposed it. In 2010, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was content with the current status of NATO-Ukraine relations and ended Ukraine's pursuit of membership in the alliance, preferring to remain non-aligned. This pleased Russia as Moscow had been increasingly concerned by NATO's eastward expansion and perceived it as a threat. Yanukovich fell from power in 2014 and his successors abandoned his policy of neutrality and once again pursued closer ties with NATO in the hopes of receiving a MAP, and eventually membership in NATO. As a part of this effort, Ukraine undertook several reforms, in both civilian and defense and security domains, such as rooting out corruption, securing civilian-political control over the security forces, modernizing the armed forces and adopting NATO interoperability standards, the latter of which allows for better cooperation and coordination with the alliance. Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ukraine's ties with NATO have continued to expand to the point that NATO-Ukraine cooperation in defense and security reforms is "more extensive than with any other partner country".¹

Current state of affairs

Though NATO has repeatedly stated that Ukraine will eventually receive a MAP and join NATO, there is no specific time frame for either yet. In recent years, Ukraine has been receiving military support from the United States in the form of weapons shipments. Ukraine has also

¹ "NATO-Ukraine Joint Working Group on Defence Reform," NATO, last modified April 9, 2015, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50320.htm.

been engaging in military exercises with NATO countries, such as Sea Breeze, in the Black Sea, and Rapid Trident, in Western Ukraine. As of 2021, Ukraine has asked for a clear yes-or-no answer from the Biden administration regarding its MAP and membership. Following its 2021 summit, NATO reaffirmed its 2008 statement that Ukraine will become a member of the alliance with the MAP. Since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, support for joining NATO among the Ukrainian population has jumped from 15-20% in 2014 to 64% in 2021².

Russia's reactions

In the run-up to the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, the Kremlin launched a press campaign to remind NATO and its members that a friendly gesture towards Kyiv may come at the cost of their relationship with Moscow. Russia's objective came to be as Germany and France opposed Ukraine receiving a MAP at the Bucharest summit.

Russia has responded to NATO-Ukraine military exercises by conducting their own military exercises with Belarus. In April 2021, Ukraine accused Russia of massing over 80,000 troops near its eastern border and in occupied Crimea. In response to what Moscow perceives as being NATO threats, additional military formations, including three airborne formations, have been deployed in the western region. The effectiveness of this strategy is difficult to measure, seeing as NATO has reciprocated by increasing its own military presence in its eastern members.

Putin has expressed that any move toward Ukraine joining NATO, such as a MAP, would be crossing a "red line". Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko stated that such actions would have consequences. In an article published in July 2021 entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Putin declares that Ukrainian sovereignty is only possible through a partnership with Russia and that the Ukrainian government's pursuit of closer ties with NATO is tantamount to submitting the country to foreign control.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, a Membership Action Plan is a crucial formal step in joining NATO. Ukraine does not yet have a MAP. Since 2014, both Ukraine and NATO have expressed their commitment to seeing Ukraine join the alliance. Ukraine continues to enact reforms to comply with requirements for NATO membership. NATO-Ukraine cooperation has expanded through the forums and programs put in place, and through bilateral relations with member states. Russia remains firmly opposed to Ukraine joining NATO. In response to perceived threats, Russia has stationed more troops in her western territories and conducted military exercises with Belarus. Russia's reactions thus far have been effective seeing as NATO has declined to give Ukraine a MAP on several occasions.

Ukraine should not yet be given a MAP. Doing so would provoke Russia and may lead to an escalation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Canada and NATO should continue to support Ukraine in its struggle to ensure its political independence and territorial integrity. This can be accomplished through statements of support for Ukraine and condemnations of any hostile actions undertaken by Russia as well as continued support for and participation in programs promoting cooperation in military and civilian reforms that bolster Ukraine's ability to defend itself.

² "Some 64% of Ukrainians stand for Ukraine's accession to NATO – poll," UNIAN Information Agency, <https://www.unian.info/society/some-64-of-ukrainians-stand-for-ukraine-s-accession-to-nato-poll-11395534.html>.