Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has made an impact on the entire world, affecting each country in very different ways. The response to the pandemic has been of almost equal measure, with the United States having taken the lead in vaccine development and manufacturing to enable distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine within one year to countries around the world. As a major contributor to the COVAX global vaccine distribution effort, Japan has stepped up to play a vital role in the COVID-19 response. In this report, I discuss how the United States and Japan have worked together to address the burden brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, and, as the pandemic wanes, how they will continue to work together to support the world as it recovers.
U.S.-Japan Implications of COVID-19

Introduction

Two years on, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected both the international relations and public health systems of countries around the world in unprecedented ways. While the world has faced many public health crises in the past, few have been as complicated and all-encompassing as the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally, over a quarter of a billion people have been infected by the virus as of 2022, and countries continue to struggle to contain the spread of the virus both within and between borders.\(^1\) All the while, inter-country relationships have hung in the balance with careful diplomacy and complex politics. With the United States shifting back to emphasizing the importance of their allies abroad in early 2021, the bustling Tokyo Olympics in summer 2021, and revolving politics in Japan in the autumn, strong collaborative efforts of both countries shone brighter than ever even as the pandemic seemed determined to put much travel and diplomatic activity at a standstill. A global problem called for a collective solution, and throughout the course of the pandemic, the United States and Japan have been in their own ways leaders by example in public health preparedness and response both domestically and abroad.

Tackling COVID-19 Together and Apart

Due in part to the differences in their respective pandemic preparedness and response experience, the two countries have had varying degrees of success during the pandemic, not only in the number of infection cases, but also in the number and speed at which vaccinations were distributed to their respective populations. After the first vaccines were developed and approved for emergency use authorization toward the end of 2020, the United States quickly went ahead with vaccine distribution initiatives. However, while these initiatives helped the United States reach its 50 percent fully vaccinated goal by July of 2021, several hurdles—such as dose allocations and availability as well as politically charged vaccine hesitancy—made the journey to get anywhere above 50 percent fully vaccinated sluggish compared to other developed nations. Conversely, in Japan, existing vaccine hesitancy around safety and efficacy as well as the global COVID-19 vaccine scarcity drastically slowed down campaigns to get eligible people outside of elderly populations vaccinated early on. More widespread vaccination efforts to the younger populations in Japan did not begin until June of 2021. At this point, enough time has passed from the initial vaccine distributions abroad that more people in Japan can see and understand the benefits and risks of vaccination.

As a result, vaccine hesitancy has dropped, and vaccine uptake has taken off. After an effective youth-targeted vaccination campaign allowed for a surge in subsequent vaccinations, by October 2021, Japan was able reach beyond the 70 percent fully vaccinated target recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) as part of its Strategy to Achieve Global COVID-19 Vaccination by mid-2022.²

In addition to vaccinations, both countries utilized different but similar tactics for non-pharmaceutical interventions to tackle the pandemic. In Japan, mask wearing had already been normalized far before COVID-19, which allowed citizens to easily adopt mask-wearing behaviors during the pandemic. In addition to encouraging mask wearing, Japan also adopted the public health slogan of “３つの密 (Mittsu no Mitsu)” or “The Three Cs,” used to encourage people to avoid “closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings.”³ This messaging became widespread for tackling the COVID-19 crisis, even so far as to be integrated into the Go-To Travel campaigns to continue traveling in a safe fashion during the pandemic when local governments were not issuing state of emergencies, which asked locations to close early. In the United States, methods to control viral transmission included more restrictive state- and locality-based lockdowns or mandates in addition to federal health recommendations of hand washing, mask wearing, and social distancing. Through all these prevention methods, both countries saw varying levels of success in domestically controlling the pandemic, with ebbs and flows as new waves of cases appeared and disappeared. By early winter of 2021, both countries had controlled the pandemic to levels seen around summer of 2020.⁴

As a result of these varying levels of success in domestic pandemic control, as of late October 2021, both countries still had strict barriers to entry in place, including long quarantines for visitors as well as complete bans for tourists from multiple countries. These restrictions made both tourism and business travel difficult between the two countries. Even so, as time went on, people adapted more and more to digital webinars, remote work, and even virtual or hybrid events that may not have been as possible prior to the pandemic.⁵ Now, for example, members of the Diet in Japan can

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more easily watch webinars and attend live events held by organizations in the United States, with translations of speeches and key points available almost instantaneously. In addition, both the United States and Japan have seen offices switch to remote work that never had this opportunity before. While this form of interaction may not be as satisfactory as in-person meetings, in the age of COVID-19, it has kept countries around the world close together even though they are far apart. As the world gradually adjusts to a “new normal,” it is very likely that the virtual opportunities that kept the world connected during the pandemic, such as webinars and remote work, will continue to thrive on some scale.

Furthermore, the pandemic has brought about more opportunities and necessity for information sharing across the world. Sharing public health information between countries through public health agencies like the WHO has allowed for case tracking and helped to understand the needs of countries on the ground. Countries will likely continue maintaining and strengthening their information sharing capabilities on public health to tackle other persistent global pandemics, such as HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria.

The Global Stage

In addition to domestically controlling the virus and finding innovative ways to communicate during lockdowns, both the United States and Japan took a stance of global leadership to support low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) struggling to tackle the virus. Both countries were quick to support collaborative initiatives such as those under the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A), including the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) co-led by Gavi, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, and WHO. COVAX is a joint international COVID-19 response effort that aims to accelerate the development and distribution of and provide equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for every country around the globe. As the United States was one of the first countries to begin manufacturing a COVID-19 vaccine, it has taken the lead in the development, donation, and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines abroad. By August 2021, the United States became the largest contributor to COVAX, having donated $3.5 billion to the initiative. Japan has also pledged to donate upwards of $1 billion to COVAX, becoming the third largest contributor to the initiative behind the United States and Germany ($1.07 billion). By

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September of 2021, Japan had also pledged to provide up to 60 million vaccine doses to countries in need through vaccine initiatives, including COVAX. In addition, through multilateral efforts with other countries such as Australia and India, the United States and Japan have both committed to supporting the joint manufacturing and delivery of one billion COVID-19 vaccines to countries in Southeast Asia by the end of 2022.8

Not only have Japan and the United States supported vaccine distribution for LMICs, but they have also been strong supporters of additional initiatives and mechanisms to aid LMICs and empower them to tackle both current and future pandemics. Both Japan and the United States have been top pledgers to several such initiatives, including the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which aims to ensure that the COVID-19 pandemic does not impact the efforts made to reduce those three pandemics, and the International Development Association of the World Bank, which aims to help low-income countries respond to the COVID-19 crisis and improve their resiliency.9

Through these and other collaborative efforts, both countries have demonstrated to the global stage that they are global health leaders that are committed to investing in the health and well-being of countries in need now and in pandemics yet to come.

Looking Forward

In November 2021, Japan announced the easing of some restrictions on arrivals to the country, and the United States announced that it will begin lifting the ban on inbound tourist travel for vaccinated individuals. With these developments, it is likely that the countries will gradually resume pre-pandemic levels of travel and exchanges, and some amount of normalcy will begin to return. However, as many people know, things will never be fully back to normal. The dramatic evolution of digital meetings that came about through the pandemic means that demand for hybrid events will continue, creating more chances for international attendance and collaboration. Further, the impacts the efforts the United States and Japan have made to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and aid countries in need will forever cement them as influential global leaders and the expectations for them will be higher than ever to be prepared and ready to take up arms again when the next pandemic comes around. One can only hope that, when that does happen, both countries can once again work hard together to make an even bigger difference for countries in need.


Author Biography

Hayley Hutchison worked as a JET in Gifu prefecture after graduating from James Madison University with a Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology and a minor in Asian Studies. Through her experience with the JET program, she was able to meet wonderful people, gain some amazing new hobbies (such as taiko), and further hone her love for Japan and Japanese culture. Following her time on JET, she worked to acquire more skills in the fields of health and science and is in the progress of obtaining her Master of Public Health degree from George Mason University. She currently lives in Northern Virginia and works as a program officer for the global health programs through the Japan Center for International Exchange, bringing together her passions for Japan and public health.

About the JETs on Japan Forum

The JETs on Japan Forum is a partnership between USJETAA and Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) that features selected articles of JET alumni perspectives on U.S.-Japan relations. The series aims to elevate the awareness and visibility of JET alumni working across diverse sectors and provides a platform for JET alumni to contribute to deeper understanding of U.S.-Japan relations from their fields. The articles serve as a resource to the wider JET alumni and U.S.-Japan communities on how alumni of this exchange program are continuing to serve as informal ambassadors in U.S.-Japan relations.