

GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

EDITION No. 7 - MAY 2020

The seventh in our series of expert comment and analysis, by General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command (2013-2016), now Co-Chairman of Universal Defence & Security Solutions, and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.

Resilience Is This Year's Black

The COVID-19 pandemic is a sharp reminder of the fragility of government, civil society and our ways of living around the world in the 21st century. This is as true in European countries that have not had to contend with a strategic shock on this scale for decades as in less well-developed countries with weaker government and health infrastructure. States that were focused on how to grow and thrive have suddenly found themselves juggling the risks of a rampaging disease with the mounting associated costs to economy, public finances and education - and all the consequent long-term disruption to the lives of millions.

It is equally true that other risks to our daily life and security have long been evident: regional flooding and wild fires connected to a changing climate; cyberattack on power, banking, internet connectivity and other vital services; humanitarian catastrophe from famine, mass migration and war; and extremists bent on acquiring weapons of mass destruction. In the military domain, nuclear weapons have proliferated and the risks of conventional war now include the threat from very long range precision missiles targeting Critical National Infrastructure as well as armed forces. Every state has a different situation, but all share the dilemma of finite resources and many have populations growing in size and expectations - and vulnerability. Globalisation has brought many benefits, but also the fragility of long, international supply chains, 'just-in-time' logistics, and a general reduction in national independence across food, energy and consumer goods.

On top of all these physical risks are the cognitive challenges that come with the expansion of mobile (smart) communication and social media. Most citizens in developed countries are now accessible individually and instantly with powerfully expressed information, whether or not this is based on fact or even deliberately false. Public understanding, will, and morale is as vulnerable to shock as any physical entity, and must be protected in a crisis.

All this means that sustaining a state's 'resilience' is - or should be - higher today on the agenda of all governments and many citizens, spanning natural or man-made disaster, economic crisis, and conflict. Government must function whatever the circumstances - able to understand, decide, plan, communicate, and coordinate, maintain security, assure vital services such as water, food, fuel, waste management and emergency healthcare, and if necessary mobilise, deploy, operate and sustained armed forces, including their industrial support. In Europe and no doubt elsewhere the measures that existed to support national resilience that were common during the Cold War have long been eroded or have lapsed entirely. Most political leaders, officials, and citizens are now encountering these challenges for the first time and learning 'on the job'.

With all the power of hindsight, when we eventually look back at COVID-19 we will see that we had identified pandemic risk as perhaps pre-eminent; decided not to prepare thoroughly; responded to the initial reports slower and less assertively than we wished retrospectively; struggled to make up a shortfall in preparations with as good a mix of crisis management as we could muster;



events@globalstrategyforum.org
www.globalstrategyforum.org

found there is more to crisis management than we thought and could have done better; and paid a higher price in economic, social and reputational terms than might have been necessary. But we did survive and we could say the same about almost every significant resilience crisis ever, from mad cows to major flooding. Hindsight-enabled chest beating alone rarely does much good for preparing for the next crisis, but if the 21st Century is as challenging as it currently looks perhaps we should do better at resurrecting resilience as a core requirement of government and civil society?

One thing should certainly be clear: addressing all the challenges to security and prosperity faced today by governments, armed forces, institutions, businesses and citizens requires more than skill at 'event management'. No leader or organisation can manage situations that pose an 'existential' threat to the continuity of normal life, particularly not if they are enduring and complex, by hoping to make only marginal changes to priorities, operating parameters and resources. The sort of 'just in time' approach that does underpin efficient business and logistic practice is very likely to struggle when confronted by a huge and rapid change in the operating environment such as a tsunami, an earthquake, a pandemic, a strategic cyber assault, or a major conflict. In these circumstances things like contingency plans, training, reserve stocks, fall-back information systems and rapid mobilisation of people and equipment will all support an effective response, and most of them cannot be well constructed in the heat of the moment. Good crisis management skills are certainly imperative, but not a complete substitute for substantial preparation and training if a major shock is to be managed as quickly, effectively and cheaply as possible. Most nations will reaffirm this point when in due course they review their passage through COVID-19.

Nor is it possible to try to keep everything running exactly as it was, with no reductions in goods and services or the flow of daily life. It is not possible to try and protect everything equally, nor assume that everything can be defended in the same way. In a cyberattack, for example, there will always be some penetration so defence in depth is required, and in a pandemic power, water and food supplies must be maintained as well as hospital capacity increased. It will be necessary to prioritise addressing the risks that matter the most through thoughtful, well led risk management. This also means consciously deciding what is less important and can be temporarily foregone, which in turn implies good data science, sound planning,

robust operational and logistic processes and excellent communication skills.

It also means a place for political vision and real strategy. In the management of the pandemic there was some vacillation between going for 'herd immunity' and relying on protection by locking down the economy, civil society and education. The aim was to save lives and stop the NHS being overwhelmed – and thereby lives being lost in a more unrestrained way. The cost in terms of debt, wider health, prosperity, educational attainment, and cultural life was always going to be huge by any historical standard. Even before the end of lockdown it is becoming clear that a balance has to be struck between saving the lives of many from an infection and wrecking the lives and prospects of many more as a consequence. In short, if our hearts demanded *risk avoidance* at all costs, our heads always recognised that we would have to come to terms with *risk management*, juggling keeping the pandemic at reasonable bay whilst sustaining our national fabric and prospects. This means more people will die from the virus than if we locked everyone up at home at public (i.e. our collective) expense for months, but it also means a tolerable societal bargain. It is important that striking this bargain is led by politicians who set out the broad, long-term issues and consequences that justify significant shorter-term pain.

The requirement to reset our national resilience has illuminated some skills and characteristics that make a difference, which include:

Leaders. Leaders who are personally prepared for the demands of crisis in terms of their ability to think clearly and rapidly, take good decisions in conditions of great uncertainty and stress, articulate their intent and direction clearly and concisely, inspire and support their teams, and communicate to a nervous and sceptical audience. This requires investment in the education and training of political, official and industrial figures, as well as ambition and confidence.

Responsibility. A resilience crisis that touches everyone becomes a collective responsibility to resolve. The temptation for people to expect their Government to specify behaviours and outcomes in every single set of circumstances has to be converted into a sense of distributed responsibility where people apply their own initiative and understanding to decide how to act appropriately. Civil resilience is only



possible with individual compliance and self-discipline, which will echo historical calls to 'civic duty'. Of course, some will choose to deny their responsibility to conform, and many will consciously or not sometimes breach or test the boundaries (like the school-run parent who parks 'just for a minute' on the prohibited zone at the gate). As we have already found, a tiny part of this can be enforced by the police, much more is policed by community and family pressure, but in the end resilience needs responsible adults.

Information. Most crises are a surprise, create uncertainty and require new and more information to be acquired at pace. Good 'intelligence' is the essential precursor to good decisions. Part of the answer to this lies in good data science: finding, fusing, analysing and visualising as much data as possible supported by well-judged AI. Part of the answer lies in securing the right, experienced human advice and in sharing understanding with others in a similar predicament. Experts do matter, but they support and do not supplant leaders – there is always a balance to be struck in choosing the 'least worst' outcome.

Planning & Contingency. The military are good at formal planning in a crisis environment and often set great store by holding contingency strategies and plans on the shelf. These are often not the perfect answer for the situation that actually arises, but having a plan to deviate from is generally better than having no plan at all and the process of planning itself is always instructive. The art and science of crisis strategy and planning is not endemic in all walks of life, in some cases 'strategy' is interpreted to mean a list of desirable outcomes and a 'plan' is a more detailed list. Some organisations see contingency planning and resourcing as inherently inefficient. Resilience needs a strategy – what we want to achieve, matched to ways – the lines of activity to be coordinated to deliver that outcome, and to means – the resources that give the ways credibility and power.

Data & Decisions. Resilience requires a structured method for taking timely, accurate and optimal decisions at all levels of government and society. Some of this can rely on the intuition of a single leader, but most leaders benefit from the discipline and rigour of a more formal way of considering and reaching accountable decisions. AI is becoming more useful here in being able to test proposed courses of

action at machine speed in advanced simulations. The advent of vast and complex replications of how an entire country works, in the form of a National Synthetic Twin that also connect central and local government in the same simulation at the same time, will be a profoundly important enabler to good decisions.

Operational Control and Coordination. There is little point in having a sound plan if it is not well communicated and coordinated. Part of the imperative here is to have a clear understanding about how the delegation and empowerment works between different levels of a government or organisation. There must be a well understood and practised format for executing crisis management: having a sound plan will not matter much if it is not well communicated, executed and coordinated in way that harnesses talent at all levels. The military system known as 'Mission Command' is specifically designed for robust operations in highly stressful circumstances, but there are others. Organisations that still try to put 100 subordinates on a conference call with a single leader are very likely to fall, especially should that leader fall ill or implode. At a more prosaic level, common approaches to document formats and information management matter, as does a structured approach to the dissemination of direction and information. A thoughtful daily, weekly and monthly programme of general and specialist meetings within and between levels of leadership is required to drive understanding, planning, decisions, operations, logistics, and communication. The military term for this is 'battle rhythm', but it is no more than a rigorous programme of management meetings to keep pace with events.

Communication. In every crisis leadership at any level has to communicate effectively with a range of audiences, some of whom may be sceptical or hostile and all of whom are likely to be worried. Effective communication is as important in every crisis as sound planning. It is certainly true that any really good plan can be fatally wounded by poor communication. The construction of strong, consistent and well prosecuted messages requires specific expertise able to work across all forms of media including social media. In a crisis the battle for the narrative in social media can work on a 20-minute cycle across a number of platforms and the 24/7 TV and radio news cycle



is still judged in hours, sometimes minutes. It will be important to have senior leaders who are confident personal communicators to convey the most important messages, including the ability to take responsibility when things have not worked out well. There will always be lapses, mistakes, damage and casualties in a crisis. Nonetheless, a great deal of communication will need to be managed by skilled teams and leaders must not be seduced into devoting all their time to being in front of a camera or led by an agenda set by the press.

Logistics. Without good logistics there is no plan and there are no operations. The supply and distribution of equipment and stocks are fundamental to success, in fact logistics will often determine the art of the possible and dictate pace in time and space. In a crisis, having a secure supply of essential stocks at the outbreak is vital to reducing vulnerability to long supply chains and to the competing demands for scarce commodities that invariably appears. As any large organisation knows the business of logistics is a complex and challenging aspect which requires dedicated expertise. Most leaders will find that they need to keep their logistic expert very close at hand and completely integrated into planning and decision-making.

Today's pandemic has typically highlighted the role of the military in supporting national resilience. For most countries, their armed forces are a repository of some skills and expertise that provide a degree of reassurance in a crisis. The Armed Forces can certainly provide help on the spot very quickly and robustly. Some of this help relies on skills such as planning, logistics and some infrastructure construction, and some of it is about labour support in tough conditions such as forest fires or flood mitigation. It is important that there is standing legislation in place to govern the rapid and appropriate use of the military in a crisis, including the arrangements for apportioning costs, as working this out in the heat of the moment is unlikely to be the best route.

It is also important to acknowledge the limits of most militaries in supporting resilience in terms of scale and skills: when the whole of a civil society of millions is in jeopardy a military force of a few hundred thousand cannot do everything everywhere and certainly cannot replicate the skills and capacity of hospitals, police forces, supermarkets. And the armed forces will still have

operational duties to fulfil such as maintain deterrence, counter-terrorist support and air policing. In the UK the NHS numbers 1.4m people, the social care sector another 1.6m, and the UK regular armed forces number around 145,000. The key strategic point is that the resilience of civil society can only met from the numbers and skills found in civil society. This is why many countries today are reintroducing compulsory training for their youth in the relevant skills and understanding of how to act in a crisis and creating large pools of volunteers to support their emergency services. It is much better to have these up and running before a crisis hits, and there will always be another crisis.

Resilience is certainly back in fashion this year, but a cursory look at the mounting perils of this century suggests that, like a good suit, resilience is not going out of style quickly and now needs sensible investment in policy, strategy, plans, capability and training. Or we can just wing it again.

General Sir Richard Barrons
May 2020

**Commander Joint Forces
Command (2013-2016),
now Co-Chairman Universal
Defence & Security Solutions**

