



Commentary

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How Taiwan is Leading by Example in the Global War on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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As the international community struggles to cope with the deadly novel COVID-19 pandemic, one country in the Asia-Pacific is providing a case study on how containment and mitigation can be done successfully. Taiwan, the island-nation of 23.8 million souls claimed by China, shunned by most UN bodies and frequently isolated from the international community, has handled the crisis with aplomb, earning it unprecedented attention from foreign media and governments alike.

This paper explores several factors that have contributed to Taiwan's successful response to the outbreak, and argues that had those variables not been in place, the situation in the country, three months into the outbreak, could have been far more serious.

Early response

At first glance, it wasn't obvious that Taiwan would succeed in preventing a major outbreak on its territory. For one thing, geography did not appear to play in Taiwan's favour. Taiwan and China, where the virus originated, are only separated by the Taiwan Strait, a body of water 180 kilometres wide and 130 kilometres at its narrowest. The distance between Taipei and Wuhan, in Hubei Province, the epicentre of the outbreak, is a mere 943 kilometres.

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The human factor also seemed unfavorable to Taipei's response to the outbreak during the crucial initial phase. Despite tensions in the Taiwan Strait in recent years and Beijing's punitive stance toward Taiwan, arising from the outcome of the democratic nation's 2016 and 2020 elections, cross-Strait business and people-to-people exchanges have remained vibrant. At any given time before the outbreak, as many as 1.5 million Taiwanese businesspeople (known as *taishang*) and their dependents work in China. Prior to the outbreak, there were more than 1200 flights weekly between various cities in Taiwan and China.

Given these facts, conditions were ripe for the disease to quickly spread via human vectors to Taiwan. One major advantage, inadvertently provided to Taiwan, was Beijing's decision in recent years to use tourism as a weapon to punish Taiwan for its stubborn refusal to yield to its political ambitions. By severely reducing the number of tourists allowed to visit Taiwan as individuals or groups – from a peak of 4.1 million annually in 2015 – Chinese authorities hoped to leverage affected sectors of Taiwan's tourism industry, which so far has succeeded in mitigating the effects of that strategy through diversification.

Thus, by the time the COVID-19 outbreak emerged in late 2019, the number of Chinese who were able to visit Taiwan had been drastically reduced, even more so as Beijing further restricted such visits in the lead-up to the January 11 general elections in Taiwan. As outbreaks in destinations favoured by Chinese nationals, such as Italy, would later demonstrate, Beijing's weaponization of tourism was, in Taiwan's case, a blessing in disguise.

Notwithstanding the political tensions that have marred cross-Strait relations in recent years, continued exchanges in various sectors, not to mention a shared language, have continued to give Taiwan access to timely intelligence about developments in China. Such insights allowed Taiwan to quickly realize that something was brewing in Wuhan in late December. And concluding that the outbreak could lead to something more serious, Taiwanese health authorities decided to quickly implement the appropriate prophylactic measures even as Chinese authorities were starting to cover up the outbreak by arresting whistleblowers in Wuhan and censoring coverage.

Early intelligence, and a decision to take the matter seriously, were key elements in Taiwan's ability to implement a response that was commensurate with the nature of the threat, even if, in the early stages, such actions earned the Tsai Ing-wen administration accusations of overreaction. Thus, in the first weeks of the outbreak, when the international community – including the World Health Organization (WHO) – was underestimating the scale of the problem, Taiwan was preparing for the worst and thus was well ahead of the curve. According to official figures from Taiwan's Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA), in the first week of February, half of the 1204 cross-Strait flights were cancelled, resulting in a 67 percent drop in passenger trips, or 51,009 from a weekly average of 153,372 in December. During the same period, 37 percent of the total of 1127 weekly flights between Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau were also cancelled.

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From February 6, Taiwan was prohibiting entry to anyone who had been in China or Hong Kong in the previous 14 days. Similar restrictions were imposed on other countries as the virus spread globally. By February 10, Taiwanese authorities were already cancelling all passenger flights between Taiwan and China until April 29, with the exception of five destinations in China (Beijing, Pudong and Hongqiao in Shanghai, Xiamen in Fujian and Chengdu in Sichuan). Starting on March 19, after dozens of cases of COVID-19 were brought from Taiwanese who had travelled abroad, the travel ban was extended to all foreign nationals without residence permits, and all travellers returning from abroad were required to undergo 14 days of self-quarantine (unfortunately in this instance some foreign nationals seeking employment in Taiwan and without residency permits found themselves in limbo and were not allowed entry into the country; while understanding the unprecedented nature of the crisis, a more humanitarian approach could arguably have been taken to assist foreign individuals in this category).

Learning from the past

Another factor that played in Taiwan's favour were lessons it learned during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak of 2003, which resulted in 346 infections in Taiwan during the March to June period, and 73 fatalities (37 directly due to SARS and 36 to SARS-related diseases). The SARS outbreak highlighted a number of deficiencies within Taiwan's health system, including a lack of centralized decision making.

Building upon that experience, that same year the Taiwanese government created the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) to coordinate future responses among various government agencies. For the COVID-19 outbreak, the CECC was activated on January 20, with Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung assuming the position of commander-in-chief. Chen, who has not taken a day off since, has assumed ownership of the crisis, with the CECC holding a daily press conference and launching various TV and online information campaigns.

Those efforts appear to have had a calming effect on the public. Throughout the crisis, the Taiwanese public has refrained from panic and, for the most part, did not engage in the kind of hoarding of products and food that was experienced in other countries worldwide. A government hotline was quickly launched and early on, commercial and government establishments were strongly encouraged to take temperature readouts of anyone entering the facilities. The free flow of information, which can only be guaranteed in a democracy, also helped alleviate fears and strengthen support for the administration, which throughout remained subjected to criticism and oversight.

Taiwanese authorities made extensive use of big data and information technology to consolidate data from all the government agencies involved, including the National Health Insurance Administration, National Immigration Agency, and Customs Administration databases. Cell phones are currently being used to track the whereabouts of individuals in self-quarantine.

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Taiwan also benefited from a wealth of experience in the upper echelons of government. Tsai's vice president, Chen Chien-jen – a world renowned epidemiologist trained at Johns Hopkins University – spearheaded Taiwan's response to SARS in 2003 as health minister, implementing the nation's screening and quarantine procedures. Then as now, Taiwan also had to fend largely on its own, given its exclusion from the WHO and only sporadic access by Taiwan's Centers for Disease Control to global health networks.

Taiwan's isolation from various UN agencies and lack of formal diplomatic relations with most countries have forced the Taiwanese to be self-reliant, which in 2020 would pay dividends. Where many UN member states with full participation at the WHO failed to address the outbreak, Taiwan did a remarkable job.

Rapid response

As the outbreak spread to every corner of the planet, access to surgical masks quickly resulted in shortages. There, too, Taiwan reacted quickly by bringing industry chiefs together and creating a national production centre in the city of Taichung.

The Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA) invested \$4.26 million (NT\$90 million) to set up an additional 32 mask production lines. By mid-March, Taiwan had achieved production capacity of 10 million masks *per day*, and said it had enough raw material to bring up production to 15 million masks per day by June.

While this happened, Audrey Tang, Taiwan's digital minister, created an application that allowed Taiwanese citizens to track stocks of masks at pharmacies nationwide (Tang also provided assistance to the Japanese government to address glitches in its own online system). Subsequently, the Taiwanese government built upon existing systems – in this case, the tax system — to govern the purchase of facial masks, thus ensuring orderly acquisition and preventing hoarding. Early on in the crisis, and before production of masks could reach full capacity, the Taiwanese government also took the decision to ban the export of masks to China, a “controversial” policy that attracted some criticism among the opposition camp in Taiwan and officials in Beijing. During the same period, Taiwan also markedly increased production of alcohol-based sanitizer products, and established cleaning standards for public transportation and schools (Taiwanese schools reopened on February 25 after an extended Lunar New Year break).

Soon after the outbreak began making international headlines, a group of researchers at Academia Sinica, Taiwan's premier research institute, announced they were close to developing a rapid screening reagent. On March 8, the group announced that, in just 19 days – two months ahead of schedule – researchers had successfully synthesized monoclonal antibodies that are able to identify the protein that causes COVID-19. If successfully developed, the time for necessary testing would be reduced from approximately four hours to just 15-20 minutes.

Like other countries fighting the outbreak, Taiwan's economy has also felt the repercussions. With large public events, such as conventions and expos, being cancelled or postponed, and the government encouraging the public to limit their social activities, various sectors of the economy – restaurants, airlines, taxis, retailers, tour operators – have felt the pinch. Taiwan's trade figures were nevertheless surprising strong in February, with exports, led by electronics, surging 24.9 percent and imports up 44.7 percent year on year. Thus far, production

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levels do not appear to have been overly affected, although a deepening global crisis will likely bring numbers down from March. Should the crisis continue for several months, Taiwan's small and medium business (SME) sector could be the hardest hit.

Meanwhile, jitters caused by the global pandemic have undermined Taiwan's stock market. In March, a two-week selloff wiped out an estimated \$490.98 billion in market value, according to Bloomberg. To mitigate the effects, the Tsai administration has pledged to use the National Stabilization Fund to back the stock market through a \$23.8 billion (NT\$500 billion) injection, while the Financial Supervisory Commission has taken measures to limit short selling. Taiwan's GDP is forecast to grow 1.9 percent this year, from 2.73 percent in 2019, a drop that is largely attributed to COVID-19.

Taiwan's response to the crisis has also been buttressed by a fund appropriation of nearly \$4.75 billion (NT\$100 billion) — including a \$2.85 billion (NT\$60 billion) disease prevention special budget — toward relief efforts and economic stimulus program. Additionally, approximately \$950 million (NT\$20 billion) from the special budget, with an additional \$475 million (NT\$10 billion), has been set aside to help Taiwanese firms make it through the crisis. For its part, the airline industry will obtain more than \$2.37 billion (NT\$50 billion) in financing.

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Challenges

As noted, Taiwan's laudable accomplishments in containing the COVID-19 outbreak and mitigating its effects occurred in the absence of having a seat at the table at the WHO and other specialized UN agencies, such as the Montreal-based International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), whose data are necessary for a complete picture of the spread of the pandemic. In spite of this, added to the frequent designation of Taiwan by the WHO and other tracking sites as a subsidiary of China, Taiwan's response to the outbreak has attracted attention from the international community as an example to emulate (in an interview on March 19, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern named Taiwan as one of the countries that New Zealand should use as a model for its response to the virus).

Unsurprisingly, this type of positive publicity is exactly what Beijing did not want to see, especially as, starting in March, it sought to rewrite the narrative and chain of events of the COVID-19 outbreak so as to portray China in a much more favourable light. Thus, as Taiwan was receiving favourable attention, Chinese authorities, which could not countenance such attention, sought to undermine Taiwan's image through a campaign of disinformation.

Chinese officials mocked Taiwan's response, portraying it as “inept,” while online mis/disinformation, some of it originating in China, attempted to cast doubt on Taiwanese epidemiological figures and spread conspiracy theories about a cover-up by the Tsai administration. Critics of the Tsai government in Taiwan, among them members of the opposition as well as media that tend to echo Beijing's stance on Taiwan, sometimes facilitated the spread of “fake news.” (In late March, online posts by Chinese nationals claiming they would do stopovers in Taiwan on flights back to China with hopes of spreading the virus in Taiwan, which ostensibly compelled the Taiwanese government to declare a temporary ban on transits.)

Besides state propaganda and an online disinformation campaign, earlier in the outbreak Beijing authorities also politicized the return of Taiwanese nationals (*taishang* and their dependents) from areas affected by the snowballing epidemic. Among other things, the Chinese government, using willing partners among *taishang* who are known to be close to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), attempted to depict the Tsai administration as “callous” when it refused to allow planeloads of Taiwanese from the Wuhan area to return to Taiwan without its health authorities being able to check them. Eventually, Taiwan provided a list of its nationals it wanted to be repatriated, but on one of the flights back to Taiwan, a number of those were missing, while others — Chinese spouses of *taishang* — were on board despite not being on the list.

The Chinese government also insisted on using one of its own planes and, in an early bid to downplay the role that Wuhan had played as the origin of the pandemic, insisted that the Taiwanese were not being evacuated but were rather Taiwanese compatriots returning to Taiwan after the Lunar New Year long holiday. In a subsequent incident, Chinese officials refused to allow Taiwanese health personnel to check Taiwanese evacuees before they boarded a flight. Taiwanese authorities stood their ground, and the flight was allowed to take off after the proper checks had been made. Throughout the crisis, and as Taiwan’s efforts gained recognition abroad, the Chinese government also repeatedly lied about giving access and sharing epidemiological information with Taiwan.

Twice during the pandemic, on February 9 and on March 16, the Taiwanese military was forced to scramble interceptors when People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) aircraft – fighters, bombers and surveillance aircraft – conducted transits close to Taiwan’s airspace. According to Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense, during the March 16 incident, the PLAAF aircraft (J-11 fighters and KJ-500 early warning aircraft) approached Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). Significantly, this was also the first such operation by the PLAAF in nighttime (the incident occurred at around 7pm). These two incidents demonstrated that, even in time of crisis and amid calls for international cooperation in combating a deadly disease, the Chinese military had no compunction in continuing its harassment of Taiwan and to distract Taiwanese authorities in times of emergency.

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International implications

Taiwan’s successful response to COVID-19 due to the leadership shown by the Tsai administration has encouraged a reassessment within some members of the international community of the wisdom of continued exclusion of Taiwan from UN agencies. Despite efforts by Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and warm remarks by some heads of state, it is unlikely that this acknowledgement will result anytime soon in Taiwan’s inclusion in such bodies, especially after Beijing has launched a major – and in some cases successful – campaign to turn the crisis to its advantage on the international stage. Thus, Taiwan’s exclusion from the UN, where Beijing exerts strong influence, is expected to continue.

Nevertheless, Taiwan’s handling of the crisis has encouraged some countries to explore future collaboration with Taiwan on combating COVID-19 and, presumably, future pandemics. On March 18, Taiwan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Jaushieh Joseph Wu, and the representative of the United States to Taiwan, American Institute

in Taiwan Director Brent Christensen, jointly announced that to “further strengthen US-Taiwan consultation and cooperation on combatting the COVID-19 virus,” the two countries “will seek to share best practices and cooperate on a range of activities under a partnership that includes”:

- Research and development of rapid tests;
- Research and production of vaccines;
- Research and production of medicines;
- Contact tracing techniques and technology;
- Joint conferences with scientists and experts; and
- Cooperation and exchanges of medical supplies and equipment.

Taiwan’s advanced medical field and top-notch national insurance system, added to its deft use of big data and AI to centralize information during the epidemic, has attracted the notice of potential partners abroad. Besides the US, the EU has begun to show interest in collaborating with Taiwan, and its envoy held a round of meetings at Academia Sinica in the middle of March. Canada, which is dealing with its own outbreak, certainly could learn from Taiwan’s own experience dealing with the virus, and would undoubtedly benefit from collaborating more closely with its public health sector.

On March 18, by which time its facial mask line was running at full capacity, Taipei announced it would donate 100,000 masks per week to the US, and that American authorities had also reserved 300,000 hazmat suits from Taiwanese manufacturers. In a matter of weeks, Taiwan had turned the crisis into an opportunity to situate itself as one of the world’s top producers of facial masks. In weeks and months to come, there is a high likelihood that Taiwan will serve as a source for masks in other countries affected by the outbreak. And unlike Beijing, which has begun to provide *conditional* assistance to countries in Europe and elsewhere, Taiwan will conceivably do so in a much more subdued – and less politicized – fashion.

Depending on how this plays out, and on whether Beijing overreaches during this opportunity, Taiwan could emerge as a key player in the global supply chain and with a burnished reputation as a responsible and dependable partner. On March 24, the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office blasted Taiwan’s decision to donate 100,000 facial masks weekly to the US, stating that it “undermined the health and well-being of the Taiwanese people, and launched Taiwan on a path of confrontation between a foreign nation and ‘the Motherland.’”

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Conclusion

Despite its close proximity to the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic and international isolation, Taiwan has handled the outbreak with such brio that, at the time of writing, it is arguably one of the safest places on the planet at the moment. By reacting swiftly to the first signs of trouble in Wuhan, and through appropriate measures that, in the early weeks of the epidemic, were mocked as “alarmist” and “overreaction,” Taiwan successfully erected the necessary controls and prophylactics to ensure the safety of its nationals and the hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals who make Taiwan their home. As a result, community transmissions have been extremely limited, with most cases being imported from abroad (primarily from Europe and the Middle East) from mid-March.

Blessed with experience from past outbreaks such as SARS, an enviable health system and a high technology base, Taiwan combined its assets to consolidate a response that serves as a benchmark to the international community. Its ability to navigate the uncertainty, and to do so despite not having access to some important information from the WHO and other multilateral agencies, is to the credit of the Taiwanese people. Despite incessant assaults by Beijing, President Tsai and the CECC have insisted on the need to avoid attributing blame and called for global cooperation. Humility has characterized Taiwan’s response to the pandemic, and its contributions to public health have been noticed by several countries whose own efforts have often fallen short.

Although we should refrain from adopting a utilitarian approach to disease, there is little doubt that Taiwan’s reputation has benefited from the outbreak, and that its visibility on the international stage has been much embellished as a result. The opportunity is now there for members of the international community to see the advantages of developing closer ties with Taiwan, a modern, democratic country that has tons to offer.

As of March 26, there are 252 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Taiwan, with two deaths. More than 511,000 cases, and at least 23,000 deaths, have been reported in 175 countries or territories worldwide.

About the Author



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