Pandemic Governance: A Comparative Study on COVID-19 Crisis Responses between the United States and South Korea

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Abstract

It was only a few years ago that the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the world, but the world is still reeling from its aftereffects. Some countries managed to keep the virus under control relatively well, while the others did not. This paper will discuss the actions taken by the United States of America and South Korea and compare the approaches based on Coomb's crisis responses model based on secondary databases. These two countries both provide a contrast in how countries (repetition) are handling this situation. Although these countries received their first cases of COVID-19 on the same day, South Korea has been more successful in containing and mitigating the effects of the outbreak. The success in South Korea was by practising transparency, providing maximum services to sufferers, providing adequate health equipment, and, most importantly, getting the public to comply with having mass tests to stop the spread of the virus quickly. Both countries with different degrees of success have executed similar approaches. The key takeaway from this paper is that for a containment plan or policy to be successful, it needs to be fully understood by the public. Transparency is the best strategy governments can implement to achieve their policy goals.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Health Crisis, Crisis Responses, United States, South Korea.*

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Tadbir Urus Pandemik: Kajian Perbandingan tentang Respons Krisis COVID-19 antara Amerika Syarikat dan Korea Selatan

Abstrak

Wabak COVID-19 baharu sahaja melepasi fasa berbahaya kepada kemaslahatan warga global namun impaknya masih dirasai. Beberapa negara berjaya mengawal krisis kesihatan itu dengan baik, manakala ada juga negara yang gagal menanganginya. Makalah ini akan membincangkan tindakan yang diambil oleh kerajaan Amerika Syarikat dan Korea Selatan dan membandingkan pendekatan berdasarkan model tindak balas krisis Coomb berdasarkan pangkalan data sekunder. Pendekatan menangani krisis di antara kedua-dua negara ini adalah berbeza dalam cara mereka mengendalikan situasi diakibatkan wabak maut itu. Dari segi latarnya walaupun negara-negara ini menerima kes pertama COVID-19 pada hari yang sama, Korea Selatan dilihat lebih berjaya dalam membendung dan mengurangkan kesan buruk wabak COVID-19. Kejayaan di Korea Selatan dicapai kerana pemerintah mengamalkan ketelusan, menyediakan perkhidmatan maksimum kepada penghidap, menyediakan peralatan kesihatan yang mencukupi, dan yang paling utama, memastikan orang ramai mematuhi ujian saringan dan pemantauan pada skala mega untuk menghentikan penyebaran virus dengan cepat. Kedua-dua negara didapati mempunyai tahap kejayaan yang berbeza walaupun melaksanakan pendekatan yang sama untuk melawan wabak COVID-19. Iktibar daripada proses pengurusan wabak dan polisi adalah dengan memberi kefahaman yang sepenuhnya oleh orang ramai. Ketelusan ialah strategi terbaik yang boleh dilaksanakan oleh setiap kerajaan untuk memenuhi matlamat polisi yang ditetapkan

Kata Kunci: *COVID-19, Krisis Kesihatan, Respon terhadap krisis, Amerika Syarikat, Korea Selatan.*

Introduction

It was only a few years ago that a pandemic threatened the world, but the world is still reeling from its aftereffects. The pandemic, coronavirus disease or commonly known as COVID-19, spreads through direct contact with an infected person, usually when they cough and sneeze. To date, a hundred and sixty-one million people worldwide have been affected by this pandemic (The World Health Organization, 2023). During the peak of the pandemic, all social and business operations have halted as countries urge citizens to stay inside to flatten the curve. During these troubling times, the government needs to step up to minimise the impact of the pandemic towards its economy and the overall well-being of the citizens. As such, this paper compares the health crisis responses between the United States and South Korea.

According to Ismail Ahmadi (2015), the "crisis" term was originated from the Greek word "krinon", which means hazardous conditions in social, political, and economic issues. A crisis takes place when it does not happen naturally. A crisis is a sudden event that threatens to interrupt an organisation's or state's manoeuvres, mainly in its finance and reputation. Crisis or disaster are widely used in many contexts to describe a dangerous and worst situation. There are many different categories and sources of a crisis due to the nature and background of the crisis. A crisis is well known by Coomb's definition, which is any sudden adverse event that always negatively impacts an organisation or country (Coombs, W.T, 2014). It is best to describe an unusual and unpredictable situation negatively affecting people, organisations, states, or nations. Most crises will have a negative impact on the affected institution and organisation, such as impacting the financial status of an organisation or making people think badly about a state or country and many more. This paper specifically selected COVID-19 as a health, economic and humanitarian crisis because of its impact of the COVID-19. An effective pre-planning and crisis communicative response are beneficial for reducing the severity of the crisis and any types of future damage (Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J., 2009; Holladay, S. J., 2009; Qureshi, M. I., Rasli, A. M., & Zaman, K., 2016).

One of the most influential nations in the world is the United States of America (USA). It holds the world's leading economic and military strength, with global interests and unprecedented global influence. The government structure is a constitutionally based federal republic with an evident democratic tradition in which the president serves as the head of government. The United States has a developed market system with several private freedoms, coupled with centralised economic planning and government supervision. The current population of the USA is over 331 million (United Nations, & Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).

On the other hand, South Korea is a nation in East Asia, spanning the southern half of the Korean Peninsula. To date, South Korea remains one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in the world. It is believed that the population of South Korea is a direct descendant of many Mongolian travelling tribes who migrated peninsula around half a million years ago. South Korea is now home to around 51 million, making it one of the most populous countries in the world. South Korea currently maintains diplomatic relations with more than 170 foreign countries.

In this article, researchers organise thoughts based on the themes that emerged from analysing the actions taken by both countries and the comparisons between the approaches based on secondary methods. Data was collected with the assistance of secondary databases. Secondary databases are a method of analyzing results and data through published and printed mass communication materials. Researched analyzed findings from all types of websites, newspapers, and online newspapers from the period of January 2020 until December 2021 for coding purposes.

Crisis Response in Managing COVID-19

COVID-19 was not the world's first pandemic, but its unprecedented scope and transmission speed distinguished it from its predecessors. As a prompt response to this health crisis, all levels of government must acknowledge the rising threats, communicate with the public and stakeholders, and coordinate their actions. As a result, it requires

top-down and network-based coordination to respond to a large-scale crisis. The challenge is integrating both approaches to obtain effective coordination outcomes (Kapucu, N., & Hu, Q., 2022).

According to the "Crisis Response Strategies Model" by Coombs, the three broad crisis response strategies are instructing information, adjusting information, and repairing reputation. Coombs places his primary crisis response strategies along a continuum from the most defensive to the most accommodative strategy. Defensive strategies deny the occurrence of the crisis and the organization's responsibility for it and primarily cater to the interests of the organization itself. Accommodative strategies accept the occurrence of the crisis and the organization's responsibility for it, focusing mainly on the victims of the crisis who are offered remedial action for the inconveniences the crisis has caused them. These crisis response strategies can be observed in the United States and Korea case studies through the containment, treatment, and mitigation stages.

Containment Stage

Containment is the first stage of the COVID-19 response. It involves identifying and isolating infected individuals to prevent further spread of the virus. This stage is critical in preventing the virus from spreading to other people. The second stage is treatment, which involves providing medical care to those who have contracted the virus. This stage is essential in reducing the severity of symptoms and preventing complications. The third stage is mitigation, which involves reducing the impact of the virus on society. This stage includes measures such as social distancing, wearing masks, and limiting public gatherings (Walensky, R., & del Rio, C., 2020). Click or tap here to enter text.

The initial stage in responding towards the COVID-19 crisis is *containment.* This stage focuses on response measures meant to prevent the virus from taking control of the nation, coinciding with Coomb's first strategy of instructing information. This includes early detection, isolation, and careful tracing and screening of infected patients. One of the first approaches taken by the previous president of the United States of America (USA), President Donald Trump, was to impose travel restrictions from areas

impacted by the virus and secure the borders. The first action is to ban travel to and from China in January. Following the virus's global spread, further travelling restrictions were placed on Iran, Europe, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The government has also issued the highest level of warning for red zones or hot locations of the virus. However, President Trump's dismissal of the threat and insistence that the coronavirus is under control drove the nation into chaos. To prevent the spread of the coronavirus, several containment measures were implemented, including the closure of schools, daycares, non-essential workplaces, and borders (Kaimann, D., & Tanneberg, I., 2021).

On the other hand, South Korea's *containment* crisis response started when the virus was first detected on 20th January; South Korea began to build numerous innovative screening clinics that can withstand high capacity of people. It is also found that during this stage, the South Korean government has worked closely with the private sector to ensure enough test kits for the public (Watson, ivan, Jeong, S., Hollingsworth, J., & Booth, T., 2020, March 12). As the pandemic worsened in the country, approximately 600 testing centres were built. These centres can screen citizens efficiently and withstand up to 15,000 to 20,000 tests per day. Next, the infected patients are treated to contain the virus from spreading rapidly. In this stage, the South Korean government has placed the infected patients in isolation, and those in quarantine are supported to increase their compliance. South Korea has been seen to integrate digital technology at the centre of their crisis response strategies (Heo, K., Lee, D., Seo, Y., & Choi, H., 2020). One of the government's most critical steps was to trace close contacts thoroughly. Hundreds of epidemiological intelligence officers have been mobilised for this monitoring effort and encouraged to use a wide range of data sources, including credit card purchases and closed-captioned television video footage

Treatment Stage

The treatment stage focuses on providing adequate medical care to individuals infected with the virus. In this stage, adjusting information becomes crucial as new scientific findings, treatment protocols, and vaccination strategies emerge. Governments need to adapt their strategies based on the evolving knowledge and adjust medical resources,

guidelines, and policies accordingly. Collaboration with healthcare professionals, researchers, and international organizations is vital to ensure the most effective and evidence-based treatment strategies are implemented.

This stage in approaching the crisis is arranging *treatment* measures for those affected. In this stage, healthcare providers are ensured by the USA administration that the resources and flexibility they need to respond to this outbreak are available. COVID-19 testing has also been expanded throughout the country. One of the complexities of handling COVID-19 is to ensure that all Americans can be examined regardless of their financial condition. Managing such crises and addressing their socioeconomic effects necessitates bold governmental action to ensure the continuity of healthcare systems, the continuity of education, the preservation of businesses and jobs, and the stability of financial markets. Political leadership at the centre is required to maintain the complicated political, social, and economic balance of implementing containment measures to lessen the impact of the pandemic while maintaining necessary services (OECD, 2020). Such leadership is required to keep citizens' trust in government. In addition to delivering healthcare to those impacted, the US is actively partnering with the private sector to create solutions to expand research.

On the other hand, the efforts in South Korea focused on getting patients to recover from the symptoms. With the rise of COVID-19 cases, the Korean health system surged to meet the rising demands. While public debate in nations such as South Korea frequently focuses on particular parts of their methods, such as intensive testing, what truly distinguishes their effective responses is the number of activities implemented at simultaneously (Pisano, G., Sadun, R., & Zanini, M). This is especially true in the state of Daegu, where it was once a site contributing to a large cluster of infections. In Daegu, almost 2,400 workers were recruited in that state alone. Not only in Daegu, but the government has built healthcare centres and temporary hospitals all over the country to increase capacity and address the shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) through centralised government purchasing.

Mitigation Stage

The mitigation stage involves long-term efforts to minimize the impact of the pandemic and restore normalcy. Repairing reputation becomes significant in this stage as governments strive to regain public trust and confidence. Transparency, accountability, and effective communication are essential for repairing reputational damage caused by any shortcomings in crisis response. Active engagement with the public, addressing concerns, and implementing measures to improve preparedness for future crises are critical components of this strategy.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, new policies are being formed to keep the nation going. *Mitigation* strategies in the USA are to ensure that the nation is not heavily affected by the pandemic. One of the aids includes USD$268 billion to extend unemployment insurance, USD$25 billion to have a food security net for the neediest, USD$349 billion in forgivable Small Business Administration loans and guarantees to support small companies keeping employees, $100 billion to hospitals and much more (Blanchflower, D. G., & Bryson, A., 2022). The Trump Administration has introduced a policy dedicated to combating the coronavirus called the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economy Security Act, abbreviated as the “CARES Act”. This Act offers more than USD$2 trillion, which encompasses about 11% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in emergency assistance to individuals and companies in different ways, including grants, cash transfers, and insurance benefits designed to alleviate the economic effects of COVID-19.

In addition, the US government has launched a range of economic stimulus initiatives, such as the Paycheck Insurance Initiative, which seeks to help smaller companies and non-profits stay alive at the height of the pandemic. The package is parked under the Small Business Administration (SBA) Section 7 (a) Loan program. It includes features such as waived principal payments, a one-year loan of up to 10 million, a maximum interest rate of four per cent, and temporary exemption from troubled debt restructuring (TDR) disclosures. This stimulus package has since granted USD$ 5.2 million in loans that total up to USD$525 billion (Hirsch, L., & Pramuk, J., 2020).

The pandemic has forced businesses to close, which could impact the nation's economy. As such, one of the primary responses in the mitigation stage is to support working Americans and their families who the coronavirus has impacted by providing relief for businesses affected by this outbreak. Besides helping businesses, the administration is working to help accelerate the development of therapeutics and a vaccine to combat the disease.

In South Korea, their key actions are the new *Korean New Deal* policy package, which aims to develop a digital economy and foster development in promising '*untact*' industries. *Untact* companies do things without direct involvement with others, such as using stand-alone kiosks, online shopping, or making contactless payments (Shin, Y. J., & Lee, J., 2020). The package has three key components: the digital economy, green technology, and the social safety network. South Korea has agreed to spend KRW 160 trillion by 2025 to generate more than 1.9 million jobs across the region. In addition, the government plans to use the *Korean New Deal* strategy to transform the economy from a follower to a leader, from a carbon-dependent to a green economy, with a more inclusive society.

Decisions in South Korea are made rapidly due to the enforcement of policy decisions at the local level (You, J, 2020). The flexible fiscal management structures and budget for public health have made it possible for the government to provide adequate resources. The South Korean government and the national health insurance programme have taken responsibility for the total cost of quarantine, care for Korean residents and non-citizens, and coronavirus testing. In addition to that, an additional budget of KRW 11.7 trillion and the supplementary budget of the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare (KMHW) of KRW 3.7 trillion has funded the preventative and treatment facilities. The budget has also been used to help medical institutions and staff.

When it comes to economic measures, the South Korean government has introduced four stimulus packages and passed several supplementary budgets in total throughout the pandemic. The first financial stimulus package was introduced in February 2020. KRW 4 trillion worth of

emergency support measures were distributed relating to internal and local tax, expedited customs procedures for raw materials, support for micro-businesses, and emergency funds for affected SMEs. The second financial stimulus package focuses on tourism and export, with KRW20 trillion reserved for households and damaged industries. The third economic stimulus package focuses on maintaining businesses and easing the burden on borrowers to avoid a credit crunch, and a total of KRW 50 trillion was spent. The fourth stimulus package of KRW100 million includes financial stabilisation measures such as financing support for businesses, corporate bond market & short-term money market stabilisation, and addressing the stock market stabilisation measures. According to the report by OECD (2020), the South Korean government also provided KRW10.1 trillion to provide wage subsidies for small businesses and enterprises and programs for the unemployed under their supplementary budgets.

The United States and South Korea showed similar policies implemented to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. Their policies are mainly economic relief revolving around incentives and budgets towards businesses and workers in their respective countries. The utmost priority is keeping the economy and its people afloat; therefore, funds are focused on healthcare and industries. Similarly, a chunk of the budget goes into healthcare to fund COVID-19 treatments and tests for the public. However, in terms of healthcare, South Korea can use the funds to focus on treatment as well as efforts for a vaccine in the country. In contrast, the United States budget focuses more on managing the rising number of COVID-19 in the country. This is because the United States is at the pandemic's peak while South Korea has managed to keep cases very low. Table 1 shows a summary of the new policies.

Table 1: Summary of policies introduced by the United States and South Korea

	United States of America	**South Korea**
Main Approach	**Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economy Security Act (CARES Act)** • Emergency assistance to individuals and companies • Unemployment insurance • Food security net • Support for small businesses	**Korean New Deal policy package** • Develop digital economy. • Green technology • Social safety network • Generate more than 1.9 million jobs across the nation by 2025
Economic Stimulus Packages	• Paycheck Insurance Initiative • Waived principal payments. • Loans for businesses and individuals • Temporary exemption from debt	• Introduced four packages • Emergency fund for SMEs • Compensation for those in quarantine • Wage subsidies for small businesses and programs for the unemployed

Comparative Analysis

South Korea and the USA present a unique case as the two countries detected the first cases of COVID-19 on January 19 and 20, respectively. However, there are many differences between the two countries in the way that they approached the outbreak. On average, USA has 1,46 cases per million of the population, while South Korea only has 207 cases per million (Our World in Data, 2023). With this initial comparison, it can be seen that South Korea is more successful in tackling and adapting to the outbreak in their country.

The USA and South Korea both have followed similar patterns of approaching the pandemic crisis starting with *containment, treatment* and followed by *mitigation* crisis response strategies. The difference is that the implementation of the phases is more effective in South Korea as the government is more proactive and the citizens comply with all the restrictions given. In the *containment* crisis response stage, both countries suggested using face masks to stop the virus from spreading. However, Vargas, E. D., and Sanchez, G. R. (2020) found that the core principle of individualism in the USA has led to a large segment of the American public being resistant to wearing masks to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. Meanwhile, South Koreans are more willing to don face masks as it was already culturally accepted in the country. Their experience with a previous virus, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and the air pollution in Korea has led the citizens to accept the use of face masks as the norm.

One of the noticeable issues is that the USA's efforts are affected significantly by the lack of COVID-19 testing kits. As such, the government is forced to limit the COVID-19 testing for those who are seriously ill and requires admission and patients with underlying conditions such as respiratory disease, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and immunocompromised patients are given priority. In contrast, the South Korean government worked tirelessly to ensure that there were adequate testing kits for their citizens. The country also innovated ways to limit physical contact during tests, such as drive-through and phone booth testing facilities. The way these sites were placed convinced the citizens

to take the test voluntarily without fear of getting infected while waiting in queues or exposing their private information (Chung, D. J., 2020). Although South Korea is a significantly smaller country, the USA is a big country with more resources and, thus, should be able to be at par with what South Korea is doing.

In terms of the crisis approaches, the USA is going for the more conservative approach towards their COVID-19 response, especially since only 19% were admitted and limited to those with underlying diseases. South Korea is the opposite as they go for the aggressive approach and provide every citizen with testing – regardless of whether they have the symptoms. The United States has mishandled many facets of its early pandemic response and has thus wasted a considerable amount of time. Initially, travel restrictions on Europe and China were deemed adequate by President Trump to stop the spread of the virus. Besides that, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) produced flawed test kits. However, the government still released its public release (Temple-Raston, D.,2020). The United States should reflect on some of South Korea's guidelines to flatten the curve in hot spots and mitigate cases in parts of the country that have not yet witnessed a significant outbreak. Unfortunately, the solutions implemented by South Korea may be too invasive for Americans to comply quietly.

In order to contain the outbreak early, South Korea has implemented effective testing and contact tracing. The United States also needs to establish tests to find out how to track contacts on a larger scale. Alternatively, the United States could emulate South Korea using smartphone and Internet technology. However, Americans will not readily agree with such intrusive practices, as are people who respect their privacy as a fundamental right. Americans may prefer to wait for the vaccine before allowing contact tracing to be carried out, but the vaccine may take some time to form. As such, the situation in the United States can worsen.

Conclusion

The global impact of the COVID-19 virus outbreak can be significant and takes many years to recover from. Most economic sectors are affected, which has heavily influenced international and trade relations among countries. Due to the shared virus outbreak, the world is banding together to search for a vaccine and to share best practices among the successful nations in containing the outbreak. The United States and South Korea provide a contrast in how countries are handling this situation. Although these countries received their first cases of COVID-19 on the same day, South Korea has been more successful in containing and mitigating the effects of the outbreak. The United States, on the other hand, are not faring well. This was especially when the country was undergoing a few things simultaneously, such as the *Black Lives Matter* protests and the US presidential election. These two events have forced the public to expose themselves to others and thus, created a spike in the number of cases.

If not controlled, more deaths will occur due to the pandemic. South Korea minimised the spread of the COVID-19 virus outbreak by practising transparency, providing maximum services to sufferers, providing adequate health equipment, and most notably, having mass tests to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus quickly. In that sense, the United States can benefit from emulating the practices of South Korea. Being a bigger country, it is hard for the United States to control the virus outbreak, but it is also essential to show a united front to the public. United States' biggest concern is the public's reluctance to adhere to COVID-19 preventative measures such as wearing masks and social distancing.

All in all, both the United States and South Korea have implemented various policies to mitigate the coronavirus outbreak. Both countries with different degrees of success have executed similar approaches. One of the lessons that can be taken from this comparison is that for a containment plan or policy to be successful, it needs to be fully understood by the public. Transparency is the best strategy governments can implement to achieve their policy goals.

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