

US calls twin expulsion from Russia 'tit for tat'

The US has dismissed Russia's expulsion of two US military officials as a 'tit for tat' move by Moscow after Washington kicked out at least two Russian diplomats in recent months.

US officials said that on two separate occasions - in November 2007 and last month - Russian diplomats were asked to leave the US. At least one of the Russians was expelled for spying, US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates told reporters.

Russian officials in Moscow refused to comment on the expulsions of the US military attaches Thursday who worked at the US embassy there, but a US official confirmed the expulsions in Washington earlier Thursday to DPA.

'There are some intriguing developments in Moscow, but I don't (read) much into the attache thing other than just the usual tit for tat,' Gates said. 'These things get into a kind of a back and forth, and at some point everybody decides to stop.'

Earlier the US State Department said it objected to the expulsion, but would comply with the Russian government's request.

Gates, a one-time director of the CIA during the Cold War, joked about Russian plans for Friday to hold the largest show of military strength since the end of the Soviet Union. The parade is to include tanks, troops and jets streaming over Red Square to commemorate World War II.

'I'm waiting to see if the leadership will be standing atop Lenin's tomb and see if we'll be back to Kremlinology about who's standing in what place and so on,' Gates quipped.

The news of the expelled US officials emerged at a vulnerable moment in US-Russian relations, as new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev spent his first day in office. Medvedev appointed outgoing president Vladimir Putin his prime minister, assuring Putin's continuing influence in the new government.

Medvedev and Putin will preside at Friday's parade, a throwback to the Cold War days when the Soviet Union used annual May 1st celebrations to boast of its military strength.

Gates reminisced that during the old days, the CIA would devote 'enormous effort' to examining all the equipment 'that was going by, because they'd run some of their newer stuff out.'

In those days, Gates said US intelligence officials would study 'who was standing next to whom, and who was more heavily bundled up than the next geriatric' - a reference to the tenacity of old-style ageing Soviet leaders.

But the US defence secretary said he doubted US intelligence officials would learn much of anything from Friday's parade, quipping: 'They don't have a lot of new stuff now'.

After years of a strong personal friendship between US President George W. Bush and outgoing Russian president Vladimir Putin, the two leaders were at odds in recent times over Russia's crackdown on press freedom and other rights, US plans to base a missile defence system in [Europe](#)

and the hot issue of Georgia.

On Wednesday, Stephen Hadley, Bush's national security adviser, called for Russia to 'back down' from intervening in neighbouring Georgia's affairs.

On Thursday, Russia's military announced it would increase its troops in Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia to counter Georgia's accumulating military forces in the contested region. Russia's peacekeepers in Abkhazia will increase to 2,542 troops, under the maximum permitted of 3,000 as provided for by the UN ceasefire.

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili said the move put Georgia 'very close' to war with Russia and the 'threat remained' for a breakout over its breakaway region of Abkhazia.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two regions with Russian populations, have been autonomous since civil wars ended in the early 1990s, and South Ossetia has also been targeted by Russia in a similar fashion.

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