

ARGUMENT

Fear of China Made Taiwan a Coronavirus Success Story

Taiwan has 10 million masks a day, widespread tracking, and just 1 death despite being close to the outbreak.

BY HILTON YIP | MARCH 16, 2020, 12:51 PM

As the new coronavirus sweeps across much of the world and cases exceed 160,000, there is one country that seems to have things under control, despite being only 110 miles from China and having experienced its first case on Jan. 21. Taiwan has only 67 cases (as of March 16), which is admirable in itself, especially when compared to its larger East Asian neighbors.

Taiwan has been tackling its coronavirus outbreak despite being frozen out of the World Health Organization (WHO) and continual bullying from China. In short, Taiwan has had to rely on itself to fight the coronavirus. And in doing so, Taiwan is making its efforts look easy—though they are anything but.

Taiwan's anti-coronavirus strategy utilizes a combination of early vigilance, proactive measures, and information sharing with the public, as well as applying technology in the form of analyzing big data and online platforms. All this is done with an impressive level of public transparency and engagement, in stark contrast to China's use of draconian and coercive measures and censorship to handle the coronavirus outbreak.

When the first news about a mysterious illness in Wuhan started emerging in December 2019, Taiwan treated the news with utmost urgency. There are many hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese working in China, which means there is a high frequency of flights and travelers between the country and Taiwan—although the numbers have shrunk since China started limiting tourism to the country for political reasons.

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Taiwan took measures early on, including inspecting plane passengers coming from Wuhan starting Dec. 31, banning Wuhan residents on Jan. 23, suspending tours to China on Jan. 25, and eventually banning all Chinese visitors on Feb. 6.

Recognizing that it had to ensure an adequate supply of medical equipment, including face masks, for health professionals and the public, Taiwan's government stopped exports of surgical face masks on January 24 while requesting local companies to step up production. Daily production is set to reach 10 million soon, divided between the public, medical, and industrial sectors.

The government also took control of face mask distribution from the private sector on Jan. 31, ensuring there would be no hoarding of supplies or exploitative pricing, as has happened in other places such as Hong Kong. Taiwan also implemented a purchasing policy on Feb. 6 in which every Taiwanese can buy a certain amount of adult and children's masks per week from pharmacies and clinics for NT\$5 (\$0.17) each. And to allow for easier distribution and prevent long lines outside clinics, Taiwanese can now start ordering their masks online and pick them up at a later date.

To ensure coordination, Taiwan set up a unified command center, led by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, which manages resources, holds daily briefings, and is in control of public messaging. The authorities have also moved quickly to track down infected persons and map the cases to show the sources of infection. Educating the public on the risks of the illness and precautions to take through television notices and posters is also a big part of anti-coronavirus efforts.

As a major tech powerhouse, it's no surprise that Taiwan made use of tech tools to fight the outbreak. This includes using big data for analytics and developing platforms to inform people where masks are currently available and where infected people have been. Taiwan's health insurance and immigration agencies integrated local and foreign residents' 14-day travel history with their health insurance card data, allowing hospitals, clinics, and pharmacies to access that information when dealing with patients. People undergoing self-quarantine were called frequently by officials and had their phones tracked to make sure they didn't leave their residence.

It also helps that Taiwan has one of the world's best health systems—thanks to massive reforms in the 1990s—which provides affordable, comprehensive, and convenient services to its entire population, including the elderly and low-income groups. User

health data is stored on a centralized system accessible to hospitals and clinics, so doctors can quickly see their patients' history.

While travel bans might seem a little controversial, the main priority for any country must be the safety of its own citizens. Though China criticized countries such as the United States and Australia for imposing travel bans on Chinese, the country locked down an entire province of about 60 million people in late January. This was still not enough to prevent Hubei from being ravaged with more than 67,000 cases and more than 3,000 deaths, and the entire province remains in lockdown.

The measures came too late. By the time Wuhan was locked down on Jan. 23, 5 million people from the city were estimated to have had already dispersed across the country and overseas, leading to the spread of the coronavirus to every single Chinese province and region.

Wuhan's plight shows that a travel ban is only useful when it is enacted early on, not after an outbreak has happened. This is why Taiwan was right to enact one from early February.

Up until March, South Korea only barred visitors from Hubei, while Japan barred those coming from Hubei and Zhejiang provinces. Astonishingly, it has only been from March 9 that Japan has halted visas for Chinese while requiring Chinese visitors to self-quarantine for two weeks. As a result, South Korea has the world's fourth-highest number of cases at more than 8,000, while Japan has more than 700.

Ironically, a little credit should also go to China for banning its own people from visiting Taiwan as individual tourists in 2019, in addition to limiting Chinese tour groups to Taiwan from 2016. This meant Taiwan has had many fewer Chinese visitors and has become much less dependent on Chinese tourism revenue. Worries over reduced tourism revenue, as well as concerns over offending China, may be why South Korea and Japan had been reluctant to enforce a ban on all Chinese visitors until recently.

In fact, what helped fuel Taiwan's staunch vigilance and self-reliance during the coronavirus outbreak is the constant bullying from China. Given that Taiwan has faced everything from its giant neighbor—the spreading of fake news, military threats, the withholding of vital medical information during the SARS outbreak in 2003—the country knows it must be on its fullest guard whenever any major problem emerges in China.

Taiwan shows that countries need to be proactive and take multiple measures they deem necessary. It is already too late for some to contain the coronavirus, but they can still focus on public education, making use of technology, and maintaining control of vital supplies such as masks and other medical equipment.

Taiwan is doing its bit to aid global efforts by helping its Pacific island ally Palau test a suspected case and sharing information with Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. The island state is also willing to play a bigger role in WHO, if U.N. member states allow it.

The coronavirus can be fought, and those countries that succeed may stand in a place to help and defend others. Despite being shut out by China, Taiwan may be best placed to do so—if others allow it.

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