
Special Commentary: The Impact of COVID-19 on Civil-Military Relations

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a great deal of speculation regarding how the current COVID-19 pandemic could affect civil-military relations in the United States. Oona Hathaway observes that after the terrorists attacks on September 11, 2001, which killed approximately three thousand Americans, the United States “radically re-oriented” its security priorities and embarked on a two-decade-long global war on terror that cost \$2.8 trillion from 2002 to 2017. Given that COVID-19 could kill more than one hundred thousand Americans, she argues that it is time to re-orient those priorities again.¹

Of course, simply re-orienting security priorities by themselves will not be transformative. Nora Bensahel and David Barno, for example, argue that diminished defense budgets resulting from shrinking revenues will make less funds available to maintain expensive forward bases and legacy weapons programs. Moreover, they argue, the increased sense of vulnerability will give the National Guard and reserve components a greater priority than active forces given their more prominent role in addressing the current crisis.² They are probably right that these things will occur. However, a smaller active force and an empowered National Guard and reserve components will not fundamentally alter the role the military plays in American society. That kind of transformation requires not only taking on new missions, but more importantly, taking on new expert knowledge.

Since a profession’s status is contingent on a distinct body of expert knowledge, and the autonomy to apply that knowledge within a given jurisdiction, prioritizing human security will require developing expertise in more than the use of force. Doing so will shift the military’s focus from lethality to the prevention, or failing that, the alleviation of suffering, potentially blurring the lines between military and civilian realms. Of course, such an outcome is not inevitable and the US military has played a role in disaster response before without re-orienting its security priorities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic may prove a pivotal moment but not simply because of reduced funding for military expenditures or increased vulnerability to pandemics.

Diminishing external security threats, due in some part to the effects of the virus, coupled with increasing demand to assure human well-being both in the United States and abroad, could lead to a rethinking of the military's role in American society. This rethinking could include the redistribution of roles between the military, civilian agencies, and other organizations, which extends beyond simply decreasing funds spent on defense.

THE MILITARY AS A PROFESSION

Fundamentally, the field of civil-military relations is about the division of labor between civilian government and the military profession in providing for national security. As Samuel Huntington put it, the primary problem of civilian-military relations is to find a balance between the functional imperative arising from the demands of external defense and social imperatives arising from "social forces, ideologies, and institutions" that shape the society. Prioritizing the functional imperative risks subordinating social values to military imperatives. Prioritizing social values risks undermining the military's ability to defend the state.³

Fundamental to that balance is the establishment of a military profession subordinate to the state. In Huntington's view, professional status is contingent on a body of expert knowledge, used in service to society, over which the professional has autonomy and jurisdiction to provide that service to clients.⁴ In the military context, that skill is the "management of violence." Unlike professions such as medicine and law, whose clients are typically individual members of society, the military's client is the state, which acts as a proxy for the people.⁵ For Huntington, the civilian leadership's role was to tell the military when to use force; the military's job was to figure out how. In this way, the military could defend the country without too much disruption to civil life.

There are, of course, a number of different aspects to this relationship. In the United States, the core principle of civilian control over the military is one that the military is unlikely to challenge owing to the COVID-19 pandemic or any related crisis. First, this principle is one deeply held by the military so it would take considerable pressure for it to change. Second, if the military takes on broader security responsibilities, it will do so to be more responsive to civil authority. So as long as American democracy holds, so will civilian control over the military.

Having said that, professions are social constructions and social conditions change. The driving factors of such change are outside the profession's control, but they still affect the profession's expertise, jurisdiction, and autonomy. As James Burk observes, the rise of the medical profession depended on the rise of science as a source for legitimate abstract knowledge.⁶ In the military context, the political requirement to address ethnic cleansing in Bosnia in the 1990s led to the US Army taking on peacekeeping as a core mission, which required adopting new expertise and new organizations.⁷

So, the difficulty for Huntington's civil-military division of labor is that, as the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown, managing violence is not the only thing that militaries can do. Of

course, simply having a useful, non-lethal capability does not entail a rethinking of the military's functional imperative. In fact, the US military has a long history of responding to domestic civilian crises, as it did to provide relief to victims of flooding in Mississippi in the 1920s or Hurricane Katrina in 2005.⁸ More to the point, the military's response to the Ebola pandemic in Liberia in 2014, where it deployed more than three thousand troops, several treatment units, a twenty-five bed hospital, and six medical research labs, did not fundamentally alter the nature of the profession.⁹

The reason, of course, these events did not ultimately distract the military from its role in external defense is that these crises were relatively short lived and affected, again relatively speaking, a limited number of persons. More to the point, the military's response did not require it to acquire new expert knowledge. It just required that the military apply the expertise it had to a novel situation. So while the military provided an important "surge" capability, it returned to its primary missions after the crisis subsided or civilian agencies and organizations caught up to the crisis's demands.

The COVID-19 pandemic could be a first step in changing that dynamic. If COVID-19 enlarges what Americans conceive of as security to include pandemics, it is easy to see how responding to a pandemic at home could expand to responding to a pandemic abroad. It is even fewer steps from conceiving of a pandemic as a threat to conceiving of anything that threatens human well-being as a security matter. However, much will depend on the pervasiveness of the virus and its effects, including not just the severity of future waves but also the enduring social and economic impact.¹⁰ Such change will also depend on what further threats to human well-being follow. If the COVID-19 pandemic is a "hundred year event" like the 1918 Spanish flu, where the military was victim and vector but played little role in recovery, then the impact to civil-military relations will be small.

Broadening security to include human well-being is not a new idea, so the likelihood of such change is not negligible. The idea, often referred to as "human security," is a two-fold concept: freedom from want and freedom from fear.¹¹ It shifts the focus of security from the state to the individual and thus from securing borders to securing the environment, including protecting people's access to food, water, health care, and other necessities. Human security requires governments to address conditions associated with anything that might prevent individuals and communities from obtaining basic needs.¹² The notion of fighting enemies "over there," so we do not have to fight them "here," applies just as well to viruses as it does terrorists. As such, the military may find itself in the position of being the only agency that can meet the operational and logistic challenges required to address such broad security requirements. Calling on the military to meet those requirements will not only change what the military does; it will change what the military *is*.

Of course, the slope described here is not that slippery. Adversaries like Russia, China, and Iran will continue to threaten vital interests of the United States and its partners. This will require the ability to project overwhelming military force globally. Russia could decide to assert

itself in its near abroad, requiring the United States to come to the defense of NATO allies. China could threaten US partners over disputes regarding the South China Sea, also requiring a military response. And as Iran has recently shown, it remains a threat to US partners in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia—against which it has been waging a proxy war in Yemen since 2011. Thus, it would be optimistic for any human security enthusiast to believe the Department of Defense will be trading in its aircraft carriers, attack aircraft, and armored forces for more medical equipment any time soon.

Having said that, the slope is slippery *enough*. Russia and China's ability to power-project even in their near abroad is extremely limited, more so as a result of the pandemic, opening up questions about how significant a threat to US interests they really are.¹³ Iran's ability to challenge the United States militarily is similarly limited, as it consists largely of terrorist attacks by proxies. While one should not discount such threats, there is very little conventional forces can do about them. This point does not mean it is not useful to have a carrier group and a bomber wing or two stationed in the Persian Gulf. However, doing so would not preclude rethinking what counts as security and what the military's role should be over the long term.

More to the point, the military has already slid part of the way. The Defense Logistics Agency has provided \$688 million in support to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Health and Human Services to provide personal protective equipment, ventilators, and test components.¹⁴ In addition to the deployment of the hospital ships USNS *Mercy* to Los Angeles and USNS *Comfort* to New York, the Army Corps of Engineers is assisting with the construction of eight hundred alternate care facilities and other construction projects to help with the overflow of patients in the hardest hit areas.¹⁵ By the end of April, 44,500 National Guard troops had been mobilized in all fifty states to perform functions ranging from population control to delivering food and other critical supplies to supporting testing and delivery of health care.¹⁶

Despite this effort, there have been demands for more of a military role. Even at the beginning, the administration was criticized for not mobilizing the military immediately to address pandemic-related requirements.¹⁷ In fact, former New Jersey governor and presidential candidate Chris Christie argued in a recent *Washington Post* editorial that the administration should use the Defense Production Act "to take control of the supply chain" to produce tests kits as has already been done for ventilators and personal protective equipment.¹⁸ Once money moves through the Department of Defense to address the health and safety of individual Americans, the defense industry, which is in the best place to navigate the Department of Defense's byzantine contracting requirements, will soon get involved. That is not necessarily a bad thing; however, if an industrial base evolves to address human security requirements, momentum will increase for the military to take on an expanded role in meeting those requirements.

Whatever happens, there are two likely paths for the military should human security demands reprioritize or even replace those of national security. If the military does not take on a new, broader role, its budget will shrink and go to building civilian capability. Given the

expected budget impact, such a diversion of resources will very likely result in decreased military spending and consequently capability, as Bensahel, Barno, and others suggest. Should adversaries like China and Russia suffer similar shortfalls, then the result will likely be a small military, even more isolated from the public, much like that in the interwar period between World Wars I and II.

If it does take on the new role, then the profession's expertise, jurisdiction, and autonomy will change. A military designed to respond to human security has to do more than manage violence. It needs to understand what human security needs are, how to identify threats to those needs, and how to marshal a response. Doing so will require new expertise necessary not just to respond to such crises, but also to recognize the conditions that cause them. It will also require new thinking to devise methods to prevent crises before they occur. These requirements will shift priorities away from the combat arms to operational support and sustainment capabilities. Moreover, taking on this role will expand the military's jurisdiction into areas currently held by civilian agencies like the Federal Emergency Management Agency or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However that competition resolves itself, the result will be a very different military than the one we have today.

Neither evolution is inevitable, nor will it necessarily be conscious. Rather, it will be the function of countless decisions—big and small—by the active, reserve component, and National Guard forces as they seek to maintain resourcing and legitimacy in a post-COVID world. It will also be a function of the severity of the current and future crises and how the executive branch chooses to respond. Yet, when it comes to professions, the client gets a vote on the value, if not the nature, of the service the profession provides. To the extent pandemics and other threats to human well-being proliferate, what is certain is that the profession—and the society it serves—will have to divert more resources to addressing human suffering. Equally certain, the evolving capabilities of the military ensures the civil-military *status quo* will not likely survive.

ENDNOTES

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