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INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Special Issue—COVID-19, international relations, and security studies: Has the pandemic altered the study and practice of international security?

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As of January 23, 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) has reported a total of 774,075,242 global COVID-19 cases. From these, WHO provides a total cumulative number of global deaths at 7,012,986 persons. Although the number of reported cases and associated deaths have greatly declined since the start of the pandemic, WHO currently reports a weekly cumulative total number of cases for January 7, 2024, at approximately 126,000 with approximately 1,000 deaths (World Health Organization, 2024). If these numbers represented fatalities from warfare, terrorism, or another human-made event, scholars and policymakers in international relations and security studies would likely call for international bodies to enact policies and doctrines to eliminate the threat to nation-states and their citizens. Pundits would greet global audiences on cable news networks daily, describing the death and destruction resulting from human-made activities. Theory and policy would combine, seeking to contain impending global catastrophe. But, has this been the case for scholars and policy-wonks responding to pandemics generally, and COVID-19 specifically? Has the international community and academic theories responded to these staggering statistics in the same way they have for conflicts that have produced far less suffering and death?

For example, the estimated number of Russian losses in the war in Ukraine is around 315,000 (Luce, 2023). In comparison, the Russian Federation has reported at least 401,500 deaths due to COVID-19 (WHO, 2024). With the recent war in Gaza, Israeli forces have suffered at least 219 deaths, with Palestinians suffering approximately 26,000 dead (Tal & Greene, 2024). In comparison, Israel suffered almost 13,000 deaths from COVID-19, and Palestine lost another 5,700 lives. As the reader can see, deaths from and lives affected by COVID-19 are at least as catastrophic as those lost in warfare, if not more. And unlike war, every nation-state has suffered death from the recent pandemic. This begs the question, how are international relations (IR) and security studies professionals analyzing the pandemic regarding national security? This introduction proceeds in three parts. First, I present a brief foray into prior research done on the relationship between COVID-19, international relations, and security studies, paying close attention to special themes in IR journals. Next, I present a summative review of the articles the present issue contains, focusing on how and in what ways infectious disease (ID) will have a lasting impact within the discipline writ large. Finally, I conclude with ideas for research moving forward concerning pandemics, COVID-19, and ID overall and lessons learned from the current issue.

Thematic issues on COVID-19

To what extent has the literature in international relations and security studies covered pandemics, especially COVID-19, since 2020? And how does the literature assess the impact of ID on the theory and practice of the discipline? The first major series of articles was published by *International Organization* in a special online supplement on COVID-19 (Finnemore et al., 2020). There are several articles worth highlighting that are pertinent to the present thematic issue. Drezner asks "whether, decades from now, 2020 will be viewed as another inflection point due to the COVID-19 pandemic" for world politics (2020, p. E18). He notes that the pandemic will have a pronounced effect on world politics, but it will not necessarily be an inflection point. In other words, it "is unlikely to have the transformative effects on international relations that so many are confidently predicting." In fact, he argues just the opposite, continuing, "there are reasons to believe a more counter-intuitive claim—that the distribution of power and interest will remain largely unperturbed (Drezner, 2020, p. E19). He concludes that the lasting impact of COVID-19 will be muted, and any aftershocks will be minimal with the caveat that if paired with other cataclysmic events in the international system, the combination would have a lasting effect. However, Drezner seems rather undisturbed by this possibility.

In discussing the differences between how authoritarian regimes (mainly China) and the West (mainly the USA) handled the pandemic, Stasavage (2020) argues that the two forms of government have deep historical reasons for how and why emergencies are tackled. Generally, he notes that authoritarian states with high levels of state capacity are unhindered in implementing forceful measures but that public pressures to respond quickly are weaker (2020, p. E6). He further notes that democratic regimes have a harder time keeping the public in the dark about an emergency and that taking swift and decisive actions during emergencies can be more of a challenge (2020, p. E6). It seems then that authoritarian regimes respond more quickly, but as one would assume, suppress rights and information in so doing, while democratic regimes have the opposite problem. To alleviate this in democratic regimes for future pandemics, he argues that democracies should begin building state capacities that can be used for preventive measures during crises without needing to resort to drastic emergency powers (2020, p. E12). He concludes in hoping that democratic citizens, especially voters, are convinced from the pandemic that it is a worthy investment to create state capacities capable of resolving emergencies without punishing elected officials for making tough decisions.

Greitens (2020, p. E169) asks, to what extent has the COVID-19 outbreak, and the augmented use of health surveillance technology…altered international conceptions of civil liberties, privacy, and democracy? She argues that in various types of democratic regimes, there have been various policy responses, although "democracies have, on average, been less likely to violate democratic standards and infringe upon citizen rights" while noting that these responses have been heterogeneous, ranging from expanding executive emergency powers to delaying elections to even the employment of massive monitoring (Greitens, 2020, p. E170). The author also notes that successful democratic responses to the pandemic have adhered to several criteria worth mentioning, including adopting measures that are necessary and proportional, temporally limited and limited in scope, and have also been subject to democratic review and accountability" (2020, p. E183).

Thus, in the midst of the pandemic, it was clear that various scholars were mixed in their analysis of how COVID-19 would shape international affairs. Drezner (2020) ruled on the side that it was much ado about nothing; Stasavage (2020) argued that it depended on the type of regime one analyzed and was a result of deep historical trends. Greitens also argued that various regimes responded differently, and even different types of liberal regimes implemented divergent responses. How have other journals and scholars examined the future of international relations and security studies in relation to COVID-19?

International Studies Review (*ISR*) has published several "Forum" features in its pages focused on the issue at hand. In one *ISR* forum (Agostinis et al., 2021), scholars not only provided insight on how to understand the pandemic from international relations perspectives, but also on how the pandemic pushed the community together, highlighting the diversity of perspectives the pandemic allowed the discipline to bring forth. The issue focused on responses and views ranging from critical theorists, scholars of the Global South, the relationship between philanthropy and international relations, as well as most relevant for the current thematic issue, how the pandemic may have a lasting impact on the future of IR and security studies.

In particular, Guan calls into question the capability of a national security approach in dealing with global crises such as pandemics (Agostinis et al., 2021, p. 326). The scholar here notes that many actors viewed the pandemic in a war-like narrative, which justifies national security responses and possibly the rise of authoritarian practices, even within liberal regimes (Agostinis et al., 2021, p. 326). Guan notes that the pandemic, however, provides a different path forward, one that uses human security theory to focus on the low politics (generally, issues not related to security such as economic and social policy) of the pandemic, requiring a global cooperative effort prioritizing human protection and empowerment (Agostinis et al., 2021, p. 326). The author posits that COVID-19 opens not just alternative avenues of approach in analyzing global crises but that these approaches are better equipped for such events moving forward. Perhaps most strikingly in the Forum, Guan concludes by noting, "Human security can no longer be viewed as an attractive concept but the key to managing practical complex issues" (Agostinis et al., 2021, p. 330).

In another *ISR* forum dedicated to COVID-19, Sterling-Folker et al. (2021) asked each author to theorize from different perspectives about the politics and implications of the pandemic, mainly, seeking to address how international relations theorizing helps to understand. It is clear that this forum specifically sought to determine what role theorizing has in the pandemic and to force the reader to wonder more generally about the role international relations and security studies have on policy and practice. Immediately brought to the forefront in Freyberg-Inan's contribution is that the internet, cyberspace, and especially user-generated content flooded the information domain concerning the pandemic (Sterling-Folker et al., 2021, p. 1104). She argues this information flooding provided many differing narratives on the pandemic, but problematically, also allowed for public diversity on competing views concerning how to react to the pandemic, legitimating wide-ranging responses, complicating how to finally respond to the crises (Sterling-Folker et al., 2021, p. 1105). In other words, the information space resulted in the equalization of all possible views and voices, from the practical to the irrational. The result is that "in the COVID-19 crisis, the virus itself is ideologized and thereby removed from the scientific domain." (Sterling-Folker et al., 2021, p. 1105). Specialists, politicians, scholars, and even virologists have thus lost authority and legitimacy, reifying ours as the age of post-truth or post-reality. Freyberg-Inan demonstrates just how much of a lasting effect the pandemic has on the world order: liberalism is in crisis, "not merely as a system of governance, but as a normative foundation of our civilization" (Sterling-Folker et al., 2021, p. 1105).

Sterling-Folker forces us, in a similar vein as Guan, to consider if present mainstream international relations and security studies are the most helpful or best-informed analysis through which international emergency events should be considered. The prominent scholar examines COVID-19 in light of nationalism and argues that because nation-states and policymakers approached responses to the pandemic through typical lenses, shaped by national boundaries and borders, "the response was narrow, nationalist and territorial, with borders closed to the movement of designated non-nationals, finger-pointing at which external populations were to blame for the outbreaks, ongoing comparative assessments of how different nation-states were containing the outbreak, and, with the advent of vaccines, ongoing practices of 'vaccine nationalism'" (2021, p. 1108). Like Freyberg-Inan, Sterling-Folker argues that COVID-19 shows how far the world is from a universal liberal vision (2021, p. 1109).

Sterling-Folker, in addition to the other scholars in both forums, allows us to ponder on the future of international relations and security studies to examine, analyze, and help create policy in a post-pandemic world. Each article seems to suggest that the pandemic has reinforced the need for a diversity of thought in the discipline and perhaps a movement away from mainstream theorizing to one where more critical voices are valued not just within academia itself, but also within policy circles. Thus, the literature so far has suggested, quite distinct from the contemporary concern of "the end of IR theory" (see, e.g., Dunne et al., 2013), that the discipline is more alive and diverse than ever and is more needed now than ever before in a world facing transnational emergencies. The literature begs an update to questions such as how liberalism has faired since the official end of the pandemic? How has the pandemic alerted the perceptions of how regimes respond to pandemics? And what are the larger lessons learned from the pandemic for security studies scholars and practitioners to understand moving forward to confront the next event horizon? We now turn to a summary of the present special topic to help answer some of these questions.

Articles in the special issue

The articles appearing in this special issue are not the first dedicated to COVID-19 in *Politics & the Life Sciences.* The difference is that the current issue is dedicated to understanding how ID will have a lasting effect on international relations and security studies. Past articles have focused on similar topics such as examining COVID-19 as a national security threat through human security theory (Albert et al., 2021), but also outside the realm of international relations and security studies and more geared toward domestic politics, such as the perceived vulnerability to infectious disease (PVD) on COVID-19 related attitudes and responses to the pandemic (Cassario, 2023); and domestic vaccine attitudinal politics (Koong et al., 2023). It is clear that the pandemic has had an enormous impact on society and research. But to what extent has it, if at all, altered the study and practice of international security?

In the present issue, McDermott makes clear that pandemics intertwine with international relations and can pose profound threats to every country, especially those with unstable institutions (2024, p. 10). The scholar details how the pandemic affects more than just the typical understanding of political life, however, with its lasting impact on survivors, leaving many people with PTSD and other mental health struggles (2024, p. 10). Thus, just a few years removed from COVID's peak, McDermott argues, in contradistinction to some in the literature, that the pandemic has had a profound impact across international relations and domestically as well. In fact, one can surmise from her article that the pandemic's effects could be studied across different levels and units of analysis and regardless of the lens one takes, would still have an impact on the variables reviewed. McDermott notes that even if IDs do not cause instability in isolation, they certainly influence existing dilemmas. She argues that the challenges "posed by pandemic disease for domestic governance and international security, and in the failure of political institutions to help contain illness, all become more pronounced in the context of newly emergent diseases" (2024, p. 9). She concludes by noting that pandemics such as COVID-19 should be treated in the same category for national and international security as terrorism, for instance (McDermott, 2024, p. 10).

Walker and Cramer, in what is perhaps the article in this issue that directly studies the impact pandemics other than COVID-19 have on security, investigate the relationship between measles outbreaks and various forms of civil unrest, including demonstrations, riots, strikes, and anti-government violence in four central African states (2024). To understand the relationship, Walker and Cramer adopt a difference-in-difference design as an empirical strategy to investigate the potential relationship between Measles outbreaks and civil unrest in Chad, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and the Congo (2024, p. 4). Their results find there is likely a weak relationship between civil unrest and measles, which is contrary to prior research investigating the link between disease outbreak and civil unrest (2024, p. 6). The authors caution, however, that "Despite the lack of a significant, direct relationship in [the null] finding, disease prevention should remain a critical priority for policymakers to improve global public health and well-being" (Walker & Cramer, 2024, p. 8). The authors note that COVID-19 and ID, more generally, demonstrate the interconnectedness of health and security and that much more research needs to be conducted in this area since a "majority of resources from health infrastructure in many countries being put toward COVID-19, diseases that were once almost eradicated, like measles, are now resurfacing" (Walker & Cramer, 2024, p. 9). In other words, ID and pandemics have created the conditions for multiple avenues of approach for research as COVID-19 has demonstrated how complex and complicated the relationship is between diseases and international security and domestic policy.

Stevens, Banducci, and Horvath use the COVID-19 pandemic as a chance to investigate different theoretical perspectives on authoritarianism and contextual changes in security threats (2024, p. 2). Specifically, they analyze changes in perceptions of security threats on the same 10 issues in England, 8 years apart: in 2012 and then again in 2020, examining changes in perceptions of threats as a function of changes in context (2024, p. 2). Their findings are quite interesting: authoritarians exhibit a disproportionate increase in perceptions of threat only for threats related to out-groups (2024, p. 3). There is no increase in perceived security threats pertaining to ID, represented by Avian-Flu (2012) and COVID-19

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(2020) (Stevens et al., 2024, p. 3). In fact, the authors note that they find lower perceptions of threats among authoritarians on these issues because they are not regarded as especially problematic, in other words, they are not viewed as threats to social norms (2024, p. 3). It seems IDs are not considered national security threats by authoritarians, and thus, present fewer concerns. However, the authors conclude by noting that "under conditions in which a health pandemic clearly threatened social norms or damaged social cohesion authoritarians would respond differently" (Stevens et al., 2024, p. 19).

Perhaps what this article demonstrates with precision is that, as opposed to Albert et al. (2021) and Guan (Agostinis et al., 2021), who demonstrate that when viewing ID through a human security lens, a clear national security threat emerges, the international community has still not begun to see emerging "low-political" threats as existential, and thus, not truly a threat to the nation and/or self. Thus, there is still room for the growth and maturation of security studies and IR theory to help decision-makers and citizens understand the threat posed by non-traditional threats as McDermott demonstrates in this issue. Or it demonstrates that, for some reason, naturally occurring threats, such as ID, just does not resonate as existential to most people regardless of the dire statistics presented at the start of this introduction. If so, there still exists room for research on why naturally occurring disasters are perceived as not as threatening as human-made disasters such as war and terrorism.

Topping et al. (2024) set themselves up with the Herculean task of examining the effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on domestic and international security in democratic and authoritarian regimes. They investigate various ways the pandemic has impacted topics within both the domestic and international arena concerning regime type. Their results offer striking insight into the future of international relations and security studies resulting from pandemics: both democratic and in distinction from Stasavage (2020), authoritarian regimes witnessed increased domestic political instability, protests, and political extremism during the pandemic (Topping et al., 2024, p. 2). Concerning international security, the pandemic led to more protectionist economic policies and aggressive resource allocation of medical supplies, including personal protective equipment and manufacturing items from both democratic and authoritarian regimes (Topping et al., 2024, p. 2). Additionally, the pandemic may have led to an increased tension between the USA and China, and their respective allies (Topping et al., 2024, p. 2). Furthermore, in explicitly considering theoretical approaches, Topping et al. note that the pandemic seems to have increased great power competition and perhaps more tactical policies in line with balance-of-power theory rather than the more cooperative institutionalist theoretical orientations. These findings are in line with Sterling-Folker, who earlier in the pandemic era suggested a possible increase in some form of Realpolitik policies as a result of the pandemic, including, for example, harsher border policies and vaccine nationalism from some countries (Sterling-Folker et al., 2021). However, as earlier scholars have concluded (Sterling-Folker et al., 2021), Topping et al. note that various theoretical perspectives seem to explain state behavior best, considering which variables and phenomena are being investigated in relationship to the pandemic. They note, "In reviewing the major IR theories and the effect that COVID-19 had on international security in democratic and authoritarian states, no theory appears to fully explain state behavior during the pandemic (Topping et al., 2024, p. 21). Thus, the authors note that ID clearly influences both domestic and international security in both democratic and authoritarian regimes, and the avenues of analysis open to researchers remain diverse and more pluralistic, ensuring a future in IR theory and security studies as the field looks to continue to find policy prescriptions for pandemics and, obviously, more traditionally known existential threats such as war.

The final article in this special issue analyzes the extent to which COVID-19 actively reshaped parts of the U.S. national security enterprise (Kosal, 2024, p. 1). Kosal argues that the U.S. response to COVID-19 "has been to accelerate the conceptual amalgamation of emerging infectious diseases and public health with biodefense and biosecurity explicitly in national security and military contexts" (Kosal, 2024, p. 1). Quite novel, Kosal articulates an inverse securitization within the U.S. national security apparatus, where there has been "an attempt to treat national security interests as public health problems, specifically in the context of biosecurity policies" (2024, p. 4). The scholar notes that among defense doctrine and documents emergent post-pandemic, "COVID-19 is cited as the motivating impetus at the highest levels of U.S. national security policymaking" (Kosal, 2024, p. 4). The focus of Kosal's argument is that the national security rhetoric emanating from the USA does not contextualize ID in terms of national security threats, but rather contextualizes national security threats in terms of COVID-19. The ramifications are clear: COVID-19 has had such an effect on the USA, at least in its defense posturing that its biodefense and biosecurity doctrines have been rewritten or reshaped in response to the pandemic. This is perhaps the clearest example in the special issue of how pandemics affect the future of international relations and security studies. Finally, Kosal calls attention to "the missing aspect" of COVID-19: disinformation and the weakening of confidence in institutions (Kosal, 2024, p. 7). This reasoning is in line with Freyberg-Inan's research highlighting the importance of government stability and information flows during pandemics (Sterling-Folker et al., 2021). Importantly, Kosal calls attention to the fact that nation-state and non-state actors, especially terrorist organizations, have used the information domain to spread mis and disinformation concerning COVID-19 in an attempt to destabilize society and further capitalize on pitting the political extremes against one another. Kosal notes, "A lesson that the U.S. government is not fully appreciating is that misinformation and disinformation have the potential to be the most impactful aspects of not being able to respond to an emerging infectious disease" (2024, p. 10). The implications are clear: unless better policies are developed to protect against mis/disinformation, political destabilization resulting from propaganda and information warfare threatens national security, which threatens global security. Perhaps no greater lesson can be learned from the recent pandemic.

Conclusion and future research

This special issue aims to explore the extent to which pandemics, especially COVID-19, will leave a lasting impact on international relations and security studies. The articles presented herein address this from various standpoints and rest on different assumptions, diverging in their conclusions as well as analyses. One thing, however, is constant throughout: further research is needed within national and international security studies concerning the threats posed by ID, how governments can respond to them, and how naturally occurring threats compare to human-initiated threats. Although it is tempting to predict a dire future from the conclusions, one can rest assured knowing that there is a diverse set of policymakers and scholars attempting to look at pandemic politics through various lenses and approaches. This introduction demonstrates from the start of the pandemic through this current attempt at a reflective discourse of the pandemic, the field of IR and security studies, both academically and practically, are capable of analyzing and responding to new threats, and old threats that pose more existential concerns as a result of emergent technology and a still rapidly globalizing world. The pandemic has increased the importance of a deepening and broadening of international relations and international security studies, as well as providing new fields of analysis and research paradigms that need more attention (Albert, 2023). As to the precise ontological effect of the pandemic on the future of the discipline, we invite your insight and conclusions in response to this special issue.

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