



RUSSIA RESURGENT: AN INITIAL LOOK AT RUSSIAN MILITARY PERFORMANCE IN GEORGIA

by Felix K. Chang

It is no surprise that tensions between Russia and Georgia have mounted. On August 3 Moscow warned of the growing danger of a “large-scale military conflict” between Georgia and its separatist province of South Ossetia; that warning drew a reply from Washington two days later urging Moscow to refrain from provocative actions in the region.¹

As the conflict unfolded during the night of August 7 with a Georgian military offensive into South Ossetia, it soon appeared that Tbilisi miscalculated the Russian response. By the morning of August 8, Russian forces were streaming into Georgia. While news reports from the frontlines remain preliminary and incomplete, the scale and speed of Russia’s military operations between August 8 and 12 do shed some light on Russian military capabilities and operational readiness and raise new questions regarding the events leading to the conflict.

RUSSIAN GROUND FORCES

Within hours of the overnight Georgian offensive beginning August 7, an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 Russian troops were on the main highway leading into Georgia. By 1:00 pm on August 8, witnesses reported roads filled with hundreds of tanks, armored personnel carriers, towed artillery, and truck-mounted rocket launchers already travelling into the Roki Tunnel, which passes through the mountainous area that separates Russia and Georgia.²

From the number of troops and types of equipment, and given the units of the 58th Army based nearby, it is clear that Russia deployed the equivalent of a motor rifle division. For such a force to move from bivouac into the field, Russian army commanders would have needed time to coordinate the mobilization--distributing ammunition and supplies, establishing the right of way on the only highway to Georgia, and sorting out the proper ordering of the advancing column so that it could combat any resistance it may encounter.

In addition, Russian media reported on Saturday that elements of the 76th Air Assault Division based in the Leningrad Military District had already been airlifted into the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali. Elements of the 98th Airborne Division and 45th Intelligence Regiment based in the Moscow Military District were slated to follow soon thereafter. These may have constituted the “battalion task forces” that General Vladimir Boldyrev, commander of Russian Ground Forces, said captured the capital city early on that same day. These elite formations, which represent part of Russia’s strategic reserve, are likely to have units on constant alert for rapid deployments. Still, to fully equip, embark, transport, and coordinate the arrival and integration of these troops into combat operations alongside the 58th Army units moving overland is a notable demonstration of not only long-range airlift capability involving over 100 airlift sorties, but also improved command and staff arrangements, which proved so difficult for Russia’s army in the 1990s.³

Surely with rising tensions, Russian army commanders likely had contingency plans in place for such an operation. Even so, it remains remarkable that such sizable forces could have been orchestrated and arrayed in under half a day, even if decision-making in Moscow was instantaneous, especially if the actual timing of the Georgian offensive was unknown to Russian

¹ Jim Mannion, “US military surprised by speed, timing of Russia military action,” *Agence France-Presse*, August 11, 2008; Gonzalo R. Gallegos, U.S. Department of State Daily Press Briefing, August 5, 2008, at www.state.gov.

² “Russia’s Troops to Liberate Tskhinvali,” *Kommersant*, August 8, 2008.

³ “Russian Paratroopers in Abkhazia,” InfoRos, August 11, 2008; “Paratroopers from Pskov, Ivanovo Brought in to Tskhinvali,” *Kommersant*, August 9, 2008; “Russia: Paratroopers in breakaway capital,” *CNN*, August 9, 2008.

leaders. For by the early afternoon on August 8, Russian mechanized infantry responding to the Georgian provocation were already battling in Tskhinvali, about 40 km from Russia but less than 5 km from where Georgia's offensive began.⁴ Certainly, most of the Russian ground units that participated in the incursion into Georgia must have been placed on a higher state of readiness and their commands coordinated earlier last week to achieve such a fast and smoothly executed response.

RUSSIAN AIR FORCES

Russia operates a number of air bases near Georgia. Many of these supported military operations in Chechnya between 1994-2000, when separatists in that province sought autonomy from Russia. Clearly, the Russian military has also improved its air-ground coordination since its poorly managed Chechen campaigns. In Georgia, the Russian air force appeared to have provided effective close air support to the army units advancing into South Ossetia. News reports indicated that Georgian defenses blocking the Russian advance were struck from the air.⁵ Given the fast tempo of the action, only good coordination between air and ground units would have ensured such support.

With over 300 combat aircraft--including Su-24, Su-25, and Su-27 fighters and Tu-22 bombers--reportedly participating in the operation, Russia clearly had little problem achieving air superiority over Georgia, which could field only eight Su-25 fighters. Given that many of its jets were probably on alert, the Russian air force could quickly take to the sky. Just as important, it likely possessed excellent intelligence on key Georgian military sites, which is unsurprising since Russian troops had been stationed in Georgia until 2007 and its peacekeepers have been present in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, another breakaway Georgian province.

So far, four Russian and one Georgian aircraft are confirmed to have been destroyed, though each side has claimed higher numbers. It appears that all the losses have been due to ground-based air defenses, mainly surface-to-air missiles. While the Su-25 losses on both sides are readily understandable given their role in close air support, the Russian loss of a Tu-22M3 bomber, which normally operates at high altitude, remains unexplained.⁶

As a whole, the intensity of Russia's air operations should also be noted. From a cold start, the Russian air force activated a broad array of combat units and maintained a high operational tempo for over four days. It would have required foresight to stock the needed bases with sufficient stores of fuel and ammunition. In July 2007, Russia may have had the chance to prepare for such an action during a large-scale training maneuver simulating the defense of Russia's southern border called *Exercise Caucasian Border 2007* that featured more than 400 air sorties. If nothing else, Russian air units demonstrated that they were well prepared for this sort of contingency and performed their duties with greater skill and coordination than had been seen in the 1990s.

RUSSIAN NAVAL FORCES

Possibly the most striking performance may have been that of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, whose capabilities have not been highly regarded. On Saturday, Georgian sources announced that Russian warships had begun to blockade its coast. The presence of the ships was seemingly confirmed by Russian-backed Abkhaz authorities, who claimed that the ships had deflected a Georgian attempt to close off the coastline of Abkhazia. In the meantime, Russian media reported that the *Moskva*, a Slava-class cruiser, and the *Smetlivy*, a Kashin-class destroyer, as well as a small number of supply and logistics ships had sailed from Sevastopol and arrived in the region on Sunday to "provide aid to refugees" and not to "blockade the Georgian coast." The reports concluded that after "several maneuvers" as part of an anti-terror exercise, the ships sailed onto Novorossiysk.⁷

Though not confirmed by Georgian sources, the Russian Navy informed media outlets that four Georgian fast-attack craft had crossed the border of the established security zone and threatened the Russian flotilla. In response, after firing warning shots, the Russian warships sank one of the craft with gunfire. Another unconfirmed claim was made by Georgia that the Russian navy landed troops into Abkhazia over the weekend. If true, these troops probably sailed aboard the three "large landing craft," which Russian news reported had sailed from Novorossiysk, where ground troops are known to be based nearby. The "large landing craft" were either the three Alligator-class or three Ropucha-class LSTs based with the Black Sea Fleet. But

⁴ "Russian armored vehicles approaching Tskhinvali," *Interfax*, August 8, 2008; "Russia's Armored Vehicles Entered Tskhinvali," *Kommersant*, August 8, 2008.

⁵ "Russia's Warplanes Bombed Out Georgia's Artillery near Gori," *Kommersant*, August 9, 2008; "Aircraft striking Georgian positions in S. Ossetia," *Interfax*, August 8, 2008.

⁶ "Georgian strike fighter shot down in S. Ossetia," *Interfax*, August 11, 2008; David A. Fulghum and Douglas Barrie, "Georgia Strikes Back with Air Defenses," *Aviation Week*, August 11, 2008.

⁷ "Russian Navy carries out Black Sea anti-terror exercise," RIA Novosti, August 11, 2008; "Russian Navy ships approach Georgia's sea border," RIA Novosti, August 10, 2008; "Georgians to Leave South Ossetia as Focus Shifts to Black Sea," *Deutsche Welle*, August 10, 2008.

even if accurate, these ships could not have lifted more than 900 troops at one time, far fewer than the Georgian claim.⁸

While the claims of a naval clash and a troop landing remains unclear, the speed with which the Russian vessels based at Sevastopol must have put to sea is not. Since the *Moskva* and *Smeliviy* were accompanying much slower supply and logistics ships, whose maximum speed range between 12 and 16 knots, the flotilla would have taken 25 hours to transit the 400 nm between Sevastopol and the Georgian coast. For the ships to have arrived on Saturday, they would have to have sailed on Friday, just hours after Georgian troops crossed into South Ossetia.

Thus, the Russian vessels must have been on alert with their crews aboard and the supply ships already loaded with whatever humanitarian aid they were intended to transport. Otherwise, the Black Sea Fleet would have required at least a full day, if not longer, to get its ships underway, so that naval commanders could plan the mission, crews could be recalled, and appropriate supplies could be found and loaded onto the ships. In addition, the ease with which those supplies were offloaded at their destination implies further coordination as to who would receive them and how they would be distributed. For the Black Sea Fleet, its ability to respond as quickly as it did shows that it had not only been held at a high state of operational readiness, but also made substantial preparations for the action.

OPERATIONAL AXES

Russian forces eventually advanced across two fronts. In South Ossetia, Russian troops took Tskhinvali and then crossed into undisputed Georgian territory to cut the main highway and rail line west of Gori. A second front was opened when Russian mechanized infantry passed through the UN security zone and entered undisputed Georgian territory from Abkhazia. At least 2,000 troops occupied Zugdidi, a Georgian town 10 km from the border and a sector headquarters of the UN peacekeeping force. The Russian column continued another 30 km to Senaki, where it captured a Georgian military base and airfield, severing the main highway and rail line at a second location and effectively controlling all heavy traffic movement across Georgia. It is reasonable to assume that at least some of the 9,000 troops and 350 armored vehicles the Russian military had stationed in Abkhazia as peacekeepers participated in the advance. Meanwhile, Abkhaz separatists subdued Georgian positions in the Kodori Valley and Russian air power destroyed key military facilities in Tbilisi and port of Poti.⁹

No doubt Russia's military action in Georgia will prompt many countries to view Moscow in a sharper light, from the capitals of Europe to Beijing and Tokyo. However the world eventually interprets Russia's intervention in Georgia's civil conflict--whether as a "humanitarian effort" as Moscow portrays or as a "full scale invasion" as Tbilisi portrays--it does demonstrate the Russian military's renewed ability to prosecute a relatively complex, high-intensity combined arms operation. Still, the evidently high state of readiness of such a broad array of Russian military units across all three services raises more questions about Moscow's intentions and planning prior to the outbreak of hostilities.

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⁸ "Georgian Military Boats Attacked Russian Warships," InfoRos, August 11, 2008; Marc Champion, Andrew Osborn, John D. McKinnon, "Russia Widens Attacks on Georgia," *Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2008; Ron Popeski, "Russian navy sinks Georgian boat: Defence ministry," Reuters, August 10, 2008.

⁹ "Forcing Georgians Out of Kodori Valley," InfoRos, August 12, 2008; Christopher Torchia and David Nowak, "Russia opens new front, drives deeper into Georgia," Associated Press, August 10, 2008.