

BEYOND BRITTLE PLANS: RECALIBRATING EU CIVIL-MILITARY PRE-DEPLOYMENT TRAINING FOR A BANI WORLD

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Abstract: EU civil-military missions routinely achieve tactical success yet fail to generate durable strategic outcomes in fragile states, revealing critical deficiencies in pre-deployment preparation. This paper demonstrates that these limitations stem from a structural misalignment between existing training models and the demands of contemporary operational environments. While current frameworks remain grounded in assumptions of predictability and procedural coordination, missions increasingly unfold under conditions characterized by systemic fragility, persistent anxiety, non-linear dynamics, and epistemic uncertainty. Drawing on comparative evidence from EUCAP (European Union Capacity Building Mission) Sahel, EUBAM (European Union Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission) Libya, EUPOL (European Union Police Mission) Afghanistan, and developments in Ukraine (2022–2026), the paper identifies a gap between procedural training and adaptive operational requirements. It demonstrates that this gap is epistemic rather than operational, reflecting an overreliance on linear planning models. In addition, it proposes a reform framework based on anti-fragility, strategic patience, short-cycle adaptation, and epistemic humility.

Keywords: CIMIC, Training BANI, Knowledge, Resilience

Introduction

EU civil-military missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy have historically operated within the VUCA paradigm—Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity—a concept emerging from U.S. military doctrine in the late 1980s [1]. Within this paradigm, Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC), defined as the coordination between military forces and civilian actors in support of mission objectives, has been shaped by an approach that treats uncertainty as manageable through structured planning, an assumption increasingly challenged by contemporary operational environments.

While this model proved effective in relatively stable crisis contexts, the return of high-intensity conflict in Europe, particularly following the war in Ukraine (2022–2026), has exposed its limitations. Contemporary operational environments are better understood through the BANI framework—Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear,

and Incomprehensible—which captures not only structural instability but also the psychological and cognitive pressures shaping decision-making [2]. Unlike VUCA, which assumes that uncertainty can be mitigated through improved information and coordination, BANI emphasizes systemic breakdown, unpredictability, and the limits of planning.

Existing scholarship on EU civil-military cooperation highlights persistent structural and coordination challenges within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework. Studies have identified a recurring gap between strategic ambition and operational delivery, often attributed to fragmented institutional arrangements and divergent national approaches [3–6]. Research on CIMIC further emphasizes the limitations of procedural coordination models in complex environments, where effectiveness depends on contextual adaptation rather than standardized implementation [7,8]. More recent literature

on complexity and security governance suggests that traditional VUCA-based frameworks inadequately capture the depth of systemic disruption in contemporary conflicts, particularly in relation to non-linear dynamics and hybrid threats [9, 10]. Consequently, contemporary defense analysts argue that the convergence of grey-zone tactics and technological acceleration has pushed operating environments past mere volatility into systemic incomprehensibility [11, 12].

This paper demonstrates that the limitations of EU civil-military missions are not primarily operational failures, but the result of a systemic misalignment between training systems and the environments in which they are applied. The analysis adopts a qualitative, comparative case approach, drawing on EUCAP Sahel, EUBAM Libya, EUPOL Afghanistan, and the evolving role of CIMIC in Ukraine to identify recurring structural patterns. By integrating insights from knowledge-based organization theory and the BANI framework, the paper argues that current pre-deployment training models remain anchored in procedural logic, limiting their capacity to prepare personnel for environments characterized by uncertainty, non-linearity, and sustained psychological pressure.

2. Theoretical Framework

The knowledge-based organization (KBO) framework conceptualizes organizations as systems that generate, integrate, and apply knowledge to enhance adaptive capacity [13, 14]. Unlike procedural models, which emphasize standardized responses, knowledge-based systems rely on continuous learning, contextual interpretation, and the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge [14].

Applied to CIMIC, this perspective highlights a fundamental tension between training design and operational requirements. While pre-deployment training remains largely procedural and standardized, contemporary operational contexts demand adaptive judgment,

situational awareness, and the ability to operate under fluid uncertainty [3]. In such environments, effectiveness depends less on the execution of predefined military routines and more on the systemic capacity to interpret evolving conditions and adjust tactical behaviour accordingly [7].

Building on this, the integration of the BANI framework extends the KBO perspective by incorporating the cognitive and psychological dimensions of instability [2]. In high-disruption contexts, knowledge is not only incomplete, but often contested, requiring personnel to navigate ambiguity, information overload, and moral complexity simultaneously. This reinforces the argument that security training architectures must move beyond rigid procedural instruction toward models that explicitly support adaptive learning and decision-making under intense pressure [2, 12].

3. Fragmentation, Training Structures and National Influence

CIMIC training operates within a multi-layered institutional structure combining NATO doctrine, EU frameworks, and national systems. While this arrangement provides formal flexibility, it generates fragmentation in doctrine, training, and operational interpretation, resulting in structurally inconsistent approaches to civil-military engagement.

At the NATO level, CIMIC is codified through standardized doctrine emphasizing interoperability and coordination [15]. In contrast, the EU promotes an integrated approach combining civilian and military instruments, yet implementation remains uneven due to institutional complexity and limited alignment across training pipelines [3,4]. At the national level, variation is pronounced, reflecting differing strategic cultures and operational priorities. For example, Germany emphasizes infrastructure resilience through institutional civil defense networks [16], France prioritizes active population engagement within expeditionary maneuvers [17], and Italy focuses heavily

on deep cultural mediation in stability operations [18, 19].

This fragmentation produces several consequences. Firstly, it generates inconsistent competencies among deployed personnel, undermining interoperability in joint missions. Secondly, it limits the systematic integration of lessons learned, as training systems remain nationally anchored. Thirdly, it reinforces divergent interpretations of CIMIC roles, particularly in complex operational settings. These coordination challenges are consistent with broader findings on civil–military interaction, which highlight persistent institutional and cultural gaps between actors [7, 8]. In relatively stable environments, such discrepancies may be manageable; however, in high-disruption contexts, they become systemic vulnerabilities that directly affect mission coherence and adaptability.

4. The “Anxious” Dimension and Operational Transformation

Ukraine represents a critical case in which the scale and intensity of disruption make structural constraints more visible than in lower-intensity missions. Evidence from EUCAP Sahel Mali, EUBAM Libya, and EUPOL Afghanistan indicates that, despite achieving technical outputs, mission effectiveness was often limited by weak adaptive capacity [20–24]. From an organizational perspective, this reflects a gap between formal mandates and the ability to respond to complex and evolving environments, where adaptation outweighs procedural compliance [25–27].

Across these cases, outcomes were shaped less by design than by interaction with local institutional conditions. In the Sahel, reliance

on fragile governance structures led to rapid operational collapse under political stress. Capacity-building efforts in the Sahel relied heavily on fragile institutional frameworks that ultimately collapsed amid political instability. In Libya, migration strategies emphasized short-term containment rather than engaging with local socio-economic realities, which undermined their long-term effectiveness [24]. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, attempts at centralized reform yielded uneven and unpredictable results, shaped by fragmented governance and entrenched local power structures [23]. Taken together, the cases highlight the limits of procedural models based on stability and predictability. As complexity increases, these assumptions become untenable, exposing a structural mismatch between planning and operational realities [28].

This divergence is amplified in Ukraine. Here, Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) functions as a core element of societal resilience, integrating logistics, civilian support, and information management [29]. The operational environment is characterized by continuous uncertainty, blurred civil-military boundaries, and sustained informational pressure [7]. In this context, anxiety is best understood as a systemic condition arising from the interaction of system complexity, institutional fragility, and decision uncertainty [2]. Increasing interdependence reduces predictability; institutional weakness heightens vulnerability; and informational ambiguity constrains decision-making. Their interaction limits actors’ capacity to anticipate and control outcomes [2]. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

THE OPERATIONAL ANXIETY MODEL

Interactions among Complexity, Fragility, and Uncertainty in Contemporary Missions

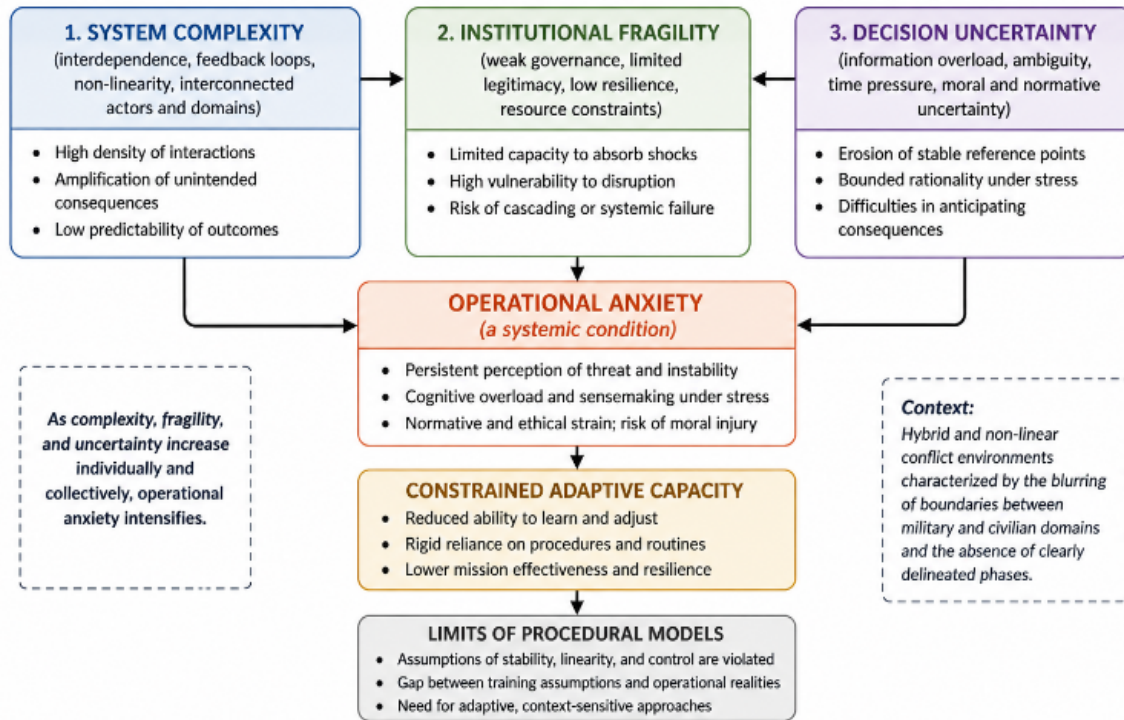


Figure 1. The Operational Anxiety Model: How system complexity, institutional fragility, and decision uncertainty interact to produce operational anxiety and constrain mission effectiveness.

Note: Visually created by the author using ChatGPT. The model's structural pillars are derived from the conceptual frameworks of [2, 7, 26, 27, 35]

It depicts operational anxiety as a systemic outcome of the interaction between system complexity, institutional fragility, and decision uncertainty, with downstream effects on adaptive capacity and the viability of procedural operational models. Theoretically, this condition reflects bounded rationality and continuous sense making [26, 27], the dynamics of complex adaptive systems [30, 31], and the blurring of security boundaries emphasized in critical security studies [32-34]. It also intersects with processes of moral injury under conditions of sustained ambiguity [35]. These dynamics align with broader transformations in hybrid and non-linear warfare [9, 12], where knowledge is provisional and control remains partial. The resulting gap between training assumptions and operational realities is therefore

structural, underscoring the need for more adaptive operational frameworks.

5. Reforming Pre-Deployment Training

Addressing the limitations identified above requires not merely incremental adjustment, but a fundamental reconfiguration of pre-deployment training. In light of the operational anxiety model, training systems should be reconceptualized as adaptive, knowledge-driven frameworks capable of functioning under conditions of systemic complexity, institutional fragility, and decision uncertainty. Rather than relying on procedural standardization, such systems should aim to mitigate the structural sources of operational anxiety by enhancing adaptive capacity under conditions of non-linearity and sustained psychological pressure. From an organizational

perspective, this shift reflects a transition toward learning-based systems capable of continuous adaptation [25] [8]. Such systems prioritize feedback loops, knowledge sharing, and iterative learning processes, enabling organizations to respond more effectively to evolving operational conditions. The principles outlined below should therefore be understood as interdependent components of a broader shift toward adaptive training systems.

The first principle, **anti-fragility**, should emphasize the capacity to sustain operational effectiveness in contexts of institutional disruption. Given the relationship between institutional fragility and systemic vulnerability, training should incorporate decentralized engagement exercises and scenarios in which formal governance structures are weak, contested, or absent. This may be operationalized through evaluation metrics capturing both the number and diversity of non-institutional actors engaged during simulations and deployments, thereby reflecting the ability to operate beyond formal institutional frameworks.

The second principle, **strategic patience** [32], should address the tendency of operational environments characterized by high complexity to privilege short-term outputs over long-term outcomes. Training modules should therefore incorporate multi-phase scenarios that prioritize continuity of engagement, trust-building, and the management of long-term relationships. Relevant indicators may include the duration and consistency of interaction with local actors, as well as a reduced reliance on immediate, output-based performance metrics.

The third principle, **short-cycle adaptation**, should respond to the non-linear dynamics associated with complex operational systems. Training should include simulations requiring continuous reassessment, iterative learning, and real-time adjustment of strategies in response to evolving conditions. Measurable outputs

may include the frequency and effectiveness of adaptation cycles, as well as the capacity to revise operational plans within constrained temporal frameworks. In this sense, adaptive learning should be understood as a mechanism for mitigating the effects of systemic complexity on decision-making processes.

The fourth principle, **epistemic humility**, should address the role of decision uncertainty as a core driver of operational anxiety. Training should expose personnel to conditions of incomplete, ambiguous, or conflicting information, requiring the critical evaluation of intelligence sources and the explicit recognition of knowledge limitations. Performance may be assessed through decision accuracy, as well as the ability to identify, communicate, and manage uncertainty within operational contexts.

Existing research on Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) effectiveness further suggests that adaptive, context-sensitive approaches may be more effective than standardized coordination models in complex environments [36, 37]. Building on this insight, pre-deployment training should also incorporate cognitive and moral resilience, as a means of addressing the psychological and ethical dimensions of operational anxiety. This may include exposure to ethically ambiguous scenarios and sustained stress conditions, with indicators such as resilience assessment scores and the consistency of decision-making under pressure [8,38].

To support the institutionalization of these principles, training systems should include mandatory EU-level certification modules for both civilian and military personnel, thereby establishing a shared baseline of competencies. In addition, coordination modules designed for high-risk environments should simulate multi-actor crises, degraded infrastructure, and overlapping humanitarian and security demands [9, 39]. Effectiveness may be evaluated through interoperability benchmarks, including response time,

coordination efficiency, and the capacity for joint problem solving under conditions of uncertainty.

The integration of these elements presupposes a degree of institutional alignment across NATO, EU, and national structures [10, 40]. In the absence of such alignment, reforms are likely to remain fragmented and uneven in their implementation, thereby limiting their overall effectiveness. Within this framework, the European Security and Defence College (ESDC) may assume a central coordinating role by harmonizing training standards and systematically incorporating lessons learned from operational contexts.

At the same time, implementation remains constrained by institutional fragmentation and the persistence of national sovereignty over training systems [9, 39]. Nevertheless, the incremental expansion of ESDC-led certification and coordination frameworks represents a politically and operationally feasible pathway for reform, enabling gradual convergence without necessitating full institutional integration.

Crucially, these developments indicate that training reform should be understood not merely as a technical adjustment, but as a structural response to the conditions that generate operational anxiety [2, 41]. By addressing the interaction between complexity, fragility, and uncertainty, adaptive training systems may contribute to narrowing the gap between planning assumptions and operational realities, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and resilience of contemporary missions.

6. Conclusion

The transition from VUCA to BANI environments reflects a fundamental transformation in the nature of contemporary conflict and crisis management. This paper has demonstrated that the limitations of EU civil-military missions are not primarily operational failures, but the result of a systemic misalignment between pre-deployment

training systems and the environments in which they are applied.

By integrating insights from knowledge-based organization theory with the BANI framework, the analysis has shown that existing training models remain anchored in procedural logic, privileging predictability, standardization, and coordination. However, contemporary operational contexts are characterized by non-linearity, instability, and sustained psychological pressure—conditions that require adaptive judgment, contextual awareness, and cognitive resilience. In this respect, the concept of an operational anxiety model provides a useful lens for understanding how persistent uncertainty, information overload, and moral pressure shape decision-making in the field. This model highlights that anxiety is not merely an individual response, but a structural feature of contemporary operational environments, with direct implications for training and performance.

The reform framework proposed in this paper—structured around anti-fragility, strategic patience, short-cycle adaptation, and epistemic humility—offers a pathway to realign training systems with these demands. Crucially, this shift entails not only the introduction of new training components, but a broader transformation in how knowledge is generated, shared, and applied within civil-military organizations. From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for greater institutional coherence and the expansion of EU-level training mechanisms, particularly through the European Security and Defence College. While implementation will necessarily be incremental, the integration of adaptive training models represents a feasible and necessary step toward enhancing mission effectiveness.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of future EU civil-military missions will depend less on the robustness of predefined plans than on the capacity of personnel to interpret uncertainty, adapt to rapidly changing conditions, and sustain operational

coherence under pressure. In such environments, anxiety is not an anomaly to be mitigated, but a condition to be anticipated and managed through training design. The challenge, therefore, is not

simply to improve existing training systems, but to reconfigure them in ways that reflect the realities of contemporary conflict, where uncertainty must be navigated rather than controlled.

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