

## COVID-19. THE NATIONAL SECURITY APPROACH

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### Abstract:

*The paper examines the COVID-19 crisis and its intersections with national security, through the lens of its impact and consequences, as well as of what the security sector can do to alleviate it and how it should treat the remaining concerns. As a former intelligence practitioner, I was particularly interested in an empirical approach to how states and international organizations prioritized the health crisis, when faced with a difficult international security situation, too, whereas tension escalation tended to be, at least for a while, muted, but not erased by COVID.*

**Keywords:** security, securitization, extended security, cooperation, prioritization.

### Introduction

In President Barrack Obama's 2015 National Security Strategy, pandemic diseases were identified as threats to national security and hypothetical measures were advanced to increase resilience in this regard. The US announced a global initiative to develop a surveillance and response system for epidemics. The US government had already increased involvement for global capacity-building through the UN and the WHO, as well as through punctual initiatives such as those stemming from the AIDS, Ebola, or avian flu epidemics. But by May 2018, the National Security Council's (NSC) Pandemic Response Office was being cut, funds for USAID's infectious disease monitoring activities were severely reduced, and American funds for the WHO were halved.

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In the January – August span of 2019, the US Department of Health organized a series of exercises dubbed *Crimson Contagion*, with a variety of participants among which the NSC, the FBI and US Marshalls, the Department of Interior, and the State Department, as well as the Office of the Director for National Intelligence – ODNI. Alongside the numerous state and federal institutions involved in the exercise, there were also NGOs and private organizations, ranging from those concerned with public health, to important American universities. The preliminary findings of the enterprise, which have never been formally released to the general public by the authorities, were nevertheless made public in a draft report (Department of Health, 2019) that had much to say about the potential response of the global leader to a natural threat of the kind: government and federal authorities had proven to be uncoordinated, lacking in resources – without an adequate view of who is in charge; what equipment is needed; who is responsible for what actions, including for the briefing of high-level policy makers – and unable to adequately aggregate data in order to present them to the general public. Overall, even the US government has been unprepared to deal with such a threat.

In less than a year, COVID-19 hit hard and globally, bringing the US in an unfortunate leading position regarding the total number of cases and casualties. The superpower had, at the end of January 2021, over 26 million positive tests, as well as 440,000 deaths (Worldometers.info, 2021). Neither the warnings following *Crimson Contagion* were heeded, nor actual improvements implemented in order to diminish the consequences of the future pandemic.

In retrospect, many events in history inclined to be more predictable than they actually were, but even without the benefits of hindsight, a global pandemic is by no means a black swan. COVID-19 was only the first truly major event of such amplitude in the past century, after the devastating lessons of the *Spanish Influenza* had almost been forgotten. Recent situations such as the SARS, MERS, Ebola or HIV epidemics did not have the same magnitude, but were, at the time, tell-tale clues of what could happen should an infectious disease prove impossible to contain.

The present paper sets the ambitious goal to examine the impact of COVID-19 on national security, since the epidemic is, in fact, a set of crisis manifesting in all aspects of life. The two hypotheses that we are exploring are: a) how can national security institutions help make the situation better – considering the theory of human security as the core-business of intelligence and in observance of their own legal capabilities; and b) how other national security risks should be approached under such strenuous circumstances.

The research is based on consulting primary sources such as legislation and political decisions relevant to the national security institutions' legal responsibilities; the already generous literature on the subject matter generated by both intelligence professionals, academics and analysts; and the author's own empirical experience as a long-time member of intelligence upper management, which proved, in many aspects, a continuous crisis-management activity.

### **Pandemic Consequences**

Events such as pandemics are history-altering, if the 1917 *Spanish Influenza* example is any kind of lesson. COVID-19 was probably the main global crisis in 2020 and is still lasting, with significant impact on almost all levels of life as we know it: it impacted health as well as liberty, prosperity and trust. It impacted individuals as well as nations, while nevertheless the rest of the problems did not stand still.

What was different with this virus from the previous ones is a question probably better left to scientists, since it is still a developing story and characteristics of the pathogen are still being discovered. But what probably made a significant difference from previous similar threats was its high infectiousness, the ease with which it spreads from one person to another, the mild symptoms or even complete absence of symptoms for a high number of patients, which make them more prone to avoid quarantine and thus to continue spreading the pathogen.

The overall consequences of the epidemic are rather easy to see and utterly interconnected, but the author has tried to briefly review them according to their essential categories:

a. **Impact on the individual.** The main and foremost individual right affected was, of course, the right to health, severely limited, in many cases, by defective and over-solicited health systems. Characteristics of our postmodern society, such as globalization and ease of travelling, were aggravating circumstances in many ways: the lack of frontiers or border restrictions, relatively low prices of flights, global businesses and supply chains meant people were free and, in some cases, compelled to travel extensively, thus spreading the virus. Travel bans were the first to hit, followed by even more difficult restrictions, such as limitations of rights to gather, to see family members and even to go outside. Supply chains for basic products were interrupted, which led to social unrest and panic.

b. **Economic impact.** The first consequence of extended lockdowns was, of course, unemployment, which used to be at historical low-points in many Western democracies. Businesses were closed or their activity significantly hindered, and by May 2020, the US, for example, had over 40 million unemployed citizens (Reich & Dombrowski, 2021, pp. 1253-1279), with an estimated 500 million job losses worldwide. Commercial demand decreased, essential goods and medical equipment were lacking. States that could afford it struggled to invest in keeping private businesses afloat. Global economy was as hard hit as local ones, and globalization tended to show its disadvantages. International supply chains were disrupted, albeit by the local effects of pandemic, the impact of new border restrictions on transportation and travel bans. Global business models proved inefficient in such context and completely unprepared for such disruptions. Supplies were short and demand was high. Most countries had insufficient stocks for medical products and pharmaceuticals, as well as no virtual capacities to produce them themselves, since those activities were outsourced – predominantly to the very country that was the source of the problem and in a difficult enough situation to need them to alleviate its own domestic problems. From a different perspective, the pandemic generated the acute need to use electronic communication solutions in order to ensure, to some extent, continuation of a wide array of activities, from economic to educational and academic ones. Cyber-crime has taken advantage of this context, particularly since much of

the dedicated software infrastructure was unprepared to manage activities of such magnitude and less focused on implementing security solutions. Attacks on infrastructures and organizations, both public and private, were not a surprise and tended to deepen the chaos.

**c. Social impact.** Individuals suffering severe limitations of their rights and liberties, under-performing health systems, lack of medical provisions and sanitary equipment, doubled by misinformation and disinformation led to social unrest and panic, and further deepened the crisis. A significant trend was manifesting before the pandemic, that of the unregulated social media, which tends to create hermetic *echo-chambers* of strong opinions and allow radical notions to be multiplied without debate, outside input or any type of challenges. Not to mention deliberate manipulation by actors seeking to advance their own strategic position and change the balance of power, as part of their hybrid war tactics. During the pandemic, those tendencies continued, which made containing the virus more difficult and brought other problems, too: extremist attitudes, anti-vaxxers, techno-libertarianism thrived in self-isolated, self-contained *bubbles*, refusing any official information sources. The *infodemic*, term coined by European Commission vice-president Vera Jurova (European Commission, 2021) thus occurred, drawing hard on disinformation regarding the pandemic origin, virus existence and its consequences etc. Social stratification and polarization often generated by unregulated social media added to domestic tensions, while mistrust in authorities increased after obvious hesitations, bad decisions and errors in judgment.

It was, nevertheless, technology which brought some alleviation to the already dramatic situation, by allowing for concerted efforts of the scientific community to first identify, and then fight the virus. Military and intelligence organizations throughout the world lost operational capacity, forced to protect their own personnel and re-prioritize activities and resources and limit direct contact with other people. The US Army, for example, postponed training for new recruits at the beginning of the pandemic.

**d. Political impact.** While social and economic life has been severely disrupted, this also had political consequences: democracies needed to approach the threat with un-democratic measures, limiting

rights and liberties in a concerted effort to contain the virus and determining relevant shifts in options. Citizens in democratic countries were concerned with the new restrictions, raising serious questions whether previous normality shall ever return, and suspecting their governments of being reluctant to ever give up the newly-acquired capacities. Social unrest increased in most democratic countries and fake news and manipulations helped, while authoritarian regimes such as China did not hesitate to point a finger at the West for its inability to contain the virus. China has even profited to try and promote its own social and political model, as well as that of other similar states, such as Korea or Singapore, as ideal for crisis-management.

The official newspaper Global Times has actually published several open-eds promoting the narrative of the deficiencies democracies have in handling crises – made obvious by the high numbers of cases and victims, and compared to the much better results in crisis management the Chinese authorities had, using more forceful measures, for example, Hu Xijin's article *Pandemic Fight Calls for Western Elites to Drop Absurd Arrogance Toward China*; Mario Cavolo's *US Making it Hard to Admire Democracy* or Ai Jun's *What Made West Lose the Race of Systems during Epidemic Fights?*. Political leaders claimed to *follow the science*, but since science itself was still fumbling, some of the leaders of major Western democracies lost face. Let us not forget the collective/heard immunity debacle and its consequences on public trust. Decision-making was obviously incoherent, which furthered the crisis of confidence. If forced to also anticipate a positive political consequence of those unfortunate events, I would consider that populism has shown its own limitations and inabilities and its public support is diminishing.

**e. International challenges.** International alliances and organizations of all sorts also seemed to have difficulties in understanding their role and taking action. Old unsolved grievances seemed not to become secondary, but rather freeze for a short while and then resurface with a more immediate urgency to them. The UN called for a temporary, three-month cease-fire in all conflict areas, the EU lost sight of its divergences with illiberal Member States for a short while, even terrorist organizations advised their followers to

temporarily halt activities which would put them at risk of getting infected.

Nevertheless, global and regional struggles for power did not cease, on the contrary, the struggle to redefine the international relations architecture became more acute, with the same actors aiming to lead and show prominence and continuing to reaffirm their intent to primacy. The US continued its competition with China, even as it depended on it for medical supplies, while promoting the *America First* and, now, *Buy American* domestic policies. EU states struggled to act unitary and to everyone's benefits while closing borders and banning travels and while Member States competed with one another for resources, from medicines and medical equipment, to tests and vaccines.

Globalization shortcomings came back in focus and became more and more disputed, as states were concentrated on emergency COVID action-plans, measures, and strategies. Important and powerful states in the global balance of power found themselves depending on their strategic adversaries, with no domestic facilities to cater to their own needs, no adequate stocks and reserves, and a fierce global competition for resources. This only led to tense relations between global powers, as well as to opportunities for regional ones to advance their own interests. Isolationism – including economically- emerged as a revisited counter-trend to globalization, and with an isolationist US, China continues ascending and trying to take charge.

Regardless of the epidemic and in its shadow, rivalries, tensions, and reorganizations in the global balance of power continue with new methods and so does the tendency towards a multi-polar world. No significant new initiatives of global cooperation were manifested in this time-frame, on the contrary, some cooperation formats were significantly weakened - with a notable exception of the EU, which, after a shaky start, managed to eventually coordinate enough, despite some separate opinions, and ensure joint negotiations and acquisitions procedures for the vaccines, as well as a simultaneous start of the vaccination campaign in all Member States.

Travel bans and the genuine need to avoid health hazards has also exacerbated pre-existent nationalist tendencies, and, lacking consensus, international organizations' actions were stalled.

### **The National Security Approach**

There are several questions that need to be debated from a national security point of view and from the point of view of a practitioner, having found myself confronted with some of them years ago. The first one is, I think, one concerning legitimacy: are epidemics a matter of national security?

Debates over the scope of national security date far back and cannot be elaborated on here, since they are far too extended and this is not the purpose of the paper. There are, of course, the two diverging positions – seeing security exclusively as *hard security*, its legitimate objectives connected only to traditional, kinetic threats and risks. There is the opposite view, stemming from the *Copenhagen School of Security Studies*, opting for an all-encompassing concept of security, centred on the safety and wellbeing of the individual, which includes traditional threats, as well as economic, anthropogenic, and naturogenic ones. This notion of extended security includes all areas of social life that have an impact on the individual, becoming legitimate subjects of security through the process of *securitization*. And there are, of course, all the in-betweens, often shaped by momentary interests of political decision-makers and by occurring situations and events.

The traditional take on security under the COVID-19 crisis was representative of the US approach to the sanitary crisis. Kinetic threats held the frontlines for policy-makers and security professionals as well, shaping policy preferences as well as the allocation of resources. The National Security Threats as listed by the FBI were and remain still terrorism, espionage, proliferations, economic espionage, government attacks, perception management and foreign intelligence activities, while the UK only lists terrorism, espionage, cyber threats and proliferation as top national security priorities. Preferences were, thus, shaped and confirmed by the same individuals, and naturogenic threats



were downplayed and under-resourced. Budgets and organizational priorities ran far from public health concerns.

Although domestic security strategies in the US, as elsewhere, alluded to the possibility of natural hazards such as epidemics, they defined little if any instruments and responsibilities for the security establishment. The US Security institutions during pandemic were mostly concerned with securing supply chains for military products and with protecting their own, while strategic documents only made them responsible for dealing with risks of weaponizing biological agents.

NATO, as a military alliance, was also concerned with the concept of extended security, putting the matter up for discussion since 2019, and finalizing a reflection plan in 2020, with 180 proposals for improvement. NATO's COVID-19 and extended security related plan envisions the need for change which is generated by a new type of conflict among global actors. International relations are less stable, and so are international institutions. Non-kinetic conflicts are considered to be changing the nature of conflict, and are best described by mutual attacks on some areas, doubled by cooperation on others. In a special address at Davos (Putin, 2021), Russian President Vladimir Putin himself hinted to a global conflict manifested as *a fight of all against all*, which is constantly accentuated by the pandemic and the fierce fight for resources. Smaller actors in this new global environment are caught in the middle and find themselves tempted to take sides for potential benefits, but also have significant opportunities which need to be capitalized. Regional actors, such as Turkey, also change the dates of the problem, in their efforts to gain ground. In anticipation of a new strategy, NATO also stressed the aspect of protecting critical infrastructures as a security mission not to be omitted, with an accent on health and environmental ones.

The EU was also concerned with security under the COVID-19 crisis, the 2020 PESCO Strategic Review pointing to progress towards developing joint defence on matters pertaining to public health as well as on military ones. The 2021-2025 phase of PESCO sets ambitious goals of increasing defence spending, alongside interoperability and coordination, for further security and defence integration. PESCO projects include land formations in the EUFOR Crisis Response

Operation Core, as well as *joint enabling*, which contains the European Medical Command and CBRN Surveillance as a Service (Council of the European Union, 2020), therefore proving some level of commitment towards the extended security notion.

Alongside financial instruments much-needed for Member States to tackle the crisis, the EU has also undertaken the development of a Strategic Compass regarding its security and defence policy. The initiative that is to be concluded in 2022 aims to “inject into the system of EU defence cooperation a new dose of political direction” and “provide guidance to the Member States` military planners”, alongside “policy orientations and specific goals and objectives in areas such as crisis management, resilience, capability development and partnership” (Novaky, 2020). The Compass undertakes concerted approaches at society-level, with coherent action by all relevant actors, and advocates for more flexible instruments, in the context of far more dynamic risks and threats.

A particularly interesting case in the manners of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis was, in my opinion, that of Israel, in which the phenomenon of *securitization* of the health crisis was easily observed and widely discussed. The non-kinetic crisis was made into a fundamental and legitimate issue of concern for the national security establishment that received strategic and operational command and control. Prime-minister Netanyahu declared the pandemic as *a war against an invisible enemy*, and military forces were brought to support civilian ones in a leading capacity. Public opinion supported the decision, with 65% of Israelis expressing their approval for the IDF to manage the crisis (in Murciano, 2020). This approach, combined with a solid health system, seems to be leading to more satisfactory results than elsewhere.

For Romania`s situation, the notion of extended security is and has been a part of the National Defence Strategy, as it is for many other EU Member States, and from this point of view, our country has proven to be visionary. Epidemics are mentioned as national security threats in the past two such policy documents, but with virtually no correlation between the National Defence Strategy and the National Health Strategy, little good has it done. The latter document, passed in 2014,

is by no means attentive to such threats as a pandemic. The security establishment has not enough resources to properly identify the risks stemming from the health and crisis-management sectors: it does not have the specialists, nor sufficient cooperation with the scientific community, and, to be honest, it is rather tributary to old mentalities, which prioritize hard power and kinetic risks over hectic aspects of modern societies which prove, sometimes, just as disruptive, if not more.

Romania, nevertheless, has a duty to capitalize on its EU and NATO membership, in this regard as in all, with both ensuing rights and obligations. Our primary concern should be to make sure that national security resources do not diminish under crises circumstances, and to prioritize them correctly.

In my opinion, making public health a matter of national security is self-explanatory. Since security is and will continue to be centred on the individual, it is with individual security that the establishment must start, and there cannot be a segregation of the two. Weak, underfinanced, and uncoordinated systems undermine individual and national security, in our country as elsewhere, therefore their improvement through all available means should be taken seriously by decision-makers and the security establishment alike.

A second question could be aimed at what national security can actually do to help prevent and contain such a crisis, and a part of it was answered in the ideas listed above. From providing early warning intelligence and analysis, to ensuring coordination, to managing crisis and relief operations, to monitoring and informing on the spread of disinformation and misinformation, support is available. The Israeli example delves deeper into what can be done to ensure support for the health system under extreme pressure, with effective measures varying from procuring medical equipment, tests and even vaccines through specific methods.

The third and probably most important question is how the national security establishment should manage its own, non-COVID priorities, since the health crisis tended to aggravate several significant security threats. A short look at the section dedicated to the pandemic's impact more than proves that.

National security systems and institutions had to re-think their strategic and operational priorities, including regarding the allocation and prioritization of resources, and the protection of their human resource.

Nevertheless, I believe there is a continuity of the former acknowledged risks, albeit classical ones, such as terrorism, organized crime, conflicts, or new ones such as cyber or hybrid threats. The pandemic does not mean they have subsided, but rather it is super incumbent on them, making it necessary to adapt, adjust, learn lessons and react swiftly, while building resilience.

The pandemic impacted the prioritization of old risks on the bases of the stringent momentary needs, but they persist, without essential changes in their basic data or in aggravated forms. It brings much unrest, but also the opportunity for our societies to improve. Moreover, it brings the opportunity for political decision-makers and the decision-making process to improve, since it seems to have promoted a decline of populism. Politicians, as drivers for security, now have the cause and motivation to reinvent themselves, by being receptive, by approaching and heading professionals and thus demonstrating a good understanding of the security problems, in a context dominated by informational war, massive disinformation and sophisticated constructs and narratives built on half-truths, which alter perceptions and increase mistrust. The public's need for trust and knowledge should be properly met by authorities, with truth, facts, clarifications, and debate within the framework provided by political legitimacy and science. And wise decision-makers should see that resources for national security are not discontinued or significantly diminished, because the same thing doesn't happen to risks, threats, and vulnerabilities.

The acute need for security withstands pandemic, or rather becomes reinforced by it, both concerning hard security, and smart security. Roles tend to shift, while the military becomes more and more involved in civilian crisis. The security establishment, intelligence included, must strive to move pro-actively, whether in deciphering

informational attacks, identifying health hazards or potential sources for relief.

## **Conclusions**

I support a reconceptualization of national security and a wider acceptance of the extended security concept, which I think would make the security establishment able to widely approach matters such as public health, with a serious impact on society, without raising debates on legitimacy. I think there cannot be a society without health, and health is part of security, but I am also convinced that the security establishment alone cannot produce satisfactory results. Cooperation with academia, the R&D sector, medical experts and professionals and health institutions – both public and private, are essential for a better approach to a future crisis of the kind.

At the same time, domestically we need to identify normative and strategy solutions which can allow for easier, more flexible prioritization of national security issues according to the current context, despite the fact that generally state institutions are rather conservatory and bureaucratic, and decision-making mechanisms tend to be lengthy and tedious. All this for one purpose: putting the citizens' needs at the centre of the security enterprise.

I also believe a pandemic is a global threat, which requires both a local and a global approach. Individual states' measures seem to count, in the balance of prevention and containment, as much as those of international organizations and better results can only be achieved through cooperation. In this regard, I salute the US returning to the WHO and reassuming its role as global leader. But further advances must be made; first of all concerning global cooperation at all levels – from security, to health and crisis management, to business and social media regulation etc.

A particularly important lesson to be learned by the national security establishment is that it needs to enhance its own cooperation and partnership with public and private sectors in all areas of interest for the extended concept of security, particularly when discussing

situational awareness and the development and securitization of technologies, building resilience of IT&C and critical infrastructures.

Nevertheless, security strategies need both an international and a domestic dimension. Therefore, they need to be connected to national features, stemming from aspects such as geographical positioning, proximity to global actors, social, cultural and infrastructural specifics.

Finally, with regard to the security environment, the international context continues to be dangerous, not just punctuated by threats and risks, with amplified, interconnected problems and negative developments in almost all dimensions, from the economic to the social and military ones. Negative developments are aggravated by geopolitical competition among the great actors, but also by uninspired political decision-making, the technological revolution and the liquefying of threats. Current dangers stem from classical, kinetic threats, as well as from recent, novel ones, blurring the line between peace and war and requiring alternative, innovative solutions. Leaders under pressure must understand the phenomena they are confronted with, and to act decisively, through correct prioritization, institution and capacity-building and modernization, and multiplication of action-nodes at society level.

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