Taiwan’s Coronavirus Example

The WHO covers for a secretive China, but Taipei is a real model.

By The Editorial Board
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Since 1971 China has prevented Taiwan, which Beijing insists is a rogue province, from fully participating in the World Health Organization (WHO). Now the Covid-19 pandemic has put in sharp relief the deadly consequences of placing East Asia’s regional politics before global health.

As the Trump Administration reviews the WHO’s handling of the coronavirus outbreak, it also should work with Congress to make better treatment of Taipei a condition for continued financial support.

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Taiwan has been a model for handling the outbreak. Its transparent and competent approach has left the island nation of 24 million with 429 confirmed cases and only six deaths. On Monday the country announced zero new cases, and officials believe the local epidemic could be over by June. China’s penchant for secrecy and political control, on the other hand, helped to make the local outbreak a global pandemic. Yet WHO has treated the two as if the opposite were true.

The coronavirus emerged in China late last year, with the first confirmed cases reported in December. On New Year’s Eve, public health officials in Wuhan, China, told WHO about a pneumonia virus but doubted it could spread easily. On the same day, Taiwanese officials say they asked the agency for more information about the virus and the risk of human-to-human transmission. WHO officials reportedly confirmed receipt of the note but didn’t respond.
This didn’t stop Taipei, which immediately began health inspections on flights arriving from Wuhan. Meantime, Chinese and WHO officials played down the threat together. Their statements on the lack of human-to-human transmission were almost identical, according to Berkeley researcher Xiao Qiang. Taiwanese officials announced on Jan. 16 that the virus seemed more contagious than originally reported. Four days later, China finally acknowledged it could spread between humans.

WHO called an emergency committee to discuss the virus on Jan. 22-23 but left Taiwanese officials in the dark. A Taiwanese Centers for Disease Control official lamented, “There’s no way for us to get firsthand information.” There also was no way to push back against Beijing’s overreach. Under Chinese pressure, WHO director-general Tedros Ghebreyesus refrained from declaring that Covid-19 had become a “public health emergency of international concern” until Jan. 30.

Despite WHO’s kneecapping, Taiwan proved more competent. Hubei province, home to Wuhan, didn’t take serious action to contain the virus until Jan. 22, when China had at least 440 confirmed cases and nine deaths. By contrast the small democracy activated its epidemic response force on Jan. 20, a day before confirming its first case. While Dr. Tedros was lavishing praise on a secretive China, the smaller nation had started drills and implemented quarantines. On April 1 Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen announced the country would donate 10 million masks abroad.

Part of WHO’s job is to provide clarity and information without political bias. Yet its insistence on following China’s line has led to confusion. In the past WHO has referred to the island as “Taiwan, China,” or simply “Taipei.” It also has labeled the country as “Taipei and its environs.” Perversely, WHO’s bizarre classification of Taiwan gives Beijing credit for Taipei’s good work.

WHO’s deference to China over Taiwan has taken farcical turns. In March Bruce Aylward, a Tedros confidant who oversees the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus, hung up on a reporter after being asked about Taiwan’s WHO membership. The agency quickly published a statement claiming it “is working closely with all health authorities who are facing the current coronavirus pandemic, including Taiwanese health experts.” Yet the Taiwanese Foreign Ministry noted, “Between 2009 and 2019, we have applied to the WHO to take part in 187 technical meetings but have only been invited to 57 of them.”

The organization also added that “the question of Taiwanese membership in WHO is up to WHO Member States, not WHO staff.” That’s technically true. But senior WHO officials have made their preference clear—often in ugly ways.

Dr. Tedros has deflected criticism of his leadership by accusing the Taiwanese government of condoning racist attacks against him. He provided no evidence, and we’ve seen none. Recently evidence emerged that Africans in Guangzhou, China, have been evicted from their homes and rejected by businesses as coronavirus-fueled xenophobia spreads. Governments across Africa have expressed concern, but Dr. Tedros has been quiet.

Many of the world’s viruses originate in China, and WHO understandably needs to maintain a relationship with the country. But its preferential treatment for Beijing has endangered lives in China and beyond.