

# Steadfast Defender 24: Exercising NATO's evolving strategy for deterrence and defence

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**From January to May 2024, NATO conducted its largest military exercise since the end of the Cold War. Steadfast Defender 24 was a multinational exercise series, incorporating 14 associated exercises and involving 90,000 participants from all member nations, marking a historic milestone in NATO's military exercise activities. Over the years, NATO's military exercises have evolved in line with the alliance's strategy for deterrence and defence. As the global security landscape has changed, NATO's deterrence and defence strategy has shifted to emphasise a forward presence on the eastern flank combined with the capability for rapid reinforcement. NATO's military exercises have reintroduced training for large-scale warfare in Europe, with Steadfast Defender 24 serving as a prime example.**

**T**HROUGH THE YEARS, NATO military exercises have reflected the alliance's strategy and core tasks. During the 1990s and 2000s, NATO's primary focus was on crisis management operations outside its territory. Allied military exercises served to prepare troops for crisis management operations such as ISAF's in Afghanistan. Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and initial aggression in eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO initiated a gradual shift towards a strategy of deterrence and defence. The increasing scale and focus of military exercises reflected this shift.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Exercise Trident Juncture in 2015 trained approximately 36,000 soldiers in NATO's Response Force.<sup>2</sup> Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted further adjustments to NATO's strategy and led to demands for a more robust force posture. This included the adoption of a new force model, new regional defence plans, and a pledge to increase NATO's presence on the eastern flank to brigade-size units. NATO's military exercises have reflected the return of large-scale warfare in Europe and the increased focus on a strategy of deterrence and defence.

In 2024, NATO's latest multinational military exercise series, Steadfast Defender 24, took place. This umbrella exercise, consisting of 14 associated multinational exercises, was conducted across Europe, from the High North to the Black Sea, with a particular emphasis on strategically vulnerable locations along the flanks.

The exercise series involved over 90,000 soldiers, more than 1,000 combat vehicles, 80 aircraft, and 50 ships from participating allies.<sup>3</sup> The historic scale and comprehensiveness of the exercise is noteworthy, but it is also of interest as it was the first time that elements of the new regional defence plans, decided upon at the NATO Vilnius Summit in 2023, were exercised.<sup>4</sup> These plans intend to enhance the alliance's ability to counter threats from multiple directions simultaneously.

The aim of this memo is to provide an overview of Steadfast Defender 24 by mapping different aspects of the exercise series. The literature on military exercises identifies two main purposes for exercises, covering both the political-strategic and the tactical-technical dimensions.<sup>5</sup> These two purposes, or dimensions, are used here to analyse Steadfast Defender 24, focusing on its purpose, content, scenarios employed and the capabilities exercised. Furthermore, the memo aims to analyse how the military exercise series fits into NATO's evolving deterrence and defence strategy. The memo is divided into five parts: the first is a short description of NATO's current strategy for deterrence and defence. The second is a brief introduction to Steadfast Defender as an exercise series. The third provides an analysis of the political-strategic and tactical-technical dimensions of the exercise series, and the fourth analyses how Steadfast Defender 24 fits into NATO's current deterrence and defence strategy. The memo then ends with conclusions.

## NATO'S STRATEGY FOR DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE

For NATO, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 served as a wake-up call and prompted the alliance to recognise the need for a more robust defence posture. During the Madrid summit that same year, the alliance made a commitment to “defend every inch of Allied territory at all times”. NATO’s strategy for deterrence and defence has since evolved to consist of two major parts, forward-deployed presence in strategically vulnerable locations and reinforcements on a large-scale. This suggests that NATO’s strategy for deterrence and defence is shifting towards deterrence by denial, which means seeking to prevent an adversary from taking action by making it unlikely to succeed in the first place—essentially convincing an adversary that their strategy is unattainable.<sup>6</sup> In practice, this entails strengthening both NATO’s presence on the eastern flank, for instance by increasing the multinational battlegroups to brigade-size units, and enhancing the capability for large-scale reinforcement at short notice, whenever and wherever needed. Hence, the alliance must be prepared for different scenarios, which requires regularly conducting military exercises.<sup>7</sup>

## STEADFAST DEFENDER IN SHORT

In the spring of 2024, Steadfast Defender 24 served as an overarching framework for a series of 14 multinational military exercises, which took place in various regions of northern, eastern, and southern Europe. With its extensive geographical distribution, substantial participation from allies, and integration of joint operations across all domains and at all levels of command, Steadfast Defender represents NATO’s most significant exercise in decades. The last comparable exercise was Exercise REFORGER in 1988, which gathered approximately 125,000 participants to train American troops in their ability to rapidly deploy to Europe, a purpose similar to that of Steadfast Defender.<sup>8</sup> As a framework exercise, Steadfast Defender is expected to be a permanent feature in NATO’s military exercise activities and is planned to take place every three years.<sup>9</sup> The first iteration of the exercise series was held in 2021 but was significantly constrained due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

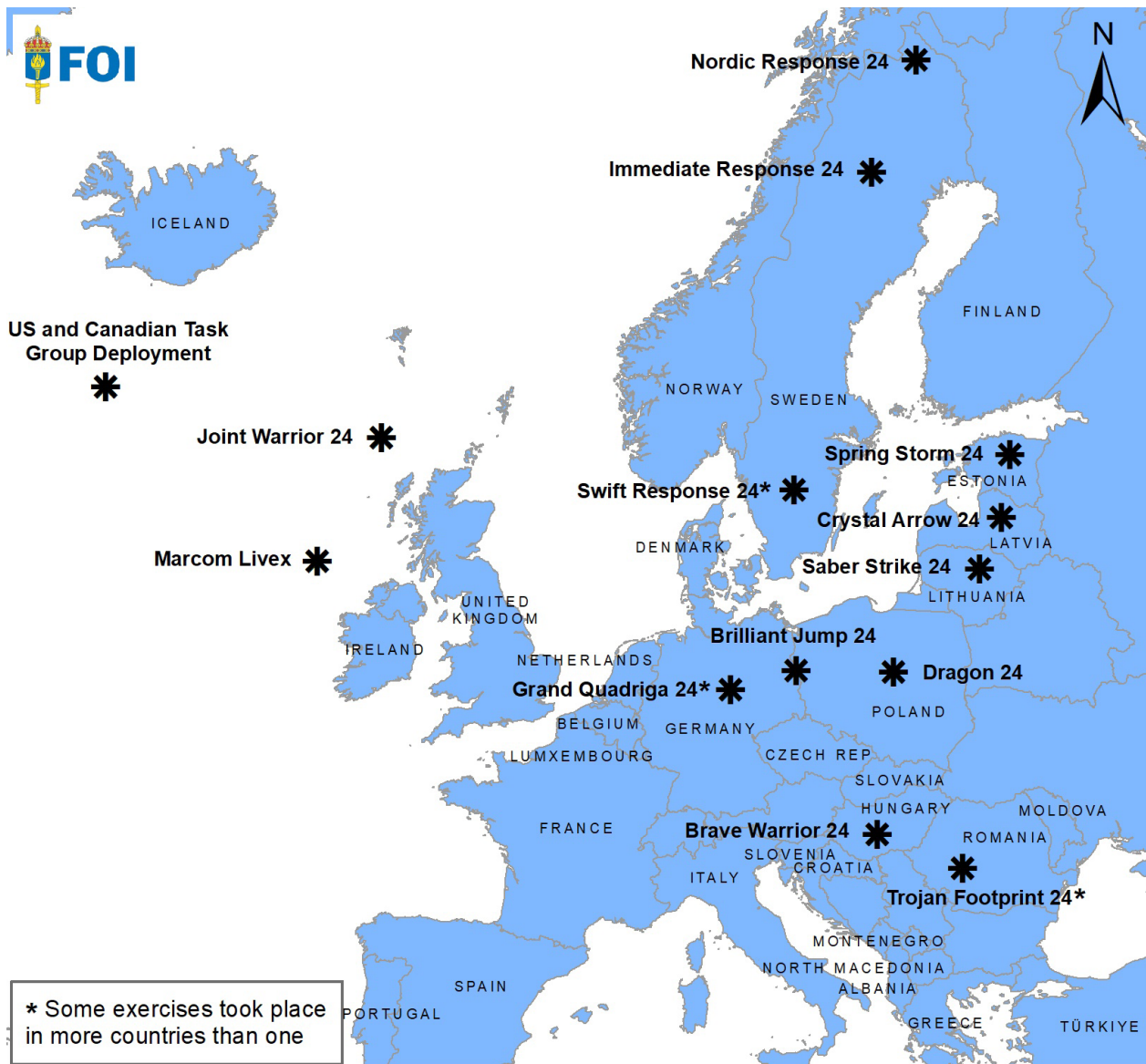
Major military exercises take a long time to plan, and the planning for Steadfast Defender has been years in the making, according to NATO. All NATO military exercises are assigned predefined goals and purposes, which in turn influence the activities included in the exercises.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the content or level of ambition may change or evolve throughout the planning process. The global security landscape arguably provided a backdrop to the exercise series. However, NATO stated

that Steadfast Defender was not aimed at any particular nation, especially given that the exercise series was defensive in nature. Nevertheless, Russia is recognised in NATO’s strategic concept as the main security threat to the alliance, and the series of exercises involved testing and implementing elements of the new regional defence plans adopted at the Vilnius Summit, intended to ensure the alliance’s ability to respond to any threat from Russia and international terrorism.<sup>11</sup>

The structure of the exercise series was twofold: the first part focused on the strategic deployment of forces from Canada, the US, and the UK to Europe, with transit routes across the Atlantic and up to the Arctic. The entryways to Europe by sea were Germany, Poland and Norway.<sup>12</sup> A variety of additional exercises was conducted during the transatlantic reinforcement phase, including training in amphibious assault and force integration.<sup>13</sup> The second part focused on enabling and deploying forces across Europe, with a particular focus on the northern and eastern flanks. This entailed exercising combat in various live scenarios. Exercises were conducted at all levels of command: strategic, operational, and tactical, and across all NATO domains: air, land, sea, cyber, and space. As the Steadfast Defender series consisted of multinational and national associated military exercises, most were nationally led, in coordination with Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFCBS).<sup>14</sup> Others were led by US European Command (USEUCOM) or US Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF).<sup>15</sup>

## POLITICAL-STRATEGIC DIMENSION

As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of military exercises is generally categorised into two dimensions, one of which is the political-strategic dimension. This aspect refers to the utility of military exercises for sending political messages, reassuring allies, and deterring potential adversaries, for instance, through the scenarios exercised and the purposes conveyed.<sup>16</sup> The Steadfast Defender series had several purposes, but the overall objective conveyed was to demonstrate the alliance’s commitment to defending each other against any threat and to demonstrate the ability to sustain complex, multi-domain operations over time and across territory.<sup>17</sup> Numerous official NATO statements, as well as allies’ national statements, repeatedly emphasised their determination to protect each other and the demonstration of unity and strength displayed by the exercise series. As evidenced by the emphasis on reassuring partners and allies, while simultaneously deterring potential adversaries, the objectives of Steadfast



**Map 1.** Map of the Steadfast Defender 24 series.

**Source:** Per Wikström, FOI.

Defender reflected the political-strategic dimension of military exercises, as well as their utility in political messaging. The overall purpose of the exercise series was also evident in the objectives of the associated exercises under the Steadfast Defender umbrella. For example, the Norwegian-led Exercise Nordic Response, held in the High North, practised receiving transatlantic reinforcements along with collective-defence training in an Arctic climate. Another example is the Latvian-led Exercise Crystal Arrow, which focused on enhancing readiness and interoperability between the Canadian-led NATO battlegroup stationed in Latvia and on integrating it with the Latvian forces.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout Steadfast Defender, the exercises took place under fictitious scenarios that aimed to be similar to what might happen in real life. Military exercises are a double-edged sword as they can send signals of deterrence and reassurance, but at the same time, they cannot be too realistic as this may lead to misinterpretation or tensions, and hence have the opposite effect.<sup>19</sup> The overall stated scenario for the first phase of the exercise series involved transatlantic reinforcement during an elevated threat level.<sup>20</sup> In the second part, the alliance had secured the seas, allowing land forces to deploy to Europe and train in a scenario simulating an emerging conflict with a near-peer adversary.<sup>21</sup> In the associated

exercises, the scenarios that were used were more specific and operated on a tactical level. Nevertheless, a pattern can be discerned. For example, the scenarios used in Exercises Nordic Response, Dragon, and Grand Quadriga all involved responding to an opponent initiating an attack from the east.<sup>22</sup> In the latter, the scenario involved NATO forces advancing via various routes from Germany to Lithuania to stop an enemy attack.<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding the statement that Steadfast Defender was not directed at any nation, the scenario that unfolded in the Polish-led Exercise Dragon was undoubtedly inspired by the events in Ukraine and thus aimed at defending against a Russian attack.<sup>24</sup> The scenario of Russian forces rapidly gaining control of territory in the Baltic region has been the subject of many analyses, and has been described as the most probable course of action for Russia to pursue, should it attack NATO, yet it has also been described as its most dangerous option.<sup>25</sup>

### TACTICAL-TECHNICAL DIMENSION

The second purpose of military exercises is the tactical-technical aspect, which refers to the training of forces, the testing of command and control structures, and the strengthening of interoperability, primarily between allies.<sup>26</sup> Military exercises are thus important in testing and evaluating the utility and efficiency of military capabilities as well as command and control structures, particularly the latter, as it tests the ability to coordinate national capabilities. In addition to testing elements of the new regional defence plans, Steadfast Defender was an opportunity for NATO to test and evaluate interoperability, preparedness, and the deployment of forces within the alliance.<sup>27</sup> The exercise series was predominantly characterised by the use of land forces. Specifically, the conduct of rapid enablement and deployment of forces and equipment along the eastern flank was a prominent feature, in which time-efficient logistics and transport were emphasised. For example, Exercise Brilliant Jump, which tests parts of NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) troops, trained their ability to quickly transfer large forces across great distances.<sup>28</sup>

Exercise Brilliant Jump commenced with the entry of UK-led VJTF troops and military equipment via the Port of Emden, Germany. Subsequently, they transferred to Poland by land. In Szczecin, Poland, troops from Spain, which arrived by sea and air, and from Albania and Turkey, which came from the south by land and air, joined the VJTF troops. Together with Polish forces, they proceeded to the Drawsko Pomorskie training

facility in northern Poland, where they engaged in live combat training.<sup>29</sup> The leadership of Brilliant Jump this year was held by Joint Force Command (JFC) Brunssum, which represented a significant logistical undertaking, given the coordination of so many multinational forces. Even if the rapid deployment of forces was executed effectively, deficiencies in logistical support related to resupply and maintenance of advanced equipment under field conditions were identified, suggesting challenges in sustaining extended operations. Moreover, some challenges were noted in the command and control structure as well, leading to delays in decision-making during operations.<sup>30</sup> The effectiveness of the command and control structure will likely continue to be a challenge for the alliance in military exercises especially given that it is not yet clear what the command and control structure will look like in light of the new regional defence plans.<sup>31</sup>

Following the Brilliant Jump exercise, troops from the VJTF, Spain, and Turkey proceeded to the Polish-led Exercise Dragon. In central Poland, forces from France, Lithuania, Germany, Slovenia, and the US joined them, and were subordinated to the Polish 11th Armoured Cavalry Division. NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroup in Poland also took part. Once all had assembled, Dragon commenced with the crossing of the Vistula River, using M3 amphibious rigs from a joint German-British unit. Following the wet gap crossing, the forces proceeded with a road march to the Bemowo Piskie training facility, located in northeast Poland, where they trained live combat.<sup>32</sup> The Bemowo Piskie training facility is located close to the Suwalki Gap, which may increase the deterrent effect.

The German-led Exercise Grand Quadriga is a further illustration of the exercise series' focus on enablement and deployment. The five-month exercise included several different manoeuvres, all of which rehearsed the ability to rapidly reinforce either the northern, southern, or eastern flank. For example, in one manoeuvre, the 10th Armoured Division, along with French and Dutch troops, used land, air, and sea to move elements of two divisions from central Europe to training facilities in eastern Lithuania. After arriving at the training facility, located about 20 kilometres from the Belarusian border, they engaged in live combat training.<sup>33</sup> In addition to leading Exercise Grand Quadriga, Germany served as a hub for reinforcement and as one of the entryways into Europe during the Steadfast Defender series, demonstrating its ambition to be perceived as a major *Drehscheibe* (logistics hub) within the alliance.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, a pattern was identified in the contributions and participation of alliance members in the exercise series. Most countries only participated in exercises in their own region, with a few exceptions, reflecting the regional approach in NATO's defence planning. For example, the Nordic countries took part in exercises held in the north, while the Baltic States participated in those held along the eastern flank.

Alongside the emphasis on the use of land forces, maritime operations were essential and particularly more evident in the first phase of Steadfast Defender. NATO's ability to secure and control the maritime route to Europe is crucial for guaranteeing transatlantic reinforcement.

This was practiced in the maritime live-exercise at the start of the Steadfast Defender series. The maritime exercise focused on integration and interoperability. Vessels from Spain, Germany, and France assembled and began the process of integration. This was followed by the arrival in the English Channel of NATO's Standing Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1) from Norway. Part of the exercise included escorting a US Navy amphibious assault ship across the Atlantic.<sup>35</sup> Having completed this, SNMG1 joined the UK-led Exercise Joint Warrior, held in the North and Norwegian Seas. This multiwarfare exercise included, among other things, live-fire scenarios, mine-clearance operations, amphibious landings, and anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare. Joint Warrior was one of the largest exercises within the exercise series, with approximately 20,000 personnel participating. In addition to SNMG1 and NATO's Standing Mine Countermeasures Group One, fourteen nations participated, including Norway, the UK, Poland, Spain, the US, Italy, Denmark, Canada, France, and the Netherlands.<sup>36</sup> As the final element of the first part of the exercise series, most of the naval forces in Joint Warrior sailed on to Narvik, Norway, and participated in Exercise Nordic Response.

Furthermore, in accordance with the multi-domain character of the Steadfast Defender series, the majority of the multinational and national exercises also incorporated air defence or air support operations throughout their duration. However, one of the associated exercises was an airborne exercise. Exercise Swift Response was led by USAREUR-AF, and involved approximately 13,000 airborne troops, 3,700 of whom were from the US. It featured six coordinated airborne operations, taking place in Sweden, Estonia, Poland, Romania, North Macedonia, and Moldova, with the purpose of dropping paratroopers and equipment over the eastern flank to quickly reinforce Europe. The airborne operations began

with a Joint Forcible Entry, essentially an operation in which forces seize and hold a position against an armed adversary. The operations took place over airbases and training areas, and once the paratroopers had landed, they focused on securing and controlling the area, later followed by air assault and live-fire exercises in various situations.<sup>37</sup> For some nations, Swift Response also involved exercising the Host Nation Support concept.

### **HOW DOES STEADFAST DEFENDER FIT INTO NATO'S DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE STRATEGY?**

To begin with, one core component of NATO's strategy for deterrence and defence is having a strong capability for large-scale and rapid reinforcement across Europe. During Steadfast Defender, this was evident in its predominant focus on enabling the reinforcement of Europe at strategic locations along the flanks, during a simulated emerging conflict scenario against a near-peer adversary. For instance, during the initial phase of the exercise series, the alliance exercised securing the Atlantic to facilitate transatlantic reinforcement to northern and eastern Europe. Moreover, it is noteworthy that NATO exercised several entryways into Europe, which could make it harder for an opponent to predict where forces would arrive, thus making reinforcement more efficient during a war. In addition, the rapid reinforcement of forces and equipment by means other than sea was practiced throughout the second phase of Steadfast Defender. Exercises Grand Quadriga and Dragon are good examples of this. In fact, the main activity of most of the exercises was to train multinational forces in cross-border movement, implying the predominant focus on strengthening logistical capabilities throughout the exercise series. Not surprisingly, the majority of the exercises involved training the ability to reinforce the eastern flank. The High North was also reinforced in several exercises, as were parts of the Black Sea region. Thus, for many nations the exercise series involved training in receiving reinforcements from NATO allies or operating within the framework of Host Nation Support, as was the case for Germany, Poland, and Sweden.

Secondly, the other core component of NATO's deterrence and defence strategy involves strengthening the forward-deployed presence in vulnerable strategic locations, i.e., NATO's eight multinational battlegroups stationed along the flanks. During Steadfast Defender, several exercises involved training parts of the multinational forces that makes up NATO's battlegroups along the eastern flank. For instance, Exercise Crystal Arrow in Latvia was a combat-ready evaluation exercise for the Latvian battlegroup. Other examples include

Exercise Brave Warrior, which focused on exercising the capabilities of the multinational battlegroup in Hungary. In Exercise Spring Storm in Estonia, forces from the multinational battlegroup participated, and in Exercise Dragon, multinational forces from the battlegroup in Poland took part. Exercising interoperability and integrating the forward-deployed forces with national and multinational forces are critical for the success and efficiency of reinforcement operations. It would be interesting to know whether the forward-deployed battlegroups exercised at the battalion or brigade level, since, in theory, these forward-deployed forces are expected to be combat-ready at the brigade level upon the outbreak of war and are not included in the general allied reinforcements that are expected to be deployed thereafter. As of 2024, the forward-deployed forces in Latvia became the first and, as of today, the only battlegroup to scale up to brigade size.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, it would also be useful to determine whether the exercises included training for

reinforcing the battlegroups up to brigade size during the exercises. Given the limited availability of information on Steadfast Defender, what is known is that only Exercise Saber Strike, which focused on rapid reinforcement in the Baltics, practiced scaling up NATO's battlegroup in Poland to brigade size.<sup>39</sup>

It would be even more fruitful to know whether the battlegroups were reinforced by their respective framework nation as they theoretically should be, or by other forces. It is reasonable to posit that this is something that should be exercised regularly and included as part of a comprehensive exercise such as Steadfast Defender. Nevertheless, some battlegroups recently exercised their ability to scale up to brigade size. For example, during the Spring Storm 2023 exercise, UK forces trained in rapidly reinforcing the battlegroup in Estonia. Similarly, during Exercise Griffin Shock in 2023, US forces practiced scaling up the battlegroup in Poland from battalion- to brigade-size units.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in the fall of 2024, the

**Table 1.** Steadfast Defender 2024 associated exercises.

Steadfast Defender 2024 associated exercises	Date	Location	Led by
United States and Canadian Task Group Deployment	January	Norfolk, Virginia - Atlantic	Joint Force Command - Norfolk (JFCNF)
MARCOM LIVEX	11 - 20 February	Spain - Atlantic	Allied Maritime Command
Joint Warrior 24	24 February - 3 March	United Kingdom	UK
Nordic Response 24	3 - 14 March	Norway, Finland, Sweden	Norway
Brilliant Jump 24	12 - 28 February	Germany, Poland	Joint Force Command Brunssum (JFCBS)
Dragon 24	25 February - 14 March	Poland	Poland
Trojan Footprint 24	29 February - 14 March	Greece, Romania, Georgia	Allied Command Transformation (ACT)
Crystal Arrow 24	4 - 15 March	Latvia	Latvia
Saber Strike 24	28 February - 8 March	Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia, Latvia, Estonia, Czech Republic	US Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR - AF)
Immediate Response 24	21 April - 31 May	Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Norway, Poland, Sweden	US Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF)
Swift Response 24	14 May - 14 June	Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Sweden	US Army Europe and Africa (USAREUR-AF)
Brave Warrior 24	1 - 22 May	Hungary	Hungary
Spring Storm 24	6 - 17 May	Estonia	Estonia
Grand Quadriga 24	30 April - 30 July	Germany, Lithuania	Germany

**Source:** NATO

Latvian and Bulgarian battlegroups trained the ability to scale up to brigade size.<sup>41</sup> This might explain why it presumably was not exercised during some of the associated exercises within Steadfast Defender.

In sum, Steadfast Defender 24 fits into NATO's deterrence and defence strategy by exercising the strategy's core components, namely the strengthening of forward-deployed forces along the strategic flanks and the rapid and large-scale reinforcement across Europe. However, within the framework of Steadfast Defender, the exercises emphasised training for perhaps more general reinforcement—i.e., reinforcement that is to be ready after ten days—rather than training for the reinforcement of NATO's battlegroups. Still, as shown in the Steadfast Defender series, NATO's military exercise activity and its strategy for deterrence and defence go hand in hand. Essentially, the exercises become a reflection of the alliance's strategy and are a core component in evaluating the implementation of that strategy.

It is noteworthy, however, that some exercises within the Steadfast Defender umbrella did not necessarily reflect NATO's deterrence and defence strategy. An example of this is Exercise Trojan Footprint, which took place in the Black Sea region and focused on strengthening the ability of NATO's Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Europe. This exercise is conducted every two years. In fact, a majority of the associated exercises are recurring events that have been conducted for years and would have still taken place across Europe even without the umbrella of Steadfast Defender.

It is easy to get the impression from the Steadfast Defender series that NATO packed as many exercises as possible into a single framework, thereby creating the appearance of considerable military activity taking place, and, by doing so, achieving a deterrent effect as well. A series of exercises with 90,000 soldiers may seem like a lot, but when spread out over 14 exercises all across Europe it is less so. Taken on their own, each

of the associated exercises may not achieve deterrence on its own, but together with 13 other exercises under one umbrella, they may have a greater deterrent effect, essentially creating synergy.

NATO has conducted large-scale exercises for years, but not this many under a single framework in a long time. The most recent large-scale military exercise conducted by NATO, for example, was Exercise Trident Juncture in 2018. The exercise, which involved 50,000 participants, trained the NATO Response Force and the alliance's ability to respond to any threat. It was conducted in Norway and the surrounding seas.<sup>42</sup> It is reasonable to conclude that NATO has made a deliberate decision in its strategy to transition from conducting large-scale exercises on specific locations to securing key strategic locations throughout the Euro-Atlantic region through numerous exercises that focus on reinforcement and a persistent presence within a unified framework.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since 2014, NATO has significantly strengthened its deterrence and defence strategy, which consists of two core components: a forward-deployed presence in locations that are strategically vulnerable and large-scale, rapid reinforcement. Steadfast Defender 24, which emphasised training for moving troops across the Euro-Atlantic region and a persistent forward-deployed presence on the flanks in most of its exercises, illustrates how it fits into this strategy. Essentially, the training was consistent with the alliance's deterrence and defence strategy and demonstrated how interconnected these elements are. That being said, given the uncertainty that surrounds our ever-changing global security landscape, NATO might further alter its deterrence and defence strategy in the future, making it even more relevant to observe what the Steadfast Defender series will look like, with Steadfast Defender 2027 coming next. ■

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