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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37458/ssj.3.1.5>

Research Paper

Received: January 24, 2022

Accepted: March 1, 2022

## **The impact of crises on the activities of international missions**

**Abstract:** *The paper covers the employment of military forces in coping with the effects of crises, such as the current Covid-19 pandemic. The efficiency of the pandemic response has the potential to alter the potential of some countries, while in zones of conflict it can lead to escalation, as the focus of major powers has shifted to domestic crisis response, while elsewhere authoritarian regimes are likely to take advantage of the situation to consolidate their position*

**Keywords:** *crisis response, international missions, resilience, Covid-19*

## Introduction

Peace and security are desirable and extremely important values, too in the context of the functioning of states in the international system, which is ultimately also a stabilizing factor for the system itself. The security of a given country is inherently related to the security and peace of other countries. International security, unprecedented in history so far, permeates the national security of individual states.

Peacekeeping missions are designed to shape a peace order in the world. They are also an important element of international activity, and the main goal is to limit or eliminate the will to use the appeal to force in current international relations. It is worth noting that this does not mean that the use of force during the mission is completely renounced. Peacekeeping operations are a special mechanism that resolves armed conflicts, contributing to the maintenance of peace and international security. For this reason, they are an important and permanent element of international politics<sup>1</sup>. The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of resilience to strategic shocks (such as pandemics) as part of national and regional security. This was evident in national health systems, supply chains for critical supplies (e.g., PPE and respirators), strategic communication and disinformation, and cybersecurity.

The pandemic also showed the contribution of the armed forces to the national crisis response, albeit at the expense of their basic military actions. However, there are significant differences between European nations in terms of military involvement in crisis response, which create opportunities for comparison and interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Military participation in crises.**

The armed forces were a key component of the national crisis response. Initially, this includes general military support such as command and control aid, citizen repatriation, logistics, public space disinfection, and in some countries support for police and internal security. Military

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<sup>1</sup> P. Żarkowski, *Rules for the Use of Armed Forces in Peacekeeping Operations*, “Doctrina” 2016, No. 12/25, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> F. Opillard, A. Palle, L. Michelis, "Discourse and Strategic Use of Armed Forces in France and Europe in COVID-19 Crisis. Hour. For econ. And Soc. Geog.", 111: 239-259, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12451>

medical services provided emergency medical services for the civilian health system, including access to military hospitals, the deployment of field hospitals, and the construction of temporary hospitals at convention centers and stadiums. Military medical services have helped COVID-19 patients travel by ambulance, train, sea, and air. In addition to supporting hospitals, in many countries, the armed forces have also supported the nursing and social care system.

This experience identified some friction in demand management processes in national health systems and at the European level, which would also limit strategic accident regulation and evacuation in the event of major conflicts in Eastern Europe. This policy brief provides a more complete analysis of the contribution of the force in spring and summer 2020.<sup>3</sup>

As the incidence of COVID-19 decreased over the summer, the role of the armed forces shifted towards supporting sampling, diagnostic testing, and tracing contacts within national COVID health surveillance systems<sup>4,5,6,7,8</sup>. This included the application of these measures to personnel in the armed forces. Military personnel has also been involved in medical research programs that will contribute to understanding COVID-19.

European multilateral security and defense institutions, NATO, and the EU have provided active platforms for the exchange of information on the COVID-19 crisis between European military leaders. This involved setting up separate COVID-19 task forces within both institutions. EU military personnel established the COVID-19 information exchange platform to exchange data with EU Member States and EU missions. Similarly, the NATO Military Medical Excellence Center of Excellence presented a special weekly report on COVID-19<sup>9</sup>. The Euro-

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<sup>3</sup> How the COVID-19 crisis affected security and defense aspects in the EU. A brief description of the policy. PE 603.510 - July 2020.

Available at: [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/603510/EXPO\\_BRI\\_\(2020\)\\_603510\\_PL.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/603510/EXPO_BRI_(2020)_603510_PL.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Italian Ministry of Defense, Covid-19: Operation Igea della Difesa begins, 200 runs will carry out 30,000 swabs per day, October 30, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Italian Ministry of Defense, Coronavirus Vaccine: Defense provides and will provide the requested support, 2 December 2020.

<sup>6</sup> German Ministry of Defense, COVID-19 Korzeororus 2019: Bundeswehr is part of vaccination strategy, December 2, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> SACEUR highlights the COVID-19 Task Force. shape available at: <https://shape.nato.int/saceur/saceur-remarks-on-covid19-task-strength>.

<sup>8</sup> EEAS, Coronavirus: Task Force to Facilitate Information Sharing Between EU Armed Forces, 15 April 2020.

<sup>9</sup> NATO COVID-19 Military Medical Center, available at: <https://www.coemed.org/resources/COVID19>.



crises rather than to radical changes. Deterioration of the political and social situation and economic issues in individual countries or regions affected by COVID-19 may generate new threats. Regardless of the severity of the pandemic, they will not change in the short and medium-term, the foundations of the global security system.

The possibility of a large-scale conflict between the major powers will remain low, not least because of their conventional forces and nuclear arsenals. The system of alliances with the central position of the United States (NATO, bilateral treaties in Asia), as well as regional cooperation in security matters (e.g. the European Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russian-Chinese contacts) will continue to influence the state of global security.

The United States will maintain its position as the world's greatest military power, but the challenge for them will remain to counterbalance the regional advantages of their main opponents. Competition for global primacy between the US should be expected to intensify and China, with Russia playing an important role. It began before the outbreak of the pandemic, but China's attitude during the crisis strengthened the conviction among American decision-makers that it was necessary to tighten the US policy towards this country.

The military dimension of this rivalry will include the development of the military potential of each side (continued even in the conditions of the economic crisis, albeit at a slower pace and to a lesser extent), gaining allies and customers, fighting for influence in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, and "arms races" in new areas of confrontation (cyberspace, outer space, use of artificial intelligence, the Arctic).

An agreement on new bilateral or multilateral arms control agreements and international regimes limiting competition cannot be ruled out, but the risk of an accidental outbreak or escalation of the crisis will increase due to the multifaceted nature of the confrontation. No country will come out of the crisis without compromising its potential, including its military potential.

Relative strengthening of the position of some countries at the regional level and the weakening of others by a pandemic, however, can lead to significant changes in the security environment. The importance of global security in the undergoing economic crisis in Europe will

continue to decline<sup>14</sup>. Possible evolution of the system of forces in Eastern Europe (a possible relative weakening of Belarus and Ukraine compared to Russia), the Middle East (a decrease in Iran's potential) and Asia (a possible weakening of states opposing China's expansion in the South China Sea basin) may provoke assertive actions by those states that will treat the crisis as an opportunity to expand their influence - even if they struggle with the effects of a pandemic.

Most of the countries affected by the pandemic used their armed forces to respond to the crisis in an ad hoc manner. They were involved, among others, in ensuring internal security, border protection, and supporting other areas of the state's functioning, including the health service. NATO and other organizations have been also using military cooperation mechanisms to assist member states and partners, e.g., in transporting patients and medical supplies.

Some countries used this type of transport and the work of their military doctors as a public diplomacy tool (e.g., support for Italy and Serbia provided by the Russian Ministry of Defense). At the same time, however, countries affected by the pandemic signaled to their societies and potential enemies that their armed forces had retained their combat capability and guaranteed the continuity of their missions, regardless of the practical limitations caused by COVID-19 (resignation or reduction of the scale of some exercises, isolation of infected soldiers, with maintaining the combat readiness of US and French "Charles de Gaulle" aircraft carriers).

In particular, the United States, China, and Russia continued their military activity by undertaking or even increasing the intensity of operations to demonstrate power<sup>15</sup>. Russia continued military exercises and aircraft flights near NATO countries, China sent their aircraft carrier near Taiwan, and the United States dispatched a group of ships to the Barents Sea in May 2020 and carried out strategic bomber flights, e.g. on the Baltic and Black Seas. Although none of these activities violated international law, they nevertheless posed the risk of incidents - such a situation took place, for example, in April 2020, when Iranian units conducted dangerous maneuvers near American ships in the waters of the Persian Gulf.

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<sup>14</sup> Zob. N. Popescu, How the coronavirus threatens a geopolitical Europe, European Council on Foreign Relations, 30 marca 2020 r., [www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_how\\_the\\_coronavirus\\_threatens\\_a\\_geopolitical\\_europe](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_the_coronavirus_threatens_a_geopolitical_europe).

<sup>15</sup> N. Childs, Great-power competition and COVID-19, Military Balance Blog, International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 29, 2020, [www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/05/great-power-competition-covid-19](http://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/05/great-power-competition-covid-19).

The UN Secretary-General launched a call for a global ceasefire in ongoing conflicts on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, but the response from the combatants was less than modest<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, the threat of a pandemic has caused a temporary reduction in the intensity of fighting in some conflicts and new peace initiatives - for example, Saudi Arabia announced a two-week ceasefire in Yemen in March, later extended, and the Taliban announced a temporary refrain from acting against Afghan forces in territories under their control.

### **Ongoing conflicts and potential crises.**

The causes of the ongoing interstate and internal conflicts have not been removed, even though there has been a temporary shift of focus to fighting the pandemic rather than each other.

Some opponents may use this time to try to resolve conflicts to their advantage. This will probably lead in the longer term to the intensification of wars, including in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, and the actions of local terrorist organizations related to Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State<sup>17</sup>. Some countries may benefit from focusing international attention on the fight against the virus to try to pacify the opposition and to increase internal repression (e.g. China against Hong Kong) or against refugees, which may lead to an escalation of existing or new conflicts. The escalation of humanitarian and economic crises in the "failing" and "failed" states will increase migration flows, transnational crime, and terrorism, which will become an increasing challenge for stability and the security of neighbors and target areas, including Europe.

During the pandemic, there were demands to suspend, for humanitarian reasons, the UN, EU, and US sanctions imposed on some countries, including Iran, Russia, and North Korea. However, no significant changes to the functioning system should be expected and the scope of sanctions, as the reasons for their imposition have not ceased. Finally, some states or non-state actors can use the pandemic to escalate tensions through military means. The aim may be to

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<sup>16</sup> A. Guterres, Opening remarks of the Secretary General's appeal for global ceasefire, 23 March 2020, [www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-03-23/secretary-general-appeal-for-global-ceasefire](http://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-03-23/secretary-general-appeal-for-global-ceasefire).

<sup>17</sup> F.Z. Brown, J. Blanc (eds.), *Coronavirus in Conflict Zones: A Sobering Landscape*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 14, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/14/coronavirus-in-conflict-zones-so-bering-landscape-pub-81518>.

demonstrate forces and get the other side of the international community to make concessions, or to implement aggressive pre-pandemic plans.

In the event of a deep political and economic crisis in some countries (e.g. Syria, Iran), such action may also serve to consolidate their societies around the authorities and thus maintain the regime. The crisis response capacity of the existing international system is likely to decline<sup>18</sup>. The intensification of rivalry between permanent members of the Security Council will further reduce the Council's ability to act and will have a negative impact on the functioning of some regional organizations (e.g., the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE).

Due to the change in priorities of some countries contributing personnel and funds, and due to epidemic restrictions, the crisis may affect the UN peace-keeping system. Some countries that were ready for military interventions or independent stabilization missions motivated by humanitarian reasons (e.g. the USA, European countries) will not have the political will or the resources to continue this policy. The expected recession will change the economic environment of security policy, forcing the affected countries to cut government spending, including defense budgets<sup>19</sup>. Although it is difficult to estimate their possible scope, the consequences will be delays or abandonment of investments in new armaments and military equipment, the withdrawal of certain defense capabilities, the reduction of the manpower and the reduction of their readiness, and limitation of participation in foreign operations. The most profound cuts can affect democracies, whose societies will put pressure on governments to shift resources from defense budgets to civilian components of national security and resilience systems, or social spending and welfare state. However, this will not mean a radical departure from allocating adequate resources to defense. On the one hand, pressure will increase - especially in the EU - on states to launch joint armaments investment programs to reduce the costs of acquiring new capabilities, but on the other hand, there will be growing expectations that governments will support the national defense industry through new orders.

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<sup>18</sup> COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing # 4, International Crisis Group, March 24, 2020, [www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb4-covid-19-and-conflict-seven-trends-watch](http://www.crisisgroup.org/global/sb4-covid-19-and-conflict-seven-trends-watch).

<sup>19</sup> D. Barrie, N. Childs, F. McGerty, Defense spending and plans: will the pandemic take its toll ?, Military Balance Blog, April 1, 2020, [www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/04/defense-spending-coronavirus](http://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2020/04/defense-spending-coronavirus).

As a result, many countries will expect large offsets when investing in imported technologies, while joint investment programs will be delayed due to difficulties in reaching a consensus on the division of labor and budget.

The difficult situation in the defense market will lead to further consolidation of enterprises in this sector through mergers and acquisitions, both internally and at the international level. The attractiveness of investments in technologies that are less expensive and, at the same time, mature enough to not require large outlays for development will increase.

These may be, most importantly, unmanned platforms, capabilities to fight in cyberspace, artificial intelligence applications in military applications, etc. The trend of taking over civil technologies, especially ICT, for defense purposes will also strengthen.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic could have a particular impact on the Euro-Atlantic area. Despite accusations of insufficient aid at the beginning of the crisis and a delayed EU-NATO response, the experience of cooperation during a pandemic may strengthen ties between members of these organizations and give them an impetus for further integration. Citing the conclusions. After the crisis, the four most militarily strong EU countries presented in May 2020 a proposal to expand cooperation and deepen defense integration within the Union. NATO Secretary General inaugurated in June 2020 the process of reflection on adapting the Alliance to new challenges under the name "NATO 2030"<sup>20</sup>. However, agreeing on a common agenda within the Euro-Atlantic community is not a foregone conclusion. In NATO, in the longer term, tensions may deepen between allies seeking to maintain the Alliance's deterrence and defense potential and those countries that will call for a significant increase in NATO's competencies in countering non-military threats.

Tensions over relations with Russia and China and defense spending may also intensify, especially if European countries cut defense budgets much deeper than the US. If NATO's political cohesion weakens due to growing divisions, it may induce some European countries to

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<sup>20</sup> M. Terlikowski, List czwórki w sprawie przyszłości europejskiej obronności, „Komentarz PISM” nr 35, 2 czerwca 2020 r., [www.pism.pl/publikacje/List\\_czworki\\_w\\_sprawie\\_przyszlosci\\_europejskiej\\_obronnosci](http://www.pism.pl/publikacje/List_czworki_w_sprawie_przyszlosci_europejskiej_obronnosci).

try to deepen defense integration in isolation from the Alliance and opposition to the transatlantic ties. These processes can be implemented outside the EU and NATO, in new multilateral formats, which will create additional tensions in Europe and transatlantic relations.

They may be accompanied by a change of policy towards Russia<sup>21</sup>, using new European initiatives in arms control and disarmament, and vis-à-vis China, emphasizing cooperation in rebuilding Europe's economy thanks to Chinese investments in infrastructure (e.g., development of the 5G network). As current US policy on these issues is maintained or tightened, transatlantic tensions will continue to deepen. At the same time, the effects of cuts in defense budgets will limit the ability of Euro-Atlantic countries to respond to unexpected security crises in their neighborhood, as well as the credibility of NATO's deterrence and defense potential.

The pandemic will become a stimulus for rethinking at the national, regional, and global level the relationship between political and military security and its other aspects, in particular health, social, economic, and environmental security. A debate is to be expected especially in democratic countries on the legitimacy of maintaining the current security policy (defense expenditure, share in operations) and about the possibilities of strengthening the broadly understood resistance and the potential to respond to non-military threats, as well as about the possibility of undertaking international cooperation to combat these threats. As a result of this reflection, the financial resources and government attention may be partially redirected away from investment in military capabilities to other objectives related to the non-military dimensions of security. Such a trend may also appear in international organizations dealing with security, and especially in alliances (e.g. in NATO).

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<sup>21</sup> Secretary General launches NATO 2030 to make our strong Alliance even stronger, NATO, 8 czerwca 2020 r., [www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_176193.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176193.htm).

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