

Pandemic Presents New Challenges and Opportunities for US National Security

Featuring Jennifer Cafarella



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The global health crisis caused by COVID-19 has affected nearly every aspect of American society and government. The pandemic has forced changes to individual lifestyles as well as the highest levels of policymaking. In this episode of Overwatch, ISW National Security Fellow Jennifer Cafarella discusses the challenges, threats, and opportunities that COVID-19 presents to US national security.

Jacob Taylor:

This is *Overwatch*, a podcast by the Institute for the Study of War. The global health crisis caused by COVID-19 has affected nearly every aspect of American Society and government. The pandemic has forced changes to individual lifestyles as well as the highest levels of policymaking. I'm Jacob Taylor and with me today is Jennifer Cafarella, ISW's National Security Fellow, to discuss the challenges, threats, and opportunities that COVID-19 presents to US National Security. Jenny, thank you for being with us today.

Jennifer Cafarella:

It's my pleasure, Jacob. I think this is such an important time for us to recall that while we may be disrupted here at home and focus very understandably on the challenges that we face as a nation here in the United States. It's important for us not to lose sight of what's happening abroad. I very much look forward to discussing that with you today.

Jacob:

Absolutely. So, speaking of international threats, I'd like to start with the state of play before the pandemic. What threats did the US face before COVID-19?

Jennifer:

I would frame four. First, is the significant challenge posed by the modernization of the Russian and Chinese militaries, which were gaining technological capabilities that threatened to overmatch US forces. What does that mean? A good example is China's development of long-range missiles, which could enable China to strike US bases and hold at risk US ships in the Pacific that were previously relatively secure, fundamentally changing the kinds of escalation scenarios for which the US must prepare. It's a major threat and one that the United States definitely was taking seriously entering into the pandemic. But there's also a more immediate threat from actors like Russia and China, which have been using their existing tools of coercion, to impose their will on their neighbors and to gain crucial strategic positioning. That includes two key elements. The first is, both Russia and China have been eroding the notion of sovereignty.

Russia's vision of this is that sovereignty is only a benefit for the strong, the weak do not have a right to sovereignty. And that framework really does govern how Russia treats its neighbors, but also how Russia sees competition with its rivals including us, the United States and potentially China. It's hugely destabilizing and a major concern for US allies and partners overseas. Russia and China are also projecting power globally in new ways that are quite dangerous. Russia is establishing military bases abroad, including the air and naval base that they have already established in Syria, as well as similar bases that they seek to gain in North Africa, for example, in Libya and other parts of the Middle East, which expand Russia's ability to undermine NATO's security, as well as create new kinds of escalations scenarios for the US to face. China is doing a similar global power projection, but largely economically through its One Belt One Road initiative, which is similarly problematic for the United States because it entraps countries including, some US partners and allies, into funding mechanisms that actually provide China

additional coercive leverage. Finally, two additional threats. We have a sustained threat from jihadists entering into 2020, which continue to exploit conflicts in unstable areas including, Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya. And then what I would frame as a Nexus threat problem with areas in which the aspects of great power competition and jihadists threats were actually overlapping in ways that really overstretched America's ability to develop and execute, prioritize National Security Policies.

Jacob:

Okay. So again, up until the pandemic, how's the Trump administration responding to the threats that you just outlined?

Jennifer:

The administration rightly took the threat from this kind of great power competition very seriously. And the Trump administration has taken important steps to rebuild US military capabilities and to modernize, to ensure that the US does not actually fall behind the capabilities that Russia and China in particular, are generating. That's important, it included undoing some of the damage to US readiness that had been caused by the sequester of Defense Department funds during the previous administration. But the administration's approach to engaging in the world in the meantime, while we're modernizing and rebuilding military capabilities, that approach has actually eroded our global position and empowered our adversaries. The administration has prioritized disengaging from active conflicts in key regions, in ways that actually see greater opportunity for both great power competition and jihadists. So that includes, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and similar force reductions that are under consideration for North Africa and possibly Iraq.

Now, the administration's theory was that we need to free up capabilities to focus on great power competition. I disagree because I actually think it's more important that we compete in areas where we currently have relative advantage to deny that advantage to great power rivals. But the administration also hoped that if we reduce our involvement, we can get our allies and partners to step up and that simply hasn't panned out. What the administration has also done is to rely on sanctions, which have imposed an important constraint on our adversaries, but are a tricky tool of statecraft because they can actually drive instability and they aren't a substitute for American engagement. My concern coming into the pandemic, was that our sanctions can constrain our adversaries, but also risk instability and we don't have a plan to fill the gaps, even if we force our adversaries to pull back in places like Syria. If we can't offer an alternative, that pullback is likely actually, just to see the vacuum that is not going to benefit American interests.

Jacob:

That was the situation going into the pandemic and how has COVID-19 affected these issues?

Jennifer:

So far, it's a bit of a mix. The loss of life is of course, the most important and devastating consequence of the pandemic itself. In terms of geo-strategic outcomes, the US has lost some additional ground overseas in some areas, but we do also have some new opportunities. What I'm concerned about most is what I referenced at the start of this podcast, is that our domestic situation including the COVID-19 outbreak and the protest movement is going to pull our focus from events overseas even more, which candidly is the greatest advantage our adversaries can hope for. That they don't face competition from the United States. That isn't to say we shouldn't focus on our problems here at home, we absolutely must. But what's happening overseas does affect our long-term recovery from the pandemic because America's prosperity depends on key issues overseas including, freedom of navigation through trade routes and other conditions that our adversaries are working actively to put at risk.

Jacob:

So I feel like we should start with the bad news which is, where and how the US has lost ground in terms of its National Security interests since the onset of the pandemic?

Jennifer:

Yeah, I support bad news first because hopefully that means we can then pivot to the optimistic side of this, which is where I'd prefer to leave it. The biggest setback to US, how in regions where we were already disengaging, so that's the Middle East especially and North Africa. The setback that I find most concerning is, emerges from the ways in which the wars in Libya and Syria are actually increasingly merging. What I mean by that is we have regional actors now fighting on opposite sides in both wars, that's Turkey on one side and Russia on the other side, in both conflicts. Both of those, Turkey and Russia, are mobilizing Syrian proxy forces to now fight in Libya, which is a dangerous internationalization of that conflict, which is further drawing in additional regional states where we now have the Egyptian military threatening to intervene militarily in Libya.

That's a huge setback for the US in the region, given that our primary goal has actually been to negotiate and end a resolution to both of those conflicts and instead, both are escalating quite sharply and in ways that the US is not positioned right now to influence. There are two other sort of pieces of bad news though, that I would add. The first is, jihadist groups have actually made concrete gains during this time. That includes ISIS executing a successful Ramadan Campaign during the Islamic holy month that began on April 23rd. That campaign thankfully did not include any mass casualty attacks in the West, but did include some very devastating attacks in Afghanistan, as well as a resurgent campaign in Iraq and Syria that is quite serious and dangerous to the long-term outcome of our counter ISIS mission there. In addition, Al-Qaeda seeks to replicate what it perceives as a major success in Afghanistan with the US Taliban deal.

Al-Qaeda wants to take that deal and implement a similar model in Mali, in West Africa where Al-Qaeda seeks to now negotiate a withdrawal of French forces, which is a pretty dangerous sign of just how empowering the jihadist network views what the US agreed to, in Afghanistan. And then finally and briefly I'll flag a more amorphous but I think dangerous trend towards an erosion of the credibility of international institutions, which actually play key roles in providing resilience to Western societies.

That erosion is occurring as a result of what I would call twin pressures from disinformation, from our adversaries namely Russia and China, meant to cause distrust among Western populations and doubt towards whether their governments actually do represent their interests and can guarantee their security and safety, as well as evidence of corruption and malign influence in organizations like the WHO, which can have a disproportionate sort of eroding effect on Western trust toward other international institutions such as the UN. And I'm quite concerned that we are continuing to slide down the direction of those organizations which play vital functions in sort of the global commons really losing their legitimacy which receives huge opportunities for Russia and China to put forward alternate structures.

Jacob:

So, I hope we can go back and talk a little bit more about some of the things you just brought up. But I would like to, as promised to get to what you perceive to be the good news or the silver linings that have come out of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of US National Security. Where are the opportunities that have come up for an improvement in the US situation?

Jennifer:

Sure, so the good news is, in some ways the economic consequences of the pandemic are what is driving the big-

gest changes in how our adversaries are behaving, and those changes actually, largely amount to constraints. Russia is severely constrained by the twin pressures it faces from its COVID-19 pandemic which is not contained despite the fact that Putin is claiming otherwise, as well as the effects on the Russian economy of the continued depression in the oil market. That really has limited what Putin is able to do internationally, and he has suffered some setbacks in places like the Balkans, where he hasn't been able to regain initiative creating an opportunity that the Trump administration for example, is now exploiting, to try to start brokering some negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia. That's just one example. But we also have China facing big constraints, with a economic recession in China resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, that is starting to undermine the key source of legitimacy for the Chinese Communist Party, which for years has been the economic performance of China under that leadership.

There are two other opportunities that I'd frame. The first is that a governing vacuum is deepening in Syria as US sanctions have started to destabilize areas under Syrian regime control. I'd treat that with caution because I don't believe that further instability in Syria at a large scale is in our interest. But it is important to constrain the resources that the Assad regime and its backers can bring to bear against their population in my view. And I do think that there is a potential opportunity for the US to re-engage in Eastern Syria, to create an alternative to the Assad regime and a source of leverage on the ground that can hopefully shape negotiations as the Assad regime's position weakens.

And then finally, I flag an opportunity for the US in neighboring Iraq where, after months of political stagnation and large scale popular resistance against the corruption and ineptitude of the Iraqi government, we actually have a new consensus government that has formed, that is a potential credible partner for the US in Iraq, both in terms of addressing those underlying governance challenges that have started to destabilize Iraq, but also in constraining Iran's malign influence in the Iraqi government and Iraqi institutions more broadly.

I think we again, must be cautious, not to overestimate what's within the realm of the possible in Iraq, in terms of the new Iraqi prime minister managing to turn this all around on a dime. But we do have an opportunity we did not have months ago, to engage with a credible partner in Baghdad, and I think that that definitely bears emphasizing.

Jacob:

What I'm taking away from what you're saying is that COVID-19 has presented an opportunity to the United States by de-stabilizing some of its adversaries, which on balance is a benefit to the US but presents a risk in that, while we naturally don't want our adversaries to be strong, instability carries its own threat by creating opportunities for other adversaries, or by simply increasing the amount of suffering that exists in the world. So, all of that being said, on balance, do you believe that the world is more dangerous than it was before the pandemic?

Jennifer:

Sure. I do think that COVID-19 is having a destabilizing effect combined with the economic pressures I mentioned from the depressed oil market and US sanctions. I think that based on what I've seen thus far, that destabilizing effects, of course, doesn't extend to major instability in Russia, China or Iran, although there are some early indicators that that could emerge. But what's happened thus far is more a deepening of existing governance and security vacuums in areas like the Middle East and North Africa. And that deepening vacuum is bad for US interests given the breeding ground it generates for jihadists to begin with, but also because it creates second and third order consequences such as the threat of another refugee way to Europe etc, that are not in America's interest to occur. It's an opportunity therefore, for the US to do better. To engage, to leverage our unique capabilities as a nation, to set conditions that do ultimately advantage the United States. Now, thus far, the administration is not willing to do that stuff and I think that's important to mention because an opportunity is only truly an oppor

tunity if we're positioned to exploit it. But I think it's important to call attention to these windows of potential opportunity, perhaps is a better way to say it, because I think as a nation, we sometimes lose sight of what we could do if we tried. And I think we need to remember that because our adversaries are acutely aware of what we could do if we tried. And they are very much focused on trying to foreclose those options to us ahead of time, so that when they take their next big escalatory action we're not able to respond as effectively. And in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I do see windows of opportunity for the US to actually do the same to our adversaries, to start to foreclose their opportunities before they take them.

I would hope that a future US administration or a rethink in this administration, could actually enable the US to start exploiting some of those gaps. Now, what does that mean for, whether the world is more dangerous? I do think, yes, the world is more dangerous than it was in 2019. But not in the sense of a major threat from a single actor that could overtake us. I think what is emerging is more a drift towards a fractured and violent and complex world, which had already been underway entering the pandemic, but it's very much amplified by the consequences of the pandemic.

The US military is aware of these changes in how global competition is unfolding and the very serious dangers that that creates for US interests, as well as US personnel overseas. It's good that rethinking is underway, but unfortunately the political appetite right now cuts against it by pulling us back to an internal focus. That internal focus reduces the important dampening effect that the US can have here and now, to buy important time and space, for the kinds of more long-term military reforms that the Trump administration wants to do, to actually be implemented.

Jacob:

Jenny, you bring up a lot of interesting points. The one I want to ask you about in more detail is, this trend that you mentioned about the de-stabilizing of specific areas leading to opportunities for US adversaries. Can you give an example of that trend in action?

Jennifer:

The best example right now is the merging of the wars in Libya and Syria. The instability that results from these escalating conflicts affects the entire mentoring in, and interacts with a number of other more low level conflicts or competitions that actually in aggregate, really threaten to overstretch NATO and US capabilities more broadly. Those additional factors include a competition for rights to explore and benefit from natural gas reserves that have been discovered in the Mediterranean. It also includes a recent move by China to expand its naval base in Djibouti, near the Red Sea, to fit both of its current aircraft carriers, which will simply add new tour to the set of challenges that the US faces in the broader Middle East and the choke points that run from the Mediterranean into the Persian Gulf. This poses a real challenge for policy makers to prioritize which aspect of this problem are they going to try to get after, especially as amidst the internationalization of the war in Libya, for example.

We now have ISIS beginning to expand its operations once again. ISIS is always going to exist in the scenes and going to exploit opportunities caused by conditions of violence to resurge. There's nothing unique therefore, about what's happening in Libya. But ISIS is the kind of perennial threat that we can not afford to give openings to, because they are capable of exploiting it so fast and on such a devastating scale. Merging of these threats is also a challenge in military terms, not just for the challenges of prioritization that it creates, but also because these issues cross multiple scenes in the boundaries of the US military combat and commands, where you have European Command, AFRICOM, Africa Command, and CENTCOM, Central Command, all engaging in different aspects of this problem set, which imposes a very real coordination and collaboration of requirement on not just the US military, not to mention the layers of complexity that get added when the US rightly involves coalition partners

and other allies.

Jacob:

Understood. So I'd like to move to the future. Now, what scenarios do you think the United States is going to face when, and presumably the rest of the world, re-emerges from the outbreak?

Jennifer:

Right. Where's this headed, right? There's a lot of bad stuff but some opportunities. So what are we going to face when we reemerge? I would highlight five key dynamics that I think will be factors of the operational environment when we refocus outward, whenever that may be. The first is, I do think that we are headed towards a widening conflict in the Middle East and the broader Mediterranean. For example, we now have Greece and Cyprus deciding to back the Assad regime in Syria, to punish Turkey for Turkey's claims, to areas in the Mediterranean that Greece and Cyprus claim as their exclusive economic zones. That kind of competition is only going to worsen because there is no actor right now positioned actually to deescalate that, no matter how much Russia tries to position itself as an arbiter. The second is, I do unfortunately think that the risk we face from jihadist groups is going to be greater.

Now, that's difficult to talk about because many of us have been warning for some years now that jihadist groups are strengthening and I'm cognizant of the fact that it can feel like a sort of crying wolf dynamic when something major and devastating doesn't immediately happen. But we raise these risks because the US is at our most advantaged, when we can strike these groups before they crest into the kind of major military power that ISIS became, at which point the cost of taking action to destroy the Islamic state caliphate went up significantly. But we also flagged the risks because these jihadist groups are innovating in ways that actually threatened to sort of sidestep and outmatch the approach the US has taken to defeating these organizations. The example I'd give is, Al-Qaeda is perhaps starting to implement ISIS type tactics in inspiring and providing low levels of support to relatively rudimentary attacks, but seeking to do it at scale, right? In ways that could overwhelm Western security responses.

And the example we have is this recent attack in Pensacola, which Al Qaeda claimed. The third is that, I think when we re-emerge Russia will likely have regained the initiative. I discussed that Putin has been disrupted due to the effect of the pandemic and his economy, but that's a temporary condition and he's doing everything within his power, which unfortunately is quite a bit, to re-emerge from those constraints. I do expect that he will be successful. The fourth thing I think we'll face is a contested, increasing contestation of the Pacific and that is also already underway. China has been asserting itself even more aggressively in the South China Sea, in part to signal strength to its own population, but also at the start of the pandemic, to exploit disruptions in the US naval presence. Now, the US has reinforced our naval posture in the Pacific and that's good. But China is continuing to assert itself aggressively including in Hong Kong.

I do unfortunately think that that trend is likely going to continue and could pose major policy concerns for the US. It should already be posing major policy concerns, but that will worsen in coming months. And then finally, I will flag this scenario, the potential for future, for further fracture in Europe, where we of course already have the UK leaving the European Union. We now have political parties in multiple other European States considering the same, really starting to doubt the value of sort of the pan-European environment that the EU was able to create. I think a very severe second wave or in some places third wave of the pandemic would likely worsen this effect. But it's also been flamed by the disinformation that Russia in particular, is trying to pump into Europe in order to cause exactly that kind of internal sort of discord, which advantages Russian interests.

Jacob:

So of these trends that you see advancing and of these outcomes that you see as being possible, what changed is that we're motivated by the pandemic or related to the pandemic, do you think are likely to endure? I ask because presumably the trends that you've identified are a product of these very specific and very unusual time that we're living in.

Jennifer:

Sure. Yeah and I would add that I think the five scenarios I outlined are also, scenarios that the US has the ability to affect, right? I flag these because, "Hey, we could do something about this and we should." There are two broader trends that I would say sort of supersede those more concrete here and now outcomes, that I think are actually, in some ways trickier for the US to get after and potentially even more critical over the long-term and that is first, that there's a growing alignment and advances and the disinformation that our adversaries are pumping out.

And that includes the adoption of Russian tactics by China, where we see for example, at the start of the pandemic, China starting to leverage Russian techniques including, sending mass text messages direct to the cell phones of American citizens, to inflict fear at that time of a nationwide lockdown, imposed by Trump early in the conflict. We also are facing sort of structural advances in how Russia and China are propagating their disinformation including, establishing local agreements with media outlets in places like Africa, but also in Europe and partnerships with very well respected media outlets such as Reuters, which has recently entered into an arrangement with Russian state-sponsored media, which really scales up what Putin can accomplish in the West in English language press through his disinformation.

The second overall trend that I think is sort of supersedes the more regional focus is, a broad polarization that is happening across Western societies, where we have both far-right and far-left groups growing stronger, both in terms of the resonance of their message to Western populations. But then also in terms of the level of violence that they are either implementing here and now or considering. I flagged this as a more superseding factor because some of it is driven by our adversaries as disinformation, where Russia in particular is very deliberately fueling exactly that kind of polarization, but also because some of it is in fact, domestic, and simply emerging from the social changes in Western societies more broadly including the advent of social media, as well as Western frustration with what their governments have and have not been able to deliver.

That's a very real challenge because it will affect the scope of political maneuver space, for example, that Western leaders have in responding to the threats from our adversaries overseas. It also of course, means that we have a threat here at home and within our allies in how do we identify and limit the scope of what we treat as external actors messing with our democracy, right? What do we treat as an organic problem that we have to own and solve together as Americans? And I think that that's a change that's not a direct outcome of the pandemic, but has very much spiked during the pandemic, in ways that I think it would not have spiked nearly as fast or as badly in the absence of that unique source of pressure.

Jacob:

It seems like the COVID-19 pandemic has presented an excuse for opportunistic authoritarians and opportunistic politicians in general, to increase their societal controls. Do you believe that is the case?

Jennifer:

Yes. Definitely from the big actors, which I'll talk about in a second. But I'd argue that this trend hasn't been quite as bad or as rapid overall, as some worried about at the start of the pandemic. When there were many observers

that were concerned about this sort of sleeping takeover of authoritarianism under the conditions of the pandemic. What we have seen is that Russia, China and Iran in particular, are indeed consolidating domestic control measures. Now, those measures are largely inline with how those states were consolidating power internally in terms of the mechanisms they can use to suppress dissent within their countries. But those actors certainly did exploit the opportunity that the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic created. That's a problem for the population suffering under those kinds of restrictions and thus for the values including the freedoms that the US champions rightly. But it's also geo-strategic concern for the US because these actors export both their authoritarian ideology, arguing against principles of democracy etc. But they also export their tactics.

As one example, we've now seen Iran possibly buying Chinese facial recognition technology and taking steps to roll that out as part of its population control measures, as the Iranian regime tightens control in a expectation of further unrest domestically in coming months. We have a similar concern that China will do that across the Middle East and I am unfortunately, pessimistic that a successful case study in Iran for example, would enable China to market that kind of technology more broadly, in addition to the successes of course, that China already has experienced within its own suppression of its population. The Congressional Syria Study Group has also warned about similar potential technology transfers to Syria, where it's possible that Russia and potentially even China will try to strengthen the Assad regime capabilities to suppress its population. And so, I therefore think what we're witnessing more is a lack of attention to this very serious issue from the US and Western States, creating the opportunity of course, for China to step in and really try to market these technologies.

I'm not as concerned personally about surveillance in the West. I know that's on a lot of peoples minds and rightfully so, but I think thus far, we haven't seen any of the kinds of really worrying steps towards that kind of implementation here in the US at least, that would concern me. I do think that some of these contact tracing apps and other forms of innovation have the potential to go a dangerous way. We're not there yet, and I do think it's important to keep in mind that the innovation booms associated with crises like the pandemic really can actually create opportunities for the US to help develop mechanisms in US, even private industry, to develop mechanisms to circumvent that kind of authoritarianism. I think it's important not to see technological advances only from the lens of government control and from the lens of places like China, but to use our lens of a country that very much values and defends freedoms and can actually put some of those technologies to good use in pursuit of those outcomes.

Jacob:

On that note, Jenny, I want to thank you so much for this overview. I look forward to unpacking the many issues you've brought up in subsequent episodes of Overwatch.

Jennifer:

Thanks so much. I hope this overview has been helpful on the Overwatch podcast to our listeners. All of these issues are very much elements of the ISW research program that is underway. We have not taken our eye off of these problems. And I know that all of our research teams will actually be following up in coming weeks and months with written product and additional podcasts, unpacking a number of these very important trends.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org, to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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