

## THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN COMBATING COVID 19

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The COVID-19 pandemic that has been wreaking havoc since late 2019, has completely stilted the rotation of human civilization, as states have limited all kinds of locomotion, sent people home for months to sustain public health, all the while attempting to bring the situation under somewhat of control. COVID 19 has also made us take a fresh look at things, structures and our overall preparedness to meet such crises. All instruments of national power have been harnessed and put to use and countries across the world have deployed their armed forces to counter the spread of the pandemic.

With new crises arising every new decade, the military has become a tool to resist and secure against all kinds of non-traditional issues, almost more than they are deployed to fight against traditional security threats. And why wouldn't they be? Military organisational structure enables them to provide surge power, such as mobilising additional resources to meet exceptional demands, at a pace and scale that no other government body can match. Military forces are composed of qualified staff, clearly organised into teams with a specified chain of command. This gives them the ability to shape and redesign units effectively across a variety of operations. And because of this, states, and even international organisations (EUROMIL, NATO, etc) across the globe have chosen to utilise their military. But of course, a few major issues lie with using the military to enforce crowd control, which is why prominent states like the United Kingdom, France, and Germany have refused to deploy their military to keep domestic order.

This paper will talk about the various methods and missions through which different military forces are serving their states by fighting against COVID-19, including Bangladesh, and also point out why, despite the myriad advantages, some powerful states are reluctant and limiting military deployment.

## **How the Military Forces are Saving Their People: Equipped, Alert and Ready to Fight**

As previously mentioned, military forces are more systematically trained, disciplined, and equipped to function under extreme pressure and state of emergency than any other forces, civil or otherwise. So, it has become a quite common decision to send them off to the frontlines to fend off COVID-19. Combined with access to various assets such as airlifts, sea lifts, and heavy utility vehicles as well as experience in sustaining and running those facilities, the military has specific capabilities that governments can use during emergencies and calamities at a national level, so this is an almost ideal and optimum choice.

The armed forces of European states are being used in three main ways for humanitarian aid: to provide additional medical capacity, transport, and internal defence. Because of national sensitivities and constitutional issues, there is a consensus across Europe on the first two but not on the last. We will discuss more on that later.

Western Europe became the new eye of the storm after China, as Italy bore the initial brunt of the first wave of COVID-19 infections. The government turned to the military to supplement civil healthcare and to provide transport and logistical support. And this set of measures became a yardstick for the rest of the European states. As the military medical staff was deployed to civilian hospitals and two military field hospitals were set up in Lombardy, Italy, more armed forces hospitals began to be utilised to deal with the patients. According to the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), London, Italy's logistics support included using Italian Air Force C-130J Hercules and KC-767s to transport personal protective equipment (PPE), while army transport helicopters were used as air ambulances and for the patient and medical-team relocation. Italian defence-industrial facilities were also used for commercial disinfectant gel production and intensive care equipment manufacturing.

Spain's soldiers are constructing improvised hospitals. Spain has deployed more than 2,500 troops as part of *Operación Balmis* and called military doctors from reserve to aid patients.

France has launched *Operation Resilience* to organise the role of the armed forces in supporting efforts by the government to tackle the pandemic. Patients were transported by air force A330 tanker/transport aircraft fitted with intensive care equipment. Their Navy is providing *Mistral*-class large amphibious ships to supplement civil healthcare, especially for French overseas territory.

In Germany, planning for military-assistance programs ramped up from mid-March, after initial funding was primarily limited to using the Bundeswehr procurement agency to assist with the rapid monitoring of large-scale PPE orders for health staff. Reservists with medical expertise and training were then requested to volunteer for service and later the request expanded with other skill sets to reservists. Since then, more military assistance for civilian-authorities operations has been discussed.

UK's Ministry of Defence's (MoD's) response has been focused primarily on providing logistics and planning support, and they announced a 'COVID Support Force' of 20,000 personnel to be placed at high alert, according to another article by IISS. The Royal Air Force (RAF) with repatriation flights while the use of military helicopters to carry emergency supplies to hospitals and remote locations around the UK. However, most military assist in conventional assistance and relief operations such as packaging items, securing shipments, and distributing materials.

The United States is taking a relatively 'secretive' approach to the pandemic as the pandemic response plan and the Defense Support of Civil Authorities both are not made public. What we do know from news releases is that the Department of Defense (DOD) "has nearly 11,000 personnel dedicated to COVID-19 operations nation-wide, with nearly 2,500 in the New York City area" and are providing medical care in several states in the country.

Now let's look into Asia. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) had a prominent role from the beginning of the pandemic. At least 10,000 military medical personnel were mobilised to treat COVID-19 patients in Hubei Province, the most gravely hit regions of the country, including relief forces deployed in several waves. The PLA was also put in charge of supplying medicine to hospitals, and food to the local people under lockdown. Helicopters provided airlift and specialists from the PLA's Academy of Military Medical Sciences have been tasked to deal with patients in Wuhan, also charged to develop a vaccine. Although China has since provided international assistance to COVID-afflicted nations through programmes by sending medical supplies and personnel to Europe and other states, it has refrained from deploying military units overseas.

The armed forces of Myanmar and Indonesia have taken on significant advisory and decision-making roles. Thailand's government has taken an additional step and reportedly have largely excluded civilians from a panel responsible for directing responses to the pandemic. All three countries have been criticised for attempts at curbing the outbreak.

On 22 March 2020, the Indian government first instituted a 14-hour 'Janta Curfew' as a precursor to the country-wide curfew. The Army quietly stepped back into the wings after the initial few engagements. The personnel has been constantly brainstorming and planning to deal with the COVID-19.

Bangladesh deployed its armed forces since 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The Bangladesh Army in the meantime informed that its troops would continue to carry out the 'Anti-COVID-19 street campaign' to enforce social distancing until the government orders them to return to barracks. A defence ministry spokesman mentioned that some 3,000 military personnel and 400 Navy troopers are deployed across the country mainly to ensure public order while the Air Force was kept ready for transporting personnel and medical support to any part of Bangladesh, mentioning the constant replacement of batches of troops, with the former sent to quarantine immediately afterward to ensure safe health of the military personnel.

### **Civil Power and Strong Infrastructure**

Example of countries having a strong infrastructure, planning, and use of civil power has also shined through as success stories in flattening the curve, despite being densely populated. In Singapore, widely praised for its comprehensive, 'task-force-led approach' to fighting COVID-19, the military has not taken on any obvious frontline roles, and personnel was used to pack masks for general people in the crisis. This is said to be credited to crisis management and behind-the-scenes planning.

South Korea and Taiwan, whose successful repression efforts against COVID-19 have garnered international attention, also stand out as models for improving civilian power. While both countries were still under military rule as early as the 1980s, attempts by the government to stop the pandemic remained firmly in civilian hands, assigning limited support positions to the military.

### **Why are States Reluctant to Use the Military for Internal Defence?**

Military presence commands authority and induces deterrence, which is useful in ensuring law and order in heavily populated urban areas where police resources are stretched. So we see Italy, Bangladesh, Panama, Peru, Philippines, and many other states deploying military forces to support the police in to control movement, enforce curfews, close non-essential establishments and impose travel restrictions.

The UK falls into the category of those states that are reluctant to put the military on the front-line to maintain domestic order and COVID-19-related internal-security tasks,

along with France and Germany. In the case of Berlin, the use of the armed forces for internal security is critically viewed by the public, and the German constitution sets strict limits, as seen when Chief of Defense ruled out the deployment of the Bundeswehr to impose public-lockdown measures or disperse crowds. Challenges like continuing to meet standing military requirements, and in the case of France and the United Kingdom, retaining their nuclear-deterrent roles in the sense of the consequences of the virus. European militaries might not be able to escape the economic damage caused by the pandemic.

Maybe in the situation of enforcing internal security due to the pandemic presents the greatest immediate challenge for armed forces. Yet having military personnel on the streets also implies danger, if any force they use to be perceived as excessive.

## **Conclusion**

As mentioned at the beginning, deployment of the much disciplined, well-equipped, and adaptive military forces is bringing forth weaknesses of civil governments and their emergency response systems that will only intensify in the coming years, even decades, when states rush to pick up the pieces of their fallen infrastructures. Military forces will not just be used in logistical functions and public order.

In the future, these armed forces will also need to put greater focus on fostering civil stability, requiring re-evaluation of contingency goals and implementing costs that may well have to be met within current or even smaller defense budgets. So this only further cements the need to utilise the military. Clearly, the military is playing a strong role in assistance and support for the civil government. A strong response from the military to hold off the protracted effects of COVID-19 might give enough space and time for the civil government to re-structure and strengthen their institutions and create policies to avail public health and security, and concentrate on revitalising the economy. The military's essential and vital supporting role to the administration is yet again what the states need for a future of stronger civil institution and better emergency response system.

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