Public-Private Partnerships in Defence

24 NOVEMBER 2025

Sonja Gruenbauer



The lines between peace, crisis, and war are blurred. Conflicts today unfold across both physical and digital domains, without us noticing. The players involved extend far beyond traditional state actors. Energy providers, logistics companies and tech firms now play a role as vital to national security as military units or government agencies. For decades, Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) has been a vital part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) operations, connecting armed forces with civilian authorities, communities, and the humanitarian sector.

As modern threats evolve and change, another set of civilian actors has moved to the centre of gravity: the private sector. From cyber defence to satellite communications, private companies increasingly shape the resilience of nations and alliances. The question is no longer if we need them in our defence ecosystem, but whether our current structures are ready to work with them effectively when crisis strikes.

Lessons from Recent Crises

Recent history shows how private sector engagement can make or break national and collective resilience. Since 2022, companies like SpaceX, Microsoft and Google have played a decisive role in supporting Ukraine's defence efforts by maintaining communication networks and countering cyber threats. It is clear that, with most satellite systems now under private ownership, the Ukrainian military's operational capability is directly dependent on the private sector. This illustrates both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of such reliance.

During the COVID-19 pandemic for example, civil-military logistics efforts were linked with private pharmaceutical production and distribution. However, coordination often lagged, showing that when roles and responsibilities are unclear, improvisation is not enough. Additionally, in the field of cybersecurity, private companies across NATO nations are often the first to detect and respond to attacks. However, they are unable to share information with defence entities due to legal and trust barriers. It is clear from these examples that there is a consistent pattern: when the private sector is engaged early and systematically, resilience strengthens; when cooperation is ad hoc, valuable time, capacity and effectiveness are lost.

CIMIC and Public-Private Partnerships: The State of Play

Within NATO, CIMIC provides a well-established framework for cooperation with civil authorities, NGOs and civil society in general. However, its former traditional focus, humanitarian support, stabilization, and liaison, does not fully capture the scale of private sector involvement needed in today's complex threat environment. Therefore, it is facing changes within the past years, opening up to Multi-Domain-Operations, updated doctrines and resilience concepts. Even though Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) exist in defence procurement and infrastructure projects, few extend into operational preparedness, hybrid threat response, or resilience planning. Initiatives such as NATO's seven Baseline Requirements for National Resilience and EU Hybrid Fusion Cell are further positive steps, but they often remain fragmented and dependent on voluntary engagement.

The Gaps We Must Address

If the next major crisis were to strike tomorrow, the ability of governments, militaries, and private companies to coordinate seamlessly would remain

limited. Experience shows that cooperation has improved in recent years, but significant barriers persist. Mutual hesitation is still undermining trust and information sharing. Corporations are worried about data exposure and reputational risks, while militaries remain constrained by classification rules.

Additionally, Legal and procedural gaps are making matters more complicated. There are few established mechanisms for rapid and legally secure collaboration during emergencies. Furthermore, cultural differences also play a crucial role: military organisations rely on hierarchical, procedure-driven decision-making, whereas the private sector operates with greater speed and flexibility, often leading to mismatched expectations and timelines. It is clear that there is a lack of structured recognition, compensation or long-term partnership incentives for private firms that contribute during crises. These obstacles are not undefeatable, but they will require political will and a deliberate effort to institutionalise cooperation across all sectors.

The Way Forward: Institutionalizing Cooperation

To move from reactive collaboration to proactive resilience, the defence community must elevate private-sector engagement from a matter of convenience to a matter of doctrine.

Achieving this requires deliberate, structured action:

For this to succeed existing platforms such as the Annual CIMIC Foresight Conference (ACFC) and the acaCIMICs platform, both provided by the CIMIC Centre of Excellence, to strengthen mutual understanding among stakeholders, can be used. Institutionalizing cooperation in this way ensures that when the next crisis emerges, relationships, procedures, and trust are already established and tested in advance rather than invented under pressure.

Building True Resilience

The future of defence is not solely about hardware or troop numbers, it is about networks, trust, and shared capacity across sectors. The wars and crises of the past few years have proven that national and allied resilience depend as much on private innovation as on public preparedness. For NATO members and partners, this means embedding public-private collaboration into the DNA of defence planning, not as an afterthought, but as a core capability. For the private sector, it means recognizing its growing role in collective security and preparing accordingly. If defence remains a government-only affair, we risk meeting tomorrow's crises with yesterday's structures.