Interview with BGen Lobel: Rethinking Warfare

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Burak: Thank you so much for taking your time to speak to us and agreeing to have this interview.

Lobel: I'm very happy to do this interview.

Burak: To begin, I want to ask you just in case the readers are not familiar, what exactly is SHAPE and especially what do you do as an Assistant Chief of staff at J9? What does your day to day look like?

Lobel: SH**APE stands for Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe and this is the strategic operational command of NATO. There are 2 commands in NATO.** One of them is SHAPE – being in charge of

operations: planning, conducting and preparing for operations. And my job is to support those three things. So planning operations, conducting operations and training for operations by making sure that the civil environment is taken into account in those 3 parts. I don't know how familiar you are with planning, for example basics of military planning is you try to understand what your enemy is going to be doing, then you understand what your forces – your brute forces, what you have, what is available to you – how you can use it, then you try to figure out how you with your brute forces are going to go against the enemy. That is what we have been doing forever. However now in the current context in Europe where we have moved in NATO from an out of area operation.

Burak: Out of area operations being?

Lobel: Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans. The places where basically what we did is that NATO could choose their fights. If we decided that we were going to Afghanistan, we went to Afghanistan. It wasn't because we couldn't do anything else. Whereas now, we are in a situation with what is happening in Russia, especially in Ukraine, where there is a threat to Europe and to NATO and our nations in Europe. But this is not something that we can choose. I mean the day someone attacks us, it will not be a choice. We will have to do it. You know what I mean? So, we are now in that situation. We used to fight outside of our countries. Now if something happens, it is going to be within Europe. In the middle of our nations, in the middle of one billion of our citizens, in the middle of our networks, our infrastructure, our civilian traffic, our civilian maritime traffic, losing our civilian transportation companies, losing our civilian internet cables and losing our civilian data centers for example. So it is completely different from when we went into Afghanistan. And so my job, just as the other divisions like the Operations Division who's building that understanding of what we are doing, or trying to understand what the enemy are doing. I need to be able to explain to my boss what is happening in the civil environment. Because we have become so dependent on civil capabilities. We depend on power, transport companies... 80% of our road transportation and train transportation is civilian. We don't own it. After the Cold War we agreed on that. We took away the dividends of peace. We stopped doing all the things we did in the past. So now, we are dependent on the civilian side – we are interdependent with them. So that's basically what I do. I just need to make sure that everybody in this headquarters who's planning or conducting operations, training exercises etc. are well aware of what the civil environment we are going to be fighting in, and how it'll affect and support the operations.

Burak: What an interesting job that you have. I really liked your perspective and understanding. You mentioned the importance of CIMIC capabilities, when we look around, we have some claiming CIMIC is essential for legitimacy, stability and long term success. There are some others claiming that bureaucracy caused by CIMIC slows down operations and

creates coordination problems in warfare. Why exactly do you think CIMIC is necessary in the context of warfare and other security issues?

Lobel: Well, I think the first thing is to define what CIMIC is. It depends on if we are talking about the structure or the function. As you probably know, CIMIC consists of two things. One is CFI, Civil Factor Integration, and the second one is CMI, Civil Military Interaction. Basically, this means that we need to understand the civil environment and we need to be able to engage with whoever in the civil environment to make sure that they can support our operations. Those two functions can be done by a lot of people. And they are actually conducted by a lot of people. Almost every division in SHAPE has some engagement with the civilian world. Our logisticians are contracting civilian companies for example. They are tracking shipping capabilities, fuel supplies... Things like that. Our medical division is tracking what's going on from a health perspective. How many hospitals there are, how many of them could be available to us during operations... So on and so on. So that's on a daily basis. We could have, and we do have, some sort of bi-speciality to the civil environment. It's cut into little pieces. I think the job of CIMIC – or my division -, well I have to say I don't like the word CIMIC. It carries a sense of something we did in the past in out of area operations. As long as you say CIMIC, people imagine people distributing water bottles in Afghanistan or opening up schools for little girls. And that is no longer what we do. But we still do CFI and CMI. And our job is to integrate all of that to make sure that we understand what we once superposed all the layers (transport, power, electricity, population, government, security forces), once we put all that together, we are able to see the interdependency and cascading effects that could come from one of those in affecting our operations. For example, if you look at the situations we are going over now, the Gulf War, let's say that we suddenly don't have enough oil in Europe, okay? What happens? Well, the population doesn't have any more fuel. That means that if we ever go to war now in that situation, the population will not be able to evacuate itself if needed. Because they won't have any cars running because there is no fuel. That will have an impact on my operations. If the population cannot be evacuated, the nations will probably ask the military to take care of the evacuation, or at least I will have to fight instead of in an empty city, I will be fighting in a city full of civilians everywhere. I need to know what's going to happen and how it's going to affect me. And so, I need to be able to tell SACEUR you had planned to launch an attack on our enemy in that area, because we thought the area would be empty of civilians. But now, it's not going to be empty. You will have 400,000 civilians in the middle of the road. You can't go through the area. You need to do something else. So it's how the situation is affecting my operation. My role is not to take care of the population, that is the role of the nation. Every nation is sovereign, following NATO Article 3, every nation has to do everything it is required to do to make sure they have a resilient nation that not only can be self sustainable, but that also can

support my operations. And this has been agreed by all nations. So, again. My role is purely operational. I need to make sure that whatever happens in the civilian environment that is going to affect my operations. I need to be able to identify the problem, and either try to find a solution or try to work for a way around with other divisions. For example, if there is no power, it will have an impact on trains, for example. I need to be able to tell my logisticians that if our enemies continue to bomb our power stations, in two weeks we will have one single train running because we will be out of power. So we try to find other solutions than sending equipment by railroad tracks.

Burak: With that, you mentioned the war in Ukraine. And you had also mentioned, previously most of the wars were fought outside, like in Afghanistan. This is the first time I believe in the modern world a war this close to Europe. Do you think this situation has made your task within SHAPE more important? If so, were there any structural changes within NATO?

Lobel: Well, I am absolutely convinced. And I think everybody is starting to be convinced. Because I can't say we are doing things better, but we are doing different things now. Especially different things in terms of the scale of the problem, the speed of the problem, the breath of the problem – covering the whole Europe , and the complexity of the problem. But the principle remains the same. We still do CMI and CFI. It's just the scale of it. In Afghanistan, at maximum, we probably had around 100,000 troops on the ground. But that is incomparable with what would happen in case of a collective defense scenario in Europe. In that case, we would have more than 2,000,000 troops deployed with all of our military forces; sea, land and everything. The scale is so different. The threat and the political impact as well. If something happened in Afghanistan, yes it was obviously important. But it wasn't directly affecting the survival of our nations in Europe. Now, if we don't deliver what we did before in case of an attack from Russia, some nations could just disappear. The risk is much bigger, the stakes are much higher. Just as the other branches are also growing in importance. Everyone has shifted to collective defense. In my domain, J9, we also need to do that. We are now almost doubling our size. It is still insufficient, but a great step forward. And what we are trying to do is to come up with what we call a 'white picture'. And this is the comparison of 'red' (adversary) and 'blue' (us). This is what we call the 'red picture' and the 'blue picture'. Basically what is the enemy doing, where are they, what do they have, what are our guys doing, what can they do... These are the basis of planning. What we are building now is missing a piece in the middle, which is the 'white picture' – what is happening in the civilian environment, how that would affect and support us as we plan and conduct our operations. That is something that we are doing. That is on computers. And this is what allows you to cross reference the information and identify gaps, issues, overlaps etc. We are looking closely at what is happening in Ukraine to try to identify patterns of what is happening to the civil society in war time. Then to be able to

replicate that in any one of our nations if should we would have to go to war. For the time being, the only data we have on a nation at war in Europe in a collective defence scenario is Ukraine. Before that, we have to go to the Second World War. Because we have never seen that before. That's the first thing that we are trying to do. The second thing we are trying to do is to make sure that the nations are resilient enough to support our operations. Because as I told you, we are unable to conduct operations without the support of the civilian side. We can't do it without the trucks, fuels, ships, people, roads, bridges, everything... We need to make sure that they are able to support us in the case of war. And what we are doing will start with a military plan. That is what we, the military, do. We prepare for wars, so we come up with plans. We first make sure that our military plan is aligned with the national military plan. We are in an alliance, every nation has some sort of a defense plan. We just need to make sure that all military plans are integrated and are feasible amongst us. But then we need to make sure of the reason with a civilian plan to support our operations. Many nations already have a number of civilian plans. Emergency plans for floodings, terrorist attacks, nuclear disasters, a massive storm, COVID, whatever. They have those plans, but not many nations have a civilian plan that is only focused on what happens if we go to a collective defense scenario – in a real war against a competitor. And so that is now what nations are starting to work on. So that their nation – the whole government effort – can support our operations if we have to come and fight to defend them. This is what we call civil military plans alignment, which is also a part of my job. We engage with those nations through military and civilian chains to make sure that we understand what each one of us is doing. Imagine if a nation is planning to evacuate their population towards the south, and we are planning to move all our forces towards the north – well. At some point we will be using the same roads, the same traffic, the same everything. It'll never work. We need to make sure that there is a deconfliction or a coordination at least of those opposing moves. If not, we are all going to end up congested in the middle of the fighting area. This is just an example, but I think it's an important one. Nations are making massive efforts, especially some nations who are already into total defense concepts, this is mainly the Nordic countries. Sweden and Finland have been by themselves for many years, they just joined NATO. They have been totally dependent and the whole society was prepared for conflict. But that is not the case for all of our nations. That's an important effort we, at J9, are leading to make sure that every single nation in the alliance is ready to be resilient enough to support our operations in case we need to conduct them to defend them.

Burak: That's such an interesting perspective and an amazing explanation that you have provided to us. You mentioned countries and decision making. The NAC is the final decision maker in NATO. Does the politics within the NAC really affect your job and responsibilities? Were there any

instances where the NAC has chosen to apply another method than you have suggested?

Lobel: Yes, the NAC is the final decision maker. But as you very well put it, remember that it is only an alliance of sovereign nations. So in the end, each nation decides. And then you just have to come up with a consensus at the NAC. Every nation is sovereign, and even if there was a declaration of Article 5, there is nothing that explicitly says what each nation should be doing. It just says that states should provide support. That can be sending 20 people to sending a million people. That is up to a nation to decide. Every nation is sovereign. And obviously every nation, despite some of them being members of the EU or not, some having bilateral relations with one nation and another... Each nation has their own interests. When you get everyone in the same room, that is exactly what they do. They discuss the topics, come up with the proposals, and everybody has to agree. It works with consensus. If not, nothing happens. It is natural that not everything goes smoothly and approved. Especially when it goes through resources. In the end, just as in any nation, it's mainly a question of resources. Who is paying for this, what am I risking, what are my benefits... There is a quote that said "Nations don't have friends, they only have interests". It is the reality. In the end, despite that we are an alliance, every nation has their interests. That obviously reflects what comes out of the NAC. If you were to ask me if I had everything I wanted, I would say obviously not. But I have to do what I can with what nations give me. But again, it's just like this in your nation. Your minister of defence can be unhappy because of the budget, the minister of foreign affairs can be upset because they don't get what they want, the minister of public health can want more doctors and hospitals. But then it's national responsibility and there is a question of priorities. It is the same thing with the NAC. There are priorities. Priorities must be approved by the NAC by consensus. That is also the beauty of the alliance. Once everybody has agreed, it works normally. I say normally, because we have seen often in the past that due to political reasons, nations can sign for a level of budget expenditure, number of capabilities to be delivered or number of troops to be sent to a country... But it doesn't always happen. That is the game of an alliance. To summarize, to answer your question, is it affecting me? It is affecting everyone at different levels but that is the rule of the game. I just need to make sure that I am as convincing as I can to make sure that nations understand the issue and are ready to provide me with what I need to do what I need to do

Burak: You emphasised the importance of consensus, cooperation and coordination. In the world, especially in the past 2 years, with the US making threats over tariffs on Europe, many of them being NATO allies, do you think that this makes achieving collective defense harder especially in the context of operational planning and coordination?

Lobel: Well – it's a difficult question. I would say it is almost facilitating consensus towards spending more. European nations have realised that

maybe the US would not commit if they occupied somewhere else. So, I think it made European nations realise they might be alone or not have the full support of the US. They need to be more capable by themselves. We never know what's going to happen. That I think is developing a sense of a stronger European pillar in NATO. Which in the end is a very good thing. Allies have never spent as much in defense as they are spending now. To be honest, I don't know if that would have happened if there hadn't been that threat over their heads of the possibility of not getting help from the US. It was an eye opener for Europe, like a shock therapy. But it seems to be working at least on paper.

Burak: You also mentioned with the change in the U.S administration, European countries are relying more on themselves. I would suggest that this makes NATO's cooperation with the EU more relevant – especially in military, cyber, and disinformation environments. In unconventional methods of warfare like cyber operations, civil infrastructure, etc., did J9 adapt to engage with civilian actors especially in these new domains?

Lobel: Well, you raised a very important point about the EU. Obviously, when we were deployed in Afghanistan, the main stakeholders were locals – the Afghans as well as some NGOs. If we are going to fight in Europe, most of Europe is composed of EU members or European nations. Everybody is concerned about it. There is definitely a realisation that Europe is going to be a part of the game, the EU is going to be a part of the game. So, there is more and more engagement with the EU and we in J9 typically are working more and more informally with the EU within the boundaries we are allowed to. You probably know there are some issues between how and what to share between NATO and the EU, because of national issues. But we are increasing that. The fundamental shift I believe is a control shift in both organisations. And in front of what's happening and with the perspective of a scenario of war in Europe, the EU is now saying 'I understand that once we fight the fight in a collective defence scenario, we'll be NATO. And we, the EU, are here to support financially, with capabilities, with regulations, with infrastructure, etc.'. There is a sort of a sharing of responsibilities. A clear separation of responsibilities which wasn't the case before. We were more in a competition mindset with the EU previously. There was duplication, overlap, each time someone in the EU was saying 'We need to develop a European Defense', NATO would say 'You are duplicating, we already have defense in NATO'. And in the end, we only have one single force. We can't have forces for the EU and forces for NATO. So I think we are making some massive progress on that. The creation of the EU for Defense and Space Industry is a big step forward. Before that, the EU was civil-centric. Now it is trying to get into more resilience, support to the military... When they came up with their plan for military mobility in Europe, they asked us whether we could give them our requirements. And we did. And I think that is a great cooperation and it is going in the right direction.

Burak: In cases where operational urgency is really high and coordination with civilian/private actors are complex or slow, how does J9 manage to fill in this gap? Have we seen an example of this in any real time crisis?

Lobel: That is our whole purpose in peacetime. We establish everything we can during the peacetime to make sure that we have no gaps in crisis and war. So that is why we engage regularly with those people. Not just when the war starts. It'll be too late. That is why we engage with the nations and understand their civil plannings and bring them in. That is why we engage with private sector companies to understand what they will do in war time, how they will affect us etc. All of that is part of the cycle of understanding the environment, talking to the right people, putting all that into the plans, into the 'white picture' and closing the loop to make it loop over and over again to make sure that we are ready when the war starts. And obviously, all of this is very important to train for it. We have more and more training with those guys – with the EU, companies, NGOs, etc. We bring them into exercises to make sure that we understand how they work, what we need and so on. The core of my job is to make sure that we have all of that ready before war so we can just turn on the key and it works.

Burak: In the context of communicating with private and civilian actors in warfare, in instances like Afghanistan, how did NATO ensure trust and neutrality with the civilian population given that NATO forces were seen as outsiders and invaders.

Lobel: At that time, one of the fundamental roles of CIMIC was the famous sentence of 'Winning the hearts and minds of the population.'. And that is why CIMIC was different at that time. Because we needed to conquer the public opinions of the locals. We had to help them, dig wells, distribute foods, accompany them, convince them etc. If war happened in Europe, in our nations, the effort to convince our nations to help us protect them would be obvious. So we wouldn't have to be as focused on winning their hearts and minds. I guess we have them, right? We would focus on what it is they need from us, how we can work together to make all of it work... That is the difference between the approaches out of area and current operations.

Burak: That was such a nice perspective General. That was all from my side. Thank you so much for agreeing to having this interview and taking your time to answer my questions. Hopefully, this interview will be published in the next edition of EPIS Magazine in a few months.

Lobel: Fantastic!

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