

# PANDEMIC INFLUENZA, A THREAT TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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**Abstract:** *The Covid-19 pandemic has hit the international community, causing a terrible shock among people everywhere. An invisible enemy that has spread all over the globe and left behind death and suffering, lockdown, unemployment, weakened national economies, a whole new depressing and frightening reality. Were there any other pandemics? Could this pandemic have been better managed? Has this threat been identified in national security strategies? Did the states act separately or unitarily? After almost two years, were there lessons learned? I reviewed the US national security strategies from 1987 to 2021 in order to see if the pandemics were mentioned as threats to the security of the American people. Then I did the same with Romania's last two security strategies. I looked for documents that showed the interest of states for the consequences of a pandemic similar with the one in 1918, which would show that pandemics were perceived as security threats before the Covid-19 pandemic broke out. I also looked for concrete actions of the states for the management of a pandemic, pandemic preparedness plans. I also highlighted the challenges states were facing following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in the medical field and in the economy. Although the management of the pandemic was initially a race against the clock, each country trying to cope with the large number of people hospitalized and lacking medical equipment, it later became clear that cooperation between states and organizations and mutual aid is the solution to get out faster from this health crisis.*

**Keywords:** *pandemic influenza; national security strategy; security threat; United States-European Union collaboration.*

## Introduction

In a world where globalization, democracy, human rights and freedoms have created opportunities for open societies, in a world where the internet and new technologies make it easier for anyone, in every corner of the world, to access information and get in touch quickly, in a world in which you can travel through various means of transport to any destination, the Covid-19 pandemic has made all these advantages disappear. Thus, the borders were closed, tests were needed, lockdowns were imposed, work at home isolated people even more. All the dynamics and bustle of the great cities calmed down, everything froze, an oppressive silence fell over the Earth under the frightening threat of an enemy that made no noise, that could not be seen, that lurked and attacked without warning. How was it possible that in the 21st century, despite epidemics and pandemics in human history, despite the training of national security experts, despite the advances in medicine, despite the existence of the World Health Organization, a virus could get out of control and affect all countries in the world?

### **The Spanish flu and other pandemics – warning signs for an imminent pandemic?**

The Spanish flu was the most devastating pandemic influenza in recent history. It is not known where the virus came from, but it is certain that the pandemic was triggered by the H1N1 virus. The pandemic lasted a year, with the virus spreading around the world between 1918 and 1919. (Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, 2018). By 1900, the world's population had reached 1,600,000,000 (Worldometer n.d.). Given that about 500 million people became infected with this virus, this means that one-third of the world's population has been affected by it. This pandemic has caused the loss of many lives on an unimaginable scale – at least 50 million worldwide. (Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, 2018) And it

wasn't the only pandemic until the one caused by the new coronavirus. Thus, from 1918 until now, humanity has faced other pandemics. For example, in 1957 the H2N2 flu virus caused another pandemic that resulted in about 1.1 million deaths worldwide. Also in 1968, H3N2, another influenza virus, caused another pandemic, with 1 million deaths worldwide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). In addition, from April 2009 to August 2010, nearly 200 countries reported AH1N1 virus infections to the World Health Organization (WHO) (Rashford 2013). Estimates of the death toll are between 105,000 and 395,000. (World Health Organization, Predictably unpredictable)

### **Pandemic influenza – a threat taken into account by the states?**

I found it interesting to review the National Security Strategies of the United States over time to see to what extent and since when the pandemic has been considered a threat. There is no reference to the pandemic in the two national security strategies carried out from 1987 during the Reagan administration to the one in 2002 during the George Bush administration. However, in 1994 “new diseases and epidemics” are mentioned being related only to developing countries (A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement, 1994, 18) Also, there are several National Security Strategies (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2002) in which epidemics such as malaria and AIDS are mentioned, as well as their consequences at the national level: overcrowding of the health system in developing countries, causing tensions in society and economic disruption.

In the National Security Strategy for a New Century elaborated in 1999 the term health threats appears for the first time, and an equally important aspect it is related to the American citizens: “health problems can undermine the welfare of the U.S. citizens, and compromise our national security, economic and humanitarian interests abroad for generations”. (A National Security Strategy for a New Century, 1999, 3)

However, in the National Security Strategy elaborated in 2006 are mentioned the measures taken at national and global level the to respond to “pandemic public health threats”.(National Security Strategy, 2006, section V) In response to a pandemic threat in the United States, projects have been launched to modernize American public health infrastructure and create the best possible conditions for the industry to accelerate the development of new vaccines.

In order to fight a pandemic the Bush Administration has created the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza, a global initiative in which states cooperate in the event of a pandemic through both preparedness and surveillance actions. (National Security Strategy, 2006, section X)

Moreover, in the United States National Security Strategy, elaborated in May 2010, during the Obama administration pandemic diseases are threats for which there are no borders and have the ability to spread extremely quickly in a very short time. (The White House, National Security Strategy, 2010, 38) and a threat to the security of the American people (The White House, National Security Strategy, 2010, 8). The consequences of an epidemic that could cause rapidly a multinational health crisis are also mentioned: millions of people affected, serious problems in trade and travel. In the event of a future pandemic, the US is acting to strengthen international collaboration in order to improve global surveillance and early warning capabilities. The word pandemic (pandemic diseases, pandemic threat, next pandemic) appears ten times in the strategy, which means that the pandemic threat is perceived as an imminent threat to the American people.

Furthermore, pandemic diseases are considered vulnerabilities in the United States National Security Strategy, elaborated in February 2015, also during the Obama administration, which determined actions to enhance pandemic preparedness. In the Strategy

is stated that America is the only leader in fighting pandemics. (National Security Strategy, 2015, 14). In addition, as a justification for this leadership role in the fight against pandemics, the same strategy sets out the actions that the US will take in this regard: “the collaboration with partners through the Global Health Security Agenda fighting infectious diseases; the establishment and consolidation of a global system to prevent epidemics, to identify epidemic outbreaks. (National Security Strategy, 2015, 14).

For the Trump administration it is important to combat pandemics because the impact of these threats on national security is significant causing deaths, generating economic decline, and generating a decrease in citizens' trust in institutions (National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017, 9).

The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance carried out by the Joseph R. Biden Administration in 2021 affirms solidarity with the international community as well as the determination to fight both Covid-19 and other diseases that could trigger a pandemic. Also, the United States, as leading nation, will also continue to reform and improve the work of the World Health Organization. In addition, it will redefine the involvement of the United Nations in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the preparation of this organization for the next pandemic. Another direction of action is to promote pandemic preparedness. The fact that the term pandemic appears six times in the strategy text, as well as the fact that preparations are being made to deal with the next pandemic, clearly indicates that this health threat is an imminent one and it will become a reality again.

Not only a superpower like the US has specified pandemics in its security strategy as a security threat. Also in Romania in the National defense strategy for the period 2015-2019 it is mentioned. Moreover, according to the National defense strategy for the period 2020-2024, the Covid-19 pandemic is considered the biggest attempt since 1989 for Romania and the prospect of a new pandemic determines the Romanian state to find solutions to manage the pandemic from many perspectives: medical, economical, educational. (Strategia națională de apărare a țării pentru perioada 2020-2024, 2020, 8) Also, the fact that in the strategy the term pandemic occurs seventeen times in different contexts indicates that the Covid-19 pandemic is a real threat to national, Euro-Atlantic and international security.

These comparisons, on one hand between the US security forces and on the other hand between those of the US and Romania, highlighted the fact that the countries took into account the outbreak of a pandemic. Consequently, it was a threat that was expected to happen, but which appeared unexpectedly.

### **Managing Covid-19 pandemic – a challenge that has revealed many vulnerabilities**

States have expressed interest in asking experts for views on the impact of a Spanish flu-like pandemic. In this regard, in a letter signed by Douglas Holtz-Eakin, Director of the Congressional Budget Office and attached to the report *A Potential Influenza Pandemic: Possible Macroeconomic Effects and Policy Issues* (December 8, 2005; revised July 27, 2006) in response to the request of the Congress of the United States, he states that the Congressional Budget Office developed an assessment of the possible macroeconomic effects of an avian flu pandemic. The conclusions of this report are worrying given that in the event of a pandemic similar with the one in 1918 the impact on the global economy would be really disastrous.

In addition, states have drawn up pandemic preparedness plans to be prepared in the event of a pandemic. Thus, most WHO Member States had publicly available pandemic preparedness plans at the start of the 2009 (H1N1) pandemic except Argentina, the Russian Federation, some Southeast Asian countries and some African countries (Rashford 2013).

However, with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, countries around the world have been facing a shortage of medical equipment for the severely ill, a lack of surgical masks and the inability to buy them due to the supply chain disruptions. There followed a period of chaos in which countries tried to cope with the situation by buying at very high prices products that had a very high market demand.

In October 2020, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, speaking at the Global Security 2020 Bratislava Forum, highlighted the vulnerabilities that have surfaced due to the health crisis. Jens Stoltenberg says safe supply lines need to be provided for NATO member countries. He also recalled the difficulty faced by all countries, namely the dependence on other states for face masks and medical equipment. In order to solve this situation, which could be one of extremely serious consequences for those in a desperate situation on a hospital bed, investments, Jens Stoltenberg said that investments, supply chains and ownership, have another dimension in the current pandemic context. Now, the economic or financial decisions are related also to the security of NATO Member States. Solutions must be found in order to eliminate dependence on various countries, some even very far away, which leads to late receipt of contracted products. Thus, it is necessary to find solutions for secure supply chains for goods and services. At the same time, efforts are needed to strengthen NATO resilience, and the solution is, on one hand, to work with countries and organizations that share the same vision and, on the other hand, a more global approach. Action is needed within NATO countries but also in collaboration with the European Union.

Countries have faced and are facing challenges related to Covid-19 pandemic that have huge consequences on citizens and economies. Lockdowns have had devastating impacts on the national and global economy. People lost their jobs. Both large and small businesses have suffered heavy losses, some even going bankrupt. The transport of products from the producers to the consumers, the supply chains registered major disturbances. (European Investment Bank, 2020, 1) Along with travel restrictions, countries whose economies rely heavily on tourism have been severely affected by the lack of tourists. Also, in the countries that faced a very large number of infections in a short time, the health system could no longer cope with the avalanche of patients. Some of them have been sent, as in the case of EU Member States, to other countries in the Union for treatment. The other solution was to send teams of doctors from one EU country to another EU country that needed specialized human resources.

The initiative of collaboration between the United States and the European Union to fight against the global pandemic is the implementation of the U.S.-EU Agenda for Beating the Global Pandemic, Vaccinating the World, Saving Lives Now and Building Back Better Health Security of 22 September 2021.

States have understood that the Covid-19 pandemic, like other security threats which have no borders such as terrorism, organized crime, cannot be fought individually but through joint action.

### **United Nations action to fight influenza**

As a result of the serious consequences of the Spanish flu, the United Nations has taken action in the event of another pandemic. Thus in 1947, the Interim Commission of the World Health Organization was established the Global Influenza Program and in 1948, the World Influenza Center was established to monitor, analyze and disseminate health data on any epidemics. (United Nations, The Yearbook of the United Nations) Numerous WHO collaborating centers have also been set up to better manage epidemics and pandemics and and they have proved their effectiveness from 2005 to the present.

According to doctors, pandemics cannot be predicted. Dr. Wenqing Zhang, Manager of WHO's Global Influenza Programme, stated that another pandemic similar to Covid-19 pandemic will break out, but it is impossible to say when. This inability to predict the outbreak of a pandemic makes this threat to international security much more difficult to fight. The most important thing is prevention. Prevention costs are always considerably lower than resolving an out-of-control situation. Thus, according to estimates, the cost of fighting a flu pandemic costs US \$ 60 billion every year; pandemic preparedness in contrast, cost only US \$ 4.5 billion a year. (World Health Organization, A unique disease)

Pandemic influenza is a threat to human security, a threat that has implicit repercussions on the national and global economy. That is why we need to find ways to better manage this type of threat. According the experts, the best way to prepare for the next pandemic is global collaboration.

In March 2020, Secretary-General António Guterres remarked about COVID-19, “This war needs a war-time plan to fight it.” The most recent plan, launched in September 2020, the UN Comprehensive Response to COVID-19, focuses on three components: a health response guided by the WHO and its Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan; a socio-economic and a Global Humanitarian Response Plan; and a transformative recovery process that leads to more just, equal and resilient societies and economies after COVID-19 (United Nations, The Yearbook of the United Nations).

## **Conclusions**

Pandemics have existed for centuries but Spanish flu and the other pandemics that broke out in 1957, 1968, 2009 show that humanity is facing an invisible enemy that can strike at any time unexpectedly. In this way, humanity can face the next pandemic at any time.

Since 2006, every US national security strategy, except for the 2017 one, during the Trump administration, has highlighted pandemic diseases as a threat to the American people. This clearly shows that the possibility of a pandemic affecting all countries of the world was foreseen. Also, the measures provided for in national security strategies at both national and international level to combat pandemics demonstrate once again that they pose a severe and current threat to health and national security.

The studies and reports on the effects of a pandemic similar to the one in 1918 on the economic sector, the health sector shows the concern of states and the international community in terms of the consequences and ways of managing such a threat. The implementation of pandemic preparedness plans means that countries are aware of this threat and are taking the necessary measures to better manage the next pandemic.

In addition, both medical experts and states and international organizations have understood that collaboration on several levels is vital: global surveillance, pandemic preparedness, early warning capabilities, new vaccines and medicines.

The inability to predict when the next pandemic will break out, the emergence of new viruses for which there is no vaccine, the extremely rapid spread of viruses, all that make humanity very vulnerable to a next pandemic that could be much more severe than Covid-19 pandemic. The only solution to fight Covid-19 pandemic is the collaboration between states at the international level, and the collaboration between governmental and non-governmental organizations.

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