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## Loud Voice, Tiny Stick

Trying to make sense of Condoleezza Rice's latest statement.

By Fred Kaplan

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Condoleezza Rice has said many strange things as secretary of state, but few stranger than this [remark](#) at an Aug. 18 press conference onboard her plane en route to Brussels, Belgium:

Russia is a state that is unfortunately using the one tool that it has always used ... when it wishes to deliver a message, and that's its military power. That's not the way to deal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It would have been mere hypocrisy if Rice had said, [as President Bush did](#) in the wake of the assault on Georgia, that invading a sovereign country is "unacceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." It would have been too clever by at least half had she repeated U.N. Ambassador [Zalmay Khalilzad's protest](#) that the "days of overthrowing leaders by military means *in Europe*—those days are gone." (It took Jon Stewart to italicize the phrasing's loophole, which implies that coups in other regions may proceed as usual.)

But for America's top diplomat to say that "military power" is no way to deal or deliver messages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is simply perplexing. Military power has *always* been used for these purposes and, alas, always will be. That is, in part, what military power is *for*. This is International Relations 101.

Rice, who has a Ph.D. in international relations, surely knows this. And the Russians, Georgians, Iraqis, Iranians, Afghans, Pakistanis, Israelis, Lebanese, Iranians, Syrians, North Koreans—all the world leaders whose armed forces have (or have been) shot, strafed, or bombed (or have issued or received threats of such violence in recent years)—know that she knows this, too.

And that's the problem. Bush and most of his top officials have now reached the point, if they haven't raced past it long ago, where nobody can afford to believe a single thing they say.

Imagine that you are the foreign minister of a NATO nation, and you're trying to devise a response to Russia's aggression against Georgia, some action or warning that has credibility and potency—that the Russians would have reason to take seriously and find worrisome. Then you hear Secretary Rice's remark about military power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and you realize that, if Vladimir Putin heard it, too, he must be laughing, wondering only if it reflected duplicity or naiveté. And then you realize that, if you did come up with a plausible response to the Russians, it's probably now doomed to failure, because the United States would have to be involved in putting it on the table and enforcing its terms if necessary, and therefore Putin would feel safe in ignoring it.

The Bush administration tarnished its credibility still further Wednesday when Rice signed an

agreement in Warsaw, Poland, that allows U.S. ballistic-missile-defense batteries to be deployed on Polish territory. For more than a year, ever since the issue arose, Bush and Rice have tried to assure Putin that a BMD system in Eastern Europe is meant to counter Iran's missiles, not Russia's. However, the rush to an accord in the wake of (justifiable) nervousness about Russia's move on Georgia—combined with Bush's pledge to send Poland *conventional* air-defense weapons for the explicit purpose of staving off a Russian attack—seems only to confirm Putin's suspicions. (Putin, I think, is silly to regard 10 anti-missile missiles, each of dubious effectiveness, as a threat to Russia's vast nuclear deterrent, but that's another matter.)

Rice was asked about this possibility—that an agreement with Poland now might seem to prove the Russians right—during the same airborne press conference in which she made her remark about military power. Her reply was curious. "Well, quite the contrary," she began, noting that the system is intended to shoot down Iranian missiles. Then she added, "But what we are saying, and what I am going to do by going to Poland, is to demonstrate that the kind of language that Russia uses about Poland isn't tolerable. When people reach out in a hand of friendship, it's really not responsible language to threaten them with a nuclear attack."

The middle sentence in this reply ("But what we are saying ...") certainly *sounds* like she sees the missile-defense agreement as a signal to Russia—which suggests first that military power *is* an instrument for sending signals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and second that the agreement *is*, at least in part, directed at Russia.

As for her next sentence ("When people reach out ..."), it certainly was irresponsible for a Russian general to warn Poles that Moscow might launch a nuclear attack against missile-defense sites installed on their territory. But the first clause of that sentence is puzzling: Who extended "a hand of friendship" to whom?

In any case, if Bush were interested in winding down the crisis so that Russian troops might pull out of Georgia, or at least let Western aid and reconstruction funds flow in, it might have been a shrewd "signal" to *delay* the missile-defense agreement—and to point out, behind the scenes, that he was delaying it—even while restating the West's commitment to the security of Poland (a NATO member, after all) and sending Warsaw *conventional* air-defense missiles. (Delaying an accord wouldn't matter, as the BMD interceptors in question wouldn't be fully tested, much less ready to deploy, for several years anyway.) Pointedly not signing the accord might have reinforced Bush's long-standing message that he is not threatening Russia—that, in fact, he's going out of his way to avoid threatening Russia—even as he restated concerns about Georgia's fate and NATO's cohesiveness.

Again, that might have been a smart thing to do if Bush wanted to wind down the crisis with Russia. If he wanted to escalate the crisis, he would have done what he sent Rice to do—sign the agreement in Warsaw. Does that mean that he *does* want to escalate the crisis? It's unclear. If he does, he doesn't seem to have laid out the next move. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has firmly stated that the administration is not going to get involved in a military conflict. The U.S. Air Force has flown C-17 cargo planes to Georgian airfields. The U.S. Navy has sent ships to Georgian ports. But here, too, officials have made it clear that the ships and planes are there strictly to provide humanitarian aid. The U.S. military personnel will defend their own assets, but their mission does not even include defending the airfields or ports, much less helping the Georgian army beat back the Russian bear.

The more likely explanation of what Bush and Rice are up to is that they don't know what to do. Not just in Georgia but around the world, they are floundering. Bush suddenly turns pragmatic diplomat with the North Koreans (though only *after* they successfully test an atomic bomb), but he remains ideologically opposed to negotiations with the Syrians and Iranians. He urges the Israelis and Palestinians to talk, but he gives them no incentives, nothing to talk about. He and his aides and

ambassadors tell the Russians their behavior in Georgia is "unacceptable," that they've "crossed the line," but no consequences are spelled out, in part because there aren't any good ones available.

Great powers, and even not-so-great shrewd powers, are known to speak softly and carry big sticks (or offer big carrots). The Bush administration is talking very loudly and dangling nothing.

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