




COMMENTARY


In the fight against COVID-19: a new role for NATO and EU Member States armed forces?

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Background

During the night of 18 March 2020, Italian military vehicles took coffins from Bergamo cemetery to other regions' crematoriums after local services were unable to deal with the dead. The picture of the military convoy passing through the empty city went viral and strongly impressed the public opinion.¹ From the darkest moment of the pandemic to nowadays, the Italian army has been extensively employed in the fight against COVID-19. Indeed, Italy has not been the only country to engage the military forces in the response to COVID-19. The traditional role of the military has been challenged, its employment is no longer limited to the fight against terrorism, peace keeping operations and missions in failed states. In fact, since February 2020 NATO and EU Member States military forces have joined the health apparatus in fighting this new "invisible, intangible enemy"². They have played a crucial role in supporting the communities hit by the pandemic. How NATO and EU Member States military forces have adapted and coped with this new unprecedented role?

Moreover, the level of duration, the geographic scope of the emergency, and the exceptional economic crisis that will persist in the years to come make the current situation different from previous emergencies determining new and unprecedented challenges. What are these new challenges emerging from the new role played by the military?

Current State of Play

With the outbreak of the pandemic, the focus of military forces has started to evolve within the national borders, but also in the case of coordinated EU initiatives and NATO operations. The militaries of EU and NATO Member States are supporting civilian authorities with medical, logistic and security resources. In general terms, they are providing transport and logistic support, building hospitals in record time, deploying their medical staff, and supporting the police and other national services.³

In **Italy**, the army was deployed firstly in mid-March 2020 to help enforce the lockdown and the restrictions imposed by the government through the 'Operazione Strade Sicure'.⁴ Even though this military operation was established in 2008, the Contingent was increased on the basis of Government measures deploying 367 additional units in the most affected areas. In addition, the Italian army employed special tactical asset, such as the hand-launched remote-controlled unmanned aerial vehicle Micro-APR RQ-11B/C "RAVEN B/DDL⁵ and drones to spot unauthorized

¹ ANSA, 'Coronavirus: Army takes Bergamo coffins out of Lombardy', 19 March 2020, (https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2020/03/19/coronavirus-army-takes-bergamo-coffins-out-of-lombardy_6903e8f3-c6d8-4a1c-909b-f415acf1a2b9.html). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

² LeMonde, '« Nous sommes en guerre » : le verbatim du discours d'Emmanuel Macron', (https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/03/16/nous-sommes-en-guerre-retrouvez-le-discours-de-macron-pour-lutter-contre-le-coronavirus_6033314_823448.html). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

³ Council of the European Union, Video conference of foreign affairs ministers (defence), 6 April 2020, (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2020/04/06/>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

⁴ Reuters, 'Italy to use army to enforce coronavirus lockdown in worst-hit region', 20 March 2020, (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy-army/italy-to-use-army-to-enforce-coronavirus-lockdown-in-worst-hit-region-idUSKBN2171ZA>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

⁵ Wikipedia, 'AeroVironment RQ-11 Raven', (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AeroVironment_RQ-11_Raven). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

gatherings of people or movements.⁶ Moreover, the Italian Air Force was mobilised to repatriate Europeans (not just Italians) stranded abroad, especially from China and Japan, to transport patients in bio-containment air vehicles and medical equipment across Europe.⁷ Progressively, medical staff from the armed forces were assigned to assist hospitals and several field hospitals were set up with the help of the military.⁸ Italian soldiers distributed also surgical masks, gloves and sanitising gels and helped with disinfection of public spaces in the most affected regions. In October 2020, 'Operazione Igea' was launched to create 200 drive-through testing facilities distributed in the Italian territory and 12 military laboratories were restructured to process the increasing number of tests.⁹

Similar to the Italian case, the **German Bundeswehr** mobilised soldiers to support the healthcare system primarily by procuring protective clothing, equipment, medical devices and medication.¹⁰ More recently, giving the current rising number of COVID-19 infections, the Ministry of Defence declared that up to 15,000 soldiers will be deployed in order to respond to the increasing requests of help made by local authorities.¹¹ In fact, German councils and government departments have been able to request directly by filling out an application the army's support in to administer COVID-19 tests, or trace infection chains, or provide emergency medical supplies.¹² During the first wave of coronavirus German Luftwaffe also engaged in transporting more than 230 intensive-care patients from Italy, France and the Netherlands to be treated in Germany and transporting donated equipment. With the surge of COVID-19 cases, also Belgium has moved some severe patients to Germany.¹³

In mid-March 2020, **French** President Macron declared war on the coronavirus launching 'Opération Résilience'. Under the umbrella of this operation, the three branches of the military have been mobilized to support public services in the fields of health, logistics and protection, in France and overseas, while continuing monitoring other security threats to French people on the national

⁶ Italian Ministry of Defence - Army, "Safe Streets" Operation, (<http://www.esercito.difesa.it/en/Operations/national-operations/Pagine/Safe-Streets-Operation.aspx>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

⁷ Italian Ministry of Defence - Airforce, 'Emergenza COVID-19', 4 April 2020, (<http://www.aeronautica.difesa.it/vetrine/Pagine/L'impegno-dell'Aeronautica-Militare-per-l'emergenza-Covid-19.aspx>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

⁸ A. MARRONE, 'Le forze armate durante e dopo la pandemia', *affarinternazionali*, 6 Aprile 2020, (<http://www.affarinternazionali.it/2020/04/le-forze-armate-durante-e-dopo-la-pandemia/>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

⁹ Italian Ministry of Defence, 'Covid-19: Parte l'operazione Igea della Difesa, 200 Drive-through effettueranno 30.000 tamponi al giorno', 21 October 2020, (https://www.difesa.it/Primo_Piano/Pagine/operazione_Igea_Difesa.aspx). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

¹⁰ F. SCHULZ, 'Germany military to make doctors, thousands of reserves available in COVID-19 response', *euractiv*, 19 March 2020, (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/germany-military-to-make-doctors-1000-reserves-available-in-covid-19-response/>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

¹¹ Reuters, 'Up to 15,000 German soldiers to support battle against pandemic', 12 October 2020, (<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN26X26O>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

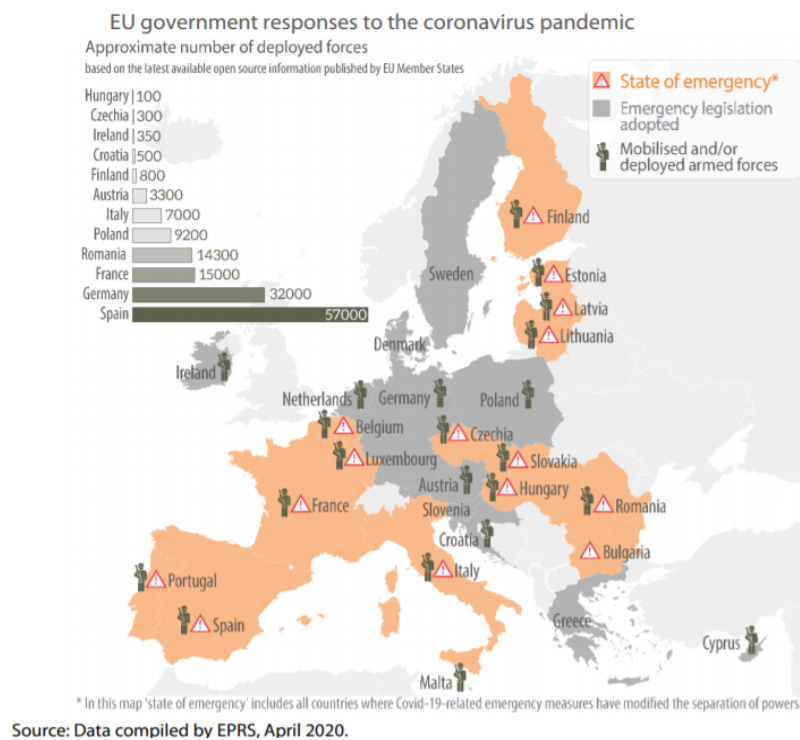
¹² Deutsche Welle, 'Coronavirus: How the German military helps fight the pandemic', 30 October 2020, (<https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-how-the-german-military-helps-fight-the-pandemic/a-55450525>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

¹³ Y. HERMAN, 'Belgium launches COVID patient air-lifts to Germany', *Reuters*, 3 November 2020, (<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN27J1MQ>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

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territory and overseas.¹⁴ The French armed forces has built military hospitals in the hardest hit region of the Grand Est¹⁵, it has also transported COVID-19 patients in military airplanes and warships.¹⁶

Furthermore, the **Spanish military** response has been similar to the one of Italy and France. The Ejército de Tierra, Armada, Ejército del Aire, Unidad Militar de Emergencias y Guardia Real permanece have been mobilized in the fight against COVID-19 with the launch of 'Operación Balmis'. The actions that are being carried out are mainly related to the disinfection of critical infrastructures (ports, airports and stations), sanitary facilities and other essential public services, as well as support in building field hospitals and in transporting various materials.¹⁷



Within the **EU institutional apparatus**, in May 2020, the European Union External Action Service (EEAS) has set up a task force in order to support the work of EU Member States armed forces both in their home countries and across EU Member States.¹⁸ The task force is meant to facilitate information exchange, bolster strategic communications efforts, and identify best practices and

¹⁴ Ministère des Armées, Opération Résilience, (<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/actualites/operations/operation-resilience>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

¹⁵ T. LAȚICI, 'The role of armed forces in the fight against coronavirus', *European Parliamentary Research Service*, April 2020, p.3.

¹⁶ CNN, 'Covid-19 puts French military in 'unprecedented' peacetime role', CNN World, (<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/04/15/france-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-macron-military-field-hospitals-bell-pkg-intl-ldn-vpx.cnn>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

¹⁷ Estado Major de la Defensa, 'La operación 'Balmis' despliega a más 2.500 efectivos en 172 ciudades para el control del virus COVID-19', 24 March 2020, (<https://emad.defensa.gob.es/prensa/noticias/2020/03/listado/200324-Continuacion-Operacion-Balmis.html>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

¹⁸ J. BORELL, 'European defence: fighting COVID-19, preparing for the future', *EEAS EU High Representative personal blog*, May 2020, (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/79305/european-defence-fighting-covid-19-preparing-future_en). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

lessons learned for the future.¹⁹ Moreover, European Union Defence Ministers have agreed to reinforce modalities for the use of military assets to support civilian authorities in response to the pandemic via the task force.²⁰ However, this task force has not published any updates on the progress of its work.

Since the beginning of COVID-19 outbreak, **NATO** has adapted preexistent procedures and created new ones to limit the spread of the virus and minimise risks to its personnel and the communities of NATO Allies. On one hand, NATO has relied on the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre to coordinate requests from its Allies and partners for help, as well as offers of assistance to cope with the consequences of COVID-19. In total, NATO has coordinated requests from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and 18 NATO and partner countries, garnering dozens of responses in return.²¹ On the other hand, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe Covid-19 Task Force has been established to coordinate actions of the Allies in April 2020.²²

The NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) has provided logistics support and the organisation of transport of key supplies and equipment to Allies, partners and other international organisations. Thanks to the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) and the Strategic Airlift International Solution (SALIS) programmes, participating Allies have been able to charter commercial transport aircraft and jointly operate heavy cargo aircraft, sharing flying hours and costs.²³

Moreover, an adaptive version of the Rapid Air Mobility mechanism was activated and offered to the nations to facilitate the movement of medical supplies. RAM initiative enables Allied military aircraft to swiftly deploy on short notice across Europe.²⁴ in the case of the COVID-19 emergency, RAM has been used in cooperation with European Organisation for the Safety of Air Navigation (EUROCONTROL) to support relief flights carrying supplies critical to the fight against the pandemic by facilitating the handling of air traffic control and diplomatic clearances and to remove route restrictions.²⁵

Looking at the numbers, in the first half of 2020, almost half a million troops from NATO militaries have supported civilian efforts, building field hospitals, helping with testing, transporting patients, distributing medical equipment, conducting repatriation, helping with decontamination, making available laboratories, quarantine facilities, establishing triage centres and supporting border security across the Alliance. NATO military forces flew more than 350 flights to transport medical

¹⁹ T. LAŢICI, 'The role of armed forces in the fight against coronavirus', *European Parliamentary Research Service*, April 2020, p.4.

²⁰ J. BORELL, 'European defence: fighting COVID-19, preparing for the future', *EEAS EU High Representative personal blog*, May 2020, (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/79305/european-defence-fighting-covid-19-preparing-future_en). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

²¹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 'NATO's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', *NATO Factsheet*, October 2020.

²² Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, 'Allied Command Operations Covid Task Force', *SHAPE - news*, April 2020, (<https://shape.nato.int/news-releases/allied-command-operations-covid-task-force-2>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

²³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 'NATO's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', *NATO Factsheet*, April 2020.

²⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Rapid Air Mobility, (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_175432.htm). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

²⁵ LGen O. RITTMANN, 'NATO and the COVID-19 emergency: actions and lessons', *NATO Defense College Policy Brief 15-20*, September 2020, p. 2.

personnel; transported more than 1,000 tonnes of equipment; and helped build almost 100 field hospitals and over 25,000 treatment beds.²⁶

One of the limits faced by NATO emerged in its response to COVID-19, was the absence of any stockpiles of the required medical equipment, which it could have distributed to the member nations and partners in need. In fact, there was no prior plan in place to tackle a pandemic and the level of the crisis made it impossible to establish a new medical stockpile from scratch considering the worldwide shortage of masks, respirators and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).²⁷ Consequently, one of the newly implemented initiatives to tackle a second wave of coronavirus has been the establishment of the NATO Pandemic Response Trust Fund, which ensures the maintenance of an established stockpile of medical equipment and supplies to provide immediate relief to Allies or partners in need.²⁸ Several Allies have already made financial contributions and donations of medical equipment to the stockpile of the NATO Pandemic Response Trust Fund.²⁹

Notwithstanding the great contribution of the armed force in managing the current crisis, as highlighted by the first part of this section, there are also some **political risks** linked to large scale military deployments. Firstly, the increased use of military equipment to monitor and control the citizens could jeopardize some fundamental rights, as freedom and privacy. The trade-off between security and freedom is an evergreen debate that goes back to Hobbes and there is no concrete solution to this. Secondly, large-scale military deployments in the homeland may affect civilian control. In other words, dependence on military interventions in response to COVID-19 may undermine weakened democratic elected governments or even promote military rule.³⁰ Thirdly, there are also direct and indirect impacts on the armed forces themselves due to the shift of their focus from the protection against external threats, to domestic military operations. This change has required reassessing NATO and EU Member States armed forces' strategic priorities regarding where to deploy, as well as balance personnel health risks against task implementation.³¹ A related risk to the EU and NATO Member States armed forces is to lose sight of other security issues not related to COVID-19, as geopolitical tensions, migration, terrorism, cyber security, hybrid warfare and disinformation.

Policy Recommendations

NATO and EU Member States have responded in different ways to the COVID-19 crisis and the armed forces have operated differently depending on the national approach and the available resources. Notwithstanding that, it has been widely acknowledged that the military support has been crucial in the fight against coronavirus. Consequently, even though there are political risks in the short and long run, the deployment of armed forces must be ensured at the EU and NATO level.

²⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 'NATO's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', *NATO Factsheet*, October 2020.

²⁷ LGen O. RITTIMANN, 'NATO and the COVID-19 emergency: actions and lessons', *NATO Defense College Policy Brief 15-20*, September 2020, p. 3.

²⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 'NATO's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', *NATO Factsheet*, October 2020.

²⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 'Coronavirus response: NATO delivers ventilators to Allies in need', *NATO - news*, October 2020, (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_179133.htm). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

³⁰ J. P. KALKMAN, 'Military crisis responses to COVID-19', *J Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 00: 1– 5, September 2020, p.3. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12328>.

³¹ J. P. KALKMAN, 'Military crisis responses to COVID-19', *J Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 00: 1– 5, September 2020, p.3. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12328>.

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At the European level, governments are expected to carry out a major review of their spending priorities, shifting their focus on the health sector and economic recovery measures. A possible solution to ensure a common European response to the present and future health crisis and balance the related costs is to revitalize the EU Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). In fact, PESCO projects can be adapted to the current crisis, as in the case of the European Medical Command. The aim of this project is to ensure a centralised medical capability to coordinate military medical resources across Member States, but it has not been implemented yet.³² The ongoing strategic review process of PESCO, which is set to be finalised by the end of 2020,³³ could be a window of opportunity to emphasize the fundamental role of PESCO in the fight against COVID-19.

As regards to NATO, the Alliance was not prepared to face a pandemic as the next security scenario. The spread of COVID-19 has revitalized the debate around non conventional threats and how to develop a comprehensive approach to tackle them. In fact, even though coronavirus is primarily a health issue, it has also affected economy, social cohesion, geopolitical dynamics and disinformation at the global level. Consequently, non-military-centric responses and capacity to react have to be further developed. The appointment of a Special Advisor to the NATO Secretary General on Pandemics and other Health Issues could be the first step in the adaptation of NATO to the current and upcoming security scenarios.

Finally, one thing that we have learnt is that cooperation is key in the fight against COVID-19. The EU and NATO have been in close consultation since the beginning of the pandemic through weekly coordination calls, briefings and interactions between the newly created EU COVID-19 task force and EADRCC.³⁴ Considering the prolonged duration of the coronavirus crisis and its long term consequences, a specific unit should be created to facilitate NATO - EU dialogue and cooperation on health issues and non-military threats. Two persons, a representative from NATO and one from the EU, should be chosen as spokesperson in order to facilitate transparency and quicker response.

NATO and EU Member States are now experiencing the second round of our fight against COVID-19, let's work together to be on the winning side by the end of this war.

³² Permanent Structured Cooperation, 'European Medical Command', *PESCO Projects*, (<https://pesco.europa.eu/project/european-medical-command/>). Consulted on November 16, 2020.

³³ E. LAZAROU and T. LAȚICI, 'PESCO: Ahead of the strategic review', *European Parliamentary Research Service*, September 2020, p.5.

³⁴ T. LAȚICI, 'NATO's response in the fight against coronavirus', *European Parliamentary Research Service*, June 2020

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