



POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON NATO POLICY

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The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore some divergent ideas that are added to the list of those already existing within NATO. Pivoting the Alliance's efforts to fight the new coronavirus (and future outbreaks) requires a different set of military capabilities. The pandemic could further contribute to a shift in NATO's strategic geography from an east-west to a north-south axis and, at the same time, shift the focus on military spending and defence preparation away from the eastern border to the Mediterranean. We are also dealing with an amplification of the Russian propaganda campaign whose target audience seems to be the population of southern and western Europe and which could call into question the value of an alliance that is not effective in the response to the crisis created by the new virus. It makes the London agenda obsolete and the Allies find the most appropriate answers and topics for discussion at the next summit in October in Beverly Hills, California, USA.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; resilience; propaganda; security.

"In a way, this crisis could ultimately have an impact as serious as a world war in terms of the number of people affected, in terms of the impact on the economy and on people's way of life"¹, said Nicholas Burns, former United States ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

We set out to begin the article with this quote precisely to draw attention to the impact of the crisis caused by the new coronavirus and, at the same time, to address the implications it may have on what NATO will mean in the coming period. As we have heard many times lately, nothing will be the same as before, because the pandemic has effects that will be felt for a long time and requires responses not only from states as individuals, but regional and even global responses.

We consider it premature to draw any conclusions about the long-term impact of the new coronavirus crisis on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization/NATO, but we cannot fail to note that the COVID-19² pandemic has brought to the fore some divergent ideas that are added to the list of those already existing within the Alliance. The news that the former NATO Secretary General, Javier Solana, contracted the virus leads us to the

idea that, like the people, an alliance can be strong at certain times, but it also has times when it can "get sick".

In the face of a not-at-all-positive public health situation coupled with the economic damage caused by isolation and quarantine measures, we believe it will become increasingly difficult for any politician in Europe and the US to argue that resources and the money collected from taxes and fees should be allocated to increase defence spending. Even before the new coronavirus produced widespread effects, there were long-running disputes amplified, in particular, by US President Donald Trump's stated views on spending and burden-sharing among NATO members. Even an increased threat from the main player counterbalancing the Alliance's influence - the Russian Federation, which wants to gain even more influence in Eastern and Southern Europe, may prove insufficient to support the spending increases we have seen undertaken by states since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and Moscow's intervention in Eastern Ukraine³. Economic recovery will take precedence over military spending, and this could very easily renew trade exchanges between allies and the gaps between the amounts spent by them to maintain or develop capabilities, and while some states bear the costs to ensure common defence of the Euro-Atlantic area, others are prepared to substantially reduce defence investment in order to achieve a better economic outcome.

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The international situation at the time of the threat

The coronavirus pandemic continues to change the nature of the Alliance's perception of threats. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union about three decades ago, NATO has changed its way of perceiving security risks and has been concerned with adapting its policy to new types of threats that still have a common cause. The problem was that there was a lack of continuity in these efforts and the ideas were either too vaguely outlined (the fight against a global unrest or the growing threat from China), or too episodic in nature (e.g. the fight against terrorism), or geographically delimited (such as the threat posed by the Russian Federation that is resuming its efforts to increase its influence). Even before the virus spread outside Wuhan, NATO sought to balance the increasingly disparate geographical perspectives of its members in order to maintain a degree of solidarity and cohesion. This dynamic may worsen, especially among Eastern members, who still see Russia as a conventional threat, and members of the South, who are dealing with instability in the Middle East and North Africa and the waves of migration that have been created and can reach the conclusion that Moscow could be part of the solution.

In early 2020, following concerns over comments by French President Emmanuel Macron, who described NATO as "brain dead"⁴ and calls for a new dialogue with Moscow, both Macron (especially after his February 2020 visit to Warsaw) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel worked hard to create their own version of an Eastern European reinsurance initiative, arguing that any new efforts to promote a reset of relations with Russia will be accompanied by assistance from credible security for NATO's Eastern area. The pandemic now threatens the personal security and economic prosperity of millions of NATO citizens in a way that terrorist threats, much more limited, or theoretical discussions about a possible Russian incursion cannot. NATO is now facing a "coronavirus" test: the Alliance's ability to respond to something that directly affects those who have been asked to vote in recent years to support increases in defence spending. It is no coincidence that some analysts in the Euro-Atlantic community see the virus as equivalent to an "armed attack"⁵ on NATO members, requiring joint and effective action by all allies to produce a collective response.

Of course, pivoting the Alliance's efforts to fight the new coronavirus (and future pandemic outbreaks) requires a different set of military capabilities. If we consider that one of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic would be to reduce the military spending of several Alliance states, then what remains of these defence budgets is likely to be dedicated to strengthening humanitarian / rescue missions in the event of disasters, as well as improving internal security and protecting the land and sea border. The decision by the United Kingdom and other states to withdraw some of the forces involved in various theaters of operations to redistribute them in actions across the country may become a defining trend in the future. Looking ahead, each member of the alliance will have to strike a clear balance between operations outside the national territory and national missions.

At the same time, the spread of the virus brought up the issue of migration. The threat posed by refugee flows is no longer a problem that could intensify terrorism and put economic pressure on states, with migrants now also seen as potential carriers of coronavirus or other diseases. If, until now, the arguments for stopping the flow of migrants revolved around the defence of the cultural / national distinctiveness and general welfare characteristics of European states⁶, arguments that were not always in the audience, the situation becomes more difficult to ignore if the movements of uncontrolled refugees poses a risk to public health.

Faced with an option to use resources to deter any Russian incursion into Eastern Europe or to strengthen its capacity to block the flow of migrants, more NATO members could choose the second option. The specter of the infected refugee can now create more fear and anxiety than the notion of "little green people" coming to claim autonomy or conquer territories. Although too early to conclude, the pandemic could further contribute to a shift in NATO's strategic geography from an east-west to a north-south axis and also remove the focus on military spending and defence preparation away from the border east to the Mediterranean area.

The effects of the pandemic on the cohesion within the Alliance

Another trend that the coronavirus can accelerate is the loss of cohesion and solidarity among Alliance members. Even before the outbreak of the pandemic



in the West, the Pew Research Trust released its latest findings (February 2020) on how NATO is viewed by the public of certain states, whether or not they are part of the Alliance⁷. Their research concluded that there was widespread reluctance to fulfill the collective defence commitment referred to in Article 5 of NATO's founding treaty. Thus, about half of those surveyed in 16 NATO member states are of the opinion that their country should not defend an ally, as there is a reluctance to do so.

Intra-alliance cohesion was also shaken by the Idlib crisis when the impression was created that NATO members did not fully agree to give Turkey a blank check which it requested in the confrontation with Russia in Syria and by Turkey's subsequent decision to allow migrants and refugees to pass through Turkish territory again in order to reach the territory of the European Union. Turkey's perspective, of course, is that, as it is not a member of the EU, it should not be necessary to carry this burden to the benefit of European states. From a security perspective, a NATO member has chosen not to hinder, but even to encourage a trend that threatens the security of its allies.

Certainly, the new coronavirus did not create this situation, but it further erodes the confidence in the proclamations of solidarity with which each NATO summit is ritually concluded. Lately, as the virus has spread around the world, NATO (and EU) allies have seen their partners stockpile medical equipment and supplies and place restrictions on exports, regardless of the needs of others. Moreover, the borders within the Alliance were closed, both between NATO and EU members in Europe and across the Atlantic. The perception that the US is ready to fight alone and seek the welfare of its citizens alone, without worrying about its closest allies, reinforces pre-existing trends. For their part, Europeans believe that allies on the east side of the Atlantic must be prepared to disengage from Washington to ensure their own security, and the messages they receive from the United States about the coronavirus somehow amplify these perceptions and trends.

Meanwhile, China has taken a serious note on public relations through its efforts to send assistance to Italy and Spain devastated by the virus, highlighting the initial lack of concrete support from Western partners in Italy and Spain. While the European Union has received all the

criticism⁸, the United States has not used NATO as a way to develop a coalition to fight the virus. Turkey, as a NATO member, used its indecision on Syria to justify its willingness to support NATO solidarity in order to have a closer relationship with Russia; Italy now feels justified in working more closely with Beijing, including in the Belt and Road initiative⁹, because of the perception that Western solidarity has failed to support Rome when it needed it most.

Beyond the political perception that NATO has not passed the solidarity test, the pragmatic reality of the pandemic raises the issue of NATO's deterrent mission: the ability to generate forces with sufficient power to discourage or repel any possible incursion. If a consequence of the pandemic has meant decisions for some governments to withdraw their national contingents from foreign missions to focus on the "front" at home, then a second consequence could be growing reluctance for countries to send or receive forces for fear that they will spread the virus.

Moreover, a number of exercises have been canceled or resized under these conditions. For example, Norway canceled the regional exercise "COLD DEFENDER", which was supposed to take place in March 2020, and other countries, such as Finland, were reluctant to send forces abroad. Also, NATO's main European exercise for 2020, "Defender Europe 20", which was designed in part to demonstrate to potential adversaries the cohesion of the alliance, is much reduced, despite the US Department of defence Directive that completely banned the movement of forces and US equipment.

The position of the Russian Federation in the context of the pandemic

The signs of discord in NATO are always closely monitored by Russia. Russia's 2015 National Security Strategy¹⁰ deems the Alliance as a threat to Russia's strategic interests, even though some of its members (such as Germany, France, Italy, Turkey and Hungary) are important bilateral strategic partners. It is therefore not surprising that the Kremlin, while not explicitly launching a disinformation campaign, considers its news and information channels that promote narratives to accelerate discord and division between NATO members and distort NATO interests to be



valuable¹¹. The Kremlin's decision to send military medical specialists and equipment to Italy is also at odds with the initial inert EU / NATO response.

Supported or not by the Russian Federation, multilingual online publications have taken advantage of the Alliance's lack of initiative in communication strategy and received millions of news shares claiming that, while most European countries are announcing drastic measures, due to the spread of the new virus, NATO continues to deploy impressive military numbers in Europe. In fact, NATO had planned to deploy troops for the Defender Europe 20 exercise in several European countries, and although it was clear that these deployments would be canceled amid increasing risks of the new coronavirus spread, the alliance's announcement to reduce the military delay was delayed.

Thus, news about a so-called "American invasion" in Europe circulated on many social networks¹², and against the background of the forced translation "word-by-word" from English, there were statements such as: "American soldiers will spread in Europe", "The US military does not have the right to contract the virus" or "the US military is exempt from contracting the virus", expressions to support the theory that, in fact, this virus is created by NATO and the military participating in Defender Europe 20 they would already be immunized¹³. Also, the fact that NATO officials refrain from declaring who the adversary against whom discouragement exercises are intended and always use the phrase "a hypothetical adversary" or "discouraging any adversary who may threaten alliance members" has been successfully exploited in these discrediting narratives. Thus, the stated purpose of the Alliance is ignored, and it is argued that it would, in fact, have other purposes, either expansionist or aiming at reconfiguring international public order. Efforts to counter these types of news are more or less visible among those who redistribute them on social networks.

Depending on the course of the pandemic, we could easily see an increase in the Russian propaganda campaign. Such a campaign would target the population of southern and Western Europe and call into question the value of an alliance that is not effective in responding to the crisis created by the new virus, but which calls on its members to be prepared to risk conflict with

Russia, sowing, at the same time, more doubts both among NATO members and non-NATO neighbors about how much credibility can be given to the guarantees brought by the Alliance.

However, better communication¹⁴ will not be a sufficient answer. NATO should not assume that, once this crisis is over, there will be a return to current activities, as usual. First, there could be recurrent outbreaks of COVID-19, leading to the re-imposition of travel bans, the closure of borders and the movement of people. The economic downturn due to the pandemic will have an impact on budgets and policies for the coming years.

China's actions in anti-NATO and anti-US propaganda

The People's Republic of China has become a potential challenge to NATO. This is also true of the North American and European economies on which NATO is based, which accounts for about half of global GDP¹⁵. Exactly one year ago, a large number of representatives of the international media were present at the events that took place during the anniversary summit that marked 70 years since the founding of NATO. The biggest news, although little reported, was that NATO, the most lasting and successful alliance in history, defined for the first time China as a potential strategic challenge. The news was somewhat overshadowed by statements made by French leader Emmanuel Macron, Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Canadian leader Justin Trudeau and President Trump, who had retorts and behavior designed to suggest that we were dealing with a weakening cohesion within the Alliance.

However, although the declaration upon the conclusion of the NATO summit was adopted unanimously, we cannot fail to notice the ambiguity of the language, reflecting the fact that Beijing is seen more as an economic opportunity than a fundamental challenge. Thus, in point 6 of the London Declaration we read: "We recognize that China's growing influence and international policies present both opportunities and challenges that we must address together as an alliance"¹⁶. The message is not firm and does not seem to reflect reality, given that this country led by an authoritarian regime with a capitalist foreign policy and a deeply socialist domestic policy has already become a global center of gravity, being the largest in the



world in depending on the population, ranking second, after the US in military spending.

Shortly after the London Summit, the first news of what would become a coronavirus pandemic began to appear. Many economic analyses showed that European states and the United States would be much more economically affected than China, which, at least declaratively, had overcome the epidemiological crisis and was discussing a rapid economic recovery that would propel it to a considerable distance in the top of global economies. However, it is too early to comment on this.

Yet, we must focus on another aspect: China's propaganda machine. While there were still doubts about freedom of expression and the credibility of the Chinese government's official statements, they were dispelled by the way the Chinese authorities responded to the protests in Hong Kong at the end of last year. The Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to the disastrous effects it has had on the world's states, has also created some opportunities to increase the self-image of some regimes or discredit others and / or organizations such as NATO or the EU.

As we can see, Russia and China quickly identified these opportunities and took advantage of them to improve, first of all, their own image and to link somewhat morally with them European states such as Italy and Spain and at the same time to discredit organizations such as NATO and the EU, or administrations such as the US. The main topic we find is again related to the US military and NATO: Covid-19 is a biological weapon produced by the US military and spread by NATO troops in China and other regions¹⁷.

Another recurring theme is that the European and US governments have not been able to take firm action to stop the spread of the virus and are unable to provide the resources needed to fight it and revive the economy, while praising the measures taken by the communist administration, Chinese or Russian¹⁸. The advantage of China and Russia is that they do not have to worry about some fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression, which are guaranteed to the citizens of the two countries only at the declarative level.

A new approach within the alliance – increasing resilience

The coronavirus pandemic can accomplish what NATO summits, the Russian incursion into

Crimea and Ukraine, or the reports of the alliance's political analysis institutions have failed to do: forcing NATO's evolution. If we accept that the immediate results of the coronavirus crisis are renewed skepticism about the value of the alliance, less money for defence spending and the possibility of severing supply and transport, then the alliance's main goal must be resilience.

We cannot ignore the statement of Daniel S. Hamilton, professor at the Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and former senior US diplomat in charge of NATO policies, who in December 2019, before the coronavirus pandemic hit the West, wrote: "When the conflict changes, the defence strategy must also change. NATO must expand its traditional investments in territorial protection and deterrence to include modern resilience approaches: strengthening the capacity of free societies to anticipate, prevent and address disruptive challenges to their critical functions and to prevent direct attack, if necessary"¹⁹.

Moreover, Judy Dempsey, editor-in-chief of *Strategic Europe*, reiterates this conclusion as the crisis deepens: "Resilience is a long-term approach that aims to protect vital infrastructure essential for security, stability and confidence-building citizens"²⁰.

Also, Ștefan Oprea, career military man and former Military Representative of Romania to NATO and the EU, also states in the article "COVID-19 Crisis – NATO Response to Civilian Emergencies", published in the Monitor of defence and Security: "Without analysis of the long-term impact of the coronavirus crisis on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, we must show, however, that the perception of threats within the Alliance will change fundamentally. Leaving aside its effects on NATO cohesion, the EU / NATO's initial hesitant response to the pandemic crisis demonstrates that the organization's resilience to disruptive challenges to human existence requires modern approaches to new realities"²¹.

This must shift the attention of NATO and, implicitly, of the "Defender Europe 20" type exercises from the view that the US must come by force in support of an alliance in which states have sufficient "indigenous" capabilities to stop attacks, raids and challenges of any kind.

It would also include a situation where the US is less in favor of force generation and more in favor of balancing the remarkable ingenuity and technological capabilities that still define the Euro-Atlantic area to provide similar capabilities for each Alliance member.

If low budgets and a lack of guarantees of freedom of movement are two new conditions that NATO must adapt to, then the changing needs presented by Dr. Harlan Ullman, president of the Killowen Group, offer a new set of tools: "a large number of drones (swarms of drones); robust anti-air, anti-surface and anti-vehicle systems; electronic warfare systems to strike command and control in enemy maneuver groups at the operational level; low-cost sensors, including satellites in lower Earth orbit, that could be deployed quickly to provide command, control, communications and research"²². To these other new capabilities can be added: the ability to be able to print with the help of 3D technology combat equipment (e.g. drones) and to be able to connect them with the help of "Internet of Things" technology (in English Internet of Things, abbreviated IoT).

The next NATO summit is scheduled for October in Beverly Hills, California, USA. When Alliance leaders left London after their annual meeting in 2019, they did not agree to increase resilience measures against a NATO pandemic. But the new coronavirus is making the London agenda obsolete. From our point of view, NATO will be challenged to move towards the new realities that will be the result of the pandemic both in Europe and in the United States otherwise risking remaining stuck in the past.

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