After Georgia conflict

Missile agreement with Poland intensifies danger of US-Russian clash

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The agreement between the United States and the right-wing government of Poland to base a US anti-missile system in that country is the first major response of American imperialism to the Russian intervention in Georgia.

The Bush administration has pressed Poland and the Czech Republic to accept US anti-missile systems and radar installations on the pretext that they are being deployed to prevent an attack on Europe by Iran, which possesses neither the required ballistic missile warheads nor nuclear weapons. Despite vehement protests from Moscow, US officials have denied that the anti-missile systems represent a threat to Russia.

However, the circumstances in which the agreement with Poland was signed make clear that it is directed against Moscow. Long stalled by wrangling between Warsaw and Washington over Polish demands for high-tech anti-aircraft systems as the price for basing the missiles, the pact was wrapped up within days of the appearance of Polish President Lech Kaczynski alongside Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili at an anti-Russian rally in Tbilisi.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk declared ominously, "We have crossed the Rubicon," after representatives of his government signed the accord in Warsaw. It is obvious that his comments were motivated not by fears of a mythical Iranian threat, but by concern over the Russian military, which fought two world wars on Polish soil in the twentieth century.

There are two exceptional features of the accord, added as incentives to Poland. First, the United States will immediately transfer a Patriot anti-missile battery from Germany to Slupsk on the Baltic Sea, about 100 miles from the Polish border with the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. The *New York Times* noted: "American troops would join the Polish military, at least temporarily, at the front lines—facing east toward Russia." The 110 American soldiers stationed there will serve as a sort of human tripwire, ensuring that any Polish-Russian conflict quickly involves the United States.

Secondly, the US agreed to an obligation to defend Poland in case of attack with greater speed than required under current procedures of NATO, which Poland joined in March 1999. "Poland and the Poles do not want to be in alliances in which assistance comes at some point later—it is no good when assistance comes to dead people," Prime Minister Tusk said on Polish television. "Poland wants to be in alliances where assistance comes in the very first hours of—knock on wood—any possible conflict."

Russian officials responded to the US-Polish agreement with apocalyptic language. General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, the deputy chief of staff, said that Poland was "exposing itself to a strike, 100 percent." He noted that Russian military doctrine sanctions the use of nuclear weapons, not only against any nation that conducts an attack on Russia with nuclear weapons, but "against the allies of countries having nuclear weapons if they in some way help them."

"The USA is busy with its own missile defense system," he said. "It does not intend to defend Poland at this point. Poland lays itself open to attack by giving the USA permission to deploy the system. The country may become an object of Russia's reaction. Such targets are destroyed in the first instance."

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev denounced the agreement at a news conference, where he stood side-by-side with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. "The deployment of new anti-missile forces has as its aim the Russian Federation," he said. "Therefore, any fairy tales about deterring other states, fairy tales that with the help of this system we will deter some sort of rogue states, no longer work."

The logic of US policy, as the Polish agreement testifies, leads inexorably in the direction of a military confrontation between the United States and Russia, two massively armed nuclear powers. This raises once again, as in the years preceding 1914 and 1939, the specter of world war, this time with the likely consequence of nuclear annihilation.

It is not simply a matter of gauging the intentions of Bush and Cheney, scheduled to leave office in five months, or of their successor, either Obama or McCain. The events and the decisions of the past week have their own logic. The impending insertion of US military forces into what were once called the "buffer states," the region separating Russia proper from Central Europe, has immense historical and political significance.

This region was the battleground in two world wars, in which tens of millions died—30 million in the Soviet Union alone as a result of the Nazi invasion through the very territory on which US anti-missile systems will now be deployed. (It is worth pointing out as well, that while the historical and political circumstances are different, Hitler's geo-strategic aim was the same as Bush's: to gain control of the oil resources of the Caspian basin.)

There are dozens of potential flashpoints in this vast territory—unresolved border disputes between Russia and many of the successor states of the former USSR, as well as conflicts involving Russian-populated enclaves such as Kaliningrad, next to Poland, and Trans-Dniestria, on the Moldova-Ukraine border, and huge Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states and Ukraine. Any one of these could become the spark for a military conflict in which the United States is now a potential combatant.

The Bush administration has maintained, in a series of leaks to the US media, that it sought to restrain Saakashvili from attacking the pro-Russian enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and that the Georgian president ignored its advice. This version of events is entirely unbelievable, given the integration of US military advisers into the Georgian military command. But even if true, it would mean that

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Washington has so little control over events that a reckless nationalistic demagogue can use its backing to trigger a major international crisis. Such political arsonists play a major role in every country in Eastern Europe.

As George Friedman of Stratfor.com, a strategic analysis web site, detailed in an article published August 13: "It is inconceivable that the Americans were unaware of Georgia's mobilization and intentions. It is also inconceivable that the Americans were unaware that the Russians had deployed substantial forces on the South Ossetian frontier. US technical intelligence, from satellite imagery and signals intelligence to unmanned aerial vehicles, could not miss the fact that thousands of Russian troops were moving to forward positions."

While Friedman suggests that the apparent surprise of the Bush administration was an expression of its strategic incompetence, there is another and more sinister explanation: the US government wanted the military conflict to erupt, despite the inevitable Georgian rout at the hands of the Russian army, because the crisis would serve its ends, both internationally—viz., Poland—and domestically, where the Republican Party is relying on war fever to bolster its beleaguered presidential campaign.

In the wake of the ceasefire in Georgia, reluctantly signed by Saakashvili Friday with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pressuring him in person, it has become even clearer that the week-long American media and diplomatic campaign over alleged Russian aggression is an example of the "big lie" technique.

It now turns out that the scale of the Russian military intervention was relatively small, with a total of 15,000 troops engaged, barely half the number that Georgia has under arms, suggesting that Moscow never intended to overrun the country. CNN reported Friday that the total number of Russian troops in Gori, the city whose occupation supposedly represented an attempt to cut Georgia in half, was only 200.

The bulk of the US accounts of the events in Georgia consisted of unconfirmed charges of Russian and Ossetian atrocities against Georgian civilians, with little or no reporting on the Georgian onslaught on South Ossetia that touched off the conflict in the first place.

The Russian ambassador to the United Nations, Vassily Churkin, denounced US claims that Russia was conducting a "war of terror" in Georgia. Such language was "absolutely unacceptable," he said, "particularly from the lips of the permanent representative of a country whose actions we are aware of, including with regard to civilian populations in Iraq and Afghanistan and Serbia."

There has been virtually no acknowledgement in the American media of the grotesque double standard being employed by the Bush administration, under which its own violations of international law and depredations against innocent civilians are ignored, while far less provocative actions by other powers are vilified and their leaders demonized.

In Georgia, for example, Russia deployed, just outside its borders, less than 10 percent of the number of American troops that have been dispatched thousands of miles to invade Iraq and Afghanistan, overthrow their governments and establish US-backed puppet regimes.

Yet Bush could declare, in a press statement Friday, "The days of satellites and spheres of influence are behind us." The man who in 2002 branded three sovereign states "an axis of evil," ultimately invading one and conducting economic warfare against the other two, continued: "Bullying and intimidation are not acceptable ways to conduct foreign policy in the 21st century."

Senator John McCain, by far the most vocal advocate of a confrontational policy against Russia, sounded a similar delusional note, telling reporters during a Michigan presidential campaign appearance: "In the 21st century, nations don't invade other nations." The Republican presidential candidate has been the most fervent advocate of US military escalation in Iraq, while his rival, Democrat Barack Obama, is playing the same role in relation to Afghanistan.

The bipartisan unity of Bush, McCain and Obama over the Russo-Georgian conflict demonstrates again that the vast majority of the American people—who oppose the war in Iraq and have no interest in provoking a war with Russia—are disenfranchised in the presidential election. There has been virtually no public discussion about the implications of the US-Polish agreement, which could involve the American people in a military conflict of incalculable dimensions.

The crisis in Georgia has sent shock waves through international relations. The ramifications extend not only into Eastern Europe, as demonstrated by the Polish action, but to the wider Caucasus region, the Middle East and Central Asia.

In the Caucasus, the initial impact was the shutdown of pipeline segments which carry Caspian Sea oil from Azerbaijan through Georgia to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (B-T-C) pipeline was built with American support to provide an outlet for oil supplies to the world market independent of both Russia and Iran, which Washington regards as its two main adversaries in the region.

Both Turkey and Israel have been drawn into the crisis. President Bush declared that the US Navy would move to the Georgian coast to provide "humanitarian aid" and test Russia's willingness to allow freedom of the seas. But Turkey must give its consent to the passage of warships through the straits connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea. State Department officials indicated that the naval deployment might have to be abandoned because of Turkish opposition.

Israel is also deeply implicated in the conflict. As the Israeli web site *Ynet* observed, "The fighting which broke out over the weekend between Russia and Georgia has brought Israel's intensive involvement in the region into the limelight. This involvement includes the sale of advanced weapons to Georgia and the training of the Georgian army's infantry forces."

As for the Russian regime, Putin and Medvedev are pursuing a reactionary nationalist policy that appeals to the most backward moods in Russian society. Their arrogance and bullying only alienate the working people of Georgia, Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic States and the wider working class audience internationally.

The Putin regime is the instrument of the semi-criminal new bourgeoisie that emerged out of the dismantling of the Soviet Union, recruited in large measure from the ranks of the old Stalinist bureaucracy and possessing all its vices—above all, the national chauvinism that became the hallmark of Stalinism.

In the final analysis, the conflict between the United States and Russia is the inevitable outcome of the world crisis of the capitalist system, which takes the form not only of economic slump and financial convulsions, but of great-power conflict leading inexorably to imperialist war.

The only social force that can prevent imperialism from dragging mankind into a military holocaust is the international working class. It must be united and mobilized on the basis of the program of world socialist revolution to put an end to capitalism and the reactionary nation-state system, which are the root causes of militarism and war.

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