

## 2.2

### Responding to Disasters

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The COVID-19 pandemic has once again demonstrated the need to call on the military to augment at short notice the capacities of the civilian arms of government, notably the national health services and logistics mechanisms, in order to be able to treat patients in makeshift hospitals, distribute protective gear and vaccines, organise the relevant logistics operations. For other emergencies too, like those caused or exacerbated by climate change, such as wildfires, hurricanes, floods, or droughts, the mobilisation of military equipment, specialist engineering and logistics, medical forces and troops can make the difference between life and death for thousands of people. The response to human-made disasters, such as major industrial or nuclear accidents, oil spills or dam collapses also require large scale interventions that military assets can help mount. The national militaries are increasingly being drawn into such duties by the civilian authorities in many countries.

*NATO is already active in civil emergency response through the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). ... What is proposed here is a step change through a thorough reconceptualization of disaster response efforts and their incorporation into the mainstream of NATO activities, as the relevant needs are expected to mount in the coming years.*

How can NATO help improve the performance of the relevant tasks by military forces and strengthen cooperation among allies, partners, and others, as necessary, in view of such threats to human security being here to stay and claiming more lives than wars at least in the Euro-Atlantic area? NATO is already active in civil emergency response through the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) <sup>1</sup> that operates 24/7 and involves all NATO member and partner countries. It primarily functions as a clearing house for tracking and matching requests for and offers of assistance for natural and human-made disasters. It works closely with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), which is the primary coordinator of international disaster relief efforts. In its coordination role among NATO members and partners, the EADRCC also promotes information-sharing through seminars for the dissemination of good practices and conducts large scale field exercises involving NATO members and partners, as well as other international organisations. There is, therefore, a good basis to build on for this side of NATO activity vis-à-vis the increasing threats to human security.

What is proposed here is a step change through a thorough reconceptualization of disaster response efforts and their incorporation into the mainstream of NATO activities, as the relevant needs are expected to mount in the coming years. There is virtual certainty that climate disruptions are

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_52057.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52057.htm)?

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accelerating across the globe in pace, intensity, and impacts, with direct repercussions on individual, societal, infrastructure and economic security. Over time, they may overwhelm the response capacity of affected countries and undermine their governance structures and political stability, especially of the more fragile countries, which can contribute to violence and generalised insecurity. Pandemics are also expected to become more frequent, as humanity infringes on the natural world and diseases spread from other species to humans. There is also the possibility of human-made disasters, from industrial or nuclear accidents to oil spills, mine and dam collapses. Vital supply chain disruptions, from foodstuff to medical equipment or other commodities due to natural or human-made reasons may also need to be bridged temporarily to avoid major human suffering.



*2.2: Airmen from Keesler AFB deliver bottled water to Hurricane Katrina victims, Biloxi, U.S., 06 September 2005.*

Under these circumstances, a modern military at the national level and a modern, attuned to the times alliance at the collective level, can only gain in purpose and legitimacy if they increase and systematise their involvement in civil emergency response. A “dual use” thinking for personnel, equipment and processes would enable NATO to play a key role in enabling this in practice. This could include from standardisation of equipment characteristics for key civil emergency uses to the systematic registration and sharing of good practices, the inclusion of relevant planning and execution tasks in regular training, improved civic-military cooperation and joint exercises. It could also include the better use of surveillance capacities for early warning and prevention, as well as real time tracking and containment of disasters. Of course, in this latter case but also across the range of civil emergency response tasks, there has to be a “firewall” between such tasks and the military defence aspects, to avoid misunderstandings and other complications, notably when NATO capabilities are deployed for emergency response outside the territory of member states. In fact, if properly planned and conducted civil emergency response operations can serve for building bridges with potential adversaries and can contribute to an increase in the overall level of security, including in the traditional military sense.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note in this regard that EADRCC was established in response to a Russian proposal in the late 1990s, in the context of the then Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.

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An important aspect that should not be missed is shielding military installations and equipment from the increasingly intense impacts of climate change, like temperature spikes, sea-level rise, hurricanes, and floods, to ensure that no disaster is caused within or more broadly because of them. That should be part of the adaptation side of NATO's climate action strategy, which should also include the significant reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by military installation (mitigation), as part of reaching the Paris Climate Agreement goals.

The recommendations that follow provide ideas for specific actions that can be considered by NATO, its members, and partners. Broader mobilisation for pre-emptive action or use of large-scale interventions to address the causes of disasters, for example "geo-engineering" solutions in response to climate change, are considered out of the scope of this chapter. Major decisions on whether such interventions should be attempted can only be taken at the highest political level and require global support, due to the potential repercussions for the planet and all its occupants. Should any such decisions be reached the use of military assets could subsequently be considered on an as needed basis.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Build an inventory of good practices in using military assets to respond to civil emergencies through a questionnaire to be addressed to all NATO member states and partners.**
  - 2. Support development of a dataset tracking military involvement in responding to domestic and foreign disasters.**
  - 3. Systematise standard setting for military equipment, personnel training, as well as cooperation and coordination protocols for the use of military assets in civil emergency response.**
  - 4. Invest in capacity building courses for key military personnel in civil emergency response, so that they can plan accordingly and be prepared to interact with civilian capacities through a pre-developed interface, command structure and ToR/division of labour. Such activities should also involve, partly at least, civilian personnel from other branches of government. Regular courses could be provided by the NATO School in Oberammergau and the NATO Defence College in Rome.**
  - 5. Conduct regular exercises to promote good practices in early warning, planning, coordination, and actual operations in response to civil emergencies, with the participation of military and civilian personnel and equipment from NATO member and partner states, and possibly other states and regional or global organisations.**
  - 6. Elaborate further existing cooperation protocols with other organisations like the UN (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) and the EU (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations).**
  - 7. Consider formalising cooperation in this area through a "Civil defence pact against natural and human-made non-military emergencies" that could be open to accession by NATO member states, cooperating countries and organisations, and even other powers like the BRICS.**
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## RECOMMENDATIONS - Continued

8. Invest into early warning information systems and cooperate with Copernicus (EU) and NASA (US) earth systems departments to continuously generate an alliance-wide capability to anticipate disaster or follow development and plan adequate responses.
9. Examine the infrastructure vulnerability of military and training Alliance sites and start developing an adaptation strategy to pre-empt climate- and otherwise-induced emergencies.

## SUGGESTED READING

European Commission, “**Civil-Military Cooperation in Emergencies**”, Last updated 24 November 2020.

[https://ec.europa.eu/echo/partnerships/relations/civil-military-cooperation-emergencies\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/partnerships/relations/civil-military-cooperation-emergencies_en)

McNerney, Michael J., Christopher M. Schnaubelt, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Martina Melliand, and Bill Gelfeld, “**Improving DoD Support to FEMA's All-Hazards Plans**”. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015.

[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1301.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1301.html).

OCHA, ***Guidelines on The Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets to Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies***, March 2003, Revised January 2006, Published 22 Jul 2016.

<https://www.unocha.org/publication/guidelines-use-military-and-civil-defence-assets-support-united-nations-humanitarian>

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