

Russia says Georgia is building up its forces

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Russia's defence minister said on Tuesday that Georgia was trying to build up its military and he warned this could spark even greater instability in the region than there was in the war in August.

"The Georgian side's efforts to increase military potential is causing concern and I think those initiatives could have bigger consequences than what we saw in August," the minister, Anatoly Serdyukov, told a news conference in Ankara.

Russian troops poured into Georgia in August and pushed government troops back after they tried to retake the pro-Moscow rebel region of South Ossetia.

Russia and Georgia have accused each other of starting the five-day war in which Russian forces took control of large swathes of Georgian territory for some time.

Moscow is incensed by the pro-Western course taken by its small ex-Soviet neighbour and particularly its drive to join the U.S.-led NATO alliance.

Outgoing U.S. President George W. Bush had pushed for swift acceptance of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, but this failed to generate unanimous support among European NATO members.

U.S. and European officials say Washington is now studying whether NATO could give Georgia something short of a formal path to membership to satisfy European opposition.

Serdyukov, who was in NATO member Turkey to discuss military cooperation, repeated that Moscow remained opposed to U.S. plans to deploy a radar in Poland and interceptor missiles in the Czech Republic as part of a proposed missile defence shield.

Washington says the plan is intended to defend against possible attacks from Iran, but Russia sees the project as a threat to its security.

"Efforts to build air defences in Poland and in the Czech Republic has awakened concerns and this is causing Russia to take similar initiatives," he said.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev earlier this month announced plans to deploy missiles near NATO's borders to neutralise the missile shield installations.

But on Saturday he said he was ready for compromise and promised to hold off on a possible military response to the project.

(Additional reporting by Ibon Vilelabeitia; Editing by Richard Balmforth)

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