



Robert Simmons

NATO's Robert Simmons: 'We believe at some stage Ukraine will be a member of NATO'

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Over the last decade, Ukraine's relations with NATO has had its ups and downs.

During the 2002 NATO summit in Prague, the seats for the 28 member states and other partner countries were arranged not according to the English alphabet, but according to the French one. That was to ensure that the unpopular Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma did not sit next to U.S. President George W. Bush and United Kingdom Prime Minister Tony Blair.

In 2003, then Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich pushed through parliament a law which, for the first time, stated that NATO membership is among Ukraine's foreign policy goals.

With the 2004 Orange Revolution, which overturned a rigged election and led to the victory of the Western-friendly Viktor Yushchenko as Ukraine's president, NATO membership became one of the administration's major ambitions.

The high point of hopes for success might have been the start of 2008, when Yushchenko joined Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and Verkhovna Rada speaker Arseniy Yatseniuk in officially asking for acceptance into NATO's Membership Action Plan. Such a MAP would have been a major step towards membership.

Despite current Ukraine's non-bloc status, Robert Simmons expressed a belief that ultimately Ukraine will join the alliance.

But it all came to nothing after Russia pressured NATO member states at the Bucharest summit in April 2008. Ukraine didn't get its Membership Action Plan and had to settle for a declaration that the nation would eventually join the military alliance. Later on, NATO granted Ukraine another acronym as a consolation prize – the ANP, or Annual National Program – which is supposed to bring the country closer to NATO standards in a number of areas.

But, for the foreseeable future, Ukraine's chances of joining NATO are close to zero.

After Viktor Yanukovich's victory in the Feb. 7 presidential election, the pro-presidential ruling coalition in parliament removed NATO membership from the list of foreign policy goals. The government also downgraded efforts to coordinate cooperation with NATO.

Earlier this month, a special NATO envoy visited Ukraine to assess the nation's progress in gaining eventual membership.

In an exclusive interview with the Kyiv Post, Robert Simmons, NATO's deputy assistant secretary general for cooperation and partnership, talked about the Annual National Program and why it still matters despite the Ukrainian government's repudiation of NATO membership.

Also, despite current Ukraine's non-bloc status, Simmons expressed a belief that ultimately Ukraine will join the alliance.

Kyiv Post: When you visited Ukraine last year in October you said that "Ukraine is on a confident and consistent path towards NATO. And whoever comes [to power in Ukraine], NATO-Ukraine relations will remain as consistent." Can you say the same now?

Robert Simmons: Well, yes. Obviously, in adopting status as a non-bloc state, joining the alliance is for Ukraine now less of a priority. Their cooperation with NATO – and in our review we've seen that – largely continues to be very active and very comprehensive. As I said to the president when I came here in February for the inauguration, much of the cooperation dates to the time when he was prime minister. So, it wasn't surprising to us that he would want to continue the practical cooperation. We welcome that and are very satisfied with that.

KP: You've mentioned Ukraine adopting the law which says that the country is no longer seeking NATO membership. Given that, is there any point in doing the Annual National Programs that are supposed to bring Ukraine closer to the alliance?

R.S.: Very much so. First of all, it is not that they do not seek NATO membership. They said that they want non-bloc status. They do not seek to join any bloc, presumably including the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. That's their decision. We have many very active partners who are called neutral or non-aligned. What's important and, whether the goal is membership or not, the Annual National Program sets out a very active program of cooperation with

defense reform, good governance and dealing with corruption. And this government [will have an] Annual National Program for 2011 because they want to continue cooperation with NATO. The Annual National Program is a bit more focused and a bit more goal oriented. But it does focus on cooperation and it's quite clear that this cooperation is going forward actively.

There will be three documents on the Lisbon summit – a document on Afghanistan, a strategic concept where Ukraine will be mentioned, because “open door” will be mentioned there to reaffirm the Bucharest decision [welcoming Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO]. We believe that at some stage Ukraine will be a member of the alliance.

- Robert Simmons, NATO's deputy assistant secretary general for cooperation and partnership

KP: By now you've already met with quite a number of Ukrainian officials. What do you think about Ukraine's performance on the Annual National Program this year?

R.S.: It has met many of the goals -- about 70 percent of them. There have been a couple of factors one has to take account of. First is the financial crisis and the need for the government to reduce the overall budget including for the armed services. As we said last year, defense reform costs money. It's nobody's fault, it's just that the money isn't there.

KP: Are the finances the only obstacle in this case?

R.S.: I would say so. I don't think that they have lacked any commitment to the basic goals of defense reform. When the current president was a prime minister that understood they need a modern army. That's true for many of the partner countries, whether they join the alliance or not. The old [Soviet] military structures are not appropriate to the modern challenges.

KP: Earlier this year, Ukraine's six specialized structures coordinating NATO-Ukraine integration were dissolved by decree without any consultation with NATO. Given that fact, do you still think that Ukraine is committed to cooperation with NATO?

R.S.: Frankly, under the other government – and that was part of the differences – there were probably too many of those [structures] because of the results of the conflicts of the Foreign Ministry, people who worked for the presidency and people who worked for the prime minister. If you want to stabilize the structures that deal with NATO, that's for Ukraine to make that decision.

KP: But stabilizing is different from dissolving them all together.

R.S.: There are three key structures that continue to operate. One is the Foreign Ministry and the very strong desk that deals with NATO. The second are officials in the Defense Ministry. And finally, Ukraine has Deputy Prime Minister Serhiy Tigipko, who at his level manages this process. Those are the essential structures. The fact that they change some names and move things around is probably less important to us as long as we have good contacts in the Foreign Ministry, Defense Ministry and a senior level official in the prime minister's office who is managing the process and can tell the ministers that they have to cooperate on this or that. That's much of the role that then Deputy Prime Minister Hryhoriy Nemyria had.

KP: So basically you do not see any problem in removing those structures?

R.S.: No, not really.

KP: Some weeks ago, James Sherr, a key British analyst on Ukraine and Russia in his briefing paper wrote that “Yanukovich's government appears to be stripping the [Ukraine-NATO] relationship of soul and substance.” Do you think this is an accurate assessment of the Ukrainian president's policy toward NATO?

R.S.: I don't think it is. Obviously, the soul of it was and is for some of the opposition politicians to join the alliance. That's changed and is not as high priority and we understand that. So, if the soul is joining the alliance, obviously it's changed. If the spirit is good cooperation over a range of activities – that very much has continued.

KP: Now NATO is developing its new doctrine which should be approved by heads of states and governments during the NATO summit in Lisbon at the end of this year. Ukrainian officials also constantly saying that Ukraine should have its place spelled out in this doctrine. What will be the place of Ukraine in this document, if any?

R.S.: There will be three documents on the Lisbon summit – a document on Afghanistan, a strategic concept where Ukraine will be mentioned, because “open door” will be mentioned there to reaffirm the Bucharest decision [welcoming Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO]. We believe that at some stage Ukraine will be a member of the alliance.

KP: Recently Ukrainian peacekeepers in Kosovo were accused of smuggling petrol, causing several million dollars worth of damage to Kosovo. How will that generally affect Ukraine?

R.S.: Right now that's a matter for the [NATO] headquarters in Kosovo and Ukrainian military. There are many individual soldiers who have difficulties in a variety of areas when they are on mission. And that's essentially a chain of command issue. That's why the NATO general secretary said they are waiting for the chain of command do that investigation. It certainly does not call into question the overall cooperation of Ukrainian peacekeeping, of the overall quality of its forces. Soldiers get in trouble – that's the nature of soldiers.

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