

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY

The unprecedented COVID-19 outbreak has every nation in the world scrambling to address the current threat and reconsidering future priorities. Many aspects of the U.S. government's response to COVID-19 merit scrutiny. There will be a thorough review of policies and procedures that might have slowed the spread of the virus, but the primary focus should be on stopping the spread of the disease and caring for those who have contracted it. Policymakers must also consider how this crisis will shape Americans' collective understanding about present and future threats and how to address them effectively.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Assess threats both at home and abroad.** Federal spending must reflect real threats to U.S. national security, and focus on advancing Americans' safety.
- **Reevaluate how to best preserve U.S. national security.** The federal government should shift resources away from a military-centric approach and invest in other instruments of U.S. power to keep Americans safe.
- **Balance public safety and personal freedoms post-COVID-19.** Learning from the post-9/11 era, beware overreactions that increase funding for some government functions over others and avoid policies that unnecessarily infringe on civil liberties.
- **Increase transparency to prevent misinformation that impedes effective policy responses.** Ensure that agencies with access to the relevant data have the authority and autonomy to provide resources and timely guidelines.

### BACKGROUND

On February 10, 2020, the Trump administration submitted its budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2021. It called for \$740.5 billion for national security, of which \$705.4 billion was for the Department of Defense with no rationale for spending nor any mention of infectious diseases or public health. To put the defense budget in perspective, the cost of a single F-35 (\$144 million) could have purchased at least 2,800 ventilators to aid in the fight against COVID-19. Though the Pentagon could not have foreseen that a pandemic would have military personnel scattered all over the country helping with the disease control effort, or that overseas deployments would have to be postponed, more care should have been taken to assess the potential risks of public health crises and to evaluate the intelligence suggesting a serious threat to national security.

The COVID-19 outbreak has naturally revived the guns verses butter debate over whether taxpayer dollars should have been spent on a single fighter jet or for useful equipment at home. National defense is a vital government function, while health care is both a public and private undertaking. What Americans spend to keep themselves healthy varies dramatically. Many of those dollars come out of our pockets, or from the third-party payers we rely on to cover our health care costs – whether that is a private health insurer or the federal government. But the government has a role to play in protecting public safety, and when the leading threat to public safety is right here at home, and not susceptible to military solutions, it is appropriate to redirect some of the money that was intended for the Pentagon to these other, more urgent, needs.

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# DEFENSE AND FOREIGN POLICY

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- “[COVID 19 and International Security](#)” featuring Emma Ashford, Trevor A. Thrall, and Greg Koblentz, *Power Problems Podcast*, April 21, 2020.
- “[One Victim of the COVID-19 Pandemic: European Integration](#)” by Doug Bandow, *The American Conservative*, April 9, 2020.
- “[Rethinking Hawks and Doves Post-COVID-19](#)” by Christopher A. Preble, *Cato at Liberty*, April 9, 2020.
- “[How Will COVID-19 Change US National Security Strategy?](#)” by Christopher A. Preble, *Responsible Statecraft*, April 8, 2020.
- “[China’s Confused Coronavirus Response](#)” featuring Eric Gomez and Caleb O. Brown, *Cato Daily Podcast*, April 4, 2020.
- For more information on this topic, visit Cato’s [COVID-19 and Foreign Policy](#) page.