

Bruno Cardoso Reis

*Center for International Studies, Iscte-IUL*

## **Lessons learned for response to complex emergencies post-COVID-19**

Good morning to everyone here in Lisbon and to those of you linked via VTC from across the different shores of the Atlantic.

Many thanks to the organizers for inviting me. I am well aware how hard you have worked for this to be possible in these very challenging pandemic times.

This is a topic that is especially dear to me. Namely the importance of civil-military cooperation in general, and, especially, the vital role of civil-military cooperation in providing an effective response to complex emergencies. Complex emergencies like the pandemic of COVID-19 we have been facing. But also complex emergencies like the extreme weather events that have become more frequent and more deadly in recent decades, due to climate change, including massive tempests and floods to which our coastlines are especially vulnerable.

In addressing this topic, in the setting of this seminar, it is important to underline something that we are all probably well aware but is crucial: not just in the Atlantic basin but across the whole Globe more than half of the human population and more than half of the most vital economic activities are concentrated in a narrow coastal strip of 100 kilometers from our oceans.

It is therefore vital to incorporate this dimension of resilience and response to complex emergencies in a better, broader more comprehensive understanding of maritime security. We can no longer view the response to complex emergencies as an afterthought to be done ad hoc by national defence. The Armed Forces have a unique ability to function effectively in very challenging circumstances, they have uniquely robust and projectable capabilities from logistics to health.

Fortunately, the military is meant to be a learning institution. To be effective the Armed Forces must be capable of adapting to new threats and responding to new challenges. Of course, there is always resistance to change in any and all human institutions, it is often costly, demanding and creates some uncertainty. But not by accident the Armed Forces have a tradition of engaging in lessons learned exercises after an armed confrontation.

We do need to move past a traditional paradigm in which the mission of the Armed Forces was to fight big conventional wars against the Armed Forces of another State. This is no longer the case even when dealing with armed conflicts, which are increasingly irregular, unconventional. And the primary mission of the Armed Forces is not to fight other States, it is to defend the lives of its citizens and preserve the ability of institutions to function normally. We cannot ignore that complex emergencies are a growing threat in this respect and one that requires the unique expertise and capabilities of the Armed Forces in close coordination with other sectors of the State.

Fortunately, in the case of the Portuguese Armed Forces there is a long tradition, embedded in the official military doctrine, regarding the vital importance of engagement

with local populations as an indispensable component of the success of any military mission, and in doing so of helping to address some of the basic needs of the people. This is a solid basis upon which to build in terms of further developing civil-military cooperation in response to complex emergencies.

Now looking more specifically at the questions that we were asked to address they can basically be divided into two main issues:

How to improve the role of the military in the provision of emergency humanitarian aid?

- Historically the military has always been used in providing emergency relief. The massive earthquake and tsunami of 1755 that destroyed large areas of the city of Lisbon, one of the strongest in recorded history, is a good early example of this. The Portuguese military had a major role in providing relief as well as security and helping plan and implement the rebuilding of downtown Lisbon. This is a reminder of the fact that from early on the modern military has had a major contribution to make in responding to complex emergencies because of its superior planning and command structure, robustness in terms of projecting men and material, capabilities in logistics and transport, and last but not least, highly trained personnel trained to be effective in high risk situations.
- The earthquake and tsunami of 1755 also reminds us of another crucial fact, because it affected not just Portugal but also parts of Spain and Morocco. It is therefore a powerful reminder that complex emergencies due to natural disaster or to pandemics almost always affect more than one country. To try to cooperate effectively in responding to them is not just a matter of humanitarianism, but of creating transnational structures of response to transnational threats that might be in the national interest in the future.
- The use of the military in response to complex emergencies is, therefore, not a novelty. But this increasingly vital mission means that we need to systematically map relevant existing capabilities in response to emergencies across the military.
- We should identify gaps in personnel and equipment.
- We should provide specialized training and exercises as well as develop further specific doctrine.
- We should develop joint emergency relief units and joint complex emergency cells in command structure that will help to improve the effectiveness of the response and liaise with national and multilateral emergency response systems.
- We need to promote greater regional and inter-regional coordination in response to these emergencies, and this takes us to the next question raised by the organizers of the seminar.

How to improve inter-regional coordination?

- This is a major challenge but also a most promising task. If a country is especially affected by a complex emergency, the best way to provide relief is, as a rule, by resorting to help from neighboring states that can provide it more rapidly and often

- benefit from a degree of local knowledge and existing connections. This means, in our case, first the different subregions of the Atlantic, and then the Atlantic as a whole.
- It is crucial to share lessons learned, identify capabilities gaps and problems in regional cooperation mechanisms and improve the ability to request help, communicate and coordinate more robust response to complex emergencies primarily via existing sub regional and regional organizations.
  - Portugal has been a strong advocate of this in the context of NATO and the UE. This is in fact one of the priorities of the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union from January 2021.
  - We can work for these lessons to be shared more widely between the different relevant regional organizations in the wider Atlantic. We should map existing cooperation and coordination mechanisms. We should also work in creating mechanisms not just to share experiences, but also share relevant situational awareness as well as mechanism for improved dialogue, and hopefully greater coordination between these regional organizations. This could be the object of a specific study or regular reports by the Atlantic Center in the future.
  - I believe these aspects would benefit greatly from shared training and exercises, to improve our capacity to work better together in responding to complex emergencies across the whole of the Atlantic. Capacity building with this specific focus of a better contribution by the military and better civil-military cooperation in response to complex emergencies could also be a priority of the Atlantic Centre in the future.

Thank you.