

THE CTX INTERVIEW

# Major Mareks Runts, Latvian Special Operations Forces

*Interviewed by Ian Rice,  
CTX Editorial Review Board*



On 3 June 2022, Ian Rice of *CTX* spoke with Major Mareks Runts, who serves in the Latvian Special Operations Forces, about the origins of the Latvian SOF, the development of their training and doctrine, and their responses to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the interview, Major Runts was a student in the Irregular Warfare curriculum in the Defense Analysis department at the US Naval Postgraduate School. He has since graduated with a master of science degree.

**IAN RICE:** To start with, tell us about the development of the Latvian SOF and their role in the Latvian Armed Forces.

**MAREKS RUNTS:** Compared with other countries, the Latvian SOF are a relatively young entity. The Latvian Armed Forces are themselves a young entity. As you know, Latvia regained its independence from the USSR in 1991. At that time, the first defense forces and also the first SOF unit, a special operations battalion, were established, but the SOF battalion was under the state security service rather than the defense forces. It was transferred to the armed forces in 1994 and reorganized as a Special Operations Unit (SOU). Initially, the Latvian National Armed Forces (NAF) also had a Special Tasks Unit within the national guard, but in 2003, a decision was made to combine it with the SOU. During its existence, the SOU has experienced several changes of command. In the beginning, the unit was under the navy and later under the land forces. Finally, in 2007, the SOU was designated as a separate unit under the direct command of the NAF chief of defense rather than under one of the regular services. Both the NATO and US SOF leadership played an important role in implementing these changes. A significant milestone in the Latvian SOF's history occurred in 2018, when our Special Operations Command was established.

**RICE:** When Latvia won back its independence in 1991, you had a special operations battalion. Was it developed under the Soviet model in the early days? How did it evolve?

**RUNTS:** It's hard to judge from my point of view because I wasn't in the unit at the time. Our first commander had been an officer in the Soviet army's *spetsnaz* [special forces] with combat experience in Afghanistan. I assume there was at least some part of this legacy in the founding of our unit. But very early, we started cooperating with the United States [US Navy SEALs] and with France's GIGN [*Groupe d'intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale*]. We mixed the *spetsnaz* legacy with a Western SOF experience.

**RICE:** It seems that when Latvia regained its independence, the Special Forces had almost a blank slate to choose the mix of best practices that worked best for Latvia.

**RUNTS:** Not only the SOF, but all the armed forces. It was a time for exploration, and we were looking for the best solutions. There were a lot of different directions to explore, such as Denmark's system, the US system, and the Swedish system. We sent out our soldiers to different schools, and they brought back this knowledge. Then we tried to mix their experiences and mold them into a unified system and standards. It was a challenging time, because our armed forces didn't have unified standards and procedures. We went through a kind of growing-up period. Now it is a totally different story, and we have our own standards that we follow.

**RICE:** It is also very interesting that you talk about all these leaders who went to all these great schools across Europe. We talk about "mirror imaging"; it seems like you took these experiences and now they're creating an image in these different units. Did you see this in the SOF unit, too?

**RUNTS:** Partially, yes.

**RICE:** With the French and Americans, predominantly?

**RUNTS:** In the initial stages of forming the SOU, yes, the influence was predominantly French and American.

**RICE:** Another very interesting thing you mention is the period from 2006 to 2007, when the Special Operations fell directly under the chief of defense. The Special Operations Forces were kept out of the chain of command of the regular forces, essentially off to the side under the direct control of the chief of defense. So, it was very close to national power and not buried in the command structure of the regular military. How has that helped or hindered your unit with regard to things like resources, training opportunities, and operational readiness?

**RUNTS:** I think it has helped a lot. I joined the unit in 2004 and, as I remember, there was a lot of uncertainty at that time. We didn't know how the unit would be developed in the future, because there were different attempts to put the SOU under the land forces and transform it into some kind of reconnaissance unit. The positioning of the unit under the direct command of the chief of defense gave us stability. At last we had a certain place in the defense structure and a clear chain of command. Otherwise, the unit's direction becomes very dependent on the commanders above it. But commanders change, and new commanders have different perspectives. If you are under direct command, you have your own resources; you have more possibility to self-determine your way ahead.

US Army Sgt. Shawn Beaver, left, with the Joint Multinational Training Command, installs a Deployable Instrumentation System Europe on a Latvian National Armed Forces soldier's G36 rifle, Ādaži, Latvia



## Then in 2014, what happened? Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine. That's when we started to refocus on one more task, which in our doctrine is unconventional warfare.

**RICE:** Is the Latvian SOF's status as a direct reporting unit under the chief of defense now written into Latvian law, or is it just an accepted policy that is handed down?

**RUNTS:** It is in our armed forces law and our structure.

**RICE:** The other interesting point you made is that there were two special units: national guard and active.

**RUNTS:** The national guard Special Operations Unit was also active. They weren't part-time soldiers. The first element that was stood up after we got our independence was the national guard, which was organized purely from volunteers. Its SOU stood up against the Russian forces that were in Latvia and fought against organized crime groups, which were an issue in all of the former Soviet states. When the Soviet structure collapsed, there was a very strong rise in organized crime. The police were incapable of dealing with this alone, so the national guard was perceived as the main force that could provide law and order for citizens. The borders weren't very well protected, so it was easy, for example, for the criminals to move across into Latvia, commit crimes there, and then escape back into Russia.

**RICE:** The Latvian national guard in 1991–92 that you've described were the true Latvian patriots, correct? There was not going to be any question of their political reliability for an independent Latvia, where there may have been questions about former Soviet officers. Is that right?

**RUNTS:** I think that is correct. I don't want to say by any means that those defense forces that were stood up were not loyal. That was not the case. Back then, the national guard was a larger element than the defense forces, and even now it is the biggest element in our armed forces. The national guard falls under the armed forces and is commanded by the chief of defense. So, the national guard is one element of the Latvian National Armed Forces.

**RICE:** For the special unit that you've been a part of, what are the different kinds of missions that you have trained for and also executed?

**RUNTS:** Our core tasks are special reconnaissance (SR), direct action (DA), and military assistance (MA), which accords with NATO doctrine. But according to Latvian doctrine, we have some additional specified tasks. At the same level as SR, DA, and MA, we have CT, Counterterrorism Tasks, which is a legacy from when the SOU was under the state security service, which was formed in 1991. We started performing those tasks by providing security for VIP visits. Today, we continue to work closely with the security service.

The other task is hostage rescue operations. Because Latvia is a small country, we don't have the resources to be able to afford such compartmentalization; we cannot afford to have the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) alone responsible for one thing and the Ministry of Defense (MOD) responsible for something else. In most cases, we have this kind of joint effort. This is true for hostage rescue operations. We have standing plans that define our tasks. The primary force, of course, is the MOI CT unit, but we are working closely and training together with them. If, for example, an event is happening on a maritime platform in our territorial waters, then we are in the lead with MOI supporting.

As for the CT portion, we were very focused on this task until 2014. It was one of the primary tasks for which we were training and preparing. Then in 2014, what happened? Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine. That's when we started to refocus on one more task, which in our doctrine is unconventional warfare [UW]. Until then, it was kind of on the shelf, I would say. We already had a UW role, but there wasn't serious preparation for it. 2014 changed that. Our unit was actually the element that started building up this UW capability, and then we began to expand the capability in our regular armed forces. And the same goes with our plans for such a scenario in state defense planning. I should mention that the US SOCEUR [Special Operations Command Europe] also helped us with this initial effort to push the UW concept at the level of our MOD and armed forces leadership.

Before 2014, there was heavy reluctance to talk about such topics even among our higher leadership. I don't know what the exact reason was, but it was probably the historical experience of what happened with the NATO stay-behind networks during the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> I think these attitudes are still dragging on to this day. That's also a reason why NATO doesn't recognize unconventional warfare or resistance as a NATO role. It's seen more as a national business for each individual country. I don't know about recent developments because I haven't been in those circles since I came here, but that was the case at least until last year.

**RICE:** To recap that, DA, SR, and MA have been the main missions of the unit. And then, for tasks that you undertake with your MOI counterterrorism partner, you focus on eliminating terrorist activities inside Latvia or its maritime possessions, and on rescuing hostages, potentially.

**RUNTS:** Hostage rescue is also a primary task.

**RICE:** The unconventional warfare task is interesting. You said the Special Operations Command Europe, under the US structure, was advising and guiding Latvia to work on these newer tasks.

**RUNTS:** They were helping us at the operational level to develop this plan for all the armed forces, and also at the national level: the operational-strategic level.

**RICE:** So the plan helps create an unconventional warfare framework to do both offensive and defensive operations?

**RUNTS:** At the national level, we should talk about resistance; the plan is directed toward national resistance.

**RICE:** That would be Latvia's ability to resist against an aggressor?

**RUNTS:** Yes, an occupying power.

**RICE:** That kind of UW is less about exporting such a capability to help another actor overthrow a state. That's not really the kind of unconventional warfare you're focused on.

**RUNTS:** We can do that, but for SOF the primary focus is about UW inside our country. Because, as you know, Latvia is a small country and our geopolitical ambitions are not like those of, for example, the United States. We are not trying to establish our sphere of influence by overthrowing neighboring governments such as Lithuania or Estonia. We don't have interests in Asia or Africa, for

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example, so that's why it's not the case. But still, we have this capability to support a US effort, for example, if needed.

**RICE:** That's why I asked, because sometimes we see countries as essentially unitary actors, interchangeable, almost the same. We don't think about them in terms of their size or their interests.

**RUNTS:** That was actually a big challenge when we began to develop our UW theory and training, because it was clear that we could not just take US doctrine, the Field Manual, and adopt it for ourselves. The initial stage was about how to develop those elements such as theory and training specifically for our interests. Primarily, as I said, it's to fight within our country, to defend our country, to overthrow some potential occupying power.

**RICE:** It's very interesting that you sometimes hear about countries that are advised [by the United States or others] and they just adopt the doctrine completely. It sounds like in Latvia, this was not the case. You receive the advice, and now you take that advice and specifically shape it to meet national objectives. It's not just, "Oh, here is the doctrine from the US for this concept," but now, "We will take the parts that are most important to us and use them." And it also seems that, by doing so, you're developing your own doctrine. It's no longer just American doctrine; it's Latvian doctrine.

**RUNTS:** We already have our own doctrine. There are also specified tasks that fall under those core roles that I think are very important because we are tasked—we can put this under MA—to provide specific training for our armed forces and other entities. Actually, in peacetime, when we are based back home, such training takes a lot of our time because we are providing training for other SOF entities, from MOI units, for example. We also have been using our experience to help create such units from the beginning: how to select, how to provide basic training, and basically



National Guard Special Operations Unit, Latvia

going through all of the train-advise-assist-accompany cycle.

One more task of ours is to support the police and our security agencies and intel agencies in peacetime. Not many countries have such tasks because of legal issues. It has been a task for Latvian SOF since 1991, so what we can bring to the table in NATO and when working with other countries is this domestic experience in conducting operations in peacetime to support police and other security agencies. That becomes very handy when we talk about gray-zone or hybrid conflict.

Our main partner has been the United States, since we started this cooperation in 1991. We have good cooperation with the Norwegians, mostly the *Forsvarets Spesialkommando* [Norwegian Army SOF unit]. We also deployed with them to Afghanistan. Then, of course, it's the "3-Bs," the three Baltic countries. With the Lithuanians, we had a combined task force in Afghanistan. We also have a joint combined effort with Estonia and Lithuania, a 3-B special operations task group that we are providing to NATO response forces every year.

**RICE:** So the three Baltic countries are combining to form a NATO task group for SOF. That's also interesting to learn about. This is a natural segue to talk about how you integrate into NATO and other coalitions that deploy in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other places, like Mali. But before we get there, one quick question. Have you advised other NATO countries based on the Latvian model of SOF working in the domestic capacity? I ask because your SOF force is so small. You have a good relationship with your MOI forces. Could you help other countries develop similar capabilities through your military assistance plan?

Specifically, for instance, how a military's SOF unit and the Ministry of the Interior could work better together?

**RUNTS:** Not as I recall. Direct coordination is needed between some nations because usually there is a legal issue. They should first solve this issue, and then there could be some kind of cooperation. For some countries such as Germany, for example, it's even impossible. Germany has strict rules regarding military forces operating domestically, and I believe the same type of rule applies for the United States. What you can and cannot do is very compartmentalized.

**RICE:** This is why I asked, because if a country is small and it has limited resources, it may look to Latvia for advice on how to integrate military capabilities into domestic security activities the way that Latvia does. That country's military may be educated by you.

**RUNTS:** It has been done under the NSHQ [NATO Special Operations Headquarters] umbrella in some working groups, and yes, the question of how to do it has been brought up. And even some countries that are not now able to do that integration are exploring ways in peacetime to enable cooperation between MOI and MOD units when some hybrid issues or hybrid threats arise. Those countries that are developing this capability are interested in both the lessons identified and those lessons learned.

**RICE:** So it sounds like this close relationship between MOI and SOF has made you well-postured for hybrid, gray-zone activities inside Latvia, for things that are hard to see and that don't fall into a nice compartment of war or peace. Where resources are short, Latvian law and policy have created operational flexibility for you.

**RUNTS:** As you said, for a small country, it's a matter of survival. We should integrate and use all of our available resources. It also helps that we don't have an unhealthy competition between units, so we understand that for this task, you [MOI] are primary, we [SOF] will support you with everything we can, and when we need support, you will support us. So yes, it helps to build those relationships. Compared to some other NATO countries, I think we are very advanced in this specific area.

**RICE:** I can tell just by listening to you that, because of Latvia's need to ensure national survival, you are more advanced in this area than the United States. The United States doesn't have units that will work well together in this particular way, and maybe it is because we are too big.

Please give us your perspectives on how Latvian SOF have integrated in NATO operations and other coalition operations, such as the larger coalitions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, and so forth.

**RUNTS:** The most significant deployment for Latvian SOF was in support of the operations in Afghanistan, the ISAF [International Security Assistance Force] mission and RSM [Resolute Support Mission] in particular, because we spent the longest time in those operations and they heavily contributed to our unit's development, starting with combat experience and working with the coalition, and so on. In other operations, such as in Iraq, we deployed some elements but it was for a very short period. The same goes for Africa: we're not participating in any operation that is ongoing right now. We are sending some individuals for specific positions; the same was true for the Kosovo mission back in the 1990s. The main coalition mission or operation for us was Afghanistan.

The next one of strategic importance was JMTG-U, the Joint Multinational Training Group-Ukraine, led by the United States, where we participated almost from the beginning to develop a kind of Westernized Ukrainian SOF. Our unit was involved in the Ukrainian SOF training center. To achieve this task, we started from the beginning, with selection and a qualification course. This was in about 2015.

**RICE:** What kinds of Afghan units did you work with in Afghanistan during the previous operations with ISAF and then later supporting RSM?

**RUNTS:** The Afghan National Army (ANA) and ANA SOF units, and we also worked with the MOI Police Special Units and National Mission Unit.

**RICE:** When you worked with these units, was it from the start, a model to "create the unit from the beginning?" Or did you arrive at a unit that was already developed and then you just ensured they had some very minor advances?

**RUNTS:** We developed a schoolhouse for ANA SOF from scratch in 2018. No, it was earlier. We withdrew almost all our forces from Afghanistan in 2014 and then we went back because of a request from our strategic partner, the United States.

**RICE:** That's quite a compliment, that the US made that request for Latvian SOF to establish the ANA SOF school.

**RUNTS:** We were tasked with establishing and then providing mentorship for the Cobra Strike Maneuver Course. This was the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command School of Excellence training venue for developing the fighting skills of all Commando Special Operations Kandaks [SOKs; a *kandak* is a 600-member battalion]. It was a new project in Afghanistan. They merged ANA Commando SOKs with the mobile strike force kandaks to increase their firepower and survivability. We were basically putting commando battalions on armed platforms. That's what we did until the end of that mission in Afghanistan.

**RICE:** Do you have any insights into how Latvian SOF assist a country like Afghanistan compared with how, say, the United States or another NATO member does it? Are there differences, or does everybody do it in about the same way? Do the Afghans respond to Latvians differently from how they respond to Americans, or Germans, or Norwegians?

**RUNTS:** I think sometimes yes, because we share some common history. We both can refer back to the Russian occupation, which became handy when we first established contact. We already had some common experiences to share. One more thing that differentiates us from the United States or other Western countries is that we had a similar experience establishing our armed forces from scratch, the same as the Afghans did. We can better understand situations related to the lack of resources and other difficulties. During those missions, this gave us another perspective, which helped us better understand our partners.

**RICE:** It's very interesting that Latvians were not only involved in the occupation of Afghanistan during the Soviet period, but you and Afghanistan also share being occupied by the same country.<sup>3</sup> Beyond helping build

rapport, how about the development of skills? Is there another area where you saw a difference between the way Latvians performed compared to Norwegians or Americans in developing essential skills for Afghan commando formations?

**RUNTS:** I think for basic skills, like shooting, for example, there is no big difference. If you want to be a good shooter, there are some basic principles to learn. But I think our main investment in the development of the forces was that we tried to teach them how to improvise from the available resources, to build up or combine something. Because that is also our experience, and maybe countries with richer resources don't have this experience.

**RICE:** This is something I've thought a lot about. The US solution for a lot of these problems is just to buy more things, and give more things to partners. When Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, the US secretary of defense said something like, "You can't purchase loyalty to the state." He was speaking of the Afghan military. But that's the American perspective, versus a smaller state that says, "We have less, so we have to do more with what we have."

**RUNTS:** I think it's especially true when you're speaking about SOF. My belief is that the value the SOF soldier can deliver is not dependent on high tech or the right tech or whatever tech. The main weapon for the SOF soldier is located between his ears: his brains. His value is that he can fight even if he has no resources or limited resources. He can improvise. That is the value of the SOF soldier and the philosophy of SOF, I think. It was instilled in our unit by our first commander. These were his words: "It's nice to be able to fight when you have all this great gear, but you should be able to fight if you have only the assault rifle and that's it."

**RICE:** Do you think this was well-received by the Afghans? The fact that you were encouraging them to stand up on their own rather than relying on another country's good will to provide resources? How did that go over?

**RUNTS:** It depends. If they were closely located with, for example, the US forces, and were previously mentored with another unit, then it was challenging to switch their mindset because they were already spoiled; they were used to receiving most of their resources from a partner unit. We actually had some challenges with this.

**RICE:** So it sounds like bigger countries with more resources may have created a dependency problem with partner forces in order for them to be able to advance more

quickly in their training and their capability to do more operations.

**RUNTS:** From personal experience, when we tried to push them to work through their own supply system, I was almost kicked out of the company commander's office. I was told that he didn't need such mentors because he was used to receiving everything he asked for. He did not want to do the work of going through his system because there was an easier way.

**RICE:** An easier and more efficient way for him.

**RUNTS:** But in the long term, it's not the right way.

**RICE:** Well, it's no way, because in the end, the resources disappear when the mentors disappear. You were trying to help them build institutions and systems to support themselves and make do with what they had available. That company commander was conditioned to receiving gifts from mentors to allow him to do the operations.

**RUNTS:** In a lot of cases in Afghanistan, those mentors were perceived by Afghans as just a way to plug into some resources and get some stuff: equipment, money, food. They didn't want to be mentored or trained; they didn't care about training; they just looked to those Western mentors to get some resources.

**RICE:** What kinds of resources did you notice were the most popular, and why do you think they were the most popular?

**RUNTS:** Fuel and food, because of corruption. Higher commanders took the money for these into their own hands and it never went down to their subordinates.

**RICE:** So it seems that military materiel that had a dual use and could be sold on civilian markets was the most popular. That's why I'm asking. Your firsthand knowledge of it is very enlightening.

Let's transition to a different topic. You're here at school, and you're watching Ukraine be torn apart. You spent significant time working with the Ukrainians. What are some of the things you see going on—from a distance, of course—that show that the work you did is paying off? And what are the things you wish you'd been able to do more of?

**RUNTS:** It's hard to judge from afar about specific details, but at least from some information that I know, SOF are playing their role in this combined joint environment. It's

hard to say more that's unclassified. From the information I have, Ukrainian SOF are heavily involved in the battle for Kyiv, the defense of Kyiv. They were the ones also conducting the small-unit raids and attacks on Russian columns and so on.

But what I think may have started too late was SOF's role in UW and with the resistance. When we started to work with the Ukrainians, it was purely an old Soviet system. The initial period was just to reorganize these Ukrainian Soviet-type spetsnaz units. I also think the standard training level was slightly less than even former Soviet standards for all those years until 2014. The initial training we provided was focused just on basic skills: individual skills and basic collective training. As for the UW and resistance tasks, by the time the allies were able to start focusing on them, it was already late in the resistance development process. I think the resistance system was not developed at the appropriate level before the invasion occurred. So, what the Ukrainians are doing now is trying to build this plane on the fly. We'll see how it works out.

**RICE:** What you are saying is that, in order for a people to resist effectively, they have to be well prepared ahead of time, and it involves a lot more than just military elements. It involves civilian elements, local governments, commercial infrastructure—all the different facets of normal life. Each of these has to be included in a resistance plan, especially in a free society, and this will likely take a while. Especially since not everybody may be interested at first.

**RUNTS:** I think it was very recently that the Ukrainian SOF were assigned the task to lead and develop this resistance effort. The legal aspect for these territorial defense forces was already approved, but I think it was just a couple of months before the invasion. I don't remember the exact time, but it was very late. Also in open sources—you probably saw from following the news—there was no system. These territorial defense forces were ad hoc. It caused a lot of issues, of course, like blue-on-blue attacks because of the lack of coordination and insufficient training.

**RICE:** One of the things I'm still shocked about is how well people can differentiate between Russians and Ukrainians based off of simple armbands, because I'm sure the uniforms are very similar, and they have similar weapons on both sides.

**RUNTS:** In the SOF, every unit is now like a clone of the other, because the uniforms are all the same. Russians are using MultiCam, Ukrainians are using MultiCam, US, Latvians—now almost every SOF unit is using MultiCam.

**RICE:** I was thinking about when I see Ukrainian soldiers on the news. Everybody seems to have an armband to identify themselves.

**RUNTS:** The same with Russians.

**RICE:** Yes. That's what I meant, because the uniforms look so similar. Especially with all the urban fighting. It seems dangerous, or an area that could lead to a lot of fratricide.

So, again, watching from afar, what surprised you about the Russians' abilities, and what didn't surprise you about the Russians? Not just SOF, but the whole campaign and how you saw it unfolding?

**RUNTS:** The Russian performance surprised me—but not only me. I think almost everybody in the Western hemisphere was surprised by how they performed. Even intel analysts were surprised because, before the invasion, the assessment was that the Russians were capable of much more coordinated and joint efforts. There were some suspicions about their logistical capabilities that proved to be true. But overall, I would say the assessment was that the Russian forces could perform pretty well in conducting these kinds of operations. But this initial effort, this shock-and-awe, when they tried to quickly overthrow the regime in Kyiv, showed that they actually can't do it. Right now, the situation has changed, and they're trying to use the same techniques and tactics they used in the second Chechen war, basically leveling the cities and pushing forward with heavy artillery, air support, and indirect fire support.

**RICE:** It seems like they're starting to adapt their tactics as they've taken heavy casualties. In a separate conversation, you mentioned that the initial Russian forces weren't military forces; they were more police units and national guard units.

**RUNTS:** It was a kind of mix, but they were sending those *Rosgvardiya* [National Guard of the Russian Federation] units to the front lines, specifically *Rosgvardiya* spetsnaz SOF units, which is not according to their doctrine. These units had specific tasks and they were sent in like initial advance forces, which, again, is not according to their doctrine. But this was probably because their assessment of the Ukrainians was inaccurate. They were trying to do it more as they labeled it, as a "special operation." It was supposed to be a quick and victorious special operation with a regime change.

**RICE:** *A coup de main.*



**RUNTS:** Yes. Maybe that is why the Russians chose to lead with those Rosgvardiya units in front. They weren't expecting such fierce resistance.

**RICE:** You've been in your unit for a little less than 20 years now. How do you see Latvian SOF and the SOF mission evolving as part of Latvia's defense and as part of NATO? Is it going to change much, especially with leaving the Middle East and focusing more on potential European adversaries?

**RUNTS:** We already shifted our focus from deployments to domestic operations and defense of the country. The trigger point was the 2014 activities in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. This shift was not only for SOF, but for our entire national strategy and the armed forces' tasks and priorities. Back when Latvia decided to join NATO, our defense strategy shifted from total defense toward NATO collective defense. The perception in Latvia was that we only needed to participate in collective defense and provide our share for this collective effort in places such as Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Africa. So all our armed forces were built to deploy and participate in operations abroad. In 2008, after the Russian incursion into Georgia, the collective defense mindset started to shift toward national defense capabilities. After the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, it became evident that it was very good that Latvia was integrated into NATO's collective defense strategy but, at the same time, we still needed to focus on our own capabilities; we should be able to defend our own country with our own resources, at least for some time. Of course, we can't compare with or overcome, for example, Russia's armed forces or their capabilities and resources. Latvia's defense strategy today is comprehensive defense, the main pillars of which include whole-of-society involvement in the defense of the country and collective defense provided by NATO.

Before this, we had NATO force goals and we were developing specific capabilities that we could offer to NATO. We were focused mainly on NATO's Article V; we weren't thinking about comprehensive defense for our country. Latvia still relies heavily on collective defense provided by NATO, but now we're also focusing on our national comprehensive defense capabilities.

**RICE:** Do you develop these capabilities unilaterally?

**RUNTS:** Unilaterally or maybe as part of a smaller alliance. It's not NATO. It's bilateral or multilateral coalitions, like with our Baltic neighbors: Lithuanians, Estonians, Norwegians. We have an effort with the UK going on already and with Denmark. So, it's not just NATO;

that's part of it, but it's also bilateral and multilateral relationships.

**RICE:** I ask because NATO may be too slow to respond, or some alliance members may vote that a specific incident does not meet the threshold of Article V. So if you have a strong bilateral or multilateral relationship with regional partners, they can move more quickly without NATO authority.

One final question. I assume that Latvian SOF have received a lot of advice from American Special Forces over the years. I imagine you trained, partnered, and went on numerous operations together. How did those relationships with US Special Forces make you a better mentor when you worked with the forces from other countries? For example, perhaps you have worked with multiple Americans who basically had the same script, so maybe you were thinking to yourself, "Oh, this is the same as the last guy." And then you end up training an American how to be a good partner when he is supposed to be training you. How did these kinds of relationships help make you a better mentor when you had to do it with other countries?

**RUNTS:** If we are talking specifically about our cooperation with US SOF, the relationship until 2014 was primarily through Joint Combined Exchange Training exercises.<sup>4</sup> We basically trained together and conducted some exercises together for a short period of time. But since 2014, when Operation Atlantic Resolve was initiated by the United States, one US SOF ODA [Operational Detachment Alpha] team has been permanently deployed to Latvia. These SOF ODAs have been doing four- to six-month rotations since then, depending on the mission requirements. Of course, strategically it's very important and we appreciate this presence. It's also been an interesting time, because it has allowed me to experience that feeling when you're on the receiving end of this partnership and assistance. We are the host nation and they are coming to help us, to work with us.

The first rotations were especially challenging, because every new ODA commander wanted to train our soldiers in basic skills, and it always took time to reach some common understanding of how we would operate together. The most frustrating thing is when there is no continuity. Every now and then, a new ODA captain came in without this background knowledge, and we were forced to start the discussions and planning all over again from the beginning, even though the SOF ODAs had already been deploying to Latvia for nearly 10 years. There was a lack of continuity across the different deployments.

And I agree, we sometimes—not always—did the same in Afghanistan. Sometimes when we deployed, we didn't have knowledge about the unit we were working with, or we didn't transfer this knowledge to the next unit that was coming after us. At times it becomes kind of tiring for the host nation. My experience working with US SOF ODAs visiting Latvia made me better understand how the Afghans felt when we came every four months. We were very eager to work and tried to start everything again from zero to make them do things the *right* way, which meant *our* way.

In our case, in the end we had established very good relationships with the ODAs. It was clear to them that we did not need some of the basic training, and eventually we were working mostly to improve our interoperability, in case there was operational need. The main value we see in the US presence in Latvia is that we can develop combined plans, increase our interoperability, and contribute to deterrence against Russia.

**RICE:** That was an excellent discussion. Thank you.

#### ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Ian Rice is a member of the CTX Editorial Review Board.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This interview was edited for length and clarity. Every effort was made to ensure that the meaning and intention of the participants were not altered in any way. The ideas and opinions of all participants are theirs alone and do not represent the official positions of the US Naval Postgraduate School, the US Department of Defense, the US government, or any other official entity.

<sup>2</sup>Stay-behind networks are groups of resistance fighters organized to remain in place when an enemy advances into and occupies their home areas. The stay-behind networks are designed to conduct operations to disrupt the enemy forces from behind enemy lines. For a recent study on this concept during the Cold War, see Tamir Sinai, "Eyes on Target: 'Stay-Behind' Forces during the Cold War," *War in History* 28, no. 3 (2021): 681–700. "The secret

stay-behind armies of NATO, however, were also a source of terror, as the evidence available now shows. It has been this second feature of the secret war that has attracted a lot of attention and criticism in the last decade, and which in the future will need more investigation and research. As of now the evidence indicates that the governments of the United States and Great Britain after the end of the Second World War feared not only a Soviet invasion, but also the Communist Parties, and to a lesser degree the Socialist Parties. The White House and Downing Street feared that in several countries of Western Europe, and above all in Italy, France, Belgium, Finland and Greece, the Communists might reach positions of influence in the executive and destroy the military alliance NATO from within by betraying military secrets to the Soviet Union. It was in this sense that the Pentagon in Washington together with the CIA, MI6 and NATO in a secret war set up and operated the stay-behind armies as an instrument to manipulate and control the democracies of Western Europe from within, unknown to both European populations and parliaments. This strategy led to terror and fear, as well as to 'humiliation and maltreatment of democratic institutions,' as the European press correctly criticized." Daniele Ganser, *NATO's Secret Armies: Operation GLADIO and Terrorism in Western Europe* (New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 245–246.

<sup>3</sup>For further information about Latvian soldiers who participated in the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, see Ina Strazdina, "Not Their Battle to Fight: Latvian Veterans Remember Trials of Soviet-Afghan War," Latvian Public Broadcasting English Service, 18 February 2019: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/not-their-battle-to-fight-latvian-veterans-remember-trials-of-soviet-afghan-war.a309933/>

<sup>4</sup>Joint Combined Exchange Training exercises are designed to provide training opportunities for American Special Forces by holding the training exercises in countries that the forces may one day have to operate in, as well as providing training opportunities for the armed forces of the host countries.