

RESILIENT LEADERSHIP UNDER BANI CONDITIONS: DOCTRINAL FOUNDATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR DEVELOPING FUTURE MILITARY LEADERS

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Abstract: Contemporary security environments, increasingly characterized as brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible (BANI) — extending earlier VUCA frameworks — have fundamentally altered the demands placed on military leadership. Command-and-control structures, while foundational to military organization, have shown limited capacity to address the complex, ambiguous challenges that now define the operating environment. This paper investigates resilient leadership as a response to this doctrinal and institutional challenge. Drawing on NATO's Mission Command philosophy, current Alliance competency frameworks, and recent academic literature, the paper argues that resilience — understood as the capacity to adapt, maintain effectiveness, and recover organizational function in the face of adversity and uncertainty — must be recognized as a core leadership requirement and a priority outcome of military education. The paper concludes by identifying directions through which military education programs might more systematically cultivate this capacity in future military leaders.

Keywords: resilient leadership, BANI, VUCA, Mission Command, leader development

1. Introduction

The security environment of the 21st century has undergone a transformation that challenges the conceptual tools military institutions have long relied upon. The VUCA construct — Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity — developed at the U.S. Army War College in the late 1980s provided a durable analytical vocabulary for the post-Cold War era. Yet the pace and character of contemporary disruption have intensified to a point where VUCA's descriptors, while not inaccurate, no longer capture the full depth of what military leaders now confront.

A more recent framework — BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible), introduced in 2020 — goes further than VUCA. It captures systems that look stable but break without warning, a kind of

widespread anxiety that makes decisions harder rather than easier, cause-and-effect relationships that no longer follow predictable patterns, and situations that simply do not respond to rational analysis [1]. These are not just updated labels: each dimension has specific implications for what military leaders are expected to do.

The evidence from recent military leadership scholarship is clear on this point. Traditional leadership models are unable to faithfully reflect the new challenges and realities of BANI and VUCA environments, and military leadership in these conditions demands a complex combination of competencies at personal, relational, and organizational levels — among which resilience emerges as the most critical [2]. Yet the question of whether military education programs are structured to

develop this competency deliberately and systematically remains underexplored. This paper addresses that gap. Drawing on NATO's Mission Command doctrine, current Alliance competency frameworks, and a synthesis of recent peer-reviewed literature, it examines what resilient leadership requires, what doctrine stipulates, and what military education programs currently deliver — concluding with four concrete directions for closing the distance between them.

2. Conceptual Framework: FROM VUCA to BANI

The VUCA framework shaped military doctrine, training, and professional education across NATO member nations for over three decades. Its institutional anchoring was both its strength and, ultimately, its limitation: designed to describe the instability that followed the end of bipolar geopolitical certainty, it proved less adequate as disruption accelerated and took on qualitatively different characteristics.

The shift from VUCA to BANI is not simply a matter of updated terminology. Each dimension of the BANI framework describes a condition that demands a different organizational and cognitive response [1]. Brittleness describes systems that function well until they shatter catastrophically — not systems that fluctuate, but systems whose apparent solidity is an illusion. Anxiety describes a pervasive psychological state in which every decision carries potentially disproportionate consequences, producing paralysis rather than adaptability. Non-linearity describes environments in which cause and effect appear genuinely disconnected — where small actions produce outsized consequences and large interventions produce no visible effect. Incomprehensibility describes conditions that do not merely admit multiple interpretations but resist rational analysis altogether, exceeding the cognitive frameworks available to leaders at all levels.

The shift matters in practical terms. Brittleness is not just heightened volatility — it requires organizations to absorb failure and recover, not just stay agile. Anxiety goes beyond uncertainty: it affects how people make decisions under sustained pressure, not just how well they read a situation. Non-linearity means that systems-thinking skills are no longer enough when a small action can trigger outsized consequences. And incomprehensibility — probably the hardest dimension — asks leaders to keep functioning even when no analytical framework gives them a clear picture of what is happening. Taken together, these four demands point toward the same requirement: resilient leadership.

3. Resilient Leadership: Definition and Military Relevance

Resilient leadership, as a concept within organizational and leadership theory, has attracted growing scholarly attention in the context of systemic disruption. It is defined as a leadership model that enables adaptation to environmental change, supports organizations in managing adversity, maintains equilibrium in difficult conditions, and enables recovery from shocks [3]. What makes this definition useful is that it separates three things that are easy to conflate: adapting to change, keeping going under pressure, and recovering after a shock. Each of these matters in a BANI environment, and each requires something different from leaders and organizations.

In the military context, resilience is not an optional quality but a core professional competency — one that must be actively developed through structured programs rather than assumed as a natural outcome of military service [4]. This has a direct implication for how military education is designed. If resilience is just a character trait, some officers will have it and others will not, and there is not much institutions can do about it. But if it is a learnable competency, then education programs are responsible for developing it — and that means it needs to

appear explicitly in curricula, not just be assumed to emerge from the demands of military life alone.

At the organizational level, decentralized leadership approaches aligned with Mission Command principles enhance organizational resilience and agility by distributing initiative and empowering personnel at all levels to respond effectively to dynamic and unpredictable scenarios [5, pp. 346–369]. This finding matters because it shows that resilience is not just about individual officers — it is also about how the organization as a whole is structured to respond when things go wrong. This individual, relational, and organizational dimension is what the educational directions in section 7 are built around.

4. NATO Doctrinal Foundations: Mission Command and Competency Frameworks

NATO's doctrinal framework for leadership provides the most coherent institutional reference point available for understanding what resilient leadership requires at Alliance level. The Allied Joint Doctrine AJP-01, revised in December 2022, formally establishes Mission Command as NATO's central command philosophy — an approach based on empowered leadership that enables decisions to be made by those best placed to make them, exploiting opportunities as they emerge [6]. The principles underpinning this philosophy — decentralized authority, trust between commanders and subordinates, shared understanding of intent, and individual initiative — correspond directly to the adaptive and relational dimensions of resilient leadership identified in the scholarly literature.

The Alliance's competency framework for leader development provides a further doctrinal foundation. The NATO Science and Technology Organisation report on Leader Development for NATO Multinational Military Operations (TR-HFM-286, 2022) identifies six competency themes as essential for effective leadership in multinational contexts: Technological

Capability, Transformative Capability, Cognitive Capability, Professional Expertise, Personal Attributes, and Social Capability [7]. Resilience-related attributes — sustained performance under ambiguity, cognitive flexibility, and cross-cultural collaboration — feature across multiple themes, particularly in Personal Attributes and Cognitive Capability. The multi-domain distribution of resilience across the framework implies that it is not a discrete competency but a quality that underpins effective military leadership as a whole.

The gap between what doctrine stipulates and what organizations practice, however, is substantial. Research on multinational Mission Command within NATO, published in the *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* in 2025, demonstrates that the translation of Mission Command philosophy into organizational behaviour varies significantly across Alliance members — from a few sentences in some national doctrines to a dedicated 110-page publication in others — and that the cultural and institutional conditions necessary for its effective practice are not consistently present [8, pp. 89–103]. This has a direct bearing on resilience development. Mission Command on paper does not produce a Mission Command culture in practice — and without that culture, the resilience it is supposed to enable does not follow. Writing a doctrine well is not the same as implementing it.

A framework for strategic leadership adapted to VUCA environments, published in the *Journal of Character and Leadership Development* in 2022, identifies three capabilities directly relevant to the BANI context: strategic judgment, strategic influence, and strategic resilience — defined as the active institutional development of leaders' competencies, character, and psychological readiness [9, pp. 47–57]. This framework bridges the distance between NATO's doctrinal aspirations and the practical demands of leader development, establishing resilience as an explicit strategic

investment rather than a background condition.

5. Research Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, conceptual research design combining systematic literature review with critical doctrinal analysis. The methodological approach follows PRISMA-guided thematic analysis applied to a defined body of scholarly literature [2], an approach appropriate for a conceptual paper whose purpose is to synthesize existing knowledge and identify directions for institutional development rather than generate primary empirical data. Sources were identified through searches in Scopus and Google Scholar using keyword combinations including "resilient leadership" and "military", "BANI" and "military leadership", "Mission Command" and "leader development", and "VUCA" and "military education". The search was limited to peer-reviewed publications from 2019 to 2025, with the exception of foundational doctrinal documents.

Doctrinal sources examined include NATO AJP-01 (Edition F, 2022) and NATO STO Technical Report TR-HFM-286 (2022). The analysis is organized around three questions: how resilience is conceptualized in current military leadership literature in relation to the BANI environment; what NATO doctrinal frameworks establish regarding resilient leadership competencies; and to what extent existing military education models address resilient leadership as a systematic developmental outcome.

6. Analysis and Discussion

The synthesis of academic literature and doctrinal analysis produces a convergent finding: resilience is consistently identified as a core requirement for effective military leadership in BANI and VUCA environments, yet its systematic development within military education programs remains largely incidental and uneven across NATO member nations. The distance between what doctrine requires and what education programs reliably deliver

represents the central institutional challenge this paper addresses.

At the doctrinal level, the Mission Command philosophy provides the most coherent framework available for resilient leadership. Its emphasis on decentralized initiative, trust-based command relationships, and effective action under ambiguity corresponds directly to the adaptive and recovery dimensions of resilience. Yet the evidence on implementation is clear: the gap between AJP-01's doctrinal stipulations and organizational practice across Alliance members is substantial enough that doctrinal articulation cannot be treated as evidence of actual capability [8]. A command philosophy that exists primarily in written doctrine, rather than in the lived culture of military organizations, does not produce the resilience it presupposes.

At the competency level, the multi-domain distribution of resilience-related attributes across the NATO STO (2022) framework [7] is worth noting. Cognitive flexibility, sustained performance under pressure, and cross-cultural collaboration are not standalone skills you can address in a single training module. They depend on a broader organizational foundation — one that resilience, properly developed, provides. This is consistent with the finding that decentralized, empowering leadership structures produce enhanced organizational resilience as a systemic outcome — not as the sum of individual competencies but as a property of the command culture itself [5].

At the educational level, resilience is among the leadership competencies most consistently reported as developed through military college education and transferred to subsequent professional practice [10]. This is encouraging, but it also points to a real limitation: resilience in military education tends to emerge from the culture and demands of military life — shared hardship, physical and psychological pressure, collective discipline — rather than from programs explicitly designed to develop it in relation to the BANI environment. It is being

cultivated, but often as a side effect rather than a deliberate goal. That is a problem when the demands of incomprehensibility and non-linearity require something more specific than just toughness.

A leader who has to operate in conditions that make no rational sense needs more than experience with hardship. They need the ability to recognize when their own understanding has run out — and to keep the organization moving anyway. That can be taught, but it requires deliberate curriculum design, not just the assumption that military life will produce it.

7. Directions for Developing Resilient Leaders in Military Education

Four concrete directions emerge from the analysis through which military education programs — including land forces academies — might more systematically cultivate resilient leadership as a deliberate outcome.

The first concerns explicit curricular recognition. Resilience should be named as a learning outcome within military education curricula alongside traditional competencies such as tactical proficiency and strategic analysis. Its three dimensions — individual, relational, and organizational — require distinct but connected approaches, combining theoretical instruction, experiential learning, and structured reflection. Leader development does not stop after initial formation — it is a career-long process [11]. This means resilience cannot be treated as a box ticked early on. It needs to be built into curricula at every level, from the first year at a military academy through to senior professional education, with each stage building on the last.

The second direction concerns Mission Command as a cultural rather than merely doctrinal objective. The evidence on implementation gaps across Alliance members [8] makes clear that doctrinal familiarity with Mission Command is insufficient to produce the command culture it requires. Educational programs must

address the institutional conditions — mutual trust, psychological safety for subordinate initiative, tolerance for uncertainty in decision-making — that make Mission Command operational. Strategic resilience, in this formulation, requires active institutional investment in the development of leaders' competencies, character, and psychological readiness [9], which implies treating the cognitive and emotional dimensions of command culture as explicit educational objectives.

The third direction concerns pedagogical design for the BANI environment's most demanding dimension: incomprehensibility. Developing the metacognitive capacity to recognize the limits of one's own understanding and to sustain organizational effectiveness under genuine cognitive overload requires specific pedagogical instruments. Scenario-based learning built around genuinely non-linear, causally opaque situations — where the relationship between actions and consequences is not recoverable through standard analytical frameworks — alongside structured uncertainty exercises and after-action review processes adapted to complex environments, offer practical means of developing this capacity. These tools are not novel in military education; what requires intentional design is their explicit alignment with the cognitive demands of the BANI environment.

The fourth direction concerns the longitudinal character of resilient leader development. The most significant leadership competencies develop through a sustained combination of formal education and accumulated professional experience, with each reinforcing the other across career stages [11]. Resilient leadership cannot be adequately addressed at initial formation alone; it requires continuous developmental investment through intermediate and senior professional military education. Land forces academies occupy a foundational position in this trajectory, but their effectiveness depends on the coherence of the broader

developmental sequence into which they feed.

8. Conclusions

The BANI environment confronts military organizations with challenges that are different in kind, not just in degree, from what earlier frameworks described. Brittleness, anxiety, non-linearity, and incomprehensibility are not just stronger versions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity — they ask something qualitatively different of leaders and organizations. Systems that appear robust fail catastrophically without warning; pervasive anxiety paralyzes collective decision-making; actions produce disproportionate and unpredictable consequences; and conditions resist the rational analysis that military planning has traditionally relied upon. Against this backdrop, resilient leadership — understood as the capacity to adapt, maintain effectiveness, and recover organizational function in the face of adversity and uncertainty — has emerged as the central institutional response that military organizations must deliberately cultivate.

The analysis undertaken in this paper has identified a persistent gap between what NATO doctrine requires — empowered, trust-based, decentralized command culture — and what military education programs consistently deliver. Resilience emerges in military education, but incidentally, as a product of institutional ethos and demanding experience, rather than as a designed, systematic, and assessable outcome. The four directions proposed in this paper are not a checklist. Explicit curricular recognition, Mission Command as lived culture, scenario design for incomprehensibility, and longitudinal development — these work together. Each one supports the others, and implementing only one or two without the rest will not produce the change needed. Resilience built at the individual level through initial formation must be reinforced at the relational level through command

culture, and carried forward at the organizational level through sustained professional military education across career stages [11].

The prospective trajectory of the security environment makes this agenda increasingly urgent. The BANI construct is not a temporary description of an exceptional period of disruption; it reflects structural features of a security environment shaped by technological acceleration, hybrid threats, information warfare, and the erosion of conventional deterrence. Military organizations that treat resilient leadership as something to be deliberately built — rather than assuming it will emerge from experience — will be better equipped to function when conditions get difficult enough to actually test it. NATO's Mission Command philosophy already provides the doctrinal foundation; the task that remains is to translate that foundation into the educational culture and curricular design of land forces academies and professional military education institutions across the Alliance [6],[8].

Looking ahead, further research is needed to establish how resilient leadership competencies can be measured and assessed within military education frameworks — moving beyond self-reported transfer of learning [10] toward validated instruments that allow institutions to track resilience development systematically across career stages. Research comparing the educational models of different NATO member nations would also contribute substantially to closing the implementation gap identified by Alliance-level research [8], by surfacing practices that translate Mission Command's doctrinal aspirations into organizational reality. For land forces academies, including "Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, the directions identified in this paper represent both a practical framework for curriculum development and a contribution to the broader Alliance effort to build the human foundations of collective resilience in a BANI world.

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