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A Research Agenda for Contemporary Total Defence: The Multilevel Governance Perspective

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Abstract: Based on a review of over sixty publications, this article develops a research agenda for the study of contemporary total defence. Despite renewed policy relevance, the literature remains fragmented across national traditions, sectors, and levels of analysis. To address this gap, the article applies a multilevel-governance perspective and develops an integrated analytical framework for comparative research. It conceptualises total defence across four dimensions – domestic vertical governance, transnational linkages, cross-sectoral coordination, and horizontal state-society relations – thus providing a coherent basis for future scholarship while remaining open to diverse theoretical approaches.

Keywords: Total defence, Multilevel governance, Comprehensive security, Comprehensive defence, Civil-military cooperation, Research agenda

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1. Introduction

Total defence emerged from the experience of total war, when battlefield and home front fused and entire societies became targets. The protection of populations and the maintenance of critical functions thus became integral to national defence, giving rise to territorially anchored forms of "home defence". Built on civil-military partnership, this logic evolved into total defence: the mobilisation of military and civilian resources against threats ranging from armed attack to systemic crises. At its core lies the coordination of armed forces, public institutions, critical infrastructure, and society in order to secure resilience. In principle, contemporary total defence rests on two pillars: a whole-of-government approach, integrating policy and resources across sectors, and a whole-of-society approach, recognising that security depends on the active participation of business, civil society, and citizens.

During the Cold War, total defence gained prominence especially in small or non-aligned European states. Countries such as Finland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia rejected offensive doctrines and countered vulnerability by mobilising society to protect territory, infrastructure, and vital services. After 1990, as conventional threats receded, total defence gave way to narrower notions of civil protection and broader concepts of societal security. Russia's interventions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, together with NATO's growing emphasis on resilience and "comprehensive defence", have revived total defence as a central organising principle of national and collective security.

Despite its renewed policy relevance, scholarship on total defence remains fragmented. Research is often organised around single countries, sectors, or policy domains, and employs divergent terminologies and conceptual frameworks. While this diversity has generated valuable insights, it has also produced a disjointed literature that hampers systematic comparison and cumulative knowledge development. This article addresses that gap by approaching total defence as a form of multilevel governance. Because total

defence spans territorial levels, policy sectors, and societal actors, it lends itself to analysis through a perspective that captures vertical, horizontal, and cross-sectoral coordination within and beyond the state. Viewed in this way, the field's otherwise separate strands of research can be brought into clearer relationship and analysed in a common comparative language.

Building upon a comprehensive review of the state of the art, the article applies a multilevel-governance perspective to total defence and develops from it an analytical framework and research agenda that are structured yet open to theoretical diversity. It does so through four dimensions of total defence governance: domestic vertical governance, transnational linkages, cross-sectoral coordination, and horizontal state-society relations. The aim is to provide a coherent foundation for future scholarship and to situate total defence within wider debates on governance and resilience.

2. State of the Art

During the Cold War, only a few studies focused on the territorial defence arrangements of smaller or non-aligned states (see Mendershausen, 1980; Roberts, 1976). The more benign geopolitical climate of the 1990s further reduced interest, with few exceptions (see Bowen, 1997). Although research has since expanded, scholarship on total defence remains fragmented across national languages and models, reflecting distinct geopolitical settings, historical legacies, and administrative traditions. Terminologies diverge and priorities shift. This diversity mirrors the fluid nature of total defence. As Noll and Rongved (2025, p. 261) note, there is no single blueprint; instead, total defence exists as a "multiverse" of distinct systems bound by shared principles.

Against this background, the present review seeks to bring greater order to a dispersed field. It clarifies the place of total defence among related concepts, traces the main publication trends and country patterns, identifies the principal themes in the literature, and considers the degree of theoretical and methodological elaboration that the field has so far achieved.

2.1 Total Defence and its "Cousins"

One difficulty in working with the concept of total defence is that it has several "cousins" that overlap with, but are not identical to, it in scope or level of analysis. The form of a total defence system varies by country and often merges with related doctrines or theoretical constructions – such as comprehensive security, civil defence, comprehensive defence, and societal security – until the boundaries between them become blurred. These adjacent concepts also complicate comparison, since each carries its own ambiguities, institutional context, and disciplinary tradition.

"Comprehensive security" (Jauhiainen and Schiffling, 2025; Kari, 2023) is the term most notably used in Finland, broadly akin to societal security, within which the country's total defence remains firmly embedded. This may be seen as an established terminological anomaly. A direct translation of the Finnish term *kokonaisturvallisuus* would be "total security", whereas the adopted English rendering, "comprehensive security", usually also carries rather different connotations. In OSCE (2010) usage, for example, comprehensive security denotes a broad understanding of security that explicitly emphasises its non-military dimensions. The official Finnish *Vocabulary of Comprehensive Security* (Sanastokeskus, 2017) implicitly acknowledges this ambiguity by recommending the phrase 'concept for comprehensive security' when referring specifically to the Finnish doctrine in the context of national defence.

Other countries, too, have been terminologically creative in defining their own versions of what is, in substance, a total defence model. Latvia, for example, initially used the concept of total defence as part of a broader state defence framework. After joining NATO, however, the emphasis shifted towards collective defence. At the same time, the term "comprehensive national defence" emerged as an alternative, especially when stressing the national dimension of defence policy within NATO (Bērziņa, 2020). In Estonia, the concept of "comprehensive approach" gained currency alongside NATO membership, although total defence was still used particularly when referring to societal efforts in support of the military during wartime rather than to an interagency-style approach. The older concept of "territorial defence", in turn, is often understood as part of comprehensive national defence and may refer

both to military defence and to local internal security as a specific form of total defence (Veebel et al., 2020; Stringer, 2022). In such cases, terminological variation is not merely semantic but may also reflect broader shifts in strategic orientation and institutional anchoring.

"Comprehensive defence", in contrast, is primarily a NATO concept and strategy promoted to member states (NATO, 2020a; NATO, 2020b), closely aligned with many core principles of the concept of total defence used in this article. While some NATO states have framed their systems under the comprehensive defence label, the academic and analytical literature using it remains limited. One factor that makes the term difficult to delimit analytically is its frequent use in cyber security contexts, where comprehensive defence typically refers to a holistic organisational or corporate strategy for preventing, mitigating, and responding to cyber-attacks.

In most cases, total defence is understood as a combination of, and collaboration between, the military and civilian spheres, making "civil defence" integral to the total defence concept. This is not a new concept. The roots of civil defence lie in wartime efforts to organise air-raid precautions, sheltering arrangements, and warning systems for non-combatants. During the Cold War, the concept expanded to include large-scale evacuation plans in the event of nuclear war (Alexander, 2002). Much of the later literature, however, came to treat civil defence in a broader all-hazards sense that does not necessarily presuppose a hostile state adversary, bringing it closer to the concept of civil protection, which partly replaced civil defence after the Cold War. A significant share of this literature is also historical rather than concerned with contemporary total defence, and it often emphasises the technical aspects of protection rather than civil defence as a system of governance.

Beyond these examples, numerous terms overlap with total defence while differing in scope, threat focus, and level of analysis. These include civil security, crisis management, disaster risk management, emergency management, homeland security, human security, internal security, safety

management, societal safety, and societal security. Of these, "societal security" has been particularly important as an attempt to establish greater conceptual clarity, especially in the Nordic countries and the wider Baltic Sea region, where it has often served as a common English-language reference point (Aaltola et al., 2018; Larsson and Rhinard, 2021). Yet it reached its limits once the Russian military threat became explicit again. In Sweden, societal security has therefore largely been superseded by total defence, or more specifically by its societal dimension, civil defence. In Norway, societal security remains an official policy area, but after 2022 it has increasingly been blurred by the renewed emphasis on total defence, and particularly by the amalgam "total preparedness" (Pursiainen, Karlsson, and Johansson, 2026). In Denmark, by contrast, the notion of "society's comprehensive emergency preparedness" has gained some traction, but the country still lacks a unified concept of comprehensive national defence integrating military and non-military means (Obling, 2025).

Taken together, these examples show that total defence forms part of a broader family of concepts concerned with the organisation of security and resilience across society. A systematic comparison of such adjacent concepts would be valuable in its own right. However, it lies beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on total defence as an explicitly articulated doctrine. For that reason, these related concepts are left outside the statistical review in Sections 2.2-2.4. Including them systematically would broaden the scope considerably and blur the analytical boundaries of the review. At the same time, the research agenda developed in Section 3 addresses themes and tensions that remain relevant across differently labelled arrangements linking military, civilian, and non-state actors.

2.2 Publication Trends and Country Coverage

The statistical part of the review applies a strict criterion to avoid biased comparison and conceptual sprawl: only English-language publications explicitly containing "total defence" in the title were included in Tables 1-5. Within these limits, the review is reasonably comprehensive. It covers all identified peer-reviewed articles, scholarly policy analyses, and book chapters

indexed in Google Scholar between 2000 and 2025, excluding brief sketches and policy notes.[1] Using this method, sixty-five articles and book chapters were identified; their annual distribution is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of English-language publications with "total defence" in the title, 2000-2025

Year	Number of articles / book chapters
2025	22
2024	9
2023	10
2022	9
2021	4
2020	5
2018	2
2017	1
2013	1
2010	1
2007	1
Total	65

The curve rises sharply in the 2020s. A few publications reflect the COVID-19 period, when civil-military cooperation extended into public health, but most register heightened perceptions of the Russian threat after 2022. The 2025 peak stems largely from *European Total Defence* (Rongved, 2025a), which covers eleven national cases as well as NATO's role. The 2023 surge reflects both Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the edited volume *Total Defence Forces in the Twenty-First Century* (Berndtsson, Goldenberg, and von Hlatky, 2023).

Table 2, in turn, provides an indicative map of country coverage, drawing on the same title-based English-language publication set, and the exclusions outlined in Section 2.1. While it may not reflect the full scholarly landscape or

[1] Several search strategies were tested, and Google Scholar provided the most comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature. For the period 2000–2025, Web of Science, for example, yields 32 hits for "total defence" under "Topic" (including keywords, abstracts, and Web of Science indexing terms), but only 12 under "Title". By contrast, a manual title-based Google Scholar search identified the 65 publications analysed in this article.

the practical realities of the countries concerned, it nevertheless shows where total defence has attracted significant scholarly attention.

Table 2. Countries covered in English-language publications with "total defence" in the title, 2000-2025

Country/ Region	Frequency	References
Canada	1	Meharg, 2023
Denmark	2	Obling, 2025; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024
Estonia	8	Jordan, 2024; Veebel, 2025; Ploom, Śliwa, and Haas, 2025; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Grigalashvili, 2023; Szymański, 2020; Veebel et al., 2020; Paulauskas, 2013
Finland*	4	Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, 2025; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Grigalashvili, 2023; Szymański, 2020
Georgia	1	Grigalashvili, 2023
Germany	1	Lange, 2018
Ireland	1	Segell, 2023
Israel	1	Ben-Shalom and Ben-Ari, 2023
Latvia	5	Jordan, 2024; Rostoks, 2025; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Grigalashvili, 2023; Paulauskas, 2013
Lithuania	8	Česnakas, 2025; Jordan, 2024; Rogulis, 2025; Rogulis, 2024; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Grigalashvili, 2023; Zdanavičius and Statkus, 2020; Paulauskas, 2013
Norway	5	Rongved, 2025c; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Berndtsson, Obling, and Østensen, 2023; Grigalashvili, 2023; Pollock and Steen, 2021
New Zealand	1	Johanson, 2022
Poland	4	Szymański, 2025; Grigalashvili, 2023; Czornik, 2022; Johanson, 2022
Singapore	4	Matthews and Bintang Timur, 2024; Grigalashvili, 2023; Prakash, Hee, and Lee, 2023; Matthews and Yan, 2007
Serbia	1	Golubović, Žnidaršič, and Stojković, 2025
Sweden	21	Berndtsson, 2025; Malmström and Berndtsson, 2025; Montelius and Kvarnlöf, 2025; Victor Tillberg, Berndtsson, and Tillberg, 2025; Antai and Hellberg,

		2024; Angstrom and Ljungkvist, 2024; Berndtsson, 2024; Ljungkvist, 2024; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Berndtsson, Obling, and Østensen, 2023; Malmberg et al., 2023; Grigalashvili, 2023; Olsson and Ruffa, 2023; Berg and Pettersson, 2022; Czarny and Kubiak, 2022; Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester, 2023; Gotkowska, 2022; Lallerstedt, 2021; Larsson, 2021; Tolis, 2018; Lindgren and Ödlund, 2017
Switzerland	2	Stringer, 2025
Malaysia	1	Liaw, Ibrahim, and Yacob, 2024
Netherlands	1	Noll et al., 2025
Ukraine	1	Glebov and Kuzmin, 2025
UK	1	Pollock and Steen, 2021
US	1	Grespin, 2023
Yugoslavia (hist.)	1	Dulić and Kostić, 2010
Comparative / generic**	7	Noll and Rongved, 2025; Rongved, 2025b; Friis and Tamnes, 2024; Jordan, 2024; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Grigalashvili, 2023; Pollock and Steen, 2021; Szymański, 2020; Paulauskas, 2013
NATO, EU etc.	9	Bargues, Joseph, and Juncos, 2025; Hilde, 2025; Friis and Tamnes, 2024; Bonomi and Bergonzini, 2022; Majchrowska, 2022; Missiroli and Rühle, 2021; Bērziņa, 2020; Szymański, 2020; Wither, 2020

*Source: Google Scholar. *Does not include the broader literature on "comprehensive security"; see the short discussion in the context of Finland in Sections 2.1 and 2.2 concerning Table 3. **Some of these comparative articles are included also in a country comparison as they include substantial country profiles.*

A closer reading of the material, despite its limitations, permits a tentative classification of countries according to the extent to which total defence doctrine shapes their security and defence policies, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Categories of total defence development: illustrative country cases

Label	Description	Example
Sustainers	Countries with well-developed and sustained total defence systems.	Finland
Rebuilders	Countries that dismantled their total defence systems post-Cold War but have rapidly rebuilt them.	Norway, Sweden
Former practitioners	Countries with dismantled Cold War-era total defence systems, reconsidering their renewal.	Denmark, Switzerland (perhaps Netherlands)
Latecomers	Countries recognising the need for total defence but with delayed progress or initial resistance.	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine (perhaps Germany)
Outliers	Countries with unique or regionally distinct total defence systems.	Singapore (perhaps Malaysia)
Outsourcers	Countries focusing on reserve forces, private military companies, or other civilian formations.	Canada, Ireland, Israel, United States
Facilitators	Institutions promoting total defence through their infrastructure resilience policies and coordination.	NATO, European Union

As Table 3 indicates, Finland occupies a distinctive place among the "sustainers". Under the criteria used in Table 2, which focus specifically on the label of total defence, the number of related publications remains modest, despite Finland's reputation as a model of the concept. The scholarly landscape appears much more substantial, however, when one considers the term comprehensive security, under which the Finnish total defence system is typically operationalised (see Perheentupa, 2026; Pursiainen, Karlsson, and Johansson, 2026; Jauhiainen and Schiffling, 2025; Kari, 2023; Elonheimo, 2021; Valtonen and Branders, 2021). The key point is that, unlike many of its peers, Finland never dismantled its Cold War-era system, but retained and refined it, preserving the core elements of its total defence system, including conscription, civil defence infrastructure, and later its comprehensive security

doctrine. Recently, the country has shifted from a cross-sectoral whole-of-government approach towards a broader whole-of-society emphasis.

By contrast, Sweden (see Berndtsson, 2025) and Norway (see Rongved, 2025c) belong to the "rebuilders". These countries phased out their systems after the Cold War but rediscovered their necessity after 2014, and even more clearly after 2022. In both cases, total defence has re-emerged in official documents, legislation, and practice as the core doctrine for integrating civilian security and defence with military defence. This relatively rapid development has been facilitated by both countries' pre-existing and well-functioning societal security systems (Pursiainen, Karlsson, and Johansson, 2026).

A third group comprises "former practitioners" seeking renewed doctrine: Denmark (Obling, 2025), Switzerland (Stringer, 2025), and possibly the Netherlands (Noll et al., 2025). Once home to robust Cold War-era total defence systems, they dismantled them but now reconsider their revival. Switzerland, once a "total defence paragon", is now seen as a "total defence pupil" (Stringer, 2025). Current assessments, however, suggest that the prospects for re-doctrinalising total defence in these cases remain uncertain.

The "latecomers" include, most notably, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, which fully recognised the need for total defence only after 2022. While the concept of total defence is not new to these countries, NATO membership and NATO's concept of comprehensive defence somewhat shifted attention towards collective efforts. In Estonia, the term total defence, which was widely used in the 1990s, 'was dropped in the 2000s in favour of an integrated NATO defence and deterrence posture, thus adopting a comprehensive approach' (Veebel et al., 2020, p. 3). In Latvia, the evolving 'total defence approach was dropped because it was seen as incompatible with the NATO collective defence principles' (Atmante, 2020, p. 3). Similarly, in Lithuania, NATO membership was 'seen as rendering total defence obsolete' (Paulauskas, 2013, pp. 75, 80). It was only Russia's aggression in Ukraine that 'brought a total defence approach back into focus in discussions' in Estonia, for instance (Veebel, 2025, p. 135). The same can be said concerning Latvia

and Lithuania, as well as Poland, which, 'facing increasingly aggressive Russia, is gradually adopting solutions typical for total defence' (Szymański, 2025, p. 197). Consequently, the literature increasingly focuses on total defence and asks whether this realisation came too late, after years of limited progress (see Veebel, 2025, pp. 143-145; Rostoks, 2025, pp. 161-164; Česnakas, 2025, p. 189). Serbia (Golubović, Žnidaršič, and Stojković, 2025) and Georgia (Grigalashvili, 2023) similarly seek to establish such systems. These states tend to prioritise whole-of-government coordination, while whole-of-society approaches require deeper societal transformation (Zdanavičius and Statkus, 2020). Ukraine, forced to build its total defence amid war (Glebov and Kuzmin, 2025), and Germany, for which the literature contains only a single such reference (Lange, 2018), also fit this group.

From a European perspective, the clearest "outlier" is Singapore, a small state in a precarious geopolitical setting, represented by some scholarly interest (mostly policy notes). Its total defence system, launched in 1984, inspired by Sweden and Switzerland, is deeply embedded in public consciousness through both its whole-of-society ethos and the annual Total Defence Day (Matthews and Yan, 2007; Kuah, 2009; Ong, 2011). The framework comprises five "pillars" – psychological, civil, social, economic, and military – to which a sixth, digital pillar was added in 2019 as a "force multiplier" for a small and vulnerable state (Matthews and Bintang Timur, 2024). The concept has also created some academic and policy interest in Malaysia (Siang, 2019; Liaw, Ibrahim, and Yacob, 2024), New Zealand (Johanson, 2022), and recently also in Australia (Jones and Maher, 2026).

Countries such as Canada, Ireland, Israel, and the United States (represented in Table 2 mainly through a single edited volume Berndtsson, Goldenberg, and von Hlatky, 2023) may be seen as "outsourcers". Alongside regular armed forces, they rely on private military companies and other civilian formations, supplemented by reserve forces. These elements may support aspects of total defence, but do not necessarily indicate a broader whole-of-government or whole-of-society foundation for national security.

Finally, several contributions view NATO, and to a lesser extent the EU, as "facilitators" of total defence. NATO defines civilian and societal resilience as

'a national responsibility and a collective commitment' (NATO, 2021). Its evolving concept of comprehensive defence emphasises the protection of critical infrastructure and the strengthening of resilience through baseline national requirements (NATO, 2025; see also Jauhiainen and Schiffling, 2025), grounded in a reinterpretation of Article 3. The EU pursues a parallel, legally binding agenda on critical infrastructure resilience (European Union, 2022), prompting joint EU-NATO initiatives to align priorities (EU and NATO, 2023). One study (Noll et al., 2025) even envisages a form of "collective total defence" with NATO as the coordinating hub.

2.3 Key Themes

What, then, are the main recurring themes in the literature? Most contributions address several themes at once. For the purposes of this review, the material has been grouped into broader categories, summarised in Table 4. Although necessarily interpretive, this classification nevertheless provides an indicative picture of the field's prevailing scope and priorities.

As Table 4 shows, two overlapping clusters dominate: civil-military cooperation and cross-sectoral coordination. The former leans towards a whole-of-society paradigm, the latter towards a whole-of-government approach. Other recurrent themes such as resilience, societal trust, public-private partnerships, and vital societal functions, including critical infrastructure, all point in the same broad direction. The literature as a whole adopts an expansive understanding of security, and recent attention to transboundary and international dimensions has added a further layer of governance.

Table 4. Key themes in contemporary total defence research

Key themes	Frequency	References
Civil-military cooperation	31	Berndtsson, 2025; Česnakas, 2025; Glebov and Kuzmin, 2025; Golubović, Žnidaršič, and Stojković, 2025; Hilde, 2025; Malmström and Berndtsson, 2025; Noll et al., 2025; Noll and Rongved, 2025; Rongved, 2025b; Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, 2025; Stringer, 2025; Szymański, 2025; Veebel, 2025; Victor Tillberg, Berndtsson, and Tillberg, 2025; Antai and Hellberg, 2024; Ben-Shalom and Ben-Ari, 2023; Friis and Tamnes, 2024; Jordan, 2024; Berndtsson, Obling, and Østensen, 2023; Grespin, 2023; Meharg, 2023; Olsson and Ruffa, 2023; Segell, 2023; Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester, 2023; Bonomi and Bergonzini, 2022; Czornik, 2022; Jones and Mehan, 2022; Pollock and Steen, 2021; Missiroli and Rühle, 2021; Lallerstedt, 2021; Matthews and Yan, 2007
Coordination	18	Berndtsson, 2025; Česnakas, 2025; Glebov and Kuzmin, 2025; Golubović, Žnidaršič, and Stojković, 2025; Hilde, 2025; Noll et al., 2025; Noll and Rongved, 2025; Rongved, 2025b; Rongved, 2025c; Rostoks, 2025; Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, 2025; Szymański, 2025; Veebel, 2025; Matthews and Bintang Timur, 2024; Rogulis, 2024; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Pollock and Steen, 2021; Lange, 2018
Capacities	17	Česnakas, 2025; Glebov and Kuzmin, 2025; Golubović, Žnidaršič, and Stojković, 2025; Noll et al., 2025; Ploom, Śliwa, and Haas, 2025; Rostoks, 2025; Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, 2025; Stringer, 2025; Szymański, 2025; Veebel, 2025; Czarny and Kubiak, 2022; Gotkowska, 2022; Stringer, 2022; Lallerstedt, 2021; Szymański, 2020; Paulauskas, 2013; Matthews and Yan, 2007
State-society relations	16	Česnakas, 2025; Glebov and Kuzmin, 2025; Golubović, Žnidaršič, and Stojković, 2025; Montelius and Kvarnlöf, 2025; Noll et al., 2025; Noll and Rongved, 2025; Rogulis, 2025; Rogulis, 2024; Rongved, 2025b; Rostoks, 2025; Szymański, 2025; Veebel, 2025; Matthews and Bintang Timur,

		2024; Czarny and Kubiak, 2022; Czornik, 2022; Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester, 2023
International frameworks	11	Hilde, 2025; Noll and Rongved, 2025; Veebel, 2025; Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, 2025; Szymański, 2025; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Bonomi and Bergonzini, 2022; Gotkowska, 2022; Majchrowska, 2022; Missiroli and Rühle, 2021; Matthews and Yan, 2007
Threat pictures	10	Noll and Rongved, 2025; Ploom, Śliwa, and Haas, 2025; Rogulis, 2025; Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, 2025; Rogulis, 2024; Angstrom and Ljungkvist, 2024; Jordan, 2024; Ljungkvist, 2024; Berg and Pettersson, 2022; Szymański, 2020; Lange, 2018
Resilience	9	Golubović, Žnidaršič, and Stojković, 2025; Hilde, 2025; Montelius and Kvarnlöf, 2025; Noll and Rongved, 2025; Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, 2025; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Bonomi and Bergonzini, 2022; Wither, 2020; Zdanavičius and Statkus, 2020
Vital societal functions	8	Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, 2025; Szymański, 2025; Antai and Hellberg, 2024; Matthews and Bintang Timur, 2024; Gotkowska, 2022; Szymański, 2020; Tolis, 2018; Matthews and Yan, 2007
Public-private partnership	7	Berndtsson, 2025; Česnakas, 2025; Rongved, 2025b; Rostoks, 2025; Szymański, 2025; Malmberg et al., 2023; Matthews and Yan, 2007

2.4 Theoretical Maturity

Much of the total defence literature lacks explicit theoretical framing. Although it provides valuable empirical grounding, it leaves ample scope for more analytically ambitious, theory-informed research. At the same time, a smaller but significant body of explicitly theoretical work, exemplified in Table 5, points to differing foci, foundations, and methodologies.

Table 5. Examples of theoretical approaches in total defence research, 2018-2025

Article	Focus/subject	Theoretical approach	Methodology
Montelius and Kvarnlöf, 2025	Vulnerability and resilience framings in Swedish total defence.	Post-structural analysis connecting security, resilience, and neoliberal governmentality.	Qualitative study of Swedish total defence policies via Bacchi's WPR model.
Malmström and Berndtsson, 2025	Identity work in the Swedish Home Guard and defence willingness.	Identity theory on norms and relational comparisons.	Qualitative study of Swedish Home Guard communication materials and interviews.
Rogulis, 2025	While the Lithuanian Parliament's (the principal) strategy involved all sectors of society and business, the government and military (agents) misrepresent it.	Principal-agent theory.	Qualitative analysis based on official documents and semi-structured interviews.
Victor Tillberg, Berndtsson, and Tillberg, 2025	Local-regional civil-military collaboration in Swedish total defence.	Security-network lens on structural and relational collaboration dynamics.	Exploratory case study based on documents and stakeholder interviews.
Angstrom and Ljungkvist, 2024	Typology of total defence based on "total war" ideas.	Strategic studies lens connecting total war and total defence logics.	Conceptual analysis creating a typology of total defence strategies.
Antai and Hellberg, 2024	Swedish total defence logistics and civil-military responses to COVID-19.	Compares logistics theory and pandemic practice, revealing coordination mismatches.	Comparative case study applying pattern matching to Sweden's Covid-19 response.
Ljungkvist, 2024	Sweden's total defence revival	Governmentality framework analysing moral,	Genealogical case study using "martial

	shaped by hybrid-threat logic.	epistemological, and strategic rationalities.	empiricism" to analyse defence materials.
Berndtsson, 2024	Sweden's renewed total defence counters hybrid threats via societal-territorial frameworks.	Constructivist framing of threat perception and political communication.	Frame analysis of Swedish Defence Commission narratives.
Rogulis, 2024	How Latvian leaders frame Russia as a threat through securitising discourse.	Securitisation theory of threat construction and audience response.	Discourse analysis of Latvian speeches and securitising moves.
Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester, 2023	Gendered effects of civil-military mobilisation in Swedish total defence.	Feminist-critical securitisation framework.	Qualitative study using interviews and documents.
Pollock and Steen, 2021	Crisis management resilience in UK and Norway.	Resilience-based crisis management using the Viable System Model.	Comparative case study using VSM and document analysis.
Zdanavičius and Statkus, 2020	Lithuania's total defence and resilience in great-power competition.	Neoclassical realism combining systemic, domestic, and cognitive variables.	Interviews and document analysis of Lithuania's defence strategy cases.
Tolis, 2018	Civil defence influence on land-use planning and resilience in Sweden.	Empirical, practice-focused approach informed by knowledge management.	Workshops and abductive case study of the civil defence sector.

As Table 5 shows, theoretical frameworks in the field are diverse and serve different purposes. They range from governance theory (Tolis, 2018; Pollock and Steen, 2021; Antai and Hellberg, 2024; Ljungkvist, 2024; Victor Tillberg, Berndtsson, and Tillberg, 2025) to securitisation, constructivist framing, identity, and discourse-theoretical approaches (Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester,

2023; Berndtsson, 2024; Rogulis, 2024; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024; Malmström and Berndtsson, 2025; Montelius and Kvarnlöf, 2025), as well as strategic studies, strategic culture, and international relations theory (Zdanavičius and Statkus, 2020; Angstrom and Ljungkvist, 2024; Wrange, Bengtsson, and Brommesson, 2024).

Taken together, this literature shows that total defence research engages with the two main dimensions of contemporary total defence: joined-up working across government and collaboration between government, the private sector, and civil society. Yet existing theorising has often addressed these dimensions through particular components, such as civil-military cooperation, critical infrastructure, resilience, public-private partnerships, or societal trust, rather than as parts of a broader governance configuration. The issue, then, is not the absence of theory as such, but the lack of a more integrative, system-level perspective capable of analysing total defence as a form of defence governance organised vertically across territorial levels and horizontally across sectors and actor types.

This is where multilevel governance becomes useful: less as an individual theoretical construction than as a meta-level framework. It does not prescribe a single institutional blueprint for total defence, nor does it imply that total defence exists outside established political-administrative systems. It provides an overarching comparative frame for analysing how contemporary total defence broadens defence beyond a predominantly hierarchical, military-centred model and reorganises it through relations among national, regional, local, transnational, public, private, and civic actors. It thereby brings otherwise scattered questions into a common field of analysis. These concern the distribution of authority, coordination where hierarchy is incomplete, the allocation of responsibility across levels and sectors, and the growing tension between nationally anchored defence systems and the transnational frameworks within which they increasingly operate.

3. A Multilevel-Governance Perspective on Total Defence

Implicit in much of the literature is that total defence is not simply an extension of military defence, but a broader form of public governance. It operates across territorial levels, connects military and civilian sectors, and depends on structured relations between state and non-state actors. These features closely align it with the core assumptions of multilevel governance theory. Viewing total defence through this lens is therefore both natural and productive. It shifts attention from individual components of total defence to the relations that connect them: domestic chains of authority, transnational commitments, cross-sectoral dependencies, and state-society cooperation. It also provides a common vocabulary for comparing national systems without assuming that they follow a single institutional model.

This section develops two closely connected contributions. First, it adapts a multilevel-governance perspective to total defence by identifying four key dimensions through which the phenomenon can be analysed. Second, it develops an analytical framework and research agenda that organise the field's main governance questions around these dimensions and help identify priorities for future inquiry.

3.1 Four Governance Dimensions of Total Defence

Originating in studies of European integration, the multilevel governance approach examines how authority, responsibility, and problem-solving are shared across different levels of government, namely supranational, national, regional, and local, and between state and non-state actors, and between state and non-state actors (Bache and Flinders, 2004a; Marks and Hooghe, 2004; Piattoni, 2009; Di Gregorio et al., 2019; Maggetti and Trein, 2019; Bache, Bartle, and Flinders, 2016; Hooghe and Marks, 2021). Scholars commonly distinguish between two ideal types. Type I refers to a relatively stable system organised around central authority. Type II refers to more task-specific and overlapping institutions operating in a polycentric setting, that is, one with

several centres of authority (Marks and Hooghe, 2004). Later refinements consider degrees of centralisation and plural identities (Zürn, 2020), as well as whether governance is better understood as a structure or as a process (Tortola, 2017). In practice, most governance arrangements combine elements of both types.

Multilevel governance systems arise not merely as pragmatic responses to complexity, but as ways of allocating responsibilities beyond central command to the levels best equipped to act (Benz, 2019; Maggetti and Trein, 2019). This is particularly relevant to total defence, which operates through overlapping mandates, cross-sectoral dependencies, and structured relations between public, private, and civic actors.

Viewed in this way, total defence can be analysed through four dimensions: domestic vertical organisation, transnational linkages, cross-sectoral coordination, and horizontal relations among public, private, and civic actors. Together, they capture the distributed agency of total defence and provide a manageable structure for comparative analysis without reducing the phenomenon to a single hierarchy or sector.

3.1.1 Domestic Vertical Governance

In multilevel governance, the vertical dimension concerns how authority is distributed across supranational, national, regional, and local territorial tiers, and how these levels interact (Bache and Flinders, 2004b). In the context of total defence, this is not a mere exercise in administrative mapping but a core question of who governs defence, by what means, and with what coherence. At stake are the mechanisms by which strategic direction is translated into implementation.

Multilevel governance offers clear advantages, such as flexibility and a rational division of power, but also characteristic tensions (Daniell and Kay, 2017). Chief among these tensions is the balance between coordination and central authority. In the absence of strict hierarchy, coherence depends more on shared norms than on command (Hooghe and Marks, 2021). Decentralisation multiplies actors and jurisdictions, which intensifies power dynamics (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 27). Friction arises when national coherence

clashes with regional autonomy, especially where authority and resources are unevenly distributed (Daniell and Kay, 2017; Bolleyer and Börzel, 2010). The tension is ultimately political: sustaining alignment without coercion and resilience without reverting to centralised control.

3.1.2 Transnational Linkages

The modest literature on transboundary civilian crisis management (see Boin and Rhinard, 2008; Ansell, Boin, and Keller, 2010; Boin and Lodge, 2016; Adrot et al., 2018; Boin, 2019; Adrot et al., 2022) underscores the importance of institutional coordination in managing complex, multi-actor crises, such as terrorism, pandemics, cyberattacks, and climate-related disruptions, in which resilience must extend across the entire crisis cycle. In the context of total defence, the transnational dimension concerns how cross-border, intergovernmental, and supranational frameworks, including NATO, the EU, regional arrangements, and bilateral accords, shape national strategies in response both to such challenges and to a shared hostile state adversary. The central question is whether, and how far, such influence shifts authority away from the nation-state.

In multilevel governance, supranational authority seldom rests on coercion, but on functions voluntarily delegated by states. This follows a principal-agent logic (de la Porte, 2011), whereby governments (principals) entrust tasks to supranational bodies (agents) better placed to coordinate through superior information or resources. Delegation may take the form of formal competences, informal mechanisms (Føllesdal, Christiansen, and Piattoni, 2004), or gradual "creeping competences" (Pollack, 1994; Citi, 2014), meaning coordination without an explicit mandate. In total defence, both the EU and NATO display such tendencies, particularly in the harmonisation of critical infrastructure protection and resilience policies. Each step towards coordination strengthens collective capacity while incrementally constraining national autonomy.

3.1.3 Cross-Sectoral Coordination

By its nature, multilevel governance is cross-sectoral: complex challenges require the alignment of objectives and instruments across policy domains and territorial levels if strategic coherence is to be maintained (Busti and Fioretti, 2020). Such coordination is well established in other domains, most notably sustainable development and climate governance, where vertically and horizontally integrated arrangements have become the norm (Wagner, Torney, and Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Allen, Malekpour, and Mintrom, 2023). Total defence likewise depends on this cross-sectoral logic. Cross-sectoral coordination is central to the modern total defence whole-of-government approach. The approach itself is not new but originates from the early 2000s as an effort to avoid "pillarisation" and "silos" in public management (see Christensen and Lægreid, 2007).

In the context of total defence, this concerns how military and civilian actors, infrastructures, and policy sectors are brought into a coherent relationship in support of security and resilience. An obvious domain is civil-military cooperation (CIMIC), a cornerstone of NATO's comprehensive defence posture. NATO defines CIMIC as 'the co-ordination and co-operation, in support of the mission, between the NATO Commander and civil actors, including the national population and local authorities, as well as international, national and non-governmental organisations and agencies' (NATO, 2003, p. 1-1). Its core functions, namely military support to the civil environment, civilian support to the military, and liaison, require robust national arrangements, since NATO operates largely through member states in non-military domains (NATO, 2025).

While practical civilian support to the military can often be organised with relative ease when circumstances demand it, the deeper challenge lies at the cross-sectoral and multilevel interface, where differing institutional cultures, responsibilities, and hierarchies complicate cooperation. Norwegian exercises reveal weak cross-sector information flows (Rongved, 2025c, p. 85), and Swedish studies point to power asymmetries and limited trust (Victor Tillberg,

Berndtsson, and Tillberg, 2025). While some countries may perform well in cross-sectoral whole-of-government cooperation in their defence policies, others face challenges such as weak central direction, a disconnect between the centre and individual departments, the clustering of decision-making, a lack of alignment between budget and ambition, insufficient attention to implementation, and widespread deception, which the actors themselves perceive as combining to inhibit effective policymaking.

3.1.4 Horizontal Governance

In multilevel governance theory, "multilevel" refers to vertical layers of authority (i.e. local, regional, national, and supranational) while "governance" underscores the role of civil society, business, and other non-state actors (Bache and Flinders, 2004b). The horizontal dimension thus concerns networks and negotiated coordination among these actors. In the context of total defence, it encompasses formal and informal cooperation in planning, resourcing, and execution, linking state and non-state entities. Effective horizontal governance requires clear roles, adequate resources, and a cooperative ethos; otherwise, inclusion risks fragmentation (Allain-Dupré, 2020).

Civil society is expected to contribute to defence objectives within a whole-of-society model, yet this raises questions of autonomy. Its value lies partly in independent initiative, reservoirs of social trust, and the capacity for self-organisation across diverse communities. If mobilised too closely under state direction, this autonomy may narrow, reducing space for contestation, innovation, and alternative perspectives (see Ericson, Svenbro, and Wester, 2023). Coordination need not entail co-option (Hermansen et al., 2017), but genuine contestation often remains limited. The challenge, therefore, is not whether to involve civil society in total defence, but how to do so while preserving independent initiative, enabling bottom-up mobilisation alongside top-down coordination, and sustaining the legitimacy and diversity that make civic actors a distinctive source of societal resilience.

When it comes to the role of private business in total defence, the main issue is ensuring the vital societal functions that underpin both civil and military defence. This is why businesses are central to national, NATO, and EU resilience strategies. The core challenge is that governments remain legally responsible for safeguarding these functions, while the infrastructures that sustain them are largely owned and operated by private actors. States often lack the authority, capacity, or technical expertise to meet these responsibilities alone, making coordination with business unavoidable but inherently asymmetric. Although state and business interests may converge in total defence, this asymmetry typically produces a search for an acceptable balance between voluntary public-private partnership and mandatory regulation (see Pursiainen, 2009, pp. 732-736; Wiater, 2015). Even where interests align, globalised ownership structures may place critical capabilities beyond effective state control (Lallerstedt, 2021).

3.2 Analytical Framework and Research Agenda

Building on the discussion above, this section turns the multilevel governance perspective into a more concrete framework for studying total defence. The four dimensions identified earlier show the main areas in which total defence takes place. Tables 6 and 7 then set out the key governance questions that can be used to compare these areas.

Drawing on the multilevel governance literature (Bache and Flinders, 2004a; OECD, 2019; Local Public Sector Alliance, 2024), the article identifies a set of concepts that help organise the main themes already found in total defence research, such as threat perceptions, capabilities, civil-military cooperation, and critical societal functions. Thus, the categories in Table 6 do not replace existing themes in total defence research. Instead, they place those themes within a broader framework for comparing different cases. The categories should not be seen as a fixed typology but as a structured guide for analysis.

Table 6. Analytical issues for total defence research from a multilevel-governance perspective

Research Dimension	Key Question / Analytical Focus
1. Power and Authority Distribution	How formal and informal authority is allocated across governance levels, sectors, and actors, and how this affects strategic direction.
2. Legitimacy	The perceived rightfulness of decisions and institutions in the eyes of stakeholders, influencing compliance and cooperation.
3. Accountability	The clarity of responsibility for decisions and actions across levels and actors, and the mechanisms for holding them to account.
4. Efficiency	The ability of the governance system to achieve objectives with optimal use of resources, avoiding duplication or unnecessary complexity.
5. Coordination and Coherence	The extent to which policies, plans, and operations align across sectors, levels, and actors to form a unified effort.
6. Subsidiarity and Scale-Appropriateness	Ensuring that functions are assigned to the lowest effective level capable of handling them, while retaining strategic oversight.
7. Autonomy versus Control	Balancing decentralised initiative with central steering, especially in security-sensitive domains where state authority is paramount.
8. Integration versus Fragmentation	Managing the coexistence of multiple frameworks (EU, NATO, regional, bilateral) to prevent duplication and conflicting mandates.
9. Adaptability and Learning Capacity	The ability to adjust governance arrangements to evolving threats, incorporate lessons learned, and institutionalise improvements.
10. Path Dependency and Institutional Inertia	How historical legacies, doctrines, and administrative cultures shape current choices and limit reform possibilities.
11. Trust and Inter-Organisational Culture	The degree of confidence among actors at different levels and in different sectors, affecting collaboration and willingness to share information.

12. Transparency and Information Sharing	The openness of decision-making, the clarity of communication, and the handling of sensitive or classified information in multilevel settings.
13. Resource Asymmetries and Capacity Gaps	Disparities in funding, skills, and infrastructure between governance levels or sectors, influencing both autonomy and dependence.
14. Boundary Management	The practical navigation of jurisdictional, sectoral, and organisational boundaries, including conflict resolution and role clarification.
15. Normative Alignment and Value Consensus	The extent to which actors share core threat perceptions, strategic goals, and understandings of resilience.
16. Crisis-Time Centralisation	The tendency for authority to recentralise under acute stress, and the implications for multilevel balance before, during, and after emergencies.

The sixteen issues listed in Table 6 should not be understood as a definitive taxonomy. They represent a selective but theoretically grounded synthesis of the principal governance questions associated with the multilevel governance approach and most relevant to total defence. The purpose is not exhaustiveness, but analytical coverage: to capture the main tensions, dilemmas, and points of variation across the field while keeping the framework manageable for comparative use. In different empirical settings, some categories may be refined, combined, or supplemented.

The next step is to add the four multilevel-governance dimensions outlined above (domestic vertical governance, transnational linkages, cross-sectoral coordination, and horizontal governance) to the Table 6 questions in order to define the main arenas in which total defence operates as a multilevel governance system. Cross-referencing these four dimensions in Table 7 with the sixteen issues in Table 6, drawn from multilevel governance scholarship and adapted to total defence, results in a matrix that serves as a heuristic tool for comparing cases, highlighting recurring governance dilemmas, and identifying gaps for further research and policy development.

*Table 7. Analytical framework and research agenda for total defence from a multilevel-governance perspective**

Generic Issue (from Table 6)	Domestic Vertical Governance	Transnational / International / Supranational Governance	Cross-Sectoral Coordination	Horizontal Governance
1. Power and Authority Distribution	Allocation of strategic and operational powers between national, regional, and local levels	Division of competences between national governments and EU/NATO/regional frameworks.	Division of control between civilian and military authorities across sectors.	Balance of influence between state agencies and private/civic actors.
2. Legitimacy	Public trust in multi-level decision-making within national borders.	Perceived legitimacy of supranational or cross-border influence over national defence policy.	Acceptance of cross-sectoral decision-making by both civil and military stakeholders.	Societal perception of state-non-state partnerships as legitimate and inclusive.
3. Accountability	Clarity of responsibility for decisions and outcomes at each territorial level.	Mechanisms to hold supranational bodies or joint frameworks to account.	Attribution of responsibility for cross-sector outcomes, especially in crisis.	Accountability arrangements in public-private partnerships and civic mobilisation.
4. Efficiency	Avoidance of duplication and waste between governance levels.	Cost-effectiveness of participating in multiple international frameworks.	Efficient allocation of resources between civil and military domains.	Efficiency of contracting, partnerships, and voluntary contributions.

5. Coordination and Coherence	Alignment of plans and procedures between national, regional, and local actors.	Harmonisation of national and supranational strategies.	Coherence of operational planning across sectors.	Alignment of state priorities with those of private and civic actors.
6. Subsidiarity and Scale-Appropriateness	Deciding which functions should remain centralised vs. devolved to local levels.	Determining the proper scale for action (national vs. EU/NATO).	Delegating sectoral responsibilities to the most capable level.	Allocating roles to non-state actors without overburdening them.
7. Autonomy vs. Control	Regional/municipal discretion vs. national oversight.	National sovereignty vs. supranational influence.	Civilian sector autonomy vs. military command requirements.	Independent initiative by non-state actors vs. state steering.
8. Integration vs. Fragmentation	Cohesion of domestic governance arrangements.	Compatibility of overlapping EU/NATO/regional frameworks.	Bridging gaps between civilian and military planning cultures.	Uniting diverse societal actors under a coherent total defence effort.
9. Adaptability and Learning Capacity	Institutional flexibility to reform after crises.	Adjusting to evolving supranational norms and practices.	Cross-sector learning from joint exercises and operations.	Adaptive partnership models responding to new threats.
10. Path Dependency and Institutional Inertia	Historical legacies shaping vertical power structures.	Past experiences of integration/disintegration shaping external cooperation.	Enduring sectoral divisions or coordination habits.	Longstanding state-society relations constraining innovation.

11. Trust and Inter-Organisational Culture	Confidence between central and subnational authorities.	Mutual trust among states and international partners.	Trust between civil and military sectors.	Trust between government and private/civic actors.
12. Transparency and Information Sharing	Open communication across levels of government.	Data and intelligence sharing between states/frameworks.	Information exchange between civilian and military sectors.	Transparency in PPPs and civic engagement processes.
13. Resource Asymmetries and Capacity Gaps	Unequal resources between national, regional, and local levels	Disparities in capability between states in the same framework.	Unequal sectoral capacities affecting interdependence.	Capacity differences between state and non-state partners.
14. Boundary Management	Managing overlaps or gaps between administrative levels.	Navigating mandates across international institutions.	Clarifying jurisdictional lines between civil and military sectors.	Defining roles and limits in public-private and civic engagement.
15. Normative Alignment and Value Consensus	Shared threat perceptions within the domestic polity.	Consensus on norms and priorities across borders.	Agreement on principles guiding civil-military cooperation.	Shared security values between state and societal actors.
16. Crisis-Time Centralisation	Shifts in authority to the national level during emergencies.	Increased supranational coordination in large-scale crises.	Military command dominance in high-threat situations.	Stronger state direction of private and civic resources during crises

**Note: This table (Table 7) combines the conceptual issues outlined in Table 6 (rows) with the four dimensions of the framework discussed above (columns), highlighting their main points of intersection*

As Table 7 illustrates, the framework comprises 64 cells, each representing an issue arising from a particular combination of variables. It is therefore not intended to require analysis of the whole system in every study. It may be used comprehensively, but it also permits selective application: researchers may focus on one dimension, a small number of cells, or a particular intersection of variables, depending on the problem under investigation. In that sense, it is not a substitute for other theories or methods, but a structure within which they may be productively combined.

This framework does not assume a single fixed blueprint for how total defence operates. Instead, it highlights the essential variables that shape a total defence system. By focusing on these core elements, the framework clarifies how national security architectures are continuously shaped and reshaped over time. The matrix is best understood as a theoretically grounded heuristic. It serves as a meta-level organising device to locate where strategically important choices are made. It simultaneously maps the relationships between various actors and exposes where recurrent dilemmas emerge. This is particularly relevant in a field where contemporary total defence systems show both convergence, in their growing emphasis on resilience, coordination, and societal preparedness, and divergence in how these aims are institutionally anchored and balanced across national settings.

4. Conclusions

Total defence has undergone a marked revival, particularly in states bordering Russia. The events of 2014, and still more Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, prompted many governments to reinforce national defence systems. NATO's endorsement may further broaden the concept's appeal, as its emphasis on coordinated action across levels and sectors mirrors the logic of multilevel governance. The literature is expanding but remains uneven, shaped by national specificities, divergent terminology, and a focus on isolated components rather than integrated systems. Despite valuable insights, the absence of a structured, theory-informed framework continues to limit cumulative understanding.

This article addresses that gap by applying a multilevel governance perspective to total defence. The resulting analytical framework captures the interplay of vertical and horizontal coordination, cross-sectoral integration, and transboundary linkages, providing a coherent basis for comparative and policy-relevant inquiry while accommodating theoretical and methodological diversity. The renewed practical and academic attention to total defence enables a more systematic, theoretically grounded research programme that clarifies concepts, connects fragmented analyses, and situates national models within broader governance contexts. Such a programme can help explain how total defence functions and evolves in a changing security environment.

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