

Japan sets an example for others

Written by Chang Kuo-tsai 張國燾

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At 1:57pm on June 4, a gift from Japan arrived at Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport. Japan Airlines Flight JL809 was carrying a donation of 1.24 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine.

This moment stuck me for its historic importance, and I could not stop myself from saying out loud: “Good for you, Japan. Thank you.”

Germany, by contrast, has opted to dance to the tune of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) “one China” principle, despite the fact that Germans feel the CCP breathing down their necks when they handle political issues involving Taiwan.

It is not difficult to understand why Japan has a better relationship with Taiwan than Germany does. The explanation can be expressed by one word: warmth. The respective differences in geographical distance between Taiwan and these countries is of little consequence, and emotive, ill-meaning references to Japan’s imperialist past are unhelpful in this discussion. Taiwanese are not suffering from some form of Stockholm Syndrome, laboring under historical baggage as one-time subjects of the Japanese emperor.

Following the March 11, 2011 Tohoku earthquake in Japan, Taiwan led the world in its generosity of donations, sending more than 20 billion (US\$182.4 million at the current exchange rate), more than any other country in the world. This act of generosity on the part of the Taiwanese opened a door between our nations.

It should be noted that Taiwanese donated almost NT\$9 billion (US\$324.9 million) to China after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, and all we have received in return for the favor is continual provocation from the warships and fighter jets of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army.

In the decade since the 2011 earthquake, the Japanese and their government — especially when former prime minister Shinzo Abe was at the helm — have expressed their gratitude to Taiwan and returned the goodwill at every available juncture.

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When each country faced difficulty, the two leaders, Abe and President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), posted encouraging messages online, highlighting the friendship between the two nations.

How different this picture is compared with the relationship between Taiwan and Germany.

At the beginning of April last year, the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading through the West, and many countries lacked surgical masks and had few places from which to obtain them. Taiwan donated 1 million masks to Germany.

In addition to canceling the previously arranged ceremony to mark the occasion, a spokesperson for the German government thanked “another country” for its help, declining to mention Taiwan by name.

With the world clamoring at the feet of the goddess of compassion that is Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co (TSMC) during the current chip shortage, German Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy Peter Altmaier wrote to Minister of Economic Affairs Wang Mei-hua (王美花) and Vice Premier Shen Jong-chin (陳宗愷) in the hope of alleviating the German automobile industry’s chip problems. He asked the Taiwanese government to pass a request to TSMC that it increase the chip supply.

Yet when Taiwan tried to purchase vaccines made by the German pharmaceutical firm BioNTech at its German facility, the company said in January that the deal would be delayed due to a “re-evaluation of global vaccine supply and adjusted timelines.”

The reciprocal assistance one might expect seems to have vanished, like an untethered kite taken by the wind.

When the US secretary of health and human services, the Canadian minister of health and the Japanese minister of health, labor and welfare released statements on May 25 in support of Taiwan’s inclusion in the World Health Assembly (WHA), where was the statement from the German representative? One could say that it was held hostage by the “one China” principle.

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On the same day, the US and Japanese representatives to the WHA called for more transparency in the investigation into the origins of COVID-19. Although this has nothing to do with the “one China” principle, Germany was silent on the matter. In the interest of its own economic benefit, is Germany willing to sacrifice a search for truth?

There is a principle that when somebody shows you kindness, you reply in kind. The Japanese understand this; it is not clear to me whether the Germans do. It should not come as any surprise that a chasm exists in the relations between Taiwan and Germany.

It is too early to tell whether this chasm can be mended. When Germany decided it would maintain formality in the face of friendship, and decline to address Taiwan by name, the Taiwanese recognized what was happening.

The ball is now in Germany's court.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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