

Opinion – Non-Military Threats and the Limits of National Security

Written by Talha Ibrahim

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TALHA IBRAHIM, MAY 18 2020

Covid-19 has ushered in the latest wave of transformation in the policy and scholarly agendas of national security. The chapter of 9/11 is over, as the priorities have shifted from terror groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS to other threats, such as economic collapse, pandemics and, the degradation of nature. Earlier, the espionage systems used to trace terrorists are now being deployed by the governments to combat Covid-19. The pandemic is being grounded in the turning points in the last century; the world wars, cold war, and war on terror, to rethink the latest conception of security. Yet, the national security contraction for the world that follows will remain rooted in traditional notions and stay deeply problematic. The reification of national power as a symbol of security works adequately where the threats could be visualised. It is easier to organise military force and other hard power resources where the antagonism is with a visible, declared foe; a revisionist state such as India or militant groups like Islamic State or Al-Qaeda. These responses are hardwired in the way national security was historically conceived and practised by the states, where military dimensions are favoured over non-military dimensions. In this situation, Richard Ullman contends, 'the [security as a] public good is much more easily defined' and 'interests are more easily co-opted or, failing that, overridden.'

The appearance of Covid-19 and the response to it have revealed that the security landscape is not equipped to absorb rising threats. It can be specified by viewing the security conundrum arising out of pandemic through two interlinked ideas; the actors that need to be secured, and the qualities or values of the actors under threat. The mixed response to the pandemic from the state and people – the principal actors – makes it evident that the political will to deal with the situation as a security problem is not as effective as it seems. A key finding of a Covid-19 attitudinal survey published at the end of March projected that 43% of Pakistanis did not feel threatened to take any precautionary measures. The international poll on public perception towards Covid-19 risks showed that the people were unconcerned about the spread of infectious disease in their own countries, but were more likely to view it as a global threat. The inability of referent actor to see invisible and abstract threats as a broader agenda of a security paradigm has been conditioned by the long-established military character of traditional security.

The idea of referent actor is coupled with the values that need protection from threats. In the case of Covid-19, the core values that require to be secured are health safety and economic well-being. Although there is a consensus that winning the Covid-19 crisis would entail lessening of fatalities and financial losses, there is a lack of clarity about the value that should take precedence. This disparity is acutely visible in the developing countries that are combatting with poverty and hunger. However, nowhere is it more apparent than in Pakistan, where the joint civil-military body responsible for directing the effort against pandemic tried to figure out the value that should rank foremost in the consideration. This shows that the existing formulation of national security is woefully incapable of dealing with the diverse sources of the threat, as it cannot forge a consensus on referent actors and the values to be protected.

However, what if the state resorts to security framing to take action on issues that traditionally do not fall under the ambit of national security. Nathan Alexander Sears contends that the global response to pandemic epitomises the act of securitisation as it contains referent actor, threat, securitising actor, and emergency measures. The specific rhetorical structure employed against the epidemic has elevated it to the level of existential risk and raised the issue from 'normal politics' to 'panic politics.' On May 7, President Donald Trump compared Covid-19 with Pearl Harbour

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and the September 11 attacks. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address on May 12 used world war analogy to describe his country's response towards coronavirus. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the speech act has neither produced a substantive change in the behaviour of referent actors who need protection nor instilled an understanding of the values that have to be protected. Ido Oren affirmed this belief on twitter, 'for a threat to be securitised, an audience must accept it as such. It is not enough for someone to characterise the danger as a threat.'

The enlargement of the scope of security comes with its own set of problems in a national security system that has been theorised and practised in an orthodox manner. To illustrate, when progressive issues such as pandemics, population growth, and climate change start becoming a part of normative security discourse, and the polity becomes more responsive, the state loses its 'authoritative determination'. This whole-of-society approach augments the confusion during the time of crises that don't bode well for the national security agendas of countries having rigid outlook. The unsettled political debates on an effective response to crisis create an incentive for the state to step in and steer the course. It becomes a vicious cycle as broadening of security discourse to make it more progressive and holistic ends up strengthening the rigidity of the national security structure itself.

In conclusion, even if the Covid-19 has changed a shift in the attitude of how national security should not be viewed in a military-centric manner, the traditional imaginaries of security defy any attempt to make the paradigm all-encompassing. The conception of national security system is gravely flawed and attempts to broaden the discourse, as Stephen M. Walt outlines, 'destroy its intellectual coherence.' As new ways of thinking are emerging across the generational divide, we should be mindful that the broadening of the concept of security has no merit and governance issues should not be 'securitised' for the state to respond adequately.

About the author:

Talha Ibrahim is the Director Academics at the Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research (CSCR). His research focuses on technology, security, and politics. He can be found on Twitter.