

Covid 19 Pandemic: Redefining National Security and Health Policy

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The covid19 pandemic is a global health crisis of unprecedented scale and has forced the governments, policy makers and international organizations to redefine and rethink the paradigms of national security and its relationship with health policy. With approximately 1739007 confirmed cases world wide and 108432 conformed death from this disease covid19 has effectively transcended the traditional conventions on national sovereignty, borders, security and International law. From Wuhan china the disease has spread to 213 countries and territories and has involved all continents except Antarctica. Most of the countries and societies affected with covid19 have seen lock downs, travel restrictions, economic stagnation, curfews, closed businesses and schools practically disrupting normal life, weakening political and economic systems and threatening the society in general. The broad social, political, economic and religious consequences of this pandemic makes it imperative that countries especially developing countries like Pakistan rethink their national security policy and incorporate health security as an essential component of its national security doctrine.

On 31 December 2019 cluster of pneumonia of unknown cause from Wuhan was reported to WHO country office China. From Wuhan the virus spread globally to the extent that on January 30, 2020 it was declared a public health emergency of international concern. Immediately the countries started to restrict travel and closing down normal life processes to varying degrees. This scenario affirmed the fact that emerging infectious diseases are a concern not only in terms of morbidity and mortality alone but have the potential to disrupt countries and societies as a whole. More than 1.5 billion children have been forced out of school around the world. Trade, industry and social life have suffered serious negative impact. A global economic slowdown has been predicted with fears of economic depression are increasingly becoming more realistic. Unemployment, food shortages, law and order crisis and political instabilities are being feared if the pandemic doesn't slow down in near future.

National security can no longer be perceived as a threat from state and non state actors alone. Emerging infections with their potential to spread rapidly across the borders with catastrophic public health, economic and social consequences must now be considered a national security threat for which the countries need to develop core competencies, capacities, national and international communication and coordination systems and mechanism, national and international stockpiles of medicine, vaccines, PPE(personal protection equipment) and a policy frame work which can trigger national and international synergistic response to a threat. Since 1990s WHO has been advocating the states to recognize the link between health and national security. The development and adoption of International Health Regulation was first step in this direction. In 2005 the revised IHR was adopted as World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution no 58.3. The purpose was defined as "to prevent, protect against, control and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease in ways that are commensurate with and restricted to public health risk". With the passage of this regulation the states committed themselves to develop core competencies in areas of national legislation, policy, finance mechanism, national focal points, communication, surveillance, preparedness and development of human resource and laboratories. Despite the commitment the progress remain varied in different states on development of these core competencies. It must be further highlighted that weakness in health system of one state put the whole world at risk so health security can no longer be seen as a national phenomenon but rather as shared international responsibility.

Pakistan as a developing country faces multiple challenges in this emerging situation of bio threat from emerging infections. Its located in South Asia with shared geography with South East Asia and Middle East where in recent past a series of out breaks have engulfed the region from SARS, to H5N1, and now Covid19 Pandemic. By 13th April 2020, 5478 confirmed cases of Covid19 have been reported in Pakistan with 95 confirmed deaths. The country is in lock down with schools and business being forced to shut down. Due to stagnation of economic activity serious implications to national growth has been predicted. Serious challenges have emerged in our response to this pandemic which range from shortages of PPE and vital health equipment to lack of trained human resource and research and development infrastructure to cater the need to identify and contain novel pathogens. Financial mechanisms to deal with the containment response and wide social responsibly to vulnerable and economically deprived have also acquired a priority.

Incorporating health security and bio threat in the national security doctrine of Pakistan will help in strategic prioritization and mobilization of resources to achieve necessary competencies and to protect Pakistan from threat of emerging infections and other bio hazards. The experience of present covid19 crisis can act as a stimulus and guide in defining the policy priorities and areas to focus. In light of covid 19

response it's clear that we need to build capacity in our health sector at multiple levels which includes increasing ICU and HDU capacity, building Infectious disease departments in hospitals, developing infection control competencies in hospitals and health departments. We need to identify Isolation and quarantine facilities within whole country which can be ready to use at short notice. A contingency plan and mechanism to activate such plan has to be formulated. A legal framework for maintaining public order and enforcing guidelines in scenarios of epidemic and bio threat need to be developed and adopted. Risk communication and mass education modules need to be developed and necessary frame works for their implementation need to be adopted. Identifying a National Focal Point and arming it with all legal, policy and administrative infrastructure to coordinate and communicate with all stake holders and departments at national and international level must be a top priority.

Pakistan has to define and built national stock piles of medicines, vaccines, PPEs and other necessary medical equipment which can be used in emergency situation. In Pandemic situation international supply has the potential of becoming unreliable and we need to identify potential sources of such supply from where strategic support in form of equipment, medicines and vaccines can be procured at preferential level. A tangible link between health and foreign policy needs to be established in order to achieve this goal. UN General Assembly resolution on health and foreign policy has already emphasized it in 2012, "recognize the links between the promotion of universal health coverage and other foreign policy issues, such as the social dimension of globalization, cohesion and stability, inclusive and equitable growth and sustainable development and sustainability of national financing mechanisms, and the importance of universal coverage in national health systems"

Another area of strategic importance for Pakistan in face of the emerging biological threats is developing human resource, institutions and competency in field of virology, microbiology, immunology and vaccinology. Promotion of research and development in field of health and biotechnology and indigenous vaccine development has to become a national priority. In rapidly deteriorating environmental situation and climate change emerging infections are a real threat and unless we have the capacity to identify, test, treat and contain such threat our national security will remain in jeopardy. To quote Lee Jong-wook, former Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), pandemics do not respect international borders . "Hence their potential to weaken societies, political systems and economy must never be underestimated. The only solution is to be prepared!

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