



POLICY BRIEF

COEs 101 – Why Canada is leading the NATO Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence

Executive Summary

This policy brief presents the background context and institutional background of a Centre of Excellence to explain why Canada has chosen a NATO COE as a method of addressing the issue of climate security with its Allies and partners.

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PREPARED ON

Jan 2023



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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief presents the background context as well as functional and operational development of a NATO Centre of Excellence (COE). Centres represent distinct locations of multilateral security collaboration around ‘identified club issues’ under the guidance of NATO Alliance Command Transformation (ACT). As of 2022, 28 NATO-accredited COEs exist across the Alliance, with 2 more in varying stages of development, the Space COE to be hosted in Toulouse, France, and the Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence (CCASCOE), to be hosted in Montreal, Canada. Canada is already a partner to several centres across the Alliance, but is among the *few Alliance members yet to host a COE themselves*, making this a new step forward for Canada and a new signal of commitment and contribution to NATO.

In summer 2022, Canada entered negotiations with NATO and global partners concerning their involvement and support of a Climate Change and Security COE to be hosted in Montreal by 2023, therefore an examination of the emergence and contemporary role of these institutions are relevant for stakeholders and policy makers as this bargaining process continues.

COEs have varying records of success maintaining relevance and increasing influence based on host-sponsor/partner grouping, agenda and mandate development relative to accreditation and financial-staffing concerns. Hosting a NATO COE offers a significant contribution to the alliance requiring knowledge of bargaining cooperation models, defense economics, and institutional design; this set of co-authored papers includes two briefing papers providing background context whereas the second one presents some lessons learned from other established COEs and sponsoring partners with years of experience.

A second set of policy papers tackles challenges associated with creating a common agenda for CCASCOE and the challenges of sharing the burden for the institution. Taken together this set of four papers offers contextual information, timely analyses of some issues and guidance to policy makers and negotiators interested in the study of NATO and the design of cooperative institutions in the context of an existing collective defense and cooperative security club format.

1. Why did the COEs emerge?

COE represent NATO’s forward-looking transition to the future; how partners will cooperate functionally and operationally over 28 mandates given an increasingly complex defense and security context. The COE concept developed “because of command structure reforms and reductions in personnel warrant and demands for cost-effectiveness and a leaner organization. Since the COE concept is not at the expense of NATO personnel warrants, it is thus cost effective for NATO as an institution, and for the alliance,” (Lobo, 2012, 62). The emergence of COE permitted partners to slice burdens differently. “Added value stresses that there should be added value only and no duplication, a principle stressing that a mandatory purpose for COE is to provide improvement to NATO capabilities rather than competition,” (Lobo, 2012, 35).

NATO established Allied Command Transformation (ACT) as the hub to manage, coordinate (doctrinal, operational, functional) alliance transformation by helping prepare and sustain club operations and capabilities, and assist in the transformation of partner capabilities (Lindley-French, 2015; Lobo, 2012). This transformation is how NATO will meet the collective defense and cooperative security challenges of the future. ACT directs various subcommands and NATO schools to facilitate and advocate improved military capabilities, maintain relevance, and adapt to the changing environment.

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2. How are NATO COEs established?

COE must be accredited on at least three of the four pillars of Command Transformation among *enhancing education & training; assisting in doctrine development; testing and validating concepts through experimentation; and supporting analyses and lessons learned processes* (see “NATO COE Accreditation Criteria,” 11 June 04 IMSM-0416-04). COE Steering Committees collaborate with Supreme Allied Command Transformation (hereafter, SACT) and may be asked to do a number of activities, (17 May 04 MC 58/1 “Terms of Reference for SACT). ACT accredits COEs, reviews them, and recommends necessary steps to regain re-accreditation (though no COE has lost accreditation). Finally, “ACT’s responsibility is to identify areas of military activity where there are gaps in expertise that an existing COE should target, or where a new COE might be appropriate,” (Lobo, 2012, 36).

“The COE institutional innovation redistributes burdens across sponsors, hosts, and partners ensuring a minimal level of the collective good. They are also forums of information exchange, socialization, debate, consultation, and outreach for stakeholders both internal and external. They are locations where partners develop discursive arguments and research expertise to legitimize courses of action. States collaborate on future defense and security policy actions. Partner participation contributes to the overall quality of the good, while offering individual level benefits (creating partial excludability),” (Kimball 2023, 175). These institutions operate at no cost to the NATO Common Funding budget (Kimball 2019).

3. How does a COE function?

Partners commit to the mutual support of each other’s educational activities and relevant events such as exercises, courses, seminars, and workshops through the exchange of Subject Matter Experts such as lectures, researchers, and mentors.

The Program of Work (POW) is decided in consultation and collaboration with the COE Steering Committee, the MC, and ACT. Those COE seeking to offer NATO certified education and training must “proceed for supplementary accreditation, from quality assurance perspective – derived from the EU standards for higher education institutions,” (Simion, 2016, 95). They “serve as hubs for information and best practices, but may also serve as a matchmaker between private institutions with expertise on one subject matter area and state militaries (and NATO as alliance),” (Lobo, 2012, 49). COE are considered an outreach tool for NATO in developing relationships with NATO agencies, NATO schools, Non-NATO nations, and external actors (II, governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, industry & academia), and working with ‘Communities of Interest.’

The partners and sponsor-host nations obtain a level of agenda-setting power and supporting states promote bilateral and military interests through COE, as well as benefit from training, education, and participation in exercises. Information sharing is accomplished through “COE products (like assessments, reports, papers, etc.) are shared within NATO, and second the degree of information sharing between respective COE involved states and strategic or civil-military partner(s),” (Lobo, 2012, p. 20). But, also, those individuals posted by COE participants report back home with access to what is produced by experts, scholars, and practitioners at a high-value. “COE is also a contribution to the burden sharing within the Alliance; having a NATO-flag on national soil is still something that seems to be considered as valuable, perhaps especially in newer [partners],” (Lobo, 2012, 23).

APPROACH & RESULTS

Canada committed considerable political, economic, security and defense capital into partnering and hosting a COE on climate change and security. A COE represents a contribution where Canada can collaborate to influence NATO and partner, “doctrine development, harmonization, as well as training and education occur in social communities where information centralization, diffusion, and learning from takes place. Those practices and interactions represent how partners participate in transformation, outside the central budgeting and collective activities, in distinct locations within hosts producing common goods,” (Kimball 2023, 178). It can expand to include other partners through joining agreements.

4. Why a Climate Change and Security COE in Canada?

Being the host of the Climate Change and Security Centre of Excellence will allow Canada significant influence over the organisation. In every COE, the Framework Nation plays a considerable role in the staffing and funding the COE, coordinating the COE’s Steering Committee, as well as inputting requests to the COE itself. While the largest client of COEs and most Requests for Support come from NATO, the second largest stakeholder of the in-house experts of the COE is naturally the host nations who are demonstrably and literally invested in the topic at hand (NATO Allied Command Transformation 2022, 13). Canada will obtain some amount of influence in the COE mandate and programme of work with its partners. A COE is a unique institution offering Canada certain opportunities that it may use to focus on particular climate security initiatives on the international stage over others.

A COE’s key strength is its unique role within NATO. While the centres are NATO-accredited, they are not funded nor tasked by NATO (NATO Allied Command Transformation 2022, 6). This allows a COE flexibility in its approach to stakeholders and partners, leaning more heavily on its NATO affiliation where helpful, and emphasizing its distance from the Alliance when approaching those possibly reticent to work directly with NATO. This position also allows for funding and partnerships from non-NATO member nations. There are several COEs who enjoy funding, expertise, and staffing contributions from countries such as Australia, South Korea, Switzerland, and Ukraine (NATO Allied Command Transformation 2022, 10, 28).

These benefits would not be possible if the institution was within the NATO Command Structure. This ‘one foot in, one foot out’ nature will allow Canada to both greatly influence NATO’s climate security agenda and expertise through the CCASCOE, while also remaining flexible to focus on the needs that the Framework Nation, as well as other future Contributing Nations, consider most pressing. There are COEs such as the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, that have created influence far beyond the bounds of the Alliance. The Tallinn Manual, a document created by the CCDCOE to demonstrate and collate legal precedent in the intersection between the law and cyber warfare, is upheld as a leading publication worldwide (CCDCOE, 2017). While staying affiliated to the world’s largest and most successful military alliance through the accreditation process, the position of a COE outside of the NATO Command Structure affords the COE and its Steering Committee the opportunity to exercise independence in key situations.

This is not to say that COEs are entirely separate from NATO. In fact, most of their requests for support come from NATO, along with their individual Framework and Contributing Nations. The operative condition is that these are ‘asks’, not ‘tasks’, given that the COEs are not under the NATO Command Structure. Ultimately, the COE’s Steering Committee determines which ‘asks’ are accepted in the COE Programme of Work and become ‘tasks’ (NATO Allied Command Transformation 2022, 10). COEs are structured around themes or areas of expertise that either member nations or NATO have identified as pressing, thus NATO understandably often has requests for the COEs to fill gaps in their knowledge. An additional wrinkle with which COEs and NATO alike grapple is that COEs are not meant to duplicate any existing efforts within NATO (NATO Allied Command Transformation 2022, 6). This lack of duplication of efforts means that requests for support that are sent from NATO are by their nature necessarily supposed to be unfulfilled by other means existing with the NATO Command Structure.

Given that COEs are not part of the NATO Command Structure, this means that they are also not party to certain customs within NATO, such as the need for consensus-based decision-making. This may be especially helpful in the case of a COE focussed on climate change and security, as not all NATO members will have the same climate politics. This function allows the COE to take on work, or make recommendations, that may not be in line with the politics of all 28 (soon 30) NATO member states, but rather just those of the members of the Steering Committee. The work being done by the COE, what policy recommendations to make, and what stakeholders to include, is ultimately up to the COE and Steering Committee, and therefore the host and contributing nations.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS & IMPLICATIONS FOR CANADA

Canada will need to collaborate with partners to develop the common coherent climate change and security agenda. That agenda shaped how a CCASCOE will go about accreditation from ACT and create goals which can be evaluated in the next five years. This requires political capital, continued bargaining and a willingness to work the foreign policy and defense aspects of the complex concerns in a collaborative manner. The co-piloting of the file by Defense and Foreign Affairs will present some additional bargaining and transaction costs. Canada must stay focused on what common climate problems should be prioritized given its own unique profile of threats and risks. Host states can exert considerable informal influence in the COE process, but it requires a strong willingness to cast aside internal political games/disturbances for the collective good. Given the willingness of some actors to instrumentalize this agenda for domestic political benefits related to the federal electoral game, NATO and CCASCOE partners are uncertain about the future state of the world and must be attentive to protecting CCASCOE from external stakeholder manipulations. That notwithstanding, the transnational complexities of climate change concerns complicate the alignment of expectations and behavior without strong institutional leadership and continued financial commitment by the host, will Canada have the required budget discipline and continued negotiation savvy into the next 5-10 to maintain this path.

The next steps concerning this research project aligned with the creation of a NATO CASCOE in Canada 1) identifying a group of ‘paying’ partners among NATO allies & possibly other states (policy brief 2, est. Feb 2023 – Kimball & Christensen); 2) creating the common agenda and working towards NATO accreditation across the four pillars with metrics for evaluation (policy report 1, est. June 2023 – Greaves) and 3) advancing towards an operational funding and staffing a CASCOE alongside relative to the deliverables on its agenda (policy report 2, *est. end 2023* - Kimball & Pernica).

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CDSN-RCDS – Canadian Defence and Security Network is an
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