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Rethinking U.S. National Security after Covid19

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Abstract: The United States has traditionally defined national security in the context of military threats and addressed them through military spending. This article considers whether the United States will rethink this mindset following the disruption of the Covid19 pandemic, during which a non-military actor has inflicted widespread harm. The author argues that the US will not redefine national security explicitly due to the importance of the military in the US economy and the bipartisan trend toward growing the military budget since 2001. However, the pandemic has opened the floodgates with respect to federal spending. This shift will enable the next administration to allocate greater resources to non-military threats such as climate change and emerging diseases, even as it continues to increase defense spending to address traditionally defined military threats such as hypersonics and cyberterrorism.

Keywords: pandemic, Covid19, national security, defense spending, military, overseas contingency operations, post 9/11, Iraq, Afghanistan

After two decades of rising defense budgets, the COVID19 pandemic has made it painfully clear that military spending alone will not ensure America's national security. The United States has been among the worst hit countries in the world, with 5.6 million cases and 175,000 deaths¹. As Senator Bernie Sanders observed in March 2020, "this crisis is beginning to teach us that we are only as safe as the least [health] insured person in America."²

But will America learn this lesson?

In the past, such warnings have been unheeded. In early 2018, Microsoft founder Bill Gates advised that the world should be preparing for a pandemic "in

¹ Johns Hopkins University, 22 August 2020 (Associated Press n.d.).

² Senator Bernie Sanders press conference, Burlington Vermont, 13 March 2020, referring to health insurance.

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the same serious way it prepares for war”³. He suggested staging simulations, war games and preparedness exercises to simulate how diseases could spread and to figure out the best response.

The Trump administration did the opposite – slashing funding by 20% for the Centers for Disease Control and its research into emerging infectious “zoonotic” diseases (Bilmes 2020). At the urging of former National Security Council (NSC) Director John Bolton, the President also disbanded the White House directorate of global health security and biodefense and reshuffled its team of world-class infectious disease experts.

Trump’s response was extreme; however he reflected the prevailing mentality towards national security before the pandemic. The US has traditionally defined threats to national security in military terms. Accordingly, the strategy to address them has been to increase military spending.

Previous efforts to shift away from this view have largely been unsuccessful. When President Harry Truman assumed office in January 1949, he hoped to realize a post-world war II peace dividend with which to invest in domestic programs. The American intelligence and defense agencies thwarted this effort, calling for increased military preparedness to counter potential threats from the Soviet Union. This process culminated in 1950 with the publication of National Security Council-68 (NSC-68),⁴ a document that called for much higher military spending to contain communism. Truman was forced to accept its terms after war broke out on the Korean peninsula in 1950.

President Bill Clinton tried again to secure a “peace dividend” at the end of the Cold War. He reduced defense spending as a percentage of GDP to a post-WWII low of 2.9% – a policy that helped produce a fiscal surplus in the years 1998–2001. However, Clinton’s approach was unpopular within what President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously dubbed the “military-industrial complex”⁵. Leading military think tanks and other conservatives called for the United States to peg defense spending at 4% of GDP, regardless of any specific national security threats facing the country (Eaglen 2007).

This brief period of military retrenchment during the 1990s ended abruptly on September 11, 2001. The 9/11 attacks had a profound impact on the American psyche. There had not been a foreign attack on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor in 1941. Fifty million Americans watched live footage of airplanes being flown into the twin towers in lower Manhattan. Television and cable stations broadcast the aftermath

3 <https://www.facebook.com/TheNewEnglandJournalofMedicine/videos/10155849069743462/>.

4 NSC 68/1: U.S. Objectives and Programs for National Security. September 21, 1950 (Administration of Harry S. Truman 1950).

5 Eisenhower’s final speech as President, January 1961 (Eisenhower 1961).

of the attacks for 93 continuous hours, the longest coverage for any event in U.S. history (Carter and Rutenberg 2001).⁶

The event reinforced the linkage between US national security and military preparedness. Members of Congress from both parties immediately rallied around President George W. Bush (MacAskill 2008). The Congress enacted an “Authorization of Military Force” (AUMF) for the President “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided” the September 11th attacks and “any entities that harbored them.”⁷ The resolution passed the Senate passed by a vote of 98–0 and the House by 420–1.

On October 7th, 2001, President Bush announced a “Global War on Terror” (GWOT). The initial U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan was designed to destroy terrorist bases and dismantle the Al-Qaeda infrastructure. However, Bush outlined far more ambitious goals, including anti-terrorism efforts around the world, rooting out weapons of mass destruction and diminishing the “underlying conditions” that foster terrorism and “threaten US national security” (Heeley et al. 2018, p. 9).

The US launched a “preemptive” war in Iraq 18 months later. The invasion of Iraq was a war of choice in that the United States was not attacked by Iraq, nor under threat of an imminent attack (Stiglitz and Bilmes 2008). Declassified documents show that the United States began actively preparing to invade Iraq almost immediately after the first bombardment in Afghanistan.⁸

Senior administration officials, including Dick Cheney; his protégé, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and others were able to develop a *casus belli* by arguing that Iraq presented a direct risk to US national security (Battle 2010). In a radio address to the nation on September 28, 2002, President Bush warned that Saddam Hussein posed a unique threat:

The danger to our country is grave and it is growing. The Iraqi regime possesses biological and chemical weapons, is rebuilding the facilities to make more, and, according to the British government, could launch a biological or chemical attack in as little as 45 minutes after the order is given (Bush 2002).

Initially, the public supported these interventions. In 2001, 89% of Americans were in favor of the invasion of Afghanistan (Reinhart 2019). Nearly three quarters of the public also supported sending troops to Iraq in March 2003 (Newport 2003).

⁶ The John F Kennedy assassination was the second longest coverage, broadcast for 70 hours.

⁷ AUMF PL 107-40 passed as Senate Joint Resolution 23 on September 14, 2001. Officially there is only one “Gulf War,” which began on August 2, 1990 and has not been officially ended (see 38 USC 101(33)). There are three AUMFs: 1991, 2001, and 2003.

⁸ National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 326 (2010).

The 9/11 attacks also inspired President Bush and Congress to establish a cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This was the largest reorganization of government since 1947. The DHS merged 22 government agencies with responsibilities ranging from protecting nuclear materials to drug smuggling. The new configuration enabled the Pentagon to become involved directly in activities ranging from the “war on drugs” to policing the Arctic. As one scholar described it, “this threat-environment mosaic is not a clear matrix of hostile states and non-state groups, but rather a threat “spectrum” — a range of hostile challenges from what Americans consider “war” to what most label as “crime” (Goss 2006).

Over the past 19 years, the defense establishment has grown wealthier and more powerful. The DoD is now the largest employer in the world, with 3.2 million employees, including active duty service members, civilians, Guards, and Reservists in addition to millions of private contractors (Peters 2020)⁹. National spending on defense grew to 4.2% of GDP by 2008¹⁰ and never fell back to pre-2001 levels (Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) and DoD 2020).

The wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the nearby region (the “post-9/11 wars”) have cost the US between nearly \$6 trillion, according to the Brown University costs of war project (Crawford 2019). Congress paid for the conflict using special “emergency” supplemental appropriations and “overseas contingency operations” (OCO) funds, which circumvented regular budgetary limits and added an extra layer of funding above the DoD base (Bilmes 2018). Total defense outlays grew by 50% between FY 2002 and FY 2019, due to the influx of war money as well as higher base funding. The U.S. defense budget reached its highest level since World War II (see Figure 1).

The Pentagon also achieved greater autonomy over its budget. The Department’s detailed knowledge over its own vast and complex operations was not available to the other participants in the budget process. As Niskanen and Dunleavy point out, this greater access to information and ability to restrict details about costs provide a built-in advantage in the budget game (Dunleavy 1991; Niskanen 1971). As Forrester writes, “If the bureaucracy is the monopoly supplier and restricts information about its true costs” then it is “institutionally allowed to make take-it-or-leave-it budget proposals” (Forrester 2001, p. 103). In such situations, bureaucracies can have the power to obtain “excessively large” budgets (Mueller 1989, p. 255). The DOD had a near-monopoly of

⁹ The DoD is 50% larger than the People’s Liberation Army, which employs 2.3 million and is the world’s second largest employer (Stimage 2018). Paul Light estimates that the DoD employed over five million contract personnel in 2005, however the exact number is unknown (Light 2006).

¹⁰ The DoD budget accounted for 4.2% in 2009, 4.6% in 2010, 4.7% in 2011, 4.6% in 2012, and 4.2% in 2013. Thereafter it fell, ranging from 3.2 to 3.8%.

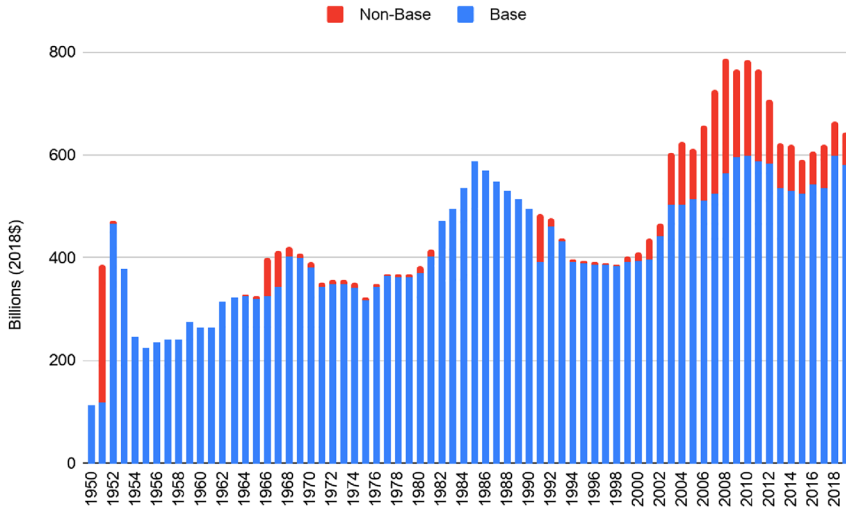


Figure 1: Base and non-base DoD budget, FY 1950 – FY 2019.

Source: (McGarry and Morgenstern 2019).

information on the details of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, which gave it the power to request the amount of funds it desired as a “take-it-or leave it” proposition.

Moreover, Congress financed the entire 19 years of conflict through debt. Due to low interest rates, low inflation and high demand for US Treasuries, the supply of war funding has been effectively unlimited. For the first time in US history, the country has been engaged in a war without the pain of conscription, tax increases or domestic spending cuts (Hormats 2007; Kreps 2018).

The surge in military spending and the ready availability of funds for new defense programs encouraged the United States to see the world through a “Pentagon lens” where military intervention became the preferred foreign policy option (Conetta 2008; Roberts 2008).

More than 92% of “Overseas Contingency Funding” funding since 2001 was awarded to the DoD, even for activities that are not traditionally under the purview of the Pentagon.¹¹ For example, DoD has overseen the \$200 billion dollar economic “reconstruction” program in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has been criticized for waste, fraud and outright failure (Sopko 2016, 2018). By 2018, some 22% of U.S. development funding was controlled by the Defense Department, up from 3.8% in 2000 (McGarry and Morgenstern 2019). The “soft power” of State Department

¹¹ Between 7 and 8% of the appropriation has gone to the State Department.

diplomacy and of multilateral organizations such as the UN were increasingly relegated to a back seat.

Despite the lengthy wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the failed U.S. intervention in Libya, the muddled U.S. activity in Syria and other setbacks, there has been little discussion in Congress or in the media about the scale or effectiveness of military spending, and whether the accompanying shift of power to the Pentagon is the best way to promote U.S. national security.

The post-9/11 military build-up has persisted throughout the Bush, Obama and Trump presidencies. Prior to his election in 2008, Barack Obama vowed to end “hidden” war appropriations, and voted against “open-ended” appropriations for the wars¹².

But once elected, President Obama made only modest changes, such as replacing the term “GWOT” with “Overseas Contingency Operations” (OCO), to signal a change in tone. In 2009, he pledged to bring the war in Iraq to a “responsible end” and shifted the focus of US military attention back to Afghanistan (Belasco 2009; Obama 2009b). Along with Admiral Michael Mullen (chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2007 to 2011), Obama called for increased spending on “soft power” and the State Department¹³. But the Obama presidency was overtaken by the 2008 economic crisis. He was unwilling or unable to take on the vested interests in Congress and the defense industry that benefitted from military dominance.

Donald Trump came to power in 2016 vowing to escalate the role of the military. He has doubled down on this promise, in particular by expanding the use of OCO funds to include new initiatives in Europe, building part of the border wall with Mexico, launching an expensive new “Space Force” and expanding research into UFOs.

In 2020, America has learned that no wall is high enough to keep virulent pathogens from crossing national borders. This experience will almost certainly make it possible for a new administration to adopt a wider view of national security that includes emerging biologics, climate change, international diplomacy and economic resilience. However, it is unlikely to overturn the mindset that equates national security to military preparedness.

The pandemic will push the national conversation on national security in two directions. First, government spending limits have been effectively suspended. On the other hand, the DoD will endeavor to take advantage of this development to continue growing its budget.

¹² Roll call vote on H.R. 2206, May 25, 2007 (Obey 2007).

¹³ Admiral Michael Mullen, March 4, 2010 (John J. Kruzell 2010).

The pandemic has forced the federal government to spend money on an unprecedented scale. During the first 10 months of FY 2020, federal spending reached \$5.6 trillion, compared to just \$867 billion for the same period during 2019. Revenues were 1% lower, while outlays were 51% higher, compared to the previous year (Congressional Budget Office 2020). The cumulative federal budget deficit for 2020 is projected to reach nearly 50% of total federal spending, and close to 17% of GDP – the highest shortfall since 1945 (DeSilver 2020)¹⁴.

The pendulum has swung in favor of big spending among economists, elected officials and the public. According to the Pew Research Center, less than half of Americans now view the deficit as a major problem, far fewer than in 2018 (Dunn 2020). Both parties have incorporated some aspects of the controversial “Modern Monetary Theory” (MMT) into their thinking. Its leading proponent, Stephanie Kelton, argues that the federal government should ignore deficits because it can create money directly (Kelton 2020). Kelton, a longtime adviser to Senator Bernie Sanders, is now integrated into Vice President Joe Biden’s economic team.

Biden has pledged a raft of expensive public initiatives, including to expand health care, education and unemployment benefits, to subsidize college tuition, provide financial aid to states and cities, invest in infrastructure and examine proposals for reparations and restorative justice. One of the centerpieces of his campaign is a sprawling \$2 trillion plan to tackle climate change (Glueck and Friedman 2020). This would be achieved by making huge investments in clean fuels, clean cars and energy efficient buildings as well as setting aside nearly one-third of America’s land and water for protection.

Although Biden has not articulated a new doctrine for national security, he has long supported international alliances and agreements. According to his campaign platform, Biden will seek to “elevate diplomacy as the premier tool of our global engagement” and to rejoin global efforts such as the Paris Climate Accord¹⁵. Some of his closest advisors have experience dealing with emerging public health threats. For example, Biden’s chief of staff as Vice President, Ron Klain, coordinated U.S. preparedness and assistance during the first major Ebola epidemic in 2014–2016, as Obama’s designated “Ebola czar”.

Another development in 2020 is increasing public attention to the plight of Black and minority Americans, who have suffered disproportionately from the pandemic. The murder of George Floyd on May 25th in Minneapolis ignited protests in more than 2000 American cities (Burch et al. 2020). This movement launched a grassroots call to re-allocate resources away from police departments into

¹⁴ By contrast, in 2009 at the peak of the Great Recession, the budget deficit accounted for 40% of total spending and 9.8% of GDP.

¹⁵ Biden campaign platform <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/#>.

measures like affordable housing and social services that prevent crime in the first place. The analog at the national level would be to shift funding from costly weapons programs into preventative efforts to enhance economic security, such as guaranteed income and Medicare for all. The progressive wing of the Democratic party has largely embraced this view.

Despite this dynamic environment, it is unlikely that a Biden administration will redefine national security in non-military terms, or seek to redirect military spending toward non-military threats. The defense community will push back hard against any reduction in the role of the Pentagon. During nearly of 20 years of unrestricted wartime funding supplements, with minimal oversight, the military has become accustomed (and arguably addicted) to rising budgets, a model that former Secretary of Defense Gates dubbed “the culture of endless money” (Gates 2010).

Second, defense spending is essential to nationwide employment. DoD has a longstanding practice of placing military facilities (such as Naval shipyards, Army bases, and Air Force installations) in virtually every state and Congressional district. Private defense firms have also made tactical decisions to locate manufacturing and support facilities in Congressional districts throughout the country (Adams 1981; Thorpe 2014). Defense contractors also wield significant influence, as one of the most powerful lobbies in Congress (Adams 1981; Thorpe 2014). These firms have become even more powerful since 2001 because private contractors have comprised 50% or more of the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan (Peters, Plagakis, and Kapp 2019).¹⁶ Hence, defense spending is vital to the health of many Congressional districts, where military installations or defense-related companies are often the largest employers. Given the fragile economy caused by the pandemic, few Members of Congress will support cuts to the military budget.

Finally, the consensus view within the powerful defense establishment is that America faces serious new security threats, within the traditional definition. For example, Biden’s national security team-in-waiting contends that the US military must invest in new technologies in areas such as hypersonics, cyberterrorism and artificial intelligence, in order to retain its superiority and “cutting edge” in dealing with China, Russia and non-state actors (Flournoy 2018). There are also numerous projects internal to the Pentagon that are being considered—all of which cost money—such as whether to reorganize the regional command structure (Ferenzi and Weber 2020). Apart from supporting international alliances such as NATO, it is

¹⁶ The ratio of contractors to military personnel was 1:1 in Iraq and 2.5:1 in Afghanistan, compared with 1:55 in the Gulf War, 1:5 in Vietnam, 1:4 in Korea, 1:7 in World War I, 1:24 in World War II, and 1:15 in the Civil War (McFate 2016; Peters, Plagakis, and Kapp 2019).

clear that future Pentagon leaders will call for higher defense budgets to meet external and internal challenges.

In conclusion, although a small virus has overturned life and well-being across America and the rest of the world, it is not powerful enough to fundamentally reshape how American thinks about national security. The most important consequence of the pandemic is that it has ushered in a new era of big government spending. This largesse will allow the US to allocate more resources to efforts such as public health, climate change and economic revival. If designed effectively, such spending may help to protect the population against future threats, even if the programs are not designated as part of a new national security plan. A Biden administration is likely to adopt an “all-of-the-above” strategy to national security, by increasing the budget for sophisticated weapons systems and advanced research into potential military threats, however hypothetical, along with higher spending for everything else.

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