
Lieutenant General Fernando García-Vaquero, Chief Commander of the Headquarters in Bétera

“AN ARMY’S GREATEST STRENGTH IS ITS PEOPLE”

The commander of the HQ NRDC-ESP stresses the importance of emerging technologies to face new challenges, but points out that “the essential element is human capital”

AT the end of last year, the Headquarters of the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps Spain (HQ NRDC-ESP) conducted exercise *Steadfast Leda 2021*, which certified it to lead up to 120,000 troops in high-intensity combat, or as a Warfighting Corps in NATO terminology.

At the head of this multinational unit is Lieutenant General Fernando García-Vaquero (Madrid, 1961). “During the exercise”, he says, “the evaluators saw that we were ready and we are now in a standby period for a year, meaning that if there is a crisis in which NATO needs to use these capabilities, our headquarters will be the one to take the lead”.

With vast experience in mountain, field and anti-aircraft artillery assignments, García-Vaquero also served as a commander in the Legion and was posted twice to Bosnia-Herzegovina and once to Afghanistan. In 2014, he arrived in Valencia to

serve in successive posts at NATO headquarters until he became chief commander two years ago when he was promoted to lieutenant general. Today, he leads an advance unit capable of responding to a wide range of challenges, including hybrid warfare and issues arising from space and cyber domains.

—General, what does the new Warfighting Corps concept entail?

—The idea is that an Army Corps headquarters like ours can take on a larger command than it usually does, going from 50,000 troops to being able to lead up to 120,000 men and women in a high-intensity operation.

The Warfighting Corps HQ synchronises and coordinates units operating across the battlefield in what we call the Four Fights: Deep, Close, Rear and Narrative, in order to achieve the objectives of the operational design.

The novelty of this concept is the presence of emerging and disruptive

technologies, the increased range and lethality of weapon systems, and the relevance of increasingly sophisticated activities, such as the use of cyberspace, the surge in information/disinformation activities and the trend towards a largely urbanised world, all in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment.

—Do high-intensity operations involve major changes in the way of thinking and acting?

—Yes, they do. First, in their conception, as the battlefield is no longer limited to the traditional land, sea and air domains. We now also have to add the cyberspace and cognitive domains.

As a result, the necessary convergence of all these activities would require the implementation of new procedures to carry out operations that we call multi-domain operations. If we fight in the future with procedures from the past, even



Lieutenant General García-Vaquero at Araca base, where Bétera headquarters was deployed for exercise Steadfast Leda 21.

INTERVIEW

with today's conflicts in mind, we are doomed to complete failure.

—What role would this headquarters take on in a potential NATO operation?

—If the HQ NRDC-ESP were to act as a Warfighting Corps, it would lead a multinational force —with contributions from the various member states— in a high-intensity military operation, which in NATO terms is called a NATO Article 5 operation.

This article establishes that an attack against one Member State shall be considered an attack against all Allies, and may lead to the use of force. It has so far been invoked only once, in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

—How many military members are assigned and which are the most common nationalities?

—As it is a Spanish headquarters, most of the personnel are Spanish nationals, currently accounting for 80 percent of personnel, while the remaining 20 percent are from the eleven allied nations participating in the headquarters (Germany, the United States, France, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Romania and Turkey). The largest contributors are the United States, Italy and Greece, although this contribution may vary slightly from year to year. It is also important to underline that, in the event of a real operation, personnel numbers would be adjusted upwards or downwards in accordance with the characteristics of each mission.

I should stress that we would like to be more multinational. Besides, the foreign personnel stationed in Bétera and their families are very well adjusted to Spain and, in particular, to Valencia.

—How do they prepare for the diversity of missions assigned to them?

—With a very demanding preparation programme which, in the case of exercise *Steadfast Leda 21*, took

more than a year in rather complicated conditions, due to the fluctuating presence of COVID-19.

During this preparation period, seminars were held and exercises carried out, concepts were analysed and procedures developed, many of them novel, including activities in what is known as the “grey zone”. All this was done in collaboration with NATO certification bodies such as the NATO Land Command Headquarters (LANDCOM) located in Izmir, Turkey; the NATO Joint Force Training Centre (JFTC) located in Bydgoszcz, Poland; another HQ NRDC that preceded us in this role, the British Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) and the various participating units: Division *Castillejos* (Spain), 1st Infantry Division (USA), 12th Mechanised Division (Poland), Division *Tridentina* (Italy)), as well

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as a Portuguese Brigade, a Greek Brigade, the 18th Military Police Brigade (USA), and Spanish Army Corps Troops.

In short, it has been a very intense year of preparation, which has led to the certification of this HQ and we are now entering the standby period.

—This HQ is designed for conventional combat, with large troop deployments. Will it be capable of conducting more limited operations in a hybrid warfare environment?

—If we prepare for the most extreme and complex case scenario, the Warfighting Corps, we can take on a minor and less intense operation without major issues. As for hybrid actions, they can occur across the entire spectrum of conflict, including in

the aforementioned grey zone, where armed conflict does not yet officially exist. NATO is also developing this concept and the HQ NRDC-ESP has been studying it for some time and is leading the work.

—How relevant will artificial intelligence be to operations?

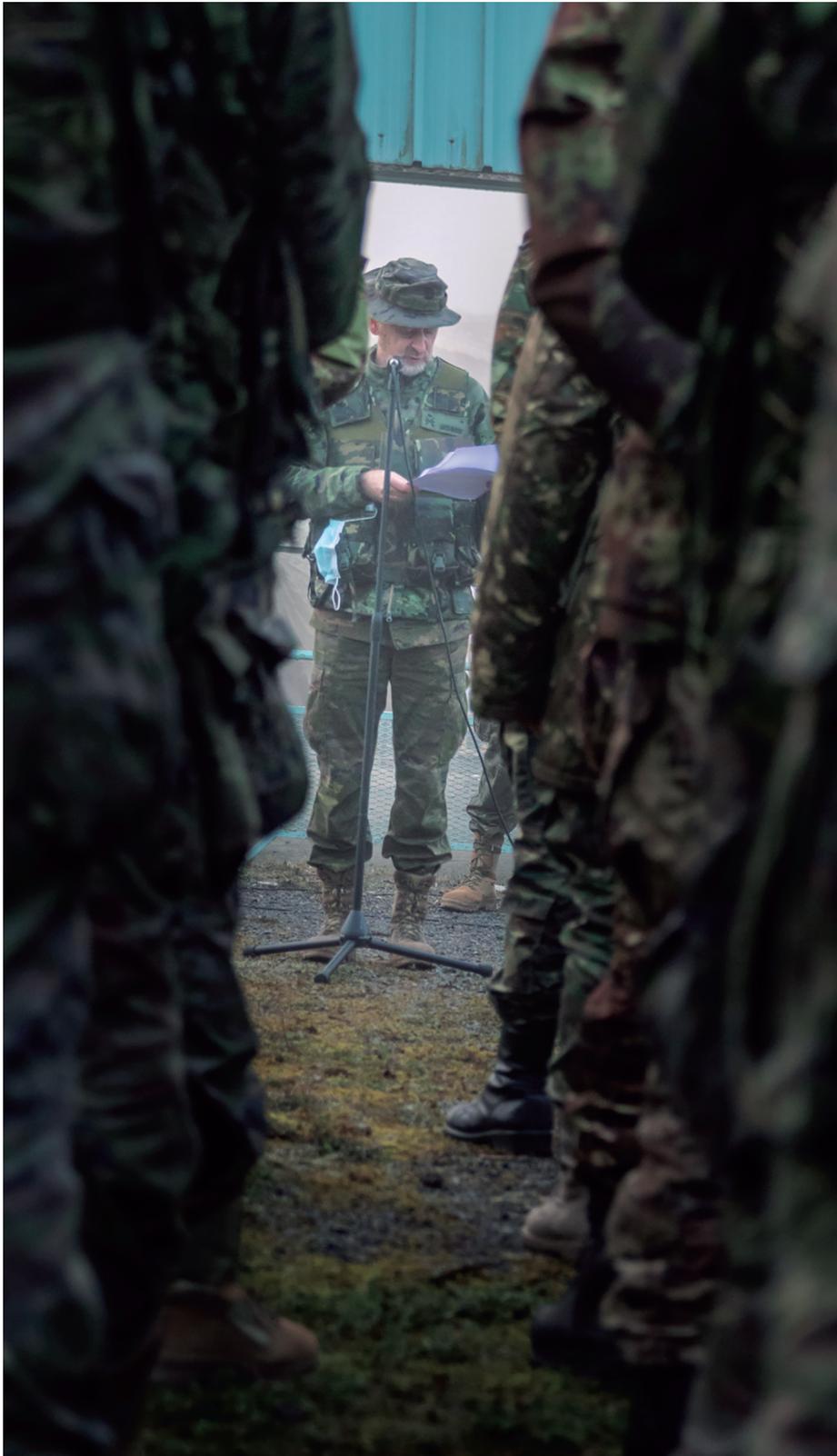
—The appearance of emerging and disruptive technologies calls for the digital transformation of various processes, not only of permanent headquarters, but also of forces deployed in operations. In the case of artificial intelligence, the main goal is to implement it in the decision-making process, reducing response times by managing and analysing all available information. This requires the convergence of technologies such as artificial intelligence, the use of 5G, big data and machine learning, among others.

The use of artificial intelligence depends on the massive availability of data, big data. This is complex at the most tactical levels of military operations, due to the difficulty of processing and transmitting, which in turn requires the implementation of edge computing technology. The progressive implementation of 5G and “tactical 5G” will facilitate access to this big data and the use of artificial intelligence.

—What about cyberspace?

—Cyberspace has been part of our planning for some time now and will become increasingly important. Having consolidated the protection of our own information systems, we are now integrating defensive and offensive actions in this domain of operations —always bearing in mind national and international law— synchronised with our other actions “in the physical world”. To this end, in exercise *Steadfast Leda 21*, we have experimented with national cyberspace situational awareness tools, with the support of the Joint Cyberspace Command.

NATO, with the support of its member states, is seeking to enhance



The commander of HQ NRDC-ESP addresses the troops of his headquarters at the start of Exercise *Steadfast Leda 21* in mid-November.

assertive actions to succeed in this field. Integrating cyberspace and space domains into the tactical manoeuvre is a challenge in which NATO is currently involved.

The essential idea I would like to point out is that, whatever the use of new technologies and cyberspace might be, it should, in my opinion, be decided upon by humans and not by machines.

– How important will information or propaganda warfare be in future conflicts?

– I think it is going to play an increasingly important role because these new technologies are easily accessible. What is called fake news is already here. Many of the current, and probably future, operations are taking place in the so-called grey zone, and have evolved from being based on the exercise to being centred on behaviour, feelings and attitudes. In other words, instead of focusing on the enemy or the terrain, they focus on people and their emotions. The actions that can be undertaken aim to create a climate of disinformation and confusion that will destabilise and weaken the adversary, often influencing public opinion.

– How can these threats, which mainly act at the cognitive level, be addressed?

– All communication efforts need to be managed from the highest level and applied at all levels of the operations. It is therefore essential to consider the information environment in the planning and execution of military operations, since planning communication aspects and information activities irrespective of the operational planning could lead to a gap between words and deeds. At the same time, the need to maintain credibility, aligning messages and actions, and to convey truthful, accurate and timely information to society, promoting favourable perceptions, as well as to integrate lethal and non-lethal activities in an effective manner, will remain significant challenges in future conflicts.

—Is the gender perspective taken into account in planning and in this type of exercise?

—Yes, of course. From the beginning of planning to the analysis of goal achievement in operations and exercises, the gender perspective is always present as it should be.

In order to ensure this, we have a gender advisor who is in direct and continuous contact with me, as well as a network of focal points in every section of the mission, serving as a transmission belt throughout the chain of command, from senior commands to subordinates, for all related information.

—After the withdrawal from Afghanistan, European leaders have again raised the possibility of building up European military forces. What can Bétera contribute?

—The HRF(L)HQ (High Readiness Force Land Headquarters), in its capacity as an international headquarters (HQ NRDC-ESP), is at the disposal of the Atlantic Alliance but, if necessary, also of the European Union, depending on the needs that may arise and the decision of the Spanish Government.

Therefore, participating in operations as a member of either the European Union or NATO does not entail changes in our command structures or functional capabilities. For all practical purposes, to change from a NATO to an EU mode of operation does not involve a considerable effort.

—You are simultaneously in charge of the two top-level headquarters, one national and one international. How do you feel about this experience?

—I honestly have to say that it is a real privilege for me to be at the helm of this headquarters and of a truly outstanding group of national and multinational professionals. The truth is that we work as a single and synergistic headquarters located in two different places, Valencia and Bétera, but as a single team, a team of people I believe in and trust.

However, there is a difference: working on a daily basis in a multinational environment brings many advantages, such as open-

mindedness, different ways of facing and solving problems, and so on, and very few disadvantages. In the end, the most important thing is that we all act as soldiers, as comrades in arms. All these experiences, ways of working, etc., revert to the national domain, in particular to our Army. Therefore, I would describe this experience as unique and highly fruitful, both personally and professionally.

—What do you expect from the implementation of Force 2035 and the new “Mission Oriented Organization”?

—Force 2035 is a transformation project affecting the entire Army, including this headquarters, both

domains in the battle rhythm of the Warfighting Corps. In any case, to meet all these challenges there is one thing that is essential and most important: human capital. An Army’s greatest strength is its people. In fact, this is one of my priorities. Without motivated and trained personnel, everything else is useless. And here I can proudly say that the human capital of the HRF(L)HQ, both nationally and internationally, is outstanding.

—How has the pandemic affected your daily life?

—The operability of this headquarters has not been affected at all, quite the contrary. That is what we are here



Lieutenant General García-Vaquero accompanies General Enseñat (Army Chief of Staff) and General Cloutier (LANDCOM) during the exercise.

nationally and multinationally. As I said earlier, our NATO membership allows us to keep abreast of new concepts and procedures, as for instance all the issues deriving from the implementation of the NATO 2030 agenda.

Of all those new ideas, I would like to highlight, among others, the practical implementation of digital platforms for audience analysis in cognitive information handling; the use at Warfighting Corps level of the Joint Air to Ground Integration Cell (JAGIC), which enables us to manage the airspace under the direction and supervision of our Air Force colleagues; or the integration of the space and cyberspace

for, to be useful, and even more so on this occasion, when the people who were suffering were Spanish citizens. From the very beginning, and thanks to the excellent relations we have with the civilian authorities and the law enforcement agents of the Community of Valencia, the HRF(L)HQ has been fully involved in operations *Balmis* and *Baluarte*, in support of the corresponding Land Component Command, as facilitators and also as implementers with our own capabilities. We have tried to help alleviate suffering and save lives, all together and at the same time, without hesitation.

Víctor Hernández/Photos: HQ NRDC-ESP