

SRI LANKA'S INTERNATIONAL SECURITY LANDSCAPE: THE WAY FORWARD AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic had reshaped the three-way nexus between the pandemics, national and international security, and international relations. When the public health issues strain international security and international relations at the same time, states are compelled to take different approaches to mitigate the effects on national integrity or sovereignty. However, in the Sri Lankan context, the possible long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are particularly disturbing. According to Peiris (2021), "pandemics go far beyond mere public health crises, leaving an indelible mark on the contemporary social fabric." In that sense, a deep analysis is required to identify the tangible as well as intangible factors that resulted from such a catastrophe. Initially, COVID-19 impacted the social, economic, and political pillars of the Sri Lankan society and secondary effects were more in global context. In this context, this paper aims on identifying significant traditional and non-traditional security threats faced by Sri Lanka in the context of international security since due to the COVID -19 pandemic. This study is qualitative in nature. In that, in-depth interviews were conducted with a cross section of professionals involving major disciplines that have bearing on the traditional and non-traditional national security concerns. The NVivo was used in analysing the data gathered through in-depth interviews. This paper analyses the present applicability of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which is one of the most comprehensive frameworks that outline distinct variables necessary for regional security analysis. However, the paper proposes changes to RSCT from a 2023 and beyond context after analysing the international security landscape since the COVID-19 pandemic. It is concluded that Sri Lanka should establish durable political stability as the essential component in reaching its economic goals. Civil society cultivation and engagement are two key areas in which Sri Lanka should focus more in the present context. It is imperative that Sri Lanka preserve and augment its domestic / national defence / regional security freedom of manoeuvre among large states such as China, India, the U.S.A and Russia using the correct blend of foreign policy whilst upholding national interests.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19 Pandemic, National security, international security, Traditional and non-traditional security threats.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As emphasized by Buzan (2009), security is a relational phenomenon. Therefore, it is paramount to understand the international pattern of security interdependence in order to determine the national security of a state. In those regions they play a mediating role between the states and the international systems. In security terms, **region** means that a distinct and significant subsystem of security relations which exist among a set of states whose fate is that they have been locked into geographical proximity with each other (Buzan, 2009). The overarching concept in determining the power relations therein is the amity/enmity pattern among states. Buzan and Waver (2003: 45–51) describe patterns of amity/enmity as ‘taking the form of sub global, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence’. Simply amity defines the possible protection whereas enmity speaks on suspicion and fear involved in such a relationship among states. The historical relations between India and Sri Lanka over centuries are a typical example of the principal elements of amity and enmity. This position leads to the concept of **security complex** in the international security landscape coined by Buzan. A security complex means a set of states whose national security concerns are linked together, resulting in their individual security concerns ~~could~~ not being considered separately. Besides, the anarchic international system acts as the main cause in developing such security complexes.

In this context, an extreme level of threat and fear that is felt mutually between two or more major states is a defining factor in determining a security complexes. The Indo Pakistan rivalry is a typical example in this respect. However, geography plays a vital role in the phenomenon of security complex. Although countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are minor geographical entities in the South Asia security complex, their alliances with major powers may impact and become a threat to a larger power. Another interesting factor that disturbs the security complex is identified as the condition of **overlay**. The involvement or intervening of armed forces of a great power in an overlain area in such a manner which

suppresses normal operations of security dynamics is termed an overlay. The colonial dynamics of European powers is the best example of this condition. This condition creates a situation where it is difficult to determine the local security dynamics due to the presence of the great power.

In this context, having identified the overarching security dimensions through RSCT, it could frame a comprehensive analytical framework to determine the complexities of national and international security dimensions. The domestic security environment of individual states is the first line or the bottom line in this framework. Next come the local security complexes, followed by great power complexes. In analyzing through this framework, it is imperative to identify the distinguishing security dynamics at each level. There may be certain interplay as well as the interferences mainly by great power complexes towards other two complexes.

As per the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) USA, the COVID-19 pandemic has killed millions of people and disrupted life worldwide, with far-reaching effects extending well beyond global health to the economic, political, security and societal spheres. In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in shifts in security priorities and perceptions around the globe. The subsequent budgetary reductions have paved the way for gaps in military training and preparedness, counterterrorism operations, and arms control monitoring, verification, and compliance. The definition of national security thus has faced further revisions and debates due to the advent of the pandemic. In the global context, research relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has shaped the security landscape has been widely spoken of. Yet, such research work relating specifically to Sri Lanka or small state scenarios is limited in the public domain. Accordingly, this paper addresses this specific research gap.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study was qualitative in nature. In that, in-depth interviews were conducted with a cross section of professionals involving major disciplines that have

bearing on the traditional and non-traditional national security concerns. Thirty-three (33) experts in the fields of security, international relations, medical and health, science and technology, geography, economy, rehabilitation and reconciliation, energy, crime prevention, and human security were consulted. The questionnaire had four clusters ,namely human security, civil society, social cohesion, transnational – domestic linkages of concern, and emerging international security issues. The secondary data ,including authentic books, journal articles, conference proceedings, and other on-line sources ,were also used. The NVivo was used in analyzing the data gathered through in-depth interviews.

3. RESULTS

According to Kevany et.al. (2021), diplomacy and integrated international collaborations have played a vital role in effectively controlling the Ebola outbreak in the West African region during 2014, along with the decisive role of the military.

Table 1: Pandemic issues as they relate to international relations and security
Source: Security Nexus 2021

International Relations	International Security
Secure essential resources and supply chains (e.g. pandemic supplies)	Telework and exposure to cyber vulnerabilities
Border closures	Tighter border management
Travel restrictions to and from affected countries	Managing travel quarantine
Citizen evacuation and airlift	Monitoring foreign travel
Expulsion of foreign workers	International contact-tracing
Cancellation of migration programs	National hoarding and price hiking
Suspension of visas	Lack of transparency and denial
Banning international travel from certain countries	Geopolitical maneuvering through opportunity exploitation
	Blame gaming
	Disinformation in an uncertain environment
	Disease migration

However, it seems a difficult proposition to expect similar results in the current international environment. The soft power and international relations have been more effective in such circumstances, as per Kevany et.al. The military has been tasked with a more logistical role when it comes to addressing health security issues. The study of Kevany et.al. (2021) shows that “thus, while pandemics may contain regional expansionism, generate new military roles, or force countries to turn inward, they also have dramatic impacts on other aspects of international relations and security” (Table 1).

According to Fonseka and Ranasinghe (2022), “the health and other challenges spawned by COVID-19 have engulfed Sri Lanka since 2020.” The areas such as social fabric, reconciliation, and governance have faced multiple challenges during the process. The initial response of the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) in this regard was to appoint a few Presidential commissions to tackle the issues at hand. As per Fonseka and Ranasinghe (2022), these commissions were established in line with Article 33 of the Constitution, which has vested such powers under the President. The establishment of the National Operations Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO) under the Commander of the Army was considered a major action plan of the government to curb the pandemic. Subsequent appointment of a Presidential Task Force with greater powers to coordinate government machinery in a number of districts supplemented the NOCPCO. However, a major criticism levelled against these authorities was the neglect of civilian administration during the process. It was highlighted that the expertise and mandate of the public officials are undermined through the process (Fonseka and Ranasinghe, 2022). Critics of the government response to the pandemic viewed the process as militarization and securitization. According to Satkunanathan (2021), the unofficial structures created through these processes acted as a shadow state further to the already existing mechanisms. It was further emphasized that the democratic processes of the country are being eroded through the government’s intentional activation of a parallel mechanism through the military.

The important aspect in this context is whether the pandemic disruptions are temporary in nature or whether they have shaped the fundamental future scenarios. More importantly, the non-traditional security threats have taken center stage more than the traditional ones. In the Sri Lankan context, straining governance is a major consequence of the pandemic. The capacity of government mechanisms under difficult conditions went down further along with the public confidence. The entire government mechanism reached a standstill with the state losing its control over the people. Sri Lanka not being an economically resilient country had to face major issues with regard to its sovereignty. In historical terms, the plague that devastated the city state of Athens during the Peloponnesian War with Sparta is an interesting phenomenon. Therein the unbearable losses of lives and economic conditions affected the Athenians as a major factor in their subsequent defeat at the hands of Spartans. In that sense, the pandemics could be termed a major non-traditional security aspect that needs the highest level of preparations to counter effectively.

4. DISCUSSION

The concept of globalization and the emergence of economic power has brought new insights to the security discourse. Ernst Hirsch Ballin, Huub Dijstelbloem, and Peter de Goede (2020) contended that security encompasses more than protecting the state's territory against military aggression by another state. The non-state actors have also played a prominent role in this regard. These authors have mentioned the role of geographical, danger, substantive, and reference dimensions as the four main pillars or dimensions of security. According to Niruthan (2023), terrorists, pirates, organized crime rings (including drug trafficking, human trafficking, and routine crimes), activist disruptors, and hackers could be considered as the main non-state actors who pose severe threats. As per Niruthan, the worldwide debate on political rights and law and order is due to the major activist disruptions that have crippled the nation states since of late. Initially, those who protest may have legitimate reasons for their course of action. However, these protests blew out of proportion thus becoming severe threats to national security. The

Black Lives Matter Movement in the USA, Mahsa Amini protests in Iran in 2022, and Nahel Merzouk riots during June 2023 in France, along with Sri Lankan Aragalaya in 2022, are examples of such activist disruptions with major consequences. Further, as per Niruthan, most of these non-state actors are international in nature yet have to be dealt with nationally. Besides, mostly they are unconventional in nature.

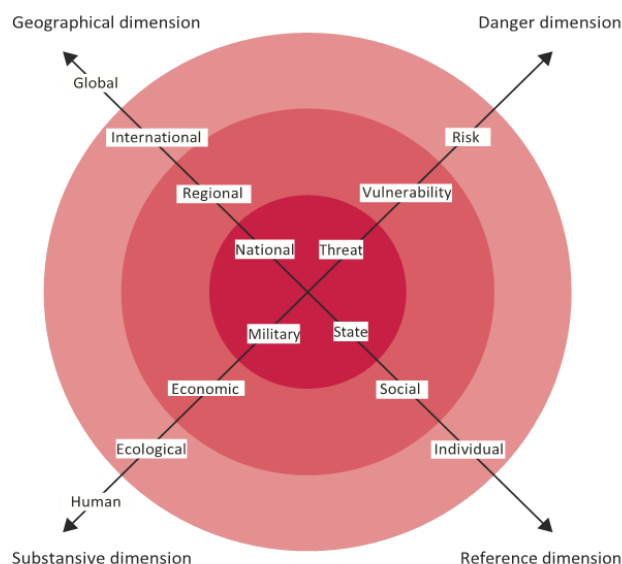


Figure 1: Four pillars or dimensions of security
Source: Ballin et.al (2020)

Besides, traditional security threats sphere headed by terrorism continue to pose severe danger to the globe while countries constantly determine on the counter measures to be effected. In that, the Four Waves Theory of Modern Terrorism is still very much applicable to the present context. David C. Rapoport in the 1970s came out with this approach for terrorism, highlighting implications of religiously driven activities. As per Kaplan (2021) wave theory relates strongly with Arthur Schlesinger's theory of political generations which posited 40-year generational cycles. According to Kaplan, "each has a precipitating event, signature tactics and weapons, and an inevitable gradual decline that culminates in the birth of another wave". The four waves according to Rapoport are: the Anarchist wave (1878–1919), the Anti-Colonial wave (1920s–early 1960s), the New Left wave (mid-1960s–1990s), and the Religious wave (1979–onwards).

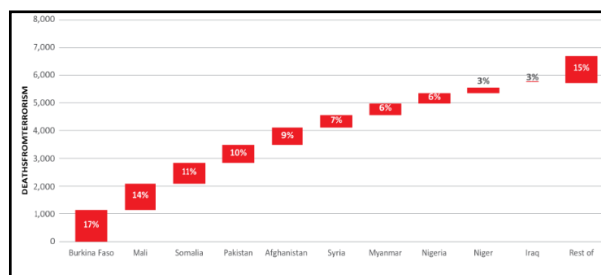


Figure 2: Deaths from terrorism by country, 2022
Source: Dragonfly Terrorism Tracker

According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), Afghanistan continues to be the country impacted mostly by terrorism. Besides, violent conflict has been the decisive course behind terrorism. Countries in conflict had suffered over 88 percent of attacks and 98 percent of terrorism deaths in 2022.

Another interesting development reflected through this study is the relationship between armed conflict and terrorism. All ten countries most impacted by terrorism in 2022 were also involved in an armed conflict. Attacks in countries involved in conflict are seven times deadlier than attacks in peaceful countries. As per the GTI, Burkina Faso has recorded the highest number of deaths due to terrorism in 2022. Besides, suicide bombing has been the deadliest form of attack by the terrorists. The study has further confirmed that the IS and its affiliates continue to be the deadliest terror group in the global arena, as per the statistics. Al-Shabaab, the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) have been identified as other prominent terrorist groups in the global context.

In relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sri Lanka can derive valuable lessons with regard to the impact of health security challenges on national security and regional security. It is evident that the major impact of the pandemic was reflected towards human security.

Human security is a multi-sectoral approach to security that identifies and addresses widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood, and dignity of the people.

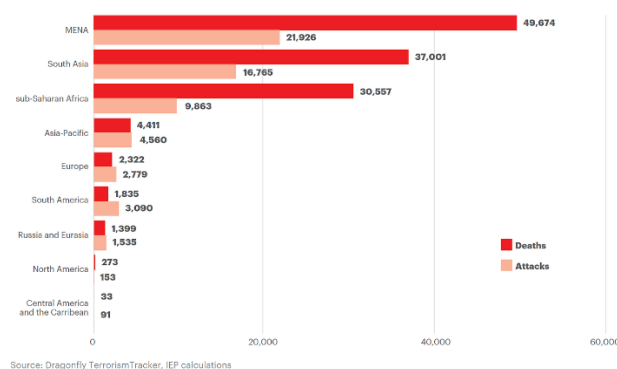


Figure 3: Attacks and deaths from terrorism by region, 2007–2022 (Source: Dragonfly Terrorism Tracker)

Human security integrates three freedoms: freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom from indignity. In that, economic security is a key component of human security. However, with Sri Lanka in dire straits with regard to economic security, the country faces numerous vulnerabilities in the coming years as far as national security is concerned. Energy security has become one of the biggest geopolitical factors in the present context. Sri Lanka at present struggles to find long term solutions in this respect. Besides, food/calories/human energy is a totally neglected phenomenon in Sri Lanka over the years. Civil society cultivation and engagement are two key areas in which Sri Lanka has failed to achieve the desired long term objectives. Further, Sri Lanka's diaspora relations is another vital area that needs course correction. Identification and analyzing possible transnational categories of criminal activities that could endanger the national security of Sri Lanka is paramount. Another important factor is how Sri Lanka can preserve and augment its domestic / national defence / regional security freedom of maneuver among large states such as China, India, the U.S.A, and Russia. It is imperative that Sri Lanka perform a comprehensive threat assessment to identify the possibilities of rivals or adversaries of the state using a larger category of technology or non-lethal technology against her.

Another important factor that came to light during the study was the fierce geopolitical competition surrounding Sri Lanka. Especially the Indo Pacific strategy (IPS) of the USA and the Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI) of China have created much tension in the region. The Indian sphere of influence is another vital factor that has created geopolitical challenges to Sri Lanka. With the country's economy in dire straits, Sri Lanka has little choice in various fronts. Alliance competition or alliance neutrality is a decision that has to be made by the country considering its domestic and foreign policy formulations. Accordingly, it is envisaged that the country needs to incorporate with these global powers in line with a robust foreign policy and a geo strategy.

Analysis

It is evident according to the study that Sri Lanka faces critical traditional, non-traditional, and hybrid security challenges at this juncture. From all these factors, the geopolitical issues could be termed as the most vital in relation to Sri Lanka. The containment strategies of the USA led alliances towards China have affected Sri Lanka geopolitically. As such, it has to use statecraft to good effect and navigate in a sound geo-strategy focusing prosperity in line with its national interests. Moreover, a foreign policy that ensures 'alliance neutrality but not alliance partnership' is the way forward for Sri Lanka. However, terrorism, cyber security, energy security, environment security, and health security issues such as pandemics are also of vital importance. The threat of transnational crimes is another factor to be noted.

5. CONCLUSION

The study identifies two ways that COVID -19 pandemic and RSCT complement each other. Firstly, the pandemic was treated as a threat and in many ways securitized by all countries. The discourse was often framed as a war/competition/rivalry, both between humanity and the pathogen, but also between states. COVID-19 did not recognize borders, natural obstacles, religion, culture, gender ,etc. This suggests that in such an interconnected, globalized world, 'regionalization' of contemporary security threats can be overplayed. On the other hand, the very fact that different states dealt with the pandemic differently shows RSCT at play. For example, vaccine diplomacy fused with other regional security issues in the case of

Chinese gifting vaccines to Sri Lanka and the desire by some in the UK to see Oxford-AstraZeneca produce a vaccine before Pfizer-BioNTech in order to vindicate Brexit. It is also the case that in different countries the populations securitize Covid to different levels. Climate change is securitized to greater levels in Europe, whereas Pacific countries consider infectious diseases/pandemics a greater threat. This again reinforces RSCT at play. The study emphasizes that Sri Lanka needs to navigate its geopolitical setting in a professional manner through a solid foreign policy. With the global powers engaged in a fierce competition to wrest control of the global balance of power, Sri Lanka should navigate its future in line with non-alignment policies.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The National Defence College Sri Lanka, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Kings College London and Institute for Security Governance (ISG) USA are acknowledged for extending valuable assistance and guidance in conducting the research and the paper

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