Network for Effective Security

From Nuclear Deterrence to Democratic Resilience: Towards a 21st Century Security Paradigm

Policy Paper

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Abstract

The key proposition of the policy paper is the need for a shift in security thinking from a belief in the relevance of nuclear deterrence towards democratic resilience which offers a safer, more effective path to securing Europe and defending democratic values than nuclear deterrence. The paper warns against a knee-jerk reaction to the current context that is rooted in Cold War thinking and the logic of deterrence. The paper presents findings from of a two-year study, drawing on research from both in-house experts and members of the Network for Effective Security, a group of scholars and practitioners from across Europe and North America.

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Executive Summary

- The key proposition of this policy paper is the need for a shift in security thinking from a belief in the relevance of nuclear deterrence towards *democratic resilience*. Democratic resilience offers a safer, more effective path to securing Europe and defending democratic values than nuclear deterrence. It calls for a renewed commitment to human security and international law.
- In response to Russia's war against Ukraine and growing uncertainty about the US commitment to European security, European countries have agreed to increase defence spending and are discussing the possibility of a European nuclear deterrent. There is, however, very little public discussion about the nature of current threats and about the most appropriate way to counter them. There is a risk that decisions being taken now may mis-frame the threat, with long-term dangerous implications for the future.
- European countries should continue to provide military and financial support to Ukraine and to help strengthen the conventional defence of the frontline states. However, the main security challenge confronting European countries is the political threat to democracy coming from the authoritarian right both within our societies and beyond, where the aim is chaos, disorder and polarisation, which Russia seeks to exploit using so-called 'hybrid' aggression.
- The paper warns against a knee-jerk reaction to the current context that is rooted in Cold War thinking and the logic of deterrence. Such an approach is likely to perpetuate a dangerous, provocative, expensive and environmentally damaging permanent imaginary war. This could exacerbate the vulnerabilities of European societies to hybrid tools, contributing to divisive ideologies and socio-economic inequalities.
- Democratic resilience includes conventional defence, societal resilience and a political strategy of increasing democratic participation and addressing cleavages in societies. The paper uses the term 'resilience' rather than deterrence not just because deterrence is associated with nuclear weapons and fear and terror, but because the whole conceptual apparatus of deterrence is difficult to adapt to these sorts of situations. Resilience is about immunity, about withstanding major disruptions rather than trying to persuade adversaries to change their behaviour.
- European conventional forces do require significant rebuilding given the shift in relations with Russia, doubts about US commitments, and the non-credibility of seeking to deter all contingencies with nuclear weapons. But *how* conventional forces are designed matters at least as much as *how much* is spent. The paper

makes the case for a public debate about strategy, manoeuvrist warfighting concepts, and alternatives that take political constraints seriously. It also calls for a rethinking of conventional procurement modalities in the light of the Ukraine war.

- Investments in conventional defence should be coupled with proportionate efforts to strengthen civil society, civil participation, and civil preparedness to counter hybrid threats as well as reducing society's vulnerabilities to extremist politics. Economic sanctions remain an important tool both by weakening adversary military capability and through targeted measures against regimes and individuals who undermine democratic institutions.
- Finally, the paper emphasises that European security cannot be disconnected from global challenges, like conflicts in places like Africa or the Middle East or Asia, climate change, migration and extreme poverty, and that foreign aid and international cooperation are essential components of democratic resilience.

Introduction

The war in Ukraine and advent of the Trump administration have triggered remilitarisation and renuclearisation in Europe. In 2024, total military spending in Europe increased by 17% to $693 billion (SIPRI 2025a). Germany now has the fourth largest military budget in the world, with 23.2% real growth between 2023 and 2024, while Poland became the 13th largest military spender and is expected to spend 4.7% of its GDP on the military in 2025 (SIPRI 2025a). In 2025, the UK government also introduced plans to increase defence spending from 2.3 to 2.5%, while cutting foreign aid from 5 to 3%. The Nordic countries have all increased their defence spending and many of them aim to reach or exceed the level of 2.5% of GDP before the 2030s. The European Commission has introduced its "ReArm Europe" plan that aims to boost defence funding by giving EU countries more financial flexibility. The package includes a loan instrument of €150bn and activating the Stability and Growth Pact's national escape clause which allows member states to exceed deficit and debt limits during crises. In 2025, NATO allies agreed to aim for a 5% target by 2035, out of which 3.5% would be used on "hard defence" while the remaining 1.5% would be allocated to other security and defence related expenses, such as infrastructure.[1]

Increases in defence spending have been paralleled by a renewed interest in nuclear weapons, raising the possibility of creeping renuclearisation. At a press conference in Berlin on 7 July 2025, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz talked about acquiring a European nuclear deterrent. Both Britain and France are modernising and increasing their nuclear arsenals. In addition, the UK government is re-establishing an air-launched nuclear capability via an F-35A squadron, stationing American variable-yield gravity bombs in the UK, and has been exploring a nuclear pact with France. In Eastern Europe, there is discussion about the possibility of Poland hosting US nuclear weapons or France extending its nuclear deterrence to Poland.

Yet if we are serious about the defence of Europe and the welfare and security of Europeans, this requires more than a knee jerk reaction drawn from the past. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1988) used the term "organised irresponsibility" to depict the way that new risks tend to be countered by old methods that make things worse. The revival of Cold War thinking could turn out to be a perilous example of such organised irresponsibility. We need an informed public debate and inclusive consultation about the dangers we face and the best way to address them.

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[1] The 5 % spending target has been criticised for being arbitrary and ineffective in enhancing allies' actual capabilities and cooperation (Ålander 2025). There are already cases where national governments aim to allocate infrastructure costs to military budgets to fulfil the new NATO requirements, such as in Italy where the government aims to approve the constructions of a bridge linking Sicily to the mainland arguing that the bridge is key for national security (Kazmin 2025).

This is one of those fork moments in history when the wrong policy decisions taken now could lead us into a worsening spiral of ever more dangerous wars, worsening climate change and increasing social and economic upheaval. There is a danger that in reaching for the Cold War deterrence playbook in pursuit of safety we contribute to polarisation and disorder. Rather than reverting to old-fashioned geo-politics, we need to identify new pathways that keep us safe while renewing a system of rights-based, law-based global co-operation.

This paper summarises the conclusions of a two-year study entitled 'Investigating Non-nuclear Deterrence', undertaken at the London School of Economics and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. It draws on a series of research papers produced both in-house and from a group of scholars and practitioners across Europe and North America that we have called the Network for Effective Security.[2] Our central proposition is the need for a shift in security thinking from a belief in the relevance of nuclear deterrence, a concept embedded in the discourse of the 1950s, to what we are calling *democratic resilience.*

We argue that while European countries do need to provide military and financial support to Ukraine and to help strengthen the conventional defence of the frontline states bordering on Russia, the main threat that European countries, and indeed the world, face is a political threat to democracy coming from the spread of transactional geopolitics and the authoritarian right, where the aim is creating and taking advantage of existing chaos, disorder and polarisation in order to undermine liberal democracy as a system of government. What is known as hybrid warfare, the grey zone, or non-linear war, conducted not just by Russia but by several oligarchic and authoritarian regimes, can have a cumulative, corrosive effect on already existing vulnerabilities in our societies. Democratic resilience thus includes conventional defence and societal resilience as is widely proposed by institutions like NATO and the EU and practised by Nordic countries. Most importantly, democratic resilience means more than hardening critical infrastructure or government programmes such as those aimed at sensitizing populations to disinformation. It also requires a wider political strategy of increasing democratic participation, resisting the rise of authoritarian populism, restoring confidence in democratic political institutions and overcoming cleavages in our societies, caused by racism, polarisation and societal distrust, to name a few.

In what follows, we start with a critique of deterrence, we then elaborate the various components of democratic resilience, and in the conclusion, we suggest that this an opportunity to open up public discussions about reducing reliance on nuclear weapons

[2] Members of the network and the papers produced are listed at the end of this paper.

and defending some of the law-based human centred concepts of security that were developed after the end of the Cold War.

What is Wrong with Deterrence?

The Cold War was probably the most dangerous period in human history. During that period tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, many times more powerful than the ones that were used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, were developed and deployed by the United States, the Soviet Union, and later Britain, France and China. Anyone old enough to have lived through the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when nuclear war seemed imminent, will remember the intense anxiety about the very future of the world associated with that moment. Yet in response to the rising sense of threat from Russia, NATO countries are instinctively returning to deterrence, both in nuclear, conventional and increasingly hybrid realms.

Pelopidas (2015, p. 9) points out that it has become the habit to identify deterrence with nuclear weapons. As an explicit concept and object of academic theorising deterrence began with the introduction of nuclear weapons and the Cold War (Lindsay & Gartzke 2019, p. 14). The advent of nuclear war, according to Brodie (1946, p. 62), one of the earliest theorists of deterrence, meant that it was no longer possible to win wars. All that could be done was to prevent or avert war.

The English word deterrence comes from the Latin word *deterrere*, meaning to fear or scare. The idea was that to prevent war, it was necessary to threaten something so terrifying that it would stop all potential hostile action, especially in Europe. In early Cold War theorising deterrence had a deeply emotive core, based on an understanding of the human fear of pain and the possibilities for manipulating threats to inflict such pain in order to prevent unwanted future actions (Schelling, 1966). In other languages, deterrence is often translated into different terms meaning to “dissuade” or “contain”, words that have less frightening connotations. In some languages, for example Finnish or Russian, there are separate terms for both meanings. In these cases, the terms used domestically tend to refer to dissuasion or containment, while the translation of deterrence is reserved for Western policy (Ossa, forthcoming).

At the heart of the concept of deterrence has always been the problem of credibility. During the 1950s, the concept of massive retaliation envisaged a large-scale nuclear strike in response to any sort of military attack. The US plan envisaged some 100 million casualties, at a time when the total population of Europe was 120 million. Several US political leaders, such as McNamara, Nixon and Kissinger, were to point out that the plan lacked credibility and undermined the so-called ‘nuclear umbrella’ for Europe (an anodyne term for something much more alarming).

According to Kissinger:

> *'I would say – which I might not say in office – the European allies should not keep asking us to multiply strategic assurances that we cannot possibly mean, or if we do mean, we would not want to execute. Because if we execute, we risk the destruction of civilisation' (quoted in Egeland and Pelopidas 2021, p. 242).*

A series of concepts, "flexible response" and the "escalation ladder", for example, were developed to get around the problem of credibility. The idea was to develop and deploy smaller nuclear weapons that were supposedly more usable. But these new concepts merely drew attention to the same dilemmas. Even a so-called "small" tactical nuclear weapon could cause large-scale human, social and ecological destruction and inevitably risk escalation.

The elaboration of deterrence theory in response to the development of nuclear weapons rooted it in the manipulation of threats, aiming to prevent an attack by promising to respond with extreme and devastating violence. At the same time, however, some theorists argued that if it were possible to deter by making such threats (known as 'deterrence by punishment') it might also be possible to deter by convincing a potential aggressor that they could not achieve their objectives or would only be able to do so at a cost that far outweighed the prospective benefit (Snyder, 1960). In the Cold War the latter notion, dubbed 'deterrence by denial', underpinned efforts to establish a conventional defensive posture capable of withstanding a Soviet invasion (and to offer response options beyond either doing nothing or initiating a nuclear war). Although deterrence by denial has become a widely accepted branch of the deterrence literature, it is not rooted in the manipulation of terror. Rather than the flip side of the deterrence coin, denial strategies are perhaps better understood as forms of dissuasion (Davis, 2014).

Fortunately, the war between the United States and the Soviet Union or China never happened. Was war averted by the presence of nuclear weapons? Perhaps, or perhaps neither side wanted war (Evangelista, 2023/24). We could prove that deterrence does not work if deterrence had failed. But we lack the evidence to claim unambiguously that nuclear weapons prevented a war between the great powers during the Cold War. What deterrence did, however, was to keep alive the idea of war and mutual threat. What Western Europe and North America experienced was neither exactly "peacetime" nor "wartime" but rather imaginary war – the exercises across the North German plains, the hostile rhetoric, the spy stories and dangerous moments like the Cuban missile crisis or the Berlin airlift kept alive the constant fear of war (Kaldor 1991). There were also real wars in Eastern Europe (East Germany 1953, Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968), and in the so-called third world (Korea, Algeria, Malayasia, Vietnam and so on). Most of these were regarded as 'proxy' wars, seen as 'limited' relative to the imagined scenario of a Soviet-NATO war in Europe and the prospect of nuclear conflagration. Nonetheless, there was

nothing small about these 'lesser' conflicts: millions perished in these wars on the margins of the imagined 'big' one (Westad 2005). The Cold War involved a continuing arms race with the build-up of military industries on all sides, establishing permanent vested interests in the continuation of imaginary war. And it represented a constraint on democracy – directly in the East where the Western threat was used to justify repression and, more indirectly in the West where control of nuclear weapons was not in the hands of democratically elected parliaments, nor even national governments (except partially Britain and France) but rather in the hands of the US President.

And finally, the world was very lucky (see Pelopidas 2017 and 2020). There were many cases of near misses. The Cuban missile crisis was perhaps the most important where Pelopidas shows, based on a careful study of primary source material, that nuclear war was avoided 'not though restraint on the part of President Kennedy and the Soviet leadership only but as a result of decisions made by individual nuclear operators, under conditions of incomplete or incorrect information.' (Pelopidas 2017). A Chatham House study entitled '*Too Close for Comfort*' examines 13 cases where nuclear war nearly happened as a result of various causes: miscommunication, conflict escalation, error, misperception, faulty technology, or mistakes about the nature of exercises. One conclusion is that 'individual decision-making, often in disobedience of protocol or political guidance, has on several occasions saved the day' (Lewis et al. 2014, updated 2023). The current discussion frames nuclear weapons as a deterrent that protects the global west from Russia and China. But the discussion fails to take account of the history of near misses and the continuing possibility of disastrous mistakes, and the profound environmental and existential risks that these weapons pose by dint of their mere existence.

Nuclear deterrence sustained the Cold War; it was an incredibly risky and provocative method of trying to contain large-scale war. The Cold War came to an end not because one side won (though Western leaders like to claim they won) but because of mass movements that, in the West, opposed a new round of nuclear armament, and in the East demanded human rights and democracy. Pressure from the grassroots movements led to negotiations on reducing nuclear weapons, and transnational support from below, combined with a new détente resulting from these negotiations, created space for the 1989 revolutions (Kaldor 2003). In the aftermath of the end of the Cold War there were big reductions in the number of nuclear weapons. In retrospect this was a generational opportunity for much steeper reductions in nuclear forces. Today there are still 12,241 nuclear weapons (SIPRI 2025b), enough to destroy the world many times over. There are also additional nuclear states: India and Pakistan, North Korea, and probably Israel. In recent years, there has been a move away from the arms control treaties signed after the Cold War by both the United States and Russia. The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has

moved its doomsday clock to 89 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to annihilation.

Alongside all these developments, there has been a growing emphasis on international law and multilateralism. The establishment of the International Criminal Court in 2002 represents an advance for accountability as does some spread of universal jurisdiction and the way that contemporary wars are so widely documented. The use of nuclear weapons would almost certainly constitute a crime against humanity, violation of fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and human rights law, as well as ecocide and genocide. Just one weapon would, for example, obliterate Gaza, doing even more damage than what is happening at present. At a time when we express such concern about war crimes and indeed genocide, how can we continue to contemplate the credibility of and justification for nuclear deterrence?

What is Democratic Resilience?

The city of Narva lies on the border of Estonia with Russia.[3] The population of the city is overwhelmingly Russian-speaking as large numbers of Russians were brought to Narva to work in the newly established heavy industries of the 1950s. After 1991, when the Soviet Union disintegrated and the Republic of Estonia regained its independence, the economy of the city collapsed. It lost its markets in the former Soviet Union and its sources of raw materials. Some 30,000 Russian speakers returned to Russia. Many of those that remained were reduced to participating in smuggling activities in order to survive.

Since independence the Estonian state has consistently discriminated against Russian speakers. Only those people and their descendants who were citizens of Estonia in 1940 were immediately eligible for citizenship in 1991. Russian speakers were only able to apply for citizenship after several years and after passing a language test in Estonian. Moreover, all Russian language schools were transitioned to the Estonian language. According to official figures, some 49% of those who live in Ida-Virumaa (the county where Narva is situated) have become Estonian citizens and 41% speak Estonian. However, even those who have taken Estonian nationality feel themselves to be second-class citizens. They tend to watch or listen to Russian media and polls show that the majority share the Russian perspective on the war in Ukraine.

The situation in Narva is helpful in order to illustrate the case for democratic resilience. Narva shares many similarities with the Donbass region of Ukraine. It is not hard to envisage the kind of hybrid activity that happened in Donetsk and Luhansk when local separatists seized administrative buildings with the help of Russian mercenaries and

[3] This story is based on a case study undertaken by Matthew Evangelista and Aleksander Lust (forthcoming).

special forces. This seems much more likely than a military attack, although some analysts argue the reverse (e.g. Radin 2017). Even after the build-up of the Russian war economy, the hybrid approach seems to be favoured as discussed below.

How would NATO react to something like this happening in Narva? Member states have primary responsibility for responding to hybrid aggression and Estonian forces reportedly have standing shoot to kill orders when encountering unidentified personnel. But what could happen if Estonia struggled to contain some kind of hybrid grab of Narva and invoked Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty (that commits all NATO members to come to the defence of each other in the case of an attack)? Since 2017 Estonia (as well as Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) has hosted a multinational NATO contingent as part the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) , now described by NATO as part of its 'Forward Land Forces'.[4] Efforts are underway to boost these contingents from battalion to brigade-sized forces. More generally, however, the problem of credibility again resurfaces: would any US leadership risk nuclear or even conventional war over Narva? On the other hand, if NATO and the US did nothing, that would severely undermine trust in Article V and the Alliance as a whole.

So, what is the alternative? The idea of democratic resilience is not to threaten Russia with punishment in the hope of preventing them from attempting this kind of action – a threat that seems unlikely to succeed in any case, given the lack of credibility. Rather, the question is how to become less vulnerable to approaches that seek to foster and harness separatist or extremist elements. It is worth noting that there were attempts to seize administrative buildings across Southern Ukraine in 2014, including places like Odessa and Kherson, but in all cases, except Donetsk and Luhansk, these were thwarted by citizens who, though Russian-speaking, were loyal to Ukraine primarily because of its democratic nature. The political understanding of Ukraine was borne out of citizen action, both in the Orange Revolution (2004–2005) and the Revolution of Dignity (Euro-Maidan) (2013–2014) where the idea of a political rather than ethnic Ukrainian identity, in which ethnic Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Poles, Roma and Greeks were all Ukrainian, was constructed (Kaldor, 2016). It was the fact that so many Ukrainians believed so strongly in these ideas that made Ukraine resilient, demonstrating the importance of grassroots movements and support in democratic resilience.

We use the term resilience rather than deterrence not just because deterrence is still associated fear and terror, and to a large extent with nuclear weapons, but because the whole conceptual apparatus of deterrence is difficult to adapt to hybrid activities that evade traditional deterrence through traits such as ambiguity, deniability and operating below the response thresholds that deterrence often needs to establish and communicate

[4] Since the 2022 invasion, four additional multinational battlegroups have been established in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.

(Monaghan et al. 2019). To be sure, the ability to withstand both conventional attack and hybrid forms of aggression or interference, can have a dissuasive effect, if well communicated (which is often described as 'deterrence by denial'). But the primary aim is to be able to withstand those attacks without the risk of devastating war even if the dissuasive effect doesn't work.

In the remainder of this section, we describe what we consider to be the various components of democratic resilience. We start by discussing the ways that conventional military postures need to change to become more effective. We then discuss the meaning of hybrid warfare and analyse the concept of societal resilience and how it needs to be interpreted. Given its central importance, we then focus on the sanctions toolkit, setting it in the framework of resilience. Finally, we consider what can be called extended democratic resilience – why in spite of the current preoccupation with a more 'geopolitical' context, addressing serious problems in the rest of the world remains important for European and Western security.

Defensive Conventional Military Postures

Greater investments in conventional defence may well be needed for the safety of Europeans but *how* conventional forces are designed matters at least as much as *how much* is spent on conventional defence. Until now the European debate about security has centred on the price tag of rearmament and has been primarily a continuation of the long-running burden-sharing debate, conducted predominantly in terms of the percentage of GDP that allies should devote to defence. Part of this debate is about the way defence is segmented along national lines and the savings that could be made from integration, and this is a key issue. But what has been absent, and this is central to the idea of democratic resilience, has been a public debate about strategy and warfighting concepts. This, after all, is the foundation from which military requirements (and therefore costs) should be derived. Such a debate has been absent largely because NATO has opted to keep its current military strategy and key strategic documents classified.

The reasoning is understandable: NATO planners hope to prevent Russia from gaining insights into NATO's intended force posture, plans and response thresholds and potentially into areas of political sensitivity among allies that could be exploited. This approach may reflect an attempt to create strategic ambiguity about how and where NATO might respond and to maintain flexibility in responding to various contingencies rather than being pre-committed to certain publicly declared courses of action. However, lack of informed public debate also effectively consigns the question of and responsibility for strategy to a narrow community of military professionals operating in classified settings. This has the effect of preventing the kind of scrutiny and vigorous deliberation

that democratic political cultures seek to harness to try to ensure that public policy is improved through scrutiny while also having political legitimacy. This is not to argue that the input of military professionals is not of the utmost importance in formulating strategy. However, confining the debate to a relatively small and secretive community also entails risks, not least the groupthink that may result from debate amongst individuals with similar professional training, culture and outlook.

We do know that contemporary military thinking tends to favour what is known as 'manoeuvre theory'.[5] This body of work began in the period after World War I when strategic thinkers like Basil Liddell Hart and J.F.C Fuller were preoccupied with how to avoid a long, attritional wars. What manoeuvre theory actually involves can be rather vague but it essentially aims at winning wars quickly by identifying and attacking "centres of gravity" through combined-arms operations. Manoeuvre theory influenced the US AirLand Battle doctrine in the 1980s and its NATO counterpart, Follow-on Forces Attack (FOFA). Its influence only grew in the post-Cold War period. Today the apparent successor to AirLand Battle, known as Multi Domain Operations (MDO), envisages "manoeuvring" across land, sea, air, space, cyberspace and the electromagnetic spectrum, overcoming adversaries through faster decision-making, and continuous technological innovation. This concept places a premium on high-end technical capabilities possessed or in development in the United States, implying that this concept may only be viable provided continuing US support Europe, at least for the time being.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, when AirLand Battle was articulated, European military theorists were developing an alternative set of ideas about conventional defence in the nuclear era. This work became known as "Non-Offensive Defence" (NOD) in the English-speaking world. The crucial point of departure was not so much "non-offensiveness" but rather an attempt to rethink conventional defence in the context of nuclear deterrence.[6] Linked to the idea of NOD was the distinction between deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. Deterrence by punishment was about preventing military attacks by

[5] This section is drawn from Mengelkamp and Vincent (forthcoming).

[6] One of the key analysts of NOD was the West German military analyst Horst Afheldt (1976); he was attentive to the way in which certain conventional force structures and operations could themselves incentivise nuclear escalation. Therefore, he ruled out offensive conventional operations, since the necessary force concentrations would present lucrative targets for tactical nuclear weapons. As an alternative to the tank-heavy legacy forces, Afheldt proposed an infantry-based network defence spread across all of West Germany, involving 'Techno Commandos', armed with anti-tank munitions. Other versions of this idea were subsequently developed based on Afheldt's principles. The most well-known was the 'spider-in-the web', which combined Afheldt's infantry network (the web) with mechanised forces, that would support the infantry at the main axis of advance of the enemy.

threatening a large scale and alarming response. Deterrence by denial was about communicating the futility of any attack because of the capacity to defend territory[7].

In the 1970s and 1980s manoeuvrist thought developed as a critique of attritional and positional concepts. Today, manoeuvre is increasingly critiqued by those who once again observe the relevance and necessity of positional and attritional warfare. In the past, defensive counter-manoeuvre envisaged temporarily ceding territory and then counter-attacking rather than holding ground and becoming locked into attrition. Such an approach may have appeal from a military point of view but is politically unacceptable in the 'never again' societies of the Baltic states, which have vivid memories of Soviet occupation, and in the aftermath of the atrocities committed by advancing Russian troops in now infamous towns such as Bucha. In addition to these political realities, any defensive scheme based on ceding territory must also grapple with the enormous practical difficulty that both Ukrainian and Russian forces have had in breaking through established defensive lines under current conditions. For these reasons, under pressure from Eastern members and against the grain of manoeuverist traditions of thinking about defence, NATO does appear to be placing more emphasis on a strategy of defending forward and 'defending every inch' of alliance territory. This trend is evidenced both in ongoing efforts to strengthen the existing NATO contingents in the frontline states, as well as in the Baltic Defence Line, a programme of defensive structures along the eastern borders of the Baltic States.

To do this effectively, this defensive form of conventional defence would mean being able to sustain high intensity combat at scale over potentially much longer time periods than is currently possible. At present, Europeans struggle to sustain Ukraine in its defence, indicating the need to rebuild the industrial capacity and infrastructure to sustain NATO forces in a drawn-out struggle. The war in Ukraine has set a frenetic pace of innovation and counter-innovation in which existing systems can become outdated within weeks. This is especially true in important emerging fields such as the low-cost and abundant drones that have become pervasive across the battlefield, and where technologies and tactics continue to co-evolve with efforts to devise effective countermeasures. Therefore, there is a need to boost production capacity in areas such as artillery and critical spare parts, but also to examine the model that underpins the existing military innovation system. With real world requirements changing at such a rapid pace, and low-cost, abundant technologies able to hold much more expensive armoured platforms at risk,

[7] Airland Battle emphasised using deep strikes against advancing Soviet echelons to dislocate and defeat an attack, implying a logic of denial. NOD advocates argued that strikes inside Warsaw Pact territory would invite similar strikes in Western Europe but would also be indistinguishable from nuclear strike preparations, thereby running serious escalation risks. NOD proposed a series of defensive schemes that avoided deep strike.

multi-year defence acquisition programmes cannot remain anchored to requirements that may have become outdated before contracts are even awarded. To remain relevant, the existing systems of military innovation need to find ways to keep pace with current rates of change, both in hardware and software. Addressing how the European defence innovation ecosystem conducts 'peacetime' innovation to build relevant and, crucially, cost-effective capabilities in ways that compete with the wartime innovation patterns in Russia, is a critical challenge. However, technological innovation is more than building equipment, but it must extend to building the individual and organisational capacity to field and employ that technology to greatest effect as part of the wider military whole. Again, there is an urgent need to find ways to innovate in the absence of the wartime context that is driving Russian learning and adaptation.

Conventional defensive capability is only partly a question of equipment but also means being able to mobilise people in sufficient numbers. This is challenging in European societies that have become substantially demilitarised, where living standards are generally high and in which human life is precious. Ukrainians are leading the way in offsetting the sheer size of Russian forces and their willingness to expend people through technology and innovation, particularly in the field of remotely operated systems. However, it is not simply a case of 'unmanned' systems making up for infantry shortages. Drone operations in Ukraine have proven highly labour intensive, and the demand to scale up drone operations creates competition for scarce manpower, feeding into the problems with keeping infantry groupings at sufficient strength. The war also suggests that drones can only mitigate but not solve shortages in infantry and artillery, and there are many tasks for which drones are no substitute for people. Therefore, besides overall magazine depth and production capacity, the will to fight surely must be a critical factor in attempting to shape any calculations that might be made in the Kremlin about military operations beyond Ukraine. There is palpable frustration from military quarters that Western European publics do not "get it" in terms of the scale of the threat that they see brewing, and that people of military age who would be called on to actually implement the strategy are not psychologically prepared for the possibility of war. It is hard to correct this issue when the analysis of both the nature of the threat and the strategy intended to contain it remain so shrouded in secrecy.

Today both Ukraine and Russia are demonstrating the military potential of a new generation of drone technologies. On the Ukrainian side the majority of drones derive not from traditional western defence firms but from a distinctive homegrown technology ecosystem that is adapting commercial off-the-shelf technologies to great effect. As the technology base develops and scales, Ukraine increasingly fields its own long range strike drones in addition to its shorter-range systems. Driven by intense competition with Russian in unmanned and counter-unmanned systems, technology and tactics Ukraine increasingly appears to be exploring the possibilities of artificial intelligence and

autonomous systems, and is at the same time developing broader concepts for drone systems as part of a layered defensive network. Combined with trenches, artillery, landmines and obstacles, drones have been critical in finding and defeating Russian armoured attacks, successfully preventing operational level breakthroughs. Drones have helped Ukraine destroy large quantities of Russian armoured vehicles, either directly or indirectly by cuing artillery and other fires, and this destruction has led Russia increasingly towards small unit infiltration tactics, which are also highly vulnerable to hunting by drones. Ukraine is seeking to leverage its rapidly evolving competence in developing and employing remotely operated systems of all kinds to build drone defences along the entire frontline that it believes will reduce the need to physically man the trenches in the same way as before, helping to reduce frontline casualties. This example, set by the country with the most intimate current experience of defending against a Russian invasion, is one that NATO should give the greatest attention.

Hybrid Warfare

The cases of Narva or the Donbas expose the salience of what has become known as hybrid warfare, the grey zone (between war and peace), or hybrid aggression. Both Russian interference in the US elections of 2016 and in the Brexit referendum can be considered examples of this type of operation. Information or influence operations stand out in Russian strategic thought for the outsize strategic effect that is ascribed to them, both relative to other kinetic and non-kinetic instruments and to the costs either of running them or that the West feels able or willing to impose in response. In Russian thought 'victory' is achieved primarily in the minds of the adversary, meaning both the decision-making elite and the wider public opinion to which decision-makers respond. Strategic goals are not primarily pursued or achieved through military operations per se, and kinetic operations are sometimes depicted in a supporting role to information operations rather than the other way around. Contemporary Russian information operations grew out of the Cold War Soviet experience conducting *dezinformatsiya* (дезинформация) and political warfare. However, contemporary internet and social media technologies create a strikingly different information environment and enable contemporary Russian operations to achieve much greater reach at much lower cost and in which it is extremely difficult to know how to attribute which insertions into the information space originate from Russia.[8]

Hybrid aggression covers much more than just information operations. Mikael Wigell (2021, p. 51) suggests that the hybrid label covers a spectrum between military tactics for waging war indirectly to hybrid 'interference'; 'more subtle, non-military activities deployed by authoritarian regimes to penetrate democratic society'. In the Russian debate,

[8] The material on information operations is drawn from Vincent (forthcoming).

gibridnaya voyna ('Гибридная война' – the Russian term for hybrid warfare) is framed as something the West is doing against Russia rather than the other way around. However, the Russian discourse also refers to activities designed to avoid the traditional battlefield with the aim of destroying 'the political cohesion of an adversary from the inside by employing a careful hybrid of non-military means and methods' (Fridman 2018, p.96, cited in Wigell 2021). Wigell sees this overarching aim running through Russia's cyber operations, use of covert or proxy deniable armed groups, sabotage, political and diplomatic subversion, the 'weaponisation' of migration', or the manipulation of corruption and assassinations. Rid, similarly, sees Russia's aim as undermining the 'liberal epistemic order', meaning faith in the institutional custodians of factual authority (political and justice institutions but also scientific bodies, media organisations, etc) that underpin open liberal political systems (Rid, 2020). Recent incursions into European airspace by Russian Shahed/Geran type drones may be intended to probe Western air defences as well as legal and political boundaries. They also seem intended to generate psychological effects, such as provoking alarm as well as disrupting civil aviation, and possibly seeking new ways to attach costs to Europe's support for Ukraine. Although making use of military technology, the intent appears to apply pressure without crossing the threshold of armed attack.

If Eastern Europe is considered the frontline in terms of military threats, Southeast Europe can be considered the frontline in terms of hybrid threats[9]. Russia operates closely with Serbia where it controls a media hub comprised of an internet portal and radio station, *Sputnik Srbija* (the Sputnik news agency has an office in the Serbian capital Belgrade) and the Russian TV channel, *Russia Today* (RT), which provide Serbian language services. Both Sputnik and RT were banned in Europe and the UK following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Serbia and Russia organise joint military exercises and since 2015, the Serbian army has participated in the so-called 'Slav Brotherhood' joint training with Russia. Under the guise of youth summer camps, Russia-funded organisations including the notorious Night Wolves and the Wagner Group (which is thought to have a 'Serb unit' with links to paramilitary groups from the Bosnian war) conduct military training.

Directed primarily at the 'strategic triangle' (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro), joint Russia-Serbia hybrid operations include active interference in the electoral process as the most direct and effective route to achieving desired change in the political orientations of these countries. Support for political parties that align with Serbia's nationalist agenda and with Russia and challenge the incumbent governments, is provided through coordinated use of a range of measures including disinformation, political party funding, co-optation of influential individuals, involvement of the Orthodox Church, politically motivated investment by Russian state-owned companies, soft loans to support

[9] The material on Southeast Europe is drawn from Bojičić-Dželilović (forthcoming).

government finance, energy diplomacy and so on, backed by cyber-attacks. In Montenegro, for example, Russia was involved in the attempted overthrow of the Montenegrin Western-orientated government in 2016. A network of proxies was mobilised, including radical Serb nationalists, members of the Night Wolves group and covert Russian operatives, combined with the launch on the same day of a series of cyber-attacks on the government's website and attacks on its critical infrastructure (Adrović 2023, p. 189). The aim was to create chaos and pressure the Montenegro government to withdraw from its application to join NATO (Conley and Melino 2019). Prior to the coup, the Serbian Orthodox patriarch had visited Montenegro, accompanied by members of the Night Wolves, in a bid to intimidate members of the public and political groups supportive of Montenegro's NATO membership. While Montenegro joined NATO in 2017, the 2023 elections were won by the pro-Serbian, pro-Russian party which received Russian funding (Dzankic et al. 2023). Other cases of interference include North Macedonia, where Russians participated in the violence aimed at undermining the agreement with Greece, which was a condition for EU membership, as well as various activities in Republika Srpska (a constituent part of Bosnia Herzegovina), Croatia and Kosovo.

What is clear is that hybrid operations are primarily aimed at exacerbating existing cleavages in society and corroding the authority and legitimacy of official institutions and processes. These efforts may seek to exacerbate ethnic polarisation, pervasive in Southeast Europe as a legacy of the wars in the 1990s. Such efforts are often linked to the promotion of a so-called 'family values' narrative that attempts to reassert traditional gender roles while denying LGBTQ rights (Putin talks about 'Gayropa').[10] They can also exploit the persistence of corruption and economic and social inequalities linked to oligarchy, or promote conspiracy theories to undermine trust, such as the widespread anti-vaccination theories or the manipulation of anti-migrant sentiment. Not all hybrid operations can be attributed to Russia. China, Turkey or Israel, as well as the far-right groups in the United States and other Western countries are also engaged in this type of behaviour.

Forms of Societal and Democratic Resilience

The term resilience is increasingly used both as something that is needed to underpin conventional military defence and resist overt threats as in the case of Ukraine, and as a way to counter or withstand hybrid operations. Resilience is a nuanced concept that has become a liberally used buzzword in the 2020s. While the definition of resilience as the ability of states, communities, businesses and individuals to anticipate, withstand and recover from various threats and crises is relatively widely accepted, the practical

[10] However, more generally Russian information operations also often promote multiple incompatible narratives in an attempt to stoke or create the impression of serious societal division, as opposed to pushing a single coherent 'alternative' narrative.

demonstrations of resilience vary greatly. Resilience can mean various things depending on the perspective, institutional priorities and individual needs. It can be anything from security of supply of energy, medicines and food to civilian preparedness for emergencies, the ability of the local and national governments to interact and function in a crisis situation, or media literacy and fact checking as well as education.[11]

The notion of civic ecosystems is useful in showing how societal resilience can be built in response to the threats, shocks and disruptions associated with hybrid warfare. Civic ecosystems emerge and self-organise spontaneously as civic-minded people across civil society, businesses, and state structures – and often across geographies – get involved to address specific social problems (Rangelov and Theros 2023). They respond to crises but also learn from them, creating new resources (ideas, practices, capabilities) and connections that can be activated and adapted to future and indeed other co-occurring crises. The civic ecosystem that emerged at the Polish border with Belarus in 2021 to assist migrants weaponised by Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian regime, for example, engaged in innovative practices that "were quickly transferred and developed on a massive scale to help Ukrainian forced migrants fleeing the war in 2022" (Czerska-Shaw and Dunin-Wąsowicz 2025).

In the Nordic countries, in particular, resilience and preparedness are often realised under the umbrella of "comprehensive security" and labelled as "comprehensive resilience". In Finland, for example, comprehensive security means the "society's overall preparedness for disruptions and emergency conditions" (Finnish Government Communications Department, 2012), the goal of which is to manage threats against the sovereignty of the country and vital functions of the society. Comprehensive security involves government leadership, international activities, defence capability, internal security, the functioning of the economy and infrastructure, the livelihood and operational capacity of the population, and psychological resilience (Valtioneuvosto 2012, p. 7). The protection of these vital functions is a joint effort by authorities, businesses, NGOs and citizens. These actors "share and analyse security information, prepare joint plans, as well as train and work together" (The Security Committee, 2017, p. 5). In other countries, such as Poland, resilience is a much more militarised conception, where the entire society is expected to participate in the military defence of Poland and where the military are expected to respond major disruptions. Thus, in 2017, Poland established the territorial defence forces, who have already been involved in emergencies such as Covid or natural disasters.

The so-called Niinistö Report, a European Commission report on civilian and military preparedness and readiness, mirrors the Nordic approaches to preparedness and puts a great deal of emphasis on citizens' own preparedness efforts. Citizens' active participation

[11] The discussion of resilience is drawn from both O'Sullivan and Daniel (forthcoming) and Mazurkiewicz and Ossa (forthcoming).

in supporting preparedness on different societal levels, either voluntarily or mandatorily, is seen as "crucial for social cohesion in crises" (European Commission 2024, p. 14). The idea is not to create anxiety among the citizens but to empower them to take responsibility for themselves and their communities and to raise their risk and threat awareness as well as enhance their resilience when facing crises (Ibid. p. 19). The report also emphasises citizens' trust in the society, government and leaders. According to the report, "preparedness begins and ends with the trust of citizens that the political community they live in is worth protecting and defending" and that "more active involvement can be asked when citizens trust that their leaders are prepared to keep them secure and are able to protect them throughout any crisis" (Ibid. p. 5).

The NATO position seems to be closer to the Polish understanding. From NATO's perspective, resilience is about preparing for, resisting, responding to and recovering from disruptions. The responsibility for strengthening resilience is mainly a national task while NATO has more of a coordinating role. NATO emphasises the mutual civil-military cooperation when it comes to strengthening resilience. The Alliance does not, however, put particular emphasis on individual citizens' role in resilience but focuses mainly on civil authorities who through their expertise and access to critical commercial services and infrastructure can support military forces. This is in rather stark contrast with the EU's Niinistö Report, which puts much more responsibility on individual citizens in creating and maintaining resilience (NATO 2024).

Resilience and deterrence are increasingly linked in official discourse, with resilience framed in deterrence terms as a form of deterrence by denial that works by reducing the impact of a given hybrid activity, thereby theoretically making that activity seem less worthwhile to the aggressor. By becoming more resilient, in this view, would-be aggressors would find it more difficult or costly to achieve given aims, thereby theoretically altering their cost-benefit calculus. If successful, resilience measures should indeed reduce the effects that actors employing hybrid means intend to achieve. However, resilience has a distinct logic that is not identical to deterrence. The logic of deterrence, even its more defensive, denial dimension, still faces outwards towards adversaries, seeking to shape their decision-making so that they refrain or desist from certain unwanted behaviours. The logic of resilience, in contrast, faces inwards to addressing vulnerabilities. Its central purpose is not to influence the behaviour of others, and it makes no threats. Framing resilience in deterrence terms tends to redirect the focus from defensive and inward-facing efforts to address the societal vulnerabilities that hybrid attacks exploit (but do not necessarily create) to an outward facing aspiration to shape adversary cost-benefit calculus and decision-making. Rather than deterring the other, the logic of resilience aims at something more like "immunity". Whereas deterrence seeks to prevent unwanted activity, it would not matter to a perfectly immune actor whether the adversary continued with the behaviour or not. Indeed, it might actually be preferable that

the adversary continue to waste their energies on unproductive efforts rather than investing in other, potentially more dangerous ones. A perfectly functioning immunity strategy might actually prefer *not* to deter.

We argue that resilience should be seen more as a defence strategy than as a form of deterrence. It is unclear that there is any way to prevent hybrid threats, especially disinformation. Since hybrid threats are often political in nature, the focus of resilience should be on resisting both external and internal chaos and attempts to destabilise societal cohesion. Countries and societies should be able to resist political polarisation, the rise of extreme movements – especially that from the far right – and threats to democratic structures whether they come from the inside or outside. We call this democratic resilience.

The key to democratic resilience is rebuilding trust in democratic political and social institutions so that they are resilient against populist disinformation and deliberate attempts to weaken them. In 2025, NATO allies agreed to allocate 1.5% of GDP annually to "protect critical infrastructure, defend networks, ensure civil preparedness and resilience, innovate, and strengthen the defence industrial base" (NATO, 2025). Undoubtedly, engaging civil society and communities across NATO is likely to be crucially important in achieving desired results with the allocated funds. Building democratic resilience is not a top-down process: building a resilient society requires active participation from various groups of people, communities and sectors of the society. Techocratic resilience measures have important roles to play in addressing specific vulnerabilities. However, addressing the deeper social, economic and political faultlines that hybrid actors zero in on, and maintaining societal trust in institutions and processes as the most legitimate and effective means of addressing those faultlines, goes beyond technical interventions. It speaks to a political programme of democratic renewal that will require both grassroots movements and political leadership.

The idea of resilience as deterrence tends to be associated with masculinised conceptions of resilience that are often top-down and technical.[12] Authoritarian populist regimes tend to be characterised by a hyper masculine gender logic and so countering this logic requires inclusion and democratic participation. If we think about the situation in Narva, any counter to potential hybrid threats necessarily involves integrating Russian speakers into the Estonian society (something Finland has done) but also empowering people, especially women, at community level; people in Narva do feel loyal to their communities. Decentralization has been an important element of societal resilience in the case of Ukraine (Rabinovych et al. 2023) and essential as a way to enhance democratic participation.

[12] For more, see a paper by O'Sullivan and Daniel (forthcoming).

The Role of Sanctions as a Tool for Democratic Resilience

For the past decades, economic sanctions have become an important tool in Western countries' economic statecraft toolbox that can be used at different stages to compel, dissuade or persuade an adversary to change its behaviour.[13] When the sanctions era began in the 1990s less than ten percent of the world economy was sanctioned. Now, sanctions are involved in nearly one-third of the global economy. In 2024 sanctions were a structural reality and often a disruptive force in all ten of the globe's most violent conflicts and in each of the top eight cases of global humanitarian disasters (Lopez, 2024 p. 45).

While there are examples of successful sanctions regimes, such as those against the apartheid regime in South Africa, sanctions are not a fail-free solution to conflicts or undemocratic developments (see Crawford & Klotz, 1999). Sanctions are not a magic bullet, but they signal disapproval and can deny material or monetary resources to miscreant actors, thus weakening their ability to act. Sanctions can fail when they become the policy, rather than just another tool in the policy toolbox. Sanctions work best when they are one of several diverse tools employed to achieve a clearly defined, consistent strategic policy. If the strategic goal behind imposing sanctions is unclear, it is more likely that sanctions will fail. Another key problem with sanctions, and a reason for their failing, is the low rate of compliance: sanctions achieve some level of compliance in only 15-25 percent of cases. In fact, partial compliance is more often accepted for settlement of a sanctions episode than achieving full compliance (Cortright and Lopez 2000; Foreign Policy contributors 2023).

Russia's war against Ukraine demonstrates how warnings of sanctions did not prevent Putin from attacking in 2022 – nor have several rounds of sanctions by the EU and the US managed to compel Russia to end its brutal war. Following the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. and its partners presented a range of restrictive measures: targeted financial sanctions, sectoral sanctions on energy exports, and export controls on technology goods used for military purposes. Russian access to the SWIFT system, critical to international transactions, was suspended. The financial accounts and personal assets of hundreds of Russian elites were frozen or seized (Baker 2024). Approximately $300 billions of hard currency assets were frozen and remain locked down in Western financial institutions.

Declining oil export earnings curtailed one of Russia's most significant sources of state revenue. The cumulative impact of these financial measures, embargoes on Russian gas exports and the price cap on Russian oil exports have been significant. They have deprived Russia of more than $500 billion that could have been used for the war effort (Luck 2025).

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[13] The material on sanctions is drawn from Cortright and Lopez (forthcoming).

Still, in 2024 the EU spent more on Russian oil and gas (€22bn) than it gave in financial aid to Ukraine (€19bn) (Niranjan 2025). Reducing dependence on Russian oil and gas would not only help Ukraine in its fight against Russia but also accelerate the European transition from fossil fuels towards renewable energy sources.

The war and sanctions also prompted more than 1,000 companies to end or curtail their operations in Russia, resulting in capital flight of $250 billion. Yet, Moscow was able to secure additional markets for oil exports, principally in China and India, and developed smuggling channels to reroute sanctioned microelectronics to Russia (Cortright and Romandash, 2023). As a result, Russia's economy has managed to stay afloat, and the regime has been able to continue its war in Ukraine. More recently, the Trump administration has threatened secondary sanctions on countries that have kept buying Russian oil and gas, in an attempt to pressure Putin's Russia to peace. In August 2025, the US introduced 25% additional tariffs on India, which still imports Russian oil (Shalal & Chiacu 2025).

While the Western sanctions on Russia have not been as successful as hoped, in part due to poor compliance, not imposing new sanctions on Russia is not an option either. Apart from sanctions, there is very little Ukraine's supporters can do that directly impacts the Russian regime. Easing and lifting some of the sanctions may also be one of the few bargaining chips that the West will have once peace is being negotiated between Russia and Ukraine.

Even if sanctions seem ineffective as a form of deterrence, they can and should be used to strengthen democratic resilience both by weakening military capability and in supporting democratic efforts. To ensure democratic resilience, targeted sanctions against individuals and larger entities may sometimes work, for example, officials and regimes that are responsible for corruption, violations against human rights or curbing political rights (though they are skilled at evading sanctions). The Magnitsky Act is an example of sanctions such as assets freezes and visa bans targeted at individuals who have been involved in human rights abuses and corruption. These targeted measures avoid broad economic harm to the general population and instead focus on undermining the power structures that suppress democratic movements.

Global Democratic Resilience

It is disturbing to note that amidst the current preoccupation with defence spending and nuclear weapons, the concerns of recent decades – including conflicts, disease, extreme poverty, and climate change – seem to have been dramatically abandoned. Yet none of those issues have gone away. Horrendous violence in Palestine or Sudan, gender apartheid in Afghanistan and the continuing bloodshed in Myanmar, to name just a few,

are the sites of never-ending human tragedy. Floods, fires, storms, desertification and the loss of species, seem to be accelerating. Diseases that were supposed to have been eradicated like polio, smallpox or measles are reappearing especially in conflict zones, as have new forms of multidrug resistant disease. Human behaviour is at the root of most of these crises – they are deliberate political choices.

The kind of quarantine that Europe experienced during the Cold War is no longer possible – if it ever was. The world is more interconnected than ever. Those who are worried about migration, can probably agree that it is important to address the causes of migration, including deliberate population displacement, pervasive violence, loss of livelihood whether due to environmental or economic factors. Democratic resilience cannot be achieved in one country or region – it has to encompass such issues as refugees, transnational crime, international terrorism, not to mention extreme poverty and environmental degradation and regulation of social media.

In the period since the end of the Cold War, international institutions, including NATO, have developed instruments for addressing some of these issues, especially in the security field. Humanitarianism, peace-making and mediation, peacekeeping and crisis management, peacebuilding and development and reconstruction have been imperfect in many ways. However flawed, these are the best tools we have for mitigating suffering and reducing violence and creating conditions for durable peace. All have evolved substantially through experience and learning. The human costs of abandoning them is far greater than persevering. Likewise, efforts were beginning to be made to address climate change and global health.

All of this requires finance – yet finance is being diverted to build up defence. This additional defence spending has significant implications for climate change and foreign aid. According to the Transnational Institute, NATO's total military carbon footprint for 2024 was 273 million metric tonnes of carbon dioxide and similar greenhouse gases (a unit of measurement abbreviated to MtCO2e). At that rate NATO would emit 1365 MtCO2e between 2025–2023. However, if NATO spending rose to 3.5% (the current spending goal), emissions in that timeframe would be 2330 MtCO2e. This is almost the same amount as the combined annual greenhouse gas emissions of Brazil and Japan and would cumulatively mean NATO emitted 965 MtCO2e than it would by remaining at 2024 expenditures: more than 3.5 years worth of additional emissions at the current rate. At the same time, NATO countries have reduced aid budgets by 7.3% between 2023 and 2024. As a third of overseas development assistance is spent on climate funding, there is a risk that less money will be spent on climate change adaption in the upcoming years (The Transnational Institute, 2025). Foreign aid is not a luxury or a charity but an essential element of security. We have to continue to work for a more liveable, habitable and prosperous world; it is not going to be possible to insulate certain parts of the planet from

the rest. There is no way that we can construct a long-term strategy of democratic resilience unless it is situated in a global context.

Conclusion

If Russia's war in Ukraine has shown the military risks to Europe, the continuing instability in the Western Balkans draws our attention to some of the implications of hybrid operations. Which scenario seems more likely for Europe and North America as a whole? What we are already witnessing in the United States, Hungary, Slovakia or Turkey are the dangers to democracy stemming from the rise of authoritarian populism. The conflicts that are experienced in the Western Balkans, as is the case for conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, often originated in crackdowns on democracy movements by similar types of authoritarian regimes. Such conflicts are less the kind of Clausewitzian clash that seems to be taking place in Ukraine, and more a kind of persistent social condition reproduced through polarising ideologies and a range of criminal and transactional economic activities. Russia does not see these as two different types, but as different blends of a repertoire of tools that range from various kinds of 'interference' to blunt military power. An approach similar to that pursued in the Balkans seems at least, if not more, likely than a Ukraine-like scenario, in which brute conventional military force has assumed a dominant role (though with the hybrid toolkit applied in concert). Europe needs an approach capable of defending us from the full spectrum of Russian capabilities. Hybrid interference has already become a routine part of life across Europe that it may not be possible to deter with threats or denial. We therefore need a strategy that combines conventional defensive forces with measures that will reduce the vulnerabilities that the hybrid playbook tries to exploit. We have called this combination democratic resilience. Many specific societal vulnerabilities can be usefully addressed through targeted resilience programmes and measures. However, resilience in our understanding also implies a broader process of political renewal. Resilience requires restoring faith in the relevance of the existing democratic system to deal with current challenges, address societal cleavages, strengthening civil society and justice mechanisms, and enhancing democratic participation, and in facing down its detractors.

This approach represents a more effective and safer way to defend democracy than reliance on nuclear weapons that is associated with a way of thinking about security that tries to shape behaviour through threats of extreme violence. Nuclear weapons are inherently incompatible with democracy and the principles of democratic governance. The secrecy around nuclear weapons – caused by the extremely high stakes of possessing and using nuclear weapons – excludes actors from decision-making and restricts information available to the public (Fraise 2024; van Buuren 2025). Moreover, in the event of a failure of deterrence, there would be no way that the public could be consulted about

their use. In addition to the risky, undemocratic and provocative nature of nuclear armament, it is very expensive. UK spending on nuclear weapons accounts for 40% of defence procurement spending (Barwick 2025). There are important trade-offs with conventional defence, foreign aid, infrastructure and public services, all of which are necessary components of democratic resilience.

What about the way that President Putin has been threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, deploying them to the border with Belarus and making ominous statements? Has Russia been prevented from using them because the West possesses nuclear weapons or because, as has been widely suggested, of Chinese pressure (e.g. Fenbert 2025)? The problem with the assumption that deterrence works is that any possible military response to the use of tactical nuclear weapons, whether conventional or nuclear, risks escalation and the knowledge that this is the case inherently weakens credibility.

The only way to prevent the use of nuclear weapons is through strengthening the taboo against their use and embedding that taboo in international law. This has been the case in many parts of the world where countries have signed the Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons and negotiated nuclear free zone treaties. Surely, a better alternative is to work towards such a framework for Europe.

Furthermore, we need a serious debate on the European security architecture. The US has distanced itself from Europe under the Trump administration, and while this has sparked near-panic reactions in Europe, it has also opened certain opportunities. European security is at a historical juncture. It is possible that, despite Trump's rhetoric and the deeper shift in US focus towards China, Europe remains embedded in US-led security arrangements with nuclear weapons playing an increasingly central role. In this scenario, European dependence on the US and its extended nuclear deterrence continues for years and decades to come. Some are arguing for a European version of the US led form of security, reproducing the same weapons and military formations. But there is an alternative: a more Europeanised alliance, in which European security policies and structures are more similar to an OSCE-type security alliance – more rights- and law-based and more in line with European norms – rather than becoming another, "reduced" geopolitical NATO.

In the period after the end of the Cold War, a new discourse of international law and human security was widely taken up. That discourse is still prevalent among global public opinion as evidenced by the global reactions to what is happening in Gaza. Democratic resilience has to build on and sustain these kinds of sentiments and avoid any return to the unrealistic 'blood and iron' assumptions of the past.

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Annex 2. List of peer-reviewed papers

- Mary Kaldor and others: Introduction: Investigating Non-Nuclear Deterrence
- Heljä Ossa: Conceptualising Non-Nulcear Deterrence: A Literature Review
- Agata Mazurkiewicz & Heljä Ossa: Deterrence through resilience and civil preparedness: The comprehensive and militarised models of civil defence
- Lukas Mengelkamp & Sam Vincent: Political and strategic requirements of European defence
- Jan Daniel & Mila O'Sullivan: Gendering Deterrence: The case of NATO's approach to Societal Resilience
- Wojciech Michnik: Defending the Frontline? Poland and NATO's Deterrence Debates on the North-eastern Flank
- Sam Vincent: Hybrid Aggression, Resilience and the Logic of Deterrence: the case of Russian Information Operations
- Christine Chinkin & Louise Arimatsu: Is a Nuclear Weapon Free Europe a Fantasy?
- Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic: Countering hybrid warfare through societal resilience: can it work in the Western Balkans?
- Aleksander Lust & Matthew Evangelista: The Home Stretch: National Defence and Ethnic Relations in Estonia
- Ulrich Kühn: German Deterrence: Complicating or Promoting European Security?
- Benoît Pelopidas & Alexander Sorg: Have European attitudes towards nuclear weapons changed because of the war in Ukraine?
- David Cortright & George Lopez: Sanctions and Deterrence: Harnessing Economic Power for Conflict Prevention
- Neta Crawford: Dilemmas of Civilian Participation in Military Deterrence and Defence: Legal and Ethical Dimension

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