

Chapter 6

Rethinking the “State Security–Human Security” Nexus in the Face of COVID–19

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ABSTRACT

It is the argument of this chapter that the COVID-19 pandemic created a need to problematize how we understand security, especially the contrast between state security and human security. This chapter argues that the pandemic has illustrated the importance of human security as well as the need to understand it as a precondition for, and not as an alternative to, state and international security. However, the study does not argue that the increased importance of human security translates into the protection of all humans. The crude reality that security is always at someone’s and something’s expense sustains vulnerabilities within societies. The study acknowledges that the changes in the security implications (both material and perceived) do not necessarily or automatically translate to changes in policies. Institutional resistance to change and general political trends among other factors affect the extent to which policies will evolve in a direction that would better meet the security implications of the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

[T]he pandemic also poses a significant threat to the maintenance of international peace and security -- potentially leading to an increase in social unrest and violence that would greatly undermine our ability to fight the disease. – António Guterres, April 9, 2020

One year into the COVID-19 Pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres made the above statement in his address to the UN Security Council in an attempt to generate international cooperation in the fight against COVID-19 (Guterres, 2020). In his remarks, he listed various ways by which the pandemic could negatively affect international peace and security ranging from erosion of “public trust in public institutions’ to creation of potential ‘window[s] of opportunity to strike while the attention of most gov-

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ernments is turned towards the pandemic” (Guterres, 2020). The complex perspective through which the UN Secretary-General defined the security implications of the pandemic is informative. However, the actual security impact that the pandemic poses as well as how those threats are perceived and reacted both at the national and international level deserves detailed problematization.

The goal of this chapter is to discuss not only the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had and still has on human security and state security, but also to problematize how it affects our preconceived notions about security.

The pandemic has illustrated that the countries that did a better job at handling the pandemic are not the ones that had the most advanced health-related technologies, but rather the countries that were able to “flatten the curve” and spread out the pressure that the pandemic put on the health system over time. Such a capacity is a function of not just a developed health system but also a result of public trust in the government’s policies, the government’s organizational and economic capacity to compensate for economic losses which resulted from decisions to initiate lockdowns as well as the availability of online technologies combined with technological literacy. Thus, not just what is considered as a security threat but also what is considered to be an appropriate security policy is also being challenged and redefined in this process.

It needs to be underlined that neither the current pandemic is the first of its kind nor are health concerns the only non-traditional concerns that has forced states to widen their security perceptions. The Spanish flu of 1918-19 which affected around one-third of the world population triggered policy decisions that look similar to the policy choices developed against COVID-19, such as restrictions imposed on “non-essential economic activity” (Wheelock, 2020). The massive death toll as well as the economic consequences of the pandemic has led to several developments regarding public health at national and international levels (Liu et al., 2018). These efforts inevitably have contributed to the extension and eventually the reach of state responsibility. Yet, the current pandemic has illustrated that the world, regardless of the differences in the levels of economic development or political will, is not prepared.

This chapter argues that the pandemic has created an opportunity to further discuss the importance of human security as well as the need to understand it as a precondition for, and not as an alternative to, state and international security. However, this study does not argue that the increased importance of human security translates into the protection of all humans. The crude reality that security is always at someone’s and something’s expense maintains vulnerabilities within societies.

This study also acknowledges that changes in the security implications (both material and perceived) neither necessarily nor automatically translate into policy changes. Institutional resistance to change and general political trends, among other factors, affect the extent to which policies will evolve in a direction that would better meet the security challenges created by the pandemic.

BACKGROUND

Even though security has always been a primary concern for the study and practice of politics, both its meaning and scope have expanded significantly over time. One of the important implications of the rise of the nation-state was the reconstruction of security as a public good to be provided by the state for its citizens through the use of citizen armies (Small, 2006). This presented a sharp contrast to the earlier period that approached security as something to be purchased, when in need (Small, 2006). This newly assigned responsibility justified the monopoly on violence that nation-states claim (Weber, 1919

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