

US, Germany clash over NATO expansion plan

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In a provocative gesture on the eve of the NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania, US President George W. Bush flew to Kiev and appeared with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko to press for the former Soviet republic's admittance into NATO.

"Your country has made a bold decision," Bush said of Yushchenko's quest for NATO membership, "and the United States strongly supports your request."

Bush praised the Ukrainian government for having dispatched token military forces to aid the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the NATO force in Kosovo.

A poll released last month indicated that barely 11 percent of the Ukrainian people back membership in NATO, while 36 percent strongly oppose it. Opposition is particularly strong in the country's east.

Thousands of people gathered in Kiev's Independence Square and rallied outside the US embassy carrying banners with slogans that included "NATO is Worse than the Gestapo" and "Put Bush's Bloody Dictatorship before an International Tribunal." The crowd chanted "Yankee go home!"

Anger towards Bush was heightened by a report leaked to the Ukrainian media that the US president had come to Kiev accompanied by American sniper teams, which had been authorized to fire on anyone suspected of carrying a weapon.

V. Gelety, chief of Ukraine's state security service, issued a public statement warning residents of downtown Kiev not to "go out on balconies, open windows, climb roofs of the houses and take photos and videos."

In January, Ukraine's government asked to join NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP), a process that sets out a timetable and set of conditions to be met to achieve NATO membership. Washington immediately backed the move, as it has the request by the former Soviet republic of Georgia for MAP status.

"In Bucharest this week, I will continue to make America's position clear: we support MAP for Ukraine and Georgia," Bush said after meeting with Yushchenko. "My stop here should be a clear signal to everybody that I mean what I say: It's in our interest for Ukraine to join."

The Kremlin responded in February to Kiev's NATO application with a warning that, if Ukraine joined the Western

alliance and allowed it to establish bases on its soil, Russia would treat it as a military target. "Russia could target its missile systems at Ukraine," declared Russian President Vladimir Putin. "Imagine that for a second."

The Kremlin has also strongly opposed NATO's expansion into Georgia, threatening that it could lead to Moscow's recognition of separatist republics in the Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both of which border on Russia.

"The sharpest problems are Georgia and Ukraine," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the newspaper *Izvestia* Monday. "They are being impudently drawn into NATO. Even though, as is known, the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians are against this and in Abkhazia and South Ossetia they won't even hear of it."

In the past decade, NATO has admitted nine ex-member states of the former Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, beginning with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in 1999. Moscow has viewed the expansion as a growing military encirclement, which would be qualitatively intensified if it were to be extended to Ukraine and Georgia, both formerly part of the Soviet Union.

The German government of Chancellor Angela Merkel has made it clear it will oppose admission of both Ukraine and Georgia. As the NATO alliance functions on the basis of consensus, Berlin can effectively wield a veto over the further expansion of the alliance.

Germany is heavily dependent on Russian energy and is also Russia's biggest trading partner. Likewise, German capitalism is by far the largest source of foreign direct investment in Ukraine, having invested four times as much as US-based interests. Politically motivated cutoffs of energy supplies in recent years have demonstrated how vulnerable Ukraine is to Russian retaliation.

Last month, Merkel spelled out the position of the German government in a speech to German armed forces commanders in Berlin that was also attended by NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

"Countries that are entangled in regional and internal conflicts cannot become NATO members," she said in a transparent reference to Georgia and its confrontations with the breakaway movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. German

officials have warned that Georgia's admission could result in NATO being drawn into a confrontation with Russia over the two territories if the Georgian government were to invoke Article 5 of the NATO treaty, committing the alliance to come to the aid of member states under attack or the threat of attack.

Merkel continued by declaring that a country should be admitted into the trans-Atlantic alliance only if there exists "numerically significant support for NATO membership in that country's population," a condition that was clearly meant to exclude Ukraine.

The German position appears to be widely shared in Western Europe. In a radio interview Tuesday, French Prime Minister Francois Fillon warned against moving ahead with NATO membership for the two former Soviet republics. "We are opposed to the entry of Georgia and Ukraine because we think it is not the right response to the balance of power within Europe and between Europe and Russia, and we want to have a dialogue on this subject with Russia," he said. "France will not give the green light to the entry of Ukraine and Georgia," he told France Inter Radio, adding, "France has an opinion which is different from that of the United States on this question."

In an interview with the *New York Times* Tuesday, France's European affairs minister, Jean-Pierre Jouyet, stressed that while Paris opposed NATO membership for the two former Soviet territories as premature, the European Union should work to develop close strategic ties with both countries. "Because we consider NATO to be premature, in a way such partnerships become even more important," he said.

NATO's eastward expansion has been a source of tension between Western Europe and Washington since it began. In 2003, faced with European opposition to the US war against Iraq, one of the war's chief architects, then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, dismissed Germany and France as "old Europe" and insisted that the "center of gravity" was shifting eastward, where former eastern bloc countries were closely aligned with US policy.

Washington viewed NATO's expansion into the former Warsaw Pact region as a means of advancing its strategic interests, taking advantage of the liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the opening up of whole new areas to capitalism.

With the European Union, and Germany in particular, emerging as the preeminent economic power in the region, the US has sought to advance its own interests by asserting its military power and dominance over the NATO alliance, into which these former eastern bloc countries were recruited.

The statement of French opposition to Washington's policy came even as President Nicolas Sarkozy was signaling that France intends to rejoin NATO's integrated military structure, from which Charles de Gaulle broke in 1966. According to news reports in France and Britain, Sarkozy is also preparing to announce at the Bucharest summit that he is willing to send another 1,000 French troops into eastern Afghanistan.

The move would allow the US, which launched the Afghanistan war and continues to bear the brunt of the fighting, to shift a similar number of its own forces to Kandahar to support a Canadian force of some 2,500. Ottawa had threatened to pull out of the tense region unless it received reinforcement from other NATO members.

Afghanistan will be another source of sharp friction between Washington and its European NATO partners in Bucharest. Recent reports have warned that Afghanistan is becoming a "failed state." In a report prepared by the Atlantic Council's Afghanistan Study Group, former NATO commander Gen. James Jones put it bluntly: "Make no mistake; NATO is not winning in Afghanistan." The report warned that failure in Afghanistan would "put in grave jeopardy NATO's future as a credible, cohesive and relevant military alliance."

Goading Germany over its refusal to send its troops into combat in the embattled south of the country, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates asserted at a European security conference in Munich last February that NATO was becoming a "two-tiered alliance" in which some had "the luxury of opting only for stability and civilian operations, thus forcing other allies to bear a disproportionate share of the fighting and dying."

The Merkel government has thus far refused to alter the rules of engagement for the 3,200 German troops in Afghanistan, which largely restrict them to security and civilian support operations in the north of the country.

The German weekly, *Der Spiegel*, reported that German officials hoped to stall on contested issues like NATO expansion and the Bush administration's proposal—bitterly opposed by Moscow—to deploy a missile shield in eastern Europe until after Bush leaves office.

"But even a new US president will not make things easier for Germany in Afghanistan," the magazine commented. "One thing that Bush and all of his potential successors have in common is the call for more German troops. They agree that what Obama calls the 'dirty work' in the embattled south and east should no longer be left entirely to the Americans, Canadians, British and Dutch."



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