

Regional Perspectives: Post-COVID-19

Strategic and foreign policy implications of COVID-19?

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United States - Southeast Asia relations were deteriorating before the virus. Since Trump became U.S. President over 3 years ago, Southeast Asia has not been enamoured with his policies. They are selfish and nationalistic - and pay almost no attention to the region. As a U.S. priority, on a scale of 1-5, the region at most ranks no.3, if not no.4.

Some in Southeast Asia are closer to the U.S. - such as Singapore and Vietnam, and one body of opinion in the Philippines. This group, it must be said, cannot voice anything negative about the U.S. and Trump. Nevertheless, the poor performance of Trump on the COVID-19 in the U.S has been obvious. It is seen as the reason that the virus has spread so extensively – and it has damaged American prestige.

This said, Indonesia has also been lax. For two months, while the Chinese were struggling against the virus, Indonesia did not commence testing or make preparations to strengthen the country's healthcare system. The government was not transparent at the beginning, in January and February. Also, the government was not speaking with one voice. Indonesia, it seems, might record more cases in the future - certainly if it proceeds with testing more people, which is a pre-requisite for a plan to overcome the virus threat.

With respect to international cooperation, the G20 promised a lot, but there have been no concrete actions so far. In terms of regional cooperation, APEC has done nothing. ASEAN was slow, and still there have been no concrete actions, even after the recent ASEAN virtual conference. The Chinese and ASEAN Foreign Ministers certainly met in Laos in February of this year and promised to cooperate on the Coronavirus - but here too there is no action so far. ASEAN+3 recently held a virtual conference. The results were promising - but time is of the essence, and the process of implementation is still not clear.

Looking ahead to the post-COVID-19 era, it may really be true that the COVID-19 pandemic will be a game-changer - and in many fields of activity. Although international cooperation has been late and lax - maybe due to the very quick expansion of the virus, and the unpreparedness of many governments - the need for international cooperation is today dramatically obvious. Experiences in the last two months have made this need clear to all.

Since the virus will last until a vaccine is made ready for the public (probably 12-18 months), international cooperation will continue to be needed - especially if the virus expands in Africa and other areas where countries have inadequate health-care capabilities.

More important is cooperation in the economic field - cooperation right now and certainly after the pandemic has spread everywhere. It will be necessary to help the weaker countries/economies with food, medicine and work.

Thinking of the longer term, post-COVID-19, some key questions – not necessarily new - have become sharper. First, there is the matter of how we can re-establish the global/regional economy again - handling trade, finance and debt problems, as well as agriculture, energy and environmental issues. How can we promote a more open economy, with stable security and politics - and what is going to happen to globalization?

A further long-term issue concerns the need to maintain the UN system of rules and institutions. We also have to ask what the future holds for the World Health Organization and what changes might be demanded for the Atlantic Charter institutions, the IMF and the WTO.

As for regional institutions, there is the matter of maintaining ASEAN and its different institutions, following their weak response to the virus.

Finally, post-COVID-19, serious consideration must be given to the future of the U.S. alliance system - especially if the U.S. does not want to participate anymore. In this region, there will be concern about how a reduced U.S. involvement will play out in the South China Sea disputes.

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