SPPS
Edited by
Andreas Umland
Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society
Vol. 306

Frederic Labarre

The Battle for Georgia

Defense Reform, NATO Doctrine, and Military Effectiveness: A Critical Assessment of the 2008 War

With a foreword by Armando Marques-Guedes

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Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society (SPPS) Vol. 306

ISSN 1614-3515

Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society (SPPS)

ISSN 1614-3515

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Frederic Labarre

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Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-2061-1
ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-8061-5

Leuschnerstraße 40
30457 Hannover
Germany / Deutschland
info@ibidem.eu

Printed in the EU

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ANP	Annual National Plan
ABM	Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Council
BDCOL	Baltic Defence College
BMP	Armored personnel carrier (Russia)
BRDM	Light armored reconnaissance vehicle (Russia)
BTR	Infantry fighting vehicle (Russia)
C2	Command and Control

1 Interview notes from the 2023 Tbilisi interviews have been taken, and confirmed by the interviewees. Since none of the Georgian respondents deigned to give their name or be recorded, a color was assigned to each respondent and each was given the opportunity to check their statements after the interviews. The WHITE Respondent, a Georgian Staff Officer, was interviewed on 26 June 2023. Another staff officer, RED, was interviewed on June 27, 2023. The Georgian BLUE, YELLOW, and BLACK respondents, respectively a member of the General Staff, a civilian ministry of defense analyst, and an intelligence analyst, were all interviewed on June 30, 2023. The author is familiar with the names of WHITE and RED. The names of BLUE, YELLOW and BLACK were never disclosed to the author.

CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CCMR	Center for Civil-Military Relations
CFE	Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty
CFR	Council on Foreign Relations
CIR	Commander's Information Request
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CISS	Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DCAF	Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces
DIB	Defence Institution Building
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EAPC	Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council
EUCOM	European Command (U.S.)
FAS	Federation of American Scientists
FPC	Foreign Policy Concept
G7	Group of 7 Most-Industrialized Nations
GAF	Georgian Armed Forces
GAZ	Gosudarstvenniy Avto-Zavod (Russian national automaker)
GRU	Russian military intelligence
GSSOP	Georgia Sustainability, Stabilization Operations Program
GTEP	Georgia Train and Equip Program
HQ	Headquarters
HUMINT	Human Intelligence
IFK	Institute für Frieden und Konflikt (Austria)
IIFFMCG	International Independent Fact-finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (Tagliavini Commission)
IMF	International Monetary Fund

IPAP	Individual Partnership Action Plan
IPB	Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield
ISAB	International Security Advisory Board
JFCOM	Joint Forces Command (U.S.)
JPKF	Joint Peacekeeping Force
JUOO	Joint Urban Operations Office
KFOR	Kosovo Peace Enforcement Mission (NATO)
MANPAD	Man-Portable Air Defense
MAP	Membership Action Plan
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOD	Ministry of Defense
MOI	Ministry of the Interior
MRD	Motorized Rifle Division
MRR	Motorized Rifle Regiment
NAC	North Atlantic Committee
NACC	North Atlantic Cooperation Council
NDC	NATO Defense College
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NMC	NATO Military Committee
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
NPT	Non-proliferation Treaty
NRC	NATO-Russia Council
NSC	National Strategic Concept
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OPORD	Operational Order
OSCE	Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe
PAP	Partnership Action Plan
PARP	Partnership Action Review Plan
PfP	Partnership for Peace
PRIO	Peace Research Institute Oslo

RPG	Rocket-propelled Grenade (launcher)
RTO	Research and Technology Organization (NATO)
SIGINT	Signals Intelligence
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
STANAG	Standardization Agreement (NATO)
START	Strategic Arms Treaty (Treaty on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Arms)
UDI	Unilateral declaration of independence
UNOMIG	UN Observer Mission in Georgia
UNOSAT	UN Satellite Imagery Agency
USECT	Understand, Shape, Engage, Consolidate, Transition

Maps and Documents

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Cover illustrations, maps, and map symbols have been designed by the author. Documents in Annex serve as academic and evidential support, and can be found in the public domain.

Acknowledgements

Those of us cursed with a good memory have nevertheless the pleasure of duly acknowledging those who, by their active support or mere presence, facilitate the production of such a study.

I do not claim that it is worthy of any prize, and in any case, I would view such honors with a healthy dose of doubt. The pleasure I have had in working on this topic is reward enough. Credit must befall those who in my view deserve it, in this lengthy eulogy. First and foremost, my gratitude goes to Lieutenant Colonel (CAF ret.) Doug Green, who planted the idea of a PhD in War Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada. I will not mention those who made such an academic endeavor so difficult the first time around save to say that, had I then persevered, my dissertation would never have had the relevance it now has for our most difficult times.

Subsequent praise falls on Drs. Michael Hennessy, director of Defence Studies at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto, and Maggie Shepherd, then director of the War Studies program at RMCC for facilitating my return to academia. Of course, I cannot forget Dr. Pierre Jolicoeur, Dean of Social Sciences at RMCC, long-time collaborator (in all senses of the word) and friend, who supervised my dissertation. They are joined by Drs. Magali Deleuze, Joel Sokolsky, and Yann Breault (RMC Saint-Jean) who tolerated my rambling answers during

my comprehensive exams and dissertation defense. I think since then, they call it an offense, not a defense.

The topic and professional outlay of this study is however much more ancient, going back to the beginning of my "career" (a word which translates to "carrière" in French, which can also mean "quarry" — a place where one digs a bottomless hole). That is where my real Education took place: in the momentous moment of authority provided by the post-Cold War. Thank you, Heli Tiirmaa, for facilitating my employment at the Estonian MOD, where I met luminaries such as Erik Männik, Jaan Murumets, and Harri Lahtein. Through them, I was exposed to mentors who shaped my thought on the subject of defense reform, and democratic transition. Those are Thomas-Durrell Young, recently retired from the Center for Civil-Military Relations (CCMR) at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, Lieutenant-Colonel (UK ret.) Tim Park, and Lieutenant-Colonel (UK ret.) Glen Grant. I am proud to consider them friends, and also proud of what we accomplished together a quarter of a century ago, in Tallinn.

I thank all those in Georgia who, although nameless for the purpose of this acknowledgement, know who they are. I salute their courage in facilitating the interview process in 2008–2009 as well as recently, in 2023, at the Georgian MOD. Should they read the present work, they might bristle at what seems criticism. I hasten to add that criticism does not mean contempt. It denotes affection, whereas indifference is the mark of contempt.

I can name, however, Maia Sherazadishvili, who graciously verified the translation of some documents from Georgian to English.

Naturally, I cannot overlook Andreas Umland, general editor of this series, and Christoph Ohlwärther, Jana Dävers, and all the unseen magic-makers at Ibidem Verlag for bringing this work to the eyes of you, the Reader.

It is to you, the Reader, that the final homage falls. Thank you.

Frederic Labarre,
Bad Bayersoien,
16 December 2025

Foreword

My encounter with Dr. Frederic Labarre emerged through the seemingly random pathways that characterize modern academic discourse, yet proved to be anything but accidental. I discovered his doctoral thesis—a comprehensive examination of the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict—that immediately captivated my attention. This study is based on that thesis. This serendipitous discovery was particularly meaningful as it occurred nearly two decades after I had completed my own book, "The Five-Day War: The Invasion of Georgia", published in 2009, barely a year after Russia's invasion of Georgia on 7–12 August, 2008.

The intellectual resonance between our works was immediately apparent, yet this study possesses a sophistication and depth of analysis that reflected not only the passage of time, but also his access to military data and documentation that was simply unavailable in the immediate aftermath of the conflict in 2008–2009. Both of us had grappled with the fundamental questions raised by Georgia's military defeat despite years of Western military assistance and training. But this perspective is enriched by the conduct of interviews with key military personnel, and the analysis of operational data that provide insights into the doctrinal shortcomings that characterized the Georgian experience.

This research is distinctive by its significant academic contribution going beyond from mere historical narrative. Where my 2009 analysis necessarily relied on

open sources, press reports, and the limited documentation available in the immediate post-conflict period, Dr. Labarre's study benefits from an in-depth look into the Tagliavini Commission's report published after the war as well as evidence which, although sometimes anecdotal, give color to the events of August 2008. His privileged access to a wide network of personal sources allowed him to construct a far more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the doctrinal contradictions that led to Georgia's defeat. This is unique among similar works.

To fully understand the significance of this contribution, one must first appreciate the historical trajectory of Georgian military development following the country's independence in 1991. Georgia was one of the first former Soviet republics to join the NATO Partnership for Peace program (PfP) in 1994 and Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) in 2004, seeking to bring her military in line with NATO standards. This aspiration was formalized when, in 2006, the Georgian parliament voted unanimously for a bill calling for the integration of Georgia into NATO, followed by a non-binding referendum on 5 January, 2008—in which 77% voted in favor of joining the organization (Asmus 2010).

Let me break it up. The Georgian military transformation cannot be understood without reference to American assistance programs that began in earnest following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Georgia joined the Global War on Terror and in 2002, the U.S. initiated the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) which assisted Georgian security forces with internal

terrorist threats in Pankisi Gorge. This program evolved into the Georgian Sustainment and Stability Operations Program (GSSOP), which trained Georgian forces for U.S.-led operations in Iraq. Georgia had deployed approximately 2,000 troops to Iraq by 2007, making it the third-largest contributor to that mission behind the United States and the United Kingdom. Unlike many NATO allies, Georgian forces operated without the national caveats, demonstrating Georgia's commitment to the West's concern for regional stability.

The scope of Western military engagement with Georgia was substantial and multifaceted, a dimension of the story that this work illuminates with particular clarity. One must not forget that the 2008 *Immediate Response* exercise was conducted jointly by U.S. and Georgian Armed Forces at the Vaziani Military Base between July 15–31, 2008, a mere week before the conflict. Significant by its size and timing, this exercise involved 1,630 Georgian servicemen and 1,000 U.S. military personnel, including representatives from the U.S. European Command (EUCOM). Meanwhile, and nearly simultaneously, Russia conducted her own *Kavkaz 2008* military exercises in the North Caucasus.

This book brings to light a fundamental contradiction that has broader implications for Western military doctrine and assistance programs, one that my 2009 analysis could only glimpse through the fog of incomplete information. The Georgian military had received extensive training in counterinsurgency operations, peacekeeping, and stability operations—precisely the

kinds of missions that NATO and coalition forces were conducting in Iraq and Afghanistan. As former Georgian deputy defense minister Nodar Kharshiladze confided to me "during peacekeeping operations, our military was being trained for combat actions against insurgents, but fighting an adversary with manifest military preponderance requires entirely different skills. We were not ready for this either theoretically or psychologically."

In my view communications represented the single weakest link in the Georgian army. Technical failures rendered clear the broader institutional failure to bridge the gap between Western technological solutions and local operational requirements—a failure that is traced through detailed analysis that reveal the systematic nature of these doctrinal disconnects. This mismatch between training and battlefield requirements exposed a critical flaw in the Western doctrine transfer that F. Labarre documents with precision in this study, but goes much further. It traces the sources of this disconnect to inadequate defense reform, and, down the line, to equally inappropriate doctrine.

The 2008 conflict must be understood within the broader context of NATO expansion and Russian strategic responses, a geopolitical chess game that remained opaque when I was writing in 2009. At the 3 April, 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Romania, members deferred discussions on Georgia and Ukraine's NATO MAP (Membership Action Plan) admittance to December 2008, despite strong American and Polish support.

This decision reflected opposition from several countries, led by France and Germany, who feared the decision would anger Russia.

The Russian response was swift and systematic, following a pattern that reveal the extent of Russian strategic preparation. As tensions rose in 2008, Russian aircraft began shooting down Georgian reconnaissance drones over Abkhazia, and the Russian peacekeeping contingent was reinforced in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Two Spetsnaz companies—Russian special purpose forces—were sent to the Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) contingents. By late May, Russian railway troops were sent to repair the rail links to Abkhazia, which would enable large-scale force flow into the separatist enclave in the event of conflict—deployments and actions that show that Vladimir Putin knew Mikheil Saakashvili well, and that he could be provoked.

The military dynamics of the August 2008 conflict revealed the limitations of Western doctrine transfer in symmetric scenarios, limitations that the author of this book maps with unprecedented precision through his analysis of operational communications, battle damage assessments, and post-conflict interviews with key participants. Georgia hoped to deter Russian intervention, not fight it. Tbilisi spent four years reforming, expanding, and modernizing the Georgian armed forces such that it had a viable operational plan to restore Georgian territorial integrity. However, the Georgian military operation was disjointed, and Saakashvili stepped into a

trap designed by Putin to take advantage of the Georgian leader's ambitions, fears, and inexperience.

In my humble opinion, the most significant contribution of this book lies in the development of what can be termed "comparative doctrine analysis"—a discipline that, systematically, examines how different military doctrines perform when confronted with specific operational challenges. This quite obviously represents a departure from traditional defense studies that focus primarily on capabilities, technologies, or organizational structures. Instead, comparative doctrine analysis examines the fundamental assumptions, operational concepts, and strategic logic that underpin military operations. And the Georgian case provides an ideal laboratory for this analytical approach because it involves the collision between two distinct doctrinal traditions: the Western emphasis on technological superiority, professional military education, and joint operations, versus the Russian tradition of mass, firepower, and operational art. Russia ultimately prevailed in its Five-Day war with Georgia in 2008, but it also brought to light a number of inadequacies in Russia's military forces and capabilities, spurring sweeping reforms and big-budget military procurements that foreshadowed the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions of Ukraine.

The Georgian experience, I would argue, raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of Western military assistance and doctrine transfer programs that is addressed her with empirical rigor. Despite more than 11,000 Georgian soldiers serving in Afghanistan since

2004, making Georgia the largest non-NATO and largest *per capita* troop contributor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) by late 2012, this experience did not translate into battlefield success against a near-peer competitor. The disconnect between counterinsurgency training and conventional warfare requirements reflects broader tensions within Western military doctrine during the post-9/11 period.

This analytical framework has gained renewed relevance in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The 2008 war served as a testing ground for Russia's new warfare tactics. This piece of scholarship represents a methodological innovation in defense studies through its systematic integration of multiple analytical levels and the synthesis with other social sciences disciplines. This work successfully bridges the gap between grand strategic analysis, operational military history, and institutional development studies. This multi-level approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how abstract doctrinal concepts translate into concrete battlefield outcomes. The comparative dimension of his analysis is particularly valuable because it avoids the tendency toward single-case studies that characterize much of the literature on post-Soviet military development. This cannot be seen but as a useful conceptual shift.

As I earlier stressed, my 2009 work inherently relied on the fragmentary evidence available in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. Dr. Labarre's work benefits from the temporal distance and access that, if it does not

allow for near-definitive conclusions about the systemic failures of Western doctrine transfer, at least should give the contemporary NATO military planner and analyst some pause. This temporal advantage produces insights that are both historically significant and strategically relevant for contemporary policy debates.

The institutional learning that occurred post-conflict in both countries illuminates the adaptive capacity of different military systems, a theme that Dr. Labarre explores through detailed analysis of pre-2008 military reforms in both Georgia and Russia. This work also richly contributes to our understanding of how strategic culture influences the adoption and adaptation of foreign military doctrines. Undoubtedly, Georgia's enthusiasm for NATO integration reflected both geopolitical necessity and genuine admiration for Western military professionalism. However, the implementation of Western doctrinal concepts occurred within Georgian institutional structures that retained many characteristics of their Soviet predecessors—a dynamic that the author illuminates through extensive interviews with Georgian military officers and analysis of institutional documents that reveal the persistent influence of Soviet-era organizational culture.

The broader implications of Dr. Labarre's research extend well beyond the Georgian case and provide essential guidance for contemporary policy debates about military assistance and alliance relationships. In an era of renewed great power competition, Western policy-

makers must grapple with the reality that military assistance programs designed for counterinsurgency operations may be inadequate for preparing partner nations to face peer competitors. The Georgian experience suggests that effective military assistance must be tailored to specific threat environments rather than reflecting primarily the operational preferences and institutional biases of donor nations.

Thus, the Battle for Georgia is a cautionary tale about the limitation of Western military doctrine transfer—and application. This work demonstrates that successful military assistance requires not merely the transfer of equipment and training, but a fundamental understanding of the strategic environment, institutional culture, and operational requirements that recipient nations face. Conversely, the country that benefits from assistance must also seriously commit to in-depth (societal) transformation. Yet, even this does not guarantee battlefield success. As we observe the on-going conflict in Ukraine and contemplate future Western military assistance programs, this study's conclusions provide essential insights into the complex relationships between doctrine, institutions, and battlefield performance. This contribution to the development of comparative doctrine analysis represents a significant advancement in defense studies methodology and offers a robust foundation for future research in this critical area. The intellectual to-and-fro has evolved into what I see as an unexpected dialogue about some of the most pressing

questions in contemporary security studies, demonstrating how scholarly discourse can bridge temporal and geographical divides to advance our collective understanding of complex strategic phenomena. I can only salute the author and wish for more books with the caliber and range of this work.

Armando Marques-Guedes,
Lisbon,
20 September 2025

Introduction

On the Values of Western Operational Art

> —I don't know if you realize the importance of this operation, Staros… Once our position is secured, we can move the bombers in, and that means air power for a thousand miles in every direction. Guadalcanal may be the turning point in the war! It will cost lives, Staros. Is that what's troubling you?
>
> —No, Sir.
>
> —I explained to you the importance of this objective. How much do you think it's worth… How many lives?
>
> —I can't say, Sir…
>
> —Are you prepared to sacrifice the lives of *any* of your men in this campaign? How many? One, two, twenty? Lives will be lost in your Company, Captain. If you don't have the stomach for it, now is the time to let me know.
>
> —You know, Sir, you're right. About everything you've said…
>
> —Fine, fine, that'll be all Captain… One more thing, Staros. It's not necessary for you to tell me that you think that I'm right. Ever. We'll assume it. Dismissed.

This exchange, taken from Terrence Malik's film *The Thin Red Line* (1998) epitomizes two approaches to the problem of war. One, illustrated by Lieutenant Colonel Tall, played by Nick Nolte, is that of the hardcore realist, motivated by the sheer will and determination of the ca-

reer soldier, relentlessly pursuing his objective regardless of the human cost. The other, illustrated by Captain Staros, played by Elias Koteas, highlights the lawyer's disdain for violence, and for the pointless sacrifice of human life. *The Thin Red Line* in the film is that which separates honorable conduct from barbaric savagery within what Carl von Clausewitz called the "province of fear and pain": armed combat.

This slice of popular culture aptly reflects the individual's expected behavior as a coercive agent of the state. Upbringing, schooling, life experiences, and socialization shape an individual's culture as a member of that state. It is culture that distinguishes between man and beast. And it is *strategic* culture that determines how armies behave on behalf of the State. In this sense, an army is a collection of individuals whose behavior reflects the norms and values of their society.

In recent memory, no greater clash of such cultures has occurred than during the Cold War, which pitted Western powers (simply put: NATO allies) against the Soviet bloc, including Warsaw Pact members. The former, somewhat risk-averse and viewing human life as precious, sought to assist—if not replace—airmen, sailors, and soldiers with technology and fieldcraft. The latter, fearful that its grand social experiment should founder, militarized its whole society to the detriment of individual rights in order to win its wars. Western powers soon became fixated on the promise of highly advanced, precise, and expensive military capabilities,

whereas the Soviets sought security through the multiplication of military units, and the creation of massive structures intended to produce the desired political and military effects. This latter approach became too expensive to sustain in financial and human terms, and was partially responsible for the collapse of the USSR.

Arguably, the combined action of the international community—led by the United States—against Saddam Hussein's seasoned (and Soviet-equipped) troops in the Kuwaiti desert in early 1991 was another reason for the Soviet collapse. That lightning-fast victory convinced the Soviet Union that there was simply no way to catch up. At the cost of only a few dozen lives over a three-week period, high-technology and maneuver warfare cemented the West's aura of invincibility as it triumphed over a foe whose force size and training had become liabilities. The end of the Soviet Union produced two parallel effects: it created a natural desire to emulate the "victors", while at the same time preserving legacy attitudes toward force generation and employment. In other words, the former Soviet republics and satellites were pressed to reform but were not yet ready to abandon the comfort of mass armies—even when, in the case of small countries like Georgia, this idea was clearly impractical.

This created a real "norms transfer" industry, as Western military advisers provided new countries with support for defense reform. Successful reform has always been difficult to define and measure. Initially, the goal was to create affordable forces that could operate

alongside NATO countries, while still providing an independent deterrent against aggression. Eventually, agencies were established to assist countries in their transition, such as the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) as it was then called, which offered practical guidance on civil-military relations, the transformation of military justice systems, intelligence services, and security governance.

Reforms were inevitable, both because the defeated often adopt the methods of the victors, and because the "new world order" proclaimed by President George H. Bush promised a safer, more cooperative strategic environment—free from Cold War enmity, and unshackled from communist management. This placed the burden of transformation on affordability, balancing credible self-defense with achievable socio-economic transition, and minimizing the risk of reversal. Indicators of administrative success included the lifting of mandatory military service, professionalization of the armed forces, capabilities-based planning and budgeting, and a force size that the country could afford while remaining compatible with larger NATO structures. Reform success was never measured by how those forces would perform on the battlefield, as scholars argued that democratic principles and the military policies derived from them would ultimately produce victory in war (Biddle and Long 2003).

The Georgian Armed Forces (GAF) were the first to test that definition of military reform in August 2008.

Georgia's NATO ambitions, declared as early as November 2002, required the adoption of democratic governance and management principles within her defense apparatus. This apparatus had to implement institutional, structural, and administrative reforms to generate strength in accordance with the precepts and conditions set forth by the Alliance and Western advisers. Georgian transition efforts aimed to produce a defense management system and institutions capable of assessing national security risks, generating a force recognizable to other NATO countries, and interoperable with their military units. A force able to respond effectively to national emergencies and contingencies at home and abroad. The outcome of the Battle of Tskhinvali, however, apparently disproves the assumption that operational success follows automatically from Western-inspired military reforms (Cohen and Hamilton 2011, 28). Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, some analysts and commentators had begun questioning the value of applying NATO doctrine in the context of massive conventional warfare.

A short piece written by this author in the *Baltic Security and Defence Review* in 2009 argued that vestigial Soviet combat practices and force organization may have merit. In the mid-2010s, however, Thomas-Durrell Young, from the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Civil-Military Relations (CCMR), expressed alarm at the apparent reversal of military reforms—or the incom-

plete transformation of new NATO members—at a moment when Russia had emerged as a serious threat to regional and global security (Young 2017; Young 2017b, 32). Much of this monograph proceeds from Young's analysis, but also seeks to address the unease expressed by other authors regarding the application of the Western way of war (Brands and Edelman 2016–2017).[2] The concern that doctrinal theory may not translate effectively to the field has been attributed largely to the predominance of the "planning" approach, which assumes that success depends solely on the right principles and techniques (Tuck 2016).

The concern that the Western way of war and force generation may not be optimal has been reinforced by the evident strategic success of Russia's 2008 campaign in Georgia. There is a need for a critical and in-depth examination of the performance of the Georgian Armed Forces, beginning with their transformation efforts in the mid-1990s through the 2000s, as well as their battlefield performance, evaluated against the principal tenets of NATO and allied doctrine. The key question is whether the defeat of the GAF stems from the doctrine itself, or from an incomplete transformation.

Research design

There are multiple dimensions to the story of Georgia's defense reforms, and its performance in the Five-Day

2 See also the whole section, in that Parameters issue (Vol. 46, no. 4), on purported flawed US strategic models.