Since the SARS outbreak, countries that are affected struggle to contain the virus and eradicate the disease. As the virus is new and has the ability to transcend international borders with the aid of air travel, cooperation among countries is seen as crucial in winning the fight against the deadly disease.

With the World Health Organization (WHO) acting as the global coordinator and advisor, governments, health officials and scientists from across the globe are putting up a concerted effort in research as well as containment of the virus. Governments share information and statistics about the disease openly; scientists update one another on the progress of their research; policy makers exchange experiences on containment policies; and immigration officials from different countries coordinated to restrict international traffic. For the most part, the governments of the world have responded to the SARS threat in unison. If SARS was exacerbated by globalization, then a coordinated and globalized effort is essential to combat it.

However, one island is facing impediments in its battle against the disease due to political red tape. Because of a long-standing sovereignty issue with China, Taiwan is encountering some difficulties in getting international help, particularly from the WHO.
Taiwan’s Sovereignty Issue

Perry Tan

The discord and historical-political baggage between Taiwan and China dates back to half a century ago. In 1949, Mao Zedong’s communist forces defeated Chiang Kai Shek’s nationalists in a civil war. Chiang and his men retreated to the island of Taiwan, while Mao took control of the mainland and established a communist regime. Since then, Beijing has never recognized the government of Taiwan and considers it as a renegade province. After China gained membership to the United Nations (UN) in 1972, it has consistently lobbied against the recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state. As a result, many international bodies, including the WHO, have denied Taiwan membership.

Political Impediments

Taiwanese researchers are complaining that this political isolation is creating unnecessary difficulties in their anti-SARS efforts. They allege that they are being denied access to crucial SARS-related information that is consolidated by the WHO.

When Taiwanese epidemiologist Dr. Ho Mei-Shang requested information and samples from the WHO, he was asked to approach Beijing instead, as WHO officially recognizes Taiwan as a Province of China and not as an independent state. In the end, Dr. Ho had to travel to Beijing to obtain first-hand data on the disease.
As a non-member, Taiwan is unable to attend SARS meetings in WHO’s collaborating centers. Furthermore, researchers face difficulties getting materials such as diagnostic reagents and test kits. The WHO refused to directly give the Taiwanese antibody test kits that were distributed to other countries, and asked them to get them through Beijing instead. The WHO says that its reluctance to provide Taiwan with direct support is because it is not a member. However, the organization arranged for an expert from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta to visit Taiwan.

**Taiwan Lobbies and Beijing Responds**

Not surprisingly, Taiwan has used the current situation to push for some form of representation in the WHO.

On 20–21 April, Taiwan hosted an international seminar on SARS for the international community. The event was attended by more than 500 health officials and researchers from several countries, and its objective was for information exchange pertaining to SARS. Taiwan’s Health Minister, Mr. Twu Shiing- jer, used his opening speech for the event to garner support for Taiwan’s bid to become an observer in the WHO. Taiwan had tenaciously tried to gain WHO observership the past few years, but its efforts were repeatedly thwarted by China’s objections every year.

In another lobbying effort, Taiwan’s representative to the United Kingdom, Mr. Tien Hung-mao, argued for Taiwan’s participation in WHO in front of the British parliament in a recent international seminar. Mr. Tien addressed the House of Commons and expressed Taiwan’s aspirations to rejoin WHO, and criticized the “moral unfairness of marginalizing Taiwan from WHO assistance for political reasons”.

Frustrated with the WHO’s less-than-forthcoming attitude to assist Taiwan, an irate reader wrote to the Washington Post and lamented, “Instead of focusing on the health needs of Taiwan’s people, the WHO bases its decisions on China’s opposition to Taiwan’s membership. It is sad and ironic that the WHO itself is placing a nation’s health in jeopardy.”

Although Beijing has not made any recent official comments specifically relating to Taiwan’s aspirations to be represented in WHO, it has reiterated its stance that the Taiwan issue is one that pertains to the sovereignty of China.

In a recent meeting with a US Senate delegation headed by William H. Frist, Chinese President Hu Jintao reminded the US of the importance to adhere to its one-China policy. The Chinese newspaper, People’s Daily reported President Hu as asking the US not to “send the wrong signals” to the “independence forces” of Taiwan. He said that he hopes that the US would “keep its word” and “play a constructive role in China’s peaceful reunification”.

The statements by President Hu could be seen as Beijing’s indirect response to Taiwan’s use of the SARS situation to attempt to gain admission to the WHO. Beijing has consistently refused to acknowledge Taiwan as a sovereign state, and has been canvassing for other countries and international organizations not to give it official recognition. The mainland has also refused to rule out the use of political coercion and military force to achieve unification.

However, it is noteworthy that despite the inconvenience caused by political reasons, Taiwan seems to be doing well in handling its SARS problem. As of 29 April 2003, the island has only 66 SARS stricken patients and no major local outbreaks has occurred. WHO has also recently designated Taiwan as an area with “limited” local transmission of the disease.
Public Health Politicized

The global SARS outbreak has many ramifications, some of which are political. For the case of Taiwan, the issue of the island’s public health has been politicized. Several observers have argued that global health issues should be separated from politics, and that the WHO should render full assistance to Taiwan.

It is fortunate that Taiwan has so far been relatively successful in combating the disease and limiting its spread. It has predictably used the SARS episode to garner political capital in the international arena, and China has also responded predictably, albeit in an indirect manner. However, Taiwan has raise a question that is morally very appealing in its favor: Is it right to politicize an issue that can put the public health of an entire society at risk? In response, Beijing shrewdly refused to be drawn into such a debate directly, but reiterated its Taiwan stance firmly in a non-SARS related setting.

Although the contagious SARS virus knows no geographical boundaries, it has certainly highlighted political ones that are highly contentious.

Asean Countries to Fight SARS Together

Leaders of Asean countries met in an emergency summit to discuss a common strategy to combat the SARS disease, which has the potential to spark off a global health crisis.

One of the most devastating impacts of the disease is the toll it exerts on the Asean economies, some of which were not in very good shape to begin with even before the SARS outbreak. As a global alert had been sounded on the disease, many travelers are avoiding Asia indiscriminately, which translates to a significant drop in tourist dollars. Not surprisingly, many Asean airlines like Cathay Pacific and Singapore Airlines suffer huge losses as passenger volume dipped.

In response to this, Asean leaders called on the international community not to avoid Asia indiscriminately, and at the same time, implemented many SARS preventive measures in an attempt to improve tourist confidence. The leaders pledged to set up a network of shared information pertaining to SARS, and proposed standardized health declaration cards and temperature checks for all air passengers.

It was also agreed that a citizen of an Asean country should not be denied entry to another Asean country even when on suspicion of SARS. He or she should instead be provided with access to medical help.

The leaders also stressed the need to allay public fear and panic. Although the disease is contagious and is able to cause death, the actual number of infected people has not reached epidemic level, and current containment measures generally have positive results. Mr. Thaksin Shinawatra, Prime Minister of Thailand remarked, “The fear of SARS is worse than SARS itself”.

At the same summit, Chinese premier Mr. Wen Jiabao openly acknowledge the initial tardiness of Beijing in reaction to the health crisis, and pledge that China is now fully committed to face and eradicate the problem.
The Defense Science and Technology Agency (DSTA) and Singapore Technologies Engineering (ST Engineering) originally developed a thermal imager for military use. However, due to the SARS outbreak, engineers ingeniously modified their invention so that they can be used as thermal scanners to detect SARS infected people at borders.

Now the device has been commercialized as orders from SARS-striken countries streamed in.

The device was originally developed for the Singapore Armed Forces, for seeking out military targets in the dark. When SARS broke out in Singapore, the Ministry of Health needed a device that could scan large groups of people without being intrusive, as manual checks by nurses are very taxing in terms of time and manpower.

Responding to this, Singapore engineers took less than a week to get a modified version of the scanner working. It was tested at a hospital and a military medical center. A few days later, a prototype was in use at the Singapore Changi Airport, one of the busiest airports of the world.

The device proved so effective that more than a dozen units are being used at air, land and sea checkpoints in the island state now. In the next few weeks, 37 more units would be used.

External interest in the device has also been on the rise.

Singapore lent one unit to Hong Kong in mid-April, and the territory has ordered two more since. The Philippines ordered three sets, and many inquiries are coming in from other countries such as Thailand, China and Taiwan.

To meet these demands, ST Engineering is planning to manufacture a commercial version of the device costing under S$90 000 a piece in two weeks' time.
Not all businesses have been negatively affected by the SARS virus. Some, in particular the healthcare and insurance industries, have found pockets of opportunities in the current health crisis.

A subsidiary of Singapore’s Raffles Medical, Raffles Health recently came out with an anti-SARS pack. Called SARS Protect and priced at S$20, it is being marketed as having “all that you need” as a precaution against SARS. The pack includes a digital thermometer, Vitamin C tablets, masks and alcohol swabs.

Chan Chong Leong, General Manager of Raffles Health, said, “Instead of buying from individual sources, which is much more expensive, people can get a starter pack, and then they can have assurance and convenience as well.”

Another hospital, the Thomson Medical Center, has also come up with a similar kit. Its contents comprise of hand disinfectant, masks, vitamin C, digital thermometer and a SARS advisory fact sheet. The pack is selling at S$18 (usual price S$28).

In other industries, insurance group Aviva has come out with advertisements for their Protection-plus-You insurance policy, which they say has coverage against all accidental deaths, including those resulting from acts of terrorism and SARS.

Another insurer, American International Assurance, launched Living Essentials, which also includes cover against accidental death due to SARS and terrorist attacks.