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Re-visiting National Security of India in the wake of Covid-19

Covid 19 has proved to be one of most fatal pandemics having a wide range of social, economic, political and security consequences. This paper at the outset, advocates for a comprehensive national security policy for India to address emerging traditional and non – traditional security threats. A state cannot ensure survival in the post-cold war world just by adopting the brute-statistical approach. Considering the emerging non-traditional security threats like climate change, energy insecurity, drug trafficking, pandemics, cyber insecurity, space war etc, a holistic security approach is the need of the hour. Covid also guides us as to how to combat pandemics, be it natural or man made, because impact and mitigation strategies would be almost similar. The paper argues that National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) should take up the task to re-visit its earlier draft National Security (NSS) Policy as the cost of not having a comprehensive NSS is very high.

Introduction

National security has traditionally been debated largely in terms of war, military threat, external armed aggression, terrorism, etc. The recent invasion of Russia on Ukraine has showed that even the world body like United Nations

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and close friends like the United States would remain passive supporters (or deactive), and therefore one has to manage its survival and national security interests on his own. This is because of the self-help structure of the International system, where the survival of the state is the biggest national interest. The statist approach defines national security as protecting the state from physical threats. This approach comes within the ambit of the conventional or traditional aspect of national security. However, a pandemic like Covid 19 suddenly comes and seriously challenges the state and its national security. This constitutes non–traditional security threat. A state can ensure its continued survival only if it strategises its national security to meet traditional and non-traditional challenges simultaneously in short and long terms.

There has been considerable debate regarding the linkage between the pandemic and national security. Some academics and political theorists have been making a strong plea to dismiss both the importance and validity of discerning links between the pandemic and the security of states. it is high time to examine the threat not just from a health or medical point of view but from a larger perspective of national security. To be more specific, treating Corona as a national security issue would make the battle against it more organised. If we continue to neglect Covid-19 within the arena of national security, there is a serious danger that we end up with mistaken domestic and foreign policies that do more harm than good.

The dynamics of national security is changing and it is not limited to only military matters and conventional wars. Post-cold war has greatly witnessed serious non-military or non traditional threats like climate change, energy insecurity, drug trafficking, pandemics, the economic collapse of the state, cyber insecurity, space war etc. Emerging and re-emerging diseases and their pandemic potential pose a challenge to national security in the 21st century. The growing covid-19 pandemic and the outbreak of Influenza H1N1 and SARS in the recent past are just a few examples of diseases that can profoundly threaten the physical integrity of a state. However, these non–military threats to national security have not been accorded the same level of urgency and seriousness as compared to military ones in academia.

The national security of a state can be threatened by a pandemic like Covid 19 in a variety of ways. First, it can cause increased rates of illness and mortality, putting huge strains on public health and the nation's workforce, leading to political instability, class strife and economic recession. Secondly,

the most direct threat posed by a pandemic to the international community arises from its vulnerability to biological warfare. It is important to note that the result of a naturally spreading disease and something like bioterrorism is one and the same. The failure to prevent the biological weapon's attack results in the same outcome – infection of the population – and requires the same solution. The preparation for the widespread disease should, therefore, be a key focus of national security.[1] Thirdly, the pandemics pose more indirect threats to national security which include "the health of the armed forces and most significantly, to the social, economic, and political stability of certain key regions."[2]

The contemporary Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted that States have to largely manage their own and the world body like World Health Organisation (WHO) may not instantly and sufficiently come for rescue and help. Therefore, the covid-19 outbreak has raised important questions about whether pandemics should be accorded a more central role in making the national security policy and operational doctrines, given their potential to seriously threaten national security by taking lives, expenditure cuts, deferred defence acquisitions and destabilising the national and global economy.

Covid-19 Pandemic and National Security

National security of India is also engulfed in the self – help anarchic system like any other State. The dominating views of Indian national security largely lean toward countering military threats posed by Pakistan and China. The discourse thus continues to be shaped primarily by the prospect of an armed conflict with China and Pakistan. In this context, India is learning from Ukraine that it has to fight its own. India is also facing non – traditional security threats like terrorism and naxalism. It can be argued that India's approach to national security is largely centred on a conventional approach to counter threats by use of the military, be it States or non – State actors.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has, however upside down the traditional notion of national security prompting for a re-visit in view of its social,

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1   Jane Evans, "Pandemics and National Security", *Global Security Studies*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 3.

2   Kujur, Rajat Kumar, " Critical Connection: COVID-19 Pandemic and National Security", URL: https://sspconline.org/issue-brief/critical-connection-covid-19-pandemic-and-national-security-mon-05112020-1200

economic, political and security implications. First of all, it led to a severe health crisis as the public health systems were not equipped enough to cope with the increased demand of oxygen cylinders, vital drugs, ventilators, beds, etc. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in India was reported on 30 January 2020.[3] Since then India has witnessed three waves of Covid 19. The devastating first and second waves of the pandemic passed without vaccination. It highlighted serious implications for India's health systems. One major reason for the poor conditions of India's public health systems is under investment.

The Covid 19 severely devastated economy as millions of jobs were lost and start-ups were closed. Secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy were severely affected due to lockdown measures and the migration of labourers. The impact of lockdown, job losses, shutting down of start-ups, and migration of labourers are a few examples of pandemic struck. The cheap labour pool has long been a major factor in India's economic growth. The lockdown has prompted these workers to return to their villages depriving industrial centres of labour. The ailing Indian economy and rationalisation measures prompted for necessary cuts in the budget estimates in line with "जान है तो जहान है".

In light of this, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that the COVID-19 pandemic was the most challenging global crisis since the Second World War and warned of "enhanced instability, enhanced unrest, and enhanced conflict" as a result of it.[4] Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic could set off a chain reaction of crises ranging from public health to socio-economic and governance crises, thereby posing grave threat to national security. Threats from pandemics ought to be taken seriously because COVID-19 is unlikely to be the last of global pandemic to occur and different variants of covid 19 will continue to come.

Traditional and non – traditional security threats in the post-cold war has made the world order more diffused and uncertain, and it requires re-visit of national security strategies. Importantly, international tensions may not be reduced by the Covid 19. Recent situations that emerged during covid times are

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3   Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MHFW). "Update on Novel Coronavirus: one positive case reported in Kerala". Public Information Bureau (PIB). January 30, 2020. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1601095

4   "UN chief calls coronavirus pandemic worst crisis since World War II". South China Morning Post. April 1, 2020. https://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/3077825/un-chief-calls-coronavirus-worst-crisis-world-war-ii

testimony to this. Firstly, India experienced Chinese revisionist mobilisation on border during Covid times and India has to put its armed forces on high alert to ensure status quo ante. In other words, military and non–military threats could also challenge simultaneously as seen from the China border stand-off. To put it differently, a covid-affected revisionist State seeks to challenge another covid-affected state who wants status quo. This constitutes two front challenges. Secondly, covid 19 pandemic (non – traditional threat) and thereafter Russia's attack on Ukraine (traditional threat) make a strong point that self-help or self-reliance strategy should get central attention while dealing with a non – State entity like covid and revisionist State like Russia. Thirdly, there could be some short-term implications for national security brought about by the pandemic, such as massive troop illnesses, as seen on the USS Theodore Roosevelt, the aircraft carrier with hundreds of Covid-19 cases on board. In extreme cases, the incapacitation of leaders in nuclear-equipped countries — such as British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was hospitalised for Covid-19 — might raise tricky defence-leadership issues as well.

The security strategy cannot be straight and one liner. It has to address multiple challenges simultaneously. Re-setting budget priorities is vital to meet multiple challenges. Continued positioning of Chinese forces at Sino-India border during Covid times necessitated for essential defence acquisitions and operational positioning. It also paved for self-reliance policy in defence manufacturing. In fact, pandemic provided enough space to understand that indigenous development and defence preparedness is vital for the survival of the fittest in the international system.

This pandemic therefore pointed out for a comprehensive national security strategy to deal with traditional and non-traditional security threats. Political leaders around the world have considered covid-19 response as their top national security priority.   Yet, such priority is misplaced in India's national security discourse. Needless to say that considering the huge impact of the pandemics, it warrants greater attention and a re-visit of India's national security approach.

Conclusion

Pandemics have historically threatened and impacted both national and international security and covid-19 has already emerged as a major national

security threat. It is important that the countries wake up to this reality soon and any failure to manage and mitigate at this stage will have a long-term impact on international peace, stability and security. As the Coronavirus pandemic escalates, the task of rethinking the political, economic, diplomatic and strategic fundamentals of a more coherent approach to national security becomes more urgent than ever. As the battle against covid-19 is seemingly uncertain, one thing is clear that it is going to alter a whole lot of ethos of national security. Other than anything, this pandemic has raised some serious question mark over the relevance of power notions of global politics and globalisation. Amidst growing uncertainties caused by the metamorphic rise and spread of Covid-19, national security preferences need to adapt holistically to the emerging landscape of complex security threats.

Therefore, India must adopt a comprehensive and integrated National Security Strategy (NSS) which addresses threats emanating from traditional/military and non-traditional/non-military sources. India currently does not have an NSS and it relies on ad-hoc responses to address its national security challenges. It is high time for the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) to re-visit its draft national security policy in view of the pandemics. The cost of not having a comprehensive NSS with clear guidelines on how to address threats to India's national security from non-military sources like the Covid-19 pandemic is very high.

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