



UKRAINE: Political wrangling obstructs foreign policy

Monday, September 29 2008

EVENT: President Viktor Yushchenko meets US President George Bush in Washington today.

SIGNIFICANCE: The Russian-Georgian conflict has placed Ukraine in one of the most challenging security contexts for any former Soviet state, and the US government hopes the meeting will reassure Yushchenko that Washington remains committed to Ukraine's security and sovereignty. However, while Kiev perceives an increased threat from Russia, persistent domestic political instability has dimmed Ukraine's prospects for integrating with the West.

ANALYSIS: Russia's military offensive against Georgia and subsequent recognition of South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence have heightened Ukrainians' fears about Russia's territorial designs on Crimea. The Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) is based on the peninsula until 2017, and on September 17, the Crimean parliament passed a resolution asking Kiev to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent.

The opposition Party of Regions, which controls the Crimean parliament, has dismissed the idea of a 'Russian threat' to Ukraine. It is unclear whether most Ukrainians share this view. A September poll demonstrated that approximately 59% of Ukrainians favour "independent but friendly" relations with Moscow, despite Russia's increased assertiveness in the former Soviet space.

However, Ukraine's security options vis-a-vis the West are limited.

NATO. Although the alliance is still deeply divided over whether and how to offer Ukraine stronger prospects for NATO membership, President Viktor Yushchenko has used the conflict in Georgia as justification for accelerating Ukraine's accession to NATO. Both Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko believe Ukraine should receive a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), and their views on transatlantic integration have not fundamentally changed in the aftermath of the war.

Nonetheless, Ukraine's progress towards NATO will be damaged by the collapse of the 'Orange coalition' between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko:

- At NATO's Bucharest summit in April, Western European alliance members cited domestic political instability and low public support for NATO accession as two key challenges that must be addressed for Ukraine to receive a MAP.
- The collapse of the Orange coalition has reinforced scepticism in Western Europe about whether Ukraine is ready for the MAP process.
- Political instability has also directly influenced the government's failure to improve low public support -- averaging at about 20% over the past five years -- for NATO membership.
- Although the Tymoshenko government allocated the largest budgetary outlay for a pro-NATO information campaign since Yushchenko became president in January 2005, the government's future remains in doubt. The NATO information programme will almost certainly succumb to continued political instability.

Relations with Russia aside, the domestic political wrangling that culminated in the governing coalition's collapse on September 3 will probably provide NATO foreign ministers with sufficient justification not to extend a MAP to Ukraine at their December review meeting.

EU. There are also fault lines within the EU over whether to extend concrete accession prospects to Ukraine. France, Germany, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands have been particularly sceptical of Ukraine's suitability for prospective EU membership, and the EU has stated that enlargement remains on hold until the Lisbon Treaty is ratified.

At the September 9 EU-Ukraine summit ([see EU/UKRAINE: EU membership promise remains implicit - September 8, 2008](#)) an Association Agreement was signed to replace the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement adopted in 1998. The new agreement -- unlike those signed with Central-East European states in the 1990s -- does not offer Ukraine concrete prospects for membership. However, the EU has offered to sign a deep free-trade agreement and adopt a visa-free regime.

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In the aftermath of the Georgian crisis, Tymoshenko raised the possibility of increasing Ukraine's involvement in the European Security and Defence Programme (ESDP). Proponents of ESDP involvement, such as Deputy Prime Minister Hryhoriy Nemyria, argue that it would fill a security vacuum well before Ukraine becomes a NATO or EU member. However, the proposal faces scepticism from Ukraine's elites, most of whom know little about the ESDP.

Domestic disarray. Ukraine's policymakers are deeply divided over how Kiev should manage its foreign affairs, and these rifts have only been exacerbated by the Russian-Georgian conflict. Although parliamentarians tabled nine resolutions on the crisis, they failed to adopt any; this stalemate reflects domestic political considerations as well as genuine disagreements over Ukraine's strategic orientation:

1. **Yushchenko's strategies.** Yushchenko and the pro-presidential Our Ukraine-People's Self-Defence (NU-NS) have adhered to a stridently anti-Russian stance in the aftermath of the war in Georgia. Yushchenko has been an ardent advocate of Georgia's territorial integrity, and on August 13, issued a decree restricting the operations of BSF vessels, personnel and aircraft. BSF ships had participated in the Russian offensive against Georgia, and Yushchenko argued that Kiev could be held accountable for the conduct of Russian military forces based on Ukrainian territory.

However, Yushchenko's foreign policy stance was often overshadowed by manoeuvres to precipitate the governing coalition's collapse by accusing Tymoshenko of betraying Ukraine's strategic interests (see [UKRAINE: Coalition collapse threatens stability - September 5, 2008](#)). Yushchenko and his allies alleged that Tymoshenko had struck a deal with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, whereby Tymoshenko would modify her electoral bloc's generally pro-Western policies in exchange for Moscow's support in Ukraine's January 2010 presidential election. However, there is no evidence of a Putin-Tymoshenko agreement, and the prosecutor's office has refused to open an investigation against Tymoshenko.

2. **Tymoshenko's pragmatism.** Tymoshenko has been less strident in expressing support for Georgia's territorial integrity, and has criticised military actions by both Russia and Georgia. Yushchenko claimed that Tymoshenko opposed his decrees imposing restrictions on BSF movements, but her government endorsed the BSF restrictions.

Tymoshenko's relative moderation has more to do with domestic political imperatives than a desire to ingratiate herself with Moscow. Her eponymous political bloc (BYuT) has aspirations of becoming Ukraine's first truly national political party, and in the 2007 parliamentary elections, BYuT successfully expanded beyond its traditional electoral base in western and central Ukraine. Tymoshenko's position on the Russian-Georgian conflict is broadly supported among the Ukrainian public, and her balanced stance will probably serve her well if early elections are held.

3. **Divided opposition.** The generally Moscow-friendly Party of Regions has also been divided over whether to support Georgia's territorial integrity. In a parliamentary vote on recognising South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent, most Regions deputies supported independence. However, 36 deputies belonging to Regions' more pragmatic, business-oriented faction did not support the resolution, nor did National Security and Defence Council Secretary Raisa Bohatyriova. Bohatyriova is a former leading member of Regions who was expelled from the party after publicly supporting Yushchenko's position on Georgia.

Energy imperatives. Kiev's relations with Russia are also coloured by mutual energy dependence as well as aspirations of making Ukraine a transit corridor for non-Russian hydrocarbons (see [UKRAINE: Challenges remain for Caspian oil transit - June 10, 2008](#)). Despite assurances from Tymoshenko this summer, it is unlikely that Ukraine has solidified an agreement with Russia on how much it will pay for natural gas from January. Gazprom CEO Aleksei Miller had threatened to raise Ukraine's gas prices to more than double the 2008 rate of 179.5 dollars per thousand cubic metres. Tymoshenko has noted that such a rapid price increase would have serious consequences for Ukraine's economic growth, which is already slowing amid spiralling inflation and the global financial crisis (see [UKRAINE: Slowing growth suggests stagflation risk - August 14, 2008](#)).

CONCLUSION: A change in Ukraine's geopolitical orientation does not lie at the heart of the political crisis in Ukraine, as neither the president nor the prime minister have fundamentally altered their support for European and transatlantic integration. However, the coalition collapse has seriously weakened Ukraine's pro-Western political leaders, hindering the country's prospects for integration into NATO and the EU as Russia reasserts its authority in the former Soviet space

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