

Missing piece in WHO campaign

Written by Shirley Kan
Tuesday, 19 May 2020 04:46

US President Donald Trump's administration is carrying out a new US campaign to support Taiwan's inclusion in the WHO, but this diplomatic effort lacks a critical counter to China's "Big Lie" about its representation of Taiwan at the UN.

As the US Congress has urged for many years, strong US leadership to support Taiwan in international organizations is long overdue. The US and other countries are praising the democratic "Taiwan model" in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic in the global interests of truth and transparency.

The campaign is commendable. Even US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo publicly called for Taiwan's inclusion in yesterday and today's World Health Assembly (WHA). However, the campaign lacks a critical piece to be more effective. The US and other countries need to counter the People's Republic of China's (PRC) false claim that UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 means that Taiwan is a province of the PRC.

What is the whole truth that Pompeo should have told? A vote at the UN in 1971 allowed the PRC to join the UN as China's only representative. However, Resolution 2758 did not address the status of or even mention Taiwan in expelling "the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石)." Thus, that resolution did not recognize Taiwan as a part of China.

Indeed, Taiwan has never been a part of the PRC and the UN did not state this claim. Until 1971, the Republic of China (ROC), commonly called Taiwan, was a member of the UN.

To be effective, the US campaign needs more truth-telling. First, while the context is tragic, the PRC is on the defensive around the world about its terrifying misinformation about the coronavirus suspected to have come from a virology laboratory in Wuhan. Many countries recognize that dealing with Beijing can no longer be business as usual.

Second, Washington needs to counter Beijing's decades-old disinformation at the UN about Taiwan. Otherwise, it fails to confront the fundamental problem of Beijing's historical revisionism at the UN that discriminates against Taiwanese.

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The Trump administration has carried out a campaign to support not only Taiwan's observership at the WHA, but also the right of Taiwanese to enter UN buildings. However, US statements have not countered China's Big Lie.

On April 28, US Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Robert Destro spoke at a virtual workshop on the US-Taiwan Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) on countering disinformation about COVID-19.

"If the rest of the world would follow the Taiwan Model — including the transparency and timely communications needed to fight disinformation — all of us would be better positioned in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic," Destro said.

On Twitter on May 1, the US mission to the UN tweeted:

"@UN was founded to serve as a venue for all voices, a forum that welcomes a diversity of views & perspectives, & promotes human freedom. Barring #Taiwan from setting foot on UN grounds is an affront not just to the proud Taiwanese people, but to UN principles. #TweetForTaiwan."

Also on Twitter on the same day, the US Department of State's Bureau of International Organization Affairs issued several statements to support Taiwan taking part in this year's WHA.

"The US believes firmly that #Taiwan belongs at the table when the world discusses #COVID19 and other threats to global health. Before 2017, Beijing didn't object to Taiwan joining the World Health Assembly as an Observer. What's changed? #TweetforTaiwan," it tweeted.

"Is the health of Taiwan's 23 million people less important now than it was before 2017? Or, is the #PRC punishing Taiwan voters for freely choosing their own leader? #TweetforTaiwan," it wrote.

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“We all know Taiwan has long been committed to global health and boasts one of the finest health and research networks in the world, and that Taiwan promotes scientific cooperation and transparency on threats to #health. #TweetforTaiwan #TaiwanModel,” it wrote.

“@iingwen, the contrast with the #PRC is striking. China’s response to the outbreak of #COVID19 has been to hide the facts, muzzle its scientists, and censor discussion. #Taiwan’s response has been and continues to be a model for the world. #TweetforTaiwan #TaiwanModel,” it wrote, referring to President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文).

“Is it too much to ask that Taiwan be permitted to share their expertise, their commitment, with the rest of the world? Will the world succumb to the PRC’s pressure and intimidation? It’s time to be heard, and time to #TweetforTaiwan #TaiwanModel,” it wrote.

“Join us to #TweetforTaiwan’s inclusion at the upcoming World Health Assembly so #Taiwan can bring its incredible expertise to the fight against #Covid19. The world needs Taiwan in this fight! Tell @WHO that it is time for Taiwan to be heard,” it wrote.

Then at a press conference on May 6, Pompeo stated: “Today I want to call upon all nations, including those in Europe, to support Taiwan’s participation as an observer at the World Health Assembly and in other relevant United Nations venues. I also call upon WHO Director-General Tedros to invite Taiwan to observe this month’s WHA, as he has the power to do, and as his predecessors have done on multiple occasions.”

The US Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft tweeted on May 6 her supporting statement.

“Echoing @SecPompeo’s call for the @WHO to include #Taiwan in the World Health Assembly. The world deserves to hear Taiwan’s expertise in responding to #COVID19,” she tweeted.

While the Trump administration can be credited with this campaign for truth-telling and

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transparency to support Taiwan, Pompeo and others have not addressed the fundamental problem. I have urged the US ambassador to the UN to counter China's disinformation on Resolution 2758.

The focus of congressional action for many years has been on Taiwan's participation at the WHO and the annual meetings in Geneva, Switzerland, of its governing body, the WHA. In signing key legislation into law (P.L. 108-235) in June 2004, then-US president George W. Bush stated that the US fully supported the participation of Taiwan in the work of the WHO, including observer status.

Nonetheless, Taiwan's inclusion in the WHO and other work at the UN have remained problematic. China has even politicized Taiwan's involvement in global health.

Only after the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) was inaugurated as ROC president in May 2008 did the WHO in January 2009 include Taiwan in the International Health Regulations (IHR).

At the WHA in May 2009, Taiwan's minister of health participated, as an observer, for the first time since the ROC lost membership in the UN.

However, concerns arose that the invitation had required the PRC's approval, was subjected to a WHO-PRC memorandum of understanding (MOU), and would be ad hoc.

In its required report to the US Congress in 2010, the State Department reported that the WHO invited Taiwan to attend the 2009 WHA after the PRC "agreed to Taiwan's participation."

Moreover, in May 2011, a secret MOU (dated Sept. 14, 2010) came to light in Taiwan, showing that the WHO had an "arrangement with China" to implement the IHR for "Taiwan Province of China." At the WHA in May 2011, then-US secretary of health and human services Kathleen Sebelius protested to the WHO, saying that no UN organization has a right to determine the position of Taiwan.

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In short, even if Taiwan is allowed to be an observer, the WHO would have these or other restrictions on Taiwan's meaningful participation that hamper communication.

The US campaign has a missing piece, which is critical to set the international record straight. US leadership is needed to counter the PRC's false claim that it represents Taiwanese. UN Resolution 2758 did not even mention Taiwan.

At the same time, a counter to China's Big Lie is not about Taiwan's status, which the UN has not addressed, and nonetheless, is a question for democratic Taiwan to decide. Telling the truth about the resolution is not about Taiwan's membership in the UN, which is a broader issue to address. Telling this truth is not about any so-called "pro-independence" stance or partisan bias in Taiwan. Telling this truth is not about Taiwan's independence or the so-called "1992 consensus."

Telling this truth is not "punishment" against China or the WHO in perpetrating misinformation on COVID-19. The truth trumps the Big Lie.

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