



COVID-19 – POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE NAVAL POWER PROJECTION

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The naval power projection has the role of protecting the maritime interests of a country, of transmitting strong messages to both allies and enemies, of shaping the security environment so as to avoid the escalation of conflicts in a particular maritime space. In this article, we have analyzed how the projection of the elements of naval power, especially warships, is affected within the established missions and international commitments assumed because of the current background of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have established as a research hypothesis that the naval forces remain the main tool to ensure the continuity of the projection of naval power in different maritime areas against the background of the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic. To validate the research hypothesis, we have established two research directions that focus on analyzing the importance of applying the concept of naval power projection and how the COVID-19 pandemic influences the actions of the naval forces. The lessons learned from the challenges faced by the naval forces during this pandemic will in the future have a major impact on the organization, training, allocation of forces and development capabilities so that personnel exposure is kept to a minimum.

Keywords: naval power projection; naval presence; pandemic; regional stability; security operations.

The naval forces, in general, face multiple challenges, starting from the specific actions executed in the context of the security environment in a certain maritime space, continuing with the technological challenges, endowment, staffing, and improvement of training by participating in national or international exercises. Sometimes a threat to the health or even life of the military suddenly appears over all existing challenges. The spread of a virus to which the human body has no immunity can produce devastating effects, being known in this sense the disappearance of ancient civilizations on the American continent following the interaction with European sailors. The first information about how an epidemic affected the conduct of a war dates back to the Peloponnesian War in 430 BC, when the plague epidemic in Athens caused Sparta to postpone the military invasion of Athens, although Sparta was superior from the military point of view. The plague killed about 300,000 people, including the Athenian head of state, Pericles¹.

It is known that during the wars, due to inadequate application of personal and collective hygiene rules and specific conditions on the battlefield, there were outbreaks of dysentery, typhoid fever, typhus or influenza which caused

very high losses among combatants. An example of this is the campaign of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte to Russia. In the march for the conquest of Russia, the emperor's army marched through Germany and Poland. Communities in rural areas lived in unsanitary conditions, drinking water became a major problem, which led to an outbreak of dysentery. The problems worsened when they arrived in Lithuania. Due to the lack of water for washing bodies, lice and dirty and sweaty equipment, the typhus epidemic broke out, killing 80,000 soldiers in a month and a half².

The well-known Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-19 killed more people than World War I. As a result of this pandemic, a mortality of between 20 and 40 million people is estimated.

In general, researchers in the health system have been able to discover, for most infectious diseases that have plagued entire armies, remedies and prophylaxis measures. When a new virus appears for which no treatment methods are known and which multiplies different strains, the situation becomes critical, especially where there are small spaces and numerous staff performing activities together.

To begin with, I set out in this approach to globally analyze the potential impact of the spread of this virus on the naval power projection, against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic (short for coronavirus disease 2019).

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The rapid spread of COVID-19 has led countries around the world to focus on solving domestic health problems and to be less focused on maintaining international solidarity. Thus, many states have closed borders for a while, tightened control measures on entry into those countries and limited international military cooperation.

In developing this article, we started from the assumption that in the event of a pandemic, the naval forces must change their strategy of projecting the elements of naval power without significantly affecting the fulfillment of national missions and international commitments.

Therefore, I will use as a research hypothesis that the naval forces remain the main tool to ensure the continuity of the projection of naval power in different maritime areas against the background of the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic. For this we have established two research directions. The first direction analyzes the importance of projecting the elements of naval power in order to model the security environment in a certain region. The second direction of research examines how the actions of naval forces are influenced by the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Starting from the definition of naval power as "the ability of a state to manifest its interests at sea, through diplomatic or military interventions in time of peace, crisis or war, to achieve strategic objectives"³, I consider naval forces as the main element of naval power and I will analyze how the projection of naval power is influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, specifically for the Romanian Naval Forces, we have identified from the Doctrine of the Romanian Naval Forces a wide range of missions in which elements of naval power participate in defending allies and partners within NATO and the EU, as well as promoting regional and global stability⁴.

Against the background of this pandemic, being in the first year of the fight against the virus, no measures have yet been taken at European level to resize defence budgets, but it is very possible that many states will review their security policies and grant greater attention to measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

Since the beginning of 2020, most naval forces have resized training activities at sea and in many cases withdrew ships from international exercises.

Withdrawal of ships (the main elements of the projection of naval power) from international exercises or from areas where the security situation is severely deteriorated may have undesirable effects and a rapid escalation of regional conflicts.

The importance of the naval power projection in the context of maintaining a climate of regional security

The projection of naval power, in many cases only by their naval presence, in an area where regional stability is affected, has led to the improvement of existing tensions in the region and ensuring the freedom of navigation on the communication lines. In this subchapter, by analyzing the examples presented, I will demonstrate that the naval presence is not just an action made for creating a desired image, it achieves a multitude of military and diplomatic purposes.

From ancient times the Athenian historian Thucydides stated that ships proved to be uniquely useful as tools for conducting foreign policy, through their actions expressing very clearly the objectives of foreign policy⁵.

Most naval theorists have highlighted the role of naval power as a direct involvement in naval warfare. The American theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan argued the importance and value of projecting the elements of naval power (showing the flag) in different regions of the globe for the sake of regional stability and national interest⁶. Thus, after the Second World War, the USA maintained a significant number of ships in various maritime spaces considered strategic. These ships participate in planned exercises within NATO or independently perform naval presence actions depending on the geopolitical situation of the respective region. In support of the previous statement, US Admiral Stansfield Turner encouraged the presence of US naval forces where the appearance of ships prevents a problem from becoming a crisis. Russian Admiral Gorshov also put this concept of naval power projection into practice in the late 1960s, when Soviet fleets made their presence felt on the world's oceans, reminding everyone that the Soviet Union had become a global player to be reckoned with.

Demonstrations by the naval forces have, in many cases, made it possible to achieve political goals by exerting pressure and threatening to launch naval operations. Thus, it was possible to model the



operational environment without resorting to naval confrontation.

The role of the projection of the elements of naval power in certain maritime spaces increased especially during the Cold War, a period in which the United States and the Soviet Union aimed to exert influence in a certain region. The great advantage of military ships is given by the maritime legislation that allows navigation in the high seas and even the execution of limited maritime operations outside the territorial waters of hostile countries. The sea is a neutral environment and the presence of ships in international waters is less challenging for the population than the presence of tank divisions or aircraft squadrons.

The naval presence in a certain maritime space as an expression of the projection of naval power is found in different forms. First of all, there is the aspect of time, so the naval presence can be temporary, routine or continuous. It can also be regular with a regular pace or as many times as possible, thus the naval presence ensuring the achievement of a major objective in the region. Such routine temporary naval appearances are carried out in the Black Sea by ships belonging to NATO member states, amid tensions between the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

Battleships are divided into several categories depending on the main missions they perform (some of them being multifunctional), which is why a ship can be used to send completely different messages to enemies or friends. A ship belonging to a state within an alliance or coalition, deployed in a certain maritime space may perform specific exercises in common with ships belonging to friendly countries, on combat environments where common capabilities are found, quay training activities, personnel exchanges. Such activities strengthen mutual trust and promote the image of the alliance / coalition or state to which the ship belongs. Instead, the message for countries that threaten regional stability is one of determination and involvement in the event of a deteriorating security situation in the region. These messages are transmitted as a result of actions performed at sea: firing with weapons on board, participation in joint exercises, participation in demonstration exercises, etc.

Cooperation between naval forces aims to increase interoperability and experience in leading

naval operations. Crisis response operations, stability, law enforcement, humanitarian assistance, maritime interdiction are planned, organized and led by the central structures of an alliance or coalition, with each Member State taking on tasks depending on the political decision of that state.

The presence of military ships as elements of the projection of naval power, with the role of supporting allied nations and discouraging the naval enemy in times of peace, crisis or war, is an aspect of diplomacy and increases the complexity of the role of naval power.

In the current security complex where there are multiple threats at sea (regional instability, piracy, resource exploitation, migration, arms trafficking and banned substances), military ships are constantly involved in specific actions and activities, many of them with diplomatic role.

Determining the amount of forces intended for naval presence in a given maritime space generally starts from identifying national or coalition / alliance interests in that maritime space and assessing the likelihood that those interests will be jeopardized⁷. In support of this statement there is a good example of the US sending a naval group, including the Enterprise aircraft carrier, in December 1971 to the Bay of Bengal during the Indian-Pakistani war to protect US interests in the region.

The projection of a group of naval forces also has the role of discouraging an enemy, usually inferior, to use the battleships provided for various actions, showing that, most likely, the costs could outweigh the benefits of hope. In general, naval deterrence through the projection of elements of naval power is done in two forms: passive and active.

Passive deterrence occurs when a group of naval forces is in an area of interest and in terms of its capabilities determines the potential enemy not to develop combat or other actions that contravene international law. Passive deterrence was most common during the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union deployed groups of ships and submarines to areas of interest.

The active form of deterrence occurs when the enemy is identified and when he acts on the basis of a course of action to be deterred.

This claim is supported by what happened to the Georgian naval forces during the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, when a group of five fast



Georgian patrol ships tried to attack the group of Russian Federation ships sailing off the coast of Georgia. Following the attack of the Georgian ships, the response of the Russian group was extremely harsh, which resulted in the sinking of two Georgian ships and the withdrawal of the others in the port where they were sunk by Russian Special Forces.

For naval powers that do not have enough forces to form and deploy naval groups, participation with ships in NATO or EU commitments is a contribution to promoting maritime security. The Romanian Naval Forces also fall into this category, which shows a pro-active attitude in expanding the area of competences, according to the assumed commitments. Participation with forces and means in the operation to combat piracy (Operation Atalanta), in humanitarian aid operations and the evacuation of Romanian and foreign citizens from Libya, in operations to prevent and combat terrorism (Operation Active Endeavor), maritime security operation (Operation Sea Guardian) demonstrates the ability of the Romanian Naval Forces to design elements of naval power for the purpose of regional security and stability.

Given the issues addressed in the first direction of research, I believe that we have shown that the projection of naval power in a maritime space by the amount of forces, deployment time and effect generated, can shape the security environment and influence a situation so that the goal of prevention a conflict to be successfully realized.

At this time, I consider that the research hypothesis is partially validated, given that the most visible instrument of the state for the projection of maritime power, through the component of naval power, is the naval force and its ability to project power and force.

Cooperation, interoperability and naval presence are elements that naval forces capitalize on to confirm the active contribution of the state to maintaining its regional security.

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the actions of the naval forces

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic took the whole world by surprise, and the naval forces were no exception. The rapid spread of this virus has seriously tested the resilience of the military medical system, especially in the first part of 2020,

mainly due to the lack of a standard treatment that works effectively against this virus and the complications that can occur from contracting the virus.

By attacking the respiratory system in the first place, oxygen no longer reaches sufficient quantities in the circulatory system, and the internal organs no longer function in optimal parameters. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 35% of infected military personnel are asymptomatic. The study conducted for the US Navy shows that 80% of the number of those infected, for the age group 18-49 years, generally have mild forms to flu-like environments with the development of symptoms of loss of taste and smell, difficulty breathing, cough, fever, muscle aches, chills, sore throat, runny nose, headache, dizziness and sickness⁸.

Following the studies performed, the most effective measures to prevent COVID-19 infection are: physical distance, frequent washing of hands, wearing individual protective masks, permanent disinfection of surfaces, especially in common areas. Advanced studies are currently being conducted to establish treatment regimens as well as to produce a vaccine to stop the spread of this virus.

Specific to a battleship is the high density of soldiers in a small space, the use of many common areas (dining rooms, barracks, cabins, battle stations) which leads to the impossibility of maintaining a sufficiently large physical distance.

In support of the above statement, I will briefly present what it meant to infect several crew members on the American aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt. The American aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt is a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier with a crew of approximately 4800 sailors who work for a long time on board using many common areas. The crew was tested following the first symptoms specific to COVID-19 infection, after a visit to Vietnam, and after testing 1271 crew members (27% of the crew) were found to be infected with COVID-19⁹.

As a result, 736 sailors with severe respiratory symptoms were placed in specially designated areas at the US military base in Guam. Out of a total of 4800 sailors, 4085 disembarked (approximately 85%), several hundred sailors remained on board to maintain essential services. All other disembarked sailors were quarantined for 14 days, one in the



room and under constant surveillance. Following the infection with COVID-19 on the medical side, there were 6 hospitalizations and one death of a sailor. The effect on the military was to cancel the planned missions. This incident highlights the vulnerabilities faced by even the most modern ships.

In case of war when the national territory has to be defended, it is justified to take risks in terms of an outbreak, but in peacetime it is necessary to take all measures to eliminate possible risks of disease that may lead to the impossibility of using ships for a period of time.

The impact of COVID-19 on ship operations was also highlighted by the departure of a NATO exercise by the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle following the infection of more than half of the crew. The ship left NATO exercise 10 days earlier than planned and returned to the port of Toulon to disembark sick crew members and sanitize. The Indian Navy canceled the largest planned naval exercise in 2020, similarly Australia canceled its largest naval exercise in the Pacific Ocean aimed at strengthening mutual trust and cooperation in core naval activities.

The Romanian Naval Forces were not spared from the challenges either, the infection with COVID-19 among the crew of the Frigate Regina Maria determined the return of the frigate faster than planned from the maritime security operation "Operation Sea Guardian" in the Mediterranean. Upon returning to the country, the 110 sailors diagnosed with COVID-19 were transported in series to the Modular Military Hospital for Intervention and Treatment (SMMIT) for investigation and treatment¹⁰.

The other crew members went into institutionalized quarantine for 14 days following the COVID-19 infection surveillance methodology. A good aspect is that no crew member has died and those infected have been medically recovered and can carry out specific activities safely. While the crew was in quarantine, the ship underwent an extensive disinfection process, making it possible to operate the entire equipment on board without any risk of infection.

The rapid spread of this virus has led to the application of strict sets of rules for carrying out activities on board ships. Daily medical screening at the beginning and end of the program, permanent

wearing of an individual protective mask, repeated disinfection of hands, maintaining a physical distance of at least 1.5 meters between people, performing specific activities with small groups of soldiers, disinfection of common areas after each activity, minimizing contact with off-board personnel, they are all carried out with the utmost care on board ships.

If a ship carries out a visit to restore the combat capability of the ship's crew, it shall in principle not be allowed to leave the ship if the epidemiological situation in that city is not certain.

The crew's awareness of the importance of preventive measures to be taken is crucial in the fight against the virus. Disinfection of the premises, washing hands, wearing an individual protective mask, physical distance and reporting of any symptoms protect the ship, the mates and the mission of the ship.

Given the issues addressed in this direction of research, I believe that we have highlighted the effects of such a threat, generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, on the actions of naval forces and what solutions may be adopted to reduce these effects.

At this time, I believe that the research hypothesis is validated, given the fact that the projection of naval power is achieved by the most visible instrument of the state, the naval force, which is able to fulfill its specific missions under any threats, even from unconventional spectrum.

Conclusions

The rapid spread of COVID-19 virus has generated a chain reaction of negative economic and military effects, the impact on the projection of naval power being quite strong in generating forces for the execution of naval exercises and maritime security operations.

The cancellation of naval exercises due to COVID-19 greatly reduces the naval presence in certain maritime areas where the security environment is unstable. Prohibited activities such as: illegal transport of goods, weapons or prohibited substances can take place in these maritime spaces and historical conflicts can be activated, which contributes to the deterioration of the security environment.

The construction and modernization of military ships in shipyards is much slowed down or delayed

in terms of respecting the physical distance, reducing the number of people they come in contact with or stopping activities if cases of COVID-19 infection are detected.

The downturn in the economy leads to a possible reduction in funding for the endowment, modernization or construction of military ships.

The acquisition of equipment and apparatus specific to the fight against COVID-19 requires a significant allocation of funds not previously scheduled.

The process of selecting military personnel is difficult, as most schools operate online, the promotion of military careers in the virtual environment may not have the same impact as the promotion of military careers face to face.

The allocation and endowment of the spaces destined for the treatment and quarantine of the infected military personnel as well as the care for the personnel in quarantine at home represents a challenge in the conditions of diminishing the human resource on the background of the contamination with COVID-19 virus.

The training programs are resized; specific training activities are performed on modules with low staff so as to comply with the rules of physical distance.

Preparing to participate in training exercises at sea, international exercises, and naval operations requires a much longer time due to the entry of the crew in quarantine a certain number of days before leaving for the mission.

Operational constraints increase as the mission approaches. Prevention and isolation measures are effective only if they are carried out correctly at both individual and unit level.

Failure to observe protective measures prior to participating in a naval exercise or operation may result in infection of crew members and withdrawal of the ship from the naval operation or operation.

The situation of diseases on board ships has led to the establishment of strict protocols on board, based on lessons learned, to limit the spread of the virus if an infected sailor has been detected.

The Romanian Naval Forces managed to overcome the moment of the withdrawal of the Frigate Queen Maria from the "Operation Sea Guardian", they learned the lessons derived from this experience, and through the measures taken they managed to complete all the given missions and commitments.

As a final conclusion, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will determine a new vision on the elements of naval power projection through the development of unmanned autonomous vehicles, the construction of small and unmanned ships, the development of surveillance and monitoring systems, the development of smart weapons, torpedoes, marine mines) commanded and directed from the shore, so that personnel exposure is minimal both in the face of the enemy and in the event of a new pandemic.

NOTES:

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