

Zelensky Presses NATO on Membership, Long-Range Weapons

By [AFP](#)

April 20, 2023



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Ukraine on Thursday for talks with President Zelensky. [president.gov.ua](https://www.president.gov.ua)

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Thursday pressed NATO to invite Ukraine to join the military alliance, while also calling for more shipments of fighter jets and long-range weapons.

Zelensky was speaking during a visit to Kyiv by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, his first since the start of Russia's invasion last year.

Moscow views Ukraine's bid for NATO membership as an existential threat, while Kyiv had said that the war justifies its years-long campaign to join the alliance.

"It is time to make the appropriate decision," Zelensky said, speaking at a press conference with Stoltenberg Thursday.

He also asked for NATO's help to "overcome the reluctance" of some member states to provide long-range rockets, modern fighter jets and armored vehicles.

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Several NATO members have sent Soviet-era fighter jets to Ukraine, but no modern planes, such as the U.S.-designed F16, have been pledged.

Ukraine's Western supporters have also been reluctant to send long-range rockets due to concerns that Ukrainian forces could use them to hit targets within Russia.

Stoltenberg said the alliance would "ensure that Ukraine prevails" against Russia, but did not hold out any immediate prospect of alliance membership.

"Ukraine's future is in NATO, all allies agree on that. At the same time, the main focus of the alliance, or allies now, is to ensure that Ukraine prevails," he said.

He also said the issue of membership would be "high on the agenda" at the NATO summit due to take place in July in Vilnius.

"NATO stands with you today, tomorrow, and for as long as it takes," he said.

Stoltenberg's Thursday trip to Ukraine was not announced ahead of time, in line with a policy followed by many Western officials who have visited Ukraine over the past year, most notably U.S. President Joe Biden's surprise trip to Kyiv in February.

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At the same time, the NATO chief's visit comes ahead of an expected Ukrainian counter-offensive.

Russian officials argue that NATO deliveries of military aid to Kyiv prove that the alliance and the United States are waging a proxy war in Ukraine.

The Kremlin said on Thursday that preventing Ukraine from joining the Western military alliance remains one of the main objectives of its invasion.

"Otherwise, it will pose a serious danger to our country, to its security," the Kremlin said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has claimed that he had no choice but to send troops into Ukraine to stop it from joining NATO.

But Western diplomats have been candid about Ukraine's potential membership in the military alliance, saying it remains a distant prospect.

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