NATO's stand on Ukraine's entry

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Why in News: The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) sought to put up a united face at its two-day summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, on July 11-12, at a time when it's deeply involved in the Russia-Ukraine war. The one issue that overshadowed the Vilnius summit was Ukraine's promised membership in the alliance on which there was no clarity or time frame.

Expansion of NATO over the years

When the alliance was formed in 1949, it had 12 members from Europe and North America. Since then 19 more countries have joined the alliance through nine rounds of expansions.

In the Soviet Union's dying years, the U.S. and the U.K. had promised Russia that the alliance would not expand east (towards Russia's borders) "by an inch".

But in 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, all former Soviet allies, joined NATO. In 2004, seven more East European countries joined the alliance, including the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all sharing borders with Russia.

NATO expanded further in 2009, 2017, 2020 and 2023, taking in countries including Croatia, Montenegro and Finland. Sweden is set to be its 32nd member.

Why is Ukraine still not a part of NATO?

According to Jake Sullivan, the U.S. National Security Adviser, admitting Ukraine now "would have meant NATO is at war with Russia".

The reason is NATO's "collective security" formula, rooted in its Article 5.

The Article states that, "The Parties [members] agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them... will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking... such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force..."

As collective security is at the heart of NATO, if Ukraine is admitted now, the Ukraine war by default becomes NATO's war— in other words, the third World War.

NATO, and particularly the U.S., does not want to take that risk. The position they have taken is to keep arming Ukraine, which suffered huge losses in the past 16 months of the war, and letting them continue to fight the Russians inside Ukrainian territories.

NATO wants to defeat or weaken Russia in Ukraine without directly committing itself to the war. This has left Mr. Zelenskyy disappointed as he wanted firmer commitments from NATO on membership and a time frame.

Achievement of Ukraine from the summit

In the Bucharest summit of 2008, NATO had offered eventual membership to Ukraine and Georgia, two Black Sea basin countries that share land borders with Russia.

The alliance said then that both countries "will become members of NATO". Fifteen years later, ahead of the Vilnius summit, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy demanded a more concrete commitment from NATO for his country's membership.

But the Vilnius communique stated, "We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the alliance when allies agree and conditions are met".

So, Ukraine hasn't gained much over the past 15 years in its push for NATO membership. But in 2008 when the membership was offered, several countries, including France and Germany, were opposed to Ukraine joining the alliance out of fears that such a move would poke the Russian bear.

But now, in the midst of Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, more member countries agree to the idea of Ukraine joining NATO, which is a marked change.

Ukraine would continue its cooperation with NATO through the Ukraine-NATO Council. The Group of Seven (G-7) advanced industrialised economies have pledged to support Ukraine's defence base, which has been battered by the war, by providing military training and institutional support for attaining NATO membership.

Ahead of the summit, France agreed to send its SCALP long-range missiles to Ukraine; Germany announced a new military aid package and other NATO members would be providing combat aircraft training.

Ukraine may not have got a time frame on membership, but it has got assurances on military supplies from NATO members.

Russia's response

In 2008, when Ukraine and Georgia were offered membership in the Bucharest summit, Vladimir Putin was there as an invitee.

He called it a "direct threat" to Russia. Boris Yeltsin, Mr. Putin's predecessor, had warned against NATO's expansion towards the east in the 1990s.

The Russian state has taken a consistent position over the years that NATO expansions pose a security threat. Four months after the Bucharest summit, Russia sent troops to Georgia to support two breakaway regions — South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Six years later, when a pro-Russian elected government of Ukraine was toppled by West-backed protesters, Russia moved swiftly to annex Crimea, the peninsula which hosted Russia's Black Sea fleet from the time of Catherine the Great.

Russia also supported the Russian-speaking rebels in Ukraine's Donbas region, which escalated into a full-scale war in 2022. NATO wants to take Ukraine into the alliance, but won't do so now.

The flip side is that the Russians might continue fighting the war — unless, of course, they are defeated — to prevent Ukraine being accessed into NATO, as Kyiv's NATO membership remains a red line for Moscow.