

The Bulgarian Armed Forces' Participation in Current NATO Led Crisis Response Operations

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about Bulgarian Armed Forces' participation in current NATO led crisis response operations. In the introduction the author depicts contemporary global challenges for predominance of NATO member states and most obvious concurrent actions to meet and solve them according to statements of NATO leadership. Afghanistan is most complex challenge that NATO faces today and that is why NATO is concentrating a tremendous effort to cope with it. The author renders some retrospection of Bulgarian participation in PKO and NATO operations back in recent history. He also provides with some information about current participation of Bulgarian units to NATO led CRO. At the end of the paper he shares some problems that the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense and Defense Staff face and some lessons learned from the operations. That concludes his paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a distinct honor and privilege to address a forum of so pronounced participants like that.

My name is Peter Dimitrov and I work for the Rakovski Academy as a research analyst.

In the next 20 minutes I will try to introduce you to the Bulgarian Armed Forces' participation in current NATO lead crisis response operations. In my presentation I will focus attention on some history of Bulgarian participation in NATO and other international organizations' operations, and our current contribution to Alliance's operations.

Dear Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

Technological revolution and globalization have brought Today we new challenges that mankind faces today. Increased industrial production and harmful emissions to atmosphere are degrading constantly our environment and are exhausting at a hectic pace worlds' natural resources. Our countries are facing grim energy deficiencies and some of them are becoming more and more energy vulnerable, and dependent. Within this pessimistic landscape we have been facing for quite a long time asymmetric threats like international terrorism, religious extremism, highly technological threats like cyber threats, missiles strikes(either conventionally or WMD armed) threats and so on. Nowadays terrorist organizations can conveniently use worldwide net to connive their wicked plots against the modern world. As Ambassador Vershbow said in his speech at the Conference of the NATO Defense Ministers in Bratislava on 22nd October, 2009: "Poor governance and festering extremism far beyond NATO borders can have deadly implications for the security of our own populations"¹.

¹ Ambassador Alexander R. Vershbow , Crafting the new Strategic Concept: Ambitions, Resources, and Partnerships for a 21st Century Alliance, Keynote speech by Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, 22nd October, 2009, "New Challenges, Better Capabilities" Accompanying Conference of the NATO Defense Ministers Meeting in Bratislava.

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In order to protect our home countries from such threats we need to look for them far beyond our territorial borders. That's why NATO countries are developing a new strategic concept that will be an instrument for the Alliance to most successfully meet and solve those challenges.

The situation in Afghanistan has created the most complex challenge for NATO and has put the credibility of the Alliance at stake. In order to answer challenges for ISAF and our partners over there, participants in London conference on Afghanistan in January decided to increase level of troops and to stay there until goals of operation are achieved². We all hope that there will be a time soon when ANSF and the Afghan Government will take the lead in this operation and NATO forces, and other international players, and NGOs will play a supportive role.

Bulgarian government and our military leadership have staunchly supported NATO policy in Afghanistan, deployed Bulgarian troops to the area of operation and have gradually increased participation from small in the beginning to significant for our scale right now. Our participation in numbers and resources has multiplied more than ten times.

2. HISTORY

Bulgaria joined international efforts to support international peace and security in 1992. This was the first time after the fall of the Iron Curtain when our Government sent troops abroad to join UN operation in Cambodia. Two infantry battalions 850 men each took part in UNTAC. The mission started in June, 1992 and ended in September 1993. Following this mission we took active part in UN, NATO, EU peacekeeping activities to enhance international security environment.

We joined PfP in 1994, became NATO member in 2004, and EU member in 2007. Since then our foreign and security policy is oriented toward contributing to the Alliance's aspirations for improving Euroatlantic security and spreading peace and stability all over the world. This said we are giving our share to produce stable international environment in the Balkans, Europe and in many hot points throughout the globe.

ISAF Operation in Afghanistan

In response to heinous terrorist attack on 9/11 2001 the international community stood firmly by the USA and unanimously supported the US administration in its consecutive efforts to recover from the strike and produce countermeasures in neutralizing further terrorist threats. For the first time in history of the Alliance NAC activated Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1386 dated Dec 12, 2001 to authorize concrete measures in fighting Al Qaeda terrorist organization. Following this resolution Bulgaria signed the Memorandum of Understanding for ISAF buildup in London in January 2002.

The National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria voted a unanimous decision to include the country in ISAF and to contribute to the operation by a platoon size consequence management unit. Hence we started our participation in the ISAF operation by a 32 men strong platoon on Feb 16, 2002. The platoon deployed within the frame of the British component nearby Kabul. The consequent management platoon conducted its mission until August 2003. Upon change of situation in Afghanistan its mission was discontinued and it was replaced by an infantry mechanized platoon.

In summer of 2004 a Mobile Training Team (MTT) were also sent there to contribute to Afghan National Army training. There were three teams of 18 instructors each that conducted training within TF PHOENIX of operation Enduring Freedom.

² London Conference on Afghanistan, Communiqué, Afghanistan, <http://hmg.gov.uk/en/conference/communiqué/>

In 2005 HQ of the SEEBRIG³ took part in ISAF operation for six months. It was commanded by a Bulgarian brigadier general, and there were 11 more Bulgarian military personnel in the HQ. An Air Traffic Control contingent 70 men strong from the Bulgarian Air Force was in charge of Kabul Airport for 3 months in 2006.

Following Riga Summit in 2006 and new commitments taken by all NATO member countries our government took a decision to significantly increase participation into the operation by a mechanized infantry company.

On Sep 2008 the UN Security Council issued Resolution 1833 that extended mandate of ISAF. Consequently it was done two more times.

In order to further contribute to ISAF efforts to normalize the country we increased our troops there by another company and a guard platoon. Thus by 2008 from mere 32 men strong contingent at the inception of ISAF our troop level in operation reached around 530 personnel.

By the beginning of March, 2009 constitution of the Bulgarian Armed Forces' force in Afghanistan was as follows.

Regional Command CENTER (RC-C)

- A Mechanized Infantry Company;
- A Guard Platoon;
- A Military Police Squad;
- Staff Officers;
- A Medical Team within the French Military Hospital.

The Mechanized Infantry Company within the frame of the Italian Battle Group conducted escorts, day and night patrolling, protection and securing of base INVICTA, and maintaining a platoon size QRF with 15 minutes notice to act. In October 2009 its mission was discontinued and it was reissued a new mission.

The Guard Platoon was executing tasks on securing and guarding base WAREHOUSE, and convoying and escorting elements of German Logistic Component. In October 2009 its mission was discontinued.

ISAF HQ and RC-C HQ staff officers, MP squad within the Croatian MP company conducted tasks in accordance with their duties and responsibilities, SOP, and ROE for the mission.

Regional Command SOUTH (RC-S)

- A Guard Company;
- An OMLT.

The guard company conducted its tasks on securing the inner perimeter of the Kandahar Airfield. It was performing its tasks by 24/7 duty on the observation towers, maintaining constant readiness, guarding and protecting Entry Control Point 4 by a platoon size unit, keeping in constant readiness of a platoon QRF with a 15 minutes notice to act, demonstration of force at ECP3 and ECP 4, and maintaining readiness for terrain illumination by a mortar platoon.

³ SEEBRIG-South Eastern European Brigade

The first OMLT deployed in the beginning of 2009 to Base LINDZEY which was situated within the inner perimeter of Base HERO, Kandahar. The OMLT was detached to Logistic Battalion HQ and it consisted of equal number of Bulgarian and US soldiers.

The OMLT was in charge of organization and execution of ANA military formations and staff officers training. It was also taking part in unit exercises and real tasks execution. Together with units from ANA the OMLT conducted joint exercises with the British Guard Unit. The team organized, liaised, and coordinated all activities between ANA and ISAF. It also organized reception and distribution of humanitarian aid for local population.

Regional Command WEST (RC-W)

- Two medical teams within the Spanish Military Hospital.

The medical teams, deployed in the Spanish Hospital in Herat, and the one in French Hospital in Kabul carried out routine roster duties and performed operations on their own or in collaboration with other international medical teams. They took care not only for ISAF personnel but also for the local population.

Regional Command NORTH (RC-N)

- We contributed to the Hungarian PRT with two commissioned officers.

In 2009 our Government discontinued missions of the guard platoon and participation in the Hungarian PRT.

SFOR Operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bulgarian Armed Forces have been taking part in operations in B&H since June, 1997. We started with an engineer platoon 38 men strong. Till 2001 there were 9 platoons rotated. In November 2001 the engineer platoon was replaced by a mechanized infantry platoon. A Bulgarian transport platoon within the logistic group HELBA was contributing to the operation in the period of July, 1998 to January, 2001. From January, 2002 to December, 2004 a Guard Company 100 men strong took care of security and protection of SFOR HQ, and upon transition of responsibilities to EUFOR operation ALTHEA this company has still been conducting the same task for the EUFOR HQ.

KFOR Operation in Kosovo

Bulgarian Armed Forces have taken part in KFOR since the beginning of 2000. We deployed an engineer platoon within the composition of the Dutch contingent. After withdrawal of the Dutch contingent, the platoon was detached to a German engineer company. The platoon was conducting tasks on housing construction for local Albanians, maintenance, repairs and reconstruction of water supply, electric supply and miscellaneous infrastructure systems. They also contributed to fortifying civil and military facilities, took part in CIMIC projects, and performed routine duties in MNTF-S. Bulgarian Armed Forces also contributed to the operation with staff officers to KFOR HQ.

A Mobile Training Team conducted tasks on planning and preparation of Kosovo Forces training activities.

Since December 2009 missions of engineer platoon and MTT were discontinued and they redeployed.

NATO Training Mission in Iraq

We took part in this mission with two commissioned officers.

NATO Naval Operation in the Mediterranean ACTIVE ENDEVOR

Since 2006 Bulgarian Navy has taken part annually in operation ACTIVE ENDEAVOR to counter and hamper terrorist activities in the Mediterranean basin. The Navy participated in the operation with a frigate.

Operation Iraqi Freedom

Beside NATO operations Bulgarian Armed Forces took part in stabilization and reconstruction operation phase of operation Iraqi Freedom. Five infantry battalions consecutively took part in the operation from 2003 to 2005. Situation demanded for the coalition of the willing there to shift attention and efforts, so that we discontinued this mission and took over security of Refugee camp in Ashraf from 2005 till 2008, and consequently a guard company contributed to security and protection of another internment facility until the end of 2009.

3. CURRENT OPERATIONS

Currently we take part in ISAF by the following units and missions.

Regional Command CENTER (RC-C)

- A Mechanized Infantry Company;
- A Military Police Squad;
- Staff Officers;
- A Medical Team within the French Military Hospital.

In the beginning of October 2009 the mechanized infantry company deployed for new operation to FOB PHOENIX and took over new mission to secure and guard the ground zone of Kabul Airport. The company was detached to Multinational Force Protection Group. The company is tasked to conduct security and protection operations of Kabul Airport ground zone. It is also tasked if needed to be ready for execution of riot control operations and support of law and order in the area. The company also maintains regular duties at FOB PHOENIX, FOB KAIA and OP SHIPKA.

There is no change of mission for the MP squad, staff officers at ISAF and RC-C HQs, and medical team at the French Military Hospital.

Regional Command SOUTH

There is no change of mission for the Guard Company. It is in charge of security of Kandahar Airfield. It conducts guard tasks there, and also maintains RRF, and illumination of the perimeter if needed.

The OMLT is performing training of ANA. Now it is 20 men strong team. It is planned for the team to be further expanded for the next rotation up to 22 Bulgarian commissioned officers.

Regional Command WEST

There are two medical teams 5 personnel each in the Spanish Military Hospital in Herat. They perform routine duty rosters, and take care not only for the military from ISAF but also for the local population.

KFOR CURRENT OPERATION

There is a MTT of 16 military personnel strong of that contributes to training of Kosovo Defense Forces. There are also staff officers at KFOR HQ.

NTMI

We contribute to NTMI with two commissioned officers that perform staff duties there.

ALTEA

Bulgarian Armed Forces participate in the operation of EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina with a guard company which is in charge of security of the HQ. It is envisaged that this year their mission be discontinued.

To conclude with this chapter I would like to inform the auditorium that currently we contribute to ISAF by 530 military personnel as follows:

- RC-C-212 military personnel;
- RC-S-309 military personnel;
- RC-W-9 military personnel.

The Minister of Defense of the Republic of Bulgaria announced recently that he and Defense Staff are considering increasing our troop level to ISAF by another 100 personnel by the end of this year. They have been purporting a further improvement of our contribution to ISAF by consolidating our units as a single battle group within one garrison. This will happen when conditions are favorable to reshuffle units.

4. LESSONS LEARNED

In the course of participation in operations abroad we have experienced some problems. There are significant amount of forces, equipment and resources that we devote to these operations so that we must subtract huge amount of funding from our military budget. Another problem that we have struggled to solve is the mere distance of the AOR from home stations of the deployed units⁴. It makes it difficult for our commanders and headquarters to supply and support deployed troops in timely manner. Our leadership is trying hard to obtain reasonable airlift capabilities in order to deploy self sufficiently forces and resources. At the moment we still have some deficiencies in this field. We believe that perspective of using allied airlift capabilities with regard to C17 airplanes will resolve this need.

There have been difficulties for our troops to cope with to include factors like climate, local culture, religious idiosyncrasies, and language proficiency of the enlisted personnel, but we have learned our lessons and currently we are organizing training in such a manner that these factors do not hamper significantly mission accomplishment.

The Bulgarian Armed Forces have gained a significant experience in operations for support of international peace and security for the last 15 years. We have improved a lot our legislation concerning deploying troops abroad. Now it allows our leadership to deploy organizational units instead of mixed ones as it used to be before. We have also improved a lot all processes in a mission cycle: selection of personnel, training, testing and validation and overall preparation for the mission. What is more, we have improved not only in tactical and operational terms but also in strategic manner. Nowadays more and more

⁴ Just for information: distance to Iraq equals approximately 2 500 km, and distance to Afghanistan equals approximately 4 500 km.

levels of the Government are involved in strategic and operational decision making. Participation in NATO lead crisis response operations has transformed to a comprehensive State mission with a great importance that everybody pays very close attention.

We have achieved significant improvement in equipping the troops for PSO. New clothing with improved protective and thermal features was provided. The personnel is geared with stronger and lighter armored vests, better night vision goggles, and night aiming sights, personal web gear and all gadgets necessary for the soldier.

Transportation means have become also better now. We broadly use 4D high mobility multipurpose vehicles, APC and transport trucks. They ensure better protection for personnel and higher reliability in operations.

We concentrated attention on gathering, analyzing, storing and disseminating lessons learned from operations. In this respect we intensively use NATO LL Database, and some other allies' ones. To this end we are working intensively on developing our own LL Database that accumulates national experience in operations but also includes applicable allied experience as well.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude my presentation I would like to reiterate that the Bulgarian Armed Forces has improved a lot and gained significant experience in NATO led crisis response operations. As a staunch ally we support all activities that contribute to consolidation of international peace and security. We have learned our lessons from all these operations and intend to further improve our capabilities in order to support all decisions and actions of the Alliance concerning support to global security.

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