

Executive Summary

1) **Purpose.** To identify how NATO Special Operations Forces (SOF) can contribute to defeating a peer adversary across a multi-domain high-end conflict within the current and near future (2 -5 years) operating environments. This wargame also seeks to answer the following:

- a) Identify additional core tasks that NATO SOF should define,
- b) Identify strategic effects NATO SOF should focus on,
- c) Explore possible capabilities NATO SOF needs to develop or expand,
- d) Explore command and control relationships that allow NATO SOF to be employed appropriately, and
- e) Identify how NATO SOF employment changes adversary decision making.

2) **Scenario and Background.** The NATO alliance continues to dominate in the globalization of economics, culture, and politics. Russia views the increase of NATO's influence in Europe, coupled with Russia's loss of influence along its periphery and the integration of former Soviet states into NATO as a critical threat to their national security. In this scenario, a Russian influence campaign turned Ukrainian public opinion in favor of pro-Russian policies. Additionally, recent evidence suggests Russia is covertly infiltrating Estonia with SOF to arm and incite an independent movement against the Estonian government. Based on these events, NATO declared Russia's actions as an attack on Estonia and invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty – an attack on one-member state is an attack on all members. Russia responded by mobilizing all its Western Military District Forcers and ordered a large military attack along NATO and Europe's eastern flank.

3) **Study methodology & Methods, Models, and Tools (MMTs):**

- a) **Wargame Design.** *AFTERSHOCK* is an operational to strategic level military wargame. The game encompasses a combination of both closed and open systems and is structured as a hybrid seminar wargame consisting of two teams - NATO and Russia. It is designed to analyze how NATO SOF can contribute to the defeat of a peer adversary across a multi-domain high-end conflict. Tactical aspects are added to enhance the realistic environment in which NATO SOF will operate and conduct its core Tasks – Direct Action (DA), Military Assistance (MA), and Special Reconnaissance (SR). Additionally, in order to explore the impact of SOF in the information domain, the task of information operations (IO) was introduced. The wargame begins after Russia's attempt to undermine Estonia's government is uncovered. This discovery triggers NATO to invoke Article 5 and results in a large-scale military attack by Russia. The game is designed to take place over a six-month period; however, the actual length of time depends on events within the game.

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b) **Key Player Roles.** Two Teams, with up to four players each, played either as NATO or the Russian Federation. Players consisted of US and NATO officers with SOF and Non-SOF experience.

(1) **NATO:** OF-4 (US Air Force Non-SOF), OF-3 (RO Army SOF), OF-3 (US Navy Non-SOF).

(2) **Russia:** OF-4 (UP Army), 2x OF-3 (US Army SOF), 2x OF-3 (GE Army SOF).

c) **MMTs.** The game consists of three game maps and numerous game pieces used to model NATO and Russian anti-access/area denial, air superiority, conventional forces, SOF, garrison units, and irregular forces. To win the game, teams developed strategies to achieve three of five objectives that included both offensive and defensive end states. The first team to achieve three objectives at the same time won the game. Additionally, the game used a combat results table and dice to adjudicate tactical actions and the success of non-kinetic actions – IO and SR. Facilitators collected and collated each team's actions for data analysis. Facilitators also captured discussions on each team's strategy as well as key strategic and operational information every turn. Finally, all players submitted a survey to answer the sponsor's essential questions and their views of how NATO SOF can contribute in defeating a peer adversary across a multi-domain high-end conflict.

4) **Top Constraint, Limitation, and Assumption.**

a) **Constraint:** The wargame is focused on a high-end conflict in the current and near future.

b) **Limitation:** Simplification of organizational command structures, forces, and capabilities were essential to facilitate game play.

c) **Assumption:** In a high-end conflict in Eastern Europe, partner nations that aspire to join NATO from this area will allow NATO forces and will conduct joint operations in their countries (ie. Ukraine, Moldova).

5) **Study findings and recommendations.** The following are the top five key takeaways from this wargame:

a) **Finding 1 – SOF TASKS:** SR was initially an undervalued core task. Neither team used SR until the last game after they experienced multiple combat losses due to a lack of intelligence on their opponent's combat strength. MA was the most executed NATO SOF core task because players believed it reduced the requirements of conventional forces and served as a force multiplier. IO was critical to influence population and support MA.

Recommendation 1. NATO operational plans should incorporate SR into as much of their maneuver plans as possible given forces available to provide strategic insight and

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intelligence. NATO will learn a hard lesson with the potential loss of crucial combat forces – just as the game players did – if it does not use SR in a high-end conflict due to the increased risk to forces. Risk assessments for the employment of NATO SOF in SR operations should heavily weigh the potential loss of strategic insight and intelligence when assessing the risk to NATO SOF. Additionally, NATO SOF should immediately begin to invest in increasing the security forces' capacity and capability of partner nations on its eastern flank. This increased capacity will provide an additional deterrent for member states against Russian aggression and will provide a critical capacity to NATO's eastern flank that it currently lacks. Furthermore, the integration of IO as a NATO SOF core task should be analyzed.

- b) **Finding 2 – SOF Effects:** In a high-end conflict, SOF enabled the greatest offensive kinetic effects when it acted in conjunction with conventional forces. NATO conventional forces were critical at deterring Russian aggression and provided time and security for NATO SOF to build forces through MA.

Recommendation 2. Operational plans should ensure conventional forces and SOF are nested and support each other.

- c) **Finding 3 – SOF Challenges:** Interoperability between personnel, equipment, communications, and logistics will be one of the most challenging aspects of a high-intensity conflict.

Recommendation 3. Baseline requirements for equipment – particularly communications equipment – and logistical systems should be developed and standardized by NATO and NSHQ for all member countries. These requirements should be developed with the sole purpose of creating interoperability between partner nations. Unresolved interoperability issues will result in a less flexible, ready, and capable NATO force and increase the risks of operational and strategic security failures due to unsecured communications and information processes.

- d) **Finding 4 – SOF Readiness and C2:** NATO SOF readiness standards require units to reach proficiency in each of its three core tasks – SR, DA, and MA. Once validated on core tasks NATO SOF units are apportioned towards operational plans and requirements.

Recommendation 4. NATO readiness and force projection requirements should account for national caveats and bilateral agreements with individual NATO members. The apportionment of SOF forces should account for each NATO nation's ability to employ their SOF towards operational plans and requirements.

- e) **Finding 5 – SOF Influence on Adversary Decision Making:** NATO SOF employment changed the adversary's decision-making and created a much more complex and dynamic environment for the adversary. NATO SOF's ability to infiltrate behind the conventional forward lines of troop (FLOT) and project small but capable forces into the rear areas of Russia's forces created an additional dilemma for Russia. In response,

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Russia was forced to adjust its operational plans and commit forces to preventing SOF actions outside of the conventional FLOT. This decreased their operational tempo and reduced their ability to mass forces to against NATO.

Recommendation 5. At times, the objective of SOF's employment should be solely focused on presenting simultaneous dilemmas to an adversary. SOF should also be employed outside of a conflict zone when NATO is engaged in a high-end conflict. Employment of forces outside a conflict zone to affect an adversary's strategic decision-making can reduce the capacity of forces an adversary is able to employ in a high-end conflict because it must reposition forces to deal with SOF actions elsewhere.

6) **Team members & Sponsor POC:**

- a) **Team Members.** Student team members all consisted of a SOF background. 1LT Sajmir Cuka (AL Army, OF-1, sajmir.cuka@aaf.mil.al), MAJ Matthias Fiala (CH Army OF-3, matthias.fiala@vtg.admin.ch), LT Thomas MacNeil (US Navy OF-2, Macneilthomas131@gmail.com), CPT Gilbert Pearsall (US Army OF-2, gilbert.h.pearsall2.mil@mail.mil), and Maj Matthew Redaja (US Air Force OF-3, matthew.redaja@us.af.mil).
- b) **Sponsor POC.** NATO Special Operations Headquarters J5 Planner – Maj Chad Buckel (US Marine Corps, OF-3, chad.bucknel@nshq.nato.int, DSN 314-423-5494)

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