NATO CIMIC ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT CAPABILITY:

Findings and Recommendations from Exercises across Strategic, Operational, and Tactical Levels

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Evidence base:
Steadfast Deterrence 2025 (Strategic Level - SHAPE J9)
Steadfast Deterrence 2026 (Operational Level - JFC Naples J9)
Joint Cooperation Exercise 2025 (Tactical Level - JOCO25)

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of the NATO CIMIC Analysis and Assessment Capability (NCAAC) validation project. It draws on evidence collected across three exercises in 2025: Steadfast Deterrence 2025 at the strategic level (SHAPE J9), Steadfast Deterrence 2026 at the operational level (JFC Naples J9), and the Joint Cooperation Exercise 2025 at the tactical level (JOCO25). Together, these exercises provide the most comprehensive cross-level assessment of NCAAC implementation conducted to date.

The overall finding is clear: the NCAA Concept is sound, but it is not yet operationally usable at any level of command. Implementation is inconsistent, heavily person-dependent, and poorly supported by training, tools, and organisational structure. Critically, the expectation that Structured Analytic Techniques (SATs) will be applied under warfighting tempo is structurally unrealistic at both the operational and tactical levels and needs to be complemented with a lighter, faster analytical approach that still reduces bias and supports transparent decision-making.

Key Findings

1	The NCAAC is not consistently understood or applied at any level. Only 19% of survey respondents across exercises reported being familiar with the concept in practice. At the operational level, structured processes were attempted but broke down under tempo pressure.
2	Full SAT application is structurally incompatible with warfighting tempo at the operational and tactical levels. A lighter analytical approach is needed that explicitly captures assumptions, considers at least one alternative explanation, and states the confidence of the judgment.
3	The capability is person-dependent at every level. Individual expertise, motivation, and informal coordination compensate for missing structures - but this makes the system fragile and non-reproducible.
4	Training is insufficient across the board. Most personnel involved in analysis have not completed the NCAA Course. Short packages do not build the analytical depth required, and there is institutional reluctance to release personnel for training.
5	Data quality and tool exploitation are serious constraints. MAVEN is widely described as underused and poorly understood. Without validated, structured inputs, no analytical system can reliably support commander decision-making.
6	Interoperability across echelons is weak. Reporting formats, indicator thresholds, and analytical standards differ significantly between nations and between levels of command, creating friction at every handoff point.

Priority Recommendations

- Develop level-specific implementation guides and checklists for the NCAAC at strategic, operational, and tactical levels, including a simplified analytical drill for warfighting conditions that preserves structured, bias-aware reasoning without requiring full SAT application.

- Integrate the NCAA module into all CIMIC courses as a baseline requirement, and embed a condensed Analytic module in pre-exercise preparation for all headquarters personnel.

- Increase the number of dedicated analyst posts within J9 branches and develop a retention strategy for experienced personnel across exercise cycles.

- Develop structured data management standards for MAVEN and pilot AI-enabled analysis support tools within NATO Secret networks, with human-in-the-loop protocols built in from the start.

- Establish a living lessons-learned repository across ACO to improve vertical information flow and capture best practices from exercises.

1. Introduction

The NATO CIMIC Analysis and Assessment Capability (NCAAC) was introduced in 2020 with the goal of standardising how CIMIC staff collect, process, and disseminate analysis of the civil environment. The NCAA Concept, developed by the CCOE, provides a structured workflow built on four phases (Direction, Collection, Processing, and Dissemination) and aims to produce timely, relevant, and objective civil factor analysis in support of commander decision-making.

Despite growing investment in the concept, little systematic evidence existed about how it performs in practice across different levels of command. This validation project was designed to fill that gap. Data collection through surveys, structured interviews, and direct observation has been carried out in three exercises : Steadfast Deterrence 2025 at the strategic level, Steadfast Deterrence 2026 at the operational level, and the Joint Cooperation Exercise 2025.

1.1 Evidence Base and Methodology

The report draws on three distinct evidence streams, which differ in scope and depth:

- **Steadfast Deterrence 2025** - Strategic Level (SHAPE J9): 8 survey responses, 9 structured interviews, and direct observation of battle rhythm events, planning processes, and analytical products.
- **Steadfast Deterrence 2026** - Operational Level (JFC Naples J9): No survey was administered, but 9 in-depth interviews and sustained direct observation over three days produced detailed qualitative evidence.
- **Joint Cooperation Exercise 2025** - Tactical Level (JOCO25): 20 survey responses and 18 structured interviews with CIMIC and non-CIMIC personnel from 22 nations.

All responses were anonymised and cleaned of classified content.

1.2 Limitations

Several limitations should be kept in mind when reading this report. First, JOCO25 participants were primarily national CIMIC staff and not representing the NATO Tactical Level (MARCOM, AIRCOM, LANDCOM). Second, the operational level of command was only represented by Joint Force Command Naples in this study, however, JFC BS and JFC NF have adopted different workflows and procedures that could lead to differing results. Third, the study faced the challenge of including the views from ‘Receivers’ of the analysis across levels, for example Commanders, J2 or other actors because of their limited number and availability during exercises.

2. Cross-Level Findings

Before examining each DOTMLPFI dimension in detail, this section identifies the patterns that emerged consistently across all three levels of command. These cross-cutting findings are the most important result of the validation project, because they point to systemic issues that cannot be solved at any single level alone.

2.1 What Is Consistent Across All Three Levels

The NCAA Concept is known but not internalised

At every level, personnel had some exposure to the NCAA Concept, but few had translated it into routine practice. At the strategic level, only 2 out of 8 analysts attempted to apply SATs, and even then informally. At the operational level, no SATs were applied at all during STDC26. At the tactical level, only 4 out of 12 respondents reported using any structured technique. Familiarity with the concept did not reliably translate into application.

SATs are not applicable under warfighting tempo

This is the most operationally significant finding of the validation project. The assumption embedded in the current NCAA Concept, that CIMIC analysts will apply Structured Analytic Techniques to produce rigorous assessments, does not hold under the time pressure and battle rhythm of warfighting conditions. This is not primarily a training failure. It is a structural mismatch between the methodology and the environment in which it must be used.

> *"There is no time to conduct SATs and in-depth analysis. An 80% correct solution is better than no solution."*

At the tactical level, analysts with relevant experience were sometimes able to apply techniques intuitively, but this was the exception. At the operational level, even experienced analysts found full SAT application impossible within the compressed battle rhythm. The concept needs a tiered approach: a full analytical process for deliberate planning phases, and a lighter, faster drill - capturing assumptions, one alternative explanation, and a confidence statement - for execution-phase conditions.

Person-dependency is universal

At all three levels, the quality of CIMIC analysis depended heavily on the presence of one or two experienced individuals. When those individuals were unavailable, rotated out, or occupied elsewhere, the analytical function degraded. This is not a personnel management problem alone: it reflects the absence of institutionalised processes, shared standards, and documented Analytic products that would allow continuity regardless of who is in the seat.

Training is structurally insufficient

Across all three levels, the dominant finding on training was the same: short packages are not enough, most personnel have not completed the NCAA Course, and the institutional willingness to release people for training is low. At the tactical level, 55% of survey respondents had received no analytical training at all. At the operational level, one analyst described the risk clearly:

> *"Training for two weeks on analysis and assessment is not sufficient to conduct proper analysis. The lack of proper analysis is dangerous because it can contaminate the decision-making process of planners."*

Data quality and tool exploitation are consistently weak

At every level, the gap between available information and usable Analytic input was significant. Reporting volumes were high, but source validation was weak, indicator definitions were unclear, and tools were poorly exploited. The problem is not a shortage of data but a shortage of validated, structured, and analytical ready data. MAVEN was described at both the strategic and operational levels as functioning more like an advanced presentation platform than an analytical tool.

Reliability and objectivity are the lowest-scoring quality criteria

Survey data from STDC25 (strategic) and JOCO25 (tactical) showed the same pattern: relevancy and actionability were rated highest, while reliability and objectivity consistently scored lowest. This means CIMIC products are perceived as useful in the moment but not reproducible across different staff or consistent in their analytical basis. This is the direct consequence of person-dependency and weak SAT application.

2.2 What Is Level-Specific

Strategic level: over-templating and threshold ambiguity

At SHAPE, the main tension was between the structured templates the NCAA Concept provides and the need for analysis that directly addresses strategic issues. Decision-makers reported that colour-coded severity scales were being applied without objectively defined thresholds for transitions, undermining the credibility of assessments. The demand was for analysis grounded in quantifiable risk rather than subjective judgment, but the tools and indicators to support that were not in place.

Operational level: the SHAPE vs JFC tension

At JFC Naples, information management remained a bottleneck, with data flowing through multiple parallel channels but mitigates by collaborative workspaces consolidating analytic outputs. The analytic capability also remained heavily person-dependent, with most of the analytic function resting on a small number of experienced individuals. A persistent challenge was balancing the requirements coming from SHAPE with the JFC Commander's own operational priorities, leaving limited capacity to develop a distinctly operational-level civil environment picture.

Tactical level: national divergence

JOCO25 revealed the sharpest national divergence in analytical practice. Countries such as the Netherlands, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom actively supported analytical approaches, while most other nations did not systematically apply them. Reporting formats varied significantly between brigades and were adapted throughout the exercise to the new requirements set by the Deterrence and Defence scenario.

2.3 Key take away

The evidence across all three levels points to the same conclusion: the NCAAC is a necessary and sound framework, but it is not yet operationally usable. The gap is not primarily conceptual as the structure of the NCAA workflow is logical and well-grounded. The gap is practical: the concept has not been translated into level-specific guidance, the training base is too thin, the tools are too poorly supported, and the expectation of full SAT application under warfighting tempo is structurally unrealistic.

Closing these gaps requires action at the conceptual level (adapting the SAT expectation), the training level (mandatory baseline preparation), the organisational level (stable personnel and integrated structures), and the interoperability level (common standards across ACO). These are not independent problems. They need to be addressed together.

3. DOTMLPFI Assessment

This section examines each dimension of the DOTMLPFI framework through the lens of evidence from all three levels. The goal is to show what the combined evidence tells us: where the problems are structural, where they are level-specific, and where targeted action is most urgent.

The following table provides a summary overview before each dimension is discussed in detail.

Dimension	Strategic (SHAPE J9)	Operational (JFC NP J9)	Tactical (JOCO25)
Doctrine	Concept exists but too abstract for strategic tempo; threshold definitions missing	CAA workflow applied in practice; analytical products tend toward description, with assessment depth varying by individual expertise.	Concept seen as too broad; no tactical translation;
Organisation	Trial structure tested; personnel shifted from liaison to analysis due to shortfalls	: Solid tentative structure with functional CORE Team design but information dispersal across tools and boards	National divergence in structure; lack of feedback loops from CORE to TCTs
Training	SATs applied by 2 of 8 only; technique choice based on familiarity not suitability	Training remains insufficient; no SATs applied	55% no analytical training; NCAA Course completed by 5 of 20 only
Materiel	TOPFAS underused; MAVEN transition requires training.	MAVEN used as presentation tool; access problems	Data collection dashboards improvised; SITAWARE limited; need for AI-enabled querying
Leadership	J9 leadership proactive; demand from command group inconsistent	ACOS J9 actively engaged in the NCAA Worflow; building broader command appetite for CIMIC assessments.	Leadership quality varies by nation; limited command pull for CIMIC analysis
Personnel	Liaison staff shifted to analysis; civilian expertise critical but limited	Single civilian analyst as linchpin; rotation gaps	Many analysts not by profession; trained analysts apply techniques more intuitively
Facilities	TOPFAS underused; MAVEN partially functional; dispersed digital workspace	OneNote, email, MAVEN all used in parallel; access uneven	Limited training; no shared analytical workspace
Interoperability	Threshold inconsistency; national reporting formats differ; J2 integration weak	Improved liaison with National elements and HQ integration; weak J2 cooperation	Three different brigade templates to division level; language barriers; national divergence

3.1 Doctrine

The NCAA Concept provides a coherent framework, but it has not been translated into level-specific, actionable guidance. At every level, personnel described the same problem: the concept makes sense in principle but is too abstract to apply under real conditions. There are no commonly understood thresholds for what counts as adequate analysis, what an operationally relevant product looks like, or how the approach should differ between strategic, operational, and tactical headquarters.

> *"The concept is too broad and needs translation to be operationalised at the tactical level. But the workflow is important, it helps you map what you know and what you do not know."*

The most significant doctrinal gap is the treatment of SATs. The current concept implies full SAT application as the standard for rigorous analysis. This is appropriate for deliberate planning phases but is structurally incompatible with the pace of warfighting. The solution is not to abandon structured analysis but to build a tiered approach into the concept itself: a full analytical process for deliberate phases, and a streamlined drill for execution conditions that captures the essential bias-reduction function without the time cost.

3.2 Organisation

The organisational picture across levels is tentative. At every level, structures were tested or adapted during exercises rather than drawn from established, approved designs. This produced some valuable innovations, such as the CIMIC Dashboard developed by Brigades 2 and 3 at JOCO25, and the CORE Team structure at JFC Naples.

At the strategic level, SHAPE J9 tested a trial structure with three teams but was forced to shift liaison personnel into analysis roles due to staffing shortfalls, reducing the capacity of both functions. At the operational level, the JFC Naples CORE Team structure provided a workable skeleton, but information still flowed through multiple parallel channels. A consistent gatekeeping function to filter and elevate only operationally relevant information was developed throughout the exercise.

The dispersal of J9 personnel across working groups and boards was identified at both the strategic and operational levels as a significant drag on analytical capacity. When the same small pool of people is simultaneously required to attend boards and conduct analysis, the analytical function is inevitably the one that suffers.

3.3 Training

Training is already making a measurable difference. Where personnel had completed the NCAA Course or had prior analytical training, the results were visible: they were more likely to attempt the NCAA workflow, apply structured techniques under pressure, and recognise the risk of bias in their own work. Brigade 2 at JOCO25 is the clearest example: two trained analysts developed their own Intelligence Collection Plan, established a direct link with Tactical CIMIC Teams, and used the workflow as a practical guide. Training works when it reaches the right people.

The challenge is that it has not yet reached enough of them. At the tactical level, more than half of analysts had received no dedicated analytical training. Personnel with training applied techniques more intuitively even under time pressure, while those without defaulted to descriptive reporting. Two factors limit the reach of training: CIMIC personnel often enter headquarters roles with a liaison or tactical background, framing their contribution toward reporting events rather than assessing their significance.

> *"The lack of proper analysis is dangerous because it can contaminate the decision-making process of planners. AI is a risk amplifier if you feed it wrong sources and then believe in the objectivity of the output."*

The practical path forward builds on what is already working. A baseline requirement for all CIMIC headquarters personnel to complete the NCAA module would extend the gains already visible among trained analysts. Alongside that, a condensed operational module focused on applying a structured drill, validating sources, and identifying relevant factors and trends under tempo would equip headquarters staff with the essentials.

3.4 Materiel

The materiel picture across levels is dominated by MAVEN, which was present at all levels but not effectively exploited yet. The descriptions were consistent: MAVEN has clear potential as an analytical environment, but in practice it is used as a presentation tool,. Access problems, insufficient training, unclear functionality, and a lack of structured input data all contributed to this gap.

> *"MAVEN is not functional. It is like having a Ferrari but no driving licence."*

The deeper issue is that MAVEN's value depends entirely on the quality and granularity of the data fed into it. Without validated, regularly updated, and structurally consistent inputs, no analytic platform can generate a reliable picture. At the tactical level, brigades improvised Excel-based dashboards structured around the 7BLRs and PMESII, which worked as temporary solutions but underlined the absence of a fit-for-purpose tool.

The aspiration clearly articulated across all levels is for an AI-supported platform to function as the NCAAC intended: populated with live, validated data that analysts can query, overlay, and use to generate analytical products. Reaching that point requires a structured programme training for CIMIC staff, clearer standards for what data should be entered and how.

3.5 Leadership

Leadership had a decisive effect on NCAAC implementation at every level, in both positive and negative directions. Where senior CIMIC leaders actively directed analytic thinking, identified opportunities, and pushed for CIMIC relevance within the headquarters, the capability performed better. Where command-level appetite for CIMIC analysis was low, the capability degraded quickly. The vicious cycle identified at JFC Naples - where low command demand reduces motivation, reduced motivation degrades product quality, and poor quality reduces appetite for CIMIC input - was echoed in the tactical level evidence as well.

The implication for capability development is that leadership engagement is a necessary but not sufficient condition. The goal must be a system that produces consistent analytical output regardless of who is in command and regardless of whether CIMIC analysis is actively demanded from above.

3.6 Personnel

Personnel shortages and the wrong personnel profile were identified as critical constraints at all three levels. The problem is not simply a matter of numbers: it is a combination of insufficient trained analysts, constant rotation and limited continuity.

At the strategic level, civilian expertise was identified as essential for the depth of analysis required, but civilian positions were limited and often filled informally. At the operational level, most of the analytical function at J9 JFC Naples highly relied on a single analyst,

representing a single-point-of-failure risk. At the tactical level, the multi-national nature of JOCO25 highlighted sharp divergence between nations. Countries with established analytical cultures (notably the Netherlands, Canada, the UK, and Germany) produced notably better outputs. Additionally, different threat perceptions and conceptualisation of CIMIC role in deterrence and defence hindered the scope of the analysis.

The personnel gap cannot be solved through training alone. It requires approved and funded analysts posts across levels, a deliberate strategy for retaining experienced personnel across exercise cycles, and a reconsideration of how external analytical assets like regional hubs, partners and/or consultancies are integrated into standing headquarters processes.

3.7 Facilities

Facilities did not emerge as the primary constraint at any level, but working environments consistently affected performance in ways that compounded other problems. At the different levels, information was dispersed across multiple digital spaces with no single collaborative workspace for the NCAA Worflow.

Operational NCAAC requires a workspace that supports collaborative analysis, secure information handling, and rapid product development. The current arrangements across all levels are functional for basic coordination but are not configured for continuous knowledge development under sustained operational pressure.

3.8 Interoperability

Interoperability is the dimension where systemic failure is most visible, because it is the point at which weaknesses in all other dimensions combine. Reporting formats, indicator definitions, and source standards differ between nations, between levels of command, and between headquarters divisions. The result is that information produced at the tactical level is difficult to aggregate at the operational level, and operational assessments do not translate cleanly into the strategic picture. The absence of agreed thresholds for J9 and the different national appetite of sharing data represents obstacle for objective analytic products:

> *"The biggest question is how to define and measure indicators, considering the variability and flexibility of the data gathered and understanding how much these affect the 7BLRs."*

At the headquarters level, the relationship between J9 and J2 was identified at both the strategic and operational levels as a persistent weakness. J2 did not consistently provide assessments that J9 could use to build a complementary civil picture, and integration between the two functions remained informal and ad hoc. The ACO White Picture coordination mechanism was valued but created its own tensions around priority and sequencing.

4. Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from the cross-level evidence. They are structured by DOTMLPFI dimension, tagged with a primary owner, and divided into short-term actions and medium-to-long-term structural changes that require resourcing decisions or multinational agreement.

4 **Doctrine** Develop level-specific implementation guides and checklists for the NCAAC at strategic, operational, and tactical levels, including a simplified analytical drill for warfighting conditions that replaces the full SAT requirement while preserving structured, bias-aware reasoning.

5 **Organisation** Formalise the trial organisational structures tested at STDC25 into approved headquarters models and vertical coordination mechanisms from Strategic to tactical level to ensure a coherent understanding of the civil environment and the “White picture” alignment.

6 **Training** Integrate the NCAA module into all CIMIC courses as a baseline requirement, ensuring that analytical skills are embedded from the earliest stage of CIMIC professional development rather than treated as a specialist add-on. In addition, develop a condensed analytical module, covering source validation, proxy variables, and indicator-based assessment, to be embedded in pre-exercise preparation for all CIMIC personnel assigned to headquarters functions.

7 **Materiel** Develop structured data management standards for MAVEN and pilot AI-enabled analytical support tools within NATO Secret networks, ensuring any capability introduced includes human-in-the-loop protocols and bias awareness training.

8 **Leadership** Equip J9 leaders at all levels with a toolkit of opportunity-based assessments to demonstrate CIMIC relevance proactively, breaking the vicious cycle of low demand and degraded motivation.

9 **Personnel** Increase number of analysts posts within J9 Branches.

10 **Facilities** Define and implement a standard collaborative workspace model for CIMIC analytical functions in headquarters, covering information management, product development, and tool access.

11 **Interoperability** Establish agreed white-source lists, harmonised minimum reporting formats, and a living lessons-learned repository across ACO to improve vertical information flow and capture best practices from exercises.

5. Conclusion

The validation project has confirmed that the NCAAC is a necessary and sound framework. The NCAA workflow provides a logical structure for integrating civil factor analysis into military planning and operations. Where it was applied, even imperfectly, it improved the relevance and actionability of CIMIC advice to decision-makers.

But the capability is not yet structurally implemented. At every level of command, the evidence points to the same pattern: a concept that is known but not internalised, processes that depend on individuals rather than institutions, lack of training, tools that are available but not exploited, and interoperability standards that have not kept pace with the ambition of the concept.

The most important single conclusion of this report is that the treatment of SATs needs to change. Expecting full structured Analytic technique application under warfighting tempo is not just unrealistic: it creates a false choice between doing analysis properly and doing it at all. The answer is a tiered approach: rigorous analysis when time permits, and a lightweight but explicitly structured drill when it does not. That drill, built into the concept and into training, would do more to improve the consistency and quality of CIMIC analysis at the operational and tactical levels than any other single change.

Beyond that, the path forward is about institutionalisation. The NCAAC will not become a reliable capability through better concepts alone. It requires stable organisations, trained people who stay long enough to build expertise, tools that are actually used as intended, and standards that hold across nations and levels of command. The foundations have been laid. The task now is to build on them deliberately, with the urgency that the current security environment demands.