



## The Security Sector and the Pandemic: We Must Do Better because Much is at Stake

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**T**he Covid-19 pandemic is shattering myths and showing up startling and usually highly troubling realities in a vast range of elements of our societies. However, despite the often central role the various parts of the security sector are playing in facing the crisis, there is surprisingly little thought being given to the impact of the moment on the sector and by extension, on our societies themselves.\*

What is the current state of play? The security sector, in an enormous variety of countries, especially those with relatively weak civilian state institutions, is engaging in a simply enormous range of activities assigned them, or taken over by them, in dealing with the pandemic. A list of such activities would be so extensive as to be almost impossible to draw up. And while the majority of the security services, such as the police, the fire service, national health services, and the like are merely increasing the intensity of their efforts in areas normally within their purview, there is one which is expanding massively outside its normal responsibilities.

This exception is of course the armed forces, and most especially the army. The armed forces have been asked to move into fields as varied as medical assistance and vaccination, protection of food convoys, evacuations of persons, cordoning off of affected zones, transport of medical support staff, setting up of concentration centres, military hospitals used by the civilian sector, emergency staffing of long-term care centres, taking over border controls at international or even internal border points, and a host of other missions.

This exceptional capacity to take over new roles in an emergency is of course usually the unique advantage of the armed forces, and especially the army, because that institution has automatically as part of what it is characteristics allowing such an expansion of missions: discipline, an organized chain of command and hierarchy, numerous and generally fit personnel, a distribution widely across the country's territory, communications internal to the force, mobility, engineering skills, air, sea, and land transport, medical and dental services accustomed to emergencies, postal services, and many other logistical capabilities largely absent from other government institutions.

Little wonder then that in times of emergency the armed forces are called on to fill gaps in the overall state response. When added to this that those forces are trained to give flexibility to the

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state, and that they are armed, with all that means in times of crisis, it can hardly surprise us that their utility to government is obvious to all. What is perhaps not so obvious is the dangers that such an imbalance between security and civilian sectors of the state apparatus may bring about precisely because of this extraordinary need for them when crises arise.

In the specific context of this pandemic, the crisis arises when the political situation is already a complicated one, with widespread disorder present in much of the globe. Populist governments have come to power in situations of dubious constitutional legality with the return of the coup d'état, in a variety of old and new forms, joined by other upheavals dangerous for the fledgling democracies of many countries. And while repression was seen once again to be no answer for societal needs over the long term, it was often extremely useful in allowing governments time to see the immediate crisis through.

In an era already characterized as of insecurity, citizen and state, a pandemic such as Covid-19 arrived with a massive impact on governments and societies. In as dramatic an appeal as ever, once again the knock at the door of the barracks was heard and the armed forces responded. Again, little wonder that under such circumstances the military receive kudos from the general public, often richly deserved, for their unique and invaluable contribution to the state effort to mitigate the disaster.

But then what? Having proven their worth yet again, and garnered the public's esteem and gratitude, they are no longer necessarily quite the same institution they were beforehand. Their budgets have normally increased substantially, the public's contentment with their acting in normally civilian missions is reinforced, their power in cabinet and government is enhanced, and the imbalance between the power and influence of the military sector of the state over the civilian is further shifted in the military's favour.

In the wake of this pandemic, this situation may be worsened by the economic depression, or at the very least recession, that virtually every economist sees as inevitable over the next extended period of time. Budgets for improving civilian sector emergency capabilities may well be far from generous. Ideas for new non-military state institutions to be able to better face future pandemics and natural disasters may find precious little funding.

Moreover, international support for such improvements may be difficult in the extreme to obtain, especially in the financial area, as a result of the growth of a nationalistic, go-it-alone approach so prominent during the current pandemic. Countries with weak civilian institutions may find themselves on their own, with highly serious economic challenges of the deepest kind, and unable to address reform issues whatever their desirability and stymied in finding assistance in doing so from traditional supporters of such reforms abroad.

For democracy, and the progress made with anchoring it in so much of the world in recent decades, the problem is visible but, as mentioned, little discussed and even less studied or addressed. It is vital that those interested in democratic civil-military relations, and the further progress of democracy in the world, take this issue seriously. It deserves immediate attention while we have the evidence of these threats clear in our minds. The military's roles are ideally those of national defence and the capacity to assure that defence gives them special capabilities in the field of pandemics and natural disasters. But for the good of democracy, democratic states need to be wary of a further drift into weakened civilian institutions alongside strengthened military ones. Study of this phenomenon in order to deal properly with it is essential. The urgent must not be permitted to boot out the important.

THE WORK OF MILITARY FORCES IN THE  
CONTEXT OF THE **COVID-19** CRISIS

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