



Training NATO for an uncertain future: An interview with Major General Erhard Bühler

In facing potential threats, being lean and agile will be critical.

Wolff Sintern

Major General Erhard Bühler of the German Army is the commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Joint Warfare Centre in Stavanger, Norway. The center specializes in multi-tier and multinational operational training and exercises, as well as capability development through simulation, experiments, joint analysis, and review of lessons learned. It is the main sponsor of full-spectrum joint operational warfare training within NATO. In April 2014, McKinsey's Wolff Sintern sat down with Major General Bühler to discuss the future of training and exercises in NATO.

McKinsey on Government: *NATO is once more going through a period of fundamental change.*

With a lot of uncertainty on the horizon, how does NATO plan strategically for the next few years?

Major General Erhard Bühler: We will have to prepare NATO forces increasingly for the unexpected, which sounds impossible but can be done. No one can say with any certainty what challenges NATO forces will face in coming years—that's been proved time and time again. As a result, we have to prepare troops for a wide spectrum of operational challenges, ranging from collective defense of member states to expeditionary challenges and those kinds of scenarios where different threats overlap. What we can say for sure is that NATO nations will have to

become ever more interoperable if NATO wants to face up to this wide spectrum of challenges. Thus, two things are evident to me. First, greater interoperability of equipment and procedures is the way forward for NATO. Second, today's challenges are not set in stone. This makes it necessary for us to anticipate issues and work to become ever more lean and agile in order to be able to face up to a variety of potential threats.

McKinsey on Government: *Austerity and declining budgets have dominated the headlines for several years now, and the effects on military personnel and equipment numbers are clearly visible. How is NATO dealing with this challenge strategically?*

Major General Erhard Bühler: The days of large standing armies and each nation being able to cover the full spectrum of military forces are definitely over. To operate effectively together, national forces have to participate in joint multinational training and exercises. What we seek is symbiosis. It is only through greater

collaboration that NATO's member nations can enjoy the same level of security they are used to. And in the foreseeable future, there is no other entity that can provide the platform for collaboration, with the required scope and quality of multinational training and exercises, that NATO can.

McKinsey on Government: *A lot of emphasis remains on capability development and the Connected Forces Initiative. What role can training and exercises play to promote these activities?*

Major General Erhard Bühler: Indeed, the Connected Forces Initiative is *the* initiative for NATO right now—the aim of which is an ever more integrated and capable NATO force. Training and exercises can eventually become the catalyst for the implementation of the Connected Forces Initiative. Training and exercises may also enhance alliance efforts to renew the capability-development process. NATO is aware that there is a need to revisit the way

Major General Erhard Bühler



Vital statistics

Lives in Stavanger, Norway

Married, with 1 child

Education

Graduated from the University of the Federal Armed Forces in Hamburg, Germany, with a degree in mechanical engineering

Completed command and general-staff training at Federal Armed Forces Command and General Staff College in Hamburg, Germany

Completed US command and general-staff course at the US Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

Career highlights

Joint Warfare Centre, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
Commander (2013–present)

Kosovo Force, NATO
Commander (2010–11)

Commander of 9th German KFOR contingent (2004)

German Army

Commander of the 10th Armoured Division (2009–13)

German Federal Ministry of Defence

Director of joint operations staff (2008–09)

Senior military assistant to the minister of defense (2001–03)

we develop capabilities. If we succeed in harmonizing our capability development with our training and exercise processes, we see great potential future benefit; a revitalized capability-development process will be even more driven by operational-level needs. I believe that training and exercises can become the operational-level lever: a kind of laboratory or test bed for capability development, where the expected increase to

six major exercises per year under the Connected Forces Initiative framework provides the necessary frequency to iterate.

McKinsey on Government: *You are commander of NATO's Joint Warfare Centre—the operational element within NATO's training organization, which conducts large-scale exercises such as the Trident Exercises and Cold*

NATO's Joint Warfare Centre: Mission and role

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Joint Warfare Centre is the main provider of training for full-spectrum joint operational-level warfare. Its objective is to enhance NATO's interoperability, effectiveness, and capabilities. It supports the Allied Command Transformation on lessons learned, experimentation, and concept and doctrine development, as well as simulation, modeling, and new technologies. To do this, the Joint Warfare Centre not only facilitates and provides training and exercises but also serves as a center of competence for warfare.

Specifically, it fulfills three main roles and responsibilities:

- joint and combined training of operational commanders and battle staff, including preparation, management, execution, and enhancement of training
- joint experimentation and development of concepts, doctrines, and standards, for example, to drive interoperability among nations

- evaluation of joint-forces training in assistance of the Allied Command Operations, including certification according to NATO standards

The International Security Assistance Force-related training and exercises account for a major part of the Joint Warfare Centre's current business. As this force's mission ends in 2014, the Joint Warfare Centre's tasks will shift significantly—with an enhanced role for training and exercises in preparing the alliance for potential scenarios. Additionally, with both NATO's Smart Defence and Connected Forces Initiative calling for increased interoperability of forces on a multitier and multinational level, the Allied Command Transformation and therefore the Joint Warfare Centre are the center of gravity for the success of these concepts.

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Response and which is charged with preparing NATO forces for the future (see sidebar, “NATO’s Joint Warfare Centre: Mission and role”). In that role, how would you say warfare is changing?

Major General Erhard Bühler: That is a big question—and precisely what we grapple with at the Joint Warfare Centre. The spectrum of potential challenges is ever widening. Because of that, and because of the increasing complexity of operational conduct, NATO operational thought finds itself at a turning point. Our operational thinking will have to respond by cutting across sectors (intelligence, police, administration, politics, and development), increasing our multinational integration, and developing a shared understanding within NATO that we are the driver of a learning organization.

McKinsey on Government: *What implications do you see for NATO’s training and exercises from the uncertain nature of the alliance’s future challenges?*

Major General Erhard Bühler: While training to prepare for Afghanistan will diminish, the complexity of exercise scenarios will increase and the diversity of scenarios will have to increase as well; put another way, the quantity and quality of NATO training and exercises will have to go up.

In addition, the time available to prepare NATO forces for future threat scenarios will diminish. We will have to do more and more complex stuff in less time. To provide examples: with NATO’s command-structure reform, we have to train 19 headquarters groups (land, air, maritime, and single service). High-intensity, large-scale exercises have to prepare forces by providing interoperational experience. These exercises must also provide experience in countering overlapping threats, such as deterring conventional forces while being under threat of ballistic missiles and having to cope with local insurgents. And the exercises must do all of that for different geographies.

McKinsey on Government: *You have recently undergone an internal transformation to prepare the Joint Warfare Centre for this. What lessons would you derive from that for NATO’s overall and larger transformation?*

Major General Erhard Bühler: Both the Joint Warfare Centre and NATO have become too static. The world is changing and NATO has to adapt. The alliance is a very large and powerful force for security and order in the world, but it can only retain its preeminent status if it evolves its self-understanding as an agile, lean learning organization. We need to reinvigorate and reinforce our processes. This has to be reflected

at every level and calls for a great effort by everyone within NATO, be it military or civilian staff. We have seen significant changes toward this goal in the past, and I am confident that NATO will adapt to the new challenges on the horizon and beyond.

McKinsey on Government: *In the Joint Warfare Centre's transformation, you explored the question of whether best practices from industry could be applied. What was your experience?*

Major General Erhard Bühler: We can learn a lot from industry and the business world. Many business tools and concepts are applicable to the military world—not necessarily as they are currently understood but with some adaptation.

Lean principles, resource-management tools, and change-management concepts can clearly find a home in the military. Military mind-sets are different, of course, and developing a military view on core products, efficiency, value propositions, and a project-oriented structure, among other such business ideas, is definitely a stretch in the beginning. However, we found that these concepts helped us focus on the important items. The military is conservative and traditional, but when it gets down to getting things done, we can be surprisingly open minded in exploring new concepts and approaches. ○