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## Special Commentary: Long-Term Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for the US Army

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April 30, 2020 | Dr. Steven Metz

### INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages across the United States, the Army is simultaneously providing extensive support to civil authorities and maintaining readiness to perform its deterrence and warfighting missions. Eventually the current crisis will subside but the United States and its Army will not simply return to the way things were before. The pandemic has unleashed great change within the United States and the global security environment, accelerating forces that will, in combination, be revolutionary.

As [Dmitri Simes put it](#), "If ever the modern world faced a "perfect storm," this is it. The combination of a deadly and highly infectious virus, an emerging worldwide economic depression, the collapse of global governance, and an absence of a coordinated and effective international response—all have contributed to a tragedy of historic magnitude, one that will not be easily overcome."

While it is impossible to predict precisely the course of any revolution, it is important to assess the likely or possible direction of change. Given that, this discussion paper suggests some of the long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for the US Army and recommends one or more senior leader steering committees the Army should undertake once the immediate crisis is under control.

### STRATEGIC EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

#### Deglobalization and Delinkage

Many experts [predict](#) that COVID-19 will lead to some degree of [deglobalization](#) and delinkage as nations attempt to move vital economic production closer to home and more thoroughly control human flows between nations. Technologies such as automation, new materials, artificial intelligence, and additive manufacturing will make this possible.

The pandemic also demonstrated the need for a vast increase in economic resiliency. This will lead to a de-emphasis of "just in time" production and logistics as nations sacrifice some degree of economic efficiency for greater security.

[Goods and resources will still move between regions](#), but this will represent a smaller portion of overall economic activity as nations sacrifice efficiency for increased resiliency. Most movement of goods and resources will be automated. This will give advanced regions the option to cut themselves off from poorer regions to a greater or lesser degree, with technology replacing the low-cost labor that previously came from abroad as much as possible. Broadly speaking economic interaction between nations and regions will mirror the "social distancing" now in place.

Deglobalization and delinkage will have important strategic implications for the United States. Since the middle of the 20th century, American security strategy rested on the idea that the United States must be concerned with stability everywhere because in a tightly connected world, instability and insecurity in faraway places resonated in the homeland. Jobs in Indiana, the argument went, depend on stability in the Middle East. Particularly after the Soviet Union took away America's central enemy, global connectivity was used to justify US leadership and preponderance in creating and managing security around the world, as well as maintaining a powerful, expeditionary military.

If the COVID-19 pandemic leads to partial deglobalization and economic delinkage, the United States could, if it chose, eschew involvement in many regions of the world. Americans may come to consider global leadership—which was already facing serious challenges and declining domestic support—a luxury rather than a necessity. Combined with the need to cut defense spending to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and to fund public health security and national resilience, this may lead to much more restrained and less military-centric US national strategy.

### **Degraded World Order and Devolution to an Archipelago Global System**

The COVID-19 pandemic [will hit weaker, poorer, and less resilient nations](#) even harder than the United States. Many governments will collapse and many nations—even entire regions—will experience protracted conflict and national fragmentation. This will be made worse as deglobalization limits the ability of poorer parts of the world to [export workers](#) who send [remittances back home](#)—which is vital to many nations—and as climate change escalates.

At the same time, the costs of economic recovery and developing public health security and resiliency in the richer parts of the world will diminish the assistance sent to the poorer parts of the world just as the need for it expands.

What may emerge is a global security system with an archipelago of stability surrounded by seas of instability and conflict. Large parts of the world may look like Yemen and Syria today with grinding, complex, multidimensional internal wars and massive humanitarian disasters. As in the economic realm, the richer, more stable nations or regions are likely to practice the strategic equivalent of "social distancing," with tightly protected borders and strict limitations on immigration or even travel, particularly from nations or regions unable to build robust public health security systems.

In such a global security system, the United States and other richer nations may no longer undertake peacekeeping and humanitarian relief operations. There will be a tremendous need for them in the face of widespread state collapse, instability, and conflict, but the demand will far exceed the ability of richer nations, themselves undertaking economic recovery and the transformation of their security systems, to provide the needed resources. The United States may fully abandon involvement in stabilization or humanitarian relief operations entirely or limit them strictly to the Western Hemisphere or even North America.

### **Reconceptualization of US Security**

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to accelerate [a shift in the way that the United States conceptualizes and organizes for security.](#)

In the 20th century, security mostly meant defense against foreign enemies. This usually equated to the military forces of other states, hence security was military centric and focused on clearly identifiable enemies. America's battles normally took place abroad so the United States developed an expeditionary military capable of power projection. This strategy and force posture reflected the way Americans conceptualized security at the time.

Throughout the Cold War, the notion of security expanded, compelling the United States to develop new capabilities and a broader, more complex way of thinking about security. Strategic nuclear weapons put the American homeland at risk while irregular forces attempting to overthrow friendly regimes, particularly ones connected to the Soviet Union, were considered security threats. Then the September 11 attacks on the United States expanded the scope of security even further, transforming networked transnational terrorists into enemies and making defense of the American homeland more important. But rather than replacing the old military-centric/enemy focused way of thinking about security with a new one based on networked transnational terrorists, the United States simply combined the two.

Recent trends have tested the adequacy of this polyglot concept of security. Climate change, what is called the "weaponization of everything," and the development of a social media battlespace, are making security more complex and less amenable to purely or predominantly military solutions. Now the COVID-19 pandemic will add public health security and national resiliency to an already expansive concept, fueling potential extensive change in the way Americans think about and organize for security.

Following the pandemic the United States is likely to conceptualize security holistically with a blended defense against identifiable state enemies, nonstate networks, and threatening phenomena. Homeland security rather than security abroad—power projection and expeditionary military capability—will be the priority in resource allocation. Phrased differently, augmenting national resiliency will be the foundation of security rather than defeating or deterring external enemies.

The US military will remain a vital component of America's security organization but the overall security system will be less military dominated than in the past. The military will be a component of an integrated, homeland focused security organization but more [a supporting component](#) than the supported one, its value assessed by its contribution to national austerity.

### **Immediate and Mid-Term Budget Austerity**

The COVID-19 pandemic likely will instigate a period of strict [budget austerity](#) for the Department of Defense with [deep cuts](#) helping cover the short term costs of recovery and the likely recession or depression that will follow and the long-term expense of public health security and resiliency.

After the 9/11 attacks the United States did not make difficult tradeoffs to reflect the new security situation, instead retaining its expeditionary military while adding an expensive counterterrorism and homeland security capability. American leaders felt that they could afford both. But with the costs of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan combined with the escalating expense of government entitlements, health care, and recovery from the 2008 economic crisis, the result was exploding government deficits.

This add-on approach will not be a viable response to the COVID-19 pandemic given its cost and the risk of further deficit spending. Recovering and then building a robust public health security system and national resilience will require both tax increases and deep cuts in other government spending. Combined with a likely move toward the political left in American politics—which had already begun but will be amplified by the COVID-19 crisis—this will create [pressure to slash military spending](#).

### **ARMY IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Limited Acquisitions and Modernization**

The economic costs of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift to holistic, homeland-focused security with a robust public health component will cut deeply into Army acquisitions and modernization. This will be particularly true of systems designed for warfighting against adversary armed forces rather than those that contribute to homeland security.

This means that the Army will have to be [highly selective](#) in acquisitions and modernization. It will also need to mothball and continue to train on many legacy systems since there will be no replacement.

### **Diminished Force Size**

While it is impossible to predict how much the Army will shrink in the future, significant force structure cuts are likely. Given the vital role of the National Guard in support to civil authorities, the [cuts are likely to fall heavily on the active component](#). If Americans shift their conceptualization of security inward the US Army may be composed [mostly of the National Guard](#).

### **Support Rather than Warfighting Focus**

If the United States does reconceptualize security, the Army's priority may shift from warfighting to support and participation into an integrated, homeland-focused security system and organization. Support to civil authorities will increase in importance.

### **Accelerated Shift to Autonomous Operations**

The effect that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on military readiness and the possibility—even probability—of future pandemics will increase the emphasis on networked autonomous operations in the Army.

### **Limited Involvement in Partner Support**

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to lead to diminished Army involvement in support to security partners, particularly if it causes diminished or collapsed order in the poorer parts of the world. Under those conditions, professional militaries will be few and far between, and US political leaders may not commit to training, assisting, or operating with militias.

## **ANALYTICAL LINES OF EFFORT**

After the COVID-19 crisis is contained or controlled the Army should develop priorities, concepts, and options for what is likely to be a very different operating environment. This should harness the full analytical power of the Army, to include the Army Futures Command, its Futures and Concepts Center, the Army's professional military educational system, its affiliated research institutes like the RAND Arroyo Center, and the wider network of experts across the security studies, economics, scientific, medical, and futures communities. The objective should be robust communities of thought producing products ranging from traditional ones like research studies, wargames, strategic concepts, and workshops to dynamic, interactive ones like ongoing role-playing games and online wiki networks.

The initial efforts might focus on the following:

## **Deep Force Cuts and Sustained Austerity**

The Army should study the implications of a 25 percent, 50 percent, and 75 percent force cut to assess the type and amount of support it could provide to civil authorities and its ability to expand and conduct expeditionary warfighting under each scenario.

An important part of the analysis would be what might be called "capability triage." The Army should assess what capabilities it should invest in, what capabilities it could sustain without significant further investment, and what capabilities it would have to abandon at various force size and budget decrements. This would be vital information for national leaders as they decide on force size and budget cuts, allowing them to understand what the Army could and could not do at each decrement.

The Army should also assess the most effective methods for mothballing capabilities rather than equipment to help it revive them should the political and strategic environments change.

## **Limited or No Footprint Operations in Contaminated Environments**

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the importance of being able to operate in contaminated environments, whether during a natural pandemic or after the use of biological or nuclear weapons. Given this, the Army should analyze operations in contaminated environments with a limited human presence or operations from a distance with no Army personnel in the actual operating areas.

## **Professional Ethic and Leader Development in Strategic Support Role**

If the United States does reconceptualize security in a holistic, homeland-focused way and the Army's priority becomes participation in an integrated, homeland-focused security system and organization, it will require significant change not only in organization and equipping, but also in the professional ethic, leader development, training, education, organizational learning, and recruiting. Career patterns will be very different. Given this, the Army should assess the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and the likely reconceptualization of security on the human dimension of the force.

## **CONCLUSION**

None of the outcomes described above are pre-ordained. In fact, some would say such profound changes are unlikely given the rapid pace of the modern world and the Army's difficulty in truly learning lessons from its experiences. Yet, such impacts are indeed plausible as the past few months have demonstrated. The next pandemic, or similar crisis, may not be nearly a century away and may be far more devastating. The Army must take this opportunity to "pause" and truly consider how it will contribute to holistic national security and resiliency.

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