



By Peter Apps

Should tensions with Russia ever “go hot” in Eastern Europe or the Baltic states, the potential consequences could be catastrophic. For all the attention that will inevitably be paid to hotline diplomacy and presidential, however, it may yet be relatively junior commanders - and relatively small formations - that hold the outcome of the conflict in their hands.

If that ever happens, a relatively small number of troops - perhaps even only a handful of platoons, troops or squadrons - may suddenly find themselves on the receiving end of a huge amount of global attention. In the world of hybrid and information warfare, things are often not quite what they seem - and yet everything can sometimes be suddenly blasted to a truly global audience. It all has the potential to be catastrophically complicated - and it's not the sort of thing that is necessary particularly easy to train for.

Somehow, however, Western armies are going to have to give it a shot. The stakes are far

too high not to.

For US and other NATO armies, it is probably now true that preparing for a confrontation with Russia - or a "Russia-like enemy", if you want to be diplomatic - is probably now the most challenging scenario training should aim for. At the most kinetic end, that means having the ability to engage fairly large formations of sophisticated armored forces backed by both heavy artillery and a range of new technologies, particularly drones and cyber. As the Ukrainian Armed Forces have discovered, that's a very significant challenge in its own right, and one that requires very considerable thought, equipment investment and training.

NATO armies are right to acknowledge that they need to get back to training against that kind of sophisticated nationstate enemy after years of prioritizing Afghanistan-type counterinsurgency operations. The truth, though, is that it's relatively hard to imagine that kind of battle taking place without the very real risk of it escalating to a tactical or even much broader strategic nuclear exchange - and all sides know it.

What armies also need to prepare for, therefore, is something slightly less extreme, operations that fall slightly short of war, but take place in highly contested and potentially distinctly dangerous environments - as well as in the full glare of social and more established media.

In reality, it may not quite be as difficult as it seems. We actually already have a fairly good idea of the sort of things that might happen to prompt some kind of escalation, as well as the steps units like those making up the Enhanced Forward Presence [EFP] in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland might be ordered to take. The threats are many and varied, but that doesn't mean they can't be imagined and prepared for.

Since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, US and Allied troops have been deployed in a number of countries. It's important to distinguish between the role of training teams in non-NATO states such as Ukraine and Georgia, however, and those in states that are full members of

the alliance. Should Russia ever try to take over Ukraine or Georgia, the most likely scenario would appear to be that US and other allied forces might withdraw. If they go into the Baltic states or Poland, Washington and others are obligated to fight under NATO's Article 5.

The most likely scenario they will face will be some kind of unorthodox action. There are a wide variety of forms that might take - political destabilization, actions by deniable forces such as the "little green men" who took Crimea, aggressive Russian posturing along the border or perhaps actions by a deniable insurgency. It doesn't necessarily really matter what exact steps are taken - the likely response will still come broadly from the same toolkit.

We've already seen in Eastern Europe that the go-to US response in particular is very simple - a more assertive presence on the ground. That means potentially patrolling or simply sending troops and forces - particularly highly visible armored forces - either on exercise or operational actions to demonstrate their presence. These may be the moves of highly visible pieces of military equipment, but they also essentially what you might term "information operations". They demonstrate capability, affect and intent to stay and fight if necessary.

Unfortunately, there are a wide range of tools Moscow or any other foe can use against that kind of presence - many of which US and other forces have become extremely used to in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Keeping skills up against a range of ambushes, IEDs etc. clearly makes sense, although the odds must be that in the early stages of a confrontation any enemy in Europe is probably likely to avoid taking extremely lethal action if they can possibly help it.

The key thing here will almost certainly be to keep an eye on what a military thinker might term the "key human terrain" - the population whose actions will determine whether this is

a disaster or a success. In the Baltic states, that essentially means the Russian-speaking population, a group unquestionably marginalized within those countries but who so far appear keen to remain within them out rather than taking the chances with the Russians.

There are a variety of reasons for that – particularly the greater range of economic and other opportunities for being part of the EU member Baltic states, and also the much greater respect for human rights than under Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

What has to be kept in mind, therefore, is that whatever action NATO or other allied forces take, that population needs to be kept on side – or the very least, not antagonized and driven into the arms of anybody else.

Thought about this way, it’s not that difficult to start to generate a range of training scenarios – a road move that is halted by a suspected IED on a bridge, or a protest against alleged actions by local law enforcement.

What’s important to remember here, though, is that those interactions will take place in what you might call a “highly digitized and social media heavy environment”. In other words, many interactions will be filmed, some of them posted immediately to social media. If a real crisis was underway, that means the actions of a small number of forward US, British or other allied troops could easily make the difference between escalation or the opposite.

Most of the major decisions here will have to be taken at a higher level, of course – and one hopes that by the time anything goes wrong, if it does, there should be relatively sophisticated information and media operations specialists on the ground in the theater. They should have a range of capabilities to expose and publicize nefarious activities by a country like Russia, as well as simply keeping on top of what ordinary people think – and what actions NATO forces might take that would keep them on side.

The most significant question may well be whether, at a time of heightened tensions, the

deployment of extra troops into forward Russian-speaking areas would be reassuring to the population or antagonistic. Getting that wrong could prove disastrous.

Still, whatever decisions get made higher up, it's going to be the junior commanders who suddenly find a colossal weight on the shoulders. In Iraq and Afghanistan, US and allied forces could frequently launch brigade or larger size operations for months at a time with only very limited coverage in US and international media. Here, even the smallest action may suddenly have huge strategic importance - and in some cases, receive global established and social media attention.

British troops got an early idea of what this might look like in 1999 during the advance into Kosovo that followed the NATO air campaign and served withdrawal. The lieutenant commanding the lead armored reconnaissance troops suddenly found himself ordered unexpectedly to prepare for an assault on buildings at Pristina airport held by Russian troops.

As it happened, more senior officers called off the assault, with NATO's regional commander General Mike Jackson telling Supreme Allied Commander Wesley Clark he would not start World War III. The junior officer involved, future popstar James Blunt, has since gone on record as saying he would have declined orders to attack in any case given the stakes involved.

Encouraging junior officers to simply ignore instructions is, of course, not the way forward. Somehow, however, a system is going to have to be built that allows them to feedback the situation on the ground to the very highest level at speed - and at the very least, prepared junior commanders and troops for the realities of these kind of deployments.

All of this, of course, may also be happening at the time of ongoing and sometimes potentially very serious cyber attacks - another reality which is so far often not directly included in training.

By the time such training programs have been built, of course, it's entirely possible that the EFP will be stuck into just those kind of worries and operations in real life. The US military and its allies are going to have to be on a steep learning curve once again - and it's in all of our interests to that they can achieve it.

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