European Journal for Security Research
https://doi.org/10.1007/s41125-023-00095-1

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Resilience Misunderstood? Commenting on Germany's National Security Strategy

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Received: 18 August 2023 / Accepted: 23 October 2023

Abstract
Resilience features prominently in the new German National Security Strategy. But the strategy does not give an explicit definition of the term. In this commentary, I analyze the use of resilience in the strategy and show the links to prominent findings from resilience research. I use a disaster resilience point of view and show that the unspecific usage of resilience in the strategy could lead to undesirable consequences when implementing the strategy. Thus, in the implementation process the German government and the relevant public administration bodies should follow three recommendations resulting from resilience research. First, they should understand resilience as adaptive capacity and not as resistance. Second, they need to address conflicting goals, like efficiency versus resilience, explicitly. Third, they should give greater attention to social aspects of resilience, because empowering people but also taking their vulnerabilities seriously is decisive for making a society more resilient.

Keywords Resilience · Security · Strategy · Germany · Adaptive Capacity

1 Introduction

Since June 14, 2023, Germany has its first National Security Strategy entitled "Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany" (Federal Foreign Office 2023). Previously, the German government issued so-called White Papers on security policy at irregular intervals, the last of which in 2016 (Kaim and Linnenkamp 2016). These White Papers served to "outline the Federal Government's security policy priorities" (Kaim and Linnenkamp 2016). The purpose of the National Security Strategy is broader. It aims at promoting "world peace in a united Europe" through "a policy of Integrated Security" (Federal Foreign Office 2023). By this, the German government means "the collaborative interaction of all relevant actors,

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Published online: 15 November 2023

resources and instruments that, in combination, can comprehensively guarantee the security of our country" (Federal Foreign Office 2023).

The concept of "resilience" plays a crucial role in the National Security Strategy. This is in line with the White Paper from 2016, which also featured resilience, although not as prominently as the new strategy (Federal Ministry of Defence 2016). The question is, what does the German government mean by "resilience" and how does this link to relevant findings from resilience research? The German government does not give an explicit definition of resilience. Anyone who takes a closer look at the strategy will find a confusing conglomeration of different meanings. This is not a criticism per se, because one of the strengths of the resilience concept lies precisely in its openness (Baggio et al. 2015). At the same time, if it is used broadly, there is a risk that it will remain unclear what is meant at all.

From a disaster resilience perspective, the German government's usage of resilience is all over the place. But from an ethical perspective, it is urgently necessary to make the respective understanding of resilience explicit. After all, resilience is not necessarily a good thing (Kaufmann 2013; Uekusa and Matthewman 2022; Walker 2020). Resilience can contribute to the perpetuation of unjust structures and processes (Chandler and Reid 2016; Kuhlicke 2013). Resilience can lead to an unjustified shift of responsibility from the state to citizens (Chandler and Reid 2016; Tierney 2020; Uekusa and Matthewman 2022). Resilience can be contrary to efficiency because, for example, it requires redundancy (Woods 2005).

In this commentary, I will use findings from resilience research to set the content of the strategy into perspective. The commentary follows a two-step approach. First, I will identify the way that the strategy uses resilience and contrast this with established knowledge from resilience research. Second, I will give three recommendations based on my analysis, on how to consider relevant findings from resilience research more explicitly during the implementation process.

2 Resilience in the German National Security Strategy

Reading the German National Security Strategy from a resilience scholar's perspective led me to a range of considerations that I will present in this section. I will begin with some general remarks on resilience and national security and then dive deeper into the specific content of the strategy. As the strategy has a whole chapter with resilience in the title, this will be my starting point. On top of analyzing resilience in the resilience chapter of the strategy, I will have a look at the chapters on robustness and sustainability, because they also entail substantial content on resilience.

That resilience plays an important role in national security strategies is no news. Countries like the US, the UK, Australia, or New Zealand have introduced the concept into their strategies some 15 to 20 years ago (Fjäder 2014). National security is the "core responsibility of the nation-state" (Fjäder 2014). It is "essentially preventive and proactive in nature, aimed at protecting the state and the citizens against threats," traditionally from the military domain (Fjäder 2014). With the emergence, or rather the realization of their importance for national security, of other threat areas like climate change, cybersecurity, or pandemics, came the need for an additional

concept, which allows for coping with disruptions should prevention fail (Fjäder 2014). Resilience is such a concept. Resilience might "be seen as an integrated element of national security" the aim of which is to provide coping capacities against unexpected disruptions, because it is either not possible or "not cost-effective to use a preventive security approach" (Fjäder 2014). However, introducing resilience into the national security sphere is not unproblematic. Resilience is "a highly political concept that is being translated from a variety of disciplines into security. Therefore, its spread and its apparent 'normalcy' need to be contested and questioned" (Dunn Cavelty et al. 2015). For example, the nation-state has a responsibility to protect all citizens, but only limited resources and thus the "problem of acceptable losses" comes to the front (Fjäder 2014). Some scholars criticize resilience as a "strategy to persuade communities to tolerate unpredictable conditions, postpone demands for change and reposition responsibility away from government to communities" (Ridley 2017). This goes alongside with critique that includes resilience into the phenomenon of securitization (Dunn Cavelty et al. 2015). Overall, research shows that implementing resilience into national security and national security strategies needs careful consideration of possible contradictions, problems, or unintended consequences. It is against this backdrop, that I make the following comments on the use of resilience in the German National Security Strategy.

Resilience in the title: "Resilient" appears as an adjective in the title of the strategy (Federal Foreign Office 2023). This shows that resilience is now a widely used political buzzword. Many scholars hint at the potential of resilience as an attractive political concept due to the often inherently positive connotations of the term (Alexander 2013; Dunn Cavelty et al. 2023; Tariq et al. 2021; Walker 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that the German government uses the term in such a prominent way. The strategies' central part, which is entitled "Integrated Security for Germany," consists of three chapters. One of these chapters has the title "Resilient: Safeguarding our values through inner strength" (Federal Foreign Office 2023). Here, resilience is clearly thought of in political terms, as a defence mechanism to protect democracy against disinformation, hybrid threats, and threats resulting from espionage and sabotage (Federal Foreign Office 2023). This meaning is not wrong. There are ideas from research that are implicitly linked to. One example is Riescher's paraphrase of resilience as strong-democratic security, which is expressed precisely in terms of societies holding on to their core values of freedom and openness in the face of threats from terrorism (Riescher 2013). To frame resilience like that is nonetheless surprising, given that Germany has a Resilience Strategy since July 13, 2022 (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community 2022). The aim of the Resilience Strategy is "to protect people and their livelihoods and to strengthen the resilience and adaptability of the community to disasters," using a resilience definition equivalent to that of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community 2022; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015). Obviously, the National Security Strategy has a much broader scope compared to the Resilience Strategy. Its overall aim to protect values is essential to uphold the democratic German society as such. However, I would question the need to frame "safeguarding our values" as resilience as this is not in line with most of resilience research. It is politically feasible to re-define resilience in such a

way. But many resilience scholars have been working on clarifying the meaning of resilience—including its meaning in the political sphere—for decades. A strategy that does not reflect on this ongoing debate in research and rather sets its own understanding of resilience raises the question of why the German government has chosen this framing for resilience.

Economic and financial resilience: Within the resilience chapter, the strategy touches upon economic and financial resilience. The content is on securing the supply of critical raw materials and supply chain security more generally (Federal Foreign Office 2023). Diversification is mentioned several times as a promising path to the goal because it helps to reduce dependencies (Federal Foreign Office 2023). This is consistent with large parts of socio-ecological resilience research, in which scholars like Folke analyze the usefulness of diversity for ecosystem resilience (Folke 2006). Translating this to complex socio-technical systems, diversity is useful for preventing supply chain failure independent of the reason for the failure, be it the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine or extreme weather events. At the same time, the strategy argues for efficiency maximization (Federal Foreign Office 2023). Some resilience scholars in the past claimed that resilience and efficiency maximization can go hand in hand (Wildavsky 1988). But many others have problematized short-term efficiency maximization as being detrimental to resilience, because it strips systems of unused resources that can be deployed in emergencies and that enable the system to adapt to unforeseen disruptions (Holling 1996; Korhonen and Seager 2008; Patriarca et al. 2018; Walker 2020; Woods 2005, 2019). Thus, arguing for enhancing supply chain security while at the same time sticking to business as usual—which is efficiency maximization—is contradictory. The strategy does not make this possible conflict of goals explicit.

Cybersecurity: Failure of critical infrastructures due to cyber-attacks caused for example by ransomware poses a growing threat to societies and we need to tackle this challenge (Dunn Cavelty et al. 2023). However, the focus of the strategy is mainly on technological and legal aspects. Apart from an appeal to citizens and companies to assume more responsibility, the strategy does not address social aspects (Federal Foreign Office 2023). In a recent paper, Dunn Cavelty, Eriksen, and Scharte show that cybersecurity is not only a technical problem, but also a societal one, and that making society cyber resilient necessitates an effort which goes well beyond conceptualizing systems as socio-technical (Dunn Cavelty et al. 2023). If "only aggregate systems are the centre of attention, it is difficult to consider important differences in how cyber threats are experienced and dealt with by individuals" (Dunn Cavelty et al. 2023). Therefore, the technological and legal focus of the strategy could be problematic. It is true that citizens should develop risk awareness, but they can only take responsibility for their own cybersecurity if the state empowers them to do so (Fekete et al. 2014). Accordingly, the strategy should also focus on non-technical solutions. Examples of that include the work of scholars like Aldrich, who analyze the role of social capital for community resilience (Aldrich 2012).

Disaster risk reduction: Topics like civil preparedness, civil protection, and disaster prevention and relief are not part of resilience in the strategy, but part of robustness (Wehrhaftigkeit) (Federal Foreign Office 2023). However, the content is on disaster risk reduction and resilience against natural and technological hazards. Framing such topics

as part of robustness rather than resilience could make it more difficult for German disaster risk reduction actors to connect to the international debate on resilience—for example on platforms like PreventionWeb. It is also questionable whether the approach of the strategy to rule out structural changes in Germany's federally organized civil protection system makes sense. Given the challenges ahead, fundamental, and far-reaching structural changes should be discussed, such as national responsibility for systemic crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (Scharte 2021).

Resilience and sustainability: Resilience also plays an important role in the sustainability chapter of the strategy. The efforts of the German government to develop a climate adaptation strategy and a climate adaptation law are sensible and desirable from a resilience perspective, because no matter our mitigation efforts, climate change will cause a further increase in extreme weather events. However, when spelling this out, it should be noted that resilience and sustainability are not necessarily without conflict (Marchese et al. 2018). In many respects, sustainability and resilience can be mutually beneficial. Some scholars see resilience as part of sustainability, for others sustainability is part of resilience, and some scholars see sustainability and resilience as independent of each other (Marchese et al. 2018). "Because of these different lenses, the similarities and differences between sustainability and resilience become partially framework-dependent" (Marchese et al. 2018). One important difference between sustainability and resilience is the temporal scales to which the concepts typically apply. Sustainability is connected to longer time scales and strives to "create desirable conditions for future generations" (Marchese et al. 2018). Resilience is about adaptation of systems to disturbances, which often occur rapidly. These different temporal scales can create conflicting objectives (Marchese et al. 2018). "In practice, unfamiliarity with the similarities and differences between sustainability and resilience can lead to problems in implementation" (Marchese et al. 2018). While it is understandable that a political strategy cannot dive deeper into this scientific debate, oversimplifying the relation between sustainability and resilience might lead to further security problems.

Pandemic prevention: The strategy addresses the improvement of global pandemic prevention (Federal Foreign Office 2023). The points on better preparing for future pandemics make sense. They are also consistent with previous findings from research on how to prepare for and manage pandemics (Holmberg and Lundgren 2018). The question is, whether the prominent all hazard approach is actually useful or whether pandemics are "unique disasters" (Peleg et al. 2021). It is, however, surprising that the strategy does not address the serious societal consequences resulting from the fight against COVID-19 and the security issues arising from it. Research offers starting points for reappraisal, for example on questions about trust in democracy and politics in the aftermath of COVID-19 (Devine et al. 2023; Vasilopoulos et al. 2023).

3 Recommendations for Implementing the German National Security Strategy

It is important to understand that Germany's National Security Strategy is an overarching political document and not a research paper in disaster resilience. Still, from a resilience scholar's point of view there are possible problems that

could arise from the way in which the German government uses resilience in the strategy. As the strategy itself is published, it makes sense to focus on its implementation process. To help avoid negative aspects of resilience when implementing the strategy, I would like to make three recommendations to the German government and the administrative bodies responsible for implementation. While the recommendations focus on the implementation process, they result from my analysis of the use of resilience in the strategy.

The first recommendation reads as follows: do not misunderstand resilience as resistance. This does not do justice to the complexity of modern societies (Chandler 2014; Siegenfeld and Bar-Yam 2020). Rather, decision-makers should follow the many prominent voices in resilience research that see adaptive capacity as the essential characteristic of resilience (Folke 2006; Holling 1973; Hollnagel et al. 2006; Walker 2020; Woods 2005). Resilience is "the capacity to change in order to maintain the same identity" (Folke et al. 2002). This is also in line with the strategy's focus on safeguarding our values. These values are what needs to persist, they constitute our identity. For our values to persist, the German society needs to be able to adapt, both to shocks and disruptions but also value-based challenges. At the same time, working on improving the adaptive capacities of German society can not only help to prepare Germany better for future disasters, but also create opportunities to work on changing hitherto unjust structures and processes.

The second recommendation is that the German government and administration should address conflicts between resilience and other goals mentioned in the strategy, like efficiency and sustainability, proactively. Resilience research shows that building resilience might mean sacrificing efficiency at some points, because a strategy that focuses on short-term efficiency maximization can create serious vulnerabilities in complex systems (Woods 2005). Resilience and sustainability can also conflict, at least in the short term. The energy supply crisis that resulted from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent rapid completion of Germany's first liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipping terminal in Wilhelmshaven can be an example of that. To ensure the security of energy supply, Germany had to react to this unforeseen shock by relying on LNG. There was no time to replace the supply of gas by renewables. Situations like that enforce the government to choose between different objectives and potentially sacrifice one. In general, such decisions should be part of a transparent, societal deliberation process (Dunn Cavelty et al. 2023).

The third recommendation is that when implementing the strategy, the German government and administration should give greater attention to societal aspects of resilience. This is not to say that legal or technological aspects are of less importance. Still, a central finding in disaster resilience is that it is all about the people (Uekusa and Matthewman 2022). People can cope with natural and technological hazards if the authorities help to leverage their individual capabilities, social ties, and networks (Aldrich 2012). At the same time, resilience has limits (Uekusa and Matthewman 2022). People should not carry the burden of being responsible for everything, because this is unrealistic and possibly harmful (Chandler and Reid 2016). Governments and public administration have at least two tasks: create circumstances that limit the need for their citizens to show resilience, but provide them

with sufficient resources (societal, financial, political, organizational, legal) to be resilient.

4 Conclusion

The German National Security Strategy makes abundant use of the term resilience. I have analyzed this from the perspective of resilience research and pointed at possible problems. These included an unusual understanding of resilience as "safeguarding our values," ignoring possible conflicting goals, and not giving enough attention to societal aspects. In order for the German government and administration to make better use of findings from resilience research, I gave three recommendations for the implementation process. First, decision-makers should understand resilience as enabling adaptation toward unforeseen shocks and disruptions. Second, society needs to know about conflicting goals and needs to be part of the decision-making process. Third, people are the most important element of resilience and thus empowering them to show resilience is essential for Germany's security.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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