

## NATO's response in the fight against coronavirus

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) might not be the first organisation that comes to mind for fighting pandemics. As the coronavirus crisis hit the world indiscriminately, NATO was fast to react, and used all the instruments in its toolbox to assist Allied countries and partners. From coordinating the transport of medicines and supplies, to launching scientific programmes to study the virus, NATO has again proven its value in times of crisis. Close European Union (EU) and NATO coordination during the crisis was equally helpful in ensuring a coherent, civil-military approach.

[Armed forces](#) almost everywhere across the EU and NATO have been engaged as governments responded to contain and vanquish the coronavirus. Their efforts include deploying military medics to assist over-run civilian facilities, building field hospitals, airlifting essential medical and protective supplies, evacuating patients and repatriating citizens, but also in distributing food, disinfecting public spaces and providing psychological support to people in distress. Over 100 transport [missions](#) for supplies or personnel took place in the spring of 2020. The pandemic has seen the largest peacetime military deployment in history.

NATO also underwent a virtual transition, with Foreign and Defence Ministers having [addressed](#) the pandemic in online meetings in April, and with the Chiefs of Defence in the [NATO Military Committee](#) meeting by videoconference for the first time in history on 14 May 2020. The latter discussed lessons learned for NATO during the pandemic and how to improve NATO's resilience for future health crises. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has also appointed a group of experts to guide the Alliance's [reflection process](#) about its political dimension and about reinforcing unity between NATO Allies.

### NATO instruments and Allied responses

#### Disaster relief

NATO's main civil emergency response mechanism, the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), operational 24/7, has proven [key](#) during the crisis. Centralising requests and offers for assistance, the [EADRCC](#) enables NATO and partner countries to coordinate responses. The Centre informs Allies about the state of play through situation reports. Italy and Spain were among the first to request assistance through the mechanism, and responders include Czechia, Germany, Luxembourg and Turkey, which [provided](#) medical supplies, equipment and disinfectants. Both partner countries and NATO members have [requested assistance](#) through the EADRCC, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Slovenia and Ukraine. The EADRCC also responded to the [request](#) of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for military and civil defence assets to ensure the transport of essential and humanitarian supplies. [NATO's contribution](#) is coordinated through the EADRCC and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe.

The [NATO Rapid Deployable Corps Italy](#) (NRDC-ITA) is a multinational headquarters based in Milan, able to be mobilised quickly on missions within or beyond the territory of NATO members. The NRDC notably [supported](#) local authorities in the Italian region of Lombardy, one of the hardest hit by the pandemic. The support included the disinfection of hospitals, supply delivery and diverse logistical support.

NATO has also launched a [scientific project](#) using immuno-diagnostic methods to provide rapid and accurate Covid-19 diagnoses. Conducted by scientists from Italy and Switzerland, the initiative is set to last 24 months. It has been launched and funded through NATO's [Science for Peace and Security Programme](#).

#### Strategic Airlift

Jointly coordinated by NATO and Eurocontrol, the [Rapid Air Mobility](#) initiative simplifies air traffic control procedures for military relief flights. The programme thus [enabled](#) a medical supply delivery from Turkey to the United Kingdom, as well as a United States Air Force aircraft to redistribute over 15 000 kg of supplies around distribution hubs in Italy. Another airlift framework is the [Strategic Airlift International Solution](#) (SALIS), a programme enabling nations to charter commercial transport aircraft. The SALIS helped countries such as Czechia and Slovakia to import essential supplies, and also Poland, which transported 170 tonnes

of [medical supplies](#). A co-ownership and sharing arrangement, the [Strategic Airlift Capability](#) (SAC) entails co-ownership and sharing of three strategic transport aircraft. Romania's National Military Command Centre, for instance, coordinated [two military shipments](#) of medical supplies through the SAC.

The [NATO Support and Procurement Agency](#) (NSPA) is part of the NATO Support and Procurement Organisation and deals with logistics and procurement activities. During the pandemic, the NSPA organised deliveries of key supplies and equipment to Allies, partners and international organisations. For example, the NSPA provided Luxembourg with [field hospital](#) tents and equipment within less than 24 hours of the request, managing the transport, construction and maintenance. The NSPA also manages the SALIS.

### NATO's defence posture during the coronavirus crisis

Security challenges will persist despite the coronavirus, [emphasised](#) Jens Stoltenberg. 'NATO must continue to ensure that the health crisis does not turn into a security crisis', he added. Besides having contributed to a rapid and substantial force mobilisation in responding to the virus, NATO also suffered its [consequences](#), including the switch to virtual work and cancellation of various military exercises to protect soldiers and staff. Nevertheless, NATO 'must continue to deliver [credible and effective deterrence](#) and defence' which puts the concept of [resilience](#) at the heart of the Alliance's focus – in line with Article 3 of the [North Atlantic Treaty](#) – whereby each member should develop capacity to resist and recover from an attack or a major crisis.

### EU-NATO cooperation

The EU and NATO have been in close consultation since the beginning of the pandemic. Their overarching cooperation on security and defence matters takes place in the framework of the [2016](#) and [2018](#) Joint Declarations, which substantially expanded the fields and mechanisms through which they work together. Deputy Secretary-General Mircea Geoaană reportedly [participated](#) in weekly coordination calls, including with EU counterparts, addressing matters from global supply chains to economic effects and to the repatriation of citizens. During the videoconference meeting of the EU's [Foreign Affairs Council](#) (Defence format) of 12 May 2020, the NATO Secretary-General briefed EU ministers and discussed defence cooperation in light of the pandemic. On 14 May 2020, EU Military Committee Chair, General Claudio Graziano, briefed NATO Chiefs of Defence, about the EU's [response](#) and relief measures. Echoing remarks of Commission Vice-President [Margrethe Vestager](#), [Jens Stoltenberg](#) emphasised the risks stemming from investments into and potential foreign take-overs of strategic infrastructure in Allied countries. This, he warned, could severely weaken countries in the face of future crises.

During the 6 April 2020 Defence configuration of the [Foreign Affairs Council](#), ministers mandated the creation of an EU Task Force at the level of the European External Action Service and the EU Military Staff, which is meant to exchange information among Member States' armed forces on military assistance in support of civilian authorities to help fight the coronavirus pandemic. Its main [aim](#) is to enable the sharing of best practices and lessons learned, while bolstering strategic communication efforts. The task force also coordinated with NATO, in particular with the EADRCC. Lastly, the [EU-NATO bi-annual meeting](#) on 19 May 2020 (by videoconference) was chaired by the respective heads of the Military Staffs, Lieutenant Generals Hans-Werner Wiermann (NATO) and Esa Pulkkinen (EU). Besides taking stock of their common response to the crisis, the participants also discussed emerging technologies and ongoing EU military operations.

### Post-pandemic outlook

Jens Stoltenberg [encouraged](#) Allies to maintain and, in some cases, increase defence spending after the pandemic. Despite adamant commitments made by the [Chiefs of Defence](#) to maintain their contributions to collective defence, doing so might prove challenging for governments under pressure to refloat economies drowning as a result of the pandemic. At the same time, [armed forces' contributions](#) during the crisis could present an opportunity to advocate increased civil-military approaches, and to highlight how military means can also serve civilian purposes. As NATO is currently undergoing a reflection process about its future in the next 10 years, its Secretary-General [stated](#) it must 'stay strong militarily, be more united politically, and take a broader approach globally'. German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer [advocates](#) improving NATO's military capabilities to render it better at 'combating less traditional security challenges' such as climate change or disinformation campaigns, while engaging more with civilian authorities.

