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ASEAN's Multilateral Path Through the Pandemic

MELY CABALLERO-ANTHONY

The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as the most challenging public health crisis in a century—an existential threat that has caused untold suffering for millions of people and hundreds of thousands of deaths around the world. Many more lives were upended as the public health crisis rapidly gave rise to an economic crisis of global proportions.

The layered health and economic impacts of the pandemic underscore the growing complexity of the international security environment. The twin crises have exposed the fundamental flaws and weaknesses of institutions that promote peace and security. In an absence of global leadership, tensions between the United States and China have deepened amid growing trends of protectionism and rivalry. Just when greater international cooperation is needed, a turn toward nationalism and unilateralism in parts of the globe is putting multilateralism at risk.

These complex challenges raise urgent questions about Southeast Asia's security and the future of regional order in the wider Indo-Pacific arena. Central to this order is the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as the main institutional framework for managing security and economic cooperation in the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first health crisis to hit the region in the twenty-first century. There were at least two previous public health emergencies that severely affected Southeast Asia and the wider East Asian region: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), in 2003, and the H1N1 influenza, otherwise known as swine flu, in 2009.

The SARS outbreak was regarded as a major threat, given the novelty and the virulence of the virus. It rapidly became a global concern as it spread from the site of its first outbreak, in China's Guangdong province, to other Asian countries, including Taiwan, Vietnam, and Singapore, eventually reaching parts of Europe and the Americas. The pandemic lasted about six months, infecting more than 8,000 people and causing 772 fatalities.

Despite those relatively low numbers, the economic impact of SARS was severe. Travel advisories issued for countries like Singapore and Vietnam damaged their vital tourism industries. Most studies estimated the economic cost of SARS at roughly \$40 billion, shaving about 1–2 percentage points from affected countries' gross domestic products. But the impact of this rapid deterioration was limited: most of Asia experienced a sharp rebound after SARS disappeared.

A similar economic slowdown occurred during the H1N1 pandemic. But the impact was harder to quantify, given that much of the region was also reeling from the devastating effects of the 2008 global financial crisis.

COVID-19 is even more infectious than SARS and H1N1 and spreads at an alarming speed, thanks in part to today's global hyper-connectivity in trade and people. Most countries opted to lock down their borders and impose tight restrictions on people's movements in desperate attempts to contain the spread of the virus. The impacts of the pandemic have severely disrupted all facets of human life, from the socioeconomic to the political and security realms, likely with long-lasting consequences.

Aside from the high number of lives lost, the most serious impact of the pandemic has been on the global economy. The forced lockdowns froze business activities and rattled supply chains,

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causing millions of job losses. Reports from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank project a global growth contraction of up to 8 or 10 percent, resulting in the worst downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In Asia, the pandemic has triggered large-scale unemployment, with an estimated 339 million more people driven into poverty, joining the 700 million already under the poverty line.

The sudden economic downturn has exacerbated growing inequality within societies and across regions, and has threatened food security and other basic needs for millions more people across the world. Many who were dependent on the gig economy have been left jobless. The consequences of the pandemic are most acute for developing countries that are largely dependent on remittances from millions of migrant workers who have been displaced. The Philippines, for instance, took in an estimated \$30 billion in remittances from its overseas foreign workers in 2019. Now hundreds of thousands of its overseas workers have lost their jobs and been forced to return home, with no guarantees of employment in a battered economy.

Most forecasters suggest that a global economic recovery is contingent on the discovery of a vaccine. But even before the pandemic, the world economy was slowing down. One of the main reasons was the rising trade tensions between China and the United States. This major power rivalry has unsettled the geostrategic environment in East and Southeast Asia, raising concerns that the rules-based international order is being undermined.

THE CHINA CHALLENGE

The COVID-19 pandemic has become yet another issue fueling tensions between Washington and Beijing. Their relationship is crucial to ASEAN and regional security. Prior to the outbreak, their relations were already fraught with problems—not least, economic and trade tensions. The United States has also accused China of undermining the international order with its unilateral claims to disputed territories in the South and East China seas.

Chinese military assertiveness in the contested waters has grown even more audacious during the pandemic. Within the month of April 2020 alone, China dispatched fishing and coast guard vessels

into the exclusive economic zones of Indonesia and Vietnam; expanded its presence on Thitu Island, the largest island claimed by the Philippines in the South China Sea; sent a survey vessel, with maritime militia in tow, into Malaysia's exclusive economic zone, where the state oil company Petronas conducts drilling; and brazenly established two new administrative districts for contested islands in the South China Sea's Paracel and Spratly chains.

These unilateral moves by China came amid ongoing negotiations between Beijing and ASEAN members on a code of conduct for the South China Sea. At every ASEAN summit, the chair issues a report on where the negotiations stand. In most instances, it emphasizes hope and progress in an effort to manage bilateral tensions.

The lack of a collective response from ASEAN to denounce Chinese adventurism in the South China Sea—only Vietnam and Indonesia have openly protested—reflects the current dynamics of major power competition in the region. There is clearly a marked difference in China's power, and in how it is now perceived by ASEAN countries, compared with the situation when SARS emerged in 2003.

In terms of economic power, China accounted for only 4 percent of global GDP in 2003. But 17 years after SARS, China's share has risen to nearly 20 percent. China is also the second-largest trading partner of the ASEAN countries as a whole, and the leading partner for some member states, such as Cambodia and Laos. ASEAN and China are both integral to global supply chains, particularly in the manufacturing sector; China produces 20 percent of intermediate manufacturing goods, like automotive and telecommunication equipment. Any disruptions caused by rare but high-impact “black swan” events such as pandemics have grave repercussions for the region's economy.

The pandemic has only underscored China's growing economic influence, and how the resulting asymmetry in power relations has given Beijing more latitude to act with increasing assertiveness, both militarily and diplomatically. Despite US attempts to blame it for the global spread of COVID-19, China appears to have turned the pandemic to its advantage. Beijing not only dismissed the Trump administration's claims that the virus originated in a government laboratory in Wuhan; it

*ASEAN provided a critical platform
for East Asia to work together.*

has also moved to fill the void in global leadership left by Washington.

Unlike parts of Europe, the United States, and Latin America, China was able to effectively contain COVID-19 within three months of when the coronavirus first emerged. At the height of the pandemic's first wave, when many countries faced critical shortages of medical supplies like masks, other personal protective equipment (PPE), test kits, and ventilators, China promptly dispatched aid. Global news reports showed Chinese planes full of medical goods arriving in European countries, including Spain, Italy, and Britain. Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, also received Chinese aid. Chinese doctors visited cities in Italy and the Philippines to share lessons on effective pandemic containment.

At a special ASEAN summit held virtually on April 14, 2020, China offered to contribute to the bloc's pandemic recovery fund under the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) framework, which brings the 10 member states together with China, Japan, and South Korea. The recovery fund is aimed at improving capacity for regional health emergencies, addressing shortages of medical supplies, and funding research into vaccines and therapeutic drugs.

China has announced that it plans to treat any COVID-19 vaccine it develops as a global public good, promising to make it accessible and affordable for developing countries, which are often at a disadvantage when vaccines are commercially produced. With its near-monopoly in the production of medical goods, and its readiness to lend a helping hand to countries in need during these extreme circumstances, China has displayed a friendlier side that has been dubbed "mask diplomacy," offsetting the belligerent "wolf warrior" style recently adopted by many Chinese diplomats.

It is premature to claim that the United States is in retreat from its long-held role as a resident power in the Indo-Pacific. But its current preoccupation with domestic politics, as well as the Trump administration's inaction and prevarication in dealing with the pandemic, have raised doubts about America's role in Asia and its commitment to upholding the regional order.

SETTING STANDARDS

To its credit, ASEAN has fared reasonably well in coping with the impact of COVID-19. Indeed, the success of member countries like Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand in containing

the pandemic offers important lessons on health security governance.

Learning from their experiences with SARS and H1N1, ASEAN countries have set standards and norms for effective pandemic preparedness and response. Their progress is evident in the way the bloc has responded to the coronavirus. When news of the viral outbreak in China emerged, ASEAN immediately activated its regional mechanisms for handling a pandemic.

One of these is the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) and its Network for Public Health Emergencies, which coordinates ASEAN member states in preventing, detecting, and responding to health threats. It also provides a communications channel for ASEAN and the Plus Three countries.

The EOC serves as a surveillance mechanism to monitor the spread of infectious diseases, following standardized protocols for information sharing. These require member states to report all cases that fall under the category of a "public health emergency of international concern."

According to accounts from the ASEAN Secretariat, Chinese health officials had already reported the outbreak of the then-unknown virus in early January 2020 to its Health Division, which in turn relayed the information to the health officials of ASEAN member states, as well as to Japan and South Korea. Even before the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the ASEAN-led regional health network was already at work to contain the spread.

Regional actions were supported by national-level responses. Most ASEAN countries had national pandemic preparedness plans in place as a result of their experiences with SARS and H1N1. These plans were constantly reviewed in accordance with the WHO's call for countries to be prepared to implement the International Health Regulations for emerging infectious diseases. As part of ASEAN cooperation on health security, a number of table-top exercises had been held since 2010 to allow officials from both health and non-health sectors (immigration, civil defense, and so forth) to review and strengthen their pandemic preparedness plans.

Thanks to this work on national preparedness, ASEAN countries were able to take the necessary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The lengths to which governments have gone to control the virus, and the speed and decisiveness of their actions—travel restrictions, border closures, social distancing directives, massive testing—

resulted in their success in “flattening the curve” of infections, compared with the struggles of many countries in regions like Europe, North America, and Latin America.

STRENGTHENING COOPERATION

In the early months of the pandemic, many countries around the world turned inward and retreated from multilateral cooperation as they grappled with containing the crisis. ASEAN, however, opted to turn the crisis into an opportunity to strengthen regional bodies for multilateral cooperation. Travel restrictions notwithstanding, ASEAN leaders on April 14 convened via video conferencing for their special summit on COVID-19, as well as an ASEAN Plus Three summit with the leaders of China, Japan, and South Korea. The two summits charted pathways for deeper regional cooperation on health security.

The first priority they set was building the capacity of existing regional mechanisms to deal with future public health emergencies. These include the ASEAN EOC, the region's nerve center for timely and accurate information on disease outbreaks, providing daily situational updates on prevention, detection, and response. The ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre has supported the EOC by producing and circulating risk assessments, using big data analytics to track the spread of COVID-19.

The Regional Public Health Laboratories Network facilitates information exchange and assists labs in ASEAN countries that require technical or material support. The ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre disseminates information on preventive and control measures to member states, including advice on combating misinformation. The ASEAN Plus Three Field Epidemiological Training Network promotes disease surveillance and reporting.

The second priority was to provide financial support to supplement member states' limited resources. To this end, with the support of China, Japan, and South Korea, the bloc established the ASEAN Response Fund, which can be used to help member states procure medical supplies and equipment, as well as to finance research and development of vaccines and therapeutic drugs.

One proposal currently being considered is to build a regional stockpile of critical medical equipment for distribution to countries in dire need of

items like masks, gloves, other PPE, and ventilators. The proposal builds on existing ASEAN resources such as the Disaster Emergency Logistics Systems, which store relief supplies contributed by donors including Japan, China, and the European Union. When disasters strike, these supplies can be deployed through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance.

The April summits also helped to foster trust and confidence in a region mired in power rivalries. ASEAN's ability to reach out to China, Japan, and South Korea provided a critical platform for East Asia to work together despite bilateral tensions among those three countries, and to focus on harnessing countries' respective strengths to collectively respond to unprecedented twin crises of global proportions.

This was not the first time that the APT countries had worked together to cope with a regional crisis. In 1997, the Asian financial crisis swept the region. What began as a banking crisis that first hit countries like Thailand and Indonesia rapidly turned into a regional economic contagion, as currencies went into free fall and

debt-laden companies were forced to shut down. This resulted in massive economic displacement for millions of workers across Asia.

Since most countries needed emergency liquidity support to keep their economies and companies afloat, many turned to the lender of last resort—the International Monetary Fund—to provide life support. As part of the conditions it set for aid, the IMF imposed stringent structural adjustments, such as ending government subsidies and closing insolvent banks. These requirements were onerous for countries already facing extreme economic difficulties and political challenges.

Some ASEAN leaders felt it was time for countries in East Asia to band together and come up with their own financial and economic arrangements that would be more responsive to the particular needs of the region—something akin to a regional self-help mechanism. The Asian financial crisis prompted the establishment of the APT in 1999. This new regional institution was initially geared toward promoting financial and monetary cooperation among the ten ASEAN countries and their three Northeast Asian partners. Areas of cooperation were later extended to the political and security realms, as well as social welfare and development.

ASEAN immediately activated its regional mechanisms for handling a pandemic.

A key APT project was the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI). Launched in 2010, it started out as a regional currency swap arrangement to address short-term liquidity problems faced by APT countries in the wake of the Asian financial crisis, supplementing the assistance provided by the IMF. In 2011, an ASEAN Plus Three macroeconomic research office was created to manage the CMI mechanism and to monitor the health of the region's banking sector. The CMI's \$120 billion fund was doubled in 2014. Yet the liquidity mechanism remains untested to date, awaiting another Asian financial crisis. The economic fallout caused by the pandemic is a much deeper problem and requires different instruments to provide economic aid through loans and other forms of assistance.

The decision to work collectively to address the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic reflected this history of cooperation led by ASEAN. It led to commitments by the APT to keep markets open for trade and investment and to ensure the resilience of supply chains for essential goods like food, medicines, and medical supplies. Countries have suffered due to lack of access to vital medical goods during health emergencies. Such situations call for lifting export bans and eliminating tariffs and other trade barriers on these goods. It is necessary to counter the protectionist tendencies of some countries toward imposing export restrictions on these essential goods in the middle of public health crises.

HEALTH SECURITY LEADERSHIP

ASEAN's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is still very much a work in progress. While there have been some successes, keeping the virus in check while navigating the strong waves of geopolitical tensions in the wider region remains a difficult challenge. But three important aspects of ASEAN's contribution to global health security and the rules-based international order deserve to be highlighted.

First is the emphasis placed by ASEAN on comprehensive and nontraditional security—in this instance, health security. Since its inception as a regional body, ASEAN has always stressed the need to address the nonmilitary aspects of security, including its political, economic, and sociocultural dimensions. Some scholars refer to this range of concerns as human security. It encompasses

freedom from want—including protection from disease—and freedom from fear.

ASEAN's experiences of dealing with the severe consequences of SARS and H1N1 demonstrated the critical importance of health security to national and regional security. That led the bloc to develop regional mechanisms to promote cooperation in this area, which would prove extremely useful for managing the coronavirus pandemic.

For the international community, the pandemic has been a grim reminder of the increasing threat that emerging infectious diseases pose to global security. Pandemics like COVID-19 are regarded as black swan events—low probability, high impact. But in a hyper-connected world, outbreaks of such highly infectious diseases are becoming more frequent.

Entrenched views of what constitutes a threat to national security are often skewed toward military threats, such as nuclear missiles and other weapons of mass destruction. But a pandemic, like climate change, is an existential threat. It is folly to pour funds into building up sophisticated military surveillance capabilities while ignoring the need for global and national disease surveillance systems that can prevent, detect, trace, and respond to a rapidly spreading virus.

A second ASEAN approach worth noting is its emphasis on the transborder implications of nontraditional security threats like infectious diseases and climate change. The bloc has set the goal of establishing an ASEAN Political and Security Community to raise the level of cooperation, particularly in dealing with transnational security threats. This approach is intended to encourage regional solutions to regional problems, based on the understanding that achieving national security requires working beyond borders.

The Political and Security Community is envisioned as both a normative and a functional framework of security cooperation with four constituent elements: a rules-based community bound by shared values and norms; enhanced capacity to respond quickly and effectively to challenges; deeper coordination with external parties; and improved regional institutions, like the ASEAN Secretariat. These elements can already be seen in the way ASEAN has dealt with COVID-19. The international community should take heed of them if it

ASEAN has always emphasized the need to address the nonmilitary aspects of security.

wants to take a truly global approach to a generational threat to peace and security.

INDEPENDENT AGENT

During this crisis, ASEAN has shown its ability to work with other countries, cognizant of the fact that regional health security can only be as strong as its weakest link. Since the pandemic will have long-lasting consequences, ASEAN must build regional capacity by helping members and nonmembers alike strengthen their public health systems.

Aside from sharing information and best practices, key priorities in the immediate and mid-to-long term include more cooperation in ramping up scientific and medical expertise, laboratories, and diagnostics, as well as training a more qualified health care workforce in the region. Achieving these aims requires creating more opportunities for medical training and educational exchanges, allowing health care professionals from less-developed member countries to study in the region's established universities.

Before and especially during the pandemic, ASEAN has also demonstrated its support for multilateral institutions like the WHO. ASEAN invited WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to participate in its special APT summit. At a time of rising nationalism, when some countries like the United States have turned away from international institutions, ASEAN is helping to define health security as an imperative for multilateral cooperation and global governance.

Last but not least, ASEAN has shown its independent agency in maintaining a rules-based regional order. Despite being caught between the United States and China, ASEAN has stuck to its approach of remaining neutral regarding their geopolitical rivalry. By choosing not to take a side, and instead focusing on coordinating and leading multilateral

efforts to respond to the pandemic, ASEAN reaffirms its central role in the region.

ASEAN's centrality, however, cannot be taken for granted. The bloc's credibility is being tested on many fronts. Domestically, some member states are struggling to preserve democratic gains and avoid sliding into authoritarianism. Most face the challenges of maintaining social cohesion in multi-racial societies, resolving internal conflicts exacerbated by religious extremism and radicalism, and addressing growing inequality that jeopardizes economic development and prosperity. Externally, ASEAN must maintain regional cohesion against China's attempts to drive a wedge among its members on issues like the South China Sea, while making credible efforts to advance regionalism and multilateralism in East Asia and beyond.

ASEAN has not allowed its members' relatively small size and lack of material power to hinder efforts to promote cooperative security and foster trust and confidence in East Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN's inclusive approach—bringing countries together, both like-minded and otherwise, while encouraging the observance of rules and norms of interstate conduct—has given it the ability to be a first mover in building regional institutions. Its own open and inclusive institutions are critical building blocks for pushing ahead with multilateral and multisectoral initiatives to address common security challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fissures in the international system. It has also intensified the US–China rivalry. These divisions will not be resolved soon. But ASEAN, through its institutions and practices, can continue to develop the capacity to act and claim a central role in maintaining a rules-based regional order that provides comprehensive security. Clearly, public health is more important than ever to this broader approach to security. ■