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Coronavirus Disease-2019: A Threat to Global Peace and Security

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& O.B.A. Oyinloye

Abstract

The outbreak of the “Coronavirus Disease 2019” on a worldwide basis has brought about an unprecedented threat to the already fragile global peace and security position. The epidemic has had catastrophic social, economic, and political consequences on a global scale. The global pandemic which originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019 has become a source of serious international debate, a humanitarian crisis of fearsome proportions, and sparked conflict among the world's major powers. It is against this background and perturbing development that this paper interrogates the implications of Coronavirus disease 2019 as a threat to global peace and security. Thus, the fulcrum of the ensuing discourse is anchored on the examination of the post-Covid-19 outbreak humanitarian crisis, surge in domestic violence in lockdown periods the world over, the imminent world economic recession, food insecurity, revival of xenophobia related violence and the ignition of geopolitical conflict mainly among the world's major economic and political powers. The paper is based on the qualitative research paradigm, as it sought to probe deep into contemporary issues around the novel Covid-19 pandemic. The paper found out that Covid-19 is a serious threat to global peace and security and has also perpetuated a global humanitarian crisis, gender-based, economic recession violence, and xenophobia. Based on the salient findings and major conclusions reached the paper ends by proffering recommendations tailored to promote global peace and security in the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Keywords: coronavirus, peace, security and geopolitics.

Introduction

This paper focuses on how “Coronavirus Disease 2019” (Covid-19) is threatening global peace and security. Coronavirus disease -2019 is a pneumonia-like respiratory illness that has spread like wildfire from the time it appeared in the Chinese region of Hubei, in the city of Wuhan in the latter days of December 2019. Currently, as we write this article, there are more than one hundred and ninety-five million confirmed cases worldwide, with a death toll of more than one and half million while more forty-two million have recovered from lethal Covid-19 (Worldometer, 2020 and WHO Dashboard, 2020). These numbers do increase every minute and it is anticipated that the death toll will rapidly increase into millions before the vaccine to cure the ailment is discovered and made available by scientists.

It is worth noting that Covid-19 was declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO) having been declared a public health emergency of international concern on January 30. Since then, many countries have swung into action to stop the spread of this deadly virus. These actions include mass quarantines and nationwide lockdowns, closing of schools, suspending of public transport, ban on international and local movements among many other efforts (Ishveena, 2020). Johns Hopkins University highlights that not until the vaccine for Covid -19 or prophylactic treatment is available, the management of this pandemic will solely rely on traditional public health methods like case identification and contact tracing (Johns Hopkins, 2020).

One of the immediate consequences of the pandemic has been the economic well-being of the poor segments of society especially as employment shrinks due to the result of lockdowns. United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres highlighted that “the pandemic also poses a significant threat to the maintenance of international peace and security potentially leading to an increase in social unrest and violence that would greatly undermine our ability to fight the disease”. He further noted that in areas where conflicts have been rife. Covid-19 has created further room for actors to promote further crisis. Consequently, this will lead to further escalation of violence and conceivably much damage. This eventually could imbed ongoing wars and exacerbate efforts to fight the pandemic (UN, 2020).

Similarly, Special Advisor to UN Secretary-General Karen Smith also observed that “While it is natural to look inward in times like these, it is equally important that we do not lose sight of the plight of millions of people around the world who remain extremely vulnerable to atrocities being committed against them, and to remind governments that they remain responsible for not only protecting their populations against pandemics but also against atrocity crimes” (UN, 2020). Marczak (2020) posits that racism is creeping in at a terrible speed into Covid -19 narratives, ultimately combining with violation of human rights. It is anticipated that there is a likelihood of intensified crimes and atrocities such as ethnic cleansing and perhaps genocide in countries where underlying causes of conflicts and violence have been experienced, especially the vulnerable communities which have been persecuted (Webinar 2020).

As for terrorism and bioterrorism fears, it was reported that while most governments are engrossed in the fight against the pandemic, terrorist groups will take advantage and strike. "The weaknesses and lack of preparedness exposed by this pandemic provide a window onto how a bioterrorist attack might unfold – and may increase its risks. Non-state groups could gain access to virulent strains that could pose similar devastation to societies around the globe"(UN, 2020).

Covid-19 has derailed efforts to control the proliferation of arms and the entire arms control processes. As a result of this pandemic, there has been cancellation and postponement of various events including the Review Conference of the treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear weapons (NPT) which was scheduled to take place at the end of April 2020 in New York. Besides, the risk of nuclear war is more imminent and higher than during the cold war, this is because the arms control framework is slowly being bulldozed since the US withdrew from Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Ultimately, this leads to a riotous arms race (Finaud, 2020). There is a lot of uncertainty and fear all over the world. This has its parallels at the local level, Marczak (2020) noted that in North Carolina, gun shops are overwhelmed with long queues of customers who have been busy stocking firearms, and one of the owners was quoted saying “...financial meltdown, pandemic, crime, politics...you throw it all into the pot, and you have one hell of a mess”.

It is likely that as a result of the disastrous Covid-19, violence will be inevitable especially in countries with weak state systems, where there is no transparency and history of gross human rights abuse. Even in countries with strong systems there, there are embers ready to ignite violence, for instance, the interesting emerging trends particularly the 5G conspiracy and destruction of 5G towers and boosters in some countries; the wrangle between China and the American president Donald Trump who intentionally and repeatedly coined the term 'Chinese Virus' and also threatened to withdraw American funding to the World Health Organization; the ill-treatment of Africans in China; the controversies surrounding vaccine testing in Africa; the allegation that China created the virus intending to weaken other countries' economies; conspiracy theory that Jews created the virus intending to reap money from selling the vaccine; and unavoidable increase in food insecurity worldwide due to lockdown all show that world peace and security is in jeopardy. All these wars of words and counter-accusations are legitimizing violence and unmistakably indicate that wrong choices are being made towards combating the lethal Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore how the deadly Covid -19 pandemic is threatening global peace and security.

Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations in 2005 highlighted that threats to peace and security in the 21st century include not just armed conflict, civil violence, organized crime, terrorism, arms race, racism, ideological differences and weapons of mass destruction (McInnis 2009). They encompass poverty, deadly infectious diseases, and environmental degradation. The above assertion succinctly captures the thrust of this paper by underpinning the worldwide outbreak of Covid-19, in the context of its implications on global peace and security. As we were writing this paper, the World Health Organisation (WHO) global statistics on the fatalities of Covid-19 stood at more than sixty-seven million confirmed cases and more than one and a half million deaths (WHO Dashboard, 2020). The social, economic, and political repercussions of Covid-19, at an international level, have distressed the already fragile balance of global peace and security, with major powers being at the epicentre of unresolved controversies, accusations and counter-accusations, trade wars and diplomatic confrontations. If the current trends go unchecked, they have the potential to slide the world into a major military fallout, with dire consequences for humanity.

Covid-19 and the Exacerbation of Global Humanitarian Crisis

Due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, disruptions in the local and international world food supply chains will likely occur and result in people not affording to buy food. The notion is premised on the fact that big importers will lose confidence in the reliable flow of basic food commodities resultantly panic buying will ensure driving prices up creating an unbearable food crisis for the people across the globe. For low-income countries from Central America and Africa, the consequences could be gruesome with long term repercussions. It is therefore worth noting that Africa constitutes the majority of almost 212 million people in the world who are chronically food insecure and the 95 million who live amidst acute food insecurity largely as a result of climate change (Sango and Nhamo 2015). With the prevalence of this Covid-19, it, therefore, means that the supply of food aid has been halted and hunger and poverty never seen before are likely to bedevil the African continent, and levels of food insecurity are likely to skyrocket in the coming days.

The Crisis Group (2020) postulates that Covid -19 emergency could exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Central America concerning the Trump administration's immigration policies as well as the region's already high levels of violent crime. Having announced the closure of its Southern border to all non-essential traffic from 21 March 2020 the United States of America may seek to strengthen efforts to halt the arrival of migrants and refugees from central and resultantly this is likely to create a serious humanitarian crisis in the region exposing people to more health hazards amidst this coronavirus pandemic.

It has also been observed that the outbreak of Covid -19 can cause havoc in weak states and trigger widespread unrest. Its implications are especially serious for those caught amid conflict and the diseases are likely to disrupt humanitarian aid flows exposing ordinary people to serious food shortages. As highlighted by Kofi Annan former Secretary-General of the UN in 2005 that threats to peace and security in the 21st century include not just international war and conflict but civil violence, organized crime, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction. They include poverty, deadly infectious diseases, and environmental degradation and these have equally catastrophic consequences. In light of the above statement, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic should, therefore, be treated as a serious threat to global peace and security.

Surge in Gender-Based Violence in Times of Lockdown and Impending Global Recession

Activities that involve the gathering of people, meetings, and awareness sessions on gender-based violence have been suspended due to the outbreak of coronavirus. As such the creation of such curfews and lockdowns will make women more vulnerable to gender-based violence and domestic abuse. Anderlini (2020) posits that "As the coronavirus engulfs us across continents forcing stagnation not only the cancellation of activities but also prioritization of humanitarian efforts". Interestingly, this pandemic with its multifaceted security dimensions is demonstrating the centrality and prescience of women's agendas to contemporary global peace and security challenges. It has to be anticipated and assumed that in another crisis context the risks of men perpetrating violence against women increase with the stresses of unemployment and cramped living conditions. In China for instance, at the height of quarantine, there was a threefold increase in calls to women's shelters regarding violence at home and for those already in abusive relationships, the situation is even worse and dire. Due to various government's policies of lockdown across the globe, people became confined to one place with nothing to do, and obviously, tensions developed amongst families leading to unprecedented levels of gender-based violence which ultimately is a threat to peace and security.

The crisis group (2020) notes that the disease's catastrophic economic impact could as well sow the seeds of future disorder in a way that threatens global peace and security. It is important to highlight that the world in contemporary times has become a global village in which states rely on each other for survival. However, with the mushrooming of the Covid -19 pandemic international flights were suspended, businesses were halted so is trade. In other words, interdependency has been suspended and this is likely to culminate into a serious global recession with dire consequences to social security. Most international companies are likely to close or downsize their staff leading to a surge in unemployment. A global recession of unknown scope lies ahead, pandemic related transport restrictions will disrupt trade and food supplies for instance in Southern Africa it is a fact that South Africa is the economic giant of the region on which all countries in the region rely for survival. It is saddening to note that with the outbreak of the Covid-19 all borders were closed and restrictions have been imposed no meaningful trade is taking place in the

region and the same applies to the international community. Poverty levels never seen before is likely to skyrocket as a result of this imminent economic recession. As the Crisis Group noted at the start of 2020, the raucous protests of 2019 stemmed from a pervasive sense of economic injustice that could set more cities ablaze this year. Anger over the effects of covid -19 and perceptions that the governments are mismanaging them could eventually trigger more demonstrations and such demonstrations will threaten peace and security.

Covid-19 and Xenophobic Sentiments, Disease Outbreak and Geopolitical Friction

One further reason is Covid 19 clear potential to unleash racial and xenophobic sentiment especially in countries with large immigrant communities. Early in the crisis, Chinese labourers in Kenya faced harassment linked to the suspicion that Chinese southern airline flights are bringing the coronavirus into the country. The current reckless statements by the United States President Trump attributing the virus as the ‘Chinese virus’ ignites racial sentiments amongst its citizens who then will develop hatred toward the Chinese residing and operating in the United States of America. Similarly, and closer home South Africa is one of the countries in the continent that houses a multiplicity of nationalities from across the globe and given its history of xenophobic attacks there is a real likelihood that there will be a re-ignition of xenophobic sentiments with the increase in the number of new cases of Covid-19 infections in South Africa. South Africans are likely to accuse foreigners of bringing the disease and further spreading it and the result will be xenophobic attacks. Such attacks cause the death of innocent people creating more problems for human security and also for fear of losing their lives people will be obliged to disperse exposing themselves to the menace of the Covid-19.

The outbreak of the Covid -19 pandemic culminated in a trade war between China and the United States of America. The extreme example of this was the notorious statement by U.S Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross suggesting that the outbreak in China represents an economic opportunity for the United States (Hindustan Times, 2020). It is worth noting that the Covid -19 has fuelled geopolitical tensions with the U.S blaming china for the disease while Beijing tries to make friends by offering aid to affected countries thereby exacerbating existing great power tensions that

complicate cooperation in crisis management. Taking the issue of Covid-19 on one hand and China and U.S on the other it can be observed the outbreak of the pandemic is premised on the economic fight between the great powers but with far-reaching consequences for the countries with poor health systems. It seems in the opinion of the writers to be biological warfare gone wrong as it has turned to be hard-hitting the superpowers particularly America more than other countries. The fallout between China and the USA is exacerbated by the proclamations by China that she is prepared to assist North Korea in fighting the coronavirus pandemic. Global peace and security are extremely threatened when one notes the insistence by the American president Donald Trump that if China is found to be responsible for manufacturing the coronavirus, which he described as a “worse attack than the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour or the 9/11 attack” she will be severely punished (obviously through military penal procedures) (BBC, 2020).

Conclusion

The Covid-19 outbreak made a compelling revisitation of the concept of international peace and security by scholars. It became abundantly apparent that the threats to peace and security are not confined to armed conflict, violence, organized crime, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction but cascades to poverty, an outbreak of infectious diseases, and environmental degradation. The current world attention on the deadly coronavirus disease has engineered a shift of attention from the plight of millions of people chronically exposed to atrocities, human rights abuses, violence, racism, political disenfranchisement, and terrorism. The covid-19 pandemic, as observed in this study has triggered a major humanitarian crisis by scuttling food production and food supply chains thus fuelling frightening levels of global poverty. The study also concludes that most countries were likely to experience economic recession which will have far-reaching consequences on the international political landscape, peace, and security. The study finally concludes that the current international social, economic, and political dynamics are a solemn threat to global peace and security.

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