

At the **crossroads**

Bush visit and NATO summit promise to clarify Ukraine's geopolitical position

Taras Kuzio Business Ukraine

President George W. Bush will be in Ukraine for a two-day visit this week before flying direct to Bucharest for a NATO summit that will address the issue of the Ukrainian government's recent request for a Membership Action Plan. With opinion divided both within Ukraine and throughout the region over the country's relations with the military alliance and Russia voicing its staunch opposition to any strengthening of ties, much will depend on attitudes among the Old Europe group of NATO members led by Germany. Bush's visit is set to deliberately coincide with NATO's April 2-4 summit in Bucharest, a gathering that is set to be dominated by two issues: NATO's difficult ongoing military operation in Afghanistan and further rounds of NATO enlargement in the western Balkans and Ukraine and Georgia. Russian opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia is long standing but has become more outspoken in recent months, while America has consistently been an advocate of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration since the early 1990s.

A long overdue visit

President Bush had planned to visit Ukraine in June 2006 but this was cancelled after post-election talks to form an Orange coalition collapsed. In both 2006 and 2008, the US sought to publicly show its support for the spread of democracy by greeting an Orange government committed to Trans-Atlantic integration.

During the Clinton era Ukraine had very good relations with the US, even becoming the third largest recipient of US aid after Israel and Egypt. US-Ukraine relations deteriorated during Leonid Kuchma's second term in office and Bush's first term in office in 2000-2004. The reasons were two-fold: Scandals in Ukraine (Kuchmagate and Kolchugagate) and the US-Russian partnership that emerged after the 9/11 terror attacks on the US.

Kuchma attempted to improve relations by sending Ukrainian troops to Iraq. The Ukrainian contingent was the third largest and the largest from a non-NATO member country. Ukraine also officially declared its intention to seek NATO membership in July 2002, not by coincidence when Bush was visiting Moscow where the NATO-Russian Council was unveiled. President Kuchma and then Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich outlined plans for Ukraine to join a Membership Action Plan (MAP) in 2004 and to join NATO by 2006.

Manufacturing anti-American sentiment

Attempts by the Kuchma administration to improve bilateral relations with America were largely undermined by their own actions. In the 2002 parliamentary and 2004 presidential elections the Kuchma regime and the Yanukovich campaign unleashed a stream of anti-American rhetoric. A virulently anti-American documentary entitled PR was made, with the assistance of former Financial Times Kyiv correspondent Charles Clover, for the 2002 elections.

The purpose of these campaigns (the latter unleashed at a time when Ukraine had large numbers of troops in Iraq supporting the US-led coalition) was to undermine the national democratic opposition by tainting it as an instrument of American foreign policy. As part of this campaign rumours had been spread since 2001 that then Prime Minister Viktor

Yushchenko's wife, the American-born Kataryna Chumachenko, was allegedly a CIA agent. In addition, the documentary PR and numerous media outlets controlled by the Kuchma regime claimed that a US conspiracy was behind the Mykola Melnychenko tapes that nearly brought down Kuchma in the winter of 2000-2001. Similar mutterings of an alleged US conspiracy were made during the Orange Revolution.

This fanning of anti-Americanism, coupled with scandals related to Kuchma's alleged involvement in the murder of journalist Georgi Gongadze and the selling of Kolchuga military radars to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, made it impossible for Bush to visit Ukraine during his first term. US-Ukraine relations improved after Yushchenko's election and in April 2005 the Ukrainian President paid a highly successful visit to the US. Washington-Kyiv relations were set to regain the momentum they had achieved under Clinton.

Departure from Russian propaganda principles

Anti-Americanism had always been largely artificial in Ukraine and was imported wholesale from Russia during and after the Kuchmagate crisis. Unlike in Russia where anti-Americanism has widespread public support, it found little public support except among the diehard old guard of the extreme left and Crimean separatists.

Ironically anti-Americanism became passé after the Orange Revolution when the political force that had fanned it the most – the Party of Regions – ditched its Russian election consultants in place of American ones. The Party of Regions has therefore shifted 180 degrees from promoting anti-Americanism with Russian consultants while sending troops to Iraq and supporting Ukraine's NATO membership to using American consultants while now opposing NATO membership. Will the "real" Party of Regions please stand up and reveal itself?

Yuliaphobia derailed Ukraine's drive to NATO and plans for Bush's first visit in 2006. In 2006 President Yushchenko's apparent inability to place broad political interests over and above personal friction with Tymoshenko prevented Ukraine's progress towards NATO membership. Following the 2006 elections, Ukraine had a far better chance of receiving a NATO MAP than this year. The arguments of Old Europe against giving Ukraine a NATO MAP received less recognition ahead of the November 2006 Riga summit than they are receiving today ahead of the April Bucharest summit of NATO.

Germany doing the Kremlin's bidding

The subjects of Afghanistan and NATO enlargement have divided Trans-Atlantic relations at a time when relations between Old Europe and New Europe have only partially recovered since their nose-dive five years ago during the invasion of Iraq. At the centre of both issues is Germany's newly assertive nationalism that revealed itself during the 2003 Iraqi crisis and then obtained widespread public expression during the summer 2006 World Cup.

Germany has refused to commit additional troops to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan or to send existing ones to combat zones. Germany has turned down US and NATO requests to have its troops deploy in Afghanistan's south where US, British and





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IMAGE: UNIAN

» Canadian forces are taking the brunt of the fierce battle against Taliban-led forces.

Divisions over Afghanistan and NATO enlargement reflect a NATO alliance fundamentally divided between Old Europe led by Germany and New Europe led by the US. Standing behind Germany is Russia in a new pact that has historic precedents in the inter-war period and opens up strategic questions for the future of NATO and the EU's energy independence from Russia that Germany seems hell bent on undermining.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel held two days of talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on March 8, two days after NATO's meeting of member country foreign ministers. After her Moscow meeting Germany's opposition to NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia perceptibly hardened.

Ukraine and Georgia: A bridge too far?

Ukraine and Georgia are the two most problematic NATO membership candidate countries because they are geographically located within the CIS, an area that Russia sees as its sphere of influence. Both countries continue to host Russian military bases and Moscow has issued a series of strongly worded public statements warning of the dire consequences for regional security if MAPs are offered to the two former Soviet republics.

Chancellor Merkel has argued against Georgian membership by pointing towards NATO's unwillingness to accept a country with two frozen conflicts (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) that could exacerbate relations with Russia. Such a policy is disingenuous to Germany's own history as West Germany was brought into NATO when a frozen conflict existed in East Germany, which remained under Soviet occupation from until 1991. Cyprus was also integrated into the EU in 2004 despite a frozen conflict existing on its territory since 1974.

More importantly, Germany's use of two frozen conflicts as justification for blocking Georgia's path to NATO membership undermines a long-standing cornerstone of NATO policy. Namely, not permitting an outside country to use a veto over NATO policy. Germany is in effect deferring to Russia.

Low public support unexceptional

Germany has also used the issue of low public support as an argument against NATO granting Ukraine and Georgia MAPs. While Ukraine currently has low levels of public support for

NATO membership of approximately 25% the German authorities seem unaware that a recent referendum in Georgia gave 72% in support of NATO membership.

During Ukraine's 17 years of independence, popular support for joining NATO has fluctuated between one third and one quarter. However, repeated opinion polls demonstrate that a large number of Ukrainians remain undecided. As a swing group they could be persuaded to support NATO aspirations ahead of the referendum traditionally held prior to joining NATO.

Public support for NATO membership in Ukraine is actually no lower than it was most post-communist states that joined in earlier enlargements. Of the ten new members, only Poland and Romania stand out with high levels of support while the remainder had levels reminiscent of Ukraine before their governments launched information campaigns.

Exaggerated role of post-Soviet Russian minorities

Ukraine's Russian-speaking population, often touted by Old Europe as another obstacle to Kyiv's NATO aspirations, is in fact proportionately the same as that of Estonia and far smaller than that of Latvia whose capital Riga, like Kyiv, is a Russian-speaking city. NATO already includes two countries with sizeable Russian-speaking populations. Nor would NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia bring NATO to Russia's borders for the first time, as Russia has bordered four NATO countries since 2004.

Balkans Yes, Ukraine No?

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The US has lobbied intensely within NATO for MAPs, widely understood to be the preparatory stage for NATO membership, to be offered in Bucharest to Ukraine and Georgia. Bush's visit to Ukraine ahead of the NATO summit is seen as a strong show of US support for NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia.

A letter backing MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia was sent to NATO in late March signed by the governments of Canada and nine New Europe members of NATO who joined the organisation

during two earlier waves of enlargement in 1999 and 2004. Hungary, which is currently led by a Socialist government more sympathetic to Russia than its predecessors, did not sign.

Ukraine's 14-year record of co-operation with NATO is unparalleled and should be taken into account in any discussion over the country's membership prospects. Ukraine joined the Partnership for Peace programme (PfP) in 1994, the same year it was launched by NATO, and has been one of its most active members. Three years later NATO and Ukraine signed a Charter on Distinctive Partnership in Madrid (only Russia has signed a similar treaty with NATO).

Ukraine already has a MAP-Light

In diplomatic language reminiscent of Old Europe's opposition to Turkish membership of the EU, Germany seeks to offer Ukraine and Georgia an unclear compromise that would be less than a MAP. Germany, France and Austria are supportive of offering Turkey a vacuous "Enhanced Agreement" rather than full EU membership.

Any MAP-light proposal risks ultimately damaging NATO's credibility as a compromise has already been in place for the last five years. The existing NATO-Ukraine Action Plan (AP) is widely acknowledged as being little different to a MAP. Former US Ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer commented to Business Ukraine: "We told Ukrainian officials in early 2003 that the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan agreed at the November 2002 Prague summit was 90-95% of a MAP. The main difference was in the title." Ukraine has successfully delivered five Action Plans to NATO ahead of the Bucharest summit.

At the geopolitical crossroads

Both Ukraine and Georgia are young democracies that see the future of their countries in the Euro-Atlantic community of nations. Their democratic progress is far greater than that of Romania or that of the three Western Balkan states which were all invited into MAPs at the end of the 1990s.

If the alliance decides against offering MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia, doubts would grow over whether NATO still pursues its long-standing open door policy. NATO will have ultimately shown that Russia does indeed have a veto that is delivered through Berlin. ●

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Viktor Yushchenko, Ukrainian President

"These are attempts to leave Ukraine in a position in which it would be unable to protect its security against threats. This is not acceptable. We are a sovereign nation. For Ukraine to be or not to be in NATO means to be or not to be a sovereign Ukraine. The Membership Action Plan does not pose any threat to any single neighbour of Ukraine, including Russia. Apparently (the Kremlin) wants to see Ukraine as Russia's neighbourhood without

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clear political sovereignties or a contemporary defence security policy. Public support is growing, and it might reach 60%-70% in two years, in contrast to the current 30%."

Dmitry Medvedev, Russian President-elect

"The moves of Georgia and Ukraine towards

NATO are extremely troublesome for the existing structure of European security. We are not happy about the situation around Georgia and Ukraine. No state can be pleased about having representatives of a military bloc to which it does not belong coming close to its borders. This is something that is even more difficult to explain when the vast majority of citizens of one of the states, for example of Ukraine, are categorically against joining NATO while the government of this state follows a different policy. At the very least in such a situations it is usual to hold a referendum."

Borys Tarasyuk, Former Ukrainian Foreign Minister

"NATO will accept a democratic country which fits with values that the NATO member countries have united around. Are there Ukrainians against Ukraine being a democratic state that respects the rule of law, with unbiased courts and without corruption? From a geopolitical point of view, Ukraine will have a chance to use its existing military potential for common aims of collective security of NATO member countries. Ukraine will participate in the decision making process on security issues in the Euro-Atlantic region and will get guarantees on its own security since an attack against one NATO member country is seen as an attack against the entire alliance. In fact, that will put an end to discussion over Ukraine's geopolitical position. Russia will be forced to cease its attempts to renew its dominating influence on Ukraine and to drag Ukraine away from the democratic European community."

Yulia Tymoshenko, Ukrainian Prime Minister

"Only recently, NATO was the Soviet Union's number one enemy. Some Ukrainians still think this way. On the other hand, many people see Ukraine joining the alliance as a mechanism to defend national sovereignty and guarantee the country's security. Everything has changed dramatically in today's world. I don't know any country which does not co-operate with NATO in some way or another, including the Russian Federation. It

is legitimate for any country to create its own security system, especially in those countries which are involved in geopolitical relations that determine a need to develop a national security system."

Vladimir Putin, Russian President

"Ukraine's NATO membership bid raises the question for Russia of the need for retaliatory actions. It's frightening not just to say, but even to think, that in response to such a step, Russia will have to point its warheads at Ukrainian territory."

Dmytro Vydrin, Head of the Integration and Development Institute, Kyiv

"If we had joined the Alliance in the late 1990s, we would have gained huge advantages: many countries have rushed into the European Union through the NATO gate. It opened access to certain funds, resources, technology, and reform tools. NATO was a problem-free organisation in those days, with which co-operation produced nothing but positives. Today, NATO has a slew of problems, and is undergoing a bulk of challenges that it cannot find answers to. That's why I support non-alignment for Ukraine to any military or political organisations, both in the West and in the East, unless the problems in these organisations can be ironed out. Then we'll see where the advantages and disadvantages are. We should not join the alliance unless it solves its own problems."

Dmitry Rogozin, Russian Ambassador to NATO

"Participants in the upcoming summit will likely decide to postpone any invitation to Ukraine and Georgia, because everybody realises that under the current situation in Georgia and Ukraine, NATO membership will lead to complete destabilisation in these regions, which cannot be in Europe's interests. Russia's concerns over the issue, a lack of public support in Ukraine over the issue and Georgia's territorial disputes all point to the fact that the issue will be postponed indefinitely." ●