How is the Coronavirus Pandemic Changing Thinking on Security?

GMF Experts

The coronavirus crisis is shifting how the transatlantic partners think about security. From the role of institutions like NATO to the threat of bioterrorism, to investment in non-conventional security, it has sparked new discussions at the intersection of health and security. Governments have long been aware of biological security threats. The United States issued its first health-security strategy in 2009, the Obama administration initiated the Global Health Security Agenda in 2014, and Germany has been updating its national pandemic plan since 2005. But as they scramble to respond to this unprecedented challenge, a deeper shift is likely in how to plan for, mitigate, and counter the security challenges arising from pandemics.

Watershed moments like the current crisis tend to reshape the way governments and international organizations think about security. After 9/11, counterterrorism became a pillar of Euro-Atlantic security and NATO defense cooperation. After the 2007 cyberattacks against Estonia, cybersecurity became a bigger part of transatlantic discussions. After the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, NATO members understood better and adapted to new forms of hybrid warfare. Today the transatlantic partners are experiencing an event that will reshape the way they understand how health security and biological threats can impact their societies.

As Senator Chris Murphy argued recently in GMF's Post-Pandemic Order podcast, despite knowing better, U.S. security has "never…been properly resourced… Yes we have to protect against conventional military threats to the United States, but no one in our country today would suggest that we should be spending 100 times as much money on military defense as we are on pandemic defense given what we're living through right now."

Below GMF experts on the possible effects of the coronavirus crisis on transatlantic security.

Weaponized Health and Bioterrorism Threats

The sweeping human, social, economic, and potentially political effects of the coronavirus crisis have already inspired a wave of thinking about the consequences for global geopolitics. But with the notable exception of the debate over disinformation, there has been relatively little attention to the potential direct implications for

security per se. One important dimension may be the demonstration effect of the crisis on state and non-state actors interested in using health as a weapon.

This could take various forms. Governments may deliberately impede medical responses in an attempt to cause disproportionate harm to adversaries (this could also be a by-product of broader economic sanctions). Even more troubling could be growing interest in biological weapons on the part of states and terrorists. Analysts have long been concerned about the potential for bioterrorism as a vehicle for inflicting mass lethality, or simply widespread chaos. In the wake of 9/11—and less visibly for many years before—experts focused on accumulated evidence that Al Qaeda and other networks had explored the use of biological terrorism. There have been limited attempts by a variety of groups, some with secular apocalyptic ideologies, to employ anthrax and other agents. Fortunately, the broad conclusion from this experience has been that producing mass casualties with biological weapons is technically demanding and unlikely to feature significantly in future terrorist threats. The ability of health systems to respond to biological threats is also likely to be greater in the wake of the coronavirus experience.

Ian Lesser, vice president and executive director, Brussels office

NATO Forced to Think More Broadly about Security

The coronavirus pandemic is again shifting the way that NATO should think about security. With thousands dying each day and national resources quickly depleting across its members, the crisis is straining the alliance's operations and worsening pre-existing political tensions.

Immediate needs have exposed a crucial gap in how the United States and Europe think about security, and in how institutions like NATO are impacted. As an organization focused on collective defense, pandemic response may not seem like a natural fit for the alliance. However, it is now clear that it needs to elevate its planning for this in the future.

As the crisis has unfolded, NATO has adapted and improvised. For the first time, it convened a foreign ministers meeting on April 2 via secure teleconference. A virtual meeting of defense ministers followed a couple of weeks later. Beyond responding to the pandemic, this practice could be key as the alliance addresses long-standing issues around the speed of decision making in a crisis, which could ultimately boost deterrence.

NATO's experience coordinating logistics among allies and partners is a comparative advantage that allows it to make meaningful contributions to the coronavirus response through programs like the Support and Procurement Agency and the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre. This infrastructure and muscle memory enables the alliance to organize strategic airlifts in ally and partner countries and facilitate the delivery of critical medical supplies to pandemic-stricken to these.

As politicians and publics look to address the crisis, highlighting the role NATO is playing is important. Bolstering the resilience of its posture and operations during a health crisis is essential, but alleviating the burden experienced by partners and allies where possible is also key. It can help resolve persistent questions around NATO's purpose, and potentially alleviate the tension on some issues around political cohesion. And

as the crisis ebbs in member and partner states, the alliance's logistical and airlift capacity can be a key asset in helping project stability to other regions such as North Africa and the Middle East as they combat the coronavirus pandemic.

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(The arguments above are drawn from an article by the authors in Defense One)

Rethinking Risk, Reallocating Resources

The coronavirus pandemic highlights the need for a realignment of how countries think about national security and allocate resources to keep their citizens safe—a need that pre-dates the current crisis. In the United States, as elsewhere, the idea of broadening the scope of "risks" has been a growing feature of national security strategies for over a decade as governments come to terms with threats like cyberattacks, extreme weather, and pandemics.

However, the capacity that has been developed to manage these risks have not kept pace with the assessed threat. This stems, in large part, from the fact that the constitution and the way that it has been interpreted have made it much easier for presidents to pursue foreign policy than domestic policy, including the limitations on the role of the federal government in relation to the states. As a result, successive presidents have tended to play to their strengths looking to manage threats abroad, arguably at the expense of appropriate investment of time, money, and political capital in building resilience and preparedness at home. It is not that the plans do not exist, or that the experts behind them are not highly professional and competent, but rather that the tools available to them are not always fit for purpose. For example, as the recent congressionally mandated Cyberspace Solarium Commission noted, the federal government lacks a "continuity of the economy" planning capability. That this does not exist illustrates the fact that there is a more systemic challenge than just pandemic response.

One silver lining of the economic and social disruption from the coronavirus crisis might be to shock policymakers into action—to reallocate resources to increased national preparedness and resilience, and to authorize the development of the bureaucratic structures to properly operationalize that (including new grant arrangements, more broadly focused planning cells, and better coordination with state and local governments). With a divided Congress (with the Democrats controlling the House of Representatives and Republicans the Senate), however, it may prove hard to chart a bold new path on anything. Whether that changes will no doubt be driven by perception of the Trump administration's response to the coronavirus, including whether there is a willingness from his critics to recognize systemic weaknesses as well as specific policy and personal missteps. Where the political fallout settles is likely to have significant implications not just for future pandemic preparedness, but also for how the United States organizes itself to deal with a range of emerging threats, its effectiveness in doing so, and how it engages with its allies and the rest of the world on those issues.

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Higher Incentives for Non-Conventional Capacity?

Major scientific publications that have investigated the nature of the coronavirus have so far agreed on its natural origin. In-depth studies from The Lancet and Nature showed that its neither a laboratory construct nor a purposefully manipulated virus. However, from a security perspective, the implications of this crisis are far-reaching. The chaos caused by the pandemic and its massive multidimensional impact can be an incentive for non-state and terrorist organizations to pursue more actively the achievement of a non-conventional capacity of any sort.

The Aum Shinrikyo chemical attack in the Tokyo subway system in 1995 boosted the hype among terrorist organizations about replicating this kind of attacks. In the 1990s, there was a significant focus by terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda on acquiring and weaponizing biological agents, such as ricin, botulinum toxic, and anthrax. However, it proved difficult for them to build-up these capabilities as they lacked technical support and know-how. The situation is now different, though, for two main reasons.

First, the threshold for technological access is lower. New technologies can facilitate the "privatization of large-scale violence," with individuals enabled to carry out high-impact attacks that before only states could carry out. 3D printers, nanotechnology, and bioengineering are sectors of growing interest—and accessibility— to criminal and terrorist organizations. Vast state capabilities might not be necessary anymore to acquire, produce, and weaponize biological and chemical elements.

Second, the coronavirus crisis will inevitably lead to the development of new high-containment laboratories (HCLs) for studying and analyzing biological agents. The proliferation of HCLs will increase risks too. The probability of accidents there could grow. Terrorists might try to attack them or to gain access to pathological agents through rogue scientists, along the line of what happened with the infamous Khan network on nuclear weapons.

Jihadist organizations, such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State, white supremacist groups, fundamentalist groups of any sort, and criminal organizations perceiving these developments as a business opportunity, will likely see the ongoing crisis as an incentive to acquire these biological-weapons skills.

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