



COVID-19 in the Philippines: Expanding the role and capabilities of the Philippine Coast Guard and the Philippine National Police

Sherwin Ona¹, Roman dela Cruz, Jr.²

Jane Gesgulong³, Rosa Babel Calilung-Teehankee⁴

NOTICE

The views provided in this policy brief do not represent the official views of the authors' institutional affiliations. These insights are offered voluntarily as a resource for consideration by local authorities. All errors are ours.

¹ Associate Professor, and Chair,
Department of Political Science, De La Salle University

² Doctor of Philosophy Major in
Development Studies, De La Salle University, Colonel, Philippine National Police

³ Executive Officer, BRP Capones (MRRV 4404), Philippine Coast Guard

⁴ Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, De La Salle University

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown numerous challenges and created new opportunities for law enforcement and public safety (LEPS) agencies in the Philippines. The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and the Philippine National Police (PNP) together with the Bureau of Fire Protection are the LEPS agencies that were mobilized to be part of the National Joint Task Force (NJTF)-COVID SHIELD. This task force is responsible for the security and public safety component of the government's overall strategy to control the outbreak. The PCG and PNP were also tasked to augment the existing resources of the Department of Health (DOH) and local government units.

However, the pandemic has uncovered challenges in its ability to conduct population control, port security, public affairs, and medical support as part of the national disease mitigation efforts. Both agencies have also recorded a significant number of COVID-19 infections among its personnel. Also, the pandemic has forced both agencies to transform its units to

respond to various missions that are often incompatible with its LEPS mandate.

This policy brief discusses the role of the PNP and PCG in the national COVID-19 response. It also examines the organizational challenges and explore ways on how to enhance its capabilities as well as stress the importance of reexamining its roles given the changing national security environment. The brief also discusses the possible policy alternatives related to the following: (a) The need to improve its capabilities in Chemical-Biological Radioactive Nuclear (CBRN) response; (b) Propose new roles for the PCG and PNP auxiliary units, and (c) Strengthen its public affairs and community relations capabilities.

■ OVERVIEW

The PNP and PCG are regarded as the premier law enforcement agencies of the Philippines. The history of both organizations precedes the creation of the Philippine Republic while its current existence was mandated by law.

For the PNP, the enactment of RA 6975 in 1990 created a police force that is “national in scope and civilian in character.” Because of this, the then Philippine Constabulary and Integrated National Police were combined to form the PNP. Since 2010, the PNP has embarked on various programs aimed at enhancing its operational efficiency and improve its public image. Most notable of these programs is the PNP P.A.T.R.O.L Plan 2030 or known as the “Peace and Order Agenda for Transformation and upholding of the Rule of Law” Plan. This plan presents a roadmap on how the PNP envisioned its transformation into a “highly capable police service working in partnership with a responsive community towards the attainment of a safer place to live, work and do business” (Philippine National Police, 2016). This plan also presented the PNP’s commitment to improving its capability on the following: (a) improve its capabilities to conduct internal security operations, (b) promote a culture of accountability and respect for human rights, and (c) strengthen institutional mechanisms to eliminate corruption and politicization (Philippine National Police, 2016). In 2016, the PNP was tasked to play a significant role in the country’s national security agenda by being the lead agency in the government’s anti-illegal drugs campaign. The plan also calls for the PNP’s modernization as it is being slated to take the lead role in operations against communist insurgents and Islamic terrorists.

Meanwhile, the current PCG is a product of RA 9993, which called for the creation of an organization that will serve as the country’s primary maritime law enforcement and safety agency under the Department of Transportation (DoTR). Aside from safety and environmental protection, the PCG has figured prominently in the country’s ongoing dispute in the West Philippine Sea. PCG vessels, together with the Philippine Navy, are conducting maritime patrols to strengthen the country’s claims over its disputed territories. Furthermore, it plays a vital role in the national disaster risk reduction and

management strategy and counterterrorism campaign.

At present, the PCG is pursuing a modest modernization program aimed at reconstituting its current maritime fleet. Since early 2000, it has acquired several ships, expanded its aviation unit, and increased its human resource base. It also plans to develop new berthing facilities to accommodate its new ships and has expanded its disaster response capabilities (The New PCG Commandant Charts the Future Strategic Direction of The Philippine Coast Guard, 2021).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed gaps in the capabilities of LEPS agencies to support the national disease mitigation effort. The authors argue that these gaps can be traced to the traditional security orientation of the PNP and PCG. The brief will also posit the need to reexamine the national security roles of both agencies to enable a more effective response to the pandemic.

Role of PNP and PCG in the National COVID-19 Response

The WHO pandemic declaration and reports of the rising incidence of infections prompted the Philippine government to declare a “national state of calamity” on March 16, 2020. The declaration placed the entire Philippines under a 6-month emergency mode, while the whole Luzon island was placed in an enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) up to April 14, 2020. Because of the unabated rise in COVID-19 cases, the lockdown was further extended, making it one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world.

The COVID-19 outbreak showed that health emergencies such as pandemics are indeed significant national security concerns. These draconian measures have underscored the limitations in the ability of security and LEPS agencies to respond to such a threat. For instance, police and coast guard units were hastily tasked with disease mitigation as well as population and border control responsibilities. These new missions required both agencies to organize ad hoc units to respond to the situation. Also, these units are often composite, with their

manning and logistical requirements unprogrammed and their resources obtained from existing unit allocations.

PNP and PCG response to Operation COVID SHIELD

President Duterte's national emergency declaration prompted the PNP to create the Administrative Support to COVID 19 Operations Task Force (ASCOTF) to support the NJTF-COVID SHIELD. The mission of the ASCOTF was to implement the community quarantine and population control activities of NJTF COVID-SHIELD. The PNP was also tasked to preserve peace and order during the national lockdown. To ensure the sustainability of its operations, PNP planners envisioned the task force to support the logistical requirements of the police units that will be deployed to support COVID-SHIELD (Peralta-Malonzo, 2020). Furthermore, Police Regional Offices (PROs) were directed to replicate the task force structure from the regions down to the city/municipal level. The PROs were also directed to implement the directives of the Inter-Agency Task Force on COVID-19 (IATF), Department of the Interior and Local Government, and other government agencies in areas under community quarantine. Aside from its role in the national pandemic response, ASCOTF was tasked to ensure that PNP personnel are protected from the virus. Directives from the PNP national headquarters called for the regular monitoring of PNP personnel, the dissemination of health advisories, and the creation of decontamination facilities in major PNP installations nationwide (Delos Reyes, 2020).

Similarly, the PCG also organized more than 3,000 response personnel, complemented by available water and air assets to support the NJTF COVID SHIELD. Upon the instructions of the DoTR secretary, the PCG manned one-stop shops for OFWs in all major ports of entry of the country. In addition, the PCG was tasked to maintain the Eva Macapagal Quarantine facility together with the Bayanihan Quarantine Vessels docked at the Manila North Harbor. PCG's community relations personnel also assisted in the repatriation of stranded OFWs, provided perimeter security for quarantine facilities, and assisted in testing and contact tracing efforts of the national government (De Guzman, 2020; De Leon, 2020).

Operational Challenges

The initial pandemic responses of both agencies were marred by logistical difficulties and challenges in coordination. Since the pandemic was an unforeseen event, the mobilization of resources became a gargantuan task since both agencies were traditionally tasked with public safety, anti-criminality, and counter-terrorism missions. For instance, the PNP is the lead agency in the government's drive against illegal drugs and assists the Armed Forces of the Philippines in counter-terrorism. Meanwhile, the PCG's mandate is to ensure maritime safety and now plays a significant role in the country's territorial defense. This is further complicated by the fact that the Chemical-Biological-Radioactive-Nuclear (CBRN) capabilities of both organizations are in their nascent stage. Also, coordination with other national agencies became a daunting task as the lines of authority became blurred while the national government struggled to control the spread of the virus.

In addition, the deployment of the PCG and PNP personnel for quarantine control also showed the gaps in its preparation and equipage. Both agencies experienced shortages in PPE and testing supplies. Medical units experienced understaffing as both agencies augmented the DOH in its contact tracing and testing efforts. Table 1 in the Appendix provides a summary of the roles and the initiatives of the PNP and PCG in support of the NJTF-COVID SHIELD.

Possible Implications to the Modernization Programs of the PNP and PCG

Considered a non-traditional threat, the pandemic has exposed numerous challenges in the country's overall mitigation strategy. Aside from its public health aspect, the rapid viral spread has revealed ominous effects on the economy, social cohesion, and governance.

For both the PNP and PCG, their capacities were significantly undermined, as shown in the initial stages of the enhanced community quarantine. However, these challenges go beyond the perennial human resource, budget, and logistical constraints. It can be observed that an unabated outbreak creates a broader range of repercussions that endangers food and

COVID-19 in the Philippines: Expanding the role and capabilities of the Philippine Coast Guard and the Philippine National Police

economic security, peace, and order among others. For instance, a September 2020 survey of the Social Weather Station showed that nearly one-third of families (7.6 million households) – said that they did not have enough food to eat at least once in the previous 3 months while 22 million families were experiencing “severe hunger” (Social Weather Stations, 2020). Meanwhile, the Department of Justice reported a 260% increase in cybercrimes during the first 4 months of the lockdown (Pulta, 2020). Also, force protection is another concern that emerged from the deployment. As of March 2021, the PNP has a total of 12,735 infections with 34 deaths and 1,176 active cases¹. Meanwhile, the PCG has recorded a total of 2,614 infections with only 1 death.

These concerns clearly show that aside from its public health aspect, the pandemic can further exacerbate socioeconomic tensions and undermine the rule of law. Given these challenges, the authors believe that it is vital for LEPS agencies to adopt a whole of society strategy in addressing the negative impact of the pandemic.

At this point, it is important to reiterate the urgency of reviewing the country’s 12-point National Security Agenda and combine it with our experiences (National Security Council, n.d.). This process will allow LEPS agencies to revise their current plans and programs. For instance, Agenda 1 and 2 underscore the importance of strengthening institutions in the light of emerging human security threats. This is necessary to ensure the preservation of our national values and the protection of our people. Clearly, this pandemic has changed the traditional roles of LEPS agencies almost overnight. New tasks such as community quarantine, civil affairs, medical support among others were given to the responding units. For this, the PNP and PCG modernization programs must now be conscious of non-traditional threats such as pandemics, cybercrimes, and related emergencies. These agencies must now look ahead to better address these emerging threats. Future procurement must allow both agencies to become force multipliers by having capabilities beyond their current physical security and

logistical support roles. An excellent example of this is the planned acquisition of a hospital ship by the PCG, which the authors consider a “game-changing resource”. The authors also propose that these agencies explore the usefulness of mobile kitchens and medical stations for frontline units. These assets can be rapidly deployed to peripheral communities as well as provide force protection services. Also, revitalizing its CBRN and civil affairs competencies can provide both services with the needed capabilities to better respond to future health emergencies. New doctrines and operational plans must now be developed to adapt to the challenges of this multifaceted threat environment.

For Agenda 7, disaster preparedness must now be seen as a whole of society effort rather than a government-centric, organization-specific response. The authors encourage the LEPS planners as well as national policymakers to redefine the role of the private sector and citizens in its pandemic response strategy. This will enable both services to rapidly expand their capabilities and mobilize the various segments of society. Another viable idea is the mobilization of volunteers as augmentation units or reserves in times of emergencies. Table 2 in the Appendix provides a summary of the National Security Agenda items and the possible policy opportunities.

■ KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, a more capable PNP and PCG will provide national policymakers with more options on how to address the challenges of non-traditional threats. For this, the authors encourage both agencies to use the current national security policies and its COVID-19 experiences to propose revisions to their current plans and programs. Also, both agencies must now prepare for the inevitable expansion of their mission and roles given these new threats. Below are the recommendations for these agencies:

¹www.pnp.gov.ph as of March 18, 2021.

Reevaluate the programs, doctrines, and plans of both agencies to respond to health emergencies

The authors underscore the need to reexamine the current modernization plans and programs of the PNP and PCG. This review should allow both agencies to rethink their priorities and redefine their role during public health emergencies. Also, both agencies must now conduct an audit of their performance. Furthermore, the national security facet of this matter is equally important. This would also require a review of the country's national security policies, especially on how the Philippines will address future health emergencies and related non-traditional threats like cybersecurity and disinformation.

Consider the creation and mobilization of community-based auxiliary units

The pandemic has also highlighted the need to rapidly expand the capabilities of the PCG and the PNP. The ability to mobilize communities and tap specific expertise is an important aspect of the overall pandemic response. This would require 2 things. First, both agencies must now view communities as their partners instead of wards. This means that in a pandemic, communities can be viewed as the "first line of defense", primarily treating communities as sources of information and conduits for public awareness. Of course, this would require that both agencies develop a coherent public affairs and community relations strategy that can promote trust, foster synergy, and ensure compliance to health protocols. Second, this suggestion requires both agencies to develop and capacitate community-based auxiliary units that will allow for the

expansion of its capabilities. Specific skills in health, communication, information technology, and community organizing are competencies that will provide both agencies with the needed expertise to fulfill their new mission and roles.

Rapidly develop the capabilities of CBRN units

This suggestion requires both agencies to accept their roles as force multipliers in a public health emergency. CBRN doctrines and capabilities must be immediately developed to augment the national health response. This will also provide the government with the expertise and resources to respond to bioterrorism and similar threats.

I REFERENCES

- De Guzman, S. S. (2020, October 12). Philippine Coast Guard—a force to be reckoned with. *The Philippine Star*. <https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2020/10/12/2048882/philippine-coast-guard-force-be-reckoned-with>
- De Leon, S. G. (2020, March 12). PCG activates task force to fight against coronavirus. *Philippine Information Agency*. <https://pia.gov.ph/news/articles/1036141>
- Delos Reyes, Z. (2020, April 5). PNP activates ASCOTF for faster logistic response, deployment of cops. *People's Tonight*. [https://archive.journal.com.ph/news/nation/pnp-activates-ascotf-faster-logistic-response-deployment-cops#:~:text=THE Philippine National Police \(PNP,several checkpoints and health facilities.](https://archive.journal.com.ph/news/nation/pnp-activates-ascotf-faster-logistic-response-deployment-cops#:~:text=THE Philippine National Police (PNP,several checkpoints and health facilities.)
- National Security Council. (n.d.). National Security Policy For Change and Well-Being of the Filipino People 2017-2022. <https://nsc.gov.ph/attachments/article/NSP/NSP-2017-2022.pdf>
- The New PCG Commandant Charts the Future Strategic Direction of The Philippine Coast Guard. (2021). *The Maritime Review*. <https://maritimereview.ph/the-new-pcg-commandant-charts-the-future-strategic-direction-of-the-philippine-coast-guard/>
- Peralta-Malonzo, T. A. (2020, April 6). PNP creates task force to assist frontliners. *SunStar Philippines*. <https://ph.news.yahoo.com/pnp-creates-task-force-assist-055400573.html>
- Philippine National Police. (2016). PNP PATROL PLAN 2030. <http://www.pnp.gov.ph/index.php/about-us/pnp-patrol-plan-2030>
- Pulta, B. (2020, May 25). Online child exploitation reports in PH surge amid Covid-19: DOJ. *Philippine News Agency*. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1103852>
- Social Weather Stations (2020). WS September 17-20, 2020 National Mobile Phone Survey – Report No. 5: Adult joblessness remains very high at 39.5%. <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20201005200818>

I APPENDIX

Table 1. Summary of COVID-19 Response Tasks and Challenges of the PNP and PCG

	Mission and Tasks	Activities	General Challenges
Philippine National Police (PNP)	<p>Support the National JTF-COVID SHIELD through the creation of the</p> <p>Administrative Support to COVID-19 Operations Task Force (ASCOTF)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deployment of PNP units to conduct community quarantine and population control missions • Advised all provincial and regional police offices to coordinate with the Department of Health and local government units • Ensure the safety of PNP personnel from COVID 19 through the following: (a) Conduct regular health monitoring of PNP personnel; (b) Creation of an information system for COVID cases within the PNP; (c) Mobilize its medical reserves, bio-chemical experts, and legal support; (d) Create decontamination facilities; (e) Provide health advisories and necessary logistical support for ASCOTF personnel. 	<p>Challenges for both agencies:</p> <p>a) Deployment of additional medical front liners in performing our roles</p> <p>b) Readiness of personnel in responding to COVID 19.</p> <p>c) Medical support to affected personnel of COVID 19</p> <p>d) Coordination and co-operation with government agencies</p> <p>For the PCG, logistical support to ensure the safety of each responder</p>
Philippine Coast Guard (PCG)	<p>Support the initiatives of the NJTF-COVID SHIELD</p> <p>Prepare the necessary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in its area of operations (AORs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deployment of more than 3,000 response personnel, water, and air assets to support the NJTF-COVID SHIELD • Secured and maintained the Eva Macapagal quarantine facilities and the Bayanihan Quarantine Vessels • Manned the one-stop shops for returning OFWs in all ports of entry • Assisted in the repatriation of OFWs • Provided security for quarantine facilities • Assisted in testing and contact tracing efforts of the national government 	<p>For the PCG, the greater role of ensuring the safety and security in the air and land transportation sector outside our primary mandate in the maritime</p>

I APPENDIX

Table 2. National Security Agenda and policy opportunities

National Security Agenda (2017-2022)	Description	Policy Opportunities
Agenda 1: Human and Political Security	“To effectively respond to the complexity of both old and new security threats to the safety, welfare, and well-being of Filipinos. It is an important element to protect the core of human lives and institutions that enhance peace, unity, freedom, democracy	Redesign, revising the PNP-PCG modernization plans to consider its roles during health emergencies. Develop doctrines and capabilities to enable the whole-of-society response.
Agenda 2: Health Security	“Enhance the quality of life of Filipinos by preventing and mitigating the effects of infectious diseases as well as interdicting	Pursue game-changing acquisitions to improve the national response
Agenda 7: Environmental and Disaster Security	“Enhance our disaster preparedness through preventive and mitigating mechanisms of natural and/or human-induced emergencies that may impact on our envi-	