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# NATO divided on American call to punish Moscow

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Russia's military walkover in Georgia has deepened Nato divisions as it prepares to find a new way next week of handling the resurgent former superpower.

Washington has called a meeting on Tuesday of Nato foreign ministers, essentially to punish Moscow for what the United States, Britain and, especially, East European countries see as a brutal invasion that reverted to Cold War methods.

Robert Gates, the US Defence Secretary, said: 'There need to be consequences for Moscow's behaviour.' Relations with Russia, which has had a 'partnership' with Nato for more than a decade, would not be the same for years to come, he said.

The trouble is that several big European states - notably France, Germany and Italy - do not see the Russian offensive that way. They partly blame Georgia, a would-be Nato member and a protégé of the United States. As Bernard Kouchner, the French Foreign Minister, told The Times: 'Russia is a great nation. Look how we have been treating it.'

The Kremlin laughed off threats from President Bush this week that Moscow risked being cast back into the cold for cracking down on an upstart neighbour that for centuries was under Russian control. 'I don't know how they are going to isolate us,' Sergei Lavrov, the Foreign Minister, joked on Thursday, as Russians celebrated what they believe was a noble victory in saving South Ossetia from 'Georgian aggression'.

Nato, like its sister organisation, the EU, papered over divisions this week, condemning Russia for 'excessive, disproportionate use of force' in Georgia and restating that Nato membership would one day be offered to Tbilisi.

The presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined President Yushenko of Ukraine in a symbolic trip to Tbilisi this week to push Nato to 'stand up against the spread of imperialist and revisionist policy' by Russia.

Germany has been leading the drive to keep doors open with the Kremlin but supported deployment of the US 'missile shield' in Poland, which as signed on Thursday. The scheme, intended to counter possible strikes by a rogue state, has enraged the Kremlin.

Nato has few options for putting pressure on the Kremlin beyond advancing Georgian and Ukrainian membership or ending the partnership with Moscow. Leverage is more likely to come from other fronts, such as suspending Russia's much-desired membership application for the World Trade Organisation or freezing its participation in G8 meetings.

The Russian crackdown was opposed by sections of the leadership, who fear losing a fortune if Russian companies and world stock markets come under pressure.

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