

Safeguarding **human security** amid changing NATO priorities

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In the 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO committed to mainstreaming human security – an approach that focuses on the needs and vulnerabilities of individuals – into its core tasks: defence and deterrence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security. Four years later, however, **implementation of human security is uneven**: despite some progress at the operational and tactical levels, human security at NATO’s political level appears to be backsliding. Its visibility is low; policy initiatives have been put on hold; and resources assigned to implementing it have been reduced. This could **threaten the progress made in understanding and mitigating harm to civilians and their environment**, just as NATO is preparing for potential military operations on its own territory. The retrenchment is also affecting partnerships, including NATO’s Protection of Civilians (PoC)-oriented work in Iraq.

Human security at NATO is defined in its 2024 [Human Security Agenda](#) 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 for the Alliance to mitigate the risks to civilians and the objects they depend on during conflicts and crises. At NATO’s political level, human security is effectively an umbrella over five policy areas: PoC, children and armed conflict, trafficking in human beings, conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), and cultural property protection (CPP).

The decline of human security is a result of multiple developments, including the dismantling of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and civilian harm mitigation policies in the US; an increased focus on collective defence preparedness and the concept of resilience; and the evolution in the role of the civil-military coordination function to prioritise domestic liaison. NATO has had challenges in retaining human security expertise – developed in post-9/11 operations – and adapting it to collective defence priorities. Its operationalisation has been uneven: there is limited consensus on what the approach requires beyond the application of international humanitarian law, and it has mostly been an add-on in planning for collective defence and work on crisis management and partnerships. At the same time, the relevance of some elements of human security – especially PoC and CPP – to NATO’s collective defence is largely accepted across NATO’s military structure, and new initiatives in professional military education aim to integrate human security with educational content in Allied defence academies.

Human security remains valuable for NATO in the evolving international environment. Experience from the post-9/11 wars and from Ukraine's defence after Russia's invasion suggests that the role of the civil environment is crucial in any conflict. In planning for collective defence, where the focus is on supporting the armed forces, human security can inform the understanding of the civil environment so as to enable military operations while protecting civilians. In partnerships, human security will remain relevant to countries tackling frequent and direct threats to their populations. The following aspects remain key:

- **Understanding of the civil environment, including risks to civilians and civilian agency.** While resilience benchmarks focus on the continuity of governments and services, the human security lens would yield a fuller picture of the operational environment by leading planners to analyse, *inter alia*, the readiness of individuals and groups to adopt self-protection measures and support civil defence or military operations.
- **Balancing civilian and military needs.** A human security lens, focused on civilian needs and vulnerabilities, would help planners protect civilians from the actions of the adversary and to meet civilian and military needs in an Article V context.
- **Mitigating and responding to civilian harm.** Civilian casualties undermined the legitimacy of international forces in the post-9/11 wars. Lessons from these operations need to be adapted to shape targeting protocols and other guidance for crisis management operations and for large-scale combat operations (LSCO). They also show the necessity of constructing a civilian harm tracking and response system, so that NATO and national governments can acknowledge harm and provide assistance. Finally, NATO personnel need to be equipped for cases when they might become first responders to cases on human trafficking or CRSV.
- **Maintaining a human security lens in partnerships and crisis response.** International instability lessened the importance of partnerships and crisis response work, and has reportedly redirected NATO partners' attention to protection of strategic assets. However, partners tackling continuing threats to civilians would still benefit from what human security and resilience concepts have to offer. Maintaining human security expertise will enable NATO to provide support when the environment permits.
- **Improving interoperability.** To ensure that human security informs NATO's current preparedness, the Alliance needs to facilitate the inclusion of human security lessons identified in national military education, and to ensure that lessons on civilian harm mitigation and response are adapted for LSCO. Progress is already being made, and continuation will bring tangible benefits to NATO civilians.

This briefing summarises the recently published [report's](#) findings: *How to safeguard human security amid changing NATO priorities*. It is based on interviews and conversations with 17 key NATO stakeholders, attendance at key NATO events, and a literature review. The research was conducted by an independent consultant.