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Global Health Security

ASEAN-China COVID-19 Meeting: Why and What's Next?

By Zi Yang

SYNOPSIS

The 20 February ASEAN-China foreign ministers meeting in Vientiane, Laos was a watershed in bringing together China and ASEAN member states to combat the COVID-19 epidemic. Driven by security and economic interests, ASEAN and China decided to expand collaboration in many areas to address mutual concerns in public health security.

COMMENTARY

ON 20 FEBRUARY 2020, ASEAN and China held the first Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on COVID-19 in Vientiane, Laos that sought to coordinate a unified ASEAN-China response to the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic that now has all features of a [global pandemic](#).

During the meeting, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi made four proposals — enhance inter-agency response; set-up permanent public health cooperation mechanisms; be prepared to lift trade and travel restrictions; and foster new areas of cooperation amid the epidemic. Wang's proposals were received positively by ASEAN counterparts.

Factors Behind the Meeting

According to the meeting's [joint statement](#), ASEAN and China promised to increase information sharing and communications, strengthen cooperation mechanisms, expand policy dialogue, build disease prevention and control capacity, support

businesses affected by the epidemic, “mitigate supply chain disruptions of urgent medical goods and promote research and development of medicines and vaccines”.

Some two months after the outbreak began, China finally held the first meeting with ASEAN, the largest multi-nation bloc in China’s neighborhood. Although we are not sure why it took so long for China’s foreign minister to meet ASEAN counterparts, the results of the meeting were clearly positive.

Still, it is necessary for us to grasp the circumstances that led to the meeting, so we could better understand the future trajectory of ASEAN-China cooperation in combating COVID-19. Two major factors contributed to the realisation of the meeting. One deals with national security of ASEAN states, the other is mutual economic interest.

The Security Factor

COVID-19 is a highly contagious virus with an unpredictable profile. In a recent speech, Chinese President Xi Jinping confirmed that COVID-19 “has the fastest transmission, widest range of infection and has been the most difficult to prevent and control”. Unlike SARS, the source and transmission patterns of COVID-19 have not been completely understood.

Thus, COVID-19 is comparatively more difficult to contain. The surprise rise of infections in South Korea, Italy, and Iran of the past several days are testaments to mounting challenges in global containment efforts. So far, COVID-19 has already surpassed SARS in infected cases and death toll, all within a shorter time frame.

With porous borders and heavy international traffic, Southeast Asian countries are especially vulnerable to the epidemic, leading to a number of ASEAN countries taking strict protective measures, with Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia being the most stringent in limiting visitors with recent travel history to Mainland China.

Currently, six out of 10 ASEAN states have reported COVID-19 cases, out of which Singapore has the highest of 93 cases, of which 62 have fully recovered. With that being said, ASEAN countries cannot return to normalcy when the epicentre of the initial outbreak remains very much active and ASEAN states are helping themselves by contributing to China’s containment effort.

Mutual Economic Interest

Besides security, common economic interest also brought ASEAN and China together. At the crossroads of international commerce, Southeast Asia is a main investment destination for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). And in recent years trade between ASEAN and China has been expanding exponentially. Merchandise trade with China reached US\$479.4 billion in 2018, or 17.1 percent of ASEAN’s total merchandise trade.

In addition, China has been ASEAN’s largest trade partner since 2009. In 2018, China provided the third-largest amount of foreign direct investment to ASEAN and the country produced the largest number of tourists to four ASEAN countries.

COVID-19 is extremely disruptive to commerce. Both China and ASEAN countries are forecasting much slower economic growth this year with billions of dollars in economic losses due to disruption in trade, travel, and investment. According to Morgan Stanley's assessment, China's first quarter growth could slow to 3.5 percent if COVID-19 is not properly contained.

In the meantime, Singapore has downgraded its 2020 growth to between -0.5 percent and 1.5 percent, a reflection of regional ill fortunes. As commonly known, economic troubles could amplify problems in other sectors. Therefore, it is in the interest of both ASEAN and China to join hands and bring an end to the epidemic as soon as possible.

Meeting's Impact on COVID-19 Containment

While the Vientiane meeting ended on a high note with words of mutual support and confidence in overcoming difficulties together, President Xi struck quite a different tone to Foreign Minister Wang's promising words. Three days after the ASEAN-China meeting, Xi gave a speech calling the COVID-19 epidemic the "largest public health emergency" since the People's Republic's founding and called the crisis a "big test" for the government.

Xi's statement, in addition to rising infections in several countries, show that COVID-19 will have lasting global impact and its containment demands coordinated international action.

For ASEAN countries, the Vientiane meeting is comparable to the April 2003 Bangkok meeting, when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao met ASEAN counterparts and devised plans to jointly combat SARS. The Vientiane meeting could mark a new beginning for ASEAN-China public health cooperation.

Besides utilising existing mechanisms such as ASEAN-China Health Ministers' Meeting and the ASEAN-China Senior Officials' Meeting on Health Development to "fully implement the ASEAN-China MOU on Health Cooperation and support more mutually agreed cooperation projects", we will likely witness changes in three areas.

Three Key Impacts

First of all, according to the Chinese foreign minister, China seeks to hold a Special China-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on COVID-19, in addition to establishing a China-ASEAN public health liaison group, and reserve centers for epidemic-control provisions. Thus, we will see the formation of new mechanisms in the coming months.

Second, besides meeting between high-level government officials, there will be more coordination between Chinese and ASEAN medical professionals in sharing information regarding the COVID-19 containment, research, and treatment. Finally, ASEAN will accelerate aid to China. ASEAN governments and civil society organizations were sending aid to China before the meeting and such trend will likely gain momentum.

In fact, the day after the Vientiane meeting, Singapore's Ministry of Defence delivered some 2,000 kg of [essential medical supplies](#) such as N95 masks, safety goggles, and

medical handwash to China's military hospitals that are actively engaged in containment at Wuhan city and Hubei province.

Although the official meeting to coordinate ASEAN-China COVID-19 containment could have happened earlier, the recent meeting in Vientiane is a positive sign for both parties' public health cooperation. Overall, this is an important milestone for what is shaping up to be a long fight for the global community.

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