Overview: Driving defense coverage were discussions of COVID-related tensions between the U.S. and China and effects on global security, economics, and U.S. relationships with allies. Additionally, guidance from Sec. Esper on beginning a “return to normal operations” at military installations was reported in defense publications. Also of note, coverage continued on National Guard benefits and a potential decrease in defense spending.

Several outlets reported on rising U.S.-Chinese tensions due to the pandemic. The Japan Times wrote that “the pandemic is compounding already faltering views about Washington’s commitment to the [Asia-Pacific] region” under Pres. Trump, with experts predicting the DoD’s focus on the virus as well as China’s increasingly aggressive military moves in the region may lead Japan to “increase defense self-reliance.” The article cited confrontations between Chinese and U.S. military vessels, including a number in the South China Sea that “had not been previously reported” until the DASD for Southeast Asia provided details in an interview with Fox News. NBC News reported on China’s “information war” since the start of the pandemic, including the launch of new Chinese-linked Twitter accounts and over 90,000 tweets sent to deflect blame for the outbreak, including by promoting a conspiracy theory that the coronavirus started at USAMRIID at Fort Detrick. Breaking Defense also noted these incidents in arguing against a reduction in defense spending. According to the Los Angeles Times, China could see its own economic troubles, as the pandemic may hurt China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which could “further intensify China’s geopolitical tug of war with the U.S.”

Defense outlets covered Sec. Esper’s new guidance to commanders on loosening pandemic restrictions, as some overseas installations began reopening. Before Sec. Esper’s guidance was released to the press, Stars and Stripes reported on loosened restrictions at bases in South Korea and Okinawa, noting in both stories that local governments had previously eased social distancing guidelines and that U.S. personnel were still under some restrictions. Military Times wrote that installations in the U.S. would be “beholden” to the CDC as well as the White House coronavirus task force guidelines.

Other DoD-related news:
• An interview with AFCS Gen. Goldfein in Air Force Times focused on his “three resets” as the service adjusts to the pandemic. Gen. Goldfein emphasized the “several complicating factors” expected to emerge in the fall, and explained his strategy to give “lower-echelon commanders...more authority” and encourage creativity in “ways to get the job done.”
• USD(R&E) Mike Griffin told the Washington Space Business Roundtable he is “worried” that spending on weapon systems research and development will decrease due to a growing federal deficit caused by the pandemic, noting that it would not surprise him if “every government budget” was not “under siege.” (Inside Defense)
• The New York Times continued its reporting on difficulties facing military recruiting during the pandemic, but quoted military leaders saying that the increased retention rate could make up the difference.
• Military.com and Military Times continued coverage of current federal orders which would end tens of thousands of National Guard deployments on June 24, one day before qualifying for retirement and education benefits. Rep. Max Rose’s (D-NY) comments calling the decision “the definition of heartless” were emphasized in both stories, and Military Times reported on reactions from other legislators with ties to the National Guard.
• Gov. Mike DeWine (R-OH) said on Tuesday he will ask the Ohio National Guard to assist with COVID-19 testing at nursing homes after increases in infections at the long-term care centers. (AP)
• Around 90 sailors who tested negative for COVID-19 replaced the caretaker crew aboard the USS Kidd on Monday, according to Stars and Stripes. Cleaning of the ship and medical oversight and care of the crew is expected to continue for about two more weeks, and all crew will be retested before the ship deploys, the Navy said.
• ABC News profiled several Army medical officers participating in Wednesday’s virtual commissioning ceremony, emphasizing that the military’s response to the coronavirus “really has solidified [their] desire” to serve.
Other relevant/global news:

- New coronavirus cases in China are behaving differently than earlier cases, “indicating [the virus] is changing as it spreads” and increasing fears of a second wave. (Reuters).
- Lebanese PM Hassan Diab, in a Washington Post op-ed, said the coronavirus could lead to mass starvation and migration in his country, “the effects of which would be felt for generations.”

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1. For the Army's newest medical officers virtually commissioning, coronavirus reaffirms desire to serve – 5/20

The group includes doctors, dentists, veterinarians, psychiatrists and nurses.

ABC News | Elizabeth McLaughlin

More than 125 people are set to become the U.S. Army's newest medical professionals during the service's first virtual nationwide commissioning ceremony for future health care officers on Wednesday.

There are 127 current and future Army officers expected to participate in the online ceremony, according to the Army.

While some are just now beginning an academic program, others are current students, recent graduates or already practicing medical professionals. The group includes doctors, dentists, veterinarians, psychiatrists, nurses, physical therapists and pharmacists.

The diversity of their backgrounds and experiences was evident in recent phone interviews ABC News conducted with three of these future officers. For all of them, a desire to help others seems to have long-driven their decision to work in medicine and now join the Army. But the ongoing coronavirus pandemic -- and the Army's deployment in response to it -- has given new meaning to an already significant commissioning ceremony.

Dr. Rebecca VanHorn has worked extensively with service members and veterans during her career as a psychiatrist.

During her residency, she spent time at the West Los Angeles Veterans Affairs Medical Center where she learned best practices in providing care for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, she said. Now in Chicago, VanHorn is the medical director for Rush University Medical Center's Road Home Program, a grant-funded program that provides mental health care for veterans and their family members.

"I continue to be drawn to providing care for soldiers and their families, and I think it's an opportunity to fulfill my own desire to give back," she said of the upcoming ceremony where she will be commissioned as a major in the Army Reserves.

Though VanHorn said she has long-considered joining the military, now feels like the right time with her 17-year-old son set to finish high school soon.

The timing also coincides with a large deployment of Army medical teams to cities across the country, staffing temporary medical facilities, augmenting local hospitals and assisting nursing homes in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Asked how the public health crisis has affected her view of Wednesday's commissioning, VanHorn said, "It actually reiterates, sort of, the importance of the commitment that I'm excited to make and at a time when I think our country needs as much as people are able to give to help everyone."
For Kyle Wilson, Wednesday's commissioning as a second lieutenant is a return to the Army after already serving as a combat medic for 10 years -- including deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

He left the Army to fulfill his dream of becoming an intensive care unit (ICU) nurse. After graduating from the University of Texas at El Paso, he is now treating COVID-19 patients in the ICU of the university's medical center.

Wilson said that seeing the Army's response to the pandemic has similarly reaffirmed his choice to be commissioned during "a very difficult time for the country."

"I think it really has solidified my decision to return: seeing the Army come together, setting up the mobile field hospitals (and) providing care for the communities," he said.

As the daughter of an Army major, Aliyah Howell said the idea of helping soldiers and veterans has long appealed to her.

"I can honestly thank the Army for my way of life and how I grew up," she told ABC News.

To prepare for her career in dentistry, Howell volunteered at the Army's Fort Belvoir Dental Clinic in Virginia before attending the Marquette University School of Dentistry in Wisconsin. She will receive the rank of captain after her expected graduation in 2023.

"I'm really looking forward to being able to be dispatched to different locations to bring my skills into environments, whether that be overseas or to different states, different communities as needed," she said.

Howell said the Army's ability to quickly deploy in response to the coronavirus appealed to what she wants out of her own career.

"The whole goal is to take care of our country and those who take care of us," she said.

Wednesday's commissioning, hosted by Army Surgeon Lt. Gen. Scott Dingle, will be livestreamed on the U.S. Army Recruiting Command's Facebook page at 1 p.m. EDT.

2. As retirement nears, Goldfein readies Air Force for long struggle against coronavirus – 5/20

Air Force Times | Stephen Losey

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Dave Goldfein has led pilots through combat, overseen air operations at war, and even come back safe and sound after being shot down behind enemy lines.

But as he nears retirement this summer after 37 years in uniform, Goldfein faces one of the trickiest challenges of his career: How to prepare the Air Force to operate for months — and probably longer — during a coronavirus pandemic that has snarled every facet of society.

"How do you change the way you're doing business to be able to continue to operate with a cyclical virus in our midst?" Goldfein said in an exclusive interview with Air Force Times. "We have to expect, [and] the scientists tell us, [the virus] will return a few times before we get a vaccine."

By the end of this summer, the Air Force will have gone through three “resets” as it adjusts to the coronavirus, Goldfein said during a phone conversation Tuesday. The first reset came in April, and focused on how to ensure its most critical missions — nuclear operations, cyber, space, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and homeland defense — continue.

“We reset our operations across the Air Force to build breadth and depth across these critical mission sets,” Goldfein said.
The second reset is expected to come June 30, Goldfein said. It seeks to figure out how to get its training pipeline in better shape. Some changes had to be made in basic military training, undergraduate pilot training, and other forms of technical training where airmen learn to be maintainers, air traffic controllers or air battle managers, Goldfein said. But now, the Air Force needs to figure out how to make training work in this environment for the long haul.

“We changed the way we are doing business, but we have certain areas where we’re operating at about 50 percent, and that is not sustainable,” Goldfein said.

It’s not realistic to expect those training areas to get back up to full capacity, he said, but he’s hoping to find a way to get to at least 75 percent to be sustainable until a vaccine is widely available. What’s more, Goldfein said, the Air Force is seeing retention improve recently as more airmen choose to stay on longer. The combination of increased retention and getting training back to 75 percent capacity should be enough to meet the Air Force’s needs, he said.

**Bracing for autumn**

The third and final reset, which Goldfein set for Aug. 1, seeks to prepare the Air Force for what will likely be a “turbulent fall,” he said. Several complicating factors could converge at that time.

Not only is the coronavirus expected to resurge as temperatures start dropping, Goldfein said, the regular flu season is also expected to be a bad one. That will be particularly complicated, he said, since people who contract the regular flu may think they have the coronavirus.

What’s more, meteorologists are predicting this year’s hurricane season will be worse than average — possibly much worse. Last month, respected meteorologists from Colorado State University specializing in hurricanes predicted 16 named tropical storms will form this year. Of those, eight could become hurricanes, and this season could see four major hurricanes. A typical season, which runs from June 1 to Nov. 30, sees 12 tropical storms, six of which become hurricanes.

And to top it off, the election season this fall will bring additional responsibilities for the Air Force, Goldfein said. As President Trump increases his travel during the campaign, that means more travel on Air Force One.

“The August reset is, how do we position the Air Force so we’re postured accordingly, to be able to handle what could be a pretty turbulent fall,” Goldfein said.

Goldfein said that Hurricane Michael’s 2018 devastation of Tyndall Air Force Base showed how important it is to prepare for extreme weather, like any other adversary that is violent and appears with little warning. Lessons learned after Michael, including how to posture vulnerable bases and when to fly out aircraft when weather threatens, will be ready for this hurricane season, Goldfein said.

And to get training capacity back to around 75 percent, Goldfein said the Air Force is giving lower-echelon commanders, down to the squadron level, more authority.

In an April 28 memo, Goldfein asked commanders to dust off old Ability to Survive and Operate manuals — guides that spell out how the Air Force could operate in environments contaminated by radiation or chemical weapons — and find inspiration for creative ways to get the job done during coronavirus.

One thing Goldfein won’t do is start sending his own ideas down to commanders on the ground.

“As soon as I start talking about ‘how,’ I will unintentionally crush creativity where I need it most, which is at that squadron, group and wing level,” Goldfein said.
Goldfein said many retirees with this kind of experience have also contacted the Air Force to share their ideas for how to operate during the coronavirus.

The equipment used to deal with chemical, biological and radiological contaminants is different than the personal protective equipment for the coronavirus, Goldfein said. But the basic principles of how to decontaminate an aircraft, or how to separate a contaminated base into “clean” or “dirty” areas are very similar, he said.

“There are principles that we developed over the years that can be applied creatively to this scenario, to allow us to get our production numbers up and operate in this new normal in a way that is sustainable,” Goldfein said. “I do think that, if we can allow the creativity to come from the right levels of command and leadership, I’m very confident that we’ll be able to get up to the numbers I’m looking for.”

These changes are important to start working on now, because the coronavirus probably isn’t going away anytime soon. And it remains unclear when a vaccine will be available. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said on Friday that a vaccine would be available by the end of the year, but a Pentagon memo said that the vaccine might not be available until next summer. In his April 28 memo to commanders, Goldfein warned that a vaccine to protect against COVID-19 could be 18 months away.

The Air Force has so far recorded 453 positive cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, among uniformed airmen. That’s the lowest per capita rate of all the military services.

Goldfein said he believes the Air Force’s comparably lower rate is because airmen tend to be more spread out on the job. For example, airmen on a flightline can usually get their jobs done several feet away from one another.

Air Force bases also tend to be larger and more spread out, Goldfein said, and are often located in rural or sparsely-populated areas with plenty of open airspace and fewer residents to disturb with aircraft noise. Those factors also could help reduce infection rates in the Air Force.

“If you look at what we know about the virus and what we know works in terms of [preventing] transmission, we know physical distancing works, we know masks work, we know proper hygiene protocol works,” as well as isolating people who start to display symptoms, Goldfein said. “If you follow those four protocols, then you’re going to be very successful.”

Goldfein said he’s comfortable with the amount of testing the Air Force does, given the need to prioritize testing kits for older and more vulnerable population centers such as nursing homes.

*Passing the torch*

But while the coronavirus remains a pressing day-to-day crisis, Goldfein is also still working to finalize some of his top priorities before he retires — revitalizing the Air Force’s squadron structure, improve joint leader development, and multi-domain command and control. The exact date of his retirement has not yet been set.

As he looks back on his tenure as chief, Goldfein said that the effort to improve squadrons — the “foundational fighting formation” of the Air Force, as he puts it — and give commanders more authority is bearing fruit.

“If I hear one thing when I travel more than anything else, it’s how much fun squadron command is, and how much they’re able to do with the squadron innovation funds and the delegation of authority,” Goldfein said. “I’m proud of the Air Force for what we’ve been able to accomplish with that.”

But while the Air Force has made progress on each those three efforts, Goldfein said, they’re not done, and work will continue for years.
“The things you pick [to work on] as chief ought to be really hard, to be worthy of a chief’s time,” Goldfein said. “They don’t actually result in planting a flag on top of a hill. They’re a journey, versus a destination. And I don’t honestly believe the journey ever ends. We still have miles to go.”

Goldfein will likely be succeeded by Gen. Charles Q. “CQ” Brown, the current commander of Pacific Air Forces. Goldfein and Brown have known each other nearly their entire careers and worked with each other several times, such as in 2013 when Brown was the deputy combined force air component commander for U.S. Central Command and Goldfein was commander of U.S. Air Forces Central Command.

Trump nominated Brown in March, and the Senate Armed Services Committee held his nomination hearing on May 7. Brown is expected to be confirmed by the Senate.

Goldfein said Brown is an experienced combat leader, who has built relationships with officials across the Pacific, Middle East and African regions and NATO.

“You don’t have a person who is more connected and is more combat-savvy than CQ Brown,” Goldfein said. “No one’s been better prepared for this job than him. It’s going to be exciting to watch our Air Force just flourish under his leadership.”

3. Ohio governor calls on National Guard to help nursing homes – 5/20
Associated Press | John Seewer and Andrew Welsh-Huggins

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio National Guard units will be going to nursing homes this week to test for the coronavirus as the death toll continues to climb at a fast pace among long-term care residents, Gov. Mike DeWine said Tuesday.

The devastation from the virus inside the state’s nursing homes is even more severe than what had been known, with new statistics showing the death toll has topped 1,000 residents.

That translates to three of every five virus-related deaths in the state since the pandemic began, according to updated statistics obtained by The Associated Press.

DeWine said he’ll be asking both the Guard and the state’s largest hospitals to pitch in with testing.

“We’re going to push the testing as hard as we can in these nursing homes,” he said. “And I think in the next seven days we’re going to be able to report to you a lot more progress in that area.”

Fourteen teams of 10 members each will assist the Health Department with testing, with teams consisting of medically qualified Ohio Air and Army Guard personnel including medics and nurses, said Guard spokeswoman Stephanie Beougher.

DeWine’s announcement came as cases are growing at the Ohio Veterans Home in Sandusky, including the death of one resident.

Long-term care centers are still seeing a steady number of deaths despite virtual lockdowns that have restricted all visitors and Ohio’s practice of deploying “strike teams” when there are outbreaks.

For more than a month, nursing homes operators have been asking for more personal protective equipment and calling for widespread testing, saying they should be a priority like hospitals because of their residents’ susceptibility to COVID-19. But the state said at that time there simply weren’t enough tests, maintaining a policy of only testing once a nursing home resident or staff member shows symptoms.
In western Ohio, nearly two months passed between the first positive case at a nursing home in Troy and the completion of testing for all the facility’s residents and staff. During that time, 24 residents died at a pair of long-term care centers eight miles apart — a sign of what was to come for the rest of Ohio.

“We were absolutely amazed at how quickly it spread through the facility even with proper protocols in place,” said Dennis Propes, the health commissioner in Miami County.

At the height of the outbreak, the local health department was pushing to check everyone at the two Miami County nursing homes, but they were told to follow the state’s policy of treating all of the residents as if they had the virus because of the shortage of tests.

Being able to evaluate everyone at all nursing homes — not just those that are infected — would be a big step to stop more flare-ups and allow health departments “to see what’s really there,” Propes said.

Miami County officials are fairly confident that the outbreak has stabilized in those two nursing homes, but that’s not the case around much of Ohio, which has an older population on average than most states. In Lucas County and Toledo, the number of nursing home deaths during the past month has climbed to nearly 100.

As of last week, 1,031 residents of Ohio’s long-term care facilities had died from the virus, the state health department told the AP.

Up until now, that total included deaths only after April 15, which was when the state began tracking long-term care deaths by facility.

The new total includes 369 residents who died before mid-April, when Ohio recorded only whether an individual had been in a nursing home, according to the health department.

Nationally, outbreaks in nursing homes and long-term care facilities have claimed more than 32,000 lives, according to a count by the AP.

More testing is crucial for nursing homes, but it must be done in a thoughtful and efficient way, said Kathryn Brod, CEO of LeadingAge Ohio, which represents long-term care and hospice organizations.

For example, testing staff is challenging since many employees work multiple shifts over multiple days, she said. And despite improvements, some facilities are still short of personal protective equipment. Another challenge is coordinating approaches by the state’s 113 local health departments, and the range of differences between nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other care centers.

“We have so many different kinds of congregate care settings across the state, that I think one of the challenges that we have is that everybody wants to have a one-size-fits-all approach, and we just can’t,” Brod said.

Ron Kilpatrick has pushed more testing at the Youngstown-area nursing home where his 100-year-old mother moved six months ago. He has no complaints about the care she’s been receiving at the home, where she’s isolated from others and has everything she needs brought to her room.

What has bothered him is that her facility, under state protocol, would not conduct testing unless symptoms are detected among staff or residents.

At the very least, nursing home staff should be tested regularly since they’re the ones most likely to inadvertently bring the coronavirus into a facility, Kilpatrick said.

“It’s just logical to me you’d want to get ahead of this and just test the staff,” said Kilpatrick, 78, of Naples, Florida. “You don’t have to test the residents right away. They’re not going anywhere. They’re not bringing it in.”
Last week, the White House strongly recommended to governors that all residents and staff at long-term care facilities be tested for the coronavirus in the next two weeks. DeWine said then that it was unlikely in Ohio, arguing the state had a responsible plan without widespread testing.

--Associated Press writer Julie Carr Smyth in Columbus contributed to this report.

4. Don’t Use COVID As Excuse to Slash Defense Spending – 5/20

Opponents of defense spending may cite the economic consequences of COVID-19 — huge deficits and ballooning national debt— in an effort to slash the Department of Defense’s budget. If they succeed, American military supremacy will erode further, inviting aggression from adversaries and decisively undermining American security.

Breaking Defense (Opinion) | Bradley Bowman

Even as many Americans huddle in their homes to avoid the coronavirus, our adversaries have continued to use military power to test and undermine the United States. Since the crisis began, Moscow has sent bombers to probe American air defenses near Alaska. China escalated its belligerent activity in the South China Sea. Iran has harassed U.S. naval vessels in international waters. North Korea launched a barrage of missiles. Hackers have pummeled defense networks and suppliers with cyberattacks. All the while, terrorists have continued attacking U.S. and partner forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Authoritarians and terrorists apparently did not get the memo that they were supposed to play nice during the pandemic. They clearly still believe they can advance their interests and undermine ours with the employment of cyber and kinetic military power.

Despite this, opponents of defense spending may cite the economic consequences of COVID-19 — huge deficits and ballooning national debt— in an effort to slash the Department of Defense’s budget. If they succeed, American military supremacy will erode further, inviting aggression from adversaries and decisively undermining American security.

To be clear, the United States did not find itself in this tenuous position overnight. America’s military edge has been eroding for years. For many years after 9/11, Washington repeatedly failed to provide the Pentagon with the timely, predictable and sufficient funding necessary to maintain current readiness and modernize its forces.

When confronted with this difficult choice, defense leaders were often forced to postpone vital weapon modernization research and development programs to resource and support the next units to deploy.

Meanwhile, Beijing and Moscow studied how the United States fights wars and undertook comprehensive efforts to modernize their weapons and revamp their operational concepts.

So, by 2018, the military balance of power had shifted so significantly that the National Defense Strategy (NDS) Commission — a group of bipartisan national security experts not prone to hyperbole — sounded the alarm. “The security and wellbeing of the United States are at greater risk than at any time in decades,” they warned. “America’s military superiority—the hard-power backbone of its global influence and national security—has eroded to a dangerous degree.”

Thankfully, the U.S. has now emerged from what the 2018 National Defense Strategy called a “period of strategic atrophy” and taken concerted action. With increased defense funding in the last few years and a focus on great power competition, the Department of Defense is undertaking the most significant U.S. military modernization effort in decades.

In order to win the intense military technology competition with Beijing and others, the Pentagon is focusing its research and development on artificial intelligence, biotechnology, autonomy, cyber, directed energy, hypersonics, space and 5G. Simultaneously, the Pentagon and combatant commands are working to develop a new joint concept to employ these new weapons.
Despite these positive efforts, U.S. military supremacy has continued to erode.

Consider Indo-Pacific Command’s report submitted in March warning that the military balance of power with China continues to become “more unfavorable.” The United States, it said, is accumulating “additional risk that may embolden our adversaries to attempt to unilaterally change the status quo before the U.S. could muster an effective response.”

This is because America has not yet deployed most of the weapons and capabilities it has been developing and is still crafting its new joint warfighting concept. To be sure, each of the U.S. military services are sprinting to field key systems, weapons, and capabilities in the next few years. But the Chinese Communist Party and its People’s Liberation Army are sprinting too, and there is no time to waste.

The bipartisan experts on the NDS Commission recommended that “Congress increase the base defense budget at an average rate of three to five percent above inflation” in the coming years. If Congress ignores its own commission and slashes defense spending, U.S. military supremacy will continue to erode and could eventually disappear.

The far left and libertarians often respond to such arguments by emphasizing the size of the U.S. defense budget. What they fail to mention is that U.S. defense spending, measured either as a percentage of gross domestic product or a percentage of federal outlays, is near post-World War II lows.

That doesn’t mean assertive congressional oversight is not needed; there is certainly room for improvement at the Pentagon. Indeed, defense leaders must continue to ruthlessly establish priorities, eliminate waste, and implement efficiencies—while credibly demonstrating tangible stewardship to Congress and taxpayers.

One should not dismiss the severe economic impacts of the coronavirus. The Congressional Budget Office has highlighted the potentially dire consequences for the federal deficit and debt. But Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security’s mandatory spending — not discretionary defense spending — is the primary driver, by far, of fiscal unsustainability.

If the American people and their representatives in Congress provide the Department of Defense sufficient resources over the next few years, the U.S. military will be able to complete and field vital modernization programs. This will ensure U.S. troops have what they need and will enable the United States to re-assert the military superiority that has been so beneficial to peace, prosperity, and security.

The coronavirus has certainly demonstrated the need for better domestic health security programs and has delivered a body blow to the U.S. economy. But if political leaders respond by slashing the Department of Defense’s budget, Washington risks making American military superiority yet another casualty of the coronavirus.

---Bradley Bowman, former advisor to Sens. Todd Young and Kelly Ayotte, is senior director of the Center on Military and Political Power at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

“l've heard some people talk about [going] back to a BCA [Budget Control Act] level of funding,” Gen. Murray says, referring to the steep cuts also known as sequestration. “And I've heard some people say that it's even going to be worse than BCA.”
Breaking Defense | Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.

WASHINGTON: Over the last two years, the Army has cut or cancelled more than 240 programs to free billions for its 34 top priorities, from hypersonic missiles to new rifles. Some of those 34 may have to die as the economy and budget reel from the COVID-19 pandemic.
“I start off with what Secretary Esper and Secretary McCarthy have said consistently, across DoD: three to five real growth is what we need,” said Gen. Mike Murray, chief of Army Futures Command. “Given what’s going on in this country over the last two or three months…. my personal expectation is we’re not going to see three to five percent growth. We’ll be lucky to see a flat line.”

While the Army is still working on its long-term spending plan for 2022-2026, the future topline is very much in doubt. “I’ve heard some people talk about [going] back to a BCA [Budget Control Act] level of funding,” Murray told an online AOC conference yesterday, referring to the steep cuts also known as sequestration. “And I’ve heard some people say that it’s even going to be worse than BCA.”

“I do think budgets are going to get tighter,” Murray said. “I do think that decisions are going to get harder.”

Across its actual and projected budgets for 2020 through 2025, despite a slight drop in its topline, the Army has moved $40 billion from lower-priority programs to the 34 “signature programs.” Murray’s Futures Command runs 31 of the 34, grouped in six portfolios: long-range rocket and cannon artillery is No. 1, followed by new armored vehicles, Future Vertical Lift aircraft, an upgraded battlefield network, air & missile defense, and soldier gear. Meanwhile, three most technologically demanding programs – including hypersonics and high-energy lasers – are handled by the independent Rapid Capabilities & Critical Technology Office.

“We’re prioritizing what I call the 31 plus 3,” Murray said. “We have fully funded those priorities in the program at the expense of a lot of other things.”

But Army leaders have already warned that the Big Six will need more funding as they move from concept to prototype to mass production. Even a flat budget topline will be tight — and COVID makes flat the best-scare scenario.

When and if the budget shrinks, Murray warned, “I do think we’re going to have to make some tough decisions.” Hypothetically, he said, the choice may come down to something like, “Is it 31 plus three, or is it 24 plus two?”

Considering the agonies the Army went through in its multiple rounds of “night court” cuts to find money for the 34 priority programs in the first place, cancelling any of them will be painful – but not impossible.

Yes, the Army needs capabilities from each of its six modernization portfolios to work together in what’s called Multi-Domain Operations against a future foe like Russia or China. Long-range precision firepower blasts holes in enemy defenses for aircraft, armor and infantry to advance; then they hunt out enemies too well-entrenched or mobile for artillery to destroy. Meanwhile air and missile defense protects the entire force, and the network passes intelligence and targeting data.

But each of the Big Six includes multiple programs, and the Army has never expected all 34 to succeed. That’s a crucial difference from the service’s last major modernization drive, the Future Combat Systems cancelled in 2009, which depended on each of its 20 component technologies working as planned.

“Is there room for failures? Yes,” Murray told reporters at an Association of the US Army conference last year. “This concept does not count on any specific piece of capability.”

That doesn’t make cuts painless or easy, however. “Our priorities are our priorities for a reason,” Murray said yesterday. The Army’s current weapons, from missiles to tanks to helicopters, largely entered service in the Reagan era. They’ve been much upgraded since, but there’s only so much add-on armor, souped-up horsepower, and advanced electronics a 40-year chassis can take. The Army says it needs new weapons to take it into the next 40 years.

“The kids running around on armored vehicles today are riding… fundamentally the same vehicles I rode around in as a company commander, way back when,” Murray said. “My now five-year-old granddaughter [lives] up the road at Fort Hood, Texas… I’ve got eight grandchildren, and out of all of them, I have absolutely no doubt that
she is my infantry company commander wearing an Airborne Ranger tab at some point in the future. So that makes it personal for me.”

6. US aircraft carrier hit by major coronavirus outbreak to return to sea this week – 5/20
CNN | Barbara Starr and Michael Nedelman

The USS Theodore Roosevelt is expected to return to sea this week after spending weeks in port in Guam following a major coronavirus outbreak on board in March, a US Navy official tells CNN.

The Associated Press first reported the ship is expected to leave port.

The Navy’s top medical officer said the ship is ready from a medical standpoint.

Navy Surgeon General Rear Adm Bruce Gillingham told CNN in an exclusive interview he is “very confident” the Roosevelt is "medically ready" despite the fact a number of sailors tested positive for the virus after returning to the ship.

More than 1,000 of the aircraft carrier’s nearly 4,900-member crew had tested positive for Covid-19 following the outbreak. After evacuating some 4,000 sailors from the ship to Guam, the Navy had been returning sailors following a period of quarantine and isolation in the hopes of getting the aircraft carrier to sea as soon as possible.

The Roosevelt has been carrying out some preliminary in-port exercises to test the operational readiness of key systems on board. Even though more than 600 hundred sailors are still in isolation, the ship will be able to go to sea as it has enough healthy crew members to run essential functions on board.

Gillingham’s medical assessment follows 14 sailors testing positive for the virus over the last week, after initially having been thought to have recovered and being allowed to return to the ship.

The sailors had reported atypical body aches to the ship’s medical team which caused them to be tested again. But it’s believed they are not infectious, Gillingham said.

"Individuals may have persistent symptoms for quite a while, but given the information that we have to date, they're unlikely to be infectious at that point," he said.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates people are unlikely to be infectious 10 days after symptoms emerge, but the Navy is keeping sailors who tested positive in isolation for at least 14 days as an extra precaution to minimize the chances of infection once they are at sea.

Gillingham emphasized that the sailors who recently tested positive self-reported the symptoms, which led to them being tested again. The ship has instituted strict social distancing measures ranging from one-way passageways and stairwells to extended meal hours so sailors can eat in smaller groups.

Inquiry in progress

The outbreak aboard the aircraft carrier triggered a chain of events that led to the firing of the ship’s commanding officer, and the resignation of the acting Navy secretary.

Last month the Navy announced that it was launching a broader inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the outbreak, effectively delaying its initial recommendation that the ship’s commanding officer be reinstated.

The announcement came days after Secretary of Defense Mark Esper declined to immediately endorse the Navy’s original investigation into the issue, which included a recommendation to reinstate Capt. Brett Crozier.
US officials told CNN that senior Navy officials had recommended that Crozier be reinstated but Esper was not prepared to immediately endorse that recommendation and the wider inquiry was launched the following week.

Crozier was fired for what then-acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly said was poor judgment for too widely disseminating a warning among Navy officials about the spread of the virus aboard his vessel, a warning that eventually made its way into the press.

While Modly publicly accused Crozier of sending his letter of warning to 20 to 30 people, the email to which the letter was attached shows that Crozier sent it to 10 people including his direct superior, according to a copy of the email obtained by The Washington Post.

"I believe if there is ever a time to ask for help it is now regardless of the impact on my career," Crozier wrote in his email, the contents of which a US official directly familiar with the message confirmed to CNN.

Modly resigned days later over his handling of the incident, actions which included a $240,000 trip to Guam where he slammed Crozier and admonished sailors for giving Crozier a rousing send off in public remarks to the crew.

The Hill | Ellen Mitchell

The Pentagon has issued new guidance for local commanders in states where stay-at-home orders are beginning to relax, according to a memo released Wednesday.

Since late March, all military installations globally have been in partial lockdown after Defense Secretary Mark Esper raised the Defense Department’s (DOD) global health protection level to its second-highest setting. The freeze — which prohibited nonessential travel for DOD personnel and families and limited access to bases — was intended to stem increasing coronavirus cases among service members.

A May 19 memo now lays out a guideline for local commanders to relax certain restrictions as COVID-19 cases decline in their areas.

“Commanders, in consultation with their medical leadership, shall exercise their authority by making deliberate, risk-based decisions to change [health protection] levels as conditions allow," according to the memo signed by Esper.

Installations must still follow guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Trump administration’s coronavirus task force guidance and regulations.

Commanders also must collaborate with state, territorial and local authorities, the command public health emergency officer and local military medical treatment facilities.

The leaders are also allowed to set health protection levels that may be more stringent than the surrounding community requirements “based on mission and other risk considerations.” If they want to make them less strict, however, such a decision must be reviewed by the next higher commander in the chain.

Local commanders can only move to relax health protection levels after several key benchmarks, including a two-week downturn in locally reported coronavirus-like or flu-like illnesses, two weeks of decreases local coronavirus cases, and proof that on-base or local civilian hospitals can handle coronavirus patients and needed testing.

As of Wednesday morning, 5,820 service members had tested positive for the coronavirus, with 129 hospitalizations, two deaths and 2,940 recovered.
In addition, 1,381 civilian employees have tested positive with 15 deaths, 1,026 dependents tested positive with four deaths and 537 contractors tested positive with eight deaths.

Pentagon officials have acknowledged that the coronavirus will be a hurdle for military readiness at least until a vaccine is developed, an undertaking that could take 12 to 18 months at the soonest.

Esper earlier this month said that the Pentagon is “preparing for a second wave and maybe more” of the illness.

8. Esper sets criteria for returning bases to regular operations – 5/20
Inside Defense | Tony Bertuca

Defense Secretary Mark Esper today sent guidance to new commanders that would allow military installations to begin planning a return to normal operations amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Under this guidance, commanders make deliberate, risk-based decisions to change [Force Health Protection Condition] levels as conditions allow," according to a Pentagon statement.

Commanders are being directed to consider guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as state and local health authorities.

Commanders must also ensure the following criteria are met before loosening restrictions:

- a downward trajectory of reported cases of influenza-like and COVID-like illnesses over the preceding 14-day period;
- a downward trajectory of documented COVID-19 cases or positive tests as a percentage of total tests over the preceding 14-day period; and
- assurance that military or local hospitals have the necessary capacity to treat patients and have an adequate COVID-19 testing program in place for at-risk healthcare workers and anyone exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms.

"The commanders will also ensure that comprehensive health surveillance processes are in place to monitor COVID-like illnesses and provide surveillance laboratory testing," the Pentagon said. "Commanders will at all times retain the inherent authority to increase their [Force Health Protection Condition] levels as necessary."

Inside Defense | Jason Sherman

Mike Griffin, the Pentagon’s chief technology officer, said he is concerned that weapon system research and development spending will soon be squeezed as the federal deficit mounts in the wake of the novel coronavirus outbreak and pressure grows to rein in federal spending -- a view he said should come as no surprise to anyone.

"Of course I’m worried," Griffin said today during an online briefing hosted by the Washington Space Business Roundtable. "This is a little like the famous line in the movie Casablanca, "I'm shocked to discover gambling in this establishment."

"We're on a multitrillion-dollar spending binge to deal with coronavirus," Griffin said. "And when the urgent problems of this pandemic are behind us, we're going to have to take stock and figure out how we're going to pay for it all."

COVID-19 stimulus spending is estimated to push the U.S. federal deficit from an estimated $1 trillion in fiscal year 2020 to more than $4 trillion.
Todd Harrison, a defense budget expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said a downturn in U.S. defense spending could be in the offing as a result.

"We could be looking at a deficit-driven defense drawdown in the next two or three years," Harrison said during an online event April 27.

"I would be very surprised if other budgets across government, not just DOD, not even just the entire national security industry -- I would be very surprised if every government budget was not under siege as we try to grope our way forward in a post-pandemic world," Griffin said today. "If you're asking me what I think the details of that are going to be, I'm going to punt that question because I have no idea at this point. I, and my colleagues on the E-Ring of the Pentagon . . . we're all struggling to figure out what the details are going to be. I just don't know."

In the 1942 classic Casablanca, starring Humphry Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, Rick's café is closed by Captain Renaut, who has been ordered to shut the business down but has no legal basis for the action. Renaut uses gambling as a pretense, even though he is a regular at the casino. "I am shocked, shocked to find that gambling is going on in here," he says, as he is handed -- and accepts -- winnings from a recent visit.


Japan Times | Jesse Johnson

As the U.S. Navy's top officer went into quarantine earlier this month after a family member tested positive for the new coronavirus, the Yokosuka, Kanagawa Prefecture-based USS Ronald Reagan was preparing for a return to patrolling the waters of the western Pacific after dealing with its own COVID-19 outbreak.

The scenes were a microcosm of the U.S. military's recent ups and downs in grappling with the virus as it has battled to maintain its formidable presence in the western Pacific, while both reassuring allies and preventing China from capitalizing on any perceived opening.

While U.S. defense chief Mark Esper said earlier this month that the pandemic has "had a very low impact on readiness," he has also warned that it could absorb a "greater impact" over time if the virus shows no signs of ebbing.

As of Tuesday, more than 5,700 service members have tested positive for the new coronavirus since late February, according to the Pentagon.

It's unclear how many cases have occurred in the Indo-Pacific region, as the Defense Department has ordered military bases and combatant commands to withhold those figures, citing operational security concerns. However, the USS Theordore Rooselvelt aircraft carrier, currently sidelined in Guam, has seen more than 1,150 cases, while the USS Kidd destroyer, which was forced to return to a naval base in San Diego after cases were confirmed while operating in the Pacific, eventually confirmed 63 cases, according to the navy.

The Reagan — the United States' only forward-deployed aircraft carrier — had seen at least 16 cases of the virus while undergoing annual maintenance, The New York Times reported on April 22.

U.S. Forces Japan, meanwhile, has extended its coronavirus public health emergency imposed on all U.S. troops in the country to June 14.

But regardless of how quickly the U.S. military recovers from the virus, experts say the pandemic is compounding already faltering views about Washington's commitment to the region under President Donald Trump, with concerns that China may be looking to fill any ensuing vacuum.

In Japan, Defense Minister Taro Kono last month acknowledged the infections of U.S. forces in the country but said the outbreaks were "not at a level where there is a problem with deterrence."
Still, experts say anxieties among allies such as Japan will continue to grow under the current circumstances.

“There’s certainly trepidation in Tokyo over U.S. military readiness due to the pandemic,” said Collin Koh, a research fellow and maritime security expert at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

Koh said the U.S. military’s battle with COVID-19 could, in the longer term, even see “the onus … fall on Japan to increase defense self-reliance.”

“Given Japan’s stature as a regional power that exerts a certain level of influence across the Indo-Pacific region … it may have to envision scenarios where the Self-Defense Forces would have to step up to the plate and fill certain voids as a result of problems with U.S. military readiness,” he said.

**China's propaganda machine**

While Washington and Beijing have traded barbs over the origin of the virus and their handling of the pandemic — both sometimes at the expense of the truth — China has used its state-run media to present a narrative that the U.S. military is attempting to conceal a weakened position.

Headlines have ranged from those focusing on the U.S. fight against the disease (“Epidemic hinders U.S. military presence near China”) to those delivering prescient, if tone-deaf, predictions (“Will U.S. aircraft carrier become next Diamond Princess?”). Some have even latched onto conspiracy theories that the U.S. military was the original propagator of the virus (“U.S. military victim or spreader of virus?”) — much akin to official, but unsubstantiated, pronouncements out of Washington citing “enormous evidence” showing that the virus originated in a Chinese lab.

Koh said that in its official media, China is “certainly seeking to capitalize” on the situation.

“The theme that recurs in recent state media commentaries is one that sends this message: ‘The U.S. military is in trouble over the pandemic, it’s abandoned by its political masters in Washington due to the politicking and inept handling of the crisis by the Trump administration, and regional governments should not have too much expectation of the Americans in coming to any assistance,’” he said.

The Chinese military, meanwhile, says there have been no confirmed COVID-19 cases among the 2 million members of its People’s Liberation Army, the world’s biggest armed force — a claim some observers have labeled dubious.

“It is hard to believe that their readiness hasn’t been negatively impacted by coronavirus,” said Derek Grossman, a senior defense analyst with the Rand Corp. think tank. “From that perspective, Beijing may be trying to paper over its readiness challenges by projecting a strong image externally.”

In conjunction with its push in state-run media, Beijing has continued to exhibit what many experts characterize as an aggressive stance in the flashpoint South and East China seas.

Earlier this month, it sent government ships to chase fishing vessels in Japanese waters near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea — staying there for three consecutive days for the first time since August 2016. The tiny, uninhabited islets are administered by Japan but claimed by China, where they are known as the Diaoyu. The latest attempts by Beijing to change that status quo via “gray zone” tactics — actions deliberately calculated to remain below the level that would trigger an armed response — have unnerved Tokyo.

Japan also watched warily last month when China, in a show of growing military strength, sent the aircraft carrier Liaoning and its strike group on its first round-trip mission through the Miyako Strait, between the islands of Okinawa and Miyako, and past Taiwan. The international waterway is strategically important as it is one of just a handful of routes that allow the Chinese Navy access to the Pacific Ocean.
But it has been in the disputed South China Sea — where Beijing in April established two districts to administer islands and reefs it controls in an apparent bid to cement its claim to sovereignty over the area — that the standoff between the U.S. and its allies and China has garnered the most attention.

Over the past month, the Chinese Navy has conducted “mock battles” and “live-fire training” in the waterway to improve its “combat capabilities,” according to state media, while also deploying a survey vessel and armed China Coast Guard and “maritime militia” vessels to tail the West Capella, a drillship contracted by Malaysia’s national oil company within that country’s exclusive economic zone. The area is near waters claimed by Vietnam, Malaysia and China, and falls within Beijing’s “nine-dash line” claim that covers much of the South China Sea, home to vital sea lanes and rich energy deposits.

Chinese forces in the waterway have also “continued risky and escalatory behavior,” a senior Pentagon official told Fox News on Tuesday.

According to Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Southeast Asia Reed B. Werner, Chinese fighter jets have harassed U.S. reconnaissance aircraft “at least nine times” in the South China Sea since mid-March, about the same time the Roosevelt entered port in Guam.

Werner said the provocative behavior had not been limited to the skies, citing “harassment” of the Yokosuka-based USS Mustin guided-missile destroyer last month near a Chinese aircraft carrier strike group that was patrolling the South China Sea. A Chinese escort ship had maneuvered in an “unsafe and unprofessional way,” he told Fox without giving details.

Those confrontations between the U.S. and Chinese militaries had not been previously reported.

**U.S. goes public**

The moves have triggered a series of furious responses out of Washington, including a statement in late April by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in which he ripped into Beijing for attempting “to take advantage of the distraction” presented by the pandemic.

“It is important to highlight how the Chinese Communist Party is exploiting the world’s focus on the COVID-19 crisis by continuing its provocative behavior,” Pompeo said. “The CCP is exerting military pressure and coercing its neighbors.”

But Grossman said that while “Japan and other allies have got to be worried about U.S. military readiness … there are many other signs of a still-strong and sustained U.S. military presence in the region.”

He cited back-to-back U.S. freedom of navigation operations near Chinese-held islands in the South China Sea last month, as well as the simultaneous sailing of the USS America, an amphibious assault ship loaded with F-35B short-takeoff and vertical-landing fighter jets, ostensibly for training in the strategic waterway — part of what he said was a concerted effort “to confront Chinese assertiveness.”

“As much as allies and partners may worry about U.S. sustainability in the region, thus far, there is little evidence to suggest much has changed for the worse,” Grossman said, “Quite the contrary, the U.S. military seems to be paying more attention to the Indo-Pacific than usual.”

Indeed, the U.S. Navy has been unusually vocal in publicly conveying its operations and training in the western Pacific in recent weeks.

In one particularly surprising move, the Pacific Fleet even took the rare step on May 8 of announcing that all of its forward-deployed submarines were at sea conducting operations “in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific region amidst the pandemic.” A day later, the 7th Fleet said that three subs had joined ships and aircraft for “a joint advanced warfighting training exercise” from May 2 to 8 in the Philippine Sea.
And in what was widely seen as a response to the Chinese dispatch of government vessels near the West Capella, the 7th Fleet also deployed two advanced littoral combat ships for separate “presence operations” near the drillship.

In addition to the navy’s operations, the U.S. Air Force has also beefed up its missions in the region.

Although after 16 years it wrapped up its “continuous bomber presence” of rotating heavy bombers through the island of Guam for long durations, the U.S. Air Force has in recent weeks flown B-1B bombers in the area as part of its “unpredictable” new “dynamic force employment” missions.

Over the last month, it has heavily publicized five B-1B training missions over the East China Sea as well as one off northern Japan involving a whopping six U.S. Air Force F-16 fighters, seven Air Self-Defense Force F-2s and eight ASDF F-15s.

It has also publicly acknowledged three flights of B-1Bs over the South China Sea, including a May 8 training mission “that resembled a simulated cruise-missile attack against Chinese artificial island bases in the Spratlys (island chain),” according to Olli Suorsa, a research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School. The Spratlys are home to fortified man-made islands built by China, including three with military-grade airfields.

“These high-profile and much publicized actions are a direct challenge to Chinese propaganda narrative that claims U.S. military power in the west Pacific is down,” Suorsa said.

Koh, the maritime security expert, agreed.

“The issue isn’t whether the U.S. military has been doing these or not in the past — such activities could have been conducted, just that they might not be announced,” he said.

Rather, he added, “it’s interesting to see how media management has evolved over the recent times: There’s no more updates on the extent of COVID-19 infections within the U.S. Navy, whereas there’s an apparent uptick in open announcements” of U.S. military activities.

“That, based on what I know so far, is rather unprecedented in terms of the intensity of … the manner in which these operations are carried out; and … the public announcements made,” Koh added.

Danger of escalation

With all of the stepped-up activity, the chances of a misunderstanding and accidental escalation is an “ever present danger,” Suorsa said.

“This is an environment in which close adherence to agreed regulations and codes on unplanned encounters at sea and air, established lines of communication, as well as exercise of restraint on both sides becomes critical in avoidance of accidental escalation,” he said.

Others say the heightened activities may reflect a vicious cycle of rising mutual mistrust and fear amid the pandemic.

Both sides believe the other party could take advantage of the crisis, said Zhang Baohui, a professor of political science and director of the Centre for Asian Pacific Studies at Lingnan University in Hong Kong.

Zhang called the situation “a classic security dilemma” that sees both parties exaggerating the belligerence of the other side.
“While hyperbole is clear, the real danger of military conflicts should remain low,” he said. “Neither government wants war.”

For Rand’s Grossman, the common refrain that Beijing is exploiting the pandemic for geopolitical gain is simply overblown.

“Its actions in places like the South China Sea and near Taiwan are simply a continuation of past assertive behavior,” he said.

Whatever the case, the U.S. military has promoted the view that it is on the mend — and looking to return to a steadier foothold in the western Pacific.

Last Thursday, navy pilots began nearly a month of carrier landing practice on Iwo Jima to qualify for the Reagan’s upcoming patrol, while the navy’s top medical officer told CNN that he is “very confident” the virus-hit Roosevelt is “medically ready” to return to action.

The carrier is expected to leave port later this week, nearly two months after it was sidelined in Guam.

And what about the navy’s top officer, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday? He is continuing his self-quarantine, and currently working from home.


Los Angeles Times | Shashank Bengali and Neha Wadekar

When Chinese engineers flew home in January for the Lunar New Year, few in Africa would have imagined that a coronavirus outbreak was about to ground planes, upend supply lines and freeze work on dozens of Chinese-built roads, railways, ports and power stations.

Many of the engineers haven’t returned. Construction sites fell silent. And now the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a global recession that threatens the colossal international loan program that is a symbol of China’s growing prestige and a centerpiece of President Xi Jinping’s reign.

The Belt and Road Initiative — China’s effort to finance nearly half a trillion dollars in new infrastructure across Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America — took flight during a period of global expansion and easy travel that has now slammed into a sober reckoning.

Beijing faces mounting calls to reschedule loans for shipping hubs, electrical plants and transport links that look unsustainable as economies struggle and globalization slows. The projects’ reliance on Chinese workers could also draw greater opposition from local populations worried about fresh waves of coronavirus infections.

No major contracts have been canceled due to the pandemic, and the initiative is too important to Xi to be shelved. But seven years after the Chinese leader unveiled his vision of a modern Silk Road connecting continents, the future of travel and trade is uncertain. Analysts say the most ambitious international building spree since the Marshall Plan could be scaled down and refocused toward safer investments.

Chinese state media have already begun trumpeting less costly global initiatives focused on technology and healthcare — moves that could further intensify China’s geopolitical tug of war with the U.S.

“The ultimate test of the BRI was always going to come when the global economy became less forgiving, and we’re in that environment now,” said Jonathan Hillman, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

“The rest of this year and beyond, China may spend more time renegotiating deals than negotiating new deals.”
Beijing insists that the initiative remains on track and that "there is a solid foundation and great potential for further cooperation" with Belt and Road partners, according to a report in state media last week.

Over the past decade, China became the world’s biggest development financier as state-owned banks backed costly building projects in risky markets — expanding Beijing's influence and creating new opportunities for its companies. According to one estimate, African nations alone owe China $145 billion, with $8 billion in payments due this year.

Beijing has remained noncommittal as governments from Ghana to Pakistan publicly ask China to freeze loan payments. After signing on to a pledge by the Group of 20 rich economies to cease collecting interest from poor countries for the rest of the year, Chinese state media clarified that many large Belt and Road loans were "not applicable for debt relief."

China has instead begun to quietly offer refinancing options to individual countries, continuing a practice of secretive negotiations that have obscured the terms of most of its lending.

One country Beijing has approached is the Maldives, an Indian Ocean archipelago that has struggled to keep up with payments on $3 billion in Chinese loans secured by a former president now imprisoned for money laundering.

“This is an economic shock that has been in part induced by China’s own handling of the virus, so countries clearly have the expectation that China has to do something,” said Andrew Small, a senior transatlantic fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. “But China wants to keep negotiating bilaterally, where they have more leverage.”

The refrain from borrowers to China has been consistent: We can’t pay you back.

“To be honest, no one at this stage can afford paying anything due to the crisis,” the finance minister of the African nation of Djibouti, Ilyas Moussa Dawaleh, said in an interview. “We have so many other urgent issues to deal with."

Over the past decade, Djibouti, strategically located at the mouth of the Red Sea, has taken on $1.2 billion in loans from China to finance a free trade zone, deep-sea port, railway and water pipeline to Ethiopia and other projects. Djibouti’s total debt to China now exceeds 80% of its entire economic output, the most of any low-income country, according to the Center for Global Development, a Washington think tank.

Dawaleh said China — which has also built its only overseas military base in Djibouti, less than 10 miles from the main U.S. military installation in Africa — has yet to offer to renegotiate loan terms.

“To be honest,” he said, debt relief “should be something considered from China, too.”

African nations are at particular risk of default, said Eric Olander, managing editor of the China Africa Project, an independent website. Ethiopia, South Africa and Kenya have all had their credit downgraded, making it harder for those governments to borrow more to get through the recession.

“There isn’t very much time left before the situation for some of Africa's largest and most important economies goes from bad to a lot worse,” Olander said.

China, which has rejected criticism that its early handling of the outbreak helped the virus spread, is trying to fight the perception that it would take advantage of vulnerable debtors in the middle of a pandemic.
The Trump administration and other critics have denounced China for “debt-trap” contracts that sometimes require borrowers to put up ports, copper mines or other assets as collateral. Many Chinese have also begun to grumble about the vast sums being invested abroad despite economic troubles at home.

In recent years China renegotiated several deals, shrinking the cost of a railway line in Malaysia by one-third and a port in Myanmar by more than 80%. Last year, Xi unveiled a more modest vision for the Belt and Road, one with higher standards of economic sustainability, transparency and environmental protection.

“China will consider ways of relieving the debt burden,” said Tang Xiaoyang, deputy director of the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy in Beijing. “It may not be debt cancellation. But there will be a method to reduce the payment burden so that borrowing countries may recover more quickly.”

In the meantime, China has begun emphasizing healthcare initiatives, projecting itself as a humanitarian leader that vanquished COVID-19. Xi has pledged $2 billion to help battle the pandemic, but China’s efforts to supply the world with medical equipment have been marred by flaws in its test kits.

Xi has also touted China’s ability to build digital infrastructure, including ultra-fast 5G internet technology and apps that could help respond to outbreaks. Products built by Chinese tech companies usually come with fewer privacy protections than those of their Western counterparts, but have found their way into Belt and Road countries.

Pakistan last month asked China for an extension on payments connected to $30 billion in loans for energy projects, most of which are beset by delays. Meanwhile, Huawei — the Chinese tech giant that the Trump administration accuses of being a backdoor for espionage — built a cross-border fiber optic cable deep into Pakistan in less than two years for under $50 million.

“We will definitely see a bigger emphasis on digital infrastructure,” Hillman said. “Telecommunications projects cost less and are less risky on both sides. They’re easier to complete. And they require fewer workers, in an environment where there was a resentment of Chinese workers even before the pandemic.”

The U.S. attempted to counter Belt and Road last year by launching the International Development Finance Corp., which recently announced its first $900 million in financing. But the program “will likely struggle in the new coronavirus environment in which U.S. attention is focused on resolving the crisis instead of competing with China’s BRI,” said Derek Grossman, a senior defense analyst at the Rand Corp.

In Asian countries with closer links to China, some Belt and Road projects have continued despite the pandemic.

This month, Indonesian crews completed a tunnel along a $6-billion high-speed railway line, with some of the work supervised remotely by Chinese engineers using video chat. A $6-billion railway in Laos has remained on schedule after Chinese supervisors recruited local university graduates to help with construction.

Sri Lanka, which banned international flights in early April, has begun to allow Chinese engineers in to resume work on Port City Colombo, a new business district rising on reclaimed land in the capital, backed by $1.4 billion in Chinese money.

The island nation is Exhibit A for Belt and Road debt, having signed over control of a port to China on a 99-year lease when it couldn’t make interest payments. But the government recently took out more than $500 million in emergency loans from Beijing to fill a budget shortfall.

“After this coronavirus, Chinese involvement in Sri Lanka will be even more,” said Rohan Karunaratne, president of a Sri Lankan construction industry group.

“During the COVID period, both countries worked together very well. We will need investment, and China has always helped us in the past.”
In Africa, too, analysts say the recession could drive countries closer to Beijing. W. Gyude Moore, a senior policy fellow at the Center for Global Development, said African governments explicitly haven’t asked China to cancel their debts because they hope to leave that funding channel open.

“Access to finance is going to be really, really hard,” Moore said. “And one of the few places where Africans might be able to turn for financing for infrastructure and other things will be China.”

--Special correspondent Wadekar reported from Nairobi and Times staff writer Bengali from Singapore

12. 'Heartless:' Lawmaker Decries Sudden Stop to National Guard Orders – 5/20
Military.com | Richard Sisk

Under current federal orders, tens of thousands of National Guard troops battling the novel coronavirus pandemic would have their deployments end one day short of qualifying for retirement and education benefits.

The order from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, first reported Tuesday by Politico, calls for a "hard stop" to the deployments on June 24, one day shy of the 90 days needed for the benefits to accrue for most of the more than 40,000 called up during the pandemic.

In a statement confirming the June 24 cutoff, a National Guard Bureau spokesman said it was FEMA's current decision.

"We are always supportive of policies that provide National Guard soldiers and airmen with benefits that match the service," he said.

However, "FEMA makes the final decisions regarding the length of time National Guard members are activated under federal orders, while the soldiers and airmen remain under the operational control of the governors," the spokesman said.

The decision ignores the sacrifices of the National Guard members who have been on the front lines of the nation's efforts to combat COVID-19, said Rep. Max Rose, D-New York, a decorated Army National Guard captain who was called up during the threat.

"Intentionally ending orders one day short of a deadline for National Guard soldiers to receive benefits for their heroic sacrifices is the definition of heartless," said Rose, a recipient of the Bronze Star and Purple Heart for his service in Afghanistan with the 1st Armored Division.

A senior FEMA official on a May 12 interagency call said a unified messaging strategy was needed to explain the cutoff of federal funding one day short of the troops qualifying for retirement and education benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Politico reported.

In a statement, Rose said, "This decision must be reversed not only because it is deeply unpatriotic, but also economically unsound and puts our gains against COVID-19 at risk for some short-term, foolish budgetary gimmick."

The more than 40,000 troops called up for service in 44 states, three territories and the District of Columbia make up the largest deployment for an emergency since the 51,000 who served during Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In a statement to Politico, retired Army Brig. Gen. J. Roy Robinson, president of the National Guard Association of the U.S. (NGAUS), said that leaving Guard members one day short of the threshold might be an oversight.

"But in the back of my mind, I know better," he said. "They're screwing the National Guard members out of the status they should have."
On March 22, President Donald Trump ordered Guard members in three states -- California, New York and Washington -- to operate under Title 32 of the U.S. Code, allowing them to be funded and paid by the federal government while being managed by state governors. The order has since been extended to other states.

"We want to win this war [against coronavirus] with as few deaths as possible," Trump said at the time. "Today, I am announcing action to help New York, California and Washington, to ensure that the National Guard can effectively respond. The National Guard, these are tremendous people. Fully on alert. It has been activated."

The Title 32 order has since been extended and was extended again May 12, with a cutoff date of June 24.

According to NGAUS, early retirement benefits under Title 32 status would provide Guard members with three months' credit for every 90 days served during a federal emergency. It added that GI Bill benefits can provide 40% off tuition at a public college or university after 90 days of federal service.

The vast majority of the estimated 46,000 Guard members serving nationwide during the pandemic are operating under Title 32 status, according to NGAUS.

They have delivered food and supplies, assisted health care workers, conducted tests, backed up local first responders, disinfected common areas and risked exposure to the virus.

As of Monday, a total of 1,162 Guard members had tested positive for COVID-19, up from 672 on April 20, according to the Defense Department.

In Pentagon briefings in March and April, Air Force Gen. Joseph Lengyel, chief of the National Guard Bureau, noted that Guard call-ups stateside are usually of short duration, so qualifying for retirement and education benefit is not normally an issue.

"FEMA generally gives shorter-duration mission assignments," he said at an April 8 Pentagon briefing.

When asked why FEMA is not extending the mission to enable qualification for benefits, Lengyel said, "I don't really know the answer to that question."

He added, "We recommended a longer period of time at the beginning."

Military.com | Cmdr. Nate Christensen, Lt. Cmdr. Mike Mabrey and Lt. Mary Sanford

While much remains unknown about the novel coronavirus, what is certain is its indiscriminate behavior on individuals around the world. The U.S. Navy is fighting against an invisible enemy, all while still doing its day job, which is to keep the maritime commons free and open alongside our allies and partners.

While the U.S. Navy is accustomed to confronting those who seek to challenge established international norms and rules, we now face a new, invisible enemy, which attacks people from all walks of life indiscriminately and has no regard for collateral damage.

Indeed, COVID-19 has brought a fight to America's shores, and the Navy has been forced to confront a global pandemic, all while continuing to carry out its mission, day in and day out.

To be sure, times are both challenging and unprecedented right now, but that's never deterred the service before. And it will not this time either.

"As the forward-deployed force of our country, we have a duty to ensure we are ready to respond," Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday recently said in a message to the force. "We cannot simply take a knee or
keep everyone in port until this enemy is defeated. We must be laser-focused on the Fleet -- from manning to maintenance, and from training to warfighting. Operational readiness is our job ... and every one of us has a role. Nobody sits on the bench."

Today, the disruption caused by our new adversary -- COVID-19, combined with the potential for others to exploit this crisis for their own gain, makes protecting the seas more important than ever. That is why the Navy continues to operate forward as America's "away team," and why we will continue to do so for decades to come.

While some headlines of the past month may cause people to think COVID-19 has limited the Navy’s ability to operate at sea, that couldn't be further from the truth. Today, our force remains ready, relevant and deployed forward around the globe.

For example, as of May 10, more than a third of the service's 299 ships, to include six aircraft carriers and four amphibious assault ships, were underway to help provide security and stability around the globe. Just two days prior, every one of the U.S. Pacific Fleet's forward-deployed submarines was at sea.

The Navy has also recently conducted several operations and exercises alongside our allies and partners. Over the past month, U.S. and British ships carried out an anti-submarine exercise above the Arctic Circle; four U.S. Navy ships and a Royal Navy ship conducted maritime security operations in the Barents Sea; and the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group and French Navy conducted a bilateral exercise in the North Arabian Sea. We will continue to exercise at sea with partner nations, including during the 2020 Rim of the Pacific Exercise later this summer.

Adm. Jamie Foggo, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa, recently discussed how the Navy must be prepared to operate going forward in a "Proceedings" article entitled "Germs: The Seventh Domain of Warfare."

"Confronting a pandemic requires an all-hands approach. We must work with our interagency and host nation partners to leverage mutual strengths in order to effectively stem the spread of the virus, while offering our support to those in need," Foggo said. "Yet we must be mindful of our operational readiness, retaining the ability to respond immediately if challenged in another domain of warfare."

Along with operating together at sea, the CNO has remained in contact with his counterparts over the past several weeks, and members of the OPNAV staff have worked closely with other navies to share lessons and best practices in the fight against COVID-19.

A number of COVID-19 frameworks have been shared with our allies and partners, which help guide commanders in pre-deployment, mitigation and recovery practices against the virus. Additionally, the U.S. Naval COVID-19 Rapid Response Team has exchanged scientific and engineering data with other navies to advance understanding of the virus and its effects on ships and facilities. Many navies have also chosen to share their approaches on the All Partners Access Network website, to facilitate rapid responses within this network.

"Despite worldwide restrictions caused by COVID-19, we have found creative ways to work with our allies and partners, that has not only had positive operational impact, but also positions the U.S. Navy to conquer future unforeseen challenges, like this one," said Rear Adm. Will Pennington, the Navy’s director of Global Integration and Engagement. "These robust exchanges with our allies and partners have dramatically steepened the collective learning curve within our vibrant and growing network of like-minded navies."

We have stood watch together throughout history; we fought our battles as allied forces; and this new fight is no different. The Navy is operating in every corner of the globe alongside our partners 24/7/365 because, now, more than ever, the world’s prosperity and security depend on it.

In mid-April, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said during a town hall meeting at the Pentagon that, "Many of our adversaries ... are trying to exploit this crisis."
And they have certainly tried. In the span of four days in April, Russian pilots twice intercepted our P-8A Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance Aircraft in an unsafe and unprofessional manner in the U.S. Sixth Fleet area of operations. Earlier that same month, 11 Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy vessels conducted dangerous and harassing approaches of U.S. naval forces inside the Arabian Gulf.

But that's not all.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently highlighted how the Chinese Communist Party is asserting itself in the South China Sea while the world is focused on COVID-19.

"Beijing has moved to take advantage of the distraction, from China's new unilateral announcement of administrative districts over disputed islands and maritime areas in the South China Sea, its sinking of a Vietnamese fishing vessel earlier this month, and its 'research stations' on Fiery Cross Reef and Subi Reef," Pompeo said. "It is important to highlight how the Chinese Communist Party is exploiting the world's focus on the COVID-19 crisis by continuing its provocative behavior."

That is why the U.S. Navy, along with our allies and partners, continues to patrol critical waterways like the South China Sea during this pandemic to provide continued security and stability, which results in a free and open global maritime commons. By operating forward, we are where it matters, when it matters.

The Navy's ships need no permission to operate at sea. They are lethal, reliable and multi-dimensional. They are a formidable naval force that clearly and undeniably represents our nation's power by their mere presence. Their power does not rest in geographic location, but rather in their ability to maneuver freely while operating across the spectrum of military operations.

Today, the U.S. Navy, and our global team of like-minded navies, operate as the world's first line of defense against lawlessness and aggression, providing strength in unity that cannot be matched by any alternative.

To be sure, we are a force for good. But make no mistake, we are also a force to be reckoned with.

--Cmdr. Nate Christensen is the public affairs officer to the chief of naval operations. Lt. Cmdr. Mike Mabrey is the speechwriter to the CNO. Lt. Mary Sanford is the deputy PAO to the CNO

14. Here are some new rules for relaxing stay-at-home policies on military installations – 5/20
Military Times | Meghann Myers

Almost two months after military installations around the world went into a partial lockdown to slow the spread of coronavirus, the Pentagon is issuing new guidance for local commanders in states where stay-at-home orders are gradually lifting.

A Tuesday memo lays out the plan for relaxing health protection conditions. Bases across the department have been at HPCON Charlie since late March, a level meant to respond to "sustained community transmission" of an ill, which prohibits non-essential workers and visitors and closes some base facilities.

While local commanders have had the authority to set many of their own policies during the pandemic — including conducting formations, meetings and physical training — the "re-opening" of garrisons will be under higher authority.

"We're going to look at things on two levels," Defense Secretary Mark Esper told Military Times on May 5.

As states move past quarantine, installations will be beholden to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as White House coronavirus task force, guidelines and regulations.

"That's something that will not be made by installation commanders," Esper said.
Commanders will consult with their medical staffs, the memo says, considering local outbreak levels, CDC guidance and the advise of local public health authorities.

“Commanders may set HPCON levels that are more stringent than surrounding community requirements based on mission and other risk considerations,” according to the memo, but if they want to loosen them further, the next step up in their chain of command will have to review them.

These are the rules for making relaxing HPCON Charlie and beyond:

- Two weeks of decreases in locally reported COVID-like or flu-like illness.
- Two weeks of decreases in locally diagnosed COVID-19 cases.
- Adequate bedspace and testing capacity at on-base or local civilian hospitals.

Also included with the memo is a handy reference chart with descriptions of each HPCON level and guidance for what kinds of on-base activities and facilities might be affected.

For example, if downgrading to HPCON B, on-base spread of the virus should have all but stopped, but there might still be some new cases in the local community.

That would still include work-from-home for some groups, including those with vulnerable pre-existing conditions or those who live with them, as well as social distancing measures in general (6-foot spacing, face coverings).

Gatherings should be kept to no more than 10 people, common areas should continue to be regularly disinfected and schools and childcare centers should stay closed, while some elective outpatient medical procedures are good-to-go.

15. Early end date for Guard coronavirus deployment draws criticism from veterans in Congress – 5/20

Several National Guardsmen serving in Congress blasted the White House for plans to end fellow troops’ coronavirus response deployments in mid-June, just one day ahead of the minimum needed to qualify for a host of active-duty benefits.

On Tuesday, Politico reported that federal officials in a recent interagency call said they still intend to end federal orders for state Guard deployments on June 24, one day short of the 90 days needed to qualify for certain military retirement and veteran GI Bill benefits.

More than 46,000 Guard members are currently serving under Title 32 orders, the largest domestic employment of the force since the Hurricane Katrina disaster in 2005.

Federal officials originally extended the Guard orders from May 31 to June 24, but did not give any public reason for the new end date. June 24 falls on a Wednesday, and would give most troops 89 days of active-duty service.

In a statement, National Guard Bureau spokesman Master Sgt. W. Michael Houk said Federal Emergency Management Agency officials will make final decisions “regarding the length of time National Guard members are activated under federal orders, while the soldiers and airmen remain under the operational control of the governors.”

He also noted that officials are “currently working with DoD and FEMA to determine the best ways to care for our Guard men and women in this unprecedented response.”

The latest news drew immediate criticism from Democrats in Congress, who accused White House officials of trying to cut costs instead of recognizing the heroism of the Guard troops.
“Intentionally ending orders one day short of a deadline for National Guard soldiers to receive benefits for their heroic sacrifices is the definition of heartless,” said Rep. Max Rose, D-N.Y., a captain in the New York National Guard who deployed with his unit for two weeks in April to help with local coronavirus support missions.

“In peace time we should never balance our budget on the backs of our soldiers, so why anyone would think this is okay to do in the middle of a wartime effort is beyond human comprehension.”

Hawaii Democratic Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, who deployed to Iraq with the Army National Guard in 2004, similarly criticized the decision.

“Rather than making a decision about when to end the activation of National Guard (troops) based on the public health needs of the American people, the Trump administration has chosen the despicable path of intentionally cutting these servicemembers orders at 89 days just to pinch a few pennies by depriving them of the benefits they’ve earned and are guaranteed to them by law,” she said in a statement.

But Rep. Adam Kinzinger, R-Ill. and a lieutenant colonel in the Wisconsin Air National Guard who deployed to the southern U.S. border with his unit last year, dismissed the criticism on social media as “not a scandal” on Tuesday.

“Assuming they went to basic training and that was at least 1 day long, they get the GI Bill. 90 days total, not at once,” he wrote in a Twitter post. “If in their 6 year commitment they do one more day of title 32 or 10, they get the three month reduced retirement.”

At least eight members of Congress currently serve in the National Guard. Several others — including prominent Senate members like Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, and Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill. — previously served there.

On Tuesday, Duckworth and several Democratic Senate colleagues sent a letter to the White House asking for immediate resolution on the matter, to ensure that currently serving Guard members aren’t left confused and frustrated by the current order end date.

White House officials have not publicly commented on the Guard deployments controversy. State officials have petitioned federal leaders to continue the deployments, arguing the military personnel are needed for continued response to the fast-spreading virus.

More than 90,000 Americans have died from coronavirus-related complications in the last three months.

As of this weekend, more than 1,100 guardsmen had been diagnosed with coronavirus, many of whom were deployed for pandemic response missions.

16. Congress must lead the fight against the disinformation pandemic – 5/20
Military Times | Kristofer Goldsmith

In order to keep ourselves safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, the White House tells us to frequently wash our hands and to avoid close contact with other people, and instead connect with friends and family online. To slow the spread and prioritize critically ill patients, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has either cancelled or moved online the majority of outstanding appointments. But as the White House and VA push millions of veterans to be more connected to the internet than ever before, new and increasing health threats await us in these cyber environments — threats that the Trump administration has done nothing to address.

After discovering an imposter Facebook page and website made to look like that of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), we began a two-year investigation that found foreign trolls from 32 countries pretending to be American veterans, and using our name and reputation to engage in illegal behavior ranging from election interference to financial fraud.
After waiting since September 2019 for the administration to respond to VVA’s 191-page report on the foreign entities targeting troops and veterans online, with multiple letters to the White House and various agencies being ignored, it’s become clear that any progress in addressing the issue will require action from Congress. Thankfully, there seems to be a bipartisan willingness to do just that.

On Wednesday, the full U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs held its first ever virtual hearing, where members discussed the evolving state of American cybersecurity and posture and recommendations made in a report by the bipartisan Cyberspace Solarium Commission. Chief among the recommendations is to create a Senate-confirmed position for a National Cyber Director, a proposal that was also included in VVA’s report. We also called for the creation of a Senate-confirmed position at the VA — an assistant secretary of cyber health — who would be tasked with ensuring that veterans have all that they need to remain safe in cyber environments.

The White House National Security Council had a cybersecurity coordinator starting in 2008, until Ambassador John Bolton eliminated the position two years ago this month. Since then, legislators’ pleas to the Trump administration to reinstate the role on the NSC have fallen on deaf ears, with even the Republican chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Ron Johnson, complaining in his opening remarks for Wednesday’s hearing that he can’t get an answer to the simple question: “who’s in charge?”

VVA’s report found “persistent, pervasive, and coordinated online targeting of American servicemembers, veterans, and their families by foreign entities who seek to disrupt American democracy,” and revealed that the infamous Russian hacking of 2016 involved the direct targeting of multiple veterans organizations. Veterans and the organizations that represent them have been specifically targeted because they, like Putin’s other American targets, possess a strong sense of identity. What makes veterans a higher priority target than our civilian counterparts is veterans’ greater level of civic engagement and political influence on those around them. Both foreign and domestic trolls know that changing the mind or behavior of a service member or veteran can have a multiplying effect, bringing entire families and communities with them.

As VVA’s chief investigator, I’ve struggled to combat this effect even within our own organization during the COVID-19 crisis. Conspiracies like the recently viral “Plandemic” video — which encourages people to act against their own health interests and aims to discredit our most important sources of real health information, such as Dr. Fauci — have been promoted by influential members of VVA on our own internal networks as an informative and important service announcement of sorts. Though social media companies have been taking down copies of the video for spreading harmful and misleading health information, it’s been viewed at least 8 millions times, and continues to be promoted by extremists on both ends of the political spectrum.

Despite Facebook using its algorithm to demote the Plandemic video, I watched as veterans from around the country and of multiple generations found themselves convinced enough by the conspiracy theory to aggressively spread it to their networks as if it were critical information. Among a host of other dangerous lies, the video discourages people from getting the influenza vaccine — which increases the likelihood that aging, health-compromised Vietnam veterans will die unnecessarily in what could be America’s “darkest winter.”

Meanwhile, it’s been nearly two weeks since the viral event yet the VA hasn’t done anything to debunk this dangerous health-related disinformation or to otherwise make veterans more resistant to falling victim to COVID-19-related scams.

This type of disinformation campaign erodes trust in the American government and encourages health decisions that endanger us all during this pandemic, and it should not go without a full-throated rebuttal.

As Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, and Rep. Mike Gallagher, R-Wis., the co-chairmen of the Cyberspace Solarium Commission report warn, “Your entire life — your paycheck, your health care, your electricity — increasingly relies on networks of digital devices... These networks are vulnerable, if not already compromised.” Even the government’s own networks’ vulnerabilities to state-sponsored actors became clear when the Office of Personnel
and Management was penetrated by Chinese hackers years ago, with the sensitive background-check information for millions of government employees and veterans being stolen for what could be ammunition for another devastating cyber attack.

Inaction from the Trump administration demands an aggressive and assertive Congress, willing to put forward prescriptive legislation that makes improvements to America’s cybersecurity inevitable. Congress must require the VA to meaningfully address the issue of cyber hygiene, to ensure that veterans have all of the tools that they need to remain safe as the Internet becomes an evermore central part of all of our lives.

Furthermore, the House and Senate should establish Select Committees on Cybersecurity to ensure attention and oversight of this important domain cannot be ignored by this or any future administration. This upcoming National Defense Authorization Act would be an appropriate vessel to implement the recommendations provided by the Cyberspace Solarium Commission’s and VVA’s reports. America can’t wait any longer.

Kristofer Goldsmith is associate director for policy and government affairs for the Vietnam Veterans of America.

17. China launches new Twitter accounts, 90,000 tweets in COVID-19 info war – 5/20

China has pushed out 90,000 tweets since the start of April from 200 diplomatic and state media accounts in a COVID-19 information war offensive.

NBC News | Anna Schecter

China has launched a Twitter offensive in the COVID-19 information war, more than doubling its number of official government tweets since January and in recent days using the platform to spread a conspiracy theory that the virus came from a U.S. government lab.

"The #US keeps calling for transparency & investigation. Why not open up Fort Detrick & other bio-labs for international review? Why not invite #WHO & int'l experts to the US to look into #COVID19 source & response?" the spokesperson for China's Foreign Affairs Ministry wrote in a May 8 tweet that has been liked more than 4,000 times.

The U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Maryland, is where the military houses and researches infectious diseases.

The Chinese have pushed out 90,000 tweets since the start of April from 200 diplomatic and state-run media accounts as part of an offensive in the COVID-19 information war, according to data collected by the Hamilton 2.0 dashboard of the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a tool that aggregates accounts connected to the Chinese government.

Bret Schafer, the digital disinformation fellow at the alliance, based in Washington, D.C., has been tracking China’s increasing social media output for months.

According to Schafer's analysis, Twitter output from China's official sites has almost doubled since January, and the number of diplomatic Twitter accounts has tripled, to 135, up from just 40 accounts this time last year. Many tweets are in English or Mandarin, but the diplomatic accounts are often in the language of an embassy's host country.

The Chinese accounts "have become more aggressive, more conspiratorial, and the ones who have done that are their most popular accounts and have by far the most engagement," Schafer said.

The Twitter account for the Chinese Embassy in France "has significantly more followers than the embassy in Poland, for example, because the embassy in France has been a driver of the most aggressive content," he said.
The Fort Detrick conspiracy theory has been tweeted about more than 30 times from official Chinese diplomatic and state-run media accounts in the past two months, according to the Alliance for Securing Democracy.

One of the first Chinese officials to tweet about the Fort Detrick conspiracy theory was Zhao Lijian, the spokesman and deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's Information Department, who has a history as one of China's most prolific officials on Twitter. On March 12, he tweeted, "It might be the US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan."

The next day, he tweeted, "Further evidence that the virus originated in the US," linking to a post on Global Research, a Canadian blog with pro-Kremlin leanings. The blog post argued that the virus could have originated in the U.S. and possibly leaked from Fort Detrick.

The blog post has since been taken down, but a cached version can be found online. The author of the post did not respond to a request for comment.

Chinese embassy accounts in France and Jordan retweeted Zhao, and in the past two weeks activity on Twitter around the conspiracy theory has accelerated.

On May 8, Hua Chunying, the spokeswoman for the Foreign Affairs Ministry, tweeted the demand to investigate Fort Detrick. The tweet was picked up by at least nine other Chinese diplomatic accounts in the two days afterward, according to Schafer, including Zhao's and the Foreign Affair Ministry's official Twitter account. China's ambassador to Venezuela also tweeted out a Spanish translation.

Zhao's March 13 tweet has been retweeted 12,600 times and liked 20,000 times.

U.S. officials, including President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have suggested that the virus escaped from a lab in Wuhan, China, and could have been man-made, although the scientific consensus is that it was not man-made. The U.S. intelligence community has said it is still examining whether the virus began through contact with infected animals or whether it was the result of an accident at a lab in Wuhan, although animal-to-human transmission is still seen as more likely.

China's use of Twitter to push the Fort Detrick conspiracy theory is a "counterpunch" to White House rhetoric, according to China watchers.

"Obnoxious and childish as this is, it should be noted that such Chinese statements have generally mirrored earlier American statements. Rhetorically, China is counterpunching - not throwing the first blow," said Robert Daly, director of the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States at the Wilson Center, a Washington think tank.

"The primary goal of this rhetoric is to demonstrate to Chinese domestic constituencies that the Communist Party is not lying prostrate before American accusations," he said.

When asked by NBC News in April about official government accounts spreading conspiracy theories, China's vice minister of foreign affairs, Le Yucheng, said, "The source of the virus is a complex issue that has to be studied by medical expert and scientists, rather than political figures."

The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said in March that it was "completely ridiculous and it's irresponsible" for a Chinese government official to suggest that the U.S. military was involved in spreading the virus.

An Army spokesperson called the Fort Detrick conspiracy theory "false" and said, "The work at Fort Detrick supports the whole-of-government effort to combat COVID-19 and other viruses."
The Fort Detrick conspiracy theory is just one example of the new, aggressive way China is fighting the COVID-19 propaganda war.

Official government accounts have flooded social media with messages and images touting the COVID-19-related aid China sends around the world.

Xinhua, the official state-run news agency, puts out a steady stream of COVID-19-related content on Twitter, and on April 30 it posted a two-minute video titled "Once Upon a Virus" mocking the U.S. response to COVID-19 and hailing China's. It has been retweeted almost 26,000 times and liked 50,000 times.

China previously focused on amplifying positive messaging around China and censoring damaging and critical information, but now the Chinese have learned from Russian disinformation campaigns, according to experts tracking both countries' online messaging.

"Like Russia did in the 2016 election and with Brexit, China is taking this opportunity to destabilize liberal democracies through disinformation campaigns aimed at exacerbating already existing societal fault lines," said Mollie Saltskog, an intelligence analyst at The Soufan Group, an intelligence and security consultancy based in New York.

"The apparent increase in China's disinformation capabilities, coupled with its affinity for using Russia's tactics, has worrying geopolitical implications, especially as it relates to a solidifying Sino-Russian alignment," Saltskog said.

Saltskog said it remains debatable how effective China's campaign is at persuading populations in the U.S., Europe and elsewhere, noting that Chinese-led disinformation campaigns that spread an anti-U.S. narrative in African countries were not received well by the local population.

Zhao's March 12 tweet stating that the U.S. Army might have brought the virus to Wuhan mirrored Trump's aggressive Twitter style. "Be transparent!" Zhao demanded. "Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!"

Schafer said, "Diplomatic language fails on Twitter."


There is no substitute for face-to-face conversations when trying to get Americans to sign up to be service members. Boot camp outbreaks slow the pipeline, too.

New York Times | Jennifer Steinhauer

WASHINGTON — The Army is in constant need of new soldiers, and Sgt. Austin West knows precisely where to find them and reel them in: high school auditoriums, local fairs and even Walmart. At the store, he casually questions workers to "see how they are doing there, how they like their job, to see if we can tailor their hopes" to fit with the Army's need for thousands of new recruits each year.

These days, his operations have been largely contained to his house near Syracuse in Calcium, N.Y., where the coronavirus pandemic has him grounded. His cats have replaced colleagues as he confabs with potential candidates over a computer screen in his living room (one of the better spots for his Wi-Fi), turning the camera around to show them job listings.

He makes sure his guitars are in the background and has taken to wearing casual clothes rather than a uniform, so that potential soldiers might conclude, "This is a different kind of guy," Sergeant West said. “You have to explore new things in these times.”

A faltering economy usually spells success for military recruiters. But a sector that relies on face-to-face interactions to bring in newcomers — followed by mandatory medical exams and intensive job training in close
quarters — has been hampered by the pandemic, which has curtailed recruitment efforts and hobbled some service members who are forced into quarantine for weeks on end before they can get to their first assignment.

The combination has the potential to compromise the pipeline that is essential to the military’s goal of perpetual readiness, a central concern of Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper. Last month, Matthew Donovan, the under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness, suggested that not all the services were going to meet their recruiting goals this year with the pressures of Covid-19.

“The military has not been able to recruit as effectively since the pandemic began, because so much of the recruiting process involves developing good personal relationships,” said Nora Bensahel, a visiting professor of strategic studies at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

“The Army, for example, enlisted 5,500 fewer people in March than expected,” Ms. Bensahel said. “Army leaders expect to be able to make up those numbers over the summer and fall, and they could be right about that,” she added. “But the longer that restrictive measures last, the harder it will be to make their recruiting goals.”

In late March, as coronavirus cases rose, the Army halted training exercises, only to reverse itself days later.

Many military officials say they hope to make up the difference by increasing retention of service members considering leaving active duty. Sgt. Maj. Michael Grinston, the Army’s top enlisted soldier, for instance, said the Army is “over 100 percent” in hitting its goals on persuading soldiers to stay in uniform and not retire.

Like other sectors in the job market, the military has married creativity with technology as it scrambles to keep up with recruitment goals and to train those who are already in.

Some recruiters for the Coast Guard, for instance, have held socially distanced meetings outside using a car, said Nelson Lim, a senior social scientist at the RAND Corporation who specializes in military personnel issues. “They are passing paperwork back and forth across the top,” Mr. Lim said.

The Marine Corps uses an app called Squad Bay that features a digital leader board for workouts as well as information about recruit training.

Yet military recruitment depends on a certain level of sales techniques — as well as an almost Spidey sense about potential service members — that is hard to emulate over FaceTime or Zoom.

“Our systematic recruiting process has always placed a premium on ‘kneecap to kneecap’ interaction between a recruiter and applicant,” said Sgt. Justin Kronenberg, a communication strategy chief for the Marine Corps Recruiting Command. “So it has been challenging to replicate this physical assessment of those wanting to become Marines through tech mediums and limited personal interactions.”

Officials at the Air Force note that they are training fewer young men and women who have signed up but have not yet shipped off to basic training. The branch is sending 460 new trainees per week to Basic Military Training instead of the usual 600 to 800, said Ann Stefanek, a spokeswoman for the Air Force. “Where we put social distancing at basic training, you can only put about half as many in the training space,” she said.

Then there is the challenge of the medical exams, which are required of all military recruits. Some exam stations have been hit by the virus, and yet each service branch — and at times recruiting stations within them — seems to be using individual judgments on how and when exams can take place.

“I am being appreciative of the difficulty decision makers are struggling with,” Mr. Lim said. “What I worry about is that we don’t have any built-in learning processes” to figure out how a recruitment policy, especially involving the medical aspects, may not be working and end it. “Everything we know is based on old normal,” he said. “We don’t know what the future holds.”
Boot camps, like any communal living space, are places where illnesses and infections tend to spread and in the case of the coronavirus, such outbreaks can clog the pipeline yet again.

At the Marines’ Parris Island recruiting depot in South Carolina this spring, roughly four dozen recruits tested positive for the virus, stymying moves to bring in new ones. Roughly the same number from Bravo Company, First Training Battalion were found to have the virus at a training camp in San Diego. At Fort Benning, an Army post in Georgia, several cases were also reported this spring.

“Of course they’re going to delay it,” said Susan Bensahel, an expert in national security at Columbia University. “I think the services are trying to expand their testing programs in order to prevent this,” Ms. Bensahel said. “But they also have to be prepared for the real possibility that clustered outbreaks will cause parts of their training pipelines to shut down for considerable periods of time.”

As a precaution, the Marine Corps Recruiting Command has mandated a 14-day quarantine for some enlisted and officer candidates scheduled to ship to entry-level training. Those recruits have to produce three body temperature readings total, with the last one taken less than three days before their scheduled ship date, and sign a document attesting that they have followed quarantine procedures, Sergeant Kronenberg said.

The Army also has a 14-day isolation period before boot camp.

But for recruits coming from areas or at training facilities with outbreaks, the quarantine can last for many weeks, delaying moves to assignments, sometimes as their families await in new locations.

Most of the service branches had already moved to recruit in new ways, like using Facebook to start conversations and other virtual techniques to handle paperwork, which has been a bit of a boon during the pandemic.

“Some of the changes include witnessing signatures over video chat,” said Lisa M. Ferguson, a spokeswoman for the Army Recruiting Command, as well as having applicants upload documents or take an online version of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. “These steps are likely much easier to accomplish digitally,” she said. This week, recruiters in certain areas of the country began resuming some in-person prospecting activities.

Sergeant West finds he can sometimes reach more members of a potential recruit’s family online than in person — although he is still trying to close some deals in recruiting stations.

“If Mom and Dad don’t like what they are hearing, they can hit ‘end call,’” he said.

He also appeals to new recruits as digital groundbreakers. “I told two awesome recruits this week, ‘You’re making history,’” he said.

--Eric Schmitt contributed reporting.

19. Coronavirus behaving differently in China’s northeast clusters, expert says – 5/20
Reuters | Se Young Lee and Jing Wang

BEIJING - The novel coronavirus is behaving differently in patients in northeast China who have contracted it recently compared with early cases, indicating it is changing as it spreads, a prominent doctor said.

China, which has largely brought the virus under control, has found new clusters of infections in the northeastern border provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang in recent weeks, raising concern about a second wave.

Qiu Haibo, an expert in critical care medicine who is part of a National Health Commission expert group, said the incubation period of the virus in patients in the northeast was longer than that of patients in Wuhan, the central city, where the virus emerged late last year.
“This causes a problem, as they don’t have any symptoms. So when they gather with their families they don’t care about this issue and we see family cluster infections,” Qiu told state broadcaster CCTV in a programme broadcast late on Tuesday.

Patients in the northeastern clusters were also carrying the virus for longer than earlier cases in Wuhan, and they were taking longer to recover, as defined by a negative nucleic acid test, he said.

Patients in the northeast also rarely exhibited fever and tended to suffer damage to the lungs rather than across multiple organs, he said.

He said the virus found in the northeastern clusters was probably imported from abroad, which could account for the differences.

He did not say where he though they might have come from but both Jilin and Heilongjiang border Russia.

China reported five new coronavirus cases on Wednesday, down from six a day earlier.

Four of the new cases were local transmissions and one was imported by a traveller coming from abroad, the commission said in a statement, compared with three imported cases reported the previous day.

China’s total number of coronavirus infections stands at 82,965, while the death toll 4,634.

Additional Reporting by Brenda Goh; Editing by Kim Coghill

Stars and Stripes | Wyatt Olson

The Navy on Monday swapped out the caretaker crew aboard the USS Kidd with about 90 sailors confirmed to be free of the coronavirus.

The guided-missile destroyer has been at Naval Base San Diego since April 28 dealing with an outbreak of COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, that occurred while the ship was at sea, the Navy said in a news release Monday.

The ship underwent disinfection after arriving at port, and a group of a sailors remained on board to operate essential services, the Navy said.

Other crew members and anyone testing positive for the virus were removed from the ship and placed in either isolation or quarantine, the Navy said.

The news release did not indicate the number of Kidd sailors testing positive.

The Associated Press reported earlier this month that 78 sailors of the crew of 330 had been infected.

Cmdr. Nathan Wemett, the ship’s commanding officer, told the AP that lessons learned from the coronavirus crisis aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt had helped the Kidd avoid wider contagion.

The Roosevelt has been sidelined in Guam since late March dealing with an outbreak that has infected more than 1,000 sailors and left one dead.

The carrier is expected to set sail later this week with a crew of roughly 3,000, leaving behind about 1,800 crew members still in quarantine.
The Navy described the Monday crew swap as “the next phase of its aggressive response” to the outbreak on the Kidd and getting the ship back to deployment at sea.

The entire crew of the Kidd was retested before the transfer, and the results of those tests “informed decisions about who to transfer and who should remain in quarantine or isolation,” the Navy said.

“Our number one priority is to protect the health of our force and our families,” Vice Adm. Richard Brown, commander of Naval Surface Forces, said in the news release. “By doing that, we also help to protect the health of our communities where we serve. Before we clear any Sailor to return to the ship, they must receive two separate negative test results.”

Cleaning of the ship and medical oversight and care of the crew is expected to continue for about two more weeks, the Navy said.

All crew members will be retested before getting underway for deployment, the Navy said.

Stars and Stripes | Matthew M. Burke

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The two military branches making up the bulk of U.S. personnel on Okinawa relaxed both on- and off-base restrictions Wednesday after three weeks with no new positive coronavirus cases on the island.

Air Force Brig. Gen. Joel Carey, 18th Wing commander, ordered the “phased” lifting of force health protection measures in a message posted Wednesday afternoon on Kadena Air Base’s Facebook page. Marine Forces Japan followed suit with a statement that evening.

Starting Thursday, airmen are allowed to purchase take-out food from off-base restaurants, send their children to off-base schools and child care facilities, and visit beaches and public parks, the 18th Wing statement said.

Airmen will also be able to dine inside restaurants on base, attend chapel services and patronize gyms, pools, outdoor equipment rentals, libraries, movie theaters, beaches, camping and resort areas, among other base opportunities.

“For the past three weeks, the Okinawa Prefectural Government has reported no new cases of COVID-19 as well as a steady decline in the number of patients still infected,” said the 18th Wing statement, referring to the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus. “Our cases here on Kadena Air Base have also fully recovered and are doing well.”

Some 18th Force Support Squadron facilities may not open right away, the statement said. Updates will be posted to Facebook. The use of reopening facilities is contingent on following posted virus mitigation measures.

Other restrictions remain in place: the use of mass transit, visiting off-base bars, barbers, hotels, nail salons and leisure shopping are still prohibited.

Base access is limited to mission-essential personnel, according to a wing Facebook post.

“We are not in the clear yet and we must remain vigilant,” the statement said. “Social distancing is still required for all personnel to the greatest extent possible.”

Cloth face coverings are required when social distancing is not possible, the statement said. The directives apply to all who have base access. Failure to obey could result in “administrative action.”

Marine officials implemented similar changes, according to the statement from III Marine Expeditionary Force.
Marines participating in recreational activities are being told to do so individually, with family or in pairs, the statement said.

In addition to being able to purchase off-base take-out food again, Marines are also authorized to patronize eateries with drive-thru windows. However, inside dining remains restricted.

Marines are also allowed to visit off-base residences.

“These changes are based on a thorough review of the current COVID-19 pandemic situation in the region and the effectiveness of continued [health protection condition] preventive measures,” the statement said.

Marine officials said the measures would constantly be reviewed.

The latest actions by military officials mirror the easing of restrictions by Okinawa government officials. Okinawa prefecture allowed most shuttered businesses to open May 14, as long as they follow social distancing and hygiene protocols. Cabarets and nightclubs, where close contact is part of the service, were scheduled to reopen Wednesday.

As of Tuesday, Okinawa had 146 positive cases, the prefectural website said. The prefecture has reported six deaths, and four people remain in critical condition. The last new positive case on Okinawa was reported April 30.

--Stars and Stripes reporter Aya Ichihashi contributed to this report.

22. ‘New normal’: US troops fill South Korean restaurants after military lifts most virus restrictions – 5/20
Stars and Stripes |Kim Gamel and Matthew Keeler

PYEONGTAEK, South Korea — American troops and civilians packed South Korean restaurants and barbershops for the first time in about three months Wednesday after the U.S. military lifted most anti-coronavirus restrictions for bases everywhere but the Seoul area.

Soldiers also withdrew from the gates at Camp Humphreys, Camp Casey and bases in the southeastern city of Daegu as the Army ended the need for health questionnaires and temperature checks aimed at preventing the spread of the virus.

Life slowly began to return to what the military is calling a “new normal” as the daily count of confirmed cases in South Korea remains low, but “adults-only” establishments like bars and clubs remain off-limits due to continued concern over cluster infections.

U.S. Forces Korea, which commands some 28,500 service members on the divided peninsula, announced Monday it was lowering its health alert level from Health Protection Condition Charlie to Bravo beginning at 6 a.m. Wednesday for all bases except Yongsan Garrison and others in the surrounding area.

The move happened as South Korea has begun to move toward normalcy, even beginning to reopen schools on Wednesday.

Defense Department schools on the military bases are still conducting classes online only, although people can now use local day care facilities.

‘New normal’

“I think it’s great that we are slowly rolling Bravo out so we are just not allowing the bars and clubs, but we are allowed to sit down in restaurants and to start to enjoy Korea again and allow us to start traveling,” Army Capt.
Gabe Romero, 29, a medical operations officer from Covina, Calif., said as he enjoyed lunch at a kebab restaurant in the Anjeung-ri area outside Camp Humphreys.

USFK issued a chart with detailed guidelines on Tuesday, explaining that people may resume traveling and going to local establishments such as restaurants, salons and museums in all designated areas but must avoid bars and clubs, which were at the center of an outbreak in the popular district of Itaewon in Seoul.

The military also urged people to maintain social distancing and to wear masks when that’s not possible. Masks were still required for entry into on-base facilities.

“This is the ‘new normal’ — centered on 3 key tenets: protect yourself, protect your bubble, protect others,” USFK commander Gen. Robert Abrams said Tuesday in a tweet.

“We need to ease into this with an abundance of caution,” he said. “Protect the force = protect the mission.”

The military largely locked down its 58,000-strong community after being caught in the middle of the burgeoning pandemic in late February when a massive outbreak began in the southeastern city of Daegu and nearby areas with 500 or more cases reported each day.

The South has been lauded for an aggressive testing, tracing and social distancing campaign that appears to have brought the virus largely under control. Officials have expressed concern about recent “sporadic infections” in Itaewon and the Samsung Medical Center in Seoul but said strict social distancing measure did not need to be renewed.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 38 new cases on Wednesday for a total of 11,110, with 263 deaths.

“Because of how well things are going here in Korea, I’m glad they are taking the steps to just bring everything back to normal,” said Army Sgt. Shawn Fowler, 26, of Tucson, Ariz. “It’s been really constricting not being able to actually go out and basically live our lives.”

However, he noted it’s a small step since soldiers remain under a military-wide travel ban that has been extended by the Pentagon until at least June 30 as the virus continues to ravage other countries including the United States.

“The only thing that is really affecting me right now is the travel restriction,” Fowler said, adding that he has applied for an exception to policy so he can return to his wife and daughters in Washington state on June 18. “I want to go home and see my family.”

Back to business

Local businesses, which had lost most of their customers due to the restrictions, were ready to make up their losses.

Song Ji Sue, supervisor of Hwa Hwa, a popular Korean barbecue restaurant near Camp Humphreys, said business had dropped by about 80% even though the Americans were allowed to order takeout, so she welcomed the full house on Wednesday.

“We have gone through a rough patch. It has been a very difficult time of us,” she said. “But they’re coming off the installation and visiting our restaurant again, so we feel good.”

One community that wasn’t happy on Wednesday was on Yongsan Garrison in Seoul, which used to be the main U.S. military base but is in the process of closing.
About 2,000 people are still stationed on Yongsan and the nearby K-16 base, which both remain at HPCON-Charlie and off-limits for nonessential travel from other bases until further notice. Residents may, however, go to other areas and participate in approved activities there.

Carla Reinisch, who lives in the U.S. Embassy residential area on Yongsan, said it was the only major Army installation without an infection.

USFK has reported 28 confirmed cases, including four active-duty service members, but most have recovered.

“It’s very tiring hanging out here and not being able to go anywhere,” Reinisch said, noting it’s difficult even to go for a walk off base or to get takeout because only two access gates are open.

“We’re all patient; we’ve all been doing good; and I feel like we’re not rewarded for all we’ve done so far,” she said.

23. Lebanese prime minister: The coronavirus is pushing Lebanon toward a major food crisis – 5/20
Washington Post | Hassan Diab

Once the breadbasket of the Eastern Mediterranean, Lebanon is facing a dramatic challenge that seemed unimaginable a decade ago: the risk of a major food crisis. A few weeks ago, Lebanon witnessed its first "hunger protests." Many Lebanese have already stopped buying meat, fruits and vegetables, and may soon find it difficult to afford even bread. Human Rights Watch and the World Bank have both warned that over half of Lebanese households may not be able to afford to purchase food by the end of the year.

How did we get here? Lebanon and its people have been struck by a triple crisis. First, as a result of decades-long political mismanagement and corruption, there has been a dramatic lack of investment in our agricultural sector, which represents a quarter of the national labor force but only 3 percent of our economic output.

Because of Lebanon's financial setup, it was cheaper to import food than to produce it locally, although our country was blessed with water, sun, rich soil and talented farmers. More than half of Lebanese food is imported, which is both a great shame and seriously dangerous for our food sovereignty.

Second, Lebanon is going through an unprecedented economic and financial crisis that led the country to default on its foreign debt. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts a 12 percent decline in Lebanon’s gross domestic product this year. People are losing their jobs while our national currency is depreciating rapidly. The price of imported food has more than doubled since the start of the year.

Third, the covid-19 crisis and the necessary lockdown have dramatically worsened the economic crisis and profoundly disrupted the food supply chain. Eighty percent of our wheat has been coming from Ukraine and Russia. Last month, Russia suspended wheat exports as a result of covid-19, while Ukraine is considering a similar move.

My government is taking important steps to address this dramatic situation. We are expanding social safety nets to protect the most vulnerable members of our society, and we are doing our best to provide specific aid packages. We are cracking down on supermarkets and shops that are artificially inflating prices. We have recently adopted Lebanon's first financial recovery plan and have reached out to the IMF for support — this is indispensable to stabilize our currency and put our economy back on its feet. Last but not least, we are working on a series of measures to improve Lebanon's food sovereignty.

Lebanon’s resources are extremely limited, and a purely domestic answer will not suffice. In addition, Lebanon is not alone in this situation. As a consequence of the pandemic, a global food security crisis is emerging. The World Food Programme estimates that the pandemic could double the number of people in low- and middle-income countries facing acute food shortages by the end of 2020. To respond to this emergency and avoid a major food security crisis, I call on the international community to design and implement a three-tier plan.
First, attempts to restrict food exports, which some countries have already given in to, must be resisted. These only reduce availability and increase prices. The United States, the Group of 20 (G-20) and the World Trade Organization must step forward and endorse policies on export restrictions. It is self-defeating in a crisis that affects all countries to be building barriers.

Second, I call on the United States, the G-20 and the World Food Programme to co-ordinate a food security policy response aimed at both low- and middle-income countries. Maintaining food supply and avoiding price inflation should be at the heart of this response.

Finally, the United States and the European Union should establish a dedicated emergency fund to help the Middle East avoid a severe food crisis; otherwise, starvation may spark a new migration flow to Europe and further destabilize the region. Explicit warnings came recently from Arif Husain, the World Food Programme’s chief economist.

Food security is becoming a global crisis requiring a coordinated global response. It would be a tragedy upon a tragedy if our efforts to beat the covid-19 epidemic eventually gave way to mass starvation and migration, the effects of which would be felt for generations.

--Hassan Diab is the prime minister of Lebanon