
Special Commentary: Domestic Politics and the Military's COVID-19 Response

May 27, 2020 | Professor William "Trey" Braun

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare several long-dormant vulnerabilities, and opportunities, associated with US national security and military business practices. Military leaders must consider political context when making resource prioritization decisions that attend to these new perspectives. Three controversial political themes dominate the national security dialogue in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. First, the nation's initial focus will likely be on the [economic recovery effort](#), while incorporating preparations to mitigate the reemergence of COVID-19 or a future pandemic. Second, the nation may experience a prolonged period of austerity, possibly combined with greater taxation, to recover [COVID-19 related mitigation debt](#). Finally, because of these first two issues, [defense budgets are likely to experience cuts](#). Defense spending is the only viable discretionary spending category subject to belt-tightening measures amid the divisive political gridlock and vitriol of a highly contentious election year.

Emerging analysis suggests the probability of economic stagnation, uneven sector and state economic recovery, mounting national debt, and political infighting in the shadow of a contentious election will underpin these themes. However, analyses of military implications are less developed. Military resource prioritization choices are often biased by traditional justification reasoning and conventional force management assumptions. Arguments defending these choices may not adequately account for the influence of domestic political agendas, structural power pressures, or the military's culture.

This paper will examine domestic political trends, their potential military implications, and offer a few defense management arguments to augment traditional justification reasoning. A future article will consider the influence of stakeholder's structural power, the culture of the Army's defense management enterprise, and their influence on arguments used to defend resource prioritization choices.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

Foreign policy choices influence defense strategies and resource management choices. These choices create “winners” and “losers” within the domestic economy, affecting domestic political support for those policies and choices. Enterprise leaders must carefully choose arguments used to defend or validate resource prioritization choices, as they can generate either resistance or support from powerful domestic interest groups.

The Trump administration pursues what it calls a “[pragmatic realism](#)” foreign policy. [Walter Russell Mead describes](#) the Trump administration’s approach as populist-nationalism, and aligns it with a Jacksonian tradition of US foreign policy. Two Australian scholars, [Michael Clarke and Anthony Ricketts, expanded on Mead’s thesis by](#) describing the motivations, key themes, and political style adopted by Jacksonian populist-nationalism. According to these three scholars, Jacksonians are primarily motivated by a pessimistic view of the political elite. This populist view, shared by the Trump administration, is fueled by a loose but interdependent cornucopia of concerns about job loss, reliance on foreign supply chains, unlawful immigration, cheating (unfair markets, intellectual property theft, state and individual “free-riding”), eroding Western values, and a general perception of US decline and failure due to liberal elite influence.

Jacksonian nationalists endorse a minimalist foreign policy ethos. They are anti-globalist, but not necessarily isolationist. On pragmatic grounds, they reject the effectiveness of a crusading US commitment to advance Western values. They prefer to demonstrate the effectiveness of individual rights, free markets, and representative democracy to advance individual liberty and prosperity. They apprehend that liberal elites’ foreign policy choices have overextended resources, relieved like-minded nations of their share of regional burdens, and do not hold theocratic and autocratic societies accountable for their repressive behaviors. Jacksonians are not willing to underwrite international political and economic institutional governance; however, they are willing to cooperate with other nations—to the extent the US, and not an international collective governance body, determines outcomes. Over time, the administration’s rhetoric has doubled-down on these views. In light of the COVID-19 crisis, these views may be enjoying a greater degree of support among a wider segment of the US electorate, especially relative to [US-China competition](#) and [supply chain vulnerabilities](#).

Following the acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis, the Trump administration will likely prioritize getting the US economy back on track. This effort will include opening businesses, curbing unemployment, and continuing small business and US manufacturing growth incentives. While the approach may differ, these priorities will likely transcend administrations should there be a 2020 transition. Former US Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee for president, promises a decisive public health and economic response to COVID-19 on his [campaign page](#). Following initiatives to deal with the crisis, Biden’s plan calls for pursuing economic measures to help workers, families, and small businesses, while leading a global response to confront future pandemics.

The next domestically energized security priority will likely be supply chain resilience and a re-commitment to expanding and securing the US manufacturing base, strategic materials, and critical components. These efforts will grow beyond traditional defense readiness priorities and into public health readiness, food supplies and distribution, information technology components, and social media security. The public's new awareness of latent US vulnerabilities and opportunities will animate any fundamental societal changes resulting from the COVID-19 crisis.

POTENTIAL MILITARY IMPLICATIONS

The public's appreciation of US vulnerabilities starts with the direct impact of the virus. Military leaders should consider the potential military implications of future public concerns. The first subjects to consider are the implications of using military stocks and distribution capabilities to augment life-sustaining equipment shortages and to bolster fragile supply chains. Other important topics concern the ethical choices associated with the [military's involvement in a range of potential pandemic mitigation strategies](#). Two particularly vexing scenarios with ethical implications involve the employment of the military's extensive surveillance and tracking capabilities to assist in contact tracing, and the use of military assistance to augment police enforcement of state and federal social distance and isolation protocols.

On the positive side, the public is becoming more familiar with new means of communication, information gathering, and remote learning from kindergarten through college. Businesses are also embracing new or expanded business models. Many managers (out of necessity) are embracing the [virtues of telework](#) for a portion of their workforce. Defense managers and military leaders should overcome their fear of losing direct face-to-face control over employee production, especially in enterprise management settings. Embracing expanded telework would enable defense organizations to reap production benefits offered through hybrid synchronous-asynchronous work schedules and distributed operations best practices.

DEFENSE MANAGEMENT SUGGESTIONS

To argue effectively for resources, defense and military leaders must adapt their priorities and justifications to account for political and public sensibilities during the COVID-19 recovery. The military should examine crisis mitigation efforts and private sector examples of modified operations to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. The military would benefit from examining how to assist civil authorities better with their challenges. The military (especially the Army, whose capabilities are most aligned with domestic crises response needs) should examine how to develop capabilities and better organize the force to support civil authorities with vulnerability mitigation efforts.

From enterprise to unit level, the military should adapt internally to mitigate vulnerabilities and capitalize on opportunities highlighted by this crisis. In the context of operations, the

military should wargame various readiness vulnerabilities and mitigation efforts associated with disease prevention, containment, and degraded operations. In a business context, the Department of Defense should examine its telework policies and adopt best practices for improving the effectiveness of a distributed workforce. Perhaps most important, the military must confront the ethical dilemmas it will encounter if called on by civil authorities to use its extensive surveillance capabilities for contact tracing or to assist in the enforcement of federal and state imposed isolation directives.

One of the more challenging arguments the military must make is the need to retain a robust rotational forward presence. To facilitate these rotational forces, senior leadership must advocate for a permanent posture forward, enabling relationships necessary to develop host-nation cooperation procedures, detailed operational planning, and expeditionary force reception preparations. Traditional justifications for forward presence include engagement and assurance of partners, force ratio assessments, guaranteed access in an increasingly anti-access/area denial (A2AD) security environment, and readily available capabilities to confront challenger and rival provocations in the competitive space below armed conflict. As [LTG Eric Wesley](#), the deputy commander of Army Futures Command, points out, “You cannot compete if you are not present.”

These arguments will not resonate if senior military leaders do not acknowledge the new political environment—one shaped by a populist desire for a smaller forward presence composed primarily of support forces and fewer forces to engage in combat operations. The military should consider much smaller footprint multi-functional formations, designed to engage with partners and effectively compete with rivals during competition. Doing so must also establish the baseline operational intelligence, reception infrastructure, and cooperation protocols for rapid expansion using US-based expeditionary forces in the event of conflict. The exact permanent presence posture and character of the rotational presence will be dependent on the regional context.¹

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 crisis exposed vulnerabilities, yet offers opportunities to improve US national security and military business practices. Potentially, the crisis has also reinforced an expanded base of support for many of the Jacksonian populist-nationalist messages proffered by the Trump administration. Regardless of the 2020 national election outcome, the next administration will need to account for the public’s renewed interest and awareness of US vulnerabilities and opportunities in their foreign policy choices. Military leadership will need to consider these new domestic political sensibilities when creating security strategies, resource priorities, and justification arguments over the next several years.

¹ For a more detailed army force design and posture analysis in the INDOPACOM Area of Operation see: Nathan Freier, John Schaus, and William Braun, *An Army Transformed: INDOPACOM Hyper-competition and U.S. Army Theater Design*, (Carlisle, PA: USAWC Press) - forthcoming.

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