

NATO summit commits to 'Big Bang' enlargement

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At the NATO summit in Prague last week, seven out of 11 aspirant countries were invited to join the organization, bringing its membership to 26. This was the so-called "Big Bang" NATO enlargement that President George Bush declared as a U.S. policy aim in a June 2001 speech in Warsaw. Bush said all post-communist states that met the pre-determined criteria should be admitted. The 11 NATO aspirant countries (the informal pressure group known as the Vilnius Ten plus Ukraine) included all of the post-communist states outside the Commonwealth of Independent States that were not already NATO members with the exception of Yugoslavia.

In the mid-1990s, opposition to NATO enlargement was widespread, and even in the West a large body of opinion feared it would destabilize Russia. The situation today is very different. Discussion in the West of the pros and cons of further enlargement is muted. There is no longer a strong Russophile lobby in the West arguing that enlargement is wrong in itself.

The degree to which the climate of Western opinion has changed can be seen from the near unanimous support from Western NATO members for inclusion of the three Baltic states in the latest enlargement. Polish President Aleksandr Kwasniewski has said this step ends the post-war divisions in Europe introduced at the 1945 Yalta summit. Kwasniewski's views were echoed by the two other post-communist member states, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

Apart from Ukraine, three other aspirant countries were not asked to join NATO last week: Croatia, Albania and Macedonia. Croatia has made significant advances in its reform process since the death of President Franjo Tudjman, but its preparations for NATO membership were too far behind. Albania and Macedonia are not serious candidates for NATO membership because of their recent civil wars. The three disappointed states will seek membership at NATO's next summit in 2007.

CIS outsiders

Four CIS countries will border the newly enlarged NATO: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.

In March, NATO Secretary General George Robertson referred to Russia as the "20th" member of NATO. "Until now, our relationship with Russia has been conducted at '19+1.' Now, however, on a range of issues, Russia will sit alongside the 19 allies as an equal partner."

NATO and Russia will continue to disagree on some issues while cooperating on others. But after Sept. 11, distrust is being replaced by cooperation, Robertson believes. The new relationship between NATO and Russia is also a reflection of the more pragmatic leadership of Vladimir Putin.

Nevertheless, Russia is not seeking NATO membership. This would be unacceptable to the Russian military, as it would require Russian forces to be placed under a U.S. Supreme Commander. The future NATO-Russia Council is expected to deal with such issues as terrorism, arms proliferation and peacekeeping. In return for accepting NATO enlargement, Russia wants the new body to have a greater degree of substance than the moribund NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council.

Belarus and Moldova have returned to the Russian sphere of influence with the installation of, respectively, Sovietophile and communist regimes. The two countries are therefore not interested in NATO membership, and they will coordinate any cooperation in the Partnership for Peace program for cooperation with NATO through Russia.

Ukraine, which will border four NATO members (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania), has been left behind in the revolutionary geopolitical changes taking place in post-communist Europe. This has been especially noticeable since the terrorist attacks in the United States last September, even though Russia's improved relationship with the United States allowed Ukraine to declare its desire for NATO membership in May and to join the Vilnius Ten as an observer.

Ever since the mid-1990s, Ukraine has been the most active CIS member of the Partnership for Peace program and has built military ties with the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and the Netherlands through bilateral exercises "in the spirit of PFP." In July 1997, two months after Russia and NATO created their Joint Permanent Council, Ukraine and NATO signed a Charter of Distinctive Partnership. Since 1998, the Ukrainian government has also drafted two three-year plans for cooperation with NATO.

Ukraine's relations with NATO have at the very least advanced more quickly than its relations with the EU. After Ukraine signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU in May 1994, it took EU members four years to ratify it. The EU has ruled out membership for Ukraine for the foreseeable future (as is the case with other CIS states and Turkey). NATO, meanwhile, has maintained an open-door policy, even after the Kolchuga scandal erupted in late September.

Until the scandal, Ukraine had pinned hope on the 1997 Charter being upgraded to a Membership Action Plan at the Prague summit. Now, however, the United States, the UK and NATO appear to see President Leonid Kuchma as the major obstacle to Ukraine's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Although Ukraine has made progress in military reform through cooperation with NATO, there are three serious concerns in Brussels, in addition to the Kolchuga scandal. First, is Ukraine committed to the non-military aspects of a potential Membership Action Plan (e.g. civilian control of the armed forces, combating corruption, implementing the rule of law, halting the slide to authoritarianism)? Second, can the Security Service (SBU) and the Interior Ministry, which are both implicated in human rights abuses and various types of illegality, be brought under parliamentary and democratic control? Finally, could NATO trust the SBU not to leak its secrets to Russia or to rogue states like Iraq for ideological and financial reasons?

Who wants to be in NATO?

The only vocal and ideologically committed supporters of NATO membership are center-right parties, such as former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko's Our Ukraine, which wants the country to join NATO and the EU independent of Russia. The left remain loudly opposed to NATO (but not necessarily EU) membership, and the Communists and the Socialists recently created an anti-NATO group in parliament. The populist-nationalist Yulia Tymoshenko bloc is not opposed to NATO membership but may veer toward isolationism.

Centrist oligarchs are not theoretically opposed to NATO membership, but they are unlikely to go beyond mere rhetoric and implement the necessary domestic reforms required for Euro-Atlantic integration. They are also implicated in corruption and the country's arms-export scandals. Their half-hearted desire for Euro-Atlantic integration could also drag Ukraine's chances of membership down.

One of the major obstacles to Ukraine's NATO membership is the Presidential Administration, which is dominated by Russophiles. These include such influential figures as its head, Viktor Medvedchuk, leader of the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine (united), and Anatoly Orel, who heads the main department for foreign policy. In fact, Medvedchuk's attempts to protect Kuchma from the Kolchuga allegations actually seem to be doing Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration hopes more harm than good. At his first press conference as Presidential Administration head on Nov. 12, Medvedchuk attacked the United States in a wholly inappropriate manner for someone so highly placed. His performance, clearly designed for a domestic audience, did not win him any friends in Washington, or in Moscow for that matter.

After NATO withdrew its invitation to Kuchma to attend the summit in light of the Kolchuga allegations, Medvedchuk advocated protesting that decision by refusing to send even Foreign Minister Anatoly Zlenko to Prague. This would only have further harmed Ukraine's international standing, which is already at an all-time low.

In the end, Kuchma decided to attend the summit despite strong hints from NATO and the United States that he was unwelcome. With the NATO-Ukraine Commission downgraded to the level of foreign ministers, Kuchma could only gate crash the evening banquet and attend NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, which brings together NATO, neutral European and post-communist states. To ensure Kuchma did not sit next to the British and U.S. presidents, French (one of two NATO official languages) was used for the first time in NATO's history, placing Kuchma at the end of the line-up.

Despite this humiliation, Foreign Minister Anatoly Zlenko now appears to believe Ukraine is in line for NATO membership in the third wave of enlargement in 2007. But this will be dependent on Ukraine implementing democratic reforms and overcoming the "crisis of confidence" in its relations with the United States.

Under a younger and more pro-Western president, Ukraine could join NATO at the next or next-but-one summit with the three rejected aspirants. Whether that happens depends on the choice made by Ukraine's voters in 2004.

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