

# US continues to ratchet up tensions with Russia

Barry Grey  
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The United States has continued to intensify its confrontation with Russia in the wake of Moscow's withdrawal of troops from most of the Georgian territory it held following the five-day war provoked by the invasion of the breakaway province of South Ossetia by the US-backed government of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

On Sunday, the US guided missile destroyer USS McFaul docked at the Georgian port of Batumi as part of what President Bush and the Pentagon have called a "military humanitarian mission" to aid the former Soviet republic in the southern Caucasus.

The McFaul, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, is outfitted with an array of weapons, including Tomahawk cruise missiles, which can carry either conventional or nuclear warheads, and a sophisticated radar system. According to US Defense Department spokesman Bryan Whitman, the US Coast Guard cutter Dallas has also been dispatched to the Georgian coast, while a third vessel, the Navy command ship USS Mount Whitney, is being loaded in Italy.

Russian military officials on Monday denounced the US-led naval buildup, and hours later Russia's flagship cruiser re-entered the Black Sea, ostensibly for weapons tests. Anatoly Nogovitsyn, the deputy chief of the Russian military's general staff, said, "The fact that there are nine Western warships in the Black Sea cannot but be cause for concern. They include two US warships, one each from Spain and Poland, and four from Turkey."

Reuters cited unnamed sources in Russian military intelligence as saying the NATO ships in the Black Sea are carrying more than 100 Tomahawk cruise missiles, with more than 50 onboard the USS McFaul alone that could hit ground targets.

On the ground, the Georgian military has concentrated equipment and forces along the border with South Ossetia, near Russian troops that have set up checkpoints in a five-mile buffer zone around the pro-Russian enclave. The Georgian parliament voted on Saturday to prolong the official "state of war" with Russia until September 8.

Russian military officials this weekend vowed to boost their forces in the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in direct proportion to American military spending to rebuild the Georgian army.

In addition to its provocative military moves, Washington is stepping up its political and diplomatic offensive against Moscow. American officials continue to charge Russia with violating the

terms of the cease-fire agreement brokered two weeks ago by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, acting in behalf of the European Union. Sarkozy currently holds the rotating presidency of the 27-member European alliance.

The Bush administration moreover announced that Vice President Dick Cheney would visit the Georgian capital of Tbilisi next week as part of a tour of former Soviet republics and Warsaw Pact nations that are now allied to the US and ruled by virulently nationalistic and anti-Russian governments. Cheney heads a faction within the Bush administration that has long pushed for an even more belligerent and aggressive policy toward Russia than that carried out by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Early in the five-day Georgia-Russia war, while Bush was still attending the Olympics in Beijing and issuing relatively muted statements on the conflict, Cheney telephoned Saakashvili and placed the blame for the fighting squarely on Moscow. His office issued a statement saying that Russian "aggression ... must not go unpunished." His visit to the -region indicates that his faction has gained the upper hand within the administration.

On Sunday, Sarkozy announced that he was calling an emergency EU summit for September 1 to consider the European Union's relations with Russia and the provision of aid to Georgia. Sarkozy, who said he was calling the meeting at the request of "some EU governments," last week threatened to call such a summit and warned of "serious consequences" if Russia failed to adhere to the cease-fire terms. He, along with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Foreign Minister David Miliband, are echoing US charges that Moscow continues to defy the agreement.

Russia on Friday withdrew almost all of the forces it had sent into Georgia to repel the attack on the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, which, Moscow contends, killed over 2,000 civilians and leveled 70 percent of the buildings in the city. However, it is retaining over 500 troops within the borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and has established military checkpoints in what it calls a "security zone" around the two provinces.

Moscow insists that it is in compliance with the cease-fire, which includes a point allowing Russia to take unspecified "additional security measures" besides keeping peacekeepers in the disputed territories. Russia has maintained peacekeeping troops in the provinces since they ended effective control by Tbilisi in fighting that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. A subsequent agreement between Moscow and Tbilisi sanctioned the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the breakaway republics.

In a telephone conversation with Russian President Dimitry Medvedev over the weekend, Sarkozy said the agreement allowed Russian peacekeepers to “patrol” areas near the borders of the two republics, but not to set up checkpoints. He also demanded that Russia remove military checkpoints near the Georgian port of Poti and the air base at Senaki, which are outside the five-mile buffer zone around Abkhazia.

From the moment the cease-fire agreement was announced, Washington began accusing Russia of violating its terms. Both Georgia and the US have refused, in practice, to acknowledge the point allowing Russia leeway to station some forces beyond the borders of the disputed provinces.

The *Financial Times* reported Monday that “US diplomats have voiced their frustration at the terms of the subsequent ceasefire deal brokered by Nicolas Sarkozy, France’s president, which they consider too vague and too favourable to the Kremlin.” In a separate article based on an interview it conducted over the weekend with Saakashvili, the newspaper reported that “Saakashvili put the blame on the ‘vague’ ceasefire agreement.”

Divisions within the EU over how closely to adhere to the extremely provocative line of the US and how far to take the confrontation with Russia were reflected in a statement by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who ruled out EU sanctions against Russia at the upcoming summit.

However, Sarkozy’s announcement of the meeting reiterated the US mantra of support for the “independence and territorial integrity” of Georgia, a formula for rejecting demands of separatists in the two breakaway provinces, broadly supported by the local populations in the wake of the Georgian assault on South Ossetia, for independence from Georgia.

The question of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia is becoming the flashpoint for further conflict. On Monday, both houses of the Russian parliament—the upper Federation Council and the lower State Duma—voted unanimously in favor of a non-binding resolution calling on Medvedev to recognize the independence of the provinces.

The Russian parliament and the governments of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have cited as precedent American and European recognition of Kosovo, which last February, over vehement objections from Russia, declared itself independent of Serbia, a traditional ally of Moscow.

Intensifying the conflict, Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh called on Monday for a military cooperation agreement between an independent Abkhazia and Russia.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin in an interview with *Spiegel Online* on Sunday attacked the US for its “deceitful role” and pointed out: “American was arming Georgia for five years, and Georgia tripled its military budget.”

Of Washington’s intense lobbying for Georgian admission to NATO, he said, “That would be very dangerous ... It is a decision by all of NATO, a decision on what relations it wants with Russia in the future.”

The Russian government is incapable of responding to the aggressive and provocative policy of the US except by counterposing to Washington’s drive for hegemony in the Caucasus and the Eurasian continent its own Russian nationalism

and militarism.

Resting as it does on the dominant factions of the new bourgeoisie that enriched itself from the plundering of the nationalized economy of the former Soviet Union, the Russian regime is incapable of making any appeal to the masses of former Soviet republics such as Georgia and Ukraine which are being lined up against it.

On Sunday, Ukraine held a large military parade in Kiev to mark the 17th anniversary of independence from the Soviet Union. Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko gave a televised address in which he declared that only NATO membership and military rearmament could protect Ukraine from Russian domination.

Yushchenko published an op-ed column in Monday’s *Washington Post* in which he reiterated earlier threats to limit Russian naval access to the Black Sea port of Sevastopol. Russia and Ukraine agreed in 1997 to a 20-year renewable lease for the Russian naval base in the Crimean port.

Yushchenko went on to declare his support for the “territorial integrity” of Georgia and insist on Ukraine’s admission to NATO.

Indicative of the bipartisan support for the Bush administration’s reckless and belligerent policy toward Russia, with its ominous implications of a potential military clash between nuclear armed powers, is an interview with Saakashvili reported in Monday’s *New York Times*. The article notes that the Georgian president is convinced of unqualified US support for his drive to reassert control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, saying he “spoke by phone with the presumptive Republican nominee for president, Senator John McCain, as often as twice a day, and that he was in regular contact with Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., who has been picked to run for vice president on the Democratic ticket.”



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