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NATO'S Gendarmerie-type Forces: a valuable tool contrasting hybrid threats in article 5 operations

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The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the consequent escalation of the Donbass war in Ukraine put NATO in front of a new reality regarding the way of conducting military operations at its Eastern border. Indeed in both the cases, the Russian Federation was able to successfully conduct a complex military operation based on the use of small teams of GRU Special Forces, elite regiments of conventional forces masked as unmarked “little green men” and local supporters used as saboteurs and agitators sustained by a massive cyber and propaganda campaign.

The complex plan at the base of the use of these forces has been described by the Alliance as a specific Russian version of Hybrid Warfare that mixed sophisticated typical state sponsored capabilities (like the use of special and conventional forces supported by cyberwarfare and electronic warfare tools) with unconventional capabilities (like popular violent or non violent protests by local civilian supporters) and acts of sabotage and subversion inside targeted state institutions.

As seen in Crimea and Donbass, the end state of this Russian hybrid strategy was the complete paralysis and subsequent collapse of the Ukrainian Law Enforcement and Defence capabilities in those areas with the practical impossibility for Kiev of activating

any sort of self-defence response. Indeed, police and security services were overwhelmed and maneuver capabilities of the army were severely affected, not only by proper enemy units, but also by local hostile mobs that were organizing roadblocks and rallies on the main highways and railway networks.

After the analysis of the Ukrainian case, NATO opted for a comprehensive review of the defence strategy at its Eastern border. The first move in the 2014 Alliance Wales Summit was the constitution inside the NATO Response Force (NRF) of the new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The VJTF also known as Spearhead Force is a 5.000 strong force centred on a land brigade supported by SF, air and maritime assets. The main task of the VJTF (active since 2016) is to be completely deployable between 2 and 5 days if the Alliance territorial integrity is threatened by an enemy force. Normally the land component of the Spearhead Force comprises 5 maneuver battalions with conventional light, mechanized and armoured capabilities. In NATO's new plans, the fast deployment of the VJTF should be able, in the best case, to deter the adversary from triggering a full spectrum conflict and, in the worst one, at least to act as a bridgehead before the arrival of the Initial Follow-On Forces Group

(IFFG) of the NRF composed by two other brigades.

The second step of the NATO strategy has been agreed in the 2016 Warsaw Summit with the constitution of four multinational rotational Battlegroups to be based since the following year in Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. These four roughly one thousand men size units are very light in terms of capabilities and should act as a first Alliance involvement in case of a military crisis at the Eastern border but with very few real combat capabilities.

It is therefore evident that, despite the complex and multi-dimensional challenge posed by the Russian hybrid strategy at the NATO's Eastern border, the Alliance's answer has been very conventional and primarily focused at increasing the level of military deterrence wholly forgetting the possible threat coming from the "internal front". Indeed, if one considers the events in Crimea and Donbass, the first targets of the Russian hybrid operations were institutional buildings, barracks, headquarters and command and control sites of the law enforcement and security services. These sites were attacked by small groups of GRU's Special Forces helped by local civilians creating the idea of a popular unrest against the government.

In these first and crucial phases of a possible Russian hybrid operation in the Baltics, perhaps NATO will simply not be able to deploy the VJTF or the Battlegroups in support of local security forces because the nature of the threat will still remain mainly composed of armed or unarmed "civilians". Moreover, diplomatic considerations regarding the necessity of avoiding a massive military provocation against Moscow could restrict the Alliance capability to employ "Green Box" forces in support of the local authorities. If this will be the situation, there could be the risk of a possible collapse at least in part of the Baltic States of the local authorities with the creation of fake local government that could ask for the protection of Russia against a NATO military reaction in support of the legitimate authorities. To avoid such a development of the situation, one of NATO's first big concerns, in the initial phase of a crisis, should be how to rapidly assist and support the Baltics Police Forces in their duties:

- protecting their barracks and headquarters;
- defending the institutional and strategic buildings;
- defeating civilian rioters in public spaces;



- ensuring freedom of movement to NATO's convoys thus preventing roadblocks;
- chasing GRU's SF operators.

Thanks to the different military traditions and backgrounds of NATO's Countries, the Alliance has the right tool to approach this demanding challenge using its "Blue Box Forces" represented by the Gendarmerie-Type units.

The Gendarmeries in NATO's Countries are a cornerstone of the internal security system in Italy (Arma dei Carabinieri), France (Gendarmerie Nationale), Spain (Guardia Civil), Portugal (Guardia Nacional Republicana), the Netherlands (Koninklijke Marechaussee), Romania (Jandarmeria Română) and Turkey (Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı). Their unique characteristic to have a military status but to be devoted to patrol the population can be seen as an asymmetric arrow for the NATO's bow. Depending on the Countries' legal framework, Gendarmeries are under the control of the Interior, Defence Ministry, or both of them depending on the specific tasks.

NATO's Gendarmeries have their national specific functions but, generally speaking, all of them are able to conduct "robust police" duties and crowd/riot control in contests that are not permissive for civilian police. Some

of them, especially Carabinieri and Gendarmerie Nationale, have also remarkable Special Forces units like GIS and GIGN which have already performed typical SF tasks under NATO framework. Currently NATO is already using a Gendarmerie in "non art.5 operations" as a specific maneuver unit in Kosovo. This unit known as MSU (Multinational Specialized Unit) at this moment is provided by Italian Carabinieri and is directly under the control of KFOR Commander as a QRF (Quick Reaction Force) for specific police and riot control tasks in support of local Kosovo Police and European Union EULEX mission.

Looking at the situation on NATO's Eastern border, the KFOR's experiment could be replicated and adapted to an art.5 hybrid scenario. Indeed, NATO's planners should consider the possibility to create a "Gendarmerie VJTF" always under the command of JFC Brunssum/ JFC Naples that can be used at the very first stages of a crisis to reinforce the Baltics Law Enforcement Agencies protecting the "internal front". The Gendarmerie VJTF could have the same size of a NATO Battlegroup (roughly 1.100 troops) and the Alliance could benefit from the specific know how of these police forces with military status to perform duties like: crowd/riot control, high risk arrests, protection of critical road/rail

infrastructures for the upcoming NATO Response Force units.

In the best case, the NATO Gendarmerie VJTF could help the local police force to completely defeat the first stages of a “state-sponsored” hybrid operation against the Baltic States particularly by neutralizing the threat posed by the initial groups of professional high skilled saboteurs and agitators. In the worst case scenario, the NATO Gendarmerie VJTF could support the local police at least by keeping the control of the most important institutional buildings and assuring the protection of the main routes and train stations while the NRF units are entering the Baltics.

In conclusion, NATO should adopt a more creative approach to confront the hybrid threat at its Eastern border by avoiding solely focusing on the strictly conventional deterrence with Russia. A NATO Gendarmerie VJTF with its hybrid status could be part of a more comprehensive approach that could be very helpful to limit the freedom of maneuver of the black and grey military units that Moscow already employed with mastery in Crimea and Donbass.