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# Degrees of Priority: Global Health or Derisory Politics?

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MR. IRAJ KUMAR<sup>1</sup> AND MS. MIHIKA KOTHARI<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*The article aims to centre stage the Taiwan - China relation in light of the current COVID -19 pandemic that has ravaged the world. Despite its outstanding success and the support it offered the world during this global crisis, Taiwan's exclusion in the WHO and its suspended participation in the WHO is a major blow to the global community in the fight against this global crisis. By delving into Taiwan's relationship with China and the WHO, we aim to explore the current consequences of their historic contention with regards to their sovereignty. Taiwan's successful fight against the pandemic highlights the critical role its government and citizenry played in controlling the spread of the disease. Taiwan's astounding resourcefulness along with a critical importance given to learning from their past experiences provided the island nation the ability to stem the infection with an efficiency that has not been observed in any other country. Beijing's paradoxical approach towards Taiwan in this fight against the virus, in contrast to two of its maritime neighbors, Indonesia and Singapore (both of whom have disputes in the South China Sea and ideological differences with China) have been observed in its pith. The article concludes with a glimmer of hope that the two Asian countries can set aside their political differences in humanity's global fight against this epidemic.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Settled by the agrarian ancestors of the Taiwanese indigenous people around 3000 BC, Taiwan first appeared in Chinese records in 239 AD (a fact still used by mainland China to stake claim to the island nation)<sup>3</sup>. The subsequent colonization of the island by the Dutch in the 17th century AD invited an exodus of Chinese population from the mainland to the island and soon after in 1662 AD, the island successively fell into the hands of the Ming and Qing dynasty respectively<sup>4</sup>. It was only in 1945, that the Republic of China (ROC), led by the Kuomintang (KMT), took control of Taiwan after the Second World War, after Japan seceded it following

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<sup>1</sup> Author is an Information Security Consultant.

<sup>2</sup> Co-Author is a B.A.LL.B. (2<sup>nd</sup> Year) student at Jindal Global Law School, Sonapat, India.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-34729538> (as visited on 13th April, 2020)

<sup>4</sup> idib.

heavy losses<sup>5</sup>. A few years later, facing persecution that followed the rise of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Republic of China retreated to Taiwan.

In response, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) decided to take back control of Taiwan, keeping in line with its 'One China' policy. However as fate would have it, the invasion of South Korea by North Korea prevented the same. China's act of aggression was met with the deployment of the United States armed forces under Harry Truman's presidency<sup>6</sup>.

## **II. TAIWAN - CHINA RELATIONSHIP WITH RESPECT TO WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION:**

*'A great man is hard on himself; a small man is hard on others' - Confucius*

China's 'big brother' skew towards Taiwan has also affected the United Nations (UN) specialized agency, the WHO's approach with regard to the island country. Taiwan's membership and status in the UN and its specialized agencies has seen its own shares of peaks and valleys.

On October 25th 1971, the Republic of China (Taiwan) was dismissed and its seat in the UN was replaced by the People's Republic of China (China)<sup>7</sup>. With that China began to systematically and diplomatically isolate Taiwan (to increase Taiwan's dependency on China) to the point that currently only 17 nations recognize Taiwan, and even the United States switched its recognition to Beijing 1979 despite still enjoying strong ties with Taiwan.

Between 2009 - 2016, Taiwan held the 'observer status' at the annual World Health Assembly meets (the decision-making body of WHO). But since 2016, relations between the organization and the country have been hampered due to Taiwan's changing government and their respective stance towards China. The Ma Administration (KMT Party) which was in power until 2016, had welcomed the 1992 'One China Consensus' albeit with the critical difference in the interpretation that the Republic of China was the true and legitimate government of both mainland China and Taiwan. Nevertheless, the Tsai Administration (Democratic Progressive Party) that came in power in 2016 and since has been a propagator of eventual and complete independence of the island, non-conforming to the 1992 consensus.

The effects of the same have been discerned time and again with WHO's differentiating approach towards Taiwan over the years. Rather than holding on to Taiwan's experience, WHO

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<sup>5</sup> idib.

<sup>6</sup> <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-didnt-mao-invade-taiwan-22752> (as visited on 13th April, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Meisler, Stanley. *'United Nations : A History'* Atlantic Monthly Press; Revised, Update Edition (29 December 2011), ISBN-10: 0802145299

suspended its 'observer status' and never accepted Taiwan as a full-fledged member despite the island being lauded for its top-notch health care system. Taiwan was deserted from the WHA meet in 2019 (third time in a row). China has conveniently defended WHO's actions with the claim that only 'sovereign states' can be granted the member status within the organization; which Taiwan is not. WHO's discomfort regarding its stand on Taiwan can very well be perceived from Dr. Bruce Aylward's (a senior WHO official) interview this February when asked about Taiwan<sup>8</sup>. The stubborn refusal (backed by China) has been reiterated once again despite clamouring calls for Taiwan's inclusion by the international community, with various heads of state providing official support to Taiwan amongst the dwindling support for China, owing to its questionable actions in relaying accurate information during the initial spread of the disease<sup>9</sup>.

Taiwan had experienced isolation from WHO during its fight against SARS (2003)<sup>10</sup>. The island had restricted access to state-of-the-art R&D and lacked any access to global information networks which forced it to resort to WHO's website, which provided information which was outdated by the time it became public. Taiwan's COVID-19 experience with WHO has not been very different - the country faced difficulty in obtaining antibody test kits, lack of communication, inaccurate reporting of cases, arbitrary travel bans by several countries (Vietnam, Italy, Philippines) despite having the lowest infection rates amongst others. Taiwan claims that WHO acknowledged the acceptance but did not respond to its letter written on December 31st, 2020, requesting for more information on the virus.<sup>11</sup> The only difference was that Taiwan being a seasoned veteran had learned from its 2003 experience and was hot to trot to fight the 2020 pandemic.

### **III. TAIWAN'S BATTLE WITH COVID-19:**

Today, Taiwan is the world's preeminent expert on public health care. It was Ranked No. 9 by Bloomberg Health Care Efficiency Index (2019)<sup>12</sup> and No. 1 in the world as per Health Care Index (2020)<sup>13</sup>.

Unlike China's draconian measures to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic, Taiwan adopted a rather enterprising approach. The country recognized the crisis and imposed early travel bans

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/senior-who-adviser-appears-to-dodge-question-on-taiwans-covid-19-response> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>9</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/15/taiwan-must-accept-chinese-status-to-attend-who-assembly-says-beijing> (as visited on 29th May, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/422652a> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/taiwan-who-coronavirus-china/> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>12</sup> <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/104644> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.numbeo.com/health-care/rankings\\_by\\_country.jsp](https://www.numbeo.com/health-care/rankings_by_country.jsp) (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

: Taiwan started inspecting passenger planes from Wuhan as early as 31st December, 2019 and by February 6, 2020 banned all visitors from China (whereas Japan, a country facing higher number of cases banned travelers from China only from 9th March, 2020 to protect its 'travel revenue' from the country.)

Taiwan played by its strength and took advantage of its technological prowess to combat the virus. It resorted to big data and online platforms - apps to inform citizens about availability of masks, QR code scanning system to map<sup>14</sup> and keep track of the infected people, toll free number (1922) for citizens to report cases and symptoms. The government ensured an adequate supply of medical equipment by stopping exports of surgical masks early, taking control of its distribution from private companies to prevent hoarding, implementing a purchasing policy - allowing a certain number of masks per individual a week. A tech expert in Taiwan helped create a rationing system which mitigated the country through face mask shortages. The system allowed buyers to purchase the allowed two masks per week<sup>15</sup>.

Information sharing with the public is another distinctive feature. The government created supplementary online content which listed down all the actions effectuated by the government in response to COVID 19 as per dates and category.<sup>16</sup> The Ministry of Health and Wealth also set up a 'Unified Command Centre' to ensure daily briefings, managing resources and sending out public messages. Actions by Taiwan's Health Insurance and Immigration agencies also warrants merit.

Taiwan's early vigilance and its proactive measures to deal with COVID-19 was applauded by several countries around the world. It has also garnered support and called for the return of the observer status it enjoyed with WHO. The German office in Taiwan have expressed support by opposing 'the politicization of global health issues.'

#### **IV. CHINA'S PARADOXICAL APPROACH:**

It is a commonly known fact and a major stage in foreign diplomacy that China shares disputed relations with many of its South-East Asian neighbours due to its aggressive naval exercises and claims over multiple parts of the South China Sea. In places where there are no islands,

<sup>14</sup> <https://focustaiwan.tw/society/202003065001> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>15</sup> <https://focustaiwan.tw/society/202002280019> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>16</sup> [https://cdn.jamanetwork.com/ama/content\\_public/journal/jama/0/jvp200035supp1\\_prod.pdf?Expires=2147483647&Signature=bIZCLS7ZLWTJd~U~H40JgiEGdFb3ggVUJpBvJ7KdANK7HgK1zaj4uWHvqweGym1nWfO~nXt9Y5i1vX79pF7zjjqfzmJAy3udTdpVVZQe07xnQIPcBMXLwZ5XjgTO8yKFXVIpxsXhrmOu8sGSpKiEmQ86ZCKfOTar7fMAGmUCtjiYVFwf31K3REWAA-r3hZyoZpqz3QKpVgpsRpF9fV9thQCq0~yvbvRKTH4PcoB~CZgmXH7rpVb6bILXQn5zBCphf6pyLAa4zIebUEKfCdCYdSdi9LeIEUsesqsYpNWgHJcr4K1LC0hFlst0RHQz-vZ7I-OvrX~5jel6zjjtuDQzjQ\\_\\_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAIESG5CRDK6RD3PGA](https://cdn.jamanetwork.com/ama/content_public/journal/jama/0/jvp200035supp1_prod.pdf?Expires=2147483647&Signature=bIZCLS7ZLWTJd~U~H40JgiEGdFb3ggVUJpBvJ7KdANK7HgK1zaj4uWHvqweGym1nWfO~nXt9Y5i1vX79pF7zjjqfzmJAy3udTdpVVZQe07xnQIPcBMXLwZ5XjgTO8yKFXVIpxsXhrmOu8sGSpKiEmQ86ZCKfOTar7fMAGmUCtjiYVFwf31K3REWAA-r3hZyoZpqz3QKpVgpsRpF9fV9thQCq0~yvbvRKTH4PcoB~CZgmXH7rpVb6bILXQn5zBCphf6pyLAa4zIebUEKfCdCYdSdi9LeIEUsesqsYpNWgHJcr4K1LC0hFlst0RHQz-vZ7I-OvrX~5jel6zjjtuDQzjQ__&Key-Pair-Id=APKAIESG5CRDK6RD3PGA) (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

China has on instances resorted to creating them by reclaiming land from the sea<sup>17</sup>. With these differences especially ideologically, China has chosen to fix its damaged image during this pandemic by lending a helping hand.

### **Singapore:**

Despite its tiff over the South China Sea, a recent agreement reached between Singapore and China, shows a mutually beneficial alliance between two countries with contrasting models of governance and ideology. As on 1st April 2020, during the virtual Singapore-China Joint Meeting, the two countries agreed on achieving the goal of regional and global cooperation for combating this pandemic<sup>18</sup>. China continued to express its gratitude to Singapore for the assistance they have provided. The contingent from Singapore outlined efforts it had and was making to fight the outbreak<sup>19</sup>.

### **Indonesia:**

Notwithstanding the territorial dispute over the sovereignty of Natuna island (in the South China Sea), the two Asian countries have agreed on underpinning the relations to fight the pandemic. China has aided Indonesia's fight by shipping them much-needed medical equipment such as test kits, N95 masks, surgical masks, protective gear and portable ventilators. Accordingly China dispatched a bulk of items on March 22, 2020<sup>20</sup>. The Chinese embassy in Jakarta stated that this was in response to the support it had received from Indonesia during its toughest time of the outbreak<sup>21</sup>.

## **V. CRITICAL ANALYSIS:**

With the case studies presented above, we see a dissimilar and contrasting approach China has adopted while dealing with the three island nations in this fight against the global pandemic. China has allowed its geopolitical dreams and demands to supersede the demands of the current global health and its state of affairs. As of 29th May, 2020, this disease has claimed more than 360,000 lives and counting across the world, defying race, creed, religion, sex and national boundaries.

It has become painfully clear that Taiwan is capable of helping several developing and

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<sup>17</sup> Hawksley, Humphry. *Asian Waters: The Struggle Over the South China Sea and the Strategy of Chinese Expansion*. Harry N. Abrams; ISBN: 978-1468314786

<sup>18</sup><https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/coronavirus-covid19-singapore-china-meeting-cooperation-12599434> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup><https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/26/indonesia-china-deepen-ties-through-covid-19-response.html> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>21</sup> *idib*.

developed countries. To spot one example, with a daily output of 13 million masks (as of April, 2020) Taiwan has sent out millions of masks to several countries around the world. China has made a disparaging accusation on Taiwan regarding the same and accused it of engaging in ‘Mask Diplomacy’<sup>22</sup> When asked if Taiwan would provide masks for China, Tsai Ing-wen, Taiwanese President said that ‘it would provide aid to any nation in need of the help within its ability’<sup>23</sup>. This is the approach we, the members of the ‘Earth-society’ need to attune to.

WHO depends on China for both funding and cooperation (receiving approximately \$86m in 2018-19<sup>24</sup>). This dependency has made WHO behave like China’s ‘god like soldiers’ propagating China’s ‘Boycott Taiwan’ agenda. The organization, rather than focusing on its real goals of providing universal and world health care, is distracted with trivial global politics. It was representatives from Brazil and the Republic of China in 1945 who proposed the creation of an international health organization to fight for universal healthcare while the world’s leaders were gathered in San Francisco laying the foundation stones of United Nations<sup>25</sup>. WHO cannot sit on the fence any longer and must acknowledge the role Taiwan can play in helping it fight this battle. Adapting Taiwan’s knowledge and experience, WHO can help achieve its Universal Health Coverage Missions by 2030<sup>26</sup>.

To quote Abhijit Naskar from his book “When Humans Unite: Making A World Without Borders”<sup>27</sup> - ‘*When the mind is without borders, the world will be without borders.*’

The time is not to play petty politics, but that of action and solidarity. The virus did not discriminate on the basis of borders and neither should China. Beijing should not pretermitt the core values it has propagated to set this apolitical institution and shake friends with Taiwan to fight the pandemic, like it has done with Singapore and Indonesia.

The untapped potential of these two powerhouses and the infinite benefits of their partnership would truly be a gift to humanity in one of its darkest hours.

## VI. CONCLUSION:

With the power and influence China wields in the current geopolitical scenario, its adamant

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<sup>22</sup><https://thediomat.com/2020/04/taiwans-success-is-the-bane-of-beijings-global-coronavirus-propaganda/>

<sup>23</sup><https://thehill.com/policy/international/asia-pacific/490550-taiwan-donating-millions-of-masks-to-other-countries-to>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52289056> (as visited on 30th May 2020)

<sup>25</sup> <https://qz.com/1831093/taiwan-china-conflict-is-disrupting-whos-fight-against-covid-19/> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/universal-health-coverage-\(uhc\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/universal-health-coverage-(uhc)) (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>27</sup> Abhijit Naskar, ‘When Humans Unite: Making a World Without Borders’ (Neuro Cookies, 2019)

stand on excluding Taiwan from participating in WHO might seem like a pipe dream. However, there is a precedent that would serve the need of the hour. When China entered the World Trade Organization in 2001, Taiwan was immediately permitted to participate under the name as “Separate Customs Territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu (Chinese Taipei)”<sup>28</sup>. Taiwan was eventually conferred an official membership to the organization thanks to the backing of a powerful supporting bloc consisting of the US among other major trading nations despite China’s displeasure<sup>29</sup>. The key factor to this decision was that Taiwan’s importance to the global trade and economy was too significant to be kept captive by China.

If global economics can be considered a factor significant enough to bring about such change then the world must strive to bring about such changes to a body like the WHO which has a sworn mission of striving towards the upliftment of global health irrespective of race.

While the future has always been dependent on the decisions made in the present, the current world scenario is one that has shaken the very systems running the world. Our decisions today shall be critically analyzed for its inevitable far reaching impacts for many years to come. They shall be a testament to the face we showed in the need of the hour and become our very pride or shame.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/14/taiwan-must-join-who-global-health-is-too-important-play-politics/> (as visited on 30th May, 2020)

<sup>29</sup> *idib.*