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Revitalizing the Eschewed Nexus: Pandemics, Public Health and National Security

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ABSTRACT

The history of human race holds copious stories of outbreak of pandemics and infectious diseases. The impacts of diseases, strategies and responses and the way forward in post pandemic era grabbing the attention of scholarly community across different disciplines is not new too. Unsurprisingly, amid recent wave of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), public health and health security are the buzz words in leaders' speeches, the media and scholarship. Despite the growing appreciation of plethora of threats posed by pandemics in a highly globalized and interdependent world, the concept of national security, pertaining to its scope and meaning, is wanting in precision. The paper makes a case for the need to appreciate health-national security interactions in intellectual and policy-making world by drawing upon two major arguments; firstly, health is an essential stabilizing factor for state that overlaps and interacts with military, economic and traditional components of security and secondly, state stands out for being the most effective governance structure to prevent diseases and to carry out an effective response to health crisis. Generation of narratives and lexicons, therefore, need not to be completely outside the master's house of traditional IR thinking to fully comprehend the nature and sources of insecurity. The paper concludes that an intellectual pathway responsive and accommodative to these interconnected and overlapping sources of (in)securities is needed to guide policy makers to ensure the security of nations in a changing world.

Keywords: *Pandemics, Public Health, National Security, Security Studies, State Response*

Health security and national security beyond dichotomization: An Introduction

Pandemic has always remained a matter of time rather than possibility. With failing governments and increasing deaths, it is evident that the states could have performed better to ensure health of individuals. Due to lack of key capabilities and minimal preparation, states responded to the situation feebly when the immediate and decisive action was required.

As COVID-19 spread with an alarming speed and the world turned to be novel virus-stricken, World Health Organization declared it as pandemic on March 11, 2020. Uncertainty was looming around in every sector of national and international life, from health and education to international trade and international cooperation. The most frequently asked question was what the world is going to be like in post COVID-19 era. The most certain answer pertaining to future is that there is no going back to normal. The same change hit the intellectual debates concerning public health, economic resilience, future of international relations to the governing structures. The aim of this paper is to discuss the concept of national security as

wanting in accommodating alternative perspectives, which are considerate of the nature of rapid and continuous change contemporary era is witnessing.

Drawing upon the national security-public health nexus, this study asserts i) insecurity is not solely caused by malign intentions of hostile external actors or military power of other states, it is also visibly brought about by outbreak and spread of diseases within and across borders, ii) the concept of security is relational and can be completely understood when overlap and interdependence between traditional and non-traditional confines of security studies are appreciated, iii) the health-security nexus demands sustained focus of governments on public health as a broader social mechanism and not on the curative countermeasures resulting into medicalization of security

Health as a national security concern: the scholarly debates

Historically, one of the deadliest pandemics human race has faced was the Black Plague. The Black death was a bubonic plague which infected Asia and Europe in the fourteenth century. The plague had a devastating impact on social, political and economic life of affected states. Infecting around 1/3rd of world population, the episode of outbreak of Spanish flu in 1918 was also damaging enough. With 40 million mortalities, the death rate surpassed the number of casualties during World War I. The recent waves of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV), Ebola virus disease (EVD) or Ebola Hemorrhagic Fever (EHF) and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) are the resurgence of the threats human race has been facing from pandemics.

Although the history of pandemics and the losses they incur is not new, the debate in intellectual circles surfaced in the last fifty years. Wolfers (1964) posited that security threats faced by various states are not uniform in nature and the source of insecurity is not necessarily an external one. Ullman has warned against equating the security with military power. A sole focus on military while defining national security can be misleading and is likely to distract states from far more pressing issues, making them vulnerable and compromising on their security. This obsession with military narrows the policy choices available to states adversely affecting the security of the entire international system (Ullman, 1983).

Buzan has advanced the ideas of Ullman in his attempt to redefine security. For Buzan, security of a state is interdependent and relational. Diverse sectors like military, economy, politics, society and the quality of environment interact with each other to determine the security for each state. In their pursuit of security, states get affected by each other and the larger structural realities around them (Buzan, 1991).

While considering the adverse effects of climate change and its potential of provoking wars and conflict, Homer-Dixon frames it to be a security threat (Homer-Dixon, 1991). Kolodziej echoes Ullman while cautioning against adherence to a narrower concept guiding practice of security. He attempted to turn the attention of scholarly community to more pressing issues and challenges demanding urgent responses (Kolodziej, 1992).

Human security emerged as an important point of reference among policy makers and academicians alike since the surfacing of Human Development Report of United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1994. The report criticized the

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previously conceived narrower meaning of the concept of security which largely disregards the actual challenges and occurrences most of the people around the world face. An alternative definition considerate of the actual threats faced by humanity was devised which was referred to as human security. This new concept of security included two features; firstly, protection from persistent threats like repression, disease and hunger and secondly, freedom from any instantaneous or distressing disruption in the lives of individuals. The said report initiated a debate not only on how the concept of security needs to be revisited but also on appropriate ways of responding to the emerging threats and challenges.

A large number of scholarly works have adopted and expanded the paradigm of human security while advancing their argument pertaining to human dimension of security. Some of these works have been largely focusing on health security in particular. This subset of scholarship is concerned with the study of chronic threats posed by pandemics and infectious diseases. Andrew Price-Smith (1999) has contributed immensely to understanding of and the reconceptualization of security. His work while employing quantitative cross-national analyses delineates the adverse effects of diseases on economy, state's institutions and military which may last as long as for fifteen years. Price-Smith further suggests that although pathogens and humanity have long co-existed without completely annihilating each other, the contemporary threats are more intense. As the scope of threat is much greater than what existed before, it requires immediate responses to avoid the devastating impacts it may have on national security and development of states (Price-Smith, 2001). An addition to the scholarly debate is made by Singer (2002) in his demonstration of AIDS as a growing threat to international security while national militaries weaken and civil conflicts arise. While advancing the health-national security debate, Laurie Garrett (2000) discusses the threats to national security emerging from infectious diseases and subsequent failing of healthcare infrastructures.

While passing through a different terrain, some scholarly works have engaged with ethical perspective, concerned with humanitarianism, to build a case in favor of health security. Benatar's work is concerned with the nature of the world in which horrible pandemics like AIDS explode. According to him, the crisis of health security personified by growing cases of AIDS reveal the interactions between humanity and international system (Benatar, 2001). On a similar note, Nelson (2002) suggests that the aggressive responses to AIDS in LDCs are required which encompass a lot more than considering the issue as a public health concern. Nelson considers it the moral responsibility of western states to put global efforts in place in order to eradicate the disease. Only the effective response to this public health menace will ensure provision of fundamental human rights, western liberal ideas promote (Nelson, 2002).

The altering security studies agenda is not applauded by scholarly community in a similar manner. Some scholars are hostile and some skeptical about broadening the field, fearing that "encompassing-all" will make the concept of national security a fuzzy and inconsistent concept. Deudney (1986) advises against such broadening and revising of the definition. By using environmental security as a reference point, Deudney builds his case that environmental issues and national security are too unlike to be grouped as one pertaining to the nature of threat emanating from each

of these, the origin and scope of that threat and the type of responses needed to ensure security of populations. He further warns that any attempt to integrate environmental degradation as a national security concern will not yield any desirable results.

Walt, in his work, advances the same argument. He aggressively remarks against broadening of security studies agenda by inculcating issues like environmental degradation, diseases, poverty and illegal drugs. Any such attempt will be a major blow to the integrity and precision of the field of study, causing distracted and nervous responses from scholars and policymakers (Walt, 1991). The potential intellectual and policy world chaos caused by this malleability and inconsistency of the term human security also echoes in the work of Paris. The definition presented by UNDP and other sources is anything but precise. This vagueness and inconsistency attached with the concept of human security leaves the concept open to having several possible meanings and interpretations and fails to guide any researches or policymaking. Due to the jumbling up of several themes under the umbrella of human security, any systematic academic study is nearly impossible. Any hotchpotch of unsystematic efforts to bring precision to the human security concept might help in the beginning but the lasting haphazardness of these endeavors eliminate any hope of turning human security into a coherent concept even in future (Paris, 2001).

An overview of various debates on health, human and national security reveal the significant amount of controversy amongst them. The focus of the debate is clearly on the points of departure rather than the points of embrace. The newly emerging factors encompassing environment, diseases and the like are widely labelled as non-traditional threats by their advocates and the critics. While tucking these threats in pouch of non-traditional threats, traditional security scholarship has remained skeptical of their relevance to the national security debate. Similarly, health security or human security debate has largely desisted from making an explicit reference to health as a valid concern for national security owing to the relational and overlapping nature of national security. By employing the impacts of diseases on political stability, national military and economic power, the following sections demonstrate that deteriorating health of citizens is no less than an existential threat to the state.

Shock of diseases and the failing polities: An historical appraisal

Historically, the shock of diseases has not been less severe than the shock of wars. At times, it acted as the source of war and at others as determining the outcomes. Thucydides recounts how the outcome of historic Peloponnesian war was impacted by a peculiar plague weakening the Athenian army (Thucydides, 1982). In sixth century, the outbreak of Justinian Plague is recognized to bring about a whole new set of challenges to the stability of Eastern Roman Empire (Rosen, 2007). The disease of smallpox caused a substantial damage to the indigenous population, eventually facilitating the colonial conquests of Europeans in Americas (Diamond, 1998). A remarkable example cited often is how Aztec civilization got crushed by a small number of Spanish conquistador Cortez who used small pox as a bioweapon bringing about Cortez' decisive conquest of Aztec Capital in 1521. European settlers handed over the small pox infected blankets to the natives in an attempt to decimate them and to ease the acquisition of area. Similarly, the Black Plague while killing

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scores of populations contributed to dramatically changing the relationship between the then feudal lords and their assets. The declining power provided space to peasants to organize themselves and rebel against the authority of their masters. The development is said to have paved the way for reformation leading to the origin of the capitalist economic system (Brenner, 1977; Barrington, 1996).

Diseases, political instability and the threat of war

The shock of diseases can act as the source of war in three ways; by disturbing the balance of power and pushing the winning or losing state to resort to war in an offensive or defensive pursuit, by generating disputes between states over right responses to health crisis and by stirring political instability. The most significant threat is posed in last of these ways and is explained in the following sections.

Health crisis in a state unprepared to handle the menace can easily stir political instability. Amid COVID-19, masses' trust in the political system started losing visibly in cases where the leaders poorly performed and largely failed to deliver. Owing to uncertain nature of disease and not so well-equipped health care, feeling of insecurity and fear among masses kept on elevating. In absence of strong institutions and adequate medical infrastructure, political instability is even more likely to hurt weaker states. The problem gets exacerbated once state places the burden of economic stagnation on masses as exemplified by Lebanese rioters getting outraged and resorting to the use of violence in response to the care taker government's inaction in the face of crippling economy (Delaware State News, 2021). In a series of unrelenting protests, the rioters reportedly set fire to municipal building, government properties and a private university. Even economically strong states are not immune to such threats as evidenced in case of USA. In a survey conducted by Pew Research Centre in summer 2020, only 18 percent Americans believed that their country grew more united from the pandemic, compared to 77 percent who thought of American society being more crippled and divided, making it the largest reported percentage across 13 advanced economies surveyed by the Centre (PEW Research Centre, 2020).

As states become busy fighting the disease, the extremist groups capitalize on this opportunity to advance their goals. For instance, resurging online activities of European far right groups have surfaced the news and reports during COVID-19 (Rekawek, Ritzmann, & Schindler, 2020). Similar news regarding reorganization of Daesh activities in Syria and Iraq has also made headlines which has also been reiterated by UNSC (United Nations, 2020). The pandemic has bared the vulnerability of states to the threats of bioterrorism. Without clear evidence, according to some, COVID-19 was a biological weapon. Although no convincing evidence has been put forward, any great power failed to detect and respond to it timely. The current response poses serious questions to the resilience and preparedness of states to any pandemic in future.

By eroding the state capacity to mitigate competition among different social groups, diseases contribute to the magnifying of absolute and relative deprivation. Heightened competition among various ethnically, racially, geographically or economically divided groups in the absence of abundant resources hit the weak economies harder than any other state. The low-intensity intra-state conflict if left attended may lead to the utter failure of state. =

Short-term challenge of incapacitated leadership and military power

A set of short-term challenges in the wake of outbreak of disease also create havoc in uncertain times. An episode of over one thousand sailors testing positive on board in case of US aircraft carrier, USS Theodore Roosevelt, highlights the immediate adverse effect of pandemic on military power of any state (The Washington Post, 2020). The incident echoed the outbreak of Tuberculosis on a US destroyer carrying 350 members in 1966 (Naval History and Heritage Command, n.d.). Another recent example of shipboard disease in recent history occurred in 2009 when H1N1 influenza was detected on a large US Navy ship with 2000-person crew. On a similar note, as Prime Minister of nuclear weapon-equipped UK, Boris Johnson, got hospitalized after contracting virus, incapacitated leadership-national defense issue was distressful. As Britain is without any written constitution, the Prime Minister do not have any constitutional standing as US' presidents have. The office of Prime Minister in Britain, therefore, is the reflection of fragmentary system of legal and precedent rulings. For last three centuries, the office of the Prime Minister in Britain has evolved to accumulating greater power in the circumstances like economic and financial crisis, social turmoil and war. British past political practices provide no clue to what to do if Prime Minister falls ill and becomes unavailable for an extended time period (Smith, 2020). Any directions or urgent letters to the commanders of nuclear armed submarines in the absence of Prime Minister are therefore impeded. Outbreak of pandemic and subsequently taken quarantine procedures can halt military operations as happened in case of Canada. Likewise, the US military exercises were called off in an attempt to halt the spread of the disease (Reuters, 2020).

Diseases, budgetary pressures and crumbling economies

Political stability is inextricably linked with economic performance. If not prepared adequately for, any crisis situation corrodes govt's capacity to deliver public goods and guarantee well-being of masses. Concomitant additional burden on economy to fight disease takes a heavy toll on the economic performance of the states wrecking state power's various material resources. As economic conditions worsen and with that legitimacy of government crumbles, extremist ideologies and separatist tendencies capitalize on opportunity further adding to the insecurity and instability of states. The economy of a state, therefore, is both an enabler and constraint pertaining to its security.

In an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19, governments took desperate measures; the borders got closed, travel restrictions were enacted, businesses were shuttered down and lockdowns were enforced. Declining health of populations also damaged the flow of investments, created budgetary pressures and resulted into rise in debt.

The Managing Director of International Monetary Fund (IMF), Kristalina Georgieva, anticipated that declining economic activity amid COVID-19 is going to be worst slump since the financial crisis of 2008 (International Monetary Fund, 2020). When compared to the great depression, the on-going economic downturn is far more catastrophic, shrinking world economy to 4.4%. People of the world are confronting not only a crisis in terms of health but also an economic one.

While the economic activity gets halted, policymakers face an extra burden to bring national economy back on track and to grease the jammed wheel of indigenous

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industries into the working. Recovery process is a challenging and demanding one. In the presence of budgetary constraints due to declining economic growth rates, to maintain the lifeline of businesses and households in form of liquidity facilities, credit guarantees, tax relief and unemployment insurance is highly uncertain. Sluggish economic growth and decrease in production brought about the attached consequences in form of unemployment, subsequently questioning the legitimacy of government.

Unlike advanced economies, low-income states struggled to impose a prolonged lockdown. In case of COVID-19, the economic pressures forced the governments to lift the lockdowns despite the urgent need emanating from the weak healthcare structures, large population and many at already heightened risk due to living in crowded conditions. The justification presented by Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, for ending the complete lockdown was twofold: its adverse effects on economy of the country and the intensifying burden on already suffering working and poor class. Although, the coronavirus cases were still on steady rise, the elevation of misery of the daily-wage workers and small business owners forced the National Coordination Committee to end the month-long lockdown in May 2020 (Dawn, 2020). Had the lockdown not been lifted, the small and medium sized businesses and industries would have vanished. Since then, the government ruled out any possibility of imposing compete lockdown. Economic concerns pushed many states to adopt herd immunity, a controversial response to pandemic, as a resolution to on-going crisis.

As the above discussion attests, the deterioration of citizen's health and unpreparedness of states to tackle shock of diseases poses myriad of security threats which range from loss of human life and incapacitation of population to destabilizing institutions and crumbling economy. National security is relational and consists of safety from external threats as well as protection in homeland. What good is protection from an external military, when citizens are incapacitated and torn by the fear of diseases. The questions now centers on what measures can be taken to ensure long-term security of the nations.

State as provider of health security/ national security

As the global health crisis escalated, the concomitant calls for global efforts and cooperation intensified. The practice during the era of pandemic was precisely the opposite of the proclamations about the urgent need for global cooperation. The pandemic revealed the ever-increasing obstacles to global governance as exemplified by World Health Organization (WHO), the international community and especially the US. The worsening health, economic and security conditions across the globe amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis of global governance reassert that state remains the most essential actor and effective structure of governance, at least for now, to prevent and to respond to such issues.

States by identifying the security threats, mobilize resources and execute responses, failing which state's security and survival is put at an immense risk. The paper therefore pursues a state-centric analysis of direct/ indirect threats posed by diseases and emphasizes the need for enhanced state capacity to respond to future challenges of pandemics/diseases. State, for its stability and survival needs to become self-

reliant and resilient while not compromising its ability to limit and tackle shocks of pandemics.

Public health vs healthcare: Fixing the priorities

An effective strategy on part of states is to invest in public health as it produces more benefits and costs less. Public health is explained in multiple ways. The term is mostly used as an open-ended concept and generates ambiguous meanings. In its most loose connotations, public health is considered to be general condition of public being healthy. The terms public health and healthcare have also been used interchangeably leading to the confusion. To understand the concept, public health is geared towards safety and health of populace rather than localized curative care of individual patients. It focuses on disease prevention rather than treatment of disease. Public health embodies the relationship between government and populations rather than between a doctor and a patient. It encompasses the research, education and information and their dissemination to improve the quality of life rather than improving the well-being of individuals on a daily basis (Gostin, 2002).

While healthcare reduces mortality, public health lowers the risk of diseases, subsequently contributing to reduction in mortality. Public health, therefore, is the “science and art of preventing diseases” (Winslow, 1923). The responsibility lies with the government who ensures that populations are protected from various health risks resulting into their overall well-being. During COVID-19, the herd immunity although challenged on ethical foundations, was considered the solution for the countries not ready for an expensive option of prolonged lockdowns. Individuals without underlying health conditions even while getting exposed either did not reach the severity or remain asymptomatic, avoiding additional burdens on healthcare facilities.

This is the high time to recognize the presence of severe threats to a nation in form of pandemics, infectious and non-communicable diseases and fix the problems like unhealthy dietary habits, lack of awareness about healthy life-style and incompetent medical care. Realization of health as a national security concern demands pandemic resilience and preparedness. Ensuring sustainable health of populations is what states around the world need to do regardless of the fiscal constraints by diverting funds to health sector on urgent basis. The evident damage brought upon the economic and political life of states press the need for moving “low politics” of health to “high politics”, considering health a national security concern.

Conclusion

As threats to human health emanating from pandemic and other infectious diseases loom, security debates tremble in regards to their traditional focus on military and political sources of stability and security. Many states, especially developed ones, have adopted health security as part of their national security agenda, but the degree of seriousness is not up to the standard of what advocates of health as national security concern suggest. States’ responses in the wake of COVID-19 has exposed the weak institutions and poor health infrastructure contributing to the lack of robustness in addressing the issue.

This paper while outlining that the health is a national security concern, emphasizes the need for efficacious responses to prepare for ever increasing and damaging threat in form of pandemics. The extent of health crisis induced damage to national

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security is largely determined by the state capacity. For an effective defense, the financial resources need to be invested in public health. The improvement in public health is less about healthcare and doctors and more about the adjustments in broader social structures encompassing clean drinking water, balanced and nutritious food, housing, sanitation and healthy life style. In the absence of healthy individuals, the devastating impacts of pandemics can hardly be countered by medical care solely. Governments therefore need to deal with emerging threat of pandemics by deploying combination of broader social and medical measures.

While asserting that the manifestation of pandemic and infectious diseases represents a direct security risk to the populations, threatens economic growth and productivity, destabilizes the institutions, disrupts state's abilities to deliver public goods, corrodes legitimacy of the government, leads to the ethnic/ racial or other forms of intra-state conflict, this paper reiterates the need to make, so far eschewed, health-national security nexus more pronounced in literature on security studies. Only through proper theoretical grounding, citizen's health can receive proper attention within the policymaking realm.

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