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Ukraine and NATO - an On-Off Relationship

Until quite recently Ukraine had aspirations for full membership of NATO. Yet, as Ian Shields discusses, Kiev's former Russian masters continue to influence Ukraine's relations with the Alliance.

By Ian Shields for ISN

In the aftermath of the Cold War, NATO membership rapidly expanded as the organization looked eastward, with more than a few members of the former Warsaw Pact looking in the opposite direction. In both instances joining an expanded NATO was for reasons beyond security. Ukraine was one of the earliest and initially enthusiastic aspirant members from the former Soviet bloc. Yet in sharp contrast to the Baltic States and the Central European members of the Warsaw Pact, Kiev's aspirations for NATO membership have waxed and waned since Ukraine gained its independence from the former Soviet Union. Indeed, Ukraine's 'on-off' relationship with NATO remains subject to diplomatic and economic ties between Moscow and Kiev.

Looking Westwards

At first sight, it might be considered that NATO sought expansion eastwards to improve its own security both by bringing former adversaries into the alliance and increasing the size of the buffer between its western borders and Russia – still a military power that demanded respect. Likewise, to nations such as Poland and the Baltic states, NATO membership would bring benefits well beyond security. These included gaining access to funding for upgraded military hardware, and cementing democratic credentials. NATO expansion was, therefore, initially played out against the backdrop of a number of optimistic declarations regarding the future of the international system. Francis Fukuyama's 'End of History', for example, argued that the end of the Cold War represented the end of ideological evolution and the triumph of Western liberal democracy as the final form of government. Accordingly, it is understandable that the "triumph of the West" inspired those countries previously under Soviet control not only to reinforce their security but also their democratic credentials through membership in organizations like NATO and the European Union (EU). Although not formally linked, the democratic ideals and common membership of NATO and the EU (the latter even more attractive as a funding source) inevitably led to a scramble for membership – a scramble that was, moreover, equally welcomed by the West.

Indeed, all of the perceived benefits of joining NATO (and eventually the EU) that appealed to the Baltic and Central European states were at least as appealing to Ukraine. NATO-Ukraine relations were formally launched in 1991 when the country joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. Three years later, Ukraine was the first former Soviet country to join the Partnership for Peace. In 1996,

Ukraine contributed to the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by similar deployments to Kosovo. NATO-Ukraine [cooperation was further cemented](#) with the signing of the 1997 Charter on a Distinctive Partnership (the Charter) and the establishment of the NATO-Ukraine Commission (NUC). From the outset, the Charter outlined the arrangements for enhancing NATO-Ukraine relations as well as identifying opportunities for cooperation. These include dialogue on defense and security issues of common concern and practical cooperation on defense and security reform.

The opening decade of the 21st century saw an initial acceleration of NATO-Ukraine relations. In 2002, for example, the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan (the Plan) was adopted. The Plan sought to support Ukraine's reform efforts 'on the road to Euro-Atlantic cooperation'. Earlier in the year, then-President Leonid Kuchma announced that Ukraine would eventually seek full membership of NATO. Ukraine's membership aspirations received a boost in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution. NATO leaders not only expressed support for the new Ukrainian leader Viktor Yushchenko's reform plans and commitment to enhancing Kiev's relations with the Alliance, they also launched an Intensified Dialogue on Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO.

NATO-Ukraine dialogue has often been supported with military cooperation. Since 1997, for example, Ukraine has hosted the annual Sea Breeze exercises in the Black Sea. Each year, Ukraine's armed forces undertake exercises with NATO counterparts (and other navies) aimed at enhancing a host of maritime security capabilities. This year, Exercise Sea Breeze focused on [combating maritime piracy](#) and featured joint patrol flights by American and Ukrainian naval aircraft. Military exchanges have also extended beyond exercises to include staff training, cooperation with defense equipment procurement and civil contingencies. Underpinning many of these initiatives is the [NATO Liaison Office \(NLO\) Ukraine](#), which opened in 1999.

Grinding to a Halt

Yet despite the initial and well-documented enthusiasm for full membership of NATO, Ukraine has more recently curbed its aspirations. The return of the more pro-Moscow Viktor Yanukovich to the presidency in 2010 led to Ukraine formally [withdrawing its bid](#) for full NATO membership, albeit with the continuation of the vague intention of further European integration. As a result, NATO leaders used the 2010 Lisbon Summit to outline their respect for Ukraine's commitment to 'non-bloc' relations with the Alliance. Instead, NATO-Ukraine relations continue to be guided by the provisions of the NUC and the distinct understanding that the 'door remains open' to full membership at a later date.

Three issues appear to have influenced Ukraine's decision to withdraw its bid for membership of NATO. First, Kiev has always had to accommodate a Russia that is uneasy with NATO's expansion efforts within its former sphere of influence. Further complicating Kiev's relationship with Moscow is Ukraine's continued reliance on Russia for natural gas supplies. In this respect, Russia's decision [to cut gas supplies to Ukraine in 2008](#) demonstrates that political pressure from Moscow on Kiev is often far from subtle.

Second, public opinion polls have on occasion suggested that the majority of Ukrainians do not necessarily favor NATO membership. A 2010 poll undertaken by the [Pew Research Center](#), for example, suggests that only 30% of the Ukrainian population support membership of NATO. Moreover, other polls have also suggested consistently suggest that 30% of Ukrainians actually view NATO as a threat. Indeed, a lack of public support for NATO membership segues into the third, and perhaps most important, factor of Ukraine's current policies. While the Orange Revolution resulted in the installation of a pro-Western government, the return of Yanukovich further suggests that Ukraine has recently moved away from more Western notions of democracy.

Accordingly, with the return of Vladimir Putin to the Russian Presidency and a Ukrainian government that increasingly looks to Moscow it is perhaps unsurprising that enthusiasm for NATO membership has waned. Instead, Kiev currently appears to be balancing its rhetoric of 'present cooperation' with NATO with a renewal of its military ties with Russia. In 2010, Ukraine agreed [to extend Russia's lease](#) on its naval base at the Black Sea port of Sevastopol until 2042. In exchange for the continued stationing of the Black Sea Fleet in Ukrainian waters, Moscow offered Kiev a 30% reduction in the price of Russian natural gas.

Future Scenarios

So what might recent political developments mean for NATO-Ukraine relations? As the recent [NATO summit in Chicago](#) was held against the backdrop of declining defense budgets and the lack of credible state-level threats it may well be that the Alliance will rest on its laurels for the time being and not seek further expansion. Despite Ukraine's decision not to seek full membership, NATO's relations with Kiev nevertheless remain cordial. Bilateral cooperation still occurs and exercises like Sea Breeze remain an important part of NATO-Ukraine relations. By leaving the issue of formal Ukrainian membership on the back burner, both NATO and Ukraine also avoid any unnecessary antagonizing of Russia.

Maintaining the current status quo potentially allows NATO to refine its strategic outlook for the Caucasus. This, in turn, may eventually result in renewed enthusiasm for Ukraine becoming a full member of NATO. It is likely that enthusiasm for membership will be underscored by concerns that the entire region to the south of Russia may well become increasingly unstable as a result of rapidly growing Islamic populations. The importance of the Caucasus as a source and key transport node of Western energy supplies may also prompt the Alliance to canvass Ukraine for full membership status.

Accordingly, there are sound geopolitical and security reasons for NATO not abandoning its support for Ukraine joining the Alliance. However, recent political developments in Ukraine suggest that it is far too early to predict whether Kiev will once again seek closer and more formal ties with NATO, including full membership. Ultimately, any future decision taken by Kiev will, in turn, reflect Ukraine's current political ties with Russia. Indeed, Kiev's difficult relations with a country that is integral to its energy security ensure that Russia will continue to influence the on-off relationship between NATO and Ukraine.

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ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland