

MONITOR

SECURITY

Global Health as a Strategic Imperative

Health in the context of security and peace

Hermann Gröhe, Dr. Jürgen Meyer, Dr. Katalyn Roßmann, Einar Roßmann

- › Global health is increasingly intertwined with security, as pandemics, antimicrobial resistance, climate-driven disease spread, fragile health systems, and the potential misuse of AI to engineer biological weapons all pose serious and growing threats to global stability and resilience.
- › Development cooperation remains a moral duty, but in today's geopolitical and financial climate, both moral responsibility and enlightened self-interest are essential arguments to counter rising nationalism.
- › National security today goes beyond military strength, as weak health systems and unprepared societies are equally vulnerable, prompting organizations like WHO, the UN, and NATO to recognize health as a core pillar of security.
- › A well-prepared health system strengthens national resilience by preventing crises, supporting economic stability, and reinforcing trust in government. Countries that treat health as security are better equipped to face global threats.
- › To effectively strengthen national defense, health security must be treated as integral – through cross-sectoral policies, enhanced global surveillance, regulation of biotechnology, combating misinformation, and investing in public trust and societal resilience.

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The following texts are based on two speeches delivered during the World Health Summit 2025 in Berlin. The speeches were part of a VIP Dialogue Luncheon Discussion on the topic “Health, Security, and Peace – Global Health as a Strategic Imperative.” The speech manuscripts have been slightly modified for this text (e.g., omitting direct audience address and expressions of gratitude).



Discussion during the World Health Summit VIP Dialogue with a contribution by Prof. Dr. Axel Pries, president of the World Health Summit (Foto: World Health Summit)

Health in the context of security and peace *Welcome Remarks by Hermann Gröhe*



Hermann Gröhe during the World Health Summit VIP Dialogue (Foto: World Health Summit)

It has almost become a commonplace to emphasize that global health is far more than aid for poorer countries to which we feel morally obliged. One would think that, at the very latest since the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be clear how devastating the effects of a pandemic can be on the economy, supply chains, and thus on our own supply security. Yet the memory of this is increasingly fading outside of small expert circles.

Pandemics pose a major security risk, and the likelihood of another global pandemic occurring within the next 25 years is high. But the security policy relevance of global health goes even further. The deliberate use of artificial intelligence to create new pathogens that could be deployed as biological weapons is considered a significant security threat. The ever-expanding spread of antimicrobial resistance also poses a serious risk – not only in war and conflict zones, but increasingly beyond. Climate change is facilitating the spread of diseases and pathogens into regions that were previously unaffected. Fragile and insufficient health systems on the ground are often the cause of local or regional epidemics that might otherwise be preventable. These, in turn, can destabilize countries or entire regions. This is just a partial list of issues that illustrate the link between global health and our own security and resilience.

At the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, we are deeply committed to these connections. We want to explore the impact of health crises on international and national security, the role of security actors in global health governance, and conversely, the role global health actors should play in security policy. We aim to raise awareness and clearly demonstrate that strong engagement in global health contributes to economic strength and national security. Global Health is a strategic imperative in the current geopolitical situation.

Of course, these are not the only arguments. Development cooperation and especially assistance for the poorest remain a moral imperative. But under the current geopolitical and budgetary conditions, the arguments I've just outlined should play an important role in the needed debate. The moral imperative and an enlightened self-interest are the two pillars to fight rising nationalism.

In this context, I am always keen to highlight the pivotal role played by Tommy Thompson, then United States Secretary of Health and Human Services, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He championed the integration of public health authorities into the national security framework, with a particular focus on bioterrorism preparedness. Thompson was instrumental in initiating the Global Health Security Initiative (GHSI), recognising that health threats – whether deliberate, accidental, or naturally occurring – transcend borders. The GHSI, launched in November 2001, brought together health ministers from G7 nations, Mexico, the European Commission, and the World Health Organization to coordinate efforts against chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats. One year later, the initiative expanded its scope to include pandemic influenza, marking a significant acknowledgement of the risks posed by naturally emerging health threats. Through collaborative work in vaccine development, laboratory networking, and emergency preparedness, the initiative underscored a fundamental shift in global policy: health security is national security.

Let us reflect on how we can highlight the importance of global health beyond the "global health bubble." It is a matter of security and peacebuilding. We should strengthen this argument and carry it forward.

Health-Related Risks for National and International Security *Keynote speech by General Major Dr. Jürgen Meyer*



General Major (Medical Corps) Dr. Jürgen Meyer during his Keynote Speech at the World Health Summit VIP Dialogue (Foto: World Health Summit)

In the 21st century, security is no longer only about borders, armies, or weapons. It's also about something far more intimate – the health of our people, our societies, and our planet. We have seen it vividly: an invisible virus can ground planes, empty streets, close economies, and shake governments. COVID-19 was not just a health crisis. It was a global security crisis.

The global security situation has changed dramatically during the recent years. We talk about NATO's Eastern Flank again because of the Russian attack on Ukraine – we face drones above our European Airports and any version of hybrid warfare. We are back to political and ethical discussions about the budget for health and defence systems. And as we gather here today, it is clear that the line between public health and national security has blurred – perhaps for a long time.

The Expanding Concept of Security

Traditionally, when we talked about national security, we meant defence – soldiers, intelligence, and deterrence. But today, that picture is incomplete. The new reality is as such: A strong military posture cannot protect a weak health system. And an unprepared society is as vulnerable to a virus as it is to a missile. That's why the World Health Organization, the United Nations in more general, and also NATO now describe health as a pillar of security.

As noted in United Nation's General Assembly resolution 66/290, "human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to

the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people.” It calls for “people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people.”¹

The UN approach to human security entails seven dimensions:²

- 1.** Economic Security – unemployment, job insecurity, income inequality, inflation, underdeveloped social security and homelessness;
- 2.** Food Security – the problems of physical and economic access to food;
- 3.** Health Security – threats to life and health and inadequate access to health services;
- 4.** Environmental Security – the degradation of ecosystems, pollution of water, air and soil;
- 5.** Personal Security – physical violence, war, discrimination, domestic violence, child abuse;
- 6.** Community Security – ethnic tensions and violent conflicts;
- 7.** Political Security – state repression and violation of human rights.

Hospitals, laboratories, and disease surveillance networks are not just part of social welfare anymore. They are strategic infrastructure.

Major Health-Related Risks

Let's look at five key health-related risks that directly affect national and international security.

a) Pandemics and Infectious Diseases

COVID-19 was a wake-up call, but it will not be the last. New pathogens are emerging at a faster rate – driven by urbanization, climate change, and human encroachment on natural habitats. What once took centuries now takes months. A virus that begins in one region can reach every corner of the world in less than 24 hours. Weak surveillance in one country becomes a global threat to all. The economic cost of pandemics can dwarf military budgets – COVID-19 alone is estimated to have cost over 10 trillion dollars worldwide. And beyond the numbers, it has changed geopolitics, trade, and trust among nations.

b) Antimicrobial Resistance – the Silent Pandemic

Another, quieter threat is antimicrobial resistance – or AMR. Every time antibiotics are misused, bacteria evolve. By 2050, AMR could cause 10 million deaths every year – more than cancer. Think about that: surgeries could become deadly, routine infections untreatable, and intensive care medicine impossible. If we lose the ability to treat infections, health systems will collapse – and with them, public confidence, social order, and economic stability. Hospitals, in that scenario, would be like battlefields – but without bullets.

c) Bioterrorism and Dual-Use Biotechnology

Then, there is the risk of bioterrorism – and the darker side of biotechnology. Tools allowing scientists to edit genes, design vaccines, and grow organs / are in place. But in the wrong hands, the same tools could be used to engineer dangerous pathogens – and no more high complex research institute infrastructure is needed anymore. There are hackathons for the invention of new protein structures as dual use. We are now in an age where biology is programmable – and that

means oversight, ethics, and international cooperation must keep pace with innovation. Balancing progress and protection will define our biosecurity future.

d) Climate Change and Environmental Health

Health security is also linked to climate security. As temperatures rise, mosquitoes carrying malaria, dengue, and Zika or Chikungunya are spreading to new regions – including Europe and North America. Floods and droughts are destroying water and sanitation systems, leading to outbreaks of cholera and other diseases. And food insecurity is pushing millions across borders – creating humanitarian and political instability. Food and drinking water production as well as transportation routes and pipelines are a sabotage target – another area of hybrid warfare and destabilizing societies. When the environment suffers, human health follows. And when health collapses, security is endangered.

e) Mental Health and Social Cohesion

Finally – an often-overlooked dimension: mental health. After years of pandemic isolation, disinformation, and economic uncertainty, we are seeing rising anxiety, depression, and social polarization. The communication behaviour under “Social Media” has changed especially in younger generations and become a target for influencing and even hybrid warfare. Mental health affects resilience – our ability to adapt, to trust, to act collectively. When trust erodes, societies become more vulnerable – not only to disease, but to division, extremism, and manipulation. A healthy mind – on the individual level – is, in many ways, the foundation of a healthy democracy. On the population level a vivid social interaction, e.g. voluntary work, is a proxy for a healthy democracy as well. Psychosocial as well as socio-cultural aspects have to be taken into account.

Health as a Strategic Investment

So, what does this mean for national and international policy? It means that investing in health is not charity. It's strategy.

A well-prepared health system is a national deterrent. It prevents crises, stabilizes economies, and sustains confidence in government. Countries that treat health as security – by strengthening early warning systems, investing in vaccine manufacturing, and sharing data transparently – are far better positioned to respond to global threats. International cooperation is critical as well as a functional civil-military coherence on national as well as international level.

The WHO Pandemic Accord seeks to ensure that when the next outbreak occurs, data and countermeasures are shared rapidly. Meanwhile, the NATO is beginning to link epidemiology with defence planning – recognizing that a pandemic can threaten stability as much as an armed conflict. Health diplomacy – once seen as “soft power” – is now a strategic power.

Call to Action

So where do we go from here?

We must:

1. Treat health security as integral to national defence – as the WHO always emphasizes “Health in all Policies”.
2. Strengthen global surveillance and early warning systems – combined Public Health (we would say Force Health Protection for and in the military environment).

3. Regulate biotechnology and combat misinformation.
4. And invest not only in hospitals and labs – but in public trust and mental as well as social resilience. Our failures are most often in communications.

Because no amount of technology can replace the value of trust between governments, institutions, and citizens. The backbone of our resilience lies in our societies – in the same amount as security agencies, forces or economy.

In a world where a virus can cross borders faster than diplomacy, protecting health is protecting peace. Our security – national, regional, and global – will depend not just on the strength of our defences and economies, but on the health of our people and the resilience of our societies.

¹ <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/what-is-human-security/>

² <https://humansecuritycourse.info/module-1-the-concept-of-human-security/un-approach/>

Imprint

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