

How the pandemic is shaping US security policy

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Credit: Brett Sayles from Pexels

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most serious crises since the end of World War II, taking a staggering human and economic toll across the planet. As the world gets up again, groggily, like a punch-

drunk fighter, it's become increasingly clear that this coronavirus changed everything in our society. And it's forcing leadership to consider new and evolving paths forward.

In the U.S., one of the more challenging and complicated post-pandemic deliberations is around [national security](#) and how to respond to the next infectious [disease](#) run amok. Georgia Institute of Technology researcher Margaret Kosal addresses the issue in her [study](#), "How COVID-19 is Reshaping U.S. National Security Policy," published recently in the journal *Politics and the Life Sciences*.

The study was inspired, in part, by Kosal's participation in National Academy of Sciences (NAS) committees focused on reducing bioterrorism and chemical terrorism.

"My work with NAS prompted me to think about how we are designing our strategies and what is driving these choices," said Kosal, associate professor in the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs within the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts.

In the wake of the pandemic, the U.S. is actively changing part of its national security enterprise. Kosal researched Department of Defense documents, among other sources, and noted that recent trends are moving policy in a different direction. Directing the national response to infectious disease is a task that has moved from public health into the domain of national security.

It's a process called securitization. And based on Kosal's findings, the current trend, "turns the securitization debate on its head." That is, instead of treating an emerging infectious disease, like COVID-19, as a national security problem, there has been a noticeable shift to treat biological weapons and bioterrorism as a [public health problem](#).

It's not quite the "public healthization" of biodefense programs, according to Kosal, "but rather, it is an intermingling of the two, especially in the context of critical aspects of politics and warfare."

And that presents a potentially confusing problem for national defense and security where clarity and specificity are most important. The use of biological weapons, or an act of bioterrorism, "are fundamentally [political decisions](#), choices of warfare," Kosal said. "But a disease is not something that depends on political will, and it isn't influenced by power."

An emerging infectious disease like COVID-19 is clearly a public health issue and should be treated as such, falling under the purview of the National Institutes of Health or Centers for Disease Control, she added, then emphasized, "but [biological weapons](#) and bioterrorism should not be treated like infectious diseases. They are different in very important ways."

The danger of bad information

Complicating any national security discussion, according to Kosal, are misinformation and disinformation, and the resultant erosion of confidence in institutions, "including but not limited to governments," she wrote. "This is a missing aspect of the current discussions about

U.S. policies to reduce biological threats, whether from states or terrorists, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic."

The pandemic revealed a significant weakness in governments' ability to adequately address the problem of misinformation and disinformation, a failure that manifested in conspiracy theories and the flouting of public health recommendations.

Kosal cited numerous articles and studies that demonstrate how a [global crisis](#) opened the door to distortion of the facts, as extremist groups worked to leverage fears and anxieties, usually to broaden the appeal of their own narratives. Some of the more radical included: an al-Qaeda faction that claimed COVID, "is a hidden soldier sent by God to fight his enemies; a leader of Boko Haram faction who told followers the pandemic was, 'divine punishment for the world.'"

Kosal observed, too, that [economic hardships](#) and other impacts of the pandemic have made it easier for [extremist groups](#) to exploit the fragility of weak governments, while gaining followers and resources, and putting a halt to peace-building efforts in some regions. Technology, like the content-generating algorithms used in social media, has helped spread wrong information, too.

"The misinformation and disinformation problem is serious because it leads to this loss of confidence in government," Kosal said. "That confidence is crucial in the context of disease and in responding to bioterrorism."

Ultimately, she hopes her study will have an impact on defense policymakers who are helping to form and clarify our nation's security plans.

"I'd really like to see more recognition of the political piece," she said. "It's critically important for our counter proliferation efforts and for our efforts to reduce the threat of these weapons more broadly."

Placing extremist ideologies and manufactured weapons in a [public health](#) context, she argued, lessens the emphasis on the political will and the importance of the relevant strategic choices necessary to address a potential conflict.

And the nature of conflict, she said, "is all about people and power. Diseases don't care really care about those things."

More information: Margaret Kosal, How COVID-19 is reshaping U.S. national security policy, *Politics and the Life Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1017/pls.2023.13](https://doi.org/10.1017/pls.2023.13)

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