Overview: Leading coverage today was the Department of Labor monthly jobs report showing the U.S. unemployment rate hit 14.7% in April, the highest since the Great Depression. Also generating coverage was news that Vice President Pence’s spokesperson Katie Miller has tested positive for coronavirus, with outlets referencing yesterday’s news that one of Pres. Trump’s Navy valets also tested positive. While limited primarily to defense and Beltway publications, Operation Inherent Resolve commander Lt. Gen. White’s media availability and remarks on COVID-19’s impact on U.S. operations generated coverage from several outlets in attendance.

OIR commander Lt. Gen. White’s remarks on ISIS attempts to exploit the pandemic generated attention, including CNN and Military Times noting he said ISIS attacks, though “failing miserably,” have increased in recent weeks amid disruptions in coalition operations. Meanwhile, Military Times and Politico highlighted his comments acknowledging that the pandemic has caused a slowdown in troop rotations to and from the region. In a separate Washington Post piece, Iraqi officials attributed the increased attacks in part to operational changes as a result of COVID-19.

Of note, The Hill covered the “escalating war of words” surrounding Sec. Esper’s letter to SASC chairman Sen. John Inhofe (R-OK), which addressed criticism by Democratic senators of the Pentagon’s slow response on COVID-19. The outlet highlighted Sec. Esper’s defense of the DoD as being “ahead of need at every step” and his disappointment “that some, especially committee members, would argue that the Defense Department has demonstrated a ‘failure to adequately respond to the ongoing coronavirus disease.’”

Other DoD-related news:
- CNN published a firsthand account by the Javits Center’s deputy director, a Marine Corps veteran, of the rapid transformation of the medical facility into one of the city’s largest COVID-19 hospitals and overcoming seemingly “insurmountable” challenges in an effort to save lives.
- Military Times reported on a bipartisan proposal to amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, which would allow service members to terminate without penalty an agreement on a residential lease at a new location in anticipation of a PCS move; it would retroactively cover the entire stop movement order.
- Military.com reported on legislative efforts to allow Guard and Reserve members to earn credits for good years and drill days despite disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Other relevant/global news:
- Several outlets reported on a State Department claim that China and Russia are “really turning up” the public rhetoric and cooperating “out of shared interest” to spread false narratives about the virus on social media (U.S. News). However, Twitter later denied these claims, saying there is “no indication that the accounts have been unduly deferential or supportive of Chinese position.”
- Reuters reported on the attempt by Iranian-linked hackers to compromise staff email accounts at drugmaker Gilead Sciences, the producer of the antiviral drug remdesivir, which is seen by many as a COVID-19 treatment. Experts say such information could help Iran develop its own treatment.
- In his first public remarks since his absence, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un congratulated Chinese President Xi Jinping on his country’s handling of the outbreak. (Fox News)
- The 75th anniversary of V-E Day saw muted celebrated worldwide following such canceled plans as a massive military parade in Moscow, with world leaders scheduled to attend. (New York Times)
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The United States on Friday accused China and Russia of stepping up cooperation to spread false narratives over the coronavirus pandemic, saying Beijing was increasingly adopting techniques honed by Moscow.

"Even before the COVID-19 crisis we assessed a certain level of coordination between Russia and the PRC in the realm of propaganda," said Lea Gabrielle, coordinator of the State Department's Global Engagement Center, which tracks foreign propaganda.

"But with this pandemic the cooperation has accelerated rapidly," she told reporters.

"We see this convergence as a result of what we consider to be pragmatism between the two actors who want to shape public understanding of the COVID pandemic for their own purposes," she said.

The Global Engagement Center earlier said that thousands of Russian-linked social media accounts were spreading conspiracies about the pandemic, including charging that the virus first detected last year in the Chinese metropolis of Wuhan was created by the United States.

China outraged the United States when a foreign ministry spokesman tweeted a conspiracy that the US military brought the virus to Wuhan, but the two countries reached an informal rhetorical truce in late March after telephone talks between President Donald Trump and his counterpart Xi Jinping.

Tensions have again soared as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pushes the theory that the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory, even though both the World Health Organization and the US government's top epidemiologist say there is no evidence of this.

According to the Global Engagement Center, China has again intensified its online campaign to defend its handling of the pandemic, which has killed some 270,000 people worldwide, and criticize the United States.

"Beijing is adapting in real time and increasingly using techniques that have long been employed by Moscow," Gabrielle said.

China has increasingly used bot networks to amplify its message, Gabrielle said.

She said that official Chinese diplomatic accounts suddenly witnessed a surge in late March, going from adding around 30 new followers daily to more than 720, often from freshly created accounts.

She said that China was first observed using such online methods to "sow political discord" in its autonomous territory of Hong Kong, which has witnessed major pro-democracy demonstrations.
The Air Force Academy is starting to reopen some facilities and lift restrictions that were imposed to try to slow
the spread of coronavirus.

The academy on Monday will lift the “official business only” restriction, which was put in place March 23 and only
allowed access to people who work or live on the installation or who needed medical services.

This means that people with Defense Department ID cards will once again be able to enter the academy, the
school said in a Thursday release. Some services and morale, welfare and recreation activities will still be limited
or operate under restrictions as part of this phased reopening.

However, the academy will remain closed to non-DoD visitors. And anyone entering the academy or using any
service must wear a face mask or cloth face covering in public, and keep a social distance of six feet from others.

“We continually assess what we can reopen while keeping our community safe,” said Col. Brian Hartless,
commander of the 10th Air Base Wing, the academy’s host unit. “We’re moving ahead cautiously just like the
state of Colorado, the Colorado Springs community we live in, and the other military installations on the Front
Range, while bearing in mind that we remain in a public health emergency.”

Beginning on Monday, the academy will partially open its outdoor recreation rental office, arts and crafts studio,
auto skills shop, Farish Recreation Center and Famcamp family camping center.

But there will be restrictions. For example, the outdoor recreation office will be open only for equipment rentals
and reservations must be done over the phone or online. The arts and crafts center will also be open primarily
for picking up and dropping off orders, and its studios can be reopened only by appointment.

Famcamp will have 60 RV spots and 20 camp sites open for those who have existing reservations and for
personnel making permanent changes of station to or from the academy. Bathrooms and showers at the camping
center will remain closed.

Farish Recreation Center will open for camping, but by reservation only, and common showers and restrooms
will remain closed. Staff and patrons will be required to wear face masks and follow social distancing procedures.

The 10th Medical Group earlier this week opened all surgical and medical specialty clinics for personal
appointments such as women’s health, allergy and immunizations, dermatology, neurology, physicals,
occupational therapy, and eye care. The dental clinic is only open for emergencies.

The academy said that shopping at the base exchange and commissary is open to all beneficiaries, though
restricted to just those who work or live at the academy from opening until noon each day.

Also, the Eisenhower Golf Course reopened May 1, though its tavern and snack bar remain closed. The
equestrian center remains open to care for boarded horses, and its rental office will open normal hours for trail
rides, made by reservation only.

And fishing ponds, hiking and biking trails are reopened for DoD beneficiaries.

Hartless said that these incremental steps to reopen the academy are based on the continued decrease in
coronavirus cases treated in Colorado. However, the public health emergency and Health Protection Condition
Charlie guidelines remain in place, and will not be lifted anytime soon, he said.
“We’re prepared to be in this posture for the next year,” Hartless said. “This is something we’re grappling with. Just like every other university in the U.S., and U.S. military installations across the world, there are unknowns we have to prepare for.”

“Any decisions we make will continue to be based on the health of our local military community and the health of El Paso County,” Hartless said.

3. Jobless rate spikes to 14.7%, highest since Great Depression – 5/8
Associated Press | Christopher Rugaber

WASHINGTON — The U.S. unemployment rate hit 14.7% in April, the highest rate since the Great Depression, as 20.5 million jobs vanished in the worst monthly loss on record. The figures are stark evidence of the damage the coronavirus has done to a now-shattered economy.

The losses, reported by the Labor Department Friday, reflect what has become a severe recession caused by sudden business shutdowns in nearly every industry. Nearly all the job growth achieved during the 11-year recovery from the Great Recession has now been lost in one month.

The report indicated that a clear majority of April’s job losses — roughly 75% — are considered temporary, a result of businesses that were forced to suddenly close but hope to reopen and recall their laid-off workers. Whether most of those workers can return to their jobs anytime soon, though, will be determined by how well policymakers, businesses and the public manage their response to the public health crisis.

The collapse of the job market has occurred with stunning speed. As recently as February, the unemployment rate was a five-decade low of 3.5%, and employers had added jobs for a record 113 months. In March, the unemployment rate was just 4.4%

The jump in the unemployment rate didn’t capture the full devastation wrought by the business shutdowns. The Labor Department said its survey-takers erroneously classified millions of Americans as employed in April even though their employers have closed down. These people should have been classified as on temporary layoff and therefore unemployed. If they had been counted correctly, the unemployment rate would have been nearly 20%, the government said.

President Donald Trump, who faces the prospect of high unemployment rates through the November elections, said the figures were “no surprise.”

“What I can do is I’ll bring it back,” Trump said. “Those jobs will all be back, and they’ll be back very soon. And next year we’ll have a phenomenal year.”

But economists increasingly worry that it will take years to recover all the jobs lost. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office expects the jobless rate to be 9.5% by the end of 2021.

Racial minorities and lower-income workers suffered the most from the economic shutdown. Job losses were especially severe for Latinos, whose unemployment rate leapt up to 18.9% from 6% in March.

In addition to the millions of newly unemployed, 5.1 million others had their hours reduced in April. That trend, too, means less income and less spending, perpetuating the economic downturn. A measure of what’s called underemployment — which counts the unemployed plus full-time workers who were reduced to part-time work — reached 22.8%, a record high.

Though some businesses are beginning to reopen in certain states, factories, hotels, restaurants, resorts, sporting venues, movie theaters and many small businesses are still largely shuttered. As companies have laid off tens of millions, lives have been upended across the country.
One of the newly unemployed, Sara Barnard, 24, of St. Louis, has lost three jobs: A floor manager at a pub and restaurant, a bartender at a small downtown tavern and the occasional stand-up comedian. Her main job was at McGurk’s, an Irish pub and restaurant near downtown that closed days before St. Patrick’s Day. She had worked there continually since high school.

McGurk’s tried selling food curbside, Barnard said, but it was costing more to keep the place open than the money that was coming in. Around that time, the bar where she worked closed, and comedy jobs ended when social distancing requirements forced clubs to close.

McGurk’s is a St. Louis landmark, and Barnard expects it to rebound quickly once it reopens. She just doesn’t know when.

Job losses and pay cuts are ranging across the world. Unemployment in the 19-country eurozone is expected to surpass 10% in coming months as more people are laid off. That figure is expected to remain lower than the U.S. unemployment rate. But it doesn’t count many people who either are furloughed or whose hours are cut but who receive most of their wages from government assistance.

In France, about half the private-sector workforce is on a government paid-leave program whereby they receive up to 84% of their net salary. In Germany, 3 million workers are supported in a similar system, with the government paying up to 60% of their net pay.

In the five weeks covered by the U.S. jobs report for April, 26.5 million people applied for unemployment benefits.

The job loss reported Friday was a smaller figure because the two are measured differently: The government calculates job losses by surveying businesses and households. It’s a net figure that also counts the hiring that some companies, like Amazon and many grocery stores, have done. By contrast, total jobless claims are a measure of just the layoff side of the equation.

The government’s report noted that many people who lost jobs in April but didn’t look for another one weren’t even counted in the unemployment rate. They are captured in a separate index: The proportion of all working-age adults who are employed. This figure is now just 51.3%, the lowest proportion on record.

For the United States, a key question is where the job market goes from here. Applications for unemployment aid, while high, have declined for five straight weeks, a sign that the worst of the layoffs has passed. Still, few economists expect a rapid turnaround.

A paper by economists at the San Francisco Federal Reserve estimates that under an optimistic scenario that assumes shutdowns are lifted quickly, the unemployment rate could fall back to about 4% by mid-2021.

But if shutdowns recur and hiring revives more slowly, the jobless rate could remain in double-digits until the end of 2021, the San Francisco Fed economists predict.

Raj Chetty, a Harvard economist, is tracking real-time data on the economy, including consumer spending, small business hiring and job postings. Chetty noted the economy’s health will hinge on when the viral outbreak has subsided enough that most Americans will feel comfortable returning to restaurants, bars, movie theaters and shops.

The data suggests that many small businesses are holding on in hopes that spending and the economy will rebound soon, he said. Small business payrolls have fallen sharply but have leveled off in recent weeks. And job postings haven’t dropped nearly as much as total jobs have. But it’s unclear how much longer those trends will persist.

“There’s only so long you can hold out,” Chetty said.
BARCELONA, Spain — Spain’s army expects there to be two more outbreaks of the new coronavirus, according to an internal report seen by The Associated Press.

The army report predicts “two more waves of the epidemic” and that Spain will take “between a year and a year-and-a-half to return to normality.”

The document was published by Spanish newspaper ABC on Friday and later confirmed as authentic by the AP.

“There will be a second wave of COVID-19” in the autumn or winter the army report said, adding that it will be less serious than the initial outbreak due to higher immunity in the population and better preparations.

It said that a “possible third wave would be greatly weakened” next year if there is a vaccine available.

The report was produced by the army as its own forecast of the pandemic, which it can share with civilian authorities. Spain’s government has its own experts who make the final decisions on health policy, taking into account the opinion of other institutions and outside experts.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has warned that he considers it highly probable that the virus will make comebacks until a vaccine is developed.

Health officials in Spain are carrying out an epidemiological survey to determine the extent of the contagion, including the several thousand people who have been mildly ill with cough and high fever but never been tested in a hospital. There are also believed to be thousands more who were infected but never showed symptoms. On Friday, the health ministry said that medical workers had taken blood samples from over 46,000 people over the first week of the survey. It plans to test 60,000-90,000 overall.

Over 26,000 Spaniards are known to have died from the COVID-19 virus. Spain has gotten control over the outbreak which has infected a confirmed 260,177 people in the country and is now easing restrictions to activate its battered economy.

Spain’s army has played a major role in combating the virus under the nation’s state of emergency established in mid-March. Thousands of soldiers and military medics have deployed to set up field hospitals, disinfect nursing homes and transport hubs, and transport patients between hospitals and corpses to morgues.

When considering steps to prepare for the coming months, the army report said “it would be extremely important” to develop a contact tracing method using mobile phone applications. Spain so far has not done that and is relying on a local network of public health clinics to monitor future cases.

The European Union has acknowledged it allowed the Chinese government to censor an opinion piece published in the country, removing a reference to the origin of the coronavirus outbreak and its subsequent spread worldwide.

The piece was jointly authored by the EU’s ambassador Nicolas Chapuis along with the ambassadors to China for the EU’s 27 member states to mark 45 years of EU-China diplomatic relations.

In the original piece published on the EU delegation’s website, the ambassadors wrote that “the outbreak of the coronavirus in China, and its subsequent spread to the rest of the world over the past three months” had side-tracked pre-existing diplomatic plans.
But in the version that appears on the website of China Daily, a state-owned newspaper, the reference to the origin of coronavirus in China and its spread is removed.

While the EU Delegation to China said it “strongly regrets” the change, it also admitted that it ultimately agreed for the censored piece to be published because it still contained “key messages on a number of our priority areas.”

“The EU Delegation was informed by the media in question that the publication of the Op-Ed would only be allowed by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the condition that a part of a sentence related to the origins and spread of the coronavirus was removed,” the Delegation said in a statement. “The EU Delegation to China made known its objections to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in no uncertain terms.”

“As the Op-Ed states, while the EU and China have differences, notably on human rights, our partnership has become mature enough to allow frank discussions on these issues. This is what makes this incident even more regrettable,” the Delegation’s statement adds.

CNN has asked China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a response.

6. ISIS seeks to exploit pandemic to mount resurgence in Iraq and Syria – 5/8
   CNN | Ryan Browne

The coronavirus pandemic has forced the US-led military coalition battling ISIS to pause or suspend significant aspects of its campaign in Iraq and Syria, even as the terror group seeks to exploit the instability caused by the pandemic and a dramatic fall in oil prices.

ISIS has increased its attacks as Iraq’s security forces have been diverted toward enforcing curfews aimed at preventing the pandemic’s spread and maintaining stability, a senior official with the US-led coalition tells CNN.

A US defense official also told CNN that ISIS had increased its attacks in recent weeks, seeking to capitalize on the instability.

While both officials said the sophistication of the ISIS attacks has not increased, the senior coalition official said there has been a "slight uptick in the quantity of activity."

The commander of the coalition said that while there has been an increase in attacks, the amount of ISIS activity is similar to 2019 levels.

"The pure numbers (of attacks) are very consistent with last year exact same time," Lt. Gen. Pat White told reporters on a phone call Friday.

He said ISIS had claimed some 151 attacks during the month of April, akin to the number in April 2019.

White also stressed that the current spate of attacks were less sophisticated compared to previous ISIS efforts involving a wide range of weapons.

"The type of attacks they are conducting now which are the majority small arms, rifles, small caliber mortars and no (vehicle borne improvised explosive devices)," White said, adding that the degradation in ISIS' capabilities reflected the success of the coalition's military campaign.

There is also concern about how the Iraqi government will maintain stability while continuing to pursue the remnants of ISIS as the price of oil has plummeted dramatically in recent weeks. Baghdad is extremely dependent on oil revenue to fund its spending, including the salaries of workers in its large public sector.
"Even before the collapse of oil prices Iraq had some stabilization issues," the senior coalition official told CNN.

After months of political uncertainty and anti-government protests, Iraq's Parliament voted Wednesday to approve a new government led by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, a former intelligence chief.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke with the new prime minister Wednesday and welcomed the formation of his government.

"Great to speak today with new Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Now comes the urgent, hard work of implementing the reforms demanded by the Iraqi people. I pledged to help him deliver on his bold agenda for the sake of the Iraqi people," Pompeo wrote on Twitter.

Although Iraq has been beset by instability and faces a major shortfall in funding, the senior coalition official noted that ISIS has some financial challenges of its own, exhibited by the fact that many of its recent attacks have been aimed at boosting its resources.

"A lot of the intelligence suggests that the various ISIS lower-level leaders out in the provinces are really focusing on the kind of attacks that would get resources, like kidnapping for ransom and those types of things, and they're getting smaller amounts of money than they had in the past, still real money that's being generated but not enough to sustain them," the official said.

"They are lacking in financing, they're lacking in fighters and they are lacking in support by the populace in most areas and so this is all a part of their grand scheme to try to pull fighters and sympathizers underneath their cause and they continue to fail," Lt. Gen. White said Friday.

Missions scaled back

But the amount of pressure being applied by Iraqi and coalition forces is not what it once was, as many of the missions have been scaled back or adjusted due to coronavirus concerns.

Coalition troops are no longer accompanying Iraqi units or the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces during raids on ISIS targets due to the pandemic.

Those missions were still taking place in March when two US Marines were killed in an intense firefight during an assault on an ISIS cave complex in northern Iraq.

"In the pre-Covid world those (types of missions) were still going on," the senior official said, adding that "in the current Covid world those aren't going on."

The official said that if a high-enough-value ISIS target is identified, such missions could be turned back on.

"If there was a target that was important enough, a Baghdadi raid-type thing, of course we'd go out there and do something like that with our partners or potentially even unilaterally," the official said, referring to former ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was killed in a US military raid in northwest Syria in October.

Baghdadi's death "had a substantial effect" on ISIS, according to the official, who said the killing of the terror group's leader "probably had a little bit more substantial effect than we would have anticipated ahead of time. We thought Baghdadi was a little bit more isolated, but as we looked at the network afterwards we've seen that he actually was providing influence and direction to the overall ISIS network."

The official said that prior to the coronavirus pause, the US-led military coalition and its Syrian and Iraqi allies had seen success in targeting midlevel ISIS leaders, saying the group's middle leadership "has been really decimated" and that such individuals were difficult to replace.
But the question remains as to whether ISIS will be able to use the coronavirus-related respite to reconstitute its ranks.

While the coalition is still providing advice to the senior-most levels of the Iraqi military, helping to coordinate airstrikes and intelligence sharing, other advising efforts closer to the front lines have been curtailed due to the coronavirus challenge.

Bases closed

Several bases where US and coalition troops had operated from have been shuttered or handed over to the Iraqis.

And while a spokesman for the coalition said at the time that the bases were being closed "as a result of the success of Iraqi Security Forces in their fight against ISIS," the senior coalition official told CNN that the closures were taking place months ahead of plan and were due in large part to the coronavirus' impact.

The original plan was to close many of those bases in the fall or in early 2021, the official said.

Coalition advisers now have to work with their Iraqi counterparts either by telephone or video teleconference.

Another activity that has been paused is coalition efforts to train Iraqi troops.

"It was put on pause, really, by the Iraqis. They paused that training mission because of Covid. They didn't want the forces out in the field on large groups doing training, as you can imagine. We've done the same thing in the US context back stateside," the senior coalition official said.

Because of that training pause, the coalition decided to send hundreds of international military trainers, who were now without jobs, back home.

"They really wouldn't have been doing much here. That's really why the training mission left," the official said.

And while the coronavirus is having a major impact on the government of Iraq and the coalition, the official said that ISIS is also feeling the pandemic's effects.

"Covid is having a substantial impact on their operations as well. We see in the reporting that ISIS is actually concerned about running their ratlines of supply and logistics and spreading Covid amongst their force, same sorts of things we're having to deal with," the official said.

And the coalition has been able to continue airstrikes, with UK Royal Air Force Typhoon jets killing some five to 10 fighters in a strike on an ISIS cave complex in northern Iraq late last month.

7. What I saw at the Javits Center's Covid-19 hospital – 5/8

Two things have been true of the wars America has won. They had the support and participation of the public, and those fighting them quickly learned and adapted. The fight against Covid-19 is no different.

Five weeks ago, I arrived at the Jacob Javits Convention Center in Manhattan just in time to hear New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announce its opening to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. He called it a rescue mission.

Shortly thereafter, I would join more than a dozen federal, state and city agencies to do something that had never been done. We would turn a low acuity medical shelter into one of the city's largest Covid-19 hospitals. For all of us, it was a race against time to help healthcare workers on the front lines and the patients in their care.
Many, if not most, of us had been to war at some point in the past two decades. But this war was different. This was an opportunity to save lives, not to take them.

A change of plans

At first, Javits Medical Station was not going to take Covid-19 patients. It was built using four 250-bed Federal Medical Stations, which are designed, equipped and staffed to provide accommodations to people displaced by natural disaster for a few days, not to provide acute medical care needed amid a national pandemic.

There was no similar blueprint or out-of-the-box solution for building a Covid-19 hospital, but the hope was that these medical shelters could be used to offload healthier non-Covid-19 patients from New York's hospitals. However, as they prepared for an onslaught of Covid-19 cases, New York City's hospitals had already sent most of their healthier patients home.

The day we opened, there were only five patients in New York's 11 city-run hospitals whom we could treat. Four of them required methadone, a highly controlled drug treatment we were not set up to provide. Immediately, we launched a frantic effort to be able to dispense methadone. It was the first of many battles we would fight to build capabilities and increase the level of care we could provide to help the overburdened hospitals.

Soon, it became apparent that a choice had to be made. We could try to replicate every capability within a hospital, a seemingly impossible task, or we could organize, staff, and equip around one core capability: treating Covid-19 patients. On Thursday, April 2, President Donald Trump and Gov. Cuomo agreed to order Javits to become a Covid-19 facility. Our team briefly celebrated and then kicked into action.

Becoming a real hospital

The challenges we faced seemed insurmountable. We were building an airplane while flying it through a highly infectious environment. How do you get enough oxygen into the building to serve 500 or 2,000 patients without turning it into the Hindenburg? We had to build capabilities as simple as a nurse call system and as complex as continuous monitoring of pulse oximetry.

Some problems bordered on the humorous, like how do you safely get hundreds of patients down the long hospital corridors to the bathroom trailers? We named it, "Operation Doody Calls."

Through it all, a single wasted minute felt like we were failing health care workers on the front lines. But soon we had built a scalable, 500- to 2,500-bed hospital with enough ICUs for sicker patients. With the addition of a remarkable management team from Northwell Health, we became a real hospital.

By the second week of April, we were doing over 100 intakes a day, half as many discharges, and had filled over 450 beds. Eventually, we would treat 1,095 patients.

A different kind of war

Often, those of us who had served in the military found that our service overlapped. In 2004, Lt. Col. Leslie Curtis-Glanton and her then unit, the 31st Combat Support Hospital, took care of my fellow Marines wounded in Fallujah. Now, she was taking care of my fellow New Yorkers as the chief nurse officer for the 9th Hospital Center, which deployed to New York from Fort Hood to help with these efforts.

JB Cuartas, the New York City branch director from the Federal Emergency Management Administration, also served in Fallujah. And just about everyone who had previously worked in a disaster had served with Murad "Mojo" Raheem, the regional administrator from the US Department of Health and Human Services, at some point in their careers.
Dr. Renee Pazdan and Col. William Bimson, the Chief Medical Officers for the US Public Health Service and the 44th Medical Brigade, respectively, did their medical internships together at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and were there when the Pentagon was hit on 9/11. Richard Thomas, a SWAT officer and a tactical medic from HHS, and Col. Dave Hamilton, a US Army physician assistant and the commander of the 9th Hospital Center, would trade notes about experiences treating complex trauma.

Many of us working at the Javits Center seemed one or two degrees separated from each other. And many of us wore black memorial bracelets engraved with the name and branch of a fallen comrade from Iraq or Afghanistan. These bracelets serve as a solemn reminder for those of us who came home to live our lives for those who didn't.

Walking through Javits, I often thought about the words of one fallen Marine, Capt. John Maloney. John was killed in Iraq in 2005 and left behind a wife and two young children. He was one of my instructors at the Marine Corps' Infantry Officer Course.

"What was more important -- your mission or your Marines?" he once asked us. It was the summer of 2002, and, as young officers, many of us would soon have to balance accomplishing our mission in combat with risking the lives of our Marines. After some debate, Capt. Maloney weighed in, "You take care of your Marines and they'll take care of the mission."

The war in Iraq and Afghanistan didn't have a clear mission. All we were really left to fight for was each other. But in the war against Covid-19, taking care of each other is the mission.

Though worlds apart, Capt. John Maloney would have loved Dr. David Langer, a neurosurgeon who volunteered in our ICU, while also working at his own hospital. During patient rounds, he explained to me that civilian doctors and nurses never expected they'd have to put their lives on the line to take care of their patients. Unlike most other diseases, treating Covid-19 is dangerous work for medical personnel. And yet, here they were, taking care of people at great personal risk.

The day before we started to treat Covid-19 patients, three ER doctors, Lauren Tomao, Adebake Adebayo and Mollie Williams from The Brooklyn Hospital Center, came to talk to our doctors and nurses about treating the virus. They'd been tirelessly working on the front lines for weeks in one of the city's hardest-hit hospitals. Nevertheless, they took the time to come into Manhattan to help us prepare to treat for Covid-19. The military doctors listened intently. Many had been in combat, some had treated Ebola, but Covid-19 was a far more unpredictable and seemingly insidious disease than any of them had seen.

Before me that day was a remarkable cross section of America. Three brave, selfless, and tireless women from Brooklyn, who made me proud of our city. And military and civilian doctors and nurses from across the US, who made me proud of our country. They shared notes about how to care for others and how to take care of each other. John Maloney's spirit was alive and well in that moment.

And his spirit is alive and well outside of Javits or any hospital.

Whether you're on the front lines, staying home to stop the spread, or wearing a mask to protect others when you go out, taking care of each other is the only way we get through this. We all have a role to play in this rescue mission.

8. The Post-Pandemic Military Will Need to Improvise – 5/8

We don't mean Pentagon-style “innovation.” We mean like the chefs on the reality show “Chopped.”

Defense One | Bryan Clark and Dan Patt

The COVID-19 pandemic is still in its opening phases, but the disease and responses to it are already taking a disproportionate bite out of military innovation. While ship, aircraft, and vehicle construction continue, the U.S. military’s efforts to develop new technologies and tactics are slowing in the wake of cancelled exercises,
postponed experiments, and idled laboratories. And when R&D can resume, the money needed to sustain it could instead be diverted to economic recovery.

Although competitors like China or Russia may suffer similar drag, they were already ahead in some technologies, like hypersonic weapons, and have “home field” advantages that reduce their reliance on others, like autonomous systems. To sustain or regain its edge, the U.S. military will need to use its existing tools to create complex and challenging situations for enemies. But integrating and recomposing older ships and aircraft with new autonomous systems or commercial micro-satellites will require DoD to shift more money and effort toward the connective tissue that makes “kill webs” possible.

Making the most of an unexpected and diverse set of ingredients is the premise of reality television’s “Chopped.” Four chefs are given a basket of seemingly random elements — think watermelon, sardines, and pepper jack cheese — and asked to create a dish that looks and tastes good. To win, chefs need experience, intuition, and a knack for improvisation. They also need to take some risks.

Unfortunately, U.S. military innovation more resembles the chef’s table at a Michelin-starred restaurant with a set menu carefully refined over weeks of tastings. DoD and its industry partners start with the final dish they want—for example, defeating an advanced air defense system in Russian Kaliningrad—and reverse-engineer a specific recipe, such as a stealthy F-35 fighter using long-range smart missiles.

DoD’s approach works as long as the adversary holds still, projected scenarios emerge as expected, and the specialized systems needed can be fielded. But like a chef who misjudges food trends or loses an essential supplier, the U.S. military could find itself in a confrontation using the wrong tactics or without the weapons for tactics that might work.

With tightening budgets and an eroding technological edge, the U.S. military will need to operate more like the “Chopped” chefs, evolving tactics using new combinations of systems and weapons to address the situation at hand. The missing ingredient for DoD is flexible connections between its sensors, platforms, networks, and operators.

For example, although the F-35 strike fighter emerged from a haute cuisine approach to acquisition, with modest software re-architecting it could adapt to a “Chopped” operational environment. The F-35 could be configured as a flying server, letting a Marine on the ground borrow the view from its sensors, download the latest update on adversary movement, and use the aircraft’s radio to talk to troops over the horizon.

Interoperability between disparate proprietary data networks will be essential to military creativity and adaptability. The Pentagon largely failed during the past 60 years to achieve interoperability through joint communication standards; the equivalent of trying to get everyone to learn and stay proficient in a common language they may only use once every few years. On the other hand, a technological approach—Google Translate—seamlessly uses machine learning to convert messages in one language to another on demand. Although it uses mathematical graphing instead of artificial intelligence, DARPA’s STITCHES toolchain provides the same function for military data networks, allowing old and new message formats to talk to each other.

The need for interoperability extends to software inside military equipment as well. Replacing custom-made lines of code strung like spaghetti through today’s combat systems with containerized modules like Kubernetes would help DoD integrate proprietary software from multiple vendors in the same hardware. With each contractors’ intellectual property encased in a container, individual software elements in a system could be upgraded, replaced, or recomposed without rewriting the entire software program.

Integrating diverse networks and software without changing their internal structure or code would allow the government to prescribe and own only the rights to interfaces between proprietary elements. Network and software vendors, including commercial providers, would be incentivized to improve their products with the promise of reasonable profits. And like proprietary hardware manufacturing, DoD inspectors could monitor production for quality assurance.
The U.S. military needs new approaches to warfighting if it is going to deter aggression and counter gray-zone tactics from great power and regional competitors. Technology proliferation and post-pandemic budget and experimentation constraints will prevent staying ahead through superior equipment and tactics alone. DoD will need to start enabling what American military leaders have always said is their greatest resource: the creativity and adaptability of their warfighters.

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What do even worse relations between Washington and Beijing mean in practice?
The Economist

When conducting war games between China and America, David Ochmanek of RAND Corporation, a think-tank, worries most about an invasion of Taiwan, the security of which is implicitly guaranteed by America. In one scenario the red team unleashes a "joint firepower strike" on Taiwan's defence forces and on American forces, bases and command-and-control nodes in the Pacific, including on Okinawa and Guam. Many of the blue team's planes are destroyed on the ground, and its runways disabled. China severs communication links as part of an effort to gain information superiority, part of a full-spectrum strategy called "system-destruction warfare". Then comes the amphibious assault on the island. American submarines knock out some portion of the invasion force with torpedoes, but surface-level carriers and frigates are hammered by Chinese anti-ship missiles if they venture near the fight. "We always assume that the United States intervenes forcefully and early," Mr Ochmanek says. But now, in contrast to years past, "I would not have confidence that we would succeed."

The probability of such a world-changing military conflict between the two countries remains mercifully low. But it is becoming something to ponder beyond simulations, a reflection of how grim their relationship has become. Lesser conflicts may be reignited this year—over trade, technology, espionage and propaganda and disinformation—while the American death toll from covid-19 climbs. The world’s two largest economies, so long intertwined through trade and investment, are heading towards a partial decoupling. There is less trust between the two governments than at any time since the normalisation of relations in 1979. And as an election approaches in November, the chances of misunderstanding, miscalculation and provocation are escalating on both sides.

President Donald Trump had praised Chinese leaders in the early days of the pandemic, after signing a "phase one" trade deal. He has repeatedly expressed admiration for Xi Jinping, China's president, even as recently as late March, tweeting after a telephone call, "We are working closely together. Much respect!" But in April, as Mr Trump faced intensifying criticism for the failure to contain the epidemic, he swung to attacking China, a strategy which Republican pollsters suggest may help him against Joe Biden, his Democratic challenger. (One attack ad paid for by Trump allies said that "To stop China, you have to stop Joe Biden"; another declared, "China is killing our jobs and now, killing our people"). On May 3rd Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state and a proponent of the term "Wuhan virus", tweeted that "China has a history of infecting the world", implicitly blaming the covid-19 pandemic on "failures in a Chinese lab" in Wuhan. That theory is still in search of some evidence.

In China, too, the political calculus threatens to escalate tensions. In recent days state media have called Mr Pompeo "evil", "insane" and a "common enemy of mankind", stoking the fires of nationalism. In Beijing there are signs that leaders are getting nervous. On May 4th Reuters, a news service, reported that an elite think-tank under the Ministry of State Security had warned China's leaders of an elevated risk of war with America, as the country endures a global backlash not seen since the massacre around Tiananmen Square. On May 4th a hawkish Chinese military strategist, apparently worried that some in China are eager to exploit a moment of weakness in America, warned against taking Taiwan by force, telling the South China Morning Post that it would be "too costly".
State-sponsored hacking of American government and corporate targets carries fewer risks. The practice had subsided after a deal struck between Mr Xi and Barack Obama in 2015, but reportedly resumed after Mr Trump took office. It is expected to continue as tensions worsen; sensitive medical information, including work on covid-19 vaccines, could be a target. America in turn could decide to open its arsenal of hacking tools, potentially escalating cyber-hostilities to new levels.

Then there is what P.W. Singer, a specialist on 21st-century warfare, calls "like war", the Kremlin-style use of social media to spread propaganda and disinformation. Mr Singer says China has learned from Russia. Its diplomats and state-media actors have spread the fiction that the American armed forces brought the virus to Wuhan. Xinhua, the official news agency, released an animated video using Lego characters to illustrate America's efforts to blame China for its failure to contain the virus: "We are always correct, even though we contradict ourselves," says the Statue of Liberty, while hooked up to an IV drip. "It's like that scene in 'Jurassic Park' where the velociraptors figure out how to turn the doorknob," Mr Singer says. "That's what you just saw with China in information warfare."

In some arenas the rhetoric may be little more than hot air. The "Justice for Victims of Coronavirus Act", a bill sponsored by Josh Hawley, a Republican senator from Missouri, would allow citizens and states to sue China for damages related to covid-19. Mr Hawley published an op-ed in the New York Times arguing that the World Trade Organisation should be abolished because it has enfeebled America's economy while enabling China's rise. Mr Trump is considering action in a few areas--levying new tariffs, imposing sanctions, asking companies to move manufacturing out of China, and ordering federal pension funds not to invest there. News outlets reported the fanciful idea, floated by sources in the administration, that the White House was considering cancelling part of the country's $1.1trn in debt obligations to China, to "punish" China for the pandemic.

The administration's push to blame a lab in Wuhan for the pandemic may fall apart if it fails to produce evidence; officials in Britain and Australia have briefed newspapers that America has shared no convincing intelligence under their Five Eyes agreement. But in other ways the row is already taking a real toll. At the United Nations a resolution calling for ceasefires in regional conflicts around the globe has stalled over a squabble between the two countries about whether to name-check the World Health Organisation.

Taiwan is likely to be a flashpoint for increased tensions, if not armed conflict. America is backing the self-governing island's bid for observer status at the World Health Assembly, the decision-making body of the WHO. A vote is expected later this month. The administration has also allowed a deputy secretary of health and human services to take part in a Zoom conference with a Taiwanese vice-premier about Taiwan's successful response to covid-19. Mr Trump may consider sending a more senior official to Taipei, which would be taken as provocation by the Communist Party. In that sense the pandemic might provide a saving grace. If such a high-level summit were to be conducted over Zoom, to prevent the spread of the virus, the two governments might at least keep at a safe distance from each other.

Fox News | Peter Aitken

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has reached out to President Xi Jinping to congratulate him on China's handling of the coronavirus, according to state media.

Korean Central News Agency released a report that the North Korea chairman sent a “verbal message" to President Xi, congratulating him on “registering a success" in the fight against COVID-19.

The message is the first public remarks Kim has made since his long absence from the public, which led to widespread speculation about Kim's health.

Kim disappeared for around 20 days, even missing North Korea's "Day of the Sun" celebration, held to honor the birth of Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, the founder of North Korea.
Evidence from Kim’s first public appearance indicated he may have undergone a cardiovascular medical procedure, but no conclusive findings have been reported as of yet.

Kim further wished President Xi “good health” and indicated that he hopes that China can continue with its success in combatting the pandemic.

"Kim's message is further evidence of the substantial improvement we've seen in DPRK-PRC relations since the 'bad old days' of 2016-2017," Evans Revere, a former acting assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs, told NK News.

"Those ties bottomed out during that period, but both sides have made a sustained effort to refurbish, restore, and strengthen relations since then."

Experts have widely speculated that the pandemic started in Wuhan, China, either from the wildlife wet markets or from a virology lab near Wuhan. The U.S. has led international criticism of China's initial handling of the outbreak, accusing them of failing to act quickly to contain the virus, silencing doctors and whistleblowers during the early days of its spread, which eventually led to the global pandemic.

While Pyongyang denies any presence of the virus within its borders, the DPRK took drastic steps to prevent any possible spread with a national lockdown starting in January as China dealt with the peak of the pandemic.

NK News notes that North Korea ended its activity pause in late February and commenced a series of missile tests that amounted to the country’s busiest month of tests ever.

11. Esper escalates war of words with Warren, Democratic senators – 5/8
The Hill | Rebecca Kheel

Defense Secretary Mark Esper has sent a letter to the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee pushing back on criticism from ten other senators of his response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The letter largely echoes comments Esper made at a press briefing earlier this week when he shot back at the senators, but sending it steps up the Pentagon’s efforts to push back on criticism of its coronavirus response.

"The Department of Defense (DoD) is committed to providing accurate and timely information in support of Congressional oversight," Esper wrote in a letter to Chairman Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.). "This is why we are providing weekly updates by senior DoD officials to Congress. Recently, however, some members have leveled false or misleading assertions regarding the department's response to the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, despite these briefings. I want to ensure you have the facts."

"I can confidently state, informed by my service leaders and combatant commanders, the U.S. military is maintaining a high state of readiness and the morale of the force remains strong," Esper added in the letter dated Thursday.

At issue is a letter sent to Esper from Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.), a Senate Armed Services Committee member, and nine of her Democratic senate colleagues in which they expressed "grave concern" about how the Pentagon has handled the coronavirus crisis.

“Civilian leadership of the department has failed to act sufficiently quickly, and has often prioritized readiness at the expense of the health of servicemembers and their families,” the senators wrote. “This failure has adversely affected morale, and, despite the department’s best intentions, undermined readiness.”
Fellow Armed Services members Sens. Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii) and Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) were among the letter’s co-signers, as were fellow former Democratic presidential contenders Sens. Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) and Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.).

The eight-page letter cited several examples, including the coronavirus outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier and Esper pushing decisions on implementing social distancing and other guidance to local commanders.

It also asked for answers to about a dozen questions by this coming Monday. Asked whether the Pentagon will be responding to the senators who wrote the letter, a spokeswoman told The Hill that Esper’s letter to Inhofe “is the secretary’s response.” The spokeswoman did not immediately respond to a follow up question on whether Esper's letter was also sent to the 10 senators or whether Esper will not be answering their questions.

Warren’s office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Esper’s letter.

As of Friday, 5,171 service members have been diagnosed with the coronavirus, including 114 who have been hospitalized, 1,978 who have recovered and two who have died.

In his letter to Inhofe, Esper maintained the Pentagon has been "ahead of need at every step," arguing officials “have met or exceeded every request for assistance we have received.”

“That said, on behalf of America's 2.9 million service members and DoD civilians, I am disappointed that some, especially committee members, would argue that the Defense Department has demonstrated a ‘failure to adequately respond to the ongoing coronavirus disease,’” Esper wrote to Inhofe. “Such a statement does not respect the 62,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines currently deployed across the nation in support of their fellow Americans, typically operating away from their families and usually at risk of their own lives.”

12. As Guard, Reserve Members Face Disrupted Drill Periods, Some Call for Legal Fix – 5/8

In the immediate wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, thousands of National Guard members in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Virginia were called to active duty in support of their state’s defense and recovery, sacrificing the federal drilling points they would have earned toward their retirement as they completed the state mission.

It was an extraordinary situation, and Congress ultimately intervened, crafting a narrow exemption that allowed state activation in these instances to count toward a Guard member’s retirement.

Now, as the nation contends with another extraordinary event in the form of the novel coronavirus pandemic, some are once again looking to Congress to step in and provide relief to Guard and Reserve members whose careers might be at risk due to circumstances outside their control.

Social distancing measures to limit the spread of the virus have forced Guard and Reserve units to suspend, postpone or reconfigure regular drill periods -- training opportunities worth points many need to earn a "good year" toward retirement. And while officials with the military services and the National Guard Bureau say they're working to find other ways to accomplish training, there's no holistic waiver or adjustment that accounts for disruption due to the pandemic.

The Navy, for example, moved in mid-March to postpone drill weekends for most reservists, a suspension that has now been extended through the end of May. While units were directed to work with members to reschedule and to grant liberal waivers, there was no guarantee that reservists would be able to make up requirements. The Marine Corps also moved to suspend Reserve drilling indefinitely, while the Army postponed Battle Assemblies. The Air Force enforced a stop-movement order, but encouraged commanders to find creative ways to make up time.
Susan Lukas, legislative director of the Reserve Officers Association, said that some Guard and Reserve members are more at risk of losing out than others -- those nearing retirement, for example, or who mark the end of their contract year in spring, leaving little room to reschedule missed drill periods.

To earn a "good year" that counts for retirement, members must earn at least 50 points -- 35 on top of the 15 they are credited for membership. Each day of active service, drill period attendance and funeral honors duty is worth one point each; a typical drill weekend is worth four points total. Guard and Reserve members need 20 "good years" to be eligible for retirement.

Lukas said her organization is proposing a law that would grant constructive credit for this year for drilling members of the Guard and Reserve, making up the difference in career points they need, up to 50. It's a better option, she said, than a Defense Department waiver or allowance, because service members would not be obligated to keep their own records or make their case to the military accounting system.

"Twenty years from now, when [the Defense Finance Accounting Service] is reconciling [members'] record to make sure they have 20 years, who's going to remember that this year was a waiver year?" Lukas said. "The members would then have to do an appeal. I just saw a waiver as a bureaucratic nightmare for the member when it comes time for them to retire."

Frank Yoakum, executive director of the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States, said the idea that drill periods and battle assemblies can just be replaced by virtual sessions and video chats doesn't take into account the many military jobs that are hands-on. Making up drill periods virtually, he said, is at best an extremely temporary solution.

"I get [using] Zoom ... but there's really only so much you can do at home for certain jobs," he said. "If you're talking about an infantry unit or an artillery unit and their job is to go out and fire artillery pieces or to perform weapons maintenance or perform maintenance on wheeled vehicles, you can't really do that virtually. That's not why you joined the Guard."

He added that many Guard members remain on state active duty, where they are supporting pandemic response, but not accruing retirement points. As of late April, according to a Military Times report, roughly 80% of Guard members were on federally funded Title 32 orders; but nearly 8,000 guardsmen continued to support state response only, with lesser benefits and no retirement credit.

"Maybe if your retirement year just started in March, you've got time to make up this year," Yoakum said, noting that each service member is on a different calendar based on when their initial contract began. "But if it started in January or February … you might be worried."

And it's not just about retirement, he added.

"In the Army regulations, there are penalties for not getting a good retirement year," he said. "If you don't get a good year one year, they could throw you out of the military for unsatisfactory participation. I would hope that somebody in DoD or the Army ... would take a look at that."

At least one military service has already expressed interest in finding a legislative solution for the problem.

Air Force Reserve policy teams are working with the Defense Department "on potential legislative relief for those Reserve members who may not achieve enough points for a 'good year' due to COVID-19 restrictions," Bo Joyner, an Air Force Reserve Command spokesman, told Military.com in a statement. "As this becomes available, that information will be disseminated to our Citizen Airmen."
Joyner added that the Air Force is also encouraging Reserve commanders to group their Unit Training Assembly drill periods into “super UTAs” later in the year and maximize telework and virtual training to reduce the impact of suspended drill periods.

The Navy has announced a number of mitigating measures for reservists, including a liberal telework policy and extended deadline to support participation waivers.

"In order to help ensure our Reservists maintain readiness and get credit towards their 'good year,' we are making it significantly easier to telework," Navy Reserve Forces Deputy Commander Rear Adm. John Schommer said in a statement. "Our intent is to provide maximum flexibility for our Selected Reserve (SELRES) Sailors and set them up for success during these challenging times."

Marine Corps Reserve officials also said they are turning to telework wherever possible to help reservists stay current on career points.

"With regard to annual training, we, along with the other military reserve forces, are working closely with the Department of Defense to assess impacts and determine options to unforeseen challenges," Marine Forces Reserve spokesman Capt. Markian Sich said.

Army officials, who released a lengthy "Frequently Asked Questions" document regarding pandemic-related concerns, are leaning heavily on "Virtual Battle Assemblies" to take the place of all in-person drill periods. For job specialties that don't lend themselves to virtual training, an official told Military.com that unit commanders have discretion on how to structure training and currency requirements.

A Defense Department spokeswoman, Jessica Maxwell, declined to comment on any legislative proposals that might be under consideration to help Guard and Reserve members. She referred Military.com to documents published by the DoD that emphasize telework options for drill periods.

"We are doing everything within the confines of statute to remedy this issue for our Service members," she said. "We are unaware of a situation that is not covered by the policy flexibilities discussed in the previously provided documents."

April Cunningham, a spokesperson for the National Guard Bureau, also highlighted the flexibility being provided to commanders to reschedule drill, make it virtual or authorize an alternative place of duty for Guard members.

"The flexibility is intended to provide alternative ways to fulfill unit assemblies at the same location in order to acquire drill credit or points for retirement," she said. "Additionally, individual members can always work with their Commanders for approval of limited equivalent training, when they cannot meet the requirements of the scheduled training plan (including re-scheduled, alternate location plans) due to personal issues."

For Guard and Reserve members, the good news is that there is some time to build in a legislative fix for anyone who can't use one of the options provided to earn their "good year."

Yoakum said constructive credit can be approved retroactively by Congress -- and that it's a step that can be taken after the most pressing pandemic response issues have been addressed.

"I think they've got a good six to nine months to work on this, really," he said.

**13. ISIS exploits COVID-19 with little success, US troop deployments to Iraq on track despite pandemic – 5/8**

*Military Times | Shawn Snow*

The Islamic State has gained little for its efforts to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic, while U.S. troop rotations to Iraq are still on track despite the ongoing pandemic.
Lt. Gen. Pat White, the commander of Operation Inherent Resolve, told reporters Friday that while ISIS has sought to exploit the pandemic, attacks carried out by the Islamic extremist group are on par with last year’s tally.

White said that ISIS claimed 152 attacks in 2019 and there were 151 claimed attacks in 2020. But CNN reported, citing a U.S. defense official, that ISIS has increased attacks in recent weeks.

The increased attacks by the terror group come as Iraqi forces have been forced to divert resources and manpower to enforce curfews due to COVID-19, CNN reported.

White said that the curfews may have actually had a negative impact on ISIS fighters and their ability to launch attacks. The curfews “constrained the ability of an adversary to move above ground,” he said.

Anyone moving at night or during the day “became an easy target,” White said.

White explained that ISIS has “failed miserably” to achieve recently stated goals, and that the jihadi group was unable to capitalize on recent operational pauses due to COVID-19.

“I was surprised that Daesh did not take advantage of some of the pause in some of the empty space that might have been an opportunity for them,” he told reporters.

White also noted that recent attacks have lacked sophistication of the ISIS organization that once held sway over vast territory across Iraq and Syria from 2016 to 2017.

“What we have seen is that the attacks we have been witnessing here over the past weeks are inconsistent with an organization that we knew of in the past,” he explained.

During the height of ISIS’ control of territory, the jihadi group was capable of launching “complex” attacks using bomb-laden vehicles, small arms and rockets all “simultaneously,” White said.

White said now the majority of attacks are small arms, rifles and mortars with no VBIEDs.

White acknowledged that COVID-19 did slow the coalition down “a little bit.”

But partner forces are continuing to put pressure on ISIS while U.S. troop rotations are continuing with implemented safety guidelines and quarantines to stem the spread of the virus.

White said the U.S. military was “proceeding forward with most of our rotational forces that were already planned.”

**14. Military families caught in COVID-19 financial straits could see relief under this proposal – 5/8**

*Military Times | Karen Jowers*

With thousands of military families in limbo during a virtual halt of permanent change of station moves, lawmakers introduced legislation Friday to address financial losses some families are facing.

Specifically, the proposal would change the law to allow service members — without penalty — to terminate a residential lease they’ve already entered into at a new location in anticipation of a PCS move, when that service member is affected by a stop movement order in response to a local, national or global emergency for a period of at least 30 days. The proposal would amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, or SCRA.

The bipartisan proposal has been introduced in both the House and the Senate, and would also apply to vehicle leases. This is one step in the process before the proposal could become law, although there appears to be bipartisan support.

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In the current stoppage of PCS moves in the coronavirus pandemic, many military families have been caught having to pay housing costs for two residences— their current location, and at another location where they had rented housing in preparation for their PCS move before the initial stop movement order was issued in March. The stop movement has now been extended through June, with some exceptions.

The legislation would be retroactive to March 1, providing relief to families who had been paying rent for a residence they can’t yet occupy.

Under the long-standing Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, or SCRA, service members are allowed to terminate their residential and vehicle leases when they need to leave the current area because of deployment or PCS orders, when certain conditions are met. This proposal would extend those protections to the leases entered into at a new location, in anticipation of a PCS move, when that PCS move is stopped under the conditions outlined.

“These families are stuck — unable to relocate to their new duty station, while getting double billed and paying rent twice over,” said House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano, D-Calif., in a statement. “By helping slow the spread, these military families have suffered unintended financial hardship due to their service...”

About 12,500 military members have moved since the stop movement order in March, and 30,000 have asked for exceptions to be able to move. Lawmakers have asked DoD for information on how many service members have been affected financially by the stop move order; information was not immediately available about how many service members this proposal could potentially help.

“No service member or their family should have to worry about whether they will face an added financial burden because of the sop movement order DoD put in place to stop the spread of COVID-19,” said Roe. “By allowing them to cancel a lease for a new car or house without penalty, this legislation would give them the flexibility and peace of mind they need during these trying times.”

**15. Locked Down on V-E Day, Europe Celebrates World War II Liberation – 5/8**

*Pandemic restrictions forced ceremonies for the 75th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s surrender to be sharply scaled down. But some poignant rituals went ahead.*

*New York Times | Elian Peltier*

PARIS — There were no poignant handshakes with veterans. Military parades were canceled. Wreaths were laid, but with appropriate social distancing.

European nations commemorated the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II on the continent in novel ways on Friday, with ceremonies and public events now paused. Citizens were encouraged to honor the day — a national holiday in some places — at home. And while closeness may have marked previous commemorations, distance, masks and hand sanitizers played a part in the celebrations this year.

Seventy-five years ago in Berlin, German military officials signed the instrument of surrender, ending nearly six years of conflict in Europe that saw hundreds of millions face occupation, forced displacement and persecution. Estimates vary, but at least 70 million people died globally in the war, which continued in Asia for a few more
months, an overwhelming majority of them civilians. Among them were the six million Jews and millions of others killed systematically by the Nazi regime, many of them in concentration camps across Europe.

On May 8, 1945, tens of thousands of people filled the streets of Britain, France and other victorious European countries. For others, in Poland, the Baltic States and countries of Eastern Europe, the date marked the beginning of another period of domination, this time by the Soviet Union.

On Friday, the places that once erupted in joy, like the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris or Trafalgar Square in London, remained mostly empty. The World War II veterans who are thanked by leaders every May 8 in emotional moments broadcast on national television were forced to stay home. The coronavirus pandemic has killed nearly 120,000 people across Europe, mostly from older generations.

In Britain, the national moment of remembrance included the jets of the Royal Air Force’s Red Arrows flying over Buckingham Palace in London. People paused for a two-minute silence, and at home they were invited to stand and raise their glass in a toast as the BBC broadcast a speech from Winston Churchill, the wartime prime minister.

A speech from Queen Elizabeth II will be broadcast at 9 p.m., exactly 75 years after her father, George VI, addressed the nation at the same hour. It will be the queen’s second address since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, weeks after she urged Britons to pull together even as they were forced to maintain their distance.

Among the heroes that Britain celebrated was Capt. Tom Moore, 100, who served in India and Burma during World War II, and who last month helped raise 30 million pounds, or about $37 million, for the country’s National Health Service.

The official death toll of the coronavirus in Britain is now more than 30,000, higher than that of any other country in Europe.

In France, President Emmanuel Macron oversaw commemorative ceremonies in Paris, without the crowds that usually gather to watch, and without the French leader’s traditional walk up the Champs-Élysées to review troops.

The handful of participants — ministers, politicians and military officials — stood conspicuously far apart as the national anthem rang out underneath the Arc de Triomphe, where Mr. Macron laid a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldier. After writing some words of tribute, Mr. Macron sanitized his hands.

Mr. Macron had been scheduled to attend a victory parade in Moscow on Saturday, but the Russian authorities canceled the event. The French president also called upon his fellow citizens to hang the national flag from their windows and balconies to celebrate while staying at home.

In Germany, a full state ceremony was canceled, but Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier laid a wreath in memory of the victims of war and tyranny. “There is no end to remembering,” Mr. Steinmeier said at the Neue Wache memorial in Berlin. “There is no redemption from our history.”

Berlin itself, for the first time, declared May 8 a holiday. While Friday was a normal work day in the rest of the country, there has been some push to make the day a national holiday. This year, Esther Béjarano, a concentration camp survivor and the head of the International Auschwitz Committee, a group of survivors, wrote an open letter to Mr. Steinmeier and Ms. Merkel pressing that case.

A May 8 holiday would be “an opportunity to reflect on the great hopes of humanity: freedom, equality, fraternity — and sisterhood,” she wrote. Online, her petition has gathered more than 100,000 signatures.

The day has also taken on new meaning as the continent faces the coronavirus crisis. On the ruins of Europe’s bloodiest modern conflict were laid the foundations of the European Union, which now faces its worst recession.
Some leaders have equated the struggle to contain the coronavirus to a war, and have drawn parallels between the conflict that changed the fate of hundreds of millions and the pandemic that has so far killed over 250,000 worldwide.

Many saw parallels between the two eras, as Europe prepares for the prospect of deep turmoil.

Nicholas Soames, Churchill’s grandson and a British former lawmaker, said the coronavirus might have brought generations and families together for the first time since World War II. “I think that is an added poignancy in the 75th anniversary year, that we should find ourselves drawn together by a terrible threat,” he said of the pandemic, in a conversation with Britain’s ambassador to France, Edward Llewellyn.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was hospitalized for weeks after contracting the virus, said the country was now engaged in a struggle that “demanded the same spirit of national endeavor.”

“We can’t hold the parades and street celebrations we enjoyed in the past, but all of us who were born since 1945 are acutely conscious that we owe everything we most value to the generation who won the Second World War,” he said.

But as leaders celebrated those who saved Europe 75 years ago, historians said that in such times of uncertainty, they, too, would be judged for their response to the current pandemic.

“We might forgive our leaders’ frequent and self-serving language of war and their invocation of Churchill in 1940 if only it is accompanied by some of that wartime spirit that reset and expanded the boundaries of the possible,” the Canadian historian and Oxford University professor Margaret MacMillan wrote.

At the wreath-laying ceremony in Berlin, Mr. Steinmeier urged for more unity across the European Union, arguing that the spirit of solidarity that helped defeat Nazi Germany was now needed to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. In recent days, various political figures across Europe have warned that the union would not survive the challenges posed by the coronavirus if the member countries did not address it together.

“For us Germans, ‘never again’ means ‘never again alone,’” Mr. Steinmeier said at the ceremony. “If we don’t hold Europe together, including during and after this pandemic, then we are not living up to May 8.”

16. Russia Was Ready to Celebrate a Glorious Past. The Present Intervened. – 5/8
New York Times | Andrew Higgins and Sergey Ponomarev

MOSCOW — As the coronavirus began its silent but relentless march on Moscow in February, the names of the millions of Russian soldiers killed in the far deadlier horrors of World War II were already appearing, one by one, on state television, scrolling down the screen in a harrowing torrent.

The Kremlin offered soothing words about the pandemic, saying that Russia would not suffer too badly. So, the names kept coming, day after day, mourning Russia’s wartime martyrs at a staggering rate of more than 6,000 a minute.

But at the end of March, when the coronavirus crisis could no longer be glossed over, the names suddenly vanished from TV. And Russia awoke from its glorious, morbid memories of the Red Army’s defeat of Nazi Germany 75 years ago to confront an insidious enemy that kept getting closer and more menacing.

The pandemic arrived with full force in Moscow just as the Russian capital was preparing to celebrate Victory Day on May 9, a joyous annual holiday filled with national pride that transcends all of Russia’s many divisions. The timing has left the city in a strangely expectant yet suspended state.
The grand party has been canceled, but this becalmed and still beguilingly beautiful city is all decked out for a big celebration. Copies of the red banner that was raised above the Reichstag in Berlin in 1945 fly on every silent street. Billboards outside shuttered theaters promote patriotic concerts, plays and songfests, none of which will take place as planned.

A flyby over the city by warplanes and military helicopters is still on for Saturday, but Moscow’s mayor, Sergei Sobyanin, has told residents not to go out to watch it. State television, which now devotes nearly all its daytime news coverage to the virus, periodically resumes scrolling the names of the war dead late at night.

Orange trucks sent to spray the streets with disinfectant and water carry a reminder of canceled joy, emblazoned with stickers declaring “Victory.”

Police cars, meanwhile, cruise the streets, blaring a taped message on an endless loop: “Respected citizens. We ask you not to leave your home unnecessarily. Take care of your health and do not allow the infection of fellow citizens.”

Restrictions announced in March by the mayor, Mr. Sobyanin, have put the city in a lockdown more severe than those imposed on New York and London. All parks, restaurants and stores — other than those selling food, medicine and other essential items — are closed.

The rules, announced just as Moscow was shaking off the last icy chill of a long winter, make no provision for exercise, except for pet-owners, who are allowed to walk their dogs within 100 yards of their homes.

In a country with a long history of legal nihilism, the mayor’s stay-at-home pleas were not expected to gain much traction. Russia is, after all, a land where, according to popular wisdom, “the severity of the law is compensated by the laxity of its enforcement” and “when something is not allowed but is greatly desired it can be done.”

Most Muscovites, however, have more or less obeyed. That the threat was real, and not just another propaganda exercise to keep protesters off the streets or to gin up fury at the West, became clear in late March. That is when President Vladimir V. Putin shelved a referendum on constitutional changes that would allow him to stay in power until 2036.

Russia at the time had reported only 658 infections but, Mr. Putin, broadcasting from his country retreat, said it was “objectively impossible” to stop the virus from spreading. It now has more than 187,000 cases, after reporting more than 10,000 new infections per day for six straight days.

A vast propaganda machine geared to trumpeting the triumphs of Mr. Putin has mostly shifted gears. On the street near my apartment, an illuminated panel that at this time of year usually has a poster celebrating victory in 1945 now features a picture of the head doctor at Moscow’s main hospital for coronavirus patients. “Stay at home!” warns the doctor, who has himself tested positive. “This is the most dangerous place.”

Tormented by cabin-fever, Muscovites, at least those with dachas — country homes that range from huts to palaces — have left the city in large numbers. Others make do with furtive forays outside when they can.

An artist friend goes out at night for long walks, saying she feels like a World War II “ partisan” as she darts between trees in the dark trying to elude police patrols.

I prefer going out during the day, walking with my wife, shielded by a big shopping bag in the hope that the police will let us be.

As a journalist with papers from the Russian Foreign Ministry, I have no real reason to worry about police checks, which are generally polite, but, still gun-shy after being mugged by a pair of thieving police officers in Moscow many years ago, I prefer to keep the police at a distance.
Russians who want to go out without worrying need a digital pass on their cellphone. These are easy to get for anyone working in essential businesses, which include takeout florists and, I discovered this week in an affluent area, a jewelry store aimed, according to a sign in the window, at “people who don’t wear jewelry.”

The area is usually crowded with tourists who come to experience the place where, in Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel “The Master and Margarita,” the devil takes up residence and throws the city into disarray.

That part of the city is now smothered in a diabolical calm. The jewelry store had no customers.

Moscow, as of Wednesday, had reported just 905 deaths, compared with more than 19,000 at the time in New York City. The hospitals are strained, but not yet overwhelmed.

Stripped of the traffic jams and the deafening hubbub of the vibrant metropolis it was just two months ago, Moscow is today in some ways like the city I moved to soon after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

Then, too, it felt suspended, torn from the predictable, and waiting not for the plague — though some Russians certainly regarded the advent of capitalism as a terrible pestilence — but for some clarity as the rituals of Soviet life vanished. Except, of course, for Victory Day.

At the time, even as the country seemed to be falling apart, my wife marveled that at Akademicheskaya subway station near our apartment, the clunky escalators were still running, fitfully, and old ladies with mops were still cleaning the platforms. We wondered: How long can that all last?

But it did — for years and years, through an armed rebellion against President Boris N. Yeltsin, through an economic collapse more severe than the Great Depression, through two wars in Chechnya and murderous terrorist attacks in Moscow. The old ladies kept cleaning.

They were still at it this week when I put on my face mask and, thanks to my accreditation card, made my way to the subway, where the trains, always clean, still arrive like clockwork every few minutes.

In a car with only three passengers, all of them in face masks, a video screen flashed a message from President Putin: “Be responsible!”


*Using CRISPR, Sandia National Lab researchers are genetically engineering antiviral countermeasures to fight the coronavirus—and potentially future outbreaks.*

*NextGov | Brandi Vincent,*

Genetic sequencing tools and CRISPR-based technology help scientists thoroughly probe the most micro happenings inside of cells in multi-dimensional ways—and researchers at Sandia National Laboratory are now putting them to use against COVID-19.

Biochemist Joe Schoeniger and virologist Oscar Negrete recently briefed Nextgov on their team’s long-term vision and efforts to genetically engineer antiviral countermeasures that could help curb the novel coronavirus and other future outbreaks.

“There’s huge open questions about mitigating this thing as it goes on as a phenomenon all around the world,” Schoeniger explained. “And that’s a reason why we need to vigorously pursue lots of avenues.”

Using CRISPR (short for Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) technologies, researchers can essentially alter the nucleic acids that make up cells. The tech enables experts to hone in on particular DNA and RNA sequences and manipulate genes or control gene expression to combat viruses and help human bodies withstand infection. “You can do all kinds of things with that,” Schoeniger said.
From their homes and inside the New Mexico-based lab, the team is tapping into advanced genetic resequencing tools to address the present pandemic, but the efforts were not initially ignited by COVID-19. Negrete and Schoeniger have been studying emerging infectious diseases for years, including the zoonotic Nipah virus and Ebola virus. Negrete noted several significant commonalities between those viruses and the coronavirus exist: They likely emerged from bats, they have spillover events that can lead to outbreaks and they also all have well-defined host factors, as well as defining targets that could be used for therapeutic interventions.

“And that is the key sticking point that we’ve been thinking about for a long time—it’s how do we create rapid countermeasures that could basically target a family of viruses instead of just one,” he said.

Backed with funding from the Biological Technologies Office in the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the researchers were already fervently working to deploy CRISPR and other technologies to conduct studies addressing a broad class of viruses on their radar, and particularly using Ebola as a model. But as the reality of the novel coronavirus’ threat surfaced in late January, the team members opted to pivot their work to focus on the latest global health threat. Since then, they’ve shifted to even more institutional work.

“Part of this—if you’re trying to make an impact in a timeframe of even a year, year and a half—is to realize there’s lots of therapies to develop,” Schoeniger explained. “You have to understand how you might be a piece of the puzzle—and then there’s a longer-term question of, well, ‘what happens when something else, you know, another coronavirus re-emerges?’”

Still funded by DARPA, Negrete said the current, more COVID-19-focused project encompasses three overall components. The first is ultimately exploring “new technologies, like CRISPR” as a novel antiviral countermeasure approach to targeting a broad spectrum of viruses, as opposed to one strain. Though most immediately associate CRISPR with editing DNA, the scientists emphasized that “the CRISPR toolbox is much bigger than that”—and their specific work is much more about responsible programmability inside human cells.

“Basically you don’t really have to cut DNA or make permanent rearrangements and mutations, you can use [CRISPR] as a toolbox to harness gene regulation methods—you could up and down regulate genes of interest,” Negrete explained. “And so what we really want to do with CRISPR is reprogram the cells to block infection.”

This essentially entails using the technology to upregulate or downregulate important proteins that are involved with virus infection. Once that works in a cell culture and dish, the next component scientists are pursuing is how to safely translate it into humans. The delivery of such biological treatments is an area that is also undergoing rapid development, Negrete noted. One of those methods is a nucleic acid vaccine. He explained it this way: “Instead of making components of the virus, purifying them, then injecting them into humans, you’re sending in the code—messenger RNA—into the cells and you make your own body produce the antigens of the virus to stimulate the immune response.”

“So can we incorporate that CRISPR delivery, those methods, to inhibit virus infection with nucleic acid delivery technology, [and] we make ourselves reprogram them to defend against viruses, so that speeds up the process,” he said, regarding their ongoing explorations.

Thirdly, the team is also working on a technical component in its efforts: the development of delivery vehicles. Nucleic acids will potentially degrade upon entering the body, unless they can be protected until they reach the affected cells. In their original Ebola virus research, some of the early cells infected by the virus were liver cells. Working in collaboration with Lawrence Livermore National Lab, the team used delivery vehicles that can be injected intravenously.

“So we could basically use CRISPR technology, knock out a host protein that's important for infection in the liver of mice … and then it basically protects the mice,” Negrete explained.
Now, the team is looking to apply that same approach to countering the coronavirus and effectively switching the delivery efficacy to lungs—the main targets of the latest viral threat—to see if there’s a new host protein worth addressing.

The researchers are currently leading proof-of-concept trials for an antiviral that they hope could be customized to specific viruses, including the coronavirus. Though further testing and study is needed, if it works, this would keep medical professionals from scrambling to create new countermeasures for each outbreak or pandemic that occurs. And Sandia’s gene-focused research will continue, even if or after the coronavirus has halted.

“We have a big-picture problem, which is that we keep having outbreaks of emerging illnesses,” Schoeniger said. He added that while some of the work has been managed and maintained remotely, certain studies just can’t be done alone at home.

“This is something that people have to go in the laboratory and they have to work very hard under conditions that are stressful—both from the point of view of the stresses that everybody is going through in these times, but also, people are working very hard, very, very long hours,” Schoeniger said. “Because this is very important work to them.”

The lab imposed comprehensive measures to ensure the safety of those who enter it, and the scientists added that all researchers are trained not to touch their faces while working. Generally, they wear a great deal of protective equipment in facilities regardless of the pandemic. Working with viruses inherently requires strong protection.

Though society is largely focused on the coronavirus now, it’s ultimately “difficult to keep people’s attention focused on these sorts of problems,” Schoeniger said. For example, countering emerging biological threats—one of Sandia’s roles as a national lab—captured national and lawmaker attention after the 9/11 attacks, yet that initial sharp focus can quickly shift to the next crisis.

“But I think this current pandemic shows that we have a vulnerability to this—and it has implications for how we should think about this as a national security problem, and not just a public health problem,” he said. “So I just want people to know that there are folks who think about that fact. We understand this is a long slog and this is something that we need to mitigate.”

18. Katie Miller, Pence spokesperson, tests positive for coronavirus – 5/8
The diagnosis brings the threat of infection into the president’s inner circle
Politic | Dan Diamond and Myah Ward

Katie Miller, a spokesperson for Vice President Mike Pence, has tested positive for coronavirus, according to two people with knowledge of Miller’s diagnosis.

Miller’s positive diagnosis for Covid-19 puts the potential threat of the infection squarely into the president’s inner circle. Miller serves as the vice president’s top spokesperson, traveling with him frequently and attending meetings by his side. She is also married to another top White House aide and senior adviser, Stephen Miller, who writes the majority of Trump’s speeches and spends copious amounts of time around the president, Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump.

Katie Miller’s positive diagnosis raises the risk that, through both her and her husband’s daily work, a large swath of the West Wing’s senior aides may also have been exposed to the novel coronavirus. She did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany earlier on Friday confirmed that a member of the vice president’s team had tested positive for coronavirus — just one day after one of President Donald Trump’s personal valets contracted the illness — although did not specify who the person was.
The vice president’s trip to Iowa on Friday was delayed by more than an hour as six other Pence staffers who had been in contact with Miller were removed from Air Force Two.

The White House said that the Pence staffer had tested negative on Thursday before receiving positive test results Friday morning. A senior administration official told reporters that the president and vice president had not been in contact with the person recently.

Pence was tested on Friday and has been tested daily, according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters traveling with the vice president.

“We have put in place the guidelines that our experts have put forward to keep this building safe, which means contact tracing,” McEnany told reporters during Friday’s news briefing. "All of the recommended guidelines we have for businesses that have essential workers, we are now putting them in place here in the White House. So as America reopens safely, the White House is continuing to operate safely."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends anyone who has been exposed to a person with the coronavirus should “stay home until 14 days after last exposure and maintain social distance (at least 6 feet) from others at all times.”

The vice president is scheduled to meet with faith leaders in Des Moines, Iowa, on Friday to discuss responsible religious gatherings, followed by a roundtable on securing food supply. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue and Iowa Sens. Chuck Grassley and Joni Ernst also accompanied Pence on the trip.

While staff in the West Wing are tested regularly, according to the pool report, staff members in the Executive Office Building are not tested as frequently. About 10 people on Pence’s staff are tested daily.

Trump on Thursday said both he and Pence had tested negative for coronavirus after they were informed that a member of the U.S. military who works at the White House had tested positive. That individual is one of the president's valets, military members who assist the president with personal tasks.

Judd Deere, a White House spokesman, said in a statement: “The President's physician and White House Operations continue to work closely to ensure every precaution is taken to keep the President, First Family and the entire White House Complex safe and healthy at all times. In addition to social distancing, daily temperature checks and symptom histories, hand sanitizer, and regular deep cleaning of all work spaces.”

--Nancy Cook contributed to this report

19. U.S. troop deployments to Middle East slow down amid pandemic – 5/8
Politico Pro | Lara Seligman

U.S. troops are still moving in and out of the Middle East, albeit at a slower pace, despite the coronavirus pandemic that is sweeping the globe, according to U.S. officials.

As of January, the United States had 60,000 to 70,000 troops in the Middle East, including more than 7,000 in Bahrain, 5,200 in Iraq and 13,000 in Kuwait. Troops regularly rotate in and out of the area on planned deployments.

The spread of Covid-19 initially threw a wrench in regular U.S. troop movement. Defense Secretary Mark Esper in March ordered a global 60-day freeze as a response to the virus.

But the U.S. military is moving forward with most of the rotational deployments in and out of Iraq and Syria as an exception to the 60-day stop movement, Lt. Gen. Pat White, commander of the mission to defeat the Islamic
State in Iraq and Syria told reporters Friday. For example, a unit from Fort Bragg, N.C., is soon set to arrive in Iraq to relieve an Alaska unit.

The deploying units must undergo a series of health precautions, including quarantine and testing, before flying to their destination, White said.

“It’s slowed us down a little bit,” White said. “We will continue on path with conditions and with requirements that will address the Covid vulnerability and what it would do to a formation.”

In addition, White said he has sent several soldiers home "on compassionate leave" due to Covid-related family illnesses.

But the virus has slowed the enemy, too. The Islamic State, already severely weakened by U.S. and coalition attacks, has been limited in its movements, White said. The implementation of a curfew has also made it "plainly obvious,” even in hours of darkness, when members are trying to move around.

White said he was “surprised” that the group did not take advantage of the “pause” during the early stages of the pandemic, as partner nations rushed to respond to the virus.

“All that does is validate for me that they no longer possess the capability, the leadership or the finances to be the Daesh of old,” White said, using an Arabic name for the group.

Meanwhile in Afghanistan, the pandemic has not halted the planned U.S. drawdown, said Capt. Bill Urban, a spokesperson for U.S. Central Command. Under an agreement signed between the Taliban and American diplomats in February, the number of U.S. troops in the country is set to decrease from 12,000 to roughly 8,600 by the middle of June.

But like in Iraq, the movement of U.S. troops has slowed due to the mandatory 14-day quarantine, Urban said.

20. China says Taiwan's bid to attend key WHO meeting will fail – 5/8

BEIJING - Taiwan will fail in its bid to join a key meeting of the World Health Organization (WHO) amid efforts to rein in the novel coronavirus as its efforts are based on politics, not health concerns, China said on Friday.

Self-rulled Taiwan has been lobbying to attend, as an observer, the May 18-19 ministerial meeting of the WHO’s decision-making body, the World Health Assembly (WHA), and has won high-level support from the United States and several U.S. allies, including Japan.

China, under its “one China” policy, considers Taiwan a breakaway province ineligible for state-to-state relations or membership of bodies like the WHO. Taiwan has diplomatic relations with only 15 countries, almost all small and developing.

Six of the WHO’s 194 member states had proposed inviting Taiwan as an observer to the WHA meeting, the WHO’s principal legal officer, Steven Solomon, told a U.N. briefing in Geneva on Friday.

He named eSwatini (Swaziland), Marshall Islands, Nicaragua, Palau, St. Lucia and Paraguay, all of which recognise Taiwan over China.

Solomon said that since 1972, the WHA recognised Beijing as “the only legitimate representative of China” to its meetings and added: “That decision still stands.”

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus had “conditional discretion” to issue invitations, provided they are consistent with the WHO constitution and WHA policies, Solomon said.
“The only body with authority, control and power is the Assembly itself. It’s not the director-general, it’s not the secretariat of WHO,” he added.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said Taiwan’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party was trying to use the pandemic for political purposes.

“Its so-called attempts to get into the WHO and participate in the WHA are absolutely not for the health and well-being of Taiwan’s people but are through-and-through political manipulation, and will not succeed,” she said.

‘DEEPLY DISAPPOINTING’

Taiwan says its exclusion from the WHO has created a dangerous gap in the global fight against the coronavirus.

On Friday, it’s vice premier, Chen Chi-mai, told an event hosted by a Washington think tank that Taipei would continue to work with the United States on WHO participation.

“We believe Taiwan is capable of contributing to WHO work, including response to coronavirus pandemic,” he told the Center for Strategic and International Studies by teleconference.

At the same event, the U.S. deputy health secretary, Eric Hargan, praised Taiwan’s work in containing the spread of the virus and added:

“It is deeply disappointing that the World Health Organization has excluded Taiwan from participating in the WHO, and other WHO technical experts meetings. We hope they will return to the practice of inviting Taiwan as an observer at this year’s WHA.”

He said there had been “some positive signs from other countries,” but did not elaborate.

Taipei and Washington say Tedros has the power, should he so wish, to invite Taiwan to the WHA. But diplomatic sources in Taiwan say he is unlikely to do so if China does not approve.

Taiwan’s China-policymaking Mainland Affairs Council on Thursday accused China of “using politics to infringe upon health and human rights” and said the WHO should “not be manipulated by a single country’s political position.”

Taiwan attended the WHA as an observer from 2009-2016 when Taipei-Beijing relations were warmer.

China blocked further participation after the election of Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, whom China views as a separatist, an accusation she rejects. China says it has the right to represent Taiwan on the international stage, and it and the WHO say Taipei has been provided with the help and information it needs during the pandemic, something Taiwan disputes.


Reuters | Joseph Nasr

BERLIN - A German intelligence report casts doubts on U.S. allegations that COVID-19 originated in a Chinese laboratory and says the accusations are an attempt to divert attention from U.S. failure to rein in the disease, Der Spiegel magazine reported on Friday.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Sunday there was “a significant amount of evidence” that the coronavirus had emerged from a Chinese laboratory, but did not dispute U.S. intelligence agencies’ conclusion that it was not man-made.
Spiegel said Germany’s BND spy agency had asked members of the U.S.-led “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance for evidence to support the accusation. None of the alliance’s members, the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, wanted to support Pompeo’s claim, it said.

An intelligence report prepared for German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer concluded that the U.S. accusations were a deliberate attempt to divert public attention away from President Donald Trump’s “own failures”.

A German government spokesman was not immediately available for comment.

Trump has said he has evidence the virus could have originated in a Chinese lab, but he has declined to elaborate.

U.S. deaths from the coronavirus exceeded 75,000 on Thursday, according to a Reuters tally, with mixed messages from the White House and state governments on how to slow the rate of infection.

Deaths in the United States, the epicentre of the pandemic, have averaged 2,000 a day since mid-April.

22. Iran-linked hackers recently targeted coronavirus drugmaker Gilead: sources – 5/8

Reuters (Exclusive) | Jack Stubbs and Christopher Bing

LONDON/WASHINGTON -- Hackers linked to Iran have targeted staff at U.S. drugmaker Gilead Sciences Inc in recent weeks, according to publicly-available web archives reviewed by Reuters and three cybersecurity researchers, as the company races to deploy a treatment for the COVID-19 virus.

In one case, a fake email login page designed to steal passwords was sent in April to a top Gilead executive involved in legal and corporate affairs, according to an archived version on a website used to scan for malicious web addresses. Reuters was not able to determine whether the attack was successful.

Ohad Zaidenberg, lead intelligence researcher at Israeli cybersecurity firm ClearSky, who closely tracks Iranian hacking activity and has investigated the attacks, said the attempt was part of an effort by an Iranian group to compromise email accounts of staff at the company using messages that impersonated journalists.

Two other cybersecurity researchers, who were not authorized to speak publicly about their analysis, confirmed that the web domains and hosting servers used in the hacking attempts were linked to Iran.

Iran's mission to the United Nations denied any involvement in the attacks. "The Iranian government does not engage in cyber warfare," said spokesman Alireza Miryousefi. "Cyber activities Iran engages in are purely defensive and to protect against further attacks on Iranian infrastructure."

A spokesman for Gilead declined to comment, citing a company policy not to discuss cybersecurity matters. Reuters could not determine if any of the attempts were successful, on whose behalf the Iranian hackers were working or their motivation.

Still, the hacking attempts show how cyber spies around the world are focusing their intelligence-gathering efforts on information about COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

Reuters has reported in recent weeks that hackers with links to Iran and other groups have also attempted to break into the World Health Organization, and that attackers linked to Vietnam targeted the Chinese government over its handling of the coronavirus outbreak.

Britain and the United States warned this week that state-backed hackers are attacking pharmaceutical companies and research institutions working on treatments for the new disease.
The joint statement did not name any of the attacked organizations, but two people familiar with the matter said one of the targets was Gilead, whose antiviral drug remdesivir is the only treatment so far proven to help patients infected with COVID-19.

The hacking infrastructure used in the attempt to compromise the Gilead executive's email account has previously been used in cyberattacks by a group of suspected Iranian hackers known as "Charming Kitten," said Priscilla Moriuchi, director of strategic threat development at U.S. cybersecurity firm Recorded Future, who reviewed the web archives identified by Reuters.

"Access to even just the email of staff at a cutting-edge Western pharmaceutical company could give ... the Iranian government an advantage in developing treatments and countering the disease," said Moriuchi, a former analyst with the U.S. National Security Agency.

Iran has suffered acutely from the COVID-19, recording the highest death toll in the Middle East. The disease has so far killed more than 260,000 people worldwide, triggering a global race between governments, private pharmaceutical companies and researchers to develop a cure.

Gilead is at the forefront of that race and has been lauded by U.S. President Donald Trump, who met the California company’s CEO Daniel O’Day at the White House in March and May to discuss its work on COVID-19.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration last week gave emergency use authorization to Gilead's remdesivir for patients with severe COVID-19, clearing the way for broader use in more hospitals around the United States.

An official at one European biotech company said the industry was on "red alert" and taking extra precautions to guard against attempts to steal COVID-19 research, such as conducting all work related to vaccine trials on "air-gapped" computers that are disconnected from the internet.

--Additional reporting by Raphael Satter in WASHINGTON, Joseph Menn in SAN FRANCISCO and Michelle Nichols in NEW YORK

23. Contracting coronavirus won't disqualify you from serving in the military, but a hospital stay for it might – 5/8
Stars and Stripes | Corey Dickstein

WASHINGTON — A past diagnosis of the coronavirus will not disqualify individuals from joining the U.S. military, a defense official said Friday, after the Pentagon clarified guidance issued this week that appeared to bar all people who recovered from the illness from serving.

The updated guidance does bar from military service individuals who require hospitalization for complications from the virus, which has caused an international pandemic that has shut down much of the United States and killed more than 75,000 Americans, the official said. Those individuals can apply for a service-issued waiver to attempt to enter the military, said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly about the policy and requested anonymity.

The decision to disqualify individuals who require hospitalization was made because the Pentagon assumes those individuals faced a “critical case” of the coronavirus, the official said. The guidance is meant to be
temporary to provide the Defense Department more time to better understand the long-term impacts the coronavirus might inflict on the human body, the official said.

More than two months into the pandemic, public health officials have said scientists still do not have a full understanding of the virus. They know it does not cause symptoms in many individuals who contract it. But it causes massive damage to others’ lungs.

As of Friday, more than 1.25 million Americans had been diagnosed with the virus and 75,650 of them died after contracting it, according to Johns Hopkins. The Pentagon said Friday that 5,171 of its service members had tested positive for the coronavirus. Among them, 1,987 had recovered, 114 faced hospitalization at some point, and two died of complications caused by the virus.

Among the questions yet to be answered include whether an individual’s exposure to the virus ensures future immunity, according to the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC is conducting testing aimed at answering that question.

Prospective service members who have been diagnosed with the coronavirus but were not hospitalized can enter initial training after they spend 28 days in “home isolation,” the official said about the updated policy.

It was not clear Friday whether the Pentagon was considering policy changes for its active-duty or Reserve troops who have contracted the disease, such as barring those who faced hospitalization from reenlistment.


Stars and Stripes | Kim Gamel

SEOUL, South Korea - An American sailor tested positive for the coronavirus while in quarantine after arriving on a U.S.-government-chartered flight from Japan for a new assignment in South Korea, the military said Friday.

Separately, South Korean health authorities worried about a new cluster infection in Seoul after 13 new cases, including a South Korean noncommissioned officer, were linked to a coronavirus patient who went clubbing in the trendy neighborhood of Itaewon.

The new cases underscored the fragility of South Korea’s recovery as it begins to ease anti-coronavirus restrictions after several days with few to none local infections.

USFK commander Gen. Robert Abrams said Wednesday that he would not yet lift the military restrictions, which include a ban on nonessential travel off base and dining in at local restaurants and bars.

Many of the infections reported in recent weeks have been imported from abroad.

The American sailor landed at Osan Air Base on the charter flight on Wednesday and was transported to a barracks on Camp Humphreys for a mandatory 14-day quarantine, according to a press release from U.S. Forces Korea.

“Since testing positive, the sailor has been moved to Camp Humphreys’ isolation barracks designated for confirmed COVID-19 cases,” the command said.

He was the third active-duty American service member to test positive for the virus on the divided peninsula and USFK’s 27th case overall. The others were military dependents, contractors and other U.S. and South Korean employees of USFK.

USFK health professionals determined that “limited contact tracing” and a thorough cleaning of the plane and the bus that took him from the air terminal to Camp Humphreys was necessary.
More details were not immediately available.

In addition to the restrictions, USFK has mandated that personnel arriving from abroad be quarantined for 14-days and tested for the coronavirus upon entering quarantine.

“The above policy stands as a testament to USFK’s aggressive preventative control measures to stop the virus’ spread within USFK,” the command said.

The Pentagon has banned most military travel, including deployments, moves to new assignments and temporary duty for professional education, but commanders may grant exceptions to policy, or ETPs.

Some 28,500 American service members are stationed in South Korea, which remains technically at war with the North after their 1950-53 conflict ended in an armistice instead of a peace treaty.

Itaewon is outside the gates of Yongsan Army Garrison, the former military headquarters that is in the process of being closed and handed back to the South Koreans. Personnel on Yongsan also are under the military restrictions.

South Korea has been cautiously optimistic that the coronavirus crisis may be ebbing as the daily count of new cases has declined to single digits after reaching 500 and more after an outbreak began in late February.

But health authorities said 13 more cases that were reported Friday were linked to the man who went clubbing with a colleague who also was infected last weekend in Itaewon.

“This could lead to another widespread community infection,” vice health minister Kim Gang-lip said during a regular briefing.

One of those infected at an Itaewon club was a South Korean staff sergeant working at the cyber operations command in Seoul, raising the total number of local military cases to 40, according to the Yonhap News Agency.

The NCO was quarantined, and the military restricted movement of the other members of his unit, Yonhap quoted the defense ministry as saying.

The military also partially shut down the annex that houses the cyber operations command and other facilities he may have visited to be disinfected, it said.

South Korea has reported nearly 11,000 infections, with 256 deaths, since the virus first appeared in China in late December and began spreading globally.

**25. State Department: China Working With Russia to Spread Coronavirus Disinformation – 5/8**

Beijing appears to be increasingly adopting Russian tactics to sow discord and spread disinformation on social media about the origins of COVID-19, the State Department says.

*U.S. News & World Report | Paul D. Shinkman*

The State Department on Friday accused Beijing of coordinating with Russia to manipulate social media platforms to spread disinformation and combat international condemnation that China did not do more to stop the coronavirus' spread.

Lea Gabrielle, who oversees the State Department's Global Engagement Center, tasked with identifying and responding to foreign propaganda, told reporters Friday morning her office had identified "a new network of inauthentic accounts" on Twitter designed to bolster China's narrative that it was not responsible for the global spread of COVID-19. Proxies of both China and Russia appear to be working in coordination to magnify this
narrative on the social media platform, leading Gabrielle to conclude the two governments are likely working together out of shared interest.

"One of the things we have to consider right now is what's essentially a one-way megaphone from the Chinese Communist Party into free, open and democratic societies," she said. "General populations just aren't aware enough of this."

China appears to be employing automated "bot" networks to create artificial Twitter accounts on a massive scale that boost the effect of government social media posts, Gabrielle said, such as those for foreign ministry spokespeople or official accounts for Chinese embassies abroad.

"We're seeing the Chinese Communist Party adopt Russian-style tactics," the former intelligence official and Navy fighter pilot said, describing what she called a "disturbing convergence of narratives."

The New York Times last month first reported that Chinese agents were spreading posts online and through cellphone messages in an attempt to sow disinformation – such as an impending U.S. government lockdown – that distracted from international condemnation of Beijing and demonstrated new, sophisticated digital tactics.

The State Department has in recent days ramped up its focus on China as the cause of the virus, as its spread throughout most of the U.S. worsens. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday blasted China for refusing to release information about the origins of the virus, believed to have first spread in the Wuhan region, and failing to have done more to mitigate the outbreak.

"They had a choice, but instead China covered up the outbreak in Wuhan," Pompeo said. "China is still refusing to share the information we need to keep people safe."

"Calls for transparency aren't about politics. It's not about bullying, it's not about blame. It's about the ongoing need to save American lives," he said.

The latest outrage from elements of the U.S. government represents a shift from the early days of the virus' spread, including in late January when President Donald Trump lauded Chinese President Xi Jinping for his country's "efforts and transparency." Trump said Friday he's having "a very hard time" with China.

26. Trump says he was near Navy valet who tested positive for coronavirus – 5/8
USA Today | David Jackson

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump said Friday that a Navy valet who tested positive for the coronavirus was in the same room with him on Tuesday, the day he began exhibiting symptoms.

Trump also said he has been tested twice in recent days with both tests coming back negative.

"On Tuesday, he was in the room," Trump said on the morning program "Fox & Friends," but he does not recall any direct contact with the ill employee.

"And then I went to get tested and I tested fine," Trump added. "And then I got tested a second time and I tested negative ... and (Vice President) Mike Pence likewise."

In light of the positive test, which was announced Thursday, Trump said the valets who serve his food will now all be wearing masks.

"They've already started," Trump told Fox.

Trump said the valet in question had been off duty in the days before Tuesday. He told reporters Thursday the valet wore a mask, as many employees do, and that he knows the aide but has had "very little contact" with him.
After the White House announced the worker had tested positive, Trump said his staff would be tested daily moving forward.

"A lot of people in the White House wear masks," Trump said. "And, frankly, a lot of people want to wear masks, until this thing goes away."

27. DOD says no demand for test kits while states and military lag far behind in testing – 5/8
Washington Examiner | Abraham Mahshie

Most states are far behind the coronavirus testing that experts say is necessary to reopen safely, but test kits are not one of the items federal agencies have asked the Department of Defense to help acquire, Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman told the Washington Examiner at a recent Pentagon briefing.

“We’ve been looking at the entire chain of items needed for testing. So it’s swabs, it’s the medium for carrying it, it’s the testing machines, it’s professionals, whatever that is and how can we help,” Hoffman said. “I’m not aware of a demand on the test kit side of that as well at this point.”

White House Coronavirus Task Force member Dr. Anthony Fauci, since removed from daily briefings, said recently, the country needs to double its testing capacity to open safely.

Meanwhile, a study released Thursday by the Harvard Global Health Institute reveals that 41 states and the District of Columbia are not meeting the minimum level of testing required by May 15 to contain the virus in their states.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo recently sought President Trump’s help acquiring test kits to meet his state’s shortfall. After the April 21 White House meeting, Cuomo declared a partnership whereby the federal government would help obtain the test kits and the state would implement testing.

Neither have spoken publicly about the progress of that partnership, with New York testing about 22,000 per day, far below the Harvard study’s recommendation of 112,000 daily tests.

Another Democratic-controlled state, Washington, said it is now testing just below the 6,600 people per day required, thanks in part to more federal supplies arriving to the state.

Washington is scheduled to receive 580,000 swabs and about 430,000 units of viral transport medium, according to Gov. Jay Inslee’s website.

The Pentagon has been using existing defense contracts under the Defense Production Act to acquire or invest in companies that produce urgently needed medical supplies.

To date, that has included $628 million in direct support to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Department of Health and Human Services, which relay their needs to the Pentagon.

The Pentagon announced its first DPA Title III deal to ramp up test kit components April 29, a $75 million investment in Puritan Medical Products to increase its monthly output of test swabs from 20 million to 40 million.

Trump, for weeks, argued that the nation’s testing regiment is just fine.

Last week, he entertained a revolving door of Republican governors at the White House, who each declared the same, challenging the notion of a nationwide test kit shortage.
“We’re going to have a lot more capacity going forward, but we still, right now, are able to meet the current demand,” said Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis at the White House April 28. “The overall numbers of people who are seeking testing is not currently beyond our capacity.”

The Harvard study reports that Florida is conducting about 15,000 tests per day and needs to reach 24,000 by May 15 to safely reopen.

At the White House the day before DeSantis’s visit, Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards highlighted his state’s federal partnership, noting the White House testing czar, Adm. Brett Giroir, agreed to supply Louisiana 200,000 tests per month to help reopen.

“That gets us to 43 out of every 1,000 tested every month,” said Edwards. “We believe that that’s sufficient for us to move forward, as we are able, to start reopening the economy. We know the lab capacity is there.”

Louisiana conducts about 5,000 tests per day, far below the recommended 22,000 per day.

The Pentagon told the Washington Examiner that test kits remain a priority for the Defense Logistics Agency, which arranges the contracts and investments, but HHS conducts the ranking of urgent items.

The agency is managed by the undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment, Ellen Lord.

“Ms. Lord continues to support the Department’s COVID Task Force and interagency to continue developing test kit requirements and industrial capacity,” said Lt. Col. Mike Andrews in an email.

Pentagon spokesperson Jessica Maxwell later clarified: “To be clear, HHS (not DoD) has the authority to rate items (set priorities) for medical equipment and supplies under the DPA.”

HHS did not respond to several interview requests from the Washington Examiner to discuss test kit demand.

Test kit needs of the Department of Defense “have been met,” Maxwell said, but later in the day, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley indicated the department needs to double its rate of testing from about 30,000 to 60,000 per week to meet its new force testing objectives.

“Thirty-thousand is really our capacity right now, and we’re going to continue to build and build and build,” said Milley.

28. America on the wane, Russia’s scavenger diplomacy is succeeding in the Middle East – 5/8
Washington Post | David Ignatius

While most of the world has been on lockdown from the novel coronavirus, the wars and political machinations of the Middle East have continued. Amid this turmoil, Russia has been making steady progress in what State Department spokesman Morgan Ortagus described as its “malign engagement” in the region.

The administration’s worries about Russia were voiced in an unusual on-the-record briefing Thursday by three senior State Department officials. Henry Wooster, a deputy assistant secretary of state for the Near East, summed up the concerns this way: "The Kremlin uses . . . military power, proxies and disinformation . . . to expand its influence across the [Mediterranean]."

Russia has been opportunistic toward the conflicts in Syria and Libya, using a mercenary army known as the Wagner Group, run by a friend of President Vladimir Putin. The local combatants in these wars are exhausted, but efforts to negotiate peace deals have failed, as they have in Yemen. The result may be de facto partitions in all three countries — and frozen conflicts that leave the nations fragmented and vulnerable.
Russia is likely to emerge with several important military bases in the Mediterranean, achieving a centuries-old dream. Russian forces control Khmeimim air base and the port of Tartus in Syria, and they helped seize al-Ghardabiya air base near Sirte in Libya in January. "No one should think that Russia is going to pack up and leave now," said Wooster.

Moscow's hopes of bringing order to this fractious region have been no more successful than those of the United States. The "Astana process" failed to bring peace to Syria, and talk of a similar Russian-Turkish accord to stabilize Libya is probably doomed, too.

Russian impatience, especially with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, is obvious. Ambassador Aleksandr Aksenok, in an essay published last month by the Russian International Affairs Council, trashed the corruption of Assad's regime and "outrages" by its security services. "There's obvious growing Russian frustration with Assad because he will not bend," said James Jeffrey, Trump's special representative for Syria.

But the Russians have less at stake. Their investment of blood and treasure is relatively small, and they've left much of the dirty work to others, like the Wagner Group. This is empire on the cheap.

One modestly hopeful development for the United States comes in Iraq, where Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, an America-friendly former chief of intelligence, has formed a new government. U.S. commanders will hold a strategic dialogue with Kadhimi in June, and they expect some U.S. troops will remain in Iraq training its military. The number will be less than the current 5,000 but still in the thousands, U.S. officials believe.

Saudi Arabia, historically the United States' most important ally in the region, is struggling from the double whammy of covid-19 and the global crash in oil prices. Saudi officials are weighing major budget cuts, including possible delay of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform projects.

The Saudis are also discussing with the United States and Russia additional oil-production cuts to bolster prices. One possibility is a small unilateral Saudi cut for July, which would be increased if other major producers agreed to similar reductions.

With an embattled Iran posing less of a threat to Saudi Arabia, the Pentagon is withdrawing some Patriot missile batteries and fighter jets that were rushed to the kingdom last summer. Yemen remains a ruinous conflict that the Saudis want to exit, but peace efforts have failed; the Saudis may have no alternative but joining the United Arab Emirates in accepting a de facto partition of Yemen's north and south.

The United States' dilemma this year will be how and when to extract U.S. forces from northeastern Syria. Russian and Syrian regime forces that have been fighting rebels in the western province of Idlib will move east. U.S. commanders would probably prefer a withdrawal deal with Russia to a shooting war over territory they plan to leave eventually anyway.

Libya is the most cynical Russian power play. It has been backing the Benghazi-based forces of Gen. Khalifa Hifter in an unlikely coalition that includes the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and France, against the Turkish-backed government in Tripoli.

Middle East analysts speculate that Russia may try to broker a Libya peace deal with Turkey. But Libya, like the region overall, looks too fragile and fragmented for any diplomatic breakthroughs now, and what's more likely is continued stalemate and de facto partition.

Russia is picking up the pieces in the post-pandemic Middle East, not so much to further a grand strategy as to poke its deflated rival, the United States. This is scavenger diplomacy, feeding off the carcasses of these broken states.
Islamic State militants in Iraq are exploiting the coronavirus lockdown to intensify their attacks, striking more frequently and at times with more sophistication than in recent years.

In the northern city of Kirkuk, a suicide bomber walked calmly toward an intelligence headquarters last week before detonating his load in a fireball. Days later, ISIS militants carried out a nighttime ambush on a government-affiliated militia checkpoint north of Baghdad. More attacks near Baghdad and in Kirkuk then followed.

Although ISIS is much weaker than at the height of its caliphate and shows no sign of mounting a serious comeback, the group is now finding it easier to operate in part because some Iraqi security forces have been redeployed from rural areas where it is gaining strength to police the lockdown in urban centers.

"Corona is an important factor," said Brig. Gen. Tahseen al-Khafaji, a spokesman for the Iraqi armed forces. "Some soldiers are not on active duty, and some of our operations against [ISIS] stopped. They are taking advantage to move and attack."

The nighttime ambush on Saturday, for instance, occurred at a time when a federal police unit usually stationed nearby was absent, redeployed elsewhere to enforce the public health lockdown. That attack, against a checkpoint in the northern village of Mkeshefeh, killed nine Sunni Muslim militiamen. They had no night-vision goggles and no idea the militants were coming, the militiamen said.

This assault may have been the militant group’s most sophisticated in years, involving several waves of attackers and the targeting of those already wounded.

U.S. officials said the recent uptick in violence was a reaction to Iraqi forces becoming more aggressive in taking on ISIS. "The Iraqi security forces are being quite active about going after them. They’re taking fight to them," said Col. Myles B. Caggins III, a spokesman for the U.S.-led military coalition. Khafaji said instead that the coronavirus had briefly caused the tempo of operations against the group to drop, although that had since changed.

The U.S.-led military coalition, which had played an instrumental role in Iraq’s fight to defeat the Islamic State, is now in the process of withdrawing forces from Iraq, where troops have been helping Iraq’s military battle the militants. Last month, the coalition closed its facilities inside bases in Kirkuk, al-Qaim in the west and Qayyarah airfield in the north.

Experts studying the group said the militants are also exploiting gaps left by Iraqi security forces. Iraq is controlled by a patchwork of forces, and disputes among them — as well as a lack of coordination and in some cases of adequate equipment — had created opportunities for the militants even before the virus arrived.

The group first mentioned the coronavirus in its propaganda in January, urging supporters to take advantage of governments’ distraction to step up attacks. The first confirmed cases of the virus were recorded in Iraq weeks later and, by March 15, the country was under strict lockdown. City streets fell silent. Arterial roads were nearly empty. And the Islamic State began claiming more attacks.

Mara Revkin, a fellow at Georgetown University’s Center on National Security and the Law who researches societal attitudes toward the group, described the recent attacks as the most significant and costly since the official defeat of the Islamic State’s caliphate back in 2017. “But the scale and sophistication of the attacks is not yet at the level we saw in 2014, before ISIS began capturing territory in Iraq,” she said.

Militant fighters are now mostly hiding out in small units, nestled in rugged, rural terrain where the government has a limited foothold. They fund themselves through a mix of extortion and appeals to local sympathizers, Iraqi
officials say. While attacks are increasingly common, they are usually small-scale: a rudimentary explosive one day, a potshot at security forces in the desert another day.

The difference in recent weeks, experts say, is that the ISIS fighters are more often carrying out attacks closer to cities. Hisham al-Hashimi, who advises the Iraqi government on security issues, said he expected “more attacks to come, especially in Kirkuk and the areas where there is a security gap to exploit.” Kirkuk’s rocky terrain makes it tough to police, and a territorial dispute between the national government and Iraq’s semiautonomous northern Kurdish region has created inconsistent security in the area.

In the eastern province of Diyala this week, residents said news of the Mkesheefeh attack was unsettling. “We’re on the edge of our seats here. We know there are lots of fighters in the mountains, and we know that they can move around very easily,” said Salwan Al-Dahlaki, 32, reached by phone in the city of Baqubah. He reeled off a list of small attacks in recent days.

“We are really worried that ISIS might take advantage of corona and increase their attacks in the city,” Dahlaki said. “If they come here, they will come to die, and they will make sure to kill many with them.”

But while the militants pose a persistent risk, officials and security experts stress that the environment is much changed from the one that provided fertile ground for the rise of the Islamic State in 2014.

“ISIS [then] had the advantage of not yet having attempted to establish and maintain a territorial caliphate, so its promises and propaganda were believable to some,” said Revkin. “Those promises eventually turned out to be false, and ISIS can’t undo its past failures and the severe violence that turned civilians against it.”

30. White House’s pandemic relief effort Project Airbridge is swathed in secrecy and exaggerations – 5/8
Washington Post | Amy Brittain, Isaac Stanley-Becker and Nick Miroff

On May 1, as White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany defended the Trump administration’s response to the coronavirus pandemic, an illustration of an airplane flying to the moon appeared on the monitors beside her.

"One hundred flights for Project Airbridge have been completed to date," McEnany said, delivering "nearly 1 billion pieces" of personal protective equipment to the front lines. The flights had traveled 720,000 miles, the display read, equal to "more than 3 trips to the moon!"

Since the debut of Project Airbridge in March, the Trump administration has promoted the initiative as part of a historic mobilization "moving heaven and earth" to source and deliver vast amounts of medical supplies from overseas to pandemic hot spots in the United States.

 Widely credited to President Trump’s son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner, the plan harked back to storied U.S. wartime efforts such as the Berlin Airlift. It called for the federal government to partner with a handful of medical supply companies, which could purchase emergency masks, gowns and gloves in Asia. The government would pay to fly the supplies to the United States — bypassing weeks of shipping delays — as long as the companies sold half of the goods in parts of the country hit hardest by the pandemic.

Almost six weeks after its launch, Project Airbridge has completed its 122nd flight, having cost taxpayers at least $91 million. But its impact on the pandemic is unclear and shrouded in secrecy: The White House, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the companies involved have declined to disclose where supplies have been delivered.
Administration officials, meanwhile, have pointed to the project as a signature initiative of their pandemic response. Broad and sweeping statistics about supplies procured through the project have been an almost daily fixture of White House press briefings.

"Through Project Airbridge, we have succeeded in bringing planeloads of vital supplies into the United States from overseas," Trump said at a briefing on April 7. "These are massive planes, by the way. The big planes — they are very big, very powerful — and they are loaded to the gills with supplies."

But the White House has on several occasions overstated the amount of supplies the project has delivered, according to a Washington Post review that compared shipment totals provided by FEMA to statements made by White House officials through news briefings and on social media. FEMA records, for example, show that Project Airbridge on average has delivered about 2.2 million surgical masks a day over the program’s span. Yet Vice President Pence claimed in a news briefing in April that the program delivered 22 million masks daily.

Overall, Project Airbridge flights have distributed just 768,000 N95 masks — far fewer than the 85 million N95 masks procured through conventional federal relief efforts, according to the latest FEMA records.

The N95 masks, which offer greater virus protection than surgical masks because they can filter airborne particles and tiny droplets, have made up less than 0.1 percent of Project Airbridge items shipped, records show. Disposable gloves account for about 90 percent of the nearly 1 billion items that McEnany said had been flown in through the initiative.

At the heart of Project Airbridge is the deal the Trump administration struck with the six medical supply companies: Cardinal Health, Concordance, Henry Schein, McKesson, Medline and Owens & Minor.

In exchange for the subsidized flights — costing taxpayers $750,000 to $800,000 per trip — the companies agreed to sell half of their cargo to customers in geographic hot spots specified by the administration. But the companies decide where to sell the rest of the supplies flown into the country at taxpayers' expense.

"The fact is you're using taxpayer dollars to distribute private resources," said W. Craig Fugate, who led FEMA for eight years under President Barack Obama.

Asked about Fugate's comment, FEMA spokeswoman Janet Montesi said: "FEMA covers the cost to fly these supplies from overseas to the U.S., cutting the amount of time it takes to ship supplies from weeks to days. Once the supplies have landed in the U.S., the medical distributors are the ones who distribute these supplies, not the federal government."

The Trump administration has said Project Airbridge eased medical supply shortages in some of the areas hit hardest by covid-19. FEMA officials said pandemic hot spots designated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have received half of all supplies, but they declined to provide details of those shipments.

To assess the program's impact, The Post interviewed 49 government and health-care officials, including those in the 10 states and 10 counties hit hardest by the pandemic.

Officials in three of the 10 counties said they believed they had not received any supplies through Project Airbridge. In seven counties, officials said they said they had no way to know.

"I haven't heard of it," Jeremy Simmons, an emergency manager in Lincoln County, Ark., said of Project Airbridge. In April, Lincoln was among the counties with the highest rate of infection per capita.

In five states — Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan and New Jersey — officials confirmed deliveries but said they could not provide details about the supplies or the destinations of shipments.
Officials from New Jersey and Maryland said they were told by FEMA that they could not share information about what medical supplies had arrived through Project Airbridge.

"The FEMA guidance specifically says the information is not for release," Michael Ricci, director of communications for Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R), said when asked to provide numbers for Airbridge deliveries.

FEMA's Montesi disputed the claims from state officials.

Rear Adm. John Polowczyk, who is responsible for managing Project Airbridge operations at FEMA, said that the speed of the effort has been its greatest asset and that Project Airbridge has delivered hundreds of millions of items of personal protective equipment.

"I view it as a success, as a short-term measure," he said in a recent interview.

A medical supply airlift

Early news accounts of Project Airbridge often ascribed the original idea to Kushner — "We formed an unprecedented public-private partnership," he told numerous media outlets at the end of March — and Ivanka Trump has posted praise on social media for her husband's role in the program.

But the framework for Project Airbridge originated hundreds of miles from the White House, within the Boston home of Valerie Karplus, an assistant professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who specializes in science and technology policy and is a member of the Covid-19 Policy Alliance. The group analyzes data and offers policy recommendations related to the pandemic.

Karplus and others in the alliance had become convinced by mid-March that rapid air transport was the solution for the country's growing shortage of personal protective equipment, or PPE, she said in an interview.

On March 22, Karplus spent the day crunching the numbers — the weight of materials, the volume of cargo space and the number of flights needed to satisfy the needs of various infection scenarios in the United States. She said she enlisted the help of a friend, an aerospace engineer. Later that day, she put together her proposal, titled "A Medical Supply Airlift to Protect the U.S. from COVID-19."

The memo, reviewed by The Post, made no mention of a partnership with private suppliers. Rather, it focused on the strategy to procure goods from China, laid out the benefits of air cargo transport over sea travel and provided estimates of goods that could be rapidly flown to the United States.

The following day, March 23, Karplus emailed her memo to Polowczyk, who had just been assigned to FEMA to lead an effort to fix the supply-chain crisis.

Karplus and Polowczyk exchanged emails and spoke by phone over that week.

"Obtaining enormous volumes of PPE in a matter of weeks was something of a herculean task that they were asked to do late in the game," she said. "There's a lot that I actually don't know about the implementation. I did find that Admiral Polowczyk was really receptive to this idea."

Separately, others at MIT passed the memo along to Kushner, and his team soon joined the discussions, according to interviews with White House officials. Adam Boehler, a friend of Kushner's and former chief executive of Landmark Health who now leads the U.S. International Development Finance Corp., and Brad Smith, a Medicare official and the founder of Aspire Health, talked through scenarios with Polowczyk.

"What became really apparent was that it was going to be really hard to buy more stuff and make sure we're not getting screwed," said one White House official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the
condition of anonymity. The administration feared being overcharged for emergency supplies, the official said, and ultimately decided to "fly it over and let [the companies] do what they want."

Karplus's memo included an offer from MIT experts who said they could help federal officials determine where PPE should be delivered.

"Upon arrival in U.S. hubs, the COVID-19 Policy Alliance will be able to advise on routing equipment to areas that need it most," Karplus wrote. But the White House officials who took charge of the effort were convinced that the private sector could move the supplies faster.

Within days, the pitch from MIT experts morphed into the Trump administration's Project Airbridge, a plan designed to take advantage of the buyer-seller relationships maintained by the largest health-industry suppliers in the United States.

"I came up with the concept for Airbridge," Polowczyk said, adding that he drew upon conversations with his colleagues and MIT economists.

White House officials involved said they chose the six companies because their distribution contracts covered about 90 percent of the country's health-care facilities.

"One of the reasons that we used the distributors is that we didn't want supplies going from abroad to sit in a federal warehouse and then sit in a state warehouse instead of going direct to the hospitals," Boehler said in an interview. "The important thing wasn't how to get supplies into the country but how to get them to end users in the quickest time possible."

The companies also had extensive relationships with manufacturers in Asia, including experience with orders for medical supplies that would ordinarily take a month or more to arrive via cargo ship.

Cardinal Health and McKesson — both embroiled in costly lawsuits related to the opioid epidemic — and the four other companies were now key partners for the White House.

The companies sent a letter to the Justice Department requesting an antitrust waiver and expedited clearance of their plans to work together. Separately, they signed project agreements with FEMA. The Post filed a Freedom of Information Act request for these documents, which is pending.

Officials with knowledge of the arrangement said that the companies agreed to charge "reasonable" prices for PPE delivered to hot spots and that the prices would be consistent with what customers were paying for supplies under their existing contracts with the companies.

Karplus said the White House approach may overlook buyers such as state governments and senior care facilities that may not have previously purchased large amounts of PPE from any of the six companies.

"The private sector is incentivized to focus on its existing, profitable relationships," Karplus said.

Two of the medical supply companies — Henry Schein and McKesson — provided statements to The Post about their work with Airbridge. The other four declined to comment.

"We feel it is important to be doing our part to help mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, and we will continue to work in partnership with FEMA as long as the crisis requires," Henry Schein said in a statement.

McKesson issued a statement that said the company has used its "expertise in managing complex logistics to deliver lifesaving medicines and medical supplies across the country."
On March 29, leaders from the six companies gathered around a conference table at the White House to discuss the launch of the initiative with Trump.

"Our first project — and we call it 'Airbridge,'" Trump said at the meeting, which was televised. "It's 'Airbridge.' That's the name."

The president praised Polowczyk, saying his work on Airbridge was "just fantastic."

Then, Trump turned to Cardinal Health CEO Mike Kaufmann and pointed to Polowczyk. "Is he doing well?" Trump asked Kaufmnan about the admiral.

"If he's not, let me know," Trump said, laughing. "We'll reduce his rank by one notch."

'We have no idea where it's going'

On March 29, the day of the White House roundtable, the first Project Airbridge flight landed at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York.

A commercial aircraft arrived with 60 percent of its cargo — a mix of masks, gowns and gloves — purchased directly by FEMA and earmarked for delivery in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, according to an agency spokeswoman.

The flight, however, would be an anomaly in the overall Airbridge effort.

Every flight since has carried supplies purchased by the companies involved, according to FEMA and White House officials.

On April 3, several days into the new initiative, a FEMA regional administrator hosted a conference call with the Florida congressional delegation, including Rep. Ted Deutch (D-Fla.). Deutch said he was confused during the call as the FEMA official suggested that just 20 percent of Airbridge-delivered goods would go to pandemic hot spots, while 80 percent would go elsewhere in the companies' supply chains.

Several days later, FEMA announced that 50 percent of the supplies were going to hot spots. The mixed messages befuddled Deutch, who said he has sent FEMA Administrator Peter T. Gaynor requests for flight manifests, cost breakdowns and a list of recipients of goods.

"If you think about it, if there are 100 cargo planes, then right now what we know at a minimum is that 50 cargo planes full of much-needed, desperately needed PPE is coming to America and we have no idea where it's going," he said in mid-April of the 50-50 distribution split.

Jared Moskowitz, the director of Florida's Division of Emergency Management, said he has no way to confirm whether Project Airbridge supplies have been delivered to the state. He said it has been hard to plan his state's response without an explanation from FEMA about how the hot-spot deliveries are prioritized.

"What's confusing to us is the 50 percent that goes to the vendors," Moskowitz said. "Do the feds tell them where they want it to go? Or is it the vendor that then gets to decide which order to fill? And how is that even decided at all? Is it based on how old the order was? Is it based on price? Is it based on need? There's no visibility on any of that."

Kevin Klein, director of the Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency, also wanted answers about how supplies were being distributed when he read in news reports that FEMA would direct shipments to certain counties.
"No transparency. No communication with the states," Klein wrote on April 6 to a regional FEMA director in an email released through a public records request. "Kept us out there fighting for supplies. It may have been effective 6 weeks ago, but now? What is really going on?"

'We don't know if it is from Project Airbridge'

In recent days, Pence has highlighted Project Airbridge's deliveries to his home state of Indiana, as well as to Minnesota and Wisconsin — likely to be key states in the November election — in promotional graphics posted to his Instagram and Twitter pages.

Pence claimed that more than 1.4 million N95 masks were delivered in the three states through Airbridge. But Airbridge has brought in fewer than 800,000 masks for the entire country, according to FEMA records. FEMA released total numbers of each type of supply delivered but declined to provide details on where they were distributed.

In a statement, the Joint Information Center in Indiana said this of the figures touted by the vice president: "We cannot verify these numbers."

After Post reporters asked Pence's office about the claims, the Instagram and Twitter posts related to Indiana and Minnesota were deleted.

"It was an incorrect graphic," said Pence press secretary Katie Miller. She said the numbers included other federal relief efforts. The original postings were replaced by new graphics that said "FEMA total deliveries."

In some cases, Project Airbridge received credit for supplies obtained through other means.

In Cook County, Ill., local officials held a news conference on April 14 to celebrate the arrival of 240,000 N95 masks, some of which were stacked in boxes behind the speakers' lectern. Kevin Sligh, a deputy regional administrator for FEMA, took the microphone and credited Project Airbridge for swift action.

"Project Airbridge has ensured critical health-care supplies are getting to communities who need them the most, including here in Cook County," Sligh said, briefly describing Project Airbridge's "commercially procured" supply chain.

A Cook County spokeswoman later confirmed to The Post that the supplies were donated by the Defense Department.

Sligh later said he erred during the news conference.

"Initially we were under the impression that it was from Project Airbridge," he said in a phone interview. He said he learned in recent days that the Defense Department had donated the masks.

To locate deliveries of Airbridge supplies, Post reporters contacted governors' offices, state emergency management agencies and county officials across the country in areas with high rates of confirmed infections per capita.

In addition to the five states that confirmed Project Airbridge deliveries, New York, Louisiana and Massachusetts officials referred reporters to FEMA. Rhode Island did not respond to requests for information, and in Delaware an official said he was unsure.

"We really cannot say with certainty what, if anything, has been received with the support of this initiative," said Jeff Sands, a spokesman for the Delaware Emergency Management Agency.
In Tennessee, where an outbreak in a Bledsoe County prison made the area a top-10 hot spot nationally, a state official was unable to verify that any Project Airbridge supplies had arrived.

"I'm not saying that Tennessee and other states aren't getting shipments of PPE through Project Airbridge," said Dean Flener, a spokesman for the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency. "It's just that when we get PPE, we don't know if it's from Project Airbridge. They don't stamp, you know, 'Courtesy of Project Airbridge' on the boxes."

Reporters also sent inquiries to 25 of the largest health-care chains in the country, asking whether their facilities had purchased supplies flown through Airbridge. Most did not respond. The others said they were unaware of the initiative or simply unable to confirm how they had received their PPE.

"We are not aware of the project," said Angela Marie Dejene, a spokeswoman for Sanford Health, based in Sioux Falls, S.D., where an outbreak at a Smithfield Foods processing plant turned the area into a major hot spot.

‘Airbridge to Seabridge’

As the number of Airbridge flights rose into the dozens by mid-April, Trump said that the program had helped equip "medical warriors on the front lines."

"The Airbridge has been incredible," Trump said at a news briefing April 17.

Some Democrats in Congress, however, began to criticize the operation for its secrecy, as well its reliance during a national emergency on the six companies, which are allowed to sell half the supplies wherever they want.

"Outrageous," Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) said of the arrangement in a recent interview, calling it "the worst of all worlds."

Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.) wrote to Trump to say that Project Airbridge has given too much control to the six companies, "with no transparency."

At the end of April, Sens. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) sent letters to the six companies with questions about Project Airbridge, including requests for what they were charging for supplies transported by the project and a list of the states, municipalities, tribal governments, hospitals and others that received them.

"The American people need an explanation for how these supplies are obtained, priced, and distributed," the senators wrote. "Unfortunately, neither the administration nor your company has explained critical details, such as the content of any existing contracts or financial agreements."

The companies had yet to respond, a Warren staffer said Thursday.

As quickly as Project Airbridge took flight, the program is winding down. As of Thursday, FEMA reported only 23 more scheduled flights.

In an interview in late April, Polowczyk said the administration may transition to moving cargo by ships instead of planes. While the travel time is weeks longer, stacking containers on commercial ships allow for more-efficient transport of bulky items.

"I can see where Airbridge will transition to maybe Seabridge," the admiral said.

--Nate Jones contributed to this report

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Baltimore National Guard flies over parts of the state Friday in support of frontline and essential workers amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The flyovers, which included a formation of four A-10C Thunderbolt II aircraft, began at 1:45 p.m. at Martin State Airport near Baltimore and was set to end at 3:30 p.m.

The flyover passed over a number of Maryland communities, including Baltimore, Annapolis, Frederick and Salisbury.

Last Saturday, the U.S. Navy Blue Angels and U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds held flyovers in Baltimore and Washington, D.C. to honor health care workers.