

HOW OTHER COUNTRIES HAVE RESPONDED TO THE PANDEMIC

Singapore has not been alone in implementing firm containment measures alongside health and non-medical responses to the pandemic.

China, where the first COVID-19 cases were detected, is arguably the nation that has most strongly applied containment measures to lower infections and deaths at the onset of the pandemic.¹ As of 6 May 2021, it has allocated almost 5% of its GDP to discretionary fiscal spending, targeting epidemic control, medical equipment, unemployment insurance (including for migrant workers), tax relief, and further public investment.² In absolute numbers, China has also administered more COVID-19 vaccine doses than any other nation (over 700 million by 4 June 2021), with plans to inoculate most of its population by the end of 2021.³

In the **US**, in March 2020—more than five weeks after WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern—then-President Trump was still downplaying the severity of the situation, comparing the coronavirus to ordinary flu.⁴ Despite this, US fiscal support in response to the pandemic was considerable. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of March 2020, signed into law by President Trump, provided US\$2.3 trillion in economic stimulus, including one-time cash payments to taxpayers, increased unemployment benefits, loans to corporations, and aid to state and local governments. Amounting to 11% of GDP, this was the largest federal stimulus package in US history.⁵ In March 2021, President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan, providing another 9% of GDP to extend unemployment benefits, send direct stimulus payments to individuals, and increase school funding.

The **UK** initially considered a strategy of "herd immunity"—allowing enough of the population to get a mild case of COVID-19 and attain immunity,

shielding the more vulnerable from infection. Confronted with a spike in cases, the government later imposed social distancing measures, including sharp restrictions on the operations of gyms and entertainment outlets.⁶ The UK was the first Western country to administer large-scale vaccinations to its residents, starting from December 2020. By 15 April 2021, the UK had offered at least the first dose of the vaccine to everyone above the age of 50 and those in high-risk categories that accounted for 99% of UK's COVID-19 deaths. Following these measures, daily cases in the UK fell from a high of 90 per 100,000 people in January 2021 to 2.4 per 100,000 people in mid-April 2021.⁷

The **EU** saw numerous fiscal and monetary policy schemes put in place, both across the EU and in individual member states. Germany, for one, provided supplementary budgets to the tune of 5%, 4%, and then 2% of its GDP. These funds went towards hospital capacity expansion, grants for small businesses and the self-employed, expanded unemployment insurance, as well as childcare benefits for low-income parents, and parental leave benefits. Later in 2020, subsidies were also directed towards investment in green energy and digitisation.

Closer to home, **Malaysia** reported its first COVID-19 case in February 2020. A local outbreak in March 2020 prompted the government to impose its first Movement Control Order (MCO), which barred citizens from travelling overseas and shut all non-essential businesses and services.⁸ Despite a dip in daily cases to double-digit lows for a few months, a spike in cases prompted the government to announce a second MCO and then a state of emergency in January 2021.⁹ A renewed spike in the weeks before May 2021 led to the imposition of MCO 3.0, which still allowed businesses to operate. However, as the situation rapidly

deteriorated, Malaysia entered a total lockdown from 1 June to 14 June 2021, shutting down all non-essential economic and service sectors.¹⁰ As of March 2021, the Malaysian government has

announced six economic aid packages totalling RM340 billion,¹¹ the largest being the PRIHATIN Rakyat Economic Stimulus Package which amounts to RM250 billion (around 17% of GDP).¹²

Notes

1. World Health Organization, "Report of the WHO-China Joint Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)", February 2020, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-china-joint-mission-on-covid-19-final-report.pdf>.
2. International Monetary Fund, "Policy Responses to COVID-19", May 2021, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>.
3. Huizhong Wu, "After Slow Start, China Catches Up on Its Vaccination Drive; 80 Percent of Population to be Inoculated by End of 2021", *The Associated Press*, June 4, 2021, accessed June 6, 2021, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/after-slow-start-china-catches-up-on-its-vaccination-drive-80-percent-of-population-to-be-inoculated-by-end-of-2021-9684731.html>.
4. Tommy Beer, "All The Times Trump Compared Covid-19 To The Flu, Even after He Knew Covid-19 Was Far More Deadly", *Forbes*, September 10, 2020, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/09/10/all-the-times-trump-compared-covid-19-to-the-flu-even-after-he-knew-covid-19-was-far-more-deadly/?sh=3490d1c6f9d2>
5. Carl Hulse and Emily Cochrane, "As Coronavirus Spread, Largest Stimulus in History United a Polarized Senate", *The New York Times*, March 26, 2020, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/us/coronavirus-senate-stimulus-package.html>.
6. Noel Titheradge and Dr Faye Kirkland, "Coronavirus: Did 'Herd Immunity' Change the Course of the Outbreak?" *BBC*, July 20, 2020, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53433824>.
7. Vivienne Walt, "The U.S. and Britain Are Vaccinating at a Blistering Pace—With Very Different Results. Here's What the U.K. Did Right", *Fortune*, April 16, 2021, accessed June 3, 2021, <https://fortune.com/2021/04/16/us-britain-covid-vaccination-what-uk-did-right/>.
8. Tashny Sukumaran, "Coronavirus: Malaysia in Partial Lockdown from March 18 to Limit Outbreak", *South China Morning Post*, March 16, 2020, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3075456/coronavirus-malaysias-prime-minister-muhyiddin-yassin>.
9. Justin Ong, "Explainer: What Led to Malaysia's Second Major Lockdown and Its State of Emergency", *Today*, January 15, 2021, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/explainer-what-led-malaysias-second-major-lockdown-and-its-state-emergency>.
10. Vincent Tan, "Malaysia to Enter 'Total Lockdown' from Jun 1 to Jun 14 as Daily Number of COVID-19 Cases Hits New Record", *CNA*, May 28, 2021, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-total-lockdown-jun-1-14-muhyiddin-covid-19-cases-record-14905394>.
11. Vincent Tan, "Malaysia PM Muhyiddin Unveils RM20 Billion Economic Stimulus Package", *CNA*, March 17, 2021, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/malaysia-pm-muhyiddin-rm20-billion-economic-stimulus-covid-19-14428000>.
12. Principal Asset Management Berhad, "Malaysia Announces RM250 Billion Stimulus – 31 March 2020", accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.principal.com.my/en/malaysia-announces-rm-250-billion-stimulus-31-march-2020>.

