

# NATO's Role in Pandemic Response

*Daniel Kochis and Luke Coffey*

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

NATO's response to the coronavirus pandemic has shown that the Alliance can play a positive supporting role in helping member states respond to health emergencies.

While members are responsible for their own pandemic responses, NATO can support mitigation measures, ensure readiness, and respond to adversaries.

NATO's focus should be helping member states to manage the crisis, maintaining readiness through training, and rebutting Chinese and Russian disinformation.

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic raises the question of what role, if any, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) should play in responding to current and future global health contagions. As an intergovernmental military alliance, NATO's main interest during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as any future pandemics, is to ensure the readiness of Alliance forces to carry out combat operations at a moment's notice. On April 2, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg assured the world that NATO's "forces remain ready, and our crucial work goes on—including in our multinational battlegroups in the east of the alliance, NATO Air Policing and our maritime deployments."<sup>1</sup>

In the months ahead, the Alliance must gather the lessons it is now learning regarding its response to the pandemic, especially as it relates to safeguarding the health and safety of service members, and

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maintaining a high level of readiness to respond to any threats to allies. Finally, the coronavirus crisis has reaffirmed the pernicious role of Chinese and Russian propaganda, which has likely have set off a rethink in the trans-atlantic community about China's role in global supply chains.

## Alliance Response to COVID-19

Most of the responsibility for maintaining the health and safety of their armed forces lies with the member states, not with NATO. That is not to say that NATO does not have a role to play in pandemic response, and member states heavily affected by COVID-19 quickly turned to the Alliance for assistance.

NATO established the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) in June 1998 as a “clearing-house mechanism for the coordination of requests and offers of international assistance amongst NATO Allies and partners.”<sup>2</sup> The EADRCC originally covered the geographical area of 50 countries, including NATO allies and the signatories of the Partnership for Peace. Over time, its mandate widened to cover requests for assistance in the event of a major chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear incident or attack, and gradually extended to cover the territories of NATO partners from the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, as well as of other partners across the globe. Currently, the EADRCC's mandate covers the geographical area of 70 countries.<sup>3</sup> The EADRCC has responded to events including Hurricanes Harvey and Katrina in the U.S., forest fires in Israel and Latvia, Ebola in West Africa, H1N1 swine flu in Bulgaria and Ukraine, and flooding in the Balkans.<sup>4</sup>

During the pandemic, the EADRCC is helping to coordinate assistance based on requests and availability of supplies, such as Czech and Turkish relief aid to Italy and Spain, including personal protection equipment and disinfectants.<sup>5</sup> In April, NATO foreign ministers directed Supreme Allied Commander Tod Wolters to help coordinate matching requests for aid with offers of assistance, as well as to use excess airlift capacity to ease transport of essential supplies across borders.<sup>6</sup> Secretary General Stoltenberg stated: “He [Wolters] will also implement simplified procedures for rapid air mobility, in coordination with Eurocontrol, using the NATO call sign for military relief flights.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, NATO's Support and Procurement Agency provided field hospital tents and equipment to Luxembourg to increase capacity.<sup>8</sup>

NATO's Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC), “a multinational programme that provides assured access to strategic military airlift capability for its 12 member nations,”<sup>9</sup> was leveraged for pandemic response. Examples include cargo flights from Europe to South Korea to collect essential medical

supplies for the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.<sup>10</sup> In April, SAC capabilities helped to transport ICU beds to the Dutch-controlled part of the Caribbean island Sint Maarten.<sup>11</sup> Other examples of Alliance responses to COVID-19 include an Italian team from NATO's Support and Procurement Agency working with a private company that created printed 3-D connectors to convert snorkeling masks to ventilator masks.<sup>12</sup> In April, the NATO Mission in Kosovo (KFOR) helped to transport gowns, masks, and sanitizers to North and South Mitrovica in Kosovo.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to NATO facilitation, allies have banded together to assist one another during the pandemic. Poland and Albania sent doctors to Italy, the German air force helped to transport patients from France and Italy to German hospitals for treatment, Germany donated ventilators to the U.K., the United States donated medical supplies to Italy, and Estonia donated masks and disinfectant to Spain and Italy, to name several examples.<sup>14</sup>

Governments across the alliance have called upon their militaries to assist with civilian mitigation and pandemic response. A few of the myriad examples include French armed forces helping to set up additional capacity in the form of a field hospital,<sup>15</sup> with the French air force even flying some patient transfers.<sup>16</sup> In the United States, two U.S. Navy hospital ships, the *USNS Comfort* and the *USNS Mercy*, docked in New York and Los Angeles to alleviate hospital overcrowding.<sup>17</sup>

## NATO Must Focus Its Attention on Two Key Tasks

As a military alliance, NATO's responsibility during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as any future pandemics, is to ensure the readiness of Alliance forces to carry out combat operations at a moment's notice. Under this guiding principle, there are two important areas where NATO and its member states should pay close attention when it comes to dealing with a global pandemic.

### 1. **The Health and Welfare of Service Personnel and Their Families.**

This is the most important consideration for NATO during a global pandemic. An armed force that is medically unfit is useless. Also, soldiers who are deployed thousands of miles from home should not have to worry about the safety and health of their family members at home. They need to be 100 percent focused on the mission at hand. During an international pandemic, this is perhaps the single most important issue for armed forces.

As seen with the current pandemic, viruses do not discriminate between ranks. Inside NATO, two senior generals tested positive for COVID-19:

the Chief of Staff of the Italian Army, Salvatore Farina, and the head of the Polish Armed Forces, Jarosław Mika. There was even at least one confirmed case of COVID-19 at NATO headquarters in Brussels. A large military base in northern Norway near the border with Russia was put on lockdown after a Norwegian soldier tested positive for the coronavirus, and another 1,300 soldiers were put into quarantine.

- 2. Maintaining Military Readiness.** Militaries rely on training. If they cannot train, they will be less prepared to fight. As seen with the novel coronavirus, its spread throughout Europe has already affected readiness on both a strategic and a tactical level. On the strategic level, major NATO exercises were cancelled or curtailed. A major exercise in Norway focused on arctic security called “Exercise Cold Response 20” was cancelled. This exercise was supposed to involve 15,000 NATO troops. Another major exercise called “Defender Europe 20” was curtailed because of the coronavirus outbreak. This exercise was originally billed as the largest since the mid-1990s. On a positive note, at least the planning for these exercises has already happened, which in itself, is an important part of any training exercise. On the tactical level, if soldiers cannot do basic training, such as going to the rifle range because they are restricted to military bases or to the barracks, their readiness levels go down. This also leads to low morale.

## Adversaries Seek to Cash in on Pandemic Opportunity

The pandemic also exposed areas of concern about Chinese and Russian efforts to benefit from the outbreak. Both China and Russia sent aid to Italy, the European epicenter of the pandemic; however, in nearly every case, this aid came with strings attached, such as steep prices or useless supplies and tests. Furthermore, the scale of combined aid from NATO allies to Italy and other coronavirus hot spots in Europe was of many magnitudes greater, and was true aid as opposed to aid supplied for a price. While Chinese planes did bring some equipment and doctors to Italy, “it was part of a commercial deal formalized a few days before in a phone call between the foreign ministers of China and Italy, Luigi di Maio and Wang Yi. Italy was buying medical equipment from China, but the government took advantage of a parallel donation made by China’s Red Cross to make it look like an instance of its ‘politics of generosity.’”<sup>18</sup> Regardless, the Chinese Red Cross is directed and funded by the Chinese Communist party.<sup>19</sup> Despite the propaganda narrative, as one analyst recently wrote, “China is not donating but selling ventilators, face

masks, COVID-19 tests, and other medical supplies to Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Malaysia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Northern Ireland, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Brazil, Japan, Mexico, Qatar, Serbia, and Austria, among other countries. Meanwhile, many of these supplies are defective.”<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, at the same time that Chinese diplomatic outposts in Europe trumpeted the equipment “deliveries,” many of them to Italy,<sup>21</sup> Chinese propaganda pushed a false narrative that the novel coronavirus began in Italy.<sup>22</sup>

Russia has also sought to profit from pandemic by sending a shipment of purported aid and personnel to Italy in March. However, 80 percent of the equipment sent was of no value; one official described the worthlessness of the shipment, saying, “the Russian delivery contained, for example, equipment for bacteriological disinfection and a field laboratory for chemical-biological sterilization—not the ventilators and personal protective equipment.”<sup>23</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the threat of propaganda in Europe spread by the Russians and the Chinese, who seek to create new, and exacerbate existing, divisions, while casting themselves as selfless benefactors and generous nations that deserve transatlantic trust.

## Responding to Pandemics

While most of the responsibility for responding to pandemics lies with individual member states, NATO does have a role to play—both in supporting member state mitigation measures, as well as ensuring the readiness of Alliance forces and responding to the opportunism of adversaries. When considering its role in responding to pandemics, NATO should:

- **Reaffirm the importance of individual member states keeping their service members healthy and fit.** Ensuring the health and welfare of service members and their families is the first essential role of any armed force. This is a responsibility solely in the hands of the member states. However, if the member states fail at this task there are serious consequences for the Alliance.
- **Help the member states to manage the crisis when appropriate.** This is where the EADRCC and NATO’s SAC can play a role.
- **Maintain readiness through training.** As a military alliance, NATO’s responsibility during any pandemic is to ensure the readiness of Alliance forces to carry out combat operations at a moment’s notice. If training exercises must be canceled or curtailed, they must

be rescheduled as soon as possible. Also, virtual training events must replace canceled real-life training.

- **Consider lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.** NATO has taken a leading role in helping to facilitate the transfer of needed equipment, personnel, and supplies between member states. This is critically important work that should continue during the current pandemic. NATO's upcoming strategic review should recommend an expert review of NATO's response to COVID-19 to assess the success and timeliness of NATO's response, and issue recommendations to the Secretary General for preparing for future pandemics.
- **Prepare for future waves.** While the current wave of the coronavirus pandemic is likely to abate by the summer, the potential remains for future waves of the virus especially during the fall and winter. Therefore, NATO should continue to prepare and plan for additional waves, working with member states should recurring outbreaks materialize.
- **Rebut and refute Chinese and Russian disinformation.** The current pandemic has unleashed sustained efforts by both China and Russia to cast commercial deals and opportunistic forays as altruistic aid. The Alliance must immediately and forcefully refute and rebut the prevailing Chinese and Russian narrative with factual evidence, while highlighting the real and valuable role that NATO has played in pandemic response, and the true aid and assistance that allies have provided for one another.

## Conclusion

NATO's response to the coronavirus pandemic thus far has shown that the Alliance can indeed play a positive supporting role in helping member states respond to health emergencies, especially in the transatlantic community. The lessons of COVID-19 also underscore that pandemics pose a risk to the health and safety of service members and their families, while posing a challenge to maintaining military readiness.

**Daniel Kochis** is Senior Policy Analyst for European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. **Luke Coffey** is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy of the Davis Institute.

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