Perspectives from Szczecin

by Jürgen-Joachim von Sandrart

Resumé[1]

Generallöjtnant Jürgen-Joachim von Sandrart är tysk pansarofficer och var till november 2024 chef för Natos multinationella armékår med högkvarter i polska Szczecin. Hans militära bakgrund inkluderar befäl i pansarförband på alla nivåer från stridsvagnspluton till pansardivision. Von Sandrart har också tjänstgjort i SHAPE och som chef för den tyska försvarschefens stab. Han har deltagit i utlandsinsatser i Bosnien, Kosovo och Afghanistan. I oktober 2024 medverkade von Sandrart vid ett KKrVA-seminarium i Stockholm och beskrev det militära läget på Natos nordöstra flank, det närmast obefintliga operativa djupet som gör kontrollen av Östersjön till en avgörande faktor för att kunna försörja i Baltikum, och därmed hur Sveriges inträde i Nato får en avgörande positiv påverkan på möjligheten att kunna föra en uthållig strid på den östra flanken.

IN FEBRUARY 2024, a boat from the Russian Border Guard appeared in the "NARVA" river in Estonia and removed buoys marking the border between Russia and Estonia. Two days earlier, the Russian Ministry of Defence published a resolution announcing that it would no longer accept the current maritime borders around Kaliningrad Oblast and in the Gulf of Finland in their present form. Half a day after the buoys were removed, the Russian decree was officially withdrawn. The buoys did not reappear. So far so good – a classic hybrid lawfare!

As the commander of the Multinational Corps North-East, however, I asked myself: What if the border buoys had reappeared, but far on the Estonian side? Strictly speaking, the territorial integrity of a country that falls under my responsibility would have been questioned. How would Estonia deal with it? How would NATO, and we as part of it, deal with it? This is just a brief look into the Russian script, and I am sure you all can name similar examples off the top of your head.

These examples illustrate that the time when we could dismiss RUS hybrid aggressions as harmless provocations without consequences is over once and for all.

For 25 years, the Multinational Corps North-East in Szczecin has stood for deterrence and defence by NATO on the northeastern flank. In 1999, the German-Danish Corps LANDJUT was relocated from Rendsburg to Szczecin. At that time, the focus was on integrating the new ally Poland into NATO and creating a military docking point for the new allies in the East. In that sense, the Multinational Corps North-East is a reflection of its time and the younger history of the alliance.

When the corps was established, no one thought it would one day take on tasks in the Hindu Kush. And yet, the phase of out-of-area deployments did not stop at Szczecin. After the HQ reached full operational readiness, staff served three times

in Afghanistan as part of ISAF, where two soldiers fell. With the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the geostrategic environment of Europe changed fundamentally. At the NATO Summit in Wales 2014, it was decided to refocus on alliance defence and readiness; the "Readiness Action Plan" was adopted. The Multinational Corps North-East became a "High-Readiness" HQ, meaning the readiness period was shortened from 180 to 30 days. At the summit in WARSAW 2016, the Multinational Corps North-East became the "Regional Land Component Command" in the BaSR, responsible for the newly established "Battlegroups" as part of the "tripwire logic".

February 24, 2022, changed everything for our HQ. Overnight, we woke up in a new world; the Graduated Response Plans were activated, and we were tasked with becoming defence-ready against the remaining threat from Russia with available forces without relying on the NATO Response Forces. On April 10, 2022, orders were issued for the Area of Operation Baltics: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and northern Poland. For me, it is the culmination of a military career spanning over 40 years. At the same time, it became clear that our force disposition would not be sufficient and that the previous plans did not reflect a scenario like the one in Ukraine.

With the summit in Vilnius 2023, NATO, and we as allies, also arrived strategically in the new world. By adopting the regional plans and the decisions to build up and expand NATO forces on the northeastern flank, the right course was set. The regional plans are not a finished product. No plan ever achieves 100% success guarantee. They are living documents that must be continuously adapted to the strategic environment and changes within it.

It is up to the tactical level to translate strategic military and political decisions into reality, implement them, and further develop and improve them in an iterative process. Despite the threat on the northeastern flank, the alliance cannot close its eyes to the conflicts and crises in the world that affect NATO allies' security.

In the alliance, we have currently agreed on two adversaries: Russia and terrorism. Without wanting to drift into an academic discussion, in my view, Russia is the more tangible threat to NATO's territory. As NATO, we are committed to a 360-degree approach. Absolutely right, but these 360 degrees have two aspects: on the one hand, the conflicts and crises worldwide, and on the other, the Russian threat. The Kremlin challenges NATO and the West along 360 degrees in multiple crises and conflicts worldwide. The new "Axis of Evil" of North Korea, China, Iran, and Russia is not a regional phenomenon.

But it is important, especially in this apparent omnipresence of crises, to prioritize and pursue a clear force approach derived from our security interests, because the alliance territory is only truly threatened, in the true meaning of the word, in one region: the Baltic Sea Region.

To describe the threat we are facing one rule is important: Geography matters! Maps cannot explain everything to us, but they put many things into perspective. The eastern flank – some of my Baltic comrades also call it the "eastern front" – is simply the "land borderline of freedom." It stretches from northern Scandinavia down to the Black Sea. While we must expect a maritime and air-dominant fight in the north and south, the threat in Central Europe is essentially a land battle! Geographically speaking, the Baltic States and Poland offer the only sensible directional axes for this.

The trade routes and roads in the Area of Operation of the Multinational Corps North-

Figure 1.

East have seen many soldiers and military equipment advance and retreat over centuries of campaigns – whether it was the Teutonic Order, various Swedish kings, Napoleon, Lithuanians and Poles, the Wehrmacht, or the Red Army. You can see this exemplified in Operation Barbarossa by the Wehrmacht in 1941, and in the counter-movement of the Red Army through Operation Bagration in 1944, which led to the collapse of the German Army Group Centre.

All conquerors had in common that they understood the importance of controlling the coastline and thus partial control of the Baltic Sea. After this excursion into history, let's look at a map that hopefully will never exist. Here we have the area presently (2024) occupied by Russia in Ukraine transferred to the areas of our responsibility.

Vilnius would be in Russian hands, Tallinn and Riga close to the front. Kaliningrad Oblast would be connected to Russian territory. In Poland, Russia would have overrun Warsaw and would be standing at the Vistula, the last major natural barrier before Berlin. Such a scenario is unacceptable. Preventing it is the mission of the Multinational Corps North-East.

We are facing an enemy who has already announced that, parallel to the war against Ukraine, they will establish additional forces and thus will again have sufficient offensive capabilities at the NATO border in the future. First of all, it should be noted that the Russian economy is still significantly affected by Western sanctions. However, Russia has switched to a war economy: Despite all efforts, production rates for combat vehicles and ammunition are increasing. What does this mean for the Russian threat on the northeastern flank?

The Russian Defence Minister already announced extensive reforms in 2023. Among other things, the Russian armed forces are to grow from about 1.3 million to 1.5 million by 2027. As a reminder: in 2022, the Russian armed forces still comprised about 900 000 troops. The former Western Military District was restructured this spring into the Leningrad Military District in the north and the Moscow Military District below it (approximately at the level of Belarus). A new army corps was organized. In addition, three new infantry divisions and seven existing infantry brigades are to be restructured into divisions. Also newly established are two artillery divisions and two airborne divisions.

Particular attention is paid to Kaliningrad Oblast and the suspected Russian air defence capabilities there, which, in combination with the capabilities located in the Russian and Belarusian heartland, can form an effective A2AD area. What forces are countering these scenarios?

The Multinational Corps North-East in Szczecin coordinates five subordinate units: EST Division, MND-N, DEU Division, [LTU Division], and MND-NE. Our neighbors with area responsibility are the FIN Corps

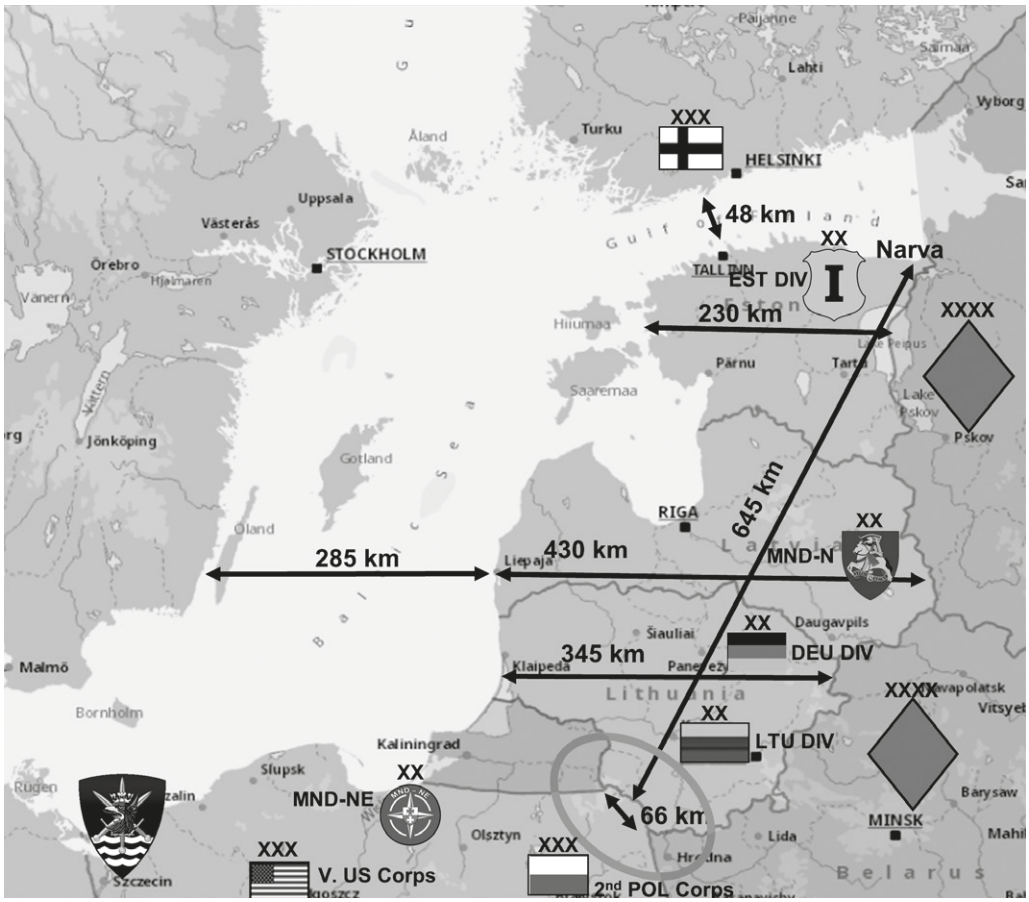

Figure 2.

in the north and the 2nd POL Corps in the south. Not shown, but of course present in the area, are the respective national territorial defence forces (TDF).

Additionally, you see an American flag on the map: this represents the V. US Corps in Poznan, slightly further south than this map section allows.

To have these formations in my Area of Responsibility is a blessing and a burden at the same time. Their presence has concrete implications: Imagine NATO units and units under national command simultaneously striving to counter a Russian advance in the Baltic States: How many units do you think I can get through the Suwałki Gap at the same time? And what would a declining American commitment in Europe in favor of a potential conflict in Southeast Asia mean? Which European nation could replace this contribution overnight? And we are only talking about land forces: it is no different in the maritime and air domains.

Accession of Sweden and Finland drastically changes the strategic environment of the Baltic Sea Region. Instead of Suwalki being a strategic dilemma for NATO with regards to a possible isolation of the Baltic states, it now only constitutes a tactical dilemma. Suwalki will be defended but at the same time the Baltic Sea becomes key for the fight in the Baltic states. Sweden's role as a rear area hub will become crucial for the land fight at the opposite coastline!

For us, this means: our NATO planning must be set up in such a way that we are ready to take up the defence fight tomorrow with what we have on hand today. We already know that Russia is implementing a wartime economy that will enable them to reconstitute the capabilities. A peace agreement in Ukraine will only hasten that process.

The enemy has the vote! Putin alone decides WHEN, WHERE, WITH WHICH forces, HOW, and FOR WHAT PURPOSE he attacks. Therefore, on the so-called D-DAY, Russia would have a significant force advantage over NATO if we do not manage to increase our own force disposition long before D-DAY. The gap between Russia's advantage as an attacker and NATO's slow force buildup represents Russia's opportunity to create a "fait accompli" against NATO. Only through our preparation in peacetime, including the timely deployment of NATO forces, can the "window of opportunity" for Russia be closed.

In summary, I conclude: Russia is capable and willing to pose a threat to the countries in the Area of Operation of the Multinational Corps North-East. Whether this takes until 2029 or is already the case today, we can discuss. The northeastern flank is not a distant land: it is the gateway to the heart of Europe, the gateway to NATO's logistical heart. With the regional plans, NATO has taken an important step – many more must follow.

We are NATO – NATO is us. It is not an anonymous organization, but an alliance shaped by the nations that actively participate in it. My own country has heavily committed the German Army in the Regional Plan Center in the area of responsibility of the Multinational Corps North-East. But that alone is not enough: Germany's role and force contributions must be based on an operational narrative. This means that the greatest threat to the alliance must therefore be clearly placed at the center of all our considerations.

What role will Sweden take? One might ask where does the defence of Sweden start, in this newfound role as an alliance member? Defending against the threat is primarily the task of the military. But we cannot do it alone. Whether the Multinational Corps North-East can successfully take up the de-

fence fight is decided by politicians. Certain questions must be allowed and clarified before the first shot is fired.

We live in NATO in two time zones: the military and the political. The military clock is currently at 11:59: We need all decisions ideally immediately to be ready before 12:00. The political clock, on the other hand, is usually more at 11:30, sometimes 11:45. There is still time to discuss, weigh options, gather more information, and decide later.

How do we balance these different time zones within NATO? When do we recognize a Russian buildup as such? How would we have been positioned within NATO if we had already drawn the necessary conclusions and decisions from Ukraine militarily and politically in December 2021? How do we politically deal with hybrid attacks? When do we recognize an attack as such, with all the associated consequences?

If we publicly lay out and discuss our red lines and let Putin dictate what we can and cannot do, we create a strategic disadvantage for the alliance and Germany. We must become unpredictable.

I am very pleased that the fellows of the Swedish Academy for War Sciences, through their many different formats, already contribute to harmonizing the military and the civilian political world. Please continue this important work! Thank you for the invitation.

The author is a German lieutenant general and was until November 2024 Commander of the Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin, Poland.

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1. Författat av ledamoten kommendör Jonas Hård af Segerstad.