

COVID-19 and National Security: A Global View

Brief Q & A

Dr. A. T. Symeonidis
(RIEAS Academic Advisor)

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As the world reels under the raging pandemic, governments face critical questions of stability and, even, survival. National security is one of these questions and carries particular primacy. What are the key ingredients of trying to respond to this challenge?

First off, we need to understand that Covid-19 won't go away for quite some time. There are conflicting theories on the persistence of the pandemic; even with an effective vaccine coming online imminently (first half of 2021) administrative, organizational, storage, and supply problems will consume months of preparing for universal vaccination. In the meantime, Covid-19 will continue to hammer our societies, keep filling graveyards, and overpower health systems. And the pandemic has already caused such enormous economic and social dislocation that many lesser-endowed states are on the brink of collapse.

Such rapidly building pressures are pregnant with possibilities of serious domestic political violence and, even, terrorist extremism but also the likelihood of increased tensions between states. The pandemic is adding fuel to the scourge of illegal immigration and could result in overwhelming even well protected borders—let alone the poorly monitored frontiers of Third World countries already struggling with their own brittle domestic security and collapsing economies.

We can keep freely adding instability elements to the Covid-19 list as the crisis deepens and new problems emerge. All in all, however, we must realize we are faced with global challenges which require innovative politico-strategic thinking and outstanding government determination; both these ingredients are in short supply even in supposed “model” political and social systems as societies sink in pandemic gloom and doom.

The origins of the Covid-19 pandemic are the subject of widespread speculation centering on a “China conspiracy” theory that presumes deliberate action by the Chinese government for releasing the virus upon the world. China isn’t pleased with such theories. Could this conundrum create threats of military conflict?

Even before the Covid-19 outbreak US-West-China relations were tense given commercial conflicts and Chinese attempts at aggressive penetration of developed societies. All in all, though, and aside from verbal polemics, moves that could have been construed as preparations for military action have not materialized (yet).

The Chinese economy contracted significantly thanks to Covid-19 but it is now [bouncing back](#) strongly. China’s rather peculiar “communist capitalism” system depends on the iron rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that maintains totalitarian control over Chinese society—and it is only logical to assume that any perceived outside threat to this system will eventually mobilize the CCP to “defend the motherland” by force of arms. Chinese [global military expansion](#) in recent years has been spectacular and the fact hasn’t gone unnoticed in Western capitals, but especially in both Washington and Moscow, with the latter hoping for an [alliance rapprochement as a counterweight to NATO’s eastward expansion](#).

The US, in particular, is paying an enormous human and economic toll because of the pandemic—and it remains to be seen how this disaster will affect her defense budget in the longer term and, by association, thoughts of confronting China beyond naval presence in the Pacific and staunch diplomatic support of, and arms sales to, Taiwan.

Furthermore, the US is in the midst of soul-searching concerning perceptions of threat and military spending under pressure from the pandemic—and even conservative thinkers, traditionally supporting often gargantuan defense outlays, are coming to accept that “...*other urgent American national needs like health care*” [should take precedent](#) over ever-expanding defense budgets—and emphasize that “*Instead of simply pouring more money into the Pentagon, we need to develop new capacities to combat foreign disinformation, transition away from carbon fuels and stop the spread of pandemics.*”

The emerging “new normal,” therefore, is that the pandemic forces governments to look inwardly and put on hold what the liberal Left would label “military adventurism.” Given that “*significant macroeconomic after-effects of the pandemics persist for about 40 years,*” according to a [recent study](#), US policy makers could become a lot more circumspect when it comes to the use of force as the preferred tool of national security.

In the end, could the pandemic bring about lasting changes in national security perceptions and, in turn, national security policies?

It is perhaps too early to answer this critical question with confidence yet, with red lights blinking across the developed world, it is almost certain that defense budgets will come under increased pressure and “rationalization,” to say the least.

A key associated issue is the future definition of national security threats and the guidance that would flow from the said “rationalization.” Major setbacks along the way should be expected, however, as in the case of the blatantly reckless decision of the [Trump Administration disbanding the White House unit dedicated to preventing and responding to pandemics](#).

Today we have come to shift focus from narrowly defined military threats to truly global challenges like climate change (which is still bitterly denied by many) and across-frontiers public health. Growing numbers of experts, and steadily increasing public opinion majorities, demand emergency responses to these global challenges and assume the forefront to insist on radical change.

This across-the-board scientific and popular mobilization brings to mind the [warning expressed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower](#): *“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”* Eisenhower’s message resonates with deafening clarity in today’s world of “forever wars,” virulent international Islamist terrorism, biohazard threats, and, yes, pandemics like the current Covid-19 pestilence. Let us hope the late wise president’s warning will be finally observed by those whose duty is to prevent the manipulation of budgets, and the expenditure of trillions, in support of often opaque, nefarious, and disastrously damaging interests.