



Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response
Coordination Centre

NATO Headquarters | Brussels - Belgium



EVALUATION ИМПАКТ РЕПОРТ



Index

Foreword	5
Impact	8
A message about priorities	8
Knowledge sharing	8
No methodology exists to test resilience	8
A first step, not a finished product.....	8
Civil-military cooperation: lines more blurred than ever	9
Bridging the knowledge gap	9
NATO's only window into functional resilience.....	9
Conclusions	10
Testing the infrastructure that defence plans depend on.	10
Building military readiness and civilian crisis management capacity in parallel.....	10
No other mechanism produces what large-scale civil protection exercises produce.....	11
Exercises with partners are a resource management argument, not a competing priority.....	11
Exercise evaluation	12
Objective setting	12
Planning process	14
Exercise organisation	15
Resource allocation	16
Exercise direction	18
Logistics and Host Nation Support	21
Civil-Military cooperation and coordination	22
Resilience components of the exercise	23
Integration of hybrid challenges	23
Exercise evaluation.....	24
Host Nation crisis management system integration	24
Exercise innovations.....	25
Glossary	27
Insets	
Participation.....	6
Strategic exercise objectives	7
Exercise in brief	7
Context	9
How this report was produced	26
Videos.....	26



Foreword

The Evaluation and Impact Report of NATO's 20th civilian emergency management exercise, "BULGARIA 2025", focuses on what has been done, what progress has been made, and what can be achieved with these exercises going forward. The aim of this report is not just to document what happened, but also to help shape what comes next.

I am proud of what we achieved with this exercise. It attracted 1200+ participants to train, work and learn together, including decision-makers, diplomats, emergency responders, military commanders and logisticians, capacity-building experts, researchers, and innovators. Their hard work and enthusiasm demonstrated the strong need for more and more diverse international emergency management exercises.

I thank Bulgaria for hosting this exercise and being a reliable partner in its organisation. I also thank Allies (especially Allied representatives to the Resilience Committee and its Civil Protection Group) for their support, trust and contributions to "BULGARIA 2025". And I am especially grateful to the men and women in uniforms and hazmat suits, in diving gear and ambulance helicopters, in tents, offices and research labs, who came together to make this exercise a success. Thank you for your service to the safety and security of our citizens.



Burcu San
Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Operations
NATO

Participation

Operational teams (16 Allies + 6 partners)

Albania, Belgium, **Bulgaria**, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye, United Kingdom, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Malta, Moldova, Morocco, and Ukraine.

Other Allied participation (14):

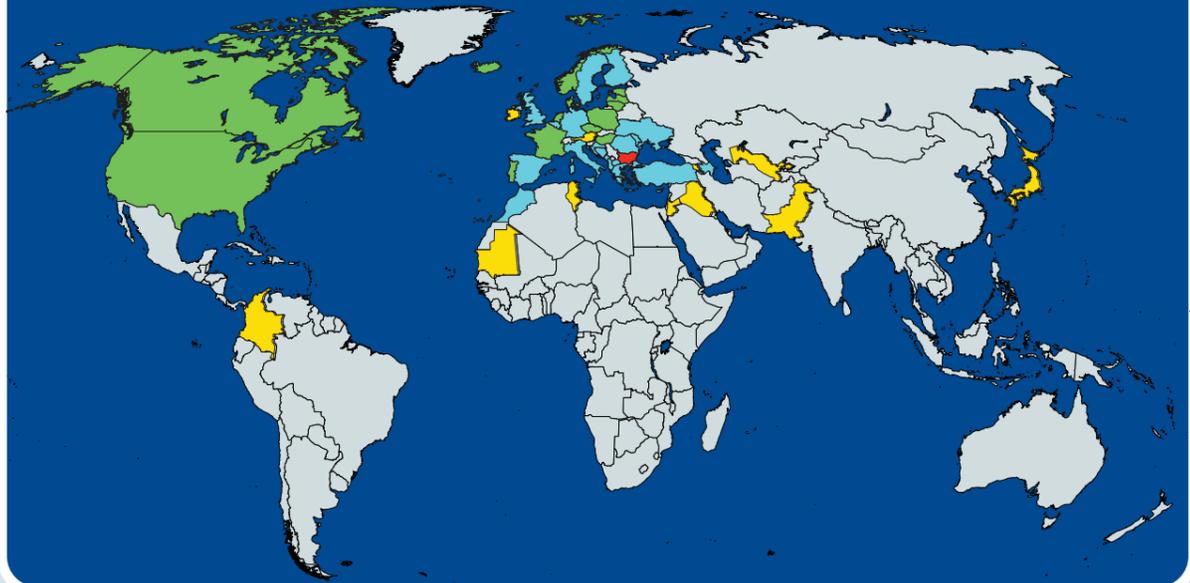
Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal and the United States

Other partners' participation (12):

Armenia, Austria, Bahrain, Colombia, Japan, Jordan, Iraq, Ireland, Mauritania, Pakistan, Tunisia and Uzbekistan

International Organizations / NATO bodies (14):

CMDR CoE, E-ARC, ETAF, European Commission, IOM, JATEC, JCBRN Defence CoE, NATO AIRCOM, NHQSa, NSPA, OECD, PDC, SEEBRIG and UNHCR



Strategic exercise objectives

- Build resilience and interoperability through improved disaster preparedness, planning, prevention and response, and strengthen the capability of NATO Allies and partners to manage complex emergencies and respond to security challenges, including climate change and hybrid threats. **Partially met**
- Exchange of knowledge and good practices on the coordination and response capacities of the participating countries and organisations. **Largely met**
- Build up cooperation between civilian and military actors in responding to a range of crises. **Partially met**
- Encourage cooperation between Allies and partners, and with NATO, including by facilitating vital civil cross-border transport. **Met**
- Contribute to NATO's defence capacity-building support to partners. **Met**
- Test and improve Bulgaria's host nation support capacities. **Partially met**
- Send a public signal to audiences in Allied and partner countries on the value of cooperation through NATO. **Met**

Exercise in brief

The exercise saw 1255 participants from 30 Allies and 18 partners and 14 (international) organisations, as well as others.

The aim of the exercise was to enhance interoperability and cooperation, and to improve the national capabilities of NATO Allies and partners in coping with complex crises (excluding conflict). The exercise was designed to support national and international preparedness and resilience and enable stakeholders at all levels to test and validate specific plans, procedures, and capabilities.

The scenario was based on a set of cascading emergencies, which included natural disasters (earthquake followed by flooding, chemical and radiological accidents, risk of nuclear incidents), extreme weather, population movements, health threats, and hybrid and information threats, which affected the population and critical infrastructure of Bulgaria, and required international assistance.

The management of this complex emergency included logistics and border crossing cooperation, the use of military mobility corridors, search and rescue, response to chemical and radiological incidents, and emergency medicine. In addition to the field exercise component, a strategic decision-making part of the exercise took place in Sofia, with representatives of Bulgaria's Unified Rescue System, which includes ministries, municipalities, the private sector, volunteers, and the Armed Forces.

Overall, NATO spent around 300,000 EUR on the exercise in 2024-2026.



Impact

A message about priorities

“BULGARIA 2025” demonstrated NATO’s commitment to:

- ☑ Prevent and respond to crises that can affect the security of the Alliance;
- ☑ Contribute to preventing crises through partnership; and
- ☑ Engage with partners in its neighbourhood and across the globe.

Clearly, these priorities resonated with Allies and partners. The exercise saw high interest from Allies and partners (1200+ participants in the exercise, 330+ attendees in the planning conferences across 2024 and 2025, and 110+ attendees in the lessons identified conference in 2026). This demonstrated high interest in NATO’s civilian-led emergency management exercises, their enduring value, and the need to continue to improve them.

The positive communication impact of the exercise was recognised in the assessment of the NATO 2025 communication strategy, where it was highlighted as one of the organisation’s main outputs illustrating ‘Alliance unity’ in the course of 2025.

Knowledge sharing

“BULGARIA 2025” provided opportunities for participating nations to strengthen interoperability and coordination in crisis management, including civil-military interaction in a crisis. There was extensive knowledge sharing and professional exchanges among participants.

The exercise scenario reflected real-world challenges to decision-makers and operational practitioners. Throughout the planning and execution process, they had many opportunities to consider how to improve their ability to respond to complex crises and how to do this through a whole-of-government approach.

By involving experts from a range of Allies and partners in the exercise planning process (for instance as members of its Core Planning Team (CPT)), NATO offered opportunities to learn, rethink practices, and find new ways of working together and building resilience.

The EU Disaster Risk Management Peer Review Assessment Framework highlighted “BULGARIA 2025” as a “good practice” example in joint international exercises, for its broad access to scientists and researchers.

No methodology exists to test resilience

There is currently no established methodology within NATO’s emergency management exercise framework to test resilience. The Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) exercises have been designed, conducted, and evaluated as response exercises for two decades. Response is what we know how to measure: team interoperability, coordination mechanisms, operational procedures. Resilience is different. It sits upstream of response. It concerns whether the national systems that enable response actually function: continuity of government, early warning, energy, food and water, transport, communications, mass casualty management. BULGARIA 2025 was the first attempt to bring these topics into the construct of an EADRCC exercise, and that matters.

A first step, not a finished product

The integration of resilience injects at the strategic level during BULGARIA 2025 was a meaningful first step. It put the EADRCC at the forefront of designing exercises that connect response operations to the broader resilience architecture of the Alliance. But the scope was limited, and intentionally so. A real crisis escalates: it begins locally, expands regionally, triggers national coordination, and only then reaches the point where international assistance is requested. Traditionally, our exercises have focused on the peak activity, the international response phase, skipping the escalation that precedes it. The seven NATO Resilience Baseline Requirements (BLRs) live in that escalation space. They cut across ministries, levels of government, and civil-military boundaries. Testing them requires exercise designs that warm up through the natural escalation pathway rather than starting at the peak. This is a valuable lesson for future NATO exercises.

Civil-military cooperation: lines more blurred than ever

Today’s complex crises do not respect the traditional boundaries between civilian and military domains. Hybrid threats, cascading infrastructure failures, and grey-zone scenarios mean that the lines between civil protection and national defence are more blurred than at any point in the Alliance’s history. BULGARIA 2025 demonstrated this: the exercise scenario combined natural disasters with hybrid and information threats, and the response required civilian and military actors to coordinate across domains they have historically treated as separate. Civil-military cooperation is no longer a supporting function. It is central to how we respond to any crisis on our territory or abroad, and central to how we build resilience.

Bridging the knowledge gap

There is also an opportunity here that we have not yet taken full advantage of. Civilian crisis management operates within its own frameworks, doctrine, and legal systems. National defence is built on a different set of frameworks, doctrine, and legal authorities. In practice, these two worlds depend on each other, especially during complex crises and grey-zone scenarios, but the professionals working in each domain often have limited understanding of how the other side is organized, what authorities it operates under, and what constraints it faces.

Exercises like BULGARIA 2025 can bridge that knowledge gap. Not by requiring military involvement in every scenario, but by creating a space where civilian crisis managers gain insight into the defence frameworks their national systems connect to, and where defence professionals develop a practical understanding of how civilian crisis management actually functions at the community, regional, and national level. That mutual understanding is foundational to resilience. BULGARIA 2025 offered glimpses of this. The opportunity is to design exercises where bridging that knowledge gap is much more intentional.

NATO’s only window into functional resilience

The EADRCC exercise programme is currently the only mechanism within the Alliance that offers any glimpse into how resilience, continuity of government and essential services, civil support to military operations, societal resistance to hybrid and CBRN threats - actually function in practice. Everything else, the baseline reports, the Defence Planning Questionnaire submissions, the national self-assessments, is built on trust and documents. And as Ukraine shows us every day, documents do not prove resilience. Resilience is proven and demonstrated under stress.

Every NATO Ally and every partner has a different legal structure, different community dynamics, different institutional arrangements for crisis management. What these exercises offer is the opportunity to gain insight, to learn from how others organize their response, and to understand the complexities that each nation faces. That kind of learning, practitioner to practitioner, nation to nation, can only come from working together in an exercise like this one. That is real value, and it is why these exercises matter for our future security.

Context

As part of its adaptation to the evolving threat landscape, and its commitment to defend every Ally and work with partners to strengthen our security, NATO organised its 20th emergency management exercise “BULGARIA 2025”, in September 2025. The exercise offered training across all of NATO’s core tasks, and supported current priorities and work strands, including:

- ☑ increasing the Alliance’s collective awareness, preparedness and capacity, across all hazards and domains;
- ☑ building readiness and shared resilience;
- ☑ civil-military cooperation and coordination;
- ☑ host nation support;
- ☑ logistics and mobility;
- ☑ practical partnership cooperation and capacity-building; and
- ☑ operating in extreme weather conditions.

Conclusions

The overarching objective of “BULGARIA 2025” was to verify whether and how NATO’s civilian-led crisis management exercises can contribute to the Alliance’s bottom line in the current strategic reality. There are four arguments for this.

Testing the infrastructure that defence plans depend on.

The Cold War concept of defence and deterrence assumed a clean separation between military and civilian domains. That separation no longer exists. The roads, bridges, rail lines, port facilities, energy grids, and communications nodes that military forces depend on for movement, sustainment, and command are owned and operated by the private sector in every NATO member state. Technology has accelerated this shift significantly.

NATO’s exercises cannot be separate from this picture. They are the mechanism through which civilian operators of critical infrastructure practice coordinating with public authorities and military forces under stress. An exercise that moves forces across a host nation, drawing on civilian transport and logistics networks, tests the actual infrastructure that defence plans depend on. That is not soft-power work. That is realistic deterrence planning.

Building military readiness and civilian crisis management capacity in parallel.

The debate about whether civilian crisis management and military defence are sequential or concurrent has been settled in real time on a European battlefield. While Ukrainian forces conduct operations along the frontline, adversary strikes consistently target power grids, water systems, railway junctions, and urban infrastructure.

Civilian crisis management responds continuously, not after a ceasefire. Emergency managers, civil protection services, and civilian logistics chains operate inside an active war, supporting both the population and the defence effort at the same time. This is the pattern of how war is fought in a European theatre right now.

The implication for NATO is direct: to prepare for the conflicts of today, the Alliance needs to build military readiness AND a trained, interoperable civilian crisis management capacity in parallel. Exercising only one of them is an incomplete readiness posture. This is why NATO needs to continue to invest in its civilian exercises alongside its military ones.

No other mechanism produces what large-scale civil protection exercises produce.

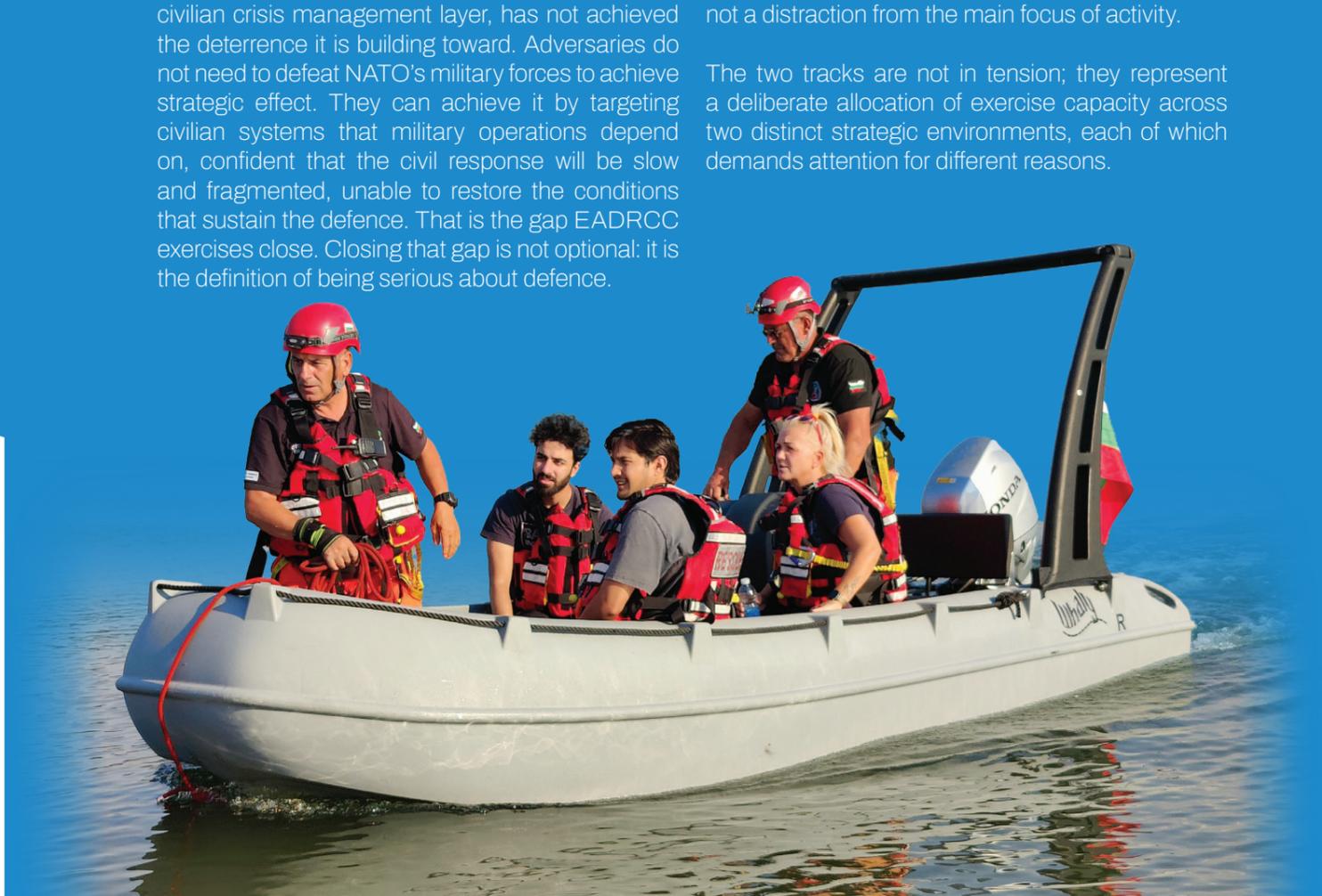
The military community has known for decades that joint exercises at significant scale create a quality of interoperability that surveys, consultations, and tabletop exercises cannot replicate. The friction is the point. Working through a host nation’s customs procedures, budget authorities, command cultures, language barriers, and coordination protocols under exercise conditions is categorically different from discussing how those things work in a conference room. The EADRCC is the only mechanism that currently exists to conduct civil protection exercises at that scale and with that degree of multinational jointness across the Euro-Atlantic area. Remove it, or allow the exercise program to atrophy, and there is no substitute. What remains in that scenario is a growing inventory of military capability sitting on top of a civilian crisis management architecture that has never been stress-tested at the scale and speed a real contingency would require.

The consequence is concrete. A NATO that reaches 2030 with improved force readiness, better integrated military command structures, and stronger defence investment, but a disjointed civilian crisis management layer, has not achieved the deterrence it is building toward. Adversaries do not need to defeat NATO’s military forces to achieve strategic effect. They can achieve it by targeting civilian systems that military operations depend on, confident that the civil response will be slow and fragmented, unable to restore the conditions that sustain the defence. That is the gap EADRCC exercises close. Closing that gap is not optional: it is the definition of being serious about defence.

Exercises with partners are a resource management argument, not a competing priority.

The EADRCC exercise programme has historically engaged partner nations as well as Allies, and its next major exercise is planned for Jordan in 2027. As the Alliance concentrates military readiness investment on the eastern flank, the EADRCC exercise programme can operate in a complementary lane without competing for the same resources or attention. Exercises with eastern flank Allies build civilian crisis management capacity where the probability of a military contingency is highest and where civil-military integration gaps have the most immediate operational consequences. Exercises with partners serve a different but reinforcing purpose: they build the Alliance’s understanding of how specific partners perform under pressure, establish coordination relationships before a real contingency forces them to, and maintain a degree of stability in a region whose instability would eventually consume Alliance bandwidth regardless. Jordan’s geographic position relative to NATO, and the operational demands that regional instability there would generate, make civil protection engagement there a form of strategic preparation, not a distraction from the main focus of activity.

The two tracks are not in tension; they represent a deliberate allocation of exercise capacity across two distinct strategic environments, each of which demands attention for different reasons.





Exercise evaluation

Observations, key findings and lessons for future exercises

Objective setting

Observations

NATO and the Host Nation set ambitious objectives for the exercise, covering national and collective resilience, interoperability, civil-military coordination, testing Bulgaria's national host nation support capacities (including through interministerial coordination), deployment of operational rescue capabilities, strategic crisis management, integration of almost 100 researchers, cultural heritage protection, hybrid threats, critical infrastructure failures, extreme weather scenarios, and sending a public signal about the value of cooperation with NATO.

In addition, NATO and the Host Nation attempted to accommodate as broad participation as possible (in line with the EADRCC's mandate, which opens these exercises to all Allies and partners).

There were significant challenges to meeting these objectives, including the EADRCC's limited capacities, the fact that most Bulgarian institutions do not have experience with multinational crisis management exercises and NATO (except the Ministries Interior and Defence), and the non-availability of up-to-date guidelines for the preparation, conduct and evaluation of NATO emergency management exercises.

The fact that this was a first attempt to operationalise the seven Baseline Requirements in a civilian exercise was also an interesting challenge that produced a lot of useful lessons for those involved.

Despite these challenges, the exercise was assessed by the participants and evaluators as valuable for the advancement of its objectives. This speaks to the potential of these exercises to support Allies, partners and NATO in improving our abilities to respond to the unpredictable security environment.

Key findings

The exercise objectives were too ambitious. To meet them fully, the "BULGARIA 2025" exercise would have required a significantly larger budget, as well as a bigger staff with relevant knowledge and experience.

Lessons

Unless there is a significant increase in the exercise budget and staff available, future exercises need to have more limited objectives, or focus on alternate cycles, with fewer disciplines per exercise. The trade-off would be fewer participants and smaller contribution to strategic objectives.



Planning process

Observations

The exercise planning process took place over a year. The host nation, particularly the Ministry of the Interior, as well as the NATO Crisis Management and Disaster Response Center of Excellence (CMDR CoE), handled most of the logistics.

There was transparent and timely circulation of planning documents and instructions. The organisers made effective efforts to collect and understand the training objectives of the participating countries, including at the planning conferences and through briefings and discussions about the exercise at the Resilience Committee and its Civil Protection Group (CPG).

The late confirmation of participants' intentions (including in the week prior the exercise) led to many logistical difficulties for the organisers.

Key findings

The planning and execution process would have benefitted from more rigorous project management and a professionally developed exercise plan.

A Main Events List and Main Injects List, with detailed sequencing and timing of all activities and end states were not fully developed during the planning process, and were not available to those who needed them during the execution process. This led to a lot of ad-hoc decision making in the execution phase. This made the exercise play quite similar to the management of a real crisis, adding realism to the exercise. However, this came at the expense of structure, proper planning and fully meeting the operational objectives.

Another consequence of the planning weaknesses was a lack of clarity regarding roles, objectives and reporting formats – especially among evaluators, directing staff and others in enabling roles.

The planning phase did not include the development of a proper evaluation plan.

The integration of scientists, CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear) specialists and modelling tools experts into the planning process brought analytical and technical value, including the development of visual data products, 3D modelling, and scenario injects supporting materials. This strengthened the realism and technical credibility of the exercise design.

Lessons

Future exercises could include a complementary Table-Top Exercise (TTX) to clarify responsibilities and ensure shared situational awareness before the live phase.

NATO should review and update the planning process and work on developing a standard that guides the planning and preparation of future exercises (field as well as table-top). As part of this, the EADRCC should develop a consolidated strategic exercise plan for future exercises (a project plan), clearly defining objectives, priorities, roles and responsibilities across all entities participating in the exercise planning process.

The organisers should insist that Allies and partners confirm and provide full details of their participation as early as possible before the exercise execution, to ensure all necessary elements can be put in place.

The Main Events List and Main Inject List, with detailed sequencing and timing of all the activities and end states, should be developed by the Core Planning Team and handed over to the Directing Staff (DISTAFF) prior to the conduct of the Exercise.

The EADRCC should explore technical solutions such as exercise software development tools (if these are available and affordable), and/or collaborate on the exercise design with partner organisations that have these capabilities.

The EADRCC should continue to leverage the CMDR CoE as well as other Centres of Excellence, Partnership, Training and Education Centres (PTECs) and other bodies in the NATO ecosystem in the organisation and planning of its exercises.

Exercise organisation

Observations

A large-scale field exercise requires a technical architecture designed by specialists in emergency management, advanced simulation, CBRN, Urban Search and Rescue (USAR), Water Search and Rescue (WSAR) and Emergency Medical Team (EMT) operations, command and control, civil-military coordination, strategic communications and scenario design.

Key findings

NATO needs access to relevant and diverse expertise for its Core Planning Team (CPT). For "BULGARIA 2025", the NATO CPT was composed of civil experts and unpaid subject matter experts. The role of these experts should be advisory, whilst the implementation of logistics and setup of the field exercise components are the responsibility on the host nation.

Lessons

The EADRCC should develop clear "job descriptions" for all members of the NATO exercise planning team. Communication and collaboration between the members of the CPT should be part of the requirements, to ensure operational alignment throughout.

The EADRCC should seek and incorporate relevant advice from Allies and NATO bodies with know-how in exercises in a civilian-military context, including the CMDR CoE, the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC), etc.

Host Nation inter-ministerial planning bodies should be fully integrated in the national CPT from the start of the exercise development process.



Resource allocation

Observations

The costs of organising the “BULGARIA 2025” exercise were shared between NATO and the Host Nation in line with a Memorandum of Understanding.

The Host Nation made significant contributions to the exercise, including the provision of all training sites and associated facilities, the Base of Operations to accommodate the international participants, multiple operational capacities, hundreds of personnel, logistical assistance, transportation and hospitality in Montana and Sofia.

NATO’s financial contributions to the exercise went towards:

- The planning conferences and the VIP programme;
- The participation of eligible partners in the planning process and the exercise;
- The preparation of exercise sites;
- Expenses of the NATO CPT, development of exercise scenario, documentation and evaluation.

NATO had no specific budget dedicated to this exercise; the financial contribution came from the EADRCC budget and Defence and Security Cooperation Directorate (DSCD) funds. Overall, NATO spent around 300,000 EUR on the exercise, in a process closely coordinated between the EADRCC and the NATO Office of Financial Control.

Key findings

“BULGARIA 2025” was one of the year’s biggest multinational training events (in terms of scope and number of participants); it was executed with the budget of a small multinational workshop.

Budget limitations affected the design and governance of the exercise, the training value, the integration of advanced technology, and the quality of exercise evaluation.

Lessons

Future EADRCC exercises should have a dedicated budget which significantly exceeds the budget of “BULGARIA 2025”. Otherwise, the level of ambition needs to be adapted in line with the available human and financial resources.



Exercise direction

Observations

A multinational exercise of this scale requires an experienced and dedicated Directing Staff (DISTAFF) function shared between NATO and the host nation, that:

- ☑ generates, controls, and coordinates injects,
- ☑ oversees narrative compliance,
- ☑ manages information flow between levels,
- ☑ coordinates evaluators, site commanders and safety,
- ☑ ensures coherence and synchronization,
- ☑ and maintains an up-to-date operational picture.

Key findings

In “BULGARIA 2025”, there was no centralised, integrated DISTAFF. Instead, the CPTs tried to play this role together with national contributions who had received little guidance prior to the exercise about their role.

Furthermore, the DISTAFF, evaluators, and the Exercise Base of Operations, Local Emergency Management Authority (LEMA) and On-Site Operations Coordination Centre (OSOCC) were physically separated, breaking the logical chain of exercise control. This led to inconsistencies in information flows, the sequencing of scenario events, and other flaws.

There was no dedicated simulation cell, nor a technical team responsible for maintaining narrative continuity and realism. This resulted in lack of control and synchronisation over the exercise, and a proliferation of parallel activities without a coherent thread. The Unified Operations Centre in Sofia operated on an independent cycle from the exercise in Montana, without a DISTAFF capable of linking both levels.



The result was:

- ☑ loss of training opportunities
- ☑ not enough realistic secondary crises or tactical dilemmas were generated, which prevented teams from making complex decisions under pressure
- ☑ the hybrid dimension (malign information interference, etc.) was not sufficiently integrated in the scenario or exercise play
- ☑ difficulty for the evaluators to build a shared operational picture due to the absence of centralised control.
- ☑ inability of the DISTAFF to quickly resolve choking points in the execution of the injects.

Lessons

The exercise planning team needs to include a DISTAFF function separate from the scenario developers. This function needs to be part of the exercise process from the preparation phase, and should be on-site at least two days prior to the start of the exercise. It needs to be located in a single centre (at the Base of Operations, together with scenario developers and the evaluators); it needs to be capable of coordinating the scenario execution from the start to the end of the exercise; and it should be equipped with systems such as the virtual On-Site Operations Coordination Centre (Virtual OSOCC), the Next-Generation Incident Command System (NICS), and the Integrated Case Management System (ICMS).

Directing staff and evaluators need to have clear roles, responsibilities and expectations ahead of the exercise.

This requires significant additions of staff to the CPT.





Logistics and Host Nation Support

Observations

An exercise with 1200+ operational participants, many of them coming from abroad by road and air, is a significant logistical undertaking, involving transport, border crossings, security, the construction of a full base of operations with catering and sanitation facilities, internet connectivity, etc. In addition to the field component in Montana, the exercise had a parallel strategic session in Sofia, which included a VIP programme at two locations and a table-top exercise for decision-makers.

“BULGARIA 2025” also practiced air mobility (with two chartered flights specifically related to the exercise, one provided by Belgium and another by Bulgaria and Denmark via the Movement Coordination Centre Europe (MCCE)), military mobility corridors between Bulgaria, Türkiye and Romania, and border-crossing procedures.

The logistical challenges offered opportunities to practice inter-institutional coordination, response to fast-moving situations, public-private cooperation (including with Sofia Airport, the IT sector, CBRN-related companies, etc).

Key findings

A large-scale field exercise creates many practical training opportunities that are relevant for both crisis management and resilience, including:

- Practicing cross-border movement in emergencies, including military mobility.
- Help to identify gaps in host nation support – both practically and in terms of legislation and regulation. Improving host nation support procedures, but also the understanding of the national institutions of their obligations and limitations when they need to provide host nation support.
- Clarifying who does what in a fast-moving situation, and figuring out possible roles for the private sector.
- Considering the application of framework contracts in emergency response, e.g. ways to utilise the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) to provide base camps.

The exercise timeline focused primarily on field operations after international teams arrived on site. The arrival and departure phases could have been used better to exercise national and international

capacities related to logistics, border-crossing and movements. Extending the timeline to begin with activation and request for international support would have added realism without substantial resource implications. This approach would have allowed the Host Nation to conduct the exercise at the national level while international teams deploy from their home countries, reflecting how international assistance actually functions. For example, the exercise would then be in progress at the national level for a full week prior to arrival of teams.

Lessons

EADRCC exercises offer practical opportunities to advance NATO’s work on logistics in crisis situations and improve host nation support readiness (transport, medical surge, logistics corridors) to NATO forces in a crisis. This is a tangible reinforcement of NATO’s deterrence and defence posture. The EADRCC should continue to work with the NATO Military Authorities to capitalise on these opportunities.

Hosting NATO emergency management exercises provides multiple opportunities for Allies and partners who want to put their host nation support capabilities to the test, identify gaps and make improvements.

Future exercises could consider expanding the timeline to include:

- Activation phase: Host Nation conducts national-level exercise from crisis onset through decision to request international assistance;
- Deployment phase: International teams activate and travel from home countries (realistic movement timelines);
- Integration phase: International teams arrive and integrate into ongoing Host Nation response.

This structure addresses multiple training objectives simultaneously. While the Host Nation manages the crisis at the national level and awaits international support, exercises can focus on unified command structures, inter-ministerial coordination, and national crisis management systems. International teams then augment an existing national response rather than arriving to initiate one, mirroring operational reality. The expanded timeline maximises training value by converting what are currently logistical phases into substantive exercise periods.

Civil-Military cooperation and coordination

Observations

The Host Nation participated in the exercise with both civilian and military operational assets and decision-makers; the complex scenario allowed them to practice their cooperation and coordination in a crisis in line with national procedures.

International participants came from both civilian and military institutions; for some civilian participants, this was the first opportunity to work with military crisis managers and cooperate with military responders. This was highlighted as a major asset of the exercise.

The NATO Military Authorities had limited involvement in the exercise planning process, although several commands (Joint Forces Command (JFC) Ulm, JFC Naples) tried to use the exercise for their objectives, e.g. by testing their interaction with NATO Headquarters and facilitating the participation of military officers from partner countries and organisations (e.g. Iraq and the African Union).

Key findings

The limited participation of Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and the NATO Military Authorities in the planning process resulted in missed opportunities to discuss, practice and improve cooperation between NATO's civilian and military entities, as well as between NATO and international organisations, in a crisis unfolding on the Alliance's Eastern flank.

Lessons

Request Allies to task NATO Military Authorities to engage in the exercise planning to align military participation and coordination and make the exercise more realistic.

To contribute to NATO's current priorities, future EADRCC exercises need to include more interaction and integration between civilian emergency services and military forces. The military must be more broadly represented in the exercise planning; shared logistics platforms and interoperable communication systems should also be explored. This would support coordination between civilian and military actors and would strengthen NATO's defence posture and crisis response ability.



Resilience components of the exercise

Observations

BULGARIA 2025 was the first attempt to incorporate injects specifically relating to the seven resilience baseline requirements (BLRs) at strategic and operational levels. The inclusion of injects based on the BLRs was partially successful.

Key findings

This exercise put the EADRCC at the forefront of designing and executing civilian emergency management exercises with an operational focus on resilience.

Lessons

The resilience component should be integrated with the operational aspects of the exercise. This requires expertise, as well as closer involvement of NATO and national policy experts on resilience.

Integration of hybrid challenges

Observations

"BULGARIA 2025" was the first EADRCC exercise that included a strong hybrid dimension in its scenario, aimed at testing and practicing participants' ability to detect, coordinate and respond to hybrid threats (notably cyber attacks, infrastructure damage, malign information interference).

Key Findings

The integration of hybrid elements was limited, but has major potential and should be more broadly incorporated in future exercises.

Lessons

Future EADRCC exercises – table-top and field – should include a substantial hybrid dimension. The exercise planning team needs to include relevant expertise to that end.

Exercise evaluation

Observations

The evaluation process was ad-hoc and not well-structured.

Key findings

Lack of a strategic exercise evaluation plan and appropriate feedback processes.

Lessons

Determine early in the exercise planning process the methodology and practical execution of exercise evaluation. Establish a strategic exercise evaluation plan with structured feedback collection and analysis.

A bigger exercise budget would enable the EADRCC to bring on board evaluation experts, implement digital data-collection tools, train evaluators before the exercise, and deploy a professional multi-level evaluation system.

Host Nation crisis management system integration

Observations

The exercise emphasised local emergency management coordination in Montana, with less integration at the national level where international assistance requests and cross-border coordination actually occur. This created challenges in establishing realistic command and control relationships between international responding teams and Host Nation authorities.

Key Findings

Understanding how a Host Nation manages crises domestically (up to the point where international assistance becomes necessary) is critical for realistic exercise design.

During the planning phase, deeper CPT integration with Bulgaria's National Crisis Management System would have enabled more realistic scenario development.

The exercise should strengthen existing Host Nation coordination mechanisms rather than creating parallel structures.

Exercises can offer added training value to the Host Nation should they be conducted under the umbrella of the Host Nation its emergency laws and crisis establishment. The latter would also ease the logistics for the participating teams.

Lessons

Future exercise planning should include early mapping of Host Nation national crisis management structures, processes, and the escalation pathway from local to national to international coordination. Scenarios should realistically portray how international assistance integrates into existing national systems, ensuring exercises strengthen rather than bypass Host Nation capabilities and emergency legislation.

Exercise innovations

Observations

The exercise introduced innovative elements that increased complexity and realism, including:

- ☑ The integration of NATO Resilience Baseline Requirements in the scenario, in the form of deliberate injects.
- ☑ The introduction of the Unified Operations Center (UOC, or National HQ in Bulgaria) in Sofia allowed for the integration of a strategic, decision-making level in the exercise. This platform for inter-ministerial engagement would be essential in a real crisis, and should have been more fully utilised in the exercise. Still, this innovation was a valuable training opportunity, and should be developed in future exercises.
- ☑ Science and innovation: "BULGARIA 2025" integrated 97 researchers from 15 NATO Allies and 3 partners, collecting data for 33 research proposals during the exercise; DIANA innovators were invited to present their work during the exercise, and demonstrate how new technologies can support emergency management. The researchers were on the ground throughout the exercise to collect data, supporting evidence-based analysis and strengthening the science-practice interface of their research projects.

Key findings

The integration of strategic-level components and innovative frameworks enhanced the exercise and should continue to evolve in future iterations, ensuring closer integration with national governance and crisis management systems.

The integration of the Resilience Baseline Requirements into exercise design represents evolution in connecting EADRCC exercises to NATO's broader resilience agenda.

Lessons

Continue developing integration of Resilience Baseline Requirements, cultural heritage protection, and additional NATO priorities into exercise design. Ensure CPT planning discussions address how these elements function within Host Nation systems.

Consider the implementation of impact assessments to feed into and inform Baseline Requirements and inter-ministerial response. These elements provide training value at NATO and national level, complementing field response training and real-life response.

The presence of so many researchers and innovators at the field and strategic components of BULGARIA 2025 (at their expense) speaks to the value of this exercise to the scientific community. The scientific output produced in the course of the exercise would be relevant to NATO as well: including to operational work on exercise design and execution, as well as to policy work on resilience, crisis management, civil-military cooperation, etc. Other international organisations, as well as the private sector, spend significant amounts of money to have this kind of analysis produced to support their work, while NATO will receive it for free. Therefore, the integration of science and research in NATO exercises is a win-win proposition.



How this report was produced

Exercise “BULGARIA 2025” has been evaluated since the beginning of the planning process in order to assess effectiveness and improve performance. A multinational team of 29 members applied a structured observation methodology based on the “Guidelines for the planning, conduct and evaluation of international exercises”¹ using standardised assessment criteria.

Daily observations and reporting during the exercise execution formed the core evidence base. The post-exercise phase focused on systematic lesson identification through hot-wash discussions with the participants, anonymised feedback collection, and consolidated evaluator inputs. Additional feedback and outcomes were generated during the Exercise Lessons Identified Conference held in Sofia on 9-11 February 2026.



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Videos



Short exercise video (1:44') ([link](#))



Long exercise video (8:19') ([link](#))



Research video (2:05') ([link](#))



Video credits: Martin Georgiev, National Association of the Volunteers in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAVRB)

Glossary

BLR	Resilience Baseline Requirement
BULGARIA 2025	NATO Emergency Management Exercise “BULGARIA 2025”
CBRN	Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear
CMDR CoE	Crisis Management and Disaster Response Centre of Excellence
CPG	Civil Protection Group
CPT	Core Planning Team
DIANA	Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic
DISTAFF	Directing Staff
DSCD	Defence and Security Cooperation Directorate
E-ARC	Euro-Atlantic Resilience Centre
EADRCC	Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre
EMT	Emergency Medical Team
ETAF	European Training Center for Disaster Victim Identification and Forensic Sciences
HazMat	Hazardous Materials
HQ	Headquarter
ICMS	United Nations Integrated Case Management System
IOM	United Nations International Office for Migration
JATEC	NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre
JCBRN CoE	Joint Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Defence Centre of Excellence
JFC	Joint Forces Command
JWC	NATO Joint Warfare Centre
LEMA	Local Emergency Management Authority
MCCE	Movement Coordination Centre Europe
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NATO AIRCOM	NATO Air Command
NATO HQ	NATO Headquarters
NAVRB	National Association of the Volunteers in the Republic of Bulgaria
NHQSa	NATO Headquarter Sarajevo
NICS	Next-Generation Incident Command System
NSPA	NATO Support and Procurement Agency
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSOCC	On-Site Operations Coordination Centre
PDC	Pacific Disaster Center
PTEC	Partnership, Training and Education Centre
RC	Resilience Committee
SEEBRIG	South Eastern Europe Brigade
SHAPE	Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe
TTX	Tabletop Exercise
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UOC	Unified Operations Center
USAR	Urban Search And Rescue
V-OSOCC	Virtual On-Site Operations Coordination Centre
WSAR	Water Search And Rescue

Photo credits

DG FSCP, Bulgaria	1, 14-15, 15, 26 (top, edited)
NATO HQ	2-3, 4-5, 5, 6, 10, 15-16, 16, 18, 20 (2x), 22, 23, 24, 25, 28
Troy D. Darr, United States Army	10, 11, 19
Martin Georgiev, NAVRB	26 (bottom, edited)

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