

FROM THE PANDEMIC'S ASHES, ASIA HAS RISEN AS A WORLD LEADER

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At time of writing, we are just over a year from when the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Although undoubtedly a global event, the uneven impact of the pandemic and the recovery exposes injustice and weakness in the global system. The West and Latin America are battling tragically high caseloads, yet many Asian countries routinely see few, if any, local cases.

Countries like the United States and the United Kingdom — whose economic development led to assumptions that they'd be “most prepared” for a global pandemic — have seen some of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks. But even Western countries that outperform their peers pale in comparison to Asia. This exposes the fallacy that wealth and modernity go hand-in-hand with competence and the ability of the state and society to work towards the collective good.

Germany — often seen as the best-governed country in Europe — saw an average of 16,000 daily cases over the past week. Canada saw 3800 cases over the same period. Almost no country in Europe or North America currently sees fewer than 100 cases per million people each day: a threshold exceeded for much of the pandemic.

In contrast, much-less-developed Vietnam has seen only one case a day over the past week. Singapore sees a dozen, South Korea has around 430, and Japan around 1,400. Asia's pandemic is a whole order of magnitude less deadly than the West's. The facts are clear: the likelihood of catching the virus at all, let alone fall ill and, worse, pass away, is much greater in the West than in Asia.

So how did Asia outdo the world's supposed hegemons?

Asia's success in tackling the pandemic is a testament to its rapid rise, inherent cultural traits, and different approaches to governance in times of crisis. It is rooted in a wider understanding of the social contract, which goes beyond a shallow understanding of democracy and rights.

Undoubtedly, Asia's experience with pandemics pushed it to take COVID more seriously. The outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, which caused over 700 deaths, left a mark on many Asian countries.

This time, many Asian countries took early and aggressive action. China's swift decision to lock down Wuhan and neighbouring cities, while drastic, succeeded in leading to a sharp decrease in

cases by April 2020. South Korea also took early action by mandating its biotech companies to quickly produce diagnostic tests, allowing them to expand capacity and isolate confirmed outbreaks.

Vietnam, a relatively low-income country, used extensive contact tracing, isolation and quarantine to control the pandemic among a population of almost 100 million people.

As for culture, Asian societies also have a strong sense of collective welfare, where communities are more willing to undergo inconvenience to protect each other from harm, nor do they necessarily have an adverse relationship with authority. In that sense they are more resilient.

In Hong Kong, despite deep political polarisation, people readily complied with social distancing and public health guidelines from trusted institutions and, in many cases, followed more stringent practices than what was prescribed.

Asia's economic rise and cultural influence also helps to explain the success of Australia and New Zealand: two outliers in what we would normally consider to be "the West". Their proximity to Asia and strong ties to the region likely encouraged them to watch developments in Asia and take early action to prevent spread. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), one of the highest-level multilateral forums in the region, released a joint statement early on during the pandemic, sharing their committing to fight COVID-19 together and pursue facilitative measures to expedite the region's economic rebound, including facilitating the flow of essential goods and services across the region.

All of these countries were willing to consider drastic measures in terms of infection control, even with significant economic costs. China led the way, taking unprecedented actions that affected tens of millions. They paid off.

One thing that marks all the success cases is a strong system of test-and-trace, centralised quarantine, and rapid response. Almost all these countries have strict test-on-arrival and quarantine systems for international arrivals, ensuring that outbreaks aren't caused by incoming travellers. Several countries have government-managed quarantine facilities, which isolates potential cases and prevents "leakage". And, in the case of Australia and New Zealand, even a single case can lead to a citywide lockdown: extreme, but definitely successful in stopping spread. Many learned from the China blueprint.

In contrast, from the politics of social distancing and mask governance to the lack of sufficient personal protective equipment and doctors, the West's stumbling policy response was far behind what was common in Asia. Western countries were quick to lower restrictions at the first sign of a wave easing, which often served to reignite another wave.

The honest truth is that the West's development of highly-effective vaccines has bailed it out. If not for the success of these vaccines, Western countries may have struggled for years, highlighting how a strong sense of individualism and the absence of a wider social contract leads to an inherent lack of resilience.

Nor will the West emerge from the pandemic from a position of strength. Almost all Western economies will emerge from the pandemic with sluggish growth and high unemployment that is unlikely to recede quickly. The financial losses, in some estimations, will be greater than the Great Financial Crisis and Sovereign Debt Crisis in 2008-2010. The one exception, perhaps ironically, is the United States, whose massive economic stimulus — a policy that counters much of the Washington Consensus the country used to promote — may give the West its only dynamic economy in the short-term.

This strikes a blow to the West's reputation for competency. Western countries had cultivated a strong worldwide reputation for effective governance and good social outcomes, even as global trust in their political administrations plummeted. This reputation is the foundation of these countries' soft power: a foundation cracked by the poor response to the pandemic and the inability to sacrifice "freedoms" in the face of an existential threat.

Asia has stepped up to fill the gap. China sent PPE and doctors to several countries, including Cambodia, Italy, France, Spain, Philippines etc. Apart from donating millions of vaccines, India also recently co-introduced a proposal to temporarily waive intellectual property rights to make it easier for developing countries to increase their manufacturing capabilities in vaccine development.

The West appears less willing to let go of their position of moral, economic, and technological authority, as shown by their financial and legal hesitancy to make the vaccine a common good and their attempts to undermine vaccines from countries not politically aligned with them, like China and Russia, even if some have proven high efficacy rates.

Another reason for the discrepancy between Asia and the West's handling of the pandemic is their differing understandings of risk, best shown with official attitudes towards mask-wearing. Many prominent U.K. scientists pushed back against making masks mandatory, arguing that there was insufficient support in the scientific literature for the efficacy of masks to prevent COVID-19 transmission. In contrast, Asian public health authorities assumed that most transmission mechanisms were possible vectors for infection, and so acted earlier, scaling back only when evidence showed that things were safe.

Yet much of the West's risk-taking stems from a concern about not having freedoms impinged and a rejection of authority when it comes to being told what to do to protect oneself and others.



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This goes hand in hand with the precautionary principle, which advocates acting if there is a potential for causing harm even in the absence of scientific certainty, emphasizing caution in a time of crisis.

It mirrors something I wrote in my 2018 book *The Sustainable State*, formulated years before our current crisis yet increasingly (and unintentionally) relevant today:

“To borrow a metaphor, consumption is often perceived as innocent until proven guilty. It is deemed acceptable unless it presents clear harms to the consumer and to others, and even then any actions must be of a light touch.”

Taking such a laissez-fair approach to risk management would certainly reduce a society’s resilience. Countries can learn much from how Asian countries perceived risk and applied strategic foresight to handle the pandemic.

COVID-19 will not be the last pandemic, let alone the last global crisis. We should look back to see which countries really possessed the competence to grapple with the pandemic and the leadership to guide the world out of suffering.

Asia’s success in fighting COVID is not an isolated incident, but rather the culmination of decades of strong institution- and knowledge-building in many areas of development.

How different would this pandemic have turned out if the West had acted as early and decisively as Asian countries did? When it comes to the next global crisis, world policymakers would do well to look towards the East.