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Are We at War? The Politics of Securitizing the Coronavirus

<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/01/10/are-we-at-war-the-politics-of-securitizing-the-coronavirus/>

INDIA WRIGHT, JAN 10 2021

Since its emergence in the Wuhan Province of China in December 2019, the novel coronavirus (herein COVID-19) has spread around the world at such “alarming levels” that the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the outbreak a pandemic on 11 March 2020.[1] The virus has become entangled with military metaphors and analogies, leading academics like Cynthia Enloe to argue that “waging a war” against the virus is a problematic frame to use.[2] After outlining a definition of security and discourse using Poststructuralist and Copenhagen School contributions to security studies, this essay will employ these theories to analyse the vocabulary of global political leaders. Given that the language surrounding COVID-19 implies that the virus is a threat, COVID-19 has been placed within a security discourse and been securitized. The outcomes of this will be analysed in relation to historical global health crises, culminating in the argument that the political effects of placing COVID-19 within a security discourse are simultaneously advantageous and problematic.

Global Health and Security: Framing the Analysis

The security studies discipline is contested, primarily due to a lack of consensus as to the meaning of security itself.[3] Whilst traditional accounts of security are linked to the nation-state and the “accumulation of power,”[4] this narrow definition, which is often associated with Realist approaches, pays little attention to issues of global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] A broader conceptualisation is necessary to understand how COVID-19 could be perceived as a security issue.

Poststructuralism offers a relevant starting point to broaden the definition of security. Focusing on the importance of language, security is seen as a discursive practice and a political practice.[6] Discourses are “systems of meaning-production”[7] that “do something.”[8] By engaging with sites of communication and interpretation, security is seen as something that is constituted through language.[9] This is complemented by the insights of the “speech act approach”[10] of the Copenhagen School. By considering security as a social construction, the Copenhagen School views security as a move whereby politics can transcend the “established rules of the game,”[11] enabling and justifying the use of “extraordinary measures.”[12] A particular issue is securitized when a security actor (such as a global political leader) presents it as an existential threat to a relevant audience who accept this securitizing move.[13] Like Poststructuralism, the focus on the “speech act”[14] component of security means that these frameworks can be applied to explore how security is subjectively constructed through language.

Concentrating on language, the connections between security and health in a broader sense are evident. Historically, military metaphors have dominated the language of medicine, leading to the narrative that medical therapies are “weapons”[15] used to defeat disease. The shared vocabulary between discourses of health and those of security are highlighted in concepts like “elimination, defence, containment, and frontlines.”[16] These linguistic connections underpin how security and health are inherently entwined.

Additionally, COVID-19 can be analysed in light of the historical context of global health security. Indeed, the links between global health and security are well documented, with academics arguing that “modern warfare and medicine are symbiotic and homologous.”[17] The current pandemic must therefore be seen as a continuation of this historical

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trajectory which has developed narratives of communicable diseases as security threats.[18] The securitization of historical global health crises such as HIV/ AIDS,[19] the H5N1 Avian Flu,[20] and SARS[21] have become precedents,[22] enabling global political leaders to effectively position COVID-19 within a security discourse.

A War-Time President: The Coronavirus and Security

The methods of labelling the virus as a security issue range from merely identifying COVID-19 as a threat, to declaring war. At the level of international institutions, the WHO has previously engaged in securitizing moves by using the logic of security to frame infectious diseases,[23] which foregrounds the case of COVID-19. During a press briefing, the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom used vocabulary such as “efforts on many fronts” and “operational tool[s],” encouraging international solidarity throughout such difficult times.[24] Similarly, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres commented in a Tweet that we all “face a common threat”[25] from the virus. These example speech acts by leaders of international institutions display how COVID-19 has been positioned within a security discourse as is it presented as a threat to the international community.

An extension of this is the presentation of responses to COVID-19 using the metaphors of war; an unmistakeable narrative that has been predominantly pushed by state leaders. Not only has the President of the United States mentioned the need to “fight against the virus,”[26] but he has declared himself a “wartime president.”[27] Additionally, French President Emmanuel Macron proclaimed repeatedly in a national address “Nous sommes en guerre,”[28] translating to ‘We are at war.’ The pandemic situation also led Xi Jinping to declare a “people’s war”[29] in China against COVID-19. The use of this metaphor by state leaders is a clear example of actors speaking security. Interestingly, COVID-19 is not an enemy in the traditional sense; it does not adhere to the traditional rational-actor model which explains conflict and war in terms of states and armed forces.[30] Instead, the pandemic has been constructed as an existential threat by leaders who have used language to position it within a security discourse.

Furthering this, the insights of the Copenhagen School support the argument that these existential threats have mostly been accepted by the relevant audience, enabling extraordinary measures and the securitization of COVID-19. A primary example of these measures are the restrictions placed on human movement both within and between borders. States such as the US, China and Australia have implemented legislation that restricts international travel through closed borders.[31] In some instances, internal borders have likewise been shut to restrict movement and protect communities from the virus.[32] Isolation and quarantine measures in many states have also led to police enforcement of these new laws, and cases of people being fined for breaches of social distancing laws have been reported.[33] The acceptance of these extraordinary measures, when taking Australia as an example, can arguably be evidenced in the success seen in “flattening the curve” and reducing community transmissions as people have curbed their social interactions.[34] By adhering to new regulations regarding their mobility, citizens have accepted the measures put in place by governments in response to COVID-19.

Furthermore, measures which are distinct from politics-as-usual are evident at an international level. Key treaties and global meetings like the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty review have been postponed due to the pandemic. New arrangements have been agreed upon by states regarding on-site inspections for treaties like the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between the US and Russia.[35] Thus, not only have citizens accepted the implementation of extraordinary measures by states, but states too have accepted the securitization of COVID-19 and have adjusted their usual inter-state relations accordingly.

Evidently, the positioning of COVID-19 as a security threat speaks to the understanding of security as a discursive practice. This also leads to the observation that security is a “political practice”[36] that is accompanied by a break from politics-as-usual. The evocation of security by leaders leads to particular political consequences which will be discussed further.

Are We at War? : The Political Effects of Securitizing COVID-19

The traditional view of security has seen conflated security with military operations.[37] As such, securitizing COVID-19 endows responses to the virus with a certain “political baggage.”[38] Understanding this, three major

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trends regarding the political effects of referring to COVID-19 as a war become evident when comparing the current pandemic to previous global health crises that have been similarly securitized.

The first political effect has been the increased attention and resources made available as the virus is given priority status. In the historical case of the H5N1 Avian Flu, Jeremy Youde found that by appealing to the self-interest of states, securitizing global health issues means they are endowed with a higher importance relative to non-security issues and thus receive greater attention and resources.[39] Stefan Elbe has further argued that this is the major political advantage of securitizing global health crises.[40] This dynamic is observable in responses to COVID-19. At a state level, governments have invested in the funding of research, as seen by the Australian Government's \$2.6 million AUD plan to improve testing capabilities and technologies.[41] At the international level, increased awareness has seen key organisations like the World Bank offer concessions such as debt-service suspension and the disbursement of funds to countries like Senegal, Ghana and Uzbekistan.[42] Advantageously, by presenting COVID-19 as a security threat, global political leaders have imbued it with the sense of urgency and heightened awareness. By increasing the resources available to deal with the crisis, both states and the international community are able to develop faster and better-funded responses.

Conversely, whilst the heightened awareness has mobilized resources, it has also promoted inappropriate responses to the pandemic.[43] The first of these inappropriate responses is unsurprising given the Poststructuralist conceptualisation of "security as a logic informing war as a practice." [44] As the state has been the historical provider of security,[45] securitizing global health crises promotes militaristic state solutions.[46] The resort to police enforcement to maintain emergency measures has been evident in state responses to COVID-19. Extreme controls have been witnessed in states like Kenya where police used weapons such as teargas and batons to enforce new laws, and strict COVID-19 curfews have resulted in instances of citizens being shot and killed.[47] Indeed, a consequence of calling COVID-19 a security issue, and employing metaphors of war, is the promotion of such militaristic responses. These clearly create further insecurities in populations who are now not only vulnerable to the virus, but also the potentially violent enforcement of COVID-19 laws.

Securitization, as conceived by the Copenhagen School also results in a phenomenon known as the 'security trap'; in securitising issues with the goal of obtaining security, actors can alternatively create a greater feeling of insecurity.[48] Instead of reassuring populations, certain emergency measures can "create a feeling of panic." [49] The anxiety caused by securitization was documented in relation to the SARS and H5N1 Avian Flu crises in China where panic buying and mass social instability were outcomes of the additional restrictions put in place by authorities.[50] Clear parallels can be made with the COVID-19 pandemic. Since imposing restrictions to mobility, states like Australia have witnessed mass panic buying as citizens stocked up on toilet paper, medicines and other essentials.[51] In instances like this, securitising the pandemic has not made citizens feel more secure but has resulted in anxious populations.

Moreover, securitization of COVID-19 has led to the development of a divisive blame-game between states. The "short-term us-versus-them thinking," [52] witnessed here is supported by the Poststructuralist observation that security practices centre on a construction of a national Self by comparing this Self to a different and distinct Other.[53] This has been most evident in the increasingly tense relationship between China and the United States. As the COVID-19 has spread, Donald Trump has taken to referring to it as the "Chinese Virus." [54] In doing so, he insinuates that China is the source of the security threat since it is the origin country of the pandemic. This political move came after Beijing officials claimed the American military was to blame for the outbreak.[55] Such a blame-game moves the security discourse in a nationalistic direction whereby states like the US securitize COVID-19 to protect their own citizens against external sources of threat, like China. Now, instead of simply viewing the virus as the threat, states have begun to position others states as the enemy.

The final political effect of placing COVID-19 within a security discourse is the furthering of global inequalities. Scholars have previously argued that global health institutions like the WHO prioritize the concerns of developed countries insofar that securitization will likely worsen the situation of developing countries.[56] In the mobilization of resources to respond to a pandemic situation, developing countries may be required to prioritise this health crisis and divert already-insufficient resources away from other areas of concern.[57] Cases from states such as Nigeria, Peru

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and Kenya have highlighted how already weak health systems, that were struggling before the pandemic, would be wholly unable to deal with a large outbreak of COVID-19 cases.[58] Compounding this vulnerability are the detrimental economic outcomes of the virus. In developing states, crucial industries like tourism and manufacturing that are heavily dependent on international travel and transport have been negatively impacted or even suspended since the closure of borders.[59] Given these examples and the idea that “health is determined by level of development,”[60] the securitization of COVID-19 renders already insecure populations in developing nations even more vulnerable.

Ultimately, whilst securitization does present the advantage of increasing the awareness and resources available to respond to the pandemic, this is outweighed by the more problematic political effects. Some of these include the propensity for inappropriate measures such as militaristic responses, the creation of panic and the fostering of tensions and divisions between states, as well as furthering the inequalities between states in their ability to address the vulnerabilities of their populations. Designating the virus as a security issue is a political move which frames global health debates in ways which do not assist with the end goal of international health cooperation.[61] If the WHO is calling for “solidarity within and between countries,”[62] then referring to COVID-19 as a war (thus encouraging the identification of enemies and use of violence) decreases the potential for a coordinated global effort in responding to the challenges the pandemic poses.

Conclusions

By broadening definitions to focus on the construction of security through language, insights from Poststructuralism and the Copenhagen School demonstrate how global political leaders have referred to the pandemic situation as both a threat and a war, positioning COVID-19 within a security discourse. Furthermore, the securitization of the virus has been witnessed as emergency measures at both domestic and international levels have been enacted and arguably accepted by relevant audiences. Placing COVID-19 within a security discourse has resulted in varied political effects. Indeed, the increased awareness has enabled resources to be mobilized to respond to the situation, but this advantage is outweighed by the inappropriate responses the securitization of COVID-19 encourages. Ultimately, the securitization of COVID-19 entangles the pandemic in the political quagmire associated with security politics; increasing tensions and insecurities within and between states, furthering inequalities and hindering a coordinated global response.

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Date written: May 2020