

The transformation of EU and NATO security narratives: towards resilience and total defence?

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In a context of geopolitical competition and multiplying crises at the global level that destabilize the liberal world order, the European Union and NATO increasingly talk about the need to boost their resilience and that of wider society. Both depict a moment of ontological insecurity, in which resilience seems to be the answer to all risks: from hybrid threats to energy and economic insecurity to the possibility of military invasion.¹ What is intriguing is that both seem to be converging on the idea of resilience, even if their traditional narratives were historically travelling on different tracks: the EU presented itself as peace promoter, whereas NATO told a narrative of defending a liberal community through military defence and deterrence. To what extent and how does resilience relate to these institutions' dominant narratives? This article investigates this emerging resilience narrative in both, contrasts it with their historical narratives, and considers its implications, for example when it comes to hindering or enabling security cooperation between them.

In the case of the EU, a peace narrative had long depicted it as having brought peace to European states and societies after the Second World War through economic and political integration. This story had a beginning, with the establishment of the European Communities that would make the prospect of a war among European states unthinkable and would bring peace to the peoples of Europe. Later, this was extended to those outside the EU with the Common Foreign and Security Policy. However, this peace narrative started to weaken at the turn of the twenty-first century with the emergence of new challenges to the political integration process after the Maastricht Treaty

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¹ For example, see Sebastian Harnisch, 'NATO's crisis resilience', in Sebastian Mayer, ed., *Research handbook on NATO* (Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2023), pp. 356–68; Jonathan Joseph and Ana E. Juncos, 'Conceptual politics and resilience-at-work in the European Union', *Review of International Studies* 50: 2, 2024, pp. 373–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210523000463>; Maria Mäklsoo, 'Risk, resilience, and resistance', in James Sperling and Mark Webber, eds., *The Oxford handbook of NATO* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), pp. 192–207; Nathalie Tocci, 'Resilience and the role of the European Union in the world', *Contemporary Security Policy* 41: 2, 2020, pp. 176–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2019.1640342>.

and the global failure of the liberal peace project.² Manners and Murray have rightly argued that the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the EU in 2012 ‘appeared to mark the zenith of the chronicle of the EU as a peace project, but at the same time it also marked its nadir’.³ In a world of deep ontological insecurity, a resilience narrative has now replaced the peace narrative with which the EU had become associated. As permanent crises exacerbate perceptions of insecurity, the EU’s new *raison d’être* becomes its ability to protect itself and its populations. In the search for simple narratives, policy-makers (as narrative entrepreneurs) have thus replaced the old ones with a new one of resilience, which provides reassurance in the context of geopolitical contestation and ontological uncertainty, and aligns with emerging narratives such as that of strategic autonomy.

We argue that there is now convergence with NATO’s emerging narrative of resilience, which places emphasis on civil preparedness in response to an uncertain and belligerent context and the broadening and evolving military and non-military security challenges. From the beginning, NATO’s dominant narrative has combined military deterrence with a liberal security community ‘of shared values, shared interests, and shared destiny’.⁴ In order to maintain its *raison d’être* NATO (like the EU) has developed a complementary narrative of resilience. This emphasizes common threats that necessitate a common commitment and shared responsibility across the military and civilian spheres. The implications of this resilience defensive turn in the narratives of both institutions, as we write in the conclusion, are the spread of fear, preparedness and a gradual move towards total defence.

The article is divided into four sections. The first reflects on why narratives are relevant to the study of international relations. The second section examines how the EU’s dominant narrative of peace has been replaced with that of resilience. The third centres on NATO and how its defence and security narratives have also integrated the idea of resilience. Finally, the conclusion reflects on this convergence around resilience and the implications this may hold for both.

Narrative approaches in International Relations

The need to tell stories about who we are and to make sense of our role in the world has always been part of human experience. Narratives are likewise at the heart of international politics and foreign policy, and have been at the centre of analysis of recent International Relations (IR) scholarly work that embraces

² Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, ‘A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus’, *British Journal of Political Science* 39: 1, 2009, pp. 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000409>; Oliver P. Richmond, *A post-liberal peace* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011).

³ Ian Manners and Philomena Murray, ‘The end of a noble narrative? European integration narratives after the Nobel Peace Prize’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 54: 1, 2016, pp. 185–202 at pp. 185–6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12324>.

⁴ NATO, *NATO 2030: united for a new era: analysis and recommendations of the reflection group appointed by the NATO Secretary General* (Brussels, 2020), p. 7.

a 'narrative turn'.⁵ Narratives have been used to study the foreign policies of states, but also of international institutions such as the EU.⁶ Policy-makers have also espoused the notion of narratives and their power, as when EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell warned in 2021 about the need for the EU to be more aware of the ongoing 'global battle of narratives' and their geopolitical implications.⁷ Narrative has been defined as 'a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors'.⁸ From this perspective, narrative should not be equated with discourse or dismissed as mere rhetoric; it needs to be understood as a form of storytelling; a narrative is a story about the past, present and future. A narrative establishes a time sequence of 'events' with specific actors (the protagonist and other characters in the story) in a particular context or setting. This story centres around a plot which develops over the time sequence.

Through storytelling, we are able to make sense of a complex and uncertain world.⁹ Narrating stories about ourselves and others also helps to create a sense of identity and security. According to Browning, 'it is only through emplotting ourselves in stories that we are able to attribute meaning to the social world, to construct a sense of our own identity and interests and therefore to provide a meaningful basis for action'.¹⁰ Crises, by exacerbating feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, reaffirm the need for a strong narrative that can help make sense of the world. Similarly, Subotić has argued that (state autobiographical) narratives are 'selectively activated' at times of existential crises 'to confront state insecurities', with narratives providing a sense of continuity.¹¹

Narratives can help us make sense of our past, our current lived experience and our future actions, delimiting the boundaries of the possible. Although the forces behind action in international affairs are agents as much as material conditions, as long debated in IR theory,¹² we align with more critical constructivist approaches to claim that agents and structures are inseparable from narratives,

⁵ Ronald R. Krebs, 'How dominant narratives rise and fall: military conflict, politics, and the Cold War consensus', *International Organization* 69: 4, 2015, pp. 809–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818315000181>; James Pamment, 'Strategic narratives in US public diplomacy: a critical geopolitics', *Popular Communication* 12: 1, 2014, pp. 48–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2013.868899>; Paulo Ravecca and Elizabeth Dauphinee, 'Narrative and the possibilities for scholarship', *International Political Sociology* 12: 2, 2018, pp. 125–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/oly009>.

⁶ Natalia Chaban, Alistair Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Understanding EU crisis diplomacy in the European neighbourhood: strategic narratives and perceptions of the EU in Ukraine, Israel and Palestine', *European Security* 28: 3, 2019, pp. 235–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2019.1648251>.

⁷ Josep Borrell Fontelles, *European foreign policy in times of COVID-19* (Luxembourg: EU Publications Office, 2021), pp. 44–5.

⁸ Alistair Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic narratives: communication power and the new world order* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

⁹ See the introduction to this special section: Sarah Wolff, Karolina Pomorska and Richard G. Whitman, 'Security provision in and beyond Europe: transformed narratives and roles in times of interregnum', *International Affairs* 102: 4, 2026, pp. 1109–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia090>.

¹⁰ Christopher S. Browning, *Constructivism, narrative and foreign policy analysis: a case study of Finland* (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 47.

¹¹ Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12: 4, 2016, pp. 610–27 at p. 611, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12089>.

¹² Alexander Wendt, *Social theory of international politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

which play a decisive role in framing and enabling or constraining what action is possible or desirable. For example, Hagström and Gustafsson have explored narrative power, or ‘the capacity of narratives to produce effects by ascribing meaning and mobilizing collective action’.¹³ Similarly, Holland and Mathieu refer to the structural power of narratives, which derives from the fact that a particular storyline forecloses other options (we expect things to happen in a particular way, with a beginning, a middle and an end).¹⁴ More importantly, we always expect a story to provide a (re)solution or end. According to Roselle et al., ‘narratives are appealing to human beings in part due to the presentation of action to resolve a conflict or disruption to the status quo’.¹⁵ The expectation that the story will provide an end can thus structure and enable or foreclose policy options. While narratives are powerful, we do not wish to go as far as to claim that they have ‘a life and force of their own’,¹⁶ as if actors could narrate and shape their identities freely, separated from material conditions. Rather than dismissing the centrality of structures, the study of narratives here seeks to intertwine agents and structures, highlighting that the meaning of events, crises or the foreign policy of actors is neither fixed nor self-evident but mediated through competing narratives.¹⁷

While there might be a plurality of narratives at any specific point in time, some of them might become more central, becoming ‘dominant’ and replacing previous dominant ones. Krebs defines ‘a dominant narrative of national security’ as ‘a realized hegemonic project’.¹⁸ A dominant narrative will make particular actions appear normal or legitimate, while others will be rejected. As some narratives become hegemonic, others are silenced or even forgotten, such as those connecting European integration and colonialism. In the 1950s, as Hansen and Johnson explain, European integration was deeply influenced by the idea of ‘Eurafrica’, which assumed that European states could only exploit their colonies in Africa through greater economic and political cooperation.¹⁹ Instead, the narrative of peace—of ‘Europe’s relentless progress towards ever closer union’—emerged as the dominant story of European integration, overshadowing a much darker history.²⁰ In other cases, we might observe several narratives at the same time, with narratives competing—putting forward

¹³ Linus Hagström and Karl Gustafsson, ‘Narrative power: how storytelling shapes east Asian international politics’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32: 4, 2019, pp. 387–406 at pp. 390–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1623498>.

¹⁴ Jack Holland and Xavier Mathieu, ‘Narratology and US foreign policy in Syria: beyond identity binaries, toward narrative power’, *International Studies Quarterly* 67: 4, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad078>.

¹⁵ Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, ‘Strategic narrative: a new means to understand soft power’, *Media, War & Conflict* 7: 1, 2014, pp. 70–84 at p. 76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635213516696>.

¹⁶ Holland and Mathieu, ‘Narratology and US foreign policy’, p. 5.

¹⁷ Zuzana Krulichová, ‘Charting the narrative landscape: distinguishing agency-centric and structure-centric approaches to narrative research in International Relations’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, publ. online 2 Aug. 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367251352095>.

¹⁸ Krebs, ‘How dominant narratives rise and fall’, p. 5.

¹⁹ Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: the untold story of European integration and colonialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

²⁰ Mark Gilbert, ‘Narrating the process: questioning the progressive story of European integration’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 46: 3, 2008, pp. 641–62 at p. 656, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2008.00795.x>.

alternative visions—or complementing each other.²¹ For instance, in the case of the EU, de Vries distinguishes between four foundational narratives that ‘continue to shape EU politics of the present day’: the EU as a peace project, the EU as forged in crisis, deeper economic interdependence fostering political change, and law being able to replace power politics.²² Similarly, Manners and Murray identify five European narratives that have competed and/or complemented the peace one at different points in time.²³

Focusing on the hegemony of narratives and their shifts is not intended to dismiss materialist or agent-centred accounts but to read them simultaneously. In addition to the structural properties of a narrative, we interpret whether and to what extent a narrative becomes a dominant one in relation to the context (e.g. an external shock or crisis) and the role of agency. Crises tend to put pressure on dominant narratives as they open up space for contestation.²⁴ Narrative change, however, tends to be slow and gradual, with dominant narratives often co-existing with other ones for some time. According to Berenskoetter, ‘a master narrative is sufficiently vague to exist alongside more specific, derivative narratives that can be either layered or interwoven, and that can be strategically employed without hurting the coherence of the basic discourse’.²⁵ Having said that, a narrative is never fully stable. It confuses facts, fiction and myths, and has gaps or contains contradictory elements that can be exploited by other competing narrative agents.²⁶ This is also why the role of agency is important, when it comes to promoting and sustaining, and also resisting, particular dominant narratives in the face of external challenges and crises.

While narrative analysis as a method is open to exploring a wide range of material, including cultural artefacts such as images or acoustic sources, science fiction or social media posts,²⁷ in this article we use a qualitative content analysis of NATO and EU speeches and policy documents. The corpus for this article includes all the key strategic documents (security strategies and strategic concepts) published by the two institutions from 2010 to 2024. This allows us to identify the range of narratives; whether they are dominant, complementary or competing; and their evolution over time. In addition to these strategic documents, we analyse other relevant policy documents, declarations and policy speeches focused on resilience to examine in more detail key features of this narrative: the setting (the context in which it is placed), the characteriza-

²¹ Kai Oppermann and Alexander Spencer, ‘Narrative analysis’, in Patrick A. Mello and Falk Ostermann, eds., *Routledge handbook of foreign policy analysis methods* (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 117–32.

²² Catherine E. De Vries, ‘How foundational narratives shape European Union politics’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 4, 2023, pp. 867–81 at p. 867, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13441>.

²³ Manners and Murray, ‘The end of a noble narrative’.

²⁴ Krebs, ‘How dominant narratives rise and fall’.

²⁵ Felix Berenskoetter, ‘Parameters of a national biography’, *European Journal of International Relations* 20: 1, 2014, pp. 262–88 at p. 280, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066112445290>.

²⁶ Séverine Autesserre, ‘Dangerous tales: dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences’, *African Affairs* 111: 443, 2012, pp. 202–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/afro80>; Berit Bliese-mann de Guevara, *Myth and narrative in international politics: interpretive approaches to the study of IR* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Subotić, ‘Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change’.

²⁷ Katja Freistein, Frank Gadinger and Stefan Groth, ‘Studying narratives in International Relations’, *International Studies Perspectives* 26: 4, 2025, pp. 434–55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekae019>.

tion of the actors (mainly, the EU and NATO, but also their competitors and like-minded partners) and the emplotment (the way the narrative unfolds over time). This coding scheme is well established in narrative analysis of foreign policy.²⁸ The following sections thus explain how resilience has become—in a context of multiplying crisis and shaped by narrative entrepreneurs—a dominant security strategic narrative for the EU and a complementary one for NATO.²⁹

The EU's evolving narrative from peace to resilience

The EU's peace narrative tells the story of how its member states overcame historical conflicts. It is a narrative that has passed into history with traces of heroism, since the building of Europe after the devastation of the Second World War was the product of 'a small number of remarkable men', charismatic, ingenious and determined.³⁰ The key protagonists, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman, with backing from advisors and other committed Europeans such as Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi, devised a plan to resolve the Franco-German dispute over the mining and metalworking Saar area. This invited European states to create a community around the production and trade of coal and steel under the supervision of a higher authority. The economic dependence and benefits would be so great that war between them would become 'not merely unthinkable but materially impossible'.³¹

The narrative of peace glorified the European history of integration, one that has usually been told as a liberal and progressive march against nationalist forces.³² François Duchêne, an influential political analyst who wrote a biography of Jean Monnet, viewed the European Community as a civilian power with economic standing capable of civilizing international politics through international law and institutions.³³ The optimism in liberal democracy at the end of the Cold War gave the peace narrative even greater impetus. Free trade was seen to enhance prosperity while reinforcing democracy and enlarging the zone of peace across the continent.³⁴ Even further, an increasingly integrated EU with democratic institutions, the rule of law, the Single Market

²⁸ Oppermann and Spencer, 'Narrative analysis'.

²⁹ Wolfram Kaiser, 'Counter-narratives in the European Parliament: far left and far right groups and European "union" in the 1980s', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 30: 1, 2022, pp. 26–38 at p. 27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1902291>.

³⁰ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Europe: a history of its peoples* (London: Viking, 1990), p. 394.

³¹ Robert Schuman, 'Schuman Declaration May 1950', https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en; see further, Duroselle, *Europe*, pp. 394–8. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 14 Jan. 2026.)

³² For a critical account of this Whig history of European integration, see Mark Gilbert, *European integration: a political history*, 2nd edn (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

³³ François Duchêne, 'Europe's role in world peace', in Richard Mayne, ed., *Europe tomorrow: sixteen Europeans look ahead* (London: Fontana, 1972), pp. 32–47.

³⁴ Erich Weede, 'The diffusion of prosperity and peace by globalization', *Independent Review* 9: 2, 2004, pp. 165–86.

and a values-driven foreign policy was seen to hold a distinctive identity.³⁵ Manners influentially interpreted the EU as having a 'normative power' capable of shaping what ought to be 'normal' in world politics.³⁶ The peace narrative reached a climax in the 2000s and sought to shape international affairs in its image and likeness.

Historically, EU enlargement has been regarded as the most useful instrument for peace, since it can generate relations of interdependence and a sense of belonging, transforming weak candidate countries into stable and prosperous liberal democracies.³⁷ The accession of former authoritarian states like Spain and Portugal in 1986, or former socialist states in central and eastern Europe in the 2000s, was deemed essential for advancing democratization and growth. Also, the prospect of the eventual inclusion of the western Balkans states as members was connected to the need to end the conflicts in the region, since ethnic, parochial and nationalist identities would be superseded by a common European identity.³⁸ Similarly, the European Neighbourhood Policy launched in 2004 was meant to strengthen cooperation with neighbouring countries, bringing them closer to the EU.³⁹ It was an open attempt to promote the EU's model of integration, good governance, democracy, justice and human rights in a period when the winds seemed to blow in its favour.

A series of crises have since put pressure on the EU, prompting a shift in its main hegemonic narrative. In a moment of perceived uncertainty and complexity, the idea of resilience has proved valuable to create a common language and cohere diverse policy fields, advancing towards a joined-up foreign policy.⁴⁰ Resilience was a pivotal concept in the EU Global Strategy of 2016,⁴¹ to be promoted in the eastern and southern neighbourhoods, as well as within the EU itself, in response to various challenges, ranging from long-term development and socio-economic transitions to short-term disaster emergencies.⁴² The narrative of resilience replaced the peace one in a moment of intense contestation of the EU and the liberal international order, when the EU felt insecure, less confident in asserting its normative power and leaning towards a more pragmatic posture.⁴³ While the peace narrative has not completely disappeared in the

³⁵ Thomas Diez, *A different kind of power? The EU's role in international politics* (New York: Idebate Press, 2014).

³⁶ Ian Manners, 'Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40: 2, 2002, pp. 235–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353>.

³⁷ Tanja A. Börzel, Antoaneta Dimitrova and Frank Schimmelfennig, 'European Union enlargement and integration capacity: concepts, findings, and policy implications', *Journal of European Public Policy* 24: 2, 2017, pp. 157–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1265576>.

³⁸ Soeren Keil and Bernhard Stahl, 'Between the Balkans and Europe: the state/nation problem in the Post-Yugoslav states', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 17: 2, 2023, pp. 119–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2023.2180723>.

³⁹ European Commission, *European neighbourhood policy: strategy paper*, COM(2004) 373 final (Brussels: 2004).

⁴⁰ Tocci, 'Resilience and the role of the EU'.

⁴¹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared vision, common action: a stronger Europe: a global strategy for the European Union's foreign and security policy* (Brussels: European Union, 2016).

⁴² Jonathan Joseph and Ana E. Juncos, 'Resilience as an emergent European project? The EU's place in the resilience turn', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 57: 5, 2019, pp. 995–1011, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12881>.

⁴³ Ana E. Juncos, 'Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm: a pragmatist turn?', *European Security* 26: 1, 2017, pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2016.1247809>.

EU's rhetoric, resilience has become dominant. This has taken place alongside a transformation of the notion of resilience itself, as discussed next.

The EU's resilience narrative: from peace to a whole-of-society defence

The EU's narrative of resilience first emerged in foreign policy documents in 2012 and 2013, and was imbued with emancipatory potential. In the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, the EU sought to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable communities facing recurrent natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies. The EU's approach to resilience at the time included 'a multifaceted strategy' and a 'joint humanitarian–development' analytical framework for long-term adaptation to various pressures; the EU's narrative of resilience strengthened partnerships and coordination at the global level, advanced regional integration and was designed to be embedded into national planning while remaining attuned to local contexts.⁴⁴ These initial interpretations of resilience could be seen as vestiges of the peace narrative and the EU setting an example as a normative power. But this did not endure.

The narrative of resilience shifted away from the ideals of peace and development as the contestation of the liberal international order intensified.⁴⁵ Within the EU, from the early 2010s, a growing number of radical populist parties criticized European integration as well as the common norms, values and consensus that had developed over the years, including over its foreign policy.⁴⁶ Outside the EU, great powers pursued spheres of influence and accelerated geopolitical confrontation, while challenges in the eastern and southern neighbourhoods such as the Russia–Ukraine conflict starting in 2014, the civil war in Syria that erupted in 2011 and the crisis in migrant reception, particularly in 2015–2016, added mounting pressure.⁴⁷ Narrative entrepreneurs such as Nathalie Tocci, then adviser to the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini and the penholder for the EU Global Strategy, put forward a narrative of resilience that emphasized a much more pragmatic and interest-based foreign policy: 'It is in the interests of our citizens to invest in the resilience of states and societies to the east stretching into Central Asia, and to the south down to Central Africa'.⁴⁸ The promotion of resilience had to wed principles and interests. Different from a norms-based narrative of assisting or partnering with others for promoting resilience, the EU's dominant narrative gradually became more strategic and selective to manage a 'more connected, contested

⁴⁴ European Commission, *The EU approach to resilience: learning from food security crises* (Brussels: 2012); European Commission, *Action plan for resilience in crisis prone countries 2013–2020*, SWD(2013) (Brussels: 2013).

⁴⁵ Pol Bargués, Jonathan Joseph and Ana E. Juncos, 'Rescuing the liberal international order: crisis, resilience and EU security policy', *International Affairs* 99: 6, 2023, pp. 2281–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaad222>.

⁴⁶ Ana E. Juncos and Karolina Pomorska, 'Contesting procedural norms: the impact of politicisation on European foreign policy cooperation', *European Security* 30: 3, 2021, pp. 367–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1947799>.

⁴⁷ Iain Ferguson and Susanna Hast, 'Introduction: the return of spheres of influence?', *Geopolitics* 23: 2, 2018, pp. 277–284, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1461335>.

⁴⁸ EEAS, *Shared vision, common action*, p. 23.

and complex', 'dangerous, divided and disorienting world'.⁴⁹ Whereas the peace narrative understood interdependence as the basis for mutual understanding and reconciliation, the EU began to associate interdependence with risks: 'We will manage interdependence, with all the opportunities, challenges and fears it brings about, by engaging in and with the wider world'.⁵⁰ Globalization and interdependence had exposed the EU's vulnerabilities and enabled 'connectivity wars',⁵¹ requiring a drastic turn inward. The EU Global Strategy also mentioned 'strategic autonomy', the need for the EU to act independently to defend its interests and values. Strategic autonomy, though still a contested notion among the member states,⁵² has grown in significance in a context of growing great power competition, though here we understand this narrative to complement the narrative of resilience.

In the later years of Jean-Claude Juncker's Commission (2014–2019), the narrative of resilience adopted a more defensive tone, with the EU's security felt to be in jeopardy.⁵³ This was brought to another level by other narrative entrepreneurs such as Ursula von der Leyen during her first term as Commission president (2019–2024) and Borrell. Resilience was further bent to serve geopolitics. Every event in international affairs was read as a crisis, which shocked and destabilized a vulnerable EU.⁵⁴ Trade and energy relations with others were deemed suspicious and reinterpreted to highlight protectionist strategies such as nearshoring or friendshoring.⁵⁵ Enlargement policy was also rebranded. From a technical process to expand the zone of peace, it came to be understood as a geopolitical instrument of defence to contain Russia after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.⁵⁶ The narrative of resilience that had once been associated with peace and an ever-enlarging EU was associated with the handling of migration and the imaginary of a 'fortress Europe'.⁵⁷ During this period, the narrative of a 'geopolitical union' put forward by von der Leyen

⁴⁹ EEAS, *The European Union in a changing global environment: a more connected, contested and complex world* (Brussels: European Union, 2015), pp. 1, 19.

⁵⁰ EEAS, *Shared vision, common action*, p. 17.

⁵¹ Mark Leonard, ed., *Connectivity wars: why migration, finance and trade are the geo-economic battlegrounds of the future* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2016).

⁵² Ana E. Juncos and Sophie Vanhoonacker, 'The ideational power of strategic autonomy in EU security and external economic policies', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62: 4, 2024, pp. 955–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13597>.

⁵³ EEAS, *The European Union's global strategy: three years on, looking forward* (Brussels: 2019).

⁵⁴ Mark Rhinard, 'The crisisification of policy-making in the European Union', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 57: 3, 2019, pp. 616–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12838>.

⁵⁵ Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaidis, 'The geopoliticization of European trade and investment policy', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 57: S1, 2019, pp. 103–13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12932>; Teva Meyer, 'Mapping energy geopolitics in Europe: journalistic cartography and energy securitisation after the Russian invasion of Ukraine', *Geopolitics* 30: 2, 2025, pp. 432–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2024.2362668>.

⁵⁶ Veronica Anghel and Erik Jones, 'The geopolitics of EU enlargement: from club to commons', *Survival* 66: 4, 2024, pp. 101–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2380203>.

⁵⁷ Rosanne Anholt and Giulia Sinatti, 'Under the guise of resilience: the EU approach to migration and forced displacement in Jordan and Lebanon', *Contemporary Security Policy* 41: 2, 2020, pp. 311–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2019.1698182>; Tamirace Fakhoury and Nora Stel, 'EU engagement with contested refugee returns in Lebanon: the aftermath of resilience', *Geopolitics* 28: 3, 2023, pp. 1007–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2022.2025779>.

and other EU officials also became more prevalent. However, this narrative, in which the EU needs to respond to great power rivalries, can be read as complementing rather than competing with that of resilience since the two narratives work hand in hand to defend the EU from external threats.⁵⁸

The shift towards a more defensive understanding of resilience is clearest in the *Strategic Compass*, drafted under the leadership of Borrell. Based on a comprehensive analysis of the threats faced by the EU, the document seeks to develop a common strategic culture and be the security and defence framework for the coming years. The Council approved the *Strategic Compass* in March 2022 immediately after Russia invaded Ukraine. In a fast-deteriorating context, resilience appears primarily as ‘our’ resilience, the resilience of the EU and its member states, which needs to be protected from competitors. According to the *Strategic Compass*, ‘We need to best prepare for fast-emerging challenges. Our strategic competitors are targeting us with a broad set of tools and testing our resilience with the aim to diminish our security and actively undermine our secure access to the maritime, air, cyber and space domains’.⁵⁹ Rather than an outside full of opportunities or countries in need of support that have to be brought closer to the EU, the outside in the *Strategic Compass* appears ‘hostile’, ‘more volatile, complex and fragmented than ever due to multi-layered threats’ and ‘a breeding ground for multiple threats to European Security’—and thus the EU is ‘confronted with a dangerous mix of armed aggression, illegal annexation, fragile states, revisionist powers and authoritarian regimes’.⁶⁰ The resilience narrative thus plays the role of sustaining the EU’s identity *vis-à-vis* multiple risks and threats. The list of these is long and stifling, including hybrid threats that need to be countered for ‘our’ resilience.⁶¹ It may not quite be warfare, but this is a dramatic, fear-mongering and even apocalyptic narrative, rather than one of cooperation and peace. While the narrative of resilience to adapt to (hybrid) threats has put aside principles, norms and the capacity to transform the outside, it serves the function of security and preserving the self.

Von der Leyen’s speech at the European Parliament to introduce her second Commission (2024–2029) reflected an overall perception of ‘today’s ever more dangerous world’, in which ‘war is raging on Europe’s borders’.⁶² As is usually done in these grandiloquent speeches in European institutions, von der Leyen appealed nostalgically to the narrative of peace of the EU’s self-asserted dawn: first came Europe’s liberation from the Nazis, then a decade

⁵⁸ Pierre Haroche, ‘A “geopolitical commission”: supranationalism meets global power competition’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61: 4, 2023, pp. 970–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13440>.

⁵⁹ EEAS, *A strategic compass for security and defence: for a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security* (Brussels: EEAS, 2022), p. 33.

⁶⁰ EEAS, *A strategic compass for security and defence*, pp. 17–18.

⁶¹ Maria Mälksoo, ‘Countering hybrid warfare as ontological security management: the emerging practices of the EU and NATO’, *European Security* 27: 3, 2018, pp. 374–92 at p. 383, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1497984>.

⁶² Ursula von der Leyen, ‘Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the new College of Commissioners and its programme’, Strasbourg, 27 Nov. 2024.

later ‘it took a generation of leaders with the courage to mend the wounds, to imagine a different future. This is the spirit that has led our continent forward ever since ... Stories that incarnate Europe’s eternal struggle and sacrifice for freedom’.⁶³ However, while these may still contain elements of a peace narrative, they function more as a narrative for resilience. Von der Leyen advocated reducing dependencies on others because ‘in today’s contested world ... every weakness is weaponized, every division pounced upon and every dependency exploited’.⁶⁴ Here the narratives of strategic autonomy, geopolitics and resilience reinforce each other to support a more inward and defensive turn in EU foreign and security policy. The apex of this defensive resilience narrative is the 2024 *Preparedness Report* written by the former president of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, in his capacity as Special Adviser to the President of the European Commission. Acting as a narrative entrepreneur, he starts by contrasting the optimism of the 1990s with today’s ‘security environment [that] has in many ways taken a turn for the worse’, and claims that ‘security is the foundation on which everything is built’ and Europe needs ‘a new mindset to preparedness’: a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to boost Europe’s resilience.⁶⁵ Resilience is built ‘from the top’ and spread across European societies through investing in communication, coordination and education programmes and curricula. Civil society and citizens are key to the extent that they are ‘enabl[ed]—in different capacities—to play an active role in ensuring crisis preparedness and first response’ and ‘an integral part of a “whole of society” approach’ that brings together as many actors as possible.

The Niinistö report and other follow-up initiatives such as the 2025 *Preparedness Union Strategy* also edge the EU closer to the notion of total defence, understood as a ‘whole of society approach to national security intended to deter a potential enemy by raising the cost of aggression and lowering the chances of its success’.⁶⁶ This strategy seeks to deter external aggressors not only by increasing military and economic capabilities or alliances to punish (‘deterrence by punishment’), but also by doubling the efforts on preparedness (‘deterrence by denial’) to reduce the EU’s vulnerabilities.

⁶³ von der Leyen, ‘Speech at the European Parliament Plenary on the new College of Commissioners and its programme’.

⁶⁴ von der Leyen, ‘Speech at the European Parliament Plenary on the new College of Commissioners and its programme’.

⁶⁵ Sauli Niinistö, *Safer together: strengthening Europe’s civilian and military preparedness and readiness* (Brussels: European Commission, 2024), pp. 4–5.

⁶⁶ European Commission, *European Preparedness Union Strategy*, Joint communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions JOIN(2025) 130 final (Brussels: European Commission, 2025); James Kenneth Wither, ‘Back to the future? Nordic total defence concepts’, *Defence Studies* 20: 1, 2020, pp. 61–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2020.1718498>.

NATO's dominant narrative: a military alliance and liberal security community

There has been considerable discussion of how NATO uses narratives to create stories about a 'self' and construct a shared understanding of the past, present and future. These narratives work to depict it as a military and political institution, blending the notions of military alliance and security community despite intrinsic tensions between the two.⁶⁷ Flockhart describes NATO's dominant narrative as one of 'an Alliance based on shared values and a common threat held together through the unity and equal sharing of risk expressed through the firm commitment to Article Five of the Washington Treaty'.⁶⁸ Similarly, Rynning writes how, from the very first moment of the North Atlantic Pact's signature in 1949, NATO combined the United States' idealistic vision of 'cooperative security' to nurture community with Europe's more pragmatic view of 'balance of power' to prevent another war.⁶⁹ However, it can also be argued, as Radchenko et al. do, that there has been constant contestation over NATO's *modus operandi* and its very identity, thus leaving room for narrative change to play an important role.⁷⁰

Even if the external threat was not explicitly spelt out in the Washington Treaty, NATO was portrayed as a military alliance in which an attack to one member would be an attack on all. Article 5, with its focus on mutual defence, encapsulates this idea of a shield against external foes. Complementing this military defence alliance narrative is the notion that NATO constitutes a security community united by values—democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law—shared by its members as set out in the preamble of the Washington Treaty. This narrative of a liberal security community should also be understood as a social construction. Rather than representing a given community, 'NATO has always been involved in constructing "the West"' and here the western community is understood by its sharing of liberal values and democratic practices'.⁷¹ The motto of the alliance was thought up by André de Staercke, Belgium's representative to NATO, and endorsed by the Belgian statesman Paul-Henri Spaak (who was its secretary-general in 1957–61) to capture the combination of security and freedom: 'Animus in consulendo

⁶⁷ Felix Ciuta, 'The end(s) of NATO: security, strategic action and narrative transformation', *Contemporary Security Policy* 23: 1, 2002, pp. 35–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713999727>; NATO, *SACT's remarks to New York University, 'A conversation on NATO's adaptation and projecting stability'* (New York: NATO, 2018), https://www.act.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/180416_nyu.pdf.

⁶⁸ Trine Flockhart, 'Towards a strong NATO narrative: from a "practice of talking" to a "practice of doing"', *International Politics*, vol. 49, 2012, pp. 78–97, p. 85, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2011.31>.

⁶⁹ Sten Rynning, *NATO: from Cold War to Ukraine, a history of the most powerful alliance* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2024).

⁷⁰ Sergey Radchenko, Timothy Andrews Sayle and Christian Ostermann, 'Introduction to the special issue, NATO: past & present', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43: 6–7, 2020, pp. 763–68 at p. 764, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1831714>.

⁷¹ Alexandra Gheciu, 'NATO, liberal internationalism, and the politics of imagining the western security community', *International Journal* 74: 1, 2019, pp. 32–46 at pp. 33, 39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702019834645>.

liber—in discussion a free mind'.⁷² That is, the emphasis was on members that could freely share and exchange their views and concerns to build trust and security.

During the critical Cold War years, as NATO took the role of a defence alliance to prevent an attack from the Soviet bloc, the more transformative ideas of community and security ebbed. 'The triumph of ordinary alliance over aspirational community', Rynning explains, left even the starkest defenders of NATO 'fatigued and disillusioned'.⁷³ 'Crisis narratives' surfaced and even questioned the existence of the alliance.⁷⁴ One of the prevalent 'crisis narratives' during the Cold War had to do with transatlantic burden-sharing,⁷⁵ and it has persisted to this day, particularly during the two Trump administrations. Crisis narratives did not necessarily have the effect of weakening the alliance; in fact, they might have reinvigorated it by fostering the development of new, out-of-area, roles as the Soviet bloc collapsed.

The end of the Cold War brought new enthusiasm and opportunities for reimagining the western security community.⁷⁶ NATO offered Partnerships for Peace and other security programmes to former Soviet states, including Russia, and designed plans for enlargement 'to provide increased stability and security for all in the Euro-Atlantic area, without recreating dividing lines'.⁷⁷ There was a combination of a favourable global context for liberal ideas and resolute leaders who sought to chart a new course for the alliance in the service of humanitarian causes beyond its borders. Beyond military interventions such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, NATO's identity narrative sought to ground the alliance within the liberal values laid out in the Washington Treaty, rather than its militarist purpose, allowing it to take on more civilian identities such as in the Women, Peace and Security agenda or in the promotion of democracy and freedom across the world.⁷⁸ This worked to prevent NATO from becoming a 'zombie institution' following the demise of the Soviet existential military threat.⁷⁹

Uncertainty and NATO's resilience narrative of civilian preparedness

NATO's mantra since the end of the Cold War has been to stress the ability to adapt to a changing and challenging context. At the end of the 2000s, the security context deteriorated as Russia became more aggressive in its neighbourhood and towards NATO members through the use of hybrid warfare

⁷² This is according to NATO's own narrative: <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/nato-history/history-by-theme/symbols-of-nato/nato-motto>.

⁷³ Rynning, *NATO: from Cold War to Ukraine*, p. 77.

⁷⁴ Flockhart, 'Towards a strong NATO narrative'.

⁷⁵ Flockhart, 'Towards a strong NATO narrative'.

⁷⁶ Gheciu, 'NATO'.

⁷⁷ NATO, *Study on NATO enlargement* (Brussels: 1995).

⁷⁸ Katharine A. M. Wright and Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'NATO's strategic narratives: Angelina Jolie and the alliance's celebrity and visual turn', *Review of International Studies* 47: 4, 2021, pp. 443–66 at pp. 447, 451, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210521000188>.

⁷⁹ Harnisch, 'NATO's crisis resilience', p. 358.

tactics while China emerged as a global superpower that rivalled the United States.

Between NATO's Wales summit in 2014 and Madrid summit in 2022, resilience underwent a transformation in its discourse, moving from a definition that applied solely to cyber issues to a focus on a full spectrum of security challenges and how these affect the resilience of societies.⁸⁰ This shift occurred in response to the perception of a context of permanent crises and 'challenges closer to NATO territory', requiring the alliance to strengthen its deterrence and defence posture, re-evaluate its vulnerabilities and preparedness to deter and defend, and strengthen civil preparedness and national resilience.⁸¹ While NATO describes itself as 'transparent and predictable',⁸² the world is increasingly described as unpredictable and complex:

Today's security environment is unpredictable. Strategic competition, pervasive instability and recurrent shocks define our broader security environment. Threats can come from state and non-state actors in the form of terrorist attacks, cyber attacks or hybrid warfare, which can blur the lines between conventional and unconventional forms of conflict. Climate change and natural disasters such as floods, fires and earthquakes underline the importance of civil-military engagement and cooperation. Society's resilience has also been severely tested by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.⁸³

The widespread use of new technologies and the extent of economic, financial and informational interdependence also create significant vulnerabilities, while hybrid threats and warfare represent the biggest fear as they embody disruption and uncertainty. Increasingly, NATO has looked to stay united to confront new strategic realities that are in fact old ones—geopolitical competition and the 'profusion and escalation of state-based rivalries and disputes over territory, resources, and values'.⁸⁴ The emerging NATO resilience narrative has therefore been tied to a context of uncertainty and the need for preparedness and better civil defence.⁸⁵ While resilience is not NATO's dominant narrative, existing among a range of emerging new ones, it plays an important role in emphasizing new uncertainties and the importance of continuity.

Within NATO's policy frameworks, sustained resilience is understood as requiring the full range of military and civilian capabilities as well as a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach based on cooperation between and across governments, the private sector and civil society.⁸⁶ This drives

⁸⁰ Mārtiņš Vargulis, 'NATO and the role of societal resilience and willingness to defend own country', in Māris Andžāns, ed., *Willingness to defend own country in the Baltic States: implications for national security and NATO's collective defence* (Rīga: Rīga Stradiņš University, 2021), pp. 18–28 at p. 18.

⁸¹ NATO, 'Resilience, civil preparedness and Article 3', 13 Nov. 2024; see, also, Maria Mäklsoo, 'NATO's new front: deterrence moves eastward', *International Affairs* 100: 2, 2024, pp. 531–47, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae008>.

⁸² NATO, 'Wales Summit Declaration: issued by the heads of state and government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales', 5 Sept. 2014.

⁸³ NATO, 'Resilience, civil preparedness and Article 3'.

⁸⁴ NATO, *NATO 2030*, pp. 12, 16.

⁸⁵ Vargulis, 'NATO and the role of societal resilience', p. 18.

⁸⁶ NATO, *Resilience, civil preparedness and Article 3*.

NATO's narrative in the direction of resilience and civil preparedness where these approaches are understood in relation to broadening and evolving military and non-military security challenges. As Prior argues, civil preparedness is also a 'game changer' for NATO's overall deterrence and defence posture.⁸⁷ Taking a civilian turn means being resilient against these challenges through maintaining and protecting critical civilian capabilities as well as military ones, encouraging a whole-of-government approach and working with like-minded national and international actors, notably the EU.⁸⁸

At its 2016 Warsaw summit, NATO agreed to boost the capacity of members and the alliance collectively through seven baseline requirements for national resilience and preparedness. First, to assure the continuity of government and critical services, including the ability to make decisions and communicate with citizens during crises. Second, to ensure resilient energy supplies with back-up plans for disruptions. Third, to deal effectively with the uncontrolled movement of people. Fourth, to secure resilient food and water resources. Fifth, to be able to deal with mass casualties and disruptive health crises. Sixth, resilient civil communications systems such as telecommunications and cyber networks. And seventh, resilient transport systems for civilian services and for the movement of forces.⁸⁹ Overall, civilian preparedness is understood by NATO as comprising three core functions: continuity of government, continuity of essential services to the population, and civil support to the military.⁹⁰

These baseline requirements reflect current thinking on how to combine military efforts to defend NATO territory and populations with robust civil preparedness aimed at dealing with potential vulnerabilities. It reflects NATO's journey towards a more civilian approach, with resilience playing a useful role in emphasizing the connection. This is underpinned not just by notions of uncertainty and complexity, but also by a liberal narrative that shows citizens and the military to be united in the defence of liberal institutions, values and territory. The new approach is a pragmatic response to a full spectrum of threats—including hybrid ones and the violent, disruptive and military efforts of other actors—but it also offers continued support for liberal values, while recognizing the unintended consequences of liberal principles such as the free movement of people, goods and ideas across borders.⁹¹ In this sense, it clearly converges with the EU's mantra of 'principled pragmatism'.⁹²

Embracing the idea of resilience, the communiqué for NATO's 2021 Brussels summit echoes the commitments made at the Warsaw summit and states that resilience 'is essential for credible deterrence and defence and the

⁸⁷ Tim Prior, 'NATO: pushing boundaries for resilience', *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, no. 213, 2017, p. 21, <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000184886>.

⁸⁸ NATO, 'Commitment to enhance resilience: issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw', 8 July 2016.

⁸⁹ NATO, 'Resilience, civil preparedness and Article 3'.

⁹⁰ NATO, 'Commitment to enhance resilience'.

⁹¹ Harnisch, 'NATO's crisis resilience', p. 364.

⁹² Juncos, 'Resilience as the new EU foreign policy paradigm'.

effective fulfilment of the Alliance's core tasks'.⁹³ Here resilience is understood in existential terms as the ability to survive and to be able to absorb shocks and maintain purpose. As Hall and Sandeman argue, 'resilience is as much about coping with all possible eventualities as trying to anticipate specific events'.⁹⁴

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO stepped up its rhetoric about the need to increase 'the resilience of our societies and our infrastructure to counter Russia's malign influence'.⁹⁵ Its 2022 *Strategic Concept* emphasizes the notion of resilience as critical to achieving the Alliance's core functions, saying it 'underpins our efforts to safeguard our nations, societies and shared values'.⁹⁶ The *Strategic Concept*, just like the EU's *Strategic Compass*, refers to resilience in the context of foreign interference (by Russia and China), including in areas of space capabilities, critical infrastructure, supply chains and health systems.⁹⁷ A joint EU–NATO taskforce was established to protect critical infrastructure following the attack on the Nord Stream pipelines in 2022.⁹⁸ From this perspective, resilience is seen as robustness: robust civil preparedness supports the military sector and better ensures that the civil sector can support the military by withstanding attacks or disruptions. While top-down robustness might be predominant in this narrative, resilience is supported by a psychological aspect or mindset of encouraging people to cooperate and withstand in the face of adversity.⁹⁹ This moves us to NATO's advocacy of a whole-of-society approach.

As we have implied in the EU section, the next logical step in this narrative journey might be one of total defence, especially as the geopolitical context continues to deteriorate. The notion of total defence is promoted by front-line states such as Sweden and Finland, which joined NATO following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and act as narrative entrepreneurs. This narrative influenced Nordic and non-aligned European states during the Cold War, shaped thinking in the Baltic states after they regained independence and is now spreading to other EU member states such as Belgium amid Russia's recent actions and the perceived threat to Europe. Although not yet a NATO doctrine, such thinking is in line with the EU's promotion of societal resilience and NATO's whole-of-society approach.¹⁰⁰

In this way of thinking, territorial defence requires not only the armed forces but also the support of all society. In Sweden this is understood as the responsibility of the government to ensure that society will remain operational in case of war or other national crises. This requires well-trained, equipped

⁹³ NATO, 'Brussels Summit Communiqué', 14 June 2021.

⁹⁴ Jonny Hall and Hugh Sandeman, *NATO's resilience: the first and last line of defence* (London: LSE Ideas, 2022), p. 7.

⁹⁵ NATO, 'Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government', 24 March 2022.

⁹⁶ NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, adopted at the Madrid Summit, 2022 (Brussels: 2022), p. 1.

⁹⁷ NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, p. 7.

⁹⁸ EU and NATO, *EU–NATO task force on the resilience of critical infrastructure*, final assessment report (Brussels: 2023).

⁹⁹ Harnisch, 'NATO's crisis resilience', p. 364.

¹⁰⁰ Erik Claessen, *Total defence* (Brussels: Royal Higher Institute for Defence, 2023).

and prepared civilian agencies. The overall objective is to protect the country and its population from armed attacks and to manage diverse security threats, including crises like natural disasters and pandemics, through effective preparedness in peace and conflict.¹⁰¹ It is seen as possible and desirable to involve the entire population in national security, with the belief that this societal approach amounts to ‘deterrence through resilience’.¹⁰²

In sum, resilience was initially understood in relation to NATO’s ability to withstand a major shock such as an infrastructure failure due to a cyber attack. It has increasingly become associated with a new security agenda concerned with uncertainty and all kind of unpredictable risks such as hybrid threats, expanding its scope over time. It might also lead to embracing the notion of total defence, though at this point this is limited to some alliance members.

Conclusion: towards narrative convergence?

By focusing on the evolution of their security narratives, this article has highlighted continuity but also change in the way NATO and the EU have portrayed themselves over time as well as how they perceive their security environment and their changing role in it. While an analysis of narrative change does not exhaust the conversation and should ideally be further complemented or nuanced by additional perspectives on foreign policy (such as foreign policy role theory or strategic culture), some tentative conclusions are offered.

In the case of the EU, there was a gradual change from a dominant narrative of peace to one of resilience, which has had an impact in terms of the orientation and security roles it is supposed to play, with an increasing emphasis on protection and strengthening defence capabilities. This narrative change, driven by external events and crises as much as by the leadership of policy entrepreneurs, has been accompanied by the transformation of the notion of resilience. Resilience had previously played a more optimistic role for the EU. This understanding accepted a world of complexity, insecurity and threats, but also acknowledged that there are opportunities to learn, improve and transform. This was linked to a more positive worldview in line with the EU’s peace narrative. This approach to resilience implied that individuals, communities and society can prosper through taking responsibility and showing initiative in the face of adversity. Then, as external threats multiplied, the EU came to embrace an increasingly defensive and inward-looking understanding of resilience.

NATO never really embraced a transformative understanding of resilience, nor a peace narrative; instead, it saw resilience through the lens of civil preparedness and its increasing importance in facing hybrid threats and even possible war. Resilience was also seen as a way to anchor and reinforce the traditional and dominant narratives of deterrence, a strong military alliance

¹⁰¹ Government of Sweden, ‘Total defence’, 2024.

¹⁰² Elisabeth Braw and Peter Roberts, *Societal resilience as a deterrent* (London: NATO and S&I Organization, 2019), pp. 11–19.

and a liberal security community. As NATO Deputy Secretary-General Mircea Geoană put it in 2023, 'resilience is our first line of defence. It offers a handrail that guides policy, strategy, planning, and capability development and helps us successfully navigate the challenges of today and the turbulent times of tomorrow'.¹⁰³ Unsurprisingly, given its purpose, NATO's understanding of resilience differs from that of the EU in having had a distinctively military and security-oriented narrative from the outset. In a sense, the two institutions made opposite journeys: NATO from a military narrative to one that encompasses citizens and the EU from a citizens' narrative to one that encompasses security and defence.

Yet it is also possible to see some convergence around the notion of resilience understood as a whole-of-society approach. This might facilitate cooperation between the two institutions, particularly in areas such as cybersecurity and hybrid threats. When it comes to NATO, the importance of civil preparedness in building resilience has led to the espousal of a whole-of-society approach, as articulated by Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in 2016, when he said that 'NATO's defence and deterrence posture is full-spectrum, from resilience and national defence, to conventional capabilities, to the nuclear dimension'.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, resilience is also conceived as something of a mindset to respond to adversity.¹⁰⁵ Developing this requires a whole-of-society approach that engages not only the state and governments but also the main actors of civil society and the private sector.

Where this will lead remains to be seen, but the narratives of complexity, interdependence and rising external threats are viewed as requiring further steps towards a whole-of-government approach to enhance the resilience of societies. On this NATO and the EU are converging. This is reflected in the EU's continuing shift to link its global strategy to the dangers within society caused by a multitude of hybrid threats of unprecedented scale and diversity. The EU converges with NATO in the claim that far more needs to be done to engage the whole of society, build capacities and ensure a future-proofed security architecture. Long gone are references to the commitment to the promotion of peace beyond the continent. The focus is exclusively on the protection of Europe.

The increasingly influential arguments for total defence might take this a step further and represent an intensification of the threats and uncertainty narrative. A whole-of-society approach is deemed essential in the face of the deteriorating European security situation. Along with more comprehensive security policies, a total defence approach combines various actors across the civilian-military spectrum. The population's preparedness for crisis or even war

¹⁰³NATO, 'Opening remarks by NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană at the NATO Resilience Symposium in Latvia', 26 April 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_214174.htm.

¹⁰⁴NATO, 'NATO defence ministers agree to enhance collective defence and deterrence', 14 June 2016, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2016/06/14/nato-defence-ministers-agree-to-enhance-collective-defence-and-deterrence>.

¹⁰⁵Hall and Sandeman, *NATO's resilience*, p. 8.

is essential for deterrence and possible resistance, and institutions like NATO have been carefully assessing how this has been working in the case of Ukraine. The experience of the Nordic and Baltic region shows that a shared understanding can strengthen common purpose and that, as Wrangé et al. argue, the likelihood of a shared security culture is improved by convergences in common threat perceptions and overlapping identities rooted in shared history, geography and political culture.¹⁰⁶ This is something that NATO is encouraging to spread across the rest of Europe, and it could well become the next narrative if geopolitical uncertainties continue. NATO thus conceived will be the source and outcome of political cohesion, shared interests and shared values, with societal resilience ensuring that hostile external actors cannot disrupt the functioning of democratic institutions and processes.¹⁰⁷

Of course, further developments and lines of convergence will also depend on the trajectory of the United States during the rest of the Trump administration. The rise of illiberalism within the alliance, particularly in the United States, poses a vital challenge to the notion of NATO as a liberal security community, and it might also affect its ability to act as an effective military deterrent.¹⁰⁸ NATO may come unstuck, while the EU will have to decide whether to throw in its lot with it or go it alone. What is clear is that the EU will make this decision based not on the promotion of a wider peace narrative but on the basis of ensuring its own resilience.

¹⁰⁶Jana Wrangé, Rikard Bengtsson and Douglas Brommesson, 'Resilience through total defence: towards a shared security culture in the Nordic-Baltic region?', *European Journal of International Security* 9: 4, 2024, pp. 511–32 at p. 515, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.15>.

¹⁰⁷NATO, *NATO 2030*, pp. 50–52.

¹⁰⁸Trine Flockhart, 'NATO in the multi-order world', *International Affairs* 100: 2, 2024, pp. 471–89, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae004>.