



ACFC26

From Assumptions to Alignment with Reality

Annual CIMIC Foresight Conference 2026

The Hague | 15–17 September 2026

Are our assumptions still right?

NATO Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence (CCOE)
CONFERENCE REPORT

Handling. ACFC26 was held under the Chatham House Rule. This report attributes no contribution to any person, organisation, or nation. Descriptions of roles, employers, and nationalities that could identify a speaker have been removed, and no speaker list is published.

What this is. A record of what was said and found at ACFC26, written for the people who plan and run civil-military work. It is not doctrine and not a NATO position.

Status. Draft for CCOE review. Not cleared for release. Do not pass outside CCOE before release has been agreed.

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1 Key Messages and Implications

The conference examined ten such assumptions of current CIMIC thinking, which are presented together in Annex C. None stood unqualified: seven did not hold, and three held in part. The seven messages below are what recurred across the panels and breakout sessions. They are the editors' synthesis and not a vote of participants.

The central challenge is not more information or more coordination. It is to make civil understanding change decisions, to settle responsibilities before a crisis, and to act in alignment with civilian actors without assuming they share our mandate or purpose.

M1	Assumptions go stale, so test them routinely. Foresight often gets the trends right and still fails to change institutions. Speed and daily pressure push people back on long-held beliefs. Participants with recent combat experience called their lessons "identified", not yet "learned". Implication. Which assumption in our plans, procedures, or training would we defend hardest, and when did we last try to disprove it? Developed in: 4.1, 4.4, 5.1, 5.2
M2	Understanding counts only if it changes a decision. There was no shortage of information about the civil environment. The difficulty was turning it into something a commander or staff can act on. Open sources help prepare engagement but do not replace direct contact or contextual judgement. Implication. For each piece of civil information we hold: which decision does it change, and who takes it? What could an adversary learn about our people and networks from open sources, including what their families post? Developed in: 4.1, 5.1, 5.2, 5.4
M3	Settle mandates and decision rights before the crisis. Personal networks help, but they do not survive time pressure, security rules, or staff rotation. Liaison personnel need clear authority, within national law and applicable permissions, to understand what they may ask for, receive, use, and pass on; liaison and coordination do not create command authority over civilian or commercial actors. Implication. Who has written authority to ask for, receive, and pass on civil information for us, and what happens to our contacts when staff rotate? Developed in: 4.4, 5.4, 5.5
M4	Dependencies run both ways. Military operations rely on civilian and commercial systems for transport, IT, medical capacity, and more, while those systems remain subject to their own statutory responsibilities, owners, and property rights. Those systems have their own needs, owners, and claims on scarce resources. Implication. Which civilian services do we rely on, what do they need from us, and who settles it when both sides claim the same resource? Developed in: 4.4, 5.4, 5.5



Assumptions



Understanding



Decisions



Authority

M5	Do not assume common aims. Military, government, humanitarian, commercial, and community actors differ in aims, authority, timelines, and appetite for risk, and each difference is legitimate. Meetings do not create shared purpose. The moderator called alignment the most interesting idea of the conference because it accepts these differences. For humanitarian actors, visible separation can be the right answer. The conference did not identify who is responsible for creating the conditions for alignment when actors retain separate mandates and decision rights. Implication. Where do our counterparts' aims, timelines, and authorities differ from ours, and where would distance protect their role better than closer cooperation? Developed in: 4.3, 4.4, 5.3, 5.4	 Dependencies
M6	People decide, so invest in them. Trust works as an operational capability, not only as a personal quality. Judgement, communication, and the ability to make time to think matter most when data and AI are plentiful. Exercises that show behaviour under pressure, followed by an honest debrief, help. Implication. How do we create time to think under pressure, and do we debrief behaviour (who was heard, what was set aside) as well as outcomes? Developed in: 4.2, 4.4, 5.6	 Alignment
M7	Rules and the protection of civilians are under pressure. In a fight, protecting civilians competes with survival and mission. International humanitarian law is strained, and enforcement is weak and selective. Existing policy was written for expeditionary operations and does not yet answer how to protect civilians on Allied territory. Implication. Is protection of civilians in our planning and orders, or only in our briefings? Developed in: 4.3, 5.3	 Human judgement and civilian protection

How the messages connect. The order moves from how organisations understand their environment (M1, M2), to who has the authority to act (M3), on whom they depend (M4), how actors differ (M5), and the human, legal, and ethical conditions that decide whether action is effective and legitimate (M6, M7). It is a reading aid, not a model of sequential activity. The messages influence one another and may need revisiting as circumstances change. The implications are prompts drawn from the sessions. They are not findings, not doctrine, and not tested.

Connection Messages and Assumptions

Messages	Linked Assumptions
M1	A4 – A5 – A7
M2	A1 – A3 – A4
M3	A2 – A7

M4	A2 – A10
M5	A6 – A8 – A9
M6	A5 – A7
M7	A5 – A6 – A9



2 From Conference to Programme of Work

This chapter sets out CCOE's proposed response to the conference. It is not a conference finding, a formal decision, or a NATO position. It has three parts: what CCOE proposes to put into its Programme of Work, what you can do now without waiting for it, and what CCOE leadership is asked to decide.

2.1 Proposed contributions to the Programme of Work

The conference did not ask simply for more information about the civil environment. The eight proposals answer the needs behind the seven messages (M1 to M7 in the table chapter 1). They form one programme but not a fixed sequence: some can begin within existing activities, others need confirmed ownership, resources, national input, or policy direction. The branches confirm these through the Programme of Work process.

#	Proposed CCOE action	Possible vehicle	Proposed lead	Indicative timing
1	Set up a routine loop for testing assumptions. Use ACFC, acaCIMICs, and experiments as recurring checkpoints. Retest the three thinly supported readings in Annex C (A4, A9, A10) first. Reference – M1: Assumptions become outdated, and lessons are identified but not consistently learned.	ACFC; acaCIMICs; Experimentation	CCOE across branches	Programme of Work 2027; first test at ACFC27
2	Apply one test to CCOE's own products (analysis, OSINT, engagement, foresight, training): what does this change in a plan or a decision? Reference – M2: Civil understanding and information do not consistently influence decisions.	Doctrine; Training & Education	Doctrine	Now
3	Separate the liaison and information-sharing barriers that existing arrangements can solve from those that need national policy or legal change. Produce a liaison-mandate and handover checklist for practitioners, that identifies the relevant national authority, permissions, information boundaries, and escalation route. Make clear that liaison and coordination do not create command authority over civilian or commercial actors. Reference – M3: Relationships and information sharing are vulnerable to unclear authority, security restrictions, and staff rotation.	Studies; Domestic CIMIC work	Studies	Programme of Work 2027

#	Proposed CCOE action	Possible vehicle	Proposed lead	Indicative timing
4	Map two-way dependencies and competing demands, including what civilian systems need from the military. Conduct this work with the responsible national authorities and with civilian and commercial actors, respecting their statutory responsibilities, property rights, and information-sharing permissions. Link the work to Host Nation Support, resilience, and military mobility without implying military command over civilian systems. Explore a companion to the CIMIC Handbook written from the civilian perspective: what civilian actors need to know about when, how, and with whom to engage. (The companion is a CCOE proposal that was not raised at the conference but aligns with this effort.) Reference – M4: Dependencies are often treated as one-way and are not built into planning.	Research; Experimentation; Domestic CIMIC work; CIMIC Handbook	Concept Development	Programme of Work 2027
5	Clarify and apply existing terms for coordination, synchronisation, and alignment, including the limits of military authority over civilian actors, and for where distance from civilian actors is the right answer, humanitarian settings especially. Feed the result into CCOE doctrine work. (This is CCOE's reading: the sessions showed confusion about the terms, but did not ask for new ones.) Reference – M5: Coordination is sometimes treated as alignment, and different mandates and the need for humanitarian separation are insufficiently recognised.	Doctrine; Human Security work	Doctrine	Now
6	Continue Escape Room-style exercises with a debrief on behaviour. Add a module on OSINT and personal digital exposure. Build mutual understanding between civilian and military staff. Reference – M6: Conventional training does not consistently reveal behaviour under pressure, information filtering, or group dynamics.	Training & Education; acaCIMICs; Experimentation	Education & Training	Next CCOE course; ACFC27
7	Bring IHL accountability and the protection of civilians in Article 5 settings into the Human Security work. Reference – M7: Existing approaches do not yet answer civilian protection and humanitarian access in contested environments.	Human Security work	Human Security work	Programme of Work 2027
8 M3–M5	Invite the responsible national authorities, infrastructure operators, and companies to participate in exercises, where they agree and where national law, authorities, and permissions allow; participation does not place civilian or commercial actors under military command. Invite the small local NGOs that were missing this year to ACFC27. Reference – M3-M5: Civilian, humanitarian, and local perspectives were under-represented in exercises and at the conference.	Exercises ACFC	Education & Training ACFC team	ACFC27

2.2 What you can do now

The Programme of Work is not a prerequisite for beginning. Several lessons can be applied immediately:

- Test one assumption. Pick one from Annex C that matters in your area and try to disprove it in your next planning cycle or exercise (M1).
- Use the questions. Take the implications in Chapter 1 to your next staff meeting. Start with M2 and M3.
- Check your liaison arrangements. Confirm the written authority, national permissions, and information boundaries for each liaison officer, together with a handover routine for when staff rotate. Make clear that liaison and coordination do not create command authority over civilian or commercial actors (M3)
- Debrief behaviour. In your next exercise, ask who was heard and what was set aside, not only what was achieved (M6).
- Look at your open-source footprint and your team's, as an adversary would (Section 5.2).
- Tell CCOE what works and what does not.

3 The Conference in Brief

3.1 Where it fits

The conference has moved in three steps. ACFC24 explored what the future operating environment would ask of CIMIC. ACFC25 asked what CIMIC must change and opened a dedicated space for the CCOE Programme of Work. ACFC26 went back to the starting assumptions and tested them against current experience.

Conference	Core question	Focus
ACFC24	What is changing?	Emerging gaps and future requirements
ACFC25	What must CIMIC change?	Priorities for concept, doctrine, and capability development
ACFC26	Are our assumptions still right?	Testing assumptions against current experience

ACFC26 did not replace the findings of the earlier conferences. It examined whether those findings remain sufficiently grounded in operational, societal, and institutional reality.

3.2 Who was there

182 external participants from 34 nations: armed forces, NATO and multinational headquarters, Centres of Excellence, academia, humanitarian and civil-society organisations, public authorities, think tanks and the private sector (Annex A). The range mattered to the conference's purpose. CIMIC operates where military activity, public authority, civilian infrastructure, humanitarian action, and wider society meet, so the conference sought perspectives from beyond the military community.

3.3 Format

The conference combined plenary discussion with smaller, problem-focused sessions: four panels that challenged established assumptions, and six breakouts that worked on selected problems in depth. The panels ran without formal prepared remarks and under the Chatham House Rule. That created space for disagreement, challenge, and contributions from the audience. It also means the report records themes and arguments, not statements by individuals or institutions. The conference opened and closed with short video presentations. The opening one contrasted what we assume with what might be reality.

3.4 How the conference was perceived

The moderator's First Impressions Report (18 September) records three things participants valued: the quality of speakers and discussion, the chance to build networks across the community, and the lessons from participants with recent combat experience. Military CIMIC specialists and NGO representatives engaged closely with each other. Furthermore, it states that several participants said they could have listened to another hour of the panel.

3.5 How to read this report

This report is an interpretive synthesis. It draws on panel discussions, breakout reports, and the First Impressions Report. It does not reproduce a transcript, measure participant agreement, or establish causal findings. It works on three levels:

Conference discussion	Chapters 4 and 5. The issues, arguments, and examples raised in the sessions.
Editorial assessment	Chapter 1 and Annex C. Recurring themes and what they suggest about current CIMIC practice. A reading by the editors, not a vote, survey, or decision.
CCOE response	Chapter 2. Proposed contributions to the Programme of Work and immediate actions for practitioners.

Limitations to keep in mind:

- Under the Chatham House Rule, contributions cannot be attributed or independently verified.
- The report rests on session records and summaries, not complete transcripts.
- Some topics were broad or contested: human security, international humanitarian law, alignment, and whole-of-society approaches.
- The participant base did not include all relevant civilian, humanitarian, and local perspectives. The moderator notes that the many small local NGOs that supply practical civil-military support in a war zone were not heard.
- The Escape Room observations come from three iterations with a limited record.

Use the material as a source of questions, considerations, and possible further work, not as a definitive statement of doctrine or evidence.

4 Panels

The four panels explored the wider conditions in which CIMIC operates: how change is anticipated and acted on (4.1), contested information environments (4.2), pressure on human security and international humanitarian law (4.3), and growing dependence on civilian and commercial systems (4.4). Each summary shows what the panel contributed to the conference's central question, not the order of discussion. The implications are editorial.

4.1 Strategic Foresight meets Operational Reality

Most useful for: staffs that produce or use foresight.

Focus. The gap between identifying change and adapting to it. Foresight often identifies broad trends but has less effect on institutional behaviour, planning, and doctrine.

Main points

- Foresight keeps getting the big trends right and still fails to change institutions. Participants pointed to short planning horizons, political timelines, and the habit of treating foresight as prediction instead of a way to clarify direction.
- What helped was a standing foresight community with a simple shared method. The routine of using it mattered more than the content of any one analysis.
- Speed is not quality. Participants warned that “move fast” thinking and AI-driven targeting can produce faster decisions that are not better ones, and that complete information does not remove the risk from a military decision.
- The line between war and society is already blurring, through threats to civilians and growing reliance on private contractors. Humanitarian participants added concern over shrinking humanitarian space and the militarisation of aid, and asked for closer coordination with NATO.
- The real audience for foresight is not the top commander but the staff officers who turn it into doctrine and plans.

Implication for practice. Foresight should be connected to planning and decision cycles, tested against alternative futures, and used to challenge established assumptions. Its value should be judged partly by whether it changes a decision, plan or preparation activity.

4.2 Headline versus Ground Truth

Most useful for: communicators and anyone who explains defence to the public.

Focus. The relationship between public understanding, strategic communication, and the changing information environment, and the tension between communicating accurately and communicating effectively in a contested environment.

Main points

- Hybrid attacks (drones, cable sabotage, cyber attacks on public services) have not shifted public debate, which stays with health, pensions, and migration. Participants disagreed on whether this reflects a gap between military and political understanding or simply weak communication.
- Communicators face a tension between strictly factual public affairs and sharper, cognitive-warfare-style messaging. AI tools help detect narratives early, but a human approves every release.
- Messaging has to be national. “Total defence” resonates in some countries and alarms others, where “resilience” works better. Credible messengers outside government, influencers among them, can reach younger audiences. AI can produce content faster, but credibility and trust need human judgement.
- Participants wanted faster and clearer public attribution of hostile acts, closer coordination between government, business, and civil society, and ways to include linguistic minorities without legitimising hostile narratives.

Implication for practice. Effective communication requires more than producing accurate messages quickly. It requires an understanding of how different audiences interpret risk, which messengers they trust, and how communication affects public resilience and legitimacy.

4.3 Human Security under Pressure

Most useful for: planners, legal advisers, and anyone working with humanitarian actors.

Focus. Human security in high-intensity conflict, and situations where military requirements, civilian protection, and humanitarian principles pull in different directions.

Main points

- Once fighting starts, protecting civilians competes with survival, mission, and logistics, and pre-deployment principles fade. NATO’s human security policies were written for expeditionary missions. They do not answer how to protect civilians, children in particular, in an Article 5 setting on Allied territory.
- Aid workers and first responders are now deliberately targeted. Humanitarian participants argued that this makes strict adherence to humanitarian principles more necessary, not less. They warned against militaries treating NGOs as force multipliers and against blurring civil protection of one’s own population with protection of civilians under international humanitarian law (IHL).
- IHL is under strain: accountability is weak, enforcement is selective, some armed forces call IHL a handicap, and states are withdrawing from arms-control treaties. The moderator adds that military participants acknowledged that some treaty commitments, for example, on anti-personnel mines and cluster munitions, can limit flexibility against Russian aggression. All agreed that non-compliance damages Alliance’s credibility.

- Human security now reaches non-military threats such as climate, pandemics, and infrastructure collapse, for example, the 2025 blackout on the Iberian Peninsula. NATO's formal human security mandate has five areas and does not include climate.

- In some conflicts, societal cohesion and national survival are one and the same. In more fragmented conflicts, civilians split along factional lines, so a unified human security interest cannot be assumed.

Implication for practice. Civilian protection, humanitarian access, legal accountability, and responsible technology use should be addressed in planning, doctrine, education, and command decisions. Cooperation with humanitarian actors should rest on a clear understanding of their mandates and the consequences of association with military forces.

4.4 Whole-of-Society Alignment

Most useful for: those who plan with authorities, infrastructure operators, and industry.

Focus. How military activity depends on civilian and commercial systems, particularly when nations must support forward operations while keeping essential functions running at home.

Main points

- The opening recap named the conference's recurring threads: unexamined assumptions as a root problem in nearly every breakout, trust as an operational capability, time to think as essential and rarely available, and implementation as the hard part now that militaries turn back to defending home territory.
- Nations that serve as mobilisation hubs depend heavily on civilian and commercial support for logistics, IT, and medical capacity, because most active forces are committed forward. In some nations, civilian and military defence planning remains separated and requires deliberate connection. A real exercise showed a private company closing a capability gap.
- Two models were contrasted: society supporting the military, and the Nordic total-defence model, where military support contributes to society's ability to keep functioning under arrangements established by the responsible national authorities. Its supporters call it cheap, non-escalatory, and a deterrent signal, because a society that can show it keeps working under attack changes an adversary's calculation.
- Participants debated whether whole-of-society approaches need legislation. Some systems make business participation mandatory, with penalties. Perceived threat and actual exposure differ across nations. The moderator is sceptical of the term: it is hard to define and hard to make coherent without shared history and threat perception, though it can be modelled and exercised on a small scale.
- On "who do I call" when military staff rotates: the responsible national authorities should invite industry associations, such as banking and telecoms, into recurring national security fora, where appropriate, so that relationships outlast postings. Private-sector resilience is uneven, and the gap between firms that exercise and diversify and the majority that do not is an exploitable weak point.

Implication for practice. Whole-of-society work needs more than a list of critical infrastructure. It needs pre-agreed arrangements for decision-making, information sharing, and competing demands, and contacts that outlast military postings.

Panel Implications

Across the four panels, several points connect directly to the messages in Chapter 1:

- Foresight must challenge assumptions and connect to decisions (M1 and M2).
- Communication and information do not automatically create understanding or trust (M2 and M6).
- Human security and civilian protection must remain operational concerns, not background principles (M7).
- Civilian and commercial dependencies require deliberate planning before a crisis (M4).
- Alignment must accommodate different mandates and purposes and not assume one shared objective (M5).
- Technology can increase speed and access to information, but it does not remove the need for human judgement (M6).

M3, on mandates and decision rights, came mainly from the breakouts. They examined how these issues play out in practice.

5 Breakout Sessions

The six breakout sessions examined how the issues raised in the panels apply to planning, operations, engagement, resilience, and training. Each session reported three findings, two open questions, and one takeaway. The summaries below condense those reports to their main points. They do not reproduce every contribution. The breakout session records are held by CCOE. As with the panels, the sessions ran under the Chatham House Rule, so the findings are presented without attribution.

5.1 From Signals to Decisions

Most useful for: foresight and planning staffs.

Findings

- Foresight is a continuous process, not a product. Its value depends on purpose, level, and time horizon. A standardised, cyclical approach can provide continuity while different drivers of change develop at different speeds.
- Signals do not speak for themselves. Perception, data bias, national culture, and institutional assumptions shape what is noticed, interpreted, and dismissed. Foresight teams should try to falsify, not only confirm, and should include civil and adversarial sources and the politically inconvenient.
- Foresight matters only if the organisation can act on it. It should connect to planning and decision cycles and work with plausible alternative futures instead of one “most probable” future. AI, shared data spaces, and scenario exercises can help, provided human challenge stays central.

Open questions

- How do we know whether foresight is relevant and useful? What should be measured, how many scenarios are enough, and how do we tell meaningful signals from noise?
- How can institutional and cultural bias be reduced when foresight is turned into action, and how do we reconcile decision speed with the long-term horizons foresight needs?

Takeaway. Foresight does not predict the future or prescribe a decision. It prepares an organisation to adapt. The discipline is simple: do not fall in love with your assumptions.

5.2 Operational Reality – Ukraine

Most useful for: CIMIC and intelligence staffs, and those who train personnel.

Findings

- Civil-military interaction may be required of any soldier, unit or commander, while specialist CIMIC expertise remains necessary for advice, coordination and continuity. OSINT strengthens, but does not replace, in-person civil engagement. It can help identify actors, map information environments, and prepare engagement. It cannot substitute for direct contact, relationships, and contextual judgement.

- OSINT requires systematic training in collection, analysis, verification and use of publicly available information. Experience from training the CIMIC personnel of a nation at war suggested that isolated training events are insufficient. In parallel, personnel need digital-security awareness to manage their digital exposure: what they, their families, friends and networks reveal through public or commercially accessible digital traces. This digital exposure is an operational vulnerability distinct from OSINT. The moderator also noted the need to strengthen data-analytic capability among CIMIC personnel.

Open questions

- What can an adversary learn about personnel, units, and networks from public traces such as fitness apps, social media, contacts stored on other people's devices, reviews, tagged posts, and public Wi-Fi? Family and colleagues are part of the exposure.

- How can OSINT be used tactically within legal, ethical, and security safeguards, verified against other sources, and protected against manipulation and overreliance?

Takeaway. OSINT can make CIMIC more prepared and efficient, but it does not replace talking to people. Digital behaviour should be treated as part of the operational security environment, not as a separate personal issue.

5.3 Human Security in the Current World

Most useful for: planners, legal advisers, and those working with humanitarian actors.

Findings

- Reaffirm and operationalise International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the rules-based order. NATO, the EU, and their member states should keep common positions, protect a global forum for accountability (the UN and the ICRC's Global Initiative on IHL), and teach the law of armed conflict more consistently and to a wider audience, including future generations.

- Embed protection of civilians and human security in planning, doctrine, and command, starting with senior leadership. Protecting a state's own civilian population may be central to a strategic campaign. Protecting affected and enemy populations can limit harm, support conflict termination, and contribute to a sustainable post-conflict environment.

- Relate human security, resilience, CIMIC, and technology. Keep resilience conceptually distinct but state its relationship to human security. AI-enabled decision support should include safeguards and be assessed for its ability to mitigate civilian harm.

Open questions

- How can NATO secure systematic IHL accountability and humanitarian access in contested environments without selective or expedient application of the law?
- How should human security, resilience, and emerging technologies relate in doctrine, and can AI decision support demonstrably reduce civilian harm? The wider question of where the battlefield is remains open.

Takeaway. The status quo is insufficient. IHL is increasingly subject to political dynamics, which opens a gap between legal obligation and operational reality. Civilian protection, accountability, humanitarian access, and responsible technology use need to be built into doctrine, planning, education, and command decisions.

5.4 CIMIC in Multi-Domain Operations

Most useful for: operational planners and liaison officers.

Findings

- Connect civil understanding to operational tasks and the commander's objectives. CIMIC personnel supporting each echelon need clear tasks tied to intent. If a port is identified as critical, planning should examine who operates it, what it depends on, how continuity will be maintained, who requires access, and what this means for the operation. Functional staff branches should incorporate these dependencies into their planning.
- Build cooperation before the crisis, and exercise it. NATO, national authorities, and subordinate headquarters should engage civilian authorities, infrastructure operators, and emergency services in peacetime. This engagement should clarify roles and support relationships and connect them to contingency planning, exercises, and training. The moderator adds that being present at each other's exercises is not enough: civilian partners need to take part, at scale.
- Clarify liaison mandates and information sharing. Liaison personnel need guidance on their role, authority, and access, including what they may request, receive, use, and share. NATO states the requirements, but nations determine how to meet them. Any remaining restrictions should be reflected in planning assumptions and risk assessments.

Open questions

- Which barriers to liaison and information sharing can be solved within existing arrangements, and which need changes to national policy or law?
- How far should cooperation be formalised in peacetime, and where do flexible arrangements work better than permanent structures?

Takeaway. Operational effects can provide a common language for connecting civil understanding to decisions across functional areas. Understanding of relevant civilian actors, authorities, dependencies, and constraints must inform decisions at headquarters and unit level, while recognising that civilian partners have their own priorities, statutory responsibilities, and support needs.

5.5 Whole-of-Society

Most useful for: those who plan with authorities, infrastructure operators, and industry.

Findings

- Establish public-private-defence governance before a crisis. Relevant actors should agree on who decides what, when, and under which conditions: leadership, mandates, decision rights, information sharing, and how competition over scarce resources is resolved. Democratic oversight and property rights must be respected.
- Move from listing vulnerabilities to understanding mechanisms. A dashboard of critical nodes does not show how infrastructure, services, institutions, markets, communities, and information environments interact and how disruption cascades across sectors. Frameworks for hard infrastructure can support standardisation, but second-order effects require a broader assessment.
- Build resilience jointly, locally, and through testing. Joint planning, wargaming and exercises can show whether essential functions continue under pressure. Counter-radicalisation requires local and multisectoral approaches. Private actors may need incentives to invest in resilience.

Open questions

- Who leads, coordinates, and, where necessary, enforces resilience and civil-military measures, and how are decision rights settled when several legitimate actors need the same scarce resource?
- How can strategy and implementation be brought together: incentives for private investment, sustained political commitment, and adaptation to different national political cultures? Nordic approaches should be studied for what makes them work, not simply copied.

Takeaway. Resilience failures often reflect unresolved questions of trust, mandate, and decision rights rather than an absence of capability. Threats can cascade through society before they become visible as violence, so early signals, shared cross-sector understanding, and pre-agreed authority to act are essential.

5.6 Escape Room: Building CIMIC DNA

Most useful for: trainers, educators, and exercise designers.

Findings

- Build human capability deliberately. Education should cover communication, calibrating trust, judgement, self-regulation, stakeholder engagement, and acting when certainty disappears. During the exercise, teams initially struggled to form a common picture, then set up expert groups and a division of tasks, and only then developed leadership and coordination.
- Use complex, experiential training to observe behaviour under pressure. Simulations can expose anchoring, information filtering, uneven participation, emerging hierarchy, frustration, withdrawal, and verification behaviour. They should not be treated as pass/fail events. The debrief should examine how decisions were reached, who was heard, and which information was discounted.
- Move from one-off exposure to repeated, team-based development. Group dynamics, hierarchy, role ambiguity, information overload, and culture can enable or suppress individual strengths. The exercise suggested that human performance development should include teams and repeated practice over time.

Open questions

- How reliably can human capabilities be assessed in an artificial environment, and where does development end and selection begin?
- Who decides what effective CIMIC performance looks like, given that military, civilian, humanitarian, political, and community actors judge the same decision differently? How can a framework avoid reducing the person to a checklist?

Takeaway. Complexity does not only test what we know. It shows how we perform when knowing is no longer enough.

Observed patterns. Participants first oriented individually and then shared information openly without a coordination structure. Verification began when reports contradicted each other. Some requests from role-players were ignored as distractions. Leadership emerged, but authority and succession were not always communicated. Teams often put internal coordination ahead of engagement with humanitarian and civilian actors, and new information did not always prompt a review of earlier assumptions.

These observations come from three iterations with a limited record. They illustrate; they do not prove. Two questions carry forward: when should a structured, military-led approach give way to a more adaptive and shared one, and how does the mix of civilian and military team members change behaviour?

Breakout Session Implications

The breakout sessions turned the broad issues from the panels into six practical questions about how CIMIC works:

- Q1: How can foresight challenge assumptions and influence decisions?
- Q2: How can civil engagement and OSINT reinforce one another without replacing direct contact?
- Q3: How can civilian protection and international humanitarian law be built into planning and command?
- Q4: How can liaison arrangements, mandates, and information-sharing authorities be clarified before a crisis?
- Q5: How can military and civilian actors understand interdependencies and manage competing demands?
- Q6: How can training reveal and develop behaviour under pressure? (5.6)

The questions that remain open are consolidated in Chapter 6. CCOE's proposed response is in Chapter 2.

6 Open Questions

The conference produced useful observations and practical proposals, but it did not resolve several issues. That is not a shortcoming of the conference. These questions mark where further discussion, experimentation, policy review, or doctrinal work may be needed. They are consolidated from the panels and breakouts to remove repetition and ordered by practical relevance: governance and authority, cooperation and information sharing, foresight and human performance, civilian protection and technology, and resilience. They are not recommendations or agreed positions.

#	Question	Route
1	Who leads, coordinates, and, where necessary, enforces resilience and civil-military measures, and who is in charge of alignment? (5.5, moderator)	Institutional attention
2	Which barriers to liaison and information sharing can be solved within existing arrangements, and which need changes to national policy or law? (5.4)	Practice first, then law and policy
3	How far should cooperation be formalised in peacetime, and where do flexible arrangements work better than permanent structures? (5.4)	Practice and experimentation
4	How can we show that foresight is relevant and useful, and reduce institutional bias when it is turned into action? (5.1)	Practice and education
5	How reliably can human capabilities be assessed in an artificial setting, and where does development end and selection begin? (5.6)	Practice and research
6	How can NATO secure IHL accountability and humanitarian access without selective application, and can AI decision support demonstrably reduce civilian harm? (5.3)	Institutional attention; law and policy
7	What can an adversary learn from public digital traces, and how can OSINT be used tactically within legal, ethical, and security limits? (5.2)	Practice, with legal and security review
8	How can long-term resilience strategy and implementation be brought together: incentives, sustained political commitment, national differences? (5.5)	Institutional attention; national policy

The questions need different kinds of follow-up. Some can be explored through exercises, experiments, education, and professional discussion. Others need doctrinal development, national policy decisions, or legal review. CCOE cannot and should not take on all of them. The proposals in Chapter 2 do not answer the questions; they are ways to keep them under examination.

Annex A Participation

182 external participants from 34 nations. Nations with four or more participants are named. The other 24 nations sent one to three participants each.

Nation	Participants
Germany	29
United States	24
Netherlands	24
United Kingdom	16
Belgium	13
Canada, Switzerland	6 each
France	5
Italy, Türkiye	4 each
24 further nations	1–3 each (51 in total)

Institutional communities represented

Community	Nature of representation
National armed forces and defence establishments	Armed forces, defence ministries, military headquarters, and specialist formations
NATO and multinational military structures	NATO commands, headquarters, and multinational military bodies
Specialist military and CIMIC organisations	CIMIC structures, specialist military organisations, and Centres of Excellence
Academia, defence education, and research	Universities, defence academies, research institutes, and security studies organisations
NGOs and humanitarian organisations	Humanitarian, civil-society and information-resilience organisations
Government and public institutions	Ministries, police, civil-protection, meteorological bodies, and other public institutions
International organisations	International and multinational organisations working on security and resilience

Community	Nature of representation
Consultancies and think tanks	Specialist expertise in security, CIMIC, resilience, and policy
Private sector	Commercial organisations in consulting, technology, energy, and specialist services

Organisation names are not listed. Under the Chatham House Rule, and with several nations represented by a single participant, a named list could identify individuals.

Annex B Conference Agenda

Monday 14 September 2026

09:30 – 17:00	Early-bird in-processing, Majoor Jan Linzel Complex, The Hague
13:00 – 16:00	Interoperability and Synchronisation Working Group (invitation only)
17:00 – 19:00	Non-hosted meet and greet

Tuesday 15 September 2026

07:00 – 12:00	Late in-processing, Majoor Jan Linzel Complex, The Hague
08:45 – 09:45	Conference opening and keynote speech
10:30 – 12:00	Panel: “Strategic Foresight meets Operational Reality”
12:00 – 13:30	Hosted lunch
13:30 – 16:30	Breakout sessions
18:00 – 21:00	20th anniversary of the NATO CIMIC Centre of Excellence, Delft

Wednesday 16 September 2026

08:30 – 08:50	Talk: “CIMIC function in Transition of Ukraine’s National Resilience into Operational Advantage”
09:00 – 10:30	Panel: “Headline versus Ground Truth”
11:00 – 12:30	Panel: “Human Security under Pressure”
12:30 – 14:00	Hosted lunch
14:00 – 17:00	Breakout sessions
17:30 – 19:30	CIMIC Time Machine

Thursday 17 September 2026

09:00 – 12:00	Breakout sessions
12:00 – 13:30	Hosted lunch
13:30 – 15:00	Panel: “Civil-Military Alignment through the Whole of Society”
15:00 – 15:30	Conference closing
16:00 – 18:00	Conference check-out

Annex C Assumptions Put to the Conference

Ten assumptions framed the conference. Each is worded so that “holds” means the assumption stands. The reading is the editors’, based on what the sessions showed. Section numbers refer to Chapters 4 and 5.

#	Assumption	Reading	What the sessions showed
A1	We understand the civil environment well enough to plan and conduct operations effectively.	Does not hold	Information exists but is fragmented and rarely turned into something operations can use (5.2, 5.4).
A2	Existing civil-military relationships will work under the pressure of crisis and conflict.	Does not hold	Unclear mandates, authority, and decision rights. Networks fail when priorities conflict, and contacts expire with rotation (4.4, 5.4, 5.5).
A3	We can synchronise military and non-military activity at the speed modern operations require.	Does not hold	Insight does not become action (4.1, 5.1). Information sharing, national authority, and liaison mandates hold it back (5.4, 5.5).
A4	CIMIC is positioned to influence decisions before they are made.	Partly holds	Civil knowledge must connect to objectives to count (5.1, 5.4). The sessions did not test where CIMIC sits in the planning cycle.
A5	We are adapting CIMIC faster than the environment is changing.	Does not hold	Institutional adaptation is slower than change in technology, society, and warfare. Human security policy still rests on expeditionary assumptions (4.1, 4.3, 5.1, 5.3).
A6	CIMIC understands the civil environment on its own terms, not through military categories.	Does not hold	Military requirements and humanitarian principles pull apart. Civilian actors have their own duties and definitions (4.3, 4.4, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5).
A7	Our procedures and liaison structures fit the civil environment as it is today: networked, fragmented, digital.	Largely does not hold	Fragmented information environments (4.2). Complex public-private dependencies (4.4, 5.5). The communication panel spoke to information environments, not procedures.
A8	Synchronising activity is enough to align military and civilian actors.	Does not hold	Actors pursue legitimate but different aims (4.3, 4.4, 5.3). Communication and coordination are not the same as reconciling actions and consequences.

#	Assumption	Reading	What the sessions showed
A9	More civil-military integration is better.	Partly holds	Blurred roles, shrinking humanitarian space and neutrality (4.3, 5.3). Yet 4.4, 5.4, and 5.5 show where more cooperation is needed.
A10	CIMIC's value is measured by the military effects it enables.	Partly holds	Dependencies run both ways (4.4, 5.5), and partners have support needs (5.4). No session showed CIMIC to be worth more to civilians than to military headquarters.



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