

Nordic Response 2024

– NATO returns to the North in large scale

Emelie Moregård

In the spring of 2024, NATO conducted a number of military exercises in Europe. In the High North, the exercise Nordic Response, gathered 20,000 soldiers from 13 different countries. Beyond improving capabilities and interoperability between allies, Nordic Response was a crucial first step in implementing NATO's regional plans for defending northern Europe.

Due to the changing security environment, NATO has faced the urgent task of reconstructing its military strategy and operational planning to meet emerging threats. From its previous focus on crisis management and international operations, NATO began the gradual process of returning to collective security in 2014, after the Russian annexation of Crimea. With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in 2022, it became evident that NATO urgently needed to further develop its operational planning to encompass defence against a large-scale attack from a near-peer adversary, i.e., Russia. Since then, this work has led to the adoption of a new military strategy, the concept of Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA), and the new regional plans. These recent developments are in stark contrast to the patchwork planning undertaken in the immediate aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea, in 2014. Thus, NATO will soon have a coherent military strategy and conduct operational planning for the first time since the Cold War.

Throughout the spring of 2024, NATO is demonstrating this shift through its initiative to hold allied military exercises all over Europe to test its new operational planning, including the ability to deploy American reinforcements, thereby enhancing Europe's collective defence. One of the most extensive was Nordic Response, held 3–14 March, a multi-domain exercise held on land, in the air and at sea in the High North, to test and develop the Nordic countries' ability to defend the region. The exercise was another milestone in Nordic integration into NATO and its regional plans.

This memo analyses the new reality of NATO's regional plans for northern Europe. It focuses on Nordic Response, its scope, content, and participating states. This particular exercise is of interest for several reasons. First, its geographic location in the High North implies not only its importance from a geostrategic perspective, but it also demonstrates the renewed priority ascribed to this area. With Finland and Sweden as new alliance members, the High North generates a new domain of opportunities and requirements for NATO's operational planning. Second, given the exercise's focus on providing transatlantic reinforcement to the Nordic countries and testing their capacity for collective defence, the purpose and elements of the exercise suggest NATO's commitment to being prepared to protect the northern flank, which provides a further indication of NATO's future threat perception. Third, the size of the exercise, including its scope and content, is of interest as it indicates the level of commitment of other allies. This memo's aim is to provide an analysis of these aspects and, hence, answer the questions: What can Nordic Response tell us about NATO's adaption of the new operational plans? What indications can the exercise give us about NATO's renewed attention to the High North?

NATO TO HOLD ITS GREATEST MILITARY EXERCISE SINCE THE COLD WAR

NATO's new regional plans for collective defence were adopted at the Vilnius Summit, in 2023. Shortly after, NATO announced that during the first half of 2024, the alliance would hold its largest collective defence exercise

in Europe since the Cold War.¹ The exercise, Steadfast Defender, will be the first opportunity to practice and evaluate these new regional plans. It will also reinforce deterrence.² Military exercises can send different signals: internally, to a state's armed forces and population; and, externally, in the form of political signals to the international community and rivals. For instance, the geographic location of an exercise can send specific deterrence signals if it is near a potential adversary's territory. Additionally, an exercise of the calibre of Steadfast Defender signals that NATO can execute multiple extensive operations simultaneously.³

Steadfast Defender is a multi-domain exercise involving 90,000 soldiers from all NATO member states, including the newest NATO ally, Sweden. The exercise is divided into two parts. The first part concentrates on deploying US forces to Europe in a fictional crisis scenario, this includes Nordic Response. The second part is a series of eighteen different national and multinational exercises all over Europe, as can be observed in Table 1.⁴

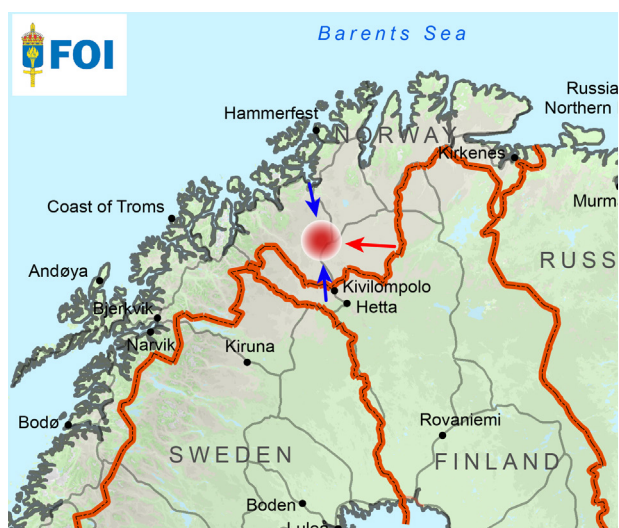
RENEWED ATTENTION TO THE HIGH NORTH

The Nordic Response exercise took place 3–14 March 2024. It followed in the tradition of the biannual Norwegian cold weather exercise, Cold Response. With Finland and Sweden's participation as new members of NATO, the exercise has grown to include all the Nordic countries. Moreover, the presence of the new members significantly increases the High North's geostrategic importance as more of it becomes part of allied territory. Hence, it opens up both new operational possibilities and problems, given that there are now new land borders that have not previously been under NATO command and that it is now possible to use routes through Sweden and Finland. The High North is also of relevance considering its proximity to Russia's Northern Fleet, on the Kola Peninsula, where much of Russia's naval nuclear weapons are deployed.

The exercise was conducted in Norway, in central Finnmark, from Bjerkevik in the northeast, to the coast of Troms, to Hammerfest, and southwards to Hetta, in

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 February - 3 March	United Kingdom	UK
Nordic Response	3 - 14 March	Norway, Finland, Sweden	Norway
Brilliant Jump	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	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
Swift Response 24	14 May - 14 June	Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Sweden	US
Brave Warrior	1 - 22 May	Hungary	Hungary
Spring Storm	6 - 17 May	Estonia	Estonia
Grand Quadriga	30 April - 30 July	Germany, Lithuania	Germany



Map 1. Land operations in Nordic Response 2024

Remarks: The map illustrates the land area in which the allied forces was attacked by an adversary from the east, and responded with side attacks from north and south. Per Wikström, FOI.

Finland. As illustrated in Map 1, the section marked in red displays the area where the ground forces operated. While not unprecedented, allied exercises normally take place further west in Norway. Hence, Nordic Response was notable due to the ground forces operating in central Finnmark, which brought them in close proximity to Russia.⁵ Additionally, the air forces operated from the airport in Rovaniemi and Oulu, covering the entire Finnish county of Lapland, even closer to the Russian border.⁶

Another exercise, Immediate Response, which also is a part of Steadfast Defender, will take place throughout April and May. This is interesting as it is located in the same geographic area and has a similar purpose of deploying American soldiers to the High North. In order for NATO to deploy transatlantic reinforcements to the High North, they must be skilled in operating in Arctic terrain and climate. The task of Immediate Response is to transfer a part of a Marine Corps Brigade (consisting of around 1,200 American soldiers), from Norway to Finland via Sweden by road and rail. This also includes transporting large amounts of equipment on the Malmabanan/Ofoten line. Immediate Response will thus allow Sweden to practice its ability to provide force protection along with the Host Nation Support concept.⁷

The aim of Nordic Response was multifaceted. First, it aimed to test and evaluate NATO's northern regional plans and practice the defence of the Nordic region, including the ability for Europe to receive transatlantic reinforcements. Second, it aimed at increasing

the Armed Forces' capability to operate in demanding environments, such as Arctic climate and terrain. This was illustrated, for instance, by Sweden sending units from Southern Sweden to participate, ensuring that not only units in the north are trained for the Arctic climate. Third, the exercise tested and trained various activities, including operating in winter conditions, transportation, supply, basing, and other aspects of the Host Nation Support concept. Fourth, the exercise also aimed to contribute to Nordic interoperability and integration within the NATO framework by training their capacity for collaboration and management. Lastly, the exercise signalled stability and reassurance through NATO's intent and ability to defend its northern flank.⁸ The geographic location of the exercise also had a deterrent effect, as it demonstrated NATO's ability and intent to reinforce and defend the Nordic region in the event of Russian aggression and showcasing NATO's capability to carry out such operations in Arctic terrain.

Nordic Response was led by the Norwegian Joint Headquarters in Bodø (NJHQ), with support from NATO's new Joint Forces Command (JFC), in Norfolk, Virginia (JFCNF). However, following the exercise, until JFC Norfolk has acquired the capacity to assume command of the Nordic region, much of the region will answer to JFC Brunssum, in the Netherlands.⁹

The exercise was structured around a fictive Occasus scenario intended to mirror real-world situations. Occasus refers to a fictive world, and the adversary in it, where different scenarios are played out. Hence, the exercise included a simulation of an Article 5 attack by a near-peer adversary. The exercise represented a joint approach, including land, air, and sea activity. In the land domain, larger units, including infantry and mechanised units, assembled under the command of NATO. The scenario involved aggression from the east, with Occasus seeking to seize territory in the High North before advancing to the Norwegian coast.¹⁰ The Swedish brigade was led by an integrated Finnish-Swedish division staff, and together, the division responded to the Occasus aggression by attacking northward, crossing the border at Kivilompolo in Finnish Lapland and entering Norway.¹¹ Synchronously, a Norwegian-German division advanced south, thus, created a pincer manoeuvre for the adversary together with the Finnish-Swedish division.¹² The air forces practiced air-defence tasks in the same geographic area, supporting the land units in conducting offensive operations. Approximately 110 fighter jets, maritime surveillance aircraft, helicopters, and other aircraft participated in the air domain.¹³ Moreover, the air forces operated

from allied air bases; for instance, Finnish F-18 Hornet fighter aircraft operated from Andøya air base in Norway, German fighter jets were stationed in Finland with the squadron in Rovaniemi, and due to damages to the runway in Rovaniemi, the American fighter jets had to operate from air bases in Oulu and Luleå.¹⁴ This meant either that allied countries were able to service and operate with other allies' air forces from their own air bases, or that national ground-service teams were dispatched to the bases in question.

Simultaneously, a maritime exercise was conducted on the north coast of Norway, practicing coastal defence and assisting the land units in warfighting tasks.¹⁵ About 50 naval vessels, such as frigates, submarines, corvettes, and aircraft carriers were deployed.¹⁶ More than 20,000 soldiers from 13 different countries participated. Of the Nordic countries, 4,500 were from Sweden, and 4,100 from Finland. Other countries participating were Denmark, France, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Spain, Belgium, Italy, and the US, with a force of 5,000.¹⁷

THE CHALLENGE OF LARGE EXERCISES IN THE HIGH NORTH

One critical element during military exercises is logistics, the transport of thousands of military personnel and equipment through a wintery wilderness, ensuring that they are provided for and maintained. This includes everything from supplying accommodation to fuel and ammunition. An exercise the size of Nordic Response depends on smoothly running logistics operations. This involves the transit of soldiers and heavy equipment across Northern Europe, which, due to deficiencies in military mobility in Europe, may present several challenges. NATO members have long underinvested in the logistics required for rapid deployment of troops by rail or road.¹⁸ For instance, the rail gauge in Finland and the Baltic states is wider than in the other Nordic countries. This means that Swedish trains cannot run directly on Finnish rails. Instead, they must stop near the border at Haparanda to unload and then transfer onto a Finnish train to continue into Finland. Another example is the Malmbanan/Ofoten Line, which connects the port of Narvik, in northern Norway, to Boden, in northern Sweden. This single-track railway was closed for repairs for two lengthy periods in late 2023 and early 2024, the first lasting two months and the second two weeks, which significantly affected businesses (as it is the most heavily trafficked railway in Sweden) and the armed forces, particularly because many participating nations had planned to use the railway for transportation during the

exercise. Instead, other solutions were planned for, such as ship or road transport.¹⁹ Many argue that logistics poses one of the greatest future challenges for NATO's deterrence strategy to be perceived as credible. The ability to move larger forces smoothly across national borders has become even more significant now that NATO has a 1,340 km border with Russia. For deterrence to work, NATO allies must show that they can transport forces from A to B faster and with less friction than Russia can.²⁰ Nordic Response is providing important findings on how to address that requirement.²¹

Another challenge related to military exercises arises when they risk becoming over-complicated in an attempt to mend diverging interests. Even when military exercises are planned years in advance, they may be preceded by conflicting interests. To illustrate, when NATO allies have occasionally disagreed on exercise priorities, their response has tended towards packing the exercises with more and more content. Consequently, they become increasingly complex and have to adhere strictly to a planned course of events, which leaves little room for free-play and friction. The participants remain inadequately prepared for a world full of unexpected events and inhibited in their ability to develop good improvisation skills.²²

LOOKING AHEAD – NATO RETURNS TO THE NORTH

The fact that NATO conducted Nordic Response indicates that it is adapting to a changing world. NATO's ambition and resolve to develop capabilities to defend the northern flank establishes the strategic relevance of the High North. The exercise also shows NATO's commitment to defending every inch of allied territory. This is a shift away from the former primacy given to areas outside of NATO territory, exemplified by the military operations in Libya and Afghanistan. The extent of these military operations meant that the alliance had to scale down its exercise activities. The understanding was that since participation in expeditionary military operations fostered interoperability, there was a less urgent need for large exercises.²³ The renewed priority of collective defence that military exercises such as Nordic Response illustrate can thus be viewed as NATO's readjusting to the changing security environment and new emerging threats. An essential takeaway from the Nordic Response exercise is its purpose, i.e., the emphasis it placed on different elements. Examples are conducting an exercise under an Article 5 scenario, or being attacked from Norway, not Finland, and then practising a counter-offensive from Finland into Norway. Further, it is interesting that it heavily emphasised enabling transatlantic

reinforcement of Europe, as this implies the US's commitment to defending the northern flank, something that may shift given the upcoming US election this fall. Yet another noteworthy element was that the exercise practiced operations from each other's air bases, as this capability increases the air force's readiness and preparedness in times of crisis.

Another key takeaway of the exercise is its geographic location. Finland, Sweden and Norway have large territories that are sparsely populated, with tricky terrain and cold climate that are difficult to defend and operate in. To bring in military reinforcements, they will likely first need transportation by sea or air, followed by land transport.²⁴ In addition, as some other participating nations were neither accustomed nor adapted to the north's Arctic climate, the exercise's geographic location was an important opportunity to test and enhance their collective ability to operate in such a challenging environment and terrain. Many believe that in the event of an escalated conflict with NATO, Russia would probably first try to attack northern Norway and Finland and then seek to establish control over the Norwegian and Barents Seas.²⁵ It is therefore interesting that the exercise included a scenario where a near-peer adversary launched an attack in the northern parts of Norway and then practiced defending this region by mounting a counteroffensive from northern Finland.

The large-scale dimensions of the exercise were a strength. Although larger exercises, such as Cold Response 22 and Trident Juncture 18, have been held in Norway, exercises of this extent, with so many participants and military equipment, are not the norm. Large exercises generally result in more specific lessons learned,

not only because some capabilities can only be tested on a larger scale, but also because they are the ultimate indication of their peacetime capacity.²⁶

Conducting the Nordic Response exercise was a good opportunity for the Nordic countries, together with the other participating nations, to test and develop collective capabilities and enhance interoperability, while simultaneously signalling resolve. As mentioned above, when compared to other exercises conducted by NATO and individual member states, Nordic Response stands out in terms of size and number of participating troops. On the other hand, prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in 2022, exercises conducted by NATO's primary adversary, Russia, have been substantially larger.²⁷ Although host countries often emphasise the number of participants or vehicles involved in an exercise, size could be subordinate to other important signals communicated through the holding of large-scale NATO exercises, namely, the level of unity or dedication of the allies to Article 5. Equally, a critical strength of the 2024 exercises lies in the fact that they reflect the alliance's wartime planning, making sure the exercises are relevant for collective defence.

In conclusion, we ask: What implications does the Nordic Response exercise have for the future? All exercises are designed to mirror reality as much as possible. Hence, this exercise's focus on readiness, the ability to receive reinforcement, and collective defence in an Article 5 scenario could be interpreted as NATO's assessment of what the future may hold. With this in mind, it is likely that the number of exercises with the same character and geographic location as Nordic Response will increase in the future. ■

Emelie Moregård is a student at the Swedish Defence University's master's program Politics, Security and War, and served as an intern in FOI's department for Security Policy and Strategic Studies during spring 2024.

Endnotes

- 1 NATO. *Press Conference by NATO Chair of the Military Committee, Admiral Rob Bauer and the Norwegian Chief of Defence, General Eirik Kristoffersen following the meeting of the Military Committee in Chiefs of Defence Session, Oslo, Norway*. 16 Sept. 23.
- 2 Edvardsen, Astri. 'Nordic Response: Over 20 000 soldiers from 13 nations will practice defending NATO's Northern flank.' *High North News*. 2 Feb. 24.
- 3 Aronsson, Albin & Ottosson, Björn. *Västlig militär övningsverksamhet 2014–2019: Anpassning, utveckling och framsteg*. Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut (FOI). 2020.
- 4 'Natoövningen "Steadfast Defender 2024" inleds.' *Sveriges Radio*. 22 Jan. 24.
- 5 Edvardsen, Astri. 'Nordic Response: over 20.000 soldiers from 13 nations will practice defending NATO's Northern flank.' *High North News*. 2 Feb. 24.
- 6 The Finnish Defence Forces. *Nordic Response 24 to be visible and audible in Lapland*. 14 Feb. 24.
- 7 'Natoövningen "Steadfast Defender 2024" inleds.' *Sveriges Radio*. 22 Jan. 24.
- 8 Norwegian Armed Forces. *Nordic Response 2024*. 26 Feb. 24.
- 9 Edvardsen, Astri. 'Statslederne i Finland og Norge på Nordic Response: - En historisk merkedag av flere grunner'. *High North News*. 8 Mar. 24.
- 10 Ehn, Linus. 'NATO-övningen med extra allt'. *Försvarets Forum*, nr 1, 2024.
- 11 Kristiansen, David. 'Markförbanden laddade för Nordic Response. Försvarsmakten. 21 Feb. 24; NATO Multimedia. *Finnish and Swedish armoured units cross into Norway for Nordic Response 2024*. 11 Mar. 24; the Swedish-Finnish division probably consisted of command elements, plus the brigades, which were probably not up to their full wartime strength.
- 12 Holmström, Mikael. 'Storövning blev elddop för Sverige första veckan i Nato.' *Dagens Nyheter*. 18 Mar 24.
- 13 Edvardsen, Astri. 'Nordic Response: over 20.000 soldiers from 13 nations will practice defending NATO's Northern flank.' *High North News*. 14 Feb. 24.
- 14 von Boguslawski, Thomas. 'Nato övar försvara Finland under jätteövning – det här går Nordic Response ut på.' *YLE*. 28 Feb. 24; Tuominen, Tero. 'Nordic Response jylisee pohjoisella taivaalla.' *Reserviläinen*, 11 Mar. 24.
- 15 'Natoövningen "Steadfast Defender 2024" inleds.' *Sveriges Radio*. 22 Jan. 24.
- 16 NATO has not released full list of the ships participating but it is known that two aircraft carriers will participate, the Italian Navy's ITS *Giuseppe Garibaldi* (551) and the (UK) Royal Navy's HMS *Prince of Wales* (RO9). Mahadzir, Dzirhan. 'Carrier HMS *Prince of Wales* [italics added] under NATO command in major exercise'. *USNI News*. 26 Feb. 24.
- 17 Edvardsen, Astri. 'Nordic Response: over 20.000 soldiers from 13 nations will practice defending NATO's Northern flank.' *High North News*. 14 Feb. 24.
- 18 The issue of logistics has gained renewed attention lately. In early 2024, Poland, Germany, and the Netherlands agreed on developing a military corridor through Europe to facilitate transportation of military equipment and personnel from Europe's North Sea ports to the eastern flank. Ruitenberg, Rudy. 'Europeans set up corridor for rushing NATO troops eastward.' *Defence News*. 31 Jan. 24; Siebold, Sabine. 'NATO reaches back to Cold War past with first major defense plans.' *Reuters*. 18 May 23.
- 19 Bye, Hilde-Gunn. 'Nordic Response Exercise Logistics Impacted as Ofoten Railway Line Remains Closed.' *High North News*. 16 Feb. 24; 'SVT Nyheter. Efter andra urspårningen – nu rullar godstågen på Malmbanan.' 6 Mar 24.
- 20 Hagström Frisell, Eva; Gustafsson, Jakob; Rydqvist, John & Dalsjö, Robert. *Deterrence by reinforcement – The strengths and weaknesses of NATO's evolving defence strategy*. Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut (FOI). 2019.
- 21 'Moving weapons around Europe fast is crucial for deterring Russia.' *The Economist*. 7 Mar. 24.
- 22 Aronsson, Albin & Ottosson, Björn. *Västlig militär övningsverksamhet 2014–2019: Anpassning, utveckling och framsteg*. Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut (FOI). 2020
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Edström, Zigne & Thorburn, Emelie. *Nordiskt operativt försvarssamarbete – före och efter ett svenskt och finskt Nato-medlemskap*. Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut (FOI). 2023.
- 25 Lindqvist, Marcus. 'Så kan ett ryskt angrepp mot de nordiska länderna gå till.' *Dagens Nyheter*. 10 Mar. 24.
- 26 Aronsson, Albin & Ottosson, Björn. *Västlig militär övningsverksamhet 2014–2019: Anpassning, utveckling och framsteg*. Stockholm: Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut (FOI). 2020
- 27 Ibid.