Despite Covid-19 Success, Taiwan Still Struggles for International Legitimacy

By James Baron

Two recurring themes in Western media analysis of the Covid-19 pandemic have been the inherent untrustworthiness of China and the near unparalleled success of Taiwan in tackling the disease. Strangely, few commentators have expressly connected these strands.

The West, we are repeatedly told, is finally “waking up” to the mendacity of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the dangers it poses. Yet if Western countries are just beginning to wipe the sleep from their eyes, Taiwan has been up and ready to go since daybreak. No one understands the CCP better than Taipei. Simply put, Taiwan operates on the premise that its cross-strait counterparts are inherently untrustworthy. This was a key factor in the rapidity and comprehensiveness with which Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen’s administration responded to reports of a strange new virus in late December.

Cruel experience has shown that Beijing has no qualms about jeopardizing the lives of its own citizens, let alone those of a country it brands a renegade province. That the rest of the world was unaware that this lack of compunction extended to its own population can hardly be put at Taiwan’s doorstep. Over the last two-plus decades, Taipei has repeatedly broadcast examples of the threat that the CCP poses to health and safety on an international level. Politically motivated as these admonishments have often been, they have also coincided with altruistic principles.

The system of integrated rapid-response agencies behind Taiwan’s successful handling of Covid-19 emerged — at least partly — in response to Beijing’s attempts to prevent Taiwan attaining observer status at the WHO’s annual World Health Assembly (WHA), beginning in the late 1990s. An early example of the tangible effects of these obstructions was the 1998 enterovirus outbreak in Taiwan that killed 78 people (91 percent of whom were children under the age of five). Taiwanese officials criticized the World Health Organization (WHO) for preventing timely international cooperation. The SARS crisis of 2002 to 2004, which claimed 73 lives in Taiwan (a mortality rate of 10.7 percent, when underlying health conditions are discounted) was a starker case in point. Taipei decried a two-month cover-up by China and a parallel delay by the WHO — at Beijing’s behest — in providing assistance. Worse: the two-man team that was eventually dispatched was constrained by a purely observational remit. An attempt by the Taiwanese to effect that most basic of Chinese courtesies — the mobilization of the WHO officials snubbed all but designated healthcare professionals.

The politics of exclusion

The SARS outbreak presented a huge challenge for an inexperienced government. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration of Chen Shui-bian had built its name in opposition to the authoritarian Nationalist (Kuomintang, or KMT) government during the martial law period. The status of an unjustly persecuted victim came naturally. It is unsurprising, then, that one element of the DPP’s campaign to gain WHA admission was to emphasize the unfairness of its ostracism from the world’s leading health policy-setting body, particularly as it resonated with the domestic audience.

“The Chen administration, in order to improve its prospects of re-election in 2004, deliberately utilized the threat posed by the SARS pandemic to appeal to Taiwanese identity,” writes Björn Lindemann in a 2014 case study of Taiwan’s WHO bid. “The mobilization of the Taiwanese population during the SARS crisis indeed benefited the DPP government in the 2004 elections [as] public discourse shifted... to the consequences of SARS and the threat that China posed to Taiwan’s security in the run-up to the presidential elections. People were left with the impression that the island had been left on its own and were thus susceptible to the government’s efforts to appeal to Taiwanese identity and nationalist sentiments.”

However, there was always more than one prong to the DPP’s approach, and arguments for Taipei’s participation on functional grounds were advanced in tandem with appeals of a more emotive nature. Sometimes the line between the two was blurred. One example from the SARS period was the resurgence of the virus at Taipei’s Hoping Hospital. Having contained the initial outbreak relatively well, in April 2002, the authorities suffered a setback.

“The SARS outbreak in the Hoping Hospital in Taipei painfully demonstrated the risk posed by the lack of essential real-time information from the WHO, because Taiwan realized too late that the SARS case definitions published on the WHO web page were lagging behind the latest developments,” writes Lindemann, referring to Department of Health (DOH) data. Lindemann quotes former Minister of Health Hsiao Mei-ling as stating that “doctors in the hospital did not identify the first SARS case immediately, because not all the criteria for the identification of SARS that...
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had been defined by the WHO had been made available to Taiwan: unaware that the WHO was going to revise these particular criteria very soon, the medical personnel did not classify the patient in the case of the WHO,” Winkler writes. “The SARS crisis had proven that Taiwan could benefit from better access to the WHO and that, conversely, Taiwan’s exclusion created a health risk for the rest of the world. Such arguments are harder to make when air travel and climate change are considered.”

In April 2009, Taiwan received an invitation to participate in the WHA as an observer. This followed an announcement in January that Taiwan would be included in the WHO’s International Health Regulations (IHR). On the face of it, these developments were cause for celebration — the culmination of years of diplomatic maneuvering to come to a mutually acceptable arrangement with Beijing. Involvement in the IHR, in particular, was seen as something that would yield concrete benefits, because it would provide Taiwan’s Center for Disease Control with direct access to the IHR Event Information Site, which contains updates on disease outbreaks. Taiwan would also be able to appoint its own expert to the IHR roster, be eligible for WHO support in emergencies and send experts to participate in WHO emergency committees.

Yet, these potential advantages were negated by the conditions Beijing imposed. First was the issue of nomenclature. The Ma administration had already received criticism for accepting the 2008 “Olympic formula” of “Chinese Taipei,” but when reports surfaced that the WHO was continuing to use the names “Taiwan, China” and “Taiwan, Province of China” in its internal correspondence, the then-opposition DPP seized upon this as evidence that China’s new-found congeniality was little more than a ruse to erode Taiwan’s sovereignty by stealth.

In fact, the offending designations had been agreed upon by Beijing and the WHO in a secret 2005 memorandum on Taiwan’s relationship with the organization to which Taipei had not been party. Meanwhile, Taiwanese participation in technical meetings remained negligible, as applications were denied or went unanswered with little in the way of explanation, and when an internal document regarding Taiwan’s IHR involvement was leaked, it became apparent that there was little in the way of qualitative improvement on the 2005 MOU. One provision even urged staff to avoid “actions which could constitute or be interpreted as recognition of a separate status of Taiwanese authorities and institutions from China.”

**BENEFITS OF FAILURE**

All of this led to disillusionment with Ma’s approach, which came to be seen as a sycophantic attempt to accommodate Beijing’s increasingly unreasonable demands. Questions now arose over the desirability of access to IGOs under such conditions. For the DPP, which has been better able to harness its “victim” status, some analysts have suggested that brave failure in the face of China’s bullying might even be more attractive than restricted success.

In a 2004 article on “SARS diplomacy,” for example, the Hong Kong political scientist Simon Shen observes that, “the response generated from the WHO defeat is already, ironically, more beneficial to the DPP than a success might have been,” adding that the motive “was to extend Taiwan’s non-Chinese identity and self-sovereignty to the international arena, with the ultimate goal of achieving independence in a non-Chinese sphere of influence.”

Likewise, the Taiwanese-American scholar Wei-chin Lee has stated that the Ma administration’s failure to obtain any substantive concessions from Beijing on Taiwan’s participation in functional international organizations means that younger Taiwanese feel “an assertive Taiwan under the DPP might be a better option for their voices to be heard.”

More recently, in a view that echoes Shen’s analysis, the British academic Colin Alexander has raised the possibility that the DPP is pursuing a policy toward IGO access that is deliberately condemned to failure. “Taiwan’s marginalization shapes its past, present and future, and any major step towards its resolution, particularly in the form of its becoming a member of a UN subsidiary body, would likely create a political crisis that would disenfranchise the DPP, which emerged as a political force under these conditions,” Alexander wrote in a February 2020 analysis of Taiwan’s WHA bid. “This makes it highly unlikely that the DPP would purposefully seek such recognition.”

Yet, this view seems to hinge on an outmoded view of the DPP, as do Alexander’s contentions.

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that the administration continues to rely on a “narrative of victimhood” that “amounts to a declaration of limited competence” and is “unlikely to fool anyone.” In fact, while it would be an overstatement to claim that the current government has completely abandoned emotive appeals to justice and probity, the PR drive surrounding Taiwan’s Covid-19 success has made it clear that Taiwan is already focusing on promoting its achievements as a means of gaining traction with a hitherto indifferent international community.

REWARDS OF SUCCESS
This view is supported by several academics in Taiwan, who believe that the strategy has undergone a marked change in recent years.

“To a certain degree, I do agree that over the past decades, Taiwan has been using the discourse of international injustice in its efforts to seek support from international society,” says Mei-chuan Wei, an associate professor at the College of Social Sciences at National Chengchi University.

“Specifically, central to this discourse is the idea that international society should recognize Taiwan’s achievements, especially in creating an ‘economic miracle’ characterized by its rapid and equitable economic growth, and establishing a liberal democracy in the 1980s … if democracy is a value that is held dearly. But this has been changing as you can see from the discourse put forward by the Taiwan government in the so-called ‘epidemic-prevention diplomacy’ or ‘mask diplomacy.’ ”

Where Alexander sees slogans such as “Taiwan can help” and “Taiwan is helping” as emotive appeals to an international community that is largely immune to such moralizing, Wei and others believe these appeals are designed to highlight Taiwan’s functional value.

So, where does the Tsai administration go from here? In May, the United States and Japan joined Taipei’s diplomatic allies in calling for renewed WHO observer status for Taiwan, while other high-profile countries signaled tacit support. Though this year’s bid was ultimately unsuccessful, some have seen it as a foot in the door. Writing for The Diplomat in June, Wen-Ti Sung refers to Taiwan “losing the battle but winning the war.”

Can Taiwan turn this apparent goodwill into concrete gains in terms of IGO access? In the short term, this seems doubtful. For, while the backlash against China for its mishandling of the virus is real enough, and has been accompanied by threats of economic repercussions, it is unlikely to fundamentally change the unwillingness of most countries to call Beijing’s bluff on this tinderbox of an issue. Sung writes of the “diminishing [of] their cost of supporting Taiwan,” but it is hard to see how this is the case for many of the countries over which China brandishes its economic cudgel.

Perhaps the answer, as Alexander and others have indicated elsewhere, lies in a public diplomacy strategy that targets foreign publics more directly and effectively. Alternatively, should its efforts continue to flounder, Taipei may eventually have to focus on cultivating fruitful non-official ties by continuing to prove and emphasize its usefulness to the international community. In the end, as has long been the case, domestic perceptions regarding the oft-cited status quo will also necessarily be a factor.

“What concerns most people in Taiwan,” says Wei, “is whether the move of purposefully seeking recognition, be it made by the DPP or KMT, would step on Beijing’s toes and trigger military confrontation.”

James Baron is a Taipei-based journalist and writer.