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While all the facts of last week's Russian-Georgian war are not clear, enough information--including eyewitness accounts--has been reported in the media to draw initial conclusions about the performance of Russian military forces and the implications of these operations for U.S. defense policies. Unquestionably, the war is a reminder that "conventional" military operations as an instrument of modern combat are far from obsolete. The U.S. and its allies must retain a robust conventional capacity to deter aggression and assist in the defense of its treaty obligations to NATO and other allies.

Lightning War

While terrorism remains a 21st century scourge, the Russian incursion serves as proof that the age of conventional warfare is far from over. After weeks of mortar attacks and shootings by rebel forces in secessionist South Ossetia targeting Georgian villages and outposts, hostilities escalated on the evening of August 7 with a Georgian artillery and rocket barrage against rebel positions. On August 8, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered forces into Tskhinvali to put an end to the South Ossetian fire and to restore control over the rebel capital. That same day, Russian mechanized forces began to pour into South Ossetia. Operation "Clear Field" pushed back Georgian military forces from South Ossetia. The number of Russian military involved in the operation--reportedly as high as 25,000 troops backed by over 1,000 armored vehicles, artillery, rocket forces, and airpower[1]--overwhelmed Georgian forces.

On August 13, Russian land forces advanced from South Ossetia and entered Gori, south of South Ossetia and straddling Georgia's main central highway and railway line. The conflict quickly expanded into Georgia's rebel region of Abkhazia along the Black Sea coast. There, the Russian forces, with the help of Abkhazian irregulars, marched south. By August 18, Russian forces established positions only 40 kilometers from the Georgian capital. The Black Sea Fleet blocked Georgia's main commercial port of Poti, and Russian airborne troops coming from Abkhazia occupied the port, effectively closing the main entry point for imports not just for Georgia but also for Armenia and Azerbaijan. A Russian armored column then advanced to within 50 kilometers of Kutaisi, the country's second largest city. Using overpowering force, the Russian incursion faced no effective opposition.

Assessment of Russian Military Operations

The war appears to reflect comprehensive and systematic planning by the Russian general staff. As a result of this planning, the combined operations were well prepared and well executed, employing combat, support, and logistical forces as well as pre-positioned ships and planes. Most likely employing deception to mask operational preparations, the Russian offensive achieved a strategic surprise. The Russian army conducted a two-pronged offensive

against Georgia from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. By conducting more than one offensive operation, the Russians prevented the Georgians from concentrating their forces, a military tactic representative of classic Russian operational art.

The main Russian ground forces involved in the invasion of Georgia belonged to the 58th Army and are veterans of the 1999 invasion and ongoing occupation of Chechnya. Ground forces also included elite Guard divisions and "special forces" such as airborne troops and Spetsnaz (special operations forces). Many of the tanks, armored personnel vehicles, and armored personnel carriers used by the 58th Army are older Soviet models but were employed in overwhelming numbers. Some of the older tanks, like the T-62, have been photographed with recent bar armor to protect against anti-tank rocket propelled grenades, while T-72 tanks have been provided with explosive reactive armor protection. Several units were made up entirely of professional soldiers--as opposed to conscripts--and most likely represented a test of all-contract soldier units in major military operations. (For force structure, see table below.)

The air force carried out close air support operations, primarily using SU-25 ("Frogfoot") fighter-bombers--which belong to Front Aviation--to neutralize Georgian forces on the ground. Other missions included the bombing of strategic targets such as Georgian air and military bases, radar and communications sites and civilian buildings and the failed attempts to bomb the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. Supersonic Tupolev Tu-22M3 ("Backfire") strategic bombers--belonging to the Long-Range Aviation--also participated in the bombing raids. Transport Aviation ferried airborne forces and supplies to the theaters of military operations.

Russia's Black Sea Fleet carried out operations with the participation of the fleet's flagship, the guided-missile cruiser Moskva. Fleet units reportedly sunk a Georgian patrol boat in combat. The Russian military has blown up eight Georgian naval ships at the port of Poti. According to Georgian sources, Russia used amphibious landing ships to transport troops to Abkhazia. In addition, logistic support ships were reported to have transported relief supplies for refugees.

The Russian military has used over a dozen of Tochka-U (SS-21 "Scarab") short-range ballistic missiles and possibly Iskander SRBM (SS-26 "Stone") on targets throughout the Georgian theater, including the BTC pipeline and the town of Gori.

Along with the use of conventional weapons, Russia conducted information and psychological warfare, though the full extent of these operations remains unclear. Georgian officials reported cyberattacks on government websites as well as Internet servers. Allegations of widespread efforts to spread disinformation, intimidate the population, and foster criminal activity (such as looting, rape, kidnapping, and ethnic reprisals) have also been made.

Lessons Learned

The age of conventional warfare is far from over. For the U.S. and NATO to maintain both a credible conventional deterrent and the capacity to aid friends and allies, each must retain the "traditional" robust capacity to meet conventional threats, including the following:

Marshalling the "strategic enablers" that allow for the projection of military power including

gaining and maintaining sea control, air supremacy, rapid strategic transport, expeditionary logistical support, and the means to defeat "anti-access" strategies that seek to prevent the deployment of forces into a theater; Improving the capability to rapidly strike mobile armored forces; Developing the means to defeat mortar, artillery, rocket, and missile forces that can be targeted at both military forces and civilian populations; and Sufficient forces to meet multiple deployment requirements on short notice.

In addition, instead of preparing for "asymmetrical" or "unconventional" threats (such as terrorism and cyberwarfare) as alternatives to conventional conflict, the U.S. and NATO defense policies must recognize that future conflicts could well be an admixture of both. Thus, military modernization and readiness should not sacrifice preparation for conventional conflicts in order to plan for new ways of war. Modern militaries must prepare for both. In particular, NATO and the U.S. must each:

Improve capacity to conduct both offensive and defensive cyberwarfare; and Place renewed emphasis on psychological operations, deception, and other forms of information warfare in all types of conflict.

Next Strategic Steps

Revitalizing the conventional capabilities of NATO forces to be part of an integrated geo-strategic effort sends an unequivocal message that naked territorial aggression is unacceptable against members of the alliance and other friendly and allied countries.

As President George W. Bush has stated, "aggression should not stand." Subsequently, the U.S. should do the following:

Rebuild the unity of NATO by bringing together all members with shared defense concerns; Proceed with the building of a missile defense system in Central Europe; Accept Ukraine's offer to include its early warning radars into the ABM system; and Proceed with issuing NATO Membership Action Plans (MAPs) for Georgia and Ukraine.

After an almost 20-year hiatus, the United States and NATO allies may once again prioritize Russia as a potential threat to the common European security. NATO should send a strong signal to Moscow that its aggression will not stand. This should be done through diplomacy, international organizations, and inventive economic measures. The U.S., its allies, and Europe must do everything possible to reverse Russian aggression against Georgia and to prevent hostile action against European countries.

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[1] Jenny Percival and James Meikle, "Georgia agrees to ceasefire with Russia," The Guardian, August 15, 2008, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/15/georgia.russia2?gusrc=rss&feed=networkfront> (August 19, 2008).