

EASTERN EUROPE OPS ASKING FOR COMMITMENT - part1

We are living in a challenging period and one of the main questions is: do we stand for each other when the call is upon us? For years Europe was embedded in a NATO strategy sufficient to the circumstances. The doctrine changed however and after years of disarmament the question raised with some if NATO would have a future. Nowadays Europe is facing a firm talk from Russia at its eastern borders but also there are dangers from within. Showing capability on one hand to possible dangers, and a more or less NATO 'self-test' resulted recently in a large conventional Army exercise 'Bison Drawsko' in Germany Poland and Lithuania and continuation of the Baltic Air Policing in the Baltic States Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

DANGERS ARE RECOGNIZED

Russia driven by nationalistic powers, and involved in conflicts such as in the Ukraine causes destabilization. Consensus about how to deal with this is not easy to achieve with so many member states in the European Union. Also unity decreases when political influences called 'populist' grow in importance with the aim to leave great alliances like the European Union or NATO. Unforeseen political moves makes it even more unpredictable if unity will remain in future. Nobody would have expected the 'Brexit' and neither the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America. Some of his messages to the public could indicate a dramatic change in American back-up for NATO, but this still remains to be seen.

At least the U.S. administration wants to see a much bigger input on funds and means from the European counterparts. Those issues bring back to Europe the question about a strong and united NATO as ever. Also there is a call to stand with the feet on the ground. The eastern memberstates of NATO asking us for help to show the tightness of the alliance with the underlying question 'what are the allies worthed'. They want some relief from the ever felt threat of possible Russian aggression with the help of good friends. Former President Obama answered with troops being stationed in Romania and Bulgaria for training and in Poland and the Baltic to meet the request of more deterrence.

But this is not enough. European defence forces were shifted to peace keeping and stabilization operations abroad, multinational operations under political umbrellas and in the last years the focus was on counter terrorism operations and means and energy were attached to those issues. Today European countries asking themselves if defence abilities are sufficient for all kind of opposing threat. Officially we left the 'cold war' doctrine a long time ago but some feel the strong and separate appearance of Russia could bring back this situation. Nevertheless the unity between NATO members is recognized but should be guarded and all tactics needed on possible threats should be exercised and brought to 'currency'.

BRIGADE 5 EXERCISE LEVEL

The Dutch and German army units play an important role in the back-up of Eastern Europe. The Dutch defence authorities decided to train again on a large scale ground war by organizing together with Poland a big exercise on Polish training grounds called 'Bison Drawsko 2017'. This exercise was between the middle of January till the middle of February and mainly conducted on the large military range of Drawsko Pomorskie in North-West Poland with some

movements on German ground especially in the first phase at the Jägerbrück training facility near Poland. Also flying units from the Polish Air force (SU-22/Mig-29 fighters from 1st and 2nd Tactical Air Wing) and Polish Army (W3/Mi-24/ helicopters of the 1st Army Aviation Brigade and of the 25th Air Cavalry Brigade) participated marking the joint element as an ever returning element. The exercise concerned a large ground operation with tank battles and massive firepower. This to show the world and especially Vladimir Putin that the NATO allies in the west could be counted on in time of crisis. The key role in this Brigade 5 exercise was for the Dutch 43 mechanised Brigade from Havelte (part of 1st German Pantzer division) with Brigadegeneral Jan Swillens in the role of exercise commander. A total of 4.500 troops comprising 3.600 Dutch troops and more than 500 Polish troops were supplemented by German, Belgian, Canadian, Estonian and U.S. soldiers, altogether forming a force on brigade level.

The Dutch announced that the Bison operation is one of the largest training exercises organized by the land forces since several years, but not wanted by the Dutch defence only, also the Polish army was eager to refine their skills. Testing your own skills is maybe one priority, but how to cooperate with other partners under difficult circumstances is a matter that needs practice to find out where you are and this is of imminent importance too. Not to forget that a logistic operation on this scale to bring land forces in considerable time to Eastern Europe is a test itself. It is a matter of solidarity to reinforce in the East parts of NATO when circumstances asking for it and as general Swillens stated: "we are in a time of rapidly changes with unpredictable outcome and when crisis is knocking on your door a soldier knows that he can never see no! We must be ready and we will be ready".

LOGISTIC PERFORMANCE

Prior to the exercise was a gigantic logistic operation set up by train over German railway to Poland to transport 1000 items including 600 vehicles and 400 containers/other equipment in 28 missions from three railway stations in the Netherlands. The Dutch armour from the 43 mechanized Brigade included, Fennek reconnaissance platforms, Boxer armoured fighting vehicles, CV-90 (Combat Vehicle 90 version CV-9035NL) light tank and infantry vehicles, PzH 2000 self-propelled howitzers and engineer vehicles. Part of the troops was formed by the fire support command or 'vuursteun commando' (part of the operationeel ondersteuningscommando land - oocl) tasked with logistics.

Integrated in 43rd is a combined Dutch-German unit from the 414 pantzerbattalion Bundeswehr with 60 tons heavy Leopard 2A6 tanks. It was this unit located in Germany to train with in the first phase before leaving to Drako Pomorskie for the second phase. When starting at Drako Pomorskie, (as did other NATO countries before in equal exercises), the need was recognized by the Dutch to test their competence and if the skills are enough in homeland defence warfare after focussing on other types of warfare for so long. In Swillens words "together we stand and together we shield" implicating the brotherhood, but also the skill of interoperability and with words "Be as good as you can be" speeched in six languages the exercise started.

INTEROPERABILITY IS THE KEY-WORD

The input of the Polish counterpart was not only playing host on the facility, but they also deployed battle troops in the field, hailing mainly from the 12th Mechanized Brigade. They used the Rosomak armed personal carriers (APC) and were supported by PT-91 Twardy main battle tanks detached from the 9th Armoured Cavalry Brigade, as well as air defence elements of the 4th and 15th Anti-Aircraft regiments with 72 mm Grom man-portable surface-to-air missile launchers. The PT-91 based on the T-72 undercarriage was described by the Dutch as less advanced compared with the CV90 or Leopard 2A6 but still a very potent weaponsystem. As mentioned the cooperation between countries is focussed on interoperability, but in some issues cooperation is going further into multinational units as a standard.

The 414th armoured battalion of the Bundeswehr (with a single Dutch company) is a good example of this. This unit was to originally play a reserve role and a pilot project in the new Dutch-German structure, but in the light of the variable security context it is gradually reacquiring full combat readiness. Defence cuts caused in 2011 the sale of the last 100 Dutch leopard 2A6 main battletanks to Finland, but now the experience can find its way again in the combined German-Dutch unit which is great emphasized by the Germans within the context of reinforcing the Pan-European defence capabilities. Similar cooperation with combined units has currently been developed between Germany and Poland involving the German 41st Mechanized Brigade and the 11th "Lubuska"Armoured Cavalry Division.

EXERCISE BIZON DRAWKSO 2017

In Bizon Drawsko 2017 the scenario's were both to train offensive and defensive tactics with 'blue and red' forces in a typical setting of a red force with a planning what to do and the blue force, being trained in reacting and responding. Dutch pantserinfanterie battalions painfbat 44 and 45 normally support each other are now fighting against each other. Results of the combat activities were noted in digital systems. According to a Dutch CV90 soldier who was expected to be 48 hours continuously in action the work is tough but it is encouraging with fellows with a good mentality. They slept under the starry sky with night temperatures of minus ten and day temperatures between 2 and minus 6 degrees. Dutch soldiers played both blue and red roles and it is not a matter of winning or losing but a matter to be well trained.

Fast and sudden interactions with the Boxer and CV-90's (the latter with 35 mm fast canon) makes the situation challenging and forces soldiers to a high alert level and a high responsiveness level. This higher rate of actions with a full combat power and equal opponent makes it so much different from superiority missions like in Iraq or Afghanistan lacking this higher dynamics. Apart from fast movements there must be the threat of retaliation with large firepower to influence the tactics of the opponent. The 155mm PzH 2000 Howitzer plays an important role in defensive and offensive Joint Combat Operations on brigadelevel with the possibility to shoot grenades over 40 km distance to the enemy.

HIGH NUMBER OF ACTIONS IN COMPLEX EXERCISE

The training area is huge. Reconnaissance teams make distances. Suddenly there can be danger. CV-90's are sometimes under protection of Leopard tanks but not always. They try to hide in the woods and use the surroundings to their advantage. Awareness is of highest priority. Information is sometimes shared by tablets but tank crews generally communicate with radio. The infanterists have anti-tank weapons like the GILL and can threat the tanks. Tactics were exercised about how to block a military force with much more firepower than your own units by strategic use of the terrain. Dummy munition and simulation techniques were used and for evaluating the Dutch use the Mobile Combat Training Centre (MCTC) from SAAB which is installed on many vehicles but not in all.

Sometimes a jury unit has to decide who is eliminated. Several techniques were trained in the command operations with mobile Boxer command units, but also special skills in the Brigade saw exercise like the 105th eginneerings unit 'Geniecompagnie waterbouw' who prepared a water crossing for tanks over the Drawa river even with thick ice on it, they were really unstoppable. Also the care for wounded people was organized with a field hospital and Polish W-3 helicopters extracted people out of the scenery. You may say that every part of the brigade saw the possibility to train their own training objectives. The complexity of the exercise caused new questions and a request for further solutions. It is good to see where you can do better and what was unexpected. For example communications lines and night vision operations can be improved. The interoperability between communications systems is challenging and was a main issue during the exercise.

SKILLS NEEDED FOR FOLLOW-ON DEPLOYMENT IN THE BALTIKS

The first phase evaluation was done in the field, but lessons learned are to be recognized for everybody later on. The exercise saw expression of skills, technical systems, leadership, coordination, logistics, motivation, commitment, courage, fellowship, creativity, flexibility, interoperability and multinational cooperation. The impression of the Dutch is; 'We are good, but we can do better!' Part of the troops will see a prolonged situation by joining the Euro Battle group in Lithuania March 2017. Lithuania is protected in the air by the air policing unit.

END OF PART ONE, START OF PART 2

EASTERN OPS ASKING FOR COMMITMENT

Since March 2004 when the Baltic states joined the NATO they are police guarded in the air. This is for the Baltic States a high priority, to feel connected to NATO in the first place and by this presence somehow feeling safeguarded against possible Russian aggression. At time of the crisis in the Eastern Ukraine after the Crimea was taken, the air patrol conducting aircraft in the Baltic were even doubled. At the moment it has been returned to previous level because that would be sufficient. Vladimir Putin criticized this presence several times and while he hoped President Trump would take another policy, he knows this presence would not hold back by NATO. It is walking the thin line between giving a signal and not to provoke Russia.

NATO MEMBERS ON ROTATION IN BALTIC QRA

The Baltic air policing is performed by the NATO- members on rotation. NATO air policing is a routine and fundamental example of how NATO provides security to its members. Safeguarding the integrity of Alliance members' sovereign airspace includes all member states, not only those near to Russia. In Northern Europe for those countries adjacending the North Sea and Baltic Sea it is a familiar sight to see Russian aircraft and to respond by intercept them and flying along with them out of the airspace of responsibility. Although there was minor activity since the end of the cold war for some time, after Vladimir Putin's politics were established, the activity of Russian aircraft above the North Sea and Northern Atlantic areas increased.

So it is for the Baltic Air space. Above this area only the Germans and Danish aircraft saw aerial meetings with the Russians in the past with Sweden and Finland responsible for their own airspace. With the expanding of NATO territory to the East however it became a matter of more countries and today the Baltic air policing mission is participated by all members with sufficient equipment to do this. For member nations not having the full range QRA assets (QRA =Quick Reaction Alert) in their own military (Albania, Estonia, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Slovenia) agreements exist to ensure a single standard of security. The QRA of Albania and Slovenia is covered by Greece and Italy and Luxembourg by Belgium and the Netherlands. For protecting Icelandic air space a rotation system was set up likewise those of the Baltic States.

CURRENT OPS BY DUTCH F-16'S

In January 2017 it was the turn of the Netherlands to do the job, in the same way the ground forces of the Euro Battle groups in the Baltic are to be joined by Dutch troops, just trained on Polish grounds. The Royal Netherlands Air force is equipped with the F-16AM and are doing the job for the third time and are well trained in QRA missions above the North Sea having encountered Russian aircraft several times. It is therefore interesting to have a scoop on their participation in the Baltic missions. The Dutch operate during February and March until the end

of April 2017 from Zoknai/Siauliai in Lithuania with four F-16's while Germany operate in that time 24/7 QRA with Typhoons from Ämari Air Base in Harju County, Estonia.

Dutch aircraft and personnel were drawn from Leeuwarden air base and Volkel air base, both QRA bases in the Netherlands, and some personnel from Gilze Rijen air base and the Air Operations Control Station-Nieuw Milligen (AOCS –NM), the latter being a military air traffic control station in the Netherlands. All about 100 persons. The facility at Šiauliai is very good and the Lithuanians are very cooperative. We have enough capacity to ensure 24/7 QRA and to stay fit in between the duties according the Dutch detachment commander. There is always a light tension and this increases when the QRA is activated and everything must be ready within short time for take-off, but this is a normal tension. For the interception itself the tension disappears while the pilots are handling on routine but some curiosity might appear. Pilots wants to see the opponent aircraft in reality, instead of knowing from pictures only.

NATO-LINES ARE STRICTLY OBeyed

Until now the Dutch intercepted a Sukhoi Su-24 Fencer and a Antonov An-26 Curl. Both were not flying in the Lithuanian air space itself, but in airspace of responsibility of Lithuania above the Baltic Sea. Until the moment of interview at the end of February the Detachment commander saw no increase of Russian movements. This however could change suddenly and depends on several factors like political stability, the presence of more NATO forces or when a big Russian exercise is planned. A QRA in the Baltic Air Police, which is called BAP, is initiated by the Combined Air Operation Centre (CAOC). They decide who scrambles and when. A QRA from Lithuania and one from Estonia will be separated by the CAOC in case of simultaneous action.

Actually there are two CAOC's on NATO territory, one located in Torrejon, Spain and one located in Uedem, Germany under the supervision of the Allied Air Command Headquarters located at Ramstein Air Base, Germany. When in the air the airplanes are under command of the NATO –CRC (Control and Reporting Centre) and the rules of engagement are determined by NATO. The Dutch detachment commander makes it important to note that their presence must be de-escalating but nevertheless the F-16 are fully armed which makes it far from obedient. A possible clash would have political consequences with a major impact so both parties play threat but avoiding hostile action. A cat-and-mice game.

TRAINING IS A NECESSITY

Besides the QRA missions, the F-16's execute trainings missions to check the structure of commanding until the interception moment more or less to check practically if everything will go as smoothly when needed. This training also involves the CRC. Those missions are classified as 'tango missions' while a real interception of a Russian aircraft is called an 'alpha mission'. It is important to learn from each other and knowledge about the current situation will be obtained from the previous missions. Every mission will be debriefed as usual but others can learn from it when something special occurs. Alpha sorties are interesting for all NATO-members. The Dutch were informed by France, their predecessor in the BAP-missions, about the current Russian behaviour. The F16AM is considered to be sufficient for the operation and is armed with three AIM120 AMRAAM, one AIM9 Sidewinder and 20mm canon. When scaling the mission easy-moderate character –difficult the detachment commander chooses for a moderate character. The logistics asks for some challenge but on the other hand the flight operations are based on routine.

RESPONSIBILITY IS SHARED

The BAP is a pure defence operation responding on Russian actions which occur over the Baltic sea and sometimes they are sharp with aircraft flying on high speed. Because those flights are not announced there is always the danger for civilian aircraft and therefore this flights

must be guided. Sometimes the flights seems to test not only NATO but also Swedish forces. Several NATO air forces have met the Russians in the sky. In the last few years there are mostly F-16 deployments next to Typhoons but some time ago Hungarian Gripens and Polish Mig-29's were also part of it and even Canadian F-18's were on deployment in BAP. Some members seem to be more often on the tour of duty with Belgium and Germany as examples. The BAP was scaled down to normal strength but on the ground it will be different with the forming of the euro battle groups. Those army units are seperated issues from the BAP but it marks the fact that defending the Baltic States is taken more seriously. Consequenses of this deployments and responding on Russian grounds by possible sending more troops to border areas will be closely watched. The citizen of the Baltic States have the right to sleep well. NATO policy provides them security.

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