

END NOTE

THE UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT'S NATO STRATEGY

By Taras Kuzio

What has Iraq got to do with U.S.-Ukrainian relations and Ukraine's desire to join NATO? Judging by the meeting of countries interested in sending peacekeeping troops to Iraq on 22 May in Warsaw and earlier signals from the U.S. and NATO, the answer is: a great deal.

U.S.-Ukrainian relations deteriorated sharply last September after Washington publicly accused Ukraine of supplying Kolchuga radars to Iraq two years earlier. The Kolchuga scandal was behind the implicit warning issued to Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, when he was told he would not be welcome at the NATO Prague summit in November -- a warning he duly ignored. But the war in Iraq has provided Kyiv, which has consistently cooperated with NATO far more actively than has any other CIS state, with a golden opportunity to redeem itself in the eyes of both NATO and the United States.

Ukraine joined the coalition to disarm Iraq and sent an anti-nuclear, -biological, and -chemical (NBC) battalion to Kuwait. Ukraine will also send 2,000 troops -- including a command-center brigade, a sapper, and an engineering battalion -- that may be based in the Polish stabilization sector of south-central Iraq. Anatoliy Hrytsenko, head of the Razumkov Center in Kyiv, said, "The U.S. considers [such a deployment] a real step toward America, a chance for later serious political support to Ukraine on the path to NATO."

Kuchma's foreign ministers between 1994 and 2000, Hennadiy Udovenko and Borys Tarasyuk, both wholeheartedly supported Ukraine's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. (Udovenko and Tarasyuk have each led the Ukrainian Popular Movement [Rukh] at one point or another.) Nevertheless, Ukraine did not openly declare its intention to join NATO until May 2001, and it still has not submitted a formal application.

Kuchma regularly offloads responsibility for Ukraine's domestic and foreign problems onto others. Ukraine's poor international image, he claims, is due to opposition Internet websites. Similarly, Kuchma blames the slow pace of Ukraine's integration into "Euro-Atlantic" structures on Mykola Melnychenko, the presidential guard who triggered the "Kuchmagate" scandal by making public tape recordings of incriminating conversations in Kuchma's office.

He also has blamed inactivity on the part of a parliamentary committee on Euro-Atlantic integration created after the March 2002

elections and headed by Tarasyuk. Tarasyuk has rejected those accusations and invited Kuchma to debate the issue publicly, an offer that Kuchma has so far refused. Tarasyuk has correctly pointed out that the Ukrainian Constitution specifies that responsibility for foreign policy lies with the chief executive. Moreover, as Tarasyuk and Our Ukraine politicians including leader Viktor Yushchenko have recently stated, the West is confused by Ukraine's foreign policy and its seemingly contradictory efforts simultaneously to create a CIS free-trade zone and to attempt to join the EU.

Tarasyuk's criticism of Kuchma's passivity (in not formally applying to join NATO) was echoed by U.S. and NATO officials at a high-level conference on NATO-Ukraine relations at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies in May. Participants in the conference, which included 12 of 26 NATO defense ministers, repeated hints given to Ukraine at NATO's pre-Prague summit in Reykjavik in May 2002 by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell: that an application to join NATO would be received positively. The message conveyed was that Ukraine could be rewarded for its support of the U.S. stance in the Iraqi conflict and its contribution to stabilization efforts in Iraq by being invited to join NATO at the alliance's 2007 summit along with Croatia, Macedonia, and Albania.

Tarasyuk has argued that a country should first apply to join NATO and then proceed in stages to achieve the goal of a formal invitation. But Yevhen Marchuk, secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, countered that Ukraine needs first to go through different stages of preparation for NATO membership, and then apply to join the trans-Atlantic defense alliance.

Marchuk's approach should engender concern, as it is contrary to the path that Ukraine has always demanded from the European Union. Ukraine has long insisted that the EU give it a signal of potential future membership by signing an Association Agreement with Ukraine. After that, the argument goes, Ukraine would begin to implement EU reforms. Marchuk would seem to be insisting -- unlike Tarasyuk, who advocates a similar procedure with regard to both NATO and the EU -- that Ukraine be allowed to adopt a different approach to NATO: ignore the implicit invitation to apply for membership extended in 2002-03, undertake the required steps, and only then formally applying to join.

Although the United States and NATO are both well disposed toward a possible Ukrainian application to join NATO, it is highly unlikely at this juncture that Kuchma would risk jeopardizing his personal fate by endorsing a departure in Ukrainian foreign policy that would alienate Russia. Russian commentators and Ambassador to Ukraine Viktor Chernomyrdin have repeatedly stated that Russia would view a Ukrainian application to join NATO as an unfriendly act. Kuchma has assiduously solicited President Vladimir Putin's support since relations with the West deteriorated in the wake of the Kuchmagate crisis in November 2000, since Putin and Russia hold the key to the 2004 transition to a post-Kuchma era. The choice of Kuchma as head of the CIS heads of state council, the creation of a CIS Free Trade Zone and the signing this month of a Russian-Ukrainian "strategic partnership" are all steps in the same strategy to ensure

that Kuchma's chosen successor wins the 2004 elections by appealing to voters in the more populous, Russian-speaking eastern part of the country.

Applying for NATO membership now -- as Tarasyuk, the United States, and NATO are urging, or at least tacitly encouraging, Kyiv to do -- would undermine Kuchma's 2004 strategy. In Kuchma's eyes, NATO can and should wait until he has secured immunity from prosecution through the election of his chosen successor.

Russia, for its part, knows that Ukraine's multivector foreign-policy games have led to "Ukraine fatigue" in Western Europe, and that these games would end if Yushchenko were to win the 2004 presidential election. Yushchenko most likely would follow Tarasyuk's advice and apply for NATO membership first, then ensure that all of the steps required of Ukraine were undertaken.

The choices for Ukraine are twofold: Apply for NATO membership now and hold free elections in 2004 that Yushchenko would almost certainly win; this might, in turn, prompt the EU to alter its stance on Ukraine. Or, alternatively, hold off on applying for NATO membership to guarantee Russian support in ensuring that a Kuchma loyalist is elected through undemocratic presidential elections. That approach would only exacerbate the West's fatigue with Ukraine.

Dr. Taras Kuzio is a resident fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Toronto, and a visiting fellow at the Institute for Security Studies-EU, Paris.