

Pandemics as security issues and their role in the reconstruction of the international system

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Abstract:

This paper illustrates how Covid-19 is a security threat, not only a health crisis. To do so, we examine how it has directly and indirectly affected international security and cover its multi-layer effects. Thus, the paper first discusses the literature about health security to establish a theoretical framework for the analysis of Covid-19 as an emerging security norm.

Then, three different channels are distinguished through which Covid-19 can affect international security issues: the first revolves around the impact of the crisis on the form, interactions, and actors of the international system; the second deals with the analysis of its effects on national security; while the third examines its repercussions on the human security.

Keywords: pandemic; security threat; international security; national security; human security

INTRODUCTION

The global health and socioeconomic landscape are vulnerable and cannot face public health emergencies, as the Covid-19 has shown. In this perspective, Covid-19 had a significant impact on the status-quo of the international relations and the operation of the international system due to its diverse forms and effects on societies. The weakness of the states in the battle against pandemics has been made clear by Covid-19. Therefore, we need a cohesive and coordinated global reaction with cross-border and methodical outcomes. Besides, the pandemic created a contradiction between the centralization of power and the decentralization of administration.

Based on what was said, this study aims at understanding the various effects of pandemics on the global security and answering the following question, "What impact did the different pandemics have on security levels and sectors?" In so doing, we hypothesize that "If pandemics are a source of instability, they are security threats which require a non-traditional approach to prevent various future security emergencies."

The study is based on the deconstructive-synthetic approach to reveal the process of securing pandemics. In this regard, we take Covid-19 as a focal point and shed light on its actors and interactions, and the future international system it shall impose. We divided the study into two axes; the first discusses the process of securing health and epidemics between theory and practice while the second shows the impacts of the pandemic on the international relations and security.

2. The process of securing health: theories and practice

Security has always been the top priority of all human needs because no other need can be satisfied nor any development can be achieved without meeting the security requirements of a society.

2.1 Expanding security:

A. The concept of security in Islam

The Quran clearly explains the importance of security in many verses. It tells us about the prayers of the prophet Abraham when he built the Kaaba in Mecca: "Oh my Lord, make this city a place of security, and bestow its fruits on those among its inhabitants who believe in Allah and the Last Day"¹ "When they came to Yusuf (Joseph), he welcomed his father and mother, and said to them: "Enter Egypt in safety, if Allah wills"². Furthermore, Allah Almighty says in Surah Qureish: "let them worship the Lord of this house, who has provided them with food and given them security"³. Moreover, Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon him) said: "Whoever of you who became safe and healthy in his house and had the food of his day, as if the world had been possessed for him."⁴

Thus, Islamic teachings clarify the important position of security in the human life, offer us an expanded concept that encompasses moral and material dimensions, including health security, and impose a profound concept of security based on meeting the basic needs of the individual and groups.

B. Health security in the theory of the international relations

The international relations theory shows that a tradition of mutual neglect has emerged between the fields of public health and international relations, even though many public health problems require action outside of countries. Besides, the scientists and public health experts generally do not rely on the concept of international relations to assess the challenges of international chaos despite the long international history of public health.

As for realism, it refuses to take into account public health issues, because realists do not consider health threats as physical threats to the security of large countries, and do not focus on the issues related to them such as cross-border surveillance of infectious diseases in foreign policy.⁵

This deliberate neglect makes the realist thinking critical due to the need to include transnational health risks in the realist analysis, since health threats jeopardize the material power of the state and weaken its power. Besides, the survival in the international system raises a threat that can be included in the field of Soft Power, which includes biological weapons that threaten the military and economic power of a country.

Speaking of health diplomacy, the Covid-19 crisis has shown that the national epidemic control has become a proof of the national strength. Regarding the institutional stream, it studies the health issues from a technical point of view and believes that international institutions facilitate the processes of communication, the flow of information, and the technical cooperation that helps alleviate conflicts. The institutionalized public health provides a framework for understanding the processes of formation and functioning of systems and ensures rational management of health problems⁶.

Liberalism uses different premises that distinguish this theory from other perceptions, because liberalism is part of the assumption that individuals and groups are the main actors in the international relations. This position means that liberalism does not view the rule of chaos from a horizontal perspective that focuses on the state, but from a non-governmental vertical perspective. Thus, two issues of liberal thought dominate the local context, namely the protection of individual rights and the existence of democratic governments.

Based on these assumptions, liberals present a broader perception of health threats. On the one hand, they criticize the government's responsibility for public health at the national and international levels and consider it a misconception. On the other hand, they interpret the mismanagement of public health problems in non-democratic countries as a lack of respect for the civil rights and an absence of democratic governance. In this context, Thomas Jefferson emphasizes, "sick populations are the

products of sick political systems.” Finally, when liberalism focuses on cross-border interdependence and trade threats, and when the public health concerns cross, public health becomes a secondary concern.

For Covid-19, the main currents of international relations have given explanations while preserving their intellectual premises. Realists presented the pandemic as a threat that forces states to adhere more to the policy of autonomy according to the principle of "self-help". Moreover, the liberals presented it as a transnational challenge to the liberal international order, norms, and institutions. Finally, the constructivist approach presents it as a social construction; it is “what states do with it”.⁷ It is clear that the level of global health research has not moved beyond the application of the contemporary international relations concepts to study these new developments.

2.2 Health security in the international agendas

At the level of the international management of health issues, health has been the subject of securitization based on the perception that cross-border health problems do not only raise a threat to national security, but also to global security. In this regard, the national security documents and strategies and the international agendas focus on the potential health risks, mainly after the UN Security Council issued Resolution 1308 on an issue of health in 2000, which recognized a potential epidemic that threatens stability and security. The perception of the international community was confirmed after the appearance of infectious diseases such as SARS in 2003, H1N1 in 2009, and Ebola in 2014, which was considered by the Security Council of the United Nations in Resolution 2177 as a "threat to international peace and security". Therefore, it seems that viewing health issues as security issues began before Covid-19. Since health problems raise a threat to stability and security, and because health is linked to the environment, trade, economic growth, social development, national security, human rights and to dignity, various countries around the world have

launched initiatives to integrate health issues into their foreign policy agendas, as set out in the Oslo Ministerial Declaration. In this regard, the United Nations General Assembly of 2008 adopted, after this declaration, the first resolution, 63/33, on global health and foreign policy, which was followed by a series of other resolutions, namely 64/108, 65/95, 66/115, 67/81, and 68/98⁸.

Furthermore, in his 2009 report entitled “Global Health and Foreign Policy: Strategic Opportunities and challenges”, the previous UN Secretary-General “Kofi Annan” highlighted that the global health affects all essential functions of foreign policy, including security, creating economic wealth, supporting the development of low-income countries, and protecting human dignity. Therefore, the global health security has become part of the foreign policy agenda in national security, trade, and diplomacy.⁹ In this context, the right to health and its contribution to peace and security are clearly defined in the Constitution of the World Health Organization, which includes the following principles:

1-Enjoying the best possible state of health is one of the fundamental rights of every person, without distinction of race, religion, political opinion, and economic or social situation.

2-The health of people is essential to the establishment of peace and security, and also depends on the full cooperation of individuals and states.¹⁰

3. The impact of the pandemic on the international relations:

Regarding the impact of pandemics on the nature of the international interactions, many proponents of the health security model have looked to historical records to support their claims about the role of infectious diseases in changing the international system. In this line, Thucydides mentioned how the mysterious plague overthrew the army of the Athenians and played a crucial role in the outcome of the Peloponnesian War, as did

the Black Death, which killed almost a third of the European population in the end of the feudal system. History remembers that Cortés defeated the Aztec civilization with a small army during the spread of smallpox. In addition, historians say that the European settlers deliberately gave smallpox-infected blankets to the indigenous peoples to steal their lands. These historical examples illustrate the decisive impact of infectious diseases on the resolution of geopolitical conflicts.¹¹

Since the second half of the 20th century, non-traditional security threats have emerged, such as pollution, large-scale industrial activities, cross-border terrorism, global warming, crises, and epidemics such as SARS, Zika virus, and H1N1 influenza, which are signals of increasingly clear warnings that call for the attention of the international community and for a collective response. These non-traditional security threats have been the subject of consensus among countries and have advanced international cooperation through a series of international channels. At the same time, the United States drew attention to traditional security threats by separately presenting a "rebalancing" strategy for the Asian-Pacific region, and a preventive and proactive strategy for the Indian and Pacific oceans, which aimed at targeting traditional security issues such as the rise of China, Russia's comeback strategy, and the geopolitical struggle between the great power. However, non-traditional threats are gradually falling behind security issues.¹²

For Covid-19, which is now one of the non-traditional threats to global peace and security according to security studies, it is no longer a mere health problem; rather, it is a transnational threat which obliges the states to cooperate with civil and military parties and various national and transnational institutions¹³. The World Health Organization declared this global problem as an epidemic on March 12, 2020, demanding that each country be a self-help and tackle the problem at the national level. Thus, the absence of international organizations to solve problems, the weak international cooperation, the decrease in external interdependence, and the

growing importance of science, health, and IT are all signs that mark the entry of the international system into a new era.

In Covid-19 and the post-Covid-19 international anarchic system, where the states act alone without supreme authority, the concepts of “Military Power” and “Economic Power” and the phenomenon of “Mighty Power” gain a new meaning, with the emergence of new ideas such as the health system, supply chain, and emergency capacity. People are trying to redefine the international system in the light of these concepts.¹⁴

3.1 The human security is subject to a direct threat by Covid-19

Because viruses do not respect the national borders in their transmission, Covid-19 is a human security crisis that spreads fear and need, and deprives people of freedom to live in dignity. The pandemic has shown the need for an approach to human security, which includes the protection and empowerment of humans. In response, a medical solution alone is not enough, as the measures must address the impacts on the economy, politics, society, and even culture.

Covid-19 has reversed a number of development gains, leaving great uncertainty surrounding pathways to recovery. In this context, it is useful to consider seven components or types of human security needs or issues as developed by the UN:

1-Health security: Health security encompasses access to health services and living in a safe environment. The emergence of Covid-19 has created a serious global public health emergency.¹⁵ According to estimations from the World Health Organization (WHO), the death toll directly or indirectly associated with the pandemic between January 1, 2020 and December 31, 2021 was approximately 14.9 million.¹⁶ In addition to direct deaths caused by Covid-19, there are many indirect deaths resulting from delays in seeking care for other conditions, from overwhelmed health systems, or from the diversion of resources to deal with Covid-19. Unexpectedly, the

United States and the United Kingdom, which had previously been identified as the two best prepared countries for a pandemic in 2019, found themselves among the worst affected due to imperfect and delayed government responses, coupled with the worsening of social and health inequalities.

2-Economic security: Due to the pandemic, poverty has increased and chaos has affected the populations of many countries. The World Bank estimated in 2020 that due to Covid-19 and climate change, 119 to 124 million people are pushed into extreme poverty (those living on less than \$1.90 per day). In 2021, the crisis would continue and is expected to intensify, and these numbers will increase further to reach 143 to 163 million. Against this backdrop, measures to contain the spread of the virus, such as repeated lockdowns, led to economic disruptions that threatened nearly half of the global workforce and led to loss of livelihoods.

3-Food security: Food security, i.e. access to basic nutrition and food supply, is closely linked to the economic security. Many people who lost their jobs, or whose work hours were reduced, lost income and became food insecure. The lack of social protection affects populations in both rich and poor countries. The pandemic is eroding incomes and causing disruptions to markets and supply chains, leading to food shortages and price increases.

4-Environmental Security: There are concerns that as some governments focus their efforts on containing Covid-19, they may be less able or willing to enforce regulations that govern environmentally sensitive activities such as farming, mining, and forestry, what leads to greater environmental damage. During the first five months of the pandemic, deforestation reportedly increased by more than 50% in Africa, Asia, and South America. Illegal use, mining and land grabbing have rapidly increased in Brazil during the pandemic.

Additionally, the growing number of the environmental crimes appears to be the outcome of loose sanctions from the authorities. In Cambodia,

travel restrictions have prevented international conservation NGOs from maintaining a presence in sanctuaries to help monitor and discourage deforestation. In Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Indonesia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, governments have deliberately rolled back environmental regulations and protections in order to stimulate economic growth.

5-Community Security: As it relates to human security, community security means preventing community collapse by avoiding traditional relationships and values and sectarian and ethnic violence. Analysts warn of increased instability in the world's poorest countries, which already suffer from hunger, disease, lack of opportunities, climate change, and conflicts.¹⁷

6-Personal safety: This question concerns the absence of threat of physical violence. An increase in family violence has been observed because of Covid-19. Gender-based violence is known to be exacerbated in times of crisis, conflicts, and economic tensions. Due to movement restrictions and stay-at-home orders to contain the virus, victims have been abused, and simultaneously, had restricted opportunities to seek help from formal and informal networks.

7-Political Security: The political security of people means that they live in a society that respects the fundamental human rights. Covid-19 is not only a health and economic crisis, but also a political crisis in which authoritarian leaders suppress the opposition and strengthen their power. Authoritarian governments have used emergency powers to restrict human rights and increase state surveillance, without adequate guarantees or provisions for the restoration of the constitutional order.

This comprehensive view sought to clarify the complex reality by revealing the threats created by Covid-19 in domino form.

3.2 The impact of Covid-19 on the national security of countries

The development of the security research in the international relations has often been linked to the protection of the national sovereignty against the military and conventional threats. However, in this age of information and technology, the essence of security has been diverted from its single meaning. The threats facing the world today are most often hidden in unpredictable and invisible ways. Besides, the military power is no longer the only threat. For example, Covid-19 raised a major challenge to health systems, and even the national security of countries, including the most developed.

At the same time, the economic and health impact of Covid-19 has multiplied disproportionately on the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, causing deep cracks in the current global health architecture and highlighting the need for reforms. Hence, it is necessary to reduce the risk of future pandemics and raise the level of public health as a national security priority.

For decades, policymakers and experts have argued that the concept of the national security should extend beyond state-centric and military-focused threats to include infectious diseases and climate change. Biological repair should be considered as a health security threat to mitigate future epidemic threats.

Should health security be militarized in the international reality under the questions raised by Covid-19? Under the revised International Health Regulations, the fundamental missions of the military have changed, and in many countries around the world, the military health services have unique capabilities that can contribute to the global public health such as the military health surveillance system against influenza (Miss) in France and the infection surveillance and response system of the United States Armed Forces Health Surveillance Center

However, Covid-19 is a good example of how conventional weapons are not necessary to combat future security threats, given that they may not only be limited to a massive military invasion, but also be smaller than an airborne virus. The local attitude of the public towards government policies makes the obligation that security must be established not only by the state, but also by individuals, what requires a broad, transparent, and fair approach for cooperation, including cross-border sectors and phenomena. Thus, the non-asymmetric challenges do not always require military solutions. Furthermore, countries should not militarize the management of epidemics, because it is a war between man and virus, not between humans.¹⁸

It is, therefore, important to emphasize that the Covid-19 as a non-traditional security threat menaces the human life and affects the national security. On the other hand, Covid-19 can affect traditional security through the development of the biological weapons by non-state actors.

3.3 The geopolitical changes

From the start of the pandemic, the United States and China considered it as an event of geopolitical importance. The geopolitical indicators of the outbreak were clear to China, which responded by focusing on superpower status. In this context, global ambitions strictly embody China's vision of its sovereignty, global position, and regional leadership. The same goes for the United States, which handled the incident geopolitically by blaming China for withholding aid to the World Health Organization, or even diverting medical resources to other countries because the pandemic is a threat to the state's national security and international position, before being a threat to human security. Therefore, it can be said that the geopolitical treatment of the epidemic raises international problems for health cooperation. A policy of balancing "soft power" could harm the international health and cooperation. Moreover, the World Health Organization, which is supposed to pursue global health goals,

could also serve as a shadow of the goals of its existence, which undermines the scientific efforts. On the contrary, certain new crises could lead the global health to regain its traditional place in the geopolitical logic.

4.3 The impact of Covid-19 on the regional and international realignment efforts

Covid-19 has affected the external behavior of countries at the international level. Some of them are trying to take advantage of the pandemic and past experience in fighting it, to gain allies through medical aid, and to rebalance regionalism leading to intensified competition and confrontation among states.¹⁹

Politicizing humanitarian aid aims to anticipate and redefine the characteristics of the international system, as is the case, for example, in China and Turkey. Before the outbreak of Covid-19, China was not ranked in global humanitarian spending. Later, with the outbreak, it has become a major player in providing medical assistance to nearly 80 countries and international and regional organizations. Compared to national income, Turkey ranked first in the world in providing humanitarian aid.²⁰

4. The post-Covid19 international system

Before Covid-19, the international system was already in a phase of transition, with tensions between those who wish to preserve the liberal world order, and those who reject the status quo and seek to reorganize the international situation by making a post-Western world. However, Covid-19 has imposed new models of cooperation and reshaped the geopolitical orientations. In this context, a number of perceptions can be indicated about the changes that will take place in the post-Covid-19 international system.

- 1- International cooperation will be a need based on a functional model close to the concept of Mitranian functionalism by breaking the geographical link with the human activities²¹. This form of international interactions reveals the limited health performance of the

states, regardless their strength, in the face of certain non-traditional and cross-border threats such as Covid-19.

- 2- In the struggle between those who adhere to globalization and a free world order, and those who interact with protectionist trade policies, Covid-19 has entered the global scene and accelerated the transformation of the world order. Perhaps, we will see a new self-reliant state in all sectors that can support its own needs without relying heavily on the global supply, but which will continue to expand its global trade relations, which could lead to a new state model based on nation trade.

In this new order, we are likely to see the return of states and the emergence of a smaller system of trade theory, which together will be constrained by trade theory because states cannot prevent cooperation. This will allow us to go beyond the centers of power and institutions that support the process of globalization, i.e., to create a new model of state, as defined by Cox as a state that seeks to achieve self-sufficiency by imposing conditions that allow it to no longer depend on dominant global institutions and their international political and economic relationships, while continuing global trade and setting standards for how it can interact with other actors in the global economy²².

- 3-By forcing countries to cooperate for the development of vaccines and deal with pharmaceutical companies from another country, Covid -19 goes beyond traditional models of national politics and international relations, and gives everyone the opportunity to think outside the box. Besides, it strengthens different models of diplomacy, such as the human, government, and health diplomacies.

- 4- The post-Covid-19 world will force states to participate more in international cooperation, and the supporters of liberal globalization to question the ideological motivations, which are the only determining

factor of international cooperation. It is a model of cooperation, which may be motivated by the desire for survival and be based on basic needs.²³

5- Promote the role of NGOs as partners to meet the challenge of pandemics as security challenges: the involvement of NGOs in the management of cross-border health threats through non-governmental humanitarian diplomacy is one of the manifestations of specialization and the privatization of the diplomatic domain. The Non-governmental humanitarian diplomacy suggests finding a negotiated solution to the pandemic while providing humanitarian support to the affected²⁴. All parties concerned with the fight against the health crises face the multilateral diplomacy negotiated with the host countries.

Covid- 19 has once again established a strong link between the humanitarian action and the humanitarian diplomacy, whose relation and communication are based on the premise that both are the result of social and economic affairs and the cultural and political interactions between people. The humanitarian diplomacy goes beyond the human dignity to the national interest, security, development, as well as a panorama of functions from “hard power” to “soft power”. It is important to distinguish between humanitarian “diplomacy” and humanitarian “operations,” because diplomacy does not include only the provision of aid and materials, but also promotes the humanitarian action.²⁵

6- Digitalization and technological development to meet health challenges:

The international experience in handling Covid - 19 has proven that technology is the basis for a good health system and the best option for predicting pandemics. In this regard, technology allows humanity to respond quickly to pandemics and epidemics, as the experience of the Asian countries has shown. They used advanced technologies to contain epidemics and provide virtual access to healthcare via technology installed in smartphones. Technology helped determine whether an individual should be isolated and get information about their symptoms.

- Artificial intelligence can help diagnose the virus and help frontline healthcare workers detect and monitor patients effectively. The technology is so fast that Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba is offering it, claiming 96% of virus diagnoses are accurate. Moreover, the Canadian start-up “Bluedot” offers early detection services before outbreaks. Moreover, it reduces the direct interactions because healthcare requests are processed faster, regardless of employee constraints.
- Artificial intelligence can develop medicines through algorithms that understand the proteins that make up the virus and develop a cure.

Beyond the artificial intelligence, big data is essential to identify and assess the risk of each person based on their travel record, time spent in virus hotspots, and potential exposure to infected people. It is an excellent system to combat the pandemics or potential bioterrorist attacks.²⁶

CONCLUSION

Covid-19 has triggered a global alert and a non-traditional security threat. It has serious repercussions on the life and health of all the people. On the other hand, it encourages the international community to strengthen its response to transnational non-military threats. After the international community has paid a heavy price, it recognized the need for a united international front to combat the health threats and promote fair international governance to ensure the protection of the international economy, trade, and health security.

The article illustrated the process of securing pandemics as a challenge of an unprecedented degree, either in terms of human, socio-economic, political, and even environmental damage, or in terms of the states’ reactions. This confirmed the principle of “self-Help” of realists and the limits of action of non-state actors during major security challenges. However, the international organizations, mainly WHO and UN, called for strengthened international coordination.

In this context, the following conclusions were drawn:

- The general difficulty facing the international community in the common fight against the new coronavirus is the contradiction between the global character of the pandemic and the national character of national responses.
- Health security promotes multilateral cooperation in matters of cross-border epidemics and diseases. However, given the lack of consensus on the implications of the health security, the focus on its risks deepens the global divisions between North and South rather than promoting a collective approach to health challenges.
- Securing epidemics should not include military mechanisms or geopolitical considerations. Furthermore, Covid-19 cannot be viewed from a traditional security perspective because it is not a military threat; it is a security challenge to public health and human security. Additionally, it has been argued that health presents challenges at different levels in different countries.
- Finally, it should be noted that deepening reconciliation between the international security and public health communities is essential for a rapid response to various future health emergencies.

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