

# My Vision for the Japan-U.S. Alliance After COVID-19

By: General Shigeru Iwasaki

## The Origin of the New Virus

When did this virus start infecting people? That has yet to be precisely determined, but at present, it seems the infection started sometime between November and December of 2019. Initially, China reported that only animal-to-human transmission was possible and not human-to-human transmission, but when we examine the scope of the infection, the latter has clearly become undeniable. If there is no human-to-human transmission then containment of the infection can be relatively easy, but containment becomes incredibly difficult once human-to-human infection occurs due to the mobility of our modern society. Due to advances in technology, humans can almost cross the world in as little as 12 hours. Tracing a disease that spans oceans and continents remains an insurmountable burden.

The Chinese government issued a "strict alert" all over China on January 20 and carried out a full-scale blockade of Wuhan on January 23. The major feature of this virus has been that it can present as asymptomatic in many patients which may cause them to unknowingly infect others, further complicating control or monitoring of the situation. Many Wuhan residents who had no symptoms after being infected then traveled to places outside of Hubei Province, unaware of any problems before the alert was issued. During the eight hours between Beijing's decision to blockade Wuhan and the actual implementation of that policy, many residents also escaped Wuhan to elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Some might have traveled outside China to all over the world, unwittingly carrying the virus. Mobility of asymptomatic carriers has been considered a major cause of the global pandemic.

After the blockade was put in place, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Adhanom, even went on record saying that he respected the Chinese government's swift policy response to the virus. Similarly, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres echoed those sentiments in his public briefings. However, shortly after that, on January 30, the WHO ended up announcing a global state of emergency. This is a situation in which the views and judgement of the WHO must be called into question.

I cannot tell if it was deliberate information manipulation or not, but the initial numbers of infected and dead announced by the Chinese government were significantly lower than the actual numbers reported later.<sup>2</sup> Due to those inaccurate numbers, infectious medicine specialists in countries around the world asserted that although the virus was a new strain, its mortality rate was much lower than the seasonal flu, even urging the public to not be afraid. This kind of delay in understanding the actual situation on the ground in countries around the world, and the lack of a sense of urgency for the health crisis may have also been contributing causes to the spread of the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Scissors, "Estimating the True Number of China's COVID-19 Cases," (American Enterprise Institute, April 7, 2020), <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/estimating-the-true-number-of-chinas-covid-19-cases/>

<sup>2</sup> Nick Wadhams, Jennifer Jacobs, and Bloomberg, "China Intentionally under-Reported Total Coronavirus Cases and Deaths, U.S. Intelligence Says," (Fortune, April 2, 2020), <https://fortune.com/2020/04/01/china-coronavirus-cases-deaths-total-under-report-cover-up-covid-19/>

## **Different Responses to COVID-19 Around the World**

Looking at the responses to COVID-19 in different countries, I have noticed that every country has very different approaches to crisis management. The international community should carefully evaluate whether the results of each national response have been accidental or inevitable after the pandemic has dissipated. However, while success can be measured in different ways, I view Taiwan, Germany, and South Korea as countries, which have successfully responded to the virus.

First of all, the number of cases and deaths related to COVID-19 have been considerably lower in Taiwan than in other countries. Even when factoring in relative population size, the number of actual cases or fatalities has remained at a low level in Taiwan. Coincidentally, I had the opportunity to visit Taiwan in mid-January, before COVID-19 was causing disruptions around the world. One of my best friends, General Shen Yi-ming, served as the Chief of the General Staff of Taiwan's armed forces. Unfortunately, he passed away on January 2 in a helicopter crash accident during a mission to visit troops in the New Year. I went to Taiwan to participate in his funeral. At the time, based on our limited understanding of the peculiar 'pneumonia' that started in Wuhan just a month before, we held a meeting to discuss countermeasures which included requesting Chinese visitors living in Taiwan to return to the mainland.

Taiwan was exiled from the WHO because of China's coercive "One China" policy. It has therefore been difficult for Taiwan during past outbreaks to obtain necessary information from the WHO. This has promoted a sense of crisis regarding infectious diseases and likely contributed to why Taiwan swiftly enacted precautionary measures. The government has clearly institutionalized the lessons it learned from previous outbreaks of Dengue fever, SARS, and MERS. Incidentally, although it is not a member, Taiwan shares all of the medical information it gathers with the various member states of the WHO in an honorable effort to help curb the spread of global pandemics.

Although Germany was late in its initial response, Chancellor Angela Merkel's strong leadership has helped her avoid an explosion of new cases despite the fact that Germany is close to virus hotspots like Italy and France. With her background as a scientist and the open candor that Germans expect and respect from their Chancellor, Merkel has managed to implement social distancing policies with little pushback from the public. These measures were undertaken in typical German fashion - quickly and efficiently.

In the case of South Korea, the response was haphazard at first and at one point it looked like the government might have trouble controlling the outbreak at a megachurch in Daegu. However, upon review of the policies implemented to stop the spread of SARS and MERS, South Korea established virus testing protocols in an extremely short period of time and subsequently managed to suppress additional outbreaks. As a result, the approval rating of President Moon has skyrocketed, and in the national elections on April 15th, the ruling coalition of the Democratic Party exceeded expectations and achieved a record-setting legislative majority.

Unfortunately, other than Taiwan, Germany, and South Korea, there are no other countries that have been as successful in stopping the spread of the COVID-19.

## **The Importance of a National Security Viewpoint**

I feel that many national responses may be insufficient from a security perspective. In other words, each country is working hard to reduce the number of infections and fatalities occurring at the

moment, but they have not taken sufficient measures to deal with the pandemic from the viewpoint of national security.

So far, the measures taken by countries have been the same they would enact normally. To put it differently, countries have been addressing the pandemic with organizations and procedures designed for peaceful circumstances. As a result, the initial responses to the virus by most countries were largely ineffective as reflected by the extraordinarily high number of infected and dead. Some people think that these extreme impacts were inevitable when faced with a pandemic, but I think it was caused by the fact that they did not have a crisis management mindset.

The ironclad rules of crisis management are: (1) always make efforts to collect information; (2) when an abnormality is detected, assume the worst-case scenario and take all possible relief measures; and (3) deal with the crisis according to the developing situation on the ground. Unfortunately, although every country has its own way of responding, these rules were only followed perfectly in Taiwan.

### **Democracies Versus Authoritarian States**

In democratic nations like Japan and the United States, it is essential to establish a national system, consisting of laws, regulations, and institutional arrangements that govern crisis management in advance. Moreover, the leadership of presidents and prime ministers remains extremely important during crisis situations. Even if a national system is in place, it is impossible to take effective measures if national leadership makes a wrong decision. Similarly, regardless of how effective a leader is, they cannot act efficiently without pre-established crisis management institutions or legislation.

On the other hand, in authoritarian states, a national leader can introduce measures at their leisure and respond to crises more quickly. As COVID-19 infections rapidly rose not only in Wuhan but throughout the country during February and March, China dispatched its fleet with new destroyers near Hawai'i. On its return voyage, the fleet harassed the U.S. Navy P-8 that was surveilling them with a laser in an attempt to intimidate or disorient the pilot. In early April, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel collided with a Vietnamese fishing boat, sank it, and fled the scene.<sup>3</sup> In mid-April, China publicly announced the formation of two new administrative districts, namely Xisha and Nansha, in the South China Sea, as if the Paracel and Spratly Islands were Chinese territory.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Russia already surpassing China in coronavirus cases, they have continued to conduct their 'usual reconnaissance flights' near Alaska, the North Sea, and around Japan. Additionally, Russia has carried out anti-satellite weapons tests. Moreover, Russian Su-35 aircraft relentlessly harassed U.S. Navy P-8's in the Mediterranean last month.<sup>5</sup> North Korea launched rocket-propelled projectiles

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<sup>3</sup> Darryl Coote, "Pentagon Voices Concern over China's Sinking of Vietnamese Fishing Boat" (UPI, April 10, 2020), [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/US/2020/04/09/Pentagon-voices-concern-over-Chinas-sinking-of-Vietnamese-fishing-boat/2961586483012/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2020/04/09/Pentagon-voices-concern-over-Chinas-sinking-of-Vietnamese-fishing-boat/2961586483012/)

<sup>4</sup> Zachary Haver, "Sansha and the Expansion of China's South China Sea Administration," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, (Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 12, 2020), <https://amti.csis.org/sansha-and-the-expansion-of-chinas-south-china-sea-administration/>

<sup>5</sup> Sam LaGrone, "Russian Su-35 Fighter Makes 'Irresponsible' Intercept of Navy P-8A Over Mediterranean," (USNI News, June 4, 2020), <https://news.usni.org/2019/06/04/russian-su-35-fighter-makes-irresponsible-intercept-of-navy-p-8a-over-mediterranean>

into the Sea of Japan five times between March and April, while also taking steps to improve its weapon capabilities.<sup>6</sup>

In short, despite the severe difficulties facing China, Russia, and North Korea arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, all three of these authoritarian powers have continued to try to take advantage of the chaos facing the United States and its allies, which remain preoccupied with the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Centrality of the Japan-U.S. Security Alliance**

I am a little concerned with the situation in the United States. The number of COVID-19 cases has passed 1 million and the number of deaths has surpassed 110,000 already exceeding the number of casualties from the Korean War and the Vietnam War combined.

This situation has clearly affected the U.S. military. In particular, the U.S. Navy is facing a serious challenge following the situation with the USS Theodore Roosevelt which was forced to berth in Guam due to a large number of COVID-19 cases. Furthermore, four out of eleven aircraft carriers have suffered COVID-19 outbreaks. Secretary of Defense Esper announced that these outbreaks would not affect the deterrence of the United States. However, I must express my apprehension about the deterrent capabilities of the United States, when several aircraft carriers are affected by the virus at the same time. The United State has also canceled or postponed major joint training exercises with Japan and South Korea. I wonder whether such cancelations or postponements will lead to the deterioration of coordination and defense capabilities among the United States and its allies.

I am concerned with the situation on the Korean Peninsula as well. There have been reports of the mysterious disappearance and reappearance of Kim Jong-Un. If there is a leadership change on the horizon, then North Korea will become even more unstable. In the meantime, South Korea's President Moon Jae-in recently received a landslide victory in the national elections. As a result, I am concerned Moon might promote relations with North Korea and China more aggressively, while keeping the United States at arm's length.

As for China, the official account of the People's Liberation Army's Eastern Theater Command issued a message on April 15 saying, "Cast away illusions and prepare for struggle."<sup>7</sup> The message reminds me of Mao Zedong's treatise which was published on the eve of the construction of a communist China. On the same day, the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council of China published a paper on its official website about "reunification by force" with Taiwan. China is a country that has taken advantage of democratic states, while they are occupied with other issues, in order to push aspects of its own agenda and deliver a fait accompli to its adversaries. The South China Sea is a prime example.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Maresca, "North Korea fires missiles ahead of founder's birthday," (UPI, April 14, 2020), [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2020/04/14/North-Korea-fires-missiles-ahead-of-founders-birthday/6301586846024/?ur3=1](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2020/04/14/North-Korea-fires-missiles-ahead-of-founders-birthday/6301586846024/?ur3=1)

<sup>7</sup> Drew Thompson, "China Is Still Wary of Invading Taiwan," (Foreign Policy, May 11, 2020), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/11/china-taiwan-reunification-invasion-coronavirus-pandemic/>

It is no exaggeration to say that the security environment surrounding the United States and its allies is more dangerous than ever before. Unfortunately, there is sufficient doubt that the United States alone can provide an adequate response to the current situation. I believe that cooperation with other democratic states, which share the same values as the United States and Japan, such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and France, has become essential at this time. I am convinced that the most important relationship in this respect remains the Japan-U.S. alliance. The United States and Japan must play a central role in responding to these global challenges and adversarial threats.

### **Recommendations**

I would like to present the following recommendations for the Japan-U.S. alliance.

#### Strengthening Early Warning and Surveillance

- The United States and Japan should collect information and administer early warning systems much more precisely, and with the utmost caution and discretion. We should take steps to improve our surveillance capabilities and raise quality of our intelligence reporting. While the United States belongs to many intelligence sharing agreements, Japan must often rely on the United States to act as its hub for information sharing. This reduces the ability of Japan and other allies to respond efficiently in operations against adversaries.
  
- The United States and Japan should prevent their adversaries from delivering a *fait accompli* by immediately responding to unusual or revisionist behavior. This is particularly true in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. In order to prevent further militarization of the East China Sea and the South China Sea as well as to deter provocative actions by China, North Korea, and Russia, the alliance should establish procedures to improve response times against provocations. Part of this plan includes increased surveillance of peculiar behavior and improving military readiness on both sides of the alliance.

The above two points are the immediate measures we can implement at this time but, if we consider the chaos of the global economic downturn, there may be situations in which the United States and Japan will find it difficult to act on their own. Therefore, they should build cooperative systems with like-minded partners such as Australia, India, and European states like the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. At the same time, it is necessary to establish a similar system with Taiwan.

#### Strengthening Japan-US Relations After COVID-19

From the end of 2018 to the beginning of last year, the United States completely reviewed its National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and National Military Strategy. From last year to the beginning of this year, each service branch has announced its own plans for future reforms. The U.S. military has embarked on fundamental changes, which are unlike anything seen before. Whereas, Japan has been improving our defense capabilities based on the new National Defense Program Guidelines and the new Medium-Term Defense Plan, which were formulated at the end of 2018. However, unfortunately, both the United States and Japan did not necessarily prepare to deal with infectious diseases. I think that, once again, our two countries should analyze future challenges in the post COVID-19 world and further evolve our alliance to meet these new challenges.

- The United States and Japan should pay careful attention to future threat analysis, sharing critical information, improving interoperability and establishing concrete cooperative systems in the fields of space, cyberspace, and electromagnetic warfare.

○ Japan should urgently build a crisis management system. This will require a dramatic overhaul of existing security policies, the creation of legislation to deal with states of emergency, the enhancement of the National Security Council, and the potential establishment of a national public health organization like the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Additionally, Japan should launch a comprehensive review of all plans and policy measures from the perspective of national security including topics like food and energy security, or even examining the degree our country depends on China in the framework of the alliance with the United States.

○ Japan should work closely with the United States regarding Taiwan, as China continuously increases pressure to Taiwan. While the United States has increasingly shown support to Taiwan in terms of both security and diplomacy in recent years, Japan has been hesitant to do so because of the intention to improve its relationship with China. While Japan needs to carefully manage its relationship with China, Japan should also adopt a policy to increase its security and diplomatic support of Taiwan in partnership with the United States.

COVID-19 has exhibited both the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of all the systems present in the Japan-U.S. alliance. Japan has drastically altered its perspectives on critical security areas following the “Great East Japan Earthquake and Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant Accident” in March 2011. However, there are many areas where reforms are not necessarily adequate. COVID-19 is a global crisis that is completely different from the domestic disaster nine years ago. The United States and Japan, together with our like-minded friends, should stabilize the situation quickly by consolidating expertise and fully begin to prepare for future challenges.

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