



NATO Exercises: Role, Purpose, and Evolution of a Key Tool for Collective Defense

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Exercises are one of the fundamental tools through which NATO tests and validates operational concepts, procedures, systems, and tactics. At the same time, they allow military forces and civilian organizations engaged on the ground to refine their capabilities and practice joint work in complex and realistic scenarios. From the Cold War to the current context of international instability, Alliance exercises have remained an essential element of deterrence and operational readiness.

Why NATO Organizes Exercises

Military exercises serve to prepare commands and forces to operate in times of peace, crisis, or conflict. Generally, they can take three main forms:

- **LIVEX (live exercise)**: field exercises with the actual deployment of troops and equipment;

- **CPX (command-post exercise):** command post simulations involving command staff and their communication structures;
- **Exercise study:** theoretical activities such as war games, seminars, or operational analyses.

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Main Objectives

1. Training and Experience Accumulation

Exercises allow forces to consolidate previous training and improve the level of operational readiness. Thanks to realistic and complex scenarios, military and specialized units can test procedures, coordination, and technical capabilities.

2. Verification of Structures and Systems

Not only personnel: NATO also uses exercises to test the efficiency of its organizational assets, including doctrine, logistics, tactics, and procedures. This is particularly important when the command structure undergoes reforms or sees the creation of new headquarters.

3. Interoperability

The ability to operate together, despite linguistic, doctrinal, and technological differences, is one of NATO's cornerstones. Exercises – often open to partner countries as observers or participants – are essential to maintain such interoperability, the result of years of cooperation.

4. Defense Reform

Participating in NATO exercises allows member countries to test the reforms implemented at the national level, while also offering partners the opportunity to observe and learn advanced operational mechanisms.

How a NATO Exercise is Born

Each exercise is based on fictitious but realistic scenarios, which can range from combat to stabilization, from humanitarian aid to reconstruction operations. The duration can vary from a single day to several weeks and involve a limited number of officers or thousands of soldiers, aircraft, land vehicles, and ships.

The entire process is coordinated by the two strategic commands of the Alliance:

- **Allied Command Operations (ACO)**: defines training requirements and conducts operational evaluations;
- **Allied Command Transformation (ACT)**: manages the training program, defines objectives, and oversees exercise planning through the *Military Training and Exercise Programme* (MTEP).

Planning takes place well in advance – at least 18 months – and involves member and partner states. At the end of each exercise, a review process is conducted to identify *best practices* and *lessons learned*, essential for continuous improvement.

Transparency and Mutual Trust

NATO makes its annual exercise programs public through SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), and complies with the OSCE Vienna Document norms. The rules provide for:

- advance notification for exercises with over 9,000 military personnel;
- the possibility of sending observers for activities exceeding 13,000 participants.

Transparency aims to reduce tensions, promote trust, and prevent misunderstandings between states.

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How to Read NATO Exercise Names

Each exercise is identified by two words:

- The **first letter** of the **first word** indicates the responsible command (e.g., *B* for Brunssum, *N* for Naples).
- The **first letter** of the **second word** indicates the operational domain (e.g., *A* for Air, *L* for Land, *M* for Maritime, *J* for Joint).

Example: *Brilliant Jump* → joint exercise (*Joint*) under the responsibility of JFC Brunssum.

Seventy Years of Exercises: A Brief Historical Overview

NATO exercises began in 1951, during the height of the Cold War, with the aim of consolidating collective defense against a potential attack. In the 1970s and 1980s, training activity became a pillar of the Alliance's deterrence posture, ensuring that forces were ready to face high-intensity scenarios.

After 1994, with the launch of the *Partnership for Peace*, non-NATO countries could also participate in many exercises, especially peacekeeping ones. In 2002, the **NATO Response Force (NRF)** was established, whose continuous training became a central element of the exercise program.

Since 2014, following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, the Alliance has once again intensified exercises focused on collective defense. The year 2022, marked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, confirms the centrality of exercises in deterrence and operational readiness.

Conclusion

NATO exercises are much more than mere military maneuvers: they represent a continuous learning process, a testing ground for structures and strategies, and a key tool for ensuring interoperability, transparency, and common response capability. In a rapidly evolving international context, they remain fundamental to ensuring that the Alliance is ready to face any type of crisis, preserving the security of its members and contributing to global stability.

News link: <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/nato-exercises?selectedLocale=en>