



**Clingendael**

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## Defence and Covid-19

Why budget cuts should be off the table



Source: Mediacentrum Defensie

The Corona virus is spreading over the globe, from China and Europe into the Americas and Africa. With its far-reaching consequences for health and social-economic welfare, it comes as no surprise that comments and analyses have focused on these two aspects up until now. The geopolitical impact of Covid-19, however, is primarily considered in terms of its potential to accelerate a global power shift from the United States to China, reinforced by President Trump's slow reaction to the crisis and his China-bashing while Beijing has launched a charm offensive as a brother-in-arms to countries that suffer most, such as Italy. In contrast, little attention has been paid to the impact of Corona on

the role of Armed Forces. We see videos and pictures of the military providing medical and other support to hospitals, doctors and nurses. But what is actually the military's role in the current crisis? What impact will Covid-19 have on Armed Forces in the longer term? Most importantly, defence budgets are in danger of once more being cut severely – a repetition of what happened after the 2008 financial crisis. Why should this be avoided?

In most of the countries that are being severely struck by the virus, civilian authorities have called in military support for civilian authorities. Thousands of soldiers were 'on the frontline' fighting the spread

of the virus in China.<sup>1</sup> In Italy, like in many other countries, the military was deployed to control the lockdown. Army trucks have transported coffins containing the deceased to cremation sites and cemeteries elsewhere in the country because local morgues were unable to deal with the rapidly rising numbers of deaths. In Spain, soldiers have carried out many tasks, including disinfecting private nursing homes. Contrary to a hesitating President Trump, the US Armed Forces have reacted quickly to the emerging crisis. Already by the end of February, a Department of Defense Covid Task Force was created to coordinate all military activity. Despite Corona infections in their own ranks, the American military have been providing medical assistance, from the US Navy sending two hospital ships to the harbours of New York and Los Angeles to the Army Engineer Corps constructing extra medical facilities for treating infected citizens. Around 20,000 military personnel of the National Guard are helping with virus testing, planning and support.<sup>2</sup> All over the world military aircraft are being used for transporting stranded citizens to their home countries.

In the Netherlands, the assistance provided by the Ministry of Defence has been less visible, but nevertheless deemed to be necessary. The Dutch Armed Forces have provided 65 respirators and over 100 military doctors and nurses to support hospitals. Dozens of military planners are helping the civilian authorities in the coordination of medical activities, in particular the distribution of intensive care patients across the country, to relieve those areas that have been hardest hit. The military have advised on the organisation of turning hotels into temporary facilities for hosting Corona-infected patients who do not need intensive care. Army barracks have been made available for newly arrived migrants that are not allowed to go to the regular asylum

centres because of Corona precautions. The Chief-of-Defence, Admiral Rob Bauer, and the Minister of Defence, Ank Bijleveld, have left no doubt that the Dutch Armed Forces are prepared for the worst – a total lockdown and the maximum employment of the military as ‘the last man standing’.<sup>3</sup>

The Corona virus underscores the important role of the military in supporting the civil authorities when crises occur. This is nothing new and, once the worst of the Corona crisis passes, all the military will resume their daily work. But what might be the impact of Covid-19 on the military beyond the national support tasks?

Recently, the deployment of the military abroad was temporarily scaled down. For example, the Netherlands has withdrawn 40 of its approximately 160 troops in NATO Operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan. Especially the training capacity has been withdrawn, i.e. the main effort of the mission. Left behind are the staff and support troops to keep the bases up and running. In Iraq, the international training mission has been put on hold until at least the end of May. The largest NATO exercise since the Cold War, Defender 2020, in which thousands of US Army vehicles were to enter Europe through the Dutch port of Vlissingen, has been scaled down. Nevertheless, the call for the deployment of the military can become louder as the consequences of a widespread outbreak of the virus unfolds, in particular in Europe’s southern neighbourhood. For the moment, the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases in the Middle East and Africa remains low, but the situation could rapidly change if the virus starts to spread widely. In war-torn countries like Syria, Libya and Yemen contamination will be nearly impossible to follow and health systems that are already operating under normal capacity could be overwhelmed.<sup>4</sup> In particular, millions of refugees and internally displaced persons are extremely vulnerable to the impact

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1 <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3075396/how-chinas-military-took-frontline-role-coronavirus-crisis>.

2 *Department of Defense Press Briefing by Jonathan Hoffman, Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs*, US Department of Defense, April 3, 2020.

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3 *‘Onzichtbare’ strijd tegen COVID-19 – CDS en minister beschrijven impact virus op Defensie*, Defensiekrant 11 (‘Invisible’ fight against COVID-19 – CHOD and minister describe the virus impact on Defence).

4 *Intelbrief: the humanitarian impact of the coronavirus pandemic*, The Soufran Centre, 2 April 2020.

of the virus; they often lack appropriate sanitation and medical facilities. A near-term implication could be that the military are called upon to act as a first responder for humanitarian relief operations, including planning, transporting medical kits and other goods, delivering engineer assistance on the ground and providing medical support.

Furthermore, the Corona virus could lead to the flaring up of existing conflicts or the unravelling of already weak political regimes, such as in Afghanistan or Iraq. Large-scale societal disruptions resulting from lockdowns and serious economic consequences could aggravate already existing unrest and provide an additional factor for the emergence of conflicts, including in countries such as Iran with potential spill-over effects in the region. In other words, potentially the Corona crisis has the longer-term effect of further destabilising the Middle East and Africa. The Islamic State (ISIS) has already announced that it will step up its activities in the region.<sup>5</sup> Terrorism, human trafficking, the illegal weapons trade and other criminal activities flourish as instability and conflict rise. Stability in Europe is dependent on a stable southern neighbourhood as recent history has shown. Covid-19 could even destabilise countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, while in fractured states like Mali the virus could have a serious impact on urbanised areas, such as the capital Bamako. Resulting turmoil and unrest will increase the pressure on Europe to provide humanitarian assistance. The military might be called up as first responders, but in worst cases also to intervene and to stabilise the security environment. This is unlikely to happen in the short term – due to lockdowns and military support tasks in the home country – but it might happen in due course.

In most European countries governments have released billions of euros to support the economy and to prevent the massive loss of jobs. Although there is a wide variety regarding percentages of the downturn, serious economic recession will occur. In some specific sectors, such as construction in the Netherlands, forecasts already point

to a more severe effect due to Covid-19 than what happened after the 2008 financial crisis. European governments will soon have to face the challenge of balancing increased government spending on social-economic welfare by quickly reduced state income. Sooner or later, this will lead to amending existing budgets. Most likely, healthcare, social welfare and other governmental expenditure of direct importance to citizens will be prioritised at the cost of Foreign Affairs and Defence. Bastian Giegerich of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London claims that the next wave of defence budget cuts is around the corner: “Increased pressure on funding is inevitable, only further complicating the challenges of allocating constrained resources across a threat spectrum that now spans from peer-to-peer conflict to a society-disruptive pandemic.”<sup>6</sup>

The present danger is a repetition of the huge defence budget cuts that were implemented in the timeframe 2010-2015. Today, the Armed Forces in most European countries are still in the process of recovering from the damage done in those years, to restore (partially) lost capabilities and to modernise equipment. It would be ill-advised to slow down or to stop this repair and modernisation cycle by a new round of defence budget cuts. Instead, the Covid-19 crisis should be used to reinforce the role of the Armed Forces in order to guarantee, firstly, that they are able to provide comparable assistance to pandemics and other humanitarian disasters in the future and, secondly, to strengthen military capacities so that Europe can take more responsibility for its own security. With the likelihood of rising insecurity in Africa and the Middle East in the aftermath of the Corona crisis, this second responsibility is not just a mere luxury or a matter of ‘choice’, but a plain necessity. In this ‘Corona year’, several countries are reviewing their security and defence strategies, including the Netherlands. The Dutch Defence Vision 2035, to be released after the forthcoming summer, should be based on a sustained budget increase and a continued modernisation plan. In short: stay steady!

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5 <https://www.crisisgroup/global/contending-isis-time-coronavirus>.

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6 See e.g.: Bastian Giegerich, *Defence spending and plans: will the pandemic take its toll?* Military balance blog, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020.

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