



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

## POLITICAL COMMITTEE (PC)

# COVID-19 AND TRANSATLANTIC SECURITY

## Special Report

Lord CAMPBELL of PITTENWEEM  
(United Kingdom)  
Chairperson

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## I. INTRODUCTION

1. “A global pandemic is not a question of if, but when and how bad”. Variations of this statement have over the years been repeated by countless health experts, yet when in late 2019 a novel coronavirus<sup>1</sup> emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan, much of the world found itself woefully ill-prepared. According to estimates by Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, by late September 2020, the virus had infected more than 33 million people worldwide and claimed more than one million lives. The actual number of victims is likely to be considerably higher<sup>2</sup>.

2. China, having initially covered up the magnitude of the outbreak, managed to contain it by imposing drastic measures and placing hundreds of millions under an extremely strict lockdown. Such measures came too late, however, to prevent the rapid global spread of the virus. Many countries in the Western world initially assumed that this novel coronavirus, just like SARS or H1N1, would largely bypass the developed world. When they did finally act, the response was by and large uncoordinated and varied widely: countries like Italy, Spain, and France imposed a strict national lockdown, while, on the other end of the spectrum, Sweden has mostly relied on voluntary measures and individual responsibility. By early April, half of the world’s population was ordered or recommended to avoid social contact. The outbreak overstrained healthcare systems in hardest-hit countries and wreaked havoc on education systems. The world is also heading for the worst global economic downturn in a century<sup>3</sup>.

3. Although many Western countries attempted to restore some kind of normality over the summer, the growth of COVID-19 cases picked up again in the second half of the year, potentially indicating the arrival of the second wave of the outbreak and prompting the reintroduction of safety measures. At the time of writing, the United States, India, Brazil, and Russia had the highest number of registered COVID-19 cases. A full return to the *status quo ante* will require the development and mass deployment of a vaccine – which according to generous estimates could take months (Roubini, 2020).

4. A crisis of this magnitude cannot but have a major impact on international affairs as well as on transatlantic security. Lessons from the COVID-19 crisis need to be examined thoroughly, especially in the context of the ongoing NATO 2030 reflection process. This special report will discuss how the outbreak turned into a security crisis and how it affected global politics, including effects on globalisation and great power competition. The report will pay particular attention to NATO’s response and what the crisis tells us about the level of solidarity within the Euro-Atlantic community. Finally, the Rapporteur will share some ideas on ways for the Alliance to adapt to the post-COVID strategic environment and to use the crisis as an opportunity to bolster the Alliance’s cohesion and the transatlantic link.

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<sup>1</sup> Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The infectious disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 was named COVID-19 by the World Health Organization in February 2020.

<sup>2</sup> In April, FT analysts compared the number of deaths from all causes in 14 countries in March and April 2020 with average mortality rates during the same period between 2015-2019. They noted an uptick in total deaths in all of these countries, in many cases truly dramatic: a 51% increase in Spain, 60% in Belgium and 155% in Lombardy, Italy. Mortality rates in certain urban centres were staggeringly higher than usual: a 96% increase in London, 122% in wider Paris, 161% in Madrid, 299% in New York City and 463% in Bergamo, Italy. According to Eurostat, there were around 160,000 more deaths from March to May 2020 in 24 European countries than the average number of deaths during the same period in 2016-2019. It seems fair to assume that the increase in total deaths is related, directly or indirectly, to the coronavirus outbreak.

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the economic impact of the outbreak, see the draft report of the Assembly’s Economics and Security Committee, [The Economic Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

## II. SECURITISATION OF THE PANDEMIC: USING THE LANGUAGE OF WAR?

5. Pandemics have been a part of human existence for the better part of a thousand years. Despite being recognised as a “public health hazard”, it was only after the end of the Cold War – when the focus on non-conventional threats was increased – that communicable diseases were successfully “securitised”, i.e. became widely regarded as a security threat (Kamradt-Scott & McInnes, 2012). However, the frequent use of the security narrative *vis-à-vis* health emergencies (for instance, H1N1, SARS, MERS, and Ebola) has seemingly created “a perpetual state of emergency,” so much so that the international community hardly seems shocked when a new “health emergency” emerges (Wenham, 2019), which may explain the initial scepticism in the West regarding the gravity of the COVID-19 outbreak.

6. In the course of the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been a significant escalation in the language used to describe the disease. The current global pandemic is often not just framed as a security issue but as a war. All around the world, leaders are “declaring war” on the disease, experts warn against the “invisible enemy,” and journalists laud the “heroic effort” of health care workers on the “frontline”. US President Donald Trump said the pandemic hit the United States harder than the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the 9/11 attacks. In his address to the nation on 16 March, French President Macron used the phrase “We are at war” six times, noting that the “enemy (...) is advancing”. EU High Representative Josep Borrell called the pandemic a “threat” that is “very likely to deteriorate the security environment in the years ahead”. While this trend has been particularly strong in Western democracies, it has also been present in countries as different as China, India, and South Korea, among others.

7. Consequently, in many countries, the armed forces have become one of the methods of choice when it comes to “combating” the virus<sup>4</sup>. After all, militaries have experience in mounting big logistical operations, a large amount of available manpower and equipment and can move on short notice (The Economist, 2020). The role of intelligence services should also not go unmentioned. In April, the US intelligence community made public its view that “that the COVID-19 virus was not man-made or genetically modified” (Seldin, 2020). In May 2020, the US authorities issued a statement warning that Chinese cyber spies were targeting virus research institutions in the U.S. The UK National Cyber Security Centre released a similar alert warning of malicious actors targeting COVID-19 response organisations (FBI, 2020). A significant increase in cyberattacks on medical research institutions was also observed by NATO officials (NATO PA, 2020). Overall, however, the intelligence communities in most countries proved to be ill-equipped to predict the scope of the coronavirus crisis and to provide early warning to their governments.

8. Framing the pandemic in terms of a national security threat does not just convey urgency, but also stokes fears, which in turn has contributed to panic-buying and shortages in essential commodities like hand sanitiser and medical face masks. War metaphors also facilitate public acceptance of sweeping powers by governments without these necessarily always being appropriate to the situation. Most importantly, as noted by some analysts, war is by its very nature divisive, which is likely to be counterproductive in the midst of a global pandemic that only global cooperation can address. These divisions have manifested themselves in the rise of xenophobia against “Asians” who were initially perceived as carriers of the disease, but also in the rise of tensions between major powers, particularly China and the United States (Serhan, 2020). The securitisation of the pandemic of this magnitude was inevitable, but some leaders may have gone too far in equating the pandemic with an act of war.

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<sup>4</sup> For more details on the military implications of the pandemic, see the draft special report of the Assembly's Defence and Security Committee, [The Role of NATO's Armed Forces in the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

### III. THE CONSEQUENCES FOR GLOBAL SECURITY: A WORLD TURNING INWARDS?

#### A. EFFECTS ON GLOBALISATION AND GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS

9. Since the beginning of the current health crisis, there has been no shortage of voices claiming that the COVID-19 pandemic is a watershed moment in modern history that will change everything. However, if the impact of the Spanish flu pandemic (1918-1919) is any indication, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to accelerate and exacerbate already existing trends, rather than radically alter the course of history (Haass, 2020). The pandemic can be expected to magnify the forces that were already moving the international system in a more “fractured” and “competitive” direction (Kahl & Berengaut, 2020). Interestingly, the Spanish flu may have been a major factor prompting the United States to turn inwards, toughen immigration law, and refrain from joining the League of Nations (Burrows & Engelke, 2020).

10. Globalisation was already on the backfoot before the first case of COVID-19 ever emerged. Global economic integration has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty and raised prosperity overall. However, while the benefits of economic globalisation are often diffuse, its downsides, like lost manufacturing jobs, tend to be highly concentrated. This resulted in a rising populist backlash against global interconnection in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere. These forces were bolstered further by the refugee and migration crisis in the mid-2010s. Even before the pandemic, the share of trade relative to the world’s economic output was lower than it was before the 2008 financial crisis, the same also applies to cross-border flows of investments (Fontaine, 2020). To make matters worse, the current pandemic is brutally driving home the disadvantages of global supply chains with more than 60 countries restricting or banning exports of personal protective equipment and medical goods (Sharma, 2020). The push to bring supply chains back home is likely to continue even after the pandemic subsides. Protectionist politicians see themselves vindicated in their quest to reduce dependencies on foreign nations. The key drivers of global economic integration like comparative advantage or economies of scale are still present, but the “combination of changes in popular sentiment, government policy, and corporate practices” will invariably affect the pace of globalisation – for better or for worse (Fontaine, 2020).

11. Multidimensional crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic require global multilateral cooperation more than ever. Yet, in the face of growing international acrimony, global institutions like the G20, the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) seem almost helpless: the G20 convened an emergency summit, but it resulted in little more than a bland statement<sup>5</sup>. Although the UN General Assembly passed a unanimous resolution in favour of cooperation on COVID-19, it took months for the UN Security Council (UNSC) to agree on the text of the resolution demanding immediate global cessation of hostilities during the pandemic. This much needed resolution was only adopted on 1 July 2020. International voices condemned this delay, and David Miliband, CEO of the International Rescue Committee, stated that “the paralysis of the Security Council in the face of COVID is shameful” (reliefweb, 2020). Even the WHO, the natural forum to coordinate a global health crisis response, is struggling to get its members to follow its guidelines. Additionally, the initial reaction of the organisation to China’s handling of the crisis – with the WHO uncritically repeating Chinese statements, ignoring warnings from Taiwan and lavishing effusive praise on the Chinese response – has damaged the organisation’s reputation. The United States has been particularly critical of the WHO: in April, President Trump announced the suspension of US payments to the WHO, in May, he threatened to reconsider the US membership in this UN body, and in June, formally notified the UN of the US’ withdrawal, effective July 6, 2021.

12. In the *de facto* absence of global collaboration, the main response to COVID-19 was left to national or even subnational authorities, resulting in a patchwork of uncoordinated measures and

<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, the G20 finance ministers agreed to a debt moratorium for 77 developing countries until the end of 2020.

strategies, often pitting countries against each other in competition for a limited supply of medical goods and protective equipment (Haass, 2020). Additionally, there are already indications that this kind of detrimental nationalist competition could also extend itself to the hunt for a COVID-19 vaccine (Salisbury, 2020).

## B. MAJOR POWER DYNAMICS AND GEOPOLITICAL FALLOUT OF COVID-19

13. The COVID-19 pandemic will almost certainly trigger or accelerate shifts in global geopolitics, albeit at this stage it is difficult to identify the exact geopolitical contours of the post-COVID world and the potential winners or losers. It is plausible that the **United States** will continue to pay greater attention to the Indo-Pacific region – a policy that started under the Obama administration or even before. During the coronavirus crisis, the US leadership has prioritised a US-centric approach, not least because the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States far harder than any other country. Whether this represents an irreversible trend in US strategic thinking is an open question: in the recent past, the United States did rally the international community and lead the global response to health emergencies such as the Ebola outbreak.

14. The top contender to fill the global leadership vacuum is the People’s Republic of **China**. Despite the pandemic and contrary to trends in other parts of the world – such as a series of unilateral ceasefire declarations by belligerents in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well as the reduction of US Navy deployments in the Asia-Pacific region – China has continued and even increased its assertive behaviour in recent months. This includes continuing military and militia deployments and establishment of new “research stations” on military bases in the South China Sea; sinking a Vietnamese fishing trawler; intensifying provocative behaviour against Taiwan (including airspace incursions and sailing naval ships nearby the island); and sending Chinese vessels into the contiguous zone around the Senkaku Islands (that are controlled by Japan but claimed by China) (Hornung, 2020).

15. Keen to make the world forget its arguably inglorious early response to the virus<sup>6</sup> and strengthen its global influence in the process, China has launched a major public relations offensive. The most visible element of this campaign has been its “mask diplomacy”, which involved the delivery of highly photogenic help such as face masks, protective suits, ventilators, and test kits to affected countries. While most of these deliveries were commercial in nature, unsurprisingly few were willing to challenge the “Chinese aid” narrative, which in turn lent credibility to a steady barrage of public messages, tweets, and propaganda articles in a variety of different languages that were highlighting China’s achievements, emphasising the effectiveness of its governance model and claiming the mantle of global leadership in the fight against the global pandemic (Campbell and Doshi, 2020). The propaganda campaign included high-ranking Chinese officials spreading, among other things, outlandish conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus (Erlanger, 2020). China’s public relations campaign is aggressively promoted by its diplomats: the so-called “Wolf-Warrior” diplomacy includes tactics such as pressuring the EU not to release a report on disinformation unfavourable to China, pressuring aid recipients to praise China publicly, and threatening a boycott of Australian produce if Canberra continued to insist on the investigation of the origins of the outbreak (Hille, 2020).

16. However, the results of this campaign have been mixed so far, and Beijing’s aggressive dismissal of any criticism as well as threats of retaliation may have backfired. The view of China as a challenge to national security was prevailing in the United States even before the COVID-19 crisis, but the outbreak has increased the general alertness about the challenge of a rising China in

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<sup>6</sup> In the initial stages of the crisis, the Chinese authorities censured warnings about the severity of the problem, including punishing Chinese doctors for “rumour-mongering” on 2 January. Reportedly, even after top Chinese officials had already determined, on 14 January, that they were likely facing a highly contagious disease, President Xi Jinping waited almost a week before finally informing the public on 20 January. The official number of cases in Wuhan was also implausibly low. Arguably, greater transparency and earlier release of information would have saved numerous lives worldwide.

Europe as well, where calls for limiting Chinese investments into critical infrastructure have intensified. The EU is considering proposals to reduce dependence on China, especially when it comes to medical supplies, but also areas such as battery technology. The European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, conceded that Europeans had been "a little naive" on China, as well as reiterating that Beijing is as much an economic partner as it is a "systemic rival that seeks to promote an alternative model of governance" (Guillot, 2020). Even several members of China's 17+1 initiative have issued statements in favour of Taiwan re-joining the WHO (Beranga & Stec, 2020). The UK government reversed the earlier decision to allow Huawei to develop the country's 5G network. Japan earmarked USD 2.2 billion to help bring back manufacturing from China (Crawford & Martin, 2020).

17. Since the start of the pandemic, **Russia** has acted as a spoiler rather than as a contender for leadership. As COVID-19 case numbers rose in Europe and the United States, Russia started to act out from an all too familiar playbook: using online disinformation campaigns to weaken the cohesion of the democratic West and its institutions such as NATO or the EU, spreading conspiracy theories and attempting to incite fear and panic (Kalensky, 2020). Russia has even engaged in a downsized version of China's "mask diplomacy" with Moscow making highly publicised deliveries of medical goods to both Italy and the United States. Interestingly, Chinese and Russian disinformation campaigns are frequently piggybacking on each other's efforts in order to amplify their messaging (Kliman, Kendall-Taylor, et al., 2020).

18. Yet, unlike China, Russia has not brought the COVID-19 outbreak under control before going on an international propaganda offensive. Surprisingly, the Russian central government took a rather hands-off approach towards containing the spread of the disease, with Putin being very much absent in the initial stage of the Russian response and the country continuing to operate mostly as normal, while most of Europe was already on lockdown (Duclos, 2020). As a consequence, COVID-19 cases have been spiking in Russia with the country reaching in May the second place in the world in confirmed cases. Pressures on Russia's already stagnating economy and the chronically underfinanced health care sector are further exacerbated by the plunging price of oil – the source of 40% of Russian budgetary revenues (Dettmer, 2020), albeit Russia's National Wealth Fund is expected to cushion some of the shock. COVID-19 could therefore pose a serious threat to the socio-economic stability of the Russian regime. Playing geopolitics might become a secondary concern for Moscow, albeit if the situation deteriorates sufficiently a diversionary foreign adventure could again become a temptation. However, under these circumstances Putin may see little other choice than to align himself even more closely with China in the hope of being bailed out by Beijing (Gabuev, 2020). Moscow's attempts to convince the West to call off sanctions on Russia due to the pandemic have not been successful.

19. The impact of the pandemic on the global role of the **European Union** is extremely difficult to predict. At the time of writing, the EU was simultaneously being torn by centrifugal trends and at the same time coming together on ambitious joint response and recovery plans. Experts question the EU's ability and willingness to pursue an ambitious "strategic autonomy" agenda in the wake of the expected economic contraction (Popescu, 2020); the appeal of Europe's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell to EU defence ministers not to slash defence spending due to the pandemic indicates that the problem is real. However, given the European Union's tendency to survive periodic crises, it is plausible that, as renowned strategic thinker François Heisbourg put it, "the EU could be one of the bigger geopolitical surprises of the crisis." (Heisbourg, 2020) Furthermore, the outbreak may bring reputational damage to all of the abovementioned traditional great powers, thus potentially opening some space for the EU's global leadership. The appetite for a more active global role can be detected in the repeated references by the European and Commission leaders to the "geopolitical Union", "geopolitical Commission" and the need for the EU "to re-learn the language of power" (Youngs, 2020). The EU's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak is discussed in more detail in the next chapter of this report.

20. **India**, a potential global power in waiting, in the initial phases of the outbreak was expected to improve its global position in the wake of the pandemic, capitalising on what was perceived to

be an effective handling of the crisis and by leveraging its status as the world's largest producer of generic drugs, as well as offering itself as a back-up for those companies that decide to move manufacturing away from China. However, by mid-2020, the number of registered COVID-19 cases skyrocketed, and, at the time of writing, India appeared heading towards replacing the United States as the most affected country in the world. Furthermore, India increasingly finds itself in a more turbulent regional environment, manifested, *inter alia*, in the border clashes with China. In neighbouring **Pakistan**, the civilian government has been effectively side-lined by the military which stepped in to enforce a lockdown in a country that was utterly unprepared for an emergency of this type. Reportedly, there are only 600 ICU beds in Karachi, which has a population of 20 million (Burrows & Engelke, 2020).

21. The pandemic might alter the balance of power in the **Gulf** region. While both leading adversaries – Iran and Saudi Arabia – are affected by the drop of oil prices, Iran is in a more precarious situation as it was also severely hit by COVID-19 and its pre-crisis socio-economic troubles have not gone away. Moreover, the recent rapprochement between Israel on the one hand, and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain on the other may further recast the regional balance of power, tipping the scales against Iran. Nevertheless, the launch of Iran's first military satellite on 22 April 2020 might signal an intention to continue its assertive regional policies regardless of mounting internal and external woes.

22. The fallout of the pandemic is particularly damaging to **developing countries**. First, they are already vulnerable to the spread of disease due to less developed health care systems, and the bidding war for medical goods has left most unable to gain sufficient quantities of even the basic necessities. In Africa, some 200 million live in densely packed slums where social distancing measures cannot be applied (Burrows & Engelke, 2020). Second, while even wealthy nations will struggle to finance economic recovery packages, many developing nations are already overburdened with debt. As a result, a public health disaster in the developing world – including the Middle East and North Africa – might soon be followed by a wave of political upheaval, possibly leading to a collapse of fragile states as well as an increase of refugee numbers (Kahl & Berengaut, 2020).

#### IV. THE IMPACT ON EURO-ATLANTIC AND EUROPEAN UNITY

23. It is undeniable that both NATO and the EU were caught off guard by the COVID-19 pandemic and lost the initial stage of the narrative battle to China and Russia. Both organisations were accused of being slow to respond and to provide timely and adequate assistance to their members. The critics failed to consider the fact that responding to health emergencies is not NATO's core business, or that the EU's competences in the health sector are extremely limited. On the surface, the rapid collapse of the Schengen open-border system has challenged European integration, but it must be recognised that the temporary closure of borders was the right course of action when responding to this type of crisis.

24. The crisis indeed demonstrates that the concept of a sovereign nation state remains strong in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that, when major threats arise, the most immediate instinct for nations is to turn to their national governments rather than multilateral organisations. That said, as the crisis unfolded, both NATO and the EU were able to demonstrate their relevance and make a tangible contribution assisting the hardest-hit nations that far exceeds the highly publicised Chinese and Russian aid.

25. As James Appathurai, NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs, explained in an online meeting with NATO Parliamentarians on 7 May 2020, **NATO's** most urgent responsibility during the initial stages of the crisis was to guarantee that the Alliance's core function – credible collective defence and deterrence – remained unaffected. NATO had to revisit its troop rotations, take measures to protect NATO's deployed personnel from the virus, cancel its winter exercise *Cold Response 2020* and scale down the *DEFENDER-Europe 2020* exercise, designed

to test NATO's Readiness Initiative. According to Mr Appathurai, NATO commanders were confident that, while making these adjustments, they had the capabilities needed to provide collective defence and to continue NATO operations<sup>7</sup>.

26. The second priority for the Alliance was to assist its hardest-hit Allies. Allied foreign ministers meeting at the beginning of April tasked Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Tod Wolters to "further contribute, coordinate, and assist" both national military and civilian authorities in combatting COVID-19. Overall, NATO forces have helped to build almost 100 field hospitals and over 25,000 treatment beds as well as deploying thousands of medical personnel in support of civilian efforts of its Allies and partners. The Alliance contribution has been particularly visible in the areas of procurement and logistics. The organisation very effectively activated its principal civil emergency response mechanism – the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). The Centre coordinates requests and offers of international assistance among NATO allies and partners, with its mandate currently covering 70 countries. In an interview published by the Assembly, Osman Askin Bak, Head of the Turkish delegation to the NATO PA, highlighted Turkey's positive experience using EADRCC mechanisms. The NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) has utilised its position as an established buyer to provide vital supplies such as ventilators, protective equipment, and medical goods to Italy, Spain, Norway, and Luxembourg (NATO, April 2020).

27. Other noteworthy initiatives include NATO's Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) and Strategic Air Lift International Solution (SALIS). The fact that most civilian aircraft have been grounded during the pandemic makes the use of military assets an invaluable option. NATO-enabled SAC and SALIS frameworks allowed nations to pool military airlift assets to transport medical supplies and equipment more effectively to recipient countries. By May 2020, Allied forces had flown more than 350 flights to transport medical personnel and more than 1,000 tonnes of equipment. Additionally, the North Atlantic Council (NAC) authorised the activation of NATO's Rapid Air Mobility (RAM) – a process that allows aircraft carrying medical supplies, equipment, and personnel to use NATO callsigns to accelerate air traffic control clearances to cross airspace (NATO PA, 2020).

28. In June 2020, NATO Defence Ministers decided to update NATO's baseline requirements for resilience, covering critical sectors such as energy, telecommunications and the security of supply chains in order to help Allies prepare for possible further pandemic waves. In July 2020, NATO also decided to establish a stockpile of medical items as well as a multi-million euro pandemic response trust fund to enable Allies to quickly acquire medical supplies. The trust fund is designed to complement the efforts of Allies and other international organisations, such as the EU. Many Allies have already offered to donate to the stockpile and contribute to the fund (Braze, 2020). NATO's Science for Peace and Security Programme was used, for instance, to bring Italian and Swiss scientists together on a NATO-supported project to develop rapid COVID-19 diagnostics. NATO helped to deliver innovative solutions such as 3D-printed respirators and masks repurposed from diving equipment. In an interview published by the Assembly, Mihály Balla, Head of the Hungarian delegation to the NATO PA, highlighted the role of the NATO Centre of Excellence for Military Medicine, with branches in Budapest and Munich, which provided helpful regular situational updates, guides, and analysis of the evolution of the pandemic.

29. Allies have assisted each other substantially both through the abovementioned NATO channels and on a bilateral basis. For example, while grappling with the worst outbreak of the pandemic in Europe, Italy was aided by the United States, Estonia, and Turkey who promptly dispatched KN-95 masks, surgical gowns, and COVID-19 test kits to their Italian allies. Estonia also distributed EUR 100,000 to Italy as well as Spain through the International Red Cross.

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<sup>7</sup> For more details on the Alliance's military readiness during the pandemic, see the draft report of the Assembly's Defence and Security Committee, [The Role of NATO's Armed Forces in the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

Moreover, the United States dispatched Air Force Super Hercules C-130J out of Ramstein Air Base in Germany to provide assistance to the cities of Milan and Rome. In April, the Czech Army aircraft transported one million masks to North Macedonia while Norway donated an entire field hospital. Also, in April, Germany delivered ventilators to Spain using two Spanish military aircraft. On April 28, Turkey's A400M military aircraft flew to the United States to deliver surgical masks, overalls, disinfectant, goggles, masks, and face shields. Overall, Turkey provided assistance to 128 countries, of which 25 are NATO member states. These are just a few of numerous examples.

30. Allies also provided crucial assistance to partners. Through the EADRCC mechanisms, critical supplies were delivered to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other partners. For example, Poland delivered 6,800 protective face shields and 5,400 litres of disinfectant to Georgia, while Estonia delivered some 3,000 pump dispenser bottles of hand disinfection liquid and hundreds of litres of disinfectant. Spain and Poland dispatched large quantities of disinfectant and masks to Iraq, while the Turkish Air Force delivered masks, ventilators, and testing kits. Furthermore, Turkey supplied some 180,000 masks and a plethora of other health equipment such as oxygen regulators to Afghanistan, while the United States offered USD 15.6 million to support Afghanistan in improving their laboratory facilities and health surveillance systems. Also, in the framework of the EADRCC, the United Kingdom and the State of Qatar responded to a UN call for strategic airlift support (NATO, May 2020). Again, these are just a few of numerous examples of Allied assistance to partners.

31. These actions contradict assertions of there being a lack of solidarity among NATO members. Yet, despite armed forces responding well to the humanitarian aspects of the coronavirus health emergency, it is important to remember that they were not designed to handle such tasks. Nevertheless, NATO has offered valuable assistance in the fight against COVID-19 and provided tangible contributions to its hardest-hit members and partners, while maintaining adequate levels of preparedness to execute NATO's core tasks of defence and deterrence. As the Head of the UK delegation to the NATO PA, Alec Shelbrooke, pointed out in an interview published by the Assembly, without NATO's Rapid Air Mobility process and relationships among Allies, "collaboration in a time of crisis would not be as simple."

32. Even more so than NATO, the **European Union** has been criticised for an apparent lack of solidarity with its most affected member states. Yet, the European Commission offered member states its support against COVID-19 back in January, but it was assured by member governments that no EU assistance would be required. Instead, when the true scope of the health crisis emerged, many member states resorted to unilateral measures such as the uncoordinated closing of borders and export restrictions on medical goods (Guarascio, 2020). In the initial stages of the outbreak, the EU was passive, which later led to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen extending a "heartfelt apology" to Italy on behalf of the Union, while asserting that the EU remains "the world's beating heart of solidarity." (Gill, 2020)

33. Indeed, a more coordinated EU response gradually developed: Austria, Germany, and Luxembourg took in intensive care patients from the most heavily affected EU countries with Germany alone accepting more than 200 critically ill patients. Over 600,000 EU citizens stuck abroad could be brought home due to EU consular cooperation, 67,000 returned on repatriation flights "facilitated and co-financed" by the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. Together EU members have sent each other protective equipment, tons of medical equipment and teams of medical professionals. Following previous deliveries from the strategic rescEU reserve, as of 7 May, the Commission has also started to deliver 10 million face masks purchased through the EU Emergency Support Instrument (European Commission, 2020). The European Commission has also given a remarkably fast regulatory response. It quickly released vastly relaxed fiscal rules and regulations on state aid, urging member states to protect "companies and critical assets" (Smith-Meyer & Tamma, 2020).

34. The EU is expected to play a major role in assisting European economies during the recovery process. In July, European leaders agreed an unprecedented recovery plan for Europe – the

EUR 750 billion Next Generation EU instrument, combining loans and grants. In addition, leaders increased the European long-term budget for 2021-2027 by EUR 1.1 trillion. These impressive sums are expected to support a sustainable and resilient recovery in the Union. European Commission President von der Leyen noted that “The agreement is a strong signal of trust and a historic moment for Europe.” At the time of writing, the package was being discussed by the European Parliament.

35. Another notable EU contribution in the area where it has unique competences was the publication, in September 2020, of the first-ever rule of law report. The report called on members to respect the EU’s fundamental principles and values when adopting coronavirus emergency measures. The EU is also engaged in a number of other activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from proposals to harmonise national measures affecting free movement in the EU to conducting exploratory talks with potential vaccine manufacturers.

36. **NATO and the EU** are talking to each other during this crisis, focusing on two areas: 1) dovetailing the EU’s capacity to procure medical material with NATO’s strategic transportation capabilities; and 2) coordinating efforts to counter disinformation narratives. In the latter, the EU has particular strengths, including the existence of a dedicated structure within its External Action Service. Relevant NATO and EU officials are also exchanging information and harmonising activities with the office of the UN Under-Secretary General for Peace Operations. Overall, the virus crisis has demonstrated the need for further improvement of NATO-EU collaboration and the continuation of strategic initiatives such as the Military Mobility project. As the Head of the Romanian delegation to the NATO PA, Vergil Chitac, noted in an interview published by the Assembly, “NATO-EU cooperation has proved essential in the management of the current crisis, as it enabled the medical community to respond to high-impact events and ensure specific logistical security, including through the European rescEU mechanism.”

37. The COVID-19 pandemic puts into sharp relief the challenge of **authoritarianism** to liberal democratic values as well as to Euro-Atlantic and European solidarity. In theory, the situation appears to benefit authoritarian regimes: the presence of an outside threat, the seeming failure of globalisation and high public acceptance of extreme measures and the limitation of personal rights. Governments with authoritarian inclinations are using the COVID-19 crisis to acquire coercive tools and consolidate power, to ban protest, to postpone elections and to side-line opposition (The Economist, April 2020) (Ben-Ghiat, 2020).

38. Yet interestingly, nationalist and populist forces have so far benefited very little from the COVID-19 crisis. Promises of easy solutions to complicated issues by populist/nationalist governments have been revealed as little more than bluster – sometimes at the cost of thousands of lives. For instance, the popularity of Brazil’s right-wing president, Jair Bolsonaro, fell sharply due to his lax approach to the outbreak, while the country was rapidly turning into a new global epicentre of the crisis (Boadle, 2020). The approval rating of Vladimir Putin had dipped to 59% in early May - still high by Western standards, but an all-time low for him and considerably lower than the 80% public support he enjoyed in recent years (Osborn & Balmforth, 2020). Mr Lukashenko’s initial denial and poor handling of the pandemic in Belarus was among key triggers of the political upheaval that has engulfed this country since August 2020 (Light, 2020). In contrast, responsible democratic leaders have been surging in the polls as populations have rallied around their elected governments in the face of the global pandemic (Henley, 2020). On the other hand, populist parties may be reinvigorated if governments fail to mitigate possibly the worst economic recession on record.

39. The lack of a common and easily communicable transatlantic narrative on COVID-19 has left a gap that outside authoritarian powers are trying to exploit through fake news and disinformation designed to exacerbate differences among members of the Euro-Atlantic community and to undermine their solidarity. For instance, the Chinese Foreign Ministry or China’s state-controlled media claimed that that the coronavirus was brought to China by US troops, or that COVID-19 originated in Italy, while China’s embassy to France posted a fake-news article claiming local

nursing home staff had abandoned residents “to die of hunger and disease”. (Braze, 2020) Russia spread false claims that NATO continued to hold large-scale exercises during the height of the outbreak, with no regard for participants’ health. In April, NATO detected three coordinated attacks against the presence of NATO troops in Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. These attacks included a fake letter, purportedly from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to the Lithuanian Defence Minister Raimundas Karoblis, stating NATO’s intention to withdraw troops from the country, a fake interview claiming that Canadian troops in Latvia had brought the virus to the country, and a forged letter by a Polish military leader appearing to criticise US troops (NATO, July 2020). NATO and the Allies were able to debunk these attacks effectively, but the overall disinformation campaign conducted by malign actors has been partially successful. For instance, in a recent opinion poll in Italy when asked to identify the country’s “friends”, some 52% named China (up from a mere 12% in 2018), followed by Russia at 32% (up from 15%), while the United States was cited by only 17% (Bechis, 2020). Some 49% of Italians now want to leave the European Union (Grant, 2020). While these sentiments may subside with time, they still constitute a worrying shift in public opinion. NATO officials note that the spike in anti-Western propaganda and conspiracy theories has not been spontaneous, but a targeted, deliberate, and well financed effort. NATO-EU cooperation is essential in order to counter cyberattacks and fake news.<sup>8</sup>

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

40. Whether or not the COVID-19 pandemic ushers a paradigm shift in global history remains to be seen, but there will certainly be important lessons and conclusions to be drawn in the fields of life sciences, economics, sociology, psychology, and also international relations and security. Like every crisis, it presents an opportunity, and in this case to revisit the global order and rectify some of its deficiencies. In particular, an urgent debate is needed on how to adapt the international system to the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including a fairer distribution of the benefits of globalisation, striking the right balance between security and privacy in the cyber era as well as between security and the movement of people and goods, and addressing existential challenges such as climate change. Leaders of the Euro-Atlantic community must take an active and leading part in this process.

41. When it comes to the role of the North Atlantic Alliance in the post-COVID world, the Rapporteur would like to suggest the following ideas, in hopes that they could be helpful in the context of the NATO 2030 reflection process, launched by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg:

- Allies should strive to re-energise their activities in – and, where relevant, consider reengaging with – global institutions, including the UN and its bodies, with the view to ensuring that the values of democratic, free nations are well represented there. The pandemic might require a substantial overhaul of these institutions, including the WHO, and the leadership and buy-in from democratic nations will be crucial in this process. The active engagement of the United States in the international system will be indispensable for the preservation of the rules-based system.
- The post-COVID global security environment is likely to be more adversarial and characterised by increased geopolitical competition. It is of vital importance to retain adequate levels of funding for defence and security, in line with Allied commitments to the Defence Investment Pledge agreed at the 2014 Wales Summit. Parliamentarians of NATO countries have an essential role to play in this regard.

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<sup>8</sup> For more details on countering disinformation and propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic, see the draft report of the Assembly’s Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security as well as its earlier reports, [The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on the Civil Dimension of Security](#).

- Based on the lessons learned from this outbreak, NATO should conduct a review of its mechanisms and assets to establish what can be used in emergencies of this kind and to reduce the response time in the future. The Allies should also consider providing additional resources to the EADRCC, which once again proved its effectiveness. Allied nations should also revisit their national security strategies to give greater priority to the capacity to engage in public health and pandemic response. But, in preparation for any such future scenarios, NATO must not be distracted from its core mission of deterring and protecting its members from more conventional security threats.
- The Euro-Atlantic Allies must improve the coordination of their policy towards China. There can be no return to “business as usual” with Beijing. In particular, the Allies must redouble their efforts to limit third party investments in strategic infrastructure and to encourage diversification of supply chains in strategic areas, including medicines and medical equipment. Allied leaders should consider endowing NATO with the mandate and resources to provide advice to Members regarding security implications of third-party investments in critical industries and infrastructure in a broader and more strategic way than NATO currently does. Coordination with the EU is also crucial in this regard.
- The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the relevance of the “whole-of-society” approach to security. NATO’s efforts to promote resilience through civil preparedness should be supported, in particular, the updating of baseline requirements in seven strategic sectors – continuity of government, energy, population movement, food and water resources, mass casualties, civil communications, and transport systems. The pandemic showed the importance of NATO-EU cooperation on logistics and military mobility for both organisations. It is to be hoped that the EU will continue to fund its Military Mobility project adequately. Ensuring resilience of cyber structures will be particularly important in the wake of the pandemic, when societies, governments, and militaries are likely to increase dependence on online communications. NATO’s significant efforts in protecting Allied networks and enhancing cyber resilience will need to be expanded, including in cooperation with the EU.
- The Allies will need to review the work of their intelligence agencies to increase their capacity to detect significant health emergencies early on, including by employing or collaborating with virologists, toxicologists, medical doctors, and other experts. Big data analysis, potentially involving artificial intelligence, also offers opportunities for tracing transmission of diseases, provided safeguards are in place to ensure adequate protection of privacy rights.
- NATO should continue supporting partners that are affected by major health emergencies, including through the EADRCC. An upgrade of NATO global partnerships<sup>9</sup> in the Asia-Pacific region (particularly with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand) should be considered. Partnerships in Asia and Africa are mutually beneficial, given the experience of these countries in dealing with past health emergencies such as SARS or MERS.
- The Allies should redouble efforts supporting the multinational initiative spearheaded by Australia to launch an objective international investigation into the origin and the genesis of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This information is vital in order to draw adequate lessons from the COVID-19 outbreak.
- While the evidence that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was bioengineered is currently lacking, the COVID-19 outbreak might provide the necessary momentum to strengthen the 1972

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<sup>9</sup> NATO cooperates on an individual basis with a number of countries which are not part of its regional partnership frameworks. Referred to as “partners across the globe” or simply “global partners”, they include Afghanistan, Australia, Colombia, Iraq, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, and Pakistan.

Biological Weapons Convention by finally endowing it with a verification mechanism – something that has never been implemented. The Allies should give leadership on this important arms control issue.

- The Allies should consider providing NATO's Public Diplomacy Division with additional resources and manpower. Engagement with the EU on countering disinformation and propaganda is vital and should be continued.

42. Democratic systems have the possibility of coming out of this crisis stronger, but it requires continued responsible and science-based efforts by governments, solidarity as well as better communication. Parliamentarians on both sides of the Atlantic have a crucial role to play in this effort.

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