



## **Intelligence Studies and the Pandemic**

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**Publication date: 24 May 2020**

Hello, I am Joseph Fitsanakis, associate professor in the Intelligence and National Security Studies program at Coastal Carolina University, in the United States. I have been a member of the International Board of Advisors of the Research Institute for European and American Studies since 2012, and have been serving as deputy director of the European Intelligence Academy since 2016. For me, the most important aspect of the work of these two institutions, set up and led by Dr. John Nomikos, is their emphasis on transatlantic collaboration in the sphere of intelligence and national security. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the centrality of transatlantic collaboration in this global environment of uncertainty and ambiguity.

I have been teaching in the field of intelligence and national security for over a decade. The first college class I ever taught was called “American Government After 9/11”. It examined the monumental transformation of America’s intelligence and national security establishment in response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. Back then, most of my students had vivid and lasting memories of 9/11, and used it as a point of reference in their understanding of what national security meant in the early stages of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today, nearly two decades after these dramatic events that shaped America and the world, we find ourselves in the midst of a very different, but equally transformational, moment in history. Looking back over my academic career, it is clear to me that 9/11 altered intelligence and national security studies, and in fact generated the momentum that led to the unparalleled growth of intelligence studies and national security studies in our time. I am convinced that the coronavirus pandemic will leave an equally indelible mark on our conceptions of security and on all the activities that are undertaken by government agencies to promote and safeguard it. It will also change —*indeed* it should change— the way we explain and teach intelligence and national security to our students.

The pandemic that is currently upon us has been analyzed as a medical and as a public health crisis. It is also a crisis of security and a crisis of intelligence. But not in ways that one might think. Focusing for a moment on the American experience with the coronavirus, I think we have a duty to resist the predictable descriptions of the COVID-19 pandemic as “an intelligence disaster”. In fact, if it had been an “intelligence disaster”, COVID-19 would have amounted to an intelligence catastrophe, bigger than Pearl Harbor and 9/11 combined. But it was nothing of the sort. Despite proclamations by American government officials that “nobody saw this coming” and “it came out of nowhere”, we already know enough to assert with certainty that this was not so. In fact, numerous elements of the United States Intelligence Community have produced articulate and explicit reports about the danger of an impending —not a possible, but an impending— pandemic for over 20 years. Some of these warnings appeared in an unclassified form in the National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends* reports, or in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence’s *Worldwide Threat Assessment*. They provide stark assessments of the consequences of a respiratory virus pandemic, which describe our current predicament with remarkable accuracy.

So why were these warnings not heeded? Can we simply blame the politicians for ignoring them? Perhaps, but we also need to seek answers in the dissemination function of intelligence agencies themselves. For years we have focused our instruction on intelligence collection and analysis. There is no question that intelligence collection has been less than optimal in this case, especially since the outbreak of the virus on a global scale —for instance intelligence agencies have been unable to propose definitive answers about the actual extent of the spread of COVID-19 in China, as well as about the roots and the evolution of this disease. But, let’s face it, intelligence collection is difficult business, and its fruits are rarely —if ever— optimal. However, even in cases when both the collection and analysis of intelligence are spot-on, it is the duty of intelligence mechanisms to complete the intelligence cycle by capturing the attention of decision-makers. We must become better at that, and we must inculcate our students with the understanding that their job is not over once they produce a well-written masterpiece of intelligence analysis, with all the t’s crossed and the i’s dotted. On the contrary, the ability to draw the attention of the decision-maker — especially to what we call warning intelligence— the ability to use our limited access to those in power to alert them to the threats that they are not expecting, is a skill that is today far more important than at any other time in the recent history of the intelligence profession. The more complex the world becomes — and it is becoming more complex— the more fragile it becomes. The more fragile it becomes, the more difficult it is to defend. Defending a fragile world requires individuals and teams of committed professionals who demonstrate initiative, and that is what we must teach our students as a matter of urgency.

There are, of course, aspects of this crisis that we have seen before, in fact repeatedly. There is no question in my mind, for example, that even Chinese officials are in the dark about the roots of this virus —though of course it was not bio-weaponized. I am not at all convinced that even the highest echelons of the Communist Party of China can enlighten us as to the extent of the coronavirus’ distribution in their country. It is difficult to collect on an adversary in search of a question, when even the adversary does not have the answers you are looking for. That was also the case during the later stages of the Cold War, when Western intelligence analysts were frantically seeking to uncover the extent of the fragility of the Soviet economy —something that we are now aware even the Soviet premier did not know at the time.

Furthermore, we have the problem of speed: time efficiency is a recurring problem in intelligence work, but few crises we have ever faced have been as time-sensitive as the present one. Studies show the difference between a decision-maker acting to stop the spread of the coronavirus on Tuesday, as opposed to Friday, can be calculated literally in the tens of thousands of lives gained or lost —though, again, this is not completely new. We also have the problem of information overload. Indeed, the main problem

intelligence agencies have today with the coronavirus is not the absence of information, but rather the unprecedented volume of information, as literally every target, every open and restricted mode of information transmission, every targeted and non-targeted telephone conversation, every email or diplomatic cable exchanged around the world, focuses on the pandemic. Of course there are automated ways to prioritize this unfathomable volume of information. But these machines must be programmed by people. And the problem is, amidst this unprecedented crisis in our lifetimes, nobody truly knows what they are looking for. We are like young adolescents who find themselves at the early stages of discovering a new field of knowledge, where every piece of information is new and interesting. It takes time to learn to prioritize and sequence information, and time is clearly a value that we are currently short of.

Ultimately, however, this crisis has made even more apparent the stark contrast between the worldview of decision-makers and the worldview of the Intelligence Community in democratic nations. Our students often come to us with illusions about what the Intelligence Community is, and what it does. But I would say their greatest illusion of all is the view that, by entering the Intelligence Community, they will somehow gain physical access to an exclusive, history-making environment. Nothing could be further from the truth. Remember this: the role of the Intelligence Community is to deliver bad news to decision-makers, to limit their choice of options by reminding them of the stifling aspects of reality and to help them project into the future by preparing them for the worst possible outcomes. People instinctively dislike that —especially elected decision-makers, or officials with political aspirations, because they are by nature, as Shakespeare would say, of hopeful disposition.

As a result, not only are decision-makers not obligated to utilize intelligence products, but, the higher the stakes are in a decision, the less likely they are to do so. They would often rather gamble —go with their gut feelings— and win big, rather than play it safe and be viewed as weak or irresolute, especially by unforgiving voters. Furthermore, decision-makers who are up for re-election will constantly put a positive spin on a situation, no matter how desperate things get —unlike the Intelligence Community, which is inherently and instinctively skeptical and cautious. When decisions are made, there is no guarantee that they will prioritize the security concerns of the Intelligence Community. In fact, we must consciously prepare our students for entering a world in which they and their colleagues will be but just one group of participants in a vast universe of actors who are competing to get the attention of decision-makers. During crises of global proportions, like COVID-19, this universe of actors turns into a cacophony of sounds, as everyone is tense, frantic, incredulous, and desperately trying to salvage their political reputation. For this universe, the Intelligence Community of the United States, and possibly many other Western countries, found itself unprepared during this crisis. The results are before us.

This crisis is far from over. But we don't need to wait for it to conclude before we begin to implement its lessons as intelligence specialists. We must incorporate these lessons into our curricula, as we prepare the next generation of professionals who will have to respond to the next pandemic, or to any other crisis of similar proportions. The inherent tensions in the role of this profession within a democratic society are laying bare before us in the context of this pandemic. We have a duty to our profession, to our country, and to the world, to study them intensely, and learn the lessons that they offer us.

I am Dr. Joseph Fitsanakis. Thanks for watching.

