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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND COVID-19: EXPLORING AND EXPLOITING A GLOBAL CRISIS

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Introduction

By Dr Neville Bolt

Choose your metaphor. It was the perfect storm. It was an accident waiting to happen. Humanity on the move–the prosperous seeking leisure, the deprived migrating *en masse*, the desperate fleeing from war. Global supply chains so complex as to have enmeshed national economies into an international web. While the rise of Great Power politics was daily pulling the world apart. Then along came Covid.

The Corona pandemic was not just to be a story of bureaucratic inertia playing out a nightmare scenario in slow motion. Rather, when the pandemic struck, it hit with a fury and reach unprecedented since the so-called Spanish Flu in the dying days of the First World War. Today, 6.9 million people are reported but 17.2 million estimated to have died globally from Covid-19, and nearly 600 million more have suffered short- or long-term effects.[1] The World Health Organisation (WHO) expects the official mortality rate to rise to 15 million; its director pleads to be heard: 'No, it's most certainly not over'.[2]

As if to reinforce the point, economists at the IMF estimate that by 2024 the cumulative loss of output to the global economy will be 13.8 trillion US dollars.[3] Meanwhile educators fear a generational crisis in the loss to young people's education, even allowing for differences between learning experiences around the world, noting that 'on average, students globally are eight months behind where they would have been absent the pandemic.'[4]

Three years on from the outbreak of the global pandemic, commentators now speak to two broad areas of inquiry:

What went wrong–why was the world so unprepared for a pandemic that experts had foreseen for some time?

And, how did Covid-19 infiltrate itself, not simply into the bodies of populations, but into their body politic–consequently, what is the true legacy of this modern-day plague?

Twice-Pulitzer-Prize-winner Barbara Tuchman had set out on a similar quest to identify the effects on the 14th century of the Black Death (1348-50). She would conclude that 'its disorders cannot be traced to any one cause; they were the hoof prints of more than four horsemen of St. John's vision, which had now become seven–plague, war, taxes, brigandage, bad government, insurrection, schism in the Church. All but plague itself arose from conditions that existed prior to the Black Death and continued after the period of plague was over.'[5] Her words resonate in a world seven centuries on.

Both lines of contemporary inquiry–what went wrong, and what is the legacy–are of concern to strategic communicators whose overarching task is to 'look over the horizon' to future consequences and conversations. But this report addresses more the latter question of legacy, inevitably leading to how strategic communicators should shape discourses amid future threats: how to set out the problems they perceive, then how to design communications to avert similar unpreparedness. Yet first, we need to analyse the problem set. In these pages we have asked a number of expert thinkers to reflect on *STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND COVID-19* and how to prepare for or mitigate the next crisis. Their observations are thought-provoking and caution against a still widespread reluctance to address structural problems at the state level that have been laid bare in most, if not all societies. These range from social and economic imbalance, to distorting systems of governance, to constraining personal freedoms.

Global public health provision has witnessed institutional growth over the last hundred years. Meanwhile, a number of pandemics have come and gone with varying effects: Spanish Flu 1918-19,[6] Asian Flu 1957-8, Hong Kong Flu 1968-70, HIV/AIDS 1968-present,[7] SARS 2002-4, H1N1 Avian flu 2005, MERS 2012.[8] Whether the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the subsequent Covid-19 pandemic emanated from a bat via open ('wet') food markets or was helped on its way by laboratory researchers in Wuhan, China remains a trail for journalists to uncover. But 'the theory that the pandemic began as a natural spillover was from the start, and remains to this day, highly plausible. It is the null hypothesis, the default assumption', argue Alina Chan and Matt Ridley.[9] As early as March 2020, The *New England Medical Journal* was publishing research on 425 laboratory-confirmed cases in Wuhan: 'Although the majority of the early cases were linked to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market and the patients could have been infected through zoonotic or environmental exposures, it is now clear that human-to human transmission has been occurring and that the epidemic has been gradually growing in recent weeks.'[10]

The *how* and *why* are clearly important questions for public health officials, but it was the frayed relations between China and the WHO, exploited by the administration of US President Donald Trump, that would capture the geopolitical spotlight, recharging the security environment. 'We built the greatest economy in history, and we closed it down because of the China plague', an American television audience heard in late 2020. And this from a president who only months before had signed the first stage in a US-China trade deal with the words: 'Together, we are righting the wrongs of the past and delivering a future of economic justice and security for American workers, farmers, and families'.[11] Not to be outdone, Beijing would craft its own jingoistic response, suggesting that the US military had brought the virus to China. And that Washington was covering up. 'Be transparent!', demanded a Foreign Ministry tweet, 'Make public your data! US owe us an explanation'.[12]

A more considered analysis is forthcoming of what went wrong and where the blame should be apportioned. Since fault would be found to lie with numerous responsible parties–certainly when it came to preparedness, understandably a valued concept in public health. Michael Lewis sees the world through the eyes of ordinary people who reveal extraordinary character. He begins and finishes his analysis at the ground level where individuals take decisions that affect the lives of millions. And where the frustrated attempts of other individuals are thwarted by bureaucratic systems that would prefer to prevaricate or side-step for the expediency of a quiet life. In his American true story *The Premonition*, the public service crusader Dr Charity Dean came to realise that 'the country didn't have the institutions that it needed to survive. In particular, it did not have what it needed to battle a pathogen. The pandemic had given America's enemies a clear view of the country's weakness: its inability to respond to a Covid-like threat'.[13] But the same public health officer would come to an even more disturbing conclusion. 'From the point of view of American culture, the trouble with disease prevention was that there was no money in it'.[14] Lewis is not the only one to swim in these waters.

Historian Adam Tooze sees the problem as structural, targeting the confluence of money and medicine. Again, he examines the collapse of the medical system across the US by mid-2020, with the emphasis on the word 'system'. Lurking deep below any questions of resourcing and emergency drills lay the transformation in where hospitals fitted into the marketplace. Hospital overload became the priority concern. The greater the reserve capacity, the faster people could return to normal life and employment. However, writes Tooze, hospitals 'are not outside the economy or society. By 2020, hospitals were no longer the giant organisational monoliths of the mid-twentieth century. Since the 1980s they had been incorporated not just into the economy–they were always part of that–

but into the market. They had become sites for experiments in modern management'. Alarmingly, he goes on, 'They were slimmed-down just-in time operations or at least they aspired to be, run like "normal" businesses according to the criteria of efficiency'. Encroachment of the market and corporate practice into the public sector had come to undermine public service outcomes at the best of times. In a crisis, the formula failed. And without a clear rescue plan from the top of government, even more lives were lost than might have otherwise been the case.[15]

Transformation of the way we manage our economies has been propelled by globalisation at the heart of neo-liberal economics since the 1980s. Ubiquity of mass containerisation, access to low-cost labour markets, and cheap international travel have added impetus to human movement, facilitating the global spread of disease. Connectivity, often thought of as digital technologies but more pertinently here through proliferating transport links to formerly less accessible locations where uncommon pathogens might occur, has fuelled a broader geopolitical questioning of extended global supply chains. Even before the Ukraine war and geopolitical confrontations around Taiwan in 2022, Western states and markets had become aware of a growing exposure to risk. But no one chose to act.

The Covid crisis brought the twin-threat of biomedicine and economics to impact governance in the political space of both democratic and authoritarian states. It bears citing Adam Tooze at length as he looks to future threats following the crisis of 2020: 'Either we find ways to turn the billions invested in research and development and futuristic technologies into trillions, either we take seriously the need to build more sustainable and resilient economies and societies and equip ourselves with the standing capacities necessary to meet fast-moving and unpredictable crises, or we will be overwhelmed by the blowback from our natural environment'. But with a chilling reminder, he adds, 'These are the kinds of demands dismissed as unrealistic'.[16] These are also the kinds of overarching frameworks of analysis and 'big picture' communications–the meta-narratives–which have so far eluded the world of strategic communications where practitioners still struggle to position long-term discourses in politicians' priorities, engaged instead in tactical fire-fighting. Which begs the further question whether those engaged in Strategic Communications become responsible for while being complicit in projecting ideas designed to encourage populations to adapt to turbulent environments, via less than clearly articulated concepts such as resilience, rather than to demand reform of the underlying iniquities and failures of economic and political systems.

In pandemics the poor suffer most–already impoverished communities in both rich and poor countries lack social welfare safety nets even in good times.[17] Noticeable has been the effects on low- and middle-income

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countries, whose economies have suffered the brunt of converging crises. According to the *Financial Times*, 'the world now combines a number of separate crises, each of which has on its own historically constituted a danger for many–but not all–emerging economies'. Increased debt burden and lower economic output with thinly spread fiscal relief mean that 'the pandemic reversed the decades-long pattern of convergence where the rest of the world was catching up economically with the west'.[18]

The WHO's director would be moved to confide to his executive board in January 2020, 'I need to be blunt: The world is on the brink of a catastrophic moral failure–and the price of this failure will be paid with the lives and livelihoods in the world's poorest countries.' Such had been the *moral* failure to provide poor countries with vaccines–'more than 130 countries have not received a single dose'.[19] Strategic communicators sit at the intersection between political economy and ethics. According to NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence' Terminology Working Group, Strategic Communications is normatively rooted in a system of values.[20] Here, the effects of mortality on already weak economies are not relieved by an assumed responsibility on the part of richer countries towards the developing world.

Events of such magnitude–once in a century occurrences–would almost certainly reap long-term consequences. At its height in 2020 it was predicted that working patterns in shops, offices, and factories would be changed forever, loosening employees from the moorings of the traditional workplace, offering a new life of home-working and online-shopping; that city centres would empty out as people headed for the safety and relative solitude of the countryside; that global patterns of trade would change, enabling more local production to close the gap between supply and demand. But unscrambling networks that supply the consumer marketplace is one thing; decoupling investments and delivery lines that in a post-pandemic climate of geopolitical confrontation are suddenly perceived as security threats is something else. Early signs are mixed.

Cassandra-like warnings are not without precedent: the historian Barbara Tuchman had already described the calamitous 14th century when the Black Death struck four times, wiping out a third of the population living between India and Iceland, and shaking the very foundations of European societies. Then, as perhaps now, alarming numbers of deaths and a closing-down of the normal way of life, edging to a new post-pandemic normality, forced societies to question what had gone before. In the 14th century the political economy of feudal Europe was turned on its head as labour shortages in the fields forced a new relationship between the tiers of the social hierarchy, in some places shaping a new set of understandings.

Even more significant was the way that people would see their lives and destinies in relation to God. 'Survivors of the plague, finding themselves neither destroyed nor improved, could discover no Divine purpose in the pain they had suffered. God's purposes were usually mysterious, but this scourge had been too terrible to be accepted without questioning. If a disaster of such magnitude, the most lethal ever known, was a mere wanton act of God or perhaps not God's work at all, then the absolutes of a fixed order were loosed from their moorings. Minds that opened to these questions could never be shut again.' [21]

Whether the 21st century mind would ask the same questions, albeit this time of their governments, was moot, having already suffered extreme hardships and austerity policies following the Global Economic Crisis of 2008-9. In the wake of this earlier crisis, one *Financial Times* commentator would remark: 'Another ideological god has failed'.[22]

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND COVID-19 looks to the distant horizon with a strategic communicator's eye. Predictions about a post-pandemic future world must inevitably come with their own health warning. But drawing on expert commentators–both our own and from the wider community of scientists and public intellectuals–a number of paths become apparent.

Bruno Maçães is one thinker who draws on hegemonic struggles throughout history to reflect on the effects of Covid. These, he proposes, have consistently led to shifts in the international order. Far from the latest manifestation of this struggle being one of ideological ideas caught in inevitable existential struggle, for him it boils down to who possesses superior technology and the better means to control the earth's natural resources. Such is the dilemma for the US and China, he argues. What Covid exposed, however, was not just a Chinese populace readied in a revolutionary and perpetual state of alert or, by contrast, a United States with a passive system characterised by the expectations of normal times; rather, it revealed a new context with an 'unexpected technological and political threat to social stability.'[23] Maçães quotes Mao: 'Everything under heaven is in utter chaos, the situation

is excellent'[24]–a variation on the maxim that 'where there's chaos, there's opportunity'.

Through the Covid years of 2020-21 China's economic performance overshadowed its Western competitors' dramatically. Whether Beijing's centralist approach to enforcing its lockdowns compares more or less favourably with the patchier performance of a federal America is less poignant than his claim that 'China is not playing the same game. While Europeans or the United States regarded the pandemic as a public health problem, for the Chinese authorities it was always a national security crisis'.[25] Alluding to Graham Allison's theory of the Thucydides Trap,[26] it prompts the further question whether the world is facing more uncertainty from a resurgence of Great Power politics or from the acceleration of transnational risks such as climate change or pandemics–the latter were captured in NATO's Strategic Concept 2022, albeit presented as secondary to kinetic threats of major powers.[27] Such scene-setting reminds us that the Covid pandemic cannot be isolated to a biomedical or public health shock. Rather, it is interwoven with the innate vulnerabilities of societies to sustain a sudden shock that results in arresting population movement and freezing economies–in effect, when a country grinds to a halt. Most important to understand is that local context determines the divergent nature of response both historically and geographically: all societies are different. That said, a consensus is emerging around global supra-challenges that create kinetic risks at the local level, for which political and economic elites seem, for the time being at least, bereft of innovative solutions.

From a more geopolitical starting point commentators are searching for a new strategic framework to define a post-Covid era. NATO's own look to the future takes in a broad portfolio of future threats already incorporated in its 2017 *Strategic Foresight Analysis* publication, and due to be updated for publication by the summer of 2023.[28] But its core concerns are reaffirmed in the *Strategic Concept* agreed in Madrid in 2022. Here a 360-degree, collective approach is built on three core tasks of deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security. Noticeable is its emphasis on 'the cross-cutting importance of investing in technological innovation and integrating climate change, human security and the Women, Peace and Security agenda across all our core tasks'. But if it is to represent more than virtue signalling, then greater detail will be required on how each agenda, individually and collectively, will be integrated into both policy and practice.[29] Pandemics, absent from this text, are perhaps best understood by NATO through the lens of a secondary or tertiary effect, as a cause of instability in the security sector. At best, the Alliance's conceptualisation of human security is the natural home for the advance of viruses where individual insecurity places at risk community well-being–more consistent with the remit of a politico-military organisation.

Chinese and Russian challenge to America's hegemony, particularly in the last decade, has meant a reluctance by rival powers to cooperate, at once intent on asserting or expanding the reach of their borders while universally confronting a malign actor (a virus and its mutations) that knows no borders. The sovereign meets the transnational–what has been described as a negative synergy. All the while, the threat from both is set to escalate. Despite yet because of this, Colin Kahl and Thomas Wright call for bipartisan 'critical domestic investments and renewed support for American global leadership'. It is a Western response to the tragedy of the Covid years, built on seizing the initiative and learning from the recent past. Innovation born of resilience, accepting that renewed humanitarian institution building to win over hearts and minds in developing economies will not be looked on favourably by a resurgent China keen to shape an alternative model to the international rules-based order that has come to dominate since 1945.[30] Adam Tooze suggests that 'what 2020 demonstrated were the stresses generated by China's astonishing growth, the flaws in the Chinese apparatus of power, and its resilience, potency, and ambition'. But he cautions, 'Beijing too is walking a tightrope without an end'.[31] All of which makes for a less predictable China and more febrile geopolitical climate. Nevertheless, this presents strategic communications with a canvas on which to write a long-term agenda for change. Home truths is a better way of describing Fareed Zakaria's robustly presented ten lessons for the post-pandemic world. How should strategic communicators understand the Covid pandemic? He volunteers: 'Some have suggested that it will prove to be the hinge event of modern history, a moment that forever alters its course. Others believe that after a vaccine, we will quickly return to business as usual. Still others argue that the pandemic will not reshape history so much as accelerate it. The last scenario seems the most likely outcome'. If true, then unpredictability that naturally arises out of acceleration promises to offer a hesitant backdrop to all our lives.

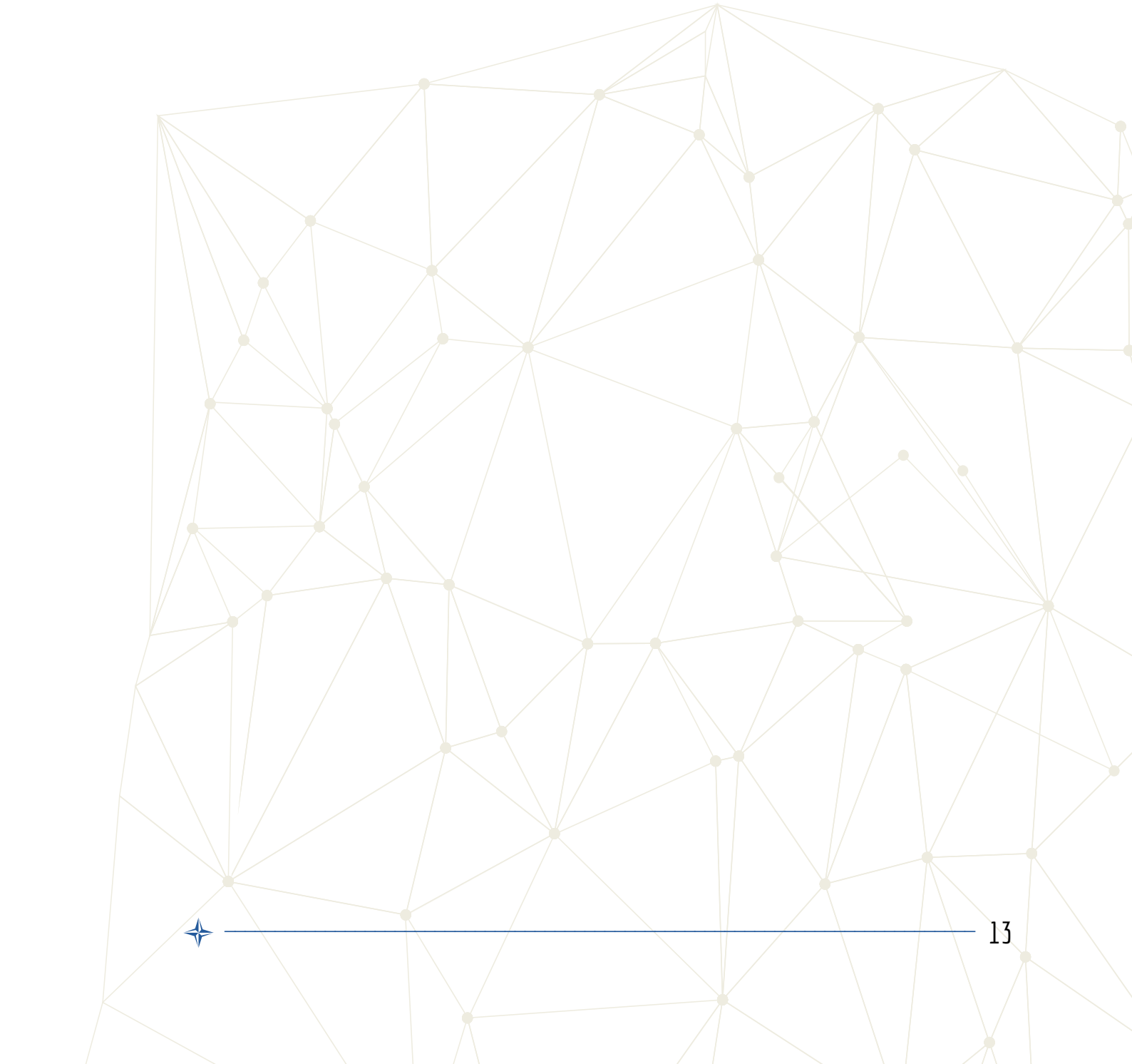
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND COVID-19 prompts the question: where is the grand design that leads to the plan before handing over to the strategy on meeting the frictions of the real world? Strategic communicators build conversations around attractive if not desirable ideas. They attempt to engineer these into a wider public consciousness beyond the smaller segments of population which their tactical campaigns target. The Covid-19 crisis has generated a number of ideas. Greater co-operation between states and Big Pharma on viral research for vaccines; encouraging relationships between scientific researchers around the world; addressing intellectual property rights ownership associated with high costs of development; making vaccines freely available to populations for whom the price is unaffordable weighed against the payback on investment for corporate shareholders; reform of international public

health institutions capable of 'speaking truth unto power'. Any of these questions invites communicators to frame a new vision able to mitigate the inevitable pandemic to come.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND COVID-19 draws on fresh and revealing insights from authors around the world. James Farwell finds a United States at odds with itself, fractured and polarised, and where the Covid pandemic has wrought a terrible toll in mortalities. More concerning for this commentator is how the response to the virus fed into further dividing a society only to undermine 'the unity critical to project power, eroding the population's will to support national policies or purposes'. Covid would lead to a weakened ability for the country to project national power. Paul Bell finds the small South Caucasian state of Georgia, already economically weak and politically deadlocked before the crisis, even less likely to secure EU accession and NATO membership afterwards, and consequently more vulnerable to the threat from Russia. Post-Covid days in Georgia are playing out to the refrain of a Hard Rain on a Bad Roof. How did some states seek to exploit the crisis to benefit their own national interest? Aurelio Insisa looks at China's attempts to project renewed influence into the global South. At the same time, it reveals how Beijing pushed back against a growing backlash from other global powers with their uneven and inadequate handling of the pandemic. Vera Michlin-Shapir observes how Russia's government attempted to exploit the Covid crisis geopolitically by prompting foreign criticism of its home-grown Sputnik V vaccine, only to be met with a backlash at home and resistance by ordinary Russians to use it. Martin Innes has captured through open-source intelligence a variety of responses to public health interventions during the Covid years, noting how violent reactions have emerged to form 'a broader coalition that is anti-lockdown, anti-mask, and anti-vaccine, while holding an adversarial view of Western liberal democratic governance'. Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho discovers an attempt to create an 'alternate reality' in Brazil where that country's President pursued a policy of disinformation and misinformation, denying both the scientific data and the measured impact of an unrestrained Covid virus on the population. The consequences have been alarming: the second highest mortality rate in the world. This despite a history of vaccination with an established success record until now due in no small part to repeated Strategic Communications campaigns in the past. Karen Allen surveys the African continent where its rapid pace of digital transformation offered a target during the pandemic for a shift from cybercrime to digital attacks on health service providers, government ministries, and international NGOs. Growing uncertainty in the digital space served to highlight the competition between international hardware and data storage suppliers within a broader geopolitical landscape.

It is not the purpose of this publication to campaign, only to report and analyse what

happened and why. Nevertheless, it has not passed without notice how many experts and figures of international repute have called for a concerted response. What was widely described as a once-in-a-century event appears to be slipping into history without societies and their leaders heeding the warning of worse to come. 'Our message for change is clear', wrote The Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response, 'no more pandemics. If we fail to take this goal seriously, we will condemn the world to successive catastrophes'. Ominously, they would declare 'Let history show that the leaders of today had the courage to act'.[32]



How Has Covid-19 Impacted China's Geopolitical Strategic Communications?

By Dr Aurelio Insisa

Abstract

Crossing the shatterbelts of Eurasia and the commercial sea-lanes of the Indo-Pacific, the Belt and Road Initiative has put the distinctively geopolitical outlook of China's strategy into the spotlight. Beijing articulates this strategy through the deployment of multidimensional diplomacy, Leninist 'propaganda work' and 'united front work', economic statecraft, and deterrence signalling. By framing the deployment of this vast array of tools as a strand of 'geopolitical strategic communications', this chapter examines the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Beijing's attempt to shape the perceptions and choices of foreign countries' decision-makers and public opinions. The chapter explores how the pandemic has both expanded and created avenues for influence, with a focus on the Global South. At the same time, it examines how Beijing's concern for regime security and diverging national strategies in containing the pandemic have emboldened China's geopolitical strategic communications vis-à-vis other regional and global powers.

China's Strategy, the Covid-19 Pandemic, and Geopolitical Strategic Communications

China's assertive turn in foreign policy is widely associated with the centralisation of power under the leadership of Xi Jinping that occurred in the past decade. This assertive turn, however, should be backdated to the immediate aftermath of the 2008-9 Great Financial Crisis (GFC).[33] Two factors led to the shift towards assertiveness: first, concerns over domestic political stability tied to economic development; and, second, the perception of a decisive tilt in the balance of power vis-à-vis the US. In the earliest stages of this strategy, China focused on a muscular defence of its 'core

interests' in the South and East China Seas, and on leveraging trade asymmetries with its neighbours.[34] The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013 signalled a new stage, with Beijing welding heightened regional security concerns to the country's 'go global' strategy that traced back to the late 1990s to early 2000s period.[35] From this perspective, the BRI can be understood as a platform to guide a process of Eurasian integration and to establish a new international order that champions post-liberal norms, values, and Chinese technological standards.[36] The BRI can be understood as a facet, as well as a marketable global brand, of a wider post-GFC strategy focused on (1) national 'core interests', (2) security concerns related to the continuing presence of a relatively declining US in the Asia-Pacific, (3) geo-economic concerns over the access to the energy markets of the Middle East, and (4) geo-economic concerns over access to consumer markets of Western Europe. The contours of this strategy, in turn, reflect an outlook rooted in what Geoffrey Gresh defined as 'hard geopolitics',[37] centred on the Eurasian landmass and the sea-lanes of communications surrounding it.[38]

How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact Beijing's strategy? China was the first country engulfed in the fight against the Covid-19 virus *and* the first to successfully contain it. With the country's early victory against the virus, the Chinese leadership recognised a new "window of opportunity" to advance its strategy.[39] It is indeed possible to identify a discrete time frame between March 2020, corresponding to the end of the first Covid-19 wave in China, to February 2022, when the geopolitical cataclysm of the Russian invasion of Ukraine upended international politics, and the arrival of the Omicron variant posed a new challenge to Beijing's 'zero-Covid' approach at home. Throughout this two-year window, scholars and observers have framed Beijing's response to the pandemic challenge in terms of propaganda,[40] soft power,[41] and humanitarian diplomacy.[42] Alternatively, scholars focusing on regional and international security have noted an uptick in China's assertiveness in defending its 'core interests', in what has been defined as a 'pandemic power play',[43] as renewed tensions with Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, and India emerged in this period.

Strategic Communications (SC) is a conceptual tool uniquely equipped to capture how China adapted its strategy during this window of opportunity. As a 'holistic approach to communication, based on values and interests, that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment',[44] SC provides a flexible yet coherent framework to examine Beijing's actions. Unlike propaganda, it does not suffer from the proliferation of fuzzy and contradicting definitions. At the same time, SC is not constrained by a narrow definition of tools or behaviours associated with it. Instead, an SC approach focuses on the orchestration of multiple communicative acts in order to achieve an actor's strategic objectives. In so doing, the SC approach provides the necessary latitude to examine

how a state actor in pursuit of a strategic objective may rely on tools across the entire spectrum of behaviour, from attraction to coercion, to shape an environment receptive to the actor's aspirations. Beijing's own practice of SC consists in the coordination of a variety of activities managed by different bureaucratic actors within the Chinese party-state: external propaganda, public diplomacy, 'united front work',[45] overlapping strands of non-kinetic warfare (political, psychological, public opinion, cognitive, legal), and economic statecraft. While some of these practices are not generally associated with the conception of SC in Western academia and Euro-Atlantic institutions, they are an important part of how the Chinese party-state projects its values and interests. From this perspective, distinctions between 'licit' and 'illicit' activities, which could be meaningful in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of SC from a Western perspective, should not be applied in the Chinese case.

Given this context, this chapter examines China's geopolitical SC–namely SC serving a national strategy informed by classical geopolitics and articulated across pivotal geopolitical regions and places[46] during the two-year window of opportunity that China enjoyed between March 2020 and February 2022. It does so through five short sections. The first section provides an outline of China's narratives and tools during the period under examination. The second, third, and fourth sections ground China's practice of SC in three geographical areas of critical importance for Beijing's strategy: Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Each of these sections focuses on how Beijing adapted its SC toolkit and approaches in specific regional contexts from March 2020 to February 2022. The last section sums up findings and evaluates the significance of Chinese activities during the pandemic for the field of SC.

Pandemic-Era Narratives in China's Strategic Communications

China's aspirations for a post-Western, post-liberal global order embedded in the BRI had coalesced by 2018 in the concept of the 'community of common destiny for mankind' (also translated as 'community of shared future'). As a party-state sanctioned discourse, this concept emphasises the limitations and supposed exhaustion of Western models. It stresses the need to 'democratise' global governance, thus legitimising China's model and Chinese solutions in interstate relations, the management of traditional and non-traditional security issues, socio-economic development, and inter-cultural relations.[47] Since the beginning of the pandemic Beijing has adapted these narratives and their main vector, the BRI, to achieve these immediate aims: (1) repairing the damage to the country's national image in the aftermath of the original viral outbreak in Wuhan, (2) curbing Sinophobic sentiments among foreign public opinion, and (3) showcasing China's effective contribution in a global crisis.

As early as March 2020, Beijing sent a medical team and provided personal protective equipment to Italy, the first Western country hit hard by a Covid-19 outbreak and, incidentally, the only G7 member that signed a BRI Memorandum of Understanding. The 'health diplomacy' mission in Italy helped revive the Health Silk Road (HSR), a BRI-WHO initiative originally launched in 2017, which had languished for years. As contagion spread across the world between March and April 2020, Beijing adapted the logistics and the network of relations built under the BRI to deliver medical supplies to signatory countries, thus providing a tangible dimension to the HSR.[48] A state-media driven global publicity campaign followed this phase. In May, President Xi announced that Chinese vaccines, already in Phase II trials, would become a 'global public good'.[49] In June, the white paper *Fighting Covid-19* outlined the main narratives for the country's propaganda actors. The official document championed the Chinese model built upon tracing, mass testing, and lockdowns, and presented Chinese containment efforts as a steppingstone in the construction of a 'global community of health for all'. It also implicitly criticised Western, and in particular American, responses to the pandemic by emphasising how the Chinese approach placed 'people's lives above economic growth'.[50] The second half of 2020 constituted a long build-up to the mass distribution of the made-in-China vaccine, with Beijing joining COVAX, the WHO-backed global scheme for vaccine distribution, in October.

Throughout 2021, narratives on the Chinese model progressively lost salience. Beijing's solitary pursuit of its 'zero-Covid' strategy was successful in saving lives and rooted in a realistic assessment of China's public health conditions. But it stood in stark contrast to both Western countries, which largely shifted to less draconian public health policies thanks to highly effective m-RNA vaccines, and to that of many countries in the Global South, which due to limited access to vaccines and domestic economic imperatives resorted to 'live with the virus'. As a result, Beijing's narratives in the second year of the pandemic necessarily pivoted toward vaccine provision, with President Xi himself repeatedly pledging China's commitment to offer vaccines to countries in the Global South. By the end of 2021, 1.7 billion vaccine doses were provided to countries in need according to Chinese sources[51]–a powerful testament to Beijing's ability to adapt its strategy to a rapidly changing international environment and to exploit glaring missteps on the part of its geopolitical competitors.

China's Strategic Communications in Taiwan

Even though Taiwan does not play any role within the BRI, the geostrategic value of the island for China remains immense. Beijing's control over Taiwan would break the 'first island chain' stretching from the Kuril Islands to Borneo, thus projecting Chinese naval power in the Pacific Ocean.[52]

> China was the first country engulfed in the fight against the Covid-19 virus and the first to successfully contain it.

Its commitment to 'reunify' with Taiwan, however, is primarily rooted in history, national identity, and regime legitimacy. In other words, China's commitment to reunification with Taiwan would have likely remained the same even if the island were located in a less relevant geostrategic position. The victories of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and its presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen in the 2016 general elections halted a strategy of gradual reunification through economic integration that had started in 2008. Consequently, cross-Strait relations between Beijing and Taipei have entered a downward spiral, leading the Xi administration to exert a long-term pressure campaign against the Tsai administration. Further complicating Beijing's predicament, polling conducted in recent years has consistently shown a notable preference for upholding the status quo, and the strengthening of Taiwanese identity vis-à-vis Chinese identity.[53]

Since 2016, Beijing's response has relied on a wide array of tools, including diplomatic pressure, economic statecraft, and political warfare. From an SC perspective, the deployment of such tools aims at convincing Taipei and the Taiwanese electorate that (1) the trend toward re-unification cannot be stopped, (2) the island cannot uphold the political status quo indefinitely, and that (3) any move toward 'Taiwan independence'–namely cessation of the Republic of China and the proclamation of a Republic of Taiwan–will lead to war.[54] The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic after the second consecutive victory by the DPP and Tsai in the general elections held in January 2020, however, presented a new challenge to China's SC targeted at the island. The Tsai administration instrumentalised Taiwan's success in fighting the pandemic to present the island as a champion of a new strand of techno-democratic governance–and thus as an alternative to China's own public health paradigm.[55] Within this context, Taipei expanded and strengthened ties with the US, Japan, Australia, and European countries, in an attempt to leverage the success of its public health policy and expand its limited 'diplomatic space'. Beijing's answer, beyond harsh condemnations for 'using the pandemic to plot for independence',[56] relied mainly on deterrence signalling.[57] Between

2020 and 2021, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) routinised 'patrol operations' within the south-western sector of Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ), while military vessels stepped up their operations in the waters surrounding the islands. As the tempo of PLA operations intensified in 2021, concerns about a Chinese invasion of the island reached new heights.[58] Yet, with closer scrutiny it is possible to appreciate how repeated spikes in the number of PLA 'patrol operations' in the Taiwanese ADIZ followed major breakthroughs for Taipei. Such operations coincided with visits to the island by US officials, the issuing of multilateral communiqués by the US and its allies stating concerns for rising tensions in the Strait, and specific events such as the announcement of the AUKUS pact, Taiwan's demand to access the CPTPP free trade agreement, and the US army's own patrolling operations in the Taiwan Strait.[59]

The Tsai administration's wariness of Beijing, and Taiwan's own success in managing the pandemic throughout 2020, also constrained China's use of humanitarian diplomacy as a tool of SC towards the country. Following Taiwan's first major Covid-19 outbreak and the island's difficulties in the vaccination rollout in the spring of 2021, Beijing resorted to the concerted use of economic leverages and propaganda. For instance, Taiwanese authorities implied that a first attempt to purchase five million doses of the Comirnaty vaccine was refused by BioNTech due to Chinese pressure. At the same time, Taipei also refused offers to obtain the vaccine by the Shanghai-based conglomerate Fosun, which holds the distribution rights for the vaccine on the island.[60] As the crisis continued, Beijing offered instead to vaccinate Taiwanese people in the Mainland with its own CanSino and Sinovac vaccines, not approved on the island,[61] using Taiwanese pro-China politicians as sponsors of the initiative.[62] This crisis ended when Taiwanese companies TSMC and Foxconn purchased BioNTech vaccines on behalf of the administration and the US and Japan stepped up donations.

China's SC towards Taiwan has primarily focused on the gradual deterioration of the island's security environment and the supposed inevitability of reunification. The Tsai administration's success in managing the pandemic, and its willingness to use its public health policies to expand ties with foreign partners, has pushed Beijing to further rely on sharper aspects of SC, including deterrence signalling and economic statecraft.

China's Strategic Communications in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is the most critical region in China's post-GFC geopolitical strategy, since it is the key geographical junction between the industrial heartland of coastal China and the sea-lanes of communications leading to the Gulf energy markets and the Western European consumer markets. China's aims in the region can be summed up in (1) the ousting of the US as a key security actor

in the region, (2) the establishment of new economic and security mechanisms that guarantee Beijing's interests, and (3) obtaining Southeast Asian states' acquiescence of its maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea. However, the gravitational force of China's economic strength in the region has not yet translated into the establishment of a new regional order. Major regional actors such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines remain wary of Chinese security designs, as shown by the continuing postponement of a shared ASEAN-China Code of Conduct for the South China Sea.[63] Furthermore, Southeast Asian states have taken advantage of the ongoing infrastructure competition in the region that pits China against Japan and the other countries of the Quad (US, India, and Australia). Even though the economies of Southeast Asian countries are increasingly integrated with China, and their governments have largely embraced BRI projects, state actors in the region have not given Beijing a blank cheque yet.[64] Rather, Southeast Asian states have consciously pursued a 'deliberately contradictory' approach aimed at maximising benefits by strengthening ties with the US and other states in the Indo-Pacific as they move closer to China.[65]

As a result, China's SC in the region is bound to pursue objectives that are hard to reconcile in the short term. On the one hand, Beijing needs to show to regional actors that Chinese core interests, including claims in the South China Sea, are non-negotiable. 'Grey zone' events involving coast guard and even civilian vessels, military drills in contested waters, as well as the instrumental use of domestic legislation ('lawfare') are all tools used to communicate China's objectives to its neighbours and the US–and to shape their responses. On the other hand, Beijing has long made use of economic statecraft, consistent diplomatic engagement at the highest level, and humanitarian diplomacy–bolstered by propaganda and 'united front work' that mobilises the influential ethnic Chinese diasporas–in an attempt to favourably shape its neighbours' response to Beijing's sovereignty claims.

Throughout the two-year window under examination in this chapter, Beijing showed a remarkable deftness in employing the vast array of SC tools at its disposal as the Covid-19 pandemic spread into the region. Having gotten the initial outbreak under control in March 2020, Beijing stepped up its presence in the contested waters of the South China Sea between April and August 2020. It did so with an eye on Vietnam, the ASEAN member most wary of China. With the exception of a 'grey zone' event occurring in the waters of the Paracel Islands in April, in which a Chinese coast guard vessel collided with a Vietnamese fishing ship, Beijing's SC mainly relied on lawfare throughout this phase.[66] In the space of a few months, China established new administrative units, renamed geographic features in contested waters, and enforced a unilateral temporary fishing ban in disputed waters. Later, in January 2021, the

National People's Congress passed a law that authorises the Chinese coast guard 'to take all necessary measures including the use of weapons' when Chinese sovereignty, sovereign rights, or jurisdiction are violated or in danger of being violated.[67]

Crucially, this assertive phase took off just as Western countries, and especially the US, were severely hit by the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Between May and August 2020, the Trump administration eventually responded to Chinese actions in the region through aggressive diplomatic rebukes, virtual diplomacy meetings with ASEAN and its member states, and Freedom of Navigation Operations in the South China Sea. By then, however, Beijing had already pivoted towards a new regional charm offensive. In the second half of 2020, within the context of booming ASEAN-China trade relations, Beijing skilfully projected its narratives centred on a new 'community of health', through the vector of the BRI/HSR, to chart a path to post-pandemic economic growth. These narratives were carefully articulated via multiple high-level meetings across the many diplomatic platforms present in the region, such as the ASEAN, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), as well as via negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) free trade agreement, which was eventually signed in November 2020. A key example of the interplay between humanitarian diplomacy and economic statecraft in Beijing's SC during this phase was the August 2020 Lancang-Mekong Leaders' Summit, in which the PRC premier Li Keqiang promised access to Chinese vaccines 'on a priority basis' to those same Southeast Asian neighbours most affected by Beijing's ongoing attempts to reshape norms in the region.[68] During this second phase of China's pandemic engagement with Southeast Asia, the Chinese leadership sketched a divide between a stable China contributing to regional integration and economic development, and a disruptive US affecting the region's security without providing any actual contribution to the fight against the pandemic and the planning of post-pandemic growth. Southeast Asian governments' frosty reaction to the announcement of the AUKUS pact in September 2021, while primarily rooted in regional and domestic security calculus, reinforced China's narrative.[69] According to Chinese sources, by the end of 2021 Beijing had provided two billion vaccine doses to the region. Yet, the effectiveness of Chinese humanitarian diplomacy and the accompanying narratives, was at least partially blunted by the Quad countries' own and renewed focus on humanitarian diplomacy, especially their promise of providing one billion doses of a more effective m-RNA vaccine to the region. Noticeably, as competition via vaccine diplomacy in the region intensified by the end of the year, Beijing resorted once again to deterrence signalling to defend its claims in the South China Sea.

Ultimately, the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the mixed use of hard and soft tools in Chinese SC in Southeast Asia. Beijing skilfully alternated between lawfare

and deterrence signalling on the one hand, and humanitarian diplomacy and economic statecraft on the other. More importantly, it effectively combined global narratives regarding China's role in the fight against the virus with regional narratives concerning stability and socio-economic development. Yet, Quad pro-activism in the region, as well as uncoordinated but persistent pushback against Beijing's maritime and territorial claims among regional actors, have continued to constrain Chinese aspirations.

China's Strategic Communications in the Middle East

Both as the site of key energy markets and as a crossroads to the consumer markets of Western Europe, the Middle East occupies a critical position in Chinese geopolitics. Beijing has long enjoyed a favourable strategic environment in this region. While the burden of regional security has rested upon the US, China has been able to expand its ties with local state actors from purely transactional relations based on energy, to multidimensional relations encompassing technological cooperation and infrastructure financing and construction. Since 2016, China has become the major investor in the region. This rising profile has consequently led to the expansion of its security footprint in the region, a shift marked by the PLA military base operative in Djibouti since 2017. But Beijing has carefully avoided stepping in as a security guarantor–even as the region's security architecture appears increasingly fragile as America's role in the region diminishes.[70]

China's strategic objectives in the Middle East include: (1) strengthening existing ties and collaborations in the economic, political, and cultural domains; (2) maintaining neutrality over intra-regional disputes; (3) guaranteeing the mutual recognition and projection of national sovereignty together with regional state actors; and (4) strengthening cooperation with said actors to 'democratise' the international order.[71] Chinese SC in the region has consequently aimed at shaping a regional environment more receptive to these aspirations through economic statecraft, multidimensional diplomacy, and external propaganda—all vectored in recent years through the BRI platform, of which all states in the region (with the exception of Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Jordan) are members. The main narrative, articulated via Chinese media, diplomats, and business actors, has revolved around a so-called 'developmental peace' that is contrasted against a Western presence associated with instability and prevarication of national sovereignty.[72] In doing so, Beijing has also found in countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, audiences appreciative of its hands-off approach to human rights issues and fascinated by China's politico-economic model.[73]

The first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic did not alter this regional strategy, but they did require Beijing to fine-tune its SC tools and narratives. HSR-branded

humanitarian diplomacy in the first months of the pandemic played an essential role–once again highlighting the importance of the window of opportunity that Beijing had enjoyed in the spring of 2020. Medical supplies, together with medical teams both dispatched on the ground and involved in virtual meetings were made available between the spring and summer of 2020.[74] These humanitarian diplomacy initiatives were followed by economic statecraft focused on health cooperation. For instance, the Saudi National Unified Procurement Company signed a USD 250 million deal on testing and medical training with BGI (a Chinese private genomics company with alleged ties to the PLA) in April, while joint hubs for the production of Chinese vaccines were established both in the UAE and Egypt during the first year of the pandemic. Even the decision by the UAE to approve the use of Chinese vaccines as early as December 2020 had a distinct economic dimension, allowing the tourist and financial hub of Dubai to present itself as a pandemic haven.

Particularly intriguing from an SC perspective, the Sino-Middle Eastern relationship emerged as a communicative space where humanitarian diplomacy and health cooperation translated into the outward projection of Chinese sovereignty and national interests, as well as its aspirations to 'democratize' international relations. The platforms and language used closely resembled the Southeast Asian case. The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum ministerial conference held in July 2020—only a few weeks before the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation meeting discussed earlier—is a key example of this dynamic. Beyond mentioning the 'community of shared future' four times, the Chinese readout highlighted 'the Arab brothers' support to its just position on Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Taiwan and other matters that are China's internal affairs', their opposition to 'the politicization and stigmatization over Covid-19', and their rejection of 'racial discrimination and ideological prejudice'—all direct jabs against the Trump administration.[75]

As in the case of Southeast Asia, by 2021 the resonance of Beijing's humanitarian diplomacy was curtailed by the higher effectiveness and gradual availability of Western vaccines.[76] Yet the overall solidification and expansion of China's presence in the region continued. In fact, as of early 2022, China's position in the Middle East 'actually appears to have grown stronger'.[77] In stark contrast with China's relations with Western countries,[78] no visible damage was detectable in the relations between Beijing and Middle Eastern governments.[79] State actors in the region remained keen to avoid any fallout with their major investor and energy purchaser, and avoid politicising the pandemic even while facing major challenges such as the collapse of oil prices in March 2020 and the expected tightening of BRI-related investments in the medium term. Evidence of China's expanding role in the Middle East, even as humanitarian diplomacy lost its salience, can be found in the string of bilateral agreements signed in this period. In

> Since 2016, Beijing's response has relied on a wide array of tools, including diplomatic pressure, economic statecraft, and political warfare.

March 2021 Beijing signed the Iran-China 25-year Cooperation Program with Tehran, while in November, it signed an economic and technological cooperation agreement with Cairo. Furthermore, the UAE purchased Hongdu L-15 jets in February 2022 following a collapsed deal for the purchase of American F-35 fighter jets, a decision taken in the context of rising tensions in the US-UAE relations because of Emirati determination to install a Huawei 5G network in the country. Similarly, another traditional US ally in the region, Saudi Arabia, greenlit a Saudi Aramco deal for the construction of a facility in Northeast China, as well as a training agreement to build digital capabilities with Huawei, in the same month.

These developments suggest that the first two years of the pandemic have enhanced the effectiveness of China's SC in the Middle East. The skilful deployment of humanitarian diplomacy and economic statecraft in a region already receptive to Chinese investments and aspirations, and open to enhance technological cooperation, have created an ideal environment for the further strengthening and extension of bilateral ties. It also allowed for the projection of Chinese narratives to regional and international audiences concerning the redrawing of the international order and the protection of Chinese interests and sovereignty.

Conclusions

The Wuhan outbreak and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic have posed a formidable challenge not only to China's national image, but also to Beijing's aspirations to lead the transition toward a post-Western, post-liberal international order that is more receptive to the geopolitical and regime-security anxieties informing its global strategy. The Chinese response has been generally assessed by examining the interplay between propaganda, public diplomacy, and humanitarian diplomacy, with a focus on the main vector of this campaign, the BRI. This chapter provides a different perspective by examining China's SC in three critical geopolitical junctions for China's global strategy—Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East—during the first two years of the pandemic. In doing so,

this chapter has expanded the analysis of Beijing's actions from mainly being about repairing its reputation and building support among foreign policymakers and public opinion, to the larger issue of Beijing's pursuit and realisation of global and regional-level strategies in a rapidly changing environment.

In Taiwan, where Beijing could not rely on BRI-branded humanitarian diplomacy and where security concerns are paramount, the pandemic resulted in an intensification of the sharpest tools of SC to signal to the Tsai administration and the Taiwanese public opinion an unrelenting commitment to unification and the futility of clinging to the status quo. In Southeast Asia, where regional state actors face a choice between economic relations with Beijing and a security framework that relies upon US protection of the post-WWII rules-based order, Chinese SC has instead intensified these countries' dilemma through three main tactics. China strategically coordinated a forceful upholding of its maritime and territorial claims, substantial BRI-branded humanitarian diplomacy, and a concerted effort to accelerate economic integration. Finally, in the Middle East, Chinese SC has facilitated, through humanitarian diplomacy and economic statecraft, the further strengthening of the country's position in a crucial region that is both particularly receptive to Beijing's investments and fascinated by its politico-economic model. Even more than in the Southeast Asian 'backyard', Beijing's rising status in the Middle East, and the regional regimes' endorsement of its 'developmental peace' model provide a truly global dimension to China's aspirations for a 'community of common destiny for mankind'. Ultimately, the Chinese case during the first two years of the pandemic shows how a powerful Leninist party-state such as the PRC is also remarkably capable of making use of all the tools at its disposal across the diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and legal domain (DIMEFIL) as tools of SC.

Covid-19's Impact on the US Ability to Project National Power

By James P. Farwell

Introduction

Despite unity – so far – within the United States and Congress in supporting Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion, and relative unity within Congress to Chinese economic imperialism, on balance Covid-19 has impaired the ability of the United States to project national power.

This chapter argues that Covid has aggravated polarisation in a society already fiercely divided, fearful and uncertain about the longer-term impacts on the quality of life and financial stability of families. Were the response to Covid-19, highlighted by divisions over vaccines, the only dividing crisis, the US would manage. But it is merely one of various top-of-mind topics that elicit strong emotional responses, are influencing our elections and casting doubt on the legitimacy of elected government and the ability to achieve consensus on critical policies essential for prosperity and security. Polarization undermines the unity critical to project power, eroding the population's will to support national policies or purposes.

Three major exceptions qualify that assertion.

First, quantitative data shows that the public lacks confidence in government and the news media, and is polarised along partisan lines on domestic issues.[80] Yet unless there is breaking news on armed conflict involving Americans, as Gallup Senior Partner Chris Stewart has astutely observed, 'national security is not a top-of-mind issue for most Americans. That gives US political leadership more flexibility on security issues than on hot-button domestic issues like inflation or immigration.'[81] Such flexibility has enabled Congress and the White House to provide

strong support for Ukraine in fighting Russia's invasion.

One must assess the impact of the Ukraine conflict in a broader context that defines US political dynamics. Congressional hearings over the 6 January 2021 invasion of Congress by demonstrators, highlighted by allegations that President Donald Trump 'hanging' Vice President Mike Pence over Pence's refusal to help him overturn the election results); a national outbreak of gun violence; and the overturning by the US Supreme Court of the decision in *Roe v Wade*[82] combined with comments by Mr. Justice Clarence Thomas that have cast doubt on the viability of guarantees for birth control and LGBTQ?-rights, have moved the Ukraine war to the sidelines in news coverage. The practical reality is that the 2024 presidential election commences the day after the November 8 mid-terms, casting divisive political issues into high relief. Cutting across all of these are growing concerns about a return to high inflation, what that means for family pocketbooks, and what actions to combat inflation are required, as well as cultural issues. These comprise an explosive, emotionally high-octane mixture.

Second, while the US electorate is politically polarised, substantial unity has emerged in Congress for tough-minded approaches toward China and Russia, although Congressional views may or may not align with the President's, and Members of Congress differ on policy details. Much is at stake in the Ukraine conflict, including collective security of the West and avoiding the potential outbreak of a nuclear war. The conflict has revitalised NATO, an example of renewal and strength.

Yet one wonders: will unity persist as the 2024 presidential election draws closer? The relative unity on China seems stable for now. But what happens if or when China moves to seize Taiwan? What about Ukraine? Will the current robust posture on Ukraine persist if Donald Trump, who was sharply critical of NATO and empathetic towards Russian President Vladimir Putin, regains the Oval Office? A Trump victory is by no means implausible.

Third, behind the scenes, both conservative, pro-Trump Republicans and left-wing Democrats are questioning the wisdom of spending so much money to support Ukraine and asking whether sufficient accountability for aid exists. This discourse seems likely to gain greater visibility if the Ukraine conflict, initially supposed by some to be short-lived, turns into a bloody stalemate that bears echoes of World War One. Unity in this country is by no means assured.

The Covid-19 Impact

Over-generalising can be treacherous, but that said, Covid-19 appears to have two quantifiable impacts on the ability of the US to project national power.

> Covid has aggravated polarisation in a society already fiercely divided.

The US has spent at least USD 2.59 trillion[83] to combat Covid-19. Compared with the authorized USD 770 billion authorised in the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act, money spent on public health to strengthen military capabilities demonstrates the relative priorities. Considering that China is already a near-peer competitor, the funds authorised for defense spending is a healthy figure and an encouraging level of priority.

This chapter also argues that forging national unity is vital to generating national will and arousing passion for supporting policies, strategies, operations, and tactics. Quantitative data reveals deep political polarisation over key domestic issues. These issues have eroded trust in government and political leadership essential for projecting national power. Such weakness also may prompt foreign adversaries to perceive weakness and encourage them to act aggressively. The current crisis in Ukraine illustrates this concern.

During the week of 20 January 2022, Covid caused the outbreak of over 700,000 Covid-19 cases in a single day in the US.[84] At the time of writing, the virus had infected over 66 million Americans and killed over 850,000.[85] Infections cut across every demographic group. Politically, the impact has severely divided the nation over vaccine mandates.

What is the broader impact of political polarisation?

Polling in January 2022 by an NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist National poll revealed that 78 per cent of Americans now believe that the divisions pose a severe threat to democracy.[86] Yet people divide over who to fault. Take the 6 January 2021 violence at the US Capitol. The Marist poll reports that 94 per cent of Democrats blame former President Donald J. Trump, while 84 per cent of Republicans say he is not very much or not at all to blame. Independents divide evenly.[87]

Beyond blame, a recent CBS News poll found that 68 per cent of voters believe 6 January was a sign of increasing political violence, and while the 66 per cent there

who said democracy today is threatened may be fewer than in the Marist poll, that's still two-thirds of voters. More unsettling, 30 per cent of Republicans and 15 per cent of Democrats who expect violence after a future election said **they favor it**. The picture darkens as one drills down to specific issues. Fully 35 per cent thought violence might be justified on civil rights issues, 29 per cent on gun policies, 28 per cent on election results, and 27 per cent on labor issues.[88] Some may think it's Republicans who support violence. The CBS poll revealed that 40 per cent of liberals and Democrats support it on civil rights issues.

These 2022 survey results align with an American Enterprise Institute poll taken a year earlier. The AEI survey found that one in three Americans believe violence is justified if US leaders fail to protect the country. AEI's survey found that 55 per cent of Republicans support the use of force as a means to stop the decline of 'the traditional way of American way of life'.[89]

Consistent quantitative data since January 2020 reflects an increasingly polarised American electorate on issues including immigration, public safety, election integrity, culture, race relations, and Covid. As pollster Celinda Lake—who polls for President Joseph Biden—states, the data shows that 'polarization, centred around apparently irreconcilable views on issues of prime voter concern, renders extremely difficult establishing the unity that historically leaders in the US have found vital in forging and executing coherent national security strategies'.[90] Covid has inflamed these divisions, rendering the US more unpredictable. Still, a tolerable consensus exists *for now* in favour of a hard line on Russia and China and little support for trade agreements. Support for alliances is strong, but Americans want allies to pay their fair share.

Certain Requirements for Projecting National Power

Many factors affect a nation's ability to project national power. An essential requirement is national unity behind security policies. Conceptually, two parallel sets of precepts appear to most influence the ability to garner unity. First, a consensus on the government's legitimacy. Second, Count Carl von Clausewitz's 'holy trinity' defines a nation's ability to wage armed conflict and project national power by extension.

A. The requirement for unity

National unity is generally essential. In Greece, Pericles' Funeral Oration aimed to unify Athenians facing war with Sparta.[91] In ancient Rome, ambitious politicians invoked themes of decline and renewal to gain and assert power. In 195 BC, Cato the Elder complained that Greek culture was polluting Roman values. He exploited that to gain election and to rule as Consul. In 132 BC, Tiberius Gracchus applied the lesson in denouncing the gap between rich and poor.

He conjured a fictitious lost agrarian ideal to inflame voters and seize power. Marcus Aurelian invoked positive themes but used the same strategy to unify support. He talked about decline and crisis to enhance bonds that held imperial subjects together.[92]

During the 17th century, Armand Jean du Plessis – Cardinal Richelieu, recognised that French intellectual elites viewed France as predestined for continental leadership. He exploited these sentiments to unify the nation to strengthen his nation's position in Europe.[93] During the 19th century, the Prussian leader Otto von Bismarck manipulated France into starting an unwinnable war to unify Prussian states.[94] Even Adolf Hitler went to extreme lengths to unify Germans behind his monstrous policies, despite his iron grip on Germany.[95]

In the United States, Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt realised that forging national unity was vital in entering their wars to preserve the Union or defeat Japan/Germany.[96] Both recognised that unity turned on manipulating their adversaries into firing the first shot. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's national security strategy of containment to defeat the Soviet Union during the Cold War depended upon national unity.[97] Conversely, President Lyndon Johnson's war-fighting in Vietnam collapsed sharp domestic dissent ignited over the war. President George H.W. Bush demonised Saddam Hussein to forge domestic unity and an international coalition to oust the Iraqis from Kuwait.[98] His son followed suit to justify the 2003 Iraq War.[99]

One must judge each strategic situation on its facts. But history teaches that popular unity is vital in projecting national power.

B. The requirement for legitimacy

Any nation seems well advised to satisfy four general requirements to establish and sustain legitimacy.

First, voters must agree that the political system offers newcomers viable access to power. In the US, that means outsiders can win office in free and fair elections.

Second, voters must perceive government as accountable and responsible. No formula governs this notion, but it is real to anyone who works in politics.

Third, as Henry Kissinger has observed, political players must adhere to a commonly accepted set of rules that provide sufficient justice. Voters must agree on the justice and fairness of existing arrangements.[100]

Finally, again using Kissinger's language, 'equilibrium is needed for stability; moral consensus is essential for spontaneity'.[101] Kissinger's espousal of moral consensus is not original. John Locke had long before argued that uniting members into a single political community required a moral consensus. He defined that as a set of normative convictions and commitments

that justify coercion to hold a system together.[102]

C. The requirement for uniting the will of the people behind a cause or purpose

Carl von Clausewitz's 'holy trinity' governs a nation's ability to conduct warfare and project power. Writing nearly 200 years ago, Clausewitz argued that three factors govern: '…hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct… the play of probabilities and chance… and reason.'[103]

In a modern context, this translates into will or passion, chance or probabilities, and purpose or cause. Clausewitz observed that the relationship between the three varies and gives rise to complex interactions. One difference is that today, information warfare—an ancient art of using information (and, today, information communication technology) to conduct warfare, with the brain as the battlespace, has increasingly taken centre stage.

The requirement for unity is essential to arouse essential support – popular will -- behind a cause or policy, whether that means strengthening ties with NATO, bold policies to deal with Russia or China, and our posture in the Middle East.

The Polarised Electorate

Certain hot-button issues divide the US electorate. In addition to Covid-19, this chapter selects four to illustrate the point. They include border security/immigration, culture, public safety, immigration, and election integrity.[104]

This commentary takes no editorial position on the merits of policies arising from these issues. They are complex. Their complicated nuances lie beyond this province. The relevant points are (i) to identify the divisions and (ii) to show through quantitative data that they have polarized attitudes and opinions.

Data from public opinion surveys shows that partisanship is the key factor that separates voters.

A. Border security/immigration

Democrats and Republicans agree on one thing about this issue. Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has said: 'it feels like we're speaking in two different worlds'. Republican Rep. Debie Lasko speaks of 'parallel universes'.[105] Quantitative data bears them out.

In a 2019 survey for the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, eight in ten Republicans (78 per cent) viewed large numbers of immigrants and refugees coming into the United States as a critical threat, with Independents split evenly. Fewer than two in ten Democrats (19 per cent) agreed. A similar number of Republicans said restricting immigration would make the US safer, while 57 per cent of Democrats say

it makes no difference. Independents split evenly at around 42 per cent.[106]

Eighty-one per cent of Republicans favour using US troops to stop immigrants at the US-Mexico border, while 75 per cent of Democrats oppose it. Independents split about evenly, 48 per cent for it, 51per cent opposed. Plus, 82 per cent of Republicans favor carrying out more arrests and deportations, while only 29 per cent of Democrats think that is effective in creating border security.

Phrasing matters in eliciting responses. Still, a September 2021 survey by YouGov America revealed a similar conclusion. Among Republicans, 55 per cent said immigration makes the US worse off, while 52 per cent of Democrats said it made the nation better off. Independents divided, with 35 per cent saying it made the nation worse off and 31 per cent saying it made it better off.[107] What about a wall along the border with Mexico? A 2021 Quinnipiac Poll revealed that 87 per cent of Democrats oppose such a wall, while 91 per cent of Republicans support one. Independents divide equally.[108]

Bottom line: while polling shows most Americans favour border security, Republicans mostly dislike immigration while Democrats mainly support it. When you drill down. Of course, politics drives this debate, as each side asks what enables them to benefit. Arguably, both sides misread what immigration means for their political fortunes, but that is where the data places the debate today.

B. Culture

Pew Research Center has observed, 'Americans have long debated the boundaries of free speech, from what is and isn't protected by the First Amendment [to the United States Constitution] to discussions about "political correctness" and, more recently, "cancel culture".'[109]

Attitudes and opinions vary between generations, with younger generations more likely to have heard the term cancel culture and formed an opinion about it than older ones. A fall 2020 Pew Research Center survey asked US adults who had heard a fair amount or a great deal about the term to explain in their own words what it meant to them.

Around half (49 per cent) said it describes actions people take to hold others accountable.[110] A Harris-X poll taken for *The Hill*, a respected Capitol Hill publication, defined the related term cancel culture as 'the practice or tendency of engaging in mass cancelling as a way of expressing disapproval and exerting social pressure'.[111]

Pew found that Democrats were more likely than Republicans to interpret cancel culture that way: 75 per cent versus 39 per cent. But 22 per cent of Democrats versus 56 per cent of Republicans say this generally punishes people who do not deserve it.

> The requirement for unity is essential to arouse essential support – popular will – behind a cause or policy

Language conservative Republicans have used to describe it includes 'mean-spirited actions taken to cause others harm', 'people cancelling anyone they disagree with', 'those who are challenged face consequences like being fired or boycotted', 'an attack on traditional American society', and 'a way to call out racism, sexism, etc'.[112]

In American politics, one aspect of the issue challenges the notion of American exceptionalism, a bedrock of national thinking for most of the nation's history. Exceptionalism is the idea that America has been a force for good in the world. Those critical of the United States, such as controversial but Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, view the founding of the nation as steeped in racism by Colonials who fought the American Revolution to preserve slavery and criticize the nation today for deep-rooted institutional racism.[113] Others can debate her views, but suffice to say, they provoked a fiery backlash.[114]

How do Americans feel about political correctness/cancel culture? They are bitterly divided. Six in ten Democrats said people should be careful about what they say to avoid offending others. Only 17 per cent of Republicans feel that way.[115] This issue manifests itself in different forms, including debates over critical race theory and the idea of being 'woke', to allegations of sexism, racial or gender discrimination, and other matters. One thing seems clear: people are getting fed up. The Harris-X poll found that 71 per cent of voters strongly or somewhat believe 'that cancel culture has gone too far'.[116]

The issue for voters is real and partisan divisions over it are playing out in elections.[117]

C. Public Safety

The murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis unleashed calls to defund police departments and reallocate the money to social programs. Mayors in cities like Chicago, Denver, Seattle, and San Francisco and a host of new District Attorneys who label themselves 'progressive' have demanded fewer police and no prosecution for certain violent offenders on felony charges.

Advocates for reducing police funding see such action as a fundamental reform needed to sever ties between policing and the history of slavery in the US. They believe the existing infrastructure cannot protect and serve black citizens. They think that reinvesting in public services, like homelessness and mental health support, will do more to make people safer, although recent crime waves such as the 'smash and grab' attacks on retailers in San Francisco quickly triggered an evolution in officials' attitudes by officials.[118]

Opponents argue that reducing policing increases violent crime, reduces police ability to deter crime, and puts police at risk. Race doesn't drive this view.[119] A 2020 Gallup poll[120] revealed that 81 per cent of Black Americans said they wanted police to spend more or the same amount of time in their areas, although 88 per cent wanted major changes in policing.

Top Democrats like Bernie Sanders have favored defunding police. A *New York Times* and Siena College national poll released in summer 2020 showed that 55 per cent of candidate Joe Biden's supporters favoured reducing the resources spent on law enforcement.[121] Former President Donald J. Trump – his hold on Republicans is evident – likened reduction in funding for police to 'abandoning' the police.[122]

In 2022, violent crime increased, shifting public opinion. A September 2022 Pew Research Center survey shows 47 per cent of respondents wanted spending on policing to be increased a lot or a little, compared to only 31 per cent who were in favour of an increase the year before. A majority of Republicans and Independents who lean Republican (61 per cent) favoured increasing spending in 2021, compared to 45 per cent in 2020. Only 34 per cent of Democrats feel that way, and while only five per cent of Republicans would decrease funding, 25 per cent of Democrats do – a drop from 41 per cent the year before.[123]

The data shows a strong partisan divide over how (not whether) to increase public safety. The debate starts with funding.

A national series of mass shootings in the US has intensified debates on public safety. One side demands control over guns. The other stands firm on its interpretation of the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, which they interpret to guarantee the right to bear arms.[124]

D. Election Integrity

The seeming inability of Americans to find common ground or a moral consensus is concerning. Rendering the challenge greater is the growing lack of distrust in elections. The AEI survey noted above found a pronounced partisan divide over President Joseph Biden's election victory legitimacy. While 98 per cent of Democrats and 73 per cent of Independents found it legitimate, only a third of Republicans found it not legitimate.[125]

A December 2021 survey by Schoen, Coopers Research reaffirms the earlier AEI survey. Dr. Schoen – who advised President Bill Clinton, Mike Bloomberg, and, internationally, Yitzhak Rabin – reported that the number of voters who thought Joe Biden 'legitimately won the election' had dropped from 64 per cent in April 2021 to 54 per cent six months later. His survey found that 85 per cent of voters are concerned 'about political extremism going forward', with 53 per cent 'very concerned'.

A study conducted by the Center for Election Innovation & Research (CEIR) partnered with Echelon Insights reveals that a majority of Republican voters lacked confidence in the accuracy of the 2020 election results and the 2022 midterms. Less than one-third of GOP voters were confident their votes across the US were counted accurately in the 2020 election, and 65 per cent lacked confidence. Confidence remains low going into the 2022 midterms, with only 53 per cent believing they will be counted accurately then. By contrast, self-identified Democrats (87 per cent) and Independents (62 per cent) are much more confident about 2022.

Looking ahead, a lack of confidence in election integrity cuts across parties. A January 2022 ABC-Ipsos survey revealed that only 20 per cent of all voters were 'very confident' in the integrity of the US electoral system overall.[126] In the meantime, as Democrats have pushed voting rights legislation, they have encountered angry divisions in Congress and among the American public.[127]

Nearly half (48 per cent) of GOP and Trump voters believe that there were deliberate, widespread occurrences of election officials in counting votes in 2020. By contrast, 90 per cent of Democrats and 75 per cent of Independents believed that votes were counted accurately.[128]

These trends are problematic. Data reveals that a majority of 51 per cent of likely voters—49 per cent in each political party—believe that 'US democracy is at risk of extinction'.[129] A Quinnipiac Poll released on in January 2022, offered similar findings: By a margin of 58 per cent to 37 per cent, a majority of Americans think that the nation's democracy is in danger of collapse. Slightly more Republicans felt that way, but strong majorities in both parties shared the opinion.[130]

Intensity on election integrity is growing. In 2022, former President Donald Trump has continued to stoke the fires under the slogan of 'stop the steal', and has intervened in GOP election primaries to endorse candidates who refused to support his claim. Already steeped in controversy over whether in overturning *Roe* the Supreme Court engaged—as Chief Justice John Roberts believes—in precisely the political legislating from the bench that five of his colleagues asserted was reserved to legislative bodies, the Court has now accepted a case that will test the 'independent state legislature theory'. This theory stems from the election

clause in Article I of the Constitution, which on its face apparently accords state legislatures control over federal elections and removes their actions from judicial oversight. Critics believe legislatures might override the popular vote to elect partisan electors for the electoral college and deprive the nation's voters of their right to elect the president.[131]

Issues like immigration, inflation, gun control, culture, and public safety offer, in theory, an opportunity to reconcile opposing views, despite the sharp division that exists. Election integrity is all or nothing. As noted at the outset, the legitimacy of government – and the ability of governments to forge unity behind causes or purposes – depends on a consensus that elections are free, fair, and open and that voters can hold officials accountable and responsible. The data shows that Americans harbour deep fears about the resilience and integrity of their political process. No democratic republic – the US form of government – can stand forever if that view persists.

The Covid Sledgehammer

The Covid-19 pandemic inflamed polarisation, cutting across every demographic group. The virus disrupted the economy and employment, education, daily lives, confidence in social and political institutions, aroused fear and anxiety, and cast a shadow over the hopes and dreams of citizens. An angry debate broke out between those who favoured vaccination mandates and those who rejected them, citing constitutional freedom of choice. A top-of-mind concern, the virus arrests the attention of nearly every American citizen.

The divide is partisan. President Biden has focused on getting as many people vaccinated as possible. He's faced stormy weather. The US Supreme Court struck down his mandate requiring businesses to mandate vaccinations for their employees. The Court made an exception for health care workers, who will be subject to the mandate. Republicans have increased their hostility to vaccine mandates, turning it into a political battle under the banner of defending freedom and liberty. Republicans even oppose allowing employers who want to impose mandates to do so.

What does the data show? An October 2021 YouGov America survey showed that only 56 per cent of Republicans said that they were fully vaccinated, in comparison to 79 per cent of Democrats. 29 per cent of Republicans said they would not get vaccinated, compared to only 5 per cent of Democrats.[132] A Kaiser Family Foundation survey in October 2021 showed that Republicans comprised 60 per cent of unvaccinated Americans, and Democrats only 20 per cent. Independents were made up 17 per cent of those without a Covid shot. KKF found that 'political partisanship is a stronger predictor of whether someone is vaccinated than demographic factors such as age, race, level of education or insurance status'.[133]

> It is reasonable to assert that history teaches that nations project power more effectively where their populations, a centre of gravity, unite.

Emotions are intensifying. The vaccinated display over anger against the unvaccinated, especially among the vaccinated who came down with breakthrough cases of Covid-19 and who believe they contracted the virus through the unvaccinated who likely infected them.[134] The gap between the two sides has fuelled political polarization. That the scientific community itself disagrees on how to deal with the crisis complicates matters.[135]

Covid-19 eroded trust in government. A daily tracking survey by Morning Consult shows that just under half of Democrats and under 40 per cent of Republicans trust congressional handling of the pandemic.[136] A Pew Research Center report in May 2021 revealed that only 36 per cent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning Independents said that they trust government. For Republicans, the number was 9 per cent, a figure that flipped after Biden defeated Trump in 2020. Generally, trust in government is higher among the party that controls the White House.[137] But the trust among Democrats is not cheering.

Concluding Thoughts

What conclusions can we draw from the above? Bearing in mind the three exceptions noted at the outset. Americans were less inclined to support NATO prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but quickly expressed approval for *supporting* Ukraine in the conflict, even though they opposed a US intervention. It is not clear where voters would land should China invade Taiwan. But it is reasonable to assert that history teaches that nations project power more effectively where their populations, a centre of gravity, unite. We live in an era in which unity is fleeting. A moral consensus on hot-button issues that drive election results is eroding fast, to a point where less and less common ground seems plausible.

Worse, voters doubt the integrity of elections, an obvious condition to according elected officials legitimacy. These considerations make it less possible to unify the US population behind a government they can trust to support causes that the political leadership supports. One can see evidence

of what that means in a recent multi-nation Gallup survey. The findings should concern anyone interested in national security.

National power is also about economic power. Despite concerns about inflation and supply chain issues, the US economy is flourishing. NATO must be concerned with the ability of the US to build military capabilities to deal with challenges posed by Russia and China. It seems evident that given the US involvement with NATO, the US will do what it takes to make the Atlantic Alliance work. Its ability to keep pace with Chinese technical advances is an open question.

How does that play into the will of the population to support pro-active policies that project national power? Polarisation and lack of national unity are real concerns.

Among US voters, prior to the Russian invasion, only 44 per cent of respondents expressed a willingness to 'fight for your country'. Americans are not alone in their cynicism, a factor that complicates the ability to mobilise alliances like NATO. In Canada, only 30 per cent expressed a willingness to fight. In France and Australia, 29 per cent; in Italy, 20 per cent; in Germany, 18 per cent; in the Netherlands, 15 per cent; and in Japan, 11 per cent. Compare that to 59 per cent of Ukrainians and Russians and 71 per cent of Chinese. At the time of writing, there is too little polling to illustrate how voters feel post-invasion on any aspect except support for supplying Ukraine. Generally, Ipsos found in April 2022 that 65 per cent of US respondents opposed the US getting involved militarily in the conflict, but 59 per cent supported giving weapons to Ukraine's military.[138]

Yet, a month later, Pew Research found that US respondents who thought the US was doing too much for Ukraine had nearly doubled, from 7 per cent to 12 per cent, although support for military aid was essentially consistent with 55 per cent approving.[139]

In July 2022, a Morning Consult tracking survey found that 27 per cent said that the US was not doing enough to support Ukraine, but 28 per cent said it was doing 'too much'. Half of Democrats and 30 per cent of Republicans said the US was doing 'the right amount'. Less than half saw the defence and protection of Ukraine as America's responsibility, although about 80 per cent remained concerned about Russia's invasion. Less than half favoured a coalitional response.[140] The point is that attitudes and opinions on Ukraine will fluctuate, depending on how events unfold.

Current Examples

The disunity that plagues US politics has real world consequences today. Some are pressuring President Joe Biden to provide humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. He will always act to advance US interests, but the political reality is that while a majority

of Americans supported his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, he suffered serious political blowback over how the exit was executed. He confronts mid-term elections in 2022 that could cost his party control of Congress. While perhaps unacknowledged, domestic politics does constrain his actionable options.

That is also true for how President Biden has approached the Ukraine crisis. Biden took a tough-minded posture with Russia, but his job approval ratings have remained stuck at about 40 per cent. He believes in what he is doing, and he has maintained his posture without regard to domestic political consequences. But domestic politics may yet constrain what is politically plausible in forging the grand strategy able to survive successive in establishing a stable international order between the West and Russia in Europe. A workable strategy requires sufficient bi-partisan support, looks over the horizon, and, as with Dwight Eisenhower's strategy of Containment in dealing with the Soviet Union and Communism, is sufficiently stable that other nations can count on successive US administrations to respect it.

The Future

We can reclaim our future. In national security, one key lies in a new Solarium Project such as President Dwight Eisenhower convened to debate strategic options and forge a new grand strategy for a globally competitive world. Ike opted for Containment to combat Communism. It worked. No successive Presidential administration has embarked upon that process or forged a grand strategy to succeed – or define success – in the new threat environment.

Covid will eventually – one hopes – become manageable. Russian President Vladimir Putin has proven a wily tactician, not a grand strategist. China is a rising power with high hopes, but declining birth-rates, economic problems, and a global backlash against it for how it has dealt with Covid mandate not over-reacting to its propaganda. President Xi Jinping is a savvy insider player with a big vision, but critics have observed that China has erratically executed a sophisticated grand strategy.

Every nation confronts challenges. US political polarisation represents a growing concern that it has entered a new winter of discontent, with only the first frost so far evident. But no one should estimate its energy, innovation, talent, and ability to weather fierce storms. If one can identify a bottom line, the way forward lies in finding exemplary leadership that can forge, and realise, a vision that can move the ship of state and its occupants forward. That is not easy. Great leadership never is.

How Strategic Communications Backfired: The Case of the Russian Sputnik V Vaccine

By Dr Vera Michlin-Shapir

Abstract

This chapter demonstrates how Russia's government used its domestic-made Covid-19 vaccine, Sputnik V, as an information warfare tool. In August 2020, Russia surprised the world when it became the first country to authorise a Covid-19 vaccine for public use. Russia's government exploited the early authorisation to draw attention to its vaccine and provoke Western criticism of it. Russian tactics echoed insurgents' use of Propaganda of the Deed (POTD), namely by using the weight of Western criticism against Western states once Sputnik V was peer-reviewed and proven as safe and effective. But since then, Russia's use of Sputnik V as an information warfare tool has backfired. Analysis of polls and focus groups suggest that international controversy around Sputnik V has contributed to widespread Russian public distrust in the vaccine. Today, despite being the first country to approve a Covid-19 vaccine, Russia's vaccination rates remain relatively low, while its Covid-related death rate is among the highest in the world.

Introduction

On 8 August 2020, President Putin announced that Russia had become the first country to authorise a Covid-19 vaccine: Sputnik V.[141] He claimed that his daughter had already received a dose of the vaccine, and stated that Sputnik V 'works quite effectively, forms strong immunity, and […] has passed all the necessary checks'.[142] Russian officials hailed the vaccine authorisation as 'a Sputnik moment', referencing when the Soviets launched the Sputnik I, the world's first artificial satellite, and took an early lead in the Space Race.[143] It was quickly revealed, however, that the last part of Putin's statement was false. Fast-tracking approval of Sputnik V, Russia's health regulator autho-

rised the vaccine's use after it was tested on just 76 people, before crucial Phase III clinical trials were completed.[144] The fast-tracked vaccine sparked uproar among international scientific and public policy communities. Western media criticised Sputnik V's rushed authorisation as a 'reckless' move and a 'propaganda coup'.[145] Only a few months later, in February 2021, did Western doubts about Sputnik V start to lift when the prestigious UK medical journal *The Lancet* published a study that confirmed the vaccine's high safety profile and protective efficacy—and legitimised Russian claims that it was a leader in the vaccine race.

Content analysis of four Russian state media outlets' coverage of the authorisation and rollout of Sputnik V, released between August 2020 and February 2021, suggest that the vaccine was part of a larger Russian state-led communications strategy, also known as 'informatsionaya voyna' (information warfare), to undermine the West.[146] This strategy reflected Russia's confidence in their ability at the time to develop a working vaccine on par with Western competitors, as well as the state's brazen attitude toward rules, ethics, and protocols. Russia's decision to use Sputnik V as part of its Covid-19 information warfare strategy would come at a terrible cost to the Russian people, ultimately undermining the country's domestic inoculation efforts, and compromising the lives of millions.

This chapter offers three conclusions: first, it serves as a warning against the use of public health issues in information warfare; second, it shows how the Russian government's use of deeds (rather than words) in its 'informatsionaya voyna' strategy expands classic definitions of POTD; and, third, it highlights a weakness in authoritarian regimes, like Putin's Russia, where a blatant disregard of ethics, and a lack of checks and balances in state decision-making, lead to adverse and unintended consequences.

Strategic Communications, Informatsionnaya Voyna, and 'Propaganda of the Deed'

President Putin and the Russian political elite regularly refer to informatsionnaya voyna as part of the West's foreign policy strategy to undermine Russia.[147] Russian politicians' frequent use of the term contributes to a flourishing Russian academic and political debate on the meaning and significance of informatsionnaya voyna in international politics.[148] Official Russian doctrines define informatsionnaya voyna as a confrontation in the information space between two or more state-backed actors, who are 'delivering informational and psychological influence' by means of 'propaganda and agitation, disinformation, demonstrative and demonstrational actions', with the aim to 'destabilise the internal political and social situation', and 'coerce states to make decisions in the interests of the opposing side'.[149] Ofer Fridman points to parallels between Russian conceptualisations of infor-

matsionnaya voyna and Western definitions of strategic communications, as both seek to influence audiences in order to achieve geopolitical goals.[150]

Most importantly, and according to Fridman, Russian articulations of informatsionnaya voyna emphasise that 'the effectiveness of actions is measured not by their impact in the real world, but by their influence on the virtual information dimension', making it 'a type of "propaganda of the deed", but on a much more sophisticated, multifaceted and hyperbolic level'.[151]

Propaganda of the Deed (POTD) emerged as an 'anarchist revolutionary strategy', where 'violent acts of terror [were] deployed against state institutions with the objectives of goading the states into over-reacting with excessive force', and undermining their 'legitimacy in the eyes of the people'.[152] The shortcomings of propaganda through words to drive change in the repressive nineteenth century-European order pushed anarchists at the time to seek out new ways to achieve their goals.[153] Anarchists turned to symbolic violent acts—from exploding bombs in music halls, to assassinating police chiefs and heads of state—to perform 'a shock doctrine' that reverberated through the pages of newspapers.[154] Twentieth and twenty-first century insurgents, including the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Al-Qaeda, have similarly used symbolic violence, often caught on camera, which took 'POTD to a new level of spectacle and impact'.[155]

Russian decision-makers are not typical insurgents or revolutionaries; hence, their exercise of POTD through informatsionnaya voyna diverges in key ways from classic definitions of the concept. The current Kremlin regime has launched a series of challenges to the post-Cold War, Western-dominated order. Behind these challenges is Russia's ambitions to reclaim its status as a great power, or, in the words of one of the country's top strategic thinkers, Dmitri Trenin, for Russia 'to remain a world-class, self-standing player' that neither accepts nor conforms to American-led liberal democratic values.[156] These goals, coupled with Russia's military and economic inferiority, have turned the state into a subversive international actor. The asymmetries of power between Russia and the West make informatsionnaya voyna, which exploits these very asymmetries, the Kremlin's foreign policy tool of choice. Russian informatsionnaya voyna, however, deviates from classic definitions of POTD in two key ways: it does not use 'acts of political violence',[157] and it is carried out by state-sponsored actors, not revolutionaries.[158]

Still, on account of two key similarities, POTD offers a useful framework to understand Russian communication strategy. First, informatsionnaya voyna relies on a core POTD feature: the use of 'shock and awe' through media exposure. Second, like POTD, it privileges deeds over words. Despite this context, Western analysis often misinterprets the objectives of the Kremlin's sophisticated information ecosystem of radio, television, social media, and websites

> The asymmetries of power between Russia and the West make 'informatsionnaya voyna' the Kremlin's foreign policy tool of choice.

as primarily aimed at spreading disinformation and propaganda (of the word).[159] As will be shown through this chapter, the Kremlin's information ecosystem often rather amplifies the state's political acts to incite shock and awe with the aim of undermining the West and furthering Russian political goals. So, while informatsionnaya voyna may diverge from POTD in some ways, it remains a useful concept to explain how the Kremlin sees and manipulates the contemporary information environment.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian state continued to pursue great power status through the tactics of POTD and the strategy of informatsionnaya voyna. Already by February 2020, reports emerged that Russian state actors were actively spreading disinformation about the SARS-CoV-2 virus, including its origin.[160] The global 'race' to develop and roll out a vaccine, though, soon became the focus of Russia and other states' communication efforts. This shift in focus reflected an understanding that vaccines would be a scarce good, as the most effective way for populations to overcome the health crisis and mitigate the economic fallout caused by the pandemic. Russia was uniquely positioned to take a lead role in the vaccine race. Reports suggested Russian scientists, from the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, were part of leading academic labs and international companies tasked to develop a vaccine.[161] Developing the world's first Covid-19 vaccine reinforced Russia's strategic goal to position itself as a world power. That is why, in parallel with scientific efforts, while drawing on subversive lessons from POTD tactics, Russian state actors prepared a communications campaign along the lines of informatsionnaya voyna, deploying its fast-track vaccine not only as a public health good, but also as a tool in its ongoing confrontation with the West.

Sputnik V in the Media

Russian media discourses on state-backed channels featured three mutually complementing narratives which, taken together, formed the contours of Russia's use of Sputnik V as POTD. First, Russian media boasted about Russia's achievement of authorising

the first vaccine in the world. Second, it disparaged Western critics, and framed those critical of Sputnik V as Russophobes waging 'information war' against Russia. Third, it contributed to the state's Covid-19 disinformation campaign, propagating false and manipulated information about the safety and efficacy of Western vaccines. These three narratives mutually reinforced one another and formed a meta-narrative in which Sputnik V was presented as the first and best vaccine, while the West promoted its inferior vaccines and tried to undermine Sputnik V in the process. This meta-narrative captures the judo-like tactics of POTD—aiming to increase Sputnik V media effect by using the weight of the Western criticism against its critics, with the ultimate goal of proving them wrong and, at the same time, framing the West's treatment of Russia as unfair and unjust.

The coverage of Sputnik V's authorisation exemplifies these dynamics. During the week that the authorisation was announced, the popular weekend news show *Vesti Nedeli* devoted a large portion of its programme to celebrating the Russian vaccine. The show's host interviewed vaccine developers from The Gamaleya Institute, the director of which stated that they would be 'the envy of any American and European research institute'.[162] He then interviewed the powerful and well-connected sponsor of the vaccine—the head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), Kirill Dmitriev.[163] Dmitriev assured viewers that of the various vaccines RDIF considered Gamaleya's vaccine to be the 'safest and most reliable'. Dmitriev did not stop there, adding how Sputnik V was safer in comparison to the 'immature technologies […] in the West, where nobody tested long-term effects on fertility'.[164] These statements revealed how Sputnik V's promotion would be inextricably tied to Russia's competition with the West, and that disinformation, such as suggestions that Western mRNA vaccines were rushed through approvals and unsafe, would form an integral part of Russia's communication strategy.

Dmitriev's *Vesti Nedeli* interview offered additional 'behind-the-scenes' details of the Russian vaccine authorisation and rollout. Dmitriev was interviewed alongside his wife, Natalya Popova, who shared that they had both participated in Sputnik V's Phase II clinical trials. Dmitriev and Popova are reportedly close associates of Putin's younger daughter Yekaterina Tikhonova,[165] whom Putin likely was referring to when he announced Sputnik V's authorisation and claimed that one of his daughters had already received a dose. The two degrees, if not fewer, of separation between Putin and Dmitriev and Popova further implies that the Kremlin influenced the decision to rush Sputnik V's approval. Dmitriev and Popova's willingness to take an experimental vaccine also suggests a high confidence in its success.

Russian media coverage of Sputnik V's authorisation also focused on Western criticism of the announcement. On the day of

the vaccine authorisation, the Sputnik News website published a column by Dmitriev, titled 'Forbidden Op-Ed: The Sputnik Vaccine as a Lifesaving Global Partnership'.[166] Sputnik News editors claimed the piece had been 'rejected by all leading Western media' due to a 'blockade imposed on positive information about the Russian Covid-19 vaccine'.[167] Instead of addressing legitimate concerns about the vaccine's rushed authorisation, the column presented strawman arguments, stating that 'some international politicians and media chose to focus on politics and attempts to undermine the credibility of the Russian vaccine'.[168] While calling for a 'political "ceasefire" on vaccines', the op-ed repeated Russian disinformation and falsehoods about Western vaccines, claiming that Oxford-AstraZeneca was using adenovirus from a monkey,[169] and hinted at understudied side-effects from mRNA vaccines. Dmitriev concluded that 'today politics […] stand in the way of Russian technology'. Other Russian outlets also described alleged political biases against Sputnik V, claiming the vaccine was met with 'extreme prejudice in the West as part of 'a premeditated attempt to discredit a competitor [Russia]'.[170] The focus on Western criticism, rather than the promotion of Sputnik V, suggests that Russian media anticipated the Western uproar, and planned to use it as part of the broader Russian communications strategy.

As time passed and Western vaccines were authorised and rolled out, Russian media continued to spread disinformation about Western vaccines, and accuse the West of unjustly criticising Sputnik V.[171] In December 2020, the Russian Ministry of Defence and the Kremlin reported that they had 'detailed knowledge' of foreign plans to 'discredit' the Russian vaccine both inside and outside the country via funding of 'pseudo-analytical investigations' about Sputnik V's dangers.[172] By January 2021, as hundreds of thousands of Western vaccines were being distributed, Russian outlets began to report on potential side effects of the vaccines, such as facial paralysis and allergic reactions.[173] While Western media also reported these effects, Russian outlets reported about them using manipulated and out of context details, failing, for example, that the risk of the vaccine causing serious harm or death was extremely small.[174] Meanwhile, in Russia, despite Sputnik V having successfully finished Phase III Sputnik V, polls at the time indicated only 16 per cent of Russians were willing to get the vaccine, while 40 per cent were 'categorically against it'.[175]

The most cathartic moment for the Sputnik V communications campaign came in February 2021, when the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet* published a favourable peer-review of Sputnik V, describing how interim results from Phase III trials indicated a 'clear' outcome and that 'the scientific principle of vaccination [had been] demonstrated', with the vaccine showing 91.6 per cent efficacy after the second shot.[176] This was a triumphant moment for Russian vaccine developers, or, as Dmitriev put it, 'the most powerful watershed' and 'a monumental achievement of Russia, but

also a monumental achievement for the world because there are only three vaccines now […] with efficacy of more than 90 per cent, alongside Pfizer and Moderna'.[177] Dmitriev added how they were 'thankful to *The Lancet* that showed it's not driven by politics, but […] by science'.[178] Russian media coverage underscored how the British medical journal's favourable review proved Western critics were wrong about Sputnik V, and that their scepticism was fuelled by anti-Russia sentiments. In the words of one of Russia's top media managers and the anchor of Vesti Nedeli, Dmitry Kiselev: the peer-review has 'become a painful injection for Europe'.[179] The show amplified the triumphant mood by spreading disinformation, including the claim that while Sputnik V had a proven high efficacy rate—on par with Pfizer and Moderna—there were 'sad statistics' related to Pfizer: dozens of deaths (a false claim) and numerous complaints about side effects (an exaggerated claim taken out of context).[180]

Sputnik V as POTD

Russian media coverage of Sputnik V, from its authorisation to *The Lancet*'s favourable peer-review, suggests a strategy that is commonly referred to in Russian political jargon as a 'two-mover' ('dvukhodovka')—a problem in chess that is solved by two consecutive moves. First, the Russian government authorised the vaccine early and in breach of protocol, believing that it was safe and efficacious (as evidenced by its powerful patrons' willingness to volunteer for clinical trials). This move provoked anticipated and understandable scepticism and outrage from Western critics, who were then framed as politically motivated Russophobes. Once the vaccine proved to withstand a rigorous peer-review in a prestigious Western medical journal, the critics were ostensibly proved wrong, and Sputnik V benefited from the surprise element of a favourable endorsement by reputable Western scientists. This created a POTD effect in the information space by using Western critics' early criticism of Sputnik V against them, helping portray them as over-reactionary, and having 'exaggerated' the risks of Sputnik V's early authorisation. In this context, Sputnik V's early authorisation was not a careless bet, but a calculated informatsionnaya voyna tactic—and a new sophisticated form of POTD.

An analysis of the timeline of development and experimentation of Sputnik V further substantiates the Kremlin's intention to use the shock and awe effect of POTD to promote the vaccine. Analysis of this timeline suggests that Gamaleya Institute researchers were on track to finish their Phase III trials in November 2020, around the same time as other leading laboratories in the West (*see Chart 1 below*). But unlike its Western competitors, the Russian vaccine was pushed toward authorisation in August before trials could finish. Even without a fast-tracked approval, Sputnik V could have still emerged as the first authorised Covid-19 vaccine in the world, and avoided

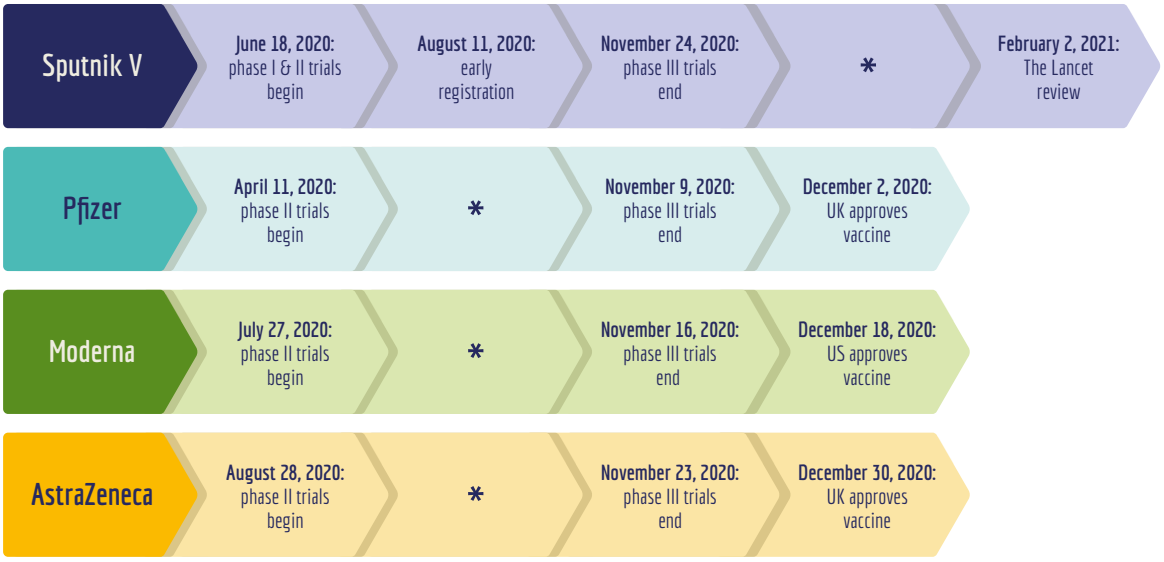


Chart 1: Timeline of development of Sputnik V and Western Vaccines

the controversy of having been authorised before completing the standard three-phase development process.

At the same time, a December 2020 authorisation would have diminished Sputnik V's POTD media effect, while even a timely authorisation in late-November 2020, after the completion of Phase III trials, may have rendered Sputnik V as one of 'just' several Covid-19 vaccines, limiting its prestige and prowess. The fast-track authorisation a mere three months earlier had an enormous media effect—compelling Western scientific and political communities to participate in a heated debate, and ultimately be proven wrong by *The Lancet*. Rhetoric by Russian actors like Dmitriev suggest that decision-making around the vaccine's early authorisation and rollout aimed to leverage any media controversy surrounding it. In July 2020, even before the early authorisation, Dmitriev framed expected criticism toward Sputnik V as 'a concerted effort to stop anything Russian from being adopted by other nations because of the national interests of Western powers'.[181]

The media resonance of Sputnik V's early authorisation, however, did not aid Russia's vaccination efforts. As the Russian government began to roll out its public inoculation campaign, the public's high level of vaccine hesitancy became apparent. According to Russian independent polling and research organisation Levada-Centre, vaccine hesitancy in Russia has remained consistently high.[182] In fact, since August 2020, more than half of respondents to Levada-Centre polls have indicated they are not willing to vaccinate. While

there could be many reasons for people's unwillingness to vaccinate, Levada-Centre focus groups suggest ordinary Russians' hesitation towards the vaccine is tied to the circumstances surrounding Sputnik V's authorisation, as well as Russian narratives about its 'victory' in the vaccine race. These groups emphasised that they were disturbed by 'the incredible speed of development of the Russian vaccine, [and] the race between countries, each of which wanted to register the vaccine first at the expense of the thoroughness of clinical trials'.[183] These comments stress the link between the use of Sputnik V as POTD and domestic distrust of the vaccine.

In January 2021, the Russian government's concerns about low domestic vaccinations rates and high levels of vaccine hesitancy became visible.[184] To help increase vaccination levels, the government carried out a public information campaign, which included statements from Putin that he had received the vaccine.[185] Yet, as of December 2022, the spectre of suspicion toward Sputnik V has still not subsided. In October 2021, vaccine hesitancy rates in Russia remained at 45 per cent. A couple months later, still only slightly less than half of the Russian population was double vaccinated.[186] The low vaccination rate has translated into one of the world's highest levels of pandemic mortality rates, with some figures in late 2021 estimating as many as 800,000 excess deaths.[187] Such tragic consequences may prove nothing less than a strategic setback for Russia, as even before the pandemic Russia was heading toward a demographic downturn.[188] The pandemic has only worsened these conditions, and may throw Russia into a full blown demographic crisis for the years to come.

Conclusions

Sputnik V's early authorisation aimed to shock the world. Russia was not considered a leader in pharmaceutical research, and hence its ability to develop a safe and working Covid-19 vaccine was never taken seriously in the West. Yet, by the summer of 2020, the Russian Gamaleya Institute did just that, and the Russian government decided to employ the achievement in its ongoing confrontation, and information war, with the West. Authorising Sputnik V without completing the standard three-phase development process, Russia demonstrated both a brazen disregard of international conventions and protocols, and a high confidence in the safety and efficacy of its vaccine. The fast-track authorisation provoked significant criticism from Western scientific and public policy communities. Russian state actors, such as RDIF's Kirill Dmitriev, framed these critiques as part of a premeditated, anti-Russian communications campaign. They then exercised a 'the best defence is a good offence' mentality, spreading disinformation about leading Western vaccines, such as Pfizer and AstraZeneca. But when *The Lancet* published a favourable review of

Sputnik V's Phase III trials, the full scale of Russia's information campaign became apparent, as Russian actors celebrated their country's scientific triumph, and executed a judo-like move against Sputnik V's Western critics. Russia had not only proved it had developed a safe and effective vaccine, but also proved Western critics wrong.

This chapter offers several conclusions. First, it helps further develop understandings of Russian informatsionnaya voyna, which goes beyond propaganda of the words, and finds new meaning in POTD. While POTD, as it is referred to here, precludes the use of symbolic violence, it does use deeds that contribute to a doctrine of shock. Second, while Russia's use of Sputnik V to further its informatsionnaya voyna goals enjoyed some success, it has had a disastrous effect on the country's domestic inoculation campaign. Russia may have scored points in 'the virtual information dimension',[189] but it failed to achieve a far more crucial goal—protecting its population. This failure may have long-lasting strategic consequences for Russia, which is increasingly headed towards a demographic crisis. Such poor policy choices may also reveal an inherent weakness in Putin's regime, suggesting an absence of checks and balances among the state's decision-making elites. Unelected and unaccountable persons like Dmitriev are given disproportionate power to direct policy on sensitive issues, while showing a blatant disregard for norms, ethics, and protocols. The result is shortsighted policies, which, in the long term, threaten Russia's overarching goal to establish itself as a world power.

A Hard Rain on a Bad Roof

By Paul Bell

This past July, as the Georgian summer approached its height, and Tbilisi sweltered, it was clear the country had learned to live with Covid-19. Things had pretty much gone back to normal despite a five-fold rise in infections between one week and the next; numbers had risen from 100 to 500 infections per week, and almost doubled in the capital.[190] (Why the spike? This is pure speculation but there had been two large protest rallies and a pop festival in Tbilisi in the ten days before.) Nonetheless, the health secretary, Zurab Azarashvili, pronounced the epidemiological situation in Georgia 'calm' and 'fully manageable'—and indeed that seemed an altogether fair assessment given that in that preceding fortnight, deaths had been down to between one and three.[191]

Calm and manageable—at a time when Georgia seemed anything but. Russia's invasion of near-neighbouring Ukraine had entered its fifth month. The European Union had just rejected Georgia's application for candidate member status. The ruling Georgian Dream party, in its tenth year of power since sweeping away the government of Mikheil Saakashvili in 2012, was locked in narrative warfare against most of the political opposition over who and what was to blame for this setback—or whether it was a setback at all.

And once again, large crowds had taken to Shota Rustaveli, Tbilisi's historic main boulevard where the Parliament of Georgia looms above the avenue in faux-Grecian splendour. Completed in the year Stalin died, the building has for decades provided a theatrical backdrop to the political drama that has periodically played out on the avenue, where power and protest have clashed, at times leading to a change of government. When the capital protests, this is where it happens.

On this occasion, however, there were few masks in the crowd; fears of Covid had receded like a bad dream. What *was* back was everything else that had held Georgia in suspension for so long—its stuttering economy, its ambivalent democracy, its frustrated aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration, its vulnerability to Russia. The advent of Covid-19 had merely exacerbated economic and political trends that were already evident in Georgia's trajectory,

strengthening those conservative forces that rode on their back. The pandemic fell on Georgia like a hard rain on a bad roof.

The facts of Covid-19 in Georgia were pretty stark. Its government reacted swiftly in attempting to close its borders against the virus. The first restrictions were imposed in early March 2020, and measures including curfew, the closing of public transport and the hospitality industry, and restrictions on gatherings, soon followed. For six months numbers flatlined, then boomed to over 50 deaths a day. By March 2021, numbers had dropped sharply again but as the virus mutated, they boomed once more, reaching new heights of more than 80 deaths in August 2021 and again in November of that year. By mid-February 2022, the number of recorded cases was approaching 1.5 million; more than 15,500 had died; and about 20,000 new cases and about 60 deaths were being reported daily.

These are big numbers for a small country.[192] Estimates of Georgia's population vary: the UN records it at 3.9 million; Georgia's own national statistics office puts it at 3.73 million; informal estimates put the number of Georgians actually living in the country much lower, possibly as few as 3.2 million. One way or another, around a third of the population had already been hit by Covid, and for a period in the second half of 2021 Georgia was an unenviable world leader in cases per million. In July 2022, at 4,532.4 deaths per million, Georgia ranked fifth.[193]

The first vaccines arrived from the West in March 2021 and within two months many more arrived from China (although these were widely viewed as inadequate and to be avoided). Further supplies from the West drove the vaccine roll-out. By mid-February 2022, almost 2.78 million Georgians had received at least one dose of the vaccine; of those 1.23 million had had two. By July 2022 the government was offering citizens GEL 100 (EUR 30) to encourage people to get vaccinated.

Fiscally, the government had responded in 2020 with a GEL 3.5 billion (USD 1 billion) support package to support households and businesses and protect jobs. The EU made more than EUR 300 million available to support Covid recovery, and the US millions of dollars more in aid and vaccines. The government's response over the first eighteen months has been well documented by Gogita Ghvedashvili.[194] He says the government took early, decisive measures to combat the pandemic and communicated well with the population, including minorities, on public health and related financial measures. Overall, the public tended to agree: a December 2021 nationwide poll by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) indicated that 50 per cent of respondents thought the government was doing a good job in dealing with the pandemic. On balance, in terms of managing the crisis from a public health and fiscal support perspective, for the government of a poor country, Georgia had done quite well.

> The advent of Covid-19 had merely exacerbated economic and political trends that were already evident in Georgia's trajectory.

However, as it happened globally in 2020, Georgia's small, USD 16 billion low-wage low-skill economy tanked. It rebounded in 2021 but by the end of that year at least one in five workers remained jobless,[195] including large numbers of trained professionals unable to find work in their fields. Inflation, which had remained at about six per cent before Covid, doubled because of higher transportation and energy costs. Foreign direct investment declined sharply. Before the pandemic there had been signs of a decline in FDI—in the face of political turbulence, legal uncertainty and a decline of trust in the justice system, restrictions on foreign land ownership, the failure of the Black port development scheme at Anaklia, and a generally less stable investment environment. But following the Covid outbreak, FDI fell to less than half of pre-pandemic levels between 2019 and 2020. 'All [these factors] were exacerbated by the pandemic and economic crisis it spurred,' the East European Centre for Multiparty Democracy's Georgian office reported in 2021.[196] FDI is expected to recover in 2022; the first quarter showed USD 568 million, only USD 4 million shy of the total for 2021.[197]

By early 2021, sixty-seven per cent of Georgians surveyed by IRI were reporting that their 'household situation' had worsened. Only remittances back to Georgia from family members who have gone abroad to work seemed to stand between many households and outright poverty. These remittances grew as the spending of Georgians abroad declined, and the World Bank estimates that they contributed more than thirteen per cent of GDP. Therein lies a hidden tale of heartbreak. For the million or more Georgians who now live abroad as economic refugees, there are all the families sundered as a consequence, causing significant and damaging social impacts in a country where family is so central to national life.

Ironically, it is the Russian invasion of Ukraine that may have provided a boost for the post-Covid Georgian economy. In June 2022 alone, more than USD 231 million flowed in from Russia —54 per cent of that month's total inflow of foreign funds.[198] Undoubtedly property and commodity prices have risen steeply, partly as a holdover from Covid, partly due to the knock-on effects of the war in Ukraine. But for an economy

whose workforce and spending power had declined, the influx of Russians with skills and money has been welcomed. Before the invasion there had been as many as 100,000 Russians living in Georgia, and the streets of Tbilisi were full of Russian tourists who, after the pandemic struck, were almost the only source of Georgian tourism. They had their favourite coffee shops and restaurants, which they boisterously inhabited. In the Christmas season they came south to the old colony to play, some as strolling players to entertain the shoppers under the festive lights along Rustaveli. There was something brash and proprietorial about them: they considered this their paradise after all—its mountains and vineyards, its wine, women, and song. It was here that Russians escaped the cold and dourness of Moscow.

After the invasion, their numbers shot up, though quite by how many is difficult to say: estimates range from 30,000–100,000 depending on the level of hysteria. They came either for political reasons or because it is easier to do business from a country without sanctions. Tbilisians in the more affluent parts of the capital are acutely aware of this increased presence. Many find it ominous and have little sympathy for the idea that many among these new arrivals are also escaping a war they do not agree with. Others, like property owners and the hospitality sector, have clearly found it beneficial.

Two economists interviewed by the author emphasised different ways in which the pandemic had affected Georgia's economy. Hans Gutbrod, an LSE-trained German academic and consultant, who has lived in Georgia for more than twenty years, had a nuanced view.[199] On the one hand, migration had shown signs of increasing economic integration with Europe as more and more Georgian economic migrants have been taking advantage of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreement with the European Union which entered into force in 2016. Moreover, according to Gutbrod, Georgia's monetary policy had not succumbed to incontinence despite the pressures. On the other hand, shifts in perceptions of Georgia as an investment destination had led to it attracting 'the wrong kind of investor, snapping up assets'—against a backdrop of weakened state and strategic governance and a regime of growing entrepreneurial permissiveness that was increasingly at odds with wider notions of economic and social justice. There was, he said, the danger of a 're-feudalisation' of Georgia, in which sharp and seemingly irreconcilable divisions within the political sphere were serving to keep attention away from 'other issues which play to various [economic and financial] interests'—referring to what many consider to be an politico-economic elite running the country for its own benefit.

A second economist, David Shiolashvili, echoed this theme.[200] He feared the continuing erosion of the middle class, and the extent to which government largesse during the pandemic had expanded that class of voters—those on welfare, and

civil servants—who now depended on government for an income, at the cost of a growing deficit in government spending. '[The government] are just consolidating their power' he said. Meanwhile, state institutions were 'being brought into line', ordinary people were 'exhausted', and were 'voting with their feet'. It is a grievance expressed by many young Georgians who, unless born into relative privilege, struggle to see an economic or professional future in their home country and look for any opportunity to study and work abroad—exacerbating an already heavy brain-drain in Georgia that has been since Georgia reclaimed its fragile sovereignty from Russia in 1991.

Georgia's largely privatised public health system survived the Covid assault. A 2021-22 study by the International Journal of Public Health concluded that despite significant weaknesses, systematic problems, and the pandemic's toll, the Georgian health system, with five beds per thousand population but also a chronic shortage of nurses, had nonetheless avoided a breakdown. But it took a heavy toll on health professionals. 'By mid-October 2020, Georgia faced health workforce overload and burnout. Medical schools were instructed to urgently prepare senior medical students for field or phone centre work. Of the over 1,700 trained medical students, about half joined the workforce ahead of their projected graduation. By the end of June 2021, 24,345 health workers in Georgia had been diagnosed with Covid-19 (and 76 of them, predominantly those over 60 years old, died). Approximately 30 per cent of them were physicians and 40 per cent were nurses (about a third of all practicing physicians and over half of employed nurses)'.[201]

The pandemic's impact on education was hidden away indoors. Covid drove not only workers out of jobs but also young people out of their classrooms. After the economy, this was the next biggest impact cited by householders. 'In response to the pandemic, Georgia's 2000 schools closed their doors, and the country's 600,000 students switched to online classes,' wrote Tata Burduli, a senior researcher at GeoWel Research.[202] Her findings were grim. 'Rural and disadvantaged communities were already left behind by Georgia's educational system. PISA scores consistently show rural schools falling far behind their urban counterparts. Rural schools are often unsustainably small. Buildings are dilapidated, lacking ICT infrastructure, and even heating and plumbing. As a result, only around 10 per cent of the students in rural areas achieve the Unified National Exam score required to gain financial support for university, compared to 27 per cent in Tbilisi'.[203] As education went online, 90,000 schoolchildren were without access to the internet and many more struggled with connectivity and speed. Many households did not have enough devices for their children to join online classes and had to prioritise one child's lessons over another's. And government estimates of 94 per cent attendance online were described by teachers as grossly exaggerated.

Yet, there was a silver lining. Professor Iago Kachkachisvili, head of the sociology department at Tbilisi State University, and of the Institute for Social Studies and Analysis, noted how online learning had opened up new possibilities: from postgraduate students being better able to balance their academic and work commitments to a shift from tests (where there is little control over the resources available to examinees) to essays which required greater analysis in online examination.[204] But for undergraduates, much greater in number, the experience had been far more negative. 'Results during the pandemic were better than before but students became lazy about their quality of their work. There was far more plagiarism—cut-and-paste—and much less knowledge. Those diplomas are an empty box'.

The effects on primary and secondary school children—especially the younger ones—was devastating, Kachkachisvili said. 'Imagine, these children forced to sit in front of a computer for six hours a day, it felt like punishment. They became like robots'. Nor had teaching methodology adjusted to the reality of online learning, and parents had to stand in for teachers in monitoring assignments that would normally be completed in class— 'it was not a good substitute'. He also described the physical effects on children—back pain, 'screen vision', growing weight problems—and growing psychological problems. And students at all levels had lost out on the socialisation that vitally accompanies education, and with it a diminishing sense of community engagement.

In terms of longer-term impact, all of this was impossible to quantify, said Kachkachisvili, but he feared that over time these factors would affect young people's later chances of employment or international study.

Covid and the illness, loss, hardship, isolation, and anxiety that attended it, left no one untouched—not anywhere. But in Georgia, an intimately small society where it is not often you can name a person in conversation and someone among your company will not know or know of them, Covid fell hard on this almost claustrophobically close-knit, vibrant, and emotional people, smothering and exhausting them.

Over their heads, meanwhile, the most terrific political ruckus was going on as the 'real' battle was fought out in the information space—a battle that was less about this immediate public health crisis than about Georgia's political destiny.

In the supercharged atmosphere of an election year, malign or opportunistic Covid-tipped narratives emanated from every quarter: Russia, the political opposition, far-right/anti-liberal groups, and elements within the Orthodox Church. The country became an information battleground as dis- and misinformation, conspiracy, and quackery—rooted in deep, continuous tension over Georgia's broad political orientation—welled up beneath the Covid emergency. As the

American non-profit International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) put it in a 2021 report: 'Turbulence from the Covid-19 pandemic and parliamentary elections rocked the Georgian media and information system in 2020. Misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda swamped the information space, while the government tightened control over the media—leading to a deterioration of media freedom in the country'.[205] Effectively, the pandemic was being instrumentalised in the ongoing existential competition between the country's modernist Euro-Atlantic aspiration and the traditionalist orthodoxies of Georgian religion, power, and geopolitics.

For traditionalists, Covid became a proxy for globalism, despised liberal values, sinister forces using biotechnology to exert control over society's social and economic direction, unwelcome migrants, First World drug-testing of Third World guinea pigs, and divine retribution for Georgia's flirtation with a decadent West. Into this toxic potpourri Russia injected narratives about the superiority of their Sputnik V vaccine (a notion that gained no traction), the beneficence of Russian and Chinese international efforts to combat the virus, and the weakness of the West relative to the Russian and Chinese models for growth and governance. At the further edges of surrealism, far-right anti-liberalists propagated myths about Georgian racial superiority—'our DNA will defeat the virus'—and divine intervention.[206] God would save Georgia. The Orthodox Church, ranked second behind the Army among Georgia's most respected institutions, initially refused to suspend large services or speak out against anti-vaccination sermons by members of its clergy.[207] It had to be carefully coaxed into compliance with public health safety measures by the government but ultimately it did not wholeheartedly endorse the state vaccination campaign.

As for the political opposition, already railing against the government's entrenchment of power and its growing intolerance towards those who challenged its authority, showed scant regard for any need for unity in the face of a national crisis. It lambasted the government at every turn for its handling of the pandemic—for not giving enough financial aid to the public, for being too slow in acquiring vaccines, for not consulting with the opposition or with civil society on appropriate measures. There were indications, too, that vaccine hesitancy showed some correlation with political affiliation—resistance against the government translated for many into anti-vax sentiment. Between disinformation and misinformation, the malign, the cranks, and the crackpots, the babble was deafening. Small wonder it should all play out in an alarmingly high rate of vaccine hesitancy. The NDI survey reported 42 per cent of respondents saying they would not get vaccinated, citing concerns about the quality of the vaccine (38 per cent) and possible side effects for those with pre-existing health conditions (20 per cent). A third of those already vaccinated said they

would not get a booster or were undecided about it.

So much for the hard rain; but the bad roof that it fell on may take a generation or more to repair. Meanwhile, Georgia's more immediate struggle will be to decide what kind of cover to replace it with—will it be European or Russian?

In June 2019, eleven years after the Russo-Georgian War, the steps of the parliament became the scene of the first serious confrontation between the Georgian Dream government and civil and political opposition forces. The fuse was lit when the leader of a visiting Russian parliamentary delegation, Sergei Gavrilov, delivered an address to MPs from a chair reserved for the Speaker of Parliament. Opposition parties and civic activists were incensed by what they saw as an affront to Georgian honour and sovereignty. The government, sensing rising tensions, condemned the incident and characterised it as a 'protocol blunder', but violent clashes still ensued between protestors and the police.

Even if not intended as such, the Gavrilov incident was seen as a provocation by the government's civil society and political opponents, for whom it was emblematic of the government's ever more evident autocratic tendencies. It also brought home to Georgians the eternal frustration of their asymmetric, conflicted relationship with Russia. Indeed, spend any length of time in this small, intensely idiosyncratic country—one so deeply aware of its history and geopolitics, its relationship to the land, its unique language, and its Orthodox Christianity—and one becomes acutely conscious of its sensibilities, how it feels Russia's proximity, and of its mounting sense of discomfort when the old occupier seems closer.

When the Russians established their hegemony over this ancient former kingdom more than two centuries ago, they brought with them their feudal habits and (as it is remembered) treated the local population like serfs, something the more egalitarian Georgians could never grasp. Russia's historic sense of ownership over Georgia was most brutally expressed under Stalin who ensured that no one might accuse him of being soft on his homeland; 700,000 soldiers from a population of only 3,5 million were sent to fight the Axis powers. More than half of them did not return.

Today, more than thirty years after regaining their independence from the Soviet Union, most Georgians view Russia as they might an abusive uncle, with a shiver up the spine. The language of the oppressor, which for decades school children were forced to learn, remains ingrained among older Georgians, but for younger generations it has become merely useful to know and its usage is slipping. Much of the old colonial legacy remains—the close ties between the Georgian and Russian Orthodox Church, Russia's continued importance as a trading partner, and family ties with the one million

> The pandemic was being instrumentalised between the country's modernist Euro-Atlantic aspiration and the traditionalist orthodoxies of Georgian religion, power, and geopolitics.

Georgians who live in Russia. Russia occupies mental and physical space in Georgia. Most obvious is its occupation, through proxies, of the twenty per cent of Georgia's landmass that Russia grabbed during the 2008 war. This grieves Georgians and fills them with a galling sense of their own powerlessness. But psychologically too, the so-called 'post-Soviet mentality'—which Georgians recognise and frequently lament—dominates national political instincts and behaviours. It also frames, nay mangles, relations between the populace and the state in a contrary and, at times, volatile mix of defiance and dependency. In most spheres of national life, the relationship between the imperial metropole and its former satellite continues to exert a powerful influence on Georgia's historical path.

Georgia may no longer be *in* Russia's claws, but it feels the breath of the bear on its neck. In terms of contrasting threats, Covid was escapable; Russia is not.

The already fraught relationship with Russia came into even sharp relief when the Kremlin decided to invade Ukraine. This, and the EU's subsequent decision to fast-track applications for candidate member status by Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, catapulted the country's existential choice, Europe or Russia, into the heart of the nation's already deeply polarised politics.

Most Georgians consider themselves to be European, and their governments are constitutionally mandated to secure membership of the European Union and NATO.[208] That aspiration was endorsed by 83 per cent of the population in January 2022.[209] The EU's flag flaps alongside that of Georgia at the entrance to Parliament. Formally, the ruling party cleaves to this mandate and at the last election it promised its supporters it would apply for candidate status in 2024.

This is not to say that Georgia is home to a population of natural Liberal Democrats. Outside of Georgia's small progressive urban elite, Georgians consider EU membership to be of secondary importance. The material advantages of Euro-Atlantic integration are far more evident—easier trade, access to European culture and education, and the

right to work and have a career in the EU that can support family back home. Leaving aside the question whether this would make Georgia more secure against Russia, the desire to join the Euro-Atlantic bloc is more material than philosophical in nature. But this popular, constitutionally mandated aspiration, and where the country's politics appear to be heading, have been on divergent paths for some years.

Political developments since 2019 have strained relations between the government and the Western alliance. Georgian Dream will not allow the Euro-Atlantic aspiration to be easily traded off against liberal democratic pressures for cleaner elections, a more accommodative approach to political power-sharing, more judicial independence, an end to political prosecutions, or greater tolerance of gender, ethnic-minority or gay rights—all of which would risk it losing its own grip on power. Instead, casting its eye towards Hungary or Poland or even China, and striking a nationalist note, the government asserts Georgia's right to choose its own (hybrid) model of democratic development, employing a well-documented array of tools and tactics to suppress opposition. Thus, for four years in a row, Georgia's 'democracy score', as measured by the Economist Intelligence Unit's annual index, has declined from 5.31 to 5.12 on a scale of 10, though it maintains its position at 91 in global rankings. As the Georgian journal *Civil* reported, 'Georgia's downward trend began after 2017, tapering off from 5.93 year after year'.[210] That said, Georgia did receive its lowest ranking in the index (4.59) in 2010, during Mikheil Saakashvili's second term as president.

The two elections held during the pandemic, parliamentary in October 2020 and municipal in October 2021, were rancorous affairs. These campaigns were fought not about the future, but about the past. Georgian Dream sought to remind voters—as it had in 2016—of the 'bloody nine years' when their main rival, Saakashvili and the United National Movement, had been in power. UNM and other opposition parties trained their fire on Georgian Dream's *padrone*, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the country's single oligarch who rules unseen from a spaceport-like structure of steel and glass he built on a hilltop above the old city. Under his rule, they said, Georgian Dream had captured the state, used its instruments to punish its opponents, subverted democracy, and was 'returning Georgia to Russia'. (In June 2022, the European Parliament called on the EU to consider imposing sanctions on him, sending Georgian Dream into counternarrative overdrive.)[211]

The ruling party won a third term handily, the opposition boycotted the new parliament, and protestors took to Rustaveli demanding fresh elections. The leader of the main opposition party, wanted for violating bail conditions, was plucked from the top floor of his headquarters by police using a cherry picker. The prime minister resigned. And then the EU turned up—in the form of Council president Charles Michel who, after six months, brokered an agreement

to end the boycott. It lasted all of three months. In July 2021 Georgian Dream withdrew from the agreement and in the local government election of October went on to capture all but one of Georgia's sixty-four executive mayoralties. In the midst of this, ex-President Saakashvili returned from his refuge in Ukraine, was arrested, and put on trial for abuse of power. More protests followed, then Saakashvili fell ill and was moved to a prison hospital where, his supporters claim, he is slowly dying. Pro-government media launched a prolonged barrage of propaganda against him, and he can expect to remain in prison unless and until there is a change of government. Saakashvili had clearly hoped his martyrdom would galvanise a new wave of protest that might force the government into retreat, but he was mistaken. The protests died away.

The war shocked Georgians back on to Rustaveli. Through March 2022 they came out in large numbers to show their support for Ukraine; its blue and yellow flowered across the capital, from the flags draped over balconies, to the ribbons on people's lapels, to the new colours displayed on the screens of cash machines. The anger, disgust, and fear were palpable. A frequent sentiment expressed by Georgians will be that, 'we know from experience what they [the Russians] are capable of'.

That round of fervour too had dissipated by April 2022, only to be jump-started by the EU's decision in late June not to award Georgia candidate status. Civil society grabbed the lead, blaming Georgia's failure to win candidate status on the government's Janus-like approach to the application—on one hand making a submission, on the other waging a running battle with Western diplomats over Georgia's 'dignity' and 'sovereignty' and that it would not be lectured on political morality and governance. This round of protest died also, in a welter of impossible demands from protestors, and a government propaganda onslaught asserting that the price of entry included joining Europe's war with Russia. Absurd as this latter narrative may be, it is also true that even among the most liberal-minded Georgians, there were those who were stung by what they interpreted as the EU's rejection of their 'Europeanness'.

The EU has undertaken to review progress at the end of 2022; the government could take steps to address the legal and political shortcomings the EU has identified. But that is unlikely. Georgian Dream's response has been to cloak inaction in proceduralism while, with an eye on elections in 2024, conjuring up the threat of 'war with Russia' so that it can try to square the circle politically with those among its own support base who support membership.

None of this is to say that Georgian Dream 'wants the Russians back'. They just want to run Georgia in a way that best suits their own purposes. In this political culture, in which the strictures of European liberalism chafe against Georgia's traditions of authority, that is easier than it ought to be.

For all the progressiveness of Georgia's more liberal, modernist elite, the country's instincts, sources, and structures of power tilt towards authoritarianism—a natural counterweight to any challenge that might arise from a more confident, increasingly prosperous, engaged, and demanding citizenry. That tilt is familiar and attractive to a population whose political culture craves a strong personality to whom the people look to lead, govern, control, dispense, and take responsibility for their wellbeing—Iago Kachkachisvili calls it 'patriarchal consciousness'. Since 1991, politics in Georgia appear to follow an eight- or nine-year cycle: that is, a 'patriarch' will rule until their egregiousness becomes intolerable and they must be replaced. It remains to be seen whether, in the nearer term, Georgia can manage a transition of power without returning to Rustaveli or a legal orgy of revenge.

If anything, the Covid pandemic made Georgia's tilt towards illiberal democracy more pronounced. In 2019, as fists and shots flew on Rustaveli following the contretemps over Mr Gavrilov's seating arrangements, it seemed that change might once again be around the corner—at least by the October 2020 election. Instead, eight months before that election, Covid-19, that hard rain, came down—dampening political opposition, freezing the nation economically, enervating and exhausting its people, driving them back on already meagre resources, sapping their energy for change, and increasing their dependence on the state. Yet despite all this, it bought the government time. 'Politically, what Covid has done is to allow the government to shift responsibility for its own prolonged failure to develop the economy to external factors caused by the pandemic,' says Iago Kachkachisvili, 'and talks about its current high growth rate using the bottom of the pandemic as a benchmark. Yet the public do not challenge this narrative because of that patriarchal consciousness and their fear that the government will punish them.'[212]

The corollary to that is reward: the government has used Covid handouts to buy the allegiance of a great number of voters. The economist David Shiolashvili made the same point, as did Mamuka Khazaradze, an entrepreneur driven into opposition politics after being driven out of his bank on unproven allegations of money-laundering. 'GD is just capitalising', he said. 'In 2015 there were 300,000 people on social aid, today there are 720,000. Soon it will be a million.'[213] Tellingly, Kachkachisvili points out that in all of its post-independence history, Georgians have never taken to Rustaveli to protest on socio-economic issues. It has always been about freedom and power. 'We lack the internal energy for change. Always it comes under pressure from our external partners.' If there is hope, he says, it is in the changing attitudes of young people—'but they are leaving the country'.

Politically, 2023 and 2024 will be critical. In 2024 Georgia is scheduled to hold its first fully proportional elections. If that goes ahead, Georgian Dream cannot be sure of

attaining an electoral majority. Failure to secure one will usher in a new era of coalition government for which Georgia's intensively combative, conflictual political culture is ill-prepared. On the other hand, a coalition could be the forcing function that, with the Western alliance encouraging Georgia's political leaders to find consensus, the power imperative to some extent in check, forces the country's political class to find new, common ground. But it would require a sublimation of what is, across the spectrum, the political class's deepest driving instinct—the gaining and maintaining of power.

There will be those who wonder, given the geopolitical and cultural obstacles to Euro-Atlantic integration, whether the desire for it is more emblematic than attainable? Given the implications of pursuing it—abundantly evident now in Russia's savaging of Ukraine—might Georgia do better to take those aspirations off the table? To refocus what energies it can muster on developing a more unifying vision for its people's political and economic advancement, one that does not depend on national goals that place the country between the Russian hammer and the European anvil? Today, Georgia's traditionalists and powerbrokers would call that realism, its embattled modernists: Outright betrayal. To abandon the dream is impossible yet to stay on the tightrope burns a cauldron of energy that might otherwise be directed to the nation's welfare. It is a monstrous conundrum.

Covid has come and gone. As a public health crisis, it is well past its peak. The spring of 2022 saw Georgians once again confronting their country's particular existential dilemma, then summer came and they escaped to the countryside and those pleasures that make life bearable. But the pandemic and the geopolitics of its time have left a small, exposed nation poorer, less educated than it should be, more dependent on 'state aid' and Russian money, and further from its European dream; while its remarkable people—renowned for their music, poetry, art, wine, basketballers, weightlifters, and *joie d' vivre*—either stagnate as they await a salvation that does not come, or escape abroad, always to long for home.

Post-Pandemic Society and the Violent Extremism and Conspiracy Belief Nexus

By Martin Innes

The history of pandemics teaches us they have deep 'downstream' consequences with a capacity and capability to induce profound new patterns of social organisation and order. Initial indicators of what some effects of the coronavirus global health pandemic might be include changing how and where we work, and our increased dependency on information communication technologies. For the moment, however, our vantage point renders it hard to forecast what these impacts might be exactly. One emergent trend that warrants urgent and close attention involves a shift in the ideologies and conduct of violent extremism. Specifically, there appears to be an increasingly troubling blurring and blending of ideas and groups possessing far-right proclivities among adherents of conspiracy theories.

As the health pandemic evolved, many global cities experienced a series of violent protest events pivoting around anti-vaccine, anti-lockdown, and anti-mask wearing sentiments. Countries across Europe have seen their 5G mobile phone mast infrastructure subject to arson and other forms of attack. Additionally, doctors, medical scientists, and other public health communication specialists have reported being subject to threats of violence and retribution by individuals and groups who claim to be motivated by beliefs that current health surveillance and protection measures are part of a 'deep state' conspiracy.

This can be labelled 'the conspiracy-extremism nexus'. It marks an increasing volume and intensity of interactions and exchanges between core idea sets and adherents of what were previously separate and distinct extremist groups, and conspiracy communities. As they trade and blend ideas and members, there is a clear risk of a toxic double movement that can be defined as:

1. *The 'extreming' of conspiracy communities*, wherein their adherents and members become more willing and able to engage in violence in pursuit of their actions;

2. and *the 'conspiracising' of extremist groups*, capturing how established extreme groups increasingly adopt, adapt, and appropriate discursive tropes and narratives originating with conspiracy theories into their belief and rhetorical systems.

The former process refers to how elements of once largely politically motivated and defined groups increasingly find their ideas and members supported by thought communities engaged in conspiratorial interpretations of the world. Accompanying this, conspiratorial frames and ideas reciprocally embed within the membership of groups advocating violent extremist tactics and strategies.

This chapter explores evidence for these patterns of evolution and adaptation in the construction of violent extremism and conspiratorial thinking in the midst of the pandemic, while drawing upon a range of international material around different events. A key theme of the discussion is to diagnose some of its causes, and project and assess what the medium-term strategic consequences might be. Some attention is also invested in considering what social control measures might be leveraged to manage and mitigate these developments.

Background Influences in the Covid Era

Whilst there has been a rapid growth in contemporary interest in misinformation (unintentionally misleading communications) and disinformation (intentionally misleading),[214] academic study of rumours and conspiracy theories (and allied constructs such as propaganda) has been long-standing. Indeed, there is now a sprawling multi-disciplinary literature that has attributed a range of effects to these forms of communication, across a range of different social problems and policy challenges.

Early psychological work on rumours tended to define them as beliefs about important topics lacking authoritative empirical validation.[215] Sociologists, by contrast, depicted rumours as forms of 'improvised news'.[216] The original studies of conspiracy theories cast them as: irrational and unscientific;[217] forms of clinical sickness;[218] or collective delusional ideations.[219] Later work, however, has developed a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the nature of such beliefs and their situational influences.

Two key triggers for rumour propagation have been repeatedly identified: (i) ambiguity of the situation; (ii) and importance of the rumour in the lives of individuals.[220] Subsequent contributions have integrated more psychological variables such as: general uncertainty/cognitive unclarity;[221] source and content ambiguity;[222] outcome-relevant involvement;[223] personal anxiety, credulity, and externalisation of control.

Social psychological work on how and why people tend to believe conspiracies and rumours has centred on a number of under-

> As the health pandemic evolved, many global cities experienced a series of violent protest events pivoting around anti-vaccine, anti-lockdown, and anti-mask wearing sentiments.

lying conditions: anomie and alienation;[224] feelings of powerlessness;[225] 'enemyship';[226] perceived morality of authorities;[227] and the social-psychological mechanism of projection.[228] Notwithstanding, thematic shifts in studying rumour and conspiracies have largely refracted the concerns of the historical moment in which the research was situated. Wartime scholars were primarily concerned with sinister and demoralising soft facts. Whereas between the 1960s and 1990s focus alighted more upon rumours inciting social unrest, ethnic tension, and aggression.[229] In recent years the previous assumption that conspiracy theorists are a small minority has been revisited and revised. Evidence suggests that conspiracy belief may be much more widespread than previously thought.[230]

Douglas contends there are three principal motivations for belief in conspiracies: existential; epistemic; and social. Existential motivations are the ways people individually and collectively cope with uncertainty and avoid danger. In contrast, epistemic motives tie conspiracy beliefs to some of the ways humans cognitively process and make sense of the world, in particular their tendency to search for patterns. The latter category attributes belief in conspiracies to more social factors, such as the desire for group belonging and affiliation.

What appears to be especially important and intriguing about the contemporary moment is how the distinctions and divisions between adherents of different conspiracy beliefs, rumours, and extreme ideologies are 'melting' and becoming 'blurrier'. Such that, where previous generations of analysts could isolate a particular core set of beliefs and identify distinct social identity based groups gravitating around them, the principal analytical challenge today is different. Instead, we need to attend to how and why a complex amalgam of distinct but broadly compatible belief systems are sustaining a simultaneously defined but amorphous social movement, that involves multiple interacting and over-lapping individuals and ideas. At its core, it is deeply anti-establishment, profoundly distrustful of authority, and increasingly willing to engage in violence in pursuit of its beliefs and interests.

To better understand how and why matters have developed in this way, it is helpful to look in detail at some of the specific events and interests around which adherents to the wider movement have mobilised. First, however, it is useful to sketch out the multiple 'base' influences that have structured and shaped the emergence of the conspiracy-extremist nexus. The pandemic has accelerated and intensified a set of social and political processes that were already in motion.[231] Whilst limitations of space constrain tracing out all such influences, the main ones may be highlighted:

- *The far-right ecosystem*. Benkler and his colleagues (2018) have used social network analysis models to evidence how broader changes in the media ecosystem, including the rapid growth in social media and changes in mass media ownership and usage, have been associated with a growth in the transmission of highly polarised political discourse.[232] Significantly, in part, this may have been engineered through the agendas of a small number of economically powerful individuals. Notably, in a quotation attributed to Andrew Breitbart (founder of the infamous hard-right news outlet), he claimed that 'culture is upstream of politics'–meaning that real power derives from shaping the ideas and values of a society–rather than the converse. Thus, by establishing a 'strong' voice across digital media, hard right groups and their ideas have increased their saliency and effects.

- *The mediascape*. Alluded to above, structural changes to mainstream media and journalism in tandem with increasing penetration of social media into all aspects of social life have profoundly altered what and how we 'know'.[233] A growing number of studies have documented varying ways how shifts in the constitution of media have negatively impacted social processes via which collective knowledge is constructed, communicated, and contested.[234] As a result, there is a contraction in what is agreed upon and accepted, and an expansion of the sense of dissensus around some core organising concepts that underpin liberal-democratic polities.

- *QAnon as an incubator of ideas*. An offshoot of the developments outlined above, QAnon is a digital first 'cult-like' entity that, for a while, was influential in its own right. But its longer-term significance may prove to be how the movement blends together elements from previously distinct conspiracies while giving them political impetus.[235] Most notable is a narrative about an elite world order and paedophilia—an especially influential version of which is 'the Great Reset' narrative.

- *#Thebigsteal and the US Presidential election*. Following former President

Trump's failure to win the US 2020 Presidential vote, significant attention has focused on violence conducted by his supporters and sympathisers during the Capitol Riot of 6 January 2021. However, whilst he may have failed to win the election, Trump's 'playbook' for undermining public confidence in the result amongst a sizeable proportion of citizens proved more successful. It is likely to have an enduring influence. Notably, in the German Bundestag elections during the latter months of 2021, various fringe *Querdenker* and far-right groups were clearly emulating narratives and tactics they had observed used by the Trump campaign.

- *The normalisation and domestication of disinformation*. Intertwined with several of the points outlined above, has been the increasing role being played by disinforming, distorting, and deceptive communications. Significantly, many of the innovations in tactics and techniques originally only practised by foreign state information operations have 'trickled down' to be adopted by and integrated into ordinary domestic political campaign strategies—such that disinformation is verging close to being seen as a 'normalised' feature of social and political life.[236]

In compiling this inventory of malign influences it is important that we do not overstate their uniqueness. After all, writing back in 1964 (at the time of Barry Goldwater's bid for the White House), in his seminal essay on the role of the 'paranoid style' in American politics, Richard Hofstader was describing how 'heated exaggeration, suspicion and paranoid fantasy' constitutes an effective and persuasive mode of political psychology. And yet, the confluence of influencing factors outlined above, co-occurring in combination with the far-reaching social, political, and economic disruptions induced by the Covid-19 global health crisis, does seem to have created an especially vulnerable historical moment and situation.[237]

Framing the issues in this way starts to disentangle how and why the contemporary conspiracy-extremism nexus is so potentially powerful and troubling. Much of the ideological and influencing work is not being pursued around normal political issues. Focusing on the idea that young people are endangered by a secret cabal of paedophiles in politically powerful positions, and, according to QAnon are in urgent need of saving ('#SaveTheChildren'), does not fit within our orthodox political frames and conventions.[238] Likewise, the idea that 5G phone signals afford surveillance by the institutions of the 'deep state' does not cohere with most peoples' expectations of politics.[239] But in fact the installation of these kinds of beliefs is clearly doing some kind of 'upstream' influencing work, in terms of inducing radical mind-sets and belief systems, that can be translated into a more explicitly political form of mobilisation 'downstream' from these initial radicalising moments.

Case Studies of the Conspiracy-Extremism Nexus

As the global health pandemic has evolved, an increasing number of countries have experienced a series of protests and public order events that have descended into violence. This has happened in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and Australia, amongst others.[240] Alongside which, a growing number of journalists and public health experts have documented how they have been targeted by abusive and threatening behaviour, frequently via social media. There has also been a significant number of physical attacks on vaccination centres and objects, such as 5G mobile phone masts[241]–the latter on the grounds that some conspiracy theories hold that these are covertly being used for mind control purposes.

It is probably best to describe the participants involved in these actions as constituting a social movement, rather than a group. Social movement theory holds that particular social identities and forms of collective action can be constructed when groups with shared interests and ideas are encouraged to mobilise and organise together.[242] This provides an opposite descriptor of what appears to be happening, inasmuch as the protests seem to be engaging a confluence of different groups and thought communities. Some are motivated by their opposition to vaccines, whereas others are more triggered by their beliefs that lockdown measures are a precursor to unfettered government social control. Still other segments of the broader movement are rooted in an anti-government and broadly anarchist ideological disposition. The fundamental point remains that the movement is significant because it draws together a range of different ideas and people, and provides them with a common purpose. This involves adopting a broadly adversarial and radical posture that contests many of the core values, ideas, and dispositions of so-called 'mainstream society' and liberal democratic state institutions.

Particularly worrying is that, at the time of writing, there may be signals of changes in certain aspects of the movement's activities, that can be characterised as shifting gear from 'mobilising' to 'organising'. Mobilising involves getting sympathisers to move from passive support for a set of values or ideas, to active participation in promoting or protecting them. Most theories of radicalisation recognise the 'mobilisation moment' as a critical juncture in the onset of violent extremism, on the grounds that typically most people will not actively mobilise and directly participate in confrontations or conflicts. However, having done so once, they are more likely to do so again.[243]

This general pattern in human behaviour is reinforced by the fact that both violent extremist groups and conspiracy communities have been shown to afford their adherents strong sensations of identity and belonging. As the anthropologist Scott Atran (2016) has compellingly described, the propensity and willingness to invoke

violence for an ideological cause escalates in situations where personal identity is subsumed into a group identity, and notions of 'I' are replaced by 'we'. Thus, according to his 'devoted actor' theory of radicalisation, initially small acts of resistance and violence can serve as a 'gateway' to a rapid extension of such behaviours, accompanied by an intensification of belief, and investment in membership of the social group.[244]

The detection of signals of increasing 'organisation' at the nexus point between extremism and conspiratorialism is thus concerning because this may indicate a movement establishing an infrastructure that can underpin and support a collective effort over an extended period of time. Open source intelligence obtained via monitoring of social media suggests that some UK-based members of the movement, who are former and current professional journalists, are currently providing 'media training' to the wider membership so they can improve their public messaging and influence campaigns.[245] At the same time, discussions have been observed on social media and other public forums of establishing lists of businesses that are anti-lockdown / masks / vaccines, so that movement members can support these businesses economically by steering their spending towards them, and away from other businesses. Moreover, on 1 January 2022, *The Times* newspaper ran a story about how a faction called 'Alpha Males Assemble' was organising events designed for combat readiness and preparation. The reporter suggests that these events were being led by individuals with military backgrounds.[246]

To develop more detailed insights into how and why the extremism-conspiracy nexus matters, we will explore a couple of case studies which illuminate different aspects of how this nexus is worrying and problematic.

Personal, Political, Targeted

It is notable that many of these conspiratorial and extremist idea-sets overlap and interact with other forms of prejudice. One notable strand reveals a fairly strong taint of misogyny.

Professor Devi Sridhar from Edinburgh University has taken on the role of the public academic during the pandemic, acting as an advisor to the Scottish Government, and providing regular commentary in the media on public health policy developments. She has written in *The Guardian* recounting how she had been targeted by highly abusive messages on social media.[247] Likewise, Marianna Spring, the *BBC*'s specialist disinformation reporter, who has published a number of in-depth investigations on adherents to anti-vaxxer and anti-lockdown beliefs, has similarly described how she received large volumes of invective and hate messages as a result.[248]

On Monday 7 February 2022, Leader of the Opposition Keir Starmer and other political figures were walking near Parliament when

> Both violent extremist groups and conspiracy communities have been shown to afford their adherents strong sensations of identity and belonging.

he had to be rapidly extracted from the area by police, after being approached by an aggressive crowd. Amongst other things, they were shouting the insult 'Paedo protector' at Starmer. The significance of this insult was that on the previous Wednesday, he had been accused by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, in a heated exchange at Prime Minister's Questions, that he (Starmer) had failed to prosecute an infamous celebrity paedophile during his previous role as Director of Public Prosecutions. It was a mendacious claim that had been circulating for some time amongst extreme far-right groups on internet chat forums, but was proven to be false.

It is alleged that Johnson was advised by his aides not to repeat the insult given its origins online and lack of veracity, but he did so anyway. Subsequently, a number of Conservative MPs along with their colleagues from other parties, disavowed Johnson's actions, given that repeating such false claims might induce risks to safety. Indeed, *The Observer* newspaper reported that the attention and publicity the event attracted served to 'embolden' members and sympathisers of the groups involved, and triggered an increase in the number of online death threats targeting Starmer.[249]

Of particular interest, from the perspective of this chapter, is how this sequence of events illuminates the increasingly 'blurry' and blended nature of online and offline extremist behaviour. In this specific case it is possible to track and trace how: (i) a set of conspiratorial narratives circulating on social media were (ii) repeated by an influencer figure (Prime Minister), (iii) in turn these were repeated and amplified via mass media reporting of his comments, whereupon (iv) this invigorated and intensified the interests of some group members, resulting in (v) an increased volume of hate messaging targeted at Starmer. It is sometimes posited that the influence and significance of social media is overstated. However, this case clearly conveys how there is an ongoing sequence of online and offline actions and reactions that feed into how events and their impacts actually unfold.

The Siege of Ottawa

The 'Siege of Ottawa' began as a protest by angry lorry drivers against a cross-border Covid-19 vaccine mandate, in early 2022. Branding themselves as 'the freedom convoy', the truckers started demonstrating against a legal requirement to be vaccinated to cross the US-Canada border. But the anger driving the protests grew to include a range of anti-Covid restrictions, and was also directed at Prime Minister Justin Trudeau himself.

The truckers' actions functioned as a 'lightning rod' engaging a coalition of individuals and groups with a variety of grievances, including: people frustrated with lockdowns; those who had lost jobs to vaccine mandates; members of far-right groups; and those protesting against Justin Trudeau's government more generally.

Some amongst the convoy's self-appointed leaders had right-wing political affiliations and agendas, such as Tamara Lich, formerly a member of a fringe party that advocated secession for Western provinces. Pro-Trump, QAnon, and Confederate flags were also commonplace at the demonstrations that developed across Canada. They also spread internationally.

Social media traffic gravitating around the protests indicates high levels of adherence to several of the conspiracy theories traced in outline above: from 5G-enabled microchips in vaccines, through to QAnon tropes and references to the 'Great Reset' narrative.[250] Many posts online called for Trudeau to be prosecuted as 'a traitor'.

Consistent with the main thesis of this article, the interplay between online communications and offline action was especially salient. For three weeks in February 2022 about 400 lorries blocked the main avenue in front of Canada's parliament and senate, as well as numerous other streets. At the height of the protest, some 8,000 people arrived in the city, waving Canadian flags, 'F*** Trudeau' banners, and antivax slogans. As days turned to weeks, protesters set up a mini-city, with kitchen tents, fuel stockpiles, bouncy castles, and a hot tub. The protesters attracted support from right-wing politicians and media figures in America, raising in the region of CAD10 million (EUR 7.2 million) through crowdfunding websites, although these sites ultimately refused to release the funds because of concerns about some of the origins and potential uses of these monies. Protesters also blocked vital Canada-US border crossings, severely limiting US-bound traffic across the Ambassador Bridge in Ontario. Most worryingly, in Coutts, Alberta, police seized a cache of weapons with the RCMP stating that four out of 13 protesters detained along with the weapons were plotting to kill police officers.[251]

The sense of public consternation about the protests, especially in Ottawa, was reinforced by perceptions that the government's response was inadequate. For

21 days police took no action, infuriating residents, who had been subject to abuse, harassment, and noise pollution from the horn honking. This criticism reached such a crescendo that Ottawa's police chief resigned. Eventually, the national government moved to invoke Canada's Emergencies Act, enabling them to increase enforcement and freeze funding—measures that were criticised as constituting government overreach.[252]

The Siege of Ottawa demonstrated how the intersection of extremist groups and conspiracy narratives can seed deeply disruptive forms of collective protest. Equally salient is how the ideas and narratives of those involved clearly resonated with citizens in other countries, implying that this was not just a 'localised' protest, but a confluence of issues with a strong potential for international transfer.

Conclusion: Implications for Control

One of the most intriguing and striking features of the conspiracy-extremism nexus is its transcendence of orthodox conceptions of 'left' and 'right' in terms of political activism. Careful observation of pandemic-facing protest events in different countries reveals that groups who would previously have been understood to be opponents and adversaries are appearing alongside each other. Notably, some of the interests and ideas of largely anarchistic and anti-establishment collectives are resonating with hard-right groups (and vice versa). Whilst it is important not to overstate these connections, equally they should not be ignored.

A not dissimilar blurring and blending effect pertains to how the conspiracy-extremism nexus encompasses both online and offline action. It is simultaneously digital and analogue. One is not in the service of the other, rather both dimensions are integral to how and why this nexus is so troubling. It is certainly posing dilemmas for those engaged in designing the delivery of social control interventions. Traditional forms of violent extremism in pursuit of political or ideological goals clearly lie within the purview of counter-terrorism policing and the intelligence agencies. But when the focus of attention is on the potential to engage in violent conduct in pursuit of conspiratorial ideas, it is less clear that these same state social control assets are the most appropriate to implement any counter-measures. But neither is it obvious which other institutions can and should do so.

Scanning the globe, there are clear reasons for concern about this movement. There are multiple instances of violence that can be attributed to adherents of the movement. Some of which are public order type issues, but others are more targeted in nature. It is worth noting that, in this regard, these activities are getting close to fulfilling the key criterion associated with formal definitions of 'terrorism'—namely, the conduct of violence in pursuit of a political objective.[253]

However, we should be careful not to overstate the extent of linkages, nor the cohesiveness of the overarching movement. At present, and based upon limited empirical data available, it is not clear whether to conceive the social relationships as a loose network, or as more closely bonded such that it makes sense to talk in terms of them as a de facto networked group. Given such uncertainties, we have tended to use the concept of social movement. For this adequately balances the idea that it is a coalition formed from a multiplicity of historic interests. Equally, there seems to be a sense of common purpose to their activities.

Such complexities and intricacies notwithstanding, this chapter suggests that one outcome of the pandemic may have been to induce a new variant of violent extremism. It derives from a variety of different ideas and interests that have been progressively melded into a broader coalition that is anti-lockdown, anti-mask, and anti-vaccine, while holding an adversarial view of Western liberal democratic governance. A key moment in the development of this movement came when each of these public health interventions was framed as constituting an incursion into citizens' freedoms. Both individually and collectively, these and other measures were cast as part of a sinister plot by the state to establish a more pervasive and penetrating regimen of social control.

What has the expansion of digital technologies during the Covid-19 pandemic in Africa revealed about some of the key challenges the continent faces?

By Karen Allen

The effect of the Covid-19 pandemic across Africa, like in many other parts of the world has been varied but as a continent it has served to propel what was already an observable trend–a steady increase in internet usage–owing to greater access to mobile phone and smartphone technology, tablets, laptops and affordable data. Africa has witnessed a sixfold increase in the number of people using the internet between 2010 and 2022, with currently about 565 million online users.[254] Those in the formal employment sector, who were forced to work from home due to social distancing regulations, as well as an increased number of people online generally, contributed to more social interactions and other services being conducted online.

Despite internet use being uneven across the continent, this paper will argue that the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated a process of digital transformation that was already underway across Africa and consistent with the African Union's Digital transformation strategy.[255]

Furthermore, the pandemic exposed significant vulnerabilities in the African digital landscape. Those vulnerabilities have been amplified as numbers of online users have increased, thus potentially offering a bigger attack surface for malign actors to exploit. Health service providers, government ministries, and multilateral organisations such as the World Health Organisation, who experienced more online traffic as a result of the pandemic, reported a sharp increase in digital attacks by the first quarter of 2020.[256] Interpol reported a shift in cybercrime targets away from individuals and small businesses, to governments and critical health infrastructure. And the organisation's Sec-

retary General Jürgen Stock observed that cybercriminals are 'exploiting the fear and uncertainty caused by the unstable social and economic situation created by Covid 19'.[257]

The *modus operandi* of malign actors, among them state adversaries, criminal networks, hacktivists, lone operators, or those offering their services for a fee, are varied. They may include conventional cyber-attacks, online disinformation campaigns, and other internet-based crimes such as extortion, forgery, and fraud. The increased volumes of individuals online presents an expanding market for data storage and also exerts more pressure on infrastructure such as fibre optic cables which are needed to support increased demand. This in turn has created competition in the provision of that infrastructure which reflects existing geo-strategic competition to project power through digital spaces. It also raises questions of data sovereignty, given the borderless nature of the internet and the interdependencies between states, as part of a global digital ecosystem.

Finally, this paper argues that the Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted and intensified another pre-existing phenomenon: the potential for digitally enabled surveillance practices or norms to be diffused in a way that may not have happened so rapidly in the absence of a global pandemic. This paper examines these issues thematically.

Methodology

This paper combines a descriptive narrative and mixed method analysis drawing on the limited literature available in its approach. Much of the scholarship and commentary on the digital impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has focused on the global north rather than on Africa. Moreover, given the relative maturity of its digital ecosystem–the high level of digital penetration amongst the population and digitalisation of state activities–and its status as a financial hub for the continent, the analysis focuses primarily on the South African experience. The literature has been supported by targeted interviews with selected scholars and key thought leaders from academia, media, and civil society, who are engaged in monitoring the digital ecosystem in Africa.

Global Context and Geostrategic Competition

The global Covid-19 outbreak exposed underlying areas of geostrategic tension linked to the ownership of digital infrastructure in Africa and divergent views of political elites on the central question of how to balance open access to the internet and state sovereignty. It also revealed contested views on the uses and limits of surveillance technologies. These tensions predated Covid-19, but the global pandemic brought them to the fore and informed the debate about ensuring Africa does not become the 'weakest link' in a new global digital landscape—a

phrase used often by the Chair of the African Union's Cyber Security Expert Group Dr Abdul-Hakeem Ajijola.

A larger attack surface and shortcomings in digital literacy and digital security across many African government institutions, including ministries of health and justice, and vulnerabilities in the private sector and wider society provided opportunities for an increase in cyber breaches during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, according to Interpol. In its October 2021 Africa Cyberthreat Assessment Report,[258] Interpol identified online scams, business email compromise, digital extortion, ransomware, and botnets as being the most 'prominent' threats.[259] It also cited warnings by a Kenya-based cybersecurity firm that cybercrime was responsible for a 10 per cent loss in GDP in Africa 'at a cost of 4.12 billion US dollars in 2021'.[260]

In addition to the direct economic costs incurred through the pandemic due to job losses, reduced spending by individuals, and the need for state relief for citizens affected by Covid-19, cybercrime proliferation has been something of a wake-up call for policymakers in Africa to give greater policy priority to building resilience. South Africa is among a number of countries which has recently signed cybercrimes legislation[261] into law, giving prosecutors and investigators the tools to identify cybercrime and co-operate with other states experiencing similar threats. However, legislation alone is not sufficient to repel digital attacks.

A much-cited report by the security company Accenture claimed that 'South Africa has the third highest cybercrime victims worldwide'.[262] However, such vendor-driven statistics on cybercrime need to be viewed cautiously. They may underestimate the size of the threat given that many victims of cybercrime may not know they have been targeted. Vendors have also tended to focus on cyber dependent crimes—i.e. crimes that target a computer directly—rather than attacks on the wider digital ecosystem, because there is a competitive market for providing products or solutions to deal with cyber dependent threats.

Much has been written about the geostrategic importance of cyberspace in the field of international relations.[263] Two key points have dominated the discussion. Firstly, that the cyber domain challenges the conventional norm that the state has a monopoly on the use of force. Secondly, attribution in the digital environment is often problematic given that 'state actors can use proxy actors to conduct operations'. These observations are set out by Valeriano and Manness in *International Relations Theory and cyber security: threats conflicts and ethics in an emergent domain*.[264]

The question of how cyberspace is governed has boosted the argument as to why Africa needs to enhance its contribution to the field of digital diplomacy, despite the continent facing severe capacity constraints compared to major cyber powers.[265] South Africa, Kenya, Mauritius, and Morocco were all

> The pandemic exposed significant vulnerabilities in the African digital landscape.

represented on the UN mandated Group of Government Experts on Advancing Responsible State Behaviour in Cyberspace, which agreed on a number of norms, *inter alia* that international law applies in cyberspace.[266] Other UN forums, including the Open Ended Working Group on developments in the field of information and telecommunications in the context of international security and the Ad Hoc Committee to Elaborate a Comprehensive International Convention on Countering the use of Information and Communications Technologies for Criminal Purposes, continue to discuss the issue of cyber governance and cyber-crime more broadly.[267] All of these provide a potential platform for Africa to highlight its digital needs and priorities both as a marketplace and an innovator of digital technologies.[268] The Covid pandemic has served to amplify those needs.

Given the borderless nature of cyberspace, interactions online by both state and non-state actors amplify a complex web of power dynamics which can result in real-world consequences. For instance, the 2021 cyber breach experienced by South Africa's state-owned logistics company Transnet,[269] which runs ports across South Africa, resulted in major supply chain disruptions across neighbouring countries affecting food, medical, and energy distribution. The port of Durban which handles much of the freight for the wider region was reportedly operating at 10 per cent capacity during the incident, resulting in slow turnaround times for hauliers loading trucks taking supplies across borders by road.[270] It was a potent example of a critical infrastructure breach, which at the time of writing is still being investigated (and according to some commentary bears some resemblance in tactics used by other attacks allegedly sponsored by Russia). Regardless of the actor behind this attack it highlights the impact such intrusions have on a state's ability to function.

While the scope of this paper is to examine the societal impact of Covid-19 in Africa in the context of rapid digitisation, the broader power dynamics related to digital security, cyber espionage, and the ownership of data and digital infrastructure, provide an important backdrop to this debate. These themes are likely to gain wider global

prominence as Africa's digital maturity deepens and as scholarship in this field advances.[271]

Furthermore, Africa is not immune to 'cyber-wars' perpetuated by state adversaries —either as a target or a facilitator of such attacks through criminal networks. There is considerable knowledge and cyber innovation on the continent and a growing tech economy.[272] The use of commercial proxy actors to deliver cyber-attacks on behalf of state actors has also been observed with respect to information operations. Press reports of a Russian troll factory based in Ghana are an example of how such operations are being outsourced to Africa.[273]

At present many online threats, in Africa and South Africa in particular, are blamed on hacktivism, criminality, and personal vendetta rather than state sponsored attacks.[274] However, given the growing interconnectedness of the evolving digital ecosystem, Africa's role as both a target and an actor in state-on-state cyber-attacks cannot be ignored as its capacity increases. However, to date, China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea currently make up more than three quarters of all state sponsored cyber operations, with African countries having very little cyber offensive capacity.[275]

Conventional Cyber Attacks

As described above, the increase in the numbers of Africa-based residents online, caused by the strict lockdowns following the outbreak of Covid-19, provided a larger attack surface for cyber criminals. As a result, digital intrusions and threats such as ransomware attacks multiplied. This very much reflected a global trend.[276]

A consequence of more digital intrusions has been to exploit the very limited capacity of the state to protect its citizens and mitigate against risks. The spectre of South Africa's Department of Justice being hacked,[277] forcing a key pillar of democracy to adopt contingency plans in its offices and law courts, revealed vulnerabilities in an already stretched government, trying to deal with the primary threat of Covid-19. In September 2021 South Africa's Department of Justice was targeted in a ransomware attack in which up to 1200 files containing individuals' personal data may have been exposed.[278]

In the South African context, a further challenge to the state's authority was played out in July 2021 with a failed insurrection attempt linked to a power struggle within the governing African National Congress. Just days later, the country's ports and container terminals were paralysed after a cyber-attack on the state's logistics company Transnet.[279] Although attribution for the Transnet intrusion is still being determined, there has been much press speculation as to whether the two events were linked, with some suggesting that cyber-attacks are being used by a limited number of actors to destabilise the South African government internally.

While Covid-19 has not been the cause of such attacks, the expanded attack surface owing to more people being online, meant that the negative impact of such intrusions was greater. They had a compounding effect on an already stretched economy and further undermined trust in the government. Across Africa press reports examining case studies in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa suggest that the mining, health, education, and government IT sector have experienced the highest number of attacks, in part due to the increased amount of sensitive data they hold. This observation is echoed in Interpol's Africa Threat Assessment Report 2021.[280] The potential to create a single point of failure, given the concentration of data in particular 'nodes', provides a pretext for criminals and other actors to extract revenue through such targets, by deploying carefully targeted ransomware attacks.[281]

Information Operations

Covid-19 and an increased online presence in Africa has heralded a rapid increase in malicious social media information operations and disinformation campaigns.[282] Due to the way in which social media algorithms are designed, the potential reach of such online communications is increased as messages embedded in posts based on other interest areas (e.g. sport, pop culture, fashion) are networked and multiplied exponentially. In South Africa, a study into the phenomenon of digital vigilantism whereby existing xenophobic narratives which propagate the belief that foreign nationals are primarily responsible for South Africa's high rates of crime and unemployment and coalesce around hashtags such as #putsouthafricansfirst were played out online. Chinese nationals were among the groups singled out for attack. The study found that the potential reach of such discourses far extended what might have been expected in the 'real world'.[283]

Narratives surrounding Covid-19's genesis and debates about vaccine hesitancy online have provided a rich data set for future study. Research topics that may be particularly valuable to focus on within an African context include whether disinformation campaigns which challenge the science, scientists, and politics behind Covid-19 are the product of external influence or are borne out of existing internal cleavages?

'The intersection of Covid-19, security and digitisation' has laid bare geostrategic competition online, observes Noelle Cowling who leads the cyber programme at the Stellenbosch Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA).[284] The issue of vaccine diplomacy and the accompanying narratives that gained prominence on social media platforms across Africa are perhaps a useful example of these linkages.

While debates raged over so called 'vaccine hoarding'[285] and the withholding of vaccines by countries such as the UK and Canada from the developing world despite having

> China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea currently make up more than three quarters of all state sponsored cyber operations, with African countries having very little cyber offensive capacity.

a surplus,[286] Russian and Chinese vaccines were swiftly rolled out across many parts of Africa.[287] The general narrative that accompanied these events was that the West was selfish and inward looking, while the East was portrayed as altruistic—offering vaccines as a humanitarian gesture at a fraction of the price or, in the case of China, sometimes even free of charge.[288]

South Africa, which has strong historic and economic ties with both China and Russia is no stranger to polarised views on medical matters. It was the site of legal contestation over access to antiviral medicines during the height of the HIV-AIDS epidemic in the 1990s and early 2000s led by the Treatment Action Campaign.[289] Consequently, South Africa is a useful case study to examine the dynamics of such information campaigns. A sense of 'real world' solidarity was fostered between South Africa, China, and Russia in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, drawing on historical and economic ties and shared resistance to the former apartheid government. Additionally, Cuba (another Cold War ally) played the geostrategic card when it deployed its medical teams to South African hospitals in the first few months of the outbreak, in a move that dominated headlines globally.[290]

Vaccine diplomacy was instrumentalised by all sides as a powerful tool of influence during the Covid-19 pandemic to convey narratives of individualism, freedom, self-preservation, and survival. Western governments were all too often framed online as selfish and inward looking, perhaps even realist in as much as the rationale used by some Western governments to stockpile vaccines for their domestic use was one of existential survival. That was backed up in statements by leaders such as President Cyril Ramaphosa who chided Big Pharma for its 'selfish' and 'unjust' vaccine policy.[291] In contrast, the Chinese and Russian approach was framed more as a collective enterprise and as a global public good, even if ultimately, they too were pursuing national interests.[292]

As the pandemic advanced and the virus mutated, online narratives about Africa being "'locked out' from much of the Western world with the advent of the Omicron

variant, led to further reputational damage being inflicted on the UK and its Western allies. They were being framed as seeking to 'punish' Africa and South Africa for having notified the World Health organisation of the existence of the new Omicron variant. A BBC interview with Dr Ayoade Alakija, the co-chair of the African Union's Vaccine Delivery alliance, in which she berated the West for its travel bans and characterised them as being 'based on politics and not science', went viral.[293] That China also had introduced restrictions on foreign nationals entering the country was a message that was lost.

Therefore, from a NATO point of view, Cowling argues, 'Covid-19 damaged the reputation of the West in Africa'.[294] The subsequent locking out of many African countries with the discovery of the Omicron variant, 'simply added fuel to the fire'. The damage may well be long lasting as it underscores two controversial points: the perception in Africa that the continent is not seen as an equal partner by many Western powers and that Africa has little agency to influence global power dynamics.

The use of digital conspiracy theories, as part of information operations to undermine or confuse public health messaging during the pandemic, has also attracted interest of scholars and commentators. Two key conspiracy theories circulated on social media in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. One suggested that the introduction of 5G technology 'was either the cause of Covid-19 or was accelerating its speed'.[295] A second revolved around a theory that Bill Gates was taking advantage of Covid-19 vaccines as part of a global surveillance regime. The effects of these conspiracies on the wider population in Africa appear to have been minimal. There are other factors that perhaps play a greater role in vaccine hesitancy in African states, such as suspicion towards science-based, modern medicine.

Research has focused on communities in the US which have propagated such theories, particularly the alt-right Make America Great Again (MAGA) movements. Social scientists have asked how MAGA came to coalesce with the white body politic in South Africa. US-based organisations perpetuating conspiracy theories have had some influence on social media content generated in South Africa. However, this author would concur with scholars who have undertaken this research and argued that the impact has been marginal.[296] Firstly, the MAGA and the white South African body politic constituencies are very different (partly due to the contrasting demographics between South Africa where the white population represents less than seven per cent of the total population and the United States where Caucasians represent 75 per cent).[297] While there are limited overlapping interests that become conflated at particular points in time, data scientists such as Kyle Finlay, an independent researcher based in South Africa who writes frequently about this subject both academically and via

the social media handle @superlinear on Twitter, observed that 'the shared interests of the two groups rapidly dropped off after the Capitol riots,' revealing the fragility of such ties.[298]

One could also argue that indigenous mistrust of vaccines in South Africa may have propelled vaccine hesitancy to a greater extent than American conspiracy theories. This indigenous mistrust derives from cultural norms which privilege traditional medicine over Western medicine, apartheid era history in which medical experiments were conducted on black individuals as part of infamous projects such as Project Coast, and mistrust of the authorities and Big Pharma given the experience of inequitable access to AIDS drugs in the 1990s.[299] Finlay concludes that conspiracy theories in South Africa shed light on how conspiracies are strategically enacted to articulate specific grievances and contestations (be they issues about religion or land).[300] Yet they are highly context specific. This may make them harder to export.

Given the rapid uptake of digital technologies during the pandemic, the potential for information operations to sow divisions or amplify existing cleavages was greatly increased. This could be observed with the emergence of a phenomenon described as digital vigilantism in South Africa during the Covid pandemic.[301] Touchstone issues such as nationalism or xenophobia become points of contestation, help to foster a sense of community online, and can result in real world consequences. In South Africa, at the start of the pandemic, narratives blaming foreign nationals for having brought Covid-19 to South Africa subsequently morphed into broader discussions about foreigners taking South African jobs.[302]

South Africa has a painful history of xenophobia which resulted in violent outbursts peaking in 2008 and 2013 and 2020.[303] A study of digital vigilantism in South Africa found that the networked impact of social media platforms enabled such narratives during Covid-19 to reach a far greater audience then they might otherwise have done.[304] Social media users who shared the content in many cases became 'unwitting foot-solders' in perpetuating extremist narratives.[305]

A variety of actors tapped into areas of fragmentation during the Covid-19 pandemic based on race, class, and nationality. Cowling describes social media as the 'kryptonite behind the fragmentation', because disinformation online operationalises existing societal cleavages and is extremely hard to counter. It has also led to a pluralism of truths whereby all voices online are given parity and the important issue of context is lost all too often. That states struggle to produce counter-narratives backed up by facts, not only demonstrates state weakness but it also exposes a gaping vulnerability which protagonists of information operations may wish to exploit in future.

Reports indictate that the use of fake sites or troll factories, such as the widely reported case of Russia's Yevgeny Prigozhin's empire, are behind inauthentic accounts.[306] These have sought to influence events in Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Sudan, and Libya, which were eventually taken down by Facebook. It concerned major political events including elections in Madagascar and other political events in the DRC and Ivory Coast. They offer a flavour of the future potential of Africa as both a target and a collaborator in state backed information operations. Given the democratic fragility of many African states with limited oversight mechanisms, Africa could potentially become a weak link in the chain for information/disinformation campaigns.[307] Furthermore, given its relatively young population who are enthusiastic adopters of digital technology, the foundations for future information operations may well have been laid.[308]

Digital Infrastructure

Covid-19 has also exposed a phenomenon that was already present in Africa but is expanding rapidly: digital power concentration. Digital dependence is largely being built on the back of strategic dependence. Covid-19 has propelled forward current investments in information technology, which is overwhelmingly being provided by foreign states and their commercial proxies.

States such as South Africa and Kenya have progressed rapidly in developing e-government services, from billing systems to centralised biometric databases.[309] Such databases give citizens a digital identity and store personal data for access to important services such as welfare payments. Yet Covid-19 has exposed the vulnerabilities of those excluded from such a system, many of them foreign African nationals, who were effectively digitally invisible (owing to a lack of paperwork in some cases because their details were still being entered into a centralised database) and consequently denied access to financial Covid relief. The pandemic has shone a spotlight on digital inequalities on a massive scale.[310] With biases baked into algorithms by the developers of the technology, who are largely situated in the Global North, that sense of exclusion may well be perpetuated and, in extreme cases, fuel instability.

A study by IT Web and Amazon Web Services, indicates a vast appetite within the public sector across Africa to accelerate the use of cloud computing, particularly in the education sector.[311] One of the stated benefits of the technology is the ability to maintain continuity of service. Google Cloud and Microsoft Azure currently dominate the market on the continent for cloud services.[312] Both companies are American tech giants and AWS in particular has moved aggressively in recent years to secure a foothold in the African market.[313] While there will be concerns about tech concentration, this US presence potentially serves as a count-

er-weight to Chinese tech influence on the continent through companies such as Huawei, which is providing much of Africa's 5G technology. Increasingly we can expect to see Africa become the site of digital competition and contestation reflecting geostrategic rivalries, which are not limited to the tech space. However, this may be the price that has to be paid to achieve Africa's digital transformation ambitions given limited large-scale indigenous capacity.[314]

Another concern of digital infrastructure being concentrated in the hands of just a few companies with important geostrategic ties is the increased prospect of cyber espionage, argues Noelle Cowling in a joint publication with Nathaniel Allen for the Brookings Institute.[315] Cyber espionage may include not only state secrets but also intellectual property in a highly competitive tech market. To what extent can countries such as South Africa retain sovereignty over their citizens' data given that so much digital activity is currently outsourced to foreign companies?

However, Allen and Cowling argue that because the African continent is a late adopter of many digital technologies, it can potentially benefit from best practice in digital security.[316] This positive outlook rests on the assumption that African countries have the capacity to operationalise the best practices in cyber security. However, competing policy priorities such as addressing youth unemployment and economic development suggest this could be an area of vulnerability.[317] South Africa has recently introduced a robust Cybercrimes Act which brings it up to the highest international standards but it is struggling to enact legislation to implement tougher cybersecurity measures in part because of the mistrust between the state sector and private sector (where much of the know-how on cyber security resides).[318]

Surveillance and Norms

Covid-19 and digitisation in Africa have exposed the continent's geostrategic position as a potential theatre in which competing ideologies (cyber sovereignty versus open and free cyberspace) are played out. These divergent perspectives are set out in a Belfer Centre paper, which argues that competing interests in cyberspace—a domain which transcends state borders—reflect the 'demands of three distinct actors, the state, the citizen and the international community'. [319] In short, these tensions reflect competing perspectives on how cyberspace is conceptualised as part of a global international order. In particular, it reflects a tension between state sovereignty and the protection of individual human rights in cyberspace. Is the internet a platform for freedom of speech or should the state be allowed to impose limits on this freedom in the interests of national sovereignty and security? These areas of contestation have dominated international discussions seeking to introduce norms and a rules-based order in cyberspace.[320]

We have seen this played out across Africa during the Covid pandemic (although arguably not *as a result of* the pandemic) with political elites in, for example, Nigeria closing down access to social media platforms such as Twitter for seven months, arguing that they posed a threat to national security.[321] With more people online as a consequence of the pandemic, the potential to influence a wider audience is greater. However, the trend towards internet shutdowns preceded the arrival of Covid-19 in Africa. In 2019 at least 10 African countries shut down the internet, with tactics including 'throttling of internet speed, over blocking of specific web content such as Facebook or Twitter, to banning internet access altogether.'[322] Togo, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Somalia were among the states denying access to the internet for citizens. Typically, this has happened during times of political contestation or national crisis.

However, a broader issue concerns human rights in cyberspace and state surveillance. Some are concerned that personal privacy is at risk, especially through technologies such as location monitoring, and fear that such technologies and data could be re-purposed once the pandemic has receded. In countries such as South Africa the government offered smartphone apps using Bluetooth technology to send individuals alerts if they had been exposed to the virus.[323] This was possible because smartphone penetration had risen sharply in South Africa owing to the availability of cheaper models, according to a study undertaken by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA).[324] The study found that smartphone penetration had increased to 91 per cent in South Africa since the start of the pandemic. ICASA recorded 53.4 million smartphone subscriptions in September 2019.[325] That was just short of South Africa's 58.78 million population figure for 2019. Although there was much media commentary about insidious surveillance emerging, the system in South Africa required users to opt in voluntarily. At the time of writing, there were no figures available for what proportion of smartphone users had joined this initiative and traded personal privacy for the peace of mind of knowing whether they had been in contact with someone infected with the virus.

However, there are concerns that China as a major supplier of relatively cheap technology in Africa is also exporting surveillance norms. This concern had been raised by civil society organisations in South Africa, even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The much-cited data breach uncovered by *Le Monde* in 2017 at the Chinese-built African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa, where data was routinely copied to a server in Shanghai, has amplified this discourse.[326]

China has invested extensively in Africa as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, focusing on the infrastructure which underpins cyberspace and affordable tech.[327] African countries make up around a third of all projects and the initiative is described by some ana-

lysts as China's signature vision for re-shaping global engagements.[328] South Africa and Kenya's smart cities initiatives, in which networked technology is positioned as a means to fast track economic development, are being powered by the Chinese tech giant Huawei and are framed by issues such as security, modernity, and convenience for those who choose to live in them.[329] Hikvision is the major supplier of CCTV cameras in South Africa and across the continent, and Huawei smartphones are proving to be an affordable alternative to US (iPhone), South Korean (Samsung), or Swedish (Ericsson) rivals.

Given the dominant Western narrative that the driving force behind China's assertive courting of African states is not only to cement trade ties, but also to advance Chinese strategic interests in the region, concerns over surveillance culture in an increasingly interconnected world, are growing.[330] Civil society actors have raised concerns that the expanding Chinese presence could result in more cyber espionage and a greater surveillance culture across Africa, as surveillance norms are baked into the technologies Chinese exports such as mobile phones, video security, and communications infrastructure.[331]

Kai Fu Lee, in a Foreign Policy article on the Data Arms Race and Privacy, asserts that Chinese users are willing to trade their personal privacy for convenience or safety.[332] A moot question is whether in the light of the existential threat posed by Covid-19, African countries such as South Africa are also prepared to engage in a similar trade off?

One can make a case that African populations were already confronted with this trade-off independently of Covid-19. The threat of violent crime in South Africa remains stubbornly high.[333] It has enabled surveillance culture to be adopted, driven largely by vendors in a competitive security market, and it has done so with some degree of encroachment on personal privacy and human rights. The proliferation of public space security and CCTV cameras in affluent parts of South Africa as well as in many other African cities underscores this trend.[334] Tough data protection legislation in the form of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) in South Africa is designed to safeguard personal privacy and surveillance overreach.[335] However, POPIA does have exemptions in cases of national security. Midway through the Covid-19 pandemic, the South African government experienced what was broadly described as an 'insurrection' fuelled by social media mis/disinformation—an attempt to challenge the state's law enforcement capabilities and administration of President Cyril Ramaphosa—[336] that could then act as a pretext for deepening surveillance culture.

However, a key inhibitor to a mass rollout of surveillance tools across Africa in the immediate future are 'resource constraints and government capacity'. In other words,

the mass rollout of surveillance tools may be hypothetically attractive to political elites in African states where democratic oversight mechanisms are weak, but operationalisation may be limited. Nevertheless, this undermines the normative argument and replaces it with one of efficiency, availability, and expediency.

Conclusion

Africa was already experiencing rapidly advancing, albeit unequal, access to digital technology prior to the Covid-19 pandemic driven largely by economic imperatives.[337] The arrival of Covid-19 altered the digital landscape in that it accelerated the digitisation of economic activity, education, and healthcare but also provided a greater attack surface for malevolent actors to exploit. By virtue of more people being online, the opportunities to mount cyber-attacks dramatically increased. As Interpol and several other researchers observed, Covid-19 provided an opportunity for 'predatory crime behaviour'.[338] Online fraud and other cyber-enabled crimes persist as a particular area of concern for law enforcement agencies.

Furthermore, the potential for disinformation campaigns to reach a wider audience by virtue of a greater public presence online, was also exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet disinformation campaigns already existed prior to the pandemic. Prominent examples are the Cambridge Analytica ventures in Kenya and Nigeria whereby the firm's operatives tapped into and amplified existing fears of voters based on ethnicity and religion via social media.[339] Although digital vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic may well make the continent a greater target for future malign cyber operations by a variety of actors, its role as an important theatre of operations between state adversaries may well be overstated. However, criminal actors, who may well be hired as proxies, pose a growing threat. Therefore, without urgent mitigation measures, enacting of response protocols, and attempts to foster greater African agency and co-operation with the private sector to develop and deepen knowledge–Africa may become a 'digital wild west'.

The unexpected effects of Jair Bolsonaro's anti-vaccination and alternate reality rhetoric in Brazil

By Dr Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho

Introduction

On 24 October 2021, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, said in a live broadcast that 'official reports from the UK government suggest that fully vaccinated people [...] are developing acquired immunodeficiency syndrome much faster than anticipated'. Immediately thereafter, several of his followers posted this declaration on social media despite it being a scientific and empirical absurdity. This was only the most recent of his statements during the pandemic that denied the reality and risks of the virus or promoted mis- and disinformation about Covid-19. This contributed to the creation of an alternative reality concerning the impact of the virus in Brazil. The president and many government actors discredited any scientific data or empirical evidence regarding its spread in the country. Given this context it is perhaps not surprising that Brazil became the country with the second highest Covid-19 death rate worldwide.

Methodology

This chapter focuses on statements by President Bolsonaro on Covid-19 and how they created an alternative reality that had serious implications for how Brazilians responded to the pandemic. It sets out with a discussion on terminology, especially concepts such as disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information, since these are fundamental terms in this discussion.

Then, this chapter proceeds with a hermeneutic analysis of how President Bolsonaro presented so-called 'fake news' in his public statements and speeches. Furthermore, it demonstrates how this alternative reality promoted mistrust and resistance to public health in the Brazilian population and furthered the spread of the virus given the subsequently inadequate health care response of the government. This analysis is based on an assessment

of 279 quotes from President Bolsonaro from 15 March 2020 to 28 January 2022. They are drawn from 43 official government statements and speeches, 101 interviews conducted by several Brazilian media outlets and radio stations, 14 television appearances, 31 Twitter, seven Facebook, one Instagram, and 33 YouTube social media postings, together with 49, mostly live speeches from different political events across Brazil. The media outlets include Jovem Pan, Gazeta do Povo, Globo, CNN Brasil, Jornal da Cidade Online, and Veja; the radio stations include Rádio Viva, Rádio Sociedade da BAHIA, Rádio Farol, Rádio Nova Regional, Rádio Capital Notícia, Rádio Brado, Rádio 93, Rádio ABC – Novo Hamburgo, and Rádio Rock.

All materials are either written or audio-recorded and were released on social media, by media outlets, and/or published on the government's official website (gov.br). Visual materials were not included in this sample, as this chapter focuses solely on President's rhetoric around Covid-19 and the vaccination campaign.

The third part examines the unexpected effects of Bolsonaro's discourse on the general public. It highlights a lack of correlation between Bolsonaro's rhetoric, and the restrictions, public health measures, and vaccination campaigns which gradually contributed to an improvement in the Covid-19 situation. It further analyses how successful strategic communications, previously applied in the country to build trust in vaccination campaigns, played a stronger role than the 'fake news' promoted by the president. The article also explores how civil society actors and government bodies contradicted the president's declarations to promote and design an evidence-based narrative for implementing public policies to combat the spread of the virus.

Conceptual remarks

Social media is a means of disseminating information at an unprecedented pace and scale.[340] Individuals can communicate in an almost unrestrained environment accessible to all, and politicians and public figures have used this space to address their target audiences directly. According to Fernanda Barth, mass media (including television, printed journals, and radio) plays an important role in constructing a political image.[341] The emergence of social media, however, transformed so-called cyberspace into a new arena for communication and social interaction, organisation, and transaction.[342] Political debates take place increasingly in a virtual environment, flexible enough to allow a multiplicity of actors, regardless of their position in society, to exchange information at unparalleled speed.[343]

However, flexibility has important drawbacks. The amount of available information which circulates in the public and private spheres contributes to a relativisation of truth and is subject to the judgement of individuals rather than any objective as-

sessment made by official gatekeepers and institutions.[344] Commonly referred to as the 'post-truth' era, the term refers to 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.[345] Against this backdrop, information becomes easily distorted or inaccurate, and is sometimes published with the purpose of misleading an audience in order to manipulate it.[346] Fake news is exacerbated in a virtual environment where all citizens have the power to create information and share it on a massive scale. As argued by Adriana Teixeira, the digital landscape confers ever more power to 'fake news' as its reach and effect are amplified.[347] Since 'fake news' is a rather imprecise term, it is helpful to think about it in terms of three main categories, identified by Wardle and Derakhshan as:

Misinformation	False information not formulated or spread with the purpose of causing harm.
Disinformation	False or fabricated information intended to mislead or harm an individual, group, organisation, or nation.
Mal-Information	Fact-based information intended to mislead an individual, group, organisation, or nation.[348]

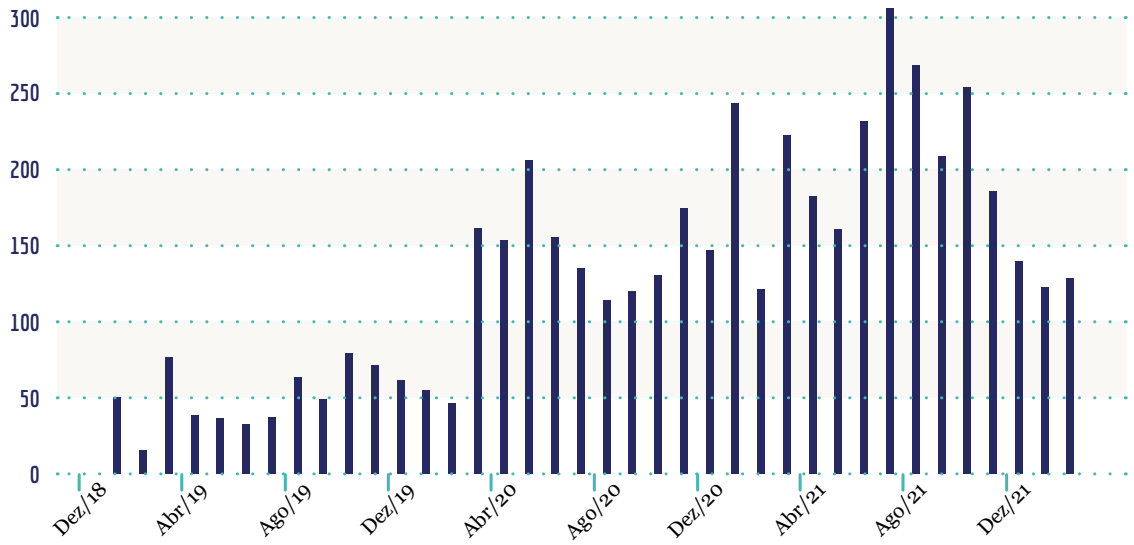
'Fake News' in Bolsonaro's Brazil during the Covid pandemic

In Brazil, the disclosure of 'fake news' in cyberspace was instrumental in the 2018 general election. Considered one of the world's most connected societies, Bolsonaro could reach Brazil's population easily through social media which provided a space to interact directly and establish a close relationship with his audience.[349] As such, the political landscape has become increasingly exposed to risks associated with the circulation of information in a virtual setting.[350]

The situation deteriorated with the onset of the pandemic, when the leading figure of authority in Brazil (the president) became the primary source of disinformation and mal-information. The following figure illustrates the number of false assertions made by Bolsonaro relating to the pandemic. It demonstrates how 'fake news' increased after the first case of Covid-19 was identified in Brazil in February 2020.[351]

Closer inspection of Bolsonaro's discourse throughout the Covid-19 pandemic points to a pattern where: a) assertions are made with no factual grounding or b) scientific data is manipulated and distorted for the purpose of downplaying the lethal effects of the virus. More precisely, this chapter identifies four main categories in the type of information disseminated employed by the President on the topic of Covid-19 in Brazil.

First, Bolsonaro sought to **downplay the health effects of the virus**, portraying it



False statements or distorted information by Bolsonaro each month (Jan 2018 – February 2022)

as a minor flu or 'gripezinha' on several occasions.[352] In March 2020, the president announced that 90 per cent of infected patients had not experienced Covid-19 related symptoms: 'many of you […] have already been infected in the past without noticing'.[353] Meanwhile, reports across the world suggested otherwise. Japanese epidemiologists concluded that only 30.8 per cent of infected individuals might have been asymptomatic.[354] Another tendency was to compare Covid mortality rates with those of influenza (H1N1). However, preliminary studies conducted since April 2020, when Bolsonaro first made his comparison, already emphasised an important difference. 0.01 to 0.08 per cent of the influenza-infected population had died of the disease, while the mortality rate linked to Covid-19 was found to have reached 1.6 per cent, according to Bern University researchers, and 0.5 per cent based on the findings of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.[355]

Further, an important pillar of President Bolsonaro's rhetoric was the **promotion of scientifically unproven pharmaceutical measures** as miraculous cures for the virus. These included hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, azithromycin, and chloroquine, idealised as the most effective means to contain the virus, despite scientific research evidence to the contrary already available in the early stages of the pandemic.[356] In some instances, doctors even complained about being pressured by public health authorities to prescribe medicine containing chloroquine to Covid-19 patients.[357]

Third, the **efficacy of physical distancing and other public health restrictions was consistently de-legitimised** by the President. They were framed as a constraint on the nation's economy and as being deadlier for 'the poorest'–who 'cannot be deprived of their right to freely come and go, since they must bring bread to their families'–than the virus itself.[358] Bolsonaro sought to associate scientifically approved measures with economic failure, pointing to '10 million formal job losses [due to the lockdown]' in May 2020.[359] The IBGE (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*), however, found an increase of 158,000 workers in the first three months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, mirroring a fall of 559,000 jobs compared to the last trimester in 2019.[360]

Finally, and key to uncovering the extent to which previous strategic communications campaigns in Brazil had played a significant role in how Brazilians use vaccines, Bolsonaro promoted an **anti-vaccination discourse**, insisting that the administering of doses should not be compulsory.[361] The presumed efficacy of chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, normally used in treating malaria or inflammatory conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, was reinforced to highlight the uncertain nature of the vaccine and portray its mandate as an attack on personal freedom.[362] As the pandemic progressed and vaccination rates increased, the president continued to delegitimise its efficacy, arguing that the vaccine was not appropriate for teenagers[363]–despite the findings of a study published in the *New England Medical Journal* pointing to the effectiveness of the vaccine for adolescents between 12 and 15 years old.[364] On 18 December 2020, the president suggested the vaccine developed by Pfizer-BioNTech could turn people into crocodiles or bearded women.[365] This announcement triggered a humorous reaction with some people arriving at vaccination centres dressed as crocodiles. One journalist from a leading Brazilian broadcaster, TV Globo, even appeared in a crocodile costume on a live show.[366]

The examples of President Bolsonaro's rhetoric presented in this chapter only capture a small fraction of the false and distorted information disseminated by the president. In their totality, however, his pronouncements had the effect of undermining any sense of urgency in tackling the pandemic as cyberspace was inundated with an excess of disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information, denying the serious nature of the virus and discrediting the scientific community. Against this backdrop, the question remains as to what effect Bolsonaro's discourse actually had on how the pandemic played out in Brazil.

The limited reach of Bolsonaro's 'fake news' discourse: the influential legacy of vaccination campaigns in Brazil

Having outlined President Bolsonaro's rhetoric surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, what were the empirical effects of disinformation and mal-information on

the evolution of the pandemic across the country? Is there a traceable correlation between his pronouncements, strategically coloured by 'fake news' spread across nationwide social media platforms, and the progression of the virus in Brazil?

On 26 February 2020, Brazil reported its first Covid-19 case, marking the beginning of infections in Latin America. The initial stages of the pandemic were undeniably challenging. Bolsonaro's reluctance to acknowledge the gravity of the virus and react accordingly was accompanied by record-high infection rates in Brazil.[367] The immediate reaction of the government when first faced with the pandemic followed Bolsonaro's rhetoric of dismissal of the risks the virus represented. The only initiative the federal government took was to impose quarantine measures for detected Covid-19 cases. Coordination at the federal level was close to non-existent. No national strategy was developed by public health institutions. At the same time, the central government insisted on adopting pharmaceutical measures promoted aggressively by Bolsonaro but lacking any scientific proof.[368] The virus was thus considered unimportant. Meanwhile any sense of urgency was hidden behind a veil of false information, and official narratives were lacking in scientific evidence.

The initial results of this negligence by the central government, exacerbated by President Bolsonaro's discourse, were grim. In July 2020, more than 45,000 infections and 1,000 deaths were identified each day in what came to be known as the first Covid-19 wave in Brazil. Cases gradually decreased to less than 10,000 daily infections and 400 deaths around November 2020. A new peak was reached in April 2021 (approximately 77,000 cases and more than 4,000 deaths registered each day) before dropping again.[369] Cases reached more than 200,000 infections per day in February 2021.[370] Importantly, however, the mortality rate did not witness as dramatic a rise as the number of infections, given that 1,000 deaths were registered in February 2022, lower than at the previous peak.[371]

As Covid-19 vaccines began to be acquired by countries across the world, implementation strategies in Brazil experienced significant hurdles with the central government failing to supply the nation with sufficient medical equipment and other resources such as individual protection equipment or oxygen. The same happened with the supply of vaccines that were not acquired in sufficient numbers by the government. However, '[v]accine acceptance in Brazil is generally higher than in other countries because of the country's renowned immunization programs and campaigns before the pandemic'.[372] In fact, only 10 per cent of the Brazilian population expressed discontent and unwillingness to receive a Covid-19 shot.[373] Consequently, the ground was set for the implementation of a national vaccination campaign starting on 18 January 2021. By 26 February 2022, almost 400,000,000 doses had been administered on Brazilian soil, enough to vaccinate 92.7 per cent of the

population (assuming each individual was given two doses).[374] Importantly, such progress might account for the decreasing number of deaths related to the virus, regardless of the number of daily infections.

How can the large-scale acceptance of Brazilian society towards the vaccine be explained? In brief, by the existence of a discourse favourable to vaccines—an 'immunisation culture' in Brazil—created and shaped by *strategic communication*s.[375] Here, strategic communications is understood as 'the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives'.[376] This instrumentalises a more essentialist understanding of strategic communications as presented in recent publications of the NATO Strategic Communications Terminology Working Group.[377]

According to Vieira da Rocha, the use of strategic means of communication for the nationwide endorsement of vaccination campaigns in Brazil can be traced back as far as the 1920s.[378] However, the history of vaccination in Brazil was off to a bumpy start—as shown for example in the 1904 *Revolta da Vacina*.[379] Gradually, however, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the emergence of radio and cinema as political instruments for communication. In the public health sector, these were used for mass persuasion and to convince the population to comply with health authorities' requirements. By the 1940s the idea of educating to prevent illnesses was consolidated in government and programmes were undertaken to teach citizens new hygiene customs and practices. Such practices were accompanied by the creation of new federal institutions to tackle exclusively rural endemics, including the *Departamento Nacional de Endemias Rurais* (DNERu)–an organ of the Health Ministry–which conducted a vaccination programme against smallpox between 1958 and 1961.[380]

By the 1970s, the discourse around vaccination was adapted to increase the efficiency with which information was disseminated, hoping to further transform public health practices on an individual and collective level. In 1973, for instance, the *Programa Nacional de Imunizações*[381] (PNI) emerged to facilitate dialogue with parents of children less than a year old and to promote widespread vaccination campaigns.[382] Importantly, these strategies gave way to a rhetoric of community participation within national health programmes in light of the eighth National Health Conference of 1986. The process of eradicating poliomyelitis (polio) in Brazil during the 1980s is a poignant case.

An innovative polio eradication brand was developed to ensure long-term and large-scale public engagement with the initiative. Designers for marketing brand logos created a cartoon character resembling a drop of vaccine, playful and familiar in the eyes of young Brazilians.[383] In order to take

the strategic communications initiative a step further, the *Projeto de Divulgação para o Programa de Imunizações* launched a nationwide competition to choose a name for what would soon become the national face of the polio vaccine. The entire nation was mobilised in an effort to 'baptise' the cartoon character, but more importantly engage in the vaccination campaign. Finally, the national jury selected 'Zé Gotinha' as the winner. It would become a symbol of the successful fight against polio, a national hero capable of eradicating the illness. As a result, the vaccination campaign became associated with a positive and comforting experience, gaining the trust of Brazilians nationwide, and for the long-term.[384]

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the culture of immunisation in Brazil planted the seeds of a growing distrust towards the federal government, especially after the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine was officially deemed effective on 9 November 2020.[385] The positive announcement prompted a wave of political de-legitimation worldwide. A recent online survey found that the vaccine announcement caused a 28.6 and 23.1 per cent drop in trust levels of civil society trust towards the governments of the United States and United Kingdom respectively.[386] According to the authors of the study, this phenomenon can be understood as a psychological reaction during unsettling times, rather than a critique of government initiatives. Given the high levels of anxiety caused by the pandemic, the vaccine became a source of certainty individuals could 'pin their hopes on'.[387] Perceptions of the government's efficiency also changed relative to the announcement of the vaccine which caused individuals to believe that governments were less competent in dealing with the virus than scientists.[388]

Although both more short-term psychological reactions might have played a role in Brazilians' detachment from Bolsonaro's approach to the pandemic, the legacy of long-term strategic communications promoting support for and acceptance of vaccines and other health measures cannot be ignored. More precisely, the lack of central government legitimacy may be observed in two different areas: cyberspace (demonstrating poor support for Bolsonaro's anti-vaccination discourse) and the political landscape (showing fractures between federal and state authorities).

On the one hand, despite the revolutionary nature of social media as a medium for communication and engagement with wider audiences, the political debate initiated by Bolsonaro across virtual platforms has attracted more criticism than support. A study conducted by Clara M. Fernandez et al. to measure the impact of Bolsonaro's assertion that the vaccine should not be compulsory (Twitter, 31 August 2021) revealed interesting findings.[389] The study focused on the most re-tweeted posts on the subject collected from 1-7 September 2021 to measure the audience's level of engagement with different arguments. The study identified four types of content. The most re-tweeted

> His [Bolsonaro's] pronouncements had the effect of undermining any sense of urgency in tackling the pandemic as cyberspace was inundated with an excess of disinformation, misinformation, and mal-information.

posts concerned the Vaccine Revolt, used with irony to de-legitimise individuals who showed resistance vis-à-vis the vaccine. The second most re-tweeted posts associated the vaccine with a potential solution to the public health crisis. In the third, Bolsonaro's discourse was expressly supported, with the vaccine considered to be a constraint on personal freedom. This tweet category was highly politicised and favoured the president's approach. Finally, the least re-tweeted segment directly criticised Bolsonaro—his behaviour and conduct was condemned in tweets which relied on elaborate arguments in favour of the vaccine.[390] Importantly, in the four discussions which generated the most conversation and engagement (measured by the number of re-tweets), only one supported Bolsonaro's approach.[391]

By contrast, faced with such a lack of initiative by the central government, Brazilian states and municipalities gradually detached themselves from Bolsonaro's approach. By mid-March 2020, they sought to contain the virus on a local level, implementing additional public health restrictions, although most states were registering less than 10 Covid cases and no deaths in their jurisdiction at the time. Some officials even recommended state-wide lockdown measures in July 2020.[392] Furthermore, the country's judicial system also supported local authorities' independence from the federal government. The Supreme Court decided to grant states, districts, and municipalities discretionary power to manage the pandemic through the implementation of non-pharmaceutical measures on 15 April 2021.[393] Thus, as the pandemic continued, a divide emerged between the federal government (under the rule of Bolsonaro) and municipalities and sub-national entities who enjoy a significant level of independence. This allowed for the creation of an alternative reality away from the negative discourse of Bolsonaro—which was characterised by false and misleading information—and an environment favourable to immunisation campaigns at a national level.

Conclusion

Considering the pronouncements of Brazilian President Bolsonaro concerning

Covid-19 from March 2020 to January 2022, it may be concluded that they contributed to the construction of an alternative reality that had serious implications for the ways in which Brazil addressed the pandemic.

After a discussion of terminology used in this study, this chapter employed a hermeneutic analysis of the pronouncements of the president. It demonstrated how in his role as a leader, he promoted an alternative reality of a less-harmful virus, that prevented the state from adequately tackling the spread of the virus through public health policies and cooperation at the national level.

This hermeneutic analysis demonstrated that Bolsonaro's rhetoric consistently sought to minimise the health effects of the virus through the promotion of 'fake news' around pharmaceutical measures lacking any scientific evidence and framed as miraculous cures for the virus. Bolsonaro also de-legitimised the efficacy of physical distancing and other public health restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of the virus while sustaining an anti-vaccination discourse.

Focusing on the vaccination discourse, this analysis demonstrated that despite the president's anti-vaccination rhetoric, the country's population embraced the vaccination campaign vigorously, contributing to an improvement in the state of the pandemic across the country. This response to vaccination actually ran counter to the president's discourse based on misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information in an information environment which facilitates the spread of false information.

Two dominant factors emerge. One echoes the study carried out by Shaun et al. whose results suggested that factors other than the actions and performance of governments in the context of the pandemic can explain levels of trust (or lack of it) in governments.[394] The second factor speaks directly to strategic communications. Successful strategic communications previously pursued in the country over decades to build up trust in vaccination campaigns proved stronger–powerful enough to counterpoint so-called 'fake news' promoted by the president. This conclusion underlines the importance of strategic communications mechanisms for vaccine-uptake in society. Steps that were taken many decades before Covid-19 first emerged are still proving effective in confronting disinformation and misinformation, even when it originates from the country's most authoritative figure.

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