



## **Strategic Considerations for the Post CV-19 Pandemic Period:**

### **Some Early Reflections**

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*April 2020*

The pandemic of 2019-20, which is set to enter a second phase in the winter of 2020-21, represents the most significant crisis for the West in recent decades. The strategic implications are more serious than the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 (GFC) since we know that China is doing all it can to exploit the opportunities afforded by the pandemic to accelerate its competition with the United States while, at the same time, managing a potential economic and political challenge at home. The United States is in danger of distraction into domestic issues, yet more polarisation in its politics, and a possible strong reaction against China.

In the UK, the immediate concerns have been about public health. The UK public demonstrated remarkable cohesion and resilience during the pandemic lockdown. The number of incidents of disobedience were largely as a result of good weather and complacency rather than conspiracy, which was even more astonishing given the deeply divided nature of public discourse during the debates over Brexit. Looking ahead, the public will expect to see a rejuvenated NHS. There are likely to be serious and intense discussions on how the government handled the crisis and whether its approach was the optimal one (regarding testing, border closure, timing of the lockdown, PPE and other stockpiling provision). It is easy, of course, to be wise after the event.

Certain debates are bound to resurface. One will be Scottish separatism, another will be the future of devolved government in Northern Ireland. Brexit and trade relations with other countries will be a centrepiece. Each of these debates will be targeted by Russian disinformation operations, just as we have seen a vast increase in Russian bot activity since the lockdown began in March 2020.

Government messaging during the pandemic was a point of success. The acquisition of relevant data and its processing was a significant feature, which will remain important in the coming months. The ability to trace and test the virus, to identify areas and individuals at risk so as to ensure the work force can return to work safely, and the management of data and messaging at the strategic level are all crucial. There are new domestic opportunities too in the strategic realm. One is greater automation. If there is a greater risk to the human workforce, then the UK needs to accelerate its automated manufacturing, not just for health equipment in a pandemic, but also in as many areas of the economy as possible. The UK currently lags behind South Korea, Singapore, Japan and Germany in terms of robotics and automated system per head of the work force, and far behind the US in terms of volume. This is a vital area if the UK is to find a solution to the challenge posed by larger volumes of Chinese manufacturing in the coming years.

Alongside its domestic resilience, the UK needs to consider not only its own economy, but its allies and partners, and all of its global connections. The UK has prided itself on its myriad partnerships across the world in its defence reviews of the past, so now it will be called on to honour those. This will be a critical time for the Ministry of Defence and for the Department for International Development, as much will be expected of them.

It is remarkable how Russia and China have pushed their own messaging on CV-19. Russia has engaged in its disinformation operations on expected themes but at a much greater volume than before. Once the lockdown began in the UK, the number of bot messages increased exponentially, with millions of messages delivered to undermine government messaging, polarise the public, and exaggerate class or party divisions. Russia has once again concentrated on trying to maintain cohesion within its own country while at the same time seeking to divide the Western states and gain access to European markets on favourable terms.

China's manipulation of the information environment is now known to be more than simply trying to shift blame for the CV-19 pandemic. Its messaging is aggressive, nationalistic, conspiratorial, and full of deception. It has exploited the opportunity to act as 'first mover' in any economic recovery, has misled the West on the seriousness or lethality of the virus, and now applies pressure against its critics in Vietnam, in Thailand, in the Philippines and in India, as well as in the West. This has produced an interesting reaction, the 'Milk Tea Alliance' and a concerted US reaction such as the call for 'decoupling' or dependence on Chinese supply chains. China is eager to use primarily economic levers of coercion to force the US, UK and Europe into compliance, and wants to make use of information activities to further its aims, but its approach so far has been clumsy. Nevertheless, China sees the chance to make a bid for global leadership over the US.

In the early 2010s, HMG regarded China as a potential economic partner, but it is now clear that China is not a country prepared to abide by the 'international rules-based system.' It has been hollowing out international institutions like the WHO and parts of the UN, purchasing stakes in Western companies to ensure compliance and indeed political pressure. The abysmal performance of the WHO is now a grave cause for concern, but it is only one of such institutions influenced by China. Yet herein lies another strategic opportunity, specifically, to encourage and perhaps lead a reaction to the Chinese pressure and influence. This need not be overtly hawkish, but business-like, quiet, and firm. The UK should, like the EU, seek to diversify its supply chains, reinvigorate its manufacturing base, align more closely with the US economy, and demand greater restrictions on Chinese investments, goods, student numbers, and other forms of penetration. The idea that cheap goods and easy investment from China couldn't constitute a strategic threat to the UK, either its CNI (critical National Infrastructure) or CNE (Critical National Economy), is now well and truly dead.

The West could also compete more effectively in the information space. There are a number of vulnerabilities for China, and for Russia, that could be the points for engagement and, if necessary, pressure, to obtain a better outcome internationally. In information activities it has been Russia and China that have been trying to set the narrative, with blame placed on the US for the origin of the virus (a groundless narrative that millions of Chinese and Russian citizens believe). Both countries have argued that they have led efforts in aid and relief, while Americans and Europeans have neglected the world. They argue their national governments have gained control of the virus, but the West's responses have been chaotic. None of these narratives have gained much support internationally. Information has become the strategic fulcrum in the current crisis.

Let us be clear, that in the post pandemic period, the strategic gravity will shift. For the rest of 2020 and into 2021, it will be a primarily economic contest. China will seek to get greater access and leverage to weakened Western economies. Russia too will try to use informational pressure to get higher hydrocarbon prices and access to European markets. If China and Russia succeed, the West will be strategically weakened, and, in terms of manufacturing and dependence, perhaps fatally so. Once China acquires economic leverage, it will insist on acceptance of its strategic narratives and then its political advice. It was for this reason that critics of the Huawei deal, offering 5G for the UK, were less concerned with the technical risks of access than the issue of dependence. When added to Chinese investments and perhaps control of nuclear power, infrastructure, or other parts of industry, as a whole, the threat becomes very significant indeed.

## **The Defence Contribution to UK Strategy**

In the CV-19 crisis, the Ministry of Defence has been a supporting act and a highly supportive actor. Beyond the crisis, Defence must show that it was able to (1) maintain external defences, (2) assist its allies, partners and dependencies, and (3) counter the disinformation activities of its enemies.

Defence has to show that its overseas projective reach is still dependent on its air and sea capacity, and its ability to push forward land units, properly protected and mobile with the capability to endure all conditions and deliver logistics and medical support where needed. Yet, alongside this, 'information advantage' activities are still the cheapest and the most urgent. Information activities offer the chance for the UK to mobilise its allies and reassert a strategic advantage against any malign Chinese and Russian actions and their deceptive narratives. It is likely to be proactive in countering disinformation messaging, in partnership with the private sector and other elements of the UK government. This counter activity will probably not be limited to a purely 'defensive' posture: it is likely to be engaged in depth, with acute understanding of the cultural, economic, political and social issues of Russia and China so as to compete and present the nuanced messaging that will resonate with different critical elements of those countries. It will not try to persuade entire populations – its success will be in targeting selected groups, organisations, institutions and individuals, seeking to deny their actions or to compel a choice through persuasion, dissuasion, compellence, or coercion.

Over the next few years, in the forthcoming anticipated recession, the Defence budget is going to be squeezed hard, so investments in next generation missiles, versatile personnel and platforms, and a bigger emphasis on air/space/CEMA (Cyber and Electro-Magnetic Activities) will gain more support than old industrial systems and approaches. The key words will be modernisation, x-government, information age/e-enabled, and cost-effective. The cost-effectiveness argument is detested by the armed forces, often with validity, but Russia seeks ways to make the West spend more and commit to expensive actions through probing and demonstrations. The longer it leaves the initiative to them strategically, the more expensive it will become. The same is even more true when it comes to China.

The force that the UK armed services needs today should be able to deploy globally. The armed forces will make maximum use of unmanned systems, and be lightweight, airmobile, lethal to long range, and possess a low electronic signature. If size is to be reduced (a poor option but likely to be adopted) then it will still be potent, mobile, and effective, with a regenerative capacity. As the pandemic has shown, reducing the scale of organisations without a large built-in reserve capacity is all very well when things are going well, but one is likely to need those very same critical resources at large scale in a very short time frame in an emergency. If not, those in government need to have some very good reasons for not being prepared when the greatest test comes.