

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 39  
Number 1 *Parameters Spring 2009*

Article 7

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3-1-2009

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### Recommended Citation

Roger N. McDermott, "Russia's Conventional Armed Forces and the Georgian War," *Parameters* 39, no. 1 (2009), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2463.

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# Russia's Conventional Armed Forces and the Georgian War

ROGER N. McDERMOTT

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Russia's rapid military victory over Georgia in August 2008 surprised many commentators, since it stood in stark contrast to the manner in which Russian forces had once become bogged down in a protracted conflict in Chechnya. On the other hand, the conflict might be thought of as the final war of the twentieth century, fought by a Soviet legacy force, desperately seeking to make do with dated equipment and a top-heavy command and control system more suited to conducting the kind of large-scale conventional warfare that had passed into the annals of military history. Damage to Russia's international reputation also ensued, jeopardizing the nation's relations with the European Union and NATO and raising questions regarding the legality of what Moscow dubbed a "peace enforcement operation" that precipitated its unilateral recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>1</sup> Russia's military actions provoked widespread international condemnation, spread panic among foreign investors, and left the East European and Baltic members of NATO calling for protection from a "resurgent Russia." In the following analysis, the lessons learned by the Russian military will be examined in the context of an announced military reform and rearmament program aimed at producing a more efficient, combat-capable conventional force by 2020. Despite the rapid victory, the war itself exposed fundamental weaknesses and shortcomings in Russia's armed forces, reinforcing conditions that were already known and served as a catalyst for the military reform program.

Before proceeding to the lessons learned from the campaign, there needs to be an important precursor: a brief explanation of what worked

and how the otherwise beleaguered Russian military managed to deliver swift success. Within a few hours of the commencement of the operation the 76th (Pskov) Airborne Division's 104th Regiment was already in action in the Tskhinvali suburbs with 1,550 soldiers and more than 100 vehicles, accompanied by no fewer than 200 men from the Pechora GRU brigade *Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye* (Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff). Russian mobility was arguably far superior to that seen in previous conflicts. Within 24 hours the deployed forces almost doubled in size even though Russia could not begin an immediate airlift, owing to Georgian air defenses, and the army columns' slow movement toward Tskhinvali via the Rokki Tunnel forced commanders to commit troops piecemeal.<sup>2</sup>

A key factor in the speed of the Russian military victory was the opening of a second front in Abkhazia using mechanized infantry. In South Ossetia, Russian forces captured Tskhinvali and then crossed into undisputed Georgian territory to effectively cut the main highway and railway routes west of Gori. At least 2,000 soldiers occupied Zugdidi, a Georgian town ten kilometers from the border, and an armored column continued another 30 kilometers to Senaki, capturing a military base and airfield, severing the main highway and railway at a second location, enabling de facto Russian military control of all heavy traffic movement across Georgia. Abkhaz separatists subdued Georgian positions in the Kodori Valley, while Russia's Air Force (*Voyenno-Vozdushnyye Sily*—VVS) destroyed military facilities in Tbilisi and Poti.<sup>3</sup>

In the final phase of combat operations the Russian Army made efficient use of the Uragan multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS), Tochka-U missiles, and also, possibly, the Smerch MLRS for attacks against the Georgian Army's positions. Those systems, coupled with support from the Russian Air Force, inflicted sufficient losses on Georgian forces to bring about their rapid "demoralization and retreat."<sup>4</sup> After hostilities ended, the General Staff particularly praised the 76th Pskov airborne personnel operating in South Ossetia and called attention to the need to strengthen air assault battalions and possibly give the airborne units their own aviation assets.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, to fully equip, transport, and coordinate the deployment and integration of these forces into combat operations alongside 58th Army units

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represented a notable demonstration not only of long-range airlift capability encompassing more than 100 sorties, but also improved command and staff arrangements, aspects that often challenged Russia's Army in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

Arguably the rapid collapse of the Georgian armed forces, however, was more a result of Georgian military weakness, poor management, and limited combat capabilities, than anything accurately reflecting the prowess of Russia's armed forces.<sup>7</sup> The Russian government struggled to mitigate the political and economic consequences of the conflict, including criticism from various international quarters regarding how closely it complied with the ceasefire negotiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and its decision to unilaterally recognize the breakaway Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and confirming plans to establish Russian military bases there. The damage to Russia's international reputation was more painfully revealed in the outflow of capital from foreign investors. Amidst a buoyant mood in the Russian military, celebrating victory over Georgia and achievement of the operational goals set by the Kremlin, an atmosphere of uncertainty concerning the future of Russia's conventional armed forces soon arose.

### ***Georgia War: A Seismic Shock***

The retrospective critique of Russia's armed forces that publicly unfolded in the autumn of 2008 was centered on key aspects of the military's combat capabilities.<sup>8</sup> A recognizable pattern emerged which focused on aged vehicles, hardware, and weaponry; ineffective command and control organizations and systems; lack of interservice coordination; failures of intelligence support and the GLONASS (*Global'naya Navigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema*, or Global Navigation Satellite System); and an unusual fascination with the causes of Russian casualties, distinct from previous military operations. It should be noted that very little difference can be found between the criticism of the campaign in either civilian media or official sources,<sup>9</sup> suggesting the presence of an orchestrated effort by the government to "sell" reform to the military and garner support among the populace.<sup>10</sup>

Typical of this effort was the publicity when Lieutenant-General Vladimir Shamanov, Chief of the Main Combat Training and Service Directorate, said military training programs would be revised. "Training programs for services and service arms are being reassessed with due account taken of the specifics of the operation to rebuff the Georgian aggression against South Ossetia, and of the experience gained in Chechnya. We are also bearing in mind the Soviet Army's experience in Afghanistan, the United States' operations in Iraq, and other armed conflicts." Shamanov's

analysis of the weak performance of the Russian military in Georgia encompassed three factors: poor interoperability between the Air Force and ground units, communication problems during combat, and low-resolution reconnaissance systems.<sup>11</sup>

Senior Russian officials called for armaments modernization, military reorganization, increased defense spending, and switching from a divisional to a brigade-based structure among permanent readiness units as the key features of military reform.<sup>12</sup> On 11 September 2008, President Dmitry Medvedev stated, “We must focus on the modernization of our armaments. The Caucasian crisis, the Georgian aggression, and ongoing militarization make this task a top priority of our state.” Medvedev met senior Russian officers at the Dongus test ground on 26 September and demanded a “precise plan of action for the immediate future” by December 2008. He highlighted five areas for improvement:

- Bring all combat formations and troop units to permanent readiness status.
- Raise the effectiveness of command and control systems.
- Improve the system of officer training, education, and military science.
- Equip the armed forces with “the most modern weapons” with special attention given to precision munitions.
- Improve the military’s pay, housing, and social amenities.<sup>13</sup>

Deep cuts among the officer corps and downsizing the armed forces, as well as reforming the command and control structures, were always going to be sources of heated controversy within the military, and the leadership quickly moved to address the backlash.<sup>14</sup> In November 2008, Army-General Nikolay Makarov, Chief of the General Staff, justified the planned systemic changes in terms of the experience gained in several campaigns:

Two command chains will be eliminated: regiments and divisions as far as recent events (two Chechen campaigns and the August Caucasus conflict) have demonstrated that our command system, created in the 1960s—army, division, regiment, and battalion—is so complex and heavy that at the present time we are unable to ensure quick decisionmaking, that orders reach troops, interoperability, and effective command.<sup>15</sup>

General Makarov, whose prominent role in the military reform campaign seemed intended to deflect criticism away from Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov, addressed a meeting of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences in Moscow on 16 December. He highlighted the immense operational and planning problems and low levels of combat readiness that were prevalent during the war in Georgia. In short, Makarov suggested

that Russian forces were incapable of fighting a modern war and had to be radically reformed. “To find a lieutenant colonel, colonel, or general able to lead troops with a sure hand, you had to chase down officers one by one throughout the armed forces, because those career commanders in charge of ‘paper regiments and divisions’ just could not resolve the tasks set.” Once officers were allocated personnel and equipment they soon demonstrated their ineffectiveness by “losing their heads” or in some cases refusing to fulfill assignments. Eighty-three percent of Army units were numerically incomplete, and only 17 percent were combat ready. Of the 150 regiments in the Air Force only five are permanently combat ready, while in the Navy “half the warships stand idle at anchor,” Makarov lamented. He said Russia plans to modernize 30 percent of its weapon systems by 2012, and 70 percent by 2020, and said that while conventional forces remain in such poor condition Russia will place greater reliance on its strategic nuclear capabilities.<sup>16</sup> His speech marked him as perhaps the most severe critic of the contemporary Russian armed forces and as the primary proponent of reform.

### ***Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence (C<sup>3</sup>I)***

Russia’s central military command was evidently caught unaware by the sudden crisis in South Ossetia; it occurred at a time when many officers were on leave and civilian and military decisionmakers were unavailable. In apparent disarray and panic, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) attempted to recall from retirement Colonel-General Alexandr Rukshin, the former chief of the MoD’s Main Operations Directorate (critical in planning and overseeing combat operations), but he refused the request to return to duty. He had, in fact, been “retired” from his post in June 2008 by Defense Minister Serdyukov following a dispute over proposed cuts to the officer corps. Only a personal telephone call from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to the reluctant Rukshin overcame the latter’s refusal. As events unfolded, Defense Minister Serdyukov, who was also difficult to contact in the early hours of the crisis, failed to authorize the use of unmanned aerial vehicles or an information warfare campaign; these missteps later provided grist for officer complaints regarding the inexperienced “civilian” minister.<sup>17</sup> Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov, president of the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, publicly criticized an earlier plan by President Medvedev that had called for discharging up to 200,000 officers. General Ivashov disputed that streamlining the General Staff would necessarily improve the combat capabilities of the Russian Army. Moreover, he went out of his way to note the General Staff’s disorganization at the initiation of hostilities in Georgia:

Take 8 August, for example, when the Georgian Army attacked our peacekeeping battalion in South Ossetia. For two to three days command and control on the part of the General Staff was essentially absent. Why? First, the chief of the General Staff was new, and his right hand, the chief of the Main Directorate for Operations [General Rukshin] of the General Staff, had been dismissed and no replacement had been found.<sup>18</sup> On 8 August, the General Staff was in the process of moving to a new location. The officers and generals were loading their property, maps, and documents onto KamAZ trucks and essentially did not control the situation.<sup>19</sup>

Communication systems and electronic warfare assets employed by commanders and frontline forces were obsolete, in many cases “unchanged since Soviet times.” The 58th Army commander, Lieutenant-General Anatoliy Khrulev, was reported to have communicated with his forces in the midst of combat via a satellite phone borrowed from a journalist, since communication between units was unavailable.<sup>20</sup> Intelligence failures were quite evident, as demonstrated by the inability of units to communicate space-based and electronic intelligence, which consequently “failed to inform the country’s leadership of the concentration of Georgian troops.” Additionally, such failures resulted in electronic warfare systems not being employed to suppress Georgia’s air defenses. Commanders were forced to struggle in their efforts to gain timely information related to events on the battlefield; difficulties compounded by the fact that maritime and topographic maps provided conflicting data.<sup>21</sup> Satellite-targeting support to artillery was woefully absent, thereby preventing the use of precision-guided munitions and the accurate adjustment of artillery fire. Despite promises made in December 2007 by Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov to fully equip the Russian Army with GLONASS receivers by mid-2008, the Russian Army largely went into combat in August with World War II-era compasses and maps. Russian forces allegedly attempted to use the US Global Positioning System (GPS), but were thwarted in their attempts by the fact that the map of Georgia was blanked out for 48 hours. They were forced to resort to targeting conventional weapon systems through the use of vintage 1960s optical equipment.<sup>22</sup>

This lack of satellite data partly explains one issue that puzzled military experts, the failure to employ precision-guided munitions. Munitions such as the Kh-555 air-launched cruise missile, Gran shells and mines with satellite guidance, or frontal aviation’s Kh-28 and Kh-58U antiradar missiles were not deployed in theater.

In fact, the calamitous performance of Russia’s C<sup>3</sup>I during combat operations in Georgia sheds some light on the rapid decision by Russian authorities to seek increased funding to address these weaknesses. In

September 2008, Prime Minister Putin announced a government decree increasing the funding for the GLONASS program by some 67 billion rubles. Aleksey Pchelintsev of the GLONASS/GNSS-Forum Association said that “the system will guarantee round-the-clock navigation of the Russian territory,” once a total of 17 satellites were in orbit. Three more satellites were hurriedly scheduled for the GLONASS constellation in December 2008.<sup>23</sup> GLONASS has both military and economic implications for Russia. It will almost certainly prove to be a future force multiplier for the Russian military, providing independent navigation and targeting for joint direct attack munitions. It has the added value of potentially boosting the sale of Russian military equipment abroad to customers who cannot rely on the GPS. Ground forces commander-in-chief General Vladimir Boldyrev said C<sup>3</sup>I capabilities would be upgraded. “In addition to updating the armament of armored vehicles, [we] will take the most radical measures to update the communication equipment of the tank troops and drastically improve their command and control system.”

The Russian casualty rate was also disproportionately high and may have reflected shortfalls of identification-friend-or-foe (IFF) equipment. Obsolete equipment in many cases rendered the units “blind and deaf” and may have been a contributory factor in losses from friendly fire. General Shamanov indicated that the Georgian conflict had forced the MoD to compile a list of critical equipment required for any future operation. This compilation emphasized the priority of geopositioning and IFF equipment. Shamanov said, “In South Ossetia the IFF system in fact did not work, and it was very hard for our units to recognize whose equipment they were seeing—ours or Georgian.”<sup>24</sup>

### *Aging Equipment*

The deteriorating condition of Russian weapons and vehicles has long been a source of discontent within the military, with insufficient funds allocated to modernize obsolete hardware and equipment. Civilian commentators and media repeatedly highlighted this factor following the Georgian war. Officers who participated in the campaign told President Medvedev that the quality of their equipment fell seriously short of that which the United States had supplied to the Georgian Army.<sup>25</sup>

A remarkable feature of the Russian media reporting was the extent to which harsh criticism was directed at equipment still in use by Russian forces. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* reported that reactive armor canisters mounted on the 58th Army’s T-72 tanks were empty, effectively rendering them



useless. Reportedly the 58th Army's command vehicles were falling apart. "The headquarters UAZ [Russian all-terrain vehicle] didn't want to start at all." Commanders apparently "submissively stood and waited while the repairmen brought the vehicle back to life. After the UAZ started up and was [being] driven out the gate its silencer fell off after 50 meters." According to eyewitnesses, the unit's two armored columns (150 to 170 pieces of equipment), designated to spearhead the advance into Tskhinvali, left broken-down vehicles along the Zarskaya road.<sup>26</sup>

The independent Russian military weekly, *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (NVO), pointed out that 60 to 75 percent of 58th Army's tanks deployed to the theater of operations were older T-62 and T-72Ms. Even the upgraded T-72BM could not withstand Georgian antitank warheads. Older tanks not only lacked GPS but also thermal imagers and IFF systems. Moreover, the armored columns included BMP-1 and BMD-1 (infantry personnel carriers) with "primitive" sights and vision equipment.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Airpower: Future Lessons?***

Russia's use of airpower in the campaign undoubtedly played a major role in securing the military's operational goals. Yet, as the media and officials developed their criticism of Russia's conventional forces, they extended their criticism to include the Air Force.<sup>28</sup> The root cause of this negativity stemmed from the downing of a Tu-22M3 strategic bomber by Georgia's air defenses. The bomber was shot down while flying a reconnaissance mission, an event that was singled out by the media as intolerable. It is remarkable that the VVS conducted no suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) operations; however, this may have been a reflection of the lack of night-fighting capability. On the eve of the campaign the VVS had no around-the-clock SEAD capabilities, which meant Russia did not possess the option of mounting an air campaign such as those executed by the United States in the 1991 Gulf War, Afghanistan in 2001, or Iraq in 2003. Retired VVS commanders Army-General Petr Deynekin and Army-General Anatoliy Kornukov harshly criticized the failure to suppress Georgia's air defenses. General Kornukov was especially damning, saying the Tu-22 "was sent to its death," and he raged at "the miscalculations of intelligence and the incompetence of the Air Force leadership." General Deynekin added that the "poorly organized" search-and-rescue service contributed to the capture of Russian pilots.<sup>29</sup> Other critics attacked the absence of a unified command system as a cause of aircraft losses. Retired General Makhmut Gareyev argued that army aviation's failure to provide effective close air support to

ground combat units was a result of its subordination to the VVS. General Gareyev called for the return of tactical aviation to ground commanders and the placement of forward air controllers in each ground force battalion.<sup>30</sup>

There was also confusion surrounding the nature of the command relationship between the North Caucasus Military District commander and the VVS. The VVS operations were being directed by VVS commander-in-chief Colonel-General Aleksandr Zelin, who commanded the air forces from his office on his mobile phone, without entering the command post. He decided all matters related to the conduct of air operations and did not even consider it necessary to invite his air defense assistants to a meeting. Furthermore, the VVS was accused of failing to support ground combat operations. NVO asserted that a lack of air controllers among Russian troops was responsible for allowing Georgian multiple-rocket launchers to fire on Tskhinvali for 14 hours without opposition. Allegedly, the Air Force was unable to integrate two- or three-man observer teams with the combined-arms units without deploying a command post “in parallel,” a fact that left Russian armored columns without sufficient resources to coordinate air cover. When Russian military planning staffs assessed the role of airpower in the Georgia war, they concluded that Russian aviation losses would have been significantly higher if Georgia’s air defenses been considerably more efficient.<sup>31</sup> Equally, had the Georgian Army not panicked and abandoned several Buk-M1 surface-to-air missile launchers close to Senaki, in western Georgia, and a small number of Osa missile launchers in South Ossetia, they could have inflicted much greater losses on Russian aircraft. General Rukshin finally intervened to order attacks on Georgian air defenses, an act that arguably should have been executed much earlier in the campaign.<sup>32</sup>

### ***The Navy’s Role?***

It is notable that there was an absence of media hostility toward the role and operational functions of the Russian Navy during the Georgia war. The Black Sea Fleet, among the most combat capable in the Russian Navy, was used to blockade the Georgian coastline. Abkhaz authorities claimed that Russian ships had thwarted a Georgian attempt to seal the coastline of Abkhazia. Russian media reported that the *Moskva*, a *Slava*-class cruiser, and the *Smetlivy*, a *Kashin*-class destroyer, along with a number of small supply and logistics vessels, sailed from Sevastopol, arriving in the region on 10 August 2008 with the mission of providing “aid to refugees.” Their precise involvement in the conflict is unclear, though the Russian Navy did sink a Georgian patrol boat. But given the Russian Navy’s presence

in the Black Sea in such close proximity to the area of operations, closer examination of the timing of embarkation and the alert status of the Black Sea Fleet might indicate an advanced level of military preparedness prior to the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali.<sup>33</sup>

### *Military Reform*

On 14 October 2008, Defense Minister Serdyukov announced a “new stage” in military reform, promising the most radical change to the military since 1945. Serdyukov said this reform would affect the entire functional basis of Russia’s armed forces, transforming personnel numbers, central command and control agencies, and the officer training system. Although these plans were initiated prior to the war in the South Caucasus, he stated that the events in Georgia had “strongly influenced” the character of the reforms. The program involves the following elements:

- Reducing the armed forces to one million by 2012.
- Downsizing the General Staff by 200,000 officers.
- Converting from a “mobilization” to a “permanent readiness” force structure by 2012.
- Introducing a three-tiered structure (military district, operational command, and brigade) to improve command and control efficiency.
- Streamlining the military education system, resulting in a reduction in the number of educational facilities.
- Reforming the airborne forces by distributing airborne brigades to all six military districts.
- Updating equipment and weapon systems in stages with the aim of achieving a modernized military by 2020.

Serdyukov explained that the overall aim of this reform is to create a professional, permanent combat-ready force. All formations of Russia’s Army will be fully manned and become permanent-readiness forces by 2012. Recognizing the controversial nature of the reforms, Minister Serdyukov expected a fierce reaction from the military. He made it abundantly clear that the top-heavy troop management system, more suited to large-scale conventional warfare, had to evolve. “From the point of view of positions, our Army today is reminiscent of an egg which is swollen in the middle. There are more colonels and lieutenant colonels than there are junior officers. In three years we will build a pyramid, in which everything will be precisely structured and tested.”<sup>34</sup>

If the reforms succeed, by 2020 a modernized Russian military will encompass the new project-955 Borey-type submarine, armed with

the Bulava sea-launched ballistic missile. Also, the modern, ground-based Topol-M ballistic missiles will have replaced conventional Topols. Ground forces will have modern tanks (the T-80 Chernyy Orel [Black Eagle]) and air defense systems (the S-400 surface-to-air missile system). There will be a fifth-generation Russian fighter; delivery of the state-of-the-art, multirole Su-35 fighter is to begin in 2011. All units will be transferred to the category of permanent combat-readiness units (at the moment the ratio of combat organizations to general-readiness units is one to five). The system of higher military education will be reformed. Social provisions for service members will change; all officers will have housing, and pay will be the same as for NATO forces.<sup>35</sup>

A vital element of this reform is budgeting to modernize dated or aging equipment. President Medvedev has earmarked increased funding for aviation equipment and precision-guided munitions. “As a result, budget applications have been accepted from the militarized agencies amounting to 344 billion rubles additionally,” Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov reported to Medvedev.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, by 2020 Russia anticipates that almost all of its armed forces will be modernized. “In the next three to five years we plan to equip 30 percent of the armed forces with advanced weapons and military hardware, and to raise this figure to 80 to 100 percent by 2018-2020,” Army-General Makarov, Chief of the General Staff, said.<sup>37</sup>

Since personnel numbers are to be reduced, Russia’s Defense Ministry will impose increased health requirements on applicants for entry to military higher education, as well as on contract soldiers and conscripts. In addition, approximately 70 percent of the billets of officers working in education will be eliminated. “Out of roughly 17,500 military educators, about 5,000 will be left by the end of 2009,” according to a spokesman for the MoD. “During the staff reorganization measures, the posts of officers engaged in education at company [through] battalion level will be abolished, and over 8,000 junior officer posts—lieutenants and captains—will be cut.”<sup>38</sup>

In December 2008, Defense Minister Serdyukov told the Northern Fleet in Severomorsk that “one of the major objectives of the reforms . . . comes down to establishment of a combat-ready, mobile, and perfectly equipped Army and Navy capable of simultaneous participation in at least three regional and local conflicts.” This statement not only marked a departure from Russia’s current military doctrine, which outlines one conflict and one all-out war, but also raised questions regarding the definition of “regional or local conflicts.” This new strategy may forecast changes in the military doctrine planned for late 2009.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, given the slow pace associated with the introduction of modernized equipment and weaponry, it is worth noting that each new system introduced will already be several years out of date. Similarly, despite the ambitious and confident nature of the announced reforms, one of the most evasive questions thus far is how modernization can be resourced in the context of the global financial crisis and declining oil prices.

### ***Reform and Controversy***

Following Serdyukov's speech on military reform, critics soon marshalled not only to question the proposed reform program but in a number of instances actually demanded the Defense Minister's resignation. This sense of outrage was partly rooted in the degree of reductions that would affect the General Staff, yet it also reflected deep neuralgia within the military and civilian circles. Critics claimed the reformed armed forces would undermine centuries of tradition and leave the nation weak and vulnerable. Russian television reported alarming statistics related to the officer reductions: By 2012 the numbers of colonels were to be slashed by two-thirds, majors by three-quarters, and a total abolition of warrant officers.

Criticism of Minister Serdyukov was severe, drawing attention to statements made following his appointment as Defense Minister in 2007 when he pronounced the armed forces "fit for purpose," obviously failing to notice their obsolete equipment or the homeless state of numerous officers. He was accused of auctioning off military assets with little received in return. Major-General Aleksandr Vladimirov presented an image of the General Staff under attack, facing an "invasion of dozens of some sorts of structures from Saint Petersburg." A "new broom" approach intended to sweep clean the General Staff was in Vladimirov's view achieving very little. His perplexity concerning the need for such controversial reforms was perhaps due to the timing; after all, Russia had just won a war. He did acknowledge that the call for radical change, such as the reorganization to a brigade-based structure, with emphasis on a mobile permanent-readiness force, was a direct result of weaknesses exposed during the conflict in Georgia:

Our victorious five-day war with Georgia showed up the poor performance of the General Staff, the poor performance by the command of the military district, and the poor performance of the army command.<sup>40</sup>

The war had, in fact, compelled Serdyukov to reform the structure of Russia's conventional forces, exchanging the four-tiered construct (military district, army, division, and regiment) for a new three-tiered system (military

district, operational command, and brigade). The real question was the value of forming a new mobile formation in such a large country, the thought being that the new mobile force was best suited for operations within a compact theater. "Russia is a vast land, so in many ways a brigade-based system could turn out to be just useless," noted one knowledgeable critic.<sup>41</sup> It was also suggested that plans to reform the military education system by streamlining the 65 existing military educational establishments into ten "military-science centers" would effectively decimate Russia's military science hierarchy. The impact of this new organization on the overall defense effort is at this time unknown, and could, in fact, be negligible. But the lack of public debate regarding these changes is definitely cause for alarm, and the tide of criticism against Serdyukov has grown in such proportion to result in questioning the "sense" of having a civilian as Defense Minister.

Communists within the Duma publicly demanded Serdyukov's resignation, accusing him of instigating reforms that jeopardized national security and amounted to a "pogrom" of the officer corps. Again, the extensive nature of the planned cuts was the main source of controversy. Nevertheless, the Communist members of the Duma were astute enough to recognize that some type of reform was required. "The victory over the tiny Georgian Army should not give our leadership and society illusions of grandeur. This short war uncovered a mass of flaws in troop command and combat readiness," declared the Communist deputies.<sup>42</sup>

A statement by officers, a number of military-patriotic groups, and veterans' organizations followed this same line of criticism. It was signed by such notables as Colonel-General Leonid G. Ivashov, president of the Academy for Geopolitical Problems; Colonel-General Vladislav A. Achalov, head of the Union of Russian Airborne Troops; and Army-General Igor N. Rodionov, former Minister of Defense. The statement characterized elements of the reform program: "They are cynical in nature and may lead to the complete destruction of the personnel training system, re-orientation of doctrinal concepts, and will undermine the most important foundations of the development of the Russian Armed Forces." The critical statement also argued that the reductions of military command agencies were ill-conceived and "alarming," since those organizations were tasked with staffing formations and unit structures. Restructuring the military to a brigade-based system was portrayed as trying to copy the American model, which for a number of these military specialists was the ultimate insult; even though Russia began experimenting with brigade constructs before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The veterans' critique differed, however, on one crucial point, the linking of reforms to the Georgia war: "Considering

the extremely radical nature of the reforms, it is especially senseless to base it on the experience of the complex five-day war in the Caucasus in August 2008.” The self-styled “military-patriotic community” in Russia considered any linking of the reform program to the Georgia war to be overstated.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Recalibrating and the Future***

It is unusual, to say the least, that what was considered in many circles a successful war should be the catalyst for military reform. Yet, given the controversy that swept Russia following the announcement of this ambitious reform program, the political and military elites in Moscow chose to link reform with the Georgian conflict. The leadership was perhaps driven by a conviction that reform could best be accomplished within the context of a successful military campaign. Allowing for the politicization of various critiques of this new operational assessment, some degree of exaggeration is likely due to parties competing for their own interests during the implementation phase of the reform program. It is clear, however, that “something” has changed within the power circles with regard to military reform. That “something” relates to how the country’s leadership transitioned from the conduct of a successful war to announcing sweeping reforms of the armed forces. The reforms entail a move away from a mobilization army to one of permanent formations, with an emphasis on mobility and modernization.

It is this author’s contention that the Russian military and political leadership came to perceive the Georgian war as a setback to their aspirations of projecting the image of a “resurgent Russia.” This negative assessment of Russia’s conventional armed forces in the conflict sent a seismic shock throughout the security establishment. The reform program has the support of President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin. This critical fact, when coupled with the December 2008 amendment to the Russian constitution that extended the presidential term to six years, is grounds to cause one to believe that systemic military reform will be implemented; it remains to be seen how enthusiastically and successfully such reform will be executed. One final point: Russia’s armed forces will not be reformed along “western” lines; even the term has pejorative connotations within political circles. The military may emerge, however, as a force better suited to the needs of a modern and possibly resurgent Russia.

The Georgian war was arguably the last war of the twentieth century for Russia’s armed forces; in the sense that it was largely fought using organizations, tactics, and equipment designed in the last century.

Shortly after President Medvedev's inauguration, Moscow was the scene of the largest military parade since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was a grand display of national pride and promoted the image of preeminent military power.<sup>44</sup> Within three months that same military was exposed as far from preeminent. Medvedev and Putin appear serious about closing the gap between image and reality with regard to Russia's armed forces. This will not be an easy task, as succinctly captured in the words of a Russian soldier who fought during the Georgia campaign: "The equipment is for parades, but unfit for battle."<sup>45</sup>

#### NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of the legal implications of the Russian campaign, see Roy Allison, "Russia Resurgent? Moscow's Campaign to 'Coerce Georgia to Peace,'" *International Affairs*, 84 (November 2008), 1145-71.

2. Richard Giragosian, "Georgian Planning Flaws Led to Campaign Failure," *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 15 August 2008; Mikhail Barabanov, "Reform of the Combat Spirit," *Kommersant-Vlast*, 20 October 2008.

3. Ilya Kedrov, "War in the Background of the Caucasus Mountain Range," *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kur'er*, 31 August 2008; ITAR-TASS, Interfax reporting, 8-15 August 2008.

4. Colonel-General Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff, *Interfax*, 12 August 2008.

5. Tatyana Stanovaya, "The End of New Russia?" *Politkom.ru*, 26 August 2008; Yulia Latynina, "The Casualties of War," *Ezhednevnyy Zhurnal*, 26 August 2008.

6. "Russia's Troops to Liberate Tskhinvali," *Kommersant*, 8 August 2008; "Russian Paratroopers in Abkhazia," *InfoRos*, 11 August 2008; "Paratroopers from Pskov, Ivanovo Brought into Tskhinvali," *Kommersant*, 9 August 2008.

7. Giragosian.

8. "Meeting of Medvedev with Russian Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov," *RIA Novosti*, 9 September 2008.

9. A number of official reviews of the war were conducted. On 8 September 2008, the Duma Defense Committee discussion of the "organizational and financial problems of the military" witnessed "a heated argument between representatives of the ministries of defense and finance." Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov also testified before the Duma in closed session 10 September 2008. ("Russian Army Weakness Exposed by Georgia War," *RIA Novosti*, 9 September 2008.)

10. Dmitriy Litovkin, "The Defense Order Can Be Refused Nothing; Record Large Sums Allocated for Army Modernization," *Izvestia*, 20 October 2008.

11. General Shamanov gained a reputation as a hawkish general during the first Chechen war, 1994-96. See "Combat Training to be Adapted to War Experience, Reform Plans—Russian General," *Interfax*, 30 October 2008.

12. President Medvedev ordered a program of rearmament of the Russian armed forces, taking account of "the experience of the South Ossetian operation," which will be accompanied by a 27 percent increase in defense spending for 2009 over 2008. (Statement on *Zvezda TV*, 18 August 2008.)

13. Dmitriy Litovkin, "Gosduma Found Out Military Secret," *Izvestia*, 11 September 2008; Dmitry Medvedev, "Opening Address at a Meeting with Commanders of Military Districts" (Donguz Test Ground, Russia: 26 September 2008).

14. "Russian Armed Forces' Chief of Armament Interviewed," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 2 October 2008.

15. "Russian Military to be Fully Rearmed by 2020," *RIA Novosti News Agency*, 19 November 2008.

16. Dmitry Solovyov, "Russian Army Not Fit for Modern War: Top General," *Reuters*, 16 December 2008.

17. Author interviews with Russian officers. See also Litovkin, "Gosduma Found Out Military Secret."

18. General Yury Baluyevskiy was replaced in June 2008 by Army-General Nikolay Makarov as the new Chief of the General Staff; the latter was reputed to be an ally of Defense Minister Serdyukov.



19. "Combat Training to be Adapted to War Experience, Reform Plans—Russian General;" Roger N. McDermott, "Medvedev's Ambitious Military Reform Plans," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 4 November 2008; Dmitry Babich, "The Army's Pain: Servicemen Do Not Understand the Aims of Military Reform but Are Terrified by Its Scope," *Russia Profile*, 12 November 2008.
20. Simon Saradzhyan, "Obsolete Hardware Revealed in Military Analysis," *The Moscow Times*, 17 August 2008; "Interview with Chief of Armed Forces' Communications," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 18 October 2008.
21. Denis Telmanov, "Divisions to be Cut into Pieces: The Ministry of Defense is Continuing the Reformation of the Organization and Staff Structure of Divisions," *Gazeta*, 28 October 2008.
22. Anatoly Tsiganok, "Assessing the Campaign in the South Caucasus," *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 19 September 2008.
23. Mikhail Barabanov, "The August War between Russia and Georgia," *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 3 (13), 2008, <http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/3-2008/item3/article1/>.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Aleksey Ryabinin, "Russia-Georgia: Was the Scenario Ideal?" *Izvestiya*, 9 September 2008.
26. Filling these canisters with the required explosive required ten hours per vehicle carried out under the supervision of a company-level mechanic. This oversight may have resulted from insufficient time. (Author interviews with Russian military officers, November 2008; Igor Dzhadan, "A Post-Fight Analysis: The Five Day War," *Agentstvo Politicheskikh Novostey*, 15 August 2008; Mikhail Lukanin, "The Price of Victory: Military Experts on the Mistakes of the Campaign in the South Caucasus," *Trud*, 18 August 2008.)
27. Tsiganok.
28. For a more detailed assessment of Russia's use of airpower in the Georgia war, see Stéphane Lefebvre and Roger N. McDermott, "Air Power and the Russian-Georgian Conflict of 2008: Lessons Learned and Russian Military Reforms," *RAF Air Power Review*, 12 (forthcoming).
29. "Georgian Strike Fighter Shot Down in South Ossetia," *Interfax*, 11 August 2008; David A. Fulghum and Douglas Barrie, "Georgia Strikes Back with Air Defenses," *Aviation Week.com*, 11 August 2008.
30. See "Russian General Stresses Importance of Nuclear Weapons, Criticizes Army Reform," *ITAR-TASS*, 22 September 2008.
31. "Russian TV Analyses the Impending Big Cutbacks in the Armed Forces," *NTV*, 23 November 2008; Tsiganok.
32. Sergey Ptichkin, "Visible-Invisible," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 11 September 2008.
33. "Russian Navy Carries Out Black Sea Anti-Terror Exercise," *RIA Novosti*, 11 August 2008; "Russian Navy Ships Approach Georgia's Sea Border," *RIA Novosti*, 10 August 2008; "Georgians to Leave South Ossetia as Focus Shifts to Black Sea," *Deutsche Welle*, 10 August 2008; "Georgian Military Boats Attacked Russian Warships," *InfoRos*, 11 August 2008.
34. Mikhail Barabanov, "Reform of the Combat Spirit," *Kommersant-Vlast*, 20 October 2008.
35. Litovkin, "The Defense Order Can Be Refused Nothing."
36. *Ibid.*
37. "Russian Military to be Fully Rearmed by 2020."
38. "Russia Is to Slash Moral Education and Character Training in Armed Forces," *Interfax*, 1 December 2008; "Russia's Military Academy Intake, Conscripts Will Face Tougher Health Standards," *Interfax*, 2 December 2008.
39. Victor Litovkin, "Serdyukov Revises Strategy: Military Experts Comment on Anatoliy Serdyukov's Statement Concerning Three Regional Wars," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 December 2008.
40. "Russian TV Report Questions Military Reform Blueprint," *Ren TV*, 1 November 2008.
41. Aleksey Mukhin argued that given the vast expanses of land in Russia's Far East and Siberia, this new system could be rendered useless, suggesting the divisional system should be retained. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. C. J. Shivers, "Moscow Echoes with Nostalgia as Military Parades through Red Square," *International Herald Tribune*, 9 May 2008; "Russian Military Planes Fly over Victory Day Parade Route," *RIA Novosti*, 29 April 2008.
45. Tsiganok.