

***From Bowling Alone to Fighting Together:
Social Capital and Whole-of-Society Defence***

Andrew Sharples

25th August 2025

**Dissertation
Executive MSc International Strategy and Diplomacy
London School of Economics and Political Science**



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INTRODUCTION

Context

Over the past two decades, post-Cold War US hegemony has been unravelling and with it the rules-based international order it guaranteed. An increasingly heated geostrategic competition between the United States (US) and China has heralded a new era of great power politics, whilst in Europe an increasingly rapacious and expansionist Russia has raised the spectre of interstate war once more (Flockhart and Korosteleva, 2022).

Russia's aggressive behaviour during the 2010s, culminating in its attack on Ukraine in 2014, prompted many countries to begin to reassess their defence arrangements. This process was made increasingly urgent by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the Trump administration's apparent retrenchment from Europe, beginning in 2025 (Rongved, 2025a: i). Amid growing uncertainty around US security guarantees to NATO allies, several European countries, including the Nordics, the Baltic states, and the United Kingdom (UK), that lack the resources to massively increase military spending, are now placing more value on whole-of-society approaches to national defence in a bid to deter the Russian aggressor.

Whole-of-society defence achieves deterrence by mobilising a nation's entire resources, requiring government, the military, the private sector, civil society, and ordinary citizens to work together to defend the country (Wither, 2022: 62). It is a significant undertaking, particularly for countries with no recent tradition of citizen service, but as threats proliferate, alliances crumble and national economies stagnate, many states are left with few other options to ensure their security.

Research question

Whole-of-society defence asks difficult questions of countries, requiring levels of citizen commitment and sacrifice rarely seen during peacetime. Knowing what motivates people to step up and serve their country and what knits diverse groups together to work towards a common cause is crucial. Why are one country's citizens prepared to fight whilst another's remain passive? Why do certain groups collaborate whilst others remain isolated? This dissertation attempts to explain such differences to uncover insights into the social dynamics underpinning successful whole-of-society defence.

Social capital theory has been used with considerable success as an analytical tool across a range of public policy areas, including resilience (e.g. Aldrich and Meyer, 2014), crisis response (e.g. Schobert, et al, 2023) and public health (e.g. Borgonovi and Andrieu, 2020). Comparatively little work has been done, however, to apply it to defence policy, despite its apparent suitability. Social capital, with its focus on the network relationships between individuals and groups, the qualities of those connections and their impact on civic behaviour and collaboration (e.g. Putnam, 2000), appears to offer a powerful lens to understand the dynamics of whole-of-society defence. In this dissertation, I will use this theory to explore variations between different countries' approaches through the following research question:

“What is the role of social capital in the design and implementation of whole-of-society approaches to national defence?”

Argument

Through a case study comparison of Finland, Sweden and the UK, I will argue that multiple types of social capital play crucial roles, both in shaping the design of a country's whole-of-society defence system and in its subsequent effectiveness. Of these types, the form of cognitive social capital described as *shared goals* is the most important, and without this whole-of-society defence will fail. This means there must be clarity about the threats a country faces in order to negotiate consent for a whole-of-society defence approach across government and society and to mobilise all the various security actors.

Other kinds of social capital, both structural¹ and cognitive,² facilitate collaboration and motivate individuals to participate in defence activities. Pre-existing high levels of these kinds of social capital will enable faster adoption of whole-of-society defence, whilst deficiencies create barriers. However, although social capital is normally difficult to create over short periods, whole-of-society defence systems, particularly in times of heightened threat or crisis, can act as powerful engines of social capital, generating new supplies quickly.

By the same token, although negative social capital³ interferes with collaboration, whole-of-society defence can, over time, create effective connections into those communities, contributing to greater social cohesion. This means that if clear defence goals can be established early on, whole-of-society defence systems will then work to overcome other deficiencies in social capital, contributing to increasingly positive outcomes.

¹ The network connections between people and organisations.

² The intangible qualities attached to structural connections, such as trust, norms, values and shared identity.

³ Close bonding connections leading to the social exclusion of certain communities.

THEORETICAL SECTION

Whole-of-society defence

Whole-of-society approaches to national defence were first truly adopted during the Second World War as a response to the all-encompassing nature of the conflict. This new kind of *total war* was doctrinally predicted several years before by the German strategist General Ludendorff, who described in his 1935 book, *Der Totale Krieg (The Total War)*, a coming conflagration which would be waged not just between military forces, but by nation states in their entirety.⁴ “[The war] will make demands on the spiritual, physical and material powers of the people of a more far reaching kind than was the case in the [First] world-war” (Ludendorff, 1935: 9). The concept of Total War was not just about fighting taking place in and amongst civilian populations, but a recognition that victory or defeat depended on the integrated efforts of an entire country across the military, economic, and social spheres. “Thus, ‘total defence’ and ‘total war’ are two sides of the same coin due to the understanding that war requires a whole-of-society approach for both attack and defence.” (Berzina, 2020: 1).

The purpose of whole-of-society defence is to deter potential enemies from taking aggressive action by increasing its costs and making success less likely. This represents a form of *deterrence by denial* (Wither, 2022: 62). Many customary approaches to defence pursue the same goal, but whilst they rely purely on military forces to achieve this, whole-of-society defence “involves institutionalized collaboration between government ministries, civic organizations, the private sector, and the general public” (ibid: 62). My focus is on the

⁴ Arguably, Clausewitz preceded this thinking in his conception of *absolute war*, under which belligerents would be forced to continuously escalate until they were employing all means at their disposal, forcing both sides to extremes (Clausewitz, 1984: 86). However, he posited this as a theoretical concept and argued that in reality political, economic, moral or legal factors would constrain how states fought (Paret, 1984: 23).

institutionalised collaboration between military and civil actors (collectively “security actors”) because it is in this crucial departure from customary defence policy that major challenges emerge, not just in mobilising one or another of the actors, but in ensuring that they work harmoniously together to achieve the desired outcome of deterrence (Alvinus and Hedlund, 2024: 603).

The Weberian ideal type

In order to compare the different approaches to whole-of-society defence between states, it is useful to develop an *ideal type* in the tradition of Max Weber. Because there are no fixed conceptual boundaries around the notion of whole-of-society defence, an ideal type can provide a notional model, or, as Weber put it, “emergency safe havens until one has learned to find one’s bearings while navigating the immense sea of empirical facts” (Weber, 2012: 133). To do this, I have adopted an approach developed by Richard Swedberg, who distilled Weber’s principles. This calls for the construction of a heuristic that encapsulates the behaviour of the actors and their intention; that ensures the behaviour is adequate to achieve the actors’ goal(s); that assumes the actors have complete knowledge of their situation; and that assumes the actor is rational (Swedberg, 2017). The resulting ideal type, described below, will provide a ‘yard stick’ against which I can measure the real-world examples of whole-of-society defence in Finland, Sweden, and the UK.

Ends: The objective of the ideal type of whole-of-society defence is to deter by denial potential aggressors through raising the costs of any offensive action and making success less likely (Wither, 2022; Ford, 2022; Matthews and Timur, 2023; Rakov and Fainberg, 2025).

Ways: To succeed, it must therefore respond credibly to the full range of threats posed by the enemy's capability across the conventional and hybrid⁵ spectrum (Berzina, 2022; Jermalavičius and Parmak, 2018). This requires:

1. **A territorial defence capability** that can resist a potential invasion by a large well-armed conventional force. This requires the ability to rapidly generate mass, so the ideal type combines a highly professional volunteer military force, capable of withstanding an initial assault, supported by a large, well-trained reserve force and conscripted troops (Rongved, 2025b; Matthews and Timur, 2023). Businesses will be contracted to ensure the sustainability of supply chains and to build the resilience of key industries required to maintain the defence-industrial base and sustain a war economy (Berndtsson, et al, 2023).
2. **A civil defence capability** that ensures **physical societal resilience**.⁶ This will integrate government civil agencies and emergency services with local authorities, voluntary organisations, businesses and the military to ensure preparedness and the delivery of emergency response in the event of invasion. Government will communicate with ordinary citizens, providing them with the knowledge and means to survive in the event of an invasion (SACT, 2017; Kepe and Harold, 2025).

⁵ Hybrid threats are defined as where “a hostile actor deliberately combines and synchronizes action, specifically targeting the systemic vulnerabilities in democratic societies.” (Giannopoulos, et al, 2021: 11).

⁶ Resilience is a key concept for whole-of-society defence, sitting alongside territorial defence as the main component that raises the costs of an adversary's attack to create deterrence (Wither, 2022: 62). Resilience can be defined as “the ability to resist disorder... to continue its existence, or to remain more or less stable, in the face of surprise, either a deprivation of resources or a physical threat” (Bruijne, et al, 2010: 13). In relation to war, a society that is resilient is one that can quickly recover from attack, avoid collapse and fight back (Angstrom and Ljungkvist, 2024: 509).

3. **Strong social cohesion**⁷ to withstand enemy attempts to subvert or fragment society. The state will dedicate resources ensuring the full integration of immigrants to prevent social fragmentation and a breakdown of trust. Media literacy and psychological defence campaigns will guard against hybrid attacks (Szymański, 2020; Security Committee, 2025).

Means: Every entity within a country, across the whole of government and whole of society becomes a 'security actor' that is legally obliged to actively participate in national defence (Angstrom and Ljungkvist, 2024: 500). The entire whole-of-society defence system will be directed by central government via a command-and-control network that allows for the perfect transmission of intelligence and orders between government departments, to the regional and local government and allows for seamless and timely communications with citizens (Förster, 2007: 71). Collaboration will be continually maintained between all security actors, across government, the military, the private sector, civil society, and the public, so ensuring that any enemy action may be resisted fully, inflicting very high costs on the aggressor.

Social capital

Social capital is a concept employed across the social sciences and more widely in policy and journalistic circles, often with such loose precision as to make the term, "definitionally chaotic, as it is imbued with so many different variables, approaches and applications" (Fine, 2010: 5). To make it analytically useful, therefore, we must carefully define the term.

⁷ Social cohesion is defined as the attribute of a society that "encourages the strengthening of relationships between individuals, within and between different groups of society; and between citizens and the state" (Khan, 2024: 25).

The concept was originally defined in 1916 by L. J. Hanifan as “that in life which tends to make these tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of a people, namely goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit” (Hanifan, 1916: 131). Hanifan goes on to explain how repeated contact between members of the social unit accumulates the community’s store of social capital and that this can subsequently be realised to improve the overall wellbeing of that community.

Since then, the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam, has created a bifurcation in how scholars think about the concept. Bourdieu conceives of three types of capital – economic, cultural, and social – as private goods that can be accumulated by individuals for personal gain. Cultural capital (the accumulation of skills, knowledge and talent) and social capital (social connections between people that can be leveraged for personal advancement) can be converted into economic capital. Under Bourdieu’s model, social capital is inextricably linked with social class, is not considered to be of intrinsic value to wider society, and often reinforces existing inequities (Bourdieu, 1986).

Putnam takes a more optimistic view that lends greater analytical leverage when considering issues of collaboration. He explains in his seminal work on social capital, *Bowling Alone*, that “the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value” (Putnam, 2000: 19) and defines social capital not just as connections between people, but also as the associated norms and values concerning reciprocity and trust that are associated with those connections. Moreover, because the benefits of connections help not just the individuals directly involved but also wider society, social capital functions as both a private and public good. Social capital as a public good has the potential to increase social cohesion, reduce transaction costs and stimulate cooperation between individuals and groups. (ibid: 20-21). These benefits are key to understanding the drivers of the institutionalised collaboration required by whole-of-society defence.

Types of Social Capital

Following in the tradition of Putnam, social capital can be typologised along two axes. The first concerns *who* is connected by the social capital – people of similar background and identity (bonding social capital); people who are unlike (bridging social capital) (ibid: 22); or connections between individuals and sources of power, such as government (linking social capital) (Sretzer and Woolcock, 2004: 655).

The second axis is about the *characteristics* (cognitive social capital) and *amount* (structural social capital) of the connections. Importantly for understanding how collaboration comes about, cognitive social capital includes “the shared beliefs, values, trusts and norms between people that stimulate cooperation” (Alcorta, et al, 2020: 450). The structural social capital, the network connections between people, acts as the mechanism for groups of people to organise themselves and builds platforms which can be used by external actors to engage with those groups (ibid: 449).

Social capital and collaboration

Individual forms of social capital play different roles in facilitating collaboration between individuals and groups, the basis of whole-of-society defence.

Structural social capital

Structural social capital gives collaboration its form, allowing for the passage of information and transmission of instructions. The vast range of organisations and individuals involved in whole-of-society defence requires a complex web of networks with links that run both vertically, from the top of government, down through the relevant departments and agencies,

to local government, civil society organisations, private companies and individual citizens; and horizontally, connecting participants at each level (Wang and Ran, 2023: 1197).

Linking structural social capital

The vertical connections represent linking structural capital, a command-and-control system that allows central government to set objectives, distribute resources, and receive feedback. Critically, because collaboration on whole-of-society defence in a democracy relies on the active consent of the population, the linking structural capital represents a two-way relationship that allows for negotiation rather than being only a conduit for top-down instructions (Ansell and Gash, 2008: 544).

Bonding structural social capital

The horizontal connections constitute both bonding and bridging structural social capital. Bonding structural social capital exists at all levels and across all groups participating in whole-of-society defence. Firstly, it exists in communities,⁸ those units that organise members of the public. Here it represents strong bonds between members of a community who, by virtue of their membership, will share certain characteristics. Without strong network connections between individuals at this level, the community would not truly exist and rather represent a collection of disparate individuals, incapable of collective action. Bonding structural networks are also vital to create cohesive platforms for engagement by actors outside those communities (Alcorta, et al, 2020: 449). However, where bonding social

⁸ We can define a community as a group of people connected by real world social relationships that are derived from common experience and which create a shared bond (Colclough and Sitaraman, 2005: 477). This common experience might refer to living in the same place (Anderson, 1983), or to participating in a specific activity (Pyrko, et al, 2017: 390), or to an identity, such as religion, ethnicity or sexuality (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 285). These different kinds of communities continually intersect with one another, complicating the analytical and policy landscape. Engaging with all kinds of community is important for whole-of-society defence to maximise resource mobilisation.

capital becomes exclusive, communities can turn in on themselves, reducing bridging social capital that connects them with other actors and inhibiting collaboration (Cuaton and Su, 2023: 1576-1577).

Bridging Structural Social Capital

Bridging structural social capital represents the connections between people who are unlike, or from different communities and organisations. These are essential to collaboration as they provide conduits for information and resources. They are typically weaker connections than we see under bonding structural capital, but over time, and through collaboration, they become stronger (Oh and Bush, 2016). Bridging structural capital is key for groups to work together at every level. It is seen as essential in preventing elements of society from being isolated and plays a vital role in building resilience (Aldrich and Meyer, 2014: 7), a key component for whole-of-society defence.

Cognitive social capital

Manifestations of cognitive social capital are less readily identifiable than structural social capital as they relate to less tangible concepts (Oh and Bush, 2016: 221). Because cognitive social capital also covers such a wide range of phenomena it is also harder to pin down the precise roles they play in facilitating collaboration, particularly across a nationwide system such as whole-of-society defence. At times, certain aspects of cognitive social capital may play a more or less important role, depending on the type and size of the social group in which they operate (Bhandari and Yasunobu, 2009: 502-503).

Trust

Trust can operate as both *generalised trust*, which is a measure of how much people believe in the trustworthiness of other people in general, and *particularised trust*, which is a measure of how much a person trusts a specific individual or institution (Glanville and Shi, 2020: 1801-1802). High generalised trust across society is important to facilitate collaboration at a national scale, as people need to believe that others that they do not know will play their part in the joint endeavour and so justify their own participation (Rothstein and Stolle, 2008: 441).

Particularised trust, between members of the same community (bonding capital), between actors working across community or organisational boundaries (bridging or linking capital), or between citizens and the government or individual agencies, also drives collaborative behaviour and a lack of it can lead to fractious relationships or even stop actors working together at all (Oh and Bush, 2016). It is largely driven by an expectation of reciprocity where people recognise that by helping another, they themselves will benefit later on (Hume, 2000: 519).

Shared Identity

A sense of shared identity helps to facilitate collaboration because “group identification relates to individuals’ ability and motivation to perceive, feel and act as psychological group members, rather than isolated individuals” (van Zomeren, et al, 2018: 125). When this manifests at the community level, for example as ethnic identity, or local (place-based) identity, this acts as bonding cognitive capital and plays a part in motivating people to work among and on behalf of that community. However, if that community identity becomes exclusive, it interferes with the formation of a national identity, which is key when motivating people to act in the interests of their country. National identity in one sense represents bonding cognitive capital by acting to strengthen connections between people of a single

nationality (the common characteristic), but it can also be thought of as a kind of bridging capital, forging links between people who are otherwise unlike.

For whole-of-society defence it is necessary for people to work as part of a local and regional community and as a nation. So, a strong sense of both community and national identity are desirable. National identity is considered particularly important in mobilising people to take up arms and fight for their country. It can be a powerful motivating factor that makes people feel they have a moral duty to defend their country; it can create an in/out group mentality vis à vis a foreign enemy; rational choice theory holds that it can create material incentives to fight; the list goes on (Comaroff and Stern, 2012).

Societal norms and shared values

Norms and values are an integral component of cognitive social capital. They represent the unwritten rules that govern social behaviour and define what is acceptable and what is not (Reimer, et al, 2008: 257). For whole-of-society defence this has major implications. At the macro level, norms and values dictate the very nature of the social contract – the fundamental ‘deal’ between the state and its citizens, where individuals accept certain limitations in order for the state to fulfil its duty to provide security, and which underpins the legitimacy of the state itself (Medina, 1990: 1-7). Some countries have an established tradition of citizens actively participating in governance and/or security whereas in others, citizens have a more passive role and government is responsible for security across the board. The socio-political tradition of a country therefore may narrow the range of policies that its electorate finds acceptable.

Shared Goals

For collaboration, it is important that actors share the same goals in order to work towards a common objective for mutual benefit. Part of the process of collaboration is the identification and negotiation of agreed shared goals, potentially involving adaptation and compromise by different actors (Oh and Bush, 2016: 228). In whole-of-society defence, this process generally involves government and citizens coming to a shared perception of the threat that they are working to deter. Generally, it will be incumbent on government, with the special knowledge gained through intelligence gathering, to communicate this threat clearly and persuasively to the public to reach consensus on the kind of defence policy required to counter the threat. Without a clear understanding of the goals and why they are required, citizens are unlikely to be motivated to make the personal sacrifices necessary for whole-of-society defence to be successful (Berndtsson, 2025: 152-153).

Creating social capital

There is an ongoing debate over the causal pathways and how different types of social capital may beget one another. “The causal arrows among civic involvement, reciprocity, honesty, and social trust are as tangled as well-tossed spaghetti” (Putnam, 2000: 137). Consequently, it remains unclear exactly how social capital is created, but where one type of social capital increases, often so do others (Fukuyama, 1995: 10). In contrast, where social capital is absent, it is hard to build. Putnam observed that, “Collective life in the less civic regions of Italy has been blighted for a thousand years and more” (Putnam, 1993: 163). Essentially, where there is no tradition of the various kinds of cognitive social capital described above, there is none of the social ‘glue’ that makes the structural relationships stick. In the absence of norms of reciprocity, where people recognise that helping another person should benefit themselves later on, there is not much incentive to cooperate.

By the same token, without the structural connections between people, we are unlikely to see increases in cognitive social capital. There is some evidence to suggest that by bringing people together, voluntary organisations can transmit a sense of civic virtues to members, which over time can spread to wider society, but this will likely take decades to result in substantial change (Hooghe and Stolle, 2003: 13).

Threat and crisis as a catalyst of new social capital

Under exceptional circumstances, new social capital *can* be generated at pace and scale, historically going hand-in-hand with a remodelling of the social contract. Charles Tilly's famous theory, often summarised in the aphorism "War made the state and the state made war," posits that the need to extract resources from society to wage war historically led nascent states in Europe to establish sophisticated governance systems and reset their relationship with citizens (Tilly, 1990). Following Tilly's argument, I suggest pressures that external threats put on states and society create a situation where change becomes vital for survival. Under these conditions societies are reorganised and people are more likely to collaborate in new and different ways, forming new relationships, values, identities, norms and social structures.

More recent research has explicitly tied increased threat and conflict itself to increased social capital production. Jennings and Sanchez-Pages found that when exposed to a threatening rival out-group, in-group social capital increased as people became more united, solidified their national identity and participated in a range of pro-social behaviours to help one another (Jennings and Sanchez-Pages, 2017: 157-158). I posit that whole-of-society defence leverages this phenomenon and accelerates the production of social capital further by actively creating the structures of enhanced collaboration between groups and mandating that people participate.

Hypothesis

In countries facing a complex hybrid and conventional threat from an external aggressor, including a threat of territorial invasion, we would expect attempts to build a whole-of-society defence system along the lines of the ideal type. Our theory indicates that social capital should be a vital component for the institutionalised collaboration required for whole-of-society defence. It provides the network structures that connect the actors operating at every level of society as well as the intangible cognitive elements that both motivate people to participate and which underpin their relationships with one another.

In countries with high levels of structural and cognitive social capital, we would expect whole-of-society defence to move quickly from initial formation towards institutionalised collaboration and so establishing a strong deterrent.

Countries with lower social capital should experience greater challenges in establishing an effective system. However, where the threat is high, we might also expect to see that the process begins to generate new social capital itself, ultimately creating a virtuous circle and facilitating more intensive collaboration and effective outcomes.

Where there is less of a tradition of citizen participation, we should anticipate barriers to building whole-of-society defence and may see governments fail in their attempts or be forced to adopt a more limited version.

CASE STUDIES SECTION

Scope

In this section, I examine the cases of Finland, Sweden, and the UK, comparing their defence systems against the ideal type and examining how the different kinds of social capital have affected the design and implementation of whole-of-society defence. Each of these countries has adopted a distinct approach to whole-of-society defence, which represents the dependent variable in my study. They all exhibit variations in different kinds of social capital, which together represent the independent variable, allowing me to make inferences about causal relationships between the two variables.

In many other respects these countries display strong similarities, so limiting intervening variables that might skew my analysis and interfere with my conclusions about the relationship between the dependent and independent variables. All are wealthy liberal democracies with high GDP; they have modern and well-equipped militaries; and they are members of NATO, albeit only recently in the case of Finland and Sweden. All three strongly oppose Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and have provided considerable financial and military support to Ukraine. Each perceives a dangerous military and hybrid threat to their interests from Russia, but the precise nature of that threat and how it has been communicated to the general public varies between them.

Despite the similarities, however, significant differences between the countries remain that are likely to have a bearing on whole-of-society defence. Population size, strategic culture and leadership are just a few examples. Where I detect the effect of intervening variables I will note this in the discussion and the implications this has for my conclusions about social capital.

My analysis is primarily focused on a snapshot of the current system of whole-of-society defence as it is being implemented now in each country, drawing on analysis of the most recent strategic documents. To understand how current policy has been shaped, however, I have also considered the legacy of defence policy and trends in social capital from the Second World War⁹ onwards, with a particular focus on events post-2014.¹⁰

Methodology

Through a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) of the relevant strategic documents published by each of the three national governments, combined with a series of semi-structured elite interviews with 19 policymakers, military officers, and civil defence practitioners, I have assessed how closely each country's whole-of-society defence system conforms to the ideal type and how levels of the different types of social capital can explain deviations. Where relevant I have cross-referenced this with other data sets, such as opinion polls to gauge the levels of social capital present at the national level in each country. I have then mapped each country against my overarching hypothesis.

Documents

For each country, I selected the key state documents detailing the ends, ways and means of their whole-of-society defence system. For Finland and Sweden this was straightforward, as they both capture the system in its totality in a single document.¹¹ In the UK, whole-of-society defence is yet to be developed as a single coherent policy and so its architecture is described across four principal documents, which are the National Security Strategy (2025), the Strategic Defence Review (2025), the UK Government Resilience Framework (2022), and the UK Government Resilience Action Plan (2025).

⁹ When the first iterations of whole-of-society defence were developed in all three countries

¹⁰ When Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted a significant change in the threat perceptions of each country

¹¹ Finland's Security Strategy for Society (2025) and Sweden's Total Defence Bill (2024).

Interviews

To understand the dynamics of policy design and collaboration at every level, I sought interviews with individuals with detailed knowledge or experience of the design and implementation of whole-of-society defence, drawn from the different security actors in each country. I used the snowball technique to identify interviewees, beginning with my personal network, then asking interviewees to introduce me to their contacts. I interviewed four individuals from Finland, four from Sweden, and 11 from the UK.

Each interviewee has been assigned an identifying code: F1-4 for Finland; S1-4 for Sweden; and UK1-11 for the UK. The table at Appendix A provides details.

Thematic analysis

I analysed each document using open coding, as per Braun and Clarke's guidelines for thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), to identify central themes pertaining to the relationship between social capital and whole-of-society defence. Relevant passages were coded against the different types of social capital, as per my theoretical section, which then informed the questions asked in the interviews. I then analysed interview transcripts by the same method and organised the codes into different themes as they emerged.

To illustrate my approach, consider the following quote from a Finnish 3-star military officer: "As a brigade commander, I used to get phone calls [from mothers] saying, 'Why are you not taking our Lauri [for military service]? He is applying for civilian service. I will beat him!'" I initially coded it as *social norm of military service*, and then grouped it with other quotes under the category of *cognitive social capital supporting effective generation of mass through conscription*.

Through this method, I was able to identify relationships between different kinds of social capital and individual elements of whole-of-society defence.

Structure of discussion

The discussion presented below does not represent a comprehensive review of all the themes that emerged from my analysis. Instead, to comply with the word limit, I highlight the most significant findings pertaining to each country and the implications these have for social capital theory and its relationship with whole-of-society defence.

The discussion is structured around the strands of the Weberian ideal type, divided into 'ends' and 'ways' to demonstrate clearly how the different kinds of social capital interact with specific elements of whole-of-society defence. The 'means' of the ideal type refers to the collaboration across the full spectrum of security actors, which relates both to the agreeing of goals ('ends') and the design and implementation of activities ('ways'). Consequently, discussion of 'means' is woven throughout.

Limitations

The selection of countries enabled comparison of three distinct cases, each representing a markedly different form of whole-of-society defence. However, whilst each shows variations in the different kinds of social capital, compared to other countries globally, all three have relatively high levels. The inclusion of another country with more limited social capital, perhaps from the Baltic countries, where levels of trust are lower and national identity can be more contested, could have yielded additional insight.

The spread of interviewees is heavily weighted in favour of the UK, reflecting the greater strength of my network in that country and the fact that the data collection period coincided

with the Nordic summer holiday period, making access to interviewees harder. Despite this, the profiles of all interviewees are highly relevant, providing data from most of the key security actors. The disproportionate amount of UK interview data is also balanced against the far greater volume of published research on whole-of-society defence in Finland and Sweden compared to the UK, which allowed some gaps to be filled in.

I have deliberately chosen to exclude the private sector from my analysis. Although it plays a hugely important role in whole-of-society defence (creating the defence-industrial base that equips the military force; ensuring resilience of supply chains; and maintaining the economy during war), private sector actors are primarily driven by commercial interests (Berndtsson, et al, 2023: 399). Consequently, social capital, although still influencing the behaviour of companies, plays a less vital role than it does with wider society and government. For this reason, and due to the constraints of time, resource and wordcount, I have excluded private sector actors from my data collection. Whilst this does limit the scope of the study and prevent me from building a fully rounded picture of whole-of-society defence, it does not materially detract from my overall analysis of the role of social capital.

Discussion of results

Ends

Finland and Sweden

Both Finland and Sweden's whole-of-society defence systems conform closely to the objective of the ideal type, which is to deter by denial potential aggressors through raising the costs of any offensive action and making success less likely. Finland's Security Strategy for Society describes the aim of its defence capability as being "to deter the use of military force and the threat thereof" (Security Committee, 2025: 18). Although not explicitly stated as being a form of deterrence by denial, this is implied by the strategy's primary focus on resilience, with no mention of capabilities designed to inflict *punishment* on potential aggressors.

Since 2015, Sweden has been rapidly rebuilding its whole-of-society defence system, called Total Defence, having dismantled its previous system at the end of the Cold War. The aim of Sweden's system is "to have the ability to defend Sweden and our population against armed attack, to assert our country's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity and to contribute to the defence of allies" (Swedish Parliament, 2024: 59). This is explicitly designed to achieve deterrence by denial. "For a potential attacker, the disadvantages of war against Sweden and allies should appear to be greater than the advantages" (Ibid: 60).

Both Nordic countries are also explicit about the primary source of the threat their whole-of-society defence systems are designed to deter. The objective of Finland's Comprehensive Security is clear and every security actor from central government down to each individual citizen agrees what it is. Put simply, this is to deter Russia, a goal that has remained unchanged since Russia invaded Finland in 1939, starting the Winter War. Finland's land

border with Russia extends over 1,300km and repeated Russian invasions throughout history have demonstrated the persistence of the threat and Finland's continuing vulnerability. The Finnish Government's 2024 Defence Report lays out the current threat: "Russia seeks to consolidate its great power status and to re-establish the division of Europe into spheres of influence... even by openly using military force. Russia is the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area" (MoD Finland, 2024: 18).

A Finnish 3-star military officer (F1) described the constant state of alert felt by all citizens, which, as we shall see, suggests the kind of crisis conditions that might stimulate the fast production of new social capital. "If you think about 2,000 years of the Finnish history, every now and then there is a war and mostly against the Russians. So, there will be war... you have to prepare for that" (F1).

All the Finnish interviewees referred to Russia as the primary focus of Finland's defence policy and said that defence against the Russian threat is the key motivation for Finns to participate in Comprehensive Security. A senior Finnish government official on the Security Committee¹² (F3) said, "Growing interest to participate in ... not only defence but also other types of security activities – the key trigger seems to be the Russian aggression to Ukraine" (F3). Triangulation across multiple sources suggests a very strong causal relationship between the shared goals associated with a clear and credible threat and the enthusiastic participation of security actors in whole-of-society defence.

The Swedish case further reinforces this finding. The Total Defence Bill is unequivocal about the threat facing Sweden, stating, "Because of Russia, a large-scale war is raging in Europe... An armed attack against Sweden or our allies cannot be ruled out" (Swedish

¹² Finnish cross-government body responsible for designing and coordinating Comprehensive Security.

Parliament, 2024: 15). As in Finland, we see here in Sweden a clear articulation of both the threat, and the whole-of-society mechanism needed to deter that threat. Jörgen Berglund (S1), Chair of the Defence Commission¹³, pointed to strong consensus across both government and other security actors, saying, “All eight parties signed on [the Total Defence Bill]... it sends a good signal to Swedes that Swedish politicians can set aside differences... And I think it's a good signal to our allies that in Sweden we have a strong commitment to what we are saying and also to our enemies” (S1).

The difference between Finland and Sweden is that, in the former, the goals have remained set for 80 years, but in Sweden they have changed, disrupting planning and investment, with significant implications for the effectiveness of the whole-of-society defence system, discussed in more detail below.

UK

By contrast to Finland and Sweden, the UK's objectives are less clearly defined. Its turn towards whole-of-society defence is very recent, referenced explicitly for the first time in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR), which calls for a “Whole-of-society approach – widening participation in national resilience and renewing the Nation's contract with those who serve” (MoD UK, 2025: 4). That said, civil defence has run ahead of its military counterpart and the UK's domestic resilience policy, led by the Cabinet Office, was first defined as a “whole-of-society approach” in the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, which called for collaboration between “all levels of government, CNI [Critical National Infrastructure] operators, the wider private sector, civil society and the public” (HM Government, 2021: 88).

¹³ Swedish cross-party body responsible for designing Swedish Total Defence policy.

Finland and Sweden both articulate their whole-of-society defence approaches as fully conceived systems. The UK instead relies on individual government departments to develop policy independently, albeit in consultation with each other, and then articulate it in separate departmental documents. Consequently, it is difficult to distil a single, overarching shared goal for whole-of-society defence, or even state with confidence that an integrated whole-of-society defence system exists.

The intention has been plainly stated at the most senior level of government. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, in his speech launching the SDR, proposed to “mobilise the nation in a common cause.... Recognising, in these dangerous times, that when it comes to the defence of the realm... Nothing works unless we all work together” (Starmer, 2025).

However, one senior official (UK10) involved in the SDR commented that not all departments share the same vision of a whole-of-society approach, saying, “Some quarters argue that citizens expect the Government to deliver security, with no role for wider society” (UK10).

The National Security Strategy (NSS), published in June 2025, just over three weeks after the SDR, was expected to provide clarity, but turned out to make only limited references to the whole-of-society approach, with two somewhat vague statements saying, “We must also now mobilise every element of society towards a collective national effort” (HM Government, 2025a: 5), and “NSS 2025 is also a call to action for an all-of-society effort to make our country stronger and more secure” (ibid: 51). Dr Fiona Hill (UK11), one of the three lead reviewers that authored the SDR, said, “I’ll be frank about the NSS. In the end it was a bit of a disappointment in this regard... These things should have been intertwined” (UK11).

Over the past 80 years, the UK has navigated a more dynamic threat landscape than Sweden and certainly Finland, which has meant that its defence goals have shifted more, explaining some of the lower clarity. During the Second World War, the UK did adopt a form of whole-of-society defence, mobilising its entire population in support of the war effort, but

he dynamics of the Cold War were different in the UK to those experienced by Finland and Sweden, driving a different approach to defence. The UK, as a NATO member, was locked in a more direct confrontation with the USSR than the two Nordic countries, but its geographical position meant that it was at much lower risk of territorial invasion. At the same time, the UK's possession of nuclear weapons and its alliance with other nuclear powers, meant that the chief mechanism for deterrence of the USSR relied on punishment, rather than the denial associated with whole-of-society defence. Also, unlike Finland and Sweden, the UK, throughout the Cold War and beyond, aimed to maintain a military capability capable of projecting force beyond Europe to defend Britain's territories and overseas interests (Curtis, 2024: 69).

The impetus for a new and more comprehensive whole-of-society approach, spanning both military and civil defence, has been driven by the Government's recognition that the current threat is not just to British interests overseas but that the UK homeland and society are also being targeted. "The fundamental truth is clear: a step-change in the threats we face demands a step-change in British defence to meet them" (MoD UK, 2025: 2).

In an interview, General Sir Richard Barrons (UK4), another of the three lead reviewers that authored the SDR, painted a vivid picture of a world undergoing massive change across multiple domains, including climate, technology and society, which is translating into increasingly vigorous confrontation between states. He explained that these confrontations are being fought not just between opposing militaries but by using all the resources at the states' disposal, amounting to a clash of wills between states.

Doctrine is evolving to suit the threat... The military are important to that, of course, but society also has a part to play. The whole society argument is more than just 'you [the people] are the target set.' It's 'How do you consider doing mobilisation? How do you make your own forces bigger when you need them and make them endure for as long as

is necessary and make them successful,' which is about innovation and industrial capacity... And that is why if you bundle all of that together, defence and security is again unequivocally a whole of society endeavour (UK4).

The SDR clearly identifies Russia as an “immediate” and pressing threat” with a “willingness to use force to achieve its goals, as well as its intent to re-establish spheres of influence in its near-abroad and disrupt the international order to the UK and its allies’ disadvantage” (MoD UK, 2025: 28). It also calls out China, Iran, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) as potential adversaries that threaten the UK across several domains. There is no suggestion, however, that any of these hostile actors could directly threaten the territorial integrity of the UK homeland in the near future, which has implications for the kind of whole-of-society defence the UK might adopt, placing less emphasis on territorial defence.

As the UK’s threat perception of Russia grows closer to that of Finland and Sweden and the case is made for a whole-of-society approach, we might expect to see a convergence in their defence goals. However, the UK continues to lack consensus between security actors and remains the furthest away from the aim of the ideal type. As we shall see, the absence of shared goals across the different security actors correlates with a less coherent whole-of-society defence system and inhibits successful collaboration. This negative example further demonstrates the causal relationship between the shared goals type of cognitive social capital and successful institutionalised collaboration for whole-of-society defence.

UK MoD planners understand the need to communicate the threat posed by hostile states, such as Russia, in order to create goals that are shared by the public. Indeed, UK4 suggests that it is because British citizens do not feel a sense of peril it makes it difficult for Government to spend more on defence. “Today’s government are not keen on electoral suicide. They are not going to say, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we’re going to reduce your entitlement to Universal Credit because we can’t tax or borrow more, but we need to spend

more on defence” (UK4). The imperative to overcome this issue and create goals that are shared between government and public is why the SDR calls for a “Government-led national conversation” about defence (MoD UK, 2025: 9).

So far, however, the Government has failed to begin this conversation, preventing military officers and defence officials from speaking publicly about the threat. Bruce Mann (UK6), former Director of Civil Contingencies at the UK Cabinet Office, believes that this is both a matter of political expediency to reduce the potential for negative headlines at a time when the Government has been under pressure and also in line with the longstanding (in his view, misguided) policy, captured in the Civil Contingencies Act¹⁴, of avoiding the risk of public panic (UK6).

Until a national conversation does take place, we are unlikely to see the kind of unity between security actors around shared goals called for by the ideal type and that we see in both Finland and Sweden.

Summary – Ends		
Finland	Sweden	UK
Clear threat perceptions lead to shared goals across security actors, facilitating effective collaboration.	Clear threat perceptions lead to shared goals across security actors, facilitating effective collaboration.	No common threat perception across security actors prevents agreement of shared goals, inhibiting collaboration.

¹⁴ The legislative framework for civil defence in the UK.

Ways

The ideal type incorporates three principal strands of activity, which are territorial defence through the rapid generation of mass; a civil defence capability; and the maintenance of social cohesion.

Territorial defence

Conscription

Finland's Comprehensive Security model matches the territorial defence element of the ideal type almost exactly. All men are called up in the year they turn 18 and are required to serve for 165, 255, or 367 days, depending on the nature of their role and the training they must undertake. Conscripts may opt for armed or unarmed military service or for non-military (civil) service instead. After their service is over, former conscripts are liable for call up until they are 60. (Finnish Defence Forces, 2025).

Fuelled with trained soldiers by the conscription model, the Finnish Defence Forces, which are based around a small core of 13,000 regular troops, 20,000 male conscripts and 1,000 female volunteers, can be expanded to a wartime strength of 280,000 when reserves are mobilised. There is a grand total of 900,000 trained reservists that can backfill the force as losses are sustained in war (MoD Finland, 2024: 34-35). This means Finland can call up some 20% of its entire population of around 5.6million people, an impressive force generation capability.

The only deviation from this element of the ideal type is that Finland excludes females from conscription, so failing to maximise the force generation potential. This can best be explained, not by social capital, but by path dependency. F1 explained that, although the

system does get updated to align with societal changes, many aspects of contemporary Comprehensive Security exist because they were set up historically. The complexity of the system makes it difficult to adjust individual components, without risking unintended negative consequences. “We have had a lot of discussions for the last years about equal conscript training... mandatory for males and females... There is a war in Europe now. It's not time to make reform.” (F1).

This perspective was confirmed by S1, who commented that Sweden has the opportunity to build a new system more suitable for the modern threat environment. “The Finns... told us that they are sometimes jealous of Sweden because we can start over. Because they are trapped in old systems and thinking, and it's hard to get rid of it because that would cost too much” (S1).

Sweden scrapped conscription in 2010, before reviving it in a much-reduced form in 2017, following the reintroduction of Total Defence. Under the present system, all 18-year-olds (around 100,000 men and women) are automatically eligible for conscription each year but only around 8,000 end up serving (Swedish Defence and Conscription Agency, 2025), although this is planned to increase to 12,000 by 2035 (Swedish Parliament, 2024: 89). With such small numbers this does not amount to a meaningful attempt to generate mass, although certainly over time, the increase in the size of a trained reserve will contribute to that goal.

The UK deviates significantly from the ideal type's approach to generating mass for territorial defence, eschewing any form of conscription and relying instead on a core professional military of around 147,000 personnel, supported by Active Reserves of some 29,000 (UK Parliament, 2025). On top of this, the UK can call on former regular military personnel who retain call-up liabilities for varying lengths of time, although there are no accurate statistics on what size of force that might potentially generate (Anon, 2024). Overall, this represents a

significantly smaller force than Finland, which does use compulsory conscription, is able to generate. In part, this reflects the much lower likelihood that UK could face an invasion of the homeland.

Social norms

Counterfactually, if the UK did try to reintroduce conscription, then low levels of certain kinds of social capital might act as blockers and potentially make it politically unviable. There is no social norm related to military service in the UK. With a relatively small proportion of the population serving, there is a growing gap between the military and wider society, and a lack of defence ethos among the general population. “[D]ecades of fighting wars overseas and shrinking personnel numbers have led to a society with less awareness of Defence” (MoD UK, 2025: 88). With 48% of the population saying there are no circumstances under which they would be willing to defend the country (IPSOS, 2025), compared to 11% in Finland (ABDI, 2024) and c.25% in Sweden (Andersson and Wedebrand, 2024: 25), the UK clearly does suffer from a weaker will to defend.

In Finland, by contrast, because of conscription, everybody either has served or knows someone who has, leading to a strong military-society connection. “If I take my home street, in every family they have some somebody who is doing military service, is about to do it, or has done it for decades. So, there is a link [from the military] to those families” (F1).

Through these network connections, Finnish women, although they are much less likely to have served, are still linked to the military and so knowledge of and close identification with the armed forces spreads through all Finnish society (Ålander, 2024:34). The norm of military service is therefore powerful, helping keeping support for conscription high at 80% (ABDI, 2024: 24).

F1 explained that even opting for legally permitted non-military service could be perceived as a shameful choice by some people, which underlines the strong martial culture underpinning Finland's whole-of society defence.

I know a couple of company leaders who when they are interviewing a new employee, they ask, 'Have you done your military service? OK. You are hired.' Because they know if that person can handle this, he must be capable of interaction with humans and he's a normal guy. But if you haven't done the military, 'Oh, why not? Is there something wrong with your brain, or attitude, or whatever?' (F1).

In Sweden, the norm of military service has faded very quickly after only a seven-year break in conscription. Individuals coming of age in 2017 would have grown up not expecting to have to undertake military service and it stopped being something expected by wider society. Moreover, some studies suggest that an increasing trend for individualism across Swedish society has started to erode the legitimacy of armed service to the state in the eyes of many (Strand, 2024: 1176).

National identity

Apart from social norms, a shared sense of national identity is frequently cited as a factor in motivating people to fight for their country. The Finnish government officially states that Finns' strong will to defend¹⁵ is based on national unity and a belief in the worth of Finland itself (MFA, 2024: 26), which corresponds with a sense of shared identity and shared values, kinds of cognitive social capital.

In the UK, however, the sense of shared identity appears to be weakening, which causes problems for defence planners trying to motivate people to join the armed forces. A 2024

¹⁵ 80% of Finns are willing to defend their country (ABDI, 2024: 20-24).

report by the National Centre for Social Research revealed that between 2013 and 2023, citizens' pride in Britain's history has declined from 86% to 64%. Over the same period, the number of people who say they would rather be a citizen of Britain than anywhere else has gone down from 62% to 49% (Curtice and Scholes, 2024: 4).

The sense of shame about national identity and the gap between military and civilian values felt by significant portions of the UK population has a negative effect on public attitudes towards defence, hampering efforts to rebuild links between the military and society. For example, multiple news sources reported the decision of the city of York council to ban the locally based armed forces from exhibiting military equipment on Armed Forces Day, due to council "fears of causing offence" to local residents (e.g. Montgomery, 2025).

UK11 explained that people in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, partly due to their smaller populations, exhibited stronger place-based national identities than people in much larger England, and that there was a declining sense of British identity to knit everybody together and encourage participation in a collective national defence. She said, "Think like a Finn. How can you be like a Finn? You might have to bring this collective sense down to smaller regional levels where people can [more easily] identify [with one another]" (UK11). Proposals in the SDR for local public-private partnerships investing in local defence infrastructure and in growing the local cadet forces align with this idea of bolstering and leveraging regional identities.

Conscription as a generator of social capital

Conscription does not just rely on social capital to function, but it actually works as an engine to generate new social capital as well. Perhaps more than any other Finnish institution, conscription creates connections between individuals, crucially spanning boundaries of socio-economic status, geography, race and religion. This represents powerful bridging

social capital that helps avoid the harmful effects of inward-looking bonding social capital that can lead to immigrant communities becoming excluded from wider society, with positive implications for social cohesion and creating a more resilient society. F1, referencing conversations he had had with parents of immigrant conscripts said how proud they were to be part of society and that their sons were making their contribution.

Conscription reinforces a strong sense of shared military identity among those who serve, and in wider society through the vicarious experience of conscripts' families (Hadar and Häkkinen, 2020: 201). Conscripts coalesce around the shared goal of defending Finland, which further encourages voluntary participation in other aspects of Comprehensive Security after their compulsory military service is over. More than this, "Conscription is a key cultural phenomenon, even a myth that unites citizens and creates intergenerational continuations... [and it] maintains and develops the will of the Finns to defend themselves and the country" (Kosonen and Mälkki, 2022: 465). This *mythmaking* contributes to a strong sense of shared Finnish identity, which is a clear example of bonding cognitive social capital manifesting at the national level.

In Sweden, despite the much smaller numbers being conscripted, the system does, as in Finland create new structural and cognitive social capital, remaking broken links between the armed forces and wider society and establishing a stronger sense of shared values, identity and understanding of the goals of Total Defence among those who serve. said, "With conscription back, we are seeing more closeness with the military" (S1).

In the UK, defence planners recognise that they lack conscription as a tool to generate social capital. Proposals in the SDR to expand young people's participation in the UK cadet forces (MoD UK, 2025: 92) are designed at least partially to address this shortfall, helping to create cognitive social capital in the forms of norms of voluntary military-style service. This is also expected to create structural bridging social capital, connecting hard-to-reach, socially

excluded communities. UK4 referenced the case of the air cadets in Northolt, which he said took many children from Asian families whose parents sent them because of the discipline it instilled.

For some, particularly the first and second generation who've arrived in the country, their experience of people in uniform is universally bad, and they don't feel they're invested in protecting their new country. Perhaps because they sense a hostility to them. So, I think this is a slow and patient thing, and you're probably, by working with their kids, looking for success in about a generation's time (UK4).

This echoes the Finnish approach that pursues similar outcomes through conscription, but without the heightened sense of threat felt in Finland, the crisis conditions that might stimulate fast generation of new social capital appear to be lacking.

Summary – Territorial Defence		
Finland	Sweden	UK
Social norms of military service, structural social capital connecting society and the military, and a strong shared national identity all enable conscription.	A break in the practice of conscription degraded the social norm of military service and lessened structural social capital connections between society and the military, reducing support for conscription.	A lack of social norms around military service and a weakening sense of shared national identity correlates with a lower will to defend the country, corresponding to a lack of structural social capital connecting society and the military.

<p>Conscription under threat/crisis conditions generates powerful structural and cognitive social capital.</p>	<p>Conscription appears to generate some social capital but this is limited by the small numbers of conscripts called up.</p>	<p>Defence planners are seeking alternatives to conscription to generate social capital but a lack of perceived threat/crisis conditions may slow this process.</p>
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Civil defence

The ideal type calls for an integrated preparedness and response capability led by the government and its agencies, working together with the voluntary sector and individual citizens. All three countries generally conform to this ideal type, although collaboration between the various security actors is more mature in both Finland and Sweden than it is in the UK.

Coordination by government

Finland benefits from what Kimmo Kohvakka (F2), Director General of Rescue Services, referred to as “a synergy of smallness”, a function of the country’s small population, whereby all the senior leaders working across every level of government know each other personally through a range of ties, such as having attended school together, or crucially, having served in the military. “If you have served almost 35 years in the service, you know every head of police, every general, every rescue director, all the major politicians, all the regional responsible organisations and their leadership” (F2). These strong ties, he explained, help to increase trust and connectivity between organisations, enabling them to work effectively together.

Whilst personal connections play an important role in facilitating cross-government collaboration, the Finnish system is also designed so that network links are deepened and maintained through regular contact. F1 explained that “Cooperation... must be daily, weekly, routine or business as usual. Otherwise, it doesn't work” (F1). This regular cooperation is formalised through institutional structures, starting with the Security Committee, “a permanent collaboration body... assisting the government and ministries in the coordination of comprehensive security” (Security Committee, 2025: 40). A senior official working on the Security Committee (F3) referred to it as a “24-person network of trust” that includes

permanent secretaries from relevant ministries, heads of security authorities and the President's office, as well as representatives from business and NGOs (F3).

Sweden appears to have a highly coordinated civil defence capability, although the country's larger population and reduced tradition of military service mean that close personal connections are cited as less of a contributing factor. Sweden's civil defence effort is led by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), which is responsible for coordinating the activities of all the government agencies and voluntary sector organisations, as well as ordinary citizens. A senior MSB official (S2) described a very flat system that relied heavily on joint decision-making rather than top-down direction. "We [the MSB] bring them [security actors] together, we point to the vulnerabilities, the gaps, the, the outstanding issues and suggest, 'You two need to get together and deal with that and make it work.' But we don't have a mandate to tell anyone else what to do (S2)."

That the system works in this way reflects the high levels of trust between the different security actors, which Swedish security planners explicitly rely upon. S2 referenced the Swedish response to COVID, which, in contrast to most other countries, did not impose draconian rules around physical distancing and lockdowns. He explained that the Swedish authorities trusted the people to abide by the rules, following a wider norm of social responsibility and reciprocal trust in the guidance of the government. "They [the government] said, 'We feel comfortable in issuing this guidance because we feel as though the Swedish people are prepared to follow it... that was definitely part of the calculation'" (S2)

S1 confirmed the important role of trust between government and citizens and that it was factored in when designing the new version of Total Defence. "We weren't hoping... Maybe we took it [trust between citizens and government] for granted... I think we just [thought] of course we're doing this [establishing a whole-of-society approach]" (S1).

Bo Stennab (S3), Secretary General, Swedish Defence Training Association¹⁶ pointed to this tradition of strong trust and reciprocity (cognitive social capital) as an enabling factor that allows the state to make the greater demands of its citizens required by whole-of-society defence.

In times of crisis, people come together and I think this has to do to some extent of our historical political background, being an historically socialist country, being a country where we've been supported with welfare, we've been well taken care of by our government and people have had quite a lot of trust... and people have realised that maybe there's an obligation that needs to be fulfilled in return for that support that you receive from the government (S3).

Whilst Finland's political values follow a similar social democratic tradition (Brandal, et al, 2013: 4), in the UK there is no such convention of citizen service and defence planners recognise that there is a need to establish this. UK4 referred to a "clash of warfare and welfare." In Sweden people understand the two are inextricably linked, but in the UK, "you believe in welfare and you believe that warfare is somebody else's problem" (UK4). This further underlines the need for the proposed "national conversation" in the UK to align security actors on values as well as goals.

In Sweden, Total Defence puts considerable responsibility on individual citizens to prepare themselves for invasion or other emergencies and the MSB has invested considerable resource in communicating this to the population, most notably through the booklet, *In Case of Crisis or War*, which was delivered to every household in Sweden in November 2024. This provided clear direction on what was expected of citizens under their Total Defence Duty, which states that, "From the year you turn 16 until the end of the year you turn 70, you

¹⁶ Voluntary organisation tasked by the Swedish government to provide civil defence training.

are part of Sweden's total defence and required to serve in the event of war or the threat of war" (MSB, 2024: 9).

The booklet encourages all Swedes to be prepared to survive independently for one week if services such as water and electricity are disrupted and provides information on how to go about this. The language used in the communication leverages and reinforces the norm of mutual social responsibility. "Together we make Sweden stronger. During times of crisis or war, we all need to contribute to Sweden's resilience" (ibid: 6). It also reinforces the shared goals of Total Defence, reminding people of the high threat level that reinforces the sense of "crisis conditions" which motivate people to participate in whole-of-society defence activities and stimulate the fast production of new social capital. "If Sweden is attacked, everyone must do their part to defend Sweden's independence – and our democracy" (ibid: 3).

The UK's central government coordination down to the local level appears to function less smoothly, reflecting both a lack of linking structural capital and, in some cases, issues of trust. The UK Government Resilience Framework, published in 2022, sets out an approach to civil defence that, on paper, resembles some aspects of the ideal type, describing a highly integrated system of close partnerships linking all the relevant actors from central government down to individual citizens. However, the Framework does not connect general resilience planning with concepts of territorial defence (HM Government, 2022).

Consequently, hostile state threats are frequently not explicitly included in the resilience planning of actors at the regional and local level.

Michael White (UK7), the Emergency Planning Liaison Officer for Test Valley Borough Council, said, "We don't promote planning for things like war. However, I think by promoting community resilience at a more local level for things like extreme weather, flooding, fire, then by default you are making your community more resilient to deal with those bigger, higher-level issues" (UK7).

UK6, who was responsible for setting up the original Regional and Local Resilience Forum (RRF and LRF) architecture after the passing of the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act, explained that the link through RRFs between LRFs and central government was cut by the sudden removal of the regional governance architecture. “The regional office network was abolished in 2010 as an act of political dogma by the DCLG [Department of Communities and Local Government] Secretary of State... so that critical linkage between LRFs and the centre was emasculated. It needs to be put back.” (UK6)

Social capital facilitating collaboration at the local level

In Finland, at the civil society level, the state’s deliberate leveraging of bridging structural social capital is evident, calling for actors that “include social networks, non-profit organisations and social movements that are based on the voluntary participation of people” (Security Committee, 2025: 42). The participation of voluntary organisations in Comprehensive Security is crucial to the delivery of effective civil defence, providing manpower to assist in a range of activities in the event of a disaster, such as search and rescue, firefighting, or first aid. Many of the organisations that can be mobilised are not dedicated emergency specialists but whose members undertake training so that they can be useful when needed.

The diversity of organisations actively supporting Comprehensive Security is illustrated by the presence of groups such as the Finnish Sports Confederation, Finnish Taxi Owners Federation, and the Reindeer Herders Association (Security Committee, 2025: 84; Vapepa, 2025), which take their place alongside more conventional civil defence associations such as the Finnish Red Cross and Finnish Lifeboat Association.

F2 says, “in my particular branch [Rescue Services], we have strong third sector actors which have organised volunteer fire brigades. It has been estimated that more than 700,000

persons are members of voluntary organisations” (F2). This clearly demonstrates how Finland’s high levels of structural social capital, as manifested through volunteering, directly support institutionalised collaboration.

F2 expanded on the types of cognitive social capital he saw playing a part in driving high levels of volunteering in civil defence, referencing a shared norm of social responsibility driven by a national memory of the Second World War, as well as trust in the authorities enabling citizen collaboration with the rescue service as, for example, volunteer firefighters. He admitted, however, that it was difficult to isolate the roles played by individual components of social capital, and that volunteering was driven by combination of many different factors. “It's rather difficult to explain because I think there's a summary of various things... and of course this voluntary service, the possibilities to serve. I think they are all benefiting from that social capital” (F2)

In the UK, although linking social capital extending downwards from central government appears to be frequently lacking, within many local communities, social capital of all kinds is flourishing and facilitating effective collaboration between local authorities, civil society and citizens. A resilience manager working with local authorities in London (UK5) explained in an interview that much of his work focused on the building of social capital, both vertically and horizontally, creating the relationships that would help communities build resilience for emergencies. “We work with the faith sector to deliver a training programme for faith leaders within their areas. And then a WhatsApp group’s created ... to build connections and relationships... and the local authorities then are working with faith communities more.” (UK5).

The LRF system in the UK can be an effective, if somewhat uneven structure for collaboration at the local level, bringing together local authorities, government agencies, such as police and fire, and the voluntary sector. The establishment of the LRFs in 2004,

under the Civil Contingencies Act, represents an attempt by central government to create the required linking and bridging social capital. UK6, believes that the LRF structure is still the right one for contemporary challenges, although under-resourced and suffering from the lack of connectivity with central government. He suggested that the problems were less of a function of social capital, which he saw as generally flourishing within local communities, but were caused more by issues of poor leadership from the centre and the absence of the right expectations, resourcing and hence attitudes and culture.

At the UK local level, the combination of different types of social capital appears to function in line with our theoretical model, with the structural social capital providing the links for collaboration and the cognitive social capital of shared goals, identity, values and mutual trust operating to motivate individuals and groups. Of these different types of cognitive social capital, it is, as we see in Finland, shared goals, as shaped by threat perception, that supply the initial impetus. UK6 underlined the importance of this, saying, “Until you define the purpose, and build a persuasive narrative around that purpose, there's no point talking about drawing on social capital to achieve that purpose.” (UK6).

The pre-eminence of threat perception-related goals as a motivating factor was reflected by multiple interviewees as they brought up local community responses to the COVID pandemic, which has clear parallels with the resilience work required of communities under whole-of-society defence. An official working at an LRF in England (UK1) explained that when there had been a clear sense of threat, individuals and local communities took action, but in the absence of that, it was hard to motivate them. “When the threat has been activated, they go, ‘Oh, wow! Something bad is happening. What do we do? Whereas beforehand, if you say to somebody, ‘What are you going to do about a flood?’ ‘OK, when it's sunny outside, why would I think about flooding?’” (UK1).

Overall, structural and social capital at the local level does motivate successful collaboration on civil defence, but it can be inconsistent. Rather than cognitive social capital being a general store held across communities and organisations, UK1 observed that it was often tied to specific relationships. Trust and a sense of shared values might be present, but then if a particular individual left an organisation, that could instantly be lost.

We've got a really great partnership manager.... She has organised a structure where we as an LRF meet every other week... We build those connections and do all of that in- peacetime preparation effectively instead of during an incident. So, when there's an incident, the emergency planning officers know each other... Not every LRF operates like that (UK1).

It is worth noting that despite generally successful collaboration systemwide in both Finland and Sweden, research has observed some friction between organisations on civil defence, related to issues of social capital. For example, one study cited lack of trust as causing difficulties in joint working between the MSB, armed forces and voluntary agencies in Sweden (Alvinus and Hedlund, 2024: 612) and another observed similar issues between the police and partner organisations in Finland (Niemi, et al, 2014: 329-330). Whilst national and regional level data can provide a snapshot of strong social capital overall, for successful collaboration between organisations, social capital linked to individual relationships at the microlevel is hugely important and this can break down in any country.

Summary – Civil Defence		
Finland	Sweden	UK
Strong structural social capital linking officials through personal ties (partly facilitated by conscription) among a small population underpins close collaboration on civil defence.	Strong trust system-wide enables flat structures and successful non-hierarchical collaboration.	Poor linking structural social capital inhibits successful coordination from central government to the local level.
Strong cognitive social capital motivates high levels of citizen participation in civil defence.	Reinforcement of shared goals and social norms of duty by government communications stimulates action by citizens.	Strong cognitive and structural capital facilitates effective collaboration between security actors at the local level in some areas.
In all countries, individual relationships are key to successful collaboration and specific relational social capital can support or undermine this. The key role of individuals in making collaboration work can make the overall whole-of-society defence system more fragile.		

Social cohesion

Strengthening social cohesion is a fundamental element of whole-of-society defence. It involves safeguarding society against an enemy's hybrid attacks, which look to exploit potential social fissures, and against internal ruptures that might be created by the state itself or by dynamics within a country's society. Whilst all three countries make deliberate efforts to maintain social cohesion, Finland, and to slightly less extent, Sweden, are closer to the ideal type of strong social cohesion than the UK.

Social cohesion has a close relationship with the type of cognitive social capital of shared values, which as Sara Khan said in her government-commissioned review of social cohesion in England, "should form part of the common ground that helps bind diverse groups together in a pluralistic society. The support, protection, and defence of democratic rights and freedoms must lie at the heart of social cohesion" (Khan, 2024: 27). In each of the three countries, much of the public debate around national values has been closely linked to immigration and increasing ethnic diversity, with implications for social capital and whole-of-society defence.

Immigration

In relatively homogenous Finland,¹⁷ with its long tradition of stable social democratic politics, there have been few intra-societal tensions or challenges to democracy (Luonila, et al, 2023: 5). However, even the relatively modest increase in immigration to Finland over the past decade has sparked debate, creating opportunities that Russia has tried to exploit.

¹⁷ c.90% of the population speaks a national language as their first language (Statistics Finland, 2025)

The effectiveness with which Finland has so far been able to counter Russian hybrid attacks reflects the high levels of social capital that Comprehensive Security both fosters and relies upon. For example, in 2023, Russia began to redirect migrants within its territory to cross into Finland at a significantly increased scale to put pressure on Finland's asylum system and, more importantly, exploit Finnish domestic tensions about immigration (Ministry of the Interior, 2024). Finland responded by closing the border and subsequently passed legislation giving the Finnish Government the power to stop accepting asylum seekers. This caused controversy within Finland, as Russia had planned. However, despite this, the Finnish population largely supported its government's action. Tapio Pyysalo, Head of International Relations, European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats¹⁸ (F4) said:

By instrumentalising migrants at the border, they [Russia] really found the one thing that could divide Finns. But the [Finnish government's] very active, very honest, very forthcoming strategic communications... showed that this is not regular migration here... And because of the resilience we had built, even that part of the population that was very much in support of letting refugees in understood what we were really dealing with (F4).

We see here that cognitive social capital, in terms of shared goals (defending Finland against Russia) has worked to unify Finnish society, building resilience against external threats. Effective strategic communications by the Finnish government reinforced the threat perception and commitment to defence goals among its population.

More so than Finland, Sweden is contending with significant changes to its political and social landscape, which affect the stores of social capital required for whole-of-society defence. Historically, Sweden has been a country with extremely high levels of social capital

¹⁸ Based in Finland, working closely with the EU and NATO, the Centre provides expertise and training for countering hybrid threats.

and whilst remaining ahead of most other countries on many measures, recent social changes have prompted a downwards trend. Increased immigration linked to the Syrian civil war saw a spike in asylum-seekers coming to Sweden, sparking a fierce debate about how an increasingly heterogeneous society should be organised (Gougoulakis, 2024: 114-115).

Prior to 1997, the official government approach towards migrants was one of multiculturalism, preserving the distinct cultures of newcomers. However, as fears increased that society was becoming divided into exclusive ethnic blocs, policy shifted in favour of an integrationist approach, putting pressure on migrants to conform to Swedish values, learn the Swedish language, and discard customs at odds with normative Swedish behaviour (Government Offices of Sweden, 2025). This aligns with the Swedish social contract tradition, whereby each member of society is afforded the same generous benefits as well as being expected to contribute to the overall wellbeing of society.

Despite the change in policy, there is widespread concern that integration has been so far unsuccessful and that *parallel societies* have developed that fail to interact with mainstream Swedish society (Andersson, 2022), indicative of high levels of inward-looking bonding social capital and an absence of bridging social capital. Following riots in 2022, sparked by the public burning of the Quran by a Swedish politician, then prime minister, Magdalena Andersson blamed the violence on this failure, saying, “We live in the same country but in completely different realities” (ibid).

The implications of social division for collaborative policies like Total Defence are significant. Not only does the surfeit of community-specific bonding capital and lack of bridging capital mean that large segments of the population may be less likely to play a part, but the resulting perceived unfairness risks also undermining the integrity of the social contract and potentially could reduce participation across the whole of society (Pevnick, 2024: 333).

Taken together, multiple sources show that increased immigration can create pockets of negative bonding capital that inhibits collaboration on whole-of-society defence. However, we cannot create draw a causal link between immigration and declining social capital across the board. Indeed, there is also evidence that immigrants can also help produce new cognitive social capital when they actively seek to take part in Swedish society. S3 discussed how some non-native Swedes have exhibited greater willingness to support Total Defence than many of those born in Sweden. “In many cases, we found that people with a foreign background have been even more eager and willing to support their new country because Sweden has accepted them and welcomed them into society” (S3).

Securitisation of society

One of the main tools the Swedish government uses to build social cohesion under Total Defence is the Psychological Defence Agency, which is responsible for identifying and countering disinformation, a function we would expect to see in the ideal type of whole-of-society defence. In carrying out its work, however, this agency must beware that in countering what it identifies as information operations directed by hostile foreign actors, it does not inadvertently shut down the free speech of Swedish citizens, so undermining the democracy it is tasked with protecting.

Dr Magnus Hjort (S4), Director General of the Psychological Defence Agency, explained that to preserve the trust of Swedish society, the agency errs on the side of caution and never seeks to intervene in cases where Swedish people spread harmful material, even if they suspect foreign manipulation. “You have to have tolerance for people who do not agree and this should be handled in the open society with debates” (S4).

S4 went on to discuss the case of hostile foreign actors spreading disinformation through Swedish networks (on and offline) that claimed Swedish authorities were forcibly removing Muslim children from their families, and which incited several violent riots. Mindful of not silencing Swedish citizens, even though they were transmitting highly damaging false information, the agency instead supported relevant government departments to refute the story and communicate the true facts. Despite some success in countering the false narrative, “These conspiracy theories are still out there and this is a problem for social services in certain communities” (S4). This illustrates the tension inherent in a whole-of-society approach between avoiding the over-securitisation of society, which would damage trust in government, whilst also trying to protect that same society from hostile external actors.

In contrast, the UK takes a more proactive approach to tackling harmful narratives. The National Security Online Information Team has a remit similar to Sweden’s Psychological Defence Agency and “leads the UK government’s operational response to information threats online, and ensures the government takes necessary steps to identify and respond to acute misinformation” (DSIT, 2024). It has faced criticism for infringing on free speech, having been accused of monitoring UK citizens in relation to their online posts around sensitive issues such as COVID lockdowns and the 2024 riots that followed the murders of several young girls in Stockport (Carlo, 2024). This demonstrates the potential pitfalls of securitising the information space and the harm it can do to trust in government.

Trust and wellbeing

Trust in government in the UK, at 27% (OECD, 2024c) is considerably lower than in Finland (47%) (OECD, 2024a) and Sweden (43%) (OECD, 2024b) and has been dropping for several years. A 2024 report cited dissatisfaction with the handling of Brexit, the declining service provided by the NHS and the cost-of-living crisis as key drivers of the decline

(NatCen, 2024). This corresponds with a lower willingness for citizens to collaborate with government and indeed a lower willingness to defend the country. At a community level, we see that when there is mistrust of government, it can prevent engagement on civil defence. “There are communities that if you turn up with the lanyard on and a clipboard, they will not talk to you... For some communities, it's that kind of insider-outsider dynamic of, ‘They're these official people, we don't want them’” (UK1).

Perhaps more concerning for defence planners is the notion that lower trust is linked to a sense of wider decline in the UK, where many people feel they can't get on and live “the good life”. UK11 cited the phenomenon of “shit-life syndrome”, originally coined by NHS doctors, whereby individuals or sections of society, suffer “a level of long-standing poverty, family breakdown, lack of stability, unemployment and potential risk factors” (Rizq, 2013: 1278). She explained that this was a barrier to individual and group participation in wider society, which would, if experienced broadly enough in a community or region, prevent participation in whole-of-society defence and also lead to a break-up of social cohesion (UK11).

This sense of malaise in the UK is reflected in the findings of the World Happiness Report, which combines a range of wellbeing data to create global rankings. The UK lies 23rd, well behind Finland (1st) and Sweden (4th) (Wellbeing Research Centre, 2025). It is striking that two countries with whole-of-society defence systems rank so highly. Denmark, in 2nd place also has a form of Total Defence. Whilst the “shit life” in the UK may deter people from taking part in society, perhaps in the Nordics, the “good life” makes people think it worth defending. Minna Ålander, a Nordic defence specialist, suggests that, more than this, the tradition of citizen service and resilience built through historical hardship has bred a trait of “Pragmatic pessimism [that] acts as a driving force, leading to a constant process of improvement. Hoping for the best, but always preparing for the worst” (Ålander, 2024: 35).

In this we find yet more clues, that under crisis conditions, the practice of whole-of-society defence drives the production of social capital in the form of societal shared values.

Summary – Social Cohesion		
Finland	Sweden	UK
High standards of living and shared values drive participation in whole-of-society defence.	Fast immigration into previously homogenous society has disrupted social capital.	Declining living standards and negative exclusive bonding social capital in some communities has harmed social cohesion.
In all countries, the securitisation of society can risk harming trust.		

CONCLUSION

Finland, Sweden and the UK largely follow the paths mapped out by the hypothesis and we can see a strong causative relationship between higher levels of social capital and successful whole-of-society defence.

Leveraging high levels of social capital, Finland has successfully built and maintained a mature and sophisticated whole-of-society defence system. Whilst all the different kinds of social capital function as predicted, it is the cognitive social capital of *shared goals*, as shaped by a common understanding of the Russian threat, that form the foundations for the entire whole-of-society defence architecture. The *crisis conditions* this creates enable the Comprehensive Security system to function as a self-sustaining engine of social capital, increasing security actor collaboration, particularly through conscripted military service, to generate new supplies continuously.

Sweden, also with a clear view of the Russian threat, has been able to remake whole-of-society defence anew. However, the hiatus in its Total Defence system has stalled its production of new social capital and caused helpful social norms to erode. Now issues with pockets of negative bonding social capital in some communities, shifting societal values and the lack of a universal conscription model mean Sweden's ability to generate new social capital remains impeded, slowing progress.

The UK's deficiencies of social capital, including a damaged sense of shared national identity and declining trust between security actors, limit collaboration. Problems with linking capital between central government, local authorities and communities create further issues.

Most importantly, the UK's continuing failure to reach a common understanding of the external threat, means that shared goals cannot be agreed, ultimately strangling whole-of-

society defence at birth. Until the SDR's proposed "national conversation" about defence gets underway, it is unlikely substantive progress will be made. Moreover, growing feelings of dissatisfaction among 'left behind' parts of the population could further degrade societal trust, undermine social cohesion and impede future defence work.

More positively, there is evidence of social capital at the local level facilitating effective joint working on emergency preparedness, most clearly seen during the COVID response. This suggests that, if security actors can align on goals, the potential is there for successful collaboration, which could, under crisis conditions, be scaled up to the national level and help create new social capital.

The comparison of these three cases has yielded useful insights into the role of social capital in whole-of-society defence. Most strikingly, it has revealed that establishing shared goals is the most important component, and without this whole-of-society defence does not function.

Other types of social capital appear to operate in line with established theory but seem to work most effectively among smaller populations. This benefits small countries like Finland but presents challenges to larger ones such as the UK. However, we have seen in the UK that at the regional or local level, social capital does enable effective collaboration among those smaller population segments.

Finally, we see signs that the practice of whole-of-society defence itself can, especially under crisis conditions, act as an engine to produce new social capital at pace. Not only does it create a more networked society (structural social capital), it can also generate cognitive social capital manifested as a stronger sense of shared identity, greater unity of purpose, and increased trust between communities and in government. By ensuring collaboration between different communities, whole-of-society defence can break down negative bonding capital and help reduce social polarisation.

More research into countries at war, or which face an imminent threat, would help better understand this potential mechanism. For whole-of-society defence can only be truly tested under the stresses of war, which, as the global disorder continues to grow, may arrive sooner than we hope. As Lieutenant General Vesa Virtanen, Chief of Defence Command Finland, warned in a recent address, “The only good thing coming from the East is the sun” (Virtanen, 2025).

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Appendix A – List of interviewees

Finland

Code	Name	Role	Date
F1	Anonymous	3-star military officer	24/07/25
F2	Kimmo Kohvakka	Director General, Rescue Services	29/07/25
F3	Anonymous	Senior official, Security Committee	30/07/25
F4	Tapio Pyysalo	Head of International Relations, European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats	05/08/25

Sweden

S1	Jörgen Berglund	Chair, Defence Commission	22/07/25
S2	Anonymous	Senior official, MSB	24/07/25
S3	Bo Stennab	Secretary General, Swedish Defence Training Association	04/07/25
S4	Dr Magnus Hjort	Director General, Psychological Defence Agency	06/07/25

UK

UK1	Anonymous	Official, UK-based Local Resilience Forum	03/07/25
UK2	Tony McMahon	Prevent counter-terrorism communications	07/07/25
UK3	Anonymous	Manager, Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership	16/07/25
UK4	General Sir Richard Barrons	Reviewer, Strategic Defence Review	17/07/25

UK5	Anonymous	Resilience manager, London	18/07/25
UK6	Bruce Mann	Former Director Civil Contingencies, Cabinet Office	21/07/25
UK7	Michael White	Emergency Planning Liaison Officer, Test Valley Borough Council (TVBC)	25/07/25
UK8	Dave Growcott	Community Manager, TVBC	25/07/25
UK9	Emma Silverton	Democratic Services Manager, TVBC	25/07/25
UK10	Anonymous	Senior official, Strategic Defence Review	29/07/25
UK11	Dr Fiona Hill	Reviewer, Strategic Defence Review	30/07/25