Global Health Security

Military Response to COVID-19: Advantages and Constraints

By Angelo Paolo Trias

SYNOPSIS

Governments around the world are deploying their military forces to respond to COVID-19. Militaries can be helpful in responding to emergencies and disasters because of their organised and unique capabilities. But how can the military be useful in the fight against the coronavirus?

COMMENTARY

MILITARIES ARE increasingly deployed to respond to non-traditional security issues threatening the well-being of states and societies, despite the United Nations' guidance that they should only be used as a last resort. The growing utilisation of militaries in many parts of the world is often attributed to the widening gap between the needs of affected populations, resource demands, and capacity of civilian actors to fulfill both in rapid and large-scale emergencies and disasters.

We are observing a similar case in today's global pandemic response. As health care, law enforcement, and social service systems are increasingly strained by the widespread effects of COVID-19, more and more militaries are being mobilised. While there are advantages in involving militaries in the fight against the coronavirus, there are also constraints and potential drawbacks for doing so.

The Military Factor

The organisational structure of militaries enable them to provide surge capacity, like mobilising additional resources to deal with extraordinary demands, at a speed and

scale that no other parts of government can match. Military forces are made up of able-bodied personnel that are clearly organised in teams with a defined chain of command. This gives them the ability to efficiently form and reform units for a range of operations.

Combined with access to major assets such as airlifts, sealifts, and heavy utility vehicles as well as the expertise to maintain and operate those, militaries have unique capabilities that governments can employ during national-level crises and calamities.

Militaries can meaningfully contribute to a country's pandemic response. So far, we observe this in six key areas: (i) law enforcement support; (ii) health and medical assistance; (iii) logistics and engineering services; (iv) humanitarian assistance; (v) crisis management; and (vi) research.

The Plus Side

The presence of militaries commands authority and creates deterrence. This is particularly useful in maintaining peace and order in densely populated urban areas where police capacity is stretched out. Mobilising militaries can help reduce and prevent civil disobedience and opportunistic crime that may disrupt or lessen the effectiveness of pandemic responses.

To 'flatten the curve', military forces like those from France, Italy, Malaysia, Panama, Philippines, Peru and Spain are supporting the police in controlling movement, enforcing curfews, imposing travel restrictions, and closing non-essential establishments.

Military operations are designed to be self-sufficient. So military forces have the capacity to offer not only personnel and services, but also the assets and infrastructure needed without additional burden on civilians. This comes in handy when providing health and medical assistance, as well as logistics and engineering services.

Soldiers from Spain are constructing makeshift hospitals, while those from France are transporting the sick. Most militaries, however, are assisting in conventional aid and relief-related activities such as packing goods, guarding shipments, and delivering supplies.

There are also militaries undertaking unconventional roles including those that do not necessarily rely on brute force. Personnel from a South Korean military command formed to decontaminate areas following Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) attacks has been deployed on the streets sterilising infected facilities.

The UK military drew on defence scientists to assist public health in suppressing the spread of the coronavirus. While Singapore is ingeniously employing its servicemen to enhance the nation's psychological defence, in Spain, the military has been deployed to deep-clean hospitals and manage dead bodies in care homes.

The Downside

Militaries are strikingly visible. Depending on the context, military response may be perceived as 'the government is taking action' – a way to project force and model good governance. Or it may be perceived as 'militarising the pandemic response' and cause unwanted fear and panic. Public sentiment should be considered and civilian leaders need to manage this carefully.

Rules that are unclear and poorly communicated are highly prone to abuse by state forces. Germany presents a good example of how the right messaging can increase people's acceptance of extraordinary measures. Militaries, particularly those in direct contact with civilians, can do their part of allaying public concern by ridding themselves of weapons and tactical gears whenever reasonable.

The primary function of militaries is to ensure national security which involves defending the state from internal and external attacks that threaten national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Militaries assisting in civilian affairs do so, first and foremost, to support this mission rather than the humanitarian imperative.

Militaries on mission are wired to clearly distinguish 'friends' versus 'foes'. If a military is party to an internal conflict such as separatist movements, struggles over community rights, local political and electoral violence, and urban crime, populations associated with or tagged as 'enemies' will lose access to aid and relief.

Balancing Civil-Military Relationships

To counterbalance this, civilian authorities need to assign a dedicated civil-military coordinator to proactively engage militaries in dialogue "to protect and promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition, minimise inconsistency, and when appropriate, pursue common goals".

Militaries are exceptionally adaptable. Although not everything they have and can do are applicable to the issue at hand. Militaries need to highlight their capability gaps to civilian counterparts early on. For instance, the US Department of Defence explicitly noted that their resources are designed for treating physical trauma – not for dealing with infectious diseases.

As such their field hospitals do not necessarily have segregated spaces, and hospital ships can only treat patients suffering from noninfectious ailments and injuries. It is well-defined and as witnessed in New York City, the US military hospital ship anchored there is freeing civilian hospitals of non-infected cases so the latter can focus on patients with COVID-19.

Military-led responses, however, face certain limitations in implementation. For example, military institutions are dominated by able-bodied males which means that special arrangements have to be made for them to take care of women, children, and other vulnerable segments of the population. In some cases, female military personnel have to be specifically deployed in helping the civilian authorities.

Closing the Gap?

Military response can fill in the civilian capacity gap or it can widen the gap. If employed prudently and judiciously, the military can contribute to a positive outcome. The military can help in many ways, but they cannot solve the government's response problems.

Crises and calamities are also windows of opportunities because they reveal the strengths and dysfunctions of societies they hit. Several militaries, especially in Southeast Asia, are first responders and front-liners of governments in such times.

They are experienced in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief work. Yet, COVID-19 is an extraordinary pandemic and the demand is different. It is not obvious how the militaries will come out of this particular crisis.

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