

The role of armed forces in the fight against coronavirus

SUMMARY

While armed forces may find it difficult to distance themselves from what is perceived as their primary mission, the coronavirus pandemic largely challenges society's vision of their role. This has been showcased through the vital contributions of the military to civilian authorities' responses to contain and stop the spread of coronavirus.

Exchanging guns for bags of food supplies and disinfectant spray, military personnel have been among the first responders in the coronavirus pandemic. Whether distributing food, building hospitals or shelters for the homeless, European armed forces were mobilised early. Trained to react quickly in highly dangerous conditions, the military carried out missions of repatriation and evacuation of citizens and transported medical supplies and protective equipment. Almost all European Union (EU) Member States have mobilised their armed forces in one way or another.

Discouraging post-crisis economic projections indicate that the impact of the coronavirus pandemic will not spare the defence sector, nor will it weaken geopolitical tensions. With resources further under strain, countries' abilities to meet the EU's defence ambitions with the required investments is under question. However, current EU defence initiatives, if appropriately financed, could see the EU being better prepared to face future pandemics among other threats. Examples include various projects under the permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) mechanism, as well as the European Defence Fund, whose precursor already envisioned pandemic-relevant projects. While EU missions and operations abroad continue, they too have seen their activities limited. However, this has not stopped the EU from deploying staff to help locals in host countries to tackle the virus.

In coordination with the EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has also provided vital assistance to Allies and partners. Its disaster relief coordination centre, as well as the strategic lift platform and rapid air mobility mechanism, successfully ensured the swift provision of essential equipment and supplies. Around the world, armed forces have demonstrated their added value by closely assisting authorities and citizens in battling the pandemic.



In this Briefing

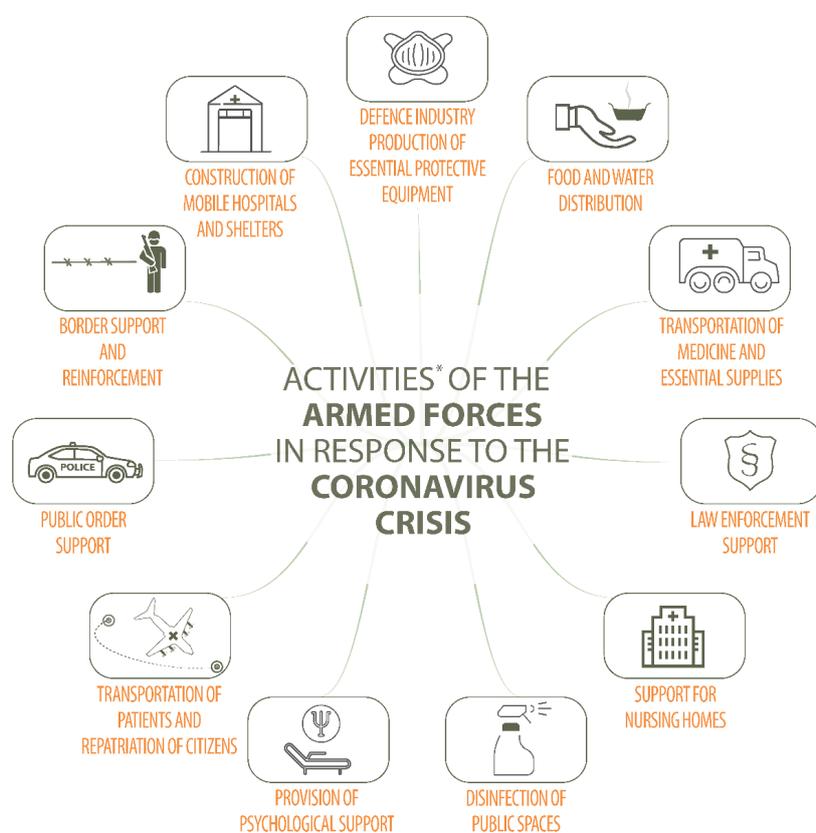
- The military and pandemics?
- EU countries' militaries to the rescue
- Coronavirus crisis impact on EU defence ambitions
- Common transatlantic front against coronavirus
- Military responses across the globe

The military and pandemics?

Since the beginning of March and at the time of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic has been the top agenda item for European and world leaders. This pandemic has exposed the urgency for solidarity and whole-of-government approaches to containing and ultimately eradicating the disease. Although only some European countries have declared '[war](#)' on the virus, armed forces have been on the coronavirus frontline almost everywhere on the continent. More often armed with bags of essential food than guns, European armed forces are proving key to fighting the spread of the virus.

Military forces are trained to [quickly mobilise](#) in crisis situations. Military exercises often simulate public health crises and test armies' abilities to set up an operation in tough conditions, with limited resources and at short notice. Investments in military readiness and preparedness are proving their worth through armed forces' contributions, such as building hospitals, transporting supplies, repatriation and evacuation, border management and assisting law enforcement. The capabilities currently deployed by European armies for medical purposes demonstrate the usefulness of pre-emptive research and development investments in strategic defence capabilities. The military response to Covid-19 also showcases how the military can [complement](#) civilian efforts not only in healthcare and logistics, but also in social welfare and humanitarian assistance. Such efforts see military helicopters becoming air ambulances and soldiers becoming shop assistants for the elderly. As with other disasters before it, the pandemic is highlighting the human face of the military.

Figure 1 – Armed forces' contributions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic



* These represent non-exhaustive examples of European armed forces' support to civilian authorities

Source: EPRS, 2020.

EU countries' militaries to the rescue

In 2016, the [EU Global Strategy](#) acknowledged the need for effective 'prevention, detection and responses to global pandemics'. While only some countries declared an official state of emergency (Figure 2), armed forces have been among the first responders in almost all Member States.¹ Non-exhaustive examples of key military contributions in various Member States are outlined below. The selection aims for broad geographical coverage, but also to illustrate the different military responses.

In Italy, one of the European countries [hardest-hit](#) by the virus, the army was [deployed](#) in mid-March 2020, at first to help enforce the lockdown. Part of '[Operazione Strade Sicure](#)', armed forces were made available to respond to the crisis. Progressively, medical staff from the armed forces were assigned to assist hospitals, and the Italian [Air Force](#) was quickly mobilised to repatriate Europeans (not just Italians), stranded abroad. The air force was also engaged in transporting medical supplies and patients across Europe. Several [field hospitals](#) were set up with the help of the armed forces, including those in Piacenza and Crema, built in just 72 hours. Lastly, Italian soldiers [distributed](#) thousands of surgical masks, gloves and sanitising gels and helped with disinfection of public spaces.

The German [Bundeswehr](#) mobilised around 15 000 soldiers to support civilian facilities with testing and processing of patients. The German [Luftwaffe](#) also engaged in [transporting intensive-care patients](#) from around Europe to be treated in Germany and transporting [donated](#) equipment – an important sign of solidarity, according to its [Defence Minister](#). The [Bundeswehr's procurement](#) office played its part in helping to fast-track orders of protection equipment for health workers.

France's '[Opération Résilience](#)' was launched to coordinate the armed forces' role in the effort to tackle the pandemic. The military has [built](#) field hospitals in one of the most affected French regions, the Grand Est. Meanwhile, the [French Navy](#) has been deployed to engage in healthcare support missions in the French Overseas Territories.

The Spanish equivalent of the French operation is '[Operación Balmis](#)'. As Spain became one of the countries most affected by Covid-19, the government deployed over 57 000 troops. Beyond the provision of logistical support, Spanish armed forces also assisted with [disinfecting](#) transport infrastructure, hospitals and [nursing homes](#) and by installing shelters for homeless people. The army provided additional support to [food banks](#) and delivered essentials such as food, [water](#) and medical equipment to citizens in need.

In Belgium, military staff have provided assistance to overwhelmed and understaffed [care givers](#) in homes for the elderly. Belgian armed forces have also carried out [repatriation](#) and evacuation missions, for example flying 53 Europeans from Niger back to their Member States. Finland was among the first EU countries to make use of its military staff to reinforce public order and [implement the lockdown](#) measures, by contributing to traffic control, for example. In Hungary, [special military task forces](#) have been charged with monitoring the operational safety of 140 companies providing essential services. Besides assisting with logistical support and medical transport, the [Romanian military](#) is also providing food and water supplies to quarantined citizens. Armed forces were further tasked to reinforce border controls and disinfect busy roads. In [Poland](#), the military has not only helped with logistics and law enforcement, but also assisted the government's psychological support helpline for people in quarantine and for coronavirus patients.

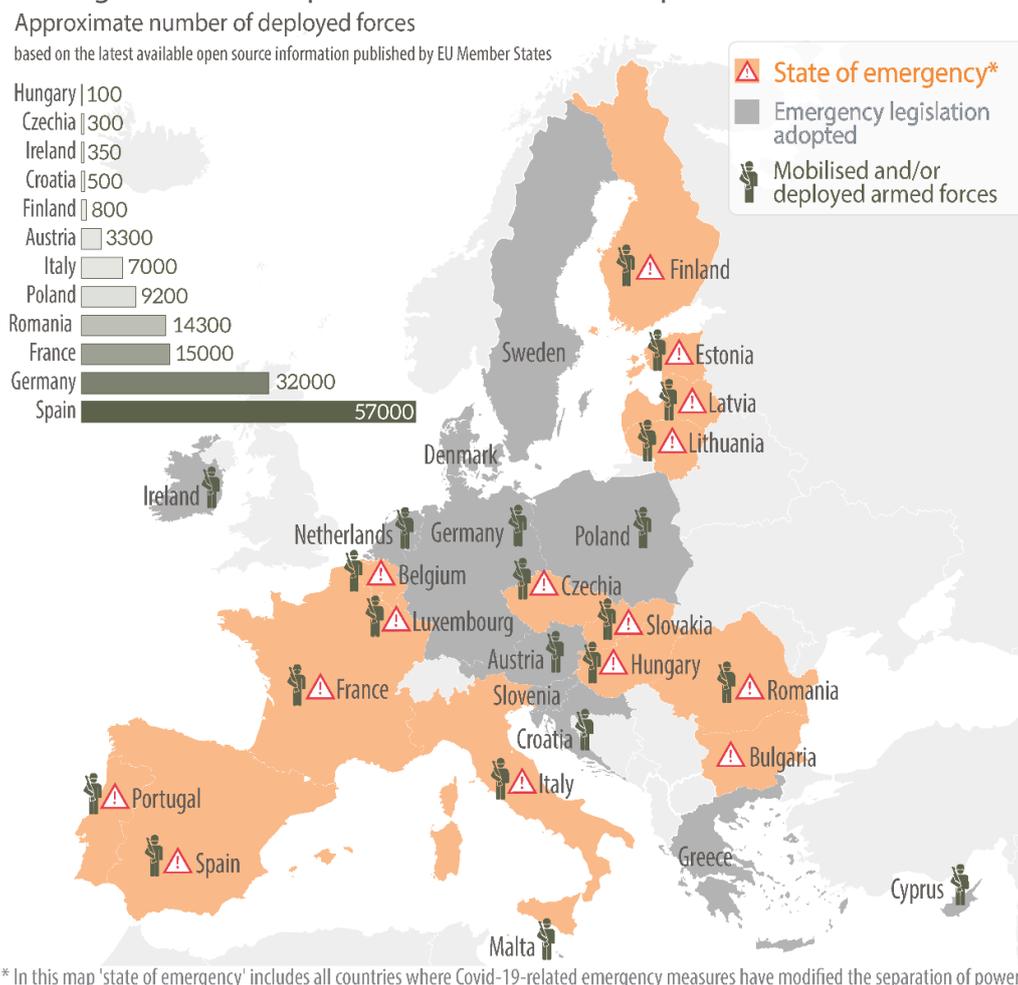
The Nordic countries, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland, set an example by opting to reinforce their [military cooperation](#) in fighting the pandemic. Their respective defence ministers agreed to cooperate in joint evacuations, air transport support and information sharing. As experts [note](#), 'Europe can only achieve military power in concert'. It can therefore only get the best out of its armed forces to respond to the coronavirus crisis through coordination. The [European Air Transport Command](#), a seven-member military air transport organisation, has also commanded and controlled air mobility missions, including medical evacuation, repatriation and delivery of medical supplies.

Defence industries respond to coronavirus crisis

Despite seeing most of their production and manufacturing halted in many countries, defence industries have contributed to the fight against coronavirus. For instance, defence-industrial [facilities](#) were used for additional disinfectant gel production and for manufacturing intensive-care equipment.

In [Spain](#), for example, defence companies mobilised to help with the production of essential supplies such as protective equipment, masks, and respiratory devices. In its Spanish facilities, aerospace company [Airbus](#) is using 3D printers to produce equipment. Other defence companies such as [Leonardo](#) and [Safran](#) are also using 3D printers for these purposes. [Greek](#) military factories have also been contributing to the production of protective material and mask production. In Italy, specialised army technicians were sent to factories to [assemble lung ventilators](#). Major defence players in Germany are also engaged in [supplying](#) federal authorities with up to six million respiratory protection masks. Lastly, Romania's national armament producer will manufacture [surgical masks](#), aimed at producing 500 000 per day.

Figure 2 – EU government responses to the coronavirus pandemic



Source: Data compiled by EPRS, April 2020.

EU Member States' military responses to the crisis were discussed by video-conference in the defence configuration of the [Foreign Affairs Council](#) on 6 April 2020. Consequently, EU Defence Ministers mandated the creation of a dedicated task force at the level of the EU Military Staff. This is meant to temporarily support and facilitate information exchange among Member States' armed forces on military assistance in support of civilian authorities to help fight the coronavirus pandemic. The [task force](#) will also bolster strategic communications efforts, and identify best practices and lessons learned for the future. General Claudio Graziano, [Chair](#) of the EU Military Committee, confirmed the close involvement of all chiefs of defence in EU Member States. He noted that taking account of lessons learned and increasing European armed forces' capacity will become a priority, to also be reflected in future EU defence initiatives.

Coronavirus crisis impact on EU defence ambitions

With the [International Monetary Fund](#) predicting global growth in 2020 to fall to -3 % and the [World Economic Forum](#) warning of an economic shock more severe than the 2008 global financial crisis or the Great Depression, there is no doubt that defence spending will suffer. The latter tends to be the '[sacrificial lamb](#)', as one expert put it, during economic crises and governmental efforts to save money. This was the case for EU countries recovering from the 2008 financial crisis, whose [defence budgets](#) started to recover only in view of the deteriorating post-2014 security environment. Experts also [draw attention](#) to potentially misleading growth percentages in countries' spending in the upcoming period. Recession-induced lower gross domestic product (GDP) in absolute terms could appear to increase shares of GDP to particular spending categories, such as defence.

The NATO target of 2 % of GDP defence spending is considered unlikely to be met by all Allies in the immediate aftermath of the coronavirus crisis. However, [not everyone agrees](#) with the need to

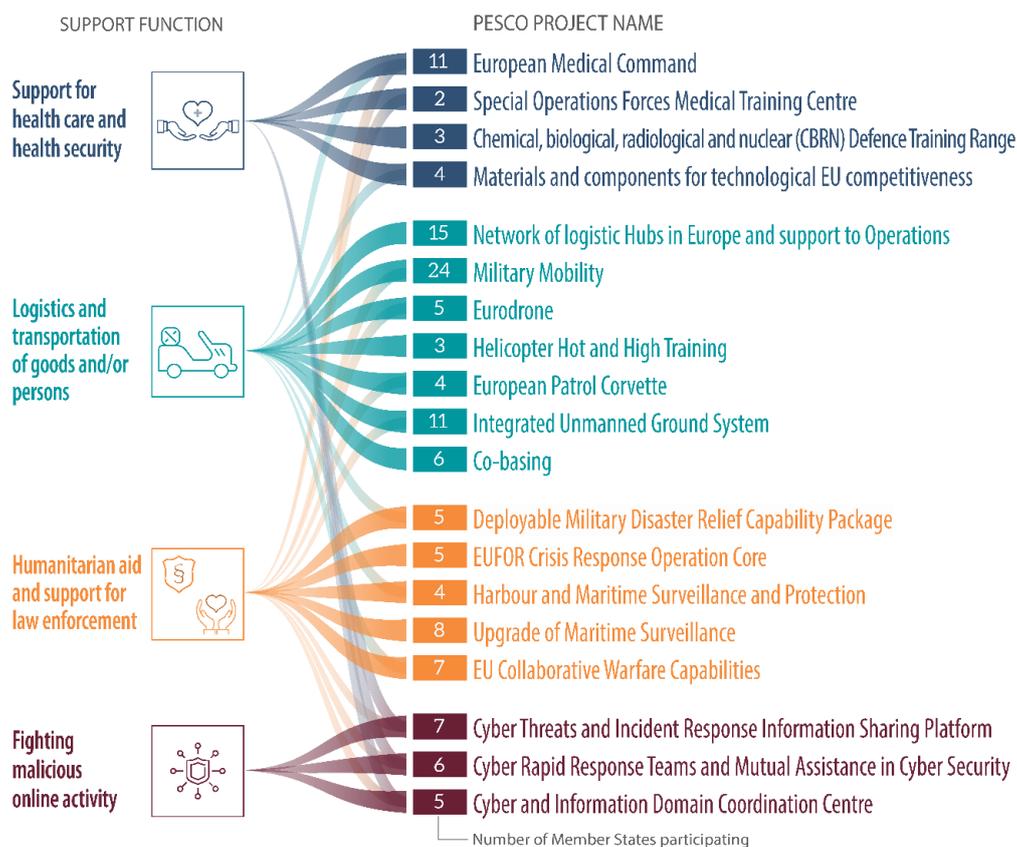
maintain or increase defence budgets. Looking at the case of the United Kingdom, critics contrast the vast amounts spent on defence with spending on threats such as pandemics or climate change.

Defence industrial impact

Defence industrial cooperation and integration programmes developed by the EU since 2016 are likely to see their funding impacted as the negotiations for the EU's next multiannual financial framework (MFF) unfold in the context of coronavirus-ravaged economies. Recent budgetary [proposals](#) had reduced the amounts for initiatives such as the [European Defence Fund](#) (EDF), [military mobility](#) and the [European Peace Facility](#) already before the pandemic hit Europe. It remains to be seen how they will fare in the European Commission's [upcoming](#) revised MFF proposal, given that negotiations have to be finalised by the end of 2020.

Permanent Structured Cooperation ([PESCO](#)), another flagship EU military and defence integration initiative, is fully dependent on the 25 participating Member States' financial contributions. **If national defence budgets suffer reductions, PESCO will too. Paradoxically, several of the 47 PESCO projects adopted, if funded accordingly, could strengthen Member States' preparedness if or when another public health crisis hits. One example is the [European Medical Command](#). This project is aimed at providing a centralised medical capability to coordinate military medical resources across Member States, but also to 'create a common operational medical picture, enhance the procurement of critical medical resources and contribute to harmonising national medical standards'. The objective is for the Command to be operational in 2021.** Other examples of projects that could at least be partly useful in such a crisis can be seen in Figure 3, but notably include the 'Special Operations Forces Medical Training Centre', the Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) Defence Training Range', the 'Deployable Military Disaster Relief Capability Package'.

Figure 3 – PESCO projects relevant for dealing with pandemics (non-exhaustive)



Source: EPRS, 2020.

For its part, the EDF and its two precursor programmes, the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP) and the Preparatory Action on Defence Research, can also contribute to a Union better prepared to face future challenges, including pandemics. The

2019-2020 EDIDP [work programme](#) focused on key priority areas such as CBRN, the mobility of forces or artificial intelligence. The 2020 [call for proposals](#) specifically included a category on CBRN medical countermeasures, such as preventive and therapeutic immunotherapy, for example. [Military mobility](#) – a flagship PESCO project, European Commission action plan and goal under EU-NATO cooperation – could also be viewed in light of its capacity to enable smooth and swift transport of military assets and equipment. In a health crisis, it would thus facilitate much needed rapid transport of essentials and patients whether by road, rail, air or waterborne transport. [Experts](#) therefore argue that the Covid-19 crisis serves 'to further underline that more defence cooperation is needed'. Cutting funding for strategic capabilities that the EU and its Members currently lack would leave them in a considerably weaker position for tackling future crises.

As for many other industries, defence will also suffer as a result of shutdowns caused by the coronavirus crisis. Defence association Finabel reports a historical fall in the [stock market](#) prices of EU defence companies, leading to possible debt increases. Manufacturing blockages could negatively affect supply chains and disrupt defence research and development activities, delay shipments of defence products, and limit the technical expertise available. One [report](#) warns that countries more severely affected by the pandemic could be slowed down developing key capabilities such as artificial intelligence. Transferring money to health-related priorities, Member States are already [cancelling orders](#) for military equipment. Declining military spending will thus be directly linked with a weakened European defence technological industrial base. The crisis, a further [study](#) notes, could nevertheless be transformed into an opportunity to restructure and strengthen Europe's defence industries. Another [analysis](#) envisions a possible 'reshaping of the defence technology ecosystem', which could become more favourable to new and innovative defence suppliers, including suppliers with healthcare oriented solutions.

An unfriendly post-coronavirus geopolitical landscape

If the EU's pre-coronavirus geopolitical environment was unfriendly, post-coronavirus it might become even more so. As one [think-tank](#) writes, Covid-19 is not going to kill geopolitics. Ongoing conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, as well as challenges in the Balkans, will persist or even be aggravated, as a consequence of the pandemic. For instance, Russia [reportedly](#) flew strategic bombers further south than usual across the North, Norwegian and Barents Seas several times in March 2020. Peacekeeping forces in conflict areas have also seen their activity limited in recent weeks, a gap which could be exploited by ill-intentioned parties. The prevalence of dis- and [misinformation](#) has spiralled since the outbreak and could exacerbate social discontent over economic difficulties, government responses and solidarity.

The alleged 'crisis of solidarity' is thought to have [eroded](#) EU ambitions for increased freedom of action or strategic autonomy. Preventing a deterioration in the EU's credibility and capacity to face threats, it is argued, would require 'continued investment in the EU as a full-spectrum power', including in its defence capabilities. Other [experts](#) express caution about potential cuts in strategic areas leaving 'Europeans more vulnerable in the near future' and exposed to threats. The European Commission's April 2020 [communication](#) on the global response to the coronavirus shows awareness of the impact on international security. It thus aims to soften it with targeted funding to increase [external partners'](#) resilience. When geopolitical weaknesses could be further exposed by the coronavirus crisis, the security of EU partners is even more directly connected to its own.

Common security and defence policy missions and operations

The importance of maintaining an EU presence where the missions and operations under its common security and defence policy (CSDP) are deployed was underscored at the 6 April 2020 [Foreign Affairs Council](#). High Representative Josep Borrell [announced](#) that some missions might see a reduction in staff and activities limited as a result of Covid-19. The latter include limiting meetings, visits and training sessions considered non-essential. He confirmed that Operations Althea and Atalanta will continue to operate at 100% capacity, while highlighting the importance and timeliness of launching [Operation EUNAVFORMED IRINI](#). The outbreak has unfortunately [not spared](#) staff deployed to CSDP missions and has even compelled some EU countries to [recall](#) parts of their

military staff deployed abroad. Although [civilian](#) CSDP missions have adopted precautionary measures and reduced or adapted operational activities, indispensable functions continue digitally.

The [EU Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) will continue its operations but with limited personnel movement to contain the virus. In Palestine, the EU Border Assistance Mission reallocated funds to donate a thermal imaging fever system to [support Palestinian authorities](#). The latter are also making use of a mobile clinic, previously donated by the CSDP mission, to screen citizens in the West Bank. The EU capacity-building mission in Mali provided [training for Malian authorities](#) in the fight against the pandemic and donated essential medical equipment. Also in Mali and despite having limited its activities, the [EU training mission](#) continues to implement its mandate. In Ukraine, the EU's advisory mission organised [webinars](#) and lectures to share good practices in tackling the pandemic. Lastly, experts [argue](#) that the newly launched IRINI operation and the [civilian advisory mission](#) in the Central African Republic will be crisis management tests for an EU grappling with the pandemic. Existing CSDP missions and operations might have to consider incorporating a public health and security dimension to their mandate, in addition to police, administrative and security sector reform.

Common transatlantic front against coronavirus

As the coronavirus has spread, NATO and its relevant bodies have been duly mobilised. NATO's main civil emergency response mechanism, the 24/7 alert Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) has proven [key](#) during the crisis. Italy and Spain have been among the first to request assistance through the mechanism and the responders include Czechia, Germany, Luxembourg and Turkey, which [provided](#) medical supplies, equipment and disinfectants. NATO also plays a [coordinating](#) role by facilitating logistics and bilateral assistance. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Slovenia and Ukraine are also among those [requesting assistance](#) through the EADRCC. The [NATO Support and Procurement Agency](#) (NSPA) has contributed through provision of logistics support and by organising deliveries of key supplies and equipment to Allies, partners and other international organisations. For example, the NSPA provided Luxembourg with field hospital tents and equipment in less than 24 hours from the request. Moreover, two airlift mechanisms have been used under NATO coordination: the [Strategic Airlift International Solution](#), a programme enabling nations to charter commercial transport aircraft, which helped countries such as Czechia and Slovakia to import essential supplies; and the [Strategic Airlift Capability](#) (SAC), entailing co-ownership and sharing of three strategic transport aircraft. For instance, Romania's National Military Command Centre coordinated [two military shipments](#) of medical supplies through the SAC. Jointly coordinated by NATO and Eurocontrol, the [Rapid Air Mobility](#) initiative has simplified procedures involving military relief flights, thus enabling a medical supply delivery from Turkey to the United Kingdom.

On 15 April 2020, [NATO Defence Ministers](#) discussed NATO's key role in matching requests for support from Members and partners to available donors but also through its airlift capabilities. Echoing remarks from Commission Vice-President [Margrethe Vestager](#), NATO Secretary-General [Jens Stoltenberg](#) emphasised the risks stemming from investments into and potential foreign take-overs of strategic infrastructures in Allied countries. This, he warned, could severely weaken countries in the face of future crises. Similar calls have been made by [think-tanks](#), arguing for strengthened laws and supply chains to prevent take-overs of vulnerable companies. Experts also [question](#) the ability of a heavily coronavirus-affected United States of America (USA) to keep providing the ultimate defence guarantee on the European continent.

Military responses across the globe

Armed forces have also been on the frontline of the coronavirus pandemic elsewhere in the world. In the USA, the army has been [mobilised](#) to provide medical support and hospital capacity and the Department of Defense (DoD) created a [Covid-19 task force](#). For example, the [New York National Guard](#) supported call centres, taking questions from citizens, staffed drive-through testing stations, as well as cleaned public buildings and delivered meals and sanitiser. In collaboration with other bodies, the US Army is [reportedly](#) testing 24 potential vaccines. As regards its forces in Europe, the

US European Command cancelled or delayed parts of the multinational [Defender-Europe 20](#) exercise. The US DoD also temporarily [halted](#) movements of military personnel and exercises. Lastly, an example of US assistance is the [White House](#) memorandum offering US facilities based in Italy for treating Italian non-Covid-19 patients, particularly victims among the first responders.

Further north, [Canada](#) has 24 000 troops at the ready to assist with the pandemic and the military is [assisting](#) with setting up tents and transporting supplies. In [Australia](#), the armed forces are moving from the bushfire crisis to the coronavirus crisis, by assisting law enforcement and with transporting of supplies, while [reservists](#) have also been called upon to help. Even in [Switzerland](#), the citizen army has been tasked to support hospitals and to [reinforce](#) border guards. In China, the cradle of the coronavirus crisis, the [People's Liberation Army](#) (PLA) was given [control](#) over medical and essential supplies – more so than local governments. Around 60 000 Chinese [military personnel](#) have reportedly been mobilised to help. In Israel, [defence forces](#) developed protective and medical equipment to assist health workers and the Defence Ministry focused research and development efforts on technologies addressing the pandemic. In [Argentina](#), the army provided food supplies to citizens in need, while in [Colombia](#) military personnel also mobilised to upgrade hospital capacity.

Remarkable efforts have so far been made by countries in Europe and beyond, with military forces usually part of the response. Though, as [stated](#) by the chairs of external policies committees in the European Parliament, more international cooperation and solidarity is needed. The coronavirus crisis has also shown that investment in military preparedness, equipment and training can pay off when a crisis hits, as capabilities to protect citizens can be deployed in multiple scenarios, from CSDP missions to repatriation and to building hospitals. As the EU is currently in a reflection process about its role in the world, the Covid-19 pandemic will certainly give political leaders food for thought.

MAIN REFERENCES

Popescu N., How the coronavirus threatens a geopolitical Europe, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2020.

Marrone A., The COVID-19 Pandemic and European Security: Between Damages and Crises; Istituto Affari Internazionali, April 2020.

ENDNOTE

¹ In humanitarian assistance, military deployment is usually a last resort. However, the impact of the coronavirus crisis has quickly overwhelmed under-equipped civilian authorities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank a number of EPRS colleagues for their research on individual Member States for this publication: Anne Altmayer, Nikolai Atanassov, Marie-Laure Augère-Granier, Jan Bäverström, Krisztina Binder, Denise Chircop, Enrico D'Ambrogio, Karin Finer, Enrique Gomez Ramirez, Raquel Juncal Passos Rocha, Ülla Jurviste, Vilma Karvelyte-Shetty, Verena Kern, Eleni Lazarou, Ingeborg Odink, Marketa Pape, Eric Pichon, Martina Prpič, Jakub Przetacznik, Anja Radjenovič, Martin Russell, Branislav Staniček, Jana Titievskaia, Anne Vernet and Sofija Voronova.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2020.

Photo credits: © Jörg Hüttenholscher / Adobe Stock.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

