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

Pandemic Recovery: No Need For US Leadership?

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

The COVID-19 pandemic is the first global crisis in decades in which United States leadership is entirely absent. Regional organisations such as EU and ASEAN will have to manage the pandemic and economic recovery – and they are doing a decent job so far.

COMMENTARY

THE COVID-19 pandemic is turning out to be one of the greatest global crises in living memory. Due to the nature of pandemics, international cooperation is imperative. Traditionally, the United States has played the critical role in managing global crises and marshalling international responses, including HIV/AIDS or the 2014 Ebola outbreak.

Now, for the first time in decades, nations around the globe cannot look towards Washington for leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic is the first global crisis in decades in which US leadership has been entirely absent.

US Leadership No More

US leadership is far from perfect and never altruistic, but it has always been present and, hitherto, necessary to address challenges of such substantial global magnitude.

It remains entirely speculative whether COVID-19 will be remembered as the moment when American leadership vanished forever. What is evident, though, is that the current US President Donald Trump has entirely abdicated the leadership role of his predecessors.

Instead of offering global support and facilitating multilateral cooperation, Trump has shown to be vastly out of his depth. Trump neglects multilateralism, [seeks to sever ties with the World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#), and disastrously mismanaged the domestic American response to the pandemic.

Rightly or wrongly but certainly unhelpfully, Trump wasted valuable time [blaming Beijing](#) for [the “Chinese virus”](#), continues to [downplay](#) the severity of COVID-19, and led by bad example [taking an untested drug publicly](#).

If that was not bad enough leadership, the President of the US undermined state-led efforts to curtail the spread of COVID-19 by [voicing support for protesters](#) marching against COVID-19 lockdown measures.

Regionalism’s Turnaround

COVID-19 requires deeply interconnected nation states to cooperate — mutually providing aid, sharing information, best practices and lessons learnt, and coordinating both lockdown and reopening of borders and supply chains. And it is mostly the geographical regions where such cooperation is most promising.

The two most advanced regional organisations, the European Union and ASEAN, were both slow to react. Initially, regionalism came to a standstill. As soon as the severity of the crisis became evident, member countries [switched into full nationalist gear](#).

With unilateral border closures and export bans, unhelpful national self-help dynamics began to unfold in both regions. Yet, the EU has awoken from its initial crisis paralysis with impressive determination, and ASEAN is beginning to catch up, too.

EU Solidarity

Before COVID-19, it would have been impossible to imagine the extent of institutional failure and lack of solidarity that characterised the EU’s total absence as first crisis responder. But Brussels’ comeback from paralysis has been nothing short of impressive.

EU lobbying efforts managed to break the negative self-help spiral across membership, [as individual EU members](#) came to each other’s aid, providing consular support and repatriation of each other’s citizens, opening their ICUs to other EU patients and sending medical teams and equipment across the union.

The EU Commission and European Central Bank initiated several substantial grant and loan packages to support EU businesses and workers, and the Council are currently discussing an even [bigger financial EU instrument](#). Once all financial support

packages are finalised, EU members will channel the largest ever recovery package through the EU, with a size comparable to the GDP of France.

Perhaps most important for regionalism as such, however, is the [EU's Joint Roadmap](#) to lift national pandemic-management measures in a coordinated and coherent way. To restore trust in regionalism, it is imperative to coordinate the lifting of national restrictions that were put in place all too hastily and uncoordinatedly, and to design common guidelines for future pandemics.

This minimises the detrimental impact on supply chains, trade and free movement. And it can help overcome the negative dynamics of burgeoning unilateralism and restore trust in regionalism's value-added in lieu of American leadership.

ASEAN Centrality 2.0

On 14 April 2020, ASEAN held a special virtual leaders' summit to develop a COVID-19 strategy for the region. The summit allowed ASEAN leaders to exchange lessons learnt and better coordinate their responses. ASEAN leaders [agreed](#) on a set of measures to combat the virus, including the inauguration of a yet to be specified common COVID-19 response fund to aid economic recovery.

ASEAN agreed to work towards extensive sharing of information and best practices, and initiated dialogue on joint cross-border responses to retain the smooth functioning and openness of essential trade routes to protect food security and the exchange of medical equipment.

Extending their multilateral approach, ASEAN hosted a video conference [with its ASEAN Plus-Three \(APT\) partners](#) Japan, South Korea and China, all of whom have launched organised, cohesive responses to the pandemic.

ASEAN managed to establish pan-East Asian buy-in to their multilateral approach to the crisis, for example securing APT contribution to their response fund.

APT leaders also agreed to strengthen real-time information exchange and to set-up an East Asian medical supply stockpile. They committed to ensuring the continuous flow of commodities and medical supplies across Southeast Asia and specifically emphasised the commitment to food security.

Regionalism's Moment

The EU and ASEAN are also proving the value of inter-regional networking, as is already taking place with COVID-19 ASEAN-EU virtual ministerial meeting, EU financial support to ASEAN, and upcoming webinars on the topic.

Of course, ASEAN and the EU cover only 1.1 billion people. But they can be leading the way for fellow organisations, such as [SAARC](#). The further extension beyond the immediate region to include third countries such as Japan and China shows the tangible value of diplomacy and multilateralism in times of crisis.

Regional recovery aside, such multilateral efforts show the path forward in this crisis

amidst the US no-show, and they are a roadmap for a possible future scenario of permanent absence of leadership.

Not only has the US been almost entirely absent on the international stage at this time of immense crisis, but because of Donald Trump, no other country is seeking US leadership. If regional organisations can step-up, US leadership is not only absent, it is also unnecessary.

Dr Frederick Kliem is a Visiting Fellow with 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