

Cheney in Georgia: Gunboat diplomacy in pursuit of oil

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The US is continuing to ratchet up tensions with Russia in the aftermath of last month's war in the Caucasus.

On Thursday, US Vice President Dick Cheney appeared in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Cheney reiterated US support for Georgia's incorporation into NATO, while making bellicose denunciations of Russia.

Only a day earlier, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice proposed the staggering sum of \$1 billion in aid to the impoverished Black Sea nation.

During his visit, Cheney made statements tantamount to declaring Georgia an American military protectorate. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, Cheney said, "can count on continued support and assistance from the United States. I assured the president as well of my country's strong commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity."

"Georgia will be in our alliance," Cheney promised. "NATO is a defensive alliance. It is a threat to no one."

Georgia has yet to be included in the NATO alliance, with the major continental powers, especially Germany, so far objecting in spite of the Bush administration's fervent efforts. This may change as a result of the recent war.

The \$1 billion aid package the Bush administration is proposing is an enormous increase over last year's funding, which amounted to \$63 million, and would make Georgia the third largest recipient of US foreign aid, trailing only behind Israel and Egypt. About half of the money would be approved by this year's Congress, while the other half would be approved at the start of the next congressional session.

Rice claimed that the money was not earmarked for rebuilding Georgia's military, which disintegrated under Russian attack during the war. However, there is

little reason to believe the money will not be used for precisely that purpose once in Georgian coffers. A *Guardian* report stated that Cheney would "discuss Georgia's long shopping list of military hardware" during the visit.

In a Wednesday editorial headlined "Help for Georgia," the *New York Times*, although allowing that it felt "nervous" about Cheney's trip, nonetheless hailed the proposed appropriation for Georgia and the hard anti-Russian stance assumed by the Bush administration. According to the *Times*, "Moscow needs to understand that the West will not be intimidated into abandoning a struggling democracy."

US machinations in the Black Sea have nothing to do with democracy. Instead, two closely related aims animated Rice's proposal for massive financial assistance to Georgia and Cheney's nearly simultaneous visit. First, Washington is preparing for war against Russia. Second, it is seeking to secure oil and natural gas pipelines outside of Russia's orbit.

Cheney's visit to Georgia came a day before a planned visit to Ukraine, another state hostile to Russia, and only two weeks after Poland agreed to put in place a US missile system designed to shoot down nuclear missiles, clearly directed against Russia.

The same day Cheney arrived in Georgia the US sent yet another warship, the flagship of the Mediterranean fleet, the USS *Whitney*, into the Black Sea to Georgia, ostensibly on a humanitarian mission.

This is classic gunboat diplomacy. But Washington is also making advanced preparations for war against Russia. This would include a nuclear first strike, which the US political and military elite believe the missile shield will allow them to carry out.

A day before visiting Georgia, Cheney was in Azerbaijan, home to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and

the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines, the only non-Russian-dominated routes for Caspian oil and gas bound for the European market. Georgian national security chief Alexander Lomaia said the visits, taken together, are “a very clear sign that alternative energy routes and sources will be secured.”

Azerbaijan, under President Ilham Aliyev, has recently attempted to chart something of a middle course between Washington and Moscow. It has remained largely neutral in its public pronouncements regarding Russia’s standoff with the West over Georgia, and Moscow has been attempting to court the Aliyev government. Azerbaijan has even begun to route some of its oil through a Russian pipeline, citing the instability in Georgia as a reason. Analysts believe that Cheney’s visit was an attempt to cajole Baku back into line.

Cheney also took time during his brief stop in Azerbaijan to hold private talks with the local heads of the BP and Chevron oil companies.

While in Azerbaijan Cheney all but declared that he is seeking to form a military and oil/gas axis in the region. Cheney pointed to the importance for US interests that “energy export routes are diverse and reliable” and that “additional routes for energy exports that ensure the free flow of resources” would be needed, promising to enlist the aid of Turkey in protecting and increasing the number of energy pipelines. The effort is calculated to undermine the basis of Russia’s economic resurgence, its oil exports.

A second purpose for such a coalition would be for preparation of war against Iran. Turkey and Azerbaijan border Iran, while Georgia could be used as a staging ground and base for air operations.



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