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

Race for the Vaccine: Will ASEAN Be Left Behind?

By Joel Ng

SYNOPSIS

While COVID-19 has made physical distancing the norm and diminished the visibility of ASEAN summitry, it also presents an opportunity for the region to make a lasting impact on its people. Will ASEAN be left behind in the global race for the vaccine?

COMMENTARY

AS EUROPEAN Union delegations gathered in Brussels for the first major physical international summit in months, the planning and controls were heavy with symbolism. Delegation sizes were sharply reduced, distanced seating arrangements were in place, and small details such as airflow were meticulously checked.

This was a more socially-distant world than when they last met, and very little could be left to chance. One poignant message was implicit: Humans must overcome the threat of the coronavirus, and meeting physically for the first time since the global pandemic started showed that they had the capacity to overcome it. By contrast, the 36th ASEAN Summit concluded in June with little of its usual fanfare.

ASEAN's Low-Key Summit

THE ASEAN delegates were joined — or one could also say separated — by video-link as the global pandemic made travel and physical gatherings too risky to convene. ASEAN produced a notable Chairman's Statement authored by (virtual) host Vietnam, in which it again upheld international norms and law. But its impact may

have bypassed most of its 650 million population, who still face restrictions due to the pandemic.

ASEAN already had a visibility problem amongst its people, with fewer than one quarter of its citizens aware of basic structures like its three Community pillars, according to an ASEAN survey released last year. And whereas the public was generally positive about benefits that ASEAN conferred, less than half of businesses and civil society groups felt the same; they held a similarly lower sense of optimism about the group's future than the public.

The move to virtual summits, shorn of public visibility, could therefore not have come at a worse time. Moreover, the temporary fall in international travel and trade has led to 'de-globalisation', a process that some felt had already begun with the rise of nationalist sentiments in several countries.

International cooperation has tended to be most successful when there is a high degree of interaction between states, while low interaction has tended to result in relatively superficial agreements. Lower interaction could leave ASEAN multilateralism further adrift.

Finally, there are the ongoing China-US tensions that have worsened amid the pandemic. Each side is taking increasingly tough measures against the other and may be leaning on partners to distance themselves from their foes. As ASEAN leaders, including Singapore's prime minister, have cautioned, they are against taking sides between equally beneficial trading partners. The last thing ASEAN would want is to be disadvantaged during a global health crisis.

Race for a Vaccine

Amid the widespread uncertainty in human security, scientists globally are seeking solutions for the COVID-19 pandemic. Clinical trials for vaccines are underway in several countries, while promising anti-virals have already been shown to have limited palliative effects. Some estimate that a vaccine could be available by the end of the year, although that timeline almost certainly is over-optimistic about the ability to produce quantities on the scale required globally.

What is certain, however, is that there will be a scramble for anything with promising results. In April, the prices of ventilators skyrocketed as US states bid against each other for them in the absence of federal coordination.

New York governor Andrew Cuomo [encapsulated the problem](#) saying, "Why? Because we bid \$25,000. California says, 'I'll give you \$30,000' and Illinois says, 'I'll give you \$35,000' and Florida says, 'I'll give you \$40,000.'" As soon as studies showed a minor success with the drug Remdesivir, the US acquired almost the entire global supply.

Meanwhile the EU's meeting in Brussels, despite a fractious start, will have discussed joint efforts to secure its own supplies when they become available. The UK, with its strategic universities sector, has acquired commitments for millions of vaccine doses from Oxford-AstraZeneca, among others.

Amidst these counter-pandemic efforts, ASEAN regional efforts comes across poorly, lacking significant multilateral cooperation and support for research and biotech infrastructure.

Vaccine Multilateralism, Not Vaccine Nationalism

ASEAN cannot afford to be left behind, and it has already changed many practices to accommodate the pandemic. National-level approaches to vaccine acquisition will quickly run up against the typically high costs for new drugs, and worse, result in countries competing against each other as US states did over PPE.

As Richard Haass of the US Council on Foreign Relations has quipped: “Vaccine nationalism is almost certain to win out over vaccine multilateralism.” This need not be true for ASEAN, but to avert this, it must approach the issue multilaterally.

As part of its COVID19 response, ASEAN could consider pooling purchasing agreements and must devise a concerted response to ensure its presence in global negotiations for future treatments.

The establishment of the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies is a very good first step but its priorities should focus not on the lower-hanging fruit of PPE stockpiling, but on the chance to use the clout of ASEAN’s 650 million citizens to give it a strong hand in global negotiations. In doing so, it may finally make a lasting and visible impact among its own people.

Joel Ng is a Research Fellow with the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), 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