

EDITORIAL

ASEAN and Its Relevance amidst Pandemic

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the global economy, which brought many countries into recession. Not only that, but the COVID-19 pandemic has also made a fundamental change in the international system. The extent to which this COVID-19 Pandemic will fundamentally change the way we view globalization, democracy, and most importantly, the superiority of the United States' power in the world.

Such a question indeed has been asked by many scholars of international relations. Drezner (2020) argues that although the impact of COVID 19 is enormous on the current global economy, it will only have a short-term impact. In a more macro and long-term context, COVID-19 will not change the international system as we know it today. Drezner even stated that COVID-19 would only be a footnote in the study of International Relations. At best, the impact of COVID-19 on the international system is no greater than the impact of the influenza pandemic on international politics, which is, of course, very minimal.

In contrast to Drezner, McNamara and Newman (2020) instead, see that COVID-19 is accelerating the process of major transformations taking place in the international system. For both of them, COVID-19 shows how the distrust of globalization is getting bigger and the strengthening of identity and nationalism for the nation-state. Despite the importance of international cooperation in resolving transnational issues such as the pandemic, the reality is that countries are increasingly nationalistic and seek to protect the goods they need.

Given such polarised debate, it is not surprising that the COVID-19 pandemic led many scholars to analyze the extent to which domestic politics may link to international cooperation.

Pevehouse (2020) observes that despite the crisis requiring significant international cooperation, surprisingly, limited international cooperation had emerged. Here, he argues the need for us to see the impact of domestic politics in understanding the impact of COVID-19 towards the international system, especially the rise of populism and nationalist-inspired populism. Surprisingly, there is a tendency of the rise of populism in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this piece, we want to bring the debates into the context of ASEAN and the study of ASEAN. As one of the most dynamic and emerging regions, Southeast Asia and its robust regional organization can provide an interesting discussion on the study of International Relations in general and area studies in particular. In this opportunity, we argue that it is undeniable that the COVID-19 pandemic provides a clear picture of how the struggle of the two-axis of power in the international system, namely the US and China, compete in shaping the narrative and offering a vision of post-pandemic international cooperation. Southeast Asia has inevitably become the centre of competition for influence from these superpowers in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. ASEAN as a regional organization then needs to accommodate countries in the region to face various real challenges during the pandemic.

Moreover, we discuss three levels of challenges faced by ASEAN in facing the pandemic, namely the international, regional and domestic levels. The deepening strategic rivalry between the US and China has become the major international challenge faced by ASEAN at the international level. We argue that ASEAN should increase its assertiveness in enhancing international cooperation amidst the rise of competition between the US and China. At the regional level, the major concern is the cohesiveness of ASEAN in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We assert that ASEAN should be able to stay relevant by making sure that all programmes and actions it created are delivered and implemented. Last but not least, domestic aspects matter in international and regional cooperation. We show that each ASEAN member state utilizes different approaches which ultimately result in different mitigation outputs. We argue that ASEAN should provide a platform where each state can learn from other countries and even help each other in implementing best practices in the region.

The International Challenges

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic shows us how international cooperation is not something to be taken for granted. The literature related to the study of international cooperation has stated that international cooperation is more likely to occur when the cooperation is carried out in the context of low politics such as environmental and health issues than cooperation in the context of high politics such as security, nuclear, and also strategic (Drezner, 2003; Raustiala, 2002; Vries et al., 2021).

The notion of politicization of international cooperation is then important to understand why some cooperation is problematic while others do not. According to Vries et al. (2021), two main aspects lead to public discontent about the existing international cooperation and the mobilization of this discontent by political entrepreneurs. Public discontent might be caused by three factors; First, the economic consequences of international cooperation may negatively impact the domestic audience. Second, growing concerns about identity and cultural value

divide which make international cooperation difficult. Finally, the contestation over international authority and their legitimacy. The mobilization of discontent by political entrepreneurs may result in strategic politicians' effort to gain benefit from the grievances associated with international cooperation.

In the case of COVID-19 pandemic, arguably, these factors indeed play roles in making the international cooperation in mitigating COVID-19 is getting harder. Public discontent toward international cooperation can be seen from the public's distrust of international authorities who manage cooperation to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. We also see how politicians politicize COVID-19 in both developed and developing countries. In the United States alone, we see how President Donald Trump sees COVID-19 not as a threat but as a tool to slow down the US economy. The same is true in Brazil and India, where leaders are politicizing COVID-19 for their domestic interests.

We further show that the lack of international cooperation is also exacerbated by a growing rivalry between superpowers. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States and China are handling the spread of the devastating coronavirus pandemic in very different ways, and those differences are reshaping the global rivalry between the world's two leading economies. In the case of ASEAN, such rivalry seems to tilt toward China. For the past four years under the Donald Trump administration, the United States' relations with the ASEAN region have been deteriorated. President Donald Trump refused to attend the ASEAN Summit for the third year in a row, even in 2020 when the forum was conducted online.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Xi Jinping regime was criticized for its slow response and indications to cover up the outbreak that allowed the coronavirus to spread rapidly worldwide. With an authoritarian approach in dealing with COVID-19, China can control the spread of the virus and can successfully emerge from the crisis. With factories reviving, China is again exporting vital supplies and medical equipment to other countries.

The initiatives and steps taken by China with this 'mask diplomacy' are interpreted as a means of re-branding the Chinese government to maintain good relations with ASEAN countries, especially in relation to economic cooperation. China seeks to change the face of COVID-19 from a COVID-19 outbreak to a symbol of its global leadership in overcoming the crisis. This effort is reinforced by propaganda that focuses on the Chinese government's response to the outbreak, which is part of a global campaign that observers call Covid Diplomacy. It is not surprising that according to a study conducted by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 44.2 per cent of Southeast Asian respondents stated that China have provided the most help to the region for COVID-19 while the US is trailing behind with only 9.6% of respondents.

ASEAN must be able to continue to be an international actor who plays a balancing role between these two superpowers. In this pandemic era, ASEAN's role is becoming increasingly important. ASEAN must be able to keep the engagement of these two countries present in the region and at the same time not make one superpower country have a more significant influence than the other.

The regional challenges

ASEAN's challenges at the regional level are more about the ability of ASEAN countries to be able to collaborate and synergize in efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 (Djalante et al., 2020). Many scholars view the role of ASEAN sceptically in helping member countries to be able to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the region. Beeson (2020) for instance would argue that ASEAN has so far been limited given that the organization is mainly ineffectual in overseeing a collective response to the crisis.

Despite the scepticism in seeing how ASEAN responds to crisis, we show that ASEAN is still relevant in nurturing cooperation among Southeast Asian states in mitigating Pandemic COVID-19. This stems from ASEAN member states that see the pandemic would crash their economy. To that end, ASEAN took action by proposing regional cooperation to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. ASEAN leaders have made plans and discussed a number of policies that are part of ASEAN regional cooperation. There are a number of policies that are mutually agreed upon by all ASEAN members, and it is hoped that these policies can help fellow members fight the COVID-19 virus. However, there are a number of criticisms and challenges for ASEAN regional cooperation in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within ASEAN itself, the ten members agreed on several essential points regarding the handling of COVID-19, namely strengthening cooperation against COVID-19 by exchanging information, best practice, research development, epidemiological development, and others. Furthermore, providing protection for ASEAN citizens in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, strengthening public communication and efforts to combat stigmatization and discrimination, committing to take collective action and coordinated policies to mitigate economic and social impacts, the importance of a comprehensive approach involving multi-stakeholders and multi-sectoral, assigning ASEAN economic ministers to ensure the continuity of supply chain connectivity so that trade can continue, and to support the reallocation of the ASEAN Trust Fund to tackle the COVID-19 virus pandemic.

The leaders of ASEAN countries have also decided to establish a regional fund to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The establishment of the Response Fund is aimed at securing the availability of essential medical supplies and equipment in the ASEAN region. The funds come from the reallocation of available funds and existing finances. Support from ASEAN partners, such as ASEAN Plus Three, contributed to this funding. This funding is also accompanied by a commitment to refrain from spending unnecessary funds on the flow of goods, especially strategic goods to combat COVID-19 such as medical, food and essential supplies (ASEAN Declaration 2020).

We certainly see new initiatives from the APT Summit and Summit, such as the establishment of the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund and the ASEAN Center for Infectious Diseases as an ASEAN effort to become more relevant amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, learning from ASEAN's experience so far, initiatives to form new bodies like this often do not answer substantial problems at the member state level. Its effectiveness will clearly depend on the matter of funds and the will of each member country. However, there are economic-political factors that shape state-society relations in member states that often pose challenges for

multilateral agencies in managing non-traditional security threats in such a region (Hameiri and Jones, 2015).

In the end, being able to demonstrate its important role in a crisis situation like this has indeed become a touchstone for ASEAN. Moreover, looking at the data, all ASEAN countries are almost certain to be exposed to this global outbreak, although to varying degrees. But again, ASEAN must be able to show its unity as a sharing and caring community. ASEAN must prove that regional solidarity can be realized by giving priority to countries in the region to rise together.

We need to stress the importance of ASEAN to strengthen cooperation in accelerating ASEAN's economic recovery. President Joko Widodo, in his speech also reminded that in the economic situation that was quite down due to the pandemic, all ASEAN countries must work harder to strengthen and grow the regional economy more quickly. The Indonesian government sees connectivity as the key, whether the connectivity of goods, services and economic actors can be revived as soon as possible. ASEAN is also considered in need to start arrangements regarding the ASEAN Travel Corridor in a careful, measured and gradual manner. This is deemed to be important because it can show the strategic meaning of the ASEAN community both in the region and in the eyes of the international community (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2020).

The domestic challenges

Arguably, the domestic challenges have so far, the main hindrance for ASEAN countries in responding to COVID-19. In the context of ASEAN, there are two debates regarding how Southeast Asian countries respond to the emergence of the pandemic. The first is the debate related to the implementation of neoliberalism and policy capacity in mitigating the impact of COVID-19. The second is the issue of the securitization of health issues.

In mitigating the economic impact caused by the pandemic, the governments of each country have also issued domestic policies, both monetary policy and fiscal stimulus. Since early 2020, the majority of ASEAN members have lowered interest rates and implemented other financial sector policies, according to the approach of each country. These efforts are taken to ensure liquidity and financial stability are maintained, as well as reduce borrowing costs to stimulate business production activities and public consumption

The way each government in ASEAN deals with this crisis is also very varied, including the amount of the budget specially prepared to reduce this pandemic. But overall, there are two broad approaches that the state has taken in its efforts to mitigate the COVID-19, namely fragmented regulatory model and authoritative state-driven developmental model. Jones and Hameiri (2021) provide an interesting comparative analysis of solid state Asian and neoliberal European states.

This analysis fits with the context of ASEAN. Some countries choose to apply an authoritative approach, such as Singapore, Vietnam, and Malaysia and countries that prefer a neoliberal approach such as Indonesia. We also see how the differences between these two approaches have implications for the output of handling COVID-19. In countries that use an authoritative

approach, the state has managed to control the rate of spread of the virus. Meanwhile, in a country that is fragmented and neoliberal-oriented, the handling of a pandemic seems slow and unprepared.

Another debate regarding domestic aspect of the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is to what extent the state has framed the crisis as a security issue. Many studies suggest that the government elites may be best positioned to shape security attitudes and use their narratives to influence public attitudes during a crisis (Karyotis et al., 2021). In his study, Chairil (2021) asserts that state response toward the pandemic may be mainly driven by security rather than public health issues. This is particularly true for several ASEAN countries, especially Indonesia. He shows how Indonesia's response initially focus on the de-securitization of the issue but later turn into a securitization process limiting Indonesia's ability to restrict the spread of the pandemic. While countries such as Singapore that treats COVID-19 pandemic as a public health issue rather than security issue and then focus more on increasing states' presence of fiscal, operational and policy capacities.

The issues surrounding ASEAN

Having discussed the challenges faced by ASEAN, this volume reflects our concerns regarding the pandemic. As we have discussed above, the pandemic has further enhanced the rivalry between the US and China in the region. Moreover, we see that challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have also directly impacted the economy of ASEAN member states. In this volume, we collect interesting topics that relate to the growing concerns faced by ASEAN both as regional organization and as region.

We believe that understanding ASEAN-China relations is essential to understand the trajectory of ASEAN position in the post-COVID-19 international system. In the previous volume, JAS has published an article investigating China's defence diplomacy toward ASEAN (Sinaga, 2020). In this edition, we further enhance the debate by bringing an article entitled "Of benevolence and unity: Unpacking china's foreign policy discourses toward Southeast Asia", written by Enrico Gloria. In this article, Gloria shows that China has constructed a story of a 'Benevolent China' in line with 'Developing Southeast Asia' to positively represent itself in light of its ongoing rise to great power status. By doing so, China is benefitting from its overall pursuit of a positive identity within Southeast Asia. Such positive sentiment can be seen in how China disburses Chinese vaccines to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia.

The second article, entitled "Maritime security cooperation within the ASEAN institutional framework: a gradual shift towards practical cooperation" also discuss one of the main challenges of ASEAN particularly in the context of US-China rivalry that is how ASEAN members cooperate with each other's particularly in maritime security issue. I Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia shows that there are various forms of cooperation between ASEAN countries on maritime security issues. However, such maritime security cooperation among ASEAN members continues to be largely dialogue-based, with few instances of practical cooperation. By comparing the three fora, He further shows that the organizational design of these forums tends to affect the forms of cooperation.

The use of technology for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) is increasingly relevant to continue operating amid a pandemic, increase productivity, expand market access, and look for alternative financing. In fact, ASEAN member states agree to enhance financial digitalization in order to create market resilience in facing pandemics. Moreover, ASEAN itself currently has the ASEAN Strategic Action Plan for SME Development 2016-2025, in which one of its strategic goals is to promote productivity, technology and innovation. The third article, entitled “Prerequisites and Perceived Information System Qualities Model for Mobile Banking Adoption among the Customers of Private Commercial Banks in Myanmar”, provides us with a glimpse of how mobile banking helps commercial banks in Myanmar grow. Phyo Min Tun shows that user interface design quality is a prerequisite of system quality and information quality.

The following article deals with socioeconomic determinants of the infant mortality rate in ASEAN. This article is relevant considering that studies related to health issues have not yet received an appropriate place in studies on ASEAN. This article looks at how the infant mortality rate indicates the health status of a country. Vita Kartika Sari shows that the size of the female workforce has a strong influence on increasing the infant mortality rate in ASEAN.

The last article, entitled “Western Centric Research Methods? Exposing International Practices”, is an exciting work for those who want to reflect on how should we approach ASEAN without any western bias. Catherine Jones reminds us that in the study of international relations and particularly regarding institutions, area studies approaches should be more frequently adopted. The limited use of these approaches not only hampers new research but also hides a colonial hangover. This is the reason why the Journal of ASEAN Studies tries to continue to understand ASEAN not only as actors and processes in international relations but also to bring understanding and an area studies approach to understanding the Southeast Asian region.

We hope that this regular issue Vol 9. 1 2021 would invite further examination of the role of ASEAN during the pandemic and post-pandemic. We look forward to more studies that search out the effects of the pandemic towards ASEAN and how ASEAN member countries cope with the pandemic.

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