

Thoughts on modern fighting in the Baltics

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Resumé

Under de kommande åren kommer det att vara betydelsefullt att kunna hantera samspelet mellan vad man vill göra, ska göra och kan göra, eftersom de möjligheter som finns inom ramen för existerande liksom framväxande teknologier fortsätter att öka. Att försöka förutspå framtiden har alltid utgjort en signifikant utmaning, särskilt vad gäller möjligheterna att förutse effekterna av ny teknologi. Utmaningarna som är ett resultat av förväntningarna kommer inte att förändras. Hellre än att försöka förstå teknologier oberoende av varandra, borde vi fokusera på att prognostisera interaktionerna mellan dem och förbereda ledare och organisationer på att anpassa sig till förändringar snabbare.

FOR SMALLER AND geographically constrained countries, the question what to do is paramount as the margin for miscalculation is relatively small. The road to failure is short and quickly affects national survival. Therefore, we need a clear understanding of trade-offs between necessary and desirable. Turning to the topic of modern fighting in the Baltics, any discourse about the defence of the Baltic States must first recognise two critical realities. First, the proximity of Russia and secondly, the disproportionate availability of forces. Because of these vital interactions and the time-distance-forces gap for any Allied reinforcement, we must endeavour to find multiple and innovative ways of managing the scarce means available. Fortunately, 20th-century history serves as an excellent schoolmaster with examples of how to begin harnessing these interactions.

Everyone wants to be Germany 1940 and not France

The most recent conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is an excellent example of the efficacy

of combining existing and emerging technologies. On one side of the recent conflict, according to our sources, we observed a force relying on a battle-tested concept with forces lined up in predominantly mountainous areas with entrenched artillery systems and tanks in support of entrenched infantry. Arguably, little had changed in decades, resulting in the cognitive entrenchment. On the other side, we have the previous loser who was compelled to innovate, and together with new capabilities and concepts (and cash), quite easily broke through the lines, previously considered highly improbable. What is essential is not the platforms used but the effects achieved. The winner left the cognitive trench and harnessed the interactions of a new system through the cognitive manoeuvre.

Because it is never the platforms themselves, but how they are fielded and used, parallels with France 1940 are appropriate. Stukas, gliders, tanks – all provide significant capabilities, but what broke the French was their inability to detach themselves from their past thinking mentally and the subsequent ina-

bility to grasp the situation on the ground. You can only see so much from your trench.

Using the example of novel UAS (Unmanned Aerial Systems) application and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, I would argue that the UAS used are not Wunderwaffen by themselves but serve as enablers to innovative ways for increased performances. In this example, they enable a faster pace in the sensor to shooter competition. However, the confounding effects of UAS use and effectiveness require understanding the operating environment going beyond the battlefield and the capability development process. The example above serves as an interesting illustration as it highlights the possibilities of a fresh approach to preparation and thinking, starting with procurement, international cooperation, innovation, and supply chains before the belligerents' first shots. Arguably much more to study, however, suffice to mention what can be achieved if we harness smartly the interactions of existing and emerging systems.

With a relatively small investment in a particular sequence in the kill chain, Azerbaijan significantly increased its advantage, and more importantly, we found that Armenia did not have the necessary countermeasures available. The gap in capability sparked a worldwide frenzy for rapid fielding of counter-UAS systems because of the suboptimal cost-benefit of using a Patriot to down a Bayraktar TB2. The example highlights challenges in contemporary Capacity Development models, especially in tempo, across many, especially western militaries.

Platforms are essential; however, cognitive thinking (mental agility/ability to adapt) is more important. With the examples of France 1940, and more recently, Nagorno-Karabakh 2020, gains and losses were predominantly explained by effects on decision-makers caused by the accelerated appli-

cation of novel technologies. By outpacing your opponent, you achieved a significant advantage. Needless to point out, organisations and leaders need to be prepared for radical change once hostilities break out, as most likely, we are all going to be in for a surprise. For countries and their militaries in the Baltic area, this is even more critical as we do not have the necessary depth to absorb any shortcomings. Therefore, we must sharpen our focus and emphasis on the right mind-set.

Getting the right focus

If a strategic surprise attack launches against one or all the Baltic countries, we should focus our countering efforts on these three words – "Strategic, Surprise and Attack", and explore ways to use multiple domain tools to operationalize these concepts.

Strategic

Pinning down strategic objectives and achieving strategic focus is exceedingly difficult but paramount for geographically and resource challenged nations. This is extremely hard, as it requires an environment of mutual trust and understanding as well as respect for differences in opinion and judgement. As previously mentioned with the Nagorno-Karabakh example, the significant risk lies with aiming at the perhaps wrong things/wrong levels, such as assumptions and not on objectives, and secondly, by not fostering an environment of continually challenging your thinking constructively. An observant student of conflict would have noticed the tragic consequences of strategies too much based on assumptions set in stone and not challenged enough. Again, France 1940 serves well to remind us. The assumptions made and betting on the Maginot line were made irrelevant with a simple bypass.

Agreeing on possible strategic scenarios is quite challenging, but in our case, irrelevant, as I would argue that the bigger picture, from a Russian perspective, is most certainly different as it would be from the three Baltic states (3B) perspective. We fight for national survival, but Russia arguably contests on what they consider to be on peer level, with the US. Successively, this manifests itself through the preference to operate under the so-called threshold of both national and allied treaty-bound military response, as well with a preference and emphasis on the initial phase of conflict if escalated. Ambiguity provides deniability for both sides and a successful initial, but decisive kinetic action provides *fait accompli*. The point is to focus on the Russian preferable ways and means available, not so much on the ends as irrelevant for us in this case.

Ambiguity as a critical requirement can quickly become a critical vulnerability for the aggressor. This Russian preference must be constantly contested with all means available as reinforcing the powerful tenet of Article 5 is not enough. We need to do more and use many pathways to do this. As an example, having a robust mental and institutional agility resilient to strategic changes is as important as having relevant military capabilities. One thing is having this, but another is to convince the opponent that you possess it. In an age of constant competition, we need to feed, or direct, the Russian internal cost-benefit-analysis calculus. Perhaps by better anticipating and synchronising all-domain efforts as planting seeds of doubt is as important as staging military hardware.

Therefore, the strategic objective must counter the Russian preference for and ability to operate under the so-called armed attack threshold for a national and allied treaty-bound military response. This preference for ambiguity gets harder to maintain as time

and events progress, making time a critical factor and an ally. This struggle must take part persistently as it may contribute to effective deterrence. For ourselves, however, we would be so humble to recognize that Baltic strategy is not to win a war against an aggressive Russia, but rather not to lose one.

Surprise

Surprise brings automatic disruption, especially on the defenders' C2 (decision-making at large). Since surprise is difficult to prevent, we had better prepare our people to manage it when it happens. Much has been said about mission command and contingency plans and planning, but to my point, we have not exceeded our true potential – but not only for the military but also across the whole of government and society. Recent experiences across the globe in the Covid 19 responses have shown us significant discrepancies in our societal abilities to do this coherently and over a longer time.

As previously mentioned, the Armenian paralysis caused by Azerbaijan innovative application of emerging technologies is an excellent example of tactical military surprise that turned into strategic effects as well as proof of the importance of the initial phase of the conflict. The surprise was the application of novel UAS concepts, but the rapid fielding of such a capability certainly contributed to the observed effect. As emerging technologies develop at a faster pace, we should grow accustomed to an aggressor tempted to utilize novel applications of old and new in order to achieving immediate objectives (achieving strategic effect, usually systemic paralysis early on). We should do the same and adapt our thinking and behaviour to the same sort of ways. Contrary to our current planning rules and settings (as we never question the settings), we should

focus on the need to have a bounce-back setting, both mentally and physically, with the appropriate technical enablers. We know that tempo is essential in conflict, but mastering adaptation is as crucial as it is a prerequisite to regaining tempo when subject to aggression. We unconsciously assume that technological advantages will have the same effect in fighting today's peer adversary as an inferior one. We seem to think that all services (technological and commercial) will be available regardless of the conflict's direction. If we do not prepare for this duality, we are most likely in for a big surprise.

One of our greatest challenges is our current misuse of already available technical tools. Unfortunately, just as perhaps, the internet was supposed to connect people, not polarize them; in many ways, governance and leadership have utilized technological advances somewhat wrongly in these last three decades. Instead of technology liberating us to do more, simultaneously enhancing the power of human ingenuity, it at times constrains us with senior leadership regularly interfering in arguably junior leader, tactical business. Along with growing resentment and a lack of trust it has resulted in an inherent dependency on senior decision-making. This, together with centralized C2 (Command and Control) nodes, makes us very vulnerable both mentally and physically. We need to reverse this trend. Existing and emerging technologies will and must enable resilient C2 constructs with the ability to respond and adapt in a more decentralized manner than our current generation envisions. Future battlefield participants will have to work with fluctuating C2 formats ever-changing C2 availability (measure-countermeasure) and must be prepared to switch their communications systems off and on as even when mostly having an overabundance of information available. This necessitates

future junior leaders to be trained, trusted, and authorised to make appropriate decisions and equipped with technologies that enable them.

A 21st century, digital Auftragstaktik ethos needs to cement across our military as well as governmental structures. Fostering an environment enabled by emerging technologies, where team members know to act in the absence of orders and will provide the means for agile ways of tackling problems. We must set the bureaucracy straight, enable technological and mental frameworks, train and educate to an expectation of initiative, and encourage the employment of ingenuity, experience, and knowledge of the environment to accomplish missions, especially in a disruptive digital environment. This is of principal importance, as most likely, we will be surprised when attacked. Covid 19 responses across the globe are proof of that.

Attack

A military attack will, with most certainty, be kinetic, violent, and very disruptive. From a historical perspective, prospect of conventional war in Europe, seems to have sunset and so has our understanding of it. European armies lately have shifted their focus to so-called peer competition capabilities, but there is still a risk that the recent fixation with so-called hybrid warfare could lead to a neglect of capabilities to deal with direct, kinetic threats. You can waffle with indistinct hybrid innuendos, but you most certainly will die if shot.

Given the geographic circumstances and resources available, the 3B options to counter an attack are limited. It is of my opinion that to counter a physical attack, we must master the defence but do so in the broader depth or sense. Arguably, the main Russian purpose/task to opt for kinetic action is

probably not to strike 3B in isolation but rather to defeat NATO at large or render it politically irrelevant. This is what we must prepare for, as we might be the place for Battle, but not necessary the War. Classic linear responses are quite challenging to devise, as we do not have the numbers even if properly mobilized and lined up for battle with ample time to prepare. Decisive battles are out of the question, as attrition will only favour Russia. Alternate, dispersed, and layered battlefield designs must be explored to better contest the aggressor on terms that are more favourable, especially as rear area logistics becomes more of a challenge. One notable observation from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the vulnerability of supply lines and rear, as illustrated by the high loss rates suffered by Armenia logistic trucks. This vulnerability may be more of importance than the losses of tanks, but is also a potential problem for all belligerents, not just the defender.

Taking the past decade of Russia aggression as a reference, three factors come to mind: Ambiguity across all domains, preference for a successful initial phase if going kinetic, and an ambition to compete with the "western/NATO" sensor to shooter capability (not only massive fires). Addressing these three items could form a reference for further design.

The first is relatively easy to address – namely, violence is the shortest way to contest ambiguity. By going hot (i.e., shooting the polite little green men), you render ambiguity pointless – at least on the tactical and operational levels. The risk with violence is that we should be very aware that traditionally Russia has displayed much higher levels of absorbing violence; consequently, the objective is not to inflict pain and suffering on Russia as such but solely on rendering ambiguity pointless.

Achieving necessary battlefield density with the 3B forces available is a problem, especially when facing Russia. What cannot be achieved in numbers must be mitigated in thinking, procedures, and technology. The concentration of effort and mass would have to be achieved through other means, most likely through synchronization of fires enabled by innovative application of existing and emerging technologies. Simplified, the sensor-shooter kill chain serves as an excellent vehicle to explore this notion. A radical increase of the speed of Sensor to shooter chain with what that requires, first, an abundance of sensors, secondly a technology to tabulate targets in the right order, and finally lethal delivery systems (Allied and Regional) could be an interesting approach to explore. Factors such as reach, availability, interoperability, survivability, and cost, together with overt signalling of this ability (Switzerland 1939), would have to be examined carefully. Examples from history such as Finland 1939–40 and more recently Lebanon 2006 are interesting examples where the defender by various methods countered an aggressor by utilizing its available resources superbly. If relevant Baltic resistance continues, potential Russian objectives for a successful initial phase are not met. This should be considered as "winning." In other words, our military goal should not be focused solely on traditional, linear winning but rather on denying the enemy the victory he covets.

Conclusion

Though the means of a focused strategy, surprise, and attack; we can manage the interactions with Russian on the modern battlefield. Before the modern battlefield calls us and we answer the sirens' call to war we must ask and answer the following question? Why do we focus on inanimate platforms

and relegate secondary importance to animate platforms? Perhaps we need to recognize our personnel as platforms – valuable animate platforms. Animate platforms can continuously improve, get stronger, faster, adapt, adjust, and increase inanimate platforms' value as they improve the interactions between various capabilities systems.

Leaving the cognitive trench, understanding how to manage strategy, react and use surprise, and initiating the attack will allow us to achieve cognitive dominance and subsequent strategic dominance through the 'way' of cognitive manoeuvre.

By adding complexity to the cost-benefit-analysis calculus, we can and must influence the decision cycles of our opponents. To be effective it must be relevant in addressing the critical requirements necessary for [their] successful strategic surprise attack scenario. It may be a truism, but it is still true: For this, we need the right people with the right skills, able to utilize most effectively the tools available (today and tomorrow).

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