

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 and Its Impact*

EU and ASEAN: In Common Disunity

By Alan Chong and Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

Nationalist obsessions and failure to grasp the transboundary ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic characterise the deficient responses of the world's two leading regional organisations. Serious reputational damage has been inflicted on the European Union and ASEAN.

COMMENTARY

ON 16 APRIL 2020, *The Guardian* newspaper in the United Kingdom published a remarkable story that lauded [Chancellor Angela Merkel's dispassionate, scientific explanation](#) of how Germany could flatten the curve of COVID-19 infections if it continued to strictly enforce social distancing and lock down the economy.

In the midst of rampant uncertainty about when normality could return to public life across the European Union and the lack of an EU anti-COVID-19 action plan, Merkel's message and presence received far warmer treatment outside her country than at home. She was not speaking as a prominent EU politician; it was plain and simple national leadership from the pedestal of one of the EU's largest and wealthiest members.

ASEAN and EU Responses Compared

In Southeast Asian and international media, ASEAN is seen as generally immaterial in the fight against COVID-19 despite its reputation of being in the driver's seat of regional cooperation and community-building processes.

ASEAN's chair country for 2020, Vietnam, has been celebrated domestically and across Southeast Asia for its proactive measures to lock down early on any commune or district that contained a single COVID-19 infected resident. Contact tracing was widely deployed and the national guidance given to its population was to re-enact the spirit of resistance against a foreign invader.

This securitisation legitimised collective sacrifices of consumer convenience, school closures and the shutdown of daily commuting in locked-down zones. Hanoi too imposed travel bans and mandatory 14-day quarantine of all foreign arrivals just like its ASEAN neighbours. By mid-April it boasted no more than 268 cases and no fatality while also declaring that all patients were steadily recovering.

[This prompted a number of commentators to argue that Hanoi could now enjoy diplomatic momentum to flesh out ASEAN's 'model' of pandemic containment.](#) The problem is that, aside from a vaguely worded commitment by ASEAN leaders and their Plus Three counterparts from China, Japan and South Korea to set up a joint aid fund for supporting economically weaker ASEAN member states facing the pandemic, there remains no substantial region-wide plan to combat COVID-19.

What then has hobbled the respective regional leaderships in the EU and ASEAN in tackling the deadly virus?

Nations Going it Alone

COVID-19 is turning into one of the greatest global challenges of our lifetime, and it is testing the international resolve to cooperate. Both China and the United States have hitherto failed to provide global leadership.

While concerted global action is always difficult to achieve, it is the geographical regions where collective COVID-19 governance could have been expected most. And nowhere more so than in Europe and East Asia where the EU and ASEAN are generally regarded as the two most advanced regional organisations. Yet, the EU and ASEAN are struggling with nationalistic instincts and unilateral knee-jerk reactions.

In both regions, integration is based on and accelerated by geographical proximity and human and economic connectivity. Ironically, as the spread of COVID-19 intensifies, it appears that these two acknowledged pillars of integration are fumbling with needed actions to deal with the crisis. Even where previously agreed measures for crisis management at the bureaucratic levels were activated, parochial considerations took precedence and any modicum of joint response was absent.

Instead of cooperating to uphold intra-regional connectedness, many governments unilaterally abandoned achievements of regional integration as countries shut borders, broke supply chains and fought over medical supplies.

In the nerve centre of the EU, the European Commission in Brussels did little to warrant its reputation for institutional cooperation and legalism. When some EU members went into full nationalist gear and curtailed the precious freedom of movement of goods and people, the much vaunted single market place and borderless Schengen area in Europe were de facto abandoned.

When Italy asked its EU “friends” for solidarity in the form of medical equipment as well as commonly guaranteed sovereign debt, other EU capitals decreed export bans on such goods, forsaking the EU single market, and [issued a clear “no” to common Eurobonds](#).

Like EU, ASEAN Faced Pandemic with Fear

Likewise in Southeast Asia, the pandemic aroused public fear that played into the national security mindsets of elected and authoritarian leaders alike. The instant reaction was framed in terms of COVID-19 needing a domestic lock-down solution. Multilateral cooperation came to a standstill as borders were closed and travel restricted unilaterally.

Despite being the most logical platform to manage a common transboundary challenge, the leaders of ASEAN and their Plus Three partners from China, Japan and South Korea came together for a teleconference only several months into the pandemic. Even then, some leaders continued to speak of the need to protect supply chains, and after reducing the numbers of fatalities, to create mutual health protocols for ensuring the safety of air passengers commuting between one another’s cities.

The average ASEAN citizens do not know what is the take-away for them and their families in the face of the viral contagion and economic hardship arising from the massive lock down situations.

It also became painstakingly obvious how the capacity of each ASEAN member state to manage the pandemic differs. Brunei and Singapore are regarded as having the resources to do testing, contact tracing and treating infected individuals. Vietnam impressed with its no-nonsense whole-of-society approach while it is impossible to do wide-scale testing in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand.

Laos and Cambodia appear to be relying on third parties, particularly China, to address any nation-wide contagion due to inadequate healthcare systems and a lack of physicians and equipment.

All Not Lost; But Too Little Too Late?

Amidst the nationalist turns in tackling COVID-19, there are nonetheless signs that all is not lost.

Both the EU and ASEAN have agreed to set up common funds to tackle the economic consequences in the hope that throwing money at the inevitable post-COVID-19 economic slump will rescue both the regional economies and the belief in regionalism itself. Leaders from ASEAN member states, China, Japan and South Korea have agreed to ensure the flow of commodities, food and medical supplies across their borders.

There are also attempts to better coordinate procurement and stockpiling of medical equipment across the respective regions. And in the EU, some members have begun treating EU patients instead of just their own citizens to alleviate the pressure on their respective home healthcare systems.

Both the EU and ASEAN find that there is a need to coordinate the incremental lifting of restrictive measures and the implementation of such measures for future pandemics so as to minimise the negative impact on supply chains for food, medicine and medical equipment, and manufactured goods.

While such efforts and pronouncements are useful going forward, the fact is that they seem too little too late. While ASEAN regionalism will probably emerge relatively unscathed from COVID-19, simply because ASEAN has never had a strong record for coordinating against pandemics and the ASEAN Community is still a nascent work-in-progress, the EU may have suffered serious damage.

With 200-times more staff than the ASEAN institutions and a 430-times larger administration budget, expectations on the EU bodies are much higher. That the most integrated organisation the world has ever known has done so little to prove its more sophisticated reputation has undermined its image and credibility.

Alan Chong is Associate Professor and Acting Head, Centre for Multilateralism Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore where Dr Frederick Kliem is a Visiting Fellow. This is part of a series.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg