Resilience and National Defense: The Strength of Civil Society in the New European Geopolitical Reality

Abstract:

In the early days of the Second World War, Winston Churchill pledged "blood, toil, tears, and sweat" to the British nation, symbolizing its resolve in the face of war. This effort rested on three key pillars: determined leadership, the strength of British society, and its capacity for adaptation. Today, the war in Ukraine echoes that promise, revealing not only the devastation inherent to conventional armed conflict but also the growing threat of hybrid strategies, such as disinformation and cyberattacks, designed to destabilize states from within. In this evolving context, the deliberate infliction of civilian suffering as a means to erode the political will of democratic governments has become an increasingly pressing concern. In response, Europe has adopted a strategic approach centered on reinforcing collective defense and fostering resilient societies. This resilience, far from being an abstract concept, refers to the concrete ability of populations to confront threats, adapt to adverse circumstances, and maintain social cohesion.

Keywords:

Resilience, national defense, society, geopolitics, Europe.

How to quote:

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I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.

Sir Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister Address to the House of Commons, 13 May 1940.

Introduction

At the dawn of the Second World War, in the midst of the Battle of France, Sir Winston Churchill promised the British nation "blood, toil, tears and sweat." A phrase composed of three words that succinctly encapsulated the resilience of the British people in the face of the barbarity of war. Three factors proved decisive for such steadfast resolve: the determined leadership of the British Prime Minister, the strength and courage of British society, and its capacity for adaptation. Nearly a century later, the war in Ukraine has emerged as a turning point for European security, echoing those three words, blood, sweat and tears, as it ushers in a paradigm shift in the way armed conflicts are conceived and confronted in the twenty-first century. As in the Second World War, this conflict highlights not only the destructive impact of conventional military capabilities, but also the effectiveness of hybrid strategies, such as disinformation or cyberattacks, designed to destabilize states from within. One of the most concerning elements has been the systematic use of civilian suffering as a tool to erode the political will of democratic governments, exploiting their vulnerabilities and social fragilities as yet another front in the conflict. In response to this new reality, Europe has adopted a strategic approach based on two fundamental pillars: strengthening collective defence through the Atlantic Alliance, while seeking greater autonomy; and fostering resilient societies. This resilience is far from an abstract notion, as Sir Winston Churchill well understood, and instead manifests itself as the population's real capacity to confront the materialization of threats, from indiscriminate bombardment of civilian targets to massive energy outages or disinformation campaigns, to adapt to adverse environments, recover from the damage sustained, and preserve social cohesion and the continuity of daily life. Thus, the new European security paradigm appears to revisit the remarkable fortitude once displayed by British society, redefining both the concept of defence and the active role of societies in an increasingly volatile and hostile environment. But how can we enhance resilience

within our societies? Is there a roadmap for building a resilient society capable of adapting to the new geopolitical reality? By identifying the core characteristics that shape our geopolitical and social environment, we can determine the axis upon which our resilience strategy should pivot.

The new geopolitical reality

The new geopolitical reality is defined by the erosion of the Western-dominated unipolar order and the emergence of a clearly multipolar system, where powers such as China, Russia, and other rising regions compete for global influence. The war between Russia and Ukraine has symbolized the breakdown of international law and the weakening of multilateral institutions, revealing a scenario in which military force, economic coercion, and information manipulation outweigh diplomacy and cooperation. In this context, competing blocs consolidate not only in military or economic terms but also in technological and cultural dimensions, shaping an international landscape that is increasingly fragmented and volatile[1].

Alongside states, non-state actors, technological corporations, armed groups, transnational organizations, and even digital networks, are acquiring growing prominence, transforming both the instruments of power and the nature of conflict. As a consequence, the trend toward remilitarization and the coercive use of economic tools has replaced the logic of dialogue with that of pressure and deterrence[2]. In parallel, new forms of hybrid aggression have emerged: cyber operations, cognitive manipulation, and the use of low-cost, high-effectiveness systems, such as drones, capable of inflicting significant strategic damage[3]. Taken together, these dynamics point toward an international order in transition, where the rules are still being written and stability depends on the capacity to adapt to a global distribution of power that is increasingly diffuse and less predictable[4].

For Europe, this scenario entails growing exposure to risks that may produce severe and harmful consequences for its population, not only in terms of security, but also in the

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[1] CENTRO CONJUNTO DE DESARROLLO DE CONCEPTOS (EMAD). "Entorno Operativo 2035. 1ª Revisión". Estado Mayor de la Defensa. Madrid, 2022.

[2] NATO. "Interdependency in Resilience. Building resilience. Collaborative proposals to help nations and partners". Norfolk. Allied Commnad Transformation – ACT, 2017.

[3] Ibídem.

[4] CENTRO CONJUNTO DE DESARROLLO DE CONCEPTOS (EMAD). Entorno Operativo 2035. Op. Cit.

economic sphere, social stability, and even physical integrity. Hybrid threats, cyberattacks, and information manipulation can destabilize democratic institutions and erode public trust, while the possibility of high-intensity conflicts along its periphery, or even within its territory, revives fears of civilian casualties and the destruction of critical infrastructure such as energy grids, transportation systems, and communication networks[5]. In this regard, developments in Ukraine offer a stark illustration of the characteristics of future conflicts: massive population displacement, widespread destruction of critical infrastructure, and a high number of civilian victims. The need to anticipate and mitigate such scenarios is therefore urgent and unavoidable.

Faced with this reality, the continent is compelled to strengthen its collective defence mechanisms, both within NATO and the European Union, reinforcing its ability to respond to multidimensional crises that combine military, technological, and social threats. Building a more resilient Europe requires investment in strategic capabilities, enhanced cooperation in intelligence and defence, and preparing citizens for emergencies, with the aim of protecting populations and safeguarding the stability of its political model in an increasingly hostile, uncertain, and competitive geopolitical environment. Yet a question remains: what strategy can we pursue to ensure that our society is prepared to withstand the initial blow, recover, adapt to the new circumstances, and ultimately prevail?

Resilience as the axis of security

Within NATO, the concept of resilience has its roots in Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that "in order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." In this sense, this definition establishes the foundation upon which the Alliance's ability to fulfil its core missions is built, particularly deterrence and defence[6]. For the Alliance, therefore, resilience is understood as both a national responsibility and a collective commitment[7]. Each Ally must be prepared and capable of adapting to the full spectrum of conflict and to any crisis the Alliance may foresee. At the same time,

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[5] NATO. "Interdependency in Resilience. Building resilience. Collaborative proposals to help nations and partners". Op. Cit.
[6] NATO. "North Atlantic Treaty". Washington D.C. 4th April 1949.
[7] Ibídem.

maintaining and strengthening the resilience of each individual Ally directly contributes to reducing NATO's overall vulnerability, thereby reinforcing collective security[8]. In this context, resilience refers to the capacity to prepare for, withstand, respond to, and rapidly recover from a crisis or large-scale attack. It is for this reason that strengthening resilience is primarily a national responsibility, with the sum of these national efforts constituting the common denominator of Allied resilience. In this regard, Allies can enhance their resilience through the development of defensive capabilities, guaranteed access to critical infrastructure, and contingency and recovery planning for crisis situations.

Taken together, resilience not only reinforces NATO's ability to respond to threats, but also constitutes a key element of its internal cohesion, its deterrence credibility, and its collective defence capabilities. Deterrence, defensive capacity… Does resilience influence the capacity to deter or to defend/respond against an adversary's attack? To what extent are armed forces dependent on the resilience of the society that sustains them?

The Capacity to Withstand: Resilience vs. Vulnerability

During the Cold War, most civilian infrastructure, railways, ports, airports, or energy networks, was state-owned and could be easily transferred to NATO control in times of crisis or war. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a reduction in investment in civil preparedness and to an increasing reliance on private actors to provide critical services and infrastructure[9]. In this respect, Allies have deepened their dependence on civilian assets and capabilities, fundamentally linked to the private sector, not only to support the projection and movement of military forces, but also for the sustainment and maintenance of their capabilities[10]. The extent of this dependence can be illustrated through several figures[11]:

- Around 90% of military transportation for large-scale operations is provided by civilian assets chartered or requisitioned from the commercial sector;

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[8] NATO. "The Secretary General's Annual Report 2017". Brussels, 2018.

[9] PRIOR, T. "NATO pushing Boundaries for Resilience". CSS Analysen in Security Policy, nº 213/09/207, Zurich, 2017.

[10] NATO. "Civil preparedness underpins a society's resilience". Mission of Finland to NATO, 2017.

[11] Ibídem.

- More than 70% of satellite communications used for defence purposes are supplied by the commercial sector;

- Approximately 95% of transatlantic Internet traffic, including military communications, is carried through undersea fibre-optic cable networks, most of which are owned and operated by private-sector entities;

- Around 75% of host nation support for NATO operations comes from local commercial infrastructure and services.

Reinforcing this trend, as international terrorist threats became more frequent, Allied operations were increasingly conducted outside NATO territory, which did not require substantial involvement of Allied civil preparedness resources. Outsourcing of tasks, requirements, and essential non-combat military capabilities became the norm[12].

However, the international situation has once again refocused attention on the need to avoid excessive dependence on the civilian and private sectors. Indeed, Allies are reassessing their own vulnerabilities as well as their preparedness systems in order to deter and effectively defend against contemporary security threats. Consequently, the Alliance is strengthening its deterrence and defence posture, particularly by reinforcing civil preparedness and national resilience[13].

In fact, in today's security environment, effective and sustained resilience requires the full range of military and civilian capabilities, as well as a whole-of-society approach that includes active cooperation among government, the private sector, and civil society. Yet this raises an essential question: Is it possible to strengthen a society's resilience? And if so, what mechanisms can be used to reinforce it? The answer to this compelling question is affirmative. Indeed, it is possible to replicate, or at least emulate, the widely praised resilience of British society during the Second World War, embodied in the famous call to *"blood, sweat and tears…"*

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[12] PRIOR, T. Op. Cit.
[13] NATO. Interdependency in Resilience. Building resilience. Collaborative proposals to help nations and partners. Op. Cit.

The Key: Strengthening Resilience

In this regard, at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, Allied leaders agreed to increase the Alliance's resilience in order to be able to address the full spectrum of conflict[14]. To this end, they committed to developing the individual capacity of member states to withstand any form of armed attack. Accordingly, they agreed upon seven baseline requirements to strengthen national resilience and assess its overall level. These requirements are[15]:

1. Ensuring the functioning of government and critical public services, including the ability to make decisions and communicate with citizens during a crisis.

2. Maintaining resilient energy supplies, guaranteeing continuity and establishing contingency and backup plans to manage interruptions and power outages.

3. Effectively managing uncontrolled movements of people, preventing such movements from interfering with the deployment and mobility of military capabilities.

4. Ensuring resilient food and water resources, capable of guaranteeing supply and withstanding disruption or sabotage.

5. Responding to mass-casualty scenarios and acute health crises, ensuring that public and private health systems can cope with severe emergencies and that medical supplies are available and sufficient.

6. Maintaining resilient communication systems, ensuring that telecommunications and cyber networks can operate even under crisis conditions, with sufficient backup capacity.

7. Ensuring resilient transportation systems, enabling military forces and civil protection units to move rapidly across Alliance territory.

Ultimately, these seven baseline requirements share three core functions of civil preparedness, which must be maintained even under the most demanding circumstances: continuity of government; essential services for the population; and civil support to the military[16].

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[14] NATO. "Commitment to enhance resilience". Warsaw, 8-9 July 2016.
[15] Ibídem.
[16] CIVIL EMERGENCY PLANNING COMMITTE (CEPEC). "Factsheet on baseline requirements for

Since then, and especially following the impact of the war in Ukraine, the direction of the Alliance has moved decisively toward strengthening resilience. In this respect, in 2021 the Allies agreed to adopt a more integrated and better-coordinated approach to enhancing resilience. Thus, in the 2022 Strategic Concept, resilience is identified as a fundamental pillar of the Alliance's missions: deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security[17]. The Strategic Concept further specifies that Allies must strengthen their national resilience against both military and non-military threats and challenges. Consequently, NATO established the High-Level Resilience Committee with the purpose of providing political and strategic guidance to member states on issues such as critical infrastructure protection, disinformation, and supply-chain security[18].

Indeed, it is clear that a military force deployed during a crisis or conflict depends heavily on civilian and commercial sectors, such as transportation, communications, energy, and essential supplies (food, water, etc.) [19], to fulfil its missions effectively. In this sense, effective civil preparedness is essential to ensure that these sectors are capable of withstanding attacks or disruptions and of continuing to support NATO forces under any circumstances. This raises a crucial question: how can we improve our civil preparedness so that it contributes effectively to our national defence?

Civil preparedness as a means to enhance societal resilience

In March 2024, the European Commission launched its Preparedness Union Strategy. The document outlines up to 30 key actions aimed at integrating a "preparedness by design" philosophy across all European Union policies[20]. These actions include, for example, the creation of a crisis hub to improve coordination among different agencies and institutions; the establishment of minimum preparedness standards for essential services; the proposal of regular Union-wide emergency drills; and even the integration

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national resilience and resilience guidelines". Brussels, 2016.

[17] NATO. "NATO Strategic Concept 2022".
https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

[18] NATO. "Strengthened the Resilience Commitment". NATO - Official text: Strengthened Resilience Commitment (2021), 14-Jun.-2021

[19] CIVIL EMERGENCY PLANNING COMMITTE (CEPEC), Op. Cit.

[20] European Union (EU). "Preparedness Union Strategy: reinforcing Europe's resilience in a changing world". European Union External Action, 2024. Preparedness Union Strategy: reinforcing Europe's resilience in a changing world | EEAS

of concepts related to coping with and overcoming crises into the educational system[21]. Additionally, and almost simultaneously, the European Commission published the EU Defence White Paper, which emphasized the need to combine the development and acquisition of military capabilities with the strengthening of the Union's collective resilience[22].

It appears evident that the European Union and its Member States seek to prepare their institutions—both public and private—to respond to extraordinary crisis situations. Official documents establish a series of measures intended to strengthen the resilience of our societies. These measures include, among others, the following actions:

1. Establishing protocols outlining how to act in the event of an emergency or when credible threats emerge[23].

2. Strengthening the civil protection system to address emergency situations. This enhanced civil protection system must be equipped with the units and bodies necessary to prevent disruptions and ensure the continuity of vital sectors such as energy, transport, communications, health, food, and water[24].

3. Creating strategic reserves and ensuring the stockpiling of essential goods, protective equipment, and certain critical raw materials[25].

4. Conducting periodic risk assessments, while operators of critical infrastructure must implement technical, security, and organizational measures to ensure preparedness and must notify governments of any incidents[26].

5. Establishing a common European framework as the most effective way to share resources and avoid redundancies, noting that decentralized networks of vital resource reserves are less vulnerable to attacks and sabotage[27].

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[21] Ibídem.

[22] European Union (EU). "White Paper for European Defense: Readiness 2030". European Commission, 2025. White paper for European defence - Readiness 2030 - Defence Industry and Space

[23] European Union (EU). "EU preparedness union strategy: Getting ready to respond crisis". European Commission, 2025. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/preparedness_en

[24] Ibídem.

[25] Garantizar este abastecimiento pasa, entre otras medidas, por diversificar las fuentes de obtención e implementar diferentes y diversas rutas de suministro. GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA. "La resiliencia en el marco de la seguridad nacional". Ministerio de la Presidencia. Marzo, 2024.

[26] Ibídem.

[27] European Union (EU). "Critical infrastructure resilience at EU-level". European Commission, 2024. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-

6. Strengthening communication systems so that they remain secure, particularly when conventional networks fail. Public information systems must also be reinforced to ensure constant availability and the transmission of clear and regular messages with adequate security safeguards[28].

7. For private operators of critical infrastructure, such as those managing energy networks, telecommunications, or food-supply chains, there must be mandatory requirements to protect their operations by establishing firewalls, enhancing physical security, and performing backups. They must also develop emergency protocols, adopt contingency plans, and conduct regular tests and stress assessments, all with the aim of ensuring the continuity and/or restoration of the public services they provide[29].

All these actions are directed toward preparing and strengthening the public–private sector. But what about the preparedness of individual citizens, who are also a substantial part of society? During the Battle of Britain, Londoners embodied the famous "keep calm and carry on", demonstrating remarkable resilience and fortitude[30]. Thus, each citizen and the community to which they belong play a fundamental and extremely important role when confronting a crisis. When the population is well prepared, adequately supplied with essential goods, and properly trained to respond to emergencies, the likelihood of a country achieving meaningful resilience increases considerably. The British society of the Second World War stands as clear evidence of this.

However, contemporary examples also exist, such as the Nordic "total defence" model, which many European countries are beginning to emulate[31]. In this regard, nations such as Finland, Sweden, and Norway have, since the Cold War, developed a total defence approach that fully integrates civil society into national defence. This civil preparedness includes, among other activities, training in first aid, crisis management, territorial defence, and institutional continuity. Moreover, as the highest expression of societal

radicalisation/protection/critical-infrastructure-resilience-eu-level_en?utm_source=chatgpt.com#directive-on-the-resilience-of-critical-entities

[28] Ibídem.

[29] European Union (EU). "EU preparedness union strategy: Getting ready to respond crisis", Op. Cit.

[30] ELPAIS. "Keep calm and carry on. La historia de un lema". 2012. Keep calm and carry on, historia de un lema que cualquiera puede hacer suyo | S Moda: Revista de moda, belleza, tendencias y famosos | EL PAÍS

[31] ALANDER, M. "Deepening total defence: Northern Europe's strategic advantage". Britains World. Council of Geostrategy. 2025.

preparedness, periodic emergency simulations and drills are conducted in workplaces, schools, and training centres[32].

Nevertheless, strengthening the public–private sector and fostering citizen preparedness are only two fundamental components that require integration within the broader national defence ecosystem. For this reason, at the 2024 Washington Summit, Allies committed to enhancing national resilience by integrating civil emergency planning into national defense plans[33]. But why integrate civil protection plans and civil defense with national defense planning? The answer is not incidental: integrating the civil and military dimensions of resilience is essential for establishing a comprehensive national resilience system capable of responding to complex crises.

Integration of defense and civil protection into national defence

Military efforts to protect Allied territory and populations must be accompanied by robust civil preparedness capable of reducing potential vulnerabilities and mitigating risks in times of peace as well as during crises and conflicts. As previously noted, this civil preparedness fulfils three essential functions: ensuring the continuity of government, maintaining the provision of essential services to the population, and providing civilian support to military operations[34]. It therefore seems evident that resilience must be anchored in strong cooperation between civilian and military stakeholders, an arrangement that benefits both sides, in peacetime as well as in times of crisis.

As demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, military assistance to civil authorities can provide crucial support when civilian resources are under severe pressure. At the same time, civilian support is indispensable for enabling and sustaining military forces in times of crisis, whether through technical expertise or access to critical commercial infrastructure and services. But how can these two dimensions—civil and military—of resilience be integrated? Numerous examples illustrate this. Exercises provide an excellent paradigm and an effective method for stress-testing national preparedness. They are a valuable tool for practicing responses to large-scale contingencies, such as

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[32] BRAW. E. "Scandinavia's Homeland Defence: A Model for Other Countries?". The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). 2018.
[33] NATO. "Washington Summit Declaration". 2024. NATO - Official text: Washington Summit Declaration issued by NATO Heads of State and Government (2024), 10-Jul.-2024
[34] CIVIL EMERGENCY PLANNING COMMITTE (CEPEC), Op. Cit.

surprise attacks with devastating effects or hybrid-warfare scenarios. Therefore, it is essential to incorporate civil preparedness elements into military exercises, integrating them at all levels, from strategic-level crisis management exercises to tactical-level training activities[35].

For instance, the exercise *Steadfast Defender 2024*, the largest NATO military deployment since the end of the Cold War, helped assess the Alliance's resilience. With the participation of more than 90,000 personnel from 32 Allied countries, its principal objective was to demonstrate the Alliance's ability to defend its entire area of responsibility, mobilizing reinforcements from North America to Europe across the Atlantic Ocean, and throughout northern and eastern Europe. Its execution showed that the massive movement of troops and military materiel across different countries requires close coordination with civil authorities, particularly in matters of transportation, logistics, and infrastructure—highlighting the need to ensure the resilience of civilian infrastructure and the continuity of essential services[36].

Conclusions

The war in Ukraine has profoundly reshaped the European security landscape, demonstrating that national defence can no longer be confined to the military domain alone. In an era of hybrid threats, cyberattacks, information manipulation, and vulnerabilities in critical infrastructure, societal resilience emerges as a key factor in national defence. In this context, the strength of civil societies—their ability to adapt to and recover from multidimensional cri000ses—becomes a strategic asset as decisive as military deterrence itself.

Examining history—from British resilience during the Second World War to the Nordic "total defence" model—demonstrates that a well-prepared population, aware of its role, can sustain national cohesion even under the most adverse conditions. For this reason, European nations must not only establish clear frameworks to strengthen their states' capacities to resist, respond to, and recover from any form of attack or crisis. They must also promote *preparedness by design*, from a micro to a macro perspective, reinforcing both public institutions and private actors against critical disruptions—preparedness from

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[35] NATO. "Steadfast Defender 2024". https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/222847.htm
[36] Ibídem.

the individual to the organization. This holistic vision of security, based on anticipation, coordination, and civic education, expands the classical concept of defence toward a *total societal security* approach.

Ultimately, Europe's strength in the face of the new geopolitical reality will depend not only on its military power, but on its collective ability to withstand, adapt, and maintain social cohesion in the face of any threat. Only a resilient, prepared, and committed society will be able to safeguard the peace, freedom, and democratic values that constitute the essence of its defence. For, just as in the darkest days of European history—and paraphrasing that famous phrase by Sir Winston Churchill, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat"—survival and victory will depend not solely on weapons, but on the indomitable will of its peoples and their capacity for resistance.

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