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COVID-19: The Pandemic and Its Impact on Security Policy

The world is caught up in an existential struggle. The enemy is intangible; it spares no state or social group and does not stop at any border. For many of us, this struggle feels like war. Indeed, with the growing use of war-like language¹ in the fight against COVID-19, also called coronavirus, the rapidly rising number of victims², and last but not least the economic consequences which are becoming increasingly clear, we do seem to experience a war-like situation. This includes the social psychological effects of the crisis that are becoming more and more apparent: an increasing uncertainty among large social groups, but also a strengthening of group cohesion. People are afraid and join forces, but they also tend to be egoistic – certainly when their own livelihood is at risk, as illustrated by the EU member states' initial response to the pleas of Italy and Spain.

Currently, attention is focused on two areas: the medical and the social domain, with the latter including legal, economic, political and cultural aspects.³ In view of the existential threat and great uncertainties arising from the coronavirus crisis as well as the tensions that come with them, it is only a matter of time before this crisis also becomes the focus of security policy. As far as the German armed forces are concerned, they are already putting a lot of effort into dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak. To address the coronavirus crisis, the Bundeswehr has mobilised 15,000 soldiers within a very short space of time (Gebauer/von Hammerstein 2020), has set up regional commands to facilitate coordination, supports interagency action when it comes to procurement processes and has organised its activities with creative ideas, e.g. by making use of the 'Helping Hands' concept (Loose/Henning 2020). The Bundeswehr has a long tradition of providing subsidiary assistance in emergency situations. This assistance ranges from helping with procurement and logistics as well as area and facility protection to performing tasks in support of law enforcement and traffic control. Operations during an epidemic are nothing new to the Bundeswehr as shown most recently in the fight against Ebola in 2014 and 2015 (Funke 2015). What is new, however, is the scale and the speed with which all states and societies around the world are being hit hard by this crisis.

¹ Cf. Donald Trump's most recent statements in which he called himself a 'wartime president', <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8127239/Donald-Trump-says-hes-wartime-president-fighting-unseen-enemy.html>, last accessed on 16 April 2020.

² In Italy alone, the death toll at the end of March and beginning of April (approx. 1,000 deaths a day) was about twice as high as the average number of casualties in Italy during WW I (approx. 460 deaths a day).

³ Cf. also the Ad hoc Recommendation by the German Ethics Council entitled 'Solidarity and Responsibility during the Coronavirus Crisis', which is worth reading (German Ethics Council 2020).

The risks of a pandemic have been known

The existential threat of a pandemic, however, has always been a matter of public safety, security and security policy in Germany. The outbreak of the highly pathogenic Marburg virus in 1967 is just one example.⁴ As part of a notification provided by the Federal Government, an extensive chapter of the 2012 report on risk analysis in civil protection discusses a pandemic due to a ‘Modi-SARS virus’. In view of current events, this chapter largely reads like an ominous, all too accurate warning (Federal Government 2013: pp. 5–6, 55–88). In the current version of the White Paper on German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr published in 2016, a short section entitled ‘Epidemics and Pandemics’ links the risks of regional destabilisation to systemic risks (which may also emerge in our country) and to Germany’s interest in and responsibility for prevention and crisis management in cooperation with international partners and organisations (Federal Ministry of Defence 2016: pp. 44–45).

In 2015, the Helmut Schmidt University / Bundeswehr University Hamburg, on behalf of the Bundeswehr Office for Defence Planning, applied methods from the field of mathematics to compare different operations research models that can be used to predict the course of an epidemic in a theatre of operations (Matheia 2015). With regard to Africa, a dual strategy characterised by significantly improved infrastructure and early detection seemed to be the most promising. The Bundeswehr, together with NATO partner states, is already using disease surveillance systems such as ASTER⁵ to ensure the rapid detection of infectious disease outbreaks. To improve the infrastructure, the ‘One Million Community Health Workers’ campaign, which was launched back in 2013 and aims at employing one million community health workers in Africa, could be further developed.⁶ According to the study, both approaches would ‘revolutionise’ health care systems in Africa, making the outbreak of an epidemic substantially more difficult.

The dangers of a pandemic have been known for some time. Experts have repeatedly pointed out the relevance of this topic for national and international security, emphasising the importance of both early detection and sufficient infrastructure. Internationally, pandemics have either been regarded as ‘black swans’ (Delko 2020) or ‘wildcards’⁷ in simulations. Although Germany brought forward the topic of a pandemic among the international participants of the 2015 G7 and G20 summits (Federal Government 2015: p. 24 et seq.), pandem-

⁴ See the well-researched Wikipedia article (in German) on the Marburg virus: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marburg-Virus?wprov=sftil>, last accessed on 1 April 2020.

⁵ ASTER is the acronym of ‘Alerte et Surveillance en Temps Réel’, the proven French real-time surveillance system that was adopted by NATO; cf. Holtherm 2012.

⁶ Information on the One Million Community Health Workers Campaign: <http://1million-healthworkers.org/about-us/>, last accessed on 1 April 2020.

⁷ In futurology, the term ‘wildcard’ is used for an event that is highly unlikely to occur, the consequences of which, however, would be very serious. Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild_card_\(foresight\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild_card_(foresight)), last accessed on 17 April 2020.

ics continue to represent an intractable problem faced not only by individual states or alliances, but the entire world.⁸

The fact that all states in the world were surprised by the COVID-19 outbreak is perhaps not surprising after all. In fact, the 2019 Global Health Security Index concluded that no nation was adequately prepared for an epidemic or a pandemic.⁹ Interestingly enough, the 2019 GHS Index (still) classified the United States and the United Kingdom as ‘well prepared’: two states which are currently facing strong criticism for their approach to crisis prevention and management. Despite the world’s available capabilities as regards the early detection of epidemics (National Public Health Institute, Medical Intelligence, Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network¹⁰), the alarm bells at the international systems were not ringing loud enough apparently – or maybe we simply failed to hear them. Therefore, we can already state that when analysing the crisis in retrospect, the question as to why the world stumbled into this catastrophe like a sleepwalker will have to be the subject of a rigorous inquiry.¹¹ Or perhaps the disaster was simply considered acceptable – for experts, not only at the GIDS, have long been warning of such a scenario!¹²

From a security policy point of view, two perspectives arise: one focuses mainly on the national level and the other on the international level, with the latter in turn opening up discussions of possible impacts on German security policy.

Germany’s strategic strength in the face of the crisis

Although the challenges of whole-of-government efforts should not be underestimated, Germany has been hit by the coronavirus crisis under comparatively favourable conditions. At the moment, Germany is facing one crisis only. We neither have extreme weather events nor floods nor a government crisis to deal with – quite the opposite: we have a stable, experienced and, above all, effective government which enjoys the full confidence of the German people, especially in this situation. Furthermore, Germany can rely upon a functioning administration, an excellent health care system and, last but not least, upon an outstanding welfare system. The instrument of “short-time work allowance” alone, which is unique in the world, is a huge benefit to the economy. Unlike in many other countries, Western states among them, the public sector in Germany is in

8 The question as to why e.g. South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore reacted early and decisively to the spread of the virus and thus, based on what we currently know, are dealing with the crisis more successfully will need to be further investigated.

9 Global Health Security Index: <https://www.ghsindex.org>, last accessed on 1 April 2020.

10 <https://netzpolitik.org/2020/corona-tracking-datenschutz-kein-notwendiger-widerspruch/>, last accessed on 1 April 2020; Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network: <https://extranet.who.int/goarn/>, last accessed on 1 April 2020.

11 The words ‘stumbled’ and ‘like a sleepwalker’ were chosen deliberately based on Christopher Clark’s instructive analysis as to how the world staggered into war in 1914: Clark 2013.

12 Cf. the panel by Commander (MC) Dr Christian Haggemiller (GIDS) at the World Health Summit in Berlin from 14 to 16 October 2018. See Gannon 2018. Cf. also Jezard 2018.

a strong financial position. Our country rightly enjoys the highest credit rating in the international financial markets and, therefore, has financial possibilities that now enable quick and effective action. Thanks to the above Germany is very well set up in strategic terms.

COVID-19 reveals Germany's strategic deficiencies

And yet, notwithstanding these favourable framework conditions, the crisis also makes it increasingly clear that federal states and municipalities are lacking substantial resources that, in theory, are required by law. Moreover, a lack of strategic reserves with regard to personnel, material and infrastructure at federal level is also becoming apparent (Bayer 2020). For generations, people have not felt this vulnerable. The shortages of essential goods in the health care sector (medication, protective equipment, etc.) suddenly show us how much we depend on global supply chains. This is even the case for products the manufacturing of which should not be an issue for an industrial nation with world renowned companies. For the very first time, many people are thinking about what and, not to forget, who is system-relevant during a crisis. All of a sudden, state regulation and resilience building are necessary again in the health care sector, even though only last year the closure of half of all German hospitals was being discussed for reasons of efficiency (Böcken 2019). To gain back strategic autonomy, we must pay more attention to supplier diversity, stock keeping and the avoidance of redundancies in the future. The management of certain resources the importance of which often becomes evident only in the course of a crisis must be identified as relevant at an early stage and centrally controlled. Hans-Peter Bartels, Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces, got to the heart of the problem: “Having is better than needing!” (Varwick 2020: p. 5)

Since the suspension of compulsory military service, the Bundeswehr has had only very few strategic personnel resources at its disposal. At this time in particular, we are witnessing, yet again, the great commitment of our reservists. At the end of the day, however, the Bundeswehr is very limited in providing support due to its focus on operations abroad as well as on national and collective defence. The consequences for the public health system and the civilian relief agencies, which for decades had benefited from young men doing civilian service, have become more than apparent – right now, we certainly could use these highly committed young people in the armed forces and, above all, in the social and health care systems. Additionally, the gradual downsizing of the armed forces over the past 30 years and the not always transparent decisions regarding different stationing concepts have led to the closure of numerous Bundeswehr facilities. Now we lack a comprehensive infrastructure that, given its structural features, would be perfectly suitable for the setting up of emergency shelters or for isolation purposes. Already when coping with refugees in 2015, it was painful to see these deficiencies, and now we are facing similar problems again. The fixed costs for maintaining a strategic reserve – be it with regard to personnel or material – could be far lower in the end than the direct

costs and, especially, the resulting follow-up costs that may arise from a crisis. Germany urgently needs to improve this situation!

The Bundeswehr is needed during the fight against the coronavirus – and will still be needed afterwards

When the crisis has abated, if not before, discussions on a national initiative to boost the economy, to revitalise the labour market, and to rebuild our social and cultural life will start immediately. Particularly because it is impossible to predict the long-term impact of the crisis at this point, and with some economic experts already comparing the current situation to national post-war recovery programmes, we should prepare for extreme competition for the financial resources that will be made available. Within the European Union, too, there are increasing calls for financial solidarity. Every citizen, every organisation and every institution is affected by the crisis and will seek compensation. Since most people today would probably associate the notion of ‘safety and security’ with health, social welfare and economic security, and as this is unlikely to change in the future, all aspects relating to Germany’s and Europe’s military security will very likely be pushed into the background – and that would be disastrous.¹³ It is not only because the crisis so clearly reveals our strategic deficiencies and the Bundeswehr’s limited resources but also because, thanks to the reversals initiated in funding, equipment and personnel trends, the armed forces have finally started a long overdue consolidation process. Stalling this process once more would be grossly negligent. For these reasons alone, it is of utmost importance that the Bundeswehr effectively proves its commitment during the crisis. The security policy challenges and threats which have justifiably led to a gradual growth in the defence budget will not simply disappear after COVID-19. The crisis indicates, on the contrary, that the security landscape will presumably become even more complicated and a comprehensive approach to security even more important.

COVID-19 opens up new opportunities in security policy

The question as to how the European Union, which is already under pressure, will emerge from the crisis is one that is (yet) to appear on the agenda. When Germany takes over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2020, COVID-19 will probably still be the -dominant issue – and the expectations, especially with regard to Germany, will be huge. This will particularly be the case for the heavily affected member states Italy and Spain. The

¹³ In this respect journalist Andreas Flocken states: “From what we have seen, the coronavirus seems to be a much bigger threat than the superpower rivalry between Russia and the United States. This is a result that perhaps should have an impact on the armaments efforts in the East and in the West.” (Flocken 2020)

fact that they – and not only them¹⁴ – had to ask countries such as China and Russia, their competitors in terms of security policy, if not rivals in terms of political systems, for material assistance during the crisis because EU members had turned them down, and that they immediately received the help they had asked for, reflects, among other things, how desperate the situation is. Italy, a country that had only recently been planning to provide a substantial contribution to NATO's large scale exercise 'Defender Europe 2020', is now grateful for material and personnel assistance from Moscow in the fight against the coronavirus (Ivits 2020). Russia not only wants to show the world its political strength and capacity to act, the Kremlin is probably also hoping to ease the tense relationship with NATO, maybe even to build a bridge, which could result in loosening of the sanctions.

There are more examples indicating that there is another power (with regard to security policy) which is inherent to the coronavirus; one that is not destructive but actually has the opposite effect. Security policy is changing everywhere in the world, and suddenly the impossible seems possible. In times of natural disasters, we have often seen that conflict parties looked for ways of working together, agreed to ceasefires, and gave their societies a moment to take a breath (Kreutz 2012). A perfect example is the tsunami in Southeast Asia that also hit Indonesia in December 2004. It opened up a space for a dialogue between the Aceh rebels and the Indonesian government – a development which, up to that point, no one had thought possible (Garrigues 2020). During the coronavirus crisis, Venezuela and Colombia, the US' closest ally in that region, have begun to explore cooperation possibilities in the fight against the pandemic through the Pan American Health Organization. In Libya, the international actors have taken up negotiations to reach a 'Corona ceasefire' (Garrigues 2020). Shortly after the UAE had begun to support their 'arch enemy' Iran with medical assistance in the fight against COVID-19, Qatar and Kuwait followed suit. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has ordered a one-month ceasefire in the fight against communist rebels to allow the armed forces (sic!) to focus on fighting the coronavirus instead (International Crisis Group 2020:13). And even the United States, despite years of conflict with Russia, has sent humanitarian aid to the secessionist region of Abkhazia. As a matter of fact and without being too enthusiastic, one can conclude that we are currently seeing some progress in a number of conflicts which had seemed to have reached an impasse. German foreign and security policy actors should carefully monitor the resulting leeway and make use of it.

¹⁴ China, for example, is taking advantage of the current crisis by expanding its already strong position in Africa even further and promises an incredible amount of medical help for every (!) state of the continent. Cf. International Crisis Group 2020: p. 11.

COVID-19 accelerating crises and conflicts

Notwithstanding these encouraging signals and the fact that positive changes seem to be emerging, we in Germany tend to focus on what is going on in the Western world only. However, the unforeseeable consequences of a further spread of the pandemic in regions that already suffer from a precarious security situation (Barakat 2020) could not be any more dramatic, and they could aggravate the crisis in Germany in ways we cannot yet imagine. Despite the previously mentioned limited resources, a responsible approach to strategic and political thinking and acting requires us to also take this aspect into account (N. Müller 2020). Gerd Müller, Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, has once again appealed to Germany's responsibility for and interest in Africa, especially now during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current crisis has taught us: "We must thoroughly review supply chains to ensure that our supplies are not only crisis-proof, but also pathogen-free" (G. Müller 2020). Many other states are finding themselves in a much more difficult situation. It was no other than the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, who warned that the lack of basic medical care in the many conflict zones in the world throws the doors wide open to COVID-19 (Maurer 2020).

It is obvious that the current low numbers of documented cases in Africa and the Middle East are due to the fact that the number of tests carried out there is completely inadequate since most states only have a rudimentary medical infrastructure. However, the African states should not be underestimated – because they are by far more experienced with pandemics. At the same time, their urban centres are at high risk as it is likely that an outbreak of the coronavirus would cause an inexorable catastrophe there. Realistically, the question is not if, but when that will happen and where it will start. The course of the Ebola epidemic clearly showed that fragile states where the people have little confidence in their government additionally undermine countermeasures of any sort.

Experts of the International Crisis Group estimate the risk for north-western Syria, around the region of Idlib, and Yemen to be particularly high (International Crisis Group 2020: pp. 2–3). Among the hot spots in this world are the refugee camps: not only Moria on Lesbos, a place which has almost been forgotten, but also the camps in the Gaza Strip or those inhabited by the one million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Wherever borders have been closed for refugees, as for example in Brazil and Columbia for people from Venezuela, the potential for violence grows. The continued travel restrictions which often indiscriminately apply to humanitarian workers, too, make it even more difficult to organise help on site and to gain a reliable situation picture. As dramatic as a COVID-19 outbreak would be in an overcrowded refugee camp, it is nearly impossible to imagine how the local security forces would react and what this humanitarian disaster would mean for the political stability of already unstable regions.

After all, the coronavirus has a toxic effect on authoritarian states as it accelerates crises and conflicts. The latest measures introduced by the Hungarian government using the coronavirus crisis as an excuse, i.e. declaring a state of emergency with no time limit allowing the government to rule by decree, remind us, especially us Germans, of the Enabling Act of 1933 – and thus of the darkest of all chapters in our history (Löwenstein 2020). Other examples from China, Algeria and Russia show that with reference to COVID-19 their oppositions' rights are being restricted even further (International Crisis Group 2020: p. 7). It is also possible that, as the International Crisis Group convincingly notes, COVID-19 might induce governments to use the crisis as cover to embark on foreign policy adventures expecting the international community to be unable to react (International Crisis Group 2020: p. 10).

Irrespective of which political orientation the crisis-shaken, economically weak states in the wider Middle East and in Africa have chosen: they are particularly vulnerable to the pandemic, have little chance of establishing an effective crisis management, and would very likely find it much more difficult to consolidate themselves politically, economically and socially in the wake of a pandemic. It takes little imagination to realise that COVID-19 would accelerate the crises and conflicts in those countries in many different ways.

Seven theses and recommendations for action regarding COVID-19 from a security policy perspective

The world is caught up in an existential struggle. For many of us, this struggle feels like war – even if the guns have been silent so far. At the moment, we are still mainly dealing with the medical challenges, and with questions such as when life can return to what we remember as normal or how we will be able to cope with the economic consequences. All this is important. Focusing on one's closer private circle or, at most, the national level is understandable. Yet it should not blur our vision when analysing international developments. The pandemic also has a security policy dimension the importance of which will only increase further.

1. The COVID-19 pandemic will presumably open up opportunities for foreign and security policy since actions that were inconceivable before are now emerging between the actors. In this respect, Germany should carefully monitor ongoing developments and consider where it would be helpful, and also in its own interest, to put its weight into the balance and use its influence at international level.
2. Learning with and from the crisis means giving more strategic consideration to 'global health and security' in the future. This topic must become the centre of our attention – it must be the focus of our foreign and security policy and, thus, also of the armed forces.
3. German politicians keep emphasising the importance of scientific expertise during the crisis, and for this very reason the causes and mani-

festations of the crisis must be thoroughly investigated using scientific methods – and these investigations must start immediately. To this end, the Bundeswehr is called upon to contribute with all the resources of its universities and scientific institutes. This includes, always as part of a comprehensive approach, the execution of war games with decision makers as well as the development and maintenance of science-based models under pandemic conditions.

4. The conflicts emerging in the complex framework of health, the economy and safety and security indicate that new ethical answers must be found for these conflicts, too.
5. Scarcely less important than the above is an honest, empirical and critical analysis of the performance and coverage of medical early warning systems, social resilience as well as the employment of the Bundeswehr during the crisis.
6. We need a genuine debate about Germany's strategic reserves. And this discussion should not be limited to material aspects such as supply chains, procurement processes and stock holding: The introduction of a mandatory year of service, a topic that has been buried many times before, needs to re-appear on the political agenda – for when would be a better time to discuss the matter?
7. COVID-19 is a global challenge which requires global and comprehensive action. Germany, with its international reputation particularly in the areas of foreign, security and development policy has work to do in this respect. Now the actors in our country must prove, too, whether they are willing and capable of thinking and acting in a comprehensive manner. It is only a matter of time before the virus spreads into the most deprived regions of the world. Now we still have time to imagine the consequences and consider possible reactions. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, we completely underestimated the coronavirus. We should not – no, must not – make the same mistake again!

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