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UKRAINE: NATO Aspiration

EVENT: NATO Secretary General George Robertson will visit Kyiv on July 7, at which time President Leonid Kuchma is scheduled to issue a decree stating the country's desire to join NATO.

SIGNIFICANCE: Kyiv's decision in late May to aim for NATO membership marks a sharp change in Ukrainian policy towards the Alliance. However, it is not clear whether the shift in declaratory policy is matched by a commitment to undertake reforms necessary to achieve Alliance membership.

ANALYSIS: On May 23, the Ukrainian National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) decided to aim for future NATO membership. The decision is to be confirmed by a presidential decree timed to coincide with NATO Secretary General George Robertson's visit to Ukraine on July 7. The decision marks an ostensibly sharp change in Ukrainian foreign policy: Kyiv has for years prioritised close relations with NATO but has thus far demurred on the subject of eventual membership (see OADB, April 17, 2000, IV).

However, the decision stops short of a formal application. Any aspirant member must agree with NATO and then fulfil a Membership Action Plan (MAP) before being considered for admission. Following the May 23 NSDC meeting, council secretary Yevhen Marchuk suggested membership was 5-10 years away, given the demands of satisfying the terms of a MAP. He added that "Ukraine is still very far from applying for membership in NATO".

Policy context. President Leonid Kuchma framed the decision in terms of Ukraine returning to the transatlantic integration focus of foreign policy, rather than a move to join NATO. In the second half of the 1990s, Kuchma adopted this approach in response to what many Ukrainians perceived to be an aggressive Russian policy, including the refusal to recognise Ukraine's borders. By mid-1997, an increasingly close Ukrainian-NATO relationship had succeeded in prompting Moscow to conclude a border agreement. Thereafter, in order to strengthen the country's independence by building ties to the West to counterbalance existing economic and political ties to Russia, Kuchma continued to sponsor a policy of active relations with NATO and the pro-Western GUUAM group (Georgia-Ukraine-Uzbekistan-Azerbaijan-Moldova) within the CIS (see OADB, August 2, 2000, I). GUUAM is now in decline, following the withdrawals of Uzbekistan (de jure) and Moldova (de facto).

Since re-election in 2000, Kuchma has returned to a Russophile policy orientation -- a process assisted by his partial diplomatic isolation in the West following allegations that the president was implicated in the abduction of a journalist (see OADB, February 6, 2001, II). Kuchma forsook all references to transatlantic integration in 2000 and 2001, in deference to Russia's opposition to NATO. This position only changed in May, following the improvement in NATO-Russia relations, which culminated in the creation of a new NATO-Russia forum (see OADB, March 12, 2002, III). Indeed, the re-assertion of transatlantic integration into Ukraine's foreign policy agenda was undertaken only after Kuchma gained Russian approval. One week before the NSDC meeting, Kuchma met Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi; the quid pro quo for the move to NATO was that Ukraine agreed to join the Eurasian Economic Community.

Competing camps. The shifting pressures on Ukrainian foreign and security policy derive mainly from distinct interest groups within the country. These used to number three, although the extreme left faction which advocates a reintegration of the Slavic former Soviet states has entered an apparently terminal decline following its poor showing in the March 31 Rada election (see OADB, April 4, 2002, III). Thus, two main factions now vie for influence over Ukrainian foreign policy:

Pro-Western reformers. One group strongly supports EU and NATO membership, and is prepared to undertake the domestic reforms necessary to achieve this. The group comprises centre-right figures who draw their support from Western and Central Ukraine, as well as some liberal business interests. The main political groups that back this policy are former premier Viktor Yushchenko's 'Our Ukraine' (NU), which obtained the largest share of the vote in the March Rada election, and former deputy premier Yulia Tymoshenko's nationalist bloc. NU includes two of post-Soviet Ukraine's three foreign ministers, Hennadiy Udoenko and Borys Tarasiuk.

Oligarchic centrists. Centrists in the Rada who support Kuchma and the country's oligarchs favour a policy under the slogan "To Europe with Russia!", seeking to maintain the 'multi-vector' (balanced) foreign policy of recent years. This group, which draws support from Eastern and Southern Ukraine, controls the Rada, the government and the presidential administration. Its two main political forces are 'For a United Ukraine' (ZJU) and the United Social Democratic Party (SDPUO). However, unlike its pro-Western rival, this group is not fully prepared to back its foreign policy orientation with complementary domestic reforms; the policy stance is undertaken to maintain some balance in Ukraine's relations with Russia.

The two factions vie for influence in the Rada, where they control competing committees: NU's Tarasiuk heads the Committee on European Integration, while ZJU's Dmytro Tabachnyk heads the Committee on Foreign Affairs. There is also a divide among Ukraine's security related state entities: the military is pro-NATO, while the Security Service (SBU) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVS) -- the largest militarised structure in Ukraine -- are Russophile and pro-CIS in orientation.

Outlook. The decision to aim for future NATO membership will only be translated into decisive policy action if the pro-Western group gains the presidency in 2004. That group is likely to back Yushchenko, the country's most popular politician, in the presidential election. Yushchenko appears likely to compete against Viktor Medvedchuk, who is less popular but is Kuchma's anointed successor and will probably enjoy the administrative support associated with incumbency.

While both groups will offer rhetorical support for EU and NATO membership, only the grouping around Yushchenko has the ideological commitment to the task. The country's ideologically amorphous centrist parties are unlikely to back the democratic, economic and military reforms necessary for a Ukrainian MAP to be successful. Similarly, they are unlikely to favour democratic-civil control of the armed forces, an increase in the military budget to the NATO benchmark of 2% of GDP (from the current 1.25%), standardisation of weapons with NATO (which may put some of Ukraine's military enterprises out of business) and fundamental structural and personnel reform of the MVS and SBU.

CONCLUSION: Kuchma and the Rada centrists have made the move towards NATO having first secured Moscow's support. Their objective is to maintain balance in foreign relations, by building Western ties without offending Russia. Only the radical pro-Western reformers centred around Yushchenko have the commitment to NATO membership sufficient to enact the required reforms.

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