

Taipei upstages Beijing's virus act

Written by Palden Sonam
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China's COVID-19 narrative has been offset by the exemplary performance of Taiwan, which has employed neither an authoritarian system nor draconian controls, something that makes Beijing unhappy. Taiwan, despite having few diplomatic allies and no WHO membership because of the Chinese government, is doing better than its powerful rival across the Taiwan Strait.

China finds it difficult to digest that the neighboring democracy, which Beijing often sneers at and harasses, has outperformed it in the face of this challenge.

When it became clear that China's outbreak could no longer be kept a secret, as the number of cases and casualties in Wuhan soared, Beijing revved up all of the state machinery to incapacitate it — although it was fatally late for China and the world.

The Chinese government followed this with a propaganda blitz that touted its political system as ideal for fighting contagious diseases, a model to be applauded at home and imitated abroad. A favorite story of Beijing's propaganda machine is how a 59,922m2 makeshift hospital with 1,000 beds was put up in just 10 days. Another is how quickly the Chinese government locked down city after city.

Once enacted, the response effectively contained the coronavirus. By all official accounts, China seems to have its outbreak under control, provided that its virus statistics can be relied upon.

What would have been even better is if the one-party state had not withheld and suppressed vital information from the public in the early days of the outbreak. Thousands of people could have been saved, trillions of US dollars in livelihoods not lost, and the world spared so much fear and uncertainty.

Instead of confessing its complacency as the coronavirus spread in China and overseas — which would demand political and moral fortitude — China has primarily used the health crisis to burnish the image of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, lauding them as decisive, swift and courageous in the face of grave challenges.

Beijing's narrative, in which an authoritarian system shows itself to be the most competent at handling major crises, has been punctured by Taiwan's crisis response, a far different reaction than China's more aggressive and high-handed approach.

Taiwan's COVID-19 narrative is simple: If information is promptly shared with people — and screening, testing and social distancing are implemented early on — then there is no need to rush to construct a makeshift hospital or force millions of people into lockdown, with such enormous economic and human costs.

As there are no grounds for China to make Taiwan the scapegoat of the health crisis, Beijing seems to be bullying Taipei just to satisfy its imperial ego. The Chinese government used its sizeable influence within the WHO to ensure that the global health body did not share with Taiwan critical information and data on containing the pandemic.

A video interview of WHO Assistant Director-General Bruce Aylward with Radio Television Hong Kong's Yvonne Tong (楊容), in which he avoided her questions about Taiwan's membership in the WHO, and WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus' accusation against Taiwan that the nation was running a racist campaign against him show how China has been aggressively lobbying to denigrate Taiwan's profile and performance during the pandemic.

Overnight, the WHO became Beijing's "borrowed knife" to stab Taiwan, but Beijing's thirst for blood is insatiable. As Taiwan donated millions of masks to European countries and the US, and signed cooperative agreements for the development of diagnostic tests and vaccines, the Chinese government cried foul, attacking Taiwan's health diplomacy as a "political plot to pursue independence with the help of the epidemic."

The superior quality of Taipei's donations have made Beijing envious, as millions of Chinese-made testing kits and masks have been rejected around the world due to their being substandard. The Chinese government remains adamant about politicizing Taiwan's support to the international community during the pandemic, whose outlook remains gloomy.

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Small nations, which desperately need testing kits, masks and healthcare expertise, could end up refusing Taiwan's help due to pressure from China, which would only place an additional obstacle along their path to containing the coronavirus.

Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) said: "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice." Given the colossal costs that nations are paying to subdue this health crisis, it would be politically prudent and ethically sound for China to let loose Deng's cat, at least for the time being, as whichever feline kills the virus is a "good cat."

The whole of humanity is suffering because of China's repressive political system at home and it should not multiply the same hardship on account of Beijing's geopolitical considerations abroad.

In this context, the international community has a moral responsibility to ensure that Taiwan is not the next Li Wangling (李旺玲), the Wuhan physician whose efforts to notify the public of the virus' danger were in vain, because the CCP was not happy about it.

Instead of bullying Taiwan, China should have the moral courage and decency to appreciate Taipei for controlling the cases within its borders, thereby drastically reducing the risk of retransmitting the coronavirus to China, given their proximity.

Unfortunately, authoritarian regimes are not typically known for being accountable or giving credit where credit is due — and, in particular, Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) version of Mao Zedong's (毛泽东) regime is obsessed with nationalistic arrogance and its dream of becoming a great power.

Beijing claims its anger over Taiwan's international outreach has to do with its "one China" principle, but that appears to be more pretext than context.

The CCP's real calculus is to amplify its narrative that authoritarianism is better suited to managing major crises and cement its role as hero — instead of acknowledging its failure to contain the original outbreak and its suppression of warnings from the medical community —

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but Taiwan's exemplary performance at home and abroad stands in the way of that grand narrative, which is not only painfully embarrassing for Beijing, but could also be politically dangerous.

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