

What are the limits to inclusive security? Civil-Military Relations in the Age of Covid19

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Covid19 has been presented as an ‘existential threat’, an emergency of national, and even global, import. With world-wide cases of over 6 million, and upwards of a million fatalities, the impact is clear enough. What is more, according to World Bank estimates, “global growth could shrink by almost 8% in 2020.” Accompanying the disease has been a tsunami of misinformation, some passed on out of innocent ignorance, but some the product of foreign entities seeking to undermine trust in governments. In reaction to the disease, regular systems have been severely disrupted: hospitals have been overwhelmed, schools and businesses have had to close, communications campaigns have had to have been mounted.

As such, militaries around the world have been called upon to respond: not surprisingly, they have built and staffed hospitals, transported patients and material. If Covid19 poses a national security risk, then it makes sense to draw on the capacities of the armed forces—such as available personnel and logistics—to address that risk. Indeed, there are many who claim that such a widening of our understanding of security makes sense; if the ‘thing’ that is threatening the country is a disease (or, for instance, the effects of climate change) then it is precisely that ‘thing’ that should occupy the time and attention of the military.

However, there a number of cases that go beyond the usual deployment of military assets in aid of the civil authority that raise the question of whether such a broad and inclusive view of security doesn’t have limits. Especially when viewed through the lens of civil-military relations, there are some activities that see the armed forces take on domestic roles that are disconcerting, to say the least. What, then, is the appropriate role for the military in the framework of a more inclusive understanding of security? While it can be useful to tap into the capabilities of the armed forces during such crises, are there limits to what we should ask our militaries to do?

In this paper, I examine two such cases. The first is the deployment of Canadian military medical personnel into long term care facilities (so-called “nursing homes”) in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. These facilities were hit hard by Covid19 and civilian health care workers were not available to deal with situation. As such, the premiers of those provinces sought assistance from the federal government and military personnel were used to assess and manage medical requirements. When they entered these facilities they discovered Dickensian conditions that prompted the military medics to report on what they saw. Through the chain of command,

these reports were made public. While entirely medically appropriate, these reports had the effect of placing the military in the awkward position acting as the auditor of the civilian health care system, something that is not at all normal.

The second case is the use of British psychological operations troops to address issues of disinformation amongst the domestic population. The aim of this deployment was to quash rumours and false information, some of which were believed to originate from Russian propaganda sources. However, the elements of 77 Brigade are not usually aimed at influencing British audiences. That they did so raises a number of operational and ethical questions.

The aim of this paper is to discuss both these cases through the lens of civil-military relations theory, with a focus on the concept of democratic control of the armed forces and what such domestic deployments mean now and in the future, a future where pandemics and climate-emergency related risks are likely to increase. If security is set to become more inclusive, what will that mean for our norms and expectations of our militaries? How will we ensure proper oversight so that the military is not instrumentalized by civil authorities, particularly when they find themselves in the midst of national and international crises?

The findings and conclusions of this paper are relevant to scholars, members of the military as well as civil servants and politicians.