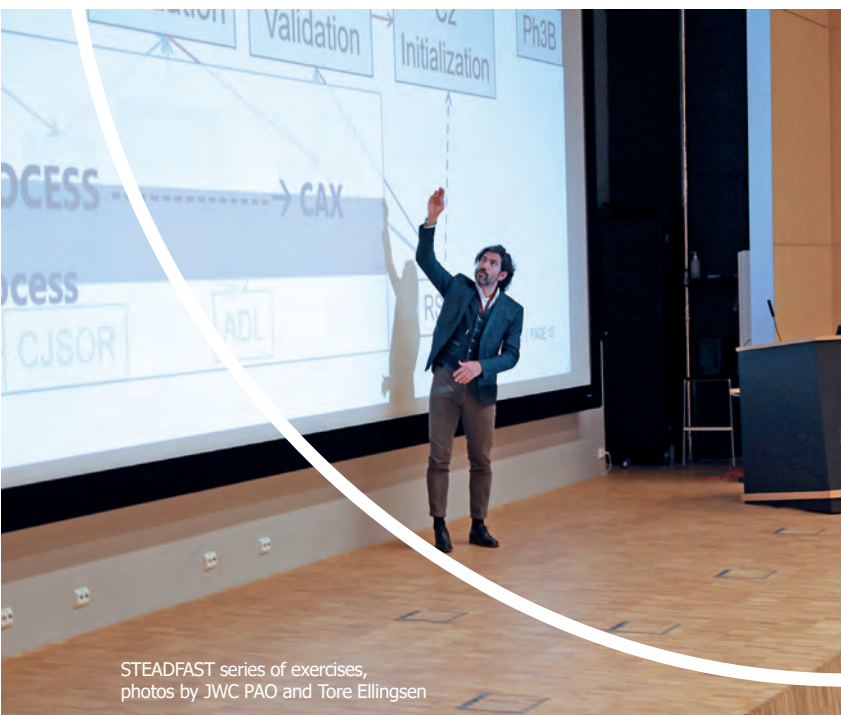




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NATO'S EXERCISE PROCESS

THE ART OF CHANGE AND CONSENSUS



STEADFAST series of exercises,
photos by JWC PAO and Tore Ellingsen



EXERCISE PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT AND DELIVERY are some of the best analogies for what the Alliance must achieve in a time of crisis. No single country or unit within NATO can accomplish the task alone. Some exercises will require extensive interaction with outside units and others may rely more on the collective doctrine and policies developed by the Alliance. Either way, those developing an exercise and those being exercised rely on collaboration across NATO. It is cooperation, communication, sharing of resources and a common understanding of the desired outcome that make the process successful.

Due to its many stages, events, meetings and interrelated processes, the exercise process (EP) can seem like a complex and, at times, overwhelming project. However, it is purely the scale and scope of an exercise that drives this complexity, and not the process itself.

This is seen in the Alliance's overarching guidance for exercise planning and delivery, the Bi-Strategic Command Directive 075-003, Collective Training and Exercises. As the governing instruction for more than 900 NATO exercises every year, it enables personnel to deal with the very large exercises that the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) and the Joint Force Command Training Centre (JFTC) develop, as well as the small-scale single-country or single-domain exercises that comprise the majority of the exercise programme.

With the inherent flexibility of the directive comes the requirement for the officers of primary responsibility (OPRs) to be effective leaders, managers, and problem solvers. There are significant decisions and compromises to be made throughout the process, and they all require an understanding of the situation, the impact on the process and the product, analysis of those impacts, and most importantly, well-reasoned decisions.

Compromise across the exercise is one of the most difficult tasks for the OPRs. There is an underlying mandate for all exercises to maximize the benefit to the Alliance as a whole and to the individual training audiences (TAs) and other participating commands. The OPRs must temper this drive to draw as much as possible out of the events with an understanding that we must meet the primary exercise aims and objectives (EAs and EOs) set by Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).

This requirement does not preclude other objectives, but it does limit the available resources and how much of an impact additional efforts may have on the exercise process and execution. In short, the Alliance cannot exercise all capabilities, in all phases, for all units in every exercise. Without focus, the stated objectives cannot be met or become so diluted that they are met in name only, without effective training or warfare development.

The OPRs are not alone in meeting this challenge. They are wholly reliant on the subject matter experts (SMEs) within the JWC and those at the units serving an officer scheduling the exercise (OSE), officer conducting the exercise (OCE) and the TAs. Additionally, the OPRs must integrate experience and

knowledge from domains and member states through centres of excellence (COEs) and national elements.

The level of effort for each participant varies throughout the EP. At the programming, multi-year level, the OSE, OCE, officer directing the exercise (ODE), and the primary training audience (PTA) are all required.

The OSE and OCE determine the desired effects for the exercises (expressed as EAs in the Collective Training and Exercise Directive), while the PTA will provide input on what it needs in order to be prepared for planned or potential operations.

ODEs serve as experts on what is feasible given the available resources including time, finances, personnel and technical capability. Throughout the EP, the resource providers and authorities responsible are well defined, but they are always reliant on the expertise and insight across all parties to ensure EAs are met using the available resources.

Moving out of the multi-year stage, the EP begins in earnest and enters a specific process for an individual exercise. Throughout this process it is critical that the defined exercise objectives based on the exercise aims remain the focus of the process.





Above
The JWC's OPR teams for exercises STEADFAST DETERRENCE 2025, STEADFAST DUEL 2025 and STEADFAST DAGGER 2025. Photo by JWC PAO

In Stage 0, Initiation, we confirm or adjust the participants, resources, and EAs stated in the Collective Training and Exercise (CT&E) Directive. Changes at this stage are generally tolerable if they remain within the participation, time, and physical resource capacity of the units involved. While time is needed to adequately analyse these parameters and work out the needed changes, this stage should not take very long, as the intent is simply to confirm, and modify as needed, guidance given in the CT&E. It is not the time for wholesale new development or implementation of immature concepts. As with all exercise stages, the agreed output by all commanders is the necessary result.

In Stage 1, Specification, we formally determine and agree the responsibilities, authorities, resources and EOs. As in Stage 0, this does not take very long, as the priority is on the agreed exercise intent (EXINT) that will establish the framework for the detailed planning and execution of the exercise. Without this agreed framework, the exercise would lack a solid foundation, and many resources,

particularly time, could otherwise be wasted in re-planning or incorporating concepts not directly related to the EAs and EOs.

While most of the time and effort is spent in Stage 2, Planning, it should not be the most complex part of the EP. This is not to discount the work and expertise required to develop the exercise plan (EXPLAN) and flesh out the myriad details that make a successful exercise. If planners adhere to the framework discussed above and stay within the defined EAs and EOs, this process can work collaboratively and there is capacity to deal with risks and unforeseen

"Officers directing the exercise serve as experts on what is feasible given the available resources."

issues as they arise. Significant changes to exercise specifications late in the process, such as adding new participants or new concepts, would cause confusion and wasted effort through delays or by invalidating previous work.

OPRs and all participants in the EP must be conservative with financial resources, and the concept of minimum military requirement always applies. Personnel requirements can be a challenge, especially securing people with the right experience and knowledge. This is where all participants in the EP are dependent on the OSE, as the resource provider uses its authority to ensure the needed capabilities are available. Of all the resources, time is the least forgiving. No matter what we do, we cannot get it back or buy more of it. This is one of the greatest challenges to the OPR. They must ensure the EP progresses and continues to meet the EAs and EOs while dealing with changes and challenges that arise in the process.

The impact of time as a resource is further compounded by its impact on the other capacities. Most resources become more expensive when they are needed quickly or on





Exercise STEADFAST DAGGER 2025, photo by MCH Chatellier Julien, 3rd French Division

short notice. Others become unavailable if time is reduced. Information systems and physical structures may take years to develop and implement, and no matter how much money is available, it may not be possible to incorporate these capabilities faster. Additionally, units outside of the EP have lead time requirements that the OPRs at any level do not have the authority to change.

The final challenge to the OPRs is to not solve the training audience's problems. This is not to say that the OPRs representing all the units in the EP will not assist the TA. During the EP, many real-world challenges will be encountered and should be resolved by the TA as part of their planning and execution.

The OPR should not be tempted to, and should resist efforts to change the exercise so that TA no longer have to worry about issues such as computer information system interoperability and access, access to fully trained SMEs for functional area systems, transportation delays and capacity limitation, or other areas that will significantly impact how the Alliance is able to achieve its missions in the future and continue to provide collective defence across NATO.

The Alliance's needs and purpose for collective training and exercises will constantly evolve and change. This is inevitable if NATO is to respond to a changing world, meet diverse

challenges and leverage emerging capabilities. In order to do so, all participants in the EP from long-term planning through execution and reporting must be willing to embrace change and develop products to meet the need.

The basic processes and underpinning doctrine are quite flexible in what is produced and grant the latitude to tailor the process to

meet the individual requirements of a given exercise. However, OPRs and others must take care not to overturn the established, understood and effective framework that has served the Alliance well. We should welcome change and adaptation, but any replacement methodology must meet the same requirements and adhere to NATO's underlying concept of consensus. ✦

Below
Participants and instructors of the NATO Exercise Planning Course (EPC) held at the JWC, February 3-7, 2025. The EPC primarily targets exercise planners at the strategic and operational levels, while ensuring an understanding of NATO's 18-month exercise planning process. Photo by JWC PAO

