



From the (dis)illusion of combined arms manoeuvre to the war of attrition: the deficiencies of the Russian Battalion Tactical Group in urban operations

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With 15 years of experience in armoured and motorised combat units, including several deployments abroad (Afghanistan, Lithuania, Mali), Lieutenant Colonel GS Benoît VERBREUK teaches at the Belgian Defence College of the Royal Military Academy. His main fields of interest are doctrine of land operations, tactical and operational planning as well as new developments in land warfare.

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Grâce aux contributions d'auteurs très différents, la Revue militaire belge poursuit l'analyse de la guerre en Ukraine. Dans l'édition 24, le lieutenant-général Marc THYS a abordé les enseignements tirés des opérations en Ukraine en prenant en compte les dimensions stratégique et opérationnelle. Le lieutenant-colonel Dr Tom SIMOENS a ensuite analysé le niveau tactique à travers le prisme du concept de Combined Arms Warfare, notamment dans une perspective historique.

Dans le présent article, le lieutenant-colonel breveté d'état-major Benoît VERBREUK et le major Gregory TEULINGKX concentrent leur analyse sur le combat en milieu urbain (urban warfare) à la lumière des contre-performances de l'armée russe. Leur réflexion puise dans leur expertise opérationnelle et dans leurs échanges avec le professeur Anthony King. Dans un monde qui s'urbanise de façon exponentielle, leur angle d'attaque est particulièrement pertinent pour les opérations futures. Ils explorent notamment les aspects « doctrine », « commandement », « personnel » et « logistique » afin d'en tirer des enseignements au niveau belge.

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Aan de hand van bijdragen van verschillende auteurs met uiteenlopende achtergronden wordt in het Belgisch Militair Tijdschrift de analyse van de oorlog in Oekraïne voortgezet. In editie 24 behandelde luitenant-generaal Marc THYS de lessen die getrokken konden worden uit de operaties in Oekraïne, rekening houdend met de strategische en operationele dimensies. Lieutenant-kolonel dr. Tom SIMOENS analyseerde vervolgens het tactische niveau vanuit de invalshoek van Combined Arms Warfare, vooral vanuit historisch perspectief.

In dit artikel richten luitenant-kolonel stafbrevethouder Benoît VERBREUK en majoor Gregory TEULINGKX zich op stedelijke oorlogsvoering (urban warfare) in het licht van de ondermaatse prestaties van het Russische leger. Hun analyse is gebaseerd op hun operationele expertise en hun uitwisselingen met professor Anthony King. In een wereld die aan een razendsnel tempo verstedelijkt, is hun invalshoek bijzonder relevant voor toekomstige operaties. Ze onderzoeken zowel de doctrine-, commando- en personeelsgerelateerde als de logistieke aspecten om zo lessen te kunnen trekken voor België.

Preface by Professor Anthony King

In Ukraine, Russian and Ukrainian forces have converged on urban areas. The most intense, longest and important battles have taken place in and around towns and cities, initially around Kyiv, then, Kharkiv, Mariupol, Severodonetsk, Bakhmut, Kherson, and Svatove. Against all expectations, Russian forces have performed egregiously throughout the war. Gregory Teulingkx and Benoît Verbreuk's perceptive article identifies several key factors, which might explain Russia's defeats. Above all, they show how the organisation of the Russian Army into Battalion Tactical Groups has undermined its operational effectiveness. Urban operations require the coordination of the full suite of combined arms and, in fact, multidomain capabilities at sufficient scale to fix and, then, overwhelm defenders. It is a complex and demanding mission. Russian BTGs have not been well-trained enough at the tactical level, they have lacked firepower, mass and weight, and have insufficient command capability to reduce Ukrainian defences. As a result, President Putin has failed to attain his strategic goal in Ukraine; the Zelensky regime remains in power. The Russian Army may struggle to hold onto any of the terrains it has taken in Ukraine. The lessons for NATO seem to be clear. NATO should prepare its forces for high-intensity operations, prioritising urban areas. To do this, as Gregory Teulingkx and Benoît Verbreuk suggest, they need to create robust, capable, well-trained tactical

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forces at the brigade level proficient at the close urban combat, coordinated by divisional and corps headquarters, which are skilled enough to prosecute the multidimensional deep battle.

Reforms and experiments

Since the arrival in power of Vladimir Putin, Moscow has not ceased to emphasise its desire “to be or to stay” a Great Power that carries weight on the international scene in a different multipolar world. As a result, this strategic objective has been officially taken up in many state documents, strategies, speeches, etc. To achieve this declared level of ambition, the military instrument had to be thoroughly transformed. From 2000 onwards, the Russian Armed Forces launched a series of important reforms aimed at profound restructuring and modernisation. The electric shock of the wars in Chechnya and the Western coalition or NATO-led operations, notably in Iraq and Kosovo, have largely contributed to this structural change. Moreover, the entry of former Soviet countries into NATO, the Arab spring, the fate of Gaddafi and the risk of destabilising the Syrian regime have reinforced the Russian Federation’s perception of the Western threat.

The Russian strategic posture remains defensive, but its offensive and power projection capabilities have been upgraded, although still having important limitations. Within this framework, Moscow seeks to maintain certain buffer zones between its vital territory and NATO. At the same time, access to the warm seas, the presence in the Arctic, and attempts to destabilise or weaken the Western powers, also in Africa, remain strategic points of attention and action for the Russian Federation. The latest Russian operational deployments should be understood in this sense. In addition, these operations, such as in Georgia and Syria, were intended to test new military capabilities and concepts for tactical units. However, the scope and results of these tests should not be overestimated. As a reminder, except for the case of Georgia, the forces engaged were often in direct support of local forces. Consequently, ground forces were limited in number and mainly composed of specialised units and mercenaries from private companies. For example, in Syria, it was mainly air strike and fire support assets that contributed to the success of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. In the end, it is impossible to confirm that the lessons learnt by the Russian command

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from these campaigns would allow it to hold its own in a direct peer-to-peer or near-peer confrontation. Indeed, current observations in Ukraine indicate that the Russian Armed Forces have not mastered combined arms manoeuvre.

On the doctrinal level, based on the Boston and Massicot study for RAND Corporation¹, the art of war as seen from Moscow can be summarised as follows: firstly, the defence of its territory, critical infrastructure and urban centres is at the heart of its strategic doctrine; secondly, it is also essential to maintain a buffer with Western countries. To do this and gain reaction time, the massive use of different layers of anti-aircraft defence combined with long-range strike capabilities is essential. Furthermore, because of its potential conventional weaknesses, a quick military victory will be sought alongside asymmetric actions. These engagements will take place in multiple domains. On top of that, the threat of the use of nuclear weapons, whether tactical or strategic, remains linked to the perceived risks of the destruction of the Russian state or the massive degradation of its nuclear deterrence capability. Tactically, for the Russians, the extensive use of artillery protected by an anti-aircraft curtain remains the cornerstone in the art of war.

Organically, the former divisional structure with its regiments gradually gave way to brigades and battalion tactical groups (BTGs) that could be rapidly deployed, especially by rail. In other words, the reforms of the Russian military apparatus made it possible to increase the number of units with a high readiness status in a way to professionalise them.

Russian BTG concept

During the 1980s, combined arms formations at battalion and brigade level had already been described in the 1987 edition of “Taktika” and the fundamental idea behind these has not changed. Therefore, the concept of an infantry or tank battalion reinforced with combat support elements, such as reconnaissance, artillery, anti-tank and aircraft as well as engineers, is not a new or recent concept, but was formalised between 2007 and 2012 by the Russian Minister of Defense A. Serdyukov.

¹ Boston, S. & Massicot, D. (2017). The Russian Way of Warfare - A Primer. [www.rand.org.
https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE231.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE231.html)

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BTGs have evolved towards tactical, modular, adaptive and quickly deployable units, given the need for speed and flexibility to project brigade combat power into crisis theatres in order to achieve their tactical objective before the opponent is able to organise some form of opposition. As seen in the last decade in relatively short, small-scale and high-intensity conflicts with heavy use of artillery, this concept was very well suited to obtain subsequent successful outcomes as seen for example in Aleppo, Syria and in Grozny during the second war in Chechnya.



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Russian BTR destroyed in the outskirts of Kyiv (Butcha)

In order to meet these criteria, some deeply rooted Soviet pillars needed to be redesigned. On the one hand, the approach of a high level of conscription within the army had to shift towards a considerable increase of better-trained and equipped “contract” service men. On the other hand, the anchored structure of large units at army and corps level composed of divisions with several regiments, characterised by very limited combat support elements, had to be reconsidered. This rigid structure hampered the speed and flexibility of use because of the strict hierarchy and too

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many levels in the decision-making and command and control (C2) structure. The new cornerstone echelon to project Russian combat power with a tactical combined arms capability therefore became the brigade level with its BTGs.

Recent conflicts, as mentioned previously, have demonstrated that this concept proves to be efficient in this particular type of operations, but the latest events, and especially the first lessons from Ukraine, revealed weaknesses in a number of areas, which will have a major impact on the conduct of urban operations. From the start, the recruitment of “contract” service men for the new BTGs did not meet the initial required numbers, considering the very quick build-up of the amount of BTGs, up to more than 150 BTGs in 2021. Furthermore, this recruitment had stagnated over the last five years, which resulted in many BTGs being undermanned and still relying on large numbers of conscripts. Such a significant lack of personnel, mainly within infantry units, led to some very fragile BTGs. Not only manoeuvre units suffered from this issue, but combat support units as well, which prevented them from detaching personnel to the already small BTG and brigade staffs, thus resulting in a lack of or no coordination and synchronisation in combined arms planning. Besides the personnel issue, the ambitious material modernisation programme had to be downsized, therefore not meeting the initial expectations, mainly due to a lack of financial resources caused by the economic problems Russia was facing. This implies that only a limited number of BTGs are equipped with the latest equipment from the modernisation programme. Finally, the Russian army has not invested in its training for combined arms combat at the tactical level. This training could have been executed by the BTGs during their deployment near the borders or when stationed in Belarus, while waiting for the launch of the operations².

Significant proof for the lack of combined arms education can also be found in the mission statement of the Russian Combined Arms Academy³ in Moscow and in the objectives of the annual large-scale exercises Zapad and Vostok, which mainly focus on the interoperability at the highest levels and the rapid deployment of large troop masses over significant distances. These well-masked weaknesses by the Russians

² Comprendre les contre-performances de l'armée russe (Par M. Yakovleff). (2022). Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire (IRSEM). <https://www.irsem.fr/le-collimateur/comprendre-les-contre-performances-de-l-armee-russe-25-10-2022.html>

³ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. (2022). Objectives of the Combined Arms Academy. Combined Arms Academy of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. <https://ova.mil.ru/>

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became painfully clear during the events occurring in Ukraine since the invasion in February 2022. In the next paragraph, we will illustrate some implications and the consequences for urban operations of these shortfalls identified over the last months.

Shortcomings of BTGs in urban operations

Doctrine

In the opinion of many academics and military experts, urban combat cannot be avoided in modern conflicts. Rapid urbanisation in an ultra-connected world makes cities both political and economic magnets. The Russian operational campaign in Ukraine is no exception to this rule. However, as Professor Anthony King sets out⁴, the Russian Armed Forces are currently in a difficult position to face this type of challenge, especially due to the lack of available troops. As a result, the capture of cities is all the more risky, imposing a significant cost in lives, time and resources.

Moreover, urban combat requires specific expertise and the use of an adaptive doctrine that takes into account the multiple dimensions of this complex environment. As stated above, the Russian Armed Forces have undergone a thorough reform and, according to the official narrative, investments have been made to fill the gaps in this particular field. Thus, training facilities have been built and conventional troops have been able to practise urban combat in a combined arms environment. Russia, on the contrary, does not have a unified MOUT⁵ doctrine and easily falls back into the shortcomings already observed during the First Chechen War or in Syria, namely besieging cities and devastating them by fire through the massive use of artillery and bombing. Targeting critical infrastructure, hospitals, residential housing and civilians is their classic modus operandi in this context. Indeed, this is an objective to subdue the adversary in order to avoid street fighting. The siege of Mariupol and then the micro-siege of the Azovstal site are just two examples.

⁴ King, A. (2021). *Urban Warfare in the Twenty-First Century* (1st ed.). Polity.

⁵ Military Operations in Urban Terrain

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Russian Tank destroyed in Mariupol

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Command & Control

In contrast to the “mission command”⁶ philosophy applied within NATO, the Russian planning process and conduct of operations is primarily led by the commander. The staff only makes sure that the plan chosen by the operational or tactical commander is properly implemented in accordance with the commander’s intent. In some ways, this is a quasi-mathematical approach, and the conduct of operations becomes excessively rigid. As a consequence, having almost no control over the analysis and development of the sequence of actions, staffs are generally very small in Russian units, reducing combined arms dialogue to its simplest expression. Urban combat, on the other hand, requires maximum decentralisation of means and initiative at the lowest echelon is key. As you can see, this style of command and control is a real disadvantage, as is the lack of a specific doctrine for approaching combat in a city.

⁶ NATO. (2022). Allied Joint Doctrine for Land Operations - AJP-3.2 (B, version 1). NATO Standardization Office - NSO, p. 41-44.

Personnel

Russia is increasingly having difficulties with recruiting sufficient “contract” service men, leaving the BTGs undermanned and reserve forces unavailable for longer periods before being able to intervene. The main reasons for this are the many years of ill treatment of conscripts, budget cuts and an increasing unwillingness of young men to fight in Ukraine.

The battles in the early stages as seen in Bucha and Irpin in the north and Mykolaiv in the south have shown us that Russian BTGs were not able to seize medium-sized towns and have suffered massive casualties once they set foot in the urban areas. In these suburban battlespaces, BTGs were up against an opponent consisting mostly of very mobile light infantry, in meticulously prepared positions and heavily equipped with anti-tank weapons. Once halted by artillery and obstacles, the lack of dismounted infantry and engineers in the BTGs transformed the long convoys of armoured vehicles into sitting ducks and forced the survivors to retreat.

In the southeastern provinces Luhansk and Donetsk, the outcome in urban fighting has been greatly influenced by the help of proxy forces and pro-Russian militias. They have been able to fill this gap with the necessary boots on the ground, which enabled them to control the urban areas and progress further towards Zaporizhzhia and Kherson.

Sustainment

Combat in urban environment also requires significantly more combat resources, meaning if the sustainment means and plans are not in proportion, the operation will rapidly come to a halt. Compared to most NATO countries, Russian units do not dispose of the same size of sustainability elements embedded at the tactical level and, as a rule of thumb, it is one level down the NATO standard. This implies that BTGs have to rely strongly on the brigades or even the division for most of its recovery, maintenance, resupply and especially the evacuation of wounded soldiers. As long as Russian logistics can rely on the railroad system, it is able to sustain its operations over considerable distances, but in Ukraine, they had to convert rapidly

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to road convoys because of sabotage and destruction of major railheads and tracks coming from Russia, as seen in Kharkiv. Insufficient logistic brigades, unprotected evacuation and resupply convoys, as well as ground forces not able to protect the long lines of communications led to sustainment assets becoming even scarcer and units being either cut off or isolated and thus forced to retreat from these urban areas.

Conclusion

The deficiencies of the Russian BTGs in urban operations, despite all the previous reforms, have proven to be ineffective for success in large-scale peer-to-peer conflict. This highlights the illusion perceived by NATO about the ability of Russian forces to conduct combined arms manoeuvre warfare. On the other hand, it seems that Russia has become disillusioned and forced back into attrition warfare. From our perspective, combined arms education and training has to remain a fundamental building block throughout all our tactical echelons and across all military educational institutions. In addition, the complexity and difficulties in urban operations must be taken into account as well, in order to be able to face future conflicts as seen in Ukraine. Furthermore, speed in the planning process and decision-making to stay ahead of the operational tempo of an opponent and the race for technological advance force us to reconsider military norms and standards. Looking at our leading NATO allies, we notice the importance of the shift back to a classic corps-division-brigade structure to be competitive for long-term high-intensity conflicts.

If we compare the problems encountered by the Russian Armed Forces mainly in terms of personnel and equipment, the Belgian Land Component faces difficulties in the same areas. These structural issues will only be solved in the medium or even long term, after completion of the current transformation. In the meanwhile, to make sure we do not lose the combined arms expertise within the operational units, we need to implement short-term solutions. In this context, opportunities have already risen with the Land Component's CaMo⁷ project. Indeed, this partnership with France aims at filling recently identified capability gaps across various domains.

⁷ Capacité motorisée: the Belgian Land Component transformation programme for the motorised brigade

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The focus of this unique cooperation lies in a common doctrine, training and capabilities, which will result in increased interoperability at the tactical level. Thus, for Belgium, enhancing the possibilities to plug in small tactical units in a broader multinational combined arms task force is key to bridge the gap until structural solutions emerge.

Key words: BTG, Ukraine, urban warfare

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