Resilience in the age of crises

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The global environment has been turbulent in the past decade. The still on-going COVID-19 pandemic has become the last in a long line of conflicts and unrests, including troubles like a global financial crisis, instability in the Middle East, the election of Donald Trump, and the rise of right-wing extremists. To govern during such instability is challenging, and to fully prepare for all the potential crises of the future seem futile. As such, the diversity and unpredictability of these events has showcased the need for states, societies, and individuals to be resilient. *Resilience* denotes the ability to overcome and continue to function in spite of adverse circumstances. Considering the complexity, vulnerability, and interconnectedness of the world, building resilience might be the best strategy for overcoming the crises of the future.

The concept of resilience has for many international organisations become the new way of handling the constantly changing environments in which they find themselves. NATO has agreed on seven baseline requirements for national resilience.[1] The EU included resilience as one of the five key priorities of the EU's external action in its Global Strategy of 2016[2], and has also embraced the concept as one of the so-called 'four baskets' of the newly adopted Strategic Compass-initiative[3]. The World Bank recently issued a report stressing the importance of resilience in the face of climate change[4], and the United Nations Development Programme has placed resilience 'at the heart of development'[5]. It seems like everywhere you turn, building resilience has become part of organisations and nation states' idea of how best to prepare for the future. There is talk of resilient economies, resilient cultures, resilient infrastructure, and resilient systems. Individuals, communities, societies, countries, and regions are encouraged to strengthen their own resilience, in order to prepare for future shocks. What is yet to be agreed on is what exactly constitutes a resilient entity – what does resilience even mean?

The basis for resilience thinking is the underlying assumption that we cannot have all the knowledge in the world and will instead have to attempt to make the best choices with limited information when a crisis occurs. *Uncertainty* lies the foundation for resilience building. The beginning of this new decade has made it evident that it is close to impossible to foresee what will happen in the future. Although experts warned that a global pandemic probably would occur at some point, given how modern societies function, few could predict when, how and what kind of impact such a crisis would have. The world was unprepared, as it often is in the face of a crisis. One of the reasons for such unpreparedness is the fact that there is no way of knowing when, where and how the next crisis will hit. After all, a crisis can take the shape of something as diverse as a cyber-attack, a natural disaster, economic crash, terrorism or, as has become evident, a pandemic. The interconnectedness and complexity of the world has shaken the previously held belief that we will be, at least to a certain extent, able to predict the future.[6] The future is not linear, and future events will not unfold the same way they did in the past. No one are able to fully foresee and prepare for all possible crises – the world is too complex, uncertain, and incalculable for that. As a result, the best most organisations and nations can hope for is to work to create systems and responses that will make both developed and less developed societies more resilient in an array of different adversities.

One thing several of these strategies have in common is that none of them use the concept of resilience in the same way. This does not mean that they simply use different definitions of the concept – they use different understandings of what the word really means. Resilience is a slippery and vague concept, and researchers and policy officials have yet to reach a consensus on what resilience really is.[7] While critics say that this malleability makes the concept more or less useless, others have argued that the conceptual flexibility allows resilience to be applied in several contexts. As a result, resilience is now to be found in the fields of development, emergency preparedness, crisis response, psychology, urban planning, and public health.

The main challenge with the concept of resilience is that it simultaneously denotes to different, almost contradictory, stands. On one hand, resilience stipulates the ability to return to a previous state of stability – to 'bounce

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1. Shea 2016

2. High Representative of the EU 2016: 9

3. German Council on Foreign Relations 2020: 4

4. World Bank Group 2020

5. United Nations Development Programme 2015

6. Chandler 2014: 22-23

7. Malkki and Sinkkonen 2016: 281

back' to *status quo*.[8] This definition explores the elasticity of an individual, a society, or an organisation. Exactly how far is something able to stretch or bend without snapping or breaking? Such an understanding of resilience denotes an ability to withstand change. No matter what happens, the goal is to return to the way things were before a crisis or a shock. The entity remains the same – it is stable. As such, resilience could be seen as having a static outcome. However, being resilient is not always the same thing as being stable and unyielding. Sometimes, on order to survive, one would have to change. Imagine a population of animals living under extreme climatic conditions. The population may fluctuate wildly in number, thus being unstable.[9] Regardless of these violent changes, the population lives on. As the population is able to survive in spite of such extreme conditions, they are resilient. Resilience then becomes a dynamic process, a way of adapting in the face of adversity.[10] The concept of resilience thus promotes two different ways of handling uncertainty and challenging environments – either by changing to adapt or to withstand change and remain the same.

To make matters even more complicated, there seems to be two different paths of adaptation to a stressful and changing environment. Either it can take the path of minor changes – such changes that does not challenge the basis of a society. The adaptation occurs within the same borders as before. However, adaptation can also take a more revolutionary path, one where the aims is to change or to remodel entire social structures. This view is based on an understanding of society as it is today as being incapable of dealing with the challenges it faces. As a result, we can distinguish between three different aggregates of resilience: 1) resilience as persistence or maintenance of what exists, 2) resilience as adaptation or marginal changes of the existing basis, and 3) resilience as renewal or transformation. Resilience becomes a scale, from standing still to leaping forward.[11] Consequently, when using resilience as a concept in a policy strategy, the authors will have to keep in mind exactly which version of resilience they desire to use. Whether the focus will be on bouncing back, adapting or transforming will in different ways affect the main objective and outcome of the strategy.

Time is the key dimension to remember when considering which version of resilience to emphasise. Simply put, the longer an entity is put under strain, the more likely the entity is to adapt to its environment.[12] Short-term strain can be seen as challenging, but if the entity understands the stress as lasting for only a short period of time, it might be willing to live with the strain for this amount of time. On order to escape from such strain, the entity might choose pragmatic solutions which might not be optimal, but which is the best one can do under the circumstances and limited knowledge available. Nevertheless, the end goal is a return to 'normal'. However, if the strain is understood to be long-lasting, the entity will need to change in order to survive, either through minimal changes or as a complete renewal of the existing system. Additionally, the amount of stress experienced will play a part in choosing which version of resilience to focus on. If the stress or pressure is perceived to be manageable, although unpleasant, 'bouncing back' or maintaining what already exists might be the best option. Other times, the shock experienced might be so severe that the entity in question acknowledges it will have to change in order to survive. This is linked with the implementation of liberal values, as liberal democracies are more resilient. This, in order to foster long-term development, security, and democracy building, enhancing resilience requires flexibility and adaptation. It can be compared to interval training: during a short interval, you are able to handle a large amount of strain, because you know it will be over quickly. However, in order to last during a long interval, the amount of effort will have to be lessened.

As already mentioned, the use of resilience is to be found in a variety of fields. This includes crisis response, fight against terrorism, and defence and security policies. The idea behind the use of resilience in these fields is that resilient states and societies are, unsurprisingly, not only better equipped at handling turbulent environments, threats, and political instability – such events also are less likely to happen in resilient states. States lacking in resilience are inherently fragile in the long term, as they are more susceptible to political upheavals, and more likely to suffer for a longer time should such events occur. Not being able to handle and recover properly from shocks makes the next shock hit even harder. Consequently, less resilient states may fall into a downwards spi-

8. Malkki and Sinkkonen 2016: 282

9. Holling 1973: 17-18

10. Southwick et al. 2014: 2

11. Bourbeau 2017: 29-30

12. Chelleri et al. 2015: 6-7

ral, which could result in political unrest and civil war. In the field of security and defence, promoting resilience building in order to make states and societies better equipped to deal with such turbulence becomes of utmost importance.

The resilience agenda is built upon an understanding of the world as inherently unpredictable. Rather than aiming to develop specific strategies aimed at combatting all possible crises of the future, the goal of resilience building is to strengthen all critical parts of society, making them more capable of withstanding or adapting to a wide variety of turbulent events. This does not mean that the state or society is to be completely unaffected by instability – rather, the goal is to decrease the impact of crises to such an extent that the entity is able to function and persist in spite of the circumstances. Consequently, NATO has recently hailed resilience as the 'first line of defence', both against military and non-military security challenges. Building resilience will require both military and civilian capabilities, as well as continuity of government and essential services and security of critical infra-structure. Remember, the more long-term the stress experienced is, the more reason there is to aim for a version of resilience which highlights the need for adapting to turbulence, making flexibility a core characteristic of resilient societies. Undeniably, for this to work, all of society has to be included in the resilience building process for it to be as effective as possible.

The importance of resilience has also been reflected in the EU Global Strategy of 2016, which highlighted resilience as one of five key priorities for the Union's future foreign policy. This is a position the Union carries with it in its recent work to develop a 'Strategic Compass' to guide its foreign policy in the years ahead. Interestingly enough, the EU not only aimed to assist in the resilience building of its Neighbouring states, such as the Western Balkans and Turkey, but also of its own Member states. This stance can be seen as a response to the past crises the Union has faced, and the instability in which it now finds itself. After all, a state, society, or Union is only as strong as its weakest link, and in order to prepare for the future, the EU aims to enhance the resilience of both itself and its Neighbours to endure stability and continued prosperity.

So far, the Norwegian government has been cautious in its use of resilience. While the concept has been mentioned in white papers and certain speeches, there has been limited effort regarding an attempt to define resilience. However, the use of the concept shows a desire to use the same terminology as the organisations and states with which Norway enjoys close cooperation – as such, there is no reason to believe the Norwegian government should be opposed to using it. The lack of a clear definition of resilience might be an advantage, should the government choose to place more emphasis on the concept. As resilience is hard to define and as different definitions potentially could give different outcomes when translated into and actively used in a strategy, the government would be advised in making clear which aggregate of resilience they see as most relevant and realistic. If the wish is to make a system unyielding when faced with an external threat, for instance a cyber system in the face of adverse cyber events, the first aggregate of resilience, resilience as persistence, would be the best-fitted choice. However, if the wish is to make a system flexible and able to deliver the preferred result under strain, a definition of resilience as adaptation would be more applicable. For instance, in order to increase the resilience of the economy, aim for a higher degree of diversification. To paraphrase the English proverb, it is wise to place your eggs in more than one basket. No matter which version of resilience the government deems most relevant, having a clear idea of what exactly is meant when the concept is being used will have great impact on the outcomes of a resilience-based strategy. It is strongly advisable for the Norwegian government that they should place more emphasis on and actively use the concept. Additionally, defining clearly how the concept will be used will make it easier to understand what the results of such a policy strategy will be. Resilience is not a buzzword to include in a strategy just because it sounds good – it is a concept which can make it easier to prepare for the future, while simultaneously help handling a shock once it hits.

That being said, focus on resilience has been included with regard to the Norwegian defence sector. In 2019, the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) published a report which called for increased use of the concept, as it has been proven to strengthen an integrated approach to risk management. The report also acknowledged that it would be more fruitful to avoid applying a set definition of resilience, and rather aim for a broad understanding of the concept which can be specified with regard to the contexts in which it will be used. Additionally, resilience has been widely used by the Norwegian National Security Authority (NSM). They emphasise that safety measures should be as independent of each other as possible. Consequently, the potential suffering of one measure will not affect the others. They also emphasise that the aim of resilience is to avoid the loss of critical func-

tions, rather than focus on the survival of infrastructure or a specific organisation. Achieving this relies on the flexibility of such functions. Accordingly, with regard to national security, Norway has so far aimed to incorporate the long-term, dynamic version of resilience.

There is no way of knowing when and where the next crisis will hit, or what it will be. There is also no way of knowing exactly how long it will last. However, it seems like most of the events of the past decade have required states and societies to adapt, rather than aiming to return to *status quo*. The longevity of the turbulent events seems to require adaptability and flexibility, rather than strength and inflexibility. This became only too evident in 2020. At the beginning of the pandemic, some were hopeful that life would soon return to normal. The pandemic would pass quickly, as several other rapidly spreading diseases had, and society would be able to 'bounce back' without having to change. However, as we are nearing the one-year anniversary of the first restrictions, it has become evident that there will be no return to normal. In order to handle the pandemic, we have all had to change our ways of life. The longevity of the situation has resulted in resilience as adaptation, and we still do not know what the world will look like when we emerge from the other side.

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