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Emerging Threats – Analysis

Outside View: Old, new Europe clash

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By TARAS KUZIO

UPI Outside View Commentator

WASHINGTON, March 31 (UPI) -- President Bush's two-day visit to Kiev on the eve of NATO's April 2-4 summit in Bucharest, Romania, is his first visit to Ukraine and therefore long overdue. His predecessor, Bill Clinton, visited Ukraine on three occasions. Bush's visit to Ukraine ahead of the NATO summit is seen as a strong show of U.S. support for NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia.

Bucharest will be dominated by two issues, NATO's ongoing difficult military operation in Afghanistan and NATO enlargement. Both issues divide trans-Atlantic relations at a time when relations between Old and New Europe have only partially recovered since their nosedive five years ago this month during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

At the center of both issues is Germany's newly assertive nationalism that first found widespread public expression during the summer 2006 World Cup. Divisions over Afghanistan and NATO enlargement reflect an organization fundamentally divided between Old Europe led by Germany and New Europe led by the United States.

Standing behind Germany is Russia in a new pact that has historic precedents and opens up strategic questions for the future of European security. German Chancellor Angela Merkel held two days of talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on March 8, two days after NATO's meeting of NATO ministers of foreign affairs. Germany's

opposition to NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia perceptibly hardened.

ISAF includes 43,250 troops from 40 countries. In addition to most NATO members, four countries seeking NATO membership (Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, Georgia) have also contributed forces. While France contemplates increasing its troops in Afghanistan, and even re-joining NATO's military arm, Germany continues to reject calls to increase its troop size and deploy it to the south where NATO forces are battling Taliban forces.

Dwarfing Afghanistan are divisions between Old and New Europe over NATO enlargement. While Albania, Croatia and Macedonia's membership of NATO is uncontroversial within Old Europe, and they are therefore likely to receive invitations to join NATO in Bucharest, NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia has revealed deep divisions.

The United States has lobbied intensely within NATO for Membership Action Plans, widely understood to be the preparatory stage for NATO membership, to be offered in Bucharest to Ukraine and Georgia. A letter backing MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia was sent to NATO last week signed by Canada and nine New Europe members of NATO that joined the organization during two earlier waves of enlargement in 1999 and 2004.

Germany is Old Europe's chorus leader within NATO against inviting Ukraine and Georgia into MAPs. Looking toward Ukraine, Merkel has argued that low popularity is a major problem while in the case of Georgia she has pointed to two frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both issues are red herrings that merely seek to mask Germany's real motives for opposing NATO's fourth enlargement since the end of the Cold War.

During Ukraine's 17 years of independence, popular support for joining NATO has fluctuated between one-third and one-quarter. A large number of Ukrainians remain undecided and as a swing group could be persuaded to support NATO aspirations ahead of a referendum that is traditionally held many years after entering a MAP on the eve of joining NATO.

Ukraine's support for NATO membership is no lower than most post-communist states that joined in earlier enlargements. Of NATO's 10 new members, only Poland and Romania had high levels of support while the remainder had levels reminiscent of Ukraine before their governments launched information campaigns. Georgia's 72 percent high support for NATO membership is therefore akin to Poland's and Romania's.

Ukraine's Russian-speaking population, often touted by Old Europe as another obstacle to Kiev's NATO aspirations, is the same size as that of Estonia and actually far smaller than that of Latvia. Riga, like Kiev, is a Russian-speaking city. NATO already includes two countries with large Russian-speaking populations and four countries that border Russia.

Ukraine's 14-year record of cooperation with NATO is extensive. Ukraine joined NATO's Partnership for Peace in 1994 and has been one of the most active members. Three years later NATO and Ukraine signed a Charter on Distinctive Partnership in Madrid.

Ukraine outlined its intention to join NATO in July 2002, two years ahead of the election protests that came to be known as the Orange Revolution. President Viktor Yushchenko has relied on legislation introduced under his predecessor, Leonid Kuchma, who together with Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich laid out Ukraine's goal of achieving NATO membership by 2006.

In diplomatic language reminiscent of Old Europe's opposition to Turkish membership in the EU, Germany seeks to offer Ukraine and Georgia an unclear compromise that would be allegedly less provocative to Russia than a MAP. Germany, like France and Austria, is supportive of only offering Turkey a vacuous "Enhanced Agreement" rather than EU membership.

Any new initiative less than a MAP will only sow further confusion as a compromise has already been in place for the last five years, the annual Action Plan developed by NATO for Ukraine that is little different from a MAP. Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer said, "We told Ukrainian officials in early 2003 that the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan

agreed at the November 2002 Prague summit was 90–95 percent of a MAP. The main difference was in the title." Ukraine has already successfully completed five Action Plans.

Both Ukraine and Georgia are young democracies that see the future of their countries in the Euro–Atlantic community of nations. Their democratic progress is far greater than Romania or the three Western Balkan states when they were invited into MAPs at the end of the 1990s.

Not extending MAPs to Ukraine and Georgia, after they have already successfully passed most of the required stages, would be widely seen as generating doubts over NATO's longstanding open–door policy and would deepen divisions within the Alliance that is still recovering from the Iraq crisis. In deferring a decision on MAPs for Ukraine and Georgia, NATO will have served to move its goalposts for geopolitical ends and in doing so show that Russia does indeed have a veto that is delivered through Berlin.

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(Taras Kuzio is a research associate at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at George Washington University and a former head of the NATO Information and Documentation Office in Kiev.)

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