



## THE STRATEGIC SHOCK IN THE DESIGN OF WAR BETWEEN CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY: COVID-19

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The hybrid warfare concept developed in many ways during the past twenty years. What we are facing today is a new component, limited previously by its potential worldwide impact. Biological weapons have the advantages of facile and silent spread, are very difficult to detect and deter in terms of individual and collective protection equipment. The consequences of biological weapons use have implications at political and diplomatic level, but also operationally and tactically-wise. The main aim in these difficult times is to maintain combat readiness and to strengthen national defence.

**Keywords:** CBRN; pandemic; defence; combat readiness; hybrid warfare.

Within the past twenty years, the greatest politologists, strategic thinkers and defence futurists acknowledged the tremendous prominence of war dimensions<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>, especially the so-called "hybrid" one. And, together with this hybridity, they emphasized the special place that nuclear weapon systems have in the global war space. We did highlight in some of our previous papers the importance that chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons have together with the explosives (CBRN) within the hybrid war, next to the space and cyber facilities<sup>5,6,7</sup>.

In the modern history, the highlight was on the chemical and nuclear dimension, with the well-known examples from World War I and World War II, from Vietnam, the US and Japan. Less attention was given to the biological side, where actually even natural diseases significantly influence policies and strategies, and, consequently, the military strategies, thus illustrating the potential worldwide impact of a deliberate release of biological agents or use of biological weapons.

In this respect, intentional release of various bacteria or viruses represents an important

dimension of threat, as part of conflict and hybrid war. Biological weapons have the advantages of facile and silent spread, are very difficult to detect and deter in terms of individual and collective protection equipment. Moreover, the enemy owing a biological weapon may use it in any stage of the conflict, with respect to the technical parameters, the environment conditions and the envisaged effects.

### COVID-19 pandemic

The consequences of biological weapons use have implications at political and diplomatic level, but also operationally and tactically-wise. Biological contamination does not choose between military and civilians, between geographic areas or time of the day. But it does reduce force protection operational resources and the morale, redirecting logistics for nonproliferation in spite of operations in due course.

Until this year, no threat of biological input raised real concerns of a pandemic or biological war. Yet, here it is: SARS-CoV-2 and, consequently, COVID-19 appeared as a paradigm shift in the modern war, an invisible enemy that targets every human being alive, regardless gender, age, nationality, religion, health or financial situation, the great powers, the US, Russia and China accusing each other of bioterrorism<sup>8</sup>.

COVID-19 pandemic came with respect to the definition of the real strategic shock, both against wealthy and poor nations, despite the useless efforts from the beginning of the pandemic to disregard its

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power. Next to the disruption in everyday habits, break-outs and shortages in supplies, the highest impact of this pandemic is, incontestably, on the governmental priorities, and, consequently, the international organizations priorities.

Why COVID-19, together with the media empowerment, may be defined as the strategic shock of the century? Due to the fact that it came unexpectedly, it disrupted the world as we used to know it and made a significant shift in the worlds' strategic priorities. Even with a low mortality rate, the additional costs that came worldwide together with COVID-19 are far higher.

We are able to see for ourselves the pandemic's impact on industry and economy, from domestic

time and resources required to recover from this strategic shock?

Thus, two questions arise: at the scientific and technological level of 2020, why the humanity is not able to mitigate a naturally-occurring virus? Or, if this virus is a synthetic one, who would have been so forward-thinking to tailor a biological weapon and, of course, to undertake the risks associated with? And which state or non-state entity may benefit from the pandemic?

In Figure 1, considerations on the observed effects at governmental level and on the consequences at military strategic level are highlighted.

It is clear that policies and strategies available early in 2020 are dismissed, while at UN, NATO

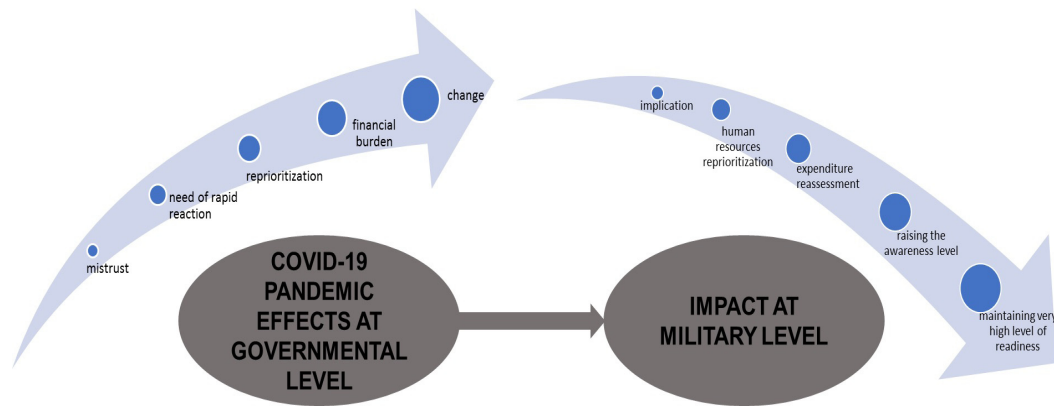


Figure 1 COVID-19 pandemic seen from a strategic level

production to tourism and transport, from professional fairs to leisure events. In due respect, governments will be forced to reassess their monetary and fiscal policies, to balance between opportunities and contentions, to shift from foreign to national policy, from border security to medical security.

**Influences of COVID-19 at strategic level**

Most likely, COVID-19 is going to have also an important impact on the defence budget. While within the past 5 years, at global level a record in defence expenditure has been highlighted, the year 2020 and the COVID-19 economic impact will, most likely, weigh down on next years' budget plans. Is any government able to justify now additional defence expenditure, to the detriment of weakened national industries needing reconstruction, while no one is able to quantify yet the deeds and the

and EU level new ones are under discussion. Further on, would it be still available for the NATO member states, by the end of 2020, to allocate the due 2% GDP for military expenditure, while the unemployment rate in the NATO countries increases dramatically? Or is it the beginning of a new era, where the artificial intelligence (AI) creators/supporters are pushing towards AI employment instead of humans in various sectors, including in military operations?

Who is going to gain from this shift? Or, better, is anyone going to gain anything?

For the time being, we are surrounded by a huge amount of uncertainties, both from a medical and health organizations and security viewpoint. Thus, we can only observe the rupture between institutions, non-coherence between scientists and strategies. And, of course, the small amount of attention that is to be paid to the possibility of a



real hybrid war, with many unknowns to determine and/or to deter.

NATO member states face a great vulnerability against biological weapons at strategic and operational level, since state or non-state actors may balance the forces by using exactly this type of weapons of mass destruction, due to the low fabrication cost and resources employed.

Thus, in order to cope with the present health crisis, both at NATO and the EU level, coordinated actions have been considered in terms of regulatory framework flexibility, budget use, monetary policy and financial support for the most weakened member states, in order to enable them to absorb the COVID-19 shock.

In a press release from 02 April, one may see that NATO stated that its ability to conduct military operations has not been weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>9</sup>. Still, in due time, an objective analysis on COVID-19 military impact clearly shows that the pandemic has a significant three-fold impact on defence: reduction or even cancellation of defence expenditure, cancellation or postponement of planned exercises and diversion of operational resources toward COVID-19 fighting: logistic and human resources as support for patients' air and ground transport, field hospitals, decontamination and borders security.

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) published the figures for the global military spending in 2019, which reached \$1,917bn, as the largest defence budget within the past decade, with a 3.6% increase versus 2018. It is hard to believe that a similar budget would be still available for 2020, especially having in mind that worldwide the armed forces were involved in maintaining the citizens' security and the financial resources and manufacture facilities made a turn towards COVID-19 mitigation. Moreover, that large-scale DEFENDER Europe 2020 military exercise has been initially cancelled<sup>10</sup>, together with national field exercises, daily training exercises or military courses which are not crucial for the sustainment of combat capabilities and the obligations assumed at organizational or international level, and only at after three months being reloaded at a smaller scale<sup>11</sup>. The armed forces worldwide reduce deployments at a minimum for peacekeeping operations and withdraw military personnel from various operation theatres.

The main aim in these difficult times is to maintain combat readiness and to strengthen national defence even during the state of emergency. But we are facing a very rough financial crisis, and thus, even if until now the defence spending has been considered a priority, NATO officials state that every nation's budget relies on state-of-the-art social requirements and political priorities. Consequently, a balance between investments in the armed forces and the public health should be made.

### **Coordinated measures against COVID-19**

Every strategic shock conducts to a major imbalance. At present, what we are able to see is a disturbed world, with citizens tired of having their fundamental human rights disrupted, claiming medical, financial and political solutions. We see shared and opposite opinions from the most powerful people in the world regarding the source and the aim of COVID-19, we see a media covered by fake news, instability and lack of coherent policies at global level.

What is happening behind that?

At NATO level, coordinated efforts come to fulfill the requests of Allies or PfPs which requested assistance<sup>12</sup>. Further, NATO is starting this month a scientific research project for the development of new devices for COVID-19 diagnosis<sup>13</sup>. Meanwhile, the US Navy just directed three warships in the Barents Sea, USS Donald Cook, USS Porter and USS Roosevelt, close to the Russian Arctic shore, and HMS Kent frigate of the UK Royal Marine joined shortly, assuming together the support of the Alliance and freedom of navigation<sup>14</sup>. This occurs after last month events, when Pentagon accused Moscow of endangering a surveillance US Marine aircraft in the international air space from East Mediterranean Sea, after a Russian aircraft made an "unsecure and unprofessional interception maneuver".

In Russia, the armed forces performed in late March a readiness assessment across all branches, emphasizing the role of CBRN branches and the medical support in emergency situations and anti-epidemic mitigation, claiming a full readiness of the troops<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, Kremlin stated that its defence industry (the main sector of the national economy) remains open, in order to sustain the defence requirements according to the current procurement strategy.



Meanwhile, the European Union is coordinating a common response focused on the health and economic sectors. It came the time to highlight the growing need to create non-dependencies over non-EU countries, to reorient production to protective and medical equipment and devices, to relax certain trans-border /transshipment management regulatory frameworks, to facilitate procurement through "green lanes", to involve airline companies to support air cargo and medical care personnel/volunteering operations, and, also to raise awareness on environmental issues.

Together with the aim to mitigate the direct health effects of the pandemic, solidarity in countering the socio-economic impact is requested, since the financial forecasts are very dark. Over €11bn funding is directed to support research on diagnostic and treatment, joint COVID-19 – related procurements, the medical care system and the first common stockpile of equipment<sup>16</sup>. Meanwhile, over €3,4tn are mobilized to mitigate unemployment, to support companies, to provide liquidities, to reorient budget towards businesses, to protect Member States companies from foreign acquisition or influence.

Also, the European Commission promotes "authoritative content" of information in the media and stands against misleading conspiracy-wise theories on the COVID-19 origin and release.

However, there is no information on the European Defence Fund (EDF), which was supposed to begin in 2021, after having concluded the budget negotiations this year – a research program coming to sustain the European Union's necessity of independence in terms of defence industry and defence technology.

### Conclusions

With all the questions raised here and such poor data at strategic level, it is difficult to predict the follow-ups. In most countries, the containment will end soon, policy-makers will reconsider their positions and measures will be taken worldwide to survive the crisis raised by the pandemic.

At the social level, the current activities will be resumed, in agreement with the national customs, and strategic projects and programs will continue. The economy will be affected in the short and medium term, with some areas diminishing in importance and others returning to the forefront,

especially in the immediate support of the fight against COVID-19. Governments will seek to strengthen their positions also in pandemic effects countering, will develop material and human resources in the medical field and will take measures to build reliable national production capabilities for the future.

What remains for military strategists is to be able to reinforce and to maintain the armed forces' high readiness, for the case this strategic shock is only the tip of the iceberg, and this crisis has been artificially created, with an offensive purpose.

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