



For Immediate Release
Office of the Vice President
September 6, 2008

Vice President's Remarks at the Ambrosetti Forum

At The Ambrosetti Forum
Villa d'Este
Cernobbio, Italy

5:11 P.M. (Local)



THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, thank you very much, Tom. And I appreciate the introduction and the kind words. For those of you who don't know Tom Ridge -- although I know he's been a regular here for a number of years -- we're very proud of the fact that he served as a veteran in the United States Army. He and I served together in Congress for many years. Of course, he was governor of our -- one of our largest states, and as Tom mentioned, the first Secretary of Homeland Security.

Let me thank all of you for the welcome this afternoon, and also the organizers of this event for inviting me to the Ambrosetti forum. Among your distinguished guests this year are many I count as friends, including President Peres of Israel, President Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority, Jose Maria Aznar of Spain, and other names of prominence from the public and private sectors. It's a true pleasure to be with all of you, and I bring greetings and good wishes from our President George W. Bush.

I also want to thank our host country, the Italian Republic. Lynne and I have been here many times over the years, and each time received wonderful hospitality. Tomorrow we'll be traveling to Rome, where I will meet with President Napolitano and Prime Minister Berlusconi.

Italy is a friend and ally of America, and millions of our citizens proudly call this nation their ancestral home. Gathered as we are at Lake Como, I think each of us can testify that Italy rightly boasts some of the most beautiful scenery on earth.



My purpose today is to speak of unfolding events and challenges that are facing the trans-Atlantic alliance. I have come here from the east, by way of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine. These lands, once held in the grip of a totalitarian empire, now stand proudly as independent nations -- setting their own course, and engaging the world with confidence. That is as it should be. Since 1989, the lamps of liberty have been coming out again, and millions have walked in that light toward a future of prosperity, security, and peace.

The nations of our Alliance have celebrated this progress -- from the popular uprisings in Central and Eastern Europe nearly 20 years ago, to the more recent Color Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. As entire countries reclaimed their independence and built the institutions of freedom and democracy, we were able to move beyond the stand-offs, and nightmare scenarios, and line-drawing exercises of the Cold War. That struggle ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. And our security was strengthened as former captive nations enthusiastically joined the camp of freedom.

We have welcomed those new allies, just as we shall welcome others in years to come. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, three Presidents of the United States of both parties have worked with partners across Europe to expand the frontiers of democratic rule. Members of our Alliance have acted confidently, and together, to serve our common interests -- including our commitment to advancing freedom, human rights, and justice. Because we've done so, this continent -- where millions died in two World Wars, and generations suffered behind the Iron Curtain -- is now becoming one that is whole and free. After a century of struggle, Europe has the opportunity to shape a more peaceful future.

Yet this is not the ending of history. Our principles are being tested anew. We must meet those tests with candor and resolve, and, above all, with unity.

Recent occurrences in Georgia, beginning with the military invasion by Russia, have been flatly contrary to some of our most deeply held beliefs. Russian forces crossed an internationally recognized border into a sovereign state; fueled and fomented an internal conflict; conducted acts of war without regard for innocent life, killing civilians and causing the displacement of tens of thousands -- all this against a nation that has a democratically elected government and an orientation towards the West.

The United States and many in Europe have made clear that Russia's actions are an affront to civilized standards and are completely unacceptable. For its part, Russia has offered no satisfactory justification for the invasion -- nor could it do so. Differing views on the status of these two areas, within the sovereign borders of the Georgian democracy, cannot justify a sudden and violent incursion by Russia. This much, at a minimum, should be understood by all people of good will in the year 2008.

Three weeks ago, after causing significant destruction inside Georgia, Russia accepted and signed a six-point ceasefire agreement proposed by President Sarkozy of France, the nation that holds the Presidency of the European Union. By now the Russian government is well aware of its responsibilities: To abide by the signed ceasefire agreement, and the clarifying letter and document from President Sarkozy; to let in all humanitarian and medical assistance from the United States and other countries; to keep open all lines of communication and transit for that assistance; to end all military activities in Georgia; to withdraw from that country; and to fully respect Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Though aware of these responsibilities, Russia has yet to meet them. Indeed, it has taken the opposite course, by recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. This only worsens the situation in the region. It also contravenes the ceasefire, and runs against numerous UNDERSTAND Security Council Resolutions that Russia itself voted for in the past.

To summarize: In the space of the last 30 days, Russia has violated the sovereignty of a democracy; made and then breached a solemn agreement, in a direct affront to the European Union; severely damaged its credibility and global standing; and undermined its own relations with the United States and other countries.

This chain of aggressive moves and diplomatic reversals has only intensified the concern that many have about Russia's larger objectives. For brutality against a neighbor is simply the latest in a succession of troublesome and unhelpful actions by the Russian government.

In Central Asia, the Caucasus, and beyond, Russia has continued to use energy as a tool of force and manipulation. It has, at various intervals, interrupted or threatened to interrupt the flow of oil or natural gas to Georgia, Ukraine, the Baltics, and Belarus. Earlier this year, Russia cut back on oil deliveries to the Czech Republic. We don't know exactly what prompted this action, but it coincided with the Czech Republic's announcement that it was deploying a missile defense radar on its own territory -- as part of defenses that pose no conceivable danger to Russian security.

In the Middle East, Russian arms-dealing has endangered the prospects for peace and freedom in that region. Russia has sold advanced weapons to regimes in Syria and Iran. Some of the Russian weapons sold to Damascus have been channeled to terrorist fighters in Lebanon and Iraq.

And in Europe, the Russian government is increasingly antagonistic toward the enlargement of NATO and the advance of democracy. This is not a new development. And it has come despite the Alliance's opening wide the doors of cooperation through the NATO-Russia Council. Moscow has opposed every eastward addition to NATO. Most recently, during the NATO Summit in Bucharest, Russia strongly protested membership in the Alliance for Georgia and Ukraine, now and forever.

It's unfortunately the case that Russia's leaders regard the expansion of free governments and democratic values as a threat to their country's own interests. How, exactly, those interests are broadly defined is a matter of opinion. Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet foreign minister and president of Georgia, said, "The goal of Russia is to restore the influence that it had during the Soviet period and during the empire period." Prime Minister Putin has bluntly stated that he regards "the demise of the Soviet Union [as] the greatest geopolitical catastrophe

of the [twentieth] century."

Here again, opinions differ, so let me state my own: The demise of the Soviet Union was inevitable, and was the greatest forward step for human liberty in the last 60 years.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, my country, and our trans-Atlantic partners, stood foursquare in favor of integrating free Russia into the larger world. The Russian people deserve freedom, peace, and the opportunity to prosper every bit as much as the rest of us do, and it is right and just to support those aspirations.

In doing so, we have also cast aside the old suspicions of the Cold War -- entirely and emphatically. We have shown respect for Russia, and consulted closely with its government. We have acted according to our principles, and at every stage we have been utterly clear about our objectives. Though Russia has treated NATO expansion as a threat, we have made the case that this bias is profoundly and provably false. All countries have the right to be concerned about what kind of neighbors they have. All governments have a duty to be alert to the intentions of others. The Russian people know this because in their own history they have faced foreign aggression, and have suffered mightily from it. But whether it was Napoleonic France or Hitler's Germany, threats to Russia have come from an expansionist -- from expansionistic dictatorships. Russia has nothing to fear from democratic governments along its border.

It is hard, in fact, to imagine a better kind of neighbor to have than a stable, developing democracy that upholds individual rights, answers to its own people, and seeks to resolve differences peacefully.

Should any such neighbor also be a member of NATO, so much the better. NATO's members include longtime democracies, as well as newer ones -- countries that were, in living memory, overrun by invaders, absorbed by dictators, or simply on the wrong side of a line across a map. Given the chance, they put a sad past behind them, choosing the path of free institutions and common security that has led to peace and prosperity. NATO's alignment is with the forces of freedom; it exists to preserve liberty, not to oppose any country. NATO is not a possession, a sphere of influence, or an authoritarian bloc. It is a growing community of values -- a voluntary, defensive alliance that is devoted to freedom, and is a threat to no one. Russia now enjoys the most benign western border ever in its history -- from its very edge, all the way to the cliffs of the Atlantic.

At times it appears Russian policy is based upon the desire to impose its will on countries it once dominated, instead of any balanced assessment of security interests. There is, of course, the case of Georgia, known to all the world. The world must also pay attention to Ukraine, which Russia has attempted to intimidate by threats and severe economic pressure, and the Baltic states, which have also been subjected to Russian pressure.

Another case to consider is Russia's conduct towards Poland, after that country decided to deploy ballistic missile interceptors. It is clear beyond question that those interceptors, together with the associated radar in the Czech Republic, are needed to combat any launch of a ballistic missile fired from the Middle East. The location was chosen to give maximum defensive coverage to Europe and to the United States. The system is not directed against Russia; it is not designed or capable of countering Russia's strategic offensive missile force. The interceptors don't have explosive warheads on them. Furthermore, we've proposed to the Russians cooperative measures to assure transparency of all of our actions. President Bush sent both Secretaries of State and Defense to Russia to personally discuss those proposals. We've also set forth measures to include Russia itself in the defensive perimeter of the new system. In response, the Russian government has rejected these ideas, and senior military officials have threatened Poland, a NATO country, with attack.

That is no way for a responsible power to conduct itself. And it reflects the discredited notion that any country can claim an exclusive zone of authority, to be held together by muscle and threats. That's the old thinking, which created artificial divisions, militarized borders, the domination of client states, and a half-century division of East against West. That divide was good for nothing, morally indefensible, and a human tragedy. In the 21st century, nations that want constructive and positive relations with one another won't get there by trying to carve out spheres of influence and trying to play balance-of-power games. The old ways are gone. The Cold War is over.

I don't believe that any of us expects those days to return. The United States certainly does not. Indeed this very year, the governments of my country and Russia reaffirmed that we've gone past the era of viewing one another as an enemy. We agreed to cooperate as partners to promote security and peace -- and that agenda is a very full one, on issues from ballistic missile proliferation to the nuclear ambitions of Iran. We share these and other

interests with Russia. For the good of our peoples, we have a serious responsibility to work on these matters together.

But the United States, and nations across this continent, rightly expect Russia's leaders to consider some very basic questions. Do those leaders believe that bullying others will turn out well for their country's future? Does Russia really want to separate itself from the community of values that has fueled so much of its own economic progress? Does the Russian government really wish to operate in the modern world as an outsider, alienating free countries and trying to rally the world's dictatorships?

What we do know right now is that Russia's leaders cannot have things both ways. They cannot presume to gather up all the benefits of commerce, consultation, and global prestige, while engaging in brute force, threats, or other forms of intimidation against sovereign, democratic countries. To succeed and prosper in the modern world, Russia must relate to the world as a responsible modern power.

Russia has a choice to make. And we in the trans-Atlantic alliance have responsibilities. As I said at the outset, our prevailing need is for unity of purpose. And on that issue I have great confidence. The Western countries have had our differences. We state them freely and candidly. Yet we are so closely intertwined -- by values, history, economic interest, and security imperatives -- that we can see our way clear.

In Georgia, we have provided unambiguous support to the people and to their elected government. We've given a strong response that is rooted in historical memory and common sense. We know that if one country is allowed to unilaterally redraw the borders of another, it will happen -- and it will happen again. We know that if we permit a new line to be drawn across Europe, that line will be drawn.

Together, we've insisted on respect for the principle of territorial integrity. In our unity, let us affirm other purposes that will serve the cause of peace, and the security of all our people.

Let us make clear that the enlargement of NATO will continue as and where the Allies decide. We have long held those meeting the standards for membership and having the desire to join have every right to do so. At Bucharest only five months ago, we considered extending a Membership Action Plan to Georgia and Ukraine, but did not do so. But Allies agreed that those nations will be NATO members, and the time to begin their Membership Action Plans, I believe, has come.

Let us recognize that energy has become a strategic issue, from the perspective of source, transit, and diversity of supply. Europe represents more than 25 percent of the entire global value of goods and services. For their own well being, European countries absolutely must be able to count on abundant energy, produced by multiple providers and delivered by diverse routes. All of us understand the need for reliable pipelines to meet long-term needs. Completing those pipelines will take time and patience and political will on the part of many nations. The United States is strongly committed to that effort. All of us have an interest in markets that truly work -- and that means a stable supply, plus reliable transit lines that are not susceptible to manipulation. No part of this continent should leave itself vulnerable to a single country's efforts to corner supplies or control the distribution system.

Finally, on national security, let us reaffirm that NATO will provide steady leadership to combat all threats to democracy, whether from outside coercion, or terrorism, or the spread of deadly technologies. A community of values must be unequivocal in defense of our territory, our freedoms, our way of life, and our civilization itself.

Next Thursday marks the seventh anniversary of the attacks of September 11th, 2001. That day brought sudden and dramatic challenges to my country, and a swift response from our partners in NATO. For the first time ever, the Alliance invoked Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty. Many NATO countries joined our coalition to remove the Taliban, to liberate Afghanistan, and to help its people chart their own destiny.

NATO now leads the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, with a total of some 50,000 troops -- plus reconstruction and training teams. The mission in Afghanistan is, in some ways, tougher and more demanding than some had expected. More troops may become necessary, and it's already clear that we need a better concept of operations among NATO forces inside Afghanistan. Proper coordination is lacking, and differing rules of engagement and caveats are severely limiting NATO's effectiveness against the enemy. As the NATO Secretary General recently said, "Afghanistan is one country and one strategic theatre ... We cannot have 26 different strategies. We need a NATO strategy."

We can and must fix these problems. And we must remember that, despite all difficulties, the effort in Afghanistan was undertaken for right and necessary reasons, and we must maintain our resolve to see it through. Afghanistan remains a critical battleground in a fight for civilization -- against an enemy that has, since 9/11, attempted to intimidate Europe by acts of mass murder, from Madrid to London to Istanbul. This enemy desires and is determined to seize control over entire regions. And they would use that control to establish tyranny, to arm themselves with catastrophic weapons, and to wage further attacks against civilized nations. They are zealous in that enterprise, and they are convinced that free nations lack the will to fight and win a difficult battle. In our unity, we must persevere and defeat this challenge to freedom and security.

NATO members also continue to play a useful role in Iraq. In Bucharest, the NATO summit expanded the NATO-Iraq partnership, so that Iraqi officers can have access to more leadership training. Since the surge of American forces began last year, the momentum of events in Iraq has turned decisively toward victory. Our goal there, as in Afghanistan, is to help a once-tyrannized people to secure their democracy; to gain the capacity to defend themselves over the long term; and to become an ally against a common threat. By the courage and perseverance of the Afghan and Iraqi peoples, and with continued help from nations committed to democratic values, that objective will be fully achieved.

In this new era, it's clear that our security will sometimes require us to carry out many missions at once. Right now NATO forces are on anti-terror patrols in the Mediterranean; NATO peacekeepers are on the ground in Kosovo, and NATO has provided airlift and training for peacekeepers in Darfur. In the future, maintaining our abilities, and our reach, and our credibility, will require NATO members to increase spending on defense. An alliance committed to freedom and security in the 21st century must equip itself with 21st-century capabilities -- and each member can make a good and a vital contribution.

It is, after all, our willingness to provide a strong, enduring contribution that makes each of us a proud member of NATO. This great Alliance, this growing Alliance, serves the noblest ideals in our world -- human rights, individual dignity, self-determination, equality, and justice. It now guards the liberty and the lives of more than 850 million men, women, and children. And all in that number can look to the future with confidence -- for we shall face it together. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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