

## Disinformation, CBW and COVID Concerns: Exploring the New Age Scourge

Animesh Roul

*The author is a founding member and presently, the Executive Director at the Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict, New Delhi. This paper is part of his ongoing research project on 'Countering CBW Disinformation', supported by Health Security Partners (HSP), USA.*

### Summary

The growing trend of disinformation operations is weakening the trust in international community general and multilateral institutions in particular. The policy of biological weapons disinformation is being pursued by all the major powers, and quite interestingly, the victim of it is also from all the major global political groupings. The same is true about the Chemical Weapons Convention. As State-backed disinformation wars have become a central facet of global geopolitics, its disorderly impact on the international security environment and future challenges are yet to be decoded. Resolute disinformation campaigns could vitiate the national and global ambience that could in turn dent international cooperation during crises and emergencies.

The world is battling the scourge of disinformation due to the rise of digital or internet-based media and unbridled broadcast of fake, false or inaccurate information via traditional and digital (social) media platforms. This phenomenon is gaining notoriety due to its rapid spread and disruptive impact. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a classic example of distrust and disruption due to this information disorder. Though propaganda and influence operations existed during and prior to the Cold War, the rise of internet usage, social media tools, and real-time messaging applications have given lethal power to a host of players ranging from political operators, States and other actors with vested interests to criminals and terrorists, in manipulating news, events and information to their respective benefits. The power of disinformation demonstratively triggered widespread unrest, polarized public opinion, and spread distrust throughout societies and between States.

The increasing threat of disinformation campaigns can also undermine trust in international multilateral institutions (e.g. the United Nations and humanitarian organizations (e.g. the World Health Organisation or the World Food Programme). It has immense power to undermine confidence in compliance standards, understanding support to arms control treaties and conventions, and international cooperation. Similarly, a targeted disinformation campaign would make multilateral arms control or disarmament treaty regimes (e.g. the Biological Weapons Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) vulnerable, under duress due to ongoing geopolitical tensions

raising compliance concerns that can adversely affect the verification and monitoring mechanisms. The article examines how this disinformation menace related to the COVID-19 pandemic and biological and Chemical weapons threats dominated the security discourse in the last decade.

Much of the disinformation among State actors in the last decade has been linked to a few major powers, such as Russia and China, primarily targeted against Western interests. While Russia has inherited this disinformation strategy from the Soviet era 'active measures'<sup>1</sup> programme, China is not far behind on influence operations with its growing geostrategic interests in Asia and beyond. Like the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine also witnessed this phenomenon where disinformation through the internet and social media became a powerful tool for political actors to manipulate the geopolitical narrative to their advantage, albeit temporarily. The use and misuse of technology for disinformation purposes fulfils various political goals and covert State objectives.

### **COVID-19 Disinformation**

As the coronavirus strain progressed to other parts of the world in early 2020 and overwhelmed affected States' health infrastructures, Chinese State-run media attempted to deflect its misdoings and mismanagement at home. It waged a disinformation campaign citing that American military members were responsible for bringing the coronavirus to Wuhan during the World Military Games. Several such accusations surfaced against the US, including a virus leak from Fort Detrick lab.<sup>2</sup> The origin of disinformation was traced to Russia, which underscored that the coronavirus is a biological weapon launched

by the Americans to harm the Chinese economy. Similar news also came from China, accusing the US of spreading the coronavirus. Chinese Foreign Ministry official Zhao Lijian promoted a conspiracy theory on Twitter that the virus had originated from the US and was brought to China later by the US military.<sup>3</sup>

In the US, news spread about how the coronavirus leaked from a BSL-4 bio-containment laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) in Wuhan, Hubei province, making the city an epicentre of the global pandemic.<sup>4</sup> The news further spread through social and mainstream media that the virus was a Chinese bioweapon resulting from a secret scientific experiment.<sup>5</sup> These unsubstantiated theories surrounding the origins of COVID-19 have made the bilateral atmosphere between China and the US more susceptible to distrust. The veracity of these accusations could not be confirmed at the height of the pandemic. Similar to the US allegation against China, assertions by Sir Richard Dearlove, a former British Secret Intelligence Service chief, that the new coronavirus was created in and escaped from the Wuhan lab were also unverified.<sup>6</sup> However, before the UK dismissed Dearlove's views, the story had already been picked up by several agencies across the world.

In July 2020, another example of disinformation on bio-warfare surfaced, through a Report underscoring long-standing collaborative efforts between China and Pakistan to conduct experiments on dangerous pathogens.<sup>7</sup> The Report also noted a secret military deal between the two countries to expand potential bio-warfare capabilities. It was alleged that China's Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) had signed a secret three-year agreement with Pakistan military's Defence Science and Technology Organisation for collaborative

research in “emerging infectious diseases” and the “biological control of transmitted diseases”. The Report even mentioned the results of five studies conducted by Chinese and Pakistani scientists involving the detection and characterization of deadly pathogens, including the West Nile Virus, the MERS-Coronavirus and the Crimean-Congo Haemorrhagic Fever Virus. This unverified Report triggered widespread speculation about the possible collaboration between China and Pakistan. Russian, Indian and American media houses covered the news elaborately. Iran, affected most by COVID-19, promoted conspiracy theories against the US that COVID-19 is a bioweapon produced by the US.

Ensuring and enforcing compliance with international conventions or treaties remains an uphill task and mostly untenable in an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion. The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us how only multilateral cooperation can reduce the risk of future threats that can engulf every living being beyond national boundaries. After sustained efforts, the WHO-led team of international scientists travelled to Wuhan in early 2021 to investigate the origins of COVID-19.<sup>8</sup> Though Beijing was initially reluctant to agree to an independent investigation, it had, authorized a 10-member scientific team to investigate early infections in Wuhan.<sup>9</sup> This ‘origin-tracing’ mission with a WHO mandate was not aimed at probing virus leak claims from the BSL-4 lab in Wuhan.<sup>10</sup>

### **Biological Weapon Disinformation**

Biological weapon activities of the past and the legacy of the bio-warfare arsenal of a few States (e.g. US, Russia and China), along with their ongoing biodefence research, fuel fear and uncertainty about existing biological weapon capabilities and availability of material and technical expertise. Even

Western countries such as the US and the UK are not free from this suspicion, especially the possible misuse of science and technology. Throughout its 45 years, the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) has witnessed few suspected violations. Most State parties, including the US, the UK, France, China and Russia, comply with the treaty regime. However, several key member states had elaborate biological weapon capabilities in the past, and a few others are involved in dual-use research, which is not prohibited under the BWC. The legacy biological weapon arsenals remain a sore point between State Parties, and often countries accuse each other of existing secret biological weapon capabilities. Several incidents in the past raised questions about BWC State parties’ compliance towards the treaty regime.

In the last few decades, the United States remained at the forefront in levelling accusations related to the BWC non-compliance against State Parties such as Iraq, North Korea, Iran, Libya and Cuba. The US was also accused by Iran and Indonesia of biological conspiracy violating the Convention. For example, in 2008, Siti Fadilah Supari, an Indonesian legislator, alleged that the US and the WHO had conspired against developing countries by seizing control of the H5N1 virus sample.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the UK has also been the target of allegations of biological weapons development or use in the past. Despite these allegations, proving non-compliance is a challenge.

The unusual outbreak of human anthrax in the Soviet city of Sverdlovsk (presently Yekaterinburg) in 1979 due to an accident at a secret military bio-facility, triggered an international outcry, and only after the US-led international inspection, did Russia admit to the violation subsequently. However, Russia does not favour onsite investigation

and always refers to the UNSC provision for non-compliance investigation. Russia often raises questions about the non-compliance of the US, as it continues to question the activities of the Luger Center for Public Health Research in Tbilisi, Georgia. It often alleges that the US Army Medical Research Directorate-Georgia (USAMRD-G) located at the Luger Center, carries out dual-use research activities.

Besides these allegations against the US, a few other events showed the US in a bad light regarding arms control treaty compliance. The discovery of frozen vials of the smallpox virus variola on 1 July 2014, in an unused storage room in an FDA laboratory located at the NIH Bethesda campus in the US being a case in point.<sup>12</sup> In May 2015, Utah's US Defense Department Laboratory accidentally sent live Anthrax samples to laboratories and a US military base in South Korea. Nearly 22 military personnel at the Osan Air Base in South Korea received preventive treatment after possibly exposure to the sample.<sup>13</sup> Countries like North Korea and Syria are secretive about their existing covert capabilities and their questionable intent to use or develop bioweapons either as a deterrent or as a defence. State Parties like China, too, faced international ire in the last decade for maintaining offensive bio-programmes in violation of its BWC obligations. In a 2005 report, the US observed that China's voluntary annual BWC confidence-building measures (CBM) data declarations were inaccurate and misleading.<sup>14</sup> Even though China rejected these allegations, the SARS outbreaks in the past and recently, COVID-19 from Wuhan, raised eyebrows about its commitment towards BWC.

During the ongoing Russia and Ukraine conflict, Russia alleges the existence of US-funded biological weapon laboratories in Ukraine. It claims that these secret

American-funded labs in Ukraine are the epicentre for biological warfare activities. However, in early 2022, the US diplomatic representative denied any presence of secret Bio labs in Ukraine and accused Russia of spreading disinformation about bioweapons as part of a 'false-flag operation' for using chemical or biological agents in the Ukrainian conflict.<sup>15</sup> Russia also circulated another conspiracy theory in March 2022 regarding US involvement in training birds in Ukraine to spread disease among Russian citizens. The allegations and media campaigns were rejected and countered by the US agencies as outright lies.<sup>16</sup>

China, in favour of Russia, further spread the conspiracy theory about the existence of US-funded biological weapons in Ukraine through official press briefings to make the disinformation more credible. Zhao Lijian from China's Foreign Ministry, while reading the Russian media report about the alleged discovery of a "military biological program" in Ukraine, urged the US Embassy in Ukraine to disclose information about its biological research facilities in the country.<sup>17</sup> **To address this allegation, UNSC has met at least three times since February 2022 at Russia's request. However,** the UN office has maintained each time that it had seen no evidence of the use of biological weapons in Ukraine.<sup>18</sup>

## **Chemical Weapon Disinformation**

Russian and North Korean disinformation strategies in the sphere of chemical weapon use and proliferation have remained a significant concern in the last decade. North Korea has out- rightly denied involvement in the assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's half-brother Kim Jong-Nam in Malaysia with the nerve agent VX in February 2017, and questioned the investigation and even the identity of the deceased.

Russia resorted to disinformation campaigns to evade attribution and accountability for using banned Chemical agents in the Sergei Skripal Novichok poisoning case in the UK in March 2018 and Alex Navalny's Novichok poisoning in August 2020.

The Russian government denied involvement in Skripal's case, and rejected reports by British authorities on the matter.<sup>19</sup> Instead, pro-Russian media spread theories regarding Skripals' poisoning case by putting forward competing and contradictory narratives to distract or confuse public perception. Russian agencies adopted a similar distraction strategy in the Navalny poisoning case. In Twitter, Russian agencies circulated conspiracy theories terming Navalny's poisoning as a false flag operation by NATO to stop using the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Europe. Some other pro-Russian messages question Navalny's credibility while blaming the West for the poisoning.<sup>20</sup> Russia is often blamed for the lack of transparency and cooperation surrounding the Novichok events in the past. Russia also rejected the proposal to use the Chemical Weapon Convention's consultation and clarification mechanisms to resolve allegations against its involvement in producing and using Novichok nerve agents.

North Korea, not a signatory to the CWC, adopted deny and deflect tactics on Kim Jong Nam's assassination in Malaysia. While denying the dead man's identity, North Korea maintained he was Kim Chol as per his diplomatic passport and not the half-brother of the North Korean leader as portrayed in the media or Malaysian investigations. The country also rejected a Malaysian autopsy claiming the use of any nerve agent, terming it as normal death due to a heart attack.<sup>21</sup> The Malaysian court, however, termed the whole episode as a well-planned conspiracy between the two women

involved and the four North Koreans who fled the country on the day of the attack.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

As State-backed disinformation campaigns have become a vital aspect of global geopolitics, its disruptive impact on the international security environment and future challenges are yet to be deciphered. Concerted disinformation campaigns could vitiate the national and global atmosphere that could undermine international cooperation during crises and emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic has a lesson that individual States cannot effectively fight any biological or chemical threat of a global scale on their own. The importance of multilateralism once again resurfaced with much hope. However, at a time when disinformation in the form of accusations, false claims, and conspiracy theories dominates the information space, it is challenging to manage perceptions and trust in any multilateral agreement or collective understanding.

## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, Profile Books, New York, 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> "Wuhan lab leak theory: How Fort Detrick became a centre for Chinese conspiracies", BBC News, 23 August 2021 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58273322>, Accessed on November 21, 2022
- <sup>3</sup> "Chinese diplomat promotes conspiracy theory that US military brought coronavirus to Wuhan", CNN, 13 March 2020 at <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/13/asia/china-coronavirus-us-lijian-zhao-intl-hnk/index.html>, Accessed on November 21, 2022)
- <sup>4</sup> "Fact Checker: Was the new coronavirus accidentally released from a Wuhan lab? It's doubtful.", *The Washington Post*, May 2020 at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/>

- 2020/05/01/was-new-coronavirus-accidentally-released-wuhan-lab-its-doubtful/, Accessed on November 25, 2022)
- <sup>5</sup> “US government report assesses China intentionally concealed severity of coronavirus”, CNN, 4 May 2020 at <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/03/politics/mike-pompeo-china-coronavirus-supplies/index.html>, Accessed on November 21, 2022)
  - <sup>6</sup> “The coronavirus was created in a Chinese lab, former MI6 chief claims”, *The Herald*, 4 June 2020 at <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/18495508.coronavirus-created-chinese-lab-former-mi6-chief-claims>, Accessed on December 01, 2022
  - <sup>7</sup> “EXCLUSIVE: China’s Wuhan lab operating ‘covert operations’ in Pakistan, handling ‘anthrax-like’ pathogens”, *The Klaxon*, 23 July 2020 at <https://www.theklaxon.com.au/home/wuhan-lab-conducting-deadly-pathogen-research-in-pakistan-since-2015>, Accessed on December 01, 2022
  - <sup>8</sup> Unlike UNSC, the only and the final arbitrator on allegations of compliance violation, the World Health Organization, among other world bodies have limited roles in clarifying suspicious or controversial events and situations.
  - <sup>9</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on January 11, 2021”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic China, 11 January 2021 at [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202101/t20210111\\_693573.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202101/t20210111_693573.html), Accessed on December 01, 2022
  - <sup>10</sup> “China blocks entry to WHO team studying Covid’s origins”, *The Guardian*, 5 January 2020 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/05/china-blocks-entry-to-who-team-studying-covids-origins>, Accessed on December 12, 2022
  - <sup>11</sup> “Indonesia claims wide support for virus-sharing stance”, CIDRAP, 27 May 2008 at <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2008/05/indonesia-claims-wide-support-virus-sharing-stance>, Accessed on December 12, 2022
  - <sup>12</sup> “CDC Media Statement on Newly Discovered Smallpox Specimens”, CDC Media Statement, 8 July 2014 at <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2014/s0708-nih.html>, Accessed on December 15, 2022
  - <sup>13</sup> “Anthrax: Pentagon accidentally sent bioweapon to as many as nine states”, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2015 at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/27/pentagon-live-anthrax-accident>, Accessed on December 15, 2022
  - <sup>14</sup> “2005 Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Non-proliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments”, at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/51977.htm>, Accessed on December 12, 2022
  - <sup>15</sup> “Remarks by Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield at a UN Security Council Meeting Called by Russia to Spread Disinformation About Ukraine”, 11 March 2022 at <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-by-ambassador-thomas-greenfield-at-a-un-security-council-meeting-called-by-russia-to-spread-disinformation-about-ukraine>, Accessed on December 20, 2022
  - <sup>16</sup> “Russian Conspiracy Theory Says U.S. Training Birds to Spread Bio Weapons”, *Newsweek*, 11 March 2022 at <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-conspiracy-theory-says-us-training-birds-spread-bio-weapons-1687399>, Accessed on December 20, 2022
  - <sup>17</sup> “Complete Transcript: Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on 8 March 2022”, at [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/202203/t20220309\\_10649938.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202203/t20220309_10649938.html), Accessed on December 20, 2022
  - <sup>18</sup> “UN still sees no sign of biological weapons in Ukraine”, *UN News*, 27 October 2022 at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129952>, Accessed on December 25, 2022
  - <sup>19</sup> “Sergei Skripal and the Russian disinformation game”, BBC News, 9 September 2018 at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45454142>, Accessed on December 20, 2022

- <sup>20</sup> For a very detailed study, See, Iuliia(chk sp) Alieva, J. D. Moffitt and Kathleen M. Carley, “How disinformation operations against Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny influence the international audience on Twitter”, *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 12 (80), 2022 at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13278-022-00908-6>, Accessed on December 25 , 2022
- <sup>21</sup> “North Korea says strong indication that heart attack is the cause of Kim Jong Nam’s death”, *Strait Times*, 2 March 2017 at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/north-korea-says-strong-indication-that-heart-attack-is-the-cause-of-kim-jong-nams>, Accessed on December 26 , 2022
- <sup>22</sup> Though eventually both the women were released from prison on March and May 2019, a Malaysian court during the trial observed the event as conspiracy to kill. See, “Judge Cites A ‘Well-Planned Conspiracy’ In Kim Jong Nam’s Death”, *NPR*, 16 August 2018 at <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/16/639162368/judge-says-a-well-planned-conspiracy-in-kim-jong-nam-s-death>, Accessed on December 26 , 2022