

Tensions between leading European nations and US following NATO meeting

Foreign ministers agree to resume talks with Russia

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The NATO meeting of foreign ministers held Tuesday and Wednesday this week in Brussels delivered a renewed rebuff to the US over the issue of membership in the organization by Georgia and Ukraine. The NATO summit consisting of 26 foreign ministers refused to bow to pressure from US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for a speedy acceptance of the two Eastern European countries.

Instead, in response to an initiative by a number of core European countries, including Germany, France and Italy, the meeting agreed to resume a dialogue with Russia. The alliance's eventual decision to begin "a conditional and graduated reengagement" with Moscow was the result of prolonged and heated debate behind closed doors between, on one side, Rice—supported by the British foreign minister and a number of central Eastern European countries—and on the other side, an alliance of Western European countries led by Germany and France.

The summit also decided that Georgia and Ukraine would "eventually" become members of NATO and confirmed that existing NATO commissions would assist each country along the "long" path to NATO membership.

Indicating just how "long" this process of preparation for admission could be, the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted Wednesday in an article supporting the NATO decision: "It was only reasonable to oppose (any quick membership). Realistically there is no basis for an acceleration, but rather for a deceleration. Ukraine is very far, generations away, from NATO. And so long as Georgia is in conflict with the rebel provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia it will not be accepted by the alliance, because no one wants to be drawn into a new war in the Caucasus. It will take decades to defuse the situation."

Already in April of this year, US plans for a speedy admission of the two East European countries were rejected by core European states led by Germany at the NATO summit in Bucharest. In the course of heated debate at the summit, the US and its allies had accused Germany in particular of being "naïve" and "overly trusting," with regard to Russia.

In August of this year, the US and its allies in Europe then moved quickly to vilify Russia as the aggressor nation following the outbreak of the conflict between Georgia and Russia. The concerted media and political campaign to back the propaganda

lies of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was led by President Bush and supported at the time by the Democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama.

Since the outbreak of the conflict, increasing evidence has emerged that the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia was the culmination of a long-prepared plan for the occupation of the rebel republic. Only recently, Georgia's former envoy to Russia, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, gave testimony to the Georgian parliament and declared: "The US leadership gave Georgia the green light for a military operation in South Ossetia."

Notwithstanding the growing mountain of evidence demonstrating the provocative role of the Georgian regime in the conflict, the *Wall Street Journal* published a statement by Saakashvili on Tuesday—obviously timed to coincide with the start of the NATO conference—in which the Georgian president once again attempted to defend the actions of his government.

In the run-up to the latest NATO summit in Brussels, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier made clear that there would be no shift in Germany's policy of opposition to rapid NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. In Bucharest in April, Steinmeier noted, there were some "rude objections" aimed at Germany, but it would be absurd to imply that he or the German government were "naïve or ignorant" with regard to Russia. "I am and remain firmly convinced that it would be wrong to isolate Russia," Steinmeier concluded.

In comments to *Der Spiegel*, Steinmeier described the tensions between Europe and Russia in the wake of the Russia-Georgia war as an "unnecessary domestic European conflict" and evoked the language used by former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who in the wake of the Iraq war had divided Europe into "Old" (leading West European nations) and "New" (Great Britain and Eastern Europe). This time round, Steinmeier noted, "It was Old Europe that brought reason to the proceedings."

While the German foreign minister made clear there would be no concessions on the part of his government with regard to Georgia and Ukraine, the Russian ambassador to NATO reacted to the summit decision with jubilation: "There is an open split within NATO and it will widen if NATO tries to expand further," Dmitry Rogozin told the state broadcaster Vesti-24. "The schemes of those who adopted a frozen approach to Russia have been destroyed."

Germany, in alliance with the French and Italian foreign ministers, was able to repel US pressure over the issue of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, but Washington was able to win agreement for US plans to install an anti-missile defense shield in Europe despite the vehement opposition of Russia. The summit's communiqué on the defence shield was signed by all 26 NATO states but, in another indication of behind-the-scenes tensions, it was revealed that the final communiqué had gone through no less than 22 drafts.

Despite the concessions made to the US over its missile defence shield, it is clear that the NATO summit in Brussels represented a new milestone in the growth of tensions between the great powers on either side of the Atlantic.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 the US has pursued a policy of systematic military and political encirclement of Russia. During the Cold War and prior to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, direct US military influence ended at the borders of West Germany. Since then, the US has extended its military presence by no less than 1,200 kilometres (745 miles) eastwards and now has NATO soldiers in Estonia, directly on Russia's border.

For some time, West European nations, which are heavily dependent on supplies of oil and gas from Russia, have witnessed this process of gradual encirclement by Washington with growing concern. Germany is Russia's largest trading partner, and only two months ago German Chancellor Angela Merkel travelled to Russia to sign a major deal between the German utility E.ON and the Russian state energy giant Gazprom for the exploitation of the huge reserves in the Yuzhno-Russkoye gas field in Siberia. The repercussions of the international financial crisis have also served to worsen relations between the US and Europe with the growth of protectionist lobbies on both sides of the Atlantic.

In a recent article in the *New York Times*, Angela Stent (leading officer for Russia at the United States National Intelligence Council from 2004 to 2006) pointed to the growing tensions and offered a piece of advice to the incoming US president: "There are serious disagreements between Washington and Berlin from which Moscow can only benefit if there is not better coordination.... The Obama administration should work with the Germans as it reassesses US policy toward Russia."

In fact, there is little to indicate that an Obama presidency would reverse the course of political confrontation and military encroachment of Russia begun by President Bush. Obama followed up his support for the White House line on the Russia-Georgia conflict by joining the choir of those calling for rapid NATO membership for the country. At the same time, his foreign policy team contains a number of figures who represent a bipartisan continuity with the policies adopted by the Bush White House.

Already in April 2008, Obama's then Democratic rival and now nominee for secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, had declared she was "deeply disturbed" by Russian activity in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which she said undermined Georgia's "territorial integrity." Clinton went on to call upon President Bush to "show our support" for the Georgian government. She also criticized the Russian government for engaging in a "pressure campaign to

prevent Ukraine from seeking deeper ties with NATO."

With regard to the missile defence system, the conservative Czech daily *Lidové* wrote that the decision to support the system at the Brussels summit is "bad news for the opponents of the project and those who thought that after Barack Obama's election there would be a change in the direction of America's foreign policy. The nomination of radar advocates Hillary Clinton and Robert Gates (secretaries of state and defense, respectively) shows that at least as far as this point is concerned, the frequently invoked change in Washington's policy won't come."

Contrary to the expectations of broad sections of the media, an Obama presidency will do little to ease tensions on either side of the Atlantic. In fact, comments made after the summit by the secretary general of NATO, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, pointed to the next area of conflict between Europe and the US.

According to de Hoop Scheffer, there was unanimity in NATO over its involvement in Afghanistan, but he made clear that a President Obama would ask European allies for a larger commitment of troops and money. "It's crystal clear that we need more forces in Afghanistan," de Hoop Scheffer said, adding that he had no doubt that Mr. Obama will set phones "ringing in European capitals."

"The allies need to do better," he said. "I want to see the balance in this alliance. I don't want to just see more American troops. It has to be a combination of a military and civilian surge, and what slightly concerns me is that allies on this side of the ocean will have difficulty in matching the extra effort a new US administration might put into Afghanistan."

There is already considerable opposition in European capitals to being dragged deeper into the quagmire in Afghanistan under US leadership. Germany, France and Italy are quite prepared to conduct military campaigns, including in Afghanistan. However, in Berlin, Paris, and Rome there is growing political pressure that European governments free themselves from the grip of US imperialism in order to pursue their own interests unhampered across the continent.



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