

US Vice President Biden visits Ukraine and Georgia

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Following his visit to Ukraine earlier this week, the US vice president, Joe Biden, arrived in the former Soviet republic of Georgia Wednesday. The trip follows President Barack Obama's summit in Moscow this month, during which the American and Russian leaders made efforts to cooperate in certain strategic areas.

In return for Russian support for the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan Obama, according to one senior Kremlin official, offered to recognize the "peculiarities" of Moscow's relations with Georgia and Ukraine.

Biden's tour of these two countries is widely seen as a sop to their pro-US governments, both brought to power by American-funded "color revolutions," and a warning to Moscow that, despite limited recent concessions, Washington retains strong interests in the ex-Soviet area.

The vice president arrived in Ukraine's capital, Kiev, for talks with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko on Tuesday. After the meeting Biden made a speech suggesting that US relations with Russia would not impact on Ukrainian plans to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Biden's words were tailored to leave the door open to future Ukrainian membership of the US-led military alliance, while suitably vague so as not to antagonize the Kremlin.

"If you choose to be part of the Euro-Atlantic integration, which I believe you have, then we strongly support that," Biden said, adding, "We do not recognize—and I want to reiterate it—any spheres of influence."

"We do not recognise anyone else's right to dictate to you or any other country what alliance to belong to or what relationship to have."

Despite the warm words in public, unnamed US officials accompanying the vice president told the press that Ukraine had a "long way to go" before the US would consider allowing it into NATO.

President Yushchenko is committed to Ukrainian

membership of NATO, a move fiercely opposed by Moscow. Opinion polls in Ukraine indicate that the overwhelming majority of the population opposes membership in the alliance.

Biden also proposed that the US invest in Ukraine's oil and gas pipeline network, which serves as a route for much of the energy supplied by Russia to Western Europe. In January this year a dispute between Russia and Ukraine over payments and prices left much of Europe without natural gas. The transit of oil and gas through Ukraine is a highly lucrative business but the pipeline infrastructure is in need of renewal. With continuing poor political relations between Moscow and Kiev, US energy companies could make inroads into the country at the expense of the ambitions of Russia's state gas company, Gazprom.

Later on Tuesday Biden met with Ukraine's prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko. A former ally of Yushchenko during the "orange revolution," they are now bitter enemies. In recent months both leaders have accused each other of plotting to establish a totalitarian regime. Tymoshenko will stand in next year's proposed presidential election, and is likely to defeat the deeply unpopular Yushchenko.

Biden also met with Viktor Yanukovich, the defeated candidate in the disputed 2004 election. The candidate favored by powerful eastern Ukrainian oligarchs, Yanukovich is due to run again for the presidency in 2010. He is seen as favoring the maintenance of close relations with Russia, but has made efforts since 2004 to court the European powers and Washington.

US imperialism still appears to favor an "orange coalition" in Ukraine, with Biden advising Yushchenko and Tymoshenko to "stop posturing" if Ukraine wanted to develop closer links to the West. However, with Yushchenko considered a lame duck in Ukraine and bitterly opposed in the Kremlin, Washington could swing behind Tymoshenko.

Arriving in Georgia yesterday, Biden was greeted by President Mikheil Saakashvili. The Georgian leader faces a political crisis following the disastrous war against Russia

last year. In August 2008 Saakashvili ordered Georgian forces to attack the breakaway province of South Ossetia, in which Russia has maintained a military presence since the early 1990s.

Moscow responded to the attack by invading Georgia then backing South Ossetia's unilateral declaration of independence from Tbilisi, as well as that of another pro-Russian Georgian province, Abkhazia.

The United States has played a key role in aiding the Georgian military, especially since Saakashvili came to power in the US-backed "rose revolution" in 2003. Washington likely had foreknowledge of last year's attack on South Ossetia, with hundreds of US troops embedded in the Georgian army.

The Georgian president had clearly hoped that Washington would back his military adventure in South Ossetia; however, the scale of the Kremlin's response threatened open warfare between the two powers had US forces directly intervened. The US did dispatch Navy ships to the area and warned against Russian "aggression," but ultimately the war was a debacle for Saakashvili and Washington.

As a result of the conflict, South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been drawn closer into Russia's orbit, while Russian armed forces have a stronger presence in the separatist territories. Saakashvili has faced frequent large-scale protests in Tbilisi demanding his resignation and the holding of early presidential elections, due to take place in 2013. Opposition groups have accused the president of corruption and incompetence in last year's war.

Just days before Biden arrived, Saakashvili was forced to concede vague promises to the opposition that he would introduce legislation to limit the powers of the presidency and hold early local elections. Opposition leader David Berdzenishvili rejected the offer as a "public relations stunt" designed to save Saakashvili from demands that he resign, and claimed that the president plans to use his powers to put down dissent.

Speaking in Georgia, Biden supported Georgian territorial integrity, in a rebuff to Russian recognition of the de facto secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In a thinly veiled criticism of Saakashvili, however, he suggested that Georgia had to implement reforms before it could move closer to western institutions. Privately, diplomats are reporting that plans for Georgian accession to NATO have been shelved.

Saakashvili also called for the US to send monitors to observe Russian troop movements along the boundaries with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, a move that Washington is unlikely to agree to at this time.

In an indication of the new deal struck between Moscow and Washington over Georgia, Obama recently nominated John Bass as the next American ambassador to Georgia.

Bass recently worked at the US Embassy in Baghdad and has specialized in developing NATO-Russia relations in the State Department. The appointment is seen as a move to ease Washington's tensions with Russia while maintaining the US effort to foster Georgia as a key regional ally.

Deeply unpopular and facing accusations of human rights abuses, electoral fraud, and rigging the judiciary, Saakashvili's government is nonetheless categorized by the Obama administration as a democratic ally. However, the days of the current administration may be numbered unless Saakashvili can prove to be a more reliable tool of US strategic interests.

Georgia is a vital transit route for Caspian Sea oil and gas. While Washington and the European Union are seeking to develop additional alternative pipelines through Georgia and the Caucasus countries, bypassing Russia, the Western powers do not want to see their interests in Georgia and the region threatened by the unstable regime in Tbilisi.

Commenting to television station France 24 on Biden's tour, George Frederick Dewsbury of the Center for the Study of Caucasian, Central European and Russian Worlds, stated that Washington was already looking for "the next generation of leaders" in Georgia.

The main opposition parties, which are cooperating under an anti-Saakashvili Manifesto of Unity, signed in March, are equally committed to offering the country as a bastion for US imperialism in the Caucasus region. Biden met with opposition leaders during his visit.

The Russian newspaper *Kommersant* reported this week that Biden would pressure the unpopular leaders of Georgia and Ukraine to resign. Though the story is likely a plant from the Kremlin, there is a degree of truth in the suggestion that both leaders are considered to be too destabilizing for current US interests in the ex-Soviet region.

Saakashvili's war with Russia last year and Yushchenko's disputes with the Kremlin over NATO and gas supplies, while supported by the US at the time, are now viewed as distractions from the central focus of US imperialism under the Obama administration—the successful occupation of Afghanistan and securing Pakistan as a reliable US client. For this, Washington has come to the conclusion that it needs Moscow's aid, for the time being.



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