



The Usefulness of the Human Security Concept for NATO Collective Defense

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THE USEFULNESS OF THE HUMAN SECURITY CONCEPT FOR NATO COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

Abstract

NATO has not made a clear case for how its Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles can improve how the Alliance identifies and responds to insecurities, particularly in a collective defence scenario. To aid the development of the Military Contribution to Human Security (MC2HS), this thematic paper explains how human security is a unique method of analysis underpinned by evidence-based principles. Second, it explains how to operationalize human security within civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) and other Joint Functions to improve NATO's understanding of the human environment. Lastly, it argues a human security approach can improve collective defence operations, including by better preventing and responding to the insecurities faced by the civilian population.

'NATO's Human Security Agenda increases NATO's legitimacy, accountability and solidarity within the Alliance, while also enhancing its understanding of the human environment. Human Security makes NATO more operationally effective, successful and better equipped to address today's security challenges, ultimately contributing to a safer and more peaceful world.'

2024 NATO Washington Summit Communique

Keywords: Human security; deterrence and defence; collective defence; MC2HS; CIMIC; protection of civilians

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Formally entering the NATO policy sphere in 2022, the adoption of 'human security' language signals an important shift towards a human-centred approach for all of NATO's core tasks. But as a concept first coined by the United Nations Development Programme in 1994, and much debated since, human security is a concept that comes with significant baggage. Nevertheless, human security is a unique concept with a valuable contribution to make to the analysis of the human environment.

Despite identifying human security as an 'essential tool', NATO provides little guidance on how human security is implemented, including in situations of collective defence. As NATO looks to move past current political and strategic guidance on human security and drill down what the concept means in different contexts and at different operating levels, the issue is how to draw out the appropriate MC2HS. This paper recommends key methods to visualize and develop the MC2HS in the context of collective defence.

Following the revised Allied Joint Doctrine for Civil-Military Cooperation (AJP-3.19) issued in June 2025, the human security approach is to be operationalized under CIMIC leadership. However, NATO must outline how other Joint Functions also feed into a concerted human security approach (NATO 2025). The concept offers an opportunity to modernize CIMIC and significantly deepen NATO's, and consequently the Commander's, understanding of the human environment. This serves two purposes: (1) to more effectively generate effects and (2) to sustain the will to fight amongst a population that feels better protected

and accounted for in decision-making.

NATO's focus on developing human security for crisis prevention and management operations is shortsighted as human security has a critical role to play in deterrence and defence. First, the reality of the modern peer-to-peer battlespace shows that, in collective defence, the enemy will undertake conventional and hybrid operations that deliberately target the civilian population and critical civilian infrastructure. Non-governmental organizations may not be present in the same numbers or capacities as NATO has encountered in crisis management operations, thus leaving Alliance members and, in some extreme circumstances, NATO itself as the first responder to a wide array of humanitarian crises.

Second, a human security approach can make a direct contribution to NATO's effectiveness in collective defence. Human security provides a more comprehensive view of the human environment to mitigate harm to civilians. In the event an Alliance member is invaded, supporting the local population will be key. A human security approach shows that concern for both Ally and adversary civilians is an important part of NATO's analysis and actions. A human security approach focuses NATO on pre-empting the use of civilians as a weapon of war, beyond merely physical harm, and gives the Commander a deep understanding of different potential threats. These threats, if ignored, could not only damage NATO's legitimacy amongst the population but also limit NATO's freedom of manoeuvre and ability to produce kinetic effects.

INTRODUCTION

First introduced by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994, 'human security' has developed into a unique conceptualization of (in) security including what can constitute a threat to civilians and how to prevent and respond to such threats. Entering NATO policy in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept, human security is said to be central to crisis prevention and management and to cut across deterrence and defence and cooperative security. In the NATO context, human security has been used to encapsulate the well-established Cross Cutting Topics, importantly the Protection of Civilians. But NATO has not made a clear case for how the unique concept of human security can improve how the Alliance identifies and responds to insecurities, particularly in a collective defence scenario, nor has it developed the exact Military Contribution to Human Security (MC2HS) to be operationalized by the CIMIC Joint Function.

To aid the development of the MC2HS, this thematic paper explores two key questions: (1) what is the unique contribution of a human security-based analysis and (2) how does human security contribute to NATO's understanding of the human environment in collective defence? To answer these questions and present three key products for NATO, this paper first describes the background to the concept of human security and explains how it is a unique method of analysis underpinned by evidence-based principles. Second, it explains how to operationalize human security within CIMIC and other Joint Functions to improve NATO's understanding of the human environment. Lastly, it argues a human security approach can improve collective defence operations, including by better preventing and responding to the insecurities faced by the civilian population.

WHAT IS HUMAN SECURITY?

The concept of human security emerged in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) 1994 Human Development Report. Although the UNDP is not primarily a security-focused body, it began addressing security concerns because it recognized that people's needs during emergencies—whether natural disasters, armed conflicts, or humanitarian crises—are deeply intertwined with development (Murphy 2006, 277).

The 1994 Report criticizes traditional development approaches that focused narrowly on increasing gross national product (GNP). Instead, the UNDP uses language such as, “safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease and repression” to direct attention away from prevalent physical threats that were focused on during the Cold War (UNDP 1994, 23; Acharya 2014, 449; Owen 2004, 382). This led to human security effectively ‘securitizing’ what were traditionally development issues to increase awareness of non-traditional threats of insecurity (Zwierlein and Graf 2010, 8).

The Report aims to reframe security by focusing on building human capabilities to overcome poverty, illiteracy, disease, discrimination, political repression, and violent conflict. It advocates for a transition from state-centric, arms-based security to a people-centred model grounded in sustainable human development (UNDP 1994, 24). It identifies seven key dimensions of human security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security.

Importantly, the Report urges that resources be directed toward addressing the most pressing threats, regardless of whether they originate from state or non-state actors. It also emphasized the importance of prevention over intervention. As Bílkova notes, the Report represents a “broader

normative shift” that elevates the individual's role in international affairs (Bílkova 2014, 30–31). However, the approach has faced criticism. Gasper and Gómez described the seven categories as merely a “rough starting point,” and others have argued that the concept of human security is overly reductionist (Gasper and Gómez 2014, 14; Buzan 2004).

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan established the Commission on Human Security which published the Human Security Now report in 2003 (Commission on Human Security 2003). This report distinguishes human security from human development by focusing specifically on humanitarian crises (Farer 2011, 47). It emphasizes that security should be about protecting people—not just territories—and that responsibility should extend beyond the state to include a broad range of actors and institutions, especially individuals themselves (Commission on Human Security 2003, 6).

The UN continued to promote human security through institutional mechanisms. The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) was established in 1999 to support efforts toward freedom from fear and want. In 2003, an Advisory Board on Human Security was created to advise the Secretary-General and oversee the Fund. The following year, the UNTFHS was placed under the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and a Human Security Unit (HSU) was established to integrate human security into UN activities (Thérien 2012, 208). Despite these developments, the use of human security language within the UN has declined in recent years.



United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, countries such as Japan, Norway, and Canada began integrating human security principles into their international strategies, each interpreting the concept in unique ways (Farer 2011, 46; Moher 2012; Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade 1999; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 1999, 2(3)). Much of the literature on human security unpacks these definitional differences and includes debates that cut to the core of what the concept encompasses. The definitions put forward can be broken into two categories: narrow and broad.²

Despite states, organizations and academics interpreting human security in different ways, it is possible to discern key hallmarks that underpin the unique notion of a human security approach. Human security can be said to advance two main tenets: (1) it aims to shift the referent object of security from the state to the individual, giving the individual intrinsic value in decision-making;

(2) it requires states and organizations to consider broader causes of insecurity and that many threats are interconnected and reinforcing (Gilder 2021, 9).

Human security's content and methods distinguish the concept from other notions of security. First, the UNDP's seven human security factors are a useful tool to broadly categorize threats to the population and with which to understand the multifaceted way in which the conflict will simultaneously generate insecurity.³ For instance, military operations may cause physical harm but also second and third order effects on public health services and food production. The need to flee the battlespace will impact community security, and damage to some infrastructure may result in environmental harm that impacts populations in the short, medium and long-term. Awareness and analysis of the UNDP's human security factors and integration of insecurities into military planning is key to understanding the impact of one's own and others' actions.

Principle	Description
(1) It is a rightsbased and normsbased concept,	The Human Security Now Report focused heavily on existing normative frameworks clearly explaining that human security is grounded in human rights law, humanitarian law, refugee law, and international criminal law.
(2) which is focused on the vital core,	The vital core is described as what people hold to be the 'essence of life' and 'crucially important'. Engagement from the bottomup is necessary for international actors to understand the context of a conflict and the needs of persons involved. Hanlon and Christie have made similar observations explaining that, "[o]nly through continuous stakeholder dialogue involving a range of both local and international actors can [a human security approach] achieve meaningful results" (Hanlon and Christie 2016, 107). The vital core shows that human security includes aspects of 'inclusiveness' and 'holism' that highlight that all the areas of security and their potential threats are equally valid concerns for the population.
(3) has a concern for vulnerability,	Human security recognizes vulnerability as a crucial factor in decision making. A human security approach encourages clear identification of particularly vulnerable persons (such as women, children, the elderly, the disabled, the indigenous, and the missing). Then, protection and empowerment methods must contribute to building resilience to that vulnerability.
(4) and implements a protection and empowerment framework.	First, human security recognizes that people require protection from a range of threats, not only physical violence, and protection responses must be preventative where possible and with a longterm vision in mind. Second, capacitybuilding must take place to ensure institutions, communities, and individuals are resilient and able to identify and address security threats locally where possible and be included in the work of the international community where more resources are required.

Figure 1. This table is a summary of the principled analytical framework of human security created by the author in (Gilder 2022).

Second, by distilling the UN's approach and associated academic literature, it is possible to outline five principles that underpin the unique human security approach (see Figure 1).

Therefore, adopting a human security approach requires a change in methods where the state and international organizations must be able to engage in a bottom-up manner with affected populations to identify crucially important security threats, be able to analyse threats beyond the threat of physical violence in line with the seven human security factors, recognize vulnerabilities and be able to plan resilience measures, take preventative measures where appropriate, and support the empowerment of populations.

As Meharg explains, human security offers “a mutually reinforcing approach to understanding today's security challenges, providing militaries with thorough knowledge of the people-centric and people-driven contexts in which they operate” (Meharg 2025, 5).

But to unlock that knowledge, the military must adopt the unique methods that constitute the human security approach within a defined MC2HS. However, NATO can expect criticism if their human security approach detracts too far from the above principles, as Richard Reeve (2021) warns NATO's use of the terminology “threatens to undermine the very different use of the term by civilian academic and development workers.”

Nevertheless, human security can be a useful analytical lens for military actors. As will be explained in later sections, a human security approach requires the CIMIC Joint Function to be able to conduct an effective, bottom-up liaison with local communities and civil society, conduct analyses based on the human security factors to map the impact of one's own and others' actions on the human environment, and work with the host state (principally national CIMIC personnel) to plan resilience measures and support where requested.

HUMAN SECURITY AT NATO

Despite conceptual uncertainty, the term ‘human security’ entered into NATO’s strategic-political discourse for the first time at the 2019 London Leaders’ Meeting, then was elaborated in further detail in the 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué (NATO 2019, 2021). The Brussels Summit Communiqué states “a Human Security approach is a reflection of our values and makes us more operationally effective” (NATO 2021).

Human security then became a prominent theme in the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept, emphasizing the primacy of NATO’s Protection of Civilians policy within the human security approach. NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept identifies that human security includes the protection of civilians and civilian harm mitigation and requires the integration of human security and the Women, Peace and Security agenda across all core tasks. However, Munroe notes how “only a passing reference to “malign interference” hints at the prospect that rival great powers might exploit such human insecurity to the detriment of NATO members” (Munroe 2025, 16).

At the Madrid Summit in June 2022, the North Atlantic Council approved the NATO Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles, which

describes Human Security as an approach for “embedding considerations for the comprehensive safety and security of populations into all stages and levels of Alliance operations, missions and activities, wherever NATO operates, with the objective of preventing and responding to risks and threats to all people” (NATO 2022b, 2022a).

This policy confirmed that NATO’s Human Security Approach focuses on the five Cross-Cutting Topics (CCTs): protection of civilians, preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual violence,

combating trafficking in human beings, children and armed conflict, and cultural property protection (NATO 2025, 7). Previously, the CCTs were distinct, individual policy areas but now NATO is working to harmonize their implementation under its human security approach. Each Cross-Cutting Topic (with the exception of cultural property protection) has its own standalone NATO policy. Through the policy development of the CCTs, NATO has broadened its understanding of security and “while not explicitly cited, human security has been implicit in foundational documents” (Hutchinson 2023, 97).



The most important features of this policy are the seven Guiding Principles, which are intended to guide implementation and integration:

“a. Be people-centred, actively integrate gender perspectives, and address the differentiated impacts of conflict and crisis on different people in the population, especially individuals in situations of vulnerability or marginalisation;

b. Be prevention and protection oriented;

c. Take into account local customs and social norms in the communities coming into contact with NATO in Alliance operations, missions and activities, while respecting the common values and principles of the Alliance;

d. Be consistent with international law;

e. Respect and provide space for the neutral, independent and impartial work of humanitarian actors, whose operational viability and safety is essential during armed conflict and other situations of violence;

f. Be in full respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States;

g. Pursue two-way staff level engagement on human security related issues with relevant actors, such as the United Nations, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the African Union, host nations, partners and civil society, as appropriate.” (NATO 2022a)

At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, heads of state and government gave their renewed commitment to the integration of the Human Security and the Women, Peace and Security agendas. They also endorsed the Policy on Children and Armed Conflict, as well as an updated Policy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings, while indicating future plans to develop policy on cultural property protection (NATO 2023).

At the 2024 Washington Summit, NATO issued a report titled ‘NATO’s Human Security Agenda: from Madrid to Washington and onward to The Hague’ that reflects on NATO’s progress in operationalizing Human Security and defines the Human Security concept as:

“the risks and threats to civilian

populations which may arise in all that the Alliance does. ... NATO’s Human Security Approach is people-centred, gender-responsive, prevention- and protection-oriented. Its objective is to avert and respond to risks and threats to all civilians and their objects, especially in situations of conflict or crisis.” (NATO 2024, 6)

NATO HQ has provided strategic guidance on the meaning of human security across NATO’s core tasks in its Human Security Agenda (2024), and NATO has begun work across the organization to operationalize human security in its operations by beginning workstreams on the MC2HS that are aimed at generating a new approach to its CCTs.

The first major step forward in this work was the introduction of the term human security into the Allied Joint Doctrine for Civil-Military Cooperation in June 2025 (NATO 2025). The new CIMIC doctrine outlines that implementation of the CCTs is a key part of the military contribution to human security. CIMIC is the main function through which all human security topics are integrated in military planning and operations (NATO 2024, 9).

Implementing a human security approach faces several key challenges. First, NATO’s human security approach lacks conceptual precision and a clear evidence base due to the claim that its approach is “drawn from that of the United Nations” with little additional detail (NATO 2022a). NATO’s Human Security Approach and Guiding Principles (2022a) have presented confusion and contention due to how different bodies within NATO (and the nations themselves) have developed human security for their purposes and how they implement their own understanding of the concept (Yilmaz 2025, 296). This can lead to policymakers and military personnel not fully understanding the unique nature of the concept of human security. For example, Grimes explains that “for those who equate human security and the WPS agenda with International Humanitarian Law and Rules of Engagement, they may perceive human security as the emperor’s new clothes” (Grimes 2023, 143).

Policy on the MC2HS must explain how a human security approach, principally as a method of analysis, makes a unique contribution to the understanding of the human environment. However, NATO can expect criticism if their human security approach detracts too far from the above

principles as Richard Reeve (2021) warns NATO's use of the terminology "threatens to undermine the very different use of the term by civilian academic and development workers." The lack of conceptual precision invites such criticism, and the policies as they stand fail to clarify how human security can be a useful analytical lens for military actors. As will be explained in later sections, a human security approach requires the CIMIC Joint Function to be able to conduct effective, bottom-up liaison with local communities and civil society, conduct analyses based on the human security factors to map the impact of one's own and others' actions on the human environment, and work with the host state (principally national CIMIC personnel) to plan resilience measures and support where requested.

Second, military thinking in this domain focuses on measurable activities, such as defeating the enemy that seeks to harm civilians, defending

humanitarian convoys, providing logistics for medical aid and more (Meharg and Okros 2025, 11). Whereas human security goes beyond the provision of physical security and associated aid, the principles of human security (see Figure 1) demonstrate how there are wider considerations for NATO actors when they seek to identify and respond to insecurity. To effectively implement a human security approach, a change in thinking is needed. For instance, when considering resilience strategies in urban settings, a human security approach can focus analysis on where vulnerabilities lie and how the destruction of basic services (by one's own or others' actions) would undermine the security of the civilian population by placing the affected communities at the centre of the analysis (Constantinescu et al. 2024, 4). The remainder of this paper outlines how a MC2HS can complement the core military mission (Bergaust et al. 2025, 22).

HUMAN SECURITY AS A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

The reality of the battlespace is that wherever NATO operates, either in collective defence or crisis management, NATO will enter a crowded security landscape where the military no longer dominates (Matyók and Zajc 2022, 338). In this crowded space, the military must be able to engage with a diverse array of stakeholders and be adaptable. For example, in the event of hostilities on NATO's Eastern flank, NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence and Allied Reaction Force may be tasked with collective defence, but in practice also be first responders to humanitarian crises. This scenario necessitates NATO forces being dynamic and maintaining close relationships with national and local authorities, civil society, and communities.

NATO expects that when operating on Alliance territory its CIMIC forces will not interact with civilians directly. Instead, national CIMIC forces will engage with the civilians and NATO CIMIC will engage with national CIMIC. Particularly in collective defence, this thinking will not hold. Rapidly deployed NATO forces on Alliance territory will not be engaging an adversary in isolation. National CIMIC forces may have been overwhelmed by humanitarian crises, thus necessitating NATO direct assistance. Similarly, were NATO to engage the adversary on their territory, it remains an open question how NATO CIMIC would gather information on the human environment. The crowded security landscape exacerbates these complex questions and demands that NATO consider how it will directly engage with national and local authorities, civil society, and communities.

Where human security concerns are almost certain to become intertwined with other primary military

tasks, planners must be prepared to "consider the multidimensional nature of security threats, through identifying vulnerabilities, assessing civilian needs, and integrating these factors into mission objectives" (Constantinescu et al. 2024, 2). Similarly, the UK recognizes that "populations are not passive bystanders to conflict" and the UK's human security approach "introduces a line of analysis that can ensure the population is factored in as a stakeholder to violent conflict" (Ministry of Defence 2024, 4).

It is here that a human security approach offers valuable analytical insights by focusing planners on both (a) the human security factors as interlinked ways in which population security can be undermined and (b) the human security's hallmarks of engaging from the bottom-up to identify critical population needs, consider vulnerabilities and build resilience.

NATO's CIMIC doctrine makes clear that it is through the CIMIC Joint Function that human security will be integrated in military planning and operations. However, to effectively undertake human security tasks, CIMIC must be adapted. As Harig explains, "CIMIC suffers from an image problem within military institutions across the Alliance. It remains associated with the expeditionary phase of operations after the end of the Cold War, and many still equate CIMIC with digging wells and its contributions to winning over the 'hearts and minds' of local populations in foreign countries" (Harig 2024, 1).

Integration of a human security approach brings CIMIC up-to-date and clarifies that the CIMIC Joint Function bridges the gap between the civilian

environment and the military and plays a leading role in the analysis of human factors to improve the building of resilience while supporting NATO's agility in the complex battlespace (Harig 2024, 3). By adopting a clear human security approach, CIMIC will be able to conduct an effective, bottom-up liaison with local authorities, populations, and civil society that prioritizes the 'vital core'.

In the complex modern battlespace, CIMIC is key for the operationalization of a human security approach because

“[c]ollaboration fosters resource efficiency (by pooling resources from multiple sectors ensures that limited budgets are allocated effectively, avoiding duplication of efforts) and contextual understanding by using the expertise of the local NGOs and community organizations who often have deeper knowledge of the cultural and social dynamics within conflict zones, which can inform more nuanced military strategies. This collaboration also ensures an enhanced legitimacy, as partnerships with respected civilian organizations can enhance the perceived legitimacy of military operations, reducing opposition and fostering trust” (Constantinescu et al. 2024, 3).

CIMIC staff activities contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the operating environment by identifying, analysing, and assessing civil factors. As the Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence explains, “[t]he Joint Function CIMIC plays a crucial role in understanding the human environment and the overall operating environment” (CIMIC-COE Handbook 2024, 10). A human security approach requires these analyses to include assessment of the human security factors and consideration of how to build resilience. By taking human security's preventative approach, NATO can plan alongside its member states to integrate resilience, which some regard as the “first line of defence in meeting human-security challenges” (Matyók and Zajc 2022, 342).

NATO recognizes in the Warfighting Capstone Concept that 'layered resilience' requires both civilian and military resilience (Harig 2024, 3). A human security approach is one tool in NATO's arsenal to deliver resilience by focusing

planners on the human security factors and by adopting human security methods to interrogate vulnerabilities and take preventative actions. By steering NATO towards prevention, a human security approach is then of critical importance for civil preparedness.

However, to ensure consistent and effective analyses, NATO must develop detailed guidance for how the CIMIC Joint Function is to conduct analysis of the human security factors, account for vulnerabilities, and integrate resilience and empowerment into its advice. Only then can CIMIC synchronize military and non-military activities to create converging effects and mitigate negative consequences of military activities, which is central to human security, and particularly Protection of Civilians (PoC).

NATO guidance on the MC2HS must explain how human security is to be integrated across the entire HQ to ensure the CIMIC Joint Function is able to lead and access the relevant data. For example, the Intelligence Joint Function will be the best place to provide information on the identity, relationships, motivations, and intentions of various actors involved in threats to human security (Kis 2023, 113).

NATO HQ Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (HQ ARRC) have mapped how each branch of the HQ feeds into the MC2HS (see Figure 2). Similarly, HQ ARRC has developed a Standing Operating Instruction (SOI) on the MC2HS that maps out tasks for the Human Security Advisor and human security focal points across the HQ. As noted by the NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC), NATO Land HQs that currently have SOIs on the MC2HS include all the mapped MC2HS activities (NATO Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre 2024). Similar to the best practices identified by JALLC, NATO should mainstream SOIs on the MC2HS and human security focal points across the force structure at operational and tactical levels; however, this can only be achieved in a consistent way once NATO sets a strategic approach to the MC2HS.

Branch/Joint Function/ Combined/Joint Staff Responsibilities	Role in the MC2HS
G1 Personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contributes to own force behaviour – such as preventing sexual exploitation and abuse.
G2 Intelligence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plays a key role in integrating human security into the Common Operational Picture by understanding the capacity, intent and tactics and identifying the most likely and most dangerous courses of action of military actors and nonstate armed groups toward the population. Provides intelligence support to targeting which feeds into the Human Security Advisor and Commander's Advisory Group advice on vetting targets.
G3 Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consequence management of human security incidents and events and provides support to G9 Ops. Responsible for gathering data on civilian deaths and injuries, property damage or destruction for analysis to reduce civilian harm.
Military Police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand the capacity, intent and tactics of organized/opportunistic criminals toward the population (CRIMINT), and the effects of their criminal activities on population groups. Policing and investigative capability to conduct investigations of crime and incidents. Control and regulation of military ensuring free and unimpeded humanitarian access, and the voluntary movement of the civilian population away from the Close area of operations. Managing the humane and pragmatic management of POWs to maintain campaign authority and internment of civilians for imperative security reasons. Liaison and joint patrolling with Host Nation civil and military police. The reinforcement or replacement of civil police in recaptured areas, where the continued presence of the local police force cannot be assumed, to maintain order.
Medical Corps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Subject to medical rules of eligibility, medical support to support the health needs of vulnerable persons while they are under the duty of care of the military, particularly those who may be suffering from a lack of medicine and health services for medical conditions, those suffering from malnutrition, and victimsurvivors of ConflictRelated Sexual Violence / Six grave violations against children in times of war.
G4 Logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider and mitigate modern slavery and human trafficking risks in logistics supply chains. Consider and mitigate corruption risks in procurement (with G8) and logistics operations.
G5 Strategy and Plans & G35 Future Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate consideration of vulnerabilities of civilian population, civilian objects and services into plans. Identify options to reduce civilian harm, incidental harm, infrastructure damage and essential service degradation throughout course of action development.
G7 Joint Force Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate human security factors and approach into education, training and exercises.
G8 Force Structure, Resources and Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure contracting with reliable & transparent sources to avoid NATO implications in modern slavery and undue risk to civilian personnel. Consider conflict sensitivity in sustainment procurement to avoid competition over potentially scarce local resources, and market distortions that drive up prices for vulnerable population groups or undermine coping strategies.
Military Engineering & Geographic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate environmental protection & cultural property data into all intelligence and geographic products. Provide advice on the reverberating effects of hazardous materials on environment and affected populations, where these are collateral concerns. Assess damage or estimate engineering repairs, and assist in restoring power supply and distribution, utilities repair work, and water purification that are critical to the population.
Information Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter adversary mis/disinformation operations targeting the civilian population. Amplify Host Nation communications to inform the affected population of safe routes, shelters and aid points. Ensure that advanced warning of attacks are effective.

Figure 2. A consolidated table of information presented by Daniel Linsdell and Alexander Gilder in 'CIMIC's Contribution to Human Security', NATO CIMIC Centre of Excellence Annual CIMIC Foresight Conference 2025, 17 September 2025.

With CIMIC leading and the other Joint Functions feeding into the MC2HS, human security offers a method of significantly deepening NATO's (and consequently the Commander's) understanding of the human environment by focusing planners on the interlinked human security factors and the

building of resilience. This serves two purposes: (1) to more effectively generate effects and (2) to prepare and enable NATO forces to respond to a wide array of insecurities that are both a moral imperative and a way in which the enemy will seek to degrade NATO's capabilities.

HUMAN SECURITY IN SITUATIONS OF COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

NATO's human security approach will be critical to future collective defence operations. The war in Ukraine has shown that the civilian population will be used as a weapon of war 'at a grievous scale' (Kis 2023, 114). From the deliberate targeting of civilians to the deportation of children, the challenges faced by Ukrainian forces have been extreme. For example, Russian forces are reported to have booby-trapped bodies during their retreat from the Kiev oblast (Zelenskyy 2022) and engaged in the removal of physical evidence of Ukrainian culture (Straatsma 2025, 60). Russia has a "predisposition toward using human insecurity as a considered operational activity" (Straatsma 2025, 58). These activities significantly impacted the manoeuvrability of Ukrainian forces, particularly where civilians were in the battlespace. Ukrainian CIMIC forces needed to manage evacuations, provide supplies to civilians in combat areas, and take over local governance functions (Harig 2024, 5).

In a peer-to-peer conflict, NATO can expect to encounter similar challenges. First, rapidly deployed NATO forces may encounter humanitarian crises that require direct engagement with the population, especially where national CIMIC forces are overwhelmed. Second, it would be wrong to assume that the intensity of a peer-to-peer conflict would make the security of the population a low priority. Conversely, the reality of the battlespace means NATO, in support of host state forces, may be the first responder to population groups fleeing across the battlespace or those unable to flee who lack access to basic services. As they have learned lessons from the 2022 invasion, Ukrainian CIMIC forces, at the operational level, interact with border and national guard, energy companies and other industries, international NGOs, national NGOs and communities to build resilience.

NATO must build on the experience of Ukrainian CIMIC forces that have encountered challenges, such as a lack of material resources and wider funding, limited understanding of CIMIC amongst commanders, being overloaded with non-CIMIC duties, and fragmented training (Doma 2025). The Ukrainian experience is important for NATO because (1) some Allies may have greater CIMIC capabilities than others, thus requiring NATO forces to be prepared to support where requested and fill any gaps whilst national CIMIC is scaled up, and (2) the Ukrainian experience of modern peer-to-peer conflict evidences some of the situations NATO forces could encounter that would impact NATO's freedom of manoeuvre.



NATO can use its human security approach to recalibrate the CIMIC Joint Function, as well as its role in partnership with other Joint Functions, to prepare for situations of collective defence that build on lessons learned from Ukraine. As Harig explains, "NATO CIMIC has always clearly aimed to contribute to achieving the military's desired

end-state. As these end-states will be different in territorial and collective defence than they used to be in expeditionary operations, CIMIC will have to be adapted” (Harig 2024, 2).

NATO’s Warfighting Capstone Concept makes little mention of the civilian population. It makes one mention of civilian resilience and does not mention the human security approach in its discussion of the military instrument of power, despite NATO’s Human Security Unit having been created several years before the adoption of the Capstone Concept (MacVicar 2025, 39). Much of the literature on deterrence and defence post-2022 and on the 2022 Strategic Concept has focused on readiness and warfighting capabilities – not human security or resilience. This is shortsighted and leaves NATO unprepared for the realities of the battlespace it will encounter in a collective defence situation. As Munroe argues, human insecurity will drive operational tempo as adversaries seek to exploit the civilian population where NATO has not considered it a primary task in deterrence and defence (Munroe 2025, 16).

What the Capstone Concept does mention is the need for “better day-zero integration” that requires partnerships with “non-governmental organizations, civilian actors and industry” (Harig 2025, 1). The CIMIC Joint Function must then be prepared to engage with a wide range of actors, in support of national CIMIC. The CIMIC Joint Function will need to account for the fact NATO forces may need to undertake activities directly with civilian actors if national CIMIC forces lack the capacity at an early stage of the conflict. Nevertheless, the Capstone Concept fails to recognize how both one’s own and adversarial actions in large-scale combat operations will inevitably impact the human security factors. This is key because, for example, a civilian population fleeing to seek protection or that is unable to access basic services will be a constraint on NATO forces, undermining manoeuvre and ultimately warfighting capability.

Swift implementation of a strategic MC2HS and cascading of the approach to the operational and tactical levels of the NATO force structure through standing SOIs and training is key to filling the gap left by the Capstone Concept. The human security approach is a necessary corollary to the shift

from “deterrence by reputation” to “deterrence by preparedness” because while NATO increases a potential aggressor’s cost of resorting to an act of war through the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) and its rapid deployment forces, it must also ensure a deep understanding of the human environment in its Allied territory in order to enable interoperability during both peacetime and situations of collective defence (Leuprecht 2019). This preparedness is only possible by adopting guidance on the MC2HS.

For example, PAX for Peace identifies how many direct civilian casualties in the early stages of war in Ukraine were due, in part, to limited preparedness to evacuate civilians from frontline areas (PAX for Peace 2025). Similarly, Russia used attacks on energy infrastructure to limit access to basic services and increase the suffering of the civilian population (Nikolaieva and Zwijnenburg 2022). A human security approach would push NATO to prepare for these situations and include mass evacuations, outcomes of attacks on energy infrastructure and more as part of planning for collective defence operations. Using human security’s focus on taking preventative action, identifying vulnerabilities and building resilience, NATO should work alongside nations to analyse where evacuations or the protection of civilian infrastructure might be especially necessary as part of their regional defence plans.

In a collective defence situation, NATO will also be concerned with sustaining the will to fight of the Alliance member that has been invaded. It will be critical to account for and harness the civilian population (a) where NATO seeks to mitigate harm from its own and adversary actions as a key activity to protect and maintain civilian support for NATO operations and (b) where civilians “take on tasks that the military would normally seek to keep exclusively within its purview” such as “improvising single-use Uncrewed Aerial Combat Vehicles (UACVs) by fusing first-person view (FPV) commercial drones with grenades and anti-tank munitions” (MacVicar 2025, 42). A balance would need to be struck between the host state’s need to win the war and repel the invasion and long-term considerations for the need to preserve critical infrastructure and access to basic services. That balance becomes more difficult to picture without CIMIC and whole-of-mission efforts that deepen NATO’s understanding of the human environment.

A human security approach can make a direct contribution to NATO's effectiveness in collective defence. As explained in this paper, analysis of the human security factors and use of its methods provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interlinked nature of security threats in order to mitigate harm. A human security approach that shows concern for the population is an important part of NATO's analysis and actions through consideration of vulnerabilities and bottom-up engagement. Human security focuses NATO on pre-empting the use of civilians as a weapon of war beyond physical harm and giving the Commander a deep understanding of different potential threats. By using a human security approach NATO can preserve its legitimacy amongst the population and avoid where the enemy has used the civilian population to limit NATO's freedom of manoeuvre and ability to produce kinetic effects.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATO

1. To fully realize a human security approach, NATO must adopt a MC2HS at the strategic level that clearly explains how human security offers unique analytical tools and methods. It is important to draw out how human security is a unique method of analysis that will assist NATO staff in better understanding the contribution a human security approach can make to collecting, analysing and utilizing information on the human environment. Given that human security now features in Allied Joint Doctrine for Civil-Military Cooperation, the MC2HS must clearly explain how the human security approach alters and enhances NATO CIMIC. As this paper has shown, the concept of human security presents an opportunity to prepare NATO CIMIC for the realities of the modern battlespace and situations of collective defence. Building on the best practices identified by JALLC, the MC2HS must then be cascaded at the operational and tactical levels through standing SOIs and human security focal points that harnesses the existing knowledge produced by HQ ARRC and others.

is both a command responsibility and requires a whole-of-mission effort with human security tasks given to all Joint Functions that contribute to the Commander's understanding of the human environment. A human security approach offers both interlinked factors of insecurity that can be integrated into planning and methods of analysis that can focus Joint Functions on vulnerabilities, building resilience, and taking preventative measures to avoid insecurity.
2. The MC2HS must clarify that human security
3. Training on the human security approach and how it is integrated across the whole HQ is necessary to effectively operationalize the concept. Human security is mentioned in current training offered or accredited by NATO, such as training provided by the Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence (CCOE) and the NATO-UN POC course delivered by the Finnish Defence Forces' International Centre. Following the adoption of the MC2HS across the NATO force structure, the human security approach must receive its own standalone training packages and be integrated into training in discreet areas such as CIMIC, targeting, and senior command courses.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The concept of human security is a useful analytical tool that broadens NATO's understanding of insecurities that face the civilian population and encourages Commanders to address critical threats identified by civilians, to account for vulnerabilities in their decision-making, and to consider preventative steps to mitigate harm. To date, NATO has failed to harness this tool and operationalize a human security approach. Consequently, the human security approach has been prone to misunderstandings and the

perception of simply repackaging it into other existing legal frameworks. But human security has unique features that contribute to NATO's preparedness and effectiveness in all three core tasks, including deterrence and defence. It is clear NATO's adversaries will use civilians as a weapon of war. It is vital that NATO and its nations develop strategies for building resilience and integration with national forces that are supported by human security's focus on identifying vulnerabilities and taking preventative actions.

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