Corona and Security

Ralph D. Thiele

April 2020

Summary

The corona virus has taken control of the world. Former issues hardly play a role. Health issues are at the top of the agenda. This may be a serious mistake, because "dark figures" in politics and the armed forces, the economy and society, organised crime and terrorism are in a gold-rush mood these days. Disinformation and information have gained a key role. Contact tracing apps will soon allow for global supervision by those who need to and by those who shouldn´t while there is no major public debate on such a critical issue.

About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

In the increasingly complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, which occasions both major opportunities and risks, decision-makers in the economic and political arena depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, the economy, international relations, and security/ defense. ISPSW network experts have held – in some cases for decades – executive positions and dispose over a wide range of experience in their respective fields of expertise.

ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security
Corona and Security
Ralph D. Thiele

Issue
No. 686
April 2020

Analysis

… To Control the World

Even before COVID-19 came, the world was already out of joint. The USA was vying with China for world supremacy - with surprisingly good cards for China in business and value chains, research and new technologies. Russia had fought its way back up onto the world stage and surprised the West with hybrid and military capabilities, especially in the fields of cyber and information warfare. Despite all the sanctions, Iran made the formerly overpowering U.S. presence in the Middle East forget. North Korea unashamedly expanded its nuclear potential. And then there was the migration and refugee crisis, climate and renewable energy.

Meanwhile, the corona virus has taken control of the world. Suddenly, the former issues hardly play a role in the public perception and possibly also in the minds of those in power. Health issues are at the top of the agenda. This may be a serious mistake, because "dark figures" in politics and the armed forces, the economy and society, organised crime and terrorism are in a gold-rush mood these days. Politically motivated conspiracy theories are making the rounds. Organised crime is booming. The European Union sees European companies that have been hit by the Corona crisis as a threat from Asian and other bargain hunters. Will there soon be terrorists who are infected with the virus and deliberately spread it?

Disinformation and information have gained a key role. Contact tracing apps will soon allow for global super-vision by those who need to and by those who shouldn´t while there is no major public debate on such a critical issue.

… Pressure

In Germany we are currently mobilising enormous resources to combat the virus and its consequences. Not only our health care system, but also our social and national resilience are under pressure. Obviously, we could have been better prepared. The existential threat posed by a pandemic has long been an issue of public safety, also in Germany and Europe.

The Johns Hopkins University, which provides decision-makers and the world public with the latest corona statistics on a daily basis, made presentations in Brussels, Berlin and other capitals over a decade ago to draw attention to upcoming pandemics and the need to prepare for them. In Germany, too, there have been analyses and recommendations in this regard. The Federal Government's Report on Risk Analysis in Civil Protection 2012 devotes an entire chapter and over 30 pages of recommendations that anticipate today's experience with COVID-19, a "pandemic caused by the Modi-SARS virus". One may be surprised how little these recommendations are reflected in the preparation of the German health care system for a pandemic.

After all, the corona crisis affects Germany under comparatively favourable conditions. A functioning admin-istration, stable social security systems, a robust health care system and the economically eminently important instrument of short-time work have so far reliably supported resilience in Germany. Nevertheless, new deficits and challenges are being discovered every day. The state and its citizens learn first-hand who and what is systemically relevant in a crisis.

ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security
Corona and Security
Ralph D. Thiele

Issue
No. 686
April 2020

… Disinformation

Governments and their representatives present action plans to combat COVID-19 on television and radio. The classical media give their echoes online. The alarmed population communicates via social media. Political opponents at home and abroad mix in fake news or bend narratives to fit their own radical objectives. It is not surprising that in the face of a deadly virus for which there is as yet no cure, people and societies are confused and frightened; that they become easy prey to disinformation. Human nature is seeking understandable explanations.

In the context of COVID-19, the European External Action Service evaluates disinformation activities affecting Member States and the European Union as a whole. According to the report, disinformation and misinformation around COVID-19 is increasing worldwide, with potentially harmful consequences for public health, trust in government institutions and effective crisis communication. In particular, state and state-supported actors are trying to present endangered minorities as the cause of the pandemic and to fuel mistrust in the ability of democratic institutions to deal with the pandemic effectively. Some states are trying to assert their geopolitical interests in the shadow of the pandemic.

With a clear lead in terms of time and numbers, Russia is a major actor of disinformation. Putin has had the subject of "health care" in social media for over a decade. Whole disinformation salvos spread false reports about the effect of vaccinations and the origin of AIDS, Ebola, etc. With regard to COVID-19, the EU has recorded over 150 cases of disinformation of Russian origin since 22 January 2020. Conspiracy stories such as "the virus was man-made" or "deliberately spread" are of particular interest to the target groups. RT - the former "Russia Today" - as well as Sputnik Germany are at the top of the list of disseminating media. Sputnik advertises, for example, on Facebook and Twitter for the claim that "washing your hands does not help". In contrast, the state-controlled Russian media emphasise the Russian willingness to help in the fight against the outbreak. There has been extensive coverage of Russian aid to Italy, while the Italian newspaper La Stampa has unveiled the involvement of Russian special forces in the Russian help package.

China is following in Russia's footsteps, albeit with its own unique style. State media and government representatives prefer to spread a conspiracy theory according to which the US military is responsible for importing the new corona virus to China. Chinese reporting also highlights the gratitude of European leaders for Chinese aid.

In addition, there are hate campaigns against social and ethnic groups in some African countries in connection with the pandemic. In the Middle East, Daesh encourages militants to exploit the chaos and confusion surrounding COVID-19, while presenting the pandemic as a "painful punishment" against "crusader nations". The Syrian regime uses COVID-19 to attack EU sanctions. EU member states are presented as incapable of helping each other but stealing resources from others in need. Conspiracy theories are circulating in the Western Balkans claiming that the virus is a US biological weapon or a pretext for a foreign invasion. Here, the COVID pandemic is supposed to serve the narrative that the EU "turns its back on the Western Balkans".

Moreover, there are indications that online platforms are making good money with disinformation and conspiracy theories related to COVID. Allegations that the European Union is disintegrating in the face of COVID-19 are trendy in all social media. False health advice about COVID-19 is also very common.

… Information

Governments and their decision-makers are on shaky, unchartered territory in the face of COVID 19. Decisions about the lives and deaths of thousands of people must be made - within hours - on the basis of incomplete data and delayed information. It is not only the flood of news from Germany that has to be tamed. There are also reports from Wuhan in Chinese, hospital reports from Bergamo in Italian, situation descriptions from Qom in Farsi and developments in Syria, Egypt or in various refugee camps in Arabic.

To be able to act appropriately, it is crucial to gain a very broad, comprehensive, real-time understanding of how the situation is developing. For this purpose, highly developed technical analysis tools are available today, which can access large amounts of private, economic and also governmental data from open or publicly accessible sources. One of the main sources has been text and image information from television, radio and print media for many years. However, the Internet has long been the real power source of data collection. This includes blogs, online newspapers, social networks, video streaming services, forums and other user-contributed content as well as hidden gems in the backend of websites.

The problem is to filter out the relevant data from the vast amount and complexity of available data. Data streams from the Internet have layers upon layers of nuances. Analysts filter the data streams, check facts, analyse moods and keep an eye on the context of the data. Artificial intelligence is an enormous help here, not only for analysis, but also because AI software and algorithms for processing natural languages can systematically search the Babylon of data streams of social networks and other sources to select relevant elements.

It will therefore come as no surprise that intelligence services are also involved in the fight against COVID-19. The involvement of the Israeli foreign intelligence service became public just after the head of the secret service became infected during a meeting with the Israeli health minister. This led resourceful journalists to discover that Mossad was apparently involved in the procurement of medical equipment, protective clothing and medicines by diverting supplies from their original destinations to Israel.

Apart from such actions, intelligence services can support the rulers in four areas:

- They help combat disinformation.

- They provide political decision-makers with assessments of the spread and impact of the virus. For example, the US secret service warned the Trump government of the danger of the virus spreading as early as January 2020.

- By uncovering classified information, intelligence agencies can provide policy makers with unique information about the extent to which the official infection rates reported by other governments are accurate. These secrets are particularly important for accurately assessing the real situation in autocratic regimes such as China, Russia, Iran and North Korea.

- They can also help to combat COVID-19 and other pandemics through surveillance. Autocratic regimes like China simply use these technologies without the participation of the population. China uses comprehensive mass surveillance of its citizens to ward off the virus. It uses digital IDs to monitor people's movements and also offers rewards for informing sick neighbours. Against this background, health apps are of particular interest to intelligence services of all origins.

ISPSW Strategy Series: Focus on Defense and International Security

Corona and Security

Ralph D. Thiele

Issue
No. 686
April 2020

... App Versus Virus

The German Robert Koch Institute has made available for download a corona app to help combat the corona virus. Fitness data are intended to provide more precise insights into the spread of the virus in order to better identify infection foci and the effectiveness of measures. According to a recent survey, a majority of Germans think such an app is good. However, many citizens are still concerned about potential surveillance even after the Corona crisis.

This concern is shared and justified by the GI, Gesellschaft für Informatik (Society for Information Technology). It considers the app "Corona Data Donation", which the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) has published to fight the pandemic, to be half-baked, if not even counterproductive, because the application "... does not meet the basic requirements with regard to data protection and IT security". However, precisely because digital tools are potentially helpful in reducing and tracking new infections "... they should be state-of-the-art and meet the highest standards of transparency, purpose limitation, privacy, anonymity, auditability, encryption and data economy".

Israel, has already implemented a nationwide digital surveillance program that uses spyware technology, originally developed for counter-terrorism, to track phones to map infections and notify people who may be infected. The US government has similar technological capabilities. For example, Google and Apple are working together on contact tracing software. The cooperation could soon make apps available on most smartphones in the world that inform their users whether they have been in the vicinity of possible corona infected persons. The extraordinary cooperation of the two technology companies creates a global standard. Nevertheless, the move raises concerns about possible misuse of the technology. Generally speaking, programs for collecting mass communication data - once established - are often used later in secret by intelligence and security services.

Singapore, for example, raises concerns about a centralized screening of all contacts. The "TraceTogether" app distributed there by the government is not actually supposed to collect location data, according to official information. But that is exactly what the app does, according to analyses by French security researchers. Therefore, not only the Americans should insist on supervision and transparency. So far, they have not yet begun to conduct an urgently needed public political debate on the extent to which they are prepared to have their privacy violated for the protection of public health by tracing infection contacts. Of course, such a debate is also appropriate in Germany.

... Outlook

At present, we are mainly concerned with the medical challenges of the pandemic, as well as the questions of when a life that was normal for us for decades will be possible again and how the economic consequences can be overcome. This is important. But it must not obscure the view of other important international developments.

What the world looks like after the pandemic depends on political will, leadership and the ability of international actors to work together. This cooperation has so far suffered from consumption. In contrast, the corona virus acts like a toxic accelerator for authoritarian states. Examples from China, Algeria and Russia show that with reference to COVID-19 the rights of the opposition there are even more restricted. It is possible that governments will embark on foreign policy adventures in the shadow of the crisis and in anticipation of the international community of states being unable to act. Moreover, the global pendulum in terms of the bundling of power and economic strength continues to swing in the direction of Asia.

The corona crisis will intensify rather than ease the rivalry between the USA and China. Its geopolitical impact - on the international order, interstate rivalries, conflicts and cooperation - is not yet clear. It is to be feared that the international community as a whole will initially be able to devote little energy to crisis diplomacy and conflict resolution. Governments must urgently deal with the pandemic and its economic aftermath at home. Already poor and weak states will soon slide into an economic crisis. Neither China, the US nor Russia will take the lead in inclusive multilateral efforts. This is a major challenge where the European Union, in conjunction with like-minded multilateralists around the world, could and should take the initiative.

<div align="center">***</div>

Remarks: The opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Ralph D. Thiele, born in 1953, is President of EuroDefense, Germany, Managing Director StratByrd Consulting, Germany, Chairman Political-Military Society, Germany and Member Advisory Board German Employers Association, Wiesbaden. He is a retired Colonel, held in his 40-year military career in the German Armed Forces key national and international positions. He

- Commanded troops up to the battalion level;
- Developed concepts and capability requirements in the Ministry of Defence;
- Drafted speeches and policy papers for Federal Presidents, Ministers of Defence, Major NATO Commanders and Service Chiefs;
- Drove educational innovation at the German Armed Forces Command and Staff College (Director Faculty) and at the NATO Defense College (Chief of Staff);
- Shaped the Bundeswehr's path towards network enabled capabilities (Commander Bundeswehr Transformation Command).

In his honorary and business functions he advices on Defence Innovation and Cyber issues in times of digital transformation. He has been frequently consulting, publishing and lecturing in Europe, America and Asia.

Ralph D. Thiele is also a member of the ISPSW Speaker Management Team. Further information at ISPSW website: http://www.ispsw.com/en/speaker-management/

Ralph D. Thiele