Critical Connection: COVID-19 Pandemic and National Security
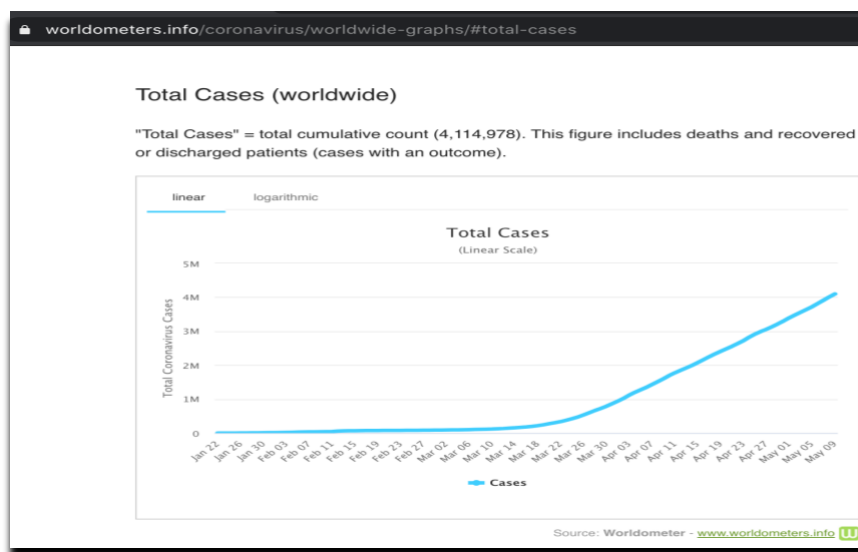
Rajat Kumar Kujur

May 11, 2020

Pandemics brings immense human suffering, disrupts the socio-economic fabrics of society and impedes development across the affected geographical region. As Novel Coronavirus or COVID-19 reaches over 200 countries infecting millions of people and killing scores of them, it is imperative to examine the threat not just from health or medical point of view but from a larger perspective of national security. It is important that the nations wake up to this reality and any failure to restrict and mitigate the challenge at this stage will have a long term impact on international peace, stability and security. The paper attempts to examine the emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases (ERIDs), and their enormous security challenges to national security which would remain a central theme of any future security discourse hereafter.

SSPC

Introduction

Pandemics are a centuries-old phenomenon which has often changed the course of history. In addition to human suffering, pandemics create panic, disrupt the social and economic structure, and can impede development in the affected communities. The past experiences show that the pandemics not only destroy immune systems but also undermine the social, economic and political systems that underpin entire nations and regions. There has been considerable debate regarding the linkage between the pandemic and the national security. Some academics and political theorists have been making a forceful plea to dismiss both the importance and validity of discerning links between the pandemic and the security of states. It has been argued that there is no evidence to determine the fact that the presence of the virus in any given society is directly responsible for an event that jeopardized the stability, capacity, or viability of the state. What they fail to understand is by the time such evidence is apparent, it may be too late to protect the state. As Coronavirus or the COVID-19 reaches over 200 countries infecting millions of people and killing over 250, 000 (and counting), it is time to examine the threat not just from health or medical point of view but from a larger perspective of national security. It is important to clarify the security dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic because the actions taken to confront the disease as matters of domestic policy may differ markedly from those taken to address the threats to national security. To be more specific, treating Corona as a national security issue would make the battle against it more organized. If we continue to neglect this aspect of Covid-19, there is a serious danger that we end up with mistaken national and international policies that do more harm than good.

[*Graph-1: Worldometers, Total COVID-19 Cases worldwide, Data until May 09, 2020*]

Pandemic and National Security

Traditionally speaking, national security has been narrowly defined as protecting the state from physical threats. However, the last five decades have witnessed a sharp increase in more non-traditional threats, such as terrorism, left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism, drugs trafficking, human trafficking, migration, ethnic cleansing, and disease. Emerging and re-emerging diseases, and their pandemic potential, pose a challenge to national security in the 21st century that cannot be ignored. The growing COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of HIV/AIDS, Influenza H1N1 and SARS in recent past are just a few examples of diseases that can profoundly threaten the physical integrity of a state.

A discussion on the connection between pandemics and security must begin with a clarification that whose security is at stake. In the pandemic outbreak with the severity of the COVID-19, many believe that the security of highly afflicted states is only at stake. However, the pandemic poses not only a greater level of severity in its threat to the highly afflicted states, but also substantially endangers the security of the less affected states. Globally speaking, the pandemic presents a range of challenges to the integrity of a state and may best be tackled by various states through different institutions, diplomatic instruments, economic schemes, and public health strategies. The inevitable connection of pandemics and security was best explained by the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who while speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations on December 16, 2004, emphasized on the increasing need of "collective security" and "biological security."[1] Looking at the contemporary international scenario, national security needs to be redefined as conventional war is no longer the primary physical threat to a state; rather, the focus must shift to include threats from the disease that challenge the interests of states both internally as well as externally.

The national security of a state can be threatened by a pandemic in different ways. First, it can cause increased rates of illness and mortality putting huge strains on public health and the nation's workforce, leading to political instability, class strife, and economic recession. For example, HIV/AIDS has led to numerous problems in many African countries. In an extreme example of that recognition, the then President of Botswana Festus Mogae, in his address to the Economic Commission on Africa, in December 2000 stated that, "the impact of HIV/AIDS on the population, the economy, and the very fabric of our society undermines not only development,

---

[1] Laurie Garrett, "HIV and the National Security: Where Are the Links", *Council on Foreign Relations*, New York, 2005, pp. 13.

but poses a serious threat to our security and life as we know it."[2] Secondly, the most direct threat posed by a pandemic to the international community arises from its vulnerability to biological warfare. It is important to note that the result of a naturally spreading disease and something like bioterrorism is one and the same. The failure to prevent the biological weapons' attack results in the same outcome – infection of the population – and requires the same solution. The preparation for the widespread disease should, therefore, be a key focus of national security.[3] Thirdly, the pandemics pose more indirect threats to national security which include "the health of the armed forces and most significantly, to the social, economic, and political stability of certain key regions."[4]

Coronavirus and the Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theories often accompany major world events and disasters. Such a theory can be explained as an attempt to explain harmful or tragic events as a result of the actions of a small, powerful group. The outbreak and spread of COVID-19 pandemic have also given rise to a number of conspiracy theories which critically threatens the long term prospects of international peace and security**.** What started as an epidemic in China in December 2019 has now grown into a truly global pandemic often compared with a world war. Quite alarmingly, it is giving rise to xenophobia adding more confusion to an already uncertain situation. As the COVID-19 spread continues to create havoc across the world, conspiracy theories are inflicting more damage to the security of nations and people.

On their part, US President Donald Trump and senior members of his administration never miss an opportunity to brand the outbreak as the result of a "Chinese virus" as they gradient up accusations that Beijing failed to identify, stop or warn about the virus early on. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, along with other Trump allies like incoming Chief of Staff Mark Meadows and Arkansas Republican Senator Tom Cotton, have also attempted to reinforce the idea that the virus originated in China by publicly referring to it as the "Wuhan virus" or "China virus." The President himself was spotted recently by a photographer while changing the word "Corona" to "Chinese" in his prepared remarks.[5]

---

[2] Ibid.

[3] Jane Evans, "Pandemics and National Security", *Global Security Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 3.

[4] Susan Peterson, *"Epidemic Disease and National Security." Security Studies*, Vol.12, Issue 2, 2002, pp. 43-81.

[5] Zachary Cohen, Alex Marquardt, and Kylie Atwood, "Blame Game Escalates Between US and China Over Coronavirus Disinformation", *CNN News*, March 24, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/24/politics/us-china-coronavirus-disinformation-campaign/index.html

As Coronavirus cases decline in China, and explode across the rest of the world, the allegation of creating and spreading the virus by the US' military has come from Chinese medical leaders, Ambassadors and Foreign Ministry spokespersons along with hundreds of thousands of comments on Chinese social media builds up the Chinese version of conspiracy theory. A spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian, on March 12, 2020, took on to twitter to state that 'it might be the US' army' that brought the Coronavirus to China. This statement provided an official boost to a conspiracy theory which suggested that the contingent of 300 athletes belonging to US' army who visited Wuhan in October 2019 to attend the 7th Military World Games were infected with the virus and thereby spreading it to China.[6]
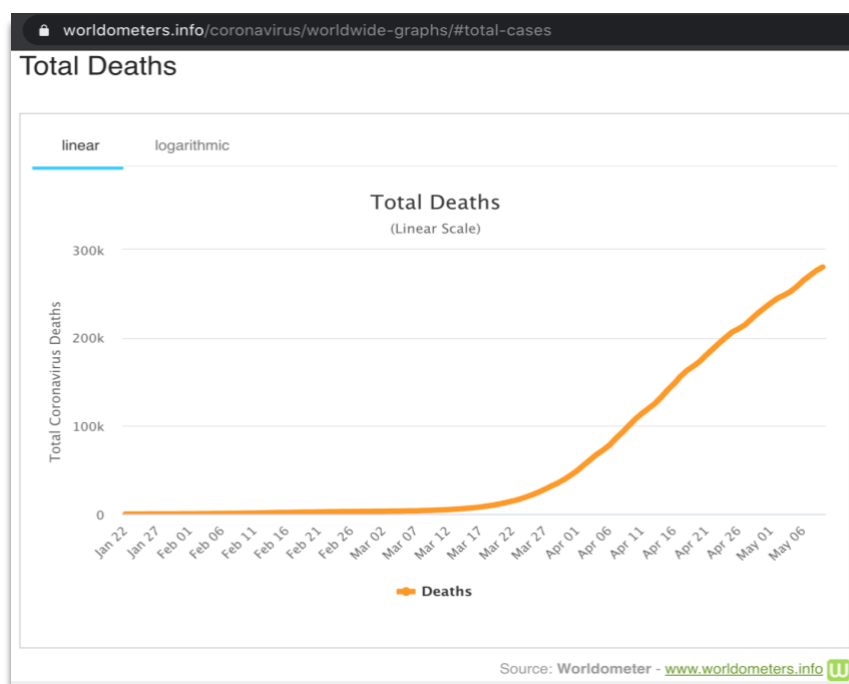
Adding more woos to the battle against Coronavirus, the US and Iran are now engaged in bitter blame game accusing each other of the spread of the virus. As thousands of people continue to die and with an ever-increasing number of people getting infected each day, Iran blames Coronavirus outbreak on a 'US biological attack'. General Hossein Salami, head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, in a recent statement stated that, "It is possible that this virus is a product of a biological attack by America which initially spread to China and then to Iran and the rest of the world. America should have known that this virus will return if it was behind it."[7] On the other hand, the US considers Iran responsible for the spread of the deadly virus. The US holds Iran to be an epicenter of this virus outbreak and make it very clear that there will be no relief on sanctions through a fresh decision to blacklist five companies based in the United Arab Emirates, three in mainland China, three in Hong Kong and one in South Africa for trade in Iran's petrochemicals. Justifying the US' action, Brian Hook, the US Special Representative for Iranian Affairs in a recent statement stated that "Iran spends billions on terrorism and foreign wars and that if it spent one-tenth of this on a better health care system, the Iranian people would have been much better off."[8]

---

[6] Jane Li, "A Conspiracy Theory Linking US Army to the Corona Virus Now Has an Official Endorsement", *Quartz*, March 13, 2020, https://qz.com/1817736/china-fuels-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-blaming-us-army/

[7] Felix Alen, "Bio War: Iran blames coronavirus outbreak on a 'US biological attack' as death toll jumps to 107 and it locks down cities', March 5, 2020. https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11106235/iran-blames-coronavirus-outbreak-us-biological-attack-death-toll-lockdown-cities/

[8] Arshad Mohammed, Daphne Psaledakis and Parisa Hafezi, "U.S. To Iran: Coronavirus Won't Save You from Sanctions," *Reuters*, March 20, 2020. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-iran-usa/us-to-iran-coronavirus-wont-save-you-from-sanctions-idUSKBN21712L

Impacts of the conspiracy theories have already begun to intensify the tensions between nations across the world. South Korea, with a rapidly deteriorating situation, witnesses a proliferation of anti-Chinese sentiment. In Japan too, public hostility against China is on the rise although Japan so far has avoided putting the blame on China for the outbreak of the virus. With Iran being one of the worst affected states, conspiracy theories too are having their damaging impact in the Middle East. While countries like Iraq, Syria, Palestine consider the US to be behind the Corona spread, Saudi Arabia holds Iran responsible for recklessly allowing the disease to spread. With a major outbreak of the virus confirmed in Europe, there is a danger that the spread of conspiracy theories might widen existing rifts among the countries of the continent (the struggle between the radical right and the socialist left, the refugee crisis) and even weaken the very basis of the European Union and its institutions. On the other hand, Asian Americans, and particularly Chinese Americans, are now facing an increase in racism and discrimination due to the Coronavirus, in different parts of the world. It is no more a Chinese virus but COVID-19 has now become an American virus, an Italian virus, and a Spanish virus too. The pandemic experience like HIV/AIDS reveals that conspiracy theories about manmade viruses are not new. Unfortunately but in this global crisis of Corona, conspiracy theories can be very harmful as it can interfere with the international relations and increase hostility towards those who are perceived to be conspiring. The states need to awaken to this aspect of Coronavirus and take steps to stop conspiracy theories relating to the virus getting out of hand.

[**Graph-2: Worldometers, Total COVID-19 Deaths worldwide, Data until May 06, 2020**]

Coronavirus and Human Security

It was in 1994 that the United Nations Development Programme for the first time used the term human security significantly but the term did not get much attention during then.[9] However, with the spread of deadly Coronavirus, human security makes a comeback as a policy alternative. Broadly speaking, the human security refers to 'all those threats to survival that are not military or state-sponsored, and therefore tend to fall beneath the radar of those who imagine security in a conventionally hard term.'[10] The scope of human security could be expanded to include not only traditional, political and military security but also economic, educational, food and health security among others. On the economic front, the Corona pandemic has plunged the world economy into a recession with the potential of deep consequences and historical levels of unemployment and deprivation. According to one recent estimate by the International Labour Organization (ILO), as many as 25 million people could become unemployed, with a loss of workers' income of as much as US $3.4 trillion. However, it is already becoming clear that these numbers may underestimate the magnitude of the impact.[11] The economic impact of the Pandemic is further aggravated with the halting of the manufacturing units and the falling of commodity prices. As education constitutes a major component of human security, the closure of the education sector due to the spread of Coronavirus is adversely affecting the children and young people. It is disrupting the process of learning and human interaction which is essential to social and behavioral growth. Many countries also face the danger of an increase in child labor and child marriage due to sustained disruption of education. In addition, this also seriously hinders the supply of nutrition to the school children. "This pandemic is having a devastating effect on school children around the world, particularly in developing countries," says Carmen Burbano, director of school feeding at World Food Programme. "For children from vulnerable households whose only proper meal is the one they get at school, this turn of events is calamitous."[12] Similarly, health security is inextricably linked to national and human security. It denotes the protection of national populations from

---

[9] "Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security", *UNDP*, 1994. http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-1994.

[10] Dennis Altman, "Human Security during COVID – 19 Crisis", La Trobe University, March 20, 2020. https://www.latrobe.edu.au/news/articles/2020/opinion/human-security-during-covid-19-crisis.

[11] Guy Ryder, "COVID-19 has exposed the fragility of our economies"*, International Labour Organisation,* March 27, 2020. https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_739961/lang--en/index.htm

[12] "World Food Programme gears up to support children left without meals due to COVID-19 school closures", *World Food Programme*, March 20, 2020. Accessible at, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/world-food-programme-gears-support-children-left-without-meals-due-covid-19-school

global pandemic threats. In the absence of specific anti-viral therapy, Coronavirus has seriously damaged the prospects of global health security. Despite apparent decisive actions by the governments, it is evident that it has affected people from all over the world -- rich as well as poor countries. The Global Health Security (GHS) Index 2019 reveals that national health security is fundamentally weak around the world and no country is fully prepared for epidemics or pandemics, and every country has important gaps to address. 'There is little evidence that most countries have tested important health security capacities or shown that they would be functional in a crisis.'[13] Unfortunately, the vengeance of Coronavirus is just proving to be more than correct. The food security, another important component of human security, is also seriously threatened because of the global pandemic of COVID-19. The full impact of the virus on food security is yet to be known fully, as the spread of the virus continues to evolve differently by a continent and by a country. But one thing is clear that it will have, and is already having, significant negative effects on people along the food supply chain involving producers to processors, marketers, transporters and consumers. According to the UN World Food Programme, the Coronavirus pandemic is projected to raise the number of people suffering from acute hunger this year to 265 million.[14]

Coronavirus and Migration

A worldwide surge in Coronavirus cases has raised concerns. The outbreak could be particularly devastating for vulnerable refugee and migrant populations in countries hobbled by conflict. Amidst the hour of crisis, the issue of migration and refugee poses a serious security threat to the affected countries. This is because of the fact that refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) often don't have fixed places to live, and authorities might not know how to contact them or have the capacity to coordinate a response. The international community so far has responded in two distinct manners to the problem of migration and Coronavirus. Both the responses, however, bear a strong concern for national security.

The first response to the contentious issue of migration and Coronavirus forms a more humanitarian approach. Given the condition in which the refugees live in the camps of Syria, Myanmar – Bangladesh border, it would really be disastrous if the Coronavirus reaches there. Dr. Adam Coutts, a public health specialist at Cambridge University who focuses on the Middle East said refugees are especially vulnerable to the Coronavirus or other diseases, due to "high

---

[13] 2019 Global Health Security Index, https://www.ghsindex.org/

[14] "Kretchmer Harry, Coronavirus could trigger a Hunger Pandemic", World Economic Forum, April 23, 2020, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-coronavirus-could-double-acute-hunger-un-warns/

geographical mobility, instability, living in overcrowded conditions, lack of sanitation and WASH (waters, sanitation and hygiene) facilities, and lack of access to decent healthcare or vaccination programmes in host communities".[15] This human rights approach critically comes within the broad framework of national security as human rights and human security are inseparable components of national security.

On the other hand, the issue has taken a more ominous turn in Europe, where right-wing populists are renewing calls to crack down on immigration, even making unsubstantiated claims that migrants from Africa brought the virus to the continent. Earlier the enemy was the migrant. Now the enemy is the migrant carrying the Coronavirus.[16] Such populist claim in Europe is reminiscent of the aftermath of terror attacks on European cities. Whether such a claim can be established or not is something remains to be seen, but such a claim is bound to have an adverse impact on the international relations of which national security is the most crucial component.

The migration amidst the present pandemic in India poses an altogether different security challenge. In a televised address to the nation on March 24, Prime Minister Modi urged all Indians to stay at home for three weeks to contain the spread of the novel Coronavirus. The short, four-hour notice for the shutdown, effectively trapped the country's 470 million migrant workers in no man's land which resulted with thousands and thousands of migrant workers in Delhi embarking on a long arduous journey towards their villages in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and other states.[17] Not only Delhi but states like Kerala and Maharashtra receives thousands of migrant laborers from the poorer states of northern and eastern India. Amidst the announcement of lockdown, thousands of people have returned in past weeks to their native places in the states of Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. Many of them were not paid their dues and will also not earn anything for the next few months; this causes enormous danger to ensure food security. Incidentally, most of the homebound migrant laborers belong to the Maoist infested regions of the country and the possibility of Maoists taking advantage of such extra-ordinary situation cannot

---

14. Eric Reidy, "How the coronavirus outbreak could hit refugees and migrants*", The New Humanitarian,* February 27, 2020. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/02/27/Coronavirus-Iran-refugees-IDPs-Italy-Europe-disease.

16 Alexander Smith, "Coronavirus used by European populist right to challenge E.U. open borders*", NBC News,* March 07, 2020. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/coronavirus-used-european-populist-right-challenge-e-u-open-borders-n1149491

17 Manavi Kapur, "In Locked Down India, Poor Migrants are on a Long March Back Home," *Quartz,* March 27, 2020. https://qz.com/india/1826384/indias-coronavirus-lockdown-has-triggered-mass-migration-on-foot/

be ruled out. The situation is gradually becoming so uncontrolled that it could lead to community transmission and nobody wants that. Taking cognizance of the alarming situation, the Supreme Court had to say that 'fear' and 'panic' over the Covid-19 virus outbreak is a bigger threat than the pandemic itself.[18]

COVID-19: Violent Extremism

One of the disturbing features of the ongoing Corona crisis is the emerging pattern of relationship between actors of political violence and the pandemic. The Department of Homeland Security in the US has recently sent a letter to law enforcement officials warning that terrorists may try to seek advantage of the Coronavirus pandemic by carrying out attacks. "Violent extremists probably are seeking to exploit public fears associated with the spread of COVID-19 to incite violence, intimidate targets and promote their ideologies, and we assess these efforts will intensify in the coming months."[19] Of course, there is no concrete evidence of the terrorist groups putting up some exclusive terror plan and the threat is still hypothetical yet it is hard to deny that social distancing might raise the risk of homegrown radicalization, as isolated people with loads of free time can be brainwashed via the disinformation onslaught online.

Cyber terrorism has grown into a major security threat in this era of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). As the Coronavirus spreads across the world, cybercrimes have recorded an alarming rise in recent months. As most of the COVID-19 affected countries have declared a prolonged lockdown, people are getting unlimited time to spend online. Cybercriminals are taking advantage of the situation and already started new techniques to inflict more damages to states and the people. More and more hospitals, research hubs and medical centers are being targeted for information, intelligence, and system accessibility. Although the aim of these attacks is unclear, there is a possibility that cybercriminals could be looking for the information about cures, tests or vaccines relating to the Coronavirus to sell in the black market, encrypt sensitive data and hold it for ransom, or simply disrupt the operability of the institution. Earlier this March, Brno University Hospital in the Czech Republic - which is a major COVID-19 testing hub - suffered an attack that disrupted the functioning of the institution and caused surgery

---

[18] Samanwaya Routray, "SC says 'fear', 'panic' bigger problem than Covid-19", *Economic Times*, March 31, 2020. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/coronavirus-supreme-court-seeks-status-report-from-centre-on-steps-taken-to-prevent-migration-of-workers/articleshow/74885965.cms

[19] Alexander Mallin and Margolin Josh, "Homeland Security warns terrorists may exploit COVID-19 pandemic," *ABC News*, March 24, 2020. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/homeland-security-warns-terrorists-exploit-covid-19-pandemic/story?id=69770582

postponements. Likewise, a hacker group attacked the computer systems of the UK's Hammersmith Medicines Research (HMR), which is performing trails on COVID-19 vaccines; publishing personal data of thousands of former patients after the company failed to pay the extortion demand.[20] The World Health Organization (WHO) recently warned about suspicious email messages attempting to take advantage of the COVID-19 emergency by stealing money and sensitive information from the public.[21]

COVID-19 brings in more challenges for the Left-Wing or Right-Wing infested countries. For example, India, where the Maoist Movement is considered to be the greatest internal security problem faces the daunting task of tackling two invisible enemies (the Coronavirus and the Maoist insurgents) simultaneously. Recently on March 21, 2020, at least 17 security personnel were killed by the CPI (Maoist) in Chhattisgarh. The attack came at a time when people of this country irrespective of political, social, and religious differences have come together to deal with Corona threat. Although there is no exact information indicating any active plotting, CPI (Maoist) is probably seeking to exploit public fears associated with the spread of COVID-19 to incite violence, eliminate targets and promote their ideologies.[22]

Conclusion

Pandemics have historically threatened and impacted both national and international security and COVID-19 has already emerged as a major national security threat, both externally and internally. It is important that the countries wake up to this reality soon and any failure to manage and mitigate at this stage will have a long term impact on international peace, stability and security. As the Coronavirus pandemic escalates, the task of rethinking the political, economic, diplomatic and strategic fundamentals of a more coherent approach to the national security becomes more urgent than ever. As the battle against COVID-19 is seemingly uncertain, one thing is clear that it is going to alter a whole lot of ethos of national security. Other than anything, this pandemic has raised some serious question mark over the relevance of power notions of global politics like super-power and globalization. There are reasons to believe that a distinct fall out of the ongoing crisis could be, maybe short term, nations withdrawing into themselves while following an isolationist

---

[20] Nicholas Sanchez, "Cyber Crime rises during Coronavirus Pandemic", EU *Observer*, March 25, 2020. https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/147869

[21] WHO Report, "Beware of criminals pretending to be WHO", Available at https://www.who.int/about/communications/cyber-security

[22] Ritesh Mishra, "Maoists kill 17 security personnel in Chhattisgarh in bloodiest hit since 2017"*, Hindustan Times*, March 22, 2020. https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/17-bodies-of-security-forces-recovered-by-rescue-team-in-chhattisgarh-s-sukma/story-uSFUMFQPRbXqkkJPqkk9SO.html

policy. Also, there exists a formidable danger that radical elements (such as extreme right-wing movements, left-wing extremist groups, terror organizations, and autocratic regimes) could exploit such a situation in their favour. Undoubtedly, the Coronavirus pandemic is posing the greatest challenge for humanity in the 21st century. At the same time, it also offers an opportunity for cease-fires between combatants, for peace between enemies, for cooperation across and within borders, and for building trust where there may be none. Amidst such growing uncertainties caused by the metamorphic rise and spread of COVID-19, national security, international politics and economic preferences, need to adapt holistically to the emerging landscape of complex security threats.

Dr RAJAT KUMAR KUJUR (PhD), Assistant Professor, Sambalpur University, Odisha.

The views expressed in this article are solely that of the author.