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COVID-19: National Security and Defense Strategy

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted questions about U.S. national security and crisis preparedness. Inherent to those discussions are broader, foundational questions about how the United States government conceptualizes national security, and the currently held view by many of the relative prioritization of the Department of Defense (DOD) over other instruments of national power.

What Is "Security"?

While definitional debates often seem frustratingly obscure, their outcomes often have a significant bearing on the programs, priorities, and activities of the United States Government. In other words, how a problem is framed matters because those definitions directly affect how the government operates, including how it translates those concepts into the priorities that require primary attention and resources.

Scholars and practitioners have long debated what, exactly, constitutes a "security" challenge, and what the role of the state should be in their management. The tension between traditional "realist" security and "human" security perspectives provides one example of how these debates can play out. Traditional analyses contended that security is synonymous with the mitigation of military risk and the effective deterrence—or prosecution—of warfare between states. In the 1990s, responding in part to genocides in Africa and the Balkans, as well as humanitarian and financial crises, some analysts widened the aperture for security studies. "Human security," a concept of security that uses the individual as its referent point and focuses on the overall well-being of people within society, became another way that scholars and practitioners began evaluating security.

Over time, issues such as access to health, impacts of climate change, food and energy security, and even to some extent counterinsurgency have become associated with the concept of human security. A key question for policymakers has been to what extent, if any, concepts and issues that have become associated with human security should be integrated into national security planning that is still to a significant degree based on updated versions of traditional security concepts.

On one hand, some observers contend that "human security" is too broad to be useful for policy planning; if everything is a security priority, nothing is a security priority. Other practitioners, building on that point, argue that the expansive "human security" definition obscures the formidable defense challenges that adversaries around the globe pose through their military modernization investments. One example: analysts express concern that adversaries including Russia and China, and to a lesser extent Iran and North Korea, have invested in "anti-access/area denial" capabilities designed to limit U.S. freedom of action and therefore constrain America's ability to advance its interests around the globe. U.S. adversaries such as Russia and China are also modernizing their nuclear capabilities. According to this more "traditional" view, diluting the concept of security in defense planning risks the United States being unprepared for a major conflict, should it arise.

Other observers respond that some "human security" approaches better reflect extant realities. As their logic goes, over the past 25 years, "non-traditional" security challenges such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and pandemics including the 2016 Ebola outbreak and now COVID-19 have all commanded more U.S. attention and resources than conventional warfare with another nation-state. They argue that choosing to define security narrowly is choosing to ignore the challenges with which the U.S. government—and U.S. military—have had to contend, and are likely to have to do so in the future.

Differing U.S. Government Definitions of Security

The Obama Administration arguably used a more expansive definition of security in its strategy documents. Its 2010 National Security Strategy argued that key threats to the United States have evolved:

> Wars over ideology have given way to wars over religious, ethnic, and tribal identity; nuclear dangers have proliferated; inequality and economic instability have intensified; damage to our environment, food insecurity, and dangers to public health are increasingly shared; and the same tools that empower individuals to build enable them to destroy.

The Trump Administration, by contrast, chose to focus the national security agenda on strategic competition, primarily with key adversarial states:

> China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence. At the same time, the dictatorships of the democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Islamic Republic of Iran are determined to destabilize regions, threaten Americans and our allies, and brutalize their own people. Transnational threat groups, from jihadist terrorists to transnational criminal organizations, are actively trying to harm Americans.

Preventing China and Russian from developing military capabilities superior to those of the U.S. and creating

"peace through [military] strength" is viewed as a key way by which the U.S. can advance its interests in this competition. The Department of Defense, through the 2018 National Defense Strategy, interpreted the Trump Administration's guidance to mean that the U.S. military ought to prioritize improving the "lethality" of its forces.

The Military vs. Civilian Resource Gap

Why is the United States government seemingly unable to manage both adversary aggression *and* contend with issues usually associated with human security?

One answer to this question relates to a long-standing issue that has created a dilemma for national security institutions for the better part of two decades: the military versus civilian resources mismatch. In theory, the Department of Defense is but one element of national power that can be utilized to respond to crises or contingencies; the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Trade Representative, and other agencies all provide critical capabilities to the broader national security toolkit. During the Cold War, these nonmilitary instruments were vitally important to prosecuting—and countering—political warfare strategies against the Soviet Union. Today, although DOD is generally viewed to be the instrument that fights and wins the nation's wars, in practice, the U.S. military has taken on missions beyond that narrow warfighting scope largely due to the fact that DOD has been provided with the lion's share of national security resources.

Reflecting on the resourcing levels of State and USAID in particular, senior national security officials have long argued that this authorities-versus-resources imbalance is damaging the United States' ability to grapple with a variety of national security challenges. For example, in November 2007, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates argued during a lecture at Kansas State University:

> One of the most important lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that military success is not sufficient to win: economic development, institution-building and the rule of law, promoting internal reconciliation, good governance, providing basic services to the people, training and equipping indigenous military and police forces, strategic communications, and more—these, along with security, are essential ingredients for long-term success.

Gates went on to argue that State Department and USAID personnel and budget cuts during the 1990s contributed to a shortfall of civilian expertise in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, nonmilitary tasks (such as building schools or managing city councils) often fell to U.S. service members, who usually did not have the requisite training to do so.

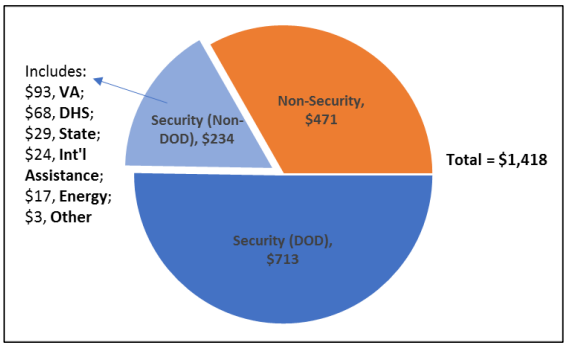
The current COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of strong agencies for managing and mitigating "nontraditional" threats to U.S. security (some examples of other challenges include narcotics trafficking, crime, and climate change) as they manifest themselves both domestically and globally. Given the long-standing civilian versus military resources gap, some observers question whether those agencies that must deal with such challenges are adequately resourced relative to the current and future needs, and whether they are sufficiently integrated into national security plans and operations.

"National Security" Resources Today

Discerning this resource imbalance can be challenging because, in terms of the budget, the federal government does not categorize spending by national security. However, the Budget Control Act of 2011 (P.L. 112-25) initially specified separate "security" and "nonsecurity" categories for discretionary spending limits in FY2012 and FY2013. The security category was broad in scope and included budget authority for DOD, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the National Nuclear Security Administration, the Intelligence Community Management account, and the international affairs budget function (identified by the numerical notation 150). For illustrative purposes, CRS applied this definition of "security" to FY2020 discretionary budget authority estimated in the FY2021 President's budget request to show that such spending for agencies and departments other than DOD would collectively account for approximately one-third of the DOD allocation (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Discretionary Budget Authority, by Security and Nonsecurity Categories, FY2020

(in billions of dollars)



Source: CRS analysis of Office of Management and Budget, Public Budget Database, Budget Authority XLSX; and OMB Final Sequestration Report to the President and Congress for Fiscal Year 2012, p. 3.

Notes: Analysis by Brendan W. McGarry, Analyst in U.S. Defense Budget, and Christopher T. Mann, Analyst in Defense Policy and Trade.

Issues for Congress

In light of the threat posed by pandemics, U.S. leaders, including those in Congress, may once again need to revisit their definition of "security." Congress, in turn, may wish to explore

- whether it agrees with emerging concepts of national security, and whether an adequate balance is struck between "human" and "traditional" security priorities or whether those concepts can be effectively merged into a fundamentally new way to think about security; and
- whether other instruments of national power are adequately resourced relative to current and emerging challenges.

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