The Non-traditional Security Threat of COVID-19 in South Asia: An Analysis of the Indian and Chinese Leverage in Health Diplomacy

Swagata Saha¹ and Sukalpa Chakrabarti¹

Abstract

South Asia has emerged as a major challenge in dealing with COVID-19 virus in terms of its demographics, economy, social values, political ambition and geographical location. The pandemic viewed through the prism of non-traditional security (NTS) threat presents new challenges and demands reworking of conventional governance mechanisms. India is the South Asian hegemon, and China is the single largest immediate neighbour with expansionist ambition in the region. Two most populous countries—one has been the epicentre of the virus, while the other is one of the most widely affected. Their public health and governance trajectory during the pandemic and their health diplomacy in the region have overtures for security architecture of South Asia in post-COVID-19 world. A lone statist approach and legal–institutional officialdom fail to appreciate the instrumentalities of an unconventional security threat like COVID-19. This calls for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to deal with NTS threat, in general, and epidemiological disease, in particular. This by no means indicating a retreat of the state rather a proactive role in articulating interests of more inclusive categories and, in doing so, the state consolidates its role of governance and becomes a significant point of integration.

Keywords

Pandemic, non traditional security, governance, health diplomacy, India-China relations, South Asia

¹ Symbiosis School of International Studies, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, Maharashtra, India

Corresponding author:
Sukalpa Chakrabarti, Symbiosis School of International Studies, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, Maharashtra 412115, India.
E-mail: dydirector@ssispune.edu.in
COVID-19 has firmly established itself as the single largest security disrupter of this century in non-traditional sense. It has necessitated a recalibration of securitisation framework, governance mechanisms and diplomatic manoeuvres hitherto employed by States. South Asia in grappling with the virus has charted a distinctive path with pre-existing inadequacies. This raises pertinent questions with respect to the uniqueness of COVID-19 as an unconventional security entity. Considering the context of South Asia, Indian and Chinese engagement during the pandemic raises many perspectives on the management of, and mobilisation around, the disease. The article strives to find if the existing non-traditional security (NTS) management (particularly, COVID-19) measures are sufficient for the present pandemic, or the vocabulary of security governance warrants an expansion in unconventional terms.

The debate on NTS issues surfaced in many academic circles during and after the Second World War and the Cold War. Decolonisation, bipolarity, failure of ideological divide, economic liberalisation and reinvigoration of multilateral or regional institutions necessitated a rethinking of the then existing literature on security studies. NTS was not new in terms of its existence, but its appreciation and academic adaptation was not so evident earlier.

The Paris, Copenhagen schools and many other upcoming academic circles broadened the notion of security and rejected the State as the sole custodian of national security. NTS, in fact, was more transnational, non-military and required extra-Statist, along with non-Statist, approach to meet the new challenges, which included epidemiological diseases, human rights violation, terrorism, illegal migration, climate change, cyberterrorism/crime and the like. Barry Buzan in his Speech Act theory went further to identify a somewhat concocted existential security threat to usurp wider security defender prerogative. State is often the usurper, according to him, to securitise an apparently non-issue of security to gain absolute control (Caballero-Anthony, 2016). Welsch School of Critical Security Studies also emphasises on the notions of human emancipation and narrows security concerns to a more individual level (Caballero-Anthony, 2016). Hameiri and Jones’ ‘State Transformation Theory’ also reiterates the overhaul of State’s role and class forces in managing the unconventional security threats such as a pandemic, pollution or money laundering (Rhinard, 2016, p. 855). Post-structuralist and Third World schools criticised the Western-centric definitions of NTS and challenged the status quo to expound on NTS suited for non-Western contexts (Caballero-Anthony, 2016). In Asia, the Consortium of NTS studies headed by the Rajaratnam School of International Studies focused on a more inclusive definition of NTS and also interpreted humanitarian use of military force as a counter-NTS threat measure (Caballero-Anthony, 2016). In Asian experience, the financial crisis of 1997 uncovered its cascading sociopolitical effect besides its economic effect. This necessitated a comprehensive security approach to meet the multifaceted dimension of such NTS issues (Caballero-Anthony, 2008).

The conceptual core of Consortium on NTS Studies in Asia lies in the transnational operational level when there is a sudden appearance or meteoric propagation of the non-State and non-military security concerns (Caballero-Anthony, 2008). This conceptual core coincides with the very innate characteristics of SARS COVID-19
pandemic that has raked the world like never before. Hameiri and Jones (2013) have rejected the newness of NTS, citing the example of Spanish flu, which, in 1918, despite taking a toll of 50 million lives, was merely seen as a consequence of the Great War. It was not until the 1970s that the flu’s security significance was well appreciated and solely ascribed as a phenomenon of security salience, when a book came out on the subject (Collier, 1974; Hameiri & Jones, 2013)

The catastrophic consequences of diseases and pandemics stand very well recognised and articulated, globally. Deliberations on disarmament of biological weapons of mass destruction began as early as in 1969 in the United Nations, and the first multilateral disarmament treaty on biological threats—the Biological Weapons Convention—was signed in 1972 (Arms Control Association, n.d.). As an offshoot of NTS, biological threats and use of toxins needed not just an army of soldiers but more inclusive and varied participation when attempting to mitigate it.

**COVID-19 as a Non-traditional Security Threat in South Asia**

As of early November 2020, COVID-19 had affected about 47 million lives globally and claimed over 1 million lives (ORF, 2020). Over 9 million cases have been recorded in South Asia (ORF, 2020). Figure 1 represents the geographical distribution of COVID-19 over the globe, and South Asia continues to share a major portion of high reportage in daily cases.

![COVID-19 Case Notification per 100,000 People in 14 days from 13 October 2020](https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases)

**Figure 1.** COVID-19 Case Notification per 100,000 People in 14 days from 13 October 2020.

**Source:** ECDC. https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/geographical-distribution-2019-ncov-cases
Figure 2. State of SDGS in South Asia.

Source: Asia Pacific SDG Gateway. https://data.unescap.org/data-analysis/sdg-progress
Two countries with the highest number of cases in the world are the USA and India. India is the largest country in South Asia, and owing to its high density of population, compromised levels of sanitisation, lack of optimum level of medical support, high migrant population, high poverty and malnutrition levels, the region has become particularly vulnerable to the new virus. The grim situation of India may be generalized for South Asia in terms of the region’s performance in meeting the United Nations Social Development Goals (SDGs).

Economic resilience of South Asia has been stretched beyond limits due to the outbreak of the pandemic. South Asia’s growth is projected to plummet by 7.7% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). According to the Asian Development Bank’s Asian Development Outlook Update, 2020, South Asia is going to be the worst hit in the record sluggish economic growth of Asia in the past 60 years. The only silver lining to this dismal trajectory is that the Indian economy is expected to rebound by 7.7% in 2021 and the Chinese economy by 8% (BBC News, 2020, September 15). In this sense, the two leading Asian countries have to shoulder the responsibility of bringing Asia back on track, and consolidating their position in South Asia will be critical to their long-term vision.

Why India and China?

India and China are, arguably, the chief architects of the Asian century. Two of the oldest civilisations, having traversed common path of ancient trade, foreign domination, population explosion and economic liberalisation, have many synergies. The world has seen the advent of regionalisation with renewed vigour, and multilateral institutions have become an ivory tower of ornamental deliberations. The reference point is the Group of 20 (G-20), which has emerged as a powerful bloc of negotiators in various multilateral forums and global corridors of power and has exercised its collective clout like never before. India and China, being important constituents of G20, have contended to occupy more space for action. South Asia has emerged as this immediate space where they could cultivate their strategies in geopolitical, historical, economic, demographic and cultural terms.

No imagination of South Asia is complete without the reference to India, which, owing to its size, position, economy, resource potential, population size, historical ties and events, military might, etc., has acquired the role of a natural leader in the region. Muni (2003), in identifying the commonalities of the South Asian region, said that constituent countries have ‘hardly anything in common with each other except India’ (p.187). As the natural leader, India has bilateral and collective responsibilities towards her immediate neighbours and the region, respectively.

There are apprehensions over India’s hegemonic presence in the region, and the neighbours often turn towards the Asian numero uno to maintain balance. The countries in Asia, including India, are resource rich and development deficient, and hence open up enormous possibilities for China to engage in the region to feed its manufacturing hub of the world, to materialise its connectivity plans and resist any attempts of the region being identified by a single country or to let India
become a contender to its presumed Asian leadership. Taken as a single case in point, each country has many NTS concerns over poverty, disease, unemployment, malnutrition, social dissent, terrorism, political tension and, as such, largely behind the SDG goals as mentioned in Figure 2. Chinese investments, which may mitigate these economic vagaries, will also lay these NTS concerns to rest, to a large extent.

Pakistan is an all-weather ally to China in navigating through its murky journey with India. Apart from their nuclear arms cooperation, Pakistan’s participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and operational claims of Gwadar port by China are testimonies to the everlasting friendship and attempts at encircling India.

Myanmar, during the Military junta days, was armed by China when an arms embargo was imposed on the country by the United Nations (UN). Post opening up, its illegal drugs and terrorism linkages point towards its covert link with China. The Myitsone Dam and solar projects are major Chinese development projects in the Myanmar, but it is not without controversy over the persecution of indigenous labour force by China. The Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor and Kaladan multimodal projects are important attempts by China to gain access to the region and, specifically, India. Myanmar had two lock downs amidst the rising cases and the very feasibility of holding elections in November 2020 seemed uncertain then, due to apprehensions over people gathering and spreading the contagion.

Nepal and Bhutan are the buffer states. Nepal’s position is dynamic, truly, balancing the two giants juxtaposing the small landlocked country. Amidst the India–China military build-up in multiple sectors and firing, death and seizure of troops during the COVID-19 upheaval, earlier this year, Nepal has made a cartographic intrusion in claiming part of Indian territories of Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura as rightfully Nepal’s and has made constitutional amendments to that end (Ethirajan, 2020). Lipulekh Pass, in particular, is a close gateway between India and China, an ancient trade route as well as the present Manasarovar Yatra route. Nepal’s sense of timing and unanimity in institutionalizing a cartographic claim over Indian territory, clearly demonstrated the Chinese bent of Nepalese foreign policy. In the earlier phases of the COVID-19 crisis, Nepal had thwarted China’s mask diplomacy by rejecting a consignment of Chinese masks after worldwide reports of faulty Chinese masks. However, coinciding with India–China border tensions, Nepal had blocked broadcasting of Indian news media, except Doordarshan, over Indian media’s claim over Chinese Ambassador in Nepal and Premier Oli having vested interests. China, acting as an extra-regional power, is securitising media interaction and freedom of expression in unconventional terms besides playing hard politics over territory and resources between countries in South Asia.

Bangladesh, along with India and Pakistan, constitutes the Indian subcontinent. There are deep historical, cultural, linguistic and trade ties between India and Bangladesh, and the former may be safely held as the pivot of the latter’s foreign policy. The signing of Land Boundary Agreement in 2015 between the two countries was a celebration of their friendly relation in an age of irredentist neighbours. Bangladesh’s bulging population and intense inequality make it spend twice the revenue it collects, annually (Hassan, 2020). In this respect, it
looks up to China for investments without losing sight of its debt trap. In 2015, China ousted India as Bangladesh’s top trading partner and China’s second highest arms export destination, only after Pakistan (Anwar, 2019). Water sharing, illegal migration and criticism of India’s new citizenship laws are some bottlenecks in India–Bangladesh relations, and it was Bangladesh to moot the idea of SAARC to balance the hegemonic position of India in the region. In the context of the pandemic too, Bangladesh was open to both India and China in seeking medical provisions, transfer of best practices knowledge and vaccines (further discussed later in the article).

Although positioned as a buffer state, Bhutan is a close ally of India and wary of Chinese irredentism and abject disregard for the Buddhism minorities in Tibet. In recent past, China offered Bhutan more than 600 sq. km of land in lieu of the mere 100 sq. km of contested land at Doklam at the India–China–Bhutan tri-junction, establishing Chinese fervour for control in South Asia in clear terms. More recently, amidst the COVID-19 outbreak in June 2020, at the Council of the Global Environment Facility that was created following Rio Summit of 1992, the Chinese delegate alleged that a Bhutanese wildlife sanctuary was situated at Chinese side of disputed area (Lintner, 2020). Sri Lanka and Maldives are priceless ‘pearls’ in the string of maritime silk route at the Indian Ocean, and strategically leveraging these countries would mean uninterrupted access to sea lanes of communication so dear to the bourgeoning Chinese freight movement and will also result in encircling India, to some extent. This is evidenced by the fact that Sri Lanka was the first stop in South Asia during a Chinese official trip after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Although the newly elected Rajapaksha government of Sri Lanka has pledged itself to an ‘India first’ policy, Sri Lanka’s (De Silva, 2020) sluggish economy as a result of the pandemic needs fresh cash pump to gain some semblance of normalcy. Economic predicament of Sri Lanka gives more room for Chinese action. However, the political price of economic engagement with China was well demonstrated in the leasing out of the Sri Lankan port city of which the controversial Hambantota is a part of, due to non-payment of debt (Hundlandi & Kannangara, 2020).

The plight of Maldives is worse than that of Sri Lanka with its tourism industry heavily hit by the present pandemic situation. A close ally of India, Maldives does not have bargaining powers like many others in South Asia and is in dire need of cash flow to sustain its economy. As per the Asian Development Bank estimates, Maldivian economy is set to shrink by 20.5% in 2020. Since 2018, India’s pledged assistance amounts to US$2 billion, whereas loans from China stands at a close to US$1.4 billion (South China Morning Post, 2020). The economic crisis in the wake of the pandemic has limited Maldives’ options, but it is cognisant of consequences of non-payment of Chinese loans as evident in the case of its close neighbour, Sri Lanka.

Therefore, the altitudes of Chinese stake in South Asian engagement through connectivity, infrastructure, private investments, cultural people to people ties, donation diplomacy and soft power extension measures have proved to be quite high. This is essentially the Chinese tactic of ‘hexiao kongda’: pursuit of, or influencing, small countries to regulate the bigger one (Kondapalli, 2014). This could be interpreted as a reiteration of India’s omnipresence in South Asia not
only in regional but extra-regional and global scale. The cultural ties, track-two initiatives and twinning of cities of South Asia in para-diplomatic perspective (Chatterji & Saha, 2017) with China is a natural corollary to advent of globalisation, failing of Keynesian welfare model, ‘Regulatory State’ concerned with ‘metagovernance’ and delegating much to subnational units, which have wider latitude with respect to ‘multi-scalar governance arrangement’, often, across borders (Hameiri & Jones, 2013, p. 467). This has also placed interstate interaction away from the central corridors of power in more unconventional and issue-based parlance. While fraught with concerns over unequal development, dilution or over-concentration of central control and the like, this uncovers the uncharted paths of security in forms of community/genetic disease (often shared by similar communities across borders), poverty, dissidents and terrorism, human trafficking, unsustainable resource exploitation, etc., which are often sidelined in the clamour for traditional security concerns unless it takes the shape of national/transnational proportions like the present pandemic.

Drawing from this argument, it may be pointed out that the virus in its rudimentary days in Wuhan was not given requisite attention until its speed of contamination was recognised worldwide. According to a problematic Harvard study report, the contagion may have begun in August 2019 as the satellite images suggest a sudden rise in the traffic at hospital parking lots and increased searches in Chinese search engines related to keywords like cough and diarrhoea (Giles et al., 2020). In addition to the allegation against China’s silencing of whistle-blowers and doctors in its initial approach at de-emphasising the virus, multilateral bodies like the World Health Organization are also believed, arguably, to be a part of this secret mission. There are Chinese virologists who have hinted that the virus had incubated in Chinese laboratories with the intention of being used as a biological weapon, and there were also Chinese foreign policy representative’s claims about the US Navy carrying the virus with reference to military games in Wuhan in 2019 (Chunshan, 2020).

Notwithstanding rumour-mongering and misinformation with regard to present claims, India and China are yet again tied in a close counter in South Asia in more unconventional terms. The new security challenge and its ramifications in South Asia calls for new modes of engagement by the two Asian leaders. The very transnational nature of NTS necessitates a transnational response. This transnational element denotes a slight slip in governance, which leads to securitisation of an otherwise unlikely security concern, in some cases. While there are merits to both internationalisation and localisation of NTS issues, governments walk a tight rope in managing the two. This holds true for the Asian big powers too.

The Paradox: Indian and Chinese Experiences

The COVID-19 contagion viewed through the lenses of NTS threat may be dissected to find numerous other NTS threats: human rights violation, women and transgender rights violation, religious freedom and freedom of expression
violation, access to food, clean water and basic sanitation needs violation, etc. It is a Herculean task for any government to safeguard the multifaceted NTS threats as they tend to bombard each other in keeping the contagion at bay.

Another dilemma for governments lies in the constituent nature of NTS itself. NTS is transnational in nature and calls for a comprehensive transnational approach. However, in limited physical channels of communication among governments and its people, lockdowns, travel restrictions, a vigilant international community and regional neighbourhood and a need to, or desire to, exercise central control in the wake of the pandemic, the governance paradox in South Asia becomes graver. The governance paradox lies at the churning point of centripetal forces of centralisation of control, curtailment of rights, emphasis on securitisation of issues that have the least security concern and the centrifugal pulls of individual rights, federating units’ autonomy, global surveillance, etc.

The paradox is unprecedented and profound for the largest democracy—India—beginning with the staging of the biggest lockdown for 21 continuous days. The paradox began with the very proclamation of lockdown. Declaring a nationwide lockdown to be effective within a period of 4 h had sent tremors throughout the country. A constitution that guarantees freedom of movement, a huge itinerant and migrant population, large commuters, unprepared supply chains, the timing of the month (barely 9 days before the month to end), the timing of agricultural and budgeting session, etc., are few factors that made the vagaries of lockdown worse and controversial. However, the contamination rate of the new contagion, frenzy over hoarding supplies (as witnessed in the USA and many other countries), and spike in transport and mobility out of panic are arguments, which may be cited in favour of making such a huge and abrupt lockdown successful.

In the following discussion, the paradox is discussed in more specific terms. In analysing the collisions of rights against rights, one security threat against another, the governments and people’s experiences will bear significant overtures for any South Asian counter security architecture of non-traditional nature.

To put figures into perspective, the National Human Rights Commission recorded 32,876 human rights violations in the months from April to September 2020 in India. The concentration of cases during the outbreak is evident in the fact that out of 73,729 complaint registrations from October 2019 to September 2020, almost half of them occurred from April, coinciding with lockdown and popularisation of outbreak in India (The Times of India, 2020). Till May 2020, there were 300 deaths unrelated to COVID-19, but due to COVID-19-induced hardships such as starvation, suicide, police brutalities, exhaustion, etc., 97 people perished in Shramik special trains for migrants, and out of the post-mortem carried out on 51 deaths, it was found that none had succumbed to COVID-19 (Times News Network, 2020). The passing away of 16 migrant labourers killed on the railway track while heading back to their home states or truck accidents claiming lives of 55 in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and another 24 in Madya Pradesh (MP) while their long journey back home point to the glaring gap in human security and social safety measures of the Indian government (Negi, 2020). A 25-state survey revealed that during the national lockdown, 82% did not receive aid (food ration) from the government, 84% did not receive payment during the lockdown period and 72%
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had ration for, at best, 2 days to fend for themselves (Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020). It may be noted that even before the pandemic, 10% of annual household consumption had to be directed towards healthcare concerns, most of which was sourced out of pocket (Razvi & Khan, 2015, p. 17). The never-ending ordeal of the 40 million migrant population ousted from their livelihood, rented accommodation and with minimal access to sanitation and safe drinking water and such basic fundamental rights has raised a burning question: are the government initiatives just operational or ornamental use?

We find that the lockdown had reinvigorated the government as keeper and defender of basic rights and needs of its people. However, a sole statist approach seems inadequate to handle this crisis of unprecedented global measure. It may be added here that former Chief Justice of India, Ranjan Gogoi reminded, during the course of an academic deliberation in early 2020, that the role of the government in managing the COVID-19 crisis cannot be compared to that of an Emergency (Garg, 2020). Scathing criticism was hurled at the plight of India’s massive migrant workforce, and there was an ardent plea to designate them as internally displaced people, following relevant UN conventions to which India is a signatory (Raghavan, 2020).

Hameiri and Jones (2013, p. 467) expounded that the ‘relativisation of scale’ of governance (local, regional or national) has made opportunities for ‘scale jumping’ or broadened the scope of ‘inter-scalar articulation’. This relativisation was evident in India in the NTS context of the COVID-19 pandemic too.

The governance paradox is mirrored like no other in the clash of fundamental constitutional rights laid in Article 21: right to life and liberty. The pandemic has created a situation in which barter of one right for the other has become inevitable: to live and enjoy basic liberties together seem a distant dream during the pandemic. This threat to basic human right is subtle but pervasive in modern modes of governance and surveillance. The severance of physical communication has made Internet and information highways busier than ever before. The Indian government did not lag behind in making use of Information Technology (IT) and phone application in exercising governance and tracking COVID-19 cases. The Aarogya Setu app was recommended to be downloaded for tracking COVID-19-positive patients, and it was made mandatory for domestic air travel and also in some private organisations (corporate, clinics, hospitals, departmental stores, etc.). As the app functions with GPS, name, location, address details and passport/Aadhar card number are stored in it (Shrivastava, 2020). The irresponsible sharing of data from this app of quarantined patients have not only infringed their right to privacy and liberty but have also made them vulnerable to different fraudulent money laundering agencies as well as victims of social taboo associated with the disease. To the dismay of many, the public sharing of names and residential addresses of COVID-19-positive patients by Rajasthan and Karnataka had exposed them to social stigma (Human Rights Watch, 2020, March 27).

The central government, after the 21-day lockdown, left the onus of reopening and further administration with regard to pandemic management to the states, keeping only ‘meta-governance’ for itself (Hameiri & Jones, 2013, p. 467). However, the rise of regulatory State and meta-governance often causes a divide
and debunks the very purpose of administration of NTS threat. The paradox of governance, here, is at two levels: empowerment (of people) and exercise (of power of governance). The government has to cautiously balance between protecting people from the virus and keeping dissent from such tight controls in check, and in doing so, it must not compromise on the constitutional empowerment of people to their basic rights. For the people, the paradox lies in whether to exercise liberties of privacy and consequent human security necessities or give away a part of the same to ensure mortality of an individual and society. The exercise–empowerment paradox and exacerbation of rights were visible in the Indian Education sector as well, not losing sight of the fact that right to education in India is a fully enforceable fundamental right. The ‘one nation, one digital platform’ or ‘one class, one channel’ initiatives of Ministry of Human Resource and Development, Government of India (GOI), were welcome and much awaited initiatives for the students and learners. However, its trickle-down benefits remained highly unequal. As per the GOI estimates of 2018, the rural–urban divide in households with Internet facility remained at 14.9% and 42%, respectively, taking mobile Internet count as well (Government of India, 2019). Therefore, online education remained prized possession of few urban middle-class groups. Pervasive loss/lack of electricity disrupted DTH channel streaming of education, in particularly, rural areas. Also due to limited number of mobile handsets (not considering computer availability, which is much lower) in a family in comparison to the number of students per family, simultaneous attainment of online classes remained a distant possibility.

Internet communication is the coming-of-age instrument of governance in the present times. As discussed earlier, it may make deep inroads into people’s rights and liberties through an app or IT outfit. Governments may make both hyper-use and underuse of IT services to deal with security threats: traditional and non-traditional. The latter use may be well exemplified in the case of the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. In August 2019, the Indian government abrogated the controversial Article 370, putting an end to special status of Kashmir and mainstreaming it in the folds of nationhood. As a pre-emptive exercise for supposed public outcry leading to law-and-order situation, 4G Internet services were withdrawn from the Union Territory. Leading a normal life was never so difficult besides the curtailment of freedom of expression and speech during the pandemic in the valley. Notwithstanding interruption in work from home or online education video sessions, even something as basic as consulting a doctor over video call or making bank payments were made impossible due to the suspension of 4G services (Raghuvanshi, 2020). The grim situation during the Covid-19 pandemic stands self-explained by a comparative estimate made in Kashmir: while there is one soldier for every nine civilians, one ventilator is available per 71,000 people and one doctor for a set of 3,900 people in the valley (Aijazi, 2020). This is in clearly a case of disproportionate attention being paid to traditional security issues over NTS concerns in government’s security prioritization matrix. This is reiteration of the faulty premise on which NTS is considered new or non-traditional: it is not non-existent; rather, it is conspicuous by its absence in Statist and largely legal–institutional academic debates on security studies.
COVID-19 has turned out to be the new arena of bio-political intervention by governments. The exceptionalism incurred under the label of endemic preparedness has become the new normal. In Foucault’s exposition, this ‘anatamo-political’ disciplining of bodily/community threat necessitates ‘normalising’ or governmental intervention (Cisney & Morar, 2015, pp. 4–5). Apart from use of apps or internet, artificial intelligence, drones, new forms of immigration and transport surveillance are in some way bifurcating society into covid positive and negative compartments where trade off between personal space and life is increasingly becoming norm of social existence. It has also given rise to new forms of class struggles and social tensions, making further scope for governance. This aligns with Foucault’s understanding of bio-power as ‘power bent on generating forces’ rather than ‘impeding them’ (Foucault, n.d., p. 35). Bio-politics and NTS draw closer in view of their operational unit, which is the individual. Bio-politics does not circumscribe individual action through ‘traditional security forces’; rather, ‘individuals discipline themselves’ to keep sustaining (Van de Pas, 2020, p. 18).

There is, therefore, a glaring gap or inadequacy on the part of the government to deal with NTS threat of the new contagion, and it makes a frantic call for engagement of non-governmental and people-centric organisations to articulate Interest of both—government and people. This inclusivity has to be global and cross-regional. However, this is by no means an indication of relegating the role of governance of state into the background. State must take a proactive role in engaging more stakeholders and maintain the balance of governance in steering through threats that defy old modes of management.

The discussion on NTS threat seems incomplete without reference to ground zero of the present contagion crippling the world. It is common place that human rights infringement and NTS threats have been rampant in China. Its communist political regime and capitalist economy have erected the convenient command and control system. In contrast to India’s score of 71 (Freedom House, 2020b), China has a score of 10 out of 100 and is declared ‘not free’ (Freedom House, 2020a), according to the latest Freedom House Country Report. The COVID-19 outbreak had made China’s iron-fisted control more convenient and risked the pre-existing denial of rights, further. Thus, the ‘hyper-normal’ and ‘extra-legal intervention’ by the Chinese government was somewhat legitimised in the wake of this unprecedented public health emergency (Lu et al., 2020, p. 12). China has experienced domestic dissent from many fringe communities like Uighurs, Tibetans and Hui Muslims, and the democratic ardour from Hong Kong has resonated more than ever before. Amidst the pandemic, around one million Uighurs are detained in prison like environment, ostensible, vocational training centres with the aim of Hanification of these minorities. They were quarantined for as long as 40 days and were made to take traditional Chinese medicine without their consent as potential experiments for curing or preventing the virus (The Economic Times, 2020). Racial homogenisation and unconsented trials at the altar of public health are rigorous bio-power exercises unleashed by the Chinese government. The pretext of the pandemic are also put to use effectively in quashing pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong, which was handed over to China by the British, and the Sino-British Treaty of 1997 ascertained Hong Kong’s special
freedom till 2047. In June, China institutionalised a new security law for Hong Kong, which had practically put an end to the ‘one-country two-system’ arrangement and severely restricted Hong Kong’s permanent and on-permanent citizens’ freedom (BBC News, 2020, June 30). Persecution of Tibetans has continued unabated under the euphemism of contagion. As in case of bio-political Sinicisation of Uighurs, the Tibetans were made to unlearn and learn their indigenous thought and practices, and alternative thinking and action were subverted at any costs. In an attempt to re-educate the Tibetan minorities, a ‘million police to 10 million homes’ campaign was launched in January 2020 with the apparent motive of sensitising security forces to local needs and aspirations (International Campaign for Tibet, 2020). Due to the pandemic, Losar or Tibetan New Year celebrations were cancelled to prevent public gathering, and the unreasonable swarming of security forces during the pandemic was completely overlooked. Besides these communities, another stumbling block for the Chinese citizens in need during the pandemic was its Hukou or household registration system. Just like India, China’s massive migrant population, who have made an influx to urban centres for better pay and opportunities, has been terminated from the cash benefits made available by the government against their household registrations in home provinces (origin of migration). This population was unable to travel to their registered locations due to the lockdown and restriction on physical movement, as well as fear of permanent job loss (Lu et al., 2020). China’s media and Internet censorship efforts were also intensified post the pandemic outbreak. Deaths and disappearances were rampant among whistle-blowers, journalists, lawyers, scientists and medics who attempted information sharing on online platforms about COVID-19 or were critical of the government.

The pandemic had made Internet modes of communication the sole medium, and China’s high-handed crackdown on Internet had practically shut the country from the world. Zoom, a China-made remote work and webinar app, had caused much inconvenience to its global users by shutting down meetings (instead of removing Chinese participants) if it had Chinese participants and discussed on any subject that China believed did not comply with local laws. Conversely, China’s attempt to silence any counter or alternative narrative to its official institutional position is getting global (Wang, 2020).

The global fulmination against Chinese human rights situation is not only premised on its internal crackdown but also based on Chinese attempt to hide or best delay information sharing on virus and, particularly, human transmission. In an open letter to the United Nations Secretary General and member states, 321 civil society groups have beseeched them to begin an impartial inquiry into human rights violation within and outside China connected with persecution of Uighurs, Hong Kong crusaders, whistle-blowers as well as secrecy over vital information about the contagion (Hong Kong Free Press, 2020). In World Health Organization’s (WHO) annual health assembly, 62 nations pledged to begin an independent inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak, of which India is also a part. The USA had withdrawn funding from the WHO and accused it of having vested interests with China in managing the pandemic (Gupta, 2020). The global outrage is evident in everything Chinese: from its government to its people. While former US President Trump had created much
uproar over calling the new contagion as Wuhan virus, Brazilian education minister had criminalised China further in sharing his belief that the disease is used to leverage Chinese supremacy at a global level. Anti-Asian sentiments and related xenophobia has raised a storm over the Internet besides physical assault and mental duress of Asian-origin people as citizens, foreigners, refugees or other migrants across the world. UN Secretary General, Gueterres, had also warned that the disease had caused a ‘tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering’ and urged for concerted global effort to safeguard society from these perils (Human Rights Watch, 2020, May 12). A 14-nation survey conducted by Pew found that 61% were not convinced with China’s handling of the virus (Silver et al., 2020). An online survey by the Takshashila Institution found a similar negative view of China. An overwhelming 67% held China responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic, and another 56.4% felt that the Chinese support extended globally was intended for pursuit of power politics only (Kewalramani, 2020).

As an NTS event, COVID-19 emanating from China has given rise to a modern ‘risk society’ as public health has become a global common, and an exclusive national health security perspective is self-defeating in purpose and action (Lu et al., 2020, p. 12). Hameiri and Jones have also indicated that with the end of class struggle and advancement of ‘world risk society’, NTS issues have garnered new lines of political mobilisation along ‘more precarious’ and ‘individuated nature’ of conflicts (Hameiri & Jones, 2013, p. 468). As the sensitisation and opinion on NTS threat of COVID-19 have come from all walks of life, every corner of society and individuals, the counter-mechanisms must also be inclusive and all encompassing.

The governance paradox exists in both India and China, although, in Chinese terms, the paradox is minimum in government perception as its command and control structure rules out the possibility of parallel or alternative administration narratives. However, the unconventional threat is far more to people’s liberties at large in China. In the Chinese case, there is a slim chance of measuring the empowerment and exercise gap as the government suppresses all forms of protest and dissent, and the pandemic has allowed the excesses to be employed further. Instead of a regulatory model of meta-governance followed by States in meeting NTS threats, the Chinese government had put on the garb of a ‘quasi-war state’ and ‘big government’ to deal with the contagion (Lu et al., 2020, p. 4). However obscure its domestic situation may be, global uproar against Chinese disregard for NTS threat has amassed from all quarters. Herein lies the transnational dimension of NTS threat, which affects one and all. As environment and public health are considered as global commons today, a national action plan (without regional and international consideration) will not be able to make any foray in an NTS-compromised situation, in this case, a pandemic.

**Health Diplomacy: New Form of Contestation in South Asia**

The Asian front runners have found health diplomacy as the new battleground to augment their power position and also instil a normative image in South Asia. An
investment-deficient and medically underprepared South Asia has made India and China vie for influence in the region during the pandemic. According to the World Bank estimates, South Asia’s gross domestic product—GDP (at market prices) growth in 2019 was 4.1% and forecasted to be −7.7% by 2020 (The World Bank, 2020, October 8). Till 2017, South Asia’s public health expenditure as a part of GDP stood at a meagre 3.46% (World Bank data, n.d.b).

The South Asian region seems divided in receiving medical aid from either China or India. At the behest of the Indian prime minister, the Emergency SAARC fund for COVID-19 was set up, which was worth US$18 million, wherein India contributed US$10 million (Alden & Dunst, n.d., LSE). Pakistan’s conditional contribution of US$3 million came with much controversy over routing it through SAARC Secretariat and Charter (Bhattacharjee, 2020). The idea of setting up an emergency fund outside SAARC charter was to keep it free from procedural delays and difficulties in order to facilitate easy and timely dispensation. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka have been part of China’s BRI, and the Chinese favours would add to the debt diplomacy project. China has pumped new blood into its magnanimous BRI under the banner of ‘Health Silk Road Initiative’. As a part of this project, China had sent its medical teams to 27 countries, including Pakistan and Myanmar (Haidar, 2020). At a video conference of foreign ministers of China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal, the significance of building the silk road of health was reiterated in the context of the pandemic situation (Bhadrapuram, 2020).

The other Indian Ocean Region countries and Bhutan have looked up to India to extend help during the pandemic. The Indian Navy Ship (INS) Kesari had sailed off as early as May to deliver essential food supplies and medicines, including the much coveted hydroxychloroquine to Mauritius, Madagascar, Seychelles and Comoros besides airlifting medical supplies to Sri Lanka. Also, the Indian Army was prepared with Rapid Response Teams and five Indian naval ships for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka way back in March 2020 (Kulkarmi & Roy, 2020). However, these countries remained sceptical of military engagement in apparently non-military affairs, and Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka stayed away from any military deployment. Initially, Nepal had rejected medical help from both the countries, citing its self-sufficiency (Haidar, 2020), while Bangladesh and Sri Lanka had accepted donation and aid from both.

In the bid to make medical provisions as the new diplomatic mode of outreach and co-option, vaccine diplomacy has emerged like no other in the diplomatic arsenal of the two countries. While masks and Hydroxychloroquine acted as incremental diplomatic steps to deepen ties with neighbours, immediate or in the future, vaccine’s diplomatic potential is greater and long-lasting in the absence of any magical cure for the present pandemic. Like China had set up the world factory, India has created the world pharmacy, bearing the responsibility of supplying 60% of vaccines worldwide (Sridharan, 2021). India has pledged to gift 10 million doses of the vaccine to immediate neighbours in South Asia—Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and adjoining Mauritius, Seychelles and Myanmar (The Print, 2021). Indian Foreign Secretary, Shringla had reassured Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal about vaccine supply
way back in the later half of 2020 in his official visits to these countries (Basu, 2020). He also committed to support supply and storage facilities to interested countries. Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar had made commitment to Sri Lanka on vaccines once they are exportable (Sridharan, 2021). Also, Bangladesh made an agreement with India to procure 30 million doses by November, 2020 (Sridharan, 2021). In India, more than 60 foreign Heads of Missions had visited the Hyderabad-based pharma company, producing indigenous vaccine in December 2020 (Basu, 2020). Indian Dr Reddy’s Laboratories had also partnered with the Russian Sputnik V for conducting trials (Sharma, 2020). The Serum Institute of India had taken the unilateral risk of producing 40 million doses before the AstraZeneca vaccine’s (with which it had partnered to produce) final trial results were due (Sharma, 2020). The company has an infrastructure to produce 500 doses per minute, and 50% of them will be shelved for export (Oaten & Patidar, 2020).

Having met dejection in vaccine diplomacy in its immediate neighbourhood of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), turning to South Asia was both out of compulsion and ambition for China. Thailand, Philippines and Malaysia counted on the USA and British rather than China on vaccines as more dependable sources (Business Insider, 2020). China has offered its home-grown Sinovac to Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh (Basu, 2020). Nepal, in the past, had volunteered for Sinovac trials, and talks are underway to conduct trials on Nepalese and Chinese workers of Hongshi Shivam Cement, a joint venture cement factory in Nepal as well as in Bangladesh (Basu, 2020). Bangladesh had initially consented to Sinovac trials, but later stages of trial were stalled over disagreement on its fund sharing (McCarthy, 2020). While Pakistan seeking China-made vaccine does not come as a surprise, Afghanistan seems to have kept both options of China and India open Reuters Islamabad, 2020, December 31; Saleem, 2020). In 2018, health expenditure as a percentage of total GDP of China stood at 5.35 and that of India was recorded at 3.54, which was way lower than developed countries such as the USA, Britain, Japan or even South Korea (World Bank, n.d.a). This does not send out an inspiring message to those who India and China seek to influence through health diplomacy efforts.

The success of health diplomacy will be determined by not only existing geopolitics and efficacy of vaccine but also its administration and supply management and the degree of vaccine necessity and readiness of a particular country. However, what seems palpable in the declaration of the topmost leaders of the two countries is the realisation that the present pandemic is a threat of an unconventional nature, and it brings to bear common suffering for all. Xi Jinping in the G20 virtual summit in 2020 had put forward the idea of ‘community of common destiny of mankind’ (People’s Daily, 2020) in any attempt to counter the COVID-19 crisis. Similarly, his Indian counterpart, Modi reassured at the United Nations platform, in September 2020, that India’s vaccine will be available to ‘all humanity’ in COVID-19 amelioration (The Economic Times, 2020).
In the race pertaining to health diplomacy between India and China, the fault lines of South Asia in terms of development, ethnic identification, political will, economic compulsions, baggage of past and institutional strength, among others, become prominent. South Asian integration story remains incomplete whether tested at the altar of Indian hegemony or Chinese expansion. The approach, for most countries in the region, is case based and need based. There is an overtly Statist formal approach in dealing with the crisis and the various non-governmental, track-two initiatives and para-diplomatic agreements have fallen flat beyond deliberative stage.

**Way Ahead**

Just as each person, States should also follow a COVID-19 responsible behaviour. This process of pandemic adaptation is incomplete without application of the new terms of engagement and governance necessitated by today’s unconventional threats. In the case of COVID-19, governance imperatives, public health policy, social safety nets, political will and economic outcomes, all seems locked up in watertight compartments. Fluidity among these concerns is the need of the hour to manage the unconventional threat of epidemiological disease. COVID-19 is a public health event; however, it had to brace itself with social taboos and exclusion, community (of medical health professional, cleaning staff, community medicine workers, certain religious sect for untimely congregation) rejection and was point of political mobilisation, civil society activation besides being the single largest market disruptor. Thus, the ramifications of COVID-19 and its intricate interconnection necessitate a comprehensive and inclusive approach to deal with the subject.

This is not suggestive of the overarching role of State and formal governance, neither does it consistently require a regulatory minimum participation of State. Just as the contagion strikes in waves, similarly, governments have to subtly regulate their control mechanisms. As this disease is going to stay for a long while in Asia amidst uncertainties over availability of the vaccine and medical supply chain bottlenecks, a continued whipping control or concentration on meta-governance affairs only would be impossible. The State has to meander its governance mechanisms keeping the ramifications of NTS issues: alternating prudently between tight controls and making space for democratic exercise.

In the context of South Asia, India’s natural leadership is not fait accompli; rather, India has to work towards it. The present NTS event has spurred new possibilities for deeper engagement in the region for India. Herein, China should strive to participate in the region in pursuit of global ambition and not with an aim to replace the region’s own historical and geo-cultural positioning. It may be reminded that while India has vehemently opposed China in its territorial conflict, banning several Chinese apps (also because of reported espionage claims), it remained silent at UN Human Rights Council elections unlike the USA, the UK and 39 other countries over China’s gross rights violation and persecution.
(Bhaumick, 2020). Being bilaterally vociferous on traditional security issues and selectively silent on unconventional security issues of global concern are not reflective of global or regional leadership. India has to make its opinion count about unconventional security abuses afflicted by China. This is because the very nature of NTS bears a common responsibility and places it wide open for national, regional or global participation. India has to don this participatory role to fulfill the expectations of regional leadership, not to mention global power aspirations. This is also the making of a ‘structural power’, in addition to a traditional security provider, which influences the international order in non-military ways (Gordon, 2010, p. 200).

Governments’ obsession with traditional security issues and obliviousness to unconventional ones will lead to proliferation of the latter in the recent future, where infectious disease, environmental degradation, climate change, human rights abuses, etc., together form a dreadful vicious cycle for humanity. An all-encompassing, extensive participatory approach by governments is indispensable for South Asian security architecture in post-COVID-19 world.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Sukalpa Chakrabarti https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2841-2771

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