

Initial Military Operations during the War in Georgia in August 2008

By Wolfgang Richter, Berlin

Abstract

Notwithstanding critical assessments of the historical, political, legal and humanitarian aspects of the August 2008 war in Georgia, key areas to be evaluated include the concept of the military operations and the sequence of the deployment of forces. The following analysis does not support the interpretation that the Georgian large-scale offensive operation against South Ossetia was necessary and suited to counter an alleged massive Russian invasion in progress. On the contrary, the first clashes with two smaller Russian combat units took place only two days after the deployment of the bulk of the Georgian forces against South Ossetia and Russian forces needed two more days to match Georgian units in numbers. The indiscriminate shelling of Tskhinvali, aimed at the destruction of the political power base of the break-away region, and the Georgian deployment to the frontline had clear escalatory potential.

The Design of the Georgian Offensive Operation against South Ossetia

On 7 August 2008 at 23:35 Georgia started a large-scale military operation against South Ossetia with a massive shelling of the town of Tskhinvali by mortars, heavy artillery and multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS), which had been deployed during the day south of the town. According to eye witnesses, the artillery strike on Tskhinvali started at a time when the ceasefire announced by President Saakashvili in a televised address on 7 August at 19:00 had been kept for more than four hours also by the Ossetian side, at least in the town itself and its immediate vicinity.

The shelling was well prepared, with open stores of ammunition close to the firing positions. Observers counted hundreds of explosions of heavy rounds in the town: Ten minutes after the shelling had begun, the incoming rounds exploded at intervals of 10 to 15 seconds – a frequency which was kept all night long with short breaks. The shelling aimed at destruction, particularly of the political and communication centers of the South Ossetian authorities rather than providing fire support for the advance of Georgian troops against the town, which started more than 6 hours later. It struck and destroyed residential areas and hit the compound of the OSCE field bureau with OSCE staff personnel and Russian guards. The headquarters of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF) came under fire as well (the Georgian staff personnel had left in the afternoon). Around midnight the Russian commander of the JPKF informed the OSCE about the first fatalities and several wounded among the Russian peacekeepers. The shelling inflicted heavy damage to the town and losses among its population, although the initial high figures claimed by the Russian and Ossetian side did not prove to be true.

Simultaneously, two infantry brigades advanced on both flanks aiming at encircling the town by taking dom-

inant heights to the east and cutting the Ossetian “Road of Life” to the west with the village of Khetagurovo as its corner stone. This winding mountainous road was the only remaining viable link between the town and the northern part of South Ossetia. There, in the Didi Gupta – Java area, the main camps of the Ossetian militia with heavy armaments were located, i.e. outside the area of responsibility of the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (“security zone”) which included the zone of conflict.

The direct link to and from the north, the “Caucasian Highway” which led from Gori via Tskhinvali to the Russian border with the Roki Tunnel as its needle’s eye had been blocked to the north of the town by the Georgian side long before the war: With the installation of the Provisional Georgian Administration in the string of villages predominantly populated by ethnic Georgians in the Didi Liakhvi Valley between Tskhinvali and Didi Gupta a Georgian special security (“police”) force was established in 2007 which introduced a new military element to the zone of conflict. Thus, the two attacking Georgian brigades could complete the encirclement of the town by closing up to the northern enclave, which was partially fortified before the war and now successfully defended by Georgian security forces with heavy artillery support against enemy reinforcements from the north. Initially, the attack of the two brigades was successful: They resolved to wipe out lightly armed Ossetian militia units from the frontline, take twelve major villages including Khetagurovo, cut the “Road of Life”, occupy dominant heights east of Tskhinvali and reach their first objectives within six to eight hours after the beginning of the operation.

In a second phase of the Georgian offensive operation, in the morning of 8 August at approximately 06:00, a third Georgian brigade-sized battle group launched an attack against the town itself advancing from the south (Zemo Nikozi, the Headquarters of the Geor-

gian Peacekeeping Battalion) to its south-western suburbs (“Shanghai district”). The task force was composed of Special Operation Forces of the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and supported by a tank and a light infantry battalion.

As a first action, it destroyed and overran the Russian Peacekeepers’ camp at the south-western corner of the town (Verkhniy Gorodok) which was located directly on the main route to the “Shanghai” suburb. Georgia admitted that it fired at the Russian camp, which was identified as a priority target for MLRS, but claimed to have acted in self-defense and returned fire originating from this direction. However, with the order to storm and take the town, the tactical initiative was on the Georgian side. The Russian camp geographically blocked the Georgian assault in battle order. Moreover, Ossetian fighters had dug trenches close to the camp and defended their positions by firing from northern directions. Given the combat range of their canon, Russian BMP (Boevaya Mashina Pekhoty) armored infantry fighting vehicles were not suited to hit Georgian units in Zemo Nikozi before these had left their positions and started attacking towards the camp. On the contrary, Russian combat vehicles were not lined up in defensive positions, but destroyed together with communication equipment and trucks in their parking and storage areas. Having suffered fatal losses and high numbers of wounded, the Russian peacekeepers withdrew towards the town and continued fighting until they were relieved by regular Russian forces arriving on 9 August.

After overcoming the resistance of the Ossetian fighters in the “Shanghai” suburb, the MIA task force entered the city itself at around 11:00 and controlled large parts of the city at around 14:30 while Ossetian militia as well as Russian and Ossetian peacekeeping units continued defending some pockets of resistance in the center and the northern part of the town. At 15:00 the Georgian side called upon the Ossetian militia to surrender and to leave the town together with remaining civilian population through a corridor leading to a Georgian-controlled area in the south, which was kept open for three hours.

Up to 18:00 on 8 August, i.e. within 19 hours after the launch of the Georgian offensive operation and approximately 40 hours after the alleged beginning of a large-scale Russian invasion as claimed by Georgia, no clash with regular Russian troops was reported in and around Tskhinvali. According to information provided by both sides, the first direct fire exchange between two Russian battalions (approximately 400 men each) and Georgian units took place in the vicinity of Tskhinvali between 18:30 and 19:00. More Russian forces arrived at the north-western outskirts of the town in the late morning of 9

August. At around midday of 9 August – after regrouping and introducing a fourth Georgian maneuverable brigade from Senaki (2nd Infantry) which replaced the 4th Brigade at the left wing – the 4th Brigade and the MIA task force launched a combined counter attack in the town of Tskhinvali. Only in the early morning of 10 August, when the bulk of the Russian forces marched through the Roki Tunnel, did the Georgian forces withdraw from the town and take positions in its southern outskirts.

Georgian Operations in the North and Russian Military Movements through the Roki Tunnel

Although the Georgian attack focused on the town of Tskhinvali and the southern part of the break-away province, some minor Georgian operations took place at the northern edge of the Northern Georgian enclave: Georgian artillery attacks as well as air strikes have been reported to have targeted enemy columns in the area of Didi Gupta – Java and the Ossetian by-pass roads on the morning of 8 August between 05:20 and 08:00. Whether these columns were predominantly of Ossetian or Russian origin was disputed after the war. According to the Georgian Minister for Re-integration, Temuri Yakobashvili, the difference between “Russian Russians” and “Ossetian Russians” did not matter for the assessment of its political and military significance.

However, there is no doubt, that Ossetian militia units with heavy equipment were assembled in this area and tried to counter-attack in the southern direction. At the same time, it is also likely that smaller Russian elements such as reconnaissance parties, communication groups, advance guards or augmentations of the Russian peacekeepers (the bulk of which were encircled in Tskhinvali) were present in this area. An official Russian source reports that a Russian unit shortly after midnight of 7 August took control of the Roki Tunnel just after the Georgian operations had started. Georgian information states that Georgian artillery deployed in the northern enclave targeted an enemy column south of the Roki Tunnel (probably in the Java area) shortly after midnight of 7 August. An official Russian source informs that on 8 August at around 05:30 – in addition to Georgian artillery and air strikes – a Georgian special operation unit attacking from the northern enclave engaged Ossetian forces at Didi Gupta and that some Russian elements were involved. It remained unclear, however, whether the counter-fire originated from Russian or Ossetian artillery. (The latter had their main camp in this area.)

Another element to be considered was the influx of volunteers from the North Caucasus through the Roki

Tunnel to South Ossetia. Traditionally, Cossacks and North Caucasian volunteers supported South Ossetians in emergency situations such as the war in the early 1990s and the Georgian “anti-smuggling” operation in 2004. Furthermore, volunteers were also regularly assigned to Ossetian and Russian peacekeeping units as “reinforcements”. Despite the propaganda war which had started during the escalation in early August, the number and military impact of volunteers available for combat on 7 August in support of the South Ossetian militia was rather limited (probably less than 200 with more arrivals during the course of the war). In any case, it is obvious that a few heavily-armed Ossetian units, some volunteers, or a few Russian elements assembled in the Didi Gupta – Java area were not strong enough to relieve the town of Tskhinvali, which remained under siege until late in the morning of 9 August.

According to Russian information, the first regular Russian forces crossed the Roki Tunnel into South Ossetia at 14:30 on 8 August after the respective orders had been given. Since the Russian air force was observed in action already in the morning of 8 August between 08:30 and 09:30, an earlier time for the influx of the first regular Russian combat units through the Roki Tunnel (between 10:00 and 11:00) is likely. After completing the march to the Java area and regrouping, two Russian battalion size battle groups of the 135th and 693rd Motorized Rifle Regiments of the 19th Division probably between 14:00 and 15:00 started advancing on the by-pass roads in the southern direction and engaged in battle in the vicinity of Tskhinvali on the evening of 8 August between 18:30 and 19:00. A further brigade size Russian task force assembled in the Java area in the late evening of 8 August.

According to Georgian information, it failed to advance through the Georgian northern enclave due to a successful Georgian defense. Only on 9 August, shortly before midday, did the Russian task force – now reinforced by Russian airborne units – arrive at the outskirts of Tskhinvali using the by-pass roads. In the afternoon the task force fought a battle in the town against counter-attacking Georgian units. In the early morning of 10 August the bulk of the Russian forces crossed the Roki Tunnel and brought the strength of the Russian operative group in South Ossetia up to the size of one mechanized division equivalent to approximately 12,000 servicemen, 100 battle tanks, 500 armored combat vehicles and 200 artillery systems. The Russian operative group now advanced directly to Tskhinvali through the northern Georgian enclave. With their sequential arrival, the Russian forces on 10 August reached the size of the Georgian operative group, which had been deployed three days earlier. The

Russian air force was greatly superior in numbers but suffered losses and needed some time to suppress the modern Georgian air defense which was well equipped and operated successfully during the first two days.

With the growing pressure of Russian ground and air attacks on 10 and 11 August and the opening of a second strategic front in and from Abkhazia the cohesion of the Georgian operations deteriorated quickly: Efforts to defend the area north of Gori together with those parts of the 1st Brigade (1,800 servicemen) which were transported by the US Air Force on 10 August from Iraq back to Tbilisi failed. A new defense line was established on 12 August at Mtskheta and east of the Kaspi – Igoeti line, while Russian forces followed and carried out reconnaissance and area-securing operations aiming at re-establishing contact with Georgian units and securing “buffer zones”. However, they did not continue attacking towards Tbilisi and, thus, no further battle was fought until the ceasefire agreement on 12 August officially ended the hostilities.

The Deployment of Georgian Forces: Timing and Risk of Escalation

Although this article does not intend to analyze the strategic rationale for the Georgian offensive operation against South Ossetia in August 2008, the timing of the decisions for concrete military preparations and the deployment of forces seems to be one of the clues and deserves further consideration. According to Georgian information, the President of Georgia on 7 August at 23:35 issued an order

- to protect civilians in the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia;
- to neutralize firing positions from which fire against civilians, Georgian peacekeeping units and police originated;
- to halt the movement of regular units of the Russian Federation through the Roki Tunnel inside the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

Apart from the fact that the reasoning provided by the Georgian side up to midday of 8 August did not refer to the influx of regular Russian units, but to Ossetian irregulars and North Caucasian volunteers, as well as to incursions by Russian military aircraft, it was naïve to believe that this presidential order could have any influence on the design of the Georgian offensive operations: They started at the very moment of its issue.

Georgian forces equivalent to one mechanized division were already combat ready in positions around Tskhinvali and involved in combat activities against Ossetian fighters. They had deployed two infantry brigades (about

3,000 soldiers each), one brigade sized battle group composed of special operations forces of the Ministry of Interior (MIA) with tank and light infantry support, a heavy artillery brigade, available tank and mechanized units of the newly created 5th Infantry Brigade and the 1st Infantry Brigade (60% of which were deployed in Iraq), engineers, a radio technical unit for electronic warfare as well as headquarters and communication units. Combat helicopters, combat aircraft, air defense, logistical, technical and medical support units were prepared to support the operative group of forces which extended up to 20 km east (3rd Brigade) and west of the town (4th Brigade) with the MIA task force in the center facing the town itself.

According to arms control information, the operative group included about 12,000 soldiers, approximately 130 battle tanks, 100 armored combat vehicles, 140 artillery pieces and mortars, 24 multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS) and several hundred wheeled vehicles. In addition, the MIA battle group deployed around 70 Cobra armored combat vehicles. Later, during the night from 8 to 9 August the 3rd Brigade from Senaki was introduced and reinforced the operative group bringing its numbers up to 15,000 soldiers, more than 150 battle tanks, approximately 200 armored combat vehicles and 200 artillery pieces, mortars and MLRS.

With that composition of units, the bulk of the available Georgian armed forces took part in the operation against South Ossetia. It is self-evident that such a large force deployment cannot be organized “spontaneously” in only a few hours, e.g. in response to local sporadic fire exchanges. It requires prior planning, organization, logistical preparation as well as the tactical preparedness and combat readiness of subordinate units, including training. Large columns of hundreds of military vehicles, which partially even crossed paths, had to be moved from their peacetime locations in Vaziani, Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Khoni and Gori (later also from Senaki) to their pre-designed deployment areas via the main East–West highway over a distance of up to 130 km – with heavy armor partially loaded on the train. The movement of the main echelon itself lasted the whole day of 7 August. Upon arrival in the zone of operation, the final and most sensitive approach to the “frontline” against opposing Ossetian units required prior intensive reconnaissance, securing key tactical positions and protection by earlier-deployed frontline units and artillery.

The orders for frontline units to reconnoiter and secure key positions and for the bulk of the forces to prepare, march, approach the frontline and deploy in battle order had to be given in this sequence and obviously much earlier than the final order to attack. The respective orders

had to be carried out through detailed planning and preparation on every command level from the highest political one through a hierarchical chain of command down to the units on the ground. This process not only involved the necessary coordination between reconnaissance, combat and artillery units but also coordination between army and air force and between the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior. For planning the execution of respective tasks, every level needs detailed assessments of the own force status and the enemy situation based on the results of reconnaissance, which had to be started several days earlier; consultation and coordination are needed to design the operations to be carried out by subordinate units; and, apart from planning the mere writing, approving and communicating the orders needs several hours at every command level.

According to Georgian information, the order to approach the frontline was given on 7 August at 14:30. However, at this point in time large columns of Georgian units from west and east Georgia were already on the move and a large artillery force from Gori was in fire position at the southern boundary of the “security zone” (JPKF responsibility) with tanks lined up along the main route towards Tskhinvali. Movements of the main body of the 3rd Brigade from Kutaisi and of units from Gori were observed en route already in the late morning of 7 August. A much disputed “order No. 1” of the 4th Georgian Brigade was issued on 7 August at 09:00 according to Georgian information while the version provided by the Russian Federation indicated 7 August at 01:30 as the time of issuing. In the chain of command a brigade functions as a medium command level below the command of the operative group (land forces command), the general staff of the Ministry of Defense and the political command level. Thus, the decisions to prepare the deployment of the bulk of the forces and to secure frontline positions had to be taken before the 7th of August. The final order given by the President on 7 August at 23:35 merely triggered the attack of forces which were already deployed in the field in combat order. Obviously, their logistical and tactical preparations, including those in the frontline, had started much earlier.

Early frontline operations, such as intensification of reconnaissance, securing key tactical positions, preparing fire protection by artillery and, in particular, the approach of the bulk of the Georgian forces towards Ossetian field positions, necessarily entailed the risk of escalation. Earlier sporadic fire exchanges evolved to a full-fledged battle along the whole frontline on 6 and 7 August, involving heavy artillery and resulting in fatal losses and wounded on both sides. The fighting concen-

trated on the routes of the later advance of two Georgian brigades, with the village of Khetagurovo west of Tskhinvali and the Sarabuki Heights east of it being the hot spots of clashes. There, at around midnight of 7 August, the Georgian side succeeded in deploying artillery in the northern enclave: It had by-passed Tskhinvali on a mountainous road east of the town, which required prior reconnaissance and protection by combat forces. Thus, the deployment of Georgian forces in the zone of conflict was not merely a reaction to Ossetian provocations: The threat of a major offensive operation and the encirclement of Tskhinvali in itself provided an incentive for Ossetian action and local attacks.

Conclusions

From this brief account of the Georgian operations towards South Ossetia and the sequential arrival of Russian forces between 8 and 10 August, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The Georgian operations were offensive in nature, focusing on the encirclement and occupation of Tskhinvali and the populated southern part of South Ossetia and aiming at the destruction of the political power base of the break-away region. The Georgian forces kept this offensive design with a focus on Tskhinvali even in view of the first (smaller) Russian reinforcements appearing in the vicinity of the town during the evening of 8 August. Consequently, the Georgian operative group introduced a fourth maneuver brigade from Senaki to enable a counterattack in the town on 9 August.

2. In addition to the main emphasis, smaller scale Georgian operations from the northern Georgian enclave aimed at preventing the advance of Ossetian reserves (possibly supported by volunteers and Russian advance guards or peacekeeping augmentations) from the north directly through the Didi Liakhvi Valley to Tskhinvali and at delaying their movements on the by-pass roads. They were not in a position, however, to defend against a major operative group attacking from the north as events on 9 and 10 August have shown.

3. The overall design of the Georgian operations in South Ossetia was not geared to halt a Russian invasion from the north and at no time before 11 August did Georgia prepare for operative defense.

4. In particular, the massive and indiscriminate shelling of Tskhinvali, which aimed at destroying the politi-

cal structures of the South Ossetian authorities, can in no way be explained by the purpose of halting a Russian aggression. It came as a surprise to the local population, which assumed that the ceasefire announced by the Georgian president in the evening remained in place. It started without prior notice or preceding escalation in the town and its immediate vicinity. It was out of proportion even if there had been renewed fire exchanges far outside the town, as indeed was the case during the preceding days. Firing salvos into populated areas from several batteries of heavy artillery pieces and MLRS Grad Systems, which are designed to cover large areas with lethal effect, does not leave any room for speculation: Georgia's goals were destruction rather than support for an attack that started only six hours after the first strike. The results of this indiscriminate area shelling could be predicted in advance: The involvement of civilians, OSCE staff and peacekeepers, including eventual losses, had to be part of the risk assessment. Obviously, the planning of the operation had accepted these results.

5. The Georgian claims of a Russian and volunteer presence south of the Roki Tunnel in excess of the peacetime strength of the Russian and (North) Ossetian peacekeeping battalions (500 each) before and after midnight of 7 to 8 August do not seem to be unfounded. However, their size, functions and capabilities do not substantiate the claim of an imminent or progressing large-scale invasion, – an interpretation which would also contradict the actual design of the Georgian military operations. In contrast, the sequential arrival of Russian combat and support units after the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali lasted more than two days before they reached a combat strength comparable to the size of Georgian forces which had been deployed three days earlier. Only from 10 August onwards did the Russian forces succeed in pushing back Georgian forces beyond the administrative borders of South Ossetia. For more than 36 hours they were not in a position to relieve Russian peacekeepers under siege in Tskhinvali. They did not appear on the battlefield at all with a significant combat strength before the evening of 8 August, although some tactical reserves were located in close vicinity to the Roki Tunnel since the beginning of the escalation in July 2008. Other units were kept in high readiness in their peacetime locations but had to wait for respective orders before they started moving towards South Ossetia.

About the Author

Wolfgang Richter is an army colonel and fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik), Berlin. He contributed as an expert to the work of the Independent International Fact Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. This article represents his personal opinion.