

ON THE RADAR

EXERCISE BEST PRACTICES AND  
INSIGHTS FROM THE PLANNERS

**Features:** Joint Targeting • J35 Warfare Development • NATO Exercise Process



# ADVISING JOINT TARGETING *at the* JOINT WARFARE CENTRE

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**NATO JOINT TARGETING IN EXERCISES** has come a long way since 2017. What has the Alliance learned since then? In this article, I will share a summary of insights and best practices for future NATO personnel interested in joint fires and targeting at the operational and strategic levels.



## Invest in Planning

As my Advisory Team colleagues would say, one must "plan to plan." Investing in a joint operations planning group (JOPG) is a must.

When I was posted to NATO in 2017 as a Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) Joint Targeting subject matter expert (SME) supporting the execution of Exercise TRIDENT JAVELIN 2017 (TRJN17), I noticed a few opportunities. Most importantly, there was no linkage between the exercise targeting campaign against the exercise near-peer competitor in the scenario, the fictitious Federation of Skolkan, and the joint force commander's operation plan (OPLAN). In fact, in that exercise, no exercise OPLAN was written.

One problem with the lack of an OPLAN was procedural. Back then until the present through subsequent editions, the Bi-Strategic Command (Bi-SC) Directive 075-003 on collective training in exercises assumed that a NATO joint headquarters would practice the creation and writing of an OPLAN for a given exercise, based on the setting and scenario information. A significant problem with skipping the OPLAN is that it disregards the wisdom inherent in military planning.

For 200 years, since Carl von Clausewitz wrote "On War," Western militaries have understood the importance of military planning in relation to military operations. To date, NATO joint doctrine codifies the linkage between operational planning and execution of military operations. It is, simply put, a good idea.

The level of planning during TRJN17 had an impact on the quality of the targeting play. The advice I gave to the headquarters (HQ) targeteers was to link the target sets, systems and folders to the OPLAN next time. Better yet, invest in participating in a JOPG. The targeting evaluator augmenting the evaluation team from Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) realized this challenge as well.

Ironically, the evaluator's HQ, Joint Force Command Naples (JFCNP), would itself be evaluated by SHAPE J7 in 2018, during Exercise TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18 (TRJE18). Guess what his Targeting Branch, to be renamed Joint Effects Branch, would do for that exercise? They placed personnel in the JOPG for the planning phase (then known as Phase IIB, currently C-Block) of TRJE18. During the execution of the exercise (then known as Phase IIIB), they briefed the Commander JFCNP on the joint fires and targeting campaign masterfully, linking joint fires and targeting operations with the OPLAN. Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFCBS) saw the benefit as they had augmentees in Naples for that exercise.

NATO Rapid Deployable Corps (NRDC) Greece and NRDC Germany (extant at the time) did the same for their respective roles in Exercise TRIDENT JAGUAR 2018 (TRJR18). Both HQs participated in crisis response planning for TRJR18. When the two

HQs executed their portions of the exercise, they were able to abide by NATO policy (Bi-SC 075-003) as well as the NATO doctrine set out in Allied Joint Publication (AJP) 5 on planning, AJP-3 on operations, and AJP-3.9 on joint targeting. They understood how to build and execute a targeting campaign in support of the joint force commander. The NATO joint fires and targeting community of interest (COI) has never looked back since then.

## Invest in the Exercise Content

Apart from investing in JOPG participation (both for exercises and real-world planning), a best practice for a NATO joint fires and targeting staff, or any J-staff for that matter, is to provide trusted agents for the main events list/main incidents list (MEL/MIL) process in exercise planning. Another good practice that has emerged since 2017 within the joint fires COI is for the primary training audience trusted agents to lead a joint fires syndicate parallel with the MEL/MIL scripting process.

In exercise design related to joint fires and targeting at the operational or strategic level, the exercise script, consisting of injects, is helpful as exercise content. However, the content related to the start of the exercise (STARTEX) execution (now named E-Block)<sup>1</sup> is more important. This STARTEX content needs to





Exercise FORMIDABLE SHIELD 2025,  
photo by Maiken Dignes, Norwegian Armed Forces

include enough information about the situation at a given point in time. This is especially vital when the scenario at STARTEX begins in a crisis with imminent war, or after a large-scale attack in the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) area of responsibility.

✔ The Art and Science of Joint Operations is Perishable

NATO is, thankfully, not at war at this time. However, the Alliance exists solely to defend against attacks. While effective deterrence is indisputably the preferred way to defend NATO, Alliance personnel should practise wartime procedures in an invasion or post-invasion scenario. This is done through JWC-directed exercises such as the former STEADFAST JUPITER series and the current STEADFAST DUEL series. One challenge for these exercises is the tendency for military staff individuals to rotate every three years, sometimes even sooner. A commonly expected figure is that in a given year, a NATO HQ will rotate 30% of its personnel. Some of these individuals are in leadership positions for the exercising of joint

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fires and targeting, e.g. the commander, deputy commander, the deputy chief of staff for operations, the assistant chief of staff J3, or the branch head for joint effects, joint fires or joint targeting.<sup>2</sup> The leader may or may not have previous NATO experience, and they may have little joint experience, operational experience, or experience in a command or staff at echelon above corps, or its equivalent across the land and air domains.

✔ Adaptation to the Fog of War is a Must

From 1991 to the present, the advent of precision-guided munitions (PGMs), colloquially known as "smart bombs," has made war and operations cleaner and less risky regarding a potential loss of life. Smart bombs facilitated an overwhelming conventional military victory by coalition forces against Saddam Hussein's regime in both Gulf Wars. They allowed the United States Air Force air supremacy over the skies of Serbia and Kosovo in 1995 and 1999, respectively. PGMs also facilitated the protection of land forces throughout the Afghanistan campaign (2001–2021). The military leader-



ship of many Allied states became used to the availability of air supremacy and surgical strikes in peacekeeping, counterterrorism and operations against a technologically weaker military. Russia constitutes a far larger, more technologically capable enemy — and that is without taking into account support from China, North Korea, or Iran in a potential conflict with NATO.

A look at the exercise products produced by SHAPE, as well as U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) in Exercise STEADFAST DETERRENCE 2025 (STDC25) — and across the JFCs since 2017 — demonstrates that the term "joint fires" has gained prominence in Article 5-based scenarios, and rightly so. Not all usage of "joint fires" is identical to the term "joint targeting": In the event of high-intensity combat during a hypothetical near-peer invasion of NATO territory, there is no doubt that the member states will defend their territory and that the Alliance will do the same. However, such a fight will involve contested battlespace and degraded intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance — in other words, sometimes action (fires) will have to be taken without the full information-guided process (targeting) preceding it.

Air supremacy over the past four decades has set high expectations concerning

information fidelity. This highlights the importance and complexity of the information environment in an Article 5 situation. Furthermore, stocks of high-end munitions such as smart bombs and Tomahawk missiles are, of course, not unlimited. The Russo-Ukrainian war and the demand for "normal" 155 mm munition gives us an impression of the operational requirements in an Article 5 scenario. How will combat planners deal with implicit challenges resulting from high-intensity combat operations? Commanders will use their precious resources even more judiciously, need to accept more risk, and need to know what to do when an unlocated target becomes located on the battlefield.

✔ **Participation Determines the Quality of Joint Fires Command and Control in the Exercises**

If a headquarters trains as it fights, then it stands to reason that it is best to have a whole-of-headquarters effort during a JWC-directed command post exercise. Ideally, the commander of the participating headquarters takes part in the exercise battle rhythm events. His or her best advisors will ensure they are present at all events attended by their commander.

The best example of this to date was Exercise STEADFAST JUPITER 2023. In that exercise, SACEUR was personally attending key battle rhythm events. This led to cross-command discussions, transmitted through video teleconferencing, which provided unparalleled insights into warfighter thinking for any NATO staff member observing the discussion. The issues and dilemmas discussed were far beyond anything one could script or anticipate. In fact, the SHAPE staff came out with a new concept they called "the SACEUR Effect."

The SACEUR Effect has become a concept in subsequent exercise planning events. More importantly, SACEUR's participation in the exercise heavily motivated the SHAPE staff to improve processes and fostered a new appreciation of the scale of a massive conflict across Europe, the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

✔ **Sometimes Less is More: Fight the Rhythm of the Battle, not the Battle Rhythm<sup>3</sup>**

Some staff officers believe that daily boards and working groups are especially necessary in a continental-scale conflict. What is needed even more is time to think. The perfect battle



Exercise NEPTUNE STRIKE 2025, photo by NATO





The author (centre) supporting colleagues at the Exercise STEADFAST DUEL 2024 scripting workshop, photo by JWC PAO

## Where is NATO Joint Fires and Targeting in 2025?

As of this year, NATO is in a good place for joint fires and targeting. This was apparent at the Annual Joint Effects Conference held in June 2025, hosted by Romania. It was the first time that all participating organizations had a clear sense of differing roles and authorities across NATO HQs and in the J-code staffs. Most importantly, the use and appreciation of the NATO operations planning process, e.g. following AJP-5, the Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations, and tying it to the joint targeting cycle described in AJP 3.9, was the best seen to date.

Another highlight was the institutional understanding of different planning horizons and their relationship to current operations. This mindset shared by the key leadership across NATO HQs in relation to joint fires and targeting is encouraging. Compared to 2017, NATO is truly where it needs to be in relation to both. If we fight tonight, we have a solid idea how to prioritize and employ forces based on planning. If we fight tomorrow, we are on the right track to compete with a near peer. Going forward, the joint fires and targeting COI needs to maintain knowledge across personnel rotation and build on the foundation work of the past eight years in support of the deterrence and defence of the Alliance. ✦

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Bi-Strategic Command Directive 075-003, 1 September 2023.
- 2 For the best document to date on the relationship between Joint Effects, Joint Fires, and Joint Targeting, read the 2021 NATO JALLC Study Joint Fires in NATO. It is classified NATO Restricted and available on the NATO SECRET network.
- 3 "Fight the rhythm of the battle, not the battle rhythm" was said by Lieutenant General (Ret.), J. Thompson in October 2023, JFC Brunssum, Netherlands.
- 4 See a previous article by the author "Words Matter: Supporting NATO Interoperability Through a Common Understanding of Operational Concepts," Three Swords Magazine, issue 38, November 2022, for the importance of common terminology in an alliance of then-30 nations using the example of the defining of MDO in NATO during that time.

rhythm remains elusive. This is not a bad thing, per se. There is a good argument to be made that the battle rhythm should be flexible and tailorable depending on the problem set the military HQ is meant to address. Certainly, the SACEUR area of responsibility is beyond continental in scale; in fact, it covers almost half a hemisphere. Add to this the complexity of dealing with the geography, culture, infrastructure and capabilities of 32 states in the Alliance, as well as the entirety of NATO command and control while preparing for defence of the Alliance in accordance with the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area family of plans. In a massive conflict, there is something for every NATO HQ to contribute in support of the plans.

However, the commanders of those headquarters need to be working in concert. Therefore, the battle rhythm is important in the event of a conflict with a near-peer competitor. Whether we fight tonight or tomorrow, the battle rhythm needs to be founded "top-down." This means that in a militarily logical fashion, the highest military HQ sets a battle rhythm schedule, and the joint force commands and tactical component commands should align their battle rhythm with this.

In Exercise STEADFAST DUEL 2025, all three NATO joint force commands will exercise as training audiences simultaneously. This affords us an excellent opportunity to develop and refine such a battle rhythm.

## SHAPE Adopts the Continental Staffing System (2023)

After the 2022 Russian Federation invasion of Ukraine, by the summer of 2023 SHAPE staff had re-organized itself: SHAPE adopted a full continental staffing system. The J1 was for personnel, the J2 for intelligence, the J3 for operations, etc. The most significant part of this change, from a joint fires perspective, was the adoption of the J35 nomenclature.

What was redesignated as the J35 was previously the Comprehensive Crisis and Operations Management Centre (CCOMC). The CCOMC was a joint operations centre (JOC) by another name. It focused on current operations, or J33. The JOC current operations capability was kept afterwards but was now called the Multi-Domain Strategic Operations Centre (MDSOC). The term multi-domain operations (MDO) was adopted for that new JOC-like entity, as by that time in 2023, NATO had defined and adopted the term.<sup>4</sup> The J-code structure will not solve all the problems of warfare at scale, but the general reorganization at SACEUR's headquarters was a step in the right direction. Most Allied staff across NATO are more likely to understand what a J3 operations directorate is, as opposed to a strategic employment one. The change was basic, but helped other headquarters understand better who was doing what at SHAPE.