

Welcome Remarks by
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Regional Outlook Forum 2021: Power, Politics, and Policy in a Post-COVID World
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Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen

A very warm welcome to the 2021 Regional Outlook Forum. This Forum is ISEAS' flagship event, held at the beginning of each year to analyse high-level trends and issues that will have the greatest impact on Southeast Asia, and to consider how key developments in specific countries in the region will unfold.

The title of this year's event is *Power, Politics, and Policy in a Post-COVID World*. The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed suffering and hardship for many, and change and uncertainty for all. I believe that, in the long sweep of history, people will look back at the pandemic as a critical event that demarcates 'before' and 'after' periods that are distinct from each other. This 'new' or 'rearranged' order will mean different and unexpected ways of life for governments, businesses, and individuals.

The way this event is being held is illustrative of this. Every year for the past 24 years, the forum has been a full-day event at a large conference venue, but this year, we have moved it entirely online, and split it into two half-day sessions to suit the new routines and habits of our audience resulting from the pandemic.

Over the last three decades, many observers have predicted that nation states would lose influence and relevance in an ever-globalising world. Yet, the pandemic saw physical borders re-emerge between, and even within, countries, while citizens the world over are seeing their national governments as the primary actors to ensure their safety, security, and wellbeing. Indeed, during this time, controls over daily physical activity have had to be asserted in new and far-reaching ways. Thus, the need for 'hard' or kinetic power has again been brought to the fore.

Yet, at the same time, in this era of social media, the need for 'soft' power has also become key for states to reach out to and engage their citizens to modify every-day behaviour and secure the cooperation needed to defeat the virus.

COVID-19 has also had a knock-on effect on politics, as new groups have sprung up to uphold and defend their interests. Previously booming sectors such as tourism, aviation and higher education have been hard hit, whilst other sectors such as e-commerce, logistics, and electronics have enjoyed accelerated growth. Many families and communities have seen hard-earned gains in income wiped out, requiring rapid and concerted action from governments and NGOs to help sustain them. Many young people ready to start their careers or higher studies have had their plans pushed back, while the elderly have borne the brunt of serious complications disproportionately in the virus outbreak.

Policy-making has been severely tested as decision-makers have had to act rapidly to establish action-plans to deal with the evolving health and economic consequences that the crisis has thrown up, while still keeping an eye on longer term priorities. Administrations that have failed in this have seen their legitimacy and competence questioned. Job creation, inclusive growth, and re-skilling have taken on new urgency. The significance of such measures is further heightened by the World Bank's warning that allowing robust human capital reforms to stall while the pandemic lasts could diminish Southeast Asia's growth over the next decade by 1 percentage point per year.

Although the advent of effective vaccines can stem the ongoing health crisis, the region's disparate fiscal, demographic, social and logistical challenges suggest that many of the COVID-induced changes will have long-term repercussions, and not everything will revert to the old status quo.

What we seek to do in this year's ROF is analyse what some of the immediate implications of these changes are in the short-term, as well as examine the impact of other key geostrategic and economic trends, including the recently concluded 2020 US Presidential election.

Let me now take a moment to lay the programme of this year's ROF for you. We begin our event from a macro-level perspective, with Professor Wang Gungwu's keynote speech, which will lay out and examine the foremost geopolitical challenges facing the region. This will then be complemented by the focus of our first panel, which will analyse US-China relations at the key turning point that we are in and tease out what this means for Southeast Asia.

With these macro-level dynamics in mind, the subsequent five panels will provide a snapshot and analysis of key economic and political developments in five Southeast Asian countries. Today, we will get a granular perspective of events unfolding in Vietnam and Thailand. Vietnam is gearing up for its 13th Party Congress, which will take place in a matter of days. This event will elect the country's leaders and chart its socio-economic direction for the next decade. Thailand, on its part, is facing wide-ranging political movements which are new in both form and composition. What happens next could either bring it forwards or backwards, as staying still is not a stable outcome.

Tomorrow's sessions will zoom in on Indonesia, Myanmar, and Malaysia, all of which are facing unique challenges. Indonesia is witnessing a rising COVID-19 case load, as well as an economic downturn which threatens to stymie President Joko Widodo's sweeping regulatory reform agenda. Myanmar's newly re-elected administration also needs to confront the social and economic impact of COVID-19, in addition to attending to the higher expectations of its population. Malaysia's ruling administration, on the other hand, is constrained by a narrow parliamentary majority, and deep fissures within the ruling coalition. It too seems on the cusp of change, though to where this will lead remains uncertain.

I am confident that the panels that we have lined up today and tomorrow will provide much food for thought on Southeast Asia's future. The upside of our online format is that it has allowed us to bring together a wide range of speakers, based in many different locations, who are all experts, thought leaders and players in their fields. I would like to thank them in advance for contributing to an exciting and enlightening ROF.

I would also like to encourage our audience to actively participate during the Question and Answer Session that will be part of every panel following the presentations by the speakers. And, taking advantage of the technology that we have, we will be polling the audience on a series of questions in each panel, the results of which will be included in the discussion.

Finally, I thank our Platinum and Gold sponsors for today's forum – Albizia Capital, Singapore Power, Mitsubishi Corporation, Mapletree Investments and Nikkei Group Asia – for their generous support that has made the hosting of this year's ROF possible. With that, I have come to the end of my remarks.

Immediately after this, we will have the keynote speech by Professor Wang Gungwu. Prof Wang needs no introduction, especially to this audience. He is without a doubt the most distinguished modern scholar that Southeast Asia, and perhaps all Asia, has produced. ISEAS has had the privilege and pleasure of having him as the chairman of our Board of Trustees for 17 years, a stint that ended only in 2019. It is therefore a great honour for us to have him back with us at ROF this year. Let me now invite Professor Wang Gungwu to deliver his keynote speech.