

US, Europe denounce Russian support for Georgian provinces' independence

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The US and Western European powers have issued vitriolic denunciations of Russia's decision to recognize the independence of the two breakaway provinces of Georgia—South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree Tuesday backing independence for the provinces, just one day after both houses of the Russian parliament voted unanimously to call on Medvedev to take the action.

The general tenor of the statements from Western governments was to attack Russia's action as a violation of Georgia's sovereignty and "territorial integrity" and a threat to peace and stability in the Caucasus. All of these statements are drenched in hypocrisy, since the US and its European allies precipitated the crisis in the Caucasus by backing independence for Kosovo, over strenuous objections from Serbia and Russia, last February, and the US is fully complicit in Georgia's August 7 attack on South Ossetia, the event that sparked Russia's intervention and subsequent backing for South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence.

US President George W. Bush immediately denounced the Russian decree as an "irresponsible decision... which only exacerbates tensions," and went on to warn Russia to respect the borders of Georgia. Bush's comments were echoed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who described the Russian decision as "regrettable" and warned that it would have no chance of support ("dead on arrival") at the United Nations.

Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate, rushed to put out an even more belligerent statement, not waiting for Bush to issue his. This was in keeping with the line adopted by the Obama campaign over the Georgian crisis, which is to seek to outdo the Bush administration and Obama's Republican opponent, Senator John McCain, in sabre-rattling threats against Russia.

Obama condemned Moscow's move and said the US should "further isolate Russia internationally because of its actions." He reiterated his demand for \$1 billion in US aid to Georgia and suggested that Russia be kicked out of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, that the NATO-Russia Council be disbanded, and that Russia be denied membership in the World Trade Organization.

His statement concluded on the menacing note that "peace and security in Europe cannot be taken for granted."

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer warned: "Russia's actions in recent weeks call into question Russia's commitment to peace and stability in the Caucasus."

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband joined in the choir of condemnation and declared he would seek to forge "the widest possible coalition against Russian aggression in Georgia." Miliband flew to Kiev on Wednesday for talks with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko as part of this campaign to isolate Russia.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner also condemned Moscow's decision, accusing Russia of violating UN resolutions and trying to seize the breakaway provinces.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that the Russian decree was "absolutely unacceptable" and warned ominously that the crisis in Georgia "has not only changed the region, but world politics as a whole."

All of these governments, first and foremost the American, have been seeking to supplant Russian influence in former Soviet republics and former satellite states of the Soviet Union since the break-up of the USSR in 1991. The one-time Soviet Baltic republics and Warsaw Pact nations of Eastern Europe have been incorporated into NATO, and the US is demanding early admission of Georgia and Ukraine into the American-dominated military alliance.

The turning point in this highly provocative and aggressive anti-Russian policy was last February's recognition of Kosovo by the Western powers.

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on Wednesday, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier was asked to comment on warnings from international legal experts that recognition of Kosovo would create a precedent for such actions as Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Steinmeier could do no better than claim Kosovo was a "special case."

While US and European leaders condemn Russia for violating international laws and UN resolutions, they did precisely the same thing when they recognized Kosovan independence. That action contravened UN resolutions enacted following the 1999 US-NATO air war against Serbia.

The 1999 air war was itself carried out without UN sanction, and was the culmination of a deliberate policy initiated first by Germany, with its endorsement of independence for Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, to dismember Yugoslavia—a policy that unleashed a bloody civil war that took thousands of lives. The US and Western Europe wanted to blow up Yugoslavia—an ally of Russia—because they deemed it an obstacle to Western control over the energy-rich Caucasus and Caspian Basin to the east.

Following the end of the 1999 war, Kosovo was under UN administration. The first UN administrator, from 1999 to 2001, was Bernard Kouchner, who, as French foreign minister, was among the first to declare diplomatic recognition of the Republic of Kosovo last February. He now denounces Russia for following his lead in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The role of the American government in deciding the fate of Kosovo was summed up in a recent article by the US think tank Stratfor:

“In the summer of 2007, when it was obvious that the negotiations were going nowhere, the Bush administration decided the talks were over and that it was time for independence. On June 10, 2007, Bush said that the end result of negotiations must be ‘certain independence.’ In July 2007, Daniel Fried said that independence was “inevitable” even if the talks failed. Finally, in September 2007, Condoleezza Rice put it succinctly: ‘There’s going to be an independent Kosovo. We’re dedicated to that.’ Europeans took cues from this line.

“How and when independence was brought about was really a European problem. The Americans set the debate and the Europeans implemented it.”

So much for international law and respect for territorial integrity!

The link between US and European policy in Kosovo and Russian recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was most succinctly drawn out in an editorial comment by the conservative Hungarian newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* on Monday:

“The Kremlin is doing nothing different in the Caucasus today than what the United States did in 1999 in the Balkans. Back then, the US prepared for a military battle against Serbia. The Kosovo script is being played out once more. It serves as a precedent and provides Russia with a basis for military intervention.”

Following an initial wave of reports in the US and European press declaring Russia to be the main aggressor in the Georgian conflict, a number of more recent articles have thrown light on the role of the Georgian military in the run-up to the war and make clear the complicity of the US administration.

A report in the latest edition of *Der Spiegel* entitled “Chronology of a Tragedy” makes very clear that the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia had been planned long before and in close collaboration with Washington.

The chronology begins with Saakashvili’s election as

president following the US-sponsored Rose Revolution at the end of 2003. Immediately after his election, Saakashvili pledged to return South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Georgian control. Plans for a military intervention in the two regions had already been drawn up in 2006.

At the end of April of this year, following renewed tensions on the border between Abkhazia and Russia, Saakashvili ordered the concentration of 12,000 Georgian troops at the military base of Senaki, close to Abkhazia.

Saakashvili maintains that he discussed his plans for a military offensive at a dinner with Condoleezza Rice held during her trip to Georgia last July, and was assured of US support. A few days later, on July 15, Georgian forces took part in an extensive military exercise (Direct Answer 2008) together with 1,000 US troops in a region to the south of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi.

The *Der Spiegel* report then states: “At the end of the large-scale manoeuvres, something astonishing took place on the Georgian side, under the eyes of American military advisors. Instead of sending parts of his army back to barracks, President Saakashvili sent them in the direction of South Ossetia.”

The report continues: “On August 3, the Russian foreign ministry issued a final warning: an ‘extensive military conflict’ was imminent... Saakashvili’s plans for an invasion were long completed. A first draft, drawn up in 2006... anticipated that it would be possible to capture all important positions within a space of 15 hours.”

Since the rout of Georgian forces by Russian troops in the five-day war earlier this month, the US has continued to ratchet up tensions with Russia. The most significant escalation was the signing of an agreement with Warsaw to establish a permanent US military presence in Poland as part of missile defence installation—a development that will put US troops within 150 miles of Russian territory.

At the same time, the US has assembled a flotilla of war ships in the Black Sea to challenge the Russian fleet, which also has a number of vessels operating off of Georgia’s coastline. On Tuesday night, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin accused US ships of smuggling weapons into Georgia under the guise of humanitarian aid, and the deputy head of Russia’s general staff declared that the Russian fleet was closely monitoring activities “in light of the buildup of NATO naval forces in the Black Sea.”

The Black Sea and the southern Caucasus have been turned into a tinder box. The slightest provocation could lead to a military confrontation, with implications reaching far beyond the Caucasus.



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