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Review article

## THE CONCEPT OF RESILIENCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

### **Abstract:**

*In recent years, resilience has emerged as a central concept in national and international security discourses, featuring prominently in strategic frameworks and policy documents across various sectors.*

*This paper will analyze how resilience has come to play a significant discursive role in the field of national and international security. The analysis strongly suggests that resilience has become the new buzzword of national security. "Resilience" is the necessary ability of a critical entity to prevent, protect, respond, resist, mitigate, secure, adapt, and recover from an incident.*

*This is evidenced by positioning resilience as a core concept in many key strategic documents. In line with its broad applicability, the term has dominated security discourse on the strategic level.*

*The paper argues for a more integrated and operationalized understanding of resilience—one that aligns institutional preparedness, community empowerment, and strategic foresight in addressing the complex security environment of the 21st century.*

**Keywords:** *resilience, contemporary security threats, concept, instruments of power, critical infrastructure*

## Introduction

The concept of resilience is used in many different contexts in the contemporary world, including business, politics, security, and even physical and social sciences.

The uncertainty and the unpredictability of the security environment are another reason to embrace the concept of resilience. Given the broad spectrum of threats and security challenges, the proliferation of conventional and unconventional conflicts, the fuzzy boundaries between military, asymmetric and hybrid threats, and the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemics, NATO and EU turned to the need to enhance the resilience of each member state.

In the contemporary security environment, the boundaries between conventional and unconventional conflicts are blurred and the application of non-military instruments of power by various state and non-state actors has become the norm. Unexpected threats such as terrorism, cyber-attacks, and other tools of warfare, in addition to natural disasters like floods, fires and pandemics, put unprecedented pressure on every country and organisation worldwide.

Since not all disruptions and attacks can be predicted and/or attributed to specific actors, the application of traditional deterrence and defence mechanisms have become increasingly difficult. In many cases, this is often due to the absence of long-term orientation in anticipating threats and lack of resources hindering preparations for all hypothetical threats and risks. Therefore, to effectively prepare for and recover from various challenges and threats, an increasing number of actors are searching for defence and security solutions through the concept of resilience.

## Evolution of the concept

The use of the term “resilience” has a long tradition in various sciences and scientific disciplines - psychology, sociology, ecology, engineering, management, while it has only been present in security studies since the beginning of the 21st century. In the last few decades, the use of this term in academic discourse is growing at a “dizzying” speed, and its conceptualizations and operationalizations (even mutually opposed, almost contradictory) are increasingly numerous and diverse, both in academic literature and in strategic and legal documents (Stanković, 2021).

The concept of resilience can be generally characterized as a „capacity of a system to constantly evolve and adapt to disturbance while maintaining its basic function and structure.” (Walker, 2006). Given this general definition, one can intuitively sense the wide variety of possible applications and purposes of the term in security policy and practice. The concept first appeared in its English version in the 17th century dictionaries to be later adopted by the 19th century mechanics and the 20th century ecology and psychology (Alexander, 2013).

Across the broad discipline of Security Studies, the understanding of resilience differs fundamentally in terms of its meaning and purpose. Throughout the 2000s, a rather positivist approach to resilience gained ground in the field of strategic studies (Fjäder, 2014) and emergency management (Rogers, 2017). This perspective sees resilience as a problem-solving tool which opens up security to a range of new actors, and thereby leaves the state behind to a certain degree. Taken up as an analytical and practical tool, resilience helps to make sense of the complexity that defines the current security environment, and „democratizes“ the responses by engaging – and empowering – other actors. Around 2010, an alternative stream of resilience literature emerged to challenge the problem-solving approaches. Government resilience discourses became scrutinized with regard to the practices they tend to legitimize. That is, political questions were raised about what resilience does and to whom. This approach sees resilience as a largely neoliberal tool, with a state – albeit dressed up in the logic of empowerment – contributing to the existing and unequal power structures (Chandler, 2014). Scholars have argued that one’s ability to be resilient depends on their social and spatial position – that is, resilience does not work on a level playing field. It is therefore seen as fundamentally political – and questions are asked about who is to be made resilient, by what means, and with what consequences (Vale, 2014).

In extreme cases, resilience-labelled security measures can be seen as undermining security rather than enhancing it. (Coaffee, Fussey, 2015). Much of the critical security views focused on „urban resilience“ – a booming research agenda especially after 9/11, with many cities seeking anti-terrorist measures ranging from defensive urban planning (Coaffee, 2009) to militarization of urban public space and surveillance.

Mirroring its rise in the academia, „resilience“ also became widely adopted in national security policy, particularly after 2010. While countries around the world incorporated resilience into their national security strategies, others – such as Canada, the Netherlands or Australia, even adopted specific „resilience strategies“ (Fjäder, 2014). Rather than promising „total security“, which is unattainable in today’s complex security environment, resilience accepts a possibility of occurrence of disruptions and crises. It is no longer about if these will happen – it is rather about how to withstand when they happen. As becomes apparent when analysing security strategies and declarations, the range of possible security threats that can materialize is virtually limitless. Therefore, two types of resilience are distinguished - specified vis-à-vis known risks and anticipated security events, and general as for coping with the unknown. (Scholz et al, 2012).

In the national security arena, Fjäder (2014) argues that resilience challenges the traditional role of the state as a security provider. A broad range of other actors on different levels come into play, reflecting the variety of domains covered by resilience. As will be shown in the following sections, resilience incorporates issues from public health and social cohesion to industrial disasters

and terrorism. In terms of its scope and objectives, it far overreaches a government or military authority. Resilience also aims to go beyond the material dimension of security by highlighting the interconnectedness of the natural, environmental, demographic and social domains. (Pickett et al., 2014). Blurring of these different dimensions, and of the formerly clear distinction between internal and external security, becomes clear in analysing resilience discourse of states and international organizations.

The studied strategies and high-level declarations tend to use the language of threats, risks and vulnerabilities on one hand, and offer principles of resilience on the other. Protection, adaptation, collaboration, empowerment and capacity building are among the terms often used in relation to the referent objects of security – be it states, societies, critical infrastructure networks, or vulnerable communities. Resilience represents an all-encompassing principle, serving to understand and analyse threats and responses on any level and scale desirable. Also, resilience in a sense of persistence, renewal and continuity, has an important normative aspect to it, which is difficult to counter-argue. In sum, a remarkable analytical utility and flexibility of the concept have turned it into one of the principal buzzwords in today's security discourse. (Svitkova, 2017).

### **Defining resilience**

As the concept of resilience is rather new to security policy, the term is often mixed with related concepts such as resistance and preparedness and sometimes confused with some broader nation-state approaches such as whole-of-government, whole-of-society, or total defence. There are many, often conflicting, terms describing resilience from different perspectives.

Resilience is defined as: "The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions". (UNISDR, 2009).

Among complicated and multi-layered definitions developed by states and international organisations, there are few specifically related to national security. For example, the British doctrine provides a detailed definition of resilience: "the ability of the community, services, areas or infrastructure to defect, prevent, and, if necessary, to withstand, handle and recover from disruptive challenges". (Cabinet Office, Civil Protection Lexicon Version 2013). The US definition is quite similar: "the ability to adapt to changing conditions and withstand and rapidly recover from disruption due to emergencies". (The White House, 2011).

NATO defines resilience as the society's ability to resist and recover easily and quickly from such shocks as natural disaster, failure of critical infrastructure, or a hybrid or armed attack. Such ability combines both civil preparedness and military capacity. Robust resilience through civil preparedness

in Allied countries is seen as “essential to NATO’s collective security” with a major contribution to “the credibility of NATO’s deterrence and defence.” NATO’s approach is anchored in Article 3 of its founding Treaty: by committing individually to maintaining and strengthening resilience, Allies reduce the “vulnerability of NATO as a whole”; hence resilience a national responsibility. Seven baseline requirements for such national resilience have been agreed – they concern the core functions of “continuity of government, essential services to the population and civil support to the military” (military efforts to defend the Alliance territory and populations needing ‘robust civilian preparedness to reduce potential vulnerabilities – military forces again depend on the civilian and commercial sectors for transport, communications, and basic supplies such as food and water).

Resilience is also the central pillar of the European Union’s strategy to deal with multidimensional hybrid threats that combine coercive and subversive measures, including CBRN hazards and disinformation. (European Council, 2018). Again, member states are mainly responsible for strengthening resilience and enhancing response capabilities, while EU institutions reinforce national efforts.

Furthermore, the 2020 EU Security Union Strategy (European Commission, 2020) and Counter-Terrorism Agenda stress the importance of resilience and, in particular, the resilience of critical infrastructures. Hence, taking into account new policies and the lessons from the implementation of the 2008 European Critical Infrastructure Directive, the European Commission proposed replacing it with a new directive aimed at enhancing the resilience of critical entities providing essential services in the EU. (European Commission, 2020).

Both NATO and the EU tend to adhere to their traditional missions, principles, and values in the analysed discourse. This is what creates a certain contrast in their understanding of resilience. NATO has discursively applied resilience to the traditional principles of defence cooperation and deterrence on one hand, and to the „new“ challenges of infrastructural, environmental or demographic nature on the other hand. The EU, for its part, has used resilience in the context of state-building, good governance, human rights, and sustainable development. In other words, the mission and nature of these two organizations inform the ways in which resilience is used in both cases.

In any case, resilience seems to be the new analytical framework used by both NATO and the EU in order to make sense of the complex security environment. In a context of a broad understanding of security, the adaptability of the concept seems particularly useful.

Out of the numerous definitions of the term ‘resilience’ in the literature, it is still possible to point out three prevailing characteristics that appear in most of them.

Resilience is perceived as an ability (or a capacity or capability – but not as a reaction, response, a trait, or a process) of a person, a group, a community, or a society. (Ajdukovic et al., 2015).

Resilience involves a dynamic change or transformation of behavior. (Berkes, Ross, 2014).

Resilience is typified by a dynamic adaptive capacity of a system to adjust to an evolving situation.

A precondition for the existence of resilient behavior is the occurrence of a disruption. This is because the need for resilience appears only in a state where a system's equilibrium is interrupted. The disruption can be man-made, e.g., war, terror, violence, or can be caused by nature, e.g., earthquake, tsunami, floods, etc., as long as it causes a significant disturbance in people's routine life. (Padan, Gal, 2020).

### **Framework for understanding resilience-levels and elements**

The "principles model of resilience", offered by Carl Gibson and Michael Tarrant (2010) in the work "Conceptual models", can serve as a convenient and at the same time the most comprehensive starting point for understanding different conceptual models of organizational resilience. This "model" of resilience was created by identifying the most common themes or concepts that appear in the definitions of resilience of different sciences and scientific disciplines, and is based on six key principles:

"Resilience is an outcome";

"Resilience is not a static property";

"Resilience is not a single property";

"Resilience is multidimensional";

"Resilience exists through a number of forms";

"Resilience is based on valid risk management" (Gibson & Tarrant, 2010).

Acknowledging the fact that resilience is determined by interactions with a changing context, the organizational context can simultaneously have both a stimulating and a degrading effect on resilience capabilities, which ultimately results in a wide range of possible outcomes – generating opportunities from high to low resilience. How an organization will deal with such variability depends on how it monitors, understands and deals with the risks it faces (Gibson & Tarrant, 2010).

The absence of clear definitions and universal features makes resilience a highly individualised concept that has to be tailor-made for each actor. Regardless of the exact definition used, for purposes of analysis, it is often more relevant to focus on the variables that constitute resilience. Only the analysis of those tangible variables can lead to the understanding of various stages of the process that constitutes resilience. To this end, it is imperative to define variables and elements that affect the various physical and psychological components of resilience on all measurable levels: individual, community, organisational, national and multinational.

The main body of academic literature describes the effective application of resilience as resting on understanding and managing interdependencies be-

tween instruments of power and their effects on both components of resilience on all levels.

Elements of Resilience: Managing modern multi-domain and comprehensive threats requires the concerted use of all available instruments of national power, including Diplomatic, Military, Informational, Economic, Financial, Intelligence, Law Enforcement, etc. Currently available and new concepts require coordination and cooperation of those involved at national and international levels.

Physical elements of reliance are material and instrumental variables such as instruments of power, critical infrastructure, resources, networks, structures, or even how a group or institution is organised in terms of relationships, mechanisms, and decision-making systems. For example, NATO considers those physical aspects of resilience to be necessary to assure the continuity of government and critical government services. This could include the ability to make decisions, communicate them, and enforce them in a crisis (NATO, 2025).

### **A Multi-dimensional Matrix**

The comprehensive definition mentioned above can serve as the core for several specific definitions, representing twelve distinct types of resilience which are created by the intersection of two relevant dimensions: content and level.

The content dimension in the forthcoming matrix is comprised of four domains:

- social,
- economic,
- political, and
- security/military.

While, evidently, these are not the only domains in which resilient behavior can be studied (environment, climate, and culture are sampled examples of additional domains where resilience plays a major role), these four provide a better prospect for the examination across different levels, as will be demonstrated soon. The main *raison d'être* of the content dimension is the assertion that the resilience capacities required in these four domains are not necessarily identical. From an ontological perspective, each domain represents a distinct category. (Fjäder, 2014).

The level dimension involves three levels of reference: the individual, the community, and the state. The recent COVID-19 pandemic, affecting all countries severely across all continents, evidently advocates yet a fourth level – global. It is also possible to add various intermediate levels to this dimension as well, such as family, regional (or ethnic), or organizational level. However, in the current paper, we will focus on these three fundamental levels.

The matrix generated from combining the content and the level dimensions produces twelve cells, each representing a sub-type of resilience (see Table 1).

		Content Categories			
		Social	Political	Economic	Security
Level Categories	Individual				-Previous experience in similar situations; -Relevant information; -Optional participation in threat-related activities; -Support of family and community members.
		Community			
	State				

**Table 1.** A Multi-dimensional Matrix for Representing Twelve Types of Resilience

Table 1 summarizes the most cited components for building resilience in content category security generated by our multi-dimensional matrix.

### **Individual resilience under security (military) emergency**

We denote here attributes of resilience that characterize individuals, mostly civilians, who find themselves in war situations, or under prolonged military threat, repeated terror acts, or protracted security hazard. Such was the

situation for thousands of individuals in New York City after the 9/11 attacks, during the 'Troubles' period in Northern Ireland, as well as in many countries in Africa, Central America, and South-East Asia throughout the recent decades. The definition of resilience in this particular 'cell' is as follows:

the capacity of an individual to behave during a security crisis (e.g., war, fatal riots, terror attacks, counter-insurgency) or following disruption of this nature, in an adaptive way, in order to return to previous or even improved level of functioning.

The most cited factors regarding this type of resilience are previous experience in similar situations; the amount of relevant and well-run information flow regarding the threats; amplified engagement in threat-related activities (Gal, Lazarus, 1975). For individual victims of mass terrorist attacks, the support of family and community members can be crucial. (Desivilya at all, 1996).

### **Communal Resilience under Security (Military) Emergency**

This category does not necessarily pertain to a whole-war situation (in which case the community is just a component in a whole-State effort). Rather, we focus here on situations where a community, or several, are under a security danger or a military threat. The danger could be a terrorist attack or a lethal military attack explicitly aimed against this community.

The definition of resilience in this particular 'cell' is as follows:

the capacity of a community to behave, during a security crisis or following a security-related disruption, in an adaptive way, in order to return to a previous or even improved level of community functioning.

In recent years, the concepts of "urban resilience" and "resilience design" have been developed in different cities worldwide, such as London and New York. These concepts refer to using the idea of resilience not merely to aid recovery from attacks but for incorporating counter-terrorism design principles to deter, detect, and delay potential attacks. (Sampaio, 2017).

The majority of public spaces lack threat-specific security measures that have been selected and implemented through a systematic risk assessment process. Security measures, if they exist, should be identified, appraised and improved if deemed insufficient and outdated. Such a procedure should include both assessment of the performance of the current measures and identification of areas that remain exposed to particular threats. As noted previously, the security threat evolves over the years, so the employed measures may not be appropriate for the increased needs dictated by modern, emerging threats. Existing security measures, if properly applied, can substantially reduce the budget needed to implement new security plans. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC), 2022.

### **State Resilience under Security (Military) Emergency**

This category refers to a situation where a State's resilience is ultimately challenged by a total war or extreme upsurge of terrorism. Our definition for State resilience under war-related emergencies is:

the capacity of a State to behave during a nation-wide security crisis or following a security-related disruption, in an adaptive way, in order to return to a previous or even improved level of functioning.

The most cited factors regarding this type of resilience are charismatic leadership; national ethos, collective fear, and fighting enthusiasm; trust in security-related institutions (e.g., military, police); patriotism; optimism; and social integrity. When focusing on military indices of resilience, the list is comprised of the military strength (material, moral and doctrinal) and military leadership, perceived level of deterrence, national security strategy, and perception. (Prior, 2018).

Expected outcome and goal is to prevent new and reduce existing disaster risk through the implementation of integrated and inclusive economic, structural, legal, social, health, cultural, educational, environmental, technological, political and institutional measures that prevent and reduce hazard exposure and vulnerability to disaster, increase preparedness for response and recovery, and thus strengthen resilience. (Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015 – 2030).

### **Conclusion**

Resilience has rapidly evolved from a peripheral notion into a central pillar of modern security thinking. It's growing prominence in national and international policy frameworks underscores a paradigm shift in how states and institutions understand and respond to security threats in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

This paper provides a conceptual framework for defining resilience, both generally and particularly, in relation to a specific domain. Our contention is that this framework can provide a set for possible measurements and assessments of resilience at different levels and domains. The conceptual matrix offered in this paper will enable states to better learn and map their strengths and weaknesses, hence assisting them to guide their system's attitudes and behaviors (including individuals, communities, etc.).

However, the broad appeal of resilience also presents new challenges. Its conceptual elasticity, while enabling diverse applications, risks diluting its practical significance. There is also a concern that resilience discourses may shift the burden of security from states to individuals and communities, raising questions about responsibility, equity, and governance.

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