Analyzing the Russian Way of War

Evidence from the 2008 Conflict with Georgia

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Acknowledgments

Cover image: Soldiers of the Russian *Vostok* Battalion in South Ossetia, August 2008 (Image credit: Yana Amelina)

Executive Summary

In the dog days of August 2008, a column of Russian tanks and troops rolled across the Republic of Georgia's northern border and into South Ossetia, sparking a war that was over almost before it began. The war, while not insignificant, lasted all of five days. The number of casualties did not exceed one thousand, the threshold most political scientists use to classify a war, although thousands of Georgians were displaced. By historical comparison, when Soviet tanks entered Hungary in 1956 and Afghanistan in 1979–89, the fatalities totaled 2,500 and roughly 14,000 respectively.[1] The Russia-Georgia conflict was a limited war with limited objectives, yet it was arguably a watershed in the annals of modern war. It marked the first invasion by Russian ground forces into a sovereign nation since the Cold War. It also marked a breakthrough in the integration of cyberwarfare and other nonkinetic tools into a conventional strategy— what some observers in the West have termed "hybrid warfare." Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it provided a stark preview of what was to come in Ukraine in 2014. Russian "peacekeepers," including unmarked Russian special forces—or *Spetsnaz*—stationed in the region carried out an armed incursion. That is, Russia used separatist violence as a convenient pretext to launch a full-scale multidomain invasion to annex territory, a type of aggression that many analysts in the West thought was a relic of the twentieth century.

The 2008 Russia-Georgia War highlights not a new *form* of conflict but rather the incorporation of a new *dimension* to that conflict: cyberspace. Where states once tried to control the radio waves, broadcast television channels, newspapers, or other forms of communications, they now add to these sources of information control cyberspace and its component aspects, websites, and social media.[2] This allows Russia to influence audiences around the world. Propaganda, disinformation, and the manipulation of the informational aspects of both conflict and nonconflict settings has been a persistent attribute of state behavior.[3] The new dimension added to the conduct of hostilities created by cyberspace is both a challenge to conventional hybrid information manipulation tactics and a benefit. Even though the tactical gains achieved through cyberspace in Georgia by Russian non-state actors had limited impact, the strategic and psychological effects were robust. The plausibly deniable nature of the cyber side of conflict should not be understated and adds a new dimension to hybrid warfare that once required state resources

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[1] Taubman, "Soviet Lists Afghan War Toll"; History.com staff, "November 4, 1956."

[2] Schlosser, *Cold War on the Airwaves*; Sweeney, *Secrets of Victory*; Price, "Governmental Censorship in War-Time."

[3] Lasswell, "Theory of Political Propaganda"; Treverton, *Covert Action*.

to accomplish. Now, managed through forums and social media, decentralized noncombatants can join the fight. Arguably, the inclusion of cyber means into a kinetic battle, not as a standalone effect but rather as a force multiplier, constitutes a logical progression to the natural evolution of conflict and demonstrates the value of information operations (IO) during conflict.

The war was a wake-up call for Russia. Even though Moscow won the war and despite its relatively sophisticated cyberattack, it arguably lost the battle for controlling the narrative. Russian forces could not engage in information-driven or network-centric warfare, lacked precision-guided munitions, and were ill supplied due to insufficient spending and attention paid to its armed forces over the preceding two decades. The war also served as a wake-up call for reformers within its defense community, as the Russian military lacked the operational experience and training, and these numerous shortfalls revealed themselves in combat. Put simply, the state of much of its Soviet-era military equipment, not to mention its command and control (C2) capabilities, proved an embarrassment. The war would spur Russia to reform and modernize its military by moving from an old division structure toward a more decentralized one reliant on brigades given greater autonomy. Russia would also shift away from the use of conscripts and rely increasingly on so-called *kontraktniki*, volunteer soldiers who signed up for two-to-three-year tours and were more professional than conscripts.

Russia also sought to boost its IO and electronic warfare (EW) sophistication. Nearly a decade after the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, Moscow still prefers to operate in gray zones, where economies are informal, local rule is subdivided, and information and facts are ambiguous. Truth appears to be one of the least precious commodities in its tool kit.

The Caucasus region remains important to Russian war efforts elsewhere, as Russia looks to develop an A2D2 zone around the Caspian Sea. Russian strategic bombers and sea-based missiles launch from the Northern Caucasus to Syria, Russia's first expeditionary mission since Afghanistan. According to the United States' Defense Intelligence Agency, "Russia's forces are becoming more mobile, more balanced and capable of conducting the full range of modern warfare."[4]

The purpose of this report is to examine Russian military strategy and how it was shaped by the 2008 Russia-Georgia War in order to understand Moscow's military objectives in the current conflict in Ukraine and how it executes cyber, psychological, and so-called "hybrid" warfare against Western states. A number of our sources said that had the West studied the lessons of that conflict, we in the West may have been better prepared to prevent Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and avoid hostilities in Ukraine.

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[4] E. Schmitt, "Vast Exercise Demonstrated Russia's Growing Military Prowess."

The report will also analyze the types of warfare Russia executes—exploring how its hybrid, cyber, and information aspects are integrated into Russia's increasingly advanced conventional capabilities—and lay out a series of recommendations for how the US military and its counterparts in Europe should respond.

The report's central findings are the following:

- The 2008 Russia-Georgia War was a playbook of its later operations in Ukraine, in terms of how it probes for weak spots, exploits internal crises, and seeks to redraw borders along its buffer region with NATO, an area it calls its "zone of privileged interest." After 2008 the West should have taken proper remedies to deter Russia from similar incursions to annex territory, a violation of international norms on the legitimate use of force.

- The 2008 Russia-Georgia War served as a wake-up call for Russia to reform and modernize its military, reversing its dependency on unprofessional conscripts, Soviet-era equipment, and poorly trained field officers. The war also served as a dress rehearsal of sorts for what was to come in Ukraine. Nearly a decade later, the Russian military is more professionalized, responsive, and capable to mobilize on short notice than it was previously, especially its elite special forces.[5]

- The 2008 Russia-Georgia War was about militarily balancing against NATO just as much as it was a regional political dispute between Moscow and Tbilisi. Russian grand strategy for the foreseeable future will be to control an uncontested sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region, assert Russia's voice and influence globally, and constrain the United States. Specifically, Russia seeks to create a zone of "privileged control" around the Black Sea. By annexing Crimea in 2014, where its long-standing Black Sea Fleet is based, and deploying forces in the southern Caucasus, Russia aims to keep this area not merely as a strategic buffer but also as an alternate transport corridor for its military and energy needs. Control over this corridor also gives Russia greater leverage over Iran and Turkey and boosts its influence in the wider Middle East. Russia has also intensified its exercises, training, and professionalism of its military forces in the region.

- To achieve its military strategy on the cheap, Russia has relied and will continue to rely on a hybrid, or nonlinear, approach to modern warfare—which seeks to merge political warfare with conventional means. Along these lines, it will continue to weaponize information, orchestrate via third parties cyberattacks against government and civilian targets, carry out electronic warfare,

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[5] On this point, see Golts and Kofman, *Russia's Military*, 9–10.

and utilize local proxy volunteers as well as Russian soldiers who do not wear insignia. When it comes to cyberwarfare, Russia's reliance on third party actors to execute the state's cyber dirty work, given its many advantages, from plausible deniability to ambiguous attribution, is unlikely to go away as a tactic anytime soon.

- In sum, Russia will continue to "fail upward," barring outside resistance: As it arguably declines as a major power, it will punch above its weight, largely by exploiting weaknesses in the West (cyber vulnerabilities, disagreements within NATO on defense policies, etc.), sowing uncertainty in countries bordering it, intervening in elections and conflicts where it sees a vacuum in Western leadership (Ukraine, Syria), and contorting international rules and norms toward its will. It has shown a willingness to incur risks that Western powers, including the United States, is not. This makes its willingness to escalate, provoke, and push boundaries—figuratively *and* literally—that much greater. Complicating matters, Moscow will continue to operate in a gray zone and sow a level of chaos within states it considers part of its zone of privileged interest to prevent them from joining these Western clubs, undermine their democratic governance, and remind them of their dependence on Russia for resources, security, and economic livelihood.

Map of Georgia[6]

[6] "Administrative Map of Georgia," Nations Online, accessed October 21, 2017, http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/georgia_map2.htm.

Introduction

The Jvari Monastery, built in the sixth century, sits high above a central artery that slices through a picturesque gorge linking Gori to Tbilisi. On the fourth day of the 2008 August war, Russian forces advanced as far as nearby Mtskheta, within artillery range of this temple, just outside Tbilisi. The topography of this area would make any advancing army twitchy, given its wealth of natural defensive fortifications, as well as its canopy of forest for cover and concealment. According to Georgian military officials, the Georgian army was prepared to fall back and fight a prolonged insurgency if the Russian forces had advanced farther southeastward.[7] There were reports of Russian aircraft shelling the television tower that soars high above Tbilisi, as European officials scrambled to get both sides to declare a cease-fire. Much of the world were glued to their televisions, but they were watching the Beijing Olympics, not the unfolding war in Georgia. Even a number of Georgians were caught off guard, given that August is when politicians and defense officials typically head for the Black Sea coast for vacation. Even Georgia's best-trained brigade was in Iraq.

Even though the immediate goal of the Russians was to establish control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the war was about larger issues related to the expansionism of NATO, the isolation of Russia, and the prevention of its near abroad from reorienting themselves westward. The war was believed to be planned well in advance, given the careful execution of Russia's units and formations, as well as the degree of coordination between its cyber, military, and diplomatic offensives. The timing and location of the war caught many off guard on both sides. The expectation was that if war were to erupt, it would occur in Abkhazia, not South Ossetia.

Still, there were plenty of warning signs that war was on the horizon, if not imminent. The leaderships of Russia and Georgia had engaged in a series of verbal volleys that hinted at brinkmanship-like provocations. Neither side, one might argue, wanted war, yet neither were they prepared to back down in the face of a direct challenge. In previous summers, there had been a series of cross-border skirmishes that never escalated. Many observers reckon that what changed in 2008 was an external environment that altered Russia's calculation and willingness to incur risk: First, the previous year, Kremlin proxies had carried out a cyberattack against Estonia, the first of its kind, which this report will explore further. This action

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[7] From interviews with senior Georgian military officers in Tbilisi, June 12, 2017.

emboldened Russia to combine offensive cyber capabilities with its conventional operations in any future conflict. Second, the war clarified the Kremlin's thinking that future wars would be limited ones fought along Russia's periphery. Finally, presidential elections in the United States and Russia changed the political configuration of two former adversaries. Russia was nominally under the control of its new president, Dmitry Medvedev, who was seen as more of a moderate than his predecessor, Vladimir Putin.

In the United States, the administration of George W. Bush, who had a highway named after him on the edge of Tbilisi, was coming to a close. Georgia's cocksure president, Mikheil Saakashvili, saw in Bush an important ally who would have his back were he to go to war with Russia, a window that might close after Bush left the White House the following winter. Finally, two important events occurred in Europe early that year. In Bucharest, Georgia and Ukraine were denied a membership action plan, or MAP, to join NATO, but the door was left ajar enough to leave Russia feeling unsettled. Second, Kosovo was given independence, against the wishes of Russia and Serbia, which set a dark precedent for declaring independence at the barrel of a gun (given NATO's 1999 war in Kosovo). The encroachment of NATO and declaration of Kosovar independence left Moscow feeling both isolated and neutered diplomatically.[8]

Russia remains a declining power with a population diminishing in size.[9] Its economy is far from modernized, and its state budget is highly dependent on one industry for income: oil and gas. Its previous actions against Georgia were driven in part by neurosis and nostalgia. After all, Georgia lies at an important nexus—a strategic crossroads between the former Soviet Union and the Middle East; wedged between the oil-rich Caspian Sea and Black Sea; and a natural buffer for Russia to its north, an area wracked by Muslim separatism and extremism. For much of the 1990s, Russia waged a brutal counterinsurgency only miles to Georgia's north. Sochi, site of the 2014 Winter Olympics, also sits just north of Abkhazia, one of Georgia's separatist regions. Russia has sought improved relations with Turkey, which lies farther to the south, as a way to strengthen its influence in the Middle East. Georgia has also long been the playland of tsars and Soviet leaders, given its scenic beaches, mountain vistas, and fine food.

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[8] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*.

[9] Drawing on the realist international-relations literature, we assess power using both latent (wealth and population) and military (expenditures and force size) measures; see Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 60. Drawing on the literature (see Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War"; Organski and Kugler, *War Ledger*), we also focus on relative power when determining declining powers.

Many moneyed Russians own assets there. Russia's nostalgia, as many experts have described, can be likened to Britain's colonial-era view of India: its "jewel in the crown." Georgia is also the birthplace of Joseph Stalin.

Although a small country (population: roughly 4 million), Georgia contains a hodgepodge of various ethnicities. Along its perimeter, mountainous terrain provides its various clans and ethnic groupings natural defensive fortifications to survive the writ of the state or advancing armies. Warlordism took hold along Georgia's lawless periphery after the Soviet Union collapsed.[10] Georgia would adopt a kind of "Finlandization" policy toward Russia.[11] Partly this was for fear of rocking the boat and stirring up ethnic resentments in its peripheral areas; partly it was out of diplomatic inertia. To keep Georgia weak and divided, Russia sought to keep the lid on the separatist wars along Georgia's periphery, to freeze them as a way from keeping Georgia unstable and dependent on Russia. No European organizations would come knocking on Georgia's door so long as one-fifth of its territory was in dispute and the subject of periodic violence. Georgia emerged from the 1990s, a lost decade, broken, poor, and unclear about its future trajectory. Saakashvili saw himself as a state builder; part of his mission was to restore Georgia's borders. A number of analysts described Georgia at this time as a "failed state."[12]

This report proceeds over six short chapters. The first examines the post–Cold War history of Russia and Georgia to set up the war's structural, mezzo, and immediate causes. The next chapter examines Russia's grand strategy and how the 2008 war both shaped and was shaped by its use of what some call "hybrid warfare." The third chapter details the war at the tactical and operational levels, to glean lessons of how Russia will fight in future wars, examine the decisions made, and understand how both sides learned from their mistakes and reformed their militaries. The next chapter looks at Russia's cyber capabilities and examine its cyber strategy in the context of its psychological and IO campaign. The following chapter explores how the Russia-Georgia War shaped the Kremlin's campaign in Ukraine from 2014 to the present. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for countering Russian actions in Ukraine and elsewhere going forward.

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[10] Marten, *Warlords*.

[11] This refers to when a smaller country stays on favorable terms with its stronger and larger neighbor. The phrase refers to post–World War II Finland, which held a neutral policy toward the Soviet Union for much of the Cold War.

[12] Goltz, "Paradox of Living in Paradise," in *The Guns of August 2008*, ed. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, 27.

Chapter I – History of Bad Blood

A number of analysts describe the 1990s as a lost decade for Georgia and the Russian Federation.[13] Georgia saw its economy stagnate, its hinterland provinces try to secede, and its border left contested. Contributing to the tension was a violent counterinsurgency against Islamists across its northern border, some of whom enjoyed sanctuary in Georgia's ungoverned Pankisi Gorge. Russia saw its empire collapse; its economy sink; and its previous mortal enemy, NATO, inch closer to its borders. During this decade, Russia fought a long-standing war against separatists in Chechnya, while stirring ethnic uprisings in nearby places like South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two breakaway regions of Georgia.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia declared its Soviet constitution null and void, which in turn triggered a series of uprisings along its periphery for greater self-autonomy. When Georgia gained its independence, it was mandated to keep the same borders it had as a republic, so there was no chance to redraw the borders. Akin to Texas in the 1840s, areas along the Georgian frontier were rife with ethnic minorities pushing for greater self-autonomy. Stoking these ethno-nationalist sentiments was Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who proudly declared "Georgia for Georgians."[14] Russia intervened militarily, nominally on the side of the separatists; and after the wars were left unresolved, it left a battalion of Russian "peacekeepers" deployed in Abkhazia (roughly 2,300 soldiers) and South Ossetia (500).[15] For the rest of the decade, Georgia's hinterlands became a bastion of criminality, warlordism, smuggling, and corruption.[16]

That went in spades in South Ossetia. Ossetians are not ethnically Georgian—they are closer to Persian—yet having arrived to this region only a millennium ago, they are considered relative newcomers. From the time of the tsars to the Bolsheviks, they have enjoyed closer ties to Moscow than to Tbilisi.[17] In 1990, South Ossetia launched a campaign to reunite with North Ossetia after Tbilisi stripped South Ossetia of its independence. That set off sporadic fighting between Georgians and Ossetians, displacing some sixty thousand people and leading to a cease-fire in 1992

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[13] This comes from discussions with Georgia analysts in Tbilisi, June 11–15, 2017.

[14] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 60.

[15] Lavrov, "Timeline of Russian-Georgian Hostilities in August 2008," 39.

[16] Marten, *Warlords*.

[17] Goltz, "Paradox of Living in Paradise," 18.

sponsored by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).[18] The province, particularly its capital Tskhinvali, devolved into a popular haven of smuggling.[19] Abkhazia, meanwhile, was more or less ethnically cleansed by powerful Georgians under Soviet rule—namely, Joseph Stalin and Lavrenti Beria (a native of Abkhazia who was a former marshal of the Soviet Union). Buttressing the Black Sea coast and dotted with spas and soaring peaks, the region became popular vacation grounds for Soviet apparatchiks.

Violence soon erupted in Abkhazia, as local police began cleansing the area of ethnic Georgians and foisted the Abkhazian flag high above parliament. Fighting erupted shortly after, but it became clear that Georgians were not just fighting ethnic Abkhazians but rather a motley army of Circassian fighters, mercenaries from abroad, and elements of the Russian military. An early hint, the Abkhazians lacked an air force, yet the Georgian military found itself up against Russian planes. By 1993, Georgia had in effect lost to the Abkhazian separatists, while its president, Eduard Shevardnadze, had to be airlifted to safety by the Russians.[20]

Throughout the 1990s Georgia under Shevardnadze engaged mostly in domestic nation building, while Russia under Boris Yeltsin sought to retain a zone of influence in the southern Caucasus. At times, these two goals clashed. Shevardnadze was seen by some Georgians as a toady of the Kremlin, given his old Soviet ties as a high-level apparatchik (he was formerly minister of foreign affairs). And Russia stationed forces in four bases throughout Georgia proper to act as nominally neutral peacekeepers, which Georgians suspected as a way of Moscow maintaining its imperial-like hegemony in the region. Under Shevardnadze, Georgia adopted a friendly policy toward Russia. Partly this was for fear of rocking the boat and stirring up ethnic resentments in its peripheral areas; partly it was out of diplomatic inertia.

Indeed, Georgia has long stirred up an emotional attachment for Russia. The country enjoyed a privileged status under Stalin, Georgia's native son. Its Black Sea coast was a favored vacation spot for tsars and Bolshevik leaders alike. It is a land of plenty, as one expert put it, of "wine, women and song." Yet Georgia also was important strategically, given its position between the Soviet Union and the Middle East and its corridor status between the energy-rich Caspian Sea and Black Sea basins. By the mid-1990s, Georgia had, in effect, again

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[18] Bacon and Lynch, "Plight of Displaced Persons in the Caucasus."

[19] Goltz, "Paradox of Living in Paradise," 18.

[20] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 61.

become of vassal of Moscow. It was cajoled to join a number of Russia-controlled institutions, including the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty (CST), which some suspected of trying to resurrect the Warsaw Pact.[21] Georgia's top security services and defense officials became, in effect, Russian appointees. Tbilisi occasionally pressed Moscow on the issue of restoring its territorial integrity—namely, reacquiring Abkhazia—but the Russians showed no interest. Even its promises to supply Georgians with military training and aid were not met.[22] Russia soon became preoccupied with its own separatist struggle in Chechnya after 1994, thereby putting Georgia on the back burner, where it remained for most of the 1990s.[23]

Bilateral relations began to sour during the second half of the decade. Shevardnadze was unpopular in Kremlin circles, seen as he was as one of the Soviet Union's "gravediggers." An attempt on his life in 1995 was believed to be the handiwork of Russian intelligence. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, meant as a way of shipping Caspian crude to European markets, was also an important turning point for Georgian

sovereignty and thumbing its nose at Moscow. Russia also came out of the decade bruised by the First Chechen War. Around the same time, the United States had taken a keen interest in the Caucasus, given its strategic importance as an energy corridor. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Georgia had become a top recipient of US aid on a per capita basis, opted out of the CST, and set in motion the removal of all Russian forces. This last development was no small feat, effectively ending two centuries of a Russian military presence on its territory.[24]

In 1999 a new prime minister was appointed in Russia, an unknown KGB veteran named Vladimir Putin, in the midst of a military escalation in Chechnya. The Kremlin demanded air space and the stationing of Russian forces on the Georgian side of its border with Chechnya. Shevardnadze refused, thus angering Russia (which would "accidentally" bomb parts of Georgia during its Second Chechen War, claiming there were some six thousand Chechen fighters in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge; the actual number was closer to two hundred).[25] The Kremlin would also require Georgians entering or residing in Russia to apply for visas, a violation of CIS rules

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[21] "Warsaw Pact—A Model for the CIS Collective Security Treaty."

[22] Gordadze, "Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s," 42.

[23] See M. Kramer, "Perils of Counterinsurgency."

[24] There was a brief interlude during Georgia's short-lived independence from 1918 to 1921.

[25] A subsequent OSCE investigation discovered that Russian aircraft had indeed violated Georgian airspace and bombed targets in the Pankisi Gorge in August 2002. For more info, see Lieven, "What Is the Future of Chechnya?"

and widely seen as a measure to squeeze Georgia's economy (it did curb remittances but not by much). After 9/11, Russia also was concerned by the threat posed by radical Islamism, partly because of a spate of terrorist attacks in Moscow and partly to ensure there would not be American criticism of how Moscow prosecuted its war in Chechnya. At one point, Moscow claimed that Osama bin Laden was hiding out in the Pankisi Gorge.[26] What emerged was the beginning of the Georgian Train and Equip Program, joint counterterrorism drills with the United States that initially had the blessing of the Kremlin. The program brought two hundred US trainers to Georgia in 2002, in addition to $60 million in military aid, as a way to boost Georgia's fledgling armed forces.[27]

Rose-Colored Glasses

That set the stage for the 2003 Rose Revolution, which brought to power a regime of young and reformist-minded officials, at the helm of which stood President Mikheil Saakashvili. To be sure, the 2003 Rose Revolution posed a thorny dilemma for the Kremlin. It had previously rescued Shevardnadze a decade earlier during the war in Abkhazia. Now the Georgian leader,

after rigging parliamentary elections in November, was asking for Russian support again. Moscow had no love lost for Shevardnadze but also was against so-called color revolutions, interpreted as attempts by Washington to exert greater soft power and leverage in Russia's sphere of influence. The Kremlin decided not to bail out Shevardnadze, paving the way for Saakashvili to take power.

The Rose Revolution was as much about state building as it was about restoring democracy. Saakashvili's national security strategy was threefold: to restore Georgia's territorial borders and bring its breakaway provinces back under Tbilisi's fold; to stabilize the larger Caucasus and Black Sea region; and to secure Georgia's status as a lucrative energy transit corridor.[28] For him, restoring Georgia's territorial integrity was a vital, even existential, issue, one he would prove willing to go to war over. As one analyst put it, he was more like "Ataturk than Jefferson," a top-down modernizer with a dictatorial streak. In November 2007 he violently cracked down on peaceful demonstrators in Tbilisi.[29] Another expert described Saakashvili as having a messiah

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[26] Gordadze, "Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s," 42.

[27] GlobalSecurity.org, "Georgia Sustainment and Stability Operations Program."

[28] Tseluiko, "Georgian Army Reform," 12.

[29] "Crossing the Line."

complex.[30] Soon, Saakashvili's state-building project ran afoul of Vladimir Putin's push for "sovereign democracy," which profited from the lawlessness and corruption of the South Caucasus and also wanted to prevent Georgia from leaning too far toward Europe or the United States. While not intervening militarily just yet, Russia stepped up its contacts with the separatist regimes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, exerting greater administrative and military control over them, raising their subsidies, and distributing Russian passports to South Ossetians.

Moreover, Georgia had previously tended to comply with Kremlin preferences for key government portfolios—typically pliant officials with close ties to the Kremlin. In 2004 Saakashvili denied Putin's suggested appointment for Georgian interior minister, the first of many clashes between the two men. After 9/11, terrorist attacks in Russia, allegedly by Chechens aligned with al-Qaeda, led Moscow to push Georgia to exert greater effective control over areas like the Pankisi Gorge.[31] This dovetailed with US efforts to curb Islamist extremism in the region, setting the stage for joint Georgian Train and Equip Program exercises in 2004, which continue to this day.

Around the same time, Saakashvili sought to foment a revolution as a way to formally retake Adjara, a semiautonomous fiefdom in the southwest run by Aslan Abashidze, much to the ire of Russia (though it did not intervene). Saakashvili also moved a brigade toward South Ossetia and carried out its first military exercises around this time, as a show of force toward Moscow and its regional proxies.[32]

Buoyed by Georgia's success in Adjara and its growing economy, Saakashvili sought to lure ethnic separatist regions back into Georgia's fold by mounting an antismuggling operation in South Ossetia. Naïve and optimistic, he thought this move would spur locals to reject their corrupt leaders and seek to rejoin Georgia, yet it was met with stiff resistance and increasing violence. Tbilisi ultimately failed to reestablish control over the province. Thwarted, Saakashvili turned his attention inward to reforming Georgian politics, while forging closer ties to Washington (Bush made Georgia part of his democracy-promotion agenda, delivering a moving speech in downtown Tbilisi in 2005). Georgia also sought to reform its military by making it more professional, disciplined, and well trained. To that end, it shifted away from its use of untrained conscripts. Having ratcheted up

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[30] From an interview with a Russian military analyst, May 31, 2017.

[31] Lieven, "What Is the Future of Chechnya?"

[32] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 21.

its military spending—reaching 8 percent of Georgian gross domestic product (GDP) by 2008[33]—Georgia procured newer and more sophisticated weapons and equipment, such as man-portable surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), from Western suppliers.[34] It carried out joint military exercises with US forces, and in 2006 it reestablished control over the Kodori Gorge, along Abkhazia's frontier to the east.[35] Regarding its breakaway republics, Georgia wavered between its use of soft power (boosting the local economy) and hard power (threatening military force), a policy that proved counterproductive. "At times, Tbilisi sought to display changes on the ground in the balance of pure military power," Niklas Nilsson wrote, "thus contradicting the incentive of carrots with threats of using military force."[36] Russia responded by rearming the provinces; so much so that by 2006 the military capacity of the two regions—whose combined population was 250,000—had far exceeded that of Georgia.

The result was a raft of tit-for-tat measures, including Russia pressuring its energy companies to cut off supplies and banning Georgian wine and mineral water imports and Georgia arresting and deporting four Russian spies, prompting Russia to evacuate all its nationals from Tbilisi and place its regional bases on high alert.[37] In Moscow there were also reprisals against Georgian restaurants and theater companies.

In 2007 Putin delivered his widely reported speech in Munich, in which he lashed out at US intervention and decried what he called a "unipolar world."[38] Two days later Saakashvili announced that Georgia would join NATO by 2009. The next year, Russian forces shelled Georgian administration buildings and villages in the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia. Russian aircraft also violated Georgian airspace and bombed radar installations near the South Ossetian border. Putin and Saakashvili met a few days later, where the Russian president told his Georgian counterpart, "As for the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in this regard we shall respond not to you, but to the

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[33] Lavrov, "Timeline of Russian-Georgian Hostilities," 38.

[34] Tseluiko, "Georgian Army Reform," 25.

[35] The statements by Georgian leaders also took on a more hawkish tone. The Georgian defense minister, Irakli Okruashvili, threatened the use of military force to reintegrate South Ossetia, even pronouncing he would celebrate New Year's Eve in Tskhinvali, his hometown; see Nilsson, "Georgia's Rose Revolution," 94.

[36] Ibid., 85–103.

[37] Illarionov, "Russian Leadership's Preparation for War," 54.

[38] Beehner, "U.S.-Russia Interests on Collision Course."

West."[39] The independence granted to Kosovo in early 2008 was the final straw, many analysts say. One telling has it that Putin told Saakashvili after Kosovo, "We will respond to this. You will be part of that response. Don't take it personally." The move also came on the heels of Russia suspending its participation in the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), which set ceilings on the amount of conventional arms systems and provided verification and confidence-building measures. Russia fully withdrew from the treaty in 2015.

When Ukraine and Georgia sought fast-track admittance into NATO in early 2008, or what's called a membership action plan (MAP),

they were declined, but the door was left ajar enough to rattle Russia. The incident propelled Russia to call for greater incursions into Georgian airspace, attacks against Georgian nationals by South Ossetian militias, and a movement of Russian armed forces into the immediate region. Russia, as one analyst put it, sought to poke and provoke Georgia into launching a preemptive war. A few months later, a Russian MiG-29 shot down an unmanned aerial vehicle, prompting a rapid buildup of armed forces and military exercises on both sides of the border. "The scene was now set for war," wrote Andrei Illarionov, a former economic advisor to Putin.[40] "Now all that was necessary was the spark to start it."

Table 1: Causes of 2008 Russia-Georgia War

Structural causes	Mezzo-level causes	Immediate causes
Desire of post-Yeltsin Russia to take greater control over its sphere of influence. *Insecurity caused by prospect of Georgia joining NATO.* *Unresolved historical legacies of ethnic non-Georgians in Caucasus.*	*February 2008 declaration of Kosovo independence.* *Recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence by Russia.*	*Downing of an unmanned drone by Russian artillery in April 2008.* *Unchecked buildup of military forces in the breakaway republics.* *Inflammatory rhetoric by leaders on both sides.*

To summarize, no one cause led to the 2008 war—there were multiple factors. On the

systemic level, the perceived isolation of Russia, as manifested by the expansion of NATO, left it

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[39] Illarionov, "Russian Leadership's Preparation for War," 67.

[40] Ibid., 72.

feeling insecure, isolated, and bereft of regional allies. This coincided with Russia's economic and political rise under Putin after a decade of economic stagnation, which it blamed on the West. Russia no longer felt bound by a United States–led international order and sought to reshape Europe and its institutions along its rules. The prospect of Georgia joining NATO, Russia's historic archnemesis, only added to Moscow's perceived insecurity. Another systemic cause was the unresolved historical legacies of a restive southern Caucasus, including the nationalist aspirations of non-Georgians living within its borders. A mezzo cause of the war was the February 2008 declaration of Kosovo independence, which prompted Russia to push for recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Finally, the proximate causes were the downing of an unmanned drone by Russian artillery in April 2008, the unchecked buildup of military forces in the breakaway republics, and inflammatory statements made by leaders on both sides.

Squeezed between the mountains of the southern Caucasus, South Ossetia and Abkhazia became over the past several decades what scholars called a "frozen conflict."[41] But this conflict became "unfrozen" by a deliberate and strategic set of policies, mostly originating from the Kremlin. To understand how and why these breakaway territories would erupt as they did in the summer of 2008, as this chapter demonstrated, one must look back over a turbulent decade to the messy aftermath of the Soviet Union, the unclear fates of displaced ethnic groups along its periphery, and the motivations of Abkhazians and Ossetians.

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[41] On this issue, see Welt, "Thawing of a Frozen Conflict."

Chapter II – Russian Grand Strategy in Context of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War

The purpose of this report is not to give a forensic report of the 2008 conflict itself but rather to use the Russia-Georgia War as a case study of how Russia's grand strategy has shaped the evolution of its military strategy and how it intends to fight its current and future wars. By reexamining the 2008 war, this analysis will provide Western militaries better guidance on how to counter or deter Russian aggression elsewhere in the region. This chapter is divided into two parts: first, an explanation of Russian "grand strategy" since Putin came to power and, second, how this grand strategy informs its military strategy, specifically with respect to its use of hybrid warfare in Ukraine and the Caucasus.

It should be stated that the phrase "grand strategy" lacks a cohesive or agreed-upon definition. Clausewitz conceived of strategy as aligning one's ends, ways, and means.[42] Of course, this is a broad definition that lends itself to application to nearly any task requiring advance planning; indeed, even a visit to the grocery store requires some forethought to the ends or objectives (buying food for dinner), the ways in which a shopper will traverse the store efficiently (dairy and frozen foods should always come last), and the means available (how much can I spend on groceries?). And so, whether discussing military strategy, political strategy, economic strategy, or some other strategy, we can analyze it according to the objectives, the methods, and the resources necessary to achieve the objectives.

The same can be said of "grand strategy," a concept that has caused nearly as much definitional consternation as that of "strategy" as it has gained currency among scholars and policy makers since the end of the Cold War. Peter Feaver defines grand strategy as "the collection of plans and policies that comprise the state's deliberate effort to harness political military, diplomatic, and economic tools together to advance that state's national interest . . . the art of reconciling ends and means. It involves purposive action."[43] Thus, in Feaver's definition we find the key elements of our definition of strategy: ends (advancing the national interest), ways (purposive action in the political, military, diplomatic, and economic realms), and means—all of which must be reconciled with one another. What makes such a strategy "grand" is the focus on high-level matters of national interest, as well as the

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[42] Lykke, "Toward an Understanding of Military Strategy," 179.

[43] Feaver, "What Is Grand Strategy and Why Do We Need It?"

comprehensive use of military, political, economic, diplomatic, and even social tools to advance the national interests.

In a similar vein, Hal Brands defines grand strategy as "a purposeful and coherent set of ideas about what a nation seeks to accomplish in the world, and how it should go about doing so."[44] In an ideal scenario, a state is able to clearly identify its core national security interests (and the genuine threats to those interests); select the best tools from *all* spheres of policy making to pursue those interests and mitigate those threats; and do so with the backing of the resources necessary for success. This might be called the "ideal type" of a successful grand strategy.[45]

Russia's Ends

It makes sense to begin our discussion at the end(s). From a structural realist perspective, Russia's most fundamental interest is to secure both the Russian state and the Putin regime against foreign and domestic threats.[46] Of

course, any sensible observer would note that this is the objective of any state operating in the anarchic international system. Indeed, "security" as *the* core national interest sits at the foundation of most realist theories of international relations. But how states understand security, perceive threats, and respond to such threats is very much subject to national-level factors.[47] Russia's conception of its security environment, the threats to that security, and its methods of achieving security take on very Russian flavors. These are the result of a wide array of forces ranging from geography, history, domestic politics, culture, and of course, rivalry among other great powers.

This report points to three key objectives of Putin's grand strategy that are not dissimilar to the grand strategic vision of Joseph Stalin's at the February 1945 Yalta conference.[48] First, as noted above, Russia seeks to ensure its military, political, and economic security through an uncontested and exclusive sphere of influence in the territory that once formed the Soviet Union. Essentially, a Monroe Doctrine for Russia in the

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[44] Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, 3.

[45] Any survey of the post–Cold War literature on grand strategy, however, will yield the oft-repeated argument that the United States has failed to develop a coherent grand strategy—particularly with regards to clarity in defining core interests—since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the grand strategy of containment that fell with it. But the same should not be said of Russia, which, after a decade of post-Soviet drift in the 1990s, has spent the last seventeen years pursuing a very clear and generally effective grand strategy.

[46] On structural realism, see Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

[47] Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*.

[48] Leffler and Westad, *Cambridge History of the Cold War*, 201–2.

post-Soviet space, this vision would give Russia a privileged position of influence in the foreign and domestic affairs of the countries in Russia's sphere. Equally important, this strategy denies other great powers from pursuing interests and influence within Russia's exclusive sphere of influence. Second, Russia seeks a seat at the table and decisive voice on issues in regions where a regional great power is absent (such as the Middle East) or where there are multiple great powers in the region (such as the Arctic). In other words, it positions Russia as a global player with global influence. It should come as little surprise that the first two pillars of this strategy are likely to generate significant friction with the United States, which also seeks influence in the post-Soviet region and areas important to Russia.

This brings us to the third pillar: in order to achieve its grand strategic objectives, Russia seeks to contain and constrain the United States' unopposed unilateral pursuit of *its* interests globally. This mandate is most urgent in the post-Soviet region: in order to carve out its sphere of influence, Russia must push the United States out of the region. Similarly, Russia must muscle its way into a seat at the table in other regions where it seeks influence, often by limiting or complicating what may have previously been uncontested American pursuit of foreign policy objectives. Finally, Russia must pursue a general strategy of complicating matters for the United

States and raising the cost of action, even in regions where Russia lacks a direct interest. Throwing sand in the United States' gears wherever it can makes it more difficult for the United States to influence world events. Importantly, most of the tactics used to pursue this objective of US constraint are not those of traditional military balancing. Rather, they are tactics of soft balancing and hybrid balancing, discussed at greater length below.

These three pillars—uncontested sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region, Russian voice and influence globally, and constraint of the United States—are the main ends of Russian grand strategy in the twenty-first century.

Russia's Means

Before we discuss the ways of Russian grand strategy—the policies that Moscow has developed and implemented in order to achieve its objectives—and how those ways have evolved over the last seventeen years, it is worth mentioning the material means that have enabled those ways. Of particular consequence is the fact that Russia's increasing economic means since 2000 have allowed it to pursue ever more assertive ways to achieve its ends. Figure 1 shows that after a difficult and traumatic decade of economic contraction in the 1990s, the 2000s

witnessed a period of major economic growth in

Russia.[49]

Figure 1: Russian GDP per Capita (Current US Dollars)[50]
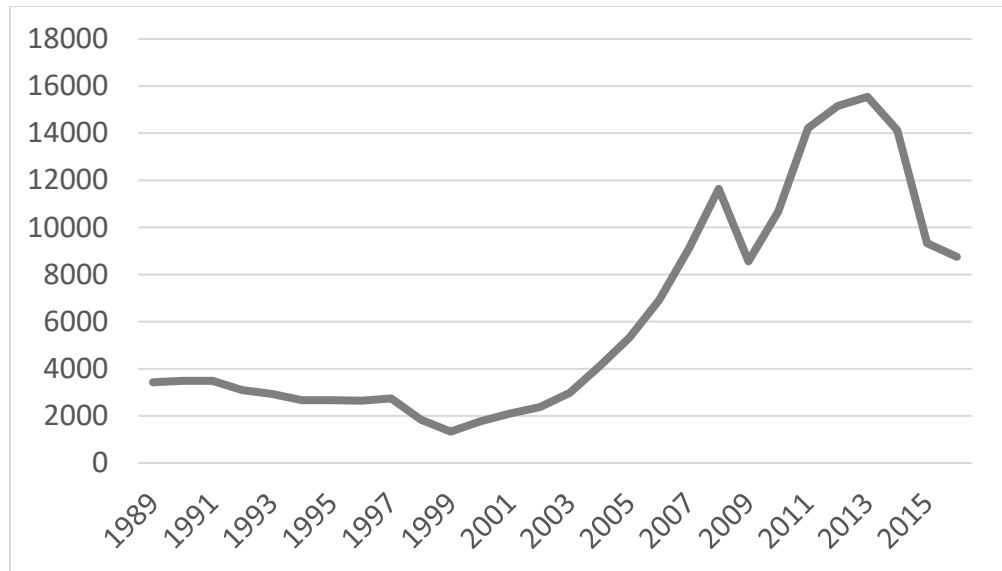
From 2000 to 2013, Russian GDP per capita increased by nearly ninefold. Contrary to common perceptions that Putin's strong hand on Russia provided the stabilization that fueled Russia's economic growth, in fact Russia's recovery in the 2000s can largely be attributed to the rising price of oil, on which the Russian economy—and federal budget—are dependent.[51] But regardless of who deserves credit, there is no disputing the fact that throughout the 2000s Russia had significantly growing wealth that it could apply toward its grand strategic objectives. This includes a major military modernization project that was initiated based on lessons learned from the 2008 war against Georgia (see next section). Figure 2 traces total Russian military expenditures as percentage of GDP between 2000 and 2016, showing that broader economic expansion in the country helped to fuel expanded military

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[49] Indeed, it was only the global financial crisis of 2008–9 and the collapse of oil prices and post-Crimea sanctions in 2014 that curtailed Russian economic growth in the Putin era.

[50] DataBank, "GDP per capita (current US$)," World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=RU.

[51] McFaul and Stoner-Weiss, "Myth of the Authoritarian Model," 87.

spending, wherein larger defense expenditures (in absolute terms) were the consequence of rising overall GDP and rising defense-spending rates.[52]

Figure 2: Military Expenditure (Percent of GDP)[53]
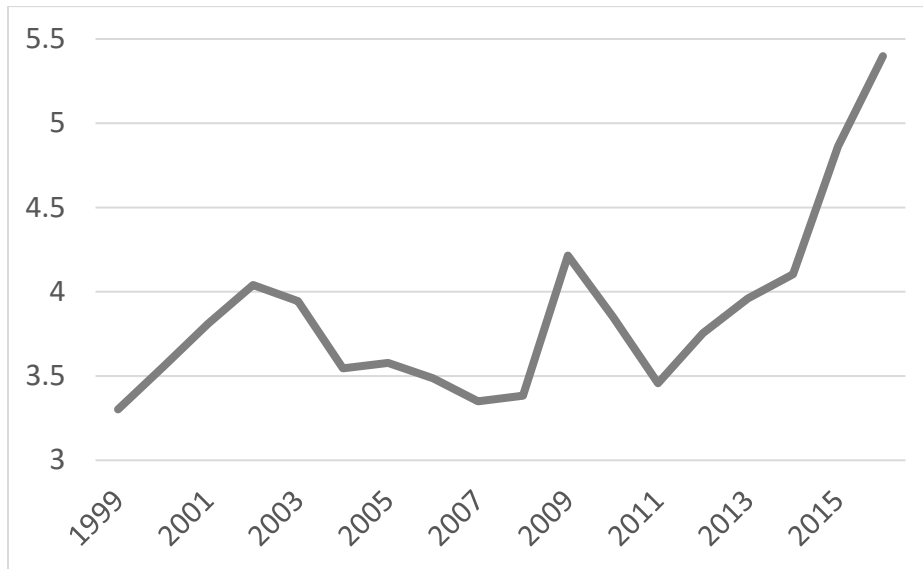
To be sure, Russia's pursuit of its grand strategic objectives goes well beyond military expenditures, but these two figures illustrate that Russia's resources necessary to pursue the ways of grand strategy have increased immensely since 2000. And these increased resources have had a profound impact on the nature of the ways in which Russia has pursued its grand strategy.

Russia's Ways

Though the strategic objectives of Russia in the twenty-first century have remained relatively stable since Putin's rise to power, the policies associated with those objectives—the ways of grand strategy—have undergone an important evolution throughout that period. Generally speaking, we can identify several distinct periods of Russian foreign policy approaches since Putin's ascension to the presidency in 2000. The period of pragmatic accommodation lasted from 2000 to 2003, when it was replaced by a policy

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[52] DataBank, "Military Expenditure (% of GDP)," World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?end=2016&locations=RU&start=2001.

[53] Military expenditures data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed October 21, 2017, https://www.sipri.org/databases.

of soft balancing that lasted until 2007. Since 2007, Russia's foreign policy approach can be described as one of hybrid balancing that—with the exception of a thaw during the Obama-Medvedev "reset"—has hardened in recent years.

Pragmatic Accommodation, 2000–2003

When Putin became president of Russia in 1999, he was dealt a weak hand in global politics. While Russia under Yeltsin retained some trappings of great power status, it had been weakened significantly throughout the post-Soviet economic collapse of the 1990s (see figure 1). As Putin sought to reestablish central authority and strengthen the Russian state domestically, so too did he seek to restore Russia to a place of influence in the international system. Recognizing the reality of a massive power imbalance between Russia and the United States, Putin first sought to advance Russia's grand strategic objectives through pragmatic accommodation and deal making with the United States. By offering support to the United States in other areas or making concessions on areas of disagreement, Putin hoped to be rewarded with concessions to Russia's strategic interests, particularly with regard to its desired sphere of influence. Ironically, one of the first such concessions involved deliberately allowing the United States into that sphere following the

9/11 attacks. Putin was the first foreign leader to call Bush after the attacks to offer support, and he made good on that promise when he gave his blessing to five former Soviet republics to allow American forces to operate out of their territories if necessary in the campaign against the Taliban. Putin and Bush were able to leverage a strong personal relationship early on for other cooperative endeavors on counterterrorism and arms control, including a nuclear arms control treaty signed in Moscow in 2002.

There can be little doubt that Putin hoped to parlay this cooperative accommodation to get American concessions on two major Russian interests: limiting further NATO expansion and preserving the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, a 1972 arms control agreement that placed limits on the United States' and the USSR's ballistic missile systems. The prospects of NATO expanding farther toward Russia (especially into former Soviet states) as well as the possibility of the United States abandoning the ABM Treaty that Moscow saw as the cornerstone of strategic stability were threatening developments that Putin hoped to prevent through implicit or explicit bargaining. He failed on both counts. In December 2001 President Bush announced the United States' withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, and in November 2002 NATO invited seven states—including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—to

begin formal accession talks. The limits of Putin's ability to get concessions by granting concessions were even more apparent when Russia failed to prevent, through diplomatic maneuvering and vocal opposition, the 2003 United States–led invasion of Iraq. From these disappointing failures, Putin concluded that he could not fulfill Russia's strategic objectives through accommodation. Rather, a more assertive approach would be required.

Soft Balancing, 2003–7

Though Putin shifted to a more assertive approach to pursuing Russia's strategic interests following the aborted attempt through accommodation with the United States, the fact remained that Russia was too weak to challenge American unipolarity head-on through traditional methods of hard balancing.[54] From this position of relative weakness, however, Russia implemented with great success a strategy dubbed "soft balancing" by Robert Pape, who defined the term in 2005 as "actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies. Soft balancing

using international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangement has already been a prominent feature of the international opposition to the U.S. war against Iraq."[55]

Russia used such methods effectively during the period from 2003 to 2007, both within its own near abroad and beyond. In Russia's own backyard, Moscow was able to use its position as a regional power to advance its interests more assertively, though these methods were primarily nonmilitary in nature, consistent with the overall soft-balancing approach to influence and interests. In particular, Russia made extensive use of economic tools to reward neighbors who toed the line (Belarus) and coerce those who resisted Russian influence (Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltics). In retrospect, the gas wars of the 2000s look almost benign; but during the period of soft balancing, Russia's control over energy supplies and transit routes was a major nonmilitary tool in the tool kit as it sought to assert its sphere of influence.[56]

During 2003–8 Russia's neighbors were rocked by political events whose consequences are felt to this day: the so-called "color revolutions." While these events no doubt reminded Putin of potential uprisings in Russia,

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[54] These include strategies such as military buildups, war-fighting alliances, and transfers of military technology to allies. See Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," 9.

[55] Ibid., 11.

[56] Nygren, "Putin's Use of Natural Gas to Reintegrate the CIS Region."

the strong support by the United States of these opposition movements reinforced his belief that Washington was trying to encircle Russia by toppling pro-Russian regimes on the country's periphery. American support of opposition movements was seen as going far beyond meddling in Russia's sphere of influence and aimed straight at the heart of Putin's regime. However, it is notable that Russia did not respond to these revolutions with military measures. The same could not be said in 2014, when a much more capable Russian military was given a do-over to disrupt a popular revolution in Ukraine.

Hybrid Balancing, 2007–17

The period of soft balancing ended in 2007–8 with three foreign policy actions that demonstrated that Russia had the means and the will to go well beyond soft-balancing tactics to promote a more ambitious grand strategy. Call it "hybrid balancing," in a nod to the methods of hybrid warfare that would become an increasingly prominent part of Russia's foreign policy tool kit. We can conceive of this as a strategy that lies somewhere between the tactics of soft and hard balancing. Or more accurately, it utilizes a spectrum of tactics that range from soft to hard, though kinetic military

operations are used rarely. Like the concept of hybrid war—which admittedly is an overused term whose meaning may have outlived its conceptual usefulness but which we employ here for the sake of simplicity—hybrid balancing takes place in the military, political, economic, and social realms, using a variety of overt and covert measures to exert influence and shape outcomes. However, its purpose is not necessarily military action or territorial conquest (which may be the objective of hybrid war). Rather, its purpose is to counterbalance an adversary while remaining below the level of hard military alliances or open warfare. If soft balancing is akin to throwing sand in the gears of US foreign policy, then hybrid balancing is about throwing gravel and rocks into the machinery to severely impede US action and open the space for Russian action.

The year 2007 marked the beginning of this era. It kicked off with the April 2007 cyberattack against Estonia, a massive denial-of-service attack executed from within the Russian federation.[57] Though not directed by the Kremlin, the attack was carried out by activists in protest of the Estonian government's relocation of a Soviet-era WWII monument. But the episode did reveal that there were plenty of followers in the shadows willing to mobilize against Russia's adversaries under the Kremlin's

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[57] Richards, "Denial-of-Service."

approving gaze. Here was a potent new tool, used not to steal identities or credit card information for financial gain—then the dominant objective for cyberattacks—but to disrupt and destabilize another government for political reasons. From a balancing perspective, an unstated purpose of this attack was to undermine Estonians' confidence in their institutions and test NATO's resolve.

The second jolting event marking the onset of the hybrid balancing period was, somewhat ironically, a conventional war. While the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia was in many respects fought conventionally, it featured several elements of what we now would describe as hybrid warfare. Furthermore, the Russian government and military derived several lessons from the experience, making crucial reforms to its conventional military while simultaneously developing more refined hybrid methods that would be utilized against Ukraine in 2014. The 2008 war is interesting in its own respect and is covered in the detail it warrants elsewhere in this report. But for the purpose of this section, the elements of hybrid *warfare* are of less interest than the balancing aspects of Russia's invasion of Georgia. If the Georgian war was about hybrid *balancing,* against whom was Russia balancing?

Go back to the April 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, when the alliance welcomed "Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. The West agreed today that these countries will *eventually* become members of NATO."[58] Though Ukraine and Georgia had hoped for a MAP that would have fast-tracked their entry into NATO, such a plan was not forthcoming. However, even the definitive (if open-ended) statement that NATO membership would happen one day was enough to cross a crucial red line for Russia. Already forced to watch impotently as NATO expanded into the Baltic states, Russia made clear on several occasions that it would not tolerate NATO members on its southern and western borders.

Though the Russia-Georgia War had local and regional causes with blame to be shared by both governments for provoking the conflict, the war gave Russia the opportunity to ensure that Georgia's frozen conflicts would continue to smolder. By securing perpetual border disputes between Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, Russia managed in a few short days to postpone Georgian NATO membership indefinitely, since such disputes disqualify new members. In short, there is a case to be made that the 2008 war was about balancing against NATO just as much as it was a regional political

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[58] North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Bucharest Summit Declaration."

dispute between Moscow and Tbilisi. The ways by which the Kremlin has sought to balance against NATO has increasingly resembled something that military analysts describe as "hybrid warfare."

"Hybrid Warfare" Explained

The phrase "hybrid warfare" has become a bit of a cliché among military circles. It should be plainly stated that *all* modern warfare is hybrid warfare. Despite dozens of articles and reports in recent years on its novelty,[59] the reality is that hybrid war is not new.[60] If one goes by Frank Hoffman's original definition—wars that "incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder"[61]—then hybrid warfare has been occurring for millennia. While the terminology might be new, the general practice of hybrid warfare has remained largely the steady state of conflict for most of human history. It is convenient to think of warfare as large set-piece battles played out on a grand map, yet the reality of warfare is far different. States that try to only engage in conventional warfare often find themselves at a disadvantage.

Instead of attempting to describe Russia's actions in the context of a new form of warfare, it would be more beneficial to understand its approach as a reaction to what it perceives as *US hybrid warfare* that has been undermining its own influence in the post-Soviet space. Key to this phenomenon are the color revolutions that occurred in Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005. As mentioned previously, writing in 2013, Russian chief of staff Valery Gerasimov stated that "these events are typical of warfare in the 21st century. . . . The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness."[62] Other Russian officials have argued that "color revolutions are a new form of warfare invented by Western governments seeking to remove independent-minded national governments in favor of ones controlled by the West."[63]

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[59] Jagello 2000, "Hybrid Warfare"; Renz and Smith, "Russia and Hybrid Warfare"; Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*; and Rácz, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*.

[60] Popescu, "Hybrid Tactics."

[61] Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, 14.

[62] Galeotti, " 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War."

[63] Gorenburg, "Countering Color Revolutions."

Russia considers these examples of foreign-sponsored regime change to fall short of war; and since Ukraine's EuroMaiden protests in 2014, which caused pro-Russian President Yanukovich to flee (see later chapter), Russia has only hardened its stance on countering the West's use of color revolutions to subvert Russian influence in its near abroad.[64] Russia's argument is indeed based on historical precedent, though it may attribute excessive credit to US machinations at the expense of legitimate indigenous organizations.

The United States supported anti-Soviet subversion and local resistance movements during the Cold War.[65] Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, United States–sponsored institutes (as well as privately financed ones) funded civil-society movements that contributed millions of dollars to the Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), respectively.[66] However, as one of these institute's chairs put it, "There's a myth that the Americans go into a country and, presto, you get a revolution. It's not the case that Americans can get two million people to turn out in the streets. The people themselves decide to do that."[67]

Ironically, while condemning the United States' use of nonmilitary means, Russia incorporates this as a key element of its hybrid approach. For instance, Gerasimov's model[68] for modern Russian warfare focuses on supporting political opposition and utilizing information warfare in a 4:1 ratio of nonmilitary to military measures.[69] This was most evident in Ukraine as a local referendum was utilized to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea, coupled with the subsequent presence of "little green men" supporting pro-Russian crowds and seizing government buildings in early 2014 (see chapter 6).[70]

In fact, Russia has a long history of supporting indigenous movements abroad to

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[64] Bouchet, "Russia's 'Militarization' of Colour Revolutions."

[65] This notably includes the CIA's involvement in the overthrow of the communist-leaning Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran in 1953 and support to Poland's solidarity movement throughout the 1980s among many other intelligence activities during the Cold War. See Lee, "Social Movement Approach to Unconventional Warfare," 28-29.

[66] For example, the *New York Times* estimated that the United States spent $24 million on "democracy-building" programs in Ukraine in 2004, in addition to other "technical assistance" to democracy activists around the world. Collins, *Time of the Rebels*, 153, 185.

[67] Ibid., 152–53.

[68] One might take issue that there is no Gerasimov model for modern Russian warfare per se, making the case that in his article he clearly states that every war has its own rationale and no model is applicable across conflicts.

[69] US Department of the Army, *"Little Green Men."*

[70] Ibid., 52.

secure its political objectives. Under the guise of protecting *sootechestvennikii*, or so-called "compatriots," Russia utilizes these populations as proxies to justify humanitarian intervention and then maintain "frozen conflicts" to create new facts on the ground that cement favorable political outcomes.[71] This was clear in Moldova, Georgia, and most recently in Ukraine.[72] Russia capitalized on early post-Soviet nativist Georgian politics to establish the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as protected areas to thwart Georgia's accession into NATO,[73] similar to its use of ethnic Russians in Crimea and Donbass to achieve the same goal regarding Ukraine.[74]

However, while both Russian officials and US analysts emphasize this nonmilitary component, critics claim that the focus should be on the "war" in Russian hybrid warfare—namely, the advances in high-end conventional military technology that Russia has achieved while the

United States has focused elsewhere in the pursuit of non-state actors such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda following 9/11.[75] These include advanced cyber- and electronic-warfare capabilities, target-acquisition systems, and long-range precision weaponry for massed fires.[76] Gerasimov has recently emphasized both Russia's soft-power requirements identified in his earlier writings, as well as high-tech weapons necessary to achieve its goals by "remote non-contact impact upon enemy forces."[77] It's important to recognize that Gerasimov was trying to link the mission of the military to the threat environment, getting high-end capability married to what was principally an asymmetric Western threat.

The next phase of hybrid warfare, or Russia's next generation, will likely see the use of digital technologies move beyond the manipulation of the informational environment to the disruption, degradation, denial, and

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[71] This includes ethnic Russians (*russkiy*), citizens of the Russian Federation (*rossisskiy*), as well as anyone connected to Russia by culture or family background. See Zakem, Saunders, and Antoun, "Mobilizing Compatriots," 3–8.

[72] U.S. Department of the Army, *"Little Green Men,"* 10–14.

[73] Georgia stripped South Ossetia of its independence in 1990, sparking fighting that lead to an OSCE-monitored cease-fire in 1992. Similarly, Georgia nullified Abkhazia's Soviet constitution in 1992, followed by Georgian president Gamsakhurdia proclaiming "Georgia for Georgians."

[74] In 2008 at the Bucharest Summit, NATO declared support for Ukraine's and Georgia's future memberships in NATO, further encroaching on Russia's zone of interest. North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Bucharest Summit Declaration."

[75] See Monaghan, "Putin's Way of War."

[76] Karber and Thibeault, "Russia's New-Generation Warfare."

[77] McDermott, "Gerasimov Calls for New Strategy to Counter Color Revolution."

destruction of assets in the physical world. The 2008 Russia-Georgia War demonstrated the value of a digital component to kinetic conflict. The Russian occupation of Ukraine is demonstrating the strategic and tactical value of incorporating digital tools to shape the battlespace using drones, attacks on critical infrastructure, and more.[78]

In sum, Russian military strategy is a reflection of its grand strategy, which, like any state, is aimed at the survival of the state. To this end, Moscow's present strategy is geared toward preventing the expansion of Western political-military blocs to Russia's borders. This means blocking states such as Ukraine or Georgia from joining groups like NATO or the European Union (EU). Russia has sought to keep these countries politically weak, economically dependent on Moscow, and their borders unsettled. To achieve its military strategy on the cheap, Russia has relied and will continue to rely on a hybrid, or nonlinear, approach to modern warfare—which seeks to weaponize information; orchestrate via third parties cyberattacks against government and civilian targets; employ electronic warfare; and utilize local proxy volunteers, so-called *kontraktniki*, as well as Russian soldiers who do not wear insignia. This will allow for some level of plausible deniability but also for the ability to sow confusion over who is a combatant and who is not. Confusion is a deliberate Russian method to erode local resistance. We see evidence of this in eastern Ukraine and previous evidence of Russian peacekeepers taking up arms against Georgian forces, a violation of international law. Russia's military provides these actors with sophisticated weaponry and air support. In addition, Russia spreads its soft power, as well as "fake news," via local and national media to both control the narrative and confuse its audiences, relying on IO troops whose sole remit is counterpropaganda.[79]

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[78] FireEye, *Cyberattacks on the Ukrainian Grid*.

[79] Sharkov, "Russia Announces Information Operations Troops."

Chapter III – The Five-Day War

In this chapter, we look at how the war was fought at the tactical and operational level to observe what mistakes Russia made and what postwar adjustments it took to reform its military in terms of force structure, doctrine, and modernization. This section will examine the five-day war and then outline how the war motivated Russia to modernize its military forces in the years following the war ahead of its 2014 invasion of Ukraine.

What kicked off the Georgian shelling of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali remains in dispute. There had been exchanges of fire— small arms, grenade launchers, mortars—on August 7 near the village of Khetagurovo and the Georgian towns of Avnevi and Nuli. But sporadic fighting was not uncommon during this time of year along the border. A fact-finding mission by the Council of the EU in September 2009 found the artillery shelling of the city "unjustified" under international law. Saakashvili received intelligence reports of Russian units, including fighter aircraft, mobilizing just north of the Roki Tunnel, which divides South and North Ossetia.

Another report came in that Russia's Black Sea Fleet, based in Sevastopol, Ukraine, had repositioned itself in preparation for a major battle. On July 29, 2008, South Ossetian paramilitary forces began shelling Georgian villages.[80] In response, on the night of August 7, 2008, the Georgian military began shelling Tskhinvali to, according to the Georgian general on the ground, "restore constitutional order in the whole region."[81] The attack reportedly killed hundreds of civilians, not thousands as Russia initially claimed.[82] Most of the civilian population fled Tskhinvali. A Georgian general would later describe it as a ghost town.

The Georgians argue that they began using aircraft only after Russian planes appeared in Georgian airspace. As Georgian Interior Minister Shota Utiashvili told *Kommersant*, "At 11 a.m. [on August 9, 2008] three Russian Su-24 jets appeared in the sky over Georgia. First, they headed toward the community of Kareli and bombed a police station. Then they circled over Gori for a while, dropped a bomb on a telephone tower, and flew away. Then they came back and

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[80] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 165.

[81] Quoted in Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 39.

[82] There is some dispute about whether the Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali was indiscriminate and also defensive in nature. A front-page story on November 6, 2008, in the *New York Times* (Chivers and Barry, "Georgia Claims on Russia War Called into Question") found evidence that Georgia had exaggerated its claims of protecting Georgian civilians.

shelled Gori again. They bombed the market—there are a lot of injured people there. After that, the planes flew almost all the way to Tbilisi, dropping bombs on the Vaziani military airfield." The Russian Defense Ministry at the time told *Kommersant* that its planes had only bombed "military facilities."[83]

There is plentiful evidence that the war by Russia was "premeditated," to borrow then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice's term. Russia restored a railroad near Abkhazia shortly before the outbreak of hostilities. Large containers of military equipment—including antiaircraft systems and GRAD rocket systems—were seen being carted into the region. The Kremlin had previously supplied heavy military equipment (e.g., T-55 battle tanks) via the Roki Tunnel to the South Ossetians in 2003. Russia also attempted to squeeze Georgia economically, by banning key exports such as mineral water and wine. Further, Russia scrambled to erect military bases in Java, South Ossetia, and Gudauta, Abkhazia. Indeed, Andrei Illarionov has suggested that a long-hatched grand plan existed to launch a war against Georgia.[84]

In conjunction with its militarization of the region, Russia distributed passports to ethnic Abkhazians and South Ossetians, provided them with political and military support, assisted in forced deportation of Georgian citizens living in these enclaves, and enacted an embargo of Georgian products. Russian media began an intensive anti-Georgia IO campaign to undermine domestic and international support for the regime in Tbilisi.

Still, the war caught many in the region by surprise. Many experts expected that if a war were to erupt, it would first ignite in Abkhazia, not South Ossetia. Consider the title of a June 2008 International Crisis Group report: "Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia."[85] Reasons vary as to why war did not break out there first. Abkhazia is much larger yet less ethnically integrated than South Ossetia—ethnic Abkhazians and ethnic Georgians are more isolated from one another than Georgians and Ossetians are in South Ossetia, which is an ethnic hodgepodge of Georgian villages surrounded by Ossetian ones. Abkhazia had also seen military reinforcements throughout early 2008, making war there a tougher sell in Tbilisi. Even still, some Europeans were whispering in Saakashvili's ear to accept the loss of Abkhazia. There was growing talk among some Georgian hawks in government of a preemptive strike against

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[83] Olga Allenova, "Russia and Georgia Are Fighting for South Ossetia," *Kommersant*, August 9, 2008, quoted in Niedermaier, *Countdown to War in Georgia*, 395.

[84] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 22.

[85] International Crisis Group, "Georgia and Russia."

Abkhazia, to take advantage of the fact that there was only a small contingent of Russian peacekeepers; seize the area around Sukhumi, the capital; and then negotiate a more favorable settlement.[86]

In late July 2008, Georgian forces' readiness was low, with much of their defense leadership away on holiday. During the previous few summers, cross-border tit-for-tat skirmishes along Georgia's ABL with South Ossetia were common. In July 2004, Georgian peacekeepers, which consisted of a small battalion stationed just outside Tskhinvali, had intercepted a Russian convoy setting off a series of skirmishes that nearly escalated into war. Four years later there were similar tensions after South Ossetian separatists began shelling the Georgian villages of Avnevi and Nuli along the border and Russians mobilized thousands of *kontraktniki*, or "volunteers"—Russian mercenaries including Chechen and Cossack fighters—in North Ossetia. "Everything went so fast," one Georgian officer said. "It was hard to tell who was a peacekeeper and who was a combatant."[87]

Table 2: Estimated Size of Forces Deployed in 2008 War[88]

Type of force	Russia	Georgia	South Ossetia	Abkhazia
Troops	40,000	20,000	16,000	5,000–9,000
Armored vehicles	1,200	400	70	100
Aircraft	200	24	-	-

Note: Troop numbers are rough estimates and include active-duty troops, reservists, self-defense forces, and peacekeepers.

All told, Russia mobilized some forty thousand forces over the course of the five-day war, divided almost evenly between South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This force size was more than double the size of Georgia's, which was much more than needed to pacify a province the size of Rhode Island, much less, as Ronald Asmus put it, to bail out a handful of Russian peacekeepers, as Russia claimed.[89] Fearing an imminent invasion, Georgia countermobilized. All told, Georgia would send 400 tanks and armored personnel carriers, 270 artillery, and 24

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[86] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 144.

[87] Interview with Georgian officers at their J3 headquarters in Tbilisi, June 13, 2017.

[88] Data comes from Cantin, Pendleton, and Moilanen, *Threat Tactics Report*; Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*; and from briefings and interviews with Georgian military officials based in Gori and Tbilisi, June 12–15, 2017.

[89] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 165.

fixed-wing aircraft (Sukhoi Su-25 and L-39) and air defenses (Buk-M1). Its elite First Brigade, which is normally only a few miles away in Gori, was deployed in Iraq, so Georgia sent its Fourth Infantry Brigade.

Invasion

Day 1—August 7, 2008: A Ground Invasion

Georgia's plan of attack was straightforward: to strike first and crush the South Ossetian force and then advance quickly and deeply into the enclave to block reinforcements from Russia from moving south. To do this, the Georgian military made a decision to launch a three-pronged attack to occupy the whole of Tskhinvali, as it would deliver a symbolic blow against the South Ossetians and, by flying the Georgian flag above the capital, signal its control of the breakaway province. Tskhinvali sits at the base of a bowl, surrounded on three sides by heights. Georgia's military leaders sought to occupy the high ground to enable their forces to control the city, thus allowing other units to advance north, both to capture key terrain—specifically the Dzara bypass—and to protect ethnic Georgian villages.[90]

By 2300 hours, Georgian army and Interior Ministry forces, including dozens of tanks and heavy artillery, were positioned along South Ossetia's border, waiting for the signal to advance. The movement of heavy arms was a violation of previous agreements that banned such equipment in the two regions. All told, the Georgian military mobilized some twelve thousand soldiers and seventy-five tanks (T-72s), backed by four thousand Interior Ministry forces and seventy armored vehicles (Cobras).[91] The operational plan also involved one brigade seizing key South Ossetian towns and villages surrounding the capital within a matter of days, including the village of Khetagurovo to the west, the Prisi heights and towns of Dmenis and Sarbuk to the east, and two brigades moving north of the capital to occupy the village of Gufta.[92] This would effectively choke off Tskhinvali, thus allowing Georgian forces to move northward to the Roki Tunnel, which bisects South Ossetia and Russia, in order to prevent Russian-backed forces from advancing from the north. Simultaneously, army squads of special task forces backed by tanks and artillery would conduct cleanup operations to sweep the capital of any South Ossetian forces. The plan
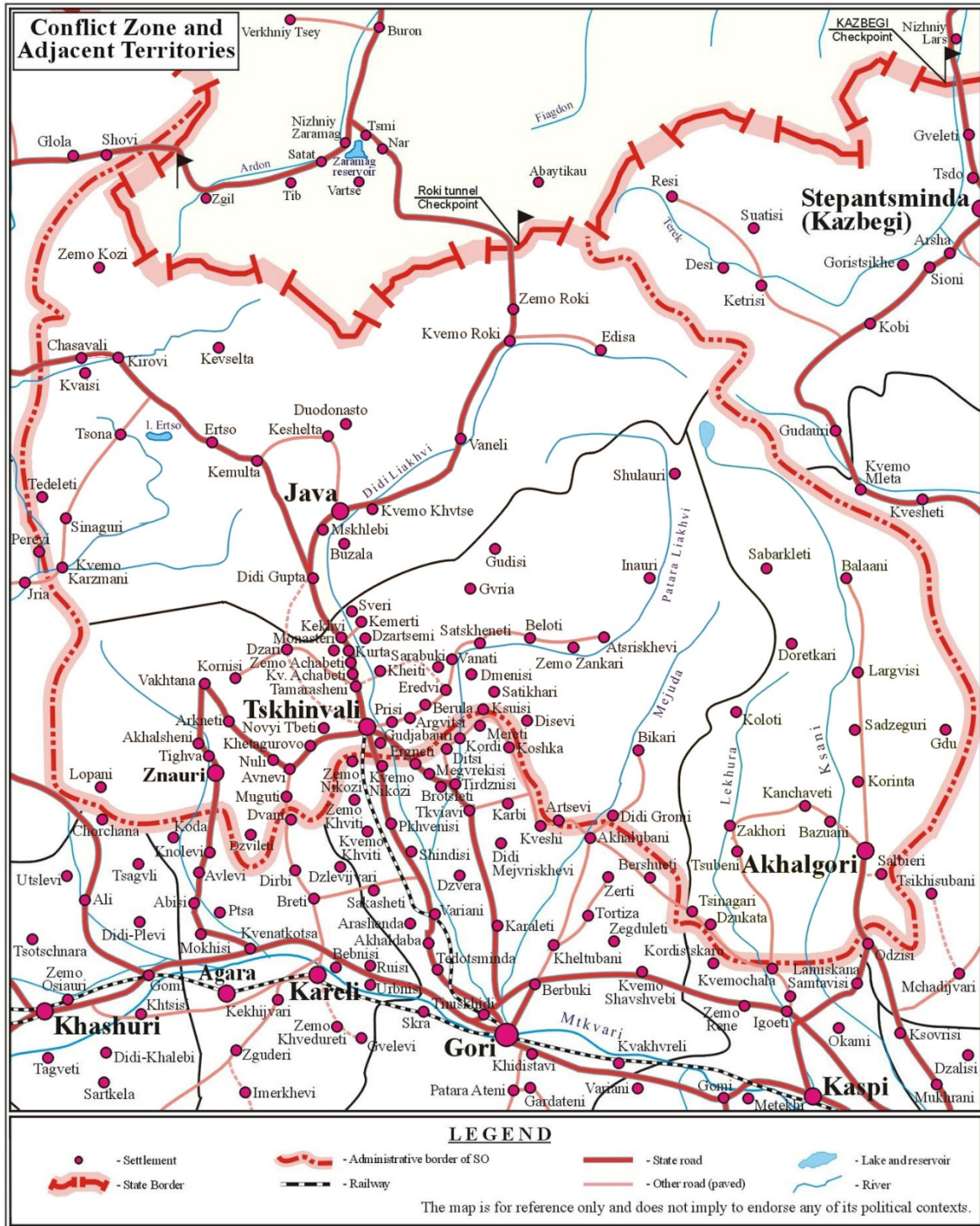
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[90] Ibid., 175.

[91] Lavrov, "Timeline of Russian-Georgian Hostilities in August 2008," 47.

[92] Ibid., 44–47.

Figure 3: Map of South Ossetia[93]

[93] "Conflict Zone and Adjacent Territories," Human Rights Watch, accessed on October 21, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/multimedia_images_2015/southossetia0109_0.jpg.

was to create safe corridors for the eventual evacuation of Georgian citizens if needed.[94]

Georgia's Fourth Infantry Brigade advanced from the west and was ordered to capture the village of Khetagurovo as a way to cut off the Zarskaya road. The brigade would then move to control the village of Gufta and its strategic bridge. Farther west, two units—consisting primarily of the Independent Combined Mountain Rifle Battalion and an Interior Ministry special task force squad—attacked South Ossetia's weakly defended flank to try to seize the town of Kvaysa, advance northward, and sever the Trans-Caucasus Motorway linking North and South Ossetia via the Roki Tunnel. Meanwhile, Georgia's Third Brigade advanced along the left flank and was tasked to control the Prisi heights and then capture the villages of Dmenis and Sarabuk, bypassing Tskhinvali to meet up with the Third Brigade in Gufta.[95]

The brunt of the Georgian invasion, however, was focused on pushing through and capturing Tskhinvali. The advancing units consisted primarily of Interior Ministry special task forces, armed mostly with machine guns and grenade launchers, backed by a combined tank battalion from nearby Gori, some special-

operations forces (SOF), and a Defense Ministry light infantry battalion. The operation was backed by a reserve force—the Fifty-Third Light Infantry Battalion and the Fifth Infantry Brigade based in Khoni—and Georgian peacekeepers stationed near the South Ossetian capital. Because of the intensity of the exchanges between Georgian and local forces immediately prior to the war, the local government had ordered that all women and children be evacuated from the capital and resettled in safer villages or in Russia. This meant that Tskhinvali was mostly empty when Georgian forces entered.

The capital and its suburbs were heavily shelled throughout August 8. Attempts to surgically strike command and military facilities were hampered by poor targeting accuracy and intelligence, resulting in damaged civilian infrastructure and residences. Interestingly, Georgian forces were instructed not to target Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali. It was rumored that in a phone call between their respective commanders, it was conveyed that the Russian peacekeepers would be guaranteed their safety in exchange for their neutrality

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[94] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 40.

[95] Lavrov, "Timeline of Russian-Georgian Hostilities in August 2008," 47.

during the operation.[96] Artillery from the Fourth Infantry Brigade targeted Khetagurovo to prepare the movement of ground forces into Tskhinvali.

By the end of the first night of fighting, Georgia controlled most of the high ground around Tskhinvali and secured a few villages. However, they crucially failed to capture key terrain to the north, including the Gupta Bridge and Roki Tunnel. This was a fatal mistake.

Day 2—August 8, 2008: The Battle of Tskhinvali

Early in the morning, the Forty-First and Forty-Second Light Infantry Battalions seized the village of Muguti and then overtook Khetagurovo. The Forty-Third Battalion advanced westward, meeting little resistance, and occupied a number of Ossetian villages. East of Tskhinvali the Third Infantry Brigade carried out cleanup operations of Ossetian villages and strategic terrain, taking mortar fire from the heights around Tskhinvali. Moreover, Georgian Interior Ministry forces were blocked from entering Kvaysa by a dug-in platoon of South Ossetian forces. In the capital's southern outskirts, Georgian forces clashed with Russian peacekeepers, sending three T-72s into the perimeter of their compound, killing a handful of peacekeepers and locals. This slowed the Georgian forces' movement northward. For backup, Georgia's air force sent three Mi-24 helicopters to the region; thousands of extra reserve forces were also mobilized that morning; and Georgia's Second Infantry Brigade, normally stationed in the western city of Senaki, was deployed.

Around late morning, Georgia's Fourth Infantry Brigade entered Tskhinvali from the south, meeting little resistance at first. They erected roadblocks and cleared blocks of resistance. Much of the capital had already been emptied of noncombatants. The advancing forces erected a blockade of sorts around a compound of Russian peacekeepers.[97] Most of the resistance consisted of South Ossetian commando units, who were lightly armed but held strategic apartment along the city's southern perimeter. East of the city, the Third Brigade met heavy resistance from South Ossetian forces.

Russia had forces already stationed in its so-called North Caucasus Military District, consisting of competent fighters, including its Forty-Second Motorized Rifle Division, Russia's Fourth Air Force and Air Defense Army, hardened by several years of war in Chechnya.[98]

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96 Ibid., 48.

97 Ibid., 53.

98 Ibid., 40.

These forces had already begun restructuring prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 2008, switching from division to brigade-level structures. But they were poorly equipped, relying on aged T-72s or T-62s rather than T-80s or T-90 tanks. The same could be said of Russian aircraft, little of which had been upgraded.[99] Russia held a series of exercises earlier that summer involving ten thousand forces—primarily from the Fifty-Eighth Army and Fourth Air Force, together with the Black Sea Fleet—partly as a show of force to deter any Georgian advances in the region.

After the Kavkaz 2008 exercises, Russia left two motorized rifle battalions near its border with South Ossetia. These forces were able to mobilize in a matter of hours after Georgia's August 7 incursion into South Ossetia. By 1800 hours on August 8, a column of Russian soldiers from its Fifty-Eighth Army and Seventy-Sixth Guards Assault Division, backed by heavy artillery and two tank columns (roughly 150 armored vehicles), advanced through the Roki Tunnel. They intervened under the banner of defending Russian peacekeepers and their citizens in South Ossetia.[100] Russia's air force also began its aerial assault, targeting Georgian

artillery and infantry. There were reports of Russia-backed militias engaging in looting, arson attacks, and even ethnic cleansing.[101] The goal of the Russian military operations was to quickly take control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia while establishing air and sea supremacy by deploying massive amounts of ground, air, and naval forces. "In other words," as Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund put it, it was "a strategy fully in line with Soviet military thinking."[102] Russia also sought to prevent Georgia from resupplying its military by cutting off its ports, roads, and railroads.

Around midday, Russia began its heavy air campaign, as Su-25s and Su-24Ms pummeled Georgian forces in and near Tskhinvali. Together with South Ossetian militias on the ground, Russian airpower battered the Fourth Brigade's Forty-Second Light Infantry Battalion located on the western outskirts of the capital, killing or wounding dozens. This dealt a tremendous blow to Georgian morale on the first full day of fighting. The government in Tbilisi, after being informed of their army's steady retreat from Tskhinvali, announced a humanitarian cease-fire around 1400 hours, providing a corridor for civilians to flee safely out of the city (few

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[99] Ibid., 41.

[100] At the time, Russia said that it was invading to prevent the slaughter of two thousand Ossetians, a statement that later turned out to be false.

[101] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 22.

[102] Pallin and Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia."

Ossetians took them up on their offer). Artillery from Russia's 693rd Motorized Rifle Regiment and 292nd Combined Artillery Regiment hammered Georgian forces as they retreated from the city. Russian air strikes extended beyond South Ossetia and into the territory of Georgia. The military base in Vaziani, southeast of Tbilisi, and Marnueli, south of the capital, came under sustained bombardment from the air. Even still, Georgia's Second Infantry Brigade positioned itself to retake the village Khetagurovo. Georgian artillery continued to target Ossetian villages. And a few army units, backed by a few tanks, remained in the capital's southern outskirts. But after heavy artillery and mortar fire from Russian forces, these units were ordered to retreat southward. Over the course of the day, some 3,500 Russian soldiers backed by thirty tanks crossed into South Ossetia— hardly an overwhelming force yet enough that by the end of August 8 the city of Tskhinvali had been cleared of Georgian forces and the Zarskaya route had also been retaken by Russian-backed forces.[103]

Day 3—August 9, 2008: The Second Battle of Tskhinvali

Georgian forces made a second attempt to retake parts of Tskhinvali. The Twenty-Second and Twenty-Third Light Infantry Battalions of the Second Brigade advanced toward Khetagurovo. Russian forces initially retreated from the village and moved into the city to rescue the Russian peacekeepers from their blockade. Meanwhile, Georgia's Forty-Third Light Infantry Battalion, backed by some reserve units, carried out an offensive against the Znaur district of South Ossetia, and the Third Brigade continued its offensive to retake the high ground. The Georgians proceeded cautiously, bruised as they were by Russia's entrance into the war. By midday they had recaptured Khetagurovo and resumed shelling of the capital. They also had managed to shoot down three of Russia's combat aircraft, killing one colonel and capturing another. Georgian Mi-24 helicopters even were briefly able to attack South Ossetian defenses near the village of Gudzabar. Georgia was preparing its forces to storm the city again and retake it.

Russia began amassing more forces from the north to the capital. The commander of the operation, Lieutenant General Anatoliy Khrulev, moved his forces in from the west to take defensive positions along the capital's southern flank, in order to wait for reinforcements. Georgian forces reentered the capital from the south. A Russian convoy was surprised when it encountered Georgia's Second Brigade, and a firefight ensued, killing a handful of soldiers on

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[103] Cantin, Pendleton, and Moilanen, *Threat Tactics Report*, 8–9.

both sides. Lieutenant General. Khrulev, who commanded Russia's Fifty-Eighth Army, was injured in the melee. The Georgian forces began shelling the Russian peacekeepers' barracks. Russian forces, which consisted of the 135th Motorized Rifle Regiment's First Battalion, found themselves surrounded, and much of the convoy withdrew, coming under fire from Khetagurovo, which had been retaken by Georgian forces. At about 1500 hours, another Russian Su-25 was shot down near Djava in a friendly fire incident, killing the pilot.[104] Shortly afterward, an artillery battle between Russian and Georgian forces ensued, as Russian *Spetsnaz* forces intervened. Russian forces holed up along the Zarskaya incurred heavy losses, given that they were in plain view of the enemy. Russian artillery eventually was able to push back the Georgian forces along the road. Russian special forces also lifted the partial blockade around their peacekeeper base. By nightfall, with its military's command and control broken down, Georgian forces were ordered to disengage, retreating to border villages while carrying out retrograde operations against the enemy. By nightfall the capital was mostly under the control of local South Ossetian militias. To the east, Georgia's Third Infantry Brigade had begun retreating. The only territory Georgia controlled by this point was Khetagurovo and a few insignificant villages. Morale was low and exhaustion high by the end of the third day of fighting.

Just north of the Russian border, Prime Minister Putin had arrived to orchestrate the military campaign. He was reported to be incensed by what he saw as slow military progress and especially by the Georgian ambush that wounded Khrulev. Putin then ordered the pullout of nearly all paramilitary forces, and operational command was handed to the Pskov Seventy-Sixth Airborne Division. Most importantly, he would open a second front and attack Georgian forces from the west.

The Western Front

Georgia had left its left flank along the Abkhazian border completely unguarded. In the middle of the third night, Russian forces began to advance, having launched short-range missiles mounted with cluster munitions against Georgia's naval port at Poti to the south. The strike killed five Georgian sailors and injured thirty more.[105] Russian forces also raided and seized the Second Infantry's base at Senaki, which at that point had been inhabited by about a thousand Georgian army reserves. Around 0530 about six hundred Russian marines and 120 vehicles aboard a naval

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[104] Lavrov, "Timeline of Russian-Georgian Hostilities in August 2008," 62.

[105] Ibid., 64.

vessel were anchored in the Ochamchira harbor, ready to advance. A few hours later, Abkhazian troops, backed by heavy artillery and air support, began an offensive to retake the Kodori Gorge. During the Abkhazian offensive, Turkey delivered several armored personnel carriers (APCs) to Georgia, but the movement of these APCs fueled rumors that NATO was resupplying the overmatched Georgian forces. That same afternoon, Russia's navy effectively blockaded Abkhazia's coastline from all shipping. A small fleet of Georgian navy boats fleeing Poti came under attack from the Russian naval forces near Ochamchira. The operation demonstrated Russia's combined arms capabilities as well as Georgia's lack of territorial defense and naval capacity.

Figure 4: Map of Abkhazia

Day 4—August 10: A Disorderly Retreat

As shelling continued along the Zarskaya route, Russian forces—including the Forty-Second Motorized Rifle Division, normally based in Chechnya—poured across the Roki Tunnel and into South Ossetia. Throughout the night, Russian *Spetsnaz* carried out cleanup operations

of Georgian villages across South Ossetia's north. Another regiment of Russian soldiers entered the enclave from the west. By daybreak a division of some 4,500 soldiers, twenty-nine tanks (T-62s), and 250-plus APCs were approaching the capital, facing little resistance. The invasion caused major traffic jams along the main motorway near Djava. All told, Russia had some ten thousand forces in South Ossetia. By the early afternoon the last holdouts of Georgian forces had fled the enclave, with the Second Brigade taking up defensive fortifications in Georgian villages on the southeast side of the ABL, as well as between Tskhinvali and Gori, the largest city between South Ossetia and Tbilisi and an important military and transportation hub. Despite Georgia's leadership announcing that it had officially withdrawn from South Ossetia and ended hostilities, exchanges of artillery fire continued between both sides. During the night, Georgia resumed shelling of the South Ossetian capital, but it abandoned its hopes of reentering into South Ossetia.[106]

Meanwhile, in Abkhazia, Russian airborne assault troops—roughly four battalions—were airlifted to Ochamchira, while others arrived by railroad. All told, Abkhazia-backed forces stood at roughly nine thousand.

Throughout the day, their artillery pummeled Georgian targets in the Kodori Gorge. By evening their forces had taken up positions along the Inguri River, which divides Abkhazia from Georgia. The bulk of Russia's backup consisted of airborne troops, not heavy arms or artillery. By that evening, Russia's Black Sea Fleet had arrived from Sevastopol, part of Ukraine's Crimea, and positioned itself in the harbor off Abkhazia's coastline. Russian forces entered into Zugdidi, a Georgian city near the ABL.[107]

Day 5—August 11: The Battle for Gori

Russian airstrikes continued throughout the night against Georgian targets near Gori, shutting down Georgia's mobile air defense system. Previously, they had also bombed Georgia's military barracks in Gori, killing sixty civilians, and later targeted airfields in Gori and Senaki.[108] The assault from South Ossetia into Georgian territory was led by a regiment in Russia's Seventy-Sixth Airborne Assault Division. They met some resistance from Georgian army forces fortified in the town of Avnevi. Despite a few ambushes, Russian forces advanced along the west bank of the Liakhva River. Russian forces entered the village of Variani, the home of a Georgian logistics base, as Georgia's Second

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[106] Ibid., 67.

[107] Ibid., 68.

[108] Cantin, Pendleton, and Moilanen, *Threat Tactics Report*, 9.

Infantry Brigade fell back to Gori. The city of Gori takes its name from the Georgian word for "hill" and lies along an important highway running east and west that bifurcates Georgia. A Georgian convoy came under attack, followed by a series of skirmishes involving Russian paratroopers that left several Georgian soldiers killed. Russian forces sustained no casualties. Mikheil Saakashvili was actually in Gori during the battle there but fled after Russian Su-25 jets appeared overhead. By evening Georgian forces began to pull back from the city, most of them retreating toward Tbilisi, while some fled to the west toward Kutaisi, Georgia's second-largest city.[109] Russian-backed forces did not target the retreating soldiers, though they reportedly set Gori's university, post office, and other government buildings on fire.[110]

Instead, Russian forces holed up in Variani, expecting a Georgian counterattack that never came. Instead, Georgian forces had fallen back to Mtskheta, the ancient capital and natural defensive fortification just northwest of Tbilisi. By this point, there was widespread belief among the political leadership in Tbilisi that Russia's war aims were not as limited as previously thought. There was a mounting suspicion that Russia aimed not just to retake Abkhazia and South Ossetia but also to advance on Tbilisi and overthrow Saakashvili. Russia's air force had bombed the Vaziani and Marneuli military bases on the outskirts of Tbilisi. It also tried but failed to target Georgia's oil pipeline, as well as its international airport, construction plants, and civilian radar station. Confusion reigned in the capital. Locals stockpiled foodstuffs, and long queues formed at gas stations and ATMs. Rumors that six Russian strategic bombers were headed toward Tbilisi circulated but turned out to be false. Georgia's leadership was divided on what to do next: whether to wait and defend the capital against the pending Russian advance, retreat into the countryside and fight a guerrilla-like insurgency, or sue for peace.[111]

In the west, Russian forces had seized the airfield at Senaki and occupied Zugdidi, while Abkhazian forces controlled Kodori Gorge, where Georgian forces were surrounded (some shed their uniforms and fled). Georgian troops were not targeted by Russia-backed forces. Interestingly, though accused by their enemy of ethnic cleansing, Russia's military mostly did not target civilian infrastructure—a notable exception was a missile strike that hit the central square of Gori, killing eight civilians and a Dutch

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[109] Lavrov, "Timeline of Russian-Georgian Hostilities in August 2008," 72.

[110] Cantin, Pendleton, and Moilanen, *Threat Tactics Report*, 9.

[111] Asmus, *Little War Rhat Shook the World*, 189–214.

television cameraman.[112] Russia's lack of precision-guided munitions, including its failure to complete its version of GPS called GLONASS, led to the Russian air force's inability to find and hit targets.[113] At least one Russian commentator remarked that had Russia targeted Georgia's political leadership, the outcome of the war would have been more favorable to Russia.[114] By the end of the fifth day of fighting, Russia was able to, in effect, split Georgia into two by occupying a crucial artery, the east–west highway.[115] The following day, Gori fell to Russian forces.

By August 12, however, a French-led cease-fire was presented to Saakashvili, who reluctantly agreed to sign the document. The six-part agreement sought to end hostilities, allow access to humanitarian aid, withdraw forces on both sides back to bases or their ex-ante positions, and open up international discussions on the statuses of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian forces began their withdrawal on August 17 but would leave checkpoints in place near Gori, Poti, and other places. There were calls for an exchange of POWs. According to EU monitors,

Russia did not withdraw completely as per the agreement and continues to hold nineteen bases in South Ossetia. Russia also unilaterally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[116] Russia's war aims are difficult to discern, even with several years of hindsight; but based on a survey of analysts we interviewed, their aims were as follows:

- To prevent an alleged "genocide" and defend Russian "citizens" in South Ossetia.

- To defend Russian peacekeepers based in the region.

- To punish Georgia for its actions.

- To send a strong signal to Georgia and other post-Soviet states keen on joining NATO.[117]

A September 2009 report by the EU's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia Report (IIFFMCG) found that Russia's initial claims of intervening to prevent a genocide were grossly exaggerated and lacked merit.[118] That said, the report was equally, if not more, damning to Georgia's claims

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[112] Lavrov, "Timeline of Russian-Georgian Hostilities in August 2008," 73.

[113] Cohen and Hamilton, *Russian Military and the Georgian War*.

[114] Ibid., 403.

[115] From interviews with Georgian military officials in Tbilisi and Gori, June 11–15, 2017.

[116] Asmus, *Little War That Shook the World*, 189–214.

[117] Ibid., 42–43.

[118] Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Report.

that it was a helpless victim of Russian aggression. Indeed, the report asserted that Russia's movement of military equipment did not justify Tbilisi's disproportionate August 7 attack on Tskhinvali.

Nearly a decade later, the war is over but tensions along the ABL still simmer. Russia continues to occupy nearly 20 percent of Georgian territory. Over two hundred thousand internally displaced persons remain from the war. Georgia finds itself, at least territorially, a shell of its former self. Since 2008, economic growth has slowed, and the windfall of profits it expected from hosting a number of Western-financed pipelines linking the Caspian Sea to Europe was never fully realized. Georgian farmers living near South Ossetia steal and deface the green border signs that the Russian military erect along the border. Roughly fifteen people get detained by Russian forces per month.[119] The war demonstrated the inability or unwillingness of Europe to rush to any nation's aid in the event of an attack by Russia. Russian forces have gradually moved the ABL deeper into Georgian territory, giving rise to a commonly heard refrain among Georgians about a "farmer who goes to bed at night in Georgia and wakes up in South Ossetia." Others see this as a more

sinister form of creeping annexation, a form of conquest that Russia is also demonstrating in parts of Ukraine. In Abkhazia over thirty thousand Georgians face limits on grade school education—the Georgian language is no longer taught in Abkhazian schools—and medical services, as checkpoints limit their mobility. Each August 8, South Ossetians now celebrate their independence day. Georgia's survival as a state is not guaranteed. Russian tanks and artillery sit just across the ABL. As part of the 2008 cease-fire agreement, there is no Georgian military presence along the ABL with South Ossetia. The fact remains that if it wanted to, Russia could occupy Tbilisi in a matter of hours.

Military Lessons Learned from the 2008 War

Russia

General Nikolay Makarov of the Russian army, then chief of the general staff, remarked shortly after the conflict that Russia was incapable of fighting a modern war.[120] The war served as a wake-up call that revealed Russia's military deficiencies, both in terms of its outdated doctrine, strategy, and status of forces, as well as in terms of Russia's future intentions regarding its so-called "zones of privileged interest."[121] The

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[119] This statistic is from EU monitors we spoke to in Gori, June 14, 2017.

[120] Solovyov, "Russian Army Not Fit for Modern War."

[121] Bryce-Rogers, "Russian Military Reform," 339.

war was perversely modern and mid-twentieth century at the same time. It was modern in that it utilized a concerted and relatively sophisticated denial-of-service cyber campaign to disrupt Georgian command, control, and communications (C3) capabilities, the first war of its kind in history. Electronic warfare (EW) was also deployed, to varying degrees of effectiveness. It was similarly modern in that Russia relied heavily on local proxies of dubious loyalties and professionalism to carry out both an array of conventional and unconventional types of war. These actors provided the Russians with a way to engage in plausible deniability and to avoid deploying more of its forces, who were nominally based in the region as neutral peacekeepers.

Yet perversely, the war was primitively fought, employing organizational tactics and technologies left over from the twentieth century—a conventional war fought using maneuver warfare. The war was short, given the mismatch in the two sides' military power and capabilities. Not unlike, say, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 2008 war revealed the benefit of surprise, speed (specifically the first-mover advantage), and superior firepower. It was fought in a way that even Clausewitz would have

recognized: focusing on an enemy's center of gravity, fighting with overwhelming force, and utilizing combined arms, however problematically. On some level, the war was a template for what would occur in Ukraine in 2014, a mix of tactical improvisation with strategic-level maneuvers, of primitive forms of warfare with advanced weaponry.

Indeed, the war was eerily reminiscent of twentieth-century conflict. Structurally, Russia's command and control proved wanting, with poor interoperability between its air, army, and naval units. Orders from the general staff took too long to reach the front line, given the level of bureaucracy and unclear and overlapping chains of command.[122] Mobilization was slow and plagued by poor communications, with field officers often relying on insecure and low-tech mobile phones. General Anatoly Khrulev, who commanded Russia's Fifty-Eighth Army, reportedly had to borrow a satellite phone just to communicate with his troops.[123] Satellite-targeting support for artillery units was also inadequate, which contributed to Russian casualties and friendly fire incidents.[124] According to one analyst, "The elite rapid reaction units were armed with obsolete weaponry . . . inherited from the Soviet Union. It

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[122] Gayday, "Reform of the Russian Army."

[123] McDermott, "Russia's Armed Forces."

[124] Ibid.

was tried and tested, but it was also aged and decrepit."[125] Although Russian airborne troops performed decently, air defenses were weak and reconnaissance capability in the conflict zone proved inadequate.[126]

Worse, nearly 30 percent of its army comprised poorly trained conscripts. Russian pilots received little training. And there was ineffective leadership at the NCO (noncommissioned officer) level. Russia relied on Soviet-age tactics as well as technologies, not helped by a Cold War mindset among its older officer corps. It won the war solely because it outmatched its opponent on the battlefield, spending thirty times as much as Georgia and deploying forty times as many forces. Some 60–70 percent of its tanks broke down along the north–south route linking South Ossetia and Gori.[127] Unlike their Georgian counterparts, Russian frontline forces lacked GPS, night vision, IFF, or thermal imaging.[128] There were few precision-guided munitions. Their Su-25s lacked computerized targeting, resulting in high numbers of civilian casualties. Russians targeted

airfields that were not even operational. The compasses Russian soldiers used were the same ones used in World War II. Much of the weaponry Russia had were approaching the end of their lifespans.[129]

The war prompted then president Medvedev to announce sweeping reforms to the Russian armed forces, including advancing its C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) capabilities, improving officer training, and upgrading its precision-guided munitions, which performed poorly during the war. There was a lack of leadership at the NCO level. The combat readiness of Russian forces was also found lacking, as was its efficiency at combined arms.[130]

In 2008 General Makarov, together with Defense Minister Anatoli Serdyukov, sought to reform Russia's armed forces by making them smaller, more agile, and more professional—a model that was called "New Look." The war reinforced the importance of joint operations as

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[125] Lavrov, "Reform of the Airborne Troops," 37.

[126] Ibid., 39.

[127] From various sources, including briefings by Georgian military officials in Gori, June 14, 2017.

[128] Besides breaking down, these older models lacked IFF equipment (Identification, Friend or Foe), which raised the risk of more friendly fire incidents. See Pallin and Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia," 410.

[129] Lavrov, "Reform of the Airborne Troops," 51.

[130] On Russian military reform, also see Thornton, *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces*; and McDermott, *Transformation of Russia's Armed Forces*.

an essential component for its future strategy.[131] There was a radical restructuring of the Russian air force, reducing the number of airbases and replacing air defense corps and divisions with aerospace defense brigades. The top-heavy corps left over from Soviet times was disbanded in favor of a leaner officer corps that rewards both Kremlin loyalty and battlefield effectiveness. The MoD sought to slash the size of the armed forces by 1 million by 2012, downsizing the general staff to two hundred thousand officers. Agility has come from mobilizing its forces around smaller brigades, rather than large divisions, which has improved its command and control and led to greater flexibility on the battlefield to outflank opponents. And professionalism comes from less reliance on undisciplined conscripts, which created problems during previous wars in Chechnya as well as the 2008 war in Georgia. Russia's military also retired its aging Soviet-era equipment in favor of smarter weapon systems like the SU-35 fighters and Topol-M ballistic missiles.[132] Russia's navy also was overhauled, including its aging Black Sea Fleet.[133]

Another factor shaping Russian military reform is its threat environment. The MoD decided that fighting a major war with multiple adversaries was no longer a likely scenario to prepare for.[134] Instead, the Russian armed forces were tasked to prepare to fight and win local conflicts along Russia's frontier, just like the one it engaged in Ukraine in 2014.

Nearly a decade after the 2008 war, having learned its lesson and been embarrassed by its less-than-stellar performance, Russia now boasts a stronger armed forces with greater professionalism, greater mobility, more modernized equipment and weaponry, and a streamlined command staff, with more devolution of authority to the operational level.

The war also presented opportunities to better understand the role of public opinion during war. Georgia lost the conventional war but arguably won the war for international public opinion. From the get-go, Russia faced difficulties navigating, much less controlling, the media landscape during the five-day conflict. It fared better than in previous conflicts—namely, in Chechnya and Afghanistan—but struggled to get its side of the story told to international media. Global perceptions would not shift until the following year, when the EU report was

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[131] Pallin and Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia," 413.

[132] Bryce-Rogers, "Russian Military Reform." Also see Boltenkov, "Reform of the Russian Navy."

[133] Boltenkov, "Reform of the Russian Navy," 84.

[134] Gayday, "Reform of the Russian Army," 20.

released and heaped much of the blame on the Georgians.

Russia sought to portray itself, particularly its peacekeepers and allies in South Ossetia, as the victims to Georgian aggression, not the initiators of the war. This was a strategy Russia had used in previous conflicts in Afghanistan and Chechnya.[135] It depicted the Georgian leadership as unhinged and in the pocket of the United States (Russian television showed US equipment from their recent joint military exercise as proof of collusion). It depicted its actions as justified under international law to defend its own citizens and prevent what it called a genocide. Russian media tended to inflate the estimates of civilians killed in the early phase of the war, suggesting that as many as two thousand civilians had perished. The 2009 EU report later discredited these figures.[136] Finally, Russia studied the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and carried out press conferences modeled after the Pentagon. It flew in some fifty reporters to South Ossetia days before the onset of conflict, something it still has never explained.

Russia has since learned from its mistakes in 2008. One of the first things it did after the war was hire a pricey Western public relations firm, Ketchum, to hone its messaging.[137] Russia's use of information warfare since 2008 has grown more advanced and now largely operates on three levels: the manipulation of information, espionage, and cyberattacks. The latter is the most novel and consequential, as it allows for increased speed and allows for farther distance. Russian information warfare consists of four pillars: first, and most benignly, it aims to put the best spin it can on ordinary news; second, it incites a population with fake information in order to prep a battlefield; third, it uses disinformation or creates enough ambiguity to confuse people on the battlefield; and fourth, it outright lies when given true information and claims that it is falsified. This information strategy has several objectives: to degrade trust in institutions across the world; to weaken political institutions and norms (e.g., elections); to push populations currently undergoing conflict to simply accept the status quo of the conflict and not push for resolution; and finally, by keeping these areas in perpetual conflict, to nix these countries' chances of joining NATO.

In short, Russia takes advantage of controlling the narrative via propaganda, misinformation, distortion, and what is

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[135] Pallin and Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia," 404.

[136] Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Report.

[137] Kupchinsky, "Russia's Hired Lobbies in the West."

commonly referred to as "fake news," even deploying IO brigades to counter propaganda.[138] The Kremlin has also interestingly deployed traditional values as a form of soft power. Given recent polls that show that Georgians, while pro-EU and pro-NATO, are still a deep-rooted Christian and conservative nation as a whole, especially on social issues, Russia sought to exploit that gap.[139] Finally, Russia has sought to create a certain level of ambiguity as a way to ensure these regional crises stay frozen. Keeping everyone guessing is part of its overall strategy, much as it has done in Ukraine's Donbass region.

The 2008 war acted as an important wake-up call for Russia to reorganize its armed forces from the top down and bring them into the twenty-first century. Russia was surprised by how well trained Georgian forces were at combined arms. This has pushed Russia to move from divisions to light mechanized brigades, to improve its mobility. Russia also realized it lost the narrative of the war, so it boosted its information and cyber warfare capabilities. Yet Russia's officer corps still exhibits a zero-sum mentality when it comes to the projection of power. As one senior Georgian army officer put

it, "The nature of Russians has not changed in over five hundred years."[140]

Georgia

Georgia's battle plan suffered from a number of other setbacks. First, and most puzzlingly, it did not prepare for the eventuality that Russian forces would retaliate on behalf of South Ossetia. For example, Georgia's advancing forces lacked any serious kind of air defense. Second, the Georgian peacekeeping forces under Brigadier General Mamuka Kurashvili, who knew the local terrain well, lacked a central staff, command post, or even functioning radios. His units had never worked together before.[141] As mentioned, they tried to retake the village of Kyaysa in the west but were blocked by Russian irregulars. The Fourth Infantry Brigade, though able to briefly secure the villages of Avnevi and Khetagurovo, got bogged down in urban fighting in Tskhinvali, which they were untrained for, forcing Georgian infantry to have to go back and refight in the city. The Third and Second Brigades were called in to plug gaps in Georgia's defense line. At least one senior Georgian official asked why their forces did not simply circumvent

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[138] Sharkov, "Russia Announces Information Operations Troops."

[139] "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe."

[140] From an interview with a Georgian military officer in Tbilisi, June 12, 2017.

[141] From interviews with senior Georgian military officials in Tbilisi and Gori, June 11–15, 2017.

Tskhinvali to seize the key terrain to its north and prevent a Russian advance.

The 2008 war revealed to the Georgian military other vulnerabilities. The principal lesson learned was that the army had oriented itself away from defending its territorial borders and toward assisting in stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This was done to boost its chances of joining NATO. The Georgian Train and Equip Program that Georgian forces carried out with their US counterparts was mostly focused on counterterrorism operations. According to its 2007 national military strategy, its armed forces would "avoid direct engagement with a militarily superior force" and "resort to asymmetric warfare, guerrilla tactics, and mobile units to maintain combat capabilities and cause profound damage to the adversary."

Regardless of the mismatch in capabilities, the 2008 war effort suffered from poor military planning on the part of the Georgians. Critical information and intelligence were not shared across the services. Special operating procedures (SOPs) were never fully prepared. Reservists arrived with unclear missions. And military doctrine, from artillery to air-ground operations, was found wanting. To take one example, Georgian infantry had no procedures for how to clear or hold buildings. Worse, prior to the war, Georgia reduced its

intelligence capabilities, which led to a lack of sophisticated technologies to locate the enemy, insecure communications, and ineffective coordination.

Georgian air defenses, mostly S-300s and BUKs, performed reasonably well—they managed to shoot down as many as twenty-two planes, including a TU-22 bomber—yet were overwhelmed by Russian airpower. Georgian C2 capabilities were also poor. Communications were not jammed by the enemy, as was reported, but rather just did not work, requiring field commanders, like their Russian counterparts, to rely on insecure mobile phones for communication.[142]

Since the war, Georgia has realigned its military toward what it calls its Georgia Defense Readiness Program, a multimillion-dollar plan to deter Russian aggression along its border via stronger air defense systems, combined arms, and expeditionary operations. "This is a huge paradigm shift for us," a military officer said. "Education and training are our top priorities." "We found out we are way behind," another added. "At the tactical level, we know how to fight, but at the brigade level and above, nobody had this type of expertise." Additionally, Georgia has all but grounded its air force—which prior to the war consisted of a dozen Su-25 attack aircraft—given vulnerabilities to Russian air

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[142] From interviews with Georgian military commanders in Gori, June 14, 2017.

defense systems, as well as the growing need to shift resources toward territorial defense.[143]

In sum, the key takeaway lessons learned for Georgia are the following:

- *Establish greater territorial defense.* Part of Georgia's prewar army reform required a reconfiguration that made its armed forces more professional, mobile, small, lightly armed, and up to NATO standards. But this contradicted Georgia's call for greater self-sufficiency, as reflected in its 2005 national military strategy. This tradeoff was exacerbated by Georgia's interest in joining NATO, which required it to *deemphasize* the threat of foreign invasion, even despite evidence to the contrary.[144] Further, Georgia had prepared its armed forces for two threat scenarios unlike the one it faced in August 2008: classic counterinsurgency and guerrilla-style network warfare, which required lightly armed infantry battalions.[145]

- *Prevent civilian leaders from micromanaging combat operations.* C2 issues were made more complicated by efforts among the civilian leadership in Tbilisi, amid the confusion, to give operational orders during the conflict. What made matters worse was that the leadership in Tbilisi was young, naive, and inexperienced, especially on military affairs. To take one example, panic reportedly set in when their pleas to Washington to send Stingers for surgical strikes against the Roki Tunnel went unanswered.

- *Expand its urban-operations training.* Georgia was not prepared or trained to fight in dense urban terrain, as it did in Tskhinvali. It failed to properly clear or secure buildings and blocks of the enemy, requiring its forces to have to go back and refight in hostile areas, slowing their advance northward.

- *Develop stronger defenses.* Regarding movement and maneuver, while radically improved from the army of the Shevardnadze era, Georgia's infantry was not well trained or accustomed to operating with armor, and they lacked sufficient antitank weaponry. Despite massive military spending and a boost in its military size from twenty-eight thousand to thirty-seven thousand between 2007 and 2008, its

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[143] Pallin and Westerlund, "Russia's War in Georgia," 408.

[144] Tseluiko, "Georgian Army Reform under Saakashvili Prior to the 2008 Five Day War," 9–14.

[145] Ibid., 16.

infantry brigades were still not properly trained or equipped for defense.[146]

- *Improve its combined arms capability.* The Russian military was reportedly quite taken aback by how skilled the Georgian military was at combined arms. But the Georgian military leadership recognized that they had limited close air support (CAS) to back up their ground campaign and shape the battle. To this end, the Georgian military has scrapped its Su-25s and is moving toward all rotary-wing aircraft.

- *Restructure its air force.* A key military lesson of the 2008 war for Georgia was to effectively nix its use of fixed-wing air force. During the war, Georgia's aircraft were rendered ineffectual, due to Russia's air superiority. In 2010 the Georgian air force was abolished as a separate service and repurposed as air and air defense brigades. Georgia's military now only fields rotary-wing aircraft and has sought to get rid of its Soviet models in favor of more-modern US and French ones.

- *Strengthen its cyber defenses.* Since the war, the cyber situation in Georgia has become increasingly complicated. Nearly every aspect of every Georgian's life is in some way impacted by cyberspace, from banking to mobile phones to government services. Efforts to confront the present cyber realities in Georgia are underway but would likely prove insufficient to maintain networks and services if an attack comparable to 2008 were to transpire in the near future. The MoD's efforts to build a resilient cyber force are in their nascent stages and are in need of a significant, coordinated training and development pipeline to establish even a rudimentary national cyber defensive capability. Efforts to mobilize the general population for the defense of the nation are likewise in their nascent planning stages and are fraught with issues, including the potential to increase the number of legally viable targets within an armed conflict (See chapter 4 for more on Georgia's cyber vulnerabilities).

- *Strengthen ties with Western institutions.* At the strategic-political level, Georgia still hopes to join Western clubs such as the EU and NATO, the latter of which it believes is its best guarantee for territorial survival against Russian aggression. However, most Western officials we met said that Georgia's admittance into NATO was not likely to happen in the foreseeable future, if ever.

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[146] Ibid., 17.

Georgia has few friends in the international arena and sits in a dangerous yet strategically important neighborhood. The Georgian military is banking on its Georgian Defense Readiness Program, an intensive effort to shift its defenses away from the types of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism training it received under the Georgian Train and Equip Program, which was in response to Russian complaints that Georgia was allowing its Pankisi Gorge to be used as a safe haven for Chechen guerrillas. By contrast, its new doctrine cites the need to focus primarily on territorial defense.

Chapter IV – Russia's Use of Cyberattacks and Psychological Warfare in Georgia

"Wars of the Future will be information wars."

— Russian Deputy Chief of the General Staff

Aleksandr Burutin, February 2008[147]

The Russia-Georgia War represented the first instance in history in which a coordinated cyberspace attack was synchronized with conventional military operations.[148] While cyberattacks had become an established tool of statecraft by the summer of 2008, they still lack a legal framework and their long-term implications remain poorly understood. Conducted by an invisible army of patriotic citizen hackers, the attacks consisted of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks and website defacements that were similar in nature but different in method to what had occurred in Estonia the year prior. In total, fifty-four government, news, and financial websites were defaced or denied, with the average denial of service lasting two hours and fifteen minutes and the longest lasting six hours.[149] Thirty-five percent of Georgia's networks disappeared during the attacks, with the highest levels of online activity coinciding with Russian tanks moving into South Ossetia on August 8, 9, and 10.[150] The National Bank of Georgia had to suspend all electronic services from August 8 to August 19, 2008. By impeding the Georgian government's ability to react, respond, and communicate, Russia created the time and space to shape the international narrative in the critical early days of the conflict.

The digital attacks, which coincided with Russia's advances into Georgia and indicated a change in warfighting tactics, constituted a new form of warfare. Despite appearances, the attacks were unable to be attributed directly to the Russian state, and their impact was relatively minimal. Still, a patchwork of state, criminal, and citizen-led actors tried to undermine the command and control and information environment of an adversary state during a time of ongoing hostilities with the intent of facilitating tactical successes and strategic gains within the international community. The inclusion of cyber means into a kinetic battle, not as a standalone effect but rather as a force

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[147] "Project Grey Goose Phase II Report."

[148] Examples of the state-sponsored use of cyberattacks prior to 2008 include espionage (e.g., Titan Rain, Moonlight Maze), precision military raids (e.g., Operation Orchard), sabotage (e.g., Stuxnet, the planning for which began in 2007), and coercion (e.g., Estonia).

[149] Tikk et al., "Cyber Attacks against Georgia."

[150] Russel, *Cyber Blockades*.

multiplier, constitutes a logical progression to the natural evolution of conflict and demonstrates the value of information control during conflict. This chapter examines the digital aspects of the Russian-Georgian conflict and establishes the importance "cyber effects" in facilitating kinetic-warfare objectives.

Bits and Bytes

Although the shooting war began on August 7, 2008, the digital mission to undermine the information environment of Georgia likely began almost two years earlier.[151] The long lead time required to exploit an adversary's targets is typical and follows a normal pattern of cyber–weapons systems development. Some experts have found that many of the domains and hosting purchases for the primary malware distribution hub, StopGeorgia.ru, were registered months in advance of the outbreak of hostilities.[152] Another hint is that the hosting company that was used to register the site was

reported by malware-monitoring sites nearly two months prior to the outbreak of the conflict.

While the digital conflict between Georgia and Russia appeared to be a spontaneous response to hostilities, the reality was something else entirely. As the US Cyber Consequences Unit (US-CCU) report on the conflict notes, the digital attacks launched against Georgia occurred in close time proximity to kinetic advances by Russian military forces.[153] There were no reconnaissance or mapping activities common to the early stages of networked attacks. The close timing of digital and kinetic effects strongly indicates prior knowledge of the conflict and challenges the Russian narrative of acting in response to Georgian provocations.

The timing of digital attacks is problematic for the Russian narrative for several reasons. First, it indicates coordination, if not direction, by the Russian state in the perpetration of cyberattacks against Georgian entities. Second, it highlights the near fait accompli and inevitability of the conflict.[154]

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[151] US-CCU, "Overview by the US-CCU of the Cyber Campaign."

[152] Carr, *Inside Cyber Warfare*.

[153] US-CCU, "Overview by the US-CCU of the Cyber Campaign."

[154] A report by GreyLogic ("Project Grey Goose Phase II Report") traced the registration of StopGeorgia.ru through the email address and a phone number listed within the WHOIS database and linked its registration to other known malware and criminal sites, including Nanuet.ru, and to what they believe was the fictitious persona of Andrej V Uglovatyi. Beyond tracing the registration information, the report also traced the Internet Protocol address of the domain and found that it belonged to a small Russian hosting company called SteadyHost. The offices for SteadyHost are next door to a Ministry of Defense research institute called the Center for Research of Military Strength, itself conveniently down the street from the headquarters of Russia's military intelligence.

Further down the investigative chain, the management of the Internet Protocol space was another company whose address in the United Kingdom turned out not to exist.[155] In the end, the ability to accurately attribute the registration, development, and management of the site that served as one of the central repositories for cyberattacks against Georgia provided no direct evidence linking it to the Russian Federation. Although there were significant suspicious relationships, arguably the connections do not meet the international legal standards necessary for assigning blame, but it is widely accepted that the Russian government at least coordinated, if not directed, the attack.

Of course, attribution in conflict is vital.[156] Attribution is one of the more important aspects of developing a legal case for self-defense or preemptive or preventative actions, yet even in a seemingly clear conflict situation, it is difficult. The constraints imposed by international law on states is why hybrid conflict, which minimizes attribution and reduces clarity of conflict participants, remains so contentious and difficult to address.

At the time of the attacks, only 20 percent of the Georgian population was connected to the Internet.[157] The lack of penetration of Internet access into the broader Georgian population reduced the overall impact of the cyber side of the conflict. This stands in stark contrast to Estonia little more than a year earlier, which had more than 66 percent penetration and prided itself as being "E-stonia."[158] Moreover, the economy and diaspora of Georgia were far less dependent on the Internet than Estonia. Although the physical-layer aspects of the Russian-Georgian conflict within cyberspace were constrained by geography, network design, and agreements with other nations, Georgia's systemic dependence on these technologies was substantially less than that of other comparable countries.

What makes the cyberattacks against Georgia more significant is, *not* how they affected the human layer of cyberspace domestically, but rather how it constrained the tools available to the government in Tbilisi to convey their narrative in the early stages of the conflict to the international community. It was

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[155] The company also contained overlapping registration information with another hosting company called Mirhosting.com.

[156] Within the 2017 Tallinn Manual 2.0, a work that examines international law applicable to cyber operations, a great deal of time is spent parsing out the responsibilities of state and non-state actors in determining attribution (M. Schmitt, *Tallinn Manual 2.0*).

[157] "Georgia Internet Users."

[158] Karatzogianni, *Cyber Conflict and Global Politics*.

reported early on that the official website of Saakashvili, the central government site of Georgia, and the home pages of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense were all taken down as kinetic attacks commenced.[159] Additional websites attacked included popular news sites, such as the website of the Georgian television station R2.

To achieve effect beyond the use of conventional weapons, the Russian forces were heavily aided by non-state actors who degraded the communications capabilities of the Georgian state. The attacks against the information dissemination capabilities of Georgia were instigated through attacks against the *logical layers* of its domestic cyberspace and did not target the physical layers of the domestic Internet. Attacks that degraded the communications capabilities of the state also included the influx of propaganda and disinformation, including the replacing of the picture of Saakashvili with one of Adolf Hitler.[160] The degraded communications were achieved through three primary types of attacks against the logical layers of the Georgian Internet to include cross-site scripting (XSS), SQL injections (database manipulations), and DDoS attacks.[161]

None of these attacks are particularly complicated, nor do any of these attacks require any robust skill sets. Largely, these attacks were facilitated by prefabricated tools and techniques disseminated to willing participants.

The significance of early manipulations of Georgian information portals should not be understated. While the domestic impact of these disruptions would have been substantially less than those that occurred in Estonia, the reduction in channels through which to convey and control the narrative of events is likely to have led to a delayed international response. Moreover, the attacks served to mobilize ethnic Russians, South Ossetians, and Abkhazians in support of the ongoing military efforts. This format of combined information operations and kinetic operations would come to serve as a model in later conflicts in Ukraine (2014–present) and Syria (2015).

The human layer of cyberspace is effective at demobilizing support within a targeted population and mobilizing support within the aggressor's own base.[162] Just as traditional kinetic operations can be conducted to achieve both physical and psychological effects, so too can cyber operations. Although

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[159] Danchev, "Coordinated Russia vs Georgia Cyber Attack in Progress."

[160] F. Kramer, Starr, and Wentz, *Cyberpower and National Security*.

[161] Carr, *Inside Cyber Warfare*.

[162] Fitzgerald and Brantly, "Subverting Reality."

some of the hackers behind the exploits used during the Russia-Georgia conflict were very adept, a large number constituted a less skilled group of script kiddies who engaged through prefabricated tools on forums such as StopGeorgia.ru.[163] This both encourages civilian support and safeguards the state against reprisal due to plausible deniability.

Cyber operations against Georgia allowed the time and space for Russian politicians to establish the Russian narrative of events, squarely pinning responsibility for the conflict on a belligerent Georgia. Moreover, their claims that Georgia was engaged in acts of genocide prompted the OSCE, Human Rights Watch, and others to initiate investigations, all of which damaged the initial credibility and communicative capacity of the Georgian state.[164] Some acts attributed by Russia to Georgian soldiers, such as deliberate targeting of pregnant women, were so viscerally disturbing that they led many to doubt whether diplomatic support for Georgia was warranted.[165] The combined effect was a more permissive environment in which to conduct military operations without the constant gaze of the international community.

The cyberattacks against Georgia and their ability to slow the narrative of the Georgian government fit well within Russia's later-defined 2010 military doctrine for warfare, described as "the integrated utilization of military force and forces and resources of a nonmilitary character."[166] It is also in line with the Russian concept of *informatsionnaya voyna* ("information war") and, as previously mentioned, the writings of General Valery Gerasimov.[167] Although the 2008 war predated his 2013 essay, at its core he writes, "The very 'rules of war' have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness."[168]

The interwoven effects of cyber operations against Georgia, to include a constrained physical layer, a degraded logical layer, and a manipulated human layer, while not sufficient to win the war, did facilitate kinetic operations at a negligible cost to Russia. The

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[163] This led to what Alexander Klimburg refers to as "mobilizing cyber power," the act of providing plausibly deniable resources and capabilities to non-state actors. See Klimburg, "Mobilising Cyber Power."

[164] "Putin Accuses Georgia of Genocide."

[165] "Russia/Georgia."

[166] Kofman and Rojansky, "Closer Look at Russia's 'Hybrid War.'"

[167] Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review* 96, no. 1 (2016): 30–38.

[168] Gerasimov, "Value of Science Is in the Foresight."

comparable costs to Georgia were substantially higher. While amid a kinetic war, Georgia was also tasked with reestablishing its global Internet presence and rehabilitating its global image, all while facing an overwhelming military force. To do this, Georgia leveraged both its own technical capabilities and the private capabilities of actors within the United States. In contrast to attacks against Estonia, the Georgians immediately began to seek out assistance from foreign actors. Most significantly, they reached out to state actors in Poland, Estonia, and the United States and private actors in the United States. The latter group poses problems for conflict escalation and highlights one of the potential pitfalls of uncontrolled hybrid conflict.

From a conventional military perspective, the 2008 cyberattacks had limited operational or tactical benefit. The attacks did not truly degrade the command and control functions of the Georgian military. Nor did they fully prevent Georgia from communicating with its citizenry. Strategically, however, the attacks helped to shape the early perceptions of the conflict. While it was unlikely that Georgia would have been able to win against Russia even in the absence of cyberattacks against its government websites, its inability to fully disseminate a counternarrative to Russian claims of genocide and just intervention likely slowed international

involvement and wasted the resources of international organizations. By the time the bullets and bombs of August silenced, the bits and bytes of its cyber conflict began to recede as well. Yet the lingering damage of both remains to this day. Georgia lost significant swaths of its sovereign territory, and there remains a large volume of articles online countering the Georgian narrative of the conflict. While the tools and tactics of cyberspace are new, the logic of controlling the perceptions of war and using any means available to win both physical and human terrain remains largely unchanged.

The reality remains that the digital age is only in its infancy. At present, there are approximately 17.5 billion Internet-enabled devices. By the year 2020 this number is expected to reach more than 20 billion; and within a decade, exceed 50 billion.[169] Although the exact number of connected devices is debated, the impact and reach of these devices is not. The expansion of cyberspace and its increasingly pervasive and critical role in all aspects of human society will make the use of hybrid techniques increasingly beneficial to aggressors and more difficult to defend against. In the nine years since the Russia-Georgia War, an additional 1.5 million Georgians have come online. Should the 2008 conflict have occurred today, the digital effects of cyberattacks against

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[169] Nordrum, "Popular Internet of Things Forecast of 50 Billion Devices by 2020 Is Outdated."

the government, media, and citizens of Georgia would likely have been substantially greater, because the human, physical, and logical layers of cyberspace within the country have grown both in scale and in importance. Next, we turn to the psychological impact of Russia's use of information and cyber warfare.

A Tool for Psychological and Information Warfare

While the cyberattacks had little effect on the conventional war and were not decisive to the outcome of the conflict, they nevertheless offered significant lessons on the character of modern warfare for scholars of conflict and military studies. First, the attacks reinforced the Russian view of cyberspace as a tool for psychological manipulation and information warfare. Second, the attacks highlighted the role of third forces—Russian "patriots," hackers, and other non-state actors—on the modern battlefield. Third, the attacks provide a useful conceptualization of how the technical concepts of cyberspace can be analogized through conventional maneuver doctrine.

Russia maintains a fundamentally different view of cyberspace from the one that prevails in Washington. While the US military has established an understanding of cyberspace as a discrete domain of warfare that deserves its own doctrine, its own troops, and its own unique menu of lethal and nonlethal effects, for Russia, cyberspace is but another subordinate component to a holistic doctrinal information warfare.[170] In analyzing Russian cyber warfare doctrine, one must understand that neither the word "cyber" nor the term "hybrid warfare" exists independently in the Russian conceptual framework; instead, both are used only in reference to Western activities.[171] The Russian conception of information warfare is also far more holistic than what traditional Western audiences are accustomed to. Typical discussions of information warfare rely on two competing understandings of information.[172] The first is an understanding of information as data that is transmitted and stored on networks, a technical approach that tends to dominate the American way of thinking. Encouraged by technological innovations, the US perception of information warfare culminated in concepts of command and control (C2) warfare in which the primary objective is to attack information systems rather than manipulate information content.

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[170] "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation"; Giles, "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2010."

[171] Giles, *Russia's "New" Tools for Confronting the West*.

[172] Lawson, "Russia Gets a New Information Security Doctrine."

The data- and system-centric perspective of information warfare that prevails in American military thinking contrasts with a second understanding of information as a platform for shaping individual and collective perception. The Russian conception of information warfare reflects this second, more psychological tone. Shaped by a history of confrontation with adversaries who were technologically and economically superior, the Russian military tradition has depended on achieving victory through a qualitative moral superiority of an almost spiritual character.[173] This moral superiority required the deliberate cultivation of a sense of psychological and cultural integrity that was strong enough to withstand the effects of outside influence. The latest version of Russian information-security doctrine, the conceptual framework for Russian activity in cyberspace and the broader information environment, reveals the strength of this impulse, containing adamant declarations of an "informational pressure" that has "the aim of diluting traditional Russian spiritual-moral values."[174]

The vast majority of publicly available Russian writing on cyber conflict reflects a defensive tone that is more concerned with psychological, perceptual, and cultural integrity than the physical state of networks or their resident data. Noticeably absent from this discussion is any mention of the role of the offense in cyberspace, something that the US and British governments have far more openly discussed. However, one could see how such a holistic and psychologically oriented approach to cyberspace as a subcomponent of information warfare might not require the same logical delineations between offense and defense as would a more technical and physical orientation. A 2007 article in *Moscow Military Thought* reinforces this idea: "In our view, isolating cyber terrorism and cyber crime from the general context of international information security is, in a sense, artificial and unsupported by any objective necessity."[175]

Understanding Russia's psychological approach to information warfare allows one to evaluate the 2008 cyberattacks in their proper context. The specific targets selected for the campaign isolated the Georgian government

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[173] Adamsky, *Culture of Military Innovation*.

[174] Galperovich, "Putin Signs New Information Security Doctrine." The new information-security doctrine is of the same spirit as the 2000 version, which includes as threats: "the devaluation of spiritual values, the propaganda of examples of mass culture which are based on the cult of violence, and on spiritual and moral values which run counter to the values accepted in Russian society." Quote taken from Giles "Information Troops."

[175] Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, "Russian Federation Military Policy in the Area of International Information Security."

from its most effective means of strategic communication and, in the process, rendered it unable to communicate with either its own population or the outside world. Russia then filled the void created by this information blockade with a concerted propaganda campaign that allowed it to saturate the news media with its own version of events.[176] Additionally, while analysts agree that Russian hackers had the expertise to create lasting physical effects on Georgian infrastructure,[177] their refusal to do so reinforces the idea of psychological manipulation and narrative control as the cyber campaign's ultimate purpose. The significant amount of time that Russian hackers spent discussing the merits and drawbacks of different kinds of malware further suggests an understanding of the campaign's higher strategic needs.[178]

Russian behavior in cyberspace, in Georgia and beyond, must be evaluated within the context of Russia's intellectual orientation to the domain. This orientation manifests itself in an information-security doctrine that is preoccupied with a sense of both physical and psychological vulnerability. As a result, the Russian perspective on cyberspace views deception, manipulation, and denial as

legitimate tools of statecraft that today's mass communication platforms readily enable. Actions that we would characterize as discrete, technical, and fundamentally offensive in character—such as DDoS and website defacement—instead reflect Russia's holistic approach to cyberspace as a tool of large-scale information warfare rather than as a fundamentally separate warfighting domain. This distinction is critical to understand in countering the ongoing Russian cyber threat.

Moreover, we can expect that Russia will continue to operate in gray zones. Its IO campaign largely operates on three levels: the manipulation of information, espionage, and cyberattacks. The latter is the only thing new and important, as it allows for increased speed, allows for farther distance. Russian information warfare consists of four pillars: First, and most benignly, it aims to put the best spin it can on ordinary news. Second, it incites a population with fake information in order to prep a battlefield. Third, it uses disinformation or creates enough ambiguity to confuse people on the battlefield. And fourth, it outright lies when given true information, which it claims is falsified. As mentioned, this information strategy has several objectives: to degrade trust in

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[176] Deibert, Rohozinski, and Crete-Nishihata, "Cyclones in Cyberspace."

[177] Bumgarner and Borg, "Overview by the US-CCU of the Cyber Campaign against Georgia in August of 2008."

[178] "Project Grey Goose Phase II Report."

institutions across the world; to push populations currently undergoing conflict to simply accept the status quo of the conflict and not push for resolution; and finally, by keeping these areas in perpetual conflict, to diminish these countries' chances of joining NATO.

Next, this report concludes by examining lessons learned from Russian military actions in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 and providing a list of recommendations for US policy makers.

Chapter V – Lessons from Georgia and Ukraine

The return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2012 amid the largest mass protests in Russia since the early 1990s brought the cooperative pragmatism of the Medvedev-Obama reset to an abrupt halt. More importantly, those protests against Putin's stage-managed return to power reinforced his fears of externally supported opposition as a threat to his rule. A domestic crackdown ensued, with Putin tightening the screws across a wide array of perceived political threats.[179]

Putin's return to the Kremlin marked the return of more-forceful methods and military posturing, which began to manifest themselves in late 2013. Faced with the prospect that neighboring Ukraine was about to sign an association agreement with the European Union—an essential first step toward possible EU membership—Russia responded with a counterproposal for Ukrainian membership in its Eurasian Customs Union. Put in an unenviable position, Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich ultimately accepted the Russian proposal, touching off the massive protests that would culminate in the Maidan Revolution that swept him from office in February 2014.[180]

The Russian occupation of Crimea and proxy invasion of eastern Ukraine that ensued afforded Russia a rare opportunity to achieve several key objectives simultaneously, much like the Russia-Georgia War six years prior. Like the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict, there were certainly military objectives of Russia's intervention, and military means were used to achieve those objectives. But once again, the more intriguing aspects of Russia's actions in Ukraine have been the ways in which it has used the conflict to balance against NATO and the United States through the use of so-called hybrid-warfare methods. By destabilizing Ukraine domestically through intervention and keeping the conflict in the Donbass simmering, Moscow has simultaneously ensured that NATO membership is off the table for Kiev and heightened the likelihood of regime change in Ukraine.[181] The Obama administration's reluctance to provide lethal weaponry to Ukraine for fear of escalating the conflict with Russia demonstrated some success in keeping the United States out of the region. And yet the Ukrainian gambit cannot be taken as an unmitigated success for Russian grand strategy. Poroshenko's government in Kiev still stands,

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[179] Person, "Balance of Threat."

[180] Traynor, "Ukraine's Bloodiest Day."

[181] Person, "Here's Why Putin Wants to Topple Ukraine's Government, Not Engineer a Frozen Conflict."

and American military advisors continue to assist Ukraine in its efforts to reform. In fact, the effort to pull Ukraine back into Russia's orbit likely backfired in the final analysis, as Russia's actions over the last three years have firmly galvanized the once-divided Ukrainian population in opposition to Moscow.

The same could be said in other regions. Russian attempts at intimidating the Baltic states have kept those countries—and their NATO allies—on high alert. Provocative flights into NATO airspace and major military exercises near the Baltic borders are properly seen, not as prelude to hybrid *war* per se, but as a means to challenge and complicate NATO operations. But the efforts to sow discord among the allies and within the domestic populations of the Baltic states have come up short.[182] Once again, they have produced a counterbalancing response from the United States and NATO in the form of significant troop buildups in the region.

While the United States and its allies remained bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia continued to develop its hybrid war and war plans following the 2008 Russia-Georgia War. Many of the shortfalls that Russia identified following its incursion into Georgia were remedied. This chapter is not meant to be a detailed analysis of the Ukraine war—that war

will be analyzed in a future report—but it is meant to demonstrate how the 2008 Russia-Georgia War was a precursor of what would follow.

The Situation in Ukraine

The geopolitical situation for Ukraine is similar to that of Georgia: both were republics in the former Soviet Union; both share a border with Russia; both have a strong, historical tie to Russia; and both were actively seeking NATO membership. In 2014, Russia was in a similar position of relative political, economic, and military strength as it was in 2008, with an international community that it believed had no appetite to act beyond tough talk or enact ineffective sanctions. However, one major difference between the two is that there were no separatist republics in Ukraine prior to 2014, and there was no provocation by Ukrainian troops prior to Russian action. Like Georgia, Ukraine had a weak military, and it also made mistakes—such as downgrading the status of the Russian language by declaring Ukrainian the official language—that played right into the hands of Russian propagandists.[183]

In February 2014, Ukrainian students and activists poured into EuroMaidan, a plaza in

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[182] Person, "Six Reasons Not to Worry about Russia Invading the Baltics."

[183] Reid, *Borderland*, 276.

central Kiev, to peacefully protest a move by pro-Russia president Viktor Yanukovich not to sign an association agreement with the European Union. When tensions escalated, nearly one hundred civilians were killed by security forces, unleashing a series of events that would have Yanukovich flee the country. Shortly thereafter Russia dispatched so-called "little green men" to occupy Crimea's parliament, set up a series of checkpoints, and take control over the airport, shortly before annexing the province after a referendum deemed by observers to be rigged.[184] Indeed, not unlike Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, many analysts believe that Russia's intervention in Ukraine was developed long in advance. In less than a month and without firing a single shot, Russia was able to annex Crimea.[185] Russian "peacekeepers"—including unmarked Russian *Spetsnaz*—stationed in the region carried out an armed incursion, which, as one Ukrainian analyst described it, was "externally disguised as an internal political conflict in the state which is the victim of aggression."[186] That is, Russia used separatist violence as a convenient pretext to militarily intervene and annex territory.

However, Russia did not achieve the same success in the east. Following the annexation of Crimea, demonstrations continued to escalate throughout Ukraine's eastern oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, where Russian-backed militants eventually seized government buildings and media outlets. This time, however, Ukraine fought back to retake the buildings and defeat the Russian-led separatist forces. While unsuccessful at reclaiming its territories, the Ukrainians effectively stopped the Russian advance.[187] A tenuous cease-fire has existed since February 2015, though there are dozens of daily violations and casualties continue mount. As of the summer of 2017, the conflict has claimed the lives of more than ten thousand Ukrainians.[188]

The brilliant success of Russia in Crimea is a direct result of what it learned and perfected following the 2008 war. Below is a summary of the lessons that can be learned following the two wars.

- *Strategic interests.* Russia demonstrated once again that it was willing to use force to prevent a former republic from joining NATO or the EU. While the annexation of specific

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[184] Ibid., 258–76.

[185] US Department of the Army, *Little Green Men*, 55–58.

[186] This quote, attributed to Evgen Dykyi, comes from Zerofsky, "Everyman's War," 71.

[187] US Department of the Army, *Little Green Men*.

[188] Schlein, "OHCHR."

territory is clearly the exception, in this case, the strategic value of owning the base and its surrounding territory on the Black Sea made it unique. Russia's actions in the Donbass demonstrate that they generally do not prefer annexation and, instead, simply desire a semiautonomous separatist region in Ukraine, just like Georgia, making it almost impossible to join an organization like NATO, which requires its alliance members to have territorial integrity.[189]

- *Strategic preparation.* The ability of Russia to take the Crimea without a shot being fired was brilliant, but it could not have occurred without the groundwork laid months and years in advance. In addition to operational planning and staging forces along the border as a strong deterrent, Russia had been conducting subversion long before introducing "little green men." Russia identified points of vulnerability in the economy, armed forces, and state administration and used bribery or intimidation to coerce local officials. Additionally, Russia supported and financed political and cultural organizations loyal to Russia and used its media to create narratives favorable to Russia and counter to Ukrainian government.[190]

- *Operational plans.* As it did for Georgia, Russia had clearly developed operational plans for an invasion of Ukraine, although the plans may not have been fully developed. And like Georgia, Ukraine failed to develop a serious military strategy since becoming an independent state, making things easier for Russia than they might have been.[191]

- *Military reform and professionalization.* From a military perspective, Russia is smaller, more flexible, and more professional than its previous post-Soviet self. It has downsized its overall size and general staff to become a more agile and adaptive fighting force, moving from over two hundred divisions during Soviet times to just five today. To improve its mobility, Russia relies primarily on brigades equipped with advanced antitank weaponry. Russia's senior staff reckons that any future armed confrontation will be lethal, fast, and favorable to the first striker, not unlike the perceived conditions that predated the outbreak of World War I. A recent RAND

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[189] Rácz, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*, 64–67.

[190] Rácz, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*, 57–59; US Department of the Army, *Little Green Men*, 56–60.

[191] Karber, "Lessons Learned."

report found that Russia would overrun NATO forces based in the region in a matter of hours.[192]

- *Escalation dominance.* Like Georgia, Ukraine highlights Russia's ability to achieve escalation dominance on its frontier and to do so in a big hurry if it needs to. Along these lines, Russia will continue to pursue a policy of hybrid warfare, given that it is effective and cheap. Russia has moved beyond its Soviet-era mentality and has advanced its thinking on military operations. However, although Russia has taken great steps to professionalize its military, it still relies on sizeable numbers of conscripts with reportedly low morale. This partly explains its preference for nonconventional means, as a way to put its adversaries on their heels, instill fear, and leave its border regions unsettled. The popular term in the 1990s was "frozen conflict"—Ukraine's conflict is not frozen, per se, given its scale of casualties, but risks escalation and destabilizing Ukraine's neighbors to the north.

- *Information operations.* Having lost the IO battle in Georgia, Russia continued to invest in its IO efforts. Russia combined "secrecy, deception, threats, and accusations in crafting the narrative for the international community" and continually denied Russian involvement to promote a consistent message.[193] Many of the initial targets for Russian agents in Crimea and the Donbass were media outlets, so they could replace Ukrainian broadcasts with Russian television to establish an information monopoly.[194] In Crimea, Russians nearly eliminated all Ukrainian landline, Internet, and mobile services.[195]

- *Cyber operations.* Russia has continued to expand its cyber capability and has effectively employed cyber operations at the tactical level. Russians have reportedly used "malware implant[s] on Android devices to track and target Ukrainian artillery units."[196]

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[192] Samuels, "NATO Puts 300,000 Ground Troops on 'High Alert' as Tensions with Russia Mount."

[193] US Department of the Army, *Little Green Men*, 48.

[194] Rácz, *Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*, 62–65; US Department of the Army, *Little Green Men*, 59.

[195] US Department of the Army, *Little Green Men*, 46.

[196] Volz, "Russian Hackers Tracked Ukrainian Artillery Units Using Android Implant."

Additionally, Russia conducted a cyberattack to disrupt Ukraine's power grid.[197]

- *Electronic warfare.* Russia has expanded its use of electronic warfare to include jamming to damage or destroy C2 networks, hampering radar systems, and spoofing GPS signals.[198] There are multiple reports of Russians hacking into Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).[199] Russia integrates information warfare, cyberattacks, psychological operations, and the electromagnetic spectrum in a concept of "information confrontation"; a good example from Ukraine is how its Leer-3 EW platform employs drones to deliver SMS messages to individual commanders and Ukrainian troops, often tied directly to their IO strategy to undermine their enemy.[200] Ukrainian commanders have received text messages after an artillery barrage, asking them if they enjoyed the attack, and Ukrainian soldiers have received messages encouraging them to defect or attempting to degrade their morale.[201]

- *Soft power.* Russia will continue to wield its soft power in the region, as it does in Georgia, given that many fellow Orthodox Ukrainians, even those who are anti-Russia, are still socially conservative. Putin will paint himself as a defender of traditional values to win over these people's affection; however, in the process, he only galvanizes and alienates a much larger share of the population.

- *Avoidance of overt military force.* With each conflict, Russia has decreased the role of overt military forces, given the political cost associated with its employment. During its intervention in Lithuania in 1991, Moscow used live ammunition against civilians and drove tanks through demonstrators, which killed fourteen civilians. Intense political pressure followed, and the Soviets responded in Georgia by waiting to send troops across the border until after the Georgians initiated shelling into South Ossetia. For Crimea, instead of uniformed military forces, the Russians instead sent in "little green men" that they continued to

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[197] Potilyuk, "Ukraine Sees Russian Hand in Cyber Attacks against Power Grid."

[198] Sukhankin, "Russian Electron Warfare in Ukraine."

[199] Liam Collins interviews with Phillip Carter and multiple Ukrainian officers.

[200] Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, "Electronic Warfare by Drone and SMS."

[201] "Russian Military Apparently Using Cell Tower Spoofers to Send Propaganda Directly to Ukrainian Soldiers' Phones."; Connell and Volger, "Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare."

deny as Russian operatives.[202] In the Donbass, instead of primarily relying on large formations, smaller units were sent across the border that they claimed were simply Russian troops on leave who were not acting on behalf of the state.[203]

- *Other tactical developments.* While a relatively new technology that was not employed in Georgia, Russia has greatly expanded its use of UAVs in Ukraine, primarily using them in an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) role often tied directly with artillery to control fires and assess battle damage. At the same time, counter-UAV technology and technics are underdeveloped. In terms of artillery, the Russians and their local proxies favor multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS) as opposed to precision munitions, often employing them from populated areas, where they know their opponent must respond judiciously. The Russians have decentralized artillery down to maneuver battalions to make them more responsive and have pursued longer-range guns and ammunition. The increased lethality has led to an increased emphasis on counterbattery radar. Finally, modern Russian tanks are fairly invulnerable, except by advanced antitank guided missiles, such as the US Javelin, which the Ukrainians largely lack.[204]

- *Role of cease-fire agreements.* Russia has consistently violated regional cease-fires or political agreements. In Ukraine, Russia has violated the Minsk I and II agreements (2014–15), which were signed to deescalate tensions in the Donbass region, on a daily basis. This is deliberate. Likewise, in Georgia, Russia has violated the terms of the 2008 cease-fire by moving borders and by not fully demilitarizing the disputed areas. Based on our research, the proverbial line about a Georgian farmer who goes to bed Georgia and wakes up in South Ossetia, because of the unilateral moving of the boundary, is not a myth.

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[202] They were in fact the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade stationed in Crimea.

[203] Gregory, "Russian Combat Medals Put Lie to Putin's Claim of No Russian Troops in Ukraine."

[204] Karber, "Lessons Learned."

Chapter VI – Recommendations and Key Takeaways

To recap, the 2008 Russia-Georgia War foreshadowed the kinds of military actions Russia would later take in Ukraine in 2014, including its takeover of Crimea and other parts of eastern Ukraine. The war also provided a template, however imperfect, of what modern wars will look like—fought across multiple domains, as part civil war and part interstate war, while using conventional forces as well as unconventional proxies, integrating cyber-operational, psychological, and informational warfare. It was an imperfect version of what some military analysts call "hybrid war." The war was over in less than a week, though Russian forces lingered in the region. In several ways, Georgia was a testing ground for Ukraine. It clearly showcased Russia's military weaknesses but also some of its strengths. Even though Russia "won" the war—Tbilisi was forced to sign a cease-fire that ceded one-fifth of the country and all but nixed its chances of ever gaining admittance into NATO—it was a wake-up call for Russia's military, whose Soviet-era equipment paled in comparison to their Georgian adversaries. Russia also learned the importance of controlling the narrative, a mistake it would not repeat in Ukraine.

Russia has sought to prevent Georgia from leaning too far toward Europe. To keep Georgia weak and divided, Russia sought to keep the lid on the separatist wars along Georgia's periphery and to freeze them as a way of keeping Georgia unstable and dependent on Russia. No European organizations would come knocking on Georgia's door to offer membership so long as one-fifth of its territory was in dispute and the subject of periodic violence. On Georgia's breakaway provinces, Russia has taken a position of integrating them without formally incorporating them. Inhabitants were handed Russian passports. Some have called it a creeping annexation, but in fact, Russia is fine with the status quo and not making their inhabitants full Russian citizens. We may see similar developments in Ukraine's east.

Russian strategy in the region can be described as threefold: first, to guarantee its security going forward and maintain a powerful grip over its so-called "privileged spheres of influence"; second, to restore Russian greatness on the cheap, by exploiting its adversaries' weaknesses and leveraging its influence in places near (Ukraine) and far (Syria), shoring up regional allies, and creating a dependency on Moscow; third, to challenge the current United States–led world order and provide an alternative model that looks much like a mafia state and relies principally on coercion and confusion as a way to sow discord, weaken opposition, and gain greater influence at the

expense of American dominance.[205] This includes the interference in other states' elections, the use of cyber warfare to disrupt financial and political systems, and the deployment of other hybrid ways of warfare to provoke its adversaries and to test international norms on the use of force. Based on our fieldwork in the region, the authors of this report make the following recommendations for US policy makers:

- *Expect Russia to respond to internal crises in countries along its periphery, however real or imagined, as pretexts to use force to redraw international borders.* Moscow has intensified its military exercises and training to increase its combat mobility, readiness, and maneuverability. Russia's military has deployed new mechanized infantry divisions and maneuver units that can perform simultaneous combined arms operations in Georgia and Ukraine. It now has the ability to achieve escalation dominance on its frontier and to do so rapidly. Based on its military restructuring, Moscow will rely on low-level incursions to probe for weak spots to exploit, utilizing unmarked Russian fighters—so-called "little green men"—and

local proxies, all as part of its hybrid-warfare strategy. Its 2008 war with Georgia provided a template of what was to come in 2014, and we can expect its incursion into and annexation of Crimea to be a sign of future incursions elsewhere in its zone of privileged interest.

- *To deter these types of incursions will require a significant show of military strength, unity, and credibility among NATO allies.* A 2016 RAND report found that Russia would overrun NATO forces along its western periphery in a matter of hours.[206] It will also require economic isolation. The biggest threats to Russia's military reform are budget cuts, a consequence of its contracting economy as well as punitive Western economic sanctions. Despite an uptick in its defense budget in recent years and an increase of its overall armed forces to roughly nine hundred thousand, analysts say Russian defense spending is unsustainable.[207] That may impede its procurement of newer and more expensive weapons. What we've seen instead is Russia modernizing its most reliable Soviet-era weaponry (e.g., T-72B3 tank). This too is

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[205] This assertion has been challenged. For a good primer on Russian foreign policy, see Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*.

[206] Withnall, "Russia Could Overrun Baltic States in 36 Hours If It Wanted to, NATO Warned."

[207] Golts and Kofman, *Russia's Military*, 7.

unsustainable in the long term. The sanctions the West slapped on Moscow may perversely make Russia more likely to rely on cheaper military solutions to carry out its operational objectives, fueling its embrace of hybrid warfare.

- *Stop sending mixed signals to non-NATO allies.* The mixed signals sent from Washington in the run-up to the 2008 war in Georgia led to some confusion in Tbilisi. This kind of fence-sitting can create spiral dynamics and moral hazards, whereby our allies believe they will be bailed out by the US military in the event of conflict escalation with Russia, thus potentially dragging us into an unwanted conflict with a near-peer adversary or getting involved in a proxy war. One analyst described Saakashvili as having "an extremely active fantasy life." To dispel illusions of a US military bailout, Americans must speak forcefully, with one voice, and not mix its signals.

- *Take NATO accession off the table, while still providing Georgia and Ukraine with the necessary security guarantees.* A chief US goal has been to fully integrate Georgia (as well as Ukraine) into Europe's architecture of institutions, from the EU to NATO. While this is laudable, it greatly unsettles Russia

and has become a red line of sorts for the Kremlin. The West would be wise to recall the 1992 speech in Stockholm by Andrei Kozyrev, then Russian foreign minister, in which he predicted that Russia would project force to prevent the enlargement of NATO.[208] Based on a robust literature on security dilemmas, from Thucydides to the present, the authors recommend formally taking NATO accession off the table, while still providing Georgia and Ukraine with the necessary security guarantees, hardware, and training, short of offering them membership. Given the security situation in central and eastern Europe, NATO membership is no longer seriously in the cards. Eventually, that geopolitical reality will be realized among Georgia's leadership, and the fallout could lead to a blowback or downturn in US-Georgian relations. It would be better to be forthright and to secure something in return from Russia, rather than maintain a kind of ambiguity that only exacerbates the security dilemma on both sides.

- *Explore and replicate what the United States' allies are doing successfully in cyberspace.* Among the states doing cyber defense most successfully are the Baltics. In cyberspace, Russia perceives deception, manipulation,

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[208] "Diplomats Shocked by Kozyrev Ploy."

and denial as legitimate tools of statecraft that today's mass communication platforms readily enable. Actions that we in the West would characterize as discrete, technical, and fundamentally offensive in character—such as DDoS and website defacement—instead reflect Russia's holistic approach to cyberspace as a tool of large-scale information warfare, rather than as a fundamentally separate warfighting domain. Russia will continue its use of cyber, informational, and psychological warfare to achieve its military objectives. The West is vulnerable to this type of IO, given its institutions of free speech, interconnectedness, and openness. Nor do we have clear rules of engagement, which are still in flux, especially in the cyber and informational realms.

- *US policy toward Russia requires lots of strategic patience.* Russia will consistently pursue a policy of militarily intervening in states along its periphery. It did so back in 1979 in Afghanistan. Likewise, some propose that Ukraine may slowly bleed Russia's military, much as Afghanistan did back in the late-1980s, given that global oil prices have dropped and Russia cannot sustain its military expenditures indefinitely. But this

would come at a severe cost and could take many years. Also, this assumes that the war in Ukraine is costly enough to the Russians to be a burden, but that is unclear, given that the cost estimate varies widely, ranging from $18 billion to $100 billion per year.[209] Russia has shown its willingness to keep conflicts frozen or at a low boil indefinitely, as it has in Transdniestria and in Nagorno-Karabakh. Besides strategic patience, US policy must provide a credible deterrent to prevent Russia from escalating and must encourage allies to avoid jumping the gun and provoking Russia, as Saakashvili did in 2008.

- *Pay close attention to Russian military exercises.* Prior to its use of force, Russia tends to carry out large-scale military exercises not unlike the September 2017 joint exercises it carried out in Belarus called *Zapad* ("West"). While many analysts point out that these are fairly routine, defensive in nature, and normal among major powers, there is a precedent for Russian military forces and equipment not returning home after the exercises are over, as was the case with Russia's Kavkaz 2008 exercises near Abkhazia shortly before the war. It is not unrealistic to expect that Russian military exercises may signal their regional intentions

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[209] Goble, "Putin's Wars Already Costing Russia ~100 Billion US Dollars a Year, Illarionov Says"; see also, http://putin-itogi.ru/putin-voina/.

for using force, whether in eastern Europe or in the southern Caucasus.

- *Do not let Russia redraw sovereign borders by force.* Russia will continue to pursue a concerted strategy of creeping annexation of these semiautonomous regions, which will be "integrated without being incorporated."[210] The idea behind this strategy is to move their boundaries ever so slightly as to operate below the radar and not provoke a response by local, regional, or international bodies, yet also to create new and irreversible conditions on the ground. To be sure, establishing a sphere of privileged influence is not synonymous with the reestablishment of the Soviet Union or outright annexation of its former satellites. Though this has been claimed as Russia's objective in recent years, it fundamentally misreads its true intention, which is to enjoy the benefits of uncontested influence without bearing the cost of administering new territory and populations.

- *Expect Russia to continue to show brazen disregard for human life or civilian casualties.* Its use of imprecise "dumb bombs" in Georgia and indiscriminate violence in Ukraine suggests a refusal to distinguish between civilians and soldiers. A recent UN report found evidence that Russia committed "multiple and grave" human rights abuses in Crimea, including arbitrary arrests and torture.[211] Moreover, the United States has a normative interest in preventing borders being redrawn by force, a twentieth-century phenomenon that risks reemerging as an international norm. To that end, the United States must continue to use its soft power and influence to sway its allies, both in the UN Security Council and elsewhere, to condemn Russian actions in Ukraine and the Caucasus and to raise the economic and reputational costs for Moscow. Along these lines, the United States should provide considerable humanitarian aid, not just military assistance, to Ukraine and Georgia to help their economies and unstable political systems deal with the fallout of the crises related to their internally displaced people, as a way to leverage America's own soft power in the region.

- *Avoid needless conflict escalation while remaining strong.* Compelling Russia to cease its current behavior would require active measures that invite increased risk. At the low end, maintaining sanctions on Russia until it reverses its actions and restores

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[210] Taken from an interview with an expert on Russian foreign policy, June 5, 2017.

[211] Cumming-Bruce, "Russia Committed 'Grave' Rights Abuses in Crimea, UN Says."

Ukraine's territorial integrity, for example, have failed to induce the desired response.[212] Staying below the threshold of overt conventional military actions would require reciprocating Russia's use of indigenous movements, specifically in areas such as Donbass where Russia's momentum has ceased. An unconventional-warfare campaign, employing either violent insurgent groups or nonviolent resistance movements, a la the "color revolutions" on Russia's periphery, or even inside Russia itself, would impose significantly greater costs on its behavior.[213] However, this may produce unintended consequences that lead to escalation.

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[212] Sanger, "Tillerson Says Russia Must Restore Ukraine Territory, or Sanctions Stay."

[213] For more on how to counter hybrid threats in the gray zone below the threshold of conventional war, see Chambers, *Countering Gray-Zone Hybrid Threats*.

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