Global Health Security

War on COVID-19: More Than One Front

By Kumar Ramakrishna

SYNOPSIS

The current COVID-19 crisis is at its core a public health issue. However, because of its wider and significant social, economic and geopolitical impact, it can also be viewed from a national security lens.

COMMENTARY

AS SINGAPORE continues its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, much has been written about what should or should not be done to keep the nation safe. Granted, the COVID-19 fight is at its core very much a public health issue, and one should take care not to hastily "securitise" the matter.

Nevertheless, given the rapidly unfolding and significant social, economic and geopolitical impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, it has arguably become a wider national security matter as well, requiring a coordinated response from other sectors. In this respect, what would a wider, more encompassing, national security response to COVID-19 entail?

Adapting Clausewitz's Enduring "Trinity"

The 19th century Prussian philosopher of war Carl von Clausewitz conceptualised war as comprising a "remarkable trinity" of "primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force"; "the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam"; and the "element of subordination, as an instrument of policy".

Clausewitz's interpreters have essentially identified the *population* as the repository of the "primordial" passions and "blind natural force" that energises the nation for conflict; the *armed forces* as the site where "the creative spirit" must neutralise threats characterised by "chance and probability"; and the *government* as key to harnessing such energies and responses toward clearly defined policy objectives.

If we accept that the current struggle against COVID-19 is indeed a "war" – as many commentators have so described – what would a systematic, coordinated "trinitarian" response encompass?

The Public Health Sector

The public health community – the frontline medical staff in hospitals and clinics, as well as the supporting ecosystem of scientists and researchers – are the nation's "armed forces" against the virus. It is they who have to find ways to unleash their collective creative energies to stem the relentless, unpredictable spread of this unseen enemy.

While the frontliners fight to "flatten the curve" of infections, the supporting medical research community have to race against time to better understand myriad issues. These range from how even asymptomatic individuals can apparently shed the virus; modelling the projected spread of the virus in the community; and what current treatments against other coronaviruses can be hastily jury-rigged and thrown into the fray.

Another critical issue they have to grapple with is how far we are from effective vaccines to cope with ever-mutating strains of the bug. The public health community literally stands between the virus and the rest of the nation. They must not fail and they deserve the fullest support from other sectors.

The Public

The population is a key sector in this regard. No matter what accomplishments the public health sector can pull off, all will be undone if the public takes the newly-imposed "circuit breaker" measures for enhanced safe distancing overly lightly. In the 1960s, soon after Separation from Malaysia, founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew declared that for Singapore to survive, we have to function as a "tightly organised society".

He later likened Singapore to a finely calibrated "chronometer" in which the government, businesses and the public pulled together effectively in the same direction. That generation helped lay the foundations for Singapore to take off and achieve First World status in a few decades.

Today, many from that cohort have passed on, or are today the very elderly that are being constantly cautioned to stay home as any infection is likely to be especially harmful for them. Can the current generation rise to the occasion and emulate the social discipline and "primordial passions" of that post-Separation cohort of "can-do" Singaporeans?

We simply must. If the circuit breaker measures, the exhortations to wear masks in public and to practise good hygiene habits take deeper root, this would be a huge step toward winning the COVID-19 war in Singapore – sooner rather than later.

The Government

Finally, the government – the third element of the Clausewitizian trinity – obviously must continue leading the fight at the whole-of-society level. As Singaporeans have recognised, the COVID-19 war has more than one front.

Economically, the government has had to draw on past reserves to fund massive budgets to stabilise a rapidly-contracting economy to save jobs and businesses, while at the same time finding various means to maintain the resilience of food and other critical supply chains.

Moreover, security and intelligence agencies have to keep abreast of the continually evolving transnational terrorist threat, given that the both violent Islamist and White Supremacist networks have urged their followers worldwide to take advantage of the COVID-19 situation to strike hard at distracted states and societies.

In addition, the government must continue navigating an even more troubled regional and global security landscape, in the light of heightened US-China tensions fuelled not just by trade issues but now by accusations and counter-accusations over each side's handling of the COVID-19 situation as well.

Moreover, there are indications that certain major powers have also capitalised on the global pandemic to sow disinformation and foment chaos along ethno-cultural lines in multicultural societies.

These same powers, their affiliates or transnational criminal networks may also take advantage of the societal distraction caused by the COVID-19 outbreak to launch cyber attacks against national infrastructures.

Implications for Scholarly Community

Make no mistake: with almost 1.8 million cases and 110,000 deaths worldwide at the time of writing, the struggle against COVID-19 is, as has been said in some quarters, likely to be the defining struggle of this era. The world – including Singapore – has to do whatever it takes to win this war, because there is simply no other choice.

Once the dust eventually settles, one final take-away from the COVID-19 war would be that the scholarly community can no longer afford to think in mono-dimensional terms about interlocking security challenges.

In 1999, the great Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson argued – prophetically – that the "issues that vex humanity daily – ethnic conflict, arms escalation, overpopulation, abortion, environment and endemic poverty" cannot be solved without integrating insights from the "natural sciences" with that of the "social sciences and humanities".

Wilson insisted that only "fluency across the boundaries will provide a clear view of the world as it really is". Singapore should position itself to take the lead in such a quest for building systematic, interdisciplinary expertise – and in so doing prepare the nation for future national security challenges.

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