**“HOLE” OF GOVERNMENT: *What the COVID-19 Challenge Reveals About America’s Understandings of and Approaches to ‘Security’ and ‘Defense’ Planning***

By Isaiah Wilson III, PhD

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*ovel Coronavirus, COVID-19*. One almost need not say more. This is not one of those old school traditional threatening [*‘Monsters’* that America and the world sought out to destroy](https://www.theamericanconservative.com/repository/she-goes-not-abroad-in-search-of-monsters-to-destroy/). It is a monster that is pursuing us.

The coronavirus, COVID-19, provides a window into understanding the compoundedness of today’s security threats. At the time of this writing, the United States still confronts this deadly adversary, which is inimical to accepted international laws and conventions regarding warfare and human security protections. This adversary respects no borders and no boundaries, physical or ideational; it is perfectly sociopathic, caring none at all about class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or religious faith. This adversary has already achieved mass societal disruption at an alarming speed. Within three-months, this enemy has managed to [inflict over 157,000 casualties (confirmed cases) with over 5,700 deaths globally](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-14/widespread-clampdown-takes-hold-spanish-emergency-virus-update). Worldwide economic market disruptions now threaten a global recession, perhaps even depression, and national publics now question the responsiveness of their governments’ capacity, and even willingness, to contain and mitigate the adversary. The second-, third-, and nth-order damage across all sectors—political, economic, societal, so-called foreign and domestic—are as yet incalculable. The potential for a global paradigm shift in the way we should perceive these threats is real.

If (or as) left under-mitigated (most experts agree that the global “we” have already largely missed the moment for an effective ‘containment’ strategy), big-data computer projections predict a worldwide trajectory of [at least 550,000 physical case “casualties” and maybe upwards of 4.4 million](https://www.statnews.com/2020/02/14/disease-modelers-see-future-of-covid-19/). These “casualty rates” project mere “body counts.” The 2nd, 3rd, and nth ordered derivative damages and harms, across “all-domains” and sectors, political, economic, societal – so-called ‘foreign’ and ‘domestic’ – and from the individual person to individual household, from local/municipal through state and national (federal), to the international and the global levels are, to put it baldly, incalculable. The potential for a world-system wide paradigm shift is real. As of the second week of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) had declared this ‘threat’ a *global* pandemic, with all countries of the world-system triaged as Level-3 areas of risks. This is now a global ‘war’, as far as consequences go, by other (and any) means.

Some readers may ask, why choose to speak of the COVID-19 illness in terms more appropriate to traditional warfare; why speak of a global pandemic as a global, epochal changing war? This moment takes the popular fashion of ‘war rhetoric’ beyond the metaphorical: [*We are at war against this virus*](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/us/politics/joe-biden-coronavirus.html), … or at least we should be. We should look at this threat and its compounded cascading implications as the security issue it is because [COVID-19 is indicative of the changed nature of many of today’s threats](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/us/politics/joe-biden-coronavirus.html).

***Compound security threats and the ‘new’ Compound Security Dilemma***

It is important that we appreciate the major disruptive change that has occurred in the global security environment, for COVID-19 is an exemplar of the new, complex and most dangerous periods in our Nation’s history. What makes it so uniquely ‘dangerous’ is the *changed nature* of the threats… they have all “compounded” largely because the “root causes” and underlying conditions (“currents”) have been allowed (passive voice is intentional here) to go for so long, unaddressed or under-addressed. The security dilemma of the 20th century international environment – a dilemma defined primarily by physical material-based security threats of a military (martial) nature – has now given way to a new 21st century security dilemma, [one aptly regarded as the “compound security dilemma”](https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/title/thinking-beyond-boundaries).

By ‘compounded’ I am referring to [‘*the increased interaction – interconnectedness and collision – of otherwise once separate policy issues reflective of this new, post-cold War (and now post-911) international security environment’*](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2014/ssi_da-silva-liebert-wilson_141205.pdf). Many contemporary threats have become compounded largely because their root causes and underlying conditions (or currents) have been allowed to persist unaddressed, or under-addressed. These causes and conditions include economic imbalances, sectarian conflict, massive and sudden demographic shifts due to regional conflict, climate change and insecurity, loss of trust in governing institutions, and border concerns inextricably tied to identity. The repercussions of these compound threats follow a multiplicative, or exponentially contagious, progression, as opposed to an additive, linearly sequential one typical of traditional threats. Hence, they dramatically alter the risk calculus, risk-reward, and benefits-to-costs factors so critical to strategy planning and policy decision-making.

Another distinguishing aspect of the changed nature of a ‘compound threat’ in contrast to a ‘traditional’ threat is that the behavior and impacts of the former, because of its very multi-compositional and ‘boundaries-spanning’ nature, follow more of a multiplicative or event exponential growth ‘contagion’ character, rather than a more typical additive, linear-sequential progression. Such characteristics dramatically alter the risk calculus and risk-reward, benefits-to-costs factors core and critical to policy and strategy planning. Consequently, our National estimates of security and defense “demand” and “supply” rapidly become anemic; they under-scope the composition, full reach, and harms of today’s and day-after-tomorrow’s threats, and under-count: (a) resource requirements (including, perhaps most importantly, C2 requirements); (b) required timelines for ‘effective’ strategic force deployment/projection (huge negative implications on national security ‘agility’); and (c) the necessity of correctly geo-located forward-presence forces, for assurance of credible deterrence and adequate forward-positioned and prepared forces for compellence. The elusiveness of the COVID-19 challenge to effective ‘control’ by all levels of government – from household levels through state and local, to national and world-system wide – as well as private organizational and corporate business worlds, is ample testament.

[The new compound security](https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/title/thinking-beyond-boundaries)***[[1]](#footnote-1)*** dilemma lies in a questioning of the old foundational logic of the traditional security dilemma while at the same time making a clarion call for an entirely new governing logic; both of which harmonize on the core questions of *‘scale’* (and economies and diseconomies of scale), and the *legitimacy of preferred unilateral policy approaches over multilateral options* (from an instrumental solvency as well as ideational sovereignty standpoint). Again, global health pandemics, like the ongoing novel coronavirus contagion, are a clear expression of the ‘compound security’ dynamic and the new “security dilemma” it manifests.

These compound threats are incredibly complex and multi-dimensional, and transcend the traditional boundaries of the foreign “versus” the domestic, the public “versus” the private, the stuff of public government “versus” of the private sector, the military “versus” the non-military. These new compound threats are hard if not impossible to “contain” and especially so by traditional means. They are transnational and transregional, with the potential for metastasizing into big compound “contagion events” (including compound wars) with potential for big global-wide disruptions. These are literally the “in our faces” hard lessons of COVID-19; lessons worldwide ‘*body politics’* are having a hard time heeding. In essence, we are confronted by ‘post-Westphalian threats’ and are currently only responding with an increasingly ineffectual ‘Westphalian’ treatment approaches that aren’t calibrated effectively.

Central to this Compound Security Dilemma (CSD), is the [*tragedy of scales problem*](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/d/diseconomiesofscale.asp), where the accelerated and exponential ‘growth’, or contagion spread of threat and risk outgrows and outpaces traditional, long-standing present-day governmental and public-private service “capacities” that in the past have allowed for a more efficient, effective-costs policy treatment approach to planning, decision-making, and implementationthat have traditionally been calibrated more around *response-mitigate-recovery* public policy standard operating processes and procedures (SOPs).

Another feature of the compound threat is the interaction effect at play between simultaneous and overlapping sources of instability. The manifestations of these threats derive their character from the nature of the interaction between variables; this interaction is multiplicative, not additive, in nature.

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|  | Conventional Paradigm | Compound Security Paradigm |
| Threat Calculation | A + B + C | A x B x C |
| Threat Manifestation | Divergent or Convergent | Convergent |

**Figure 1. Multiplicative Dynamics of ‘Compound Threats’**

Similar to the paradox of the [‘wicked problem’](https://hbr.org/2008/05/strategy-as-a-wicked-problem), with compound security threats, under-treatments and poorly-timed (i.e., late-in-coming) treatments to the threat not only do not solve or mitigate; rather, *they metastasize*. This tendency of the compound security threat to ‘outpace’ the capacity of policy response options is just as apt to the COVID pandemic as it is the rise of ISIS, the crises in the Middle East, the ‘compound’ threat in Venezuela, and numerous other ‘nexes of conflict’ that manifest (with great regularity, but with varying intensity) at geopolitical flashpoints.

Looking at the actual *trajectory* *and directions* of these threat trends, *we see a convergence* of these compound challenges toward certain very specific key geographic locations; locations that just so happen to reside at major ‘seams’—political, cultural, ethno-sectarian— offering both challenges possible benefit and opportunities, interestingly, at or near key states (“strategic pivot states”) at the ‘nexuses’ of our current geographic combatant command Unified Command Plan (UCP) boundaries.

Another challenge manifesting from, while at the same exasperating, the compound security phenomenon is the “separated and unequal” bifurcated culture and architecture of our U.S. National Security & Defense Enterprise. This has certainly proven the case when it comes to the somewhat “shooting behind the target” public health security response to COVID-19. The planners’ challenge at the regional (theater) strategic level is to contain and reverse adversaries and trends that [threaten to “break” nation-states](https://www.amazon.com/Breaking-Nations-Order-Twenty-First-Century/dp/0802141641). Likewise, the challenge at the operational and tactical level is to combat and counter- adversaries and threats, “as they present themselves to us”, i.e., increasingly asymmetrically, simultaneously on different noncontiguous battle fronts—physical, virtual, and ideational— and as ‘compounded’ threats often presenting themselves at thresholds of dangers falling short of traditional war, via direct and indirect actions.

These “threat nexuses” are places where this convergence of compound threats presents the United States with additional challenges for certain; but also with opportunities *to sharpen our focus and apply our resources in more precise and economical ways*, at decisive geographic locations through simultaneously-executed named operations and several enduring efforts creating possibility for the achievement of overmatching compound wins. It is here where it seems some “big opportunities” lie and can be taken advantage of, allow us to focus our geopolitical and geo-economic efforts and investments “at or near” these “threat nexuses,” and in creative, collective defense and security ways.

***Implications for the strategic application of ‘Land-Force’***

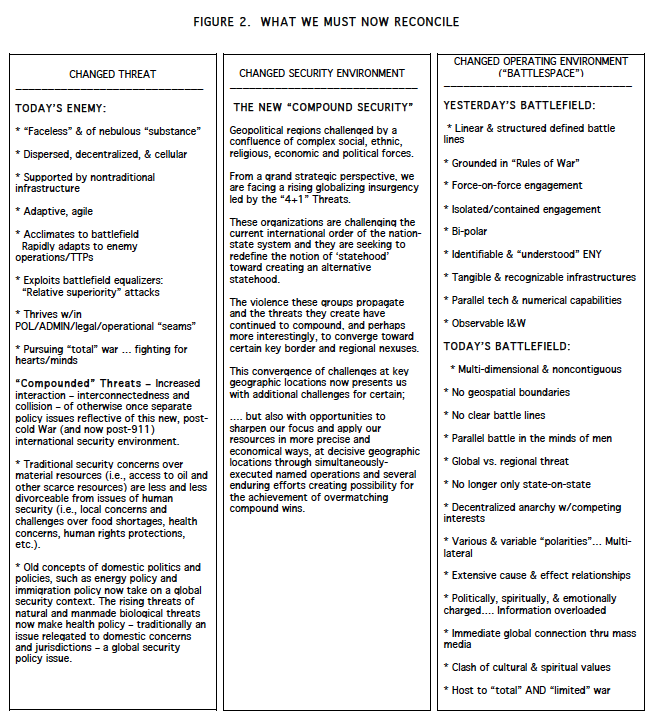
*Compound threats demand compound treatments, for compound ‘wins’.* Strategic-level, full-enterprise, whole-of-government (WoG)approaches to planning and decision-making can help devise better strategies and optimize resources. Redesigning ourselves for a more integrative and cross-functional, multi-domain set of ways for thinking, planning, and actioning “anew,” and thinking anew is now unavoidable, if our intent is to, ultimately, achieve true [*competitive engagement*](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0030438713000446) national capacity, and preserve and protect and defend our Nation from the perils of this new compound security operating environment. [As the last few decades of counterinsurgency and stabilization demonstrated](https://www.the-american-interest.com/2013/08/11/beyond-coin/), so it is with the paradox of countering-COVID-19: *it is only the synthesis of various lines of effort that create the opportunity for lasting, durable, balanced, and sustainable change and threat-resolution*. A similar approach is necessary for compound threats, but at a vastly different scale and delivery.

Our existing structures and processes for planning and analysis are not sufficient for today’s and tomorrow’s needs.  The increasingly adversarial relationships the United States faces with great powers such as Russia and China, in addition to regional-level disruptors such as North Korea, Iran, and the self-declared Islamic State – collectively, referred to as the “4 +1” threats – lead the Pentagon’s and the armed services’ calls for major strategic shifts in policy, war plans, planning architectures, and approaches. Our current systems do not fully nor adequately account for these “compounding” dynamics. The United States’ former top general, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, agrees…[*“Our traditional approach where we are either at peace or at war is insufficient to deal with that dynamic.”*](https://breakingdefense.com/2016/09/cjcs-dunford-calls-for-strategic-shifts-at-peace-or-at-war-is-insufficient/)

Moreover, Dunford recognized the state of [“adversarial competition with a military dimension short of armed conflict”](https://breakingdefense.com/2016/09/cjcs-dunford-calls-for-strategic-shifts-at-peace-or-at-war-is-insufficient/) mili­tary and security studies scholars and practitioners have come to label [gray-zone conflict](https://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2804/GrayZone.pdf). This particular description, which answers the key questions of whether and how the character of geopolitical competition has changed, now represents an increasingly resonant line of inquiry in defense circles.

These [so-called ‘gray zone’ conflicts](https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-490693063/solving-america-s-gray-zone-puzzle) are nothing more than manifestations of the compound security dilemma – but also, vice versa – that the compound security dilemma is, at least in part, an artifact of limitations in how we as a nation view and understand and approach the following: (a) what constitutes (and does not), an issue or situation of ‘security’ versus non-security (which is an ideational blinder), (b) how we are institutionally structured for planning, decision-making, and implementation (an organizational flaw), and (c) how we view and value (or ‘weight’ and prioritize) an issue or a situation (which is an organizational cultural dynamic). All three, combined, impact or even determine behavior.

In the face of compound threats, and the new compound security dilemma, these three factors have retarded the solving power of our traditional policy and strategy planning, decision-making, and operations. The challenge, the imperative, of achieving practical and ‘doable’ whole-of-governments planning solutions is not limitable to one simple problem; this is a multidimensional, multi-functional, multi-echelon, temporal puzzle.



By legacy organizational, bureaucratic, and process designs (flaws), there is unfortunately now an exaggerated “business cycle-like” lag in all risk assessments, due to the tripartite contributing factors of: (1) the rise of a new “species” of threat (the “compound” security threat), (2) new transformational changes in the global security threat environment (trans-regionalization of threats), and (c) the poverties we now face in having to “process” this new world of compound threats and trans-regionalization of threats by way of legacy organizational structures, operational methods, and planning business practices. To some degree, there is always a natural ‘lag’ of business practices to the cycles of environmental change; i.e., the analytical “models” lag behind actual ‘real-time’ change. However, today’s “lags” have become dangerously wide, demanding fixes to how we organize for the conduct of the business of national security and defense. All of our current risk assessments, arguably, discount or outright ignore these “compounding and convergence” effects, and the exponential dynamics of ‘simultaneity’.

***America can no longer go it alone . . . and shouldn’t.***

The United States power-problem today is one of (1) *insufficient power*, (type and kind), (2) *insufficient capacity* to produce, maintain, and sustain the power required to meet contemporary missions, and (3) *insufficient capability* to “convert” power available (on-hand; in production) into effective policy and strategies that solve. Again, the anemic public policy handling of the 2020 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is a sad testimonial to the fact. America remains an *exceptional* nation in terms of its relative capabilities and capacity to other rival nation-states and in her ability to project power globally. Yet, the US has reached the limits of its fungible power, at least from a perspective of single-select instrumental or unilateral choice. Like a boxer, replete with years of bout experience and a reach that outdistances younger less experienced competitors, the tale of the tape for the US today might read: “great reach, but poor endurance in the latter rounds.”

The US retains the ability to reach anywhere and everywhere, but frequently with the *wrong* kind of instrument, *too little* of the right-fitting solution set, applied *too late* to prevent, contain, or effectively mitigate, and also for *not long enough* in its treatment regimens; a worrisome if not tragic combination. There is a point of diminishing return that all great power nation-states (empires) must face in relations to the power available to expand, manage, and govern over its imperial dominions. As historian [Paul Kennedy](https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/04/04A70DD54F5CB55BED6BE3B351E242EE_The_Rise_and_Fall_of_Great_Power_Paul_Kennedy.pdf) noted:

*Nations project their military power according to their economic resources and in defense of their broad economic interests. But, the cost of projecting that military power is more than even the largest economies can afford indefinitely, especially when new technologies and new centers of production shift economic power away from established Great Powers – hence the rise and fall of nations.*

We still live an international relations paradigm that privileges the rights of sovereignty of individual nation-states, and with that the right to make their own policy choices. However, exercising that sovereign right to determine one’s own [“art of the possible”](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/424187-politics-is-the-art-of-the-possible-the-attainable) independently does not change the nature of threats nor the character of change in global geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic competition. If the policy choice is unilateralism and self-help, the risk calculations of such choices must be measured against the changed and changing environment. In an era where that environment– both “foreign” and “domestic” – is governed more by a new compound security dilemma, the risk of continuing to choose public policies of unilateral self-help will prove beyond the calculus of risks itself; more the stuff of gamble.

*So, then, what might come with an* [*‘America First’*](https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426) *U.S. foreign policy?* The lessons of history are illustrative, providing examples of the kinds of consequences that all too often come from the adoption of purely transactional, approaches: uncertainty, strategic mis-signals and misreads, and illiberal solutions and outcomes, that while perhaps instrumentally beneficial and successful in achieving and securing short-range strategic goals, wind up being devoid of a moral footing, much less an instrumentally-sufficient policy treatment, of the kind needed to secure a lasting, durable, legitimate peace and stability in the longer run.

**Conclusion: *Implications for Military Strategy and Force Planning*?**

Compound security threats represent a change in the character, scope, and scale of challenges to our common defense and public welfare. While “hybridity” is certainly part of the equation, it is not all of it. The compounded nature of today’s and tomorrow’s threats dramatically alters our public policy and force planning, sizing, and shaping calculations and algorithms. Under compound conditions, threats are not additive; they are multiplicative and, in many cases, exponential.

As former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once said, [“As you know, you go to war with the Army you have. They’re not the Army you might want or wish to have at a later time.](https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/you-go-to-war-with-the-press-you-have/)” Unfortunately, these remarks echo our reality today, a reality largely of our own making. At the same time, we too often hear this expression offered as an epiphenomenal excuse for failures of imagination, anticipation, forecasting, and planning, and for our under-preparedness for the fullness of contemporary public policy puzzles. These shortcomings are not epiphenomenal. They are the outcomes and consequences of our own agency and policy choices.

Addressing these failures will require ‘choice’ on all our parts; demanding our entire national security enterprise come to grips with a recurring set of behaviors that cuts across our checkered performance against compound threats:

* The phenomenon and paradox within the social constructions of the meanings of war and peace, the issues of security and non-security, and the tendency to win a war but to lose the intended peace, as evidenced by our decades-long [*anabasis*](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1170/1170-h/1170-h.htm) [in Iraq](http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n2007013520/).
* The false distinction between national security and human security issues, as demonstrated by US-led military-humanitarian interventions in the 1990s which addressed only symptoms but not root causes (e.g., Somalia, Kosovo, Haiti).
* The persistence of chronic, civil-societal, government-society structural inequalities that go unaddressed or under-addressed for many reasons, yet remain the common denominator of rebellions, insurrections, and insurgencies (e.g., Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan,  the Arab Spring).
* The tendency to declare false or premature victories while a conflict is evolving, not ending; the “mission accomplished” paradox that results in undercounts in risk assessments and capability requirements calculations (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, COVID).

If the power equation, under CSD dynamics, can no longer muster and sustain the type, quality and quantities of ‘force’, nor *displace* such force packages in ways and on a timeline that can overmatch threats once they form, even before they compound – then, [society may simply need a whole new equation](https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00062677/00004). This might just be the moment of paradigm shift that many within military, public policy, and public affairs circles have debated, even promoting, for at least the last three decades. The 2020 Novel Coronavirus pandemic may be its herald. But would we recognize it, and heed its clarion call for whole-cloth change as it faces us? *Will we?*

A person wearing a suit and tie smiling at the camera

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1. For more on “compound security challenges” and the “compound security” dilemma and concept, see Hugh Liebert, John Griswold and Isaiah Wilson III, eds., *Thinking beyond Boundaries: Transnational Challenges to U.S. Foreign Policy*, New York: Johns Hopkins University Press, November 2014, and Isaiah Wilson III and James J. F. Forest, eds. and contributing authors, *Handbook of Defence Politics: International and Comparative Perspectives*, New York: Routledge Press, July 1, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)