The World HandCOV'd: COVID-19 and NATO: no game-changer but acceleration of pre-existing trends

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Key takeaways

- While having an impact, in particular by accelerating pre-existing developments regarding NATO, COVID-19 is not a fundamental game-changer for the organisation. The security environment around and controversial issues within the alliance remain the same, albeit partly exacerbated by the spread of the virus.
- NATO has adapted and evolved in terms of the tasks it can perform – as it has in the past – and will continue to do so in the future. Thus, the alliance will most likely take up a more proactive and efficient role in supporting member states in their fight against COVID-19 if necessary, in the future.

The full scale of the destructive effect that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought on virtually all aspects of life is not yet fully clear. However, it is evident that the pandemic already had profound consequences for international affairs in general and security policy more specifically. These developments, in turn, have also affected a cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Although infectious diseases are hardly a chief concern for the organisation, heads of the member states and senior decision-makers within NATO have underlined that the spread of COVID-19 at least bears indirect consequences for the alliance. In order to measure the effect of COVID-19 on NATO, the following analysis will first describe the status quo within NATO before the spread of the disease. Secondly, it will examine the direct

effects the virus has had on NATO. Lastly, this analysis will look at the extent to which the virus has altered transformation processes in the political and security environments and thus has had an indirect effect on the alliance.

Before COVID-19: More collective defence but debate on burden-sharing

NATO underwent a significant readjustment process after 2014. In the decades before, the alliance had drawn its attention increasingly to 'out of area operations', such as the NATO mission in Afghanistan, that were designed to counter international terrorism and insurgency. This changed with Russia's annexation of Crimea and its subsequent intervention in Eastern Ukraine, which brought the objective of collective defence back to the forefront of the alliance.

In the aftermath of the crisis, NATO allies undertook major efforts to grant reassurances to those Eastern member states that felt specifically threatened by these Russian actions. It has initiated the Enhanced Forward Presence, most prominently but not only through four battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland and its Baltic air policing mission. Furthermore, NATO has sought to solidify its defence posture, by enhancing the alliance's ability for rapid response, first and foremost through building the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and more recently also by complementing this with the broader NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI). In addition, the alliance built up its capacity to counter threats below the threshold of military force, with a particular focus on hybrid threats and cyber-attacks by strengthening the resilience of its member states.

In sum, NATO has substantially expanded its ability to perform collective defence in the past years. While on the whole its member states command conventional superiority vis-à-vis Russia, the comfortable technological advantage of the 2000s is shrinking due to a significant modernisation programme of the Russian armed forces. Moreover, the situation on the north-eastern and nouth-eastern flank of the alliance remains a concern. Russia has concentrated personnel and equipment in the Baltic Sea, the Kaliningrad exclave, its Western military district and the Black Sea region. Especially its anti-access and area-denial (A2AD) capabilities threaten NATO's ability to aid the exposed Baltic states in case of an attack. In addition, concerns about collective defence are unevenly shared within the alliance. Some European member states, such as France or Turkey, are more preoccupied with terrorism, state-fragility and conflict in their direct neighbourhood, Northern Africa and the Middle East. As a consequence, their

focus on territorial defence is less pronounced than with Eastern NATO members, while in case of France or Italy they are also more open to pursue a cooperative relationship with Russia.

> While having shifted its focus on defence and deterrence, the alliance also continues to strive for a certain level of dialogue with Russia.

However, this objective is seriously hampered by the reduced and limited channels of exchange and consultation with the Russian side since 2014. Most importantly, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) has suspended all practical cooperation due to the Russian actions in Ukraine. It resumed dialogue on a political level in 2016 but has only conducted a handful of meetings since then. This lack of means to create mutual transparency, re-assurance and understanding has been further exacerbated by the break-down of a range of arms control treaties and their respective monitoring tools, in particular the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and, most likely, the Treaty on Open Skies.

Among the most pressing political issues of recent years amongst NATO member states have also been the attempt to achieve more equal burden-sharing between the United States and other allies and the European strive to strengthen the European pillar of NATO. Although this debate has been fuelled by the confrontational, sometimes erratic, rhetoric from US President Donald Trump, it predates his presidency and is connected to a more structural shift of the US policy towards the Pacific theatre and great-power competition with China. Still, Trump has been especially adamant about the goal to move toward an expenditure of 2 per cent of GDP on defence and has publicly criticised and threatened member states that fail to meet this goal. While the US commitment to NATO has remained strong on the ground – both funding for the European Deterrence Initiative and US troop levels in Europe have even increased after 2014 – it has become clear that the US is no longer willing to shoulder the burden to the same extent it has in the past.

European member states are therefore looking to increase their contribution and have cumulatively spent an additional USD 130 billion on defence since 2014. However, only 8 out of 29 member states besides the US had defence expenditures of two per cent or larger in 2019. In certain member states, such as Germany, it has also proven to be extremely challenging to build domestic political consensus around spending more on defence, both amongst political parties and in the wider public. Furthermore, in terms of capabilities, the European states remain highly dependent on US contributions towards NATO. This pertains to the extended nuclear deterrence that – despite discussions about

a French nuclear deterrent for Europe – only the US nuclear forces with their highly diversified capabilities can provide. And it also holds true in certain conventional areas. It would take years of a tailored defence industrial policy and a transformation of European militaries to decrease dependence on the US.

Direct effects: Negligible impact on readiness and priorities

> COVID-19 directly affected NATO operations and its readiness in a number of ways. However, none of these effects have fundamentally altered NATO's priorities or hindered its functional processes.

First of all, the spread of the virus has only had a minor effect on NATO's defence and deterrence posture. COVID-19 has of course directly affected the armed forces of member states participating in NATO missions or standing by for the alliance's rapid response initiatives. For instance, several soldiers of the forward-deployed NATO Battle Groups have fallen ill with the virus and COVID-19 cases have also appeared on ships earmarked for the NRI. The resulting quarantines have led to limited operational readiness for certain NATO elements. Precautionary measures and restrictions due to the virus have also hampered a range of out-of-area operations, such as the Iraq Training Mission or Operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan. In both cases, training had to be stopped or drastically limited.

Nevertheless, all the above are mere short-term effects. As experience and means to cope with the virus grow, armed forces will be better able to deal with its consequences while maintaining operational readiness in the future. Thus, COVID-19 does not undermine the overall NATO defence posture in a significant manner, a conclusion that has also been drawn by General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg.

Secondly, the virus has led to a new awareness within NATO for non-conventional security issues. While much of the alliance's focus has been on conventional military threats in the last years, COVID-19 has drawn attention to other security issues. The uncoordinated response to COVID-19 early on during the crisis and the perceived disunity between the Euro-Atlantic partners has been exploited by Russia and China. Both countries continued their pre-existing efforts to undermine NATO and EU through propaganda and disinformation campaigns questioning the solidarity between member states and stirring grievances, especially in those countries struck hardest by the virus.

Recognising the importance of dealing rapidly and effectively with the spread of COVID-19, NATO supported member states with airlifts and logistics during the crisis through its Strategic Airlift International Solutions programme and the NATO Euro-

Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre. This will remain a concern for the alliance in the future. Under the oversight of Supreme Allied Commander Todd Wolters, NATO is currently developing a military operation plan to cope more efficiently with a possible second wave of COVID-19. With the plan, the alliance strives to better support member states in the field of logistics or with mobile hospitals but also seeks to improve coordination, to streamline military support and to achieve a harmonisation of civil disaster management procedures.

> While there can be no doubt therefore that coping with COVID-19 as a non-conventional security threat will remain on the agenda of NATO, this should not be misunderstood as a fundamental shift in priorities.

The outlook of the alliance will remain similar to the time before the virus; measures to increase preparedness against COVID-19 should rather be seen as part and parcel of overall steps to strengthen the resilience of the alliance. This is not entirely new but has already been NATO policy to counter hybrid threats and solidify overall defence.

Indirect effects on the security environment: Accelerating pre-existing transformations

While direct effects of COVID-19 on NATO are limited, as shown above, the spread of the virus has also impacted the overall political and security environment, which in turn has spill-over effects for the alliance. Here, the fallout from the virus could have the greatest effect by accelerating pre-existing transformational processes that influence the future of NATO.

First and foremost, the absence of US leadership has been a striking feature of the international response to the crisis. Oscillating between isolating itself from other countries, threatening to cut funding to the WHO and engaging in confrontational rhetoric with China over its responsibility for the outbreak, American behaviour has been a far cry from past pandemics, where the US took a lead in international coalitions to fight infectious diseases. This suggests the US will be at least gradually stepping back from its role as the sole global leader and will increasingly be choosing a rather reserved approach, in which it will more selectively engage in multilateral formats when the US deems this to be in its direct national interest. This has implications for the abovementioned shift that is taking place within NATO. The US can be expected to further reduce their degree of engagement in Europe while asking their European allies to step in, especially when dealing with security threats in Europe's direct

neighbourhood. Instead, the growing antagonism with China that has worsened in the context of COVID-19 will be a more determining factor in American foreign policy in the future. This trajectory would most likely not be reversed by a possible Biden-presidency.

This is closely connected to the second process that the COVID-19 outbreak has most likely accelerated, which is American demands for Europe to pick up a larger share of the financial burden within NATO. Facing a staggering economic downturn that has taken hold of the US, the American government will be even less willing to maintain past levels of commitment while European allies such as Germany, having weathered the COVID-19 crisis comparatively well, are perceived not to pay their fair share. The renewed announcements regarding American troop cuts in Germany reflect this development. It is not a new dynamic altogether but can be expected to intensify as economic recession puts pressure on state budgets.

> At the same time the already fragile public support for raising defence expenditures in those NATO member states required to increase spending will fray further as these countries will also have to make tremendous financial commitments to fight the long-term effects of COVID-19.

A public discourse already sceptical of putting aside greater amounts of money for their armed forces will be even more reluctant to do so in the midst of an economic and health crisis. The result could be a more complicated rift within NATO on the issue of burden-sharing that ultimately will have to face the realities that the shift in the US policy will increasingly create in the future. COVID-19 will intensify this dynamic without changing its overall course.

Lastly, COVID-19 does not fundamentally change the security situation on NATO's Eastern flank or the threat Russia poses towards the alliance's Eastern member states, even though Russia has been severely affected by the outbreak of the disease. The spread of the virus does have profound economic implications for the Russian Federation because it has coincided with a simultaneous collapse of oil and gas prices. To date, prices remain below the mark Russia needs to balance its budget, let alone to build-up financial reserves. This does limit room for defence expenditure and investments.

However, the Russian leadership's propensity to preserve its room for manoeuvre in foreign and security policy will probably limit the extent to which this has spill-over effects on such core areas as the modernisation and development of new Russian defence systems or its troop deployments. Russian manoeuvres during the COVID-19 crisis demonstrate its continuing resolve. If anything, a more unstable situation at home

and rising disapproval of the government among the population could make the foreign policy actions of the Russian leadership more unpredictable, in case it feels compelled to use it as a tool for garnering support amongst the Russian public. Therefore, the tense situation at NATO's Eastern flank has not changed in the wake of COVID-19.

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