

# **The Alliance in the pandemic chaos and the role of the NATO SFA COE**



## ***Interview with the President of the Atlantic Treaty Association – ATA – FABRIZIO W. LUCIOLLI***

A strand of RNA, encapsulated by four proteins with a total diameter six hundred times less than a human hair, has produced the most serious crisis since the post-war, affecting a system of institutions, political, economic and social relations, which were not vaccinated against biological threats.

## The pandemic crisis had an impact on NATO's activities. How do you see the Alliance's response to this new challenge?

Unlike other international organizations, the Covid-19 pandemic crisis has strengthened the Atlantic Alliance, which reacted with a strong spirit of solidarity. Upon overcoming the first impact, NATO has quickly responded to the Allied needs, adapting its complex political-military organization to support civil efforts and activating the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) to coordinate the air transport of doctors, patients, medical devices and field hospitals.

Since 2010, article 15 of the Strategic Concept includes "health risks" in NATO's security scenario. However, biological threats directly undermine national security and must be addressed with specific strategies that cannot be generically framed within the environment of hybrid threats. Covid-19 has also produced relevant effects on all three of NATO's fundamental tasks: collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security.

In the new context of global bio-insecurity, the concept of resilience embodied in Article 3 of the Treaty must be revised in a more rigorous way. Therefore, the protection of NATO forces in operation, as well as the preservation of critical national assets and supply chains, require more attention.

## How is the Washington Treaty responding to the pandemic security environment?

The pandemic crisis offers further prominence to article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty and to the political dimension of the Alliance, which confirms itself as the irreplaceable forum for transatlantic consultation on security issues.

Moreover, in the current security scenario, article 5 and the core principle of collective defence implies a broader and more demanding solidarity commitment. In fact, in a global pandemic crisis, NATO most likely would not be called upon to intervene in defence of a conventional aggression to a single allied country. Probably, it would be requested to provide all 30 Allies with the necessary support against a biological agent.

In this context, the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Forces in Europe (SHAPE) could be further engaged in early warning, situation awareness and air transport for monitoring

threats originating from agents of a biological nature, as well as for the planning and managing of complex operations in support of civilian authorities.

**The Centres of Excellence play an important role in supporting the Alliance with their expertise. Which are the main tools they could use in the current situation?**

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO devoted its major efforts to the Eastern flank. However, the 360-degree approach of the Alliance underlined the relevance of projecting stability to the Southern Flank, from where many of the threats and challenges to the Alliance's security arise. Thus, NATO needs to develop a greater understanding of the Southern Flank to project stability by using the wide range of tools at its disposal.

In the current security landscape, Covid-19 could seriously impact the fragile institutions and health system of the African countries, with serious consequences on the political and social stability of the region.

In this perspective, Security Force Assistance can play a crucial role in assisting Host Nations' governments and security forces in coping with the disease. These efforts can have a dual beneficial effect: on the one hand, it will improve the conditions of the local population with the possible implementation of effective health protocols combined with the provision of medical equipment. On the other hand, it will indirectly provide NATO troops with an additional shield against the disease through the improvement of the general health conditions in the operational environment.

In this context the NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence (NATO SFA COE) can play a key role, thanks to its ability and experience in involving various civilian and military actors in defence and security capability development forums and its link with other COEs for facilitating NATO's actions towards fragile countries in need of assistance. In this regard, it is important to recall the experience identified by NATO and its member countries to build sustainable and long-lasting medical capabilities, including the provision of services to support, facilitate and contribute to the enhancement of the Host Nation and the development of sustainable capacities.

The Committee of the Chiefs of Military Medical Services in NATO (COMEDS), the NATO Centre of Excellence of military medicine and the recent Multinational Medical Coordination Centre, could contribute to the definition of protocols and standards (STANAG) for NATO's National military Healthcare.

In addition, the Science and technology organization (STO), the Science for peace and security program (SPS) and NATO Centres of Excellence (such as the one for CBRN defence and the Alliance's database of over six thousand scientists) constitute other bodies, with different responsibilities, which can work in synergy and offer wide margins of development if supported by adequate investments and resources.

### **In your opinion, how should NATO and EU further develop their relationship?**

Cooperation between NATO, the European Union and the United Nations in the areas of prevention, research, monitoring and resilience is also crucial to develop and apply severe regulations to effectively track hazardous and biological materials, as well as to ensure the compliance with bio-safety standards of the laboratories treating microorganisms.

Nevertheless, the new wider NATO commitments cannot distract the Allies from the fundamental tasks of deterrence and defence towards the assertive posture of the Russian Federation and from the threats and risks originating from proliferation, terrorism, disruptive technologies and cyber space. Moreover, China could exploit the pandemic and economic crisis, for predatory interests on Western strategic assets and companies.

Furthermore, NATO and the EU are called upon to strengthen cooperation in countering the growing misinformation and disinformation campaigns implemented by Moscow, Beijing, and other non-state actors, through the pervasive and uncontrolled use of modern social media.

Finally, NATO's increased role and experience in support of civil authorities may constitute an extraordinary added value to re-launch the partnerships in the regions of the Middle East and Northern Africa, which are structurally fragile in facing a pandemic crisis.

In several regions, the EU covers areas of operations not covered by NATO, such as the EUTM missions conducted mostly in sub-Saharan Africa (EUTM-Mali, EUTM-Somalia, EUTM RCA, EUCAP Sahel Niger and Mali). While these missions are conducted under the EU political direction, from an operational point of view they share many characteristics of the NATO's SFA activities.

In other cases, the EU works in close cooperation with NATO to strengthen institutions and legitimate political authority in complementary and non-redundant activities, such as the European Assistant Mission (EUAM) Iraq, aimed at offering assistance to the implementation of civilian goals within the Security Sector Reform Program (SSRP) and

NATO Training Mission in Iraq which is designed to help strengthen Iraqi security forces and military education institutions.

The two missions are addressing specific audiences and activities, sometimes overlapping to avoid uncovered areas: the EUAM is focused mainly on internal and civilian security aspects, and the NATO Training Mission is dedicated to the defence aspects.

In this context, the NATO SFA COE can play an important role in facilitating the common efforts, such as offering advanced training and education for institutional, military and civilian advisors and providing in-depth analysis and assessment support, either in the early stages of Security Force Assistance missions or during their execution and Transition phases.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over seventy years after its establishment, NATO proved to be the Organization that adapted itself to respond to the new challenges of a changing security environment quicker than any other multilateral institution. However, in the current complex and demanding scenario it is vital that the Alliance is provided with the necessary capabilities and financial resources to continue operating effectively and to prevent a global health crisis from becoming a security crisis affecting the security of our citizens, territories and fundamental freedoms.

