

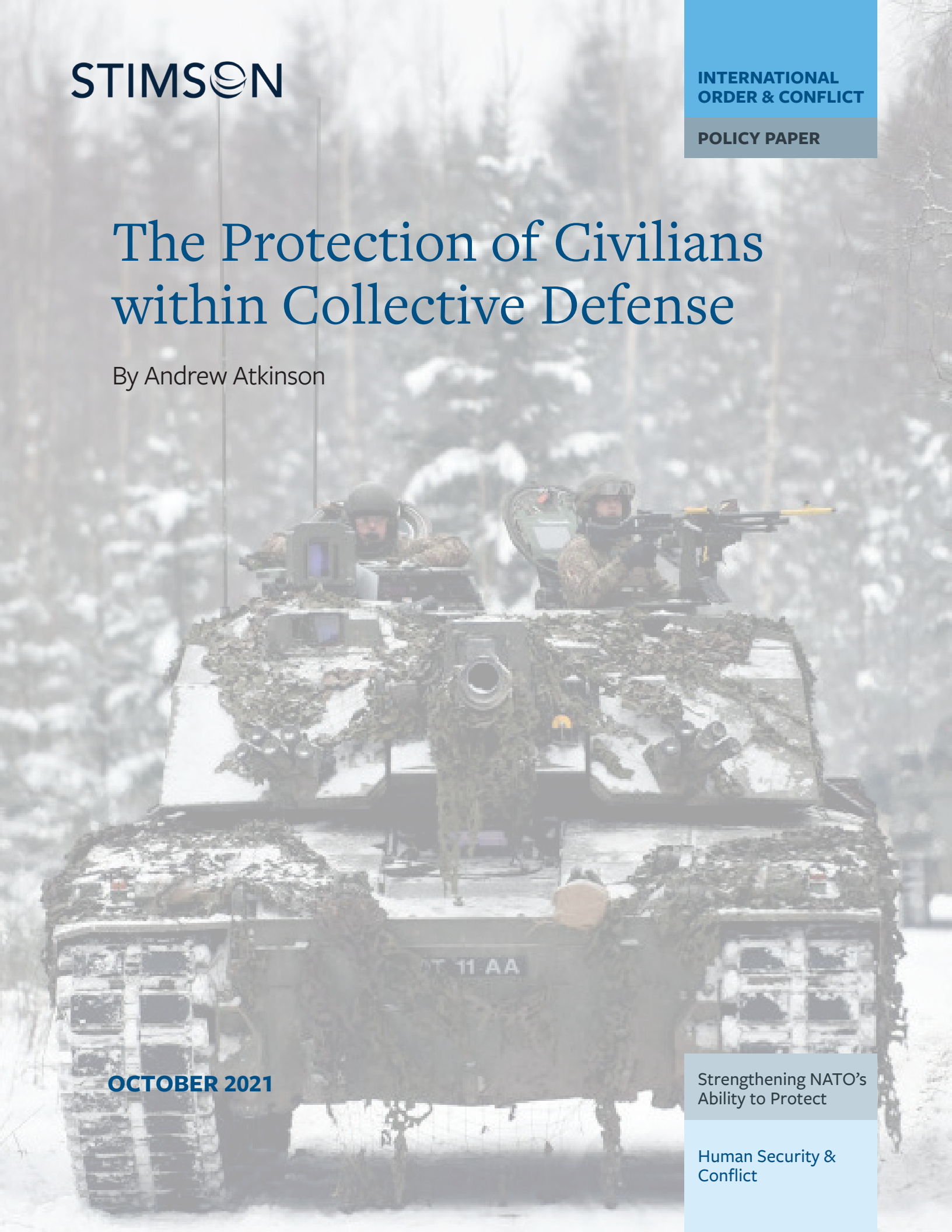
# The Protection of Civilians within Collective Defense

By Andrew Atkinson

OCTOBER 2021

Strengthening NATO's  
Ability to Protect

Human Security &  
Conflict



---

© 2021 The Henry L. Stimson Center

**The Stimson Center**  
1211 Connecticut Ave, NW, 8th Floor  
Washington, DC 20036  
[https://www.stimson.org/  
communications@stimson.org](https://www.stimson.org/communications@stimson.org)  
202.223.5956

**COVER**

*British troops take part in a  
NATO exercise in Estonia.*

Photo by Joe Giddens/  
PA Images via Getty Images

Report designed by Dena Verdesca

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>About the Project</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>About Stimson</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>About the Team</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
PoC & NATO's New Strategic Concept	4
<b>A Need to Redefine Collective Defence</b>	<b>6</b>
NATO's Core Tasks	7
PoC Within Future Warfare	8
<b>POC within Future Collective Defence</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Rise of POC at NATO</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Applying NATO's POC Approach</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Integrating PoC in Future NATO Operations</b>	<b>12</b>
Understanding the Human Environment	12
New Capabilities to Mitigate Harm	13
Facilitating Access to Basic Needs	13
Resilience & Maintaining a Safe & Secure Environment	14
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Endnotes</b>	<b>16</b>

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

**Strengthening NATO's Ability to Protect** is a research initiative of the Transforming Conflict and Governance Program at the Stimson Center. This project seeks to build bridges between NATO stakeholders and the expert community to act on the Alliance's ambition to protect civilians in its operations around the world.

In 2016, the NATO Policy on the Protection of Civilians (PoC) made protection a goal of future operations, kicking off the development of an action plan and a military concept on PoC. Whether in active security operations, train and assist missions, or support to disaster relief, NATO policy is to mitigate harm from its actions and, when applicable, protect civilians from the harm of others. To help NATO succeed, Stimson launched this project, in partnership with PAX and supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to cultivate and offer external expertise to NATO as well as assess the current levels of doctrine and guidance on PoC within NATO nations and partners. Emphasis is on solutions-focused research and building bridges across governments, academia, international organizations, and NGOs.

In support of this project, Stimson is commissioning a series of papers authored by leading experts in their fields that considers protecting civilians and NATO's future missions, capabilities, and approaches. The papers, published throughout 2021 and 2022, aim to engage NATO stakeholders as they consider NATO's role in future conflict, support further implementation of the NATO Policy on the Protection of Civilians, and focus on NATO's 2030 agenda and beyond.

We would like to thank our partners at PAX and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their insights and generous support of this work.

## ABOUT STIMSON

**The Stimson Center** promotes international security, shared prosperity & justice through applied research and independent analysis, deep engagement, and policy innovation.

For three decades, Stimson has been a leading voice on urgent global issues. Founded in the twilight years of the Cold War, the Stimson Center pioneered practical new steps toward stability and security in an uncertain world. Today, as changes in power and technology usher in a challenging new era, Stimson is at the forefront: Engaging new voices, generating innovative ideas and analysis, and building solutions to promote international security, prosperity, and justice.

More at [www.stimson.org](http://www.stimson.org).

## ABOUT THE TEAM



**Marla B. Keenan**, Project Lead, is an adjunct senior fellow at the Stimson Center. Her areas of expertise include international security issues, human rights in armed conflict, protection of civilians, civilian harm tracking and analysis, and civil-military relations in armed conflict. Marla served as senior director of policy and advocacy and previously senior director of programs at Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC).



**Andrew Hyde**, Policy Lead, is a nonresident fellow at the Stimson Center. His focus at Stimson is on multilateral diplomacy, international security issues, conflict prevention and institutional partnerships. Andrew's 28-year U.S. diplomatic career included postings in Europe, South Asia and Latin America; he has also worked in the U.S. Congress.



**Kathleen H. Dock** is a research assistant at the Stimson Center, where she focuses on NATO, the protection of civilians, and atrocity prevention. Previously, Kathleen was a Herbert Scoville Jr. Peace Fellow with the Stimson Center.



**Alexander R. Hopkins** is a research associate at the Stimson Center. He focuses on UN peace operations, protection of civilians, legislative affairs, and the nexus of conflict and climate change.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Andrew Atkinson** is an independent consultant specialising in the development of defence and security related concepts including resilience, urban conflict and human security for clients within NATO, UK and the Middle East.

A retired British Army Officer, Andrew served for over four years within NATO Allied Command Transformation and was a core member of the team responsible for the development of the NATO Protection of Civilians Policy approved at the Warsaw Summit in 2016, and the development of associated military concept approved by the North Atlantic Council in 2018. A former instructor in military operational planning, he has worked to integrate the Protection of Civilians into core military thinking, including the running of wargames at Exercise VIKING 2018 and supporting the development of the joint UN-NATO course now run at the Finnish Defence Forces International Centre.

He has spoken widely on the subject of Human Security and the Protection of Civilians, including engagements at the United State Institute for Peace and the NATO Engages conference at the Brussels Summit in 2018 and continues to support this work through the Stimson Center and PaxforPeace.

## INTRODUCTION

In its 72-year history, NATO has faced many pivotal moments. And today, it faces another. Following the 2021 Summit in Brussels,<sup>1</sup> the Alliance looks to implement the recommendations of the NATO 2030 study,<sup>2</sup> the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept,<sup>3</sup> and re-center the idea of collective defense. Under the banner of the NATO 2030 initiative, NATO's new Strategic Concept is expected to set the priorities for "making sure NATO remains strong militarily, becomes even stronger politically and takes a more global approach."<sup>4</sup>

Based on its experience in Afghanistan and its involvement in conflicts over the past three decades, NATO has made significant progress in developing its approach to integrating Protection of Civilians (PoC) into its operations. As NATO moves forward to develop its future strategies that are less expeditionary and more centrally focused on collective defense, these lessons must not be lost. PoC must remain a core element with NATO's strategic, operational, and tactical thinking.

This paper aims to identify the role that NATO's PoC Policy and its supporting military contribution could provide within an in-area, Article 5 collective defense operation. Consequently, this paper argues against associating PoC only with stability operations and crisis response, but instead recognizing that the policy must be fully established as a central component in all future NATO operations.

### PoC & NATO's New Strategic Concept

Following the Afghanistan withdrawal, NATO is placing a greater emphasis on deterrence, defense, new technological threats, the resurgence of great power competition, and hybrid warfare.<sup>5</sup> But the hard-learned lessons of the past two decades must not be forgotten. These include the progress NATO has made on PoC. In current and future battlespaces, civilians are a critical strategic vulnerability<sup>6</sup> in need of protection. Thus, the Alliance has advanced the integration of PoC into its strategic and operational thinking, and this approach has a crucial part to play in building the resilience the Alliance needs to successfully meet its future goals.

Looking forward, PoC is no longer a principle only employed during interventions, but a fundamental concept central to all types of crises. It is critical to achieving all three of NATO's core tasks—collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. These are set out in NATO's current Strategic Concept, defined in 2010 during an era of out-of-area interventions.<sup>7</sup> The NATO Secretary General's 2030 Reflection Group recommended that "when updating the Concept, Allies should seek to preserve NATO's three core tasks," but the context in which they will be applied varies widely.

A decade of increased state tension between Western nations, Russia, and China is now marked by persistent activity that falls below the threshold of armed conflict. Activities such as the Russian actions in their annexation of Crimea, the nerve agent attack in Salisbury, U.K.,<sup>8</sup> and the prolonged Ukraine crisis are typical behaviors that have become the new normal in great power competition.

In addition to these situations, there now seems to be a constant barrage of disinformation and cyber-attacks<sup>9</sup> that seek to undermine societies. In Syria, Iraq, and North Africa, conflicts have come to NATO's European shores with increased migration by refugees seeking safety and terrorist actions in major NATO cities. The global COVID-19 pandemic has compounded all this, with economic and political implications still playing out.

The 2019 London Declaration marked a shift in emphasis for the Alliance back towards collective defense and NATO's origins enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.<sup>10</sup> While such a shift seems prudent today, it is essential to remember that conflict is rarely neatly categorized. Civilians are and will always be affected, directly or indirectly, and their safety compromised. Simplistically, this is because conflicts are about influence. Populations

are a central component of any crisis, and therefore, PoC must be a persistent political and military objective whenever and wherever security forces deploy.

Approved by the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in 2018, the NATO Military Concept for the Protection of Civilians was designed as a set of planning principles that would endure for all NATO and NATO-led operations and missions, including Article 5 and Non-Article 5 Crisis Response Operation (NA5CRO).<sup>11</sup> Its simplicity is its strength, and the

concept provides a versatile approach to understanding PoC factors relevant to any operation or situation, from the strategic to the tactical. Its challenge, particularly as operations in Afghanistan end, is to ensure that its applicability is not forgotten in NATO's 2030 agenda and the new Strategic Concept.

**In helping to protect and build societal resilience—and counter hybrid threats—NATO should look to PoC as both a political and core military necessity.**



## A NEED TO REDEFINE COLLECTIVE DEFENSE

Article 5 of the Washington Treaty provides the collective defense foundation for NATO's status as an alliance, stating that an attack on one shall be considered an attack on them all, and committing each member to respond to that attack.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Article 5 operations in Afghanistan have shown that, in reality, this concept of collective defense is not well-defined. While the al Qaeda attacks of 9/11 are the first time Article 5 has been invoked, NATO's Secretary General has also cited new threats such as cyber-attacks as having the potential to trigger an Article 5 response.<sup>13</sup>

NATO was a product of the Cold War and primarily envisioned as engaging in large-scale combat operations and peer-on-peer conflict where any discussions or considerations of PoC were grounded in the application of international humanitarian law (IHL). The NATO Readiness Action Plan (RAP) was announced at the 2014 Wales Summit as the “most significant reinforcement of NATO's collective defense since the end of the Cold War.”<sup>14</sup> With four battlegroups deployed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, it would be easy to see this as a return to the Cold War definition of collective defense.

However, this is only one of the dilemmas NATO faces. In addition to more conventional force-on-force aspects of warfare, new threats—which include cyber and information activities and other hybrid activities—now undermine political and societal cohesion. Consequently, the approach to collective defense needs to adapt to these threats. Therefore, a future collective defense scenario will be a blend of characteristics such as those experienced in Afghanistan—where PoC was a central element of a campaign with roots in security, stabilization, and counterinsurgency—and the prospect of peer-level force-on-force threat situations such as those on NATO's eastern flank. The enduring factor in either situation is the civilian populations; civilians both at home and those caught up in the conflict will need protection.<sup>15</sup> As such, PoC must be a part of any future collective defense strategy.

Decades of “wars amongst the people”<sup>16</sup> have shown that future confrontation and wars, no matter how characterized, will harm civilians either accidentally, incidentally, or increasingly through deliberate targeting to impart political pressure. Thus, NATO's experience and lessons in implementing PoC measures in out-of-area operations are highly relevant to future missions and not solely for humanitarian reasons. In helping to protect and build societal resilience—and counter hybrid threats—NATO should look to PoC as both a political and core military necessity.



*Civilian harm is an enduring factor in any conflict and must be addressed within NATO's future approach to collective defense.*

# NATO'S CORE TASKS



NATO's current Strategic Concept was agreed to at the Lisbon Summit in 2010. This defined 3 core tasks: Collective Defense, Crisis Response and Cooperative Security. Currently, the focus on the tasks was more on Crisis Response and Non-Article 5 Crisis Response Operations (NA5CRO). Although NATO's PoC policy was generated out of Article 5 operations in Afghanistan, it was still associated with NA5CRO.

The NATO 2030 vision acknowledges the continued relevance of the core tasks, but also the greater concurrency and connectivity between them. This will challenge the distinction between Article 5 and NA5CRO activity, as the transition from competition to contest to conflict becomes increasingly nuanced. Such a view can only be positive in breaking down preconceived categorization of conflict.

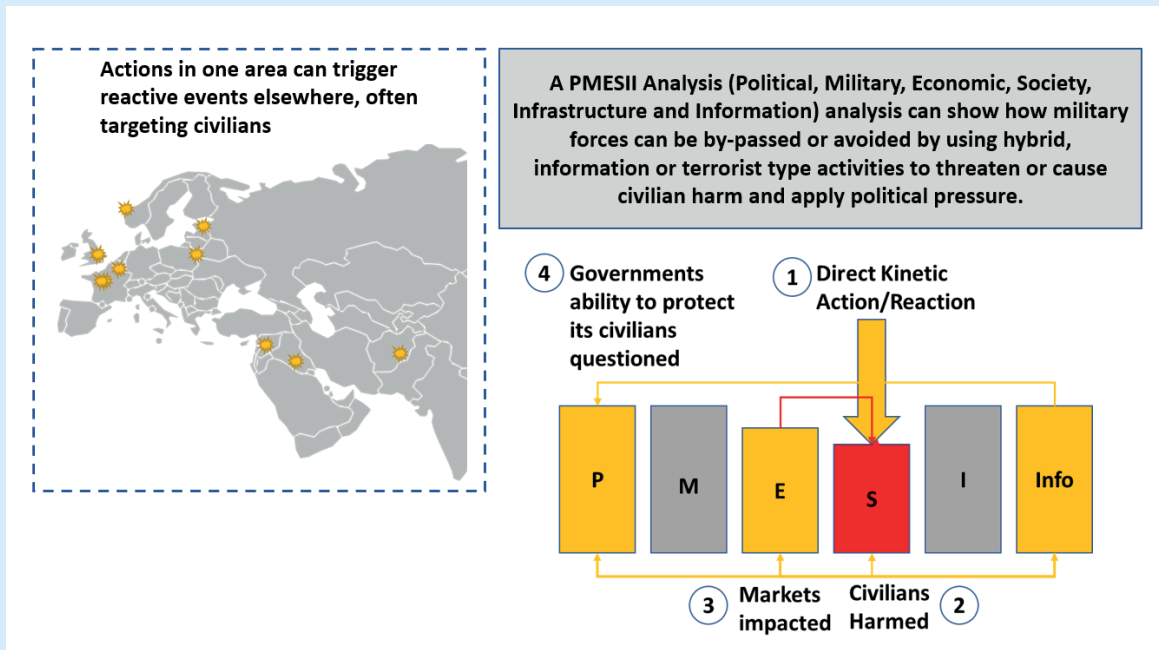


The NATO 2030 vision acknowledges that concepts and activities such as counter-terrorism must become more central and applicable to all. This must also be the case for PoC as protecting its 1 billion civilians is central to NATO's rationale, its center of gravity, and core beliefs.

*In the future operating environment, NATO's core tasks are part of a 360° continuum. Protection of Civilians must be central to all core tasks.*

The important conclusion is that classifying future conflicts to understand their character, deciding whether to act, and discerning the type of action necessary will be increasingly difficult.<sup>17</sup> NATO politicians will often refer to some operations as NA5CRO versus Article 5 collective defense operations when categorizing the mission. This distinction implies that certain types of activity—for example, security and stabilization, counterinsurgency, or humanitarian and disaster response—are only applicable in certain circumstances. From a military perspective, this is simply not true. Each crisis or conflict is likely to include aspects of all, and therefore all military responses and approaches to address the situation need to be trained for and practiced. In echoes of U.S. Marine Corps Gen. Charles C. Krulak’s concept of the Three-Block War,<sup>18</sup> as NATO looks to refresh its Strategic Concept, it must acknowledge that the factors and types of operation activities traditionally categorized against its core tasks are potentially applicable to all types of crises and conflict situations. That differentiation between the core tasks is becoming less distinct.

## PoC WITHIN FUTURE WARFARE



For future collective defense there is no frontline; adversaries will target civilians through a variety of means, including cyber, terrorism and other means to apply political pressure.

Such approaches seek to avoid military action and bring into question, the ability of a national or coalition force to effectively protect their civilians populations.

## PoC WITHIN FUTURE COLLECTIVE DEFENSE

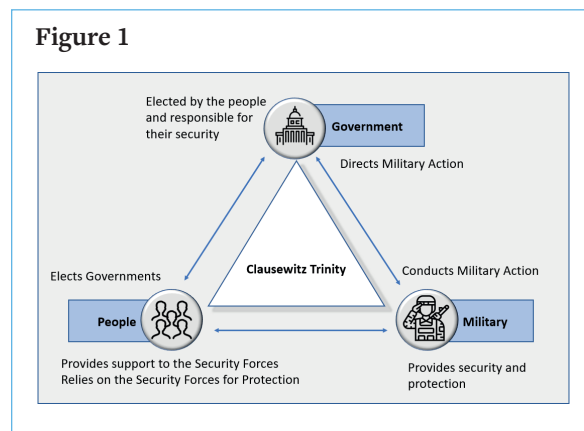
*“NATO’s operating environment, both now, and in the future, will present threats that defy neat categorization and their diffuse nature means they can affect any area, even in home nations.”<sup>19</sup>*

Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations, ADP 3-10

In the future, the notion of collective defense must cover a range of threats to NATO member states, their interests, core values, and populations, irrespective of whether threats come from non-state armed groups or peer states. The capabilities and tactics of state and non-state actors are no longer distinct, and there is no frontline in information age warfare.

Future collective defense situations will need to address more than just conventional warfighting. At all levels, NATO must plan for and practice contingencies for the inflow of refugees from conflict zones, cyber-attacks on critical national infrastructure, terrorist-style attacks on population centers, and other actions that seek to sow discord and exploit any political or social divergences within the Alliance. Given that war is famously cited as ‘politics by other means,’<sup>20</sup> hybrid warfare and other tactics actively seek to avoid direct military confrontation by targeting civilian populations to apply political pressure. Non-state actors may resort to crude terrorism, as in the Paris or Manchester attacks, but they could also destabilize political processes and economic markets using other methods.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, such tactics including the use of cyber-attacks may be used by state and non-state actors to disrupt critical infrastructure or disinformation to hamper the ability of the government to function. From the civilian perspective, it doesn’t matter who conducts the actions; the effect is still the same in that civilian harm is caused for the purpose of applying political pressure.

Therefore, it stands to reason that protecting member state civilians and conducting operations in line with the Alliance’s shared values must lie at the heart of NATO. The Alliance’s current approach to PoC focuses on identifying and addressing threats to human security. By applying this philosophy within a collective defense situation, NATO can act decisively and build credibility for effective deterrence and defense.



At the strategic level, the critical strength of the Alliance is its political-military cohesion among its 30 member states. However, the differences between social groups, either nationally or within diverse cultural groups, offer exploitable fault lines to undermine cohesion. As a politico-military organization, NATO and its member states have responsibilities that echo Clausewitz’ Trinity; the three-way relationship between states, their people, and their militaries as illustrated in figure 1.<sup>22</sup> This simple principle is essential when looking at PoC within a NATO context and explains why civilian populations are always a target for influence.

For NATO, PoC is a political, strategic, and operational imperative. NATO has already started to look at collective defense differently, including strengthening national resilience under Article 3. This Article acknowledges that “civil capabilities can be vulnerable to disruption and attack in both peacetime and during war” and that “by reducing these vulnerabilities, NATO reduces the risk of a potential attack.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, integrating PoC into NATO’s collective defense and mitigating threats to civilians contributes to the protection of the Alliance.

## THE RISE OF PoC AT NATO

International humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions of 1949, encapsulates the need to protect civilians.<sup>24,25</sup> These rules of war are the legal foundation underpinning the conduct of security activities of NATO Allies and Partners. However, the ever-changing character of conflict and centrality of the human dimension means that PoC must be much more than simply adhering to IHL.

Within NATO, PoC's roots are deeply tied to lessons learned from International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in Afghanistan, as well as operations in Libya, Kosovo, and the former Yugoslavia. These experiences built momentum around protecting civilians, leading to the NATO policy on PoC at the Warsaw Summit in 2016.<sup>26</sup> These missions, except for Libya, pre-date the 2010 strategic concept. However, they fell under Chapter VII UN mandates, and all took place within failed or failing states outside of NATO's core territory. Using current terminology, these operations would fall under NA5CRO, with a focus on security and stabilization, with most PoC activity conducted through specialized Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) capabilities.

Whether through the UN, NATO, or both, historically most PoC situations have fallen under the security and stabilization operations banner. But that's too narrow of a categorization; civilian harm is a constant component of conflict and must be addressed. As the historian Lawrence Freedman writes:

At its base level, war, irrespective of its categorization, leads to disease, malnutrition, or a breakdown in law and order, which adds to society's overall violence levels. Sexual assaults follow armies ... [and] those seeking to flee the immediate impact of war often put themselves through terrible hardships, becoming internally displaced or full refugees.<sup>27</sup>

During World War II, mass displacement of populations, damage to critical infrastructure, and civilian suffering were constant factors for nations that would later form NATO. Both Axis and Allied militaries deliberately targeted civilian centers to undermine the will to fight. And at the onset of the Cold War, the Berlin Airlift, which provided basic needs to civilians, was seen as geopolitically necessary to prevent the Soviet capture of West Berlin.

Today, such an operation would sit firmly within the realm of PoC. Contemporary conflicts have shown that it is possible to "weaponize" civilian populations so that their displacement and disruption can be used to impede operations and stress the capacity of governments to cope. NATO must deter and prevent any future such situations where civilians are used as political pawns.

Such scenarios show what protecting civilians could mean in large-scale armed conflict, and NATO should prepare for them. Analyzing PoC in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Mali, Sudan, Bosnia and Kosovo, and Ukraine<sup>28</sup> will provide insights relevant to NATO's core tasks, including collective defense. The challenge is to prove that PoC continues to be a relevant factor for future missions beyond security and stabilization.

Within NATO, PoC's roots are deeply tied to lessons learned from International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in Afghanistan, as well as operations in Libya, Kosovo, and the former Yugoslavia.

## APPLYING NATO'S PoC APPROACH

The NATO PoC policy and framework provide a solid basis for understanding threats to human security in a conflict or crisis. The challenge within a collective defense operation is not in identifying what should be done. Instead, it is in defining who has responsibilities to protect the population within a political-military environment, when military action may take place within an Allied member state's territory. Therefore, the question is not whether PoC is applicable, but how to ensure the framework is embedded as a core element within strategic and operational planning.

The NATO PoC Military Concept requires planning staff to identify the threats to human security not from an outside military's perspective but from a civilian's.<sup>29</sup> This approach allows threats to be identified from two complementary perspectives; factors that directly threaten civilians (survival threats) and those that seek to destabilize societal constructs<sup>30</sup> (societal threats). Both will impact on the security environment and will undermine the primary purpose and duty of a state or government: to protect its people.

The relationship between NATO forces and the nation they are operating within will be key. Therefore, enacting measures to protect civilians will require dialogue, agreement, and coordination within NATO at the political level. This will include the permissions to cause harm (and provision of redress) within NATO member state territory, the coordination of the movement of civilians within and across borders, the provision of basic needs and where needed, and requested augmentation of state institutional capacities. Thus, while the PoC policy and concept principles are relevant to any situation, who bears responsibility for resolving issues will differ.

The publication of the NATO PoC Handbook by Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) was designed for this purpose and was a promising start.

Universally applicable by design, the PoC concept prompts the identification of challenges that need to be addressed but does not specify how this should be done nor which agencies, organizations, or means should be assigned to do so. This is because each situation is different. The roles and responsibilities applicable for operations in Afghanistan or Libya will differ from those for collective defense in the Euro-Atlantic region. NATO needs to determine these relationships and exercise these responsibilities for PoC for all future conflicts.

By including PoC as a core factor rather than an addendum, threats to civilians can be anticipated and mitigated, creating greater freedoms for operational decision-making and action. This will not be easy, as there will always be conflicting priorities and pressures between the needs of warfighting operations versus what could be seen as secondary, civilian protection activities. Despite these pressures, it is important that PoC is not side-lined as a niche or specialist activity and is seen as a core operational imperative. By doing so NATO will be playing to the strengths within its existing organizational structure and embed PoC within its central strategic and operational planning.<sup>31</sup> The publication of the NATO PoC Handbook by Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) was designed for this purpose and was a promising start.<sup>32</sup> The challenge, however, is that PoC is still viewed as a specialist area. Until PoC elements are included in all staff training, there remains a risk that the consideration of PoC as a central factor will be primarily driven by personality and experience rather than procedure.

# INTEGRATING POC IN FUTURE NATO OPERATIONS

PoC is often placed as a specialist function within the J9 (Civil-Military Affairs) Branch. While the operations in Afghanistan were conducted under NATO’s Article 5 collective defense invocation, it is often labeled an out-of-area stabilization activity. Some elements of PoC are well understood and practiced—especially those surrounding warfighting, IHL application, targeting, and the direct mitigation of harm caused by NATO actions. Other elements, such as understanding the humanitarian situation, threat assessments and risk analysis, and capacities of the host nation, may be seen by military forces as secondary.

However, the experiences in Syria, Iraq, and—nearer to NATO’s core—Ukraine show how future conflicts will be hybrid and often in urban centers.<sup>33</sup> In this context, adversaries will use all levers to gain an advantage, not just direct military components. This could take the form of preventing populations from fleeing (i.e., human shields), thereby reducing Allies’ advantages in firepower. Conversely, adversaries could force the displacement of civilians to hamper military freedom of movement or overload already stressed government and civilian support infrastructure. They could increase subversive or criminal actions, terrorist activities, or purposefully deny access to food and water. Cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, remote and increasingly autonomous warfare, and information activities to influence populations are also likely. For these reasons, future PoC must be integrated into all core planning by using the framework in the PoC Concept.

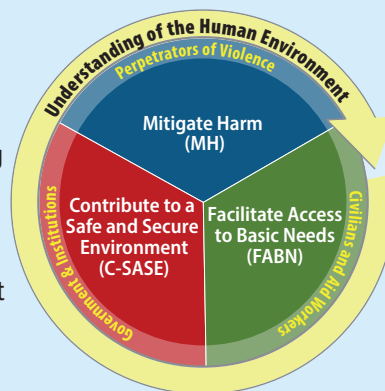
## Understanding the Human Environment

Knowledge is critical for planning. Effective PoC requires a threat assessment and risk analysis of civilian populations to be integrated into the operational planning process. In much the same way that information operations and target audience analyses have been integrated into military planning, an understanding of civilian risks and fault lines within increasingly diverse societies will require plans to protect against and mitigate those risks. This includes identifying who is responsible for what tasks and recognizing that military forces cannot and should not do everything, so they retain the capacity to fight wars.

### NATO’s PoC Concept

The PoC concept was designed to apply regardless of the type of the crisis or conflict facing military planning staff or operators.

The NATO PoC concept comprises four interdependent components: Understanding the Human Environment (UHE), Mitigating Harm (MH), Facilitating Access to Basic Needs (FABN), and Contributing to a Safe and Secure Environment (C-SASE).



This concept was approved in 2018 and complements the 2016 NATO PoC policy.

Elements of such an approach, including gender-based analysis, already exist and are central elements within the NATO planning process, having been developed during operations planning in Afghanistan. However, these analyses tend to be specialist activities aligned to CIMIC rather than included in military warfighting functions.<sup>34</sup> Effective understanding of the human environment in which forces operate must be led by the intelligence branch, much in the same way focus is traditionally placed on understanding an adversary.

Focus should be on understanding resiliencies and identifying societal strengths and vulnerabilities. Such analysis will also need to include an understanding of civilian needs, who is providing those needs, and the system's fragility to disruption. This must include those areas that future adversaries could exploit and how their tactical successes could affect Allied campaigns at the strategic level. While this information is often readily available through external sources such as academic institutions, think tanks, NGOs, and other civil society organizations, NATO needs to develop the capability to tap into this information in real-time. NATO military planners do not need to be country or regional experts; instead, they must know how to access and work with those who are.

By focusing not only on the need to defeat the adversary, but also understanding the consequences for those that NATO is fighting to protect, the PoC concept is fully aligned with the legal obligations in this field, whether dealing with a peer-state adversary or non-state armed group.

## New Capabilities to Mitigate Harm

Military forces are primarily responsible for the "Mitigating Harm" aspect of the PoC concept. This includes applying IHL and restraint to mitigate the effects of NATO's actions on civilians and preventing harm by adversaries and other perpetrators. However, there are increasingly diverse ways to inflict damage beyond the traditional air, land, and maritime domains.

Advances in technology, especially in autonomous and remotely operated systems such as drones, are driven by civilian consumer markets, while greater connectivity and reliance on vulnerable information systems creates opportunities for non-state adversaries to inflict harm on civilian societies without needing to engage military forces.

Developments in militaries' hypersonic and advanced remote weapon systems may reduce the risk to soldiers on the ground, but for civilians caught up in attacks, the results are the same. Likewise, advances in air defense systems and anti-access and area denial strategies may prevent protection and aid from the air from getting to where it is most needed. Undoubtedly, applying the IHL principles of necessity, proportionality, distinction, and humanity will become more challenging in understanding the upstream and downstream consequences of action. Reliance on precision weapons may not always be possible, and the relatively limited conflicts in Afghanistan have not prepared NATO to deal with the scale of what could happen in a near-peer large scale/high tempo situation.

Within a collective defense scenario, NATO will face the challenge of multi-domain and multi-directional threats. Physically this will be from the air, land, and sea, and not only on the frontline but within NATO member states' territory, no matter the scale of the conflict. The hyperlinked connectivity of the operating environment offers an exploitable pipeline from the frontline to the homeland. Consequently, identifying cyber, information, and other physical threats at home<sup>35</sup> must be part of the NATO assessment and mitigation. Estimates of collateral damage and efforts to mitigate the harm to civilian populations must be integrated and coordinated within this context. These situations must be prepared and trained for.



By focusing not only on the need to defeat the adversary, but also understanding the consequences for those that NATO is fighting to protect, the PoC concept is fully aligned with the legal obligations in this field, whether dealing with a peer-state adversary or non-state armed group. The PoC policy and concept require NATO to identify and mitigate the harm to civilians caused by adversaries. This calls for strategies to counter hybrid and more direct threats of indiscriminate violence, particularly in NATO Ally or Partner territory.

## Facilitating Access to Basic Needs

Similarly, other aspects of the PoC concept, which may seem more intuitively aligned to NA5CRO, will be equally relevant to future collective defense operations. Any crisis or conflict will erode civilians' access to their basic needs. While direct threats of violence to the population are included in the "mitigate harm" element of NATO's PoC concept, disease, exposure, thirst, and hunger are also threats that must also be planned for and addressed. While these aspects are a state responsibility, interventions in failed states or conflicts where the state has been the prime perpetrator, or where an Ally or Partner has diminished capacity, have reinforced the primacy of international humanitarian organizations in this task, with NATO providing a supporting role when requested.

Within NA5CRO, enabling access to basic needs is a fundamental element of achieving stability. For collective defense within NATO's core, the principles are no less important, but providing basic survival needs becomes a non-discretionary aspect that NATO must address and coordinate with other actors, including the E.U. Indeed, failure to address basic needs will undermine a state's legitimacy and open avenues for adversaries or proxies to directly influence populations.

Consequently, when planning for such scenarios, NATO will need to anticipate requests for support from Allies and Partners under stress, coordinate the provision of aid from within the Alliance, and cooperate with international organizations and humanitarian agencies also operating within the affected areas. The provision of such needs will be along contested supply lines, however. In Europe, routes that provide regular commerce, economics, and logistics to sustain population centers will also be needed by NATO forces. Access for military forces and aid agencies will become even more challenging against capable adversaries, either because of action or through the purposeful use of anti-access and area-denial strategies.

## Resilience & Maintaining a Safe & Secure Environment

The final area of the PoC concept considers situations where military capabilities may be required to contribute to a safe and secure environment. This element considers state institutions' capacity to maintain sufficient security levels (e.g., policing) to allow normal patterns of life to be sustained or regained. Within a collective defense context, member states will need to conduct such an assessment and link it closely to NATO's resilience concept.

History has consistently proven that conflict consistently stresses a state's capacity to provide a safe and secure environment. The civilian population will suffer from criminality and the activity of external proxies. Understanding the critical vulnerabilities and capacities of Alliance members will be necessary, especially as civil systems and infrastructure become stressed, either through targeted activities or by being overwhelmed by challenges such as large-scale population displacement.

## CONCLUSION

PoC is relevant to all types of conflict and crisis operations, from peer-on-peer, large-scale combat operations to counterinsurgency and stability operations. The threats to civilians, like warfare itself, are constant. It is the context, how threats are mitigated, and who has the responsibility to respond that differs. These elements must be identified early in the planning of any military operation. As NATO now looks to produce a new Strategic Concept and protect the values, beliefs, and citizens of the Alliance for the next 20 years, it must build on the lessons and successes of the past two decades. This includes the significant advances that NATO has made in providing a practical framework for PoC. The challenges and security threats that NATO faces will continue to evolve. The implementation of NATO's approach to PoC must as well. Indeed, as NATO once again looks to devise strategies for defense and deterrence within the Euro-Atlantic region, the application of PoC principles has a critical part to play in meeting NATO's responsibilities to protect its more than 1 billion citizens and provides the operational freedoms the Alliance needs to act.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 “Brussels Summit Communiqué Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels,” NATO, June 14, 2021, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm).
- 2 “NATO2030,” NATO 2030: Making A Strong Alliance Even Stronger, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.nato.int/nato2030/>.
- 3 Rear Admiral John W. Tammen, “NATO’s Warfighting Capstone Concept: Anticipating the Changing Character of War,” NATO Review, July 9, 2021, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/07/09/natos-warfighting-capstone-concept-anticipating-the-changing-character-of-war/index.html>.
- 4 “NATO2030,” NATO 2030: Making A Strong Alliance Even Stronger, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.nato.int/nato2030/>.
- 5 Hybrid warfare uses all the levers of power—diplomatic, information, military and economic—to create and target weakness to destabilize situations to gain advantage. It is also related to other concepts such as sub-threshold conflict or grey-zone activities, where are disruptive and potentially harmful, but conducted below a level that would trigger a military response.
- 6 “NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians,” NATO, July 9, 2016, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133945.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133945.htm).
- 7 NATO, “Active Engagement, Modern Defense: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization,” Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon 19-20 November 2010, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_82705.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_82705.htm).
- 8 “Britain’s Response to the Salisbury Attack: A Net Assessment,” Chatham House, March 27, 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/03/britains-response-salisbury-attack-net-assessment>.
- 9 Kevin Liptak, “US Blames China for Hacks, Including Microsoft, Opening New Front in Cyber Offensive,” CNN Politics, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/19/politics/us-china-cyber-offensive/index.html>.
- 10 “London Declaration,” NATO, December 4, 2019, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_171584.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm).
- 11 NATO MC 0688 Concept for the Protection of Civilians. April 2018.
- 12 “The North Atlantic Treaty” (NATO, April 4, 1949), [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm).
- 13 Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, “NATO Will Defend Itself,” NATO, August 27, 2019, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_168435.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_168435.htm).
- 14 “Readiness Action Plan,” NATO, July 15, 2021, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_119353.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_119353.htm).
- 15 E.g., subversion, terrorism, cyber-attacks, direct attacks or through proxy agents.
- 16 Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (Penguin Books, 2019).
- 17 For example, the intervention into Iraq in 2003 started as a state-on-state conflict that quickly morphed into a complex counterinsurgency and stabilization operation. From a civilian perspective, however, the labeling of war or stabilization operations was largely irrelevant.
- 18 Franklin Annis, “Krulak Revisited: The Three-Block War, Strategic Corporals, and the Future Battlefield,” Modern War Institute, February 3, 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/krulak-revisited-three-block-war-strategic-corporals-future-battlefield/>.
- 19 NATO Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations ADP 3-10 Edition A Version 1. December 2015.
- 20 Carl von Clausewitz, “On War,” Oxford World Classics, April 2008.

21 The November 2015 Paris attacks killed 130 civilians and injured 416. Twenty-three people died in the May  
2017 attack in Manchester, and more than 800 were wounded.

22 Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Presidio Press, 1995).

23 “The North Atlantic Treaty.” Article 3 of the Washington Treaty states: “*In order more effectively to achieve the  
objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual  
aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.*”

24 “The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Their Additional Protocols,” International Committee of the Red  
Cross, August 12, 1949, [https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions/  
overview-geneva-conventions.htm](https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions/overview-geneva-conventions.htm).

25 Amanda Alexander, “A Short History of International Humanitarian Law,” *European Journal of International  
Law* 26, no. 1 (February 1, 2015): 109–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chv002>.

26 “NATO Policy for the Protection of Civilians” (NATO, July 9, 2016), [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/  
official\\_texts\\_133945.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133945.htm).

27 Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History*, First edition (New York: Public Affairs, 2017).

28 Beatrice Godefroy, Liza Baran, and Suleiman Mamutov, “Building Bridges, Reinforcing Protection: How  
NATO’s Protection of Civilians Framework Influenced Ukraine’s Approach” (Stimson Center, July 29, 2021),  
<https://www.stimson.org/2021/building-bridges-reinforcing-protection/>.

29 This is a critical aspect referred to as Understanding the Human Environment (UHE).

30 Societal constructs are rarely homogenous, and societies are made up informal and formal groups and  
individuals with shared and diverse beliefs and values. In stable environment, such groups may have some  
frictions but reside harmoniously. However relationships are often stressed in crisis and differences can be  
exploited to destabilize situations often resulting in civilian harm.

31 For example, at the strategic level, NATO’s Civil Emergency Planning Committee should have a clear  
responsibility for PoC-related activities. Within an operational command, the standard staff functions all  
have a part to play and not just the CIMIC branch (J9).

32 “Protection of Civilians ACO Handbook” (NATO, March 11, 2021), [https://shape.nato.int/resources/3/  
website/ACO-Protection-of-Civilians-Handbook.pdf](https://shape.nato.int/resources/3/website/ACO-Protection-of-Civilians-Handbook.pdf).

33 Evan Lawson, “Entering the Grey-Zone: Hybrid Warfare and the Protection of Civilians in Ukraine” (Center  
for Civilians in Conflict, July 1, 2021), [https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CIVIC\\_  
Ukraine\\_Report\\_Web.pdf](https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CIVIC_Ukraine_Report_Web.pdf).

34 NATO Allied Joint Doctrine for the Planning of Operations ADP 5 Edition A Version 2. May 2019.

35 Such as direct attacks by another state, proxy actions, terrorism, criminality, reprisals, and sectarian  
violence.

---

© 2021 The Henry L. Stimson Center

**The Stimson Center**  
1211 Connecticut Ave, NW, 8th Floor  
Washington, DC 20036  
<https://www.stimson.org/>  
[communications@stimson.org](mailto:communications@stimson.org)  
202.223.5956