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DIVERGENT MODELS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT AND THEIR INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION: CASES OF CHINA AND SOUTH KOREA

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented an extraordinary and unprecedented situation. In their efforts to end the pandemic, countries worldwide followed different approaches to combat the virus. Among these, China emerged as the prime example of an authoritarian model of virus management, whereas South Korea managed to slow down the pandemic with a liberal democratic approach. Although both were successful in pandemic management, China and South Korea have different and contrasting images in the international area. This study analyzes how China's and South Korea's pandemic management models and their international reception differ from each other. It claims that while both models were largely applauded domestically, in the international sphere, China, after early acclaim, ended up with a more negative and controversial image, whereas South Korea created a relatively more positively regarded model. Still, compared to the South Korean model, many more countries emulated and implemented the Chinese model worldwide.

Keywords: *China, South Korea, Covid-19 Pandemic, Pandemic Management Model, Liberal Democratic and Authoritarian Regime, International Image.*

FARKLI COVID-19 PANDEMİ YÖNETİMİ MODELLERİ VE MODELLERİN ULUSLARARASI KABULLERİ: ÇİN VE GÜNEY KORE ÖRNEKLERİ

Öz

Covid-19 pandemisi olağanüstü ve benzeri görülmemiş bir duruma neden olmuştur. Dünyanın dört bir yanındaki ülkeler, pandemiyi sona erdirmek için virüsle mücadelede farklı yaklaşımları takip etmiştir. Bunlar arasında Çin, otoriter virüs yönetimi modelinin başlıca örneği olurken, Güney Kore liberal demokratik bir yaklaşımla salgını yavaşlatmayı başarmıştır. Her iki ülke de salgın yönetimi konusunda başarılı olsalar da Çin ve Güney Kore, uluslararası alanda birbirinden farklı ve hatta birbirlerinin zıttı imajlara sahiptir. Bu çalışma, Çin ve Güney Kore'nin salgın yönetim modellerinin ve bu modellerin uluslararası alanda kabul edilme düzeylerinin birbirinden nasıl farklılaştığını incelemektedir. Çalışma, her iki modelin de ülke içinde büyük ölçüde desteklenirken, uluslararası alanda Çin'in erken dönemde beğeni topladıktan sonra daha olumsuz ve tartışmalı bir imaja sahip olduğunu, Güney Kore'nin ise nispeten daha olumlu değerlendirilen bir model geliştirdiğini savunmaktadır. Bununla birlikte Çin modeli, Güney Kore modeliyle karşılaştırıldığında dünya genelinde daha fazla sayıda ülke tarafından taklit edilerek uygulamaya konmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Çin, Güney Kore, Covid-19 Pandemisi, Pandemi Yönetimi Modeli, Liberal Demokratik ve Otoriter Rejim, Uluslararası İmaj.*

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INTRODUCTION

China and South Korea represent two contrasting examples of national authorities' instruments to fight against Covid-19. While the former is the pioneer of authoritarian policies such as implementing strictly controlled lockdowns and zero-Covid policy (He et al., 2020), the latter is a leading example of more liberal democratic approaches like "no compulsory nation-wide lockdown measures" (Schwak, 2022: 205). However, this discrepancy between their solutions to the pandemic is not an inevitable outcome of their authoritarian and democratic governance structures. China instantly applied an authoritarian style with a strict lockdown in Wuhan (Graham-Harrison and Kuo, 2020). But this approach was later replicated by many democracies from France to the United States (US), though to different degrees (Henley, 2021). In other words, many democratic countries have also implemented strict lockdown measures, especially in the early stages of the pandemic. Therefore, rather than being a foregone conclusion of its governance type, South Korea's liberal and democratic solution to Covid-19 is the outcome of its government's management strategy. Despite their contrasting strategies, China and South Korea were among the very first states to flatten the curve (Reuters Covid-19 Tracker, 2021). Their successes, based on dissimilar models, have also been reflected in the international arena in diverse ways. While China has been criticized by many countries, South Korea, at least initially, was praised as a more liberal model of virus management.

Starting from this point, this study aims to analyze how the pandemic management models and the respective international images¹ of the two countries differ from each other, despite both being effective in controlling the first waves of the pandemic. Although South Korea experienced an increase in the number of cases after July 2022 and China, due to the Omicron variant, maintained its strict lockdown policy until late 2022, both have been among the countries with relatively low death rates.² In this context, this paper first analyses the two countries' virus management models by focusing on four important domestic factors that can be considered fundamental in shaping their models: center-local government relations, state capacity, previous experiences and lessons learned from earlier health crises and domestic societies' reactions to each government. Thereafter, it compares these two models' prestige and acceptance in the international arena mostly concentrating primarily on the first year of the pandemic. Based on this comparison, this study argues that the Chinese model, very efficient in curbing the spread of the virus in the short-term, was at the same time supported by Chinese society and emulated by many countries in the early months of the pandemic while also being perceived and criticized for being authoritarian. South Korea, on the other hand, positioned itself as a model of a liberal democratic response to the pandemic challenge. This model, unlike the Chinese one, was highly appreciated for prioritizing democratic practices and transparency even during a crisis and supported by the Korean people, while not being emulated by many countries, including Western democracies. This shows that particularly in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, rather than primarily focusing on the democratic or authoritarian characteristic of a pandemic management model, societies opt for the most effective solution for managing the pandemic, at least in the short-term when the impact of the pandemic is high, the future uncertain and treatment mechanisms are insufficient.

Covid-19 has left deep traces on humanity as well as other living creatures in the world. As of 20 October 2022, more than 630 million people got infected by the virus, while at least 6.5 million lost their lives (Worldometer, 2022). Furthermore, the virus has a profound impact on how people eat, move, work, study, communicate, produce, buy and consume. In other words, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, every move people make were influenced by the virus. Because Covid-19 is a highly contagious virus, decision-makers, who initially did not know what policies to implement, warned and even enforced their citizens to stay at home through

1 International image is an important indicator for a country in its dealings with the outside world. When a country has a positive image and appreciated by others, it can have strong influence over others and this way improve its standing in the international order. This is why, through diverse strategies, countries invest in their international images and this way, try to positively influence the way they are perceived by other countries.

2 Based on the data of more than 200 countries, as of 20 October 2022, China, with 4 deaths per a million people ranked 220th and South Korea, with 563 deaths per million people, ranked 130th, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>. Furthermore, China has the second lowest number of deaths among the G-20 countries after Singapore, while Korea has the 7th lowest number of deaths, <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/coronavirus-deaths?continent=g20>. While analyzing this data, it should be kept in mind that since the summer of 2022, many countries stopped sharing updated data on the number of Covid-19 related cases and deaths. China and South Korea are among the relatively few countries that continue to daily update the numbers related to Covid-19 and share them with their citizens. Considering this lack of data, it is fair to state that South Korea's actual ranking is better than the one provided here.

compulsory lockdowns (BBC, 2020a). In addition to the health crisis, measures taken by the governments to struggle with Covid-19 resulted in economic and social crises as well. In due course, millions lost their jobs and tried to maintain their lives under harder conditions than they faced in “normal” times (Kharas and Dooley, 2021; Yeyati and Filippini, 2021). As economic activities were restricted first in China and then in other countries in early 2020, agricultural and industrial production and commercial activities slowed down globally. This, in the end, led to a crisis in both national economies and the global economy (Gopinath, 2020).

Due to the pandemic’s heavy economic, political and societal impacts, political scientists as well as academics and professionals from other disciplines like economics, public health and sociology need to research diverse topics related to the pandemic such as the origins of the virus, the policies implemented by governments and their effectiveness. Through such studies, scientists as well as policy-makers can take lessons from both failures and successes of different policies implemented by governments worldwide. These lessons might help policymakers and scientists to prepare for future pandemics and other global public health problems. This necessity is the starting point of this study as well as many other studies on the pandemic. Since early 2020, political science and area studies scholars have contributed to the growing literature on Covid-19 by looking at the economic, political and societal impacts of the pandemic, the diverse set of policies implemented by governments to overcome such problems and their failures and successes.

Since Covid-19 originated in China, in the early days of 2020, numerous studies have analyzed China’s Covid-19 response. Mei (2020) evaluated the varying policies implemented by China during the early days of 2020 and their eventual efficiency against the pandemic. He et al. (2020) analyzed China’s Covid-19 crisis governance by focusing on institutional, strategic and operational levels. Cai et al. (2020) examined China’s response to the shock created by Covid-19 by constructing an analytical framework of a campaign-style governance regime to understand the Chinese-style response to the pandemic. Saratchand and Kaur (2021) studied the propaganda campaign and hegemonic narratives of Chinese mainstream media about the country’s response to the health crisis. Macheda (2021) examined the structural roots of China’s effective response to the pandemic and claimed that the Chinese state’s presence in the banking and industrial sectors helped the government to produce the necessary equipment in its fight against the virus. Wood (2022) analyzed how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced the prestige of the Communist Party of China (CPC) domestically as well as internationally and the CPC’s policies to combat its loss of face.

The initial political science studies on South Korea’s pandemic management were published in 2020. One of the early studies by Noh (2020) focused on South Korea’s religious traditions and their relations with the pandemic struggle. Another study put forward South Korea’s Covid-19 experience and concentrated on the lessons for developing countries (Lee, D. et al., 2020). Some countries like South Korea that were successful in their struggle against the pandemic could use their successes to advance their public diplomacy. Lee and Kim’s study (2021) analyzed South Korea’s nation branding and use of public diplomacy during the pandemic. Since the pandemic also stressed the weaknesses and strengths of the countries, the ones that have been relatively more successful had a chance to convert their success into a soft power tool. Cho et al. (2020) looked at South Korea’s soft power during the Covid-19 era by conducting an expert survey in Europe.

In addition to these studies that separately examined China’s and South Korea’s Covid-19 pandemic management strategies, several studies made a comparison between the diverging strategies of countries. As one of the early examples, Cha (2020) evaluated several East Asian countries’ responses to Covid-19 in the initial months of the pandemic and offered lessons to the West in its struggle against the virus. Another study looked at the policy capacities of states to understand their varying nation-level responses to the pandemic (Capano et al., 2020). Mao (2021), through its comparison of the cases of China and South Korea, discussed the way political institutions influence countries’ responses to crises. Moon et al. (2021) compared South Korea’s and Japan’s differing Covid-19 policy responses by focusing on the two countries’ institutional contexts and governance structures. Another study, on the other hand, made a comparison between China and the US by focusing on these two countries’ multi-level governance, policy coordination and subnational responses to the pandemic (Liu et al., 2021). Chen et al. (2021) studied the effectiveness of core Covid-19 strategies in China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea. Rothstein et al. (2022) discussed the way different governance traditions

shaped Covid-19 responses of governments in China, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US. Arbel et al. (2022), by comparing 169 countries and regions worldwide, examined whether the regime types of countries have an impact on Covid-19 recovery rates and found that in autocratic countries the prospects of recovery are better than in democracies.

This paper differentiates itself from these early studies, especially through its comparison of the way the divergent pandemic management models of China and South Korea are perceived internationally, in addition to its comparison of their authoritarian and liberal democratic management models. Such a comparison is important to learn from alternative pandemic management models and compare their successes and failures and this way, prepare governments and societies for future pandemics and other types of health crises. It is also important because particularly in the initial stages of the pandemic, some European countries and the US's relatively unsuccessful management of the pandemic raised the question of whether democracies cannot successfully combat the pandemic. Therefore, a comparison of these two models as well as their reflection on the international sphere can contribute to the debate on democracy vs. authoritarianism and keeping a balance between fundamental rights and freedoms and protecting public health. Within this context, this study examines China's and South Korea's divergent models of Covid-19 pandemic management and their international acceptance. The first part discusses China's authoritarian model of pandemic management by analyzing center-local relations in China, the state capacity of an authoritarian state, China's severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) experience and Chinese society's assessment of the government's handling of the crisis. Following a similar approach, the second part examines South Korea's liberal model of pandemic management under four subheadings: center-local relations in South Korea, the capacity of a democratic state, South Korea's SARS and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) experiences and domestic support given by South Korean society to the central government's handling of the crisis. Afterward, the third part evaluates the prestige and international acceptance of these two states' divergent models of pandemic management. Finally, the paper ends with a discussion of China's authoritarian and South Korea's liberal models of Covid-19 pandemic management and their reception by the international community.

CHINA: AN AUTHORITARIAN MODEL OF PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT

Several factors contributed to China's successful Covid-19 pandemic management. First, center-local relations and the center's authority over local governments, albeit de facto decentralization in the country, helped China in its fight against the pandemic (Mei, 2020). Second, the high capacity of the Chinese state helped the government to effectively produce and mobilize resources and to fight the pandemic (He et al., 2020). Third, the country also benefited from its previous failure in managing the SARS epidemic (Mason, 2020; Zhao et al., 2020). Fourth, despite its initial mishandling of the Covid-19 crisis and hiding of information, the Chinese state, in a relatively short period, got total control of the situation and started to share information with the world, which resulted in sincere participation of the Chinese society to strict measures and strong domestic support for the government (Greer et al., 2020; He et al., 2020).

Center-Local Relations

One of the defining features of the Chinese administrative system is the de facto decentralization that coexists with the central authoritarian system (Zheng, 2007). Local governments in China have very large budgets and broad authority in decision-making and -implementation in their areas of responsibility. However, China is a unitary state with a strong central government. Due to this structure, although strategic decisions are taken by the central government and top decision-making bodies of the CPC, the role of local actors goes beyond implementing decisions taken by and ordered from above. Under the condition of being "non-political" and offering innovative solutions to the problems faced, the center gives local administrators the right to conduct political experiments, and even, in some cases encourages them. Still, the role played by local governments in policymaking is never allowed to reach a point where the central government and the CPC's authority over national and local politics can be eroded. In other words, central leaders never allow local administrators to challenge central authority. Due to its authority over local administrators, the central government can direct the steps to be taken by local governments in times of crisis and, when necessary, can directly intervene in policies implemented (He et al., 2020: 244-245; Mei, 2020: 314; Bulman and Jaros, 2021).

An important feature of China's administrative system is the fragmented structure of its bureaucracy. The Chinese bureaucracy, on the one hand, horizontally shares tasks between ministries and, on the other hand, is highly fragmented vertically. This fragmented bureaucratic structure complicates information and task sharing and coordination between governmental agencies. As a result, agencies can pass the buck to other units, and hence, mismanagement may arise in times of crisis (He et al., 2020: 245-246). The fragmented authoritarian structure, moreover, leads to the emergence of a dual leadership structure in which local units face the problem of being caught between central and local governments. For example, in China, *ipso jure*, the National Health Commission (NHC) is the highest authority on health issues. However, while local health agencies are subject to the NHC on professional matters such as national standards, they are also a part of the local government structure in terms of budget and personnel management. In this dual structure, due to its authority over critical administrative matters that directly concern the functioning of local health units³, the local government's influence over local unit's decisions is stronger than that of the NHC, whose main task is to provide professional guidance. Due to this, when possible, each level of institution tends to avoid taking responsibility (Mei, 2020: 315). The symbiotic relationship between the CPC and the state bureaucracy complicates the problems of the distribution of authority and responsibility even more. Furthermore, "as the party further tightens its grip over government institution, partisan loyalty is prized over technical expertise" (Yang, 2021: 6). Especially in times of crisis, the increasing uncertainty in authority sharing can turn into an impasse in which no one is sure which unit is authorized to take decisions and relegate power to other agencies to implement decisions taken. This, in the end, as the examples of SARS (Thornton, 2009: 33-36) and Covid-19 demonstrate, prevents timely decision-making and effective crisis management. In other words, the fragmented structure of the Chinese bureaucracy prevents clear-cut task sharing and this, in the end, causes lower-level to evade responsibility unless they are instructed by higher authorities. Furthermore, as a result of the symbiotic relationship between the CPC and the state bureaucracy and the party's superiority over bureaucracy, bureaucrats and lower-level cadres fail to act unless they receive instruction from their superiors.

In times of crisis, especially in the early outbreak periods, due to its fragmented bureaucracy and non-transparent structure, China's administrative system faced problems in terms of swift and decisive response and information sharing. The same system, on the other hand, thanks to its authoritarian state structure and high state capacity, allows the central government, when needed, to guide both local governments and Chinese society. Once the decision is made, the center's authority over local units ensures that the ordered steps will be taken. Nevertheless, although strict top-down bureaucratic management stands out as the most important institutional factor affecting China's policy style, this does not necessarily exclude opposing policy styles such as decentralization and professionalism, which have an important place in the country's political system. Especially in times of crisis, different ways of policymaking can become prominent (Mei, 2020: 313).

Since there are no democratic elections in China, party members and local administrators are evaluated and promoted according to certain criteria such as their loyalty to the Party, competence during their term in office and past performance. This way, the CPC ensures that local party cadres act according to goals set by the top leadership. Since the early 1980s, economic success has been very important both for legitimizing the rule of the CPC and the central government and for the promotion prospects of local administrators. However, the central importance attached to economic growth, on the one hand, results in local governments to limit the resources allocated to social welfare and health provision and, on the other hand, places great responsibilities on local administrators in preventing social unrest that may disrupt social stability and negatively affect economic growth. This, in turn, may cause local administrators to prioritize social stability and maintain order by covering up incidents and information in their jurisdiction. For Covid-19, this was exemplified by the cases of Li Wenliang and Ai Fen, two medical doctors who were reprimanded by officials for informing their colleagues about an unknown virus (Kuo, 2020a), and by local authorities' dissembling of information about the person-to-person transmission of the virus and the extent of the problem (He et al., 2020: 246-247; Mei, 2020: 314-315; Yang, 2021). After all, as Deng Xiaoping once stated, for the CPC, "Stability must take precedence over everything" (Karl, 2020: 172).

³ A local health unit "is a component of local governments that manages the NHC's local human resources and budgets" (Mei, 2020: 315).

Despite such problems, the Party and the Chinese bureaucracy are capable of expeditiously adapting to crises. In a short time, through diverse policies, the CPC can mobilize party cadres enrolled in different localities and units. The first of these practices is the transfer of personnel between regions, which serves to strengthen local leadership (He et al., 2020: 246-247), while at the same time aims to avoid localism in the long run (Bulman and Jaros, 2021). In this context, in February 2020, due to their inadequate and unsuccessful leadership in the fight against Covid-19, the Party secretaries of Wuhan city and Hubei province were replaced respectively by Jinan City Party Secretary Wang Zhonglin and Shanghai Mayor Ying Yong (Woo, 2020). Another method applied by the party-state is to ensure the rapid rise of local administrators who are successful in crisis management. This way, the CPC rewards local administrators for managing the crisis featly and provides an important incentive to take crisis management seriously. However, as the CPC leadership rewards success, it also punishes failure in diverging ways from dismissal to condemnation and demotion (He et al., 2020: 247-249). The main purpose here is not to punish the authorities for personal mistakes, but also to encourage other officials to work harder, both to achieve better results and to please the public (Mei, 2020: 320).

The Capacity of an Authoritarian State

Another prominent feature of China in combating crises is its ability to mobilize enormous quantities of human and material resources. State capacity plays a very important role in policy-making and policy response, particularly in times of crisis. While the possession of strong state capacity does not guarantee its effective use as exemplified by the inefficiency of US's and UK's public health systems in the early stages of the pandemic, weak or strong state capacity determines policy options of governments (Greer et al., 2020: 1415). In this regard, the economic and political power and the high organizational capacity of the Chinese state enabled the central leadership to promptly gather and mobilize massive amounts of human power for the relevant purpose. In other words, especially during crises, the Chinese state's capacity is sufficient to swiftly move large quantities of resources to where they are most needed. In addition, thanks to the major role played by state-owned enterprises in the economy, the state can very quickly produce materials and allocate them where they are needed (He et al., 2020: 249-250; Mei, 2020: 317).

The capacity of the party-state to quickly generate and effectively distribute resources played an important role in overcoming the intense lack of medical personnel and health supplies that Wuhan city and Hubei province faced in the early days of the strict lockdown that was first implemented on 23 January 2020. To overcome personnel and supply shortages, on February 7, the central government ordered 16 provinces to support 16 cities of Hubei province under the slogan "one province helps one city". In this way, a large number of medical and military personnel, party members, health equipment and consumer goods from all over the country could be sent to Hubei province in a short time (Global Times, 2020; Xinhua, 2020). Furthermore, when the bed availability of Wuhan hospitals was insufficient to meet the needs of rapidly increasing numbers of patients, the state mobilized its resources for the construction of two emergency hospitals with a total bed capacity of 2,600 and built them in ten days (Qin, 2020). The Chinese state's strong presence in the banking and industrial sectors helped the government to direct fiscal as well as material resources for the mass production of necessary goods in the fight against the pandemic. In other words, the high level of public ownership and the central government's high capacity to influence the Chinese economy provided the means for the government to intervene and scale up the production of essential goods such as medical equipment in a very short time (Macheda, 2021).

The establishment of the Central Leading Group for Covid-19 Prevention and Control as the top-decision making body for managing the pandemic played an important role in the successful implementation of decisions taken by the central government. The Leading Group, which was formed of senior Politburo and State Council members and led by Premier Li Keqiang, was in charge of pandemic-related strategic decision-making and -implementation. Due to its extraordinary political authority, the Leading Group's directives required absolute obedience from all lower-level cadres. Central-level decision-making and task execution mechanisms were replicated in local jurisdictions as they created local mechanisms to command Covid-19 control and prevention (He et al., 2020: 246). In short, the high capacity of the Chinese state helped the government to effectively mobilize resources to Hubei province. This efficiency was at odds with the inefficiency of democratic states such as Italy, France, the UK and the US in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kelland, 2020).

SARS Experience: Development of Early Prevention

One other important factor contributing to China's success in combating the spread of Covid-19 was the experience it gained during and after the SARS epidemic in 2002-2003. Similar to Covid-19, initially, local officials in Guangdong, where SARS first erupted in November 2002, refused and ignored reports about the virus. For a few months, both the central and local governments continued to downplay the importance of the disease. This was changed when Jiang Yanyong, an army doctor, exposed the truth about the spread of the virus on 20 April 2003. After the whistleblower's report, Hu Jintao, who was recently inaugurated as president, declared a war on SARS and used the full force of his government to overcome the problem. Measures taken included the building of field hospitals, mass coercive quarantine, establishing village surveillance systems to prevent migrant workers from going back to their hometowns and encouraging people to inform their neighbors (Mason, 2020: 204).

The initial inability of the government to efficiently handle the epidemic explicitly showed the insufficiency of China's public health and crisis management systems. After SARS, to prevent and be better prepared for similar crises, the government took several steps to thoroughly modernize China's public health and crisis management systems by increasing per capita health spending⁴, establishing a cooperation mechanism with the US, training public health professionals and developing one of the world's most advanced disease tracking systems based on the US and World Health Organization (WHO) models. Nevertheless, these modernized systems, mainly due to above discussed political and administrative reasons, could not prevent the eruption of a pandemic. However, they at least helped the country to prepare for future health crises and to determine the policies to be implemented in the fight against Covid-19, and this way to contain the crisis relatively quickly and with minor damage (Bouey, 2020; Mason, 2020; Wang, 2019; Zhao et al., 2020).

Domestic Criticism and Strong Support for the Central Government's Handling of the Crisis

Another crucial element that stands out in the country's success is societal compliance with strict restrictions (He et al., 2020: 251). Even in authoritarian regimes like China, society's participation is necessary for the implementation of authoritarian public health measures (Greer et al., 2020: 1414). The Chinese state successfully enforced drastic Covid-19 measures and strictly required people to comply with them. As was seen in many European countries and the US, however, when parts of society reject compliance, governments may have difficulty in implementing such measures effectively. One of the prominent reasons for Chinese people's participation in Covid-19-related measures was the availability, albeit with delay, of information about the problem. According to Yang et al. (2021:8), in the early stage of the crisis, even though society was highly interested in the problem because the government did not share information, people lost interest. From 20 January 2020 onwards, however, as the government became more transparent and began to disseminate information, people were once again engaged in the process and started to support both the government and the measures taken by it. Nevertheless, high compliance was not unique to China but seen in other East Asian countries as well. Social distance, which is one of the most effective measures to prevent the transmission of the virus, and the widespread use of masks have been important factors in the success of both China and other regional societies like South Korea, Japan and Taiwan (Cha, 2020). Different from these East Asian societies, however, China implemented very strict lockdown measures that completely isolated Wuhan and Hubei province from other parts of the country for several weeks (Zhang and Wang, 2020). This measure, which has been implemented in several different localities such as Xi'an (Politico, 2022) and Shanghai (Ni, 2022), stands out as the Chinese solution or model for containing Covid-19.

The support given by the Chinese society to the central and local governments does not mean that people supported their governments blindfolded. Quite the contrary, especially during the early days of the crisis, different segments of the Chinese society from intellectuals to businesspeople and independent/citizen journalists to ordinary citizens criticized the government for underestimating the problem, misinforming the society, mishandling the crisis and not acting decisively against the virus (BBC, 2020e). Nevertheless, in time, as the government could handle the crisis effectively, society's satisfaction with the performance of government officials at various levels, but especially of the central government, has increased to very high levels. Such that contrary to the expectations of some (Pei, 2020a; Topaloff, 2020), the Chinese government's success in winning the "people's battle" against the pandemic has increased the large parts of society's support for and

4 Nevertheless, China's per capita health spending was way below than regional countries like Korea and Thailand (Ahmad 2020, 6).

the legitimacy of the government (Guang et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021). According to online surveys conducted by China Data Lab, “On a scale of 1 to 10, the average level of trust in the central government —already high— increased from 8.23 in June 2019, to 8.65 in Feb 2020 and 8.87 in May 2020. There was a similar upward trend for the average level of trust in municipal governments” (Guang et al., 2020). A similar trend was seen in a large-scale online survey made by Wu et al. in April 2020. During the pandemic, while only 3.3% of participants in the survey trusted less to the national government, 49.2% trusted more and 47.6% felt the same. Furthermore, on a scale of 1 to 5, satisfaction with the central government’s information dissemination was 4.33, and satisfaction with the provision of daily necessities and protection materials was 4.15 (Wu et al., 2021: 7-12). In short, in the early months of the pandemic, Chinese society’s trust in their government, as well as its pandemic management model, increased and this, in the end, led the society to comply with the strict measures implemented by the government.

SOUTH KOREA: A LIBERAL MODEL OF PANDEMIC MANAGEMENT

Many factors paved the way for South Korea to successfully manage the Covid-19 struggle. The WHO stressed innovation and public trust as two crucial factors that helped South Korea to flatten the curve and manage the spread of the virus (WHO, 2020). During the pandemic, South Korean society actively participated in practicing social distance (Kim, 2021: 1737). Furthermore, the country learned very much from its previous experiences such as SARS and MERS (Lee, S. et al., 2020: 363, 372). Before the pandemic, based on its previous experiences, South Korea formed a cooperation mechanism between public and private organizations (Lee et al., 2020b: 250). Moreover, from the very beginning, transparency in policy implementation has been one of the key factors that contributed to the country’s pandemic management (Park and Chung, 2021: 5). This approach helped the government in increasing the approval rate of South Korean society. Such that in the spring of 2020, the approval rate of the central government increased to 71% (Kim J., 2020).

Center-Local Relations

South Korea is commonly regarded as a strong and highly centralized state, where, during the period of rapid industrialization, the market and local governments were strictly controlled by the central state (Bae, 2016: 63). However, after decades of struggle, South Korea has managed to transform itself from an authoritarian to a democratic government. During the authoritarian era, presidents of the country were strong political figures. In those years, economic development was the priority of the state and democratic demands of the society were systematically ignored. However, things started to change in 1987. Through the last months of Chun Doo-hwan’s presidency, massive public protests occurred, and people showed their desire for a constitutional change to bring back direct presidential elections. Finally, with the famous 29th June Declaration of Roh Tae-woo, direct presidential elections, greater local autonomy and many other demands of the society were met (Han, 1988: 54-55). Since 1987, the year that signals the start of democratization in South Korea, decentralization has gained speed as well. South Koreans are inclined to accept local autonomy and decentralization as essential elements of democratization (Lee and Suh, 2021: 70).

The political history of South Korea shows that since the late 1980s, the country has spent significant efforts to realize decentralization. However, the economic crisis of the late 1990s made South Korean people question the role and efficiency of a centralized state and hence, gave rise to a new and strong wave of decentralization. During the presidencies of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Rho Moo-hyun (2003-2008), in 1999, the Law for the Promotion of Transfer of Central Authorities and in 2004, the Special Law on Decentralization Promotion were accepted as comprehensive plans for decentralization (Koo and Kim, 2018: 296). These two important policy frameworks were legalized and after decades of military rule, local elections were held in 1995. However, there is still a discrepancy between administrative-political decentralization and fiscal decentralization in South Korea (Koo and Kim, 2018: 296).

Even though there has been an enormous effort to realize decentralization through administrative, political and financial aspects, Yoo argues that South Korea is both legally and politically centralized (2018: 523). In times of crisis, the central government can control events and organize necessary institutions. However, the cooperation between local and central governments should not be ignored. Especially the centralized structure

of public health governance provides the central government with the ability to implement policy decisions at the local level. This way, the central government guides provincial and municipal health units⁵ including the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare (KMHW) and the Korea Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), (You, 2020: 802).

As regards the pandemic, local governments in South Korea focus on four basic structures: innovative public administration, support and management of self-quarantine, local economic recovery and transparent disclosure of information (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 1). The first step of innovative public administration is the drive-thru screening (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 2). This is a facility operating separately from medical units/hospitals that aims to prevent high numbers of people gathering in closed spaces. Thanks to this method, both visitors and medical staff had the opportunity to avoid the risk of infection. Additionally, to keep hospital beds available for seriously ill patients, the state set up living treatment centers for patients with mild symptoms (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 3). Therefore, from the very beginning, a sudden need for a high number of beds for heavily ill patients was prevented. The second step is the “non-contact visit” (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 4). The in-person visits were replaced with video calls, and transparent walls were being used to arrange family visits to patients. Considering the quarantine administration, safe accommodations were arranged in cooperation with local lodging facilities (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 5). Local governments not only offered a discount for accommodation but also gave some financial support. This way, while the local economy was supported, the spread of the virus could also be slowed down. Furthermore, Self-Quarantine Safety Protection App was an important tool for maintaining the daily needs of people under quarantine. In addition to local people, foreigners visiting the country were also required to use the app (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 6-7). Therefore, to make foreigners feel comfortable and understand related procedures, a translation service was designed.

Another significant influence of local governments showed itself in the economic sphere. The central and local governments offered tax cuts and tax credits to shop owners who willingly reduced rent to support the local economy. Through this mechanism, which is called the “Nice Landlord Movement”, local economies were empowered (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 8). Furthermore, local government units have compensated for the losses of small businesses (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 9). As an example of economic activities’ reconsideration under pandemic conditions, tourism, as one of the most negatively affected sectors of the economy, was redesigned by offering non-contact tourism, which includes new methods like scenic driving destinations and visits to recreation forests (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 10). Finally, information sharing was vital. The government shared real-time information about confirmed cases and other related issues via text messages and local government websites (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2020: 11). This transparency was essential in establishing public trust and reducing public anxiety, which is as important as the physical impact of the pandemic.

The Capacity of a Democratic State

Since the beginning of the pandemic, South Korea has been at the center of attention primarily because of the policy it adopted in its fight against Covid-19, which is quite distinct from the ones implemented by many Western democratic countries. Different from many Western democracies that applied lockdowns, curfews and travel bans to limit both domestic and international movement, South Korea has followed less strict measures, which for many (Schwak, 2022; Lee and Kim, 2021; Park and Chung, 2021) made the country to be seen as a model to be emulated. The South Korean government names this model “TRUST”, an acronym for “Transparency (sharing of the latest situation), Responsibility (society’s adaptation to the guidelines and government’s support for testing), United Actions (public-private cooperation for test-kit production), Science-Speed (innovative technologies, testing stations), Together in Solidarity (spirit of solidarity, stand against xenophobia and discrimination)” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

Besides this well-defined strategy, South Korea was the first democratic country to hold elections in the very first months of the pandemic, on 15 April 2020. To prevent voting citizens from getting infected, the state made high-level preparations. Considering that at that time there were discussions in the US on whether, due to the

⁵ In South Korea, municipalities manage health centers, health subcenters and primary health care posts while regional governments, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Welfare, manage regional medical centers (Kwon et al., 2015: 16).

pandemic, the presidential elections could be held in November 2020 or not, the South Korean elections meant more than just an election. It was a clear demonstration of the South Korean state's commitment to democratic practices and the South Korean people's robust faith in democracy. The fundamental sign of this was the turnout rate of 66.2%, which was higher than any parliamentary elections held since 1992 (Shin, 2020). In the elections, although the opposition parties were expecting a decline in the votes of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), the DPK managed to increase its vote and seats in the assembly, mainly thanks to its successful fight against the pandemic. Nevertheless, compared to the authoritarian Chinese state, the South Korean democratic administration also faced difficulties in combating the pandemic. The relatively low coercive capacity of the South Korean state weakened its Covid-19 prevention efforts in some cases, for instance, religious organizations' patterns during the pandemic (Mao, 2021: 327), since some of them ignored the rules issued by the state at the beginning of the pandemic and caused Covid-19 cases to increase rapidly (i.e., Shincheonji Church in Daegu)⁶.

SARS and MERS Experiences: Development of Early Prevention

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, South Korea had already experienced several epidemics. Especially, the SARS epidemic was a milestone for the country's disease prevention preparedness. Although there were no SARS-related deaths in South Korea until the summer of 2003 (Lee and McKibbin, 2004: 115), a concrete step was taken to combat future epidemics by establishing the KCDC. This center was designed as an institution in which different methods can be implemented in combating an epidemic, including quarantine measures. South Korea obtained its first significant experience on this path with the SARS epidemic.

After almost nine years, this time a new disease, MERS-CoV, emerged and was first seen in Saudi Arabia in 2012 (WHO 2019). With the detection of a South Korean citizen as the country's first MERS-CoV case on 14 May 2015, South Korea was added to the list of countries where this virus spread. However, three weeks after the first case, the country had the second highest number of cases after Saudi Arabia (Lim and Sziarto, 2020: 61). Thus, the country, which could successfully control SARS, could not achieve the same success against MERS-CoV. There are several different explanations for this failure. One of them was given by a research team that was jointly established by the South Korean government and the WHO. The team's report emphasized the unfamiliarity of the virus to health professionals in the country, overcrowd in emergency rooms and an insufficient number of beds, the impact of habits such as so-called "doctor-shopping", where patients seek care at several medical facilities, and visits to hospitalized patients by many friends and family members (WHO, 2015).

Another study argues that "neo-liberalization of Korean public health system over the previous two decades, the Korean government's concealing information from the public regarding the spread of the disease; and failure of multiple actors, including international health agencies, local governments and private healthcare providers to coordinate reactions to the epidemic crises" (Lim and Sziarto, 2020: 61) were critical. However, when the SARS and MERS experiences of the country are compared, an interesting point becomes prominent. Before the first SARS case was confirmed in South Korea, President Roh Moo-hyun established the Pan-government Countermeasures Support Headquarters under which the Office for Government Policy Coordination, various ministries, the National Institute of Health, local quarantine stations and health centers established a multi-organizational network to combine efforts to build strong prevention and control measures (Oh, 2020: 5). Also, under the Roh administration, the National Security Council (NSC) was expanded, and a Crisis Management Center was founded within the presidential office to work as a control tower to deal with crises. But after Roh, for political reasons, his successor nullified these emergency/crisis management systems. However, after he took office in 2017, the current President Moon reestablished the system (Lee et al., 2020a: 734). This seems to be an important parameter influencing the South Korean state's quick and efficient response to the pandemic.

Domestic Support for the Central Government's Handling of the Crisis

No major wave of criticism was directed toward the Moon administration's pandemic management. Before the pandemic emerged, there was a decline in the approval rates of the Moon government. This started to change with the government's handling of the crisis in a timely and efficient way. While a poll announced on 16 January 2020 displayed that support for Moon's party had fallen by 4.1% to 37%, in the last poll conducted

⁶ This Church's religious gatherings became a vital turning point in increasing Covid-19 cases in South Korea in February-March 2020.

before the mid-April elections, it climbed to 41% (Ryall, 2020). In addition to the Moon's coalition bloc's largest parliamentary election victory since 1987, in May 2020, his approval rating hit 71% (The Strait Times, 2020). As seen from the numbers and election results, the Moon government and his coalition bloc managed to turn the pandemic into an opportunity to consolidate their position. Besides the domestic support and approval of the administration, Moon was able to reflect this success on the international stage, as well. His inclusive handling of the pandemic within the country has been also deliberated for experience sharing on the international stage. This way, Korea became an example of a democratic regime containing the pandemic in an inclusionary manner without restricting the freedom of society.

The most critical point for South Korea was the management of the vaccine supply because the government was late in making vaccine deals. The country could only get vaccines from late February onwards, only after the vaccines were approved by related authorities (Our World in Data N.d.). In addition, the groups that would be prioritized for vaccination were also changed by the government. In the first days of August 2021, "[South] Korea is delivering first-round vaccinations to people in their mid-to-late 50s. For people in their 40s and younger, eligibility opens up later in August. Of the 51 million people here, 37.9 percent received at least one dose of a vaccine, while 13.9 percent were fully vaccinated" (Kim A., 2021). Although the vaccination was not so fast in the first months (Our World in Data N.d.), the Moon government expressed its intention to make South Korea a global vaccine hub by public-private sector cooperation (Cheong Wa Dae, 2021). This explanation was a sign of the willingness of the government to repair its image both in the eyes of South Korean society and the international community. Within a few months, the country managed to realize its goal and by mid-November 2021, 80% of the South Korean society was vaccinated (Reuters Covid-19 Tracker, 2021). In addition to steadily increasing vaccination, Moon's office expressed that "he [Moon] plans to invest 2.2 trillion won (\$2.26 billion) to turn the country into one of the world's five largest Covid-19 vaccine manufacturing bases by 2025" (The Strait Times, 2021). This move is another sign that the Moon administration took long-term decisions and precautions that will be helpful in the near future in the struggle against the pandemic. The Moon administration's plan included North Korea as well. President Moon said that "North Korea will surely become one of the countries for [vaccine] cooperation. If North Korea agrees, we will actively proceed with vaccine aid to North Korea" (VOA, 2021). This explanation was important to show that the Moon administration gave priority to cooperation with North Korea, although there were still some developments regarding the North Korean nuclear tests.

THE PRESTIGE AND INTERNATIONAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE CHINESE AND SOUTH KOREAN MODELS

When the first case of Covid-19 was formally announced in Wuhan, many might have thought this would be a local disease and would stay within China's borders. However, this expectation was not fulfilled and, eventually, the whole globe got infected. In the initial weeks, due to the chaos created by the virus and the inwardly focused attitudes of many governments, the trade of masks and other medical goods was blocked by many countries, even among members of the European Union (Lister, Shukla and Bobille, 2020; Willsher, Borger and Holmes, 2020). In due course, while western countries experienced troubles in their fight against Covid-19 (Kelland, 2020), many Asian countries, including China and South Korea, were more successful (Navarro, 2021). Despite both countries' domestic successes against the pandemic, the international acceptance and admiration of their authoritarian and liberal models followed diverging trajectories. China, notwithstanding its success in flattening the curve in a relatively short time and rapidly re-opening its economy and society, was criticized for its initial concealment of information, which in the end created a feeling of mistrust towards the country (Erlander, 2020; Silver et al., 2020). South Korea, on the other hand, at least initially, was praised by many states for its transparent and liberal approach to the pandemic, which led to the country being treated as an alternative to the model promoted by China (WHO, 2020). In brief, the international images of these two states' pandemic management models evolved in different directions.

Initially, despite its non-transparency with information, China was very well positioned to take advantage of its early triumph. During the time other countries like Italy and Spain started to implement lockdowns in March 2020, Xi Jinping visited Wuhan to declare China's success in curbing Covid-19 (BBC, 2020b). He portrayed that it was time for China to share its knowledge and experience with others and support their efforts to free themselves from the virus. In the coming weeks and months, China sent medical personnel and equipment and offered

financial assistance to many parts of the world from Europe to the Middle East and from Asia to the Americas (Kuo, 2020b; Suarez, 2020). Since, by that time, it was the only country to almost overcome Covid-19, China looked like a model for others to learn from. Hence, through its health diplomacy, the country presented itself as a model to be emulated by others. The massive lockdowns implemented in Europe and the US showed that even leaders of developed democratic Western countries were eager to follow the Chinese solution, albeit in differing ways. In other words, the time was ripe for China to increase its soft power and present itself as a benevolent and responsible power and even position itself at the center of the global health system, especially after the Trump administration started the process of leaving the WHO (BBC, 2020c) and abandoning the US leadership in the international system. To that end, at least to partially fill in the gap left by the US, the Chinese government increased the amount of funding China provides to the WHO (Shih, 2020). In short, in the aftermath of March 2020, China tried to improve its position in the global health system, shared best practices for overcoming the virus and this way, aimed to show itself as a responsible great power and improve its status in the international system.

Notwithstanding this favorable environment, for several reasons, the Chinese leadership could not benefit from it, and indeed, at least in some parts of the globe, the country's image has even been tarnished compared to the pre-Covid-19 era. Since the virus originated in China and, because of the Chinese government's inability to curb it at its source, people worldwide believe that the CPC did not act swiftly enough to stop the virus from spreading and to inform other countries about the dangers of the virus (Silver et al., 2020). To overcome this view, the Chinese government launched its intense coronavirus, and in particular, vaccine diplomacy, through which the country shared its expertise on virus management and provided medical personnel and equipment to countries in need (Zhai and Vasovic, 2020). On 18 May 2020, in his World Health Assembly speech, President Xi promised to make China-made vaccines a global public good (Pan, 2020). In line with this promise, on 6 August 2021, he stated China's intention to provide 2 billion doses of vaccines worldwide (Reuters, 2021), which was fulfilled by 2022. As of 17 January 2022, China has delivered over 2 billion doses of vaccines to more than 120 countries and international organizations. According to President Xi, China is to provide an additional billion doses to Africa, of which 600 million will be donated. Additionally, the country will donate 150 million doses to ASEAN countries (Zheng, 2022). Due to rising vaccine nationalism in the world, but especially in Western societies, China's eagerness to contribute to the vaccination efforts of the Global South, whose possibility of reaching enough numbers of vaccines is lower than the Global North, was highly appreciated by countries of the Global South. This way, coronavirus diplomacy also helped China to increase its soft power among the members of the Global South (Mendez, 2021; Vannarith, 2021). Such moves, at least initially, also resulted in promoting the country's authoritarian model of virus management. Even during the winter and spring of 2021, several liberal democracies in Europe and many countries throughout the world implemented lockdowns and hence, continued to partially emulate the Chinese model (Henley, 2021). Furthermore, on 21 May 2022, President Xi promised \$3 billion in aid to the countries of the Global South to support them in their efforts to combat Covid-19 as well as to overcome pandemic-related socioeconomic problems (Khalid, 2021). All these steps were taken as part of the Health Silk Road Initiative, an important component of the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi's signature project. The Chinese leadership promoted the link between the Health Silk Road Initiative and Covid-19 recovery efforts as vital to building a "community of common health for mankind" and a "global community of common destiny" (Mardell, 2020; Rudolf, 2021).

However, the pandemic also potentiated the so-called "wolf-warrior diplomacy", which was first instructed by Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Chinese diplomats towards the end of 2019. The main idea behind this diplomacy was to defend the government and the Party against international criticism and to fight for China's interests internationally. The pandemic and related criticism that China had to encounter exacerbated it. In line with this idea of assertive diplomacy, to divert attention from China's mistakes, Chinese diplomats launched an all-out attack by claiming that the virus was brought to Wuhan by the US military and criticizing France for abandoning the elderly Covid-19 patients. Beijing, furthermore, as a reaction to Canberra's demand for an independent inquiry on the origins of Covid-19, attacked Australia for the misbehavior of Australian soldiers in Afghanistan and imposed economic sanctions on Australia, despite the existence of a bilateral free trade agreement (BBC,

2020d; Pei, 2020b; Wu, 2021). Lastly, Chinese state media launched a wave of criticism against the viability of Western vaccines, while its vaccines suffered from low levels of efficiency⁷ (BBC, 2021).

As Lee and Kim argue a nation's ability to project positive influence and manage its nation brand depends on how the country reacts to the crisis (2021: 392). On the South Korean side, it is noteworthy to say that from the very beginning, the government expressed its willingness to openly share information about and decisions taken in its struggle against the pandemic, which helped the country's liberal model to become prominent internationally. This transparent stance was declared at the first governmental meeting conducted just after the announcement of the first Covid-19 case in the country. Although the vital importance of this point might not have been understood then, the WHO indeed emphasized it years ago during the SARS epidemic (WHO, 2005). Establishing transparent communication during the Covid-19 crisis both created a psychological calmness in the society and made South Korea a responsible, constructive and trustworthy country in the eyes of the broader international society. Therefore, one of the keys to the country's success has been its transparency in pandemic management. The election, which was successfully held in March 2020, was also crucial. South Korea was seen as an exception in the democratic world thanks to its handling of the election since including Britain, France, Chile, Bolivia, Ethiopia and more than a dozen U.S. states were pressured to postpone or cancel elections due to their inability to manage them during the pandemic (The Washington Post, 2020). This clearly contributed to the prestige of South Korea in the international sphere.

A related action of South Korea that contributed to its prestige has been experience-sharing with other states through various platforms. The country actively contributed to many regional and global platforms in discussing issues related to the pandemic. In each platform, compatible with the meetings' agenda and content, former President Moon emphasized crucial points of their experience of the liberal democratic model of pandemic management and proposed concrete steps to be followed. For example, at the online G-20 Summit on 26 March 2020, Moon said that his administration has adhered to the three principles of openness, transparency and democracy in its response to the pandemic (Cheong Wa Dae, 2020a). In addition, before the G-20 Summit, the leaders of many countries, like US President Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau, called him and asked for advice on his country's successful fight against Covid-19 (Do, 2020). South Korea's openness to cooperation and willingness to share its experience has given the country important credibility and prestige in the international system. Additionally, Moon offered to launch the "Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative for Infectious Disease Control and Public Health", which includes China, Japan, Mongolia, and North Korea as well as South Korea to handle future health crises and pave the way for peace with Pyongyang (Smith and Shin, 2020). This was another sign that South Korea was trying to prioritize regional cooperation during crises and diversify its international cooperation mechanisms.

After the G-20 Summit, on different occasions, Moon mentioned his country's eagerness to help others in their fight against Covid-19 and promoted a liberal democratic model of virus management. For example, at the ASEAN+3 Summit on 14 April 2020, he indicated his country's humanitarian aid to the ASEAN region and aim to make the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund functioning and proposed to establish an "ASEAN-ROK Health Ministers' Dialogue Channel", in addition to the ASEAN+3 Health Ministers' Meeting, thereby demonstrating the attention that South Korea gives to the region (Cheong Wa Dae, 2020b). Furthermore, at the World Health Assembly on 18 May 2020, he made three suggestions to overcome the current crisis and be prepared for the next: increasing humanitarian aid to countries with fragile health systems, supporting vaccine development activities beyond national borders and ensuring that vaccines are distributed equally to the whole world, updating WHO's international health norms and regulations and making them legally binding (Cheong Wa Dae, 2020c). Then the Foreign Affairs Minister Kang Kyung-wha also defined South Korea's approach to the pandemic as a policy of balancing containment and human rights protection (Yonhap News Agency, 2020). The country's efforts were

⁷ This might, however, change in the future. According to the first stage clinical trials of the newly developed mRNA Covid-19 vaccine by Chinese companies, the first ever China made mRNA vaccine develops 80 to 95 percent immunity (Yin, Jiang and Han 2022). Despite such news, as of October 2022, Chinese companies could not produce reliable mRNA vaccines. This failure has important negative consequences for the Chinese government both domestically and internationally. Since there is no mRNA vaccine that is effective against the current variants of the virus, the Chinese state continues to stick to its zero-Covid policy (Reuters, 2022), which creates unease among the population (Davidson and Yu, 2022). For the very same reason, China keeps its doors closed to the outside world, which isolates the country from the rest of the world in economic, political and societal terms.

not ignored in the international sphere. Also due to its timely response, South Korea was considered among the countries, alongside Germany and New Zealand, as a successful model in managing the pandemic (Bruno, 2020).

As argued by Pak, “this moment is a unique opportunity for Moon to shine on the global stage” (2020). In line with another characteristic of post-Cold War era South Korean foreign policy, President Moon emphasized the principles of multilateralism and cooperation. His suggestions are crucial also in the sense that he was among the very first, even before the leaders of major powers, to put forward these ideas. Underlining these principles as a bridge between developed and developing countries, he added that international organizations should be supported to be able to provide vaccines to all countries in need and that Korea is making efforts to achieve this aim (Cheong Wa Dae, 2020d). Thus, South Korea expressed its intention to become a model not only for its region but also for others by acting as a bridge between developed and developing countries in the world. By reflecting its internal success in the international sphere, the country’s Covid-19 success can even be called the second Korean miracle, the first referring to the fast and robust economic development following the Korean War of 1950-1953. An interesting study sheds light on the soft power of South Korea by analyzing the views of European experts. According to the study, the majority of these experts suggested that South Korea improved its public image in Europe alongside its pandemic management (Cho et al., 2020: 618). Just a few months to the third year of the pandemic, South Korea is more and more seen as a model to be emulated by others. Bouey argues that countries, including the US, should look at South Korea’s near-perfect response as a model to tackle future public health crises (2022).

CONCLUSION

China and South Korea represent two contrasting successful examples in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. While the former is the pioneer of authoritarian policies such as implementing strictly controlled lockdowns, the latter is a leading specimen of liberal democratic policies such as transparent and cooperative governance without lockdowns or curfews. As reflected in their official numbers, both the Chinese model and the South Korean model were quite successful in managing the pandemic. Based on the data of more than 200 countries, as of 20 October 2022, China, with 4 deaths per million people ranked 220th, and South Korea, with 563 deaths per million people, ranked 130th. Even though both models of pandemic management were successful against Covid-19, international images of these models and their promoter countries have evolved in very different directions. Since early 2020, because of China’s highly efficient and successful pandemic management, to fight against Covid-19, many governments, including Western liberal democracies, followed the authoritarian Chinese model and implemented curfews and even locked down their regions and countries. However, this is a hard-to-implement model that requires a strong central government that can control, or at least guide, local governments as well as its people and enforce its will upon them. It also necessitates a high-capacity state that can provide the necessary personnel, equipment and consumer goods during a strict lockdown. These requirements make it hard for most countries to fully emulate the Chinese model. Furthermore, in addition to its initial mishandling of the virus and concealment of information, as China burst into prominence internationally with wolf-warrior diplomacy, rather than its parallel benevolent coronavirus diplomacy, the country lost its chance of being accepted as the model to be emulated in the struggle against Covid-19 and this way, win the hearts of global, or at least Western, community and position itself at the center of the global health system. However, the same diplomacy helped the central government to at least initially win the hearts of many Chinese people and this way to increase their support for the government, while the coronavirus diplomacy helped China to be appreciated by many members of the Global South.

South Korea, on the other hand, has been very successful in developing a highly appreciated liberal democratic model of virus management. At the beginning of the pandemic, South Korea, as a result of its success in combatting the pandemic, emerged as a notable actor in the discussions of whether democracies, compared to authoritarian states, were not doing well in the fight against Covid-19. In other words, South Korea’s initial response increased the hope that not only authoritarian countries but also democracies can be successful in controlling the pandemic as well. This discussion primarily stemmed from the initial incapability of many Western democracies, such as Italy, Spain, the UK and the US, to handle the health crisis created by the pandemic. In this regard, South Korea was remarkable to show that a middle power can do better than the great powers. This

comparison might encourage future studies on Korean leadership among niche areas like health diplomacy and health cooperation. One of the underlying elements of this democratic regimes vs. authoritarian regimes debate was the view that authoritarian regimes were successful in taking quick decisions and imposing lockdowns and curfews while putting some human rights such as the right to travel into the background. On the other hand, democratic regimes were less eager to restrict the daily lives of the people and were trying to keep the balance between public health and liberties. Although South Korea permits the acquisition of health-related monitoring data without a prior court order during infectious disease outbreaks, it has also set time and bureaucratic scope restrictions on the collection and preservation of digital data (Greitens, 2020: E184). With its open, transparent and liberal approach, South Korea's model has been acclaimed, both domestically and internationally. Botto argued that South Korea's well-governed pandemic response enhanced the country's international image as a competent democracy and a responsible international actor (2020). Even so, compared to the Chinese model, the South Korean model has not been widely emulated by other countries. Still, especially due to its features of transparency and open communication and its ability to curb the virus without resorting to lockdown measures, it seems to provide a more liberal model for people and governments in fighting the pandemic, whose importance and usefulness might be appreciated and implemented in a future pandemic.

Moreover, as reflected in the introduction, although there are several comparative studies regarding different countries' pandemic management, most of these studies concentrate on national responses and domestic elements of pandemic management while overlooking the international dimension of the issue. In this regard, this paper shed light on the international dimension and shows how two different cases have been perceived globally. This, in return, provides a ground for further discussions on what kind of policies shall countries follow to prepare themselves for similar global public health crises in the future. Since such crises, pandemics as well as other types of crises, require keeping a balance between public health and the rights of the society, different pandemic management experiences of China and South Korea might show a pathway for all countries to follow in the future.

Finally, since, during the initial stages of the pandemic, former President Moon was invited to many international organizations' forums and meetings to offer lessons from South Korea's successful pandemic management experience, the diplomatic appearance of the country increased noticeably. As a result, the country's potential to create new mechanisms for its public diplomacy, increase its prestige in the global community and strengthen its leadership role in non-traditional security areas has strengthened. This topic might be the subject of future academic studies. Similarly, China's desire to improve its position in the global health system with its Covid-19 diplomacy and Health Silk Road Initiative as well as its intensive public diplomacy in different regions of the world during the pandemic also requires academic attention.

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