



NDC Conference Report

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The Future of Airborne Forces in NATO

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Introduction

One of NATO's core tasks, as outlined in the Strategic Concept, is for the Alliance to prevent crises, manage conflicts and stabilize post conflict situations. This means NATO must maintain unique conflict management skills and the capability to intervene when and where necessary, by rapidly deploying and sustaining robust military forces in the field. To accomplish this essential task, the NATO Response Force (NRF) is designated as the high-readiness and technologically-advanced multinational force that the Alliance can deploy when so directed. However, since political consensus and the NATO decision-making process take time to develop, nations may decide to intervene unilaterally, bilaterally or multilaterally. In this type of scenario, where a sizeable entry force is required to prevent or manage crises, nations may rely on their parachute-capable airborne units to spearhead an operation while an international mandate is developed and a coalition formed. Such forces may also help to shape future intervention operations under NATO command. Looking forward, especially to the post-ISAF environment, NATO should seek to leverage the high-readiness airborne units, separately or in conjunction with the NRF, as an integral component of Smart Defence and the Connected Forces Initiative (CFI), to improve crisis response, to advance Alliance transformation, to enhance operational preparedness and to field military forces that can operate together in any environment.

The Future of Airborne Forces in NATO

On 12 April 2013, the NATO Defense College hosted a Conference and Workshop entitled "The Future of Airborne Forces in NATO". Participants at the Conference included commanders, deputies and representatives from NATO countries' national parachute formations (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, United Kingdom and United States), for an in-depth discussion and analysis of prospects for NATO's airborne forces in the short to mid-term, focusing on ways to enhance interoperability and share best practices. The Workshop was divided into four discussion sessions: 1) The Strategic Relevance of Airborne Forces in NATO Operations; 2) Common Challenges and Opportunities facing NATO Airborne Forces; 3) Building Airborne/Airlift Partnerships; and 4) Smart Defence: Building Interoperable Airborne Forces in NATO.

This conference report provides insights from each of the subject areas and includes practical recommendations for national and Alliance consideration.

The Strategic Relevance of Airborne Forces in NATO Operations

Airborne operations make any spot on the globe accessible, to achieve tactical or operational surprise for subsequent, larger operations. It is the fastest way to get the largest force on the ground in the shortest time. The US can get an airborne brigade combat team on the ground in 45 minutes. Being parachute dropped onto the objective may not always prove necessary, however: what is more important is the high state of readiness that airborne formations maintain and their availability for immediate impact. Airborne units can move quickly to set up a trip wire, or act as a deterrent, they are able to deploy rapidly, while being light enough to move quickly, and are heavy enough to secure a lodgement long enough for the arrival of follow-on forces.

Parachute units should be capable of conducting Joint Forcible Entry Operations, defined by US doctrine as seizing and holding lodgements against armed opposition. A lodgement is a designated area in a hostile or potentially hostile operational area that, when seized and held, makes the continuous landing of troops and material possible and provides space for the manoeuvring of subsequent operations. Forcible entry demands careful planning and thorough preparation; synchronized and rapid execution; and leader initiative at every level to deal with friction, chance, and opportunity. This translates into the ability of airborne forces to conduct a range of missions at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.

The employment or mere threat of employment of airborne units to spearhead an operation has great strategic value and demonstrates significant political resolve. For example, in September 1994, with US Special Forces on the ground and paratroopers en route for an airborne assault into Port-au-Prince, Haiti, the synchronization of diplomatic efforts with a military show of force proved decisive in the reinstatement of Haitian President Aristide. The pending operation was thus changed from a forcible entry operation to permissive entry, as over 20,000 troops in a 15-nation Multi-National Force air-landed or arrived in sea ports for Operation Restore Democracy. France's recent airborne assault into Timbuktu in Mali in January of this year highlights the usefulness of retaining the capabilities necessary to quickly gain access into denied areas, where the host-nation government may lack control, or when indigenous security forces require assistance. Some 250 French paratroopers boarded three C-160s and two C-130s located at an airfield just outside Abidjan, in the Ivory Coast. Their mission was to conduct a static line combat parachute jump into the northern part of Timbuktu, thereby preventing Islamist extremists from escaping into the northern deserts. This airborne operation clearly illustrated the significant political statement being made by the French government, not only to the people of Mali but to Islamist extremists. French political resolve was clearly demonstrated by flying five aircraft several hundred miles at night, identifying the drop zone using unmanned aerial vehicles and global positioning satellites, parachuting the force into a foreign country and then linking up with host-nation ground forces. No other ground forces could have converged more quickly in a land-locked country.

It is conceivable that future operations will require the same speed, mobility and discipline shown by airborne units, to gain a foothold and link up with indigenous security forces and secure a lodgement for follow-on forces. These missions could range from kinetic forced entry operations to humanitarian and disaster relief operations. These examples, and the capabilities inherent in air delivery, demonstrate the greatest strength of airborne forces – a capability to rapidly project strategic power over great distances. Airborne forces are characteristically flexible, customized and ready and able to provide a “surprise effect”. The employment of airborne forces requires prudent planning but can create a disproportionately huge effect compared to its size or capabilities, and may be the opening move to seize the initiative, evacuate non-combatants or quell civil unrest.

Common Challenges and Opportunities Facing NATO Airborne Forces

Faced with shrinking defence budgets, a decade of contributions to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan and pressing domestic issues, nations are reviewing the size, composition and roles of their armed forces – including airborne units. In a resource-constrained environment, the challenge for airborne units comes increasingly from within militaries, not outside, as competition for manpower and funding increases. But an airborne unit is a cost-effective option, as light infantry airborne units are cheaper and more deployable than heavier units, in terms of equipment, arms, transport and training.

Another challenge stems from the increase in the number of Special Operations Forces (SOF). In most countries, airborne units provide the primary pool of recruits for SOF. For example, in the United Kingdom, over 55 percent of special operators come from less than 2.5 percent of the Army – the Parachute Regiment. While it is difficult for airborne units to lose the cream of their crop to SOF, it adds credence for nations to maintain sufficient numbers of young paratroopers to develop the discipline and the proficiency required to be a special operator. The fact that most SOF personnel originates from airborne units is beneficial to the professionalization of the force and to the integration of capabilities on the battlefield. Indeed, the integration of SOF, who use parachuting primarily as a means of infiltration, with airborne units who use it as an entry method for combat operations, combines speed with mass, in sufficient numbers to have a greater operational effect when required.

Regardless of the size of national airborne forces, all are currently challenged by lack of access to aircraft. This limits the training of qualified aircrews, jumpmasters and pathfinders, as well as paratroopers. Airborne proficiency and interoperability between air components and airborne units were hindered by the war in Afghanistan, where airborne assault operations were rarely employed. In fact, for US airborne brigades rotating to Afghanistan, the number one priority when returning to home base was to maintain individual jump proficiency for pay purposes, short of being able to practice airborne assault as a cohesive unit. With the limited number of aircraft and aircrews trained and available for airborne operations, most airborne forces are currently limited to battalion level airborne proficiency instead of brigade level.

The ability to conduct large-scale airborne operations has clearly atrophied over the last decade due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. All NATO airborne forces are experiencing loss of access to airlift. Currently, in the US, only about 25 percent of C-17 aircrews are air-drop qualified and there are only about five jumpmasters in an airborne company. Due to budget constraints, the United States Air Force has cut the number of annual training packages with the 82nd Airborne Division from 10-12 per year to 2-3 per year. Today, the United States would not be able to muster the same show of force that was en route to Haiti, which consisted of more than 60 aircraft and thousands of paratroopers, because the air crews and airborne units have not trained or exercised together. As one participant noted, it is easier to go to war with the 82nd Airborne Division today than it is to train with them.

As the United States continues to draw back from Afghanistan, the 82nd Airborne Division is reemphasizing its role as the Army's main contributor to the Global Response Force (GRF). The GRF has been activated 18 times in the last 10 years, 16 times for Iraq and Afghanistan, twice for humanitarian purposes. The GRF maintains three characteristics; scalable in size, able to be customized for specific missions, and maintaining high states of readiness and responsiveness. For NATO, the same should hold true, with airborne units slated to deploy in advance of, or participate within, the NATO Response Force. As a high-readiness force, airborne units are versatile, relevant and capable of deploying at anytime, anywhere around the globe, by forcible entry if required, to accomplish shared objectives set out by the North Atlantic Council.

For ISAF, the war was very predictable and automated. Future conflicts may be very different. This requires progressing in the art of crisis response, with nations having a core ability in airborne assault operations and forcible entry operations. It is unlikely that a NATO combined airborne force

would jump onto the same objective, from the same aircraft or even in the same formation, as variances in aircraft specifications require different separation of aircraft in flight. It is more likely that different nations within a coalition would jump onto multiple drop zones in an area of operations, and conduct coordinated operations and activities under a single ground commander.

NATO is currently at a crossroads, as nations are at different phases of withdrawing from Afghanistan, while simultaneously seeking to cut costs and increase responsiveness through the NRF, Smart Defence and the Connected Forces Initiative. National airborne units can collectively respond to this challenge by incorporating units into the NRF exercise program or by building airborne requirements into the NRF. Another practical measure could be to leverage the UNIFIED ENDEAVOR exercise, currently used to prepare nations for deployment to Afghanistan, as an exercise for the airborne units to operate with national air forces in a crisis response or contingency operation scenario. The airborne units should be used as part of a larger exercise and not just exercised on their own. The US is also open to having nations observe or participate in exercising the Global Response Force. Nations could also work with US Africa Command and develop proposals for training and improving interoperability for strategic airlift, C4ISR, airborne operations, and integration of SOF with airborne units to train or conduct operations with indigenous security forces on the African continent.

Another challenge is that NATO does not have a single voice that speaks for the airborne community as a whole. An airborne Centre of Excellence, either within the NATO structure or led by a framework nation, such as the United States, would improve Alliance responsiveness, leveraging the existing capabilities and training conditions embedded within NATO partners and linking them in an airborne Net of Excellence. Sharing best practices, exercising together to improve cohesion, developing airborne-focused liaison officer exchange programs and having small units train and exercise together all help improve interoperability at a low cost to nations. A Centre of Excellence within NATO's organizational structures or through a framework nation, promoting a virtual community of interest that brings together airlift and airborne personnel, would be beneficial to learn the lessons from past operations or current ones like Mali, and make progress in interoperability and commonality. Maintaining airborne units in a high state of readiness with shared techniques, tactics and procedures among nations to enable rapid early entry operations can thus be a critical enabler for the Alliance.

Building Airborne/Airlift Partnerships

Airborne operations are typically conducted as part of a larger operation requiring the integration of ground and air command and control, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, air power, fire, medical evacuation and coordination with host-nation actors. This requires interoperability in a joint and combined operational environment, and close work with national air forces which provide airlift and other forms of air support (such as counter-air, close air support, tactical air reconnaissance, aerial re-supply and air interdiction in support of the ground forces). The key to building airborne/airlift partnerships is to ensure that both air force and airborne units have the opportunity to train to standard on their mission-essential tasks during exercises. Training and exercises must incorporate tasks beyond airlift, that are useful and appealing to air forces, such as: short take-off and landing, container delivery drop systems, limited visibility air land missions and penetrating integrated air defence systems.

NATO airlift/airborne exercises would benefit the Alliance by identifying gaps in interoperability. There is no intent to standardize all airborne equipment, such as parachutes or even aircraft within the Alliance – despite the future introduction of the A400M aircraft that will provide a common platform for European paratroopers to jump from – but there is a requirement to improve compatibility and identify modifications in advance of operations so as to improve interoperability. Ultimately, NATO could act as a central clearing house for national airborne tactics, techniques and procedures to make it easier for nations to meet identified standards.

The business of interoperability between services within a nation, and between members of the Alliance, transcends all phases of an airborne operation and the mechanism for command and control requires continuous communications en route to the objective area and on the ground, including with host nation elements. In the US, Joint Force Vulnerability Exercises train both the Air Force and Airborne Forces by conducting joint planning and execution of air operations from the pre-deployment phase right through to the air assault. This includes executing offensive air operations, counter-air operations and suppression of enemy air defences with paratroopers in the formations and culminates with the battalion, brigade or division command posts actually jumping. The goal is to exercise unity of command and achieve unity of effort between the services. The 82nd Airborne Division's Air Standing Operating Procedures now include chapters on how to integrate operationally with the US Air Force. For NATO, similar exercises for airborne units and air forces with detailed SOPs would benefit the responsiveness of the Alliance. US Airborne forces are rapidly fielding advanced C2 capabilities which should be shared with Allied airborne units to effectively communicate en route and in the objective area. In particular, NATO's Battlefield Information Collection and Exploitation Systems (BICES) network offers a promising platform for secure communications.

As nations adapt to fewer resources, the challenge is to maintain a range of airlift capabilities, acknowledging that supporting airborne units is the fastest way to project meaningful forces to contingency areas, such as getting a brigade size element on the ground. Ultimately, it is not about the parachutist, it is about the effect you get from the light, mobile, agile and lethal airborne force once it hits the ground.

Smart Defence: Building Interoperable Airborne Forces in NATO

At the Chicago Summit in May 2012, NATO leaders agreed to embrace Smart Defence to ensure that the Alliance can develop, acquire and maintain the capabilities required to achieve its goals for NATO Forces 2020. Airborne forces with the capability for rapid deployment to spearhead operations, in concert with joint forces, clearly fit these criteria. Building momentum for airborne inclusion in Smart Defence requires positive movement from the bottom up, by uniting national airborne units through bilateral exchange programs and training, and from the top down by creating exercise scenarios where multinational response forces are integrated into the NRF and can rehearse contingency operations.

It is unlikely that NATO will reorganize in a manner that combines air and land components, especially at a time when the Land Component Command in Turkey is just being formed. Additionally, the United States may not be in the best position as a framework nation due to its distance from Europe. However, nations could, on a rotating basis, host airborne units for combined exercises under a joint framework to improve interoperability. Exercising non-combatant evacuation operation scenarios is a task benefiting all nations and the coalition. Command post exercises are another cost-effective method to share command and control procedures without involving large numbers of troops, such as employing airborne platoons from several nations in friendship jumps. (For example, COLIBRI is an existing Combined Joint Airborne exercise on the European continent. This annual exercise is organised by Germany or France with an additional contribution from Belgium and the Netherlands, and could be used for further developing the interoperability of Airborne Forces.)

Bilaterally, nations can build up existing cooperation, such as the Franco-British Defence Cooperation Treaty and the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) concept, whereby nations carry out airborne operations bilaterally or through NATO. By signing a Declaration of Intent, Germany and the Netherlands too decided to intensify military cooperation. The aim of this cooperation is the integration of the Dutch 11 Airmobile Brigade into the German Rapid Forces Division (Division Schnelle Kräfte). Through this integration the Division obtains bi-national airborne capabilities. These efforts in cooperation, however, could be extended to other nations to pursue the integration of ISR, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, satellite communications, strategic airlift and airborne operations.

Coordinating with Partners, in particular through the European Defence Agency and the European Air Transport Command (EATC), is another key aspect of Smart Defence. The EATC includes the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg for air transport, air-to-air refuelling and aeromedical evacuation. NATO could cooperate with the EATC to pool air resources, such as the C-17 consortium for strategic lift and the A400M for parachute drops. These initiatives could also help contributing nations to identify equipment issues, such as outfitting the UK's C-17 for airborne operations or procuring equipment for on-loading and off-loading vehicles for air-land operations.

Within Smart Defence, it is important to separate process from content. Procedurally, a centralized airborne capability within NATO structures is not imminent. But it is clear that air forces and airborne units must work together in a joint environment, perhaps under a lead nation sponsored by ACO, with Allies and Partners working in federation and able to opt in and opt out of training and exercises to build interoperability. The US Joint Forcible Entry doctrine is but one example that could be explored further by Allied Command Transformation and Allied Command Operations, to improve Smart Defence procurement, identify force requirements, integrate with the NRF for rapid response and institutionalize best practices. Joint Forcible Entry ties together rapid deployment, strategic airlift, crisis response, and operating on the ground in austere environments. At this level, what is critical is not whether a paratrooper can jump out of another nation's aircraft, but that aircraft from different nations can participate in the same missions within an area of operations. Multinational airborne operations under a joint mission command can be worked out through combined planning and rehearsals and exercise scenarios can be elevated to include the integration of C4ISR and the defeat of enemy air defences.

Conclusion

Airborne Interoperability creates options for political leaders, and there can be no doubt about the level of commitment if nations, or NATO, deploy national response forces from strategic distances to a foreign country in an airborne operation. While it is tempting to rely on SOF and drones to achieve immediate effects, there is a clear case for developing multinational air force and airborne units capable of quick response and short-duration operations. With the end in sight for the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, now is the time to coordinate the activities that will improve interoperability and increase the responsiveness of the Alliance for the missions of the future.

List of Participants by Organization

Belgium: Defence Staff
Germany: Division Spezielle Operationen, Airborne Brigade 31
Italy: Folgore Parachute Brigade
Portugal: Brigada de Reacção Rápida
Spain: Brigada Paracaidista Almogávares
United Kingdom: Headquarters 16 Air Assault Brigade
United States of America: XVIII Airborne Corps and 82nd Airborne Division
SHAPE Headquarters
NATO Defense College