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Russia Fires Shot Across Bows of EU, US and NATO

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Russian Military Intentions

As both houses of the Russian parliament call upon President Medvedev to support Abkhazia and South Ossetia's right to self determination, Russian military commanders would appear to be consolidating a so-called 'buffer zone' within Georgia proper. According to Moscow, a battalion of 272 Russian troops will occupy eight 'forward' positions up to 15km within Georgia proper along its borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A further 250 Russian troops are set to be deployed to the rear of these positions to perform 'logistics, engineering and support' functions.

As Russia consolidates its foothold in Georgia, serious questions arise as to the future role of an apparently resurgent Russian military in Kremlin foreign policy. Recent developments in the Russian military establishment – pioneered by Vladimir Putin in particular – give some clues as the future role and status of the Russian military in world affairs.

The commander of Russian forces in Georgia, Major General Vyacheslav Borisov, like many of his subordinate commanders in the 58th Army is a veteran of the disastrous Russian war in Chechnya. In 2000, Borisov led the quiet withdrawal of approximately 50,000 Russian troops from Chechnya, halving Moscow's forces there and effectively signalling an end to any Russian hopes for a quick or decisive victory in the Caucasus. The war in Chechnya – the first major engagement of the Russian Army after the collapse of the Soviet Union - humiliated the Russian military and cost the Kremlin over 14 trillion Roubles (3 billion dollars). By the time Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin in 2000, the Russian military was in disarray, suffering from poor morale and widespread corruption among its officer class – many of whom were regularly unpaid for periods of up to six months or more. Brutality was rife within the armed forces with approximately 3,500 Russian conscripts killed every year as a direct result of bullying and ill treatment within the ranks. In some cases, Russian conscripts were close to starvation in remote outposts within Russia itself.

In October 2002, after the Moscow theatre siege - carried out by Chechen separatists - Vladimir Putin and his Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov ordered a series of fundamental changes to Russia's concept of defence in an attempt to radically transform Russian military culture. Following failed attempts during Yeltsin's presidency to reform the Russian military, Putin personally drove the change agenda despite strong resistance from within the Russian general staff. In December 2002, Putin sacked General Gennady Trishev, commander of Russia's forces in Chechnya and accelerated the process of subordinating the Russian military to political and civilian control.

Under Putin's presidency, the security threats confronting Russia were radically re-evaluated and under his direction the Kremlin devised a new national security concept. This vision removed the former Soviet cold war scenario of the US and NATO as the primary threat to Russia's security and replaced it with counter terrorism imperatives within Russian territory and the ability to deal with regional 'small scale contingencies' along its borders – in what the Russians term the 'near abroad'.

To this end, the Russian military was to be reconfigured by 2015 from a massive standing army of over 2 million conscript troops designed to win an all-out global war - a legacy of Soviet times - to a more compact force of 1 million professional soldiers capable of fighting smaller flexible combined joint operations on a regional basis. This re-modelled Russian army was to draw heavily on the US military and NATO's Battlegroup concept. This fundamental change of strategic doctrine was intended to move Moscow away from the massive manpower concept of the former Red Army towards a professionalized Russian Army - halved in size - but, like the US military, heavily invested in aviation, smart missiles and modern weapons systems in order to develop a highly mobile rapid reaction capability within Russia's borders and throughout its sphere of influence.

To facilitate this radical overhaul, Putin has quadrupled Moscow's military spending from 8 billion dollars in 2001 to 32 billion dollars in 2007. Currently, 2.8% of Russia's rapidly expanding GDP is spent on defence. Eleven billion dollars, or 44% of the current defence spend is invested in research and development into new combat aircraft, attack helicopter programmes, missile systems, IT infrastructure and electronic warfare measures. At the same time, the Russians are stepping down conscription. They intend to reduce the term of compulsory military service from 2 years to 1 year by the end of 2008 and are planning for an all-volunteer army - of less than one million troops - by 2015. This shift in emphasis from the 'human wave' philosophy of the Red Army to a smaller, highly mobile set of regional forces aims to move away from the static 'army of occupation' posture of the former Soviet Union.

The Russians have been successful in implementing these changes. This year alone has seen a doubling in the number of new weapons systems issued to Russian combat units. So far this year, 30 new weapon systems on land, sea and air have been deployed throughout the Russian military including for example the R-29 sea-launched ballistic missile, the ground based S-400 Triumfator missile system and the air launched X-102 missile. In a parallel development, the Russian Defence Export Department - Rosoboronexport - has doubled its exports of weapons internationally. Controversially, Putin has encouraged western investment and cooperation in his re-energised military industrial complex. Boeing for example are involved in the latest Russian Sukhoi aviation programme.

Despite these rapid advances, the Russian military are still approximately seven years short of addressing their medium term tactical and strategic goals. Recent events in Georgia will buoy up these developments considerably. One Russian source commented to the Irish Times that Georgia was not part of an overarching military 'grand design' - which would lead to a pattern of successive invasions and annexations of territories with Russian enclaves - but rather 'an opportunity that presented itself at relatively short notice'. Whilst not fully geared up for its newly conceptualised battle-group concept of operations, the Russian military according to this source, 'after much provocation did a quick cost benefit analysis and concluded that Georgia, whilst strategically important was militarily small and therefore presented the Russian government with the prospect of a swift, winnable war'. The rest, as they say, is recent history.

Other sources within the Russian military reiterated to the Irish Times that western fears of imminent Russian military interventions in Ukraine or the Baltic states were 'highly unlikely' due to the 'unacceptable and unsustainable losses' that would arise. Rather ominously however, they were also keen to point out that events in Georgia in recent days were not solely about 'policing' the 'near abroad'. 'Rather, these actions send a useful and timely meta message to the west about Russia's emerging status on the world stage as a fully fledged economic and military super-power'.

Whilst it would appear that Russia is not quite ready to take on the remainder of its 'fractious' neighbours militarily – just yet – it has demonstrated that it is ready, willing and able to do so when confident of victory. If Russian military development continues on its present trajectory, it will in the short to medium term have a global military reach – and flushed with its success in Georgia will feel ready to take on the world. In these circumstances, the EU and the US will have to decide whether to embrace or continue to bait the awakening bear that is modern Russia.

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