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EDITING BOARD

Coordinator: COL Zlatko GJORGJIOVSKI

Director: COL Memduh DERE

Co-Director: COL Vladimir STOJANOVSKI

Editor: LTC Daniel NATU

Production Manager: MAJ Zlatko ORDEVSKI

Photographers: SGT Daniel FLOREA
SGT Georgios ARGYROPOULOS

Design: Jovan Dimoski

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ONE
TEAM
ONE
MISSION



Brigadier General Aristeidis ILIOPOULOS (Na-3) Commander of SEEBRIG

2020 was tough. It took SEEBRIG through unprecedented challenges as lockdown, periods of remote work, postponement of SEVEN STARS Exercise, quarantine of some of our colleagues and a constant state of pressure and uncertainty. But 2020 was also a year of milestone events for SEEBRIG, like the smooth relocation of SEEBRIG HQ from Tyrnavos/Na-3 to Kumanovo/Na-5, the quick restoration of its full operational capability in the new location and the change of command, all possible only with the hard work and determination of the staff and the outstanding support of our nations.

Taking over as Commander of SEEBRIG, I totally apprehended and embraced the privilege and the honor of such an assignment. SEEBRIG reflects the will of its participating nations to cooperate in the most productive way, promoting good neighborly relations and exchanging views and aspects of operational thinking and planning regarding peace support operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

Challenges pushed us harder and made us wiser, and SEEBRIG has managed to maintain its military capabilities in order to be able to conduct its mission, whenever requested.

We must carry these lessons in 2021 and beyond. In my vision, we must continue with dedication to the purposes and principles provided by the United

Nations Charter, with respect to the State-Parties of the Multinational Peace Force Southeastern Europe Agreement and the coordinative bodies of SEDM, honoring the heritage of the previous brigade commanders and staff with passion, ambition, enthusiasm, optimism, smile and excellent relationship among the personnel.

We are committed to maintain and improve the capabilities of the Southeastern Europe Brigade, by enhancing international cooperation with regional security organizations, by participating in collective exercises with affiliated units and NATO structures, by training our staff through activities conducted by international and regional training centers, by strengthening the interoperability through evaluation visits of the affiliated units and by creating a positive multicultural working environment with cultural and sport activities, study trips and other events.

In such manner, we will ensure SEEBRIG's readiness for possible employment in missions according to the provisions of our founding Agreement and strengthen the foundation of a unique military structure which came a decades' long way and is committed to making a difference in the future.

ONE TEAM, ONE MISSION!



**Deputy Minister of Defense, H.E. Mr. Petro KOÇI, (Na-1)
PMSC/SEDM-CC Chairman**

SEDM INITIATIVE – PROMOTING REGIONAL COOPERATION AND STRENGTHENING THE REGIONAL DEFENSE CAPABILITIES

The South-Eastern Defense Ministerial (SEDM) Initiative, which started in 1996 in Tirana, has established a “new paradigm for cooperation” in our region.

SEDM member nations expressed their commitment to take a “regional ownership approach” of working towards building a lasting secure and stable environment, ready to contribute to the peace and security in the South Eastern Europe (SEE).

In this regard, the SEDM Process was a crucial driver by giving a new impulse to the peace and stability in our region and becoming a security contributor within the SEE and even beyond.

Today the SEDM Process represents a “successful story”, as it has proved to be an excellent confidence-building mechanism in SEE, further enhancing our friendship and improving the security and prosperity of our countries.

There is no doubt that the SEDM Process has become an integral element of the security policy of the regional cooperation and has contributed significantly towards a common Euro-Atlantic future.

Albania assumed the Chairmanship of the SEDM Secretariat in July 2019. Throughout this period, Albania has been fully dedicated to promote the vision, ideas and activities of the SEDM Process, by contributing to the fulfillment of the goals and priorities of our Initiative.

Albania remains a firm supporter of the SEDM Process through a steady and serious commitment, by being active in fostering constructive regional cooperation and enhancing the connectivity with all member nations, SEEBRIG and regional/

international organizations. That is why the words of our National Hero, Gjergj Kastrioti Scanderbeg “Power through Unity”, became the motto of our Chairmanship.

SEDM has always been project-oriented and in this regard, during our mission, we enhanced their effectiveness and usability.

Despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with our willingness to adapt, we found our way through these extraordinarily circumstances, We continue to rely on cooperation and to empower our countries to work closer and remain unified in our vision and purpose, despite the current challenges that our region and all the world is facing.

During our mission, with the readiness and efforts shown by all nations, the projects and activities undertaken within SEDM context, specifically the Interconnection of Military Hospitals (IMIHO), the SEDM Portal, Female Leaders in Security and Defense (FLSD), Building Integrity (BI) and the South Eastern Europe Simulation Exercise (SEESIM) have been further developed by achieving successful results.

Among the SEDM Initiative, one that carries the most significant prominence is the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG) established with MPFSEE Agreement signed in Skopje on 26th September 1998.

This year marked the 21st Anniversary of SEEBRIG HQ and the relocation of SEEBRIG from Tyrnavos, Greece to Kumanovo, North Macedonia as well as the Hand Over - Take Over of the Command of SEEBRIG.



SEDM-CC&PMSC Chairmanship Handover-Takeover Ceremony on 30 August 2019, Tyrnavos/Larissa, Greece

After 21 years of history, SEEBRIG has shown to be the most valuable military component in the context of the SEDM Process. It has offered a unique platform for military cooperation, mutual training and exchanging of experience.

In all these years, SEEBRIG enabled to bring together Armed Forces representatives from our countries to work towards our common security goals. The numerous SEEBRIG's activities and the exchange of the good practices in a multinational environment, significantly contributed in fostering the military cooperation among our nations.

SEDM and SEEBRIG represent "our capabilities" and in this regard, SEEBRIG is capable of providing SEDM with a credible operational capability, available for future commitments in a variety of missions.

The accomplishment of SEEBRIG mission in Afghanistan in 2006, as part of ISAF, is a great success of this force and represents an evidence of our great spirit of cooperation.

The experience that we gained so far is significant for enhancing SEEBRIG's potentials. The Brigade may serve as a good frame of "pooling and sharing of our countries capacities" for regional civil emergencies and NATO's military operations and missions.

With regard to regional cooperation in coping with natural disasters, the approval of the "Concept on Disaster Relief Operations" and the development of "SEEBRIG Disaster Relief Operations Capabilities List" was a distinct achievement in an area, where we have to join our forces by increasing the coordination and cooperation to help saving lives.

The signing of the 6th Additional Protocol of the MPFSEE Agreement and the ratification by the respective Parliaments of the member nations is a positive step for our Initiative.

The challenging time of COVID-19 pandemic and the nature of the new threats and challenges, make our cooperation a necessity, as the benefits we can draw when we cooperate are far more numerous and valuable.

Next year marks the 25th Anniversary of the signing of SEDM Agreement, which is a milestone to increase our efforts to promote its goals.

In all these years, SEDM Initiative has always been an instrument of growth, cohesion and union within SEE, as well as a support instrument for the region towards its Euro-Atlantic integration, as we have seen recently the Republic of North Macedonia on 27th March 2020 joined NATO as thirtieth member.

It is a great responsibility for all of us to continue with the enhancement of the confidence, security and sustainable development of our region.

All the achievements that have been done so far, present an imperative for us to make all the necessary steps and efforts, thus, this successful story may continue to last in the future.

Therefore, we should continue on the path of the SEDM regional cooperation, as a path to international security and stability, focusing on SEEBRIG as a main pillar of our regional defense cooperation and developing the regional projects for increasing the peace and democracy in the region.

As the Chairman of Albanian SEDM-CC/PMSC Secretariat, I assure you that we will continue the ongoing efforts and work to promote actively the projects, activities and the goals of SEDM Process. At the same time, I encourage all member nations to continue developing ideas to make the SEDM Initiative more effective and ready to adapt to the current and future geostrategic context.



LTC Daniel NATU (Na-6)
Chief G9 (CIMIC)

SEEBRIG HQ ACTIVATION IN KUMANOVO, COMMAND HANDOVER-TAKEOVER AND 21ST ANNIVERSARY CEREMONY

26 August 2020 was a particularly busy and important day for SEEBRIG HQ. Shortly after successful completion of relocation of the HQ from Na-3 to Na-5, a new challenge was up – organizing a major ceremony for the HQ activation, Change of Command between Brigadier General Tudorica PETRACHE (Na-6) and Brigadier General Aristeidis ILIOPOULOS (Na-3) and also SEEBRIG's 21st Anniversary whilst setting up the new HQ in the barracks "Boro Menkov" in Kumanovo and adhering to the precautions and restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.



The Nucleus Staff of SEEBRIG HQ and their leadership rose to the occasion and, with admirable support from the Host Nation, have managed to put in place a perfectly organized high-level event.



The ceremony was attended by the President and the Prime Minister of Na-5, the Chairman of SEDM-CC&PMSC, the Minister of Defence and the Deputy Minister of Defence from Na-5, ambassadors accredited in Skopje, Deputy Chiefs of Defence from member countries, as well as the military leadership of the Na-5, military attachés, local authorities and media representatives.



The newly renovated and equipped facility provided for the HQ by Na-5 was opened in a ceremonial manner by the highest officials of Host Nation and SEDM-CC & PMSC, and will be the home of the Brigade HQ for the period 2020-2026.

COL Zlatko GJORGIOVSKI (Na-5)
Chief of Staff



NEW LOCATION OF HQ...CONTINUATION OF THE SEBRIG HISTORY



"The Knotted Gun" by Carl Fredric REUTERSWARD
The sculpture at the United Nations headquarters in New York City

"The pursuit of peace and progress cannot end in a few years in either victory or defeat. The pursuit of peace and progress with its trials and its errors, its successes and its setbacks, can never be relaxed and never abandoned."

(Dag HAMMARSKJÖLD, UN Secretary General, from 10 April 1953 – 18 September 1961)

The COS/SEEBRIG is head of the HQ SEEBRIG/NUCLEUS Staff at peacetime and head of the SEEBRIG Tactical Operations Center (TOC) during deployment. The task of the COS/SEEBRIG at peacetime is to direct and manage the establishment and running of the HQ SEEBRIG/NUCLEUS STAFF in accordance with this Annex. The COS/SEEBRIG will be responsible for the following:

Running and directing the HQ SEEBRIG/NUCLEUS Staff during deployment,

- Ensuring the economic use of the common funds connected to the HQ SEEBRIG/NUCLEUS Staff,
- Training and exercising the HQ SEEBRIG/NUCLEUS Staff and the augmentation part of the HQ SEEBRIG.
- Supervision of contingency/operational planning,
- Any other tasks which he is directed to perform by COMSEEBRIG.

(MPFSEE Agreement Annex C, signed in Skopje, September 26 1998)



PERSONAL WORKING EXPERIENCE IN MULTINATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Working in a Multinational Brigade HQ is a challenge and a great opportunity. I first experienced it during my assignment to SEEBRIG HQ in 2008, as Political Adviser (POLAD). While preparing my family to move for almost three years in Istanbul, Na-7 (where SEEBRIG HQ was located at that time) I was a little worried about my new assignment- although I have previous experience in some international activities such as meetings, exercises and courses, the POLAD position was my first work assignment in a multinational environment. In addition, my new post was slightly different from the work of a signal officer, which I had done



The author at the HO-TO ceremony in SEEBRIG HQ Istanbul, Na-7, July 2009

before. However, being aware that the assignment would be an excellent opportunity to improve my military knowledge, I was also confident I would cope successfully with all requirements related to my new position.

Following daily routines and taking part in all HQ activities, my time as a member of SEEBRIG HQ in Istanbul passed very quickly. During this period, I had many opportunities to understand the complexity of the responsibilities of the Chief of Staff (CoS). Being the Commander's principal assistant and senior national representative of HN, the CoS carries an important burden on his shoulders. He was tasked with making the HQ work like a team, in close cooperation and interaction with colleagues coming from other Nations, diverse both in military knowledge and cultural mentality. Privately, my family and I found it very enjoyable to live and work in Istanbul, the only city in the world that lies in both Europe and Asia. During our time there,

Istanbul was the European capital of culture in 2010, which offered many exciting events to us.

Coming back in 2010, in national environment, I continued working as a signal officer while keeping in touch with SEEBRIG topics in multiple ways – routine web page visits, participation in meeting/conference held in Tyrnavos/Larissa organized by SEEBRIG HQ and direct contact with officers and NCOs from Na-5 who have been working in SEEBRIG.

After working in the Joint Operations Command in Kumanovo, at the "Boro MENKOV" barracks for almost 5 years, one of my most demanding involvements in 2020 lead me back to SEEBRIG. As Chief of section J-6 in General staff, I was responsible for providing CIS (Communication and Information System) capabilities and equipment in the new location of the SEEBRIG HQ, in Kumanovo. Soon afterwards, in October 2020, following the completion of all national procedures, I was selected and appointed as Chief of Staff of SEEBRIG. It was a great surprise that destiny reserved for me – working

one more time under the SEEBRIG flag, this time as a CoS, in the Kumanovo camp "Boro MENKOV". When I was informed of this decision, many good memories revived.

Arriving back in SEEBRIG HQ, after 10 years, I have noticed some changes: new structure was implemented according to the 5th additional protocol and the ratification procedures of the 6th additional protocol (signed in Skopje, on 12th June 2019) are already ongoing in all SEEBRIG Nations. However, I found the same dedication and willingness of all HQ members to work hard, and to give the best of their efforts, in order to improve operational capability of the brigade and to ensure peace and stability within our region and beyond.

WHAT WERE THE MOST IMPORTANT ACTIVITIES LAST YEAR?



Na-5 MoD, Mrs. Radmila SHEKERINSKA-JANKOVSKA,
Official ceremony at SEEBRIG HQ, 26 August 2020 Kumanovo Na-5

Without a doubt, the biggest event last year was the relocation of the HQ. In August 2020, SEEBRIG HQ was moved from Larissa, Na-3, to Kumanovo, Na-5. The relocation is definitely the most demanding "exercise" during peace time and it consumes tremendous effort of all staff members. The good coordination between two host nations (Na-3 and Na-5) enabled timely preparation for the relocation of SEEBRIG personnel, their families and equipment, as well as smooth execution of the relocation plan without major problems and delays.

The HQ was officially established in a new location on 26th August 2020 with the official ceremony for the HQ Activation, Commandership Handover-Takeover and 21st Anniversary. On this event Na-5 Minister of Defense, Her Excellency Radmila SHEKERINSKA-JANKOVSKA welcomed the SEEBRIG personnel and their families to Kumanovo by saying: "... It is truly my immense pleasure today to address you here at the opening of the new headquarters location of the South Eastern European Brigade. The pleasure is twofold – first North Macedonia, that was the birthplace of SEEBRIG many years ago, is now welcoming back this important regional initiative. The second reason is that this relocation happens in the same year when

North Macedonia became the 30-th member of the Alliance... Since SEEBRIG was established here in North Macedonia, it won't be far from the truth to say – SEEBRIG, welcome home".

When reflecting on 2020, we should not forget that the world has faced the pandemic spread of COVID-19 emerging out of Wuhan province of China in November of 2019. The various measures such as prohibition of travelling, quarantine and nation-wide lockdown were implemented by many countries in the world, including in our region. These measures affected the Annual Plan for 2020 and some activities were postponed while some others were conducted using VTC, a modern communications tool suitable for the work needs of SEEBRIG personnel.



WHAT CHALLENGES WE ARE GOING TO FACE IN 2021?

The eyes of the Chief of Staff are always fixed on the future, on the most important activities in the next years, which demands lot of coordination, close cooperation and additional efforts from SEEBRIG personnel.

First and foremost, the good health and well-being of the personnel is of utmost priority. The implemented anti-COVID measures should be applied even more rigorously. It is not only about wearing a mask and keeping the required social distance. The most challenging task is organizing work in HQ, in shifts or with reduced presence of the personnel, which requires more organizational skills, as well as keeping an uninterrupted flow of information and effective working processes.

According to the SEEBRIG approved Annual Plan, year 2021 will be busy, with many activities that will contribute to further promotion of SEEBRIG in the broader international environment.

As every year so far, we are focusing on training and the preparations of the Nucleus Staff to achieve appropriate level of knowledge and expertise and to improve overall operational capability of the brigade. Our crucial activity is exercise "SEVEN STARS 2022" which will consume a lot of effort. Additionally, we plan to participate in several other exercises such as:

- "STEDFAST LEDA 2021" organized by NRDC-ESP,
- "ON GUARD 21" organized by NRDC-TUR,
- "STEADFAST DEFENDER 21" organized by MND-South East (Na-6),
- "MAPLE ARCH" organized by LITPOLUKRBRIG (Poland),
- Consequence management field exercise "NORTH MACEDONIA 21 (Na-5)" organized by Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC).

The participation in exercises is not the only form of training. In continuation of the already established cooperation with training institutions/centers 6 courses are included in the Annual Plan 2021. The Mobile Training Team (MTT) coming from RACVIAC - Center for Security Cooperation (Zagreb), the Human Intelligence Centre of Excellence (HUMINT CoE) Na-6, the Public Affairs Regional Center (PARC) Na-5, the Multinational Peace Support Operation Training (MPSOTC) Na-3, the

Crisis Management and Disaster Response Center of Excellence (CMDR CoE) Na-2 and the Peace Support Operations Training Center (PSOTC) Sarajevo will provide 3-5 days courses to SEEBRIG HQ personnel on the relevant areas of their competences.

Furthermore, to evaluate PSO capability of SEEBRIG affiliated units, 5 evaluation visits are scheduled for 2021 (Na-5, Na-3, Na-7, Na-2 and Na-1).



CoS coordination meeting with Deputy Chief of Staff OPS, Deputy Chief of Staff SUP and Secretary of CoS, Kumanovo Na-5

Finally, as it was in the past, SEEBRIG HQ teams will participate in 4 meetings (2 PMSC&SEDM-CC meetings, DCOHDs meeting and SEDM meeting) to present SEEBRIG activities and achievements conducted since the last meetings and planned activities for the upcoming period, as well as to discuss other projects and initiatives.

Instead of a formal conclusion, I would like to emphasize the SEEBRIG's motto "One team, one mission". As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, it is essential to work as a team towards our common goals. As a Chief of Staff, I always encourage my staff to work together as a team and as a wider SEEBRIG family. Only by sharing our experience and knowledge, we can further develop our mutual understanding and gain skills to face new challenges. In my humble opinion, this is the best way to contribute to the daily work of SEEBRIG HQ and to further promote our successful story of cooperation and contribution to peace and stability within the region and beyond.



THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON PEACE SUPPORT OPERATIONS (PSO)

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has already had a huge impact threatening the lives and subsistence of many people around the world. Particularly, Covid-19 continues to pose huge risks for people obliged to live in or caught in conflict-stricken zones. Will the Covid-19 pandemic also crucially change peacekeeping, peace building and, humanitarian assistance operations? Will it deal a fatal blow to crisis-stricken areas or will it once again encourage the international community to support the most vulnerable? While these questions are still hot on the agenda, this article aims to talk about concrete incidents of the peace-support operations carried out under the umbrella of the United Nations during this pandemic and its effects in the short and medium term.



Peacekeepers of the UN Mission in DRC (MONUSCO) conducting a mission to strengthen protection of civilians and to raise awareness of preventive measure for COVID-19 in Kiwanja, DRC.

POSITIVE IMPLEMENTATIONS PERFORMED DURING THE PANDEMIC

Today, more than 50 missions are in full crisis management mode and they are adapting to a radical new situation while providing security approximately 200,000 civilian, police and military peacekeeping forces (1). Coronavirus accelerated the development of contingency plans for UN peacekeeping missions. Among other things, these plans determine which activities should be carried out during COVID-19 to fulfill mandate responsibilities. These include patrols, activities related to the protection of civilians, escorting convoys, support to humanitarian assistance, protection of forces, protection of critical infrastructures and support to local authorities. These basic activities had to be adjusted to reduce the risk of spread viruses and for the people that the UN has the task of protecting for the peacekeepers themselves. It created the positive effects on the flexibility of operations.

It is important not to associate UN tasks solely with military activities like armed escorts. Many activities that distinguish the multidimensional UN peacekeeping force from the rest of the international military operations are its civilian capacity to support political processes and create favorable conditions. These civilian functions are still being performed, but remotely. All these activities must be planned, financed, managed, coordinated and evaluated, and these functions also continue. Most civilian and military staff at headquarters work from their homes. Approximately 10% of international civilian personnel now are working outside the mission area. This means that almost all planning and support works are now done electronically, including video-conferencing, which forced the UN to adopt or accelerate the application of digital technology and related processes.



Measures to curb COVID-19 spread in MONUSCO.

Secondly, a number of preventive measures have been taken in peacekeeping operations to promote the safety, security and health of all UN personnel to ensure the continuity of operations. Leadership has been in regular contact with troop- and police- contributing countries and working closely with the Department of Operational Support, the Office of Military Affairs and the Police Division to monitor the situation and advise governments according to the latest developments. PSOs have also introduced their own social distancing-policies both to avoid the spread of the disease to local communities and to protect staff. For example, in Somalia (AMISOM) all staff movements are limited to necessary ones, all rotations and new installations are suspended and civilian personnel outside Somalia work from home. Furthermore, non-critical personnel were moved out of Mogadishu. In the AMISOM headquarters in Mogadishu, core staff works in separate offices and the other work from their homes. The dining facilities now only serve takeaway food. There are restrictions on the size and number of meetings that cannot be done remotely. Most UN missions have adopted similar measures. In the UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL), an entire battalion that rotated into the country in April 2020 stayed under 14-day quarantine.

Furthermore, contingency planning processes enhanced the situational awareness about the large-scale evacuation operations, should such situation requires it. Questions such as "Where can mission staff be evacuated to? Where will it be safer and who would be willing to accept several hundred or thousand evacuees?" emerged. A mission like the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) has approximately 3,000 civilian staff, 1,000 police officers, and 13,500 troops.

Complications During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly disrupted UN peacekeeping operations. In short-term, activities were cut to the most critical level, rotations were frozen and most staff worked remotely. Most of the missions have adapted pretty well, however more extreme changes are likely in the medium term as the global recession

following the virus can force UN peacekeeping operations to shrink drastically and dramatically.

One of the unintended consequences is the loss of roles of critical national staff, because many do not have an internet connection at home. Missions are addressing this challenge by increasing mobile connectivity with their systems. These events will modernize the way the UN uses technology and change some of the UN functions in the future. However, not everything can be done remotely.

Telephone calls or VTCs can only bring the success of the operation to a certain level. One of the great advantages of field staff was that they could get in the car, drive to the location, communicate with important interlocutor, obtain important information, share the UN position or agree with them on what will be done, for example, to protect civilians. In some contexts, mounted patrols without social interaction do not have the same effect as dismantled patrols. That's why it is impossible for UN peacekeeping operations today to have the same overall impact as before this crisis.

In the short term, peacekeeping operations must overcome a number of other challenges. In some countries, peacekeepers are shown responsible for the spread of the virus by rumors or disinformation campaigns. For example, government forces in South Sudan established checkpoints outside of UN compounds at various locations to stop or reduce UN movements (2). UN radio stations in South Sudan and Mali help the right information sharing about coronavirus in local languages. Peacekeeping missions increase access from these stations distributing solar power and wind-up radios to remote local communities that do not access to electricity or internet.

In terms of medical services and hospitals, the larger peace support operations have their own medical facilities, but these facilities are limited and were not designed for a public health emergency. Very few missions have test kits, sufficient protective equipment, or ventilators of their own at this stage. These limited facilities will be quickly overwhelmed if staff starts to get ill. Emergency medical evacuations can still be arranged, but the countries, the UN would normally evacuate people to, have closed their borders since the escalation of the pandemic.

The United Nations has stopped personnel rotations for a long time in order to contain the virus and

prevent the spread of the virus.

However, the decision of the United Nations to stop the rotation of personnel increased the need for air transport even more during the summer months.

Under these circumstances, transportation capacity and logistics personnel were needed more in July and August. All new troops returning went into 14-day quarantine, which poses another logistical challenge which necessitated that they could not operate during this time, which increases the workload of remnant units.

The sacrifices civilian, police, and military personnel have to make should also be recognized. For instance, some units may have already been deployed for almost a year, and staying in the mission longer means that they cannot be reunited with their families for several more months. Therefore, the situation caused problems between the pressure of success of the staff to fulfill the task and the responsibility to take care of their family.

The most severe disruption to UN peacekeeping is likely to be caused by another side-effect of the COVID-19 crisis, a global economic recession. The IMF has changed its forecast for 2019 from a 3.3% growth to a 3% contraction in the global economy. The 2008 global financial crisis has already contracted UN peacekeeping with approximately 20%, and the COVID-19 crisis may reduce it with a further 30 to 50%. The USA, one of the countries most affected by the virus, is also the largest financial contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget. More than 120 contributing countries in the past, including major contributors such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan may be under internal pressure to reduce the number of troops due to finances or the coronavirus-related reasons (3).



CONCLUSION

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has claimed or disrupted lives worldwide. In the medium term, it is considered that the operational capacity of the United Nations to support the peace-support operations will not exceed the current level. It is unlikely that the risk to civilians will not change significantly in the medium term. The more likely scenario is that the effects of the coronavirus combine with other factors such as climate change, instability and risk will increase. Burden of the UN Peacekeeping operations will increase too. On the one hand, tasks will be under increasing pressure to increase the effectiveness of their activities, on the other hand they must cope with tight budgets and even more complex operational environments coronavirus and climate change simultaneously. Yet, despite the challenges, United Nations peacekeepers continue their vital work on the ground, carrying out their mandates while also supporting countries in their coronavirus response.

In accordance with the Multinational Peace Force South Eastern Europe Agreement, South Eastern European Brigade (SEEBRIG) can be deployed in Peace Support, Conflict Prevention, Humanitarian Assistance, Coalition of Willing and Disaster Relief type of operations mandated by United Nations. As an important tool of South Eastern Europe Defense Ministerial, SEEBRIG dedicated itself to cooperate with and enhance the interoperability with United Nations. With these feelings and thoughts, order to execute in the potential future Peace Support Operations, benefitting from the experiences of UN gained during the pandemic, taking advantage of positive examples, brainstorming in the problematic areas together and sharing the creative proposals and solutions will make a positive contribution to the mutual interoperability and create a productive working environment with the multicultural harmony.

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During an UN-media organized workshop in Maridi, South Sudan, local youth gather to discuss ways they can promote reconciliation, social harmony and lasting peace within their communities.



LTC Daniel NATU (Na-6)
Chief G9 (CIMIC)

CPT Adrian ZLOTEA (Na-6)
G3 Operations Officer



EVALUATION VISITS TO SEEBRIG AFFILIATED UNITS IN 2020

The SEEBRIG Evaluation Standards and Procedures (SESAP) is the starting point for the evaluation of the affiliated units which is one of the main pillars of activity within the SEEBRIG framework. The aim of the SESAP is to assess and maintain the overall PSO capability of SEEBRIG affiliated units by accomplishing four objectives focused on:

- The ability of units to achieve the appropriate Training and Operational level for PSO, in accordance with SEEBRIG Directives, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Generic Operations Plans (GOPs).
- Identification of deficiencies which limit the capability of units to meet the requirements within the appropriate time-frame of their readiness level.
- Overall assessment of the units.
- Achieving the highest degree of standardization in evaluation procedures and criteria.

All units are evaluated in the areas of Organization, Personnel, Operations/Training, Equipment, Logistics, Communications, and Medical.

Apart from the Commander of SEEBRIG (COMSEEBRIG), the size of the Evaluation Team shouldn't be less than five but it has to be tailored to the size and complexity of the evaluated unit. COMSEEBRIG is the leader of the team. The team consists of personnel from different nations comprising at least the SNR from the evaluated unit's nation, one officer from each of the Operations and Support divisions, and one officer from G-6 Section. Also, one officer from G-7 Section (Engineer) will be part of the Evaluation Team for Engineer Task Force units' evaluation.



The reporting system is designed to contribute to the assessment of the overall PSO capability of SEEBRIG units and to assist in the development of SEEBRIG Generic Operations Plans. The Evaluation Report initially drafted by the respective SNR and signed by COMSEEBRIG, is to be sent to the PMSC Secretariat and to the all SEEBRIG Nations. Afterwards, a Formal Report will be submitted to the Nations. On completion of the unit evaluation, the Evaluation Team will verbally debrief the unit commanders and their staff.



During 2020, due to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 pandemic, only Na-6 affiliated units were evaluated. Na-2 and Na-1 units' evaluation activities were postponed until the threat level from COVID-19 in those countries will decrease.

The evaluation visit to Na-6 affiliated units was conducted from 7th to 9th of September 2020.



The activity started in Constanta, home of 9th Mechanized Brigade „MĂRĂȘEȘTI”, the higher HQ of the SEEBRIG allocated units from Na-6. At the Brigade HQ, its Commander BG Florin Marian BARBU welcomed SEEBRIG HQ team and provided the information briefings along with the Commander

of 341st Infantry Battalion and affiliated sub-unit Commanders.



The following day the SEEBRIG HQ delegation conducted the operational evaluation of the Na-6 affiliated units in Topraisar Training Area, where the evaluated units conducted a comprehensive exercise to show the planning and execution of a mission in a Peace Support Operations scenario, complete with concept briefing in the Tactical Operations Centre, mission rehearsal, tactical conduct of the mission with close air support and casualty evacuation in cooperation with Na-6 Air Force.





On 9th of September, in Bucharest, COMSEEBRIG BG Aristeides ILIOPOULOS met MG Iulian BERDILĂ, the Chief of Na-6 Land Forces Staff and HE Simona COJOCARU, the State Secretary and Chief of the Department for Defence Policy, Planning and International Relations. The meetings were aimed at strengthening SEEBRIG HQ relationship with Na-6 authorities.

The evaluation visit was an opportunity for SEEBRIG HQ leadership and staff to familiarize themselves with the capabilities, training standards, facilities, equipment and weaponry systems of affiliated units and to strengthen the relationship with their personnel and key leaders.



CPT Adrian ZLOTEA (Na-6)
G3 Operations Officer

LTC Emrah IBIS (Na-7)
Chief G3 (Operations)



SEEBRIG TRAINING ACTIVITIES IN 2020

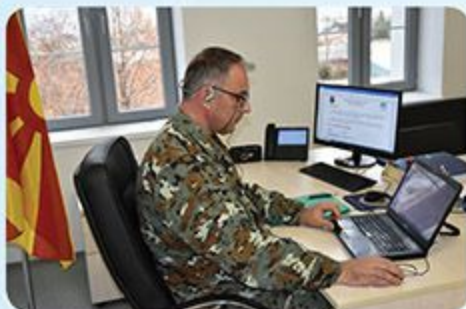
Training is an essential pillar for achieving the appropriate level proficiency for SEEBRIG units and its Nucleus Staff. The knowledge and skills acquired through the training activities are essential for the permanent evolution of the brigade in accordance with the highest standards. Despite the fact that the pandemic affected the entire activity of this year, SEEBRIG continued to train and by doing so, it maintained its rhythm of development.

COURSES AND CONFERENCES

SEEBRIG tailored its participation to all training events in the context of the global pandemic by participating to a series of online courses and conferences conducted by several organizations from NATO community as presented below.

ENERGY SECURITY AWARENESS COURSE

From 30th November to 3rd December 2020, the Turkish Partnership for Peace Training Center (PTC-TUR-ANKARA) organized this activity in which our organization attended with the SEEBRIG DCOS SUP, COL Vladimir STOJANOVSKI.



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE "GENDER EQUALITY - 20 YEARS AFTER THE ADOPTION OF THE UNSCR 1325. THE IMPACT ON THE SECURITY AND DEFENSE SECTOR"

On 5th of November 2020, two officers of SEEBRIG HQ attended the International Conference "Gender Equality - 20 years after the adoption of the UNSCR 1325. The impact on the security and defence sector". The conference was held via VTC and organized by Bucharest / Na-6, within the framework of the project "Women Leaders in the field of Security and Defense." On this event the aim of the conference was underlined as the reaffirmation of the role of women in prevention and resolution of military conflicts, promotion of peace and security and involvement in political and military decision-making process. Moreover, the participants from SEDM member countries, NATO, RACVIAC and UNDP SEESAC addressed topics concerning the impact of the UN resolution on recruitment and career promotion policies, as well as on training activities and participation in peacekeeping missions and operations.



COMSEEBRIG AND SECURITY FORCE ASSISTANCE (SFA) CENTER OF EXCELLENCE (COE) DIRECTOR VTC MEETING

The intention of SEEBRIG Commander, BG Aristeidis ILIOPOULOS, regarding this event was to initiate cooperation between SEEBRIG HQ and SFA COE in order to establish a channel of communication for developing common projects with the contribution of both sides' expertise. In the light of this event SEEBRIG will have the opportunity to access SFA COE training programs which are designed to improve HQ Nucleus Staff (NS) level of knowledge. As first act of cooperation, two NCOs from SEEBRIG NS attended NATO SFA Operators Course using online means.



BORDER SECURITY, REFUGEES AND COUNTER TERRORISM COURSE

Another online training activity was "Border Security, Refugees and Counter Terrorism Course" conducted from 07th to 11th of December 2020 by the Centre of Excellence Defense Against Terrorism (COE-DAT-ANKARA). Seven members of SEEBRIG HQ attended this course and benefited from the knowledge delivered especially because the scope of the course is of great interest for the personnel of this HQ.

SECURITY MANAGEMENT IN SITUATIONAL PREVENTION COURSE

In the same manner the "Security Management in Situational Prevention Course", conducted between 2nd and 13th of November 2020 by the

Multinational Peace Support Operations Training Centre (MPSOTC-KILKIS-Greece), contributed to SEEBRIG level of professionalism in a very consistent way through its classes.

ANNUAL SEMINAR (2020) "MULTI-DOMAIN OPERATIONS – KEYS TO MASTER COMPLEXITY"

The Seminar (turned Webinar) was organized by NATO Command and Control Centre of Excellence from Netherlands between 10th and 12 of November 2020. Valuable lectures and insights by leading experts helped enhancing situational awareness about contemporary challenges in the area of Command and Control. Furthermore, group discussions and experts' panels brought participants' experiences into play.

EXERCISES SEVEN STARS 21

SEEBRIG planned to conduct its main training activity, Exercise "SEVEN STARS-21" (SS-21) in Veles, Na-5, on 07-16 April 2021. As of today, SEEBRIG HQ has conducted the Initial Planning Conference, two reconnaissance visits to Na-5 Simulation Centre in Veles, the Operation Planning Process and the Main Planning Conference. As the following steps of the SS-21 execution required a chain of activities (some of which would imply traveling and gathering of a significant number of personnel from multiple countries and organizations) and given the concern of SEEBRIG for the protection of the personnel from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, future SS-21 related activities were cancelled for the year 2021.

Even though the traditional conduct of SEEBRIG Exercise SEVEN STARS SEVEN was hampered by the pandemic, SEEBRIG HQ went through most of the required planning process as part of its training, which enhanced the knowledge and experience level of all nucleus staff. SS-21 Exercise Planning Process was conducted as follows:

A. Exercise Design Preparations:

SEVEN STARS exercises are planned as a Command Post Exercises (CPX)/Computer Assisted Exercises (CAX) focused on tactical level processes, procedures and capabilities. They are the venue to

reaffirm the Brigade's capability to operate as a multinational force in peace support and humanitarian assistance operations. The Exercise Design preparations began in November 2019. The Exercise Specification Document (EXSPEC) for was subsequently developed and released on December 16th, 2019. According to the EXSPEC:

- SKOLKAN 2.0 scenario was to be used with some modifications for Peace Support Operations (PSOs);
- The aim of the exercise was to improve SEEBRIG's overall operational capability and to enhance military interoperability between its HQ and the assigned units/subunits, during PSOs.
- Exercise Objectives that were to be achieved:
 1. To increase capabilities of SEEBRIG's staff to conduct PSOs.
 2. To develop capabilities of planning and conducting Humanitarian Assistance (HA) operations in conditions of a PSO.
 3. To improve C3 (Command, Control and Communications) process between SEEBRIG HQ and affiliated units and subunits.
 4. To check and improve SEEBRIG SOPs in PSO, Disaster Relief Operations (DROs) and HA.
 5. To enhance military interoperability between SEEBRIG and the affiliated units.
 6. To improve the HQ's capabilities for Civil-Military cooperation.
 7. To implement the lessons identified/learned from previous exercises and to improve the staff awareness.
 8. To increase SEEBRIG's visibility within the international environment.



B. Planning and Product Development

The main events related to the exercise are listed below:

- Initial Planning Conference (IPC), March 11th to March 12th, 2020, executed in Camp Schina, Tyrnavos (Na-3).
- Battle Staff Training (BST) was conducted from June 1st to June 9th, 2020 in Camp Schina, Tyrnavos (Na-3). The aim of this event was to provide a productive and multicultural environment to enhance the capabilities of the nucleus staff about Operation Planning Process (OPP).

The BST activities included staff meetings and briefings focused on the OPP steps and products from Initiation of the process, through Mission Analysis, Courses of Action Development, Comparison and Approval and then Concept of Operations and Operations Order and Annexes production.

The BST not only improved the knowledge of Subject Matter Experts but also provide a climate to enhance and practice their skills.



- Main Planning Conference (MPC), 21st January 2021, was conducted via VTC.



- Final Coordination Conference (FCC) and Key Leader Training (KLT) were designed to be conducted with the participation of affiliated unit commanders, but these activities were canceled due to the unfortunate evolution of COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the purpose of this training was to provide detailed information on areas pertinent to SEEBRIG Command & Control (C2) and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). During the KLT, before the Execution Phase, a set of different operational documents were prepared to be delivered to the audience in order to increase interoperability between all participants to the exercise. Furthermore, the commanders of affiliated units were prepared to present their concept of operations regarding execution phase to SEEBRIG Commander along with a number of experiences about previous PSOs.

C. COVID 19 impact on “SEVEN STARS 21” Execution

- As previous mentioned, the MPC was conducted in a VTC mode and the FCC, the KLT and the Execution Phase of this important training event for SEEBRIG HQ were canceled due to the evolution of COVID 19 pandemic. As a temporary solution, SEEBRIG decided to conduct part of the milestones of the event using the VTC design but we need to highlight that physical presence remains a key factor for the proper development of the interoperability within the brigade.
- Initially, execution phase of the exercise “SEVEN STARS 21” had been scheduled between 7th and 16th of April 2021 with the expected physical presence of 150 personnel from SEEBRIG Nucleus Staff, Host

Nation and many different countries as well. Additionally, VIP visitors from MPFSEE member nations and international organizations would have been invited to attend to the Distinguished Visitors Day, which increased the planned number of participants. The exercise was planned to be executed in Na-5 SIMCEN/TRADOC from Veles. The facilities of this center were adequate to host such an activity in normal circumstances. However, the capability to implement the protective measures specific for the pandemic was low and the evolution of the pandemic did not allow us to have realistic expectations for near future and especially for the period of time in which main training events and execution phase were planned to be conducted.

- Although vaccination process slowly started, there would have been no optimistic prediction about the duration of the immunization of the population and of the participants against COVID-19. Therefore, the rescheduling of the next events of the exercise was considered to be ineffective. Based on current realities such as activities and personnel management and taking all the factors into consideration, with focus on protecting the personnel, COMSEEBRIG decided to ask PMSC to approve the cancelation of the Exercise SEVEN STARS 2021 and to start designing "Exercise SEVEN STARS 22".



OTHER EXERCISES

Participation in other organizations' exercises, as a part of SEEBRIG Training, prepare Nucleus Staff and assigned units for Peace Support Operations (PSO) in a multinational PSO environment. The main goal of the participation in such exercises is to train SEEBRIG HQ Nucleus Staff and Units in peacetime, in order to help them achieve the appropriate standard of proficiency, as well as to be ready to execute all military tasks in PSOs.

In 2020, SEEBRIG HQ took part in the following exercises:

A. BLONDE AVALANCHE 2020, Brăila/Na-6

On 10th of September 2020 the Commander of SEEBRIG participated in the Distinguished Visitors Day for the Exercise "Blonde Avalanche 2020" of the Multinational Engineer Battalion (MEB) "Tisa", which was organized in Brăila/Na-6. The exercise was based on a disaster relief scenario (flooding) and was conducted in the barracks of Na-6 10th Engineer Brigade with a practical demonstration of engineer troops activities in specific disaster relief situations organized in Vărsatura Training Range.

B. "VALIANT LYNX 20" 19th to 27th of October, Valencia/Spain

Execution phase of Valiant Lynx 20 Exercise (VL20) was conducted from 19th and 27th of October 2020 at the training facilities of Betera Camp in Valencia and it was the main training effort of NRDC-Spain and Spanish Army for 2020. SEEBRIG HQ supported this significant training activity with one officer, LTC Emrah IBIS, Chief of Operations, Na-7 in HICON as an augmentee in G35, Battlefield Management Center



of NRDC-Spain. The contribution of SEEBRIG HQ personnel in operation planning process in mid-term (48-96 hours), synchronization of the activities at brigade-division and corps level and lessons identified was highly appreciated by NRDC-Spain HICON Commander and Staff. This exercise provided a good opportunity for SEEBRIG to increase its visibility among NATO countries and to enhance the mutual trust and collaboration in common future training activities and exercises between NRDC-Spain and SEEBRIG.



CONCLUSIONS

The development of training activities for SEEBRIG Nucleus Staff during 2020 was tailored due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously mentioned, one of the side effects of this pandemic was the cancelation of the SEVEN STARS 21 Execution Phase, but the involvement of our staff in a significant amount of activities like online courses, conferences, seminars and real exercises, highlighted the level of adaptability and the strong interconnection of SEEBRIG with the other military organizations from NATO community. Nevertheless, SEEBRIG HQ is permanently focused in planning activities which involve physical presence which are the essence of interaction through training and are conducive to the development and increasing of knowledge and skills.

Therefore, we can reaffirm that the SEEBRIG HQ is an adaptable organization and that training for the improvement of our professionalism is a permanent and very important concern.



COL Vladimir STOJANOVSKI (Na-5)
Deputy Chief of Staff for Support



HQ RELOCATION - LESSONS LEARNED

SEEBRIG HQ relocated from Larissa to Kumanovo in August 2020. The relocation took place at a time when the personnel from the HQ couldn't carry out initially planned steps. The COVID-19 pandemic interfered with many things worldwide and also disrupted our agenda and intentions.

However, SEEBRIG HQ is now in Kumanovo, North Macedonia, and most of the staff and their family members are settled down in the capital city of Skopje.

Despite the difficulties inside and outside of the HQ, our dedicated military personnel successfully managed to execute the relocation.

The timing for relocation was not ideal, but we manage to compress our operation between two waves of COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, we all remained healthy and our HQ has achieved full operational capability. Now, a few months later, we can make a comprehensive retrospect of what we have encountered and learned from this experience.

FIRST THINGS FIRST: PLANNING

In previous editions of Stars Informer, we have pointed out that early planning, supported by budget planning, is essential. We executed this step spending many hours on planning regarding the emerged issues. All members of the SEEBRIG HQ gave their inputs for a consistent and feasible plan. Naturally, the main efforts were carried out by the Logistics Section.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were forced to adjust our general plan only once, when the timing of relocation was changed from July to August. That didn't disrupt the HQ, because all of us, as a group, already concluded the full planning process, which was crucial. Changes in the dates did not affect the execution of the relocation. A minor concern was the beginning of the school year, but that was swiftly solved and represented no significant issue.

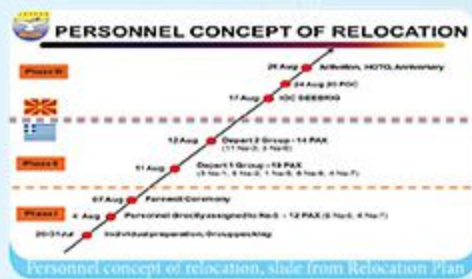
"Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential. (Winston Churchill)"



THE MOST IMPORTANT: PERSONNEL

When it comes to the staff, there are several important issues. The most important one is the status of family members and accommodation. Unfortunately, we couldn't manage to agree with one single company for group accommodation. That forced us to find individual solutions which will later make difficulties in the execution of host nation support in the area of security and transportation. The external cohesion between the staff and families, in general terms, was also disturbed, because the families are now living in different areas.

Standard procedure in SEEBRIG HQ during day to day life is a change of personnel. Usually, the staff changes occur in the summer months. This activity is not related to any other, including relocation, but can affect relocation efforts.



RECONNAISSANCE: ROAD TO EXECUTION

The basic SEEBRIG rule is an implementation of a minimum of three Recce Visits. Conducting these activities is extremely helpful and exceptionally important. To create results from recce visits, the composition of the SEEBRIG team is the key effort. The mixed team which is well prepared with strictly defined criteria for success is crucial. Don't go to a recce visit without a checklist.

The cooperation with the HN (might be OPR Team or other staff) is also important. They are our eyes on the field and many things should be arranged by them. The best option for SEEBRIG is an earlier engagement of the next HN OPR team in these visits. It is vital to mention that this part of our relocation was exposed to risk by the COVID-19 pandemic. The final recce (July 2020) was dramatically reduced by time and people. This required the members of the team to cover areas of expertise that are not their basic work occupation.

In our case, about 40 percent of people have changed during the relocation. Among them, some of the key players in the HQ would be replaced (same nation or another nation) and this process can slow down vital activities during relocation. Fortunately for the organization, the departing personnel, as well as the newcomers, understood their roles and transitions were conducted without problems or difficulties.

For the purpose of this article, I would like to mention the critical role of the G8 Clerk who is the SEEBRIG's property manager and his/her role is significant for the transfer of goods and material from one to another HQ. Worth mentioning are the roles of the G4 Movement & Transportation and the whole CIS structure because of the large amount of their equipment.



ROLE OF HN OPR TEAM: PRICELESS

A well-shaped HN OPR Team is significant for success. Sooner is always better, but the New HN OPR team must be in place at least 6 months prior to the arrival of SEEBRIG.

This team should be a task force with a range of 8 to 10 people covering different areas.

The amount of their obligations rapidly grows when the relocation date comes near. It is important to mention that Legal issues together with Customs issues are the most important in the days of practical relocation. Experienced Legal advisor with good support from HN is the key player during those days. Later, obligations of the HN OPR Team shift to more practical and vital matters important to every member of SEEBRIG. One of the constantly present issues is the medical support for the staff and the family members.



It is important to mention another impact of the pandemic - we failed to organize the planned HO-TO meeting between the Old and New OPR team. This should be remembered and promptly administered for the next relocation.



HQ SEEBRIG Recce Team meeting with Na-5 representatives in Skopje



Ribbon cutting at HQ Activation in Kumanovo on 26 August 2020

OPENING CEREMONY: SUPPORT NEEDED

During the planning process, SEEBRIG was ambitious and at that time and the first idea was to organize a celebration with an impressive number of invited people. The motives were reasonable because this occasion was conceived as 3 in 1 event. First, there was the Commander HO-TO, then the 21st anniversary of SEEBRIG, and finally the Opening Ceremony.

This represented a good chance for good promotion, but the COVID-19 pandemic reduced a certain number of ambitions and the size of the ceremony.

The preparations for the ceremony had to start early in the process to inform the wider SEEBRIG community about the date. Our leaders were supposed to have this pre-arranged date in their calendars.

The event organization ought to be perfect and elaborated in detail. Within SEEBRIG HQ, a significant portion of the common effort is to be

credited to G1 Section. First of all, our Scenario and flow of Ceremony needed to be shaped and planned by this section. Furthermore, all coordination activities with HN authorities involved G1 Section, HN and SEEBRIG OPR Teams. At last, perfect timing in general is crucial for success and of course, weather as something which we cannot affect.

Be conscious that without the help of the HN in areas such as protocol, logistics, media, security, and general support, every effort will be useless.

Side events such as an Ice backer cocktail, Social event, and SEEBRIG Dinner also should be planned in detail and respectively. Be aware of transportation issues.



SEEBRIG Flags in front of new HQ Building in Kumanovo

WHEN DOES RELOCATION FINISH?

Our first impression was that with the Opening ceremony our relocation will finish, but we were wrong. We shaped our Relocation Plan to finish with the date of the Ceremony; however the "relocation" continued to be our main task in the following months.

The unpacking of our offices, starting the machines to operate, opening of the boxes, placing the newcomers into the system and familiarizing with the surrounding area, connecting with the neighbors, etc. Of course, these actions were not part of the relocation, but they were some of the lingering activities after the relocation and then the settlement of SEEBRIG HQ at its new location.

In overall the chain of these expanded events created and stabilized our HQ on the new location, so now we can switch our main efforts from providing to the use of the facilities.

Although our new home was prepared in a manner that provides all necessary capabilities for achieving Initial Operational Capabilities, many things were supposed to be done after the settlement of the HQ.



COOPERATION AND RELATIONS BETWEEN SEDM COUNTRIES AND SEEBRIG HQ UNDER THE RESTRICTION RELATED WITH THE GLOBAL COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Cooperation and relations between SEDM initiative countries, SEEBRIG HQ and regional security organizations have been and continue to be the focus of the SEDM process. But as a result of restrictions imposed by states as measures to prevent the global pandemic COVID-19, the continuation of cooperation and international relations, required the finding of new channels of communication.

And in this case the countries participating in the SEDM Initiative adapted better to the new conditions using the opportunities provided by the electronic platform SEDM portal. Thus, based on the SEDM portal and under the excellent planning and coordination made by the SEDM secretariat headed by Tirana, they managed to successfully hold 6 meetings 2 of SEDM-CC, 2 of PMSC, 1 of DCHODs and the meeting of the Ministers of Defense in the framework of SEDM initiative.

Implementation of protocols and structures required coordination between states and international and regional organizations. Coordination was carried out through the SEDM secretariat, where in order to have successful meetings, several tests of the SEDM portal were conducted, to continue with the exchange of information and documents, processing the meeting document including and adapting comments and inputs from countries and organizations.

1. SEDM PORTAL NEW WINDOW IN PLANNING, COORDINATING AND CONDUCTING MEETINGS.

Faced with movement restrictions and rules set by the SEDM Member States, the SEDM Secretariat took the initiative and asked States to hold periodic meetings of this online initiative. After the states approved the holding of meetings through the VTC, coordination began between the Secretariat under the chairmanship of Tirana and the SEDM portal supported by Athens.

The SEDM portal prepared the protocol for conducting meetings through the VTC, which was sent to the states for recognition, through the SEDM Secretariat. The protocol was improved from one meeting to another, making that in the last meeting of the Ministers of Defense of Southeast Europe, we have a document which would detail everything in the successful development of the meetings and easily implemented.



In this way, the SEDM portal became an important platform in organizing initiative meetings and other activities within the SEDM process, increasing cooperation and maintaining a stable relationship in the region, under the constraints caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic.

2. COOPERATION AND RELATIONSHIPS UNDER THE CONSTRAINTS CAUSED BY THE GLOBAL COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

Since the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, SEDM initiative countries, SEEBRIG HQ and regional security organizations have conducted a total of 6 successful online meetings through VTC, supported by the SEDM portal.

a) 43rd PMSC and 42nd SEDM-CC Meetings of the South-Eastern European Ministerial Defense Process (SEDM), 15 May 2020

The 43rd PMSC and 42nd SEDM-CC Meetings of the SEDM process were held under the Albanian Presidency, online via VTC on 15th May 2020, due to COVID 19 pandemic restrictions.

Representatives from SEDM countries, SEEBRIG Commander and international and regional organizations such as NATO, RACVIAC and UNDP SEESAC participated in the meetings, chaired by H.E. Mr. Petro Koçi.

During the 43rd PMSC meeting, SEEBRIG Commander BG Tudorică Petrache presented an update on SEEBRIG activities, achievements, future activities, financial and manning issues, and future perspectives. The most critical elements of the briefing were the SEEBRIG HQ relocation in Na-5 and the execution of the Exercise Seven Stars. The outbreak of the virus dictated new assessments and decision-making was required. Furthermore, DCOSSUP presented the SEEBRIG HQ relocation plan from Na-3 to Na 5.

More over during the 42nd SEDM-CC meeting, other programs, initiatives, and projects were discussed in a fruitful atmosphere, friendly spirit and mutual understanding.



b) South-Eastern Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM) Deputy Chiefs of Defence Meeting (DCHODs), June 3rd, 2020 (VTC)

On 3rd of June 2020, Commander of SEEBRIG BG Tudorică PETRACHE participated in the DCHODs Meeting, hosted by Bucharest under the Albanian Chairmanship, online via VTC. The participants were informed about the SEEBRIG achievements since the last DCHOD Meeting, future activities, and medium and long term projects. During the meeting, the updated Annual Plan 2020 was presented and important elements of the Relocation in Na-5 and Seven Stars Exercise were highlighted.

The Deputy Chiefs of Defence/General Staff welcomed the achievements of the SEEBRIG Brigade and acknowledged the contribution of this Brigade to regional security and stability, becoming a unique platform for cooperation and mutual training. The representatives reiterated their commitment to further strengthen the effectiveness and efficiency of this initiative through increased co-operation between member nations. They stressed that the SEDM initiative has strengthened relations between the countries and has contributed to their efforts for a common European and Euro-Atlantic future.

c) The 43rd SEDM-CC and 44th PMSC Meetings of the South-Eastern European Ministerial Defense Process (SEDM), 23-24 September 2020

The 43rd SEDM-CC and 44th PMSC Meetings of the SEDM Initiative were held under the Albanian Chairmanship via videoconference on 23rd and 24th September 2020, due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.





Representatives from 13 SEDM member nations, SEEBRIG's Commander and representatives from international and regional organizations such as NATO, UNDP SEESAC, RCC and RACVIAC participated in the meetings, chaired by H.E. Mr. Petro KOÇI, the Chairman of the SEDM-CC/PMSC Secretariat/ Deputy Minister of Defense.

The Chairman highlighted in his speech that during all these years, our cooperation has strengthened the relations among our nations and has contributed to the efforts towards a common Euro-Atlantic future. He underlined that the experience we gained so far it is significant in order to maintain the efficiency of the regional cooperation and increasing SEEBRIG's potentials.

During the 44th PMSC meeting, SEEBRIG's Commander Brigadier Aristeidis ILIOPOULOS presented an update on SEEBRIG activities and future activities, highlighted the main elements of SEEBRIG'S Annual Plan 2021, new timeline of the Exercise "Seven Stars-21", went through the major points of the Budget Plan for the Fiscal Year 2021 and Medium-Term Financial Plan 2021-2023.

COMSEEBRIG shared with PMSC his vision for the next 3-years and addressed some manning issues. PMSC endorsed SEEBRIG's Annual Plan and Budget Plan 2021, which will be submitted to upcoming Defense Ministerial for its approval.

The South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) Meeting, Via VTC, 14th October 2020.

The representatives from SEDM Nations, SEEBRIG Commander, RACVIAC- Centre for Security Cooperation, Regional cooperation council (RCC) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP/SEESAC) participated online via VTC on 14th October 2020 in the SEDM Meeting, hosted by Athens and chaired by H.E. Petro Koçi.

In the beginning, SEDM Chairman addressed the impact and the challenges posed by COVID-19 virus as a global health crisis and expressed that our thoughts are with the loved ones of the victims, and with all those who suffer from the pandemic, as well as informed with the latest developments on SEDM-CC Projects and PMSC activities since the last SEDM Ministerial Meeting highlighting the achievements obtained within the SEDM process under the Albanian Chairmanship.

During the SEDM meeting, the SEEBRIG Commander Brigadier General Aristeidis Iliopoulos presented a summary of the SEEBRIG's main activities since the last Ministerial Meeting in Bucharest, future activities, SEEBRIG's documents pending for approval and other issues.

The representatives of SEDM Nations, welcomed the report of COMSEEBRIG, about the SEEBRIG HQ activities since the last SEDM Meeting and acknowledged the contribution of this Brigade as important tool for promoting regional security, stability, cooperation, and fostering good neighborly relations among countries in the region.

SEDM nation's representatives expressed their views on the future of SEDM Initiative and underlined that SEDM Initiative has strengthened the relations among the countries and has contributed to their efforts for a common European and Euro-Atlantic future.

The representatives reiterated their commitment to further strengthen the effectiveness and efficiency of this initiative through increased co-operation among member nations and through specific projects within this initiative.

During this meeting the MPFSEE Ministers of Defence also approved the SEEBRIG's Annual Plan for 2021, SEEBRIG's Budget for the Fiscal Year 2021, (275,610 EURO) and Medium Term Financial Plan

2021-2023, COMSEEBRIG's authorization to re-locate up to 20% among chapters of the approved 2021 Budget, as well as approved the Board of Auditors to be rescheduled for 2021, when Property Accounts audit will be conducted simultaneously with the Financial Accounts audit, by an enhanced Board of Auditors, consisting of members from Nations 1, 2, 6 and 7, following a combination of the Board of Auditors rotational table for the years 2020 and 2021.

At the end of the meeting, the nations expressed their appreciation to Athens and SEDM Portal Technical Working and to the SEDM Secretariat for the tireless efforts in successfully preparing and conducting the annual SEDM Ministerial Meeting via Video Teleconference.

CONCLUSION

The regional cooperation and relations among the countries of Southeast Europe on the security issues they face is extremely important, and to achieve these requirements our countries should hold periodic meetings in order to continuously strengthen good cooperation and relations. The use of electronic communication platforms is a new way of communication among countries and regional security organizations at a time when the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has made it impossible for meetings to be held physically.

The SEDM portal was the right venue to be used in the successful conduct of meetings of SEDM countries, SEEBRIG and regional organizations, and the uninterrupted cooperation and good relations in our region. Through SEDM portal were conducted also some important conferences such as Main Planning Conference of SEVEN STARS 2021 Exercise, International Conference "Gender Equality - 20 years after the adoption of the UNSCR 1325, the impact on the security and defense sector", as well as the different programs of the SEDM process.

Conducting SEDM activities online due to the COVID 19 pandemic had the positive aspect that cooperation and relations between the countries of the Southeast Europe region were not interrupted, but on the other hand during the online meetings there were less consultations or discussions than it would happen if the meetings were held with the physical presence of representatives of SEDM countries.

Moreover, conducting meetings with physical participation breaks the ice by involving participants extensively in consultations, encourages fruitful discussions, as well as fosters a friendly atmosphere and mutual understanding, in the true spirit of SEDM.





SEEBRIG HQ SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN 2020

During 2020, SEEBRIG nucleus staff and their family members participated in many social activities, which included not only social trips and cultural visits to local touristic objectives, but also recreational events which provided them with the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the Host Nation's environment and culture, as well as to strengthen the SEEBRIG community relations.

On 16th of April 2020, a delegation of officers and NCOs from SEEBRIG HQ visited the University Hospital of Larissa to make a donation of protective equipment for the doctors and nurses engaged in battling COVID-19. Moreover, SEEBRIG offered food to the churches of Saint George and God's Wisdom in order to support the breadlines, which reach hundreds of people daily.

Apart from the military aspects of its activities, SEEBRIG focuses on contributing to the local society and promoting altruism, solidarity and care for the people in need.



In the period from 6th of July to 12th of July 2020, a study trip to Halkidiki was organized and performed in a professional manner. Most of the HQ SEEBRIG staff took part in this very interesting and educational activity.



During the study trip, the military personnel visited Na-3 Special Operation Forces Training Center in Rentina, Multinational Peace Support Operations Training Centre in Kilikis and NATO Rapid Deployable Corps (GR) HQ in Thessaloniki, to exchange experience and expand their military knowledge. The socio-cultural part of the trip included visits to the stronghold in Rentina and continued to Asprovalta where the families could have their free time and rest.

It continued with boat cruise from Pefkohori - Toroni / Byzantine Fortress - Neos Marmaris - Turtle Island – Pefkohori, which was one of the most interesting activities in this trip, especially for the children. They had a lot of fun and the families together had a great time to familiarize and get to know each other.

A visit to Thessaloniki and a tour around the second-largest city in Greece was performed on 9th of July where the visitors took pleasure in the chance of taking photos in the center of Thessaloniki which is considered as one of the most popular destination for street photography.

The educational, social, cultural and recreational aim of this trip was fully accomplished.



On 6th of September 2020, at the invitation of Na-5 Minister of Defense Mrs. Radmila SHEKERINSKA, a group of SEEBRIG HQ staff and family members headed by acting Chief of Staff Colonel Vladimir STOJANOVSKI participated in a hiking tour on the occasion of the Independence Day of Na-5, which is celebrated on 8th of September.



The hiking tour offered an opportunity to honor the Host Nation tradition, interact with the leadership of the Ministry of Defense in an informal environment, exercise in the open and get better acquainted with the unique relief of Mount Bistra and the richest pasture in Na-5.



The participants appreciated the hospitality and camaraderie of the Host Nation representatives and expressed their hope that this hiking tour will be followed by more such enjoyable events.



On 8th of October 2020 SEEBRIG HQ personnel visited Kokino Megalithic Observatory and Pelince Memorial Center.



The main purposes of this activity were to develop knowledge about significant landmarks of Host Nation territory and history and to contribute to strengthening of physical endurance and team spirit.

Despite inclement weather, SEEBRIG HQ staff enjoyed the field trip and the knowledgeable support provided by the Host Nation guides.





In the difficult times of the COVID-19 pandemic, SEEBRIG motto "One Team, One Mission" is more current than ever.

SEEBRIG remains focused on its mission and Commander's vision. Apart from the military aspects of its activities, our brigade is committed to making a contribution to the local community and promoting altruism, solidarity and care for the people in need.



In the spirit of its commitments, on 15th of December 2020 a delegation of officers and NCOs from SEEBRIG HQ led by the Commander BG Aristeidis ILIOPOULOS visited Kumanovo Municipal Hospital to make a donation of protective equipment for the doctors and nurses engaged in battling COVID-19.

SEEBRIG HQ is looking forward to future opportunities to demonstrate solidarity with the local community by providing honest help to those in need.



South-Eastern Europe Brigade "SEEBRIG"

Believing that cooperation and dialog among the countries of South-Eastern Europe must be further developed and considering their commitment to contribute to regional security and stability, and to foster good neighborly relations, among the countries, an Agreement on Multinational Peace Force South-Eastern Europe (MPFSEE) was signed by the Ministers of Defense of the seven participating countries in Skopje on 26th of September 1998.

In accordance with MPFSEE Agreement, the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG) was established and activated by seven participating Nations, on 31st of August 1999 in Plovdiv, Na-2 and was then hosted in Constanta, Na-6, then in Istanbul, Na-7 then in Tyrnavos (Larissa), Na-3 and is currently located in Kumanovo, Na-5.

The current structure of the MPFSEE is a brigade-sized force and is known as South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG).

Units allocated to the SEEBRIG will remain at their permanent home base locations and will be committed under a task force principle for exercises and operations upon the decisions of the participating Nations and appropriate joint direction and coordination of the "Politico-Military Steering Committee (PMSC)".

In accordance of the provisions of the Agreement:

The Brigade will be declared to UN and OSCE. It will be available, commensurate with its capabilities, for employment in conflict prevention and in other peace support operations, including peace-keeping, peace-making, peace-building and humanitarian operations.

The force will be available for possible employment in UN or OSCE-mandated NATO-led or EU-led conflict prevention and other peace support operations. It could also participate in "coalition of the willing" type international initiatives. The Force will also function "within the spirit" of PfP.

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SEEBRIG HQ Address:
CAMP "BORO MENKOV", KUMANOVO/NORTH MACEDONIA
Tel: 0038970342596 Fax: 0038931387976
E-mail: seebrig@sedmprocess.org
www.seebrig.org

"ONE TEAM, ONE MISSION"