

The Impact of COVID on Security in the Pacific Islands

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Nations within the Indo-Pacific region have had a vastly different set of experiences throughout the 2020-21 pandemic, undergoing intense societal and economic pressures as a result of either COVID-19 or related restrictions. Larger land masses and sub-continentals such as India have been severely affected in the realms of both public health and personal freedoms, as has China and (at times) Australia, as well as large island archipelagos such as Indonesia and the Philippines. By contrast, some of the only countries in the world that continue to record zero cases are also located in the region. On the surface, it has been an 'all or nothing' situation; however, that is far from the reality. Rather, the pandemic has resulted in small Pacific nations with no cases suffering much larger losses to GDP than large nations with many cases.

Nonetheless, common threats bind those countries that were severely affected and unaffected. All countries in the region suffered from isolation, limited access, high impacts on certain economic sectors such as tourism and remittances, along with all of the other social and cultural impacts that the pandemic has brought worldwide. Likewise, the impact of the pandemic on security in the region has many common features across countries.

Defining Security in the Pandemic Context

National security refers to the protection of national and international borders from traditional and non-traditional, internal and transnational threats to peace, prosperity, and economic productivity. In the Indo-

Pacific region, security often is synonymous with maritime security, cyber security, and traditional geographical security related to territorial infringement. Yet there are also geopolitical, human, health and environmental elements of regional security that are dependent on the actions and reactions of different countries in the region that relate to stability.

Economic Failure and Security Compromises

The pandemic has unquestionably negatively affected all countries in the region economically. This includes losses related to tourism, the live entertainment sector, eateries, public transport, trade, remittances, jobs, cost and availability of health care services, and international trade which impact on all aspects of every economy in the region. Traditionally, economic decline is associated with decreased regional security, environmental degradation, and an increase in black market and terrorist activities. The pandemic has caused the deepest recession since the end of World War II.¹ Over the past two years, the global economy shrank by 3.5% each year and almost every nation reported negative growth in 2020 with poorer nations experiencing the worst impact.^{2,3}

It remains to be seen how the post-pandemic period will reflect this. The only potential mitigating factor may be the equally-devastating effect the pandemic has had on all regional countries, thus debilitating incentives and resources for conflict or conquest. Framed in that light, there is the chance that economic failures and setbacks may not necessarily lead to more regional conflict, as countries focus on internal affairs and post-pandemic national rebuilding.

A further element of economic security, as affected by the pandemic, is the consideration of the social solidarity economy. Increased demands have been placed on non-governmental means of social support in the absence of anticipated income streams via tourism or other realms. By contrast, areas within the Pacific with more market-based economies may

1 Filippini, Eduardo Levy Yeyati and Federico. 2021. "Social and Economic Impact of COVID-19." Brookings. June 8, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/social-and-economic-impact-of-covid-19/>.

2 International Monetary Fund. 2021. "World Economic Outlook, October 2021." IMF. October 2021. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/10/12/world-economic-outlook-october-2021>.

3 Djankov, Simeon. 2020. COVID-19 in Developing Economies. Edited by Ugo Panizza. CEPR Press. <https://voxeu.org/content/covid-19-developing-economies>.

have suffered more severely in human and economic security terms, as a result of the pandemic.

Epidemics, the Military, and Conflict

Epidemics and Lockdowns as Security Enhancers and Conflict Preventers

On the positive side, security in the region may be said to have improved as a result of lockdown and limited travel options. The opportunities to launch offensives against neighboring countries or in the region proportionately decrease, with protagonists likely to exercise more caution and care in pandemic environments. Likewise, at the societal level, proponents of improved societal monitoring and surveillance, including capturing personal data, would argue that national security has been improved through limiting opportunities for physical criminal activity. Certainly, we have witnessed a commensurate swell in online crime.⁴ The pandemic-excused introduction of increased monitoring and surveillance will most likely remain a long-term part of law enforcement in the region for the foreseeable future.

In terms of border security, any small island states could be said to have gained from the lockdown and pandemic conditions. Limitations on ingress and egress may have, by their nature, also prevented the movement of terrorists, extremists, and other destabilizing influences in the region. Thus, although there have been severe economic consequences as a result of limitations on freedom of movement, there may also have been security dividends.

Military Engagement in the Security Context

A notable development in the pandemic-security nexus context in the Indo-Pacific region was the aid provided by the US Military to assist with pandemic relief in India. Under the auspices of USAID, a series of 'greytail' airlifts were conducted to India and Nepal in April and May

4 Interpol. 2020. "INTERPOL Report Shows Alarming Rate of Cyberattacks during COVID-19." [www.interpol.int](https://www.interpol.int/News-and-Events/News/2020/INTERPOL-report-shows-alarming-rate-of-cyberattacks-during-COVID-19). INTERPOL. August 4, 2020. <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/INTERPOL-report-shows-alarming-rate-of-cyberattacks-during-COVID-19>.

2021. These included the provision of respirators and other critical care equipment in order to assist with spiraling infection rates in both countries.

Though the effort was relatively small scale, it held significance on a number of levels. First, it demonstrated that the military had the capacity to assist in this and future epidemic contexts, which may not have been fully elevated during 2020 for a variety of political, economic, and bureaucratic reasons. Second, the airlifts demonstrated that global health engagement in pandemic responses can have critical alliance and, therefore, security and stability rationales. Unquestionably, the airlift response drew India and Nepal closer to the US as regional and mutually-reliant partners. It should be noted, however, that this impact may have been significantly lessened in comparison with related efforts from China, which took place on a larger geographical and logistical scale throughout the region.

Third, the elevation of epidemics into the realm of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief was unquestionably attained through this airlift. Previously consigned to global health engagement in military terms, with a focus on laboratory and disease surveillance work, the events of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014, followed by the 2021 response, demonstrated that global health engagement and health security are now undoubtedly part of the purview of all militaries in the region. In turn, this will likely help to assist with safety, security and stability in the region. Thus, COVID 19 has positively influenced security in the region by catalyzing mil-mil alliances and forging health security partnerships.

For example, the first shipment (1.5 million Moderna doses) of the 580 million US pledged vaccines arrived in Honduras, via COVAX, on June 27, 2021. Early in July, Bangladesh received 2.5 million Moderna doses via COVAX. In subsequent months, COVAX shipped millions of US-donated vaccines to partner nations, including 27 countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

USAID and the Department of Defense's Joint Program Executive Office for Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Defense (JPEO-CBRND) have also entered into an interagency agreement (IAA) for the procurement of US-donated Pfizer vaccines. Though the IAA is not expected to include DOD transportation of the vaccines, DOD

assisted in an airlift of 400,000 KN95 masks; 449,000 gowns; and 4,327 pulse oximeters, which arrived in Nepal on June 19.

China and India

A unique dimension of the pandemic on regional security is the contributions the virus has made to perceptions of China in the region and worldwide. In many cases, the emanation of the virus in China and its effect on regional and international economies has resulted in further stigma and resentment towards this burgeoning global power, which many believe already represents a threat to regional security and stability even before the pandemic. The question of China's motives and future strategy in the region remains open, but will inevitably be framed in the context of health as well as regional security.

With the ongoing increase in suspicion and fear of China's motives in the region, suggestions of inadvertent bio-warfare are likely to further limit China's benefits from their own efforts to improve regional goodwill and cooperation. If the pandemic leads to political or policy reforms in China and greater efforts at regional cooperation to prevent global pandemics in the future, then there is the possibility that the pandemic may, in the long term, improve regional security and China's international standing.

The ongoing pandemic crisis in India unquestionably poses security challenges to the nation and the region as it undermines basic government services and increases population dissatisfaction. The increase in persons surviving below the poverty line in India and elsewhere, estimated by the World Bank to exceed 1 billion people by the end of the pandemic, epitomizes this effect of instability and insecurity. India's position as a global leader in both technology, pharmaceutical production, and vaccine manufacture has been destabilized not only by Indian politics, but by the impact of the pandemic, which will take some time to bring under control in the region.

Security Realms

The Indo-Pacific region, as with any part of the world, deals with a range of security realms: health; cyber; economic; maritime; human; national; international; and many other forms. Though it is, as noted above, hard to predict the longer-term effects of the pandemic on regional

security, there are several likely scenarios that may emerge in the region for each of these realms.

Maritime Security

Impacts of the 2020 pandemic on maritime security have already been revealed in various forms. From cruise ship disease incubators to outbreaks on naval vessels to the impact of quarantine leaving many vessels marooned at sea, maritime security has been compromised on a number of levels.⁵ In many ways, the full impact has yet to be determined, and will also rely on knock-on, long-term effects via economic changes and associated security implications.

If previous periods of economic downturn after economic shocks are good indicators, however, it is likely that there may be a further increase in piracy and other maritime crime as a result of the pandemic. Conversely, increased levels of health security at the port and seafaring levels may indirectly result in improved overall regional security.

Cyber Security

The impact of the 2020 pandemic on regional cyber security is also worthy of consideration. During the pandemic, much of the region's previously in-person business became virtual in a short space of time. Inevitably, this resulted in a greater risk of cyber threats due to increased amounts of sensitive information and transactions online. To date, there has been an upsurge in cyber threats in the region, though this trend cannot be exclusively ascribed to the pandemic.

However, during the COVID pandemic, INTERPOL reported an alarmingly rapid shift in cybercrime activities from individuals and small businesses to major corporations, governments and critical infrastructure. As organizations make adjustments to accommodate teleworkers, security vulnerabilities have appeared in related remote systems and networks that have permitted intrusion and data theft.

Additionally, the quantity of false information, misrepresented threats, and conspiracy theories have exploded into all public and private sectors. Many misinformation messages are bound to malware as hackers take advantage of humanity's unhealthy appetite for online gossip and

5 Turvold, Wade, and Jim McMullin. "Ships Become Dangerous Places during a Pandemic". Security Nexus. DKI APCSS. https://apcss.org/nexus_articles/ships-become-dangerous-places-during-a-pandemic/

rumor-mongering.⁶ The use of misinformation to facilitate the sale of fake medical supplies and the execution of cybercrime has created considerable anxiety in providers and users. INTERPOL called for an increase in public-private cooperation to counter this multi-sector threat.

Economic and Political Security

As noted above, levels of economic security, and therefore regional stability, have inevitably been affected by the 2020 pandemic. Sectors such as travel and tourism have been badly affected, in many cases terminally so. Without these sources of income, economic security declined significantly for many countries in the region in 2020 and 2021. In turn, declining levels of employment and gross national product inevitably produce a decline in remittances, along with and social and political instabilities.

In terms of political security, a study from Papua New Guinea suggested that public–state relations have been significantly reconfigured as a result of the pandemic, not least as a result of excessive lockdown policies as well as the need for citizens to ‘forgo democratic rights, liberties, and freedoms’ for undisclosed periods of time.⁷ This has been counterbalanced by an equally high level of global protests in countries in which governments have been perceived as too laissez-faire or non-interventionist, such as in Belarus and elsewhere.

Health Security

In contrast to the above thematic security threats and compromises as a result of the 2020 pandemic, health security, including human security, can perhaps be said to have significantly improved as a result of the pandemic. Border checks for health conditions, vaccine passports, quarantine measures, and many other efforts to improve national and international health security have been put in place with alacrity and effectiveness by most regional countries. Whether or not these measures remain in place in the post-vaccine era remains to be seen. It seems likely, however, that

6 COVID-19 Cybercrime Analysis Report - August 2020. Interpol. <https://www.interpol.int/content/download/15526/file/COVID-19%20Cybercrime%20Analysis%20Report-%20August%202020.pdf>.

7 Australian National University, Crawford School, “Development Bulletin 82.” <https://crawford.anu.edu.au/rmap/devnet/devnet/DB82-final-manuscript-23-02-21.pdf>

some measures will inevitably be retained, therefore permanently improving regional health security.

In the same way, the pandemic has significantly impacted investment in regional outbreak management and disease surveillance. Improvements in health security investments, networks and other collaborations are all likely to contribute to improved regional health security. The collaborations inspired by these measures are also likely to indirectly contribute to improvements in regional security.

Many other considerations in the health security context also remain pivotal in the context of regional security. The exposure of many countries' public health infrastructures as inadequate increased reliance on restrictive movement policies, as prevention took precedence over treatment. By contrast, tourism and official delegation travels were only briefly abated at the onset of the pandemic, in turn leading to political unrest and separatist movements in some countries.

Similarly, despite a significant global and regional reevaluation of the importance of functional public health systems, fewer people have been able to access medical attention for non-COVID conditions, particularly in areas where COVID patients are dominating health system capacity. Ultimately, health security in the region will remain primarily a function of efficient, effective, and equitable primary health care provision.

Environmental Security

The interplay between epidemics, health security, climate change, and environmental security is complex and of great relevance to the region. Climate change effects on migration patterns, urbanization, and economic activity are closely linked to the spread and transmission of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, dengue, and malaria. There is no reason to assume that such environmental considerations will not also play a part in the latter stages of the pandemic in the region, with associated knock-on, downstream health security effects.⁸

Though there is no correlation between countries affected by climate change and those affected by the pandemic, the events of 2020-21 have

⁸ Kevany, Sebastian. Climate Change, International Migration, and Health Security: The Need for Smart and Synergistic Global Health Policies and Programmes in The Solomon Islands. *Global Health Governance* X (1): 119–28. <http://blogs.shu.edu/ghg/2020/05/26/climate-change-international-migration-and-health-security-the-need-for-smart-and-synergistic-global-health-policies-and-programmes-in-the-solomon-islands/>.

revealed the significance of environmental security in the public health context. The ongoing destabilization effects of climate change inevitably have public health and infectious disease downstream effects. In turn, public health and infectious disease control and outbreak response considerations play a part in the rationale for increased attention to climate change and environmental security responses, justifying combined and synergistic future public health / environmental efforts.

Human Security

Human security, as defined by the attention to the security and safety of the individual, has been affected on numerous levels by the pandemic. Limitations to economic opportunities, separation, isolation, and an increase in the rule of law over personal freedoms have all been associated with lockdown and other public health policies. Conversely, other elements of human security have been enhanced, not least in terms of falling crime levels and protection of public health.

Informal settlements, in particular, have faced negative human security consequences; the pandemic has been described as having had the greatest impact on those populations that are already disadvantaged.⁹ This includes a geographical and environmental security aspect in the context of their location in more marginalized, flood-prone areas.

A further subset of the human security realm, also associated with health security, is food and nutrition security. This is associated with environmental security, particularly in a region in which 50% of the population live within ten kilometers of a rapidly-changing coastline. The pandemic has been described as a ‘threat multiplier’ in this context, with reference to both economic livelihood and access to resources.

Gendered Security

Amongst the many dimensions of security affected by the pandemic is gendered security.¹⁰ In many countries in the region, females have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, not least via their role in society as careers (and, in particular, nurses).¹¹ Inevitably, this will lead to a

9 Australian National University, Crawford School, “Development Bulletin 82.” <https://crawford.anu.edu.au/rmap/devnet/devnet/DB82-final-manuscript-23-02-21.pdf>

10 The Gender and Covid-19 Project (2022). <https://www.genderandcovid-19.org/>

11 McKinsey Corporation (2020). COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/covid-19-and-gender>

reevaluation of gender inequality and public health concerns combining to threaten regional security.¹² Only adherence to ongoing progressive policies will help to change this dangerous course.

Vaccines

Vaccine Diplomacy and Spheres of Influence

Soft power and humanitarian assistance strive to make countries and regions more rather than less secure. In the Indo-Pacific region, the efforts of technologically advanced powers, e.g., US, China, India, Britain and Sweden, have contributed to a wave of vaccine availability throughout 2021. By reducing the severe effects of the virus these efforts have actively improved stability. The only threat to stability and security in the region through vaccine diplomacy may result from expectations of quid pro quos. If that is to be the case, tensions and therefore security threats may arise in the post-pandemic period if hastily-agreed aid agreements are not clarified during vaccine roll-out.

Within the vaccine diplomacy realm, many sub-considerations are in play. It is highly likely that those countries that achieve the fastest and highest rates of vaccination with the best available vaccines will, for example, be best positioned from a security context going forward. Conversely, it is equally likely that host countries that experience high rates of vaccine hesitancy, poor quality vaccines, or reopen their economies and societies at a stage before it is safe to do so, will suffer negative security consequences. Nonetheless, vaccine diplomacy remains a key opportunity for competing powers in the region and the results of such operations may have key implications for regional and national allegiances in the years to come. Conversely, a badly managed vaccine diplomacy program could be harmful to such allegiances in the longer term.

Notwithstanding all of these considerations, it is highly likely that a rapid and effective and equitable vaccine roll-out will result in significant security benefits to the region. This includes greater domestic stability (e.g., decreases in civil unrest inspired by lockdowns); improved trade patterns; a return to in-person regional dialogues and conferences; and careful attention to future health security protocols which will, in turn, enhance

equality-countering-the-regressive-effects

12 Global Health 50/50 (2022). The Sex, Gender and COVID-19 Project. <https://global-health5050.org/the-sex-gender-and-covid-19-project/>

regional security. Depending on how the US, China, and India – along with other global powers – choose to involve themselves in this sphere (preferably via cooperation or at a minimum benign, altruistic and enlightened competition), significant and lasting security benefits could result.

Improving Security

Without question, the most pivotal potential security dividend from the pandemic will hinge on the efficacy, efficiency, and duration of the donations and distribution of vaccines by the US and other countries to less affluent regional economies. With support from China, the European Union, and many other regional powers, the US can help to lead this staggering global public health effort, spearheaded by the COVAX effort, to a successful conclusion. Without doubt, also, this is a case of enlightened self-interest: vaccine programs operating under the aegis of USAID or other development institutions will unquestionably help to protect the donors themselves, both in terms of regional stability and also by preventing the development of new mutations and strains.

Conversely, in both the national, regional, and health security contexts, the greatest threat to stability in the region in the post-pandemic environment lies with vaccine failure and/or the triumph of anti-vaccine activists. Under the influence of online influencers, regional opinion leaders, political and social factions that oppose vaccines may ultimately hold the key to regional stability. Should the region develop high levels of vaccine hesitancy or skepticism, there is a significant risk that lockdowns will continue; economic decline will last into 2022; and international travel (and therefore relations) will be severely curtailed.

Conclusions

It is difficult, at the present time, to envisage the post-pandemic regional security environment. The rapid shift to cyber and virtual business and commerce in the region, for example, has rendered many countries vulnerable to cyber-attacks and hacking. Conversely, the heightened regional attention to health security, which in turn contributes to national and regional security, may help to balance this negative trend. In either case, much will depend on which scenario evolves – eradication,

elimination, cohabitation, or conflagration. For each of these possible situations, different regional security landscapes result.¹³

A key conclusion for the region is the dynamic nexus between broader public security and health security. “If partnerships between public health and public security were more critically examined for potential synergies, responses to incidents affecting health and disease outbreaks could be immensely improved.”¹⁴ In other words, public health should be elevated to a construct within national security; likewise, national security must be viewed as a construct pivoting around public health. This involves increased collaboration between actors existing at the intersection of national security and health security, such as non-governmental organizations, border health agencies, public health officials, and military leaders.

This would naturally lead to consideration or the reconfiguration of militaries in the region to increase their capacity for global health engagements in emergency and outbreak situations, perhaps extending even to improved investments in hospital ships and other related resources. Without such cross-sectoral interdepartmental initiatives, the region remains exposed to the recurrence of the events of 2020 and beyond.

Many other questions remain unanswered. Can, or should, the US military be involved in regional vaccination efforts as a combined health security / soft power initiative? Similarly, given lessons learned from 2020 and 2021, what should be the future role of both the US and regional militaries in global health engagement and epidemic control? Should there be greater engagement along the lines of climate change efforts? In retrospect, would this have made a key difference in 2020?

Taken together, the varying security effects of the 2020-21 pandemic on the Indo-Pacific region may mean that while some countries have ‘broken even’ in terms of security, others have been stuck a savage social and economic blow. Though some security threats increased, particularly those related to health and human security, some were eliminated through the suspension of many conflicts and strategic efforts in the region. It is, perhaps, in the post-pandemic period in which many countries will face the greatest security threats, as many previously-suspended conflicts may

13 Kofman A, Kantor R, Adashi EY. Potential COVID-19 Endgame Scenarios: Eradication, Elimination, Cohabitation, or Conflagration? *JAMA*. 2021 Jul 27;326(4):303-304. doi: 10.1001/jama.2021.11042. PMID: 34236382. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34236382/>

14 Australian National University, Crawford School, “Development Bulletin 82.” <https://crawford.anu.edu.au/rmap/devnet/devnet/DB82-final-manuscript-23-02-21.pdf>

reignite as countries, states, and regions awaken from the lockdown hibernation and seek for new ways to reconfigure their alliances and partnerships.