The World HandCOV'd: COVID-19 and NATO: Short-term Effects and long-term Challenges

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Key takeaways

- The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the reduction in the number and scope of military exercises by NATO and demonstrated initially poor solidarity among its member states. Numerous already concluded military contracts have also become hostages to the pandemic;
- NATO member states will have their defence budgets curtailed, which will ultimately have a negative effect on the defence capabilities of the whole Alliance;
- The coronavirus has highlighted several serious vulnerabilities of the member states' armed forces (in particular, the Navy);
- NATO faces the need to bring its response mechanisms in line with new non-military threats.

In a matter of only a few months the coronavirus pandemic became the dominating domestic policy driver for many countries and the primary shaper of international relations in its own right. It not only affected individual states, but also disrupted the operations of international organizations, integration blocs and military alliances. NATO is no exception.

> Involved in the fight against the pandemic, the Alliance also found itself faced with serious long-term challenges, which are not entirely new, but have become markedly more relevant in the new environment.

So what is it that NATO gas already encountered during the pandemic and to which long-term challenges will the Alliance need to find answers?

Immediate impact of the pandemic

The immediate effect of the pandemic on NATO member countries included the reduction in the number and scope of military exercises conducted by NATO or with the engagement of its member states. Exercise DEFENDER-Europe 20, which had expected to deploy 20,000 soldiers directly from the U.S. to Europe, along with weapons and equipment, was among the first ones to experience serious cuts. In total, 37,000 personnel were supposed to be involved in the exercise. However, on March 13, transfers of military personnel and cargoes from the U.S. to Europe were halted. As a result, the exercise started as late as 4 June. Some 4,000 U.S. and 2,000 Polish personnel were involved.

Furthermore, exercise Cold Response 2020, which began in Norway on 9 March and originally involved 15,000 soldiers from nine countries, including the U.S., was suspended. Exercises Dynamic Front, Saber Strike and Swift Response were cancelled.

> Although the shrinking scale of military training affected the combat readiness of the armed forces of individual NATO member countries and the bloc as a whole, the situation did not lead to complete de-escalation of tensions in the region between the West and Russia.

They appeared to be unable to agree on a complete cancellation of exercises during the pandemic, although such a proposal had been voiced.

The coronavirus also exposed a number of specific vulnerabilities of the allied armed forces. For example, the Navy suffered the most. Two U.S. nuclear aircraft carriers, USS Theodore Roosevelt and USS Ronald Reagan have been as good as knocked out of action because of the growing number of COVID-19 cases among the personnel. Since the U.S. nuclear aircraft carriers operate as part of carrier strike groups (the carrier itself and 8-10 escort ships, including submarines), it is safe to say that the U.S. Navy's capacity has been narrowed by two dozen attack ships, 180 combat aircraft (deck-based aviation) and about 18,000 sailors.

France's only aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, en route to eastern Mediterranean to support the Chammal operation against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria (mission Foch), had to head back to its home port ahead of schedule due to the coronavirus outbreak onboard. The Dutch attack submarine HMNLS Dolphin with its infected crew left the area of combat duty (in the North Sea) two weeks before the scheduled date, which created a gap in the NATO maritime defence system.

Military contracts have also been affected by the pandemic. The quarantine has caused adjustments to rearmament and equipment upgrade programs. The U.S. Department of Defence expects to see a three-month delay across the majority of its Major Defence Acquisition Program portfolio as the result of workforce and supply chain issues caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The suspension of some subcontractors due to lockdown has also affected the hypersonic weapons development program. Given the projected second wave of the pandemic, this factor could have long-term negative consequences for both the rearmament of the U.S. armed forces and the defence capabilities of NATO as a whole.

The pandemic has also become a solidarity test for the EU and NATO, the underlying value that is so often mentioned by European politicians and bureaucrats. The grim and at the same time scandalous statement by French President Macron about "brain-dead" NATO made in the fall of 2019 was at least brought back to memory in several European capitals throughout the pandemic, if not corroborated.

> The closures of the borders between the allies, national selfishness in the fight against the virus, detentions of humanitarian aid and repurchases of protective equipment and tests, late response to the issue by the governing bodies and relevant agencies of both the EU and NATO - all delivered a crushing blow to the very notion of transatlantic and European solidarity, as well as to NATO as the organization embodying this solidarity.

In this context, the presence of the Russian military in Italy with a humanitarian mission even before NATO's response to requests for assistance from its ally was quite symbolic.

Eventually NATO made a somewhat belated effort to help its member countries combat the pandemic. As NATO does not have its own stockpiles of medical and protective equipment, it mostly focused on the coordination of humanitarian aid via its Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). The scheme was used, among other things, for medical supplies to reach Spain and Italy.

Long-term challenges

Apart from the immediate effects of the pandemic, the Alliance will face longer-term challenges in the foreseeable future that could have a significant negative impact on the entire organization.

First, it is about the continuing decline in confidence in NATO and the weakening of solidarity among its member countries. In addition to the heightened awareness of the prevalence of national interests due to the pandemic, the established trend towards the growing unwillingness of "old Europe" to defend its NATO allies in the event of external invasion will be growing even stronger. Public opinion in these countries is increasingly inclined to shift this task to the U.S.

For example, the overall perception of NATO significantly deteriorated in the period from 2007 to 2019 in a number of member countries, including the most influential European states of Germany and France. When asked if their country should defend a fellow NATO ally against a potential attack from Russia, 41% of the respondents in France said that their country should use military power, while 57% believe that the U.S. should be the one to respond. In Germany, the proportion was 34% to 63%, in Spain 41% to 72%, and in Italy 25% to 75%. The trend is similar in most of the other member countries, although the gap is slightly narrower. From 2015 to 2019, the willingness to protect allies under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty decreased in such countries as France, Spain, Poland and Italy. The COVID-19 pandemic will likely aggravate this trend, and the leadership of the Alliance will have to look for ways to build up intra-bloc solidarity.

Second, the member countries of the Alliance are in for cuts of their defence spending, which will eventually produce a negative impact on the defence capabilities of the entire bloc. The economic impact of the pandemic is forcing both European states and the U.S. to allocate enormous funds to bolster their respective economies, which will inevitably entail a revision of defence appropriations. Therefore, it is unlikely that NATO's declared defence spending increase targets (to 2% of GDP) will be achieved, at least within the originally approved timeframe.

Furthermore, the impact of the conflict in Ukraine and the "Russian threat" on public opinion and, consequently, on political debates in NATO countries will continue to weaken. This, for its part, will demand that new compelling reasons for increasing military spending in member countries be found.

Third, the growing trend towards the U.S.' unilateral actions in the international scene during Trump's presidency will continue to have a detrimental effect on NATO. The U.S. president's attempt to distribute the financial burden of collective defence more fairly has brought about the discontent of European allies and another attempt to make the EU more "geopolitical".

This trend leads to an even greater divergence of views on defence and security between "old" and "new" Europe, where the former advocates a greater European defence identity (the longstanding concept of a European army), whereas the latter tries to build a closer bilateral relationship with the U.S., viewing it as its main (perhaps the only) ally. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's foreign policy envisages neither the complete rejection of NATO support, nor the exclusive focus on the states on the "eastern flank". This is evidenced, for example, by the "Fort Trump" project in Poland, which has made lots of headlines but in the end failed to materialise.

Fourth, the NATO leadership will have to put in place another transformation of the Alliance in order to bring its response mechanisms in line with new threats. The COVID-19 pandemic, among other things, has demonstrated the insufficiency of the priority given to the traditional military threats that dominate in NATO at a time when emerging unconventional security threats stand behind the failure of the Alliance to promptly help its members.

> Therefore, in order for the organization to regain legitimacy in the eyes of its members, its leadership needs to find ways to ensure a reasonable balance between collective defence in its traditional military sense and the buildup of necessary capabilities to address new unconventional threats; such as pandemics that can undermine military capabilities the way the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor did in December 1941.

On the other hand, the growing gap in the military capabilities of the U.S. and all the other NATO member countries (with the exception, perhaps, of the UK) has already created a framework, in which NATO is largely incapable of joint high-intensity combat operations. The operation in Kosovo seems to have been the last mission of this sort.

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