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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

The ASEAN-Led Multilateral Order: Unravelling?

By Henrick Z. Tsjeng and Shawn Ho

SYNOPSIS

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep ideological divisions and geopolitical rivalries, especially between the US and China. ASEAN once again risks getting caught in between the two contentious major powers. ASEAN's role in balancing such rivalries and managing regional cooperation is yet again being tested.

COMMENTARY

WITH THE global COVID-19 pandemic showing no signs of abating, some countries around the world have decided to turn inward and away from multilateral cooperation. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN leaders instead convened the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19, as well as the Special ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit on COVID-19 with the leaders of China, Japan and South Korea.

These Summits were conducted via video conferencing on 14 April 2020 under the chairmanship of Vietnam, this year's ASEAN Chair, to discuss a coordinated regional approach to combat the COVID-19 outbreak. The [Declaration](#) and [Joint Statement](#) that resulted from these two Summits highlighted key areas in which ASEAN and the Plus Three countries should cooperate in.

US-China Confrontation: Impact on ASEAN

The Summits are a sign that ASEAN recognises the severity of the pandemic and the urgency in coming up with a coordinated regional response. ASEAN has swiftly

organised these ad-hoc, high-level COVID-19-related meetings. Defence, health, economic and foreign ministers from ASEAN member states and partner countries have convened to map out and settle action plans before their respective leaders conferred at the Summits to endorse them.

The political will to act is critically needed as the multilateral order shows signs of severe strain and even unravelling. While ASEAN member states hunker down to enhance coordinated efforts to fight the pandemic alongside some of the group's neighbours, the United States and China are engaging in an acrimonious war of words.

Even as US President Donald Trump had indicated [he would like to work with China](#) to deal with the pandemic, he has since criticised both China and the World Health Organisation (WHO), including [stopping US funding of the WHO](#), in an apparent attempt to deflect criticism of his bungled domestic response to COVID-19.

Meanwhile, China continues to push cooperation with the rest of the world, including Southeast Asia, even as [it continues to trade barbs with the US](#). With China seemingly in control of the COVID-19 infection within its borders and slowly reopening its economy, Beijing is now attempting to take on a proactive role in helping countries badly affected by the coronavirus, particularly in the provision of face masks, test kits, ventilators and related medicines.

At the same time, China has not let up its assertiveness [in the South China Sea](#). It maintains an aggressive stance in a number of hot spots in the South China Sea while the US Navy continues with its freedom of navigation operations. The reaction in ASEAN claimant states, namely, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia is one of rising alarm even as they are engaged with China in tackling the COVID-19 threat.

Stage Set for China?

Regardless of whether Trump does continue as president for a second term, the US' capacities may be degraded after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. This could potentially mean that East Asian countries, which have been traditionally dependent on the US for the provision of public goods as part of the multilateral order, could expect that provision to dry up further.

This is the result of Trump's "America First" policies and the potential economic devastation of the US economy wrought by COVID-19. As a result, the stage could be set for China — whose capacities may also decline but to a lesser extent — to accelerate its filling of this void.

The level of US "regression" from the region, as well as the nature of China's dealings with ASEAN member states — whether judged to be friendly or assertive — will impact ASEAN, including putting its longstanding principles of centrality, neutrality and consensus to the test.

ASEAN must address these headwinds by seizing the initiative and showing unified leadership. ASEAN has grabbed the low-hanging fruit of cooperation in pandemic

control. The recent two Summits show that ASEAN is acting more cohesively and giving credence to ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN: Holding on to the Driver's Seat

How do these two Summits keep ASEAN in the driver's seat of the regional multilateral order?

Firstly, the Special ASEAN Summit charts a course for ASEAN to deepen cooperation among member states by strengthening the capacity of existing ASEAN emergency response network mechanisms to deal with future public health emergencies. Three of these mechanisms in particular are the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre Network, the ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre and the ASEAN Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre).

The ASEAN leaders also discussed the establishment of a COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund which can be used by member states to procure medical supplies and equipment as well as to finance research and development of antiviral drugs and vaccines.

Secondly, the Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit stated that member states have resolved to strengthen public health cooperation measures to contain the pandemic across various sectors.

To effectively fight COVID-19 in Southeast Asia, such efforts at greater regional cooperation via a whole-of-ASEAN approach are vital and timely. Individual ASEAN member states need to know that they are not alone in fighting COVID-19 and that ASEAN remains committed to coordinate regional efforts to fight this virus.

Thirdly, the ASEAN leaders have reaffirmed ASEAN centrality in the process — by organising the Special APT Summit and reaching out to the Plus Three countries. In this way, by reaching out to China, Japan and South Korea with one ASEAN voice, it can help the Plus Three countries understand once again that it is in their own interests to engage constructively with ASEAN on health issues too.

At the same time, ASEAN has also demonstrated its commitment to cooperating with other multilateral institutions by inviting [the Director-General of the WHO to participate](#) in the Special APT Summit.

COVID-19: ASEAN's Next Multilateral Battle

The unprecedented crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep ideological divisions and geopolitical rivalries, especially between the US and China. With this major power contestation set to intensify even before the pandemic has passed and with there being no clear global leader to fight this pandemic, ASEAN has stepped up to reassert the need for regional cooperation.

With the recent Special APT Summit, ASEAN looks set to deepen regional cooperation with China, Japan and South Korea which have all arguably had their relative successes in managing the COVID-19 crisis. The key is whether ASEAN can follow-

through with its plans so that the two Summits on COVID-19 are not relegated to mere talk shops.

ASEAN leaders need to maintain a consistent posture of sticking to approved plans and implement them to be credible in the eyes of their people and the international community.

In light of COVID-19 and US-China contention, ASEAN should continue to work with extra-regional powers through ASEAN-led mechanisms for a coordinated regional response to tackle communicable diseases and health emergencies. Such ASEAN-driven multilateral cooperation is more important than ever before.

Henrick Z. Tsjeng and Shawn Ho are Associate Research Fellows with the Regional Security Architecture Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This is part of an RSIS 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