

Regional Perspectives: Post-COVID-19

COVID-19: An Opportunity to drive ASEAN Institutional Reform

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As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, the Asia Pacific region stands at a crossroads. Not only has the pandemic accelerated existing socio-economic tensions across countries - it has also deepened strategic competition between Beijing and Washington.

The pandemic has delayed grand strategy initiatives by major powers within the region - from China's Belt and Road Initiative to Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, as well South Korea's and India's respective eastward looking policies. US influence in the Asia Pacific continues to spiral downwards - fanned in no small part by the Trump administration's repeated stress on the virus originating in China, and also by the rising death toll in the US.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic can be viewed as an opportunity for the region. It is a chance to reset - specifically, a chance for existing multilateral bodies within the Asia Pacific to reset and reshape the foreign policy environment. This might include a focus on achieving greater accountability to the region's citizens.

We have seen countries offering much needed aid to others in the region. Despite persistent wariness and concerns over an expectation of a strategic quid pro quo, the Chinese government to date has used four international organisations to channel aid to more than 80 countries in our region and beyond. Chinese state-owned and private companies delivering infrastructure investment projects in Myanmar, for example, have been active in donating a range of medical equipment to authorities within the country. Optimists have regarded this as a simple act of kindness, devoid of considerations about a quid pro quo.

South Korea has also displayed a welcome responsiveness to the acute needs generated by the pandemic, with the government and South Korean companies jointly pursuing so-called 'test-kit diplomacy.' LG Group, for example, secured 500,000 testing kits, valued at USD 132 million, to aid local response efforts in Indonesia.

However, it is imperative that the Asia Pacific community of states make a concerted effort to shift from reaction to a proactive response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. There are existing multilateral institutions designed to handle emergency responses - in the case Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) network, the ASEAN Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre), the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre and the ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre. In April, the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 formulated a series of resolutions aimed at combatting the virus - notably strengthening the aforementioned institutions and enhancing cooperation with external partners.

Yet this is simply not enough. The limitations of ASEAN institutions have been well documented and, though a welcome step forward, multilateral initiatives tackling COVID-19 should not, and must not, stop with the adoption of well-intentioned resolutions.

Take Myanmar as an example. Innovators among engineering companies and students, driven simply by a sense of duty to aid Myanmar's COVID-19 battle, have been creating makeshift ventilators, disinfection robots, setting up misinformation monitors and volunteering as contact tracers.

Similar, and even more successful, endeavours can be seen in neighbouring Vietnam, where technology, coupled with the same innovative drive, has seen the development of rapid testing kits and one-of-a-kind 'rice ATMs'. The brainchild of local entrepreneur Hoang Tuan Anh, rice is stored in elevated vats and dispensed through plastic pipes to individuals waiting with bags. When a button on the ATM is pressed, a volunteer receives notification through a mobile app and releases the rice.

Multilateral institutions providing local entrepreneurs with timely access to funding and to platforms for technology transfer can be crucial steps in harnessing this collaboration, innovation and drive within the Asia Pacific. Instead of simply waiting for whatever windfall may emerge from the diversification of production beyond China, such access would demonstrate a commitment not only towards the greater well-being of the region, but also a powerful willingness to change practice.

Concerted multilateral responses and action should not end with the eradication of COVID-19. Rather, it should be sustained and signal a new beginning regarding multilateral response initiatives within the Asia Pacific. The post COVID-19 foreign policy environment cannot be defined simply by the challenge of recovering from this crisis. We must seek broader and enduring change.

Healthcare must be prioritized as a policy end-goal for the region, as opposed to merely being a time relevant tactic for soft power leverage. Effective institution-building and reform are essential in making the 2020s the decade when the Asia Pacific realizes its full potential - taking a united stand not merely against COVID-19, but also against the pace of tumultuous deglobalization. Asia Pacific decision-makers and institutions have a choice to make: to reform and take advantage, or not?

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