

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# What Does Success Against COVID-19 Mean for Taiwan?

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## **S***ummary*

This issue brief argues that Taiwan's successful handling of the COVID-19 challenge and the narrative built around it makes the domestic scenario more conducive for the ruling DPP to push its political and ideological positions on cross-strait relations even further. However, the diplomatic gains made in terms of sensitising the international opinion on the issue of Taiwan's observer status in the WHO are at best tentative and limited.

Taiwan’s early success in tackling COVID-19 and its notable medical assistance to various countries to fight the coronavirus outbreak has brought international approbation for Taiwan. It has also generated empathy for its demand for an observer status in the World Health Assembly (WHA) of the World Health Organisation (WHO) among sections of the international community.

This issue brief argues that Taiwan’s successful handling of the COVID-19 challenge and the narrative built around it makes the domestic scenario more conducive for the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to push its political and ideological positions on cross-strait relations even further. However, the diplomatic gains made in terms of sensitising the international opinion on the issue of Taiwan’s observer status in the WHO are at best tentative and limited.

### Outlining Taiwan’s Success

Taiwan’s handling of the COVID-19 challenge has been laudable. Its swift response and timely measures helped contain the spread of the virus in the early stage itself. It provides useful lessons for pandemic prevention. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Taiwan was reported on January 21, 2020. As of July 19, 2020, Taiwan has 455 confirmed cases with seven deaths so far. Of the 455 confirmed cases, 364 are imported and 55 are indigenous cases while 36 were reported aboard Panshi fast combat support ship.<sup>1</sup>

The following data from mid-January to the date speaks for itself. Taiwan’s record shines brighter when compared with many smaller countries from across the world in terms of comparable population size.

**Table**

**COVID-19 in Taiwan: Monthly Interval (Cumulative Figures in Persons)**

Reported on	Cases Reported	Ruled Out Cases	Laboratory Confirmed Cases	Imported Cases	Indigenous Cases	Naval Crew Cases	Released from Isolation (Recovered) Cases	Deaths
21/01/2020	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
19/02/2020	--	--	24	--	--	--	--	--
19/03/2020	20,014	18,579	108	71	29	0	26	1
19/04/2020	53,005	50,619	420	341	55	24	189	6
19/05/2020	69,657	68,588	440	349	55	36	401	7
15/06/2020	74,409	73,507	445	354	55	36	433	7
19/07/2020	79,506	78,568	455	364	55	36	440	7

**Note:** This table tracks the outbreak of COVID-19 in Taiwan on a monthly interval with nearest date that completes the monthly cycle.

**Source:** Compiled from [press releases issued by TCDC](#), Taipei.

<sup>1</sup> “[CECC confirms 1 more COVID-19 case; male case returns to Taiwan from Hong Kong](#)”, *Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (TCDC)*, July 19, 2020. Also see [TCDC Homepage](#), July 20, 2020.

The ruling DPP and various government agencies have promoted Taiwan's success story in preventing the outbreak of the virus through media and international webinars. The objective has been to strengthen Taiwan's case for its re-entry as an observer into the WHO.<sup>2</sup> The objective could have also been to showcase Taiwan's democracy to the world and highlight the contrast between its early success in containing the outbreak and the initial mishandling of the situation by the communist rule in Mainland China (hereafter China or the Mainland).

Taiwan's achievement stands out also in view of its predicament arising out of its geographical proximity and linkages to Mainland China, with which the people of Taiwan share deep linkages owing to robust cross-strait trade, investment, employment and educational opportunities, and its exclusion from the WHO. The cumulative approved Taiwanese investment in the mainland between 1991 and the end of February 2019 was US\$ 183.4 billion. The bilateral trade stood at \$150.5 billion in 2018.<sup>3</sup> A total of 2,714,065 people from the Mainland travelled to Taiwan in 2019 and 4,043,686 from Taiwan to the Mainland in the same year.<sup>4</sup> Taiwan is not recognised as a sovereign country, except by a handful of small countries. This situation denies it a "first hand" participation and involvement in the health initiatives of the WHO. Taiwan interacts with the WHO through International Health Regulations (IHR), 2005 and relies on the courtesy and cooperation of the Mainland.<sup>5</sup>

A swift response to the potentially grave situation and speedy measures based on past experiences made it possible for Taiwan to keep the COVID-19 infections under a strong check. The national effort against COVID-19 was led by the Taiwan Centres for Disease Control (TCDC), established in 1999 under the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW). Later, drawing on lessons learned from the experience of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003, a National Health Command Center (NHCC), as part of the TCDC, was instituted in 2004. The Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC), within the NHCC, discharges the duty of "international epidemic surveillance" and "border control measures" to insulate Taiwan from pandemic outbreaks abroad.<sup>6</sup> Apart from success in containing the spread of the virus, the investment made in developing the health infrastructure over the years strengthens Taiwan's case for entry in the WHO. Thus, the existence of an efficient anti-pandemic infrastructure enabled it to timely sense the gravity of the situation in late 2019 and early 2020 itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Taiwan had an observer status in the WHO from 2009 to 2016. Taiwan under the name of 'Department of Health, Chinese Taipei' managed to secure a place in the WHO because the then KMT Government under Ma Ying-jeou could secure a no-objection from China for its entry into the WHO on account of KMT's adherence to the 1992 Consensus, which means One China principle for Mainland China, but "One China, Respective Interpretations" for KMT.

<sup>3</sup> **"Fact Focus, Cross-Strait Relations"**, *Government Portal of the Republic of China (Taiwan)*.

<sup>4</sup> **"Annual Statistical Report on Tourism: Taiwan, Republic of China"**, Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communications, pp. 5, 27.

<sup>5</sup> See the WHO spokesperson Tarik Jasarevic's statement in Felice Wu and Yimou Lee, **"Taiwan Calls on China to Share 'Correct' Virus Information"**, *Reuters*, January 22, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> **"NHCC"**, TCDC, Taipei.

Being a small Islandic demography, border control measures have been the key focus in Taiwan's strategy for insulating itself from transmissible diseases originating abroad. Taiwan had equipped its airports with health monitoring facilities for passengers arriving from abroad after the SARS outbreak back in 2003. It greatly helped Taiwan in meeting the COVID-19 challenge. In fact, Taiwan had implemented quarantine measures for the flights returning from Wuhan on December 31, 2019 itself when China first reported about the spread of pneumonia in Wuhan of unknown reasons. A reading of the press releases by the TCDC from December 31, 2019/January 1, 2020 to January 23, 2020 when Wuhan, the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak, was put under a lockdown, reveals noteworthy monitoring of the health situation in China.<sup>7</sup> Several important steps required for preventing the outbreak from reaching Taiwan had been taken by January 23. These measures included issuing health and hygiene guidelines for the public, sending medical professionals to Wuhan to assess the situation, travel advisories with increasing levels of alertness for those travelling to Hubei and other parts of China, ramping up production of face masks and personal protective equipment (PPE), curbing black-marketing of face masks and PPEs and rumour mongering, and augmentation of hospital capacities.<sup>8</sup>

With Taiwan promptly containing the spread of the virus, the need for blanket lockdowns of the cities and towns and imposing travel restrictions on the people, which would have halted the economic activities, was largely eliminated. Therefore, although the overall economic disturbances created by the virus across the globe are bound to impact Taiwan, the first quarter's data from January to March (as per the Taiwan financial calendar) shows that the impact on its economy has been relatively milder.<sup>9</sup> Taiwan's exports are expected to perform better than the neighbouring economies such as South Korea.<sup>10</sup>

### Conducive Domestic Scenario for DPP

A successful handling of COVID-19, leading to a vigorous drive for Taiwan's observer status in the WHO, and a possible soft landing of the economy amidst the global pandemic creates a favourable environment for the ruling DPP. Its high-voltage media and diplomatic campaign, supported by the United States (US) and its allies, for the observer status in the WHO, and a fierce tussle with China on the issue, combined with the inconvenience Taiwanese faced while returning from China and for which Taipei blamed the Chinese authorities, can but shape a pro-incumbent public opinion.

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<sup>7</sup> **"Press Releases"**, TCDC, Taipei.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Also see Chen Shih-Chung, **"Taiwan's Coronavirus Protocol Shows How It is Done"**, *The Hindu*, May 02, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Cindy Wang and Samson Ellis, **"Taiwan Dodges the Worst Economic Impacts of Coronavirus"**, *Bloomberg*, April 30, 2020; and Liu Shih-chung, **"Taiwan Faces a Changed Economic Outlook in Asia Following COVID-19"**, *Brookings*, June 29, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

The main opposition Kuomintang's (KMT) popularity is at an all-time low as per a survey conducted in early May.<sup>11</sup> Recently, the Mayor of Kaohsiung city, Han Kuo-yu, who was KMT's presidential candidate and a widely perceived Chinese bet against President Tsai Ing-wen in January 2020, had to resign after he lost a recall vote, moved by some DPP-affiliated civil-society groups.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the political situation following COVID-19 appears to be very conducive for the ruling DPP that rejects not only the "One Country, Two Systems", which the KMT too rejects, but also the eventuality of Taiwan's ultimate reunification with the Mainland as opposed to the KMT's position on the reunification issue, to further ingrain the society with its views on cross-strait relations.

Recently, in an important development, a reform committee set-up by the KMT proposed four new points for cross-strait relations in its report, which were: "safeguarding the sovereignty of the Republic of China, protecting democracy and human rights, prioritizing Taiwan's security and building a win-win situation and prosperity on both sides of the strait." The committee identified them as "the four pillars to shape a new relationship with the mainland." However, sections within the party criticised the report for its silence on the "1992 consensus — the only policy that had enabled Taiwan to get along with mainland China in the past few decades" — and accused the committee for giving into the DPP's position on cross-strait relations.<sup>13</sup>

### Uncertain Security-Strategic Scenario

While there may not be any direct implications of the global pandemic for Taiwan as it has been contained successfully, at least as of now, nevertheless, it has induced an environment that poses challenge to Taiwan. A US-Taiwan 'coordination' on anti-pandemic efforts, US support for Taiwan's quest for observer status in the WHO, and Taiwan's backing of the US allegations against China that it concealed the information about the outbreak and also against the WHO for helping China in covering it up,<sup>14</sup> are all too visible. In the meantime, a US-China confrontation is unfolding on Hong Kong, where China implemented One Country, Two Systems that it offers to Taiwan too. This geopolitical environment can strongly motivate China to

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<sup>11</sup> Ching-Tse Cheng, "[Support for Taiwan's KMT Drops to Historic Low](#)", *Taiwan News*, May 07, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Yu Hsiang and Chiang Yi-ching, "[Rise and fall of Han Kuo-yu, KMT's 'fallen star'](#)", *Focus Taiwan*, June 07, 2020; and Matthew Mazzetta, "[Han Kuo-yu Becomes First Mayor in Taiwan to be Recalled \(Update\)](#)", *Focus Taiwan*, June 06, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Flor Wang and Yu Hsiang, "[KMT Criticized for Sidestepping Consensus that Enabled Good Relations](#)", *Focus Taiwan*, June 19, 2020. In short, "the 1992 Consensus" implies the One China Principle, which means "One China, Respective Interpretations" for the KMT. It was the policy framework that facilitated cross-strait dialogue between the KMT governments and the Mainland China. However, the DPP rejects this framework altogether in any form; therefore, China has not engaged the DPP governments in dialogue.

<sup>14</sup> Lin Chia-nan, "[Virus Outbreak: Minister Points Finger at China](#)", *Taipei Times*, March 14, 2020; "[Wuhan Wet Markets may not be Coronavirus Origin, Identifying Patient Zero Difficult: Taiwan's VP](#)", *India Today*, April 20, 2020; and Marc Perelman, "[Taiwan's Vice President Says 'Possibility' that Covid-19 Came from Chinese Laboratory](#)", *France 24*, May 05, 2020.

push its diplomatic manoeuvres and further marginalise Taiwan in the international community.

Incidentally, the Chinese Air Force manoeuvres near Taiwan have shown a notable trend since January 2020. Recently, in June, Chinese fighter planes breached Taiwan's air defence identification zone on multiple occasions.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Taiwan Strait had been witness to politico-military posturing by China, and also by the US, following the changed cross-strait relations since the DDP under Tsai, whom China accuses of being a pro-independence force, came into power in 2016.

### Likely Future Scenario

One would have to wait for the global economic recovery, and also the outcome of the US presidential election later this year and its policy implications for the US-China relations, to sketch a convincing strategic and geopolitical outline of a post COVID-19 world. However, one can still argue that the post-COVID-19 world is unlikely to be dramatically different for Taiwan.

The Donald Trump administration has taken measures such as the signing of the Taiwan Travel Act, 2016; Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAPEI) Act, 2019, and promoting joint US-Taiwan cooperation with countries which recognise the Republic of China (Taiwan). These measures help Taiwan retain its *de facto* independence. However, the wholesale abandoning of the US' One China policy would still not be a rational choice for the US. Similarly, there is also nothing to conclusively suggest that China has jettisoned the policy of peaceful reunification and the use of force for reunification only as a last resort. Notwithstanding its diplomatic suppression of Taiwan in the international arena and military posturing in the Taiwan Strait since Tsai came into power, the aforementioned policy remains the overall policy framework.

Continuing robust relations with the US, enhancing international profile and reducing economic reliance on China by diversifying its economic relations through New Southbound Policy (NSP) remain at the heart of Taiwan's security strategy against any Chinese threat or coercion. As the geopolitics of COVID-19 has further strengthened the US-Taiwan relations, Taiwan is poised to look for enhanced international visibility and functional cooperation within the ambit of its 'pragmatic diplomacy', buoyed by its successful handling of the pandemic and medical assistance extended to various countries across the world. Taiwan may make some gains and receive enhanced approval — particularly in civil-society arenas and health and other areas of functional cooperation — in some countries, especially in Europe which has received mask donations from Taiwan in large quantities and also the NSP-target countries such as India and the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As health is a key area for cooperation in NSP, Taiwan's

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<sup>15</sup> Chen Yun-yu and Ko Lin, "[Chinese Military Y-8 Transporter Expelled from Taiwan's ADIZ](#)", *Focus Taiwan*, June 12, 2020; and Matthew Strong, "[Chinese Warplanes Enter Taiwan's ADIZ for 4th Time in 2 Weeks](#)", *Taiwan News*, June 17, 2020.

offers for cooperation in health sector should help create more space for Taiwan in the NSP-target countries.

However, Taiwan's assistance has been received within 'pragmatic' or 'unofficial' diplomacy which has long enabled it to operate in the international community.<sup>16</sup> It is unlikely that the recognition and approbation it has received from the international community will spill over onto "official" domains of diplomacy for Taiwan. Here, one should recall that the WHO passed the resolution on the COVID-19 enquiry without any reference to China. The bid for the observer status for Taiwan in the WHO by Taipei's diplomatic partners failed at the 73<sup>rd</sup> WHA in May 2020.<sup>17</sup> This only proved China's heft in the global affairs.

As per the latest data, China's GDP growth in the second quarter of this year has recovered to 3.2 per cent, indicating a comparatively faster economic recovery.<sup>18</sup> Economic strengths that have shaped Chinese influence in the world thus remain largely intact. As far as Taiwan is concerned, China may increase its focus on reinvigorating and promoting political sections and business lobbies in Taiwan that favour closer ties with China.

A military conflagration in the Taiwan Strait does not seem to be a possibility in the short to mid-term. Nevertheless, in a wildcard scenario, if the current geopolitical situation emboldens the pro-independence forces in Taiwan to the level unacceptable to China, or if the great power jostling between the US and China takes a more complex turn, Taiwan has a reason to fear military reprisal from China.

Meanwhile a prudent Tsai and her government are expected to maximise the gains made in domestic politics and in 'pragmatic diplomacy' internationally, occasioned by COVID-19, without indulging in geopolitical exuberance over relying on the US 'guarantees' which have never been unconditional and unqualified.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, donation of masks were received by the Red Cross Society in India and Canada, and not by the government health departments. **"Taiwan Donates 1 Million Face Masks to Protect Indian Medical Personnel"**, *Hindustan Times*, May 08, 2020; and Sean Boynton, **"Coronavirus: 500,000 Surgical Masks Donated to Canada from Taiwan"**, *Global News*, May 05, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> **"Countries Sign up to 'Historic Resolution' to Fight COVID-19"**, *China Daily*, May 21, 2020; Chen Qingqing and Liu Xin, **"Australia Gets 'Slap to the Face' as Global Community Welcomes China-Sponsored Resolution on COVID-19"**, *Global Times*, May 19, 2020; and Brian Hioe, **"Taiwan Drops Bid for Participation, Xi Jinping Delivers Opening Remarks at World Health Assembly"**, *New Bloom*, May 18, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Liu Wenbo and Yao Nian, **"China's Q2 GDP Growth Recovers to 3.2% after Steep Slump, Beats Forecast"**, *CGTN*, July 16, 2020.

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