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He who is not contented with what he has, would not be contented with what he would like to have.

- Socrates



DIALOGUE AND DEBATE

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Indecision and Opportunism Derail NATO in Ukraine

By Taras Kuzio



Ukraine has led the way in the CIS with its deep levels of cooperation with NATO, and in seeking EU and NATO membership. Ukraine has always supported intensive levels of cooperation multilaterally within NATO's "Partnership for Peace" ("PfP") and bilaterally "In the Spirit of Partnership for Peace" programs. Ukraine helped to facilitate the enlargement of NATO into Central and Eastern Europe by supporting the broadening of the alliance eastwards to the borders of the Western CIS, looking upon an enlarged NATO as enhancing Ukraine's national security.

Following Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich's visit to NATO headquarters in September, 2006 he was heavily criticized by the presidential secretariat and Our Ukraine for his call for a "pause" in the seeking of a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP).

Two issues arise. Firstly, it is not Ukraine's prerogative to request, or not to request, a NATO MAP, since it is NATO that does the inviting into the MAP process as a preparatory phase before membership. Secondly, NATO had already unofficially moved away from its intention to offer Ukraine a MAP following the collapse of the brief Orange coalition; already two months prior to Prime Minister Yanukovich's visit to NATO. The lack of an invitation into a MAP is more a result of the failed strategy pursued by the presidential secretariat, President Viktor Yushchenko and Our Ukraine following the March 2006 elections, rather than Prime Minister Yanukovich.

Party of Regions Opportunism and NATO

This does not absolve the Party of Regions from the accusation of blatant opportunism in its stance towards NATO, and foreign policy in general, as seen in the following survey. In government in both 2002-2004 and in 2006, Prime Minister Yanukovich and the Party of Regions supported intensive cooperation with NATO and even membership. Briefly outside government in 2005-2006,

Yanukovych and the Party of Regions opposed the very same policies. Ukraine has held annual "Pfp" and "In the Spirit of Pfp" exercises since 1997 at Yaroviv, a military training ground near Lviv. Other exercises were held near Odesa and in Crimea. Centrist political forces, such as the Party of Regions, never opposed these exercises during Kuchma's decade in power. The first Yanukovych government supported the holding of these exercises.

Following NATO's signing of a Charter on a Distinctive Partnership with Ukraine on July 9, 1997, Ukraine supported the first and second rounds of NATO enlargement in 1997-1999 and 2002-2004. This position contrasted with that of Russia, which opposed NATO enlargement.

Ukraine first declared its intention to join NATO in July 2002, four months before Yanukovych became Prime Minister. The first Yanukovych government never rescinded the official position of seeking to join NATO, and never publicly stated that such a step would be impermissible because of low public support or because it would harm relations with Russia, two of the main arguments used by Yanukovych during his September 2006 visit to NATO headquarters.

During the 2004 presidential elections, Yanukovych introduced opposition to NATO membership in the last month of the campaign alongside raising the Russian language to a second state language and dual citizenship with Russia. All three issues, following the doubling of state pensions, were aimed at attracting Russian speaking and Communist Party voters.

The introduction of opposition to NATO membership into the election campaign by Yanukovych, when his government still officially supported NATO membership, smacked of opportunism. Following Yushchenko's election victory on December 26, 2004, the Party of Regions and the Social Democratic United Party (SDPUo) initiated steps to hold a referendum on NATO membership. The SDPUo is led by Viktor Medvedchuk who headed the presidential administration during the same two-year period that Ukraine had an official policy of seeking NATO membership in 2002-2004. Medvedchuk never called for Ukraine to hold a referendum on NATO membership under Kuchma.

The Party of Regions and SDPUo's strategy of campaigning for a referendum on NATO membership aimed to use anti-NATO sentiment to undermine the Yushchenko administration in Russian speaking Eastern and Southern Ukraine. These two regions had largely voted for Yanukovych in all three rounds of the 2004 elections and it was hoped that this would be repeated in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

Former pro-Kuchma centrists, such as the Party of Regions and the SDPUo, also backtracked from their support for cooperation with NATO (as well as seeking NATO membership). During the last fifteen months of the 2002-2006 parliament, both parties voted against legislation that supported Ukraine's military cooperation with "Pfp" and "In the Spirit of Pfp". Between 1997-2004, this legislation had been routinely approved by pro-Kuchma centrists and the then center-right opposition (with only the left voting against). Yet, in 2005-2006, the Ukrainian parliament was unable to adopt legislation permitting

foreign troops to exercise in Ukraine and for NATO to lease Ukrainian transportation aircraft because the center aligned with the traditionally anti-NATO left.

The anti-NATO/Yushchenko alliance of the Party of Regions and the SDPUo disintegrated following the March 26, 2006 parliamentary elections. Of the former pro-Kuchma centrists, only the Party of Regions entered parliament with 32 percent of the vote. The campaign to hold a referendum on NATO membership became less important to the Party of Regions than entering government. Former pro-Kuchma allies, such as the SDPUo, were ditched in favor of holding negotiations with Our Ukraine on establishing a parliamentary Grand Coalition.

The Party of Regions successfully capitalized on internal disquiet in the Orange camp, and on weak presidential leadership. Anti-NATO and anti-American rallies in the Crimea in May-June 2006, orchestrated by the Party of Regions and its extreme left and Pan-Slavic allies, led to the first ever cancellations of "PfP" and "In the Spirit of PfP" exercises.

The rallies ended following the creation of the Anti-Crisis parliamentary coalition between the Party of Regions, Socialist and Communist Parties on July 5, 2006. President Yushchenko's Our Ukraine had opted to join an Orange coalition over a Grand coalition between Our Ukraine and the Party of Regions, but the Orange coalition rapidly collapsed after the Socialist Party defected. The Socialists, together with the Party of Regions and Communist Party, established the Anti-Crisis coalition and government.

The signing of the Universal of National Unity by President Yushchenko, the Our Ukraine pro-presidential bloc and the three members of the Anti-Crisis coalition reduced the need for the Party of Regions to continue its opportunistic anti-NATO activities. The Universal continues to support cooperation with NATO while ignoring the issue of membership.

On the same day that Yanukovych was confirmed by parliament as Prime Minister, parliament also voted to support the holding of "PfP" and "In the Spirit of PfP" military exercises, the very same legislation that parliament had failed to adopt in 2005-2006. Our Ukraine and the Party of Regions voted for the legislation, with the left voting against and the Yulia Tymoshenko bloc boycotting parliament.

The Party of Regions had never opposed Ukraine's cooperation under "PfP" and "In the Spirit of PfP" during the Kuchma era, including when Yanukovych first headed the government in 2002-2004. Following Yanukovych's return as Prime Minister, the Party of Regions returned to its Kuchma era support for cooperation with NATO. The Party of Regions opposed cooperation with NATO and fanned anti-NATO sentiment only when it was briefly in opposition in 2005-2006. In other words, opportunism, rather than ideological principles, guided the Party of Regions attitudes towards foreign policy.

Yanukovych in Brussels

During Prime Minister Yanukovich's visit to NATO headquarters in September 2006, he reiterated Ukraine's desire to deepen cooperation based on Intensified Dialogue on Membership Issues and yearly Action Plans (in place since 2003). "Ukraine highly values the level of cooperation with NATO. We value continued support for our Euro-Atlantic aims, support for military reform and democratic and market transformations", Yanukovich told a closed Ukraine-NATO Commission. Yanukovich promised to improve information work on NATO, a step that NATO should hold him to as the NATO Information and Documentation Center, which was established in Kyiv in 1997, has traditionally had little support and cooperation from the Ukrainian authorities.

The main criticism of Yanukovich's visit to NATO focused on his disinterest at this current moment in time on Ukraine being invited into a NATO MAP. During his speech to the Ukraine-NATO Commission, he said that he had strove to separate membership issues from, "normal, mutually beneficial cooperation with the alliance". Our Ukraine and the Tymoshenko bloc had earlier accepted Prime Minister Yanukovich's linkage of membership to the holding of a referendum. With support for membership having declined to twenty percent, Ukraine differed from Georgia, which had seventy per cent support for membership.

Disingenuous Criticism

Criticism from President Yushchenko's Secretariat and Our Ukraine was an attempt at deflecting blame from their own lack of a strategy since the March 2006 elections. Ukraine could have been invited into a MAP during NATO's meeting in New York in September, on the eve of the November 27-28 Riga summit, but this would have required a pro-reform coalition government to have been quickly established following the elections. The failure to create a pro-reform coalition and government, and the creation instead of the Anti-Crisis coalition with two members opposed to NATO membership (i.e. the Socialist and Communist Parties), ruled out Ukraine being invited into a MAP already prior to Yanukovich's visit to NATO.

Following the Orange Revolution, Ukraine's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures has been focused upon the WTO and NATO where membership is on offer. Ukraine had two major hurdles to pass in its quest to receive a MAP; the first was to hold a free and fair parliamentary election. Ukraine passed this hurdle after the OSCE, Council of Europe and EU, declared them to have been held in a "free and fair" manner. The second hurdle was to transform free elections into a pro-reform parliamentary coalition and government, an obstacle that Ukraine failed to vault.

Following the 2006 elections, the Bush administration, and some other NATO countries, linked Ukraine's invitation into a MAP at the Riga summit to the creation of a pro-reform parliamentary coalition and government. "Pro-reform" was clearly understood as drawing on those political forces who had supported the Orange Revolution and who had entered the 2006 parliament (i.e. the president's Our Ukraine, the Tymoshenko bloc and the Socialist Party). While supporting pro-reform forces the United States did not have a position on who should become prime minister from within the Orange camp.

The MAP-pro-reform government linkage was undermined by presidential inaction and lack of leadership, personal conflicts within the Orange camp and duplicitous negotiation tactics. As the Tymoshenko bloc's Mykola Tomenko noted, throughout the three-month coalition negotiations, Our Ukraine had "negotiated" with its Orange partners in the morning and "consulted" with the Party of Regions for a Grand coalition in the afternoon.

President Yushchenko and Our Ukraine had rightly taken credit for holding free elections while not accepting the election results, with Our Ukraine coming third after the Party of Regions and the Tymoshenko bloc. In the end, neither an Orange nor a Grand coalition emerged as the Socialist Party defected to the then opposition Party of Regions and Communists. This paved the way for the Anti-Crisis coalition, return of Yanukovich and no offer from NATO to enter the MAP process.

Conclusion

An important change following the summer 2006 crisis will be in Ukraine's attitudes towards NATO membership. Two members of the Anti-Crisis coalition, the formerly pro-Orange Socialists and anti-Orange Communists, are both opposed to NATO membership. Indeed, Ukraine is the first country seeking NATO membership where the entire left spectrum is against membership. The Communist Party is a marginal force in Georgia, which is also seeking an invitation into the MAP process and eventual membership.

In the Ukrainian parliament two political forces support NATO membership, Our Ukraine and the Tymoshenko bloc, who together control 210 out of 450 deputies. The two left-wing parties, who control 54 seats, oppose NATO membership. The remaining 186 seats are controlled by the pragmatic Party of Regions, which has an opportunistic stance towards cooperation with, and membership in, NATO depending on whether it is in government or in opposition.

The Party of Regions dominates Eastern and Southern Ukraine where support for NATO membership is lowest. Therefore, Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations can only become realistically achievable if the Party of Regions is encouraged to gradually move from opportunism to support; that is, the position of Our Ukraine and the Tymoshenko bloc. Whether this will prove possible only time will tell but in the short term the Party of Regions should not be blamed for undermining Ukraine's invitation into the MAP process in 2006. The fault for this clearly lies elsewhere.

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