



TAIWAN'S COVID-19 DIPLOMACY AND WHO PARTICIPATION: LOSING THE BATTLE BUT WINNING THE WAR?

BY WEN-TI SUNG

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Taiwan's pragmatic "warm power" diplomacy during the coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak represents a low-key approach to boosting its international participation while minimizing the burden for its sympathetic international partners and friends. The government of President Tsai Ing-Wen's successful management of the Covid-19 crisis has also made a strong case for liberal democracies as the superior form of government for public health crisis governance. This, in turn, has translated into more positive international publicity for Taiwan, as well as greater opportunities to network with other states' relevant agencies and potentials for functional spillover into other forms of cooperation at the governmental level.

China, the alleged origin of the virus, has seemingly kept its official toll relatively low. While officially China has less than 100,000 confirmed cases, several Western liberal democracies—even, some have argued, with more reaction time and insight from the Chinese experience—have suffered greatly, with more than a million confirmed cases in the United States and over a 100,000 each in five populous Western European nations (Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France).

Assuming these official statistics are dependable, this development might have engendered yet another blow

to liberal democracies in the ongoing battle over perceived performance legitimacy between authoritarian and liberal democratic regime types, adding fuel to what [Larry Diamond](#) has termed the [global democratic recession](#).

It is in this context that Taiwan finds a way into the international collective narrative. Despite Taiwan's geographic proximity, as well as close economic and demographic linkages with China, it has kept its Covid-19 toll remarkably low—with less than 450 confirmed cases to date and a death toll in the single digits. Together with fellow high performers such as South Korea, Taiwan's performance provides solid proof that liberal democracies can be just as effective in public health governance as authoritarian polities. In so doing, Taiwan helps prevent the Covid-19 crisis from diminishing the case for democracy in the global marketplace of ideas.

Accordingly, Taiwan's public diplomacy efforts have focused on presenting itself as a persecuted but nonetheless gracious international good Samaritan. Case in point: in an opinion piece for *Time*, [Tsai](#) says that although Taiwan has been "unfairly excluded" from the World Health Organization (WHO), it remains "willing and able" to contribute to global public health during the crisis using its strength in manufacturing, medicine, and technology.

Taiwan's "mask diplomacy" represents the first significant initiative in this area. In a campaign titled "Taiwan can help; health for all," Taipei has so far announced three rounds of international humanitarian assistance in the form of mask donation. These took place on April 1, April 9, and May 5, when it pledged to donate 10 million, 6 million, and 7 million masks to the international community.

The choice of priority recipient countries seems consciously tied-in with Taiwan's soft power strategy. The aid goes to three broad categories: first, to the so-called "like-minded democracies" in the North Atlantic that share Taiwan's liberal democratic values—a key theme that Tsai [drove home](#) in her June 2018 address at the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy; second, to Taiwan's 15 diplomatic allies that frequently voice support for Taiwan in

international forums, as reciprocity for their goodwill; and third, to a select number of worst-hit developing nations, in a show of international good citizenship.

The approach has dove-tailed with both Taiwan's *image projection needs* and its *coalition-building strategy*. First, the initiative instills the image of Taiwan as an altruistic actor that repays slights with kindness. That despite it being it largely shut out of the World Health Organization and the public health expertise and support that participation would have engendered, Taiwan still harbors no grudge, remains gracious and empathetic towards the needs of other societies, and is keen to lend assistance to those in more dire situations.

For its international "good samaritanism," Taiwan has earned an extraordinary amount of goodwill from numerous Western governments, especially on Twitter, that dual-use messaging platform where official statements come with a cloak of informality and plausible deniability. Often hash-tagged #StrongerTogether, these messages include: from Japan, [Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's](#) open expression of gratitude and pledge to combat Covid-19 together on Twitter; from Europe, European Commission President [Ursula von der Leyen](#) became the first EC president to directly address Taiwan in an official communication when she thanked Taiwan for mask donations; from the United States, numerous tweets from the [White House National Security Council](#) and various State Department missions' accounts form an echo chamber that acknowledges the people of Taiwan's gestures of goodwill, while noting Taiwan's significance in safeguarding a free and open Indo-Pacific.

On coalition-building, Taiwan is capitalizing on this outpouring of international goodwill to enhance bilateral relations and rally support for regaining participation at the World Health Assembly (WHA). Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not been shy about espousing what it calls "[the Taiwan Model for Combating Covid-19](#)," on which [New Zealand's](#) Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and the [US State Secretary Mike Pompeo](#) had lavished praise and claimed to borrow significantly from for their respective Covid-19 responses. In addition, numerous

bilateral functional linkages have sprung up for Taiwan, as [Taiwan's vice president](#) (a renowned epidemiologist), [vice premier](#), and [health minister](#) have all joined virtual track 1 or track 1.5 exchanges, often with US cabinet secretary and deputy secretary level dialogue partners—hitherto politically sensitive but now legitimized in the name of global public (health) interests. While these talks may be functional and technical in nature, the establishment of regularized channels of communication at high levels may be expected to have a functional spillover effect facilitating future discussions at more political levels.

By [exporting its best practice lessons](#) to the world, Taiwan exploits that intersection where the very interdependence of the global common's non-traditional security needs (in pandemic mitigation) meets Taiwan's particularist interests in greater international participation. In the name of enlightened self-interest, where health for one is dependent on health for all, Taiwan has built a multinational coalition to support its bid for meaningful participation in the World Health Assembly (WHA). The Foreign Affairs Committees of both houses of the [US Congress wrote a public letter to 55 countries](#) urging them to support Taiwan's participation at the WHA session and the WHO more broadly. The US State Department's various missions launched a #TweetForTaiwan initiative over Twitter to marshal media interests. Meanwhile [leaders from Australia, New Zealand, Japan](#), and others have openly announced support for Taiwan's participation as either an observer or a guest.

Ultimately, whether Taiwan's bid for WHA observer status comes to fruition or not may be secondary. During Covid-19, Taipei has branded itself as a champion of liberal democracies in the ongoing contest of legitimacy between liberal and authoritarian regime types. Moreover, its coalition-building effort over WHA participation has set a politically useful precedent of sympathetic partners' collective bargaining on behalf of Taiwan, thus further diminishing their cost of supporting Taiwan in the future, especially when they chain-gang. In this sense, even if Taiwan is losing the WHA 2020 battle, it may still be winning the war of greater international space.

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