

The NATO Practice of Exercises: Cold Response 2022

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Introduction

On 14 March 2022 Cold Response 2022 (CR 22) began, one of the largest North Atlantic Organization Treaty (NATO) exercises in the Arctic since the 1980s. The exercise, led by Norway, involved 30.000 troops, 220 aircrafts and 50 ships from 27 countries and ended on 1 of April. The 2022 edition was held after two years of suspension (2020-2021) because of the pandemic.

The Relevance of the Exercise

The exercise is not special: Norway has hosted exercises since the 1950s and the first Cold Response Exercise occurred in 2006. Indeed, the weather conditions in Norway allow Allied troops to train to be ready in harsh and extreme conditions, such as frozen ground, cold weather and snow.

Although it is common, a giant exercise such as this one did not go unnoticed because of both the period of tension and war and the exercise's characteristics and size (Ali, Emmot, 2022). First, the fictional scenario represents an attack on Norway by a foreign country and the consequent activation of NATO collective self-defence under Art. 5. It is clear that this scenario resembles the possibility of an attack by Russia, a case that, today, after the invasion of Ukraine, seems much more accurate. Second, two non-NATO countries took part in the exercise, namely Sweden and Finland, two neighbouring countries of the Russian Federation. Their participation in the exercise is normal, and it had already happened in the previous years; however, in this case, it is impossible to ignore that Russia's invasion of Ukraine sparked and reinvigorated the debate in the two countries to enter the Alliance.

NATO representatives stressed that the exercise was not organised in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine; indeed, it had been already planned for several months, and the first troops began to arrive in Norway in the fall of 2021 (Szumski, 2022). NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg reinforced this concept, affirming that the Alliance's aim in the region is to prevent conflict and preserve peace; moreover, he underlined the ever-growing strategic importance of the region of the High North and increasing Russia's activity in the area (Temizer, 2022).

General Yngve Odlo, in charge of the Cold Response, highlighted that CR 22 is a defensive exercise and that it is normal that armies train together to demonstrate their capacity to fight. Moreover, the Norwegian Armed Force website explicitly considers the possibility that the exercise escalates tension, and, in response, it underlines that the exercise is neither unexpected nor surprising for Russia. Russian Federation has been warned about it: the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Vienna Document, adopted in 1990, prescribes its member to notify each other about major military activities such as exercises. For this reason, Norway communicated about CR 22 and invited all 57 OSCE member states (among them Russia) to send observers to watch the exercise. However, Russia declined the invitation and the Russian Embassy in Norway told AFP that such an exercise does not contribute to strengthening security in the Arctic region.

NATO Exercises

As already stated, NATO exercise practices are not new: they have been conducted since 1951. An exercise consists of creating a fictitious scenario to which troops have to respond. They can be very different from each other: indeed, they include the full range of military operations and vary in size and duration.

They are one of the main ways in which it is possible to test capabilities and get trained in working together. According to the NATO website, they have four official purposes. Two are quite clear: the first one is indeed training and experience; in addition, exercises allow testing and validating structures.

Moreover, they are also useful to achieve a better interoperability between the armed forces of the different members of the Alliance. Indeed, the armies must be ready to work together effectively, even though differences in language, doctrine and tactics exist. Finally, yet importantly, the aim of the exercise is defence reform: it allows member countries to test national reform in this field.

Being these the official aims, it is clear that these “war games” also have an important informal purpose: deterrence and, therefore, stability maintenance. Indeed, the underlying idea is that showing the power and the capability of an army would deter the enemies from attacking or engaging in a conflict (Clem, 2018).

In the last years, it is undeniable that there was an increase in NATO exercises, probably mainly to fill what has been identified as «the NATO-Russia Exercise Gap» issue: the size and frequency of Russian exercises were much bigger compared to NATO ones (Brzezinski, Varangis, 2016). Moreover, some scholars outlined that the Alliance’s exercises were often too small and too simple compared to real-life situations; due to this fact, they would fail in their effect of deterrence and, most of all, in achieving an effective interoperability between armed forces (Lucas, 2022).

However, it is disputed if exercises really can transmit powerful geopolitical messages as deterrence, especially in the specific case of the Russian Federation (Clem, 2018). Instead, the risk may be a trend of escalation: exercises increasingly extensive in size could lead to a conflict because of the perception of aggression.

The Exercise Gap has been reduced in the last years due to both bigger and more frequent NATO exercises and less frequent Russian ones; but, despite this trend, the gap still exists (Brzezinski, Varangis, 2016).

Conclusion

It will be interesting to watch the tendency of exercises by NATO in the next years, after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Cold response 22, even though it was planned before the war, is a hint of the possible future scenarios: as said initially, it was one of the largest exercises in the Arctic region since the 1980s. Therefore, it is likely that the new time of instability and war would lead to bigger and more frequent exercises, especially on NATO's eastern flank, with a possible risk of further escalation.

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