



Weekly Briefing

**Hungary external relations briefing:
NATO summit in Vilnius: The Hungarian approach**

Csaba Moldicz


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

NATO summit in Vilnius:

The Hungarian approach

At the NATO summit, Ukraine was not invited to join the alliance. This allowed Hungarian foreign policy to achieve its goal, as Hungary has taken the view that a country cannot join NATO, as this would mean, based on the Alliance's own rules, that the members of NATO would be obliged to enter the war on Ukraine's side. This briefing will look at the main outcomes of the NATO summit in Vilnius and Hungarian interests at that summit. Another part of the briefing will take a brief look at Hungary as a member of NATO over the past nearly three decades and the public support of NATO in Hungary. The briefing also briefly reviewed the bilateral relations between Hungary and Ukraine.

Introduction

NATO was founded in 1949 in the early days of the Cold War. At that time, the mission was quite clear: NATO wanted to keep the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern and Central Europe in check. At that time, the geographic scope of the alliance was also clear; it covered North America and Western Europe, and its missions were also limited to that region. Today, both the mission and the scope of NATO are much less clear. It suffices to think of recent U.S. foreign policy efforts to open a NATO headquarters in Japan, an effort that failed because of reluctance on the part of European partners. but the request must be at the heart of U.S. foreign policy, for in this way the resources of the North Atlantic Defense Alliance could also be deployed in an Asian conflict. Clearly, even European partners with colonial pasts have no real geopolitical interests in the Asia-Pacific region that should be protected by military means. After the collapse of the Eastern and Central European socialist bloc in the early 1990s, it was not clear how NATO should be reorganized and what tasks should be assigned to the alliance. And even after several expansions, it did not become much clearer what the main task of NATO is and, most importantly, where the final boundaries of NATO are. Especially if we think about the American proposal to expand into the Asia-Pacific region as well. Obviously, the war in Ukraine has changed the picture and made the alliance more important than ever for the members of NATO, and therefore the stakes were high at the NATO summit in Vilnius.

The main issues at the summit

The leaders' summit was held in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius on July 11, 2023. 31 NATO allies gathered in Vilnius; among them was new member Finland. The central question of the summit was how the alliance would respond to Ukraine's application for membership. Even before the summit, it was clear that Ukraine could not join NATO, but at the same time, the Ukrainian side expected at least an invitation to join NATO, even if this invitation would be formulated "after the war". The Vilnius communiqué put it this way: "We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met." While this promise obviously fell short of Ukrainian expectations, NATO – as compensation for Ukraine – created the so-called NATO -Ukraine Council at the meeting. The reason for not inviting Ukraine into the ranks of NATO is that the United States and other allies did not want to risk Russia escalating the conflict.

The Hungarian position at the summit

In recent years, the Hungarian government has taken a consistent view of Ukraine's membership NATO. Before the war, Budapest argued that protecting ethnic Hungarians was a primary goal of Hungarian foreign policy. The debate between Ukraine and Hungary centered on the language rights of Hungarians living in Ukraine, which were restricted by a new law. The measure was aimed mainly at ethnic Russians in Ukraine, but also affected Hungarians. As the war broke out, the focus shifted to other, more important issues, such as protecting ethnic Hungarians who might be directly affected by the war.

The Hungarian prime minister summarized these thoughts thus: "The Hungarian position we will be representing is unchanged: it is peace, rather than weapons that should be delivered to Ukraine" ... He continued "The Hungarian position is clear, since the war is going on in our neighborhood, and because of the Hungarians living in Transcarpathia, tens of thousands of Hungarians are in immediate danger".¹

Sweden's membership was also an issue at the summit. As Turkey and Sweden were able to find a compromise on contentious issues and the Turkish President announced that Turkey is ready to ratify Sweden's membership in the Western Alliance. Since Hungary is the other country that has not ratified the treaty, the Hungarian foreign minister made clear the Hungarian position on Sweden's membership: "We need peace in Ukraine as soon as possible, because this is the only way to save lives. Our position on Sweden is also clear: the government supports its accession to NATO, which is why we submitted a proposal to this effect to Parliament many months ago. Completing the ratification is now only a technical

¹ <https://defence.hu/news/viktor-orban-peace-rather-than-weapons-are-needed-in-ukraine.html>

matter"²

After the summit, the Hungarian Foreign Minister made it clear that “seeing as Ukraine has received neither an invitation nor a timetable to join NATO until it meets all necessary conditions, the alliance has successfully avoided the threat of an escalation in the war.”³ He added that this compromise was a win-win for responsibility, since admitting Ukraine as a member state would have drawn NATO into the war. (He was referring to the 5th article of the NATO treaty. According to it, the members of NATO are obliged to protect other members of NATO militarily if they are attacked by third countries.)

Hungary as NATO member

Hungary became a member of NATO in 1994 and has deeply integrated into the military organization. Hungarian soldiers participated in NATO missions, including Afghanistan. The mission in Kosovo is largely carried out by Hungarian troops; moreover, most troops in this mission are deployed by Hungary.

According to a report published by NATO, 2023, Hungary spent 1.44 percent of its GDP on military spending in 2022, which is below the 2 percent target reaffirmed at the NATO summit in Vilnius. At the same time, Hungary spent the most on military technology among the members of NATO. The share of spending on military technology was 48 percent. This figure puts Hungary in the middle of the ranking, but one of the reasons why the figure was not better in terms of GDP was the relatively rapid GDP growth last year. Hungary's GDP grew by 4.6 percent in 2022. Hungary is not the only one to miss the target, because of the thirty members of NATO, only seven member states met the 2 percent military spending target last year (in terms of GPD). To get the full picture, we should also add that Hungary has made significant progress in this regard, as Hungary's military spending as a percentage of GDP was only 0.8 in 2014, peaking at 1.8 percent in 2020. Looking at absolute figures, military spending amounted to 281 billion forints in 2014, which almost quadrupled to 958 billion forints by 2022.

The above-mentioned report shows that Hungary’s membership in NATO enjoys broad public support. 77 percent of Hungarians would vote for membership in NATO, while only 9 percent would leave the North Atlantic Defense Alliance. 72 percent of respondents support military spending, and only 15 percent would curtail such spending. 71 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that membership in NATO reduces the probability of an attack on

² <https://telex.hu/english/2023/07/11/szijas-ratification-of-swedens-accession-to-nato-now-only-a-technical-issue>

³ <https://nato-brusszel.mfa.gov.hu/eng/news/a-nato-allam-es-kormanyfoinek-csucstalalkozoja-2023-julius-11-12-vilnius>

Hungary, while 11 percent disagreed with this statement. If we look at the figures, we can see that Hungary is the tenth most friendly NATO country among the member states.⁴

Summary

We have seen from the briefing above that Hungary was able to assert its interests at the Vilnius Summit and Ukraine – a country at war – did not receive the invitation to join NATO. As discussed above, the invitation and subsequent accession would have led to a direct military conflict between Russia and the members of NATO with the potential for nuclear war. While Hungary has been able to make its case effectively, it is not clear whether it can take further steps to protect the rights of ethnic Hungarians in the Transcarpathian region, including their right to learn in their native language at school. Bilateral relations between Hungary and Ukraine are very fragile, as the history of Hungarian soldiers has shown us. (Hungarian ethnic soldiers who fought on the side of Ukraine became prisoners of war and were released by Russia with the involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church. The handover of the 11 eleven soldiers was heavily criticized by Ukraine, which had no part in the story. The criticism is hypocritical, because if Ukraine had been involved, the 11 soldiers would never have been released) In the medium and long term, Ukraine will most likely remain a neighboring country with which Hungary will have many issues and problems to resolve.

⁴ <https://www.vg.hu/vilaggazdasag-magyar-gazdasag/2023/04/ezer-milliard-forint-nyomaban-nato-jelentesbol-derult-ki-mennyi-penzt-koltott-fegyverekre-magyarorszag>