



<INTERVIEW> **SKOLKAN: NATO's operational battlespace**

THINK DIFFERENT





The Joint Warfare Centre's PAO had the pleasure of talking to Mr Simon Dewing, one of the masterminds behind "Skolkan", about the history and inspiration behind NATO's operational battlespace for two/three-level command post and single-service exercises since 2012.

Interviewed by Inci Kucukaksoy, Public Affairs Officer, Joint Warfare Centre



Above: Mr Dewing during an OPFOR meeting. **PHOTO:** JWC PAO **Top:** The Three Swords, Issue No. 21.

In 2012, JWC launched the fictitious Skolkan setting and scenario, which transformed Scandinavia into a potential crisis area for NATO and completely changed the training platform for NATO Response Force (NRF). Turning back the clock, what do you remember the most about the creation of Skolkan?

— I remember the enormity of the challenge. JWC was provided with very clear guidance from NATO, through SHAPE J7, and the process of questions and answers was informative in that it allowed us to establish the key baseline for the countries, the type of exercises envisaged and the timeline. The fact that we kept to the schedule and delivered our first exercise scenario was a success story in itself and a complement to the team. The premise for Skolkan was decided outside of JWC, but the remit was six countries of various political structures, graduated escalation over a three-year exercise period and a country that was able and willing to threaten NATO.

What is the secret recipe for creating such a comprehensive repository of scripted data, including maps, biographies and peer or

near-peer adversaries?

— Relationships. Only one of the countries was meant to be unstable for a non-Article 5 crisis. Relationships are international, national, partisan, political, social and economic and, of course, military. It is the threat of destruction that catches the imagination. Confrontation between people and countries happens all the time, but it becomes challenging when one person, a group or a country wishes to change the outcome and turn the confrontation into a conflict. Here, the dynamics come alive and the issues take hold. But before that, you will need to establish the country's setting and scenario; start with a blank sheet of paper and build relations between countries. When you have established their relations, you can "develop" the countries, which, in the case of Skolkan, are six countries that have to try and get on with each other. Inevitably, building countries requires situating that country in a larger setting. Europe has so many examples, but you can also expand world-wide. Low and behold, we used North Island, one of New Zealand's two main islands, for one of the countries, and named it "Lindsey".

What key expertise and experience are required to create such a complex scenario?

— Firstly, you need to understand who you are writing it for; in other words, you must know your Training Audience. In the Skolkan case, our Training Audience was a strategic and operational level headquarters, which meant that the requirement was for a complex environment where politics-meets-strategy meets the operational military environment.

Second, you need to understand the political-military context very well, and here you do not have to be ex-military, although it helps. Third, you need the experience on top of the education and training to make the right judgements and to be able to answer what is essential and what is desirable. Moreover, you need to be flexible and adaptive and to keep in the back of your mind that the Training Audience always seeks complexity.

In my opinion, unconventional thinking and pushing the boundaries developed through experience in the military environment is important. By this I mean that being an unconventional thinking conventional soldier, you will be able to think through complex scenarios



and actions and at the same time understand how to challenge the conventional thinking and processes at the operational decision-making level. Then there is the international relations; the quicker you understand the relationship between the political-strategic-operational level, the sooner you can explain the "why".

Last but not least, you need a vision. Your only limitation is your imagination. By vision I mean that when one is developing a setting, one should always think to the future and consider how a specific issue will challenge the commands that need to be exercised. When we talk about conflict and war, we usually mean the military style, but, of course, when one looks at the financial crisis of 2009, this was indeed an economic war, although it was unintended. These can be as disastrous as military wars. Such is their impact on the lives of people and the nations throughout the world. There is this constant confrontation and it does not have to be just military. In my opinion the current oil market downturn is an example of a comprehensive approach by a dominant oil country deliberately adopting a policy to maintain their dominance of the market. Flooding the market or withholding supply are a means of influencing markets for national

ends. Russia is in an information war with the West, trying to dominate the narrative and using multiple means to change the outcome. It is a political war about the power to influence geo-politics within its national strategic zone. This brings it in conflict with its neighbours. The current migration challenges in Europe have undermined EU's cohesion with more success than if a belligerent nation using military means tried to achieve the same outcome. These challenges are political but they all shape the environment in which the military must function. The point here is that our exercise settings and scenarios must provide the context for conflict using multiple instruments of power and ensure NATO command and force structures are challenged and trained to fight the future conflicts, not the past ones.

Can we realistically address future conflicts through training?

— This was one of the great successes of Skolkan; it was in the European geo-strategic space. The first tranche of Skolkan concerned "Bothnia"—an authoritarian state based on the old East Germany, built to threaten Estonia. Remember that this was 2011, so we could easily use the Baltic States' anxieties and real-world issues in the exercise, and more importantly,

SKOLKAN, IN A NUTSHELL: The protection of NATO territory is the focal point in the Skolkan training scenario, which is commissioned by Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in January 2010 and developed by the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) in 27 months. It transformed Scandinavia into a potential crisis area for NATO, including the Partner Nations of Sweden and Finland, who were also transformed into fictitious countries in various political/military states of conflict.

Skolkan was first launched during exercise STEADFAST JUNCTURE 12 (1-8 November 2012). Set in Estonia, this first Skolkan exercise saw NATO conducting a **Visible Assurance** mission to demonstrate its commitment to its Member Nations, namely Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, while providing significant challenges to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

The countries of Skolkan include Bothnia, Torrike, Lindsey, Arnland, Framland and Otso. Currently, Skolkan has two settings: **Skolkan 1.0** presents a complex Article 5 collective defence of a NATO Member Nation that enables interaction between the Nations and the NATO Command Structure at all echelons, whereas **Skolkan 2.0** provides a complex non-Article 5 setting, in which a failing state contributes to regional instability, leading to a NATO-led Crisis Response Operation (CRO).

SKOLKAN EXERCISES



STEADFAST JUNCTURE 12



STEADFAST JAZZ 13



TRIDENT JAGUAR 14



TRIDENT JUNCTURE 14



TRIDENT LANCE 14





the Training Audience could relate to that. For the first time in many years, NATO was now exercising on its borders with a credible threat. We even used some hostile activities, which now fall under the umbrella of Hybrid Threats. The problem is that the military prefers attributable, conventional threats, rather than deniable, unconventional, threats. This was a challenge, but subsequent real activities east of NATO have shown that we were indeed exercising reality. The first run out of Skolkan was exercise STEADFAST JUNCTURE 2012, where we introduced "rogue" units operating on NATO territory, which were denied to exist by the adversary. At that time, there was a push back by the Training Audience over credibility. But, the events in Ukraine confirmed that our thinking was on the right lines. Every war or conflict has been unconventional, even when armies faced each other in a linear fashion. Every successful commander has used unconventional strategies to gain an advantage, and those who did not are now on the scrapheap of history.

At the end of the exercise, who wins?

— Each exercise challenges the Training Audience to plan and execute at the operational level. It's not a question of whether they win; but what each member of the audience takes away

Skolkan provides all the ingredients to challenge and pressure the military decision-making process.

and gains by the experience—and I think they do learn a lot. The uniqueness of JWC exercises is that they challenge the Training Audience to plan within a political context and deliver the direction and guidance to the tactical level. This operational level of command is extremely difficult because it occurs within the conflict or war, not in battle. The commander and his staff also have to deliver the end-state, which is usually a political one. Skolkan provides all the ingredients to challenge and pressure the military decision-making process, which is executed under simulated public scrutiny through media role players and usually within constricted time lines.

Can you explain how do you ensure that the different aspects of this operational environment (economic, social, diplomatic and military) are well-threaded across the broad spectrum of warfare?

— The exercise process designs how the play will roll out. The Training Audience will provide details of what they want and this again translates into Training Objectives. We then have a known period of time for the exercise, which determines how many opportunities there will be for assessment and decisions. This will also scope what challenges can be undertaken in three horizons, short term (0-3 days), medium term (4-6 days), and long term (beyond 6 days). Every military action will have an economic, social and diplomatic consequence which in turn will have a consequence on the military decision-making. The complex situation becomes complicated and challenging. The operational art is to unravel that in a timely manner. The scenario team's and the Main Events List/Main Incidents List (MEL/MIL) team's task is to offer the Training Audience the opportunity. Again, all this process is only limited by one's imagination.

PHOTOS: JWC PAO



TRIDENT JAGUAR 15 (NRDC-ITA)



TRIDENT JAGUAR 15 (ARRC)



TRIDENT JEWEL 15



TRIDENT JAGUAR 16





Left: The MEL/MIL Strategy Workshop for TRIDENT JAGUAR 16 (TRJR16), 7-18 March 2016. **Right:** Injects are scripted at the workshop in accordance with the exercise scenario. PHOTOS: JWC PAO

So, what is the major threat in Skolkan?

— Skolkan can be played as an Article 5 scenario and a non-Article 5 scenario. In the Article 5 scenario, a country, which is not deterred by the political deterrence of NATO, needs to change its regional dynamics to meet its economic needs. The country in the Article 5 scenario is authoritarian and has a very capable military, which can choose to develop uncertainty in the Baltics. It has limited objectives and seizes a window of opportunity. The country in the non-Article 5 scenario, on the other hand, experiences internal conflict and is bordering Europe. The conflict, however, has regional consequences, specifically terrorist threats and restrictions on trade routes in the Baltics through to the North Sea. The challenge becomes whether and how NATO can change the outcome of what is a non-international state confrontation. This, I think, in many respects is more challenging than an Article 5, as the political-operational relationship is closer.

One early impression was that Skolkan could have been developed further in the field of Comprehensive Approach. Do you find this to be true, and, if yes, has there been any change to this?

— I think this is due to a misunderstanding of the scope and depth that Skolkan offers. As I said, it is limited only by imagination. The countries and international relations have all the necessary ingredients for a Comprehensive Approach. The key is what the aim of the exercise is and how much interaction is possible. In my eight years in JWC, I have watched how everyone concentrates on execution. Actually, all the work, including comprehensive interaction, needs to be staffed and interrogated during the planning phase; planning is everything. Without this element and the comprehensive preparation of the environment, you will have no foundation for understanding the complex environment, which will then be challenged during the execution phase.

We should also recognise that most people's experience in the Comprehensive Approach is through operational tours in Afghanistan. Skolkan is geographically located in northern Europe with common values to a majority of the population. The issues are different and diverse. These are all countries where governance and relationships are relatively stable, but even in stability there is confrontation. NATO and the EU are very dominant in the geo-political space and some of the

fictional countries remain independent and not to be subsumed; this creates the space for conflict. Skolkan offers a different challenge, and, hopefully, one that prepares the headquarters for the future, not the past.

While there is a tendency to limit the comprehensive nature to just the Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC), it is only one of many ingredients needed to form the environment of the crisis. The key is for the commander and his staff to identify the essential facilitators or actions that will unlock the crisis and begin the initial overtures to the belligerents. It is the interaction of people, not platforms that draw a conflict to an end.

There is a further dimension, which demonstrates the comprehensive nature of the training scenarios. As a scenario developer, you need to be able to anticipate and know how something will impact on the operational domain. The political domain is so dominant, but in the process of delivering the planning or execution of the operational military effects Training Audiences may forget that the real movers and shakers are the unintended consequences of political or economic effects. It is through politics that real power is distributed. These are the issues that move nations and pol-





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iticians and as a developer these can be used to pressure or challenge the military domain.

Would you agree that what makes Skolkan transformational is the fact that it can be adapted to reflect any possible threat environment in Europe?

— I am grateful for allusion to any threats, but I would prefer "the most possible threat environment." I know that Allied Command Transformation (ACT) did call Skolkan "transformational" and it has proven its worth. I think what you maybe alluding to is the hybrid nature of the modern crises in the world. Here, I would like to discuss the utility of force, which is better explained in General Sir Rupert Smith's book, with this very title, "Utility of Force". Essentially, one must understand that the use of force at one level may have no utility at the higher level. I will give you an example. When two Colonels met post-Vietnam War, the U.S. Colonel stated "you never beat us in battle," while the North Vietnamese Colonel's reply was "true, but it is irrelevant."

JWC exercises focus on the operational level and this level deals with allocation of resources, priorities and actions in time and space. Its key role is timely decisions and coordination to ensure the components can

fight their battle in a joint campaign. As such, the operational commander is similar to the conductor of an orchestra ensuring that the strings, percussion, and wind section are perfectly synchronised. In war, however, perfection is not attainable.

Terrorism, meanwhile, is in the criminal domain; it is an activity—violent, offensive—but, it is not in the military domain. Disinformation is in the political domain and politicians use it all the time. Only urban warfare is in the military domain, more specifically, on the tactical level, but it is just an environment, which constrains some tactics. In the operational level of command, urban warfare is a consideration, which needs to be analysed in order to have an insight into and understand why something has happened and how it will impact operations in general.

How has Skolkan affected the MEL/MIL process as a whole? For example, nearly 1,000 injects were created over a period of 10 days during TRIDENT JAGUAR 16; is the process more dynamic than ever?

— Skolkan is complex, war is complex, and the operational level of command is complex. We live in an age where video games and Hollywood feed the illusion of winning. But, there are no winners in modern conflicts; you can be a victor, but then you need to rebuild—an issue which is rarely discussed until after the fact. The first casualties of war are those not involved in combat, and Skolkan offers the opportunity for the military environment to try to understand the consequences and mitigate. The operational level of command is where most campaigns fail to achieve the political and public view of success, but it is not always their fault; trying to achieve a political success when you are under-resourced, under time pressure and answerable not only to the chain of command, but also to your national government and the government you are supporting,

places a burden on any individual. But, in a Crisis Response exercise, the commander is there as a catalyst for change. In essence, the military is part of the security domain but it does not own it; it only treats the symptoms; finding the cause is the politicians' responsibility. The military is therefore there to create the time and space for the politicians to find the cause through diplomacy.

In many respects, the MEL/MIL has been eased by the necessity to have an Opposing Force (OPFOR) with their own Campaign Plan, using all instruments of state. Even in a non-Article 5 scenario, the OPFOR can have an aim and objectives, which can then be turned into activities. This appears early in the process, so that the necessary intelligence can be provided to the Training Audience allowing them to analyse the content. Exercises have very little white noise so to give the Training Audience opportunities to develop a process and understand the crisis they have to plan against. The OPFOR, thus, represents the spine of the MEL/MIL; then additional areas need to be developed to keep the Training Audience distracted from the main event, which they will have to deal with during the course of the operation. These will be "Stakeholders", such as the in-country government, international organisations, media and others, who have a vested interest. There will be additional threats and sustainability issues, which will all add zest to the exercise.

Mr Jens Stoltenberg, NATO's Secretary General, said that we are not back to the Cold War, but adapting to a changed security environment. My take is that training and exercises ensure the success of this adaptation.

— I think JWC's task as the primary trainer for NATO at the operational level of command is, and will continue to be, of utmost importance to prepare NATO commands for deterrence and, if necessary, conflict. With modern



The members of TRIDENT JAGUAR 16 White/Grey Cell provided NRDC-TUR Operational Liaison and Reconnaissance Team (OLRT) with valuable information to support their Crisis Response Planning phase of the exercise by enabling civil/military interaction for effective implementation of NATO's Comprehensive Approach. PHOTO: JWC PAO



technology providing new opportunities and options, NATO needs to train its staff on how these could be exploited in defence of the Alliance's collective values.

I think that it is also beholden on scenario developers to think the unthinkable and provide opportunities and examples of what could be. An example used in the recent exercise TRIDENT JAGUAR 2016, was an explanation of why a government with a majority of one vote could remain in power. One exercise paper distributed described how power is also in the hands of others (business elites or oligarchs) and their ability to persuade sitting members of the parliament to vote correctly. In an article by THE ECONOMIST on 17 February, titled, "Political Theatre: Crisis in Ukraine", there was a description of power politics in Ukraine and, I quote, "some see evidence of a grand backroom deal involving several oligarchs, the prime minister and the president." I rest my case: Fiction or Fact. JWC continues to provide a challenging platform for commands to exercise military planning and decisions in a comprehensive environment. The more you train, the more instinctive it becomes.

So, in the end, does this all make you feel a

bit like a thriller novelist?

— Actually, this is just like going back to academics, without the exams, which suits me. I have perhaps read and researched a lifetime equivalent in the last six years. I wrote the initial Country Book Economic Data based on research and a business studies qualification at my college when I was 18. I then was at HQ SHAPE when it was analysed, feeling a little like a student waiting to see if I got a pass. I did and now we have an economic developer who is maturing the product. I can say that Skolkan is a collective novel and that ensures its robustness and strength. I am certainly better prepared and understand the dynamics of this current political and economic challenge that Europe and the world are battling at the moment.

Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

— Yes, I was brought up during the polar years of the Cold War. Now, there is no polarity and life is more complex. There are now six major potential powers—U.S., Europe, China, Japan, Russia and India. I have lived for most of my life in South Asia and currently that area is heating up. International relations are global; communications are instantaneous, and econ-

omies operate simultaneously; there are liberal and illiberal governments. As Henry Kissinger says on foreign policy: "Many foreign policy decisions are choices between evils." There is no better way of ensuring one's survival than to follow the 2,000-years-old-maxim: "If you want peace, prepare for war." The Joint Warfare Centre does exactly that. ✦

FURTHER READING

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- * "Skolkan, Scandinavia's Alter Ego" by LCDR Ronel Reyes, The Three Swords Magazine, Issue No. 21
- * "STEADFAST JUNCTURE 12" by Lt Col Mark McMillion, The Three Swords Magazine, Issue No. 23
- * "STEADFAST JUNCTURE 12, Skolkan and the Nature of NATO's Rapid Military Response" by Jerome Guehenneux, JFC Naples POLAD, The Three Swords Magazine, Issue No. 24
- * "A World of Illusions" by Simon Dewing, The Three Swords Magazine, Issue No. 24