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By Taras Kuzio

On 23 May, National Security and Defense Council (NROB) Secretary Yevhen Marchuk released an unexpected statement saying that the NROB believes "a long-term strategy must be worked out that would enable Ukraine to join the collective-security system upon which NATO is based." Marchuk added that, "There is no future for Ukraine if it remains outside the bloc."

This announcement came as a surprise because Ukraine's foreign policy has lacked any strategic direction for many years. The 2001-04 Ukrainian state program on cooperation with NATO does not mention full membership of the alliance. Nonetheless, Ukraine has always been the most active CIS state cooperating with NATO; therefore it is not surprising that it is also the first CIS state to openly express membership aspirations. Last year Ukraine undertook 500 activities with NATO -- the same number as is planned for this year -- in 23 different areas. Georgia and Azerbaijan are the only two other CIS states that also are seeking NATO membership.

Right up until 23 May, Ukraine's leaders had ruled out NATO membership as an option for Ukraine. In December 2001, Marchuk repeated what President Leonid Kuchma himself has said on many occasions over the last few years: "What is at issue has nothing to do with bidding for NATO membership in 2002. We are not on the waiting list, and Ukraine's entry into NATO is not an issue today." In February, Foreign Minister Anatoliy Zlenko simply talked about replacing the July 1997 Charter on a Distinctive Partnership Between Ukraine and NATO with a new document, arguing that the charter had been exhausted, particularly in the aftermath of the 11 September terrorist attacks on the United States.

The newspaper "Zerkalo nedeli/Dzerkalo tyzhnya" has argued that Ukrainians should remain cautious about Kuchma's intentions because "this is not the first time that [Marchuk] has made statements like this." At a Moscow summit of CIS foreign ministers at the end of May -- just a week after the NROB meeting -- Zlenko still spoke only of upgrading Ukraine's relations with NATO. "It is not our ultimate goal...to join this alliance," he stressed.

It is not coincidental that on the same day as the NROB announcement, U.S. President George W. Bush arrived in Moscow, in

part to finalize the creation of the 19+1 NATO-Russia Council, which will significantly upgrade Russia's cooperation with NATO. In April, Marchuk half jokingly warned that Russia might join NATO before Ukraine and that "the dynamic of Russian cooperation with NATO is outstripping that of Ukraine."

Fearing being sidelined or, worse still, pushed into the Russian sphere of influence, Ukraine was forced to make a public statement for which former Foreign Minister Borys Tarasiuk, former President Leonid Kravchuk, former Rada speaker Ivan Plyushch and Marchuk -- the prime mover behind this decision -- had long pushed. Plyushch said earlier this year: "Ukraine has no wish to become either a bridge or a buffer between Russia and NATO, or between Russia and the EU. Ukraine aspires to be a full-fledged partner of these organizations."

Professor Olexiy Haran of the Kyiv Mohyla Academy's Center for National Security Studies believes that the NROB announcement was cleared at a meeting between Kuchma and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on 17 May prior to its being made public. This hypothesis would seem to be substantiated by the highly muted responses to the announcement from Putin and Russian Ambassador to Ukraine Viktor Chernomyrdin, who is hardly known for his diplomatic restraint. Kuchma may have offered Putin two palliatives for this move, Ukrainian foreign policy experts have speculated. The first was Ukraine's eventual membership in the Eurasian Economic Community (EES), as Kuchma agreed at Sochi that his country would become an associate member of the organization. Second, unconfirmed rumors have circulated that Ukraine may finally agree to an long-standing Russian demand to extend the current lease for the Black Sea Fleet from 20 to 99 years. Chernomyrdin has argued that the fleet "defends the southern coast of Ukraine."

Marchuk also announced on 23 May that the NROB decision means the end of Ukraine's neutrality and "multi-vector" foreign policy. Neutrality will be easy to ditch since it was never internationally recognized and "has always been more a product of virtual reality," "Zerkalo nedeli/Dzerkalo tyzhnya" wrote. "Multi-vectorism" though, has life in it yet. If Ukraine is going west to NATO, it is also going east to the EES.

The first step toward NATO membership, which Marchuk believes is at least five to 10 years away, is a formal decree and the creation in consultation with NATO of a Membership Action Plan (MAP). This plan is likely to be presented formally to NATO Secretary-General Lord George Robertson when he visits Ukraine on 7 July. A MAP will not only require Ukraine to increase its military budget from 1.25 percent to 2 percent of GDP -- the NATO norm -- but also to undertake profound military reform, to place the military under civilian and democratic control, and to increase its interoperability with NATO. But Defense Minister Volodymyr Shkidchenko cautioned after the NROB announcement that, "at the moment, there is no plan to switch the country's army to NATO standards."

Ukraine will be only the second country (after Norway) not to regard NATO membership as a stepping-stone to the EU. True, Kuchma said after the 23 May NROB meeting that Ukraine's decision to seek

NATO membership is "connected with EU integration." "One is impossible without the other," he said flatly. Ukraine's EU aspirations are, however, illusory since the EU refuses to sign an association agreement with Ukraine (or any other CIS state), and Ukraine's domestic reforms entered an "era of stagnation" after Kuchma was elected to a second term in 1999. Even NATO membership will require a greater commitment to democratic and economic reforms than has been evident during Kuchma's second term.

If Ukraine is serious about starting down the road to NATO membership, it must draw up a MAP this year. As Marchuk said, "a Ukrainian application to join now would be ridiculed" unless backed by a MAP. Ukraine is still "very far" from asking to join NATO, Marchuk cautioned last week. And it is as important to remember that "Ukraine's recent history is full of strategic documents, programs, and conceptual frameworks," "Zerkalo nedeli/Dzerkalo tyzhnya" pointed out, that have never been fully implemented, including two separate decrees on cooperation with NATO and the EU.

The implementation of a MAP requires an ideological commitment of the kind demonstrated by the "Vilnius Ten" lobbying group of Central and Eastern European, Balkan, and Baltic postcommunist states that have opted to "re-join Europe" in deed and not just in words. Marchuk believes that Ukraine needs a consolidation of political forces and "society" in order eventually to join NATO. But no such consolidation can take place until after Kuchma leaves office in 2004, as Ukraine's parliament and parties are split into pro- and anti-presidential camps. Consequently, the 23 May NROB announcement appears to be a declaration of intent that is shorn of ideological commitment -- and which will therefore be realized only in the post-Kuchma era.

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