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RESEARCH BRIEF 7/2020

Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa

[SIGLA @ Stellenbosch](#)

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COVID-19 as a security threat: some initial perspectives

Background

The international response to the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a health security threat stimulated an international response that commenced with drastic, but localised actions in China, but responses rapidly manifested in more extreme measures in the rest of the world. Amidst international efforts imposing extraordinary national and international movement restrictions and a rush to find a medical cure, two questions arise. First, how does COVID-19 as a health security threat feature within the global security debate and second, how to explain the harsh responses that one observes.

Discussion

Security theorists made rapid strides in shifting the concept of security from a state-centred focus that prioritises governments and states backed by security institutions to one that accentuates people as main beneficiaries. This drive for an [extended security discourse](#) aims to stress individual security as the ultimate outcome of responses to threats and vulnerabilities in previously neglected security sectors. The latter sectors refer to amongst other, social, economic, environmental, health and climate security that support safe and secure livelihoods for all. In similar vein, the UN's influential 1994 [Human Development Report](#) identifies and describes the range of sectors that underpin a more secure human environment. The report flags health security and how all countries are exposed to risks associated with illnesses and low quality health care with an emphasis on respiratory diseases that even in 1994, unwittingly alluded to pandemics such as COVID-19.

[Hough](#)¹ sets health threats to security within the global context and offers arguments one can relate to the COVID-19 pandemic. He stressed Influenza and Pneumonia viruses as a most significant communicable global health threat with [disease](#) and ill health a prominent cause of death in the world. Placing health threats within increased travel and migration trends, global trade patterns, displaced persons, global market forces and cultural globalisation, he argues that these trends collectively expose societies to distant health threats as well as rapid spread and contraction risks. Hough also emphasised the threat to ordinary people, rather than governments

¹ Hough, P. *Understanding Global Security*, 4th Edition. 2018 Routledge. Chapter 7.

and their pillars of power although the latter suffers if the dangerous health threats cannot be contained or prevented.

Understanding responses to prevent and contain COVID-19, turns one's attention to [securitisation theory](#) (ST) that explains how extraordinary responses to an [existential threat](#) take shape. The ST requires a speech act that labels a threat as existential. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN and [World Health Organisation](#) (WHO) as well as world leaders have already verbally stated the severity of the threat and that [normal rules](#) no longer apply or are insufficient. This represents a major development in a debate where threats to health are rarely labelled as existential, remains hotly debated and tend to draw attention and resources only if, and when set as a [national security threat](#). Here the conundrum is the wide powers that rulers invoke to respond with speed and sufficient resources to prevent or contain and counter. The extraordinary responses too often infringe on democratic and Human Rights principles and misuse must be countered to facilitate a speedy and often difficult or delayed return to normal politics and rules in democratic societies.

COVID-19 has drawn an unprecedented international response through speech acts from leaders that emphasise the danger it holds for ordinary citizens, the existential implications for many as a life and death matter and potential economic and social collapse at global and national levels. Speech acts also highlight that combatting COVID-19 [requires responses beyond normal politics](#), are directed at whole societies and demonstrate how world leaders connect COVID-19 to extraordinary restrictive policy measures, and plead for acceptance and responses (and for the moment little resistance) from their constituencies. The German chancellor, Italian prime minister, French president and [South Africa's president](#) for example personally announced states of emergency or disaster states, lockdown measures and instituted extraordinary movement restrictions on their societies. Extraordinary restrictions include shutting down countries domestically and deploying armed forces, unparalleled restrictions on all air travel, confining large tracts and in some cases, whole populations to their homes and closing schools and universities. Sports events, religious gatherings are prohibited and the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo postponed to 2021.

COVID-19 is the non-traditional threat that shattered the biased mould that military and political threats deserve preferential treatment as far as mobilisation, speech acts, audiences and extraordinary responses are concerned. Military measures are now probably no longer the exclusive measure of extraordinary policy responses as embedded in the state-military paradigm. It is therefore necessary to understand the repercussions of COVID-19 that justifies the existential label. While it appears that the threat to human life and by implication humanity cause alarm, wider ramifications reinforce ideas of an existential threat. [Exponential growth](#) of contractions and casualties are foremost with Italy and Spain demonstrating the threat to life. Add to this fear, violent unrest and competition for resources, [contrived scarcity](#) of possible vaccines and related medical products as well as collapse of industries and even national economies during an already weak global economic climate, pessimistic futures arise. Fear of disease and economic insecurity often feature in combination in indexes and survey responses that show their intricate inter-relationship. The US-German spat about [monopolising a future vaccine](#), must be noted with other governments taking on the risk of [releasing emergency funding](#) under difficult economic conditions to protect businesses, placing stays on mortgage and other payments and as in South Africa, lowering the country's repo rate to release money to ordinary citizens.

Africa, it appears, will be hardest hit by the pandemic on account of its [crumbling health infrastructure](#) and the inefficient civil service in some countries. South Africa, in particular, with its porous borders, and large swathes of the population presenting as HIV positive and with TB is particularly susceptible. Although South Africa responded with extraordinary measures in good time, a particularly dangerous outcome is if the 21-day national lockdown from 27 March 2020 exposes the real impact of [underfunding the military for years](#) if they are required to play a more intrusive role or enforce martial law. A related threat stems from South Africans' habitual disregard for the law compelling government to bring in legislation that is more draconian or having to extend the lockdown. In China, South Korea, Japan and Singapore their more law-abiding citizens result in [greater control over the virus](#) as people tend to abide by government edicts – even if extraordinary and intrusive in kind.

Globalization versus COVID-19 harbours threats and opportunities. The world witnessed how quickly as a result of global travel, the deadly virus spread from [Wuhan to the furthest corners of the earth](#). As countries like China and South Korea seems to have “flattened the curve”, South Africa can learn from these international experiences. We need not repeat the mistakes made. Moreover, several countries have reached out across political and ideological fault lines and are willing to lend a helping hand. Ventilators, face masks and the like were shipped by [Beijing to Italy](#) – Europe’s epicentre. [Russia](#) also sent aid to Italy to assist the beleaguered Italian citizens. The South Korean ambassador, to South Africa, reached out to South Africans stating that Seoul is ready to assist the country. Multinational and Non-Governmental Organisations also extended unprecedented assistance as demonstrated by the [Alibaba Group and Foundations](#) donating equipment to African countries to test and combat COVID-19. In South Africa for example, the [Rupert and Oppenheimer](#) foundations contributed R3 billion, and the [Motsepe business group](#) R1 billion to help lower the COVID-19 impact on the economy while [NASPERS](#) made R1.5 billion available. These donations one can also construe as extraordinary responses as South Africa’s business tycoons realise the existential nature of the threat.

Conclusions

COVID-19 rapidly elevated health security as a human, national and global security threat. Responses can partly be explained through securitization theory and particularly the existential language coupled with unprecedented extraordinary measures taken. Overall, COVID-19 has probably impressed upon decision-makers how a previously peripheral threat perception rapidly became pivotal in global and national security debates and forced leaders to introduce responses beyond normal politics in order to deal with an existential threat to all societies. The ripple effect across societies is unpredictable and this is visible in how leaders react, containment measures and the will to enforce decisions with police, and even military agencies. As the world recognizes that health insecurity anywhere is a threat to security everywhere, we need to make common cause with all the nations in the world as a collective to accept extraordinary measures to serve the common good of humanity.

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