

EAST ASIA: KEY ELEMENT IN THE GLOBAL COVID RESPONSE EQUATION

Profile of the East Asian Response



**COVID-19 Policy Research Task Force
Reischauer Center for East Asian Studies
Johns Hopkins University SAIS
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EAST ASIA: KEY ELEMENT IN THE GLOBAL RESPONSE EQUATION

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- ❑ **East Asia has been unusually resilient at containing waves of COVID-19.**
- ❑ **East Asia provides multiple globally relevant lessons for managing the pandemic with successes in mobilizing industry, testing and tracing, and utilizing digital technology.**
- ❑ **Because East Asia is emerging from the pandemic more quickly, it now has distinctive abilities to support the broader global response.**

Introduction

In cooperation with the 2020 T-20 Global Think Tank Summit, the Johns Hopkins University SAIS Reischauer Center for East Asian Studies convened a major virtual conference in November on “COVID-19, East Asia, and the Global Response,” involving a broad policy dialogue between public health specialists and policymakers. T-20 is the Track II arm of the G-20 Global Economic Summit, held virtually this year in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Speakers from six nations, including Saudi Arabia, India, Nigeria, Singapore, Japan, and the United States contributed to this cosmopolitan event including public health specialists from Johns Hopkins, Duke University, and overseas institutions. The proceedings were broadcast worldwide on the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center website, known globally as an authoritative source of COVID-19 statistics.

The event fostered dialogue centrally on three policymaking areas: health and supply chain resiliency; impact of the crisis on access to food and environmental protection; and configuration of the post-COVID world related to vaccines, treatment, and economic cooperation. In a world where regional initiatives responding to global challenges are increasingly important, **this memo offers insights from the T-20 event and related Reischauer Center research concerning East Asia’s role in addressing the coronavirus pandemic and future health threats.**

Profile of the East Asian Response

1. East Asia has been unusually resilient at containing waves of COVID-19.

- **Compared to the total number of COVID-19 cases in the US and Europe, countries in East Asia have seen a fraction of cases**, being able to fend off new waves of the virus. The US, for example, has experienced far more infections with a total of 53,911 cases per million people, while

Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea combined have experienced a total of 2,594.5 cases per million since the pandemic started back in March.¹ⁱ

- Further evident of the region's success, **public health systems in East Asia maintain among the lowest COVID-19 mortality rates in the world**. Fatality rates in Taiwan, China, South Korea, and Japan are far lower than those in the West—at a range of 0.3 to 21.7 deaths per million. Comparatively, the US, France, UK and Spain—all of which prioritized rapid economic reopenings—have now experienced significantly higher rates of mortality with over 900 deaths per million people.²ⁱⁱ
- **East Asia has also dealt unusually well with the public health/economy trade-off**, focusing primarily on positive health outcomes first. With effective containment measures and a rapid scale of testing and contact tracing infrastructure in place, **countries in East Asia are starting to experience a gradual economic recovery**. The region as a whole, despite occasional modest setbacks, is emerging from one of its worst recessions.
- **Japan's economy, being the third largest in the world, for example, grew 5.1% from July to September at an annual rate of 22.9% from the previous quarter**, exceeding expectations after severe economic slowdown.³ During this same quarter, China's economy grew by 4.9%, followed by Taiwan's growth at 3.3%, and South Korea's at 1.9% after steep economic contractions widely among the region.⁴
- While the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects the world's gross domestic product to decline by 4.4% in 2020 and the US economy to shrink by 4.3%, **China's economy is forecasted to grow 1.9% along with Vietnam's economy at 1.6%**, according to the *IMF Regional Economic Outlook*.⁵ **These are two major Asian economies experiencing positive growth for the whole of 2020**, underscoring the region's unique resilience.

So why has East Asia, in general, seen a faster recovery and lower rates of infection?

A critical factor in explaining these anomalies has been the region's experience with past pandemics. Outbreaks, such as SARS in 2003 and MERS in 2015, all of which struck East Asia, greatly sensitized the region to the virus danger and prepared countries to act quickly and decisively to manage the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Governments and societies, learning from these emergencies, **ramped up health systems and national responses while taking guidelines and quarantines rules more seriously than elsewhere.**⁷

ⁱ Data sourced from Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center on December 21, 2020. Individual COVID-19 cases per million for Japan (1575.5), South Korea (986.8), and Taiwan (32.2) account for a total of 2,594.5 cases.

ⁱⁱ COVID-19 fatalities per million in Taiwan (0.3), China (3.3), South Korea (13.6), and Japan (22.0) have been far lower compared to those in the France (929.4), US (959.7), UK (994.4), and Spain (1,046.4), according to data from the Our World in Data Coronavirus Explorer accessed on December 21, 2020.

This memo, now at a critical time of global and regional recovery, outlines additional key takeaways from East Asia in the following section to explain these successful results, along with the region's distinctive abilities to now support and strengthen the emerging global response.

2. East Asia provides multiple globally relevant lessons for effectively containing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ability to Mobilize. In East Asia, when faced with shortages in essential protective equipment, **governments stepped in to incentivize medical supply production.**

- Japan, for example, developed a “Reshoring Subsidy Program” as early as March, allocating 70 billion yen (\$653 USD) among 87 Japanese firms to diversify key medical production and encourage investment back in the country.⁸ Japan then expanded its subsidy initiative, as of November, distributing 146 subsidies for a total of 247.8 billion yen (\$2.4 billion USD).⁹
- Taiwan also strengthened its domestic supply chain resiliency. In May, Taiwanese medical supply manufacturers were able to increase their daily production of surgical masks from 1.88 million to 20 million in simply over a month.¹⁰ At the same time, the US faced major shortages of masks and other essential PPE in May while cases surged rapidly.¹¹
- In Wuhan, the epicenter of the first major COVID-19 outbreak, China mobilized construction resources quickly building two new hospitals in over a week, with more than a thousand beds each to support coronavirus patients.¹²

Testing and Tracing. **East Asian countries invested early and heavily in testing and diagnostic capacity,** building comprehensive programs to identify and isolate cases.

- Korea, for example, conducted nearly 500,000 tests by early April, at a per capita rate almost twice the US, despite both countries announcing their first COVID-19 case on the same day. Korea also had over 600 testing facilities and 50 driving test centers in April, later adopted as a model in cities around the world.¹³
- Japan has pursued a distinctive but comparatively successful cluster-based approach, since February, being able to identify “clusters” of infection at early stages to prevent major outbreaks. Japan adopted this strategy nationwide, effectively incorporating its 450 regionalized Public Health Centers to track cases locally to the original infection source to test and isolate them.¹⁴

Digital Innovation. **The use of apps and digital technologies has strengthened East Asia's response to the virus,** enhancing its ability to contact trace and communicate.

- Singapore developed one of the first digital monitoring apps, “Trace Together,” in March. The app exchanges Bluetooth signals between phones in near proximity, and users can provide contact information for health officials to track the spread of COVID-19.¹⁵ As of December, the app now covers 3.4 million citizens, about 60% of Singapore's 5.64 million population.¹⁶

- South Korea and Taiwan, relatedly, incorporated digital self-quarantines, using unique apps and digital location to ensure patients stayed at home. These “electronic fences” alert officials if patients leave quarantine, with potential fines up to \$3,500 for violators.¹⁷
- In Japan, the government launched a similar coronavirus contact-tracing app, COCOA, in mid-June that drew 7.7 million downloads in the first month.¹⁸ Japan used this digital model to build upon its aggressive public education campaign, of the “three Cs”—avoiding closed spaces, crowded places, and close contact—to disseminate information and prevent spread of infection.

3. Because East Asia is emerging from the pandemic more quickly, it now has distinctive abilities to support the broader global response.

East Asia has significant economic capabilities to help countries overcome the pandemic, with Japan, China, and South Korea together accounting for nearly one-quarter of global GDP.¹⁹ East Asian countries also have **first-hand experience with addressing the coronavirus** domestically as well as **extensive experience with international aid**.

This combined knowledge makes East Asia particularly well positioned to help the developing world and assist the global response, as the West remains occupied in containing the pandemic’s spread. **Below, we consider ways in which East Asia has played an essential role thus far in the global and regional response.**

Asian Development Bank

The Asian Development Bank (ADB)—with 49 members in the Asia Pacific region and 16 outside, and led by Japan since its inception, **has been a major powerhouse in providing COVID-19 aid and support at the regional and country level.** In early April, for example, the ADB announced a \$20 billion USD assistance package to help its developing member countries respond to the pandemic and produce essential PPE.²⁰ In December, 2020, the **ADB has since launched a regional \$9 billion USD vaccine initiative—the Asia Pacific Vaccine Access Facility (APVAX)**—to “safely, equitable, and efficiently” help members procure and distribute vaccines, according to ADB President Masatsugu Asakawa.²¹

Notably, the **ADB’s regional health cooperation builds on existing aid frameworks** with Japan, such as the massive \$110 billion “quality infrastructure” partnership with Japan’s Foreign Ministry across Asia, planned from 2016-2020.²² These channels of regional cooperation between the ADB and Japan, moving forward, will become ever more important in overcoming the pandemic.

Japan’s Role

Japan has significantly ramped up its international aid efforts, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Since the pandemic started, Japan has provided **over \$1.54 billion in COVID-19 medical and health assistance** bilaterally to countries and through international organizations.²³ At the UN General Assembly in September, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga emphasized that **Japan will “proactively lead” the**

international effort to provide COVID-19 assistance and work towards universal health coverage under a “leaving no one’s health behind” principle.²⁴

Japan has since established a **COVID-19 Crisis Response Emergency Support Loan of \$4.5 billion** to distribute aid over a two-year period to countries around the world.²⁵ As a part of this program, **Japan’s International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is co-financing with the Asian Development Bank (ADB), including two separate \$450 million ODA loan agreements** to Indonesia and the Philippines to strengthen essential health and medical capacity among regional partners.²⁶

Additional prominence in Japanese COVID-19 aid includes **\$150 million through the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction and the Asia Pacific Disaster Response Fund**, operated chiefly with the ADB.²⁷ Japan has also committed **\$4 million in Japanese technology and health-related products to 12 countries in Africa and Asia**, in cooperation with the UN Industrial Development Organization.²⁸ These multilateral and regional initiatives leverage the strength of Japan’s years of international aid experience to mitigate the impact of the current pandemic in developing countries.

Confronting the Future

Through decisive early action at the national level, and active support for broader international efforts, East Asia is playing a key role in the global fight against COVID-19. As the world moves towards recovery, and as vaccines are distributed more widely, **the region’s efforts will likely become increasingly more visible—and important—in the global context.** We remain critically focused as a task force on monitoring East Asia’s future role and capabilities in this global fight.

ENDNOTES

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