

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.

THE GEORGIA CONFLICT OF AUGUST 2008: Exponent of Russia's assertive security policy

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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 politics. 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.

Related 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 law and order and Tbilisi's rule in the rebellious province of South Ossetia⁽¹⁾. 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'⁽²⁾. 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

Figure 1: Comparison of forces⁽⁷⁾

Russia's Armed Forces	Georgia's Armed Forces
1 million personnel	25,000 personnel
23,000 tanks	183 tanks
25,000 armoured combat vehicles	134 armoured combat vehicles
26,000 artillery pieces	238 artillery pieces
1,736 combat aircraft	9 combat aircraft
635 attack helicopters	9 attack helicopters
Russia's North Caucasus Military District	
90,000 personnel	2,000 armoured combat vehicles
800 tanks	900 artillery pieces

Figure 2: Russian targeting of Georgia's order of battle⁽⁸⁾

Location	Units
Poti	Main naval base
Senaki	Infantry brigade; attack helicopter squadron
Kutaisi	Infantry brigade; air defence battalion
Gori	Artillery brigade; tank battalion; engineer battalion
Tbilisi	Special forces brigade, transport helicopter squadron
Vaziani	Two infantry brigades
Marneuli	Combat aircraft squadron

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 it would keep 7,600 troops permanently stationed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia; and will set up military bases accordingly⁽³⁾. 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⁽⁴⁾. 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 to be used to transport reinforcements from Russia to the battlefield in Georgia⁽⁵⁾. Moreover, on 10 July the commander of Russia's North Caucasus Military District (NCMD) stated that his troops were exercising for possible intervention in Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia. At the end of July the NCMD 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 port and later also contributed in the Georgia conflict⁽⁶⁾. 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 combating 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.

Russia's strategic objectives and military targets

During and after the armed conflict the leaders in the Kremlin made it quite clear what their intentions were towards Georgia. Russia's political-strategic goals were - to prevent Georgian authority over the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; - regime change, to remove Saakashvili from office; - to prevent Georgia and Ukraine from joining NATO; - to demonstrate to the West that it has no access to Russia's former Soviet sphere of influence; - to discourage the success of alternative pipelines aimed at diminishing Russia's energy dominance; - and to show to the world that Russia is back as a key player in the international arena which will influence its agenda. Moscow's political-strategic objectives were translated into

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: 'Eyewitness accounts confirm shelling of Georgian villages', RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 14 November 2008; Another source claims that Russian reinforcements were already in South Ossetia on 7 August 2008 ('Soldaty govoryat', polit.ru, 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 must withdraw to the line where they were stationed prior to the beginning of hostilities. Prior to the establishment of international mechanisms the Russian peacekeeping 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 ('Press Statement following Negotiations with French President Nicolas Sarkozy', 12 August

2008, kremlin.ru, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/08/12/2100_type82912type82914type82915_205208.shtml.

3. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/europe/7606072.stm>; <http://www.rferl.org/section/South+Ossetia+Crisis/454.html>; <http://en.rian.ru/trend/osset/index1.html>.

4. According to Andrei Illarionov, former advisor of President Putin on economic affairs, Russia had been preparing for a war against Georgia since 2004, after Saakashvili aligned himself with the West and had returned Ajaria under his rule (*Le Monde*, 25 October 2008; *Ekho Moskvy*, 19 August 2008).

5. 'Schöner Schein um Sarkozys Kaukasus-Mission', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 12 September 2008; 'Russia doubling its troops in Georgia's Abkhazia region', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 5 May 2008; 'Abkhaziya – "Germesova" mogila', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 25 April 2008; 'UN mission confirms Georgian, rejects Russian version of air clash', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 27 May 2008; 'Russia deploys railway troops to Abkhazia', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3 June 2008.

6. "'The-recognition" of Georgia's territorial integrity', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 11 July 2008; 'Russian railroad troops complete mission in Abkhazia', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 31 July 2008; P. Felgengauer, 'Eto byla ne spontannaya, a splanirovannaya vojna', *Novaya Gazeta*, 14 August 2008; 'Did Russia plan its war in Georgia?', *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 15 August 2008.

7. *Military Balance 2008*, International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, February 2008, pp. 212-220; *Annual exchange of information, Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty*.

8. *Annual exchange of information, Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty*.

9. 'Georgia war shows Russian army strong but flawed', *Reuters*, 20 August 2008; V. Ivanov, 'Tsena pobedy v Yuzhnoy Osetii', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 22 August 2008.

the following military-strategic goals. After neutralising the Georgian armed forces, by installing buffer zones south of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and consequently occupying vital transport lines and locations, Russian forces could easily control the major part of Georgia's territory in case of a return of violence. Perhaps Russia also anticipated that by partly occupying Georgia this might entail an internal revolt against Saakashvili. Subsequently, military-strategic goals resulted in military-operational targets. The targeting by Russia's land, sea and air forces coincided with the order of battle of Georgia's 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. Furthermore, Russian soldiers were seen sitting on top of their armoured personnel carriers because traveling inside – due to insufficient armour - was more dangerous. 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 disproportional use of force in stead of precision guide munitions (PGMs), much collateral damage was caused. Next, it was astonishing to see that the Russian military captured all Georgian arms and equipment that they could find to transport them back to Russia, apparently to use it themselves⁽⁹⁾.

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 losses of aircraft were caused by insufficient aerial reconnaissance and other intelligence gathering. The coordination of action among the services (army, air force and navy) also failed. Although after the fiascos of the Chechen conflicts conceptual approaches were launched to increase coordination and to conduct joint warfare – in particular by creating joint-style regional military commands to replace the mainly 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 Russian armed forces conducted in Georgia old-fashioned in stead of high-tech and non-contact operations, i.e. the modern (Western-style) of warfare. They won the war by using the traditional Russian/Soviet concept of warfare: an overwhelming use of arms and troops⁽¹⁰⁾.

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 conditions of the army 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

infantry carriers with insufficient armour and by the fact that Georgian arms were looted. The level of investment earmarked for purchasing new hardware has been too low. The share of modern military hardware is allegedly only 10-20 percent of the total. The amount of arms and equipment becoming obsolete is growing faster than the numbers purchased to replace them. For example, from 2000-2004, the army added only 15 new tanks to a total of 23,000 pieces. As to human resources, the social circumstances of military personnel are poor. Salaries and pensions make living conditions hard and cause an increase in suicides among the military. In addition, Russia's military suffers from severe conscript desertion, mainly due to hazing, a shortage of qualified officers, low levels of motivation, corruption, and a lack of training, resulting in insufficient combat readiness. The Kremlin has maintained that the total size of the armed forces -- around one million soldiers -- will not be subject to radical cuts and conscription will be continued. The bad reputation of the army (hazing, Caucasian conflicts, low salaries) and a declining population have been obstacles for finding the required amount of contract soldiers.

Attention for asymmetric warfare

In October 2003, then Minister of Defence Sergei Ivanov published a defence whitepaper, The Priority Tasks of the Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. In this document an analysis of recent Western-led conflicts and Russia's own experiences in Chechnya led to the conclusion that irregular warfare had become a priority for the military. However, the observation that modern, specifically irregular, warfare can only be fought with sophisticated weapon systems, such as PGMs and avionics that provide all-weather capability, and by improving the training level of personnel, required financial means. So far, reform plans did not aim at fulfilling these requirements to an adequate level. Moreover, this document demonstrated contrasting entries in Russia's threat perception, by mentioning irregular conflicts but also still emphasizing large-scale warfare, i.e. against NATO, as main threats. Russia's generals also regularly gave proof of their ambiguity in threat conception. Sometimes they mentioned modern day threats such as organized crime, drugs and arms trafficking, illegal immigration, extremism, separatism and terrorism as priorities. But at the same time traditional Cold War vestiges of threat perception, such as the expansion of military blocs, military presence in regions traditionally of Russian interest, ignoring Russia in international security politics, and moves against the strengthening of Russia as one of the influential centres in the world, were also stated as major threats.

Military thinking

In the defence whitepaper of 2003, Russia focused on modern high-tech warfare and on asymmetric conflicts, instead of large-scale conventional wars. However, unless the current large-scale structure of the armed forces is changed, the adaptation of the armed forces to modern warfare is likely to be obstructed. Military exercises and the Georgian conflict demonstrate that Russia is capable of handling conventional warfare, but in a traditional way. Until now there were no indications that the armed forces are trained and equipped for wide-ranging, complex military operations abroad, which these days is the core business of Western military power. So far the Kremlin refrained from radically changing the structure of the armed forces toward one which is capable of addressing the challenges



Figure 3: Map of Georgia.⁽¹⁶⁾

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, expeditionary military forces that can be deployed at short notice anywhere in the world. At the same time, protracted 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 two demands for the armed forces.

New security thinking and corresponding military reforms

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

On Russia's powerful posture:

"...A new Russia [...] has now acquired a full-fledged role in global affairs; Russia wants to achieve strong positions of authority in the world community that best meet [its] interests as one of the influential centres in the modern world; Russia exerts a substantial influence upon the development of a new architecture of international relations; Russia will provide comprehensive protection of rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad...";

On the European security architecture:

"...[B]loc-based approaches still persist in the European architecture that took shape during the Cold War period; Russia maintains its negative attitude towards the expansion of NATO, notably to the plans of admitting Ukraine and Georgia to the membership in the alliance, as well as to bringing the NATO military infrastructure closer to the Russian borders on the whole; Russia opposes unilateral actions in the field of strategic antimissile defence that are destabilizing the international situation...";

In this security paper the Kremlin makes it clear that Russia is back as an important power, wishes to be treated likewise, and that it will influence the international agenda. The August 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict comes to the fore as an example of the latter. Soon after this conflict President Medvedev further elaborated his views on foreign and security policy by announcing five principles:

1. Primacy of international law;
2. The world should be multi-polar; not single-pole; no domination, such as by the USA;

3. Russia has no intention of isolating itself, seeks friendly relations, also with the West;
4. Protecting Russians wherever they may be is priority. Russia responds to any aggressive act against them or Russia;
5. Russia has privileged interests in certain regions⁽¹³⁾.

In addition and related to these new concepts on security policy, in autumn 2008 the Kremlin launched radical plans for modernization of the armed forces. The reforms entail cutting the number of officers from the current 30 percent of the total manpower to 15 percent by 2012. Furthermore, a restructuring of the strategic- and operational-level command-and-control structures 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, a rise in the defence budget for 2009 of some 25%, and large procurement programs – to replace 30% percent of the old weapons within five years and more than 80% by 2020 – were also made public⁽¹⁴⁾.

Conclusions

Although a victory for the Kremlin, the Georgian conflict clearly demonstrated shortcomings in the capabilities of the Russian armed forces. The Georgian conflict is part of a consistent assertive stance in Moscow's foreign and security policy, of which military power is one of the major instruments. Around the military campaign in Georgia President Medvedev launched new policy concepts, emphasizing Russia's return to a position of strength. After the conflict the Kremlin concluded that the military should be brought in line with this status. Thus, ambitious reform and procurement plans were announced. For a number of reasons it is doubtful whether these plans will be carried out. First, for many years the armed forces have been faced with reforms which were not established, either by obstruction of the generals or lack of political will. Secondly, although Russia's defence budget has risen rapidly since 2001, there is no considerable improvement of combat readiness of the forces. Often, money disappears into the pockets of corrupt officers or is used inefficiently. Defence Minister Serdyukov, a former tax official, was nominated for this post by former President Putin especially to counter corruption and obstruction by the military leadership. Thirdly, Russia is suffering heavily from the international financial crises, to an extent that the financial reserves built up by oil and natural gas revenues are fainting away rapidly. Money might be needed more to avoid social unrest than to invest in military power⁽¹⁵⁾. However, if the Kremlin maintains its military ambitions and is capable of realizing them, then the West, confronted with a resurgent Russia, might have to change its defence plans into those in which collective defence has once again a central focus. ■

10. 'Absence of regional commands blamed for Russian inadequacies in Ossetia', *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 23 August 2008; A.D. Tsyganok, 'Uroki pyatidnevnoy voyny v Zakavkaze', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 29 August 2008.

11. M. de Haas, 'Russisch militair denken: voorbereiding op de verkeerde oorlog?', *Atlantisch Perspectief*, jaargang 30, nr. 8, December 2006, pp. 16-20.

12. *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, 12 July 2008, <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml>.

13. Interview given by Dmitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Russia, NTV, 31 August 2008; http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2008/08/31/11850_type82916_206003.shtml.

14. 'Russia to downsize Armed Forces to 1 mln by 2012', *RIA Novosti*, 14 October 2008; 'Russia's radical military reform in progress', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 20 November 2008; 'Pushka vmesto masla', *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 15 September 2008.

15. M. de Haas, 'Veiligheidsbeleid en airpower onder Jeltsin en Poetin: de ontwikkeling van het veiligheidsdenken in de Russische Federatie en de gevolgen ervan voor de inzet van het luchtwapen (1992-2000)', *Utrecht: uitgeverij De Banier*, 2004, pp. 75-84; 'Russia to slash bloated military bureaucracy', *Reuters*, 14 October 2008; 'Russia's peace offensive', *International Herald Tribune*, 14 October 2008; 'Mismanagement of Russia's economy could lead to social unrest', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 1 December 2008.

16. Map used with permission of the United Nations Cartographic Section, New York. Map of Georgia, No. 3780 Rev. 5, August 2004.