

## **Ukraine decides to join NATO at last.**

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On 23 May, the same day that President George Bush arrived in Moscow for a summit with President Vladimir Putin, National Security and Defense Council Secretary Yevhen Marchuk made a somewhat surprising statement. Ukraine had decided to join NATO. He added that Ukraine's much maligned, ill-conceived and confusing multi-vector foreign policy was now history.

On the surface, the decision may not have looked all that unexpected. After all, ever since NATO's Partnership for Peace was launched in 1994, Ukraine has always been the most active member among the CIS countries. In 1998-1999 Ukraine acted to subvert the CIS by creating the GUUAM regional group along with Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova, and subsequently Uzbekistan. GUUAM has always taken a pro-U.S. and pro-NATO orientation. Uzbekistan joined GUUAM during NATO's 50th anniversary celebrations in Washington in April 1999, right in the middle of the alliance's bombing campaign in Yugoslavia.

In the second half of the 1990s, Ukraine hinted on many occasions that it sought to join NATO. In reality, though, as Marchuk's predecessor as National Security and Defense Council head, Volodymyr Horbulin, admitted at a round-table in London's Royal United Services Institute in 1999, this was just a tactic designed to put pressure on Russia to sign a long-delayed inter-state treaty.

Leonid Kuchma, who came to power in 1994 on a pro-Russian platform, initially believed that he, unlike the country's first President Leonid Kravchuk, could quickly normalize relations with Russia. In fact, Russia continued to refuse to recognize Ukraine's borders and Boris Yeltsin kept postponing his visit to Kyiv.

Ukraine's use of the NATO card worked. When Yeltsin finally flew to Kyiv in May 1997, got off the plane and signed the treaty, it was mainly because of concern about what sort of arrangement Ukraine would be offered at the NATO summit in Madrid two months later. By February 1999, the two houses of the Russian parliament had ratified the treaty, and Ukraine no longer needed to use the NATO card after Spring 1999. Pro-Western Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk was kept on until after Kuchma's re-

election to obtain diplomatic support for Kuchma purported pro-European orientation.

Tarasyuk had obviously taken Ukraine's pro-NATO position too literally, and after Spring 1999 his days were numbered. His support for NATO and EU membership was increasingly at odds with stagnation in reform in 1998-1999. Finally, the new Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was elected in March 2000, demanded the replacement of Tarasyuk with somebody less anti-Russian and pro-NATO.

The years 2000-2002 were not a particularly successful period for Ukraine's leadership and foreign policy. Under Tarasyuk's replacement, Anatoly Zlenko, Ukraine switched to the Herculean task of joining the European Union only, dropping all talk of joining NATO (or "Trans-Atlantic structures"). Back in December 2001, Marchuk himself played down the chances of Ukraine bidding for NATO membership in 2002, saying that Ukraine's entry into NATO was not an issue.

Usually, countries attempt to join NATO as a stepping stone to the EU. It is easier to join NATO, and membership in both organizations tends to be seen as a joint foreign policy goal. Ukraine, however, insisted on doing things in its own way. NATO membership was no longer sought, if it ever had been. Meanwhile, the EU refused to consider signing an agreement on associate membership with Ukraine, which had attempted to speed up its campaign to join after 1998 with two presidential decrees. This was just as democratic and economic reforms were stagnating (with the exception of the brief Viktor Yushchenko government of 1999-2001). The Melnychenko tapes simply provided the EU, and the entire world, with concrete evidence that the Ukrainian regime was in its own Brezhnevite "era of stagnation" and could not hope to become even an associate member of the EU.

To make Ukraine's foreign policy even more confusing, another element was added to its multi-vectorism and plans to join the EU (while adopting decidedly nasty un-European policies at home). Ukraine would now go "To Europe with Russia!" The problem here is that Russia has never expressed any interest in joining the EU or NATO. Whoever dreamt the latest foreign policy line up would have been given an Order of Socialist Labor in the USSR.

## Change of course

Ukraine's foreign policy is prone to abrupt changes of course, since it is conducted by a small coterie of people close to Leonid Kuchma. The last people Kuchma will consult on these changes is the public, of course.

Ukraine made just such an abrupt change of course in May, when it stated its desire for NATO membership. Marchuk's announcement came after another "no neckties" summit between Kuchma and Putin in Sochi. It was at this meeting that Kuchma agreed that Ukraine would join the Eurasian Economic Community, the CIS alternative to the EU, initially as an associate and eventually as a full member.

While Ukraine showed little interest in joining NATO after Tarasyuk's departure, Russia under Putin was moving to consolidate its cooperation with the United States - especially after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. In other words, Ukraine might want to wish to go "To Europe with Russia!" but Russia was not waiting for the Ukrainian slow coach and was already there. Russia has compromised over a Big Bang NATO enlargement this year that will take in five to seven new members, including the three Baltic states, in return for an upgrading of its relationship with NATO.

The arrival of Bush in Moscow to finalise details on a joint declaration that would create a 19 (NATO members) plus one (Russia) NATO-Russia Council threatened to leave Ukraine sidetracked. Kuchma was afraid that Ukraine would be ignored at the NATO summit in Prague this November or, worse still, that a deal would be struck over Ukraine's head whereby it would be consigned to the Russian sphere of influence in the CIS Near Abroad.

Ukraine's decision to upgrade its relationship with NATO from its July 1997 Charter to possibly a Membership Action Plan as the first stage towards future membership cannot, therefore, be seen as the product of a deeply held, ideological desire to re-join Europe, as seems to be the case with the "Vilnius Ten" lobby group of Baltic, Central European and Balkan post-communist states.

## NATO, not EU?

In taking this step, however, Ukraine has set two records. Firstly, the good part is that Ukraine is the first CIS country to state it

would like to join NATO. Georgia and Azerbaijan have talked about this continually since 1999-2000, but nobody in Brussels has taken them seriously (although Turkey wishes they would). Secondly, the bad part is that Ukraine is the only European country that wishes to join NATO while forgetting about the EU. Usually NATO membership is seen as the first stage on the way to the EU, for countries like Turkey, for example. Or, you can forget about NATO and only join the EU, like Sweden or Ireland. Norway is the only country that is a member of NATO, but not of the EU. But Ukraine is not Norway (or Sweden or even Ireland). Ukraine cannot expect to get into NATO if its increasingly authoritarian leadership undertakes antics such as the dubious election of Volodymyr Lytvyn as Rada speaker last month. Fulfilling Ukraine's Membership Action Plan will require a commitment to reforms less demanding than is required for the EU but still greater than any Kuchma and his band of oligarchs are ready for. It will require Ukraine to nearly double its meagre spending on the military to the NATO norm of 2 per cent of GDP. In addition, the Ukrainian authorities need to give more support to the largely uninfluential Kyiv NATO Information and Documentation Centre, which can promote a pro-Western/NATO orientation among the public. Maybe Marchuk has his own idiosyncratic definition of multi-vectorism. This is possible since it is such a malleable concept as to be virtually worthless. But it is really hard to understand how moving West toward NATO and East toward the Eurasian Economic Community represents an end to multi-vectorism.

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