



CENJOWS

COVID-19: A DECISIVE LEADERSHIP IS THE ANSWER

BY

BRIGADIER (DR) RAJEEV BHUTANI (RETD)

The Novel Coronavirus (named 2019-nCoV or SARS-Cov-2), which emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019, has spread all over the world, halting industry, bringing flights to a standstill, closing educational and training institutes and forcing the postponement of sporting events and concerts. Even the Tokyo Summer Olympics have been postponed by a year.

With the number of reported Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID19) cases now touching over 1,030,000 in 204 countries and territories around the world with 54,194 deaths, this pandemic is truly global in its reach and impact. Historically, the other two novel coronaviruses that had emerged as global health threats were the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the Middle-East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). SARS outbreak that started from China in 2002, spread to 37 countries and infected 8,098 people with 774 deaths, mostly in South-east Asia. MERS spread to 27 countries and infected 2,494 people and caused 858 deaths in 2012.

In the past half a century at least, the mankind has not faced a calamity of such an enormous magnitude, which is deeply impacting not only the very concept of globalization – global trade and supply chains,

intertwined global and local economies, free movement of people and inter-state relations but has stressed the political, economic, security, social, technological and institutional fabric of each and every nation-state to extreme. Once the crisis is over, which may take a few more months, a new international order is expected to emerge and that may be based not on traditional 'balance of power' but on 'balance of interests'. Countries will have to reorient and recalibrate their national strategies and national interests based on experience gained during this pandemic.

However, in the present context three aspects have clearly emerged:-

One, this crisis has shown the ineffectiveness and inability of global organizations to assess, analyze and pre-empt or institute measures to prevent the proliferation of SARS-Cov-2 before it could engulf the whole world in to a pandemic. Though, China officially notified the World Health Organization (WHO) about several cases of an unusual pneumonia in Wuhan on 31 December 2019 but WHO officials did not take it seriously - comparing this Novel Coronavirus with earlier strains of SARS and MERS, not recommending any specific health measures for travellers to and from Wuhan and even discouraged the entry screening of passengers from Wuhan on 11 January, finding time only on 20 & 21 January to conduct its first field visit of Wuhan. The seriousness of the situation was not fathomed by the WHO officials even three weeks after it was notified by China. It took another five weeks when on 11 March 2020, the Director General, WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic. The UN Secretary General also cannot absolve himself of the responsibility of coordinating a global response to this world crisis. Stating in a media briefing "Covid-19 is the greatest test we have faced together since the formation of the UN" by the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres is not enough. If the United Nations is going to be absent in a global crisis where it is required most, then question will be raised on its relevance, efficacy or even continuance.

Two, this pandemic has brought forth the fragility of the concept of Comprehensive National Power (CNP) of the nations as conventionally calculated. The United States, the sole super power, has resources, research capacity, infrastructure, scientific talent and best health care systems in the world but as the death rate mounts it is helpless firstly due to the delayed and fragmented decision by its leadership and secondly one cannot fight against the nature – the virus has a set life and to find a cure and later a vaccine against the disease will take its own time. China being a Communist country beside fudging the figures and hiding facts adopted draconian measures to control the pandemic in Wuhan, which cannot be emulated in open democratic societies.

Three, when the safety and security of the entire population of a country is at risk, the national leadership plays a decisive role. The role played by national leaders of global stature needs to be studied. On 11 March, when the WHO declared COVID19 as pandemic, the US President Donald Trump considered the threat as a containable problem involving outsiders and stuck to the belief that the virus would “go away.” Just a week ago, President Trump was tempted to ease restrictions and was arguing for restoring economic activity by Easter (12April). Now with a figure of 100,000 to 240,000 likely deaths staring in his face, Mr. Trump extended restrictions, warning Americans that painful two weeks lie ahead. It is clear that the President cared little about the science or expert advice and is reckless in taking decisions. As a leader, what sort of confidence will he inspire in his people? Chinese President Xi Jinping, on the other hand, controlled the pandemic in his country but China’s lack of transparency in sharing information about the outbreak of pandemic and reveling about their success in containing the virus while the remainder world is still struggling is not appreciated. While Xi Jinping’s status at home has been bolstered by the outbreak, domestic frustration with the government has grown and China’s image abroad has suffered. Knowing fully well that India does not have a comprehensive health support system comparable to the developed countries of the West, Prime Minister Narendra Modi used his charisma and persuasive skills to appeal to the nation for adopting social distancing as the mantra to nip the problem in the bud. A twenty-one day countrywide lock down along with proactive investigative techniques to identify the sources of spreading the virus is paying dividends. His innovative approach in uniting 1.3 billion people of the country for fighting the coronavirus is commendable. The remainder two weeks will be crucial for the country. In the European Union, Germany with Angela Merkel at the helm has been able to stabilize the outbreak because of timely enforcement of disciplinary measures and optimum utilization of its superior health facilities.

One of the best Facebook posts from abroad by a known staunch critique of Prime Minister Modi says, *“Indians are lucky to have Narendra Modi as their Prime Minister in this time of need!!”* Interestingly, the novel viruses – SARS and MERS did not affect India despite causing outbreaks in neighboring countries. If India is able to control the spread of this virus early, it can stake its claim as the *Vishwa Guru*.

Disclaimer: Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.