

What does resilience really mean ?

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In 2001 General (retd) Loup Francart founded *Eurocrise*, a company that conducts strategic research and studies for ministries, private companies and local authorities. He has written a number of works on future strategic issues and will shortly be publishing a book on operations in urban areas.

In this wide-ranging article the author reflects on the notion of resilience and the different domains in which its application is relevant, and sketches out a concept that acknowledges the ambivalence of the term. He then considers what is meant by the resilience of a nation, and outlines a concept of French resilience.

As part of its strategy of geopolitical synergy, *diploweb.com* is pleased to present this article, which first appeared in *Revue Défense Nationale*, February 2010.

THE term *resilience* is appearing increasingly in articles in specialised journals, covering anything from psychology to management and strategy. The very word *resilience* is worthy of a moment's consideration because of the issues it raises, and also to examine why it has become so fashionable. It comes into the language, probably via French, from the Latin verb *resaltare*, which means to rebound or bounce back, to get moving again or to result from, or possibly from the verb *resilire*, with the literal meaning to jump backwards. In modern language, however, the word is used in a number of contexts with nuances of meaning, most of which boil down to the notion of adapting to circumstances in the face of some shocking event.

Resilience in context

Science has long used the word resilience, one application being in metallurgy, in which it defines one of the properties of a metal—steel, for example. [1] Put simply, it is a measure of the resistance of a metallic bar to shock. The word is also used in biology to explain the ability to live in an environment in spite of changes to the latter and attacks by predators. Ecologists refer to resilience when defining the ability of an ecosystem to maintain its function when faced with a disturbance, and *resilience time* as that needed for an ecosystem to return to its original state after such a disturbance.

In France, however, it is in the field of psychology that the concept of resilience has been promoted over the past few decades. The term was introduced by Boris Cyrulnik as the capacity to carry on regardless in environments that ought to lead to breakdown. Resilience is therefore considered as the capacity to face up to trauma without later being affected by it, or to find the means to reconstruct after it. In a broader sense, resilience is the capability to continue one's life post-suffering or post-shock, in a way defining a kind of immediate or rediscovered stability. Hence resilience would seem to be a psychological quality that affords those who possess it a conscious or unconscious return to normality without lasting injury. That said, the psychiatrist Michel Hanus, in his latest book *La résilience, à quel prix ?* (What Price Resilience ?), warns against over-generalisation of the resilience process, since it risks sidelining those who are not resilient and labelling them negatively as incapable.

Resilience does not only refer to the individual—the concept can be applied to an organisation. According to Pierre d'Huy, a consultant with Experts, a bureau counselling on innovation,

resilience does not offer the possibility to resist wind and tide, but is the ability to create a structure such that crisis or shock, even—or perhaps especially—when it is completely unpredictable, can be withstood by a company, perhaps to the extent that the company could even be stronger after the event. Thus we see the existence of organisational resilience. Karl E. Weick referred to highly reliable organisations as being those capable of revising their routines whenever they are confronted with new, insurmountable problems. [2] For him, analysis and identification of resilience factors in such highly reliable organisations would eventually lead to identification of a structural model that could be transferred to others.

In the field of economics, resilience is the ability to recover growth after a crisis. Gilles Paquet of Ottawa University maintains that resilience is the capacity to fall on one's feet, to keep on course, to keep an organisation or company going and to maintain an element of permanency in a turbulent environment. We find similar ideas in the IT world, referring to the ability of a system or network to function in a breakdown situation, and in aeronautics, where what is important is the ability to operate in a fallback mode in a hostile environment.

Yet another application of the concept of resilience is to communities, or even to entire societies. Gary Caldwell, a Canadian sociologist, speaks of the capacity to hold out, and adds that the latter is the responsibility of everyone, and particularly of a civil society, all too often neglected when compared to the organisational capabilities of the State. [3] We could also speak of societal resilience, which is the capability of society in all its aspects and facets to overcome the consequences of an attack whilst preserving its culture, and without sinking into a state of psychosis that would give the adversary a taste of victory. So it is that expressions such as *resilient business* and *resilient community* are appearing in American and Canadian publications when highlighting the intrinsic capability of companies, organisations and communities to regain a state of equilibrium, be it their original state or a new one, that allows them to operate after a disaster or in the presence of continued stress.

One last application to add to this list is the current lively success of the British-led notion of resilience in the field of geopolitics. It is the cornerstone of the National Security Strategy (NSS) presented to Parliament in March 2008, in which resilience was defined as the ability to *reduce the risk from emergencies so that people can go about their business freely and with confidence*. It is broadly based upon protection of civil liberties and a strong will not to disturb British ways of life whilst preserving inter-community social cohesion. For its part, in 2008 the British Ministry of Defence published a joint forces document, *Operation in the UK : The Defence Contribution to Resilience* (JDP 02), which seeks to prepare the armed forces for the best possible cooperation with civilian authorities. In contrast to this, resilience in the United States is perceived as a capacity to anticipate risks and to limit their impact in order to return to the previous state. In its application, this series of measures carries with it considerable infringement of individual liberty.

In short, the term resilience has invaded numerous fields of activity, including the worlds of research and communications. Even mattress manufacturers use the word to describe the ability of their products to recover their original shape after being compressed ! For all that, does the term actually bring anything new to our approach to problems, be they individual, societal or geopolitical ?

The concept of resilience

We should note at the outset that the notion of resilience is vague, has many meanings and is in any case largely metaphorical. It is used in widely differing fields with widely differing definitions, with often only the remotest of relationships between them. It appears in pure sciences like physics, life sciences like biology and ecology, human sciences such as psychology, sociology and medicine, and also in economics, IT, aeronautics and even the fields of politics, strategic thinking and crisis management.

Is it possible, then, to give any form to the concept of resilience, given this multitude of fields of application and definitions ?

Above all, the most obvious common factor is the link with some crisis or trauma, whether personal or collective, and whether it affects a single person, a group or an entire nation. We should remind ourselves of what constitutes a crisis : it is a major breakdown that completely overturns a previous set of assumptions and ways of going about business, bringing with it new and often unidentified dangers, chaos and uncertainty. It has major and lasting consequences that call into question the stability of the organisation suffering the crisis, thus necessitating rapid decision-making. This means, then, that 'routine' disturbances, failures and incidents do not invoke resilience, since they are controlled by the processes already mentioned. Resilience only becomes apposite when there is trauma : that is, when the functions of normal daily life are lost and the trauma is sufficiently serious to lead to breakdown in points of reference and the normal processes of recovery from difficult situations.

Resilience is this ability to carry on *despite* the trauma suffered, yet is inseparable from the trauma itself. This would seem to imply that anything dealing with crisis prevention or planning for crisis management does not really involve the notion of resilience. In such a context, we would be talking of crisis management as the term is usually understood. Resilience only enters the equation once a crisis has occurred and is sufficiently serious to lead to a level of disruption that the usual crisis management processes cannot handle. But at exactly what point can we say that the concept of resilience comes into play ? In practical terms, it can only happen once breakdown is recognised and the crisis has to be seen from another point of view, leading to the establishment of different management mechanisms and an organisation adapted to the situation. In short, a new vision is needed at this point in order to provide a response that is disconnected from the trauma itself, allowing life to carry on regardless.

Others would suggest that resilience is a capacity to restructure to prevent the crisis from having any effect (for example, continuing operations despite a breakdown, shock or crisis) or even the capacity to find a means to reconstruct. From this it would seem that resilience develops in two stages. The first is short-term and immediate, during the crisis when confronted by the traumatic experience, and is characterised by the establishment of protection and defence mechanisms that resist the disorganisation caused by the invasion of reality. Then comes a longer-term, post-crisis stage of resilience in which the traumatic shock is acknowledged and overcome through a process of reconstruction and repair in order to give some meaning to the injury suffered.

This is also why resilience can manifest itself in two ways—either a return to the original state,

which allows a new start in the same context as before without difficulty, or the establishment of a different, though stable, state without the change in state itself leading to further trauma. One might reasonably conclude that a return to the original state relates to short-term resilience, whereas creating a new state of stability necessarily requires a mechanism for long-term resilience.

Another important point is that the resilience of all people and all organisations when faced with similar sets of circumstances is not the same. Distinction has therefore to be made between, on the one hand, the circumstances of a shock, and on the other the person or organisation that has suffered under them. Neither past events nor the circumstances of the catastrophe should be of interest to those investigating resilience, but just the manner in which the individual or the organisation commits itself to its existence beyond the trauma of the event. Boris Cyrulnik explains that resilience also means being able to extricate oneself from the past, and not becoming a prisoner of it. Resilience, he says, has nothing to do with what some would claim as a form of invulnerability or superior quality, but with the ability to recover a human life despite the injury suffered yet without becoming obsessed with that injury. This is very much the ability to bounce back, as in the origin of the term resilience.

One could deduce from this that resilience is a dynamic phenomenon and not simply resistance to shock. It is a sort of moral spring ; a quality possessed by something or someone who does not give in and who can overcome trouble without any obvious problems. Psychologists tell us that resilience depends on the mental image an individual has of the event—for example, a trivial event for Mr A could prove catastrophic for Mrs B simply because she does not perceive it in the same way.

The resilience of a nation

We should now look more closely at the resilience of a nation in the face of a major crisis that could affect the future of the country. Following the logic discussed above, there are two options open to us : organising in advance in order to face a major crisis and come out of it successfully or, when faced with defeat, reconstruction and recovery of normal life without major problems. Deciding which to choose is far from simple. As a general rule, the phenomenon of resilience begins to develop before the crisis is over, and indeed it is this nascent resilience that often provides a way out of the crisis. At the same time, however, all the arrangements put in place before a crisis strikes only relate to careful preparation and good crisis management. One of the best-known examples of resilience in France followed the defeat of 1940. Resilience was exemplified in General de Gaulle, the Free French Forces and the Resistance, and the spirit of resilience was emphasised in de Gaulle's famous speech of 18 June 1940. Yet at the same time the majority of French people and the French government did not show themselves to be resilient. True resilience began at the point when some believed that the crisis had been resolved by an abandonment of sovereignty, yet others considered that a new, more complex and more difficult battle was beginning, one that would lead to a real victory that would permit France to recover its place and role in the world. But let us look at how the Anglo-Saxons see resilience. The British vision of it leans more towards anticipation of a crisis than of crisis and post-crisis management. It is founded on protection of civil liberties, a strong will not to disrupt British citizens' way of life and seeks social cohesion between communities. For the British, resilience depends largely on

minimising the chance of being caught by surprise, a concept that is supported by six main principles :

Anticipation : thorough preparation for crisis so that management of it can ensure that the nation continues to function, and the people remain calm.

Planning : planning means setting in place the necessary measures and standard, though flexible, responses to a given crisis. It also means having access to logistics centres at less than 24 hours' notice—for example, to have access to medical and NBC equipment and supplies.

Communication : studies into recent major ecological, natural and terrorist catastrophes (for example, Hurricane Katrina and the attacks in London in 2005 and Madrid in 2004) have revealed that a badly informed population, or one that has been subject to disinformation, turns more readily to pessimism and suspicion, thereby losing confidence in state institutions and other organisations. [4] The various national authorities have therefore created information sites on the Internet that allow anyone to have access to documentation and advice in case of crisis. [5] Emphasis is also put on ease of access to information and to the state of alert.

Simulation : full-scale exercises or case studies (for example, Exercise *Aurora*, organised by the Department of Health for management of a long-term pandemic) allow near-real simulation of a given crisis and involve everyone, including businesses and the general population. The Cabinet Office is driving the development of resilience in the United Kingdom and regularly publishes exercise outlines for use by the public and companies.

Cooperation and coordination at all levels, local, regional and national : resilience is unimaginable without strong interdependence between governmental authorities and the various local, regional and national players. Factors involved in preparation under the NSS include working to reinforce resilience at national, regional and local levels, with the government, Police and emergency services operating together with the private sector and local authorities to ensure that communities are ready for a terrorist attack, and are capable of limiting its consequences and returning to normal life as quickly as possible. [6] Exercise *Triton*, a simulation of wide-scale flooding held in June and July 2004, emphasised this aspect : 60 agencies worked together and 35 teams were deployed in the field to test the coordination and cooperation between the many players.

Reactivity : as a general rule, the population wants everything, and it wants it immediately, and a government's credibility depends on the speed of reaction of the players involved. An example of this is the creation, in August 2005, of Hazardous Area Response Teams, capable of going into action at very short notice. [7]

All that said, and as Joseph Henrotin has underlined, one has to understand that resilience is like terrorism, in the sense that it is virtual : the strength of each lies in its supposed power and cannot be verified until an attack occurs, and in its aftermath. [8] Indeed so : as currently laid out, the principles of the NSS rely solely on predictions and possibilities which do not permit any real evaluation of British resilience, merely consideration of the possible reactions. The Americans have also developed a concept of resilience, although the preferred term in the United States is Homeland Defense, with particular emphasis placed on the terrorist risk, as distinct from the British concept of defining a policy for security and management of crises,

whatever their nature. Furthermore, US resilience has been designed as a series of preventive measures against future terrorist attacks, measures that infringe individual liberties to a considerable degree. A new legal framework for this fight against terrorism was created, resulting in the Patriot Act (from October 2001 to 2005), which incorporated increased powers for fighting terrorism and for acquisition of intelligence. Bill Clinton's 1996 law, the Antiterrorism Law and Effective Death Penalty Act, was also broadly strengthened. The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 was beefed up, allowing suspects to be placed under surveillance or intelligence to be gathered (from the workplace, at home, or from family and relations) on a simple request from the FBI. The FBI's intelligence-gathering assets were also extended. Competence of the courts was modified to allow the indefinite detention of foreign citizens even if no charge has been brought against them. This new legal framework greatly eases the task of the new Homeland Security Department, with its 22 sections and 17,000 staff, that was created in 2002. The creation of this department, and the reductions in civil liberties, did not lead to mass opposition. Far from it : 356 of the 435 Representatives, and 98 of the 100 Senators voted for it. The FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) was created in May 2003 with a mission to determine a national response, to include plans for responding to citizens' problems and facing up to all types of crisis in the new environment. It should be remembered that for the Americans, resilience is based on three key areas. The first is planning for good crisis management which will lead to the birth of a resilient society : the beginnings of this were seen in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001, and later developed following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Next is a security policy based on thorough background checks on communities and citizens, and a reduction in civil liberties, as was started very rapidly after the 9/11 attacks. The third area concerns the Revolution in Military Affairs, aimed at improving the effectiveness of the armed forces and better coordination between allied systems.

France defines resilience as the will and ability of a country, society in general and public authorities to stand up to the consequences of major aggression or catastrophe, then to rapidly re-establish their normal functions under conditions that are at the very least socially acceptable. The 2008 White Paper on defence and national security adds that this definition presupposes the existence of organised public authorities, and that organised cooperation exists between national (that is, centralised) and local authorities, and between the State and private sectors. The reality is that, up to now, little has been put in place in real terms despite the many papers that have been published on crisis management and planning. The Interior Ministry's Directorate of Civil Security has developed structures to deal with emergency situations, such as the COGIC, [9] and reorganisation of departments of state is allowing better coordination of action against terrorism, and yet, other than the words in the White Paper, none of those papers has developed the concept of resilience as it affects the nation as a whole.

All of this highlights the difficulty for the French to take a firm grasp of what is a conceptual problem, to give it some logical definition, to analyse it in the context of its different applications and to put it into practice. Therein lies the weakness of our strategic thinking : we are looking for a number of Anglo-Saxon ideas that we could adopt instead of asking our own specialists to think about the issue. It is not the aim of this article to offer any solution to the problem—it is too soon for that—but it can nevertheless put forward a few principles in order to orientate our thought processes.

Key points for a French concept of resilience

From the thoughts and ideas discussed above, we have a number of criteria which allow us to set some bounds on the notion of resilience.

The first concerns our understanding of the concept itself. A basic question has to be answered here : is resilience the capacity for resistance and regeneration of technical and social structures in the face of crisis, as envisaged by the Anglo-Saxons, or is it a capacity to recover after a crisis (not to *manage* that crisis, note) by facilitating the changes necessary for reconstruction without further trauma ? As we have seen, the answer is not as simple as it might appear. And yet it seems that the first option, that taken up principally by the British, is a new way of viewing crisis management by involving more people and broadening the traditional fields of activity in the management of crises. It might be judged a good overall approach to crises within which a number of ideas could be adapted to suit French crisis management. There, too, this concept of an overall approach to crises needs to be built upon to create an organisational and doctrinal direction that will allow better management of crises, whatever their nature. As seen by France, the concept of resilience leans more towards the second option, which has been far less explored than the first. It is true that it is more difficult to see how a national system that has been completely or partly annihilated could be regenerated, and some would even question the need to investigate the issue. It is, of course, only after the event that we become convinced of the need to think towards the future on that issue. So we see that resilience involves the ability and will to recover some form of innovative dynamism despite the upset of a major traumatic crisis. And it is precisely because the crisis is major and traumatic that resilience comes into play : without it, there is only a capability for reaction and adaptation to adversity, which is part of the overall approach that we have been talking about.

The second point concerns learning how to reconfigure after some crisis that is unthinkable, or hard to predict in all its aspects. Such was the case after the defeat of 1940, with the reconfiguration envisaged by General de Gaulle in his speech of 18 June. Very often, this reconfiguration takes place outside the bounds of an established system, administrative structure or standard thinking. Novel solutions are needed, as is a small group of people who have the courage and will to act in opposition to the established system and administration. How, then, can we nurture within an existing system or institution a spirit of reconfiguration which would only have any use in the event of a crisis which, in any case, is so often unthinkable to the authorities in place ? A few aspects of this issue are worthy of further study.

First of all, we need to encourage variety in opinions and cultures within any given organisation to counter the French tendency to follow the leader's vision of things. It is odd that independence of spirit, seen as so characteristic of the French, so often proves unproductive and falls on deaf ears. It will involve facilitating the thoughts and imagination of a group of people for the benefit of all, without prejudice to the system in place or to the plans of those in charge of the process. This will require the selection of people able to do this on the basis of criteria other than the usual, since their role will be specifically to think of the unusual. This being the case, the decision-making processes in current management structures cannot be applied. Statistically, it is said that only some seven per cent of the population, from all backgrounds and ages, have a capacity for innovation, when the value of the existing system and the possibilities for reorganising it without destroying it are taken into account. How do

we select them, educate them and find them a place in the system, without them feeling constrained to follow the thinking of the majority, albeit the latter is needed for the nation to function ?

Then, we need to broaden the circle of those responsible for crisis resolution. We need to think in particular of civil society, all of which has to be involved in the development of collective resilience. The British have clearly grasped this idea and set up a structure that provides for better coordination of the various organisations concerned, both state and private.

How can we prepare our citizens to face up to a serious crisis with determination and to come out of it without lasting damage ? Is it a question of putting more and more measures in place, or on the other hand of instilling in them the spirit to face the unexpected ? Here, too, we need to find a happy medium between directives regarding good preparation and the freedom for the most courageous and inventive to take the initiative. Thus there are two paths to follow : first, in education, in which at some stage, after having learned the traditional methods of facing up to crises, it is important to distinguish between what needs to be retained and what left aside, and how to organise one's thoughts in order to innovate. The second path concerns training through unscheduled exercises in which the situations portrayed are sometimes unimaginable, albeit realistic given the circumstances, and for which the players have no recourse to written procedures.

Conclusion

What has been set out here represents just a few of the many aspects that need to be studied in order to establish a true capacity for resilience as understood by the second option. This does not mean, however, that the first option should be ignored : it, too, should be developed but under some name other than resilience—'the overall approach to crisis management' perhaps. As for resilience itself, it has to form the last bastion to the collapse of a country in a major crisis, and the root of its reconstruction. Many would of course say that there is no pressing need for consideration of these problems, since they remain very distant. Nevertheless, the factors that lead to resilience cannot be put in place in an atmosphere of denial, collapse or defeat. Only by intellectual, emotional and organisational preparation and thorough, rigorous training will the country be able to rise to the challenge.

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P.-S.

General (retd) Loup Francart founded *Eurocrise*

Notes

[1] In essence, resilience refers to the energy necessary to break, under a step input, a test piece that has a notch cut in it of a determined shape and depth, and is expressed in joules per unit cross-section. Whilst resilience, like rupture load and elastic limit, is not an absolute measure that can be brought into calculations, it is nevertheless considered a reasonable means of evaluating the quality of steel.

[2] Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, Calif. : Sage Publications, 1995).

[3] Gary Caldwell, 'La résilience, cette capacité de résister aux chocs et de rebondir' (Resilience, the Capacity to Withstand Shock and Recover), in *Revue Notre Dame*, Montreal, October 2000.

[4] In 'Doctrines : Urgences sur le territoire, civils et militaires, s'unir pour secourir', a collection of inputs to a colloquium held on 19 November 2008.

[5] An example in the United Kingdom being the site www.ukresilience.gov.uk.

[6] See full text in *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom. Security in an Interdependent World*.

[7] *CBRN Resilience in the UK*.

[8] In Joseph Henrotin, 'Résilience et antiterrorisme', *Note d'analyse no. 2*, Réseau Multidisciplinaire d'Etudes Stratégiques (RMES), September 2007.

[9] Centre opérationnel de gestion interministérielle des crises. (Interdepartmental operational crisis management centre).