



# COVID-19: The Dangers of Securitisation

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## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is now at the point where it will be met with international cooperation and humanitarian concern for those affected, or be seen as a threat to the well-being of the more secure sectors of societies that has to be suppressed. Taking the latter approach would be hugely detrimental to human security. This briefing assesses the chances of avoiding a securitisation of the outbreak.

## Introduction

As was forecast by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in recent months, the COVID-19 pandemic is still a developing problem taking different forms across the world. While its direct health impact is still far from extreme, the particular features of the virus, especially its infectiousness and asymptomatic transmission, make it difficult to control without vaccines. Alternative measures available include sustained changes in personal behaviour on a large scale, quarantines, lockdowns and, above all, effective and rapid test and trace systems. A few states have used these in varying combinations with some success, but most have not. This failure has substantially increased the severity of the pandemic.

There are going to be many short-term problems before the virus is brought under a substantial degree of control over the next 18 months to two years depending on when vaccination becomes widely available. After that, there will be years of economic downturn with an enduring global impact especially among poorer and more marginalised communities.

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Looked at in broad terms the pandemic is proving to be a hugely costly threat to human security and there is a very strong case for rethinking national and international approaches to security, not least in terms of the current high levels of expenditure on the conventional military. This briefing examines the current state of the pandemic and then explores this additional dimension. It assesses the chances of avoiding a securitisation of the issue that gives the military-industrial complex a major, costly but inappropriate role to play.

## The State of the Pandemic

The WHO [assesses](#) the current level of COVID-19 at over 33 million confirmed cases and one million deaths. Given the highly variable levels of testing and of health provision these are both likely to be lower than the true figures and should be treated as minimal figures. Sero-surveys of antibodies conducted in some countries and extrapolated to the global picture provide approximations of true figures. One estimate based on 279 sero-surveys in 19 countries indicates between 500 and 730 million people are infected, from 6.4% to 9.3% of the world's population. ("Grim Tallies", *The Economist*, 26 September 2020, pp21-24). Figures for deaths from COVID-19 may frequently be inadequate but can be estimated indirectly by looking at excess deaths – the increase in deaths overall compared with the average for previous equivalent periods. An assessment of a group of countries puts "excess deaths" at [55% higher](#) than specific COVID-19 deaths.

A [recent briefing](#) in this series (August 2020) put COVID-19 in the context of other pandemics, including the [1918-20 flu pandemic](#) that infected 500 million people and killed up to 50 million in three years and HIV/AIDS that has so far killed 35 million people over nearly forty years. Asian flu (1957-58) was [less serious](#) than the 1918 flu but spread rapidly and still killed a million

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people. SARS (2002-04) was as dangerous as Spanish Flu but spread less rapidly and was brought under control by rapid effective action, killing a tenth of the 8,500 people infected.

Compared with these examples, COVID-19 may not be as lethal, but, as already stressed, its asymptomatic transmission makes control difficult and, in any case, it is already as dangerous as other key diseases. Taking WHO figures for 2017, Malaria killed 620,000, HIV/AIDS killed 954,000 and 794,000 people committed suicide. The current figure for COVID-19, at one million, is for only part of a year.

Last month's briefing may have appeared pessimistic at the time, not least when it sought to summarise the then circumstances:

**“ It looks increasingly likely that COVID-19 will be a long-term problem. One early indication of this is the large level of people being tested positive that suggests a large pool of virus circulating within communities yet not openly visible in younger people even if they are infectious. Another is the extent of the COVID-19 resurgences being experience in many countries. That suggests that the pandemic will continue on a substantial scale unless there are very tough policies of lockdown and quarantines that will have even greater economic consequences than are currently the case. On present trends this difficult predicament will continue until substantial vaccine and drug therapies are readily available world-wide, the working assumption being a very damaging two-year event. ”**

Since then, while there are now some positive indications of progress in vaccine development, these are more than countered by the continued spread of the virus across the Global South and the sheer pace and extent of

development of second waves in many northern states. These latter changes have really caught many governments by surprise, notably France, Spain and the UK, and further major lockdowns now look very likely with all the economic consequences that follow. In June, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [forecasted](#) that in the event of a second wave the world economic output could plummet by 7.6 percent and the unemployment rate could double to 10 percent.

To add to this, there is already evidence from across the Global South that the economic downturns that are following in the wake of the pandemic are having serious impacts. They arise at a time when low paid jobs are lost and when the informal sector may have shrunk so much that alternative casual jobs are simply not available. A common experience is that people migrating to cities for work lose their jobs, cannot find alternative sources of income and return to rural areas that are already being impoverished by local shortages because those previously migrating to cities would have repatriated some of the earnings to their rural extended families. A recent UN report estimated that as many as 490 million people in 70 countries could slip back into poverty, reversing positive trends of almost a decade. ([“From plague to penury”](#), *The Economist*, 26 September 2020, pp 60-62)

## **The Securitisation of COVID-19**

It is therefore wise to expect that there will be some years of severe economic difficulty mostly affecting the poorer and more marginalised parts of societies. All too often these will be people who have already been deeply affected by the impact of austerity in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and made worse by the neoliberal approach to economic activity ([see March briefing](#)). The individual and group suffering will be intense but the risk is that the more elite

and wealthy communities will see their position threatened by social unrest, civil disturbances and the attempts of desperate people to take refuge in more successful states and sectors of society.

From this, it is only a small step to securitising the pandemic as a threat to be controlled, not a common problem to be addressed cooperatively with an emphasis on aid to the weakest and most marginalised. Moreover, this fits in with a trend already under way in many countries – a steady move to the populist right with an anti-immigrant mood being exacerbated by people with political ambition. In this context, it is important to recognise the nature of what President Dwight D Eisenhower publicised as [the military-industrial complex](#) with a power and influence of its own.

At the end of his eight-year term of office this Republican President and former commander of the allied forces in Europe in the Second World War spoke of the huge arms complex that had developed during that war and consolidated in the first 15 years of the Cold War. [He said:](#)

**“ This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence -- economic, political, even spiritual -- is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society. ”**

Speaking of the extent of its power he warned:



**“ In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together. ”**

The complexes exist in any country with a sizeable military budget whatever its political system and involves a myriad of interconnections between the military, the executive, the legislature, the civil service, the executive, arms corporations, universities and trade unions, with frequent transfers between them. The international arms trade, as one element, may be important to an economy and frequently has a long history of bribery and corruption. The whole

complex in all its different elements depends on enemies representing significant threats and therefore requiring substantial public funding.

The complex went through a difficult period in the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its removal as a threat, but the war on terror came to the rescue. More recently, the rise of China and a perceived new threat from Russia have helped the complex's revival further, with annual military expenditure world-wide now close to \$2 trillion. The many millions of people engaged in the complex across the world all see their work as relevant, legitimate and, indeed, patriotic, but as a complex dependent on threats for its own wellbeing it is all too ready to observe and accentuate new challenges.

Random current examples of this include offshore patrol boats and reconnaissance drones for spotting and intercepting desperate people trying to reach hopefully welcoming shores, many different types of border defences and riot control equipment. At times of major civil disturbance stretching to radical and violent revolts from the margins, special forces, private military corporations, drones, stand-off weapons and offensive cyber systems may all have a role. Overall, the complex stands ready to assist in maintaining security in the event of large-scale pandemic disruption whatever form it might take. As ORG observed in 2006:

**“ Problems of poverty and socio-economic divisions are largely ignored as a security issue. But when immediate threats to the ‘homeland’ are perceived, the usual response is heavy societal control in an attempt ‘keep the lid on’ civil discontent, which only makes matters worse in the long-term, and a belief is promoted that the free market will enable people to work their way out of poverty. ”**

ORG further commented

**“ All too often, international arms corporations, with the assistance of their governments, are ready and willing to provide a wide range of weapons systems, often directed at the harsh control of dissident movements. ”**

## **Conclusion**

We are at that point in the development of the COVID-19 pandemic where it can be seen either as a huge challenge to be met with international cooperation and humanitarian concern for all affected, or as a threat to the well-being of the more secure sectors of society that has to be suppressed. There will be considerable pressure for the latter and the coming months will see whether it can be avoided. Moreover, if the pandemic is securitised then it is all too likely that the same will apply to our response to climate breakdown. For that reason alone, a thoughtful and humane response to the pandemic is desperately important. Get that right and there will be more chance of responding to the even greater challenge of climate breakdown.

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### About the author

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