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THE ART OF WAR GAMES:

CANADA AND THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF MILITARY EXERCISES

BY THOMAS HUGHES

MARCH 2019





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THE ART OF WAR GAMES: CANADA AND THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF MILITARY EXERCISES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Thomas Hughes is a PhD candidate at Queen's University, Ontario. His primary area of research is deterrence and coercion, particularly the use of the military as a signaling mechanism, and his dissertation focuses on the political effects of military exercises in Europe. Thomas has also presented and published research on media coverage of Remotely Piloted Aircraft and has a keen interest in air power and its strategic effects. Thomas gained his MA from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, Denver in 2016, and has also worked for the UN Inter-regional Crime and Justice Research Institute.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Military exercises can play a significant role in shaping the international security environment, but the mechanism that links the exercises to changes in security relationships are complex and nuanced. Although exercises can engage directly with security concerns because of their size or location, they can also signal a breach of a regime that is designed to promote transparency and enhance trust, and they can demonstrate a departure from expected patterns of behaviour. Significantly, despite the expectation that exercises would undermine security relationships when conducted as a ‘show of force’, a belief that the exercising party is obfuscating key features of its exercise can be critical in shaping responses to the activity. Although it is possible to use military exercises as a signaling mechanism, there is also significant potential for signal misinterpretation. Mitigating this requires comprehensive awareness of the beliefs of a potential adversary and a shared framework of understanding.

By developing knowledge of the way in which exercises can affect adversarial relationships Canada can enhance its own security, as well as further developing its international leadership. The Arctic has been noted by the Canadian government as a key security consideration. Military manoeuvres in the Canadian Arctic have the potential to lead to the escalation of tensions with Russia, even if they do not represent an acute and direct security threat to Canada or Russia. Consequently, this region provides Canada with a testing ground to develop its exercise construction and engage with Russia. Furthermore, despite efforts to limit their negative impact, NATO’s exercises in Europe have occasionally antagonized Russia. By leveraging expertise in exercises, Canada can play a leading role in ensuring that NATO’s exercises do not lead to unwanted escalation. This is particularly pertinent given the presence of Canadian forces in Europe as part of NATO’s enhanced Forward Presence.



Introduction

With concerns about ‘war games’ in South Korea, large-scale Russian training operations, and NATO’s manoeuvres in Europe, military exercises remain a critical facet of international security. Moreover, it is glaringly apparent that they can have broad political effects. However, the subject remains “under-researched”¹ in academia,



South Korean Marines during a joint exercise with US forces. Image Credit: Jung Yeon/Je/AFP/Getty Images

and the complex mechanism between an exercise occurring and security relationships being undermined has not been fully explored.

This paper will examine these mechanisms, applying them in particular to exercises in Europe, and outlining the benefit that Canada can derive from developing a deeper understanding of the connection between exercises and security relationships. The first section of the paper considers the applicability of deterrence theory to an analysis of exercises, the role of openness and transparency in international security relationships, and how regimes can influence behaviour. This is followed by a series of brief case studies that examine three notable exercises that have occurred in Europe in recent years, TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15, ZAPAD 17, and NOBLE JUMP 17. In each case, the context and features of the exercises that contributed most significantly to heightened tensions are highlighted. The final section draws from the previous discussion to apply the ideas directly to Canada, noting how the application of this knowledge can enhance Canada’s position in both the Arctic and Europe.



Ascertaining how a state anticipates engaging on the international stage, and the degree of threat that it potentially represents, requires more than simply considering the exercises in which its military engages. It is only by developing a holistic understanding of a state's global activities, across the spectrum of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic engagement, that a true picture of its signals and

“...only by developing a holistic understanding of a state's global activities across the spectrum of diplomatic, informational, military and economic engagement that a true picture of its signals and intent can emerge.”

intent can emerge. Nevertheless, exercises form a highly visible feature of a state's attempts to shape the security environment. It is also apparent that exercises can lead to broader political consequences both through the development of alliances or the furtherance of a deterrence posture. Consequently, it is worthwhile examining exercises and their effects, while acknowledging that they are not the only form of interaction that can affect security relationships.

Security relationships are dynamic, and an analysis of the responses to an exercise should be set in a political context. Notably, this includes the narrative that particular groups or leaders have built around the security environment. Thus, the way in which the physical components and features of an exercise (its size, composition, and geographical location, for example) are framed and communicated, can influence their effect. In considering the effects of an exercise, it is therefore important to ensure that the political context and narratives in which it is conducted are acknowledged.

Military exercises in Europe provide an exceptional opportunity to investigate the connections between exercises and security relationships and are the focus of this paper. Although exercises on the Korean peninsula have had notable political effects, those in Europe demonstrate two unique features. First, both sides of an adversarial relationship have a longstanding history of engaging in visible exercises that engender a political response. Second, European exercises occur under the regulating umbrella of a regime of 'Confidence and Security Building Measures' (CSBMs), the latest iteration of which is contained in the 2011 Vienna Document. This regime does not place limits on individual exercises but requires that participants provide notification of forthcoming exercises and facilitate full observation of the manoeuvre when certain size thresholds are met. It



is not only the individual components of the exercises that can shape their effect on security, but also the engagement of the exercising party with this regime. European states recognised the potential for exercises to exacerbate existing tensions during the Cold War, and NATO and its partners acknowledge this consideration in order to limit the possibility of unwanted escalation. Despite awareness of optics amongst military planners, scholars have largely neglected examining the political impact of these exercises. Engaging in such research and integrating the conclusions into future exercises will enhance academic theory and facilitate the development of effective policy.



NATO soldiers during Arrow Express Exercise, 1977. Image Credit: NATO

In practical terms, this also presents Canada with an opportunity to improve its own security and enhance its international leadership. Although the impact of operations with Russia is being monitored, Canada can further ensure that its military activities in Europe and the Arctic do not create undue repercussions by developing a more thorough understanding of how exercises can lead to unwanted escalation. Canada's military is already involved with NATO's ongoing efforts to reinvigorate its understanding of deterrence in the twenty-first century. By becoming the acknowledged leader in exercise design, Canada can help shape NATO's exercises in Europe. This would have two benefits. First, it would result in reducing the risk that exercises cause greater friction with Russia. Second, it would demonstrate Canada's ability to positively influence security far beyond its own borders. Furthermore, a stronger understanding of exercises and security relationships, and the application of this knowledge to exercises in the Canadian Arctic, would prevent military manoeuvres in the region from becoming a point of contention with Russia.



Exercises and Political Effects: The Theory



Image Credit: RUSI

Exercises in Europe can undermine security relationships in three key ways. First, they can engage directly with security concerns because of size and location. Second, they can signal a breach of a regime that is designed to promote transparency and enhance trust. Finally, they can demonstrate a departure from expected patterns of behaviour. These routes are not mutually exclusive, and

exploring the theory that underpins how militaries can be used to shape adversarial relationships is instructive in understanding their political effects.

Exercises are founded on the development of the military's ability to perform a specific operational role or function, but how this activity is perceived by external observers is critical in shaping its political effect. The security dynamic will be altered by structuring an exercise in a way that suggests that an external party is under threat from the military engaging with the exercise, or that they would be outmatched by the exercising force. Consequently, the most logical connection between military exercises and security is as a 'show of force'. The U.S. Department of Defense provides a valuable definition:²

Show of force operations are designed to demonstrate US resolve. They involve the appearance of a credible military force in an attempt to defuse a situation that, if allowed to continue, may be detrimental to US interests. These operations also underscore US commitment to our multinational partners.



This description falls within the broader heading of ‘deterrence.’ The necessity of an actor believing that their opponent has strong capability has always been a critical component of deterrence theory. As the definition indicates, capability must be matched by a belief that an actor has the resolve to use it.³ In theory, exercises can bolster the effectiveness of a deterrent strategy. For instance, NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) framework incorporates exercises to improve interoperability. It is expected that such enhancement will limit the likelihood of a direct challenge to the status quo. Ascertaining the deterrent effect of exercises is not the purpose of this paper but the twin bases of capability and resolve are significant in shaping how an exercise is perceived and valuable in understanding how exercises can heighten tensions.

There are multiple ways in which an international actor can showcase its military capability. Public declarations of technological breakthroughs, cyber operations, and the application of military technology can all serve to demonstrate



British troops on deployment in Estonia as part of NATO’s eFP. Image Credit: NATO.

capability. Russia’s actions following its intervention in Syria provide a salient example. Visible military exercises can also fall into this category. Using an exercise to demonstrate capability to deter or coerce an adversary provides a neat chain between action and effect. Indeed, this is not a new phenomenon. In the 18th century, Frederick II of Prussia attempted to deter neighbouring countries from attacking Prussian territory by inviting them to observe his military’s exercises.⁴

More recently, Lt.-Gen. Hodges, then commanding the U.S. Army in Europe, expressed hope that Russia was “watching” and described NATO’s TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15 as an attempt to “deter any possible conflict.”⁵ The emphasis on openness in the CSBM regime makes using an exercise for this purpose even more practicable, by virtue of the fact that they are intended to be visible.



Despite this, not all exercises are conducted openly. Furthermore, if the mechanism by which exercises interact with security relationships is through the demonstration of capability, one might expect those that openly display large quantities of military equipment to have the greatest impact. This is not always the case.

“...an exercise need not be large for the capability that it demonstrates to undermine a security relationship.”

Small exercises can also undermine security.⁶ In these cases, capability is demonstrated on a more targeted basis. In the late 20th century, both NATO and the Soviet Union worried that exercises could be used as deception operations and cover for

invasion.⁷ This was not a baseless fear – the Soviet Union, Egypt, and Iraq all used exercises to mask the build-up of forces prior to deployment.⁸ The Russian assertion in its 2014 Military Doctrine that “exercises in the territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation and its allies” represent a threat to Russian security is thus set in sharp relief.⁹ What is more, the notification threshold for exercises in the European CSBMs has shrunk, from 25,000 troops in 1975, to 13,000 in 2011.¹⁰ This indicates that the size of force considered threatening has reduced. Consequently, as indicated in the most recent wave of deterrence theory, capability can be viewed not just in general terms, but from the perspective of potential localized effects.¹¹ As a result, an exercise need not be large for the capability that it demonstrates to undermine a security relationship.

Large exercises can undermine security relationships regardless of location or level of observation. This is, in part, a consequence of an awareness of the capability that is being developed within the exercise. But it seems unlikely that the exercise itself, particularly if observation is not facilitated, significantly alters awareness of the exercising party’s capability. Even so, the exercise is identified as a notable action. Instead, the exercise can signal the resolve of the exercising party to resort to military force in the event of escalation. Stanford political scientist James Fearon’s concepts of ‘sunk costs’ and ‘hand-tying’ are useful in understanding the mechanism behind the effect on a security relationship.¹²

Conducting a large-scale, costly exercise is a prime example of how incurring ‘sunk costs’ *ex ante*, when such costs result in the improvement of military capability, can have political effects. In this



case, committing resources to developing military capability indicates the resolve to use force should the situation demand it.¹³ Similarly, an exercise with multiple partners can ‘tie hands.’ The exercise is a demonstration that the forces involved anticipate co-operating in the event of conflict. The reputational damage that would be incurred were one of the exercising forces to renege on this agreement would be significant,¹⁴ and the costs that would be incurred *ex post* demonstrate the resolve of the participants to avoid incurring them. In both cases, a degree of awareness of the size and participation is required for external parties to perceive resolve. For example, the participation of all twenty-nine NATO members in exercise TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18, which commenced in October 2018 and was NATO’s the largest military exercise since the Cold War, is a strong message in and of itself.



US Marine CH-53E Super Stallion crew member during Exercise Trident Juncture 18 at Keflavik Air Base, Iceland. Image Credit: US Marine Corps/Lance Cpl. Menelik Collins.

The effect of the CSBM regime in Europe has been broadly positive and instigated a move toward a norm of transparency in military manoeuvres that has only started to break down in the past four years.¹⁵ Consequently, exercises in Europe represent not simply a manoeuvre, but also an interaction with this regime. This interaction can be as consequential in affecting a security

relationship as the physical components of the exercise. By departing from a regime based on openness, an exercising party increases uncertainty about capability and indicates that it no longer believes itself bound by the regulations. This is significant considering the martial nature of exercises and the inherent threat posed by the military of a potential adversary.

An actor’s self-perception can lead to the breach of a regime. This is particularly the case in three circumstances: 1) if they feel that the regime constrains them to a dangerous extent; 2) if they believe they can achieve gains without mutual co-operation; or 3) if they believe that they are



powerful enough to withstand any realistic repercussions.¹⁶ In the context of the Vienna Document, a breach could indicate that the actor no longer believes there is a benefit in being open about military capability, and that they are comfortable with the increased risks of misunderstanding that leads to escalation. In both cases, this implies confidence in their strength, and can undermine belief that the breaching actor has internalized the norm of peaceful interaction.¹⁷

Uncertainty provides a bridge between the security concerns that exercises can exacerbate, and the connection to a regime is uncertainty. From a rational and realist perspective, uncertainty is founded on a lack of information. Meanwhile, constructivist scholars perceive uncertainty as being based on actors having differing understandings of processes and causal mechanisms.¹⁸ Regardless of these differences, both approaches highlight how exercises can undermine security.

By obfuscating an exercise, uncertainty about capability and resolve grows. Similarly, by disengaging with a regime, uncertainty about the desire of an actor to ‘play by the rules’ is increased. Uncertainty can be central to deterrence¹⁹ – belief in the possibility of failing to achieve objectives encourages actors not engage in conflict – but this uncertainty can also lead to attempts to hedge against the risk that one’s own capability is being outmatched. Predictability and regularity also create a belief in the stability of the status quo. A shifted pattern of behaviour can therefore increase uncertainty, leading to further hedging against a perceived threat.

The failure of twenty-first century exercises in Europe to deter potential adversaries also highlights the challenge of signalling on the international stage. For instance, the results of U.S. table-top war-gaming during the Cold War indicated that, “players on each side rarely if ever understood the political intent of the military moves that others directed at them.”²⁰

“Even if an actor believes that their exercises clearly signal capability and resolve in the context of a defensive posture, this may not be the message received.”

Even if an actor believes that their exercises clearly signal capability and resolve in the context of a defensive posture, this may not be the message received. NATO and its partners have made efforts to plainly signal the intent of exercises both to Russia and the rest of the world. Be



that as it may, these signals are necessarily filtered through preconceptions of NATO's intent, cultural norms, and domestic politics. Consequently, the planners' ability to incorporate both capability enhancement and strategic communications that ensure the adversary understands the intended message and has limited opportunity to use it to their advantage is at the heart of creating exercises.

European Exercises and Political Effects: Case Studies

A brief overview of three recent exercises in Europe demonstrate how size, location, and interaction with the CSBM regime can negatively affect security relationships:

TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15

This NATO exercise in October and November 2015 represented “the biggest and most ambitious [NATO] exercise in more than a decade,”²¹ incorporating 36,000 troops from 30 countries.²² While planning for this exercise commenced more than two years earlier, it was conducted in the aftermath of the Russian annexation of Crimea. Most of the exercise took place in Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Despite heightened



*NATO forces and equipment crossing the Rio Tejo, Portugal during Trident Juncture 15.
Image Credit: NATO.*

tensions, it did not represent an immediate security threat to Russia based on its location. What is more, NATO appears to have adhered to the strictures of the 2011 Vienna Document. Both Russian and Western media also reported positively on the access afforded to Russian observers.²³



Nevertheless, Russian sources still expressed frustration that NATO was “playing games” and suggested that the Alliance’s “military activity” was somehow “hostile and destabilising.”²⁴ Even if this message was intended for a domestic Russian audience, such activity could still be interpreted as threatening.

It is also notable that senior NATO personnel described the exercise as a “deterrent,”²⁵ although there is limited evidence that Russia was deterred. Although the exercise was conducted with great openness and transparency, tensions between Russia and NATO were heightened. There appear to have been two significant reasons for this. First, the radical increase in the scope of the exercise compared to previous iterations was a signal of resolve to use military force in Europe if deemed necessary. Second, the inclusion of multiple participants indicated a degree of hand tying. The breadth and depth of participation by NATO members in TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15 represented a strong message of Alliance unity. Particularly given the cost that each state expended in engaging in the exercise, the manoeuvre demonstrated resolve to maintain and deploy a powerful military if the situation required.



T-80BV during Zapad 17. Image Credit: History and Military Technology

ZAPAD 17

This Russian-led exercise in September 2017 took place against the backdrop of increasing tensions between Russia and NATO and was described as “intimidation” by the French Minister of Defence.²⁶ Most of the exercise happened relatively close to the

borders of potential adversaries.²⁷ However, NATO did not indicate that the exercise itself represented a security threat. Instead, obfuscation over the number of participating personnel appears to have been of greater concern to NATO.



Prior to the exercise, authorities in Moscow claimed that only 5,500 Russian and 7,200 Belarusian troops would participate.²⁸ This meant that it fell 300 troops short of the 2011 Vienna Document's threshold for inviting observation. Hyperbolic suggestions that over 100,000 troops would participate proved incorrect,²⁹ but it seems likely that over 40,000 military personnel were actively involved.³⁰ If this figure is accurate, preventing observation therefore constituted a breach of the 2011 Vienna Document. Subsequent comments by Russian officials that invited observers were only allowed to see "part of the exercise" suggests that Russia was aware of its efforts at obfuscation.³¹ While the scale of the exercise and its demonstration of Russia's capability to integrate tactical manoeuvres into its strategic objectives caused some concern, it is notable that NATO's public disquiet was based primarily on the perceived Russian breach of an agreed regime.

NOBLE JUMP 17



Polish troops arrive for Exercise Noble Jump 17. Image Credit: Government of Poland.

NATO's NOBLE JUMP 17 was one of the largest exercises that the Alliance conducted in 2017 but its size was well below the notification thresholds set in the 2011 Vienna Document, involving around 5,000 troops.³² Regardless of its relatively diminutive size, the exercise was considered important enough to be covered by both *Sputnik* and *Russia Today*.³³ While the exercise's appearance in two pro-Russia news sources may not appear to be significant, direct coverage of a NATO exercise was not frequent in either publication in 2017.



There are three features that stand out in this coverage: the number of participating states, the location of the exercise, and composition of the participating force. With eleven NATO states participating, the exercise represented a significant cross-section of the Alliance and demonstrated, alongside hand-tying effects, increasing interoperability. While Greece was one of the three host countries, the most significant elements of NOBLE JUMP 17 took place in Romania and Bulgaria. Separated from Russia by the Black Sea, the exercise did not represent a realistic threat. Instead, it demonstrated NATO's willingness to deploy military forces in a location that Russia finds too close for comfort. This was exacerbated by the fact that the exercise was designed to develop NATO's "Very High Readiness Joint Task Force," intended to allow the Alliance to rapidly deploy elite troops.³⁴ Russia perceived the exercise as a threat because it demonstrated that hands were being tied and it tapped into Russian fears of deployment close to its borders. The exercise also highlighted the development of a specific capability honed to deter or respond to Russian aggression. This was significant given the evolution of the Russian military's operational techniques and increased use of highly mobile military units engaging in "non-linear warfare."³⁵

Canada and Military Exercises

The lack of systematic academic engagement with the political effects of exercises provides an opportunity for Canada. Tensions with countries like Russia can rise despite the care and attention that both NATO and Canada put into both planning and executing exercises. Canada can further mitigate potentially negative repercussions by investing in research to develop a better understanding of the way in which adversarial relationships develop and build a framework that translates theory into practice. In doing so, Canada enhances its own security. The potential for escalation due to activities in the Canadian Arctic would be minimized, and Canada's international reputation would be enhanced by taking an even greater leadership role within NATO exercises.

"Canada can...mitigate potentially negative repercussions by investing in research to develop a better understanding of the way in which adversarial relationships develop and build a framework that translates theory into practice."



The Arctic is a critical component of Canadian security, with *Strong, Secure Engaged* stating that the ability to operate in the Arctic is “principal among the challenges at home.”³⁶ It is also a contested region, and Canada is not the only country to be a “rightful...primary actor” in the area. Canada has a broadly positive relationship with all but one of the “Arctic eight.”³⁷ But it is notable that Russia does not appear in the list of “Arctic partners” with whom Canada anticipates conducting “defence operations and exercises.”³⁸

Engagement between actors in the Arctic occurs across multiple lines of interest. Climate change and improvements in technology have also improved accessibility. But a legal framework to define exactly what is owned in the region has yet to appear and would be beneficial to avert future conflict. After all, there is now a much greater potential for resource extraction, and an increasing possibility that the Northern Sea Route will become the preferred method of transit through the Arctic. In both cases, the economic benefits for Russia would be significant.

While there is considerable debate over the true foundation of Russia’s Arctic policy,³⁹ the pragmatic desire to maintain *de facto*, if not *de jure* control of the sea route and assets that lie within its claimed boundaries will play a central role. Russia’s enhancement of its military capability in the Arctic forms part of this attempt at “securing economic development.”⁴⁰ Historic tensions with the Nordic



Vostok 2018. Image Credit: Kremlin/Wikimedia Commons

states and concerns about Finland and Sweden’s relationship with NATO provide an additional backdrop to Russian military activity across the region. Aside from general concerns about the broad balance of military capability, in the Arctic context NATO’s leadership has “worried for decades about the prospects of an amphibious assault on Norway.”⁴¹ Recent Russian exercises, like VOSTOK 2018, have done little to assuage these fears.



It is important to avoid characterising the Arctic as a single entity, although the metaphorical ripples from activities or decisions in one area can have effects on all the Arctic partners. The Canadian Arctic does not represent the same crucible of interests and security environment as the Arctic region of the North Atlantic, often referred to as the ‘High North’ by European states. It is in the latter that the most serious contestation has arisen, both due to its economic potential and the perceived threat that Russian military dominance would represent.



3rd Battalion Royal 22nd Regiment during Exercise Trident Juncture 18. Image Credit: MC 2 Brett Dodge, US Navy.

Canada has, historically, avoided large-scale exercises anywhere in the Arctic due to fears of escalation.⁴² Canadian involvement in NATO’s TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18 exercise, which took primarily took place in Norway and Norwegian waters, demonstrated a shift in thinking. The need to support NATO allies and partners in northern Europe is stark, especially in the context of fears of Russian military build-up. Large multinational exercises like TRIDENT JUNCTURE 18 can provide effective deterrence. Nevertheless, Canada must also ensure that, even if it is not the primary instigator of the exercises, it can contribute to discussions about how the exercises are constructed. By leveraging Canadian expertise, the potential for escalation can be further limited.

The Canadian Arctic and its direct approaches represent a potential route through which Canada could be threatened. Given the existing strategic environment, the threat of invasion from this direction is minimal. Canada currently conducts three annual exercises here, namely: Operations NANOOK, NUNALIVUT, and NUNAKPUT,⁴³ and invites European partners and the U.S.⁴⁴ The central focus of these small exercises is to develop awareness and the ability to respond to incidents, rather than to enhance offensive military capability. There is also little evidence that they perceived as a strategic threat by Russia. Likewise, it seems highly unlikely that Russia has any intention of invading Canada. Despite



this, it has been suggested that Canada may instigate larger exercises, potentially including broader NATO involvement.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the references in *Strong, Secure, Engaged* to conducting “joint exercises...in the Arctic” leaves the exact location of these activities ambiguous.⁴⁶

If Canada takes the decision to increase its military activities in the Canadian Arctic, either unilaterally or with allies, it must exercise caution. Simply moving military exercises away from the European ‘High North’ does not render them unthreatening. What is more, the potential for their contribution to a negative security spiral should not be overlooked.

Exercises in the Canadian Arctic are unlikely to represent a direct security threat to Russia, but have the potential to lead to escalation because of the uncertainty engendered by changing a pattern of behaviour. Engaging in such a spiral would be detrimental to Canada’s interests, not least because of the financial expense that it would entail. The potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication will also rise if Canada dramatically increases the number and scope of exercises, concurrent with Russia increasing its own manoeuvres.



Aurora 17. Image Credit: Bezav Mahmud/Swedish Armed Forces

The potential exists even if Russia does not harbour any intention of invading Canada. Sweden and Russia demonstrate the importance of communication in preventing inadvertent escalation. Both countries installed a dedicated telephone line to ensure deconfliction between forces when their respective militaries were simultaneously engaging in the AURORA 17 and ZAPAD 17 exercises. A greater understanding of how to conduct exercises without undermining security



relationships will bolster Canada's ability to conduct or contribute to successful military operations across all areas of the Arctic, and mitigate the potential that exercises lead to escalation.



Canadian Coast Guard Ship *Pierre Radisson* during *Arctic Guardian*. Image Credit: Canadian Coast Guard

Introducing invited observers to Canadian exercises represents a practical measure to enhance the otherwise unregulated exercises in the Canadian Arctic. The initial success of the CSBM regime in Europe suggests that such an approach would be effective in pre-empting escalation. In time, this could be developed into a formal regime and provide the foundation for possible joint Canadian-Russian exercises to further foster a spirit of co-operation.

Although the political will to engage in military co-operation with Russia seems to be lacking, extending the ARCTIC GUARDIAN exercise of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum to enhance joint search-and-rescue missions represents a promising avenue.

Should Canada increase the scope and participation in its exercises in the Canadian Arctic, inviting Russian observation would be a positive step. This would be the case even if these exercises are well below the threshold for observation set out in the CSBMs that apply to Europe. The invitation would result in two beneficial outcomes. First, inviting observation reduces the potential that Russian officials will perceive exercises as part of a Canadian or multinational effort to open a new threat vector and directly challenge Russia. Second, Canada will demonstrate self-confidence and a desire for stability in the broader Arctic region. Such an invitation challenges Russia to reciprocate. Such reciprocation would have an immediate strategic benefit and allow Canadian forces to directly observe Russian Arctic capability and operating procedures. More importantly



for long-term security enhancement, inviting observers also sets the stage for a formal confidence-building regime.

Developing a CSBM regime in the Canadian Arctic is not without risk, but such risks are limited in comparison to the potential benefits. The primary risk is operational. By opening exercises to observation, Russia may derive some limited strategic benefit through learning about Canadian military capability. This should be balanced against the possibility of Canada deriving similar benefit from observing Russian exercises. And the reality is that both Russia and Canada would mask sensitive components of exercises. This sets a high-water mark on the strategic benefit that can be accrued. Unless a Russian exercise is set up as a complete deception, observation would enhance Canadian knowledge of Russian capability to some degree.

Gaining a better understanding of the mechanism through which exercises can undermine security also provides Canada with a springboard to take on a leadership and advisory role in structuring NATO exercises in Europe. Given the tensions from previous exercises, applying the lessons learned from developments in the Arctic to Europe meets Prime Minister Trudeau's objective of "restor[ing] constructive Canadian leadership in the world."⁴⁷ Although European exercises occur under the CSBM regime outlined in the 2011 Vienna Document, this only covers regulations pertaining to notification and observation and does not directly address concerns that arise due to exercise composition or scope. Developing understanding of the political effects of exercises in the Arctic also provides the ideal opportunity for their translation to the European context given that, in both cases, the emphasis is on de-escalating tensions with Russia. Consequently, exercise planning requires a keen appreciation of Russian perspectives and concerns.



Russian troops on Arctic expedition. Image Credit: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.



The Canadian Armed Forces currently has a significant presence in continental Europe. Canada is one of four “Framework Nations” for NATO’s eFP, leading operations in Latvia and providing the core of the battlegroup.⁴⁸ Pertinently, a key feature of Operation REASSURANCE is “conducting...exercises.”⁴⁹ In light of Latvia’s proximity to Russia, and Russian fears, expressed in its 2014 Military Doctrine,⁵⁰ about exercises close to its borders, Canadian troops are actively involved in a pattern of activities that Russia perceives as threatening.



Canadian troops during Op REASSURANCE. Image Credit: Canadian Department of National Defence.

It can be challenging to differentiate the effects of the exercises themselves from the response to the broader deployment of troops within the eFP framework. Be that as it may, conducting any military manoeuvre in proximity to a potential adversary increases the risk of misunderstanding and escalation. This was apparent during the Russian “interception” of a U.S. B-52 *Stratofortress* over the Baltic Sea during a NATO exercise in November 2017.⁵¹ Contact

between military forces during an exercise is not unusual, but has the potential to lead to escalation. Although a consideration of the Russian perspective forms part of the planning of Canadian exercises within the EFP framework, a stronger understanding of how exercises are perceived would further reduce the potential that misunderstanding.



Military exercises are a form of communication and signalling between states. Consequently, effective operational leadership involves understanding and managing their communicative aspect. This includes both the signalling inherent in the exercise and the physical communication of

“Taking on a leadership role in exercise planning will...allow Canada to have a positive influence beyond the scope of its current deployments.”

information to external parties prior to and during an exercise. Taking on a leadership role in exercise planning will also allow Canada to have a positive influence beyond the scope of its current deployments. To be clear, this does not require the country to take on the burden of arranging every NATO exercise. By becoming an expert in optimizing the practical components of exercises to maximize operational benefit and mitigate negative political impact, Canada can also contribute advice and support to organizers. This will also demonstrate hands-off leadership and commitment to NATO. Canadian personnel have been heavily involved in large-scale exercises has already proven significant, and Canada hosted Russian observers during TRIDENT JUNCTURE 15. But Canadian planners can further reduce the risk of inadvertent conflict by extending their influence even further in future.

Developing approaches to exercises that mitigate negative political impact risks the accusation that Canada is simply pandering to Russian interests, rather than committing to its European allies. Nonetheless, exercises can still be used to demonstrate capability and resolve in the face of Russian belligerence, even while addressing Russian concerns. A greater understanding of the mechanism through which exercises can undermine security relationships would generate a better appreciation of how they can be used to achieve political goals, and limit the potential for unwanted escalation. By being at the heart of this, Canada will demonstrate genuine international leadership and contribute heavily to maintaining peaceful relationships in Europe.

Conclusion

Military exercises are a significant but under-studied facet of international security. This results in a limited understanding of how and why the otherwise innocuous manoeuvre of military personnel can result in damaging political outcomes. In the European context, security relationships are



undermined by exercises through both the security threat that the exercise is seen to represent, as well as the degree of interaction with the CSBM regime. Notably, the resolve demonstrated by an exercise can be as significant as the capability that they display. Thus, an exercise can heighten tensions, even if there no belief that it will be transformed into an invasion force. The current lack of knowledge means that there is an opportunity for Canada to truly understand and appreciate the art of military exercises, and in doing so, improve its own security and enhance its international status.

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