

NATO and Ukraine: At the crossroads

Professor Grigoriy M. Perepelytsia gives his personal perspective on the choices facing Ukraine in its relations with the North Atlantic Alliance.

NATO and Ukraine: Ten years of Partnership

In 2007, NATO and Ukraine are celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership, which was signed by Allied and Ukrainian leaders at a summit meeting in Madrid in July 1997. The Charter identified areas for consultation and cooperation, and established the NATO-Ukraine Commission to take work forward.

Since then, the relationship has developed progressively, and a pattern of dialogue and cooperation has become well-established in a wide range of areas. In particular, Ukraine has proved to be an important contributor to Euro-Atlantic security in the framework of NATO-led operations. A significant aspect of relations is the support given by NATO and individual Allies for Ukraine's ongoing reform efforts, particularly in the defence and security sectors. These reforms are vital for the country's democratic development and the realisation of its goal to become more integrated with Euro-Atlantic structures.

NATO and Ukraine are also engaged in an Intensified Dialogue on Ukraine's membership aspirations and related reforms. This Dialogue does not guarantee an invitation to join the Alliance, nor does it prejudice any eventual Alliance decision. Such an invitation would be based on Ukraine's performance in the implementation of key reform goals. Ultimately, however, it is up to Ukrainian people and their elected leaders to determine, in an open and constructive discussion, the country's future path with NATO. As a contribution to this ongoing discussion, senior Ukrainian academic Professor Grigoriy M. Perepelytsia sets out his views on his country's relations with the Alliance.

Ukraine finds itself at a crossroads in its relations with NATO. One path could lead to membership and offers Ukraine the prospect of becoming a civilised European state, protected against threats to its sovereignty and national security. The second path may lead Ukraine to renounce its Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations, with less certain outcomes. While a promising start was made on the road to NATO membership in the wake of the Orange Revolution, the process has since slowed due to the political uncertainties in Ukraine that surfaced with the March 2006 parliamentary elections and the formation of a new government.

What is at stake?

NATO membership would be in the Ukrainian strategic interest and also represents a major societal choice. It would provide solid guarantees for the preservation of Ukrainian sovereignty, national identity and territorial integrity, while helping to consolidate and continue Ukraine's democratic reforms. Further progress towards meeting Euro-Atlantic democratic standards would also protect and encourage mainstream and minority cultural development, as well as the evolution of Ukrainian civil society.

The alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration lies in Eurasia with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which is currently characterised by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes, grey economies and marginalised or underdeveloped civil societies. Taking

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this path would be welcomed by those who view Ukraine's independence as being counter to Russia's vital geopolitical interests and its efforts to restore its great power status.

Ukraine's interest in Euro-Atlantic integration has led to closer cooperation with the Alliance. However, any future accession of Ukraine to the Alliance will ultimately depend on the ability of the country to meet membership criteria, and on the domestic political will to move forward.

Walking the path

The first declaration of Ukraine's intent to increase its integration in Euro-Atlantic structures was made ten years ago in the 1997 NATO-Ukraine Charter on a Distinctive Partnership, which established the NATO-Ukraine Commission (NUC) and identified areas for consultation and cooperation. However, cooperation with a view to furthering Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration goals was given a sharper focus with the adoption of the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan in November 2002.

The Action Plan aims to deepen and broaden the NATO-Ukraine relationship and to support Ukraine's reform efforts on the road towards full integration in Euro-Atlantic structures. It sets out specific objectives, covering political and economic issues; security, defence and military issues; information issues; and legal issues. These objectives are supported by Annual Target Plans in which Ukraine sets its own targets for the activities it intends to pursue both internally and in cooperation with NATO.

The Action Plan itself will not lead directly to membership. However, its successful implementation is regarded as a precursor to an invitation to join NATO's Membership Action Plan, and would help Ukraine move towards meeting the requirements expected of a candidate for NATO membership.

The Orange Revolution brought in under President Viktor Yushchenko a new Ukrainian leadership, which put NATO accession at the top of its foreign policy

priorities. This led the Allies to invite Ukraine to start an Intensified Dialogue on its membership aspirations and related reforms at the NUC meeting of foreign ministers in Vilnius, Lithuania, in April 2005. The aim of this dialogue is to give Ukrainian officials the opportunity to learn more about what would be expected of Ukraine as a potential member of the Alliance, while simultaneously letting NATO examine Ukrainian reforms and capabilities.

In parallel with the launch of the Intensified Dialogue, the Ukrainian and Allied foreign ministers agreed a package of short-term actions to help Ukraine in moving the reform process forward. This package covered a range of areas, including strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing political dialogue, intensifying defence and security sector reforms, managing the social and economic consequences of reform, and improving public information.

To improve the internal coordination of Ukraine's implementation of activities agreed in the framework of NATO-Ukraine cooperation, on 27 December 2005 President Viktor Yushchenko signed a decree in which deputy heads of the central executive authorities were assigned specific responsibilities. The president tasked the Cabinet of Ministers to strengthen cooperation between the executive authorities and the parliament, giving priority to relations with NATO and to public promotion of the benefits this cooperation brings to Ukraine.

Towards a Membership Action Plan

In January 2006, the defence ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, meeting in Budapest, Hungary, announced that their countries were ready to support Ukraine on its path to NATO accession. Hungarian Defence Minister Ferenc Yekhas stated after the quadrilateral meeting that "we believe it is an important task for us to help Ukraine on its way to integration and accession to NATO." The four countries announced that they would organise a special committee to promote Ukrainian military reform.



A technician dismantles an assault rifle as part of a NATO Partnership for Peace Trust Fund project in Ukraine's Khmelnytsky region



A Ukrainian BTR passes through a water barrier in joint NATO-Ukraine maneuvers on Donuzlav Lake, near Yevpatoriya

A month later, in February 2006, President Viktor Yushchenko reiterated in Brussels, Belgium, that Ukraine was ready to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP). In March, he followed this up with a decree setting up an interagency commission to prepare Ukraine for NATO accession. This body can set up task forces to deal with specific directions of cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, and is chaired by the relevant national coordinators.

The National Security and Defence Council is responsible for defining the strategic goals and conceptual approaches to Ukraine-NATO cooperation and submitting relevant proposals to the President. The Cabinet of Ministers is responsible for implementing the national policy of Ukraine-NATO cooperation, in particular with regard to the fulfilment of membership criteria.

Participation in the MAP would allow Ukraine to prepare better for NATO accession through technical assistance and practical advice from NATO. It would not, however, guarantee any future membership in

the Alliance – such an invitation would depend on the country's ability to meet membership criteria. In the MAP framework, Annual National Programmes are developed which focus on a number of requirements for aspirant countries, including in the political, economic, resource, legal and security fields. Aspirant countries are expected to demonstrate a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy; fair treatment of minority populations; commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes with neighbours; the ability and willingness to make a military contribution to the Alliance; and a commitment to democratic civil-military relations and structures.

In March 2006, Ukrainian Defence Minister Anatoliy Grytsenko expressed the opinion that if Ukraine works effectively to meet these requirements, and the Allies agree, "the decision on granting membership to Ukraine could be taken in the nearest future. Ukraine will be granted a transition period to finish its preparatory work, which is about a year and a half or two years... That's why full-fledged membership is possible



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Pitching camp during joint NATO-Ukraine peacemaking and counterterror exercises

by 2010, but it is only a forecast. Life may bring changes into it.”

Of course, one of the current major hurdles to Ukraine’s joining the MAP is significant public reluctance to move further – according to opinion polls, only some 20 per cent of the population actually support NATO membership, whereas some 54 per cent are opposed. Outdated and counterproductive stereotypes about NATO still hold sway over many in Ukraine. However, the Defence Minister also expressed confidence that by the time Ukraine has to make a decision on NATO accession, the public will be ready to support such a step.

A change of pace

By holding a free and fair democratic parliamentary election in March 2006, Ukraine successfully passed a key test for NATO membership. So it is ironic that the result of that election has been a significant slow-down in the pace of progress towards that goal.

It took months of political turmoil for a new government to be formed. During this time, anti-NATO sentiments among the population were exploited for political gain, provoking demonstrations against the US-Ukrainian Sea Breeze exercise in the summer of 2006. The “Anti-Crisis Coalition” that eventually emerged, with Viktor Yanukovich as Prime Minister, put the brakes on moves toward NATO membership and made improving relations with Russia a priority.

Visiting NATO Headquarters in September, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich reassured Allies that Ukraine was committed to developing closer relations to NATO through ongoing cooperation. But he said that the Ukrainian people were not yet ready for Ukraine to consider joining the Membership Action Plan and that the issue of membership would eventually have to be put to a referendum. He did, however, promise that the Ukrainian government would launch a major public information campaign to explain NATO and its cooperation with Ukraine.

Meanwhile, President Yuschenko has continued to push for NATO membership. But there is no doubt that under the Anti-Crisis Coalition we have seen not just a change in pace in relations with NATO, but also a change in the language used. Political leaders tend to refer to “cooperation” with NATO rather than to “integration”.

Stirring things up further, Russia itself has warned Ukraine of potential costs of joining NATO. During his visit to Kyiv, in December 2006, Russian Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov, while recognising the “sovereign right of Ukraine to choose major vectors of its security policy”, warned of the “negative consequences of Ukraine’s accession to NATO” on relations with Russia.

Clearly, the political uncertainties in Ukraine over the past year and the ongoing rift between the camps of the President and the Prime Minister have had an impact on the level of cooperation with NATO. This was manifest in the delay in finalising this year’s Annual Target Plan, which was only approved by the

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Cabinet of Ministers and sent to the President for signature in early June.

At the crossroads

So Ukraine finds itself at a crossroads in its relations with NATO. Most likely, both roads will lead Ukraine to develop closer cooperation with the Alliance. However, the key question is how close the country will get to actual NATO membership. This will largely depend on the ability of the authorities – and society at large – to preserve the gains of the Orange Revolution and to further develop democratic structures and practices in the country.

Time will tell how important basic democratic values are for the Anti-Crisis parliamentary majority. If they really share these values, the time it takes for Ukraine to join NATO will be no longer than the time needed to achieve Euro-Atlantic standards and to reach consensus at the national level.

As Defence Minister Anatoliy Grytsenko stated in an October 2006 interview:

“Ukraine has not lost its chance to move forward and join the Alliance... How long it will take, depends, first of all, on the level of coordination of our authorities. Second, it depends on our desire to build a country that meets NATO standards. And third, it depends on the will and determination of key political players in our country to support NATO accession.”

For all of this to happen, it is clear that civil society will have to work closely with government, parliament and other relevant political actors. It is also essential that a broad public information campaign should be launched to raise awareness of the benefits of NATO-Ukraine cooperation and potential membership.

There are plenty of good stories to tell about the practical benefits of ongoing cooperation with NATO. Since 1994, NATO and individual Allies have provided professional military training to some 8 500 Ukrainian officers. Moreover, between 2001 and 2006, NATO

has supported the retraining of over 3 000 retired Ukrainian military personnel to help their transition to civilian life. In 2006 alone, nearly 800 servicemen were retrained, and 440 have already found new jobs. Since 2006, new professional courses have been launched for former military personnel in Kirovohrad, Melitopol, Chernihiv and Lviv. And language courses are ongoing in Odessa, Kyiv and Simferopol.

Another good example is the support that individual Allies are giving to demilitarisation projects in Ukraine through Partnership for Peace (PfP) Trust Fund projects. These projects are helping Ukraine deal with its huge stockpiles of surplus and obsolete munitions, which pose a major security risk to local populations. A first project, launched in Donetsk in 2002 while Viktor Yanukovich was governor there, safely destroyed 400 000 anti-personnel landmines. A second project – the largest single demilitarisation project of its kind in the world – aims to destroy 133 000 tons of conventional munitions, 1.5 million small arms and light weapons, and 1 000 man-portable air defence systems over twelve years at a total estimated cost of €25 million.

Highlighting these kinds of initiatives to the Ukrainian public would go some way to overcoming the Cold War stereotypes about NATO that remain prevalent. That may encourage people to learn more about what NATO is today.

Ukraine is likely to remain stuck at the crossroads for a while. With another parliamentary election now scheduled for September, no clarity on the way forward is likely to emerge soon. In this climate, NATO remains a highly politicised issue in Ukraine. Nevertheless, I remain hopeful that a recent statement by NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer may come true. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, he expressed his desire to see Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine move closer to the Alliance by the time of the NATO Summit in 2009. “The Ukrainian people will have to decide for themselves. Nevertheless, I hope in 2009 we’ll see a stronger relationship with Ukraine.” ■