

POLICY BRIEF



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Training and Exercises – NANOOK and Beyond

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Exercises are a critical component of operational-level defence collaboration. Training and exercises are key to developing the skills needed to operate effectively in the Arctic, increasing capabilities and providing an opportunity to identify the capability gaps that need to be filled. Equally significant, however, exercises are political signals, not simply extended training. The way in which an exercise is constructed and conducted influences participants, participants' governments, domestic populations, and potential adversaries. While complex, optimising exercises to thread these needles offers considerable opportunity for Canada. This complexity around constructing, conducting, and messaging around exercises, and the currently disparate nature of much of this process across and between allies, represents a real opportunity for Canada to position itself as a hub of expertise and organisation. This would require investment and commitment but could ultimately cement Canada as a leader amongst the like-minded Arctic nations.

Leveraging NANOOK

The Operation NANOOK series is the apex of Canadian-led Arctic exercises.¹ The Operation currently consists of four parts, with two focusing directly on defence activity. Across NANOOK, military capability is included from across domains and frequently also involves allies and partners. This

is an important manoeuvre, representing a key opportunity for Canadian troops to enhance their own capability, as well as enhancing alliance strength and capability. Cost is a challenge for Canada in hosting multinational Arctic exercises with European allies. It is simply more cost effective to conduct cold-weather training in Europe than North America, especially when the exercises involve large numbers of ground-based troops. As a result, it would be helpful for Canada to identify narrow areas of expertise that represent a point of difference, encouraging connection with allies along this axis. The allied divers participating in NANOOK during 2022 is an example of this opportunity. Naval exercises offer a different opportunity, and Canada can engage with its allies in supporting development of the ability to operate in the Arctic and North Atlantic. Again, it would be helpful to work with allies to identify specific points of need and ensure that Canada is involved in filling necessary gaps in expertise.

The geographic connection between Canada and the U.S. and the interconnected nature of at least a portion of their Arctic defence policy means that engaging in bilateral exercises is important in optimising capability. This involves NORAD and NORAD-related materiel exercising to prepare for a range of scenarios.² With the standing-up of the U.S. 11th Division and its dedicated cold-weather

multi-domain mission,³ there is now an even stronger opportunity to engage in exercises in different domains. U.S.-led exercises such as *Arctic Edge* and *Arctic Eagle-Patriot* have included Canadian personnel, and formalising this process will help to ensure that this connection between Canada and the U.S. remains central to defence in the North American Arctic.

NATO and Arctic Exercises

NATO's recent emphasis on exercises led by its northern members and engagement in cold-weather training is an indication of the importance of the Arctic to the alliance's perception of the threat environment. However, the number of exercises running in close temporal proximity, including NATO exercises, bi- or multi-national exercises involving NATO members, bi- or multi-national exercises involving NATO and non-NATO members (notably, in this context, Sweden), and single-state exercises is significant. There is considerable utility in streamlining this complexity. Creating a central hub that collects data on the exercises would be helpful, ensuring that resources aren't duplicated, and that training can be optimised. In addition, recent indications that NATO's role in Arctic defence will increase poses questions and opportunities for Canada to enhance its place in defence collaboration.

Recent years have seen significant movement in NATO's overarching posture and operational focus, and the creation of Joint Force Command Norfolk is a strong indication of the importance of the North Atlantic, as well as being meaningful due to the presence of NATO in North America. NATO's interest in the Arctic was further accentuated by Secretary General Stoltenberg's visit to Operation *NANOOK-NUNAKPUT* in August 2022, the first such visit by NATO's senior official. Although North American

defence has been an important part of NATO's foundational mandate, the practice of North American defence has been left to Canada and the U.S. While this will likely remain the case, increased NATO involvement could change the operational dynamics of at least some areas of North American Arctic defence. This raises the question of burden-sharing in North American Arctic for the alliance: what is the decision-making process around resource allocation? Who has the lead for constructing operations in different contexts? This represents an opportunity for Canada to take a leadership role in Arctic defence. Working within NATO and with key allies, and building on other expertise around organising exercises, Canada can play a significant role in shaping the way in which NATO's capabilities are leveraged and extended in the Arctic, especially in the North American context.

The wider political implications of Canada's role in Arctic training and exercises should not be overlooked. With greater NATO involvement in the Arctic, existing conceptions of sovereignty in Arctic defence, as well as decision-making frameworks, are likely to come under scrutiny. This is not to suggest that Canada will be stripped of its ability to operate independently and make its own decisions about Arctic defence, but it is nevertheless a potential challenge that Canadian decision-makers must be aware of. Positioning itself as a leader in administering Arctic exercises, if not always an active participant, represents a critical opportunity for Canada to shape the dynamics of potential changes.

Measuring Effects

The multi-faceted nature of exercises means that measuring their effects can be challenging. Nevertheless, it is a critical component. Without clear analysis, the signalling effects are, at best,

potentially wasted, and at worst counterproductive. Broadly, the analysis and promotion of exercises from within NATO is strong, with the Public Diplomacy Division tracking media reaction to exercises occurring, and exercises are well publicised via social and traditional media.⁴ Working with allies is important in ensuring that there is a consistency of messaging. Without this, generating a clear image of what is occurring in the Arctic and leveraging the activities for political effect is more difficult. The complexity of command structures and regional authorities can make disentangling multiple exercises difficult.⁵ Although a degree of complexity will remain, signalling and messaging would be enhanced if a clear picture can be drawn. There is also room for creativity in this context. Although NATO and individual states have begun to pay greater attention to publicising and framing exercises (the use of Lt. Matberg as the ‘poster child’ for *Trident Juncture 18* being an excellent example⁶), this has not been fully optimized. The standard procedure of distributing press releases, often augmented with social media releases, should be reconsidered to create the best possible route(s) for messaging. The predominance of bi- and multi-national exercises in the Arctic means that working with allies on this process would be helpful.

Better understanding of signalling and a more comprehensive approach to strategic messaging in Arctic defence also applies to reacting to others’ Arctic exercises. To accomplish this, it is crucial to develop an accurate picture of potential adversaries’ Arctic exercises, and this is best achieved by working in collaboration with allies to pool monitoring resources and intelligence analysis. The political decisions about how to respond to others’ exercises lie above the ‘operational’ level, but it is effectively and efficiently collecting data at this operational level that allows for effective decision-making.

Generating greater clarity on exercises also provides opportunity for Canada to work with like-minded states to consider creating a framework of openness and transparency like that which exists around military exercises in Europe. There is currently no mechanism through which greater clarity is given to military exercises in the Arctic for any exercising force, leading to a higher potential for misunderstanding or miscommunication causing escalation. Developing and negotiating the framework of such a regime will occur above the operational level. Nevertheless, working at the operational level to be able to provide input into the initial negotiating positions (both to identify the information that would be required from observation of others’ exercises, and the information that could be provided to others) would be valuable preparatory work.

Expanding ‘the Arctic’

On a practical level, exercises are necessary to close the operational ‘seams’ between the European and North American Arctics, as well as between the Arctic and the North Atlantic. NATO’s annual *Dynamic Mongoose* exercise, for example, is designed to enhance anti-submarine warfare capabilities. Involving multiple NATO members and taking place in the North Atlantic, the exercise is the twin of the *Dynamic Manta* exercise that is conducted in Southern European waters. *Dynamic Mongoose* represents important training for the forces that are likely to be vital in the context of large-scale Arctic-related combat. Although *Dynamic Mongoose* does not usually occur entirely within the circumpolar Arctic, it is a valuable reminder that the Arctic is connected to other regions. As such, it is helpful to use exercises to better understand how Arctic domain awareness and capability can be leveraged in support of

operations in other areas, and what can be done in other areas to support Arctic defence operations.

Expanding the understanding of “like-minded Allied nations,” Inuit represent a nation with whom the Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) has a “nation-to-nation” relationship. The importance of the Indigenous

peoples in Arctic defence cannot be overstated, epitomised in Canada by the Canadian Rangers. Through this lens, it is vital that the Department of National Defence involves and includes the Indigenous population within its Arctic training and exercises, with such engagement providing a two-way benefit.

¹ Government of Canada, “Operation NANOOK,” at <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-nanook.html>.

² See, for example, the *Noble Defender* series of exercises at NORAD, “Newsroom,” 8 February 2022, at <https://www.norad.mil/Newsroom/Fact-Sheets/Article-View/Article/2928028/operation-noble-defender/>.

³ 11th Airborne Division, “Welcome to the 11th Airborne Division, the ‘Arctic Angels’,” at <https://11thairbornedivision.army.mil>.

⁴ NATO, “Communications and Public Diplomacy,” at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69275.htm.

⁵ For example, *Defence Exercise North 2023* is a small Finnish exercise, involving US troops stationed in Finland. However, it is claimed by US Army Europe and Africa as part of its *Autumn Forge 2023* series (*Autumn Forge* being the “umbrella” rather than an exercise in itself). *Autumn Forge*, however, comprises two exercises, *Defence Exercise North 2023* and *Joint Viking 2023*, a Norwegian-led exercise involving around 12,000 troops from nine countries. This is further complicated by the connection between *Joint Viking 2023* and a simultaneous exercise *Joint Warrior 2023*, a UK-led naval and amphibious exercise involving around 8,000 troops and sixteen ships. Consequently, it is difficult to determine whether *Joint Viking* is connected to *Defence Exercise North*, which has significant implications for reporting under the terms of the OSCE’s 2011 Vienna Document. Furthermore, the exercises demonstrate the connection between operations in the circumpolar Arctic and more southern areas, highlighting the significance of ensuring that the two regions do not become siloed.

⁶ Elsa Hedling, Emil Edenborg, Sanna Strand, “Embodying Military Muscles and a Remasculinized West: Influencer Marketing, Fantasy, and “the Face of NATO,” *Global Studies Quarterly*, Volume 2, Issue 1 (January 2022): 1-12.