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Background Briefing by Senior Administration Official on the Vice President's Trip to Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Italy

Vice President's Ceremonial Office
EEOB

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Russia's actions in recent weeks have clearly cast grave doubts on its intentions, its purposes, and its reliability as an international partner. It is critically important at this time of uncertainty that we are consulting and coordinating very closely with our friends, especially those who literally are living in the shadow of Russia's recent power play. [White House News](#)

But also with our allies throughout Europe, the West, and the broader international community, Russia's actions pose a serious challenge to us all. They merit and demand a unified response from the free world -- one that is based on a sober appreciation of the new realities created by recent events; that responds thoughtfully but with firmness and resolve to the immediate needs of this crisis; but that also provides a long-term strategic framework going forward that will responsibly protect and advance our interests and values in the months and years ahead.

And this includes, I should stress, our fervent hope that Russia's leaders will over time reconsider the costs, benefits and wisdom of Russia's recent behavior, and move to help us reestablish a basis for picking up again the consistent course that every American President since the end of the Cold War has placed near the very top of his agenda -- and that is to deepen the U.S.-Russian relationship, to lead the effort to promote Russia's integration into the international community as a full and equal partner, and to help build a Europe that is undivided and committed to a common set of principles, including democracy, the rule of law, and respect for the sovereignty and independence of all its members, regardless of their size, power or geographic disposition.

Let me now quickly run through the basics of each of the stops. The centerpiece of the visit to Baku on Wednesday will be a meeting and dinner with President Aliyev and his team. As I indicated earlier, the Vice President has known President Aliyev for quite some time. And he met the current President Aliyev when he was, again, I think, Azerbaijan's Minister of Oil. When President Aliyev made a working visit to Washington a few years ago, the Vice President hosted him for lunch at the Vice President's residence.

In addition to their discussion of recent events in Georgia, there are a number of other important topics on the U.S.-Azerbaijan agenda. Azerbaijan has been an important partner in the war on terror, not only through its cooperation on counterterrorism, but in contributing troops in both Afghanistan and Iraq. I think the Vice President will want to express America's appreciation for that assistance.

I also expect that energy will be a major topic of conversation, obviously, especially in light of the global energy situation, currently. The importance of working with Azerbaijan to help its people develop their energy resources and reliably bring them to market is a very strong common interest, not just for the United States but for all the nations of Europe, as well, as they plan for their own energy futures.

Other important issues in Azerbaijan include the need to resolve peacefully the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh; the international community's concerns with respect to Iran; and our continued support for efforts to strengthen democracy and the rule of law in Azerbaijan, where I believe they're scheduled to hold a presidential election in the near future.

In Georgia on Thursday, the Vice President's time will obviously be consumed assessing with President Saakashvili and his team the aftermath and implications of this crisis. Again, the Vice President knows President Saakashvili well. They have spoken by phone on at least a couple of occasions since the outbreak of this crisis.

As you know, at the President's direction, Secretary Gates has been overseeing a significant U.S. relief effort to address the immediate humanitarian needs of the Georgian people. The Vice President wants to get a first-hand assessment of the heroic job being done by U.S. personnel, as well as how the overall international relief operations are progressing in light of the continued difficult circumstances on the ground.

Finally, I'm sure that the Vice President and President Saakashvili will also look beyond the immediate situation and discuss in depth the need for a comprehensive long-term strategy by the international community to help Georgia recover and rebuild, including the critical task of supporting the democratic choice of the Georgian people to integrate further with Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO.

In Ukraine, the Vice President arrives on Thursday night, and he's currently scheduled to attend a private dinner with Mrs. Cheney and President Yushchenko and his wife. He'll then hold a working meeting with President Yushchenko on Friday, as well as a meeting with Prime Minister Tymoshenko. Here, again, the Vice President knows these leaders quite well, especially President Yushchenko who he's met several times since Ukraine's Orange Revolution, and spoken to by phone on numerous occasions.

Again, in addition to the situation in Georgia and reaffirming the great importance we place on our relations with Ukraine, I think the Vice President will want to thank Ukraine for its support in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. And despite great challenges, Ukraine continues to develop its democracy and its economy, and to seek deeper integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO. The United States has long supported Ukraine in these efforts, and we will want to continue doing so, going forward.

Finally, in Italy, there are two parts to the visit. The first consists of the Vice President's appearance at the Ambrosetti Conference at Lake Como, where he's agreed to give a speech that will look at some of the key challenges facing the Trans-Atlantic alliance. The Vice President has received numerous invitations over the last several years to attend this conference, and this trip provided a good opportunity, finally, to accept.

After Lake Como, he's off to Rome for discussions on Monday and Tuesday with Italy, our longtime ally and key NATO and G8 partner. The Vice President will hold meetings with both the Italian President and Prime Minister, and will discuss a full range of issues on our common agenda -- from the crisis in Georgia to the situation in the Middle East, Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran.

Why don't I stop there, and see if there are questions.

Q Why not go to Moscow, too, and have direct talks?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think that -- well, the President, first of all, has asked that the Vice President visit these particular countries first. There's obviously a division of labor that happens in these things. There's a lot of diplomacy to be done. First and foremost, I think the principal is with your friends and with your allies. There will be ample time and opportunities for discussions with Russia, both by us and by our allies. Secretary Rice is on top of a lot of that. There are contacts going on now. But I think for this trip, the President thought it was important for the Vice President to make these particular stops.

Q Could you talk a little bit -- you mentioned energy on a couple of occasions there. Can you talk a little bit more specifically about the concerns the U.S. has about the energy as well as Europe, obviously, with the pipeline and supplies, and also the expansion of Gazprom? Does that contribute to the tension?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't say too much more beyond the fact that the United States and Europe and Turkey and other countries have long been interested in ensuring a diversity of supplies and supply routes of energy to Europe and the international market. And Azerbaijan and Central Asia and the Caspian Basin, in general, provide great opportunities to develop additional resources and put new reserves on the international market. And the United States and our allies, I think, have long expressed support for helping those countries develop those resources. And that's what we'll discuss -- what he'll discuss with President Aliyev and others.

Q But do you -- is the Russian incursion into Georgia a few weeks ago, is that -- what kind of concern does that bring into the U.S. -- or what does that telegraph ahead, as far as future development?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, the Russian incursion in Georgia, I mean, it remains to be seen exactly what the strategic implications of it are. Obviously, there are a lot of countries in that region that are quite concerned about what all this means. And I think part of the purpose of all of this is to get a first-hand chance to privately have some very candid discussions with these leaders about their concerns and views about what the future holds, and how we can work together to address some of those concerns.

Specifically on the energy front, I mean I -- you know, I would point you to Foreign Minister Miliband's speech yesterday in Ukraine, and the kind of impact he observed there about what the most recent events portend for the way Europe thinks about its energy future, and the way the rest of the world needs to think about energy security in light of this unpredictable behavior by Russia that stands as a major supplier of oil and gas into Europe.

Q If I may follow up, that seems to be part of the reason why the reaction from Europe, while unified, they still seem to be feeling their way around how to respond; what kind of sanctions, what punishment there might be against Russia -- to seek a reversal of this decision -- because of the energy dependence they have.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What's the question?

Q I guess the question is, I mean, do you feel like that that is part of the reason why there can't be a more unified response to the Russian action, because of this dependence on the --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Listen, the importance of Russia's role in the overall international energy market, particularly Europe's, I think, is an indisputable fact. It's a reality that I think obviously enters the calculations of Europe and everyone else when they figure out how we best respond to this crisis.

On the other hand, I would say that I think people have been quite impressed with the unity and the universality within the alliance in places like the G7 -- both how deplorable Russia's military action was, and the illegitimate nature of the subsequent step it took to unilaterally try and alter Georgia's borders by recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I think, clearly, the NATO statement on these events, and the statements by individual countries, the G7 statement by foreign ministers yesterday, will happen at the upcoming meeting of EU leaders and the diplomacy going forward. I think you're only going to see that kind of unity enhanced. And it's obviously an important purpose in these kinds of visits that the Vice President is undertaking.

Q But is he going on this trip with anything more than words? Like, is he taking any sort of action, or is he going to tell them the United States is going to do something in the days ahead that it's not doing now?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I am certainly not going to reveal to you what may or may not happen in these discussions and what he's going to do. I'd simply say, do not underestimate what has happened already -- the unity of condemnation that we have seen of the Russian actions; what that portends potentially for Russia's own place and standing in the international community. I just wouldn't underestimate that -- which is not at all to say, and I don't want to imply that -- and I think I've said -- that a strategy is underway and is being developed. But I'm just not going to get into the details at this point in time.

Q When you talk about the long-term implications that he's going to have a discussion with leaders, beyond energy are there other long-term implications you think will come up in other areas?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I mean, the immediate -- beyond simply energy, the most important is that Russia has just taken a military action against one of its neighbors.

Q So you consider it still an ongoing crisis?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's taken action to attempt to unilaterally change that neighbor's borders both by force and by some political action. And it obviously has a number of other neighbors that are in similar situations and are wondering what all this means for them. I'm not sure anybody has exactly the right answer, a definitive answer on all of that. And an awful lot depends on what the Russians themselves do. I don't think anybody wants to close the door -- that Russia has very real choices to make here. In fact, Russia has probably the most important choices to make on how all this unfolds going forward.

They've got a great responsibility here to think about what it is they've done and where they're headed, and the opportunity costs of that in terms of what's happened over the last 20 years in terms of the transformation of their relationship both with the United States and with the West in general, which I think has been very much in Russia's interest and the interest of the world.

Q Are there any specific implications for energy infrastructure that the Vice President thinks should be drawn from the events that we've seen so far? In other words, are there -- there's been discussion of a Nabucco pipeline and different alignments of new pipelines to be developed through some of the countries we're going to be visiting, right? So are those ideas accelerated necessarily by what's happened, by the -- do we assume that Russia is a less reliable energy partner for Western Europe now?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think by its actions one has to assume -- and you can read the statements of the Western leaders -- that the level of confidence and trust that people have in Russia's overall reliability has been put in serious question by what's happened, including -- and I would assume that extends to energy and the issue of energy supplies.

Now, the United States has had a priority for quite some time in trying to lead an effort to encourage this diversification of energy infrastructure and pipelines and supplies, particularly to Europe, of gas. And I think we're on the record of supporting Nabucco. And I don't think anything about this, these recent events, has done anything but reinforce the sense that that basic strategy is important and critical, and one that has to be pursued, if anything with greater energy by us and by our European partners.

Q You talked about the opportunity cost that Russia faces here. Doesn't it seem like, at least in Putin's case, that they've calculated this already and they've made their decision and they've gone full-steam ahead on it? I mean, in fact, now, it's almost a fait accompli; it's going to be very hard to reverse, given the situation on the ground -- in the two break-away regions, I mean.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I -- you know, just from a diplomatic standpoint, Steve, I -- nobody is closing any doors here. I think you've got to prepare for potentially that kind of scenario. But the ramifications are obviously very, very big if, in fact, you're correct that Russia has definitively decided this is the course it's on; this is the way it's not only going to treat Georgia, but that it will proceed in other areas along its borders. That has very large strategic implications that we -- obviously people need to consider and think about.

Secretary Gates has talked about the need for this kind of reassessment to happen. But again, to say that something is irreversible, or that the Russians can't be made, through a variety of diplomatic and economic interventions, and using other tools that the international community has, come to see that the strategic consequences of this are much too high to pay for Russia in terms of the loss of its standing and relationships and future potential -- both with the United States, Europe, much of the rest of the international community -- we hope that there will be a reconsideration, specifically of what's happened here in Georgia. If there are broader objectives that Russia is pursuing, we hope in that course, as well.

Q How is the Vice President's trip to Tbilisi going to differ from Secretary Rice's trip, which was just a week ago?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not -- I mean, U.S. objectives and purposes here in terms of our long-term relationship with Georgia and this region are consistent. So it seems to me that there's a commonality in agendas that is right and proper, and it should be in any great power's diplomacy. You know, this is a very dynamic and moving situation. Secretary Rice went there at a particular time: there were still active hostilities; the Russians had assumed a particular military posture in Georgia; the French were actively trying to work that cease-fire agreement. Secretary Rice was very actively engaged in trying to refine and get that pinned down. So there was a very immediate need that needed to be met that she did very, very well.

We've clearly moved to a different point in time now with U.S. humanitarian -- a large-scale humanitarian relief effort underway. Georgia then is assessing its medium- and longer-term needs on how it's going to rebuild its economy, reestablish some measure of security, how it will relate to the international community and the kind of support it needs. So given that kind of dynamism, I don't think you can have -- and given the need of the Georgian people and the people in that region to know and to hear again and again about the United States' commitment to stay involved, that we are not going anywhere and that we're going to continue to build our relationships with these countries, that's something that they very much need to hear. And I don't think you can do it often enough.

Q Could you talk a little bit more about this strategic framework that you mentioned earlier, and what that might entail? I mean, I know that you probably are limited --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I don't -- I mean, again, this is -- there are immediate needs in this crisis, and then there is a need and a very -- clearly, it is urgent, but there is a need to soberly and very responsibly figure out how we and our allies are going to proceed in this circumstance, given the stakes involved. And that process is underway. It is very, very active. But I'm not here -- going to get into any specifics or details about it.

Q Can you talk a little bit about the Black Sea and the various NATO ships that are there, and the Russians complaining about that? I mean, is there a concern that a humanitarian effort or an unrelated NATO exercise could turn into direct confrontation with Russian forces?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The only thing I can tell you, if there are concerns -- and I know that I've read about press reports of concerns being expressed -- they're just completely baseless. This is nothing but what we have said it is, which is a full-fledged effort to get humanitarian supplies in to people that have undergone enormous suffering. That's what it is. That's what we've told the Russians it is. So far we've had a good record of getting that aid in. Now we need to get it distributed to the people who need it.

Q Is the Vice President going to get a chance to see any of that effort underway?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's unclear to me exactly what --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's one of the things that he wanted us to figure out, a way to incorporate that during our time in Georgia. I know our -- (inaudible) -- is working on that, and certainly the goal being we don't interfere in any way with the distribution or any movements. So I think they're still working through that. But as of right now, that's on the schedule.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That he'd like to do. And he will certainly be getting the report and assessment from people on the ground engaged in this effort who will -- who are very knowledgeable about it, and give him, I think, a very solid briefing on where we stand and what more needs to be done.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: If there aren't any more questions -- I mean, if you have some, please ask them. But if not, then we can let you go.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you all.

Q Can I just ask one last one? Was the Vice President annoyed in any way at all that Georgia went in to try and retake Ossetia, South Ossetia, at the start?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Was he annoyed?

Q Yes.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Now, that -- he's never been annoyed; you know that. (Laughter.)

Q Well, perhaps you could describe his initial reaction to when Saakashvili ordered forces into South Ossetia that sparked the whole --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I can't tell you what his initial reaction is. I think he's been like the President, and from everybody on down, very much focused on the complete and utter deplorable nature of what the Russians have done here, both militarily as well as this attempt politically to dismember Georgia, to change its borders by force. And that's been the consistent message I've gotten from him, other than the need to go in there and help our friends and allies rebuild out of this crisis, and to reassure them about the continued and deep interest of the United States in this region, and our determination to remain there engaged.

Q Can I just ask one last follow-up? You mentioned reassuring them, and it's what he's going to be doing in all three of those countries. Can you give us an example or two of what steps you're going to take, the U.S. is going to take, to reassure them? How are you going to define that, other than words?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, let me tell you, the Vice President of the United States, Dick Cheney, showing up in places he hasn't been before I think is a reassuring step. And I think the Vice President, and the President, who thought it important enough to send him there on this kind of mission in the middle of this kind of crisis, I just would not underestimate the importance of that signal.

We do already have, I think, quite extensive and deep relationships with these countries. And as I said, we're determined to continue to strengthen those relationships, whether in the economic field, the political field, the security field, the way we work with them, and particularly with regard to Ukraine and Georgia, their aspirations to move closer to Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO. So I think there will be important discussions on all of those that will advance that agenda and intention on the part of the United States, and I think on the part of all of our allies in Europe.

Q This is his first trip to Tbilisi? Are you saying --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It is, yes.

Q -- first ever trip to Tbilisi?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes. And I think the same thing for Azerbaijan. Ukraine, all I'm aware of is that he went there as a congressman at some point in time.

Q Okay. So this really is pretty new.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: This is new. He's had invitations from each of these countries for quite some time now that he hasn't been able to take up. He's been very interested in doing it; they've been very interested in having him come there. And circumstances are clearly unfortunate, but they are in some ways -- make it all the more important that he get there.

Q Can you put this trip in the context of the last trip that he made to Lithuania and Kazakhstan in 2006, where he gave a speech in Vilnius that was somewhat critical of Russian leadership over its aggressiveness?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: To provide everybody context, I'd urge everybody to re-read the speech. It was an important speech. I think it was reflective of worrying signs that were already on the horizon about Russia that existed throughout the administration. And again, unfortunately, a couple of years later, it seems at least one of the worst prongs of those -- that worrisome kind of behavior have come to pass. But I'd urge everybody to, before we go off, to look at the speech again. It's well worth reading.

Okay, thank you.

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