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Cool reception for Cheney in Azerbaijan

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Cool reception for Cheney in Azerbaijan

American Vice President Dick Cheney's visit to the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, appears to be have been unsuccessful for Washington, unlike his visit to Tbilisi.

Cheney received a cool welcome and, according to Russia's Kommersant newspaper, Azerbaijan's President Ilkham Aliyev has implied that Baku is going to play a waiting game concerning the Nabucco gas pipeline, which is set to bypass Russia.

Neither President Ilkham Aliyev nor the Prime Minister, Artur Rasizade, were there to greet Cheney at Baku airport. Instead, he was met by the country's First Deputy PM and the Foreign Minister.

The Kommersant newspaper reports that Cheney was very annoyed by the results of the meeting with President Aliyev and even refused to attend a ceremonial supper in his own honour.

Aleksandr Pikaev, an analyst from the Institute for World Economy and International Relations, believes Dick Cheney is hardly the right man for diplomacy in the region.

"The Americans didn't find anything else to support their failed ally Saakashvili other than sending to the region Mr Cheney who is incredibly unpopular in the world, who is associated with the war in Iraq, with all this conservative black-and-white vision of the world, who was accused of corruption – remember the Halliburton affair in Iraq. If the Bush Administration really wanted to consolidate the international community behind the U.S. in criticising Russia, I think they should have found somebody else, not Mr Cheney," Pikaev said.

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Dick Cheney to take fight against Russia's oil dominance to Azerbaijan

Dick Cheney, the US vice-president will arrive in the Caucasus on a mission to prevent Russia from gaining a stranglehold over Central Asia's vast reserves of energy.

By Damien McElroy in Tbilisi and Bruno Waterfield in Brussels

Last Updated: 12:36AM BST 03 Sep 2008

As he starts a tour of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine, Mr Cheney will try to allay fears that Russia's campaign in Georgia has fatally damaged a cornerstone of the West's energy policy.

That message will be particularly potent in Azerbaijan's capital Baku, once the capital of the Soviet oil industry and now a pivotal ally of the United States.

The Caucasus region, between the gas-rich Caspian Sea and Turkey, provides the only energy pathway from Central Asia to Europe that does not traverse Russia or Iran.

"If Azerbaijan tilts to Russia there goes 15 years of US energy diplomacy," said a Western diplomat in Baku. "Cheney has the history and personal clout to make this trip clearly focused on energy."

Mr Cheney's unparalleled reputation as a defender of US interests and close ties to the oil industry means the vice president is uniquely placed to deliver a tough message to Russia.

John Hannah, his national security advisor said: "The overriding priority,

especially in Baku, Tbilisi and Kiev, will be the same: a clear and simple message that the United States has a deep and abiding interest in the well-being and security of this part of the world."

After European leaders bickered over how to deal with Russia at a summit on Monday, Mr Cheney will have to shore up Azerbaijan's confidence in Western support.

In an interview with The Daily Telegraph, the Georgian prime minister Lado Gurgenzidze said that without efforts by Gordon Brown, the EU position would have been weaker.

"We are aware that the document perhaps would have read differently if it had not been for the efforts of the British delegation," he said.

The vulnerability of pipelines running from Azerbaijan to Turkey was dramatically illustrated by Russia's war in Georgia, when exports were halted and expatriate energy workers evacuated.

"Russia didn't need to attack the pipelines running through Georgia but by stopping the flow west it ensured that the great fears over the system have been realised," said Andrew Neff, an analyst at research firm, Global Insight. "Cheney must ensure that Azerbaijan doesn't take the wrong message from events in Georgia."

Supplies of Azeri gas are crucial to European efforts to build the 2,000 mile Nabucco pipeline through Turkey to Austria by 2013. Its inauguration would erode Russian's dominant role in energy supplies to Central and Eastern Europe. America has been a strong proponent of the project. "Without Azeri gas, the Nabucco pipeline is dead on the drawing board," said Mr Neff, who concluded that Russia's campaign in Georgia had given it a "de facto veto" over energy flows through Georgia.

Russia has already attempted to coax Azerbaijan away from its Western backers. President Dmitry Medvedev used a visit to Baku in the spring to herald "co-operation prospects" between the two states.

Gazprom, the large Russian oil firm, has offered to pay market rates for its gas, which at a time of rising prices is more attractive than the long-term supply deal prices proposed by the West.

Ilham Aliyev, Azerbaijan's president, has been solidly pro-Western since succeeding his father in 2003.

However, despite its rapid economic growth, Azerbaijan remains vulnerable to Russia intervention in the breakaway enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. As in the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, separatists in Nagorno-Karabakh rely on Russian backing.

Diplomats have urged Mr Aliyev not to succumb to the short-term pressures of Russian expansionism. "It's 'don't lose sight of the long-term goal for a short-term fix'," said one official. "Ultimately Azerbaijan needs direct access to the Western market to remain independent of Russia."

Senior American conservatives have rallied behind Mr Cheney's trip, possibly his last significant act before President George W Bush's term ends in January. "The security of Georgia and Azerbaijan are vital American interests for a variety of reasons," said John Bolton, a former US ambassador to the United Nations.

"Including the critical corridor they provide to get oil and natural gas out of the Caspian Basin region without transiting Russia or Iran. Europe should also understand this key point."

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/2669248/Dick-Cheney-to-take-fight-against-Russias-oil-dominance-to-Azerbaijan.html>



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