Republic of Korea and COVID-19: Gleaning governance lessons from a unique approach

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The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered social, political, and economic dislocation all over the world. Thousands of people have died. The socio-economic and political spillovers will continue to take a toll on countries around the world, with collective despair, escalating tensions, and even possible conflicts emerging in years to come. When the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases peaked for the first time in late February and early March 2020, the Republic of Korea (ROK) seemed to be a global hot spot. However, this initial picture changed quickly. In a world struggling to manage both the pandemic and its spillover effects— with a population of around 51 million people and only about 320 dead eight months after the pandemic started— —the Republic of Korea stands out in the global landscape of pandemic management and SDG16+ leadership. The country is, of course, not immune from COVID-19 waves and containment risks. However, its fundamental approach seems to be quite effective from a global perspective. Indeed, state capacity, trust, and leadership seem to be more powerful crisis management tools than specific governance models that went hand in hand with stockpiles of equipment. Interestingly, ROK's COVID-19 management capacity is also contributing significantly to the country's soft power.

> "Over the last 2 months, Korea has been at the center of the COVID-19 challenge. The time is never right for complacency, yet preemptive and transparent quarantine measures, combined with the public's voluntary and democratic participation in such efforts, are bringing gradual stability."
>
> – President Moon Jae-in, ROK

At a glance: COVID-19 in the Republic of Korea

The first case of COVID-19 in the country was confirmed on January 20th, 2020, making ROK one of the first states to be affected by the pandemic. With the mass infection related to gathering at "Shincheonji Church of Jesus" in the city of Daegu on February 23rd, the crisis escalated. Later on, small-scale cluster infections occurred in nursing homes and education facilities in March, and a new upsurge in August.

Half of the 320 deaths took place within the first two months of the outbreak with relative slowing of infections over the past period from April onward, i.e. with around 40 new cases on average per day in that later period. Altogether by the end of August, there were almost 20,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases. A spike with a three-digit increase per day in new cases in August, linked mostly to a church in Seoul, has sparked concerns about a wider outbreak because of challenges related to the traceability of the new cases. Yet with just over five people killed in one million inhabitants, ROK is doing well compared to other countries. Considering that there was no comprehensive lockdown akin to countries like Spain and South Africa, it compares extraordinary well.

Response management

The government never implemented a full lockdown in response to COVID-19 but instead decided to fight the virus aggressively through an epidemiological approach with wide diagnostic testing and isolation of contacts, while encouraging people´s cooperation to adhere to social distancing based on their trust in the authorities.

The management of the response was put in place extremely quickly based on a finely networked balance between national and subnational governments.

> "Sharing information and cooperating with one another demonstrate a power that no virus will ever have — a power that only humans possess"
>
> – President Moon, May 18, 2020

Since raising the national infectious disease crisis level to "serious" in February, the South Korean government assembled a Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters, headed by the Prime Minister to double down on a government-wide response against COVID-19. The Korea Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (KCDC) became the disease headquarters and spearheaded the response with backing and assistance from the Minister of Health and Welfare and the Minister of Interior and Safety, providing assistance and coordination between levels of governments. Each local government formed its own headquarters, supported by the central government where they faced capacity shortages.[1] Seoul, one of the most densely populated cities in the world also responded quickly with a "pause order" and "rapid response teams", as well as innovative selective care centers such as drive- and walk-through testing sites.

A strengthening of the health system was deemed important, by bolstering the medical system´s capacity, increasing funding, and ensuring good cooperation between its public and private arms. The government responded quickly with treatment centers, disease prevention, and control strategies including the introduction of government-rationed masks and social distancing rules. Masks and sanitizers were made available on public transport soon after the first patient was confirmed. Emergency text messages were sent out informing people of new cases and their itineraries, made possible based on the government's access to credit card and mobile phone data, as well as CCTV footage. Places visited by infected people were temporarily closed, disinfected, and "clean zone" stickers were put up. The government also opened support centers for infected people with mild symptoms. International travelers were required to self-isolate for two weeks upon arrival. All visitors also had to undergo a COVID-19 test and were required to install and use a safety protection app registering their temperature, and other health conditions.

From the very beginning, the main elements of the management model were organized around detection, containment, and treatment or what became known as the three Ts: "Testing, Tracing, Treating". The Republic of Korea turned to a network of public and private laboratories to develop tests. The scaling up of testing was made possible through the expansion of screening clinics and new innovative testing facilities. Free COVID-19 health care services reduced potential resistance of testing and treatment. As of mid-March, there were more than 600 screening clinics operated by public health care centers and hospitals, and daily testing capacity was increased from 3,000 at the end of February, to 15,000 in March. By mid-August around 1.7 million tests had been carried out.

The economic spillover of the pandemic has been, and will continue to be, a hardship for millions of people. ROK has among the highest rate of household debt in the world, something that has substantially increased since the pandemic hit. ROK was among the first to develop an emergency disaster relief fund providing emergency assistance to millions of people, while also extending loans and credit for small- and medium-sized businesses, survivor funds for self-employed, etc. The country rolled out a stimulus package worth 270 trillion Korean Won, equivalent to approximately $210 billion USD, and took various measures to support vulnerable groups (Ham 2020). The Government of Seoul decided in March to provide emergency livelihood allowances to households making less than 100% of median income. Around 1.2 million households were expected to be included. The allowance varies between $233 and $389 USD, depending on the number of households' members, and is to be provided in the form of either community gift certificates or prepaid cards, in order to support the local economy. Even low-income foreign residents living in Seoul might be eligible to receive COVID-19 cash relief. The government also ensured that undocumented immigrants could get tested and treated without being reported or deported. Additionally, it increased its investment in legal aid in order to help people deal with justice problems caused by the pandemic.

Half of workers in the Republic of Korea have no employment insurance. They are either self-employed, working in the informal sector or in similar arrangements. Hence, the work also started to set in motion discussions for a universal employment insurance covering all workers. Flexible working hours and working from home was also encouraged. The lack of lockdown was exchanged with a "no-contact" society, and a system built up to control and combat the virus while maintaining daily life. Last, but not the least, the designed Korean New Deal was unveiled to reshape the economy and to work on social consequences in the aftermath of the pandemic (see below).

Citizens engagement is an important element of the response system set-up. While some countries have hesitated to reveal their virus outbreaks and numbers, ROK has shared information widely as part of a strategy of openness, transparency, participation, and democracy. The pandemic has not resulted in shrinking civic space. Public institutions were specifically working on approaches to prevent possible corruption risks related to the pandemic. Epidemiological information relevant to contract tracing has been communicated to the public and shared in transparent ways. In Seoul, for example, all information regarding infections, infector's travel logs, etc., together with the city´s countermeasures is contained and updated on separate website for everyone to access. Press conferences are streamed live (and are available in sign language). All in all, the belief that transparency is the best way to fight the pandemic is shared widely.

What can the world learn – state capacity, trust and leadership

The Republic of Korea's COVID-19 response has become a global point of reference for epidemic prevention models. A key South Korean principle is that, "an excessive, rigorous response," is better than a late and slow response. Some of the practices were innovative such as drive-through testing, as well as the use of information and communications technology (ICT). Pan-governmental cooperation at national, provincial, and city levels also caught a lot of attention. Yet, all in all, the South Korean model supports Francis Fukuyama´s (2020) point that it is first and foremost state capacity, people´s trust, and leadership that determines the success of pandemic and crisis management.

Such models often grow out of learning and **historical experience** did indeed **provide learning for short-term crisis response** in the Republic of Korea**.** In 2015, South Korea became heavily affected by the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).[2] It hit the country hard despite a robust public health system with universal health care coverage which had been in place since 1989, and led to 186 laboratory-confirmed cases and 38

deaths. The country also lost an estimated $2.6 billion USD in tourism revenues while it spent almost $1 billion USD on response activities. A strong feeling of fear was left in the collective memory of the society. ROK made a number of policy reforms in the following years to improve its capacity for pandemic preparedness and response. With the MERS experience in clear memory, the ROK government pushed for a quick and aggressive crisis management strategy when confronted with COVID-19. Its background with MERS also provided broad support amongst the public and increased readiness among people to comply with government regulations, including the early use of masks.[3]

The developmental approach in ROK was based for a long period of time on its authoritarian regime and military rule (which lasted until 1987/1988), and marred by a legacy of massive violations of human rights. At the same time two underlying **fundamental long-term historic factors** (Park 2019; Chang 2019; Yi / Mkandawire 2014) seem important in understanding the Republic of Korea's proactive and relatively successful COVID-19 crisis management response: one is the historic role of **strong government leadership** with a **regulatory state**, and a government proactively planning the development of the country; and two, the role of effective **social protection and mobilization**. While still subject to historical debate, both factors have contributed to some of the major reforms that have been implemented in South Korea's economic developments and industrialization as well as education system, citizens' empowerment, and governmental reforms (e.g. in terms of transparency and accountability of the public sector). That inherited state effectiveness and capacity probably helped produce the high number of public services developed for COVID-19 assistance (like rapidly installed COVID-19 test centers, specific services provided by the national police to fight COVID-19 related "fake news", etc.) whilst important effective social mobilization produced solidarity and trust.

A crucial dimension of the fight against the pandemic is the **high level of trust between the government**, and **the main public actors and institutions on the one hand, and citizens, on the other hand.** Trust is generally regarded as a fundamental requirement for developing and prosperous countries. However, the concept of "trust" is complex.[4] Too little trust in public actors has triggered and accelerated protests around the world over recent years, and may in some countries has contributed to polarization and/or the rise of populism. Populism is to a large extent a contradiction to a trustworthy relationship between governments (and other public actors/institutions) and a society or parts of the society. An anti-scientific world view is an inherent part of populism. There are clear indications that a shortage of a facts and evidence-base in policy- and decision-making was a main accelerator of the COVID-19 crisis in many countries.[5]

The Republic of Korea is not immune from political controversies, including the government's approach to fighting the pandemic.[6] There have been frequent and controversial debates about, for instance, the border regime during COVID-19, the approach to education during the pandemic (e.g. online and hybrid learning options), and issues related to COVID-19 "fake news", all while large parts of the population have expressed support for the fundamental principles of the government´s management. The overall relationship is dominated by high trust in public institutions. Research shows that trust in central and local governments in South Korea improved substantially during the first half of 2020; whereas trust in the judiciary, the press, and religious organizations sharply decreased. An increase in trust in the central and local governments was associated with responses to COVID-19. Data shows that the majority of South Koreans do not just think that the country managed the pandemic well, but that they are also above average compared to a group of 14 high-income countries in total.

Social Trust in South Korea (10 –point scale)

Domain ＼ Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Korean society	5.49	5.38	5.44	5.35	6.18
Korean People	5.74	5.64	5.71	5.57	6.05
Central government	4.81	5.08	5.05	4.73	5.71
Local government	5.07	5.23	4.98	4.84	5.45
Congress	3.82	4.06	3.66	3.21	3.37
Judicature	5.09	4.90	4.82	4.44	3.95
Private company	5.28	5.37	5.16	4.88	4.85
Press	5.04	5.09	4.83	4.36	3.75
Civic group	5.46	5.48	5.24	4.73	4.63
Religious organization	5.25	5.44	4.80	4.62	2.89
N (Total number)	2000	2000	2010	1500	1011

Source: Elsevier Public Health Emergency Collection (2020) [7]

How people think their country has handled COVID-19

(% who say their own country has done a good / bad job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak)
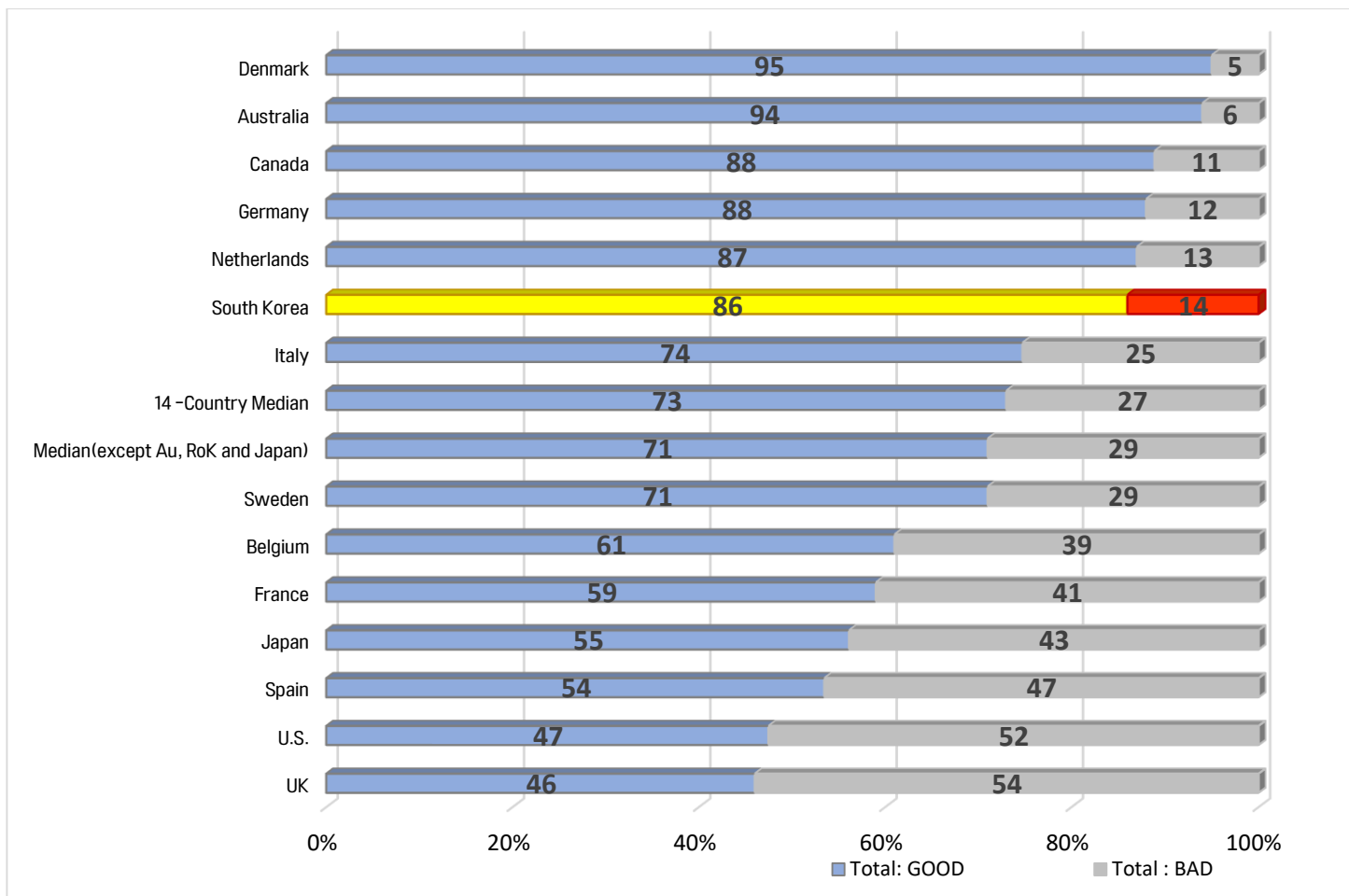
Source: Most Approve of National Response to COVID-19 in 14 Advanced Economies [8]

On April 15th, 2020 the country successfully organized parliamentary elections. The Republic of Korea became not only the **first country with national elections** in the middle of the pandemic but also a leader in **safeguarding electoral rights**.[9] Given the exceptional context of the pandemic, the voter turn-out was extremely high at 62 percent (the highest numbers in 28 years). Authorities ensured that even people in quarantine were able to vote and there is no evidence that the elections contributed to spread of the virus. The election illustrated the state's technical capacity and built up further trust in the government among the population.

One important factor for an overall trustworthy relationship is **transparent management** of the public sector notwithstanding when it comes to the fighting against the pandemic. Generally, the ROK government is combining to a large extent transparency through public information with **several ICT solutions** in order to make the COVID-19 approach effective, and to involve people proactively in fighting the virus. From an early stage onwards, the government utilized various methods of **open data to disclose real-time information** to alert citizens on the possible risks, in view of the highly infectious nature of COVID-19. In addition to regular briefings from the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) through traditional media, area-specific information, as well as information on confirmed cases in the cities and travel routes of confirmed patients has been disseminated by local government entities through mobile-based emergency alert messages, websites, as well as mobile apps.

The "Emergency Alerts" are a highly visible and relevant information tool for citizens. They are used to avoid seemingly risky neighborhoods and to encourage precautionary measures. Contact trace data often discloses the places a confirmed patient has visited and data disclosure may thus also pose privacy risks. Privacy rights generally have high value in South Korea.[10] Whilst striking the right balance between "privacy rights" and "public benefits" (use of data disclosure to reduce infection risks) remains sensitive and country-dependent (especially in authoritarian contexts), in ROK there seems to be relatively high agreement on the timebound, emergency-related lifting of privacy rights. Overall, there is little doubt that data-sharing based on innovative ICT approaches seems to be an important explanatory factor for the Republic of Korea's effective COVID-19 management. ROK had the advantage of exceptional conditions in terms of combining the **latest, innovative technological solutions** with a citizens' relatively **high tolerance for personal data-sharing**.

The Republic of Korea: A global point of reference

Globally, it was known early on that the pandemic would have socio-economic spillover effects and possibly also cause political instability. Several commentators have therefore argued for the need to have **an analytical perspective on governance implications and to manage the health pandemic with an SDG16+ lens**, i.e. keeping in mind its potential consequences on peace, justice and inclusion.[11] South Korea's real gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by 3.2 percent in the April-June period from the previous quarter, the largest on-quarter drop since 2008. Exports (which account for about half of the ROK economy) fell by 16.1 percent in the second quarter of 2020. Yet, other countries like China and the US experienced even much more drastic, negative economic effects from the pandemic during the same period. The number of employed people in ROK also decreased by 195,000 nationally, compared with same period during the previous year, marking the biggest decline in a decade (Statistics Korea), but again, this was a softer impact in comparison to what has been seen in many other countries.

The government's efforts to help vulnerable groups produced positive results. According to the statistics on household income and expenditure for the second quarter of 2020, despite reduced market income, total income increased across all quintile groups, showing the largest increase in the lowest income group (Ham 2020). There is reason to believe, due to their emergency package and the Korean New Deal announced in July 2020, that ROK has imposed a considerably high emphasis on the most vulnerable in the society and on the labor market.

The New Deal plans to invest 160 trillion Won (i.e. $132.6 billion USD) through a combination of state and corporate investments to create 1,901,000 jobs by 2025, based on two main policies: the Digital New Deal and the Green New Deal. Against a backdrop of high inequality, and an expected increase in polarization following COVID-19, the initiative argues that the growing burden of unemployment and intensifying polarization calls for an improved employment safety net that provides advanced job training while creating new types of employment. South Korea has also previously actively pursued ways of using the push for more digitalization and to lead on the 4th Industrial revolution, with parallel improvements in technology, professional education and strengthened infrastructure. As such, the New Deal is yet another initiative using external shocks as basis for innovation and transitions.

The country's successful management of COVID-19 is a highly visible example of effective crisis management and public capacities. The pandemic has shown that strong management models might be vulnerable when a virus taps into existing tensions and cleavages around religion. It also demonstrates an effective way to collaborate with the private sector, for instance, in the case of the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), and the development and provision of innovative technological solutions. All in all, this relative success is a result of long-term learning, effective state capacity and social mobilization.

The South Korean crisis management approach is also turning into an external asset. Current projections estimate that the country might be able to limit economic damage. The updated World Economic Outlook (June 2020) from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects a global decline of GDP by 4.9 percent in 2020; the contraction will be even more severe for the group of advanced economies (-8.0). Yet, the IMF expects that the **Republic of Korea could be able to limit the negative consequences more effectively** with a decrease by -2.1 percent. Based on those projections South Korea would even improve its ranking among the largest economies in the world, moving from #12 to #10 in the ranking.

The unique ROK model has gained significant global visibility. It also has led to a high number of PPE requests and inquiries for knowledge sharing regarding specific policy tools and technical instruments from other countries. This is why South Korea's experience indicate lessons well beyond "managing the crisis at home": its COVID-19 approach has **implications for international cooperation**. The diplomatic ability to keep the borders open for one's own nationals, even during a pandemic, the diplomatic ability to restrict access to other countries, and to reduce potential foreign relations damage and negative economic consequences, are just a few examples of this. The provision of most crucial medical equipment, not just for developing countries but also for eye-level partners, is another example how COVID-19 might open new windows of opportunity.

Since the 1980s, Joseph Nye's concept of **soft power** has sharpened international relations debates. The concept has been further developed many times, including by Nye himself. "Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. A country's soft power rests on its resources of culture, values and policies." (Nye 2019). Soft power is important for all countries. "Middle powers," (Shin 2015)such as the Republic of Korea, depend to a large degree on their ability to attract and to co-opt through soft power. This is an ability that goes well beyond the field of traditional diplomacy. It might be a relevant factor for economic decisions (e.g. foreign direct investments), the development of technological capabilities, scientific cooperation, investments in cultural sector, and the exports of a country.

And while ROK's pandemic management model was developed to fight the health crisis internally, it very quickly also became an external asset. The country became a strong supporter of multilateral approaches to manage the pandemic (e.g. by using the World Health Organization as a main platform, and by supporting relevant debates in the context of G20 and MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, Australia)).The country's development cooperation approach quickly adjusted to the pandemic context. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) developed concepts and operational activities for how to support partner countries in the Global South: the "ABC Program" (Agenda for Building Resilience against COVID-19 through Development Cooperation)[12] reaching from the provision of diagnostic kits to the sharing of South Korean experiences related to the management of the pandemic. Interestingly, ROK's successful COVID-19 strategy contributed to enhance visibility in the foreign policy space, and gains in both media attention and amongst global opinion makers. An effective crisis management model developed for internal purposes has hence also gained soft power attributes and foreign policy power. That may be valuable in our world´s unstable geopolitical climate.

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http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_22741/view.do?seq=19&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=2&titleNm=; Agenda for building resilience against COVID-19 through development cooperation
http://www.koica.go.kr/covid19/8018/subview.do