
Special Commentary: “Hole” of Government: What COVID-19 Reveals about American Security Planning

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Novel Coronavirus, COVID-19.

Almost no more need be said. This is not the traditional [“monster” America prepared to destroy](#). But, it is the monster we face.

The coronavirus, COVID-19, typifies the “compound” nature of today’s security threats. This deadly adversary is inimical to accepted international laws and conventions regarding warfare and human security protections. It is a true omnivore, respecting no borders and consuming all classes, genders, races, and faiths. This adversary has driven mass societal disruption and managed in about four months’ time to [infect over 1.2 million \(confirmed cases\) with nearly 72,000 deaths](#), in the United States alone. Worldwide economic recession, even depression, seems likely and national publics now question their governments’ capacity and will to contain the adversary. Should governments fail to do so (most experts agree that the opportunity to contain COVID-19 is lost), big-data computer [projections predict as many as 173,000 could die](#) in the United States by the end of May 2020. The yet untold damage from such a toll across all sectors—political, economic, and societal—is incalculable. The potential for a global paradigm shift in the way we should perceive these threats is real.

Some may ask, why speak of combatting a global pandemic as though we are waging an epochal war? This moment takes the popular fashion of war rhetoric beyond the metaphorical: [We are at war against this virus](#)...or at least we should be. We should regard this threat and its compounded implications as the security issue it is. COVID-19 is indicative of the [changed nature of many of today’s threats](#).

COMPOUND SECURITY THREATS: A NEW COMPOUND SECURITY DILEMMA

The COVID-19 pandemic is an exemplar of the new, complex, and most dangerous periods in our Nation’s history. What makes it so uniquely “dangerous” is the changed nature of the

threats. They have all compounded largely because the root causes and underlying conditions have been allowed (passive voice is intentional here) to go for so long, unaddressed or under-addressed. The security dilemma of the 20th century international environment—defined primarily by material-based security threats of a military nature—has now given way to a new 21st century security dilemma: the “[compound security dilemma](#).”

By “compounded” I am referring to “[the increased interaction–interconnectedness and collision–of otherwise once separate policy issues reflective of this new, post-Cold War \(and now post-9/11\) international security environment](#).” These issues include economic imbalances, sectarian conflict, massive and sudden demographic shifts due to regional conflict, climate change, loss of trust in governing institutions, and border concerns inextricably tied to identity. The repercussions of these compound threats multiply exponentially rather than add linearly as would traditional threats. Another distinguishing aspect of the compound threat is its very multi-compositional and boundaries-spanning nature. These characteristics dramatically alter the calculations of risk and reward so critical to strategy planning and policy decision-making.

[The new compound security dilemma](#) questions the old logic of the traditional security dilemma and issues a clarion call for an entirely new governing logic. Both harmonize on the core questions of scale (and economies and diseconomies of scale) and legitimacy (of preferred unilateral policy approaches over multilateral options). Both center on the issue of instrumental solvency as well as ideational sovereignty. Global health pandemics are a clear expression of the compound security dynamic and the new security dilemma it manifests.

These compound threats are incredibly complex. They transcend the traditional boundaries of the foreign versus domestic, public versus private, government versus private sector, and military versus non-military. These new compound threats are nearly impossible to contain and especially so by traditional means. They are transnational and transregional, with the potential for metastasizing into big compound “contagion events” (including compound wars) with potential for big global-wide disruptions. These are the hard lessons of COVID-19. Post-Westphalian threats are currently defeating ineffectual Westphalian treatment approaches.

Central to this compound security dilemma is the [tragedy of scales problem](#). Exponential contagion spread outpaces traditional governmental and public-private service capacities calibrated to efficient response-mitigate-recovery public policy approaches. Compound threats generate simultaneous and overlapping waves of instability through the interaction between countless variables. This interaction is multiplicative, not additive, in nature.

	Conventional Paradigm	Compound Security Paradigm
Threat Calculation	$A + B + C$	$A \times B \times C$
Threat Manifestation	Divergent or Convergent	Convergent

Figure 1. Multiplicative Dynamics of "Compound Threats"

Similar to the paradox of the “[wicked problem](#),” under-treatments and late treatments only cause compound security threats to metastasize. This dynamic is just as apt to the COVID-19 pandemic as it is to numerous other “nexus of conflict” such as the rise of ISIS, the crises in the Middle East, the compound threat in Venezuela, and others that manifest at geopolitical flashpoints. These threat trends often converge at key geographic locations that happen to reside at major seams—political, cultural, ethno-sectarian divides—at or near key states (“strategic pivot states”) at the nexuses of our current geographic combatant command Unified Command Plan boundaries.

Another challenge exacerbating the compound security phenomenon is the disjointed culture and architecture of our US national security and defense enterprise. This has been evident in the tardy public health response to COVID-19. Planners at the regional (theater) strategic level seek to contain and reverse adversaries and macro threat trends that [threaten to “break” nation-states](#). Yet the operational and tactical level is faced with adversaries and threats that are increasingly asymmetric and operate simultaneously on noncontiguous battle fronts—physical, virtual, and ideational. These compounded threats often present themselves at thresholds of dangers falling short of traditional war, via direct and indirect actions.

These “threat nexuses” are clear challenges, but they also present big opportunities. Sharpening our focus and applying our resources in more precise and creative ways, simultaneously, at decisive locations can achieve overmatching compound wins.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STRATEGIC APPLICATION OF “LAND-FORCE”

Compound Threats Demand Compound Treatments, For Compound “Wins”

Strategic level whole-of-government approaches to planning and decision-making can help devise better strategies and optimize resources. Redesigning ourselves for more integrative ways for thinking, planning, and acting anew is mandatory if we are to achieve true [competitive engagement](#) national capacity. Only this will preserve and defend our Nation from the perils of this new compound operating environment. [As the last few decades of counterinsurgency and stabilization demonstrated](#), only the synthesis of various lines of effort can create opportunity for sustainable change and threat resolution. A similar approach is necessary for compound threats, but at a vastly different scale and delivery. So it is with countering COVID-19.

Our existing structures and processes for planning and analysis are not sufficient for today’s and tomorrow’s needs. Increasingly adversarial relationships with a wide array of “2 +3” threats—Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and the self-declared Islamic State—demand major strategic shifts in policy, war plans, planning architectures, and approaches. Our current systems do not adequately account for these compounding dynamics. The United States’ former top general, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, agrees: “[Our traditional approach where we are either at peace or at war is insufficient to deal with that dynamic.](#)”

Moreover, Dunford recognized the state of “adversarial competition with a military dimension short of armed conflict,” what military and security studies scholars and practitioners have come to label “gray-zone” conflict. This particular description, which in many ways answers the key questions of whether and how the character of geopolitical competition has changed, now represents an increasingly resonant line of inquiry in defense circles.

These [so-called gray zone conflicts](#) are nothing more than manifestations of the compound security dilemma. Yet, a compound security dilemma is partly an artifact of limitations in how we view and approach security problems: what constitutes security versus non-security (an ideational blinder), our institutional structures for planning, decision-making, and implementation (an organizational flaw), and how we prioritize an issue (an organizational cultural dynamic). All three affect our behavior.

In the face of compound threats, and the new compound security dilemma, these three factors have eroded the solving power of our traditional policy and strategy planning, decision-making, and operations. No longer is it acceptable to solve one simple problem. Now we must resolve multidimensional, multifunctional puzzles. Sadly, our legacy organizational and process designs are not up to the challenge. They permit far too much “lag” in risk assessments to deal with new trans-regional compound security threats. Some degree of lag is natural in analytical processes that must follow behind real-time change. However, today’s lags have become dangerously wide and must be fixed. They discount, or outright ignore, compounding and convergence effects, and the exponential dynamics of simultaneity.

CHANGED THREAT	CHANGED SECURITY ENVIRONMENT	CHANGED OPERATING ENVIRONMENT ("BATTLESPACE")
<p>TODAY'S ENEMY:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * "Faceless" & of nebulous "substance" * Dispersed, decentralized, & cellular * Supported by nontraditional infrastructure * Adaptive, agile * Acclimates to battlefield Rapidly adapts to enemy operations/TTPs * Exploits battlefield equalizers: "Relative superiority" attacks * Thrives w/in POL/ADMIN/legal/operational "seams" * Pursuing "total" war ... fighting for hearts/minds <p>"Compounded" Threats – Increased interaction – interconnectedness and collision – of otherwise once separate policy issues reflective of this new, post-cold War (and now post-911) international security environment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Traditional security concerns over material resources (i.e., access to oil and other scarce resources) are less and less divorceable from issues of human security (i.e., local concerns and challenges over food shortages, health concerns, human rights protections, etc.). * Old concepts of domestic politics and policies, such as energy policy and immigration policy now take on a global security context. The rising threats of natural and manmade biological threats now make health policy – traditionally an issue relegated to domestic concerns and jurisdictions – a global security policy issue. 	<p>THE NEW "COMPOUND SECURITY"</p> <p>Geopolitical regions challenged by a confluence of complex social, ethnic, religious, economic and political forces.</p> <p>From a grand strategic perspective, we are facing a rising globalizing insurgency led by the "4+1" Threats.</p> <p>These organizations are challenging the current international order of the nation-state system and they are seeking to redefine the notion of 'statehood' toward creating an alternative statehood.</p> <p>The violence these groups propagate and the threats they create have continued to compound, and perhaps more interestingly, to converge toward certain key border and regional nexuses.</p> <p>This convergence of challenges at key geographic locations now presents us with additional challenges for certain;</p> <p>.... but also with opportunities to sharpen our focus and apply our resources in more precise and economical ways, at decisive geographic locations through simultaneously-executed named operations and several enduring efforts creating possibility for the achievement of overmatching compound wins.</p>	<p>YESTERDAY'S BATTLEFIELD:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Linear & structured defined battle lines * Grounded in "Rules of War" * Force-on-force engagement * Isolated/contained engagement * Bi-polar * Identifiable & "understood" ENY * Tangible & recognizable infrastructures * Parallel tech & numerical capabilities * Observable I&W <p>TODAY'S BATTLEFIELD:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Multi-dimensional & noncontiguous * No geospatial boundaries * No clear battle lines * Parallel battle in the minds of men * Global vs. regional threat * No longer only state-on-state * Decentralized anarchy w/competing interests * Various & variable "polarities"... Multi-lateral * Extensive cause & effect relationships * Politically, spiritually, & emotionally charged.... Information overloaded * Immediate global connection thru mass media * Clash of cultural & spiritual values * Host to "total" AND "limited" war

Figure 2. What We Must Now Reconcile

America Can No Longer Go It Alone . . . And Shouldn't.

The United States power problem today is one of insufficient power in both type and kind. The United States has insufficient *capacity* to sustain the power required to meet contemporary missions and insufficient *capability* to convert power into effective policy and strategies. Again, the anemic public policy handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is a sad testimonial to the fact. America remains an exceptional nation in terms of its relative capabilities and capacity and in her ability to project power globally. Yet, the United States has reached the limits of its real, unilateral power. Like a tall, aging boxer, the tale of the tape for the United States today might read: “Great reach, but poor endurance in the latter rounds.”

Frequently that reach wields the wrong kind of instrument, brings too little of the right-fitting solution set, and applies it too late—a worrisome, if not tragic, combination. There is a point of diminishing return that all great power nation-states (empires) must face in relation to the power available to expand, manage, and govern over its imperial dominions. As historian [Paul Kennedy](#) noted:

Nations project their military power according to their economic resources and in defense of their broad economic interests. But, the cost of projecting that military power is more than even the largest economies can afford indefinitely, especially when new technologies and new centers of production shift economic power away from established Great Powers – hence the rise and fall of nations.

We still live in an international relations paradigm that privileges the sovereignty of individual nation-states and the right to make their own policy choices. However, exercising that sovereign right to determine one's own “[art of the possible](#)” does not always alter the nature of threats nor the character of change in global geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic competition. If the policy choice is unilateralism and self-help, appropriately, the risk calculations must be measured against the changed and changing environment so that they do not become more the stuff of gamble.

What might come with an “[America First](#)” US foreign policy? The lessons of history provide many examples: uncertainty, strategic miscommunications and misreads, and illiberal solutions and outcomes. While unilateral approaches may appear to secure short-range strategic goals, they lack a moral footing and ultimately are insufficient to secure a durable, legitimate peace.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY STRATEGY AND FORCE PLANNING?

Compound security threats represent a change in the character, scope, and scale of challenges to our common defense and public welfare. While their hybrid nature is part of the equation, compound threats dramatically alter our public policy and force planning, sizing, and shaping calculations and algorithms. Under compound conditions, threats are not additive; they are multiplicative and, in many cases, exponential.

As former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once said, [“As you know, you go to war with the Army you have. They’re not the Army you might want or wish to have at a later time.”](#) Unfortunately, these remarks echo our reality today, a reality largely of our own making. At the same time, we too often hear this expression offered as an epiphenomenal excuse for failures of imagination, anticipation, forecasting, and planning, and for our under-preparedness for the fullness of contemporary public policy puzzles. These shortcomings are not epiphenomenal. They are the outcomes and consequences of our own agency and policy choices.

Addressing these failures will require choice on all our parts, demanding our entire national security enterprise come to grips with a recurring set of behaviors that cuts across our checkered performance against compound threats:

- The phenomenon and paradox within the social constructions of the meanings of war and peace, the issues of security and non-security, and the tendency to win a war but to lose the intended peace, as evidenced by our decades-long [anabasis in Iraq](#).
- The false distinction between national security and human security issues, as demonstrated by US-led military-humanitarian interventions in the 1990s, which addressed only symptoms but not root causes (e.g., Somalia, Kosovo, Haiti).
- The persistence of chronic, civil-societal, government-society structural inequalities that go unaddressed or under-addressed for many reasons, yet remain the common denominator of rebellions, insurrections, and insurgencies (e.g., Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, the Arab Spring).
- The tendency to declare false or premature victories while a conflict is evolving, not ending; the “mission accomplished” paradox that results in undercounts in risk assessments and capability requirements calculations (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, COVID-19)

If the power equation, under compound security dynamics, can no longer muster and sustain the type, quality, and quantities of “force” needed to overmatch threats before they compound, then [society may simply need a whole new equation](#). This might be the paradigm shift that many within military and public policy circles have debated, even promoted, for at least the last three decades. The 2020 Novel Coronavirus pandemic may be its herald. But, will we recognize it, and heed its clarion call for whole-cloth change as it faces us? Will we?

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