

Ukraine: A Safe Haven on the Road to Victory

Key points

- Neither Russia nor Ukraine can achieve total military victory, and good-faith negotiations with Putin are unlikely. The West, as a collective, is unable or unwilling to provide Ukraine with what it needs to win. President-elect Trump is eager to 'solve' the war in terms that appear favourable to Russia.
- Yet Europe cannot countenance the defeat of Ukraine. The war's current trajectory already places unsustainable demands on Ukraine's society, armed forces, and economy, exacerbated by unstable Western politics, on which the country's survival depends. Should Trump's peace plans fail, this untenable situation could lead to political and civil unrest with dire consequences for the war, regional security, and Ukraine's allies, UK included. Should they succeed, the consequences for Ukraine will be even graver.
- Without the means or will to develop or implement a strategy for ensuring a Ukrainian victory, Europe and Ukraine should negotiate a 'Safe Haven' strategy. This would designate Kyiv and western Ukraine as safe havens. The U.K. is well-placed to champion this proposal, which builds upon some important historical precedents.
- To avoid escalation, the process would begin by phasing in bilateral air-defence sanctuaries. The strategy would include long-term military, defensive, economic, and humanitarian commitments from a European coalition to Ukrainian territories outside the Safe Haven zone. **An incremental, regional approach will facilitate Ukraine's revitalisation and remilitarisation, as selected areas attract investment, rebuild, and grow economically**
- The strategy is underpinned by three aims:
 - To provide **sanctuary** via air defence zones for at least parts of Ukraine's economy, military production and society to revitalise
 - To improve **parity** between the Russian and Ukrainian militaries by undoing Russian air superiority, allowing Ukraine to strike missile and other military sites inside Russia, and providing for resource reallocation from the west to the east.
 - To bolster Ukrainian **morale** by providing a concrete path to sovereignty even amid a second Trump term and evidence of progress via the sanctuaries and commitments within the strategy.
- The Safe Haven strategy is the worst option, except for all the others. It is a politically difficult but achievable option that delivers some concrete benefits for Ukraine while tending to European interests.

(1) The West lacks the political will needed for Ukraine's victory, especially following Donald Trump's re-election. While European governments, Western analysts, and Ukrainian military figures have proposed several theoretically feasible victory strategies, Europe lacks the political will to implement the necessary domestic spending and policies.¹ Instead, there is a strained complacency, leaving Ukraine without adequate means to defend its people and territory. The Anders Fogh Rasmussen proposal of partial NATO membership for all non-occupied Ukraine was unworkable due to shifting borders and potential NATO-Russia conflict.² The proposed 'Safe Haven' solution aims to address these issues, recognizing the urgent need for proactive defence in a country exhausted by over ten years of conflict and two years of full-scale war.

(2) Europe cannot tolerate a defeat of Ukraine. The Russo-Ukraine war does not pose an immediate existential threat to NATO's security architecture in Europe, but a Ukrainian defeat would. A victorious Russia would likely test Article 5's robustness by staging a Donbas-like situation with semi-deniable military intervention in Russian-speaking areas around Daugavpils (Latvia) or Narva (Estonia). Defeat would force European countries, including the UK, to face significantly higher defence spending, food inflation, and energy costs, on top of an already fragile security situation and mass refugee flows.³ Given the West's sunk costs, public support for Ukraine, and the ensuing humanitarian catastrophe, NATO countries are sufficiently committed to continue supporting Ukraine's survival but not enable its defeat of Russia.

(3) Russia is in a stronger position than Ukraine to sustain the war on its current trajectory (which this strategy aims to change). No side is currently capable of significant military advances. However, Russia has partially mobilized its economy for war, receives increasing support from China and other partners, and has vastly more manpower and economic resources. While most Russians can ignore the war, Ukrainians cannot; they suffer more and are increasingly demoralized by fears that the deaths have been in vain, with no clear path to a sustainable peace (this includes any and all options rumoured to be mooted by a new Trump administration). Without hope, Ukraine's sociopolitical issues may lead to political unrest or further difficulty mobilizing soldiers. An unfair peace would highly likely lead to social unrest in the mid- to long-term.

¹ Valerii Zaluzhnyi, "Ukraine's Army Chief: The Design of War Has Changed," CNN, February 8, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/08/opinions/ukraines-army-chief-design-of-war-zaluzhnyi>; Andriy Zagorodnyuk and Eliot A. Cohen, "A Theory of Victory for Ukraine: With the Right Support and Approach, Kyiv Can Still Win," Foreign Affairs, May 21, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/theory-victory-ukraine>; Kaitseministeerium, "Setting Transatlantic Defence up for Success: A Military Strategy for Ukraine's Victory and Russia's Defeat," December 17, 2023, https://kaitseministeerium.ee/sites/default/files/kaitseministeerium_2023veeb_17.12.pdf.

² The Rasmussen plan is outlined here; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/11/ex-nato-chief-proposes-ukrainejoinswithout-russian-occupied-territories> the latest option from the Rasmussen-Yermak taskforce is provided here and is greatly changed and watered down: <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/konkretni-propoziciji-shodo-majbutnogochlenstvaukrayini-v-90741>

³ According to the Ptoukha Institute for Demography and Social Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, up to five million Ukrainians could leave the country in the event of prolonged power outages: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubricsociety/3692466-ciselnist-naselenna-ukraini-variuetsa-vid-28-do-34-miljoniv-demografi.html>

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(4) While Putin is in power, negotiations with Russia are unworkable. Negotiations are often framed as the West compelling Ukraine to renounce its 1991 borders,⁴ but the main obstacle is that Ukraine has no negotiating partner. Russia is interested only in

variations on Ukrainian capitulation. Putin has repeatedly stated unreasonable conditions to meet before even *starting* negotiations: Ukraine must withdraw its troops from four regions Russia claimed to annex two years ago, despite never fully controlling them. This would mean handing over millions of Ukrainians, including the never-occupied city of Zaporizhzhia (700,000 people), to Russian occupation, torture, and repression. Putin also demands that Ukraine commit to military neutrality, although this was enshrined in 2014 and Russia still invaded. However, Russia's indifference to Finland and Sweden joining NATO highlights the real issue: not NATO itself, but Ukraine in NATO, as Putin sees Ukraine as part of Russia's dominion.

(5) The only way to deter Russia is to prevent it from realising its ambitions to destroy Ukrainian sovereignty. Right now, the Kremlin believes it has more staying power than the West in Ukraine. European weakness, as symbolised by its failure to ramp up weapons production or take responsibility for its own continent's security, has left it and Ukraine dangerously exposed to US domestic politics. Yet, should Europe agree on a more muscular strategy, Russia's somewhat advantageous position should not be overestimated: it stems largely from its determination and political will; it is suffering a number of deficits, is unwilling to undergo a new wave of mobilisation, and there are structural economic, infrastructural problems that will only worsen over time.

⁴ Samuel Charap and Michael Mazarr, "The Wisdom of U.S. Restraint on Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, September 12, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/wisdom-us-restraint-russia>.

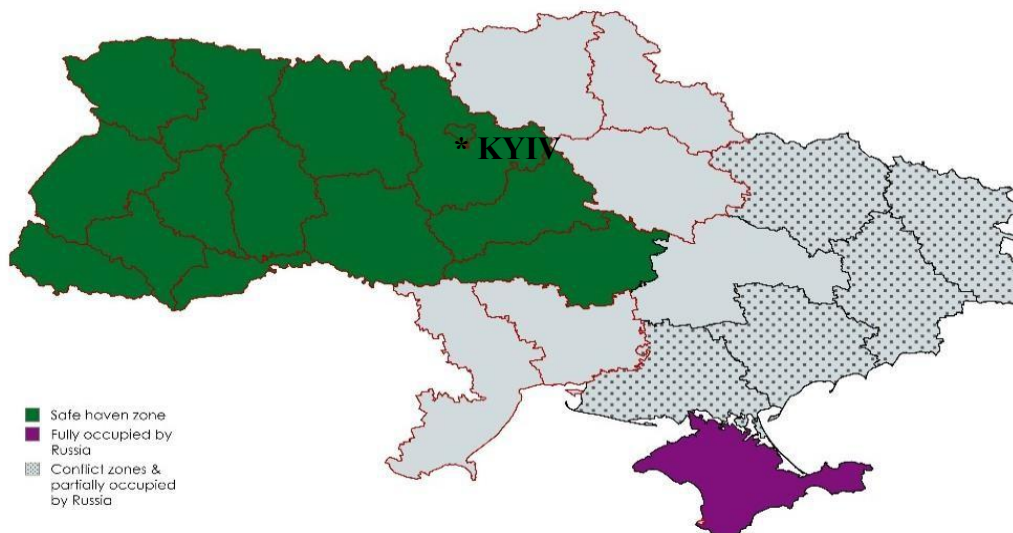


Figure 2. Proposed Borders for Ukraine Safe Haven Zone

(6) A ‘Safe Haven’ settlement for western Ukraine offers a way out of the impasse and a future potential pathway to NATO membership in the post-Trump future. The Safe Haven strategy parks the issue of NATO membership, since it is not feasible right now, but provides steps towards it and that still provide security for Ukraine.

(7) The initial air-defence sanctuaries would be secured via bilateral agreements, with European countries, likely NATO member states but outside the NATO framework, using the Kyiv Security Compact as a bridge. The air-defence sanctuaries can and will function independently of NATO accession discussion.

The suggested timeline of action is outlined below but would need to be flexible; for instance, it may be preferable to initially organise Air Defence Zones over specific areas of critical infrastructure rather than certain regions. As such, the below should be understood as a starting point for discussion:

1. Establishing an Air Defence Umbrella

- **Deployment of Systems:** Coalition to identify and prepare to send advanced air defence systems like: **Patriot missile systems:** To intercept incoming ballistic and cruise missiles; **Sky Sabre systems:** Highly mobile and effective against fast-moving threats; **Counterdrone systems:** To neutralise drones like Shahed-136s used by Russia.
- **Personnel Support:** Deploy coalition nations’ military personnel to operate or train Ukrainian forces on these systems and advisory teams to integrate coalition nations’ systems with existing Ukrainian and NATO-compatible platforms.
- **Zone Definition:** Determine the geographical extent of air defence coverage, (see below for suggestions), or critical infrastructure like nuclear power plants and ports.

2. Air Policing and Safe Haven Zone

- **Integration:** This would require coordination between coalition nations as enforcing a no-fly zone involves intercepting missiles, etc and possibly engaging hostile aircraft.

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- **Combat Air Patrols:** Deploy UK fighter jets (e.g., Typhoon aircraft) to patrol Ukrainian airspace, which would: require airbases close to Ukraine, likely in Poland, perhaps Romania, depending on the outcome of the presidential elections; Necessitate aerial refuelling capabilities for sustained patrols.
- **Rules of Engagement:** Prepare for direct engagement with Russian aircraft violating the no-fly zone, which risks escalation.
- **Radar and Surveillance:** Use AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) planes for real-time monitoring and coordination.

3. Protection

- **Layered Defences:** Integrate short, medium, and long-range defense systems to intercept threats at various stages of flight.
- **Cybersecurity:** Shield air defence systems from cyberattacks, which are a known Russian tactic.

4. Logistical Support

- **Supply Chain:** Ensure an uninterrupted supply of ammunition, spare parts, and maintenance support for the deployed systems.
- **Ukrainian Training:** Accelerate the training of Ukrainian personnel to operate and maintain coalition-provided systems independently.
- **Integration:** Synchronize coalition-provided systems with NATO-standard platforms already in Ukraine.

5. Counter-Missile Operations

- **Preemptive Strikes:** Allow or support Ukrainian long-range strikes on Russian missile launch sites to reduce the volume of incoming attacks.
- **Intelligence Sharing:** Provide real-time intelligence on missile launch sites and flight paths and ensure Ukraine has capacity to implement these platforms and this intel.

6. Strategic and Diplomatic Actions

- **Communicating Red Lines:** Clearly communicate to Russia that air defence measures are defensive and do not constitute direct NATO intervention.
- **Coalition Building:** Secure involvement from as many European nations as possible and support from as many allies as possible, including from the US and Turkey behind the scenes, to enhance legitimacy and share the burden.
- **Public Messaging:** Frame the action as a humanitarian necessity, especially to protect civilians and critical infrastructure.
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Initial Preparation (1 month):

- Agree on the Safe Haven strategy in principle among European partners willing to partake in policing air defence zones. Identify systems needed and initiate purchases, also signing contracts for longer-term supplies, ideally with a mixture of American manufacturers (to encourage Trump's tacit support) and European (to help develop industrial base).

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- Organize bilateral air-defence sanctuaries, with the close involvement of coalition air forces to select zones to be protected and specifying the longitudinal and latitudinal lines to be protected, which may not align exactly with oblast boundaries.
- Clarify that the air-defence sanctuaries are limited to air defence and do not cover other forms of protection, e.g. cyber warfare on Ukraine outside the safe haven. Involved countries will also have to agree on responses in relation to a variety of scenarios.
- Develop a strategy for areas outside the Safe Haven zone, including enabling Ukrainian soldiers to implement enhanced air defence against Shahed drones and cruise missiles in the east of the country. This will also include difficult limitations; for example, it will not be permissible to shoot down cruise or ballistic missiles and UAS outside of the agreed sanctuaries.
- Create a clear messaging and counter-propaganda strategy ahead of the public announcement. This should underline two key points: 1) Safe Haven does not equate to NATO membership nor does it cover Article 5 guarantees; 2) Fighting will continue outside the Safe Haven and Ukraine's allies will continue to support the UAF while the air defence sanctuaries plus policies in favour of military parity (e.g. lifting restrictions on Ukrainian strikes into Russia) will enable Ukraine to wage war in the east under more favourable conditions. Politicians should also stress that the costs of this operation will be paid for by frozen Russian assets alongside increased defence spending. Given Trump's expectation that Europe will bear more financial and military responsibility, a joint declaration is needed among key European powers to immediately raise defence budgets to at least 3% of GDP, with a focus on air defence and rapid mobility forces to support Ukraine.
- Messaging to the US should stress the Safe Haven as a win-win scenario that aligns with Trump's narrative of "peace through strength" without entangling the U.S. in long-term commitments. Highlight economic benefits for U.S. arms manufacturers and potential "deal-making" opportunities with Putin. Begin the messaging campaign to influence the Trump transition team, framing Safe Haven as a low-risk path to stability, as soon as possible.

Phase 1: Western Border Sanctuary (1-3 months):



Figure 3. Safe Haven Phase 1. Border regions.

- Establish an air defence sanctuary over the Western border regions. This allows Russia to test the boundaries without triggering Article 5. It may involve shooting down a Russian missile but is highly unlikely to involve shooting down a Russian fighter jet (although

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Turkey did shoot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 fighter jet and pilot without consequence in 2015). In the Safe Haven scenario, the situation would be analogous to the actions of the coalition of Western countries who shot down Iranian UAVs heading towards Israel.

- Provide additional support to frontline Ukrainian regions against likely Russian escalation in response.

Phase 2: West Ukraine Sanctuary (3-5 months):



Figure 4. Safe Haven Phase 2 West Ukraine Sanctuary

- Extend the air defence sanctuary up to, but not including Kyiv.
- Ensure measures are in place to adapt to political changes, Continue to discuss additional support for eastern Ukraine to avoid fears of partition.

Phase 3: Kyiv Sanctuary (5-7 months):



Figure 5. Safe Haven Phase 3 Kyiv

- Establish air defence sanctuary covering Kyiv.
- Announce future, hitherto date undetermined, plans for expansion of air defence sanctuary for critical infrastructure in the east, especially areas such as Mykolaiv or Chernihiv, Poltava, and Dnipro, depending on the war's progression.
- Clarify that the Safe Haven will extend to other territories (east of Kyiv) to prevent the degradation of those areas.

Phase 4: Critical Infrastructure Sanctuary in Southern Ukraine (8-12 months)

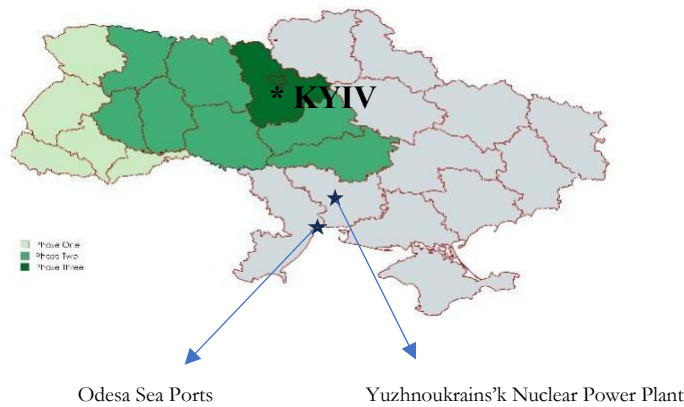


Figure 6. Safe Haven Phase 3 plus critical infrastructure in Odesa and Mykolayiv regions

- The fourth phase should include air defence zones over Yuzhnoukrainska Nuclear Power plant in Mykolayiv and the Ukrainian humanitarian sea corridor in Odesa.
- This would enhance nuclear security (with three of Ukraine's four nuclear power plants under air defence) and economic revitalisation, as the sea ports of Odesa can contribute +8% to Ukraine's GDP growth
- It also reassures Ukrainians that sanctuary is not limited to the Safe Haven zone (Kyiv+West Ukraine, aka Phase 3 territories), an assurance that will be bolstered by relocating Ukrainian air defence systems to the east and real defence-industrial cooperation between Ukraine and partners for the benefit of the front.

(8) Staggered implementation balances deterrence and restraint to maintain unity. The current Safe Haven strategy timeline covers the next year by which point the contours of the war, Trump's foreign policy plans, and the war's global ramifications will be clearer. This strategy will have kept Ukraine in the fight. The Safe Haven strategy reassures Ukrainians that their sacrifices are meaningful, affirming their choice to align with the West. Clear messaging will emphasize that the strategy is for all of Ukraine and will extend to more regions when feasible. The initial bilateral air defence sanctuaries stagger and manage Russia's response in a de-escalatory manner.

(9) Russia would not be party to, or able to spoil, negotiations. A staggered implementation period reduces the escalatory nature of the proposed Safe Haven strategy without yielding to Russia's genocidal whims. The strategy will be negotiated between Ukraine and a European coalition, preventing Russia from playing a spoiler role. Additionally, parts of the strategy could be 'sold' to the Russians: the initial focus on western Ukraine reflects military realities and the fact that Russia does not claim the same baseless historical ownership over that region. Russian politicians have previously suggested partitioning Ukraine and may choose to present it that way to domestic audiences, although this would be inaccurate.

(10) The Safe Haven strategy affirms Ukrainian sacrifices by offering concrete progress in the form of air defence sanctuaries. The proposal should evolve and extend with implementation and the war; for example, additional phases involving air defence sanctuaries for critical infrastructure beyond Odesa and Mykolayiv. The strategy's flexibility

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also means the timeline and scope of the air defence sanctuaries and NATO integration can be added or adapted based on developments on the ground and in Washington DC.

(11) Ukraine traditionally has a strong society and weak institutions. Corruption schemes and the enduring Soviet mindset of commanders have drastically undermined morale. The price of a European coalition’s involvement to such an extent should and must be an insistence on root-and-branch political, military and judicial reform, on full-scale mobilisation of the Ukrainian population, and on European countries’ oversight over especially problematic ministries, e.g. Ministry of Defence. These terms should be relayed not only to the government of Ukraine but also to the people of Ukraine. While elections and nationwide votes are not currently advisable, the feedback and polling following such an announcement should make it clear whether this is a price Ukrainians are willing to pay.

(12) An incremental and regional approach allows for Ukraine’s revitalisation and remilitarisation. The Safe Haven strategy will enable selected areas to attract investment, rebuild, and grow economically. Combined with the reforms mentioned in point 11, the provision of air defence sanctuaries will provide scope for economic growth that will help fund the fighting in eastern regions, accelerate technological innovation, train soldiers safely, and increase weapons production. With enhanced commitments from NATO member states—such as additional air defence, fighter jets, and economic and humanitarian aid—eastern Ukraine will be stronger than it would be without the Safe Haven proposal, though not as strong as the western regions



(13) This strategy avoids legitimizing Russian control. The horror of Russian occupation and Ukrainians' fierce resistance make the most unsettling aspect of this strategy its potential perception as legitimizing Russian aggression or accepting Russian dominion over currently occupied territories.⁵ These territories will remain under de facto control but not be recognized as Russian. Moreover, this strategy allows Ukraine to focus its military efforts on preventing further areas from falling under occupation or being destroyed, as seen with Avdiivka, and Vovchansk in 2024. Since other, free, Ukrainian regions will also fall outside the Kyiv + West sanctuary, **the Safe Haven strategy should be understood as an ongoing process rather than an admission of partition.** This stance will be more credible with commitments from Ukraine and bilateral partners to support resistance in the occupied territories.

(14) The strategy will enhance European security. This proposal will also bring many benefits to the rest of Europe through a chance to observe Ukraine's fighting experience and share knowledge and expertise. Access to these will enhance European defence at a critical time, when the USA is demanding the continent take more responsibility for its own security. Ukraine is the only country in Europe with experience of fighting Russia: Europe desperately needs that experience. Moreover, without offering concrete progress to Ukraine, Europe risks losing Ukraine's loyalty and its own credibility, ultimately presenting even greater risk to the continent, when an unfair peace deal leads to political and social breakdown in Ukraine that Russia can engineer to its geopolitical benefit.

(15) Russian escalation will likely occur outside the sanctuary zone and should be mitigated. One reason for the West's hesitancy to support Ukraine is the fear of a Russia-NATO war leading to nuclear weapons usage. However, Russian drones and missiles breaching NATO airspace are already leading to risks of escalation; this strategy ensures that Russian missiles are shot down over Ukrainian territory. Moreover, Russia's nuclear blackmail could result in largescale nuclear proliferation if Ukraine is defeated. Any country threatened by a nuclear neighbour would seek to acquire nuclear weapons, increasing proliferation and risk. Moreover, Russian threats and red lines have been consistently crossed by NATO states with little consequence, beyond more bombardment of eastern Ukraine. A similar response should be expected towards the Safe Haven strategy and mitigated by providing enhanced support, such as air defences, fighter jets, and

⁵ Jade McGlynn, "Crossing Thresholds: Ukrainian Resistance to Russian Occupation," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), June 2024, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-06/240618_McGlynn_Ukrainian_Resistance.pdf?VersionId=u45ETQa9E7ymPvRLT

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economic and humanitarian aid. This will also help reduce internal division and mass emigration from those regions.

(16) The Safe Haven strategy is not a sudden innovation; it builds on existing functioning security partnerships and bilateral agreements within the Kyiv Security Compact,⁶ Rasmussen's proposals, and ongoing discussions among European nations about air defence sanctuaries. Additionally, Rasmussen's introduction of partial NATO membership into public discourse has already garnered some Ukrainian public familiarity and support. A 2023 survey of "hybrid" security guarantees showed "joining NATO partially" had the most supporters.⁷ After his inauguration, Donald Trump might attempt a peace deal with Russia, but it is unlikely to succeed given it does not meet Russia's pre-negotiating conditions and given that the war does not exist in a silo from other geopolitical tensions and actors (Iran, North Korea, China). Considering the turbulent political landscape, a strong mediator and promoter of the Safe Haven strategy at the national level is essential.

(17) The UK is ideally positioned to champion the Safe Haven strategy and to restore the UK's historical role as a bridge between Europe and the US. The UK's leading support for Ukraine's self-defence had earned it significant respect and trust in Kyiv, albeit undermined by a perceived drop in support under the Labour government. However, the reserves of trust can be easily tapped into and this trust, combined with the UK being untainted by the Minsk agreements (unlike France), uniquely positions it to promote the Safe Haven strategy to Ukraine.

(18) The Safe Haven strategy is the worst option, except for all the others. The Safe Haven strategy is flawed and deeply unfair: Ukraine deserves all its territory back and for its people to live in peace. Ideally, the West would provide Ukraine with everything it needs to defeat Russia and dismantle its ideology, ultimately benefiting Russia as well. However, this is politically unlikely. The Safe Haven strategy has one benefit: it is a politically difficult but achievable option that delivers some concrete benefits and opportunities for Ukraine. Given the lack of workable alternatives and the potential for the war to worsen both Ukraine's and Europe's security and prosperity, the Safe Haven strategy offers hope. It acknowledges that European nations' commitments to Ukraine are not those of the Good Samaritan but of a neighbour who helps put out a fire before it spreads to their own home.

⁶ The Kyiv Security Compact strategy is available here: https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/jfilesstorage/01/15/89/41fd0ec2d72259a561313370cee1be6e_1663050954.pdf The more recent bilateral security arrangements as of June 2024 were with Lithuania, Estonia, EU and USA <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-signs-security-pact-with-lithuania-estonia-2024-06-27/>. The UK-Ukraine signed an agreement in January 2024 and are now working towards a 100-year agreement.

⁷ Sergiy Sydorenko, "The Global Leaders and Countries Gaining and Losing Ukrainians' Trust: Change over a Year," *European Pravda*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/articles/2023/12/5/7174945/>.