

## Own Worst Enemy – The Human Factor in National Security

National security is viewed as a military function, protecting life and land (and all domains) from external and existential threats. It's measured by destruction, lethality, and resiliency of standing forces, equipment, and logistics. Yet every aspect of national security is based entirely on human beliefs and behaviors. Whether offensive or defensive, intentional or accidental, human actions and interactions, more than the tools, are increasingly undermined or exploited. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a stark reminder of how vulnerable national security is, made so by the very citizens and institutions it's meant to protect, challenging the very meaning of security.

### Projection of power

The pandemic immediately impacted readiness and created new challenges for resiliency. As very population-dense organizations, outbreaks at the Pentagon and on naval ships, like the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, demonstrated the disruptiveness. For example, forces faced difficulties in conducting training and exercise routines. "The military likes to say it can "fight tonight," but for the time being it will struggle just to maintain a semblance of normality. The longer the plague lasts, the harder it will be to maintain a large forward military posture."<sup>1</sup>

The military's challenges aren't unique. Everything along critical infrastructure paths, especially supply chains, were immediately impacted. The frontlines of the national security weren't in military domains, but were the access to and competition for personal protective equipment and strained health care institutions. Where weapons and troops were necessary for battle, the demand for (and risks to) healthcare, food supplies, and internet access skyrocketed in priority across the world. As people contracted from business and life as usual, so did national and global economies. Unemployment in the United States rose to levels not seen since the Great Depression, and U.S. GDP is likely to contract by at least 5 percent in 2020.

Despite the need for unified leadership, political conflict and authoritarian trends undermined pandemic responses. For example, China's severe lockdown measures may have curtailed the virus' spread, but it's iron-fisted control of the country prevented transparency on the outbreak and fed their government's propaganda. "It is possible that if the details about the origin of the virus, its spread, and the numbers of affected were known earlier, different life-saving decisions could have been made"<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the fractured response in the United States has exacerbated the pandemic's severity. The pandemic has also created unusual bedfellows that may alter global power dynamics. While the European Covid-19 medical and economic response is now considered among the most effective, the early days saw hard hit Italy and Spain seek assistance from China and Russia when fellow European Union members declined. In fact, around the world ceasefires in hostilities (Philippines and Libya) and cooperation among adversaries (Middle East) may optimistically lead to better things. However, in fragile states, countries with

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Priborkin, "The Impact of COVID-19 on National and Global Security," May 21, 2020, <https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20200521-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-national-and-global-security.cfm>.

<sup>2</sup> Sue Gordon, "The coronavirus pandemic should change the way we look at national security," *CNBC*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/28/coronavirus-pandemic-should-change-the-way-we-look-at-national-security.html>.

already weak infrastructure, and among refugees, the pandemic aggravates growing and neglected humanitarian crises. Nothing and no one was left unimpacted.

### Power of perceptions

The traditional military-centric national security model has prepared for battles that likely will never be fought, but keep a relative peace. Yet the limits of the model have been reluctantly settling in for some time. Many of the biggest threats to America over the past two decades, such as the 2008 financial crisis and Russian election interference, have not required a military response, while others, such as climate change, food security, and energy, don't have military solutions. "Given that annual U.S. spending on nuclear weapons exceeds the amount spent on public health, there is a clear imperative for changing budget priorities, so the U.S. can "start right now having a savvier 21st century definition of national security."<sup>3</sup> Recognizing that human insecurities are the root cause of turmoil, instability and threats, the power mindset should evolve to one of human security, which encompasses existing and future threats that have already commanded more attention and resources.<sup>4</sup>

Expanding the national security model can help countries better prepare for threats and black swan events alike, but preparation isn't enough. Despite knowing pandemic dangers, having early detection measures and planning for a sufficient response infrastructure, the whole world was still caught by surprise and woefully unprepared. "The alarm bells at the international systems were apparently not ringing loudly enough – or maybe we simply failed to hear them?"<sup>5</sup> The culprit seems to be something both very simple and complex – trust. It begins with the disbelief that an event is actually happening. Before 9-11, it was nearly impossible to believe an attack could occur on American soil. Pandemics happened in other parts of the world. Disbelief extends to leaders and organizations with responsibilities and expertise. While there are differences of opinions on how to respond, delays in responses to threats have usually beget doubts in capabilities and ensuing 'blame games.' Moreover, factors such as foreign interference, mis/disinformation campaigns, and political polarization have eroded trust in the people and groups tasked with handling challenges and threats. Most disturbing has been those who refuse to trust scientific and medical knowledge, or economic realities, which then create new problems. "Far from easing public fears, however, the scientific transparency, early warnings, and mitigation efforts surrounding COVID-19 appear to have lowered Americans' physical and economic risk tolerance even further when it comes to new pathogens." The lack of trust only exacerbates the human insecurities that have been driving the greatest threats to security.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided an important national security lesson; that power competition isn't just military or between nations, but between the survival and resourcefulness. Human-driven threats require human-focused solutions. What a crisis that has claimed more American lives than perished in combat during the Vietnam and Korean Wars combined has shown is that greatest power may be to undermine one's own security.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Dizikes, "Will the Covid-19 pandemic change national security," *MIT News*, April 27, 2020, <http://news.mit.edu/2020/will-covid-19-change-national-security-0427>.

<sup>4</sup> "COVID-19: National Security and Defense Strategy," *Congressional Research Service*, April 30, 2020. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11525>.

<sup>5</sup> Mattias Rogg, "Covid-19, The Pandemic and Its Impact on Security Policy," *Prism*, Vol. 8 No.4 2020.