
Russia's Armed Forces: The Power of Illusion



Roger McDermott

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Contents

SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
HYPING UP THE IMAGE WITH OLD SOVIET SYMBOLS.....	7
RESUMING OLD-STYLE SOVIET MILITARY PARADES.....	7
“NEW” UNIFORMS	9
SPREADING THE ILLUSION ABROAD	11
RUSSIA’S NAVY AND AIR FORCE.....	11
COLD WAR IMAGERY: LONG-RANGE BOMBER FLIGHTS	13
THE GAP BETWEEN ILLUSION AND REALITY	16
DECAYING CONVENTIONAL FORCES	16
THE ILLUSION OF “VICTORY” IN GEORGIA	18
CONCLUSION	20

Summary

Paradoxically, Russia's military success during the "five day war" in the South Caucasus in August 2008 highlighted the deplorable state of its conventional armed forces, weakened by years of underfunding, failed reforms and declining social prestige. Nevertheless, the Kremlin sees the military as one of the principal elements in the restoration of Russian power. As a result, it seeks to promote a positive image of the armed forces, which is nothing more than an illusion, manipulated for both domestic and international ends. The return of heavy weaponry to annual parades on Red Square and Soviet-era symbols on military uniforms, the resumption of strategic bomber flights, and the deployment of Russia's navy to Latin America and the Caribbean all play a role in the staging of this illusion. Taking into account Russia's current economic difficulties, it will be difficult to realize the ambitious reform agenda laid out after the Georgian war; in these conditions it remains likely that the Russian authorities will be tempted to undertake a marketing campaign, rather than a reform program.

Introduction

Images of military power are frequently used by the Russian state to exemplify a resurgent Russia that has shaken off the humiliation of its weaknesses in the 1990s and now wants to legitimize its claims to great power status commensurate with its energy wealth. During an extended period of presidential transition in the Kremlin, soon exacerbated by the war in the South Caucasus, illusion became a vital part of Russia's political message to the West. The message being summarized succinctly as: "we are back." Aspects of illusion, masking the deeper decaying condition of its conventional military capabilities, have re-emerged in modern Russia both in their Soviet and pre-Revolutionary guises. Its hallmarks are an inclination towards an outward show that exaggerates a positive veneer over the condition of the military, a near obsession with symbols, resuming the cold war practice of strategic bomber flights and what may prove to be a search for foreign naval bases. These illusions are an underestimated factor essential to identify before a realistic assessment can be made of Russia's current military modernization and reform agendas.

Russia's conventional armed forces have been in decline since they were formed from the rump of the Soviet military after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, which repeated attempts to carry out military reform, have failed to arrest. After Russia's "victory" in the Georgia war in August 2008, its most ambitious, far reaching military reform program since 1945 was detailed. In reality the "lessons learned" from the war served as a catalyst to commence the reform agenda, announced by Minister of Defense Anatoly Serdyukov in October 2008, which proposes to transfer the armed forces from a mobilization to a permanent readiness basis, structured around more mobile brigades while seeking to drastically modernize equipment and weapons more suited to fighting a large-scale conventional war that never happened. Despite the anti-Western rhetoric so popular within the ruling elite, by abandoning its mobilization army Russia is in fact recognizing that it no longer faces any threat of invasion from the West. Conversely, fears sparked by Russia's military operation in Georgia, particularly amongst former Soviet countries including the Baltic States and within Eastern Europe, especially Poland, placed consideration of how to "contain" a future threat from Russia back on the minds of NATO planning staffs.

A torrent of officially sanctioned criticism of the experience of the Georgia war, defusing controversy surrounding Serdyukov's ambitious reform plans, agreed on one common theme: Russia's conventional armed forces have decayed so far that it will require radical measures to rectify. The sheer scale of that decay may be underestimated by the authorities.

Non-combat fatalities in Russia's armed forces, according to statistics released in January 2009 by the Ministry of Defense (MoD), are rising. In 2008 there were 471 non-combat deaths,¹ while some resulted from accidents such as mishandling a weapon, murder or manslaughter, 231 personnel committed suicide.² The suicide rates amongst Russian conscripts are particularly shocking, a reflection of the brutal practice of hazing, *dedovshchina*,³ within its structures. This institutionalized bullying blights the lives of Russian conscripts, saps their morale and undermines the military's combat capabilities. Poor social conditions, low pay, inadequate housing, and conscription of those unfit to serve, has combined with a shortage of adequate equipment to create a pattern only too familiar to Russia's conscripts.⁴

In this atmosphere, pursuing an illusion of military power has proven tempting and even comfortable for the Russian government in the pursuit of its domestic and international ends. The return of military parades or changes to the uniform are stratagems which the Kremlin uses to manipulate the image of both the state and its military. This approach uses parallels with the Soviet era in order to conjure up memories of the Red Army's strength in the minds of foreign observers.

¹ "Non-combat Deaths in Russian Army on the Rise—Defense Ministry," *Ekho Moskvy*, 18 January 2009.

² These are official statistics, however, Russian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers claim the real figures are much higher.

³ *Dedovshchina* is an informal system of subjugation of junior conscripts by conscripts in their last year of service and officers.

⁴ See: W.E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993; "Dedovshchina: From Military to Society," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, No. 1, 2004, <www.pipss.org/index40.html>; F. Daucé, E. Sieca-Kozłowski: *Dedovshchina in the Post-Soviet Military: Hazing of Russian Army Conscripts in a Comparative Perspective*, Soviet & Post-Soviet Politics & Society 28, Stuttgart, 2006.

Hyping up the Image with Old Soviet Symbols

Resuming old-style soviet military parades

The military parade of Russia's armed forces on 9 May 2008, marking the 63rd anniversary of the victory in World War II, or as it is denoted within Russia the Great Patriotic War, witnessed the first appearance of military hardware on Red Square since the dissolution of the USSR. The parade, two days after the inauguration of President Dmitry Medvedev, tried to signal the restoration of Russia's military power, carefully calculated for both domestic and international audiences to demonstrate that Russia is resurgent and has to be treated as a great power.⁵ Despite concealing Lenin's Mausoleum from view by using a large Russian tricolor and erecting a platform in front of it from which President Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin could view the parade, it followed the trend established by Putin to restore popular traditions from Russia's Soviet past.⁶

In producing this powerful visual image of military power, several interconnecting elements combined to make the illusion more potent. Strong historical traditions of holding military parades in Moscow and St. Petersburg had developed in imperial Russia, and were recast for political purposes by the Bolsheviks to display their "achievements." Military parades were held on the anniversary of the October Revolution on 7 November 1918 and from 1924 Lenin's mausoleum was used as a platform from which parades were viewed by the Soviet leadership. Stalin perfected the propaganda value of these parades, reveling in the display of thousands of pieces of military equipment, including the latest designs. Under Leonid Brezhnev parades became more conservative with aircraft excluded for safety reasons and little new equipment publicly shown. The final Soviet Victory Day parade took place in 1985; while the last Soviet military parade was held on 7 November 1990.⁷

⁵ "Softer Speech Before a Tougher Parade," *Moscow Times*, 12 May 2008.

⁶ C.J. Chivers, "Moscow Echoes with Nostalgia as Military Parades Through Red Square," *International Herald Tribune*, 9 May 2008.

⁷ B.D. Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army, Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

During what is now regarded as a humiliating period of political and economic instability in the 1990s, President Boris Yeltsin used the motif of the military parade, but avoided “Soviet” overtones: Victory Day was commemorated again in 1995, but sensitive to the allusions of Russia’s Soviet past, Yeltsin held the parade on *Kutuzovsky Prospekt* adjacent to the Victory memorial on Poklonnaya Hill on the outskirts of Moscow. The following year the tradition of the military parade on Victory Day taking place on Red Square had returned, though there was no inclusion of heavy military equipment with the exception of a small number of aircraft that flew over Moscow in 2005.⁸

President Putin decided to hold a full-scale military parade on Red Square on 9 May 2008, prior to his departure from office, in the spirit of Soviet tradition including the display of military hardware. It was a clear departure from the pattern of parades established in Russia since 1991. More than 8000 servicemen participated, with personnel from one division dressed in parade uniform introduced in 2008. Nonetheless, what caused the stir in the West was the signal sent by the regime in choosing to reintroduce a display of military equipment on Red Square for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁹

A total of 111 pieces of ground-based military equipment took part in the parade, including T-90A main battle tanks and the Iskander-M (SS-26)¹⁰ short-range missile system.¹¹ Arguably, had the chapel of Our Lady of Iver, which stands at the entrance to Red Square, not been restored in 1995 (demolished in 1931 specifically to allow free passage for military equipment onto Red Square) the presence of heavy equipment would have been greater. The parade displayed Topol (SS-25) ICBMs, though interestingly not the new Topol-M (SS-27), long absent from Red Square, their reappearance contributed to the impression of restored military power. Western interpretations of this event, with its obvious illusion of military power, unfortunately became conditioned by a dismissive remark from Geoff Morrell, US Pentagon spokesman, made before the parade was staged, asserting that the Russians were taking aging equipment for a “spin.”¹² Thus, the creation of this illusion often results in the outside observer drawing a conclusion other than that which the Kremlin intends.

This premature viewpoint was entirely mistaken; most of the equipment on show was relatively new, apart from the aviation platforms from which only the Su-34 was a recent procurement (2006). However, the military hardware on show was mostly new, though produced in small quantities and perhaps giving an inaccurate impression of the condition of Russia’s conventional armed forces.¹³ Hardware was selected to showcase the achievements of Russia’s defense industry, representative of

⁸ M. Barabanov, “Urbi et Orbi: Military Parades on Red Square”, *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 4 [14], 2008, <www.mdb.cast.ru/mdb/2-2008/item1/article2>.

⁹ “Russian Military Planes Fly Over Victory Day Parade Route,” RIA Novosti, 29 April 2008.

¹⁰ NATO reporting names given in parentheses.

¹¹ For the full list of equipment, see M. Barabanov, *op. cit.* [8].

¹² M. Schepp, “Russia Displays its Military Pomp on Red Square,” *Der Spiegel*, 9 May 2008.

¹³ Some Russian commentators also overstated the dated nature of the equipment on show. See: “Moscow Shows Georgia its Military Equipment: the Soviet One,” 9 May 2008, <www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2008/05/09/9578.shtml>.

procurement into the military during the past four years. For example, 2S25 Sprut-SD and Tor-M2 SAM systems have been produced since 2007, GAZ-2975 Tigr ordered in 2006 and was manufactured in 2007, Buk-M1, the S-300PM2 Favourite and the Iskander-M were all made within the last two years, T-90A tanks entered production in 2004 and BMD-4 airborne combat vehicles have been manufactured since 2004. These have entered service in units of the Russian army, admittedly on a limited scale, but their appearance in the parade may have been calibrated to provide proof that Russia has moved beyond the military stagnation of the 1990s, while also displaying modern equipment with an eye on the international arms market, currently valued at around 8 billion US dollars annually as well as having an unquantifiable but important prestige factor.¹⁴

The Victory Day parade in 2008 proved popular domestically, with opinion polls showing 70 percent of respondents considered the use of military hardware on Red Square as either “very good” or “good.”¹⁵ Placing the parade in the context of its historical antecedents, it seemed more reminiscent of those from the era of Stalin or Krushchev, yet in terms of equipment it was arguably the largest display of new armaments since the first Soviet military parade in 1918. Connotations which convey the message of a regime that had transformed Russia’s strength and aimed at its domestic supporters and opponents. Senior officers within Russia’s armed forces have indicated that military hardware will become commonplace in future Victory Day parades.¹⁶

“New” uniforms

In 2005, President Putin reversed changes to the Russian army uniform introduced by Boris Yeltsin in 1992. Significantly, Putin ordered that the five point star, a familiar Soviet emblem, should reappear on officers’ headwear. It revealed his obsession with Russia’s Soviet past and an appeal to image building that met with no resistance within the power ministries.

In July 2007 Russia’s MoD confirmed plans to redesign military and security uniforms, while maintaining “historical traditions” and estimated its total cost at around 100 million rubles (4 million US dollars). It is staggering that the authorities chose to prioritize this outward display, revising the uniform rather than tackling more serious issues facing military personnel. What underscored this preoccupation with the trappings of image further was the remarkable decision to tender the contract to redesign the uniform to the fashion industry. Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov boasted that the top Moscow fashion designer Valentin Yudashkin had won the tender to redesign the uniform—his international celebrity seemingly more important to the Russian leadership than his knowledge of the military’s needs. The

¹⁴ “Russia: Moscow Displays Heavy Weapons in Victory Day Parade,” *RFE/RL*, 9 May 2008.

¹⁵ M. Schepp, *op. cit* [12].

¹⁶ Y. Avdeyev, “Army Aviation’s Horizons,” *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 31 December 2008, <www.redstar.ru/2008/12/31_12/3_03.html>.

decision prompted criticism from fashion historian Alexander Vasilyev, who argued that military uniforms should be designed within the armed forces by people with an understanding of their requirements.¹⁷

Yudashkin admitted the project was highly demanding involving designing uniforms across all branches of service and ranks in the armed forces and the security structures including police and Ministry of Emergencies personnel, totaling 85 uniform designs. Yudashkin's involvement in the redesigned uniforms could conceivably boost the sense of pride with which it is worn, however, will that really matter to the ordinary conscript subjected to hazing, or experiencing the numerous social problems facing the military? In an almost farcical attempt to celebrate the new uniform, the authorities ordered a fashion show at the GUM department store in Moscow in September 2008; the "models" exhibited the modernized uniforms parading on catwalks. Incidentally, the five point star survived the revision.¹⁸

¹⁷ RIA Novosti, 17 July 2007.

¹⁸ "Interview: Designer Says Russian Army Should Dress to Kill," *Reuters*, 7 February 2008; RIA Novosti, 30 September 2008.

Spreading the Illusion Abroad

Russia's Navy and Air Force

The illusion of military power is also a political tool used to raise Russia's strategic profile, primarily, though not exclusively, intended for a foreign audience. Russian naval visits to ports in Libya, Cuba and Venezuela, as well as joint naval exercises, have been intended to show that the Russian Navy can be deployed globally once again. This was stepped up in the aftermath of the Russia-Georgia war in August 2008, with the less than subtle attempt to convey a signal to Washington that Russia is prepared to increase its naval presence closer to the US. US Naval commanders have not taken the entrance of the Russian navy into the Caribbean or South America seriously; since neither the number of vessels nor the frequency of visits significantly raises Russia's strategic profile in this hemisphere.¹⁹

Such overseas deployments, exercises and their attendant publicity exaggerate the capabilities of Russia's ailing Navy, acting as a smoke-screen for its actual poor condition. In January 2009, for example, the Northern Fleet's destroyer Admiral Chabanenko, after returning from joint naval exercises with the Venezuelan Navy, underwent major repairs at the Yantar Baltic Shipbuilding plant in Baltiysk. Though these repairs were downplayed by the naval leadership, one report suggested that on its arrival in port it was "on its last legs." The need to build an image of naval power was stimulated by the lasting damage to the navy's reputation domestically and internationally which ensued from the *Kursk* submarine disaster, with the loss of its 118 crew, in 2000, and its potentially detrimental effect upon Russia's international arms sales. More recently, in November 2008, the *Nerpa* submarine disaster resulted in twenty fatalities caused by a malfunction in the onboard fire-safety system; the submarine had been scheduled for delivery to India's navy.²⁰

¹⁹ "Russian Navy Spokesman Details Combat Ships' Missions in World Oceans," *ITAR-TASS*, 15 December 2008; "Long Deployments Show Russian Navy Capabilities," *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 16 December 2008.

²⁰ "Russian ASW Ship to Undergo 'Urgent Repairs' Following South America Drills," *Interfax*, 19 January 2009; R.N. McDermott, "Another Disaster in the Russian Navy," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 5, Issue 216, 11 November 2008; R. Moore, *A Time to Die: The Kursk Disaster*, Bantham Books, 2002; M. Tsyarkin, "Rudderless in a Storm: The Russian Navy 1992-2002," in A. C. Aldis & R. N. McDermott (eds), *Russian Military Reform 1992-2002*, Frank Cass: London, 2003, p. 162-186; Z. Barany, "The Tragedy of the Kursk: Crisis

In addition to misrepresenting Russia's naval capabilities by publicizing its international naval maneuvers, while rumoring acquiring possible foreign naval bases in places like Libya and Syria, President Medvedev has confirmed the transfer of the Russian navy's main headquarters, currently based in Moscow, to St. Petersburg. There can be no doubt of the symbolic importance of this move: returning the Navy's headquarters (HQ) to its imperial home. According to these plans, a group of 800 officers and the Navy's Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Vladimir Vysotsky, will be relocated by 31 December 2009. The navy's new headquarters will be accommodated in *Admiralteystvo*, where the Navy Ministry and General Naval Staff resided before the October Revolution; first suggested by Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov in October 2007, the idea soon gained support from Defense Minister Serdyukov.²¹ After transferring the headquarters of the Leningrad naval base from the Admiralty building in St. Petersburg to Kronshtadt outside the city, the intended relocation can proceed. St. Petersburg governor Valentina Matviyenko, Serdyukov and Andrey Kostin President and Chairman of the Board of the Foreign Trade Bank (VTB), signed a memorandum in December 2008 on establishing a unified military educational research center in Kronshtadt, which envisages building state-of-the-art laboratories, classrooms and accommodation. Matviyenko said the first stage of the project, the transfer of faculties of the Naval Academy from St. Petersburg to Kronshtadt, will only be completed by 2013.

The costs of moving the Russian Navy High Command are conservatively estimated at more than 1 billion US dollars and this figure is likely to escalate as Russia grapples with its present economic crisis and continued pressure to further devalue its currency. Moreover, current plans have not taken into consideration building secure accommodation for the command, since currently St. Petersburg lacks the underground infrastructure needed to ensure survival of command and control in a crisis. Opponents of the move fear it will prove so costly as to distract from more urgent needs for the navy, such as modernizing equipment or raising salaries.²²

Admiral Viktor Kravchenko, who headed the Russian Navy HQ from 1998-2005, believes that separating the Navy from the other military command structures in Moscow could weaken the coordination of the naval command with other elements of the armed forces. Other critics note that 6,000 naval officers in St. Petersburg are waiting for apartments, while in Moscow the corresponding figure is 1,750, moving the Navy's HQ may exacerbate this situation. Indeed, senior naval officers oppose the move on the basis that there is already a lack of money for constructing accommodation for naval officers or new ships. It's only justification lies in

Management in Putin's Russia," *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2004, p. 476-503.

²¹ "Navy Chiefs to Move to St. Petersburg," *Kommersant*, 31 October 2007, <www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=820574>.

²² "Navy Move to St. Petersburg to Cost \$1 Billion," *St. Petersburg Times*, 11 December 2007.

the historic link between St. Petersburg and Russia's Imperial Navy: poignant symbolism that appeals to Russia's current political leadership, intent on using such imagery to promote the perception, domestically and in the West, of Russia's resurgence and demonstration that its leadership think of Russia's imperial past alongside its Soviet period as repositories for use in its contemporary illusion of military power.²³ Given that St. Petersburg is the birthplace of Vladimir Putin, coupled with his numerous appearances at sea, it is likely that he played a decisive role in the decision to transfer the Navy's HQ to St. Petersburg.

Medvedev, while visiting Murmansk as First Deputy Prime Minister on 11 January 2008, spoke of the need to revive Russia's navy, admitting it had been run down as a result of twenty years of neglect. In his view Russia's navy once helped the country to command international respect, though not fear, and it was essential in regaining this sense of respect that naval power should be prioritized. That same appeal was reiterated after it became clear that Russia's economic crisis may slow the implementation of its latest military reform agenda, part of which envisages procuring several new submarines and aircraft carriers for the navy. On 27 January 2009, Medvedev reassured cadets at the Nakhimov Naval Academy in St. Petersburg that the modernization of the navy would go ahead, albeit more slowly than intended. "Without a proper navy Russia does not have a future as a state," he declared.²⁴ Until real modernization and reform enhance Russia's naval capabilities, attempting to gain respect internationally through the use of illusion will act as an alternative virtual reality.

Cold war imagery: long-range bomber flights

Other branches of the military are marshaled into this illusion, often utilizing anachronistic practices. President Putin ordered the resumption of strategic (long-range) bomber flights in August 2007, reminiscent of the Soviet Union's practice of flying bombers into areas patrolled by US and NATO aircraft. This decision met with mixed reactions in the West, being seen as a diplomatic move to strengthen Russia's bargaining position over possible compromise on US Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) plans; in military terms it had limited practical value.

For example, a Russian bomber flew over the US military base in Guam on 8 August 2007 and its pilot "exchanged smiles" with a US fighter pilot scrambled for interception. Such well publicized incidents have occurred sporadically since 2007, forcing US F-16s, UK RAF Tornados and fighter aircraft from other NATO air forces to scramble in order to "intercept" Russian strategic bombers. Similar incidents in Finland and the

²³ "The Russian Navy's Main HQ 'Sets Sail' for St. Petersburg," *Moscow News*, 18 December 2008.

²⁴ ITAR-TASS, 11 January 2008; Interfax, 27 January 2009.

Baltic States fit this pattern, as does the frequency of strategic bombers flying over the Arctic; in the latter case strongly signaling that Russia is serious about its claims over the Arctic. By selectively and tactically “prodding” Western powers using its strategic bombers the illusion of the global projection of military power is further reinforced. Nevertheless, it has perhaps been more successful in the carefully distilled media coverage aimed at the Russian public than abroad. Resuming the Cold War practice involved in these flights in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as well as over the Arctic, has symbolic value which the ruling elite wants to maximize. In December 2008 the MoD television channel, *Zvezda TV*, broadcast a documentary on Russia’s long-range bomber fleet, which strongly emphasized the tone of a resurgent Russia, claiming it signaled the emergence of the air force from the neglect and underfunding of the 1990s. Since this was Putin’s initiative, he also received lavish praise for having implemented this policy.²⁵

Yet, although the illusion of military power can be generated and manipulated by the Russian state using these strategic bomber flights, the actual condition and capabilities of Russia’s Air Force presents a reality that is unpopular within the ruling elite. Russia’s air force faces shortage of funds for conducting repairs and purchasing spare parts, weakening the technical condition of the air force fleet, which is also affected by the significant age of the aircraft; many of its platforms entered service in the 1970s and 1980s. Pilots with insufficient flight hours, often no more than 40 hours per year, in contrast to the 180 hours which is the NATO standard minimum requirement, are a direct consequence of the lack of spare parts and the declining service life of its aircraft. There are also important weaknesses in Russia’s Long-Range Aviation (as well as generally within the air force) such as the insufficient numbers of refueling aircraft (20 Il-78). There are plans to procure as many as 30 new refueling aircraft based on the Il-96 airliner, though this has been questioned publicly by independent military experts in Moscow asking about the financing of the project and to what extent Russia’s present financial crisis may lead to revisions of the MoDs procurement plans.²⁶

The aircraft fleet is ageing and will become a greater burden on the state as it seeks to modernize and maintain it in the longer term. The state armaments program for 2007-2015 plans to modernize 159 Long-Range Aviation aircraft. Work has already begun on the modernization of the available Tu-160, Tu-95MS and Tu-22M3 aircraft (to include adapting the Tu-160 to use non-nuclear weapons, such as precision guided munitions (PGMs) and conventional bombs). An investigation into the crash of a MiG-29 (Fulcrum) fighter aircraft on 5 December 2008 in Transbaikal Territory, concluded that its cause was due to heavy corrosion in the plane’s load-bearing structure. General Sergey Baynetov, head of the air force’s flight safety department said an inspection of the MiG fighters in the air force inventory established that only 30 percent were corrosion free. Consequently, as many as 70 percent, or around 200 aircraft, will now be

²⁵ *Zvezda TV*, Moscow, 22 December 2008.

²⁶ M. Lukin & V. Savin, “All Russian Aviation,” supplement *Kommersant-Vlast*, No. 33 (786), 25 August 2008.

scrapped. Often these aircraft are more than 30 years old, and the MoD has no plans to replace them in sufficient quantities. The air force expects to receive 34 re-export MiG-29SMT jets, which were recently rejected by Algeria, however, this is not enough to replace the 200 corroded jets.²⁷

Finally, the number of suicidal conscripts has increased generally within Russia's air force, indicating low morale and wider social problems, demanding more concerted remedial action by the state: instead its focus often shifts to the pursuit of illusion.²⁸

²⁷ RIA Novosti, 2 February 2009.

²⁸ "The Russian Air Force Recovering," RIA Novosti, 14 August 2008; "Russian Air Force Spokesman Says Quarter of Conscripts Suicidal," Interfax, 20 November 2008.

The Gap between Illusion and Reality

Decaying Conventional Forces

The pursuit of the illusion, instead of the more costly and politically uncertain venture of conducting systemic military reform, continues to appeal to the elite in Russia, being preoccupied with the symbols and glories of Russia's past, and reflects their search international acceptance of Russia as an equal actor. Reality is something from which the government has sought to escape, remolding an image that corresponds to the political message behind a "resurgent Russia." In Russia's conventional armed forces, the reality was ruthlessly exposed by the victory over Georgia in its "five day war" in August 2008. Far from supporting the resurgent Russia rhetoric, it unleashed a wave of criticism from within the armed forces: painfully aware of the ageing and deteriorating condition of Russian military hardware and insufficient state funds allocated to overhaul Russia's dated equipment.²⁹

President Medvedev heard at first hand in Vladikavkaz (headquarters of the North Caucasus Military District) the complaints from Russian servicemen that fought in the August war; the quality of their equipment fell seriously short of that which the US had supplied to the Georgian Army through its defense assistance programs.³⁰ Throughout the autumn of 2008, details of the condition of Russian forces used in the war often contrasted with the illusion. Allegedly, reactive armor mounted on the 58th Army's T-72 tanks was left empty, effectively rendering it useless. Eyewitnesses reported that the 58th Army's two armored columns (containing 150-170 pieces of equipment), spearheading the advance into Tskhinvali, left broken down vehicles along the Zarskaya road.³¹ Independent Russian military weekly *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (NVO) estimated that 60-75 percent of 58th Army tanks deployed in the

²⁹ J. Cooper, "The Funding of the Power Agencies of the Russian State," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, Issue 6/7, 2007, 15 December 2007, <www.pipss.org/index562.html>; D. R. Herspring, *The Kremlin and the High Command: Presidential Impact on the Russia Military from Gorbachev to Putin*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006.

³⁰ Interfax, 19 August 2008; *Vechernyy Yekaterinburg*, 17 September 2008.

³¹ Filling these canisters with the required explosive required 10 hours per vehicle carried out under the supervision of a company-level mechanic. This oversight may have resulted from insufficient time. Author interviews with Russian military officers, November 2008. See: *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 27 August 2008; 9 September 2008.

theatre of operations were older T-62 and T-72m models and even the T-72BM could not withstand Georgian anti-tank warheads. Older tanks lacked Global Positioning System (GPS), thermal imagery and “identification, friend or foe” (IFF) technology. Moreover, the armored columns included BMP-1 and BMD-1 with “primitive” sights and vision equipment.³²

Communications systems and electronic warfare assets used both amongst commanders and frontline forces were also dated. Lieutenant-General Anatoliy Khrulev, Commander of the 58th Army, communicated with his troops in the midst of combat using a satellite phone borrowed from a journalist, since adequate communications equipment between sub-units was unavailable.³³ Satellite targeting support to artillery was also absent, which prevented the use of some PGMs, or the accurate direction of artillery fire. PGMs, such as the Kh-555 air-launched cruise missiles, or the Gran satellite-guided mortar bombs, or frontal aviation’s Kh-28 and Kh-58U anti-radar missiles were not deployed in theatre owing to this lack of satellite targeting capability. Government promises to equip the Russian Army with GLONASS global satellite navigation system receivers by mid-2008 had not been honored, consequently Russian forces went into combat in August 2008 with World War II era maps and compasses.³⁴

Technological deficits within the forces also contributed to the number of Russian casualties which was disproportionately high, reflecting, for example, lack of IFF equipment. Obsolete ground forces equipment commonly lacked essential battlefield command, control and communications equipment which rendered the troops in effect “blind and deaf,” which proved to be a factor in Russia’s losses from friendly fire.³⁵

A lack of air controllers amongst Russian ground forces allowed Georgian Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) to fire on Tskhinvali unopposed for 14 hours. The Russian Air Force later suggested it was unable to insert 2-3 man observer teams with combined-arms units without deploying a command post “in parallel,” leaving Russian armored columns without sufficient air cover. Russia’s use of air power in the Georgia war exposed the limited capabilities of its air force. The downing of a Tu-22M3 strategic bomber by Georgia’s air defenses—shot down while flying a reconnaissance mission—was singled out as intolerable. Retired Russian Air Force commanders were outspoken over Russia’s failure to systematically suppress Georgia’s air defenses, the use of a Tu-22M3 to fly a reconnaissance mission using a training crew due to the scarcity of pilots with sufficient flight hours, intelligence failures and the “incompetence” of the Air Force leadership. Search and rescue operations were “poorly organized” and resulted in the capture of Russian pilots. Russian military planning staffs assessing the role of air power in the Georgia war concluded that had the efficiency of Georgia’s air defenses been

³² *Nezavissimoye Voennoye Obozrenie (NVO)*, 29 August 2008.

³³ *Izvestia*, 27 August 2008; *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 15 September 2008.

³⁴ *NVO*, 19 September 2008.

³⁵ *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 27 August 2008; Interfax-AVN, 23 September 2008.

considerably higher, Russian aviation losses would have been significantly greater.³⁶

The illusion of “victory” in Georgia

Despite the operational failures in its conflict in Georgia, Russia's ill-equipped and demoralized army still achieved rapid military victory. This is explained by several factors. The prompt insertion into Tskhinvali of the 76th (Pskov) Airborne Division's 104th Regiment with 1,550 servicemen combined with 100 units of military hardware and approximately 200 military intelligence personnel (GRU), within 24 hours the grouping almost doubled in size.³⁷ Russia's military victory was facilitated by opening a second front in Abkhazia using mechanized infantry. After capturing Tskhinvali Russian forces crossed into undisputed Georgian territory to effectively sever the main highway and railway routes west of Gori. Abkhaz separatists subdued Georgian positions in the Kodori Valley while Russia's air force destroyed military facilities in Tbilisi and Poti.³⁸ In later combat operations in South Ossetia the Russian army made efficient use of the Uragan MLRS and the Tochka-U missiles and also, possibly, the Smerch MLRS for attacks on the Georgian Army's positions inside South Ossetia. Coupled with close support from the Russian air force, losses were inflicted on the Georgian troops precipitating their “demoralization and retreat.”³⁹

The sudden collapse of the Georgian armed forces in August 2008 was arguably more a result of Georgian military weakness, poor

³⁶ “Georgian Strike Fighter Shot Down in S. Ossetia,” Interfax, 11 August 2008; D. A. Fulghum and D. Barrie, “Georgia Strikes Back with Air Defences,” *Aviation Week*, 11 August 2008; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 14 August 2008; NTV, 23 November 2008; NVO, *op. cit.* [31]; *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 11 September 2008.

³⁷ R. Giragosian, “Georgian Planning Flaws Led to Campaign Failure,” *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 15 August 2008; M. Barabanov, “Reform of the Combat Spirit,” *Kommersant-Vlast*, 20 October 2008.

³⁸ I. Kedrov, “War in the Background of the Caucasus Mountain Range,” *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kuryer*, 20-26 August 2008; ITAR-TASS, Interfax Reporting, 8-15 August 2008.

³⁹ Colonel-General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff, Interfax, 12 August 2008.

management and limited combat capabilities, than an accurate reflection of the condition of Russia's armed forces.⁴⁰ Moscow's prior knowledge of these weaknesses, based on its own intelligence assessments, indicates that the state's strongest security asset is intelligence rather than its armed forces. Victory in the Georgia war, achieving the operational goals set by the Kremlin, gave way to an atmosphere of uncertainty over the future of Russia's conventional armed forces, as it was soon realized that they would not have achieved the same result against a more formidable enemy. In military terms, the victory seemed pyrrhic.

⁴⁰ R. Giragosian, *op. cit.* [37].

Conclusion

The illusion of military power, with its preoccupation with Russia's imperial and Soviet past, projected through parades, symbols and the resumption of military practices ranging from strategic bomber flights to an increase in Russian naval activities in the world's oceans, largely depends on the elite's perception of success in restoring Russia's role as a great power. Medvedev has perpetuated the use of illusion in the conduct of Russian diplomacy. This tendency developed during Putin's two presidential terms, in which he prioritized stabilizing Chechnya and set about strengthening Russia's economy based on its vast energy reserves. Putin's political image as the "father of the nation," protecting Russia's territorial integrity and "standing up" to Russia's "enemies" at home or abroad has demanded a corresponding image for its weak and decaying conventional armed forces. It is a powerful legacy, inherited by Medvedev, which will persist or even grow as a consequence of Russia's experience of economic downturn, financial crisis, devaluation of its currency and the decline of oil prices.

The armed forces in contemporary Russia are harnessed by the state using deception and misinformation to support a more assertive foreign policy and enhance the credibility of its strategic posture. Such a tendency, predicated upon "resisting" NATO enlargement and responding to the uni-polar world order so vociferously challenged by the Kremlin, complicates Western assessments of Russia's conventional capabilities. Those elements of illusion, used by the Russian state as diplomatic tools, must be weighed and sifted from genuine reform programs. Russia's present regime, mixing symbols and traditions from its past, prefers the easier route of creating an illusion of military power.

Revamped uniforms, complete with five point stars, moving the Navy's HQ to St. Petersburg or parading military equipment only slowly being introduced within the armed forces can do nothing to remedy the manifold ills afflicting Russia's decaying conventional forces; they do not prevent a single beating of conscript personnel, save a life that may end in suicide, or give hope of improved healthcare, pay and living conditions of service for the ordinary soldier. The victory in the Georgia war fleetingly promised respite for the Russian leadership from confronting the stark condition of its conventional forces. Reliance on promoting an illusion of military power, a poor record in carrying out reform, discontent inside military structures and the domestic economic crisis: all point toward the possibility that in the coming years the Kremlin will reshape the tool of illusion to mask the difficulties of reform—in effect reducing its intended reforms to a marketing campaign.