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This is the published version of a paper published in .

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Victor Tillberg, L., Berndtsson, J., Tillberg, P. (2025)

Navigating Collaboration: Understanding Civil-Military Interactions in Swedish Total Defence From a Security Network Perspective

Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies, 8(1): 40-56

<https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.288>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

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Navigating Collaboration: Understanding Civil- Military Interactions in Swedish Total Defence From a Security Network Perspective

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to contribute to our knowledge of civil-military collaboration within the framework of contemporary Swedish total defence planning and organizing. The exploratory study focuses on perspectives on collaboration among civilian and military actors at the local and regional levels of the Swedish total defence network. Empirically, the study draws on official documents, policies, reports and interviews with civilian and military officials in Sweden. The analysis explores assumptions about, and understandings of, roles, relationships, shared goals, responsibilities and governance, pointing to several potential challenges to inter-organizational and inter-group collaboration. The study, showing how understandings and perspectives held by collaborators serve to shape the nature of their relations, identifies a potential need for collaborative actors, civil and military, capable of performing a “double grasp” – that is, of representing their organization while understanding and handling their counterpart’s perspective on (and often lack of knowledge about) their own organization and requirements. The article identifies several avenues for future research into civil-military collaboration in practice, and across country contexts.

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KEYWORDS:

civil-military collaboration;
security networks; total
defence; Sweden

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Victor Tillberg, L., Berndtsson,
J., & Tillberg, P. (2025).
Navigating Collaboration:
Understanding Civil-Military
Interactions in Swedish Total
Defence From a Security
Network Perspective.
*Scandinavian Journal of
Military Studies*, 8(1), pp.
40–56. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.31374/sjms.288](https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.288)

At the end of 2015, in light of a deteriorating security situation exacerbated by the Russian annexation of Crimea the previous year, the Swedish government decided to resume planning the execution of its total defence strategy (Government decision, 10 December 2015). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the concept of total defence has made an emphatic return across the Nordic and Baltic Sea regions. Internationally, similar trends can be traced, where concepts such as "whole force" (UK), "comprehensive security" (Finland), "total force" (USA) or "defence team" (Canada) signal a move towards collaborative and integrated defence arrangements designed to meet and deal with threats and crises (Goldenberg et al., 2019; Louth & Taylor, 2019; Valtonen & Branders, 2021; Berndtsson, Goldenberg, & von Hlatky, 2023).

Underlying such development is the need for nations to deal with threats both old and new – conventional war, transboundary crises, and, increasingly, non-traditional or hybrid threats (Boin, 2019; Bjørge & Høiby, 2024). The fundamental idea of total defence is that the combination of civil and military defence creates resilience and the ability to "deter a potential enemy by raising the cost of aggression and lowering the chances of its success" (Wither, 2020, p. 62). Collaborative civil-military interaction is thus at the heart of the total defence concept.

In Sweden, the current emphasis on total defence underscores the need for well-functioning collaboration across boundaries. Increasing the overall total defence capability requires planning and development involving public and private actors across all societal levels and sectors. As set out by the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF):

If Sweden is attacked, the Swedish Armed Forces will, with support from the rest of the total defence system, defend Sweden to buy time, create freedom of action and ultimately ensure the country's independence. ... The greatest possible defence effect is achieved through mutual support and civil-military collaboration." (Försvarsmakten 2021, p. 11).

Although the need for civil-military collaboration is clearly stated in myriad policies and decisions on Swedish total defence, it is neither simple nor problem-free. Research on total defence and crisis management collaboration has shown how a lack of communication, trust and unclear responsibilities, and differences in organizational culture and relationships between key personnel, can impede cross-sectoral or inter-organizational collaboration and governance (see, for example, Alvinus & Hedlund, 2024; Deiacio, 2024; Deverell & Ganic, 2024; Larsson et al., 2023; Christensen and Lægveid 2020; Parker et al., 2020). Other problem areas concern conflicts of goals and interests, and potential conflicts between civil (public) management principles and military traditions of command and leadership (Rosenius et al., 2017).¹

Total defence is not a formal organization in the traditional sense; it may be seen as a quantity of "collaborative arrangements" within what Whelan (2017) calls "security networks". These networks include both public and private and national and international organizations, interests, objectives and resources (McNamara, 2012). By definition, total defence involves "the whole of society" (Wither, 2020), including a number of actors and organizations from all sectors. Inter-organizational collaboration issues are clearly central to the development of Sweden's "new" total defence (Försvarsmakten 2002, 2012, Angstrom & Ljungkvist 2023, Alvinus & Hedlund 2024).² Its inherent complexity has consequences for leadership and collaboration – and, moreover, key elements of Sweden's total defence are still being developed, further challenging the ability of actors to act collectively.

One of the most important changes was the 2022 reform of the structure for civil defence and crisis preparedness, dividing the country into six civil defence areas, each with a responsible county administrative board, and ten preparedness sectors, each with a responsible government agency (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, 2023; SFS 2022:524;

1 For instance, private companies are commercial entities run on just-in-time principles that contrast sharply with the readiness and endurance Sweden's total defence planning aims to achieve (Rosenius et al., 2017).

2 It is also clear that the concept of collaboration has grown in importance over time. Collaboration appears 26 times in the 2002 Military Strategic Doctrine and 93 times in the 2012 edition (Försvarsmakten 2002, 2012).

SFS 2022:525; SOU 2021:25).³ Developments such as these, as well as additional requirements for adaptation brought about by the Swedish NATO membership, impact the structural and relational conditions for civil-military collaboration.

This article investigates collaboration from the perspective of both civilian and military actors alike. We understand collaboration to be a relational concept, a collective activity carried out jointly by actors in pursuit of specific goals. The relations between “civilian” and “military” actors, and their perspectives, are particularly relevant for understanding how representatives of seemingly disparate organizations, organizational cultures and professional identities understand collaboration within the framework of contemporary total defence. Thus, this exploratory study aims to further our understanding of civil-military collaboration in complex defence networks.

The study addresses the following questions: “How do Swedish civilian and military actors understand regional- and local-level collaboration?” and “What are the challenges for inter-organizational collaboration that can be identified in the light of organizational changes in Sweden’s total defence?” Theoretically, we draw on Whelan’s (2012, 2017) research on collaboration in security networks. Empirically, the qualitative analysis is based on a wide range of official documents, including policy documents on and evaluations of total defence collaboration, as well as interviews with representatives of civilian and military organizations at local and regional levels. By analysing perspectives on collaboration, we also gain an insight into how actors understand each other’s role in collaborative work and what opportunities and problems this, in turn, can generate.

The article proceeds as follows.

The section following provides an overview of relevant literature on collaboration and total defence. After this, we outline our theoretical framework; a section on research design and methods follows this. We then proceed to the analysis of perspectives of civil-military collaboration in total defence; in this section, Whelan’s network properties serve as analytical divisions to provide structure although, as we shall see, they are clearly interrelated and overlapping. Finally, we discuss our findings and outline several areas where more research is needed. The final section summarizes our findings, paving the way for a concluding discussion of potential challenges for civil-military collaboration in Sweden’s total defence.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL APPROACH: TOWARDS A NETWORK PERSPECTIVE ON TOTAL DEFENCE COLLABORATION

In the context of international interventions or peacekeeping missions, collaborative arrangements across civilian-military bounds are often referred to as civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) activities or operations (Brocades Zaalberg, 2018). In this study, we focus on civil-military collaboration in the context of total defence planning and organizing. Research on crisis management and total defence in Sweden includes a small but growing body of literature on collaboration across organizational, professional, and sectoral boundaries. These studies have pointed to several challenges and potential sources of “collaboration failure” (McNamara et al., 2020; see also Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Vangen & Huxham, 2011), including “inertia” rooted in an unwillingness or inability on the part of civilian and military actors to collaborate (Alvinus & Hedlund, 2024); unclear roles; mandates; governance structures; power imbalances; and a lack of interorganizational and interpersonal trust (see, for example, Hedlund & Lönngren, 2021; Larsson et al., 2023; Deverell, Alvinus & Hede, 2019; Bynander & Nordstedt, 2020). In addition, reports by, for example, the Swedish National Audit Office (2011, 2018) and the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI; see Norén, Roosberg, & Ödlund, 2012) have analysed and assessed different forms of civil-military collaboration and actors such as the SAF. The SAF have been found to be an important but “unclear” collaborative partner by civilian counterparts, and evaluations of, for example, the SAF Regional Command Staffs’ collaboration work have pointed to differences in geography, demographics and critical infrastructure that also affect collaboration efforts (e.g., Swedish National Audit Office, 2018; Försvarsmakten 2020).

³ For more information see www.msb.se, where the new ordinances SFS 2022:524 and SFS 2022:525 are also described.

While these studies and reports have contributed considerably to our understanding of civil-military collaboration, there is still a need for additional empirical research, conceptual development, and a focus on relational aspects of collaboration. In addition, total defence in Sweden is undergoing several important changes, indicating that sustained scholarly attention is needed in order to capture important developments. In this study, we follow previous calls for further research into the “soft side” of civil-military collaboration by investigating actors’ perceptions and understandings (e.g., [Larsson et al., 2023, p. 695](#)). In addition, we emphasize the need to focus on both military and civilian actors and perspectives to get at relational aspects of, and potential challenges to, collaboration ([Alvinus & Hedlund, 2024, p. 2-3](#); also [Deiaco, 2024](#)). Before outlining our analytical framework, a more detailed discussion of the concept of collaboration is called for.

Although interorganizational collaboration has gained prominence in recent years, the concept has long been studied across various fields – for instance, in public administration, organization studies, information technology, environmental studies and education ([Schrage, 1990](#); [Mitchell, 2004](#); [Slavin, 1995](#)). [Friedman \(2005, p. 201\)](#) describes the advancement of collaboration as a development motivated by the effects of globalization, which fosters “a move from a primarily vertical (command and control) value-creation model to an increasingly horizontal (connect and collaborate) model”.

[Gray \(1989, p. 5\)](#) has defined collaboration as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible”. Other commonly cited definitions include [Bardach \(1998, p. 8\)](#), who suggests that collaboration is “any joint activity by two or more agencies that is intended to increase public value by their working together rather than separately.”

[Sullivan](#) defines (public policy) collaboration as “a more or less stable configuration of rules, resources, and relationships generated, negotiated, and reproduced by diverse yet interdependent actors that enable them to act together in the pursuit of public purposes” ([2024, p. 4](#)).

Further, researchers have argued that collaboration differs from related concepts such as cooperation and coordination. For instance, [Gray \(1989\)](#) posits that cooperation and coordination may occur as part of the early process of collaboration, while collaboration is viewed as a longer-term process. [McNamara](#) suggests another distinction where coordination, cooperation, and collaboration are viewed as different degrees of integration along a spectrum of interaction ([McNamara 2012](#); also [Whelan, 2017, pp. 313-314](#)).

In short, there is no consensus on how to define concepts such as collaboration, or how it relates to similar concepts such as cooperation and coordination (see, for example, [Castañer & Oliveira, 2020](#); [Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006, 2015](#)). In this study, we follow [McNamara \(2012, p. 391\)](#) who defines collaboration as “an interaction between participants who work together to pursue complex goals based on shared interests and a collective responsibility for interconnected tasks which cannot be accomplished individually.” Collaboration differs from cooperation and coordination in terms of the nature of the tasks (complexity) to be jointly undertaken, the degree of actor integration and the extent to which interests and objectives are explicitly individual or shared. However, collaboration is not inherently “better” than, say, cooperative modes of interaction, nor does a high degree of formal organizational integration automatically produce greater goal achievement or impact ([Whelan, 2017, p. 314](#)).

In Swedish total defence planning and organizing, civil-military collaboration occurs on many different levels and across multiple sectoral, professional, and organizational boundaries ([Berndtsson, Obling & Østensen, 2023](#); [Alvinus & Hedlund, 2024](#); [Deiaco, 2024](#)). In addition, several different definitions or views of civil-military collaboration appear in official reports, policy documents, and guidelines from Swedish government agencies. In some contexts, collaboration is broadly described as “joint stakeholder activities” ([Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, 2018](#)) or seen as a “method” and as “the collaboration required to plan and carry out preparations to deal with situations during times of heightened alert and war” ([Försvarsmakten, 2016, p. 12](#)).

In this study, civil-military collaboration is understood as interaction that occurs in the context of total defence planning and organizing, involving actors working across civilian and military organizational and professional boundaries. Further, collaboration in Swedish total defence is often (but not always) mandated. Mandated collaboration occurs “when an external authority (mandator) initiates collaboration among other organizations or entities (collaborators) to achieve its goals and enforces the collaboration through governance structures” (Sullivan, Yeo & Kim, 2024, p. 324). In this context, it becomes relevant to examine more closely how individuals strategically positioned at the interface between their home organizations and the external environment perceive friction and obstacles in their work (Williams, 2002). We view these actors as potential *boundary spanners*, engaged in cross-sector collaboration, which evokes interdependencies, interrelationships, connections, and networks (Williams 2012, pp. 38–39; van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2014; Adkins, 2011; Kalkman, 2020). We also need, however, to understand the structure of total defence: the context in which actors interact or collaborate.

As noted above, total defence is a whole-of-society and whole-of-government policy or strategy that helps shape the organization of national defence. Civil-military collaboration is at the heart of this vast collection of actors, structures, and relations. Conceptually, we might think of this as an “assemblage” that spans public-private, civilian-military, and local-global divides (see, for example, Abrahamsen & Williams, 2011). In this study, however, we follow Whelan’s (2012, 2017) work in intelligence and security studies and conceptualize total defence as a dynamic “security network” (or as a set of interlinked networks) within which civilian and military actors (collaborators) interact on different levels and across the total defence domain. From this perspective, networked forms of organization comprise both structural (institutional) and relational properties that, in turn, shape the ways in which networks function, how they are governed, and the extent to which they are successful in addressing complex tasks or challenges (Whelan, 2012, pp. 18–22).

In this study, the structural properties of total defence form the context in which actors (or network nodes) relate to each other. Again, we do not claim to make a fully-fledged analysis of the entire total defence network; nor do we assess the ability of the network(s) to deliver on total defence goals and mandates. We are, rather, interested in how perceptions among local and regional level collaborators relate to structural and relational aspects, and what this can tell us about challenges to civil-military collaboration in total defence. Whelan (2017, p. 315, 2012, pp. 31–38) identifies five interdependent structural and relational properties (or what he also refers to as “levels”) that help us understand the internal dynamics and functioning of, and interaction in, security networks: structure, culture, policy, technology, and relationships. These are summarized in Table 1 below.

PROPERTIES (LEVELS)	DESCRIPTION
Structure	The design and development (adaptation) of networks, the (formal and informal) links between the constituent parts (or organizations), and how they are governed, for instance through shared or brokered forms of governance.
Culture	The culture in and of a network, including perceptions, norms and attitudes shaping a group’s (or organization’s) shared history, and their understanding and action in relation to specific problems.
Policy	Formal policies and procedures providing a framework for the network’s action; for example, the regulation of roles and responsibilities of actors, or the management of information sharing.
Technology	Infrastructure and protocols enabling information management and communication between security network actors and how it is used; for example, access to secure communication channels between actors or information security.
Relationships	Interaction between individuals, groups and organizations in security networks. Relationships can be formal or informal and require a certain level of (interpersonal or interorganizational) trust for them to work.

Table 1 Structural and Relational Properties of Security Networks.

(Adapted from Whelan, 2012, 2017).

We do not claim that these aspects or levels capture all possible features of total defence networks. Yet by exploring how actors’ perceptions and experiences of civil-military collaboration relate to these different properties, we can, as Whelan (2017, pp. 315–316)

argues, better understand how collaboration works in complex security networks. In this study, structure, culture, policy, technology, and relationships thus function as aspects through which perspectives on civil-military collaboration within Swedish total defence can be understood in relation to network characteristics and dynamics.

Methodologically, and as will be explained further below, we use the five aspects and their descriptions as broad themes to guide our analysis.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Following Whelan (2012, 2017), we focus on actors' understandings of network dynamics and perspectives on civil-military collaboration under the "new" Swedish total defence strategy. Empirically, this exploratory case study of civil-military collaboration within a total defence context concentrates on regional- and local-level collaboration. In addition to interview data, we have used a mixed method for data collection, with the empirical material comprising official documents and reports. The official documents and open-source texts included in the study cover official investigations and assessments of civil-military collaboration by, for example, the SAF, the Swedish National Audit Office (NAO), and the Swedish Defence Research Agency. The material also includes policy documents from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) and the SAF, as well as laws and guidelines that mandate and govern interorganizational collaboration. Taken together, this material provides an insight into the context, including organizational conditions, management, and formal objectives regarding civil-military collaboration on different levels of the total defence network.

To further investigate actor perspectives on collaboration, we conducted nine semi-structured interviews and follow-ups with a strategic sample of representatives at the regional and local levels, selected from both military and civilian organizations. All of the interviewees are placed at key departments or units in regional or local level organizations where they work directly with total defence planning and organizing. The military side is represented by officers in a Regional Command Staff, while civilian interviewees provide perspectives from the municipal and County Administrative Board levels. As total defence planning and organizing is in the process of development, we also wanted to capture the implications and effects of change (e.g., after the reform of the total defence governance structure and the government's decision in 2022 to apply for NATO membership).⁴ Hence, four participants were interviewed twice, first in 2019 and then in the autumn of 2023. The interviews covered themes and issues such as the actors' views on and experiences of civil-military collaboration, their roles and mandates, key challenges, and developments.⁵

The transcribed interviews were shared with participants, who read them and, in a few cases, made minor corrections or added statements, which they e-mailed back. The interviewees are anonymized and referred to by a code (e.g., P1904C or P2301M) and whether they are a member of the SAF or a regional- or local-level civilian organization. In the code, the last letter indicates whether the person works for a civilian (C) or military (M) organization; the two digits following indicate the year of the interview (2019 or 2023). The interview data allows us to analyse how representatives of civilian and military organizations understand (civil-military) collaboration and how these perceptions relate to changes and to objectives, definitions and working methods defined in, for example, policy documents and guidelines.

The interview data were analysed using a largely deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 77–101; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). We used Whelan's network properties as overarching themes, and then coded and compared across interviews. The five properties also provide the structure for our analysis below. Quotes from the interviews are selected to illustrate specific perspectives or understandings. The study does not claim to offer general conclusions about civil-military collaboration, nor do we claim to cover the whole of the total defence network(s). One limitation is that the views of industry and civil society organizations

⁴ Sweden became a NATO member on 7 March, 2024.

⁵ The interview questions included: "Can you give concrete examples of regional/local collaboration at its best?"; "What is the collaboration like when it doesn't work?"; "Who are the main actors?"; "How has the collaboration changed over time?"; "Are there ambiguities or changes needed?" Anonymity has been important in order to get people to agree to be interviewed and talk freely about their experiences of and perspectives on collaboration.

on civil-military collaboration are excluded. These are, of course, key actors from a total defence perspective, and future research on collaboration should seek to include more actors and sites of collaboration (see, for example, [Deiaco, 2024](#)). However, our aim is to explore perspectives on collaboration in civilian and military organizations, focusing on actors on the regional and local levels. This in itself is an important contribution that can form the basis for future analyses of civil-military collaboration within similar “total” or “comprehensive” arrangements or networks.

ANALYSIS

PERSPECTIVES ON STRUCTURAL PROPERTIES OF TOTAL DEFENCE

Since 2015, the scope of Sweden’s total defence strategy has been massively expanded ([Försvarsmakten 2018a](#)); naturally, this expansion has consequences for network design and development. Military representatives often describe this expansive phase as a “rebuilding” of Sweden’s total defence (or regaining the capability); civilian interviewees often refer to the expansion as something “new” that needs to be created, coordinated and managed. It should be noted that civilian actors have often become more actively involved in collaboration, although there are planning and prioritization differences that military staff need to adjust to ([Försvarsmakten, 2020](#)). Consequently, there has been increased pressure on the SAF to participate in various collaborative forums, especially in recent years, when total defence planning has picked up pace. As one regional staff officer put it in 2019:

Our tasks in 2019 are completely different from what they were in 2013. There have been no organisational changes ... but we’ve been given an awful lot more tasks.
(Interview P1901M)

The interviewee discusses a positive trend of civilian authorities and other organizations becoming more involved – but also notes that this constitutes a challenge in terms of human resources and prioritization. Much has obviously happened since 2019, and the interviewee notes that 2023 saw, for example, a significant increase in personnel (Interview P2304M). Several representatives of regional staff continue to call for clearer governance and evaluation of civil-military collaboration in total defence work – for example, in order to prioritize and evaluate the collaborative forums in which to participate ([Försvarsmakten, 2020, pp. 27–29](#)). Returning to Whelan’s concept, we can speak here of a perceived need for clearer policies on the division of responsibilities and the governance and prioritization of total defence work – especially in view of recent changes to the network design.

The growing demand for the SAF and the regional military staffs to participate in various forums is a sign that the civilian authorities and organizations are becoming more active. But this also presents challenges. After describing numerous collaborative forums and tasks involving the regional military staff, one interviewee says:

I think we’re doing too much. ... We don’t and shouldn’t have to do everything that comes our way. But, on the other hand, the most important thing we do is create trust with our partners. So we get to know them, and they get to know us. And then, all of a sudden, that is, for me, the main point. And then we’re not doing too much.
(Interview P1902M)

In this context, the organizational conditions refer to alterations within the SAF and civilian authorities. There have clearly been changes here, not least since the 2022 reform of the design and governance structure for crisis preparedness and civil defence – an attempt to address problems concerning the division of responsibilities and overlapping geographical and organizational boundaries (see, for example, [Statens offentliga utredningar, 2018; Försvarsmakten, 2018b](#)). However, the interviewees, principally the civilians, frequently describe the planning and organizational differences in similar terms: “Now, the civilian area offices are very focused on the sectors. The Armed Forces don’t have their own sector; instead, they’re a government agency a bit outside the system” (Interview P2302C). Where military representatives often describe their tasks as more clearly defined and having a clear objective, civilian interviewees often return to ambiguities that they feel need to be clarified:

The Ordinance [on Government Agencies' Preparedness] is so vaguely written; so it has not exactly made the work easier in that way. Now there are a lot of considerations and discussions, who should do what? ... Much of the time is thus spent on, well, what does a County Administrative Board with responsibility for a civilian area [*civilområde*] do? (P2302C)

The changes brought about by the creation of the current military regions and regional staffs in 2013 were found to have had generally positive effects on the SAF's regional presence and civil-military collaboration (Swedish National Audit Office, 2018; *Försvarsmakten* 2020, p. 15). At the same time, previous analyses point to ill-defined total defence roles and governance structures, and a need for greater knowledge about, and insight into, the shared goals of civil-military collaboration (*Försvarsmakten*, 2020, p. 16). The Swedish NAO has found that the regional staffs' ability to execute tasks (territorial command, command of Home Guard units and support to civil society, for example) is essentially good. However, it also finds flawed conditions and working methods. For instance, one report calls for clearer policy documents for regional staffs, the harmonization of the staffs' work and a greater exchange of experience between the staff bodies in question (Swedish National Audit Office, 2018, pp. 18–19).

As Whelan points out, the structure or design of a network is crucial to its function and governance. Collaboration is also influenced by historical factors, such as previous regional boundaries, SAF structures and changes in civil defence. As Angstrom and Ljungkvist (2023, pp. 18–19) note, the current iteration of Swedish total defence is based on a highly decentralized mode of command and control. In terms of network design, recent structural developments appear (at least initially) to have created some confusion around roles and responsibilities among both civilian and military collaborators.

PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL PROPERTIES OF TOTAL DEFENCE

There are attestations that SAF personnel can be perceived as dominant or as “making a lot of decisions” (*Försvarsmakten*, 2020, pp. 25–26; Interview P1902). In these instances, it can be a case of preconceived ideas held by civilian representatives about military organizational culture, perceived asymmetric relationships or unclear command structures; these ideas can, in turn, negatively affect a shared network culture or its development. This is an issue involving ways in which collaborating partners see themselves and their counterparts regarding the work to be done or their shared objectives (total defence planning and joint action, for example). Language and language-use issues are often highlighted. The MSB report *Shared Foundations [Gemensamma grunder]* of 2014 talks about the need for a kind of “bilingualism” among collaborators, as highlighted by later analyses of civil-military collaboration (see, for example, *Försvarsmakten*, 2017). This also emerges as a central theme in our interviews. As one interviewee put it:

Well, for me, you try not to use gobbledegook or “our language” but talk in a way that both they [civilians] and I understand, without ranting in any way, without... I always try to be humble when meeting a civilian partner because I've learnt that they're extremely clever, cleverer than I am in some respects. (Interview P1902M)

The interviewee notes how avoiding “jargon” rooted in a particular organizational culture or professional identity can clearly make communication easier and build trust and understanding (which also clearly links culture to relational aspects). At the same time, this requires the individual to make themselves understood in a different way – in this case, a way that works in a civil-military context. What is required to make inter-organizational communication and thus collaboration work? For one interviewee:

Sensitivity. That's one of my watchwords, and showing humility towards the task. I'm not talking about complaisance, but humility in how you conduct yourself, talk to people. This is essential. And not acting like the strict soldier. You don't give orders. If you're going to have a meeting, *you invite* someone; you don't *summon* them. ... And it's important that everyone gets to talk about their own needs. And I believe that for us it's very important when collaborating in any case. (Interview P1901M; our emphasis)

As shown here, there exists a need to partially step outside the culture and behaviour of the group or organization in order to facilitate communication and avoid misunderstandings in the pursuit of collaboration opportunities.

Several representatives of the regional staffs also highlight the importance of creating a broader understanding among all parties involved in total defence efforts. Here the SAF needs to apply an understanding of civilian perspectives to its work (Försvarsmakten, 2020, pp. 20–21). In the words of one interviewee:

It becomes very two-dimensional, that it's the needs of the armed forces. But we also have to realise that if we're going to get that support from the civilian authorities, they also have to get to that level so they can provide that support. ... There's also a... there's a mindset that people in the armed forces need to discuss, that... that civil defence is important. This is important so we can achieve our military defence objectives. (Interview P1901M)

This interviewee's observation emphasizes the importance of shared goals, understanding the other party and accepting one another's perspective, role and knowledge. The regional staff representatives also point to what is sometimes seen as a lack of understanding by civilian actors of the SAF's role and tasks (in times of heightened state of alert, for example), which can result in their civilian partners having unrealistic expectations about matters such as the SAF's support to civil society in various situations (Försvarsmakten, 2020, pp. 20–21). While our study does not provide a substantial insight into cultural aspects, the analysis indicates that a potential absence of a shared network or "total defence culture" among collaborators may impact relations, perceptions, and thus the nature (and success) of collaborative work.

PERSPECTIVES ON NETWORK POLICY

The material collected includes regional perspectives of representatives with a clear understanding of their own overarching mandate to coordinate civil defence. However, once again, there is a perceived lack of information and formal procedures (or mandates), thus making it difficult to see the form total defence collaboration is supposed to take. The civilian and military interviewees view the SAF as leading the way in planning and organizing. One civilian official expresses a feeling of lagging behind: "Now we will increase or start planning and investigating, or examining and interpreting, legislation that we haven't dealt with in 20 years" (Interview P2301C).

A lack of clarity in communication and asymmetric relationships are recurring themes in the interviews; organizational conditions and mandates are understood to be important components of these problems. When asked about the division of roles, one civilian official answered:

You can't compare the mandates, the military region compared with the County Administrative Board as the highest civilian total defence agency, if we were to lose contact with the government. So we would actually need to liaise directly with the joint operations staff on certain issues. ... The armed forces don't have that hierarchy; instead, the military region has been tasked with this, but it's not really harmonized. And it affects us. (Interview P1903C)

We can gather from this interviewee's answer that even the organizational hierarchy (the vertical distribution of roles) can be seen as affecting the conditions for regional, horizontal and asymmetrical collaboration. Their comments express what they see as a lack of knowledge or clarity in communication about shared and organization-specific needs, interests and objectives. Seemingly unreasonable expectations may stem at least in part from a mutual lack of knowledge, thus making it difficult to understand the interests, objectives and mandates of others, so fostering the means to collaborate across organizational boundaries. Another quote illustrates this:

In some ways, there is a civil-military intersection... if we [the county administrative board] are to coordinate civil defence, then it's good to know what the armed forces have in mind, for example. ... If we're not informed about what's going to happen

or that this has been discussed in great detail, then what exactly is total defence collaboration? (Interview P1903C)

There is an awareness at the regional and municipal levels that the SAF has, in many respects, progressed further than its civilian partners. When asked in 2023, after the reform of the governance structure described above, what was most important right now, one civilian official replied:

It is still the issue of whether the armed forces get the support they say they need, we still need to know where, what, when and how much. And we don't know that yet, at least not here. ... But then there's the armed forces' own collaboration model ... which I think they should still revise. There's a bit of a glitch in the whole system right now, before people have found their roles and who should collaborate on what, and so on. (P2301C)

Another interviewee understood why the armed forces have been perceived as “impatient”: civilian organizations have long lacked the necessary finances, personnel and technology to prioritize total defence efforts (Interview P1904C). Whelan's definition of the “policy” aspect or level of analysis includes formal frameworks, rules and procedures, often determined above or outside the networks. According to Whelan (2017, pp. 315–316), these procedures can promote or undermine collaboration. It is clear that the interviewees in this study more often perceive the frameworks and policies to be unclear and as hindering, rather than promoting, interaction. This also aligns with previous findings, in which collaboration is seen as being hampered by both a lack of harmonization in working methods and the unclear regulation of roles (Alvinus & Hedlund, 2024).

PERSPECTIVES ON NETWORK TECHNOLOGY

Whelan's definition of technology makes reference to the infrastructure that enables the processing of information between members of security networks. Further, Whelan describes the ability to reconcile tensions within and between organizations' need to protect and share information as an important criterion for success (2017, p 316). The ability to manage and exchange sensitive information is an important technological aspect of total defence collaboration, affecting the parties' relationships and ability to communicate and conduct joint planning. The challenge is, then, to correctly facilitate the exchange of information and to develop information security channels and systems. Currently this realization is clearer than ever in Sweden: “Together we need to develop communication tools, especially now that we're joining NATO. This applies, above all, to public authorities and municipalities but, in the long term, also to the Armed Forces, industry and civil society” (P2302C).

We can surmise from the interviewees' answers that “conduct” – that is, what happens when members of organizations interact – is also relevant. What they expressed can be interpreted as a perception of inflexibility and of a “military way”, or military culture; this is not always regarded as constructive for communication and collaboration. Reflecting on the challenges facing the (regional) civilian side, one interviewee says:

There's hardly anything for the civilian side to fall back on and hold up and say, “We've done it like that.” There's no organizational memory, although there may be someone with some old manuals, regional collaboration or something like that. So it's very difficult to express yourself in a way that hits the mark. (P1903C)

What the interviewee perceived as a lack of “organizational memory” can be attributed to the dismantling of the old total defence system, resulting in the loss of much knowledge about civil-military collaboration and communication. Some of this knowledge has been retained, partly because some individuals who previously worked on these issues are still in place – but this is not the case in all organizations or agencies.

Communication is also highlighted in relation to technical equipment and classification issues, where differences and shortcomings have obvious consequences for collaboration and management:

Technically, we still lack the ability to lead each other. Some security levels, so to speak, they don't have our equipment, and we don't have theirs. Even if we can get hold of their equipment, the security classification is too low, so it doesn't help us in this case. So I'd say technically... we're not there yet. (P2304M)

The fact that civilian and military organizations still have different levels of access to technical equipment and protected material makes communication and, thus, collaboration more difficult (see [Försvarsmakten, 2020](#)). Efforts are underway to address these issues – for example, through written security agreements between the armed forces and other public agencies – but this is described as a work in progress (Interview P2304M). Sometimes, interviewees expressed a lack of trust in (or preconceived ideas about) the knowledge and capabilities of civilian organizations, including such matters as classification and information security. A lack of communication and the imposition of “need to know” restrictions serve to constrain information-sharing opportunities and interorganizational trust, which, in turn, has consequences for (civil-military) collaboration ([Whelan, 2017, p. 315](#)).

PERSPECTIVES ON RELATIONAL ASPECTS OF TOTAL DEFENCE COLLABORATION

Among civilian actors, we observe different views on collaborative work and the SAF's role, responsibilities and capabilities. According to Whelan, a well-functioning collaborative network presupposes mutual interaction based on trust between actors ([Whelan, 2017, p. 316](#)). In our material, trust in the other's expertise is a recurring theme, expressed in different ways:

In general, the armed forces think that the civilian side is not really up to it, doesn't have the capability. ... The civilian side has respect for the armed forces. If someone's wearing a uniform, you come in and believe what's being said and so on. ... The armed forces need to act slightly more professionally in their dealings with their civilian contacts. ... Not hiding behind their official face or being so damn sure of themselves and indirectly showing that civilians don't understand this about the military. (Interview P1903C)

When we asked for descriptions of the most important challenges for civil-military collaboration today, the answers we received often expressed some frustration with the joint efforts and objectives and with civilian organizations' support for the armed forces in practice (e.g., in times of heightened state of alert). This, in turn, may be down to the fact that the actors have not fully tested or practised collaboration in all parts of their organizations. In the words of one municipal official:

The vital societal functions [are] number one. Protecting the civilian population; this involves shelters and alerts and everything. And then there's providing support to the armed forces. This part has been very much new ground in that, firstly, the armed forces haven't really been able to specify what their needs are. (P1905C)

In one lessons-learned report, a number of representatives of the military regional staffs highlight the positive effects of having many people in collaboration roles (both civilian and military) with long experience of collaboration and already established contacts ([Försvarsmakten 2020, pp. 17–18](#)). This includes both military officers and their civilian counterparts with insight into (and understanding of) the SAF's organization, mandate and perspective. “Knowing people” – a relational aspect – and personal contacts are highlighted as an important prerequisite for effective communication between, for example, the staffs and representatives of civilian authorities and organizations (Interview P1901M; P1902M). Again, this is nothing new; previous reports on civil-military collaboration have underscored the importance of personal relationships for joint work across organizational boundaries (see, for example, [Norén, Roosberg, & Ödlund, 2012, pp. 46–52](#)).

In addition to the specific expertise and knowledge that individuals and organizations bring, there is a need for knowledge about interaction with other actors. McNamara ([2012, p. 395](#)) highlights, among other things, the importance of trust and information-sharing when actors in different organizations are expected to take joint action. Saying things such as “not acting like a strict soldier” or “everyone gets to talk based on their own needs” points to a

need to build trust in and understanding of the military contribution in regional- and local-level civil-military contexts. When describing the interaction between collaborating actors, McNamara stresses that open and frequent communication is the basis for shared knowledge and understanding. This study's findings point to some problems in this regard; the military's experience of collaboration appears to be that trust is not a natural part of it. According to one military interviewee: "If we don't trust each other, we can't collaborate and coordinate anything. It has to work" (Interview P2304M).

While there are signs that a better understanding of total defence structures is forming, further development in knowledge about the SAF's role, capabilities and needs is required – not least to avoid unrealistic expectations, largely among civilian actors. The authorities' and civil society's interest in and prioritization of total defence efforts have increased the demand for the SAF's participation in a number of forums (Försvarsmakten 2020, p. 35), meaning both an increased burden for the organization and an opportunity to meet and include "new" collaborative partners.

SUMMARY

Table 2 summarizes challenges and areas of potential friction as indicated in our data. The wording makes no mention of the extent of the problems, which, of course, also overlap. Drawing on Whelan's concepts, the table outlines potential areas of importance from the point of view of collaborating actors and in relation to structural and relational characteristics of the areas of the total defence network that we have investigated.

PROPERTIES (LEVELS)	CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL AREAS OF FRICTION IDENTIFIED
<i>Structure</i>	<p>The imbalance in, or ambiguity of, power relations can hamper collaboration between organizations in total defence networks.</p> <p>Unsynchronized and asymmetric organizations, groups or processes in the network are seen to affect collaboration negatively. Planning, preparation and staffing can vary, and different parts of organizations and regions are at different stages of the process.</p> <p>Misconceptions of roles and expectations about each other and a lack of communication and clear governance structures risk negatively affecting the interaction between network actors.</p>
<i>Culture</i>	<p>Collaboration presupposes that professional identities and professions interact and are expected to act collectively; this can be hampered by (unfounded, inaccurate) perceptions of the "other".</p> <p>Cultural differences in terms of implicit and explicit values and attitudes result in different perceptions of how to achieve goals and what needs to be prioritised and in what order. Different communication patterns and language use (jargon, gobbledegook, profession-specific terminology, etc.) lead to misunderstandings.</p>
<i>Policy</i>	<p>Civilian, military, regional and local conditions and working methods involve varying degrees of clarity and maturity; this facilitates neither collaboration nor collective action.</p> <p>Collaboration is hindered by organizations that have differing objectives, interpreted in various ways. Areas of collaboration are described as difficult to find when networking actors are at different stages of planning, organization and resource allocation.</p>
<i>Technology</i>	<p>Problems arise from the use of incompatible systems that complicate the necessary sharing of information. Information-sharing presents challenges concerning the question of authorization, which, in turn, makes collaboration more difficult. Problems arise in system security when classified or sensitive information needs to be shared with numerous actors from different organizations.</p>
<i>Relationships</i>	<p>Relational aspects of inter-organizational and inter-professional collaboration need to be improved. A key challenge lies in the differing perceptions of capability; the SAF has reservations about the effectiveness of civilian organizations, while civilians typically regard military authority with respect. A lack of (interpersonal and interorganizational) trust between actors affects their ability to collaborate.</p>

Table 2 Challenges and Potential Areas of Friction Identified.

Our aim has been to contribute to knowledge about civil-military collaboration within the framework of contemporary total defence planning and organization. In pursuit of this aim, we have sought to address the following questions: “How do Swedish civilian and military actors understand regional- and local-level collaboration?” and “What challenges for inter-organizational collaboration may be identified in light of organizational changes in Sweden’s total defence system?”

Many interviewees in this and previous studies explicitly point to a need for clearer governance structures and more concrete objectives and priorities for collaborative work (Försvarsmakten 2020, pp. 27–29; Alvinus & Hedlund, 2024). These sentiments seem to persist despite a number of joint-objective documents and policies describing total defence collaboration mandates at the central and regional levels (MSB, 2023; Försvarsmakten & MSB, 2021). Our analysis allows, however, for a different interpretation: that the main problem may not be the perceived lack of clear frameworks for collaboration (policies, regulations, formulated objectives); rather, perceived ambiguities could be based on misunderstandings of the “other”. What is lacking is knowledge about the (civilian or military) collaborating actor’s circumstances, conditions, state of knowledge, assumptions, mandate and their room for manoeuvre. Furthermore, there exists a lack of knowledge about how one’s organization or its contribution to collaboration is viewed or received by its counterpart. These knowledge gaps are understood as unclear information; this serves to negatively affect collaboration opportunities.

To some extent, this can be explained by a lack of communication between collaborating organizations, levels of leadership, or individual actors. However, it is also the case that the actors themselves create and shape the perceived problems based on somewhat different approaches, expectations, and preconceived ideas about one another. The gap fosters both interpersonal and interorganizational challenges and frictions, summarized in Table 2. This analysis is in line with previous research that highlights challenges in Swedish civil-military collaboration (Larsson et al., 2023; Alvinus & Hedlund, 2024; Deiacco, 2024).

In this context, it is important to acknowledge the significance of the role of the boundary spanner. In the literature on collaboration, this concept frequently emerges as a critical function for fostering linkages (McNamara, 2012). Boundary spanners engage in practices that connect or effectively align the differences between actors, thereby facilitating the building of trust and enhancing coordination in decision-making processes (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2014). It is essential for boundary spanners to identify where interdependencies, coupling, and fissures are likely to arise, and to possess the skills necessary to pinpoint the strategic leverage points in play (Williams, 2012, p. 40). Our study shows that it is not enough for the organizations and their actors to be good at collaborating with others. To operate effectively as competent collaborators, boundary spanners must understand both their own roles and those of other organizations within the network. This comprehension enables them to coordinate their joint activities through diverse forms of peer-to-peer relationships (Turrini 2010, p. 529).

It is our conclusion that collaborating actors must be engaged in, committed to and capable of teaching and informing their counterparts about their organization and its conditions and limitations. They must also be curious about the “other’s” circumstances and requirements. The collaborative actor, therefore, needs to master a “double grasp” – one that involves not only representing their organization but also taking an interest in, and trying to understand, how “opposite” collaborating organizations see and understand them.⁶

For future research, we recommend additional studies on how collaboration operates “in practice”, particularly in the forums and contexts where actors engage, communicate, and work together to achieve shared objectives (for one such study, see Deiacco, 2024). This study has primarily concentrated on local and regional examples involving a limited number of actors from the SAF and civilian organizations. We also suggest further investigation into governance and management issues related to civil-military collaboration across various levels (and country cases), more focus on the potential impact of professional identities, along with studies that

⁶ The term “double grasp” is used in an epistemological perspective to describe a professional’s active ability to shift perspectives when using different models or following certain rules and regulations (Göranzon, 2022, Göranzon & Mouwitz, 2006).

encompass a wider array of participants, such as industry and civil society. For example: how does the central government view collaboration issues, and how does this perspective differ, if at all, from local viewpoints? Additionally, it would be beneficial to broaden the scope to include international civil-military collaboration, such as in the Nordics, or within organizations such as NATO.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplementary file.** Information about the interviewees. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.288.s1>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the reviewers whose comments during the course of this work have significantly improved the article.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Work for this chapter has been supported by the Modern Military Profession Project at the Swedish Centre Studies of Armed Forces and Society (CSMS) and the Institute for Management of Innovation and Technology (IMIT) (Swedish Armed Forces Technical Development Grant no. AT.9225361).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.


AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors were equally involved in the writing of the article.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Victor Tillberg, L., Berndtsson, J., & Tillberg, P. (2025). Navigating Collaboration: Understanding Civil-Military Interactions in Swedish Total Defence From a Security Network Perspective. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 8(1), pp. 40–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.288>

Submitted: 08 April 2024

Accepted: 06 January 2025

Published: 24 January 2025

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