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# A FRIEND IN NEED: KIEV WOOS WASHINGTON

## Taras Kuzio

*With the visit of the Ukrainian President, Leonid Kuchma, to the United States in February, and President Bill Clinton's trip to Kiev in April, Ukrainian-American relations have reached their highest point yet. But is Ukraine threatened by shifting power, and what can be done about it?*

HIGH ON THE AGENDA DURING President Kuchma's visit to America were Western assistance to Ukraine, the forthcoming Russian presidential elections and Ukrainian fears that President Boris Yeltsin will lose the elections and go the way of Leonid Kravchuk and Lech Walesa. In contrast to Ukraine and Poland, however, where Kravchuk and Walesa were replaced by moderates committed to reform, Yeltsin may be followed by a new tsar or commissar.

The United States has strongly backed further assistance to Ukraine from international financial institutions. 'I admire the difficult and courageous steps that President Kuchma and Ukraine have taken toward democracy and economic reform. I want to see the world community, including the United States, do everything possible to support Ukraine,' President Clinton said on the eve of Kuchma's visit to the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Kuchma's arrival, however, was overshadowed by a story which appeared on that day in the *Los Angeles Times* and was given wide publicity. It alleged that Ukraine was selling aircraft to Latin American drug dealers. Whatever the truth of the matter, timing publication for the first day of Kuchma's visit was hardly a coincidence and worthy of disinformation tactics used by the KGB in the Soviet era. According to a spokesman of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, Oleksandr Persianov: 'It was a planted article, it's obvious.'<sup>2</sup>

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## *Ominous signs*

There are ominous signs emanating from Russia these days, particularly for neighbouring states such as Ukraine. The new Foreign Minister, Yevgenny Primakov, is the inspiration behind two documents outlining Russia's current policy of transforming the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) into a vehicle to recover superpower status.<sup>3</sup> Backroom negotiations since the December 1995 parliamentary elections between Our Home is Russia, the party of power close to the current leadership, and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democrats, have served to reinforce the tendency among the current Russian leadership to move away from reform towards more patriotic, anti-Western and integrationist policies. Russia no longer hides its plans to be *primus inter pares* within the CIS – for the fourth year running, President Yeltsin was elected in January as chairman of the CIS Council of Heads of State.

US officials have warned: '...One of the major political parties of Russia is running on a platform to re-establish some kind of an association or Soviet Union. This would be a major step backwards and would not be supported by the United States.'<sup>4</sup>

But such comments have not dampened the appetite of Russia's Communists for a revived Soviet Union that could only be brought about through violence. On a visit to Kiev during Kuchma's absence in the United States, the Russian Communist leader, Gennady Zyuganov, warned: 'It is impossible to recreate the Soviet Union as it was, but I am sure there will be a qualitatively new, powerful, international creation which everyone on this planet will have to reckon with.'<sup>5</sup>

With only a few months left before the Russian presidential elections, it has become

clear that in addition to domestic factors, Russia's relationship with Ukraine will help decide whether Russia stays on a course of reform. If Russia were to reject the policies of the nation-state in favour of empire-building after the June elections, this would spell the end of reform in Russia and the possible beginning of a new Cold War with the West.

## *No Great Russia*

President Kuchma has pointed out: 'Without Ukraine, there can be no Great Russia. I think that from all points of view an independent,

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Map from The Economist

economically strong Ukraine in the centre of Europe is the best anchor of stability for the European continent.' Without Ukraine, any attempts by the Russian leadership to forge a new Eurasian empire out of the Commonwealth of Independent States, to challenge the West and NATO as a new military bloc, would be doomed to failure.

In both the 1650s and the 1920s, Muscovy and Soviet Russia became the Tsarist Russian Empire and the Soviet Union only after Ukraine joined Russia in a new union. In 1991 the Soviet Union disintegrated after Ukraine rejected Soviet and Russian calls to sign the new union treaty. Russia's superpower and Great Power status therefore depends on coercing Ukraine into a new alliance.

Since the end of last year the Russian Defence Minister, Pavel Grachev, has visited three key CIS states to buttress Russia's plans for an anti-NATO military bloc by building on bilateral ties. Negotiations with Ukraine have proved to be the most difficult, and President Yeltsin publicly complained at the January CIS summit in Moscow that President Kuchma was not heeding his calls for tighter CIS integration to form a new confederation.

Belarus and Kazakhstan, on the other hand, have close military alliances with Russia, as demonstrated by the wide-ranging bilateral agreements signed with both countries by Defence Minister Grachev in late 1995. Alexander Lukashenko, the President of Belarus, has even offered to re-establish nuclear missile bases in his country if NATO expands into Central Europe.

The new but still unofficial draft military doctrine prepared by the Russian Institute of Defence Studies, the think-tank of the Ministry of Defence, published last September, talks in such Cold-War terms. It threatens to invade the Baltic republics and to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in response to NATO expansion.

The contrast with Ukraine could not be more pronounced. US officials have repeatedly praised President Kuchma for his continued commitment to reform, his denuclearisation programme, the peaceful resolution of domestic disputes over the constitutional process and the Crimea, and his country's fulfilment of commitments under the CFE Treaty and its cooperation with Western institutions, such as NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP). Last year Ukraine, the first CIS

member state to join the PfP, participated in more exercises within the programme than any former Soviet bloc country.

### Not 'Russia first'

After three years of a 'Russia first' policy which dominated the period from 1992 to 1994, Ukraine's strategic importance to Western security is at last being appreciated by Western policy-makers and leaders. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine receives more US aid than Russia – it is the third-largest recipient after Israel and Egypt. Russia, which in 1992 received more than 80 per cent of all US aid given to the countries of the CIS, now receives less than 20 per cent.

Under President Kuchma, Ukraine has adopted a pro-European stance. As Prime Minister Yevhen Marchuk remarked: 'We now do the Brussels commute as often as we used to do Moscow.'<sup>6</sup> Ukraine's support for NATO expansion,<sup>7</sup> membership of the Council of Europe and its application to join the Central European Initiative while restricting its involvement in the CIS to purely economic matters, clearly reflect Kiev's preference for European – as against Eurasian – integration.

### A border to recognise

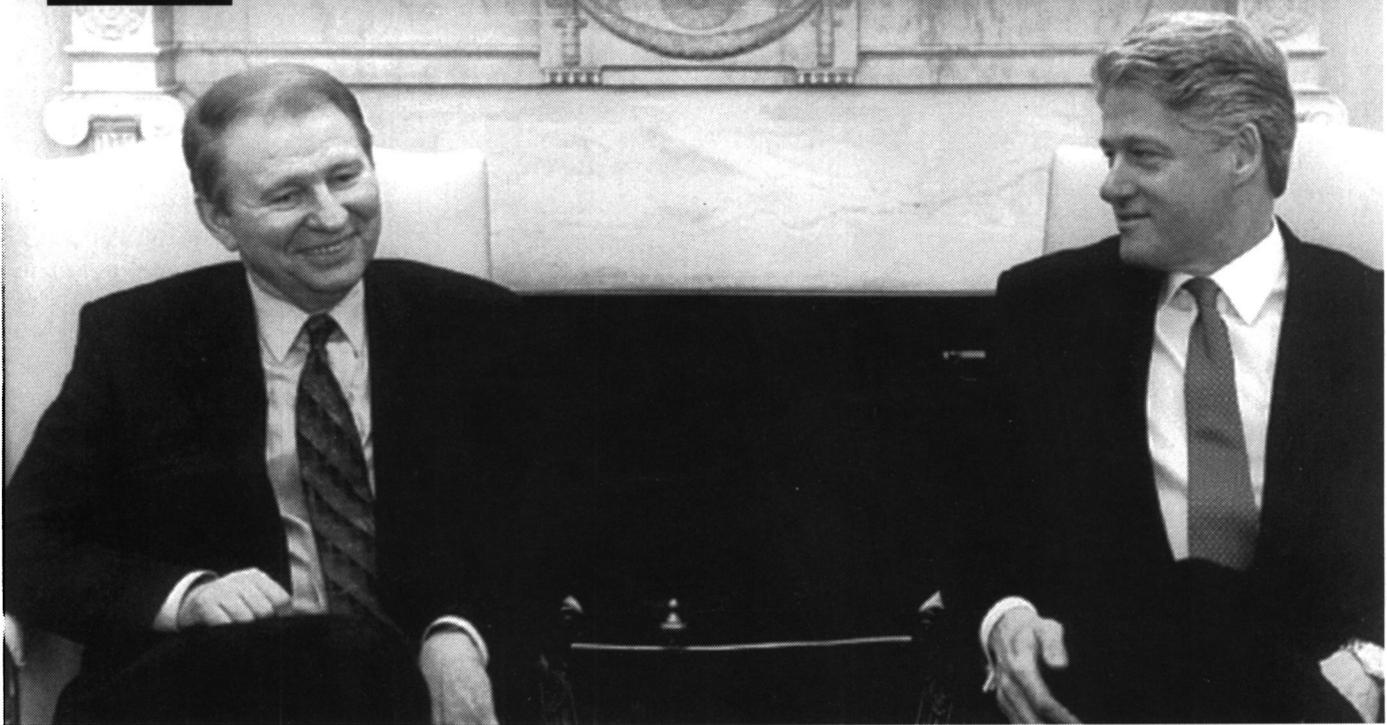
It is in the West's interests to ensure that these trends continue when Ukraine could be facing one of the greatest threats to its security from Russia. According to a recent opinion poll, three-quarters of all Russians still find it difficult to accept Ukraine's frontiers or its existence as an independent state.

Nearly two years into Kuchma's presidency there is still no inter-state treaty to recognise the current Ukrainian–Russian border. After some five official and ten unofficial postponements, the January 1996 CIS summit set 4–5 April as the latest date for President Yeltsin's visit to Ukraine to sign the inter-state treaty. Whether Yeltsin goes or not depends very much on whether he considers that the legal recognition of Russia's borders with Ukraine is likely to help or harm his chances in the presidential elections in June.

Russia describes its borders with other CIS member states as 'internal', open and purely 'administrative'. This is a concept which harks back to the Soviet era and one which Ukraine refuses to accept. It is a Russian policy which, if backed by Ukraine, would only aggravate the smuggling of banned materials – narcotics, weapons, nuclear material – through Russia and Ukraine into Europe. Yet Russia supports proposals that the 'external ►

- 1 James Rupert, 'Clinton Offers Encouragement, Funds to Reformist Ukraine', *The Washington Post*, 22 February 1996.
- 2 AP, 21 February 1996.
- 3 Russia and the CIS: Does the Western Position Need Correction?, September 1994; and The Strategic Course of the Russian Federation with Member States of the CIS, September 1995.
- 4 UPI, 16 February 1996. These views were echoed by Strobe Talbott, the Deputy Secretary of State, in his 'Terms of Engagement', *New York Times*, 4 February 1996.
- 5 Reuters, 26 February 1996.
- 6 UPI, 12 January 1996.
- 7 See T. Kuzio, 'Ukraine and the Expansion of NATO', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 7, No 9, September 1995.

President Leonid Kuchma meets President Clinton in February



Photograph from the National Tribune, New York

borders' of the CIS should be guarded by CIS (i.e., Russian) border guards, as in Belarus, Armenia, Georgia and Tajikistan, and that they should be supported by thirty forward military bases.

Western policy towards Ukraine can no longer ignore the fact that if it agrees to join a new, Russian-led, CIS military-political bloc, Europe may face a new Cold War and greater spending on arms. There are five measures the West could adopt to prevent such a return to the past:

- ▶ Agreeing to Russian demands to treat it as a 'Great Power' would only encourage it to turn the CIS into a new superpower bloc under its own hegemony. Equally, bilateral relations which respect the sovereignty of all the countries within the CIS – something Ukraine has been demanding – are rendered impossible every time Russia is encouraged to think of itself as a Great Power.
- ▶ Second, the United States should broker the completion of the Russian–Ukrainian inter-state treaty as a matter of urgency to stabilise security in Central and Eastern Europe. Russia should be put on the spot regarding the acceptance of Ukraine's borders which it, along with the other four nuclear powers, agreed to respect within the framework of the security assurances given to Ukraine as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in December 1994. Ukraine cannot be expected by the West to complete its denuclearisation programme if Russia refuses to recognise the legality of their common border. If no Russian–Ukrainian treaty is signed before the Russian presidential elections in June, it is doubtful whether one will ever be signed. Ukraine has already threatened to demarcate its border with Russia unilaterally.<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ Both Ukraine and Russia are opposed to the deployment of nuclear weapons in new NATO member states. This would only be matched by Russian nuclear deployments in Belarus, Kaliningrad and even the Crimea. NATO would therefore be well advised to agree to

the non-deployment of nuclear weapons in the Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), which are the most likely new NATO members.

▶ President Kuchma complained during his US visit that Russia, by refusing to supply fuel for Ukraine's nuclear-power stations, was not honouring its obligations under the January 1994 Trilateral Statement brokered by the United States. The US Secretary of Defense, William Perry, reassured his Ukrainian guest: 'Ukraine has made a truly bold and historic decision to go non-nuclear, and they can count on the United States being a friend and having a strong defence relationship with them into the future.'<sup>9</sup>

After Ukraine becomes a non-nuclear power, the American commitment to Ukraine's security should be given concrete substance. This is particularly important in the light of comments like that made by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy: 'Ukraine must become part of a Slavic state, otherwise Russia will cut off fuel supplies and Ukraine will cease to exist as a state.'<sup>10</sup>

▶ Finally, the question of Ukraine's future security and foreign orientation is now more urgent than ever, squeezed as it is between two expanding blocs. In view of its strategic importance, there should be assurances either about the likelihood of future membership of Western security structures or about the granting of 'permanent neutrality' by the UN, similar to that awarded to Austria after 1955, or more recently to Turkmenistan.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ukraine has demarcated borders with Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania from the Soviet era (although Romania is still reluctant to recognise them in an international, legally binding treaty). Demarcation of the Belorussian–Ukrainian border is completed and has begun with Moldova. The border with Russia therefore remains the only undemarcated section of the Ukrainian frontier.

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, 21 February 1996.

<sup>10</sup> UNIAN news agency, 23 February 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Turkmenistan's status of 'permanent neutrality' was approved by the UN Security Council in December 1995. The former Ukrainian President, Leonid Kravchuk, also proposed 'permanent neutrality' as the solution to Ukraine's security predicament. See the interview with Kravchuk in *Holos Ukrainy*, 18 October 1995.