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The multilateral security organizations at stake. NATO, OSCE and the Covid-19 emergency: an opportunity into the crisis?¹

Gian Lorenzo Zichi²

Abstract

The Coronavirus outbreak showed how nobody was prepared to this crisis and to its economic, social and political implications which now represent the main challenge for political actors. However, if the measures taken by national states to curb the sanitary emergency seem to have partially restored their capacity to address the events, the Covid-19 has struck a significant blow to the already fragile multilateral system, as exemplified by the allegations – some of them based on coherent elements of criticism, other with less objective basis and misleading – to the *World Health Organization* (WHO). To better investigate the impact of this unprecedented crisis on the international institutions and its implications on security, the present article aims first to shed light on how two important organizations as the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO) and the *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe* (OSCE), have reacted and are acting to this crisis: an aspect just partially covered by the public media and that deserves to be better explored to avoid misleading interpretations. Secondly, trying to offer to the national stakeholders and public opinions a useful way to look on the Covid-19's impact on these forums, the analysis will also reflect on the possibility that this crisis could be turn by the organizations into an opportunity to relaunch themselves and become more aware of the other elements of concern as health risks, climate change and migration which, even not strictly related with the conventional interpretation of security, are posing undeniable aspects of concern. In front of the contradiction between the emerging of complex global challenges and the deteriorating of the multilateral order, this crisis should foster organizations and states to find a new reason to cooperate in answering to the future global threats, recognizing that a better security is possible only through a comprehensive approach.

Introduction

«Because COVID-19 is a threat to all of us.

And together, we can emerge stronger from this unprecedented crisis».

Jans Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, 15th April 2020.

«If solidarity and co-operation prevail, we have the chance not only to conquer COVID-19 faster,

but also to rebuild trust, create resilience, foster greater regional co-operation,

and strengthen security for the benefit of us all».

OSCE, Joint letter to the OSCE Community.

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The COVID-19 spread out at a time when the multilateral system was already «*under enormous strain*», especially as far as two of the most relevant organizations committed to international security – the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO) and the *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe* (OSCE) – are concerned (OSCEPA, 2020a). Indeed, in the last few years NATO faced an increasing number of internal issues (i.e. the unresolved theme of member countries' financial contributions or the different strategy perception between the two Atlantic shores) and major external challenges, like the resurgent Russia, the rising People's Republic of China (PRC), the eroding system of military and diplomatic guarantees and the emerging of new hybrid security defiance, such the cyber and disinformation warfare (Lute, Burns, 2020). This situation brought into question the very essence of the transatlantic relation, as clearly stated by French president Emmanuel Macron, according to whom the alliance was «*brain dead*» (The Economist, 2019): heavy words delivered in the midst of the celebrations for the 70th anniversary of the Atlantic Pact of 1949, which would have been overcome only in December, when the Heads of States' London Summit restored a minimum of solidarity and cohesion (EuroNews, 2020).

Within this controversial framework, NATO started to become aware of the Covid-19 emergency in the early days of March 2020 when the virus hit its European members. After expressing «*sympathy and solidarity*» to allies by voice of Secretary General (SG) Jan Stoltenberg (Stoltenberg, 2020), the organization focused on two priorities: to provide a clear information on the modalities through which the Alliance was reacting and to ensure the continuation of the wide spectrum of its activities. On March 6th, the Alliance decided to open a special section of its official website entitled '*NATO response to COVID-19*' and, at the middle of the month, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Tod Wolters, affirmed «*the Alliance's ability to conduct its missions, operations and activities has not been affected by the emergency*» (NATO, 2020a). The priority accorded to these two aspects has been legitimated by the fact that the spreading of the virus in Europe for NATO coincided with two delicate questions that were coming to an end.

The first was the organization of '*Defender Europe 2020*', one of the most important military exercise scheduled in Europe in the last twenty-five years with the involvement of 18 countries and 37.000 soldiers (20.000 coming from the United States) with the scope to show «*the ability of the U.S to support and to protect Europe if needed*», which was announced in late January by the SG and set for April 27 – May 22nd (U.S. European Command, 2020). The operation - conceived to test the Alliance battle readiness, and implicitly capable to send an answer to the recent Russian manoeuvres in Eastern Europe - has been deeply affected in its preparation by the Covid-19 outbreak (Thomas, Williams, Dyakova, 2020). In fact, the sanitary risks related to this important units deployment together with

the circulation of fake news on the true nature of the exercise also within the Atlantic's public opinions, forced NATO and the U.S. European Command to announce on March 18th a redefinition of the exercise, now rescheduled for the 5-19th June in Poland with a substantial downsizing of personnel (around 6.000), activities and with significant countries' absences, for example Italy (Ministero della Difesa, 2020). The second open dossier was the finalization of the accession of North Macedonia to the Alliance, which somewhat benefited from the crisis in removing obstacles and speeding up the process, so that on March 27 the country officially became the 30th NATO's member state (NATO, 2020b).

A more direct commitment by the Alliance has begun at the end of the (busy) month of March, with an activity of support to its member states in their efforts to obtain and transport the medical supplies needed by their own sanitary and civil systems. This activity has taken place through special military air convoys under the coordination of two bodies: the *Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre* (EADRCC) and the *NATO Support and Procurement Agency* (NSPA), which from the 26th of March up today have received requests of assistance from NATO Allies and partner countries including Italy, France, Belgium, Spain, Greece, Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, Rumania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania (EADRCC, 2020; NSPA, 2020). NATO considered itself entitled to act under the provisions of the *2010 Strategic Concept* – which mentions the '*health risks*' as an aspect of potential concern for the organization's operations (NATO, 2010) – and as an application of the principle of resilience expressed by the article 3 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which recalls both the member states and the Alliance to act to «*maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack*» (NATO, 1959: art.3) . So, NATO's response has been strictly coherent with its mandate, showing how «*there is a close link between the civilian efforts to fight a health crisis and the ability of the military to support those efforts*» as Stoltenberg said (NATO, 2020c).

The impact of the virus 'from Vancouver to Vladivostok': Covid-19 and the OSCE

The Covid-19's crisis came at a very sensitive moment for OSCE as well. Since the early 00s, the world's largest regional multilateral security framework - entitled to guarantee «*stability, peace and democracy*» among its 57 participating states and 1 billion people - is dealing with growing effectiveness problems due to the difficulty to reach a consensus on key decisions and agenda priorities, and to the tensions between the participants themselves, as in occasion of the Ukraine crisis in 2013 and of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014 (OSCE, 2020a).

In 2020 old concerns – related to the unresolved question of national contributions to the common budget and to the limited results of the *Special Monitoring Mission* (SMM) in Ukraine – and new opportunities arose, like the annual Chairmanship taken for the first time by Albania, and the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the *Chart of Paris* as a symbolic moment of reflection on the past and the future. Similarly to NATO, the OSCE continued its activities, adopting remotely forms of work and meetings which have brought - on April 23rd - to the first online Permanent Council (OSCE, 2020b).

Coherently with its nature of multilateral platform of dialogue, unable to elaborate binding norms due to the lack of a legal personality (Brander, 2009), the organization addressed the crisis reminding participants of the multiform impact of this emergency. This action has been summarized by the letter «*to the OSCE community*», signed by the leading figures of the main OSCE's bodies together with the Albanian Chairmanship on March 23rd, in which the organization recommended that «*their democratic institutions continue to function effectively*» even with the limitations to individual freedom due to the lockdown; to pay attention on the need to «*safeguard women and others at risk of domestic violence, as this increases during periods of confinement and social uncertainty*»; and finally to guarantee «*transparency in sharing information with the public, [...] a free flow of information, and to enable journalists to report freely about the pandemic*» also as a way to counter «*fake news on the health crisis*» (OSCE, 2020c).

An opportunity from the crisis? Between hopes and reality

The description of how NATO and OSCE have approached the Covid-19 outbreak leads to a reflection on the possible collateral consequences of the crisis on both organizations, which can be useful for political stakeholders and public opinion to provide a way to look on these frameworks.

Although this analysis shows that both organizations gave a somehow operational answer to the crisis, the need is also clear for them to improve their capacity to communicate what they are doing and are able to do. This effort should be finalized to avoid foreign disinformation and propaganda from the East and Far East (Russian and PRC), but also to restore solidarity among the allies, starting with public opinion, which – especially in Western Europe - are becoming less able to understand their role in the international system³.

³ According to the study entitled '*NATO Seen Favourably Across Member States*' by the PEW Research Center, the level of favourability in ten years (2009-2019), even if it still score high percentages, is decreased in France from 71% to 49%; in Germany from 73% to 57%; in Spain from 56% to 49%; in Italy from 64% to 60%. (Fagan, Poushter, 2020: 8)

This consideration leads to a second one, i.e. if the Covid-19 crisis could be turned by NATO and OSCE into an opportunity to finally face the allegation of being «*Cold War relics*», unable to face present and future threats, for example, adding to the security interpretation those aspects - such as climate change, migration and lastly health risks - not yet considered, but that are increasingly affecting the security perception of states and people. An improvement in this direction is possible by the fact that both organizations dealt with this soft security elements in the past (Farkas, 2019). For instance, public health and environment sensibility were discussed in relation to security by the NATO's *Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society* since the 60s (Hatzivassiliou, 2017); and these themes were included in the *Final Act's* second basket (1975) by the Helsinki Process. Originally considered secondary in relation to the Cold War security priorities, these aspects remained in the shadow even after the end of the bipolar confrontation, when the two redefined themselves and their mission, adding the new hybrid threats to security to the conventional ones (NATO, 2020d; GJØRV, 2020). A claim for a mandate change for these organizations is unrealistic and even unneeded: on the contrary, what is desirable is a real improvement of their capacity to 'adapt' to a fast changing and global related security scenario (SÖDER, 2020; OSCEPA, 2020b). However, at the moment, the possibilities for such a change are few and uncertain. Directly questioned on the eventuality that «*the Alliance broaden its definition of what makes an adversary*» and if public health could get more attention on the defensive posture, the SG affirmed that the Alliance is not «*the main responder to a health crisis*», while it should «*make sure that the health crisis doesn't become a security crisis*» (Brzozowski, 2020; NATO, 2020c); furthermore, in the first event - the '#NATO2030' initiative of June 8th - designed to reflect «*on where we see our Alliance ten years from now*», very little space has been paid to the human security threats (NATO, 2020e). Even if the discussions on environmental and migration issues today have been included within the OSCE comprehensive security concept, the internal weakness by the organization prevents the achievement of more substantial results (OSCE, 2020d).

Nevertheless, this dramatic crisis should be an occasion for international organizations, national states and public opinions to pay more attention to these unconventional security challenges and to finally come to the long awaited reflection on the multilateral system, which could use its past experience not just to survive in a changing world, but to face tomorrow's challenges; some of which are already visible today.

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