Recent conflicts in the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia have demonstrated the difficulty of dealing with insurgent forces that are well equipped with small arms, especially the rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) in urban operations. This article seeks to show how the Russian military has dealt with the challenge of urban combat in Chechnya and Dagestan by the use of combined arms tactics, thermobaric weapons and heavier-calibre small arms. Lessons from the Russian experience are useful since, as current operations in Iraq now reveal, Western forces need to devise new tactics and techniques to meet the threat of cheap, portable... weapons in urban areas that can be used to destroy helicopters and vehicles that are unprotected by infantry.

URBAN WARFARE IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE ROLE OF WEAPONS SYSTEMS

In recent urban conflict in Central Asia, insurgents have made extensive use of the RPG. Long regarded as the poor man’s howitzer and the ‘guerilla’s artillery’, the RPG is particularly effective when used in complex terrain. With a bursting radius of four metres, the RPG kills by blast and shrapnel. In skilled hands, especially in the confines of urban terrain, this relatively unsophisticated device excels as a destructive weapons system. In 1992, rebels fighting the Russian Army in Tajikistan found that, while they lacked the modern PG-7VR tandem warhead that was necessary to destroy Russian T-72 tanks equipped with reactive armour, they could still destroy Russian armour. Because the Russians were reluctant to deploy sufficient screening infantry, RPG gunners employed ‘double-teaming’ against Russian T-72 tanks. The first gunner would fire at the tank in order to create a breach in its reactive armour. The second and third gunners would then fire multiple ‘kill shots’ at the exposed area. These rounds would often destroy the...
tank crew’s line of vision, ensuring that the crew would be unable to counter the enemy even if the vehicle survived multiple rocket hits. Inflicting such ‘blindness’ on a tank then allowed the RPG gunners time to reposition and resume their attack until the vehicle was disabled. Another technique employed by Tajik rebels was to fire a fragmentation round, or a white phosphorus grenade, at the T-72’s front deck in order to disable the driver’s vision before massed groups of fighters employing RPGs fired on the tank, aiming to disable the rear section of the turret.

The clearing and screening action of Russian all-arms teams led to greater protection for the armoured forces.

In Grozny, Russian tanks and armoured vehicles, unsupported by dismounted infantry, became easy prey for Chechen forces…

RUSSIAN COMBINED ARMS AND WEAPONS IN CHECHNYA

In late 1999 and early 2000, when the Russians again attacked Grozny, they adopted different tactics and weapons. The Russian Army deployed combined arms teams composed of tanks, infantry, engineers and artillery. In particular, the Russians employed specialised troika fire teams comprising a sniper, a machine-gunner and a soldier equipped with a grenade launcher. Two other soldiers, acting as ammunition carriers or assistant gunners, supplemented these teams. The use of Russian fire teams forced Chechen fire teams to abandon fixed positions on upper floors of buildings, on balconies and in attics. The clearing and screening action of Russian all-arms teams led to greater protection for the armoured forces. Using manoeuvre by fire against buildings, apartment blocks and strong points, Russian troops were able to counter the supremacy of Chechen urban tactics.

The Russians also discovered that, in conditions of short-range urban operations,
Ultimately, it was the use of combined arms teams in Chechnya, along with superior firepower, that restored the Russian military’s fortunes.