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Ukraine's international policy addresses three major concerns: bilateral relations with Russia, Ukraine's posture within the CIS, and Ukraine's attitude to NATO. Relations with Russia have focused mainly on the future of the Black Sea Fleet, the status of Crimea and Sevastopol in particular, and the supply of energy from Russia. Within the CIS, Ukraine has taken the lead of an association of republics--that includes Kiev's allies Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova--which are worried by Russian hegemonial tendencies. This analysis, however, will address primarily Ukraine-NATO relations.

Ukraine's attitude toward NATO so far has been rather controversial. On the one hand, Europe's second largest country officially supports NATO's eastward expansion and is one of the most active participants in the alliance's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program; last year the Ukrainian military participated in 157 PfP events, including joint military exercises. (2) On the other hand, Ukraine does not officially seek membership in NATO, and public opinion polls indicate that many Ukrainians are considerably less enthusiastic about the alliance than are many of their Central European neighbors.

In the six years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has traveled a difficult path in search of identity, groping for its place in the post-Cold War global balance of power. In 1992, Ukraine was a nonaligned state with nuclear weapons and a number of unresolved historical conflicts with its neighbors; by 1998 it had evolved into a nuclear-free state which had reached accord on several major territorial and historical issues with Russia (excepting Sevastopol and Crimea--at least as far as Mayor Luzhkov and other Russian nationalists are concerned), Romania, and Poland. Especially important were the final decision on the Black Sea Fleet division with Russia and the border
settlement with Romania, both of which were reached last year. These and other agreements paved the way to Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma's signing the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership with NATO on 9 July 1997 in Madrid.

What is the distinctive partnership for Ukraine? An inevitable and natural response to NATO enlargement, according to a seasoned diplomat (and, until recently, Ukraine's Minister for Foreign Affairs), Hennadiy Udovenko.(3) His junior, and usually more candid, colleague, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Anton Buteyko, called NATO "a target," and stated at a press briefing two weeks before the document was signed that it would serve as a basis for practical integration into the alliance.

The current Ukrainian government obviously would prefer to seek closer relations with NATO, but public opinion in Ukraine currently is against joining the alliance. Moreover, a special kind of relationship with Russia, which opposes NATO enlargement and sees Ukraine as belonging to its sphere of interests, makes such a possibility a matter for the rather distant future.

Ukraine inherited from the Soviet Union not only the world's third largest nuclear arsenal. The Ukrainian armed forces numbered 780,000 troops back in 1991. One hundred and fifty Ukrainian enterprises of the former Soviet military-industrial complex, which had been designing and building twelve of the USSR's 20 ICBMs, were employing 200,000 persons. (4) The nationalists who came to power in the first independent Ukraine may have viewed this huge military potential as a means of exerting pressure on Russia in the disputes over the former USSR's currency assets, Crimea and Sevastopol, and a matter of principle for Russia: the future of the Black Sea Fleet. The nationalist elites also believed that, by possessing nuclear weapons and refusing to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Ukraine could safely remain a neutral state, balanced between NATO in the West and the weakened Russia in the East. However, political and economic realities did not allow those illusions to last for long.
Ukraine's expectation of western political and economic support was not met: The West did not hurry either with political support of Ukraine's integration into European structures, or with economic investments. The US was polite but firm in its refusal to support Ukraine as long as the latter continued to retain its unwieldy nuclear arsenal, commonly seen as a factor of instability in Europe. In its turn, Russia was adding insult to injury by insisting that Ukraine had neither scientific nor financial resources to maintain properly its nuclear weapons and the means of their delivery. A new member was unwanted in the "nuclear club."

Having broken most of its economic ties with the former Soviet Union, and with Russia in particular, hesitating with the transition to a market economy and receiving virtually no external help, Ukraine quickly found itself bogged down in economic crisis. Real GDP per capita fell to one-half, from $5,010 in 1992 to $2,620 in 1995. Living standards were quickly deteriorating. The newly independent state was painfully reaching the realization that it simply could not afford to maintain Europe's second largest army. Military personnel strength was reduced in 1992-97 by almost 50 percent, to 400,000 troops, with a planned further reduction to 320,000 by late 1998. Defense spending was cut 33 percent in 1992-1998, and now amounts to just 1.4 percent of the state budget expenditures.

The break in ties with the former USSR also created an energy crisis with long-lasting effects. Russia, though politically weakened, could afford to indulge in playing the gas trump card. Outdated heavy industry makes Ukraine the world's third leading consumer of natural gas, and the country imports one-half of its energy. Ukraine is almost completely dependent on Russia for gas supplies; a televised picture of Boris Yel'tsin turning off an imaginary gas faucet each time Black Sea Fleet negotiations approached a deadlock served as a painful reminder to Ukraine of its economic dependence on its northern neighbor.

Ukraine was forced to cede to Russia (as the main legal heir of the deceased superpower) the nuclear arsenal which had remained on its territory after the USSR's
collapse. Eventually, Ukraine had to exchange its nuclear weapons for security guarantees given early in 1994 by Russia, the US, Great Britain, and France. By the middle of 1997, all the nuclear warheads remaining on Ukrainian territory had been dismantled. Ukraine adhered to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear state. By the end of the year, Ukraine had finally signed accords on the Black Sea Fleet division, 82/18 in favor of Russia, as well as a treaty on friendship and cooperation with Russia, which was perceived both in the two capitals and in the West as a sign of radically improving relations between the two largest countries of the former Soviet Union.

Deprived of its nuclear umbrella, or rather of the illusion of having one, Ukraine as a large non-aligned state was doomed to become an area of uncertainty in the center of Europe. When NATO enlargement eastward became imminent, the danger grew of Ukraine becoming a "gray zone," a buffer state between an expanded NATO and a still strong and unpredictable Russia. This danger and a strong desire to become a part of Europe politically were behind Ukraine's decision to join the Partnership for Peace program in February 1994 as the first member of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The fear of Russia's unpredictability increased in Ukraine after the success of Communists and Vladimir Zhirinovsky's radical right-wing party in the Russian parliamentary elections of 1995. Russian so-called "national patriots" never concealed their unfriendly attitudes towards Ukraine as an independent state, in particular where Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet were concerned.

At a 26 March 1998 session of the NATO-Ukraine Commission, the Ukrainian delegation listed three conditions for joining NATO (which coincide to a major extent with NATO's own conditions): They included decisive public opinion in favor of accession, military compatibility with NATO standards, and the guarantee that joining the alliance would not hurt relations with neighboring countries. (6) Fulfilling any of the three conditions, let alone all of them, would require considerable time and effort.
Ukraine remains economically dependent on Moscow; its debt for Russian natural gas supplies, which stood at $1.2 billion as of the beginning March 1998, comprises a heavy burden on the economy in crisis. In theory at least, Moscow can punish Kyiv for any "misbehavior" instantly by cutting gas supplies, with devastating consequences for Ukraine's high-energy-consuming heavy industries. Every step Ukraine takes regarding NATO is closely watched in Moscow, where both right- and left-wing radicals never stop calling for a return of Sevastopol and Crimea, given to Ukraine in 1954 as a gift by CPSU General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev. Especially worrying for Ukraine is the fact that Moscow's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov, widely regarded as a very strong candidate in the upcoming Russian presidential elections, shares the national patriots' attitudes toward Ukraine and toward Sevastopol, the city which, according to them, belongs to Russia.

There is also considerable opposition within Ukraine against joining NATO. Public opinion is not in favor of belonging to the alliance. According to different polls conducted last year, around the time the Madrid Charter was signed, over one-half of Ukrainians opposed NATO's enlargement. Only four percent of participants in a public opinion poll conducted by SOCIS-Gallup in late 1997 said they would vote in the March 1998 parliamentary elections for candidates who supported Ukraine's earliest possible accession to NATO. The results of the elections to a certain extent confirmed this attitude. The Communists who called for suspending all relations with NATO in their electoral platform, and whose leader, Petro Symonenko, called the Madrid Charter "an act of treachery," celebrated a convincing victory, reaping over 25 percent of the vote.

The negative attitude of those voters towards NATO is based on a traditional perception, cultivated for decades in the Soviet Union, of the alliance as an aggressive military bloc, as well as on close cultural ties between many Ukrainians and Russia, especially in the densely populated and predominantly Russian-speaking population in eastern and northern Ukraine regions. NATO enlargement is widely perceived as threatening Russian national interests, and not quite corresponding to the interests of Ukraine. Under present conditions, therefore, Ukrainian leaders see the need to be very careful about the question of NATO enlargement.
President Kuchma has said more than once that Ukraine was not planning to join the alliance, referring to the country's proclaimed nonaligned status. Moreover, speaking at a meeting of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization in April 1997, Kuchma went so far as to say that "the final decision on this issue [on joining NATO] depends on Russia's position." (7)

Kuchma's closest aide, National Security and Defense Council Secretary Volodymyr Horbulin, usually has been less coy about the question of Ukraine joining NATO. In January 1997 Horbulin declared that his country could join the alliance by the year 2010. This was, however, indirectly refuted by Udovenko, who reiterated in Geneva that Ukraine had no plans to join NATO. (8) However, after it became clear that Russia's reservations concerning NATO enlargement would be ignored, then Ukrainian Ambassador to the Benelux countries Borys Tarasyuk said in a letter to parliament that Ukraine was re-thinking its official policy of neutrality, and that this status can be viewed "only conditionally." (9) In the same month NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana presented to Kuchma a draft agreement on distinctive partnership between Ukraine and the alliance. The agreement was signed in Madrid more than one month after NATO signed a similar agreement with Russia.

The Charter on a Distinctive Partnership between NATO and Ukraine envisages a wide range of cooperation with NATO, as well as political consultations on security-related issues, and a further development of military cooperation in the framework of the Partnership for Peace program. The charter also provides for establishment of a military liaison as part of the Ukrainian mission to NATO in Brussels. On the whole, Ukraine received the opportunity to develop a close partnership with the alliance in most areas of NATO activities, with the exception of those directly associated with obligations of collective defense, specified in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

Ukraine sees the charter as more than just another step in the direction of integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. "We were acknowledged as a European nation, which is very important for Ukraine's further development," said Kuchma in
Madrid, sounding rather pathetic at the moment when Ukraine's western neighbors--Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic--were announced as NATO's newest members.

Ukraine regards the charter as a guarantee against becoming a "gray zone" between Russia and NATO, and hopes that NATO will not deploy nuclear weapons on the territories of new member states. This is psychologically very important for a country which lived through the Chornobyl nuclear disaster. Ukrainian officials also say that now their country will not be considered part of another's "sphere of influence." (10) They remain overcautious, especially in relations with Russia. Still, the Black Sea Fleet is finally divided, and Russian gas continues to flow in the pipes. Ukraine now feels better insured than before against unpredictabilities of the "sworn friend" in the north.

NOTES:
1 Mr. Varfolomeyev works for BBC Monitoring in Kyiv.
2 Holos Ukrainy, 8 April 1998.
3 Udovenko's address to the Ukrainian Supreme Council's plenary session, 12 June 1997.
7 Eastern Economist, 5 May 1997.
10 See, for example, the statement by Ukrainian First Deputy Foreign Minister Anton Buteyko at Sinta, Portugal, 30 May 1997, and the statement by then Foreign Minister Udovenko at the meeting of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, NATO Headquarters, Brussels, 11 December 1996.