

# NATO Reconnaissance and Security Strike Group: Regaining Operational R&S in European Command

by MAJ Steve Orbon

As the United States and its allies return to an era of Great Power competition, the need for military forces to execute large-scale operational maneuver grows in importance. Advances in technology and weapons have given peer adversaries the ability to challenge allied forces in domains where they previously couldn't. This loss of domain dominance has increased the need for members of the Joint force to provide organic and redundant capabilities to continue to conduct operational functions.

However, during the past 18 years of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, the U.S. Army divested itself of most of its dedicated operational reconnaissance and security (R&S) capabilities. This has significantly hindered its capacity to execute the functions of intelligence and protection. The greatest impacts from this capability gap are felt in the European Command (EUCOM) area of operations (AoR).

Through examining the character of modern warfare, the reality of the threat posed by Russia and the failed attempts by the Army to fill this shortfall, it can be concluded that a combined North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) solution should be explored. A proposed NATO R&S formation would bring together the required assets to conduct these critical missions from across NATO. This combined solution to a shared problem on NATO's eastern flank could be the catalyst needed for allied forces to gain and retain the initiative in a future high-intensity conflict.

## Introduction to problem

The 2018 National Security Strategy assessed that the current security environment is one that is "more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory."<sup>1</sup> Increasingly aggressive actions by peer competitors such as Russia and China have elicited a dramatic shift in the focus and security efforts of the United States and its allies. As a part of this pivot, the Joint force has placed exceptional emphasis in preparing itself once again for high-intensity warfare. To provide legitimate military options in a new era of Great Power competition, U.S. forces must be able to execute large-scale operational maneuver in all domains. Capabilities critical to achieving this need to be prioritized and any gaps identified must be filled. Failing to do so could result in the catastrophic defeat of U.S. and allied forces on a future battlefield.

As the land component of the Joint force, the U.S. Army is responsible for dominating operational maneuver on the ground. A critical shortfall the Army currently has in achieving this is its lack of dedicated operational-level R&S capabilities. Over the past two decades, the Army has slowly divested itself of nearly all its division- and corps-level R&S elements, leaving it unable to carry out these critical enabling missions at the operational level.<sup>2</sup> Although for years the Army has acknowledged this widening capability shortfall, other competing priorities have prevailed, and a deficit still remains.

The ramifications for not filling this gap appropriately would be felt the most in EUCOM's AoR. Without the ability for NATO ground forces to maneuver effectively at the operational level, NATO is at risk on its eastern flank. The facts of the dynamism of modern large-scale ground combat, the reality of the true threat posed by Russia and the incapacity of the U.S. Army to fill this requirement unilaterally demand that a NATO solution be sought to solve this problem. Therefore, NATO must establish a dedicated and combined formation to fill the operational R&S gap in EUCOM so that allied forces can maneuver and win in a high-intensity conflict.

## 21<sup>st</sup>-Century battlefield: detect and protect to attack effectively first

The character of high-intensity conflict in a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century battlespace is one that will be defined by extreme lethality, rapid tempo, multi-domain contestation and the denial of critical capabilities.<sup>3</sup> To have the maneuver space and time to properly deploy their forces in this complex environment, division- and corps-level formations will need to gain timely and accurate intelligence on the enemy as well as protect themselves from threat capabilities.<sup>4</sup> Although in the past, ground forces have been able to heavily rely on other members of the Joint force to achieve these effects, the modern battlefield will not guarantee this. Air, naval or Special Operations

assets may be tasked with other missions, could be disrupted or simply destroyed by near-peer capabilities. As U.S. and allied ground forces prepare themselves to operate in this complex environment, the need for dedicated and organic operational R&S formations becomes necessary.

Although distinct domains, the character of modern war on the ground is becoming strikingly similar to that of war at sea due to the increasing speed and ranges at which combat can occur. In examining some of the concepts that have been more prevalent in maritime operations, great insight can be gained for those on the ground. Naval theorist CAPT Wayne P. Hughes has stated that the most important principle of naval operations in the modern era is to “attack effectively first.”<sup>5</sup> This idea is based on observations that when facing a peer adversary with comparable capabilities to one’s own force, the first engagement might be the most decisive.

Hughes adds that one of the keys to achieving this has always been the effective execution of scouting to gain good intelligence. He even states that this is so important that it should be “emphasized as much as the delivery of firepower.”<sup>6</sup> As U.S. and allied ground forces begin to come to the realization that they no longer have a drastic capability overmatch against some of their biggest global threats, detecting effectively first becomes even more relevant.

In addition to being able to conduct effective reconnaissance, friendly forces are going to need to survive long enough to execute operational maneuver to seize positions of relative advantage. This requires that they be protected from the enemy’s attempts to gain operational surprise, attrit combat power and induce culmination before the decisive point of battle. The screening, covering and guarding of friendly ground forces from observation or effective indirect and direct fires is known doctrinally in the U.S. Army as security operations.<sup>7</sup> To ensure that this protection is achieved, operational-level forces need to have dedicated organic formations that are properly manned, equipped and trained. As senior Army leaders have said, the future battlefield will require tactical units that are flexible, resilient and able to project power into other domains.<sup>8</sup> To meet the requirements of being able to survive the modern battlefield and perform effective operational R&S, an Army corps will need to field an extremely robust and dynamic brigade-sized formation.

The highly complex aspects of modern war require the need for both tactical and operational resiliency. This resiliency will come from two aspects: survivability and redundancy. Survivability for tactical units rests on armor protection, firepower, speed, mobility and stealth. Redundancy at the operational level requires that repeated capabilities be provided by multiple members of the Joint force in support of operational functions. For ground forces to provide redundant capabilities to the joint functions of intelligence and protection, they must have R&S elements that can survive the lethality of modern ground combat.

A formation with a core nucleus of tanks and mechanized units, similar to the old Cold War-era armored-cavalry regiments (ACR), would meet the survivability requirements for a modern operational R&S unit as well. By having a formation that can survive enemy contact, operational land components will be providing themselves, as well as the entire Joint force, with redundant capabilities. This means that when aircraft can’t fly and satellites don’t work, the Joint force can still see and fight into the deep maneuver areas they would otherwise be completely shut off from.



**Figure 1. Troopers assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, 11<sup>th</sup> ACR, cautiously advance into a bunker area during a March 2005 raid on the Hateen Weapons Complex in Babil, Iraq, with an M3A2 Bradley. The raid was coordinated to disrupt insurgent safe havens and to clear weapons-cache sites in the area of operation. (U.S. Navy photo by PHC Edward G. Martens)**

To maintain the tempo required for operational R&S missions, these dedicated formations will need to have a multitude of organic capabilities not normally found below the division level. The capacity to fight for information as well as defeat enemy forces attempting to disrupt operational maneuver elements will be vital to the successful execution of operational R&S. The ability for the unit to provide internal long-range precision fires, attack aviation, air defense and cyber will be critical for it to rapidly overwhelm enemy elements. Also, it will need organic long-range reconnaissance and surveillance (LRRS) forces to provide it with asymmetric options that can stealthily infiltrate enemy defense networks. This sensor-to-shooter integration will be key to providing the Joint force with ground options for target acquisition. The execution of rapidly coordinated long-range strikes would make the formation extremely fit for the modern battlefield.

Some might argue that large-scale maneuver is an antiquated concept for the modern battlefield and therefore dedicated operational-level R&S formations won't be required. Although the character of war and force modernization will continue to drive brigade-sized elements to be more self-sufficient, it will not negate the need for large-scale maneuver. The unique problems that accompany a return to Great Power competition require the U.S. and its allies to be prepared to conduct operations that involve multiple higher-echelon ground elements. For division and corps commanders to properly coordinate fire and maneuver in a denied environment, they must be able to collect intelligence and protect their formations with internal assets. By creating dedicated R&S units that are designed to survive contact and fight for information, friendly forces will be able to gain and retain the initiative in any circumstance. If NATO ever finds itself squaring off against a Russian adversary in a high-intensity

conflict, these capabilities will be invaluable. They will enable operational level forces to detect, protect and strike effectively first, which will be the key to decisive victory on the modern battlefield.

### **Russian threat: from 21<sup>st</sup>-Century theory to respecting the bear**

It is one thing to hypothesize about a future fight against a near-peer adversary on a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century battlefield, but it is another to actually prepare for war against a tangible enemy. Currently the U.S. and its allies have two major pacing threats and, although both are extremely important, when it comes to the land components of the Joint force, the primary adversary is Russia. Since its seizure of Crimea and incursion into the Donbass region of Ukraine in 2014, the Russian Federation has demonstrated that it has significantly closed the military gap that NATO forces once enjoyed. A new doctrine, labeled new-generation warfare (NGW), increased Russia's military capabilities, and aggressive force posturing aided the Federation in achieving this. If NATO forces are going to deter or counter any future aggression by Russia, they will need to be able to conduct rapid operational-level maneuver in a highly contested region. Key to their ability to do this will be dedicated operational R&S formations.



**Figure 2. Russian troops in unmarked uniforms on patrol at Simferopol International Airport, Ukraine, Feb. 28, 2014. (Photo by Elizabeth Arrott, Voice of America, Website <http://www.voanews.com/content/us-britain-no-zero-sum-game-for-ukraine/1859367.html>)**

Perhaps the most significant capability Russia maintains is its sophisticated anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) system.<sup>9</sup> This densely layered air-defense canopy is one that can greatly limit NATO forces from achieving air superiority in any future conflict. Without this, NATO ground forces will not be able to rely as much as they recently have on air assets to provide them with the necessary sustainment, intelligence and fires needed for operational success. To get these assets back into the operational fight, ground elements will have to, as former Army Chief of Staff GEN Mark A. Milley said, “penetrate denied areas to facilitate air and naval forces.”<sup>10</sup>

To do this, they will need to enter the enemy's disruption and battle zones, where they will encounter another of Russia's newly proven capabilities, its long-range rocket-fire systems. As demonstrated during the war in Ukraine, Russian forces have increased their ability to coordinate and mass the effects of standoff weapon systems such as rocket-launched artillery. Studies of the conflict have shown that nearly 85 percent of Ukraine's casualties early in the war were caused by these systems.<sup>11</sup> Through the combined use of drones and long-range fires, the Russians were able to target static and lightly armored units, with, for example, two battalions rendered combat-ineffective in a single strike.<sup>12</sup>

To break this vigorous Russian defense network, NATO ground forces will need to infiltrate, penetrate and rapidly disintegrate its layers. A highly dynamic and robust R&S formation could provide these elements with the initiative to achieve this through the execution of an effective guard mission. To protect maneuver formations as they move through the enemy disruption zone, the R&S unit could send LRRS elements to infiltrate and gain surveillance on key enemy radar and rocket locations. These targets could then be quickly destroyed or suppressed by the R&S units' internal long-range rocket and artillery assets. This would then initiate its highly mobile armor elements to penetrate this first layer of defense and rapidly overwhelm enemy ground and A2/AD forces.

With these two destroyed, the formation's organic attack aviation, along with other air assets, could then be enabled to provide close support to ground maneuver elements as they seized key objectives. By having a robust formation that organically contains all the capabilities required to begin the rapid dismantling of Russia's key advantage, the scales would be tipped back in favor of NATO.

In addition to countering Russia's new critical capabilities, NATO forces are faced with another significant hurdle in the form of Federation posturing. Currently the Russians have substantial armored and mechanized ground units positioned along the boundary between Poland and Lithuania near the Suwalki Gap in both Kaliningrad and Belarus. A 2016 RAND study concluded that if conflict was to break out, Russian forces could seal off that boundary and overrun the region within 10 hours with some 40-50 battalion tactical groups.<sup>13</sup>

Even if a NATO response is rapid and the A2/AD canopy isn't effective, NATO forces will have to fight to re-establish Baltic sovereignties. If the air and space domains are contested by other means, such as enemy fighter aircraft or electronic warfare, the only way to perform effective operational R&S will be with robust formations.

Some may believe that Russia would never actually attack a NATO ally because it would invoke Article V and the Federation would face a collective-defense response. Although it is true that recent Russian aggression within EUCOM, Ukraine in 2014 and Georgia in 2006 were not against NATO allies, they were against partners seeking acceptance into the alliance. Also, Russia has made open threats of aggression against NATO members such as Poland and the Baltic states.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the disinformation and subversive aspects of Russian NGW gravitate toward regions that are susceptible to these types of operations due to strong ethnic Russian ties. Vladimir Putin himself has stated that it is the duty of Russia to "protect the rights of all Russians abroad."<sup>15</sup>

This makes the likelihood of future Russian aggression a distinct possibility that NATO forces need to take seriously. For NATO to fail to prepare itself to effectively respond to such aggressive action would be a risk it can ill afford to take. As a part of that preparation, it needs to solve its operational R&S gap, and currently there are no dedicated ground units capable of doing this anywhere throughout NATO, not even in the U.S. Army.

## **Here doesn't come the cavalry: not meeting the operational requirement**

The last time the U.S. Army was faced with the grim reality of having to potentially go head to head with a peer competitor was the Cold War. At that time, the Army placed great emphasis on having dedicated division- and corps-level R&S formations. ACRs, division-cavalry squadrons, division and corps LRRS detachments and division Pathfinder companies were all key elements in this operational R&S apparatus.

However, over the past 18 years of COIN warfare, the Army has stripped itself of each of these formations due to the nature of the threat and an overreliance on the space and air domains to cover down. All that remains are tactical-level units that reside in brigade combat teams (BCTs) in the form of cavalry squadrons, cavalry troops and scout platoons.<sup>16</sup> Although these elements are critical in enabling tactical-level missions, they do not have the capacity to effectively conduct R&S at the operational level. They do not possess the proper organic capabilities required; they lack certain training and are simply not big enough to deal with the breadth and depth of an operational R&S problem set.



**Figure 3. Map of NATO member Poland, Suwałki Gap marked in red. Poland is bordered by the Baltic Sea, NATO member Lithuania and Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast to the north; Belarus and Ukraine to the east; Slovakia and NATO member the Czech Republic to the south; and NATO member Germany to the west. (Based on map from CIA World Factbook) (NATO membership list at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Member\\_states\\_of\\_NATO](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Member_states_of_NATO))**

Acknowledging certain limitations, the U.S. Army has attempted to bridge this capability gap in a couple of ways over the past few years. In 2017, 1<sup>st</sup> Stryker BCT, from the Army's 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, was used as a test model for

an R&S brigade concept.<sup>17</sup> Essentially this motorized-infantry unit was given some additional armor, aviation and artillery assets to perform corps-level R&S. It was tested at the Army's National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA.

Also, the Army's 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division recently conducted Warfighter Exercise 19-02 to test the concept of using the cavalry squadron of an armor BCT to act as a division-level R&S task force.<sup>18</sup> The squadron, like the Stryker BCT, was augmented to conduct this higher-echelon R&S mission set. It was given an additional tank company, attack-aviation company and even an entire artillery battalion from within the division.

The results of both of these exercises were mixed. The Stryker BCT did not possess the armor protection, mobility or firepower to deal with enemy tank and mechanized units. The cavalry squadron achieved some success in certain scenarios but at the cost of taking away critical assets from other subordinate units that would need them to maneuver. Logistics also became an issue for the squadron because the sustainment element of its parent brigade could not support it appropriately. So, although both of these were steps forward in trying to solve the operational R&S gap, they merely reconfirmed that independent and dedicated formations like the old ACRs need to be constituted.

Finally, in an R&S-focused tabletop exercise (TTX) conducted at the Army's Maneuver Center of Excellence, Fort Benning, GA, in March 2019, attempts were made to gain insight into how the Army could update its doctrine to enable R&S at echelons above brigade.<sup>19</sup> The TTX placed different configurations of proposed operational level R&S formations against a near-peer adversary with an intricate A2/AD network. Again, it was concluded that only dedicated division- and corps-level R&S formations, built with a core of armored and mechanized forces, could properly enable maneuver in large-scale combat operations.

Fiscal constraints, material shortages and other competing demands have hindered the Army from properly addressing this capability shortfall. Acknowledging this reality, land-component commanders need to seek other options to address this problem that are viable and more cost-effective. If a high-intensity conflict were to break out today in Eastern Europe, ground forces would have to accept the fact that the U.S. cavalry is in fact not coming to the rescue!

## **NATO RSSG: a combined solution to a shared problem**

Since the EUCOM AoR would be the place in which a lack of operational R&S formations would hinder ground maneuver the most, NATO leaders should attempt to fill this gap multilaterally. If NATO forces intend to gain back the ability to maneuver in a future high-intensity conflict, they will need to accomplish it together. Therefore, a dedicated combined NATO formation with the sole function of providing operational R&S should be seriously considered to regain the initiative on the ground in Europe. To do so, it should be built around framework of a viable concept.

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the U.S. Army reviewed its ability to respond to a high-intensity conflict against a peer adversary. With the transformation of its last ACR to a Stryker BCT in 2011, it found itself without any viable way to conduct operational R&S against a near-peer threat. It looked to the past for solutions; an updated version of the ACR, dubbed the R&S strike group (RSSG), was proposed.<sup>20</sup> The RSSG would have additional cyber- and long-range precision-fire capabilities to deal with the emerging-threat environment. Unfortunately, due to multiple constraints, these plans never went anywhere, and the operational R&S gap has endured.<sup>21</sup> Although the Army never established the RSSG, the concept still remains and would be a viable framework to establish a combined formation that could achieve the same operational effect for NATO.

Within the members of NATO rests all the armor, reconnaissance, artillery, rocket, cyber and aviation capabilities required to create a dedicated formation able to execute operational R&S. To speedily address the urgency of this shortfall, these already existing elements could be pulled together and task-organized into a multinational formation under a single headquarters that would exist in Europe rather than in the United States. The strategic benefits of having the formation already forward-positioned in the region would significantly impact NATO's ability to react fast enough to deter or counter future Russian aggression. The pooling of assets would reduce the fiscal costs and time needed to man a completely new unit and field completely new equipment. Also, an allied RSSG could also be a way to effectively capitalize niche military capabilities that NATO members have such as long-range reconnaissance and cyber.

Some might argue that creating a combined organization such as the RSSG would be more of a liability than a capability due to the complexities of multinational operations. Although working multilaterally might have its inherent difficulties, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have proven that NATO allies can work well together at lower echelons. In addition to conducting combat operations together in the COIN environment, NATO forces have increasingly been executing more complex combined training exercises within EUCOM. Multinational tactical formations are constantly being formed and trained within NATO. For example, as recently as April 2019, a multinational brigade consisting of more than 5,000 soldiers from 15 nations was established to support the combined NATO exercise Allied Spirit X.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 4. Israeli soldiers provide security while conducting a town raid during exercise Allied Spirit X at Hohenfels, Germany, April 7, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Meagan Mooney)**

Establishing the NATO RSSG would bring together from across the alliance the collective capabilities needed to conduct effective 21<sup>st</sup>-Century R&S. It would be a vehicle for increasing much-needed interoperability and is a shared solution to a shared problem. This formation would be a critical element in enabling NATO forces to once again conduct operational maneuver on the European continent. The cavalry could ride again, just under a NATO guidon.

## **Recommendation, conclusion**

The U.S. Army has been proofing a concept for a formation designed to enable maritime maneuver in the Indo-U.S. Army Pacific Command AoR. This new unit, dubbed the multi-domain task force (MDTF), contains organic long-range fires, cyber and aviation capabilities.<sup>23</sup> It contains all key elements necessary for any future operational-level R&S formation.

After being tested through several iterations of wargames, reports have stated this new concept has had dramatic effects in countering the problem that Chinese A2/AD poses.<sup>24</sup> There has also been discussion of establishing an MDTF for the EUCOM AoR. This concept should be the foundation on which a future NATO RSSG could be built, and it would significantly satisfy the U.S. Army's contribution to the force. What the MDTF lacks in armored and mechanized units and LRRS elements, NATO forces could provide. A NATO RSSG that builds on the MDTF concept could be the critical element needed to finally fill the operational R&S gap that NATO forces currently have.

In a high-intensity conflict, the U.S. and its allies will need to conduct operational-level maneuver across multiple domains to achieve victory. To accomplish this, each component of the Joint force must provide redundant capabilities that enable this higher-echelon maneuver. In the land domain, ground forces must be able to provide effective R&S for division- and corps-level formations. This requires dedicated R&S forces capable of operating in a highly lethal and dynamic environment.



Currently neither the United States nor its allies have any dedicated operational formations that meet this requirement. This capabilities gap needs to be filled by NATO forces if they are going to conduct operational-level maneuver against a near-peer adversary in EUCOM or any other potential theater of war. A viable, cost-effective and efficient solution that would rapidly satisfy this requirement could be the formation of a combined NATO RSSG. This multinational formation would possess the robust, nimble and multi-domain capabilities required to enable large-scale maneuver and gain back the initiative on the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century battlefield.

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## Notes

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## Acronym Quick-Scan

**A2/AD** – anti-access/area denial

**ACR** – armored-cavalry regiment

**AoR** – area of operations

**BCT** – brigade combat team

**COIN** – counterinsurgency

**EUCOM** – European Command

**FM** – field manual

**LRRS** – long-range reconnaissance and surveillance

**MCCC** – Maneuver Captain's Career Course

**MDTF** – multi-domain task force

**NATO** – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

**NGW** – new-generation warfare

**R&S** – reconnaissance and security

**RSSG** – reconnaissance and security strike group

**TTX** – tabletop exercise