

Military Language: How Was the Language Used by Leaders During the COVID-19 Pandemic Manifested in Their Crisis Management Strategies?

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It is often assumed that tough situations require a tough response. Yet, when looking at world leaders and their approach to crisis management, this assumption does not always ring true. Whiletough, militaristic language has certainly been a recurring theme in crisis management – think the War on Drugs, the War on Terror or the War on Crime – it is not the only voice, although it is often the loudest. This has never been as evident as during the pandemic, with many leaders loudly claiming to be ‘at war’ with the virus while others, quieter yet no less important, calling for kindness, compassion and unity. So, by looking at language through the lens of leaders’ crisis management strategies, one can understand, in a practical sense, how this language manifested itself and what the long-term effects of using such language are.

Core concepts

In the context of COVID-19, crisis management refers to the procedures in which states, organisations and non-state actors have developed to prevent as much damage as possible. Although the success of crisis management varies significantly depending on cultural and socio-economic factors and the type of organisation, there is a consensus that crisis management depends on how the crises are framed (Yiu *et al.* 2021: 96). In particular, the way that leaders frame a crisis through speeches and press conferences has been described as the ‘face of crisis management’ (Wodak, 2021: 332). As such, tethering our study of militaristic language to this focus allows us to make broader connections to how leaders perform crisis management, and the long-term effects of militaristic language as a crisis management strategy.

But first, what does militaristic language – and militarisation more broadly – mean?

Traditionally, the idea of militarisation has been restricted to the capabilities of a state to use violent measures through their military institutions. However, in recent decades, the concept has expanded dramatically to include the tendency of states to use violent measures rather than solely their capability, as well as the prevalence of violence, and violent rhetoric, as a tool used by non-military institutions. That is to say, not only is militarisation related to the capabilities of a state’s military, but also their prevalence in everyday life, the violence of a state’s policing, the use of war rhetoric in all its forms – essentially, it is the way that ‘violence’ seeps into all aspects of a state.

So, how did militaristic language play a role in crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic?

One of the main recurring elements in managing the pandemic, especially managing the public during the pandemic, was the use of war rhetoric when leaders addressed their respective nations, this rhetoric often making its way into everyday discourse. More importantly, however, was the way this rhetoric played a role in influencing the practical measures put in place to ‘fight the virus’. Generally, there was a clear correlation between the use of militaristic language by national leaders and the use of militaristic and authoritarian

measures during the pandemic. This is best shown using two demonstrative examples, France and New Zealand. These cases have both been chosen due to their status as extreme cases, France having taken a particularly militaristic approach, New Zealand a particularly contrasting kind-faced approach. While this does mean that some of the arguments explored in this paper may lean towards more extreme cases, or be rather specific in their direct applications, in general, the conclusions drawn out are applicable in degrees, most nations sitting on a spectrum between the outlying cases of France and New Zealand that serve to emphasise the greater dynamics involved in the global pandemic response.

Case studies

France had one of the most institutionally militarised COVID responses. While the traditional French military branches were primarily used in soft roles, such as healthcare provision in vulnerable areas and the transfer of isolated patients from overseas departments to the Metropole, the use of both the regular police as well as the gendarmerie was highly militarised (Global News, 2020; Pasquier *et al.*, 2022: 983). Early on in the pandemic, the French police were heavily utilised to monitor those under isolation, some forces using drones and other aerial technologies to enforce the measures (RFI, 2020). Yet, as the pandemic progressed and protests began to take place, the police and gendarmerie became increasingly violent. Tear gas and rubber bullets were regularly used, police were reported to have acted in a violent manner when dealing with protests, and, in 2021, 1101 reports of misconduct were made against the police, of which 510 were in relation to undue use of violence – figures in line with previous years despite lockdown restrictions keeping people inside and limiting police functionality (France 24, 2020; IGPN, 2021).

How does this correlate to the language used by French President Emmanuel Macron and his crisis management strategy more broadly?

Macron was very overt in his use of militaristic language. In one of his first addresses regarding COVID, taking place in March 2020, President Macron explicitly framed the pandemic using military semantics, stating *‘[w]e are at war’*, phrasing that reflects France’s militarised response to the virus (Pasquier *et al.*, 2022: 983). More broadly, this follows Macron’s general crisis management style, one that tends to be unapologetic, uncompromising and hyper-masculine. Generally, he alternates between trying to play the strongman, as was the case at the start of the war in Ukraine, and playing the uncompromising leader, as has been the case more recently regarding pension reform. However, during the COVID pandemic, we saw both sides as, along with the strongman war rhetoric, Macron declared *‘[t]he unvaccinated, I really want to piss them off [...] until the end. That’s the strategy’*. Beyond being another example of aggressive, masculine leadership, it is militarised in its creation of an enemy within the collective, allowing for the use of militarised force against such a group without turning the general population against leadership, which allowed Macron to consolidate a measure of personal authoritarian power.

The situation in New Zealand saw considerable differences. The Defence Force (NZDF) was employed in both security and procedural fields, and describes itself as ‘one of the largest domestic deployments of our personnel’ (NZDF, 2020). However, unlike in France, there were no reported cases of the NZDF using undue violence to carry out its functions, with most breaches of COVID-19 rules resulting in written and verbal warnings, and only 13.1 per cent resulting in police prosecution (New Zealand Police, 2020). Thus, the conduct demonstrated by the NZDF and New Zealand does not fall within the scope of militaristic conduct for the purposes of our definition.

How does this correlate to the language used by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her crisis management strategy more broadly?

Ardern did not generally employ militaristic language, correlating to a relatively non-militarised use of the military and the police force. Despite some references to COVID being a 'battle' (Anderson, 2020), the overall narrative prioritised sentiments such as mutual kindness and the importance of cooperation, with Ardern describing New Zealand's population as 'a team of five million' (Kearns, 2021: 326). Anti-vaccine protesters were permitted to camp outside Wellington Parliament for two months before eventually being dispersed by riot police due to incidences of rioting, violence among the protesters themselves and arson (Corlett, 2022). This differs from the language of other nations, such as France, where a relatively greater focus was placed on framing COVID as an enemy that must be fought against, leading to narratives which prioritised the individual over the community; a sentiment that substantially influenced the crisis management strategies that were implemented (Gillis, 2020: 140–41).

After looking at these case studies, we must now turn to an important consideration – *why* did France and other states use militaristic language and a militarised crisis management response, whereas New Zealand prioritised other methods?

Analysing crisis management responses in the broader context of the neoliberal system and state capacity to respond to crises provides a useful framework. Scholarly literature has highlighted how the lack of infrastructure and equipment to deal with pandemics of this nature is heavily influenced by the privatisation of health as a result of the neoliberal system (Sparke and Williams, 2022). The absence of a clear directive led states to implement relatively brash and extreme measures, such as strict lockdowns in New Zealand's case, and the heavy use of the French police to enforce rules in France.

In this regard, France is something of a microcosm for the declining power of the neoliberal state, Hayward writing that '[while] those who officially speak on behalf of the state endeavour to sustain the myth of its sovereignty, their credibility has become increasingly implausible' faced with the 'remorseless retreat of the [...] welfare state' (Hayward, 2017: 58-59). This is reflected in public attitudes; in 2022, a survey of registered voters in France showed that 70 per cent of respondents felt that it was no longer clear whether the government or private companies made 'the big decisions' (Jeudy, 2022). This sort of sentiment leads to a weaker state that must rely on its monopoly on violence to enforce its power as an increasingly suspicious public gives little weight to softer directives from the state.

Drawing on a feminist approach to analyse New Zealand's situation, Ardern's crisis management style is arguably incompatible with a militarised response. Scholars highlight how Ardern's approach aligned with many female leaders during the pandemic – a community-based, proactive management approach with respect to lockdowns – differing from the management style of male leaders, including Macron (Campos, 2021). Moreover, with respect to New Zealand's society more broadly, research shows that there are high levels of public trust in the police and Defence Force (Greener, 2022). As such, a militarised approach would not be as necessary in a population that is more inclined to abide by the measures that were implemented and enforced by such institutions.

Long-term political implications

Now that we have considered the effects of militaristic language on leaders' COVID responses within our two case studies, we turn to the broader implications of militarised responses. Was this solely a pandemic

measure, implemented in a time of emergency?

Unfortunately, the trend of increasingly authoritarian, militaristic behaviour has continued in the post-pandemic era. In France, the government has recently used constitutional tools to push through an unpopular pension reform bill that, prior to the pandemic, was delayed for reconsideration following public outcry. This follows on from Macron's reinvention of himself as a strongman figure, willing and capable of militarised action. This has been especially true following heavy protests in response to the pension reforms in which the police have been criticised by human rights watchdog The Council of Europe as acting with 'excessive force', arresting people arbitrarily and assaulting clearly identifiable journalists. While the French police have always been a force willing to use violence, in combination with the government's circumvention of democratic process, this indicates greater authoritarian sentiment, backed up by militarisation (Chemin, 2023). This is further confirmed by a recent military spending increase by the French government, characterised as entering a 'war economy' by Macron, which would see a 40 per cent increase between 2024 and 2030 (Vincent, 2023). Combined with current pension reforms, this suggests a reprioritisation of government assistance from public welfare to military and security spending.

France is not an isolated example. Similar patterns can be observed in other nations that also employed militaristic language and acted in militarised ways during the pandemic, and have followed suit in adopting authoritarian tendencies since then. In the UK, where military language and allusion to the Second World War were common in political discourse, the government has been acting in increasingly authoritarian ways following the pandemic. Beyond the last two prime ministers coming into power without public votes, the government is currently trying to get rid of the European Convention on Human Rights from the UK constitution (Rankin, 2023). This is for a variety of reasons, such as appeasing the anti-EU branches of the Conservative party, as well as in order to send refugees to camps in Rwanda. Yet, despite the reasoning for this not being explicitly in relation to the pandemic, prior to COVID, such authoritarian trends were much less pronounced. Therefore, the fact that since the pandemic, the government has felt sufficiently confident to try and push through these reforms suggests that the movement of the government towards authoritarianism has been allowed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This is not, however, an entirely new phenomenon. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has proven a particularly all-encompassing crisis, other crises have had similar results. This is especially evident in the US, where multiple crises in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have seen extreme, sometimes disproportionate, responses. Scholars note that the policies that followed the War on Poverty, War on Crime and War on Drugs, such as mass incarceration and new employment laws, tended to disproportionately target minorities (Chapman *et al.*, 2020: 1108). This ethnic and social 'othering' seems also to be taking place around the 'War on COVID-19'. In the short term, we have witnessed clear examples of the othering of groups. Scholars identify people of Asian descent and immigrants as particularly likely to experience xenophobia and racism as a result of misinformation about the pandemic (Van Scoy *et al.* 2022: 2). This claim is supported by a qualitative study conducted in early 2020, where evidence that an 'us-versus-them' narrative was already emerging. Overarchingly, the racialisation of the pandemic by US conservative elites (for example, labelling COVID-19 the 'Chinese flu' or 'Kung-Flu'), combined with the prevalence of using militaristic language and war metaphors, contribute to a panic-induced narrative that classifies Asian people as an 'enemy' that can be blamed for COVID-19 (Schnepf *et al.*, 2022: 108). The explicit racial nature of this is concerning, suggesting that beyond the historical pattern of post-crisis extremity, the singular, total nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed for an even more explicit response than any precedent crises, this

type of ‘us-versus-them’ narrative feeding into populist and thereby authoritarian discourse that looks to proliferate going forwards (Pfau, 2021).

Concluding remarks

The COVID-19 crisis was singular in the modern era for its totality, global resonance and physicality. For a considerable period of time, it affected the everyday lives of almost everyone on the planet. As such, its effects have been – and look to be, going forwards – dramatic in the extreme. This is true on many levels, and the level of language and communication in relation to action is no exemption. In regards to pandemic and post-pandemic governance, the disparity between those states that employed militaristic language and those that did not is enormous on both a governmental and societal level. Clearly, the employment of aggressive, militaristic, and oftentimes ‘othering’ rhetoric served to condition political systems and national populations to behaviour that would otherwise have been considered overly authoritarian. The risk of this behaviour becoming the norm is staggering, especially when one considers the marginalised groups targeted in this discourse. Conversely, the use of softer yet more unitary language allowed for an approach built upon consensus and collective responsibility that, while imperfect, laid the foundations for greater cohesion going forwards. Ultimately, the importance of rhetoric and language on political and social trends should not be underestimated – although in the post-COVID world, this lesson may have come too late.

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