

# Russia's rapid reaction

## But short war shows lack of modern systems

GEORGIA LAUNCHED A massed artillery attack on the evening of 7 August on the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, and began to deploy its troops and tanks into South Ossetia. Its plan appears to have been to capture the city in the shortest possible time and to hand over nominal control of the territory to a pro-Georgian administration.

The attack followed a period of skirmishes between Georgian troops and South Ossetian militias, during which Georgian forces had taken control of the heights around Tskhinvali and had withdrawn peacekeeping troops. The heavy shelling destroyed many buildings and hit the Russian peacekeepers' base in Tskhinvali, killing and wounding dozens of Russian soldiers. The headquarters of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) monitoring mission was also hit. Within hours, Georgian forces took control of Tskhinvali and neighbouring villages.

Georgia had amassed ten light infantry battalions of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th infantry brigades, as well as special task forces and an artillery brigade – about 12,000 troops in total. Among these, the 4th brigade had been engaged in the US–Georgian exercise *Immediate Response 2008* during the second half of July, alongside 1,000 American troops. This fuelled Russian claims – denied by Washington – that the United States was involved in preparations for the attack.

During the same period in July, some 8,000 Russian troops, including units from Russia's 58th Army, took part in the exercise *Caucasus 2008* across several of the republics of the North Caucasus, including North Ossetia.

On 8 August, units of the 19th Russian motor rifle division (headquartered in Vladikavkaz) of the 58th Army of the North Caucasus military command entered South Ossetia between 8am and noon. Initially, they had little air support, and Georgian aircraft were able to inflict damage on the advance units. Modern Russian forces had never before had to deal with an enemy air force.

By the evening, Russian troops were in the suburbs of Tskhinvali, but no significant fighting took place as the Georgian troops retreated.

While Russian forces were moving slowly through the narrow, four-kilometre-long Roki tunnel that links North and South Ossetia, Georgian forces enjoyed both numerical and fire superiority. By 10 August, however, Russian forces not only included units of the 19th division, but also the 76th airborne division from Pskov, the 42nd motor rifle division from Chechnya and special forces units, including some from the Chechen 'East' and 'West' battalions.

In total, Russian strength had grown to about 10,000 troops, with 150 pieces of armoured equipment, including T-62 and T-72 tanks and BMP-1 and BMP-2 armoured personnel carriers (APCs). Russia did not deploy any of its modern tanks or APCs.

The Georgian troops were overwhelmed by the Russian forces, which quickly captured the Prisskih heights to the south of Tskhinvali, and most of the Georgian artillery positions on them. Then they took control of Tskhinvali itself.

Meanwhile, the Russians had opened a 'second front' in Abkhazia, having

redeployed 9,000 troops from the 7th airborne division from Novorossiisk, the 76th airborne division from Pskov, and marine infantry of the Black Sea Fleet. With their support, Abkhaz armed units began to force Georgian troops out of the upper end of the Kodori Gorge (the Kodori Valley) in Abkhazia. The Black Sea Fleet commenced a naval blockade of the Georgian coast.

Following an order to retreat on 10 August, Georgian units withdrew from South Ossetia towards the town of Gori. During this the 4th brigade was bombarded by Russian aircraft and reportedly suffered heavy casualties. Russian troops, meeting little or no resistance, moved towards Gori and established control over key positions in western Georgia – including the port of Poti and the military base at Senaki – before starting to destroy Georgian military and infrastructure targets.

On 12 August, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced an official ceasefire, although the Russians continued reconnaissance and raiding operations to seek, destroy and remove abandoned Georgian hardware and munitions. The remaining battle-worthy part of the Georgian army, primarily the 1st infantry brigade that had been rapidly transferred from Iraq in American C-17 military transport planes, concentrated along the northern approach routes to Tbilisi.

**Russia's strong and weak points**  
The speed of the Russian military reaction had a major bearing on the way the crisis unfolded. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's strategy

RUSSIAN AIR-FORCE LOSSES DURING THE CONFLICT				
TYPE OF AIRCRAFT	QUANTITY	DATE OF LOSS	TYPE OF ANTI-AIRCRAFT WEAPON USED TO INFLICT DAMAGE	NOTES
Tupolev Tu-22M3 long-range bomber	1	8 August	Buk-M1	Carried out a reconnaissance mission around Gori
Sukhoi Su-25 attack planes	3	8 August	Buk-M1	
Sukhoi SU-24MR reconnaissance plane	1	8 August	Osa-AK/AKM	Loss not recognised officially
Sukhoi SU-24MR reconnaissance plane	1	9 August	Portable SAM systems of Russian army (friendly-fire incident)	Loss not recognised officially
Sukhoi Su-24M frontal bomber	1	10 or 11 August	Osa-AK/AKM or portable SAM systems	Loss not recognised officially
TOTAL	7			

Source: Moscow Defence Brief, no. 3/2008

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had apparently assumed that Russia either would not interfere or would not make a decision before South Ossetia had fallen to Georgian control. However, Russia's immediate response put paid to those plans.

Besides military action, there were reports of Russian cyber-attacks to suppress key Georgian government structures and media outlets during the conflict. If true, this shows Moscow's readiness to use asymmetric, as well as conventional, means to achieve its goals.

The troops of the North Caucasus military command and the Black Sea Fleet had been preparing for a scenario such as this for at least the past two years. The 58th Army had been carrying out constant manoeuvres, and many exercises conducted close to the border with South Ossetia had used the scenario of repelling a Georgian attack on Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali. When the order came, the army would have acted almost automatically, while logistic support was already prepared.

Most of the Russian officers had combat experience in Chechnya, but a large proportion of the rank-and-file soldiers and non-commissioned officers were raw troops with no previous combat experience. Moreover, although most of the 58th Army, and all airborne and marine infantry personnel are volunteers and not conscripts, the 19th motor rifle division, which was the first to deploy, contained many conscripts.

This later drew criticism from Russian experts, because several years ago the Ministry of Defence had issued a directive that only volunteer servicemen could be sent into conflict zones.

The war provided the opportunity to combat-test at least one post-Soviet weapons system. According to the Moscow Centre for Strategy and Technology Analysis (CAST), the Russian army used the *Iskander-M* tactical missile system and it proved highly effective in destroying military targets and infrastructure.

However, the operation showed several Russian weaknesses. Systems in the area of C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, surveillance and reconnaissance) were unsatisfactory.

This led to an ambush of one column of the 58th Army on 9 August, during which the commander of the 58th Army, General Anatoly Khrulev, was wounded. It also led to poor coordination between detachments, as well as difficulties in locating enemy gun positions.

The Georgian army's superior

capabilities in communications and electronic warfare enabled it, according to some sources, to suppress Russian communications.

Russian troops also appeared to have limited scope for night-time operations, with few night-vision devices available for infantry and tank detachments.

One important discovery was that the Russian air force was unprepared for suppressing enemy air defences. The Georgians succeeded in creating a compact air-defence force in the conflict zone, as well as around Gori and Tbilisi, using at least one or two battalions of *Buk-M1* (SA-11) low- to high-altitude self-propelled SAM (surface-to-air-missile) systems, at least eight self-propelled launch vehicles for *Osa-AK* (SA-8B) low-altitude self-propelled SAM systems (two batteries), and six to ten self-propelled launch vehicles for *Osa-AKM* updated SAM systems.

On the first day of operations, Georgian air-defence systems destroyed four Russian aircraft – a Tupolev Tu-22M3 strategic bomber and three Sukhoi Su-25 attack aircraft. This meant that Russian aviation was all but absent from the combat zone on 9 August, although it reappeared on 10 August.

The Russian air force flew around 200 sorties during the five-day conflict. The lack of night-vision equipment meant that it operated mostly during the day, while the Georgian air force was able to operate at night as well.

Adding aircraft rumoured to be lost (*see table*), plus those damaged beyond repair, the Russian air force's total losses could have exceeded ten aircraft.

Ultimately, the Georgian air-defence systems in South Ossetia were destroyed by Russian infantry detachments, which captured at least six *Buk-M1* and five *Osa-AK* or *Osa-AKM* self-propelled anti-aircraft systems abandoned by the retreating Georgian army. Russian pilots had never rehearsed the disablement of air-defence systems, largely because this had not been required during the conflicts in Chechnya.

Problems in suppressing enemy air-defence forces meant the Russian air force was unable to provide direct support to its own troops. Even by 11 August, Russia had not completely achieved air dominance, and Georgian aircraft were still attacking Russian troops and Tskhinvali.

The urgent need to modernise the air force may thus be one of the main lessons for Russian military command to take away from the recent conflict.

## Georgia's collapse

The main limitation of the Georgian army was psychological. After approximately 72 hours of combat, during which Georgian officers and soldiers displayed a decent level of battle-readiness, there came a sudden and total demoralisation on 11 August.

This was shown not just by the retreat itself, but by the abandonment of operational military equipment and weapons. Georgian troops appear to have lacked combat experience and to have been shocked at Russia's response.

Georgian casualties were officially estimated at 295 killed, including 186 military personnel and 109 civilians, with up to 1,500 wounded.

The heaviest casualties were suffered by the Georgian army's 4th brigade (the former Interior Ministry troops), which carried out the main mission of capturing Tskhinvali. The 2nd and 3rd brigades, which provided support for the 4th brigade, suffered only minor losses, as did the Special Operations forces. The 1st brigade, which had been deployed in Iraq, did not suffer any losses.

Russia declared casualties of 71 killed and 340 wounded, many of them among the peacekeeping troops stationed in South Ossetia at the time of the initial Georgian attack on Tskhinvali.

The Russians seized up to 150 pieces of Georgian heavy weaponry, including 65 T-72 tanks (44 of them operational), 15 infantry fighting vehicles, several dozen APCs and numerous pieces of artillery. Russia captured many motorised transport vehicles and large quantities of small arms, including American M4 carbines.

In the port of Poti, Russian marines also burnt out the largest ships of the Georgian navy – the *Dioskuria*, *Tbilisi* and *Torelli* missile boats. Georgia's military infrastructure as a whole has been dealt a serious blow: its expensive bases in Gori and Senaki, the latter built to NATO standards, were both destroyed.

## Flawed success

Despite Russia's quick reaction and rapid victory, the campaign also revealed weaknesses. Its forces are equipped with outmoded weapons and did not seem prepared to engage in high-technology warfare. The rapid victory was won as a result of the Georgian army's collapse as well as Saakashvili's miscalculation.

Had the Russian army faced a more resolute enemy equipped and trained to the level of the Georgian army, it would have suffered heavy losses. □ IISS