

Policy Report



COVID-19 and Capacity-Building: Final Report

Theodore McLaughlin, Université de Montréal

During autumn 2020, the Network for Strategic Analysis hosted a series of online workshops on the links between COVID-19 and capacity-building activities. In this policy brief, I update my [previous work](#) on the basis of lessons learned from the workshop series.

How has capacity-building, above all security assistance and training operations, been affected by COVID-19? What is likely to come?

- The pandemic has meant a reduction in *where* capacity-building operations occur, with some missions suspended or reduced. The pattern of impacts seems to reflect a balance between public health and foreign policy priorities, reducing presence while maintaining the operations states and organizations see as the most important.
- At the same time, capacity-building operations have reduced the scope of their *activités*, including in places that are foreign-policy priorities. This can send a signal that a capacity-building operation matters for the sending state, and that it will be back to full strength when the pandemic is over.
- Because Canada's capacity-building operations occur in multilateral frameworks, one key question for Canada is how the pandemic will affect allied capacity-building operations.
- In the short- to medium-term, the pandemic appears to be limiting the scope of operations, but it is not the last word on where capacity-building operations are taking place. Canada's allies are still responding to changing circumstances; their priorities for where to conduct operations in the initial stages of the pandemic are not the same as today.
- Over the longer term, the economic damage and the consequent limits to defence budgets may make capacity-building less attractive (if it is regarded as inessential) or more attractive (if it is seen as a good way of pursuing geostrategic interests at relatively low cost, compared to more robust interventions).
- Either way, allied deployments are likely to refocus on core missions in strategically important environments, especially those focused on great-power competition. This likely means, among other things, that there will be a neglect of capacity-building for peace operations, despite a clear need.

Security Assistance Before the Pandemic

Security assistance has been a key activity for the Canadian Armed Forces, increasingly so since the end of its major combat role in Afghanistan. This shift was consistent with the behaviour of Canada's allies over the last ten years. Under budgetary constraints after the financial crisis of 2008, and responding to

the exhaustion of large-scale deployments and ground combat operations, the United States especially [refocused](#) how it addressed counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and other security challenges, aiming to use their own forces less and build up partner forces more. At the same time, [Russia](#) and [China](#) have made their presence increasingly felt in capacity-building, notably in sub-Saharan Africa.

In the peacekeeping domain, capacity-building became an increasingly attractive approach in the 2000s. States from the global north became much less willing to send peacekeeping troops, especially after several missions with high-profile and costly controversies. The development of interest in capacity-building also reflected a sense that regional organizations like the African Union and their members would do a better job of managing peacekeeping operations, with greater local buy-in and a better understanding of local conflict issues. A north-south division of labour emerged in which southern states provide troops while northern states provide the funding and other kinds of support. Building the capacities of southern states to contribute to peace operations is a part of this; for example, the United States' Global Peace Operations Initiative trained some 139,000 personnel from 1999 to 2016, according to the [International Military Training Activities Database-USA](#). On the other hand, there was a significant degree of concern that existing capacity-building activities were [too short-term and limited in scope](#) to grapple with the complexity of contemporary peace operations.

It is not clear how much of an impact these capacity-building activities have. Some existing research suggests that training [does](#) shape local armies' prevailing norms and values. Other research highlights its unintended consequences, such as a [link](#) between participation in the United States' International Military Education and Training program and coups d'état (though the [jury](#) is still [out](#) about this link). A [third strand](#) of scholarship suggests that capacity-building likely has little effect in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism in particular, because any tactical gains can be outweighed by problems at the political level. These include factional conflicts and local authorities who divert training, arms and supplies to political loyalists or who do not permit the officers and soldiers trained to really exercise their training. Regardless of these concerns, however, capacity-building has been a popular policy tool, in part because it [signals](#) a willingness to do one's part without taking on an excessive burden.

Drawing Down Capacity-Building Under the Pandemic: Between Public Health and Foreign Policy

The pandemic checked the rising popularity of capacity-building. It led to changes both in *where* capacity-building operations take place and *what activities* they engage in. Each was driven by a combination of public health considerations and foreign policy priorities.

COVID-19 led to the postponement of some capacity-building activities and the scaling back of others. Canada was far from alone here. The CAF, alongside its NATO allies, [suspended](#) its training activities in Iraq (NATO Training Mission-Iraq). Canada also [drew down](#) its personnel in Ukraine (UNIFIER), and [postponed](#) a training session in Niger (NABERIUS). Similarly, the United States cancelled exercises around the world, including with key partners like [South Korea](#) and [Israel](#), and the UK suspended its training activities in [Kenya](#). At the same time, some other states maintained their capacity-building activities, with France notably keeping Operation Barkhane in the Sahel fully operational, and China highlighting that a training exercise in [Cambodia](#) in March and April went ahead as planned.

Two factors underpinned these decisions: public health and foreign policy priorities.

First, the local conditions of the coronavirus pandemic drove many of these decisions. An extreme example was the United States Army's decision in late March 2020 to [suspend](#) all training activities in any country designated Alert Level 2 or 3 by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). In essence, in an emergency, it adopted a blanket public health criterion, delegated to a public health agency, rather than accounting for country-by-country foreign policy interests.

In many settings, public health conditions actually permitted capacity-building operations to carry on with little disruption. The relatively limited direct impact of COVID-19 in the Sahel has been much noted, and as Marc-André Boisvert [points out](#), some operations have been able to carry on with relatively little change, notably in Mali.

Second, however, these decisions reflect training states' priorities to an important extent. A comparison between capacity-building operations and deterrence deployments can help illustrate this. NATO suspended its training activities in Iraq on March 20th, 2020. At the same time, it kept its regular Enhanced Forward Presence deployments active in the Baltic States and Poland. The alliance's core function, after all, is deterrence towards Russia, while building the capacity of a partner army in an "out-of-area" location like Iraq is an important but secondary priority. U.S. forces in Somalia, according to Louis-Alexandre Berg, [focused on their kinetic operations](#), which seemed to be of immediate importance, while suspending its long-term capacity-building activities.

Hence, keeping some capacity-building missions essentially unchanged demonstrated a commitment. In some cases it seems to have been meant as this kind of signal. China made a fairly public show of maintaining its training operation in [Cambodia](#) even as it kept much of its own country shut down due to the pandemic. This sent a couple of signals, both showing its commitment to a partner and showing that it—and Cambodia—were not especially concerned about the disease.

Some of Canada's choices showed its own priorities. For example, on March 26th, 2020, the day the Operation UNIFIER drawdown was announced, [Latvia](#) had more confirmed COVID-19 cases than [Ukraine](#) did. By maintaining REASSURANCE in Latvia while temporarily drawing down UNIFIER in Ukraine, Canada indicated that capacity-building in Ukraine was not as important to it as deterrence and readiness in Latvia. Whatever the intent, this is the likely signal: a straightforward interpretation, and one that reflects Canada's commitment to Latvia as a NATO member.

In a grim version of a similar logic, however, many short-term training activities for PKOs stopped with the pandemic, as Arthur Boutellis [points out](#): for donor countries in the global north, this was a risk too much. But the fact that many other capacity-building deployments outside of the peacekeeping space *were* maintained suggests that states were willing to take some risks and adapt their efforts if the priority was strong enough. The disheartening conclusion is that capacity-building for PKOs often did not make the cut, reflecting the pre-pandemic trend of short-termism and decline in support for PKOs.

This also serves as a reminder that the central considerations for Canada's capacity-building operations are what its multilateral partners are doing. These operations nearly always take place in some larger framework, whether the UN, NATO or an ad-hoc partnership. Canada's decision in Iraq was part of a larger NATO decision. This reflects the weight that [alliance commitments](#) have in Canada's decisions to participate in capacity-building operations; building relationships with specific host countries like Iraq is less important.

Adapting Capacity-Building Operations

At the same time that some missions drew down, capacity-building operations everywhere have adapted to the pandemic by changing their everyday practices. Public-health considerations changed what operations could do. As LCol Pierre Leroux [points out](#), Operation UNIFIER, for example, laid down a colour-coding system to indicate the state of the pandemic in different sites in Ukraine, shaping its decisions about where to send CAF personnel in order to limit their exposure. According to MGen Jennie Carignan, the NATO training mission in Iraq had to [rapidly learn](#) how to adapt to the the impact of the virus, and developed a greater degree of efficiency over time as it learned better public-health practices.

Finally, as Maj Audrey Hudon [explains](#), the CAF as a whole had to adapt its mental-health approach to its personnel to meet the new realities of deployment under COVID-19, for example grappling with the suspension of mid-deployment leaves, and the difficulties of pre- and post-deployment quarantine on personnel and their families. Much mental-health support has had to come through digital platforms as well. Female CAF personnel have, in particular, faced challenges stemming from the pressure to play a role as household organizers in the context of significant disruption to household routines during the pandemic.

Among the most significant consequences for CAF deployments has been the limits placed on face-to-face contact. Any deployment has to try [to build acceptance](#) among the local population of the host country; this is as true for a deterrence-focused deployment like Operation REASSURANCE in Latvia as it is for a training mission like Operation UNIFIER. Generally face-to-face contact can help with this. However, in a public-health emergency, limiting contacts can improve trust by making it clear that a mission does not pose a public-health threat. As Carla Martínez Machain [explains](#), COVID-19 outbreaks at two US Marines bases in Okinawa, for example, led to local worries about the deployment. However, in capacity-building operations, limited face-to-face contact has also made it harder to build relationships between the CAF and a partner armed force.

Under this constraint, capacity-building operations have shifted to an important degree to focusing on what they *can* do. LCol Leroux [notes](#) that Operation UNIFIER retooled to focus on the administrative side, such as on training standards. [According to](#) Stéfanie von Hlatky, gender training in NATO refocused from training its partner armies such as the Iraqi military towards improving the alliance's own gender practices. Mody Berethe, director of the [Peacekeeping School](#) in Bamako, [explains](#) that his organization shifted to distance learning and offered more courses to local police and armed personnel to improve their own practices for domestic operations, adapting its curriculum to include courses on terrorism and human rights.

The concern, of course, is that capacity-building operations end up distorting the activities of a mission, preventing some significant activities and focusing efforts on the remaining activities. But from another point of view, there is simply not much of a choice.

In other words, in the areas that concerned them the most, training states including Canada tried to maintain their operations to the extent possible, but were limited in what they could do. Officers who presented at the capacity-building workshops suggested that the goodwill built up over time is likely to continue, sending a signal to recipient countries that the CAF is present in spite of the pandemic, and will return to full-strength operations with the full array of capacity-building activities when it is safe to do

so. This is a nuanced signal of commitment, but given the very real public-health concerns around deployments, probably the most effective one to send.

A corollary is that with the ongoing race between vaccination campaigns and infection rates, particularly with new COVID variants and in areas with rickety health infrastructure, operations will face a delicate task of working out just how far they can open up. This is a process that will have to be guided by negotiation between Canada, its multilateral partners, and recipients in order to maintain mutual confidence.

Impacts Of COVID-19 on Capacity-Building in the Short to Medium Term

Given that Canada's capacity-building efforts are part of broader multilateral efforts, the key question going forward is what its partners in training, like its NATO allies, are going to do. To get a sense of this, we need some assumptions about the pandemic and its overall effects. The following seem to be reasonable assumptions:

- The pandemic will stay with the world for years. There is the race between vaccine rollouts and new infections, and vaccine distribution in the developing world is likely to be very slow as rich countries like Canada and the United States snap up [supplies](#).
- Policymakers around the world will try to find ways of preventing and preparing for the next pandemic, for example through greater vigilance, more caution about travel and supply chains, and a greater willingness to adopt emergency restrictions sooner when a new outbreak occurs.

There is, additionally, the grim possibility that COVID-19 and its variants will become [endemic](#), particularly since some variants are resistant to the currently available vaccines, and there is so much virus circulation that further mutations are inevitable. What governments will do to respond to this is unclear. Many may simply decide to live with it: with the prospect that public-health restrictions cannot make the crisis end, they may simply give up trying. But endemic COVID-19 may spell ongoing uncertainty for years to come.

These assumptions imply that the concern about capacity-building operations will not go away. There may well be future waves of suspended operations and reduced activities for existing missions.

There are mitigation measures that Canada and other states have already put into place and can extend, such as pre-deployment quarantine, intensive health checks, and limiting certain training activities. But much will depend on trust between the training state and a host government, that each will follow strong public health practices. Canada will have to negotiate the terms of health protocols for these missions with local partners in order to maintain trust with recipient countries and multilateral partners. Otherwise, support for these deployments will diminish both at home and in the recipient country.

Even then, there is no guarantee that a capacity-building operation will go ahead. Travel and seemingly unnecessary interactions will face widespread scepticism for some time. In the face of a local outbreak, future operations could easily be suspended at a moment's notice.

What will be the general pattern of capacity-building in the next year? In the previous version of this article, I predicted that there would be less capacity-building in the near future and a concentration on key priorities. Specifically, I predicted that NATO would reorient away from capacity-building in counterinsurgency contexts like Iraq in order to better focus capabilities on its core missions; I also

predicted some exceptions, such as that France would maintain its focus on the Sahel. I based these predictions on the suspension of NATO training activities in Iraq and the maintenance of Opération Barkhane in the face of the pandemic.

I was incorrect on both scores. France is looking to [reduce](#) its presence in the Sahel, while NATO has announced a dramatic [expansion](#) in Iraq, from 500 personnel to 4,000. This suggests either that my initial analysis of these decisions as signals of priority was mistaken, or that it was broadly correct but not especially useful in predicting how priorities would change in the future. Either way, however, my bold prediction is not as helpful as I had thought. It appears, instead, that the pandemic is now one factor among many to take into account, rather than a force that pushes states to focus only on their most important objectives.

The immediate task for Canada is to decide on a [renewal of Operation IMPACT](#) past the end of March 2021, when it is due to come to an end. Op IMPACT allows Canada to carry on its role in the anti-ISIS coalition and especially in the NATO mission in Iraq, given the alliance's new expansion plans. Canada would certainly lose credibility within the alliance if it failed to at least renew a mission already under way. Under the lingering threat of the pandemic, however, the likelihood of major new capacity-building demands after this is probably not very high.

At least, that is probably the hope in Ottawa—that Canada will not be asked to do very much more. The pandemic has created significant general strains on personnel. Operations LASER and VECTOR became a major focus of the Canadian Armed Forces, requiring a great deal of effort from the CAF: some 24,000 troops were available at different times for Op LASER in different capacities. As Stéphanie Bélanger's [study](#) concluded, Op LASER had unique challenges for CAF personnel. Further, COVID-19 has set back training and recruitment, leaving the CAF [short on troops](#). The Government of Canada may face even more difficult choices than usual between saying no to allies and stretching the CAF too thinly.

Longer-Run Pandemic Consequences: Capacity-Building and COVID-19 in a Changing Geostrategic Context

Analyzing the likely impacts of COVID-19 over the longer term requires broader assumptions. The following seem realistic:

- With the economic and social impact of COVID, there will be significant and increasing pressure to reduce military budgets, though these can be put off for some time through deficit financing because of low interest rates.
- Geopolitical competition between China, Russia and the United States will worsen.

Unfortunately, these assumptions cannot yet yield a clear prediction about how other states will engage in capacity-building. Two scenarios are plausible, following from the first two assumptions. First, cuts may affect capacity-building operations disproportionately, because they may be seen as nonessential compared to other defence functions (on top of the public-health risks of putting members of different countries' armed services in close proximity with each other).

However, capacity-building operations may instead become *more* popular in the next few years, particularly if geopolitical rivalry escalates and American and other states' interests clash in a variety of different countries. Concerns about defence budgets may actually spare capacity-building or even make

it more attractive, just as limits to resources helped to lead to a shift from large-scale counterinsurgency missions to capacity-building in the 2000s and 2010s. Great powers pursuing geopolitical rivalries may look for ways to do so that are relatively inexpensive and do not engage their forces in costly, dangerous and potentially destabilizing direct interventions. Capacity-building with local proxies may be just such a policy tool, attractive to states like China, Russia, the United States, France and Britain as they seek to assert their relevance and influence in various countries. In that scenario, Canada's allies are likely to call on Canada to do more capacity-building. This puts Canada in a difficult bind, as its own capacity for capacity-building will suffer from limited budgets in future years.

Unfortunately, capacity-building for peacekeeping operations is likely to suffer from limited interest and contributions. As noted, prior to the pandemic, capacity-building was part of a broader north-south division of labour. However, it was also increasingly unclear that the north was holding up its end of what was already a deeply criticized arrangement: funding for UN peacekeeping operations had declined in the several years prior to the pandemic, as Linnéa Gelot [notes](#). With severe budget constraints, there is the unfortunate likelihood that peace operations continue their decline. This may also impact the investments needed for peacekeeping training and capacity-building, notably to convert to the kind of long-term model that we have seen in capacity-building activities with well-established partners in other contexts. If one of the impacts of the global recession is to spur further hardship, inequality and social tension in developing countries, the problems that peacekeeping operations confront may worsen at the same time as they become less capable of responding to them.