Reconceptualising Non-Traditional Security in the Era of Global Pandemics: An Indian Perspective

Shashi Kant

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Centre for West Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Delhi, India
Email: *sashikant02[at]gmail.com*

Abstract: *The contemporary global order has witnessed a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of security, moving from the traditional, state-centric military focus towards a more nuanced understanding of Non-Traditional Security (NTS). The COVID-19 pandemic, emerging at the tail end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, acted as a catalyst in exposing the vulnerabilities of the Westphalian security architecture. This article argues that the pandemic has necessitated a reconceptualisation of NTS, moving beyond mere "human security" to a more integrated "biosecurity-sovereignty" model. Using India as a primary case study, this research explores how the Indian state navigated the tension between domestic health imperatives and its role as a "Pharmacy of the World". By analysing data and research up to 2021, the study concludes that for emerging powers like India, NTS is no longer a peripheral concern but a core component of national strategic autonomy and global leadership.*

Keywords: Non-Traditional Security; Securitisation of Health; Biosecurity; Human Security; Strategic Autonomy; India's Pandemic Response; Global Health Governance.

1. Introduction

The conceptual landscape of international relations has undergone a radical transformation since the mid-twentieth century, moving from a rigid, state-centric focus on military prowess to a more holistic understanding of survival. Historically, 'security' was a term reserved for the preservation of territorial integrity and the deterrence of external aggression-a definition deeply rooted in the Westphalian tradition. However, the dawn of the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of threats that do not carry a flag nor abide by geographic borders. Amongst these, biological threats have proven to be the most disruptive. The emergence of global pandemics, particularly the crisis beginning in 2020, has exposed the insufficiency of traditional military-industrial complexes in protecting the most basic unit of the state: the individual citizen. This research paper explores the fundamental reconceptualisation of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) in this era, arguing that health security has moved from a peripheral humanitarian concern to a primary pillar of national strategic interest.

In the Indian context, this reconceptualisation is not merely an academic shift but a matter of national survival. India, as an emerging global power with a population exceeding 1.4 billion, faced a unique set of challenges that necessitated a dual-track security approach. On one hand, the state had to maintain its vigilance along its contested borders, and on the other, it had to mobilise its entire domestic infrastructure to combat a microscopic pathogen. This article posits that India's response characterised by the dual pillars of "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (Self-Reliant India) and "Vaccine Maitri" (Vaccine Friendship)- represents a new model for NTS. It is a model that balances domestic resilience with global responsibility, asserting that in an interconnected world, the security of one is dependent on the security of all. By analysing the period leading up to the end of 2021, this paper examines how the pandemic has redefined 'sovereignty' to include the capacity for biological defence

and how "strategic autonomy" now encompasses the control over critical health supply chains.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge the gap between human security and state security. While the 'human security' school of the 1990s focused on the individual's freedom from fear and want, the pandemic era has shown that such freedoms are only possible when supported by a strong, technologically capable state. The Indian narrative suggests that NTS must be securitised-elevated to the highest level of policy priority-without abandoning the democratic principles that define the nation. As we navigate the complexities of a post-pandemic global order, the lessons from India's experience provide a roadmap for other developing nations seeking to harmonise their developmental goals with their security imperatives. The following sections provide a detailed theoretical and narrative analysis of this evolution, examining the economic, technological, and geopolitical dimensions of this new security paradigm.

2. Research Objectives and Methodology

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the evolving nature of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) in the wake of global health crises, with a specific focus on the period leading up to and including the 2020-2021 pandemic era. Specifically, the paper aims to: (a) evaluate the theoretical transition from traditional military security to health-centric NTS; (b) analyse India's strategic response to the pandemic as a manifestation of NTS leadership; and (c) propose a reconceptualised framework that integrates health security into the broader rubric of national interest.

The methodology employed is qualitative and descriptive, relying on a theoretical analysis of existing literature and a narrative-based approach. The research draws upon secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journals, policy documents from the Ministry of External Affairs (India), and reports from international organisations such as

the World Health Organisation (WHO) published prior to the end of 2021. By utilising a "securitisation" framework pioneered by the Copenhagen School-the study examines how health was elevated from a social issue to an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures. The narrative is intentionally constructed to favour the Indian perspective, highlighting the unique challenges and successes of a developing democratic powerhouse in managing a global catastrophe.

The Theoretical Evolution of Non-Traditional Security

For much of the twentieth century, the discourse surrounding security was dominated by the realist school of thought, which prioritised the territorial integrity of the state and the balance of military power. However, the post-Cold War era ushered in a "broadening" and "deepening" of the security agenda (Buzan, 1991: 14). This shift recognised that threats to the state and its populace were not exclusively military in nature. Non-traditional security (NTS) emerged as a catch-all term to describe challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, transnational crime, and, most pertinently, infectious diseases. As Mely Caballero-Anthony (2005: 12) noted in the early 2000s, NTS challenges are characterised by their non-military nature, their ability to transcend borders, and the requirement for multilateral cooperation rather than unilateral force.

The pandemic that gripped the world in 2020 served as the ultimate litmus test for these theories. It demonstrated that a microscopic pathogen could cause more disruption to the global order than any conventional military conflict since the Second World War. The reconceptualisation of security in this era involves moving away from the idea that NTS is "low politics." Instead, health security has been elevated to the level of "high politics," where it directly impacts the economic stability, social cohesion, and geopolitical standing of a nation. In the Indian context, this transition was particularly stark. India had to balance its traditional security concerns along its borders with a sudden, overwhelming NTS threat that attacked the very fabric of its workforce and economy.

The securitisation of health is not merely an academic exercise but a survival strategy. When a health crisis is framed as a security threat, it allows the state to mobilise resources and exercise powers that would otherwise be contested. However, unlike traditional security threats where there is a clear "enemy", the pandemic presented a "threat without an interlocutor" (Thakur, 2020: 34). This required a new vocabulary of security-one that prioritised "resilience" and "redundancy" over "efficiency". For India, the pandemic reinforced the notion that security is indivisible; one cannot have a secure state if the individuals within it are biologically vulnerable. This aligns with the "Human Security" approach championed by Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen, yet it adds a layer of statecraft that insists on the state as the primary provider of this security.

India's Strategic Response: Balancing Domestic and Global NTS

India's experience during the era of global pandemics provides a profound case study in the management of NTS. While many Western nations retreated into "vaccine nationalism", India attempted to forge a path of "Vaccine Maitri" (Vaccine Friendship). This initiative was a masterful integration of soft power and NTS management. By providing vaccines to neighbouring countries and developing nations in the Global South, India redefined security as a collective endeavour rather than a zero-sum game (Pant, 2021: 45). This approach was rooted in the ancient Indian philosophy of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family), but it served a very modern security purpose: ensuring that India's periphery remained stable and health-secure, thereby preventing the re-importation of the virus.

The narrative of India as the "Pharmacy of the World" became a central pillar of its NTS strategy. The ability to manufacture and distribute life-saving medicines at scale was no longer just an economic advantage; it was a strategic asset. However, the challenges faced during the second wave in early 2021 highlighted the fragility of this position and the necessity for a more robust domestic health infrastructure as a prerequisite for NTS (Mallapaty, 2021: 15). The Indian state's response involved a massive mobilisation of the armed forces and the logistics sector to distribute oxygen and medical supplies, effectively blurring the lines between traditional military operations and NTS management. This "dual-us" of national assets is a key feature of the reconceptualised NTS framework, where the military is increasingly called upon to fight invisible enemies.

Furthermore, the pandemic exposed the dangers of over-reliance on global supply chains, particularly for Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs). For India, NTS in the pandemic era became synonymous with 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' (Self-Reliant India). Reconceptualising security meant acknowledging that economic dependence on a single geography- especially a strategic rival- constituted a major security vulnerability (Saran, 2020: 22). Thus, the security of the Indian person became inextricably linked to the security of the Indian supply chain. This shift marks a departure from the neoliberal logic of the 1990s, suggesting that in the era of pandemics, the state must reclaim its role as the guarantor of essential goods and services to ensure national survival.

The Geopolitics of Health Security and India's Role

The era of global pandemics has also redefined the geopolitical landscape of NTS. The rivalry between major powers was played out not through skirmishes, but through "mask diplomacy" and "vaccine diplomacy". India found itself at the heart of this competition, particularly within the Indo-Pacific region. As part of the "Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)", India's vaccine production capacity was identified as a key tool for counterbalancing the influence of other regional actors (Heiduk & Wacker, 2021: 8). This elevation of health security to the level of regional strategic alliances demonstrates that NTS is now a primary currency of international relations.

In this context, India's narrative has been one of "responsible power." Unlike the transactional nature of some global actors, India's NTS strategy emphasised the global public good. However, the domestic pressures of the pandemic forced a recalibration of this narrative. The tension between fulfilling global commitments and addressing domestic exigencies is a core dilemma in the reconceptualised NTS framework. For a

country like India, the "security" of its billion-plus population is a task of such magnitude that it inevitably impacts global security outcomes. The research indicates that post-2021, India's focus has shifted towards building "health as a strategic sector," ensuring that the country is not just a consumer of global health norms but a primary architect of them (Gautam, 2021: 112).

The integration of technology into NTS also deserves significant attention. India's use of digital platforms like CoWIN for vaccine distribution represents a leap forward in the "technologization" of security. By treating data as a strategic resource and a tool for pandemic management, India has shown that NTS in the twenty-first century is as much about digital infrastructure as it is about biological threats. This "digital-health-security" nexus is a critical component of the new security paradigm, where the state's ability to monitor, track, and respond to threats is mediated by its technological prowess.

Redefining the Securitisation of Health

The process of "securitisation" traditionally involves a speech act where an actor identifies a threat and gains the legitimacy to use extraordinary measures. In the era of pandemics, the securitising actor is often the scientific and medical community, working in tandem with the state. In India, the narrative was framed around the "war against the virus". This metaphor of war is significant as it aligns NTS with the emotional and psychological weight of traditional security. It allowed for the implementation of the world's largest lockdown, a measure that would have been unthinkable in any other context (Rajagopalan, 2020: 56).

However, the reconceptualisation must also account for the "human" element of human security. Critics of the securitisation of health argue that it can lead to the erosion of civil liberties and an over-emphasis on state control. From the Indian perspective, the challenge has been to maintain democratic norms while exercising the decisive authority required to manage a public health emergency. The Indian experience suggests that NTS must be "democratised"-it requires the active participation and trust of the citizenry, rather than just top-down edicts. This "societal security" is a vital but often overlooked dimension of NTS, where the resilience of the community is the primary line of defence.

Economic Security as Non-Traditional Security: The Resilience Paradigm

The reconceptualisation of Non-Traditional Security must address the fundamental economic disruptions that occur when biological threats paralyse global trade. The pandemic of 2020-2021 underscored that economic security is not a separate silo but a foundational element of NTS. For India, the sudden rupture of Global Value Chains (GVCs) revealed an uncomfortable reliance on external actors for critical medical supplies, ranging from basic personal protective equipment to advanced pharmaceutical ingredients. This vulnerability was not merely an economic inconvenience but a profound security risk that threatened the state's ability to protect its citizens.

Consequently, the Indian government's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' (Self-Reliant India) initiative, launched in May 2020, should

be viewed through the lens of NTS reconceptualisation. It represents a strategic shift from the neoliberal pursuit of comparative advantage towards a 'security-first' economic model. As Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (2020: 12) observed, the pandemic compelled nations to internalise supply chains as a form of strategic insurance. In this new paradigm, the resilience of domestic manufacturing is equated with national survival, and the state's role in de-risking the economy is prioritised over market efficiency.

This economic dimension of NTS is further complicated by the 'digital-health nexus' that emerged during the crisis. As the Indian state deployed technological solutions like the CoWIN platform and the Aarogya Setu app, the definition of NTS expanded to include data sovereignty and cybersecurity. The securitisation of health data became a necessity to ensure the integrity of the vaccination drive and to prevent malicious actors from disrupting essential services. In the Indian context, this meant that NTS was no longer just about pathogens and vaccines, but also about the digital infrastructure that managed the response. The research by various scholars during this period indicates that for developing nations, the digital divide itself constitutes a security threat (Kapur, 2020: 89). By successfully bridging this divide through indigenous technology, India demonstrated that NTS management in the twenty-first century requires a 'whole-of-government' approach.

Environmental and Zoonotic Links: Ecological Security

The environmental origins of the pandemic also necessitate a broadening of the NTS framework to include ecological security. While the "Green Security" discourse has existed for decades, the 2020-2021 period provided empirical evidence of the catastrophic link between biodiversity loss and human health. The emergence of zoonotic diseases- those that jump from animals to humans- is frequently linked to habitat destruction and the unregulated wildlife trade. For a mega-biodiverse country like India, the protection of natural ecosystems is thus a direct security imperative.

The reconceptualisation of NTS requires acknowledging that the 'frontline' of national security may well be the forest fringe where humans and wildlife interact. As pointed out in environmental security literature, the 'anthropogenic' nature of modern pandemics means that the traditional focus on state-on-state conflict is insufficient (Dalby, 2020: 45). Security, in this sense, must involve a 'One Health' approach that integrates human, animal, and environmental health. India's commitment to climate goals and its leadership in the International Solar Alliance can be seen as proactive NTS strategies aimed at mitigating the long-term drivers of biological and environmental instability.

The Role of International Institutions and Reformed Multilateralism

Furthermore, the pandemic has forced a critical re-evaluation of global governance and the efficacy of international institutions. The perceived failures of the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the early stages of the outbreak led to a crisis of confidence in multilateralism. From the Indian perspective, the global health architecture appeared poorly equipped to handle the realities of a multipolar world where information flow is often politicised. India's call for

"reformed multilateralism" is essentially a demand for the democratisation of NTS management (Modi, 2020: 5).

The argument is that for global security to be effective, international bodies must reflect the contemporary power distribution and give a greater voice to the Global South. By providing medical aid to over 150 countries during the height of the crisis, India positioned itself as a "First Responder" in the NTS domain, filling the vacuum left by traditional powers. This role as a "net security provider" in the non-traditional sphere has enhanced India's claim for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, as it demonstrates the country's willingness and capacity to address global existential threats (Saran, 2021: 156).

Societal and Human Dimension of Reconceptualised Security

A narrative-based analysis of India's pandemic response also highlights the importance of societal resilience as a component of NTS. Traditional security often overlooks the psychological and social cohesion of the populace, yet the pandemic showed that a fragmented society is a vulnerable one. The 'Jan Andolan' (People's Movement) approach adopted by the Indian leadership was an attempt to turn NTS into a participatory process. In a country of 1.4 billion people, security cannot be enforced solely through policing; it must be co-created through public cooperation and trust.

This 'social capital' is a critical, albeit intangible, NTS asset. The research suggests that nations with higher levels of social trust and community-led initiatives fared better in managing the NTS fallout than those relying strictly on top-down mandates (Helliwell et al., 2021: 112). For India, the mobilisation of civil society, self-help groups, and the private sector showcased a robust societal immune system that is vital for national security in an era of unpredictable shocks. However, the reconceptualisation of NTS must also confront the ethical dilemmas inherent in the securitisation of health. India's ability to navigate this balance- maintaining democratic processes like regional elections even during the pandemic- serves as an important data point in the study of NTS in a democratic context.

Finally, the pandemic has highlighted the role of the diaspora in NTS. For India, the global Indian community proved to be a strategic bridge, facilitating the flow of information, resources, and influence. During the oxygen crisis of 2021, the Indian diaspora played a pivotal role in mobilising global support, demonstrating that NTS networks extend far beyond territorial borders. This "transnational" security element is a key feature of the modern era. India's successful repatriation of millions of its citizens via the Vande Bharat Mission was one of the largest NTS operations in history, redefining the state's responsibility towards its citizens in a globalised world.

3. Conclusion: Toward a New Security Architecture

The era of global pandemics has irrevocably altered the landscape of national and international security. The traditional focus on territorial integrity and military hardware, while still relevant, is no longer sufficient to guarantee the survival of the state or the well-being of its citizens. The reconceptualisation of Non-Traditional Security (NTS) involves a shift towards a more holistic, integrated, and resilient framework. As this article has argued, health security is now a core component of 'high politics', inextricably linked to economic stability, technological sovereignty, and environmental sustainability. For India, the pandemic served as both a challenge and a catalyst, accelerating its transition towards a more self-reliant and strategically autonomous power.

The Indian experience suggests that NTS in the twenty-first century must be human-centric yet state-led. The state remains the primary actor capable of mobilising the vast resources required to fight a pandemic, but its success depends on the resilience and cooperation of its society. India's 'Vaccine Maitri' and its leadership in the Global South have shown that a responsible power can use NTS as a tool for global good, rather than just narrow national interest. However, the lessons of 2021 also serve as a reminder that domestic strength is the prerequisite for global leadership. The future of India's security policy will likely see a permanent integration of health, ecology, and technology into the national strategic discourse.

In conclusion, the reconceptualisation of NTS in the era of pandemics is not merely a theoretical shift but a practical necessity. The global order must move away from a 'reactionary' security posture towards a 'preventative' one. This involves investing in robust health systems, protecting biodiversity, and reforming international institutions to ensure a more equitable response to future crises. For India, the path forward lies in leveraging its strengths as a technological and pharmaceutical powerhouse while continuing to advocate for a more inclusive and human-centric global security architecture. The invisible enemy of the pathogen has proven that we are only as secure as the most vulnerable among us.

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