



READY FOR ANYTHING?

Sverre Puustusmaa considers whether or not we're best prepared for the next crisis

We seem to be frequently stepping from one crisis to another. From raging wildfires in California and waves of refugees reshaping borders, to global wars and political brinkmanship with President Trump's rhetoric about 'buying' Greenland and the Panama Canal. Natural disasters, wars, pandemics and supply chain breakdowns show us again and again that crises often strike without warning and frequently tend to be more serious than initially predicted. Whether it's floods, wildfires or the threat of war, these emergencies reveal critical vulnerabilities and highlight the vital need for security preparedness.

The recent flooding in the Czech Republic and Spain illustrates this point. In the Czech Republic, approximately 15,000 people were forced to leave

their homes and some 200,000 families lost power completely. Towns including Moravia were cut off and left isolated and vulnerable, with major rivers including the Vltava surging and transforming communities into isolated islands with scarce resources and a lack of security. The country's Prime Minister even admitted they were not prepared for the severity of the situation.

Similarly, Spain also recently experienced extreme flooding that severely tested its disaster response and security systems. The impact was devastating with roads submerged and communities isolated, meaning emergency supplies were very hard to deliver. People across both countries found themselves left vulnerable and without essential resources, underscoring the need for comprehensive security and readiness strategies.

Clearly governments have a key role to play here. Indeed, the levels to which they are prepared is often inferred from their commitment to defence and

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military spending to ensure they're well protected, have effective large-scale response and relief efforts, and are able to safeguard critical infrastructure assets. Yet the reality is that most countries and governments are still not fully equipped to deal with crises. There is a lot of talk about readiness and preparedness, but actual action is very low. Moreover, while global military spending reached a staggering \$2.24-trillion in 2022 in terms of investment in weaponry and machinery, buying weapons is not enough. Food, water, medication, shelter, clothing, blankets and all kinds of other supplies need to be budgeted for.

In the face of rhetoric from President Trump about how vital Greenland is to US security, the Danish government recently announced it will spend £1.6-billion on increasing and enhancing its military presence in the Arctic. The pledge comes after increasing talk coming out of the US about the crucially strategic location of its ballistic missile early-warning system located in the north west of Greenland.

Meanwhile, in early February the UK Prime Minister spoke in Brussels at a European Council meeting about the need for much better collaboration across Europe to counter state-threats, and particularly to ensure the security of sub-sea cables. The call from Sir Keir Starmer for increased cooperation between European leaders comes after the Royal Navy forced a Russian spy ship out of UK waters in late January, with the UK government believing it was attempting to spy on Britain's undersea cables and critical underwater infrastructure.

The threat from Russia of a direct attack on underwater cables to disrupt or cripple energy and communications is very real and extremely concerning. Russia has long possessed the capability to sabotage these cables after years of intelligence gathering via its fleet of deep-sea submarines.

Transatlantic cables are in many ways the cornerstone of the UK economy today, facilitating the real-time transfer of billions and billions of dollars in financial trades from Wall Street. Indeed, NATO estimates that \$10-trillion in daily financial transactions travel through these networks, with 99 percent of the world's data transmitted via subsea cables.

Our global reliance on subsea cable networks places a huge security question over their vulnerability to sabotage. It is estimated that AS MUCH AS 95-plus-percent of all global internet traffic is dependent on subsea cables despite increasing investment in satellite-based alternatives.

While this is something that previously may not have been common knowledge to the everyday person on the street, with 24/7 rolling news, the internet and social media, awareness about conflicts and the security threat to infrastructure such as underwater cables is now more common. However, that doesn't mean that the risk and threats haven't always been there; they have – we just have much wider awareness about them now, which is actually a good thing when you're talking about preparedness.

However, while awareness about security threats is important it does not alone help if people are not educated about what to do when a crisis occurs. Priority has been placed by governments on weaponry and defence measures, but educating citizens on how to act in times of crisis has for too long been

secondary. Relying on the public to know what to do and where to go without any specifically informed set of processes will only create a whole new set of problems.

Europe in particular is where we can expect to see even more conflict situations moving forward. Historically this is where we have seen things happen before, and while the situation may have been quiet for some time before Russia's attack on Ukraine, the reality with this level of Russian aggression is not a question of if it will happen again, but when.

So what we should be seeing is more countries facing this reality and ensuring they are best prepared. However, unfortunately too often this is not the case. If we look back at both the First World War and the Second World War many of the Western countries in particular thought there would be a political and reasonable way to resolve things, but all too often sadly real life shows this isn't the case.

THE UNSTABLE NATURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY LANDSCAPE REMAINS A BIG THREAT

In some respects history is starting to repeat itself now with Russia's hostility in Ukraine, and the overall landscape is not dissimilar from what we saw in the world 50-60 years ago when we look back through military history. The reality today is that governments are not preparing themselves in the best way to deal with the increasingly complex range of conflicts and security threats facing them.

Nobody is thinking about what could actually happen or doing proper scenario planning. In Europe in particular the growing threat is in areas such as the sabotaging of subsea cables and other attempts to disrupt or disable critical national infrastructure such as a country's water supply. We will see more attempts to disrupt connectivity and negatively hit the economy of countries in the coming years as much as we have boots on the ground. This is what Russia has been doing and continues to try to do in Ukraine.

Imagine a scenario in the UK whereby a nation state attack sees electricity taken away from London for two weeks. What would happen? Is there a Plan B in place to make sure everyone has enough warmth, food, back-up power and essentials often taken for granted to continue? In somewhere like the UK you would like to think so, but can we say for certain elsewhere?

Countries like Singapore and Switzerland have become role models in crisis readiness, adopting proactive policies to ensure their citizens are prepared for emergencies and kept secure. In Singapore, the city-state's National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) has a meticulous disaster plan that includes stockpiling essentials and regularly updating citizens on emergency security procedures.

Switzerland meanwhile is known for its extensive civil defence measures, mandating that each household keep a minimum stock of food and

essential items for two weeks. The government also conducts regular crisis management drills with both civilian and military resources, ensuring smooth, coordinated responses during actual emergencies and security situations.

However, other countries lag significantly when it comes to preparedness. Governments often respond to disasters by retrofitting policies rather than proactively managing risk. As we all see in Europe's recent floods, delayed reactions can leave citizens vulnerable, underscoring the need for proactive governance.

THE LIKES OF SINGAPORE AND SWITZERLAND HAVE BECOME ROLE MODELS IN CRISIS READINESS

Even though we have clear evidence of the human and economic toll crises and security threats pose, many governments remain underprepared. National leaders often cite the unpredictability of global events as reasons for inadequate planning. However, this excuse no longer holds; global temperatures are rising, extreme weather is becoming more frequent and the unstable nature of the international security landscape remains a pressing threat.

Preparedness is no longer a personal responsibility alone; it is a fundamental duty of governments to ensure that citizens have the tools, information and resources to live through security risks and times of crisis. However, the question remains: where is the investment in public safety? Why aren't more countries following the proactive

approaches of the likes of Singapore and Switzerland? This is an area the World Bank has sought to address with the creation of an expanded 'Crisis Preparedness Toolkit' at the beginning of this year to provide frameworks for resilience that nations can adopt. It is positioned as offering additional resources for countries looking to ensure they are most comprehensively protected during times of crisis and major security threats, including financial support for emergency response and insurance to cope with catastrophic events.

The reality is that the threats today are ever evolving and it's no good to sit back and assume you're best prepared. Again, think back to the Second World War when the Polish army had the biggest cavalry on horse-back – but that made no difference up against the advancements in tank warfare that Germany had. It's the same today when you think about the evolution of drones and other autonomous weapon systems. Some of these things are no longer new; there are more advanced threats coming all of the time. As someone once said, if you want to have peace then you have to prepare for war. That's obviously not a nice thing to acknowledge or accept, but in times of crisis preparedness is often the difference between resilience and tragedy.

The next crisis is not a question of if, but when. Now is the time for governments and citizens alike to prioritise readiness. We saw during the Covid-19 pandemic how different governments and societies reacted to the immediate crisis in vastly different ways, with a lot of immediate panic due to a lack of understanding and preparedness. It's vital that governments invest in proactive crisis management now and follow in the footsteps of countries that lead by example ●

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Singapore's National Emergency Management Agency carries out a training exercise

