



## Geopolitics and National Defense Capabilities: a look at the emerging scenario in pandemic times

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The central and constant element in the history of the international system is the challenge of power. Despite being supported by several authors of geopolitics and realism in international relations, this statement opens the third pillar “Preserve Peace Through Strength” of the U.S. National Security Strategy, 2017. A fundamental document to understand the country’s Defense challenges and its consequences for the international order. Reviewing it, in time to fight the coronavirus pandemic, provides some clues on the trends of global geopolitics and the challenges to Brazil.

Extrapolating the biological and sanitary dimension, national responses to the coronavirus pandemic have shown the States’ numerous vulnerabilities, including world powers such as the United States. Recent episodes involving the import of vital medical equipment, such as Russian and Chinese respirators<sup>1</sup>, could be isolated cases, if not preceded by actions such as the easing of standards for attracting doctors and a qualified workforce<sup>2</sup> and, above all, by the announcement, on March 18, of the application of the Defense Production Act<sup>3</sup> to compel U.S. companies to meet emergency demands. A law dating back to the 1950s and the context of the Korean War.

The above cases manifest what the National Security Strategy itself (NSS, 2017) pointed out as threats to U.S. defense capabilities. Based on the observation that defense and productive development are inseparable dimensions, the document shows that the Armed Forces’ capacity to respond to demands is directly related to the existence of a robust and diversified national productive system. Given this, it explains:

The ability of the military to surge in response to an emergency depends on our Nation’s ability to produce needed parts and systems, healthy and secure supply chains, and a skilled U.S. workforce (NSS, 2017, p. 29).

The participation reduction in the productive sector in the composition of the North American wealth brought severe consequences. In the last two decades, the deindustrialization process has intensified. A decrease in the companies’ capacity, and their internationalized supply chains, to meet strategic

Defense requirements was identified (DoD, 2018). With the systematic weakening of the North American productive system, the demand for qualified professionals has also decreased.

To illustrate the above processes, two significant data can help. The first concerns the industrial machinery and equipment sector. Since the 1980s, it has been decreasing in the U.S., especially since the 2000s. Until 2005, China accounted for less than 15% of the global machinery and equipment consumption. In 2011, this country demanded more than 40%. With its own development strategy, China began producing domestically and, in 2015, started to lead the global machinery and equipment production. In absolute numbers it represented US\$24.5 billion, about 28% of the global total, while the U.S. accounted for only US\$4.6 billion, staying behind Japan, Germany, Italy and South Korea, for example (DoD, 2018; KALVANI, 2017; KLINE, 2017).

The second data helps think about the issue of industrial employment in the USA. If in the 1940s and 1950s, industries accounted for nearly 40% of employment, in 2017 the percentage reached only 10%. Between 1980 and 2017, the U.S. lost around 36% of its industrial workforce. Of the 7.1 million jobs lost, 5 million occurred from the 2000s (MAHONEY; HELPER, 2017). Without industry demand, the supply of qualified professionals decreased. Therefore, the National Security Strategy (NSS, 2017) includes strengthening teaching in the STEM area—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—as essential to Defense and resuming a dynamic economy.

As synthesized by Fiori (2018), the new U.S. strategy moves from aspirations for liberal globalization to focus on pragmatic realism. For this reason, the document points out that the main threats to the U.S. would be, at the forefront, the growing competition with China and Russia in the political, economic and military dimensions. This unfolds a permanent war of positions with world powers strengthened from long-term strategies, articulating power-projection with the potentialities of their national productive systems.

<sup>1</sup>Besides the huge purchases of Chinese supplies, the U.S. government struck deals with Russia to acquire respirators from Kret, a subsidiary of Rostec, a major defense conglomerate which is on the Treasury Department’s list of economic sanctions. (FT, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>“Update on Visas for Medical Professionals”, March 26, 2020. U. S. Department of State.

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/News/visas-news/update-on-h-and-j-visas-for-medical-professionals.html>

<sup>3</sup>“Here’s how the 1950 wartime law Trump just invoked to produce medical supplies Works”. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/18/politics/what-is-defense-production-act/index.html>



China and Russia have secured their interests in their immediate geopolitical surroundings, helping to undermine North American power, influence and interests. In the other strategic regions of the globe, the two global powers grow in importance, starting to influence decisions of an economic, diplomatic and security nature. Unlike other times, as in the Cold War, ideological or transcendental conceptions are not confused with the reasons that fuel this intense geopolitical dispute<sup>4</sup>. The basic premise lies in recognizing that the international order is based on competition for power between nations.

The impacts of the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S. are enormous. In early April, the country has the highest contamination rates in the world, with more than 400,000 infected and 14,000 dead (CRC, 2020)<sup>5</sup>. Besides precise international cooperation, responses to this challenge mobilize several national capacities. To the U.S. military spending—in 2019, was \$684 billion, about 40% of the global total (IISS, 2020)—will be added an incomparable amount from the Federal Reserve and White House resources to obtain technologies, workforce and medical supplies in a short term. And, in the medium and long terms, the development, maintenance and control of production

and supply chains for strategic goods and services. With the crisis, Alexandre Hamilton's legacy echoes, as well quoted in the DoD report (2018), that security will be guaranteed with the existence of a thriving manufacturing sector. The resulting technological innovations, more than a fundamental component of economic competitiveness, are treated as capabilities that provide the Armed Forces with firepower and dominions to prevail in any conflict.

For the post-pandemic scenario, geopolitics strongly conditioned by national productive systems centered on acquiring strategic autonomy is outlined. An increasingly challenging international system, in which certain characteristics of globalization will coexist—its financial, production and communication networks—with the increasing demands for national productive systems to meet Security and Defense demands. The challenges for peripheral countries like Brazil will not be few or simple. They will be the subject of a new text for this OMPV. For now, however, it is prudent to remember Nicholas Spykman's observation (1942, p. 25) that wars in the international system, although undesirable, cannot be ignored, to do so is to court disaster.

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<sup>4</sup>Perhaps history does not record a U.S. strategic document that states so clearly that "We are also realistic and understand that the American way of life cannot be imposed upon others, nor is it the inevitable culmination of progress. Together with

our allies, partners, and aspiring partners, the United States will pursue cooperation with reciprocity" (NSS, 2017, p. 4).

<sup>5</sup>Data consulted on April 8, 2020.