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Advancing Responsible AI Across NATO: Innovation and Interoperability

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Key Points

- The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) artificial intelligence (AI) strategy outlines six principles of responsible use, which are operationalized in numerous ways by the Data and Artificial Intelligence Review Board (DARB).
- NATO's evolving AI strategy is part of larger initiatives toward rapid technological adaptation, innovating AI among other priority areas, including autonomous systems.
- NATO's Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA) supports responsible AI operationalization with challenge programs, accelerators and test centres, scaling rapidly since its inception in 2021 to a record year of applicants in 2026.
- Allies foster responsible AI developments that benefit from alignment with NATO, applying alliance governance infrastructure to national technology ecosystems to build innovation clusters that are interoperable and interdisciplinary across domains.

Responsible AI in an Era of Rapid Allied Adaptation

NATO's rapid advances in emerging and disruptive technologies (EDTs) are reshaping how the alliance maintains technological superiority across defence domains (NATO 2025b). The alliance's evolving AI strategy targets and promotes responsible technological adaptation, which hardens dual-use capabilities for collective defence in accordance with the Digital Transformation Implementation Strategy (NATO 2024a). Allies endorsed the Rapid Adoption Action Plan in June 2025 to accelerate the adoption and integration of innovative technologies from taking years to implementation "within a maximum of 24 months" (NATO 2025e). This accelerated integration ensures NATO's collective defence posture remains agile and interoperable across domains.

NATO has operationalized AI by translating the six principles of responsible use into practical steps involving certification standards and tool kits developed by the DARB (NATO 2022). These interdisciplinary developments align AI with other emerging technologies, and NATO's AI developments

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offer prudent methods for synchronizing national advancements that remain interoperable with allies. NATO has fielded military exercises featuring AI-powered autonomous systems as cases that operationalize AI for interoperable and interdisciplinary initiatives. This framework enables allies to advance national AI capabilities while maintaining shared standards for responsible and interoperable defence innovation.

DIANA serves as NATO's primary accelerator for dual-use innovation, linking allied industries, researchers and defence applications within a unified framework. DIANA runs challenge programs involving innovators at numerous accelerator sites and test centres across the alliance, focused on dual-use technologies that have commercial and military applications (NATO 2025a). Various developments correspond with other focal points innovating multidisciplinary emerging technologies, which provide lessons on AI advancements for national initiatives aligned with NATO's principles of responsible use.

Current considerations focus on operationalizing AI throughout the alliance to align national developments across domains, which crucially feature collaborative interoperability and interdisciplinary integration, detailed by numerous examples of NATO and allied advancements. Through DIANA, NATO and its allies are building a cohesive innovation ecosystem that accelerates responsible AI adoption and reinforces strategic technological interoperability. This policy brief draws on multiple examples of NATO responsible AI in practice, such as military exercises, innovation challenge programs, company collaborations and national strategies, to highlight how responsible AI can be operationalized across diverse settings to strengthen interoperability among allies.

Implementing Responsible AI Across the Alliance

NATO's AI Strategy: Principles and Governance

NATO released its first AI strategy in 2021, outlining the six principles of responsible use across the alliance (NATO 2021):

- First, lawfulness establishes that AI systems comply with national and international laws.
- Second, responsibility and accountability ensure that human oversight is maintained in AI development with clear accountability chains.
- Third, explainability and traceability provide verifiable and validated review methodologies for logged decision making on AI applications.
- Fourth, reliability fosters robust testing and certification processes to maintain assurances across life cycles.
- Fifth, governability requires human oversight and safety testing with override capabilities for disengagement and risk audits.
- Sixth, bias mitigation reduces prejudice by proactively minimizing unintended consequences in data sets.

Together, these six principles form the ethical and operational baseline guiding how NATO and its members design, deploy and govern AI in defence contexts.

The DARB was established in 2022 to standardize and certify AI systems with the principles of responsible use, providing guidelines for deployment to ensure systems align with operational objectives, which are transformed into standardized practices across the alliance (NATO 2022). The DARB translates the principles of responsible use into "user-friendly" AI standards, offering the alliance "a common baseline to help create quality controls, mitigate risks and adopt trustworthy and interoperable AI systems" (ibid.). The DARB has operationalized the principles of responsible use procedurally by building governance infrastructure with tool kits, checklists, templates, certification standards, self-assessments, use-case testing and integration into exercises (ibid.). Through the DARB, NATO embeds responsible AI principles directly into operational governance, strengthening trust, accountability and interoperability among allies.

NATO's 2024 revision of its AI strategy marked a pivotal shift from principle setting to practical applications, integrating emerging technologies such as generative and foundational models to support civilian and military decision making (NATO 2024b). These developments reflect a transition toward implementing practical applications, fostering "growing interoperability between all AI systems throughout the Alliance" (ibid.). The revised strategy emphasized cooperation of non-traditional defence suppliers for AI research and development with industry, academia and national defence agencies. This evolution demonstrates NATO's commitment to staying ahead of technological change by advancing interoperable AI solutions across both military and civilian sectors.

Canada's AI Strategy: National Integration with Allied Principles

Canada's 2024 *Department of National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Artificial Intelligence Strategy* aligns with NATO's principles of responsible use by operationalizing ethical, interoperable innovation across defence and allied partnerships (Department of National Defence [DND] 2024a). Capabilities are fielded through the DND/Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) AI Centre (DCAIC) as a national cluster to facilitate joint AI experimentation, validation and guidance. Responsible AI adoption is encouraged for third-party vendors to "collaborate with key allies and partners to continue to develop and integrate national and international standards for data and AI ethics" (ibid., 19). These initiatives are built on broader investments that began in 2017 under the Pan-Canadian Artificial Intelligence Strategy administered by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research.[1] Together, these efforts position Canada as a key contributor to allied AI governance, bridging domestic innovation with NATO's evolving responsible AI framework.

The DCAIC serves as a collaboration nexus, bringing together allies and diverse partners to advance trusted and interoperable AI development. These partnerships include Five Eyes[2] and NATO allies, along with non-traditional partners in "civil society, non-technical branches of academia, and the open-source community" (DND 2024a, 24). Capabilities developed by industry, academia and allies are supported by integrated partnerships with the DCAIC to "facilitate the creation of a common repository of AI applications, techniques, and data…and support local AI development within the commands and environments" (ibid., 13). By

1 See https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/ai-strategy/en.

2 An alliance consisting of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.

fostering inclusive, cross-sectoral collaboration, the DCAIC strengthens defence innovation networks that directly align Canada's national AI capacity with allied strategic priorities.

Canada's AI strategy recognizes that responsible innovation must be balanced with robust security measures to mitigate risks inherent in global and non-traditional partnerships. The strategy encourages development to counter risks associated with non-traditional partnerships, given that "academic researchers often work in global networks whose boundaries and membership can be hard to secure, while Canadian companies continue to be subject to industrial espionage and can experience supply chain vulnerabilities" (ibid., 24). Operationalizing AI responsibly across national innovation ecosystems requires that investments be made to properly secure partnerships against related threats. Canada provides a model for aligning sovereign innovation with allied interoperability that is ethically governed and strategically integrated with emerging technology capabilities to both protect critical infrastructure and advance allied innovation objectives.

AI and Autonomous Systems in NATO Military Exercises

NATO military exercises depict interoperable and interdisciplinary approaches applying AI to autonomous systems, providing critical test beds for advancing allied interoperability and readiness (detailed with two exercises as examples). First, the Robotic Experimentation and Prototyping with Maritime Unmanned Systems exercise, or REPMUS, annually tests maritime uncrewed systems off the coast of Portugal. Second, Task Force X, hosted by NATO Allied Command Transformation on the Baltic Sea, tests uncrewed systems for surface, underwater and aerial capabilities. These exercises demonstrate how responsible AI enhances joint operational capability and collective resilience across allied forces.

Annual REPMUS exercises have advanced practical experimentation with AI-enabled autonomy to test real-world applications. In 2022, more than 120 autonomous assets networked experimental scenarios for "countering submarine threats, sea mines and other asymmetric adversities" (Naval Technology 2022). In 2024, REPMUS tested a "silicon sailor" concept to experiment with how AI can assist in "accessing naval operational manuals and protocols, providing fast access to critical information, supporting decision-making processes and enhancing personnel training" (Willett 2025). AI was used for positioning and ship trajectory, using unmanned surface vessels to differentiate unusual patterns of security threats and false positives. The 2025 exercise involved AI-powered autonomous systems in which one human controlled a swarm of 10 drones in some scenarios, while "AI-controlled drones operate[d] autonomously" in others (Luxton 2025). These trials illustrate NATO's progression from conceptual AI integration to field-tested autonomous capabilities, transforming allied force coordination.

NATO Allied Command Transformation's Task Force X-Baltic exemplifies the alliance's use of autonomous and AI-enabled systems to safeguard critical undersea and communications infrastructure. In 2025, this exercise featured more than 60 American- and French-made uncrewed systems for surface, underwater and aerial capabilities monitoring infrastructure and communications (Gosselin-Malo 2025). The Saildrone Voyager was among the platforms deployed and supported the identification of "real-world dark targets in the area, including Russian shadow-fleet and military vessels," supporting regional situational awareness and the protection of critical infrastructure (ibid.). Undersea cables and infrastructure have been damaged and threatened in recent years by Russian ships dragging anchors and conducting suspected sabotage, damaging the Estlink-2 power cable and numerous telecommunications lines in the Baltic Sea region in 2024 (Janjalia 2025). NATO's responsible integration of autonomous systems enhances situational awareness and resilience against hybrid threats to allied critical infrastructure.

Task Force X-Baltic used a reverse-engineered "counter-clockwise" model of procurement to rapidly deploy and refine low-cost, expendable commercial systems to give NATO a fast, scalable and sustainable edge in modern warfare (Defense News Aerospace 2025). NATO demonstrated its practical advancement of responsible AI

in joint operations, strengthening deterrence and infrastructure protection. Specifically, this approach depicts how "autonomous systems and AI-enabled technologies can increase situational awareness, improv[ing] the detection of malign activities and deterrence of threats to critical undersea infrastructure" (NATO 2026). Collectively, these exercises featured interoperability across domains, operationalizing responsible AI at NATO and aligning national approaches for multi-domain integration of AI with autonomous systems. The initiative translates NATO's principles of responsible use into operational advantage while fostering cohesion among allied AI and autonomy programs.

DIANA's Role in Accelerating Responsible AI Innovation

The DIANA Challenge Programme serves as NATO's central platform for accelerating responsible AI innovation through testing, certification and scaling of dual-use technologies. These programs demonstrate interoperable and interdisciplinary approaches to operationalize AI with applications of standards and testing involving various EDTs, including AI-powered autonomous systems. By 2025, the program involved more than 200 affiliated accelerator sites and test centres across the alliance (NATO 2025a). DIANA's 2026 program selected 150 companies from across 24 NATO member states (NATO 2025c). Through DIANA, NATO translates the principles of responsible use into practical innovation pathways, connecting allied entrepreneurs, researchers and defence operators to strengthen technological advantage.

Selected innovators gain resources and infrastructure to rapidly develop, test and scale dual-use technologies through access to mentorship, investors and grants. Accelerator sites and test centres feature "specialised laboratories, sandboxes and testing facilities…to develop a baseline recommendation of best practices" in testing, evaluation, validation, verification and certification (NATO 2024b). Innovators received "non-dilutive grants" providing "investment capital that does not require them to give up equity or ownership in their company" (NATO 2025a). DIANA incorporates a "rapid adoption service" granting allies the opportunity to "co-develop, prototype and field technologies in operational settings before committing to large-scale procurements or acquisitions" (NATO 2025d). This model accelerates the transition of emerging technologies from experimentation to operational deployment across the alliance.

DIANA's successful innovators showcase how responsible, dual-use AI solutions enhance defence capability and collaboration across the alliance. These initiatives demonstrate interdisciplinary systems powered by AI across domains featuring dual-use solutions to problems such as translation services, information and communication technologies, and medical care. One successful innovator in the program is UK-based myLanguage Inc., selected in 2025 and paired with the DIANA-affiliated accelerator MassChallenge. The firm provides an AI translation service for "secure, offline translation capability supporting 23 languages" (ibid.). These applications exemplify how DIANA accelerates trusted, mission-ready AI technologies that directly strengthen operational effectiveness.

Canada's strong presence in the 2026 DIANA cohort demonstrates its growing role in advancing allied innovation while reinforcing national technological sovereignty. At least 20 Canadian firms were part of the 2026 DIANA cohort, including Incendia Canada, which provided an "AI-powered environmental detector that communicates wirelessly and coordinates emergency response" (Riehl 2025). Another firm, Deep Breathe, provided an "on-edge, multi-diagnostic AI for real-time detection of traumatic torso injuries with ultrasound" (ibid.). Both firms build up domestic expertise without full reliance on foreign platforms, fostering self-reliant ecosystems in Canada that align with NATO engagements. These ventures illustrate how Canadian participation in DIANA accelerates responsible innovation while deepening alignment between national and allied technology ecosystems.

Integrating local innovators and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) into DIANA's ecosystem strengthens national AI capacity while ensuring responsible technological growth. The program supports the development of commercially lucrative AI-powered applications, aligning responsible AI that builds up national technology capabilities with transnational engagements. Canada provides an important case for significant developments aligning the DND/CAF's approach to AI ethics, safety and trust with NATO's principles of responsible use. These developments within DIANA's accelerators, test centres and challenge programs support both

international and national AI investments aligned with larger approaches to responsible technology development. This integrated model positions Canada as a bridge between local innovation and allied strategic priorities, reinforcing responsible AI as an economic and strategic advantage.

Strategic Options: Strengthening National Allied Interoperability in Emerging Technology

DIANA's 2026 Cohort: Lessons in Scaling Responsible Innovation

The 2026 DIANA cohort showcases how allied innovation can translate responsible AI principles into scalable, interoperable solutions for autonomous systems across domains. A diverse set of companies provides solutions to a range of problems and challenges related to AI-powered autonomous systems, demonstrating interoperability and interdisciplinary approaches to operationalize responsible AI. NATO standards are adhered to when operating within alliance test centres and accelerators, ensuring seamless integration into multi-domain operations. This approach reinforces NATO's commitment to standardizing responsible AI deployment while strengthening allied cohesion in the development and implementation of emerging technologies.

Alias Robotics, a strong example from the 2026 DIANA cohort, demonstrates how responsible AI can be operationalized to secure autonomous and cyber-physical systems across defence applications. The Spain-based company focuses on AI-powered cybersecurity for autonomous cyber-physical systems. AliasX is a specialized large language model used to detect anomalies to secure "autonomous and unmanned systems against sophisticated cyber threats" (Alias Robotics 2025). DIANA accelerators and test centres support development, demonstrating how technological advancements can pioneer applications of the principles of responsible use, which are then translated into tangible security frameworks to strengthen allied resilience and harden responsibility guardrails.

The Centre for Ocean Ventures and Entrepreneurship Accelerator

The Centre for Ocean Ventures and Entrepreneurship (COVE) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, exemplifies Canada's leadership in DIANA's innovation network, advancing responsible AI within the maritime and defence technology domains (Careless 2025). This accelerator includes dual-use technologies in the areas of maritime autonomous systems, subsea monitoring and advanced marine technology. It demonstrates a Canadian effort for responsible AI, embedding NATO's principles of responsible use and DND/CAF's AI strategy into the development of technology for commercial and defence applications in the sea domain. COVE provides a secure means for classified testing of trusted AI for threat detection and data fusion to minimize the risks of biased outputs and accelerate safe adoption.

By integrating national strategy with allied governance, COVE strengthens Canada's role in delivering secure, interoperable AI solutions that enhance maritime domain awareness. The COVE accelerator reinforces NATO's maritime innovation ecosystem, linking Canada's emerging technologies with ongoing maritime developments at NATO. REPMUS and Task Force X fielded AI-powered maritime autonomous systems, depicting the interdisciplinary nature of operationalizing responsible AI. The COVE accelerator provides a national example, suggesting how NATO-wide coordinated innovation infrastructure can accelerate responsible AI integration.

Key lessons from NATO's innovation ecosystem highlight how allies and partners can establish sovereign AI developments that align with alliance-wide responsble AI principles and support collaborative efforts to strengthen interoperability. COVE provides a case for how sovereign investment at home can align AI and EDT development with allied nations, as part of a prudent and pragmatic approach. National responsible AI alignment is fostered by DIANA accelerators advancing principles of responsible use, and by test centres supporting the development of local incentivized challenge programs designed based on the successes of these dual-use innovators. Such approaches enable nations to

strengthen domestic innovation ecosystems while contributing to responsibly governed AI capabilities for alliance interoperability.

Aligning Defence Industrial Innovation with Allied Responsible AI Frameworks

National and regional challenge programs can strengthen responsible AI development by mirroring NATO's collaborative model and tailoring it to domestic priorities. The identification of innovators for commercial and defence needs supports competitions to foster alignment with responsible AI in the national context. Competitive challenge programs can align with local needs by engaging various government levels and learning from DIANA's successes to develop federal, provincial and municipal challenges that foster Canadian innovation based on localized needs, incentives and values. This multi-level approach enhances Canada's ability to advance responsible innovation nationally while maintaining seamless alignment with allied technological and ethical standards.

Provincial initiatives illustrate how localized challenge programs can advance responsible innovation while addressing regional priorities. In January 2026, British Columbia launched a competition for companies to gain access to a total of 400 megawatts of electricity over two years to power AI and data centre projects. The approach was designed to support "long-term economic, environmental, community and data sovereignty benefits," while managing high electricity demand amid rising costs (The Canadian Press 2026). This competition provides an example of a provincial challenge program encouraging competition to foster innovation that meets local demands. Canada is well-positioned to integrate provincial efforts and those of other technology hubs across the country, given that the NATO DIANA North American regional office is based in Halifax (DND 2024b).

AI-powered developments from DCAIC and DND/CAF collaborative approaches, aligned with NATO's principles of responsible use, strengthen Canada's domestic responsible AI innovation capacity while ensuring seamless NATO interoperability. Canada's 2026 Defence Industrial Strategy advances dual-use innovation through initiatives such as the Drone Innovation Hub at the National Research Council Canada, marking a significant opportunity to align various centres focused on interdisciplinary approaches to AI-powered autonomous systems (Prime Minister of Canada 2026). Numerous fielded exercises, challenge programs and accelerators support the alignment of interoperability to embed principles of responsible AI into the hub's foundations to ensure Canadian innovation contributes to NATO's collective technological advantage.

Recommendation: Accelerate National and NATO Responsible AI Interoperability

- **Align national AI/EDT ecosystems with allied innovation initiatives:** Direct investments toward rapid adoption programs and multi-level (federal, provincial, municipal) competitive challenges to strengthen domestic innovation aligned with NATO.
- **Operationalize responsible AI through multi-sector challenge programs:** Foster national industry-academia challenge programs supporting NATO's technological adaptation, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and responsible AI governance.
- **Target investments in NATO-aligned interdisciplinary tech sectors:** Direct emerging technology funding toward DARB principles of responsible use operationalization, DIANA accelerators, test centres and challenge programs to advance interoperable solutions.
- **Institutionalize national NATO innovation coordination:** Establish a structured liaison framework linking Canada's DCAIC, DIANA's North American hub, accelerators and test centres with provincial networks to align research, data standards and testing.

Conclusion: Operationalize Responsible AI for Allied Interoperability

Rapid AI adaptation is a critical part of NATO's broader technology ambitions, affirming that responsible development deepens technological alignment among allies. NATO aligns collaboration among member states, academia and industry to develop robust AI governance frameworks to address the continuous evolution of emerging security threats. The AI-powered maritime autonomous systems developed at COVE, along with the multi-domain exercises fielded by NATO with REPMUS and Task Force X, suggest clear multi-domain approaches to innovate responsible AI. Together, these efforts underscore the alliance's commitment to advancing responsible innovation as the foundation for technology leadership.

Sustaining a collective technological edge requires allies to strengthen national innovation hubs and foster technology ecosystems that complement one another across the alliance. The practice of aligning approaches must foster strong national innovation hubs and technology ecosystems to provide numerous means to support the development of sovereign AI. By investing jointly in interoperable and responsible innovation ecosystems, allied nations can secure enduring leadership in emerging technologies critical to collective defence.

NATO exercises and the DIANA Challenge Programme demonstrate AI-powered autonomous systems advancing across disciplines through coordinated allied innovation featuring interrelated technologies. Aligning national technology ecosystems to support local competitive challenge programs at the federal, provincial and municipal levels includes investment in SMEs and local technology clusters. Partnerships enhance interdisciplinary and interoperable approaches across centres, helping nations build innovation ecosystems that balance sovereignty with collaboration among allies.

Canada's various initiatives demonstrate how sovereign investment aligns national AI and emerging technology development with allied efforts through partnership-driven responsible innovation. Allies can learn from the DIANA Challenge Programme to foster local competitions inspired by the example in British Columbia. Local engagement can balance economic, environmental and sovereignty goals while aligning approaches on responsible AI across national and alliance-wide perspectives. Sovereign technology clusters can strengthen Canada's innovation ecosystem while supporting NATO's broader technological adaptation goals.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
COVE	Centre for Ocean Ventures and Entrepreneurship
DARB	Data and Artificial Intelligence Review Board
DCAIC	DND/CAF AI Centre
DIANA	Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic
DND	Department of National Defence
EDTs	emerging and disruptive technologies
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
REPMUS	Robotic Experimentation and Prototyping with Maritime Unmanned Systems
SMEs	small and medium-sized enterprises

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