

## Opportunity knocks for new leader

Written by William Reinfeld  
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Former British prime minister Winston Churchill famously said: “Never let a good crisis go to waste.” The COVID-19 pandemic presents Taiwan with an exceptional opportunity to find a new wave on which to catapult its economy, while helping protect the world from this and future pandemics.

The opportunity refers to making Taiwan a global leader in pandemic control. The challenges to reaching this goal are significant, but Taiwan is in an excellent position to pursue this rare opening and the rewards could be substantial.

Most of the world is preoccupied with managing the pandemic and planning for likely outbreak resurgences. Across the board there are shortages of equipment, systems and capabilities to test, treat and trace the virus. The unmet needs in most of the world are enormous.

Taiwan, on the other hand, has successfully avoided major effects of the pandemic, and has created a wide range of products, systems, technology, know-how, and research and development in what can broadly be defined as pandemic controls.

These developments, together with its strong foundation in many industries and institutions, open a unique window of opportunity for Taiwan to reap enormous economic returns, develop new industries and growth opportunities, and draw global recognition for its role in controlling the pandemic.

The outcome of this initiative could well transform Taiwan’s economy and allow it to earn the regional and global leadership distinction it has been seeking for the past 30 years, as well as support its long-term diplomatic goals.

Eventually, all nations would turn their attention to preparing themselves for future pandemics and allocating billions of US dollars for everything from masks, ventilators, vaccines, drugs, testing and tracking, to research and training of specialists, administrators and technicians.

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These expenditures could easily make this a trillion-dollar global market, for which industries and institutions are not fully prepared.

Few nations would have the ability to provide all that is needed to protect themselves.

However, capitalizing on these enormous opportunities presents equally great challenges for Taiwan to overcome.

For instance, the government needs to prevent these openings from becoming a long list of disconnected “one-off” transactions that result in it missing the chance to build a strong, globally recognized network of industries, institutions and services for pandemic control.

It must define the broader elements for this initiative, such as where Taiwan can play a leadership role, what specific need should be targeted, where to begin, where to expand and how to coordinate efforts.

The nation must convince the public and private sectors that this is a joint initiative in which each entity involved has important, distinct and obvious roles to play. It must also find “champions” in each sector to help.

Other challenges for Taiwan include: building partnerships with nations and global institutions; creating strategic alliances with international businesses and institutions; organizing and aligning economic, financial and regulatory elements to support the initiative; and paying for the planning and initiatives required to make this work.

However, an immediate issue is how to overcome the inertia that has kept Taiwan from capitalizing on other broad-based opportunities in the past. This chance has some important differences that might allow it to avoid that blockage.

The near-term market presents a large opportunity. Demands are unfilled in critical areas,

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creating a sellers' market.

Taiwan already has a solid base to meet many of those needs, and its existing base allows it to address many of these opportunities relatively quickly and spread into new areas, where it can expand capacity to meet both near and long-term demands.

Taiwan has credibility in this area, as it has been receiving highly favorable global recognition for what it has been able to accomplish. This should enable it to build relationships and partnerships quickly.

Considering the size of this market, and that most available capacity has been overstrained, established competition for serving it, at least in the near term, is minimal.

To move ahead, as quickly as possible, Taiwan must take some action-oriented initial steps to overcome the present inertia. Then, based on what it learns in this phase, it could develop a program to build a broader initiative.

In these initial steps, Taiwan needs to approach the governors of a few key US states with whom it has good relations to explore how its capabilities in controlling the pandemic can help them.

The focus could be on the near term, as states might not want to commit for longer periods, but establishing relationships and activity between Taiwan, and these states should provide an experience on which to build later moves.

The nation needs to organize a trade mission, composed of a dozen or so high-level, credible and effective leaders that represent the public sector, industry and relevant institutions.

This mission should conduct exploratory meetings in the US (or remotely, if necessary) with representatives who are in a position to discuss what Taiwan could provide their states. The

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objective of these meetings should be to open doors to more explicit opportunities from which transactions would follow.

It must prepare thoughtful and effective briefing documents for these meetings. These documents should outline the overall strength and capabilities of the relevant sectors, identify know-how, possible products, services and research that Taiwan has to offer and provide information for following up.

The material should be prepared by professional industry experts and communication specialists, and they should showcase Taiwan's high-level commitment to serving this market.

Once these initial steps have been taken and these initiatives start yielding results, the experiences should provide considerable insight and motivation to begin addressing some of Taiwan's challenges.

Taiwan should consider enacting some of the success factors that enabled it to transform itself in the 1970s and 1980s from a low value-added, semi-industrial economy to a high-tech and developed one.

To do so, Taiwan must, as a minimum, do four things:

First, it must prepare a master plan to address larger objectives, namely, making Taiwan a global leader in pandemic control. It should describe the potential breadth and scope of this broad initiative, identifying priority areas of opportunity and indicating directions for expansion of the network and potential areas for development.

These prospects should serve as indicators to the private sector to where investment should be directed and where the public sector is prepared to provide financial, institutional, regulatory and infrastructure support.

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The plan should also detail what the government would do to encourage and support private initiatives, and should provide estimates of the far-reaching benefits these investments, public and private, could yield.

The plan should be prepared by credible, internationally recognized independent experts and should offer easily implemented strategies that could be approved and acted on as quickly as possible.

Second, the government should identify and empower a “champion” to lead the initiative. Transformations such as this do not materialize without the leadership of highly influential people who devote their full capacity to inspire, motivate, activate and steer the necessary elements to make things happen.

The person or people selected to champion these initiatives should be senior and highly respected with proven track records for making things happen. Most likely they would be recently retired senior executives from the private or public sectors.

Third, Taiwan needs to make it a joint public-private sector initiative. To create an appropriately balanced initiative, it should appoint leaders from the public and private sectors to an independent high-level steering committee to help guide these initiatives.

This committee should help develop the master plan, by commissioning studies and conducting forums to identify areas of opportunity and challenges, and make road maps for reaching goals.

They should also supervise these plans and assist in steering the economy toward achieving their goals.

Again, Taiwan accumulated great success with these shared and coordinated initiatives in the 1970s and 1980, when public and private institutions cooperated in transforming the economy.

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Fourth, Taiwan must form partnerships across the globe. Positioning the nation as a leader in this critically important market requires a high degree of trust on the international stage.

Therefore, Taiwan and the organizations involved in these initiatives must maintain as much neutrality as possible.

Taiwan could effectively achieve this by establishing alliances with other nations and organizations. The initiatives must be seen as global efforts in which goals, rewards and resources are shared and where narrowly defined interests or issues are kept to a minimum.

The enemy must be seen as the global threat of pandemics, not geopolitical or competitive threats.

Ventures need to be seen as win-win endeavors and partnerships should be established across as wide a geopolitical and corporate spectrum as possible.

Although this might appear as an idealistic and difficult goal to achieve, those involved in the planning and execution of it must keep this principal in mind.

Taiwan is in a highly favorable position to not waste this crisis. The potential rewards for its economy, global recognition and quality of life are far-reaching. The difficulties and risks in pursuing it are small in comparison to the rewards.

History would look at this situation and say it was “a no-brainer” for Taiwan. The public and private sectors should not allow narrow self-interests, complacency and shortsightedness to stand in the way of doing what is necessary to reach these goals.

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