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# COVID-19 and the future of security and defence

EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY  
POLICY BRIEF

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**The European Leadership Network (ELN) is an independent, non-partisan, pan-European network of nearly 200 past, present and future European leaders working to provide practical real-world solutions to political and security challenges.**

### **About the author**

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COVID-19 is the biggest global threat in existence. In its current form, in the spring of 2020, it continues to infect large swathes of the global population, kill hundreds of thousands, and force billions into lockdown. The resulting economic collapse<sup>1</sup> threatens the prosperity of every single state in the world, escalating international tensions<sup>2</sup> and risking social unrest<sup>3</sup> in many parts of the globe. Moreover, absent a vaccine and/or proven treatment for the virus, the very real possibility of a second wave later in the year looms large, threatening a repeat of contagion, death, lockdown and further economic meltdown, and potentially further international and domestic tensions and unrest.

The Transatlantic community should have been able to deal efficiently with a pandemic, at least theoretically – not just as a matter of scenario planning, in which such an eventuality regularly appeared, but also as a matter of capabilities. Every member state boasts both security and defence forces and resources, overlaid by NATO and its guarantee of territorial defence, and in Europe by the EU as a security union. Both separately and together, all these are amongst the most advanced resources in the world, yet when tested they all failed, at least in terms of preventing the spread of the Coronavirus.

Having failed on prevention, COVID-19 forced every NATO and EU member state – as also approximately half the citizens in the world – to undertake actions that even in early 2020, just prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, seemed both implausible and impossible: to live in lockdown and stop nearly all activity other than that necessary for the supply of health, food, utilities and essential services. These drastic measures were taken to secure lives, and all the resources of states – and the EU and NATO – including their available military and defence capabilities, were mobilised in support of this core objective.

It is a new and potentially profound reality, which poses interesting questions as to the direction of security and defence issues in the post pandemic era, notably as to whether these domains will revert to business as usual, or indeed whether they can, or should. For the current silos of security and defence are no longer fit for purpose in a borderless interdependent world, and must be refocused upon a joint understanding of risks and the prevention of threats to the benefit of people as well as states.

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52273988>

2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/coronavirus-threat-to-global-peace-and-stability-un-chief-warns>

3. <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-imf-worldbank-coronavirus-protests/pandemic-could-trigger-social-unrest-in-some-countries-imf-idUKKCN21X1RC>

A significant problem of business as usual in security and defence is that there is often little clarity as to the core meaning of the terms and categories. Up until the end of the cold war, the terms broadly denoted the division between internal and external capabilities: police and dedicated intelligence services for security, the military and other intelligence services for defence. For sure, there were overlaps, but by and large the divisions were useful and reflected the activities of one group within state borders and as related to non-military activities abroad, and the focus of the other group upon defending the borders and beyond. But as the world has broadened conceptually into the realms of cyber and space, and as time has passed since the clarities of the cold war, security and defence have lapsed into a miasma of confusion. The media often use the terms either as one (“security-and-defence”) or else interchangeably, as synonyms. And while practitioners appear clearer, matters are not much better: simply adding a space command to the military does not make it a matter of defence any more than adding a digital arm to a police force or an intelligence agency make it an issue of security. For ultimately, is access to GPS or Galileo a matter of defence or security? Is a cyber-attack on a bank or a national utility a matter of defence or security – and is there a difference

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between the two events? Indeed, is a terrorist attack a matter of security or defence? It is clearly happening within a state, often by a citizen of it, yet within minutes soldiers are often out on the streets in response.

In a globalized, interconnected and interdependent world, afflicted by climate change, internal and external can no longer be defining categories. And while COVID-19 has clearly undermined some elements of globalization, notably the physical movement of people and trade, it also underlines its very existence, given the rapid spread of the virus across the globe with no respect for physical borders. Moreover, the heavy reliance upon cyberspace throughout the pandemic<sup>4</sup>, for everything from supplying aid, information, work and schooling to ordering food,

4. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/02/8-charts-on-internet-use-around-the-world-as-countries-grapple-with-covid-19/>

maintaining contacts and offering entertainment, also suggests that while some decoupling of supply chains may occur, and modes of trade may change, the interconnected and interdependent world is not going to disappear any time soon. As such, security and defence should also be defined and evaluated within the context of globalization, as tools of interconnected and interdependent states, alliances and unions.

Spending has also become a component in defining defence and often security. Defence budgets, while in some cases may be an indicator of capabilities, have become a form of litmus test: the bigger the better, the smaller the weaker. The eternal argument over attaining 2% of GDP spending in NATO has become a hallmark of this debate, as if the sum of money in itself is the answer to the puzzle that is defence, rather than the purposes to which it must be put, within a broader vision of the alliance and its aims. Much the same is true of the escalating arms race between the US, China and Russia, closely followed by a number of other states. The expanding list of hardware of every kind appears to ignore the reality that in the wars of the past three decades, notably in Afghanistan and Iraq, action was mostly advanced at company and platoon level since the enemy was not another formulated state; and that a lot of the hardware was necessary to defend long supply lines, not to fight. And there must be

an irony in the fact that as the world locked down in the face of the faceless enemy that is COVID-19, SIPRI released its annual factsheet on world military expenditure<sup>5</sup>, noting that in 2019 it had reached nearly US\$ 2 trillion. If nothing else, this must reflect that spending and budgets, or indeed a global arms race, are not a definition of security or defence.

Taken together, it is possible to suggest that business as usual in defence and security has largely been a case of maintaining the structures, and in many cases the concepts, of the cold war and adding to them as events and realities evolved, often at vast expense. This has repeatedly proven both inefficient and ineffective, be it in dispatching troops to conflict, from the Balkans to Afghanistan and the Middle East, to dealing with the rise of global terror, from Al Qaeda to ISIS and their terrorist acts in the US and Europe, or indeed the increasingly insidious emergence of cyberspace and all the resulting destabilization it has wrought. Then there is the re-emergence of Russia, notably in the Crimea and Georgia, the rise of China and its increasingly aggressive stance, all alongside the increasingly destabilizing stand-offs with Iran and North Korea, and hovering over them both – as well as Russia and China – is the potential for nuclear escalation.

These are but a small if significant selection of core issues related to both security and defence that have

5. <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>

been and remain on the horizon, and it is difficult to assert which category each belongs to, definitely not within existing structures and concepts. That in itself is a very good reason to not resume business as usual – coupled with the fact that the economic crisis wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic will very probably make it increasingly difficult to justify the vast defence budgets and arms race that have lately emerged, especially in the democratic world. At the same time, the pandemic poses the strongest need to find a clear formulation of defence and security in our current reality. For we are in uncharted territory: the risk latent in the virus was either missed or very undervalued, allowing it to rapidly become a potent threat against which no defences exist – then or now. Lockdown, social distancing and hand washing are essentially delaying tactics, which is why the threat remains potent. And it is within this reality that the meaning of security and defence must be understood: not so much as a question of business as usual or not, but as the business of life, its destruction and what comes after.

Rather than borders and budgets, threats and risks are the heart of the matter, crucial to the understanding of security and defence. A threat is a patent, clear danger, while risk is the probability of a latent danger becoming patent; evaluating that probability requires judgement. Within this framework, defence is to be seen as the defeat or deterrence of a patent threat, primarily by military

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means; while security involves taking measures to prevent latent threats from becoming patent and if the measures fail, to do so in such a way that there is time and space to mount an effective defence. Military measures are not necessarily the primary way of achieving security – yet the repeated presence of the military upon the streets of Europe, the US, Canada and many other parts of the developed world since the rise of international terrorism, as obviously in autocratic regimes, suggests they have increasingly come to be seen as an element of security.

Given the potency of cyberspace, the clarity of climate change, and an increasingly globalized world, the array of risks has clearly expanded massively over the past two plus decades, which explains why both civilian and military bodies deal with it. However, as reflected by the example of terrorist attacks, in some cases the mechanisms of mounting defences

in the face of risks becoming threats did not succeed: old divisions between internal and external structures did not necessarily allow for rapid shifts from security to defence. COVID-19 was also clearly a security failure: the risk was not assessed correctly, and no defences were available when it rapidly became a threat – and so it also became a defence failure.

Some of the international tensions and issues that have arisen from the pandemic have already produced new risks and threats. China, under increasing international attack for the virus break out, has mounted a virulent defence, lashing out at internal and external critics<sup>6</sup>, while at the same time trying to reinvigorate its economy. As such, it seems that it perceives the latter is at risk, which is why it is putting in as many measures possible to revive it; but that the regime of the Communist Party headed by Xi is under threat, hence the far more aggressive measures it is using, such as demanding the EU change a report on Chinese disinformation during the crisis<sup>7</sup> or threatening Australia with trade sanctions over its demand for an international investigation into the origin of the virus<sup>8</sup>. Much the same is true of the Trump administration in the US, that has been lashing out

in all directions clearly seeing itself under threat. At the same time, the somewhat lacking manner in which the US has dealt with the pandemic has put its global leadership at risk, and it is unclear whether the necessary defences are being put in place in case this flips into a threat. And in Europe, the initial withdrawal of each state into its national borders and absence of solidarity is perceived to have put the EU at risk.<sup>9</sup>

These examples, as well as the COVID-19 virus itself and also the effects of climate change, suggest some of the most obvious risks are not necessarily of a military nature, yet they are the very essence of the current security environment. And even if they flip into threats, the military may not be the best response, at least not at the forefront. To ensure the threats do not emerge, and looking ahead to a post-COVID world sometime in the future, it may well be that greater convergence between the silos of security and defence, and proper resourcing of both, will be a more efficient and effective way to deal with security and defence.

Keeping in mind that security is still in essence devoted to people and defence to states and territory, and that the civilian and military

6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/04/world/asia/china-coronavirus-answers.html> ; <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/18/asia/china-world-health-assembly-investigation-intl-hnk/index.html>; <https://www.ft.com/content/8d7842fa-8082-11ea-82f6-150830b3b99a>

7. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/china-pressured-eu-to-drop-covid-disinformation-criticism-sources/>

8. <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/china-australia-trade-war-looms-over-covid-19-investigation>

9. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/how-coronavirus-is-reshaping-europe-in-dangerous-ways>

establishments have intelligence operations respectively focused upon each, the first step would be in creating a mechanism for pooling relevant material from the disparate domains in a joint risk assessment operation. Such mechanisms exist to some degree in various states, but the spread of COVID-19 suggests they were not effective, whilst at the international level the sharing of information is minimal to non-existent. If the latter is to be improved, the UN and its bodies must be resourced and empowered to do this, at least in areas common to all, such as pandemics, climate and hunger.

At European and Transatlantic level, the greater convergence of security and defence would mean creating a properly resourced joint operation between NATO and the EU. Given NATO tends to see everything as a military issue, and the EU as trade and social ones, the convergence is clear. The aims would be firstly an ongoing collective risk assessment that would identify latent threats, and secondly a resulting ongoing consideration of the defence operation necessary if the risk becomes a patent threat, and the resources necessary to defeat it. This does not mean the EU issuing warnings of a need to send in battleships if the trade war with China escalates any more than NATO keeping strategic stocks of wheat in the face of extended drought. Rather, it means being able to jointly understand

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what risks the people and states of the Transatlantic community face, and how to ensure correct measures are put in place before they become threats.

To an extent this has already happened with the repeated presence of soldiers on the streets in the case of terrorist attacks – or indeed with the utilization of the logistical and engineering capabilities of the military during the pandemic. However, rather than see these as an aberration to be corrected, it may be time to create standing properly resourced structures. Not only could this make better use of dwindling resources, it may actually deliver better security and defence to the citizen and taxpayer.





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