

Fitting Ukraine into the Iraqi picture

By Taras Kuzio,
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Now that the war is over and we have entered the post-Saddam era, three questions confront us in this period.

First, did the United Kingdom and the United States tell the truth about weapons of mass destruction, the alleged main reason to go to war? None have been found.

Second, will a democratic regime emerge in Iraq? The United States says that any regime that emerges must be democratic, thus seeming to rule out an Iranian-style Islamic theocracy, a return of the Baathists or a rise of the Communists.

Finally, how does Ukraine fit into this picture?

End of the Cold War

The administration of George W. Bush is immensely different from that of his predecessor, Bill Clinton. Bush has no qualms in openly and loudly proclaiming that the United States is the victor over communism and that the West (meaning the United States) now leads the world. Lip service (unlike in the Clinton era) is no longer paid to Russia's sensitivities. Russia, after all, claims to be the successor state to the Soviet Union.

Russia and its allies in what U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld calls "old Europe," particularly France, obviously take issue with the Bush doctrine. Neither country has the military or economic clout to back up their claims to be great powers. The only way their Cold War status of great powers can still be recognized is through the United

Nations, where they are permanent members of the Security Council. In the case of France, it is also through creating a new European Union. France's vision of the new European Union would not compliment, but rival, the United States.

The Iraqi armed forces used weapons and tactics mostly from the former Soviet Union. Iraq found its 400,000-man military rapidly outflanked and defeated by 80,000 United States and British troops. Likewise, Ukraine's military desperately needs tactical reform and equipment refitting that moves its antiquated armed forces away from rigid Soviet-style formations into smaller, more mobile units.

How does Ukraine fit in?

During the Iraqi crisis, Ukraine sent a decontamination battalion to Kuwait, making it the only CIS member-state to send a military unit into the region during the conflict. As is usual in Ukrainian foreign policy, it was never clear if Ukraine was, or was not, a member of the coalition. Presidential administration head Viktor Medvedchuk said adamantly that Ukraine was not. U.S. Ambassador Carlos Pascual said that Ukraine had asked to be placed on the list of countries in Bush's "Coalition of the Willing." As Americans say, "Go figure."

In the debate raging between the pro-American "new Europe" and anti-Iraq-war "old Europe," Kyiv had little to say. Practically the entire post-communist new world outside the CIS, together with Uzbekistan and Georgia, backed the United States. Poland in particular was a vociferous ally. Where was Ukraine?

Ukraine's absence from this debate is a reflection of foreign policy paralysis in the approach to the post-Kuchma era. What is good for Ukraine's foreign policy has nothing to do with national interests (which the presidential administration has never be able to define), but is related to President Leonid Kuchma's personal fate. The central aim

of Ukrainian foreign policy is to ensure Kuchma's easy transition to pensioner status.

Ukraine was also absent from this new Europe-wide debate because its European aspirations are taken seriously neither domestically by the executive nor externally by the European Union. Ukraine, a country that is large in territory and population, is not taken seriously simply because its elites do not take it sufficiently serious.

Bush Doctrine and Ukraine

Here is where the Bush doctrine comes in. Loyal allies are rewarded while disloyal ones are ignored or punished. France has suffered the worst with its Ambassador to the United States claiming in an unprecedented manner that U.S. officials were undertaking a disinformation campaign alleging French support for Saddam Hussein.

Ukraine should clearly position itself in the non-French camp along with the remainder of new Europe and Britain. France has long preferred deepening the EU to widening it, and was a long-time opponent of EU enlargement. France's attitudes towards NATO have been ambivalent or hostile since the 1960s when it pulled out of NATO's military arm.

France now fears that the inclusion of the new Europe within the EU next year will bring in a de facto pro-U.S. lobby. Ukraine should only welcome that. This pro-U.S. lobby from the new Europe will be backed by Britain in its preference for widening to deepening of the EU. Widening gives post-Kuchma Ukraine a future chance of getting inside the EU. Deepening does not.

U.S. relations with Russia have also suffered, a step that is favorable for Ukraine. Since 1992, whenever U.S.-Russian relations have declined, Ukrainian-U.S. relations have improved. The same has

occurred in reverse. After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, U.S. relations with Russia improved at the expense of Ukraine.

Compare how the United States dealt with arms sales from Russia and Ukraine to Iraq. The United States had known since early 2002 that Russia (and its satrapy, Belarus) had been selling weapons to Iraq in contravention of the UN embargo imposed after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991. Belarus was publicly fingered by the United States while Russia was diplomatically and quietly asked to halt such flows. The United States only went public about Russia after its coalition invaded Iraq.

Then came loud, public U.S. allegations against Ukraine in September 2002 about the alleged sale of Kolchuga radars to Iraq in 2000. The manner in which Ukraine was fingered was diametrically different to the way the United States handled Russia. Ironically, only Russian and Belarusian arms have been found in Iraq since Saddam's overthrow. Ukrainian Kolchugas (like the weapons of mass destruction) are nowhere to be found.

Will Iraq rescue Kuchma?

The sending of 2,000 Ukrainian troops to Iraq to serve as peacekeeping forces is an attempt to repair the damage caused by the Kolchuga scandal. If they serve in the Polish-controlled sector between Baghdad and Basra, all the better. This would serve to solidify Ukrainian-Polish-U.S.-NATO relations. The NATO-backed Polish-Ukrainian battalion could be the backbone of this cooperation in Iraq. Poland has long been Ukraine's main proponent in both NATO and the European Union.

Based on the Bush punish-reward doctrine, Ukraine's decision to send troops to Iraq will earn Kyiv tremendous goodwill in Washington and repair damaged relations. A Washington conference in May this year at the Center for Strategic and International Studies on NATO-Ukrainian

relations hinted that an application from Ukraine for NATO membership would be warmly received.

Our Ukraine deputy and head of parliament's committee on Euro-Atlantic integration, former Foreign Minister Borys Tarasiuk, has urged Ukraine to send a formal membership application to NATO. Yevhen Marchuk, secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, rejects such a step as premature, arguing Ukraine is not yet ready.

What Marchuk was really referring to was the 2004 Kuchma succession crisis and its negative impact on Ukrainian foreign policy. Kuchma favors a warming of relations with the United States as this unblocks his isolation in the West since 2001 when the Kuchma-gate tapes scandal began. At the same time, Kuchma (unlike Tarasiuk or other pro-NATO elites in Ukraine) has no need for NATO membership, as this would alienate Russian President Vladimir Putin.

From the United States' and NATO's point of view, Ukrainian troops in Iraq will not return U.S.-Ukrainian relations to the high level that existed in the Clinton era. That would be impossible under Kuchma. The Bush doctrine values trust and Kuchma broke that in July 2000 when he authorized the sale of Kolchuga radars to Iraq. The Ukrainian authorities reluctantly admitted that the meeting had taken place but insist the sale was later blocked by the Security Service. Again, "Go figure."

2004 and beyond

Participation in Iraq peacekeeping will promote Ukraine's chances to gain NATO membership in the third round of enlargement at the 2007 summit. A new president will also be a help. But, success is not completely dependent on Kuchma's departure but on two other factors.

First, will his replacement be pro-NATO? Of the possible presidential candidates, only Serhy Tyhytko can be said to be pro-NATO.

Second, the Ukrainian military and foreign policy establishment have long been ready for NATO. This cannot be said of the presidential administration. Joining NATO (and the more hypothetical European Union) requires adherence to Western values, which the executive does not espouse. The gap between pro-Euro-Atlantic rhetoric and Ukrainian reality is why the West is experiencing “Ukraine fatigue.” This cannot be overcome, no matter how many Ukrainian troops are sent to Iraq.

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