A WAY WITH WORDS: KEEPING KIEV SECURE

Taras Kuzio

Five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the shape of European security is hotly debated. As NATO and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe tackle the issues again, Taras Kuzio argues that Ukraine is in a unique position – vulnerable and influential.

DISCUSSION ABOUT NATO'S EXPANSION INTO THE FORMER SOVIET bloc now moves around the NATO–Ukraine–Russia triangle. It has increasingly become clear that if Ukraine is the 'pivot' of European security, as British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind told his Ukrainian hosts in Kiev last September, then NATO enlargement should take into consideration both Russian and Ukrainian security fears.

Unable fully to normalise relations with Russia and feeling the pressure of its growing neo-imperialistic designs, Ukraine has increasingly tilted westwards, looking to Western structures to balance its security policy. Cooperation with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has been restricted to economic issues, much as it was under President Kuchma's predecessor, Leonid Kravchuk. Rejoining 'Europe', on the other hand, is the ultimate goal for which Ukraine is striving, much like many other Central and East European countries.

PARTNERS AND PARTNERS

From a position of supportive detachment during the Kravchuk era of 1991–94, Poland has become Ukraine's primary strategic partner – Russia is now only described as a 'necessary partner'.[1] Ukraine's leaders hope Poland will be the key in their quest to return to Europe, as it was this summer in promoting Ukraine's membership of the Central European Initiative.

The Ukrainian–Polish strategic partnership was boosted by the launch of a joint peacekeeping battalion, which could be put at the disposal of the UN and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and which has been given strong material and technical backing by Britain. This military cooperation has been supplemented by agreements on the joint sale of weapons and cooperation in developing new weapon systems, as well as the servicing of Polish Soviet-made military equipment.

Ukraine's search for 'strategic partners' has also been endorsed by three key NATO members – the United States, Britain and Germany – which are, with Canada, its main Western supporters. The West increasingly perceives its security interests as best served by Ukraine's continued independence, similar to the Baltic states.

The Polish President's support for a special relationship between NATO and Ukraine – a relationship envisaged also for Russia – is backed by the British Foreign Secretary. In September and October the US House of Representatives and the Senate unanimously passed resolutions in support of Ukrainian independence and sovereignty which argued that 'a strong, stable and secure Ukraine serves the interests of peace and stability in all of Europe. . .'

A STRATEGIC PIVOT

Why has the West relatively recently discovered Ukraine's importance as a 'strategic pivot'? One reason is that its continued independence acts as an insurance against Russia when there are doubts about Moscow's democratic transition.

The US Senate resolution also applauded Ukraine for preventing 'the emergence of any political or military organisation which has the potential to promote the reintegration of the states of the former Soviet Union'. It is not surprising that the Russian Foreign Ministry strongly condemned this resolution, together with others on the Baltic states and Moldova, for 'trying to revive the myth about Russia's hegemonic ways'.

Perhaps to the surprise of many outside observers, Ukraine did not follow the Belarusian path after the 1994 elections, and rejected suggestions that it should join the Belarusian–Russian Community of Sovereign States formed in April. Although Russian–Ukrainian relations have improved under President Kuchma, full normalisation is elusive. No inter-state treaty has been signed recognising current borders, and the Black Sea Fleet issue remains a dangerous source of tension.

In October the Russian State Duma overwhelmingly adopted a law – by 337 votes, with only 5 abstentions – to maintain a united Black Sea Fleet and Sevastopol under its sovereignty. The former Secretary of the Security Council, Aleksander Lebed, the Mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov, the State Duma and other state bodies in Russia have embraced Russian sovereignty over Sevastopol which, it is argued, was not included with the Crimea when the peninsula was transferred to Ukraine in 1954. The ▶

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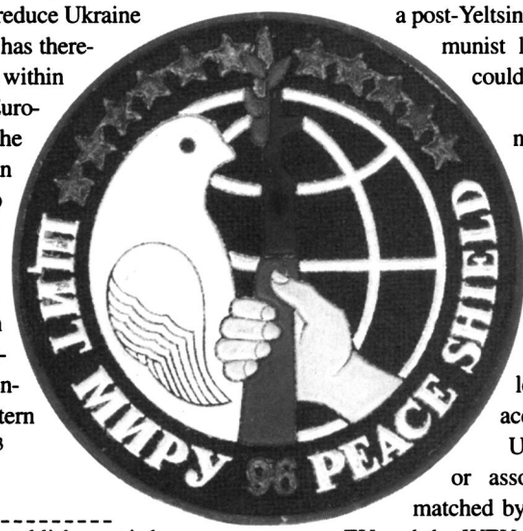
1 *Holos Ukrainy*, 3 September 1996.

Foreign Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, whose ministry reportedly supported 80 per cent of the Duma law, added that the Helsinki agreements, whereby borders in Europe could not be altered, do not apply to those within the former USSR.

The strategic partnership with Russia which President Kuchma championed in his 1994 election campaign has been quietly dropped. As the President sardonically inquired while visiting Moscow at the time of the Duma vote on the Black Sea Fleet: 'Where were the votes against? Where was Russia is Our Home? Where were the Democrats?'[2] Clearly Russia and Ukraine have very different views about the content of any potential strategic partnership.

Full integration within the CIS would reduce Ukraine to a quasi-state, much like Belarus. Kiev has therefore set its sight on alternative integration within European structures, such as the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), the European Union, the Western European Union (WEU) and a closer relationship with NATO. After the visit in September by the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General George Joulwan, President Kuchma admitted that, although his country was not seeking NATO membership, 'it is evident that Ukraine is orientated toward cooperation with Western structures that can guarantee its security'.[3]



DESTINATION EUROPE

Unlike Russia, where the entire political establishment is hostile to NATO enlargement, this policy has never been opposed by Ukraine's leaders. President Kuchma has repeatedly described NATO as an 'alliance of democratic states which do not threaten other countries' – in stark contrast to the often shrill 'Cold War' descriptions of NATO which appear in Moscow. Ukraine, much to the consternation of Russia, has not backed Moscow's attempts to use the CIS jointly to oppose enlargement.

Ukraine was the first CIS member state to join NATO's Partnership for Peace. It has participated energetically in nearly all of its exercises, sending naval vessels to the US for the first time in the summer of 1996 and holding joint Ukrainian–US exercises in the Mediterranean in October.

The recent appointment of a high-profile Ambassador to NATO, the pro-Western former Defence Minister, Konstantin Morozov, is an attempt to raise to a higher level Ukraine's political and security consultations with NATO.

In not opposing NATO enlargement, Ukraine is rendering a great service to both potential NATO members and the West. If Ukraine joined Russia in opposing enlargement, as has the Belarusian President, Alexander Lukashenko, the process could become derailed and may even have to be reconsidered. This is recognised by NATO, which is aware of Ukraine's fear of being left in a 'grey zone' between two potential expanding blocs – NATO and the CIS.

Ukraine's relationship with NATO will therefore be upgraded to a 'special partnership'. What this means in practice was spelled out by the President of the North Atlantic Assembly, Karsten Voigt, on a recent visit to Kiev. Although not formally a member of NATO, the policy of cooperation 'may be pursued flexibly, so that its status will not differ from the status of an associate member'.

ASSURANCES AND GUARANTEES

This play with words seems reminiscent of the West's talk about 'security assurances' and Ukraine's reference to 'security guarantees' received from the nuclear powers in exchange for its nuclear disarmament. But Ukraine's willingness to play with words on Russia's behalf is dependent on the domestic developments of its eastern neighbour. 'At the same time I know for certain that the Ukrainian leadership does not rule out the possibility that a change in the geopolitical situation in the future could lead to a change in our position on the question of our relations to NATO,' Viktor Voronin, Deputy Chief of the Ukrainian Presidential Administration, cautioned.[4] In other words, if a post-Yeltsin Russia is led by General Lebed or the Communist leader, Gennadiy Zyuganov, then Ukraine could ask for NATO and WEU membership.

If this were to happen, Ukraine's policy of neutrality would clearly have to be dropped in favour of an arrangement like that sought by the Baltic states. Ukraine's neutrality, after all, is quite unique; it is a policy which has aimed at keeping the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty at a distance while gradually increasing cooperation with Western security structures and leaving the door open for possible eventual accession.[5]

Ukraine's interest in a 'special partnership', or associate membership of NATO has been matched by its eagerness to expand relations with the EU and the WEU. It regards the signing of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU in May 1994 as a first step towards associate membership. President Kuchma has also outlined Ukraine's goal of associate membership – or associate partnership – of the WEU. It would join the 'six-plus-three' formula of the six former Warsaw Pact and the three Baltic states. The first document to be signed by the WEU with a former communist country followed the visit of the WEU Secretary-General, José Cutileiro, in September 1996. It outlined a wide range of joint security activities that closely resemble Ukraine's cooperation with NATO.

NUCLEAR-FREE ZONE

A central component of Ukraine's NATO policy is the search for international support for a nuclear-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe. President Kwasniewski of Poland, speaking at Chatham House, adopted the Ukrainian view that new NATO members 'perceive no security requirement for stationing nuclear weapons on Polish territory'.

A nuclear-free zone also dampens Russian objections to NATO enlargement and relieves Moscow's pressure on Ukraine. Norway and Denmark are two NATO members which joined the alliance on the understanding that they would not host nuclear weapons. There are nuclear-free zones in the Antarctic, Southeast Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

Two other factors support the nuclear-free zone idea. First, public opinion in Central Europe is largely opposed to nuclear weapons on its territory – in the Czech Republic this is as high as 75 per cent.[6]

Second, the West was never in a rush to install nuclear weapons in new NATO member states. According to US Defense Secretary William Perry 'there is no interest and no plan in NATO today for either increasing the number, the quantity of (nuclear) weapons, or

POLISH PRESIDENT PUSHES PARTNERSHIP

Photograph by Colin Lizius

In recent years, a tremendous level of openness has been demonstrated towards Russia. That important country has been specifically invited by NATO to participate in the shaping of European security.

Polish–Russian relations are developing in a positive and promising fashion. In the recent period, we have managed to overcome a complex and emotional heritage of the past. Today, our bilateral relations involve many forms of political dialogue and rapidly growing economic exchange.

It is no coincidence that in Poland we host several million Russians each year. We believe that Poland's accession to the North Atlantic Alliance would remove any latent sources of tension that may have been sensed in Polish–Russian relations as a result of the protracted decision-making process on the enlargement. I am confident that everybody will gain from NATO's opening eastwards. Paradoxically, Polish–Russian relations can well become on of the main beneficiaries.

The enlargement of NATO should be accompanied by an advancement of the Alliance's relations with Russia. The proposal aimed at drafting an appropriate Charter is a move in the right direction. We welcomed it.

Poland expects that the Charter would form the basis of a solid, lasting partnership, which may not be abused for short-term advantage. If asked, we will be ready to present our observations, which might prove useful during the formulation of that crucial partnership. It is our hope that the agreement will determine the main fields of cooperation as well as mechanisms for joint actions and guarantee future mutual confidence and predictability.

Apart from Russia, the Eastern part of our continent consists of another large state, whose security and prosperity is vitally important – Ukraine. Some stress that NATO enlargement, if not accompanied by measures strengthening Ukraine's security, might have serious consequences. I agree. It is critically important to satisfy Ukraine's security interests while designing the new European security architecture. Polish diplomacy has been the first to raise that necessity in the European debate, following our pioneer move to recognise the independent Ukrainian state.

The appropriate way to proceed is to formulate a partnership agreement between NATO and Ukraine, similar to the NATO–Russia Charter. Both should be concluded within the same time-frame. Their content will of course somewhat vary – dealing with countries of different potential, but also with different security aspirations.

Work on formulating a proposal to define the scope and the institutions of the arrangement with Ukraine should be launched in the not too distant future, allowing a more concrete dialogue with Kiev on that matter. Through such a partnership, Ukraine should acquire more freedom of manoeuvre in its foreign and security policy. It will be better protected against any *realpolitik* tendencies and would gain extra opportunities to develop strong subregional links.

From a talk given by the Polish President, Aleksander Kwasniewski, at Chatham House in October

increasing places where they are based'. Strategic nuclear weapons would require huge investment in infrastructure while tactical nuclear weapons could be rapidly deployed in times of crisis.

As Major-General Vadym Hrechaninov, former military adviser to Ukrainian President Kuchma, pointed out: 'Nobody will deploy weapons in peacetime; meanwhile, during a period of threat, when relations between states and blocs harshly deteriorate, nobody will ask anybody (i.e. Ukraine) about permission.'[7]

DEFINING THE THREAT

The leading members of NATO have not rejected a Central European nuclear-free zone. It is highly likely they will accept new members with similar restrictions to Norway and Denmark, although with the proviso that tactical nuclear weapons could be deployed in the event of a commonly perceived threat.

It is how to define this qualitatively different 'threat' that is likely to divide Central European opinion from that of Ukraine and NATO. Whereas NATO would perceive this new 'threat' as arising if Russia installed tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus and the Kaliningrad enclave – as it has threatened to – the Central Europeans would see their security threatened if Zyuganov, or even Lebed, replaced Yeltsin as Russian President.

Although the West now recognises Ukraine's 'pivotal' role in European security and is willing to open dialogue with it to establish 'special partnership's' with NATO and the WEU, much remains unclear. Where Ukraine will fit into the emerging European security architecture seems to be an unanswered question. Yet, finding an answer will become acutely important if a post-Yeltsin Russia is led by someone with territorial designs on Ukraine and the desire to create a new Union.

Ukraine is probably the key country holding back the emergence of a new Russian-led military bloc that could once again plunge Europe into a Cold War. One factor is already clear. Ukraine's geostrategic importance and pivotal role in European security will ensure that both NATO and Russia will continue to focus their attention on it.

2 See Taras Kuzio, 'Kiev Woos Washington', *The World Today*, April 1996.
3 'Ukraine Strives to be Closer to the West. At the Same Time a Certain Portion of the Kyiv Political Establishment is Trying to Distance Itself Fom Partnership with Russia'. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 25 July 1996.
4 Interfax-Ukraine, 24 October 1996.
5 Ukraine joined the Non-Aligned Movement in an observer capacity on 25 September 1996.
6 *Kyvskiye vedomostie*, 20 July 1996.
7 Reuters, 21 March 1996.