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Resilient Ukraine and the Future of War in Europe

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Opinion – ‘Resilient Ukraine’ and the Future of War in Europe

Written by Julian Reid

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JULIAN REID, MAR 17 2022

In an interview given to the BBC, Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, praised the ‘extraordinary resilience’ of ordinary Ukrainians fighting Russian military forces (BBC News 2022). Indeed, the media is awash with descriptions of Ukrainians as ‘resilient’ in the face of Russia’s invasion. Meanwhile, images circulate of Ukrainian civilians resisting Russian military forces, throwing molotov cocktails at Russian tanks, and urinating on Russian military vehicles. All of which contributes to the construction of a ‘Resilient Ukraine’. The role of resilience in the Ukrainian struggle, however, is not just that of a handy soundbite for statesmen like Blinken, or a patronizing cliché for western journalists.

Since the beginning of Russia’s most recent aggressions towards Ukraine in 2014, NATO has been developing a strategic approach of resilience to equip member states and strategic partners like Ukraine for future conflicts. To understand the resilience of Ukrainians to Russia’s invasion, we have to consider it in context of the demands for resilience made upon Ukraine by NATO over these last eight years. NATO summits in Wales (2014) and Warsaw (2016) were important forums for the development of NATO approaches to resilience. Ukraine is not a member of NATO, but it has been an important partner to NATO since the 1990s, and the development of its strategic thinking and practice has been influenced by NATO. Indeed the increasing influence of NATO over Ukraine has been an important factor in the escalation of its conflict with Russia.

Resilience, in the military-strategic context, refers, at its simplest, to the ability of ordinary people to fight their own wars of defence against aggressors. A resilient people does not rely on a state’s military to defend it, it gets on with doing that by itself. ‘Society must defend itself’ is the governing imperative of resilience in military-strategic terms. In this sense it is similar to every other way in which resilience is already deployed in other fields of policy, such as economy, development and health. In these areas people have already been taught the necessity to protect themselves rather than expect the state to save them. Resilience describes the abilities of peoples to help themselves in times of crisis, and not expect the intervention of some greater power to save them.

NATO is commonly understood as a military alliance formed to provide collective defence to its member states. Its principle of collective defence is supposedly enshrined in Article 5 of its founding treaty. This is the article said to be the defining principle of NATO membership; the idea that an attack on one is an attack on all, and that any member state attacked can expect support from other members in the alliance.

This would be fine if it were so simple. However, the myth of collective defence is unravelled by the increasing centrality of resilience to NATO. ‘Resilience’ falls under Article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Article 3 is where NATO stresses the requirements for every NATO member ‘to be resilient to resist and recover from a major shock such as a natural disaster, failure of critical infrastructure, or a hybrid or armed attack’ (NATO 2021). In other words, members of NATO are expected to be able to cope with major disasters, including armed attacks and invasions by themselves, and not depend on NATO to get them out of trouble. It is a fact, of course, that it took 52 years for Article 5 to ever be invoked, and even then, it was on behalf of its strongest member, the United States, after 9/11, on the 12th of September 2001. Still today, it remains the only occasion when Article 5 was actually invoked.

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Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine we have seen a huge swing of public support towards NATO membership in the non-aligned states of Finland and Sweden. This swing is motored by a public perception of NATO as a source of collective security should Finland or Sweden be attacked by Russia. Finns and Swedes talk positively of how they could enjoy the protection of Article 5, as well as how being out of NATO means losing any potential for assistance in an emergency.

This begs the question of whether Finns and Swedes understand exactly what they would be signing up for were they to join NATO. Media debates in these countries suggest a consensus that it is dangerous to try to go it alone in today’s world, and joining NATO means getting that protection which Article 5 automatically offers. Awareness of the implications of the shift in NATO doctrine towards resilience, and the subsequent degradation of Article 5, has been absent in these debates.

However, the war in Ukraine is illustrative of the kind of war which NATO would expect a relatively small state, such as Finland, to conduct for itself, were it to be invaded by Russia. The reality is that NATO has been tutoring Ukraine to fight precisely this style of war since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The effects of NATO’s focus on resilience since 2014 are already evident in the strategic development of the Baltic states; Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. All of whom are NATO members and each of which has increased its focus since 2014 on involving its own society in preparations for defence of the state. Developing resilience has come to be seen as crucial for the ability of these states to withstand future aggressions from Russia. The building of resilience for these states has meant, principally, focusing on increasing the will of their societies to engage directly in defence (Andzans et.al. 2021).

Resilience, in military-strategic terms, is not just about preparing society for when an attack occurs in order for it to fend off that attack after the event. It is also about deterring the possibility of attack as much as possible by projecting an image of resilience to potential aggressors. Which leads to the problem of what has gone wrong in Ukraine, such that Russia perceived sufficient weakness to launch the scale of attack which it has. Is this a failure of Ukrainian resilience, of NATO, or of Russian perception and calculation?

Of course for experts writing in the media, the answer is clear. Ukrainians are incredibly resilient and Putin has made an extraordinary miscalculation of judgement. Putin assumed Russia could win by targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure, and wait for its government and people to concede defeat. When this did not happen, Russia began to target civilians and their infrastructure, as witnessed with the bombing of residential areas and hospitals in several cities.

We can already speculate coherently on how such early errors of calculation will affect Russian strategy in the future. Quite conceivably, Russia will learn and start next time by attacking civilians and the infrastructure on which they rely, in order to shatter the resilience of the target state and its population, which they so badly underestimated in Ukraine.

As such two minimal conclusions can be drawn concerning future scenarios. Firstly, any state and people facing Russian attack has to anticipate the likelihood of a strategy which starts by targeting civilians and their infrastructure. This is the rational way to undermine an adversary which has invested heavily in its society as a source of strategic defence. Secondly, any democratic people concerned by its (in)security in the light of Russia’s actions in Ukraine, and now turning to NATO as a source for defence in the future, has to understand that joining NATO means having to accept the further development of resilience as a strategy for its security.

Acceding to the imperative of resilience, as NATO disciplines its members and partners to do already, means accepting the idea that not only is society itself a player in national defence, but also a prime target in any conflict with Russia. The more NATO invests in resilience as the way forward, the more we can expect Russia to adapt to that trend, and the more central will European civilians find themselves to be in the bloody business of warfare between Russia and the West.

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Ukraine is proving to be a laboratory for the testing of resilience as a strategy of national defence. On the evidence of the war so far, proponents of resilience in NATO will be encouraged. However, looking at this war from a social perspective, it is essential to be cautious about these developments. Resilience may increase the strategic efficacy of a state, but it will by definition, also make society itself into a more direct agent of war, and therefore, also a target in war. Whatever states may gain from adopting a strategy of resilience, their societies will lose in terms of security. Resilience, it must be understood, is not a synonym for security. It is the polar opposite of security. It is social insecurity by state design.

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