

## WHO tapes reveal flawed strategy

Written by Taipei Times Editorial  
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The WHO's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has been below par. Much has been written about WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus' close links to China — he was Beijing's preferred candidate for the post and his country, Ethiopia, is a recipient of substantial Chinese loans.

However, new information indicates that there might be more than the obvious to the WHO's mishandling of the virus. Rather than underhand collusion with Beijing, an alternative narrative suggests that the WHO pursued a “love-bombing” strategy with Beijing, which ultimately came back to bite the organization in its derriere.

Leaked audio from WHO internal meetings published by The Associated Press (AP) on Wednesday last week paints a picture of an organization agonizing over how to coax more information from China during the vital early stages of the outbreak.

“We’re going on very minimal information,” WHO epidemiologist and technical lead for COVID-19 Maria Van Kerkhove said in one meeting, adding that “it’s clearly not enough for you to do proper planning.”

In another meeting, Gauden Galea, the WHO's representative in Beijing, says: “We’re currently at the stage where ... they’re giving it to us 15 minutes before it appears on CCTV [state-owned China Central Television].”

Kept in the dark by Beijing and lacking enforcement powers to independently investigate the then-epidemic, the WHO relied on China's cooperation. It appears that Tedros and his team launched a charm offensive, believing that if they lavished praise on China's handling of the crisis and in particular on Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平), Beijing might be flattered into sharing more information.

However, by the second week of January, some within the organization were expressing doubts over the strategy. According to the AP report, WHO Health Emergencies Programme executive director Michael Ryan told colleagues that it was time to “shift gears” and apply more pressure on China, fearing a repeat of the 2002 SARS outbreak.

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“This is exactly the same scenario. [We are] endlessly trying to get updates from China about what was going on,” Ryan says in a meeting, adding in reference to SARS that the “WHO barely got out of that one with its neck intact, given the issues that arose around transparency in southern China.”

However, Tedros continued to praise China. On Jan. 31 the director-general wrote on Twitter: “In many ways, #China is actually setting a new standard for outbreak response.”

The pandemic clearly reflects poorly on the Chinese Communist Party, which has failed to learn the lessons from its botched handling of SARS. However, the entire episode is also a damning indictment of the WHO’s top leadership, who also appear to have forgotten the lessons from SARS.

During the 2002 virus outbreak, the WHO did not wait for confirmation from China, but issued global health alerts according to information available at the time. In doing so, it eventually shamed Beijing into admitting the existence of the disease.

Why did Tedros and his team not pursue a similar strategy with COVID-19?

Tedros is the first non-physician to take on the role of WHO director-general. Before joining the WHO’s ranks, he was Ethiopian minister of health and minister of foreign affairs. Perhaps, if Tedros had a higher profile in the medical profession, he might have been less willing to gamble on high-stakes diplomacy and more to reveal the facts to the world.

“It’s definitely damaged WHO’s credibility,” said Adam Kamradt-Scott, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Sydney.

“Did he go too far? I think the evidence on that is clear ... it has led to so many questions about the relationship between China and WHO. It is perhaps a cautionary tale,” he added.

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