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PAX

How to safeguard **human security** amid changing NATO priorities



Colophon

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List of acronyms

ARRC	Allied Rapid Reaction Corps
CAAC	Children and Armed Conflict
CHM	Civilian harm mitigation
CIMIC	Civil-military cooperation
CPP	Cultural Property Protection
CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
C-SASE	Contributing to a Safe and Secure Environment
CTHB	Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings
FABN	Facilitating Access to Basic Needs
FINCENT	Finnish Defence Forces International Centre
HQ	Headquarters
IO	International organisation
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
MH	Mitigating Harm
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NMI	NATO Mission Iraq
NRDC	NATO Rapid Deployable Corps
PoC	Protection of Civilians
UHE	Understanding the Human Environment
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

1. Introduction: the problem of NATO and its human security approach

In the 2022 Strategic Concept, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) committed to mainstreaming human security – an approach that widens the traditional focus of ‘security’ from states to individuals and adopts a population-centric approach to conflicts – across its core tasks, from collective defence to crisis management to partnerships. Four years later, however, human security appears to be in decline within the Alliance, hampered by low visibility, limited resources, and a lack of concrete, practical guidance for militaries. This threatens the progress made in understanding and mitigating civilian harm in conflict just as NATO is preparing for a collective defence scenario that would put

its own populations, governments and territories at a major risk of harm. The retrenchment is also affecting partnerships, including the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI), which had supported work leading to the adoption of Iraq’s National Protection of Civilians (PoC) Policy.

The current international landscape – from the United States (US) dismantling the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda and civilian harm mitigation (CHM) approaches to NATO’s focus on collective defence and national resilience – is a significant contributor to the decline of human security, but it is not the whole story. This briefing suggests that a lack of specific military guidance, inadequate levels of expertise, a lack of understanding from commanders, and changes in personnel tasks have all had a negative influence on NATO’s ability to translate the political commitment to human security into actions that would carry practical benefits for civilian populations.

Despite its weaknesses, however, allowing human security to fall by the wayside would be detrimental

to military preparedness, including for Article V missions.¹ Experience from the post-9/11 wars and from Ukraine's self-defence shows the importance of the civil environment, as civilians are deliberately targeted and as their support becomes decisive for the success of military operations. Its relevance is also visible in continuing efforts to integrate human security with NATO's current priorities at tactical and operational levels, as well as in new initiatives in professional military education. Adapting human security for collective defence would **enable NATO to gain a fuller picture of the operational environment, understand some of the dilemmas facing civilians in that context, address gaps in civilian harm mitigation and response, nurture long-term balance between civilian and military needs, and maintain operational legitimacy and effectiveness. It would also make it easier to continue human security work in partnerships and crisis management missions as and when possible, and to preserve the expertise that many partners would benefit from.**

¹ Article V refers to NATO's collective defence principle, which states that an attack against one member state is considered an attack on *all* of NATO.

2. Methodology and approach

PAX has a long tradition of working on CHM and human security, and has engaged extensively with NATO entities (including the NATO Mission Iraq) and Alliance members. Given the apparent decline of human security, PAX tasked a consultant with human security expertise and a deep knowledge of NATO to conduct a short research project assessing the current position and trajectory of the human security approach within the Alliance.

The research, conducted between March and May 2026, combined a literature review, attendance at key NATO events, and interviews or background conversations (online and in person) with 17 key stakeholders. Among the 17 interviewees, three are serving military officers and 14 are civilians, including seven with a background in the armed forces. Five interviewees work for the NATO Headquarters (HQ) and the Command Structure; five are part of the NATO Force Structure, i.e., multinational military headquarters available for Alliance operations; five are linked to national structures that work with NATO daily; one works with partnerships; and two are consultants for NATO exercises. All have worked extensively across the Alliance and have had regular, long-term engagement with issues related to human security. To preserve confidentiality, all interviews were fully anonymized and are referred to only by number. Where useful to confirm or contextualise interview findings, the consultant utilised previous NATO-related experience.

Given the short span of the research project, PAX decided to prioritise the analysis of NATO entities. This is not because implementation of human security at the national level is not important; to the contrary, it is likely to be decisive in whether and how the concept is adopted across the Alliance. NATO institutions, however, are key for standardising approaches among Allies, showcasing practical implementation measures, and providing the impetus for change through doctrinal adaptations, exercises, and planning. Including the

NATO Force Structure – the multinational military headquarters provided by nations for use in NATO’s missions – in the research also provides insight into the positioning among nations that lead and staff those HQs. Where possible and where interviewees had the expertise, PAX did ask questions about human security and specific Allies, and those insights were included in the analysis.

This paper first offers an analysis of what has impacted with human security at NATO, from the changing international situation to Allied policies, uneven implementation, and conceptual weaknesses. This is key to understanding how the concept is perceived and why it did not fulfil all the expectations attached to it. It then flags ongoing human security work that provides the basis for further adaptation, and suggests some areas where incorporation of human security – and in particular protection of civilians – would enable NATO to better address the challenges it is facing.²

² Since PAX specialises in PoC, this is the area this paper focuses on in the first place. This should not, however, be taken to mean that other areas of human security are not important.

3. Human security and NATO: from commitment to decline?

The concept of human security – a universal, rights-based approach built on commitments to political and social rights and the right to freedom from wants and needs – was first adopted in the United Nations’ (UN) development community. Unlike the traditional understanding of security as integrity of national territory and a lack of military threats, human security shifted the focus of ‘security’ to emergencies affecting individuals, making the needs of individuals and of civilian populations its primary focus.³

Through its post-Cold War and post-9/11 operations, NATO came to recognise that population attitudes and priorities, rather than exclusively government relations, had an impact on the legitimacy and effectiveness of international forces. Expecting the human security approach to provide a ‘heightened understanding’ of conflict and of civilian populations, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept committed the Alliance to integrating human security – alongside the WPS Agenda – in NATO’s core tasks, which include defence and deterrence, cooperative security (i.e., partnerships), and crisis prevention and response. At the same time as it appeared to privilege human security as a lens to view the civil environment, however, NATO narrowed the concept to five policy areas that it had already tackled and where, it argued, it could be the most effective: Protection of Civilians (PoC), Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC), Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (CTHB), and Cultural Property Protection (CPP).⁴

³ United Nations Development Programme, ‘Human Development Report 1994,’ New York: Oxford University Press 1994, pp. 13-46; Alexander Gilder, ‘The Usefulness of the Human Security Concept for NATO Collective Defence,’ forthcoming publication, 2026, pp. 4-6.
⁴ ‘Human Security: Approach and Guiding Principles,’ NATO, 20 October 2022; ‘NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians,’ 9 July 2016; NATO Policy on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence,’ 31 May 2021; ‘NATO Policy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings,’ 12 July 2023; ‘NATO Policy on Children and Armed Conflict,’ 12 July 2023.

Human security at NATO: what's in a name?

Human security at NATO is defined as “the risks and threats to civilian populations which may arise in all that the Alliance does,” and described as “people-centred, gender-responsive, prevention- and protection-oriented.” The goal of incorporating a human security approach is to mitigate the risks to civilians and the objects they depend on during conflicts and crises.⁵ At the political level of the Alliance, human security is effectively an umbrella over five policy areas known as the cross-cutting topics (to account for their applicability to all of NATO's missions):

- **Protection of Civilians (PoC).** Formalised in a policy adopted in 2016, PoC grew out of NATO's recognition of the impact of civilian casualties in Afghanistan on the effectiveness and legitimacy of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. In subsequent military guidance, PoC was operationalized through a four-part framework: understanding the human environment through continuous assessment that is population-centric rather than enemy-centric (UHE); mitigating harm to civilians that comes from the force's own actions as well as from the adversary's conduct (MH, NATO's primary responsibility); facilitating access to basic needs, for example by enabling the work of humanitarian organisations (FABN); and contributing to a safe and secure environment by providing the security for civilian institutions (C-SASE).⁶
- **Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV).** Covering grave, conflict-linked sexual violence, the CRSV policy (2021) mandates that NATO assesses the risk of CRSV when deploying, liaises with organisations preventing and responding to it, adopts a 'do no harm' manner of interacting with survivors, and – while not being the main respondent – is prepared to assist survivors *in extremis* and in the absence of other respondents.
- **Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC).** The 2023 CAAC policy mandates that NATO staff are equipped to recognise, report and tackle the UN-defined six grave violations against children in conflict, from killing and maiming through sexual abuse and recruitment of children into armed groups. They are also mandated to adapt CHM practices to account for specific harm to children.
- **Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (CTHB).** Adopted in 2023, the CTHB policy mandates NATO to avoid any actions that could increase the demand for trafficking (especially in procurement and supply chain management), develop the ability to provide immediate response to victims, and liaise with host nations and international institutions to tackle trafficking.
- **Cultural Property Protection (CPP).** NATO's commitment to CPP stems from its legal obligations enshrined in the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954). While there is no CPP policy, NATO's strategic military guidance steers the Alliance to consider CPP in line with the 2016 PoC policy (Chessman & Cunliffe, 2026 pre-publication draft), preparing to safeguard it in times of conflict.⁷ One key CPP measure are the 'no-strike lists,' i.e., registers of objects that should not be affected by military activity due to their cultural significance.

5 NATO Human Security Unit, 'Human Security Agenda,' 24 August 2024, p. 6.

6 Allied Command Operations (ACO). *Protection of Civilians. ACO Handbook*, 2021, pp. 8-11.

7 Clive Chessman and Emma Cunliffe, 'What does it mean for Cultural Property Protection to be an item on the Human Security agenda?' In: Gilder, Alexander, Hanlon, Robert J. & Christie, Kenneth. *Human Security in Policy and Practice*. University of Toronto Press. Pre-publication draft, 2026.

Two separate issues or agendas, which are nonetheless connected to human security are:

- **Building Integrity (BI).** While at the political level Building Integrity – NATO’s approach to countering corruption in its own forces and in mission area of operations – is a separate issue, the military structure connects it to human security.⁸
- **Women, Peace and Security (WPS).** This is a separate, but connected agenda focused on the gendered impact of conflict and insecurity. The latest WPS policy, adopted in 2024, focuses on two pillars: increasing the participation of women at all levels of NATO forces and institutions, and preventing and countering violence against women and girls in conflict.⁹

By 2026, NATO’s commitment to human security looked questionable. The Trump administration criticized WPS and PoC approaches as ‘woke’ and harmful to the business of warfighting, dismantled the US military’s WPS programming, and gutted the Department of Defense’s Civilian Protection Centre of Excellence.¹⁰ NATO’s new Secretary General Mark Rutte appeared to set a course mirroring that of the US, prioritising on ‘hard security’ and defence budgets, an unequivocal focus of the last two Alliance summits.¹¹ Key human security initiatives, such as an update of the 2016 PoC policy, were put on the back burner; teams responsible for human security at the political level were reshuffled and the resources available to them reduced, testifying to the de-prioritisation of human security at the political and strategic levels of NATO.¹² The NATO Mission Iraq, which included a Human Security Adviser, was suspended following the outbreak of the US-Iran war in March 2026, and earlier reports indicated that the US was pressuring other Allies to terminate it as part of reining in NATO’s out-of-area commitments.¹³

However, while **current US policies** are key to the implementation and resourcing of human security,¹⁴ laying the responsibility for its decline exclusively at the door of the Trump administration would miss other issues that have weakened the human security approach. These long-term, structural factors need to be addressed if the potential of the human security approach is to be fully realised.

The **focus on threats to individuals within the human security concept**, for example, has been an awkward fit with a military alliance that relies on governments for its legitimacy and effectiveness. While NATO recognised the state-centred approach to security as “insufficient,” this was never seen as applying equally to out-of-area and Article V operations.¹⁵ The 2022 Strategic Concept stressed that human security and in particular CHM are “central” to NATO’s approach to crisis prevention and management; in the section on collective defence and deterrence, it committed the Alliance to improving national resilience and did not mention human security. This might have resulted in an implicit perception of human security as applicable

8 ‘Cross-Cutting Topics and Human Security,’ *CIMIC Handbook*, CIMIC Centre of Excellence 2026, para 6.1.

9 ‘NATO Policy on Women, Peace and Security,’ 10 July 2024.

10 ‘The Future of Women, Peace and Security Belongs to America’s Allies,’ Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 16 December 2025; Yalda Matin, ‘The Rollback of the Pentagon’s Women, Peace, and Security Program: What it Means for NATO and the Importance of Canadian WPS Leadership,’ NATO Association of Canada, 8 June 2026; Joseph Gedeon and Cate Brown, ‘Pentagon quietly shut legally required program to prevent civilian deaths by military, watchdog finds,’ *The Guardian*, 15 May 2026; Jack Detsch and Paul McLeary, ‘Hegseth ignored military officials when he slashed offices that limit risk to civilians,’ *Politico*, 13 March 2026.

11 NATO, ‘The Ankara Summit Declaration,’ 8 July 2026; NATO, ‘The Hague Summit Declaration,’ 25 June 2025.

12 Felicia Schwartz et al, ‘How Trump learned to stop worrying and love NATO,’ *Politico*, 25 June 2026; Jessie Yeung, ‘NATO’s Mark Rutte emerges as Trump whisperer-in-chief after dramatic about-face at Davos,’ *CNN*, 22 January 2026; interviews 1, 6, 12.

13 Associated Press, ‘NATO pulls security advisory mission out of Iraq after Iranian attacks on European bases,’ PBS, 20 March 2026; Victor Jack, ‘US presses NATO for major reset, ending mission in Iraq,’ *Politico*, 19 February 2026.

14 Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5, 9.

15 NATO Human Security Unit, ‘Human Security Agenda,’ 24 August 2024, pp. 5, 10.

primarily to out-of-area operations.¹⁶ In the collective defence context, territorial and state security is often equated with human security, since potential loss of territory to an adversary such as Russia is likely to expose the population to significant abuses. The interpretation of human security as opposed to state security was therefore, one interviewee suggested, “unhelpful” in contexts where NATO governments would play a leading role.¹⁷

The Alliance’s **turn toward territorial defence** in Europe therefore contributed to the de-prioritisation of human security in two ways. One, preparations for a defensive war have brought about a paradigm shift: the Alliance moved from working on the military’s support to civilian goals to securing civil support for the military. Accordingly, the dominant lens that the civil environment is currently viewed through is not the rights-based human security, but rather national resilience, a concept that is geared just as much toward supporting military operations as it is toward protecting civilians.¹⁸ Measured through seven baseline requirements – continuing government functions, managing population movements and mass casualties, ensuring energy supply, maintaining food and water security, and providing operational civil communication and transport systems in a crisis – the focus of resilience is on individual and collective obligations rather than individual rights, further pushing the human security approach into the background.¹⁹

Two, the focus on collective defence has reduced the amount of attention and resources available to partnerships and crisis management missions; by de-prioritising the areas of work where human security was seen as a more natural fit, it reinforced its decline.

Even before the NMI was suspended due to the deterioration of the security situation, the US vision of a ‘NATO 3.0’ prioritised the focus on Europe and the Western hemisphere, pushing for an end to ‘legacy’ crisis management missions in Iraq and Kosovo. While the NMI is likely to be redeployed as the situation stabilises, its numbers and mandate could be scaled back, and the status of its human security work strand is unclear.²⁰

The turn toward collective defence has also **influenced the focus and expectations of the civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) function** within NATO.²¹ Due to its focus on civilian populations and institutions, CIMIC became “the main area in which all human security topics come into play.”²² With NATO’s turn toward Article V preparedness, however, the priority of civil-military cooperation branches became ‘domestic CIMIC,’ i.e., liaison with civilian institutions on Alliance territory in order to support the achievement of military-strategic objectives.²³ The conceptualisation of human security is not as a priority, but rather a “topic of relevance” to CIMIC, and CIMIC’s tasks related to human security seem to be focused on understanding second- and third-order effects of military operations on the civilian population.²⁴

The human security approach has also suffered from **a lack of clarity as to its operationalisation, uneven implementation, and limited expertise**. Interviewees argued that there is little clarity as to what human security is, what exactly the expectations of the military are, and how it is to be implemented. Many national militaries reportedly equate it with international humanitarian law and question the necessity of introducing additional concepts; others wonder if it

16 NATO Strategic Concept, Preface & paragraphs 5, 26, 39; ‘Human Security: Approach and Guiding Principles,’ paragraphs 4, 7, 9; interviews 5, 8, 10. In previous research work focused on NATO and carried out in 2024, the author was told by NATO staff that resilience is to Article V preparedness what human security was to out-of-area operations. Attendance at NATO events in 2024 and 2026 suggests a similar conclusion: human security is perceived as helpful if governments cannot provide security, but less useful if governments are comparatively effective, legitimate, and focused on securing state and population security. Frontline states in particular focus on the state’s response to potential threats, since a comprehensive defence approach, with the civilian population supporting the state structures, is seen as a crucial element of securing both the state and the population in a confrontation with Russia.

17 Interview 5.

18 Interviews 5, 8, 10. Supported by the author’s previous research and interviewees with other stakeholders within the Alliance in 2024.

19 NATO, ‘Resilience, preparedness and Article 3,’ updated 13 November 2024. The Alliance’s *Warfighting Capstone Concept* similarly recognises the necessity of civil capabilities for the success of military operations, referring to ‘zero-day integration’ between civil and military stakeholders. See Christoph Harig, ‘The Future of Civil-Military Cooperation in NATO,’ *In-Depth Briefing #83*, The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, 7 November 2024, p. 1.

20 Victor Jack, ‘Top US official calls for ‘NATO 3.0’,’ *Politico*, 12 February 2026; Jack, ‘US presses NATO for major reset, ending mission in Iraq,’ interview 3; background conversations with NATO stakeholders.

21 Christoph Harig, ‘The Future of Civil-Military Cooperation in NATO,’ *In-Depth Briefing #83*, The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, 7 November 2024, p. 2.

22 ‘Human Security Agenda,’ p. 9.

23 ‘The HN and domestic CIMIC,’ *CIMIC Handbook*, CIMIC Centre of Excellence 2026, para 4.2. Author’s previous experience with NATO CIMIC courses confirms that securing civil support to the military as well as ‘domestic CIMIC’ are currently priorities for the Alliance, with human security playing a much less prominent role.

24 NATO, *AJP 3.19. Allied Joint Doctrine for Civil-Military Cooperation*, Edition B Version 1, June 2025, paragraphs 1.4, 1.15, 2.9.

actually obscures key issues such as protection of civilians.²⁵ Some noted that this confusion is shared by NATO partners, who frequently prefer to talk about protection of civilians and civil-military relations rather than about human security, and whose interest is often directed toward preservation of economically significant infrastructure.²⁶ NATO itself has struggled to mainstream human security in cooperative security missions, partly due to limited resources and partly due to the positioning of human security outside the main chain of command, as an 'extra' dealt with by advisors. Within NMI, for example, limited resources and difficulties in mainstreaming human security work made it challenging to capitalise on important openings related to human security, such as the adoption of Iraq's National Policy for the Protection of Civilians.²⁷

The five cross-cutting topics that make up human security – PoC, CRSV, CAAC, CTHB, and CPP – have not been implemented at the same time or to the same degree. By and large, interviewees pointed to PoC as the area that has been best developed, where the military's tasks are relatively clear, and which has been incorporated into planning and exercises to the greatest extent.²⁸ Individual and collective education and training, however, have been overall slow to incorporate human security; testing human trafficking and CRSV at the tactical level within the current exercise design, or creating storylines that would present dilemmas to the command group, have been major challenges.²⁹

This has been compounded by diminishing availability of human security expertise within NATO, which appears to have **only partially** institutionalised the approaches developed during counter-insurgency wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As officers who participated in those missions begin to retire, expertise is receding: some personnel first encounter human security concepts at NATO-level tactical exercises, and a lack of internal military expertise means that human security issues are often raised by civilians outside the chain

of command.³⁰ The applicability of the expertise and procedures developed in out-of-area missions to collective defence and large-scale combat operations has also been questioned, and while the human security community has offered arguments defending the applicability of the concept to all operations, detailed and comprehensive military guidance is not yet available.³¹

But despite weaknesses in the human security concept, many stakeholders recognise its value and continue to push for concrete, relevant measures to operationalize and implement it. While the visibility of human security is diminishing at the political level, **operational and tactical military headquarters continue to push for implementation.** Two tactical headquarters – the United Kingdom (UK)-led Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) and the NATO Rapid Deployable Corps (NRDC) Italy – have formalised tactical guidance on human security and are part of the push for NATO-wide standardisation. Human security advisers and CIMIC staff continue to find ways to mainstream human security concerns in planning and exercises, and there are some success stories: in a recent exercise, a storyline requiring reconciliation of humanitarian imperatives with control of weapons flows became the preoccupation of the highest levels of command.³²

None of the stakeholders interviewed for this project questioned the importance of protection of civilians and cultural property protection, and a majority pointed to **PoC and CPP as the cross-cutting topics with clear relevance to Article V preparedness and to national resilience.**³³ The links between PoC and resilience as mutually reinforcing have been noted, and NATO's resilience-related guidance and host nation agreements reportedly contain provisions on protection of the population.³⁴ While the focus on FABN and C-SASE has come to be seen as largely the prerogative of the host nation, **development of other components of the PoC framework – understanding the civil environment and mitigating**

25 Interviews 2, 5.

26 Interviews 3, 14.

27 United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), 'United Nations praises Iraq's launch of the National Protection of Civilians Policy,' 17 February 2025; PAX, 'The National Protection of Civilians Policy in Iraq is public!,' 16 January 2025; interviews 3, 9, 14; background conversations with NATO stakeholders.

28 Interviews 1, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11.

29 Interviews 5, 8, 12, 13.

30 Interviews 1, 8, 12, 13.

31 Lt-Gen Charles Pede and Col Peter Hayden, 'The Eighteenth Gap. Preserving the Commander's Legal Maneuver Space on "Battlefield Next",' Military Review, March-April 2021; Gilder, 'The Usefulness of the Human Security Concept for NATO Collective Defence'; interviews 7, 8, 9.

32 Interviews 4, 8, 12, 13; NATO Rapid Deployable Corps (NRDC) Italy, 'SOP J.J9.04. Operationalization of Human Security,' 30 January 2023.

33 Interviews 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14.

34 Interviews 9, 11; 'Human Security Agenda,' p. 14. These documents are not public and could not be consulted.

harm – is ongoing. Preventing and mitigating harm in targeting processes, for example, is largely accepted as a military task at the tactical level, and ongoing adaptation of NATO's strategic targeting guidance incorporates harm mitigation and input from specialized non-governmental organisations (NGOs).³⁵ More generally, considerations related to protecting civilians and the civil environment are incorporated into work **on understanding the civil environment; incorporation of protection concerns into civil-military planning** and resilience considerations; and synchronisation of civil-military planning through work with governments, international organisations (IOs) and NGOs for the purpose of multi-domain operations.³⁶

New initiatives in **professional military education** could also help replenish the human security expertise pool. The Partnership for Peace Consortium, which most NATO national defence academies participate in, recently formed a Human Security Working Group and linked human security to resilience and comprehensive defence. Their work could help inject human security into national military education, and to introduce comparable standards across the Alliance.³⁷ The Finnish Defence Forces International Centre (FINCENT), NATO's academic lead for human security and related disciplines, is currently revising the content of its PoC course and working with partners to design a course on CPP, both with content relevant to Article V preparedness.³⁸

In partnership work, human security continues to feature in **lessons identified from Ukraine**, where the civilian population has been both a target of deliberate attacks and a key factor enabling Ukraine's defence.³⁹ Issues related to PoC form part of the workplan of the NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre in Bydgoszcz, Poland, and conversations with NATO stakeholders suggest that the Alliance is looking to Ukraine to understand the significance of the civil environment for the country's overall resilience and military ability.⁴⁰ More generally, while some partners focus on specific concerns related to infrastructure, others – especially countries tackling direct threats to their populations – continue to show interest in improving outcomes for civilians; Iraq's

recently adopted National Policy for the Protection of Civilians is one example.⁴¹

35 Interviews 7, 9; background conversations at NATO events.

36 Interviews 1, 9.

37 Interviews 1, 2; Partnership for Peace Consortium, 'PfPC Capstone in Gdynia Examines the Human Dimensions of Contemporary Armed Conflict,' 7 January 2026.

38 Interviews 9, 10; background conversations during NATO events in 2026.

39 Marta Kepe, Alyssa Demus, 'Resisting Russia. Insights into Ukraine's Civilian-Based Actions During the First Four Months of the War in 2022,' RAND Corporation, 15 August 2023.

40 Interviews 5, 15; background conversations at NATO events in 2026.

41 Interview 3.

4. Human security: why invest in it now?

Despite the weaknesses and uneven implementation of the concept, deprioritisation of human security is problematic. In the first instance, it could reinforce the incorrect perception of a potential Article V operation as fought in a battlespace fully subordinated to military goals and devoid of civilians, who are assumed to have left.⁴² Exclusive reliance on the resilience concept would focus NATO's lens on governments, reducing its awareness of the populations. A force that loses the population-focused lens loses the ability to understand not only its own impact on civilians, but also the significance of civilian conduct, attitudes, and abilities.

Tempting as it may be to think of a potential Article V scenario as a 'metal-on-metal' confrontation, the defence of Ukraine shows that this is a very unlikely outcome. Article V operations would take place in a civilian environment, among governments that have obligations toward their populations and that are concerned with protecting civilians, and against an adversary with a history of targeting civilians.⁴³

Better understanding of the civil environment, risks to civilians, and civilian agency

In this context, human security offers a lens for understanding the population that could complement assessments based on resilience benchmarks and on

⁴² Interviews 12, 13. Borne out by the author's previous research conducted in 2024.

⁴³ Interviews 3, 7, 12, 13, 15; Gilder, 'The Usefulness of the Human Security Concept for NATO Collective Defence.'

national 'total' or 'comprehensive defence' policies.⁴⁴ While the resilience approach and comprehensive defence policies assume that civilians would offer support to the armed forces, human security could help NATO governments understand which groups would be supportive and in what way: some could, for example, offer direct support to the armed forces, others could opt for participation in civil protection, yet others would evacuate, and a minority might remain neutral. It would also help NATO and Allied governments **understand the level of support available to the armed forces and map out potential threats to civilians in all relevant scenarios, including risks related to direct participation in hostilities** (as well as those related to not participating) and any trade-offs included in the choices that civilians will make.⁴⁵ Human security would also enable the Alliance to see **civilians as actively shaping their own protection measures**, which would in turn enable them to better support those measures and, where needed, deconflict them from military lines of effort.

[The] concept [of self-protection] is based on a recognition that civilians have agency during crises and regularly make decisions or act in ways that mitigate the threat of physical harm to themselves or their communities [...] In [an] extremely challenging context, Ukrainian civilians have shown remarkable resilience, as well as the ability to protect themselves while providing for the needs of the most vulnerable members of their communities. Such self-protection efforts have been critical for survival, filling the gaps where more formal protection actors have struggled to respond quickly or comprehensively enough to meet civilians' needs.⁴⁶

Balancing civilian and military needs

A collective defence scenario is also one in which human security, and especially PoC, would be a whole-of-government preoccupation. Given the need to continue services for the population and offer support for the armed forces, it would be the task of NATO

governments to **maintain long-term balance of civilian and military needs**, reconciling military operations with protecting civilians to the maximum extent possible. As noted in NATO's guidance, the Alliance could use force to protect civilians from the actions of the adversary, an issue that would very likely be a part of an Article V scenario. This means that military operations need to be planned with the situation of civilians in mind, and that governments would need to work with the armed forces on the employment of direct protection measures – for example the placement and use of air defences – and, again, on balancing those with military needs. To make those decisions, an analysis led by the human security approach – including a focus on population vulnerabilities – would provide a useful lens. It would also help the Alliance plan and provide resources for those *in extremis* situations when it might be required to **respond to humanitarian needs**, supporting national governments, other regional organisations, and national and international NGOs.⁴⁷

Mitigating and responding to civilian harm

NATO's continued focus on mitigating civilian harm through targeting protocols is welcome and should be continued. Lessons from post-9/11 operations should be adapted to shape targeting protocols and other guidance, including Battle Damage and Collateral Damage Estimates. It should, however, be complemented with attention to other aspects of addressing civilian harm, in particular response to harm that occurs despite precautions. Previous research conducted by NGOs suggests that a lack of acknowledgment or **response to harm**, or a response that does not match survivors' needs can leave lasting scars in communities, endanger civil-military relations, and decrease the legitimacy and effectiveness of military forces in the longer term.⁴⁸ In an Article V scenario, response to civilian harm would likely fall to national governments, with different scope of assistance and varying legal provisions and procedures. For cases when harm is caused by the activity of friendly forces, a deeper understanding of national processes and priorities, as well as NATO-

44 See for example Ieva Berzina, 'From "total" to "comprehensive" national defence: the development of the concept in Europe,' *Journal on Baltic Security* 6(2), 2020, pp. 1-9.

45 See Ruben Stewart, 'From "total war" to "total defence": tracing the origins of civilian involvement in armed conflict,' *Humanitarian Law & Policy*, ICRC, 30 April 2025.

46 Center for Civilians in Conflict, 'Self-Protection in Practice: Ukrainian Efforts to Avoid Harm During Russian Invasion,' 2023, p. 2.

47 Interview 15; Gilder, 'The Usefulness of the Human Security Concept for NATO Collective Defence,' p. 2.

48 PAX, 'Civilian harm response: Recommendations for a civilian-centred civilian harm response process,' *Protection Series 8/2023*; PAX, 'Community-level responses to harm: Lessons from Hawija,' 4 April 2025; Center for Civilians in Conflict, *Guiding Principles for Community-Based Amends*, November 2025.

level harm tracking and response processes, would be significant enablers. Equally, NATO personnel need to be able to act as first responders in cases involving human trafficking or CRSV.

a comprehensive and comparable set of approaches backed up by expertise that sits squarely within the chain of command.⁵⁰

Continuing the work on human security in partnerships

Working on human security in the collective defence context would also help **develop the expertise necessary to inform cooperative security and crisis response outside NATO's territory**. The Alliance's current partnership with Ukraine offers an opportunity to identify approaches and practices that support societal resilience, improve outcomes for civilians, and contribute to military operations; in particular, it would allow NATO to better understand the challenges related to protecting critical infrastructure. Since this is an area that is of interest to many NATO partners, it could help open doors to more comprehensive initiatives in the future, including protection concerns where civilian populations are under threat.⁴⁹

Investing in human security inter-operability

Investing in human security at a NATO level would help incentivise the adoption of comparable standards across Allied militaries. Some countries, such as the UK, have an independent human security mainstreaming plan; their interest in the concept precedes that of NATO and their national-level work is likely to continue. Other NATO members, such as Canada, appear to be in a 'holding' pattern, not dismantling what it achieved in human security, but also not developing it; yet others are finding it difficult to assign resources to human security in the current international environment, where the very survival of NATO is at stake. For countries that often model their military doctrine and education on Alliance standards, a lack of operationalization of human security is likely to remove it from the radar, making it more difficult for them to show up on the battlefield with interoperable processes and approaches. In this context, **international initiatives in professional military education** could allow NATO states to develop

⁴⁹ Interviews 6, 15.

⁵⁰ Interviews 1, 2, 4, 6, 7.



▲ **Photo:** A Dutch soldier conducts an urban assault training to prepare for collective defence scenarios in Lithuania, as part of NATO training for the enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup. (source: NATO/Flickr).

5. Conclusion: the way forward for human security within NATO

While the importance of human security seems to have receded over the last year to two, the concept continues to highlight a population-centric perspective that complements NATO's current focus on resilience and comprehensive defence. Drawing attention to civilians – their agency, their vulnerabilities, and their readiness to support civil preparedness and military operations – human security enables NATO to not only better understand and respond to civilian needs, but also to better plan its own operations and to structure civil-military interactions more effectively. A pathway for external organisations to engage with and better understand NATO, human security is far from a concern only for low-intensity, out-of-area operations supporting fragile government; it does, however, need

to be adapted for collective defence conducted on NATO's own territory, where state security often reinforces human security and where civilians are likely to be not only agents of their own protection, but also of support for military operations. Integrating human security in preparedness for Article V operations would not only help mainstream it, but also build the expertise needed to assist NATO partners in the future.

While NATO's current focus on collective defence presents some challenges for the human security approach, it also brings opportunities for the Alliance and the organisations that are likely to interact with it in future missions. Collective defence and the whole-of-society approach that it entails could help lift human security out of its current position as an add-on, and make it an integral part of resilience considerations and military planning – something that interviewees have suggested is already happening. As NATO's liaison network is evolving to include national NGOs in addition to international humanitarian organisations, it is creating a better picture of the organisations that

would be involved in a collective defence scenario and developing further opportunities for dipping into expertise amassed outside formal Alliance structures, especially on understanding the civil environment and preventing and responding to civilian harm.⁵¹ It is also an opportunity for civilian organisations to shape Alliance approaches and procedures. To maximise those opportunities, NGOs and other organisations need to apply human security in contexts where it might be linked to state and government security, and where the resilience of governments and their control of territory might well be a protective measure for civilians, who might otherwise need to evacuate or be subjected to reprisals from the adversary's occupation authorities. Potential gains for civilians make this an area worthy of a sustained effort.

⁵¹ Interviews 9, 15.

Make peace work.

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