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**Communication and Covid**

The Covid-19 pandemic might not alter the existing power status-quo in a fundamental way. It, nonetheless, did end up highlighting global neglect of non-traditional security threats.

The pandemic revealed – rather, tested – the whole world simultaneously for its preparedness and management of a global crisis, lessons from which can be drawn and revisited in case of other possible global crises such as a nuclear war. Developed nations such as Britain and the US struggled hard at multiple fronts to formulate a better response to pandemic, ranging from medical treatment to urgent resource mobilization to provide prompt and synchronized decision-making.

Alongside, news of leaders getting infected brought further trauma and confusion among the public; nevertheless, leaders remain steadfast in their struggle to beat this deadly virus. Gradually, states were able to gear up enough resources to deal with the influx of patients, management of disease and eventually innovation and industrial-scale development of the vaccine. However, the key area that was (and is still) put under stress was/is communication.

Clear, consistent and efficient communication during a crisis is vital in preparing an effective and efficient response and mitigating the adverse effects of the crisis. Communication brings in confidence and trust which help engage stakeholders. In case of Covid-19, states, developed or developing, faced serious communication challenges. The struggle was evident when states worked hard to build and maintain communication with their publics, asking them to change their behaviour to suppress the spread of virus.

For instance, governments struggled to manage and deal with a widening trust deficit between the government and the public even when they tried to provide appropriate and relevant information on the pandemic and its fallout based on scientific evidence and global best practices. Though the arrival of the vaccines has raised hopes, vaccine hesitancy is a manifestation of people’s lack of confidence in the health system as well as lack of proper communication of public health information. Moreover, the abrupt communication through social media and leaders’ populist rhetoric compounds the problem.

There is a positive side of social media that allows people to communicate while under lockdown and self-isolation but the negative side is more daunting. Even the scientific community expressed their concerns about the adverse impact of social media communication regarding approaches to manage the pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) called global misinformation about Covid-19 as an “infodemic” in February last year. Besides battling misinformation, states wrestled to sustain communication amid pandemic.

The management of the Covid-19 pandemic worldwide demonstrates that states struggled to sustain communication with their respective societies to effectively enforce a lockdown and associated SOPs of travel bans, self-isolation and social distancing, and to efficiently manage its economic, social and law-enforcing consequences. This was evident from the deployment of armed forces to enforce lockdowns in several states including Britain, the US, South Africa, India, the Philippines etc, and for a mass vaccination programme along with installing checkpoints, fines and online shaming to check and control lockdown breech.

Moreover, fundamental political and constitutional issues emerged such as the division of responsibilities between central and sub-national governments at the state or provincial levels. This created confusion and delayed national responses to pandemic. These examples unravelled the real-time communication challenges during crisis management for which states appeared to be completely unprepared.

Furthermore, states including the UK, China, Russia, Israel etc adopted surveillance measures such as using mobile phone operators, in cooperation with law-enforcement agencies, to record and to trace people’s movement in order to foster behavioural changes at a mass level. This must be valuable experience and can be used as a real-time exercise. The lessons learnt that can be applied to establish and maintain effective communication during crises of strategic nature in the future. Additionally, people exhibited behavioural patterns such as panic buying in certain countries such as Britain, the US and Australia. It might appear strange but it is natural as well. States addressed those behavioural challenges by engaging key stakeholders such as big supermarkets in the UK to ensure unhindered food supply thus highlighting the critical significance of food security (another non-traditional security threat).

Notably, ‘work from home’ – a consequence of the Covid-19 lockdown – was practised across the world. This trend undoubtedly has improved employees’ technological and computer skills along with coordination and communication skills. This also provided employees an opportunity to spend time with their families. Here, Covid-19 offers an inflection point for industries/organizations, policymakers, civil society and academia to embrace new norms of remote working and new technological platforms that are becoming standard.

Nonetheless, remote work can be challenging in areas with poor internet connections. For instance, excessive reliance on internet and technology-based communication could also raise issues of data privacy besides employees’ health, creativity and discipline. This has led to accelerated demand and use of zero-trust networks since the outbreak of the pandemic. It must be noted that not all organizational setups and countries demonstrated high level skills and attitude required for teleworking. For example, within the European Union, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands had relatively rich experience of remote working even before pandemic. Yet there are lessons that states could learn to improve (or bring some kind of uniformity among institutions/organizations within a country) their SOPs and technology for remote working to enable themselves to deal with future crises.

The Covid-19 pandemic emerged at a time when global security was already rendered fragile due to military modernization (including emerging technologies) by power competitors and adversaries, lack of progress on key international treaties and the rise of different power corridors and strategic dialogue across the globe. In such a state of affairs, the pandemic has revealed, in almost all aspects of communication, a gross lack of preparedness and a weak fragmented response globally.

States with advanced technologies and infrastructure failed: in their pandemic early warning assessments; in demonstrating their ability to discern incoming threats that suggested their inaccurate threat perception; in their efficient and effective planning; in synchronizing political and expert advice; and, in building and maintaining effective communication with all stakeholders.

This could raise questions about states’ crisis management, especially about nuclear-armed states that have developed the deadliest weapons and associated safety and security systems thus assumed to have skilled crisis/communication management infrastructure and capabilities. Yet, every state struggled. Over time since the pandemic outbreak, the experience of different states have highlighted technological solutions that can help states improve their strategic and non-strategic communications.

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