

The Tyranny of Coronaphobia - Open The Magazine

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*Academic and former UN Assistant Secretary General **Ramesh Thakur** had suffered under the pressure, propaganda and manipulation that preceded the Iraq war of 2003. Seventeen years later, he sees history repeating itself with the coronavirus pandemic—especially with the imposition of quarantines. With arguments and data, albeit controversially, the Indian-born, Canadian-educated political scientist and international security expert—who worked around the globe, settled in Australia and reached the frontline of the UN—fears that “coronaphobia” is preventing us from seeing the whole picture.*

Hugo Alconada Mon (HAM): Based on your extraordinary background, what worries you the most DURING this global pandemic? “Coronaphobia”, maybe, as you signalled in your [latest article for Japan Times](#)?

Ramesh Thakur (RT): I’ve had two big worries during the pandemic, starting from the very beginning and still ongoing. Both relate to my sense that “[coronaphobia](#)” has taken over as the basis of government policy in so many countries, with a complete loss of perspective that life is a balance of risks pretty much on a daily basis.

First, the extent to which dominant majorities of peoples in countries with universal literacy can be successfully terrified into surrendering their civil liberties and individual freedoms has come as a frightening shock. There is this truly [confronting video](#) of the police in Melbourne assaulting a small young woman—for not wearing a mask! On the one hand, the evidence base for the scale and gravity of the Covid-19 pandemic is surprisingly thin in comparison to the myriad other threats to our health that we face every year. We don’t ban cars on the reasoning that every life counts and even one traffic death is one too many lives lost. Instead, we trade a level of convenience for a level of risk to life and limb.

On the other hand, the restrictions imposed on everyday life as we know it have been far more draconian than anything previously done, even during World War II and the great 1918-19 flu. In present circumstances, the argument for the crucial importance of liberties has been made most eloquently by former UK Supreme Court Justice [Lord Sumption](#) in a *BBC* interview on March 31st, and repeated several times since. But it’s also an argument that Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of America (and therefore suspect in the post-Black Lives Matter and statues-toppling environment), made back in the 18th century: “Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.” Yet, the evidence for the effectiveness of draconian lockdowns is less than convincing. As one [Lancet study](#) concluded, ‘Rapid border closures, full lockdowns, and wide-spread testing were not associated with COVID-19 mortality per million people.’ The virus infection has not risen exponentially in any country; rather, it seems to climb steeply, stop, turn around and retreat almost everywhere in tune with some internal timeframe independently of government intervention strategies; and, differences in numbers of dead notwithstanding, the shape of the curve seems remarkably similar for many countries.

Second, the coronavirus threatens to overwhelm the health and economies of many developing countries where a billion people subsist in a Hobbesian state of nature and life is “nasty, brutish and short.” In poor countries, the biggest numbers of deaths are caused by water-borne [infectious diseases](#), nutritional deficiencies and neonatal and maternal complications. The lockdown has produced its own version of Thucydides’ dictum that the strong do what they can, the weak suffer as they must. In developing countries, saving livelihoods is no less important than saving lives. The privileged jet-setters who imported the virus can utilise the private hospitals but the poor they infect have little access to decent healthcare and will be [disproportionately devastated](#). The rich carry the virus, the poor bear the burden since staying at home means foregoing daily income. Millions “[fear hunger may kill us before coronavirus](#).”

I think a common error has been to privilege the medical over all other considerations. In reality, and certainly with the benefit of hindsight, this should have involved a considered assessment of what I call ‘A Balance of Interests’. Governments must take into account and reconcile medical, social, economic, liberal democratic, human rights and international policies in fashioning an integrated public policy response to a pandemic

The [World Bank](#) and [WTO](#) warn of dramatic decelerations and contractions in GDP, with a resulting ballooning of poverty. [Oxfam](#) adds that the pandemic could push an extra half billion people into poverty, and the UN [estimated](#) that the global economic downturn could cause hundreds of thousands of additional child deaths in 2020. The number of people suffering from [acute hunger](#) could nearly double to 250 million from the disruptions to crop production and global food distribution chains. A study by Johns Hopkins School of Public Health warns [infant mortality could increase by 1.2 million](#) this year in poor countries, and maternal mortality by 56,700, because of ruptured health services.

I remain very puzzled at how so many people I considered to be liberals have been so utterly indifferent to the plight of the poor and the casual labourers who do not have the luxury of working from home, nor savings to fall back on to tide their family over until they can earn an income again. Celebrities posting videos and selfies of working from home in opulent mansions is positively obscene and revolting. Not surprisingly, given my Indian background, I was powerfully influenced by the visual images of the millions of migrant workers literally on the march by foot over thousands of kilometres trying desperately to make their way back to home villages as all work dried up. Many died en route and the heartbreaking case of [Jamlo Madkam](#) in particular, a 12-year old girl who trekked 100km but died of exhaustion just 11km from home, has never stopped haunting me.

This is not to say that high-income Western countries are immune from the deadly effects of lockdown. A report in [Financial Times](#) referenced an internal British government estimate that ultimately, without mitigation, up to 150,000 people in the UK could die prematurely of other conditions because of the Covid-induced lockdown that put on hold huge numbers of screenings and operations. A report in [Lancet Psychiatry](#) said measures taken in response to Covid-19 could have a [profound and pervasive impact on mental health](#). In the UK, the Royal College of Psychiatrists has reported a [sixfold increase in suicide attempts by the elderly](#) because of depression and anxiety caused by social isolation during the lockdown. There’s also been a surge in 18-25 year old men ‘badly affected by [first-time mental health issues](#).’ Australian experts warn that [lockdown-induced 50 per cent jump in suicides](#) could kill 10 times as many as the virus. US authorities and experts, too, are warning of an approaching ‘historic

wave' of [mental health problems](#) caused by the months-long Covid-related 'daily doses of death, isolation and fear.' Lockdowns also put women at much greater risk of [domestic violence](#). This is just unconscionable and hard to comprehend intellectually as well as emotionally.

HAM: What about AFTER this pandemic? What worries you the most? Its impact on jobs and the economy in general, around the world, perhaps? Or is it the risk of more geopolitical (and even nuclear) turbulence?

RT: Most of my answer to this question is anticipated in the answer to the first question: the long-term impact on the health, nutritional requirements, food security, mental wellbeing of people, etcetera. I've been worried from the start by the long-term impact of lockdowns over the coming decade on the lives and livelihoods of poor people in poor countries. Professors Jay Bhattacharya and Mikko Packalen estimate the lockdown's long-term global impact could 'end up [taking nearly six million young lives](#) in the coming decade' in developing countries. So why have people and NGOs who most stridently demand increased foreign aid been silent on this terrible toll?

I wonder, too, if we have set ourselves up to repeat the folly every year with annual outbreaks of flu, especially if it is a bad flu season. If not, why not? Perhaps someone will come up with the slogan "Flu Lives Matter." Or governments could just pass laws making it illegal for anyone to fall sick and die.

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The geopolitical tensions between China and the US have also been exacerbated, first by the initial efforts of local authorities in China to dissemble and obfuscate, and second, also by the efforts of the Trump administration to shift the blame in order to deflect from their own incompetence. How and when are we going to return to the "new normal" and what will it look like? Globalisation has underpinned unprecedented prosperity and the rise of educational and health outcomes for billions of people around the world, along with a dark underbelly of uncivil society. Will its discontents now throw away substantial benefits as the world retreats behind national moats once again?

The pandemic proves conclusively the need to demilitarise foreign policy and promote greater multilateral cooperation against grave threats that are global in nature and require global solutions. What my former boss, the late Kofi Annan, called "problems without passports" require solutions without passports. The risk is instead we will move in the opposite direction and recreate regionalised balance of power systems in various hotspots around the world. Also, the present Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has warned that the pandemic is becoming a [human rights crisis](#), with authoritarian responses, surveillance, closed borders and other rights abuses. I hope that after the crisis is over, the balance between individual liberties and state power will be re-set instead of an even more powerful surveillance state being consolidated.

HAM: After revisiting [your articles](#) published in Project Syndicate during the last few years, I wonder which are the questions we should have asked ourselves a long time ago, but didn't. Which topics do you consider relevant that we usually don't pay enough

attention to?

RT: Funnily enough, pandemics have long been identified as one of many global challenges for which the world should have prepared in advance. Recently [The Wall Street Journal](#) had a major investigative article on the failure to do so, despite ample warnings from scientists. ‘A Deadly Coronavirus Was Inevitable. Why Was No One Ready?’ asked the authors, and quite rightly too. Another catastrophe into which we seem to be sleepwalking is a nuclear war. And remember, the whole point of the sleepwalking analogy is that people walking in their sleep are not aware of it at the time. By contrast we have been given multiple warnings of the dangers that lie ahead from a failure to mend our environmentally promiscuous consumption practices. Other pressing global challenges include growing ecosystem imbalances and fragility, depletion of fish stocks, food and water insecurity, desertification, and of course a host of other diseases that remain the biggest killers on an annual basis. It’s a sobering fact that as of the date of this interview (August 14th), [Covid-19 has killed 757,000](#) people around the world. Eighteen other causes kill more people annually, including [14 that cause over a million deaths](#) each. That’s another reason the preoccupation with Covid-19 to the neglect of other killer ailments is mystifying.

One day I thought: I wonder what would happen if I tried to analyse the response to Covid-19 through the same framework? I confess I was surprised at how close the fit was to the Iraq war analogy once I thought the whole thing through with respect to inflation threat, mission creep, de-legitimisation of dissenting voices, the humanitarian consequences of interventions, etcetera

HAM: Writing in [The Times of India](#), your point of view seems really consistent. How do you explain that, generally speaking, we all fell into the same trap that ended up in the Iraq War? Fear?

RT: At the time of the Iraq war, I was a senior UN official. The resort to emotional blackmail by the warmongers, where critics of the impending war were tarred for standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the Butcher of Baghdad, was instructive. Of course, very soon “We, the critics” were amply vindicated. The whole episode left me with two conclusions. First, the resort to emotional arguments and moral blackmail generally implies they have little reasoned argument and evidence to support their case and are deflecting to bluster instead. Second, whenever we are presented with excitable exclamation marks (Saddam already has weapons of mass destruction! He can hit us with WMD in just 45 minutes! We must stop him! Coronavirus could be more cataclysmic than the Spanish Flu! It will kill half a million British people and over two million Americans! The sky is falling!), it is a very good idea to substitute sceptical question marks instead. Why would Saddam do that? Where is your evidence? Do you have an end goal and are the proposed means proportionate to that goal? What will be the human and economic cost? How long will this take? Will you recognise success? What is your exit strategy? What are the checks against mission creep? Instead of such healthy scepticism to force a dose of reality and calm down the agitated excitement, the coronavirus has shown a remarkable triumph of the Henny Penny (or Chicken Little) tunnel vision.

So one day I thought: I wonder what would happen if I tried to analyse the response to Covid-19 through the same framework? I confess I was surprised at how close the fit was to the Iraq war analogy once I thought the whole thing through with respect to inflation threat, mission creep, de-legitimisation of dissenting voices, the humanitarian consequences of interventions, etcetera. So, I published it in my monthly column for *The Times of India*.

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HAM: Four years ago, you published an [op-ed](#) in *The Wire*, stating ‘As China fills out as a major power, uncontested US primacy will become increasingly unsustainable while US withdrawal from the region could be destabilising’. Four years—and a global pandemic—after, would you correct or reaffirm that view? Why?

RT: I think the view stands vindicated, and a lot earlier than I anticipated. The Trump administration’s frontal assault on virtually all the pillars of the liberal international order has been devastating for US global leadership, and for its reputation for competence and a spirit of generosity that was a priceless component of its immense soft power. The answer to Kishore Mahbubani’s question in his new book, *Has China Won*, is largely: Yes, it has. However, China in turn may squander that pole position and there are many who believe it has already overreached with an emphasis on wolf warrior diplomacy and belligerent behaviour with several neighbours simultaneously (including India most recently), as well as the deepening confrontation with the US. There is no doubt that the two countries are engaged in a contest for strategic primacy in the vast Indo-Pacific maritime space. At this stage, the only sustainable outcome of that contest is that both China and the US will have to work out a *modus vivendi* for sharing strategic space. While a shooting war is not inevitable, it most certainly is not unthinkable either. But the consequences and the costs are unimaginable.

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HAM: Is there anything that you consider especially hopeful these days?

RT: Like my friend Gareth Evans (the former Australian foreign minister) who’s also been a colleague on many global enterprises, including nuclear sanity and the Responsibility to Protect, I’m a congenital optimist. In fact, sometimes I have argued that optimism is an essential job description for a UN official: you have to believe in the perfectability of humankind, despite much evidence to the contrary in history and in contemporary international affairs. The good thing about the coronavirus pandemic is how it has served as a wake-up call to our vulnerability to today’s real threats, and our lack of preparedness. It is highly infectious but not quite as highly lethal as the doomsayers predicted with their abstract mathematical modelling disconnected from observational data in the real world. But the next threat could be both highly infectious and highly lethal. So I hope important lessons will be learnt and we will move away from the self-absorbed, instant gratification-directed, narcissistic consumption-driven lifestyle and reorganise national and global affairs on a more sustainable basis. We need not less but smarter multilateralism in a reinvented ethic of global cooperation. What we face more than anything else is a leadership deficit in too many key countries, especially among the major powers. Against that, the human spirit is very resilient and the better angels of our nature are not quite ready to concede defeat to the Satanic impulses that animate some leaders.

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HAM: Is there any question I did not ask you and you would like to answer?

RT: Just by way of a concluding reflection, I think a common error has been to privilege the medical over all other considerations. In reality, and certainly with the benefit of hindsight but also from the very beginning in my case, this should have involved a considered assessment of what I call 'A Balance of Interests' (my chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*). Governments must take into account and reconcile medical, social, economic, liberal democratic, human rights and international policies in fashioning an integrated public policy response to a pandemic.

(This interview originally appeared in the Argentine daily [La Nación](#) on August 22nd. This is an edited version of the original English text the interview is based on)

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About The Author

