



Building International Cooperation in Infection Control Measures: The Role of Japanese Diplomacy as We Enter the Post-Coronavirus World

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People have pointed out the lack of international cooperation in the response to COVID-19, said to be the greatest ordeal of the postwar period. At the General Meeting of the WHO on May 18, 2020, China announced that it would donate the large sum of 2 billion dollars in response to COVID-19, while the United States criticized the WHO for being “pro-Chinese,” thus making the meeting a stage for US–China conflict. At the time of writing this article (June 1, 2020), there is still no clear prospect for international cooperation in infection control measures. In this paper, I consider how Japanese diplomacy can contribute to the building of such international cooperation.



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The shortage of masks, protective gear, artificial respirators, and other medical supplies is emblematic of how international cooperation is falling behind in this task of saving lives. The WTO and the WHO issued a joint statement in April, strongly urging governments across the world to secure equal access to healthcare technologies as well as an open and transparent procurement system. However, they did not address the scramble for medical resources among the countries. As pointed out by Professor Suzuki Kazuto at Hokkaido University, we need to build international cooperation through which governments can loan each other medical resources if we want to resolve the market failure that is the scramble for medical resources.

In the cases of SARS and Ebola hemorrhagic fever (EHF), a functional system for cooperation among specialists has played an important role, coordinated by the WHO. However, when it comes to COVID-19, the WHO surely lacks the unifying force to change the behavior of the countries scrambling for medical resources. This is because the conflict between the United States and China has spread to the WHO and its member states do not even share a will to support the organization. Even more troublesome is that the US–China conflict over COVID-19 has an element of deepening dispute about which political system is superior. The United States criticizes the Chinese political system for causing the pandemic by covering it up at an early stage of its spread. In response, China actively uses its medical supplies as a diplomatic resource while urging others to be wary of democracy by emphasizing the strengths of an authoritarian system that can force society to adopt powerful infection control measures. That is, in a situation where

the world can expect strong leadership from neither the United States nor China, we are faced with the problem of how to realize international cooperation in our COVID-19 responses.

As a country with strong ties to both the United States and China, Japan plays no small role in the building of international cooperation in the G-Zero era. Japan maintains a good relationship with the United States under the Trump Administration, and both the Japanese and American people are highly supportive of the Japan–US Alliance. The momentum of improving Japan–China relations is also continuing in the COVID-19 response. Moreover, together with the WHO, Japan has advocated the importance of Universal Health Coverage (UHC), through which investment into healthcare contributes to socioeconomic prosperity, to the international community. An article in the *Washington Post*, dated December 12, 2019 and jointly signed by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the WHO, shows Japan’s role in trying to connect the United States and the WHO. Japan is working with both the United States and China, but is also in a position to support the WHO and contribute to the building of a system for international cooperation in infection control measures.

The Trump Administration tends to view international cooperation lightly and it is suddenly becoming increasingly realistic that the United States will leave the WHO, just like it withdrew from the Paris Agreement and the TPP. Japan’s role here is to maintain American involvement in international healthcare cooperation, just like when Japan kept the United States in the free trade sphere by putting together the Japan–US Trade Agreement after the exit from the TPP. To do this, Japan will probably promote international cooperation under the G7 framework and promote the WHO reforms by collaborating with the EU and Australia. At the same time, since there can be no WHO reforms without taking into consideration the role of China after its announcement of huge monetary support, Japan will need to engage in a frank discussion about those WHO reforms with China as well.

Japan’s role vis-à-vis China will be to support a shift in Chinese diplomacy toward international cooperation on infectious diseases beyond differences in political systems. To its people, the Chinese government had emphasized the failure of the Western countries as the infection spreads there and argues for the superiority of the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in successfully subduing the disease. This Chinese propaganda is evidence that the CCP is keenly feeling Chinese society’s criticism of the early response to COVID-19. However, even if China applies this logic for domestic consumption to its public diplomacy, that will simply make democratic countries suspicious of China’s medical supply support and huge donation to the WHO. At the National People’s Congress held from May 22 to 28, the Chinese government refrained from clamming that one-party rule is superior to democracy by putting stress on the importance of international cooperation. Japan will need to welcome this change and support an honorable Chinese withdrawal from ideological conflict.

Japan will have to pursue promotion of international cooperation within the framework of democratic countries utilizing G7 meetings, and at the same time realize international cooperation on infectious diseases beyond differences in political systems together with China. If the CCP can have an experience of gaining trust at home and internationally without making the democratic countries suspicious, this will help convince them of the cost of China intensifying the ideological conflict widely inside the country. It goes without saying that Chinese support of international cooperation in infection control measures will benefit not just China; the international community will also benefit from active cooperation with China, which possesses medical expertise from its COVID-19 response. Japan needs to promote international cooperation with democratic countries as well as support China to fulfill China's responsibility to the international society.

To do so, the regional cooperation in infection control measures within the frameworks of ASEAN+3 and Japan–China–ROK trilateral cooperation are sure to become a good platform. ASEAN+3 was established because of COVID-19, its member states affirming the important need to stockpile and secure important medical supplies. More than half of the world's masks are produced in China, while Malaysia has a big share in the production of medical gloves. This regional cooperation framework, which involves member states that are production centers for medical supplies, has the potential to generate international cooperation for the sharing of medical supplies. Japan's role in establishing measures for COVID-19 within these frameworks is creating “free and open” international cooperation.

Japan–China–ROK trilateral relations tend to be highlighted for the political friction, but the three countries have more than ten years of experience of infection control cooperation. Following the global spread of SARS, the Japanese National Institute of Infectious Diseases, the Chinese CDC and the Korean CDC have held the “Japan–China–Korea Forum on Communicable Disease Control and Prevention” annually since 2007. In the same way, Japan, China and South Korea have agreed to hold a meeting of the ministers of their healthcare authorities in response to the spread of COVID-19. This will likely allow them to share their experiences: China's medical expertise on COVID-19, South Korea's excellent testing system and disease control through isolation, and Japan's epidemic control of the *Diamond Princess*. It is necessary to discuss the sustainability of measures against COVID-19 as a common agenda of Japan–China–ROK trilateral cooperation. China emphasizes that it defeated the disease through powerful social control, but it is not possible to ignore the effect of the lockdown in Wuhan on the stability of Chinese society. Here, the cases of South Korea and Japan, who kept down the number of infected without a lockdown, are important for China's future infection control measures. Japan's future measures also need to honestly appreciate the success of South Korea in making possible a large-scale testing system based on experiences of SARS and MERS. The Japan–

China–ROK Trilateral Summit, hosted by South Korea, is planned for 2020, and I hope to see a lively and multifaceted discussion on COVID-19 responses that involves experts in a variety of fields from the three countries.

The post-coronavirus world will not be governed by the US–China relationship alone. Rather, Japan’s diplomacy can bridge the distance between the United States and China through the WHO and frameworks for regional cooperation, and is presented with an opportunity to contribute to the building of international cooperation in infection control measures.

Translated from an original article in Japanese written for Discuss Japan. [June 2020]

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