

# WebMemo



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## Joe Biden's Trip to Ukraine and Georgia

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Last week, the White House dispatched Vice President Joe Biden to Ukraine and Georgia to assuage fears that America may be abandoning its allies in the post-Soviet space, as Washington continues to try to push the reset button with Moscow. Instead, fudged messages and more confusion prevailed. As Biden visited Kyiv and Tbilisi, the Obama Administration managed to dilute a key message—that Russia should respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbors.

The mere fact that the Vice President ventures into what Russia calls its “near abroad” two weeks after President Obama’s visit to Moscow indicates that the White House has downgraded its relationship with Ukraine and Georgia. In the past, a U.S. President en route to Moscow would make a stop-over in the Baltic States, Ukraine, or another country in the former empire. These visits were a signal that Washington would not have “preferred partners” in the region.

Things have changed since the Obama Administration decided to prioritize the relationship with Moscow in such vital areas as Afghanistan, Iran, and arms control. While the global agenda is important, so is U.S. credibility. It is crucial to demonstrate to U.S. allies near and far that the United States stands by its friends. Unfortunately, Joe Biden’s messages, carefully monitored in Moscow, fell short of making that case.

**“Tough Love” Toward Ukraine.** Biden offered “tough love” to the political elite in Kyiv, and deservedly so. However, his tone was pedantic, if not high handed—something the Ukrainian political elite will surely resent.

Biden pointed out that the promises of the Orange Revolution of 2004 have not been completely fulfilled. He publicly criticized the lack of cooperation between President Victor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko, rivals in the forthcoming January 2010 presidential elections. And his team’s assumption that after the elections Ukraine will scale down Euro–Atlantic integration may be wrong.

The Vice President called for an intensified fight against corruption, an effort to increase energy efficiency, and an improvement in Ukraine’s abysmal economic performance (negative 14 percent of its GDP). Ukraine’s dependence on Russian gas and its inability to pay market prices to Gazprom are at the heart of the country’s strategic insecurity. Biden’s criticisms on these points were fully warranted.

Biden also announced a meeting of the U.S.–Ukraine Strategic Partnership Commission to be held in Washington in the fall. The intention is to implement the U.S.–Ukraine Strategic Charter, signed in December 2008 by the Bush Administration, and to deepen bilateral cooperation in the areas of security, economy, trade, energy, and the rule of law.

Where Biden fell short was in the area of national security. According to *Kommersant Daily*, in April

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2008, then-President Vladimir Putin told George W. Bush at the NATO summit in Bucharest that Ukraine is “not a real state.” Since then, he has pejoratively referred to Ukraine as “Little Russia.”

Vice President Biden was tight-lipped in describing what kind of security and military cooperation the U.S. and NATO can have with Ukraine. While he left the matter of potential Ukrainian Euro-Atlantic integration to the Ukrainian people, Biden ignored Russia’s staunch opposition to the prospect. He also failed to call upon America’s European allies to step up Ukraine’s integration into the EU.

**“Finlandizing” Georgia?** Biden’s trip to Georgia was even more problematic, despite receiving a hero’s welcome there. People lined the streets with slogans “Don’t Forget Us” and “No to Occupation” in reference to Russia’s occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the summer of 2008. Biden met with the democratic opposition, which is demanding President Mikheil Saakashvili’s resignation, yet indicated that the U.S. will not dictate an election timetable.

In a speech before the Georgian parliament, Biden correctly rejected Russia’s claims to a 19th-century-style sphere of influence. He delivered a message that the U.S. is seeking a free, secure, democratic, and united Georgia. Yet again, he fell short of operational details.

Biden’s call to the world not to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is the minimum Washington can do, yet the Vice President rejected any “physical security guarantees” to Georgia in case of a Russian attack. Nor did he articulate any concrete roadmap intended to restore Georgia’s sovereignty and hold Moscow to its commitments to the Medvedev–Sarkozy accords of August 2008, which call for the restoration of the *status quo ante* along Georgia’s borders.

Behind closed doors, Biden warned against any future use of force to liberate the Russian-occupied territories—a position inherited from the Clinton and Bush Administrations—and rejected Georgia’s requests for defensive weapons, such as anti-tank and anti-aircraft systems. Denying Georgia defensive weapons will hamper its ability to defend itself in case of another Russian attack and may be inter-

preted by some in Moscow as de-facto encouragement of a tougher line toward the Saakashvili administration.

While Biden was in Tbilisi, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin warned that Moscow will take “concrete measures” against any country that seeks to rearm Georgia. Particularly in this light, Biden’s declaration of a partial weapons embargo and refusal to provide “physical security guarantees” may be interpreted as an Obama Administration cave-in to Moscow’s pressure.

#### **What Should the Obama Administration Do?**

The Obama Administration is walking a tightrope between trying to improve the frayed relationship with Russia while simultaneously rejecting Moscow’s spurious claims to a “sphere of exclusive interests” in the former Soviet Union and Eastern and Central Europe.

To boost the confidence of U.S. allies while ensuring that Russia remains in a cooperative mode, Washington should:

- Expand cooperation with NATO allies in formulating and implementing a joint policy that clearly delineates security “red lines” in Europe, including contingency planning for the defense of Eastern and Central European NATO members—something that has so far been postponed.
- Continue to cooperate with, upgrade, and improve the militaries in the post-Soviet states, especially Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine, which are interested in NATO membership.
- Work with post-Soviet states on developing democratic institutions, transparency, the rule of law, and good governance, as stronger institutions and stronger states also enhance national security and improve the investment climate.
- Announce a visit by President Obama to a non-Russian state of the region in the first half of 2010. The President should deliver a strong message of support for their sovereignty, territorial integrity, diplomatic and security cooperation, Euro-Atlantic integration, democratic development, and energy security.

**“Don’t Forget Us.”** “State sovereignty must be a cornerstone of international order,” declared Presi-

dent Obama in his speech at the New Economic School in Moscow on June 7. “Just as all states should have the right to choose their leaders, states must have the right to borders that are secure, and to their own foreign policies. That is true for Russia, just as it is true for the United States.... That’s why we must apply this principle to all nations—and that includes nations like Georgia and Ukraine.” Yet after Biden’s visit, these words ring somewhat hollow.

The Administration is understandably focused on Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and other priorities, but Eastern Europe and Eurasia, the heart of the Eastern hemisphere, cannot and should not

be neglected. Nor can they be abandoned to the geopolitical ambitions of those with transparent anti-American agendas. President Obama and Vice President Biden should make certain that this message rings loud and clear even before their next visit to the region.

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