

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Coronavirus Has Come For Australia

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SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA: The island that counts as a continent in the south Pacific suffered through a difficult summer. Massive bushfires hit Australia in December and January. In February came the rains. They helped extinguish the blazes still raging but caused massive flooding. All that remained were for swarms of locusts to appear.

Instead, in March coronavirus, lately taking the name COVID-19, made a visit. After Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton announced recently that he tested positive for the virus, most Australians probably would prefer the locusts. Most Americans probably would agree.

Luckily, I arrived early during the period of plagues. I missed the worst of the fires but I got drenched in the rain, while spending the month in Sydney. I was scholar-in-residence at the Centre for Independent Studies, a (classical) liberal, or libertarian, think tank. Australia always is a wonderful place to visit. Outside events made this a particularly challenging time to go.

Although President Donald Trump apparently imagined, at least initially, that COVID-19 would be little worse than the common cold, the potential global impact of the coronavirus—becoming a true pandemic around the globe—was evident early. For reasons of cost and convenience, I originally planned to fly from Washington, D.C. to Sydney via Beijing. The itinerary was cheaper, I knew the airport well, and international transit was easy. I even had a Chinese visa if there were flight problems and I got delayed.

As my departure date in January approached that evidently had become a very bad choice, so I switched airlines. By the time I traveled the U.S. had cut air travel to and from China. Australia did likewise.

That was a tougher decision for Canberra than Washington. The president might love Chinese President Xi Jinping, but America's own appears to be less than enamored of the Chinese—along with just about everyone else from every other country. One suspects that if he could have his way he would keep all foreigners out, at least if they did not come carrying bags of cash. Thus, for President Trump the China ban was win-win: appear tough and exclude foreigners.

Australia can't be quite so cavalier in its treatment of the People's Republic of China. The PRC is the leading trading partner DownUnder. Business relationships are strong. Tourists are many. Chinese students fill universities—indeed, schools are warning that if that ban is not lifted soon, the rest of this academic year will be lost.

Obviously, America's ties to the PRC also are strong but matter much less to the economy. And with the two nations in a trade war relations have been more frayed as late. Hostility toward China remains lower in Australia. Still, the PRC's role, especially moneyed meddling in politics, has created much unease in Australia. There also is concern over economic dependence on Beijing when the latter is aggressively pressing territorial claims in the region. Nevertheless, nuance is more the name of the policy game toward China.

South Korea became another COVID-19 hotspot. The U.S. government still has not imposed any controls on travel from the latter and little more than a week ago immigration control did not ask about recent travel there (in contrast to China and Iran). Stationing nearly 30,000 troops there complicates matters. In this regard, the Australians proved tougher. In early March, after I left DownUnder, Canberra barred entry to those who had been in the Republic of Korea and Italy; Australian citizens and permanent residents from those nations faced a 14-day quarantine on returning. Explained Prime Minister Scott Morrison, the "ban is put in place because it affords the best protection and enables us to slow down the rate of transmission."

Japan, with extensive economic ties to both China and the ROK, has been desperately attempting to prevent an epidemic that would threaten the Olympics, which is just five months off. If Tokyo fails to halt the contagion Australia might have to sever travel with yet another regional partner and leading economy. This would leave the latter even more reliant on Southeast Asia, countries especially vulnerable to the disease's spread given their relative poverty and poor health systems.

DownUnder must be concerned about the possibility of international isolation. Having limited contact with China and South Korea, should Japan, to which Canberra is merely recommending against travel, join the ban list Australia would find itself cut off from the major economies of the region. With population and economy more than 15 times the size of Australia's, the U.S. can better weather temporary autarky.

As the government started isolating the country, I joined most Australians in spending February watching events that seemed afar: the Chinese city of Wuhan turning into a ghost town, the virtual end of air travel with China, the plight of the 3711 people imprisoned ("quarantined") on the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Yokohama harbor, and scores of Australians repatriated and then placed in quarantine on Christmas Island.

Despite hope that a very splendid isolation might protect them, Australians engaged in panic-buying of toilet paper even before I left. More recently shelves reportedly have been emptying of it, along with face masks and hand sanitizers, like in America. The coronavirus threat seemingly remains low—just 156 confirmed cases late last week—but the virus is present and spreading. There is Dutton, Australia's equivalent of Attorney General William Barr. And Tom and Rita Hanks, who both tested positive while the former was shooting a film in country. Although they apparently were infected outside of the two main population centers of Sydney and Melbourne, that demonstrates the widespread nature of the threat of infection.

Morrison, a Pentecostal Christian, is positioned at the right-side of the ruling Liberal-National coalition, which won an unexpected victory in national elections a year ago that mimicked Trump's triumph, running up strong gains in rural and mining areas while sacrificing some urban/suburban seats. However, Morrison is no Trump. The former is an essentially conventional politician, despite being out of sync with media and urban elites. He leads but does not dominate

his party, which enjoys only a narrow majority in a parliamentary system. Most important, he does nuance and learns from mistakes.

He took his family on an unannounced vacation to Hawaii amid the fires and unsurprisingly lost the verdict of the court of public opinion. In practice, his presence was unnecessary, but the optics were terrible. On February 28, the day I left town, a wiser Morrison triggered the government's emergency plan on COVID-19. Rather than play down the challenge, he warned: "We believe the risk of global pandemic is very much upon us." He spoke not of avoiding but preparing "for such a pandemic."

At the same time state and territorial health ministers met to go over logistics—preparing testing, stockpiling medicines, and opening clinics. The first was to ensure that tests were easily available and widespread. After Beijing released the genome, the government turned to private industry to ensure adequate testing capability. Even with all this effort there are fears of shortfalls as other countries limit exports of the kits. Washington's response looks downright incompetent in contrast.

Collecting drugs is to prepare for the worst cases. The clinics are to treat COVID-19 patients, reducing the burden on hospitals and emergency rooms. A University of Queensland virologist involved in the process, Ian Mackay, observed: "In terms of the amount of time and human hours that have gone into the planning, it's massive." Everyone hopes the extra effort won't prove necessary. But no Australian wants to be in the Pacific equivalent of Italy or Spain.

Or America. The disparity of effort makes me wish I was still sitting in my hotel room in Sydney.

The Dutton and Hanks cases have added urgency to Australia's effort. The minister merely met President Trump and several top White House aides. He undoubtedly has had significantly more contact with numerous Australian government officials. Hanks is a name recognizable worldwide; his infection demonstrates to all that truly no one is immune.

Event cancellations have turned into a cascade. Some sports events are going forward without spectators. The government has banned gatherings of over 500 people and is "advising against" unnecessary foreign travel. However, so far universities plan to continue to hold classes, while dropping nonessential events.

Moreover, the government announced the creation of a bipartisan national cabinet, sort of a "war cabinet," made up of top national, state, and territorial officials to meet weekly. As Morrison explained: "Each and every state and territory represented here is completely sovereign and autonomous in the decisions they make, but what we have agreed to do together is to work together and be unified and is consistent and coordinated as possible in our national response. That means from time to time sharing resources. It means if there is a need to assist each other with various needs, then this group will work closely together to achieve that end."

Although getting 50 U.S. state governors together, in the same way, isn't feasible, states should be communicating and coordinating. The degree of epidemic will vary by area and most of the practical issues created will be best addressed at the same level. Mutual cooperation, therefore, is essential.

There are many broad similarities between the U.S. and Australia. Most Americans would feel comfortable living DownUnder, though the political spectrum is a notch or two to the left. When it comes to fighting COVID-19, however, there is little doubt that Canberra has done a better job. Australians seem likely to avoid the chaotic and costly disorder now evident in Italy and Spain, and perhaps in transit to the U.S. It is a lesson which Americans should take to heart before the next crisis.

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