Security Nexus Perspectives

SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF MASS RETURNING MIGRANT WORKERS DUE TO COVID-19 CRISIS

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Abstract

The issue of mass returning migrant workers has broad implications for human, national and regional security domains that go well beyond increasing unemployment. This paper reports on the complex web of security challenges surrounding migrant labor, as identified by security practitioners from the region. Regional and international cooperation are required to effectively manage the system to lessen the shock created by the COVID-19 crisis and for the longer-term challenges. Short, medium and long-term best practices and recommendations are offered to address the security challenges generated by the mass return of migrant workers.

Introduction

As the wave of COVID-19 infection rolled into the U.S. and Hawaii, faculty and staff at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for security Studies (APCSS) were suddenly pressed into sheltering in our homes. Many Americans scrambled to return home as governments around the world shut their borders and enacted quarantine protocols. APCSS cancelled the Comprehensive Maritime Security Cooperation (CMSC-20-1) Course, scheduled to start on March 19 and all of the following courses up to November 2020 were subsequently cancelled. As we sheltered in place, APCSS leadership and faculty quickly reached out and connected with alumni and stakeholders in the region to gain an understanding of how they were coping with the security challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis.

As we conversed with the alumni and stakeholders throughout the region through the virtual domain, many of them expressed challenges associated with the mass return of migrant workers back to their home
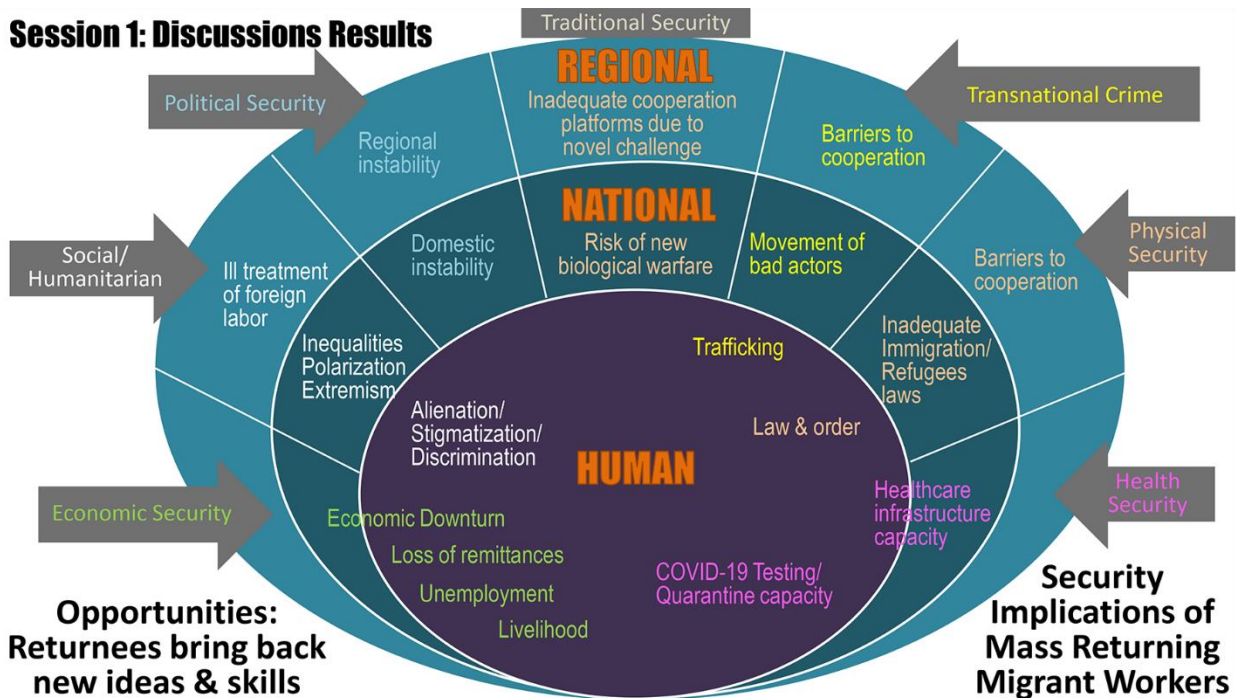
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countries. The magnitude of the return was unexpected for most governments and they were grappling with how to effectively and efficiently provide services to this returning population. Through a series of dialogues with over 100 alumni, primarily from ministries of defense and the military, a complex web of security dimensions associated with the returning migrants emerged.

The discussions are summarized in the following seven security dimensions: health security, physical security, transnational crime, traditional security, political security, social/humanitarian challenges and economic security. See Figure 1 below for security implications of mass returning migrant workers.

Figure 1: Security implications of mass returning migrant workers.

Security Implications:

As the countries received unexpectedly large numbers of returning migrant workers, they overwhelmed existing under-developed healthcare infrastructure and quarantine facilities that were stretched to the limit. Border entry points were overwhelmed with the sudden influx of returnees, exceeding the capacity of immigration and border control agencies. The crisis at borders accentuated existing barriers to cooperation with neighboring countries. As the overwhelmed immigration and border control agencies experienced gaps in cooperation, it is suspected that many bad actors were able to mix in with the masses to enter the country without detection. Some security practitioners were concerned that COVID-19 may have generated ideas for new biological weapons.

The COVID-19 pandemic seriously stigmatized the returnees who faced discrimination, marginalization and alienation within their own communities. Their ill-treatment concerned many of the discussants who saw it as exacerbating inequalities and fueling polarization within society, which could lead to domestic

instability and have spill-over effects within the region. Additionally, many guest workers were ill-treated in destination countries and such experiences may have made them susceptible to extremist ideologies that could be exported back to their home countries.

Finally, the economic dimension of insecurity associated with the returnees was of paramount importance. Regional governments are grappling with how to provide livelihood opportunities for the returnees while their economies are facing high unemployment rates even prior to the COVID-19 crisis. As such, unemployment rates soared as these countries experienced a sudden influx of returnees. The World Bank warned that a reduction in remittances would increase the risk of individuals falling into poverty (The World Bank, 2020). For many of these countries, the remittances from overseas migrant workers made up a large chunk of their economies and a significant reduction due to mass returning migrant workers could have devastating effects.

Best Practices and Recommendations:

During a series of regional dialogues with APCSS alumni and prioritization of security implications, the following best practices and list of 15 short-term, medium-term and long-term recommendations emerged (Table 1).

Session 2 Discussions Results: Recommendations for Returning Migrant Workers

SHORT-TERM	MEDIUM-TERM	LONG-TERM
Programs to address human basic needs	Ensure availability of microfinance for needed capital to start-up micro enterprises	International agreements on humane treatment of guest workers
Family-centered approach to provision of humanitarian aid and reintegration programs	Invest in SMEs to increase production of PPE	Local trade unions and labor organizations to include guest workers
Provide psychosocial support	Develop a database of skills for the returnee population, especially identification of those with healthcare skillsets	Invest in human development, particularly in health infrastructure and quality education
Establish a unified portal for all assistance	Establish job placement programs to match skills with jobs	Strengthen and invest in social safety net programs
Establish programs to address unique needs of women	In cooperation with the private sector, establish vocational training, livelihood cash programs, and create incentives for developing valued-added agriculture sector	Establish a common database within the region to track skills and for job placements

Table 1: Best practices and recommendations to address security challenges generated by mass returning migrant workers

Short-term actions focused on immediate humanitarian needs for the returnees, medium-term proposals addressed the economic security challenges and long-term recommendations focused on infrastructure issues. While the short-term actions addressed the unique needs of the returnees, the medium to long-

term suggestions would benefit not only the returnee population, but the entire community if implemented.

In spite of support and commitments by national governments, many returnees and migrant workers continue to face challenges accessing return and reintegration services. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) were at the forefront of advocating and promoting these efforts even before the COVID-19 crisis. ASEAN, home to more than 20 million migrant workers, has been more active in addressing this particular issue in comparison to other regional organizations within the Indo-Pacific (Wickramasekara, 2019).

For example, the Philippines government has been on the leading edge of implementing legislations to address this issue within ASEAN. Its legislature has passed several laws over the past decade and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration Act was signed into law in 2016 to further enhance the country's efforts to reintegrate returning workers. The Philippines' National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) provides counseling, wage employment referral assistance, enterprise development, skills training and capability enhancement and assistance to distressed OFWs (Wickramasekara, 2019).

Given limited resources faced by the Myanmar government, the formation of a partnership between the government and the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) was the hallmark of Myanmar response to the mass return of overseas migrant workers. The most prominent feature of the MRCS program was its emphasis on protection, gender and inclusion. A major effort focused on anti-trafficking-in-person measures for vulnerable populations among Myanmar returnees.

The next step would be for the governments of ASEAN countries to collaborate closely with ILO and the ASEAN Committee on the actual implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers. This effort needs to specifically address how to remove barriers for the effective implementation of these recommended measures.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) declared its commitment to collaborate and cooperate on migrant labor during the 18th SAARC Summit at the end of 2014. However, implementation and follow-on actions have not progressed since SAARC has not been able to meet again for a summit since 2014 (Zahra-Malik, 2016). According to the ILO, a conservative estimate of over 38 million migrant workers originates from South Asian countries (ILO, 2018). This current crisis on the mass returning migrants could be used as a leverage to reignite, motivate and mobilize SAARC member states to revisit this issue given the security implications it will create if not addressed.

Since the issue of migrant labor has far and wide implications on human, national and regional security domains as identified by the complex web above, international cooperation has become even more critical to effectively manage the system to lessen the shock created by the COVID-19 crisis. In this effort, regional mechanisms can play a significant role in positively advocating, promoting, and contributing towards the humane treatment of migrant laborers both at home and abroad. A collaborative intelligence is urgently needed for regional countries to generate novel solutions in response to novel challenges created by the novel virus. Our ability to turn the tide of this crisis into an opportunity for a transformational cooperation

is closely tied to new possibilities for peace, prosperity and progress for the future. Whether we want it or not, we are connected to each other directly and indirectly. We are all in it together.

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