

Taiwan's COVID-19 Response & "Mask Diplomacy"

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OVERVIEW

China's global coronavirus assistance effort, profiled in a previous China Institute [analysis](#), has received significant attention and, in some cases, criticism. Chinese governmental bodies, corporations, and NGOs moved to deploy supplies and medical workers to hard-hit locations around the globe. Taiwan is also working to provide international humanitarian assistance in response to the pandemic, having effectively contained the virus at home.

Despite a population of only 23.8 million, a high population density, and relative proximity to the outbreak's epicentre, the island has reported just 442 cases and 7 deaths as of mid-May. Taiwan's highly effective response [included](#) an early travel ban with China and the utilization of technology for early virus detection. It is also an [approach](#) characterized by "careful and intensive monitoring and surveillance" of the Taiwanese populace. The effectiveness of this approach has been lauded by global public health experts although some commenters have indeed raised concerns surrounding privacy and government overreach.

Taiwan is now [asserting itself](#) as a major producer of protective gear and other disease preventing products, such as alcohol-based disinfectants. It has invested in additional face-mask manufacturing infrastructure, rapidly increasing daily capacity. This, [according](#) to a senior government official, has led to Taiwan's emergence as the world's second largest mask producer. Prior to the virus outbreak, Taiwan's production capacity was around 1.8 million masks per day. As of late April, Taiwan produced 17 million masks per day and expected an increase to over 19 million by mid-May. Purchase orders of Taiwanese mask production units (machinery) have been [received](#) from businesses and governments across the globe, including from the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Brazil.

MASK DIPLOMACY

Taiwan [banned](#) the export of surgical and N95 masks on January 24 and launched a mask rationing system in early February. This initial export ban aligned with the initial spread of coronavirus on the Chinese mainland, sparking online [controversy](#) among Chinese netizens. While Taiwan may soon ease purchase and export restrictions, it is currently unable to sell masks to foreign countries. Taiwanese nationals, as of April 8, are able "to send up to 30 face masks every two months to their spouse or close overseas relatives."

Taiwan has, however, announced three rounds of humanitarian assistance to support international medical personnel in containing COVID-19:

- [April 1, 2020](#): Taiwan donates 10 million face masks to "the United States, European Union member states and other European nations, and diplomatic allies"
- [April 9, 2020](#): Taiwan donates a total of 6 million masks to "EU member states in Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe, more severely affected states in the US, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, partner countries under Taiwan's New Southbound Policy, and other friendly nations"
- [May 5, 2020](#): Taiwan donated 7.07 million face masks, including "2.28 million face masks will go to the US federal government and hard-hit US states, 1.3 million to the EU and its member states, 1.09 million to Taiwan's diplomatic allies, and 1.8 million to New Southbound Policy partner countries. Another 600,000 masks will also go to Africa and the Middle East, and to assist medics working with Syrian refugees."

The Taiwan Department of North American Affairs also [announced](#) a direct donation to Canada on April 22,

2020. The Canadian government received 400,000 masks. There were also smaller direct donations to Ontario (50,000), Alberta (25,000), B.C (25,000) and Canadian indigenous communities. This prompted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to thank Taiwan [directly](#) for its “generous donation.”

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Taiwan’s “mask diplomacy” campaign is set against the backdrop of a reinvigorated global diplomatic dispute, this time arising from China’s alleged early-stage mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic. Australia initially [pushed](#) for an “independent international inquiry” into the outbreak of COVID-19, which predictably [angered](#) Chinese government officials and media commentators. Beijing was quick to [accuse](#) Australia of “blindly following” the lead of United States officials, who have been among the most outspoken critics of both China and the World Health Organization (WHO). The initiative, although initially divisive, ultimately [gained](#) broad international support (including from China) and was adopted during the most recent World Health Assembly (WHA) meeting on May 19. It calls for [an](#) “impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation” of the global response to the pandemic and will “make recommendations to improve capacity for global pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response.”

Taiwan is, of course, not a World Health Organization (WHO) member. The self-governing island, which is not recognized as an independent state, was [previously](#) granted observer status from 2009-2016, but has since been excluded from attending due to China’s objections. This has angered government officials in Taiwan, many of whom believe this exclusion has [prevented](#) the sharing of critical information and ultimately endangered Taiwanese lives. To this end, Taiwan’s success in handling the spread of COVID-19 has ignited [calls](#) that it should be included in WHA meetings and granted the ability to contribute its experience and best practices to the international WHO-led inquiry. A U.S.-led campaign advocating for Taiwan’s inclusion attracted international support, including a pledge from Canada. Taiwan would ultimately [not](#) receive an invitation to the meeting, agreeing to put the issue off to allow focus on immediate coronavirus response.