

China's Governance of COVID-19: Achievements and Limitations



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The COVID-19 outbreak, which began in January 2020 in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, has spread rapidly and widely in China and around the world. The pandemic has resulted in numerous casualties and massive economic losses, leading to numerous cultural shifts and sharper competition and confrontation between the U.S. and China.

The COVID-19 pandemic has an important meaning from the perspective of international politics. As mentioned earlier, this is because it has not only intensified competition and conflict between the U.S. and China, but also provided an opportunity to shed new light on governance by major countries including the U.S. and China. As the validity of this governance has an impact on the economy as well, it warrants careful review.

When the first case of COVID-19 was reported in China, the nation fell into major chaos due to the lack of information about COVID-19 and the rapid pace by which it spread. The international community went so far as to discuss a possible collapse of China's political system due to the out-

break. However, contrary to expectations, the situation in China stabilized after about five months, while the world, including major developed countries, fell into chaos caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

China, which had been criticized for its perceived backward and coercive governance, emerged from the crisis relatively quickly, while economies such as the United States, Europe, and Japan, which had boasted advanced and democratic governance, were mired in the pandemic and suffered serious damage. In particular, the two parties in the U.S.-China competition era, a major keyword in 21st century international politics, came into sharp contrast.

With this, not only China itself, but also the international community began to view in a new light the governance in China and Western advanced countries.

China has engaged in a centralized and heavy-handed form of governance to combat COVID-19, and was able to handle the outbreak relatively early by systematically mobilizing all national capabilities. When a small cluster outbreak occurs in a specific area, the Chinese government implements strong quarantine measures by conducting extensive PCR testing upon all people in the entire city, not just the area in question. As a result, in April 2020, only four months after reports of a massive outbreak, Wuhan City and Hubei Province were already recording zero new cases of COVID-19, and a routine quarantine system has been maintained since then.

At the same time, China has been mobilizing all its national capabilities to develop a COVID-19 vaccine and increase vaccination rates. As of June 2021, five self-developed vaccines are in use to inoculate the Chinese population, four of which have been exported or provided to support overseas locations. In particular, vaccines manufactured by Sinopharm (中国医药集团有限公司) and Sinovac (北京科兴中维生物技术有限公司) have been approved for emergency use by the WHO and are being supplied to the world via the COVAX Facility. China has already approved the emergency use of some self-developed vaccines within its borders since July 22, 2020, and started vaccinating high-risk groups including medical workers, followed by nationwide vaccination from December 15, 2020. As a result, 1.6 billion doses have been administered as of July 2021 in China.

There is no denying that China's quarantine governance has objectively delivered impressive results. However, in the process, individual privacy rights were violated in the name of public interest, and local government autonomy was weakened in the face of strong intervention by the central government. In addition, organizations at the shequ (社區) level played an important

role in the COVID-19 quarantine process, presenting a positive form of governance through public-private cooperation. However, some point out this cannot be seen as a form of voluntary participation or grassroots movement by the private sector, as these organizations follow the lead of the government or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). And despite the fact that China has received considerable acclaim from developing countries by actively conducting quarantine and vaccine diplomacy, there is a suspicion that China's diplomatic actions are more for the purpose of expanding its power to contend with the United States than humanistic aid to developing countries. This can also be seen as a sign of China's lack of soft power.

As for the United States, the world's most powerful country, its governance during the global pandemic appeared to lack effectiveness, struggling with confusion in policy and many technical problems during the COVID-19 outbreak, which cast doubts in the international community about U.S. governance.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, doubts were raised about the governance of the United States, the existing hegemon, and the governance of the emerging China, thus highlighting the possibilities of new governance models. In fact, the Korean model of governance during the pandemic (the K-Quarantine model), and Taiwan's governance have received attention, together with the case of Israel, which achieved a high vaccination rate in record time. It can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment where middle power countries can command more presence in the international community. What remains now is how well the middle power countries, including Korea, will be able to utilize this opportunity. At the same time, it seems up to these middle power countries to actively present new alternatives to global issues and lead global governance, if they are to survive in the era of U.S.-China competition. **KIEP**