

## United States Bio-surveillance Project in South Korea: A conflict between Traditional and Non-Traditional Security

**Vasudevan Mani Tripathi**

*Vasudevan Mani Tripathi is a post-graduate scholar from the University of Allahabad in Defence and Strategic Studies. He is also associated with the Centre for Military Affairs at IDSA.*

### Summary

The Bio-surveillance project of the United States in South Korea is facing a serious criticism as it is believed to be a threat to the safety and survival of the local population of South Korea. While both the United States as well as South Korea denies the allegations, and they fail to provide complete information on the issue in the name of so-called 'national security issue'. The article brings out the contradiction between traditional and non-traditional security approach by putting the United States Bio-surveillance Project in South Korea as a case in point.

The Twenty-first century security environment is highly uncertain. The changing security paradigm has deepened and broadened the concept to a large extent. On the one hand, the traditional notion of security has maintained its importance and states are not ready to sacrifice their vital interest at any cost. On the other, there has been an increased acknowledgement of non-traditional security concerns, not only by states but also by various non-state actors. This has created a contradiction of its own, as both the approaches confront each other and it becomes hard to decide the priorities among traditional and non-traditional security issues for taking up certain actions needed at a particular time.

The 1994 UNDP Report while introducing the concept of Human Security had identified the seven areas from which the major threats to the security of an individual emerges. These areas are- Food insecurity, Environment insecurity, Personal insecurity, Community insecurity, Health insecurity, Economic insecurity, Political insecurity.

It is to be mentioned here that *Securitization Theory* explains how a particular issue is being securitized by the state with the help of a two-stage model.<sup>1</sup> However, the critics of securitization theory argue that it may be possible that almost every issue can be securitized like this. Thus, when every issue becomes a security issue, it becomes very difficult with limited resources to prioritize the sectors which really need extraordinary attention.

### Chemical and Biological Warfare

Chemical and Biological Weapons have been the weapons of mass destruction since early times. Various types of chemicals and bacteria, pathogens, viruses etc are

deliberately used to cause mass destruction to humans, animals and plants. It is widely acknowledged that these weapons not only pose a serious indirect threat to the state but also a big concern directly to the individual well-being. Thus, Health Security in this respect is an issue that can't be ignored altogether and must be taken care of.

It is seen that since early times traditional security notions and structures have been used by major powers of the west for their own interest. In the name of threats to national security, often th

ey are seen to use the smaller states for various activities like maintaining of bases, conducting various types of tests, etc. The United States led bio-surveillance project in one of the far-east countries, South Korea is a live example of this fact.

### **JUPITR ATD Project and Busan's public concern**

The Project was launched by the United States in April 2013 in support of US policies recognizing the importance of detection capabilities to guard against biological and chemical threats. It is named as JUPITR ATD acronym for "Joint United States Forces Korea Portal and Integrated Threat Recognition Advanced Technology Demonstration"<sup>2</sup>

Initially, JUPITR's aim was the development of early-warning detection capabilities to protect the US Forces Korea (USFK) and South Korea from biological and chemical threats. From 2015 onwards, it has been criticized continuously by the residents of Busan in South Korea. It is because in May 2015, the Pentagon confirmed that its laboratory in Utah had inadvertently sent live anthrax samples to one of its military bases in South Korea, rather than the inactivated samples that were meant to be

delivered for the project.<sup>3</sup> The live samples were so dangerous that that even without war, they can be a great threat to the people around.

Every morning, dozens of residents and activists gather to block the entrance to the Pier 8 where the US operates a bio-surveillance project in Busan's Nam district, to stop the US soldiers from going to work. At night they hold candlelight vigils, carrying signs that read, "Nam district residents are not test subjects for viruses" and "Abolish the biological weapons test lab."<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the USFK has denied all the allegations that it is conducting biological tests using hazardous materials such as live agents or toxins. The Korea Herald came up with the statement of the leader of a regional civil task force who is calling for an end to the biological weapons lab and goes on to question the motives of United States as to why can't the country conduct these tests on their own soil.<sup>5</sup>

Bio-surveillance has been a national priority of United States since 2007, when the Homeland Security Presidential Directive-21 formalized the policy that all hazards threats could take many forms, including naturally occurring disease outbreaks. The National Strategy for Bio-surveillance was established in 2012, and while some organizations have begun moving on the initiative, there are still a number of questions on how to best implement bio-surveillance.<sup>6</sup>

The Busan's bio-surveillance is an ongoing project that is meant for defending against biological threats. According to Peter Emanuel, the leader of JUPITRATD in 2013, project was seen as the Pentagon's, flagship project<sup>7</sup> which was led by the US Joint Program Executive Office for Chemical and Biological Defense and the US Army

Research, Development and Engineering Command's Edgewood Chemical Biological Center. It is a comprehensive surveillance and reaction system to provide protection and early warning in case of any biological and chemical threats. It is made up of four parts: Early Warning, Biological Identification Capabilities Sets, Assessment of Environment Detectors and a Bio-surveillance Portal.

## Conclusion

The ongoing debate between traditional and non-traditional security is practically applicable in this case. On one hand, it is argued by the state and security machinery that the project is necessary and it will make the defence stronger and would enhance its capability to a large extent. The United States and South Korea deny providing complete information in this regard by labeling it a security issue. On the other hand, the project is not acceptable to the common people, who look into it with great suspicion. The use of live-anthrax samples in the test lab was highly objectionable, which, even if by, spreads out, would wreak havoc to the area not only in South Korea but other adjoining regions as well.

This issue has yet not gained the required traction. This incident also underscores the salience of states supremacy in decision making. The present scenario where the international debates are revolving around several newer concepts like human security comprising of various elements as mentioned above, this type of incidents puts a question mark on the concepts and their practical applicability. Today, while there are a number of non-state actors like International Organizations, NGOs, etc working for the people of the world, at the same time the superior states are still under their narrow minded security perspective. The smaller states many a times fall under the trap of

bigger states in their doing. The present example is one of them. The primary duty of any state is to look after the security and safety of citizens and their well-being. And if the state fails to perform its duty or undermines it, it becomes the duty of international community to look after grievances of the people in every part of the world, wherever the need comes. The question still arises- *Who is important, State- as an entity or the people at large?*

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Emmers, Ralf. "Securitization" in Alan Collins, ed., *Contemporary Security Studies*, Fifth Edition (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Two- Stage model of Securitization explains how a particular issue in ordinary domain becomes so important to put it on the list of highly important and sensitive issues. The first stage is Politicization and the second stage is Securitization. In the first stage, the issue is discussed in the public domain by various important persons like politicians, bureaucrats etc through the speech act to increase the importance of the issue. Then, if the audience is convinced, the issue is securitized where extraordinary measures are taken then to deal with it.

<sup>2</sup> Jo He-rim, "[Feature] Fear of Biological Agent Strikes Busan as US Troops Continue Biosurveillance Project • Pacific EPeak," April 15, 2019, <https://pacific.epeak.in/2019/04/15/feature-fear-of-biological-agent-strikes-busan-as-us-troops-continue-biosurveillance-project/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See note 2.

<sup>5</sup> See note 2.

<sup>6</sup> "U.S. Army JUPITR Project to Develop Biosurveillance Capabilities on Korean Peninsula," *Aberdeen, MD Patch* (blog), April 11, 2013, see <https://patch.com/maryland/aberdeen/bp-us-army-jupitr-project-to-develop-biosurveillancec2ddcf99f1>.

<sup>7</sup> He-rim, "[Feature] Fear of Biological Agent Strikes Busan as US Troops Continue Biosurveillance Project • Pacific EPeak."