

Coronavirus and Meeting the Threat To Human Security

Whose security is threatened by the coronavirus? The Chinese, the Italians, the Americans? The answer, of course, is everyone's security is threatened. The virus has no regard for national identity. It crosses borders unhindered by all the weapons and strategic structures supposed to protect our security.

There is a lesson here that deserves attention: the concept of "security" must be redefined, or at least expanded. For a long time, it has been defined singularly in nationalistic terms and measured by military strength. Many trillions of dollars continue spent on weapons to defend nations against threats they pose to each other. Vast institutions have been created around these weapons, and outstanding intellects are dedicating their brilliance to strengthening these institutions and designing strategies for using these weapons -- all in the name of *national* security.

But as this pandemic spirals around the world, and as militaries lie helpless before it, it's appropriate to ask whether we would be better off if more resources and attention were pooled and devoted to addressing threats to *human* security.

The coronavirus is a wake-up call to stop ignoring our common human condition. It's telling us that chasing security with an inordinate adversarial perspective, without recognizing the value of cooperative and collective security, has left us unprepared and insecure before this very real global threat. We've been so preoccupied with threats from one another, we failed to plan for or effectively respond to the real dangers threatening us all.

It's irrational to respond only after a pandemic begins, yet with some exceptions, that's largely what we've done with coronavirus, especially in the U.S. But it's not as if a rational, effective response is impossible. We are capable of planning ahead. The main impediments have been a lack of political will and a preponderance of inaccurate thinking

But once we appreciate the contagiousness and lethality of the virus, we can make and implement practical decisions to deal with it. We need to establish disease detection networks capable of spotting anomalous outbreaks in real time. When a disease merits global response, trained officials of international agencies need to coordinate deployment of appropriate human and technical resources.

The entire scientific community must be mobilized to research vaccines and treatments. Information sharing among public health, biological research, and law enforcement communities is essential. Mechanisms for processing shared data effectively must be set up in advance. The central objective should be to coordinate global production and distribution of testing kits and other medical countermeasures. There should be a clear platform for stockpiling and delivering medicines and equipment, including planning and command-control decisional authority.

The essence of human security against pandemics is a broad international commitment to detect and contain disease, assemble immediate response capabilities sufficient to meet

global outbreaks, and develop immunization and cure. The World Health Organization has made great strides toward meeting the crushing demands of a pandemic. But it still doesn't have the governance authority, international support and resources to command the most efficient allocation and distribution of resources to detect, contain, prevent and cure diseases like coronavirus. Imagine how different things would be if it did.

Global public health is now getting a modicum of attention and funding. But it's dwarfed by the trillions spent on military tools which are useless for meeting dire global threats like the one we face today. That's an irrational set of priorities, reflecting a perilously misguided manifestation of fear and distrust, which ultimately leads to human destruction. Strategic initiatives based on human security would invert those priorities, and focus on saving lives rather than threatening them.

Focusing on human security is not limited to fighting pandemic disease. But pandemics throw it into the sharpest relief. They illustrate the truth that we're all in this together. A virus originating anywhere is a threat to everyone everywhere.

We are in a war, not nation against nation, but humanity against a common affliction. Many of us will die in this war. But it's the bug or us, and "us" means all of us. We're brothers and sisters in arms, with a common mission to contain the spread of the disease and heal the afflicted. To do this, we must think and act cooperatively and collectively. Inefficiency, incoherence and chaos result when leaders of individual nations manage information for their own political ends. That is a clear threat to human security.

Proclaiming the need for a human security view is not mere rhetoric. It is an existential imperative we need to prioritize now. It is essential to combatting pressing global threats, including climate change and nuclear weapons, as well as pandemic diseases. Our thinking and actions must reflect the reality that we are one human family.

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