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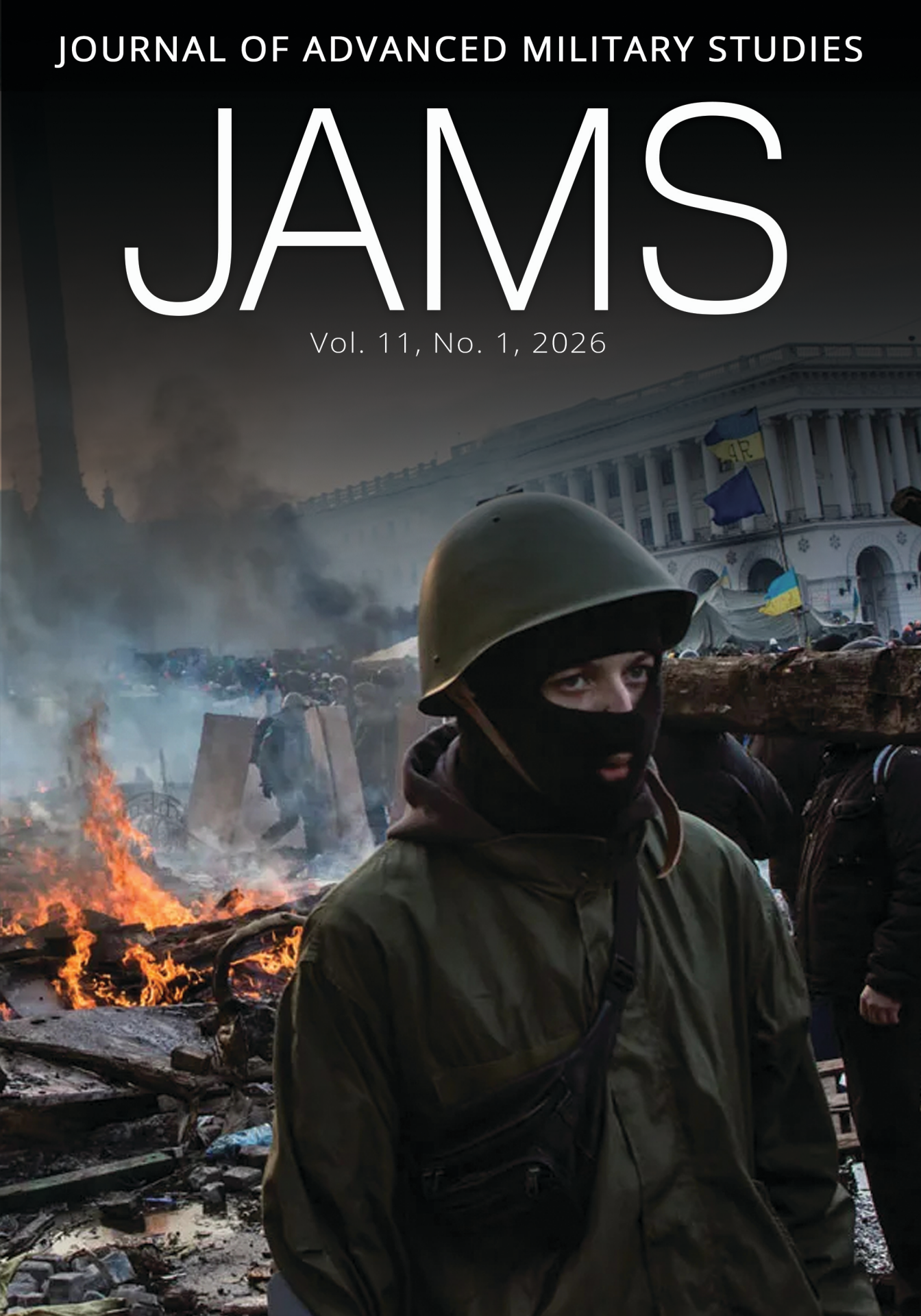

National Will to Fight in Allied Democracies
A Comparative Enabling-Conditions Assessment

Graham Wild, PhD, and Paul Fraser, PhD

Abstract: This article examines national will to fight as a system-level enabling condition for sustained defense and deterrence in allied democracies. Rather than attempting to measure resolve directly, predict wartime behavior, or construct composite indices, the study instead undertakes a structured comparative quantitative assessment of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members and United States allies in the Indo-Pacific. Will to fight is an emergent national capacity shaped by the interaction of material resources, governance legitimacy, institutional effectiveness, social cohesion, and informational resilience, operating within specific alliance, nuclear, and strategic-industrial contexts. Using a proxy-based framework for will to fight based on quantitative dimensions, the analysis suggests that material capability and alliance membership alone are insufficient indicators of national endurance. States with similar defense spending or force structures exhibit different potential will-to-fight profiles once institutional and social substrates are considered. The findings highlight how governance quality, trust, and information resilience act as underlying constraints on sustained resistance, with implications for alliance burden sharing, deterrence credibility, and strategic assessment. The article reframes will to fight as a peacetime preparedness problem rather than a wartime psychological variable.

Keywords: will to fight, deterrence, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, Indo-Pacific, governance, social cohesion, resilience

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Introduction

Will to Fight

The war in Ukraine has recentered attention on a factor that repeatedly outweighs material asymmetries in conflict outcomes; that is, the willingness of a population and its institutions to remain resilient at a cost.[1] Despite clear disadvantages in population size, industrial base, and inherited military stockpiles at the outset of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainian resistance did not collapse.[2] Instead, widespread civilian participation, rapid mobilization, and persistent societal support for national defense have all reshaped expectations about the conflict's trajectory.[3] This outcome can neither be explained by material inputs alone, nor by battlefield performance in isolation, but it points to the strategic importance of popular endurance as a national-level phenomenon, including the integration of cyber operations with kinetic actions targeting communications, infrastructure, and societal systems.[4]

Accounts of Ukrainian resistance consistently emphasize factors beyond force ratios; perceived legitimacy of political authority, clarity of existential stakes, trust in national institutions, and a shared narrative of survival rather than expediency, including the role of information operations and narrative control in shaping public perception and sustaining resistance, as well as the influence of force structure and command and control shaped by regime

[1] Mikhail A. Alexseev and Serhii Dembitskyi, "For Victory in Freedom: Why Ukrainian Resilience to Russian Aggression Endures," in *Proceedings of the PONARS Eurasia Spring Policy Conference* (Washington, DC: PONARS Eurasia, Institute for Europeans, Russian and Eurasian Studies, George Washington University, 2024).

[2] Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi et al., *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2022).

[3] Nurlan Aliyev and Mykola Nazarov, "The Role of Civilian-Military Cooperation in the Ukrainian Asymmetric War Strategy," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 38, no. 2 (2025): 157–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2025.2533630; Ibrahim Muradov, "Disrupting the Narrative: Ukrainian Agency in Resisting Russia and Winning Western Support," *Europe-Asia Studies* 77, no. 3 (2025): 341–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2025.2465569; and Tetiana Madryha et al., "The Volunteer Movement as a Tool for Strengthening Civil Solidarity in Wartime," *Community Empowerment through Education, Technology and Infrastructure* 17, no. se2 (2024): 183–94, https://doi.org/10.14571/brajets.v17.nse2.183-194.

[4] Lt Ian A. Clark, "The Ethical Character of Russia's Offensive Cyber Operations in Ukraine: Testing the Principle of Double Effect," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 88–101, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402005.

characteristics.[5] Public opinion data throughout the conflict indicate sustained support for continued resistance despite casualties, infrastructure destruction, and economic contraction.[6] Taken together, this national persistence suggests that a tactical view that implicitly conflate will to fight with material superiority or external military support; instead, this suggests a strategic view of will as a system-level property of societies under threat, shaped by governance credibility, social cohesion, and the perceived justice and legitimacy of the cause.[7]

At the same time, the Ukrainian case illustrates the difficulty of measuring will to fight directly. It does not appear as a single observable variable, nor does it map cleanly onto conventional indicators such as defense spending, troop numbers, or alliance commitments. Rather, it manifests indirectly through behavioral outcomes; mobilization compliance, civilian resilience, tolerance of loss, and acceptance of prolonged disruption.[8] These outcomes emerge from interacting political, social, and institutional conditions that are not easily reduced to quantitative metrics.

The Ukrainian experience therefore serves less as an anomaly than as an empirical reminder of a longstanding strategic reality; material superiority does not guarantee success if it is not matched by a society's capacity to endure, adapt, and persist. For allied democracies facing renewed security pressures, particularly within NATO and the Indo-Pacific treaty network, the central question is not whether will to fight exists in the abstract, but under what national conditions it is sustained, eroded, or misjudged. Addressing that question requires moving beyond narrow battlefield indicators toward a com-

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[5] Javier Cifuentes-Faura, "Corruption in Ukraine during the Ukrainian–Russian War: A Decalogue of Policies to Combat It," *Journal of Public Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2024): e2905, https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2905; Shaun Walker, "Kyiv Protesters Celebrate as Parliament Votes to Restore Anti-corruption Bodies' Power," *Guardian* 31 July 2025; Yulia Kurnyshova, "Ukraine at War: Resilience and Normative Agency," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2023): 80–110, https://doi.org/10.51870/UXXZ5757; Larysa Tamilina, "Primary Conditions for Institutional Trust in Ukraine during the Conflict," *SSRN* (2025), https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5942294; Alex Hughes, "Plan Z: Reassessing Security-Based Accounts of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 174–208, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402009; and Gilbert W. Merkx, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Two Decisive Factors," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 13–33, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402001.

[6] Alina Nychyk and Paul D'Anieri, "Ukrainian Public Opinion and the Path to Peace with Russia," *East European Politics* (2025): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2025.2538481; and V. Chernets et al., "The Impact of Russian Military Aggression on the Establishment of a New Ukrainian Political Nation," *Cuestiones Políticas* 41, no. 78(2023): 357–73, https://doi.org/10.46398/cuestpol.4178.25.

[7] Mikhail A. Alexseev and Serhii Dembitskyi, "Victory-in-freedom: Ukraine's Democratic Resilience in the Face of War," *Sociology: Theory, Methods, Marketing*, no. 2, (2024): 40–55, https://doi.org/10.15407/sociology2024.02.040.

[8] Anthony Roney I, "The Devil's Advocate: An Argument for Moldova and Ukraine to Seize Transnistria," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 121–50, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402007.

parative assessment of enabling conditions that support popular and institutional endurance in war.

Scope and Contribution

This article examines national-level will to fight as an enabling condition for sustained defense and deterrence among allied democracies. This is the state level as noted in the previous work of Ben Connable.[9] The focus is explicitly structural and comparative. The unit of analysis is the sovereign state, not military units, formations, or individual combatants. Issues of battlefield morale, cohesion, leadership psychology, or tactical performance are therefore outside the scope of this work.

The analysis does not attempt to predict conflict behavior, forecast wartime endurance, or quantify resolve in a causal or probabilistic sense. No composite index of will to fight is constructed, and no ranking is offered as a claim about future performance. Instead, the article provides a qualitative comparison of enabling conditions that shape how national will to fight can be generated, sustained, or constrained under stress.

The contribution of the article lies in integrating material capacity, institutional quality, social cohesion, informational resilience, and nuclear context within a single comparative framework across NATO members and Indo-Pacific U.S. allies. By separating material foundations from social and institutional substrates, the article clarifies why similar levels of defense investment or force structure can translate into very different national capacities for sustained resistance. The intent is not an explanation in the strict causal sense, but structured interpretation, providing a defensible basis for assessing national preparedness and alliance resilience beyond narrow measures of military power. Limiting the NATO and U.S. Indo-Pacific allies excludes other interesting and topical historical examples, such as the fall of Kabul in 2021 and the fall of Saigon in 1975, these represent the focus of future work.[10]

Will to Fight at the National Level

Defense and security studies consistently distinguish between will to fight at the tactical or unit level and will to fight at the strategic or national level. *Tactical will to fight* refers to the immediate motivation and effectiveness of military

[9] Ben Connable, "Structuring Cultural Analyses: Applying the Holistic Will-to-Fight Models," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* SI (2022): 153–67, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.2022SIstratcul009.

[10] Florian Weigand, "Why Did the Taliban Win (Again) in Afghanistan?," *LSE Public Policy Review* 2, no. 3 (2022): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.54; and Heather Marie Stur, "Blurred Lines: The Home Front, the Battlefront, and the Wartime Relationship between Citizens and Government in the Republic of Vietnam," *War & Society* 38, no. 1 (2019): 57–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2019.1524345.

units in combat and is closely associated with morale, cohesion, leadership, and psychological readiness.[11] These factors shape short-term battlefield performance and can often be influenced directly through training, command practices, and organizational culture. *Strategic or national will to fight*, by contrast, refers to a society's capacity to sustain conflict over time. It is rooted in political legitimacy, societal support, shared narratives, and tolerance of cost, rather than in battlefield dynamics alone.[12] The literature emphasizes that strong tactical cohesion does not guarantee strategic success if broader institutional and societal support erodes, highlighting the need to treat national will to fight as a distinct, system-level property rather than an aggregate of unit-level morale.[13]

Defense and military studies literature consistently identifies a small set of national-level factors that enable a sustained will to fight over time. Foremost among these are governance legitimacy and institutional effectiveness, which shape whether populations accept the costs of conflict and comply with mobilization, taxation, and sacrifice. Governance legitimacy is typically operationalized through indicators of political stability, public trust, and perceived responsiveness, and is repeatedly shown to condition societal support for prolonged military engagement.[14] Closely related is institutional effectiveness, referring to the capacity of state institutions to function under stress, allocate resources, and maintain policy coherence during crisis. Empirical work suggests that institutional resilience, including decentralized and adaptive governance structures, plays a critical role in sustaining national endurance during extended conflicts.[15]

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[11] Daniel Ussishkin, "New Wars: Morale and Democratic Mobilization," in *Morale: A Modern British History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 73–101, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190469078.003.0005.

[12] Maj Jeffrey L. LaFace, *Tactical Victory Leading to Operational Failure: Rommel in North Africa* (India: Lucknow Books, 2014); Israel Drori and Benson Honig, "A Process Model of Internal and External Legitimacy," *Organization Studies* 34, no. 3 (2013): 345–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612467153; and Christopher Bobier and Daniel Hurst, "Battlefield Triage: A Resolvable Moral Tragedy," *Voices in Bioethics* 10 (2024), https://doi.org/10.52214/vib.v10i.12913.

[13] Catherine L. Dempsey et al., "Social Closeness and Support Are Associated with Lower Risk of Suicide among U.S. Army Soldiers," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 51, no. 5 (July 2021): 940–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12778; and Deirdre MacManus at al., "The Mental Health of the UK Armed Forces in the 21st Century: Resilience in the Face of Adversity," *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps* 160, no. 2 (June 2014): 125, https://doi.org/10.1136/jramc-2013-000213.

[14] Vladyslav Pustovar, Kostyantyn Zakharenko, and Yehor Minenko, "Institutional Stability of the State during the War: Political Factors of Economic Security of Ukraine," *Baltic Journal of Economic Studies* 11, no. 4 (October 2025): 260–68, https://doi.org/10.30525/2256-0742/2025-11-4-260-268.

[15] Pustovar, Zakharenko, and Minenko, "Institutional Stability of the State during the War"; and Nataliia Sabadash and Anatoliy Kruglashov, "Decentralisation Processes in Ukraine: Dilemmas of Democratisation and National Security," *Public Policy & Administration* 21, no. 1 (March 2022): 22–37, https://doi.org/10.5755/j01.ppaa.21.1.28441.

The literature shows social cohesion and information resilience are key enabling conditions. Social cohesion reflects the degree of common identity, norms, and shared commitment within a society, which can support collective action and tolerance of hardship, although findings remain mixed regarding which forms of social capital translate into durable national resilience.[16] Information resilience has become increasingly prominent in contemporary conflict analysis, capturing a society's ability to withstand misinformation, propaganda, and information manipulation, and to maintain coherent public understanding of war aims and costs. Also, alliance assurance becomes a significant external modifier of national will to fight. Credible security partnerships can reinforce domestic confidence, reduce perceived isolation, and strengthen political legitimacy for sustained defense commitments, particularly for non-nuclear or medium powers.[17] How the Donald J. Trump administration's suspension of military aide has affected Ukrainian morale is yet to be fully studied.[18]

The literature consistently notes that national will to fight is difficult to measure directly because it is an abstract, emergent property rather than a single observable variable. Unlike material indicators such as force size or defense spending, will to fight encompasses legitimacy, public acceptance of cost, and societal commitment, which are shaped by historical, political, and cultural context.[19] These dimensions vary significantly across regimes and conflicts, limiting the validity of direct cross-national measurement and making singular metrics analytically misleading. As a result, defense and security studies typically avoid direct quantification and instead rely on proxy-based and qualitative approaches. Common proxies include public opinion indicators, measures of governance quality and institutional performance, and indicators of social cohesion, which are used to infer societal support and mobilization capacity rather than resolve itself.[20] Qualitative methods, including case studies, interviews, and content

[16] Xiang Gao, " 'Staying in the Nationalist Bubble': Social Capital, Culture Wars, and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *M/C Journal* 24, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2745; Ben Caves et al., *Enhancing Defence's Contribution to Societal Resilience in the UK: Lessons from International Approaches* (Cambridge, UK: Rand Europe, 2021); and Daniel P. Aldrich, *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[17] Will Davies, *Improving the Engagement of UK Armed Forces Overseas: Generating a Sophisticated Understanding of Complex Operating Environments* (London: Chatham House, 2022).

[18] Iselin Brady et al., "Can Ukraine Fight Without U.S. Aid?: Seven Questions to Ask," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 May 2025.

[19] Mark C. Suchman, "Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches," *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (July 1995): 571–610, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.2307/258788; and Bruce Gilley, "The Meaning and Measure of State Legitimacy: Results for 72 Countries," *European Journal of Political Research* 45, no. 3 (May 2006): 499–525, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00307.x.

[20] Muhammad Nadeem, Mumtaz Anwar, and Zahid Pervaiz, "The Impact of Political Institutional Quality on Social Cohesion: Evidence from Worldwide Perspective," *Journal of Public Affairs* 22, no. 4 (2022): e2630, https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2630.

analysis, are frequently employed to capture contextual dynamics and national narratives that shape endurance and legitimacy in wartime.[21]

Nuclear and Space Contexts as Strategic Modifiers

National will to fight does not emerge in a strategic vacuum. Certain capabilities do not constitute will in themselves, but they materially reshape how costs, risks, and survivability are perceived by political leaders, military institutions, and societies. Among these, nuclear posture and space-domain capability function as high-level strategic modifiers. They do not replace the social, institutional, or material enabling conditions identified elsewhere in this paper, but they condition how those factors are interpreted and mobilized under stress.

Nuclear Posture as a Contextual Modifier

Nuclear weapons affect national will to fight indirectly, through their influence on strategic expectations rather than through any direct contribution to conventional combat capability. Previous research found that if a state possesses weapons, it is more likely to experience conflict, but not war, as states "expand their interests" after acquiring nuclear weapons.[22]

Their effects operate along at least three analytically distinct pathways. First, nuclear deterrence influences the perception of national survivability. A reliable nuclear deterrent can increase a state's confidence that existential defeat or annihilation is unlikely, even under severe conventional pressure. This in turn can increase the tolerance for conventional costs, casualties, and disruption because of the perceived end-state. At the same time, nuclear possession can also dampen conventional will if elites or populations come to view nuclear escalation as the dominant strategic outcome, rendering conventional sacrifice strategically marginal. These effects are not contradictory; they reflect different assessments of how nuclear capability interacts with escalation control.

While people most commonly think of nuclear deterrence as discouraging attack on the possessor, deterrence is most broadly "the coaxing and persuasion of a prospective foe that the self-interest must be observed through the avoidance of assured sequence of actions," so nuclear deterrence can also include using the threat of nuclear weapons to discourage external interference in an

[21] William G. Nomikos and Eric Stollenwerk, "More Security, More Trust?: Security Perceptions as a Source of Government Trust in Post-Conflict Settings," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 19, no. 3 (2025): 329–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2367862; and Clara Margotin, "Embedded Journalism as a Strategic Enabler in US Contentious Foreign Policymaking Domestic Legitimization: Evidence from the 2003 Invasion of Iraq," *Journal of Global Faultlines* 11, no. 1 (2024): 27–53, https://doi.org/10.13169/jglobfaul.11.1.0027.

[22] Mark S. Bell and Nicholas L. Miller, "Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 1 (2015): 74–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002713499718.

expeditionary war.[23] During Vladimir Putin's speech announcing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, he addressed "those who may be tempted to interfere with these developments from the outside" and said "they must know that Russia will respond immediately and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history."[24] This was understood as a nuclear threat and, while addressed to foreign governments, it was delivered in Russian during a televised address to the Russian people; it was intended to increase their will to fight. This was followed by a public announcement in September 2024 of changes to Russian nuclear doctrine to reduce the threshold for using nuclear weapons, and publication of the new doctrine in November of that year.[25]

Second, nuclear weapons introduce escalation risk and constraint. Especially in democratic societies, awareness of catastrophic escalation can suppress willingness to initiate or sustain high-intensity conventional operations if the perceived probability of nuclear use rises. To use Robert Powell's formulation of the "stability-instability paradox," "the less likely a conventional war is to escalate to a nuclear war, the lower the expected cost of launching a conventional war and the more likely states are to start them."[26] Here, the inverse pertains; Putin increases the risk of nuclear war if Western nations intervene conventionally, so they are less likely to launch their war against Russia, as warned by Lavoy soon after the Cold War.[27] This message is broadcast to the Russian people, with the intention that they have more will to fight. Nuclear capability can therefore simultaneously stiffen resolve through deterrence credibility and induce restraint through escalation fear. Both effects act on will to fight, but in opposite directions, depending on context, doctrine, and threat perception.

Third, nuclear posture shapes alliance assurance. For non-nuclear states, confidence in extended deterrence alters national will indirectly by influencing beliefs about abandonment, entrapment, and escalation dominance, even if no umbrella has been formally extended.[28] Strong confidence in allied nuclear protection may support sustained resistance by reducing fears of existential loss.

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[23] Arushi Singh, "Russia's Nuclear Strategy: Changes or Continuities," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 34–48, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402002.

[24] Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation" (speech, Kremlin, Russian Federation, 24 February 2022).

[25] Patricia Lewis, "How Likely Is the Use of Nuclear Weapons by Russia?," Chatham House, 2022.

[26] Robert Powell, "Nuclear Brinkmanship, Limited War, and Military Power," *International Organization* 69, no. 3, (2015): 589–626, https://doi.org/ 10.1017/S0020818315000028.

[27] Peter R. Lavoy, "The Strategic Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation: A Review Essay," *Security Studies* 4, no. 4 (1995): 695–753, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419509347601.

[28] Matt Buehler and Arjun Banerjee, "Who Would Trust a Nuclear Umbrella?: Results from an Original Survey on Public Confidence in Future Nuclear Guarantees in Morocco," *Nonproliferation Review* 29, no. 4-6 (2022): 267–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2023.2205299.

Conversely, doubts about extended deterrence credibility can either motivate greater national self-reliance, such as France developing its own arsenal because it considers the American nuclear umbrella unreliable, or depress will through fatalism and perceived strategic vulnerability.[29] Which effect dominates is contingent on domestic institutions, threat narratives, and historical experience. For these reasons, nuclear capability is treated in this study as a categorical contextual variable, distinguishing nuclear-armed states, nuclear-sharing hosts, extended deterrence beneficiaries, and states without an explicit nuclear umbrella. It is not a measure of will to fight, but a strategic condition that modifies how other enabling factors operate.

Space Capability and Strategic-Industrial Depth

Space capability plays a different but complementary role. National investment in space systems reflects the maturity of a country's advanced technological and engineering base, particularly its capacity to design, integrate, and operate complex, high-reliability systems under strategic pressure. Space capability therefore functions as a proxy for strategic-industrial depth rather than as a direct contributor to combat power.

From a will-to-fight standpoint, space capability matters less for what it does in combat than for what it signals about national depth. States that can design, operate, and sustain space systems generally have the industrial coordination and technical workforce needed to keep critical enabling functions working when systems are degraded or disrupted. That matters in long conflicts, where the question is not whether capabilities exist on day one, but whether they can be repaired, replaced, or adapted over time. Where this capacity is absent, reliance on allied space enablers becomes unavoidable, and that dependence can narrow strategic options and heighten perceptions of vulnerability among both decision-makers and the public.

Space investment also signals long-term strategic intent. Sustained national commitment to space programs indicates political willingness to fund complex, long-horizon projects with uncertain payoffs, a characteristic that correlates with broader state capacity and planning coherence. In this sense, space capability is not merely technological, but institutional, reflecting coordination across government, industry, and research sectors.

Interaction Effects

Nuclear and space contexts shape the environment in which national will to

[29] Nicolas Bardio, "Towards a French Nuclear Umbrella?: Assessing the Transition from US to French Dual-key Arrangements," *European Journal of International Security* (October 2025): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10017.

fight is formed, but they do not displace the social and institutional conditions discussed elsewhere in this paper. Nuclear capability, in particular, does not insulate a state from problems of legitimacy or public trust; possession of a deterrent alone does not sustain political consent over time. At the same time, states with effective institutions but limited deterrence may confront tighter constraints when threats are perceived as existential. Space capability operates in a comparable way. It tends to strengthen states that already possess coherent governance and social cohesion, but it does little to stabilize will to fight where those foundations are weak.

Treating nuclear posture and space capability as explicit contextual modifiers allows these interactions to be analyzed without inflating their explanatory power. They frame the strategic environment within which national will to fight is generated, sustained, or constrained, while leaving the core determinants rooted in governance, social cohesion, and institutional effectiveness.

Analysis

Analytical Framework

To be able to assess and comment on the national will to fight, several dimensions are of interest for each sovereign state to be included in the comparative analysis. The dimensions included in this analysis are not intended to measure will to fight directly. Rather, each variable functions as a proxy for structural conditions that enable or constrain a state's capacity to sustain resistance under prolonged strategic stress. Will to fight is treated here as an emergent property of these interacting conditions, not as a sentiment or psychological disposition.

Alliance: primary alliance context for the state, either NATO or an Indo-Pacific U.S. ally. Alliance context establishes the strategic environment within which national decisions are made. Alliance membership shapes expectations of support, burden sharing, and escalation control. These expectations influence national cost tolerance and political sustainability, particularly for non-nuclear states relying on extended deterrence.

Population: total national population for 2024 as given by the World Bank.[30] Generally, population provides a baseline for mobilization potential and societal depth. Larger populations do not imply greater will to fight, but they affect the scale at which losses can be absorbed, reserves generated, and economic activity sustained without systemic collapse.

Gross domestic product (GDP): GDP in current U.S. dollars per capita for 2024 as given by the World Bank.[31] GDP per capita serves as a proxy

[30] "Population, Total," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. World population prospects are provided by the United Nations Population Division.

[31] "GDP per Capita (Current US$)," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. GDP per capita is based on official country statistics.

for overall economic capacity and societal resilience. Higher GDP per capita increases a state's ability to finance prolonged conflict, absorb economic disruption, and maintain public services under stress, all of which condition endurance rather than immediate military effectiveness. This measure should be interpreted alongside the structure of the economy, as states with output concentrated in a narrow sector may be more exposed to external shocks, sanctions, or supply disruptions, whereas more diversified economies are likely to offer greater adaptive capacity under sustained stress.

Defense spending: defense or military spending/expenditure expressed as a percentage of national GDP for 2024 as given by the World Bank.[32] Defense spending as a percentage of GDP reflects revealed national priorities rather than absolute power. Sustained high defense effort signals political willingness to allocate resources to security at the expense of civilian consumption, a necessary precondition for long-term will to fight.

Active military: number of active-duty military personnel based on world population numbers from 2024.[33] Active military personnel represent standing force availability and immediate readiness during peacetime conditions.

Reserve plus paramilitary: the combined number of reserve and paramilitary personnel, including potential mobilization depth and surge capacity, based on world population numbers from 2024.[34] Reserve-heavy structures indicate institutionalized expectations of civilian participation in defense, which is directly relevant to national endurance.

Military per 1,000: total military personnel (active plus reserve and paramilitary) per 1,000 population.[35] This dataset normalizes force structure relative to society, providing an indicator of how deeply defense is embedded within the population. High density suggests a society structurally oriented toward sustained defense participation rather than expeditionary or symbolic force contributions.

E in, net: net energy imports as a percentage of total energy use, based on data from the World Bank, with most values being for 2023.[36] Net energy imports function as a vulnerability indicator. High external energy dependence constrains national autonomy during conflict conditions and can erode will to fight through economic shock, supply disruption, and civilian hardship, particularly in prolonged scenarios.

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[32] "Military Expenditure (% of GDP)," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. Military spending is based on data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's military expenditure database.

[33] "Current World Population, 2024," World Population Review, accessed 1 April 2026.

[34] "Current World Population, 2024."

[35] "Military Size by Country, year," World Population Review, accessed 1 April 2026.

[36] "Energy Imports, Net (% of Energy Use)," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. Energy data based on statistics from the International Energy Agency.

National Cyber Security Index (NCSI): NCSI score based on 2024 values.[37] The NCSI score reflects institutional preparedness to defend critical digital infrastructure. Cyber resilience is a necessary condition for maintaining governance, communications, and public trust during conflict, especially during sustained hybrid or gray-zone pressure.

Education: educational attainment proxy, defined as the percentage of the adult population (older than 25) having completed at least upper secondary education based on 2024 data from the World Bank.[38] Education attainment is used as a population-level capacity indicator. Higher education levels correlate with information processing capability, institutional trust formation, and adaptability, which collectively affect resistance to panic, misinformation, and strategic shock.

Social media: social media usage, as a proportion of the population using social media platforms, from World Population Review for 2025.[39] Social media usage captures exposure to the digital information environment. High exposure increases both mobilization potential and vulnerability to disinformation. It therefore operates as a conditional variable whose effect depends on education, institutional trust, and cybersecurity capacity.

Disinformation (DIS): qualitative indicator of relative susceptibility to disinformation, derived from the interaction of education and social media exposure using median-based classification. This is a derived, interpretive column. A high education percentage and a low social media exposure percentage gives a low disinformation susceptibility ranking (1). Conversely, a lower education percentage and a high social media exposure percentage gives a high disinformation susceptibility ranking (3). Disinformation susceptibility reflects relative vulnerability to narrative manipulation rather than actual belief adoption, and is included to highlight informational fragility as a constraint on sustained will.

Space industry: space industry spending in current U.S. dollars, defined as total national investment in space programs for the reference year from the *Government Space Program* report.[40] Used as a proxy for the maturity and depth of a country's advanced technology and engineering base, reflecting the capacity to design, integrate, and manufacture complex high-reliability systems if required.

Trust in government: public trust in national government based on *Wel-*

[37] "National Cyber Security Index," NCSI, e-Governance Academy Foundation, accessed 1 April 2026.

[38] "Educational Attainment, at Least Completed Primary, Population 25+ Years, Total (%) (Cumulative)," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. Statistics based on data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

[39] "Social Media Users by Country, year," World Population Review, accessed 1 April 2026.

[40] NovaSpace, "New Historic High for Government Space Spending Mostly Driven by Defense Expenditures," press release, 19 December 2023.

come Global Monitor 2020.[41] Trust in government captures perceived legitimacy and social consent. High trust increases tolerance for sacrifice, compliance with mobilization, and acceptance of hardship. Low trust constrains political sustainability even when material capacity is strong.

Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI): published each year by Transparency International, selected from data sets that capture business sector and expert surveys and assessments of public sector corruption for 2025.[42] This compliments the trust in government measure of a society's willingness to sacrifice and comply.

Government effectiveness: government effectiveness score from the Worldwide Governance Indicators provided by the World Bank, with most values being for 2023.[43] Highlights perceptions of public service quality, policy implementation capacity, and administrative competence. Government effectiveness reflects administrative competence and policy implementation capacity. Effective governance is required to translate resources into outcomes during crisis, and weak effectiveness can rapidly erode will to fight regardless of public sentiment.

Liberal democracy: liberal democracy index score from the V-Dem project values for 2024.[44] Captures democratic legitimacy context, including electoral integrity, civil liberties, and constraints on executive power. Liberal democracy indicators contextualize political legitimacy and constraint. While democracy does not guarantee will to fight, low democratic legitimacy can undermine endurance by weakening consent, increasing internal friction, or incentivizing repression that degrades institutional coherence. In this sense, liberal democracies tend to sustain mobilization through consent and institutional trust, whereas more coercive systems may generate short-term compliance but often at the cost of longer-term resilience as repression erodes legitimacy and increases systemic strain.

Nuclear context: categorical classification of the state's nuclear posture, distinguishing nuclear-weapon states (NWS), nuclear-sharing hosts, states relying on extended deterrence under an umbrella, and states with no nuclear deterrence role.[45] Nuclear context is a strategic modifier. Nuclear-armed status, nuclear-sharing arrangements, extended deterrence reliance, or absence of nu-

[41] *Welcome Global Monitor 2020: Covid-19* (London: Welcome Trust, 2021).
[42] "Corruption Perceptions Index, 2025," Transparency International, accessed 1 April 2026.
[43] "Government Effectiveness: Percentile Rank," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026.
[44] "Liberal Democracy Index, 2024," OurWorldInData.org, accessed 1 April 2026.
[45] Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 7 July 2017, C.N.475.2017; Anya L. Fink, *U.S. Extended Deterrence and Regional Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2026); *SIPRI Yearbook, 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2025); and "Nuclear Notebook: Nuclear Arsenals of the World," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, accessed 8 April 2026.

clear assurance alter perceptions of survivability, escalation risk, and alliance credibility. These factors condition cost tolerance and political sustainability without constituting will to fight in themselves.

Comparative Analysis

First, there is a very sharp split between global system shapers and regional or dependent actors. The United States sits in a category of its own, not just because of population or defense spending, but because space investment and nuclear status stack on top of mass. No other country combines population scale, active forces, reserve depth, per-capita military funds, and space investment at anything like that level (table 1).

Second, the United Kingdom (UK)–France–Germany triangle looks materially uneven in a way that is often obscured in strategic discourse. France is materially more balanced than the UK, with larger active and reserve forces and substantially higher space investment. Germany has economic mass but weaker force density and modest reserves, which it is actively addressing. The UK's profile is narrower than its reputation suggests, including a moderate force size, moderate density, and relatively modest space investment compared with France. That is, the UK is problematic, it is not dominant even within its peer set at the top of the table.

Third, the Nordic approach is clear. Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark all show relatively small populations but high military density, strong reserves, and consistent defense effort. Finland stands out materially because of its extraordinary reserve depth relative to population, which structurally differentiates it from almost every other NATO member except Korea. This matters because it is a latent mobilization capacity, not just standing force size. Iceland being the exception here.

Table 1 shows the material and strategic capacity of NATO and Indo-Pacific allied states, capturing the structural foundations relevant to national defense and deterrence. It is worth dissecting the table and analyzing the contents. However, taken together, table 1 shows that material capacity is extremely unevenly distributed and that many alliance members rely implicitly on others for strategic depth.

Fourth, Eastern Europe shows a mobilization-heavy but capital-light pattern. Poland, the Baltics, Romania, and Bulgaria have high defense spending as a share of GDP and relatively high military density, but very limited space investment and lower GDP per capita. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are particularly interesting because they achieve high per-capita military figures despite tiny populations and minimal industrial depth. This suggests a will-to-fight orientation but also fragility if conflicts become prolonged or technologically escalatory.

Table 1. Material and strategic capacity indicators for NATO and Indo-Pacific allied states

Country	Alliance	Population (1,000s)	GDP (USD per capita)	Defense spending (% GDP)	Active military (1,000s)	Reserve + paramilitary (1,000s)	Military population (per 1,000)	Space industry (USD)	Nuclear context
United States	NATO	340,111	84,534	3.4	1,326	807	3.899	73,200	NWS
Canada	NATO	41,289	54,340.3	1.3	67	40	1.632	730	Umbrella
United Kingdom	NATO	69,226	53,246.4	2.3	144	71	2.086	1,448	NWS
France	NATO	68,552	46,103.1	2.1	270	205	3.939	3,466	NWS
Germany	NATO	83,517	56,103.7	1.9	184	50	2.197	2,286	Host
Italy	NATO	58,953	40,385.3	1.6	166	194	2.807	2,111	Host
Spain	NATO	48,849	35,326.8	1.4	120	91	2.464	757	Umbrella
Portugal	NATO	10,695	29,292.2	1.5	27	236	2.548	142	Umbrella
Netherlands	NATO	17,993	67,520.4	1.9	35	10	1.967	203	Host
Belgium	NATO	11,859	56,614.6	1.3	26	5	2.218	335	Host
Luxembourg	NATO	677	137,781.7	1	1	1	1.329	183	Umbrella
Norway	NATO	5,572	86,785.4	2.1	23	40	4.172	191	Umbrella
Denmark	NATO	5,977	71,026.5	2.4	15	44	2.426	66	Umbrella
Finland	NATO	5,620	53,149.8	2.3	24	268	4.235	79	Umbrella
Sweden	NATO	10,570	57,117.5	2	30	21	2.815	153	Umbrella
Iceland	NATO	387	86,040.5	0.2	0	0	0.000	0	Umbrella
Estonia	NATO	1,372	31,428.4	3.4	7	18	5.174	8.9	Umbrella
Latvia	NATO	1,866	23,409.1	3.3	6	16	3.328	1.7	Umbrella
Lithuania	NATO	2,888	29,384	3.1	20	21	6.873	1.8	Umbrella
Poland	NATO	36,559	25,103.6	4.2	114	75	3.120	169	Umbrella
Czechia	NATO	1,0905	31,823.3	1.9	22	0	1.994	80	Umbrella
Slovak Republic	NATO	5,422	25,992.7	2	16	0	2.923	3	Umbrella
Hungary	NATO	9,562	23,292.3	2.2	28	32	2.907	60	Umbrella
Romania	NATO	19,052	20,080.2	2.3	69	107	3.637	88	Umbrella
Bulgaria	NATO	6,441	17,596	2.1	37	3	5.736	0.95	Umbrella
Greece	NATO	10,405	24,626.1	3.1	143	225	13.714	39	Umbrella
Türkiye	NATO	85,519	15,892.7	1.9	355	536	4.153	329	Host
Croatia	NATO	3,866	24,050.4	1.8	15	21	3.932	0.3	Umbrella
Slovenia	NATO	2,127	34,301	1.3	7	7	3.408	13	Umbrella
Albania	NATO	2,377	11,377.8	2	9	2	3.576	0	Umbrella
Montenegro	NATO	624	13,263.3	1.8	2	10	3.769	1	Umbrella
North Macedonia	NATO	1,824	9,291.9	2.1	8	12	4.385	0	Umbrella
Japan	Indo-Pacific	123,975	32,487.1	1.4	247	71	1.992	4,653	Umbrella
Republic of Korea	Indo-Pacific	51,751	36,238.6	2.6	500	6,114	9.662	723	Umbrella

Table 1. Material and strategic capacity indicators for NATO and Indo-Pacific allied states (continued)

Country	Alliance	Population (1,000s)	GDP (USD per capita)	Defense spending (% GDP)	Active military (1,000s)	Reserve + paramilitary (1,000s)	Military population (per 1,000)	Space industry (USD)	Nuclear context
Australia	Indo-Pacific	27,197	64,604	1.9	59	30	2.155	631	Umbrella
New Zealand	Indo-Pacific	5,288	49,205.2	1.2	9	2	1.702	19	None
Philippines	Indo-Pacific	115,844	3,984.8	1.3	150	1,462	1.295	21	None

Source: based on author's compilation of data.

Fifth, Greece and Türkiye are an interesting contrast. Greece has extreme military density and very large reserves relative to population, reflecting historical threat perception, but little strategic-industrial depth. Türkiye has both population mass and large forces, but only middling defense spending and relatively modest space investment given its size. Materially, Türkiye should be a top-tier NATO power, yet even here the table shows under-realization of potential.

Sixth, the small Western European states'—Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Portugal—material profiles are thin across almost every dimension except GDP per capita in Luxembourg's case. Even the Netherlands, often seen as a capable military contributor, has very limited reserves and modest force density. Luxembourg represents the clearest illustration that extreme wealth without force structure or mobilization depth produces almost no material will-to-fight capacity.

Finally, the Indo-Pacific cases are very revealing when isolated from governance. South Korea is the most extreme mobilization state in the entire dataset, with massive reserves, high density, serious defense spending, and nontrivial space investment. Japan, by contrast, looks materially constrained, with moderate forces, low density, and modest defense spending, despite significant space investment. Australia and New Zealand sit clearly as expeditionary-capable but mobilization-light states, while the Philippines shows population mass without economic or technological depth.

Table 2 isolates the social, institutional, and informational substrate of national will to fight. When compared with table 1, the dimensions actively reshape how much of the material capacity identified in table 1 is usable in a sustained conflict.

The United States stands out as a structurally asymmetric case. Education and NCSI are strong, but trust in government and governance effectiveness are only middling relative to peers. Liberal democracy remains high but not exceptional. This confirms an important nuance, the United States scores highly overall because of overwhelming material capacity, not because of institutional

Table 2. Social, institutional, and informational indicators relevant to national will to fight

Country	Net E in (% of use)	NCSI (%)	Education (%)	Social media (%)	DIS (1–3)	Trust in government (%)	CPI (%)	Government efficiency (1–3)	Liberal democracy (%)
United States	-9	84.17	95.4	72.85	1	52.5	64	1.217	74.8
Canada	-90	96.67	89.9	79	2	72.6	75	1.517	74.4
United Kingdom	44	75	80.5	78.79	2	47.7	70	1.161	75.2
France	47	89.17	78	75.62	2	56.3	66	1.145	79.9
Germany	70	90.83	81.9	77.91	2	82	77	1.185	79.2
Italy	80	88.33	55.3	71.35	2	52.3	53	0.611	70.5
Spain	77	89.17	55.7	82.9	3	48.2	55	0.752	74.5
Portugal	77	84.17	48.6	71.94	2	47.7	56	0.988	75.1
Netherlands	87	81.67	74.1	80.67	3	78.5	78	1.626	76.1
Belgium	89	94.17	74.4	76.37	3	54.9	69	1.037	80.5
Luxembourg	110	66.23	77.2	46.59	2	80.81	78	1.914	78.3
Norway	-704	79.17	81.9	77.18	2	94.3	81	1.800	83.9
Denmark	44	89.17	78.1	78.13	3	79.3	89	2.016	88.3
Finland	30	95.83	82.1	78.07	2	80.7	88	1.739	80.2
Sweden	28	75.83	84.7	81.17	2	64.7	80	1.601	84.5
Iceland	20	78.33	80.2	78.59	3	48.62	77	1.555	75.9
Estonia	4	96.67	86.6	73.57	1	56	76	1.263	85
Latvia	34	85.83	89.2	76.07	2	39.6	60	0.697	76.5
Lithuania	71	90	92.5	73.85	1	55.1	65	1.050	73.4
Poland	49	92.5	87.8	76.03	2	33.6	52	0.421	61.6
Czechia	42	98.33	91.4	75.31	1	45.8	59	1.114	81.7
Slovak Republic	58	92.5	90.1	72.7	1	53.5	48	0.230	58.4
Hungary	63	93.33	83.9	73.09	1	48.6	40	0.373	31.8
Romania	28	92.5	72.8	68.75	2	24.3	45	-0.093	44.5
Bulgaria	41	80.83	80.2	65.08	2	40.4	40	0.047	50.8
Greece	89	85	70.1	73.65	2	40.7	50	0.148	57.6
Türkiye	72	71.67	41.1	66.72	2	54.9	31	-0.248	11.7
Croatia	57	82.5	81.4	69.64	1	42	47	0.713	61.9
Slovenia	49	89.17	82.3	74.63	1	48.1	58	1.039	61.9
Albania	23	85	54	50.87	2	41.4	39	0.251	39.6
Montenegro	24	64.17	81.9	64.8	1	43.2	46	0.247	47.8
North Macedonia	64	66.67	68.7	55.13	2	37.2	40	-0.051	37.4
Japan	87	82.5	85.2	78.8	2	49.5	71	1.631	73.4
Republic of Korea	85	83.33	81.5	94.64	2	52.8	63	1.405	63.1
Australia	-214	87.5	79.9	77.48	3	69.5	76	1.590	80.8
New Zealand	32	65	75.1	78.83	3	83.7	81	1.530	80.9
Philippines	54	55.83	34.5	77.75	3	82.9	32	0.154	30.8

Source: based on author's compilation of data.

cohesion. In a will-to-fight framing, the United States is structurally powerful but internally uneven.

A dominant pattern is the Nordic–Baltic coherence cluster. Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Estonia perform strongly across trust in government, government effectiveness, liberal democracy, education, and cybersecurity. Even where energy dependence differs, the institutional alignment is tight. Finland and Denmark are particularly striking because they combine high trust, high effectiveness, and strong democratic legitimacy with high education and solid NCSI scores.

The United Kingdom is now clearly exposed by this table. It sits consistently mid-pack on trust, government effectiveness, education, and cybersecurity, with relatively high social media exposure. There are no catastrophic values, but there are no compensating strengths either. Compared to France and Germany, the UK lacks France's democratic legitimacy score and Germany's trust and effectiveness. This table alone explains why the UK is lacking.

Southern Europe forms a coherent governance-fragility cluster. Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and to a lesser extent Belgium show lower trust, weaker government effectiveness, and lower education attainment than northern peers. Social media exposure is high, and disinformation susceptibility is rarely at the lowest category. Greece is particularly notable, its governance and trust indicators are far weaker than its military profile would suggest, reinforcing the earlier finding that force structure does not equate to will to fight.

Eastern Europe displays a split pattern. Estonia, Lithuania, Czechia, and Poland show strong education and cybersecurity, but trust in government and effectiveness drop sharply in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Hungary and Türkiye are the most extreme cases, with very low liberal democracy scores and negative or near-zero governance effectiveness. These cases demonstrate how institutional legitimacy becomes a binding constraint even when education or security awareness is present.

Türkiye is again analytically rich. Education attainment is very low relative to peers, governance effectiveness is negative, and liberal democracy is extremely low, yet trust in government is not collapsed. This produces a system that may mobilize politically in the short term but lacks institutional depth for sustained national will to fight under strain.

Luxembourg and Iceland illustrate opposite edge cases. Luxembourg scores extremely high on trust and governance but has weaker cybersecurity and moderate education, while Iceland shows strong governance but lower trust and high social media exposure. Both cases reinforce that governance alone is insufficient without broader social and informational resilience.

The Indo-Pacific cases are revealing. Japan shows strong education, governance, and democracy but only moderate trust and high social media exposure.

Table 3. Mean and overall rankings for each country

Country	Mean	Overall	Country	Mean	Overall
United States	11.15	1	Italy	21.21	20
Finland	11.43	2	Czechia	21.38	21
Norway	12.50	3	Latvia	21.86	22
Germany	13.36	4	Romania	22.36	23
Denmark	13.40	5	Türkiye	23.14	24
France	13.43	6	Greece	23.21	25
Australia	13.53	7	Philippines	23.80	26
Canada	13.79	9	Iceland	24.40	27
Republic of Korea	13.79	9	Hungary	24.77	28
Sweden	14.14	10	Portugal	24.86	29
United Kingdom	16.50	11	Slovak Republic	25.54	30
Estonia	16.92	12	Bulgaria	26.43	31
Japan	16.93	13	Luxembourg	26.71	32
Poland	18.14	14	Slovenia	27.00	33
Netherlands	18.20	15	Croatia	29.15	34
Spain	18.40	16	Albania	29.71	35
Belgium	18.53	17	Montenegro	31.69	36
New Zealand	19.73	18	North Macedonia	31.79	37
Lithuania	20.31	19			

Source: based on author's compilation of data.

South Korea combines high education and cybersecurity with middling trust and democracy, but far stronger than often assumed. Australia and New Zealand score consistently high across governance, democracy, trust, and education, explaining why they punch above their material weight in the combined ranking. The Philippines is the clearest fragility case in the Indo-Pacific, with low education, weak governance effectiveness, low democracy, and high social media exposure, despite high trust levels.

Taken as a whole, table 2 shows that institutional coherence, not just public sentiment, is the key differentiator. High trust without effectiveness does little, high education without legitimacy is unstable, and strong cybersecurity without governance coherence is insufficient. When overlaid with table 1, this table explains most of the "unexpected" rankings, particularly the UK, Greece, Türkiye, and Poland, and clarifies why the Nordics and some Indo-Pacific allies rise so consistently in the overall results.

Table 3 shows how countries compare based on the mean of their rankings across all variables. Lower values indicate a stronger overall position across the set of factors considered. This is not intended as a formal index or predictive

measure. It is a simple way of bringing the variables together so that relative differences between countries can be compared and contrasted.

The top of the table is tightly grouped, with the United States, Finland, and Norway forming a clear leading cluster, followed closely by Germany, Denmark, France, and Australia. The small spread in mean values here suggests that several countries are similarly well positioned across the selected factors rather than there being a single dominant outlier. There is then a noticeable step down into a broader middle group, where countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan, and Poland sit, followed by a more dispersed set extending through Southern and Eastern Europe. Differences in this range are greater, indicating more variation in how countries ranked across the different variables. The lower end of the table shows the largest separation, with countries such as Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia clearly distinct from the rest. This widening spread suggests that weaker aggregate positioning is more uneven and less clustered than at the top end.

Discussion

This study set out to address a persistent gap in defense and security analysis; namely, the tendency to conflate national will to fight with material capability, alliance membership, or episodic battlefield performance. The comparative framework developed here demonstrates that national will to fight is best understood as a system-level property emerging from the interaction of material foundations, institutional legitimacy, social cohesion, and informational resilience, all operating within specific strategic contexts. The emphasis on societal and institutional factors aligns with contemporary defense thinking on national resistance, particularly the Resistance Operating Concept (ROC), which highlights the role of civilian populations, governance structures, and societal cohesion in sustaining resistance under external pressure.[46] The "so what" of this analysis lies in what it reveals about alliance resilience, deterrence credibility, and the risks of strategic miscalculation when will to fight is inferred from the wrong indicators.

The results point to a familiar but frequently mishandled conclusion; material capacity matters, but it does not settle the question of sustained national resistance. As table 1 makes clear, allied democracies differ sharply in population size, force structure, industrial depth, and access to strategic capabilities. The data in table 2 complicates the assumption that these differences translate in any straightforward way into endurance. In several cases, states with comparatively modest material profiles, particularly across the Nordic and Baltic

[46] Otto C. Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept (ROC)* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: JSOU Press, 2020).

region, combine high governance effectiveness, strong public trust, and resilient information environments. At the same time, a number of materially significant states display institutional weaknesses that would likely constrain their ability to sustain prolonged conflict. The risk is not theoretical. Defense planning that concentrates on force generation while treating institutional coherence as background context is prone to overstating real-world endurance.

A similar caution applies at the alliance level. Alliance membership clearly shapes expectations of support and escalation control, but it does not neutralize domestic legitimacy problems or compensate for weak governance capacity.[47] In practice, several states appear reliant on alliance protection while lacking the social and institutional depth needed for sustained national mobilization. This produces an uneven burden-sharing reality in which a small subset of states contributes not only the bulk of material capability but also much of the alliance's institutional resilience. From a deterrence standpoint, this distinction matters. Adversaries do not assess alliances as abstract collectives.[48] They observe whether individual members can absorb cost, maintain political consent, and persist under pressure.[49] Treating formal commitments as proxies for endurance therefore introduces avoidable strategic risk.

Governance legitimacy and effectiveness emerge as binding constraints rather than background variables. Across the dataset, high levels of public trust do not produce resilience in the absence of administrative competence, and capable bureaucracies do not compensate for deficits in legitimacy. Greece, Türkiye, and parts of Eastern Europe illustrate how misalignment between force structure and institutional quality can generate defense postures that appear robust on paper but are fragile under sustained strain. Rapid mobilization may be achievable in the short term, yet political fragmentation, loss of consent, or institutional overload become increasingly likely as costs accumulate. For planners, this reinforces the need to treat governance indicators as operationally relevant, not merely descriptive.

Information environments further condition these dynamics. In highly digitized societies, will to fight is increasingly sensitive to the interaction between social media exposure, education levels, and cybersecurity capacity. Where high exposure coincides with weaker educational foundations or limited cyber resil-

[47] Earl C. Ravenal, "Extended Deterrence and Alliance Cohesion," in *Alliances in US Foreign Policy: Issues in the Quest for Collective Defense* (New York: Routledge, 2019), e19–40.

[48] Osman Sabri Kiratli, "The Politics of Alliance Cohesion: Experimental Evidence on American Attitudes toward Corrective Measures in Security Partnerships," *Perspectives on Politics* (2025): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592725103071.

[49] Maj Maxwell Stewart, "Revisiting the Global Posture Review: A New U.S. Approach to European Defense and NATO in a Post-Ukraine War World," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 77–87, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402004.

ience, vulnerability to narrative disruption and disinformation rises.[50] This does not imply automatic erosion of will, but it does mean that endurance becomes more dependent on effective information governance and institutional trust. Even states with adequate material resources and formal institutions may see resilience degraded through sustained informational pressure. This is particularly relevant in hybrid and gray-zone contexts, where the objective is not battlefield defeat but the gradual erosion of societal consent.[51]

Placing nuclear posture and space capability in this framework as contextual modifiers rather than determinants helps avoid overstatement. Nuclear capability shapes perceptions of survivability, escalation risk, and alliance assurance, but it does not override problems of legitimacy or social cohesion.[52] Space capability similarly reflects strategic-industrial depth and long-term state capacity, reinforcing confidence in endurance and adaptability, yet it cannot stabilize will to fight where governance and trust are weak.[53] In both cases, high-end capabilities reinforce existing strengths rather than substituting for missing foundations. Strategic confidence derived from them remains contingent on credible institutions and durable social consent.

Finally, the comparative approach adopted here has implications for deterrence signaling and for how alliances assess their own resilience. Emphasis on aggregate power or headline defense spending can obscure structural vulnerabilities within individual states. The analysis helps explain why some countries consistently perform beyond what their material profiles suggest, while others underperform relative to expectation. For adversaries, misunderstanding these patterns risks miscalculation. For allies, failing to recognize them risks brittle deterrence and unrealistic assumptions about burden sharing.

Conclusion

This article argues that national will to fight is a structurally conditioned capacity rather than a sentiment, moral quality, or proxy for military power. The comparative analysis shows that material resources and alliance membership

[50] Kai Shu et al., "Combating Disinformation in a Social Media Age," *WIREs Data Mining and Knowledge Discovery* 10, no. 6 (November/December 2020): e1385, https://doi.org/10.1002/widm.1385.

[51] Mikkel Storm Jensen, "Cyberspace Operations, Grey Zone Conflict, and Small States," in *Modern War and Grey Zones: Design for Small States*, ed. Marzena Zakowska and David Last (New York: Routledge, 2025), 170–80; and Sarah Bressan and Mari-Liis Sulg, "Welcome to the Grey Zone: Future War and Peace," *New Perspectives* 28, no. 3 (2020): 379–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X20935244.

[52] Frank P. Harvey, "The Future of Strategic Stability and Nuclear Deterrence," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 58, no. 2 (June 2003): 321–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/002070200305800205.

[53] Samantha Kallen, "Nationalism, Ideology, and the Cold War Space Race," *Constellations* 10, no. 2 (Winter 2019), https://doi.org/10.29173/cons29377.

alone are insufficient to explain national endurance; similar force structures and spending levels translate into very different capacities for sustained resistance once governance legitimacy, institutional effectiveness, social cohesion, and informational resilience are considered.

Nuclear posture and space capability shape the strategic context within which will to fight operates, but they do not substitute for domestic institutional coherence or public consent. High-end capabilities amplify existing strengths but cannot compensate for weak governance or fragile informational environments.

Finally, the central contribution of this study is not to rank national will to fight or predict wartime behavior, but to reframe how will to fight should be assessed in peacetime. National will to fight is neither a latent psychological reserve waiting to be activated nor a direct function of military expenditure. It is a structurally conditioned capacity that must be cultivated through credible governance, institutional effectiveness, social cohesion, and informational resilience. For allied democracies facing protracted strategic competition, recognizing and addressing these enabling conditions is central to the credibility of deterrence.