

U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

contact: paoci@eur.army.mil
phone: 49-6221-57-5815 / DSN 370-5815
fax: 49-6221-57-6376 / DSN 370-6376



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Conference of European Armies brings military leaders together to discuss common issues

By Bill Roche

U.S. Army Europe Public Affairs Office

HEIDELBERG, Germany -- The battles of the 21st century will be complex, persistent struggles against hybrid threats by coalitions operating outside their national boundaries in concert with local forces and governments and a wide array of nonmilitary agencies, U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr. told multinational senior military leaders assembled here for the 16th annual Conference of European Armies, Oct. 29-31.



PHOTO: KEVIN KOEHLER / GRAPHICS: MICHAEL BEATON

Participants in the 16th annual Conference of European Armies pose for a group photo. The three-day U.S. Army Europe-sponsored CEA brought together nearly 60 leaders from more than three dozen nations to discuss topics such as full-spectrum operations, cultural awareness, civil-military operations, leader development and interoperability.

The U.S. Army Europe-sponsored CEA is designed to enhance security cooperation through dialogue among senior U.S., North American and European military leaders, many the top-ranking members of their nations' armies or defense forces.

This year's forum brought together nearly 60 leaders from more than three dozen nations from Canada to Azerbaijan. The conference participants discussed a variety of topics related to partnership and coalition operations, including full-spectrum operations,

cultural awareness, civil-military operations, leader development and interoperability.

In his remarks during the conference's final session, Casey said the evolving character of conflict requires great changes in the way the U.S. and its allies operate at home and on distant battlefields.

Ideology, technology and demographics are defining that evolution, the general said.

"We believe this is an ideological struggle, and we don't believe this opponent is going to quit or go away easily," he said. "He is going to have to be beaten, but it's an ideological struggle, so it is going to take a long time. Compounding that, we believe that the trend that we're seeing around the globe will tend to exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, these conditions. And so we're at war, and so for example globalization – globalization is a double-edged sword, and the impacts of the recent economic crisis were so rapidly shared around the globe, it was striking to me."

"Technology is another double-edged sword," Casey continued. "The same technology that's being used to bring knowledge to anyone with a computer and a hookup is being used by terrorists to export terror."

"The demographic is also going in the wrong direction. The population of some of these developing countries like Pakistan is expected to double by 2020, and there are people that are increasingly moving to cities. By 2030 estimates are that 60 percent of the population of the world are going to live in cities. That says a lot about where we'll fight," Casey said.

The general said the two things that worry him most about today's conflicts are the potential for the use of weapons of mass destruction by adversary forces and safe havens "where terrorists can move and plan and conduct terrorist operations out of, unhindered by a local government."

Casey said the 21st-century enemy the U.S. and its allies will face is increasingly a hybrid threat he defined as "diverse groups of conventional, irregular, terrorist and criminal capabilities, all woven together for a purpose."

More than once he pointed to the 2006 conflict in Lebanon as an example of that hybrid nature of today's battlefield. "You (had) a non-state actor – Hezbollah – operating inside a state – Lebanon – fighting a third state – Israel – supported by a fourth state – Iran. Now that's a hugely complex environment," the general said.

In addition, he said, Hezbollah forces employed weapons such as improvised explosive devices in conjunction with sophisticated military hardware, including rockets, unmanned aerial vehicles, state-of-the-art antitank guided missiles and surface-to-air missiles, normally found only in national arsenals.

“The instruments of power are no longer exclusively in state control, and that presents challenges to us,” he said. “And so I think we’re going to see not necessarily the same conventional threats, but every place we go we’ll see hybrid threats.”

While he said he believes “21st-century conflict is increasingly going to be conducted and concluded on land, and that land power will be increasingly important in solving the security problems of the 21st century,” Casey added that to achieve long-term success commanders will be forced to deal with more complex issues that stem from a hybrid enemy and the need to reach out to a wider range of military and nonmilitary agencies. As a result, he said, commanders now must rely more on things outside their control.

“It’s a difficult feeling for a military leader ... we’re used to having our hands on all the controls. ... the keys to your success are beyond your ability to directly influence. It presents you a significantly different challenge,” he said.

As a result, the U.S. and its allies must be interoperable on higher levels than ever before, he said, reaching beyond technical compatibility to refining civil-military operations and synchronizing allies’ cooperation with military, government and civil agencies at home and in the combat theaters where they operate.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that we need to go well beyond (using) the same caliber ammunition and the same radio frequencies. We’re there. The work of NATO for the last 60 years has allowed us to be interoperable,” Casey said. “Sure we can always do better, but I believe that as military leaders now, the most important interoperability challenge that we have is being able to integrate the effects provided by the civil side. ... I believe that we as military leaders must create unity of effort. We are not going to be given it.”

“Our Soldiers rely on the effects that will come out of that effort.”

The general said in addition to interoperability, today’s forces need several other qualities to succeed on the 21st century battlefield:

-- They must be versatile in the skills of offense, defense and stability operations that make up today’s full-spectrum operations. “They must be capable of operating across the spectrum of conflict. ... You hear a lot of discussion coming out of think tanks in the United States that we ought to shift our weight completely to irregular warfare. We all recognize as professionals (that) we can’t do that. But forces designed for full-spectrum operations are inherently versatile,” Casey said.

-- They must be expeditionary forces prepared to operate beyond their national boundaries. “Prior to September 11th, (the U.S. Army was) largely a garrison-based Army that lived to train. Our major event was a training rotation to one of our combat training centers,” he said. “That’s not how we operate now, and I tell folks we’re never going back there. We are putting ourselves on a rotational cycle where a third of the Army is ready to deploy and operate at any given time, and that’s causing us to do some very different things.”

-- They must be agile, “not only in our forces, but in our institutions and in our leaders ... our institutions need to be agile enough to be able to adapt quickly to provide our Soldiers the tools and the training they need to succeed in the conflict they’re faced with. You know, our first option that we always take is that we take the force that was designed for something else, and we make the best of it. Well, we have to do better than that.”

-- They must be lethal. While the U.S. Army is evolving to embrace new methodology in fighting today’s insurgencies, the general said, he added that “we cannot ever forget that our core competency is lethality. That’s why they put us here.”

-- They must be sustainable. This means the U.S. and its allies must be able to operate in austere environments, Casey said, as well as maintain the ability to provide forces to continue the mission as long as necessary. In the U.S., this has spawned “a fundamental revamping” of the National Guard and Army Reserve that has shifted their role from that of a strategic reserve force to an operational augmentation to the active force, he said. “We have 60-70,000 Guardsmen and reservists mobilized on a given day, and have for about five years. That’s a very interesting thing for a society to accept.”

The way ahead for the U.S. and its European allies, Casey said, is twofold.

First is for those forces to continue to work together “in little steps” to integrate other agencies in their nations into military efforts and educate them about their forces’ objectives. “I think those little steps will pay great dividends over the long haul, and I think we’re in this for the long haul and we need to start now,” the general said.

Second, he said, is to make Afghanistan work. He cited a recent speech given by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, in which the secretary said the entire NATO alliance – the European Union, nongovernmental organizations and other military and civilian groups – must better integrate and coordinate with each other and the Afghan government.

“Afghanistan is the test, on the grandest scale, of what we’re trying to achieve when it comes to integrating the military and the civilian, the public and the private, the national and the international. And like all of you, I believe we can and will succeed in Afghanistan, and I think it’s a long-term effort, and it’s not too late for us, as military leaders, to continue to push to integrate the entire effort.”

Gen. (Ret.) Harald Kujat, former chief of staff of the German Federal Armed Forces and a member of the Strategic Advisors Group of the Atlantic Council of the United States, served as moderator for the final conference session. Kujat said interoperability between forces is always somewhat limited, and reducing friction between leaders and forces is an important goal of forums such as the CEA.

“I am a simple Soldier. The question for me is, ‘What is the main challenge to military leaders in an operation?’ And it’s not the enemy. It’s friction,” Kujat said.

“So I think what we heard here today here in the discussions is very interesting,” he added. “It’s exactly the way we have to move forward. But it is the complexity of a situation that is the challenge – the friction that comes up time and again in all our operations. That’s the main challenge for military leadership.”

In the closing remarks of the conference USAREUR Commander Gen. Carter Ham, who was hosting and attending the CEA for the first time, addressed the assembled military leaders. Ham said that while he hadn’t been sure going in what to expect from the conference, at the end of the three-day event he was convinced it is a useful forum, particularly in its examination of leader development.

“We’ve learned about Four Cs and Seven Steps and Three As and several other kinds of things, but I think the real value of this conference will play itself out in two ways,” he said. The conference brought senior leaders together to establish enduring relationships, the general said, and provided him with some issues to think about as he considers USAREUR’s future.

Ham said some of the benefits of the conference might not become apparent for a long time, because the issues the group discussed are not quick or easy to resolve. But he added that he’s convinced the leaders who attended this year’s CEA are equal to the challenges of the future.

“What I do know is the same that you know, and that is that we face an uncertain future, and we have many, many challenges,” he said. “There are certainly cultural challenges. There are difficulties in interoperability, both mechanical and technical, (but) more importantly in human and organizational interoperability. We know that we are headed into a future of persistent conflict, (and it’s) more difficult to define what that future might hold. The current economic crisis tells us that we’re probably in an era of declining resources, and we will have challenges reconciling that period of declining resources where perhaps our missions are increasing simultaneously.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” Ham said, “but I believe all of us, working together, will be able to meet those challenges of an uncertain future.”



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