



THE MILITARY ENGINEER STRUCTURES IN COUNTERACTING HYBRID THREATS

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The military engineer structures, both in NATO and in the Romanian Army, have played a historical and critical role in shaping the operational environment. Changes in the international security environment also have consequences for engineering structures. The military engineers will face an increasingly complex operational environment, in which hybrid threats are increasingly present. Counteracting them and solving the serious problems faced by the societies impacted by politico-military conflicts require narrowing the gap or even erasing the border between military and civilian actors. Military engineer structures will be essential in shaping the hybrid operational environment and in developing the civilian-military relationship.

Keywords: operational environment; hybrid threats; military engineer structures.

Hybrid threats – a main feature of the contemporary operating environment

The events of 1989, which culminated with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, brought with them a paradigm shift in conventional warfare, which was considered more or less irrelevant by most military analysts. A simple analysis of the conflicts of the last decade, such as those of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, reveals their tendency of manifestation towards unconventional and counterinsurgency warfare (COIN).

Based on this experience of recent conflict, some of which are ongoing, it can be said that the hybrid threat is a combination of regular and irregular forces, including criminal elements. These forces use conventional warfare capabilities to win symmetrical battles at decisive points and dissolve into the population where they continue to use asymmetric tactics. Moreover, the involvement of actors in criminal activities is another major threat.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) defines hybrid threats as those threats "represented by any current or potential adversary, including state, non-state and terrorists, with the ability, either demonstrated or probable, to use both conventional and unconventional means adaptively to achieve its objectives"¹.

The rapid growth of new communication technologies, globalization and the expansion of global transport networks have minimized the significance of geographical and political boundaries. Because of these considerations, the NATO Strategic Command rated hybrid threats as one of the most challenging issues of the post-Cold War era "the contemporary operational environment is radically changing as a result of globalization, easier access to international resources and modern means of communication and as a result of regional instability which makes the hybrid threat a great challenge"².

It is worth mentioning that hybrid warfare is not a new type of warfare, as we have seen elements of hybrid warfare in the way the Irish Republican Army, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have conducted their operations. The use of military, quasi-military and non-military means to achieve the ultimate goal gives the Western world an overview of a possible future threat scenario.

The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation provides the international community with a template for tomorrow's war. Russia is using the development of local infrastructure on the peninsula as a tool to remove attention from the fact that it has invaded another country. The effect has so far proved very beneficial for Russia³. One year after the annexation of Crimea, the majority of the local population in Crimea seems to support Russia. NATO and the rest of the world have forgotten that Putin invaded another country, the size of Maryland, with a population of 2.4 million, and claimed to be Russian territory.⁴

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Moreover, today Russia combines a humanitarian aid operation with intelligence / disinformation operations and the covert deployment of its special forces in Ukraine. According to the Russian state media, controlled by the Kremlin, the seven-point ceasefire plan provides, among other things, for the creation of "humanitarian corridors". Unfortunately, the "Russian aid" and "reconstruction teams" reach and serve the separatists.

These few examples describe the complex and challenging environment in which Romanian and NATO the military engineer structures must operate. Access to technology and rapid changes in the battlefield will cause major operational changes that can translate into "hybrid warfare tends to erase the boundaries between peace and war and between combat and non-combat"⁵.

The multitude of actors involved, as well as the complexity of the current operational environment, reveals that hybrid warfare cannot take the shape of an exclusively military campaign, requiring the involvement of all available power tools (diplomatic, informational, economic, military). In this regard, after more than a decade of COIN operations in Afghanistan, there is growing recognition that there is no exclusively military solution to challenges, just as there is no autonomous civilian solution. Consequently, it is recognized that close civil-military cooperation is needed, in which security as well as societal challenges must be considered as a whole and which require coordinated civil-military measures.

In conclusion, it can be said that hybrid threats are nothing new, only that opponents have adapted their ways of waging war to Western means and technology. *When opponents have access to Western technology, it will return and be used as a weapon*⁶.

The contribution of military engineer structures to counteracting hybrid threats

The contemporary operational environment involves the manifestation of a multitude of ethnic, religious, ideological factors, which involves the adoption of sustainable solutions that lead to the reduction of violence, the restoration of public services and intervention to solve humanitarian disasters or catastrophes. It is clear that military means alone will not be enough to solve all these challenges. Civil-military cooperation allows the

armed forces to achieve their ultimate goal by coordinating, synchronizing and deconflicting activities with civilian contributors, thus linking military operations to political objectives. For such a relationship to be productive, it must be based on trust, respect, patience and tact, as well as a determination to work with all actors, military and civilian.

In search of successful strategies, R. Scott Moore of the Washington Center for Complex Operations conducted a comparative analysis of over 100 irregular operations, conducted from 1916 to the present. His findings reveal that strategies that aimed only at a military victory over the enemy failed or led to oppression and occupation. On the other hand, strategies involving integrated political, social, economic and security measures pursued simultaneously have usually reached long-term stability⁷.

The experience gained from the development and outcome of recent military conflicts, in which counterinsurgency operations have predominated, indicates that the integration of civilian and military instruments is the main strategy for reducing violence and ensuring security and stability.

The lessons learned from the last decade of the war in Afghanistan, but especially those resulting from the action of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), are relevant in planning how to counter hybrid threats. One of them tells us that the operational environment in which counterinsurgency operations (COIN) take place generates additional tasks for military engineer structures. In this manner, economic development and infrastructure creation are often presented as the main non-lethal lines of effort in COIN operations⁸. Otherwise, military engineers have the competence and ability to contribute to winning the hearts and minds of the host nation's population.

The military engineer structures, a component of any joint military force, are indispensable both in major operations/campaigns and in crisis response and contingency operations. They have capabilities that can be integrated with fire support and the maneuvering of combat forces in order to ensure the mobility of their own forces, achieve the countermobility of opponents, as well as to increase the protection of their own forces. There are also military/non-military activities that require military engineer skills, as an inherent part of a



mission, to provide specialized support outside the joint force. In this regard, the assistance of the military engineers is fundamental to fulfilling the tasks of stability operations aimed at restoring or providing essential services (such as water supply, electricity and transport, as well as repairing critical infrastructure)⁹.

Depending on the type of operation, its phases, but also the characteristics of the operational environment, the most likely use of the military engineer structures, at the tactical level, for all components will be support for achieving mobility, in a balance with tasks to maintain capacity operational and infrastructure development. A very important aspect, not to be neglected, concerns the adaptation of the military engineer capabilities to the specifics of the mission, and ideally, they should be mobile, flexible and modular¹⁰.

Beyond all this, the following question arises: *What is the contribution of the military engineer structures to countering the threats specific to hybrid warfare?* The answer to this question is very simple, as they have always done, through operations aimed at building / developing infrastructure, support for maintaining the operational capacity of combat forces, as well as support for other organizations participating in the military campaign. However, all these activities must be carried out in a much more complex operational environment, where hybrid threats are fully manifested.

In the execution of counterinsurgency operations, the fight for human support has been and remains particularly important. For insurgents to be effective, they depend on the support and sponsorship of the population. The armed forces depend on the same support to end the insurgency and to develop a safe and sustainable environment. As the military engineer structures have the capacity to contribute to the development of infrastructure that will benefit civil society, military engineers have played a central role in winning the hearts and minds of the local people. PRTs across Afghanistan have contributed to the reconstruction and development of local infrastructure. However, how they have contributed and their effectiveness is difficult to assess. National differences between troop-contributing countries have influenced the way PRTs solved their mission, but especially in terms of the role of the military engineer structures. Also, the challenge posed by civil-military

cooperation was solved differently, depending on the national and cultural specifics, both by the military and by civilian organizations.

According to col. Garland H. Williams, a successful criterion for the reconstruction operation and the creation of a lasting peace is that the reconstruction begins immediately after the cessation of hostilities. At that time, military engineer structures were the only credible and available capabilities in the theater. If the reconstruction phase is delayed, it will be more difficult to get support from the population¹¹.

According to recent experience, there are rarely enough military engineer structures available, and this deficit can be partially overcome by using civilian contractors. To cover this shortfall, as stated in AJP 3-12, military engineers will support and coordinate the execution of all infrastructure projects in accordance with the infrastructure development plan and may also be required to contribute to the training of multinational units, staff NGOs and IBs, as well as the local population. Military engineers can also provide assistance with appropriate physical protection measures, including obstacles, observation points, detection / warning systems, masking and mitigation of the effects of weapons on structures.

The effort of the international community to stabilize and rebuild the emerging states from a politico-military conflict has enjoyed the active support of Romania through its military engineer structures and more. Thus, the 96th Engineer Battalion participated in the IFOR mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose missions consisted in ensuring freedom of movement for multinational troops and civilians, providing general support to multinational commands and contingents, and carrying out work in support of local communities in the Federation Croatian-Muslim and Republika Srpska¹². Starting with the year 2000, the 96th Engineer Battalion was reorganized and established the National Detachment "Bosnia" with a force of 68 soldiers, stationed in Butmir and the National Detachment "Netherlands", which acted within the Dutch contingent with a force of 38 of the military.

The adoption by the Romanian Parliament of Decision no. 2 of 12.02.2003, enshrined Romania's participation in the Multinational Stability Coalition in Iraq. Within the forces participating in the "Iraqi

Freedom" mission, a military engineer structure as a Detachment type was also found.

Between August 15, 2003 - August 23, 2006, Romanian military engineers performed specific missions in support of Coalition forces in the Iraqi theater of operations, from the military bases of Al Hillah, Ad Diwaniyah and Al Kut, missions that materialized in the arrangement, maintenance and preservation of the viability of road communication routes, engineering arrangement of military bases, work for personnel protection, arrangement of helicopter platforms, arrangement of CORIMEC platforms for accommodation of troops, as well as research of watercourses and level 1 inspections at road communications bridges in the area of action of the South Central Multinational Division¹³.

With the launching, in 2002, of the concept of "Provincial Reconstruction Teams" in Afghanistan, a new challenge appeared for Romania. Thus, our country participated, between 2003 and 2006, with a military police officer and a reconnaissance squad within PRT Helmand (led by Great Britain), as well as with a medical team composed of three people within PRT Kunduz (led by Germany).

Romania maintains its military effort to support the processes of return to normalcy in Afghanistan, by participating now, but also in the coming years, in the NATO mission "Resolute Support". The main mission of the military of the Multinational Coalition is to train, advise and assist the Afghan security and defence structures, ANDSF (Afghan National Defence and Security Forces). Within the Romanian military advisory teams there are officers and non-commissioned officers from the military engineer corps who offer advice in the fields as: counter-IED (counteracting improvised explosive devices), infrastructure, genetic support.

Conclusions

Therefore, military engineer structures play and will continue to play a crucial role in mitigating and counteracting hybrid threats. The timely execution, by the military engineer structures, of all specific and deduced tasks, will ensure both the necessary support to the force gathered during the military campaign, but especially will contribute to the success of the post-conflict reconstruction operation, which will ultimately win hearts and people's minds and return to normalcy.

To be able to perform their tasks, military engineers must be prepared to face future opponents,

who are adaptive and who use a wide range of abilities, which allow them to successfully fight with a superior force from a technological point of view.

All these reasons must lead military specialists to act in the direction of adapting of the military engineer capabilities, so that they provide support and assistance both in the conventional combat space, but especially to support the armed forces in a COIN environment, by:

- creation and provision of mobile, modular, flexible and adaptable military engineer structures to the situation, mission, changes in threat level and available resources;
- integration / cooperation of military engineer structures with other non-military entities;
- solving the major challenges related to interoperability, caused by differences in language, culture and endowment with equipment;
- C2 (command and control) harmonization, as to allow mission command.

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4 Michel Casey, *The Crime of the Century, A Year after Claiming Crimea for Russia, Putin Appears to have gotten away with the Heist*, New Republic, 4 March 2015, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/121222/one-year-after-russias-annexation-world-has-forgotten-crimea>, accessed on 21.01.2021.

5 *Ibidem*.

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13 *Ibidem*.

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