

PERSISTENT PRESENCE

A Special Operations Forces Engagement Strategy for Operation Atlantic Resolve

BY MAJOR MATTHEW MESKO, CAPTAIN DEREK TELLESON, CAPTAIN PETER FRISCHHOLZ, CAPTAIN JAMES KELLY, CAPTAIN MICHAEL LUTH AND CAPTAIN VINCE FRASURE



02

Following Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the subsequent activities in Eastern Ukraine, North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries are re-assessing their regional security priorities and adjusting to a new geopolitical environment in which Russia is assuming a more aggressive role. The United States has implemented a variety of diplomatic, economic and military initiatives in response to 2014, one of which has been Operation Atlantic Resolve. OAR "is a demonstration of continued U.S. commitment to the collective security of NATO and to enduring peace and stability in the region, in light of Russia's illegal actions in Ukraine."⁰¹ Although the lion's share of the U.S. military contribution to OAR comes from conventional Army components, United States Special Operations Forces are achieving great effects through a persistent presence strategy with their fellow NATO SOF partners.

USSOF and their NATO SOF partners have forged relationships over the last decade through a variety of episodic engagements such as joint combined exchange training events and combined deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Appropriately, these engagements were tailored to the development of direct-action skills and increased battlefield interoperability. However, the emergence of a rising regional hegemon, such as the Russian Federation, presents a more enduring potential threat and demands a different strategy for NATO SOF partnerships. In early 2015, Special Operations Command Europe and 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) adopted a strategy of persistent presence engagement that maintains five deployed Special Forces Operational Detachment — Alphas throughout Eastern Europe, including Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania. These persistent presence ODAs form the backbone of the strategy and are complemented by equally important contributions from Navy Special Warfare Unit Two, Military Information Support Operations teams, Civil Affairs teams and Special Operations Liaison Officers. The persistent presence SOF model is ideal for OAR because it clearly communicates U.S. commitment at a strategic level, while generating opportunities to maximize effects and operational

momentum, and establishing and cultivating lasting personal and professional relationships.

Because of the limited quantity of U.S. SOF, their involvement in a crisis or operation clearly communicates that the U.S. has made the problem a national priority. The Lithuanian military, for example, was accustomed to episodic engagements with U.S. SOF for durations usually between 30 and 60 days. A Special Forces ODA deployed to Lithuania in February 2015 and announced its intent to remain for six months before being relieved by a sister ODA from 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), further extending the engagement by another six months. This paradigm shift in U.S. engagement with Lithuanian SOF reinforced the U.S. commitment to Lithuanian national security concerns and reshaped Lithuanian perceptions of U.S. resolve at the highest levels of political leadership. The President of Lithuania, Dalia Grybauskaitė, reinforced this perception shift with her visit to a combined public display of U.S. SOF and Lithuanian SOF equipment during the 2015 Solidarity Day celebration. Immediately after arriving at the celebration, her first action was to meet with the ODA and personally thank them for their support and, more importantly, what their persistent presence in her country represented. She clearly linked the enduring commitment of U.S. SOF in Lithuania to renewed U.S. resolve in support of its NATO allies in the face of an increasingly provocative Russian Federation. The example of the ODA's engagement with the Lithuanian president

exemplifies how the persistent employment of U.S. SOF can be used to communicate strategic messages to partners and threats alike. The obligation of U.S. SOF assets resonates with clarity and should continue to reinforce diplomacy, demonstrate resolve and delineate defense priorities.

Furthermore, the persistent presence strategy allows for the identification and exploitation of opportunities that would likely be missed with more sporadic and episodic engagements. An ODA's experiences in Latvia represent the value of such opportunities. The five-month deployment duration exposed the ODA to two iterations of the Latvian Special Operations Unit quarterly exercises. Through participation in these exercises, the ODA recognized the influence the SOU harnessed in all facets of Latvian society, to include Ministry of Interior organizations such as the Latvian Border Guard Aviation Unit and the Latvian Security Police. By observing how the SOU integrated with other Latvian organizations, the ODA was able to recognize opportunity for the SOU to synergize such organizations through national level exercises. For example, on June 8, 2015, Latvia executed a nation-wide massive casualty exercise that include participants from nine organizations spread across the Latvia Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Health and the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense.⁰² The day-long exercise included more than 150 personnel and stressed the emergency room capability of the Eastern Riga Clinical University Center at Gailezers with a broad spectrum of combat related casualties.⁰³ Persistent presence enabled the ODA to work



02



03

01
A Special Operations Command Forward Eastern Europe medic conducts tactical combat casualty care training for the U.S. Embassy's Latvian local guard force in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve.
 U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT. PAIGE BEHRINGER

03
Romanian Special Operations Forces soldiers dismount their vehicles to assault an objective while conducting mounted patrolling operations during a joint SOF training exercise in Europe.
 U.S. ARMY PHOTO

02
Latvian Medical personnel provide medical aid to casualties during a mass-casualty exercise. The exercise showcased the joint medical capabilities of forces from 13 different nations and included land and air medical assets.
 U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY CAPT. RYAN JERNEGAN

04
European and U.S. SOF gather for the opening ceremony of the first ever Romania-sponsored international SOF exercise, ROUSOFEX, which was designed to increase interoperability and cooperation against threats in the region.
 U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. DANIEL A. CARTER



04

through the SOU to coordinate otherwise disparate organizations and validate Latvia's capability to respond to MASCAL crisis events with decisiveness. The exercise resulted in increased cohesion between the participants and reinforced confidence in the Latvian government's capacity to respond promptly and effectively. Fundamentally, the opportunity to assist with the planning, coordination, and exercise control of the MASCAL exercise was identified and exploited because of the persistent-presence engagement strategy. Fortunately, Latvia was not the only country where opportunities emerged as a result of persistent presence.

In Romania, ODA 0125 was able to assist with the vision, planning, synchronization, and execution of the first Romanian Special Operations Forces Exercise (ROUSOFEX). Romanian SOF, while partnered with ODA 0125, successfully integrated SOF participants from Turkey, Moldova, Georgia, Poland, and Greece into the exercise, demonstrating to NATO and the international community that Romania was capable of leading and executing multinational SOF operations in support of NATO objectives. The ODA remained an unwavering partner to Romanian SOF leadership over a period of five and a half months as the ROUSOFEX grew from discussions of visions and goals into successful execution. The opportunity to be involved from genesis to completion of the ROUSOFEX was only possible because of the continuous engagement and personal commitment enabled by the persistent engagement strategy.

Similarly, in Poland, members of the *Jednostka Wojskowa Komandosów* and an ODA planned, organized and executed exercise Bear Trap, Poland's first special warfare exercise designed to address hybrid warfare. This initial iteration was conducted at the tactical level, with the participating elements being of the ODA or special operations task unit level. However, the duration of the persistent presence engagement allowed for the development of a robust scenario that maximized realism for the participants. Specifically, the length of the engagement allowed the ODA and JWK to refine the vision for the event, design the scenario, conduct combined pre-exercise training and finally execute the exercise itself. The JWK and

ODA capitalized on the proud Polish national identity to incorporate local citizens and civil leadership into the exercise to increase relevance and pragmatism. The persistent-presence strategy enabled a familiarity with the JWK and the environment that revealed tremendous opportunities. For example, a member of the JWK had strong connections to the town nominated to be the primary exercise venue. This JWK member worked with the ODA's native Polish speaker to communicate the shared vision of the exercise to the town mayor, police chief, fire chief, forest rangers, and local government officials from the surrounding area. The opportunity to conduct these engagements face-to-face proved to be critical in maximizing the training value of exercise Bear Trap. The interaction with the local population during the development and execution of the exercise provided the ODA members with an unparalleled cultural immersion experience that would be unattainable during a brief episodic engagement.

Perhaps the most important benefit of the persistent presence strategy is the relationship network that was developed by the detachments as they lived and worked with their OAR partners for up to six months at a time. This relationship network provides the framework that facilitates interoperability and positive momentum toward mutual goals. For example, in Estonia, the persistent presence strategy enabled ODA 0121 to assist the Estonian Special Operations Forces with the execution of a qualification course in its entirety, a

task that requires several months of commitment. The ODA members were able to remain involved with the students and instructors on an individual basis from the first day of training to graduation day. This extended period of interaction established a relationship between U.S. SOF and the next generation of ESTSOF soldiers who will act as the foundation for NATO engagements in years to come. Furthermore, professional ties emerged between the ODA members and seasoned ESTSOF instructors as they shared best practices, learned one another's culture and developed mutual respect. The relationships with the ESTSOF instructors proved to be catalytic in nature as the ODA interacted with other ESTSOF units. The ESTSOF instructor cadre vouched for the ODA's credibility and military competency, greatly expediting rapport development with other ESTSOF entities. Ultimately, the relationships developed between ODA 0121 and the ESTSOF proved to be personally rewarding, professionally illuminating and efficient for increasing NATO interoperability.

Acknowledging that ODAs cannot be permanently deployed, a rotation was established to enable detachments to refit and rest before re-deploying to their respective OAR countries. However, while these ODAs are at home station, OAR relationship development continued in a variety of ways, such as inviting OAR partners to participate in traditionally U.S.-exclusive collective training events. For example, in the fall of 2015, Company B, 1st Bn., 10th SFG(A) extended invitations to OAR and NATO partners to participate in its Special Forces Advanced Urban Combat (SFAUC) course at Panzer Kaserne, Germany. Participants from Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Belgium and Italy integrated into combined training teams and transformed the SFAUC into a multinational event that not only assured ODA

readiness, but directly improved NATO interoperability and deepened established relationships.

Naturally, the benefits of the persistent-presence strategy come with associated challenges that require deliberate planning to circumvent. First, the persistent presence of ODAs requires a predictable and sustainable rotation schedule that balances a tolerable operational tempo against the contact time required to maintain a relationship. This challenge is best mitigated by clearly identifying which detachments will be rotated into each country and then adhering strictly to the established rotation schedule. Over time, consistent deployments will imbue detachments with the culture, language and geographic familiarity needed to support enduring relationships. Second, the persistent presence strategy requires that the U.S. remain sensitive to our partners' capacity for engagement. Each SOF organization within each OAR country has a unique mission set, disposition and operational tempo. We must be mindful of our partner's needs, limitations, and goals so that we can scale the size of each rotation accordingly and ensure the right enablers augment the assigned SOF element.

In spite of these challenges, the persistent presence strategy remains the optimal method of engagement for U.S. SOF in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve because it communicates U.S. commitment, generates opportunities, and invests in relationships. The potential threats posed by resurging regional powers, such as the Russian Federation, are enduring and should be balanced with equally enduring deterrent options and demonstrations of commitment to our allies. U.S. SOF have a unique role to play in providing our nation with flexible deterrent options and represent a strong commitment of U.S. military support. **SW**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Major Matt Mesko is the Commander of Company B, 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne); **Captain Mike Luth** is the Commander of an ODA; **Captain Derek Telleon** is the Commander of an ODA; **Captain Pete Frischholz** is the Commander of an ODA; **Captain J.B. Kelly** is the Commander of an ODA; **Captain Vince Frasure** is the Commander of an ODA.

NOTES 01. <http://www.eur.army.mil/atlanticresolve/> 02. http://www.sargs.lv/lv/Zinas/Dien-esta_gaita/2015/06/08-02.aspx?p=1. 03. http://www.tvnet.lv/zinas/latvija/563351-militaras_maci-bas_no_adaziem_uz_austrumu_slimnicu_parvieta_lielu_skaitu_cietusu_karaviru



01
Polish Special Operations Soldiers conduct close quarters combat training during an international special operations forces exercise in Europe.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY MASTER SGT. DONALD SPARKS

02
U.S. and Lithuanian Soldiers operate Load Handling System vehicles on a multi-lane roadway in Poland, as part of the first European joint logistics operation in a third-party country.

U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY SGT. JARRED WOODS

01