Overview: Leading coverage was Senate testimony from the nation’s leading public health officials, most notably NIH’s Dr. Anthony Fauci, who warned of “multiple outbreaks” of COVID-19 around the country and “needless suffering and death” if states and cities reopen prematurely. Additionally, House Democrats unveiled a $3 trillion relief package in response to the economic effects of the pandemic. As major outlets focused on the Senate hearing and the defense press’s attention turned to recent developments in Afghanistan, defense-related coronavirus coverage was light today and was not focused on particular topics or themes.

*AP* wrote that the ballooning federal deficit is “stirring worry” at the Pentagon, as federal government efforts to aid an economy struggling amid the pandemic could lead to a decrease in defense spending in the coming years. Sec. Esper was quoted saying the economic relief spending “accelerated this day of reckoning” over defense budgets, as *AP* predicted a coming showdown with Congress. The article highlighted nuclear modernization as a “fat target for budget cutters,” according to a defense analyst, and may spark a confrontation with the Pentagon, as Sec. Esper has promised DoD was “not going to risk the strategic deterrent.” If cuts to nuclear forces were to occur, the analyst predicted a reduction of the planned fleet of Columbia-class submarines. The article further speculated that if nuclear spending is protected, older weapons programs with “political constituencies” such as the A-10, B-1 bomber, and MQ-9 Reaper drone may be discontinued.

Other DoD-related news:
- U.S. Army North is removing support from areas with declining needs for medical assistance, such as New York City, Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia, Dallas, and New Orleans. (*San Antonio Business Journal*)
- Rep. Andy Biggs (R-AZ) wrote to Sec. Esper yesterday warning of the “unintended consequences” of new DoD policies restricting recruiting of COVID-19 survivors who have been hospitalized, consequences which *Military Times* characterized as a “waste of willingness to serve.”
- The *Detroit Free Press* gave neutral coverage to flyovers by the Blue Angels honoring frontline medical workers in Detroit, Chicago, and Indianapolis and *KCBS* in Los Angeles previewed tomorrow’s “sky-high salute” by the California Air National Guard.

Other relevant/global news:
- China is exploiting the pandemic to exert military pressure on Taiwan, according to a congressional report from the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. *Foreign Policy* reported that this comes as Sec. Esper and other DoD officials are raising alarms about Beijing’s aggression in the South China Sea and Republicans in Congress are pushing the Trump administration for a closer alliance with Taiwan.
- Nine Republican senators proposed a bill authorizing the president to impose sanctions on China if it does not cooperate with U.S. and international efforts to investigate how the outbreak started, close its “wet markets,” and release pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong arrested in recent days. (*Reuters*)
- Two Chinese state-backed newspapers, *China Daily* and *People’s Daily*, revived a conspiracy theory this week that COVID-19 originated in a military laboratory at Fort Detrick, MD, *Newsweek* reported.
- Chinese authorities announced they plan to test all 11 million residents of Wuhan for the coronavirus after six new cases emerged in the original epicenter of the global pandemic. (*Washington Post*)
- Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has been hospitalized after testing positive for COVID-19, marking the second member of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s inner circle to contract the disease. (*AP*)
- The Saudi-backed government in Yemen reported new coronavirus cases in three more southern provinces. (*Reuters*)

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1. Bored in quarantine? Learn to fly a KC-135! – 5/12
Air Force Times | Stephen Losey

As weeks of coronavirus-driven social distancing turn into months, everyone is looking for new ways to pass the time. But what to do when you just can’t stand baking yet another loaf of sourdough bread?

Never fear, MacDill Air Force Base has the answer: Learn to fly a KC-135 Stratotanker refueling aircraft.

At 10 a.m. Wednesday, Florida’s MacDill will stream on Facebook a session with KC-135 pilots Maj. Justin Kellett and Maj. Andrea May. In a Monday Facebook post that began, “Want to learn to fly?” MacDill said the pilots will “show you what it takes to fly a KC-135 and accomplish our air refueling mission.”

OK, so maybe technically, it takes a little more than a single livestream to become a tanker pilot. But MacDill’s event should provide a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at one of the Air Force’s most important missions. And, with kids across the country out of school and stuck at home, perhaps it could inspire some to become the next generation of tanker drivers.

Master Sgt. Chad Usher, a spokesman for the 6th Air Refueling Wing at MacDill, said in a phone call that the video is intended to show the basics of flying, so the community learns what goes into getting a tanker off the ground and fueling other aircraft. The pilots will demonstrate the basics of maneuvering the aircraft, he said.

And they will talk about some of the preflight steps they go through before takeoff, such as checking the exterior, Usher said. There may be a portion that shows a KC-135 simulator.

Usher said the event will be a mixture of livestreamed material and pre-recorded video. There will be a time for viewers to ask questions via the comment section, Usher said, and it is expected to run between half an hour to an hour.

If this event gets a good response, Usher said, MacDill could do more live feeds in the future going in-depth on other career fields.
MacDill has done other events to show the community the jobs its airmen do, he said. For example, the base regularly invites students with interests in engineering, aeronautics and other related subjects to fly on a KC-135.

While the coronavirus wasn’t the only thing that prompted Wednesday’s event, Usher said the base is eager to find ways to engage with the public without making too much in-person contact.

Tune in to MacDill Air Force Base’s Facebook page Wednesday at 10 a.m. Eastern time.

2. Army cancels ROTC Cadet Summer Camp over coronavirus concerns – 5/12

*Army Times | George Wright*

FORT KNOX, Kentucky -- Coronavirus has forced the Army to cancel ROTC Cadet Summer Training here, just 12 days before the first of thousands of cadets, soldiers and Army civilians were to arrive at the central Kentucky post.

“We will not host this essential element of the cadet training life cycle, and will conduct collective training in the fall and spring in order to meet our objectives, and to try to contain the COVID-19 virus,” said Maj. Gen. John Evans, Commanding General for the U.S. Army Cadet Command today.

Speaking to reporters from his headquarters by phone, Evans said that all required training “will be decentralized on campus and at military installations throughout the country.”

“Core skills will be addressed on campus, and at nearby military installations, this fall and next spring,” Evans said. To do that, Evans explained that contiguous universities would consolidate resources to train cadets on “basic warrior skills such as rifle marksmanship, treatment of combat casualties, and ‘STX’ (situational training exercise) lanes.”

Evans said such exercises last over a two-day weekend, but said he and his staff will work with universities to give cadets up to 96 hours to conduct the training over a four-day weekend.

Cadet summer training performance has traditionally been one of the factors to determine branch assignment, and active duty or reserve component assignment. Evans said that element has been removed, as it is “the only way we can fairly do that.”

Evans said that shifting this year’s training into next summer was considered, but that was rejected because of “the tyranny of time and space.”

“We don’t have enough time between mid-May and mid-August, and Fort Knox doesn’t have the facilities to handle two cohorts of cadets,” Evans said.

The original dates for cadet summer training had been May 23-Aug. 16, according to USACC spokesman Rich Patterson, “with 11 Regiments training through a 35-day advanced camp cycle, and three Regiments training in a 31-day cycle for the basic camp.”

The forecast for CST 2020 included 7,000 cadets for advanced camp (the cohort of rising college seniors), and 1,900 for the basic camp (rising juniors who decided halfway through their college career to join ROTC, and train to get credit for the first two years of ROTC).

Every year a number of cadets who were injured during CST return after their senior year to complete the commissioning requirement. This year 416 cadets are set to return, and Evans said that the Secretary of the Army has waived the summer camp training requirement. These cadets, and those who are commissioned next year, will be evaluated at their basic branch course to determine what military skills may require remedial training.
Evans and his staff conducted a town hall meeting on Facebook March 26 to update cadets, cadre and family members on the effect of the pandemic on cadet summer training and 2020 commissioning timelines. Evans will speak to the command and local Kentucky officials via Facebook over the next two days.

CST is held every year at Disney Barracks, the area of Fort Knox where armor crewmen and cavalry scouts underwent training before the Armor School moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, in 2011.

To support this effort, more than 5,000 cadre from Cadet Command ROTC detachments, along with regular Army, Reserve and National Guard personnel, come to Fort Knox, Patterson said.

ROTC produces the overwhelming majority of Army lieutenants, followed by the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning provides the balance of the Army’s junior officer needs, and the direct commission program brings in doctors, lawyers and ministers.

3. Bulging deficits may threaten prized Pentagon arms projects – 5/12

Associated Press | Robert Burns

WASHINGTON -- The government’s $3 trillion effort to rescue the economy from the coronavirus crisis is stirring worry at the Pentagon. Bulging federal deficits may force a reversal of years of big defense spending gains and threaten prized projects like the rebuilding of the nation’s arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper says the sudden burst of deficit spending to prop up a damaged economy is bringing the Pentagon closer to a point where it will have to shed older weapons faster and tighten its belt.

“It has accelerated this day of reckoning,” Esper said in an Associated Press interview.

It also sets up confrontations with Congress over how that reckoning will be achieved. Past efforts to eliminate older weapons and to make other cost-saving moves like closing under-used military bases met resistance. This being a presidential election year, much of this struggle may slip to 2021. If presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden wins, the pace of defense cuts could speed up, if he follows the traditional Democratic path to put less emphasis on defense buildups.

After Congress passed four programs to sustain the economy through the virus shock, the budget deficit — the gap between what the government spends and what it collects in taxes — will hit a record $3.7 trillion this year, according to the Congressional Budget Office. By the time the budget year ends in September, the government’s debt — its accumulated annual deficits — will equal 101% of the U.S. gross domestic product.

Rep. Ken Calvert of California, the ranking Republican on the House Appropriations defense subcommittee, says defense budgets were strained even before this year’s unplanned burst of deficit spending.

“There’s no question that budgetary pressure will only increase now for all segments of our federal budget, including defense,” Calvert said.

For military leaders, the money crunch poses an economic threat that could undermine what they see as spending crucial to U.S. security.

One prominent example is the Trump administration’s plan — inherited from the Obama administration — to pour hundreds of billions of dollars into replacing every major element of the nuclear weapons complex, from some of the warheads designed and built by the Energy Department to the bombers, submarines and land-based missiles that would deliver the warheads in combat.

Until now there has been a consensus in Congress supporting this nuclear modernization program, which includes replacing the aged communications systems that command and control nuclear weapons. Some House
Democrats sought last year to block funding for the next-generation intercontinental ballistic missile, to replace the Minuteman 3, but they gave in and the project survived.

Nuclear modernization is a fat target for budget cutters. Mackenzie Eaglen, a defense specialist at the American Enterprise Institute, foresees the possibility of calls by some in Congress to reduce the planned fleet of Columbia-class nuclear ballistic missile submarines from 12 to perhaps nine. The Navy has estimated the total cost of this program at about $110 billion, with each boat costing $6.6 billion.

The Navy several years ago accepted a two-year delay in the Columbia program, and according to a Congressional Research Service report last month, the first sub is now scheduled to enter service in 2031 and the number of subs in the fleet will drop to 10 for most of the 2030s as the current fleet of Ohio-class subs is retired.

Esper says nuclear modernization, at a price approaching $1 trillion, is too important to put off, even in an economic crisis.

“We’re not going to risk the strategic deterrent,” he told a Pentagon news conference May 5, referring to the overall nuclear arsenal, whose stated purpose is to deter a nuclear attack on the U.S. or its allies. “My inclination is not to risk any of the modernization programs. It’s to go back and pull out more of the legacy programs.”

But others, including supporters of nuclear modernization, say it’s an obvious target for reductions. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated the first 10 years of the modernization plan will cost nearly $500 billion, and that over a 30-year span the total would hit $1.2 trillion, including the cost of sustaining the current force.

In all, the administration’s proposed nuclear weapons budget for 2021 would approach $46 billion.

“There’s going to be a temptation to cut crucial programs like this because of the trillions and trillions of dollars that are being borrowed for the coronavirus stimulus,” said Fred Fleitz, president of the Center for Security Policy. He supports fully rebuilding the nuclear weapons complex.

If Esper succeeds in shielding nuclear modernization, he likely will have to overcome obstacles to accelerating the elimination of older weapons programs, all of which have political constituencies.

Even the oldest of the Air Force’s aircraft have their strong defenders on Capitol Hill. For example, Sen. Martha McSally, an Arizona Republican and former Air Force pilot, has already reminded Air Force leaders she will fight reductions in A-10 Warthog planes. She said the Pentagon’s 2021 budget proposal would “prematurely phase out” 44 of those planes, which are used for supporting ground troops and first entered service in the 1970s.

Among other candidates for a faster phasing out or retirement are the B-1 non-nuclear bomber and the Air Force’s MQ-9 Reaper attack drone. The Reaper is vulnerable to modern air defenses. Other candidates are the Army’s Bradley Fighting Vehicle, which may give way to a new-generation combat vehicle, and some older Navy warships.

In the face of these pressures, many in Congress are already brushing off the idea that the coronavirus crisis should force a spending slowdown. Sen. Roger Wicker, a Mississippi Republican whose state is home to a major shipbuilding facility at Pascagoula, advocates for a $20 billion boost to the Pentagon budget.

“In terms of the $3 trillion we’ve spent on our economy, it strikes me it’s a relative bargain to try to come up with $20 billion, only $20 billion, to get us back where we need to be where the top military leaders in our country tell us we will keep us safe,” Wicker said at a hearing last week.
WASHINGTON — On a day when COVID-19 cases soared, healthcare supplies were scarce and an anguished
doctor warned he was being sent to war without bullets, a cargo plane landed at the Los Angeles International
Airport, supposedly loaded with the ammo doctors and nurses were begging for: some of the first N95 medical
masks to reach the U.S. in almost six weeks.

Already healthcare workers who lacked the crucial protection had caught COVID-19 after treating patients
infected with the highly contagious new coronavirus. That very day an emergency room doctor who earlier texted
a friend that he felt unsafe without protective supplies or an N95 mask, died of the infection. It was the first such
death reported in the U.S., according to the American College of Emergency Physicians.

But the shipment arriving that night in late March wasn’t going to solve the problem. An Associated Press
investigation has found those masks were counterfeits — as are millions of medical masks, gloves, gowns and
other supplies being used in hospitals across the country, putting lives at risk.

Before the pandemic, federal trade law enforcement agencies were focused on busting knockoffs such as luxury
goods and computer software, mostly from China. As America fell sick, the mission shifted to medical supplies.
To date, Operation Stolen Promise, spearheaded by Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s Homeland
Security Investigations, has netted 11 arrests and 519 seizures. And yet counterfeit goods continue to pour in —
not just masks, but also mislabeled medicines, and fake COVID-19 tests and cures, according to the agency.

“It’s just unprecedented,” said Steve Francis, HSI’s assistant director for global trade investigations. “These are
really bad times for people who are out there trying to do the right thing and be helpful, and they end up being
exploited.”

The story of how one brand of counterfeits has infiltrated America’s supply chains illustrates how the lack of
coordination amid massive shortages has plunged the country’s medical system into chaos.

EAR LOOPS

AP identified the counterfeit masks when reviewing film of the Los Angeles shipment. The telltale sign: these
masks had ear loops, while authentic ones have bands that stretch across the back of the head, making for a
tighter fit.

The blue and yellow boxes being unloaded in a Southern California warehouse bore the name of the Chinese
factory Shanghai Dasheng. The masks inside were stamped as if approved by the U.S. National Institute for
Occupational Safety and Health — signifying they had been certified by the U.S. government as safe for workers
in health care settings. N95 masks filter out 95% of all airborne particles, including ones too tiny to be blocked
by looser fitting surgical masks.

But the day before they arrived, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a very specific
warning: all Shanghai Dasheng N95 masks with ear loops were counterfeit.

Ear loop masks are less expensive to manufacture because the straps are attached with glue to the face
covering, while headbands on genuine N95s, also called respirators, must be stitched, stapled or soldered to
establish a tighter seal over the nose and mouth.

And even if the electrocharged fibers in the fabric are the same, masks with ear loops are not as effective
because tiny airborne droplets carrying the virus can get sucked through the cracks.
“Fluid follows the path of least resistance: If someone is breathing and the respirator doesn't have a good fit, it will just go around,” said infectious disease expert Shawn Gibbs, the dean of Texas A&M University's school of public health.

AP tracked other shipments of Shanghai Dasheng ear loop N95 masks as they entered the vast U.S. medical system. Shipping labels and invoices, certified letters and interviews with more than a dozen buyers, distributors or middlemen pointed to the corporate headquarters and busy factory of Shanghai Dasheng Health Products Manufacture Company.

The company did not respond to AP’s queries about its masks. And AP could not independently verify if they are making their own counterfeits, or, as the CDC said in a published warning, someone is using Shanghai Dasheng’s certification numbers “without their permission.”

The CDC separately told AP it has been in talks with Shanghai Dasheng about authenticity issues.

“Recently, NIOSH has received reports stating there is product being obtained directly from the Shanghai Dasheng factory, labeled as NIOSH-approved, with ear loops,” said agency spokeswoman Katie Shahan in an email to the AP. Shahan said Shanghai Dasheng’s N95s with ear loops are counterfeit.

On their own website, Shanghai Dasheng warns: “WE DON'T HAVE ANY DISTRIBUTORS, DEALERS OR BRANCH FACTORIES. BEWARE OF COUNTERFEIT!"

Florida-based importer Mark Kwoka said he believes the Shanghai Dasheng masks with ear loops that he obtained came from their factory, based on information he received from his partners in China.

“This is kind of getting out of control,” said Kwoka, who made a career in bridal gown design and manufacturing in China but turned to masks earlier this year.

On a recent spring day, hawkers outside the guarded gates of the factory were offering to take orders for U.S.-approved, medical-grade N95s. It wasn’t clear whether the sellers were getting their products from inside. A security guard told a reporter that he believed the sellers were peddling counterfeits, but police at a nearby station weren’t able to confirm that. The security guard ordered the journalists to leave.

Shanghai Dasheng is one of the largest manufacturers of authentic N95s in the world and one of only a handful in China certified to make NIOSH approved, U.S. medical-grade N95s.

In normal times, Shanghai Dasheng was the gold standard for N95s, according to several brokers who work in China. But in the rush of this pandemic, several said cheaper masks are proliferating.

Meanwhile, Shanghai Dasheng is holding itself up as a vital part of the pandemic response.

Just days into a weeklong New Year celebration in January, company chairman Wu Shengrong called back employees and then joined cleaners, cooks and a skeleton crew of workers for long days and nights on assembly lines. Eleven days into the manufacturing blitz, Shengrong invited in a group of journalists and said his company had bumped daily mask production from 40,000 to 70,000, and aimed for 200,000 once back at full strength.

“I am not a learned man,” Shengrong said at the time, “but as a Communist Party member and army veteran, I am a patriot and Dasheng is just a drop of water in China's ocean of private enterprises."

THE FRONT LINES

One recipient of the Shanghai Dasheng ear loop masks was Direct Relief, an international humanitarian aid organization in Southern California.
Like other buyers AP contacted, Direct Relief at first thought the factory inadvertently sent the wrong mask model and set aside the entire shipment. But after reading the CDC’s warnings, CEO Thomas Tighe said they had come to believe they were counterfeit and reported them to the federal government.

“It’s a little scary that it had gone through what we understood was an aggressive customs investigation for export, and an aggressive customs import by the U.S. and still got through," Tighe said. “It’s been a real lesson.”

Direct Relief has since caught even more poorly constructed masks donated to their warehouse.

Even for those looking out for fakes, it has been difficult to keep up with changing federal guidelines for medical-grade masks.

Citing an acute shortage of N95 masks, government officials relaxed standards in March. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced that other, unapproved medical masks with ear loops were appropriate for COVID-19 care.

But government testing of newly arrived models found most were substandard, and on May 7 the agency banned mask imports from 65 Chinese factories.

Shanghai Dasheng is among 14 that remain on the approved list.

For more than four weeks, millions of masks now considered inadequate for medical protection entered the U.S. and are now in use.

Meanwhile state and local governments, hospitals, private caregivers and well-wishers have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on the flawed masks. Before the pandemic, N95 masks sold for about 60 cents each. Today they’re priced as high as $6 apiece.

“It’s terrible, just terrible,” said David Schildmeier, spokesman for the Massachusetts Nursing Association.

He said Lawrence General Hospital, which had solicited mask donations online, handed out ear loop Shanghai Dasheng-labeled masks to as many as 40 nurses in a COVID-19 unit before someone noticed.

In West Virginia, the state passed the masks to thousands of paramedics and firefighters, prison guards and hospital workers. State officials knew of the CDC warnings about Shanghai Dasheng’s ear loops, but dismissed concerns saying that, with a proper fit, they would be safe.

In a letter to first responders, Jeff Sandy, the state’s secretary for Military Affairs and Public Safety, said he reviewed the packaging and the masks, checked with the vendor, the importer, the Chinese exporter and — through a lawyer — Shanghai Dasheng itself. He wrote he is certain the 50,000 N95 masks with ear loops that the state provided are “genuine products” that provide adequate protection.

Some first responders disagree.

“While trusting the equipment to protect them, our members may have unknowingly placed themselves in situations that put them at further risk,” said West Virginia State Firemen’s Association President Jerry Loudin.

Some of the masks were purchased by charities or well-intentioned community members who held online fundraisers.

One Southern California marketing consultant, frustrated with reports that frontline medical workers didn’t have N95 masks, had a client who makes custom, re-keyable locks in China. That client said he had sources who could get legitimate N95s, and so she launched a fundraiser, and within weeks delivered a shipment of the Shanghai Dasheng ear loop masks to caregivers.
The consultant, Wendy Chou Le, said the nurses she gave them to near Los Angeles have been grateful and didn’t raise concerns.

Tyler Alvare, a pediatric physician’s assistant in Alexandria, Virginia, had run his own fit tests on the masks when they arrived. But after talking to the AP and reviewing the federal warnings, he said he grabbed all the Shanghai Dasheng ear loop masks he had left and notified everyone he gave them to.

He said the government should have taken responsibility for providing enough protective equipment as soon as the shortage of masks became apparent instead of having every medical provider figure it out themselves.

“It’s really outside of our area of expertise,” he said.

But even experts were caught off guard.

Franco Sagliocca, Mount Sinai procurement director, was working 18-hour days, seven days a week, to keep enough safety supplies in the hospital system’s ERs and ICUS as COVID-19 overwhelmed New York. He was searching, ordering and hustling for N95s, and was planning to buy from Shanghai Dasheng.

“Our sourcing lead said, ‘Wait a minute guys, this is something we don’t want,’” Sagliocca said.

Associated Press writers Erika Kinetz in Rieti, Italy, Anthony Izaguirre in Charleston, West Virginia, Dake Kang in Beijing, and AP researcher Si Chen in Shanghai contributed to this story.

5. Doctors and nurses suffered as Iran ignored virus concerns – 5/12
Associated Press | Maggie Michael

CAIRO — They are regarded as heroes, their fallen colleagues as martyrs. But for doctors and nurses still dealing with Iran’s growing number of coronavirus infections, such praise rings hollow.

While crippling sanctions imposed by the U.S. government left the country ill-equipped to deal with the fast-moving virus, some medical professionals say government and religious leaders bear the brunt of the blame for allowing the virus to spread -- and for hiding how much it had spread.

Those medical workers say they were defenseless to handle the contagion. And as a result, doctors and nurses in Iran have been hard hit by the virus. During the first 90 days of the virus outbreak alone, about one medical staffer died each day and dozens became infected.

“We are heading fast toward a disaster,” said a young Isfahan doctor who has been working tirelessly, checking dozens of suspected coronavirus patients before referring them to hospitals.

It is no secret that Iran has been hit hard by the coronavirus. Official government figures show that around 100,000 people were infected by the virus and around 6,500 have died. But a report by the research arm of Iran’s parliament said the number of cases could be eight to 10 times higher, making it among the hardest hit countries in the world. The report said the number of deaths could be 80% higher than official numbers from the Health Ministry, about 11,700.

The Iranian government is currently reporting a decline in the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in many areas, even though local authorities are expanding cemeteries in places like Tehran where the municipal council said it had to add 10,000 new graves to its largest cemetery, Behesht e-Zahra.

Interviews with more than 30 medical professionals and a review of communications by doctors on messaging apps and other documents by an Associated Press reporter in Cairo revealed many previously unreported
.details. The reporting paints a fuller picture of the roots and extent of the country’s disjointed response as the deadly virus spread throughout the population.

In the beginning, medical staffers faced the outbreak with very limited equipment. Some washed their own gowns and masks or sterilized them in regular ovens. Others wrapped their bodies in plastic bags they bought at the supermarket.

The makeshift equipment didn’t help. Further complicating the situation, the Health Ministry said millions of pieces of protective gear ordered by the agency were stolen and diverted to the black market.

The result: Dozens of medical professionals without adequate protection died along with their patients.

Iran’s leaders, several medical professionals said, delayed telling the public about the virus for weeks, even as hospitals were filling up with people suffering from symptoms linked to the virus. And even as doctors and other experts were warning the Iranian president to take radical action, the government resisted, fearing the impact on elections, national anniversaries, and the economy.

“They wanted to send people to the streets,” said a Mazandaran-based nurse and activist.

One doctor interviewed by The Associated Press — who, like all medical workers interviewed for this story, spoke only on the condition that they not be named for fear of persecution — said he and his colleagues were even discouraged from using protective equipment. He said government officials claimed wearing masks would cause panic.

The country’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, proclaimed on March 10 that the doctors, nurses, and medical staffers who died in the fight against the coronavirus in Iran were “martyrs.” Pictures of deceased doctors have been placed alongside those of soldiers who were killed in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, which claimed the lives of a million Iranians and Iraqis.

“They are normalizing death,” a Tehran-based health consultant said.

A list compiled by a group of Iranian doctors found that a total of 126 medical staffers have died since the virus was first reported, mostly in the provinces of Gilan and Tehran, while over 2,070 contracted the virus. The AP verified 100 of the deaths by piecing together scattered news reports in local media outlets, statements from health institutions and social media messages of condolences.

Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour acknowledged the deadly toll of COVID-19 on the medical profession in Iran, telling the AP the total number of deaths is 107. Jahanpour said 470 had tested positive for the virus. But he placed the blame on the U.S. “Remember this is a country under sanctions,” he said. Iran has maintained throughout the crisis that its own industries made enough protective material to fight the virus.

Iran reported its first two cases on Feb. 19 in the city of Qom — 140 kilometers (88 miles) south of Tehran and home of highly revered Shiite shrines. It would become the epicenter of the outbreak.

The announcement apparently was made under some duress. A doctor there named Mohammed Molei filmed himself next to his bedridden brother, insisting that his brother be tested for the virus. That coincided with a visit by a Health Ministry delegation to the city.

But doctors interviewed by the AP say that before the official announcement, they started to see cases with the same symptoms as the novel coronavirus and warned the national Health Ministry that it needed to take action.

Some doctors shared with the AP letters sent to the ministry. The doctors at first said they attributed the respiratory problems among patients and deaths to the H1N1 flu. Days later, they started to call for testing for H1N1 and other diseases to rule them out; the rate of infections and deaths seemed unusually high.
Through channels on the Telegram messaging service, they exchanged data. They reached out to the Health Ministry and proposed a set of recommendations and actions. At the top of the list: a quarantine and restricting travel and flights with China. But it would be another two weeks before the government took action.

“We gave a lot of information to the government through letters and communication channels,” said a Mazandaran-based activist and doctor. He said he and other medical professionals were ignored by government officials.

Two days after announcing the first cases, Iran held its parliamentary elections where thousands lined up to vote. That same day, doctors in Gilan — one of the worst hit areas in Iran — appealed to the governor for help, saying their hospitals were flooded with patients amid a shortage of masks and other protection equipment.

“The health personnel of the province are exposed to a huge threat,” a letter sent by the doctors read.

But government officials played down the danger of the virus, calling the physicians’ plea for a quarantine “medieval” and floating unfounded conspiracy theories that the U.S. created the coronavirus to promote a fear-mongering campaign.

The feared paramilitary Revolutionary Guard kept health facilities under tight control and medical statistics were treated as top secret, the medical staffers said.

Death certificates were not recording the coronavirus as the cause of deaths — either because not all severe cases were tested or just for the sake of keeping the numbers down. Thousands of unaccounted deaths were attributed to secondary causes like “heart attack” or “respiratory distress.”

And a doctor in Tehran said the Health Ministry gave orders not to refer critical cases to hospitals to be tested for the virus — to keep the numbers low, she said.

“We suppose they (want to) say they’re doing good,” she said.

A Tehran-based radiologist said that he had access to medical files of patients at different Tehran hospitals. The reports include CT scans and blood tests that pointed to the coronavirus. But tests were not done.

“These are 40% of the cases,” he said, “It’s just difficult to prove.”

“The number of real patients with COVID-19 in Iran, from the beginning ... until today is much more than what has been reported,” he said, echoing similar sentiments by most medical workers interviewed by the AP.

He estimated that the numbers are three to four times higher than the figures released by the government.

“The authorities believe they are doing great and they try to keep things out of spotlight,” a medical scholar said.

Clinics and hospitals became hubs of infection, even as parliamentary elections and national celebrations went on:

— In Khorasan, the head of the medical science school which oversees hospitals receiving corona patients, Ali Asghar, told a local news agency that a total of 600 people died between Feb. 19 and April 4. The government number through March 22 was 42.

— In Golestan, AbdolReza Fazel, a top health official, told local media that 230 had died though April 2, while the government recorded just 10 cases.
— In Isfahan, Tahereh Changiz, the head of the medical school, told the IMNA news agency that the total number of deaths reached 400; the official figure was just 87.

— According to one health official and two doctors, the total deaths in Gilan have surpassed 1,300 so far. The last breakdown provided by the government on March 22 said the total did not exceed 200.

“Gilan wasn’t ready at all,” said one physician there. “It was a catastrophe.”

Said another doctor: “The first weeks, the system has collapsed,” with patients sleeping in the corridors and doctors forced to make painful choices. A nurse at Shafa Hospital in the provincial capital of Rasht said ventilators were removed from dying patients to let others live.

“Death certificates were written before they died,” the nurse said with a hoarse voice. On the death certificates, the doctor scribbled, “heart attack” or “respiratory distress” as a cause of death.

“It was my worst day in my life when they cut the oxygen. After work, when I went back home, I could do nothing but crying,” she said.

A psychologist in Tehran told the AP that many medical staffers were traumatized. Images of the dying patients left them with a deep sense of guilt, suicide thoughts, and panic attacks, he said.

He recalled one nurse who had a recurring nightmare of burying her parents alone. Another said she dreamed she was looking into a telescope, anticipating with horror a meteor strike.

ICU doctor Gol Rezayee appeared in a March 29 video that went viral on social media as he tried, but failed to revive a dying patient’s heart.

On Telegram, he wrote the last words he exchanged with the victim. “Doctor, if I die, tell my husband to take care of the kids,” he recalled the woman saying. “He is careless and naughty.”

Rezayee said he responded: “It’s just like a cold. You will live 120 years.” Hours later, the woman was dead.

Medical professionals also watched as their own colleagues succumbed to the virus.

As the outbreak in Rasht unfolded during the last week of February, patients packed the clinic of the city’s most popular physician, Mohammad Bakhshalizadeh, who often treated the poor for free, set up the first association for physicians in the province and volunteered during the war with Iraq.

As the virus spread, the 66-year-old doctor examined an average of 70 patients each day, largely without protective gear.

A week after Iran officially announced the first two official cases in Qom, Bakhshalizadeh developed a fever and had trouble breathing. Initial tests for coronavirus were inconclusive. Another test showed that his lungs were turning white.

He later drove himself to several hospitals until he found one with an empty bed.

Four days later, on March 7, he died.

6. Fauci warns of serious consequences if US reopens too soon — 5/12
Associated Press | Lauran Neergaard and Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar
WASHINGTON — Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government’s top infectious disease expert, warned on Tuesday that “the consequences could be really serious” if cities and states reopen the U.S. economy too quickly with the coronavirus still spreading.

More COVID-19 infections are inevitable as people again start gathering, but how prepared communities are to stamp out those sparks will determine how bad the rebound is, Fauci told the Senate Health, Labor and Pensions Committee.

“There is no doubt, even under the best of circumstances, when you pull back on mitigation you will see some cases appear,” Fauci said.

And if there is a rush to reopen without following guidelines, “my concern is we will start to see little spikes that might turn into outbreaks,” he said. “The consequences could be really serious.”

In fact, he said opening too soon “could turn the clock back,” and that not only would cause “some suffering and death that could be avoided, but could even set you back on the road to try to get economic recovery.”

Fauci was among the health experts testifying Tuesday to the Senate panel. His testimony comes as President Donald Trump is praising states that are reopening after the prolonged lockdown aimed at controlling the virus’s spread.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn, chairman of the committee, said as the hearing opened that “what our country has done so far in testing is impressive, but not nearly enough.”

Worldwide, the virus has infected nearly 4.2 million people and killed over 287,000 — more than 80,000 in U.S. alone. Asked if the U.S. mortality count was correct, Fauci said, “the number is likely higher. I don’t know exactly what percent higher but almost certainly it’s higher.”

Fauci, a member of the coronavirus task force charged with shaping the response to COVID-19, testified via video conference after self-quarantining as a White House staffer tested positive for the virus.

With the U.S. economy in free-fall and more than 30 million people unemployed, Trump has been pressuring states to reopen.

A recent Associated Press review determined that 17 states did not meet a key White House benchmark for loosening restrictions — a 14-day downward trajectory in new cases or positive test rates. Yet many of those have begun to reopen or are about to do so, including Alabama, Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Utah.

Of the 33 states that have had a 14-day downward trajectory of either cases or positive test rates, 25 are partially opened or moving to reopen within days, the AP analysis found. Other states that have not seen a 14-day decline, remain closed despite meeting some benchmarks.

Besides Fauci, of the National Institutes of Health, the other experts include FDA Commissioner Dr. Stephen Hahn and Dr. Robert Redfield, head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — both in self-quarantine—and Adm. Brett Giroir, the coronavirus “testing czar” at the Department of Health and Human Services.

The event Tuesday got underway in the committee’s storied hearing room, but that’s about all that remained of the pre-pandemic way of conducting oversight. The senators running the event, Alexander and Democrat Patty Murray of Washington, were heads on video screens, with an array of personal items in the background as they isolated back home.
A few senators, such as Alaska Republican Lisa Murkowski and Connecticut Democrat Chris Murphy, personally attended the session in the hearing room. They wore masks, as did an array of aides buzzing behind them.

The health committee hearing offers a very different setting from the White House coronavirus task force briefings the administration witnesses have all participated in. Most significantly, Trump will not be controlling the agenda.

Eyeing the November elections, Trump has been eager to restart the economy, urging on protesters who oppose their state governors’ stay-at-home orders and expressing his own confidence that the coronavirus will fade away as summer advances and Americans return to work and other pursuits.

The U.S. has seen at least 1.3 million infections and nearly 81,000 confirmed deaths from the virus, the highest toll in the world by far, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

Separately, one expert from the World Health Organization has already warned that some countries are “driving blind” into reopening their economies without having strong systems to track new outbreaks. And three countries that do have robust tracing systems — South Korea, Germany and China — have already seen new outbreaks after lockdown rules were relaxed.

WHO’s emergencies chief, Dr. Michael Ryan, said Germany and South Korea have good contact tracing that hopefully can detect and stop virus clusters before they get out of control. But he said other nations — which he did not name — have not effectively employed investigators to contact people who test positive, track down their contacts and get them into quarantine before they can spread the virus.

“Shutting your eyes and trying to drive through this blind is about as silly an equation as I’ve seen,” Ryan said. “Certain countries are setting themselves up for some seriously blind driving over the next few months.”

Apple, Google, some U.S. states and European countries are developing contact-tracing apps that show whether someone has crossed paths with an infected person. But experts say the technology only supplements and does not replace labor-intensive human work.

U.S. contact tracing remains a patchwork of approaches and readiness levels. States are hiring contact tracers but experts say tens of thousands will be needed across the country.

Worldwide, the virus has infected nearly 4.2 million people and killed over 286,000, including more than 150,000 in Europe, according to the Johns Hopkins tally. Experts believe those numbers are too low for a variety of reasons.

7. Russia: Putin’s spokesman hospitalized with coronavirus – 5/12
Associated Press | Daria Litvinova

MOSCOW — Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov says he is hospitalized with the coronavirus.

Peskov, a key aide of Russian President Vladimir Putin, told the Interfax news agency on Tuesday, “Yes, I’ve gotten sick. I’m being treated.”

Peskov, 52, has been Putin’s spokesman since 2008, but started working with him in the early 2000s.

Russians who have the virus but light or no symptoms of illness are allowed to stay home, and it wasn’t immediately clear if Peskov’s hospitalization reflects the gravity of his condition or was an extra precaution.

Reporters from the Kremlin pool said on Twitter that Peskov was last seen in public on April 30 “at a meeting with Vladimir Putin.” It was not clear whether it means the two were in the same room, as Putin has been conducting all his meetings via teleconference in recent weeks.
Since early in the outbreak, the Russian president minimized meetings and switched to holding daily video calls with Cabinet members and aides.

Peskov’s announcement comes just a day after Putin said Russia was successful in slowing down infections and announced easing some of the nationwide lockdown restrictions.

Russia has reported more than 232,000 confirmed coronavirus cases and more than 2,100 virus-related deaths, as of Tuesday. Hours before Putin made televised remarks Monday about ending the country’s partial economic lockdown, health officials reported a daily record of over 11,600 new cases.

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin revealed on April 30 that he had tested positive for the virus and planned to self-isolate. Putin asked the prime minister to call him after checking into a hospital.

Mishustin’s spokesperson said Monday that the prime minister “continues to undergo treatment in one of the state-run medical facilities” and his health was improving, but gave no details about the severity of his condition.

8. Canada looking at "stronger measures" for US border as states reopen, prime minister says – 5/12
CNN | Paula Newton

Canada is looking to strengthen surveillance at US border crossings as discussions continue between the two countries about when and how to reopen the border to nonessential travel.

“We are looking at stronger measures to make sure that we’re following up appropriately on people who come over,” said Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau during a press conference in Ottawa Tuesday.

The Canadian government is looking at administering questionnaires, contact tracking apps, temperature and medical history checks.

“We’re going to be very, very careful about reopening any international travel, including the United States before we feel that it is time,” Trudeau said.

Some background: Canada and the US agreed to close the border to nonessential travel in March and the current agreement, already extended, expires May 21. There is still no decision on whether the border agreement will remain in place beyond that date.

Canadian premiers and mayors across the country have expressed concern about fully reopening the border as the US continues to deal with Covid outbreaks and significant community spread.

“Preventing transmission from outside of Canada into Canada, once we have controlled the spread within Canada, will be an essential part of ensuring that we don’t fall back into a second wave that could be as serious as this wave we’re going through, or even more so,” Trudeau said.

Neither side wants to appear weak, but recent actions and rhetoric by both sides has put all of us in greater danger of U.S.-China military tensions sliding into armed conflict
Defense One | Lyu Jinghua

The coronavirus pandemic is reshaping the U.S.-China relationship — but in the opposite of the way that many expected. While the world hoped this pandemic might lead to more cooperation between these two great powers, American and Chinese leaders instead fell into a blame game and allowed their increasing suspicions, or even enmity, to guide their decision-making. And while hostile leaders finger-point at each other, a less-noticed series of military and policy actions by both sides has put all of us in greater danger of U.S.-China military tensions sliding into armed conflict. Tensions are increasing over intensified military activities taken by both sides, how
the virus is impacting each side’s readiness to use military force, and the rising mistrust among both peoples. But there is a peaceful way out of this spiral.

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out within the context of what the American side already was calling great power competition. That framing partly explains why Washington and Beijing believe each is seeking to position themselves advantageously for the post-pandemic landscape. Each side describes the other as being aggressive while justifying themselves as merely responding to provocations, especially when it comes to military affairs: the U.S. stresses that China is expanding its sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific region, and China believes that the U.S. is determined to keep the PLA within the first island chain.

We have seen several stories declaring that the pandemic is China’s opportunity to expand its claims in the South China Sea and intimidate Taiwan. Their conclusion is that China, now recovering from the outbreak, is using the opportunity to improve its position against neighboring countries and the United States, which are still enmeshed in it. There are also reports in Chinese media of how the U.S. military increased its activity in the South China Sea and has sailed through the Taiwan Strait with higher frequency, and how Congress passed a bill to support Taiwan’s international relations, all of which occurred in March when China was struggling with the coronavirus and the United States was as yet not widely infected. Officials from both sides expressed their concerns in similar tones after the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat. While the U.S. accused China of “exploiting the distraction or vulnerability of other states” to expand unlawful claims and called for refraining from actions that could “distract from the global response to the pandemic”, Beijing urged Washington to “stop associating South China Sea issues with the pandemic outbreak”.

Under the circumstances, neither side wants to appear weak nor take the risk of slipping, even an inch. The back-to-back actions taken by the two are an example. The People’s Liberation Army claimed to have forcibly expelled one U.S. Navy vessel, the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer Barry, as the response to its “freedom-of-navigation operations” sail through the South China Sea’s Paracel Islands, which was followed by the U.S. sending a second ship.

At the same time, to prevent or limit the transmission of the virus, both sides have implemented policies such as the cancellation of military exercises and drills, the shutdown of most recruiting centers, and the quarantine of troops deployed overseas, which could reduce available human resources, field training, and proper equipment maintenance. The inevitable degradation of readiness on both sides heightens military leaders’ anxiety and increases the likelihood of accidents like collisions of warships and airplanes which could quickly result in a crossfire.

Instead of a calm and collaborative coronavirus response, Beijing and Washington have increased suspicions and hostilities. A Pew poll conducted three weeks ago shows that Americans’ negative view of China is now at 66 percent, up from 47 percent in 2018. Both sides’ leaders are airing conspiracy stories of the virus’s origin. In China, leaders have claimed COVID-19 was brought to Wuhan by the U.S. Army. In the U.S., leaders have claimed it was invented by China as a biological weapon. It is not surprising if front-line commanders and pilots are influenced by these negative perceptions. Though no one should question their professionalism during operations, the chances of misinterpretation or overreaction caused by negative feelings cannot be overlooked.

Faced with the possibility of two nuclear powers stumbling into a war, both sides must take precautions. First on the agenda should be a serious effort to maintain and strengthen channels of communication and negotiation between the U.S. military and the PLA. Issues to be discussed include improving the existing hotline for rapid communications during emergencies, achieving consensus on crisis management principles, and clarifying different red lines in different areas and domains. If both sides were more proactive in their outreach efforts, it could change the trajectory of their global relationship. The pandemic provides a chance for them to coordinate their responses to this global crisis. As both militaries have helped hard-hit domestic communities, they can find ways to jointly assist South Asian and Southeast Asian countries in combating the coronavirus. Once the pandemic has ended, they could also exchange lessons and hold military exercises on combating a serious global public health crisis bilaterally or with neighboring countries.
Some readers may think these suggestions are far-fetched. But we can’t turn a blind eye to the disastrous prospects should we take no action. Rather, we can seize the opportunity to build much-needed cooperation between the two militaries. This chance is clearly there, if both sides are willing to take it.

Lyu Jinghua is a visiting scholar with Carnegie’s Cyber Policy Initiative. Her research focuses primarily on cybersecurity and U.S.-China defense relations. Lyu is a retired colonel from the Chinese People’s Liberation Army.

10. Blue Angels fly over Detroit to salute essential workers – 5/12
Detroit Free Press | Meredith Spelbring

The Blue Angels took a brief trip over Detroit on Tuesday as a salute to coronavirus frontline workers.

Detroit was one of three cities to see the Angels on Tuesday, including Indianapolis and Chicago. The Blue Angels and the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds have been flying over cities hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic in a salute known as America Strong.

The first flyover by both the Thunderbirds and the Blue Angels took place over New York City, Philadelphia and Trenton, New Jersey. The Blue Angels have also performed flyover salutes in Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston and New Orleans in May.

The loop was scheduled to start west of metro Detroit and travel east over Dearborn and Detroit, then north toward Sterling Heights, ending along the water over St. Clair Shores and over the Detroit River.

11. China Uses Pandemic to Boost Military Pressure on Taiwan – 5/12
A U.S. congressional report warns of aggressive actions by the People’s Liberation Army against Taipei.
Foreign Policy | Jack Detsch

China has intensified a campaign of military and diplomatic pressure against Taiwan as the spread of the coronavirus pandemic has intensified around the world, according to a congressional report provided to Foreign Policy, as Republicans are pushing the Trump administration to support a closer alliance with the island nation.

The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, a two-decade-old board made up of members appointed by both Democrats and Republicans, is warning that Chinese military forces are engaging in repeated aggressive actions, buzzing the median line of the Taiwan Strait, and tracing the borders of the mountainous island with fighter aircraft.

The uptick in aggression near embattled Taiwan is likely to further raise tensions between China and the United States that have already been on a high over the spread of the novel coronavirus. In January, the U.S. Department of Defense asked Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co., which makes components for the U.S. military’s F-35 fighter jet, to begin producing parts in the United States, fearing Chinese interference. The Pentagon’s top official for East Asia, Heino Klinck, also paid an unofficial visit to the island in November 2019 to examine options to shore up its defenses.

While China’s military response appeared to be muted at first, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper and other top Defense Department officials have recently raised alarms about Chinese military threats in the South China Sea, including against a Philippine Navy ship and the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat.

In late April, the U.S. Navy conducted two freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, which Esper told reporters aimed “to send a clear message to Beijing that [the United States] will continue to protect freedom of navigation and commerce” in the contested waterway.

China has also exerted strenuous diplomatic pressure on Taiwan, the report said, by threatening allies with cutting off all economic ties with Beijing. Only 14 nations have formal relations with Taiwan, a decision that cuts
off countries from having ties with China, though Taipei maintains unofficial links with dozens more United Nations member states.

Meanwhile, the report said that China’s diplomatic pressure has been reinforced by the World Health Organization (WHO), to which the Trump administration controversially suspended funding last month. Republicans in Congress have also put together a so-called China Task Force led by the ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Michael McCaul.

Under pressure from China, WHO has squashed efforts to allow Taiwanese officials to share best practices from its COVID-19 mitigation campaign with other countries, though Taiwan had ramped up testing and began screening travelers before the end of February, ahead of other countries.

“Taiwan’s exclusion also contributed to critical delays in WHO member states’ receipt of timely and accurate guidance in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic,” the report said. “Had the WHO allowed Taiwan’s health experts to share information and best practices in early January, governments around the world could have had more complete information on which to base their public health policies.”

The report also indicates that Taiwan is making potential breakthroughs in researching vaccines and other treatments for the coronavirus, including studies that could speed up the production of antibodies and a 15-minute rapid diagnostic test. But diplomatic salvos to WHO, including requests for information about atypical pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China, were ignored.

Taiwan, an island of 23 million people, had just seven coronavirus-related deaths as of Monday and 440 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus. Pentagon officials, including the top U.S. Gen. Mark Milley, have said it remains unknown whether the coronavirus emerged from a wet market in China’s Hubei province or elsewhere. Pointedly, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said “a significant amount of evidence” pointed to the virus coming from a laboratory in the city of Wuhan, a claim that has been disputed by scientists.

Though Taipei had participatory standing at the world body from 2009 to 2016, Chinese officials say the decision to bring it back would violate the “One China” policy that stipulates that Taiwan is part of China, used as a prerequisite for diplomatic relations with Beijing.

Yet the initiative has picked up steam as China has come under intense criticism from U.S. politicians for covering up the extent of the virus early on, and for touting conspiracy theories in March that the U.S. Army was responsible for bringing the virus to Wuhan during the Military World Games in October, a claim that has not been backed up with evidence.

But as the rate of the new infections there has reached near zero by official tallies, China has appeared to mount a heated counteroffensive, forcing European Union to soften reporting chastising Beijing for spreading disinformation about the pandemic, using a viral YouTube video to call out apparent contradictions in the U.S. response, and upping attacks from Zhao Lijian, a foreign ministry spokesman who has repeatedly told thousands of Twitter followers that the virus did not originate in China.

The criticism has led to a strong push from Republicans in Congress to strengthen ties with Taiwan, going beyond WHO and into bolstering defense ties.

“Now is the time for a declaratory statement of policy committing the United States to the defense of Taiwan,” Republican Rep. Mike Gallagher, a member of the new China Task Force on Capitol Hill, wrote in the conservative National Review on Monday. “While this approach is not without risk, as we have learned painfully from decades of failed policy toward the CCP, the greatest risk of all comes from complacency.”

12. China issues lengthy rebuttal to top 24 COVID-19 'lies' told by United States – 5/12
Fox News | Barnini Chakraborty
China has issued a 30-page rebuttal of what it claims are the top 24 lies told by U.S. politicians over Beijing's handling of COVID-19, including where the novel coronavirus originated and allegations the government tried to silence whistleblowers and cover up vital data.

The Trump administration and China have been at odds with one another in a very public tit-for-tat blaming the other for mishandling the coronavirus crisis.

The 11,000-word article posted on China's ministry website over the weekend expanded on themes state-run media has used in recent weeks as part of its counter-campaign to smear the United States and push focus away from Beijing's own shortcomings.

The lengthy tome starts off by invoking former President Abraham Lincoln.

"As Lincoln said, you can fool some of the people all of the time and fool all the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time."

The article then breaks down each of the 24 claims and attempts to refute them using media reports, scientific studies as well as statements by the World Health Organization.

In it, China swats down claims made and repeated by multiple U.S. lawmakers that China was trying to hide the origin of coronavirus.

"Being the first to report the virus does not mean that Wuhan is its origin," the article states. "In fact, the origin is still not identified."

It also pushes back on accusations that the virus was created and/or leaked from its P4 laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

"Reality Check: The Wuhan National Biosafety Laboratory in the WIV is a government cooperation program between China and France," the article states. "The Institute does not have the capability to design or synthesize a new coronavirus, and there is no evidence of pathogen leaks or staff infections in the Institute."

The article specifically calls Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for pushing mistruths about China's involvement.

Cotton has been criticized for floating a largely debunked theory on Fox News that the coronavirus was created in Wuhan lab and said a bioweapons link should not be ruled out. The Arkansas lawmaker has become one of the loudest U.S. voices in attacking China's response to the pandemic and recently said that, "More Americans than ever, like more Asians than ever, recognize that China is a pariah state, and we ought to treat them like a pariah state."

China's 11,000-word story addressed international questions about why Wuhan had so many data changes with respect to the number of people infected with COVID-19 and those who had died from it.

"The data revision by Wuhan is a common international practice. As a matter of fact, it proves that China is open, transparent and responsible," the article claims.

The article then addresses everything from why China kicked out U.S. journalists just as word began to spread about coronavirus to allegations made by President Donald Trump that China was using the global pandemic to prevent him from being re-elected in November.

"China pursues an independent foreign policy of peace, and adheres to the principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs," the article argues. "The U.S. election is its internal matter. China has never meddled in it, and has no interest in doing so."
The report goes on to paint China as the victim of U.S. political manipulation.

The report references an article in Politico that claimed the National Republican Senatorial Committee had sent a 57-page memo advising GOP candidates to address the coronavirus crisis by aggressively attacking China, accusing the country of covering up the virus, pushing a theory that Democrats are "soft on China" and instructing Republicans to say they will push for sanctions on China for its role in spreading the pandemic.

NRSC spokesman Jesse Hunt defended the memo, saying in a statement that "We routinely send campaigns different documents and sources of information dozens of times per week. That's the role of the party committee, especially in these volatile times."

China's 24-lies counterattack also takes on charges made by multiple U.S. lawmakers and Trump that the World Health Organization is actively protecting China from international rebuke and that the two have worked together to cover up the outbreak.

In April, Trump went so far as to pull millions of dollars of funding from the WHO because it was too "China-centric." His decision to suspend funding to the global health agency in the middle of a pandemic was met with pushback and led to an additional $30 million pledge by China to the group.

Beijing's report also addresses claims that China didn't disclose information it had about human-to-human transmission in a timely manner and therefore put the world at risk.

"The messages from China and the World Health Organization have been timely and strong," the article stated. "The US knows about the danger of the virus all along."

The report adds that China has been "fully open and transparent about its COVID-19 data. The figures can well stand the test of history."

Beijing also defends its controversial decision to kick out several U.S. journalists - a move some claimed was made to hide the truth about the coronavirus - and refutes allegations that it silenced whistleblowers, claiming in part that they weren't whistleblowers but dedicated members of China's ruling Communist Party.

13. China suspends Australian beef imports as public spat over coronavirus origin heats up – 5/12
Fox News | Barnini Chakraborty

China has backed up its threat of economic retaliation against Australia, suspending beef imports from four of the country's largest meat processors as ties between the trading partners sour following a dispute over the origin of the novel coronavirus.

Last month Australia called for an independent international inquiry into the origin of the coronavirus just a few days after China floated putting an 80 percent tariff on Australia's barley shipments.

"I think it's incumbent upon China to answer those questions and provide the information so people can have clarity about exactly what happened because we don't want it to be repeated," Australia's Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton said on April 17.

China responded by threatening a boycott and accused Australia of doing America's dirty work.

"Obviously (Dutton) must have also received some instructions from Washington requiring him to cooperate with the U.S. in its propaganda war against China ... Some Australian politicians parroted what those U.S. forces have said and followed them to launch political attacks on China," a Chinese embassy official said. "Their move reveals the former's ignorance and bigotry as well as lack of independence, which is sad."
As tensions between the trading partners escalates, those caught in the middle say they can't afford the fight.

"Some politicians in Australia say too much, they need to stop this rhetoric with China, especially criticism and speculation regarding the origin of the COVID-19 virus," Sam McNiven, founder at Australian beef producer Providore Global told Reuters. He added that Australia shouldn't be picking fights with its largest trade partner but instead work to support it.

China is the No. 1 market for Australian beef and accounts for about 30 percent of exports.

Australia's Trade Minister Simon Birmingham called the import suspension "disappointing" but denied it was payback over Australia's coronavirus inquiry.


LOS ANGELES — Doctors, nurses and essential workers on the front-lines of the battle against COVID-19 will get a sky-high salute from the California Air National Guard's 144th Fighter Wing.

Four F-15C Eagle fighter jets will fly over a large swath of California starting at 10 a.m. Wednesday passing over medical facilities from Sacramento to the Bay Area to Southern California.

The flyover is expected to reach Southern California around 11:45 a.m.

The California National Guard urged people eager to see the flyover to maintain social distancing guidelines and refrain from traveling to landmarks, hospitals and gathering in large groups to view the flyover.

15. Strict Rules in Place for National Cemetery Visits on Memorial Day – 5/12

The national cemeteries run by the Department of Veterans Affairs will be open to the public for Memorial Day, but there will be no large ceremonies to honor the fallen due to the novel coronavirus pandemic, according to the VA's National Cemetery Administration, or NCA.

Those planning to visit one of the 142 VA national cemeteries, which have more than 4.7 million veteran gravesites, may be required to wear face masks, depending on local rules for following Centers of Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, said NCA spokesman Les Melnyk.

In addition, "we can't have mass flag placements" at gravesites to maintain social distancing, he added.

The public is being asked to spread out their visits over the weekend leading up to Memorial Day on May 25, Melnyk said.

The rules on public access for the VA's national cemeteries contrast with those in effect at Arlington National Cemetery, which is under the jurisdiction of the Army and the Defense Department.

Arlington has been closed to the public, with the exception of family members, during the pandemic.
As of last week, Arlington spokesmen said no decisions had yet been made by the DoD on whether the public would have access to the traditional Memorial Day wreath laying at the Tomb of Unknown Soldier and address in the amphitheater, usually by the president.

Last year, President Donald Trump was on a state visit to Japan, so Vice President Mike Pence filled in for him.

The VA’s cemeteries have remained open to the public during the pandemic, but committal services including an honor guard, if available, and the playing of "Taps" have been drastically curtailed since March 23 to prevent the spread of the virus.

Initially, no more than 10 family members were permitted at graveside. But as of April 15, witnessing family members have been asked to observe interments from their cars or on the road near their cars, the NCA said.

The result has been a backlog in committal services at VA cemeteries as families have decided to hold off on interments, particularly for cremains, Melnyk said.

"We're going to be extremely busy" once the coronavirus restrictions are lifted, he added. He said a large ceremony to honor those interred during the restrictions might be planned, but families could also request individual services for those laid to rest during the pandemic.

"While we will work with families to schedule committal services once the crisis passes, we want to honor and remember these veterans now" with the creation of a "Roll of Honor" listing the names and service branches of the thousands interred since April 13, NCA said on its website.

The Roll of Honor can be seen at the NCA’s website.

16. Republican lawmaker pushes back on DoD policy barring some coronavirus survivors from enlisting – 5/12

Military Times | Meghann Myers

An Arizona Republican lawmaker is calling for the Defense Department to reconsider its coronavirus accessions policy, days after the Pentagon issued new guidance narrowing its ban on bringing COVID-19 survivors into the military to those who had been hospitalized for the disease.

Rep. Andy Biggs warned of the unintended consequences of the ban in a Monday letter to Defense Secretary Mark Esper.

"If an individual can pass the Military Entrance Processing Station screening process — despite a hospitalization for coronavirus — they should be allowed to serve," Biggs wrote. "I agree that more research is needed to study the long-term effects of coronavirus on the human body. However, I do not think that the lack of research available warrants permanently disqualifying patriotic Americans from serving in the military."

An undated MEPS memo obtained posted to Twitter last week specified that a COVID-19 diagnosis would "permanently disqualify" a recruit from processing, though days later, MEPS updated that guidance to only include those who had been hospitalized after a diagnosis.

A Pentagon spokesman declined to comment on Biggs' letter.

Uncertainty about the long-term affects of the virus — including respiratory or other systemic damage and susceptibility to re-infection — has called into question whether contracting the virus could result in health issues down the road.

New recruits receive a brief at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego. (Cpl. Brooke C. Woods/Marine Corps)
What if military recruiting could screen for wash-outs?
There may be some factors that make someone more likely to leave the military before their first contract ends.

At the same time, the Pentagon has been working to test every new trainee for the virus, with an eye toward manning and readiness consequences if the accessions process is considerably slowed down during the pandemic.

To that end, Biggs expressed concern that barring any COVID-19 survivors would be a waste of willingness to serve.

“For many across our country, the American-led coronavirus response has instilled a sense of patriotism and devotion to duty,” he said. “We must honor that unique commitment ... We must not let the Chinese Communist Party’s irresponsibility to control this virus infringe on our fellow Americans’ honorable desire to serve our country.”

17. U.S. service member positive for COVID-19 after charter flight from Seattle to South Korea – 5/12
The individual who tested positive was placed in isolation and the rest of the passengers and crew are all in quarantine.

NBC News | Courtney Kube

WASHINGTON -- A U.S. service member tested positive for COVID-19 upon arrival at Osan Air Base in South Korea on Monday after a charter flight from Seattle with other service members and dependents, according to U.S. Forces Korea.

A spokesperson for U.S. Forces Korea said all the passengers and crew were tested on arrival in South Korea. The individual who tested positive was placed in isolation and the rest of the passengers and crew are all in quarantine.

All passengers and crew are required to wear masks during the flight, the spokesperson said. These chartered flights go on a loop between Seattle, Japan, and Korea. Direct flights across the Pacific Ocean from the U.S last more than 10 hours.

In a statement, U.S. Forces Korea said, "A newly assigned USFK service member tested positive for COVID-19 upon his arrival to South Korea from the United States on a U.S. government chartered flight. He arrived at Osan Air Base on May 11, was immediately tested upon arrival for the virus and moved to an isolation room at Osan AB hospital after being confirmed with COVID-19."

"As a testament to USFK's aggressive preventative control measures to stop the virus' spread, any USFK-affiliated individual arriving in South Korea from overseas will be tested for COVID-19 and then quarantined for 14 days."

18. Chinese State Media Pushes Conspiracy Theory that Coronavirus Escaped from Maryland Military Base – 5/12

Newsweek | David Brennan

Chinese state-backed newspapers are reviving a conspiracy theory about the origins of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, as Beijing faces growing calls to allow a probe into its role in the disaster.

Two government-run newspapers published op-eds on Monday and Tuesday attacking the U.S. response to the pandemic and defending Beijing against allegations of covering up news of the initial outbreak, failing to adequately warn the world, and purposely underreporting the number of infections and deaths in the country.

The Chinese Communist Party is also refusing to allow an international probe into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite growing pressure from Western nations and the World Health Organization.
President Donald Trump initially praised China’s response to the COVID-19 outbreak, but his administration has since pivoted to blame China for the pandemic, which to date has infected more than 4.1 million people and killed more than 286,000, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Trump has claimed with confidence that the virus escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) rather than originating at a wildlife market in the city, which most experts still believe. The president is yet to provide any evidence to support his conclusion.

State-backed newspapers have been a key outlet for the CCP to defend itself and spread disinformation about the pandemic.

On Monday, the China Daily newspaper—owned by the CCP's propaganda department—published an op-ed touching on a conspiracy theory alleging that the virus may have started in the U.S.

The newspaper accused the Trump administration of "trying to dodge some pertinent questions that could be asked of it," including about Fort Detrick—a Maryland military base which for decades hosted biological weapons research programs until such work was suspended in August 2019.

Chinese newspapers and officials have previously claimed that Fort Detrick could be involved in the pandemic, providing no evidence to support the assertion. "What are the circumstances surrounding its shutting down of the army biological warfare lab at Fort Detrick in Maryland last year?" China Daily asked. "Was the laboratory conducting research on coronaviruses? Was there a leak?"

The People's Daily newspaper—the official publication of the CCP—pushed the same line in its Tuesday op-ed. "Why was the main biological warfare laboratory at Fort Detrick, which the U.S. media called 'the center of the U.S. government's darkest experiments,' suddenly shut down?" the publication asked.

"What kind of shady tricks took place there? How much more truth has been concealed by U.S. politicians?"

Neither publication elaborated on the insinuations nor provided evidence that Fort Detrick has any connection to the pandemic, which was first identified in Wuhan.

Both China and Russia have tried to shift focus away from China and the WIV, instead focusing on U.S. research laboratories in America and in former Soviet states. Chinese officials have also blamed the U.S. army for the initial outbreak in Wuhan, again without evidence.

The biological warfare research programs were put on hold last year over fears that a new decontamination system for lab wastewater was inadequate.

Caree Vander Linden—a spokesperson for the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases in Fort Detrick—said there was no threat to public health, no injuries to employees and no leaks of dangerous material, The New York Times reported. Vader Linden explained that the freeze on activity at the facility would likely last several months.

19. Pelosi unveils new $3 trillion coronavirus relief plan – 5/12
The House is expected to vote on the package Friday despite opposition from the left and right.
Politico | Heather Caygle, Sarah Ferris, and John Bresnahan

Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Democrats are planning to move ahead with a Friday vote on a $3 trillion package to respond to the coronavirus crisis, despite complaints from progressives that the bill doesn’t go far enough.
President Donald Trump and Senate Republicans also object to the Democratic proposal, saying there hasn’t been enough time since the $2 trillion CARES Act passed to determine whether new legislation is needed or necessary.

Yet Pelosi and top House Democrats will proceed despite political attacks from the left and right, arguing that a 14.7 percent unemployment rate — which is sure to rise over coming months — justifies the need for Congress to “think big” in its response to the pandemic.

Reps. Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.) and Mark Pocan (D-Wis.), leaders of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, have objected that one of their chief priorities — federal funding to cover payrolls for businesses — wasn’t included in the House measure.

Jayapal pushed hard for inclusion of the “Paycheck Guarantee” program in the new bill, but Ways and Means Committee Chairman Richard Neal (D-Mass.) turned it down, saying the proposal is too costly and complicated. The Jayapal plan — which is backed by more than 60 House Democrats — has a price tag of more than $600 billion for six months. Neal instead supported an extension of the “Employee Retention Tax Credit” backed by Democratic moderates, which still costs more than $200 billion.

Jayapal’s complaints, which she raised directly to Pelosi on a caucus call on Tuesday, reflect broader concerns among Democrats, some of whom feel Pelosi and her committee leaders have largely drafted the bill without rank-and-file input. Republicans and the White House also were not involved in drafting the measure.

But House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) told reporters Tuesday that he and Pelosi “believe the Jayapal proposal has great merit to it” and said it could be considered in future relief bills.

“This is not going to be the last word nor the final word as we go forward. And her proposal is certainly under great discussion,” Hoyer said. “We want all members to support this legislation with that provision in or out.”

Progressives privately acknowledge they are in a difficult spot to push Democratic leaders in any direction. Even the most liberal Democrats say they’re unlikely to stage an uprising against this bill because they can’t vote against vital aid for their districts, depriving themselves of key leverage that might otherwise help get their priorities into the bill.

The sprawling Democratic package, known as the Heroes Act, is expected to include a slew of liberal priorities left out of previous bills — cash for state and local governments, rent and mortgage relief, hazard pay for frontline workers and expanded mail-in voting programs.

However, Pelosi also cautioned members on a Tuesday call that some would be “disappointed” by what was left out of the bill. Pelosi said she and her committee chairs had initially assembled $4 trillion worth of policy proposals, but were forced to winnow it down during final drafting.

“Everything is big, and we can’t do everything in this bill,” Pelosi said, according to people on the call. Democrats have signaled that more legislation would follow, such as a recovery package with major infrastructure investments.

The Democratic bill represents a dramatic escalation of the party’s efforts to deal with the economic fallout from the pandemic. The shutdown of the U.S. economy has spurred unemployment levels not seen since the Great Depression, and Democrats, like Trump and Republicans, are struggling to respond.

Pelosi and her deputies hope it will pressure Senate GOP leaders into negotiations on a next package, even as McConnell has said Congress should hit “pause” until lawmakers can determine the success of its previous bills.

Democrats acknowledge that their proposal, which was unveiled Tuesday afternoon, is more of a talking point than legislation that they expect to become law.
Pelosi and other top Democrats will also push through a House rules change that will allow proxy voting and remote hearings. There had been bipartisan talks between Hoyer and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) on the issue, but the two sides haven’t been able to find a compromise. Democrats now say they will move ahead with a rules change anyway.

The House Rule Committee will meet Thursday to approve the plan, which will allow lawmakers to cast votes remotely for colleagues who can’t travel to Washington amid the outbreak. The full House would then take up the rules change — which would be in effect only during this current crisis — on Friday.

20. What Afghanistan Can Teach Us About Fighting Coronavirus – 5/12

Before militarizing our pandemic response, we need to learn from our actual war failures.

Politico Magazine | Pat A. Basu and Jason Dempsey

As worried Americans looks for answers in the midst of a global pandemic, it is no surprise that many have turned to the symbols and language of war. Public officials from Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York to President Donald Trump have likened the coronavirus response to a war effort. It makes sense: The military is the most trusted of American institutions. But the desire to “militarize” our national response comes from a credulous faith in the capabilities of the U.S. military and a desire for simple solutions to complex challenges.

Just as the American military found, after nearly two decades at war, that it could not shoot its way to victory in Afghanistan, there will be no straightforward solution to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, it is the failures of our strategy in Afghanistan that offer the most valuable lessons for our handling of the pandemic. Acknowledging and acting upon these lessons will be necessary to minimize the damage from this pandemic and put America on a quicker path to recovery.

The analogy of wartime mobilization is only appropriate if we also galvanize the nation behind a clear understanding of the threat and the means to defeat it. In the words of our political leaders, the virus has morphed from a nonthreat, to a foreign threat, to a seemingly existential threat, to one that would resolve itself very soon—often with multiple characterizations in the course of a single briefing.

The nation’s intervention of shutting down businesses, schools and most medical services has been among the most severe and expensive interventions in American history. However, many Americans remain confused about the purpose of these interventions. Our friends and neighbors ask: Are the shutdowns designed to protect me personally from illness? To eradicate the virus entirely? To buy time for hospitals to build capacity? The resulting dissonance is appalling: millions of Americans are being laid off while others are at the beach.

We could have learned this lesson from Afghanistan. This military intervention turned out to be the longest in American history and yet most Americans, and sadly many politicians, could not give coherent justifications for our continued involvement. Indeed, there were times over the course of the conflict that many Americans did not even know we were at war. Here, too, the dissonance was glaring: Americans were told this was an existential struggle while millions were at the beach, their daily lives entirely uninterrupted.

‘Unity of Command’ is recognized by the military as one of the fundamental principles of warfare, yet was rarely achieved in our efforts in Afghanistan. Nearly 20 military commanders rotated through Afghanistan over the course of the war, robbing the effort of continuity and, more important, accountability. The situation below these commanders was even worse, as units from different nations and military services passed through Afghanistan for even shorter periods of time. The result was instability in the chain of command, with command hierarchies disrupted every few months. This allowed subordinate units to choose not only their own tactics but also different metrics for success, often at cross-purposes with the overall effort.

We are seeing the same dynamic at play in our response to the pandemic. There is not enough coordination between hospitals for flexing capacity, cross-credentialing doctors and transferring patients. Cities are often at odds with state governments. States are bidding against each other to secure protective equipment, driving up
overall prices. Some states are encouraging businesses to reopen while neighboring states continue isolation strategies. Some experimentation is good and should be encouraged, yet a lack of unity, let alone coordination on key principles against a virus that does not recognize political boundaries, is a recipe for disaster.

If there is one advantage the government possesses in this crisis, it is the hard-earned expertise and longevity of professionals like Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984. American military leaders had no direct experience with Afghanistan and created new doctrine for counterinsurgency in the midst of the conflict. Fortunately, in the case of this pandemic, we have experts who have both personally dealt with similar outbreaks and have spent years thinking about and evaluating possible containment strategies. The challenge is listening to these experts and acting on their advice.

Ultimately, in either a counterinsurgency effort or in the midst of a pandemic, it is important to stay focused on the main effort and not get distracted by supporting goals and short-term metrics. In the case of Afghanistan, America focused the vast majority of its efforts on either directly fighting the Taliban, or training Afghan security forces. Yet both efforts were doomed to failure so long as the central Afghan government was perceived not to represent the interests of the Afghan people. This meant that no matter how many members of the Taliban were killed, there was always a steady supply of young Afghans willing to sign up to fight with them. It also meant that the Afghan military would constantly struggle for legitimacy when viewed as the arm of a corrupt system.

After nearly 20 years of effort, the latest Afghan presidential election saw minimal turnout (less than 22 percent of eligible voters) and even then, the results were heavily contested, with two candidates declaring victory. Elections like these have rendered our efforts to build effective Afghan security forces largely moot—an effective military requires an effective and legitimate government.

We are unfortunately replicating this kind of misplaced effort by presenting a false choice between the economy and public health. They are intrinsically linked. We can pour trillions of dollars into propping up businesses, but these businesses will ultimately fail if people either continue to fall ill or are so afraid of falling ill that they keep their dollars at home. A healthy and vibrant economy is a goal shared by all Americans, but it is a goal that can be achieved only by adequately controlling this pandemic.

The best and most effective way to ensure our interventions are working is frequent and ubiquitous testing. With a population of more than 328 million and a need for regular testing (since a negative test will not rule out a future illness), our current supply is simply not enough. Without an order of magnitude increase in this production, we will not be able to identify and contain future outbreaks.

Such a testing regimen is the first and necessary step for all other efforts to return to “normal.” Without such a focus on testing, we will inevitably replicate the experience of Afghanistan, with small steps forward invariably followed by setbacks, and declarations of “turning the corner” once again reflecting only the misplaced optimism of leadership disconnected from reality.

While these lessons from our military failure in Afghanistan can seem daunting, drawing hope from the example of the American military is not entirely misplaced. Over nearly 20 years of grinding conflict, there was never a shortage of service members willing to step into the breach and serve in Afghanistan. Today, that same resilience is on display again as our medical community and first responders are unflagging in their struggle against the novel coronavirus. As our military engagement with Afghanistan winds down, falling far short of our initial hopes, we do no disservice to those who fought there to recognize the shortcomings of that effort. Not only do we owe it to them to learn from the mistakes of the past, but the future health and prosperity of the United States relies on avoiding similar leadership failures in the face of this pandemic.

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WASHINGTON -- A leading U.S. Republican senator on Tuesday proposed legislation that would authorize the U.S. president to impose far-reaching sanctions on China if it fails to give a full account of events leading to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus.

Senator Lindsey Graham, a close ally of President Donald Trump, said he was convinced that had it not been for “deception” by the ruling Chinese Communist Party, the virus would not be in the United States, where it has now killed more than 80,000 Americans.

Graham said China had refused to allow investigators to study how this outbreak started and added in a statement: “I’m convinced China will never cooperate with a serious investigation unless they are made to do so.”

Graham said his “COVID-19 Accountability Act” would require the president to make a certification to Congress within sixty days that China had “provided a full and complete accounting to any COVID-19 investigation led by the United States, its allies or U.N. affiliate such as the World Health Organization (WHO).”

It would also require certification that China had closed all “wet markets” that have the potential to expose humans to health risks, and released all Hong Kong pro-democracy advocates arrested in post-pandemic crackdowns, he said.

The bill would authorize the president to impose a range of sanctions, such as asset freezes, travel bans and visa revocations as well as restrictions on loans to Chinese businesses by U.S. financial institutions and banning Chinese firms from listing on U.S. stock exchanges.

The legislation was co-sponsored by eight other Republican senators.

China’s embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but Beijing has insisted it has been transparent about the outbreak, which began in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

Trump and his Republican backers have repeatedly accused Beijing of failing to alert the world to the severity and scope of the virus, which has sparked a worldwide economic contraction and threatened his chances of re-election in November.

Trump critics, including some former officials, academics and columnists, have said that while China has much to answer for in terms of its actions early in the outbreak, the U.S. administration appears to be seeking to deflect attention from what they see as a slow U.S. response to the crisis.

WASHINGTON - U.S. government officials are concerned that dual U.S.-Mexico citizens may flee to the United States if the coronavirus outbreak in Mexico gets worse, putting more stress on U.S. hospitals, especially near the border, three officials familiar with the matter said.

The worries, which have not been previously reported, come as hospitals in the San Diego area in southern California have pressed the Trump administration to do more to limit the threat of the virus crossing into the United States.
While senior U.S. Department of Homeland Security officials have expressed their concerns about dual nationals in daily departmental calls, there are no plans at present to bar entry to them or make other changes to border operations, according to a senior DHS official, who like others requested anonymity to discuss the matter.

“I don’t think there is any interest in telling American citizens that they can’t come in,” the official said.

The issue has come up in discussions about a potential surge of migrants if Mexico’s economy worsens or the outbreak overwhelms health facilities there, according to the sources.

President Donald Trump has suspended non-essential travel across the U.S. land borders with Canada and Mexico, saying the restrictions are necessary to protect the United States.

So far, fears of a deluge have not been realized. The United States has the highest number of coronavirus deaths worldwide and the U.S. economy has gone into a tailspin, with the unemployment rate at the highest level since the Great Depression.

Trump’s opponents accuse him of exploiting the pandemic to expand his drive to restrict legal and illegal immigration to the United States in an election year.

Leon Rodriguez, a former director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services under President Barack Obama, said that any move to prevent U.S. citizens from entering the country would raise “serious constitutional issues,” a sentiment echoed by several experts.

About 1.5 million U.S. citizens live in Mexico, according to a U.S. Department of State estimate, many of them retirees.

Mexico’s foreign ministry did not immediately have comment on whether the issue of dual nationals had been raised by the United States. The DHS did not respond to a request for comment.

Carlos González Gutiérrez, the Mexican consul general in San Diego, said some public officials in the United States “mischaracterize the situation at the border with regards to the foreign-born population for short-term, electoral purposes.”

SCENARIOS

In the Trump administration discussions, U.S. officials have detailed several scenarios that could trigger a flood of people trying to cross the southern border.

One could be an improvement in the U.S. economy as Mexico confronts worsening economic fallout from the pandemic and the collapse of world oil prices, according to two U.S. officials.

Another could be the successful development in the United States of a vaccine or therapeutic to treat COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, one of the officials said.

Private hospitals in five Mexican states and Mexico City are already at capacity due to the outbreak, Reuters reported over the weekend.

The overwhelmed facilities include hospitals in Tijuana, just across the border from San Diego, the Mexican municipality with the most deaths attributed to COVID-19. Health experts say the outbreak there started earlier than elsewhere in Mexico because of its proximity to the U.S. city, which has a similar population but four times as many confirmed cases.

As of Tuesday, reported coronavirus cases in Mexico totaled about 35,000, with 3,465 deaths. The true numbers are almost certainly significantly higher due to the low level of testing nationwide, however.
The number of known infections in the United States is 1.35 million, with more than 80,000 deaths.

Representatives of two hospital systems in the San Diego area - Scripps Health and Sharp HealthCare - sent a letter to top Trump administration officials in late April that called for medical checks at the border and mandatory quarantine for individuals suspected to be infected with coronavirus.

“This is not an immigration issue for us, we do not want the border closed,” Scripps CEO Chris Van Gorder told Reuters on Monday. “I think that would be a disaster for both countries. But we are concerned about the large number of people coming across. There are no health checks at all going in either direction.”

At Scripps Mercy Hospital Chula Vista, less than an hour’s drive from Tijuana, about a third of COVID-19 patients had traveled across the border in the previous week, a spokeswoman said.

Gil Kerlikowske, who headed U.S. Customs and Border Protection for three years during the Obama administration, said that the United States should be proactively assisting Mexico’s response to the health crisis as a border control measure.

“If people are being treated better in Mexico, it is to our benefit, as well,” he said.

Reporting by Ted Hesson and Jonathan Landay in Washington; Mica Roseberg in New York; Kristina Cooke in Los Angeles; Frank Jack Daniel in Mexico City, editing by Ross Colvin and Sonya Hepinstall

23. Yemen reports coronavirus cases in three more southern provinces – 5/12

DUBAI - Yemen’s Saudi-backed government reported the first outbreak of the new coronavirus in three more southern provinces, taking the total number of cases in areas under its control to 65, including 10 deaths.

The Aden-based government’s coronavirus committee said nine new COVID-19 cases had been confirmed, including for the first time in the provinces of Abyan, Al Mahra and Shabwa. In the last case, the person infected had died.

Four more infections were also reported in Aden, the government’s interim seat, taking the total there to 39.

Yemen is divided between the internationally recognised government based in the south and the Iran-aligned Houthi movement headquartered in the north. The Houthis ousted the government from power in the capital, Sanaa, in late 2014.

The Houthis have so far reported only two infections, with one death, from the novel coronavirus, both in Sanaa.

The United Nations has said the virus is actively spreading undetected in Yemen, where a five-year war between a Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis has wrecked health systems and spread hunger and disease.

Writing by Dahlia Nehme and Ghaida Ghantous; Editing by Gareth Jones


U.S. Army North, located at Joint Base San Antonio - Fort Sam Houston, is adjusting the amount of forces currently deployed helping the Defense Department and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Covid-19 efforts, it announced in a release on Monday afternoon.
This includes removing support in areas that have declining need, such as federal military forces staff the Javits Center in New York City, as well as alternate care facilities in Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia, Dallas and New Orleans. The Army’s response team has helped 128 FEMA-approved mission assignments nationwide over the past seven weeks.

"We remain committed to helping the American people and will continue to work with FEMA, and other federal, state, and local partners to plan for and provide support in response to Covid-19 as long as needed," Lt. Gen. Laura Richardson, the Defense Department’s Covid-19 response Joint Force Land Component commander, and commander of U.S. Army North, said in the statement. "Together we have helped flatten the curve, while simultaneously maintaining our nation’s ability to protect our homeland."

Service members will return to their home stations upon completion of redeployment, which will occur in phases, depending on local needs and conditions.

This round of redeployed service members are from Anderson, S.C., Salt Lake City, Fort Hood, Texas and Fort Campbell, Ky.

Military medical personnel are currently deployed in civilian hospitals in six states, including Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Louisiana. In New York City. Nearly 800 service members are working in local hospitals.

Along with helping with the Covid-19 response, Army North will also provide support for needs such as homeland defense missions, earthquakes, hurricanes or wildfire response, Richardson said.

25. Pandemic protocols vary from the White House to the Supreme Court as Trump pushes states to reopen – 5/12

USA Today | Deirdre Shesgreen

WASHINGTON -- As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo prepared to take his first international trip in nearly seven weeks, his staff drew up a set of detailed "risk mitigation" steps to protect him and his entourage from infection amid the coronavirus pandemic.

But when Pompeo boarded his flight Tuesday, he was not wearing a mask – one of the only people on the plane without one, according to reporters who were traveling with the secretary. A top State Department physician told reporters on Friday that masks would be used on the trip according to CDC guidelines, which calls for face coverings in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain.

Pompeo’s decision to forgo a face covering highlights the mixed messages across the federal government as President Donald Trump pushes for states to ease stay-at-home restrictions and encourage Americans to get back to work.

The dangers of that have become clear even inside the White House, where two administration aides tested positive for coronavirus last week: a valet to Trump and Vice President Mike Pence’s press secretary.

Federal agencies in Washington seem to have a mishmash of protocols for employees who may soon find themselves back at their desks, even as coronavirus infections in the Washington region remain on the rise.

Mask, tests at the White House

At the White House, new rules were put in place on Monday, and expanded on Tuesday. The White House now administers daily coronavirus testing for people who come into contact with the president and mandates masks and social distancing, when feasible, for West Wing staff.
At a press briefing in the Rose Garden on Monday, administration officials, including Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and HHS testing czar Brett Giroir, wore masks, removing them only to speak. Reporters, seated in socially distanced folding chairs, kept their masks on as they took turns approaching fixed boom microphones to ask questions.

Trump did not wear a mask, and Pence did not attend the briefing. Asked whether he was keeping his distance from his No. 2, Trump said he had not seen the vice president since “the quarantine period” but that the two could talk on the phone.

**Pentagon: Wear masks when ‘practical’**

At the Pentagon, officials are requiring cloth face masks inside the complex “to the extent practical” when people cannot maintain 6 feet of distance from one another.

The military is following guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding frequent hand washing and disinfecting surfaces, such as keyboards and elevator buttons. In addition, teleworking has been encouraged to minimize face-to-face meetings.

Moreover, senior officials self-quarantine after coming in contact with people suspected of having the coronavirus infection. On Sunday, Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations, announced that he would quarantine himself after coming into contact with a family member who tested positive for COVID-19. Gilday has tested negative for the disease but remains isolated as a precautionary measure.

**State Dept. rolls out ‘stepwise’ return to work plan**

At the State Department, employees are not required to wear masks – at least not yet.

Dr. William Walters, the deputy chief medical officer for operations, said the agency has rolled out a "stepwise phased plan for return to work" that is based on trends in the Washington region and around the world, where thousands of staff are employed at U.S. embassies and consulates.

"Whether it’s in D.C. or around the world, we’re looking at where are we in the epidemiology curve and then taking an assertive but not overly aggressive approach to bringing people back," he told reporters in a May 5 briefing. "We don’t have a timeline established for that at this point."

**Congress: Virtual testimony, limited work**

At the Capitol, the House hasn’t been in regular session since March. The Senate is back to work – sort of.

On Tuesday, a health committee hearing on returning safely to work was held via videoconference. The chairman, Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., and three of the four witnesses were participating under self-quarantine after coming into contact with infected individuals.

At that hearing, Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., blasted the Trump administration for withholding more detailed guidance from states about how to reopen their economies. Portions of the plan have been leaked, but officials have said it remains under review.

“The guidance you have provided is criminally vague,” Murphy told the head of the CDC, Dr. Robert Redfield, who said the new recommendations would be released “soon.”

**Justices go remote in historic change**
At the Supreme Court, the pandemic protocols have prompted the nine justices to conduct high-stakes oral arguments by telephone – a historic change for an institution that has resisted previous efforts to adopt greater transparency and technology advancements.

Initially, the high court initially closed its building in mid-March, conducting their private conferences remotely and postponing further hearings.

**NASA looks at optimal air flow, industrial cleaning measures**

At NASA headquarters, the space agency is using a “risk-based” approach to getting its staff back on-site, said spokeswoman Karen Northon.

The agency is “strongly recommending” that its employees wear a face covering when they’re in public and will issue personal protective equipment to employees returning to work if they are in a high-risk or vulnerable group, and to those in offices where social distancing is not practicable, she said.

NASA also has established a “Clean Team Task Force,” she said, that is researching industrial sanitation measures to clean workspaces and ways to ensure optimal air filtration. The task force is looking at what’s used in the hotel and airline industries, among other settings, to develop a benchmark and make recommendations to the agency’s leadership.

**Homeland Security: Protocols depend on location**

A spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security said officials are examining which facilities and operations will return to normal and when. "Decisions are highly specific based on functions, duty, and location," the spokesman said.

A spokesman with the Department of Health and Human Services did not respond to inquiries about what pandemic precautions they have in place.

--Contributing: Tom Vanden Brook, Courtney Subramanian, Rich Wolf, Kevin Johnson

**26. Navy Quarantining New Recruits At Closed Indoor Waterpark Resort – 5/12**

*USNI News | Ben Werner*

The Navy is paying a dry waterpark outside Chicago $1.1 million to quarantine all new enlisted recruits to prevent a COVID-19 outbreak at the service’s sole boot camp.

On April 20, the Navy started housing, feeding and training each incoming class of recruits – roughly 500 aspiring sailors per week – at the Great Wolf Lodge Water Park in Gurnee, Ill., Cmdr. Dave Hecht, a spokesman for the Chief of Naval Personnel, told USNI News. The indoor water park is about seven miles from Naval Station Great Lakes. The initial contract expires on May 20 and will be reviewed to determine whether the Navy needs to make any adjustments.

Great Wolf Lodge, and all other amusement parks in Illinois, were ordered shut on March 9 by Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker. The state’s stay at home order was extended on April 30.

The idea behind using an otherwise shuttered waterpark in suburban Chicago to house new Navy recruits is simple: to prevent the spread of COVID-19. While at Great Wolf Lodge, the recruits are under a restriction of movement (ROM) period, Hecht said. To create a safe “bubble” at Great Lakes, the Navy has decided that all instructors will be living aboard the naval station rather than going home at night, and all incoming personnel – recruits and all others – must complete a 14-day ROM first, to ensure they don’t develop any symptoms of COVID-19, before being allowed into the Great Lakes bubble.
The Navy is paying recruits to become sailors. They are not there to enjoy a two-week vacation at the popular water park with an indoor wave pool, multi-level splash-loaded treehouse and multiple waterslides dropping four stories, according to the Great Wolf Lodge website. “Resort-type amenities are not available to any of our personnel,” Hecht said.

Recruits do not participate in any group activities. They spend a lot of time in their rooms, which are currently listed with rates of between $324 and $524 per night. Meals are delivered to recruit rooms three times per day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Two of the meals are hot.

“This allows us to limit potential exposure between recruits while they prepare to begin training,” Hecht said.

As to whether the lengths the Navy is taking to prevent a second outbreak of COVID-19 at the Recruit Training Center are working, Hecht said, “it is DoD policy to not release information on COVID positive cases at the command, base or regional level.”

The Navy’s recruit training pipeline was halted on March 30 when a recruit tested positive for COVID-19 at the Recruit Training Center (RTC). Training continued for recruits already at Great Lakes, but the service briefly stopped sending new training classes to boot camp. Each year roughly 35,000 recruits pass through Great Lakes.

Now, the recruits at Great Wolf Lodge are screened daily for COVID-19 symptoms, Hecht said. Face masks are worn at all times when traveling to and from their ROM location, and they maintain proper social distancing. Any government vehicles used are thoroughly cleaned.

“Any individual who shows symptoms will be evaluated and isolated away from the off-site facility,” Hecht said. “Additionally, in the case of any symptomatic individual, preventative medicine specialists will conduct contact tracing and isolate additional individuals as appropriate. Testing is conducted as part of medical protocols by the Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center, which provides medical care for RTC.”

However, the Navy is finding ways to keep recruits busy each day. They are supervised at Great Wolf Lodge by Recruit Division Commanders, who are facilitating Navy instructional coursework and training periods throughout the day, Hecht said. Recruits also participate in light physical activity, such as stretching during designated times each day.

“Cell phones are authorized to facilitate communication with friends and family during the restriction of movement (ROM) period,” Hecht said. “One personal handheld gaming device and up to two personal reading books are authorized during the ROM period. Recruits also have access to in-room television during any free time they have throughout the day.”

27. New Coronavirus Clusters Emerge as Some Countries Ease Lockdowns – 5/12

More U.S. governors detail plans to reopen economies as world’s confirmed cases surpass 4.19 million

Wall Street Journal | Stella Yifan Xie and Matthew Dalton

New clusters of coronavirus infections cropped up in some countries that have loosened lockdowns, as more governors across the U.S. detailed plans to reopen their states’ economies.

The confirmed U.S. death toll stood at more than 80,000 Tuesday, more than a quarter of a global total that exceeded 286,000, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The total number of confirmed coronavirus cases surpassed 4.19 million globally, with more than 1.3 million of those in the U.S., according to Johns Hopkins.

Those numbers may undercount the true death toll, researchers say. A study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the Covid-19 disease caused by the virus likely killed thousands more people in New York City than official tallies show.
Meanwhile, a group of experts including Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government’s top infectious-disease official, wrote in Science magazine that the search for a vaccine requires more than one approach. “No single vaccine or vaccine platform alone is likely to meet the global need,” the authors wrote.

In Washington, President Trump said the U.S. is conducting about 300,000 coronavirus tests a day and is on track to complete 10 million by the end of this week. Experts say the level of testing in the U.S. continues to fall short of what is needed to reopen the country safely.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo unveiled details about phased plans to reopen some upstate regions if they meet certain criteria, with construction, manufacturing and outdoor recreational facilities set to resume operation as early as Friday. Among other things, regions must show a 14-day decline in hospitalization rates, sufficient intensive-care bed capacity, and the ability to conduct testing and contact tracing.

In Massachusetts, Gov. Charlie Baker said the state plans to reopen in four phases starting May 18, while South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster said gyms, salons and public pools would be allowed to reopen as early as next week.

In California, a high-profile showdown between business and government over reopening has begun after Tesla Chief Executive Elon Musk said the company is resuming production at its assembly factory in Fremont, Calif., in defiance of local authorities.

European countries hit hard by the pandemic have begun easing virus-containment measures that have crippled their economies. To limit a resurgence of infections, some will start requiring incoming travelers to isolate themselves for two weeks.

Under Spain’s quarantine order, which takes effect Friday, people entering the country may venture out only to shop for groceries or visit health centers, or for unspecified special needs.

Those entering the U.K. from anywhere other than Ireland or France will soon be required to supply contact and accommodation details. The government said there will be exemptions—for example, for drivers delivering goods.

In France, the constitutional court objected to a government proposal that would require anyone arriving to self-isolate without review by a judge. The court also demanded more restrictions on who can access personal data that the government would use to trace contacts of people who become infected with the coronavirus.

The court upheld other legislative provisions of President Emmanuel Macron’s plan to ease curbs on movement. With the number of hospitalized Covid-19 patients declining in France, about one million children are returning to school this week after nearly two months of confinement.

Italy’s government said it would give regional authorities the power to lift many remaining restrictions starting next week, a step that will allow bars, restaurants and hairdressers in many parts of the country to reopen two weeks ahead of schedule.

Italy, which has recorded the world’s third-highest death toll from Covid-19, shut down most of its economic activity in March and began easing restrictions on May 4 after mortality and infection rates started to decline. Many regions have pushed for earlier reopenings of businesses and greater control over the process.

In Iran, the health ministry said the outbreak was under control in most of the country, despite a surge in infections in the past week. In the southwestern province of Khuzestan, police have begun tracing residents infected with the virus who don’t abide by social-distancing rules, state news agency IRNA said.

Meanwhile, parts of Asia struggled with new waves of infections after relaxing restrictions on movement.
In China, seven provinces have reported new locally transmitted cases over the past two weeks, said Mi Feng, spokesman for China’s National Health Commission. “Clustered cases continued to rise,” he said.

Shulan, a city close to the Russian border, has reported an untraced outbreak that has sickened 15 people since last Friday. The city’s mayor said Monday that Shulan is entering a “wartime state” and has placed 290 people who had been in close contact with infected individuals in monitored quarantine centers.

The city’s risk level has moved up two notches since Saturday to “high risk,” the only such place nationwide. Trains bound for the city have been halted.

In Wuhan, where the virus was first detected last December, six new cases of local infection were confirmed over the weekend, ending Hubei province’s record of zero infections for more than a month. All six individuals live in the same residential compound.

China on Tuesday reported one new imported case in Inner Mongolia and 15 asymptomatic cases, according to the National Health Commission.

South Korea, which was hit hard by the pandemic earlier this year, has delayed the reopening of schools by a week after a new cluster of infections emerged linked to nightclubs and bars in Seoul. The country on Tuesday reported 27 new cases, including 22 that were transmitted locally.

India reported 3,604 new cases, down from a record single-day high of 4,213, bringing the total count to 70,756, according to local health authorities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi discussed with state chief ministers the possibility of extending the nation’s lockdown, which is due to end on May 17.

Hong Kong, meantime, extended its streak of no new local infections Tuesday. It has been more than three weeks since the city reported a locally transmitted case, though there have been some imported cases over that period.

In Australia, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg warned that the economy’s ability to bounce back from lockdowns depends on people continuing to follow health advice, such as maintaining social distancing. “Failing to do so could see restrictions reimposed,” Mr. Frydenberg told Parliament.

While delivering his statement, Mr. Frydenberg began coughing excessively and was later tested for the coronavirus. He remains in isolation awaiting the results.

28. After six new cases, Wuhan plans to test all 11 million residents for coronavirus – 5/12

Authorities in the Chinese city of Wuhan plan to test all 11 million residents for the novel coronavirus by the end of next week in a massive push to extinguish any remnants of the virus from the original epicenter of the global pandemic.

The all-encompassing mission — announced Monday and paid for by district governments — contrasts with shortages of testing kits in some other countries, including the United States, where people have complained about not being able to get a test despite having coronavirus symptoms.

But the scope of the endeavor underscores official sensitivities about any new flare-up in Wuhan, where the virus emerged in a market late last year. It comes after officials reported six new coronavirus cases in two days, confounding health experts after a 35-day streak without infections.

“It is important to realize that a decisive result does not equal a decisive victory, lowering the emergency response level does not equal lowering defenses,” said Wang Zhonglin, a top official in the Communist Party in
Wuhan, according to the state-run Changjiang Daily. “We must not be careless or lax,” he told a video conference of officials called to respond to a sudden spate of cases in the city.

Local health authorities reported that five people in one residential compound in Wuhan had been diagnosed with the coronavirus Sunday, all of them linked to an elderly man who had been confirmed as infected the previous day.

They all lived in the Sanmin compound in the East West Lake district of Wuhan, which Chinese leader Xi Jinping visited in March during his first trip to the city since the outbreak began.

The infections were the first found in Wuhan since the city emerged from its stringent 11-week lockdown on April 8.

After the cluster was discovered, all 5,000 residents of the Sanmin compound — where 20 people had tested positive for the coronavirus during the lockdown — were ordered to undergo nucleic acid tests to screen for the virus and its disease, covid-19.

But Wuhan authorities decided to go further. The city’s epidemic prevention and control headquarters issued an emergency notice Monday ordering all district management units to submit plans by Tuesday for completing nucleic acid testing of all residents in their jurisdiction within 10 days.

This “10-day battle” would focus first of all on vulnerable groups, like the elderly and infirm, and on densely populated communities, including those with a concentrated migrant population, the notice said.

More than 1 million residents had been tested so far, the Yicai financial news site reported, quoting an unnamed Wuhan epidemic response command center official as saying that the local government realized it had to expand the scope of testing to prevent a new wave of outbreaks.

The Wuhan cluster has been traced to an 89-year-old man who developed a fever on March 17 but recovered at home within 10 days without seeing a doctor.

But he started to have health issues again last month, and last week he was confirmed as having the coronavirus. His wife and two other elderly couples in the compound also tested positive for the virus.

There had been other prolonged cases similar to the man’s case, said Wu Zunyou, chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

“Actually, there is more than one such case in Wuhan; the course of disease could last 30 to 50 days for some patients,” Wu said in an interview with state broadcaster CCTV. “The virus could take longer to manifest itself in patients with weak immunity, who are also prone to ‘ons’ and ‘offs’ of symptoms.”

Asked if it is necessary to test the entire population in Wuhan, Wu said it could be targeted to areas of known infections and that there was no need to do it in residential areas free of cases.

The cluster in Wuhan coincided with a spate of cases of community transmission in northeast Jilin province, prompting concerns about a new surge in infections. Shulan city in Jilin is now in “wartime mode” to stamp out the virus, according to city authorities, with all public places and public transportation off-limits.

But Chinese medical experts tried to reassure people that this was not a new wave of the pandemic.

“There will not be a new minor peak,” Wu said. “We have had the epidemic under control after more than three months of efforts and accumulated considerable experience in both diagnosis and [epidemic] notification. Therefore, we will not allow scattered cases to develop into massive outbreaks.”
Others agreed.

“Considering the complexity of covid-19, which has an unclear incubation period and is sometimes asymptomatic, such kinds of sporadic cases are quite normal,” Wang Peiyu, deputy head of Peking University’s School of Public Health, told the Communist Party-linked Global Times tabloid.

Liu Yang and Lyric Li in Beijing contributed to this article.

29. Trump-fueled suspicion of Wuhan lab ensnares New York nonprofit researching bat coronaviruses – 5/12
Washington Post | Paul Sonne and Shane Harris

An American nonprofit received millions of dollars from the U.S. government during the Obama and Trump administrations to identify unknown viruses in bats that could infect humans and cause a global pandemic.

Now, as the world faces one such pandemic, the New York City-based EcoHealth Alliance has found itself at the center of a political maelstrom, with one of its major federal grants suddenly axed.

The reason: Its longtime Chinese partner in identifying unknown bat viruses, the Wuhan Institute of Virology, is fending off allegations from President Trump and some of his top aides that the pathogen causing covid-19 escaped from its lab.

The story of how EcoHealth became a target in the Trump administration’s effort to deflect criticism and focus blame on China illustrates the promise and perils of international cooperation on public health research between two superpowers that are increasingly at odds.

Beijing has led an authoritarian crackdown on information about the initial coronavirus outbreak, while Washington has demonstrated a cavalier willingness to fuel theories about a Chinese lab accident without presenting any evidence. Caught in the middle are scientists from both countries, facing questions about their research and doubts about whether their years-long collaboration can continue amid escalating geopolitical tension.

After a CBS News “60 Minutes” segment detailed EcoHealth’s research and defunding on Sunday, Trump accused the show of defending China. Anthony S. Fauci, who runs the part of the National Institutes of Health that awarded EcoHealth’s grant and later terminated it, could face questions about the matter during testimony Tuesday in front of a Senate committee.

EcoHealth’s work in China first gained national attention during the pandemic when Trump, at a news conference in mid-April, pledged to pull its grant from NIH. Days later, the president’s personal attorney, Rudolph W. Giuliani, assailed the grant in a tweet. Neither Trump nor Giuliani mentioned the nonprofit organization by name, instead focusing on its partners in Wuhan.

Late last month, NIH followed through on Trump’s promise and abruptly pulled more than $3 million in funding over five years that was awarded in 2019. NIH gave the nonprofit organization little reason for doing so, writing in a letter that the project didn’t align with “program goals and agency priorities.”

“This idea that it doesn’t fit the goals and objectives — there must be more to it,” EcoHealth Alliance President Peter Daszak said in a May 1 interview. “You can’t apply for money from the NIH unless it’s within the goals and objectives of the organization. They review that when you submit a proposal.”

NIH confirmed in a statement that EcoHealth’s grant was terminated and acknowledged that the Wuhan Institute of Virology was a “sub-awardee.” Asked why the funding was pulled, NIH said it does not discuss “the details of the decision-making process regarding specific grant awards.”
Daszak, who said the grant’s termination will force EcoHealth to lay off employees, says cooperation with Chinese scientists is important because the next bat-derived virus threatening humans is likely to emerge from the region. Already, two appear to have caused pandemics in less than 20 years.

“Viruses emerge from places where wildlife carry them and people interact with the wildlife,” Daszak said. “If you have a place with a high diversity of bats and lots of people hunting and eating bats like in Southeast Asia and China, that’s where you need to go.”

Some of the bat coronaviruses EcoHealth identified with the Wuhan Institute of Virology, Daszak said, were used at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to test the effectiveness of remdesivir, the antiviral medication the United States recently approved as a therapy for covid-19 patients.

“Covid-19 is [the result of] a bat-origin coronavirus from China,” Daszak said. “Our grant is called understanding the risk of the emergence of bat-origin coronaviruses. The place we were doing it is China. We were right to be doing that.”

Of science and suspicion

EcoHealth Alliance and the Wuhan Institute of Virology’s cooperation took their researchers to the front lines of infectious disease.

Scouring China, the scientists hunted the rare bat virus that would infect humans and cause the next severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS. The hope: find the virus and develop a vaccine in advance.

The quest led them to a remote bat cave in China’s Yunnan province. There and elsewhere, over many years, the researchers took blood and fecal samples from bats, used those samples to identify the genetic sequence of unknown viruses and experimented with the material in the Wuhan lab.

Over the years, the collaboration yielded considerable results.

In the aftermath of SARS, Daszak and Wuhan Institute of Virology scientist Shi Zhengli, now referred to in some Chinese media as “bat woman,” were among a group of scientists who in 2005 demonstrated that the virus most likely originated in horseshoe bats. Later, their researchers found evidence that bat coronaviruses could infect humans directly and don’t need other animals as intermediary hosts.

The joint research involved risks. Researchers in protective equipment interacted with potentially infectious wildlife. Back in the lab, they cultured a live coronavirus from a bat on at least one occasion and tested its potential to infect human cells. Using what are known as “reverse genetics,” they took the spike proteins of new viruses that they identified and inserted them into a uniform SARS-like virus to understand which was most infectious to humans. Some experiments involved mice modified with human genes or cells to test infectivity of viruses, according to EcoHealth’s grant abstract.

Theoretically, an accident during such activities could prompt an outbreak. If researchers, for example, had found SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes covid-19, and cultured the virus in the lab, it could have infected humans as the result of a mishap.

No evidence of that nature has emerged. Shi has said SARS-CoV-2 wasn’t among the bat coronaviruses that her institute identified or possessed. Daszak dismissed such theories outright.

“We have worked with this lab for 15 years,” Daszak said. “They didn’t have the virus. I have never heard anything suspicious from this lab. It’s a preposterous idea.”
Along with other scientists, Daszak has argued that the covid-19 pandemic almost certainly arose naturally, namely through the “spillover” of the SARS-CoV-2 virus from bats to humans, possibly through an intermediary species, in a process similar to what caused the SARS outbreak in 2002.

“People hunt bats, eat bats, use bat feces for Chinese medicine and put it on their vegetable gardens, every day,” he said. “We have actual evidence, real evidence, that between one [million] and seven million people a year are getting [exposed to or] infected by bat coronaviruses in Southeast Asia.”

Fauci, who hasn’t commented on why his institute, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, terminated the EcoHealth grant, said in an interview with National Geographic that the available scientific evidence points to a virus that “evolved in nature and then jumped species.”

Such an outbreak could easily happen in any Chinese city with an animal market selling species that could carry the virus from bats to humans. Many of the initial patients in Wuhan, which has a population of more than 11 million, were connected to one such market.

But questions about exactly how and where the natural spillover took place, coupled with China’s refusal so far to allow an independent investigation into the origins of the pandemic, have bred suspicion about whether the institute could be to blame. So has the coincidence that both the bat coronavirus research and the outbreak took place in the city of Wuhan.

The Trump administration has amplified the suspicion. Senior administration officials told U.S. intelligence agencies to scour their records and look for new information that might show that the Wuhan lab was the source of the virus, current and former officials familiar with those efforts said. Those agencies have not found evidence to support the theory, according to those people, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal intelligence efforts.

The U.S. intelligence community agrees with the scientific consensus that the virus was not man-made or genetically modified, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said in a statement in late April. It also said U.S. intelligence agencies will continue examining information “to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan.”

Trump and his top aides have been fueling the lab-origin theory for weeks. Asked at an April 30 news conference whether he had seen any evidence that the pathogen causing covid-19 originated at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, Trump said he had but then declined to elaborate.

“There is enormous evidence that that’s where this began,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a May 3 interview with ABC News, when asked whether there was evidence that the outbreak began in the lab. He has not presented that evidence.

Scientists have analyzed SARS-CoV-2 and asserted that it has the makings of a naturally derived virus. And they have emphasized that the spillover of coronaviruses from animals to humans is a common occurrence, especially in a place like China.

Kristian G. Andersen, a microbiology professor at the La Jolla, Calif.-based Scripps Research Institute, who co-authored a March paper in the journal Nature arguing that the virus wasn’t lab-created, said the lab-accident theory was not a plausible explanation, but rather a “possible explanation — with an extremely low likelihood of being true.”

Science alone, however, cannot definitively disprove the lab-accident scenario, said Simon Wain-Hobson, a virologist at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, in part because of the challenge of proving a negative. He said to do so would require full knowledge of the Wuhan institute’s samples and activities leading up to the outbreak.
“The only way to know is we would seek the collaboration of our colleagues at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and this would need the collaboration of the Chinese government — and given the relationship, it seems unlikely that we are going to know,” Wain-Hobson said. Trump’s actions, he said, reduce the chances even further.

“Given available data, I subscribe to the natural-virus-origin thesis,” he said. “There may be a twist.”

An unpredicted outbreak

For years, the raison d’etre for EcoHealth’s research in China and elsewhere has been “bio-surveillance.”

The aim, Daszak said, is “to find out which of the viruses in the wild even possibly could infect people so we know where they are and we can stop them from emerging.”

“It’s a little bit like if you listen to phone calls from Afghanistan. To find the terrorists, you have to listen to all the phone calls,” Daszak said. “Only when you’ve heard the phone call do you then go in and find out who these people are and disrupt those networks.”

The nonprofit organization partnered for years with a USAID program called Predict. Launched in 2009, the program took tens of thousands of wildlife samples and identified hundreds of new viruses that could pose a threat to humans in order to create an “early-warning system” for the next pandemic. The Trump administration declined to renew the program’s funding late last year. Its work has continued through an initiative called the Global Virome Project, for which Daszak is the secretary and treasurer.

Critics of the “early-warning system” approach say it would be onerous and costly to identify all of the world’s zoonotic viruses, let alone figure out which ones will enjoy the exact alignment of circumstances to spill over and cause the next pandemic.

Andersen said the scientific research that EcoHealth and its partners in China have been doing is very important to better understand coronaviruses and how they work — but he takes issue with the panacean rationale.

“I feel the claim they are making that you can prevent the next pandemic by doing this type of work is preposterous,” Andersen said. “If you could, given they worked in Wuhan for so long specifically, you would have thought they could have prevented the current pandemic, and they didn’t.”

Daszak, however, points out that one of his colleagues, Ralph Baric, a virologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, worked with Gilead Sciences to develop the antiviral drug remdesivir and used virus strains that EcoHealth and its Chinese partners identified in the process, putting the United States ahead of the curve.

In a statement, Baric said that it is critical to learn what viruses exist in nature so potential drugs can be tested against them in a laboratory setting. His lab already had been working on bat coronaviruses, including at least one discovered by EcoHealth and the Wuhan institute, before testing remdesivir.

“It is because of our early work that the United States was in a position to quickly find the first successful treatment for SARS-CoV-2,” Baric said in a statement. “It is unfortunate that research that could help humans prepare for and fight disease is now viewed as questionable.”

EcoHealth and its partners regularly sounded alarm bells about a bat coronavirus spilling over into humans and becoming the next pandemic. The nonprofit said it found more than 700 novel coronaviruses during its work in China.

Still, it did not identify or prevent the pathogen causing covid-19. Despite seeking to find “spillover-risk hot spots,” the virus emerged in the very city their partners worked.
Shi told Scientific American that when the outbreak of a mysterious illness emerged in Wuhan late last year, she left a conference in Shanghai and returned home. If coronaviruses were indeed the culprit, she wondered, according to the magazine, “could they have come from our lab?”

After scouring her lab’s records for possible evidence of an accident, Shi told Scientific American that she breathed a sigh of relief when the genetic sequences from the new virus came back and didn’t match those her team sampled; the closest shared 96 percent of its genetic material.

“That really took a load off my mind,” she told the magazine. “I had not slept a wink for days.”

Suspicion of her institute grew anyway. Rumors circulated that she had defected, that she had been shut up by China’s Communist Party in a coverup. In a social media post in February, she promised “on her life” that the virus had nothing to do with the lab. She declined to comment for this story.

Shi’s research partners in the United States, including Daszak, have rushed to her defense, describing her as a highly professional scientist and her lab as one of China’s best. Nevertheless, her claims have been treated with suspicion in a Washington where distrust of the Chinese government is at a decades-long high. Her institute is part of the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Attention soon shifted to her collaboration with U.S. scientists under NIH grants.

Starting in 2008, Daszak received the first of three multiyear grants from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases to study bat viruses. The second grant, which began in 2014 and, according to EcoHealth, amounted to approximately $3.1 million over five years, placed the nonprofit in formal collaboration with the Wuhan Institute of Virology as a sub-recipient.

About $100,000 a year went to the institute in Wuhan to pay for the genetic sequencing of viruses under that grant, Daszak said.

Daszak received the third grant in 2019, worth about $3.2 million over five years, according to EcoHealth. The Wuhan Institute of Virology was a sub-awardee, as were East China Normal University in Shanghai, the Institute of Pathogen Biology in Beijing and Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore, according to NIH.

Daszak said he received a letter from NIH in late April saying that the agency had decided to suspend the Wuhan Institute of Virology from federal grants pending investigation. NIH asked whether EcoHealth had sent money to the lab under the current grant, and Daszak wrote to say it had not and would not. He said NIH suggested that the rest of the grant’s work would resume.

Shortly thereafter, though, Daszak said he received another letter saying that the grant had been terminated. He wrote to NIH asking to have a conversation about the rationale for the termination. So far, he has not received a reply.

NIH would have screened the Wuhan Institute of Virology with input from the State Department as an acceptable foreign partner before issuing the grant, Daszak said. He said NIH was aware of all the work being done under the grant and never registered an objection.

Recipients are also required to file regular status updates for review by a panel of experts. NIH and EcoHealth declined to release those reports.

Regardless of whether the funding is restored, Daszak said EcoHealth would continue its work, much of which still relies on federal funding from agencies such as the Defense Department.

“We are just going to get on with our mission,” he said. “We just move on. We have to.”
30. National Guard chief tests negative for COVID-19 after testing positive over the weekend – 5/12
Washington Times | Lauren Meier

The head of the U.S. National Guard Bureau has tested negative for COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, after testing positive over the weekend.

Gen. Joseph Lengyel, the Guard Bureau’s 28th chief, tested positive Saturday for COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus, but a second test taken the same day came back negative, the Guard said Monday.

“Thank you to all who have expressed concern for my health and safety,” Gen. Lengyel said in a statement. “I am happy to continue to focus on the efforts of the 46,000 Guardsmen and women who are battling this pandemic in the 50 states, three territories and District of Columbia.”

Gen. Lengyel tested positive before a meeting at the White House with top military officials and several Cabinet members, but he did not attend the meeting and immediately entered isolation.

It is unclear whether the four-star general will remain in self-isolation.

31. Pentagon watchdog to investigate Navy’s handling of coronavirus outbreak – 5/12
Washington Times | Ben Wolfgang

The Pentagon’s inspector general will launch a review of the Navy’s handling of the COVID-19 outbreak, the watchdog announced Monday, with a focus on whether Navy leaders took strong enough action to stop the spread of the virus on ships and whether their plan was effectively implemented across the U.S. fleet.

The examination, which will begin before the end of the month, comes amid high case counts aboard American ships and the weekend’s startling news that Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday would self-isolate after potential contact with someone who tested positive for the virus.

As of Monday, the Navy had at least 2,162 confirmed cases of the coronavirus — by far the most of any military service. The inspector general’s review will examine whether the Navy took strong enough action to prevent such a high case count.

“The objective of this evaluation is to determine whether the Navy has implemented policies and procedures to prevent and mitigate the spread of infectious diseases, such as coronavirus-disease-2019 (COVID-19), on ships and submarines,” the watchdog said in a statement. “In addition, we will determine whether mitigation measures that are effective in preventing the spread of COVID-19 were implemented across the fleet. We may revise the objective as the evaluation proceeds, and we will also consider suggestions from management for additional or revised objectives.”

The Navy’s response to the coronavirus has been in the spotlight since an outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt ultimately led to the dismissal of the ship’s leader, Capt. Brett Crozier. Capt. Crozier wrote a letter to Navy leaders pleading for help and warning that the situation on his vessel was dire, and that sailors would likely die without a stronger response.

The ship was eventually forced to dock in Guam as the case count rose. After Capt. Crozier’s dismissal in early April, then-acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly resigned over his handling of the matter, which included a controversial visit to the Roosevelt during which he seemed to suggest Capt. Crozier was “stupid” for writing the letter.

Military officials are now conducting a thorough investigation of the ordeal. It’s possible Capt. Crozier ultimately could return to his former post aboard the Roosevelt.

The Navy also has seen an outbreak aboard the USS Kidd.

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The Navy has nearly twice as many confirmed cases of COVID-19 as any other service, according to Pentagon figures released Monday.

The most recent count shows 2,162 cases in the Navy, compared to 1,122 in the Army and 1,037 in the National Guard Bureau. The Air Force and Marine Corps have 417 and 460 confirmed cases, respectively.