



## COVID-19: CHALLENGES FOR EUROPEAN SECURITY AND SELECTED CONFLICT REGIONS

*Although the immediate crisis management of COVID-19 is currently in the foreground and the focus is on the epidemiological and economic effects, the security policy consequences of this pandemic must also be kept in mind, both at national and international level. Although they cannot be conclusively assessed yet, they are likely to be far-reaching and long-lasting. In an initial analysis of the situation in early April 2020, IFK experts seek to describe various scenarios, first trends and possible impacts of the pandemic on international crisis and conflict management in given regions.*

### **Trends and questions concerning international security after COVID-19**

The possible consequences that the pandemic may have for international crisis and conflict management (ICCM) depend on the general post-corona development scenario, which will probably proceed along three lines: The most likely strategic scenario is that the developments, which were apparent already before the onset of the pandemic, continue as they were. This would imply that confrontational multipolarity will persist, the international organisations and the multilateral system be further weakened, Europe will continue to struggle in order to maintain its room for manoeuvre in terms of security policy, and that regional conflicts in Europe's vicinity will intensify. Should COVID-19 indeed cause the international community to grow together more closely, this positive scenario would result in a cooperative international order with strengthened institutions and enhanced cooperation, which again may well promote the resolution of international conflicts. History has taught us, however, that too much optimism is out of place. In the worst of cases, the post-Corona era might see a new Cold War between the USA and

China, including also their allies, and lead to a massive re-nationalisation of almost all policy areas, with negative consequences for ICCM as well. In addition to the further development of the pandemic (duration and intensity), the political leadership of all acting players and the economic recovery of the West in particular will be decisive.

Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that, regardless of COVID-19, the structural challenges, such as the global strategic confrontation between the USA and China, regional conflicts as well as domestic risks to security, such as cyber activities, blackouts, migration and terrorism, will remain or might even be heightened by the pandemic.

Most international crisis management operations are still conducted in the periphery of the pandemic. This will change when its expected spread from the

wealthy north to the countries of the poor south takes place. Only then, the concrete repercussions on regional security and ICCM will show. The following aspects need to be assessed in this context:

1. Will COVID-19 substantially increase the vulnerability of the conflict-ridden regions and states due to weak institutions, reduced cross-border cooperation, the high risk of spreading the virus in refugee camps and a low capability to act on the part of the government?
2. Do local conflict dynamics change? Are there any signs of attempt to instrumentalise the crisis politically on the part of regional and external actors?
3. Will local actors attempt to restrict the freedom of movement and the implementation of the mandate of international forces under the pretext of virus containment?
4. Is there a short-, medium- or long-term change in the demand, planning, and acceptance of ICCM operations (e.g. vis-à-vis soldiers from countries that are heavily affected by COVID)?
5. Will Western states substantially reduce their troop contribution due to increased contributions at the national level and because of the reductions expected in defence budgets? Will other countries compensate for these gaps?
6. Will the mandates of international operations need to be adjusted? Should the operational profiles be expanded and the focus increasingly be placed on humanitarian and medical support?
7. How can short-term adjustments of the concept of operations at the same time strengthen force protection and ensure mandate fulfilment, at least in terms of core areas?

First trends point at the following developments:

- Western states re-direct their focus on national security tasks, while simultaneously attempting to continue their ongoing international operations at the highest possible level, at least for the time being.
- Immediate adjustments of the concept of operations on site and measures to increase force protection and ensure the military logistic chains have been ordered.
- First demands regarding new concepts are voiced, such as the former idea of setting up rapidly deployable and highly specialised “white helmet” troops for international humanitarian operations to complement the traditional blue helmet profile.
- The importance of strategic communication on the part of international troops is growing, and increased action to counter disinformation campaigns may become necessary.

Recent drivers of intensified international engagement were the fight against terrorism and the efforts to remedy the root causes of migration. In the future, pandemics will need to be suppressed in a timely manner and the humanitarian and sanitary crisis reaction capability will have to be improved by strengthening the resilience of crisis states within the framework of the advancement of ICCM, as pandemics are likely to occur again.

Against the background of these strategic framework conditions, the developments in crisis hotspots relevant to Austria’s security are analysed below.

*Major General Johann Frank,  
Head of Institute*

## Developments in the Western Balkans

Compared to Austria, COVID-19 spread in the Western Balkan countries with a delay of one to two weeks. In mid-March, the disease was classified as high risk by all six countries. Therefore, most governments declared a state of emergency to prevent an “Italian scenario”. Taken measures include extensive travel restrictions, border closures, curfews, assembly bans, quarantine measures and the temporary closure of schools, universities and non-essential businesses. Increased social expenditure and financial support pose a heavy burden on the already low national budgets. Violations of these measures are punished by heavy fines and in serious cases by imprisonment. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) are using their armed forces to set up quarantine camps.

At the beginning of April, about 4,000 of the approximately 17 million inhabitants of the Western Balkans had been infected. Over one hundred people have died. Serbia and BiH have been most affected by COVID-19. Kosovo and Montenegro have had the lowest infection numbers. However, due to the low rate of tests, a high number of unreported cases and a rapid spread of the virus must be assumed. State control measures are limited to urban areas, while rural areas are hardly or not at all covered by measures to combat the virus.

### *Impact on the region*

Preparations for the virus have almost completely disrupted the already difficult regional cooperation. Serbia’s rigorous closure of its borders to all passenger traffic made it difficult for its citizens to return and has led to international criticism. In BiH, the strong decentralisation of state administration (two entities, one special district, ten cantons) with separate crisis management and weak coordination could become a major obstacle to crisis management in the event of an exponential increase in the number of infected people. An additional challenge is posed by 2,500

migrants in BiH living outside the refugee centres who are not subject to pandemic control. As an immediate consequence of COVID-19, the parliamentary elections in Serbia and Northern Macedonia scheduled for April were postponed. Civil society groups fear that the current emergency measures will strengthen authoritarian tendencies even after the crisis.

In Kosovo, internal governmental conflicts over the handling of COVID-19 led to a successful vote of non-confidence against Albin Kurti’s barely two-month-old government. The population reacted to this political crisis with incomprehension and great uncertainty. Remarkably, the vote was criticised by the EU, but welcomed by representatives of the US government, who see Kurti as an obstacle to a “quick deal with Belgrade”. This circumstance highlights the disunity of “the West” on central issues of Balkan consolidation.

Thus, it is therefore not surprising that the president of the EU candidate Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, initially called EU’s solidarity a “fairy tale on paper” while heavily relying on Chinese support to fight COVID-19. The EU sought to counter this negative perception by giving “green light” for the accession negotiations with Albania and Northern Macedonia on 25 March. Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi announced EUR 38 million in emergency aid for pandemic control in the region. A further EUR 374 million is earmarked for the expected economic losses.

The peacekeeping forces EUFOR and KFOR in BiH and Kosovo continue to perform the full range of their operational tasks while observing increased precautionary measures. These include the adherence to quarantine regulations during the ongoing rotation of 200 Austrian KFOR soldiers at the end of March/beginning of April.

### *Conclusions*

- In the Western Balkans, the number of COVID-19 infections is expected

to increase, which could seriously endanger the fragile health and social systems.

- For humanitarian reasons, but also for the credibility of European integration policy, full inclusion of the Western Balkans into the EU crisis management against COVID-19 is necessary.
- BiH requires EU support to address the migration challenge under the precarious conditions caused by COVID-19.
- The current government crisis in Kosovo requires a proactive engagement of the EU and a coordinated EU and US policy on Kosovo. The repeal of trade tariffs for goods from BiH and Serbia by the Kosovar transitional government at the beginning of April may have created better conditions for future political negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina/Priština. However, the free movement of goods from the Kosovar side is conditional to Serbia's "reciprocal" behaviour.

*Predrag Jureković*

### **Developments in Eastern Europe, the Black Sea region and Southern Caucasus**

Russia gradually tightened its measures against COVID-19 from the end of February onwards and with regional variations. On 12 March, Moscow's mayor Sergey Sobyenin imposed restrictions on public life, while President Vladimir Putin announced similar measures for the entire country just on 19 March. By the end of March, curfews were imposed in almost all regions. To support them, Putin declared a nationwide paid leave for one week on 27 March. Just a few days later, the paid leave was extended

until the end of April. As of 6 April, more than 6,300 people were infected, of which almost 4,500 were counted in Moscow. 47 deaths were reported.

Ukraine started to take preventive measures at the end of February. The government eventually imposed the first restrictions on public life on 12 March. Moreover, Kyiv requested international aid. On 17 March, the curfew was tightened. Shortly afterwards, the crossings along the contact line in the Donbas were closed. The separatists also closed their checkpoints and imposed first containment measures. At the beginning of April, Ukraine counted over 1,300 infected people, 38 died. The separatists reported the first infections with coronavirus too.

In contrast to other countries in the region, Georgia undertook effective crisis management measures against the spread of COVID-19 since February. Moldova/Transdnistria, as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan, took protective measures at almost the same time as EU member states. So far, these very restrictive measures have helped to keep the situation under control. Nevertheless, Abkhazia still held early "presidential elections" on 22 March, while in Nagorno-Karabakh people went to the polls to elect both "president" and "parliament" on 31 March. According to official figures from 5 April, the number of people infected was in the upper three-digit range in Moldova and around 1,500 in the South Caucasus.

The condition of the health systems in the Black Sea region and the South Caucasus, especially in rural areas, can be described as very fragile. In Transdnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as Nagorno-Karabakh, medical care is severely limited due to years of political and economic isolation.

#### *Impact on the region*

The economic consequences will have a severe impact on all countries in the region.

The Russian budget can cope well with an oil price below USD 30 in the short to medium term. However, the forecast for 2020 shows a significant recession. According to experts, president Putin cannot provide as extensive economic support as other countries (e.g. Austria) do, despite the Russian national reserves of more than USD 570 billion. One reason for that might be the effect of Western sanctions.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Economy also expects the economy to decrease by 3.9% of the GDP in 2020. The Donbas is particularly affected by the humanitarian impact of the crisis. Medical care is severely restricted on both sides of the line of contact due to the ongoing fighting. Kyiv, therefore, announced aid deliveries to Donetsk and Luhansk, claiming to assume its “responsibility for all citizens”. The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission is continuing its work in the best way possible. Its freedom of movement is, however, considerably restricted by closed checkpoints at the Line of Contact and in the so-called “People’s Republics”. On 11 March, representatives of Ukraine and the separatists decided in Minsk to take initial steps towards direct talks on conflict resolution. As a result of COVID-19, the domestic political reaction was not as strong as assumed, nevertheless, Kyiv had to row back and postponed the conclusion of the talks until further notice.

In Moldova, drastic consequences for the economic and social situation of the population are expected, but the isolation hits Transdniestria even harder. The return of numerous migrant workers increases the risk of poverty, social unrest, and crime in Moldova and may further fuel the already politically unstable situation. Armenia’s isolated economy is likely to suffer more than those of other Caucasian countries. On 30 March, the EU announced its support to the six Eastern Partnership countries with a total of EUR 140 million.

Some positive trends were already evident in Transdniestria. Despite a lack of confidence and a faltering dispute

settlement process, some steps in crisis management were coordinated between the conflicting parties. Georgia’s offers to assist Abkhazia and South Ossetia with suspected COVID-19 cases in Georgian hospitals can be seen as a confidence-building measure. In the military conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the OSCE had to suspend its temporary monitoring due to travel restrictions. Several incidents with civilians being wounded occurred, particularly in the Northern sector of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. However, direct effects of COVID-19 on these conflicts are not expected at present.

### Conclusions

- So far, the individual administrations have succeeded in keeping the immediate crisis under control. To what extent the economic consequences will negatively impact the political systems, remains to be seen.
- To reduce the humanitarian repercussions in Ukraine, especially in the Donbas, more international support for existing programmes of the *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* is needed.
- The attempts of Ukraine’s President Zelensky to find a direct solution to the conflict with the separatists are likely to experience increased domestic political headwinds after the pandemic.
- More than ever, the strengthening of the EU environment’s resilience, as envisaged in the EU Global Strategy 2016, needs to be demonstrated now.
- International crisis management currently focuses on two urgent tasks: conflict prevention and mitigating the humanitarian impact of COVID-19. For now, the various discussion formats can be continued relying on digital alternatives only.

*Christoph Bilban, Hans Lampalzer*

## Developments in Iran, Iraq and Turkey

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Turkey, Iraq and Iran at different times and met different social and political circumstances. Hence the entire dimension of the disease in the three countries cannot yet be compared. However, a preliminary observation on the political fall-out of the corona crisis on governments in Ankara, Baghdad and Tehran can certainly be made.

The Islamic Republic of Iran suffered one of its most serious political and economic crises when the pandemic hit the country in early 2020. Domestically, the failure of Rouhani's reform policy became inevitable when its economic backbone, the country's cautious and progressive re-integration in the global economy withered away due to US sanctions. As a result, Rouhani's political faction lost standing among the population and influence in the country's political system. This in turn strengthened radical factions and institutions. Almost expectedly they performed poorly: financial scandals, the IRGC's poor management of natural disasters and above all the accidental downing of flight PS 752 on 8 January, outraged the public. The mismanagement of the COVID-19 outbreak intensified the regime's general loss of reputation and legitimacy. In the end, the authorities acted too late by shutting down public life and instead, suggested normality when they allowed the celebrations of the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution and the Iranian parliamentary elections to take place as scheduled. They also rejected criticism and partially placed the blame on the USA, because Western companies are reluctant to sell urgently needed medical supplies due to sanctions. The half-hearted behaviour of the EU in this humanitarian crisis irritated the government and the Iranian public alike and weakened the position of the EU member states towards Tehran. Whether Iran handled the crisis worse than other states will be hard to clarify due to a lack of governmental transparency and international polemics.

## *Impact on the region*

Iran's domestic political weaknesses contrast with its engagement in the region. Tehran considers its presence in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and the Kurdish areas to be ideologically and strategically of such vital importance that no change is to be expected despite the corona crisis. The situation is particularly serious in Iraq. A profound systemic crisis aggravated by Iranian-American competition makes the country almost ungovernable. Hopes the loose anti-IS cooperation between US-led troops, the Iraqi army, KRG-Peshmergas and the Iranian-supported People's Mobilization Units (PMU) would lead to a de-escalating coexistence or even cooperation of pro-Iranian forces with the USA were dashed. On the contrary, the ongoing attempts to reform the Iraqi army in the course of Operation *Inherent Resolve* are directed against the estimated 140,000 strong PMUs and are unmistakably part of a plan to roll back Iran from the region. Depending on the political will in Washington a confrontation between PMUs and American forces remains a serious possibility. The coronavirus seems to have postponed further escalations for the time being. Some Shiite elements of the PMU have announced the construction of field hospitals, while some European states are considering withdrawing their troops from Iraq.

Almost the same could be said for Turkey's involvement in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Firstly, because the bulk of the military deployment is directed against the PKK, and secondly because the situation in Idlib and Libya is rather a desperate attempt to manage those jihadist groups that were supposed to be mere proxies than an exercise in power projection. From a European perspective, Turkish involvement in Libya is particularly critical—on one hand, the intentions of Ankara are not clear. On the other hand, European disunity in Libya plays into Turkey's hands as it fiercely competes with one member state whilst its interests converge with those of another. Thus, when

it comes to military engagement neither Ankara nor Tehran are allowed to give up their positions without too great a loss of prestige and influence.

In Turkey too the coronavirus encountered a political system increasingly out of touch with the population. This trend is continuing due to domestic political challenges, such as the country's initially self-inflicted economic problems, the lack of democracy and poor management of the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, as is the case in Iran, necessary measures such as the imposition of social distancing were taken too late. The Turkish public was annoyed by the way the authorities dealt with returning pilgrims from Mecca, who were able to fly on to their provinces without a medical examination. However, the closure of mosques was carried out without major problems. Although Turkish civil society is in favour of the government's measures, it is aware of the irony of the situation given the restrictions on social contacts. Indeed, the imposition of curfews is generally perceived as part of the country's militaristic past. This is probably also the perception of president Erdoğan, who has so far refrained from using the military in the corona crisis. Apart from that, Erdoğan showed little initiative. It was only when the opposition mayors in Istanbul and Ankara became active on the corona issue that the president countered with a populist fundraising campaign titled "we are enough for ourselves" (*biz bize yeteriz*). The money collected in this way will be used to support citizens in need due to COVID-19.

### Conclusions

- One cannot expect fundamental changes in Ankara, Tehran. In either country, political camps are too entrenched and the opposition's room for manoeuvre is too limited to be allowed to score points in terms of corona management. Most certainly Erdoğan and Khamenei, will come under pressure because of the expected

high death toll, both tightly control the media and the state apparatus should allow them to weather this crisis too.

- Concerning Baghdad, the country is simply overwhelmed and would need a constructive international effort including Iranian-US cooperation to function normally, let alone to shoulder another crisis.
- A confrontation between the USA and Iranian allies in Iraq remains possible. From a European perspective, it would be therefore necessary to reconsider one's position on the de-facto shift in the mandate, away from the fight against IS towards Tehran's strategic roll-back in the region. In doing so, the EU will have no choice but to reassess its relationship with Iran and the United States' policy on Iran.
- The inflexibility in Turkey and Iran is reflected by the way they deal with their prisons: political prisoners such as Salahettin Demirtaş in Turkey or the numerous dual citizens in Iran remain in custody, while criminals are granted early release.

Walter Posch

### Developments in the Gulf region and the Levant

COVID-19 is affecting the states of the Middle East for several weeks. In the Gulf region, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are the most affected countries. The UAE was the first to implement similar measures to Austria, the other countries followed suit. While the high number of foreign workers is considered a particular risk throughout

the Gulf, Qatar is exceptionally restrictive with its predominantly Indian and Pakistani workforce. Due to strict curfews, around two million migrant workers were detained in 32 large camps for several weeks. In Bahrain, around 800 workers were quarantined. Saudi Arabia, however, opened its health care system to foreign skilled workers.

Israel—where the first cases were recorded early due to its globalised society—reacted particularly quickly in the Levant. In addition to the usual international restrictions, it imposed entry bans on citizens from affected countries and published a large number of indicators according to which self-quarantine is required.

Syria reported the first COVID-19 death on 29 March. Due to the poor overall situation, it is only a matter of time before rising infection rates have tangible effects on the population. For the time being, the responses in the provinces loyal to the government were measures like the closure of schools and the restriction of public transport.

#### *Impact on the region*

Most countries in the Middle East are not sufficiently prepared for COVID-19, thus, the exponential spread is only a matter of time. However, the Gulf states are generally better prepared than the Arab states of the Levant.

In Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu's decisive action is not without self-interest. Accusations of corruption are pushed into the background and the absent political majority of his parliamentary group in the Knesset is concealed. This brought movement into the coalition negotiations. The formation of the government with its antagonist is a result of the state of emergency. This is opposed to the situation in the Palestinian territories, where political leadership and administrative structures are insufficiently prepared for COVID-19.

#### *Conclusions*

- In the Gulf States, migrant workers who have only limited access to health care systems, are currently the main victims. COVID-19 has a massive economic impact. Besides the drop in oil prices caused by Saudi Arabia, losses of tourism revenues and the cessation of construction activities are aggravating the economic crisis.
- In Israel, Netanyahu expects to see an increase in popularity if the crisis continues. COVID-19, therefore, has a particular domestic political dimension. Israel's health care system is in control of the problem.
- In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, however, a steep increase in COVID-19 infections is to be expected. In that event, an aggravation of the general situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be expected.
- In Syria, the population in the disputed territories, the refugee camps and in the Turkish-Syrian border area will be massively affected. How this situation will affect military activities cannot be foreseen at present. With the concentration of the security forces on civilian medical facilities and the associated shift in the focus of state order towards urban centres, unopposed movements of jihadist groups in the remaining parts of the country are once again possible. Among other factors, this will exacerbate the conflict.
- International crisis management and regionally engaged international institutions (UN, etc.) will be confronted with an increasingly volatile mission environment and a worsening humanitarian situation. The latter trigger a new wave of migration.

*Stephan Reiner*

## Developments in Africa

The numbers of COVID-19 cases are rising in most African countries, where data is available. Based on current figures, these countries are about 10 to 14 days behind Austria in the number of infections. However, for countries in crisis or conflict situations, such as Libya, Mali or Southern Sudan, valid and reliable data is only available to a very limited extent. As of 5 April, 43 of the 55 member states of the African Union (AU) have closed their borders, seven have stopped international flights, three have imposed restrictions on entry and exit and two have imposed further entry restrictions on travellers from specific countries.

Due to the dynamically developing situation, drastic measures are being taken to restrict public life in Africa. Therefore, states depending on income from tourism and the export of oil or precious metals are in a precarious situation. Nigeria alone is said to be lacking revenues of over USD 15 billion from oil sales.

### *Impact on the region*

Countries experienced in dealing with epidemics like Ebola relatively quickly implemented containment measures (information campaigns, testing, curfews). Besides innovative ideas such as the use of drones to provide health care in rural Rwanda, many African countries have health care systems that are barely resilient. For example, Zimbabwe has only about 15 functioning ventilators nationwide. Apart from that, large parts of the population have no or just very limited access to medical facilities. Especially in rural areas, there is often a lack of adequate sanitation and health care. Even if information campaigns were successful, limited access to water makes it difficult for many people to follow simple rules of conduct such as hand-washing. Factors like malnutrition, underlying diseases (e.g. HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, Lassa fever) or crop failures (e.g. due to locusts at the Horn of Africa) aggravate the situation.

Several countries have already adopted economic support measures. However, a very high percentage of the population in Africa works in the informal sector of the economy and/or practises subsistence farming. For this reason, measures, such as curfews or the closing of shops to curb physical contact, are unlikely to have much effect. In crisis and conflict areas, where the state already has only limited scope for action and cannot exercise its authority throughout its entire territory, it is also likely to be extremely difficult to provide for the population.

Moreover, social security is often not guaranteed by the state, but by the family or religious groups. If religious leaders do not convey that people should keep physical distance from each other, most of their followers will not do so either. Living together in large families with limited living space will further exacerbate the situation.

Repressive measures by governments could increase, for example, the violent enforcement of curfews. Action against refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), ethnic and other minorities or marginalised social groups could deteriorate the situation and virtually eliminate civil society.

There are fears that coercive measures introduced by parliament will not be revoked after the crisis. Local elites could try to consolidate their positions of power or extend their terms of office. Due to the lack of trust, curfews and assembly bans are perceived as a measure against protest movements (as in Algeria). The travel restrictions make it difficult for international NGOs to carry out their civil society work, and the commitment to humanitarian aid and international crisis and conflict management could be significantly reduced. Contingent rotations are being complicated or postponed and more preventive measures, such as restrictions on physical contacts, are introduced in ongoing EU and UN missions. The training activities of the EU Training Mission in

Mali were also temporarily suspended. All missions in Africa aim to minimise the risk of infection for personnel while continuing to ensure essential tasks such as the protection and care of the population. The extent to which this can be maintained will be shown by the further spread of COVID-19 and its accompanying measures. Within MINUSMA, the UN mission in Mali, the first infection has already been confirmed.

### *Conclusions*

- Incomplete data suggests lacking or inadequate access to state institutions or even institutional failure in conflict regions. Even states that provide data often do not have control over all parts of the country. This is particularly evident for states in which rebels or terrorist groups are active.
- Extensive border controls are generally difficult. This cannot be expected to change soon. The measures to contain the virus in this field are therefore only as good as the border regimes are now. Moreover, it will be difficult to contain the spread in mega-cities with a high proportion of informal settlements such as Lagos, Cairo or Nairobi. Therefore, a considerable number of unreported infections can be assumed. In addition, people fleeing from the cities to the countryside will accelerate the spread.
- In the Sahel region, nomadic groups could spread the virus and reinforce prejudices against them. A rapid spread of the virus along traditional trade and migration routes will also be accompanied by an increase in corruption, organised crime and smuggling activities.
- The impact on political systems and conflicts cannot be predicted. However, both totalitarian regimes, as well as democratic opposition movements, are likely to come under pressure for various reasons. Increased violence could lead to an increase in IDPs, refugees and

migrants. Effects on Austria and the European Union, however, are likely to be felt only with a certain delay.

- Political effects in terms of worsening relations with African states are becoming apparent because, according to African sources, some European states are attempting to headhunt health workers.
- The further spread of the virus in crisis regions, but also within troop-providing nations and their personnel, will have an increasingly negative impact on the fulfilment of the mandate and the options for action of current EU and UN missions in Africa. It may also have an impact on the Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA).

*Gerald Hainzl, Nicole Gruber*

### **Effects of COVID-19 on Austrian contributions to peace support: The test-case of Afghanistan**

The health system in Afghanistan has been severely weakened by decades of conflict. Thus, the country's ability to fight COVID-19 is low. As working in the health sector is deemed very risky, implementing measures against the spread of the coronavirus is difficult. In 2019, more than 50 health workers were killed and many more were injured.

Since the controversial 2019 presidential election, the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is more divided than ever as it is de facto led by two presidents, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, both obliged to serve their clientele. This standoff makes it difficult to act comprehensively to cope with COVID-19. Simultaneously, the Taliban movement established "semi-state structures" as a military and political

actor with strong ambitions to take-over the government.

For the time being, curfews were imposed on Kabul and cities bordering with Iran while disinfection teams were activated. Most of the population relies on daily payments to survive, which makes it hard to follow restrictions to stay at home. Hence, COVID-19 might also increase hunger. The Taliban launched information campaigns in the regions under their control, as the spread of COVID-19 could weaken their position in intra-Afghan peace negotiations. For now, it remains open whether COVID-19 could bring the conflict parties closer together, given that they face a “common enemy”. Meanwhile, negotiations are hardly held at the round table anymore, but via Skype.

By 4 April, there were 337 confirmed infections, most of them in Herat province, which borders directly with Iran. This low number shows a massive lack of testing capacities, which currently exists only in Kabul, and a few other cities. In the best-case scenario, a maximum of 600 tests per day could be carried out nationwide. New test kits are missing because most airlines no longer serve the capital Kabul. Hence, the numbers of unreported infections and deaths are likely to be considerably higher.

With more than 16,000 personnel the multinational NATO training, assisting and advisory mission *Resolute Support* (RSM) is still one of the largest missions for European troop providers. It is also affected by COVID-19. However, the Austrian contingent, which is stationed in Kabul and Mazar-i Sharif, has not reported any COVID-19 cases yet. As a first measure, training activities for the Afghan army were reduced. Conference calls are increasingly used and access to military bases is also being even more restricted.

#### *Impact on the region*

There are strong indications of a massive spread of COVID-19 in Afghanistan.

Especially in urban areas, the virus spreads inexorably due to the masses of people and large family structures. However, the population is facing many other poverty-related diseases as well. There is a lack of testing facilities and funding to support public health. On top of this, thousands of Afghans are returning from Iran with hardly any medical control, while the country is massively dependent on international donors. The cancellation of USD 1 billion in US aid in March 2020 will make the fight against COVID-19 even more difficult.

In the short to medium term, the pandemic could lead to a “freeze” of negotiations between the US, the Taliban, and the Afghan government, which would further prolong the military stalemate. However, armed conflict continues. Although the number of security-related incidents decreased since February compared to the same period of the previous year, an effective nationwide ceasefire is unlikely for the time being. Attacks and armed confrontations are ongoing, particularly in Northern Afghanistan. There, and in many other regions, a power struggle is raging over the cultivation of opium, which brings lucrative revenues for elements of the government, militia leaders, and the Taliban.

The Doha agreement of February 2020 between the USA and the Taliban resulted in a condition-based reduction of US and other international troops. While this process has already started in 2019, it is now being accelerated by COVID-19. Due to the coronavirus, the political agenda and the interests of the troop providers shifted towards crisis management at home, absorbing additional resources. As a result, international conflict management and peace processes are falling behind for the time being—both for the USA and for European troop providers.

#### *Implications for Resolute Support Mission*

A further reduction of RSM troops is up for debate, also because COVID-19 increased the medical and thus political risks. For

example, around 1,500 multinational soldiers, civilian staff and contract personnel, who arrived in Kabul at the end of March were under quarantine for weeks. This makes command and control as well as logistics much more difficult. However, the continuation of RSM—irrespective of COVID-19—is closely linked to the US engagement in Afghanistan that is going down. In February 2020, the US completed its counter-terrorism Operation *Freedom's Sentinel* in Afghanistan, which was deployed in parallel to RSM. Further planning parameters for the European engagement are the prospective implementation and safeguarding of the Doha Agreement of the USA with the Taliban, and the monitoring of domestic peace negotiations in Afghanistan, which may require more diplomatic, civilian and medical personnel in the future.

In any case, RSM announced that it is capable to carry out its mission with significantly less personnel. Therefore, Germany is going to substantially reduce its contingent (previously up to 1,300 soldiers) already by summer 2020. Transferring training activities from Mazar-i Sharif to Kabul is also being considered, which would affect Austrian soldiers. Hence, COVID-19 potentially speeds up decisions in this direction.

Despite the dynamics of withdrawal, the USA is not expected to abandon its geopolitical and geostrategic interests as well as some bases in Afghanistan because of COVID-19. Any reduction of forces does not contradict the nature of contemporary operations: The use of drones and special forces requires less personnel and moreover, ground operations are primarily carried out by the Afghan army. The costs of the longest war in US history are, nevertheless, enormous and are estimated to up to two trillion USD since 2001. For his possible re-election, US-President Donald Trump would benefit also from a substantial withdrawal of force.

In addition to COVID-19, uncertainties about the US whereabouts in Afghanistan have a major impact on the future engagement of European forces in Afghanistan, since they are logistically and security-wise dependent on US troops and close air support. Furthermore, COVID-19 negatively influences the operational command of all actors in the field. Nevertheless, from a European point of view, it will remain important to continue the support for Afghanistan, in particular from the aspects of public health and migration flows. Additionally, it is vital to preserving the livelihoods of the Afghan population.

#### *Conclusions on Austria's international support for security architectures and state resilience*

- Although training, education and advisory measures for local security forces and state administrations are becoming increasingly relevant in international crisis management (see missions in Mali, Lebanon or the Western Balkans), the focus lies on force protection and maintaining the endurance of the own troops in the face of COVID-19. Hence, the mission assignment needs to balance the given mandate against the (changing) operational capacities and the sustainability of the soldiers.
- Both prolonged pre-deployment preparation of the forces as well as the more complex repatriation and evacuation procedures, e.g. due to quarantine measures, have to be considered and adapted to the new pandemic environment at home and in the field. This also means that intensive medical care procedures for the troops must be comprehensively ensured in all phases of deployment to keep the risk of infection from all sides—both from international and trainee soldiers as well as from the local population—as low as possible. It would massively

affect the local acceptance of missions in case international soldiers facilitate the spread of the virus (see, for example, the case of MINUSTAH in Haiti). Hence, one option to increase the acceptance of the respective mission and force protection is to set up COVID-19 test facilities for both local security forces and the population.

- Troop reductions, special medical testing and adjustments to mission rotations have to be considered for all Austrian missions. In this context, it seems appropriate to extend or expand the rotations to build up reserves in case soldiers get infected in the mission area. In this regard, the additional burden for the soldiers must be taken into account. The use of all technological capabilities for training and consulting activities at the tactical level, which usually require close interaction with members of the local armed forces and administrations, should be intensified.
- COVID-19 poses major challenges for the Austrian Armed Forces. Currently, there are around 700 soldiers in 16 international missions deployed. Additionally, several hundred troops are kept ready to deploy as operational reserves. Corona-related restrictions massively affect supply chains. Ongoing domestic deployments and the partial mobilisation of the active reserve due to COVID-19 beginning in May 2020, also require adequate manpower and resources. Nevertheless, it is intended to maintain Austria's military engagement for peace support operations at the current (high) level for the time being.

*Markus Gauster*

**Imprint:**

Copyright, Production, Publisher: Republic of Austria / MoD, Roßauer Lände 1, 1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by: National Defence Academy Vienna/IFK, Stiftgasse 2a, 1070 Vienna, Austria

Periodical of the National Defence Academy

Translated by: G. Fridum (introduction by MajGen Frank); C. Bilban, M. Marek, E. Zeis



[www.facebook.com/lvak.ifk](https://www.facebook.com/lvak.ifk)