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## **Finding strength in global adversity**

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Two months ago, the International Pledging Conference on Avian and Human Pandemic Influenza took place in Beijing. This significant event brought together leaders from more than 100 countries, international organisations and corporations. By the end, participants had pledged nearly US\$2 billion to combat bird flu.

China's role as host was symbolic. Emerging from the shadow of embarrassing mismanagement, cover-up and recalcitrance during the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak in 2003, Beijing is now working with the World Health Organisation on bird flu, and demonstrating comparatively good citizenship in the international community.

Beijing's co-operative approach has the full backing of the United States. Despite trade, security and human-rights concerns, Washington has encouraged Beijing to become a responsible stakeholder in the international community. Health concerns have become a critical part of this agenda, and the US and China have much to do together. This is a point that should be underscored during President Hu Jintao's visit to Washington this month.

Beijing has taken several preventive measures to contain the bird flu outbreak - bearing in mind a pandemic's costs and responding to pressure from Washington and the international community. The State Council this year released national-response plans for nine types of emergencies, including public-health incidents.

These are believed to be China's first comprehensive and detailed crisis-management plans. They followed the launch of a national contingency plan for bird flu by the Ministry of Health last September. Taken together, these measures showcase Beijing's stronger political will to prevent and address a potential pandemic in a more prompt, collaborative and transparent manner.

After the State Council released its new emergency-response plans, health officials announced the formation of a 105-member national expert team to address emerging public-health incidents. The Health Ministry set up a section to deal with bird flu, and 192 monitoring sites were established throughout the country.

Some of these corrective measures reflect valuable lessons learned during the Sars outbreak. This time, Beijing appears to be much more responsive to the potential health crisis. It has dawned upon leaders that bird flu, like HIV/Aids and Sars, is a non-traditional threat to state security that cannot be contained through denial or cover-up. In part, Washington should be credited for encouraging Chinese officials to improve transparency in disease surveillance and reporting, data sharing and biomedical research.

Shortly after Beijing reported its first confirmed human case of bird flu infection, in mid-October, the government quickly asked for outside assistance. Later that month, Minister of Health Gao Qiang visited Washington and signed an agreement to establish a US-China programme to address emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. This was the culmination of years of effort to increase co-operation on that issue. The US pledged to provide more technical assistance for building laboratories, training scientists and health-care personnel, and developing vaccines in China.

On the international front, the two nations will support the global effort to combat bird flu. Beijing has gradually grown accustomed to the new role of being both a donor and a recipient of international assistance. Its willingness to open up to public scrutiny and reach out to outside partners is a significant step forward.

The institutional changes and the establishment of a national emergency-response mechanism reflect Beijing's growing confidence in its ability to confront bird flu. Washington's assistance has encouraged other donors to increase their engagement with China. Many hope that such co-operation will be a practical model for other developing nations seeking international assistance.

Yet, there are disturbing challenges on the horizon. Generating the political will to impel both sides to follow through on these pledges is a top priority. Even if there are differences over issues like nuclear programmes in Iran and North Korea, progress on public health should not be jeopardised.

Furthermore, Beijing still displays a certain hesitancy to increase transparency. Nearly 60 per cent of China's population lives in rural areas, and most families raise chickens in their backyards. If the virus should mutate and become transmittable among humans, millions of people in rural China would be at risk. And it would be only a matter of time before the outbreak spilled over into neighbouring countries and the rest of the world. Beijing cannot fight the disease alone. Health agencies from both sides must, therefore, prepare for a worst-case scenario. Mr Hu's visit to Washington would be an opportune moment to address current challenges, renew previous pledges and allay concerns about the pace and focus of the current response.

Containing and responding to bird flu is an opportunity to further Sino-American co-operation. As key partners in the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation and the WHO, both countries understand that the prevention of a global pandemic is at stake. As the world's most populous nation and largest poultry producer, China is a pivotal player in the global response.

Together, these factors should compel Washington and Beijing to co-operate even more closely to combat bird flu and confront other global health threats.

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