

Bush administration steps up war of words with Russia

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US officials escalated their attacks on Russian actions in Georgia, despite mounting evidence that Russian military forces have begun pulling back from the positions seized in the wake of the Georgian onslaught on South Ossetia, one of two autonomous regions that have enjoyed de facto independence from Georgia for more than a dozen years.

White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe, in a press briefing Thursday morning, cited reports that Russian troops were digging in—largely circulated by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and his supporters in the American media—and declared, “the withdrawal is not happening very quickly, if it, in fact, has begun. The withdrawal needs to take place, and needs to take place now.”

In response to a direct question, Johndroe said that, in Bush’s view, “Russia is in violation of the commitments they have made” in the ceasefire pact negotiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who visited Moscow and the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, as the representative of the European Union. The White House spokesman continued, “I can’t imagine a circumstance right now that we would engage in military cooperation with the Russians until the situation in Georgia is resolved.”

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice contributed to the war of words in the course of her visit to Warsaw to sign a US-Polish agreement to base American anti-missile batteries in Poland and supply the Polish military with advanced anti-aircraft weaponry. The agreement has provoked angry bluster from Russian military spokesmen, including the deputy chief of staff, who warned that Poland was risking attack.

Rice said the threats from Moscow “border on the bizarre,” adding, “When you threaten Poland, you perhaps forget that it is not 1988. It’s 2008 and the

United States has a ... firm treaty guarantee to defend Poland’s territory as if it was the territory of the United States. So it’s probably not wise to throw these threats around.”

While Rice defended the US-Polish agreement with the claim that it is directed against a potential threat from Iran, not against Russia, there was no mistaking the implications of her words: a Georgia-style clash in Poland could touch off direct military conflict between the United States and Russia, the two states which between them control enough nuclear weapons to incinerate the planet many times over.

The most inflammatory comments came from Bush himself, in a speech Wednesday afternoon to a convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars—the same group where Vice President Cheney first unveiled in 2002 the administration’s campaign for war against Iraq.

Bush focused his remarks on a full-throated defense of the program of military aggression and domestic repression which his administration has unleashed, using the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as a pretext. “We’re at war against determined enemies,” he declared, “and we must not rest until that war is won.”

Bush seemed determined to include in the “war on terror” not only the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also the current confrontation with Russia over Georgia, thus effectively lining up Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Georgia has “sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq to help others realize the blessings of liberty,” he claimed. “Georgia has stood for freedom around the world—now the world must stand for freedom in Georgia.”

This implications of such a perspective are

staggering, since Bush has proclaimed the “war on terror” to be a conflict of indefinite length, perhaps generations-long, in which, as he famously declared in 2001, the entire world must decide either to be on the side of the United States or risk being targeted by the United States as an ally or potential supporter of “terrorism.”

Bush concluded by emphasizing, as he has on several occasions over the past week, that the US government would brook no compromise over the autonomous territories whose people are hostile to the reestablishment of Georgian rule. “South Ossetia and Abkhazia are part of Georgia,” he said flatly, “and the United States will work with our allies to ensure Georgia’s independence and territorial integrity.”

The major European powers have taken a far more muted position on the status of the two territories, in part because the Abkhazians and Ossetians are minority ethnic groups long resentful of Georgian rule and, in the case of South Ossetia, likely to seek ties to North Ossetia, an autonomous region in Russia which shares their language.

There is also far more readiness in Europe to condemn the reckless adventurism of Georgian President Saakashvili, who ordered the Georgian military attack on South Ossetia, an action the British magazine the *Economist* characterized as “foolish and possibly criminal.”

The legal status of the two territories could well become the major flash point of the conflict. The Russian parliament is to discuss next week appeals to recognize the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which could well be followed by petitions from both regions to be incorporated into the Russian Federation.

Despite the US government and media propaganda campaign, the military standoff in Georgia appears to be easing. Reuters News Agency reported that one of its correspondents had witnessed a column of T-72 main battle tanks crossing the border from Georgia back into Russia, a major indication that a Russian pullback is occurring, albeit more slowly than demanded by the US and NATO, and with more troops remaining in advanced positions to protect South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgian attack. The withdrawal column, at the Roki tunnel, included artillery launchers, armored personnel carriers and

heavy truck, as well as the 21 tanks.

The commander of Russian ground forces, Vladimir Boldyrev, said all the troops sent to reinforce Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia would be back in Russia by the end of August. He made the statement in a conference call to the press from Sochi, the summer residence of much of the Russian ruling elite, located on the Black Sea coast not far from Abkhazia.

A group of *Washington Post* reporters, who accompanied the first humanitarian aid convoy to reach the Russian-held portion of Georgia adjacent to South Ossetia, said they found considerable destruction, but also evidence that “undermined some of the most incendiary allegations advanced by Georgian officials.” They visited the village of Mereti, “where government officials had recently said three local women were raped and murdered. At least eight residents said Tuesday that no such attacks had occurred.”

The reporters operated without official Russian minders. All the more significant is their finding that Russian troops—depicted as a barbarous horde in the most incendiary accounts in the Georgian and Western media—were in fact playing the role of peacekeepers. They wrote: “Georgians living in several of the villages said the Russians occupying their land had treated them well, done nothing to encourage them to leave and offered the only protection available from the South Ossetian militias they feared most.”



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