

COVID-19 and Its
Impact — EU and
ASEAN: In Common
Disunity
Page 2-3

COVID Corner:
Issues in the Time of
Corona
Page 4

Multilateral Matters:
What You Missed &
Selected Publications
Page 5

Editorial Team

Amalina Anuar

Nazia Hussain

Pandemic Performance: A Tale of Two Regions



The multilateral system, in all its disarray, has struggled with providing an adequate response to the coronavirus pandemic wreaking havoc on global health security. But have regional organisations such as the European Union and ASEAN plugged the gaps sufficiently? Photo by Adam Niescioruk taken from Unsplash.

FEATURED COMMENTARY

COVID-19 and Its Impact — EU and ASEAN: In Common Disunity

By Alan Chong & Frederick Kliem



Though responses from both the ASEAN and EU have been deficient, the ensuing reputational risk is a greater storm to weather for the latter considering different track records in pandemic cooperation and coordination. Photo by Sara KurfeB taken from Unsplash.

Nationalist obsessions and failure to grasp the trans-boundary ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic characterise the deficient responses of the world's two leading regional organisations. Serious reputational damage has been inflicted on the European Union and ASEAN.

Commentary

ON 16 APRIL 2020, The Guardian newspaper in the United Kingdom published a remarkable story that lauded Chancellor Angela Merkel's dispassionate, scientific explanation of how Germany could flatten the curve of COVID-19 infections if it continued to strictly enforce social distancing and lock down the economy.

In the midst of rampant uncertainty about when normality could return to public life across the European Union and the lack of an EU anti-COVID-19 ac-

tion plan, Merkel's message and presence received far warmer treatment outside her country than at home. She was not speaking as a prominent EU politician; it was plain and simple national leadership from the pedestal of one of the EU's largest and wealthiest members.

ASEAN and EU Responses Compared

In Southeast Asian and international media, ASEAN is seen as generally immaterial in the fight against COVID-19 despite its reputation of being in the driver's seat of regional cooperation and community-building processes.

ASEAN's chair country for 2020, Vietnam, has been celebrated domestically and across Southeast Asia for its proactive measures to lock down early on any commune or district that contained a single COVID-19 infected resident. Contact tracing was widely de-

ployed and the national guidance given to its population was to re-enact the spirit of resistance against a foreign invader.

This securitisation legitimised collective sacrifices of consumer convenience, school closures and the shutdown of daily commuting in locked-down zones. Hanoi too imposed travel bans and mandatory 14-day quarantine of all foreign arrivals just like its ASEAN neighbours. By mid-April it boasted no more than 268 cases and no fatality while also declaring that all patients were steadily recovering.

This prompted a number of commentators to argue that Hanoi could now enjoy diplomatic momentum to flesh out ASEAN's 'model' of pandemic containment. The problem is that, aside from a vaguely worded commitment by ASEAN leaders and their Plus Three counterparts from China, Japan and South

Korea to set up a joint aid fund for supporting economically weaker ASEAN member states facing the pandemic, there remains no substantial region-wide plan to combat COVID-19.

What then has hobbled the respective regional leaderships in the EU and ASEAN in tackling the deadly virus?

Nations Going it Alone

COVID-19 is turning into one of the greatest global challenges of our lifetime, and it is testing the international resolve to cooperate. Both China and the United States have hitherto failed to provide global leadership.

While concerted global action is always difficult to achieve, it is the geographical regions where collective COVID-19 governance could have been expected most. And nowhere more

Continued on Page 3

so than in Europe and East Asia where the EU and ASEAN are generally regarded as the two most advanced regional organisations. Yet, the EU and ASEAN are struggling with nationalistic instincts and unilateral knee-jerk reactions.

In both regions, integration is based on and accelerated by geographical proximity and human and economic connectivity. Ironically, as the spread of COVID-19 intensifies, it appears that these two acknowledged pillars of integration are fumbling with needed actions to deal with the crisis. Even where previously agreed measures for crisis management at the bureaucratic levels were activated, parochial considerations took precedence and any modicum of joint response was absent.

Instead of cooperating to uphold intra-regional connectedness, many governments unilaterally abandoned achievements of regional integration as countries shut borders, broke supply chains and fought over medical supplies.

In the nerve centre of the EU, the European Commission in Brussels did little to warrant its reputation for institutional cooperation and legalism. When some EU members went into full nationalist gear and curtailed the precious freedom of movement of goods and people, the much vaunted single market place and borderless Schengen area in Europe were de facto abandoned.

When Italy asked its EU “friends” for solidarity in the form of medical equipment as well as commonly guaranteed sovereign debt, other EU capitals decreed ex-

port bans on such goods, forsaking the EU single market, and issued a clear “no” to common Eurobonds.

Like EU, ASEAN Faced Pandemic with Fear

Likewise in Southeast Asia, the pandemic aroused public fear that played into the national security mindsets of elected and authoritarian leaders alike. The instant reaction was framed in terms of COVID-19 needing a domestic lock-down solution. Multilateral cooperation came to a standstill as borders were closed and travel restricted unilaterally.

Despite being the most logical platform to manage a common transboundary challenge, the leaders of ASEAN and their Plus Three partners from China, Japan and South Korea came together for a teleconference only several months into the pandemic. Even then, some leaders continued to speak of the need to protect supply chains, and after reducing the numbers of fatalities, to create mutual health protocols for ensuring the safety of air passengers commuting between one another’s cities.

The average ASEAN citizens do not know what is the take-away for them and their families in the face of the viral contagion and economic hardship arising from the massive lock down situations.

It also became painstakingly obvious how the capacity of each ASEAN member state to manage the pandemic differs. Brunei and Singapore are regarded as having the resources to do testing, contact tracing and treating infected individuals. Vietnam impressed with its no-nonsense whole-of-society approach while it is

impossible to do wide-scale testing in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand.

Laos and Cambodia appear to be relying on third parties, particularly China, to address any nation-wide contagion due to inadequate healthcare systems and a lack of physicians and equipment.

All Not Lost; But Too Little Too Late?

Amidst the nationalist turns in tackling COVID-19, there are nonetheless signs that all is not lost.

Both the EU and ASEAN have agreed to set up common funds to tackle the economic consequences in the hope that throwing money at the inevitable post-COVID-19 economic slump will rescue both the regional economies and the belief in regionalism itself. Leaders from ASEAN member states, China, Japan and South Korea have agreed to ensure the flow of commodities, food and medical supplies across their borders.

There are also attempts to better coordinate procurement and stockpiling of medical equipment across the respective regions. And in the EU, some members have begun treating EU patients instead of just their own citizens to alleviate the pressure on their respective home healthcare systems.

Both the EU and ASEAN find that there is a need to coordinate the incremental lifting of restrictive measures and the implementation of such measures for future pandemics so as to minimise the negative impact on supply chains for food, medicine and medical equip-

ment, and manufactured goods.

While such efforts and pronouncements are useful going forward, the fact is that they seem too little too late. While ASEAN regionalism will probably emerge relatively unscathed from COVID-19, simply because ASEAN has never had a strong record for coordinating against pandemics and the ASEAN Community is still a nascent work-in-progress, the EU may have suffered serious damage.

With 200-times more staff than the ASEAN institutions and a 430-times larger administration budget, expectations on the EU bodies are much higher. That the most integrated organisation the world has ever known has done so little to prove its more sophisticated reputation has undermined its image and credibility. ■

Alan Chong is Associate Professor and Acting Head, Centre for Multilateralism Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore where Dr Frederick Kliem is a Visiting Fellow.

COVID Corner: Issues in the Time of Corona

Economic Multilateralism and International Political Economy

Trade Multilateralism: Alive and Well Despite Trump

Pradumna Bickram Rana | *RSIS Commentaries* | 20 July 2020
[Full Report](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to capital flight from emerging economies including East Asian ones. The ASEAN+3 financial cooperation process should be strengthened to help the countries involved weather this unprecedented storm. [Full Report](#)

COVID-19 is Exacerbating the Global Trade Finance Gap

World Economic Forum | 06 July 2020 | [Full Report](#)

China Joins Singapore-NZ Initiative to Keep Supply Chains Open

The Straits Times | 03 July 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Reviving Stalled BRI: China's Two-Stage Approach

Pradumna Bickram Rana & Jason Ji Xianbai | *RSIS Commentaries* | 05 May 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Can 'Travel Bubbles' Help Restart COVID Ravaged Economies?

Asia Times | 09 June 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Price of Pandemic: Weakened Trade System Exposed

Evan Rogerson | *RSIS Commentaries* | 04 May 2020

Pandemic Tracking: The Unfortunate Use of Statistics

Jikon Lai | *RSIS Commentaries* | 01 June 2020

The global trade outlook following the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniably dark. For a durable recovery it is imperative to build on the leadership that some governments have shown and revive the multilateral system. [Full Report](#)

There are two problematic issues with the use of statistics in the context of COVID-19: the use of inappropriate indicators and inapt use of indicators. While statistics might offer us an insight into the disease's development over time, we should not focus too much on the actual numbers that are reported, particularly when comparing situations between countries.

[Full Report](#)

Coronabonds: Backdoor to Collective Debt?

Frederick Kliem | *RSIS Commentaries* | 03 April 2020

To combat the economic crisis in Europe that will inevitably follow the current COVID-19 crisis, Italy, France and others demand collective Eurozone debt. A non-starter for some of their neighbours – and rightly so.

[Full Report](#)

Regional Finance Cooperation: Can It Weather the Storm?

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit | *RSIS Commentaries* | 26 May 2020

Political-Security Multilateralism

ASEAN to Devise Post-COVID Plan for 'Long-Term Immunity'

Nikkei Asian Review | 25 June 2020 | [Full Report](#)

While the US has largely abdicated its global leadership amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the People's Republic of China and Taiwan are leveraging on the pandemic as a soft power opportunity. Southeast Asia receives particular attention. [Full Report](#)

BRICS in Time of Pandemic: Leadership from Emerging Economies?

Nazia Hussain | *RSIS Commentaries* | 22 May 2020 | [Full Report](#)

COVID-19 and Its Impact – Impetus for SAARC Revival?

Nazia Hussain | *RSIS Commentaries* | 24 April 2020

Leveraging ASEAN to respond to COVID-19

Frederick Kliem | *East Asia Forum* | 21 May 2020 | [Full Report](#)

As SAARC is lauded for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is premature to expect its revival as the predominant regional grouping in South Asia. Sub-regional groupings like BIM-STEAC do not have to be side-lined. A multipronged approach to advancing regionalism in South Asia is the way forward.

[Full Report](#)

India and East Africa: New Opportunities in Healthcare Cooperation?

Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy & Graham Sherbut | *RSIS Commentaries* | 20 May 2020

As maritime neighbours, India and the countries of East Africa have a long history of trade relations, as well as cultural and educational exchange. The current COVID-19 crisis has thrown up huge prospects for Indian-East African engagement, particularly to strengthen healthcare cooperation. [Full Report](#)

China's Medical Diplomacy: How to Turn a Black Swan White

Frederick Kliem | *RSIS Commentaries* | 03 April 2020

The global spread of COVID-19 exposes the strong nationalistic tendency in the European Union and the United States and – ironically – provides China with a unique opportunity to shine.

[Full Report](#)

Why Vaccine 'Nationalism' Could Slow Coronavirus Fight

Financial Times | 14 May 2020 | [Full Report](#)

China-Taiwan Mask Diplomacy: Wooing Southeast Asia?

Frederick Kliem & Alan Chong | *RSIS Commentaries* | 08 May 2020

Multilateral Matters: News Roundup

National Security Law: EU Proposes Cutting Off Hong Kong's Access to Goods Used in Surveillance and 'Internal Repression'

South China Morning Post | 25 July 2020 | [Full Report](#)

AIIB Makes First Loan to Vietnam Bank Amid South China Sea Tensions

Nikkei Asian Review | 24 July 2020 | [Full Report](#)

The Race to Lead the WTO Begins

The Economist | 09 July 2020 | [Full Report](#)

Threat of EU-US Trade War Grows Amid Digital Tax Stand-Off

Politico | 18 June 2020

The European Union is pushing ahead with digital tax proposals just as the United States pulls out of global talks.

[Full Report](#)

ASEAN, 5G and the Great Tech Game

Amalina Anuar | *East Asia Forum* | 29 April 2020

For many economies, 5G innovation promises an opportunity to scale the economic ladder in a technological arena that will undergird the connectivity-based and data-driven Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). But for

major powers, 5G innovation is an emerging battlefield for technological, economic and military domination. For all its economic promise, this next-generation technology has the potential to be a nightmare in the making for ASEAN — an organisation that lists choosing sides between major powers as one of its most prominent concerns.

[Full Report](#)

ASEAN Smart Cities: Balancing 5G and Geopolitics

Amalina Anuar | *RSIS Commentaries* | 29 April 2020

[Full Report](#)

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Indigenizing the Cold War in Malaysia and Singapore: Interethnic Decolonization, Developmental Syntheses and the Quest for Sovereignty

Alan Chong
Asian Perspectives
29 May 2020

Neo-Liberalism, the Rise of the Unelected and Policymaking in Thailand: The Case of the Medical Tourism Industry

Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit & Guanie Lim
Journal of Contemporary Asia
18 April 2020

Asia's Troubled River: Dam(n)ing or Managing the Mekong?

Frederick Kliem
Journal of Greater Mekong Studies
19 March 2020

IMF = I'M Fired! IMF Program Participation, Political Systems, and Workers' Rights

Lee Su-Hyun
Political Studies
27 April 2020

Enlarging Singapore's Foreign Policy: Becoming Intermediary for Diplomacy, Transportation and Information

Alan Chong
Book Chapter
27 March 2020

The **Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS)** is a research entity within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. The CMS team conducts cutting-edge research, teaching/training and networking on cooperative multilateralism in the Asia Pacific region. The Centre aims to contribute to international academic and public discourses on regional architecture and order in the Asia Pacific. It aspires to be an international knowledge hub for multilateral cooperation and regional integration.

Multilateral Matters is the quarterly publication of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies (CMS), analysing the most recent developments regarding multilateralism by our team. It covers articles on relevant economic and political issues as well as programmes and latest publications from the research centre. The objective of the newsletter is to promote the research being done by our centre, raising awareness of the many events that we hold on a regular basis.