



Responding successfully to COVID-19: A case study of Taiwan's strategy

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Abstract

The author analyses how Taiwan has successfully managed the COVID-19 pandemic. She also highlights how Taiwan has skillfully used its pandemic strategy and its "Taiwan can help" campaign of mask donations to many countries to enhance its international standing and reduce its diplomatic isolation.

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Analysis

Parameters

The key aspects of Taiwan's fight against the CORONA-19 pandemic and the resulting low infection rate of 0.7 % were: an immediate response to the virus outbreak, stringent coordination of state and private actors, efficiency in contact tracing, a compulsory mask policy, a massive increase in the local production of masks, transparency about government actions and an open information policy. Taiwan got ahead of the outbreak with early testing and treatment, early activation of medical personnel, social distancing measures and the extensive use of big data analysis. Its negative experience during the SARS pandemic in 2002/03 with its high mortality rate had caused the government to be better prepared and the public to be more cautious and willing to follow government instructions. Unlike in other countries, the government did not introduce mass testing and did not shut down schools, companies and businesses. In this way, Taiwan's economy only took a light beating.

It is significant that the Government efforts were led by three experienced politicians with steady hands. There was Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen, who had just won a landslide victory and a strong political mandate for her second term on January 11, 2020, just at the start of the pandemic. Equally important for the handling of the pandemic crisis were two other prominent politicians. One was Vice President Chen Chien-jen, an epidemiologist with a doctorate degree in public health from Johns Hopkins University who was Health Minister from 2003-05 during the SARS epidemic. The other was the present Health Minister and Commander of the Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC), Chen Shih-chung, a former Deputy Minister of Health (2005-08). All three guided the public through the outbreak. The Vice President and the Health Minister were also the public faces who communicated Taiwan's strategy internationally.

Taiwan, with a population of 23.5 million, seems to have managed the COVID-19 pandemic very well. As of May 16, 2020, there were only 440 cases, 395 recoveries and only 7 deaths (CECC, May 17, 2020). Taiwan's success can be favorably compared to another island country, Australia, which has also done reasonably well in this crisis. It had 7036 cases, 6362 recoveries and 98 deaths (Australian Government, May 16, 2020) in a population of 25.4 million.

After rigorously revamping its health care system after the last pandemic SARS in 2002-03, Taiwanese health authorities had accumulated extensive knowledge about treating pandemic patients. Taiwan had also invested in extensive capacity for biomedical research and big data facilities.

Ironically, Taiwan had one advantage compared to most other countries: it didn't have many Chinese tourists in the country as China had banned Chinese tour groups to Taiwan after the election of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016.

Managing a pandemic

When the outbreak in Wuhan started at the end of December 2019, Taiwan was in the middle of a national election campaign and ahead of the all-important Chinese New Year holidays. However, with its proximity to China, with many Taiwanese working in China and a high flight frequency to and from China, Taiwan reacted very quickly after a December 31, 2019 news item of a new virus infection in Wuhan was picked up. It had to rely on itself as it initially did not receive much information about the virus from WHO or China. Between 2012 and 2016, Taiwan had a WHO observer status. However, it was subsequently blocked from participating as an observer after the election of President Tsai Ing-wen in 2016. The CECC set up a response team on January 2



and on January 20, the CECC started to mobilize various ministries and institutions in the academic, medical and private sectors. When its first COVID-19 case was confirmed on January 21, Taiwan raised its alarm system two days later to level two. Health Minister Chen, as the CECC Commander, coordinated more than eight ministries, armed forces, universities, research institutions and the private sectors involved in the fight. He also gave the daily press briefings, thereby becoming the country's "Corona czar". On February 27, the alert was raised to the highest level one.

Taiwan imposed a 14-day quarantine (home isolation) on all international arrivals on March 14 which was very scrupulously and regularly checked by the local authorities. Since March 19, foreign nationals were barred from entering Taiwan.

Health authorities started COVID-19 RT-PCR tests in January, especially on people returning from affected areas and introduced physical distancing very early. It also was an advantage that every Taiwanese citizen had a health card with all his medical history embedded in a computer chip. Hospitals could easily access this information as well as his travel history which was provided by immigration authorities and integrated into the health cards. Key to the success rate were early diagnosis and treatment.

On January 24, after demand for surgical masks had spiked, the government stopped all exports of surgical face masks and introduced a rationing system. It requested local industries to increase mask production and other personal protection equipment (PPE) and later also requisitioned factories which were able to start production. As of April 1, wearing masks became mandatory. By the end of April, the daily mask production reached 17 million.

Mask diplomacy: China and Taiwan

After its fast recovery from the pandemic, China grasped the political opportunity to trumpet its success in overcoming the pandemic and showcase itself internationally as the model country in fighting and winning against the virus. Its "mask diplomacy" and the accompanying largescale and sometimes aggressive PR campaign portrayed China as the generous and benevolent donor of medical protective equipment and assistance to some 90 countries. China also contributed an additional US \$ 20 million to the WHO. However, cracks showed in China's success story when some of the donated equipment proved to be faulty or substandard. A number of countries, including the UK, Canada, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Turkey, Spain, Belgium and Germany have complained about faulty medical products.

While exercising its soft diplomacy, the Chinese Navy continued to show its military strength. The months-old standoff over oil and gas exploration in the South China Sea has even intensified in recent months with Malaysian, Chinese, Vietnamese, US and Australian navies facing off against each other in the South China Sea. A Malaysian contracted exploration ship had done surveys in a zone claimed by Malaysia, Vietnam and China and was closely shadowed by a number of China Coast Guard vessels. In another development at the beginning of April, a Chinese Coast Guard ship sank a Vietnamese fishing boat near the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. In April, Chinese Coast Guards "pointed a radar gun" at a Philippine Navy vessel which led to strong protests from the Philippines. And in April, a Chinese aircraft carrier, before and after its deployment in the South China Sea, sailed twice in a demonstrative way along the coasts of Taiwan. There were reports of air intrusions by Chinese military planes into Taiwan's airspace in February, March and April.



In view of renewed military activities in the South China Sea and around Taiwan, China's mask diplomacy did not go down well, especially in those countries still in the middle of the fight against the pandemic. The PR campaign seems to have backfired.

With a local daily production of 17 million masks in Taiwan, the local supply was now deemed to be sufficient for Taiwan's own population. On April 5, Taiwan started the first of three rounds of "international humanitarian assistance" under the slogan "Taiwan can help", much to the chagrin of China. On May 5, the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry announced the third wave of Taiwanese donations. The government as well as Taiwanese NGO's have donated over 17 million masks as well as medical equipment such as thermal imaging devices and infrared thermometers to the worst hit countries and to political allies. Most of these shipments went to the US and to West and East European countries, some to Japan and South East Asia, Australia, New Zealand and South America. A small amount of equipment went to African and Middle Eastern countries as well as to medical staff in Syrian refugee camps. About 1 million masks were sent to four South Pacific Island Countries, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Tuvalu and Palau. After two Pacific Island countries 'defected' to China last year (Kiribati and the Solomon Islands), these four countries are among the fifteen countries that officially recognize Taiwan and are considered close diplomatic allies. The donations were accompanied by PR activities like high profile TV interviews on global TV networks with its Vice President Chen Chien-jen who recently also spoke at a video conference hosted by Johns Hopkins University and with interviews by the Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu.

So far, the "Taiwan can help" campaign went without glitches, unlike China's mask diplomacy. It resulted in a very positive international response by a number of countries and has won Taiwan international praise for its handling of the pandemic and recognition of its generosity. Taiwan and some European countries have also been cooperating on medical research and the development of COVID-19 vaccines. Suddenly, Taiwan's global profile had been raised. Taiwan, so the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry says, "is willing and able to contribute even more to global public health." According to WHO, two Taiwanese experts even participated in the Global Research and Innovation Forum organized by WHO on 11-12 February 2020 "thus contributing, alongside other world scientists, including from mainland China, to critical research questions and to finding ways to work together to advance the response" (WHO statement, March 29, 2020).

Lobbying and diplomatic ping pong

Making use of this unexpected momentum after years of political isolation, Taiwan and its main ally, the US, started a diplomatic offensive among their European and Pacific allies for a renewed participation of Taiwan in the WHO around April. They argued that it would be important for the WHO to take on board Taiwan's relevant COVID-19 expertise, especially at the virtual meeting of the WHO Assembly, WHO's decision-making body, on May 18, 2020. The US pushed this campaign in spite of President Trump having berated WHO for its "insufficient and belated actions" and having cut US financing for WHO. A recent letter from United States Congress also lobbied 55 countries seeking an end to China's efforts to keep Taiwan out of international organisations, especially World Health Organisation (WHO). It was signed by the Chairman of House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Chairman of Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. A US State Department campaign "Tweet for Taiwan" also went ahead on May 2. China dismissed this push for Taiwan's admission to WHO and made recognition of Taiwan as part of China the key precondition, a request which was immediately rejected by Taiwan. Both Australia and New Zealand which openly supported the Taiwan/US move for greater WHO



participation of Taiwan, were immediately reprimanded by China which threatened that bilateral political and trade ties could be damaged. The diplomatic ping pong is still ongoing.

Summary

Taiwan fought the pandemic with a combination of vigilance, early proactive measures, coordination of all actors, reliance on big data and, most importantly, information sharing with the public. President Tsai's popularity and her approval ratings have soared. Her Deputy was omnipresent in the international media and her Health Minister was celebrated at home as a public hero and has been widely credited with Taiwan's success in the pandemic response. Taiwan has skillfully used the international spotlight and the positive momentum to maximize its international geopolitical standing. It has thereby reduced its diplomatic isolation.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Dr Anne-Marie Schleich was a German diplomat from 1979 until 2016. Most recently, she was the German Ambassador to New Zealand and seven Pacific Island Countries from 2012 to 2016. She was the German Consul-General in Melbourne, Australia from 2008 to 2012 and has also served in Singapore, Bangkok, Islamabad and London.

