
Hard Debates at NATO On Georgian Membership Action Plan

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Eurasia Daily Monitor - 11/3/2008

Several West European governments cold-shouldered Georgia's and Ukraine's applications for NATO Membership Action Plans (MAPs) during the meeting of NATO countries' ministers of foreign affairs on March 6 in Brussels. Intended to prepare for the NATO Summit due in early April in Bucharest, the Brussels meeting adjourned without a decision on this major chapter of the Summit's agenda. Officially, no country is known to oppose the MAPs outright. In practice, several West European countries seem inclined to drag their feet in deference to Russia.

This ministerial meeting was the first to discuss the merits of MAP aspirants comprehensively in a policy-making forum of this level, with a view to an allied decision. An inconclusive outcome could be anticipated from this first meeting. A follow-up meeting is envisaged. However, with barely three weeks now remaining to the Bucharest summit, the ultimate decision may well turn out to be a hurriedly political one.

By most accounts, Georgia's MAP application is more controversial than Ukraine's in the NATO debates, including the ministerial just held. Those objecting to a Georgian MAP invoke some considerations that bear little relation to Georgia's performance as an aspirant nation. Current objections are largely based on concern for relations with Russia on the part of Germany, France, and a handful of other West European governments.

At the Brussels meeting, French Minister of Foreign Affairs Bernard Kouchner urged the NATO Council to 'take into account Russia's sensitivity and the important role it plays.' Moreover, he argued, relations with Russia are already strained over Kosova and the planned U.S. missile shield, and should not be subjected to further strain over MAPs. Kouchner had personally been committed to Kosova's independence and pressed for its secession from Serbia despite Russia's objections.

With France scheduled to take over the European Union's presidency on July 1, Kouchner claims that his government and the EU as a whole need an unperturbed relationship with Russia in order to agree on a cooperation agenda, specifically mentioning energy ties. 'We think that EU-Russia relations are absolutely important. And France is not the only country wanting to maintain a relationship with Russia as a great nation' (Le Monde, March 8).

German Minister of Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier also seemed to think of relations with Russia as a priority. Entering the Brussels meeting, he declared that he was 'skeptical' on the MAP and called for a 'calm discussion' of the differences within NATO. 'In Russia we have a new president and I think that the European Union wants to put its ties with Russia on another footing.' In this he was not alone: 'We have to take the interests of others, not only of NATO members, into account,' Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean Asselborn echoed from Luxembourg's perch (AP, Reuters, March 7). For their part, the Spanish and Netherlands governments are said to be motivated by internal EU politics in resisting these MAPs.

Four implications stand out from the public remarks of these allied ministers. First, an idea that relations with Russia may take precedence

over other considerations and may constrain NATO's internal decisions. Kouchner even seemed to weigh the issue of MAP against the issue of Russian energy supplies -- a linkage that others have previously suggested in a similar vein, but not publicly or explicitly.

Second, the notion that Russia needs some consolation over Kosova, or reassurance of peaceful Western intent against the backdrop of other security issues in dispute. This logic can lead to tradeoffs with Moscow at other countries' expense, for example by delaying these MAPs on some excuse.

The third potential implication stems from counter-posing the EU agenda to the NATO agenda, including the MAP issue. The ministers who spoke publicly in that vein alluded to Russia-related EU goals and priorities in objecting to the MAPs, which are, however, a NATO issue. Such artificial dissonance can weaken the alliance from within, particularly if certain influential governments start invoking the EU's authority to bend NATO decisions.

The fourth implication has to do with personalizing yet again the relations with Russia. An oft-heard argument among West Europeans within NATO and the EU holds that allies should reach out to Russia's president-elect, Dmitry Medvedev, and avoid any irritant issue, so as to repair the damaged relationship. A related argument holds that Russia would respond indignantly if the Bucharest summit offers MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine in the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom NATO has invited to attend the NATO-Russia Council's session there.

As an overarching consequence, such arguments would award Russia indirect levers to influence and distort NATO decisions -- in this case over the eligibility of countries for membership action plans and accession prospects. Thus, the integrity of NATO's decision-making process, and even its capacity to take internal decisions fully independent of Russia, are at stake in the MAP debate in the run-up to the alliance's Summit.
