The Georgia conflict of August 2008: Exponent of Russia’s assertive security policy

De Russische krijgsmacht was in staat met conventionele, maar niet moderne, middelen het conflict met Georgië binnen enkele dagen te beslechten. Kort na het conflict maakte Rusland een plan tot modernisering van de krijgsmacht openbaar. Of alle hervormingen er gaan komen is nog maar de vraag.

In August 2008 Russia fought and won a five-day war against Georgia. This short conflict fits into Moscow’s increasing assertive security policy of recent years. Under President Vladimir Putin Russia unfolded an anti-Western stance, condemning NATO expansion, unilateral and dominating policies and the deployment of a missile shield. Furthermore, Moscow wants to remove the ‘Cold War vestiges’ of the current European security architecture and has suspended the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. This forceful posture has been combined with demonstrations of military force. For instance by threatening European states involved in the US missile shield program, by resuming strategic nuclear bomber flights, by conducting naval exercises in the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean, by re-installing the traditional military parade on Red Square, and by starting or resuming military cooperation with countries ‘hostile’ to the West, such as Libya, Syria, Cuba, and Venezuela. Russia’s warfare against Georgia – considering that the foundations for this armed struggle had been visible for a longer time – was part and parcel of Moscow’s assertive security policies. After providing an essentially military analysis of the Georgia conflict, the article continues to elaborate on the consequences of the conflict for Russia’s military thinking.

Relaxed new Russian conceptual thinking in foreign and security policy, as revealed just before and since the Georgian conflict, also needs to be discussed. Furthermore, whether connected to the Georgia conflict or not, since August 2008 Moscow has launched a huge ‘offensive’ in re-armament programs that should bring its armed forces in line with Russia’s self-perceived return as a superpower.

The Russian-Georgian conflict (7-12 August 2008)

After days of shooting incidents between the de-facto South-Ossetian armed groupings and the Georgian armed forces, in the late evening of Thursday 7 August Georgian President Saakashvili ordered his troops to return fire and order and Tbilisi launched on South Ossetia (3). Considering the speed with which the armed forces of Georgia and of Russia brought in troops, it was clear that both parties had prepared for an armed clash. The following day Moscow sent reinforcements from North Ossetia into South Ossetia and responded fire. Also on 8 August Russia’s air force started attacks on targets in Georgia proper, i.e. outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia. During the weekend Russia further increased its military force against Georgia. Its Black Sea Fleet disembarked 4,000 troops in Ochamchire, Abkhazia, and started a maritime blockade of Georgian ports. After the troop build-up was considered at a sufficient level, on Monday 11 August Russian forces invaded from South-Ossetia and Abkhazia into Georgia proper. The Georgian armed forces were no match for the huge Russian potential of troops and arms and were forced to withdraw. On 12 August Georgia and Russia agreed on an EU-brokered cease-fire, the so-called ‘Six points peace plan’ (4). However, from 12-22 August, in spite of the armistice, Russian forces continued military operations in Georgia. On 22 August Russia withdrew its military forces from Georgia proper without those that remained in so-called buffer zones south of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. Russia justified the continued occupation of Georgian territory upon point five of the Medvedev-Sarkozy peace plan: ‘Prior to the establishment of international mechanisms the Russian peacekeeping forces will take additional security measures.’ A few days later, on 26 August, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In a successive round of negotiations between the French President Sarkozy, on behalf of the EU, and his Russian counterpart Medvedev, Russia agreed to pull its forces out of the buffer zones by 10 October, which simultaneously would be replaced by more than 200 observers of the EU. However, Russia denied access of the EU-observers to the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Next, Russia decided that 7,400 troops permanently stationed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia; and will set up military bases accordingly (5). International talks on the conflict, corresponding with point 6 of the peace plan, commenced in Geneva on 15 October 2008, but so far have not resulted in a settlement of the disputes.

Russia’s military build-up and comparison of forces

Some sources claim that Russia had prepared for war already years ago, but in spring 2008 evidence for such an assumption became stronger (6). In April Russia deployed more than 1,000 additional troops to its – formally ‘CIS’ – peacekeeping force in Abkhazia, which until then consisted of some 2,000 soldiers. As of April Russian military aircraft regularly violated Georgian airspace. The most striking example was a Georgian drone, which provided footage of being attacked by a Russian fighter, just before it was shot down. In May/June Russia deployed its so-called Railway Troops to repair railway tracks in Abkhazia, which during the conflict were used to transport reinforcements from Russia to the battlefield in Georgia (7). Moreover, on 10 July the commander of Russia’s North Caucasian Military District (NCMD) stated that his troops were exercising for possible intervention in Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia. At the end of July the NCMC conducted exercises near Georgia’s border including its 58 Army. This formation would subsequently act as the key player in the armed conflict with Georgia. In late July ships of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, involved in the same Kavkaz-2008 exercises, did not return to their ports and later also contributed in the Georgia conflict. The gradual build-up of Russian armed forces in the months prior to the conflict explains the rapid pace with which Moscow was able not only to counter Georgia’s invasion of South Ossetia, but also to conduct land, air and naval operations simultaneously and all over Georgia. The question remains whether Saakashvili realized that by invading South Ossetia he would be confronted with Russia’s military power. A comparison of forces between both combatting parties makes it clear that the Georgian armed forces did not have any chance in defeating Russia’s army (see Figure 1). Of course the discrepancy in numbers has to be regarded with due reserve, since Moscow did not conduct warfare with the whole of its armed forces. Nevertheless, the difference in military capabilities is striking. Even if we limit the comparison of forces to those of the NCMD, the adjacent Russian area from which most reinforcements of troops and arms came from, the superiority of Russia’s military power over that of Georgia’s is still evident.

Notes:
1. There are also claims that the other side started the conflict. Georgia’s invasion was allegedly in reply to South Ossetian attacks on Georgian villages, which triggered the conflict. See: ‘Georgian sources confirm shelling of Georgian villages’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 14 November 2008; Another source claims that Russian reinforcements were already in South Ossetia on 7 August 2008 (‘Today’s Georgia’, publica; 10 September 2008).
2. The Medvedev-Sarkozy 6 points armistice plan comprised (1) No resort to the use of force; (2) The absolute cessation of all hostilities; (3) Free access to humanitarian assistance; (4) The Georgian Army must withdraw to their permanent positions; (5) The Russian Armed Forces will take additional security measures; (6) An international debate on the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and ways to ensure their lasting security. Following Negotiations with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, 12 August 2008.
The Russian way of warfare in Georgia clearly gave evidence to the fact that the units involved were either not equipped with PGMs and other high-tech weapons or were not capable of using them properly. Furthermore, a lack of combat-ready trained personnel was obvious. The loss of aircraft were caused by insufficient airmanship and other intelligence gathering. The coordination of action among the services (army, air force and navy) also failed. Although the fiascos of the Chechen conflicts conceptual approaches were launched to prepare and to conduct joint warfare – in particular by creating joint-style regional military commands to replace the mainly formerly single-service military districts – military action in this conflict was still carried out by way of the long-established structure of command and control. Consequently, the combat effectiveness of Russian forces conducted in Georgia was inferior in terms of modern and high-tech non-contact operations, i.e. the modern (Western-style) of warfare. They won by sheer force of arms and not by adaptation of concepts of warfare: an overwhelming use of arms and troops (16). Status of the Russian armed forces and military thought

The performance of the Russian military in the Georgian campaign should be considered in the light of the current level of military thought and also as part of the existing military thinking (11). Arms and personnel

A large part of Russia's weaponry is obsolete. In the Georgian conflict this was demonstrated by soldiers sitting on top of military-civilian strategic goals. After neutralising the Georgian armed forces, by installing buffer zones south of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and consequently occupying vital infrastructure, Russia was able to easily control the major part of Georgia's territory in case of a return of violence. Perhaps Russia also anticipated that a significant share of Russian forces would not return to Russia after the war. This might entail an intervention that could even revert to a standoff against Saakashvili. Subsequently, military-strategic goals resulted in military-operational targets. The targeting by Russia was strongly correlated with the order of battle of Georgian armed forces (see figure 2).

Russian conduct of warfare

In their operations the Russian troops used massive artillery and aircraft barrages in stead of precision targeting, close air support for ground forces was hardly witnessed. Moreover between four and eight Russian aircraft were shot down by Georgian air defence, which was not destroyed prior to the offensive. It is known that Russian air force pilots, especially those of fighters and bombers, have a lack of flying hours. As a result of this low level of training but also due to a disproportionate use of force in stead of precision guidance munitions (PGM), much collateral damage was caused. Next, it was astonishing to see that the Russian military captured all Georgian arms and equipment that they could lay their hands on and brought them back to Russia, apparently to use them for themselves (16).

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Status of the Russian armed forces and military thought

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A large part of Russia’s weaponry is obsolete. In the Georgian conflict this was demonstrated by soldiers sitting on top of modern warfare and current threats. However, Russia’s global ambitions – as described below – demand the capability of power projection by highly skilled, modern-equipped, expeditious military forces that can be deployed at short notice anywhere in the world. At the same time, provoked conflicts in the North Caucasus demand armed forces capable of conducting asymmetric warfare against an irregular opponent. As yet, the conditions of Russia’s military and its future reform plans did not live up to these demands for the armed forces.

New security thinking and concerning military reforms

In July 2008, a new edition of Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept was published, President Medvedev’s first security document (14). Major entries in the document are (12):

3. Russia has no intention of isolating itself, seeks friendly relations, also with the West;
4. Protecting Russians wherever they may be is priority;
5. Russia responds to any aggressive act against them or Russia;
6. Russia has privileged interests in certain regions (15).

In addition and related to these new concepts on security policy, in autumn 2008 the Kremlin launched radical plans for structural changes. One move has been the restructuring of the military and the introduction of a new context, the Ministry of Defence. Formerly, this ministry was the number one position for the number of the personnel from the current 30 percent of the total manpower to 15 percent by 2012. Furthermore, a new strategic concept and operational and okomandnoe and control structure was announced. The current system of military districts, armies, divisions and regiments will be replaced by a structure of military districts, operational command units, and brigades. Each military district will have an airborne brigade as a quick-reaction operational-level unit. Based on the experience of the Georgian conflict, these units will be used to accomplish operational-level tasks with high precision and in a matter of several hours. In addition to this and also with reference to the Georgian conflict, the Russian Federation has decided to raise the size of the budget for 2009 of some 2.5%, and large procurement programs – to replace 30–35% of the older arms and weapons by 2012, by 2025 – 50%.

Conclusions

Although the conflict for Armenia, the Georgian conflict clearly demonstrated shortcomings in the capabilities of the Russian armed forces. The Georgian conflict is a part of a consistent assertive stance in Moscow’s foreign policy. The Russian Federation, by installing buffer zones south of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and consequently occupying vital infrastructure, Russia was able to easily control the major part of Georgia's territory in case of a return of violence. Perhaps Russia also anticipated that a significant share of Russian forces would not return to Russia after the war. This might entail an intervention that could even revert to a standoff against Saakashvili. Subsequently, military-strategic goals resulted in military-operational targets. The targeting by Russia was strongly correlated with the order of battle of Georgian armed forces (see figure 2).