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The role of the Armed Forces in the management of COVID-19 as a generator of trust

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The role of the Armed Forces in the management of COVID-19 as a generator of trust

Abstract:

COVID-19 has demonstrated the pressure that the impact of a pandemic places on health systems, governments, and society. The fight against the epidemic has required governments to offer an unprecedented response in both its scale and its complexity. that Countries around the world have used the deployment of the Armed Forces to address the disproportionate magnitude of the health crisis caused by COVID-19. Its efficient and versatile performance of the Armed Forces have increased the trust that the population has in this institution.

One year after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are many lessons learned from the management of the pandemic that should serve to reflect and adapt the response structures to generate trust in the face of future threats in an uncertain scenario.

Keywords:

COVID-19, Pandemic, trust, Armed Forces, Balmis Mission.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

El papel de las Fuerzas Armadas en la gestión de la COVID-19 como generador de confianza

Resumen:

La COVID-19 ha demostrado la enorme presión que supone el impacto de una pandemia en los sistemas de salud, en los gobiernos y en la sociedad. La lucha contra el coronavirus ha exigido a los gobiernos ofrecer una respuesta sin precedentes tanto en su dimensión como en su complejidad. Una de las medidas más comunes que han empleado los países para hacer frente a la magnitud desproporcionada de crisis sanitaria provocada por la COVID-19 ha sido el despliegue de las Fuerzas Armadas. Su actuación, eficiente y versátil, ha aumentado la confianza que tiene la población en esta institución.

Cumplido ya un año del inicio de la aparición de la COVID-19, son muchas las lecciones aprendidas de la gestión de la pandemia que deben de servir para reflexionar y adecuar las estructuras de respuesta para generar confianza frente a las futuras amenazas en un escenario incierto.

Palabras clave:

COVID-19, pandemia, confianza, Fuerzas Armadas, Operación Balmis.

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Introduction

From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fundamental role that public trust in institutions would play in the successful management of the pandemic has been highlighted¹.

Trust in institutions is a very important factor in disruptive events such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters and epidemics. Studies show that populations that had less trust in the government were more reluctant to take measures and precautions, as was the case in the fight against the Ebola virus in Liberia and Congo during the 2014-2016 outbreak².

COVID-19 has demonstrated the enormous pressure that the impact of a pandemic places on health systems, governments and society. In early 2020, the Global Health Security Index (GHS) report³ stated that no country was prepared for such a biohazard event. Unfortunately, the worst predictions came true, as even the best-ranked countries in this ranking were overwhelmed, highlighting the current shortcomings in health emergency response and the lack of preparedness.

The deterioration of trust in certain social institutions as a result of their performance in the face of the pandemic has raised questions with regards to the potential impact on political and social stability⁴. Lack of trust in institutions combined with situations of inequality and polarisation can lead to serious conflict and instability. This situation is particularly problematic in times of crisis, such as the economic crisis of 2008 or the current one caused by the pandemic.

One year on from the outbreak of COVID-19, many lessons have been learned from the management of the pandemic that should serve to reflect on and adapt response structures to build trust in the face of future threats in an uncertain scenario.

The fight against the epidemic has required governments to provide a response that is unprecedented both in terms of scale and complexity. One of the most common measures countries have employed to deal with the disproportionate scale of the health crisis caused by COVID-19 has been the deployment of armed forces. The close support to

¹ Available at: <https://www.mynewsdesk.com/eurofound/news/levels-of-trust-in-institutions-could-be-key-in-combating-covid-19-398507>

² BLAIR et al. *Public health and public trust: Survey evidence from the Ebola Virus Disease epidemic in Liberia*. Soc Sci Med 2017; 172: 89-97.

³ Available at: <https://www.ghsindex.org/>

⁴ Social change and trust in institutions (europa.eu)

society provided by the military in the different tasks entrusted to it has influenced the public's perception of this institution, not only in Spain, but also in the rest of the world.

COVID-19 and trust in institutions

Public trust in institutions and in the rest of the community is a key factor for the well-being and proper functioning of societies. Institutional trust is a particularly important part of managing and preventing crises such as the one we are experiencing as a result of the pandemic. Trust in public systems and authorities influences how people use public services and follow the instructions and recommendations given to them, however drastic they may be⁵.

On the one hand, the population is suffering the health, economic and social ravages of the virus itself, and on the other hand, it is in the hands of the population itself to slow down the spread of the virus. In this sense, trust in an effective response to this pandemic is arguably twofold, from society to institutions and from institutions to society. It can therefore be argued that trust in institutions is a very important part of the resilience of society⁶ and that social leaders should show their leadership with actions and empathy⁷.

The management of the fight against COVID-19 has required unprecedented action by governments, international institutions, companies and NGOs. It has also highlighted the need to raise public awareness of their involvement in tackling the spread of the virus.

COVID-19 recalled that few natural phenomena are more disruptive to society than a pandemic, and it has also marked a turning point in the public's perception of the concept of security, understood as that stable state which allows people and organisations to carry out their activities without suffering alterations.

The new post-pandemic scenario that is currently taking shape is characterised by a word that is appearing everywhere: uncertainty. For this reason, trust in institutions –while always necessary– is now more necessary than ever to ensure an effective and coordinated response to fight the pandemic and also to emerge from the crisis it has generated.

⁵ OKSANEN. A et al. "Regulation and trust: a social science perspective on COVID-19 mortality (2020)". Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3569845

⁶ Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.561747/full>

⁷ Available at: <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer>

The latest trust barometer published by the communications company Edelman⁸ reveals that trust in social institutions –governments, businesses, NGOs and the media– has been eroded as a result of the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to this study, loss of trust in institutions has been increasing as the pandemic has progressed. The increase in the number of deaths and infections, the collapse of medical services, the lack of medical supplies, the spread of denialist views supported by some governments, the obligation of facemasks, mobility restrictions and the economic crisis have created a complex scenario that has shaken trust in institutions. The positive trend towards institutions between January and May 2020 reversed to negative perception values, mainly pronounced in China and the US, leading, according to the Edelman study, to the "bursting of the trust bubbles" generated to date.

This positive trend in the first months of pandemic management has also been detected in other opinion polls. In the Globescan survey, an increase in the positive perception of trust in health and scientific personnel and a decrease in trust in international organisations such as the UN was observed⁹. The report claims this increase in trust in institutions in the first few months reflects the public's search for leadership in dealing with the pandemic. In this regard, it is worth recalling the meaning of the word "trust", according to the RAE: "1. f. A firm expectation from someone or something."

⁸ Available at: <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer>

⁹ Available at: https://globescan.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GlobeScan_2020Radar_Insight_Trust.pdf

https://globescan.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GlobeScan_2020Radar_Insight_Trust.pdf

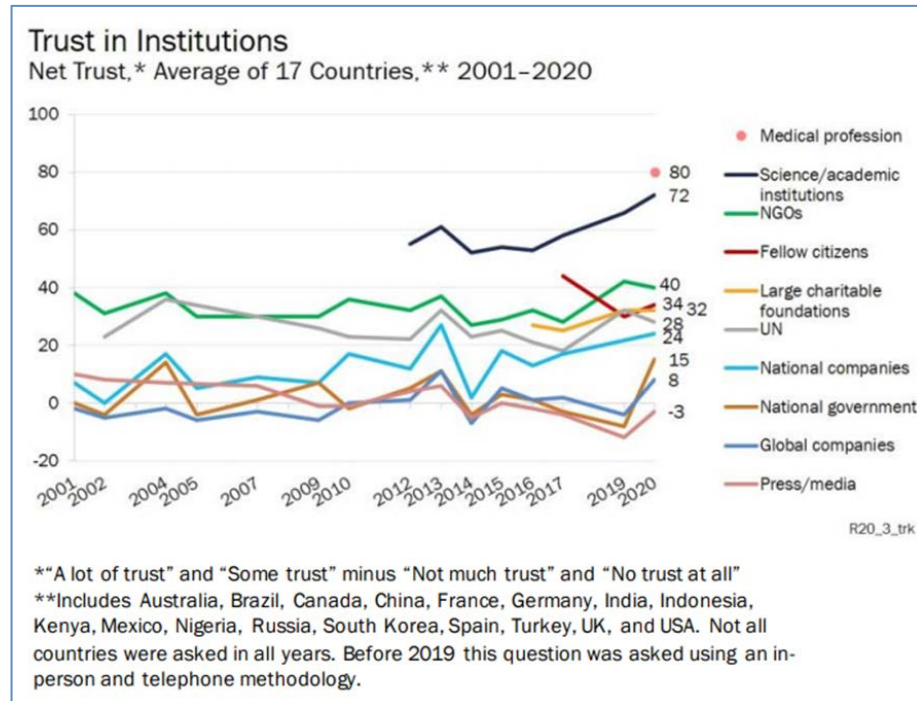


Figure 1. Trust in institutions. Source. Available at: [GlobeScan 2020Radar Insight Trust.pdfwww](https://www.globescan.com/2020/04/will-the-pandemic-affect-americas-confidence-in-the-military/).

Trust in and appreciation of the Armed Forces during COVID-19

The Armed Forces (AFs) is an institution that tends to be at the top of the rankings in terms of trust in Europe and the US. Before the pandemic, this reliance was based on support to the civilian population in emergencies and disasters and on reinforcement of police forces in the event of possible acts of terrorism in metropolitan France. On a secondary level, the civilian population perceived the AFs' commitment to participating in missions abroad, in conflicts in which national interests were defended or in which commitment to membership of international organisations was shown.

The involvement of the military in responding to natural disasters also increases trust in the institution, as demonstrated by the involvement of US military personnel in the management of Hurricane Katrina, according to a Gallup poll. In that case, the percentage of respondents who said they had high trust in the military rose from 81% to 90%¹⁰.

This level of trust in the AFs has remained stable during the management of the pandemic. According to a more recent US survey conducted in August 2020¹¹, small

¹⁰ Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/will-the-pandemic-affect-americas-confidence-in-the-military/>

¹¹ Available at: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/317135/amid-pandemic-confidence-key-institutions-surges.aspx>

businesses, the military and the healthcare system are the most valued institutions, with 75%, 72% and 51% support respectively. Therefore, the participation of the Armed Forces within the national territory in the fight against the pandemic, responding directly to the needs of the population, has influenced the continued level of trust in the military.

In the case of Spain, the Armed Forces are one of the institutions most highly valued by citizens according to the CIS studies on trust in institutions carried out several years ago¹². Even in the most recent surveys, such as the one carried out in 2019 by Sociometrica, the Spanish Armed Forces (SAF) ranks second after the FCSE.¹³

This is confirmed by the results of Statista's Europe-wide benchmarking study¹⁴ conducted in 2019. At the overall European level, the armed forces and the police are the most highly rated institutions, with 72% and 71% respectively. As far as the data for Spain are concerned, the results obtained were as follows:

Institution	Degree of trust
Police	77 %
Armed Forces	72 %
Public Administration	47 %
Local/regional authorities	44 %
Judicial system	43 %
Doctors	33 %
National government	25 %
Parliament	24 %
Political parties	12 %

Table 1. Results obtained from the comparative study. Source. Prepared internally with data from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1108375/trust-key-institutions-selected-european-countries>

This positive perception of the armed forces has increased after the pandemic, as shown by the CIS study carried out in 2020 *Effects and consequences of the coronavirus (I)*¹⁵, which shows that 52% of those surveyed believe that the image of the army, along with other institutions, has improved, and it also has the lowest percentage of those who believe that its image has deteriorated during the coronavirus crisis.

¹² Available at: http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/Archivos/Marginales/3080_3099/3080/es3080mar.pdf

¹³ The Police, Civil Guard and Army, the institutions best rated even by Podemos voters (www.elespanol.com)

¹⁴ Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1108375/trust-key-institutions-selected-european-countries/>

¹⁵ Study available at: http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/Archivos/Marginales/3280_3299/3298/es3298mar.pdf

CIS

Estudio nº3298. EFECTOS Y CONSECUENCIAS DEL CORONAVIRUS (I)

Octubre 2020

Pregunta 15

Ahora voy a mencionarle algunas instituciones, grupos de profesionales y sectores y me gustaría que me dijera si, a lo largo de esta crisis del coronavirus, su opinión sobre ellos ha mejorado o ha empeorado.

	Ha mejorado	Ha empeorado	(NO LEER) Sigue igual	(NO LEER) No procede (no hay policía autonómica/municipal)	N.S.	N.C.	(N)
El sistema de salud: médicos/as, enfermeros/as, auxiliares, servicios de limpieza, etc.	49,4	34,1	13,5	-	2,4	0,5	(2.861)
El Ejército	52,0	8,6	24,8	-	13,7	0,9	(2.861)
El Gobierno de España	18,2	59,9	15,1	-	5,5	1,3	(2.861)
La Policía Nacional	54,8	11,7	24,3	-	7,9	1,3	(2.861)
La Policía Autonómica	35,3	9,5	20,2	27,4	7,1	0,5	(2.861)
La Policía Municipal	50,0	14,2	26,9	1,1	7,2	0,6	(2.861)
La Guardia Civil	54,8	10,3	25,9	-	7,5	1,4	(2.861)
El Gobierno de su comunidad autónoma	26,9	47,1	18,5	-	6,4	1,0	(2.861)
El personal docente: maestros/as, profesores/as, educadores/as, etc.	54,6	16,6	16,8	-	11,0	1,0	(2.861)
El Gobierno municipal de su ciudad o pueblo	31,2	34,9	26,7	-	6,4	0,8	(2.861)
Los medios de comunicación social	22,9	47,7	22,0	-	6,0	1,4	(2.861)
La Unión Europea	25,0	37,5	23,5	-	13,0	1,0	(2.861)
Las ONG y asociaciones de ayuda	60,5	10,6	17,9	-	10,0	1,0	(2.861)

Table 2. Results of the study *Effects and consequences of the coronavirus (I)*. Source: CIS.

The role of the Armed Forces in supporting civilian institutions during COVID-19

In view of the results of the surveys, it can be affirmed that the military's performance in the management of COVID-19 has been well received by the population.

While AF assistance in natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods or fires, is nothing new, deployment during the pandemic in all countries as been unprecedented¹⁶. Most nations have sought the support of their militaries to assist, in one way or another, civilian institutions in managing the pandemic. This mobilisation was a novelty given the scale and uncertainty of the crisis. For this reason, many studies are under way at the academic and institutional level to analyse the new role that the armed forces have developed in supporting other state institutions in controlling the pandemic¹⁷.

Globally, the AFs are providing an effective response based on their specific preparedness and capabilities that allow rapid deployment for all mandated tasks, in coordination with the requirements of health and governmental authorities. The EU and NATO have also activated action protocols aimed at mobilising the military for a common

¹⁶ Available at: <https://finabel.org/the-importance-of-the-armed-forces-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

¹⁷ Available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/using-military-health-systems-response-covid-19>

and coordinated response, in the case of NATO through the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC)¹⁸.

In general terms, there has been a wide variety of tasks. The military has been involved in everything from assisting in the control of population lockdowns, to disinfection tasks, the provision of food and water to those most in need, and health care. But perhaps the most common use governments have made of their AFs has been to expand logistical capabilities. The rapid construction of field hospitals, the evacuation of nationals and their contribution to ensuring a safe and rapid supply of medical equipment –such as oxygen, personal protective equipment and respirators– have been the most visible tasks that have shown that the military is a key supporter of crisis assistance and thus of social welfare and humanitarian aid¹⁹. As has been the case in dealing with other natural disasters, the pandemic has highlighted the human side of the military²⁰.

The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of creating flexible structures to constantly resize the response to such a crisis. The AFs are trained to mobilise quickly in crisis situations, working under pressure and with limited resources. With health care, the construction of field hospitals, the production of hydroalcoholic gel, disinfection tasks and many other tasks depending on the demand of each country, the Armed Forces have been an example of putting all their capabilities at the service of society, demonstrating that it is necessary to develop strategic defence capabilities in the face of new threats.

At the beginning of the pandemic, as happened in Spain with Operation Balmis, most European countries established AFs missions to contribute to the management of the pandemic. In France, it was Operation Résilience, in Italy it was Operazione Strade Sicure. In Germany, 15,000 troops were mobilised to support the health authorities. In Poland, in addition to logistical support and population control, the army provided psychological support to the locked down population and also to COVID-19 patients²¹.

The Nordic countries, while not instituting the harsh lockdown measures, also opted to strengthen their military collaboration to fight the pandemic through joint evacuations, airlift support and information sharing. In Britain, on 18 March 2020 the Defence Secretary

¹⁸ Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_117757.htm

¹⁹ Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649401/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)649401_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649401/EPRS_BRI(2020)649401_EN.pdf)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649401/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)649401_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/649401/EPRS_BRI(2020)649401_EN.pdf)

announced the establishment of the COVID Support Force (CSF) to support the public services in responding to the coronavirus outbreak.

The AFs have also been involved in the vaccination campaigns, which began in late 2020 and early 2021, to ensure that the whole process is carried out properly. In some cases, AF involvement has included transporting or escorting vaccines from production plants to distribution centres. In the UK, military health personnel are participating in the administration of vaccines in order to speed up the process of immunising the population. Even in Spain, the Minister of Defence has opened up this possibility to autonomous communities that request it.

The UK Minister of Defence has stated that the AF response to COVID-19 was the largest military operation on home soil in peacetime, involving 5,000 troops in over seventy different tasks, ranging from testing schools to being involved in the vaccination campaign²². With regards to the latter, 21 rapid reaction teams have been set up to carry out the administration of vaccines. According to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, to carry out this campaign, the British Army will use "battle preparation techniques" to support the national health system to administer as many vaccines as possible in order to minimise the number of infections and deaths as quickly and safely as possible²³.

Around the world, the AFs have demonstrated the added value –of effectiveness and versatility– that they bring in the face of new instability such as that generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, NATO is clear that, in order to remain a militarily strong organisation, allied countries' AFs must transform themselves to develop new capabilities to cope with the security environment. Even NATO's own military structure, forces, capabilities and doctrine need to be reviewed to respond to potential risks, of which the COVID-19 pandemic is a clear example²⁴.

²² Available at: <https://www.forces.net/news/covid-response-militarys-biggest-homeland-operation-peacetime>

²³ Available at: <https://www.forces.net/news/covid-army-use-battle-preparation-techniques-vaccine-rollout>

²⁴ Available at: <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2021-01/091%20DSC%20%20E%20rev.%20%20fin%20-%20NATO%27S%20ESSENTIAL%20ROLE%20IN%20THE%20COVID-19%20PANDEMIC.pdf>

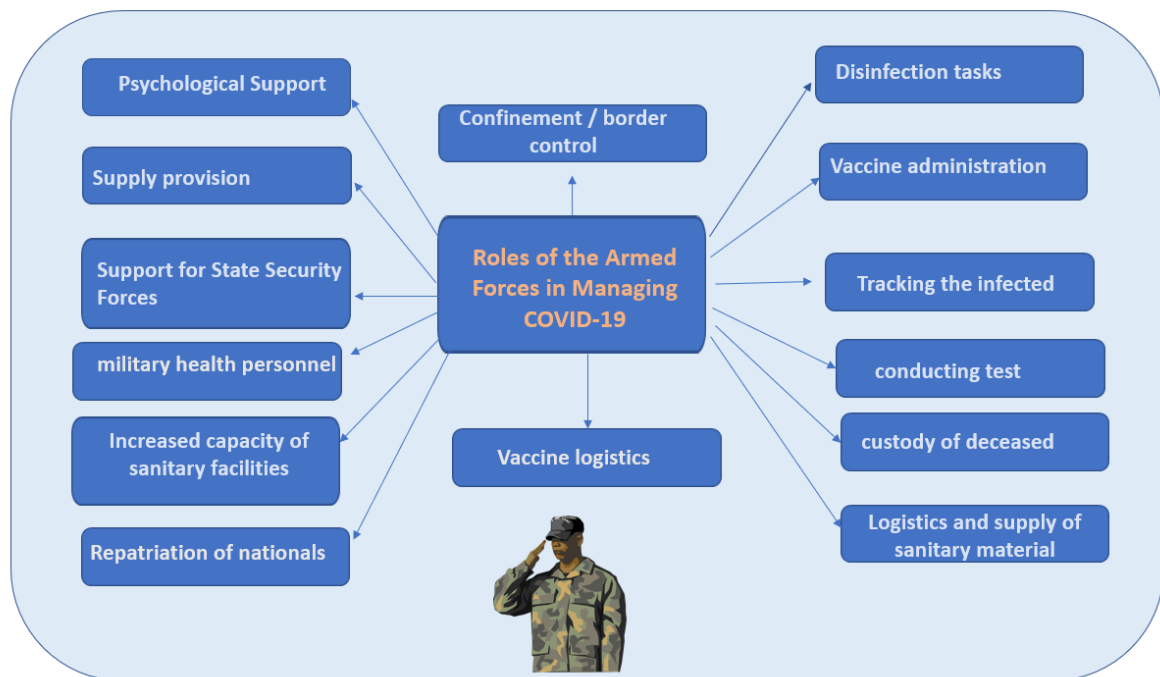


Figure 2. General roles of the AFs in the management of COVID-19. Source. Prepared internally.

Conclusions

This pandemic has highlighted a situation that has been looming for several years. We are in a new security environment where threats are more indiscriminate, complex and unpredictable. In this new scenario –and COVID-19 is a clear example of this– no country can face these new challenges alone. Moreover, within a state it will be necessary to move towards using all of its resources in a coordinated, effective and efficient manner to provide a response that allows for a return to normality as quickly as possible to counteract the negative effects of a disruptive event.

While the crisis caused by the pandemic is causing real setbacks in societies, it is also true that lessons should be drawn from this situation to enable these societies to strengthen themselves in the face of other possible crises.

One of the lessons learned is that crises can come in any form and that institutions, which were thought to be robust enough to withstand any shock, have not been as resilient as expected. The pandemic is demanding an extraordinary effort from public administrations, the scientific community and society.

Overcoming the crisis will only be achieved with trust in the institutions and also with the responsibility of the population. In an environment dominated by uncertainty, trust in institutions helps to keep people together and create the secure environment necessary for the prosperity of society, business and the country as a whole. Trust in institutions is therefore a very important part of the resilience of society.

The management of the crisis caused by the pandemic has led to a deterioration of trust in some institutions, as evidenced by recent opinion polls. However, the AFs globally have improved their image and their involvement in the management of the pandemic has been viewed positively by society.

While AF assistance in natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods or fires, is nothing new, deployment during the pandemic in all countries has been unprecedented. Most nations have sought the support of their militaries to assist, in one way or another, civilian institutions in managing the pandemic.

The pandemic has shown that in order to cope with new threats and unstable situations, the AFs will have to take on new roles, and it will therefore be necessary to continue developing strategic defence capabilities for an uncertain and complex future.

This is why, given the uncertainty of possible future situations, trust in institutions whose field of work is precisely the uncertain and hostile environment must be increased. As a result, the investment that all states have made in security and defence has proven to be wise, and in many cases greater capabilities could have been made available.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for the AFs in society and has made society aware of it. It is therefore considered a good time to promote a security and defence culture and enhance all types of AF capabilities with the necessary social support.

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