

# NATO STRENGTHENS RESILIENCE IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented challenge for NATO and our nations, as it continues to have a profound impact on our people as well as our economies. Our Allied armed forces have played a key role in supporting civilian efforts while successfully and continuously serving NATO's core tasks during the pandemic. This article explains how Allies and partners have supported each other to tackle a health crisis and prevented its transformation into a security crisis. The crisis has shown that NATO Allies are resilient, united, and stronger together. As we look to the future, we should remember that security is the foundation for our prosperity, and we must make it the foundation for our recovery as well.*

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**T**he COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented challenge for NATO and for our nations, and it continues to have a profound impact on our people and our economies. The pandemic has proven once again that we live in an interconnected world and that we face common challenges that require collective responses. While nation states remain important actors, the value of multilateral institutions in dealing with global crises in these uncertain times has become more evident. We stand with all those affected by the crisis, and we are deeply grateful to all those health and other front line workers who have been helping to fight this pandemic. NATO is playing its part in tackling today's crisis too, by supporting the wider efforts to fight the virus, while continuing to defend our nations and keep our people safe. So, while NATO is not a first responder to a health crisis, it has played an important role to make sure this health crisis does not become a security crisis.

NATO's core task remains unchanged. NATO continues delivering credible and effective deterrence and defense. Our operational readiness remains undiminished. NATO's posture is intact, including our multinational battlegroups in the east of the Alliance, NATO Air Policing, our maritime deployments, and our missions from Afghanistan to Kosovo.

The security challenges that existed before the pandemic broke out a few months ago have not gone away. At the London Summit in December 2019, our Leaders agreed that:

We, as an Alliance, are facing distinct threats and challenges emanating from all strategic directions. Russia's aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro-Atlantic security; terrorism in all its forms and manifestations remains a persistent threat to us all. State and non-state actors challenge the rules-based international order. Instability beyond our borders is also contributing to irregular migration. We face cyber and hybrid threats.

None of this has changed. NATO remains ready to respond to any threat, and NATO continues to adapt to address threats coming from all directions, as it does not have the luxury to focus on only one type of threat.

### *NATO's Contribution to Save Lives*

We face an unprecedented, complex pandemic and NATO does not have all the solutions. However, the crisis has shown that our nations are resilient, united, and stronger together. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, NATO and Allied militaries have played a key role in supporting the civilian response to the crisis.

NATO has deployed several mechanisms at its disposal, which allowed us to act rapidly, to coordinate assistance, and to bring military and civilian resources together. NATO and Allied armed forces have played a key role in supporting civilian efforts. An important element in all of this has been NATO's unique ability to organize large-scale heavy airlift. Our militaries have conducted some 350 flights to airlift hundreds of tons of critical supplies around the world to Allies and partners who are in need. Our militaries have also helped construct almost 100 field hospitals and more than half a million of troops have supported the civilian response to the pandemic, securing borders and supporting the medical response. In coordination with Eurocontrol, a dedicated NATO call sign has been used for military relief flights in order to ensure quicker freight transport. We have also been delivering innovative solutions, including 3D-printed respirators, and ventilator masks repurposed from diving equipment. Furthermore, we have tapped into our large pool of defense scientists and industry experts to support the COVID-19 emergency response. All of this has helped to save lives.

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Allies have also been working together to support our partners, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. In May, NATO agreed to support the United Nation's global call for airlift assistance. The United Kingdom has been the first Ally to come forward with an aid flight and delivered the first round of supplies to build a field hospital in Ghana on 27 June. A close coordination between NATO, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and the World Food Programme made this assistance possible, which has been a concrete demonstration of solidarity in action. The virus is a global threat and it requires global solutions, so we will continue to work closely with the European Union and the United Nations.

Medical authorities around the world have warned that we could see a second wave in the pandemic. NATO is doing the necessary to prepare for such an event and any future health crisis. In June, NATO Defence Ministers agreed on a new plan, Operation Allied Hand, to provide support to Allies and partners, a stockpile of medical equipment and a new fund to enable the speedy purchase of medical supplies and services. The stockpile will include donations from Allies, as well as equipment pur-

chased through the new pandemic relief trust fund, which will be managed by NATO and is designed to complement the efforts of Allies and other international organizations, such as the European Union. The North Atlantic Council will evaluate requests for stockpile supplies on an individual basis, and the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) will manage the physical stockpile. Many Allies have already offered to donate to the stockpile and contribute to the fund, which is a clear sign of Alliance unity and solidarity. Our experience with the pandemic response has shown that such efforts are essential to ensure that critical assistance gets to the right place at the right time. Just as Allies have supported one another and our partners during the first wave of COVID-19, we stand ready to support each other should a second wave of the pandemic strike.

### *Resilience Matters*

In the course of the pandemic, we have also learned one important lesson that resilience matters. The principle of resilience is not new to the Alliance, on the contrary, it is firmly anchored in Article 3 of the Alliance's founding treaty. Resilience is our first line of defense, and our collective security depends upon it. In this context, Allies agreed to further update NATO's baseline requirements for national resilience to take greater account of cyber threats, as well as other challenges, such as the security of supply chains and the consequences of foreign ownership and control.

What is worrying is that we have seen a significant increase in disinformation and propaganda since the outbreak of the pandemic. We are actively monitoring disinformation and propaganda campaigns by both state and non-state actors. They are trying to sow division, undermine our democracies and our ability to act. China's Foreign Ministry suggested that US troops brought the coronavirus to Wuhan, and state-backed media have promoted claims that COVID-19 originated in Italy. China's embassy to France also posted an article claiming local nursing home staff had abandoned residents "to die of hunger and disease." Russia's Foreign Ministry has claimed that some NATO Allies prevented others from accepting COVID-19 assistance from Russia. Terrorist groups in Syria and Somalia have claimed that COVID-19 is "divine punishment" for non-believers. We have also seen disinformation aimed at eroding trust in NATO troops. In April, a fake letter in the Secretary General's name was used as part of a long-standing disinformation campaign against the NATO battlegroup in Lithuania. None of these stories are true.

We are proactively countering false narratives with facts and with concrete actions in line with our values, which demonstrate NATO's readiness and solidarity. We are also working more closely with the European Union to identify, monitor, and expose disinformation. It is important to underline the important role the free media plays

in all this when it comes to countering disinformation. Both traditional and social media outlets have an essential role to play in checking the facts and exposing disinformation, and we are grateful for the work they do in the service of our democracies and open societies. The best weapon that we have against disinformation is a free and independent press. It is important we remain vigilant, especially during a pandemic, because disinformation can test the resilience of our societies and can put lives in danger.

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We have also seen state and non-state actors trying to exploit the health crisis for their own advantage in other areas such as in cyberspace. We have seen hospitals and other healthcare services targeted in the midst of a global pandemic, demonstrating an extremely dangerous and irresponsible behavior that can cost innocent lives. In June, NATO Allies issued a joint statement, calling for respect for international law in cyberspace. This was an expression of mutual support for those dealing with the consequences of attacks. NATO takes cybersecurity threats very seriously, and we are constantly stepping up our cyber defenses. NATO cyber experts offer support and are actively sharing information, including through our Malware Information Sharing Platform. NATO has cyber rapid reaction teams on standby to assist Allies. Allies are bolstering their national cyber defenses, including through NATO’s Cyber Defence Pledge. We must keep strengthening our cyber defenses as we learn lessons from the pandemic and prepare for the next wave or the next crisis.

### ***NATO 2030 and Future of Our Security***

COVID-19 has magnified existing trends and tensions when it comes to our security. As we look to the future, we should remember that security is the foundation for our prosperity, and we must make it the foundation for our recovery. In June, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg launched his vision for NATO 2030, which is about how we adapt to the new normal and ensure our Alliance remains fit to face the challenges of the next decade. NATO 2030 is not about reinventing NATO. It is about keeping our Alliance strong militarily, and making it even stronger politically, as well as making it more global. Staying strong militarily means continuing to invest in our armed forces and modern military capabilities, which have kept us safe for over 70 years. Strengthening NATO politically means using NATO more systematically as the forum to discuss and act on issues affecting

our shared security. Making NATO a more global Alliance means working even more closely with like-minded partners to defend our values in a world of increased global competition.

The rise of China is of great interest to all NATO Allies. This was true before the COVID-19 crisis, and is even more important now. China will soon have the world's largest economy. It already has the second largest defense budget in the world and is investing heavily in new capabilities. It has missiles that can reach Alliance territory and recently displayed a new supersonic cruise missile, an assortment of new drones, anti-ship missiles, and hypersonic gliders. China is also becoming a global leader in the development of new technology, from 5G to facial recognition. In light of these developments, we stated clearly at our leaders' meeting in London in December 2019 that we need to look at the implications of China's rise on our security, and on the common values we cherish: freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. The best way to do this is by Europe and North America working together because not only we represent half of the world's economic and military might together, we also share the same values. We are stronger when we speak together on the global stage. We need to acknowledge the fact that China is coming closer. We see China in the Arctic, in Africa, in cyberspace and is investing heavily in infrastructure including in Allied countries. It is important that the current economic crisis does not make us vulnerable to foreign control over critical infrastructure.

There is no doubt that this crisis will have serious economic consequences. Many parts of our economies are under strain as we tackle this pandemic. People's livelihoods are under pressure, and many have already lost their jobs. However, our collective security does not come for free. At the NATO Leaders' Meeting last December, Allies recognized the unprecedented progress we are making to achieve fairer burden-sharing. Nine Allies are now investing two percent or more of their GDP in defense. 2019 was the fifth consecutive year of real growth in defense spending by European Allies and Canada. By the end of next year, they will have added a cumulative total of 130 billion US dollars. This figure is expected to rise to 400 billion dollars by the end of 2024. Increased defense spending allows us to invest in the readiness of our forces, so they can be deployed where needed; this includes the vital role they play today in supporting national efforts in fighting COVID-19. The security and defense sector can also be a powerful engine for economic recovery in our nations. Including with investments in critical infrastructure, cyber defense, logistics, and military mobility. This can boost jobs, investment, and innovation. As our countries mobilize all their efforts to deal with this global pandemic, we must ensure that no state or non-state actor can take advantage of potential vulnerabilities, neither now nor in the aftermath of the crisis. All this

makes it ever more important that we continue to invest in our armed forces to keep our people and our nations safe.

In a nutshell, while this unprecedented health crisis has brought insufferable pain to our citizens and has wreaked havoc among our economies, we have learned that NATO's values remain highly relevant. We are stronger together, solidarity pays, and resilience rules.