

EU meeting on Georgia reveals tensions between European powers and US

Stefan Steinberg
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Despite intense pressure from a number of Eastern European states, supported by Western European powers such as Great Britain and Sweden, the declaration issued by European Union (EU) foreign ministers meeting in emergency session in Brussels on Wednesday to discuss the conflict between Georgia and Russia refrained from any criticism of Russia.

Rejecting an open conflict with Russia, the EU meeting decided against dispatching troops to the region. Instead, the majority of ministers followed German proposals to increase the number of Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitors in Georgia from 100 to 300 and step up humanitarian aid.

The stance adopted toward Russia and the limited measures agreed by the majority of ministers in Brussels stand in stark contrast to the sabre-rattling by the US government, which has accused Russia of being the aggressor in the five days of fierce fighting between Georgian and Russian forces. The Bush administration is sending its own military forces into the region, in the name of humanitarian aid.

The tone struck by the German foreign minister, Frank Walter Steinmeier of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and his French counterpart, Bernard Kouchner, in statements made in the run-up to the meeting differed significantly with the anti-Russian propaganda that has emanated from the White House and been echoed by America's closest partners in Europe.

Prior to the Brussels meeting, Steinmeier made quite clear he opposed any one-sided condemnation of Russia. "I don't think we should lose ourselves in long discussions about responsibility and blame for the escalation of recent days," he said. Instead of finger-pointing, he continued, the EU should "look to the future and take a role in further stabilization."

Steinmeier's position was supported inside the EU meeting by the French, Italian and Finnish foreign ministers. Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, whose country holds the presidency of the OSCE, summed up the position taken by a majority of ministers, declaring, "The blame game and the tough talk will start at a later stage."

Following the meeting, Steinmeier stressed once again that "stability in the Caucasus" could be achieved only in cooperation with Russia.

Steinmeier's stance received the official backing of the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, who heads the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). On Thursday, her spokesman, Thomas Steg, said in regard to Germany's reaction to the role played by Russia in the conflict that it was important not to "over-react." He added that the chancellor looked forward "with optimism" to her planned talks with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin this Friday in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

The consensus at the EU meeting for a conciliatory policy towards

Russia followed days of fierce campaigning by a number of Washington's firmest allies in Europe, who sought to condemn the role of Russia in the dispute. Some Eastern European countries even called for sanctions to be imposed on Russia. The anti-Russia propaganda offensive began at the start of the week as the agreement to end hostilities was announced.

The agreement which led to a cease-fire was brokered by French President Nicholas Sarkozy and his foreign minister, Kouchner. Shaking hands with Sarkozy on Tuesday, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced his satisfaction with the agreement, which called for a return to the status quo that existed between Russia and Georgia prior to the Georgian intervention into South Ossetia on August 7.

Following the meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov indicated that, while respecting the deal, the Russian government would not negotiate with the Georgian state as long as President Mikheil Saakashvili remained in charge.

The agreement struck in Moscow was immediately criticised by the Georgian president, who objected to point six, which stated that the future status of the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be subject to international deliberations. Saakashvili made clear that he continued to claim the provinces as part of Georgian territory and rejected any international interference.

In order to underline their solidarity with the Georgian president, the presidents of EU member-states Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia travelled to Tbilisi on Tuesday, joining President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine, who was already in the country. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, all of these countries have established close relations with Washington. The concerted action to prop up Saakashvili was a clear signal of solidarity with the Bush administration.

At a rally in Tbilisi on Tuesday, Polish President Lech Kaczynski joined the Georgian president to appeal for concerted opposition to Russia, declaring, "We are here to take up the fight." Kaczynski told the crowd, "For the first time in quite a while, our neighbours in the East have once again shown the face which we have known for hundreds of years. These neighbours feel that the nations around them should be subservient to them. We say no!"

One day later, the same countries appealed to NATO to extend membership to Georgia. A declaration read by Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus on Wednesday declared that the "only option to prevent similar acts of aggression and occupation of Georgia in the future is to extend (to Georgia) the NATO Membership Action Plan."

The portrayal of Russia as the aggressor was supported by British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, who declared at the Brussels EU

meeting that the European Union should reassess its relations with Russia following the latter's "aggressive" actions in Georgia.

Echoing the Cold War rhetoric being employed by the US, Miliband continued: "The aggressive Russian force beyond South Ossetian borders has been something that really shocked many people... The sight of Russian tanks in Gori, Russian tanks in Senaki, the Russian blockade of the Georgian port of Poti is a chilling reminder of times that I think we had hoped had gone by."

Just prior to the Brussels meeting, the general secretary of NATO, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer of the Netherlands, intervened to implicitly back the pro-Georgian lobby of European states. On Tuesday, de Hoop Scheffer called upon Russia to respect the sovereignty of Georgia and stressed that "one day" NATO would accept Georgia into its ranks.

However, the majority of Western European powers, with Great Britain the most prominent exception, rejected the confrontational course adopted by the US administration and determined the outcome of EU foreign ministers' meeting. The outbreak of hostilities between Georgia and Russia has once again brought to the surface the profound tensions between Europe and the US which first became visible on the occasion of the Iraq war.

The determination of a number of key European countries to maintain good working relations with Russia, even at the risk of jeopardising their relations with the US, is based on fundamental economic and geo-political interests.

In economic terms, Europe is heavily dependent on supplies of gas and oil from Russia. Russia is also an increasingly important market for European, and particularly German, trade. German exports to Russia rose more than 50 percent in the first half of 2008, to a total of \$29 billion. According to Christian Dreger, an economist at the German Institute for Economic Research in Berlin, "Russia is a very strong country in terms of economic development. It helps compensate for weaker growth in other regions."

For companies such as the European car makers Daimler, Renault and Fiat, Russia has become an increasingly important market, under conditions where the economic slowdown in Europe is affecting sales within the EU zone itself.

More generally, the increasingly aggressive activities of the US in the Caucasus and Balkans are seen as a threat to European interests in the region.

For a long time following the break-up of the Soviet Union, major Western European countries stood by as the US sought to compensate for its declining economic influence by massively increasing its military presence within the satellite states of the former Soviet Union. Following the disastrous US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Western European political circles have increasingly identified America as the main source of instability and division on the continent.

The efforts by the US to establish missile defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic have enraged Russia and threaten to transform Europe into a potential nuclear battlefield between Washington and Moscow. Already in 2006, the right-wing Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Germany warned that the US was intent on extending its sphere of influence in the Baltic and Caucasus regions "by bringing additional pro-American oriented countries into the alliance (NATO)."

The insistence of Washington on the rapid inclusion of Georgia into the structures of NATO led to political conflict earlier this year. At the April NATO summit in Bucharest, US President Bush met with

concerted European opposition, led by Germany, to his plans for the speedy inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO's ranks. Only a last minute compromise, putting off a decision on NATO membership for the two countries, allowed the American president to save face.

Following the recent decision by the United States and EU countries to recognise the independence of Kosovo, the German foreign minister warned that Russian patience was being stretched to the limit. Steinmeier told the German press that following the "difficult decision to recognise Kosovo, it is clear that with our foreign policy we have reached Russia's tolerance level."

Memories in Europe are still fresh regarding the comments by former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in 2003. Rumsfeld condemned Germany and France for failing to support the war against Iraq. France and Germany, he said, represented "old Europe," and added that NATO's expansion in recent years meant that "the centre of gravity is shifting to the east."

While unwilling to publicly confront the US, leading European politicians are making it increasingly clear that they are opposed to any return to the Cold War polarity that was characterised by US political and military dominance of Western Europe.

The visible economic and political decline of the US was identified by the French business daily *Les Echos* as an opportunity for Europe to increase its influence.

In an editorial published on Wednesday, the newspaper noted, "President Sarkozy's shuttle diplomacy between Moscow and Tbilisi is highly risky." It went on, however, to outline the possibilities for European nations to exploit US vulnerabilities: "President Bush's weakness at the sad conclusion of his mandate puts the European Union in the front row when it comes to replacing weapons with diplomacy in Georgia... The EU 27 hold all the aces when it comes to getting the Kremlin's ear. Especially in the economic sense... But the question remains as to whether the Europeans will play their aces, which assumes they will speak with one voice. And there is nothing less certain than that."

While the meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels demonstrated that EU countries are unable "to speak with one voice," it revealed that there is a growing consensus amongst Western European countries on the necessity to develop their own tools of foreign policy and the military capacities required to directly compete with, or even challenge, the US.



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