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Security Nexus Perspectives

## FIVE CORONAVIRUS SUCCESS STORIES: DIFFERENT, BUT THE SAME

By **Dr. Virginia Bacay Watson** \*

As of May 12, 2020, at least 200 countries, territories and places have confirmed cases of the coronavirus.<sup>2</sup> Yet only a handful have effectively managed to control the spread of COVID-19. Some of the more notable ones are Germany, New Zealand, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam. Despite their marked differences in territorial and population size, political system, GDP, economic growth rate, and resources, these economies share attributes that have earned them international praise and high marks in coronavirus crisis management. With most parts of the world struggling to manage the pandemic, the experiences of these five success cases provide valuable lessons and insights on four aspects of crisis management: preparation, leadership, communication, and technology use.

### PREPARATION

The governments of the five economies demonstrated a higher-than-normal level of preparation and their leadership articulated a sound understanding of the severity of the virus and the potential societal damage that could materialize with its spread. Germany's decentralized health-care system lent itself to a dense network of well-provisioned hospitals and diagnostic labs. Anticipating the virus spread, the availability of these facilities was integrated into a proactive government policy of partnering with the private sector to help fill in the gaps, e.g., Porsche facilitating the government's procurement contract for mask and protective equipment with manufacturers in China.<sup>3</sup> The government quickly built special clinics for COVID-19 patients and recruited Germany's two university hospitals to help develop the government's "test and treat" strategy for the at-risk groups.

Unlike Germany, Vietnam operated in conditions that could have handicapped the government's COVID-19 response: it shares a border with China, the virus epicenter; it is a developing economy with 96

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/coronavirus-map-confirmed-cases-2020-n1120686>. Accessed May 2, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/local-practical-apolitical-inside-germanys-successful-coronavirus-strategy-11588325403?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>. Accessed May 2, 2020.

million people in a country whose size is only slightly larger than New Mexico; it is not a technologically advanced nation; and a government that lacked resources to manage competing policy priorities. But like all the other success stories, Vietnam reacted quickly and decisively: Hanoi immediately banned all travel to and from China (January 23) after discovering two cases, suspended schools in January even before the record of any infections, and quarantined tens of thousands of people.<sup>4</sup> On January 30, it closed its 870-mile border with China allowing traffic only for conducting essential trade. For the first time, the government mobilized the Vietnam People's Army<sup>5</sup> to assist in crises management and utilized the extensive Communist Party apparatus for contact tracing and communicating distancing policies to the public.<sup>6</sup> The government ramped up production of testing kits in late February, sourcing components from the U.S. and Germany, and began conducting tests early.

In early February, even before New Zealand had a confirmed coronavirus case, its government had put a ban on all travelers from China. And a little over a month later on March 15, New Zealand, not unlike Vietnam (but even more restrictive), enacted one of the most stringent mandatory quarantines in the world for all visitors at the time despite only having just six cases nationwide. This policy was supplemented 10 days later with a complete nationwide lockdown (Level 4) that included a suspension on domestic travel. At the same time, testing was widespread, so the health-care system was not overstretched. This multi-pronged strategy effectively limited the number of cases in the country.

Taiwan's early responses reflected an institutionalization of the lessons it learned from the onslaught of the SARS virus in 2003. Post-SARS, it established an "interlocking set of agencies" designed for early detection of pandemics and bioterrorism, and during the intervening years had quietly stockpiled pandemic 'essentials' such as millions of surgical masks, coveralls, and tens of millions of N95 respirators for the medical staff and the public.<sup>7</sup> Apart from travel bans and quarantines, it took immediate steps to put a cap on the price of face masks and prohibited their export. It activated a response command center and sent a fact-finding team to China on January 12. Similar to Germany, it had set-up COVID-19 testing sites in hospitals and the federal disease control center.

Similar to Taiwan, South Korea had in place a response system that was a legacy from having gone through the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak in 2015 that saw a fatality rate of 20% in the country.<sup>8</sup> After confirming its first COVID-19 case on January 20, the government swiftly activated this response system augmented by establishing a widespread and rigorous coronavirus testing and contact tracing protocol. It was thus able to zero in on the cluster of infections that originated from the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu City, around 150 miles south of the capital Seoul, where emergency measures were swiftly imposed.

All told, the quick, early, and decisive actions of the governments of Germany, New Zealand, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam enabled them to manage the coronavirus spread. A legacy of a robust health-care infrastructure provided a point of departure for assessing additional requirements and priorities in both Germany and Taiwan. A legacy of experience and lessons learned with the MERS and/or SARS

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-04-23/vietnam-eases-coronavirus-lockdown> Accessed May 7, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-wins-first-round-of-coronavirus-fight-deputy-pm-4060132.html> Accessed May 6, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-04-23/vietnam-eases-coronavirus-lockdown> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/30/vietnam-offers-tough-lessons-us-coronavirus/> Accessed May 2, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/04/25/taiwan-was-the-only-nation-with-a-correct-coronavirus-response/> Accessed May 2, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/trust-testing-tracing-south-korea-succeeded-us-stumbled/story?id=70433504> Accessed May 8, 2020.

epidemics allowed South Korea and Taiwan to activate existing mechanisms already in place. The public-supported “go early, go hard”<sup>9</sup> strategies of New Zealand, Taiwan and Vietnam accounted for a low number of cases at the onset. In all of the cases, leaders fully appreciated the severity of the situation and quickly developed responses that were timely and appropriate.

### LEADERSHIP

The officials of the five economies who led their governments’ efforts to manage the pandemic demonstrated traits that made them highly effective as crisis leaders. Their swift and early responses showcased their decisiveness, and that set the tone for their respective government’s approach to the impending crises. Vietnam’s Prime Minister (PM) Nguyen Xuan Phuc was one of the most proactive and among the earliest of the world’s leaders to craft a response, quickly establishing a steering committee to oversee national, provincial and local levels. Under the leadership of Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Vu Duc Dam who was in charge of the Ministry of Health,<sup>10</sup> the committee started planning and mobilizing initiatives as early as December when news of the Wuhan infections began to appear in the news.<sup>11</sup> The Vietnamese government made the tough call of closing Vietnam’s border with China early in the year despite concerns about its effect on relations with China and the economy.<sup>12</sup> Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen reacted quickly as well. On December 31, 2019, when China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) that it had several cases of an unknown pneumonia, Taiwan’s Centers for Disease Control quickly ordered inspections of passengers arriving on flights from Wuhan.<sup>13</sup> Her successful management of Taiwan’s COVID-19 strategy is also in large part credited to her Health Minister, Chen Shih-Chung who became the face of Taiwan’s fight against the pandemic.

The leaders also conveyed the seriousness of the situation and the need for unity by summoning past national experiences or using relatable familial concepts to frame national responses. These narratives underpinned the governments’ strategies as well as defined the role of the public in combating COVID-19. PM Phuc likened Vietnam’s coronavirus fight to the “spring general offensive of 2020.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, during a rare televised speech following the closure of Germany’s schools and the economic shutdown in March, Chancellor Angela Merkel gave an “astonishing statement” for a German leader when she made reference to her country’s darkest hour, declaring that “since the Second World War, there has not been a challenge for our country in which action in a spirit of solidarity on our part was so important.”<sup>15</sup>

South Korean President Moon Jae-in also used the metaphor of war in the country’s approach to combating COVID-19, declaring during a cabinet meeting that South Korea “has entered a war against the infectious disease.”<sup>16</sup> And during one of her informal Facebook live chats talking about the country’s lockdown, New Zealand’s PM Jacinda Ardern introduced “helpful concepts, such as thinking of “the people

<sup>9</sup> Phrase from <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/05/how-new-zealand-brought-new-coronavirus-cases-down-to-zero.html> Accessed May 9, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> since its Minister’s removal last November

<sup>11</sup> <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-wins-first-round-of-coronavirus-fight-deputy-pm-4060132.html> Accessed May 3, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Dr. Alexander Vuving, professor at DKI Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu, Hawaii. May 8, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/what-taiwan-can-teach-world-fighting-coronavirus-n1153826> Accessed May 3, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/30/vietnam-offers-tough-lessons-us-coronavirus/> Accessed May 3, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/angela-merkel-germany-coronavirus-pandemic/610225/> Accessed May 3, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-03-03/south-korea-s-approach-containing-coronavirus-model-rest-world> Accessed May 9, 2020.

[who] will be in your life consistently over this period of time” as your “bubble”<sup>17</sup> and “acting as though you already have COVID-19” toward those outside of your bubble.”<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the pandemic saw the absence of partisan or divisive politics across these five economies, focusing government’s attention on the crisis at hand. The leaders were able to galvanize national unity and cooperation that lent itself to a highly effective execution of strategy. Public welfare and national health security trumped politics.

### COMMUNICATION

Information campaigns were critical components for managing the pandemic in all the five economies. Public anxiety was high because the virus was of a new variety with no known vaccine or cure, and there was scant knowledge and information about it. Moreover, the strong likelihood and negative impact of a complete economic shutdown and the uncertainty of the future stoked public fear and growing panic. In the case of the peoples of South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam, COVID-19 also brought back memories of the SARS and/or MERS outbreaks. To assuage public anxiety, prevent misinformation, and establish early control of the narrative, the governments went on the offensive, exercised a large measure of transparency, and provided the public with accurate and timely data and information using precise and clear language.

Arguably, the fact that Germany, New Zealand, South Korea and Taiwan – all functioning democracies - were transparent come as no surprise; but the strikingly transparent and open approach that Vietnam’s Communist Party adopted in managing the pandemic caught the attention of the international community. There is some precedent: the country built on its own experience of ‘openness’ during the SARS outbreak in 2003. Its strategy then included giving country access to WHO officials, international epidemiologists and pathologists, and collaborating with foreign laboratories for technical assistance.<sup>19</sup> This proved crucial in the country’s successful containment of the outbreak and served as a valuable lesson in managing the coronavirus spread.<sup>20</sup> There is also the ‘China lesson’: Beijing’s secretive response in dealing with the SARS and COVID-19 outbreaks and its cover-up in Wuhan informed Hanoi’s contrary approach, a decision that subsequently paid off, earning the public’s trust and cooperation.<sup>21</sup>

The information campaigns assumed different modalities, with all five governments heavily reliant on social media platforms to inform, advise, remind, support, and reassure their citizens. The resort to the virtual domain was complemented in equal measure by live news updates, press conferences, the use of print media, and the public’s direct access to appropriate government agencies via phone.

While possessing distinct communication styles, the leaders recognized the value of having transparent, regular, and open communications with the public. They played to their strengths to cultivate an environment of trust between their administration and the public. Germany’s Chancellor Merkel, who is a scientist, is often described as “unemotional, analytical and cautious.” Her preference for scientific thinking—a “deliberate probing of each new bit of information...and her cautious consultation with

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/04/coronavirus-the-new-bubble-and-what-it-means-for-new-zealand.html> Accessed May 3, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/04/jacinda-ardern-new-zealand-leadership-coronavirus/610237/> Accessed May, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/05/05/vietnam-took-lead-in-containing-sars/b9b97e91-b325-42f9-98ef-e23da9f257a0/> and <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3079598/coronavirus-whats-behind-vietnams-containment-success> Accessed May 9, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/vietnam-has-reported-no-new-coronavirus-cases-for-12-days-why-20200427-p54nmb.html> Accessed May 9, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/how-vietnam-learned-from-chinas-coronavirus-mistakes/> Accessed May 9, 2020.

experts”—informed her daily decision-making process and her political personality.<sup>22</sup> She put these attributes in full employ during the crises: her people were reassured they received honest information and well-considered facts from their calm and rational Chancellor. She is regarded as a “scientist in chief: the political leader who executed, celebrated, and personified evidence-based thinking when it mattered most.”<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, New Zealand’s PM Ardern is famously known for her empathy. She appeals to her people on an emotional level. Former New Zealand PM Helen Clark observes that Ardern “doesn’t preach at them; she’s standing with them.”<sup>24</sup> A degree-holder in Communications, she introduced Facebook live chats to reach out to her constituency in an informal yet informative way. Her ‘we’re all in this together’ attitude has earned her the trust and support of her people to be able to enforce a Level 4 national lockdown.

Not unlike Chancellor Merkel, Korean President Moon’s political persona projected competence and steady leadership. He also emphasized a science- and technology-based, collective response to the pandemic, an approach that has earned praises from the international community. Ewha Womans University in Seoul professor Leif-Eric Easley also notes that President Moon “has also represented South Korea on the international stage as a positive example of policy planning, implementation and cooperation.”<sup>25</sup>

The public considers Health Minister Chen as the face of Taiwan’s successful management of COVID-19. His “national hero” status is partly attributable to his empathy, sincerity, and highly effective style of communication that has been in full display since January 23 when he began his no-host hour-long daily press briefings (where he also takes calls from the public). He is known for taking the time to write letters to the editors of global news media and injecting press interviews with a dose of humor.<sup>26</sup> His high visibility and accessibility to the public during the outbreak served as a reassuring presence of a government that cared and was on top of the situation.

DPM Vu Duc Dam is also considered in Vietnam’s social media circles as a ‘national hero’ for his skillful management of the crisis,<sup>27</sup> made more remarkable because he held no prior health-related posts before taking charge of the Health Ministry. He is a down-to-earth leader, a persuasive, open and straightforward communicator, observes Dr. Alexander Vuving, Vietnam-watcher and professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii.<sup>28</sup> His leadership style includes blending with the people to listen to their concerns and not rely on reports through the bureaucratic chain. This style is atypical among the Party leadership but something that has given him credibility and a good reputation among the people, according to Vuving.

All the five governments referred to a universally-accepted playbook on effective strategic communications and utilized this accordingly. Unscripted was how leadership would personalize the strategy and the extent to which they will be effective in uniting their people and moving them to action. Without a doubt, in these five cases, the communication style of the leaders was a tremendous factor that contributed to their governments’ success in pandemic management.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/04/angela-merkel-germany-coronavirus-pandemic/610225/>  
Accessed May 3, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/04/jacinda-ardern-new-zealand-leadership-coronavirus/610237/>  
Accessed May 3, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/16/835710358/in-south-korea-success-fighting-the-virus-brings-success-at-the-ballot-box>  
Accessed May 8, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3082504/taiwan-rewards-health-minister-chen-shih-chungs-coronavirus>  
Accessed May 3, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> <https://asiatimes.com/2020/03/vietnam-spins-virus-crisis-to-win-hearts-and-minds/> Accessed May 6, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Personal interview, May 8, 2020.

### TECHNOLOGY

The five economies – with South Korea and Taiwan in the lead – have demonstrated that technological solutions are critical components of any national plan to curb the spread of COVID-19. The timely and comprehensive use of testing and tracing technologies figured prominently as a cause for the governments' successful handling of the pandemic. That contact tracing technologies require citizens to give up personal health information and provide detailed accounts of their travel and interactions<sup>29</sup> is par for the course. Government access to personal data, whether mandated or voluntary, speaks to the seriousness of this crisis.

There is a prevailing assumption of good intent on the part of government – that testing and tracing technologies and their attendant personal information requirements are solely intended to better diagnose and treat infected citizens and help contain the pandemic. This reasoning seems to underpin the public trust that the Vietnamese have put on their Communist government: people have been voluntarily sharing personal health information via a [government-launched app](#) called NCOVI - the top free app in Vietnam since its launch on March 10.<sup>30</sup>

In democratic Germany, New Zealand, South Korea and Taiwan, government access to, and use of, personal data within the context of a pandemic is additionally informed by existing constitutional provisions that safeguard the fundamental liberties and freedoms of their people. There was broad support from the people for the test and trace protocol not only because the public's welfare and health security were at stake but also because citizens know there are legal statutes on data privacy that protect their rights.

The normative constructs that inform the governance of a particular technology are derived from the intent of its creators and users. In other words, technologies have ethics. The timely and widespread employment of testing and tracing technologies saved countless lives and help limit the spread of COVID-19. But the potential of these technologies to do harm exists in equal measure. Massive amounts of personal data are now in the hands of five governments. Post-COVID-19 will see if the people's trust has been well-placed.

### CONCLUSION

Despite their differences, Germany, New Zealand, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam managed the COVID-19 pandemic in similar fashion. They demonstrated that the combination of political will, public trust, and a united front are 'must-haves' to be able to overcome the challenges of a national crisis. This triad of factors underpinned their high level of preparation, elevated political leadership, excellent communications and the responsible employment of technology. Left unsaid but equally important were the organizing principles of their national responses: courage, resilience, empathy, and cooperation.

*The views expressed in these articles are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.*  
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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/vietnams-low-cost-covid-19-strategy/> Accessed May 9, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/vietnams-low-cost-covid-19-strategy/> Accessed May 3, 2020.