The World HandCOV'd: COVID-19: Implications for Germany's Security and Defense Policy

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Key takeaways

- The Bundeswehr needs to be structurally involved — going beyond administrative assistance — in the fight against future pandemics and accordingly empowered and (financially) equipped.
- The structures and capabilities of the Bundeswehr should become more flexible so that the Bundeswehr is able to ensure national and alliance defense and homeland security, as well as execute dedicated foreign deployments and training missions at the same time.
- Health must be considered, much more than before, as an integral part of foreign and security policy. As part of the network-approach, experts who deal with pandemic prevention and biological hazards should also be on the National Security Council.
- Even if Europe is busy coping with the pandemic affecting its own countries, it must not neglect the support of the states in the neighborhood (and beyond). Implementing this and explaining it to the European population is an immensely challenging — but necessary — task for European decision-makers.

Health crises — like the current COVID-19 pandemic — have multifold effects on stability, security and defense. The Federal Government's 2016 White Paper names pandemics and epidemics as one of ten core challenges for German security policy, as they have the potential to overwhelm state health and care structures and lead to state

collapse. This applies in particular to regions that are already affected by war, conflict and poverty, where the only state structures are fragile and there is little trust in the state.

Pandemics and epidemics also have an impact on a country's military and defense resources. The German security and defense policy — in particular the Bundeswehr — is affected and stressed by the COVID-19 pandemic in several ways: on the one hand, the Bundeswehr provides domestic administrative assistance; on the other hand, the pandemic affects the financial availability and thus the operational capability and defense policy resources. In addition, of course, there is also a risk of infection for the enlisted men. The future of civil-military cooperation will also be shaped by the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bundeswehr Extending Support to Civil Forces

The Bundeswehr already supported the civilian forces in containing the virus in March, for the first time with a *Corona Aid* contingent in Germany. For this purpose, the Bundeswehr made around 15,000 soldiers from various branches of the armed forces available, who have been on standby for relief missions — under the command of the military base inspectorate. In addition, soldiers from the medical service, as well as support from the Bundeswehr military hospitals, have also been available for coronavirus-related operations.

This type and intensity of domestic support is something completely new for the Bundeswehr. Earlier cases of domestic interventions included, *inter alia*, disaster relief in flood zones. To contain the pandemic, they had to come up with a completely new makeshift structures (deployment contingent).

As part of the administrative assistance provided by the Territorial Tasks Command and the State Commands, the armed forces support the federal, state and local authorities as far as this is possible within the framework of the Basic Law. By deploying the so-called containment scouts, the Bundeswehr primarily supports the health authorities to ensure contacts tracing in regions with a high number of infected people.

Examples, such as the Corona Treatment Center Berlin, which was set up within four weeks, demonstrates the successful civil-military cooperation and the urgently needed relief and support the armed forces can extend to civil agencies in the shortest possible time. However, it also shows that the Bundeswehr, which is already at the limit of personnel and material resilience, has to make enormous efforts in order to cope with these tasks.

It is also important to check whether the command structures are adaptable. It is expected that this autumn will show the discussion of how to adapt them, taking into account possible permanent solutions for future support services rendered by the Bundeswehr in Germany. There is a chance that the Bundeswehr will posture itself with greater flexibly in order to be able to respond to all challenges. Previously, however, the Bundeswehr was rather narrowly-specialized: initially with a focus on deployments abroad after the end of the Cold War. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in eastern Ukraine, the 2016 White Paper outlined national and alliance defense as an equally paramount task alongside out-of-area missions.

> If the Bundeswehr is to further focus more strongly than before on protecting the general public, it runs the risk of not being able to perform other — previously equally important — tasks. Accordingly, it is important to embed the versatility both within the armed forces and in the command structures to ensure response flexibility.

Readiness for Action and Missions Abroad

Immediate impact is already visible with regard to the (foreign) exercises and missions of the Bundeswehr: for example, the NATO exercise *Defender Europe 2020*, the largest military exercise in Europe after the end of the Cold War, was suspended. All Bundeswehr exercises abroad have also been canceled.

The EU training mission (*EUTM*) in Mali, which should actually have a larger footprint, is currently on hold. The on-site force was reduced to an operational minimum. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is also a break in training. There is a suspended training mission in Iraq, where an increasing number of attacks on local security forces has been registered since the beginning of the pandemic. The NATO training mission *Resolute Support* in Afghanistan, currently revamped following the peace negotiations with the Taliban and the USA, offers the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces its "train, advise and assist" package partly via video and telephone conferences and sometimes in a restricted format to comply with the distancing requirements.

There is no telling how long these interruptions in foreign missions will last and how they will ultimately affect the capabilities of the armed forces on the ground. However, the fight against the virus poses further major challenges for the local governments: greater instability in the country not only affects the security of the personnel on site, but also German security interests.

> The restrictive measures in the spring and the associated decline in production in the defense industry, as well as the increased share of work-from-home in the Bundeswehr itself, will also have an impact on operations and procurement processes and thus the operational readiness of the armed forces.

Materiel and equipment shortages also have immediate consequences for the partners. As part of the Framework Nations Concept (FNC), Germany has committed itself to NATO as a framework nation to provide multiple capabilities, for example, for the Multinational Air Group (MAG). Germany has also confirmed its participation in the Very High Joint Readiness Task Force (VJTF, the so-called *Spearhead*) in 2023, to which the Bundeswehr is to contribute the required expertise.

Defense Budget versus Cushioning the Economic Impact?

The development and procurement of complex armaments requires long-term financial planning and securing of these funds. Due to the increased investment expenditure by the federal government for economic stimulus programs as well as the foreseeable lower tax revenues, there are already discussions about cutting defense spending. As with previous economic shocks, such as the 1973 oil crisis and the 2008 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has become more of a narrative. The focus is also on combating the crisis, which means that other issues, such as foreign security, warrant less attention.

However, the federal government's immediate and future economic package to cushion the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic also takes defense policy into account. There are funds earmarked for Bundeswehr projects in certain areas. These include, *inter alia*, digitization projects in administration and new armaments projects with a high share of German added value. It is therefore still debatable what effect the COVID-19 pandemic will have on the defense budget in the medium to long term. The trend reversals introduced in Materiel, Personnel and Finances can only continue provided the adequate financial resources are available.

Crisis Arc around Europe

Germany's security is deeply interwoven with the stability and security of Europe. Even before the pandemic, Europe was in a tight spot, which is now likely to be exacerbated by COVID-19. Our continent is surrounded by an arc of crises, from North Africa, Libya and the Sahel to the Middle East — particularly Syria — and Turkey to the Balkans and

Ukraine. Germany and Europe are directly affected by conflicts, wars and collapsing statehoods in these regions — there are refugees, migrants and also terrorist organizations.

The immense socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic will be particularly devastating and will aggravate the situation drastically in countries that have been affected by instability, war, displacement and poverty for years. In Africa, the virus is spreading with a lag of about two months and the WHO is expecting up to 10 million people to be infected in the next few months. Many countries in the crisis arc around Europe don't have what is most necessary to combat the pandemic. Health systems are poorly developed, there is a shortage of clean drinking water, laboratories, ventilators, and people simply cannot afford to stay at home or to adhere to distancing and quarantine requirements. Consequently, the risk of infection in poor regions of the world is much higher and the case-count in these countries is soaring.

The pandemic in the crisis arc around Europe and in other fragile countries can result in humanitarian disasters, violence, unrest and even state collapse. In the Sahel, terrorist groups are taking advantage of the fact that the state is busy fighting the pandemic and there are more attacks and assassinations. While the epidemic, which overwhelms weak to barely existing health systems, also strips people of what poor economic capacities they have and drastically exacerbates the situation of dwindling supplies, it can virtually fly under the radar in metropolitan areas and refugee camps, where people in great need are densely packed under inadequate hygienic conditions. It can be assumed that the situation in the refugee camps around Syria, such as in Lebanon, which is home to around 1.5 million Syrian refugees and is on the brink of national bankruptcy, is only getting much worse.

> The health crisis turns into an economic, food and ultimately security crisis. This can trigger uncontrolled refugee movements, which will also affect Europe.

European Cohesion and Transatlantic Relations

Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, the EU Member States showed little solidarity with one another and the EU sometimes seemed unable to act in the crisis. This is also because the competences in the field of health lie with the Member States and not with the EU institutions. Nevertheless, the lack of European cohesion and the lack of solidarity among the EU member states in March gave countries such as Russia and China the opportunity to spread the narrative of the "ailing West" through intensive

media coverage of aid deliveries and disinformation campaigns. After the initially delayed and sluggish reaction, the EU countries then started to increasingly support each other in coping with the pandemic by sharing necessary supplies and setting up care for the infected. For example, Germany has treated patients from other European countries in German hospitals and sent aid, such as ventilators. Importantly, the EU plays a major role in cushioning the economic and financial consequences of the pandemic — in July it passed the largest financial and relief package in its history — but also in promoting the development of vaccines and drugs to treat COVID- 19 patients.

The transatlantic relations are indispensable for German and European security for the time being — even if they have been in a profound crisis ever since Trump's presidency. The main criticism by the incumbent American president, but also by his predecessors, of Germany is that Berlin shows little willingness to take on responsibility for security policy, to spend more on defense or to meet NATO's promised two percent target by 2024. If, as a result of dealing with the immense aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, consideration is given to spending less on security and defense in Germany in the future, further deterioration of the relationship with our most important partner it is to be expected. Against the backdrop of the changed geopolitical landscape with a revisionist Russia and an increasingly aggressive China, President Biden will also demand more commitment from the Europeans — and especially from Germany — to security and defense.

Great Power Rivalries and System Competition

As if in a time-lapse, the global power shifts and great power rivalries that have been shaping over the years are being accelerated and intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

> While China, the ground zero of the pandemic, has apparently overcome the crisis in its own land relatively quickly, the USA is in the middle of one of the most serious health crises in its history, with serious domestic political and economic implications. This reinforces the impression that the USA is increasingly no longer in a position to take on the leading role in addressing global issues.

The termination of multilateral agreements or withdrawals from international agencies, the most recent being the WHO, further confirm the erosion of the image of the leading Western power. At the same time, China is trying to fill this vacuum and is exploiting the situation through propaganda, among other things. Beijing is currently trying to divert attention from the origin of the pandemic in its own country through a global

disinformation campaign. While the countries of the world are being distracted by COVID-19, Beijing is taking advantage of the lowered alertness while asserting its aggressive expansion agenda in the South China Sea in the shadow of the pandemic and has — with international protest piling up — passed a security law for Hong Kong that massively interferes with the autonomy rights of the Special Administrative Region.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration is also keen to shift the blame for the pandemic and the fallout on China — also to divert attention from its own failure to contain the virus. Tensions between the two rivals have increased significantly over the past few months and appear to be escalating, as evidenced by the closure of the consular offices in Houston and Chengdu.

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