

Danger grows of NATO-Russian clash in Black Sea

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A build-up of naval forces is underway in the Black Sea, involving both NATO and Russian ships. The provocative actions by the US-led military coalition create the danger of a clash with potentially catastrophic consequences.

Late last week, General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, deputy chief of the Russian military's general staff, claimed that 10 NATO warships were in the Black Sea and that more were on the way.

"In light of the build-up of NATO naval forces in the Black Sea, the [Russian] fleet has also taken on the task of monitoring their activities," he said.

The ships include two US warships, ostensibly in the region to deliver humanitarian aid to Georgia. These have since been joined by a third.

In addition, NATO admitted that four of its vessels are on a "pre-planned deployment" in the Black Sea, "conducting port visits with Romanian and Bulgarian forces".

The "long-planned routine" exercise Active Endeavor—which is said to involve training in anti-terrorist and anti-pirate manoeuvres—comprises one warship each from Spain, Germany and Poland. They were reportedly later joined by a US frigate for a three-week schedule of port visits and exercises.

While denying a build-up, a NATO spokesperson said that other NATO countries may have ships in the sea. "Obviously, there are other NATO-affiliated nations out doing things," Lt. Col. Web Wright said.

These reports confirm that at least six NATO vessels are in the Black Sea, meaning that Russian warnings that warships from the western alliance now outnumber their own fleet anchored off the western coast of Georgia are not as far off the mark as is claimed.

Russia has charged the US with using aid as a cover for rearming Georgia. "Normally warships do not deliver aid and this is gunboat diplomacy, this does not make the situation more stable," said Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov.

Cliff Kupchan at the Eurasia Group, a US-based consultancy, was cited as stating, "It is a clever policy to have chosen military-led humanitarian relief." He went on, "Given this administration's consistently aggressive approach to protecting American influence, one has to ask how long it will allow Russians to dictate which Georgian port to use."

On Thursday a US coast guard cutter docked at the Georgian port of Batumi, after the American embassy in Tbilisi had initially stated that it was heading towards the Russian-controlled port of Poti, in line with Georgian requests. According to reports, this statement was later retracted and the *Dallas* instead unloaded its aid supplies in Batumi.

Last Sunday the US destroyer, USS *McFaul*, docked at Batumi. The

US military says a third ship, USS *Mount Whitney*, the flagship of the US Sixth Fleet, will arrive in Georgia today.

The *New York Times* August 28 admitted the US was "pursuing a delicate policy of delivering humanitarian aid on military transport planes and ships, apparently to illustrate to the Russians that they do not fully control Georgia's airspace or coastline."

The report continued that this policy "has left American and Russian naval vessels manoeuvring in close proximity off the western coast of Georgia, with the Americans concentrated near the southern port of Batumi and the Russians around the central port of Poti. It has also left the Kremlin deeply suspicious of American motives."

In a further provocative move by the US, the *Dallas* is to leave Georgia and visit the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol the same day. The port is leased by Russia from Ukraine and is integral to its Black Sea operations. In a display of support for the US, Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko has said that the lease will not be extended beyond 2017 and has signed a decree requiring prior notice of all movements by Russian naval vessels and aircraft from Sevastopol.

Turkey's *Hurriyet* newspaper cited Nogovitsyn as claiming that the US ships are carrying nuclear missiles that could hit Russian targets as far away as St. Petersburg. The RIA news agency claimed that the NATO ships were carrying more than 100 Tomahawk cruise missiles, with more than 50 onboard the USS *McFaul* alone that could hit ground targets.

On August 26 Reuters reported that Russia's flagship cruiser, the *Moskva*, had re-entered the Black Sea for weapons tests. The assistant to the Russian Navy's commander-in-chief told Russian news agencies the cruiser had put to sea again two days after returning to its base at the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol.

Russian warships also reportedly arrived in the separatist region of Abkhazia. Russian deputy admiral Sergei Menyailo said they would "support peace and stability". He said, "Our tasks include the control of Abkhazia's territorial waters and the prevention of arms shipments." The leader of the separatist region said he will invite Russia to establish a naval base at Sukhumi, a deep-water port in the territory.

In an interview with CNN on Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin took the extraordinary step of accusing the US of instigating the assault by Georgia on South Ossetia.

"The suspicion arises that someone in the United States especially created this conflict to make the situation more tense and create a competitive advantage for one of the candidates fighting for the post of US president," Putin said, clearly referring to Republican candidate John McCain, whose foreign policy advisor was a lobbyist for Saakashvili government.

Putin also said he had reason to believe US military personnel were working with Georgian forces that fought Russians, a prospect he described as “very dangerous.”

The White House dismissed Putin’s assertions as preposterous. At the same time, McCain’s wife Cindy was visiting Georgia and US Vice President Dick Cheney planned to arrive this week, where he is expected to pledge American military assistance.

For his part, Democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama, has joined the bellicose threats against “Russian aggression” and said, if elected, his administration would be committed to protecting Georgia.

The *Los Angeles Times* ran an article under the headline, “Why Was Cheney’s Guy in Georgia Just Before the War?” on August 26. The piece named Joseph R. Wood, Cheney’s deputy assistant for national security affairs. It asked, “What was a top national security aide to Vice President Dick Cheney doing in Georgia shortly before Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili’s troops engaged in what became a disastrous fight with South Ossetian rebels—and then Russian troops?”

Nogovitsyn has charged that a US national was amongst the Georgian commando units who invaded South Ossetia. He produced a colour photocopy of a US passport belonging to Michael Lee White from Texas, born in 1967. He told a press conference, “There is a building in Zemonekozi—a settlement to the south of Tskhinvali that was fiercely defended by a Georgian special operations squad. Upon clearing the building, Russian peacekeepers recovered, among other documents, an American passport in the name of Michael Lee White of Texas.”

There is a growing body of evidence and commentary regarding the US role in building up Georgia’s military, with the aim of provoking a conflict with Russia. Writing in the *New Statesman* August 14 Misha Glenny noted how the US and Israel had worked to arm Georgia, so that “Saakashvili and the hawks around him came to believe the farcical proposition that Georgia’s armed forces could take on the military might of their northern neighbour in a conventional fight and win.”

Glenny noted that the Georgian minister for reintegration of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Temur Yakobashvili, had praised Israel for its military assistance. Following the assault on South Ossetia, Glenny stated, Yakobashvili had said “Israel should be proud of its military, which trained Georgian soldiers.” Thanks to its assistance, “We killed 60 Russian soldiers yesterday alone,” he said. “The Russians have lost more than 50 tanks, and we have shot down 11 of their planes. They have sustained enormous damage in terms of manpower.”

It is known that the US and Georgia held joint war games between July 15-31, codenamed Operation Immediate Response, which involved 1,000 US servicemen. One week later, on August 7, Georgian forces attacked South Ossetia.

As to the immediate future, the *Times* of London reported, “US military planners are now openly considering how to rearm Georgia’s forces” and cited a Pentagon spokesman as stating, “Down the road we will be looking at what may be required to rebuild the Georgian military... right now the mission of the United States military is to provide humanitarian assistance.”

The *Times* quoted the former British ambassador to Georgia Donald McLaren stating that NATO might have to send troops to the region. If Moscow rejected such a proposal, he said, NATO had only two choices: “To give up and surrender and say to the Russians, ‘It’s your backyard, you’ve won’, or to put men on the ground to protect Georgia’s sovereignty and the east-west oil and gas pipeline from the Caspian and Central Asia.”

McLaren *Daily wrote Maik* earlier that in “Georgia is Europe. It is our gateway to Central Asia and, with Russia and Turkey as neighbours and Iraq and Iran not far to the south, its location alone makes it of strategic significance.

“It is a friend and partner in one of the most highly-pressurised parts of the world. Georgia is a vital conduit for energy supplies from the Caspian to its East and the potential of the Central Asian suppliers beyond.

“There are few issues more immediate than energy security and Georgia’s fragile oil pipeline offers us one alternative to dependence on Russia.”

The US offensive against Russia is destabilising the entire region and inexorably drawing the European powers in its wake.

Asia Times reported, “The US-backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline passes through Georgian territory and letting Russia dictate events in Georgia has a definite implication in terms of energy security, given the fierce pipeline geopolitics in the Eurasian landmass, Europe’s heavy energy dependency on Russia and Moscow’s willingness to rely on the energy card for security bargaining with Europe.

“This alone may explain why the European Union, which has been divided over a response to the Georgian crisis, has largely consented to the US’s muscular reaction. The issue has now turned into a defining moment of the post-Cold War era because of its broader implications.”

Both Germany and France have signalled they have retreated from their earlier opposition to Georgian membership of the European Union. EU and Ukrainian leaders are to meet in France on September 9 and sign an association on closer relations. Although this does not spell out whether Ukraine will get EU accession, a recent report by the European Council on Foreign Relations think-tank argues that the EU cannot afford any more delays in defining and deepening its ties with Ukraine.

Tensions between Russia and Georgia continue to worsen. As Tbilisi announced Friday that it would sever diplomatic ties with Moscow, officials in South Ossetia stated they would seek absorption into Russia.

As well as pitting Georgia and the Ukraine against Russia, the US has embroiled Turkey in a bitter row with Moscow.

Russia argues that the NATO presence in the Black Sea violates the 1936 Montreux Convention, which limits the time non-coastal countries can sail military vessels on the sea to three weeks.

Under the treaty, Turkey—which controls the straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles—must be notified 15 days before military ships sail into the sea. These can not remain in the area for longer than 21 days. But Turkey only announced its approval of the US passage on August 20. Russia has warned that Turkey will be held responsible if the US ships do not leave when they are supposed to do so.



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