

## **Responding to Covid-19: A Framework for Analysis**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Beginning December 2019 in Wuhan in China's Hubei province, Coronavirus (Covid -19) has overwhelmed the healthcare systems and affecting education, travels, events and the economies worldwide. Governments all over have taken or bracing themselves to take extraordinary measures to contain the threat. In some countries, the measures taken to contain the epidemic appear as putting the nation under a state of siege. Some governments are adapting rather extreme measures – complete lock-down of the cities, the provinces and even the country itself, school closures, travel ban, cancellation of flights. Questions are being asked about how much freedom we are prepared to give up, for how long and onto whose hands? The paper argues that with threats and vulnerabilities transcending national boundaries and challenging most advanced knowledge and information systems in this era of intense globalization, the need for harsh and often draconian measures can hardly be over emphasized. At the same time there could be problems and unwelcome consequences in putting too much power in the hands of the governments dealing with the threat for an indefinite period of time. In view of this, the securitization framework as put forth by the Copenhagen School could be a better tool to deal with situations of unexpected crises such as what SARS epidemic proved it to be or what Covid-19 would inevitably entail

**Keywords:** Securitization, Copenhagen School, Coronavirus, Covid-19, SARS, Human Security

### **BACKGROUND**

Beginning December 2019 in Wuhan in China's Hubei province, a new epidemic – Coronavirus (Covid -19) has metamorphosed itself into a major threat overwhelming the healthcare systems and affecting education, travels, events and the economies at large.

Governments all over have taken extraordinary measures to contain the threat which as WHO declared has become a global pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Rules and regulations are being invoked which are beyond the normal. As the disease is spreading far and wide new means are being sought, the pace and the form of which resembling something like war-time mobilization. This would appear strange especially as health issues, as conventionally understood, normally fall outside the scope of national security in order to warrant war-like mobilization. But like the 2003 SARS epidemic, Covid-19 is being treated and dealt with by many countries as an existential threat specifically in the context that the virus is spreading at a faster pace and with higher mortality rate than the former.

In some countries, the measures taken to contain the pandemic appear as putting the nation under a state of siege. Some governments are being criticized for adopting rather extreme measures – complete lock-down of the cities, the provinces and even the country itself, school closures, travel ban, cancellation of flights to name a few. At the same time many governments are being blamed for not doing enough.

### **Learning from the past**

In 2003, despite arguments in support of and against the excessiveness of the measures taken to contain the SARS epidemic, in hindsight it would now appear that the measures were justified to the extent that they worked. This time, some of the measures taken by a number of countries, especially China, India, Italy, Spain, the UK and others, have been deemed to be aggressive draconian, intrusive and disproportionate.

But these measures have also led to the containment of the spread of the disease in many places and have led many countries to go for gradual easing of lockdowns and other harsh measures or to rethink about the same. As a report by a WHO mission claimed, “China’s bold approach to contain the rapid spread of this new respiratory pathogen has changed the course of a rapidly escalating and deadly epidemic.”<sup>2</sup> But, doubts abound about the effectiveness of the measures not only in respect of China but other countries including the US, India and in Europe arising from lack of transparency in terms of number of infections, fatalities, testing facilities, extent of community transmission and overall effectiveness of social distancing, among others.<sup>3</sup>

So the questions arise; is Covid-19 really changing the world risking “ [l]ife, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,”? Or if easing of strong measures is too soon and too unpredictable that could produce counterproductive consequences both for the leaders and the public?

This paper will examine the following in the context of the Covid-19 as a security threat. Human security concerns such as SARS epidemic or Coronavirus could trigger crisis situations requiring extraordinary mobilization of the magnitude that equals if not exceeds military mobilization. Since the measures could be extreme and extraordinary, there would be a tendency to put them under the test of appropriateness and put the state and its agents (that normally need to cope with such threats) under tests of legitimacy.

The paper would argue that with threats and vulnerabilities transcending national boundaries and challenging most advanced knowledge and information systems in this era of intense globalization, the need for harsh and often draconian measures can hardly be over emphasized. At the same time there could be problems and unwelcome consequences in putting too much power in the hands of the governments dealing with the threat for an indefinite period of time.

Perhaps, a better way to resolve this analytical and policy incongruence is to look at the issue through the securitization framework proposed by the Copenhagen School.

### **BACKGROUND TO THE DEBATE**

In the post-Cold War era, the emerging security debates followed a period of disorientation when new challenges appeared and the dominant neo-realist discourse was found by some scholars to be deficient in providing a relevant framework of analysis.<sup>4</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, the focus of security discourse changed from traditionalist nationalism, sovereignty and balance of power concepts to internationalism and world state,<sup>5</sup> and more specifically to human vulnerability and human survival.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars also found that international relations and the institutions that governed those relations in the postwar era were poorly configured to address and accommodate emerging concerns such as, among others, resource, environment, demographic issues and pandemics.<sup>7</sup>

There were two main strands to the new discourse. One was to widen the security agenda by claiming security status for issues and referent objects in the economic, environment and societal sector as well as the military political ones. The other was the debate about the primacy of the military element and the state in the conceptualization of security.<sup>8</sup> It was argued that security is reducible to an objective referent (human beings) and set of threats including human health and welfare, social problems, internal sources of instability and costs of violent conflict since what is really threatened is not an abstraction like 'the state' but the material wellbeing of the individuals.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the conceptions of security together with policies and institutions for providing security need to be changed to meet new challenges.

On the other hand however, elevating all emerging problems to the level of high politics did not receive universal acceptance.

Daniel Deudney for instance argued, "If we begin to speak about all the forces and events that threaten life, property and wellbeing (on a larger scale) as threats to our national security, we shall soon drain the term of any meaning. All large-scale evils [road accidents, gun violence etc] will become threats to national security."<sup>10</sup> It was also feared that elevating issues such as pollution, disease, child abuse, or economic recessions as threats to security and calling for emergency responses put a premium on state's resources, making it "more difficult to devise solutions to any of these problems."

However, scholars like Keith Krause and Michael Williams sought to downplay the concerns with the argument that what is securitized can be desecuritized once the threat has passed. Here, desecuritization- the progressive removal of issues from the security agenda as they "decrease in importance - could be quite beneficial."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, given that policy makers routinely engage with the complexities and possibilities of security in its broad sense- ethnic/communal conflicts, environmental issues, health concerns (i.e. HIV/AIDS, SARS and now Covid-19) - there is merit in letting the security studies "pursue these issues and debates with even more openness that will, in turn, foster intellectual development and political engagement with the dynamics of contemporary world politics."<sup>12</sup>

### **AN ALTERNATIVE?**

The securitization framework of the Copenhagen School could be an appropriate tool to analyze the way leaders and policy makers seek to deal with extraordinary situations which are non-military in nature but require military-like mobilization.

Here the fact that threats and vulnerabilities can arise from different sources and take different forms is not contested. What is suggested rather is the fact that to count as security issues the

emergent issues have to meet strictly defined criteria- they have to be staged as existential threats to a referent object (human beings) by a securitizing actor (leaders, policy makers) who thereby would generate endorsement of emergency measures beyond normal procedures that might be required to address the threat.<sup>13</sup>

Securitization is a powerful tool to deal with any security problem (s), first by constituting the problem (s) as a threat (s) and then empowering the relevant player (s) with means and resources to deal with the threat (s) effectively. Security problems are developments that threaten (in the classical sense- the sovereignty/ independence of) a state (the given referent object) in a rapidly escalatory sequence, putting normal coping strategies to a premium and requiring mobilization of extraordinary means.<sup>14</sup> This is especially so when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to the referent object, the special nature of the threat being such as to warrant the use of extraordinary means.<sup>15</sup>

### **What makes an issue a security problem?**

Now the question arises, what turns an issue or a challenge into a security problem or a security threat? The nature of issues that could pose existential threat encompasses many sectors- political, economic, societal and even environmental apart from the traditional military perspective. There could however be no universal standards, the interplay among all factors being immensely complicated. Besides different states have different threshold for defining a threat. However, there could be some clear cases of existential threats that could be securitized.<sup>16</sup>

The process begins when an issue is addressed in security terms. By doing so, something is done, for the security managers (the state and by extension the government and the leaders) then claim a special right to use whatever means necessary to deal with the threat. By uttering security, a particular development is moved into a specific area, thereby making it possible to legitimize the use of whatever means are necessary to block it.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, a problem becomes a security problem through a so-called “speech act”<sup>18</sup> arising out of discursive practices within a state,<sup>19</sup> in order to pose problematic issues as existential threats and claim special right to deal with those.

Thus securitization occurs when the securitizing actor, by means of an argument about the priority and urgency of an existential threat goes beyond normal procedures or rules<sup>20</sup> and invokes for itself a special right to use whatever means<sup>21</sup> to gain control over the threat and manage it. It is important however that existential threat to a referent object does not by itself create securitization. “Existential threat has to be argued and gain enough resonance for a platform to be made from which it is possible to legitimize emergency measures that would otherwise not have been possible.”<sup>22</sup>

It is also possible to assume extraordinary measures even before enunciating the “speech act,” as long as there is audience endorsement for the action. Speaking security, the securitizing actor gives words to performances already undertaken or would be taken in future.<sup>23</sup> In the ultimate analysis, an issue is held securitized only if and when the audience accepts it, and the success of securitization is not decided by the securitizer but by the audience of the security speech act.<sup>24</sup>

Securitization need not be always by the state apparatus. It is possible for other social entities to raise an issue to the threshold demanding urgent attention.<sup>25</sup> In this context, however, the

facilitating conditions of the security speech act are of importance. A successful speech act is a combination of language and society, of both intrinsic features of speech and the group that authorizes and recognizes that speech.<sup>26</sup> The speech act must follow the grammar of security and construct a plot that includes existential threat, a point of no return and a possible way out. The securitizing actor must also be in a position of authority vis-à-vis the audience to ensure latter's acceptance of the claims made in a securitizing attempt.

Last but not the least is the nature of the threat itself, features of the threat that either facilitate or impede securitization. Certain issues – like Covid-19 - are more easily raised to the level of threat if these are generally held to be threatening.<sup>27</sup> In this sense securitization approach widens the spectrum of possibilities- in principle anything can be securitized in practice, depending on facilitating conditions.<sup>28</sup>

Securitization has tremendous mobilization potential. An issue is presented as an existential threat requiring emergency measures. Once the issue has been moved into the realms of security, (securitized) the securitizing actor then can empower itself with extraordinary powers - levying taxes, placing restrictions on rights and liberties and urging secrecy, or focusing energy and resources on a specific task. Thus the issue is taken beyond the normal haggling of politics, in effect de-politicized or technologized.<sup>29</sup>

By implication this ensures that all necessary means would be used and because such a threat is defined as existential, the state would not be limited in what it could or might not do.<sup>30</sup> “The obvious reasons for putting. ...issues into the security agenda is the possible magnitude of the threats posed and the need to mobilize urgent and unprecedented responses to them.”<sup>31</sup>

### **APPLYING SECURITIZATION FRAMEWORK TO COVID-19**

The consequences of the transnational spread of diseases such as Covid-19 and before that SARS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), the Ebola virus, H5NI Influenza A virus (The Bird Flu), the Nipah virus, Merse, etc, can be constituted as inherently detrimental to the survival of the given referent object - the human being.<sup>32</sup> In this context, two aspects of these diseases are important to note. First, the globalization of business and travel and labor migration patterns help spread the diseases. For instance, during the SARS epidemic among the twelve infected at the Hong Kong's Metropole hotel, was an American who brought the infection to Hanoi. Three Singapore women on holiday in Hong Kong, an elderly Canadian lady from Toronto carried the infection to their respective countries. On 14 March 2003, a Singapore doctor who treated the atypical pneumonia patients traveled to New York for a conference on infectious diseases, and carried the virus abroad. The current spread of Covid 19 also follows the same pattern – mostly related to travel though community level transmission has also occurred subsequently.

Second, global links among peoples and the nations amplify the political and economic and psychological impact. In a rather pathetic way, these epidemics demonstrate how the boundary between the domestic and the global policy (in this case health policy) has melted and how local health problems can have global repercussions.<sup>33</sup>

Much of the impact also comes from fear and perceptions of the disease, not the disease itself. As the Washington Post put it during the 2003 SARS outbreak, “the fear factor is really gobbling

everything up.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly in respect Covid-19, Eden David mentioned how “Anxiety spreads faster than the virus,” though “some fear and some worry is legitimate, since the virus is still poorly understood and we don't exactly know what the health effects are or what the social effects are going to be.”<sup>35</sup> What contributes to the fear more than the number of persons affected, is that the disease is previously unknown, affected many otherwise healthy individuals, is potentially fatal, and spread rapidly and most significantly overwhelming the health care systems world-wide.

The socio-economic effects of the threat posed by the epidemics are equally catastrophic. Especially their impacts on tourism and airlines industry have been staggering. In respect of Covid-19, the economy of few of the countries have started falling into pieces as tourists stayed put, reductions in passenger traffic brought airlines industry into near bankruptcy (the airline industry is slated to suffer more than \$250 billion in losses due to Covid -19).<sup>36</sup> Stock markets all over the world nose-dived. As the flow of tourists petered out, there are drops in demand for service-type goods-hotel and restaurant, transportation and communication.

What also ill-dispose the countries everywhere to handle a major health issue like Covid-19 has been patchwork of public health laws, many quite old and possibly unconstitutional.<sup>37</sup> This necessitates new laws that would arm the government agencies to implement extraordinary measures as required.<sup>38</sup> Simultaneously there was also concern about the possibility of judicial intervention and the need to balance public health protection measures with personal liberties.<sup>39</sup> Overall, according to an estimate by OCEC, “global GDP growth could plummet this year to as little as 1.5%, almost half the 2.9% rate” it forecasted before the outbreak and recovery is less likely to be V-shaped – “returning quickly to growth - can't be taken for granted.”<sup>40</sup>

### **DYNAMICS OF SECURITIZATION**

There are two interrelated concepts that drive a successful securitization action. One is what is called the “speech act” and the second is “audience [public] acceptance” of the securitization act.

#### **The Speech Act**

Securitization, as mentioned, follows a distinctive rhetorical structure. It is a process of constructing a shared understanding of what is to be considered and collectively responded to as a threat. In other words an issue becomes securitized when leaders (whether political, societal, or intellectual) begin to talk about it- and attempt to gain the ear of the public and the state- in terms of the existential threat against some valued referent object.<sup>41</sup> Though the response of the governments in the countries affected by the Covid- 19 epidemic varies, most treat the outbreak as a national security threat.

On 14 March 2020, the President of the United States declared a national emergency to boost government's ability to deal with coronavirus induced crises.<sup>42</sup> In fact, as Micah Zenko put it, the new human coronavirus “certainly qualifies as a national security crisis” and “deserves to be a concern for policymakers, and the public.”<sup>43</sup> The coronavirus task force led by U.S. Vice President Mike Pence also announced the Covid-19 outbreak as a national security threat.<sup>44</sup>

China which has traditionally been criticized for lack of transparency in such matters, sensitized the entire administrative apparatus to deal with Covid -19, one of its biggest crises, and shared

information with the rest of the world as quickly as possible. President Xi urged the administration to “put people’s lives and health first,” emphasizing that no cover-ups will be tolerated.<sup>45</sup>

In fact Beijing moved swiftly to contain the spread with unprecedented and rather extreme measures - a lockdown on nearly 60 million people in Hubei and strict quarantine and travel restrictions for hundreds of millions of citizens and foreigners, described as “the most ambitious, agile, and aggressive disease containment effort in history”<sup>46</sup> –As early as 12 January 2020, Beijing shared the genetic sequence of the novel coronavirus to help other countries develop testing kits and prepare for the response.<sup>47</sup>

The response of Italy, though initially tardy, got equally stringent with the government putting the entire country in lock-down, cancelling all sports and other events and closing down schools. Spain, which has now overtaken China in respect of Covid-19 related fatalities is in extended lock-down with the Spanish government asking help from NATO – an organization primarily geared to deal with military threats to its members. Washington decided to invoke Defense Production Act 1950 – a Cold War era civil defense and war mobilization effort to tap into the domestic capabilities to redirect production to specific areas (“military conflicts, natural or man-caused disasters, or acts of terrorism.”)<sup>49</sup> This would empower the executive branch with “the authority to issue directives to private industry to boost the supply of critical materials and items,” “needed in concert with the whole of government approach to combat coronavirus.”<sup>50</sup>

British Prime Minister, who himself became the victim of the pandemic but survived, – called the outbreak the “worst public health crisis for a generation” and cautioned the public that “Many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.”<sup>51</sup> The country has been put on total lock-down since 23 March with strict enforcement of stay at home and social distancing measures,<sup>52</sup> India has put the entire country in lock-down since ...with strict enforcement measures while ramping up its healthcare system to deal with any possible spike. The Tokyo Olympics slated to be held from July 2020 has been postponed and the government declared national emergency as the infections increased substantially. Other countries have taken similar steps despite apparent negative impacts on the economy and concerns about public freedom.<sup>53</sup>

### **Audience Acceptance**

Besides the speech act, audience acceptance is an important component of the securitization process. During 2003 SARS epidemic, there was wide public acceptance of the measures by the Singapore government, despite being harsh and extraordinary. In a telephone survey, conducted between 28 April and 4 May 2003 to find out the level of public confidence, an overwhelming majority (95%) expressed confidence in the government’s handling of the SARS problem. About 87% said that the new public health measures (e.g. Home Quarantine Order, screening of travelers at borders and temperature-taking) put in place by the Government to contain SARS are adequate. Nearly 90% endorsed the changes to the Infectious Diseases Act to ensure strict compliance with the Home Quarantine Orders. 75% of the respondents felt that Singaporeans have responded well to the crisis, with 71% believing that the SARS crisis has bonded Singaporeans closer together as a community and a nation.<sup>54</sup>

What is important here is for the securitizing actor to gain public trust for dealing with the crisis with high level of transparency and communication to overcome the fear of the unknown. This is

extremely delicate – balancing “transparency and openness and yet not causing alarm”<sup>55</sup> and extremely vital for gaining audience acceptance of a securitization act.”

In respect of Covid-19 however, the public trust on some governments appears to have fallen short of the desired. This is most noticed in the U.S., where a very high level of confidence on the government’s ability to handle the outbreak in February 2020, “dropped substantially” to reflect skepticism and even distrust. A March 2020 Gallup poll found that 61% Americans were “very” (24%) or “somewhat confident” (37%) of the government's ability to handle the outbreak.<sup>56</sup> There, as the poll reported, is “much higher level of worry than” what was “measured during previous health scares, including SARS, West Nile virus and anthrax.” Though the government has moved more rapidly than before – including a massive economic stimulus package, engaging the armed forces - the lack of confidence or trust has mostly been attributed to disconnects in communication and actions among various agencies and authorities at various levels.

The transparency issue has emerged to be especially problematic in respect of China with news of underreporting of number of infections and deaths which unfortunately caught the WHO in a wrong footing<sup>57</sup> As Beth Cameron put it,

*When people don't have information, they tend to panic, and that if people don't trust that the government is telling them the truth about the risk to themselves and their families, people start to make decisions that are not rational, and that puts our medical system at greater risk.<sup>58</sup>*

Thus, to the extent that comparisons of how one government has dealt with a global crisis as compared to another are being routinely made, it is only appropriate that the governments understood the importance of global codes of conduct where transparency and accountability are becoming increasingly important.<sup>59</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Infectious diseases have been conventionally regarded as medical problems (medicalized). However, in a rapidly changing global environment, there is a need to define health concerns in strategic terms (securitize) because of the threats that these diseases - SARS and now Covid-19, for example, - create.<sup>60</sup>

At the same time, concerns about the use or misuse of the securitization framework should not be overlooked. Being rooted in rhetoric, securitization act could also be misused. It may become possible for the ruling elite to advocate their own interests in the garb of national security concerns even when there is no real existential threat especially in respect of an authoritarian regime,<sup>61</sup> to perpetuate “structural violence” against its own citizenry.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, it is also feared that by naming certain developments as security problems, the state can “claim” a special right to intervene, probably with tools that are military in nature as was in Somalia where humanitarian assistance appeared in the form of a military invasion. In respect of Covid-19, many scholars contend that there are dangers in overuse of “national security threat” discursive especially in respect a health issue. For example, Major General Charles J. Dunlap (Retd) noted that



*The problem is that if you denominate something as a “national security” threat, it’s naturally assumed that it’s to be addressed (if not solved) primarily by the defense establishment (to include specifically the military). A militarized approach to every issue is bad idea, plain and simple<sup>63</sup>*

The distinct state centrism embedded in the concept<sup>64</sup> also leaves little room for others- individuals or groups to speak security as there is, according to the Copenhagen school, less likelihood of success. Nevertheless by marking an epidemic like Covid-19 down as a national security threat (an existential threat), it becomes easier for the governments to arm themselves with extraordinary means, mobilize their full administrative machinery and commit/optimize resources to prevent the development of the threat. But all these need caution against indiscrimination in the application of the concept.

As this paper demonstrated, non-traditional security issues can be dealt effectively without crowding the security agenda of sovereign nation states. By securitizing such issues, when these threats pose existential challenges, it is possible to mobilize resources and means to prevent their malicious developments. This epidemic can be pushed back, but only with a collective, coordinated and comprehensive approach that engages the entire machinery of government.<sup>65</sup>

There is skepticism however about whether a particular government’s success – apparent or real- in dealing with an epidemic can be applied by others, and to a variety of security issues, many of which may not be falling within the spectrum of the strictly military, but important nevertheless from the perspective of the threat potential. Of course “there are very good reasons for countries to hesitate using these kinds of extreme measures.”<sup>66</sup> But there are more compelling reasons to do so considering the catastrophic nature of the threat – in terms of lethality and longevity - such as what the Covid-19 entails.

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