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COVID-19 and World Order

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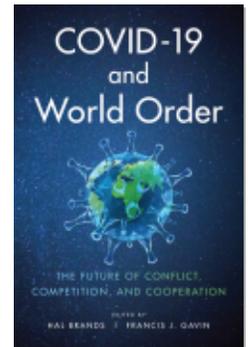
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Could the Pandemic Reshape World Order, American Security, and National Defense?

Kathleen H. Hicks

The COVID-19 pandemic seems at once to be top of mind for international relations scholars while low on their list of enduring drivers. As economists and public health experts tally the virus's accumulating effects, prominent international relations scholars have generally limited their analysis to the ways in which COVID-19 is accelerating trends already underway. Structural explanations prevail. The US national security community appears more concerned but conflicted. Will the pandemic convince Americans to draw inward, amplifying nationalist sentiments and reducing the appetite for multilateral approaches? Or will it give new impetus for global engagement?

Making predictions in the middle of the pandemic is fraught. Yet history and recent events provide guides, and they point toward this pandemic mattering and mattering big. It will not only accelerate changes underway, but if policy makers are up for the challenge, it presents an opportunity to reshape the future of world order and national security. For defense watchers, this prospect is both daunting and fortuitous. The US defense world could use some reshaping if it is to contribute effectively to the nation's future.

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COVID-19 and the International System

Some prominent analysts have spoken of COVID-19 as “an accelerant” to trends already underway in the international system. “The pandemic and the response to it,” one writes, “have revealed and reinforced the fundamental characteristics of geopolitics today.”¹ COVID-19 is undeniably serving this accelerating function in several ways. Yet there is also evidence the pandemic may help reshape the international system. If democratic-minded nations can seize on this potential, the straight-line projections of the accelerant narrative would be inadequate to capture the force of COVID-19’s effects.

The frame of competition among great powers, so prominent in US national security circles, is clearly playing out during the pandemic. In addition to continued foreign policy adventurism by Russia, Iran, and North Korea, China has attempted a multipronged influence campaign around COVID-19, including covering up and misinforming on the scale of cases inside China; undertaking health diplomacy, such as providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to Italy and other hard-hit countries; issuing official statements blaming others; and manipulating social media to divide Western countries.² Russia and Iran have undertaken less ambitious but similar efforts.³ Ever audacious, Russia pointedly donated medical equipment to the United States in April 2020. President Donald Trump, for his part, has attempted to focus attention on China’s inaction and dissembling at the outset of the outbreak, but he has done so using racist language about COVID-19, referring to it as “kung flu” and the “Chinese virus.” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has repeatedly called it the “Wuhan virus.”⁴

As the pandemic turns up the heat between the United States and China, it is illuminating two facts at once. First, it underscores that the most important bilateral power dynamic for the coming decades is between these two countries. Second, however, it provides further evidence that bipolarity will be an inadequate description for the evolving international system.⁵ Competition between the United States and China is not on pace to define the system to the same degree US-Soviet relations defined the Cold War era, and COVID-19 has set them back even further. Neither nation has fared well in managing the pandemic, with trust and confidence declining for both. The world is not nonpolar, but these two powers, it seems, have failed to generate magnetism sufficient to induce the levels of bandwagoning and/or balancing behavior expected of bipolar systems.

Instead, countries such as Germany and South Korea, and, but for Sweden, the European Union, have proved more adept and resilient in managing the crisis.

This may only fuel the degree of independence some states and entities are exerting from the United States and China, including other great (although lesser) powers, from the European Union (or France and Germany, if the reader prefers), the United Kingdom, and Japan to India to Russia. Several of these great powers, as well as Pakistan, North Korea, and soon potentially Iran, are also declared nuclear weapons states, further complicating simplistic bipolarity narratives.⁶

Then there are the transnational and subnational issues affecting the nature and expression of power itself. Even before COVID-19, several such trends were demonstrating their importance to the international system. Climate change stands out, given its potential to affect states' sources of strength—especially economic, demographic, and geographic—as well as their inclinations toward cooperation and conflict as they seek to mitigate and adapt to changes underway.⁷ Also notable is the revolution in advanced technologies, which is proliferating know-how and production in fields like biology, information and computing, and robotics, both across states and below the state level. Shifts in military and economic power differentials could come from any of these vectors, but they are most likely to come at the intersection of several. For example, global information consumption, advanced computing algorithms, the availability of vast amounts of social media data, and automation are combining to influence operations of unprecedented scale. In many cases, these campaigns aim at dividing societies and nations, amplifying ideational challenges between autocracies and democracies, feeding ethnic nationalism, and amplifying concerns around globalization and internationalism.

As a pandemic, COVID-19 manifests the potential of transnational challenges to interstate relations and the operations of the international system. It is also begetting or accelerating a range of other transnational and subnational trends. In addition to spurring new influence operations, tension between globalization and nationalism is playing out around travel bans, support for the World Health Organization, and the search for supply-chain independence. Two prominent political scientists recently warned that amid COVID, “the world seems to be headed toward growing division and national self-reliance.”⁸

Where mere acceleration of trends ends and reshaping of the international system begins is open to some debate. Still, it appears that a collective focus on the former is obscuring evidence of the latter. Just as jarring global events, like wars, have done in the past, it is worth asking whether COVID-19 may shift the trajectory of the international system toward greater order. Several scholars are skeptical the pandemic will or can do so.⁹ Yet there are some early signals in domestic

and foreign affairs that should not be quickly dismissed. Three of the most notable signs are moves by some democratic regional powers to balance nationalism with greater international engagement, the growth of citizen movements, and expanding public awareness of and push back against influence campaigns.

First, the abject failures of the United States and China to lead international COVID efforts is spurring greater voter engagement on internationalism inside the United States and other democracies, providing some green shoots of hope for a shift toward greater cooperation. In the wake of Brexit, when a further unwinding of the European Union seemed possible, the EU instead demonstrated substantial appetite for integration with its creation of a COVID-19 stimulus fund. Similarly, South Korean president Moon Jae-in used the banner “Corona Diplomacy” to convince the G20 to hold a virtual emergency summit on COVID in March 2020.¹⁰ These democracies, largely performing well in meeting the pandemic’s challenges, are developing more agency and moving to act cooperatively in the absence of global leadership from elsewhere. Recent polling suggests most of the US public shares this interest in greater global engagement and multilateral approaches to tackle security problems.¹¹

Second, autocracy may be winning, but democracy is poised for a resurgence. The downward slide in global freedom is well documented and has been ongoing for nearly fifteen years.¹² Existing restrictions on citizen liberties in North Korea, China, Russia, and Iran have been accompanied more recently by backsliding in places like the United States, Hungary, and Saudi Arabia as well as substantial new repression in India. Unsurprisingly, attacks from right-wing extremists grew more than 230% from 2013 to 2018 in the United States, Oceania, and Europe.¹³ COVID-19 and the societal restrictions imposed to combat it have already been used to generate new conspiracy theories and further fuel such extremism, resulting in neo-Nazi attacks in the United States.¹⁴

The decline of freedom is not standing unchallenged. Over the past decade, protest movements have been on the rise, growing more than 11% globally between 2009 and 2019 and above that level in the advanced democracies of Europe and North America. In 2019 alone, anti-government protests occurred in 114 countries.¹⁵ A 2016 labor rights protest in India drew the largest protest crowds in history, estimated at more than 180 million people.¹⁶ The five largest protest gatherings in US history have all occurred since the 2017 inauguration of President Trump, each significantly larger than his inauguration crowd.¹⁷

Where it is not repressed, people in the streets can translate into people at the ballot box. In the 2018 US congressional midterm election, almost 50% of the

eligible voting population voted, the highest percentage of midterm voters since 1914. In 2014, just one midterm cycle earlier, turnout had been the lowest in seventy-two years, at 36.7%. This is not solely a US phenomenon; voting has surged in Europe as well. The December 2019 European Union parliament elections saw the highest EU turnout percentage since 1994.¹⁸ The outcomes of these elections in the United States and Europe did not all point in one political direction. In several European countries, nationalist parties performed very well. Nevertheless, the degree of recent voter engagement is striking, juxtaposed as it is against global threats to freedom. In the first half of 2020, Chinese repression in Hong Kong and police brutality and systemic racism in the United States seem to have only propelled global protests and citizen mobilization.

Finally, there are signs that the pandemic is spurring greater democratic resilience to influence operations. As noted previously, China has substantially ramped up its disinformation efforts in the United States and around the world in the wake of its early failure to stem the pandemic.¹⁹ China is not alone. Russia and Iran are suspected of similar information campaigns aimed at deflecting from their own pandemic challenges and seeding doubts and divisions in the West.²⁰ Such disinformation efforts align fully with the kind of gray zone tactics that periods of intense interstate competition breed. Compared to prior years, however, democracies around the world have been especially quick to “name and shame” China and others engaged in disinformation, calling early attention to the problem and providing early and direct health information to publics in ways that build trust in these democratic governments.

Of course, some disinformation efforts are coming from inside Western societies themselves. In the United States, President Trump, other elected officials, and those close to them have also lied and misled on public health safety issues arising during the pandemic. These efforts, while still deadly in their effects, have been blunted by the competence and airtime afforded to epidemiologists and other health professionals. Moreover, the pandemic’s propensity to deliver outcomes that align to expert advice has helped push back against conspiracy theories and lies. Whereas the public had grown cynical about expertise prior to COVID-19, by April 2020, more than two in three Americans expressed trust in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and their doctors for accurate information. Fewer than one in four put great faith in President Trump’s public health information.²¹ This figure fell well below Trump’s electoral polling, which suggests that even some of his supporters are distinguishing between his attractiveness as a political figure and his reliability as a public health leader. It is more difficult for disinfor-

mation to thrive in an environment where expertise is valued, and small gains may be built upon in other areas. The Black Lives Matter movement appears to be further spurring counters to disinformation. The capture of Ahmaud Arbery's and George Floyd's killings on video and the subsequent crowdsource debunking of antifa attacks are empowering citizens to use technology to reset popular paradigms of fact and fiction.

The pandemic thus may not only be shaping the international order, it may be shaping it in positive directions that previously seemed unlikely. Whether positive change now follows depends largely on the direction taken by great powers. Democracies have an opportunity for collective action. If they can capture it, the nature of their security and the order itself may improve. Nowhere is this possibility more tantalizing than in the United States.

National Security Anew

COVID's potential to reshape our world extends from the international sphere to the making of US national security. As of this writing, more than 130,000 Americans have died from COVID-19, with well over 2.3 million cases of the virus reported in the United States.²² The economic impacts of the pandemic are historic in scale, generating sizable business closures and unemployment while prompting massive government stimulus spending. A pair of McKinsey analysts likens the moment to America's mobilizations for two world wars. Rather than ask residents to join a war effort beyond their homes, government incentives during COVID-19 are designed in part to help people socially distance and reduce non-essential activity.²³

How could this seismic dislocation fail to affect how Americans pursue national security? History suggests Americans typically adjust policy agendas at home and abroad as world events emerge. The Soviet space program led to the National Defense Education Act, failures in Vietnam led President Richard Nixon to China, the dissolution of the Soviet Union begot new attention to small wars and ethnic conflicts, 9/11 shifted US focus to countering terrorists around the world and fighting regime-changing wars in the Middle East, and, most recently, Russian and Chinese coercion has led to renewed priority on "great-power competition." Yet these examples also demonstrate that Americans often react late, tend to "fight the last war," tune out foresight analysis, and at times reach for cures that are worse than the disease. The most important question for national security, then, is not *whether* COVID-19 will affect our conception of global challenges and US strategy but *how well* we meet the challenge.

The most immediate implication of COVID-19 for US national security will be to strengthen long-standing efforts to broaden the conception of security to encompass health, climate, and domestic economic and societal competitiveness. The stimulus packages already passed into law begin the needed reboot of the global health policy agenda, which had been a priority for multiple congresses and administrations prior to the Trump administration's evisceration of these programs. The goal now will be to shift from the "cycle of crisis and complacency" on global health to building enduring pandemic preparedness.²⁴

This pandemic's legacy will also be felt in a more rapid embrace of climate change as a priority issue in national security. Health and climate are linked, and approaches to addressing them also share similarities: they typically require action at the local, national, and international level; the private sector and regular citizens meaningfully contribute to solutions for both; they affect everyone, but they will hit the world's most vulnerable first and hardest; they are best met with long-term, preventative policies; and many of the means to effect change lie outside the traditional national security tool kit. It thus bears exploring the implications of climate change more closely, as COVID-19 is likely to help it resonate as a national security issue with average citizens and security experts.

Heretofore a deeply partisan issue, climate change is increasingly a bipartisan priority for millennials and Generation Z voters. In the 2020 presidential election cycle, this cohort will be equal in size to baby boomers and their predecessors (aged 56 and older).²⁵ That climate change is a threat has long been accepted by the national security community. More than a decade ago, the US intelligence community concluded that "global climate change will have wide-ranging implications for US national security interests over the next 20 years."²⁶ With COVID, the politics, technology, and economics of climate change are finally catching up to analysts' concerns.

As a security issue, climate change multiplies security challenges in four major ways: (1) it threatens the existence of nations, (2) it makes weak states weaker, (3) it drives new contests among the strong, and (4) it imposes financial costs on security providers.

Eliminates territory: Sea level rise fueled by warming at the Earth's poles creates a near-term existential crisis for island nations, especially in the Pacific Ocean. For instance, the Marshall Islands, with its population of more than fifty-five thousand, expects to be underwater by 2030.²⁷ Nations in the Caribbean Sea, those at low altitude, and those with low-lying areas are also vulnerable to extinction or substantial dislocation.

Makes weak states weaker: Climate change accelerates instability by exacerbating underlying socioeconomic and political problems. It puts pressure on water resources, food production, and livelihoods and is affecting first many who are least able to cope. This includes nations that lack the governance practices and institutions to address the needs of their citizens. According to UN population projections, of the one hundred fastest-growing cities (by population), eighty-four are categorized as facing extreme risks of climate change and a further fourteen face high climate risks, mostly in Africa and Asia.²⁸ These results may be seen in the number and scale of humanitarian disasters, disease outbreaks, socioeconomic unrest, mass migration, crime, corruption, and intrastate violence, as well as interstate tensions. There is even a link to the flow of migrants from Central America across the US border, as climate change degrades farming conditions in places like Guatemala.²⁹

Drives new geopolitical competition: Geopolitical competition is also playing out in climate change. Nowhere is this more evident than the Arctic. Since 2002, NASA estimates that the Arctic minimum sea ice has declined at a rate of 12.8% per decade.³⁰ The region is hotter today than it has been at any point over the last four thousand years. With sea lanes opening, transits of the Bering Strait have more than doubled in the past decade.³¹ Russia, the United States, and other nations adjacent to the Arctic, and China, which is attempting to brand itself as a “near Arctic” nation, all have expressed interest in the Arctic’s natural resources, including minerals and petrochemicals. These nations also find the promise of shorter shipping routes between East Asia and the Atlantic Ocean appealing. New coastlines are also generating new military facilities in strategic locations, especially by Russia.

Security provider costs: The Department of Defense’s own capacity to respond to climate-related disasters is under strain. The US military operates in many areas of the world that face significant degradations from climate change, including within the United States. In 2018 and 2019, extreme weather at Tyndall Air Force Base (Florida), Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune (North Carolina), and Offutt Air Force Base (Nebraska) inflicted more than \$8 billion in damage.³² Financial costs on the military are also borne when the US military deploys in support of civilian agencies at home, such as with forest fires and hurricanes, and overseas, such as with tsunami relief. The Pentagon must brace for budget and readiness impacts resulting from climate-related increases in the frequency and severity of natural disasters.

Health and climate are just two of the “nontraditional” issues propelled to the center of the national security agenda in 2020. The United States is stumbling in

meeting the task of global economic competition and Russian and Chinese gray zone tactics like political, economic, and information coercion. These failures, taken together with COVID-19, the brutal killing of George Floyd, and the profoundly imprudent use of force against protesters in Washington, DC, have weakened US global standing. As I have argued elsewhere, healing America's domestic dysfunctions is a national security imperative.³³ The politicization and utter failure of US actions in response to COVID-19, and the spectacle of the Trump administration's strongman showmanship in the face of calls for racial justice, send signals of ineptness that play directly into competitors' narratives and plans. The United States cannot compete to secure its interests in the global arena when it is incapable of unifying and progressing its society at home.

With all that COVID-19 is revealing, US national security is primed for change. Advancing a more encompassing approach to security requires a new look at our national strategies, institutions, and investments. Disruptive collaboration that hones the nation's competitive edge will require trust and partnership between the government and the private sector. Competing effectively also requires pooled approaches with like-minded democracies. The US alliance system and international institutions need both repair and new vision. A next generation of diplomats must be grown. Information must be elevated as a significant element of foreign policy and economic statecraft expanded not only to coerce rivals' behavior but also to persuade friends and partners. In a world of growing multipolarity, the United States will need the collective strength of civil society, academia and businesses, and allies and partners to meet the challenge China and other authoritarian states present to its interests.

Implications for the Military

The United States will also still need its military. Acknowledging the many security needs that exist outside the military realm does not erase the reality that China, Russia, and other states are demonstrating the will and capability to use military forces to alter the character of the international system on terms that threaten American democracy and prosperity as well as the rule of law. Many Americans wrongly assume the nation retains a tolerable military edge to deter threats to its vital interests. The US advantage is eroding. Russia and China are aggressively pursuing advanced military capabilities, including in missiles, cyberspace, and space, and they are also using *fait accompli* tactics, disinformation, and proxy warfare to achieve relative gains.

The COVID-19 pandemic worsens many aspects of military competition for the United States. It is heightening the level of threat, requiring increased attention on the health and readiness of the armed forces, and expanding needs for defense support to civil authority at home and possibly abroad. These realities worsen the already troubled fiscal picture confronting the Department of Defense. Added to the sluggish pace of US adaptation to, or counterstrategy for, the high-low mix of capabilities and tactics potential adversaries are putting forth, prospects for defending against some classes of military threats are waning. As with national security more broadly, however, COVID-19 presents an opportunity to reshape rather than just accelerate current military trends seeming to favor Russia and China.

Military Threats in the Pandemic

Adventurism by China and Russia continues amid the COVID-19 outbreak. In the first half of 2020, China has renewed tensions with India over disputed border territory. It has also provoked skirmishes in the South China Sea with Vietnam and Malaysia, with the latter incident involving US and Australian vessels as well. It has stepped up its maritime activities near Taiwan, as has the United States, and near Japan. Perhaps most ominously, it has imposed a new national security law in Hong Kong that expands the Chinese Communist Party's digital and physical autocracy beyond its mainland.

Even as China agitates beyond its borders, the pandemic will almost certainly push back its military spending agenda. Using its own, usually rosy, assessments, the pandemic has damaged China's economy, with growth declining by 6.8% in the first quarter of 2020. Likely more telling of COVID's effects is China's announcement to forego any growth targets for this year.³⁴ Then, in May, China announced its smallest planned increase in defense spending in thirty years. The reported defense downshift is small, and future People's Liberation Army (PLA) budget trends bear monitoring. Beyond assessing shifts in its defense top line, understanding how China is spending its defense funds would shed light on COVID's impacts. China is not prone to provide such transparency, but it is reasonable to assume that it will divert military funds to cover costs related to the pandemic, including the PLA's role in domestic security, internal infrastructure projects, and force health and readiness expenses. Its industrial base is also likely suffering during COVID, due to worker absenteeism and possible work stoppages.

The Russian military, and likely its industrial base, are also suffering from mismanagement of the virus. First claiming no military personnel were infected,

Russia has been forced to announce some quarantines in its army.³⁵ The Russian defense budget was already projected to decline slightly in FY2021, and COVID's effects on the Russian economy, together with the collapse of oil prices, will pressurize it further. However, Russia has typically protected its highest-priority military projects during difficult times, and it is reasonable to assume President Vladimir Putin will attempt to do so again in the coming years.

To date, Russian aggression has continued during the pandemic. It undertook unsafe fighter maneuvers near US aircraft operating in the Mediterranean. It performed a direct-ascent antisatellite missile test, following on the heels of weapon-like satellite maneuvers near US space assets in February. Most notably, it stepped up the scale of its presence in Libya even as it remains engaged in Eastern Ukraine, Crimea, and Syria. As noted previously, its influence operations also continue apace, focused on influencing the forthcoming US presidential election, European democracies, and the transatlantic relationship.

The US Military and COVID-19

As China, Russia, and others grapple with the pandemic's effects on their economies and militaries, and continue to press against US interests, America's military is confronting its own challenges. Most immediately, it must attend to the health of service members and their families, as well as the broader defense workforce. Health and readiness are interdependent: health precautions impede some readiness measures, but a sick force cannot be a ready force. To date, the armed services have stayed relatively healthy and relatively ready. The most significant and public COVID-19 outbreak occurred on the USS *Theodore Roosevelt*, an incident that brought the resignation of an acting navy secretary and the firing of the vessel's captain. Overall, however, the number and severity of infections has been manageable. The Department of Defense cannot take for granted this will continue and thus must sustain focused attention—and investment—to ensure COVID-19 does not become a significant health and readiness challenge. This necessitates use of temporary quarantines, shifts in exercise plans, and other adaptations.

In addition to health and readiness concerns for its own, the Department of Defense also has a long history of providing defense support to civilian authorities in times of national emergency. President Trump declared COVID-19 to be just such a national emergency in March 2020, with a lackluster federal response following thereafter. After this very slow start, the Department of Defense has dedicated some attention and resources to its domestic support mission. It has not fully met the potential of its role in assisting contracting efforts through the De-

fense Production Act, and its early efforts to lend medical personnel and assets, such as hospital ships, were underwhelming. More recently, the president tasked the secretary of defense with co-leading Operation Warp Speed, which aims to rapidly produce and distribute a vaccine to Americans. It is too early to judge that effort.

The Pentagon's slow response in aiding civil authorities on COVID-19 stands in contrast to the speed with which it found itself embroiled in the White House's plans for countering Black Lives Matter protests. The ensuing civil-military crisis erupting in Lafayette Park and around Washington, DC, in June 2020 may generate further pressure to rebalance the national security enterprise away from military solutions. Trust between citizen and soldier is central to healthy civil-military relations in a democracy. Now more than at any other time in a generation, the military establishment may be called on to prove itself worthy of that trust, and of the investment American taxpayers make in it.

The pandemic is thus pressurizing defense spending by increasing demands on its resources at the same time economic and societal trends may be lowering the total funds available. Before COVID, the Trump administration was already signaling that the defense budget would likely be lower in a second term. At the beginning of 2020, the budget deficit was running at about \$1 trillion, and deficit hawks were looking ahead to the potential for more constrained federal spending in a hoped-for second term. The pandemic has now eliminated the possibility of significant near-term deficit reduction. Stimulus funds to help the economy survive and recover from the coronavirus have ballooned the deficit to \$4 trillion, with the potential for further spending to come. Together with the trust deficit the military now bears with some lawmakers and citizens, and the desire to invest in other areas of American competitiveness and national security, the new fiscal reality has only increased the pressure to constrain defense spending in the next presidential administration, no matter which candidate wins.

A squeeze on military spending will not be easily borne. The United States does not retain the advantages it once had, and the hurdles to cutting smartly are high. Despite the Winston Churchill adage, running out of money does not always generate more thoughtful approaches to strategy and, without strong leadership, can amplify rather than stamp out bureaucratic pathologies. Yet neither does having more defense dollars equate to better capabilities or likely victory. There are simply too many political and bureaucratic factors affecting how defense dollars are spent to make a direct correlation between inputs and outcomes one way or another. If US history provides any guide on these matters, it is that the nation at

times reaches pivot points in which it acts to reshape its national security approach and America's military. COVID-19 cannot take full credit for bringing the United States to this point, but its role is larger than is currently acknowledged and certainly greater than a mere accelerant to the process.

It is not enough to reach a pivot point. One must also exploit it. Many changes are needed to compete effectively in the modern military realm, including limiting ongoing military operations and making greater use of collective approaches and nonmilitary foreign policy tools.³⁶ Three force development priorities particularly bear mention for reshaping America's defense in a post-pandemic world.

1. The United States must conceive, test, and constantly adapt its strategic and operational approaches in line with its goals. It must have theories of victory. The leadership of the Department of Defense spends most of its energy building budgets, monitoring current operations, and navigating acquisition issues. Its strategic and conceptual enterprises are too often backwaters. If the department is to change the way it fights, it must start with an enterprise-wide commitment to the operational art, tied to strategic purpose and experimented with routinely. Failure is an option, and the more it happens early and cheaply, the better for the evolution of thought and capability. If the US military is going to seize the advantage rather than react to advances made by others, its leaders must be selected, trained, and rewarded for these attributes.
2. In an era of competition and global threats, the United States would do well to ensure flexibility with a high-low mix of capabilities. Even as it takes a portfolio approach, the US military should prioritize in two crosscutting areas. First, it should capitalize on its own asymmetries, at the strategic (e.g., alliance), technological (e.g., undersea warfare), and operational (e.g., a ready and well-trained force) levels. If defense spending is cut substantially, many worthy investments may need to be slowed or shelved, so getting the asymmetries right will be vital. Second, it should ensure sufficient investment to close gaping weaknesses, especially in logistics, cyberspace, information operations, and space. Relative US advantages and weaknesses will shift over time, so this force development priority must interact with the prior one. The United States will need a systems approach in which it continuously assesses capability investments against current theories of victory while using its capability findings to inform the evolution of those theories.

3. The United States will need a global posture that acknowledges the pressure for speed of response with the need to provide sanctuary for follow-on forces. Allies and partners that are resident in Europe and Asia can and should provide significant elements of localized early response. Nevertheless, there are advantages for the United States in positioning certain types of capabilities close to potential adversaries. Ensuring strong relationships with allies and partners will be vital to ensuring needed access for American forces and for generating the capabilities and interoperability required during crises.

A shift in approach cannot come soon enough. The US rhetoric on competition is well outpacing the reality of its capabilities, both across society and within defense. Cultural change is not happening swiftly enough, hampered by a business-as-usual approach on personnel, conceptual art, experimentation, acquisition, and budget. The political will to take unpopular stances is low, including needed decisions to curtail some current production, to close underused installations, to redesign structures and operations, and to undertake substantial benefit reform. If the moment passes, COVID's legacy for the military may simply be to further expand the distance between the goals of American deterrence and its ability to credibly achieve them.

Conclusion

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is reshaping the world as we know it. The United States and China matter tremendously to the future order, but states are glimpsing a true world of anarchy facilitated by these two powers, and they are looking beyond their own borders for ways to manage it. The American public also sees disorder and the nation's contribution to it. Together with evidence of systemic dysfunction at home, the United States is beginning to grapple with the need for change and assessing the domestic and international elements that might strengthen Americans' safety, prosperity, and freedoms. Countervailing trends toward ethnic nationalism and government control coexist with these realities, as they have for at least the last decade. With all that the pandemic has exposed, however, the winds of change are blowing more clearly toward a chance for reform and renewal.

For defense watchers, these trends might be ominous. US defense spending is likely to decline in the coming years, under pressure from the reshaping of American national security and in the presence of fiscal challenges that the pandemic is substantially compounding. America's military is still needed, and it is in some

trouble. Yet there is opportunity for the US military in the broader shifts underway, from increased economic competitiveness to strengthened tools of statecraft to repaired relations with allies. The pandemic may just be the long-awaited galvanizing moment the United States needs to generate major improvements in its military and defense enterprise.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Richard Haass, "The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It," *Foreign Affairs*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-04-07/pandemic-will-accelerate-history-rather-reshape-it>.

2. Edward Wong, Matthew Rosenberg, and Julian E. Barnes, "Chinese Agents Helped Spread Messages That Sowed Virus Panic in U.S., Officials Say," *New York Times*, April 22, 2020, updated April 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/us/politics/coronavirus-china-disinformation.html>; Michael Birnbaum, "E.U. Accuses China of Waging Pandemic Disinformation Campaign," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/eu-accuses-china-of-waging-pandemic-disinformation-campaign/2020/06/10/55af8a78-ab1f-11ea-a43b-be9f6494a87d_story.html.

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