



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **Health Intelligence, National Security and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

by Wesley Wark  
March 2020

# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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**W**e don't usually think about linkages between public health and our national security system. The severity of the global COVID-19 pandemic may force us to change our minds. The Canadian government took important early steps in that direction once before, some 16 years ago, in the aftermath of the SARS crisis. It is time we revisited those steps and ask ourselves what was accomplished and what left undone in the national security realm in the years since.

When the government of Canada issued its first (and, as it happens, last) [national security policy](#), in April 2004, it had the SARS outbreak of 2003 fresh in mind. Then-prime minister Paul Martin's covering letter for "Securing an Open Society" noted that: "The recent SARS outbreak and the 2003 electrical blackout showed how our interconnectedness to events originating elsewhere can have a major impact on the health and economic well-being of Canadians."

The 2004 National Security Policy, long forgotten, now looks prophetic in its efforts to situate public health as a core national security requirement, to consider global pandemics as a national security threat, and to build long-term response capabilities. The policy listed global pandemics among the eight major threat vectors affecting Canada. Terrorism was at the head of the list (then); global pandemics was given the eighth spot. But at least it was on the list and the policy devoted an entire chapter to public health emergencies.

The "Public Health Emergencies" chapter indicated that the federal government was committed to treating pandemic threats differently, including by bridging divides in jurisdiction across different levels of government, building a different governance model, creating a more robust public health capacity, learning lessons from the past, and by integrating the idea of public health protection into the national security canon. The strategy contained this forceful promise: "Going forward, the Government intends to take all necessary measures to fully integrate its approach to public health emergencies with its national security agenda ... the public health dimension will figure prominently in the Government's integrated threat assessments ..."

The key question that emerges from this process of looking back, while we look into a grimmer future, is: What real change occurred after 2004?

Two important things did happen. On the governance side, the Public Health Agency of Canada was created, with a chief public health officer for Canada, and a minister appointed. The pre-existing Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response was folded into the new agency. The government also spent money, allocating \$665 million to bolster public health preparedness in Budget 2004.

Some of the promised initiatives have had difficult-to-measure impacts. The policy discussed the creation of a "Global Public Health Intelligence Network (GPHIN)." The GPHIN mission statement indicates that it is "an indispensable source of early warning for potential public health threats worldwide, including chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear." There was



also the G7-based “Global Health Security Initiative” for which Canada supplies the secretariat. The GHSI was designed “to strengthen public health preparedness and response”. Canada chaired an action group that was intended to create a network of “key officials responsible for developing and implementing concrete actions to improve global health security.” Have these bodies been fulfilling their mission statement? Are they engaged with the energy initially hoped for? It is impossible to say, given the absence of transparency about their work.

One clear indicator that the National Security Policy never achieved its promised outcomes is the story of threat assessments. The policy formalized the creation of an intelligence fusion centre initially called the Integrated Threat Assessment Centre (ITAC). ITAC is housed at CSIS. While the initial idea may have been to have ITAC do wide-ranging threat assessments, including on global pandemics, the reality was that it never had the resources, expertise or standing within the Canadian intelligence community to pull this off. The idea fizzled. The Canadian military appears to have no counterpart to the U.S. National Center for Medical Intelligence, which is part of their Defense Intelligence Agency. The Public Health Agency of Canada, the centre of scientific expertise on global pandemics in the federal government, has a small intelligence unit which gives it access to classified information. PHAC was conceptualized as a non-core member of the Canadian security and intelligence system when the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians issued its foundational study of the community in its 2018 annual report. But it is hard to know what to make exactly of PHAC’s status among the agencies of Canadian intelligence and impossible to know whether a truly integrated system, of the kind imagined in the 2004 policy, is in place. My sense is that it is not, and that true hard-wiring is missing between public health experts in government, officials in the security and intelligence system, and the decision-makers and ministers whom they advise.

A Canadian answer to deploying its security and intelligence system to help monitor pandemic outbreaks will be different from that of some states (China, Taiwan, Iran and Israel come to mind), who are using their domestic security apparatus and surveillance capacities as instruments in the fight against the spread of COVID-19. It won’t come to that here. But four key areas for Canada can be identified. First, the security and intelligence community is a source of early warning about threats, and the methodology of early warning can and should be applied to monitoring of global pandemic outbreaks. Second, the security and intelligence community contains centres and much expertise on intelligence analysis, basically making the best sense possible of a flood of information from all manner of sources about the reality of a threat. That analytical expertise needs to be brought to bear on global pandemics in combination with other governmental sources of expertise. The security and intelligence community should commit to regular monitoring and threat assessment reporting on global health emergencies – but not just emergencies, also trends. Third, our security and intelligence system possesses unique connectivity to major allied security and intelligence counterparts around the world, especially through the Five Eyes partnership (linking the intelligence communities of Canada, Britain, the United States, Australia and New Zealand). The Five Eyes is a global platform for intelligence collection and the monitoring of overseas threats. It can be a global platform for the sharing of information on the spread of global pandemics, the reality of state and regional responses, on best practices, and on efforts by adversaries to exploit pandemics to their own ends. Finally,



when global pandemics hit, the global system is thrown into turmoil. Geopolitical impacts in countries and regions around the world need to be monitored and studied.

To take advantage of all these possible contributions, Canada's security and intelligence community has to embrace a pandemic threat mission. This means not just ramping up an ability across government to deal with a crisis when it emerges – something we can do; but sustained efforts to monitor, plan and prepare between those critical incidents. We need a system in place to ensure that there is proper collaboration around collecting information, analyzing it, and providing strong reporting to decision-makers on an ongoing basis.

The review system that we have put in place to monitor the workings of our security system, especially the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians, but also the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency, needs to exercise its powers to scrutinize the community's efforts, past and present, in this field to ensure that such a pandemic threat mission is in place and functional. Senior levels of our government also need champions.

As the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board (co-sponsored by the World Health Organization and the World Bank) put it in their 2019 annual report, issued last fall: "For too long, we have allowed a cycle of panic and neglect when it comes to pandemics: we ramp up efforts when there is a serious threat, then quickly forget about them when that threat subsides."

The Canadian security system can do its part to help break that cycle by fully realizing the core idea contained in the 2004 National Security Policy – that global pandemics represent an ongoing and persistent national security threat. If we can avoid unpreparedness and delayed responses caused by a lack of warning, we will all be better off in future.

## ► About the Author

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Professor **Wesley Wark** is currently an adjunct professor at the University of Ottawa and an instructor at the Centre on Public Management and Policy, where he teaches courses on intelligence and security to government officials. He is a professor emeritus at the University of Toronto's Munk School on Global Affairs and Public Policy.

Professor Wark's most recent book is an edited volume: *Secret Intelligence: A Reader* (second edition 2019). He previously wrote a classified history of the Canadian intelligence community for the Privy Council Office. He also serves on the editorial advisory board of the journal, *Intelligence and National Security*, and is a former editor of the journal.

Professor Wark served on the Prime Minister's Advisory Council on National Security between 2005 and 2009 and on the Advisory Committee to the President of the Canada Border Services Agency between 2006 and 2010. Recently he advised the Public Safety Minister on new national security legislation and policy and has appeared on numerous occasions before House and Senate committees on national security and intelligence matters.

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