AIR POWER IN RUSSIA’S GEORGIAN CAMPAIGN
AUGUST 2008

For five days in August 2008, Russian and Georgian military forces were engaged in a brief but bloody conflict that ended with a ceasefire agreement. The conflict was triggered by a large-scale Georgian invasion of the breakaway region of South Ossetia on 7 August, to which Russia responded with an overwhelming show of force, deploying large elements of armour, infantry and air forces. Although Georgia has argued that their offensive was a move in response to severe provocations, including the shooting down of Georgian unmanned systems, its strategy was significantly flawed from the beginning, being based on inadequate threat assessment and an underestimation of the vehemence of Russian response.

The importance of the Russian response lies in the fact that this was the first military offensive by the Russian military beyond its own borders since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its severity and bluntness not only surprised the international community, but also highlighted the new found resolve within the Russian polity to display its power projection capabilities. The Russian campaign was spearheaded by its 58th Army, which along with armour, artillery and air defence units also has 120 combat aircraft and 70 helicopters integral to its composition.

Early in the conflict itself, Russia established air superiority and ensured that their initial deployment and subsequent lines of communications and supplies were not in any way threatened. The Russian campaign, ostensibly aimed at liberating South Ossetia, was also aimed at crippling Georgian military capabilities by destroying as much of the heavy equipment as possible, along with bases and fixed installations—even those not involved in the conflict directly. Disruption of the on-going Georgian military infrastructure build-up, meant as a precursor to joining NATO, was the main objective.

The military infrastructure was targeted by successful air attacks on the Georgian bases at Kojori, Senaki, and Gori; the facilities at the Black Sea port at Poti; airfields at Mameuli and Vaziani; and the Tbilaviamsheni aviation plant where Sukhoi Su-25 ‘Frogfoot’ fighter aircraft were produced.

The most significant factor that emerges from the campaign is the ease and rapidity with which the Russian air forces established air dominance and the effectiveness with which they neutralised the Georgian air-defence network and command and control systems. The second factor is the shooting down of Russian attack aircraft by surface-to-air missiles. The numbers (seven according to Georgia and four admitted by Russia) are unimportant. What matters is that this was a demonstration of the effectiveness of even very shoddily maintained and obsolete air defence systems in countering ground attack aircraft that do not have sufficient electronic self protection. In this particular instance it could have been a case of Russian aircraft threat libraries not recognising the Georgian air defence radar as hostile since they are also of Russian origin.

If this is indeed true, it is a salutary lesson for all air forces to take on board in the current security environment, wherein the international arms market is insecure and prone to arms proliferation and secondary distribution of...
sophisticated weapon systems. Threat libraries in the self protection suites of airborne platforms have to be updated regularly and in relation to the potential adversary.

The Russian air forces’ lack of reconnaissance assets was clearly demonstrated by their having to send a Tupolev Tu-22M3 ‘Backfire’ strategic bomber on a tactical reconnaissance mission. Even though a number of Uninhabited Combat Aerial Vehicles have been routinely displayed by the Russians at international airshows over the years, there is obviously a lack of adequate assets within the military forces. The loss of manned aircraft could well have been avoided if this was not the case.

In the ground attack missions that the much-vaunted Su-25 ‘Frogfoot’ aircraft carried out, their inadequacies became apparent. They lacked sophisticated aiming devices and did not have sufficiently long-range missiles that could be launched outside the enemy air defence envelope. They also did not have any ‘smart’ weapons and lacked electronic counter measure systems. From a strategic assessment, it is clear that the military aviation industry in Russia has not been able to keep abreast of emerging technology trends, despite their superlative demonstrations at numerous airshows.

The drawbacks of the Georgian air defence network and air combat capabilities were sharply demonstrated. The need to electronically integrate and coordinate the entire air defences of a theatre became very apparent to even the casual observer. Another aspect of the brief conflict that should be taken note of is the Russian use of cyber warfare that completely crippled the Georgian government website domains. In advanced nations, reliant more heavily on computer networks for its day-to-day functioning, this could have a devastating effect. Computer systems security and cyber countermeasures are as important as combat capabilities to ensure victory in contemporary conflict.

When the campaign is analysed holistically, although the Georgian forces were tactically and strategically outmatched by the Russian forces, there are three major observations that emerge as factors that hindered the effectiveness of Russian air power. First, The Russian air-land integration was completely below par, with ground forces resorting to the age old technique of marking their forward position with smoke prior to close air support missions. The fault lay with inadequate interoperability of communications systems and the lack of tactical reconnaissance assets that could plug into the theatre level surveillance system. Second, integrated fire control systems were almost non-existent and therefore, joint fires could never be called upon. Third and perhaps most crucially, the identification friend-or-foe (IFF) systems did not work, since Georgia also used military hardware identical to the Russian forces. Although the break up of the Soviet Union that resulted in the formation of the many independent republics in central Europe was more than 14 years ago, the Russian military had not altered the IFF system, perhaps in a mistaken belief that they would not have to go to war with the states of their erstwhile empire.

The Russians achieved their aim, but at a cost that the military should not have had to pay if the much touted modernisation had been carried out in alignment with strategic and operational objectives.

- Threat libraries in self protection suites of airborne platforms should be upgraded with every change in national security perceptions.
- Adequate surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities are critical to the conduct of a fast moving campaign
- Cyber warfare countermeasures are as important as combat capabilities to victory.

“In the event of a small war involving one or two adversaries, or a chain of local conflicts, the existence of high-speed, highly protected and well-armed aircraft can be the decisive factor.”

Ilya Kramnik, Moscow News, 24 April 2008