

## Fragility to Strength:

### Lessons in Building State Resilience from Around the World

It is a mark of the times that ‘resilience’, a term particularly associated with fragile and low-income states (e.g. International Monetary Fund, 2019; Koliou et al., 2020; Pospisil and Kühn, 2016; The World Bank, 2013), has become a relevant lens for examining wealthy Western nations. At root, the concept concerns the way a state responds to shocks. We live in times of ‘radical uncertainty’ (King and Kay, 2020), such that no state can be perfectly prepared for every eventuality. A fragile state is one that breaks under a negative shock. A competent state can withstand the shock and recover to its previous level. A truly resilient state does more: it is ‘anti-fragile’ (Taleb, 2013), emerging from the crisis stronger than before. It learns and grows, with each trial survived leaving it better prepared for the next.

The Covid-19 pandemic has both highlighted key behaviours which foster resilience, and exposed their absence. Resilient states (i) learn from the past, (ii) train, trust and retain the best people, (iii) invest in preparedness while the sun shines, (iv) distribute domestic power effectively, and (v) build mutually-supportive coalitions internationally. One-off policy initiatives are insufficient; true resilience emerges from practicing these behaviours repeatedly, so that knowledge, expertise and trust compound over time.

The first, simplest, and most important characteristic of resilient states is that they learn from the past. Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea have been top performers in the fight against Covid-19, despite their proximity to the source of the outbreak, due in part to their previous experiences with MERS and SARS. After struggling to deal with the 2015 MERS outbreak, the South Korean government changed the law to provide more resources to epidemic intelligence officers, including access to CCTV footage for contact tracing (Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Learning and implementing such lessons is difficult if inquiries take a long time to report and are overly politicized – as with the UK’s [Chilcot inquiry](#) into the Iraq War, which did not publish its findings until 2016. There are already [fears](#) that a similar fate awaits a COVID inquiry in the UK. Resilient states learn from others’ past, not just their own. While less directly affected by previous pandemics, Germany went into the crisis with a detailed pandemic response plan that was quickly updated (Robert Koch Institute, 2020). This enabled testing to [scale up rapidly](#), with little time wasted on disputes over governance, accounting or costs.

Adopting international best practice is intimately connected to the second key behaviour of resilient states: the ability to empower and retain good people. Scientific advisors have received a nightly news profile equivalent to military generals in times of war (or national team coaches during international sporting events). Social distancing measures require public compliance; Taiwan’s response has been helped by having a popular party-independent epidemiologist as [Vice President](#). The Australian government has surprised many with its [deference to experts](#) and [collaborative decision-making](#), with [93% of Australians](#) approving of its handling of the pandemic. In the UK the Government had ‘[had enough of experts](#)’ during the Brexit debate, but subsequently in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic experts have played a central part: government action has been based on the advice of the SAGE committee, and the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer were given leading roles in media briefings. In the US by comparison, the system has become highly polarised, with many talented officials locked out of office by party affiliation, and high turnover among those who remained.

Beyond personnel, physical and financial resources are required to deal with crises – and these are best saved up during the good times. Singapore has been able to spend [almost 20% of GDP](#) on stimulus measures [by drawing on reserves](#) accrued precisely to prepare for financial shocks. Going into the pandemic Germany had 35.3 intensive care beds per 100,000 compared to 7 in the UK (Bauer et al., 2020).

Trust in government is a vital intangible asset. In the UK there was a sharp fall in already fragile public trust following the revelation that the Prime Minister's close advisor Dominic Cummings had broken rules without any apparent consequences for his position. The repeated failure to scale up tracking, tracing and testing have similarly dented trust that the ideas of experts and promises of politicians can be translated into effective actions.

The extent to which trust and compliance make the difference is evident in the relative successes of governments from Canada to China, and also relatively poor countries such as Vietnam, Mongolia and in Europe Greece, which in their management of COVID-19 have outperformed richer countries. Countries who credibly can claim to lead in science, such as the US and UK, have had far worse outcomes than those with far lower levels of national expertise. Those that have done well have been aided by high levels of public support (Edelman, 2020) and prompt and widespread compliance, not least with WHO guidelines. 'Rally round the flag' effects (Mueller, 1970) can provide a temporary boost to individual leaders, but effective responses require deeper support for a wide range of government actors and a commitment to international protocols and coordination.

Resources alone are not enough – they must also be managed effectively. This requires finding the optimum trade-off between the coordination value of centralized control and the experimentation value of decentralization. A national public health body like the Robert Koch Institute can publish guidelines and set standards, then state and county authorities can tailor them to their locality. The subsidiarity principle – that issues should be dealt with at the lowest possible level consistent with their resolution – is a useful guide, but implementing it in practice is difficult in unknown and changing circumstances. Resilient states have established mechanisms for handling the constant adjustments required, whether through formal channels like the European [Court of Justice](#), or through [complex political haggling](#), such as is the case with negotiations over Northern Ireland and devolution in the UK, or negotiations in the EU to raise common taxes. Resilience does not require that these dynamics will ever be complete, finished for all time, but simply that they occur in a way which does not undermine the ultimate unity and legitimacy of the territory being governed.

Finally, true resilience is not achieved in a vacuum. Covid-19, like financial panic or a computer virus, is not constrained by human borders. In our globalized economies it is not practical to cut off trade, and tourist demand is rebounding fast from [Bulgaria](#) to [Tanzania](#) to [Wyoming](#). A key finding from studies of developing and embattled states is that peace and prosperity are closely related to the condition of neighbours 21/05/2022 17:17:00. Given this deep integration, resilient states invest in mutually-supportive coalitions internationally. China's delay in reporting the virus may have had severe consequences (MacKenzie, 2020), as have President Trump's moves to undermine the WHO precisely when it is needed most (Horton, 2020). Multi-lateral alliances have been a key part of British security and economic stability since 1945; a successful Brexit will require new relationships to replace those that have been weakened.

How resilient does Britain appear, looking forward? Covid-19 has highlighted the country's strength in direct healthcare provision, vaccine research and macroeconomic policy, even as it has exposed fragilities in broader public health and central government. Major changes to civil service personnel are in the works, but it remains to be seen how those [answering the call](#) compare to [those who make way](#). The [budget deficit was falling prior to the pandemic](#), but the consequent cutting of investments in health and education are having a profound toll and increasing inequality, the impact of the pandemic and are likely to slow productivity and growth.

Domestic and international relationships are more uncertain than for generations, with both [Scottish devolution](#) and [Irish re-unification](#) in play and a [growing risk](#) of a 'no-deal' Brexit. Yet the British state has a long history of incremental reform and muddling through, reflected in the Common Law system. Britain will survive – it may just look diminished and different unless greater attention is given to the long term and building resilience.

[Link to full report](#)

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