

NATO meeting in Brussels: US steps up pressure on Russia

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Following intense pressure from the United States, the NATO meeting of foreign ministers held in Brussels on Tuesday issued a statement accusing Russia of “disproportionate” military force and the “deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure” in the conflict with Georgia.

The statement issued by the foreign ministers of the 26 member states affirmed “the principles of Georgia’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity”—a diplomatic formula rejecting demands, supported by Moscow, for independence for the contested breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The statement placed the onus on Moscow for the five-day war between Georgia and Russia that erupted after the Georgian government attacked South Ossetia on August 7. It declared that “military action must cease definitively and military forces must return to their positions held prior to the outbreak of hostilities.” Implying that Russia was violating the terms of the cease-fire agreement brokered last week by French President Nicolas Sarkozy on behalf of the European Union, the statement called on Russia to “take immediate action to withdraw its troops from the areas it is supposed to leave...”

The US and Russia are at odds over the terms of the cease-fire agreement. Washington insists that it requires Russia to remove all the military forces it sent into Georgia after August 7 back onto Russian territory. Russia, citing a provision that allows it to take unspecified security measures, insists it can retain a beefed-up military presence within South Ossetia and deploy some forces within a buffer zone surrounding the contested provinces.

Russian President Dimitri Medvedev on Tuesday told Sarkozy that Russia’s military pull-out would be completed by August 21-22, with the exception of some 500 troops who will man posts on either side of South Ossetia’s border.

Reaffirming NATO’s support for Georgia, the statement issued Tuesday announced the formation of a NATO-Georgia Commission to oversee Georgia’s “economic reconstruction,” leaving open the possibility of meeting “additional Georgian requests for assistance.” The formation of the commission was linked to NATO’s statement of support, issued last April, for eventual Georgian membership in NATO—something Russia vehemently opposes as an intolerable threat to its security.

At the April NATO summit in Bucharest, the US failed to obtain support from Germany, France and other major European powers for a membership action plan for the former Soviet republic, which would put it on a fast track to join the US-dominated military

alliance. The statement issued Tuesday said NATO would reconsider Georgia’s bid for a membership action plan at the next NATO summit, to be held in December.

In regard to Russia, the statement called into question the continuation of the NATO-Russia Council, established in 2002, declaring that NATO “cannot continue business as usual” with Moscow.

At a news conference following the meeting, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer denounced what he called Russia’s “occupation” of “the greater part of Georgia.” When asked whether NATO was developing any new military plans to aid Georgia, de Hoop Scheffer said, “The answer is no. I think we have in place what we should have.”

The NATO meeting stopped short of more punitive measures which have been floated by American officials, such as scrapping the NATO-Russia Council. However, the tone of the statement issued by the meeting was highly confrontational.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov responded quickly. In a televised address, he accused NATO of being “unobjective and biased” and said the alliance was “trying to portray the aggressor as the victim, to whitewash a criminal regime and to save a failing regime.”

In the run-up to the meeting, the Bush administration continued to escalate its Cold War-style rhetoric against Russia as well as diplomatic and military measures of a highly provocative character. A Pentagon spokesman said on Monday that the US military planned to ramp up its “humanitarian” aid to Georgia, and the *New York Times* on Tuesday cited a “senior administration official” as saying the US would begin selling the Georgians hand-held anti-aircraft devices to defend against Russian air attacks.

On the flight to Brussels, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for the first time since the Georgia crisis erupted raised the issue of Russian bomber flights near the coast of Alaska. Moscow initiated the flights after the US and Europe in February recognized Kosovo’s independence from Serbia, a traditional Russian ally. Rice called the flights “a very dangerous game.” She added that the US and its NATO allies would not allow Russia to “draw a new line through Europe.”

Rice follows the Brussels meeting with a trip to Warsaw on Wednesday, at which she will sign an agreement announced last week for the stationing of US missile-defence installations in Poland. The deal represents an immense provocation against Russia, providing for the deployment of US Patriot missiles and

the permanent stationing of American troops only a few hundred miles from the Russian border.

Notwithstanding the aggressive tone of the NATO statement, there are significant differences between key Western European countries on the one side and the US and its coterie of right-wing Eastern and Central European regimes on the other.

Leading European politicians have warned against any break in relations and expressed opposition to attempts to isolate Russia. Those speaking out for maintaining good working relations with Russia cross traditional political lines and include figures from both the conservative and social democratic camps.

Prior to the Brussels meeting, the president of the European parliament, Hans Gert Pöttering of Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), said, "We have to be prepared to talk... we cannot afford to isolate Russia."

The chairman of foreign affairs committee of the German parliament, Ruprecht Polenz (CDU), spoke out against any rapid admission of Georgia to NATO.

The most outspoken opponent of the campaign to isolate Russia is former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democratic Party—SPD). In an interview published in the current issue of *Der Spiegel* magazine, he said relations with Russia should not be jeopardized because of the Georgia crisis.

Schröder categorically rejected Georgian membership in NATO in the near term. He said: "Imagine if we were forced to intervene militarily on behalf of Georgia as a NATO country, on behalf of an obvious gambler, which is clearly the way one ought to characterize [Georgian President Mikheil] Saakashvili. Georgia and Ukraine must first resolve their domestic political problems, and they are still a long way off. I see the chances of Georgian accession becoming even more remote as a result of the recent events in the Caucasus, and in this connection I have great difficulties following the rather ostentatious promises made by the NATO secretary general a few days ago."

Following the NATO meeting, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) expressed hope for renewed dialogue with Russia and urged that the NATO-Russia Council could be convened quickly following the withdrawal of Russian troops. "According to my understanding," he said, "the NATO-Russia Council is not just a fair weather committee. It is needed when we find ourselves in difficult waters."

Even the foreign secretary of Britain, which has generally lined up behind the US, expressed reservations about some of the more draconian measures being broached in Washington. In an article in Tuesday's *London Times*, David Miliband wrote that "isolation has been tried in the past and didn't work. I favour hard-headed engagement." He added that he opposed expelling Russia from the Group of Eight industrialized nations, as US Republican presidential candidate John McCain has proposed.

There is great concern within Western Europe that a new Cold War-type confrontation between the US and Russia could split the European Union. The governments of a number of Western European states such as Germany, France and Italy are being thrown into crisis by the foreign policy realignment taking place in the US.

Leading politicians in France and Germany who had expressed

opposition to the unilateral foreign and military policy of the Bush administration had entertained hopes of a change of line as a result of the November presidential election. On the issue of the US stance toward Russia, however, they have been sorely disappointed. The Democratic and Republican presidential candidates are seeking to outdo one another in their declarations of hostility toward Moscow.

Among the most belligerent denouncers of Russia is Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter and is now a key foreign policy advisor to the Democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama. Following the outbreak of hostilities in Georgia, Brzezinski declared that the action taken by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was "horrifically similar to that taken by Stalin and Hitler in the 1930s."

In a recent interview, Brzezinski was adamant in calling for punitive action against Russia: "Not only the West, but the rest of the international community, must make it clear that this kind of behaviour will result in ostracism and economic and financial penalties. Ultimately, if Russia continues on this course, it must face isolation in the international community."

He went on to say that retaliatory measures had to go beyond excluding Russia from the G-8 and take the form of "a concerted effort on all levels—at the United Nations, in the Atlantic Council, in the EU or in NATO, in consultation with the Japanese, the Chinese and others..."

In his book *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), Brzezinski advocated the breaking up of Russia into a "European Russia, a Siberian Republic and a Far Eastern Republic," which, he said, would make the country less likely to engage in "imperialist mobilisation."

Hauke Ritz, a prominent German foreign policy analyst, recently published an article arguing that the failure of the US drive in southern Eurasia (Iraq and Afghanistan) meant that the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe gained priority. He wrote: "This means at the same time a massive incursion into the Russian sphere of influence... following Iran, Russia is now trapped in the cross-hairs of US geo-politics."

The evident consensus within US political circles for a confrontational course toward Russia is intensifying the fundamental dilemma of Europe. Unable to risk a military confrontation with America, European powers risk being reduced to the status of pawns as the US intervenes with increasing recklessness into Eastern Europe and Russia.



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