

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 & Its Impacts*

ASEAN Response: Pushing Back Vaccine Nationalism

By Mely Caballero-Anthony

SYNOPSIS

As ASEAN economic ministers meet virtually this week to deal with, among other things, the severe impacts of COVID-19, their crucial task should be to strengthen multilateral cooperation. ASEAN should rally its dialogue partners and the private sector to make vaccines available to all. Can ASEAN centrality help push back the worrying trend of vaccine nationalism?

COMMENTARY

THE OUTBREAK of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought home the fact that advancing regional cooperation has become even more critical for ASEAN and its multilateral agenda. ASEAN remains an important platform to deepen cooperation among the member states. In the wider East Asian region, ASEAN also works with countries like China, Japan and South Korea through the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) framework; and with Australia, India, New Zealand, Russia and the United States joining the ASEAN Plus Three countries through the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, ASEAN's shared existential threat has never been felt stronger. The impact of the long-drawn health crisis has already exacted a huge toll on the region's economy. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has projected that the global economy will contract by 4.9 percent this year. A global economic recovery is contingent on the discovery of a vaccine.

Global Race for a Vaccine

The race to find a vaccine has already seen countries making exclusive purchasing agreements with big pharmaceutical companies to lock in access before these vaccines are safely rolled out for mass production. This 'my country first' approach hugely disadvantages countries that do not have the resources nor capacity to join the bandwagon of vaccine nationalism.

It will seriously undermine the global fight against COVID-19. Can ASEAN centrality and its brand of inclusive multilateralism push back this alarming trend of vaccine nationalism?

ASEAN has played a significant role in the region's fight against COVID-19. In the early phase of the outbreak, ASEAN activated its regional mechanisms on pandemic preparedness and response to support national measures in fighting the spread of the pandemic.

Of note is the work done by the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) Network for Public Health Emergencies; it became the nerve centre to facilitate timely and accurate exchange of information among members about the spread of the disease. More importantly, its role is to help contain and mitigate the spread of the pandemic.

ASEAN convened a special summit in April 2020 on COVID-19, to explore what more could be done together to strengthen regional cooperation together with its dialogue partners – like China, Japan and South Korea.

This led to an ASEAN [declaration](#) where member states committed to setting up an ASEAN Response Fund for health emergencies to address shortages of medical supplies such as test kits and personal protective equipment; funding research into vaccines and other therapeutics; and plans for putting up a regional stockpile for essential medical supplies that can be readily deployed for emergency needs.

Vaccine Multilateralism vs Vaccine Nationalism

More efforts can certainly be done to implement these ideas and explore how its other dialogue partners like the US and India, which are major players in vaccine development, can be part of wider international efforts to provide access to vaccines and therapeutics.

One logical avenue is to realise plans for vaccine development by leveraging on complementary comparative advantages, with the participation of its dialogue partners and the pharmaceutical companies.

Vaccine supply chains are unavoidably global. Even the countries able to identify the proven vaccines, will likely require the help of other countries to upscale and sustain production.

China's Sinovac company, for instance, is working with Indonesia's state-owned BioFarma company, in [late-stage](#) human trials of vaccines. Oxford/Aztrazeneca company is likewise contracting India's Serum Institute (largest vaccine manufacturing in the world) for phase-2 testing of prime vaccine candidate, [AZD-1222](#).

With these kinds of bilateral partnerships taking place, getting other countries in ASEAN which have multinational pharmaceutical companies to participate allows for wider pool of vaccines being manufactured in the region. This in turn helps other countries in ASEAN to get better/easier access to these vaccines.

This regional effort complements the WHO-led global drive to advance the manufacturing and delivery of future vaccines to developing countries, under the “Access to COVID-19 Tools ([ACT\) Accelerator](#)” programme and its vaccine pillar – COVAX.

The COVAX Global Vaccine Facility, co-led by GAVI, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and the WHO, in partnership with countries like Switzerland and Singapore, helps ensure vaccine access for all through vaccine multilateralism.

Regional Vaccine Stockpile?

Alongside vaccine development, ASEAN could also benefit from further collaboration in realising a regional stockpile of vaccines as essential medical supplies. For instance, Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishamuddin Hussein called for [a vaccine hub at the regional level](#).

This can potentially match its efforts to enhance the manufacturing and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines in collaboration with the United States, or to fast track vaccine cooperation with China and even India.

An earlier [article in Foreign Affairs](#) likewise called for a COVID-19 Vaccine Trade and Investment Agreement, which includes an Investment Fund to buy vaccines in advance and allocate them, once they have been proved to be safe and effective.

Governments pay into the COVID-19 Vaccine Investment Fund on a subscription basis, with escalating non-refundable payments tied to the number of vaccine doses they secured and other milestones of progress. It also called for subsidising participation by the poorest countries wholly or in part.

There are already preliminary initiatives being discussed at the multilateral level such as at the G20. We may yet imagine a coalition of countries representing at least 50% of global vaccine manufacturing, whose trade and health officials work together on an equitable and enforceable system for allocating COVID-19 vaccines, as argued in the [aforementioned Foreign Affairs article](#).

Giving Meaning to ASEAN Centrality

The possibilities of ASEAN being a vaccine hub – in both manufacturing and distribution – goes a long way in advancing ASEAN centrality in promoting global health security and diplomacy, while pushing back against short-sighted nationalist tendencies.

ASEAN has shown that it is able to coordinate regional and international efforts in addressing shared challenges like this current pandemic. Thus working closely to

make vaccines available to all its members – regardless of the “size of their purses” – makes ASEAN centrality meaningful for its members and credible to the wider region and beyond.

Mely Caballero-Anthony is Professor of International Relations and Head of the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies 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