

# Comparison of Covid-19 Crisis Responses between the United States and South Korea

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## Abstract

*COVID-19 pandemic spreads through direct contact with an infected person, usually when they cough and sneeze. It also spreads through surfaces where the infected has touched as the virus has transferred. All social and business operations have come to a halt 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 overall wellbeing of the citizens. This paper will compare the pandemic response between two countries: United States and South Korea. This paper will be discussing the actions taken by both countries as well as the comparisons between the approaches based on Coomb's crisis responses model. United States and South Korea provides a contrast in how countries are handling this situation. Although these countries have 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. South Korea was able to minimize the spread of the COVID-19 virus outbreak by practicing transparency, providing maximum services to sufferers, providing adequate health equipment, and most importantly having a mass tests to stop the spread of the virus quickly. All in all, both the United States and South Korea has implemented various policies to mitigate the coronavirus outbreak. Similar approaches have been executed by both countries with different degrees of success. 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 that can be implemented by governments in achieving their policy goals.*

*Keywords: COVID-19; Health crisis; Crisis responses; United States; South Korea*

## 1. Introduction

The world is currently being threatened by a pandemic; an infectious disease caused by a new virus. The pandemic, COVID-19 spreads through direct contact with an infected person, usually when they cough and sneeze. It also spreads through surfaces where the infected has touched as the virus has transferred. As per to date, hundred and sixty-one million of people all over the world are affected by this pandemic. All social and business operations have come to a halt 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 overall wellbeing of the citizens. This paper will compare the pandemic or best known as health crisis response between two countries: United States and South Korea.

According to Ahmadi (2015), "crisis" term was originated from Greek word "krinon" which means hazardous conditions in social, political and economic issues. Crisis take place when it doesn't happen naturally. Crisis is known as a sudden event that threatens to interrupt an organization's or state's manoeuvres, mainly in its finance and reputation.

Crisis or disastrous 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 crisis. Crisis is well known with Coombs's definition which is any sudden negative events and always produces negative impacts to an organization or country (Coombs, 2007). It is best to describe as an unusual and unpredictable situation in affecting people, organization, states, or country in a negative way. Most of the crisis will give negative impact to the affected institution and organization such as impacting financial status of an organization or make people think badly about a state or country and many more. This paper specifically selected COVID-19 as a health, financial and humanitarian crisis because of the impact of the COVID-19. An effective pre-planning and crisis communicative response are very useful for reducing the severity of crisis and to reduce any types of future damage (Coombs and Holladay, 2009; Holladay, 2009; Qureshi et al., 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 a clear 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 USA is over 331 million (United Nations & Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).

South Korea, on the other hand, 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 traveling 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.

The following content will be discussing the actions taken by both countries as well as the comparisons between the approaches based on secondary methods.

## **2. Background of the Study**

### ***Crisis Responses in Managing COVID-19***

According to "Crisis Response Strategies Model" by Coombs (2007), the initial stage in responding towards the COVID-19 crisis is *containment*. *Containment* response measures are meant to prevent the virus from taking control of the nation. This includes early detection, isolation, and careful tracing and screening of infected patients. One of the first approaches taken by the previous president of USA, President Donald Trump, is to impose travel restrictions from areas that is impacted by the virus and to secure the borders. The first action is to ban travel to and from China in January. Following the global spread of the virus, further restrictions on travelling 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. As the USA borders Canada, the two countries had also mutually agreed to close the borders to all nonessential travels.

The next stage in approaching the crisis is to arrange *treatment* measures for those who

are already 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. In addition to delivering healthcare to those impacted, the US is also actively partnering with the private sector to create solutions to expand research.

The final stage of the response is the *mitigation* stage. *Mitigation* strategies in the USA is to ensure that the nation is not heavily affected by the pandemic. The pandemic has forced businesses to close and this could cause an impact to the nation's economy. As such, one of the main responses in the mitigation stage is to support working Americans and their families who have been impacted by the coronavirus by providing relief for businesses who have been affected by this outbreak. Besides helping businesses, administration is working to help accelerate the development of therapeutics and a vaccine to combat the disease.



**Figure 1:** South Korea's innovative drive-thru COVID19 testing

On the other hand, South Korea's *containment* crisis response started when the virus was first detected in its country on 20<sup>th</sup> January, South Korea started building numerous screening clinics that is innovative and can withstand high capacity of people. In the above figure shows South Korea's drive thru COVID-19 testing that managed to expedite the screening process (figure 1). During this stage, the government has worked closely with the private sector in order to ensure that there are enough test kits for the public. As the pandemic worsens in the country, there were approximately 600 testing centres that were built. These centres can screen citizens efficiently and could withstand capacity 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. One of the most important steps that the government made is to trace close contacts very 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.

The second crisis response stage is *treatment*. During the *treatment* stage, the efforts are 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. This is especially true in the state of Daegu where it was once a site contributing to a large cluster of infections. As such, 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

centralized government purchasing.

The third stage of crisis response is *mitigation* where the government tries to contain the effects of the pandemic. Decisions in South Korea is done rapidly due to the enforcement of policy decisions at the local level. 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 has taken the responsibility for the full cost of quarantine, care for Korean residents and non-citizens as well as 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.

United States of America	South Korea
1946 cases per million of the population	207 cases per million of the population
Conservative approach of testing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused mainly on 19% of patients who were seriously ill and needed hospital admission</li> </ul>	Aggressive approach of testing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide testing opportunity for every individual regardless of their underlying medical condition</li> </ul>
Citizens resist COVID19 preventative measures such as social distancing and wearing face masks	Citizens are compliant with mandatory face masks
Little to no contact tracing measures	Invasive contact tracing measures

**Figure 2:** Comparison of crisis approaches between the United States and South Korea

South Korea and the USA presents a unique case as the two countries have detected the first cases of COVID-19 on January 19 and 20, respectively. However, there are many differences between the two countries is the way that they approached the outbreak. On an average, The USA has 1,46 cases per million of the population while South Korea only has 207 cases per million of the population. 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 has 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 the use of face masks in order to stop the virus from spreading. However, Vargas and Sanchez (2020) found that the core principle of individualism in the USA has led to a large segment of the American public to be 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 (Chung, 2020).

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 who requires admission and patients with underlying

conditions such as respiratory disease, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases as well as immunocompromised patients are given the priority. In contrast, the South Korean government worked tirelessly to ensure that all of their there are 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 that these sites were placed convinced the citizens to voluntarily take the test, without fear of getting infected while waiting in queues or of exposing their private information (Chung, 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 provides every citizen with testing – regardless of whether they have the symptoms or not. 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 test kits that was flawed. However, the government still issued its release to the public (Temple-Ralston, 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 major outbreak. Unfortunately, the solutions implemented by South Korea may be too invasive for Americans to quietly comply with.

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 by using the technology of the smartphone and the Internet. However, Americans will not readily agree with such intrusive practises 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.

### ***Crisis Responses Strategies with New Policies***

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, new policies are being formed to keep the nation going. The Trump Administration has introduced a policy dedicated to combat the coronavirus called the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economy Security Act, also abbreviated as the "CARES Act". This Act offers more than \$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. One of the aids includes \$268 billion to extend unemployment insurance, \$25 billion to include a food security net for the neediest, \$349 billion in forgivable Small Business Administration loans and guarantees to support small companies keeping employees, \$100 billion to hospitals and much more.

In addition, the USA 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, one-year loan of up to 10 million and a maximum interest rate

of four per cent and temporary exemption from troubled debt restructuring (TDR) disclosures. This stimulus package has since granted \$5.2million loans that totals up to \$525 billion (Hirsch and Pramuk, 2020).

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 and Lee, 2020). The package comes 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 as a way of transforming the economy from a follower to a leader, from a carbon-dependent to a green economy, with a more inclusive society.

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 and KRW 4 trillion worth of emergency support measures were distributed relating to internal and local tax, expedite customs procedures for raw materials, support for micro-businesses as well as emergency fund for affected SMEs. The second financial stimulus package focuses on tourism and export with KRW20 trillion reserved for households and damaged industries. The third financial stimulus package focuses on maintaining businesses, easing burden on borrowers to avoid credit crunch and a total of KRW 50 trillion was spent. The fourth stimulus package of KRW100 trillion includes the financial stabilization measures such as financing support for businesses, corporate bond market & short-term money market stabilization as well as addressing the stock market stabilization measures. According to the report by (IMF, 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.

Both the United States and South Korea showed similar forms of policies implemented to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. Their policies are mainly economic relief revolving around incentives and budget towards businesses and the workers in their respective countries. The utmost priority is to keep the economy and its people afloat and therefore, funds are focused towards healthcare and businesses. Similarly, a chunk of the budget goes into healthcare in order to fund the COVID-19 treatments and tests for the public. However, in terms of healthcare, South Korea able to use the funds to focus on treatment as well as efforts for a vaccine in the country whereas 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 peak of the pandemic while South Korea has managed to keep cases very low. The table below is a summarisation of the new policies.



United States of America	South Korea
<b>Main approach</b> Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economy Security Act (CARES Act) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emergency assistance to individuals and companies</li> <li>• Unemployment insurance</li> <li>• Food security net</li> <li>• Support for small businesses</li> </ul>	<b>Main approach</b> Korean New Deal policy package <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop digital economy</li> <li>• Green technology</li> <li>• Social safety network</li> <li>• Generate more than 1.9 million jobs across the nation by 2025</li> </ul>
<b>Economic stimulus packages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paycheck Insurance Initiative</li> <li>• Waived principal payments</li> <li>• Loans for businesses and individuals</li> <li>• Temporary exemption from debt</li> </ul>	<b>Economic stimulus packages</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduced four packages</li> <li>• Emergency fund for SMEs</li> <li>• Compensation for those in quarantine</li> <li>• Wage subsidies for small businesses and programs for the unemployed</li> </ul>

**Figure 3:** Summary of policies introduced by the United States and South Korea

### 3. Conclusions

The global impact of the COVID-19 virus outbreak can be significant which takes many years to recover. Most economic sectors are affected and that has heavily affected 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 provides a contrast in how countries are handling this situation. Although these countries have 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 is especially when the country was undergoing few things at the same time such as the Black Lives Matter protests and the USA 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 was able to minimize the spread of the COVID-19 virus outbreak by practicing transparency, providing maximum services to sufferers, providing adequate health equipment, and most importantly having a mass test to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus quickly. In that sense, the United States can benefit from emulating the practices from South Korea. Being a bigger country, it is hard for United States to control the virus outbreak but it is also important 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 has implemented various policies in order to mitigate the coronavirus outbreak. Similar approaches have been executed by both countries with different degrees of success. One of the lessons that can be taken from this comparison is that in order for a containment plan or policy to be successful, it needs to be fully understood by the public. Transparency is the best strategy that can be implemented by governments in achieving their policy goals.

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