



Spc. Shawn Betschart of 3rd Platoon, Lightning Troop, 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, secures the perimeter with a Lithuanian counterpart during an offensive operations exercise at the Pabrade training area in February in Lithuania. U.S. troops and Lithuanian soldiers of 3rd Company, Algirdas Mechanized Infantry Battalion, worked together in a three-day field training exercise in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Megan Leuck)

# Menaced By Russia And Islamic State, NCOs In Europe Find Way To Win

*By Clifford Kyle Jones — NCO Journal*

**T**he Army Operating Concept is “Win in a Complex World.” The Soldiers of U.S. Army Europe know better than anyone that we can’t do that alone.

USAREUR is down to about 28,000 troops from a Cold War peak of 218,000, but the threats across the Atlantic have only magnified since the latest major U.S. cuts to the region in 2012. Vladimir Putin’s Russia skirmishes with Ukrainian forces after occupying the nation’s Crimea region and aggressively menaces the United States’ allies — NATO and otherwise. The Islamic State is building up its land forces near the continent’s southern edges, its wars create a burgeoning immigrant crisis and the terrorist organization’s recruiters and sympathizers put all of Europe under constant threat.

“Nowadays our enemies — it doesn’t matter if we’re talking about the Russians or the Islamic State — will use any means and any way to achieve their strategic ends,” Brig. Gen. Miha Škrbinc, assistant to Slovenia’s chief of defense, told a gathering of NCOs from more than 30 countries recently. “That means they will use all spectrum of power.”

It’s called “hybrid warfare,” Škrbinc said, and it’s defined as a combination of regular and irregular warfare. “But that would be so easy if hybrid warfare was just that,” he said. Škrbinc described Russia’s tactics as a combination of economic exertions, aggressive foreign policy, diplomatic pressure and diversions, clandestine cyber warfare attacks, information and propaganda offensives — all backed by a well-equipped and well-trained conventional army.





Command Sgt. Maj. Sheryl Lyon, who took over as command sergeant major of USAREUR late last month, looks at protective gear used by the Slovenian army. She was in Bled, Slovenia, for the Conference of European Army NCOs, organized by Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Huggins, looking on. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Škrlj was speaking at the ninth annual Conference of European Army NCOs, which took place in April in Bled, Slovenia. The conference, co-hosted by USAREUR and the Slovenian army, is intended to develop professional land forces across Europe and build relationships among the enlisted ranks of those armies. But the critical need for that professionalism and relationships may be more apparent now than at any other time in the conference's decade-long history.

"I think they (the allied nations) were reassured," Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Huggins said after the conference he helped organize with Igor Tomašić, the senior enlisted leader of the Slovenian army. "We don't know much about the deterrence piece of what we're doing, but I think that having that large group gathered together, having a common understanding and shared vision of the future — at least the defense part — I think there has to be some kind of deterrent value in that.

"I don't know if that's something that translates into the Russian lexicon or not," he said.

Maybe not. Even as the conference was underway, Russia was conducting artillery exercises along its border — "literally counter-battery fire to the CEANCO," Huggins called them.

## The CEANCO

Usually, the command sergeant major of USAREUR would help lead the conference, but the new senior enlisted advisor, Command Sgt. Maj. Sheryl Lyon, just started her duties late last month. She was able to attend, but Huggins, who is command sergeant major of the 7th Army's Joint Multinational Training Command at Grafenwoehr, Germany, stepped in to coordinate.

The conference included presentations about some of the large land-forces programs available across Europe, through the United States and NATO. As the host nation, Slovenia was able to show off its Multinational Center of Excellence for Mountain Warfare, which is expected to be accredited by NATO later this year.

The conference also featured speakers from armies throughout Europe describing topics that might be of particular interest to NCOs, such as how selection boards and pre-deployment training work in various countries.

"It's a shared understanding of what all of us have as a problem set," Huggins said. "Each one of us goes through some kind of process like that, and by showing a couple of examples, we're hoping that people can go back" and share those lessons with their armies.

Conference attendees were the top enlisted leaders — “the heavy hitters” — in their respective countries, Huggins notes. After the conference, those senior NCOs can share ideas and best practices with their top commanders and chiefs of defense.

“They can go back and say, ‘Hey, here’s how the U.S. briefed,’ or ‘Here’s how the Croatians have got it going on,’ or ‘Here’s how maybe we want to do that,’” Huggins said. “There’s a lot of that that has come to pass because of these briefings.”

Huggins said that during another conference he attended in Estonia that included representatives from all the Baltic countries, the sergeant major of the Estonian army was pulled out during a presentation. He had received a call from his chief of defense and was flown out on a helicopter. When the Estonian sergeant major arrived, his chief of defense promoted him to the senior enlisted advisor for all the Estonian militaries, equivalent to Marine Sgt. Maj. Bryan Battaglia’s position in the United States as senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Estonian chief of defense “wanted to make sure that his army knew he valued his noncommissioned officers to the point where he wanted to have one with him to help advise him on everything that they did,” Huggins said. “That’s part of what this group is accomplishing.”

## Training together

The senior enlisted leaders gather together annually at CEANCO, but exercises at Grafenwoehr’s JMTC and the

nearby Hohenfels training area help Soldiers at all levels build trust and relationships and learn to work together in a true interoperable environment before facing real-world threats together.

JMTC has several major regularly scheduled training exercises, some with U.S. forces functioning as the high command and multinational forces integrated and some in which U.S. units participate under the command of allied nations’ units.

In response to Russia’s aggression, USAREUR took part in a multinational training exercise that spanned Europe, demonstrating the United States’ commitment to defending its allies and those nations’ abilities to protect their borders — Operation Atlantic Resolve.

“This is a major commitment by the United States,” Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, commanding general of USAREUR, told attendees during the CEANCO’s closing remarks. But it’s a commitment well worth making, Hodges said.

“I’m a big believer that the United States is never, ever going to go anywhere by itself,” he said. “We have learned a lesson — that we need allies, that we need partners, that other countries will know more about a place than we will ever know. It’s not just a political cover. Other nations have capabilities that we don’t have. I am convinced that we will always be in a coalition, and that almost always, the most reliable partners we’ll ever have come from NATO or they’re PFP, Partnership for Peace, countries — the same people we’ve been with all these years.”



Soldiers from A Company, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division call cadence as they march through the streets of old Riga as part of the Latvia Day parade that took place in November. The U.S. soldiers participated in the event as part of the U.S. Army Europe-led Operation Atlantic Resolve land force assurance training taking place across Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to enhance multinational interoperability, strengthen relationships among allied militaries, contribute to regional stability and demonstrate U.S. commitment to NATO. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Jeremy J. Fowler)



U.S. and allied forces rolled through Europe as part of Atlantic Resolve even as the senior NCOs gathered in Slovenia. Elements of the 3rd Infantry Division, the 2nd Cavalry Regiment and the 173rd Airborne Brigade trained with Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish forces as part of Atlantic Resolve-North, then those and other allied forces demonstrated their capabilities in Bulgaria, Romania and other areas of the Black Sea as part of Atlantic Resolve-South.

Meanwhile, back at Hohenfels, the 2nd Cavalry Regiment was conducting one of JMTC's major exercises, Saber Junction, which this year included soldiers from 17 European countries. Saber Junction is USAREUR's Decisive Action Training Environment rotation, but with an international flavor, says Command Sgt. Maj. Nicholas Alexander Rolling, command sergeant major of the JMTC's Joint Multinational Readiness Center. The JMTC is the only Army Combat Training Center outside the continental United States.

Rolling and Huggins said being in Europe presents unique training opportunities: 28 nations are part of NATO, and with other partner nations, forces from any of 43 countries can take part in any exercise.

"We're not in this alone," Rolling said. "In the future, we're going to fight together. If we're going to fight together, we have to learn to work together. We have to get past some of those stereotypes. We have to get past some of those op-

erational barriers. And how do we bridge those gaps? Well, you do it through training. Through training you build friendship, you build capacity and you share ideas."

## The role of NCOs

One of the greatest ideas the U.S. has to share is the competence and professionalism of its NCO Corps. Rolling says that around the world, "if you find a great organization, if you find a great unit, you'll find a great NCO corps."

Other countries look to U.S. NCOs to understand the Army's emphasis on education and the enlisted leaders' responsibilities. The United States has invested in this shared understanding for decades, and as Europe becomes a more frightening place, that investment is paying dividends.

"Because we don't have the bodies that we had (in Europe), we need to make sure that everybody else is capable," Huggins said. "That's why we have a corps dynamic, which is developed just like our Army's: We go after the corps of the NCO first to make sure you've got all the leader skills, the attributes, all the stuff that I need you to have so I can trust you. Because now when I trust you, mission command works. If I don't trust you, mission command can't work, because now I have to micromanage. I have to figure out ways to be on your back and watch exactly what you're doing."



Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey Huggins, command sergeant major of the Joint Training Multinational Command, speaks with one of the range operators at a make-shift firing range near Bled, Slovenia. As part of the Conference of European Army NCOs, members of the Slovenian army set up a display with some of the equipment and weapons they use. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)



Pfc. John Morosi, assigned to the "Death Riders" Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 1st Armor Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, familiarizes his Polish counterparts on the finer points of the M1 Abrams Main Battle Tank during Operation Atlantic Resolve in March. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Cooper T. Cash)

Nagy Kornél had participated in training exercises with USAREUR before, but the Hungarian NCO's visit to Hohenfels in March and April for Saber Junction was his first multinational exercise acting in the role of first sergeant.

"I'm not saying we've finished with training and that we're ready to fight or deploy, but it was a big, big help, especially in this kind of area," he said. "With this kind of training, we have everything that the JMRC can provide us, so it was real situations — almost like real situations, I mean. And it put focus on lots of things that we have to improve."

Hungary's NCO corps and support channels are modeled on the U.S. Army's, so Kornél knew the system, but he still found it invaluable to see it in action.

"It was good just to see how it works," he said. "It's an old system in the States, but about a 10-year old system back in Hungary. So previously, I had just a little picture of the total picture, especially for me, of how I should act as a first sergeant."

During the 30-day exercise, he learned about managing resources, logistics, fight operations and planning procedures.

"In every army, the NCOs are the backbone of the army, so we have to be very focused on the task and the fight," he said. "But on the other side, we have to take care of our guys and that's very important to understand."

## Lessons for U.S. Soldiers

Romanian Sgt. Strizu Călin, a squad leader of a rank equivalent to sergeant first class in the U.S. Army, also participated in Saber Junction. He deployed with U.S. forces before — with the Army in Afghanistan and more recently with the Marines in Serbia — but he said the exercise in Hohenfels was much different.

"There was a lot of action, day and night, day and night," he said. "It was very successful for me. To teach with other sergeants, to work with the U.S. Army, was a good thing."

He said he got a better sense of how his soldiers react under stressful conditions, and they all learned new techniques and tactics from the U.S. Army NCOs. During the exercise, his six-man squad, including one from the United States, captured three Strykers, at night.

"That was something — I don't know the word," he said and thought for a moment. "Something outstanding."

He impressed his U.S. counterparts, as well.

"I learned a lot of techniques. But we taught them some of our techniques — survival techniques. I talked with the platoon sergeant who was with us, and he told us that they don't make traps like us."

Part of Călin's basic training, as it is for all his fellow members of Romanian reconnaissance platoons, consisted of being left in the wild for two to three months to fend for himself. He and his soldiers, therefore, are quite skilled in survival tactics, including fishing and trapping animals.





Allies take the offensive during Saber Strike

He called his time during Saber Junction a “two-way street of learning.”

That’s exactly what U.S. Soldiers who participated in the training exercise described, as well.

Staff Sgt. Danny Allen Doss, a platoon sergeant in the 4th Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment, worked with a Latvian platoon in his scout reconnaissance troop. He felt he helped the Latvians with some procedures, noting the U.S. casualty evacuation procedures, and from the Latvians he took away a newfound emphasis on discipline and enforcing standards — and a healthy respect.

“We called them monsters,” he said. “They’re the Wolves, that’s their unit. Their logo had two wolves, an older wolf and a younger wolf, and that’s how they work in the organization. It’s the older guys pulling the younger guys. As NCOs, we teach our Soldiers and mentor our Soldiers, but these guys made them do things — like made them be better than them. That’s what I want for my Soldiers, I want them to be way better than me. For those guys and their discipline and just their physicality, they’re just sheer monsters.”

He described how the Latvian soldiers he rode with would dismount on patrols. “And we’re like: ‘That’s 20k through the mountains with full kits and Javelins!’ They could just go.”

That’s a common experience for U.S. Soldiers working with multinational forces for the first time, said Command Sgt. Maj. Shane Pospisil, command sergeant major

of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment. He said multinational soldiers know U.S. and NATO doctrine thoroughly, they understand and use camouflage effectively, and, as Doss found, they’re still dismounting and moving all their gear and anti-tank missile launchers on foot for 10 miles or more, while during the past decade U.S. Soldiers have become accustomed to traveling in armored vehicles because of the threat of improvised explosive devices.

“These guys bring a lot to the table,” Pospisil said. “They’re very proud of their identity. They’re good at what they do.”

Huggins said U.S. Soldiers have learned much about small unit tactics and discipline, as well as digging in and handling artillery. Rolling noted how impressive one country’s graphics were during an exercise and how they were incorporated into all briefings during that operation.

The lessons from an operation such as Saber Junction abound on all sides, Pospisil said.

“It allows junior leaders to solve those simple and complex tasks and problems and really find a way ahead, around them,” he said. “But it’s giving us an opportunity to do it together with our allies. We’re not just learning these lessons ourselves.”

## Lingering threat

When Hodges took command of USAREUR, he looked at where the Army was going and how its forces



in Europe fit into that strategy. He took the Army slogan, “Army Strong,” and applied it to his command, now known as “Strong Europe.”

But Strong Europe isn’t just about the U.S. Army and its Soldiers and equipment. It’s about the Army’s relationships on the continent. It’s about ensuring that we — the U.S. and all of its allies — can respond when any of us are threatened. And Hodges says that as global attention shifted to Europe when Russia occupied Crimea, the U.S. and allied response showed we were ready.

“I tell Americans that Europe is an ocean closer to every problem we have,” Hodges said. “When my president last year saw Russia’s illegal occupation of Crimea, which is part of Ukraine — sovereign terrain of Ukraine — my president reminded our allies: We will defend Estonia, we will defend Latvia, we will defend Lithuania, we will defend all of our allies. He didn’t bring Soldiers from North Carolina or Texas. He sent American Soldiers, who were in Europe, on five days’ notice.

“I think it’s important to demonstrate not only that we can do that, but also that Georgia can make its own decision, that Bulgaria can make its own decision, that Turkey can make its own decision, that nations can move across the Black Sea, that it’s not a sphere that is the decision of Russia,” he continued. “There will be some

Americans that will be very worried about this: that somehow we will be provoking Russia. But this is the 21st century. Nobody gets to have a sphere. Every nation gets to choose what they want, who they want to be (allied) with, what kind of government they want to have.”

Ukraine is not a NATO ally, but Hodges said that is the direction the country was moving — it had voted out its pro-Russian president in favor of a European Union-leading faction. And, Hodges said, that movement prompted Putin’s ire. The Russian president moved quickly, in a matter of days, to seize Crimea. Hodges and Huggins warn that if the conflict escalates, it will be equally quick.

“Everybody draws this (potential conflict) back to (Iraq’s former leader) Saddam Hussein and going into Kuwait,” Huggins said. “We took six months to bring in the Reserves, to stack up big arsenals in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. And then, ta-da! The war. We overwhelmed them. The next one, if the Russians were to do something, it’s going to be 24 or 48 hours. They’re already there. Now we have to build up some way to get them out. And you know they’re going to be right in the heart of the cities, they’re going to be in all those places that are going to require us to do something we don’t typically do. It’s going to neutralize airpower, it’s going to neutralize artillery.”



A member of the Slovenian army's 132nd Mountain Infantry Regiment shows participants of the Conference of European Army NCOs some of the equipment Slovenia's soldiers use for mountain warfare. The country has a long history with mountain warfare, including being the setting for World War I's famous Battles of the Isonzo, which partially inspired Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms." (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

But Huggins is confident that Europe will stay strong. “It goes back to our Army Operating Concept: Win in a Complex World. It talks about all that capability and leaders. The one constant we have is us: the NCO Corps. Because we’re the ones who are going to get the Army through whatever happens to it here in the next couple years. Leaders are what will take whatever’s available and go win, go solve that next problem.”

Operation Atlantic Resolve, which will continue with actions indefinitely, has and continues to work out logistical kinks, Huggins said. Transportation by road and rail differs from country to country; different rules regulate hazardous material rolling across a border; U.S. and Western European allies have never moved through former Soviet bloc countries. But Atlantic Resolve and other operations are stretching and testing all those concerns, Huggins said.

“That’s going to get accomplished by those young officers and those NCOs who are out there on the sharp end of this thing, making it all happen,” he said. “So having professional folks and relationships already established in those countries? Hugely important.”

## How we win

U.S. forces and its allies in Europe hope that showing capability and resolve are enough to deter Russia from any further action. U.S. paratroopers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade, stationed in Vicenza, Italy, are in the Ukraine training that country’s national guard soldiers to combat continued Russian aggression. Huggins said that when he told one of the two

Ukrainian sergeants major attending the CEANCO that U.S. Soldiers would be helping his nation’s military, “he grabbed me like I was throwing him a life vest.” The Ukrainians, Huggins said, feel they are at war already.

Putin denies Russian involvement in the battles, but as the body count continued to rise on both sides, Hodges told the CEANCO participants: “There is no doubt that Russia is involved in eastern Ukraine. If you don’t believe that, then you don’t want to believe that. The amount of artillery, and rockets, and electronic warfare that is being used against Ukrainian defense forces — these are not coal miners and tractor drivers as President Putin described them. This is not something that you can do in the basement of your home. These are professional, very well-equipped, Russian soldiers and Russian commanders in eastern Ukraine. We know that. You know that.”

No one knows exactly what Putin’s plans are, but Slovenia’s Brig. Gen. Škrbinc thinks he has an idea.

“What is actually the center of gravity that Putin wants to attack at this moment?” he asked. “I would guess that that is unity of the alliance. If he were able to break and separate allies or within NATO or within the European Union, I think his ways to achieve strategic goals is open.”

With that in mind, Hodges urged the senior enlisted leaders from 30 countries that “we have to stick together.”

“At the end of the day,” he said, “it’s going to be soldiers led by good sergeants that are the best way to deter that war from ever happening.” ■



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