

UK declares its support for Washington's anti-Russian campaign over Georgia

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20 August 2008

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband has declared the UK's full support for Washington's provocative anti-Russian campaign over Georgia.

In an article in the *Times* on the day that NATO foreign ministers met in an emergency meeting to discuss their response to the crisis surrounding South Ossetia, Miliband demanded that international monitors be sent to Georgia to oversee the ceasefire and to defend "Georgian sovereignty."

"The invasion of Georgia was entirely unjustified," Miliband wrote, "and we will strengthen support for its wish to join Nato."

"You don't need to be a student of the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968 to find the sight of Russian tanks rolling into a neighbouring country chilling," Miliband continued, deliberately evoking the language of the Cold War.

"The Georgian crisis is about more than vital issues of humanitarian need and rule of law over rule of force. It raises a fundamental issue of whether, and if so how, Russia can play a full and legitimate part in a rules-based international political system, exercising its rights but respecting those of others."

Miliband complained of "overwhelming Russian aggression." Russia, he said, had "provided no evidence of war crimes" and had "violated successive UN Security Council resolutions which they themselves agreed."

Russia, Miliband went on, had "blatantly violated the sovereignty of a neighbouring (and democratic) country."

"The British position," Miliband declared, "is that aggression cannot and will not redraw the map of Russia's former 'near abroad' (or anywhere else)."

NATO foreign ministers must reassert their commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity, Miliband insisted, and "confirm the commitment made at the Nato summit in April to membership for Ukraine and Georgia and to follow it up with serious co-operation—militarily and politically—as part of a structured route map to eventual membership."

Miliband struck a high moral tone. But the British government is in no position to criticise others for "overwhelming aggression" and violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states.

The Labour government supported the US-led invasion of Iraq without any UN mandate under the false pretext that Saddam Hussein had "weapons of mass destruction" and assisted in enforcing "regime change" in that country through military aggression.

Only 17 months earlier, it had participated in the invasion of Afghanistan on the spurious grounds that the country was responsible for the 9/11 terror attack. Although the assault on Afghanistan had the backing of other NATO countries, it was no more legitimate for that. NATO forces have repeatedly targeted civilians. The government of Hamid Karzai is a Western puppet regime with little local support even in the capital.

On the same day that Miliband's article appeared in the *Times*, it was announced that British Special Forces would take part in a "decapitation" strategy in Afghanistan. Its aim will be to assassinate leading opponents of the Western-backed regime who are thought to be in the tribal territories of Pakistan.

The *Independent* quoted what they called "senior defence sources" who said that their intelligence pointed to an "implosion of security" in Pakistan, following the resignation of President Pervez Musharraf. It cannot be doubted that the plan is to extend the NATO campaign into Pakistan.

In 1999, British forces participated in the bombing of Serbia, which targeted civilians and neutral embassies. Earlier this year, Britain recognised the unilateral breakaway of Kosovo from Serbia.

The UK government had no concern then for the territorial integrity of Serbia. Rather, its support for Kosovo's independence was justified on exactly the same grounds as those now being claimed by anti-Georgian separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. That step must in itself have contributed to the Russian decision to act as it did in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Britain, in alliance with the US, has adopted an increasingly aggressive attitude in regions that border on Russia and were part of the former USSR.

In April, Britain backed the US call for Georgia to become a NATO member. France and Germany were reluctant to initiate the process that would lead to membership, recognising that the move could only antagonise Moscow. Britain has also backed the US plan to base a ground-based missile interceptor system in Poland and an x-band radar site in the Czech Republic.

Miliband, who is to visit Georgia on Wednesday, called for both economic and political support for Georgia and Ukraine. He said that Britain would play its full part in sending observers to monitor the ceasefire.

He rejected the idea of expelling Russia from the G8, floated in Washington. But he insisted that the other powers must be able to act as the G7 whenever they wished. While the practical

implications of being excluded from the G8 may be small, it is a significant diplomatic gesture.

Other European powers have urged a more cautious approach. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier warned against a “knee-jerk reaction” to the Georgia crisis. He called for the lines of communication to be kept open between the West and Russia.

The decision to send Miliband to Georgia followed criticism in the British press that the government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown had not responded to the Georgian conflict adequately. A front-page headline in the *Sun* demanded, “Where’s Gord?” It was followed days later by an article written by the *Sun*’s political editor Trevor Kavanagh headlined “Hello? Gordon? We still can’t hear you.” This response indicates a deep dissatisfaction with Brown’s performance in the key sections of the international financial elite for whom Murdoch’s media empire speaks.

Kavanagh pointed to the Russian warning that Poland’s decision to host the US missile defence system made it a military target.

“This escalation in tension only makes the question more urgent,” Kavanagh wrote: “Where on earth are Gordon Brown and his Foreign Secretary David Miliband?”

Other international leaders were taking a prominent role, but Brown had let Conservative opposition leader David Cameron make the running on Georgia, Kavanagh said. Brown had only issued statements after Cameron appeared on the media. Tony Blair, Kavanagh pointed out, would not have behaved in this way.

Kavanagh’s article appeared on the day that Cameron flew to Tbilisi to meet with President Saakashvili. He had been invited to the capital after he compared the response of the West to the Georgian crisis with the appeasement of Nazi Germany in 1939.

Cameron called for visa restrictions on Russians, “Russian armies can’t march into other countries while Russian shoppers carry on marching into Selfridges.”

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office pointed out that there are already visa restrictions on Russians. But the damage inflicted on the Labour government was real.

Cameron’s intervention followed the outbreak of what was described in the media as warfare in the Labour Party as Miliband challenged Brown’s leadership.

Miliband criticised the performance of the government in a *Guardian* article at the end of July. Labour could still win the next election, Miliband insisted, even following two by-election defeats. But he did not mention Brown’s name, which was taken as a sign that he was putting himself forward as a potential leader.

Guardian columnists Polly Toynbee and Jackie Ashley were quick to offer their support to Miliband. Toynbee was once a firm supporter of Brown in his contest with Blair. But she could barely contain her enthusiasm.

“Suddenly everything changed,” she wrote following Miliband’s article. “The burst of optimism was so startling it dazzled those too long trapped deep in a dungeon. In that one moment it was all over for the old leader who had plunged them into these depths. Suddenly here was the chance of escape everyone was waiting for.”

Ashley was positively adulatory. “A man who has often seemed too fastidious for frontline politics,” Ashley wrote of Miliband,

“suddenly looks like a killer.”

Brown’s difficulties did not go unnoticed in Washington. The *Wall Street Journal* ran a piece by Kyle Wingfield, editorial writer for the paper’s European edition.

“When Gordon Brown returns home from his summer vacation,” it began, “he may find that the locks at 10 Downing Street have been changed.”

This internecine conflict left the Brown government slow to respond to the Georgian crisis. Cameron was able to seize a certain advantage. He is presenting himself as the best candidate to continue the close alliance in foreign policy between London and Washington.

Brown has played his part in creating the circumstances that created the international crisis over Georgia. As chancellor of exchequer, he provided the finances that made it possible for Britain to fight a war on two fronts and act as Washington’s closest ally. But now with the economy on the brink of recession and international tensions sharpening, the question of whether Brown is capable of continuing in a leading role inevitably emerges.

Cameron has raised one of the touchstone issues of British politics. His reference to appeasement was to the policies of the Chamberlain administration at the beginning of the Second World War. He made these remarks in a situation that has been recognised as bearing dangerous similarities to the international crises that preceded previous world wars. Implicitly, Cameron is presenting himself as the better potential war leader.

Brown is not about to concede the point. His response has been to despatch his foreign secretary to the flashpoint. Eager to show his mettle, Miliband took a belligerent line at the NATO summit. The contest among British politicians to demonstrate that none of them are Chamberlains may itself become a factor in escalating international tensions as they compete in bellicosity ever more recklessly.



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