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Special Commentary: After COVID-19: American Landpower in Transatlantic Context

May 01, 2020 | Dr. John R. Deni

Over the last month, an array of analysts and experts has attempted to ascertain what the post-pandemic world might look like from strategic, policy, or institutional perspectives. Several of these assessments feature dramatic predictions of a new world unlike what existed just months ago. It's reasonable to expect change following a global crisis, but the near breathlessness detectable in some of these analyses evinces a lack of nuance or an appreciation for stasis. Moreover, few of these or other analyses have addressed the implications in a transatlantic context, or suggested specific mitigation steps. This brief essay reflects a more balanced attempt to fill these gaps, identifying recommendations for the US Army and Department of Defense to leverage the crisis and mitigate the damage across the transatlantic community.

A NEW WORLD ORDER?

Strategists, academics, and pundits have begun trying to assess how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the world order, national security, and the Department of Defense. Some have argued that the pandemic has [essentially changed](#) the [global order](#) and will include such manifestations as dramatically [lower defense budgets](#) and [deep cuts](#) to military end strength, modernization efforts, and acquisition programs. [Others argue](#) that the need to defend the American people from threats inside the homeland will quickly displace those from overseas.

Aside from the fact that many of these analyses are purely conjectural, there appears to be an unusual kind of American exceptionalism underpinning them. The United States hasn't experienced an epidemic in a century – [SARS](#), [MERS](#), [Ebola](#), and [Zika](#) were all centered outside the continental United States and typically far from American shores. So, thinking about the impact of an epidemic that's now spread across the entire country and throughout the world is a novel challenge for most contemporary analysts. Yet if we examine how the countries that *were* affected by SARS and other epidemics responded post-peak, one of the obvious conclusions is that those countries did not shed their interest in statecraft or national defense as traditionally conceived. In other words, [human security](#) did not displace national security.

More tangibly, while the defense budget may eventually – after the crisis has passed and economic growth has returned – experience downward pressure in a [sequestration](#) sequel, there is [no evidence](#) to suggest that national security threats from Russia or China are dissipating. Moscow has continued its [destabilizing military activities](#) in Europe, including [violations of airspace](#) and ongoing support for [separatist attacks in eastern Ukraine](#). Likewise, Beijing has continued to push its [territorial ambitions](#) in the South China Sea, declaring contested territory its own and conducting [hostile military maneuvers](#) against the Philippines.

Similarly, both Russia and China have seized on the pandemic as an opportunity to further their own information warfare narratives. In Russia's case, aside from spreading [basic disinformation and conspiracy theories](#), the primary message from the Kremlin seems to be that Western institutions [aren't up to the task](#) of responding to the crisis and managing the fallout. Meanwhile, Beijing seems intent on promoting China as [an indispensable, responsible international actor](#) that was [blameless](#) in the initial rise and worldwide spread of the virus and whose state authoritarian system is [more effective and efficient](#) than other models of governance.

WHAT LIES AHEAD AND WHAT MUST BE DONE

The ongoing, nearly systemic challenges presented by Russia and China will provide plenty of justification for hawks on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue to argue for a large defense budget. At the same time, it is likely the US defense industry – and the politicians whose constituents depend on defense jobs – will position itself as [part of the post-pandemic solution](#). Moreover, [history tells us](#) that it would be unwise to underestimate the willingness of American leaders to shoulder debt in the name of maintaining a robust national defense while avoiding hard political choices.

To be clear, the most dramatic assessments and forecasts outlined earlier *are possible*, just not very likely. What then should we expect are the *more probable* characteristics of a post-pandemic transatlantic environment over the coming 12-24 months? Four factors appear more compelling and more likely. First, the COVID-19 response has shown both sides of the Atlantic the [limits of international collaboration](#) for solving international problems. In particular, the apparent [lack of coordination](#) between [Europe and the United States](#), and stories that Washington was [undercutting](#) its [allies](#) in the hunt for medical supplies have undermined collective action and weakened allied solidarity. This comes on top of reportedly dismal transatlantic relations [at the highest levels](#) of government, and concerns that the White House has [abandoned international leadership](#) more broadly.

To help prevent shortcomings in the COVID-19 response from further undermining US interest in a strong transatlantic relationship, the Department of Defense should develop plans for a sustained campaign of humanitarian relief aimed at US allies and partners in Europe still in the throes of the pandemic. Then, as the worst of the virus peaks in the United States in the coming weeks, the Pentagon ought to posture the US military for larger scale assistance

deliveries and distribution across Europe under the umbrella of [NATO's disaster response coordination center](#). Washington appears willing to respond [to an Italian request for help](#), but more can and should be done proactively along these same lines. This would at least reinforce the position of the US military – if not the American political class – as the trusted guarantor of transatlantic stability and security, which would subsequently strengthen strategic deterrence and assurance. All of this must be coupled with a robust, centrally coordinated information campaign to describe and explain all that the alliance and its member states are doing to help each other. NATO has only recently appeared to have begun aggressively [promoting mutual assistance efforts](#); [US Army information operations](#) should provide supporting fires for audiences across Europe and North America while more aggressively targeting and disabling Russian and Chinese information operations. In short, solidarity among allies is vital, but so too is overwhelming *evidence* of solidarity.

Second, economic dislocation will likely push NATO allies to deficit spend on economic stimulus and reinvest in social safety nets that were undercut during years of austerity, resulting in less funding available for defense budgets. In a worst-case scenario, the Eurozone economies could [contract by 15 percent](#), or roughly three times the degree of contraction during the Great Recession of just over a decade ago. One of the enduring lessons of [Europe's response to that crisis](#) is that greater stimulus is necessary in order to recover more quickly, thereby preventing [populist parties from gaining](#) additional strength.

Defense budgets under pressure will make interoperability a greater challenge, especially for smaller and medium-sized allies but increasingly for the larger allies like the UK, Germany, France, and Italy. As allies make national level decisions on whether and how to cut defense spending, force structure, and modernization, the ability of US and allied militaries to work together will diminish. Moreover, until a vaccine is widely available, governments may be reluctant to send military units to participate in exercises. For example, Exercise Defender Europe 20, slated to unfold this spring, was to be the largest deployment of US troops for an exercise in Europe since the end of the Cold War, but it was [curtailed thanks to the pandemic](#) and is not slated to occur again at division scale until 2022.

To mitigate these challenges, the United States should ensure all NATO allies can conduct and participate in distributed [virtual and constructive training](#), while overcoming the [stove-piping](#) that can occur with multiple types of training systems. The US Army can help to accomplish this objective through its [Joint Multinational Simulation Center](#) in Germany, providing best practices and helping to better synchronize differing training systems. Such efforts will help ensure allies can still maintain and build interoperability, even while remaining at home station. Additionally, the US Army should prioritize alliance-wide plug-and-play interoperability over [framework nation concepts](#). The latter involve a single, typically larger ally leading a group of other, often smaller allies in developing or fielding a particular capability or force structure element. While touted as helping participating countries make more efficient use of their limited defense resources, framework nation concepts risk tying smaller allies too closely to specific, larger allies, which as noted may be increasingly stretched fiscally. A broader

plug-and-play approach across the *entire* alliance – in terms of operations, doctrine, and equipment – in which a company from any ally can operate within a battalion of any other ally can help promote a wider degree of interoperability, regardless of national recovery rates *or* willingness to participate in a specific mission.

Third, Europe is likely to become an increasingly contested geopolitical space over the next 12-24 months. As noted above, [Russia](#) and [China](#) have already begun information operations tied to COVID-19 response in Europe in pursuance of their respective goals. In the case of Russia, Moscow will likely use aid flows to build goodwill within certain EU countries in order to undermine [the consensus on continued sanctions](#). In China's case, Beijing will likely leverage its assistance in the name of alleviating growing pressure on its predatory, exploitative [commercial activities in Europe](#).

Given the second-to-none US-EU trade and investment relationship, common transatlantic values, and similar geopolitical interests in Europe and beyond, it's in American interests to contest and roll back Russian and Chinese efforts. For the Department of Defense, this might take the form of increased funding for European defense and deterrence efforts – [slated to drop in FY21](#) – as well as further steps to [reinforce American military presence](#) on the continent. Although the US Army is moving ahead with plans to forward station in Europe a field artillery brigade headquarters, two Multiple Launch Rocket Systems battalions and supporting units, and a Short-Range Air Defense battalion, more can and should be done in terms of forward stationing (vice rotational stationing). This is especially so in terms of heavy forces, combat aviation, military mobility, intelligence, electronic warfare capabilities, and command and control. Additionally, the US Army could provide company-size contributions to the German-, Canadian-, and UK-led battlegroups in the Baltic States on a rotational basis, drawn from CONUS or forward-stationed units in Europe. Putting American boots on the ground continuously in the Baltic States would strengthen both deterrence and assurance in northeastern Europe, even if they were stationed there only on a rotational basis.

Likewise, given the curtailing of Exercise Defender Europe 20, the Pentagon ought to reschedule the division-size event for 2021, vice waiting until 2022. This long overdue major training event would not simply have sent unmistakable messages of deterrence to Moscow and reassurance to American allies, it would have built crucially important interoperability necessary for the defense and reinforcement of NATO member states in Eastern Europe. Waiting until 2022 to test whether and how the United States can send a division's worth of troops and equipment across the Atlantic Ocean and the European continent is shortsighted and risks undermining alliance security and deterrence.

Finally, the virus is likely to cause as much harm to Russia as it does to the United States and the European Union. After initially claiming that the virus was [under control](#) amid reports that the Russian government was [under reporting the extent of the virus](#), the Kremlin has seen [cases rise dramatically](#). Thanks to Russia's vast geography, its underdeveloped domestic transportation system, and its relatively poor healthcare system, the virus is likely to play out

more slowly as a [disparate collection of major outbreaks](#), vice a single national outbreak such as what has occurred in most European countries.

This will likely impact Russian security in two ways. First, readiness may be affected as increasing numbers of Russian troops and draftees become infected. While the Kremlin has tried to downplay the impact on military personnel, it seems likely that [numerous military units](#) will be affected and that the [induction of 2020 draftees will be delayed](#) by quarantine measures. Second, the Russian defense sector is likely to experience a production slowdown. With only a [fraction of employees reporting for work and supply chains under stress](#), production for both domestic and international customers is likely to slow down.

The US Army and the Department of Defense can exploit these Russian difficulties. For example, ongoing Russian asymmetric operations outlined above juxtaposed with [shortcomings in the Kremlin's capacity](#) to respond to the pandemic and Putin's efforts to [push responsibility to regional governors](#) ought to be leveraged within the transatlantic community as well as across Eurasia. Portrayed together in this way, these narrative strands paint a picture of a central government more interested in provoking the West and protecting the powerful than in taking care of average Russian people. Additionally, assuming the virus peaks in the United States and the West earlier than it does across the vast expanse of Russian territory – as seems likely – the US Army and its NATO counterparts ought to offer (very publicly) medical and humanitarian assistance to Russia.

CONCLUSION

In sum, COVID-19 is likely to bring many changes, but traditional security challenges from Russia and China aren't going away. Indeed, even as they fight the virus at home, Moscow and Beijing are leveraging the pandemic for their own ends internationally as well as domestically. The Pentagon can best respond by discerning the most *likely* characteristics of the post-pandemic world while simultaneously calculating how to limit damage to American advantages and leveraging opportunities to favorably compete against adversaries.

The views expressed in this Special Commentary piece are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the US Government. This article is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

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