



Taras Kuzio

Ukraine is no longer a US strategic priority

May 6 at 19:17 | Taras Kuzio

Independent Ukraine has worked with four US presidents and these can be readily divided into two groups in terms of their policies and attitudes towards Ukraine. The most pro-Ukrainian were Democrat Bill Clinton and Republican George W. Bush (younger), while the ones committed to a Russia-first policy were Presidents George Bush (senior) and current President Barack Obama.

This points to the fact that there is not a ‘pro-Ukrainian’ political party in the US. Policies are very much dependent upon the personality of the president, the situation on the ground and the geopolitical situation during the period of time he is in office. Democrats and Republicans have therefore been both pro-Ukrainian (Clinton, the younger Bush) and Russia-first (the older Bush and Obama).

The same was true during the Cold War.

Republican US Presidents Richard Nixon and the elder Bush supported détente with the USSR, and in the latter, cooperation with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Meanwhile, the greatest support given to Ukraine was by Democratic President Jimmy Carter and especially Republican President Ronald Reagan, both of whom were ideological presidents who competed with the USSR over human rights, democracy, national rights, geopolitical and military issues.

Reagan established the National Endowment for Democracy in 1984 and US opinion polls show that greater numbers of Republican (than Democratic) voters support democracy promotion as a US government objective. This is because Republicans tend to be more in favor of the export of manifest destiny. They see democracy promotion as spreading American political and economic values around the world. Of course, isolationism also exists within both parties.

Clinton and the younger Bush, like Carter and Reagan, were also ideological presidents committed to enlarging NATO to post-communist Europe which they acquainted with expanding the zone of democracy from West to East. All post-communist states which have joined NATO have used this as a stepping stone to join the European Union.

The younger Bush was ideologically committed to democracy promotion, whereas Obama is less so, and this change in policy has been welcomed by Moscow. Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko lost the best opportunity in two decades of Ukrainian independence to utilize support from the Bush administration to support Ukraine's integration into trans-Atlantic structures. In April 2005, I witnessed how Yushchenko, during his visit to Washington, where he spoke to both houses of Congress, had the city literally eating out of the palm of his hand.

The Obama administration's Russia-first policies towards Eurasia resemble those of the elder Bush in the early 1990s who had the misfortune to give what became known as the "chicken Kyiv" speech to the Soviet Ukrainian parliament in July 1991. But, of course the geopolitical situation today is very different for Obama.

The Obama administration's "reset" policy with Russia has eclipsed other policies towards the non-Russian states of Eurasia, including Ukraine and even Georgia, where reforms have taken place (unlike Ukraine). This has been advantageous to Russia because Obama, unlike his predecessor, does not actively support NATO enlargement or more assertive democracy promotion and Ukraine is therefore less important to his administration. The Yanukovich administration and experts in Kyiv have failed to understand that Ukraine is not a priority for Washington, which has far more pressing issues to deal with (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, etc.). In the post 9/11 world, the importance of Eurasia to US security has declined.

The Obama administration's policies towards Ukraine broadly track with those of previous administrations - there is support for Ukraine's independence and democracy, as frustrating as that may be given that Ukraine's ruling elites often have acted in ways that give cause for questioning their commitment to Ukraine's well-being. With respect to the Obama Administration, there is good practical cooperation on various security and economic issues. Yanukovich's policies have deepened the Russia-first policies of the Obama administration by making Ukraine less geopolitically important to Washington. Yanukovich is the first of four Ukrainian presidents to not support Ukrainian membership of NATO and the Yanukovich administration has never explained (or outlined a strategy) as to how Ukraine would be the first post-communist country to join the EU without going through NATO first.

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To be fair, the Obama administration's disinterest in Ukraine is also an outcome of Ukraine fatigue that emerged in 2008-2009, the primary blame for which can be placed upon Yushchenko. This led to the US being neutral in the 2010 elections between the two main candidates, Yanukovich and Yulia Tymoshenko, which transformed into granting Yanukovich a

far too long honeymoon until autumn of last year.

The US Embassy in Kyiv initially exhibited too much wishful thinking about Yanukovich, who has never admitted to committing election fraud in 2004 and who still believes he was freely elected that year but was denied the presidency through a joint conspiracy by the CIA and President Leonid Kuchma.

The US should have looked more closely at Yanukovich's track record as he has presided over four election frauds as Donetsk governor (1999, 2002), prime minister (2004) and president (2010). Free elections and Yanukovich are as compatible as horseradish and borsch.

The Russia-first policy of the Obama administration does not mean that Washington has fundamentally changed its stance towards Ukraine. After all, the US has – and will continue to be – the strongest Western supporter of Ukraine's independence, territorial integrity, energy independence and democracy. In addition, the greatest number of Ukraine experts and supporters in any Western capital city are to be found in Washington.

Indeed, since September-October of last year, the US has been a strong critic of democratic regression in Ukraine and this will not change no matter how much the Yanukovich administration seeks to 'bribe' Washington to turn a blind eye by handing over highly enriched uranium.

Ukraine is allegedly now only seeking EU membership and therefore the Obama administration has stepped back to permit Brussels to take center stage (the problem, as seen during the Libyan crisis, is that the EU is adrift without US leadership). What Kyiv fails to understand is that it is far more difficult to join the EU than it is NATO and that only the latter is on offer to Ukraine. The EU has never offered Ukraine membership prospects, which is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future because Ukraine is too big and poor while the EU is too engulfed by constitutional and economic crises.

EU-Ukraine relations therefore resemble the old Communist slogan of 'you pretend to pay us and we pretend to work' except this has now become 'The EU pretends to give us future membership and we pretend to do reforms and undertake democratisation.'

After dropping the goal of NATO membership, the Yanukovich administration has yet to convince either Brussels or Washington that it is serious about wanting to join the EU. Western leaders and Ambassadors in Kyiv complain in private about brazen lying by Ukrainian leaders – as seen in the last few weeks by Presidential Administration head Serhiy Lyovochkin who claimed that US Senators had said positive remarks to him about the health of Ukraine's democracy, a statement that was corrected by the US Embassy.

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Yanukovych and the Party of Regions seem to believe they can build a “Putinist” system at home and continue to hoodwink Washington and Brussels that they aim to join the EU. Disbelief in Ukraine’s declared goals leads to continued Ukraine fatigue in the West and the main attention Ukraine now receives in Washington is over regression in democracy in that country, as seen in a new Freedom House report ‘Sounding the Alarm: Protecting Democracy in Ukraine’ (www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/98.pdf).

Little wonder that Obama has a Russia-first policy in the face of Ukraine’s disinterest in NATO membership or deep cooperation with it coupled with Kyiv’s constant vacillation and attempts at deception. The Yanukovych administration’s relations with the West resembles the lack of respect it has cultivated towards Ukrainian voters; in both cases they believe they can be hoodwinked and deceived into believing a virtual reality which is at odds with developments in Ukraine. What they will find is that Ukrainian voters and Western governments and international organizations are more mature than they and cannot be sucked into the virtual reality. As the British rock band The Who once famously sang: “We won’t get fooled again.”

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