

Do Total Defense Strategies Increase State Resiliency?

Description

Total defense encompasses a government's strategy and related policies which combine and extend the concepts of military and civilian defense. The concept entails developing a high level of readiness for the state and its society to secure a nation in case of war or to prepare the population for a crisis or natural disaster. Some have argued that total defense can also [deter](#) external aggression by opponents. This whole of society [endeavor](#) is united by a shared threat perception and willingness to do what is needed.

Since at least the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, total defense strategies have become increasingly relevant and urgent for smaller states concerned about aggression from larger, often neighboring, states. Although academic [literature](#) on the [efficacy](#) of total defense strategies remains limited, several small states with historic or recent experience offer case studies regarding the impact of total defense on national resilience. Put simply, resilience, in the context of a government and society, is the ability to withstand and recover from internal or external threats, including coercion, aggression, natural disasters, and biological events, while maintaining essential functions. Utilizing available datasets and polling data, this essay examines a set of countries that adopted or reimplemented total defense strategies between 2013 and 2024 to [evaluate](#) the impact of these strategies on governmental and societal resilience.

Examples of Modern Total Defense

Total Defense entails variations in scope, scale, and execution. Professors Jan Ångström and Kristin Ljungkvist at Swedish Defense University [typologized](#) total defense as either centrally controlled by the government or decentralized in a cellular approach. Total defense strategies have become quite topical for smaller states, including Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Lithuania, Singapore, and Taiwan, amongst others.

Singapore's total defense concept, initially launched in 1984, currently adheres to six defensive [pillars](#)—military, civil, economic, social, psychological, and digital. Through [conscription](#), all male citizens and residents in Singapore must serve in the military, police, or [civil defense](#) (emergency services/first responders) for 24 months. Per capita, [Singapore's military](#) is one of the best funded and equipped in the world. The Singapore Civil Defence Force and Police Force address individual and

national crises as first responders in emergency services and healthcare. Economic defense revolves around a healthy economy which can endure regional or global catastrophes. Social defense addresses the cohesion required to collaborate in a diverse population. Psychological defense focuses on dispelling misinformation. Finally, the newest pillar of digital defense represents cybersecurity, providing overarching support to the other pillars by defending their cyber networks and identifying subversive propaganda.

Figure

Figure 1. The Six Pillars of Singapore's Total Defense Concept (Source: Authors)

Comparatively, the Finnish [model](#) of total defense strategies is [considered](#) by some as an optimal approach that mandates legally required resistance from the entire society against adversaries and threats. Finland describes their [model](#) as "a combination of all national and international military and civilian efforts to secure the conditions of homeland defense in all security situations." This strategy facilitates collaboration between government and society to holistically prepare the military, public health, and infrastructure. Conscription trains the majority of the population on how to wage war. Additionally, the government emphasizes mental preparedness and public education on crisis preparation. For flexibility, the state integrates local agencies and communities into emergency planning. Meanwhile, public infrastructure supports civil defense shelters, supplies, and communications.

Ukraine has made efforts to emulate elements of Finland's total defense concepts. In 2021, the government adopted legal frameworks such as [Law 5557](#), which outlined the fundamentals for resistance to occupation. This statute detailed how the government would allocate public resources, conduct planning, and carry out rehearsals that fundamentally altering Kyiv's approach to national defense. Drawing on lessons from successful grassroots resistance and militia efforts in Crimea and the Donbas during the previous decade, the Ukrainian government implemented similar techniques to counter Russian hybrid warfare. In effect, Kyiv recognized that mobilizing broader society alongside government institutions could offer a more effective defense. Total defense proved its value in 2022 by blunting the Russian invasion and initially repelling a shocked and unorganized Russian army.

Variations in Total Defense Approaches

One disputed aspect of total defense strategies is whether and how to incorporate decentralized resistance following an occupation. In some countries, nationalized resistance is deliberately planned in advance of defeat, with networks, resources, and territorial structures built in to enable civil disobedience and insurgency-like activity. The Resistance Operating Concept ([ROC](#)) describes the

tactics and techniques of this approach. Nordic and Baltic states appear more amenable to integrate a resistance strategy in advance of hostilities, while Taiwan and Singapore support a more centralized whole-of-society approach to prevent occupation. Despite these differences, most total defense models share the common goal of deterring aggression through a credible national defense posture.

There remains tension between the aspirational ideas of total defense and their actual implementation. Universally, states adopting total defense prefer funding, organizing, and maintaining hierarchical control over the nation's activities during crisis. However, resistance to occupation is typically associated with decentralized execution. World War II provides excellent examples in [France](#) and the [Philippines](#), where local resistance organizations had no national organizational structure, nor did they follow direct orders from their governments-in-exile. Organization of nonstate entities to conduct violent resistance activities under occupation following state failure becomes politically controversial in planning for their state's defeat, but some choose this approach because of a belief that a decentralized strategy would be more effective.

The following figure illustrates some variances in total defense strategies in Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Lithuania, and Singapore, as well as Taiwan (Figure 2 utilizes open-source data and may not reflect clandestine activities). Conscription and creating defensive infrastructure prior to conflict remains universal, with the exception of Singapore due to its limited geography. However, all five states plus Taiwan appear apprehensive to prepare for occupation and governmental collapse. This includes planning for a government-in-exile, establishing shadow governance frameworks, preparing for armed insurrection, establishing resistance infrastructure (like caches or civilian shelters), and education on civil disobedience.

	<i>Baseline</i>		<i>During Occupation</i>				
	Conscription	Defensive Infrastructure	Government-in-Exile	Shadow Governance	Armed Insurrection	Resistance Infrastructure	Civil Disobedience
Sweden	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Finland	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No
Taiwan	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Estonia	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Lithuania	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Singapore	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No

Figure 2. Variances in Publicly Available Total Defense Strategies, 2024

Who Adopts Total Defense?

Adopters of total defense strategies share some common traits: Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Lithuania, Singapore, and Taiwan all have relatively small [populations](#). Each of these countries seeks to mobilize the full capabilities of their society, despite being significantly smaller than potential adversaries—Russia, with a population of 144 million, and China, with over 1.4 billion citizens. These states, as well as Taiwan, also acknowledge the conventional overmatch they face, which incentivizes unorthodox and asymmetric national defense strategies like total defense.

Surprisingly, a demographically uniform society is *not* requisite for a successful total defense strategy. The following figure compares the ethnic, linguistic, and religious [fractionalization](#) in these five states plus Taiwan with the rest of the world, enumerating 100% as most diverse and 0% as the least diverse. Estonia and Singapore, as well as Taiwan, represent more social fractionalization than most nations at over 50%. In fact, Estonia and Lithuania contain high numbers of Russian speakers, the [demographic](#) which might pose a [weakness](#) to enabling total defense against a likely adversary.

Figure

Figure 3. Average Social Fractionalization in Terms of Ethnicity, Language, and Religion
(Data Source: [Alesina et al](#))

Evaluating Social Cohesion

In order for total defense strategies to be a viable option, there must be mutual trust between the government and its population. The following chart [compares](#) trust in government in Finland, Sweden, Estonia and Lithuania between 2013 and 2023. As these nations adopted or reinvigorated total defense strategies during this timeframe, one could expect that public's trust in government [rose](#) in a spirit of mutual reinforcement. During the surveyed ten-year period, trust in government increased by 21% in Finland, 18.4% in Estonia, and 15.7% in Lithuania. Meanwhile, the trust in government within Sweden remained consistently above the general average despite decreasing by 6.1%. Similar data for Taiwan suggests government [approval](#) ratings moved from 10% in 2014 to over 70% in 2024. Meanwhile, Singapore's government consistently maintains high levels of [trust](#), a record high in 2024 at 76%. Consequently, there appears to be a correlation between adopting total defense and increasing trust and confidence in governance.

Figure

Figure 4: Trust in Government Comparison Between 2013 and 2023 by Nations with Total Defense Strategies (Data Source: [OECD](#))

Assessing Governmental Resilience

The World Bank began assessing the resiliency of governmental structures in 2013. They use six [indicators](#): voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. States adopting total defense strategies across a whole-of-society spectrum might expect to increase political stability, decrease intrastate violence, curtail illicit corruption, and increase rule of law. The following figures compare the mean average across all six indicators for each of the five nations and Taiwan at two timeframes: 2013 and 2023. The resiliency of Finland and Sweden, although some of the highest in the world, fell during this period. Meanwhile, Taiwan, Estonia and Lithuania realized appreciable gains, while Singapore generally stayed the same. In total, the mean difference in resiliency of all five nations plus Taiwan between 2013 and 2023 had only 1% variance. Thus, in data-centric terms, adopting a total defense approach did not demonstrate an increase in the resiliency of governmental institutions.

Figure

Figure 5. Mean World Bank Indicators Between 2013 and 2023 (Data Source: [World Bank](#))

To further evaluate how total defense strategies enhance national resilience, we used [metrics](#) from the Fragile States Index to identify any measurable differences when compared with the World Bank criteria. The Fragile States Index utilizes three separate indicators in four subcategories (twelve in total) for cohesion, economic, political and social factors. Consequently, the Fragile States Index provides a broader assessment than the World Bank and includes human development, public services, and military competency (Note: data for Taiwan is not available in the Fragile States Index). Figure 6 demonstrates that Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Lithuania, and Singapore remain some of the most resilient nations on earth. However, adoption of total defense strategies over a ten-year period showed no appreciable increase in resiliency, with the mean average change over time less than one percent, similar to the results from the World Bank data analysis.

Figure

Figure 6: National Resiliency per Fragility Index Between 2013 and 2024 by Nations with Total Defense Strategies (Data/Fund for [Peace](#))

Conclusion

In summary, evaluating total defense strategies from a data-centric approach produces some surprising observations. First, a whole-of-society approach to national security does not require a relatively homogeneous society. Singapore, Taiwan, and Estonia exhibit an average or above average linguistic, ethnic, and religious fractionalization and still maintain social cohesiveness. Seemingly more important is that the population and government share a common [threat-perception](#).

Second, total defense strategies may significantly impact a population's trust in its government, presumably by providing its citizens and residents agency in assuring their mutual aims of strong national security. Lastly, total defense strategies do not appear to strengthen government institutions or national resiliency. However, these five nations plus Taiwan exhibit some of the strongest resilience in comparison with the world average. This generally high and pre-existing level of resilience may be one of the decision criteria for choosing a total defense strategy. A government's choice for total defense seems more about the shared threat perception across society.

This cursory analysis suggests other questions for further research, such as: What are the criteria for assuming a total defense approach within a specific nation? What is the deterrent value, over time, for assuming a total defense? Does the scope across society and scale in terms of resourcing, plans and coordination of total defense matter to its effectiveness and deterrent value? To what extent do the cases evaluated in this analysis share linguistic, ethnic, and religious commonalities with the relevant hegemon (i.e., Russia and China), and does such a correlation tell us anything about how resiliency may act as a dependent variable? Recent history and future trends in the geostrategic environment signal increasing interest and institution of a total defense strategy amongst smaller nations in a more uncertain and dangerous world, suggesting that further research in this issue would be of interest to security studies.

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Main Image Credit: DVIDS. Swedish Home Guard with U.S. Army Special Forces, 2020.

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