

Section  
5

## Developments regarding the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)

COVID-19, which first broke out in China at the end of 2019, has been posing serious challenges that the international community has to address in close collaboration. The infection poses not only sanitary problems but exerts influence broadly on society and the economy of respective countries. In a globalized international society with increased mutual dependence, governments were pressed to take countermeasures, such as restrictions on outings and suspension or decrease of corporate activities. The infection has thus been exerting a tremendous influence on the daily lives of many people, revealing the vulnerability of supply chains and causing serious damage to local economies. Amid concerns over prolonged economic sluggishness worldwide, governments are utilizing their military forces' sanitary capabilities, transportation capacity and facilities, in addition to functions of medical institutions, to deal with the COVID-19 infection for early resumption of their domestic socioeconomic activities, and have been contributing to the prevention of the international spread of the infection. However, in some countries, military personnel have also been infected and military training and bilateral/multilateral exercises have been suspended or postponed. The infection has brought about diverse impacts and restrictions to military activities as well.

In China, where a large scale and rapid spread of the COVID-19 infection was confirmed first in the world, under a significant instruction concerning the People's Liberation Army's (PLA's) active contribution issued by President Xi Jinping, the PLA took full-fledged countermeasures against the COVID-19 infection. Huoshenshan Hospital was built in around ten days in Wuhan, the epicenter of the infection, and was handed over to the Joint Logistic Support Force

specialized in logistics missions on February 2, 2020. The Joint Logistic Support Force played the central role in coping with the COVID-19 infection and engaged in the operation of temporary hospitals, medical treatment, and transportation of relief goods. It is said that the Air Force's Y-20 large transport aircraft was deployed for a disaster relief mission for the first time. In this manner, not only the Joint Logistic Support Force, but also the Army, Navy, Air Force, Rocket Force, and strategic logistics support unit are said to have been mobilized. Additionally, militias and personnel mobilized for national defense also engaged in countermeasures against the infection and conducted such duties as measurement of citizens' body temperature, disinfection of vehicles, and assistance of corporate activities. On March 10, President Xi observed Wuhan and announced that the spread of infection had been curbed.

China seems to consider that the domestic spread of COVID-19 had basically been curbed, and the Academy of Military Medical Sciences of the PLA Academy of Military Science declared that it will start the second phase of COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials, ahead of other countries. Furthermore, China actively provides medical supplies and dispatches medical experts to countries where the COVID-19 infection is spreading, showing its intention to play a leading role in countering the infection in the international community. On the other hand, the current infection has spread worldwide starting from China, and the international community is strengthening the criticism questioning China's responsibility for the infection. Some point out that China has been endeavoring to stabilize the surrounding international environment through such international contribution, and at the same time, seeking to increase its own political and economic interests, create international and regional order to its own advantage and expand its influence, while strategically challenging the existing international order, by taking advantage of its assistance regarding countermeasures against the COVID-19 infection.

Under such circumstances, the PLA seems to have reviewed the annual operation plan for the Eastern Theater Command Navy and there seems to be a certain impact of the infection on military activities. However, even after the PLA's full-fledged operation against the infection started, China has been continuing to expand and increase military activities in the sea areas and airspace surrounding Japan.

Against the background that international cooperation and collaboration is urgently required due to the global spread



Seafood Market in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, closed due to the COVID-19

of the COVID-19 infection, China is continuously trying to change the status quo in the East China Sea unilaterally by coercion. Chinese Navy vessels regularly carry out activities and Chinese government vessels repeatedly intrude into Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands despite protests by the Japanese government. In May 2020, there was an incident in which a Chinese government vessel came close to a Japanese fishing boat and followed it in the territorial waters. Additionally, the number of scrambles by the Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) against Chinese aircraft has remained at a high level. In the South China Sea, it is said that Chinese fleets including Aircraft Carrier “Liaoning,” which passed through the waters between the mainland of Okinawa and Miyakojima Island to the Pacific Ocean, proceeded to the South China Sea through the Bashi Channel and conducted training in April 2020. In the same month, it was announced that the State Council of the People’s Republic of China approved the establishment of two new districts, the Xisha District governing the Xisha Islands and surrounding waters, and the Nansha District governing the Nansha Islands and surrounding waters, under the Sansha City of Hainan Province, which China had established in the South China Sea. In this manner, China has been trying to unilaterally change the status quo in the South China Sea, employing means beyond military tactics, and create a fait accompli. Such moves of China are triggering protests from surrounding countries, which are now struggling to counter the COVID-19 infection.

In the United States, since mid-March, in order to respond to the increase in the number of people infected with COVID-19, states, District of Columbia, and other territories mobilized their National Guards and had them engage in duties including transportation of medical goods, epidemic prevention and medical assistance. The federal troops also supported medical activities in the country by dispatching a hospital ship and operating field hospitals. The DoD (including the U.S. Forces) has been taking measures to prevent a further spread of infection within the department, such as restricting officials’ moves in and out of the country, ensuring social distancing and wearing of masks, and introducing remote work. In addition, in order to prevent the spread of infection through military exchanges with other countries, the U.S. Forces has been taking measures to postpone, scale down, and cancel joint exercises with other countries. This includes postponing the ROK-US Combined Forces Command Exercise, and scaling down U.S.-led multilateral joint exercises in Europe.

In the meantime, cases of the spread of infection in U.S. troops deployed overseas, in particular within naval vessels, have been reported. The infection was confirmed among crew

members of aircraft carrier “Theodore Roosevelt” and other vessels. Under such circumstances, Secretary of Defense Esper and other senior military officers, alleging that an enemy is trying to take advantage of this opportunity when the U.S. Forces are coping with the COVID-19 infection, emphasize the significance of maintaining the readiness to take quick actions, and have reiterated that the infection does not affect the readiness and ability to conduct national security missions of the U.S. Forces as a whole.

North Korea repeatedly publicized that there is no one in North Korea who is infected with COVID-19, but is said to have been taking measures to prevent infection by closing borders with China, suspending services of international flights and cross-border railway connections, and restricting moves of foreigners and residents. North Korea might be suffering economic losses. In March 2020, General Abrams, Commander of United States Forces Korea, mentioned that he was confident that there are people infected with COVID-19 in North Korea, and stated that the North Korean Forces were on lockdown for about 30 days and regular training was just resumed recently. In March, North Korea repeated launches of ballistic missiles four times, and seems to be making efforts to enhance missile-related technologies and operational capability, but some point out that the intention of the regime is to tighten internal control and externally demonstrate the maintenance of its leadership and military force in the face of the global spread of COVID-19.

In ROK, Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo instructed in February 2020 to input all resources for countering the COVID-19 infection, referring to the current situation as being equivalent to wartime. Under such instruction, the ROK Forces offer support in the fields of epidemic prevention and transportation. For enhancing efficiencies and accelerating countermeasures, the National Defense Prompt Support Unit was organized in March 2020. In the meantime, field training was all suspended nationwide in February, and troops under field training were provided with guidance to return to their bases immediately. COVID-19 thus exerted influence on military activities.

In February 2020, Russia dispatched aircraft of the Russian Aerospace Forces to China to transport its people back to Russia, and has carried out support activities such as transportation of medical relief goods for other countries since March. Within the country, a countermeasures headquarters was established in the Russian Forces and 49 sanitation and infection units were newly organized to take thorough countermeasures. However, in April for the first time, the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation announced the infection case found in the Russian Forces, and the number of infected personnel is increasing. Efforts

have been made to increase the number of hospital beds with the aim of also offering medical support to the private sector, such as increasing the number of beds of the hospital ship held by the Pacific Fleet and newly constructing 16 medical centers nationwide. Although President Putin announced the postponement of the military parade, which was scheduled in May 2020, until sometime within the year, drills and training of the Russian Forces seem to be carried out as usual, and active military activities have been confirmed, including launching tests of antisatellite missiles and a near-midair collision with U.S. aircraft above the Mediterranean Sea. Also around Japan, Russian aircraft continue proximate flights, and it was reported that the Pacific Fleet conducted a military exercise in the waters including sea areas near the Northern Territories in April 2020.

In countries in Europe, where the infection spread rapidly, military forces are used for countermeasures, such as the establishment of field hospitals, transportation of medical personnel, patients and medical supplies, and assistance with private hospitals by military medical personnel. For example, the U.K. Forces supply logistics and help with the construction of new hospitals, the French Forces offer

support at field hospitals and transport patients using their aircraft, and the German Forces transport patients with severe symptoms. In France, it was confirmed in April 2020 that crew members of Aircraft Carrier “Charles de Gaulle” were infected with COVID-19.

In this manner, the spread of the COVID-19 infection has not only significantly affected global socioeconomic activities, but has also had influences on the military activities of respective countries. If the spread of infection is further prolonged, this may exert various impacts on countries’ military capability. Furthermore, it is said that while actively dispatching medical experts and providing medical goods to countries where the infection is spreading, China has been making propaganda efforts in various manners, including the spread of false information, amid growing social uncertainties and confusion due to the spread of infection. The COVID-19 pandemic may expose and intensify strategic competition among countries intending to create international and regional orders more preferable to themselves and to expand their influence. We need to closely watch such moves with great concern as security issues.