

UKRAINE: Yanukovich NATO switch is mostly tactics

Monday, September 18 2006

EVENT: President Viktor Yushchenko said on September 15 after meeting Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich that the latter's call for a "pause" in Ukraine's bid to join NATO was a mistake and did not coincide with the national interest.

SIGNIFICANCE: Yanukovich's public airing of his party's opposition to NATO membership has brought him into conflict with the president and undermined the political compromise that brought the government into office.

ANALYSIS: Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich visited both EU and NATO leaders in Brussels on September 14, his first visit to the West since returning for a second term in office on August 4. For NATO and the EU, it was an opportunity to assess the new head of government.

Meeting NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and the permanent representatives of the NATO member countries, Yanukovich declared Ukraine's lack of readiness for a Membership Action Plan (MAP), citing low public support for NATO membership. An invitation from NATO to an MAP is equivalent to concluding an association agreement with the EU; both are intended to prepare countries for eventual membership.

Exceeding powers? According to Ukraine's revised constitution, it is the president who directs foreign and defence policy. The president appoints the foreign and defence ministers, the secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, the prosecutor-general and the head of the security service (see [UKRAINE: Turf wars within executive risk stalemate - September 15, 2006](#)).

Both Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk and Defence Minister Anatoly Hrytsenko are long-time advocates of NATO membership. Neither was consulted by Yanukovich about his intention to distance Ukraine from a NATO MAP and future membership. However, Ukraine's revised constitution does not spell out how a prime minister travelling abroad should handle foreign policy and national security questions. Yanukovich's recent visits to Russia to improve relations and negotiate energy prices raised both economic and security questions. On a visit to NATO, the question of membership could hardly be ignored.

Missed opportunity. However, criticising Yanukovich is a distraction from the president's own foreign policy failures. Following the election of the pro-Western and pro-reform Yushchenko in late 2004, NATO in May last year upgraded Ukraine to 'intensified dialogue' status for membership. After free and fair elections in March 2006, Ukraine was on course to be invited to a MAP at the Riga summit in November. NATO linked the offer to the quick creation of a pro-reform coalition. Had an 'Orange' government been in place by May, US President George Bush would have visited Ukraine in mid-June following the EU-US summit. Instead, he visited Hungary (see [EASTERN EUROPE: Enlargement falls off NATO agenda - July 21, 2006](#)).

The compromise to end the post-election deadlock, the Declaration on National Unity, does not mention the MAP. However, Yushchenko has maintained Ukraine's intention to join NATO, in line with Ukrainian legislation since 2002. Yet NATO was no longer in a position to offer an MAP this year. By the time of Yanukovich's visit to Brussels, Ukraine was no longer a candidate and the MAP was no longer a topic for discussion or contention.

Path towards NATO. Ukraine has a long and established record of cooperation with NATO, dating from joining its Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in January 1994. It has achieved a level of cooperation unrivalled in the CIS. Ukraine has since 1997 held annual exercises, both at the multilateral NATO level and the bilateral US and UK levels. These exercises were held under the Leonid Kuchma presidency. During the first Yanukovich cabinet, Ukraine dispatched the fourth-largest contingent to Iraq, in May 2003, and there were no moves to withdraw troops, until the new president, Yushchenko, brought them home in late 2005. Ukraine supported NATO enlargement in 1997-99 and 2002-04, during Kuchma's decade in office, whereas Russia opposed NATO enlargement.

Ukraine first declared its intention to join NATO in July 2002, four months before Yanukovich became prime minister. His first cabinet never rescinded the official position, nor did it declare such a step impermissible because of low public support or the harm it would do to relations with Russia, two of the main arguments Yanukovich used last week in Brussels.

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Campaigning opportunism. Ukraine is the only country aiming to join NATO in which the entire left-wing opposes membership. Yanukovych began to oppose NATO membership during the last month of the 2004 presidential election in which he stood against Yushchenko, alongside raising Russian to the status of second state language and dual citizenship with Russia. All three issues, together with doubling pensions, were aimed at attracting elderly, traditionalist, Russophone, communist-leaning voters.

Following Yushchenko's victory, Yanukovych's Party of Regions and its allies in the Social Democratic United Party (SDPUo) began to support holding a referendum on NATO membership. The SDPUo chairman was Viktor Medvedchuk, who headed the presidential administration during the two-year period in which Ukraine had an official policy of seeking NATO membership. However, this was abandoned in favour of exploiting anti-NATO sentiment to undermine the Yushchenko administration in Russophone eastern and southern Ukraine, which had largely voted for Yanukovych in all three rounds of the 2004 elections. Legislation supporting Ukraine's military cooperation with NATO, the United States and United Kingdom, previously routinely approved by pro-Kuchma centrists, was unable to pass the 2005-06 parliament, preventing foreign troops from exercising in Ukraine and NATO from leasing Ukrainian transport aircraft.

Post-March position. The alliance against NATO and Yushchenko between Regions and the SDPUo disintegrated after the March 26 parliamentary elections, when only Regions of the former pro-Kuchma centrists entered parliament, with 32% of the vote. The campaign to hold a referendum on NATO membership now became less important than entering government. The SDPUo was dropped in favour of holding negotiations with pro-presidential Our Ukraine on establishing a Grand Coalition.

Regions capitalised on divisions within the Orange camp, which proved unable to create a coalition quickly following the elections, and on weak presidential leadership. Anti-NATO and anti-US rallies in the Crimea in May-June, orchestrated by Regions and its left-wing and pan-Slavic allies, led Ukraine to cancel exercises with NATO for the first time. The rallies subsided following the creation of the Anti-Crisis Coalition (ACC) between Regions, the Socialists and the Communists on July 5, following the Socialists' defection from the Orange camp. The Declaration of National Unity was then signed between Yushchenko, Our Ukraine and the three ACC members. On the same day that Yanukovych was confirmed as prime minister, parliament voted to support the holding of PfP and In the Spirit of PfP exercises, with Our Ukraine and Regions voting for, the left against and the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc absent from parliament.

CONCLUSION: Following Yanukovych's surprise return to office, Ukraine is no longer on a fast track to join NATO, and Ukraine is now at the same stage as Georgia. Ukraine is divided between a pro-NATO president and a prime minister who is a post-Soviet centrist with no ideological principles trimming to the current political climate. Although Yanukovych has no interest in NATO membership, his call for a pause is purely opportunistic, capitalising on anti-NATO sentiment. It falls short of ruling out joining NATO in the longer term.

Keywords: EE, RUCIS, EU, Georgia, NATO, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, international relations, politics, social, constitution, foreign policy, government, integration, international law, legislation, military, opposition, party, policy, population, regional, security, summit, talks, transport

Word Count (approx): 1175