

# NATO'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19: LESSONS FOR RESILIENCE AND READINESS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, for the first time in its history NATO had to face an attack against each of its member states at once. Given the backdrop of political tensions within the alliance in the past few years, there were not many reasons to be optimistic about NATO's response, especially at a moment when trans-Atlantic allies were failing to coordinate on travel restrictions and competing over supplies of medical equipment. In spite of this, NATO was able to leverage its experience in crisis management and disaster relief to provide two kinds of responses.

First, NATO focused on ensuring the continuity of its operations while protecting its personnel, to prevent the health crisis from impacting readiness. Most NATO missions were preserved, but some encountered temporary suspensions. Military drillings were redesigned, including the U.S.-led NATO exercise DEFENDER-Europe 20, to prevent further spread of the virus through movement of ground troops. In addition, NATO's public diplomacy branch multiplied efforts to counter disinformation from China and Russia.

Second, amidst a low point for international cooperation, NATO set up a COVID-19 Task Force aimed at coordinating the delivery of medical aid across and beyond the territory of the alliance. Such actions, although performed through the means of NATO member states and relatively limited in scope, were an important testimony of the reactive capability of the alliance and of solidarity between member states. Yet, it is reasonable to imagine that more could have been done if the organization did not have to overcome political tensions across the Atlantic, and member states had cooperated from the beginning under the leadership of NATO's strongest member.

From this experience NATO could draw important lessons, from improving resilience to external threats to investing in readiness for catastrophic scenarios like a global pandemic. The fact that COVID-19 will continue disrupting the global economy and supply chains will have a negative impact on countries' defense spending and defense industries. However, given the resilience the alliance has shown so far, COVID-19 will not be the determining factor for the future of NATO. Instead, the chances for NATO to operate efficiently vis-à-vis growing global challenges will ultimately depend on a relaunch of trans-Atlantic relations.

## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 took the world by surprise: for the first time in living memory, the entire globe was under attack. Although the pandemic was quickly understood to be a global challenge, international cooperation was initially put under severe stress, with uncoordinated travel bans, competition over acquisition of medical equipment, and authoritarian powers trying to take advantage of the crisis to push forward their geopolitical agendas. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was also impacted by COVID-19: exercises and operations were scaled down and some countries repatriated their militaries to redeploy them at home.<sup>1</sup>

There were initially few reasons to be optimistic about either the role of the political-military alliance in supporting the fight against COVID-19 or the future of the organization. Less than a year ago, French President Emmanuel Macron had referred to NATO as “brain-dead,” lamenting the lack of shared strategy between its members vis-à-vis the most pressing challenges facing the alliance.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, for the past four years, U.S. President Donald J. Trump has consistently undermined the importance of NATO, treating security as transactional and casting doubts on U.S. commitment to the Article 5 mutual defense clause at the heart of the North Atlantic Treaty.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this backdrop and amidst negative propaganda from China and Russia, NATO established a dedicated COVID-19 Task Force. Leveraging its experience in crisis management and disaster relief along with its massive logistical apparatus, the alliance was able to offer a decisive response through transporting medical aid and equipment across the globe, fighting against disinformation, and ultimately preventing the public health crisis from leading to a traditional security crisis.

The goal of this essay is to provide a critical assessment of NATO’s preparedness and response to COVID-19. By exploring the mechanisms in place, the support offered, and the measures

taken by NATO to avert a security crisis, it provides reflections on how lessons learned from this pandemic could help to manage and prevent similar future crises. In conclusion, this report argues that the alliance has proved capable of overcoming political tensions and has given an important sign of resilience and solidarity at a crucial moment for its member states. However, more could have been done with better preparedness in managing health risks and most importantly with better political coordination between member states. Despite the disruptive effect COVID-19 had on global economy and international relations, the virus’s impact on the future of the alliance will be marginal. NATO’s survival and success in responding to global challenges will ultimately be contingent on a relaunch of trans-Atlantic relations.

## NATO: GOOD PROPHET, NOT-SO-GOOD DISCIPLE

In recent years, the debate over how to respond to natural catastrophes resulting from climate change has been particularly vibrant, while the scenario of a global pandemic, with all its spillover effects on economy and security, has received relatively little attention. NATO’s 2010 strategic concept was a somewhat prophetic exception, as it contemplated “health risks” as a future area of concern for NATO’s operations:

Key environmental and resource constraints, including health risks, climate change, water scarcity and increasing energy needs will further shape the future security environment in areas of concern to NATO and have the potential to significantly affect NATO planning and operations.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the warning about such a scenario a decade ago, the organization did not take sufficient measures to strengthen its crisis management apparatus, according to officials and professionals in international defense. Over the past few years, the staff of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center (EADRCC),<sup>5</sup> the alliance’s main

mechanism for civil emergency response, along with the NATO International Staff — which supports the North Atlantic Council (NAC), the alliance's top decision-making body — have been repeatedly cut as new cyber and geopolitical threats from Russia and China have become more pressing.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to it, given the economic advantages of globalization and delocalization, NATO member states have underestimated the vulnerability provoked by the interdependency of supply chains. For more than a decade, Western dependence on China has increased<sup>7</sup> on a number of fronts, from electronic, manufacturing, and rare earth elements — essential in the defense sector — to semiconductors<sup>8</sup> and medical material.

When COVID-19 began spreading in Europe in February 2020, it did not hit all countries at the same time and with the same intensity, while in the United States the virus and measures to counter it became tied up with polarized politics. Thus, NATO member states did not share the same perception of the incumbent threat which resulted in a late realization of the pandemic's devastating potential. On March 19, 2020, the very same day that in Italy, several military convoys were transporting the caskets of 300 victims of coronavirus out of the city of Bergamo,<sup>9</sup> NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg released the alliance's annual report. While the latter typically consists of a standard review of the activities of NATO and its agencies, it is surprising that in the forward-looking sections — “investing in security,” or “modernizing NATO” — there was no reference to the pandemic, to climate change, or to strengthening the organization's capabilities in disaster relief operations.<sup>10</sup>

Granted, a military alliance is not necessarily a first responder to a public health crisis like the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, COVID-19 had an immediate impact on the activities and the mission of the alliance itself. After initial hesitations vis-à-vis putting in place new arrangements for its personnel,<sup>11</sup> and before any assistance operation could be launched, NATO's priority was to ensure that the public health crisis did not lead to a security crisis.<sup>12</sup>

## RESILIENCE AND DETERRENCE IN THE COVID ERA

In terms of the operational framework, NATO has tackled COVID-19 following the protocol defined for hybrid threats.<sup>13</sup> With a strong focus on preparedness (thanks to analytical work carried on by Joint Intelligence and Security Division at NATO Headquarters), the alliance operated in three main domains to ensure resilience and continuity in its missions, training and exercises, as well as deterrence against newer threats to security like disinformation. Overall, because of the rapidity of the spread of the virus and the uncertainties regarding its deadly potential — according to a recent NATO report<sup>14</sup> — military activities including training and exercises were reduced by 33%, with 80% less personnel involved.

Missions. NATO missions adjusted to COVID-19 fairly smoothly for the most part. NATO's enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states was not reduced in scale. In fact, it was particularly helpful in delivering medical aid and transporting patients. Germany, Croatia, and the Netherlands sent medical personnel in for additional support to the mission in Lithuania.<sup>15</sup> In Kosovo, NATO personnel provided assistance to the local population and authorities,<sup>16</sup> and the KFOR (Kosovo Force) mission did not pause. However, some issues arose with the alliance's overseas missions and along its southern flank. In Afghanistan, the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission, aimed at training and supporting the Afghan security forces and institutions, transitioned to online training<sup>17</sup> and NATO personnel set up two field hospitals at Bagram and Kandahar airfields.<sup>18</sup> NATO's training and capacity building mission in Iraq (NMI)<sup>19</sup> was the most impacted by COVID-19. Having already been suspended due to a worsening security situation on the ground following the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the suspension was extended in light of COVID-19, with the United Kingdom repatriating some of its military from Iraq<sup>20</sup> and NATO personnel being temporarily moved to Kuwait. NATO's support to the global coalition against the self-proclaimed Islamic States and

Tailored Assurance Measures for Turkey were also temporarily suspended, along with the alliance's assistance to the African Union, where Joint Force Command Naples personnel was withdrawn from.<sup>21</sup>

*Training and Exercises.* To prevent further spread of COVID-19, some training and exercises activities had to go through limitations and redesigning. For example, BALTOPS, a Baltic Sea military exercise conducted annually since 1972, was this year strictly restricted to air and maritime assets from 19 countries.<sup>22</sup>

However, the most significant adjustments consisted in the reduction and alteration in the scope of the longtime planned U.S.-led NATO exercise, DEFENDER-Europe 20. This military drill would have constituted the largest deployment of U.S.-based forces (20,000 soldiers) to Europe since the end of the Cold War<sup>23</sup> and was designed to test the strategic readiness of the alliance in moving tens of thousands of troops across the continent, mostly by land, in the event of a Russian aggression in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe. DEFENDER-Europe 20 aimed to assess the coordination capacity of both NATO and the European Union in removing any legal and infrastructure barriers to military mobility,<sup>24</sup> which include border checks on military goods, differences in European and Baltic rail gauges requiring a switch in trains, or challenges in the ability of Eastern Europe roads to support U.S. M1 Abrams tanks.<sup>25</sup>

After starting as scheduled in early February 2020, by mid-March<sup>26</sup> DEFENDER-Europe 20 saw a significant reduction in size and scope,<sup>27</sup> due to health risks connected to the large-scale movements on the ground. Given the substantial changes in the nature of the exercise, it is possible to argue that the alliance failed to fulfill its original purpose of testing the paramount logistics in military mobility, and in particular, the ability of U.S. troops to quickly reach the Baltic states in case of attack. Nonetheless, the fact that NATO proved capable of redesigning and holding DEFENDER-Europe 20 and adjusted to the circumstances sent an important message in favor of the deterrence credibility of the alliance in Eastern Europe.

*Disinformation.* Taking advantage of people's appetite for information given the overall uncertainty surrounding the coronavirus, powers like China and Russia seized the opportunity to discredit NATO member states' management of the pandemic<sup>28</sup> and even accuse the alliance itself of spreading the virus.<sup>29</sup>

China's "mask diplomacy"<sup>30</sup> mostly sought to rehabilitate its image and shirk responsibility for its early lack of transparency on the threats posed by the virus (including blaming U.S. troops visiting Wuhan for the Military World Games for infecting the local population).<sup>31</sup> Russian disinformation on the other hand has directly targeted NATO with false claims. Some of these include allegations that secret U.S. or NATO laboratories in Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Moldova manufactured the coronavirus to be used as a biological weapon, or that NATO would withdraw its battlegroup in Lithuania for safety reasons.<sup>32</sup>

To counter disinformation and its disruptive impact during such tense moments, NATO's Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) has been extensively monitoring and reporting these false claims with fact checking in cooperation with the EU.<sup>33</sup> In response to Russian actions in particular, the PDD has set up a webpage, "NATO-Russia: setting the records straight," to tackle leitmotifs in Russian disinformation campaigns around NATO, including a section dedicated to debunking the "Top Five Myths."<sup>34</sup>

Through these efforts, the alliance overall has succeeded in ensuring continuity of its operations and pushing back against malign actors. While these actions were mostly focused on defense and operability — in line with the organization's traditional mission — NATO also took a proactive role in providing assistance to members and partners through a dedicated COVID-19 Task Force.

## NATO'S FLEXIBLE RESPONSE: THE COVID-19 TASK FORCE

When COVID-19 hit Europe, most countries in the trans-Atlantic space turned inwards, protecting their own medical resources through bans on the export of medical equipment<sup>35</sup> and uncoordinated border closures<sup>36</sup> or travel restrictions, such as the one to and from the Schengen area established by Trump.<sup>37</sup> These events contributed to spread a sense of distrust toward international solidarity even among NATO member states.

Despite Macron's diagnosis of NATO as brain-dead, the alliance was able to resort to the muscle memory of its military and logistical apparatus and provide a positive response in a moment of deep crisis. NATO officials set aside politics to focus on operations, and drew upon the organization's exceptional crisis management capabilities, which rely on close coordination between civil and military personnel with both civil and military tools.<sup>38</sup> On March 25, Stoltenberg activated the Crisis Management Mechanism to study the progression of the pandemic and plan a comprehensive response ranging from coordination transportation of medical equipment to dispatching NATO military doctors to countries in need to assist in the construction of field hospitals.<sup>39</sup> Following these preliminary efforts, in their first virtual meeting on April 2, NATO foreign ministers authorized NATO's strategic planning military headquarters – Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium – to create a dedicated COVID-19 Task Force, headed by Lieutenant General Olivier Rittimann,<sup>40</sup> to operationalize these plans. .

The alliance had no prior experience with a global pandemic and had never faced a crisis that hit every member state with the same threat at the same time. Yet its crisis management and disaster relief record – from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission to Afghanistan<sup>41</sup> to disaster relief support to support the United States after Hurricane Katrina<sup>42</sup> to the response to the 2010 tsunami in Indonesia<sup>43</sup> – was extremely helpful in

quickly adapting NATO's logistical apparatus to non-military purposes. In this regard, the COVID-19 Task Force heavily relied on the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Center.<sup>44</sup> After seeing their personnel previously reduced to just three staff members, the EADRCC was supplemented by units from across NATO and other international organizations to reach a staff of 30.<sup>45</sup>

As of July 2020,<sup>46</sup> the EADRCC has functioned as clearinghouse to coordinate assistance requests and offers from seven allied and nine partner nations, as well as from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA). Examples include Germany sending ventilators to Spain; Spain sending facemasks to Iran; the United Kingdom transporting a field hospital for the World Food Program (WFP) from Britain to Accra, Ghana; Italy receiving help from Albania, the United States,<sup>47</sup> and Turkey (among others); and Norway donating a field hospital to North Macedonia.

Beyond efficiently pairing supply and demand for medical aid, NATO's added value in the response to this crisis also relies on the ability to offer efficient logistical solutions at a shared transportation cost. To coordinate logistics, SHAPE relied on NATO's Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA), which since 1958 has managed procurement for airfield logistics and transport of weapon systems and medical services across the world.<sup>48</sup> During the COVID-19 crisis, the NSPA organized rapid cost-effective deliveries of protective medical equipment, like in the case of Luxembourg that received field hospital tents in less than 24 hours,<sup>49</sup> through NATO's airlift capabilities. In this respect and in connection with NSPA, NATO's initiatives such as the Strategic Airlift International Solution (SALIS) and the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC), established in 2003 and 2009 respectively,<sup>50</sup> have been vital to the prompt delivery of medical aid, given their roots in a durable and reliable link between the alliance and the private sector.

SALIS consists of a consortium of nine NATO allies (Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia). It has assured access to up to five special mission-ready aircrafts from the German company Antonov Logistics — two of which, the AN-124-100, can carry up to 120 tons of cargo. Building on experience with Antonov aircrafts to transport aid to Pakistan following the 2005 earthquake and in the airlifting of the African Union peacekeepers in and out of Darfur, countries like Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia used SALIS to import urgent medical equipment like facemasks, surgical gloves and protective suits during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>51</sup>

Similar to SALIS, the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) initiative allows partners to share flying hours and costs. SAC involves 10 NATO members (Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and the United States) and two close NATO partners (Finland and Sweden). SAC consists in joint ownership of three C-17 Globemaster heavy cargo aircrafts operated by the Heavy Airlift Wing (HAW) based in Hungary and staffed with personnel from all participating nations. Established in 2009, SAC has supported several operations, including the Unified Protector in Libya and humanitarian relief in Haiti. During the COVID-19 response, the SAC initiative allowed Romania<sup>52</sup> and Bulgaria<sup>53</sup> to quickly receive several tons of medical supplies.

Cooperation with multilateral organizations such as the European Union, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations also facilitated the achievement of NATO deliverables. NATO's Rapid Air Mobility initiative, for instance, in cooperation with EUROCONTROL (intergovernmental agency for coordination of air traffic), allowed simplified procedures for military relief flights. Conversely, the EU also resorted to NATO logistics apparatus to deliver aid between and even beyond EU countries. Romania, for example, sent a 17-strong medical team to Italy through the European Civil Protection Mechanism in coordination with NATO's EADRCC.<sup>54</sup> In addition to it, NATO and EU cooperated through

sharing information in regular briefing on joint procurement between the EADRCC and the EU's Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) and between the NATO COVID-19 Task Force and the one created by the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS).<sup>55</sup> Another area of cooperation was medical resilience, where NATO and EU could count on the experience of two initiatives inaugurated in 2018, the Multinational Medical Coordination Center (MMCC) and European Medical Command (EMC), with the goal of increasing readiness in medical capabilities through cooperation between military medical services and civilian health system of member states.<sup>56</sup>

## **A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF THE TASK FORCE**

With the pandemic ongoing, it is still too early to issue a definitive assessment of NATO's COVID-19 Task Force. In addition, it is hard to quantify NATO's contribution in terms of medical aid or to give a precise estimate of which countries received or have given the most, as there is no comprehensive database where aid is measured in a uniform fashion (some reports offer numerical quantities of equipment disbursed, others list weight, and still others list monetary amounts). Yet, some preliminary conclusions and macro-level analysis can be drawn from the EADRCC situation reports,<sup>57</sup> the European Council on Foreign Relations' "European Solidarity Tracker,"<sup>58</sup> and from interviews with officials from several NATO member states.

A first positive outcome of NATO's COVID-19 Task Force was the rapidity and the cost-effectiveness in the delivery of medical aid compared to the aid some NATO member states received from countries outside the alliance (such as China, but also Brazil, Cuba, and Egypt). This was made possible thanks to the alliance's experience in disaster relief, the coordination operated by EADRCC, the easy access to military heavy cargo planes thanks to the NSPA procurement agencies,<sup>59</sup> which also reduced market competition between states over medical supplies. However, it is important to specify that

as a military alliance, NATO personnel and means, such as cargo aircrafts, come directly from the resources allocated by its member states, and the medical aid exchanged is ultimately the product of bilateral arrangements performed under the NATO umbrella through the help of the EADRCC.

When quantified — with the caveats mentioned above — the impact of the NATO's contribution in terms of aid delivery on its hardest-hit member states was quite modest. The cases of Italy and Spain, the first two in Europe countries to face a COVID-19 emergency, offer a good example. Data from the European Solidarity Tracker and the EADRCC situation reports shows that of 48 actions of solidarity to Italy, seven (15%) were coordinated by NATO (all via EADRCC), compared to 13 (27%) from China. The number of masks that Beijing sent to Italy, around 3.5 million, surpassed the quantities received by Italy from both NATO-coordinated actions (roughly 330,000) and bilateral actions from EU member states not via NATO (2.85 million masks) combined. Similarly, Spain received 24 actions of solidarity, six of which (25%) were made via NATO (five via EADRCC and one through the NATO Logistics Stock Exchange) and nine (38%) by China, which sent 2.4 million masks compared to 30,000 through NATO and roughly 90,000 from EU member states.

NATO support operations may not have reached the volume or the awareness in the general public compared to Chinese aid (although it is important to point out that some of the medical equipment including masks coming from Beijing turned out to be below standard or defective, and most importantly took the form of regular purchases rather than donations).<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, as NATO COVID-19 Task Force head Olivier Rittimann highlighted in an essay, most member states did not acknowledge NATO's efforts in their media, preferring instead to present exchanges of aid as bilateral actions.<sup>61</sup> Yet the fact that the alliance was able to show solidarity at a moment of severely depressed international cooperation was perhaps the most important achievement of its COVID-19 Task Force.

As the virus hit Europe, the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism appeared deficient: it was lacking contributions from member states and several EU members imposed exports ban on supplies for medical equipment,<sup>62</sup> which naturally determined a delay in cooperation with NATO. The fact that the EEAS created a special task force in support of national armed forces in the fight of COVID-19 and promoting information sharing raised some concerns around potential duplication with NATO's task force,<sup>63</sup> and could speak to the fact that both organizations wanted to play a primary role in the fights against the pandemic and Chinese and Russian disinformation. While the European deadlock did not last very long and cooperation was achieved, it is remarkable that NATO was able to intervene during political hard times for its member states and leverage the alliance's expertise in disaster relief support. In spite of Trump's distrust and undermining of the alliance, even the United States resorted to NATO to send medical equipment to several countries, including members Italy, Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia, as well as Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Afghanistan, and Moldova. Indeed, NATO's wide reach in delivering aid and help — not just to its member states but also to the areas of NATO operations and countries outside the alliance's network — is an important sign of its reliability and soft power.

## LESSONS LEARNED

A military alliance such as NATO is not a first responder in a health crisis, as most tasks must be implemented at the domestic level. However, given the impact and the spillover effects of COVID-19 on the very day-to-day operations of the alliance — military personnel are not immune from viruses — as well as on supply chains, and economies and societies around the world, it was paramount for NATO to take initiative both to protect its member states against malign actors and to offer crucial support in the spirit of solidarity.

In spite of these successful initiatives, the Operations Division of NATO headquarters in Brussels has admitted<sup>64</sup> that the alliance was ill-prepared to handle such a crisis. As Rittimann noted, the alliance lacked its own means and political bandwidth to do more.<sup>65</sup> For this reason, NATO and its member states should not miss the opportunity that the COVID-19 crisis offers to set up more structured plans to ensure readiness in crisis management. In particular, they should expand the concept of security to include the most pressing non-military global security threats: climate change, health risks, and social resilience against disinformation.

So far, NATO has set up a Lessons Learned Steering Group (LLSG)<sup>66</sup> on COVID-19, which collects inputs by agencies, divisions, and delegations to help the alliance design a strategy for both future waves of this coronavirus and for future pandemics. Stemming from the inputs of the LLSG and from the reflections of officials interviewed for this paper, the following recommendations to the alliance focus on resilience and readiness in crisis management.

- *Resilience: NATO must remain vigilant against malign exploitation of crises.* Under whatever circumstances may arise, the Atlantic alliance should not shift its focus away from its main objectives of pushing back against adversaries through deterrence and response-readiness.<sup>67</sup>
- *NATO should have a protocol to follow in case of crises like pandemics to ensure continuity of operations.* So far, the alliance has shown impressive adaptability and was able to keep its missions running and continue with training and exercises, even if at a reduced level. However, military activities have been reduced by 33% with 80% fewer personnel participating,<sup>68</sup> and the climate of uncertainty surrounding the impact of COVID-19 on NATO missions, training, and exercises could have left gaps for malign actors to exploit, especially in more fragile settings like in Iraq. To prevent future pandemics or similar events from

eroding NATO's readiness capabilities, it is paramount to develop structured plans and protocols that would allow timely adaptation, personnel protection, and resilience against external threats. To further protect core combat capabilities, it would be necessary for NATO personnel employed in quick-response units to receive early access to vaccines; the alliance should also be prepared with contact-tracing capabilities to identify outbreaks quickly.<sup>69</sup>

- *NATO should increase its counter-disinformation efforts and protect its member states against malign actors exploiting crises to promote their geopolitical and economic interests.* Although disinformation has been included among the list of threats to NATO since the 2014 summit in Wales, the alliance has not established a special agency or team to focus on countering disinformation. During COVID-19, when NATO member states were targeted by Chinese "mask diplomacy" and Russia's claims about the inability of Western countries to deal with COVID-19, the organization resorted to its Public Diplomacy Division – in cooperation with the European Union's East Stratcom Task Force<sup>70</sup> – to increase its public profile and debunk Chinese and Russian fake news. However, this is not yet enough to counter the volume and reach of such propaganda, which requires real-time investigation and fact-checking and outreach to the audience that has been targeted by disinformation, with the possibility of providing training for soldiers and commanders to react to information warfare.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, the alliance should consider setting up a dedicated team and establish a framework of coordination with the East Stratcom Task Force to broaden the scope of counter-disinformation efforts and take more targeted actions to strengthen societal resilience across member states.



- *Readiness: NATO must further enhance its crisis management toolkit.* The core lesson COVID-19 taught NATO concerned crisis management capabilities and culture. The alliance adjusted fairly quickly and made an incredibly efficient use of its logistical apparatus; yet, more can be done to enhance NATO readiness to face challenges of this nature.
  - *Strengthen the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Relief Coordination Center.* As mentioned, over the past few years, the EADRCC staff had been reduced to three people; as COVID-19 hit Europe, NATO was forced to rapidly reallocate military personnel from other departments to support the work of NATO's clearinghouse for aid requests and delivery. At a time when the impact of global challenges can no longer be ignored, NATO should invest in and expand the EADRCC's capacity and scope to increase preparedness in preparation for subsequent COVID-19 waves and other future catastrophic events. Along with the EADRCC, the alliance should enhance the flexibility in the NSPA procurement process in order to speed up access to cost-effective airlifting as well as to the procurement of medical equipment. Beyond overseeing the transportation supplies and medical assistance, the EADRCC could also play a role in coordinating NATO's support to national armed forces in member states, in the event that such forces experience significant losses.
  - *Increase knowledge, prediction capabilities, and awareness.* Building on existing analytical platforms and programs<sup>72</sup> and intelligence sharing between allied nations, NATO should increase its understanding and awareness of how global challenges and threats such as pandemics can affect NATO operations and personnel and increase

preparation of tailored contingency plans for suitable responses. Some of these actions may include several aspects of the alliance's activities, from decisionmaking to technological potential and research through its own laboratory (the Center for Maritime Research and Experimentation located in La Spezia, Italy) and its Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Program.<sup>73</sup> Given NATO's renewed sensitivity to biological risks, intelligence sharing could be crucial to elaborate plans for countering new threats such as bioterrorism.<sup>74</sup>

- *Coordination with the European Union.* NATO's logistical apparatus was crucial in delivering aid when the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism was under stress, and after initial hesitation, in coordination with the EU mechanism. Moving forward, in the words of Malcom Chalmers, deputy director-general of Britain's Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the EU-NATO relationship will be crucial "if the West is to survive as a coherent entity."<sup>75</sup> Given that many NATO countries are also EU member states, all that applies to logistics, transportations, and purchases falls under the regulatory umbrella of the European Union. For this reason, a more established framework of cooperation between NATO and the EU will be crucial to ensure a smoother application of crisis protocols and ease the transportation of essential items within alliance territory, similarly to what was envisaged to ensure military mobility for the DEFENDER-Europe 20 drilling. In particular, the EU and NATO should also collaborate to establish permanent stockpiles<sup>76</sup> and reduce the alliance's dependence from global supply chain for crucial medical material, but also to develop cost-effective strategies for the production and distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine. Such coordination should also remain wary of duplicating efforts – as in

the case of the NATO pandemic relief trust fund,<sup>77</sup> which risks creating overlapping with the Civil Protection Mechanism for the accumulation of medical supplies.

## WHAT COVID-19 MEANS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE

COVID-19 has been a systemic wake-up call, exposing vulnerabilities in health, international cooperation, and the global economy. NATO showed reliability and solidarity under the initiative of its civil and military personnel amid COVID-19. Yet, one could only imagine how easier and more efficient NATO's response would have been if the alliance did not have to overcome tense political issues between member states and if NATO's stronger member, the United States, had adopted a more cooperative approach<sup>78</sup> to the virus response both internationally and domestically, similarly to what had been done for Ebola in 2014.<sup>79</sup> This could not only have helped the NATO Public Diplomacy Division's outreach in pushing back against disinformation, but also used the resources of the organization — constantly targeted in Trump's complaints because of its financial burden — to share costs and responsibilities and ultimately reassure partners and markets.

Instead, from a political perspective, the global pandemic revealed that American leadership can no longer be taken for granted.<sup>80</sup> Trump not only denied the gravity of the virus, but also imposed travel bans without coordinating with European allies, abdicated leadership of the G-7 which the United States was chairing,<sup>81</sup> withdrew from the World Health Organization,<sup>82</sup> and refused to join international efforts to produce a vaccine.<sup>83</sup> This behavior will leave significant scars in the trans-Atlantic partnership, of which NATO is the main pillar, and has pushed Europeans to talk more concretely about increasing their own defense capabilities.<sup>84</sup>

In spite of its respectable performance during COVID-19, one might be tempted to argue that there is not a lot to be optimistic about when it

comes to NATO's future, given widespread fatigue with multilateralism, political tensions within and between member states, and a global economic recession.

With GDP plummeting worldwide, policymakers and public opinion may be reluctant to support an increase in defense spending. Because of shrinking economies, the 2% of GDP commitment for NATO members will, ironically, be easier to achieve, in the very short term. However, once GDP recovers to earlier levels there may be significant downward pressure on defense budgets throughout the alliance. Yet, in the short to medium term it is reasonable to worry about defense sector supply chains and how this will impact NATO's fighting capabilities.<sup>85</sup> It is therefore of paramount importance that the alliance rethink the defense spending requirement, adapting it to new technological challenges which entail not only more cost-effective options but also a broader concept of security that encompasses protection of supply chains, infrastructure, and humanitarian operations.

Although disruptive, COVID-19 will not be the main factor that influences the future of NATO, which has survived sharper political divergences between its members in the past, like on the U.S.-led Iraq War in 2003. With major challenges ahead, including nuclear deterrence, Chinese and Russian geopolitical ambitions, terrorism, and increased migration flows, it is critical for NATO allies to build a common vision. As Stoltenberg recently remarked,<sup>86</sup> the alliance needs to become "more global," and to do so it is paramount for the U.S. and Europe to develop a common stance towards China, increase efforts to fight terrorism, and make defense more sustainable in the future. While the COVID-19 crisis will hopefully be overcome with a vaccine and NATO will benefit from this experience to increase its resilience towards future challenges, the future of the alliance itself depends on the trust between the allies. In this regard, the outcome of the U.S. election will have a major impact on the alliance itself and on its focus, and will determine either a relaunch of the trans-Atlantic cooperation

on strategic infrastructure, environmental security, and deterrence against outside powers, or an historical retrenchment occurs that leaves it up to Europeans to take the lead in one way or another.

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