

Fighting the Pandemic with “Shields”: Successful COVID-19 Securitization and Mask Policy in Taiwan

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jas**Chia-Chien Chang**

National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan

Wei-Ting Yen 

Franklin & Marshall College, USA

Li-Yin Liu

University of Dayton, USA

Abstract

Facemasks have been proven an effective non-pharmaceutical measure against coronavirus disease-19. Against the backdrop of global mask shortages, Taiwan distinguished herself from other countries in that Taiwan took a whole-of-nation approach to masks and mobilized the society quickly to become self-sufficient in masks. This paper argues that successful virus securitization as a threat to national security was what enabled Taiwan to effectively mobilize the private sector to carry out the state's will in ensuring adequate mask supply. Moreover, Taiwan securitized the virus more successfully than many other countries because the virus was connected to China, the nation's existing security threat.

Keywords

COVID-19, securitization, virus securitization, surgical masks, Taiwan, whole-of-nation

In the face of the unknown virus, our top guideline is: never underestimate the enemy, and get ready to fight the enemy with our utmost effort.

—Chen Shih-chung, Taiwan Minister of Health and Welfare and Commander-in-Chief of Taiwan Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC; 6 January 2020)

Corresponding author:

Wei-Ting Yen, Government Department, Franklin & Marshall College, P.O. Box 3003, Lancaster, PA 17604-3003, USA.

Email: wyen@fandm.edu

Our goals are clear. We know who we are fighting for and what we are fighting for.

—Lai Yung-Hsiang, CEO of Taiwan Precision Machinery Research & Development Center (*Liberty Times Net*, February, 2020)

Introduction

Facing the global pandemic, Taiwan stands out as a unique case. As a small state geographically close to China where the first coronavirus disease (COVID)-19 outbreak appeared, Taiwan has maintained its resilience in fighting COVID-19 with low fatality and infection rates. Taiwan's COVID-19 success is in part a result of adequate surgical mask supply and high mask wearing compliance, which is proven to be one of the most effective non-pharmaceutical measures against the spread of respiratory diseases (Chua et al., 2020). Amid the global shortage of facemasks, mask abundance enabled Taiwanese people to live in the “bubble of normality” for the most part of the pandemic before vaccines were available (The Conversation, 2020).

Taiwan's mask-related measures vividly embody her whole-of-nation approach to combat the COVID-19 crisis. A whole-of-nation response requires intergovernmental (i.e. central–central and central–local) coordination as well as state–society (i.e. public–private and government–citizens) mobilization (Hsieh et al., 2021). In the case of surgical masks, after the first COVID-19 case was spotted, the government quickly imposed mask export bans, centralized mask distribution, and deployed a rationing system to ensure sufficient mask supplies for medical professionals and the public. Around the same time, many countries also adopted similar measures and announced export bans and hoarded masks to tackle the surge (Stickings, 2020). What distinguished Taiwan from other countries and illustrated her whole-of-nation approach to masks was that the government planned further and invested in mask production lines. A “National Mask Team” was formed through public–private partnership to ramp up mask production. Before the pandemic, Taiwan imported most of its face masks from China and domestic mask production capacity was only around 1.8 million masks per day. Within 2 months of the first COVID-19 case, Taiwan successfully mobilized the private sector and increased mask supply from 1.8 million to 10 million per day in March, and the number jumped to 20 million per day in May 2020. Taiwan became not only self-sufficient in mask supply but was also able to launch “mask diplomacy” and donate masks to other countries.

Why and how did Taiwan manage to develop and implement a whole-of-nation and self-sufficient approach to surgical masks so early? How did the government immediately gain citizens' and private industries' support and cooperation for its actions? How did cross-level government agencies manage to work together and produce a coordinated response swiftly?

In this article, we use the securitization theory to explain Taiwan's surgical mask policies. We argue that Taiwan's successful securitization of the coronavirus as a threat to national security explains her whole-of-nation approach to masks during the crisis. In particular, Taiwan was able to securitize the virus more successfully than many other countries (e.g. the United Kingdom, Brazil, and South Korea to name just a few) because the virus was connected to the nation's existing security threats, namely, the geopolitical threat of China. Successful virus securitization enabled the nation to effectively mobilize the private sector to carry out the state's will in ensuring adequate mask supply.

Examining Taiwan's successful securitization of the coronavirus and its effects also help bridge some gaps in the virus securitization literature. First, existing virus securitization research focuses on acts of securitization at the elite level (see, for example, Hoffman, 2020; Kirk and McDonald, 2021; Stott et al., 2020); yet, the act of securitization is only a necessary condition for successful securitization (Ciuta, 2009; McInnes and Rushton, 2010). The act of securitization does not

automatically lead to successful securitization. For example, in the United States, Donald Trump also labeled himself “a wartime president” combating COVID-19 (Oprysko and Luthi, 2020), but Americans remained very divided on how to handle the virus. In this article, we argue that virus securitization is more likely to succeed when the virus is connected to a nation’s existing security threats (see, for example, Gaudino, 2020; McInnes and Rushton, 2010; Singer, 2002).

Second, existing studies focus heavily on the performing aspect of issue securitization (see, for example, Kirk and McDonald, 2021; Pfrimer and Barbosa, 2020) at the cost of inadequate attention paid to the buy-in aspect of the targeted citizens (Balzacq, 2005; McInnes and Rushton, 2011). Successful securitization requires not only the “selling” of securitization discourse by political elites but also the “buy-ins” of the targeted citizens (McInnes and Rushton, 2011). Using Taiwan’s case, this article provides direct evidence of both the acts of persuasion by political elites and the acts of support by targeted citizens, completing the loop of successful securitization.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The second section provides a brief overview of Taiwan’s mask policy success, highlighting key policy decisions and development since January 2020. The third section introduces the securitization theory as our analytical starting point and identifies key observable implications of successful securitization. The fourth section provides empirical evidence of Taiwan’s successful securitization of COVID-19. In particular, we show that the government explicitly connected the virus to China, the nation’s existing security threat, to strengthen the depth of the threat. We end the article with a discussion on the theoretical contribution Taiwan’s COVID-19 case can make in the fifth section.

Taiwan’s mask policy success

Mask policy is Taiwan’s signature effort in the fight against COVID-19 and is widely recognized as one of the most crucial foundational policies that paved the way for Taiwan’s success story (Yen, 2020). Taiwan’s mask-related policies can be grouped into four categories: export suspension, price control and rationing, supply expansion through government-invested production lines, and mask diplomacy.

On 24 January 2020, 4 days after Taiwan’s first COVID-19 case, the government announced the suspension of all surgical and N-95 mask exports for 1 month and extended the export suspension twice till the end of May. The mask export ban was conditionally lifted on 1 June 2020. Taiwanese residents were then allowed to ship up to 30 masks to relatives overseas every 2 months. Mask manufacturers were also free from the export ban if their mask production capacity exceeded their assigned production quota used to support the domestic needs.

Besides mask export suspension, the government also imposed price controls and centralized mask distribution to stabilize domestic demand at the beginning of the crisis. To prevent panic buying, the government first imposed price controls and limited the purchasing to three masks per person on 28 January 2020. A few days later, the government had completely centralized mask distribution, disallowing businesses from selling masks privately. On 6 February 2020, the government combined mask distribution with the National Health Insurance (NHI) cards to create a name-based mask rationing system, allowing each cardholder to purchase two masks per week. More than 300 local public health centers started distributing face masks under the name-based program on 16 February 2020.

Meanwhile, on the mask supply side, the government announced NT\$180 million (US\$6.66 million) investment to purchase new supply lines for surgical masks and started recruiting technician teams to build mask production lines on 31 January 2020. The national mask team—which composed of 3241 technicians through the coordination between the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA), Precision Machinery Research Development Center (PMC), and Taiwan Machine Tool

and Accessory Builder's Association (TMBA)—were established and handed the responsibility to build 60 mask production lines by early March, 2020. On February 26, Premier Su Tseng-chang announced another NT\$90 million investment for an additional 32 mask production lines (Executive Yuan, 2020b). The two investments together ramped up Taiwan's daily mask production from 1.8 million to 10 million in March and to 20 million in May 2020.

The investment on mask production not only helped Taiwan build enough strategic stockpiles of masks, but also enabled Taiwan to launch its "mask diplomacy"—the "Taiwan can help" campaign. Beginning in April, 2020, Taiwan started donating 10 million masks to the United States, Italy, Spain and nine other European countries as well as smaller nations who had diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Later, Taiwan expanded its mask donations to other parts of the world, including Southeast Asia, South Asia, Latin America, and South Africa. By the end of July, 2020, over 51 million had been donated worldwide from Taiwan.

Interestingly, many countries also imposed export bans and centralized mask distribution around the same time. However, very few countries were able to mobilize and coordinate the society to form a national mask team and to increase mask production at the same speed and scale. The whole-of-nation approach requires collaborative efforts from all parts of government and society. Two problems can easily arise during government-society mobilization and coordination. First, severe collective action problems can easily impede large-scale national mobilization. For example, for a national mask-production program to be successful, it requires close collaboration between the state and market. The state has to mobilize and persuade a substantial portion of the industry to implement and carry out the state's commands. It can be very costly to monitor and ensure business cooperation especially in democracies where compliance cannot be achieved purely through authoritative mandates (Yen and Liu, 2021). Because the monitoring costs are high, companies have great incentives to free ride and secretly hoard and sell masks for higher prices, disrupting the mobilization efforts.

Second, such an approach requires continuous coordination between different parts of the government that routinely do not work together. Incongruent coordination can easily generate principal-agent problems between bureaucrats of different governmental agencies at different levels. Since enforcing central commands can bear huge costs as well, bureaucrats in various departments have great incentives and opportunities to shirk the responsibilities and pass the buck to other departments. As such, it is worth an explanation why and how Taiwan managed to solve the collective action problem and the principal-agent problem and launched a whole-of-nation approach to surgical masks so early and effectively.

Moving beyond normal politics: virus securitization

To understand Taiwan's whole-of-nation approach to masks, in particular the ability to mobilize and coordinate society for massive mask production, the securitization theory provides us a useful analytical lens. In this section, we articulate our argument through evaluating three aspects of the securitization theory: components of securitization performance, dimensions of issues to be securitized, the securitized audience, and the effect of successful securitization.

Securitization performance

National security ranks highest in priority for every modern state. By labeling something as a security threat, national sovereignty is legitimized to invoke emergency clauses and take extraordinary measures to block the development of the security threat (Buzan et al., 1998: 21–26). Issue securitization is different from issue politicalization in that securitization pertains to sovereignty survival.

An issue is successfully securitized when it is presented and accepted as posing an existential threat to a state (Buzan et al., 1998: 21). According to the securitization theory, an issue becomes a national security issue not because something constitutes an objective threat to the state. Rather, national security can be the product of a political speech act that constructs a security issue or situation (Buzan et al., 1998).

The act of securitization performance requires a securitizing actor. A securitizing actor defines something as an existential threat and proposes emergency measures. A securitizer is like a norm-entrepreneur. He or she tries to convince the general public of the existence of a threatening issue and conveys the implicit message that “if it is not handled now, it will be too late, and we will not exist to remedy the failure” (Buzan et al., 1998: 21). There can be multiple securitizers in a country, but not all political elites are suitable candidates for being securitizers. The securitizing actor should possess social capital or authority. Social capital, such as public trust or societal solidarity, can help the “securitizer” persuade the public of the existential threat more easily (Buzan et al., 1998: 32–33).

Balzacq (2005) argues that securitizers’ credibility and authority are hinged on three interlinked sources. (1) Power position: actors that hold influential positions in the security field are more likely to successfully securitize an issue because they have more political leverage. (2) Knowledge/expertise: because ordinary citizens have asymmetric access to information, they tend to hold the assumption that a given securitizing actor knows better and more about what is going on, and what works for common interests. (3) Trust: public trust strengthens the legitimacy for the securitizing actors to take exceptional actions. Public trust and public support are mutually reinforcing.

Securitization performance also requires securitization language in the securitizer’s public speeches because the process of securitization is a speech act. Specifically, the speech act of the securitizing move must follow “the grammar of security.” In other words, the speech must construct a plot including the existential threat, the point of no return, and a possible way out when the securitizing actor makes a securitizing move (Buzan et al., 1998: 32–33). Through identifying an existential threat, the securitizing actor presumably can garner the most power to enact exceptional measures.

Issue dimension

Since issue securitization is a political performance, the “objects” to be securitized are not limited to traditional national security issues. Non-traditional security issues are often labeled as security threats to enable the use of extraordinary measures (Elbe, 2006). Epidemics are good examples. Nations and international organizations (e.g. World Health Organization (WHO)) have strategically securitized epidemics—including HIV/AIDS, SARS, H1N1, EBOLA, ZIKA, and the current COVID-19—to transform health issues into high-level political agendas for more effective responses (Hanrieder and Kreuder-Sonnen, 2014; Kirk and McDonald, 2021; McInnes and Rushton, 2010, 2011).

Unlike traditional national security threats, securitization of public health issues broadens the scope of threats to include viruses that “attack” human security (Chen et al., 2003; Kristofferson, 2000; Leen, 2004; Ogata and Sen, 2003) and political and economic stability (Garrett, 1996; Price-Smith, 2002). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, countries like Australia, Hungary, South Korea, and the United Kingdom all followed similar rhetoric to securitize the coronavirus, which is that “we” are at war with COVID-19 to defend our basic human security (Stott et al., 2020; Kirk, 2020; Molnár et al., 2020).

Even though we know that many nations use securitization language to frame COVID-19 as a national threat, the attempt to securitize public health issues does not guarantee successful

securitization (McInnes and Rushton, 2010). Portraying a virus or an epidemic as an “enemy” is often not enough for successful securitization. The securitization theory states that an issue is more likely to be viewed as a security threat when such an issue or object can be linked to objects generally regarded as threatening –such as tanks, hostile sentiments, or polluted waters (Buzan et al., 1998: 32–33). Therefore, tying virus/disease threats to existing traditional security issues can boost the effectiveness of the securitizing act. Such evidence was found in previous epidemics. For example, in the AIDS epidemic, Uganda was considered as a successful example in securitizing the HIV virus because the virus was widely spread among their armed forces, which was deleterious to their military training collaborations (International Crisis Group, 2004). Staff members of UN peace-keepers oftentimes were the agents spreading the virus, prompting international organizations to treat it as a security issue (McInnes and Rushton, 2010).

Emerging studies on COVID-19 securitization fall short of identifying the complexity involved in securitizing a pandemic. They mainly focus on analyzing elites’ securitizing moves, such as the use of language, rather than discussing how COVID-19 intersects with the existing national security threats (see, for example, Hoffman, 2020; Kirk and McDonald, 2021; Stott et al., 2020). For countries that successfully securitize the coronavirus, we should find signs of connecting the virus to issues or objects generally considered threatening to citizens.

Securitized audience and effects of successful securitization

According to the securitization theory, securitization performance is only a necessary condition of successful securitization. The move needs to be accepted by the audience (i.e. citizens) to be considered complete. In other words, the proclaimed existential threat has to gain enough resonance and echo from the citizens to become a “real” threat. When the majority of the audience accepts that they are at the point of no return and it is necessary to take some urgent actions immediately, extraordinary measures are enacted with legitimacy, causing transformative effects on the relationship between the governing (the securitizing actor, the state) and the governed (the audience, the citizens). As such, issue securitization is not only about how actors perform the securitizing moves. It should be viewed as a mutual agreement process between the actor and the audience (McInnes and Rushton, 2011). The securitization process is about how the securitizers “sell” the threat and how the audience “buys” the rhetoric.

Nevertheless, when examining emerging research on COVID-19 securitization, this intersubjectivity between securitizers and the targeted audience has been neglected. Existing studies mainly focus on how the securitizing actors give securitization speeches and use the securitization language, such as “at war,” to portray COVID-19 as a national security threat (Kirk and McDonald, 2021). How and whether the audience buys into securitization has rarely been discussed. In addition, securitizations can be a multi-level process with multiple actors and audiences involved in the process (McInnes and Rushton, 2011). Securitizers may use different metaphors or tactics to sell the threats to different audiences. Existing studies neither identify the diversity of the audience nor examine how different securitization tactics were utilized by the actors.

Finally, no evidence of successful securitization has been clearly discussed. Previous studies on securitizing COVID-19 often treat the use of illiberal government measures as evidence of securitization because successful securitization led to exceptionalism (Kirk, 2020). However, the use of exceptional measures is not solely driven by securitization. A state’s capacity also determines whether the state can initiate these measures. It is also possible that the public has been successfully securitized but the government fails to perform (Elbe, 2006; Kirk and McDonald, 2021). Moreover, exceptional measures can be initiated even without the use of securitization languages. For example, New Zealand prevented the use of terms that are related to threats to describe

COVID-19, but it was able to implement a series of stringent policies to contain the spread of COVID-19 (Kirk and McDonald, 2021). Therefore, how to present solid evidence of securitization is worth further examination and discussion.

We reckon that if a state can achieve successful securitization of a public health crisis; that is, if a state can successfully persuade their citizens that a public health crisis is a national security emergency, it can create mechanisms to overcome the collective action problem and the principal–agent problem associated with the centralized mobilization approach. Specifically, by successfully “enemizing” existential threats, the general public becomes aware that they are facing a common threat and the danger is socialized. The sentiment can generate a social consensus on shared sacrifices, which alleviates the collective action problem and boosts social compliance with policies. In addition, an external security threat can enhance internal cohesion within the government, which reduces internal conflicts among bureaucrats. Hence, the principal–agent problem can be significantly attenuated too.

In sum, building on the existing securitization literature, to successfully securitize COVID-19, we argue that it is necessary to (1) explore the intersection between COVID-19 and the existing national security issue, (2) recognize the significance of the audience and examine the audience’s buy-in in the securitization process, and (3) better document the direct evidence of securitization. We also identify some observable implications of successful securitization. First, there should be clear securitization performance with credible securitizers and the language of war. Second, we should also observe the buy-ins from different segments of the society through citizens supporting the exceptional measures the government takes. Third, we should also observe that securitizers would connect the object/issue to be securitized to existing national security threats. Such linkage should help securitize the object/issue more successfully.

The process and effect of COVID-19 securitization in Taiwan

To illustrate how Taiwan successfully securitized COVID-19, we conducted a qualitative case analysis of Taiwan’s COVID-19 response at the early stage from 31 December 2019 to 31 December 2020. We collected our empirical evidence from reliable sources, including government documents (i.e. news releases from different governmental agencies and officially documented speeches), daily press conferences, news reporting from major media outlets, and documentary films. We focused on the process of early decision making in Taiwan’s policy responses.

This section follows the organization of the third section, in which we divide the securitization theory into three aspects, and present the empirical evidence in the same order. We show that successful securitization requires not only the “selling” of securitization discourse by political elites using securitization languages but also the “buy-ins” by the targeted citizens. Moreover, the fear of international isolation due to China’s interference also enabled the Taiwan government to securitize the coronavirus successfully as a threat to national security, which enabled Taiwan’s nationwide coordination and mobilization of masks as war time reserve. Bureaucrats, citizens, and mask manufacturers supported the government measures wholeheartedly, which minimizes severity of the free rider and principal–agent problems.

The performance of COVID-19 securitization

To execute securitization performance, the following components are essential: securitizers (Entrepreneurs of Securitization) and language of securitization. Based on the criteria of power position, knowledge/expertise, and public trust (Balzacq, 2005), there are four main securitizing entrepreneurs in Taiwan at the onset of the pandemic.

Securitizers

CHEN Shih-chung. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Chen Shih-chung has been one of the key leaders in Taiwan's pandemic governance. Chen holds the highest position at the Ministry of Health and Welfare (2020), and has been appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) since January 23. With the expertise and power, Chen immediately identified COVID-19 as a serious threat when alarming information was circulating on social media about a local outbreak in Wuhan China on 30 December 2019. Chen took swift actions to securitize the disease by treating it as a "real enemy." On 5 January, Chen held a meeting in the Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and stated (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 2020b):

In the face of the unknown virus, our top guideline is: never underestimate the enemy, and get ready to fight the enemy with our utmost effort.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Chen kept reiterating that fighting COVID-19 is like waging a real war. For example, in March 2020, Chen published an article titled *Fighting COVID-19 Is Like Waging A Real War: Fight Together to Protect the Health of Nation*. Chen (2020) stated,

fighting COVID-19 is going to be a long battle . . . everyone needs to work together . . . we are all part of the Taiwan national team." Chen also depicts the pandemic as "the invisible enemy."

TSAI Ing-wen. As the president of Taiwan and commander-in-chief, Tsai Ing-wen is the core decision maker on every issue relevant to Taiwan's national security. In addition, on 11 January 2020 Tsai won her second presidential term with a landslide victory with a historic record of 8.17 million votes, a new record since Taiwan's direct presidential elections began in 1996. With the unparalleled political power and perhaps highest public support, Tsai played the decisive role in securitizing the pandemic. When the situation in China lost control in mid-January, Tsai immediately held the national security meetings (one on 22 January and the other on 30 January). The meetings paved the way for the military to join the campaigns against COVID-19, including manufacturing facemasks (Central News Agency (CNA), 2020c) and conducting sanitizing/disinfection missions (Voice of Han Broadcasting Network, 2020). In her public address and social media messages after the meetings, Tsai stated: "we will fight COVID-19 as waging a real war," which set the main theme of Taiwan's national model of combating COVID-19 (Office of the President, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Tsai, 2020b).

SU Tseng-chang and his Cabinet. As the premier, Su Tseng-chang led his cabinet to launch and oversee national mobilization programs for combating COVID-19, including enacting the facemask-rationing programs and building the national facemask teams. On 24 January, Su Tseng-chang led his cabinet to enact an export ban on facemasks, the first nation in the world to do so (Bureau of Foreign Trade, Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA), 2020). Su (2020a) justified the policy by reiterating that "the campaign against COVID-19 is like a real war campaign." Then, Su and his cabinet launched a series of programs to requisition masks, centralize mask production and distribution, making Taiwan the first state to use wartime economic doctrine to manage the supply of masks. During the meeting with his cabinet members on 30 January, Su pointed out:

Masks are now crucial war reserve stocks . . . Every member should be ready in his or her combat position, and make the utmost effort to hold his or her ground . . . nationwide effort is necessary . . . we need to unite together to fight this invisible enemy. (Executive Yuan, 2020a)

CHEN Chien-jen. Chen Chien-jen, then vice president of Taiwan, is well known for his expertise in epidemiology and public health. He was one of the top public health officials during the SARS crisis in 2003, and he pushed a series of reforms to prepare Taiwan for the next outbreak, including building isolation wards and virus research laboratories (Hernández and Horton, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chen utilized scientific evidence to demonstrate the necessities and effectiveness of the Taiwan model for combating COVID-19. Chen's reputation, professionalism, and leadership help develop strong confidence in government among the medical and health epistemic community, as well as foster a sense of solidarity.

Chen has long recognized the threat of public health crises to Taiwan's security. During an interview in 2003, Chen reflected on the lesson of SARS and said: "Fighting an epidemic is like waging a war." Chen even quoted *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese ultimate master of war, to depict the best strategy toward the pandemic: "Do not depend on the enemy not coming; depend rather on being ready for him" (Teng, 2003). Chen's SARS experience also made him think self-sufficiency is fundamental for Taiwan to survive another epidemic. Therefore, besides supporting the establishment of national facemask teams, Chen fervently championed the pursuit of national vaccines. Chen put it bluntly: "The vaccine industry is the national defense and security industry, so it is crucial to have our own national vaccine production" (Central News Agency (CNA), 2021).

Language: the use of war metaphors. The above-mentioned securitizers enemized COVID-19 and invoked a sense of war emergency swiftly after spotting the emergency of the then unknown coronavirus. The Taiwan government immediately notified the WHO about China's situation on 31 December 2019 (Central News Agency (CNA), 2020a). On 2 January 2020, Su Tseng-chang held a cabinet meeting to discuss how a disease outbreak in Wuhan might threaten Taiwan, and how the government should respond (Executive Yuan, 2020c). Immediately, on 5 January Chen Shih-chung announced the top guideline for combating the pandemic. In Chen's statement, he enemized the then unknown virus: "Do not underestimate the enemy, prepare for the worst and fight with our utmost effort" (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 2020b).

As the situation in China lost control and Taiwan identified the first patient from Wuhan on 20 January, president Tsai Ing-wen immediately resorted to the war metaphor to invoke a sense of national emergency. On 21 and 22 January, Tsai made several public statements and set the main tone for combating COVID-19: "fighting COVID-19 is like waging a real war" (Office of the President, 2020c).

On 23 January, premier Su Tseng-chang appointed Chen Shih-chung as the commander-in-chief of the CECC, and the alert level was raised to a level 2. Su kept reiterating "the fight against COVID-19 is like a real war" (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 2020a). On 30 January, during the meeting with his cabinet members Su again invoked war rhetoric to mobilize the bureaucracy:

We all should be ready in our combat positions, and make the utmost effort to hold our ground . . . we and the nation need to unite together to fight this invisible enemy. (Executive Yuan, 2020a)

"War" language and metaphors appear everywhere in the fight against COVID-19. For instance, one of the core principles of the Taiwan pandemic governance is "early deployment." That is, to deploy a series of response strategies before the situation gets worse, and always prepare for the

worst (Chen, 2021). Such a principle is not an innovation by bureaucracy. In fact, the term first appeared in the military playbooks—the 2009 National Defense Report (Ministry of National Defense, 2009, 2011) National Defense Report (Ministry of National Defense, 2011). The National Defense Reports state that one of the army's core missions is to deal with nontraditional threats such as disaster prevention, disaster relief, and humanitarian aid. The central principle conducting those missions is “early deployment: prepare for disasters in advance, deploy troops preemptively, and ensure readiness for rescue operations.”

Another tactic bureaucrats borrowed from the military playbook is the organizing principle of the CECC. The CECC designed its organizational structure into three sections: intelligence section, combat operation section, and the logistics section. There are striking parallels between the CECC organizational structure and command-and-control system for military operations (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2020). Although we cannot emphasize enough that bureaucrats and public health experts played an essential and decisive role in Taiwan's CECC, we found that their use of paramilitary language to invoke a sense of war emergency is quite frequent.

Under the constant usage of military terms in the COVID-19 crisis, the Taiwanese government also swiftly termed facemasks as war reserve stocks and centralized their production as well as distribution. Back during the 2003 SARS outbreak, when the capacity to cope with the epidemic was relatively low, the Taiwanese public was educated on the importance of masks in containing the spread of disease. Since then, the public has perceived a strong connection between the need for masks and respiratory-related epidemics. The four main entrepreneurs of securitization played a crucial role in the decision to make mask war reserve stocks. On 22 January, during the press briefing after the first national security meeting, president Tsai (2020) emphasized that masks are crucial goods for fighting the war on COVID-19. Two days later, Taiwan started to ban mask exports. This policy received criticisms from some segments of society, including some politicians and celebrities, arguing that the government should permit the mask export to China out of humanitarian concerns (Li, 2020). Premier Su (2020) immediately responded:

Our uppermost job, and the government's uppermost job, is to protect our citizens and nation. Fighting COVID-19 is like a war. Some measures may cause inconvenience, but it is the sacrifice we have to make.

On 30 January, Su held a meeting with his cabinet and specifically pointed out “masks are now crucial war reserve stocks . . . we need to do our best to increase the production. In addition, we have to prevent hoarding or rising prices of masks” (Executive Yuan, 2020a). On 1 February, the CECC announced that it already requisitioned all the nation's medical and surgical masks since 31 January. The CECC called these masks “war-reserve masks” and set the central guideline for national distribution and rationing (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 2020c). On 17 February, president Tsai Ing-wen visited one of the national mask team and stated:

One lesson we are learning from this epidemic is that under emergencies we need to possess our own national production capacities for strategic assets or war reserve stocks, such as masks or other PPEs. (Office of the President, 2020d)

Since surgical masks have been considered war reserve materials, mask supply has also been a critical topic for the government to stabilize public mood and mobilize social support. On 21 January 2020, when the first COVID-19 case arrived in Taiwan, Prime Minister Su Tseng-chang immediately announced that “the government has 1.93 million N95 masks and 44 million surgical masks in the national inventory no need to overstock the masks” to prevent

public panic. Thus, under this context, face masks became Taiwan's main "shield" for fighting the war on COVID-19.

Linking COVID-19 to geopolitical threat of China

Attempting to securitize a non-traditional security issue (like a public health crisis) is one thing; yet the attempt does not always lead to successful securitization. Political elites may want to convince the public of the threatening enemy, but such efforts may not yield agreeing citizens. Research shows that a non-traditional security issue can be securitized more successfully when such an issue is linked to objects that are already regarded as threatening by citizens, (Buzan et al., 1998: 32–33; Hoffman, 2020; Stott et al., 2020).

An enabling condition for securitizing the pandemic in Taiwan is that the threat perception of COVID-19 was interwoven with the geopolitical threat of China and the fear of international isolation due to China's political interference based on the past SARS experience.

Taiwan had one of the highest fatality rates in the world during the 2003 SARS crisis (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 2003). At the time, China's opaque handling of the epidemic and the active diplomatic blockade against Taiwan negatively impacted Taiwan's SARS governance. When the first local outbreak appeared in Guangzhou, China did not immediately disclose the information. As the situation in Taiwan worsened, Taiwanese public health officials and epidemiologists went to the WHO, hoping that the WHO could share the information about the virus strains and samples. The information was crucially important for public health authorities to conduct testing and contact tracing in time. However, the WHO refused to share the information directly and asked Taiwan to approach China. Mei-Shang Ho, a Taiwanese epidemiologist who sought help from the WHO, recalled the troubling experience: "Knowing the information is there but not being able to get it is truly frustrating." Yuan-Tsong Chen, then director of the Institute of Biomedical Sciences at the Academia Sinica in Taipei, also said "We can't get any information from the WHO" (Cyranoski, 2003). So, the Taiwanese government sent experts to China. However, as vice President Chen Chien-jen recalled:

China did not share the virus samples and information. What it gave us was something we already got on the news media, but that is of little use . . . we then worked with some Hong Kong Universities and they agreed to send the samples of virus strains they experimented, but they said they needed to get "final approval." In the end, they never got any approval and nor did they send the samples . . . Fortunately, the US CDC provided the virus samples and information . . . but how could China be so cruel? China refused to give us the information of the virus strains! It is really a sad story! (The Storm Media, 2020)

The 2003 SARS crisis thus made President Tsai (2003), then the Minister of Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), openly criticize China's handling of the epidemic:

The outbreak of the SARS epidemic in Taiwan and elsewhere was caused by China's choice of concealing the epidemic information and lack of transparency. The situation was further exacerbated by the Chinese Communist Party's diplomatic blockade of Taiwan's participation in the WHO . . . it caused a lot of harm to Taiwanese people's feeling.

The exclusion of Taiwan from the international health regime thus heightens the threat that if Taiwan falls into a public health crisis, it is expected to be extremely difficult, if not totally impossible, to receive external help under China's clout. It also shows Taiwan that there is a substantial risk of dependence on China. Since 2016, due to the deteriorating Cross-Strait relations, China has conducted

several rounds of economic coercion and sanctions against Taiwan. Given that the majority of Taiwan's masks were imported from China before 2020 (Central News Agency (CNA), 2020b), Taiwan became acutely vigilant when a public health threat was looming.

Before COVID-19, there have been other epidemic situations in which distrusting China propelled Taiwan to take securitizing moves. For instance, in 2019, the African Swine Fever started to spread in China. The African Swine Fever poses no threat to human health, and cannot be transmitted from pigs to humans. However, Tsai immediately held a national security meeting and stated: "the combat against the African Swine Fever is going to be a long 'war . . .'. Due to the current epidemic situation in China, Taiwan needs to be prepared for a long war." In the same speech, Tsai also urged China to be transparent about its domestic epidemic situation (Office of the President, 2019).

Similar rhetoric was used in Taiwan's campaign against COVID-19. After the national security meetings on 22 January, Tsai publicly stated:

Our top guideline for combating COVID-19 is: never underestimate the enemy, and prepare for early deployment We particularly urge China to fulfill its international obligations, to be open and transparent and fully sharing accurate information about the endemic with Taiwan. China should not allow political motives to override human lives. (Office of the President, 2020c)

In the same statement, Tsai also urged the WHO "to not exclude Taiwan due to political factors. Taiwan is at the battlefield of the endemic, and the WHO must have room for Taiwan's participation" (Office of the President, 2020c).

Taiwan's distrust toward China can also be observed in the speed of Taiwan's crisis activation. Back in December 2019, the Chinese authority denied the information of the endemic, causing the WHO (2020) to suggest that "China has found no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission of the virus." Nevertheless, the Taiwanese government did not trust China's opaque handling of the disease. The Taiwanese public health authority warned the WHO on 31 December 2019 about the alarming situation in China, and simultaneously activated enhanced border control and quarantine measures immediately (Taiwan Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 2020d).

Last, in early 2020, the then unknown novel coronavirus was called "the Wuhan Pneumonia." In March 2020, after the WHO officially named the disease "COVID-19," all countries followed suit. Nevertheless, the Taiwanese government continued using "the Wuhan Pneumonia" for an extensive period of time. Despite the claim that using "the Wuhan Pneumonia" was for clear communication purposes (Central News Agency (CNA), 2020d), an issue facing all countries at the time, using the term "Wuhan" helped strengthen the linkage between China and the virus.

The securitized national mask team

Linking the coronavirus to the long-existing geopolitical threat posed by China increased the urgency of tackling the virus. As mentioned in the third section, virus securitization is only complete when such rhetoric is accepted and endorsed by the targeted audience—the mask manufacturers in this case. It should be observed that when an issue is successfully securitized, it increases social solidarity and a sense of civic duty, leading to higher and enduring public/the private sector support for state intervention. The "audience" becomes aware that they are facing a common threat and the danger is socialized. The sentiment can also generate a social consensus on shared sacrifices, which alleviate the collective action problem and boost social compliance with state directives.

First, successful securitization of COVID-19 enabled the government to gain the mask manufacturers' support on a series of mask policies. The ban of exporting surgical masks and

centralizing mask distribution are both policies invading the economic liberty of private business. Such political actions and policies might be enacted but would not have been executed successfully without strong support from the key stakeholders—the mask manufacturers. That is, if the mask manufacturers did not share the consensus that “we are fighting a war against COVID-19,” they could have raised mask prices following self-interest due to the high demand, or they could have expressed their discontent publicly against the government.

Successful securitization provides the solution for this principal–agent problem. When the government first restricted exporting surgical masks, no severe opposition was raised from private manufacturers. Due to the cooperation and support from the manufacturers, the government was able to suspend all mask exports right after the first case entered Taiwan. The compliance of mask manufacturers was not only the results of the regulations. If regulation was the only reason for compliance, more discontent from the mask manufacturers would have been witnessed. Instead, the mask manufacturers expressed that they were satisfied with the government’s policy on centralizing mask production during interviews (BBC, 2020). They also supported price control and the name-based rationing system. None of these strategies can be implemented smoothly without strong support from the private sector.

Second, we can observe evidence of the private sector’s support when the government decided to increase mask supply. During the process of ramping up mask production, Taiwan successfully assembled and coordinated among relevant companies for mask production within a very short period of time. In early February, the MOEA directly gathered all face mask industry related manufacturers and developed an ambitious mask production plan together. All mask manufacturers complied and many expressed eagerness to help because “their country needs them.” For instance, Winston Dai was one of the key members who organized and built the national mask team. During an interview describing the national mask team, he said, “my country was under attack, we had the ability to help . . .” He also described key members of the national mask team and the organizational structure of the team using military titles: “Chairman Yen Jui-hsiung is like the Chief of the General Staff. He knew how to fight.” The Chairman of Tongtai Machine & Tool Chairman, Yen Jui-hsiung, also mentioned “my operation plan was to remove all the foreseeable obstacles, so the Forces could march forward smoothly” (Taiwan Machine Tool & Accessories Builders’ Association, 2020). The languages used by the key members of mask manufacturers demonstrates that they have adopted the mentality that “they were fighting a war for their country.” Put differently, crisis securitization successfully transformed masks manufacturers into “key soldiers” in this battle against COVID-19 and minimized the risks of free riding and moral hazard because everyone is called upon to serve their country.

Conclusion

Taiwan’s mask policies demonstrate remarkable effectiveness in fighting against COVID-19. This paper accounts for Taiwan’s swift and successful whole-of-nation approach to masks through the lens of the securitization theory and illustrates that Taiwan’s successful securitization of the coronavirus as a national threat enabled the state to effectively coordinate intergovernmental agencies and overcome the principal–agent problem. It also enabled the state to mobilize the private sector to carry out the state’s will in fighting the pandemic. The securitization of the virus “transformed” mask manufacturers to become “soldiers” fighting with honors, minimizing the free riding problem. Moreover, the paper shows that Taiwan’s successful securitization of the virus can, in part, be accounted for by linking the virus to the nation’s long-existing national security issue, China’s geopolitical threat.

Facing the pandemic, many countries attempted to use “war” language and securitized the virus in order to employ extraordinary measures and generate higher citizen compliance. Not every

country succeeded. Using Taiwan's case, the article sheds new light on when and how a virus can be successfully securitized and the effects of successful securitization. Existing securitization literature pays attention to the securitization performance and fails to pay equal attention to the buy-in process of citizens. The paper adds nuance to the literature by providing direct evidence of securitization performance and of endorsement by targeted citizens. Moreover, Taiwan's case also demonstrates that virus securitization is more likely to succeed when the virus is connected to a nation's existing security threats. Successful securitization enabled Taiwan to adopt a whole-of-nation approach on mask related policies very early on in the COVID-19 crisis, contributing to Taiwan's overall effective governance of COVID-19.

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ORCID iD

Wei-Ting Yen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4153-678X>

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Author biographies

Dr. Chia-Chien Chang is an assistant professor at the Institute of China and Asia-Pacific Studies at National Sun Yat-sen University, Taiwan. His research interest lies in the intersection of International Political Economy and National Security, with focuses on war finance, US-China economic & strategic competitions, and geopolitics of policy responses to COVID-19.

Dr. Wei-Ting Yen is currently an Assistant Professor in the Government Department at Franklin and Marshall College. She studies political economy issues and social policy development in Asia. She has several projects examining the political economy of the COVID-19 pandemic from a comparative perspective.

Dr. Li-Yin Liu is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Dayton. Her research interests are centered around science-intensive public policies, such as environmental sustainability and COVID-19 policies.