Commentary
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Israeli Security Model for Ukraine?

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

The topic of possible future security guarantees for Ukraine is a natural and inevitable component of discussions about the Russian-Ukrainian war, options for its ending, and the post-war structure of European security.

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Therefore, it is not surprising that from the very beginning of the conflict between Kyiv and Moscow in 2014, this topic was in the air and formed the agenda of many expert conferences. After 24 February 2022, the conversation about guarantees quickly moved to high political offices, acquiring central practical importance both for Ukraine itself and for its Western allies. And as faith in the feasibility of Kyiv's victory on the battlefield weakens even among its most active supporters, the issue of security guarantees becomes even more relevant and, at the same time, especially sensitive.

«Guarantees» without guarantees

This is exactly what the recent NATO summit in Vilnius showed. The part of the summit that concerned Ukraine (and it was not the only one, but key both politically and in the media) focused on two issues. *First*, on the present and future of the Alliance's interaction with Ukraine, including the prospects for Ukraine's entry into NATO. *Secondly*, on the ability to provide Kyiv with the security guarantees it actively seeks.

Given that on the former issue NATO allies, in principle, could not offer any option that would satisfy Ukraine, the importance of security guarantees grew even more. Along with it, the complexity of the issue also increased.

As a result, a rather creative political and bureaucratic solution was found in Vilnius so that the Ukrainian results of the summit would not look like a failure. The final communiqué of the summit was limited to actually repeating the infamous formula of the 2008 Bucharest summit. Now it sounds like this: «We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met». But immediately after that, on the sidelines of the summit, on behalf of the G7 countries, a Joint Declaration on Support for Ukraine was adopted. Kyiv presented this document as significant progress and the result of hard diplomatic work initiated by the Yermak-Rasmussen group within the framework of the Kyiv Security Compact.

> However, many questions arise about the efficiency and feasibility of the mechanism that the G7 declaration foresees.

It links the overall multilateral political framework with to-be-specified bilateral commitments. I have already discussed the main problems of this approach elsewhere and will not repeat them again. Let me just emphasize that neither the G7 declaration nor the numerous statements by Western leaders imply any real security guarantees. The talk is exclusively about military-financial assistance to Ukraine (that is, in fact, about the *status quo*), which they promise to make sustainable and long-term. However, it is not yet clear whether this is achievable in practice.

«À la Israeli model»

In this situation, another dimension of the discussion about security guarantees for Ukraine attracts attention and becomes a common cliché against the background of serious obstacles to offering Kyiv real guarantees. I mean nearly omnipresent references to the so-called «Israeli model». They appeared back in 2022, but have become more frequent recently.

On the eve of the Vilnius summit, Joseph Biden gave an interview to the CNN in which he tried explaining the logic of Washington to refrain from specific commitments regarding Ukraine's accession to NATO. He also stated:

"[T]he United States would be ready to provide while the process [of Kyiv and NATO getting closer] was going on, and it's going to take a while, while that process was going on to provide security ala the security we provide for Israel, providing the weaponry and the needs, capacity to defend themselves."

The wording sounds interesting and appears a rather advantageous media message both for the West and Ukraine itself. However, it is important to fit this and similar statements into the general military-diplomatic context of the war in Ukraine. In other words, in the context of overwhelming uncertainty about its prospects and the future state of international security, which explains why the West cannot give Kyiv any real security guarantees here and now.

> Then it becomes obvious that the appeal to the «Israeli model» is an attempt to find some kind of an image, a metaphor for a minimally meaningful discussion on the problem which has no solution today.

This can be clearly seen at least by how abstract the words of Western leaders sound when they make references to the Israeli model.

For example, French President Emmanuel Macron argues that «We need to build something between security guarantees to Israel and full-fledged NATO membership for Ukraine». And Czech President Petr Pavel says he has «heard about two types or scenarios of guarantees». According to him, «One is using the guarantees that were provided to Finland from the very accession [to NATO] to ratification. The other approach to security assurances is the one that was applied to Israel. We will probably see something in between».

Therefore, such references to the Israeli model should be treated accordingly: as a non-binding metaphor in a situation where the conditions for a substantive discussion on the topic have not yet developed. In addition, as events evolve, this abstract formula can then be reduced to either something fundamentally new or simply to the status quo with massive deliveries of weapons to Ukraine through bilateral channels and within the framework of the «Rammstein» format.

Ukraine is not Israel

Nevertheless, it is easy to see how the appeal to the Israeli formula sets the momentum for discussions and generates hopes (or, more correctly, illusions). Therefore, I offer a short explanation why "*ala the security we provide for Israel"* is irrelevant for Ukraine.

First, Israel has a serious military-technological advantage over all other states in the Middle East which it perceives as enemies. This gives Israel the capability, if necessary, to hit almost any target in any part of the region.

> It is difficult even hypothetically to imagine a situation where Ukraine would have similar advantages and capabilities in relation to Russia.

Under any realistic scenario, the latter will remain a powerful military force with a large nuclear arsenal and a developed military-industrial complex.

Secondly, Ukraine's three decades of post-Soviet statehood give no reason to expect that it will be able to make such a leap in economic development that will provide a stable base for a large-scale progress of its military-technical capabilities. The country's potential in this regard is huge, but the rampant corruption and the system of public administration that contributes to it (and it is difficult to imagine that a radically new one will appear quickly) will not allow it to be fully realized. And foreign aid alone, as Israel's experience shows, will not be enough.

Moreover, *thirdly*, the significance of Ukraine for the United States – the only external actor capable, in theory, of implementing the Israeli model in Ukraine – is incomparable to the significance of Israel for Washington. It is about both geopolitical and domestic political significance. With all the observed mobilization of the lobbying powers of the Ukrainian diaspora and influence groups in the United States, one cannot yet expect that they will reach the level of the Israeli lobby.

Finally, *fourthly*, according to the words attributed to Golda Meir, Israel "does not have nuclear weapons, but, if necessary, it will use them". Since the 1960s, the policy of nuclear ambiguity has been a key element of the Israeli security model. It would be logical to expect that Kyiv will also try to move in that direction. Especially taking into account the Soviet arsenal and the corresponding technological infrastructure that were located on its territory before the signing of the Budapest Memorandum in 1994. However, the implementation of this task is daunting without the support of Ukraine's Western allies. At the same time, it can be expected that Washington's priority will be to avoid such a scenario.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations