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## NEW THREATS

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UKRAINE  
CRISIS  
PANDEMIC  
RESPONSE  
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- PANDEMIC RESPONSE
- INFODEMIC AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
- SECURITY STRATEGIES



## New Threats

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# NATO AND COVID-19: LESSONS LEARNED AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

Colonel Hennadiy A. Kovalenko

NATO Supreme Allied Command Transformation Headquarters

*The pandemic caused by COVID-19 arguably came as a shock and will have profound consequences. It has already created exceptional circumstances in NATO capitals and in other NATO structures at all levels – strategic, operational, and tactical. The objective of this article is to analyse Alliance’s reaction to the pandemic, with a focus on lessons learned and a way ahead. Bearing in mind that the Alliance has not faced a pandemic before, three following main domains should be analysed: the institutional domain (how the Alliance will adapt its activities at the strategic level), the operational domain (how NATO will adapt the Command and Control structure, plan and conduct of military exercises, and the changing business within the command structure), and the information domain (how the Alliance has been waging the information campaign in order to dispel myths and rumours/perceptions and to promote own interests and agendas for the future).*

## Introduction

Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) causes an infectious disease, which was named COVID-19 by the World Health Organisation back in February this year<sup>1</sup>. Despite all the activities that were taken by states and international and regional (sub-regional) organisations across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across new territories and infect more and more people.

The global pandemic has become an unprecedented challenge, and its consequences will be perpetually reflected within the policies of all affected countries, and in various organisations, including NATO. For example, dealing with the immediate necessity of health care with

economic constraints and scarce resources in the background, it will be indescribably difficult for any politician in member nations to advocate increasing spending taxpayers’ money on defence.

Bearing in mind the unexpected and unprecedented characteristics of the pandemic, many experts underline a certain level of unpreparedness of NATO to react as quickly as it was required by the circumstances. For the sake of comparability, the same assessment is also true for other international organisations, such as the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, etc.

Furthermore, NATO was not created to face this kind of challenge, and a possible threat from any virus that can cause a global pandemic was not mentioned in the

1 The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020.

Alliance's Strategic Concept back in 2010<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the relatively embryonic readiness for robust actions should not be mixed up with or misinterpreted as perplexity, confusion, and reluctance, which never happened in Brussels.

Furthermore, NATO can be praised for quick reaction at the strategic level. Thus, on 2 April 2020, NATO foreign ministers issued a declaration where they promised, "Even as we do the absolute maximum to contain and then overcome this challenge, NATO remains active, focused and ready to perform its core tasks: collective defence, crisis management, and cooperative security."<sup>3</sup> The other quick win of the Alliance is the success in preventing the pandemic crisis from transforming into a crisis of collective defence, deterrence, and security of the member nations. Moreover, emerging activities, such as "airlifting critical medical supplies", "providing medical personnel, essential materials, and vital equipment", and "harnessing our medical, scientific, and technological knowledge and resources" were announced by the Allied foreign ministers at the same meeting with considerable support at the political level.

Furthermore, for a comprehensive and sober approach, the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, launched on 8 June 2020 an initiative named "NATO 2030 – Strengthening the Alliance in an Increasingly Competitive World". The results of the initiative are aimed to provide assurance that NATO is ready today and will be ready in ten years to meet future threats, risks, and challenges. The reflection report should be presented by the end of 2020.

From the very beginning of this pandemic, NATO led (with direct contribution from the Supreme Allied Command Transformation Headquarters – SACT HQ) with the following main lines of efforts regarding COVID-19<sup>4</sup>:

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***NATO was not created to face this kind of challenge, and a possible threat from any virus that can cause a global pandemic was not mentioned in the Alliance's Strategic Concept back in 2010***

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**1. Decreasing and, if possible, mitigating of risks** of being infected by the virus for the personnel involved in planning and executing of Allied activities at all levels;

**2. Maintaining of an appropriate level of working effectiveness** in NATO as a whole, and in some of its components, mainly – the Command and Control (C2) System;

**3. Gradual but resilient adaptation** to the recent realities and new environment in which NATO will operate in the upcoming decade.

At the same time, emphasis was placed on maintaining close ties among the NATO Supreme Commands<sup>5</sup>, operational headquarters, NATO Education and Training Facilities<sup>6</sup> (NETFs), NATO Centres of Excellence (COEs), as well as the Partnership Training and Education Centres (PTECs), agencies, academia, and industry.

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2 The first appearance of the so-called "human security", which can be considered as a weak attempt to think about a pandemic, was at the London NATO summit in December 2019.

3 *Declaration by NATO Foreign Ministers Issued Following Their Meeting of 2nd April 2020*, NATO HQ, July 2020 [[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_174855.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_174855.htm) access: 20 July 2020].

4 *Re-Configure & Re-Connect the Headquarters (R2HQ)*, Supreme Allied Command Transformation HQ, June 2020 [<http://hqsact.collab.act.nato.int/CTFLibrary/R2HQ%20-%20Narrative-final.pdf> access: 30 June 2020].

5 Allied Command Operations (ACO) and Allied Command Transformation (ACT).

6 The NATO Defence College in Rome (Italy) and the NATO School in Oberammergau (Germany).

For better understanding, and for a more analytical approach, the main NATO activities, planned as well as executed, will be divided into the following three areas:

- **the institutional area** – how the Alliance is adapting its activities at the strategic level, including the decision-making process, appropriate level of openness, and cooperation between the nations;
- **the operational area** – how NATO is adapting the Command and Control (C2) structure, plan and conduct of military exercises, daily routine business within the HQs at all levels, and changes in NETFs, COEs, PTECs, etc.;
- **the information area** – how the Alliance has been waging the information (counter-propaganda) campaign in order to dispel myths and rumours/perceptions and to promote its own interests and agendas for the future.

The abovementioned classification was apparently adopted in both Strategic Commands – the Allied Command Operations and Supreme Allied Command Transformation. Furthermore, necessary guidance has been provided to the NATO Command Structure and NATO Force Structure at the operational level. This division has enabled the Alliance (on the one hand) to cover a whole spectrum of possible consequences and (on the other hand) to coordinate efforts across the different nations in order to maximise effectiveness and avoid waste resources<sup>7</sup>.

On 7 May 2020, James Appathurai, Deputy Assistant Secretary General for political

affairs, underlined to NATO parliamentarians two immediate objectives for the Alliance<sup>8</sup>: to guarantee that the Alliance's core function – credible collective defence and deterrence – remained unaffected and to assist the hardest-hit member nations.

## Institutional Domain

In order to reach these declared objectives, the Alliance implemented the following measures at the institutional level:

- the North Atlantic Council for the first time activated<sup>9</sup> the Rapid Air Mobility<sup>10</sup> initiative in order to support military aircraft transporting doctors and equipment into the critically hit places;
- NATO and EU coordinated actions<sup>11</sup> were launched in order to increase objective situation awareness and to counter adversarial information narratives;
- the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (and the US EUCOM Commander) General Tod D. Wolters was appointed at the beginning of April at the Allied foreign ministers' meeting to ensure sufficient contribution, timely coordination, and targeted assistance within the activities aimed at combating COVID-19;
- the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) was activated in order to coordinate activities among more than 70 member nations and partners;
- NATO's Strategic Airlift Capabilities (SAC) and Strategic Airlift International Solutions (SALIS) initiatives were invoked in order to replace civilian air transport capacities, locked on the

7 Harmonisation and coordination are essential among the different nations within NATO in order to mitigate possible consequences of duplication of efforts.

8 Lord Campbell of Pittenweem, *COVID-19 and Transatlantic Security*, "Draft Special Report", NATO, June 2020 [https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-covid-19-and-transatlantic-security-105-pc-20-e-campbell-pittenweem access: 18 July 2020].

9 Actual date of activation is 31 March 2020.

10 The Rapid Air Mobility process was established in 2018 for movement of any military aircraft during crisis deployment.

11 The EU has an appropriate structure within its External Action Service.

ground as a consequence of restricting transport measures;

- the Committee of the Chiefs of Military Medical Services in NATO (COMEDS) was engaged within a wide spectrum of activities directed chiefly at coordination of military medical aspects for combating the pandemic among NATO members and partners;
- NATO Science & Technology Organisation (STO) launched the NATO Chief Scientist Challenge initiative with more than 6,000 participants. It unified the global scientific community to share information, knowledge, and skills in virus detection and handling.

At the same time, the main, existential task for NATO and for the Allied nations will be maintaining unity. This unity should be maintained in different dimensions such as the following: general understanding<sup>12</sup>, lines of efforts<sup>13</sup>, and visions of future developments<sup>14</sup>.

Although radical changes within the decision-making system should not be expected in the near future, it will not be business as usual anymore, and some improvements, based on the lessons learned, will be implemented in order to comprehend recently emerging challenges.

Due to the institutional and procedural changes, more NATO civilian and military personnel will be invited to “work from home” and “stay out of the office”, which requires high-quality internet and,

therefore, more reliable protection services. Extensive use of communication assets remotely and employing civilian providers for home internet communications will lead to increased risk for a potential attack on the cyber domain.

Whilst institutional changes and administrative adaptation have not been completed yet, Allies and key partners will be called on to work tightly and closely in order to increase the resilience and sustainability for providing collective defence and mutual protection.

## Operational Domain

Although COVID-19 does not threaten NATO nations from a military perspective, the following supplementary activities aimed at combating the global pandemic have been launched within the operational domain<sup>15</sup>:

- timely assessment of available stocks was conducted by all Allies and partners in order to have a clear picture of accessible lifesaving equipment, masks, protective tools, and items;
- in the framework of SAC<sup>16</sup> and SALIS,<sup>17</sup> Allies and partners have conducted more than 350 sorties, transporting medical personnel as well as moving hundreds of tonnes of cargo;
- more than 100 field hospitals were deployed with 45,000 treatment beds;
- about 500,000 military personnel, including about 14,000 doctors, have been routinely involved in combating COVID-19;

12 This requires a universal approach to the security threats/risks/challenges assessment.

13 This requires a united vision on the current and future priorities, as well as readiness to sacrifice national interests for the sake of collective defence and security.

14 This requires political willingness of NATO nations to increase defence spending as well as intensification of research and development within the military-industrial complex.

15 *NATO and Allied Response to COVID-19 by the Numbers*, “YouTube”, NATO, June 2020 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nllfzRgvVc> access: 2 August 2020].

16 Three C-17 “Globemaster” aircraft were operated from the Papa Air base in Hungary.

17 Five “Antonov” An-124-100 cargo transport aircraft were engaged, coordinated by the Strategic Airlift Coordination Cell, the Movement Coordination Centre Europe, Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

- advanced medical assistance has been provided on bilateral basis between member nations: Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Norway, Slovakia, and Turkey provided support for Italy and Spain; Poland and Turkey sent medical personnel and essential supplies to the United States in order to share lessons learned and provide expertise;
- critical medical support was provided by Allies to the partners<sup>18</sup>: the Afghan Army and National Police received donations in remote and unstable regions of the country; Moldova received considerable medical assistance from Hungary, and Bosnia and Herzegovina requested assistance from Hungary, Slovenia, and the United States;

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***NATO and the EU were selected as the primary targets for propaganda and disinformation campaigns from Moscow, Beijing, and, to some extent, from Tehran***

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- significant changes have been implemented within the area of joint training and international military exercises: the planned NATO exercise “Cold Response 2020” (Norwegian lead, March 2020) was terminated; the scale of the “Defender-Europe 20” exercise (July 2020) was significantly downgraded<sup>19</sup>;
- NATO Educational Training Facilities such as the NATO School Oberammergau and the NATO Defence College are working

on changes to the content and teaching methodologies of their courses.

Whilst the Alliance achieved quick wins in the operational domain and reasonable success in mutual assistance activities, the main task of finding a reliable and affordable vaccine is yet to be achieved. Many scientists and military medical establishments across the member nations have been working on vaccination development and testing, including the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory in the UK and the Center for Infectious Disease Research (Walter Reed Army Institute of Research) in the US.

### **Information Domain**

Unfortunately, the Alliance has to not only mitigate the negative consequences of COVID-19 but also combat hostile propaganda campaigns. Since the beginning of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, some countries, chiefly the Russian Federation and China, had launched a wide spectrum of information activities aimed to decrease reliability, confidence, and effectiveness of NATO’s responses as well as to erode Allied internal cohesion (including transatlantic links). NATO and the EU were selected as the primary targets for propaganda and disinformation campaigns from Moscow, Beijing, and, to some extent, from Tehran.

The Kremlin has been leading the propaganda campaign by developing anti-NATO myths at an early stage of combating the coronavirus<sup>20</sup>: For example, COVID-19 will be fatal for the future of NATO; NATO

18 A. Mesterhazy, *The Role of NATO’s Armed Forces in the COVID-19 Pandemic*, “Draft Special Report”, NATO, June 2020 [[www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-role-natos-armed-forces-covid-19-pandemic-mesterhazy-091-dsc-20-e](http://www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-role-natos-armed-forces-covid-19-pandemic-mesterhazy-091-dsc-20-e) access: 20 July 2020].

19 As of 22 July 2020, the exercises related to “Defender-Europe 20” – “Dynamic Front”, “Joint Warfighting Assessment”, “Saber Strike”, and “Swift Response” – will not be conducted.

20 *Russia’s Top Five Myths about NATO & COVID*, NATO HQ, April 2020 [[www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/2004-Factsheet-Russia-Myths-COVID-19\\_en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/2004-Factsheet-Russia-Myths-COVID-19_en.pdf) access: 16 July 2020].

is failing to support its member states in combating COVID-19; the virus is a weapon created by NATO; NATO has been widely exploiting military exercises to spread COVID-19; NATO suggests increasing spending on defence, not health care.

Furthermore, the myths were supplemented by other narratives, which were developed in order to diminish the level of effectiveness of the EU struggling against the pandemic<sup>21</sup>: The coronavirus was exported to China by the US military; China, Russia, and Iran have been managing to combat the virus quite well, unlike the US and the European states<sup>22</sup>; the outbreak is caused by migrants who spread the virus in the EU; the coronavirus is a conspiracy to control population growth, etc.

While Moscow focused its narratives on blaming NATO, the EU, and the US, Beijing concentrated its efforts on three main narratives<sup>23</sup>: first, shifting blame away from China, which has been recognised as the origin of COVID-19; second, underlining slow reaction and insufficient response from the West; third, promoting the Chinese response as the most effective one.

Since the beginning of encountering the global pandemic, NATO has adopted a two-way approach to resist propaganda and disinformation campaigns, concentrating on the “understand” and “engage” functions<sup>24</sup>. While the “understand” domain includes regular “information environment

assessments”, aimed at monitoring and analysing information areas of interest for the alliance, the “engage” one has been exploiting the gathered information in order to enable NATO to communicate effectively in combating disinformation at all levels.

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***Since the beginning of encountering the global pandemic, NATO has adopted a two-way approach to resist propaganda and disinformation campaigns, concentrating on the “understand” and “engage” functions***

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In the “engage” domain, the following actions have been taken in order to counter the hostile propaganda campaign<sup>25</sup>:

- digital communications on the pandemic response across all platforms were gradually intensified;
- online engagements were increased in order to accelerate the current and future policy dimensions debate both within NATO media platforms and on external media platforms;
- the audience of Russian-speaking customers has been purposely enhanced, including articles, translations of factsheets, videos on the Alliance’s Russian-language YouTube channel, and so forth.

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21 N. Bentzen, *COVID-19 Foreign Influence Campaigns: Europe and Global Battle of Narratives*, “European Parliamentary Research Service”, April 2020 [[www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649367/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)649367\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649367/EPRS_BRI(2020)649367_EN.pdf) access: 5 July 2020].

22 Thus, the member states have to rely on China and Russia to save them.

23 A. Mesterhazy, *The Role of NATO’s Armed Forces in the COVID-19 Pandemic*, “Draft Special Report”, NATO, June 2020 [[www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-role-natos-armed-forces-covid-19-pandemic-mesterhazy-091-dsc-20-e](http://www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-role-natos-armed-forces-covid-19-pandemic-mesterhazy-091-dsc-20-e) access: 20 July 2020].

24 *NATO’s Approach to Countering Disinformation: A Focus on COVID-19*, NATO HQ, July 2020 [[www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm) access: 28 July 2020].

25 Ibid.

There is no simple solution to fight against disinformation; international organisations, national governments, private enterprises, non-governmental organisations, free and independent media, and public opinion leaders should be engaged for cross-functioning activities, directed mainly at two tasks: first, to inform about the developments within the Alliance, member states, and key partners; second, to mitigate possible negative consequences of adversaries' propaganda.

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***To ensure the document “NATO 2030 – Strengthening the Alliance in an Increasingly Competitive World” includes comprehensive political guidance related to crisis management and civilian protection based on the outcomes of COVID-19***

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Not surprisingly, during NATO foreign and defence ministers' meetings, the issue of the Alliance's readiness to face a second wave of the pandemic before the end of the current year was raised. Among the other problems to be solved, the main challenge is a rapid increase of the level of social resilience and early situation awareness, as well as finding a reliable and affordable vaccine.

### **Future Plans**

Based on initial analysis, and on the potential of dealing with the next phase of the pandemic, SACT HQ<sup>26</sup> proposed the following lines for enhancing resilience of military forces:

- adapting the joint forces' formations for enhancing military resilience in order to ensure NATO's ability to maintain current posture of defence and/or deterrence;
- increasing the level and awareness of medical readiness capabilities in order to provide sufficient support in case of future similar risks, threats, and challenges;
- re-thinking and re-assessing the place and role of the armed forces in combating epidemics and other diseases.

Having analysed action taken by the Alliance, as well as the current global environment, including calls for shifting military engagements to disaster relief operations, humanitarian aid, state security, and border protection, some recommendations can be provided in order to enhance NATO awareness, cohesion, and resilience<sup>27</sup>.

#### ***In the institutional domain:***

- To accelerate current discussions within NATO's networks of experts and/or relevant organisations<sup>28</sup>, aimed to have lessons identified, learned, and implemented for long-term planning and, consequently, more effective collective adaptation of the Alliance;
- To ensure the document “NATO 2030 – Strengthening the Alliance in an Increasingly Competitive World” includes comprehensive political guidance related to crisis management and civilian protection based on the outcomes of COVID-19;
- To develop a strategy of cooperation and coordination with international, regional, and sub-regional organisations, emphasising significant importance of NATO-UN and NATO-EU engagements;

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26 “Food for Thought” (FFT) Paper on Post COVID-19 Global Security Landscape, Supreme Allied Command Transformation HQ (SACT HQ), 16 June 2020, pp. 14-15.

27 Ibid., pp. 17-18.

28 First of all, Centres of Excellence (COEs), NATO Education Training Facilities (NETFs), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the United Nations, the European Union, etc.

- To enhance flexibility in defence/operational planning at the strategic level, therefore enhancing the Alliance's capacity to predict future crises, as well as to transform anticipations into actions in an acceptable timeframe;
- To adapt and adjust routine working practices in the NATO Command Structure and in all structures affiliated with the Alliance in order to provide the necessary level of safety for military and civilian personnel at all levels.

Given the necessity for significant changes at the strategic level, and the unpreparedness of the Alliance for such a challenge in the past, the next NATO summit, scheduled for October 2020 in Beverly Hills (California, USA) must be the turning point for dealing more seriously with future threats similar to the pandemic.

The number of deaths caused by COVID-19 across the world and the absence of any possibility to conduct "business as usual" within the post-epidemic global environment will force NATO to take unprecedented measures for its transformation and adaptation. These measures not only will touch on the military component of the Alliance but will also require strategic changes in ways of thinking – transformation of the mindsets of the key decision-makers.

***In the operational domain:***

- To ensure smooth and effective transformation of the Alliance to be fully adapted to a new reality sketched by the post-pandemic global strategic environment;
- To use the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC) as the major catalyst for the adaptation of the NATO Command

Structure (NCS) and NATO Force Structure (NFS) to a new approach, ensuring collective defence, providing crisis response capabilities, and maintaining peace and stability within the key for Alliance areas;

- To develop capabilities of the High Readiness Forces in order to enhance their resilience, sustainability, and preparedness to accomplish tasks by the Alliance in future pandemic-like environments;
- To prioritise development of military operational capabilities with more emphasis on medical, logistics, (military) policing, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), and CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) protection aspects;
- To identify the "bottlenecks" of the member nations as well as individual cases of failure of the Alliance in order to concentrate future efforts on minimising or even mitigating them or their consequences within a short timeframe.

At this level, it will also be important to have the measures, capacities, and/or procedures for the member nations' continuation of force contribution to current and planned NATO operations and missions. Many NATO initiatives and mechanisms, such as the Mediterranean Dialogue, Partnership for Peace Programme, Science and Technology Programme, etc., must be revised, adapted, and transformed in order to bring more tangible and, therefore, more useful results for the participants.

Furthermore, artificial intelligence development, big data analysis, targeted genetic modification, and synthetic biology employment must stop being buzzwords and fancy slang for young disruptors<sup>29</sup>. The

29 K. Jones, *COVID-19, International Security, and the Importance of NATO's Science and Technology Network*, "Draft Special Report", NATO, June 2020 [https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-covid-19-international-security-and-importance-nato-sto-draft-report-jones-090-stc-20 access: 22 June 2020].

new lines of effort must assist scientists across the globe as well as experts to find an appropriate vaccine for COVID-19, as well as to provide possible solutions for handling different scales of epidemics in the future.

***In the informational domain:***

- To develop sufficient and up-to-date information capacity with proactive, not reactive, approaches as well as capabilities for conducting deep strategic analysis of current and future hostile information campaigns;
- To employ information networks for better situation awareness and actions taken (lessons learned) of the Alliance, its member nations, and key partners concerning the pandemic and related threats, risks, and challenges;
- To engage actively with subject matter experts within the area of strategic communication (StratCom) for counter-propaganda activities, especially from China and the Russian Federation.



***Many NATO initiatives and mechanisms, such as the Mediterranean Dialogue, Partnership for Peace Programme, Science and Technology Programme, etc., must be revised, adapted, and transformed in order to bring more tangible and, therefore, more useful results for the participants.***

It is rather clear that neither Russia nor China will stop their information and propaganda activities aimed at loosening cohesion within the Alliance and questioning the strength of transatlantic links. Having an understanding of the unpredictability and hostile intentions of such information campaigns from Moscow and Beijing, Brussels will have to work on enhancing its own public diplomacy

capabilities in order to mitigate unavoidable consequences of such operations.

Such capacities need to be developed at national levels as well as within NATO structures, including strategic communication tools, proactive information campaigns, timely information dissemination, and counter-propaganda measures. Moreover, a pool of well-trained and equipped personnel from NATO nations and partners should be prepared for future engagements in various circumstances and in many domains of the comprehensive information operations.

**Conclusions**

It is too early to draw final conclusions; however, one statement can be made: The Alliance successfully prevented the transformation of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 into a more dangerous and unpredictable crisis of the collective defence system.

Whilst Brussels successfully achieved some “quick wins” in its struggle against the global pandemic, the main challenges lie ahead of the organisation. They mostly relate to: the different perceptions of future security threats; temptations of solving national health care problems at the expense of the defence; and references to NATO as an obsolete, slow, and ineffective organisation.

Some NATO nations, chiefly from the Baltic region and Eastern Europe, continue to consider Moscow the main challenger of Allied security and collective defence, whilst others, led by France, Italy, and Spain, advocate switching Brussels’ attention from the Russian Federation to the challenges from the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa, and the Middle East.

One of the main victims of these different perceptions of security issues is NATO’s open-door policy, declared in the aftermath

of the Cold War. The number of people opposed to the enlargement is growing not only in Western European states, who were traditionally sceptical about full-fledged NATO membership of Georgia and Ukraine, but also among the traditional open-door policy supporters such as Poland and the Baltic states<sup>30</sup>. Consequently, NATO must work to ensure unity and a cohesive approach.

The cohesion of the Alliance is also under a threat from changing national priorities taking precedence over NATO's; for example, the United Kingdom has set an astonishing precedent for the other contributing nations by withdrawing personnel from the NATO mission in Iraq. This is a dangerous example, underlined by the COVID-19 pandemic, of national precedence above that of the Alliance's collective defence and security interests.

Additionally, senior political leadership calling NATO a "brain-dead" organisation<sup>31</sup> is not adding any stability and resilience to the current situation; this can be considered only as fuelling the fire, which was ignited and is maintained by the Alliance's existential enemies. Thus, the main focus should be placed not on declarations and buzzwords, but rather on improvements, developments, evolution, and resilience of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

Looking to the future, experts and high-level officials within NATO agree that the Alliance, as the main provider and guarantor of collective defence for its members, will never be the same again after March 2020, and continued cohesion and unity are a priority.

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30 Алена Гетьманчук, *Евроатлантический Трек (The Euro-Atlantic Track)*, "Weekly Mirror", 20 July 2020 [<https://zn.ua/international/evroatlanticeskij-trek.html> access: 16 July 2020].

31 *Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain-Dead*, "The Economist", 7 November 2019 [<http://www.economist.com> access: 20 June 2020].



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