



CENTRO STUDI
INTERNAZIONALI

**DEFENDER EUROPE 2020
IN LIGHT OF THE
CORONAVIRUS
EMERGENCY**

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The Coronavirus emergency, that hit first Asia for then arriving in Europe and in the rest of the world, is having an impressive impact also on the military sector. Indeed, every single nation had to reconsider its deployments abroad and reorganise its academic, training and operational activities on the national territory. This has been done both for containing the contagion among Defence personnel and making military medical personnel available to civilian hospitals in difficulty. Moreover, many soldiers have been employed for supporting the work of the Police in enforcing new national directives on the contagion containment.

In this context, many events of various type have been cancelled or postponed, among which the famous DIMDEX in Qatar (Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference) and numerous EU meetings relevant to the Defence sector.

Also Defender Europe 2020, that was supposed to be the largest euro-atlantic military drill since the Cold War times, has undergone the consequences of the quick spread of Covid-19. Indeed, despite it has been confirmed for the next April-May, Defender Europe 2020 will be deeply reduced in numbers, according to still uncertain estimates.

Firstly, the United States have communicated they will sensibly reduce the number of soldiers involved in the next training activities in Europe. If initially a deployment of 20,000 US troops was expected, following the outbreak of the pandemic, the Secretary of Defence has decided to block any movement of personnel and military assets from the United States overseas. In fact, only the combat team of the armoured brigade already present on the European territory will take part in the war games. Instead, all other military personnel who have already landed in Europe for the exercise will have to return home.

On its side, Italy has decided not to take part in Defender Europe 2020 anymore. As communicated by the Minister of Defence Lorenzo Guerini, our military personnel will remain on the national territory to support the institutions during the health emergency linked to Covid-19. In fact, in these days of crisis in which it is possible to move in the streets only for strict needs, the controls in the cities have had to increase and, therefore, the men and women of the Armed Forces have received the status of security operator to be able to support the work of the Police Force.

Thirdly, many of the planned training activities have been cancelled, while all the others will be reviewed and scaled down to ensure safety for the men and women who will take part in it. In fact, even in the case of Defender Europe, a series of

specific measures aimed at preventing contagion from Covid-19 will have to be put into practice.

Lastly, Germany has announced that Defender Europe can no longer be conducted on its territory (exercises were planned in the cities of Bergen and Grafenwöhr). Therefore it is possible to hypothesize that the training activities for the time being still confirmed will be carried out in Latvia and Poland, the other two countries that would have hosted the exercise.

The decisions made by Washington, Rome and Berlin are certainly consistent with the pandemic in progress and the necessary precautions to be taken in order to contain the infection. In fact, it is possible to hypothesize that many other countries will adopt similar measures shortly, in parallel with the evolution of the national pandemic framework. Therefore, given the current state of affairs, the drill could take place in a more restricted operational area and with only the troops already deployed on site by the various States, unfortunately decreasing the impact in terms of capacitive growth of the units employed.

In any case, despite the current difficulties and hard choices that governments have had to make, Defender Europe 2020 may still be able to achieve some of the objectives set. First of all, the exercise is aimed at testing logistical and military mobility capabilities on the European territory, two points on which both NATO and the EU (in the framework of the European Defence programs) have focused in recent years. In this context, already in 2018 the Atlantic Alliance had decided to create a new Logistic Command (Joint Support and Enabling Command) in Ulm, Germany, which became operational in September 2019.

As for the EU, the main project of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) is precisely Military Mobility. Considering the complexity and scope of the exercise, numerous military vehicles have already reached the places of activity and therefore, have had the opportunity to test movement protocols and European logistical and movement capabilities.

Beyond the verification of operational capabilities, Defender Europe 2020 intends to confirm Washington's will to maintain a stable military presence in Europe in the present and in the future. In fact, from the first moments of his presidency, Donald Trump, especially in NATO circles, had called for a greater taking of responsibility by European governments for the security of the continent, almost threatening to bring down the security umbrella since ever guaranteed by the United States. If these statements initially contributed to the development of numerous exquisitely European Defence initiatives, including, precisely, the European Defence and its

incentive mechanisms, over time the tones of the US President became softer and Defender Europe wanted to be the proof of that. Not surprisingly, in communicating the downsizing of US participation in training activities, the Pentagon reaffirmed its commitment to Europe and communicated details on the number of assets and personnel already deployed to take part in the drill. In fact, starting in January, the US Army sent around 6,000 soldiers and 9,000 vehicles to Europe.

To sum up, Defender Europe 2020 presents a contrasting balance sheet. Its downsizing, dictated by the contagion contingency needs, will affect the achievement of the planned objectives and progress in increasing NATO's logistical capabilities. However, in such a delicate historical moment for the entire Atlantic Alliance, the conduction of the drill contains a strong political message aimed at reassuring member countries and their citizens as well as underlining the strength of the bond that unites NATO partners.