An Overlooked Ally

Observations and Lessons Learned from the First Persistent U.S. Artillery Forces Stationed in Estonia

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Kes otsib, see leiab. [The one who seeks shall find.]
—Estonian proverb

An unexpected deployment to the Baltic State of Estonia provided unique lessons for a U.S. Army artillery battalion. Those lessons serve as a groundwork for other American units that will come to Estonia. To better understand Estonia, U.S. service members can improve American-Estonian military preparedness and develop U.S. capability with a dynamic and clever ally. Among the members of NATO, Estonia may be an often overlooked ally. The Republic of Estonia is a small nation of approximately 1.3 million people, slightly less than the population of the state of Maine. Roughly one-fifth of Estonians speak Russian. Its surface area is just over 43,000 km, making Estonia roughly a third larger than its National Guard State Partnership Program counterpart's state, Maryland.[1] Estonia's GDP is the third smallest in the European Union, greater than only Cyprus and Malta.[2] By these metrics, Estonia is easy to overlook.

There is more to the story than these metrics, however. Geography matters. Until Finland's recent admission to NATO, Estonia was the northern anchor of NATO's eastern flank. Estonia now serves at the center among the Nordic and Baltic States, situated just 160 km from Saint Petersburg, Russia. Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) protect a 296 km border with Russia, and the Estonian Navy patrols Estonia's 2,200 islands dispersed throughout the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea.

This article focuses on the experiences and perspectives garnered from Task Force (TF) Võit (the Estonian word for victory) in Tapa, Estonia, and from the U.S. Embassy's Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) in Tallinn, Estonia. 1st Battalion, 14th Field Artillery Regiment (1-14 FAR) established TF Võit in December 2022 during its no-notice deployment from Oklahoma to Europe in support of Operation European Assure, Deter, and Reinforce, which was decisively enabled through the ODC. The creation of TF Võit exposed the power of persistent force projection when given the goals to build multinational interoperability and intercultural understanding, and to refine U.S. techniques and procedures for long-range precision fires (LRPF) in a new environment. TF Võit and the ODC's close cooperation simultaneously enabled an ally to develop operational

Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 14th Field Artillery Regiment, 75th Field Artillery Brigade, march past Estonian President Alar Karis (*center, white hat*) and Estonian chief of defense Gen. Martin Herem during the Estonian Independence Day parade 24 February 2023 in the country's capital, Tallinn, to promote the strong bilateral relationship between the United States and Estonia. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Ondirae Abdullah-Robinson, U.S. Army)

capability for a future system years before its fielding, in the vein of the Department of Defense's recommendations to improve foreign military sales (FMS) cases.[3]

The Estonian Military: A Small but Burgeoning Capability

In stark contrast to its former Soviet occupation, Estonia is now firmly entrenched in the European Union and NATO. Estonia's small territory and modest population and territory belie its growing military and robust economy. The EDF supports approximately four thousand active-duty soldiers, a newly formed division headquarters established in 2023, one active-duty infantry brigade in the northeast at Tapa, and a reserve brigade in the southeastern Estonian military base of Võru. Conscripts augment regular forces through biannual indoctrination, and the Estonian Defence League provides a well-organized and trained national guard of nearly seventeen thousand volunteers.

Estonia is frequently grouped in Washington, D.C., with its Baltic neighbors Latvia and Lithuania for political and military projects (referred to as the 3Bs). Sometimes this includes Poland as well, which more often serves as the focal point of American military interests, as Poland recently embarked on a rearmament drive to field the largest land force among the European armies.[4] Finland's recent admission to NATO now expands prospects for Baltic integration into NATO's new northern flank. There may be a thought that Estonia is an identical one-third partner among the 3Bs, or a miniature Finland. However, U.S. military officers serving in Estonia are quick to realize that the many nuances, unique capabilities, and distinct differences of operations in Estonia merit deeper understanding and attention.

Estonia, like its Baltic counterparts, recognized the persistent threat from Russia since regaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. As part of its effort to safeguard independence, Estonia proactively sought a coordinated procurement of the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS). Estonia was the first among the Baltic States to pursue an advanced LRPF capability, submitting for an FMS case in December 2021. The procurement, solidified in December 2022, represents Estonia's largest to date, with the total proposed cost for six HIMARS and a plethora of munitions at over $500 million in U.S. dollars.[5] It is Estonia's most expensive and complex LRPF program ever.

U.S. Force Posture in Estonia

Estonian pursuit of serious deterrence and credible combat capabilities caught U.S. attention as the first of the Baltic nations to action the LRPF capability gap menacing NATO's eastern flank. As a result of U.S. and allied commitments at the Madrid Summit, the U.S. Army's V Corps in Europe ordered Operation Victory Vigilance to provide a persistent rotational force structure of U.S. infantry units in Võru and a platoon-sized U.S. element of four HIMARS in Tapa that would precede the fielding of Estonian HIMARS.[6] The premise of the additional forward U.S. presence is to enable (and not simply defend) Estonia and to improve technical, procedural, and human interoperability between U.S. and Estonian forces. This is particularly significant for Estonia's development of HIMARS capability given the transformational role of HIMARS in Russia's war in Ukraine.

The 1-14 FAR HIMARS battalion deployed a mixture of capabilities to Estonia to provide LRPF in support of both V Corps and the new Estonian division's deep fight. To provide this capability, five different units stationed throughout Europe deployed specialized elements to enable continuous operations in Tapa Camp as the first semi-enduring U.S. force in Estonia. As of 2023, a mission command cell, a security forces infantry platoon, a HIMARS platoon (four HIMARS with a fire direction center), a battery headquarters, a Q-53 radar section, a platoon of HIMARS resupply vehicles, and a maintenance support team comprise TF Võit. Additionally, two Estonian liaison officers, a mayoral cell from the Army's regional support group, and an Army post office team support TF Võit under one U.S. senior responsible officer due to a lack of a unified command structure among the composite forces. In this capacity, the senior responsible officer routinely engaged ODC and EDF's division-level officers, and the HIMARS battery garnered unique insight into tactical EDF-U.S. operations.

Lessons Learned in Procedural Interoperability

While many TF Võit leaders were experienced in combat tours in the Middle East, operational tours in Europe, permanent overseas assignments in Poland, or myriad U.S. annual training exercises

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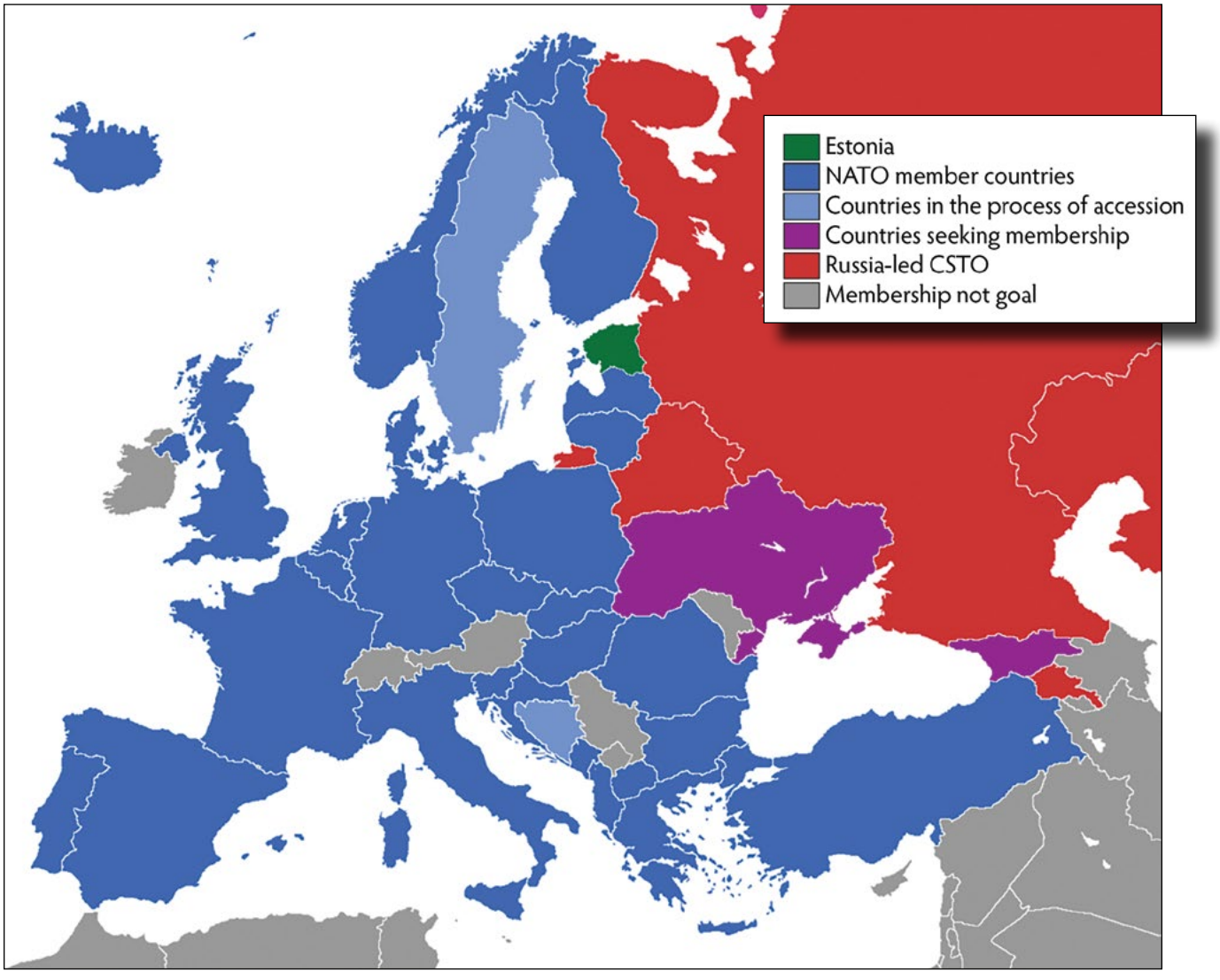

(Map by Starfire25 via Wikimedia Commons)

Estonia in Relation to NATO and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)

throughout the Baltics, their experiences often created a false sense of understanding of Estonia's professional military culture, operations and training, and the important business rules for persistent U.S. operations within Estonia.

It is not an uncommon misconception for U.S. military personnel to presume that Estonia is a third world fragile state or a helpless former Soviet satellite. Estonia's present economic and military disposition are more akin to Western than Eastern Europe. Visitors to Estonian military bases will note robust force protection, new facilities, and high-quality physical and technical infrastructure. For example, secure hard-stand facilities housing rotational U.S. forces at Tapa Camp offer free Wi-Fi, fresh linen, free laundry, stable climate control, contracted cleaning services, and abundant bunks with new mattresses. In contrast, facilities of allies perceived as more mature partners like Germany or Poland that accommodate rotational U.S. forces do not always provide comparable life support services. Estonians are deservedly proud of their overlooked investment to welcome an increased U.S. presence.

In addition to adjusting expectations of what the EDF affords rotational partner forces, U.S. forces should stay vigilant to respect Estonia as the host nation and an accommodating partner. TF Võit observed mitigatable friction when U.S. headquarters

perceived themselves as "battlespace owners" in Estonia or the Baltics, which led to frequent missteps in U.S. forces presuming unimpeded access to Estonia and its bases. Whereas in the Global War on Terrorism, a battlespace owner could relatively freely reposition forces within Iraq or Afghanistan, such actions in Estonia invited frustration at the least, and delayed movement of U.S. forces at the worst. The battlespace owner mentality, combined with TF Võit's reliance on external logistical support, encouraged U.S. forces in Europe to move forces into Estonia to augment U.S. capabilities within their commander's intent; however, at times they did not first confirm host-nation or base commander permission. Consequently, U.S. forces would arrive unannounced to the Estonian border or an Estonian base with orders from a U.S. division and insist on entrance, having ignored the Aircraft and Personnel Automated Clearance System or country and base access request processes. The familiar business rules of U.S. operations in Germany or Poland do not apply, but this friction is easily alleviated through engagement with the ODC. The ODC mitigated and often prevented unintentional missteps from U.S. forces.

Leveraging the Office of Defense Cooperation to Enable Tactical Operations

On behalf of the U.S. Department of Defense and specifically U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), the ODC works within the U.S. embassy to engage with the Estonian Ministry of Defence and the EDF to expand capability and improve interoperability. U.S. units in allied nations like Estonia are building strategic capabilities as much as they are building tactical ones. When a U.S. unit rotation like TF Võit enters into a capability procurement process, it enables a level of capability development that would otherwise take years for any nation, no matter its size. Moreover, the ODC can serve as a conduit to transfer the desire of the host nation to leverage the power of a U.S. unit rotation to expedite initial or full operating capability development vis-à-vis emergent and present threats like Russia. The ODC also helped rapidly connect and sustain critical relationships between the EDF and TF Võit that would have otherwise been impractical due to disparate command relationships. These multinational networks simultaneously give U.S. forces the opportunity to look at the employment of their own systems with fresh

Soldiers assigned to the 1st Battalion, 14th Field Artillery Regiment, 75th Field Artillery Brigade, fire rockets from an M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System during a media engagement 7 February 2023 at Tapa Army Base, Estonia. The Estonian Defense Media Team and the Estonian Public Broadcasting witnessed twelve rockets launch at close range and captured in-depth footage of the event. (Photo by Spc. Joshua Zayas, U.S. Army)

eyes. In all these cases, the ODC is an asset to help commanders and soldiers.

For Estonia, TF Võit's deployment could have been a self-contained projection of U.S. LRPF in support of an ally and the NATO alliance. Instead, it produced much more. It served as a foundation for the development of Estonia's capabilities. This foundation, while only in the initial stages, may pay off in the further development of Lithuanian and Latvian LRPF.

> The Estonian 1st Infantry Brigade commander warned U.S. forces upon arrival to not errantly boast that Americans deployed to *defend* Estonia but instead Americans *enable and support* Estonian Defence Forces capabilities.

The bottom line of the ODC's support to TF Võit is simple: improved deployability and techniques, tactics, and procedures for U.S. forces, and capability development for allies in a way that is meaningful to the alliance. This support extends to any unit operating within Estonia, regardless of duration or scope.

Estonia's commitment to its LRPF development is significant. It is Estonia's largest procurement to date, and Estonian leadership recognizes the LRPF role in the region's defense if war comes. TF Võit's efforts in building human and technical interoperability enabled Estonia to make concrete decisions about its FMS case for HIMARS. Given that Estonia's HIMARS are slated to arrive in 2025, there is no time to spare in that development. TF Võit's open and earnest effort to collaborate with Estonia did wonders to develop Estonian capability and is a model for other deployments to the region with other complex capabilities in development. Consequently, TF Võit's deployment answered U.S. defense recommendations in support of FMS cases "to provide allies and partner nations relevant priority capabilities."[7]

Lessons Learned in Human Interoperability

While the ODC is deliberately trained and onboarded to navigate unique Estonian idiosyncrasies, TF Võit and other U.S. forces encountered avoidable friction in human interoperability due to nuances in Estonia's professional military culture. For example, the EDF generally speaks English, which fosters direct interaction at echelon to foster vital partnerships. While trying to nurture these relationships, U.S. forces quickly discovered that Estonians are famously honest before polite and ruthlessly efficient in their interactions. TF Võit observed that well-developed personal relationships are critical in Estonia, since the EDF's small size correlates to strong internal networking that can helpfully circumvent bureaucratic gauntlets and even offer access to civilian resources for training. Similarly, the EDF's smaller size means that its leaders are well versed in the training and operations of adjacent units. Consequently, EDF partners were surprised that TF Võit was ignorant of concurrent U.S. operations in Võru or conversations held at the strategic level, though Estonian directness quickly addressed communication shortfalls.

TF Võit observed a commander-centric approach to mission command in the EDF. The EDF is less reliant on command sergeants major than the United States, but there is an active effort to mature the role of their senior enlisted advisors. Interestingly, in the Estonian language, only one word, "juhtimine," conveys "command," "leadership," and "management." This reflects a markedly different mission command approach between EDF and American officers, whereby U.S. leaders treat those three facets of mission command as distinct leadership methods. However, the EDF mitigates this nuance through an adhocracy culture among its military staff that supports a goal-oriented approach that deemphasizes rank and prizes innovation.

A final, important aspect of the EDF's professional culture is its sensitivity to the strategic role of non-Estonians in support of Estonian defense. First, it is the EDF's responsibility to defend Estonia and not the responsibility of the United States or any other ally. For instance, at Tapa the Estonian 1st Infantry Brigade commander warned U.S. forces upon arrival to not errantly boast

Capt. Dylan Karnedy, Bravo Battery commander for the 1st Battalion, 14th Field Artillery Regiment, 75th Field Artillery Brigade, stands in front of an M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System during a media demonstration 5 February 2023 at Tapa Army Base, Estonia. Karnedy stated, "Today, we are here to showcase the HIMARs to our Estonian partners and other media attending." (Photo by Spc. Joshua Zayas, U.S. Army)

that Americans deployed to *defend* Estonia but instead Americans *enable and support* EDF capabilities. To that end, the EDF wanted the right type of capabilities, like HIMARS and not maneuver forces, at Tapa to positively augment its defense plans. Second, nonethnic Estonians are not overtly discriminated against in their EDF role. Estonia has a sizable ethnic Russian population amongst its citizenry, but that should not imply disloyalty. On the contrary, many of the EDF officers, to include intelligence and commanders, have Eastern Slavic names and may even lack a strong command of the Estonian language as native Russian speakers, yet they are no less patriotic than their ethnic Estonian officer counterparts.

Lessons Learned in Technical Interoperability

As an artillery-centric partnering force, TF Võit expected technical interoperability to serve as the foundation for LRPF mission processing (digital or voice methods) with the EDF. Though technical interoperability remained top priority, it also proved to be the central challenge to functional cohesion. Digital connectivity from the sensor to the shooter is key in a large-scale combat operation (LSCO) with multiple NATO partners. Digital connectivity enables timely and accurate fires and mitigates the risk of miscommunication due to language barriers. A lack of appetite toward technical interoperability exposed three friction points: capability, connectivity, and clearance.

The United Kingdom and the United States were strategically stationed in Tapa to reinforce the Estonian division LRPF capability in the event of allied contingency operations or LSCO. In Estonia, the United Kingdom positioned M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS) and the United States provided HIMARS to support LRPF. By comparison, the MLRS carries two pods of six rockets or one missile, while the HIMARS can only carry one pod. MLRS executes most of the fire missions against larger bunkers,

command posts, or logistical hubs due to its larger pod-carrying capacity. Alternatively, HIMARS's reduced ammunition capacity supports prosecution of time-sensitive targets like enemy artillery, air defense, or radar capabilities. Enemy time-sensitive targets typically use survivability moves to reduce acquisition by NATO artillery. This means it is imperative to create efficiencies in fire-mission processing from sensor to shooter to enable timely and accurate fires by reducing reliance on voice communications, both internal and external, at echelon.

To achieve rapid and efficient fire mission processing in Estonia's multinational operational environment, TF Võit used a gated approach. The first gate establishes communications with frequency modulation voice communications using frequency hopping and cipher text methods. The second gate is U.S.-Estonian digital connectivity through an information exchange gateway. V Corps defined true digital interoperability as the ability to digitally transmit targeting data and coordinate instructions between nations. An elusive third gate is true digital connectivity via NATO's artillery interface software, the Artillery Systems Cooperation Activities (ASCA), among the French and UK partners in the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) Battlegroup at Tapa.

TF Võit achieved the first gate of voice interoperability by teaching the Estonians where to find and how to load NATO keys on the Estonian AN/PRC-148 MBITR radio to connect to a U.S. RT-1523 SINCGARS radio. This experience highlighted a few key persistent points of friction in NATO's technical interoperability challenges. First, in the 2000s, the Estonians upgraded their communication systems to radios that will not connect to SINCGARS radios, requiring the use of tactical voice bridges. The second point of friction stems from the EDF's reliance on the conscription system, resulting in a limited number of actively certified and qualified soldiers with the clearance to handle secret materials. This inadvertently restricts a majority of the EDF forces from access to materials and systems like communications security or NATO's Mission Partner Environment (MPE) to avoid leaking information. A combination of the lack of easy access to communications security and the difference in radios immediately reduced the Estonian appetite to maintain voice connectivity with its allies.

The second gate, digital connectivity with the Estonians, ran into similar issues of clearance, capability, and connectivity. While MPE is advertised as the premier NATO network to promote digital interoperability, it has many requirements that not all allies meet, to include Estonia. However, limited connectivity between Estonia's TOORU artillery system and the U.S Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System (AFATDS) proved to be an achievable goal with U.S. Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) and U.S. Army Europe and Africa approval.

TOORU is a unclassified but secure software internally produced with ongoing development by Estonia's proud technology and software industry. The system, as part of the wider Kolt computer software infrastructure, provides the EDF fires enterprise with a confidential fire direction and fire support ability running off preexisting civilian cellular and satellite connections. The EDF attempted to mitigate information-sharing obstacles between software by providing partner forces with an information exchange gateway to enable fire mission processing and deny cross-domain data leaks. Unfortunately, this does not provide an acceptable connection with AFATDS under USCYBERCOM and U.S. Army Europe and Africa policy. This is because TOORU has yet to federate with NATO and is not classified at the same level as MPE.

Additionally, even with USCYBERCOM approval, U.S. forces would not be able to achieve true digital connectivity. The proprietary software within AFATDS at present blocks the passing of coordinating instructions. This could cause issues for operational- or strategic-level commands or fire support elements, as they could not provide necessary coordinating instructions to a fire direction center. To achieve limited interoperability, the United States would need to assume risk within the MPE domain by allowing NATO systems to directly connect to AFATDS, or for software development to pass coordinating instructions between NATO Systems and AFATDS. Currently, there is limited U.S. appetite to assume this risk to the MPE domain.

Estonian challenges to partnered technical interoperability are not unique to the United States. The elusive third gate of connections between ASCA compliant NATO fire direction centers encounter similar challenges. TF Võit was unable to achieve technical interoperability with eFP forces because of French and UK command-support relationships and

technical capabilities. For example, there are French 155 mm CAESAR self-propelled howitzers that are direct support to Estonia's 1st Infantry Brigade, UK 155 mm AS-90 self-propelled howitzers in direct support to the eFP Battlegroup, and UK MLRS and U.S. HIMARS in direct support to the Estonian division under separate bilateral agreements. TF Võit focused efforts toward achieving digital connectivity via direct ethernet connection with the MLRS battery to enable coordinated and massed fires. This focus was due to the closely aligned command-support relationships among the MLRS, HIMARS, and the Estonian division. Unfortunately, TF Võit quickly learned about the lack of appetite from the UK due to its long-standing inability to achieve digital connectivity with the NATO fires enterprise in Estonia. Instead, NATO forces Estonia to rely on "swivel chair" fire mission processing via Estonian-provided Kolt computers or human liaison connections. As of 2023, the UK battle group completed approximately eleven "CABRIT" operational deployment rotations to Estonia without obtaining UK Strategic Command approval to attempt an ASCA connection with partner nations. Additionally, the UK-led eFP Battlegroup and its MLRS battery lack the organic capability to provide the UK equivalent of MPE connectivity. This highlights a lack of appetite to achieve ASCA connection with partners and promotes continued reliance on swivel chair interoperability via Estonian provided Kolt computers. The French CAESAR battery does not require approval for an ASCA connection, and the command-support relationship does not align to the HIMARS mission, obfuscating the demand signal to obtain eFP and U.S. compliance. The lack of clearance, capability, and connectivity ultimately inhibited progress toward true digital connectivity amongst NATO partners.

TF Võit and U.S. forces will continue to face a lack of NATO appetite to achieve technical interoperability due to a lack of capability, connectivity, and clearance. The U.S., Estonian, and UK higher headquarters do not indicate a sincere appetite to seek ASCA connectivity due to cross-domain vulnerabilities required to achieve systemic connectivity. The EDF and eFP at Tapa lack the organic capability for secure satellite communications connectivity to enable long-distance fire mission processing via MPE. Finally, as a conscript-based military, the Estonians lack the widespread clearance to operate on the same classifications as the U.S. and UK partners.

An Improved Understanding toward Continued Progress

Fortunately, the positive experiences and lessons learned in human and procedural interoperability between TF Võit and the ODC with the EDF provide core conduits for expedited progress in technical interoperability shortcomings. For units deploying to Estonia, or any other nation in the Baltics, the experiences of the first TF Võit rotation may enable some larger lessons while deployed to support a smaller ally:

- Removing the mindset of battlespace ownership will benefit the mission, respect the sovereignty of the host-nation partner, and discourage a unilateral approach.
- Identification of how an ally implements its mission command will enable a more successful deployment and lessons learned.
- Coordinate and develop localized mission parameters at echelon to develop "business rules" unique to the country.
- U.S. and UK forces will have to assume risk to the MPE domain to enable NATO partner connectivity to achieve true digital connectivity in LSCO.
- The U.S. embassy's military team and the ODC are key to accelerating a deployment's value and optimizing immediate tactical integration.
- There are high demands for LRPF capability, but their effectiveness is hindered by strategic-level command's lack of appetite to assume risk toward full technical interoperability.
- To improve technical interoperability in the U.S. European Command theater, U.S. forces must either assume risk on cross-domain spillage or accept the swivel chair method as a viable alternative to full technical interoperability.
- The ODC served as an accessible enabler and responsive mediator that converted tactical unit intent into suitable, feasible, and acceptable courses of action for U.S. operations in Estonia.

NATO's northern and eastern flanks hide more than an overlooked ally capable of credible deterrence and defense against Russian aggression. Estonia serves as a testament to the possibilities of expanded U.S. partnerships. Most importantly, Estonia eagerly invites U.S. forces to build collective interoperability in an otherwise unfamiliar theater. ■

Notes

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