

In eastern Europe, Army girds against Russian might, manipulation

ORZYSZ, Poland — Soon after a U.S. Army convoy crossed Poland's border into Lithuania during a major military exercise this month, two very strange things happened.

First, four Army Stryker armored combat vehicles collided, sending 15 soldiers to the hospital with minor injuries. No one died.

But hours later, an anti-American blog claimed a Lithuanian child was killed in the crash and posted a photo of a grisly accident.

It was a different collision from the Army mishap and Lithuanian news media quickly denounced the blog post as fake, designed to turn public opinion against the Americans and their Baltic ally.

The bloggers had borrowed a page from the playbook of Russia's so-called hybrid warfare, which U.S. and Lithuania officials say has increasingly combined the ability to manipulate events using a mix of subterfuge, cyberattacks and information warfare with conventional military might.

The 12-day military exercise, which involved 18,000 U.S. and allied troops spread across four countries formerly part of the Soviet bloc, offers a window into how Army commanders are countering not just Russian troops and tanks, but also twisted truths.

"The Russians are actively seeking to divide our alliance and we must not allow that to happen," Dan Coats, director of national intelligence, warned separately in a speech in France the day after the June 7 accident in Lithuania.

The military exercises occurred as President Donald Trump sidled up to Moscow, calling for Russia to be readmitted into the Group of 7 industrialized nations and meeting with President Vladimir Putin of Russia July 16.

U.S. commanders say they are tuning out Trump's comments and concentrating

on Defense Secretary Jim Mattis' newest defense strategy, which focuses more on potential threats from Russia and China, and less on terrorism.

Over the past year, the United States and its NATO allies completed positioning about 4,500 soldiers in the three Baltic States and Poland, and have stationed several thousand other armored troops mostly in Eastern Europe as a deterrent to Russian aggression.

In Brussels, allied defense ministers met recently in advance of a NATO summit meeting in July. They approved a plan to ensure that by 2020 at least 30,000 troops, plus additional attack planes and warships, can respond to aggressions within 30 days.

These tensions are part of an expanding rivalry and military buildup, with echoes of the Cold War, between Washington and Moscow.

The doctored photo of the Army accident in Lithuania was just the latest reminder of what U.S. officials called Russia's increasing reliance on cyberattacks and information warfare to keep its rivals off balance.

Last year, for instance, Lithuanian prosecutors investigated a claim of rape against German soldiers who were stationed in Lithuania as part of a NATO mission to deter Russia.

Ultimately, the report turned out to be false. Moscow denied being involved in any disinformation campaign aimed at discrediting troops, but the incident was widely viewed as an attempt to sow divisions among the allies. Moscow is flexing its conventional might, too, sending military forces for its own exercises along its western border with Europe and also to Syria and eastern Ukraine.

Additionally, Russia is building up its nuclear arsenal and cyberwarfare prowess in what U.S. military officials call an attempt to prove its relevance after years of economic decline and retrenchment.

In response, the Pentagon has stepped up training rotations and exercises on the territory of newer NATO allies in the east, including along a narrow 60-mile-wide stretch of rolling Polish farmland near the Lithuanian border northeast of here called the Suwalki Gap.

The corridor is sandwiched between the heavily militarized Russian exclave of

Kaliningrad and Moscow's ally, Belarus, and is considered NATO's weak spot on its eastern flank.

In the unlikely event of a land war, U.S. and allied officers say, the region is where Russia or its proxies could cut off the Baltic States from the rest of Europe. Since Russia annexed Crimea and supported separatists in eastern Ukraine, Eastern Europe has felt increasingly vulnerable.

"Putin is a bird of prey," said Piotr Lukasiewicz, a retired Polish army colonel and former Polish ambassador to Afghanistan. "He preys on weak states."

The Polish government has offered to pay the U.S. up to \$2 billion to build a permanent military base in the country, an offer the Trump administration is weighing cautiously.

U.S. forces are, apparently for the first time, flying unarmed Reaper surveillance drones from a Polish base in the country's northwest.

Nearly 2,000 Special Operations forces from the United States and 10 other NATO nations carried out one of their biggest exercises ever — Trojan Footprint 18 — in Poland and the Baltics this month.

Elsewhere in Europe, Norway agreed two weeks ago to increase the number of U.S. Marines training there regularly, to 700 from 330, drawing an angry protest from Moscow.

The Russian military threat has changed markedly since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Putin has invested heavily in modern infantry forces, tanks and artillery.

Moscow has also increased its constellation of surveillance drones that can identify targets and coordinate strikes launched from other weapons.

Russia's big war game in Belarus last year — known as Zapad 2017 — involved tens of thousands of troops and raised concerns about accidental conflicts that could be triggered by such exercises, or any incursions into Russian-speaking regions in the Baltics.

The Kremlin firmly rejects any such aims and says NATO is the security threat in Eastern Europe. Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

met with Gen. Valery V. Gerasimov, the chief of the Russian general staff, in Helsinki, Finland, this month, in part to discuss “the current international security situation in Europe,” a spokesman for Dunford said.

A mobile U.S. command post here in northeastern Poland reflects the Army’s new realities in Eastern Europe.

Soldiers accustomed to operating from large, secure bases in Iraq and Afghanistan now practice disguising their positions with camouflage netting. Troops disperse into smaller groups to simulate avoiding sophisticated surveillance drones that could direct rocket or missile attacks against personnel or command posts. Intelligence analysts track Twitter and other social media for information on their adversaries and local sympathizers.

“We have to be nimble,” said Brig. Gen. Richard R. Coffman, a deputy commander of the Army’s 1st Infantry Division based in Fort Riley who is overseeing much of the U.S. training from a command post in Orzysz.

For Lithuanian officers, many of whom have served alongside Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq, the expanded allied presence is welcome payback for the Baltic contributions to those counterterrorism campaigns of the past decade.

When it comes to Russian aggression, the Lithuanians have long memories. Hanging in the spacious office of Maj. Gen. Vitalijus Vaiksnoras, Lithuania’s second-ranking officer, is a huge painting of the Battle of Orsha — from 1514 — when a force of 30,000 Lithuanians and Poles defeated 80,000 Russians.

“We cannot afford to be weak,” said Vaiksnoras, who studied in San Antonio and at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. “The Russians will take advantage of that.”

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