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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

China-Taiwan Mask Diplomacy: Wooing Southeast Asia?

By Frederick Kliem and Alan Chong

SYNOPSIS

While the US has largely abdicated its global leadership amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the People's Republic of China and Taiwan are leveraging on the pandemic as a soft power opportunity. Southeast Asia receives particular attention.

COMMENTARY

A FRIEND in need is a friend indeed, according to a time-honoured adage. With the infection chains seemingly under control in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan in April 2020, both governments have pivoted to international assistance with medical equipment and expertise. This opens up a new front in the ongoing diplomatic battle for political space between both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Conveniently, this development has dodged the question of whether Chinese authorities underestimated or downplayed the severity of the virus at its epicentre. But Beijing performed a remarkable effort in managing the pandemic eventually, and it initiated international relief efforts to mitigate its tarnished image abroad.

From Hero to Zero and Back

While PRC support is both welcomed and needed almost everywhere, early relief efforts were undermined by mediocre equipment and inept diplomatic attempts to rewrite the COVID-19 narrative. As for Taiwan, it has been globally acknowledged for successfully managing COVID-19 and is now turning the crisis into a public relations

coup. Despite fears of antagonising Beijing, ASEAN states stand to gain as both Taipei and Beijing woo their friends in the region.

Beijing's medical soft power was premiered in Europe. While European countries turned to self-help and isolation and Italy's first request for European solidarity failed, Beijing stepped in to provide medical experts, millions of facemasks and test-kits. However, this campaign quickly hit roadblocks, as EU officials warned of Beijing's aggressive global image campaigns vis-à-vis Washington.

Initial Chinese reputational gains were quickly damaged when the German government acknowledged that Chinese diplomats had contacted the German interior ministry with the intent to elicit positive public comments on China's COVID-19 management. As time went on, reports emerged of faulty Chinese equipment, and public criticism grew regarding the inflated fanfare with which China delivered its PPE.

Nonetheless, equipment standards are improving, and Chinese support continues to make a substantial difference, especially if weighed against the virtual absence of US leadership and a missing EU response in the initial stages of the pandemic. And this will go a long way towards enhancing Beijing's standing and reputation.

PRC Assistance to ASEAN

Notwithstanding the setbacks in Europe, Beijing has been keen to demonstrate its ability to be a responsible regional leader and provider of public goods in Southeast Asia. Within the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) cooperation framework, China agreed to substantially contribute to ASEAN's ability to manage the pandemic and its consequences, by setting-up an APT medical supply stockpile and, crucially, committing to contribute to the joint ASEAN Response Fund.

The PRC also continues to ship medical equipment, PPE, medicines and experts across the region. On 21 April 2020, China donated masks, sanitisers and thermometers to the ASEAN Secretariat to ensure their continued operations and will provide 100 million face masks, 10 million pieces of protective gear and urgently needed medical supplies to individual member states.

Most ASEAN member states have benefitted from Chinese support by now. But it will be unsurprising for observers of Sino-ASEAN relations that Cambodia and Laos are particularly targeted, and are supported financially and with medical experts and equipment. One Thai observer warned that Indochina faced the dilemma of 'suffering with' or 'suffering against' China in the battle against COVID-19.

Taiwan's Once-in-a-Generation Opportunity

Even as the Chinese epicentre in Hubei province had its lockdown lifted, Taipei simultaneously emerged as one of the success stories in battling COVID-19. Despite being largely shut out of the World Health Organisation (WHO), leaders around the world look to Taiwan for a model response.

Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-Wen even authored a self-congratulatory article in Time Magazine positing that Taiwan's success was the result of contact tracing, strategic imposition of quarantines and timely medical responses.

Taipei was already one of the world's largest suppliers of PPE, particularly face masks, and trading on Taiwan's sound industrial infrastructure, it augmented production substantially. Taipei is now offering donations to Coronavirus-stricken countries all over the world.

Since the Sino-US rapprochement in the 1970s, Taiwan has struggled with diplomatic recognition, and in recent years, its diplomatic allies dwindled to a mere 15. Yet, Taipei now has a rare opportunity to leverage its COVID-19 success and gain diplomatic capital vis-à-vis China.

Taiwan's Re-Connection with WHO?

In two waves of COVID-19 assistance, Taipei donated millions of urgently needed face masks to countries in Asia and Europe. The government specifically ties this effort to its New Southbound Policy strategy. This is President Tsai's initiative to enhance cooperation and exchanges between Taiwan and 18 targeted countries in Asia in a bid to be less dependent on the PRC and deepen regional relationships independently.

200,000 masks went to Southern Thailand, where COVID-19 had escalated. Taiwan also sent other PPE items and is cooperating with those countries to develop vaccines and test-kits.

Taiwan's foreign minister specifically used the opportunity to chastise the WHO's alleged China bias. According to Minister Joseph Wu, Taiwan stands at the frontline of global epidemic prevention efforts and is ready to assist the global community – whether the WHO continued to cave in to China's unreasonable interference or not.

With its efforts to fill the PPE gap and other shortages, Taipei stands to gain substantial international reputation and recognition.

Soft Power Rivalry

With Beijing and Washington embroiled in a tit-for-tat vendetta, Taipei may have found its soft power niche by simply appearing constructive and non-political in combating the pandemic.

Beijing's cause has also been set back by glitches such as the insensitive YouTube aid promotion video in the Philippines featuring the theme of *Iisang Dagat* (One Sea). This hurt Filipino feelings since it implied that China was advancing its claim that the South China Sea was rightfully theirs – under the cover of medical aid.

The soft power rivalry between Taipei and Beijing will be drawn out if the WHO's pronouncements continue predicting a long haul global effort. ASEAN member states should not fear accepting rival aid from both sides despite Beijing's automatic admonition of parleys with Taipei.

However, the One China policy needs to be maintained pursuant to established ASEAN operating principles. Southeast Asian governments should balance national autonomy with humanitarian needs. They should loudly proclaim the need to accept aid from any quarter so long as it is offered with sincere palliative care for all human beings regardless of nationality.

Dr Frederick Kliem is a Visiting Fellow and Associate Professor Alan Chong is Acting Head, Centre for Multilateralism Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of an RSIS series.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg