

The East Asian responses to COVID-19: a comparative analysis on the region

Kamila Aben Athar

The COVID-19 pandemic gained unprecedented relevance since early December, when China detected the occurrence of a new kind of pneumonia in Wuhan, whose was unknown. On December 31st, 2019, the Chinese government reported the alarming situation to the World Health Organisation (WHO) Country Office (WHO, 2020). In January, new cases were reported outside China and the world stood alert. First, there were cases divulged in other Asian countries, such as Thailand, South Korea, Singapore, and Philippines. Later, the virus spread to Europe, having Italy as the country with the highest number of victims outside China (BBC, 2020a), along with France reporting the first COVID-19 death outside Asia (AGUILERA ET AL., 2020). Initially, the WHO declared this health outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. However, as the virus spread to other regions, such as the American and African continents, the Organisation characterized this virus as a pandemic, in mid-March (WHO, 2020).

Even though it has been only four months since the beginning of this crisis, the international community had witnessed a diverse range of public policies taken place in each country. Some cases turned out to be exceptional examples in the fight against the virus, such as South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam (CARROLL, 2020; FLEMING, 2020; VU; TRAN, 2020). Other responses became notoriously negative, such as Italy, Spain, United States and Japan (MCMURTRY; ZAMPANO, 2020; LUSCOMBE, 2020; RYALL, 2020).

For the sake of this analysis, the comparison efforts presented here will focus on the situation in the East Asia region, since it is a region of historical disputes (China-Japan and South Korea-Japan) whereby resentments are still very much present within their relations, and, on the other hand, this new situation imposes new sets of challenges to overcome the current crisis as a united region.

China

According to Worldometers website (2020a), China had reported 82,874 cases of COVID-19 in its territory, from which 4,633 passed away. Since early this crisis, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dedicated its efforts to lock down the city of Wuhan, the center of the outbreak, and also control the spread to other regions in the country (KRETSCHMER, 2020). However, the Chinese government was surprised by the fact that this virus' level of environmental contamination surpasses the one of SARS (the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which is a different respiratory disease that occurred throughout Asia in 2002 and had its first cluster of cases in the Chinese province of Guangdong (HEWINGS-MARTIN, 2020). Therefore, China had witnessed the rapid rise of cases in Wuhan, where there were reported over 500 new cases in only a few days, and also in other cities of the Hubei province (GRIFFITHS ET AL., 2020).

The CCP announcement of building, in only 10 days, a new 1,000-bed hospital to treat patients suspected of contracting COVID-19 showed to the world the Chinese capacity to give a firm and quick response to the health crisis (SIDDIQUE, 2020). The images down below present satellite pictures of the new hospital in January and in April 2020.

Figure 10 - Satellite images of the new Chinese hospital site (January and April 2020)



Source: WILLIAMS (2020).

Moreover, in late March, China raised entry bars to foreign visitors (BBC, 2020b). Although the country continued to report, on a lower scale, some locally-transmitted cases, almost all its new cases now come from abroad, either foreigners coming into China, or returning Chinese nationals. However, the Chinese government claimed that the COVID-19 hit its peak in China, and, thereafter, the lockdown in Wuhan had been gradually eased since early April. As Zhong and Wang (2020) affirm, even if the lockdown had ended, the normal life in Wuhan may be a distant dream, since the city recovery will be watched across the globe for lessons on how populations move past pain and calamity. Of mainland China's more than 80,000 reported cases of the virus, nearly two-thirds have been in Wuhan.

It is important to highlight that the international community looks carefully at the Chinese situation, and some even doubt that China had in fact beaten the COVID-19, as Chinese health authorities affirm (KUO, 2020). Public health experts and citizens claim the situation in China has improved dramatically due to the strong implementation of testing, quarantines and social distancing. Nevertheless, according to a Hong Kong's public broadcaster (RTHK) report (2020), some hospitals in Wuhan are allegedly refusing" to test patients who showed symptoms. Kyodo News in Japan (2020) also reported that a local Chinese doctor said the number of cases was manipulated before President Xi Jinping's visit to Wuhan, what could indicate that the official numbers and figures may not express the totality of what is happening in China due to possible data manipulation and underreporting (PALMER, 2020).

South Korea

According to Worldometers website (2020b), South Korea reported 10,774 cases and 248 deaths of COVID-19. The Asian country has been considered one of the leading examples in the fight against the virus. At the beginning of the spread, due to its territorial closeness to China, South Korea was considered to be battling the worst coronavirus outbreak outside China (BBC, 2020c). The city of Daegu, one of the major cities of South Korea and center of the outbreak in this country, for example, had witnessed the biggest coronavirus outbreak outside of China, having reported a total of 6,807 cases since the outbreak started there in late February (SMITH, 2020). Now, Daegu reported zero new cases after just a month.

Even though the country is one of the closest neighbors of China, the origins of the contamination in South Korea go beyond that. In March, the number of confirmed cases in South Korea neared 7,400 and many of them have been traced back to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, a fringe Christian group (RASHID, 2020). Apparently, it was believed that a 61-year-old Shincheonji congregant – known as Patient n^o 31 – had infected other worshipers during services.

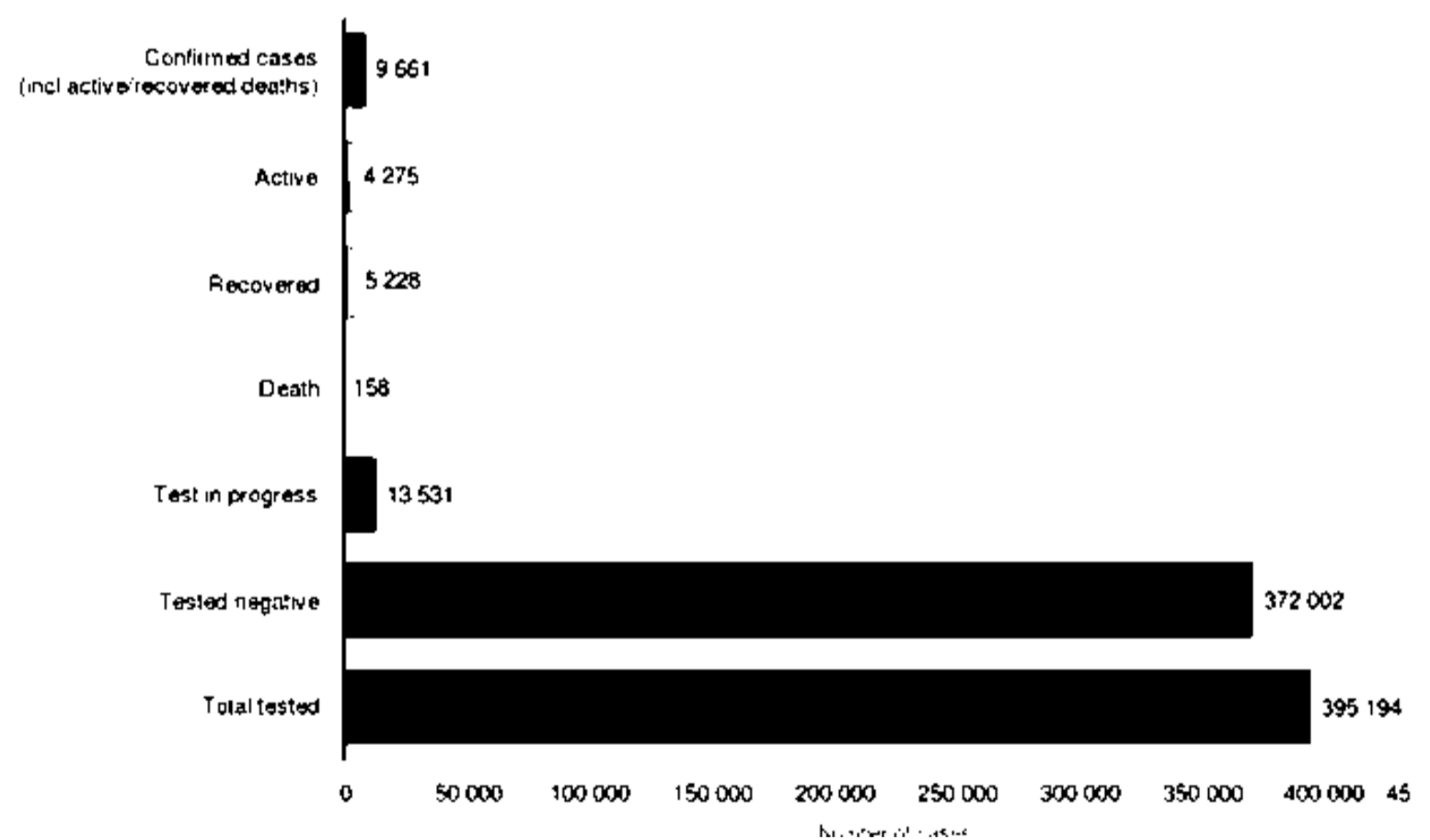
The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 63.5% of all confirmed cases in the country were “related to Shincheonji Church”. Thereafter, Mr. Lee Man-hee, the founder of the Shincheonji Church, was accused of hiding the names of some members as officials tried to track patients before the virus spread (BBC, 2020c).

Another religion-related episode happened in South Korea, where nearly 50 other people got infected with COVID-19 at a church after an official sprayed saltwater into members’ mouths because they thought it would kill the virus (DUNCAN, 2020). An official at the River of Grace Community Church in Gyeonggi Province, near Seoul, used the same spray bottle on multiple churchgoers without disinfecting the nozzle, causing a large number of the 100 or so attendees to be infected, including the church’s pastor and his wife. The South Korean authorities condemned such acts and pressed charges against these churches.

However, while the country faced such upheavals, the fast response allowed South Korea to build influence worldwide. Since the confirmation of its first COVID-19 case in late January, South Korea has shown a determination of facing this public health crisis which appears to be paying off. From a sudden spike in the number of cases to its decision to implement widespread testing, South Korea has shown able to respond quickly and decisively (FLEMING, 2020). According to South Korean Foreign Minister, Ms. Kang Kyung-wha, the rapidity with which COVID-19 took hold in South Korea surprised the authorities. However, the government put immediately into place a series of well-established strategies to stop the spread.

Foreign Minister Kang also affirmed that the Blue House (South Korean Presidential Palace) took an all-government approach. For example, the Prime Minister created a task force of all government ministries, and all regional and city governments. Besides, when one region ran out of hospital beds, the government asked other provinces to open up beds in their hospitals. Another critical factor to deal with the crisis was testing. Kang confirmed that South Korea has tested over 350,000 cases, in which some patients were tested many times before they were released, so they could say they were fully cured (FLEMING, 2020). The following image demonstrates the number of COVID-19 confirmed, recovered and test cases in South Korea up until March.

Figure 11 - Number of coronavirus (COVID-19) confirmed, recovered, and test cases in South Korea (March 30, 2020)



Source: FLEMING (2020)

Having reportedly the virus under control, South Korea even held elections under strict safety measures in mid-April (SHIN, 2020). On 15th April, South Koreans went to polls to elect members of parliament. About 14,000 polling stations were open around the country after disinfection, and voters were required to wear a mask and have a temperature check upon arrival. Anyone whose temperature was higher than 37.5° C was led to a special booth. As of 9 a.m., voter turnout was 8%, about 0.9% points higher than in the last parliamentary election in 2016, according to the National Election Commission (NEC). That excludes nearly 27% of the 44 million registered voters who took part in early voting in the previous weekend. Among them, there were about 2,800 coronavirus patients, for whom the NEC allowed voting by mail and set up special polling stations for early voting. More than 13,000 in self-quarantine have signed up to vote and will be allowed to do so after other voters leave at 6 p.m.

Ever since, South Korea has started to ease its social distancing and lockdown rules (SHIN; YANG, 2020). According to Foreign Minister Kang, the government plans to open schools on 6th April after the announcement of two school openings postponements due to the COVID-19 crisis. “The right to an education is a crucial part of our social values”, said Kang. Also, the South Korean government believes that they cannot deprive South Korean children of their right to learn, so it means that they have to do everything in the next two weeks to maintain the spread at a manageable level (FLEMING, 2020).

Lastly, South Korea did not only control the situation within its territory, but also expanded their relations with the world by exporting of COVID-19 Testing Kits to other countries, such as the United States and Brazil (FERRIER; HWANG, 2020). South Korea sent nearly \$132 million worth of coronavirus diagnostic kits overseas in the first 20 days of April, up significantly from around \$50 million in all of March. These exports have proven to be an effective means to enhance existing bonds and build new relationships, particularly below the official diplomatic level. Other countries are similarly leveraging bottom-up channels and people-to-people ties to win a share of South Korean test kit exports.

Aside from commercial sales, South Korean companies are also donating diagnostic kits, further adding to the country's positive image during the pandemic. Samsung Heavy Industries Nigeria has secured 5,000 test kits from the South Korean government to help with the local response. Similarly, LG Group donated 50,000 kits to the Indonesian government in response to a request from Jakarta. Seoul has stated its intent to donate tests to additional countries, including partners in Africa and the Middle East, based on bilateral relations and partners' ability to tackle the virus on their own. Collectively, these cases represent a new opportunity for more direct, potentially lifesaving outreach to millions of people around the world for South Korea (FERRIER; HWANG, 2020).

Japan

According to Worldometers (2020c), Japan had reported 14,305 positive cases and 455 deaths of COVID-19. Unlike the two previously analyzed cases, Japan is the country that has been facing the greatest level of criticism over its adopted policies against the COVID-19 in the East Asian region.

Although the numbers of both confirmed cases and fatalities indeed remain significantly lower than many of its peer countries in Southeast Asia (SUZUKI, 2020), the Japanese government's latest measures - or the lack of them - received many negative responses from the citizens and the global community.

In late March, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe continued to declare that Japan was not yet in a situation to declare a state of emergency (AL JAZEERA, 2020). Facing calls to do so, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was derided on social media on Thursday for instead offering people cloth masks, pointing to growing frustration with his handling of the crisis (LIES; SIEG, 2020). Abe's offer of free masks - two per household - came the day after experts had warned Japan was on the brink of a medical crisis and a health system collapse as cases surge, especially in Tokyo (BBC, 2020d). The Prime Minister even declared on Wednesday Japan that he was "barely holding the line" in its battle against the virus (DORN, 2020).

The low testing rate in Japan also raised questions from the international community (WINGFIELD-HAYES, 2020). As it seems, Japan is only testing people who are already quite sick. In fact, the official guidelines for doctors say they should only recommend a test if the patient has pneumonia. When asked why the level of testing done is about half of the capacity weeks after the government has started to ramp up its testing, a health ministry official explained it reflects the number of tests doctors are prescribing. Besides that, Keio University in Tokyo conducted a study about COVID-19 tests done on patients admitted for non-COVID related illnesses and procedures. The study found that around 6% of them tested positive for COVID-19 (ICHINO, 2020). According to Professor Kenji Shibuya (Kings College London), from a public health point of view, Japan's refusal to test more widely is incredibly risky (WINGFIELD-HAYES, 2020).

Likewise, only in late March, the Japanese government and International Olympic Committee succumbed to intense pressure from athletes and sporting bodies around the world to delay Tokyo's 2020 Summer Games for a year because of the global outbreak (AL JAZEERA, 2020). Among the Olympics organizers, who had overseen preparations worth over USD 25 billion, and the Japanese and international companies, who have paid more than USD 3.1 billion to make the 2020 Olympics the most heavily sponsored sports event in history, the decision to postpone the Olympics was a difficult choice to make (LEWIS; AHMED, 2020). The Tokyo Metropolitan government estimated that, from the winning of the bid in 2013 to a decade after the games in 2030, the event would give a USD 294 billion boost to the national economy. Beyond that, for Shinzo Abe, Japan's longest-serving Prime Minister, the games offered a potent symbol of national recovery from the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and of his Abenomics program, which consists in "a comprehensive policy package to revive the Japanese economy from two decades of deflation, all while maintaining fiscal discipline" (THE GOVERNMENT OF JAPAN, s.d, pp.1).

According to the average real economic growth analysis in developed countries that have hosted the Olympics since 1992, the actual year of the games delivers only a limited boost in comparison to the profit achieved in the long-term due to investments on infrastructure and other areas. Thus, some may affirm that postponing the games is unlikely to cause serious economic harm in the short term. Mr. Masamichi Adachi, UBS' chief economist in Japan, affirmed that "The concern is the long-term consequences if the games are completely canceled next year, especially given that such a situation would mean the pandemic is not yet under control. [That could] weigh on long-term growth expectations" (LEWIS; AHMED, 2020). Therefore, many observers agree that a postponement is better than a cancellation..

However, most of the economic policy-makers show a different perspective on the situation and argue that it is premature to expect a rescheduled 2021 games to provide any economic boost, as the image down below shows the possible losses of projected 2020 sales to hit Tokyo this year.

Figure 12- The hit to Tokyo from a postponed Olympic Games: Losses as share of projected 2020 sales (%)



Source: LEWIS; AHMED (2020).

Thus, the emphasis of the Japanese government and companies is now on limiting the impacts of the postponement on Japanese economy. For several years, Tokyo has fed the Olympic hype, increasing hotel bookings and in the commercial anticipation of a nation that has, since winning the right to host the games, seen inbound tourism jump from 10 million visitors a year to almost 32 million in 2019 (LEWIS; AHMED, 2020). Now, the Japanese government must focus its efforts on fighting the effects of COVID-19 on its citizens and this may only happen effectively if the government understands that the Olympics is not the priority right now.

For the conclusion, it is important to highlight that, even though most of the countries are focusing their efforts on their domestic level over their international realm, the East Asian countries present closer ties during the current scenario (SILVERBERG, 2020). However, the impacts of COVID-19 in the East Asian relations will probably be measured only after this crisis. Depending on how the world - and the Asian neighbors - will perceive China, which is gaining more relevance in the multilateral forums, and its role on the international chess after COVID-19, the regional power dynamics may change. Also, the vaccine is still to be created. The country (or countries) that eventually develops the cure for this disease will also display a higher level of influence in the international relations. Therefore, defining precise scenarios may be a dangerous exercise but, as the South Korean Foreign Minister Kang affirmed: “It doesn’t matter that my country is stabilizing and coming to grips with this. The world must overcome this together” (FLEMING, 2020).

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