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THE DEBATE | OPINION

## South Korea Can Do More in the Battle Against COVID-19

For all its success at home, South Korea has been less forthcoming with donations during the pandemic.



By [Troy Stangarone](#)

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Credit: [Depositphotos](#)

Three years into the pandemic, the world [continues to struggle](#) to finance the production and distribution of vaccines, as well as the related supplies needed to administer those vaccines and deal with the pandemic, despite the relatively low amount of funds required. South Korea and the new Yoon administration could play an important role in helping to fill this gap.

For much of the pandemic, South Korea has been one of the success stories. During the first year of the pandemic, Seoul [was praised for its handling](#) of COVID-19 and its response was viewed as a [model for other countries](#). Its approach of [detect, contain, and treat](#) allowed South Korea to quickly flatten the curve on COVID-19 infections and mostly prevent large outbreaks [prior to the Omicron variant](#).

South Korea has also contributed internationally. Thanks to its early success in keeping COVID-19 at bay, there was significant interest in lessons from South Korea's experience and Seoul quickly moved to share what it had learned with the rest of the world via the ["K-Quarantine"](#) model. It was also an important source of [commercial sales](#) of COVID-19 test kits during the early phase of the pandemic, and last year Seoul committed nearly

\$2 billion over five years to turn South Korea into a [vaccine production hub](#).

However, South Korea has been less forthcoming with donations during the pandemic. Even though South Korea is the world's 10th largest economy, it is currently only the world's 27th largest donor of vaccines, donating a little over 3.1 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, according to [UNICEF's COVID-19 Vaccine Market Dashboard](#).

For any government there is an obligation to ensure the protection of its own population. From that perspective, South Korea's failure to be at the forefront of vaccine donations and funding for COVAX is not surprising. Despite handling the early stages of the pandemic better than most countries, it was [slow to purchase](#) vaccines for its own population and had only fully vaccinated [about 15 percent](#) of the South Korean population by August of last year. Those numbers, however, grew to over 80 percent in just four months. Vaccine access is no longer an issue.

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In contrast, Spain, a smaller economy that has seen more COVID-19 infections and deaths than South Korea, has donated over 62.5 million COVID-19 vaccines. Japan, which was also [slow to vaccinate](#) its population, has donated nearly 42.7 million doses.

Seoul has also yet to contribute its fair share to funding COVAX to ensure that the world's middle and low income countries have access to the vaccines they need to manage the pandemic. Prior to the recent 2nd Global COVID-19 Summit, South Korea had pledged \$200 million toward COVAX. Based on data from the ACT-

Accelerator (ACT-A) Facilitation Council's Finance and Resource Mobilization Working Group, South Korea's contribution only amounted [27 percent](#) of its fair share to the last ACT-A budget, the [umbrella facility](#) (which includes COVAX) to support equitable access for low and middle income countries to tests, vaccines, and treatments.

At the 2nd Global COVID-19 Summit on May 12, South Korea pledged an [additional \\$300 million](#) over the three year period of 2023-2025, but did not pledge any additional funds for the current year.

In contrast, Canada pledged 732 million Canadian dollars to fulfill its fair share contribution to the Access to COVID-19 Tools-Accelerator for the current 2022-2023 budget cycle. Japan pledged an additional \$500 million for COVAX and additional funds for other COVID related initiatives to raise its total contributions during the pandemic from \$3.9 billion to \$5 billion.

South Korea is well placed to contribute more financially to ending the pandemic. Among the world's 10 largest economies, South Korea has the [lowest level](#) of debt to GDP. It has also had a relatively strong [economic recovery](#) from the pandemic.

Contributing more to pandemic efforts also aligns with new South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's own objectives for South Korean foreign policy. Yoon has called for South Korea to ["step up"](#) on issues such as the pandemic and to take on a [global role](#) more befitting of its status as one of the world's 10 largest economies.

How can South Korea play a larger role in ending the pandemic? The first is to provide

additional funding. Prior to the 2nd Global COVID-19 Summit, ACT-A faced a [\\$15 billion funding gap](#). The summit only produced [\\$2.5 billion](#) in new commitments to fight COVID-19. A significant financial gap remains.

At this point in the pandemic, however, the world has made significant progress on vaccine production, but is short on funds to pay for building up storage and delivery capacity in countries, as well as for oxygen and the therapeutic drugs that have been developed to treat COVID-19. In addition to funding through ACT-A, South Korea could increase direct donations of oxygen, therapeutics, and other needed supplies to ensure that vaccines are turned into vaccinations and those with COVID receive the treatments they need.

Lastly, Seoul can look to build coalitions to deal with the pandemic. Joining the Quad working group on vaccines is one option, but more work is needed on a global level to identify how gaps in non-vaccine supplies can be filled and how those in remote and disconnected areas can be tested and vaccinated. South Korea could look to work with ACT-A to build coalitions of countries to address supply needs, while working with organizations such as the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria that have experience in expanding testing and treatment for those in hard-to-reach places to do the same for COVID-19 testing and vaccinations.

In light of the recent reports of the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in North Korea, better global coordination of supplies could be an important issue for South Korea. Pyongyang is unlikely to accept help directly from South Korea or the United States, but it might be more open to international support now that it has acknowledged the presence of COVID-19

domestically. Engaging more deeply in the international process could be one path to ensuring that North Korea receives the support it needs.

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Three years into the pandemic many countries may view the situation as better or be facing donor fatigue, but as [U.K. Health Secretary Sajid Javid has noted](#), “We still face the threat of new Covid variants that could be more severe, they could be more transmissible or they could even escape the protection of current vaccines.” If Yoon is looking to boost South Korea’s role on the global stage, there is no better place to do so than efforts to end the pandemic.

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