



Biowar next? Security implications of the coronavirus

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How does the coronavirus impact global security and defence? This essay asks what the short, medium and long-term implications of the virus are. Since uncertainty pervades the political and geopolitical dimensions of the coronavirus crisis, I will consider its many and conflicting eventualities. Some security implications may be negative, while others more positive.

The first question should be if we are at war. Despite the frequent use of the term “war” by the French President Emmanuel Macron and others, this is misleading terminology. The coronavirus is not a human being, it does not have political intentions, it does not make counter-moves.¹ Societies may mobilize in similar ways to a “war-like” situation, but there is no need for secrecy and closed war-room strategies. The challenges facing global societies can therefore be discussed openly without the risk of exposing plans and strategies to the adversary. Nonetheless, the high level of uncertainty combined with need for rapid decision making have similarities to Clausewitz’ concept of the “fog of war”.² Another similarity to warfare is the balance between experts (generals or health authorities) and politicians. In a crisis the former may want to take stronger measures to achieve their sector-specific objectives—while politicians may need to take a broader perspective and balance measures with e.g. economic impact. However, it could also be the opposite: because of public stress and fear, politicians may want to be on the safer side than experts advise and introduce stronger measures at an earlier stage than advised by the experts. There are indications that this has been the case in some countries during the coronavirus crisis. “Better safe than sorry” has probably been a guiding principle for many politicians when making decisions with so many unknowns.

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The term “securitization” was famously coined in academic terms in the 1990s by professor Ole Wæver and his associates.³ It describes a process when an issue becomes so “hot” that it is lifted out of regular political decision making and made into an existential question. As a result, extraordinary counter-measures are warranted in the name of security. Such processes require both securitizing actors who push the agenda and an audience that accepts the securitization. The point is that it is not objectively given what can be regarded as a threat and how states respond to them. The same risk or danger may be interpreted differently in different places, leading to different policies in response.

The various political responses to the coronavirus certainly bear the trademarks of “securitization”. The strategies chosen by countries have been dissimilar. Some have introduced curfews while others have kept society more or less open. Many societal factors have played into the choice of strategy, even if the virus is the same. Much of this is due to better knowledge, medicine and effective counter-measures. Nonetheless, debates about the level of response, the kind of measures chosen, at what time, and to what end, are bound to emerge when the situation normalises. Decisions were made under sub-optimal conditions: in the “fog of war”, under stress, with limited knowledge, and under severe uncertainty. Still, “securitization” and “better safe than sorry”-approaches may also have contributed to decisions that had huge negative side-effects on the economy, on social welfare, health and on global security.

The challenges in the wake of the virus—and our response to it—are many. Some of these challenges are short-term, some are more long-term, some related to the virus, other to the economy. In the following I will try to sketch how they relate to global security and defence.

For the armed forces, the most visible and immediate *short-term effect* of the virus was that troops were incapacitated. The first and most dramatic example was when Capt. (N) Brett Crozier, commander of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, reported that over 100 sailors had contracted the coronavirus.⁴ Because of the physical limitations on board the ship, social distancing was impossible and Crozier wrote that “the spread of the disease is ongoing and accelerating” among the 4000 crew on board. Later on, it was reported that 840 crew members had been infected.⁵ A few weeks later the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, suffered a similar fate when about 60% of the crew were infected.⁶ The subsequent political fall-outs aside, the cases illustrate how epidemic diseases also make modern war-fighting platforms vulnerable. This, of course, is nothing new. Disease has always been a major challenge on battlefields due to the harsh conditions in war. It is, however, less common in peacetime. Nevertheless, the confined space on ships and in barracks make sailors and soldiers vulnerable in different ways than the rest of the society. The coronavirus has been a reminder that this remains the case, and that this is yet another element of “fog of war” that military planners cannot predict.

The good news, if that is the correct term, is that it is equally risky for both sides in a conflict. The virus does not distinguish between friend and foe. This fact is perhaps one of the reasons why biological and chemical weapons have not been used very much since World War I: you cannot control the path of the virus, and it can easily backfire and knock out entire units once unleashed.

In the short term, armed forces across the globe have had to cancel exercises and other planned activity due to the pandemic.⁷ They are also taking new measures to be better prepared and to remain agile, an effort which has involved everything from acquiring facemasks to devising new routines at bases.⁸

The *medium term* challenges to security and defence are nonetheless numerous. The first is that there is a risk that defence budgets will be reduced, or at least not increased, given the economic meltdown.⁹ As most Western governments borrow money to make it through the crisis, tough choices will have to be made. Politicians are likely to prioritize measures to restore the economy, secure social welfare, strengthen health care etc. In other words, it is possible that welfare will be prioritized over warfare even after the pandemic is over. One would hope that politicians have learnt that a crisis of any shape and form may occur unexpectedly, and that general societal and state preparedness is required to deal with it. Though our current crisis does not involve our armed forces (at least not in their traditional function), it has reminded us of the enduring possibility of worst-case-scenario crises, and indeed the need to remain ready to deal with them.¹⁰

Unfortunately, however, there is a well-known tendency among politicians (and generals) to prepare for the previous war instead of the next. Hence, national (and international) measures to enhance crisis preparedness post-coronavirus are likely to focus primarily on the health and economic sectors. Investment in conventional security and defence systems—such as fighter jets, ships and missiles—may not be prioritized.¹¹ It is the kind of insurance

usually associated with “low probability/high impact”- in other words, risks where the potential consequences are severe, but the likelihood of such risks materialising is low. In tough economic times, the low likelihood is emphasized—with a “fingers crossed” attitude to low probability risks. Since the virus has hit the entire globe, one could hope that potential adversaries for Western states face similar budgetary constraints and may choose to slash their military budgets. Unfortunately, in contrast to democracies, authoritarian regimes have historically often prioritized warfare over welfare for their citizens. A global *détente* is therefore an unlikely outcome of the coronavirus crisis.

A strategy for military organizations to counter budget-cuts is to try to make themselves relevant in crises other than war, which we have seen with militaries erecting field hospitals and NATO allies using military cargo planes to bring supplies to each other.¹² However, it remains a challenge that the military organizations are designed primarily for high-end warfare. They struggle with other forms of crisis management, whether it is migration, pandemics or even terrorism. Police, customs and other actors are usually better designed for dealing with these crises, and the military often becomes an over-sized add-on. Making the armed forces more relevant for low-end crises is a necessity—not only to keep defence budgets reasonably high but also to safeguard national welfare and security.¹³ Nevertheless, chances are slim that ministries of defence will be budgetary winners in NATO countries in the coming years. Despite all the words of “strategic autonomy” and a “European

pillar in NATO”, the coronavirus crisis is likely to leave European defence shattered, splintered and weak. Planned EU defence projects, such as the flagship military mobility project, was proposed to be cut entirely—to 0 Euros—by the EU Commission, even before the coronavirus outbreak.¹⁴ The prospect of any major defence investments in the Europe is therefore bleak.

One could hope that this situation would make states, in the *long-term*, more willing to engage in joint projects, as recently argued by Wolfgang Ischinger and others.¹⁵ However, the experience over the last decade or so is not too positive. Neither the EU’s “pooling and sharing” initiative nor NATO’s “smart defence” initiative, both launched almost a decade ago, has gained much traction.¹⁶ European states appear to be reluctant to build joint military units, structures and organizations, or to share equipment. The use of force remains a national competence in the EU and beyond. As a result, armies are predominantly national, with only limited ability to plug into larger formations if needed. There is no indication that the coronavirus crisis will change this pattern, unfortunately.

Although it faces its fair share of challenges too, a less ambitious objective would be to purchase similar equipment and organize joint maintenance—while keeping them under national control. The plurality of types of fighter jets, navy vessels and battle tanks in Europe is a serious obstacle to joint and multi-national operations. Hence, the very rationale of the recent EU projects in the European Defence Fund was to counter this trend. But this will take years and decades

to materialize. Furthermore, recent experience in common procurement is not very positive: The NH-90 helicopter for instance, became delayed and expensive partly because every customer (states and branches) had their own operational requirements and specification demands.¹⁷ Defence industries remains (semi-)national and protected in most European countries, and defence procurement remains a national prerogative. The coronavirus crisis is probably not inducing states to make their defence industries more open for external competition or to buy less defence materiel from domestic producers. European defence integration and cooperation are therefore unlikely to be a long-term outcome of the crisis.

It has been argued that the *European Union* has failed during the crisis.¹⁸ Many people, particularly in Italy and Spain, have expressed dissatisfaction with the EU.¹⁹ The fact that both security and health remain national competencies and therefore strictly speaking not EU responsibilities, is almost irrelevant when crisis erupts. The EU as a political project has become too big and ambitious to be able to turn a blind eye on the crisis. People expect an EU response or at least coordination irrespective of formal competencies. What is at stake is the political solidarity that the Euro, the Lisbon Treaty and the Common Market rests upon. A failure to deliver and come out of the crisis united will have long-term negative effects for the EU. Furthermore, the EU as an international player will suffer because external potency stems from internal strength. If the EU cannot keep order in its own house, how can it be expected to play a role internationally and globally? Strategic documents and visions are worthless if they are not based upon a coherent internal political base. The current political fragmentations, exacerbated by the coronavirus, do not contribute to this end.

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However, if nothing else, intra-European pandemic preparedness and crisis response mechanisms are likely to be better organized and coordinated in the future. As the EU has increased its engagement in the crisis since April, it is also likely that there is still time for the EU to play an important role and remind Europe of the organization's importance. What's more, research shows that the EU historically has been surprisingly resilient in face of crises.²⁰ Even still, there is a sticky, perhaps intractable disagreement that will hold progress back: financial assistance packages and the mutualisation of European debt. If the cleavages that emerged after the financial crisis between the north and south are deepened, the prospects of the future of the European political project is grim. If, on the other hand, the economic recovery is quicker and less socially destructive than a decade ago, the prospects for a united and thus stable and secure Europe is higher.

A stronger Europe will be needed in the geopolitical global order that is now emerging. The most important global trend that has been exacerbated by the crisis is the rising tension between the US and China, combined with the withdrawal of the US as a defender of international liberal order. President Donald Trump's attack on the World Health Organization is a good illustration. The dissemination of conspiracy theories by the Chinese government regarding the origin of the virus is another. The result of accusations, propaganda, supply chain restrictions, and other measures seems to be a more insecure world—a world with rising tensions and more dominated by the major powers. The tensions between the US and China will have global implications, and European states will feel the consequences. The debates over the 5G telecom network are an early indicator of this dynamic. European states are experiencing a more vocal and engaged Chinese diplomacy that is not shying away from criticizing those challenging Chinese positions and practices. In some of these conflicts, the US and Europe are likely to stand united—but not in all.

In such a situation, a fragmented Europe is easily swayed by big power pressure. Chinese coronavirus-aid can surely be seen in such a light where gifts and assistance are also influence campaigns, aiming at painting a positive picture of China. While such a modus operandi is by no means uniquely Chinese, it is a novel experience and a pressure that European states must deal with. The situation not only creates a public relations victory for China in the present, it may also lead China to expect favours in return in the future.

Increased US focus on China may have negative implications for European security as well. Ever since President Obama launched the “pivot to Asia”, Europeans have feared they could end up as losers in a military zero-sum game between Europe and the Asia-Pacific. As the US is assessed to only have the political and military capacity to engage in one major theatre at a time, Europe may not be granted the security guarantees it traditionally has enjoyed.²¹ The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 made the US both remain in and strengthen its presence in Europe. This, however, may be changing. The US Marine Corps’ new “Vision and Strategy 2025” is almost solely focused on China, making its future role in Europe somewhat more uncertain.²² Furthermore, given potential budgetary constraints in the US post-coronavirus, the US presence in Europe may again be reduced.²³

For Europe the neighbouring environment may also be tougher to handle. Measures to reduce the spread of the virus, such as social distancing and economic shutdowns,

have much more immediate implications in poor countries than in richer ones. Without any social welfare benefits available, hunger and desperation are much more likely implications of the crisis than in most European states. Furthermore, even when these measures are lifted, the global economic recession or slowdown is likely to hit the poorest countries the hardest. The potential for social unrest is therefore likely to be pretty high in many countries surrounding Europe. Countries in the Middle East and North Africa, but also further away, such as central Asia or Western Africa, may face new instability in the wake of the coronavirus crisis. In the worst-case scenarios, this could again cause unrest and violence, as well as worsening the ongoing migration crisis on Europe’s borders.

Despite all this, there is a saying that one should “never waste a good crisis”. Crises are also opportunities. Changes can be made that under normal circumstances are hard to accomplish. It is an opportunity to build the foundations for new initiatives. Many have already pointed to the need and opportunity to turn green and address climate change in a much more substantial way. For security and defence there are also opportunities. An obvious example is the utility of new security technology. Debates about various digital applications for tracking of people are already emerging, as authorities in many countries seek ways to prevent massive outbreak of the virus.²⁴ More conventional security and defence systems may now also accelerate towards a less human-dependent future. Perhaps new

robotics and other digital and autonomous systems can help an aircraft carrier remain operational even if half the crew is knocked out by a virus. The digital revolution was on its way before the coronavirus, but new knowledge about societal weaknesses in health and civil preparedness may trigger new ideas, solutions and technologies that are more resilient (or less fragile) than existing solutions and organizations. Before this can materialize, however, the world will need to navigate through the dire straits of both short- and medium-term challenges. If states, international organizations and enterprises fail in resolving these peacefully, insecurity and instability may characterize international relations in the years to come.

In such a scenario, the coronavirus may even be the foundation for new weapons. As Walter Russel Mead has put it, “the virus has provided the world with an extraordinary demonstration of the power of weaponized biology”.²⁵ The 20th century, he argues, was the Age of Physics, with the nuclear bomb as the primary weapon. The 21st century, he continues, “looks now to be an Age of Biology, when the capacity to unleash gene-engineered plagues on one’s opponents—or their crops—can provide countries with strategic advantage”. However, as mentioned above, viruses cannot be controlled once unleashed. This applies to both biological and digital viruses. As a result, their military utility is debatable and Mead’s predictions may therefore be exaggerated. Even still, the merger of biology and digital technology is coming. The fusion of the digital and autonomous with bio, nano and chemical substrates is at the forefront of ongoing research, including in the military sector.²⁶ This is the arms-race of the 21st century. What that will bring is unknown—but in the worst case it could dwarf the coronavirus crisis. ■

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Endnotes

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What are the possible short-, medium- and long-term implications of the coronavirus for global security and defence? In this Strategic Update, Karsten Friis investigates the pandemic's potential consequences for the world, its armed forces, the integration of Europe, US-China relations, as well as the concept and practice of 'war' more broadly. Although much remains uncertain, the disruptions which are beginning to emerge demand a reckoning with a changed world—and world order.

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