

## Regional Perspectives: Post-COVID-19

### *Realignment? Boost for regionalism? Implications for smaller states?*

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The COVID-19 pandemic will bring a shift in security concerns with a greater focus on human/non-traditional security, and also on the question of what goes to make up 'human security'. Pandemics will be high on the list.

The current pandemic will also bring new perspectives to broader security issues. Before the pandemic the issues in focus around 'mobility' were illegal people movement and cross-border crime. Now, a strong community health element will take priority for governments - and may even become a reason for tightening travel restrictions. This element could lead to governments justifying the use, or reinforcement, of draconian migration laws in their countries.

How and why countries engage with or rely on regional organisations will also be re-assessed.

In Asia, states have asserted control over and within their own borders. ASEAN has acted in this crisis pretty much as it always has acted, and there has been no expectation that ASEAN would 'step up'. ASEAN's established role is to support the national efforts of its member countries - and the national governments of member countries continue with to prioritise security within their own borders. This said, the virus crisis might actually benefit ASEAN in the long run, as the grouping could take advantage of the spontaneous cooperation effort that is happening now in order to establish deeper goodwill amongst the member countries.

Here there is a contrast with the EU. In the EU there has been an expectation of greater unity, collaboration and co-ordination. Yet, as it turned out, governments reverted to national responses - asserting control over borders and people movements.

One perception in Southeast Asia is that the US is imploding. There is an influential view that China will emerge from the pandemic in better standing than the US. In these circumstances, it is possible that smaller (regional) states will look to realigning in their relations with the major powers.

At the same time, such smaller states have seen they cannot rely on the big powers to help in such crises - and this will be an impetus to greater self-reliance.

Looking at responses to the pandemic, there are indications that some of the Western states are ill-equipped to deal with this type of health security challenge - compared with some countries in the Asian region. Also, Asian security priorities seem to differ from those of the West. Asian citizens have shown that they are more 'comfortable' with their governments asserting authority - for instance, by ordering a lock down and restricting the movement of citizens.

COVID-19 could also lead Western countries to lose ground in dealing with security challenges in Asia. In particular, there is a view that the economic repercussions of the pandemic could

impact on the future US security role in the Asian region. China has an advantage here - in that the structure of the Chinese economy means China is likely to be better placed to rebound than the US.

Domestic politics, it should be observed, have not gone away during the pandemic. The Malaysian and South Korean governments are enjoying greater public approval as a result of their handling of the crisis; and they will likely seek to capitalise on this development,

The big question, of course, is how the failure of US leadership will play out. Will it be seen just as a Trump failure? Or, will it be seen as a failure of US institutions and of the American leadership elite more broadly? We should remember that those institutional structures - and the elite itself - were not held in the highest regard before the pandemic. Trump's election, in fact, could be seen as evidence of such a lack of regard within the US national community.

Finally, in looking for signs of an upside in this current crisis period, the COVID-19 development has certainly provided examples of people and communities rising above economic, social, religious and racial divides. In these circumstances, we can ask if COVID-19 might just, in the long run, lead to a greater emphasis on what we have in common, rather than what sets us apart?

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