



## NATO'S ROLE IN A NON-MILITARY CRISIS

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**ABSTRACT:** *The article analyzes NATO's role in managing non-military crises, emphasizing its adaptation to modern security challenges such as pandemics, natural disasters, and cyber threats. It outlines the strategic framework of NATO's crisis management, its cooperation with the EU and the UN, and its increasing involvement in humanitarian and civil protection operations. The study argues that NATO's approach reflects a transformation from a traditional defense alliance to a multidimensional security actor focused on resilience and stability.*

**KEY WORDS:** *NATO, Non-military crises, Resilience, Crisis management, Security cooperation.*

### 1. Introduction

In the modern world, the security system is constantly challenged, stemming not only from military but also from a number of non-military threats — natural disasters, pandemics, migration crises, terrorist attacks, cyberattacks and hybrid operations. These threats are often transnational in nature and require coordinated efforts between states, international organisations and civil structures.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), traditionally perceived as a defence alliance, has in recent decades expanded its role far beyond its classical military functions. In parallel with its primary mission of collective defence, the Alliance has developed capacities for non-military crisis management, support to civil authorities and protection of the population in the event of natural and humanitarian disasters.

This transformation is part of NATO's adaptation to the changing strategic environment since the end of the Cold War and especially after 11 September 2001. The crises in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, as well as global

pandemics and humanitarian catastrophes, have shown that security cannot be viewed solely through a military lens.

This article aims to analyze NATO's role in non-military crises by examining the normative framework, organizational mechanisms and concrete practical manifestations of the Alliance's commitment. It will examine examples from real operations, outline the challenges and draw conclusions about future trends in NATO's development as a comprehensive actor for security and resilience.

## **2. Nature of non-military crises**

The term “non-military crises” covers events that do not result from direct armed aggression, but threaten national or international security, the life and health of the population, as well as critical infrastructure. They can be natural, technological, humanitarian, health or cyber in origin.

Examples include earthquakes, floods, fires, industrial accidents, epidemics, migration flows, energy crises and cyberattacks. What they have in common is that they require a rapid, coordinated and multilateral response that goes beyond the capacity of individual states.

NATO sees the management of non-military crises as part of its overall security and resilience strategy. The document “NATO Strategic Concept 2022” emphasizes that the security of the Alliance is “comprehensive” and includes protection against hybrid, cyber, energy and environmental threats. This is also in line with the Washington Treaty, Article 3, which requires Allies to maintain and develop individual and collective capabilities to counter all types of threats.

Non-military crises often lie at the crossroads between the civilian and military spheres. In managing them, NATO seeks to support national authorities without replacing them. This concept of “Support upon Request” is a central principle in the Alliance's work in disasters and emergencies.

## **3. NATO's normative and strategic framework for non-military crises**

NATO's response to non-military crises is based on a sound normative and strategic framework that defines the principles, mechanisms and responsibilities of member states and Alliance structures.

### **3.1. NATO Strategic Concept (2022)**

The current document “NATO Strategic Concept 2022”, adopted at the Madrid Summit, emphasizes that the security of the Allies is “inextricably linked to the resilience of societies and their ability to cope with a wide range of challenges”. Among the priorities are cybersecurity, energy security, climate change, pandemic risks and hybrid threats – all identified as potential sources of non-military crises.

The document explicitly notes that NATO “will continue to support national efforts to increase resilience and preparedness to respond to

emergencies”. Thus, the transition from the classic defense model to an integrated approach to security, in which civilian and military resources act together.

### 3.2. NATO Crisis Management Process (NCMP, 2023)

In 2023, the Alliance updated its Crisis Management Process (NCMP), which defines four key phases:

1. Assessment and Warning – analysis of potential threats and crisis scenarios;
2. Consultation and Decision – convening the North Atlantic Council (NAC) to define a political framework for the response;
3. Planning and Coordination – activation of civil preparedness structures, including the Civil Emergency Planning Committee (CEPC);
4. Implementation and Follow-up – implementation of decisions and analysis of lessons learned.

This process provides a comprehensive management cycle that allows NATO to respond flexibly to both military and non-military situations.

### 3.3. Civil Emergency Planning Policy (Civil Emergency Planning Policy, 2024)

A new version of the Civil Emergency Planning Policy was adopted in 2024, regulating NATO’s participation in natural and humanitarian disaster relief operations. The document states that the Alliance may provide logistical, transport, medical and communication support to affected member states and partners.

The actual implementation of these functions is carried out through the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), which is NATO’s main operational tool for responding to non-military crises.

## **4. Organization and mechanisms for non-military crisis response**

### 4.1. Institutional structures

The coordination of non-military crisis response is carried out under the leadership of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), which is the supreme political body of the Alliance. The NAC has the authority to approve decisions to provide assistance to affected countries and to activate collective response mechanisms.

Several key structures operate under its leadership:

- Civil Emergency Planning Committee (CEPC) – responsible for policies and standards for civil-military interaction;
- Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) – ensures operational coordination and information exchange between member states;
- Senior Civil Emergency Planning Committee (SCEPC) – provides expert advice on strategic planning.

### 4.2. The role of military capabilities

Although non-military crises are managed mainly through civilian mechanisms, NATO has the ability to use military resources to support civil authorities when necessary. This includes:

- strategic transport (through Strategic Airlift Capability);
- medical evacuations (MEDEVAC);
- engineering and logistics capabilities;
- communication infrastructure and surveillance.

An example of such an intervention is the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), when NATO organized the transport of medical equipment and the construction of field hospitals through the EADRCC.

#### 4.3. Mutual Disaster Assistance Mechanism

The EADRCC was established in 1998 and functions as a central coordination point for the exchange of information, resources and personnel between countries in the Euro-Atlantic area. The Centre maintains constant contact with national disaster protection coordination bodies and with international structures such as the EU, the UN (OCHA) and the Red Cross.

In recent years, the EADRCC has been actively involved in providing assistance to:

- The floods in the Balkans (2014);
- The fires in Greece and Turkey (2021);
- The earthquake in Turkey and Syria (2023);
- The humanitarian crisis resulting from the war in Ukraine (2022–2024).

These examples show that NATO does not act as a humanitarian organization, but as a coordination and support structure that facilitates the exchange of resources and logistical support between Allies.

## **5. NATO's role in natural disasters and humanitarian operations**

### 5.1. Natural disasters as a security challenge

Natural disasters represent one of the most frequent and destructive forms of non-military crises. In the era of climate change, their frequency and intensity are increasing, which puts to the test not only national protection systems, but also international coordination and assistance mechanisms. NATO recognizes that natural disasters can have direct security implications, especially when they affect critical infrastructure, military facilities or populated areas in strategic regions.

### 5.2. NATO and natural disaster response mechanisms

The Alliance's main instrument in responding to natural disasters is the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). It acts as an operational intermediary between affected countries and potential aid donors.

The procedure for action is clear and well-established:

1. The affected country makes a formal request for assistance to the EADRCC.

2. The Centre disseminates the request to all NATO member states and partners.

3. The assistance provided – material, technical or personnel – is coordinated through the EADRCC and transported to the affected area.

This approach ensures a rapid, flexible and effective response without violating the national sovereignty of the state receiving the support.

#### 5.3. Examples of operations and missions

##### a) Floods in the Balkans (2014)

In May 2014, severe floods affected Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. The EADRCC coordinated the provision of helicopters, engineering teams, pumps and medical teams from a number of NATO member states. Bulgaria also participated with equipment and civil protection experts. This operation became one of the first successful examples of multilateral Euro-Atlantic solidarity in the event of a natural disaster.

##### b) Earthquake in Turkey and Syria (2023)

Following the devastating earthquake in southern Turkey in February 2023, NATO activated the EADRCC to coordinate humanitarian assistance and provide temporary housing units for tens of thousands of victims. NATO forces set up field camps and medical posts, and military aircraft from several countries transported humanitarian supplies.

This event demonstrated that NATO has logistical and organizational capacity that significantly complements the efforts of civilian organizations and UN agencies.

##### c) Humanitarian assistance for Ukraine (2022–2024)

In the context of the war in Ukraine, NATO provided not only military but also humanitarian support by coordinating the delivery of medical equipment, fuel, food and winter clothing. The Alliance created the NATO Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine, which included logistical and engineering assistance, as well as support for the reconstruction of critical infrastructure.

#### 5.4. Principles and lessons learned

Analysis of these operations shows that NATO's success in responding to natural disasters is due to:

- a high degree of coordination between military and civilian structures;
- a clear division of responsibilities between national and international bodies;
- flexibility of resources and logistical capabilities;
- participation of Partner countries, which strengthens Euro-Atlantic solidarity.

NATO does not seek to replace civilian humanitarian organizations, but to complement and enhance their efforts, providing unique capabilities in the areas of transport, communication and strategic planning.

## **6. Pandemics and biological threats**

### **6.1. The global experience of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) has highlighted the need for a comprehensive and integrated approach to security. NATO has been challenged to ensure the continuity of its operations while supporting member states in the fight against the pandemic.

The EADRCC has coordinated over 150 medical and logistical assistance missions, including the delivery of protective equipment, oxygen equipment and the construction of field hospitals.

Military aircraft from the Strategic Airlift Capability and Rapid Air Mobility programmes have transported tonnes of medical equipment between member states.

An example of this is the NATO mission in April 2020, when a C-17 aircraft delivered medical supplies from China to Romania, and subsequently to Montenegro and North Macedonia.

### **6.2. Development of biological preparedness**

As a result of the pandemic, NATO established the Biological Preparedness Task Force (2022), whose task is to coordinate the actions of member states in the event of biological threats, including laboratory incidents and bioterrorism.

This initiative aims to improve early warning, medical logistics and the capacity to rapidly deploy medical teams.

### **6.3. The concept of health system resilience**

The document “NATO Resilience Guidelines” (2023) emphasizes that the resilience of health systems is part of national and collective security. NATO encourages member states to build compatible standards for responding to health crises, including the exchange of data and resources.

In this context, the role of the Alliance extends beyond military logistics - it becomes a platform for coordination and exchange of experience between allies and partners in global health threats.

## **7. Cybersecurity and hybrid threats**

### **7.1. The nature of cyber threats**

In the modern era, the digital transformation of society has transformed cyberspace into a new dimension of security. Cyberattacks can paralyze critical infrastructure, financial systems, communication networks and state institutions — without using a single projectile. That is why NATO views cybersecurity as an integral part of collective defense and as a key element of non-military crisis management.

The past decade has seen a sharp increase in cyberspace incidents — by both state and non-state actors. Especially since 2014, when hybrid operations against Ukraine demonstrated the destructive potential of cyberattacks, the Alliance has strengthened its capabilities in this area.

## 7.2. Policy and strategic framework

As early as 2016, NATO declared cyberspace an “operational domain” on a par with land, air, sea and space. The NATO Strategic Concept 2022 confirms that cyberattacks can trigger Article 5 of the Washington Treaty if they reach the threshold of an armed attack.

The Alliance has developed a Cyber Defence Pledge, through which member states commit to investing in cyber defence, training experts and establishing national cyber defence centres. In addition, the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE), based in Tallinn, Estonia, plays a leading role in analysis, training and international simulations.

## 7.3. Hybrid threats and strategic communication

Hybrid threats are a combination of military and non-military means – disinformation, cyber attacks, economic pressure, energy dependence and political influence. NATO sees them as a “grey area” between peace and war.

In 2023, the NATO Hybrid Warfare Strategy was approved, which aims to strengthen the information and communication resilience of societies.

The Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (Riga, Latvia) is central to the fight against hybrid threats. It analyses disinformation campaigns and supports member states in countering propaganda and fake news.

## 7.4. Examples of NATO actions in the cyberspace

- Ukraine (2022–2024): NATO provided technical and expert assistance to Ukrainian institutions to protect government networks and critical infrastructure from massive cyberattacks.

- Baltic States: joint exercises (Locked Shields, Cyber Coalition) are testing the readiness of member states to respond to large-scale cyber incidents.

- Coordination with the EU: NATO and the European Union signed a framework agreement for cooperation in the field of cyber defence, aimed at creating common standards and exchanging information on threats.

In this context, NATO plays a leading role in international cyber resilience by providing a political framework, technical expertise and operational coordination between allies.

# 8. Challenges and prospects for NATO in managing non-military crises

## 8.1. Political and strategic challenges

NATO operates in a complex international environment in which the boundaries between military and non-military threats are blurring. The main political challenge is how to maintain a balance between the traditional collective defence mission and the growing expectations for participation in humanitarian and civilian operations.

Some member states express concerns that excessive NATO involvement in non-military areas could dilute the resources allocated to defence.

Another problem is the need to achieve consensus in decision-making. Any operation, including in non-military crises, requires unanimous approval by the North Atlantic Council, which can delay the response in situations requiring urgency.

#### 8.2. Technological and information challenges

Modern crises develop in the context of rapidly developing technologies – artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, big data and social networks. This creates new risks of disinformation, cyberattacks and technological dependency. NATO must invest not only in physical infrastructure, but also in digital resilience – protecting networks, data and communication systems.

In 2024, the NATO Digital Transformation Strategy was adopted, which aims to integrate new technologies and improve interoperability between Allies in non-military operations.

#### 8.3. Financial and resource constraints

The growth of non-military missions poses challenges to the Alliance's budget and logistical resources. In addition to traditional military spending, more and more funds are being directed towards humanitarian, medical and environmental projects.

However, NATO continues to emphasize that non-military crisis response is not a core function, but a complementary mission that should be implemented when clearly needed and at the request of the affected countries.

#### 8.4. Development prospects

In the future, NATO will continue to transform into a multifunctional actor for security and resilience. It is expected to strengthen:

- integration with EU civilian structures;
- developing capabilities for rapid response to hybrid and climate crises;
- using artificial intelligence for early warning and risk analysis;
- expanding cooperation with partners outside the Euro-Atlantic area (e.g. Australia, South Korea, Japan).

In this context, NATO's role in non-military crises will become a key factor in the resilience and security of Allies, without undermining the Alliance's core defensive function.

### 9. Conclusion

Crisis of a non-military nature have become an essential element of the modern security environment. They have shown that the threats to societies are no longer limited to military conflicts, but include a wide range of phenomena – natural disasters, pandemics, cyberattacks and hybrid operations.

In this context, NATO is establishing itself as a flexible and adaptable organization, capable of responding to complex challenges through an integrated approach, bringing together military and civilian resources.



Euro-Atlantic coordination mechanisms – such as the EADRCC, CEPC and CCDCOE – provide an operational and strategic framework that allows the Alliance to assist member states and partners in emergencies without violating their sovereignty.

NATO's role in non-military crises demonstrates that the organization is not simply a military alliance, but an alliance of values, solidarity and collective responsibility. In the future, NATO's ability to prevent, manage and recover from the consequences of non-military crises will be crucial for the resilience of the Euro-Atlantic community.

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