

# How the COVID-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects of the EU



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## IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how the COVID-19 pandemic has directly and indirectly affected European security and defence. It documents how missions and operations of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) were directly impacted. It finds that COVID-19 has accentuated already recognised capacity shortfalls of the CSDP, such as strategic airlift, secure communications and command and control. Defence spending through EU instruments, and to a lesser extent at national level, has come under pressure although it may still escape post-2008 style cuts. The pandemic revealed the vulnerabilities of Member States' infrastructure and supply chains, and the limited competences of the EU in supporting Member States' management of public health emergencies. COVID-19 tends to act as a threat multiplier and source of instability, particularly in low-income countries already affected by socio-economic imbalances and governance problems. The pandemic is likely to accelerate existing trends, including the declining share of the US and the EU in the world economy compared to Asia, intensifying concerns about China's growing assertiveness, growing attention to IT security and cyber capabilities, and the interconnection between conventional and unconventional security risks.

This analysis also looks at which lessons the EU should learn in order to better manage and prepare for such crises. At a strategic level, the EU needs to invest in lesson learning exercises with the European Parliament playing a key role in making the learning publicly accessible. It should also be proactive in shaping international discourses about international governance and the role of the EU post COVID-19. Furthermore, the paper elaborates 19 short and longer-term recommendations, for instance, on how CSDP missions can become more resilient in public health emergencies and which capability shortfalls need addressing most; how defence spending can be made more efficient and better targeted; or how the EU can help to better coordinate military support to civilian authorities. Finally, it advocates investment in health intelligence and better managing the biosecurity risks arising from growing access to dual-use technologies. The EU should forge a preventive approach to future pandemics and associated risks and embrace a comprehensive approach to security and resilience. Yet, one should not lose sight of the distinctive function of the CSDP and what it can currently deliver.

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# 1 Introduction

This in-depth analysis (IDA) aims to better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected European security and defence over the past year to identify the most likely direct and indirect consequences. By looking back at the past 12 months, we can already identify some key lessons and recommendations that could help the EU and its Member States to better manage the security and defence fall-out from the current crisis. However, the IDA will also explore what kind of longer term consequences the pandemic may have in this specific policy area in order to better understand key risks and opportunities for European citizens and decision-makers and how to best prepare for and manage them. It draws on, updates, reviews and substantially extends the Briefing prepared in July 2020 after the first wave of infections from the SARS-Cov2 virus that was first detected in the Wuhan province of China in December 2019<sup>1</sup>.

At the time of writing, many countries, particularly in the US and Europe, are struggling to control new infections, particularly those arising from significantly more transmissible strains of the virus. While recently started vaccination programmes may help to bring the pandemic under control in the coming months, whether and particularly how soon this will happen is far from certain. This creates uncertainty about the duration and severity of the restrictive measures taken as well as the short and longer-term damage the pandemic may still cause economies, societal cohesion and trust in governance, not just in Europe but across the globe. It is clear, however, that the sheer scale of the crisis has had multi-faceted and, in some areas, longer-term consequences which will require further empirical research, analysis, lesson learning and foresight.

We will first explain how we approach this challenge by drawing on (i) the literature on public policy inquiries and foresight learning during and after crises; (ii) data from desk research about the impact of the pandemic; (iii) key informant interviews with EU officials and; (iv) a two-session expert workshop. The first empirical chapter (Chapter 3) will investigate how the pandemic has affected security and defence in **Europe's neighbourhood, relations with the US, China and Russia, as well as the salience of old and new biosecurity threats and hazards**. Chapter 4 will then look at how security and defence capabilities, markets and industrial bases have been and are likely to be affected. Chapter 5 looks at the changing role of military forces in assisting civil authorities within the EU and the impact the pandemic has had on EU missions and operations in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Finally, in Chapter 6, we will consider the cumulative effects visible so far and how the EU could shape future dynamics and trends by strengthening, adjusting and changing policies and investments.

## 2 Approach to assessing COVID-19's impact so far and projecting ahead

The empirical research and analysis for this paper are organised around two main strands. This first one is a post-action review or *post-mortem* perspective focused on identifying lessons to be learnt from the impact the pandemic has already had over the past 12 months and how European Union actors handled the associated challenges in the realm of security and defence. The second strand is an attempt to look ahead to estimate some of the longer-term direct and indirect consequences of the pandemic for the future security and defence of the European Union. Together, both of these strands of inquiry will enable us to advance recommendations that should help the EU and its members to better handle the current crisis in this specific policy area, but also to consider some broader strategic lessons that could help the EU to be better prepared for the security implications of future pandemics or the indirect and long-term

<sup>1</sup> C. O. Meyer, S. Besch, M. Bricknell, [How the COVID-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects for the EU](#), European Parliament, 2020.

effects of the current one. Hence, each of the substantive sections of this analysis take stock of what we know today and look at the short-term effects and implications as the public health crisis continues in many countries, as well as the longer-term consequences and challenges after the public health crisis is over. This may help to inform more comprehensive and potentially public inquiries to learn lessons and look ahead after the crisis.

In approaching a crisis with multi-layered effects, we distinguish between three different channels through which COVID-19 can affect security and defence matters<sup>2</sup>. First of all, we are interested in the direct health effects arising from actual infections of staff working in or on CSDP in Brussels, Member States or the field, and the immediate efforts to manage risks to the health of staff, officials and security personnel in host countries. Secondly, the EU Member **States' and non-EU countries'** domestic and external policy responses to the pandemic have had and may potentially have significant and multifaceted consequences. Domestic policy responses comprise hard and soft laws created to suppress the virus through restrictions of economic and social activities. External policies may include, for instance, efforts of great powers to gain an advantage over others by engaging in health diplomacy and influence discourses about the origin of the virus and its handling in their favour. Thirdly, businesses, civil society organisations, non-state groups and individual citizens react to the experience of the crisis and their perception of the risks and opportunities, for instance, becoming more fearful of going out in public, becoming more trusting of the state to keep them safe or becoming more critical of inequities and overreach in state responses. At times these three channels overlap and intertwine, for instance when foreign states send medical personnel and equipment to pandemic-stricken countries to enhance their own reputation, but they also provide an opportunity to better study the effects of the virus or test potential vaccines. These three channels of influence have short-term and potentially much longer-term and indirect consequences, leading to ripple effects and affecting key political events. For instance, the effects of COVID-19 and its mishandling by the Trump administration played a very salient role in the recent **US presidential elections and may have influenced voters' behaviour in some key battleground states**. Similarly, the severe threat the pandemic stimulated trust and economic cohesion in Europe which made a historical agreement on joint borrowing for a **EUR 750 billion recovery instrument** possible – after more than a decade of profound disagreements within the EU about accessing the capital markets in this way<sup>3</sup>.

### Research design and methodology

Our interpretation of the collected evidence and analysis is informed by relevant academic literature, especially that concerning forecasting, prediction, foresight and scenario planning in political science and international affairs<sup>4</sup>, as well as literature on crisis management and learning from crises, disasters and policy failures<sup>5</sup>. Firstly, with regard to foresight, it is important to balance countervailing forces against each other as there are at least two, and often more, competing arguments behind any socio-political decision or strategy. Analysts also need to be aware of and, if necessary, compensate for their own values and biases with regard to the futures they would see as more or less desirable, thereby minimising confirmation bias

<sup>2</sup> We are following here largely the distinction made by K. Mustasilta, *The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Peace and Conflict*, 2020, available at: <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2020/10/effects-of-covid-19-pandemic-on-peace-conflict/> but distinguish between domestic and international policy responses and add the civil society dimension.

<sup>3</sup> For details about the agreement see [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en)

<sup>4</sup> P. Tetlock, D. Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction*, Random House, 2016; W. Ascher, *Forecasting: An Appraisal for Policy-Makers and Planners*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1978; M.F. Oppenheimer, *Pivotal Countries, Alternate Futures: Using Scenarios to Manage American Strategy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016; A. Wenger, U. Jasper, M. Dunn Cavelty (eds.), *The Politics and Science of Prevision: Governing and Probing the Future*, Routledge, London, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> U. Rosenthal, A. Boin, and L. K. Comfort, *Managing Crises: Threats, Dilemmas, Opportunities.*, Charles C Thomas, Springfield, Ill., 2001; L.K. Comfort, A. Boin, C. C. Demchak, *Designing Resilience: Preparing for Extreme Events*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, Pa., 2010; M.H. Bazerman, M.D. Watkins, *Predictable Surprises: The Disasters You Should Have Seen Coming, and How to Prevent Them*, Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, MA., 2008; C. Perrow, *The Next Catastrophe: Reducing Our Vulnerabilities to Natural, Industrial, and Terrorist Disasters*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2007.



and negativity bias as well as wishful thinking. Best practice in foresight also requires drawing on competing bodies of knowledge and expertise that may give rise to different expectations regarding the impact of the crisis. For instance, the questions about the speed and shape of the economic recovery may be influenced both by the size and speed of EU stimulus measures, the degree to which pandemic-related fears dent consumer demands and, of course, the prevalence of the virus in society. Similarly, the current drop in oil prices might have both negative and positive consequences for different kinds of conflicts, depending on how it affects the threat perceptions, intentions and capabilities of states. The complex interplay is hard to gauge at present and is contingent on key decisions or events that have not yet occurred, such as whether and how quickly the vaccine rollout will be successful in terms of stopping **transmissions and allowing economic activities to resume, or whether 'nationalism' or 'international solidarity' dominate international distribution and access** to the vaccine. Recent research conducted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) has tried to capture some of these contingent choices and dynamics in the interlinked domains of politics, economics and military affairs by sketching out four possible scenarios for a post-pandemic world<sup>6</sup>. We will not narrate such scenarios but will try to be clear about which developments we consider, their likelihood and timeframe, where we perceive major uncertainties, and where we might expect to see changes in pre-existing trends and dynamics.

Secondly, there is extensive literature on policy learning after major crises, surprises and alleged or actual scandals and policy fiascos<sup>7</sup>. It testifies to the significant risk that the wrong lessons are learnt, as political actors try to instrumentalise the crises and subsequent public inquiries for their own ends. Another risk is that lessons may be initially identified, but not actually learned or quickly forgotten, as the memory of the crisis fades, old habits and powerful interests reassert themselves and bureaucratic inertia and pre-existing routines kick in again. In some cases, crises spark an overreaction against threats that have caused surprising harm. For instance, a number of observers have argued that the US and some of its allies overreacted after the occurrence of terrorist attacks both in scale and nature of the response, leading to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, economists have learned lessons about what worked and did not work after the financial crisis of 2008, as many governments cut back public expenditures too quickly and deeply without sufficient focus on addressing underlying problems in competitiveness. Any strong policy reaction to manage the current crisis or manage a future one can create unintended consequences and displacement risks in other areas. Overreactions to a pandemic is as much of a risk as failing to learn the lessons, thus being as vulnerable tomorrow to the security implications of a future pandemic as we are today. On the other hand, learning the right lessons can make a huge difference to performance, as we have seen when many east Asian countries activated institutions and plans created in the aftermath of the SARS and MERS endemics<sup>9</sup>. In our desire to learn from mistakes, we need to avoid hindsight bias when assessing what actors should have known and done, and carefully balance inquiries designed for accountability and blame versus those prioritising learning lessons for the future. In this analysis we prioritise the latter over the former.

As the empirical basis for this inquiry, we are drawing on evidence generated from three research strands:

1. We have conducted desk research involving academic and non-academic research findings by think-tanks, research institutes, consultancies, international organisations and other official and semi-official literature focused on the direct or indirect consequences of COVID-19. Given the timely nature of the

<sup>6</sup> See IISS, [The COVID-19 Pandemic: Scenarios to Understand the International Impact](#), IISS, Defence and Military Analysis Programme, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> For an overview related to learning from public inquiries, see C. O. Meyer, N. Ikani, M. Avendano, A. H. Kelly, *Learning the Right Lessons for the Next Pandemic: How to Design Public Inquiries into the UK Government's Handling of Covid-19*, King's College London, Faculty of Social Sciences and Public Policy, London, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> B. Rosenberg, M. Hannah, ['After the Coronavirus, Don't Repeat 9/11's Mistakes'](#), *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2020.

<sup>9</sup> R. Pacheco Pardo et al., *Preventing the Next Pandemic: Lessons from East Asia*, King's College London, 2020.

topic, there is currently only a limited number of academic peer-reviewed sources available, but virtually every think-tank or research institute working on foreign affairs, security, peace and human rights has published some kind of analysis on this topic, some are shorter blogs and others are more extensive opinion pieces. **Particularly with the early pieces, it is important to resist some of the 'novelty bias' as not all unprecedented and large-scale crises lead, over the longer term, to large-scale effects and novel changes.** Secondly, our investigation benefited from the first findings of the European External Action Service's (EEAS) attempts to gauge impact, performance and identify lessons to be learnt, even if some of this evidence still relates to the period after the first wave in the summer, when uncertainty about the virus and its impact was at its peak. We have also reviewed official documents issued by the EU on foreign, security and defence matters that reference the pandemic and its consequences.

2. We have conducted interviews with six key informants from inside EU institutions (see appendix). These interviews have helped us to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on security and defence matters, but also learn what the EU institutions and Member States perceive as the main strengths and weaknesses in handling the consequences of the pandemic in this specific policy area. The interviewees also highlighted some emerging lessons to be learnt and how they are meant to be implemented by different actors within the EU. We also discussed some of the longer-term consequences the officials foresee for the CSDP and the security of the EU more broadly. The interviews typically lasted 50–70 minutes, enabling us to explore these questions in some depth. We would like to thank all of the interviewees once again for their time.
3. At the end of November, we organised an online workshop/roundtable with a group of 10 experts from academia and leading think-tanks together with 5 members of the project team. We aimed for a good mix of expertise with experts based in or originating from different European countries, working on a range of non-EU countries and regions, and offering expertise in the area of defence economics, public health, defence strategy, security, conflict prevention and peace studies. The workshop was divided into two distinct sessions. The first session mainly focused on foresight. It aimed to generate a better understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on key drivers and trends of relevance to the CSDP, particularly with regard to security challenges and threat prioritisation, but also with regard to capability development, cooperation and spending on security and defence policy. The second session aimed to generate lessons the EU and its key actors ought to learn from these findings about future threats and opportunities on the horizon. What are the key options and choices that could help mitigate threats and costs, and maximise opportunities for the EU in security and defence affairs? Which are the most realistic and easy to implement, but also which ones could deliver the greatest impact despite higher costs and risks?

### The pandemic at the time of writing

At 11:08am CET, 5 December 2020, 65,007,974 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 1,507,018 deaths, had been reported to the World Health Organization<sup>10</sup>. The number of cases across the world had progressively increased. Figure 1 shows the number of new cases across the world as of 4 December 2020. The incidence is highest in Europe, Russia, North America and South America. There are significantly fewer cases reported in Africa, Asia and Australia. However, the difference in true incidence may be less stark because of variations in policies and access to COVID-19 testing between countries.

<sup>10</sup> WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. World Health Organisation, available at: <https://covid19.who.int/> (accessed on 6 December 2020).



So far, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused 339,409 deaths in the EU/EEA and the UK. The four countries reporting most deaths are the United Kingdom (60,113), Italy (58,038), France (54,140) and Spain (46,038), although there are limitations to the comparability and reliability of these figures<sup>11</sup>. The epidemic graph for Europe is shown in Figure 2, although it is important to stress that virus trajectory and incidence rate are not uniform across and within European countries. The first peak in late March/early April 2020 was curtailed by rather stringent and comprehensive lockdown measures in most countries. The second peak emerged in autumn 2020 after control measures were relaxed in the summer<sup>12</sup>. European countries imposed further restrictive measures in November with the second peak beginning to plateau in December 2020, albeit with significant differences between countries. It is unclear how societal behaviours over the Christmas period will influence the epidemic curve into 2021, although it is clear that the restrictive measures taken in November were generally less effective than those in March and April in bringing down the transmissions and a number of governments felt the need to tighten restrictions yet again<sup>13</sup>. Among the potential reasons for the surge in the pandemic in most of Europe are the lower stringency of the autumn measures (e.g. allowing schools to re-open), lower levels of compliance with the rules and higher mobility within and across countries, the limited effectiveness of local test-trace-isolate systems and the occurrence of significantly more transmissible virus strains in some countries, especially the UK<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, [Communicable Disease Threats Report](#), Week 49, 29 November-5 December 2020. A measurement of excess deaths is widely seen as a more reliable measurement of pandemic's death toll.

<sup>12</sup> The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) offers a useful global dataset and tool to track the ebb and flow of government restrictions and roll-back over time and in relation to other indicators, such as virus cases. It is available at: [www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker](http://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker).

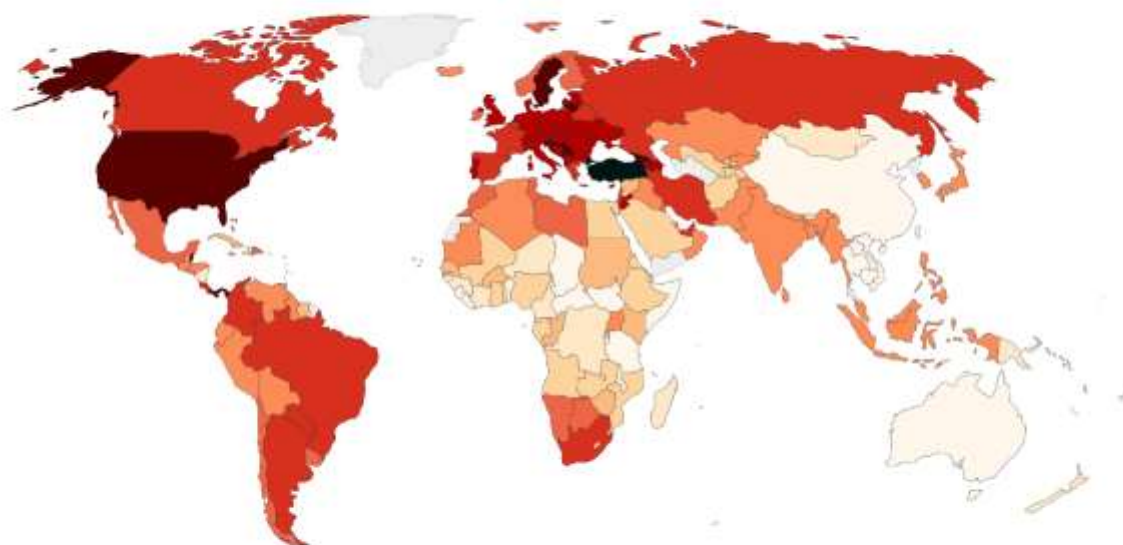
<sup>13</sup> See the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker; see also for the UK Alwan NA et al, (2020) Scientific consensus on the COVID-19 pandemic: we need to act now. The Lancet. Volume 396, Issue 10260. Pages e71-e72. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)32153-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32153-X)

<sup>14</sup> The published minutes and reports of the scientific committees advising the UK government in September 2020, especially SAGE, give a good sense of the general factors at play and do occasionally also mention European countries; The European Centre for Disease Control also provides useful updates, briefings and reports, including on the new variant of the virus, see [www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/SARS-CoV-2-variant-multiple-spike-protein-mutations-United-Kingdom.pdf](http://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/SARS-CoV-2-variant-multiple-spike-protein-mutations-United-Kingdom.pdf)

Figure 1<sup>15</sup>

### Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people, Dec 13, 2020

Shown is the rolling 7-day average. The number of confirmed cases is lower than the number of actual cases; the main reason for that is limited testing.

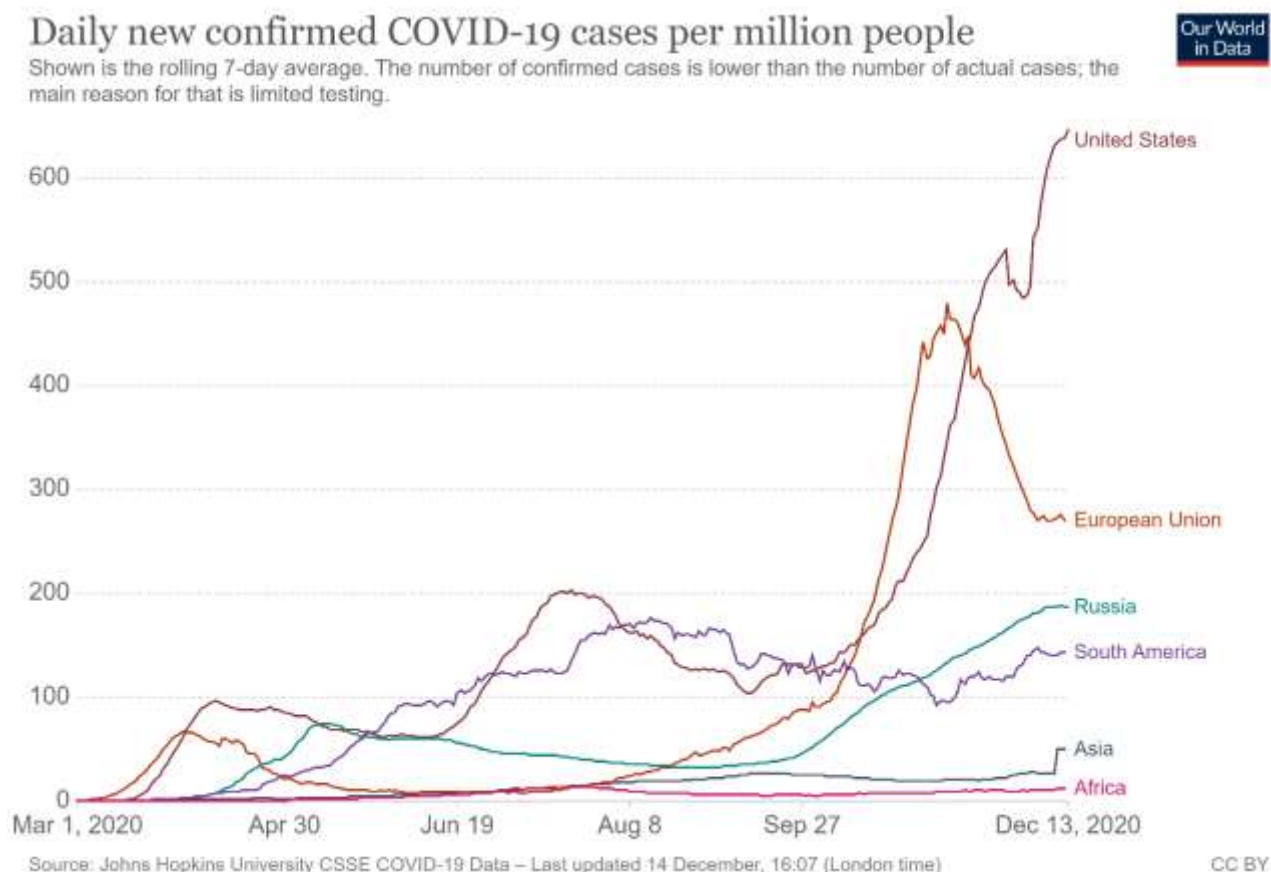


Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data – Last updated 14 December, 16:07 (London time)

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<sup>15</sup> Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-data-explorer> [Online Resource]

Figure 2<sup>16</sup>



### 3 COVID-19's impact on Europe's security environment and challenges

The three channels discussed above may impact 'security' in different ways and may indeed contribute to changing our understanding of what 'security' actually means. Firstly, there is security in a narrow or conventional sense as protection from kinetic or physical attacks against European citizens and the territorial sovereignty and integrity of EU Member States. This could be affected if a pandemic weakened state defences against such attacks or if bioweapons were used. Secondly, we have a risk-based concept of security that considers a broader range of threats and hazards that could be as damaging to state cohesion, democratic institutions, critical infrastructure and societal welfare as kinetic attacks. Security is a 'state of mind' where all risks are being managed in a way that allows citizens to go about their normal business without fear, albeit with caution where required. Thirdly, there are threats to international security which can create a range of potentially negative secondary consequences for the foreign policy interests of the EU: preserving peace and preventing violent conflicts, protecting trade interests and access to raw materials, and promoting human rights, the rule of law and multilateral organisations. Finally, there is the human security of citizens in third countries, which may be threatened by disease, hunger, or indeed violence by a range of state and non-state actors, even if the state is not directly threatened. It helps to

<sup>16</sup> Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-data-explorer> [Online Resource]. One could argue that confirmed COVID-related deaths are a more accurate measurement given changes in testing, but it is also a lagging indicator. On this measurement, the only change is that the US is just on the cusp of exceeding the EU in terms of deaths per one million people.

bear these distinctions in mind as we discuss the different facets of how the pandemic may be changing the security environment and international landscape.

### 3.1 Impact on the peace and stability of third countries

The pandemic has not had uniform effects across the world in terms of absolute infection numbers and their trajectory, as we can see in figures 1 and 2 in Chapter 2. It is apparent that some countries and regions were far less affected in terms of health than others, such as large parts of Africa and East Asia. It is too soon to attempt to explain the reasons behind these significant differences, although it appears to be a mixture between the timeliness and effectiveness of government responses, societal preparedness as a result of previous experience with infectious diseases, compliance and risk sensitivity, the age profile of societies, the effect of sanitary conditions on the immune system and climatic conditions affecting airborne transmission<sup>17</sup>. It is currently unclear whether the health impact of COVID-19 will remain limited in these countries, as some countries that managed to largely escape the first wave of infections were caught up in the second wave. The future development of the virus will largely depend on how quickly, equitably and widely effective vaccines can be supplied and administered to protect vulnerable groups and, ultimately, to stop transmission within and across borders by creating herd immunity.

The different infection levels, variable government responses and different attitudes within societies towards the virus and other competing risks can help to explain why the impact of the pandemic on local peace and stability varies too. At aggregate level, a first analysis of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) until the end of June 2020 shows that political violence has decreased by 10 % in the months following the pandemic declaration relative to the months preceding it. Demonstrations declined more significantly by roughly 30 %<sup>18</sup>. However, beyond these aggregate data, the ACLED shows substantial variation between types of violence and the actors committing them: specifically, violence against civilians has increased by roughly 2.5 %. Mob violence — where spontaneous groups, at most crudely armed, carry out violence against specific individuals or groups — has also risen: the ACLED recorded over 1,800 mob violence events across dozens of countries in the 16 weeks following the pandemic declaration – an 11 % increase. Similarly, state repression has increased by 30 %, with close to 1,800 events of civilian targeting perpetrated by state forces since the pandemic began<sup>19</sup>. Different political contexts matter greatly. In some cases, such as in **the Democratic Republic of Congo, the increase in violence is attributed to the ‘inability of state and UN forces to effectively maintain control in the east of the country – a problem grappled with long before the virus’**. In many other cases, ‘violent mobs formed to attack individuals in an attempt to take justice into their own hands, or to punish those they feared were spreading the virus’<sup>20</sup>. The ACLED has also been measuring instances of COVID-19 related disorder, including preliminary data on Western Europe where such disorder increased after initial high levels of societal trust in March and April<sup>21</sup>.

The pandemic affects state and non-state actors differently and can shift timelines in protest and conflict dynamics. According to a report by the European Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)<sup>22</sup>, the political leadership, institutions and key resources of the state were initially distracted and challenged by the demands of the pandemic. This gave some groups that are hostile to the state opportunities to gain a military advantage in the field and/or exploit weaknesses in state responses and fears through

<sup>17</sup> Expert Workshop organised by the authors under Chatham House rules, November 2020.

<sup>18</sup> M. Pavlik, *A great and sudden change: the global political violence landscape before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic*, ACLED Special Report, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> M. Pavlik, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> M. Pavlik, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> ACLED COVID-19 Disorder Tracker (CDT), available at: <https://acleddata.com/analysis/covid-19-disorder-tracker/>.

<sup>22</sup> K. Mustasilta (2020a), *‘From bad to worse: The impact(s) of Covid-19 on conflict dynamics’*, EU-ISS Brief No 13, June 2020; see also Crisis Group, ‘Covid-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch’, *Crisis Group Special Briefing No 4*, 24 March 2020.

propagandistic means, including misinformation, to undermine trust in and support for state institutions<sup>23</sup>. As the crisis progressed, however, the overall picture seems to shift insofar as COVID-19 **'appears to also create opportunities for militarist and autocratic actors at the expense of civilian actors'**, such as in the case of the Iranian revolutionary guards and South African troops<sup>24</sup>. While some populist leaders such as those in the US, Brazil and India suffered from their mishandling of the pandemic, the pandemic appears to have fed into pre-existing trends of **'democratic decline' with a clamp down on freedom of speech, democratic assembly and parliamentary scrutiny**<sup>25</sup>. At least 70 countries and territories postponed elections invoking, rightly or wrongly, the pandemic, but authoritarian and hybrid regimes such as in Chad, Ethiopia and Somalia, were most likely to postpone without setting a new date<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, governments intensified **gathering, sharing and analysing personal data for 'health surveillance', some of it in a disproportionate, clandestine or illegal way** for the purpose of strengthening surveillance of potential or actual opponents of the state. The risk is that the pandemic may increase the demand for highly intrusive surveillance technology and justify the disproportionate or outright oppressive use of it<sup>27</sup>. A Brookings study on the **growing demand for Chinese surveillance technology argued that 'tools used to monitor and enforce citizen behaviour during the pandemic are tied to overall models of domestic security and regime control'**<sup>28</sup>. For instance, in China the personal information gathered from newly deployed health apps is directly available and immediately accessible to the local police<sup>29</sup>. More positively, the growing reliance of the state on non-governmental actors, such as business and NGOs, to sustain key services and critical infrastructure may strengthen the voice of these actors as they engage with the state<sup>30</sup>.

The pandemic also affected how external actors related to and engaged in conflict-prone countries. On the upside, the 23 March 2020 call by the UN Secretary General for a worldwide COVID-19 ceasefire<sup>31</sup> was listened to by at least some of the conflict parties for some time, as in the case of the Philippines, Cameroon, and Colombia<sup>32</sup>. Similarly, in Libya intense international pressure on conflict parties created a window of opportunity that helped humanitarian organisations to provide support in regions they could not access before<sup>33</sup>. **On the other hand, the pandemic has 'complicated' or 'interrupted' peace negotiations in Ukraine, Sudan and Libya, reduced the 'footprint of international forces' and imposed operational restrictions on international peacekeeping and crisis-management missions**<sup>34</sup>. As face-to-face meetings and negotiations have become more difficult, it has proven difficult to build up trust and understanding among conflict actors that do not know each other well already. In some cases, remote technology has allowed peace processes to continue, although problems with IT infrastructure and, particularly, internet access in some countries hampered such efforts. Moreover, in some countries, particularly in Africa, misinformation campaigns, especially by jihadist movements, sought to stigmatise all foreign workers and organisations,

<sup>23</sup> K. Mustasilta, 2020a, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> K. Mustasilta, 2020a.

<sup>25</sup> K. Mustasilta (2020b), [The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Peace and Conflict](#), 23 October 2020; see also A. Lührmann, S. F. Maerz, S. Grahn, N. Alizada, L. Gastaldi, S. Hellmeier, G. Hindle and S. I. Lindberg, [Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows. Democracy Report 2020](#), Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), 2020.

<sup>26</sup> T. James, E. Asplund, [What happens after elections are postponed? Responses to postponing elections during COVID-19 vary by regime type](#), Commentary, 2 September 2020.

<sup>27</sup> C. Cordero, R. Fontaine, ["Health Surveillance Is Here To Stay"](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 2020; N. Wright, ["Coronavirus and the Future of Surveillance"](#), *Foreign Affairs*, 6 April 2020.

<sup>28</sup> S.C. Greitens, [Dealing with Demand for China's Global Surveillance Exports](#), Brookings, April 2020, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> S.C. Greitens, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Recent piece by R. Youngs, [Coronavirus as a Catalyst for Global Civil Society](#), Carnegie Europe, December 2020.

<sup>31</sup> UN-Secretary-General António Guterres, COVID-19: UN chief calls for global ceasefire to focus on 'the true fight of our lives', 23 March 2020.

<sup>32</sup> K. Mustasilta, 2020, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> See Frontline Negotiations, [How the COVID-19 Pandemic Has Affected Humanitarian Access in Libya](#), November 2020. Workshop notes from participants.

<sup>34</sup> Frontline Negotiations, 2020.

stating that they were part of a neo-colonial project of unbelievers that imported a virus or that the virus was a punishment for the West and would not affect faithful Muslims<sup>35</sup>. More positively, some of the players involved in internationalised conflicts, such as Saudi Arabia and Russia, suffer from a decline in revenue and struggle with the impact of COVID-19 at home, which may make them more inclined to seek conflict settlement, for instance, in Yemen, Libya and Ukraine<sup>36</sup>.

The pandemic is likely to negatively affect conflict dynamics in the short to medium term through its detrimental and asymmetric economic impact on middle and particularly low-income countries. This comes about partly as a result of local restrictions, but more importantly due to falling demands for key exports from high-income countries, in particular oil, falling receipts from diaspora workers working in the Global North and falling overseas aid spending. International development and peacebuilding NGOs suffer from significant falls in their fundraising activities as restrictions affect, for instance, the opening of charity shops. Similarly, western governments may cut back on their overseas development aid spending in cases where the level of spending is pegged to a percentage of (falling) national GDP or, as a matter of discretion, as we have seen in the UK which announced a temporary cut of official development assistance (ODA) of approximately **GBP 4 billion** for 2021 (or 0.2 % GDP)<sup>37</sup>. A first analysis of aid spending from the first half of 2020 shows a 5 % drop in ODA commitments by governments, whilst international financial institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank and regional development banks, increased their assistance by 31 %, a large percentage of which is in loans rather than grants when compared to bilateral donors<sup>38</sup>. If governments do not replenish the front-loaded spending of IFIs and engage in cuts themselves, this would negatively impact the root causes of conflict and thus weaken conflict prevention efforts. There is already evidence of widening vertical and horizontal inequalities within countries between community groups and within communities, impacting those already marginalised or discriminated against such as ethnic or religious minorities, women and children<sup>39</sup>. We have seen some groups, such as migrants and refugees, being stigmatised as virus bearers<sup>40</sup>. These group-based inequalities may feed grievances and thus root causes of existing and potentially new conflicts. EU officials have also reported from their own sources in the country a significant rise in violence against women in countries where EU missions are stationed, such as Ukraine, Kosovo, Palestine and Iraq. This is a threat to human security that is also seen in Europe itself<sup>41</sup>. The scarcity and high demand for some products has increased incentives for illicit trafficking and criminal activity more broadly.<sup>42</sup> The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic therefore have multi-layered consequences that tend to reinforce existing problems in terms of poverty, human rights, inequality, crime and thus threaten human security. We can also expect familiar secondary effects, such as growing migration to the north, **putting pressure on Europe's borders. The consequences may be particularly pronounced in Africa** despite the relatively mild health impact of the pandemic as illustrated in Figure 2. In a recent report The World Bank estimated that the pandemic could 'drive up to 40 million people into extreme poverty in Africa in 2020, erasing at least five years of progress in fighting poverty'<sup>43</sup>. It advocated massive investment across these countries and financial support from the international community for 'a faster, stronger and more inclusive recovery'.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with EU official, 1 December 2020.

<sup>36</sup> K. Mustasilta, 2020, pp. 3, 5.

<sup>37</sup> V. Honeyman, '[Cuts to UK foreign aid budget are shortsighted and could damage British interests](#)', *The Conversation*, 25 November 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Development Initiatives, [How is aid changing in the Covid-19 pandemic?](#), November Briefing, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> See K. Mustasilta, 2020b. Also expert workshop, November 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Frontline Negotiations, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with EU official, 1 December 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with EU official, 1 December 2020.

<sup>43</sup> World Bank Press Release, [World Bank Confirms Economic Downturn in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 8 October 2020, based on the Report [Africa Pulse: Charting the Road to Recovery](#), Volume 22, October 2020.



### 3.2 Reassessing old and identifying new biosecurity threats

While pandemics have been part of risk registers and security strategies at national and international level for a while, COVID-19 has demonstrated the magnitude of harm caused by a virus that is relatively mild by historical standards compared to the Spanish Flu, Ebola and SARS. It is extremely dangerous not just because it is more lethal than the influenza virus that some European governments foresaw, but because it can spread so quickly and widely within populations and no effective treatment is available. The most obvious implication of COVID-19 is that Europe needs to be better prepared and more resilient to future pandemics, especially those with different characteristics, in terms of lethality or the most vulnerable groups. Learning lessons from the Asian countries that largely succeeded in suppressing the virus whilst avoiding huge economic damage is essential<sup>44</sup>. One can also look at European countries such as Finland **that pursue a 'comprehensive security' preparedness model to respond to a range of emerging threats** through close collaboration between public authorities, business, NGOs and citizens. For instance, the Finish Ministry of Defence holds a monthly security committee where permanent state secretaries meet with heads of the police, intelligence, border security and business representatives to discuss security and national risk assessments. Similarly, Latvia has been prioritising military and societal preparedness and promoted a model of close collaboration, familiarity and training to keep the state and society functioning throughout a crisis. Both countries appear to have benefitted from the preparedness when managing the pandemic<sup>45</sup>. They should also actively contribute to the success of the recently launched WHO investigation into the origins and handlings of COVID-19<sup>46</sup>, as well as the common approaches and tools needed to improve the performance of all countries. Pandemics are already part of the 360 degrees threat assessment by the EEAS and should feature as a part of the EU strategic compass. It will also require a more preventive and proactive approach by the EU and the international community to tackle the growing risk of animal-human transmission of viruses resulting from the ongoing destruction of habitats and continued existence of wet markets in some countries. Moreover, the EU will need earlier, independent and reliable data about potential outbreaks in countries as it cannot rely on waiting for the WHO again – at least as long as the organisation lacks the mechanisms and authority to launch independent investigations in member countries. Taiwan was among the countries that benefited from early warnings from scientists it had on the ground and could act much sooner than the countries that waited for confirmation from the WHO.

What is currently not discussed at European level or is, at best, marginally discussed are biosecurity and biohazards other than pandemics. It has long been argued that bioweapons are very hard to use, certainly by states and for military advantage. Similarly, terrorist groups have not yet used these weapons as far as we are aware. The risk of intentional use needs reassessing for two reasons. First of all, we can see that jihadist movements in some countries claimed that Muslims are protected from COVID-19 and only infidels from the West are susceptible<sup>47</sup>. It is conceivable if not likely that such strong, if completely misguided, beliefs spread by misinformation campaigns may motivate such groups, or lone wolf fanatics, to use such viruses with malicious intent. Secondly, the huge expansion and global efforts in producing treatments and vaccines will lead to an expansion of publicly available knowledge, a huge growth in laboratories and associated equipment and more training of staff in relevant subjects and techniques. This may lead to incrementally increased opportunities for potentially hostile actors to access dual-use technology<sup>48</sup>. However, there is also a less-acknowledged but arguably greater risk of accidents, namely dangerous bio-organisms escaping from laboratories, whether they are harvested from wild animals or genetically manipulated through a range of existing or new techniques, such gene-editing Crispr<sup>49</sup>. This was a

<sup>44</sup> R. Pacheco Pardo et al., 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Expert workshop, November 2020.

<sup>46</sup> WHO, [Independent evaluation of global COVID-19 response announced](#), 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with EU official, 1 December 2020.

<sup>48</sup> We are grateful to the participants of the workshop to pointing out the dual use issue.

<sup>49</sup> R. A. Clarke, R.P. Eddy, *Warnings: Finding Cassandras to Stop Catastrophes*, HarperCollins, 2017, Chapter 16.

debunked conspiracy theory spread in relation to the origins of the Sars-CoV2 virus, but the possibility is not implausible. Given the potentially large-scale harm created by a future accidental outbreak, the EU is well advised to work with international partners to make sure such dual-use technologies and facilities are treated in similar ways as nuclear scientists and technologies were, rather successfully, in the early 1990s after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

### 3.3 Impact on great powers and geopolitical implications

COVID-19 has been an unexpected test for the US, China and Russia, not just in how they handle and control the virus at home and limit the damage to their economies, but also in whether they benefit or suffer from the crisis in terms of their international reputation, political influence and material power. This, in turn, might affect their relations with the EU, especially as far as security and defence is concerned. We will examine how the pandemic affected each in turn and how this may have changed the overall picture.

The US has suffered the most from the pandemic so far in three interconnected ways – health, economy and global reputation. First, it has one of the worst track records in terms of managing the disease with the highest number of cases (14.6 million) and deaths (281,000)<sup>50</sup>. The Trump administration failed not only to **lead and support the state authorities' efforts to control the virus in a timely and effective manner, but it** also actively hindered such efforts with unscientific and misleading statements as well as politicking the pandemic with public attacks against public health experts and Democratic Party state governors. The gross mismanagement of the pandemic at federal level may well have been the deciding factor that cost President Trump a second term in office, considering the relatively small margin of victory in some of the battleground states and the substantial widening of the polling gap in favour of Biden from 5 % at the beginning of 2020 towards 8–9 % before the elections<sup>51</sup>. A second Trump administration would have negatively affected the prospect of cooperative relations with the EU on a range of issues and may have aggravated divisions within the EU itself.

The US economy has so far taken less of a hit than the EU on average<sup>52</sup>, but this picture may still deteriorate over the coming months as the US faces a rapidly rising curve of infections at the time of writing, whilst Congress struggles to agree on an economic stimulus package. What is clear, however, is that the US will have lost economic ground vis-à-vis China as a country, now widely seen in the US public opinion as a rival if not outright adversary. According to the IMF, the pre-pandemic difference in growth between the US and China was 3.9 % in 2019. This difference is expected to rise to 6.2 % in 2020 and stay elevated at 5.1 % in 2021<sup>53</sup>. Since the projections were made before the second wave hit the US, the pandemic will have brought forward the point in time when China overtakes the US in terms of the size of its economy, according to some recent modelling by a Japanese economic research institute in 2028/2029<sup>54</sup>. Another economic research consultancy estimates that the pandemic may have accelerated this symbolic point in time by five years<sup>55</sup>.

The Trump administration had disagreed with the EU on many key issues in foreign affairs and had labelled **the EU as a 'foe' at times**<sup>56</sup>. The US handling of the pandemic, including withdrawing from the WHO and not joining the COVAX global initiative on equitable access to the vaccine, may further explain the US

<sup>50</sup> Johns Hopkins data as of 6 December 2020.

<sup>51</sup> *Financial Times*, 'Biden vs Trump: US presidential election 2020 poll tracker', available at: <https://ig.ft.com/us-election-2020/polls/>

<sup>52</sup> IMF, *World Economic Outlook. A Long and Difficult Ascent. Full Report*, October 2020.

<sup>53</sup> IMF, 2020, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> Japan Centre of Economic Research, *Asia in the coronavirus disaster: Which countries are emerging?*, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> L. Elliott, 'China to overtake US as world's biggest economy by 2028, report predicts', *Guardian*, 26 December 2020, [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/26/china-to-overtake-us-as-worlds-biggest-economy-by-2028-report-predicts](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/26/china-to-overtake-us-as-worlds-biggest-economy-by-2028-report-predicts)

<sup>56</sup> C. Contiguglia, 'Trump: EU is one of United States' biggest foes', *Politico.eu*, 15 July 2018.

reputational decline in Europe and elsewhere<sup>57</sup>. A further loss in US soft power can be expected due to the attempts of the Trump administration to discredit the legitimacy of the election result by alleging, but not substantiating, widespread fraud and putting pressure on election officials<sup>58</sup>. It is unclear how quickly cooperative relationships and trust can be repaired with the new incoming administration and how quickly the US will be able to recover from the damage caused to health, economy and reputation. It is sensible to assume that a presidential election victory in 2024 for a Republican candidate with a similar approach and agenda as Trump (or indeed Trump himself) remains a distinct possibility. European foreign policymakers **are thus advised to hedge against such an outcome by investing in their ‘strategic autonomy’** expressed as their capability to act independently, as well as try to make it less likely by giving the new Biden administration some foreign policy ‘wins’ and strengthen international institutions – a strategy already evident in the EU attempt/initiative in this regard<sup>59</sup>. There will no doubt be more common ground on a range of foreign policy issues including re-joining the WHO and COVAX and revitalising the WTO, rescuing the Iran nuclear deal, fighting terrorism in the Middle East, supporting human rights and democracy and standing up to Russian activities to undermine the stability of its neighbours. Furthermore, the Biden administration leaves advocates of illiberal democracy within the EU with one less powerful ally across the Atlantic.

Relations between the EU and China have been deteriorating in recent years. In its March 2019 EU-China **strategic outlook, the Commission labelled the Asian country a ‘systemic rival’ and ‘strategic competitor’**<sup>60</sup>. While the strategic outlook makes clear that the EU still sees the potential to partner with China in **multilateralism, the Commission’s document also demonstrates that perceptions of the Asian country have turned increasingly negative. This is partly the result of China’s growing assertiveness domestically and in international affairs.** Examples include the crackdown on the Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region; the June 2020 Hong Kong national security law curtailing freedom of speech in the territory; island and territorial disputes with neighbours in the South China Sea; and more aggressive language and manoeuvres to intimidate Taiwan. Furthermore, China has failed to open up its economy to the extent that **many hoped when it joined the WTO in 2001. The Commission’s strategic outlook is in the context of increasingly negative perceptions of China across the general public in most EU Member States**<sup>61</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further deteriorated the image of China across most of the EU<sup>62</sup>. This ties in with more negative perceptions among the governments of EU Member States, several of which have engaged in diplomatic spats with the Chinese Government<sup>63</sup>. The allegedly secretive behaviour of the Chinese Government **in the early stages of the pandemic and the ‘wolf warrior’ behaviour of many Chinese diplomats that have attacked governments and countries across the world seem to be the main factors for the hit that China’s image has suffered. Furthermore, over the past two years there has been disillusion around Chinese ‘debt diplomacy’ and the absence of promised investment – including across central and eastern Europe where China had promised to increase investment. All of this has more than offset China’s ‘mask diplomacy’, which refers to the Chinese Government’s provision of masks and COVID-19 tests in the**

<sup>57</sup> I. Krastev, M. Leonard, *Europe’s pandemic politics: how the virus change the public’s worldview*, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2020; *Transatlantic Trends 2020: Transatlantic Opinion on Global Challenges before and after Covid-19*, Bertelsmann Foundation, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Institute Montaigne, 30 June 2020.

<sup>58</sup> For instance, J. Politi, [‘Trump pressures Georgia official to ‘find’ votes to overturn election result’](#), Financial Times, 3 January 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Financial Times, ‘EU proposes fresh alliance with US in face of China challenge’, available at: [www.ft.com/content/e8e5cf90-7448-459e-8b9f-6f34f03ab77a](https://www.ft.com/content/e8e5cf90-7448-459e-8b9f-6f34f03ab77a)

<sup>60</sup> European Commission (2019), [EU-China – A Strategic Outlook](#), 12 March 2019.

<sup>61</sup> L. Silver, K. Devlin, C. Huang (2020), *Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries*, Pew Research Center, 6 October 2020.

<sup>62</sup> L. Silver, K. Devlin, C. Huang, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> J. de Weck, [China’s COVID-19 Diplomacy is Backfiring in Europe](#), Foreign Policy Research Institute Analysis, 21 April 2020.

early stages of the pandemic. It should be noted that many of these were defective and had to be returned, which may have served to further exacerbate negative views of China in recent months.

**Arguably, China's behaviour towards Europe during the pandemic and, more generally, in recent years is related to its more assertive stance. As its state media has asserted, China considers that it is being unfairly targeted by Western countries<sup>64</sup>. The Chinese Government has reacted to what it considers to be unfair treatment with more assertive behaviour, as diplomatic spats and the 'wolf warrior' behaviour shows. In addition, it has become wary of its investments abroad due to limited returns, negative publicity and the introduction of investment screening mechanisms targeting Chinese firms. This has prompted the Chinese Government to curtail overseas investment and lending since 2018<sup>65</sup>. The promised investment in Europe, therefore, has failed to materialise.**

In this context, the EU has already showed its willingness to take a more assertive position vis-à-vis China. The EU and its Member States signed up for an Australian initiative at the WHO to investigate the origins of the pandemic<sup>66</sup>. The EU and its Member States have also launched or supported networks of cooperation with 'like-minded countries' that exclude China. These include the Smart COVID-19 Management Group initiated by Austria<sup>67</sup> and the Group of Friends of Solidarity for Global Health Security launched by South Korea which also includes Canada, Denmark, Qatar and Sierra Leone<sup>68</sup>.

At the same time, the EU has shown its willingness to cooperate with China in multilateral initiatives. Most notably, both the EU and China have signed up to the COVAX Facility, a global collaboration to accelerate the development, production and equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments and vaccines<sup>69</sup>. Also, the EU has emphasised that the investigation of the origins of the pandemic is a learning exercise to prepare for future pandemics, not an anti-China move. Outside the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic but also in 2020, the EU and China were among the countries that launched an alternative appellate body at the WTO to replace the original one, after the US threatened to derail it by refusing the appointment of new judges to replace those outgoing<sup>70</sup>.

Despite these instances of cooperation, it is clear that the EU has taken a tougher approach towards China. With Joe Biden elected as the new US president, this approach could involve transatlantic cooperation. As the European Commission indicated in a communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, and the Council in December, the recently established EU-US dialogue on China should serve as a venue for both partners to coordinate their policy towards China<sup>71</sup>. The incoming US president has indicated that he wants to restore and strengthen transatlantic relations<sup>72</sup>. The expectation is that this will involve cooperation in dealing with China, which the outgoing Donald Trump administration was unwilling to do.

Official Russian figures as of December 6 indicate there are 29,039 new cases per day and a total of 43,141 deaths even though some observers suggest an underreporting of deaths. While its 'performance' in

<sup>64</sup> China Daily, 'Huawei focus for West's prejudicial view of China: China Daily editorial', *China Daily*, 16 December 2018; Zhou J. 'Reasonable for China to counter unfair treatment, says FM', *China Daily*, 6 July 2018.

<sup>65</sup> J. Wheatley and J. Kynge, 'China curtails overseas lending in face of geopolitical backlash', *Financial Times*, 8 December 2020.

<sup>66</sup> K. Needham, 'Australia welcomes growing support for COVID-19 inquiry at WHO meeting', *Reuters*, 18 May 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Agence France Press, 'Austria Pushes Coronavirus Co-operation with 'Smart Countries'', *Agence France Presse*, 24 April 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, ROK-led "UN Group of Friends of Solidarity for Global Health Security" holds virtual high-level meeting, 24 September 2020.

<sup>69</sup> WHO, 172 countries and multiple candidate vaccines engaged in COVID-19 vaccine Global Access Facility, Geneva, 24 August 2020.

<sup>70</sup> European Commission, EU and 15 World Trade Organization members establish contingency appeal arrangement for trade disputes, Brussels, 27 March 2020.

<sup>71</sup> European Commission, A new EU-US Agenda for global change, Brussels, 2 December 2020.

<sup>72</sup> A. Bloch, J. Goldgeiger, Revising the trans-Atlantic relationship, Brookings, 17 November 2020.

controlling the virus is not good, it appears to be no worse than some of the worse affected European countries. It is currently caught in a rapidly rising second wave with record rates of infections, but it is also gearing up for the vaccination of at-risk groups and healthcare with its home-grown vaccine 'Sputnik V' – a drug that has not yet completed stage three clinical trials and with unclear efficacy. It was developed with substantial support from the main military medical directorate (GVMU)<sup>73</sup>. It is possible that Russia will gain control of the virus using the vaccine in the coming months yet it is unclear how successful it will be in selling its vaccine abroad given the concern expressed over the rigour and transparency of the development process.

The economic damage is expected by the IMF to be only half as much as the Euro-area in 2020, but the bounce-back in 2021 is likely to leave Russia falling behind the EU compared to 2019<sup>74</sup>. One particular and potentially longer-term problem for the Russian economy will be a 30 % fall in oil prices from around USD 60–70 per barrel in 2018/2019 to around USD 40 in 2020 – it was around USD 90–110 in the early 2010s when Russia heavily invested in military modernisation<sup>75</sup>. The fall in gas prices may be partially compensated for by future arms sales to solvent clients such as India and China. However, other prospective clients in the Middle East may have less cash to spare for arms given the fall in oil revenue. An IISS blog argues that Russian defence spending has been stagnant in real terms since 2017, as Western sanctions took their toll, and notes the pandemic may lead to a reduction of 5 % in the armaments programme<sup>76</sup>. However, the IISS also notes that the Russian armed forces are currently at their most capable, especially vis-à-vis Europeans slowly catching up after the last decade of cuts. This creates the prospect of a potentially fast closing window in which the military balance is tilting against Russia. What if Russia feels it needs to press its (relative) advantage now before it loses? An expert at the workshop suggested that the pandemic and the drop in spending are unlikely to change Russian revisionist strategies or strategic culture and warned that any successor to President Putin may not be less aggressive or more friendly towards the EU<sup>77</sup>.

In terms of global influence and reputation, Russian actors have been quite effective in spreading misinformation against European troops as discussed in Chapter 5. Russia has also had some propagandistic success in deploying tangible support to countries such as Italy during the onset of the pandemic when many of its European neighbours were closing their borders. Since then, doubts have been voiced about how altruistic and useful this help actually was, but it is fair to say that European actors were not nimble and proactive enough in their communication and not coordinated and effective enough in **supporting each other. Russia's misinformation campaigns and attempts to steal scientific research** fall into previous patterns of behaviour. Events in Belarus, and potentially Armenia, suggest some erosion of Russian influence on its geographical neighbours in the face of growing societal demands as well as competition from powers such as Turkey<sup>78</sup>.

<sup>73</sup> R. Thornton, M. Miron, [Russia's COVID-19 vaccine, the military input and what it may mean for the future use of biological weapons](#), Defence-in-depth, King's College London, November 2020.

<sup>74</sup> IMF, October 2020.

<sup>75</sup> WTI Crude Oil Prices - 10 Year Daily Chart, available at: [www.macrotrends.net/2516/wti-crude-oil-prices-10-year-daily-chart](http://www.macrotrends.net/2516/wti-crude-oil-prices-10-year-daily-chart)

<sup>76</sup> F. McGerty, [Budget and pandemic present challenges to Russia's defence industrial base](#), IISS, 17 August 2020.

<sup>77</sup> Expert workshop, November 2020.

<sup>78</sup> S. Meister, [Moscow's Waning Influence Creates Security Vacuum in the Post-Soviet Space](#), Blog Post, Wilson Center, 18 December 2020.



## 4 Defence capacities, spending, the EDTIB and the EDF

The 26 European Defence Agency (EDA) member states spent **EUR 223.4 billion** on defence in 2018, which equates to 1.4 % of GDP<sup>79</sup>. As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU economy is expected to have suffered a historic recession in 2020. According to the Commission's autumn economic forecast, the economy of the EU is set to contract by 7.5 % in 2020. The Commission projects that the size of most EU member state economies will only reach pre-pandemic levels in 2022 or 2023<sup>80</sup>. As a result, tax revenues are expected to go down across the EU. In turn, most EU Member States will have to make choices about budgets cuts, tax increases or both once the pandemic is over. It remains to be seen, however, how quickly the cuts will be implemented and how deep they will be. Likewise, it is uncertain to what extent the **EUR 750 billion** pandemic recovery instrument will serve as a buffer to reduce the magnitude of the cuts. The economic downturn is the result of a combination of factors: the impact of infections and subsequent fear of being infected among a substantial part of the population; inadequate governmental responses across most of the EU leading to an inability to maintain the pandemic under control; and the strict measures that many governments have had to take as a result, and which have led to strict lockdowns across most of the EU. There is an expectation that vaccination campaigns starting in late 2020 will help to restore confidence among EU citizens and, as a result, economic growth will rebound from spring. The experiences of Australia, South Korea and Taiwan, which have managed the pandemic better than the EU, suggests that this will be the case. In these countries, consumer spending in goods and services and manufacturing activity recovered substantially in the third quarter of 2020 as the pandemic came under control. This could support a faster economic recovery than the latest predictions indicate. But high public debt and a poor fiscal position across the EU will not alter the basic premise that most governments are very likely to introduce budget cuts. In this context, defence spending may suffer cuts. As a result, the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) could suffer from the economic downturn.

### Potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on defence spending

In terms of the impact of the pandemic on defence spending hitherto, however, it should be noted that so far there have been no announcements of defence spending cuts due to the pandemic at EU Member State level. In fact, Germany and France, which have the two largest defence budgets among EU Member States, have expressed their commitment to protecting military spending. Czechia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland and Romania are among the EU Member States set to maintain or even increase their defence budgets<sup>81</sup>. This should help to maintain and even strengthen defence capabilities in the short term. However, the expectation is that there will be cuts in the medium term. The defence news agency Janes estimates that European defence spending will decrease in 2021 due to COVID-19, and also forecasts that defence spending in 2025 could be up to 20 % lower in real terms than it would have been otherwise<sup>82</sup>. As a result, procurement programmes and Research & Development (R&D) activities are expected to suffer.

Furthermore, there have already been announcements of spending cuts to EU programmes. Most notably, the European Defence Fund (EDF) was originally set to receive **EUR 13.4 bn** for the next EU Multiannual Financial Network for 2021–27 (in current EUR prices). This was cut to **EUR 8 bn** in May 2020<sup>83</sup>. This figure was then revised down to **EUR 7.9 bn**<sup>84</sup>. This would amount to about 45 % of the development projects of EU Member State defence projects, provided that EU investment does not crowd out domestic investment.

<sup>79</sup> European Defence Agency (EDA) (2019), [Defence Data 2017-2018](#).

<sup>80</sup> European Commission, [European Economic Forecast, Autumn 2020](#), Institutional Paper 136, November 2020.

<sup>81</sup> S. Becker, S. Hellmonds, C. Mölling, T. Schütz, COVID-19 and European Defense – Voices from the Capitals, *DGAP*, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Janes, 'Covid-19 Impact: Defence Spending Down Among NATO's Top European Spenders, predicts Janes', *Janes*, 8 June 2020.

<sup>83</sup> A. Billon-Galland, [COVID-19 Strengthens the Case for EU Defence](#), Chatham House Expert Comment, 17 June 2020.

<sup>84</sup> J. Barigazzi, ['European defense hopes live to fight another day \(just\)'](#), *Politico*, 29 May 2020.



Meanwhile, the proposed funding for military mobility to support the unhindered movement of military personnel and assets across EU Member State borders stands at EUR 1.5 bn, rather than the EUR 5.9 bn originally proposed (in current EUR prices<sup>85</sup>). In sharp contrast, spending on the economy and health has been increased as a result of the pandemic. Furthermore, the fact that EU Member States have found it relatively easy to agree on cuts to defence spending at EU level suggests that they could follow a similar approach at domestic level. Politically, it is probably easier to agree to defence spending cuts rather than to a second wave of austerity or to implementing cuts in areas, such as healthcare, that have been severely disrupted by the pandemic.

The experience of the Global Financial and Eurozone Sovereign Debt crises can serve as a guide about the effects that a sharp economic downturn will have on defence spending, and consequently on defence capabilities. Following these crises, European governments reduced their defence budgets. Between 2009 and 2013, European countries cut their defence spending. The cuts ranged from around 30 % in smaller states to around 8 % in bigger states<sup>86</sup>. A total of around EUR 24 bn was cut in the years following these crises<sup>87</sup>. Defence spending only reached pre-crisis levels in 2018. Furthermore, according to the EDA, military investment from EU Member States declined by 22 % in the period between 2007 and 2014<sup>88</sup>. This has had lasting effects across the EU, and capability gaps remain. R&D spending was the main target of budget cuts<sup>89</sup>. The planning cycles for defence platforms and equipment tend to be long, and the effects of reducing R&D investment – whether cuts are made by governments or in-house by firms themselves – are felt for years. As a result, European armies have lost around 35 % of their military capabilities over the past two decades<sup>90</sup>. In the current crisis, although all Member States were similarly vulnerable to the initial economic shock, they are expected to diverge significantly in terms of their medium-term drop in output and strength of their recovery. National fiscal stimuli could counteract the budgetary losses, at least to an extent. Countries may consider investing part of their economic recovery packages directly into the defence industrial sector. Furthermore, the EU recovery instrument could help to offset some of the cuts that defence budgets would have otherwise suffered. The EU may also consider channelling resources, including a portion of the recovery instrument, into the defence industrial sector directly.

The context in which the pandemic is taking place, however, is different from the context during the Global Financial and Eurozone Sovereign Debt crises. To begin with, Member States have learnt that the post-crises cuts were too deep and too damaging to their capabilities<sup>91</sup>. Also, there is an expectation that the incoming president-elect **Joe Biden's administration will continue** to ask NATO countries to increase military spending, including the EU Member States that belong to the organisation. This has been a long-standing US policy dating back to the 1960s. But a less antagonistic approach from the Biden administration compared to outgoing president Donald Trump and a different geopolitical context could help EU Member States to decide not to cut their defence spending as much as they did following previous economic crises. Nonetheless, NATO has projected that two thirds of its members will miss the 2014 target to spend 2 % of their GDP on defence this year<sup>92</sup>. And since this target is linked to GDP, which will decrease this year due to the pandemic-induced recession, defence budgets would fall in real terms compared to a situation when there had been no economic downturn. In fact, even NATO members fulfilling the 2 % commitment could do

<sup>85</sup> J. Barigazzi, 2020.

<sup>86</sup> C. Mölling, S.C. Brune (2011), *The Impact of The Financial Crisis on European Defence*, European Parliament, Brussels, 2011.

<sup>87</sup> D. Fiott, *Will European Defence survive Coronavirus*, Real Instituto Elcano Royal Institute, 29 June 2020.

<sup>88</sup> EDA, 2019.

<sup>89</sup> F. Mauro, K. Thoma, *The future of EU defence research*, European Parliament, SEDE, Brussels, 2016.

<sup>90</sup> C. Major, C. Mölling, 'The EU's military legacy: Over-institutionalised, under-equipped and strategically divided,' [in:] D. Fiott (ed.), *The CSDP in 2020: The EU's legacy and ambition in security and defence*, EUISS, Brussels, EUISS, Brussels, 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with EU official, 24 November 2020. Expert workshop, 30 November 2020.

<sup>92</sup> NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013-2020)*, 21 October 2020.

this as a result of their lower GDP, which would still mean that real defence spending would be lower than it would have been without the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the effect that a more persuasive approach, which a less antagonistic US administration may have, would be tempered by the effects of the recession in any case.

In terms of the broader geopolitical context, the EU's push for 'European strategic autonomy' (ESA) could support defence spending. First introduced by the Council of Ministers in 2013 and formalised in the EU's Global Strategy of June 2016, 'European strategic autonomy is goal number one for our generation' according to European Council President Charles Michel<sup>93</sup>. ESA is not universally accepted across all EU Member States, but at least half of them consider it to be important for the Union<sup>94</sup>. And as EU High Representative Joseph Borrell has stated, there seems to be an agreement that ESA entails 'a certain degree of autonomy'<sup>95</sup>. This would include the development of autonomous defence capabilities to supplement, rather than replace, national government and NATO capabilities. Therefore, a renewed push for ESA could result in greater defence spending across EU Member States. However, the election of Joe Biden and the prospect that he will take a less confrontational approach towards Europe casts doubt on the extent to which commitment to ESA will continue, even among its strongest proponents.

Great power competition between the US and China should help to offset some of the defence spending cuts that the pandemic would otherwise have led to. European threat perceptions related to the behaviour of China or Russia, dating back to its annexation of Crimea in 2014, should also help in this respect. In fact, the re-emergence of great power competition and threat perceptions contributed to the increase in defence spending during the second half of the 2010s<sup>96</sup>. Great power competition and threat perceptions are going to continue. In fact, the Indo-Pacific strategies launched by France, Germany, the Netherlands and soon the EU suggest that the Union and its Member States want to become more involved in addressing this changed geopolitical context<sup>97</sup>. Furthermore, the human and economic toll of the pandemic itself has laid bare that the EU has to prepare itself for the threat of future pandemics, epidemics or a potential biochemical attack. EU Member States have mobilised their military forces to airlift, transport and deliver equipment, or to transport patients<sup>98</sup>. As governments seek to prevent and mitigate the effects of this type of threat, the positive role played by military forces could be seen as a reason to offset some of the expected defence spending cuts.

#### European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB)

Europe's EDTIB sector should also be able to mitigate some of the negative effects of lower defence budgets thanks to growing defence spending in Asia and the Middle East. EU arms transfers reached a new post-Cold War high in 2015–2019. This was driven by purchases from Asia and the Middle East, including countries such as Egypt, India, Pakistan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The leading EU arms exporters including France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands have all benefited from this trend. French exports increased by 72 % in 2015–2019 compared to 2010–2014, reaching their highest levels since 1990. Meanwhile, German exports grew by 17 % in 2015–2019 compared to 2010–2014<sup>99</sup>. Countries across Asia and the Middle East have also suffered

<sup>93</sup> C. Michel, [Recovery Plan: powering Europe's strategic autonomy – Speech by Charles Michel at the Brussels Economic Forum](#), 8 September 2020.

<sup>94</sup> U. Franke, T. Varma, [Independence play: Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy](#), *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 July 2019.

<sup>95</sup> E. Zalan, 'Borrell: EU doesn't need to choose between US and China', *EU Observer*, 2 June 2020.

<sup>96</sup> P. Morcos, 'Toward a New "Lost Decade"? Covid-19 and Defense Spending in Europe', *CSIS Briefs*, 15 October 2020.

<sup>97</sup> L. Louis, 'The Outlines of a European Policy on the Indo-Pacific', *The Interpreter*, 26 November 2020.

<sup>98</sup> M. Daventry, [Don't cut back on military spending because of COVID-19, European defence chief warns](#), *Euronews*, 17 November 2020.

<sup>99</sup> P. D. Wezeman, A. Fleurant, A. Kuimova, D. Lopes da Silva, N. Tian, S. T. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers 2019*, SIPRI, March 2020.

recessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Asia, the expectation is that defence spending will be relatively unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is due to a smaller economic hit from the pandemic, as well as ongoing tensions in the region that drive this spending<sup>100</sup>. In the case of the Middle East, defence spending should also be relatively unaffected by the pandemic due to the existing internal conflicts and tensions among countries in the region. But a hit to oil and gas prices could see spending decrease since it tends to follow the price cycles of both resources<sup>101</sup>. Export opportunities in Asia and the Middle East will help the EDTIB by helping to shore up EU exporters' balance sheets.

As a result of the pandemic, the EDTIB sector could replicate the experience of the US defence sector and consolidate. Shrinking demand, a lack of competitiveness and the political will of European governments are the three key factors determining consolidation<sup>102</sup>. Demand, as already stated, is expected to decrease as most EU Member State governments will probably implement budget cuts. In recent years, European firms launched joint ventures or joint holdings to boost their competitiveness against US firms and new competitors from countries such as South Korea and Turkey. But they have been more reluctant to merge. Nexter, for example, merged with KMW and acquired Mecar and Simmel Difesa<sup>103</sup> but this has been an exception rather than a rule, as the failed merger between BAE and EADS shows. In sharp contrast, mergers and acquisitions have accelerated in the US under President Donald Trump. Therefore, it seems that it will be political will that will determine whether consolidation takes place in Europe or not. Fears of job losses in the defence sector and concerns about national sovereignty have dented the willingness of policymakers to support mergers. Governments will have to consider whether bigger European defence companies or a larger pool of smaller firms best serve their interests in a context of reduced defence budgets.

**On the question of political will to consolidate Europe's EDTIB, it should be noted that this has been a long-term goal for the EU that can be traced back to the aftermath of the Cold War.** In 2013, a report presented by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton stated that the European defence market was fragmented both in terms of demand and supply. The report went on to raise concerns about the sustainability of this model<sup>104</sup>. In 2014, *A New Deal for European Defence* laid a roadmap to strengthen the EU's defence industry. Among others, the report implicitly suggested the benefits of consolidation among European defence firms<sup>105</sup>. The EDF set to be launched in 2021 should support this drive for consolidation<sup>106</sup>. In practice, however, it remains to be seen whether EU Member States will support consolidation, which could result in a smaller domestic defence industry.

### European Defence Fund (EDF)

Focusing on the EDF in particular, the intention of the EU is for the fund to focus on multinational defence projects covering defence R&D – previously covered by the pilot 2017–2019 Preparatory Action on Defence Research (PADR) project – and defence capability development and prototyping – currently covered by the 2019–2020 pilot European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP) project. The EDF would work alongside the Capability Development Plan (CDP), the Overarching Strategic Research Agenda (OSRA), the Coordinated Annual Review of Defence (CARD) and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) for the purpose of defence capability development<sup>107</sup>. Even though its proposed budget has almost halved compared to the initial proposal, it will still be a substantial increase from the budgets of the Pilot Project,

<sup>100</sup> Janes, 'Defence spending in Asia largely unaffected by Covid-19, says Janes', *Janes*, 17 November 2020.

<sup>101</sup> A. Leboulangier, D. Berenson, 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Middle East Defense Spending', *Avascent*, 11 June 2020.

<sup>102</sup> L. Béraud-Sudreau, 'COVID-19: A new wave of European arms industry consolidation?', *SIPRI Commentary*, 17 September 2020.

<sup>103</sup> L. Béraud-Sudreau, 2020.

<sup>104</sup> B. Wilkinson, *In-Depth Analysis: The EU's Defence Technological and Industrial Base*, European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 603.483-January 2020.

<sup>105</sup> B. Wilkinson, 2020.

<sup>106</sup> B. Wilkinson, 2020.

<sup>107</sup> EDA, 'EDF: Opening New 'Windows' for Defence Support', *European Defence Matters*, 2020.

PADR and EDIDP, which stood at EUR 1.4 m, EUR 90 m and EUR 500 m, respectively<sup>108</sup>. Therefore, even though the EDF will be affected by the pandemic, it is still going to represent a substantive step towards EU defence capacity-building integration. The EDF will help to strengthen links among defence firms across different Member States. This might lay the groundwork for consolidation in the future. The EDF will also help to offset some of the defence spending cuts that Member State governments are expected to introduce. This is an important difference to the situation post-Global Financial and Eurozone Sovereign Debt crises.

PESCO is the other element that could drive integration and help to address some of the negative effects of potential cuts to defence budgets. Formed in 2018 and involving the armed forces of 25 of the 27 EU Member States, it sets a list of binding commitments for participating Member States to invest, plan, develop and operate defence capabilities together<sup>109</sup>. PESCO could focus on operational capabilities such as a main battle tank<sup>110</sup>. PESCO can clearly support more cost-effective development and deployment of defence capabilities, and could eventually also result in defence industry consolidation. As a recent strategic review approved by the Council has highlighted, PESCO can support integration in a range of areas including land battlefield missile systems, maritime surveillance, cyber rapid or response teams<sup>111</sup>. Having said that, PESCO depends on **Member States' financial contributions. It remains to be seen whether** the predicted spending cuts have a significant knock-on effect on its ambitions. In any case, PESCO is another instrument absent in the aftermath of the crises starting in 2007 that suggests that the defence industry might not be as badly hit post-pandemic.

**The launch of the Commission's Directorate-General for Defence Industry and Space (DEFIS)** in 2020 is another element suggesting that the EDTIB could withstand the pandemic-induced economic contraction better than previous crises. The DEFIS will implement and monitor the EDF, push to build an open and competitive European defence market and lead on the implementation of the Action Plan on Military Mobility<sup>112</sup>. The expectation is that the DEFIS will become a harbinger of defence sector integration and indirectly create more incentives for defence industry consolidation. Likewise, the recently launched Strategic Compass process should also support this integration process once it is adopted in 2022. One of the remits of the Strategic Compass is to address capabilities and instruments together with three other areas, with the goal of strengthening European common security and defence culture<sup>113</sup>. Even though drafting of the Strategic Compass will only start during the second half of 2021, following a dialogue with the EU Member States during the first half, it is to be expected that the development of a more integrated EDTIB will be one of its conclusions.

The COVID-19 pandemic could also have an effect on EU-level capability planning as strategic priorities change. Societal resilience and non-military threats are very likely to become higher priorities. PESCO projects **including the European Medical Command, the 'Special Forces Medical Training Centre', the 'CBRN Defence Training Range', the 'Deployable Military Disaster Relief Capability Project' and the military mobility project** suggest that the EU is aware of this<sup>114</sup>. In the longer term, the EU could also develop its own military command and control centre to manage this type of crisis, supporting the civilian protection mechanism<sup>115</sup>. The taskforce that the EU launched to share information on CSDP, mobilise national armies to transport patients and medical supplies across the EU earlier in 2020 is an example of the ways in which the defence sector can

<sup>108</sup> B. Wilkinson, 2020.

<sup>109</sup> About PESCO, available at: <https://pesco.europa.eu>.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with EU official, November 2020.

<sup>111</sup> Council of the European Union (2020), Council Conclusions on the PESCO Strategic Review 2020, 20 November 2020.

<sup>112</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General Defence Industry and Space, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/defence-industry-and-space\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/defence-industry-and-space_en).

<sup>113</sup> European External Action Service, [Towards a Strategic Compass](#), 2020.

<sup>114</sup> T. Latici, 2020.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with EU official, 3 December 2020.

contribute to societal resilience<sup>116</sup>. The EDF's call for proposals including a category on CBRN medical countermeasures is another example<sup>117</sup>. With the Strategic Compass also focusing on assessing the threats to European security, it is likely that the EU will prioritise **societal resilience for years to come**. If the EU's defence sector understands this, it will be able to better withstand the expected cuts to defence budgets.

#### Potential long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the EDTIB

Moving beyond the ways in which the pandemic and pre-existing trends might interact to affect defence capacities and the EDTIB, there are two crisis-specific developments that have had a negative effect on the EDTIB and could potentially have longer-term consequences. The lockdown in Europe and other parts of the world has affected supply chains and R&D activities<sup>118</sup>. The different reactions to the pandemic across the world, and even within Europe, have made planning and production harder. This is particularly applies to firms operating across borders, since single components may suddenly become delayed or unavailable<sup>119</sup>. Within Europe, the introduction of internal border controls, as well as a slowdown in export licensing, have stalled cross-border trade and exports<sup>120</sup>. Furthermore, defence firms using European components in the US and Asia may consider that it is in their interests to reduce reliance on components from other regions, including Europe, due to the potential of similar disruptions in the future (and vice versa, EU firms might decide to reduce reliance on American or Asian components.) In addition, a potential US move to reduce dependency on international suppliers could increase supply chain costs for arms producers. These higher costs would affect European programmes that rely on components produced in the US, while also increasing the costs of imported systems<sup>121</sup>.

Another effect of the pandemic with potential negative longer-term consequences for the EDTIB is the dramatic decrease in international air travel, especially for passengers but to an extent also for freight. Passenger air travel was down by 90 % year-on-year in April 2020 and was still down by 75 % in August when most of the northern hemisphere, including Europe, had relaxed lockdown and travel quarantine measures. As for freight, it was 30 % down in April year-on-year and 12 % in August due to the reduction in economic activity<sup>122</sup>. This has affected European defence firms that also focus on civil aeronautics, as the current troubles of Rolls Royce demonstrate. Revenue losses in civil aeronautics hit both big EU firms and its SMEs, which are often less resilient to revenue cuts<sup>123</sup>. Firms that have been able to offset reduced civilian returns with defence-related contracts seem to have fared better<sup>124</sup> but the longer the pandemic impacts air traffic, the more these firms will suffer. The experience of past pandemics is useful to estimate when air traffic will reach pre-pandemic levels. Following the 2003 SARS pandemic, air travel in the Asia-Pacific returned to its pre-pandemic level within seven months. Figures for November show that air traffic was still 40 % lower on a year-to-year basis. The expectation is that returning to pre-pandemic air traffic activity will have to wait until 2022 and that would be the best case scenario<sup>125</sup>.

Compared to the last crisis, the EU and its Member States are better prepared with regard to a common understanding of threats and challenges. The geopolitical context has changed and US-China rivalry and

<sup>116</sup> M. Daventry, 2020.

<sup>117</sup> European Commission, European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP) 2020 calls for proposals conditions for the calls and annexe, Brussels, 2020.

<sup>118</sup> T. Latici, *The role of armed forces in the fight against coronavirus*, European Parliamentary Research Service, April 2020.

<sup>119</sup> T. Schütz, COVID-19 and the German defence technological and industrial base: Impact and Policy Responses, ARES – Armament Industry European Research Group, 2020.

<sup>120</sup> J.P. Maulny, COVID-19 and the French defence technological and industrial base: Impact and Policy Responses, ARES - Armament Industry European Research Group, 2020.

<sup>121</sup> S. Becker, C. Mölling, C., Schütz, *Deterrence and Defense in Times of COVID-19: Europe's Political Choices*, DGAP Policy Brief, April 2020.

<sup>122</sup> OECD, COVID-19 and the aviation industry: Impact and policy responses, 15 October 2020.

<sup>123</sup> J.P. Maulny, 2020.

<sup>124</sup> T. Schütz, 2020.

<sup>125</sup> ICAO (2020), [Effects of Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) on Civil Aviation: Economic Impact Analysis](#), 24 November 2020.



threat perceptions, including a more assertive Russia and China, inform a more strategic security approach. The Strategic Compass process will help to further consolidate the process. The launch of the EDF and its predecessors, PESCO, DEFIS and other defence security initiatives have created a framework that supports greater cooperation across the EU. Even though defence spending is likely to be cut and some Member States might prefer to focus on national resilience, developments over the past decade should help the EDTIB and defence capacities to suffer less from the 2020 economic recession than from the previous economic crisis.

## 5 CSDP missions and operations and the role of the military in public health emergencies

### 5.1 Impact of COVID-19 on European armed forces and military contribution to government responses to the crisis

From the beginning of the pandemic, all nations introduced measures to protect the health of their armed forces personnel that mirrored national policies. This included the introduction of social distancing, a shift to working from home and a substantial reduction in military training and field exercises. The extent and nature of these measures is just beginning to be described in military medical academic literature, such as protective measures in the Israeli Defence Forces<sup>126</sup>, the military medical response in France<sup>127</sup> and the identification of asymptomatic cases in military quarantine centres in India<sup>128</sup>. Military health systems adjusted to caring for COVID-19 cases, identified and isolated contacts, and introduced digitally supported alternative healthcare systems. These measures applied to military personnel and entitled beneficiaries (e.g. families and retirees). As nations relaxed measures over the summer of 2020, armed forces gradually re-established their military training programmes whilst introducing quarantine measures for cohorts of personnel in order to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19 across large numbers of personnel.

Outbreaks of COVID-19 amongst armed forces personnel have had a substantial impact on military capabilities. Whilst not all outbreaks have been reported in open sources, they have had a noticeable **impact on ships' companies and maritime capabilities. This is probably a result of the cramped nature of communal living and the difficulty of identifying and isolating potential COVID-19 cases and their contacts.** Examples include the outbreaks reported on the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle<sup>129</sup>, the UK aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth<sup>130</sup>, the UK nuclear submarine HMS Vigilant<sup>131</sup>, the Belgian Frigate Leopold 1<sup>132</sup> and the Dutch submarine HNLMS Dolfijn<sup>133</sup>. It is likely that COVID-19 outbreaks have also affected army and air force units across European armed forces, but the impact is less public. Overall, the true implications of outbreaks of COVID-19 on European defence capability is likely to be classified. However, it will take time for **'military productivity'** to return to pre COVID-19 levels with a consequent impact on the rate of induction of new recruits, the depth of individual military skills and the programme of collective training across national military forces and between nations. This is an indicator of the potential effectiveness of using an infectious disease as a weapon (either a naturally occurring disease or one developed as a

<sup>126</sup> D. Segal, et. al., 'Measures to Limit COVID-19 Outbreak Effects Among Military Personnel: Preliminary Data', *Military medicine*, 185(9-10), 2020, e1624–e1631, <https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usaa112>

<sup>127</sup> P. Pasquier, A. Luft, J. Gillard et al., 'How do we fight COVID-19? Military medical actions in the war against the COVID-19 pandemic in France', *BMJ Mil Health*, Published Online First: 05 August 2020. doi: 10.1136/bmjilitary-2020-001569

<sup>128</sup> R.K. Joshi, R.K. Ray, S. Adhya et al., 'Spread of COVID-19 by asymptomatic cases: evidence from military quarantine facilities', *BMJ Mil Health*, Published Online First: 29 October 2020. doi: 10.1136/bmjilitary-2020-001669

<sup>129</sup> A. Boretti, 'Analysis of the Charles De Gaulle Aircraft Carrier Covid19 Epidemic: Infectivity and Fatality in the Young, Healthy, Active Population: Lesson from the Charles de Gaulle Aircraft Carrier Covid19 Experience', *Integrative Journal of Medical Sciences*, 7, 2020. doi: 10.15342/ijms.7.174.

<sup>130</sup> BBC News, 'HMS Queen Elizabeth postpones mission due to Covid-19', 7 September 2020.

<sup>131</sup> Daily Mail, 'Quarter of crew on £3billion nuclear submarine dubbed 'HMS sex and cocaine' test positive for coronavirus after defying orders and going drinking at bars and strip clubs near US naval base', 30 October 2020.

<sup>132</sup> Bruxelles 2, 'Covid-19. Did Belgium make the right choice by interrupting the Foch mission?', 10 April 2020.

<sup>133</sup> NL Times, 'Dutch submarine crew returning early after 8 test positive for coronavirus', 30 March 2020.



biological weapon) or the opportunities presented by the disruption caused by a disease as cover to further the interests of adversaries. However, the experience of maintaining business continuity for military organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic is also likely to be transferrable to other crisis situations (e.g. virtual working and training, increased attention to cybersecurity).

The armed forces have been a critical component of national crisis response. Initially, this covered general military support such as assistance with command and control, repatriation of citizens, logistics, disinfection of public spaces and, in some countries, support to police and internal security. Military medical services have provided extra capacity to the civilian health system including access to military hospitals, deployment of field hospitals and the building of temporary hospitals in convention centres and stadiums. Military medical services have assisted with the movement of COVID-19 patients by ambulance, train, sea and air. In addition to supporting hospitals, in many countries the armed forces also supported the nursing and social care system. This experience identified some friction in the processes of managing demand in national health systems and at European level that would have also constrained strategic casualty regulation and evacuation in the event of major conflict in Eastern Europe. Our policy brief provides a fuller analysis of the contribution of the armed forces during the spring and summer of 2020<sup>134</sup>.

As the incidence of COVID-19 diminished during the summer, the role of the armed forces shifted towards supporting sample collection, diagnostic testing and the tracing of contacts within national COVID health surveillance systems<sup>135</sup>. This included the application of these measures for armed forces personnel. Armed forces personnel have also been involved in medical research programmes that will contribute to the understanding of COVID-19. It is likely that European armed forces personnel will play a significant role in supporting immunisation programmes over the winter of 2020/spring of 2021 as the COVID-19 vaccines become available<sup>136,137</sup>.

The European multilateral security and defence institutions, NATO and the EU have provided active platforms for sharing information on the COVID-19 crisis between European military leaders. This included the establishment of separate COVID-19 taskforces under both institutions<sup>138,139</sup>. A COVID-19 Information Sharing Platform was set up by the EU military staff to share data from EU Member States and EU missions. Similarly, the NATO Military Medical Centre of Excellence has provided a specific weekly report on COVID-19<sup>140</sup>. The Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (Eadccc) has brokered mutual support across European nations and military support for international requests including the establishment of a NATO-shared pool of ventilators<sup>141</sup>. The European Air Transport Command (EATC) has played an important role in providing medical evacuation, repatriation of military personnel and repatriation of civilians in support of partner nations<sup>142</sup>. The NATO Science and Technology Organisation has funded a specific

<sup>134</sup> How the COVID-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects for the EU. Policy Brief. PE 603.510 - July 2020. Available at: [www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/603510/EXPO\\_BRI\(2020\)603510\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/603510/EXPO_BRI(2020)603510_EN.pdf).

<sup>135</sup> Italy Ministry of Defence, [Covid-19: Operation Igea della Difesa starts, 200 Drive-throughs will carry out 30,000 swabs per day](#), 30 October 2020.

<sup>136</sup> Italian Ministry of Defence, [Coronavirus vaccine: the Defense provides and will provide the requested support](#), 2 December 2020.

<sup>137</sup> German Ministry of Defence, [COVID-19Coronavirus Disease 2019: Bundeswehr is part of the vaccination strategy](#), 2 December 2020.

<sup>138</sup> SACEUR remarks on COVID-19 Task Force. SHAPE, available at: <https://shape.nato.int/saceur/saceur-remarks-on-covid19-task-force>.

<sup>139</sup> EEAS, [Coronavirus: Taskforce to facilitate information exchange among EU's armed forces](#), 15 April 2020.

<sup>140</sup> NATO Military Medical Centre of Excellence COVID-19 resources, available at: <https://www.coemed.org/resources/COVID19>.

<sup>141</sup> Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), available at: [www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_117757.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_117757.htm)

<sup>142</sup> European Air Transport Command, Covid-19 update: A common fleet against the virus through a responsive and proactive support! Update 06.11.2020, available at: <https://eatc-mil.com/post/covid-19-update-a-common-fleet-against-the-virus-through-a-responsive-and-proactive-support-update-06-11-2020?search=%3Cmark%3Ecovid%3C/mark%3E>

programme to provide scientific support to the COVID-19 crisis<sup>143</sup>. One official we interviewed felt that EU-NATO cooperation in the early weeks and months was characterised by substantial duplication if not **competition as an** 'entire range of military support was conducted by both organisations and in the same way more or less (...) there was rare coordination. It would make sense really to coordinate and agree on **who is doing what**'<sup>144</sup>. One positive instance of cooperation was that the NATO Multinational Medical Coordination Centre/European Medical Command (MMCC/EMC) has supported medical planning for both NATO and the EU military staff<sup>145</sup>. In November 2020, the MNCC/EMC hosted Exercise RESILIENT RESPONSE, a multinational civil-military crisis planning exercise to improve multilateral coordination and understanding<sup>146</sup>. This week-long exercise involved over 70 participants from 15 nations and multiple European institutions including the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) in Helsinki and the Federal Office for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief (BBK). It demonstrated the potential for wargaming to rehearse national and international policies, procedures and processes to manage regional crises. Overall, these examples of collaboration and resource pooling should be reviewed to determine if they should be deepened or broadened to provide greater resilience across and between the EU and NATO.

Looking ahead, it is likely that countries will continue to use their armed forces to support aspects of their national response to COVID-19. Armed forces will need to maintain their protective measures against the risk of outbreaks of COVID-19 until they have been vaccinated. The European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions (Euromil) issued a position statement in October 2020 calling upon governments to respect their duty of care towards armed forces personnel<sup>147</sup>. The position of military personnel within the prioritisation of vaccination for population groups is unclear. For instance, the UK published advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation in December 2020 that placed the military in the second phase of the UK programme<sup>148</sup>. **Therefore, in the short term, 'military productivity'** across European nations is likely to be reduced until armed forces personnel have been vaccinated. There will then need to be a period of recovery when normal military training activities have been restored and recruiting pipelines have returned to full efficiency.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of resilience to strategic shocks (such as pandemics) as a component of national and regional security. This has been evident in the capacity of national health systems, supply chains for critical supplies (e.g. personal protective equipment and ventilators), strategic communications and disinformation, and cybersecurity. It has also shown the contribution of the armed forces to national crisis response, though at a cost to their primary military activities. However, there has been significant variation between European nations in the extent of military support which creates opportunities for comparison and interpretation<sup>149</sup>. Whilst considerable effort is invested in military-military collaboration and civil-military collaboration for deployed missions, there has been less investment in civil-military collaboration as part of civil protection.

<sup>143</sup> NATO, [Coronavirus: Alliance scientists respond to the challenge](#), 10 July 2020.

<sup>144</sup> Interview EU official, 3 December 2020.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with BG Kowitz, Director of MMCC/EMC 23 November 2020.

<sup>146</sup> Bundeswehr, [Resilient Response 2020 pandemic exercise starts](#), 23 November 2020.

<sup>147</sup> EUROMIL, [Recommendations on Handling the COVID-19 Pandemic in the European Armed Forces](#), 22 October 2020.

<sup>148</sup> UK Department of Health and Social Care, [Priority groups for coronavirus \(COVID-19\) vaccination: advice from the JCVI](#), 2 December 2020.

<sup>149</sup> F. Opillard, A. Palle, L. Michelis, 'Discourse and Strategic Use of the Military in France and Europe in the COVID-19 Crisis'. *Tijds. voor econ. en Soc. Geog.*, 111: 239-259, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12451>

## 5.2 CSDP missions – continuity and effectiveness

Around 5,000 EU military and civilian personnel are employed in 17 CSDP missions (6 military and 11 civilian) **in Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Their tasks** ‘range from conflict prevention and peacekeeping, crisis-management, joint disarmament operations and military advice and assistance tasks to humanitarian, rescue and post-conflict stabilisation’<sup>150</sup>. COVID-19 had a significant impact on overseas missions for many international organisations. Much like the **UN’s** and **NATO’s**, the **EU’s** activity in this respect has also been influenced.

The EU training missions in Mali, Somalia and the Central African Republic have been particularly affected by **the pandemic. The first response was to ‘lockdown’ to reduce** the risks of COVID-19 transmission within contingents and, importantly, from international personnel to local populations. The crisis also reduced the capacity of local security partners to receive the training provided by EU personnel, either because they were supporting the local response **or because they were not able to undertake the training in a ‘COVID-safe’** manner (e.g. did not have the IT infrastructure to undertake remote training). In the early months of the pandemic, the widespread assumption among the EEAS was that host countries in Africa were likely to be strongly affected by the virus given the weakness of their health systems and poor public health conditions and because many live in crowded accommodation in huge urban centres and refugee camps. Moreover, it was also unclear as to what extent infection data provided by local authorities could be trusted<sup>151</sup>. Some contributing nations withdrew or reduced contingents in response to the perceived threat of COVID-19 transmission, reduction in security activities and the need for military personnel in their parent countries. There were significant efforts to ensure that the reductions in contingents were coherent and understood between nations. Concurrently, EU military staff issued new medical force protection policies to contingents, adapted medical support arrangements to the new situation and established the COVID-19 Information Sharing Platform to provide situational awareness of COVID-19 cases and other important command information<sup>152,153</sup>. During the first stages, there were significant challenges in maintaining logistical and medical support arrangements due to global restrictions on air travel and movement of personnel and goods. Examples include the transition of responsibility for hospital support to the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM-Mali) from a lead nation to a commercial provider<sup>154</sup> and the provision of strategic aeromedical evacuation for COVID-19 patients through the EATC<sup>155</sup>. This period exposed some differences between **Member States’ perspectives on the balance of risk to mission** success versus the risk to the health of contingent personnel<sup>156</sup>. Particularly with regard to Mali, some Member States stressed the importance of showing support and credibility to the host country while terrorist attacks in the country were still ongoing and both the UN mission and the French contingent stayed. However, as the Director of the EU MPCC, Vice-Admiral Hervé Bléjean, stressed ‘we should remember that these [Minusma and Barkhane] are executive fighting operations. We are dealing with training and classrooms, so the way to appreciate the risk is very **different (...)** for a lot of Member States a mission is not an operation, it is not a war, not a fighting operation, you should never die in a mission, not even in an accident’<sup>157</sup>.

<sup>150</sup> EEAS, [EU Missions and Operations fact sheet](#), July 2020.

<sup>151</sup> Interview EU official, 1 December 2020.

<sup>152</sup> Interview EU Military Staff Medical Adviser, 19 November 2020.

<sup>153</sup> Operation IRINI EUNAVFOR MED, EUNAVFOR MED response to COVID-19, available at: [www.operationirini.eu/eunavfor-med-response-covid-19/](http://www.operationirini.eu/eunavfor-med-response-covid-19/)

<sup>154</sup> EUTM-Mali, [Ensure the Medical Support](#), 4 May 2020.

<sup>155</sup> Covid-19 : EATC commands Dutch medical evacuation missions. EATC 31 Mar 2020 Available at: <https://eatc-mil.com/post/covid-19-eatc-commands-dutch-medical-evacuation-missions>

<sup>156</sup> Interview with DG EUMS, Vice-Admiral Hervé Bléjean, 1 December 2020.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with DG EUMS, Vice-Admiral Hervé Bléjean, 1 December 2020.

EU personnel have been infected with COVID-19 on EU CSDP missions and operations, aboard ships and within headquarters. This has required the imposition of pre-deployment and arrival quarantine to minimise the risk of EU personnel importing COVID-19 as well as isolation and quarantine arrangements in field facilities in the event of outbreaks among deployed contingents. It has also required medical services to be able to adopt the COVID-19 protection arrangements for health personnel and medical facilities that are in place in EU countries<sup>158</sup>. In addition to managing the risk of COVID-19 with the boundaries of field bases, contingents have had to comply with the COVID-19 measures set by national authorities in the countries of operations. This has led to detailed negotiations with local public health authorities over issues such as the comparability of COVID-19 testing regimes and COVID-19 testing in airports. By July 2020, contingents were able to respond positively to demands from host nations to restart many mission activities with new COVID-19 measures in collaboration with local partners<sup>159</sup>. This provided confidence to troops from contributing nations and personnel numbers returned to 80–85 % of pre COVID-19 levels. However, the challenge of managing the risk of COVID-19 during CDSP missions remains with an outbreak occurring in EUTM-Mali in September 2020<sup>160</sup> and the withdrawal of ITS Margottini from Operation IRINI due to an outbreak of COVID-19 on board the ship<sup>161</sup>.

COVID-19 has affected the host nations of CDSP missions though the pandemic seems to have less prominence compared to European countries, partly because of the lower incidence rate as discussed above and partly because for many local authorities COVID-19 was just one burden amongst many, as DG EUMS Bléjean explains: 'When looking at Somalia at this time, the Al-Shabaab terror attacks, the locust invasion [and] the flooding were certainly the cause of a greater death toll. We are facing governments for whom the COVID situation was just another burden, not the main focus. So those governments were not necessarily tackling it with the same focus and this had an impact on our discussions with these governments'<sup>162</sup>. The pandemic does not seem to have reduced the activities of malign actors in many host countries, for instance, in Mali or the Central African Republic. Furthermore, local government responses to COVID-19 have the potential to threaten the protection of human rights, particularly those of minorities and women<sup>163</sup>. This issue applies across the missions, extending from Africa to include Ukraine, Palestine, Iraq and Georgia. CSDP missions have provided limited assistance to support the response of local authorities to the COVID-19 crisis because other EU entities such as ECHO have humanitarian assistance within their mandates and resources. Primarily, this has been the provision of personal protective equipment to enable training activities to resume between CSDP personnel and local partners. There is also evidence that international malign actors were conducting disinformation campaigns against the EU in general and the training missions in particular by suggesting that COVID-19 had been imported by international contingents. This exposed some vulnerabilities in the security of EU communication systems between Member States, deployed contingents and the EU command structure alongside the challenge of developing unified strategic intelligence and communications between EU commanders and their contingents within missions.

In the short term, CSDP operation activities are likely to be constrained by the force protection arrangements for COVID-19 until sending nations and the EU are able to vaccinate their personnel. However, most sending nations have demonstrated their commitment to supporting these missions and it is expected that

<sup>158</sup> H. de Lesquen, MAJ, MD, M. Bergez, MAJ, MD, A. Vuong, CPT, MD, A. Boufime-Jongheere, CPT, Pharm. D, N. de l'Escalopier, MAJ, MD, 'Adding the Capacity for an Intensive Care Unit Dedicated to COVID 19, Preserving the Operational Capability of a French Golden Hour Offset Surgical Team in Sahel', *Military Medicine*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/milmed/usaa273>

<sup>159</sup> EUTM-Mali, [An expected redeployment and resumption of activities](#), 20 October 2020. Interview with EU official, 1 December 2020.

<sup>160</sup> Press Release EUTM-Mali, 30 September 2020, available at: <https://eutmmali.eu/press-release/>.

<sup>161</sup> Operation IRINI EUNAVFOR MED, [Operation IRINI: anti-Covid measures onboard ITS Margottini](#), 25 September 2020.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with DG EUMS, 1 December 2020.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with EU official, 1 December 2020.

contingent strength will be maintained. The crisis has improved dialogue, information sharing and collaboration between Member States and the EU management of CSDP missions. It has also improved communication between international actors such as the UN, NATO and the EU within mission areas, although there is still a lot of space for improvement and mutual learning.

In the medium term, it could be assumed that the risk of COVID-19 to CSDP personnel will be mitigated by vaccination. However, COVID-19 may risk the security of EU interests within these missions and create new security threats due to the second order impacts on political consent, economic growth and jobs, migration and crime as discussed in Chapter 3. It has also demonstrated the impact that would arise from another public health emergency of international concern<sup>164</sup>. Therefore, the EU should learn lessons from the response to the COVID-19 crisis for CSDP policy and missions in order to mitigate the impact of another crisis of a similar magnitude.

## 6 Overall strategic lessons and specific recommendations

**The direct effect of the pandemic on the EU's CSDP was felt most among the missions and operations. They** were not prepared for such a contingency in terms of planning or capabilities, including adequate medical staff, particularly the civilian and training missions. COVID-19 has accentuated already recognised capacity shortfalls of the CSDP, for instance, in terms of strategic airlift, secure communications and intelligence sharing, command and control, and in Member States meeting their force generation commitments for missions and operations.<sup>165</sup> It also highlighted yet again existing coordination difficulties between the Commission, the EEAS and Member States, as well as between NATO and the EU. Yet, given the challenging circumstances, interviewees emphasised that the EEAS has played an unusually proactive and leading role **in helping Member States to share information about and adjust to the pandemic's security and defence** implications. Operations were quite resilient and unity among troop-contributing countries was maintained in terms of the timing of withdrawing and re-staffing missions and operations. Some of the EU-level funding tools for defence, such as the EDF and EPF, were cut back, but there are signs that efforts to better coordinate defence procurement and projects under PESCO and retain momentum and defence spending may escape post-2008 style cuts.

The pandemic has also revealed, for the first time to Europeans, the potential devastation biological hazards can cause, the vulnerabilities of Member States' infrastructure and supply chains, and the limited competences of the EU in coordinating and supporting Member States' management of public health emergencies. It also underlined how solidarity and trust between EU Member States as well as within nations can come under severe strain. **The EU's security and defence policy is** ultimately dependent on trust between EU Member States and the resilience of the EU and Member State institutions, economies and societies. The longer-term challenges of the pandemic are more difficult to discern; we have seen evidence that suggests the pandemic may act as a threat multiplier, particularly in low-income countries already affected by socio-economic imbalances and governance problems. In addition, the pandemic may accelerate some existing trends such as the declining share of the EU in the world economy compared to **Asia, intensifying concerns and defensive strategies against China's growing assertiveness under President Xi Jinping**, growing attention to and investment in IT security and cyber capabilities, and growing awareness of the interplay of both conventional and unconventional security risks. On the other hand, the pandemic could slow down other trends including the growing electoral appeal of populist strongmen, **progress made in many countries' economic development, equality, human rights, peace and democratisation**. The pace and direction of some of these trends will still depend on policy choices made

<sup>164</sup> IHR Procedures concerning public health emergencies of international concern (PHEIC), available at: [www.who.int/ihr/procedures/pheic/en/](http://www.who.int/ihr/procedures/pheic/en/)

<sup>165</sup> C. Meyer (2020), *CSDP Missions and Operations. Briefing for SEDE-Subcommittee of the European Parliament*, EP/EXPO/SEDE/FWC/2019-01/Lot4/1/C/01, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2861/08725>.



in Europe, most notably in terms of the success of economic and fiscal policies at home, but also on the definition of foreign policy priorities, the ways they are pursued and the means that are generated and deployed. In the following paragraphs we aim to identify two overarching strategic lessons for the EU as well as a larger number of specific lessons that should be implemented in the shorter or longer term.

The first lesson is that the EU needs to embark on its own lesson learning with sufficient seriousness, openness and resources to ensure it learns the right lessons. This is particularly important as crises create conditions under which the wrong or oversimplified lessons are learnt, or lessons are identified but not actually learnt and internalised. Some of this learning is necessarily short term and internal, as there is a strong need to implement the lessons that make an immediate difference in crisis management; CSDP operation commanders in the field and at headquarters do not have the luxury of waiting for the outcome of an inquiry. One of the positive results of the crisis is that the EEAS has been proactive in adapting, coordinating, sharing information and, indeed, leading a cyclically updated lesson-learning exercise on the impact of the pandemic on security and defence involving EU and Member State officials<sup>166</sup>. Strategic and operational-level recommendations from this exercise will need to be carefully scrutinised and then implemented. However, there is a need for deeper, more comprehensive and somewhat slower lesson learning too as the crisis recedes. In terms of security and defence, the EEAS can foster learning among Member States based on identifying, adapting and diffusing best practices in five dimensions:

1. more timely and accurate identification and analysis of vulnerabilities, risks and threats,
2. approaches to defence and crisis-management coordination,
3. institutional and processual responses to diagnosed risks and threats,
4. approaches to defence and crisis-management budgeting,
5. investments in capabilities to address diagnosed risks and threats,
6. specific operational responses in areas such as key services, infrastructure, connectivity and interoperability.

For instance, workshop participants have told us that the comprehensive defence approach of countries such as Finland may have benefited their management of the pandemic by providing regular meetings and trust-building among state and civil-society actors. Sweden has a core defence budget and a crisis response budget, which can help to speed up action and improve the assessment of non-conventional threats. Lesson learning could also benefit from looking more closely at the interconnection between health, food and energy security and environmental sustainability in the context of climate change. How can connectivity and interoperability between such infrastructures be improved? Should the Strategic Compass focus more on identifying and reducing cross-cutting vulnerabilities in the 'resilience basket' rather than on assessing and potentially anticipating novel threats? The European Parliament could play a key role in supporting this lesson learning through launching a public inquiry that could call witnesses and engage the public through deliberative assemblies or focus groups. It would be also more sensitive to considerations with regard to surveillance technologies.

The second strategic recommendation is that the EU should be proactive both at home and abroad in actively shaping the lessons citizens in Europe and abroad will draw from the pandemic. We are already seeing politicisation of and international competition over the meaning of the pandemic as a range of actors seek to shape narratives of why the pandemic happened, who has been most successful in managing it and why, the contributions of EU institutions, policies and instruments, and the value of

<sup>166</sup> EEAS, Classified report: Initial lessons identified regarding CSDP decision making and operational aspects from the current COVID-19 crisis, EEAS(2020) 877.



science, expertise, multilateralism and international organisations.<sup>167</sup> At home, the EU needs to demonstrate real solidarity with the countries worst affected by the pandemic, including through the Next Generation EU temporary recovery fund. Without sufficient trust and a sense of solidarity, many aspects of the CSDP, from shared procurement and intelligence sharing to giving real substance to the solidarity and mutual assistance clauses, will rest on fragile foundations and will easily fall prey to divisions among Member States or between advocates and opponents of European integration. Abroad, the EU needs to highlight the benefits and necessity of global institutions and approaches to public health, but also support lesson learning to improve them. In partner countries the EU needs to better understand the local and differentiated impact of the pandemic alongside other pre-existing challenges, invest in close relations with host countries and back-up this approach and strategic communication with real and supportive action on the ground. Being proactive and helpful with vaccination efforts in Africa and elsewhere would make a huge difference not just to EU soft power, but also to addressing the real challenges these countries and EU missions and operations within them are facing. CSDP missions can contribute to this goal alongside other parts of EU machinery, such as DG ECHO.

## 6.1 Recommendations for short-term actions

1. COVID-19 will remain a threat to the **'health security' of nations that are supported by CSDP missions** for the foreseeable future because of the challenge of extending COVID-19 vaccination programmes into areas of insecurity. The Commission and the EEAS need to urgently coordinate and mobilise practical support under an integrated approach for the host countries of CSDP missions and operations, bringing in relevant DGs such as DG ECHO, DG SANTE and DG DEVCO. A key function is for the EU to play a forceful role in supporting UN initiatives and the WHO to ensure equitable access to vaccines for citizens in low and middle-income nations.
2. Practical measures to support **the EU's** ability to engage with partners should be further identified, for example through continuing the deployment of military advisors to EU Delegations as well as exploring the potential funding of bilateral and regional projects in security and defence, building on the experience of the pilot project for security cooperation in and with Asia.
3. The EU needs to get better at monitoring mainstream social media activity in host countries and sharing open-source intelligence from Member States so that disinformation campaigns from hostile state and non-state actors can be responded to more quickly and effectively in locally tailored communications. The EU also needs to better combine strategic communication with the support measures it gives to host countries in health emergencies.
4. The crisis has demonstrated that even high-level officials currently cannot conduct secure communications with missions/operations. The problem is magnified for staff working from home who cannot access key documents securely and have little support. Addressing these problems requires urgent investment in IT infrastructure, relevant technology and training as well as issuing relevant guidelines and policies.
5. In regard to the early tensions about the withdrawal of personnel from missions, there should be **greater capacity among EU defence ministers to broker mutual understanding of sending nations'** perspectives on the balance between risks to missions and risks to personnel in order to balance solidarity in strategic communications with the sovereign autonomy of nations. More efforts also need to be made to ensure that contributing third states are properly informed of measures taken in response to crisis situations.

<sup>167</sup> F. Gaub, L. Boswinkel (2020), 'Who's first wins? International crisis response to Covid-19', EU-ISS Brief no. 11, May 2020; L. Freedman (2020), 'How the World Health Organisation's failure to challenge China over coronavirus cost us dearly', *New Statesman*, 5 April 2020; S. L. Myers (2020), 'China Created a Fail-Safe System to Track Contagions. It Failed', *New York Times*, 29 March 2020,

6. Each CSDP mission needs to draw up contingency plans for future health emergencies to establish standard operating procedures and guidelines, including around communication and coordination, and to ensure that each mission has sufficient human (trained doctors and nurses) and material support (personal protective equipment and testing facilities) available locally, or be able to quickly draw support from elsewhere, for instance, in terms of access to strategic airlift for medical reasons.
7. The EU needs to discuss with Member States how it can generate reliable and timely health intelligence from third countries to spot future virus outbreaks earlier and verify severity **independently of countries' own information**. It should also invest in tools and approaches to gather more reliable data from open sources about infections in data-poor environments and conflict zones. These could be used for a number of different health contingencies and developed or shared with local authorities.
8. The EU needs to reach out to the new Biden administration in the US and like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific to reinvigorate, if not relaunch, multilateralism and to rebuild or strengthen democracy and human rights, given the negative effects the pandemic has had in this respect in many countries and the systemic competition from China, offering and promoting different values and ways to rule.
9. The EU also needs to strengthen its bilateral relationship with partner countries and organisations in our eastern and southern neighbourhood on issues already on the agenda, such as resilience, crisis preparedness, hybrid threats, cybersecurity and the fight against disinformation.
10. In the case of the European Parliament, SEDE could and should lead the scrutiny of EU policy towards **China, as it pertains to the subcommittee's remit. In addition, delegations for relations with countries and regions such as Australia, India, Japan, the Korean Peninsula and the US could discuss China policy with their counterparts. Since there is a shared concern about China's alleged assertiveness**, this would be an obvious area to compare policies. Certainly, the delegation for relations with China should also use every available opportunity to raise issues of concern. Last but not least, the European Parliament should continue to issue resolutions expressing its position on different aspects of Chinese actions.

## 6.2 Actions taking longer to fully implement

1. COVID-19 has also demonstrated the weakness of the Force Generation process when providing rapid augmentation or additional capabilities for CSDP missions. This was most evident in the need for additional public health expertise (rapidly deployable outbreak investigation teams) in support of mission commanders but could apply to any other military capability. This reinforces the requirement for the pre-assignment of military forces to a European response force that could rapidly deploy to reinforce existing CSDP missions or new missions.
2. The creation of the European Peace Facility<sup>168</sup> provides a new mechanism to achieve pooled funding for CSDP missions across EU members that mitigates the costs of missions that currently lie with the **sending nations. However, the need to transition to commercial provision of essential 'military capabilities' for third states should also prompt an internal assessment of EU military operational capacity** as CSDP missions represent a very small proportion of the total EU defence activity.
3. The EU should launch a stocktake of the capacity of **Member States' military medical services to support CSDP missions and their wider armed forces to determine if the total size is sufficient to**

<sup>168</sup> EEAS, [European Peace Facility - An EU off-budget fund to build peace and strengthen international security](#), 6 June 2020. Council of the EU, "Council reaches political agreement on the European Peace Facility", Press Release, 18 December 2020

support the scale of ambition for the CSDP (including the reliance on reserve forces for mobilisation and the impact of the civilian health system). Medical support might be included as an additional operational collaborative opportunity within the implementation of the first CARD<sup>169</sup> by reinforcing the role of the MNCC/EMC within PESCO<sup>170</sup>.

4. The EU needs to prepare and regularly repeat exercises or simulations to test the preparedness of **the EU, including the role of the military. Member States' authorities need to be involved both in** terms of the conception stage and running of exercises. One such exercise could revolve around an attack with bioweapons by non-state actors, attacks on critical IT infrastructure, or the spreading of virus fears as part of hybrid or irregular warfare led by a state actor. Particularly, but not only in the latter scenario, the EU and NATO should conduct the scenario exercise jointly.
5. At the next opportunity for a treaty revision, the EU needs to adjust some of the legal constraints that currently limit the creation of a strong coordination function in such crises and deprive EU decision-makers of timely, specific and reliable intelligence. It should allow for the creation of sufficiently capable command and control structures to complement the existing Civil Protection Mechanism (which cannot deal with military affairs). The EU must also be explicitly authorised to gather and analyse warning, situational and strategic intelligence to support its decision-making in foreign and security affairs.
6. Even though the responsibility for humanitarian and development assistance to the civilian health systems lies within the mandates of other EU bodies, there may be scope to include health assistance as part of the security sector reform training mission in order to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on partners. This could include training in health protection measures, the provision of COVID-19 related equipment (personal protective equipment and medical equipment such as ventilators), and **infrastructure support to facilitate 'COVID-safe' training. Greater consistency in actions taken under** the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, the European Peace Facility and civilian CSDP would be required to assist in this regard.
7. The Commission and the EEAS need to better liaise about who does what in transnational health emergencies and for **what strategic purpose. The concept of 'health diplomacy' might be a useful subject for discussion between the EEAS, DG ECHO and DG SANTE in light of China's active use of** COVID-19 assistance as a diplomatic tool<sup>171</sup>. The EU should also build on this collaboration to conceive and implement a preventive approach to pandemics by tackling some of the root causes of pandemic risks, such as habitat loss and hunting of wild animals for food on wet markets.
8. After some duplication and competition among the EU and NATO, the organisations managed to improve dialogue, information sharing and collaboration. This should be institutionalised as an improved capacity to develop policies, processes and procedures to manage CSDP operations. This might include greater intelligence and situational awareness within a secure command and control system that connects Member States, contingents and EU leadership. They need to discuss and agree a division of labour in terms of preparedness and response in future crises, bearing in mind the risks of political blockages arising from the underlap in the membership of both organisations.
9. EU-NATO partnerships under the Joint Declarations and the transatlantic bond should be explored. With due respect to the agreed principles, the EU could signal its readiness to explore improvement

<sup>169</sup> EDF, [2020 Coordinated Annual Review on Defence Report. Executive Summary](#), 20 November 2020.

<sup>170</sup> Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on the PESCO Strategic Review 2020, 20 November 2020, available at: [www.consilium.europa.eu/media/46859/st13188-en20.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/46859/st13188-en20.pdf).

<sup>171</sup> T. Fazal, 'Health Diplomacy in Pandemical Times', *International Organization*, 1-20. 2020, doi:10.1017/S0020818320000326; P. Gauttam, B. Singh, J. Kaur, 'COVID-19 and Chinese Global Health Diplomacy: Geopolitical Opportunity for China's Hegemony?', *Millennial Asia*, 2020, doi: 10.1177/0976399620959771.

in terms of crisis management, coordination mechanisms related to military assistance, exchange of information, communication channels, as well as on policy, including but not limited to areas such as countering disinformation and strategic communications, hybrid and cyber threats, military mobility, parallel and coordinated exercises, civil protection and operational cooperation, and mutual assistance on the ground.

10. The EU should initiate a broader reflection with the UN on the impact of the pandemic on the role of their respective missions and operations and explore possibilities to provide support to partner countries to fight the pandemic.
11. Given the vital role of data and trust in the proper use of data plays, not least in such health emergencies, the EU should carefully monitor, analyse and, if necessary, regulate the use of surveillance technologies, data use and transfer by the state as well as by private companies beyond GDPR. The uncritical use of new information technologies and abuse of data can undermine trust in authorities and the resilience of societies when faced with crises.
12. The European Parliament plays a vital role in scrutinising EU strategies, plans and actions given that preparedness, management and prevention are not purely technical tasks, but often imply value judgements, trade-offs between risks and costs and asymmetric effects among some communities and groups of people. For instance, decisions that would lead to more investment and greater authority will require active scrutiny in advance and accountability mechanisms thereafter. A more formalised and authoritative role for the EP besides its existing prerogatives would be advisable.

## 7 Appendix: Key informant interviews

- Lieutenant Colonel Till Perry, Senior Medical Adviser, Military Planning and Conduct Capability, EU External Action Service, 19 November 2020
- Brigadier General Stefan Kowitz, Director, Multinational Medical Coordination Centre/European Medical Command, Koblenz, Germany, 23 November 2020
- EU official, anonymous, 24 November 2020
- Vice-Admiral, Hervé Blejeau, Director-General EU Military Staff and Director of Military Planning and Conduct Capability, 1 December 2020
- EU official, anonymous, 1 December 2020
- EU official, anonymous, 3 December 2020

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