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What is Resilience? Ambiguities of a Key Term

by *Michael Hanisch*

More than any other term, “resilience” has become a buzzword for several disciplines and policy fields in recent years. Climate change, epidemics, terrorist attacks, cyber threats, social inequalities, instability of the financial markets or security of energy supply – resilience appears to be the key to managing even the most complex challenges. But when taking a closer look at the increasingly intense debate about this key term, we notice that there are often disagreement and uncertainty about what exactly “resilience” means. A clearer understanding of this meaning is indispensable for us to be able to translate this concept into practice.

The term “resilience” has been mentioned repeatedly in connection with the recent vicious terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels and Orlando. It has been said that societies and states must be “resilient” in order to better cope with the impact of such disastrous events and not collapse under the burden. This focus is shifted to effectively “dealing” with – but also “adapting” to – shocks, crises, and vulnerabilities. This shift stems from the – often painful – realisation that, in spite of the best possible preventive and preparatory measures, free and democratic states will never be able to brace themselves for all potential types of insecurity and to completely protect their population. In contrast, resilience does acknowledge vulnerabilities, and, in the sense of “survivability”, it promises to be an alternative to the desire to become as “invulnerable” as possible, which is ultimately unrealistic. Nevertheless, despite the current popularity of the term, there is widespread uncertainty and disagreement regarding the precise meaning of resilience, the capabilities and processes it includes, and the goals that a policy of resilience should pursue. To better understand the complexity and relevance of this key term, we will first take a look at the underlying controversial debate.

What is Resilience? – Conceptual Challenges

Despite the current excitement about resilience, the term itself is not new. It has been used in psychology since the 1940s and 1950s. Initially, the term was used in psychological studies that were trying to find out what makes people able to cope with personal misfortune and unpredictable hardships. The related capability to come to terms with or recover from (sudden) disruptions and crises in such a way that essential functions are maintained still constitutes the lowest common denominator of the traditional interpretations of the term resilience. In the following decades, the application of resilience research became more widespread. This included different levels of analysis (individuals, organizations, technical components as well as societies), various disciplines (engineering, ecology, economy, social and organisational sciences or security research) and different policy fields (security policy, development policy, or climate policy). In the light of the growing number of devastating natural events and the increasing danger of terrorist attacks, resilience in the sense of “resistance and regenerative capacity” or “survivability” has become the focus of considera-

tions about disaster and crisis management and civil protection, particularly in recent years. One of the most current developments can be seen in the area of urban development policy. An initiative pioneered by the American Rockefeller Foundation, for example, has the goal to help 100 cities around the world to become more resilient to the physical, social, and economic challenges of the 21st century.¹ Interestingly, the network, which is based on an application procedure, does not include one single German city.

In many ways, however, the spreading of the term resilience has negative consequences regarding the conceptual clarity and practical relevance of the concept. To begin with, a general definition of resilience has not yet been found. To the contrary: the growing number of different definitions of resilience leads to increasing contradictions between the individual interpretations and the concept is thus gradually watered down. Because if everything and everyone is supposed to be resilient, then where is the added value of the concept? As a result, it becomes more and more difficult to translate theory into practice and to precisely determine the goals, strategies, instruments, and actors in “promoting” resilience. While the majority agrees that resilience is not a dichotomous concept but rather exists at various degrees of development, there is still the unanswered question of how varying degrees of resilience can be measured. Resilience thus not only runs the risk of being reduced to a mere buzzword, but could also arouse false expectations of being a universal remedy against all kinds of challenges.

Controversy regarding the interpretation of Resilience

Specifically, there are three controversies surrounding the interpretation of resilience. These debates have made it difficult to build a consistent understanding of the concept and to translate it into practice so far. The first debate refers to the *moment of resilience*, regarding the point in time at which resilience should exist or become visible: either after or before a particular event. Approaches coming from organisational science, for example, particularly emphasize *reactive* coping and fast recovery following a disruption. To them, the process of *bouncing back* – regaining functional capacity and the ability to act – is a visible sign of resilience. However, some studies from the security sciences and on disaster and crisis management focus on *preventive* aspects and the anticipation of strain or changes. In this view, resilience means anticipatory adaptation, aiming to reduce the extent of one’s own vulnerabilities beforehand.

The second controversial debate has evolved around the *type and degree of events* where the concept of resilience becomes relevant. The more traditional view considers resilience to be the ability to come to terms with rare, sudden, and devastating events such as natural disasters, epidemics, or severe terrorist attacks. There is, however, another school of thought which, in addition to such acute shocks, believes chronic strain to be relevant enough to unbalance individuals, societies, or even technological systems. This approach is reflected in the concept of “urban resilience” underlying the Rockefeller initiative. To its proponents, factors such as high unemployment, inefficient public transport systems, endemic violence, or chronic scarcity of food and water hold the potential to significantly weaken urban structures and functions on a daily or regular basis.

The third controversial debate finally deals with the question of how to do define the *state after coping*, which is achieved through resilience. When, for example, a society resumes its daily routine or “goes back to normal” after experiencing a disastrous event, as in the case of the most recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, is this sufficient to speak of resilience? And if that is the case, how exactly does one define this “normality”? At the same time, the different approaches disagree on whether resilience means that something must go back to its original state, or whether it can also move on to a new balance. What if the new state is less desirable than the previous one? What if, in response to an act of terrorism, individual liberties are limited or social cohesion crumbles? Would this condition still qualify as resilient?

¹ See the website of the programme: www.100resilientcities.org

Characteristics of Resilience

Controversy about the concept of resilience is also reflected in the discussion about the characteristics that should ultimately define resilience. Depending on the discipline, up to three different features are taken into consideration. Most approaches focus first on *coping capacities*. These include enduring and overcoming sudden disruptions reactively, rapidly, and with as much flexibility as possible. In the case of a terrorist attack, this could mean that public life in an area that has directly been affected is maintained thanks to effective crisis and disaster management plans, sufficient availability of resources, and the will of the population to continue their usual routine or way of life despite fear of possible repeat attacks. It is indeed a relevant question how much strain people and public structures must actually withstand in order to be considered resilient in such situations.

In addition to the reactive coping component, some disciplines also believe *adaptive capacities* to be important. These capacities refer to the proactive and long-term adaptation of structures, processes, or modes of behaviour to present and future vulnerabilities. This adaptation is based on lessons learned from past crisis events and on the anticipation of risks. The constant adaptation, however, does not aim to prevent crises. The goal is rather to attenuate their harmful and disruptive impact. When it comes to terrorist attacks and natural disasters, such an adaptation could, for example, consist in placing more emphasis on the role and responsibility of citizens and the private sector in crisis management and promoting civic participation and self-help capacities particularly on a local level. For lessons learned from such devastating events have not only proven the impossibility of predicting or even preventing them, but have also shown that a state's capacities for disaster prevention and relief are simply limited and an active participation of the population and the private sector is thus indispensable.

Finally, and thirdly, there are *transformative capacities*, which mostly appear in the context of “social resilience.” These capacities differ from adaptive capacities in that societies do not adapt gradually, but undergo radical change. Such a profound change affecting all areas of society could, for example, be conceivable in the face of the impact and existential dangers of climate change. This process that started years ago with environmental awareness and “new energies” could, in future, lead to completely different social norms and behaviour and create new research areas and economic sectors, enabling societies to grow and flourish despite severe environmental changes.

Understanding Resilience – A New Momentum for the Resilience Debate

In this brief and incomplete overview of different interpretations, we have seen that the term resilience remains multifaceted, controversial, and unclear. The concept of resilience must thus be clarified to ensure its relevance to practice. There are four hypotheses that appear to be useful in the debate surrounding the concept of resilience and its possible applications.

Firstly, there is not *one* resilience, but there are many different forms of resilience in different contexts. Speaking of resilience we must thus make clear which type we are referring to and under which circumstances. Are we, for example, “only” talking about the ability to cope quickly with an unexpected crisis or rather about adapting structures and modes of behaviour to an ever-changing and insecure environment? One must also always answer the questions of who or what ultimately needs resilience for what purpose, how this resilience should be promoted and who is to be responsible for this task. This kind of clarity is necessary to render the concept of resilience relevant to practice.

Secondly, resilience is neither a universal strategy nor a panacea, because (more) resilience is precisely not what prevents disruptions, strain, or change from materialising, be they sudden or long-term. Instead, resilience acknowledges vulnerabilities and helps people to brace themselves for inevitable injuries – to increase their survivability – so they can better deal with a crisis by attenuating negative effects. To put it

simply, resilience strongly contributes to damage control – it keeps bad situations from becoming worse. Especially in the current security debate surrounding civil protection and disaster relief, care should thus be taken not to interpret resilience as “robustness” (based on the Latin *resilire* = rebound, recoil). For this interpretation suggests a desire to avert all influences or to permanently protect and immunise oneself against possible damage, which is simply impossible and is also not in line with the principle of resilience. While protective measures, such as increasing the number of security forces at large events when there is a specific terrorist threat, are and will remain essential to minimising risks, they should not be misconstrued as instruments of a policy of resilience.

Thirdly, degrees of resilience can change and even decrease despite all efforts to the contrary. Depending on the intensity, frequency, or duration of shocks and strain, the individual, technological, organisational, or social capabilities to absorb such events in a flexible way will vary greatly. It is conceivable, for example, that if a society were to experience another terrorist attack like in Paris or Brussels only a few weeks after the first attack, they would find it much more difficult to overcome their fears and go back to “normal” than in the case of a one-time event.

Fourthly, resilience does not mean stagnation. Even though it is not directed at the causes of events, many concepts of resilience still contain transformative approaches. For in an ever-changing, insecure environment, individuals, organisations, or societies can only “survive” if they learn to adapt to ever new and unpredictable conditions. Resilience must thus mean more than going back to a previous, “normal” state, namely to consciously perceiving change as an opportunity to evolve.

These and other considerations regarding the concept of resilience are of great political significance and must thus be given urgent attention by legislators and decision-makers. Without a clear conceptual approach, resilience will – particularly in the area of security policy – remain a mere buzzword that not only arouses false expectations, but is also of low practical value.

Lieutenant Colonel (GS) Michael Hanisch is Counsellor and Executive Assistant to the President at the Federal Academy for Security Policy in Berlin. This article reflects his personal opinions.