

# UKRAINE'S DEFENSE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE UNITED STATES

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*More than anything else, I'm here to say this to the Ukrainian people: as you continue on the path to freedom, democracy, and prosperity, the United States will stand by Ukraine.*

*Vice President Joseph Biden  
Kiev, 22 July 2009*

Ukraine faces a number of challenges, including a deep economic crisis and a tumultuous political system. These problems, however, only underscore the importance of continued U.S. engagement with Ukraine. The causes of European stability and prosperity are best served by a Ukraine that is democratic, secure in its borders, and integrated into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. This has been the U.S. position since Ukraine's independence in 1991. In addition to its internal challenges, Ukraine faces an external challenge: Russia. Recent Russian actions suggest that Moscow still considers Ukraine to be within its sphere of influence. Furthermore, Russia's conflict with Georgia in August 2008 demonstrates that Moscow is willing to use a wide variety of tools, including military force, to establish and enforce its sphere of influence. Such attitudes threaten to return Europe to the destructive balance of power politics of its past, rather than promote a peace in the region based on the right of sovereign nations to determine their own future. Ukraine has made a choice to be a part of Europe by undertaking a number of reforms in order to become a truly independent and democratic country. In the interest of greater European stability and prosperity, and in recognition of Ukraine's positive engagement, the United States must continue its efforts to assist Ukraine on the path to democracy.

## WHY IS UKRAINE IMPORTANT?

Ukraine's geostrategic significance derives, in part, from its location at the

crossroads between Europe and Asia, its status as the largest country in Europe outside Russia, and its population of 46 million.<sup>2</sup> Ukraine also serves as a key transit country for European energy, occupies an important position as a littoral Black Sea country, and provides a port for Russia's Black Sea Fleet. In addition to Ukraine's overall geostrategic significance, a number of other factors also render it of great importance to the United States. Since independence, Ukraine has chosen the path toward democracy and integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukrainian independence in 1991, Ukraine took steps that led to the creation of well-developed ties with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In February 1994, Ukraine became the first member of the Commonwealth of Independent States to join NATO's Partnership for Peace. In December 1995, Ukrainian soldiers were deployed as part of the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ukraine has continued to be a steadfast contributor to NATO and other international operations.

Ukraine's commitment to regional and global security has been consistently demonstrated. From 2003 to 2005, Ukraine participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom, deploying a mechanized brigade of 1,650 servicemen. During this deployment, eighteen Ukrainian soldiers were killed and forty-four others were wounded in combat operations.<sup>3</sup> Ukraine also currently participates in the NATO Training Mission in Iraq. In Afghanistan, Kiev granted overflight rights to NATO aircraft flying en route to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Today, Ukrainian servicemen participate in the International Security Assistance Force.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to NATO missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ukraine takes part in NATO's Kosovo Force and Operation Active Endeavor, and its maritime counter-terrorism activity in the Mediterranean. Indeed, Ukraine can boast that it is the only non-NATO country participating in these four current NATO-led operations and missions.<sup>5</sup> Ukraine also contributes to United Nations (UN) peace support operations around the world, including operations in Liberia, Sudan, and Georgia.

## U.S. POLICY

The basic parameters of U.S. policy toward Ukraine have remained consistent since its declaration of independence in 1991, supporting Ukraine's efforts to secure its future as a sovereign nation capable of determining its domestic and foreign policies. During his trip to Kiev in July 2009, Vice President Joseph Biden stated, "We stand by the principle that sovereign states have a right to make their own decisions, to chart their own foreign policy, to choose their own alliances."<sup>6</sup> The decisions that Ukraine makes regarding its security and its alliances should

be entirely its own. Almost all of Ukraine's political leaders have declared that Ukraine's future is in Europe whether through NATO, the EU, or another Western institution. The United States believes Ukraine can be a contributor to European security. Indeed, Ukraine can be a thriving regional leader that serves as an example to the countries around it. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in December 2009, "A strong and independent Ukraine is good for the region and good for the world."<sup>7</sup>

In December 2008, the United States recognized Ukraine's strategic significance by implementing the U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership. Signed by former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Volodymyr Ogrzyzko on 19 December 2008, the charter affirms the strategic partnership between the two countries and emphasizes shared values and interests. The charter also reaffirms the security assurances that the United States provided to Ukraine when it gave up its nuclear weapons and acceded to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty on 5 December 1994. To implement the charter, Washington and Kiev established a U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership Commission during Vice President Biden's July 2009 trip to Kiev. The commission provides a mechanism for discussions across a broad range of cooperative endeavors, including defense and security, trade and investment, energy security, and nonproliferation issues. The commission's inaugural meeting took place on 9 December 2009 in Washington, DC, and a second meeting is planned for 2010 in Kiev.

## UKRAINE AND NATO

It is often forgotten that Ukraine's bid to join NATO was made before the 2004 Orange Revolution that ushered in President Viktor Yushchenko, a vocal and determined advocate of NATO membership for Ukraine. In May 2002, former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma made Euro-Atlantic integration a formal goal when he announced that Ukraine intended to seek membership in NATO. The United States has long been an advocate of engagement between Ukraine and NATO, arguing that such a relationship will contribute to a more stable transatlantic community by promoting NATO's values of democracy, individual liberty, and rule of law. Integrating Ukraine into the NATO community strengthens the overall web of bilateral and multilateral ties that make NATO one of the most secure, peaceful, and prosperous communities of states. NATO engagement has also provided Ukraine an important means for advancing democratization and modernization efforts. To become an Alliance member, countries are expected to meet a number of key benchmarks, which include:

- » A functioning democratic political system based on a market economy.
- » The treatment of minority populations in accordance with guidelines established by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.
- » A commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes with neighbors.
- » The ability and willingness to make a military contribution to the Alliance and to achieve interoperability with other members' forces.
- » A commitment to democratic civil-military relations and institutional structures.<sup>8</sup>

Attaining these benchmarks requires aspirant countries to meet performance-based goals that support important reform efforts. For Ukraine, one major accomplishment has been its successful transition from a nation under the umbrella of a Soviet-controlled military to a nation with democratic institutions that check the power of the armed forces. As a next step, Ukraine plans to transition from a conscript-based army to an all-volunteer, professional force. While plans initially called for building a fully professional military by 2010, budget shortfalls have caused a delay until 2015.<sup>9</sup>

Following the Orange Revolution, NATO allies gave a clear signal of support for Ukraine's membership aspirations through the creation of an "Intensified Dialogue" in 2005. Five priority areas of reform were identified, helping Ukraine focus its efforts on key areas, including: strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing political dialogue, intensifying defense and security sector reform, improving public information, and managing the social and economic consequences of reform.<sup>10</sup> This new framework for cooperation offered a way for the Allies to identify areas where they could help Ukraine's reform efforts by providing advice, assistance, and practical support. Then-NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer underscored NATO's commitment and open door policy at a 2006 meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Commission: "Our commitment to the Intensified Dialogue underscores that NATO's door remains open and that Ukraine's aspirations are achievable."<sup>11</sup> Additionally, de Hoop Scheffer stressed the primacy that Ukraine's own efforts must play on its path to membership, stating, "Ultimately, the primary responsibility for success rests with the Ukrainian people and their elected leaders."<sup>12</sup>

Several important steps in NATO-Ukraine relations took place in 2008 at the Bucharest summit when NATO heads of state and government formally agreed that Ukraine would become a member of NATO. The relevant language in the final communiqué states that,

NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for mem-

bership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations.<sup>13</sup>

At the subsequent December meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Brussels, the Allies offered Ukraine an Annual National Program (ANP) that was intended to serve as a “roadmap to membership.”<sup>14</sup> The ANP provides a framework through which the Allies can provide advice, assistance, and support for Ukraine’s reform efforts, and the NATO-Ukraine Commission will have a central role in “supervising the process set in hand at the Bucharest Summit.”<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that progress remains to be made in both Ukraine and Georgia, NATO has made clear that its door remains open if Ukraine can meet NATO’s performance-based measures and have popular support for membership.

#### U.S. SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE’S DEFENSE REFORM

Kiev remains committed to meeting its reform goals and adhering to NATO’s performance-based measures. In 2009, Ukraine completed its first ANP and has made significant progress on its 2010 version. Despite chronic underfunding for the defense budget and a severe economic crisis gripping the country, Ukraine has made notable progress in transforming its military into a “modern, professional, and NATO-interoperable force” that can protect Ukraine’s borders and contribute to international operations.<sup>16</sup> Ukraine has restructured its Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces General Staff to reflect NATO standards, created a Joint Operations Command to exercise control over its deployed forces, and begun work to establish a special operations command.

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The United States is a key supporter of Ukraine’s defense reform and the bilateral defense relationship has indeed been a key component of this strategic partnership. The Department of Defense (DoD) assists Ukraine in furthering defense and security reform, fostering the development and implementation of defense planning, policy, and strategy, as well as its national security concepts. DoD provides expert-level assistance in the development of Ukraine’s Strategic Defense Review—a document that is roughly analogous to the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review—and its Annual National Program. The United States provides Foreign Military Financing, which supports improvements in the capacity of the Ukrainian military to train its personnel and to interoperate with NATO forces.

DoD also aids these efforts by providing communications equipment and advanced training aids such as the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES). Ukraine is also working, with U.S. assistance, to build a professional non-commissioned officer corps which would improve the career development of professional soldiers by creating better human resources management, and to improve supply management and acquisition procedures by conducting logistics reform.<sup>17</sup> To date, U.S. grant money has allowed Ukraine to purchase \$85 million worth of defense articles and services.

To provide a western model of professional military education, the United States sends Ukrainian military officers to U.S. military schools through

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the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Under IMET, Ukrainian officers study at educational institutions such as the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the U.S. Navy War College at Newport, Rhode Island, or the Industrial College of the Armed Forces in Washington, DC. These schools offer advanced instruction and further professional development in military art and science, and officers that attend gain valuable experience through their interactions with U.S. military officers in programs

that typically last several months. Since 1992, when the United States established an IMET program for Ukraine, 903 Ukrainian officers, including four graduates who were later promoted to general officer rank, have participated in IMET with an impressive 98 percent completion rate. Moreover, the DoD has provided the Ukrainian armed forces with seventeen English language laboratories to build English language proficiency.<sup>18</sup> These laboratories enable Ukrainian officers to participate in U.S. military schools and greatly enhance the ability of Ukrainian personnel to interact with U.S. and NATO forces during multinational and coalition exercises.

#### THE RUSSIA FACTOR

Russia has significant strategic interests in Ukraine. Ukraine serves as a transit hub through which Russia supplies its natural gas to Europe. Ukraine also controls the port of Sevastopol which has been home to Russia’s Black Sea Fleet since 1783.<sup>19</sup> But cultural and historical factors also explain why Russia casts a long shadow over Ukraine, perhaps more so than any other country in the former Soviet space. Moscow traces its political lineage to Kievan Rus’, the medieval state of the Eastern Slavic people that was centered in Ukraine. The Rus’ was the early

predecessor to the modern day nations of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. Tsarist Russia incorporated much of modern day Ukraine into its empire, and Ukraine spent decades as part of the Soviet Union. Indeed, many Russians do not even view Ukraine as a separate nation. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin once argued to President George W. Bush that Ukraine was not a real country; speaking to reporters in late May 2009, he read approvingly from the diaries of an imperial general who referred to Ukraine as “Little Russia.”<sup>20</sup> In consequence, Moscow views Ukraine as part of what Russian leaders call a “sphere of privileged interest.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Ukraine’s western aspirations challenge Russia’s desired role as a regional hegemon, and Moscow would like nothing better than to see the democratic forces of the Orange Revolution reversed and the installation in Kiev of a government willing to do Moscow’s bidding.

Russia wants to keep Ukraine under its tight control, and Moscow demonstrated in its August 2008 conflict with Georgia that it is willing to use a wide variety of tools, including military force, to impose its will over former Soviet states. One form of dependence Russia has nurtured is in the field of energy. During gas disputes in 2006 and 2009, Russia cut off supplies to Ukraine in the middle of winter, freezing out not only Ukrainian households, but many homes in Europe as well. While this tactic has helped Moscow to maintain energy distribution to its advantage, it also demonstrates Moscow’s tendency to overplay its hand. A return to the Russian orbit is not in the interest of Ukrainian sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. To win against Moscow, Ukraine needs to reduce its financial and economic dependence. This means being more competitive and attractive to outsiders and developing a more robust democracy and further opening market economy.

In the interests of European and global security, Russia should cease viewing the world in zero-sum terms. European security in the 21st century is best enhanced by engagement among countries and by building communities of shared interests, not by the destructive balance of power politics of the past. Neither Russia nor any other country should view Ukraine’s integration with the West, let alone its engagement with NATO, as a threat. As Vice President Biden made clear at the Munich Security Conference in February 2009, “The United States rejects the notion that NATO’s gain is Russia’s loss, or that Russia’s strength is NATO’s weakness.”<sup>22</sup> Ukraine provides an example of the right of sovereign nations to make their own decisions, to chart their own foreign policy, and to choose their own alliances. Ukraine’s integration into the rest of Europe, rather than pose a threat, would contribute to peace and stability. It is only certain elements of Russia’s leadership that sees Ukraine’s European future otherwise.

In the public commentary, pundits have indulged in speculation about the



Obama administration's "reset" with Russia and implications for important regional partners such as Ukraine. Will an improvement in U.S.-Russian relations come at Ukraine's expense? Will the United States accept Russia's red lines in order to keep the reset on track? Such interpretations should be corrected unequivocally. First, the "reset" is a clear-eyed, realistic and focused approach which recognizes that important disagreements with Russia will remain. Vice President Biden made this point clear during his appearance at the February 2009 Munich Security Conference, during which he gave the first major speech outlining the Obama's administration's foreign policy goals:

We will not agree with Russia on everything. For example, the United States will not—will not recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. We will not recognize any nation as having a sphere of influence.<sup>23</sup>

While the intent is to find mutual areas of cooperation, the reset harbors neither overly optimistic nor unrealistic expectations.

Second, U.S. support for Ukraine reflects basic principles that the United States considers inviolable. In his remarks at Munich, Biden said, "It will remain our view that sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions and choose their own alliances."<sup>24</sup> To demonstrate the point, Vice President Biden paid an official visit to Kiev in July—just two weeks after President Obama's trip to Moscow. He explained:

My visit to Kiev comes soon after President Obama's visit to Moscow. As a matter of fact, they were planned simultaneously. And I know there was some speculation that our decision...to press the reset button with Moscow...created some speculations that improving relations with Russia would somehow threaten our ties with Ukraine. Let me say this as clearly as I can. As we reset the relationship with Russia, we reaffirm our commitment to an independent Ukraine.<sup>25</sup>


To further demonstrate U.S. support, the DoD maintains a parallel track of high-level engagement with Ukraine even after having renewed military-to-military cooperation with Russia following the Moscow summit.<sup>26</sup> After the vice president's trip to Kiev, Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, the assistant secretary of defense for International Security Affairs, traveled to Kiev in September to co-chair the annual U.S.-Ukraine Bilateral Defense Consultations. He met with Acting Minister of Defense Valery Ivashchenko and other senior Ukrainian officials. Ambassador Vershbow's trip was followed in October by a visit from Dr. Celeste Wallander, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia. These visits help underscore the United States commitment to Ukraine



and the importance of their strategic relationship. In a speech at the Ukrainian Diplomatic Academy, Ambassador Vershbow called the security and defense partnership between the United States and Ukraine an important component of Ukraine's efforts to become a strong, independent, and secure nation and active contributor to international peace.<sup>27</sup>

## THE WAY FORWARD

Ukraine has recently wrapped up a presidential election in which former prime minister and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich emerged the victor. The campaigning was spirited, heated, and raucous; in a word, “democratic.” The conduct of the election was free and fair. Indeed, observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe described the vote as an “impressive display of democracy.”<sup>28</sup> The United States supports the choice of the Ukrainian people, which demonstrated another positive step in strengthening democracy in Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> While Yanukovich is likely to seek a more balanced relationship with Russia and take a more circumspect view toward NATO membership, it is unlikely that the choices for democracy and integration with European and Euro-Atlantic institutions will be reversed. Being an integral part of Europe is Ukraine's best guarantee for security and prosperity. Ukraine's citizens have chosen: there will be no “back to the future” moment, Ukraine will not return to being a client state of Moscow.

Furthermore, engagement with the United States and NATO is of paramount importance for the Ukrainian military's ability to transform into a truly modern and professional 21st century force. This is a commonly held view in defense spheres and, regardless of political outcomes, this strategic orientation is unlikely to change. While membership in NATO is unlikely in the foreseeable future—indeed, only 20 percent of the population currently supports membership—engagement with NATO will continue to be leveraged as a vehicle for addressing common security concerns.<sup>30</sup> For Ukraine to enjoy sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity, it must have effective armed forces with modern defense capabilities. The United States and Ukraine have nurtured a robust defense and military-to-military relationship for almost twenty years, reaping benefits for Ukraine's armed forces and for greater Euro-Atlantic security. To sustain and enhance these benefits, this fruitful relationship of shared experiences, combined exercises and training, and participation in NATO and other international operations must continue unabated. 

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this article belong entirely to Colonel Espinas and do not reflect the official position of the United States government or the Department of Defense.

<sup>2</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Ukraine," *The World Fact Book*, July 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Information provided to the author by U.S. Central Command.

<sup>4</sup> Ukraine declined to take part in combat operations in Operation Enduring Freedom due to political sensitivities stemming from the disproportionately high number of Ukrainian casualties in the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

<sup>5</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO's Relations with Ukraine," NATO-Topic, 27 October 2009, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_37750.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_37750.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Joseph R. Biden, "Remarks by Vice President Biden in Ukraine" (speech, Ukraine House, Kiev, Ukraine: 22 July 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Petro Poroshenko after Their Meeting," (speech, Washington, DC: 9 December 2009).

<sup>8</sup> NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "NATO-Ukraine: An Intensified Dialogue" (Brussels: NATO, 2006), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Comment made by then-defense minister Yuriy Yekhanurov at the November 2008 meeting of the NATO-Ukraine High-Level Consultations in Tallinn, Estonia (from author's notes).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> NATO Press Release, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," 3 April 2008.

<sup>14</sup> The offer of an ANP demonstrated that there are multiple paths to membership for countries wishing to join the Alliance. While the countries that joined NATO in 2004 (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia), and in April 2009 were offered a Membership Action Plan, Ukraine and Georgia were offered an ANP in 2008.

<sup>15</sup> NATO, "Final Communiqué: Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Foreign Ministers held at NATO Headquarters, Brussels," NATO Press Release, (153: 3 December 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Alexander R. Vershbow, "Remarks of Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs" (speech, Kiev: 29 September 2009).

<sup>17</sup> The establishment of a professional noncommissioned officer corps, a feature of all NATO military forces, is a prerequisite to the development of a volunteer army.

<sup>18</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Shannon McCoy, U.S. Army, Chief of the U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation, (discussion with the author, Kiev; 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Under the agreement between Ukraine and Russia, the lease is set to come up for renewal in 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Philip P. Pan, "Kremlin Intensifies Pressure as Ukraine Prepares for Vote: Russia Lodges List of Complaints Against Neighbor," *Washington Post*, 14 September 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Interview given by Dimitri Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Russia, NTV, 31 August 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph R. Biden, "Remarks by Vice President Biden at 45th Munich Conference on Security Policy" (speech, Munich: 7 February 2009).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph R. Biden, "Remarks by Vice President Biden in Ukraine" (speech, Ukraine House, Kiev: 22 July 2009).

<sup>26</sup> During the 6-8 July 2009 summit in Moscow, the two presidents reached agreement on a number of issues including military-to-military cooperation. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen and Russian Chief of the General Staff General Makarov signed a Framework Understanding and a work plan for resuming cooperation between the U.S. and Russian armed forces.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander R. Vershbow, "U.S.-Ukraine Security and Defense Relations" (speech, Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Kiev: 29 September 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Luke Harding, "Yanukovich Set to Become President as Observers Say Ukraine Election was Fair," *Guardian*, 8 February 2010.

<sup>29</sup> According to the White House, President Obama phoned President-elect Yanukovich on 11 February to congratulate him and to commend the Ukrainian people on the conduct of their 7 February vote.

<sup>30</sup> Gwynne Dyer, "Whether Yanukovich or Tymoshenko, Next President Left with Little Room to Maneuver," *Kyiv Post*, 21 January 2010.