

## State Responses to COVID-19 and Implications for International Security

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**ABSTRACT** This brief examines state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, taking the cases of India, Israel, Brazil, Hungary and the United States. It studies the language utilised by the government leaders in these countries and finds extensive war-time semantics. The brief explores the interrelationship of such rhetoric with the legitimisation of extreme measures by constructing an issue as an “existential threat”—a process analysts call “securitisation”, and contrasts the official narratives with actual preparedness on-ground. It explores the implications of these state actions and legislations that are being employed to support their war discourse—for instance, the heightening of surveillance measures and curbing of democratic freedoms. The analysis attempts to answer: Why have state leaders responded to a pandemic with war-time analogies and to what extent will this have implications on the international order in the aftermath of COVID-19?

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## INTRODUCTION

Over 25 million people across the world have been infected with the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2),<sup>1</sup> which causes the COVID-19 disease. Already, the political consequences of the pandemic are being felt in countries as diverse as the world's military stronghold,<sup>2</sup> the United States, or war-torn Yemen.<sup>3</sup> This brief analyses state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and ponders questions of international security and statehood in a post-COVID-19 world.

Every day, COVID-19 brings under scrutiny the most fundamental duties of the state to its citizens. Indeed, in times of crises, leaders find themselves facing difficult and limited choices, and their decisions can often damage their electoral standing.<sup>4</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has made the greenback feeble, paralysed the global economy, re-defined what is 'essential' in society, fuelled ideological wars, and worsened humanitarian crises.

As the novel virus emerging from Wuhan spread to the West, it caused damage to the morale of seemingly invincible powers. Reliant only on epidemiological modelling and whipsawed between saving lives or

saving livelihoods—administrative ethics, morals and ideologies have become more important like never before. Heads of States are delivering addresses and appeals replete with references to the Great Wars, the Marshall Plan, the Middle Eastern war of 1967,<sup>5</sup> and even the mythological “Mahabharata war”.<sup>6</sup> These are accompanied by a call to alms, like in the case of India where Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for financial contributions towards the PM-CARES Fund, comparing the war against COVID-19 to any other where the nation's “mother and sisters give away their jewellery and the poor give away whatever that can”.<sup>7</sup> Geographically distant and politically divergent India, Israel, Brazil, China, the US, and several others found resonance in each other's responses to the “war” against an “invisible” enemy that has compelled them to weave a narrative that would fit their people's imaginations.

History is testimony to the dependency of nation-states on national narratives, myths and selected pasts, though one would not intuitively expect their invocation in a viral outbreak. This brief argues that the use of the allegory of war in a pandemic effectively demonstrates two political reasonings, the consequences of which will have drastic

### Figure 1: Fighting the invisible enemy



(Source: Twitter)<sup>8</sup>

implications for the post-COVID-19 world order: consolidation of power; and call to nationalism.

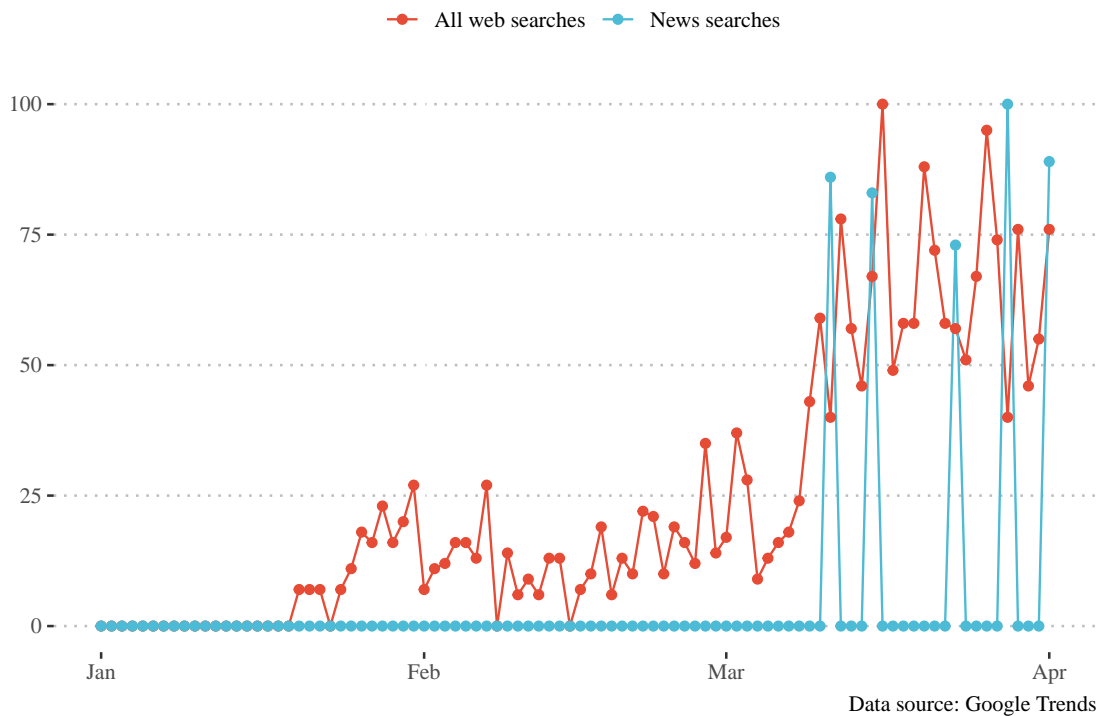
### WAR-TIME ANALOGIES TO CONSOLIDATE POWER

The preponderance of war-time analogies has entitled officeholders to respond with “all means necessary”, which they themselves imply can be best exercised through the consolidation of power. According to aggregated worldwide Google search data from the onset and initial months of the pandemic, there was a spike in the utilisation of war terminology in relation to SARS-CoV-2, peaking in the month of March and carrying through to April 2020. The trend reflects a relation between the use of war terminology—corresponding to terms such as ‘war’,

‘enemy’, ‘battle’—and the interest generated in searches by coronavirus-related information-seeking individuals (See Figure 2). A co-occurrence with Google news search data for the same time period can be observed, further indicating the prevalence of war terminologies in representations by news media, published government statements, and speeches made by state leaders. The graph underpins a broader, representative pattern substantiated by acts of narrative construction by state actors worldwide, as this brief will elaborate.

The trend is telling, not least because it corresponds to a pandemic response endowed with the extensive use of war-time analogies by state leadership across the world, which this brief deconstructs across various cases. The rhetoric of war

**Figure 2: War in the time of COVID-19.**



calling for “extraordinary measures” has found significantly increased footing in public discourse over time, especially as the challenge on public healthcare institutions intensified and political faultlines lay exposed.

Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde warn of the legitimisation of extreme measures that come from the construction of an issue as an “existential threat”— a process they called “securitisation”.<sup>9</sup> While the threat from SARS-CoV-2 is evident, the focus is on the risk posed to societal patterns from the proclamation of emergency measures and the departure from rules that would otherwise bind securitising actors or incumbents. As the cases examined in this brief demonstrate, the securitisation of the pandemic endangering the nation state could potentially prove not only to be futile in flattening the curve,<sup>a</sup> but fatal to democracy itself.

The outbreak was still a ‘Public Health Emergency of International Concern’,<sup>10</sup> when Chinese President Xi Jinping likened his country’s fight against SARS-CoV-2 to a “people’s war”.<sup>11</sup> Invoking the nation’s faith in the leadership of the Communist Party of China, Xi declared Wuhan a “heroic city”<sup>12</sup> and said plans for China’s economic growth remained impervious. In the US,

Donald Trump declared himself a “war-time President”<sup>13</sup> on 18 March and soon after, claimed “total authority” for the office of the president.<sup>14</sup>

What President Trump is aiming for is a successful war narrative—in an election year, and amidst glaring structural problems in US healthcare systems: among them, inaccessibility of expensive drugs, unaffordable insurance, and a strong pharmaceutical lobby.<sup>15</sup> On 10 August, a White House ‘fact sheet’ outlining ‘President Trump’s Historic Coronavirus Response’ proclaimed that the president had “confronted China as origin of the virus while Democrats and media cowered.”<sup>16</sup> Trump’s strategy—of mobilising the people against an enemy, assigning blame on China, and withdrawing support from critical international infrastructure—is aimed at bolstering an electoral campaign.<sup>17</sup>

In other parts of the world, state leaders have similarly engaged in their own wars against the pandemic. In South Africa in March, President Cyril Ramaphosa, garbed in full military regalia, declared his country’s war against COVID-19 and said extraordinary measures would be taken if state orders are not abided by.<sup>18</sup> In Hungary, also in March, the ruling Fidesz party granted Prime Minister Viktor Orbán emergency

a According to the World Health Organization, to “flatten the curve” is to reduce the rate of transmission of COVID-19. Given the limited number of healthcare resources available around the world, it is crucial to ensure that the maximum daily number of infections does not exceed the maximum capacity of a state’s healthcare infrastructure and provisions. Flattening the curve has been translated into several national strategies as it implies the introduction of policy measures to slow down the rates of infection while giving states an opportunity to increase and prepare their healthcare resources.

powers to address the pandemic. Civil society organisations expressed their skepticism over the resolution, including the Director of Amnesty International Hungary, who referred to it as a “carte blanche to restrict human rights”. The extreme control granted by the new law—including the enactment or reconstruction of laws, especially in the absence of a sunset clause could upend the spirit of democracy in the country in the long run and sanction the decimation of civil liberties, opposition, and press freedoms.<sup>19</sup>

The danger in these state actions is that even after a presumed return to “normalcy”, the consequences would have already been dire. In the case of Hungary, for instance, there now exists a legal precedent for the imposition of emergency rule in the name of battling a crisis such as disease outbreaks; this renders the state more powerful than previously.

In Israel, the country’s longest-serving Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu has instituted surveillance measures, incapacitated the Knesset, and shut courts ahead of his own corruption trial.<sup>20</sup> Netanyahu’s COVID-19 response has been met with a backlash from the public. In Poland, the pandemic has provided President Andrzej Duda regular media coverage, and thereby a vehicle for visibility that can benefit his electoral campaign. His opponents, on the contrary, have been unable to meet their electoral schedules or gain adequate campaign time and were left with no choice but to forfeit online campaigning ahead of the elections originally scheduled for May. Duda rallied the people around the flag and,

wanting to optimise his initial poll ratings, pushed for the holding of the elections in May despite the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country and 77 percent of Poles supporting a delay.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, the elections were rescheduled and the July vote retained the incumbent Duda in power. The exigency behind Duda’s urgency to reach the polls, however, was evident in the rescheduled elections which were tightly contested, reflecting the disappointment of the country over the actual handling of the health emergency. Despite the high public support that he received in the early months of the pandemic, Duda obtained a 51.2-percent vote share with a 68.2-percent turnout in the polls. (In March the projections were that he would get 65 percent of the votes and there would be a 31-percent turnout.<sup>22</sup>)

The excessive measures that governments have taken to respond to the pandemic have the potential to leave long-lasting impacts on some of the most fundamental freedoms of citizens around the world. Examples include censorship in Thailand,<sup>23</sup> restrictions of movement in Chile under an extended “state of catastrophe”<sup>24</sup> that has left President Sebastián Piñera’s government in total charge, and the dispersal of protests in places as varied as Hong Kong, Iraq and India.<sup>25</sup> In Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina delineated the duties of the citizen as she invoked the 1971 victory in a speech she made on 25 March 2020, the eve of the Independence and National Day.<sup>26</sup>

India, with over 3.5 million COVID-19 cases and low per capita testing, is now

leading in the third rank behind Brazil (3.8 million) and the United States (six million).<sup>27</sup> This invites further discussion on how the Indian government has handled the pandemic, especially as the country has joined the ranks of the US and Brazil in being subjects of criticism from civil society for the government's use of political control disguised as pandemic control. Over the course of one of the world's strictest lockdowns, the Indian government carried out a series of arrests and raids, incarcerating activists, academics, poets, social workers, journalists and student leaders on a range of charges from rioting, inciting religious violence, and terrorism, to murder.<sup>28</sup> Activists have argued that the charges, mostly under the notoriously used and ambiguously worded antiterrorism, national security and sedition laws, are unjust.

There is increasing fear of lasting authoritarianism as armies pour into quarantined cities and police brutality brings to question the government's concern for the welfare of its citizens. Examples are Kenya,<sup>29</sup> Peru<sup>30</sup> and the Philippines.<sup>31</sup> In Nicolas Maduro's Venezuela, any criticism of the crumbling healthcare system is met with a crackdown.<sup>32</sup>

It appears that the greatest threat to democracy at present is the fortification of impregnable power, as dissent especially against the government's handling of the crisis becomes intolerable. Given the climate of fear and extraordinary control of the state on public movement, the expert Working Group on Arbitrary Detention of the United Nations issued an official

Deliberation on the prevention of arbitrary deprivation of liberty in the context of public health emergencies. The document emphasised the need for governments to respect international law, state obligations to internationally recognised human rights and due process, thereby indicating the necessity for measuring proportionality of security measures to health emergencies.<sup>33</sup>

In Vladimir Putin's Russia, the ambit of what encompasses 'fake news' or 'false information' has been placed under the Kremlin's jurisdiction; the move has been called a 'digital gulag' by the country's civil society.<sup>34</sup>

While convincing its nationals to embrace the onus of war-time action against coronavirus, India found itself caught in an actual military situation on the China border with a grave potential of escalation. Prime Minister Modi appealed to Indian citizens to share the burden and support the battle against poverty, COVID-19 and medical equipment shortage by becoming "Covid warriors" and "soldiers".<sup>35</sup> The avoidance of responsibility by the state in leaving citizens to fend for themselves on the economic, social and medical frontlines, versus the active responsibility of the state in a scuffle with the People's Republic of China, illustrates the case for state choice and statecraft being used selectively to justify the handling or mishandling of situations. As India projected itself as a strongman to China, it weakened its case for empathy internally. The prime minister's decision to visit the battlefield in Galwan but digitally address Covid warriors, drives the distinction

between securitisation and an actual national security threat. The language, appeal and choices behind the responses of the state to the two situations unpacks debates about the duties of the state. The co-occurrence of the two situations further enables an understanding of the construction of state narratives and their malleability as per the crisis preparedness of a state.

### Mustering Nationalism

The combative state discourse also finds its underpinning in the promotion of nationalist sentiments. The cases analysed in this brief offer a comparative lens to arrive at an understanding of how state control is strengthened through the use of war narratives. Little galvanises the nation more than a war at its doorstep. As the ‘war’ widens, leaders deliver evocative speeches and use historical metaphors to summon collective memory and demand “personal sacrifice”: working on the frontlines, staying indoors, living with less.<sup>36</sup>

Britain designed “battle plans”, setting up a “war room” of scientists, experts and designated ministerial leads from across the four governments of the United Kingdom.<sup>37</sup> France went further, launching a military operation, ‘Resilience’, and repatriating troops from its operation Chammal in Iraq to strengthen the country’s defence against COVID-19.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the pandemic has qualified in situation rooms worldwide as the greatest challenge since World War II. The American people readied themselves to act under the Defence Production Act, a legislation from the Korean War-era,<sup>39</sup> as

Brazil passed its “war budget”,<sup>40</sup> declaring a state of emergency after much criticism for inaction. Even the United Nations Secretary-General designated the pandemic as a war, calling on multilateralism and the exigency of a war-time plan.<sup>41</sup>

What are the implications of such “war spirit” on the future of International Relations? Wars have often resulted in transformations of the world order, especially to institute checks and balances on power; would this *war* bear a similar consequence?

International human rights watchdogs are wary of the lasting ramifications of war-time responses and extraordinary measures. A sense of fear over the permanence of state control in the name of protection has worried experts globally, as articulated by the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, who further referred to the post-9/11 security and surveillance implications.<sup>42</sup> While a new normal is expected to emerge, it must not mark a departure from the fundamental tenets of how citizens negotiate with the state.

Ultimately, the decisive factor in winning this war will be the actual resources deployed to fight it. As Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen writes, “tackling a social calamity is not like fighting a war which works best when a leader can use top-down power to order everyone to do what the leader wants.”<sup>43</sup> The imperative is to build strong institutions and critical infrastructure that will prioritise the people’s welfare.

South Korea’s leaders have been widely

lauded as a worthy example of a public response to the coronavirus pandemic. It implemented a national strategy of testing, tracking and treatment, and managed to flatten the curve when the outbreak was peaking globally.<sup>44</sup> In contrast to the cases studied in this brief, the South Korean government has consistently presented a realistic assessment of the crisis, discouraging panic and reinforcing the duties of the different branches of government and administrative divisions. Statements made by leaders have used language with direct health and medical references—“disease fighting measures”, “epidemic prevention and control efforts”—and situated within the legal framework and context of South Korea’s Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act; they have not found it necessary to issue emergency decrees.<sup>45</sup> President Moon Jae-in also used the occasion of his third anniversary in office in May 2020 to bolster local bodies. He is also pushing for reforms at the Korea Centers for Disease Control, which has been renamed Disease Control and Prevention Administration and granted more autonomy and tasked to engage more professionals and experts in pandemic management and governance.

South Korea, therefore, became the archetype for what a democracy with due electoral process looks like in the times of COVID-19. Scrutiny of government policies over data protection were not met with unlawful deprivations of liberty; pandemic response was not characterised by draconian restrictions. Such use of political office to further democratic strategies to battle

the pandemic—and not to promote a war discourse—has had visible outcomes in the polls. The April 2020 National Assembly elections had a voter turnout of 66.2 percent, the highest in 28 years, despite the global rise in fear and coronavirus infections. Indeed, there are those who argue that the South Korea model—with its liberal, high-tech and collaborative underpinnings—will be the way to save multilateralism in a post-COVID-19 world order.<sup>46</sup>

A well-functioning government with a strong plan backed by investments in infrastructure, New Zealand has also received plaudits for its effective approach to managing the pandemic. Unlike some of its counterparts with similar economic prowess, New Zealand chose to not adopt a protectionist response to the health emergency. Rather, the Jacinda Ardern-led government, in partnership with the World Health Organization, offered support to its regional neighbours in the form of crucial medical supplies and technical expertise in incident management, contingency planning, infection prevention and control, and risk communication. This value of solidarity was also reflected internally, with the public discourse calling on New Zealanders to “unite as a team of 5 million to protect their families, friends and neighbours.”<sup>47</sup> A survey of public perception of the management of COVID-19 found mass trust in the government, with 88 percent of respondents giving Ardern approval for her decision-making. The same survey outcomes stand at an average of 59 percent across the G7 nations, some of which have been




discussed in this brief.<sup>48</sup> The dissimilitude of state responses between New Zealand and the G7 offers a contextualisation for the deconstructed state narratives, their selection, and the necessity for incumbents to employ them within a securitisation framework. The choices of narratives and emotive words—whether self-serving propaganda or preparedness coupled with political will—will have implications on the future of International Security, especially if the state maintains the supremacy it has been unquestioningly granted in a pandemic situation.

## CONCLUSION

Securitisation was posited as both a theory and process by Buzan et al in a military, political, societal, economic and environmental context at the end of the Cold War. This brief offers a novel dimension to the theory, by validating its prevalence in a health crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the cases discussed in this brief highlight, the first few months of the pandemic have witnessed a remodelling of the social contract between the citizen and the state, renegotiations of inter-governmental

bargains, and speculations over the role of international organisations and their mandates. State consolidation of power and control of national narratives enables the ‘construction of security’ and national threats as its corollary, demonstrated by this brief, leaving both consequences and precedents for emergencies to follow.

The increasing dependency on the state for pandemic and people management; economic and social control and decision-making of what “normalcy” post-COVID-19 should look like, presents a new set of enquiries for analysts. The blurring of lines between democratic and dictatorial regimes requires a reassessment of statehood within international law and the multilateral system. While international best practices garner due credit, consistent efforts must also be made to monitor and identify destabilising patterns of concerns for the international system.

Ultimately, where perennial problems have been met by unprecedented challenges at the onset of a new decade, it is imperative to assess how far allegories of war can be extended by the state. 

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ENDNOTES

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