



## TOTAL DEFENCE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: LESSONS FROM FINLAND, SWEDEN, SWITZERLAND, AND SINGAPORE

by

Kristian Patrick Alexander

As hybrid threats, cyberattacks, information warfare, pandemics, and critical infrastructure disruptions increasingly shape the global security environment, states are rediscovering an older but remarkably flexible doctrine: [Total Defence](#). First articulated during the Cold War, Total Defence rests on a simple but powerful idea: [national security](#) is not the sole responsibility of the military but a societal function shared by government, private industry, civil institutions, and the general public. Today, the concept is being re-examined not only across Europe and Asia, but also in regions with complex geopolitical exposure, where resilience and deterrence require more than conventional military capabilities. Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, and Singapore each represent a leading and well-documented expression of Total Defence under distinctly different conditions. Together they form the clearest laboratory for understanding how the same doctrine can be applied across geographies, political systems, and risk profiles.

Total Defence is [not a singular model](#). It exists as a set of strategic principles that take different institutional forms depending on geography, political structure, societal norms, and strategic depth. Comparing four leading implementers, namely Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, and Singapore, offers valuable insight into how the same philosophy can operate across different contexts, and why its relevance has grown amid contemporary hybrid competition. These states also illustrate a useful comparative spectrum: Finland and Sweden demonstrate deep mobilization culture and territorial planning; Switzerland showcases militia-based resilience and decentralized civil defence; and Singapore illustrates how psychological, digital, and economic preparedness can substitute for limited territorial depth. Terminologically, European debates increasingly use [“comprehensive defence”](#) or

[“comprehensive security”](#) to reflect the broadened agenda: whereas Total Defence originally emerged from the logic of total war, contemporary threats are diffused, hybrid and societal, spanning digital systems, information environments, economic networks, energy grids and psychological cohesion.

### Finland: Comprehensive Security Built for Existential Resilience

In Finland, Total Defence is known as the [Comprehensive Security Concept](#), reflecting a deeply institutionalized partnership between the armed forces, government ministries, private companies, municipalities, and civic organizations. The doctrine was designed during the Cold War to ensure that Finland could resist aggression from a superior adversary through a combination of military deterrence, civil preparedness, economic resilience, and psychological endurance.

One of Finland’s most distinctive features is its [underground civil-defence architecture](#), capable of sheltering over 80 percent of the population. This infrastructure is supported by the country’s geology, granite bedrock enables cost-effective fortification, making nationwide sheltering technically and economically feasible. Public education, hazard awareness, food reserves, continuity planning, and citizen readiness are deeply embedded in Finnish society. Total Defence is not viewed as an emergency posture, but as a permanent, [whole-of-society ecosystem for crisis readiness](#), continuity of government, protection of key services, and rapid mobilization. Finland’s post–Cold War evolution demonstrates that even highly mature territorial defence systems must expand toward “all-hazards” coordination and inter-ministerial leadership when threats are less kinetic and more systemic.

Finland’s version of Total Defence also [emphasizes psychological resilience](#), recognizing that morale, trust in institutions, and national cohesion can be decisive assets in crises. Finnish citizens are accustomed to preparedness messaging and active civil-defence participation, and national service strengthens links between the military and civilian sectors.

### Sweden: Total Defence as Societal Mobilisation and Strategic Depth

Sweden's Total Defence model resembles Finland's in scope, but evolved through a slightly different pathway. During the Cold War, Sweden, militarily non-aligned and strategically exposed, developed a [comprehensive mobilization doctrine](#) based on universal military conscription, civil-defence responsibilities, and large-scale strategic stockpiling. Sweden's system was designed to [maintain resistance](#) even if parts of the country were isolated or occupied, ensuring continuity of essential services, healthcare, logistics, and local governance.

Unlike Finland, Sweden did not rely as heavily on underground infrastructure, but invested more deeply in territorial defence through conscription, reserve forces, and dispersed logistics capacity. [Civil institutions](#), such as local municipalities, public utilities, hospitals, and infrastructure authorities, hold explicit preparedness responsibilities and are designed to mobilize rapidly in the event of crisis. Strategic reserves of fuel, medical supplies, food, and industrial components were central features of Swedish Total Defence throughout the Cold War.

After a period of post-Cold War demobilization, [Sweden revived Total Defence planning](#) in response to renewed hybrid and conventional risks, including cyber intrusions, disinformation, maritime competition, and the changing security environment in Northern Europe. This revival reinforces a hard lesson: it is easier to maintain societal preparedness than to rebuild it. Institutional memory, conscription capacity, stockpiles and mobilization culture atrophy quickly when demobilized, illustrating why Total Defence is not merely a policy but an [endurance practice](#).

### Switzerland: Militia, Neutrality, and Strategic Stockpiling

[Switzerland's approach](#) to Total Defence is shaped by its political culture and geography. While not strategically exposed to a single dominant neighbor, the country has long recognized the importance of strategic self-reliance, neutrality, and whole-of-society mobilization capacity. Swiss Total Defence rests on

a [militia army model](#) that integrates large segments of society directly into military and civil-protection roles. Military service and reservist structures are complemented by civil-defence networks responsible for firefighting, first aid, critical infrastructure protection, and crisis response.

Switzerland has historically invested heavily in [strategic stockpiling and dispersed resilience](#) capacity, particularly in food, pharmaceuticals, and industrial materials. The assumption underpinning the Swiss model is that continuity of essential services, even under isolation or blockade, is indispensable to national sovereignty. Bunkers are widespread and embedded within communities, though their role differs from Finland's geological megashelters. The militia model also produces societal cohesion and broad ownership of national security responsibilities. Switzerland's Total Defence architecture is thus less centralized than Finland's, but more socially embedded than Sweden's, reflecting its highly federalized institutional structure and culture of decentralized responsibility.

However, successive post-Cold War reforms, budget reductions and a shift toward broader "security policy" and international crisis management gradually eroded parts of this architecture. In the contemporary environment of hybrid coercion, financial interdependence and digital vulnerability, [Switzerland increasingly studies Nordic resilience benchmarks](#) and NATO preparedness standards. The Swiss trajectory illustrates that even the most established Total Defence systems must relearn, rebuild and recalibrate when threats evolve.

### Singapore: Total Defence for a Small-State in a Globalised Economy

[Singapore's Total Defence model](#) was developed from an entirely different set of geopolitical assumptions. As a small, hyper-globalised city-state with limited territorial depth and high economic exposure, Singapore's framework stands on [six pillars](#): military, civil, economic, social, psychological, and digital defence. The model Singapore's strategic vulnerability to disruptions in maritime trade, food supply, cyber systems, financial networks, and port logistics.



Where Finland and Sweden lean heavily on deep mobilization capacity and continuity of territorial operations, Singapore emphasizes preparedness, public education, and social cohesion in a highly diverse and multicultural society. Civil-defence training, first aid capacity, and crisis drills are widespread, while economic defence focuses on business continuity, supply-chain resilience, stockpiling, and emergency substitution planning. [Its digital defence pillar](#) addresses the state's heavy dependence on smart infrastructure, banking networks, and cybersecurity.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the Singapore model is its [systematic approach to psychological and social defence](#), ensuring that the state's diverse population develops shared identity, strong trust in public institutions, and clear crisis communication channels. In a society without large reserve forces or strategic depth, resilience depends on unity, clarity, and adaptability.

### Why Total Defence Is Regaining Global Relevance

Today's resurgence of Total Defence is driven not only by great-power rivalry but by [vulnerabilities](#) created through globalization. Digital, financial, logistical, informational, and infrastructural systems can be exploited without kinetic force. Disinformation can undermine society faster than tanks; cyberattacks can neutralize ports, refineries, or utilities from afar; supply-chain shocks can disrupt livelihoods and confidence more quickly than military confrontation.

For economies deeply integrated into global aviation, maritime trade, financial networks, critical logistics, and digital infrastructure, such disruptions are not peripheral but strategic security risks. [Hybrid competition](#) does not seek territory, but aims to erode confidence, disrupt markets, overwhelm public systems, and fracture cohesion. As a result, Total Defence has re-emerged not as militarized fortification, but as [deterrence by resilience](#), making disruption costly, slow, or ineffective for adversaries. In an era of "[permacrisis](#)", where pandemics, supply-chain shocks and regional tensions overlap, states cannot afford fragility. Total Defence functions as an insurance policy for sovereignty: if one pillar

shakes (e.g., through cyberattack, port disruption or disinformation), others (reserve capacity, civil defence, local continuity) prevent systemic collapse.

### From Model to Adaptation: Lessons for Middle Powers and Global Hubs

For emerging middle powers, island states, energy producers and global hubs, Total Defence provides a [strategic logic](#) rather than a fixed architecture. No single model is universally replicable. Finland's deep bunkers are enabled by granite geology; Sweden's mobilization depends on political culture; Switzerland's militia requires strong local autonomy; Singapore's communication-driven model reflects its demographic and territorial structure. States elsewhere would [require custom-made frameworks](#) that integrate their own geography, population, industrial mix, federal systems and risk exposure.

Many globally connected states already practice elements of Total Defence without using the term. Whole-of-government coordination, sophisticated crisis-management agencies, advanced digital systems, food-security reserves and strong public-private cooperation all represent Total Defence logic in action. The UAE provides an [illustrative example](#): National Service strengthens social and military cohesion; the COVID-19 response demonstrated civil interoperability; long-term food security investments underpin economic preparedness; and the National Cybersecurity Strategy forms a digital shield. The [architecture already exists](#) in fragments, not as imitation, but as an organic, locally tailored form of comprehensive resilience.

The value of Total Defence lies not in imitation but in institutionalizing resilience, aligning military and civilian roles, integrating public and private capabilities, and enabling societies to withstand the pressures of hybrid competition. Any future interest in Total Defence in the Gulf or elsewhere would therefore involve calibrated adaptation rather than copy-paste adoption.

*Dr Kristian Alexander is a Senior Fellow and Lead Researcher at the Rabdan Security and Defence Institute, (RSDI), Abu Dhabi, UAE.*