

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The securitization of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, Asia, and Oceania: Mixes of imbalanced securitizing narratives and measures

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Abstract

Governments across the world resorted to different forms of narratives and measures to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. This study observed the responses of six administrations (China, Sweden, UK, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and New Zealand) through the lenses of the securitization theory as complemented with tailor-made methodological tools. Introducing the concept of the 'securitization gap' between the securitizing narratives' intensity and the securitizing measures' stringency this study argues that a consistency between the rhetoric's intensity and measures' severity did not impact the governments' capacity to manage the COVID-19 outbreak. Further, this study finds a relation between the stringency of the securitizing measures and the management of COVID-19. Administrations that resorted to severe forms of securitization managed to spare more lives from the virus than administrations that did not enforce stringent securitizing tactics. Lastly, this study argues that the agreement of the general public with the securitizing narratives and the securitizing measures did not drastically influence the COVID-19 fatalities in the concerned case studies.

Keywords

COVID-19; Securitization; Pandemic; Health Policy; Narratives

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Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak was officially declared a pandemic on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization.¹ Much time has passed since then. Once the authorities recorded the virus's presence within their borders, some of them represented it as an existential threat and enforced extreme measures to deal with it. Others resorted to simple recommendations and mild social distancing measures. Yet many administrations decided to impose strict rules and seal their borders even before experiencing any major COVID-19 outbreak. Notably, most authorities across the world utilized similar rhetorical representation of the epidemic and considered the virus a security and existential threat.

We argue that Security Studies in general and the Copenhagen School securitization theorem constitute a sound theoretical framework that allows us to account for numerous aspects of the state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, namely, the political communication of the outbreak, emergency actions, and general public resonance with the authorities' discourse and approach. Considering the fact that nearly all administrations of the world securitized the pandemic, it would be of interest to assess (1) if and why there was a gap between the securitization narratives intensity and the securitizing measures stringency, (2) which form of securitization turned out to be the most effective in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) whether the acceptance of the security speech acts by the targeted audience influenced the capacity of the authorities to manage the outbreak.

To answer our research questions, we examine the securitization rhetoric and measures' intensity in six administrations that resorted to diverse pandemic-control policies and employed differentiated securitization narratives: China mainland, Hong Kong, Sweden, the UK, New Zealand, and Taiwan.

Our study attempts a threefold contribution to the current literature. Theoretically, we introduce the concept of the "securitization gap" which captures substantial differences between the intensity of the security speech acts and the severity of the securitizing measures. Methodologically, we introduce indicators of security speech acts' intensity and securitizing measures' stringency. We also introduce the Securitization Stringency Continuum that lists the securitizing narratives and measures according to their intensity. Empirically, we contribute to the literature that applies the securitization theory to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, we conduct an interpretative preliminary analysis that can be investigated empirically on more countries in the future.

¹ WHO, "WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19," last modified March 11, 2020, <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

Literature review

Security is best understood as what Ken Booth has proposed, ‘survival plus’, the ‘plus’ being freedom from life-determining threats and, therefore, some life choices.² To highlight how the non-traditional security issues develop into security threats and are consequently treated as such, security analysts utilize the theoretical framework of securitization. Accordingly, political actors make a rational choice to declare a ‘soft’ security issue as an existential threat. What follows is the implementation of extraordinary measures. The concept of securitization was first outlined by Ole Wæver in 1995. It refers to the discursive construction of threat. According to Wæver, securitization can be defined as a process in which an actor declares a particular issue, dynamic, or another actor to be ‘an existential threat’ to a specific referent object (1995). If accepted as such by the relevant audience, this enables the suspension of everyday politics and emergency measures in responding to that perceived crisis. Security in that sense is a site of negotiation between speakers and audiences, albeit one conditioned significantly by the extent to which the speaker enjoys a position of authority within a particular group. As such, securitization is context-related, so it involves articulation of the threat only from a specific place, in an institutional voice, by elites.³

The securitization theory is still being developed by scholars. So, for this study, we argue that a close look at the public policy responses and the consequent analysis of local and state governments’ responses to the coronavirus pandemic requires a more nuanced approach. Accordingly, we have developed a typology that includes the following six securitization sub-categories/modes/forms.

A-securitization refers to a condition where important social phenomena are declared security irrelevant and consequently treated as such.⁴ Preemptive securitization denotes the situation of an administration proceeding with enacting extraordinary measures even when the perceived threat appears to be distant temporarily or spatially and avoidable.⁵ Hyper-securitization takes place when the emergency actions taken by governments are super-extraordinary and linger even after the containment of the alleged threats.⁶ Desecuritization refers to the process of

² K. Booth, *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³ O. Wæver, “Securitization and desecuritization,” in *On Security*, ed. R.D. Lipschutz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 46–86.

⁴ K. Sliwinski, “‘A-Securitization’ of Immigration Policy - the Case of European Union,” *Asia-Pacific Journal of EU Studies* 14, no. 1 (2016): 25–56.

⁵ D. Stivas and N.R. Smith, “Coronavirus: China’s Attempts to Contain the Outbreak has Given it New Levels of State Power,” *The Conversation*, last modified March 13, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-chinas-attempts-to-contain-the-outbreak-has-given-it-new-levels-of-state-power-133285>.

⁶ D. Stivas and K. Sliwinski, “Securitizing Coronavirus: Global Risks, Responses, and Consequences,” *Global-e*, last modified September 8, 2020, <https://globalejournal.org/global-e/september-2020/securing-coronavirus-global-risks-responses-and-consequences>.

removing an issue from the realm of security and treating it as a normal political issue.⁷ We define mild securitization as the responses to a perceived threat that lacks stringency.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, most countries fluctuated between most or all these forms of securitization. Rarely has one administration maintained one policy/form of securitization throughout the pandemic. We show that in most cases, the authorities switched from one mode of securitization to another.

Methodology

To select our case studies, we consult the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker.⁸ The selected case studies include China mainland, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Taiwan, Sweden, and the UK. We assess the stringency of the securitization measures and intensity of the securitization rhetoric throughout the pandemic. We then decide on the form of securitization and place it on the vertical axis of the ‘securitization stringency continuum’ (Figure 1). The horizontal axis represents the timeline of the pandemic (January 2020 to May 2022). In tracing the results of the securitization rhetoric intensity and securitization measures stringency evaluation throughout the pandemic, we manage to detect whether there is a gap between the severity of the rhetoric and the stringency of the measures. Was the hyper-securitizing rhetoric uttered by the heads of governments trailed by hyper-securitizing measures? The assumption is that the securitization narrative and securitizing measures have similar intensity/stringency (H1).

We conduct qualitative analysis and discourse analysis, in particular, to interpret the securitization narratives’ intensity. We consider statements representing the pandemic as an existential threat and using words with strong existential connotations as ranging between the securitization forms of hyper-securitization and pre-emptive securitization. For determining the securitization form, we look into the words used, the frequency of the utilization of the words, and the context. The same word could indicate different forms of securitization depending on the context used. For example, the word “wave” could have hyper-securitization connotations in a sentence in which the securitizer would claim that “we are now sailing through a disastrous wave and if we do not abide with the regulations there will be not tomorrow”. The same word could have a preemptive securitization meaning if the securitizer would claim that “the wave is approaching, and we need to take

⁷ Wæver, “Securitization,” 46–86.

⁸ T. Hale *et al.*, “A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker),” *Nature Human Behavior* 5, no. 4 (2021): 529–538; The Oxford Coronavirus Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) project calculate a Stringency Index, a composite measure of nine of the response metrics. The nine metrics used to calculate the Stringency Index are: school closures; workplace closures; cancellation of public events; restrictions on public gatherings; closures of public transport; stay-at-home requirements; public information campaigns; restrictions on internal movements; and international travel controls.

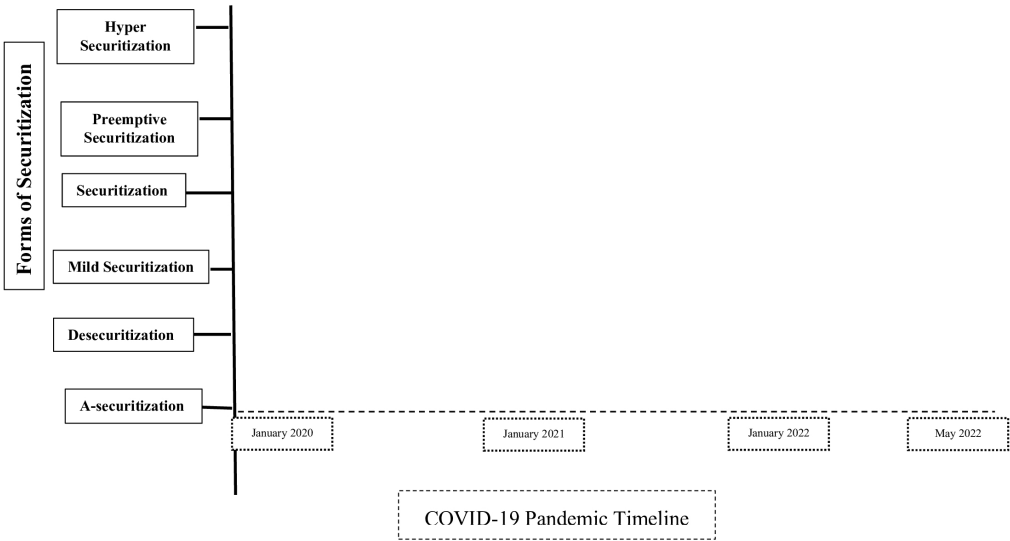


Figure 1. Securitization Stringency Continuum (as adapted for this study).

measures to avoid being swept by it”. Lastly, the word wave could be used for desecuritization purposes if the securitizer’s narrative would state that “we sailed through the wave successfully and we are safe now”.

Parallely, we evaluate the stringency of the securitizing measures. In the COVID-19 context, we consider the imposition of lockdowns within the territories of the concerned administrations and the direct or indirect restrictions to travel arrivals as indicators of hyper-securitization. Restrictions on travelling towards the concerned case studies without internal lockdowns count as instances of pre-emptive securitizations. The legal enforcement of measures like mask-wearing, vaccination, and social distancing reflects pure securitization instances. Recommendations without the chance of legal enforcement fall within the range of mild securitization. Lastly, the deliberate inaction towards dealing with the pandemic falls within the forms of desecuritization and a-securitization.

When it comes to evaluating the policy responses and by extension the success of the attempted securitizations, inspired by recent relevant literature⁹ we consider a proxy of effective public management of the pandemic to be the COVID-19 morbidity/million ratios. We hypothesize that administrations that resorted to more intense forms of securitization managed to control the COVID-19 fatality/million more efficiently than those that opted for mild forms of securitization or de/a-securitizations (H2).

⁹ D. Stivas and A. Cole, “The importance of trust and transparency in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Evidence from sixteen EU member states,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2193733>.

Since the success or failure of the securitizing measures depend heavily on the extent to which the general public complied with the authorities' regulations, we treat the general public as the targeted audience of the securitizing moves. The assessment of the general public's response to the official's securitizing rhetoric and exceptional measures is based on statistical analysis of publicly available surveys conducted between 2020 and 2022. We assume that administrations in which the general public had a relatively positive opinion about the necessity of the emergency action and resonated with the authorities' rhetoric about the imminence and severity of the threat managed the pandemic more effectively (*H3*). Having drawn conclusions on the intensity and severity of the securitization rhetoric and measures in the six case studies, we place the results on the Securitization Stringency Continuum (SSC-Figure 1).

Evidence from the six case studies

China mainland

Speech Acts. The measures employed by the Chinese central and provincial authorities to control the pandemic during the two major outbreaks in January 2020 and April 2022 were severe. The official narrative that preceded or accompanied these extraordinary measures had very few securitizing elements, though. In the first weeks of the pandemic, Xi Jinping, the Chinese President, represented China's endeavors to contain the virus as a 'battle; that China had to 'win'.¹⁰ Xi parallelized the epidemic with 'a devil'.¹¹ In February 2020, while Wuhan was the global epicenter of the pandemic, Xi spoke about the 'people's war' against the pandemic.¹² In March of the same year, the Chinese President persisted on representing the pandemic as a 'tough war'.¹³ Having managed to contain the spread of the virus in China, by the middle of March, Xi pledged that the prevention and control efforts had 'turned the tide'.¹⁴ After that, Xi's narrative turned toward the international community insisting on 'taking urgent action'¹⁵ because 'humanity rise and fall together with a shared future'.¹⁶ For Xi, the epidemic was the fastest spreading, most extensive and most

¹⁰ Chinese Government, "Xi voices full confidence in winning battle against novel coronavirus," last modified January 29, 2020, http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2020-01/29/content_75656171.htm.

¹¹ Chinese Government, "Xi voices full confidence," http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2020-01/29/content_75656171.htm.

¹² Chinese Government, "Xi vows to win people's war against novel coronavirus," last modified February 10, 2020, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202002/10/content_WS5e414765c6d04ea953b7b87b.html.

¹³ Chinese Government, "Amid COVID-19 war, Xi advocates int'l cooperation in scientific research," last modified March 4, 2020, http://en.nhc.gov.cn/2020-03/04/c_77299.htm.

¹⁴ Chinese Government, "'Turning the tide' — Xi leads anti-virus war toward victory," last modified March 11, 2020, http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2020-03/11/content_75799254.htm.

¹⁵ Chinese Government, "Xi talks with UN chief, calling for urgent int'l action against COVID-19," last modified March 13, 2020, http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2020-03/13/content_75808595.htm.

¹⁶ Chinese Government, "Xi's remarks on promoting global cooperation against COVID-19 pandemic," last modified May 27, 2021, http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2021-05/27/content_77530581.htm.

challenging public health emergency China had encountered since the founding of the PRC in 1949.¹⁷ The above appraisal of Xi's communications indicates that he rarely used powerful security speech acts to represent the pandemic. In most cases, he described it as a risk and challenge for which a battle and a 'people's war' was necessary.

Measures. At the onset of the pandemic, the Chinese authorities responded firmly. Entire cities and provinces were isolated for several weeks. Tailor-made hospitals for coronavirus patients were constructed within days. State-of-the-art surveillance technologies and big data methods, which came at the cost of privacy¹⁸ were employed to guarantee that the Chinese public complied with the restrictive measures. The Central Government was able to quickly 'send-down' almost a million communist party members to the affected Hubei province to serve as grassroots volunteers-enforcers.¹⁹ In March 2022, when the new COVID-19 variant, Omicron, infected thousands of Chinese citizens, the Central Government enforced the same recipe as in Wuhan in 2020. In Shanghai, the government imposed severe lockdowns involving the construction of barricades outside of entire blocks or single apartments. The local authorities tested all 26 million inhabitants daily, isolated positive cases and quarantined close contacts in rapidly constructed facilities. China also made it very difficult for all those outside the country to return. International flights landed only in a few cities; numerous PCR tests had to be conducted even seven days before the departure, followed by lengthy quarantines after arrival.

Audience acceptance. Few surveys focused directly on the citizens' satisfaction with the Chinese government's COVID-19 measures. In one survey, China got top scores across four key indicators: national political leadership, corporate leadership, community, and media.²⁰ Political trust is another indicator of citizens' resonance with the Government through pandemics. The Edelman Trust Barometer suggests that the Chinese Government was among the most highly trusted in the world. At the beginning of the outbreak, 90% of the Chinese public trusted its government to do what is right.²¹ In May of the same year, the Chinese citizens 'trusted' their leaders by 95%. Although the Edelman survey of January 2021 found a sharp decline in political trust (82%), one year later, the Chinese Government scored

¹⁷ Chinese Government, "Chronicle of Xi's leadership in China's war against coronavirus," last modified September 8, 2020, http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/topnews/2020-09/08/content_76680603_2.htm.

¹⁸ G. Hu *et al.*, "Information Disclosure During the COVID-19 Epidemic in China: City-Level Observational Study," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 8 (2020): e19572.

¹⁹ A.J. He, Y. Shi and H. Liu, "Crisis Governance, Chinese Style: Distinctive Features of China's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Policy Design and Practice* 3, no. 3 (2020): 242–258.

²⁰ Blackbox Corp, "World in Crisis Global News Coverage," last modified May, 2020, <https://blackbox.com.sg/?news-feature=world-in-crisis-global-news-coverage>.

²¹ Edelman, "2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Spring Update: Trust and the Covid-19 Pandemic," last modified 2020, <https://www.edelman.com/research/trust-2020-spring-update>.

91% in terms of trust in Government.²² These scores suggest that the securitizing rhetoric and most importantly the securitization measures implemented by the Chinese government found resonance with their targets, the Chinese public.

Hong Kong

Speech Acts. If we focus on the statements of the most important political leader of Hong Kong - Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive (CE) of the region, we observe that throughout the outbreak, she used mild securitizing discourse. During the first month of the pandemic, Lam represented the situation as “very serious, prompting tremendous public health concern and anxiety to people”²³ and “severe”.²⁴ In March 2020, Lam recognized the undertaken measures were “draconian” and used the metaphor “[sailing] through a wave”.²⁵ In July 2020, the CE warned that a potential community outbreak could lead to a “collapse of [Hong Kong’s] hospital system”.²⁶ Entering 2021 and within the first days of Hong Kong’s Vaccination Programme, Lam represented the efforts to control the pandemic as a “battle”.²⁷ In May 2021, while Hong Kong recorded close to zero local infections daily, Lam framed the vaccines as “more than a jab because [the jab] is the lifeline of Hong Kong”.²⁸ In February 2022, when Hong Kong was dealing with the worst phase of the pandemic since its onset, Carrie Lam spoke about an “unprecedented and challenging epidemic situation”.²⁹ The above excerpts, interviews, and statements demonstrate that the leader of Hong Kong regularly used security-charged words and phrases to urge the public to accept and tolerate the implemented exceptional measures.

Measures. At the beginning of the pandemic, while little was known about the virus, the methods of its transmission, and potential mortality, the Government of

²² Edelman, “2022 Edelman Trust Barometer,” last modified 2022, <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2022-trust-barometer>.

²³ HK Government, “CE announces activation of Emergency Response Level in relation to novel coronavirus infection,” last modified January 25, 2020, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202001/26/P2020012600087.htm>.

²⁴ HK Government, “CE visits Fire Services Department and inspects infection control measures at Queensway Government Offices,” last modified February 28, 2020, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202002/28/P2020022800882.htm>.

²⁵ HK Government, “Transcript of remarks of press conference,” last modified March 21, 2020, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202003/21/P2020032100756.htm>.

²⁶ HK Government, “CE appeals to public in fight against COVID-19,” last modified July 29, 2020, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202007/28/P2020072800713.htm>.

²⁷ HK Government, “CE appeals to public to get vaccinated against COVID-19,” last modified February 22, 2021, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202102/22/P2021022200784.htm>.

²⁸ HK Government, “Transcript of remarks of press conference on “Early Vaccination for All” campaign,” last modified May 31, 2021, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202105/31/P2021053100924.htm>.

²⁹ HK Government, “Article by the CE: Continue Our Fight Determined to Win,” last modified February, 2020, <https://www.ceo.gov.hk/eng/pdf/article20200225.pdf>.

HK strengthened health screening at boundary control points, set up a surveillance system, and reminded the public to observe public hygiene.³⁰ The Hong Kong government's strategy aimed to cut off the transmission of the virus by enhancing public education and calling on the public to take precautionary measures and reduce social contact. Subsequently, the Hong Kong authorities increased isolation and quarantine facilities, enhanced the capacity of the Public Health Laboratory Centre of the Department of Health to support the Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme for the early identification of potential cases of infection, and adjusted the special working arrangement for civil servants.³¹ The most severe measures were taken between January and April 2022, during the worst phase of the outbreak. Many establishments were shut down for a long time, the catering businesses were allowed to operate only under strictly observed rules and opening times, heavy fines were imposed on those who were found in breach of the rules, and flights from many countries were suspended.

Audience acceptance. To examine audience acceptance, this study relies on publicly available surveys of PORI. We consult the percentages of the satisfaction of Hong Kong citizens with their authorities. In the absence of any survey that directly examines the opinion of the citizens about the securitizing rhetoric and measures, we consider citizens' satisfaction with the Government as a predictor of audience acceptance. In terms of public satisfaction with the performance of the Hong Kong government, in February 2020, 82.5% of the Hong Kong public answered that it was dissatisfied, while only 8.8% being content with the Government's performance.³² In April 2020, the number of satisfied Hong Kong citizens jumped to 20.8%. This was the highest percentage of citizens' satisfaction with the Government recorded in 2020. In 2021, the Hong Kong government scored better satisfaction results than in 2020. March 2022 was the worst month of 2022 in public satisfaction, with the Government scoring only 10.1%.³³ Subsequently, and with Hong Kong's relatively quick control of the outbreak, satisfaction with the Government increased.

Taiwan

Speech acts. The President of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen is the Taiwanese political actor who held power not only to securitize an issue discursively but also to activate exceptional measures. In some of her statements, Tsai declared that "we will fight

³⁰ HK Government, "Article by the CE: Continue Our Fight," <https://www.ceo.gov.hk/eng/pdf/article20200225.pdf>.

³¹ HK Government, "Article by the CE: Continue Our Fight."

³² PORI, "People's Satisfaction with the HKSAR Government," accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.pori.hk/pop-poll/government-en/h001.html?lang=en>.

³³ PORI, "People's Satisfaction," <https://www.pori.hk/pop-poll/government-en/h001.html?lang=en>.

COVID-19 as waging a real war”.³⁴ Referring to Taiwan’s plan to fight COVID-19, Tsai emphasized the three key components of Taiwan’s pandemic response: prudent action, rapid response, and early deployment. The last component is a strong indicator of Taiwan’s endeavors to securitize the pandemic by implementing exceptional measures preemptively. Subsequently, the Taiwanese President used mild securitizing words like “challenge”, “protection”, and “battle” to portray her administration’s struggles to keep the virus out of the island.³⁵ In April 2020, she reminded the citizens that “Taiwan will continue to be in danger”.³⁶ By June 2020, Tsai began to desecuritize the pandemic. She claimed that Taiwan had “weathered the storm” and was ready to support any other countries suffering from the pandemic.³⁷ Throughout 2021, Taiwan did not experience any major outbreak.

Measures. Unlike most western countries, Taiwan took early action.³⁸ To counter the spread of the virus, the Taiwanese authorities implemented extreme measures like strict border controls, mandated social distancing, and intensive monitoring.³⁹ The authorities tracked smartphone locations to detect and penalize those who violated the quarantines.⁴⁰ The strategies of the Government were continuously adapted.⁴¹ The Taiwanese state made rational use of data technology to assist the medics with the identification and tracking of suspected COVID-19 patients and high-risk individuals. Taiwan activated new laws entitling governmental agencies to expropriate or requisite private instruments of production for disease control practices.⁴²

Audience acceptance. Considering the resonance of the Taiwanese citizens with the Government’s response, a YouGov survey found that between May 2020 and January 2021, more than 79% of the Taiwanese citizens thought that the

³⁴ Taiwanese Presidency, “President Tsai issues remarks regarding the coronavirus outbreak and responds to questions from the media,” last modified January 22, 2020, <https://www.president.gov.tw/NEWS/25200>.

³⁵ Taiwanese Presidency, “President Tsai issues remarks regarding government response to COVID-19 pandemic,” last modified March 19, 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/5985>.

³⁶ Taiwanese Presidency, “President Tsai’s address on COVID-19 cooperation,” last modified April 1, 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/5989>.

³⁷ Taiwanese Presidency, “President Tsai addresses Copenhagen Democracy Summit 2022,” last modified June 10, 2020, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6274>.

³⁸ W.T. Chiu, D.P. Laporte and J. Wu, “Determinants of Taiwan’s Early Containment of COVID-19 Incidence,” *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 7 (2020): 943, 944.

³⁹ W.Y. Yang and C.H. Tsai, “Democratic Values, Collective Security, and Privacy: Taiwan People’s Response to COVID-19,” *Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research* 8, no. 3 (2020): 222–245.

⁴⁰ I.G. Cohen, L.O. Gostin and D.J. Weitzner, “Digital Smartphone Tracking for COVID-19: Public Health and Civil Liberties in Tension,” *JAMA* 323, no. 23 (2020): 2371, 2372.

⁴¹ V.Y. Wang, “Systemic Resilience and COVID-19: Lessons from Taiwan,” *International Journal of Quality in Health Care* 34, no. 2 (2022): 1–3.

⁴² K.C. Wang, “Securitization of Public Policy and Pandemic: Taiwan’s Case Against Covid-19,” *WIMAYA* 2, no. 1 (2021): 1–7.

Government handled COVID-19 very well or somewhat well.⁴³ In May 2020, 92% of respondents were positive about their government's handling of the outbreak.⁴⁴ The confidence of the Taiwanese citizens in how their government handled the pandemic remained high till April 2021 (83%-YouGov 2022). However, following a short outbreak in May 2021, the numbers fell sharply to 50% and to an all-time low (46%) in June of the same year (YouGov 2022). Since then, confidence has fluctuated between 51% (in April 2022) and 73% (in November 2021 and March 2022- YouGov 2022).

New Zealand

Speech Acts. In New Zealand, the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, rarely used security-charged terms despite her government's tendency to enforce some of the lengthier lockdowns globally. Already from March 2020, Ardern claimed that "...we put in place our country's second ever State of National Emergency, [...] save New Zealanders' lives and prevent the very worst that we've seen around the world from happening here".⁴⁵ Ardern warned that "we are under attack".⁴⁶ On the first days of April 2020, the Prime Minister warned that COVID-19 was "the greatest threat to human health we have seen in over a century".⁴⁷ By the end of the month, Ardern described the pandemic as a "wave of devastation".⁴⁸ In May 2020, Ardern described the outbreak as a war.⁴⁹ In September, Ardern began to desecuritize the pandemic. She noted that the "waves" in New Zealand had been relatively small and contained.⁵⁰ Despite the desecurizing rhetoric, New Zealand enforced strict lockdowns. By January 2022, in attempting to persuade more New Zealanders to get

⁴³ M. Smith, "International COVID-19 Tracker," YouGov, last modified May 18, 2020, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/05/18/international-covid-19-tracker-update-18-may>.

⁴⁴ Smith, "International COVID-19," <https://today.yougov.com/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/05/18/international-covid-19-tracker-update-18-may>.

⁴⁵ NZ Government, "Prime Minister's statement on State of National Emergency and Epidemic Notice," last modified March 25, 2020, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/prime-minister%E2%80%99s-statement-state-national-emergency-and-epidemic-notice>.

⁴⁶ NZ Government, "New Zealand moves to COVID-19 Alert Level 3, then Level 4 in 48 hours," last modified March 23, 2020, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-zealand-moves-covid-19-alert-level-3-then-level-4-48-hours>.

⁴⁷ NZ Government, "Prime Minister's remarks halfway through Alert Level 4 lockdown," last modified April 9, 2020, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/prime-minister%E2%80%99s-remarks-halfway-through-alert-level-4-lockdown>.

⁴⁸ NZ Government, "Prime Minister's remarks on COVID-19 alert level decision – April 20," last modified April 20, 2020, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/prime-minister%E2%80%99s-remarks-covid-19-alert-level-decision-%E2%80%93-april-20>.

⁴⁹ NZ Government, "Level 2 announcement," last modified May 11, 2020, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/level-2-announcement>.

⁵⁰ NZ Government, "PM statement on Cabinet COVID-19 Alert Level review," last modified September 14, 2020, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/pm-statement-cabinet-covid-19-alert-level-review>.

inoculated, Ardern described the Omicron variant as a threat.⁵¹ In March of the same year, Ardern argued that “we are now in a position to move forward and change the way we do things”.⁵² Although throughout the pandemic, the narratives of the Prime Minister fluctuated between securitization to desecuritization, the measures taken by the Government were extraordinary and exceptional.

Measures. In March 2020, the Government introduced a four-level alert system. At Alert Level One, the Government and the public were supposed to prepare to fight the virus. At Alert Level Four, the highest level, full lockdown would be enforced to eliminate contact until COVID-19 is back under control. Alert Level Three was also very restrictive and close to a full lockdown. The entire New Zealand remained in Alert Levels Three and Four from the end of March till the middle of May 2020 and from the middle of August till September 7, 2021. Auckland, the most populous city of New Zealand, was on high alert levels for more time than the rest of New Zealand. From December 2021, the Alert Level System was replaced by the Traffic Light Mechanism. The country was close to a full lockdown when at ‘Red Traffic Light’. New Zealand experienced a ‘Red Traffic Light’ from the end of January till the end of March 2022, when the Government decided to open New Zealand to the world.

Audience acceptance. As some regular surveys conducted by the local social media polling company Stickybeak indicate, the New Zealanders supported the response of the Government. Already in March 2020, 80% of the public was positive to the Government’s response.⁵³ 91% of the respondents planned to comply with the Government’s requests to stay at home, not to go to school or work, and not to travel or socialize with people outside their homes.⁵⁴ Overall, 80% supported the Government’s enforcement of the quarantine and the arrest and prosecution of those who break it.⁵⁵ On April 27, 2020, 86% were in accord with the response of the Government to COVID-19.⁵⁶ Two months on, the support for the Government’s approach

⁵¹ NZ Government, “New Zealand to move to Red from 11.59pm today,” last modified January 23, 2022, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-zealand-move-red-1159pm-today>.

⁵² NZ Government, “Post-peak plan a safe return to greater normality,” last modified March 23, 2022, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/post-peak-plan-safe-return-greater-normality>.

⁵³ D. Brain, “How is the govt handling Covid-19? The first opinion poll since NZ locked down,” The Spinoff, last modified March 28, 2020, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/28-03-2020/how-are-we-feeling-about-covid-19-the-first-opinion-poll-since-nz-locked-down>.

⁵⁴ Brain, “How is the govt handling Covid-19?,” <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/28-03-2020/how-are-we-feeling-about-covid-19-the-first-opinion-poll-since-nz-locked-down>.

⁵⁵ Brain, “How is the govt handling.”

⁵⁶ D. Brain, “Exclusive: New poll shows support for level four extension despite economic pain,” The Spinoff, last modified April 27, 2020, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/27-04-2020/exclusive-new-poll-shows-support-for-level-four-extension-despite-economic-pain>.

remained very high at 84%.⁵⁷ Around the same percentage of New Zealanders stood by their Government in the ‘closed border’ policy.⁵⁸ In July 2021, the support for Ardern’s response to COVID-19 started to fade.⁵⁹ These numbers suggest that the general public of New Zealand strongly supported the securitizing measures of the Government and resonated with the securitization rhetoric of the Prime Minister.

Sweden

Speech acts. The policymaking in Sweden is premised on entertaining conflicting interests via compromise so that all parties agree on the output.⁶⁰ Intense securitization rhetoric, by the side of the Prime Minister, even in emergency situations like COVID-19, could threaten the agreement of all parties. The Prime Minister of Sweden avoided representing the pandemic as a severe security threat or even introducing extraordinary measures to counter the threat. Before the end of March 2020, the Government had delegated the management and communication of the pandemic to the Public Health Agency of Sweden.⁶¹ During that time, the agency proposed some very mild social distancing measures despite having classified COVID-19 as a disease that constituted a danger to society.⁶² When the situation began to deteriorate, the Prime Minister, Stefan Lofven, appealed to the public and announced slightly more stringent measures. Lofven warned that “the COVID-19 virus is testing our country”.⁶³ Lofven avoided to represent the pandemic as a security issue. He just appealed to the public to show solidarity.⁶⁴ Subsequently, COVID-19 vanished from the official announcements of the Government.

⁵⁷ T. Manhire, “Exclusive new poll: public support for Covid response remains sky high,” *The Spinoff*, last modified June 16, 2020, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/16-06-2020/exclusive-new-poll-public-support-for-covid-response-remains-sky-high>.

⁵⁸ Manhire, “Exclusive new poll: public support,” <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/16-06-2020/exclusive-new-poll-public-support-for-covid-response-remains-sky-high>.

⁵⁹ T. Manhire, “Exclusive poll: How has support for NZ response to Covid-19 changed, 18 months on?,” *The Spinoff*, last modified July 21, 2021, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/21-07-2021/exclusive-poll-how-has-support-for-nz-response-to-covid-19-changed-18-months-on>.

⁶⁰ E. Petridou and N. Zahariadis, “Staying at home or going out? Leadership response to the COVID-19 crisis in Greece and Sweden,” *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 29, no. 3 (2021): 293–302.

⁶¹ Petridou and Zahariadis, “Staying at home or going out? Leadership,” 293–302.

⁶² Swedish Government, “The Government’s work in response to the virus responsible for COVID-19,” last modified April 6, 2020, <https://www.government.se/government-policy/the-governments-work-in-response-to-the-virus-responsible-for-covid-1/>.

⁶³ Swedish Government, “Prime Minister’s address to the nation,” last modified March 22, 2020, <https://www.swedenabroad.se/en/embassies/greece-athen/current/news/prime-ministers-address-to-the-nation-22-march-2020/>.

⁶⁴ Swedish Government, “Statement of Government Policy,” last modified September 8, 2020, <https://www.government.se/contentassets/990e39c5c11e45fe9744afb9409f2353/statement-of-government-policy-08-september-2020.pdf>.

In the Statement of Government Policy of September 2021, where various security challenges from climate change to street violence were mentioned as security challenges, the pandemic was absent.⁶⁵

Measures. The response of the Swedish Government to COVID-19 was based on simple guidelines rather than strict directives. No emergency measures were enforced since the Swedish constitution does not allow declaring a state of emergency during peacetime.⁶⁶ Bars and restaurants were kept open even though the per-capita morbidity rate was very high.⁶⁷ In March 2020, public gatherings of more than 500 people were banned.⁶⁸ In April of the same year, the Swedish Government declared that if any emergency measures were to be enforced, they should be necessary, proportionate, temporary, and subject to regular scrutiny.⁶⁹ In June 2020, bans on visits to homes for older people as well as on gatherings of more than 50 people were implemented. In November 2020, social gatherings involving more than eight people were prohibited. These were among the strictest measures Sweden enforced throughout the pandemic.

Audience acceptance. To assess the Swedes' views about the measures proposed by the Government, we consult domestic surveys from Kantar Sifo and opinion polls from YouGov. In June 2020, surveys recorded that more than 88% of Swedes kept a greater distance from others than they usually would. 82% of Swedes avoided shaking hands, and 86% washed their hands more often than usual. 66% took part in social activities outside the home to a lesser extent, and 64% avoided crowded public places. In other words, during the first phase of the pandemic, Swedes followed, by and large, the advice and recommendations issued by the Swedish authorities. Regarding the Swedes' opinion on their government's performance when dealing with the pandemic, YouGov found that at the beginning of the outbreak and during the herd immunity approach of the Government, up to 59% thought that the Government handled the pandemic well.⁷⁰ In May 2020, these numbers climbed up to 64%. However, since then and till May 2022, the numbers of Swedes endorsing their government's approach fluctuated between 57% (in September 2020) and 37% (in January 2021).

⁶⁵ Swedish Government, "Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, the Riksdag," last modified September 14, 2021, <https://www.government.se/speeches/2021/09/statement-of-government-policy-14-september-2021/>.

⁶⁶ Petridou and Zahariadis, "Staying at home or going out? Leadership."

⁶⁷ J. Korhonen and B. Granberg, "Sweden Backcasting, Now?—Strategic Planning for Covid-19 Mitigation in a Liberal Democracy," *Sustainability* 12, no. 10 (2020): 4138.

⁶⁸ Swedish Government, "Prime Minister's address to the nation," last modified March 22, 2020, <https://www.swedenabroad.se/en/embassies/greece-athen/current/news/prime-ministers-address-to-the-nation-22-march-2020/>.

⁶⁹ Swedish Government, "Rule of Law in the context of the COVID-19 Crisis," last modified April 1, 2020, <https://www.swedenabroad.se/en/embassies/greece-athen/current/news/prime-ministers-address-to-the-nation-22-march-2020/>.

⁷⁰ YouGov, "COVID-19: government handling and confidence in health authorities," last modified 2020, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/03/17/perception-government-handling-covid-19>.

UK

Speech acts. In the UK, throughout the pandemic, Prime Minister Boris Johnson delivered numerous speeches and statements updating the public and the parliament about the developments regarding COVID-19. In March 2020, Johnson assured the Brits that his government was “ready to take necessary steps to contain and protect the most vulnerable”.⁷¹ No lockdowns or strict social distancing measures were enforced. Businesses were supposed to be going about as usual.⁷² A few days later, with the case numbers and death rates rising, Johnson warned that the outbreak “will present significant challenges”,⁷³ and that this was the “worst public health crisis for a generation”.⁷⁴ War metaphors were often used. Subsequently, Johnson announced a lockdown (with western characteristics). He justified the lockdown as “preventing the UK from being engulfed by what would have been a catastrophe”.⁷⁵ By June 23, 2020, the PM began to desecuritize the virus to ease the lockdowns. He assured the citizens that “so far, [we have] avoided the catastrophe”.⁷⁶ Entering into 2021, the PM, following the existential threat claims, announced a national lockdown.⁷⁷ The situation was framed as “a national challenge”.⁷⁸ By May 2021, Johnson began to desecuritize the pandemic again in order to ease, incrementally, the lockdown.⁷⁹ In June, the desecuritization of the pandemic was followed by attempts to a-securitize it. Boris Johnson assured the society that “because we must be clear that we cannot eliminate COVID - we must learn to live with it”.⁸⁰

⁷¹ UK Government, “PM to set out Government’s action plan on the coronavirus outbreak,” last modified 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-to-set-out-governments-action-plan-on-the-coronavirus-outbreak--2>.

⁷² UK Government, “Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19),” last modified March 3, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-coronavirus-press-conference-3-march-2020>.

⁷³ UK Government, “Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19),” last modified March 9, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-9-march-2020>.

⁷⁴ UK Government, “Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19),” last modified March 12, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-12-march-2020>.

⁷⁵ UK Government, “Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19),” last modified May 10, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-10-may-2020>.

⁷⁶ UK Government, “Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19),” last modified June 23, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-23-june-2020>.

⁷⁷ UK Government, “Prime Minister announces national lockdown,” last modified January 4, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-national-lockdown>.

⁷⁸ UK Government, “Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19),” last modified January 7, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-7-january-2021>.

⁷⁹ UK Government, “PM statement at coronavirus press conference,” last modified May 10, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-coronavirus-press-conference-10-may-2021>.

⁸⁰ UK Government, “PM statement at coronavirus press conference,” last modified June 14, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-coronavirus-press-conference-14-june-2021>.

Measures. The Government initially delayed the lockdown in favor of light measures like social distancing and self-quarantines.⁸¹ At the end of March 2020, the country entered a nationwide lockdown.⁸² The first lockdown at the national level ended on May 10, 2020. In October, a very high alert was issued in England that lasted till December 2. Less than a month later, another lockdown was imposed on England. The lockdown restrictions were gradually lifted entirely on July 19, 2021.

Audience Acceptance. In February 2020, 55% thought that the Government had handled the outbreak very or somewhat well.⁸³ In March 2020, the satisfaction level reached 72%. However, following May 2020, the positive attitudes of the British public towards their government's handling of coronavirus changed. In September 2020, only 30% thought their government was doing well. Until March 2021, the percentage of those who had confidence in the British authorities when handling the pandemic remained below 50%. From March to May 2021, possibly due to the early successful vaccination campaign of the UK government, the confidence of the citizens increased above 50% and reached as much as 62% in May 2021. However, since June 2021, the same score declined slightly to below 50%.

Discussion and conclusions

Securitization Gap

In our methodological section, we predicted a parallel trend between the securitization rhetoric intensity and securitization measures stringency. This is because it would make sense for political actors in executive positions to successfully implement extraordinary measures after first rhetorically justifying the necessity of these measures. The emergence of allegedly existential circumstances (intense securitization rhetoric) could justify the imposition of the emergency action. However, our analysis indicates that during the studied period, in 4 out of 6 cases, namely China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, New Zealand (see Figure 2 to Figure 7) there was a large gap between the intensity of the securitization rhetoric and the stringency of the securitizing measures. In Sweden, and especially in the UK, the securitization intensity gap was narrower or even nonexistent.

In China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and New Zealand, the authorities were able to impose stringent securitizing measures in the form of internal lockdowns and blockages of travelers from abroad without employing intense securitizing rhetoric. By contrast, in Sweden the government used mild to a-securitizing rhetoric to support mild measures that in most of the cases had the form of recommendations. The UK is the only case study where we observe a consistency between the intensity of the securitization rhetoric and the securitizing measures.

⁸¹ L. Enria *et al.*, "Trust and Transparency in Times of Crisis: Results from an Online Survey during the First Wave (April 2020) of the COVID-19 Epidemic in the UK," *PLoS One* 16, no. 2 (2021): e0239247.

⁸² Enria *et al.*, "Trust and Transparency in Times," e0239247.

⁸³ YouGov, "Personal measures taken to avoid COVID-19," last modified 2020, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2020/03/17/personal-measures-taken-avoid-covid-19>.

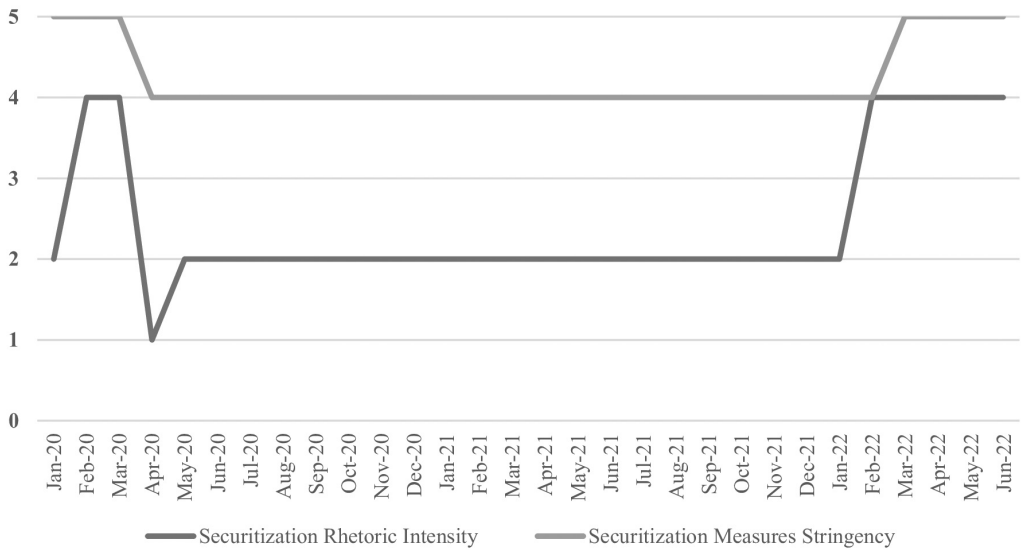


Figure 2. Securitization gap in mainland China. 0=A-securitization; 1=Desecuritization; 2= Mild securitization; 3= Securitization; 4= Preemptive securitization; 5= Hyper Securitization.

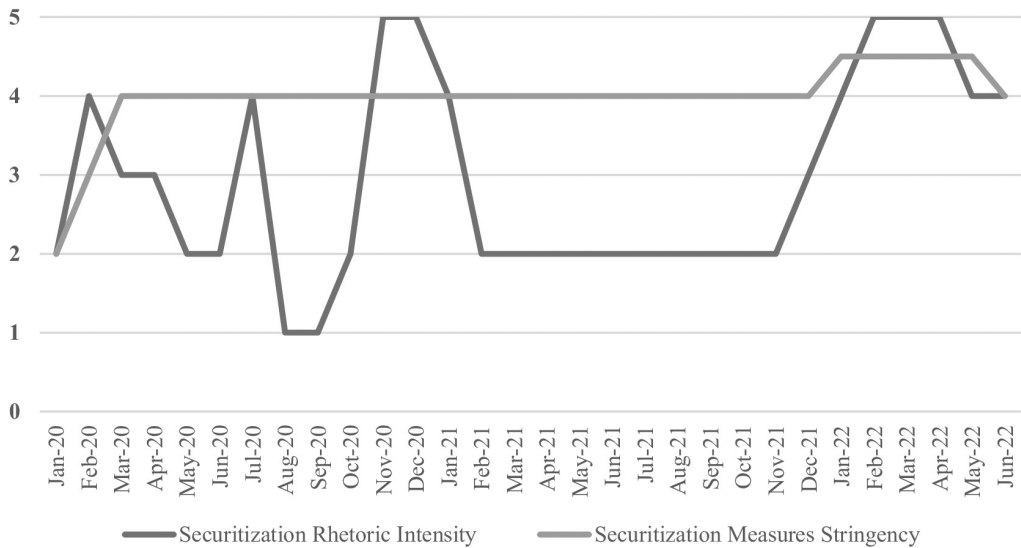


Figure 3. Securitization gap in Hong Kong. 0=A-securitization; 1=Desecuritization; 2= Mild securitization; 3= Securitization; 4= Preemptive securitization; 5= Hyper securitization.

It is possible that in contexts of high trust in the government, like in Mainland China, Taiwan, New Zealand, and Sweden, the political leaders do not need to necessarily complement stringent securitization measures with intense securitization

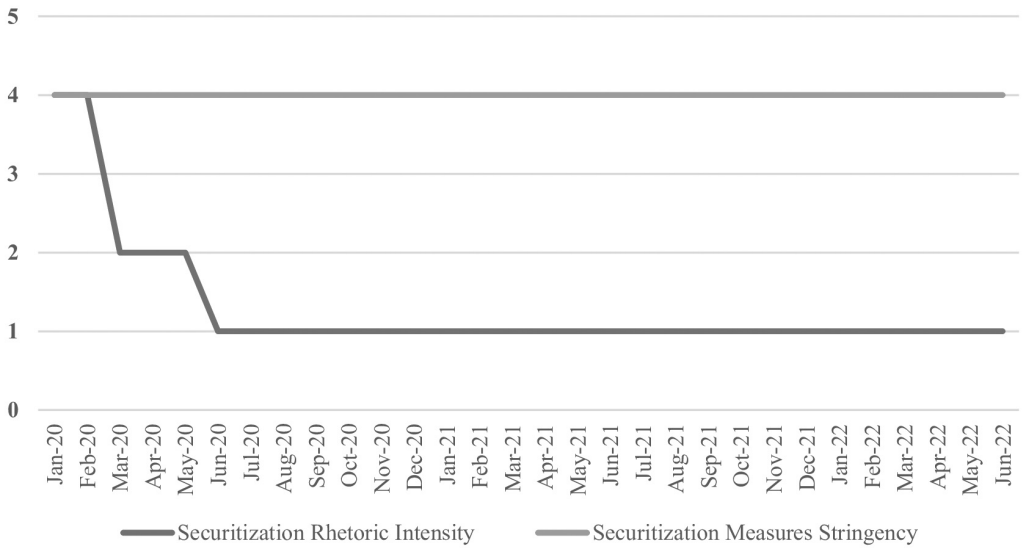


Figure 4. Securitization gap in Taiwan. 0=A-securitization; 1=Desecuritization; 2= Mild securitization; 3= Securitization; 4= Preemptive securitization; 5= Hyper securitization.

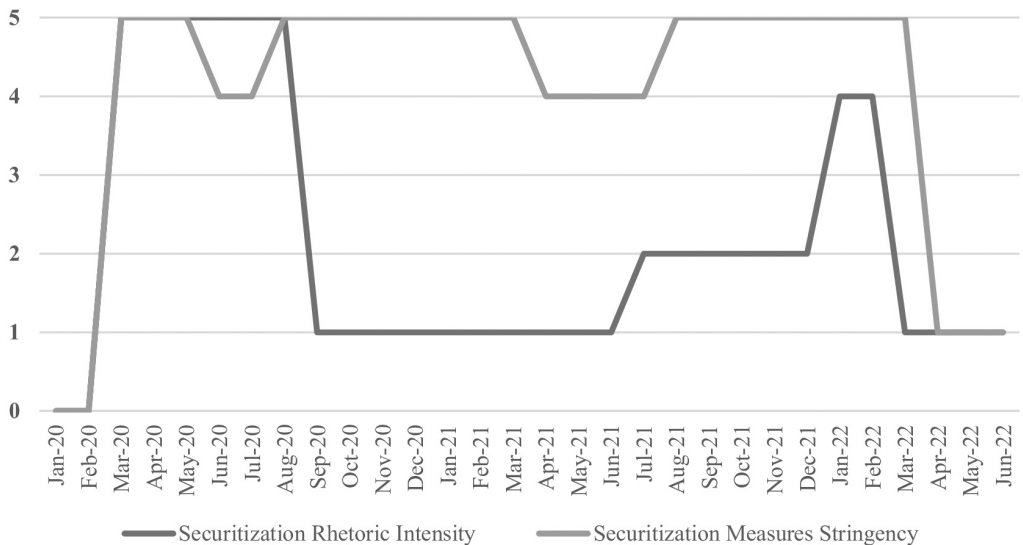


Figure 5. Securitization gap in New Zealand. 0=A-securitization; 1=Desecuritization; 2= Mild securitization; 3= Securitization; 4= Preemptive securitization; 5= Hyper securitization.

rhetoric. Because of high confidence to the government and the measures the latter undertakes, it is not necessary for the authorities to constantly attempt to persuade the public about the need for the imposed rules. In the UK, by contrast, where

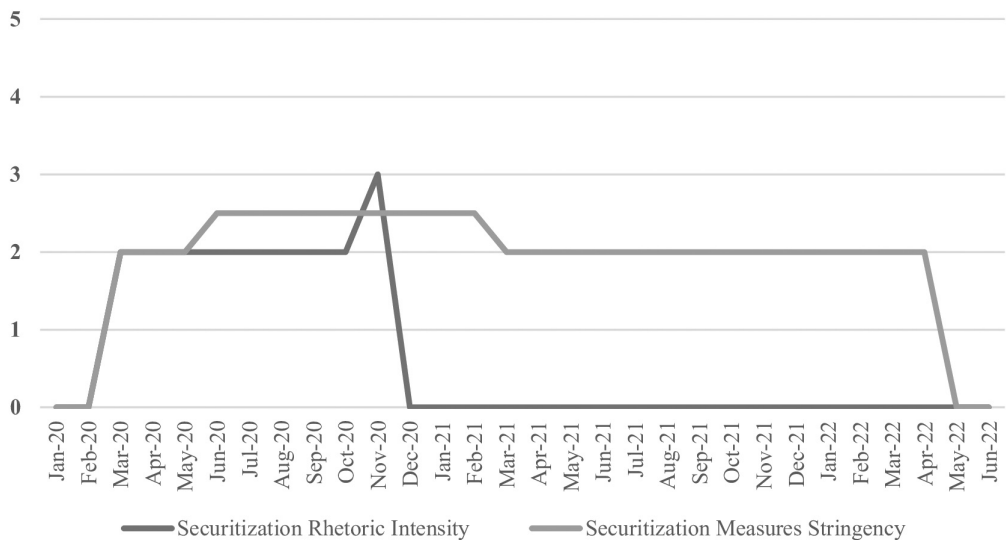


Figure 6. Securitization gap in Sweden. 0=A-securitization; 1=Desecuritization; 2= Mild securitization; 3= Securitization; 4= Preemptive securitization; 5= Hyper securitization.

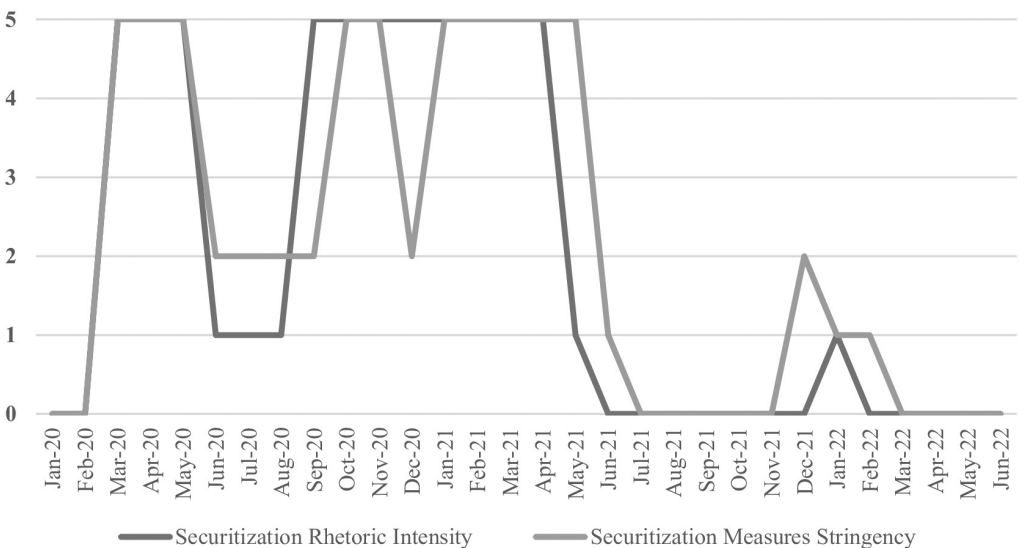


Figure 7. Securitization gap in the UK. 0=A-securitization; 1=Desecuritization; 2= Mild securitization; 3= Securitization; 4= Preemptive securitization; 5= Hyper securitization.

the public did not trust wholeheartedly the government, the latter's securitizing rhetoric intensity was consistent with the severity of the securitizing measures. To impose the lockdowns successfully, Boris Johnson appealed repeatedly to the

public about the caliber of the pandemic's alleged threat. Knowing that the UK citizens were not confident in his government, Johnson had to indicate a consistency between his words and actions. Otherwise, he would risk aggravating the citizens and facing a defeat in the next elections. The odd case study is Hong Kong. In an environment of very low governmental trust, the authorities rarely utilized intense securitizing narratives although they consistently followed draconian securitizing measures ranging from surveillance of suspected (and non-suspected) COVID-19 cases to strict and lengthy quarantines for incoming residents who travelled abroad. Having slightly shifted towards authoritarianism after the 2019s large protests, the Hong Kong authorities (like in Mainland China) became able to impose strict pandemic control measures without having to bother about the views that the public has towards them.

Another reason that could explain the large securitization gap observed in the East Asian administrations is their relatively recent experience with a like COVID-19 deadly pandemic, SARS. The citizens of Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan still had vivid the memories of the tragic events that happened to their societies during the 2003 SARS pandemic. The experience of the Asian societies with SARS constituted them more prepared than others to deal with another similar crisis. Having observed the deadly consequences of SARS, Asian societies did not have to be convinced to accept the draconian measures enforced by the governments to control COVID-19. This explains why leaders of western countries like the UK resorted more often to securitizing rhetoric to justify the extraordinary measures that they imposed upon their citizens.

Securitization intensity and COVID-19 management

Our second assumption is that the administrations that resorted to the most severe measures (hyper-securitization and pre-emptive securitization) managed the pandemic more effectively than the other states that adopted more lenient forms of securitization. We utilize the number of COVID-19 deaths in relation to the population size of the administration concerned as indicators of management success. To a certain extent, the second hypothesis is confirmed by the case studies' assessment. The authorities of Mainland China, a country with a population of close to 1.5 billion citizens, implemented some of the most stringent securitization measures observed worldwide. Whenever a COVID-19 case was detected, entire neighborhoods or even cities were placed in full lockdown for weeks or even for months. This approach seemed to be effective since China declared close to 4,650 deaths in the first four months of the pandemic and approximately 5,300 deaths till the end of June 2022. Although the reported by China numbers of casualties are subject to criticism, this does not change the fact that in relation to her population, China, by imposing hyper-securitizing measures, managed to keep the death-toll at very low levels.

Another country that managed COVID-19 relatively well by imposing barriers to the movement of her citizens internally (lockdowns) and externally (travel bans

and restrictions) was New Zealand. From the discovery of the first COVID-19 case in the remote islands till February 2022, New Zealand, a country with a population of close to 5 million, reported just 60 deaths. After gradually abolishing the hyper-securitizing tactics and opening up, New Zealand's death-toll rose sharply. Between March and June 2022, 1,400 deaths were added to the COVID-19 casualties' record. New Zealand is a clear case study indicating the effectiveness of the hyper-securitizing measures. Once the approach changed from hyper-securitization to desecuritization, more and more New Zealanders died from the COVID-19 virus.

Taiwan experienced similar trends with New Zealand. The number of deaths was kept to very low levels (close to 850 deaths in a place with 24 million inhabitants) for most of the pandemic's duration. Taiwan did not resort to severe internal lockdowns like mainland China but relied on making it almost impossible to enter the coastal island. Once travel restrictions were lifted, the number of COVID-19 deaths multiplied. By June 2022, Taiwan had reported more than 6,500 deaths. The situation was similar in Hong Kong. The city of 7.5 million inhabitants never imposed a lockdown like those in China and New Zealand throughout the duration of the pandemic. But the lengthy and strict quarantines dissuaded anyone who thought about visiting Hong Kong. As a result of the pre-emptive securitization measures till December 2021, just 213 individuals had died from the virus. Oddly, without significantly lightening the stringency of the measures, COVID-19 death numbers skyrocketed in the first six months of 2022 reaching 9,500 in June. The case of Hong Kong indicates that the preemptive securitization form was effective for as long as the virus was kept outside of Hong Kong's territory. However, once the virus infiltrated the society, even the travel restrictions and the semi-hyper-securitizing measures failed to control the death toll.

Among our six case studies, two enforced mild to no-securitizing measures for most of the pandemic's duration. In the UK, the government-imposed lockdowns (hyper-securitization) at the first months of the outbreak. These seemed not to be very effective as till December 2020, 93,000 deaths were recorded in a country of 24 million people. The numbers remained in an upward trend despite the change in the UK government's approach and the easing of the securitization forms. By June 2022, the UK reported more than 200,000 deaths. Similarly, Sweden, the government of which never enforced any strict measures, recorded 19,000 deaths by June 2022 (Sweden's population: 10 million).

Overall, among our case studies, the best performers in managing the pandemic, were the administrations that resorted to severe securitization forms. Although there was a spike in the COVID-19 deaths in 2022 for New Zealand, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, this does not change the fact that these four administrations managed the pandemic more effectively than administrations that employed ephemeral hyper-securitizing measures or mild-securitization forms throughout the pandemic's duration.

Audience acceptance and COVID-19 management

Based on our third assumption, we expect administrations with high scores of audience acceptance of the securitizing narratives to manage the pandemic more effectively than administrations with lower audience acceptance. This is because when the audience, the general public in our case studies, accepts the allegations of the securitizers about the imminence and severity of the threat (the COVID-19) the public is more likely to observe the government's regulations and recommendations.

Our evidence suggests that the observance of the authorities' directives (staying home, washing hands, wearing face masks, or taking vaccination, etc.) did not always produce positive effects regarding virus containment. Countries with high audience acceptance and compliance with the directives, like Sweden and the UK, recorded many deaths. Resonance between the government and the public and acceptance of the government's guidelines by the latter is not enough for an administration to control the number of COVID-19 casualties. The stringency of the guidelines is also important. Had the securitizing measures enforced by the British and Swedish governments been more stringent, it is very likely that the death toll in these two countries would be lower. It is not surprising that China, Taiwan, and New Zealand, which also enjoyed high public acceptance but enforced severe securitizing measures managed to keep the death toll much lower than Sweden and the UK.

The odd case study here is Hong Kong. The authorities of the coastal city managed to control the virus effectively during the first two years of the outbreak despite the relatively low levels of government acceptance. Perhaps, this puzzle may be explained by the fact that after the dramatic consequences of 2003 SARS pandemic, the Hong Kong public has become very disciplined in matters of public health. In fact, most Hong Kong people voluntarily used face masks when in public at least three to four months before the face masks became mandatory.

Overall, audience acceptance is an influential determinant of an administration's success with controlling the pandemic. Yet, when the securitization audience accepted the enforcement of stringent securitizing measures, it was possible for the enforcing authorities to keep the COVID-19-related deaths at low levels. Public acceptance of mild securitizing measures had limited effect in the administrations' endeavors to effectively manage the pandemic.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.