Regional Perspectives: Post-COVID-19

The state is back while the virus is in

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COVID-19 is leaving its imprint on almost all aspects of life. While the pandemic is not necessarily a game-changer by itself, it is a reminder of pre-existing factors, trends, and values. It is also a catalyst for changes and shifts already expected to take place in the long term. COVID-19 has raised multiple cross-cutting questions, involving several fundamental dynamics in the strategic and foreign policy environment.

At the outset, there is the question of resilience, at all levels - national, regional, and global. They go hand in hand. The traditional emphasis of Southeast Asian politics on 'national resilience' as a prerequisite for 'regional resilience' sits well in this battle against COVID-19. The pandemic has tested the cross-cutting issues of efficiency, legitimacy, relevance and resilience of institutions - nationally and internationally. Good governance and institutional efficiency have been in high demand and without them, critical problems could not be resolved - undermining legitimacy, relevance and resilience as a result. In this sense, COVID-19 has been a powerful reminder that the standing of national, regional, and global institutions and players depends above all else on their performance - especially with regards to crisis management.

While the pandemic highlights that national, regional, and global resilience are mutually reinforcing, it has also shown that the state is back - mainly in the 'self-help' guise. So far there seems to be limited enthusiasm for regional and international cooperation to fight COVID-19 – rather the opposite, with nationalism, populism, xenophobia, trade, and territorial disputes on the rise. This makes the argument for globalisation a much harder sell, and lessens the appetite among states to pursue international collective action.

One reason that international cooperation has not been strongly supported, and that countries have been dealing with the pandemic largely on a national basis, is the perceived inefficiency of regional and global institutions in the hour of need. COVID-19 has drawn attention to a widening gap between the demand for, and the supply of, regional and global governance and leadership. One factor is that the Trump Administration's role in multilateralism has waned even further - while Chinese leadership has yet to materialize, and to be accepted. Pessimism and scepticism about multilateral institutions continues to increase.

In this context, and aware of the time and resources that would be involved in implementing the reform of existing multilateral institutions, there is currently a tendency to prefer mini-lateralism. One consideration is that in such mini-lateralism, there is a potentially greater role for small and medium-sized countries. They have more opportunity there to take leadership initiatives.

A further cross-cutting question concerns US-China relations and their impact on regional and global strategic landscapes. COVID-19 is exacerbating the strategic rivalry between the two

powers. This rivalry had been in play before the crisis, with a deepening trust deficit between the two powers - and the foreign policies of each of them being influenced by ultra-nationalistic tendencies. China's more assertive expansion of its influence, including in the South China Sea - when other countries have been focusing their efforts and resources on battling the pandemic - has fuelled antagonism towards China in the US, as well as increasing vigilance and concern in many other countries.

A new intensity in Sino-US strategic competition makes it more difficult for smaller countries to navigate their relations with the two rivals and increases pressure to choose sides. Alignment arrangements might become more exclusive, regional and global governance be less effective, while power projection, force development and deployment become more competitive. The trend of economic decoupling between the US and China is accelerating, with significant implications for other countries.

Looking ahead, the public health crisis feeds into both healthy and unhealthy trends in the strategic and foreign policy environment. To promote the healthy over the unhealthy, there needs to be renewed commitment - nationally, regionally, and globally - to collective efforts in building resilience. It is critical to enabling the entire world to succeed against current and future challenges. For the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN-led institutions and arrangements are still the most relevant for channelling such efforts.

The pandemic, in conclusion, serves as a reminder of the real necessity for resilience and good governance at all levels - in order to deal with challenges which are growing in both ferocity and scale, and with which no country can successfully contend on its own.

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