



If not now, when? The Nordic EU Battlegroup

by Jan Joel Andersson

On 1 January 2015, the Nordic EU Battlegroup (NBG) began its six-month stint as the EU's rapid reaction force on standby. The 2,400 strong NBG is led by the Swedes for the third time and mainly consists of troops from Sweden (1,900), with contingents from Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway. Well-trained and equipped by all accounts, the NBG is ready for action if called upon by the EU. Strategic sea and air-lift capabilities are in place, and the seven participating nations have laid the groundwork for swift national approval should they be called upon by Brussels.

Although Battlegroups (BG) have been on standby continuously since 2005, the EU has never used one. As a result, many are now wondering if an EU BG will ever deploy, or if the concept needs to be revised or even scrapped altogether. Some, like former Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, have publicly warned that if a BG is not deployed soon, the concept as such will fade away. Others argue that the battlegroups are important drivers for European defence transformation and regional military cooperation, regardless of whether they have seen action or not.

The power of the force

The Battlegroup allows the EU to deploy troops and military equipment quickly to regions as far as 6,000km away from Brussels for a minimum of 30

days – a time period which can be extended by a further three months if the BG is properly supplied. A BG must be capable of deploying to a theatre of operations within five days of the approval of a Crisis Management Concept and begin its mission within 10 days of the decision by the Council to launch an operation. An EU BG is capable of acting alone or as an entry force in an initial phase of a larger mission. Although limited in size, an EU BG is capable of engaging in the whole spectrum of crisis management operations, from humanitarian and evacuation missions to conflict prevention and peace-enforcement tasks.

In a similar manner to other EU Battlegroups, the NBG is centred on an infantry battalion supported by tactical and logistical units. The combat units of the NBG consist of a lightly armoured motorised infantry battalion and a company-sized rapid reaction force. This force, and most of the core battalion, can be air-lifted in C-17s and C-130s transport planes.

In addition, the NBG includes a strong Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance and Target Acquisition (ISTAR) Task Force for intelligence gathering and electronic warfare. The ISTAR Task Force also includes two human intelligence (HUMINT) collection teams.

Other notable support capabilities attached to the NBG are a geospatial support group for collecting and disseminating geographic information



(improving situational awareness through imagery analysis and rapid map production); a Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) unit to establish and develop partnerships with external civilian actors; an engineering company capable of countering improvised explosives devices (IEDs) and constructing roads and bridges; and a chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) hazards unit.

The NBG is also supported by a Local Air Picture (LAP) unit which uses ground-based radar to monitor air space, locate enemy weaponry and warn of incoming rocket, artillery and mortar (RAM) fire.

Furthermore, the NBG contains an Expeditionary Air Wing (EAW) able to provide combat air patrols, ground attack missions, air reconnaissance, and air traffic control and airfield services, including cargo and passenger handling operations. The EAW consists of a fighter unit of eight JAS-39C Gripen fighter-bombers, an air tactical transport unit of two C-130 Hercules aircraft and two helicopter units for troop transport and medical evacuation.

Should I stay...

Given that the EU has never deployed a BG, many analysts are now convinced that it will never do so. There are several reasons for this. One of them is cost: it is expensive to train and certify a BG, and even more costly to deploy it. Since those states represented in the BG on standby must foot the bill, they must be both able and willing to pay.

Second, sending an EU BG may simply not be the right way to respond to the crisis at hand. After all, a European infantry battalion may not be the instrument needed, and the limited time of operation (30-120 days) set by the BG concept is also an issue.

Third, the troops on standby may be needed at home. This argument has attracted more attention recently because the NGB's units are drawn from northern Europe at a time when the Russian military is more active in the Baltic Sea region than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Some leading defence analysts have openly argued that it may not be in the interest of Sweden, for example, to send 1,900 of its best trained troops to Central Africa at this particular point in time.

...or should I go?

The BG concept draws on the experiences of the EU's first autonomous military deployment outside Europe in 2003. In Operation Artemis, a European battlegroup-sized rapid response force successfully demonstrated the EU's ability to operate autonomously far from Europe and make a real difference on the ground. Authorised by the

UN Security Council in May 2013, some 1,800 (mostly French) soldiers were quickly deployed to Bunia in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in order to secure an airfield and protect civilians from gross human rights violations until a larger UN

force could be sent. The French-led force notably included a unit of Swedish special forces, as well as smaller contributions from several other EU and non-EU countries.

Operation Artemis showed that a BG-sized force can make a difference and that the EU could deploy troops quickly. Drawing on this success, the EU chose to pursue the BG concept. But after ten years without being deployed, a growing number of prominent figures in Brussels and in member state capitals are now saying 'use them or lose them'. They argue that the significant costs of training, certifying and keeping BGs on standby are increasingly difficult to justify at a time of strained budgets and competing defence needs. Many agree that the BG concept has contributed to important defence reforms in Europe and provides opportunities for regional defence cooperation across the continent, but it will be harder to advertise the benefits if the BGs never deploy.

Lastly but most importantly, while the 'perfect' crisis may not arise while the NBG is on standby, it is difficult to envision a BG more ready to deploy. Should the NBG not see action, it would not spell the immediate end of BGs as a concept. But it would be a shame if the non-deployment of the NBG were to be remembered as the beginning of the end.

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