



SENDING CLEAR MESSAGES: STEADFAST DEFENDER 2024

Date: November 20, 2024

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On November 20th, 2024, Lieutenant Colonel Kendrah Allison and Benjamin Patterson from Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe presented *Sending Clear Messages: Steadfast Defender 2024* for this year's West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were the Steadfast Defender exercise itself, the online perception of the exercise, and the measurable deterrence and assurance outcomes.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Conducted between January and May of 2024, Steadfast Defender was the largest pan-alliance exercise conducted by NATO in decades. The goal of the exercise was a unified coordination of all NATO countries to defend itself in the case of an attack from one of their two main adversaries: Russia and non-state actors. The strategy was based on NATO's new concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA). In the aftermath of the exercise, the information team was tasked with measuring the effectiveness of the undertaking.

BACKGROUND

Steadfast Defender 24 was the principal exercise of NATO in 2024. It was a multi-domain exercise, encompassing sea, air, and land; demonstrating and practicing an operation to defend Europe. This was the largest exercise since 2015. Ninety thousand personnel from across the spectrum of capabilities

participated, with 50+ naval assets, 80+ air platforms, and 1,100+ combat vehicles. Every NATO country participated, with Sweden included as well, as the exercise started before Sweden was an official NATO member. The exercise was based on NATO's new regional defence plans.

“Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area” (DDA) came about in 2019 as a result of the evolving security landscape. Military plans at NATO hadn't been revised since the Cold War. It was a concept of how NATO would defend itself against the two main adversaries: Russia and non-state actors. The plan is designed to unify efforts against the common adversaries and is also aligned with each nation's individual strategies.

A critical question preceded the exercise: what can be done in peacetime to demonstrate capabilities and thereby lend credibility to the Allied Deterrence posture? It was noted that during peacetime, crisis, and conflict, strategic communications can be employed to deter adversaries and empower allies.

When it comes to communicating about NATO activities, all efforts are linked to achieving four main StratCom objectives: Alliance Cohesion Maintained, Alliance Publics Assured, Alliance Legitimacy Maintained, and Adversaries Deterred. All four StratCom objectives were in play during Steadfast Defender, at various times and applied against various audiences.

From a StratCom perspective, Steadfast Defender was a massive undertaking that required tremendous coordination both prior to conducting the exercise and throughout the 5 months of execution. Steadfast Defender was comprised of several separate NATO and Allied exercises, with most of the exercises being nationally-led. This design increased the challenges of coordination since we had to carefully balance both NATO and national communications priorities.

One of the main challenges we faced was how to maintain public interest over the five-month period of the exercise? U.S. Army General Christopher Cavoli, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, announced the start of Steadfast Defender in January of 2024. The media response was significant and anticipated by NATO, who coordinated media coverage and managed consistent social media operations. NATO's proprietary media (owned media) was deployed largely via social media, divided into two categories: routine content and a deliberate campaign. Instagram, Facebook, X, and LinkedIn contained routine content. NATO additionally chose to promote a mini-series with eight episodes about Steadfast Defender and its operational journey. The highest performing platforms

were YouTube and Instagram; average impressions on Instagram were between 7,000-10,000, resulting in a gain of over 4,000 followers. YouTube experienced a 30% increase in engagement.

The assessment of Steadfast Defender 24 was to measure the effectiveness of the activity in advancing the NATO Military Strategic Objectives through the delivery of information effects: objectives are NATO's large and enduring goals, effects speak to those objectives, and activities serve to deliver effects. The Legitimacy, Cohesion, and Assurance objectives were measured through the use of polling and virtual space data, including social and traditional media content. Deterrence was measured through monitoring RUS media reactions to NATO activities. The assessment concluded Steadfast Defender 24 to be generally successful, with exceptions.

For the Deterrence objective, the audience was Russian leadership. The way the assessors chose to measure this is based on prior NATO measurements of "normal behavior versus displayed behavior". Based on the Russian media reaction, SHAPE assessed that their goals were largely met.

Question and Answer

In relation to a combined Russian and North Korean adversary, how do they relate to NATO preparation for dealing with the actuality of war?

Benjamin Patterson: Different teams specialize at different things. There is the information assessment team, which is his, and looks at signals in the information environment. Other assessment teams are tasked with looking at other elements of assessment, such as the political or cyber dimensions. As a result, he can only confidently answer to the information aspect of this question. Russia and North Korea have both emphasized their closer cooperation, though this may simply be putting a positive 'spin' on a pragmatic, economic exchange. The genuine nature of the relationship is up for debate.

Lt. Col. Allison: Assessment team is much more invested in knowing the details of nation-to-nation relationships like this, so [her] team focuses on what NATO is doing.

Benjamin Patterson: Countering disinformation is often best done via a compelling positive narrative about yourself, so in this case, NATO. It's

important that your information strategy is proactive and forward leaning, rather than reactive.

Were you able to track the counter narrative? If so, what was the key counter narrative? If not, what stopped this or prevented this tracking?

Lt. Col. Allison: The hardest part was in the beginning, and having the message resonate that the exercise was not in response to any current events; that this exercise had been planned several months ago. Nonetheless, the initial media reporting was largely, “NATO is preparing for WWII.” They were somewhat prepared for this and easily adjusted to more deliberately counter that narrative by saying this was not preparation for war, but in fact this is what NATO does all the time. After that, nothing huge came up.

It is clear that NATO puts effort into PR and social media communications. This said, do you feel that sometimes the public still does not completely understand the NATO mission and value proposition? If so, what do you see as gaps that NATO could be identifying to gain more public understanding?

Lt. Col. Allison: NATO feels like, yes, there are huge gaps. For example, they communicate exclusively in English. The alliance populations do not all speak English, so NATO is trying to rectify that.

Benjamin Patterson: Is awareness of NATO what they actually want to accomplish? What they want to do is not just awareness, but support for. There is an ethical obligation to communicate what they are doing, but the main goal is not simply to communicate a broad knowledge of what NATO is and does. Arguably, NATO is a measurably popular institution.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

- Steadfast Defender 24 was the principal exercise of NATO in 2024, and was the largest NATO exercise since 2015. Multidomain, it covered air, land and sea, its activities are linked to four main STRATCOM objectives: Alliance Cohesion Maintained, Alliance Publics Assured, Alliance Legitimacy Maintained, Adversaries Deterred.
- The media attraction was expected to be large, but a new aspect to a major NATO exercise was the social media engagement strategy. A mix of routine content and deliberate campaigns were created. Instagram and YouTube resulted in the greatest engagement.

- In the aftermath of Steadfast Defender 24, a comprehensive assessment was done. The assessment included effects and objectives measurements: objectives (large and enduring goals), effects that speak to objectives, and activities that speak to effects were the main categories of the assessment.

FURTHER READING

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