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The Military's Strategic Leadership in Times of Health Crisis

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Summary

In Peru, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Armed Forces deployed to support prevention, containment and control measures in order to mitigate the virus. Their professionalism and experience enabled them to efficiently carry out the assigned activities. In other words, the military, being prepared to face difficult situations in their combat operations, have the skills to manage health crises. In this context, new challenges arose that demonstrated professional education and training from a leadership perspective. As a result, this paper highlights the importance of military leadership in Peru and its fundamental role in the effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study used a hermeneutic qualitative methodology to identify the best practices developed in this situation.

Key words: *Leadership, Strategic Planning, Effective Communication, Uncertainty, Crisis Management, Multi-sector Synergy, Pandemic.*

Introduction

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, "the idea of order, direction, guidance, leadership, command-obedience relationship, in short, power, is intrinsically and viscerally linked to the very existence of man in society".[1] In other words, there is a reflective discourse of the individual that supports his actions; elements that generate a behavioral dynamic in which the leader's thinking is crystallized in his actions when faced with complex scenarios or scenarios that demand the proposal of alternative solutions to the traditional ones.

Thus, based on this principle, it is possible to study what happened during the pandemic produced by COVID-19. On March 15, 2020, [2] the Peruvian government declared a state of emergency throughout the national territory, implementing measures to prevent, control and mitigate this disease. The Peruvian Armed Forces were mobilized to support the different measures adopted, as the State's responses would have been insufficient without the technical-logistical support, nationwide deployment and leadership capacity provided by the institution.

The Peruvian Armed Forces were one of the institutions involved in the frontal fight against the COVID-19 virus. In this task, they demonstrated strategic leadership,

which was valuable for the management of the situation.[3] These responsibilities were focused on planning, coordinating, and executing.[4]

New Frontlines: Challenges and Opportunities for Leadership

Health crisis management is a different field from military operations, so it is essential to recognize that there are significant differences and invaluable lessons to be explored. Military response has historically been associated with effective crisis and emergency management, and the pandemic had a significant impact on the world's armed forces.[5] Faced with this new event, military institutions had to reorganize and restructure to undertake emergency response operations in line with the needs of their States.[6] However, a series of obstacles arose, perhaps the most relevant being the protection of their own health, as they were exposed to a higher risk of contagion.[7] Therefore, with their professional performance, the military protected the supreme goal of society and the State, to protect the lives of the citizens.[8]

The strategies and plans implemented by the military in the fight against the COVID-19 virus had considerable effectiveness in containing the pandemic, making a series of innovations and adjustments to overcome logistical and technological obstacles in order to deal with a changing and complex reality. This response presented a deployment of skills and competencies in the implementation of emergency health policies, in collaboration and coordination of efforts between different state entities and civil society organizations.[9] Soft skills and leadership competencies stood out in this situation, considering the diverse problems that had to be faced. The need to innovate and adapt to changing scenarios, prioritizing collaboration, and teamwork,[10] was a must. Thus, military experience and skills were used to transform crises into opportunities. Its value lies in the ability of leaders to make flexible and resilient decisions, which will be put to the test when it is necessary to adjust and/or modify the strategy or response approaches. Therefore, there is a permanent need for leaders prepared to deal with emergencies.[11]

Characteristics of the Peruvian Army Military Leadership

Military leadership in the Peruvian Army is characterized by a series of features that are an innate part of its formation and that, at the time, were analyzed in the study elaborated by Castro;[12] is also supported by the research work conducted by Quiceno, et al. 2017.[13] The following typologies are mentioned below:

Strategic Planning. Planning expertise is useful in the management of all types of crises, as it requires meticulous organization for a coordinated response, as well as the development of contingency plans to ensure the availability of critical resources.

Quick and Effective Decision Making. Major staffs in operations generally carry out rigorous and detailed planning, of a neuralgic or high-intensity type. In these

circumstances, strategies and recommendations are essential for decision making, as well as for correcting or reorienting objectives in the course of military operations.

Clear and Effective Communication. Military leaders confirmed that inaccurate or misleading information generates confusion and panic. In this sense, it is necessary to provide timely and clear information to the authorities, the population and the troops themselves. It is important to highlight that this type of communication is a fundamental axis to keep the population informed and motivated, with full confidence in the government's efforts.

Teamwork and Collaboration. Military life revolves around a constant team performance, which is essential to face a crisis situation, being necessary the cooperation of multiple stakeholders and work teams, being able to perform in a joint, combined and/or integrated way.

Discipline and Resilience. Sound morale and resilience enable us to face and overcome threats, complex challenges, adverse and unknown situations, and discipline is a key factor in achieving success.

Empathy. Military leaders are adaptive and have the ability to understand and respond to the needs and concerns of their team and the general population.

One can add, to all the linked elements, the following maxim of military leadership: "Mission First, Man Always". The military has a devotion to its mission and a special bond for the fulfillment of its objectives, allowing them to remain focused and persevering. In addition, the protection of the individual is the reason to join forces and reverse any negative scenario that may arise. It should not be forgotten that the Armed Forces, particularly the Army, are deployed throughout the national territory and are with the homeland in the most critical moments of its history, as they are indivisible and loyal to their oath.

Consequently, maximizing resources and capabilities to confront an unknown enemy and minimize its impact on the population was essential to obtain synergy between all government entities, the private sector and the population. This articulation allows us to affirm that inter-institutional collaboration was the key to the Peruvian Army's strategic leadership in the fight against the COVID-19 virus.

Warriors of Sipan: Military Leadership Strategies against COVID-19

During the pandemic, armies around the world were working with their governments to combat the spread of the virus and provide humanitarian assistance to affected communities. In terms of strategy, the leaders of the Peruvian Army worked at the national level and in coordination with the three levels of government and other armed institutions.[14] In this context, it is relevant to assume that leadership in military operations and in times of crisis have similar characteristics. For this reason, there are lessons that can be applied, as shown in Figure 1.

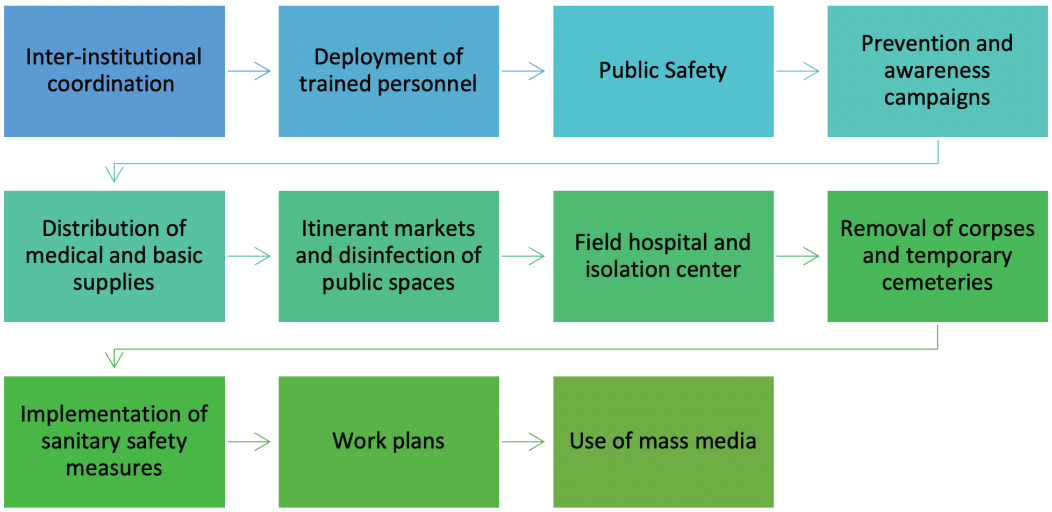

Figure 1: Lessons to be considered (prepared by the author).

Among the models to follow as an example of health crisis management, the case of the 7th Infantry Brigade of the Peruvian Army, based in the Lambayeque region, stands out. This provided some valuable lessons which are described below:

According to the Lambayeque Regional Operations Command in 2021, all of the following were required: coordinated planning and strategy, personnel training, prevention and awareness campaigns, health security measures, distribution of medical supplies and basic necessities, and actions to protect the general population to prevent the spread of the virus. [15]

Another aspect to consider was the importance of inter-institutional coordination, working closely with other institutions and authorities such as the Ministry of Health, regional governments, local governments, other armed forces and the National Police to coordinate efforts and resources. [16]

It further underscores the deployment of trained personnel in these circumstances by stating that "military health personnel have been deployed to care for COVID-19 patients at the regional military medical centers and temporary hospitals constructed during the pandemic."[17] Public safety was also considered by establishing social distancing measures, through integrated patrols, control of public transportation and the organization of markets, in order to comply with the mandatory social immobilization, as well as the use of masks to stop the spread of the virus. [18]

The organization of prevention and awareness campaigns "in vulnerable communities and neighborhoods in the region to promote social distancing, the use of masks and personal hygiene"[19] should be highlighted. In addition, the distribution of medical supplies and basic necessities became an essential activity. In this regard, the Lambayeque Regional Operations Command stated that medical supplies such as personal protective equipment, rapid tests and medicines were distributed to hospitals and health centers. Similarly, basic necessities were distributed as humanitarian aid to families affected by the health crisis, especially those in rural and difficult to access areas. [20]

The itinerant markets set up and the disinfection of public spaces were also valuable in the strategy. Disinfection work was "carried out in public spaces such as streets, markets and transport terminals to reduce the spread of the virus".[21] Likewise, it is important to mention that a field hospital and an isolation center were set up to "expand hospital capacity and care for infected patients; to this end, a field hospital and a voluntary isolation center were set up in the courtyard of the Leoncio Prado fort. [22]

Another notable action was the removal of corpses and implementation of temporary cemeteries. In this regard, the Lambayeque Regional Operations Command used a call center for the registration of deaths, which activated a humanitarian corpse collection team.

In short, it can be stated that the implementation of health security measures was crucial to achieve the objectives set. According to the Lambayeque Regional Operations Command, "health security measures were implemented in its facilities, such as temperature monitoring and the use of masks and face shields to protect its personnel and the population in general. [23] In addition, the development of work plans, such as Te cuido Perú- Operación Tayta, Plan Sipán and Plan Tumi, which were aimed at "Assistance for the Treatment and Isolation against COVID-19 (Tayta)"[24] can be highlighted. With respect to Plan Sipán, the Army's Seventh Infantry Brigade and the regional COVID-19 Command were assigned to combat this outbreak by identifying positive cases and their corresponding treatment through house-to-house visits in different localities of the region. [25]

Finally, the Plan Tumi was intended to guide the work developed through "health brigades [that] go house to house and at night to complete [the] immunization process for adults aged 60 and over".[26] Therefore, the articulated work was one of the main elements of success in this region. The role and power of the media should be emphasized due to their objectivity in the dissemination of news and, in this way, to achieve mass awareness of the Lambayeque Regional Operations Command. [27] These actions were planned in four phases: prevention, hospitalization, treatment of corpses, support, and recovery. [28]

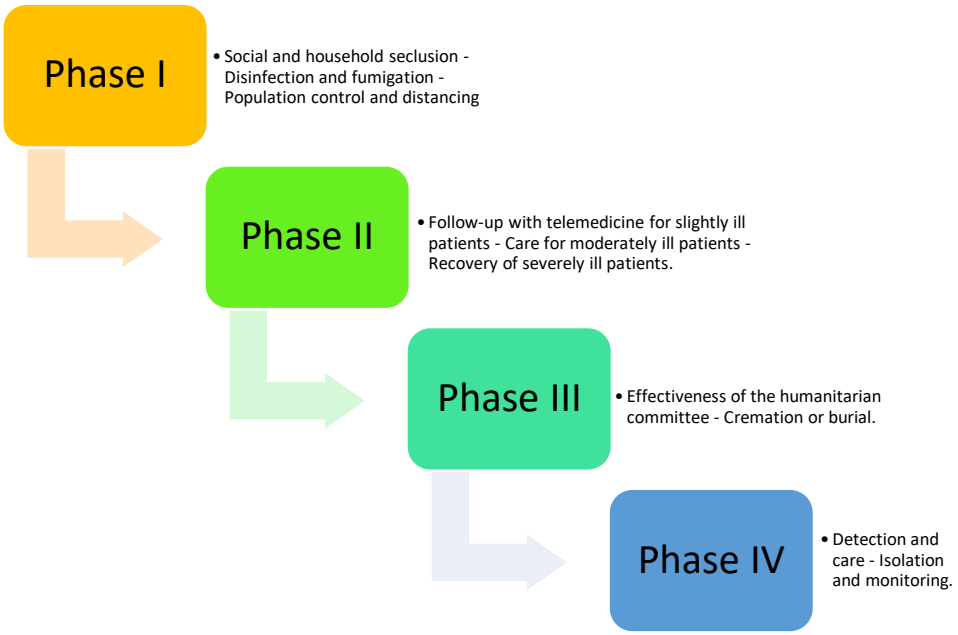

Figure 2: Phases of various actions. Lambayeque Regional Operations Command (prepared by the author). [29]

It is important to point out that, in all the described phases of the strategy, the identification of priority resources (personal protection equipment, Oxygen cylinders, ventilators, among others) was necessary for an effective response, as well as the definition of clear objectives to minimize the spread of the virus. These lessons may be applicable to other sectors and leaders in other emergency contexts.

Aspects to be Considered by All Governments in Office

The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of having clear and updated contingency plans to address emergency situations, based on logistical support and the guarantee of not carrying out improvised actions in the search for essential resources and materials that probably cannot be acquired at that time. The Armed Forces, in the current emerging crisis, and the State for a timely response; therefore, they must be alert and ready for such scenarios. [30] It should be noted that the Peruvian Army led a collaborative effort at the national level in the development of response activities with the support of personnel and logistics, with the collaboration of the health authorities in establishing emergency healthcare centers to contain the pandemic.

The strategic leadership of the military can be beneficial in situations of crisis, however, this should not detract from the Government's responsibility for the implementation of the Offices of National Security and Defense (OSDENA). [31] Such action should be taken at all levels to achieve the correct awareness of society

about contemporary threats and risks that are latent in our environment, as in the case of natural disasters and social upheavals caused by hybrid enemies who wish to destabilize the internal order and the democratic system.

Furthermore, it is also the responsibility of the Government and the authorities to take the necessary steps to maintain an operational capacity (personnel and logistics) to react efficiently to any contemporary and future threat. [32] The current emerging crises (water, food, environmental and migratory) in Peru, whether due to natural phenomena that generate destruction or social conflicts that may trigger other situations of violence, [33] require more trained leaders, suitable to make decisions, with experience and expertise, high commitment and ethics to meet social demands. Therefore, overcoming contemporary threats requires a commitment that goes beyond good intentions and is based on the professional management of knowledge for the correct decision-making process.

The pandemic is a reminder of the need for proper civic awareness and identification with the institutions, the basis of our republican system, which will facilitate the mobilization to coordinate, in an effective manner, on the resources available at a given time. According to Eduardo (2022), "the knowledge of the national reality in terms of its resources, possibilities and threats requires the creation of spaces that promote analysis and discussion in order to deepen it".[34]

Likewise, the education sector plays a key role in ensuring a well-prepared citizenry, adequately trained teachers and infrastructure in line with the country's reality. However, it must be understood that each situation is unique and needs a response adapted to the specific circumstances; for this reason, military leadership provides a model for effective coordination between the various sectors, organizations and agencies.

Conclusions

During the pandemic, the strategic leadership of the Peruvian Army (PE) commands focused on coordinating and executing actions to protect the health and welfare of the Peruvian population, as well as to support health and government authorities in the fight against the spread of the virus. His approach to strategic planning, assertive decision making, clear and effective communication, teamwork, multi-sectoral collaboration, strong discipline and resilience make him a role model in health crisis management.

Likewise, the military have extensive experience in crisis management, both in combat situations and in humanitarian operations, which allows them to develop skills in planning, coordination and execution of actions in situations of high uncertainty and stress, which was evidenced in the reduction of the mortality rate and the decrease of contagions in certain regions of the country, achievements reached thanks to the application of measures and strategies led by the EP commanders, at all levels.

Finally, collaboration between different sectors and leaders was fundamental to join efforts and optimize available resources; this meant the presentation of opportunities for PE in the construction of a more resilient society prepared for future emerging crises in scenarios yet to be determined.

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