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Global Health Security

COVID-19 Pandemic: What It Means for US National Security

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

From minor to major issues, mindsets and behaviours are bound to change. But in what direction, no one yet knows with confidence.

COMMENTARY

ALREADY AT this early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, a temperamental set-to has emerged between two poles: those who see the virus as revealing American institutional decay across the board, and view the playing out of the pandemic as worsening it; and those who espy a silver lining in the crisis cloud motivating bold reforms.

One may be sceptical of breathless pronouncements in either direction, but the Overton Window -- the range of politically acceptable policies at any given time -- will certainly shift on many fronts. We speculate here on a few of them, moving from those of lesser and immediate to greater and longer-term import.

Dilemma of Readiness

All militaries involve amalgamations of soldiers, logisticians, administrators, and bureaucrats. If these amalgamations cannot form safely to exercise and train with allies, readiness will suffer, or else personnel will be ordered into situations that will sicken them in disproportionate numbers to a similar general result.

All significant state militaries face similar dilemmas, but states whose policies rely more on allied cooperation will be affected disproportionately.

In the longer term, defence planners are likely to factor mass-medical perturbations into doctrine and planning to a greater degree than before, in part because of an increased danger of bioterrorism (see below). Political culture and the happenstance of sagacious leadership will determine which countries devise superior best practices. The US is at no disadvantage here.

Defence-industrial Base

The economic swoon caused by the pandemic is damaging the US defence-industrial base relative to those of near-peer and other serious competitors. The reason is that the US system is far more market-based than others. Many other countries, including China and Russia, can readily prioritise state-owned defence industries in their economic management and recovery plans. It's not so simple in the US.

Most large defence contractors can ride out the crisis, but third- and fourth-tier subcontractors are overwhelmingly composed of small businesses (those with 250-1,500 employees) that cannot. These businesses compose the essential supply-chain not just for new equipment acquisitions but also for ongoing maintenance and readiness needs; if they go bankrupt, the entire system will degrade rapidly.

That is why President Trump's failure to quickly implement the Defence Production Act (DPA) could bear significant implications. Title III of the Act enables the federal government to provide significant loans to smaller subcontractor firms, which are needed because the alternative -- Small Business Administration loans -- cannot cover even one month's payroll in most cases.

The president's delay could trigger a rash of imminent bankruptcies. Moreover, while small firms should receive priority under the DPA, heavily lobbied US politics is such that they may not.

Resource Shifting

In the mid- to longer term, greater mindfulness of the national security implications of natural and man-made pandemic disease could lead to significant positive reforms in the US, as elsewhere. But a danger also exists that, given the size of the US national debt and the tendency to run annual federal budget deficits, the defence budget will be poached to excess to finance new public health preparation measures.

As is well known, the US federal budget has become increasingly brittle to choice, with fiscally open-ended entitlement programmes taking up an increasing share of obligations. Discretionary spending falls disproportionately on defence, making it virtually the only place politicians can find funds for new priorities without ballooning the deficit and debt further.

The meaning of "to excess" is obviously open to interpretation. But one consequence of a significant reduction of US defence investment, more likely if Democrats win the

November elections, would be to undermine an already decaying US grand strategy predicated on providing common global security goods.

This is in order to suppress regional conflicts, arms races, and WMD proliferation, while keeping global commercial metabolism robust. Such a development would further incline US foreign policy, by default if not through thought, toward *de facto* isolationism -- sombre news for exposed US allies and friends worldwide.

Manufactured Pandemics?

The spectre of COVID-19 may have a demonstration effect of a deeply worrying kind. The world is entering a period when the capacity of “bad” or “crazy” actors -- state and substate alike -- to manufacture pandemics is increasing. It is ever easier for small groups with limited budgets to create designer plagues, and to spring them onto unsuspecting populations with sufficient stealth that their man-made origins are obscured until too late.

The COVID-19 crisis has revealed the massive damage to a capriciously designed globalised economy that a pandemic can cause. To certain radical revisionist actors, some likely motivated by non-traditional religious interpretations, what is unfolding today could encourage greater effort to acquire a decisive weapon for the weak and self-described dispossessed.

Cultural Consequences

Ultimately, the long-term security of any society is a function less of its state’s military prowess or its economic might than of the attitudes and expectations of its people. The COVID-19 experience will add to the quotient of ambient fear already rife in American society from the sum of 911, the multifold shocks of the Great Recession, and the manifest dysfunction of US political institutions that enabled an entirely unqualified person to become president.

Linked to fear is cynicism, alienation, and risk aversion, all of which undermine Americans’ tradition of can-do pragmatism and Enlightenment-propelled optimism.

No one can predict what COVID-19 will mean coming on top of these and other pre-existing cultural burdens. But one thing is clear: If enough Americans come to believe that their society is not virtuous and unified by noble purpose, and so does not merit exertions to preserve its security and world leadership role, no amount of defence spending will make much difference in the long run.

Bold reform is possible, but to be truly effective it requires acting in concert with others. Global pandemics cannot be managed by national means alone. Absent a willingness to cooperate in new ways and old, a headlong US turning inward and subsequent decline is not so far-fetched. If the COVID-19 experience ends up accelerating that inward turning, it will surely be seen by posterity as a crisis wasted.

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