



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Strategic Analysis | 13 July 2020

# National Security during the Covid-19 Pandemic

## Strategic Brief No. 1

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Series: [Strategic Analysis](#)

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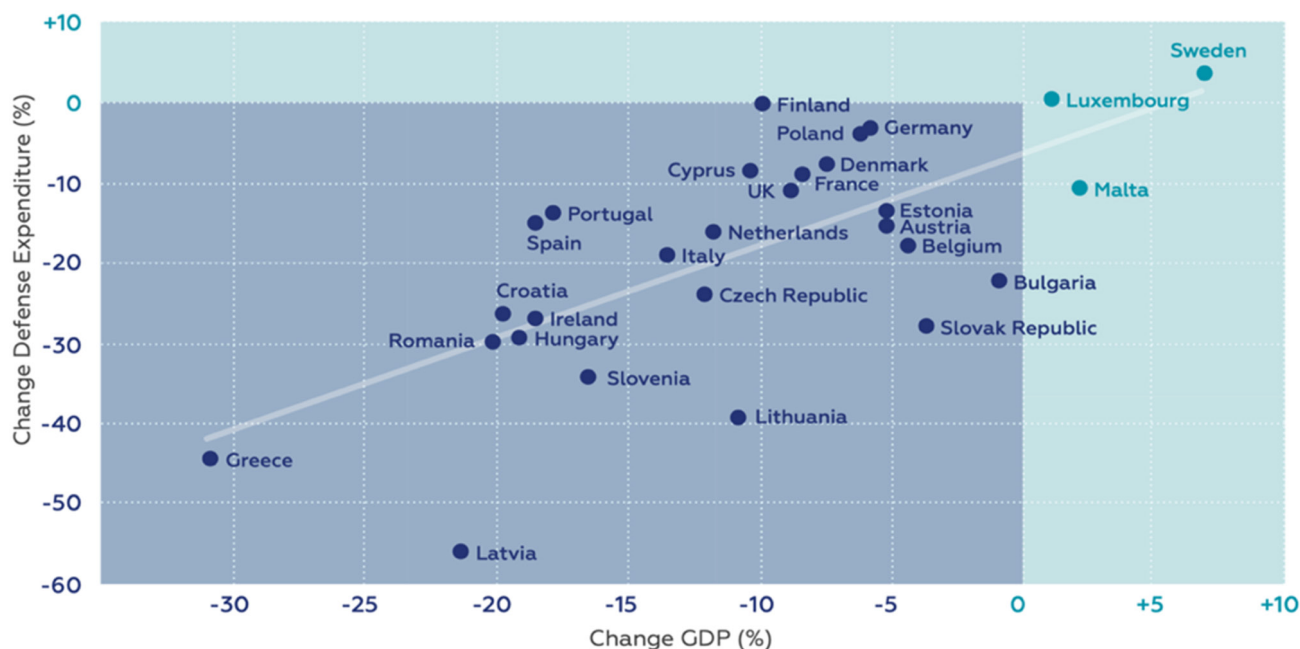
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## I: Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has crystallised the priorities of national security globally, forcing governments to develop emergency strategies to confront this hidden enemy that threatens the security and safety of developed and developing countries alike. This temporary change in national security priorities does not mean that traditional security challenges such as war, terrorism, organized crime, espionage, etc. no longer exist. It is not the deterrence and defence strategies represented by armies, conventional and unconventional weapons, military alliances, intelligence services and so on, but rather their management and training methods that have changed. Figure (1) shows reductions of defence budgets in most of the European Union member states between 2008 - 2012. The reductions are attributed to the global economic crisis of 2007 / 8 in relation to the average GDP of each country.<sup>(1)</sup> The fallout of Covid-19 pandemic is expected to negatively impact GDPs and consequently defence budgets in many countries across the globe. Equally, this pandemic has tested the readiness of traditional health and defence security systems in such a way that raises questions about the very concept of national security. The 'new normal' introduced different physical and online realities which demand reconceptualization of national security, deterrence, and defence strategies.

FIGURE 1: EU28 GDP AND DEFENSE EXPENDITURE CHANGES 2008-2012



Source: For GDP Data - International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database<sup>3</sup>; For Defense Expenditure Data - Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Military Expenditure Database<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sophia Becker, Christian Mölling & Torben Schütz, "Deterrence and Defense in Times of COVID-19: Europe's Political Choices," German Council on Foreign Relations, *Policy Brief*, no. 9 (April 2020), p. 2, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2VzsXXo>.



## II: The Concept of National Security

Covid-19 has redefined the front lines of national security. Most countries have been forced to redirect resources to invest in vital sectors such as health services, pandemic forecasting, cybersecurity, and other sectors.<sup>(2)</sup> To illustrate, due to government lockdowns people are no longer free to enter physical spaces and are instead confined to online spaces. This applies to private and public sectors, including security institutions such as the army, police, and intelligence services.<sup>(3)</sup> It should be noted that many countries, despite the spread of digital technology, were not prepared for this sudden transformation. It remains uncontested that shifting entire institutions to online spaces represents a significant challenge.<sup>(4)</sup> At this moment in time, vital state information is more vulnerable to digital infiltration than ever before.

## III: The Virtual World and Cyber Security

Over the last two decades, the topic of cybersecurity has been ubiquitous and its subject commonplace in research discussions. Covid-19 further stresses the critical role cybersecurity is to play in today's national security. A case in point is the example of a trace and track application (C-19 Covid Symptom Study). The British National Health Service (NHS) decided to build an application which identifies patterns of infections with the aim to stop the spread of the virus. It is instructive to note the involvement of the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), which works in close cooperation with the British intelligence services MI5 and MI6, in the development of this application.<sup>(5)</sup> The fact that GCHQ assisted with the design of this health application demonstrates that COVID-19 has brought about a paradigm shift to the very notion of national security. This pandemic has changed the rules of the game.<sup>(6)</sup>

With the paradigm shift, we need to ask whether the threats traditionally handled by national security remain the same? The answer is only partially affirmative. It is true that states continue to deal with threats such as war, espionage, disinformation, infiltration of electronic voting systems, and cyber sabotage. This remains unchanged. However, the modus operandi of both perpetrators and security services have transformed entirely.

<sup>2</sup> David Barno & Nora Bensahel, "After the Pandemic: America And National Security in a Changed World," *War on the Rocks*, 31/3/2020, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2AovmNa>.

<sup>3</sup> Alex Finley, Jonna Mendez & David Priess, "How do you Spy when the World is Shut Down?" *Lawfare*, 20/3/2020, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/38ilhhc>.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Sussman, "The List: Best and Worst Countries for Cybersecurity," *Secure World*, 13/11/2019, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3ePh8nb>.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Fleming, "GCHQ: Intelligence and Cybersecurity Today," in: "Day 3 - Cheltenham Science Festival @ Home Course," *Cheltenham Festivals*, 4/6/2020, min. 7:58:29, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2AiuoSo>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



Many states have already invested in their digital defences.<sup>(7)</sup> Yet, there is a significant number of other countries that are still not ready to effectively address security challenges in the new landscape.<sup>(8)</sup>

## IV: Zooming In: the Case of Qatar

Bar having a crystal ball, Qatar had a strong infrastructure needed to deal with the pandemic. Just like the rest of the region, Qatar was significantly affected by Covid-19. It was however its experience with the embargo and government response to it that placed Qatar comparatively to the position of the better prepared states for this crisis. This means that the state of Qatar had existing food reserves in place, medical equipment, medicines and other essential supplies necessary for an effective handling of the pandemic. In other words, Qatar was and is self-sufficient making it more resilient to any disruptions in international trade channels caused by Covid-19.

Moreover, Qatar has built a robust digital infrastructure after the cyberattack on the Qatar News Agency in 2017. This very attack was used as a pretext to impose the embargo.<sup>(9)</sup> Once improved, the cyber infrastructure operates as an additional line of defence: here, against various digital attacks.<sup>(10)</sup> In parallel, Qatar strengthened its air, land and maritime defence capabilities; and worked towards the development of a new deterrence strategy that simulates potential regional and international challenges. At the same time, Qatar is working to enhance its relations with friendly countries by building security and economic alliances that work to further the overarching state interests.<sup>(11)</sup>

## V: The Impact of Covid-19 on International Security

Covid-19 will not only impact national security but will also have important ramifications for international security.<sup>(12)</sup> It is important at this junction to stress again that countries have different health care systems. Because the pandemic is a global phenomenon, failures of a local health care system might have negative consequences in other parts of the world. The effects will inevitably reach beyond borders. The global character of the present crisis is also demonstrated through the disruption of international business and trade.

7 Developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Russia, Japan, Qatar, Canada and several EU member states already have secure digital infrastructures capable of protecting their national cyberspace against potential threats.

8 Toby Philips, "A Roadmap for Digital-Led Economic Development," VOX CEPR Policy Portal, 5/2/2020, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3ga5rru>.

9 Ibid.

10 Qatar was in the position to confront and prevent several digital attacks, some of which have been disclosed and analysed, some however still remain unknown. Attacks were targeting both public and private Qatari institutions, with the hacking of beIN sports TV channel among the most prominent attacks on commercial enterprise. See, (1) Mohammed Al-Dorani, "The UAE has recruited hacking experts against Qatar since 2014." Interview conducted by Taha Hussein, Al-Sharq, 3/3/2020, accessed 1/7/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2VxiyLu>; and (2) "This is the story of beoutQ & Arabsat - the Saudi Arabian-backed Pirates of World Sport and Entertainment," BeoutQ TV, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://beoutq.tv>.

11 Ebrar Sahika Küçükasci, "Extente Cordiale: Exploring Turkey-Qatar Relations," TRT World Research Centre, *Discussion Paper* (February 2019), pp. 8, 11, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/31zoyan>.

12 International security is to be distinguished from national security. It is also referred by some as Global Security and it means, "Global security includes military and diplomatic measures that nations and international organizations such as the United Nations and NATO take to ensure mutual safety and security." RAND Corporation, *Global Security* (May 2020), accessed on 8/7/2020, at: <https://www.rand.org/topics/global-security.html>.

As already posited in the previous sections, Covid-19 has fundamentally challenged the traditional security sector. To take the example of infections on ships, one cannot imagine that on-board infections with Covid-19 would result in the shut-down of the navy and its ships, in the way it did with the “cruise line industry.” That could simply not happen. Instead, when countries were notified of Covid-19 infections on their ships, this forced them to rethink and reposition their strategic assets, allowing the infected marines to be treated in the relevant facilities. This was not a purely putative situation, with the first recorded fatality among US marines to have occurred on the USS Theodore Roosevelt in April 2020.<sup>(13)</sup> The disruption to state security strategy would be far greater, when the infection to be remedied occurred on a nuclear submarine. These forced strategic responses to the non-discriminatory nature of the pandemic had a cumulative effect on global security.

Another case in point is the infection and resulting hospitalisation of the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. His absence from the government and most importantly the apparent power vacuum in the control over the UK’s nuclear weapons amounted to significant security challenge. Although undoubtedly all countries have procedures in place for when their leaders are permanently or temporarily incapacitated, Covid-19 is now one eventuality that will have to be expressly considered.

The paradigm shift introduced by Covid-19 demands that states recognise the multi-faceted nature of national security and its interconnectedness and interdependence to international security, both must be addressed holistically. No solution will ever present itself in isolation.

## VI: The Concept of Security after Covid-19

Although some might suggest that the world will return to ‘normal’ as soon as the health threat is sufficiently managed, it is argued here that what Covid-19 has brought about is in fact a paradigm shift. The pandemic has exposed many gaps in security systems and critical infrastructures worldwide. At the same time, it has highlighted the growing importance of online spaces and their cybersecurity, together with the importance of artificial intelligence. These newly discovered challenges are added to the pre-existing obligation of states (democratic or authoritarian alike), to balance between the demands of state security, public health, and the economy without exacerbating the existing threats to freedoms and human rights, especially in liberal democratic systems.<sup>(14)</sup> As seen in the current Black Lives Matter<sup>(15)</sup> movement and the Covid-19 barriers to free elections, states are rarely dealing with a single situation in isolation.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of Covid-19 on security, prospective studies are required. The new understanding of concepts of national and international security demands the stakeholders to reconceptualise them in a clearly interconnected manner. To illustrate, it is now clear

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<sup>13</sup> “Coronavirus: First Sailor on Virus-Stricken USS Roosevelt Dies,” *BBC News*, 13/4/2020, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://bbc.in/2YPj21y>.

<sup>14</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “The Pandemic and Political Order: It Takes a State,” *Foreign Affairs*, 9/6/2020, accessed on 1/7/2020, at: <https://fam.ag/2AmZ05m>.

<sup>15</sup> For overview, the official BLM website, accessed on 8/7/2020, at: <https://blacklivesmatter.com>.



that health systems are not to be invisible in the planning or strategy of national security. Equally, Covid-19 has dispelled any notions that we do not live in a global society. Therefore, national security must be viewed as multifaceted; and international security as embedded in the global society. The paradigm shift however also exposes knowledge gaps around the potential consequences of epidemics on national security and ways in which states can enhance their readiness to deal with such challenges. To fill this gap, further studies are recommended.

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