



NATO's Resilience: The first and last line of defence

JONNY HALL & HUGH SANDEMAN



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The determined resistance by Ukraine's armed forces and civil society against the Russian invasion that began in February 2022 is a vivid demonstration of the central importance of military and societal resilience in the face of external shocks. Civil and military preparedness may help save Ukraine as an independent country. Had Moscow understood more clearly the ability of Ukraine to resist Russian military advances and maintain its sense of national purpose, the Kremlin may have been deterred from launching the invasion.

The war in Ukraine adds further urgency to updating NATO's thinking about the resilience of alliance members, which will be reflected in the June 2022 Strategic Concept. Resilience in the face of armed attack is a fundamental commitment of NATO's 1949 Treaty, with Article 3 stating that parties to the treaty will “separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid ... maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack”.

The need for much broader political, economic, technological and societal resilience in the face of hostile acts below the threshold of war is a challenge only fully recognised by NATO since the Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014. This refocusing began at the 2016 Warsaw Summit with the formulation of seven baseline requirements for national resilience and was followed by the 2020 Warfighting Capstone Concept, which argued that “layered resilience”

would be one of the five “development imperatives” to ensure success in an era of persistent competition below the level of war.¹

The 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué noted that enhancing resilience was “essential for credible deterrence ... and the effective fulfilment of the alliance’s core tasks”. A “Strengthened Resilience Commitment” was made at the Summit, which pledged to “develop a proposal to establish, assess, review and monitor resilience objectives”.² NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg alluded to resilience as one of the five “critical” elements of the forthcoming Strategic Concept (due to be adopted at the June 2022 Madrid Summit), stating that “our people and our institutions must be able to better resist and bounce back from attacks”.³ It seems unlikely that the 2022 Strategic Concept will—like its 2010 predecessor—feature just one reference to resilience.⁴

The Strengthened Resilience Commitment exemplifies the continuing debate within NATO on the organisation’s future reach and authority vis-à-vis member states. In the case of resilience, the assumption that each ally will determine how to define and meet its national resilience objectives remains in place. At the same time, NATO is keen to enhance collective security through encouraging a more coordinated and harmonised approach with clearer, more measurable and broader alliance-wide resilience objectives. This

is in keeping with the vision of a more politically oriented NATO as set out in the organisation’s 2030 agenda.

This Strategic Update makes two proposals towards ensuring that attempts to strengthen resilience within NATO deliver practical results.

First, locating the effort to improve resilience firmly in the context of NATO’s new approach to deterrence can resolve the tension between long-established requirements for resilience in meeting armed attack and the newer, broader requirements for resilience against hostile acts below the threshold of war. This should help to maintain the focus on reducing vulnerabilities and threats to security, ensuring that NATO’s forces can operate effectively in varying states of peace, crisis and conflict.

Second, by adopting and improving a consultative approach to resilience that is similar to the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), NATO can avoid applying a bureaucratic and probably unproductive checklist for evaluating progress in the national resilience of member states. This would involve agreeing what each state individually should set as its resilience priorities, with the collective resilience of the whole alliance as a parallel objective.

These recommendations are reached in three steps: answering the question of what resilience is; analysing NATO’s evolving role in issues of national resilience

among its members; and outlining the political challenge of setting and meeting resilience objectives.

What Is Resilience?

NATO defines resilience as “a society’s ability to resist and recover from such shocks” as natural disaster, failure of critical infrastructure, or a hybrid or armed attack.⁵

This definition touches on two features of resilience: First, resilience concerns the ability to absorb and recover from a state of crisis.⁶ Second, resilient actors must be able to respond to a range of potential shocks, both expected and unexpected. This relates to the ability to survive; as one widely adopted definition of resilience puts it, an actor must be able “to maintain its core purpose ... in the face of dramatically changed circumstances”.⁷ This can be seen in NATO’s seven baseline requirements for national resilience, which represent an effort to delineate the core components of a functioning state by focusing on the continuity of government and hospital services, energy supplies, food and water resources, communication networks, and transport systems.⁸ Conceived as the power to survive in crises, resilience can be seen as a defensive and reactive concept.

Resilience is as much about coping with all possible eventualities as trying to anticipate specific events. While national preparedness for systemic shocks is now motivated by at least some clearly identifiable defence and national security priorities, it is still helpful to take a generic approach to preparing for unexpected shocks. Such generic measures include allocation of responsibilities at the national, regional and local level; the requirement for a single lead agency at the centre of government in any emergency; disciplines for exercising pre-agreed procedures with senior people involved; and rolling audit programmes to test that these disciplines remain effective.⁹

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Resilience, therefore, has political and psychological as well as physical dimensions.¹⁰ It can be viewed in exclusively material terms as shown above, but also as a psychological mindset held by groups or individuals which allows them to function in the face of adversity. Structures and procedures for coping with shocks cannot ensure national resilience in a crisis if the mindset for responding effectively is not there. It was this mindset for recognising and rising to an emergency that was missing in the UK's initial response to the COVID-19 emergency in early 2020. The same applies to Europe's response to the Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, when the governments of larger European powers did not fully register the alarm felt on the continent's northern and south-eastern borders.

Conceived as a mindset to respond to adversity, resilience thus entails a “social dimension, located not only in the state but also among the actors of civil society”.¹¹ It is this societal cohesion that Russian information warfare has explicitly targeted in its attempts to undermine the political stability of NATO states. In response, a whole-of-society approach has formed the basis of NATO's increased cooperation with the European Union on encouraging societal resilience, such as the 2016 joint EU-NATO declaration.¹²

Military, physical, political and societal resilience have the potential to deter as well as defend. As NATO's Brussels Communiqué recognised, the capacity for resilience can influence the policies of opponents by deterring them from armed attack or other offensive measures.¹³ Effective and visible resilience is therefore strongly linked to deterrence by denial. Contrary to the idea of deterrence by punishment, which threatens actors with severe penalties if they launch an attack, deterrence by denial seeks to deter actions by making them appear unlikely to succeed.¹⁴

NATO's Role in National Resilience

While the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept mentioned potential threats arising from technological development and climate change, it did not give much thought to resilience in the face of these challenges.¹⁵ The invasion of Crimea, the subsequent intensification of hostile measures short of war against NATO members, and now the invasion of Ukraine have concentrated the attention of the alliance on the ability of society as a whole, and not just the military, to withstand shocks.

At the 2021 Brussels Summit, NATO adopted a Strengthened Resilience Commitment, which established the principle that NATO would monitor and evaluate resilience policies adopted by member states, while recognising that national resilience remains a matter for individual alliance members.¹⁶ The seven baseline goals of resilience, adopted at the 2016 Warsaw Summit and re-stated at the 2021 Brussels Summit, aim to ensure resilience in respect to:

- continuity of government and critical government services,
- energy supplies,
- uncontrolled movement of people,
- food and water,
- mass casualties,
- civil communications, and
- civil transportation.¹⁷

NATO members made a number of further promises in 2021 to enhance resilience: securing and diversifying supply chains; protecting critical infrastructure (on land, at sea, in space and in cyberspace) and key industries, including by shielding them from harmful economic activities; addressing the impact of emerging technologies; securing next-generation communications systems; and protecting technology and intellectual property.¹⁸ At the same time, members revisited the original commitment to resilience in the face of armed conflict with a pledge to “enhance resilience by strengthening our efforts to invest in robust, flexible and interoperable military capabilities”.¹⁹

The tendency to conflate Article 3 resilience obligations and the wider responsibilities of the “baseline” requirements was carried over into the Strengthened Resilience Commitment. The 2021 Summit Communiqué spoke of NATO adopting “a more integrated and better coordinated approach, consistent with our collective commitment under Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, to reduce vulnerabilities and ensure our militaries can effectively operate in peace, crisis and conflict”.²⁰ It was agreed that “allies will develop a proposal to establish, assess, review and monitor resilience objectives to guide nationally-developed resilience goals and implementation plans”.²¹ Each individual ally was to decide how to do this.

Apart from the potentially troublesome issue of how numerous national resilience goals may or may not aggregate into “collective resilience”, there is a challenge of how to create common standards when resilience remains the responsibility of individual members. This problem is particularly apparent in terms of concerns about “weak links” within NATO. When outlining the forthcoming Strategic Concept, Secretary General Stoltenberg noted in his discussion of resilience that “this must be a collective effort ... because we are only as strong as our weakest link”.²² Concerns about “weak links” within NATO have grown in the post-Cold War era. Not only has NATO relied on internal cohesion around the significance of liberal values to provide its continuing rationale after the dissolution of the Soviet Union,²³ but the diffusion of power in the contemporary international security environment means that American military might cannot alone provide the balancing force it once did. This makes national resilience all the more important.

The Political Challenges of Resilience

A further set of challenges for NATO members regarding resilience policies revolve around efficiency and costs. The drive towards greater efficiency that underlies modern economies and societies can inhibit resilience. As Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy note, “a seemingly perfect system is often the most fragile, while a

dynamic system, subject to occasional failure, can be the most robust”.²⁴

This is a consequence of individual actions having wider effects in more interdependent systems. Advances in information and communication technologies and the growth of cross-border economic interdependence, for example, have increased vulnerabilities to disruption.²⁵ As Secretary General Stoltenberg put it, NATO members might be “more prosperous” in “today’s interconnected and digital world ... but they are also ... more vulnerable”.²⁶ Hence there is the need, as underlined in the Strengthened Resilience Commitment, to work with the whole of government and non-governmental sectors to increase NATO resilience.²⁷

However, creating resilience is almost inherently expensive. Unlike efficient systems that engage with existing environments, proactive resilience measures plan for worst-case scenarios that may not even emerge. This creates a dilemma for politicians who wish to be seen neither to over- nor underreact to potential shocks. Take the example of disease prevention in the United States. The 1976 “swine flu affair” was marked by a significant degree of government action, including \$137 million spent on vaccine research and the costs of inoculating 40 million Americans before the “sorry debacle” was abandoned as unnecessary, as *The New York Times* put it.²⁸ On the other hand, the Trump administration called for

a 17 percent cut in funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) just two years before the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁹ The Trump case is indicative of policies in the era of austerity that followed the 2008-2009 financial crisis, as NATO members have generally hedged their bets against hypothetical shocks by reducing funding. The problem of cost-saving is acute given that, unlike during the Cold War, contemporary critical national infrastructure such as internet providers and mobile networks are principally run by private companies who are especially geared towards efficiency.³⁰

To justify the costs and attention necessary to implement proactive resilience measures, a third challenge emerges for NATO and governments of alliance members: how to encourage whole-of-society resilience without adverse side effects. As highlighted by Secretary General Stoltenberg, the contemporary security environment means that “it is not enough to have strong militaries alone” as NATO also “need[s] strong societies”.³¹ This is necessary for defence and deterrence: cohesive societies will not only generate resilience in the face of adversity but may also discourage the belief by adversaries that hostile behaviour will prevail. But the required public mindset cannot be built without trust in the message that the authorities are trying to get across. If the messaging is regarded as opportunistic or politically motivated, the effort will fail. This is particularly true in an era of

widespread political polarisation, given that “resilience is often a measure of the public’s confidence in ... government”.³²

Policy Recommendations

NATO could resolve the tension between its collective responsibility for resilience and the continuing national responsibility among member states for implementing resilience measures by addressing resilience in the framework of deterrence and defence.

This aligns with the concept of deterrence used in the 2019 NATO Military Strategy and the 2020 Concept for the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area, which focuses less on crisis response and more on how deterrence can be used in persistent competition.³³ The growing use of hostile measures short of war—which prompted the search for more sustained and wider resilience after 2014—has increased the importance of deterrence by denial.

Considering resilience within the context of deterrence will establish the overarching logic of NATO’s engagement with resilience issues and encourage the practicalities of moving towards “collective resilience”. As a form of deterrence, resilience policies will need to meet the three key criteria of all forms of deterrence: commitment, capability and communication.³⁴

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Commitment to strengthening resilience, already significantly enhanced among member states after the Russian invasion of Crimea, will be greatly strengthened by the war in Ukraine. It will be important for NATO and its members to take advantage of the political capital created by these developments and the COVID-19 pandemic in enacting costly resilience measures. NATO should therefore focus on four aspects of resilience rather than the broader seven baseline requirements. These are: continuity in energy and essential supplies; the security of the digital realm to ensure key socio-economic functions; maintaining the independence of critical technologies beyond the control of adversaries; and the ability to detect and dispel disinformation.

In terms of **capability**, NATO should adopt a practical approach to helping the process of strengthening alliance-wide resilience. Rather than trying to “establish, assess, review and monitor broad resilience objectives to guide nationally-developed resilience goals”, NATO should start the other way round. A similar approach to the NDPP, which consults with allies about their military plans, could be taken to encourage the harmonisation of member state and NATO objectives concerning resilience.

The NDPP identifies shortfalls in NATO capabilities before setting, assisting and reviewing the efforts of individual members to achieve country-specific targets aimed at resolving weaknesses and strengthening NATO’s defensive posture.³⁵ As a process tailored for each member, “capability targets” are produced for each member according to the “political principles of fair burden-sharing”.³⁶ Though this expectedly produces political tensions surrounding the issue of what is “fair”, it represents a more nuanced and realistic approach than the adoption of organisation-wide requirements. As argued above, it would still be advisable for NATO to set relatively few, clearly understandable goals that allow for the positive effects of peer competition, much

like the success of the Defence Investment Pledge of 2014 in which members committed to spend at least 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product on defence and 20 percent of defence spending on major new equipment within a decade.³⁷ Resisting the temptation to set numerous goals also helps bring clarity and focus to avoid potential gaps between rhetorical commitments and policy fulfilment.

Lastly, **communication** with both internal and external audiences will be essential to fostering resilience within NATO. The ability to demonstrate resilience to external audiences can serve as an effective deterrent against aggressive action. As with NATO's annual military deterrence exercise,³⁸ comprehensive preparation and regular exercises can play an important role in resilience measures by enhancing deterrence by denial. Exercises can get messages across to allies and domestic audiences.³⁹ Societal and psychological resilience is also an essential complement to developing physical resilience capabilities. This was exemplified in 2018 by NATO partner Sweden's delivery of a brochure to every household titled "If War or Crisis Comes", which offered advice on what to do in events of power shortages or loss of internet access.⁴⁰ The leaflet stated that "everyone who lives in Sweden shares a collective responsibility for our country's security and safety".⁴¹

One avenue for building societal resilience that could be explored by NATO members is working with creative industries to put across the need—and help create a narrative—for preparation for crisis events. Following precedents from the Cold War, in 2019 the French military employed science fiction writers to assist in conceptualising potential threats to national security.⁴² The same logic could be applied to getting the public to think about unfamiliar scenarios that may emerge in the contemporary and future security environment. ■

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Ahead of NATO's Madrid Summit in June 2022, Hugh Sandeman and Jonny Hall confront the political challenges posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine to the alliance's 2021 Strengthened Resilience Commitment, especially in creating collective standards when resilience remains the responsibility of individual member states. The authors find that resilience is a psychological mindset as well as a material factor, and NATO's 'whole-of-society' approach should be framed within the concept of 'deterrence by denial' to potential threats.

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