

## **ASEAN’S RESPONSE TO COVID-19: COLLABORATION TOWARDS REOPENING**

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Paper presented at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Conference, “Covid-19 in Southeast Asia, 2020-2022: Restriction, Relief, Recovery”, 28-29 July 2022.

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In early 2020, Viet Nam, as Chair of ASEAN for the year, found itself in an uncomfortable and challenging position – to sound the alarm on the increasingly threatening advent of a public health emergency, or to wait and see if the situation will allow for the country’s best-laid plans for its Chairmanship to eventually come to fruition. Significantly, this decision was set against the backdrop of consecutive border closures and the installment of self-protecting national measures across the region.

ASEAN, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, is an association of ten member nations. Since its establishment in 1967, the Association has gone through much change and development, in tandem with the growing global importance of the region on the political and economic fronts. With a combined population of over 620 million people, the ASEAN region boasts an economic market size of about USD2.3 trillion. On the political-security front, the region is the ostensible epicentre of the contested Indo-Pacific region. In more recent contexts of US-China rivalry, many, if not most ASEAN Member States maintain a neutral position and hence are able to straddle both sides of the dichotomy, often benefitting economically from this neutral position. While each ASEAN Member State maintains its own bilateral relations with key partners around the world, the region, as represented by ASEAN, possess its own strengths and selling points and hence also maintains relatively strong diplomatic relations with numerous different countries and international organisations.

This paper will outline the ASEAN experience in countering and dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The regional response will be traced not only through the various initiatives that ASEAN had put in place in response to the pandemic, but also through the collective sentiment that the regional policies were espousing. The COVID-19 initiatives will be explored through case-studies of two different regional initiatives with a view to understand the political, social, and economic motivations behind the policies.

## **The Regional Landscape in 2020**

Border closures in the region were the most visible sign of measures being put in place in response to the rapid spread of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19); all resulting in disruptions to supply chains, volatility in financial markets, warped market outlooks for industries and sectors like tourism, services, and manufacturing. Cognisant of the potential larger impact of border closures, Viet Nam convened the *Special Meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council*<sup>1</sup> in Vientiane, Lao PDR on 20 February 2020. The ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) is comprised of all ten ASEAN Foreign Ministers and is the Meeting that is mandated to see through the decisions of the ASEAN Leaders. The ACC also presides over all ASEAN issues which are cross-cutting and multi-dimensional in nature. The ACC Meeting in 2020 was a signal not only to the regional players but to the wider global community that ASEAN had underscored the threat of the pandemic to the region and would respond collectively to the impact of the pandemic. This would be done through the promotion of multi-sectoral and a whole of ASEAN Community engagement. Consequent to this, the ASEAN Health Sector – those working on matters involving regional public health security and policies – had convened an *ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Meeting*<sup>2</sup>. The first of such meetings involving ASEAN’s partner countries.

Perhaps the most significant moment in the region’s undertakings in responding to the pandemic came in the form of the convening of the *Special ASEAN Summit*<sup>3</sup> in April 2020. The Summit, as evident in the name of the Meeting, was not part of the regular ASEAN timetable; its ad-hoc nature denoting the significance of the situation, requiring an ASEAN meeting at the highest level. The ASEAN Leaders met via videoconference for the first time ever in the organisation’s history and affirmed the sense of commitment to regionalism in countering the would-be impact of the pandemic. This was expounded upon in a commitment to ensure that critical economic and trade infrastructures and routes would continue to remain open in the region, and that the flow of medical, food, and essential supplies would continue unhindered. In terms of tangible outcomes, the Leaders put in motion the implementation of various initiatives including a post-pandemic recovery plan, the set-up of the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund and reaffirmed the coordinating and oversight function of the ACC and the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergencies (ACCWG-PHE) on all of ASEAN’s COVID-19 initiatives and responses.

Alongside the Special ASEAN Summit, an *ASEAN Plus Three Special Summit on COVID-19* was also organised. The Summit reaffirmed commitment to cooperation between ASEAN

and the Plus Three countries, maintain necessary interconnectedness by facilitating essential movement of people, including business travels, continue to keep markets open for trade and investment, and most significantly, “encourage mutual support and assistance between ASEAN and the Plus Three countries” and to “ensure adequate financing to contain the pandemic and protect our peoples, including through the proposed establishment of the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund for public health emergencies which would be reallocated from existing ASEAN+1 and APT cooperation funds, with possible additional support from ASEAN’s external partners”<sup>4</sup>. This Summit marked the beginnings of the important role that ASEAN’s partners would continue to play in the regional response to COVID-19. ASEAN’s partners play a pivotal role not only in supporting the region’s efforts in countering COVID-19; however, the strengths, or otherwise, of ASEAN’s external relations will go on to also shape the degree of effectiveness of the regional response.

### **ASEAN’s Initiatives in Response to COVID-19**

Given the keen shepherdship of Viet Nam as Chair of ASEAN in 2020, and the close management of the regional initiatives in response to COVID-19 by the ACC whilst being assisted by the ACCWG-PHE, ASEAN had in fact initiated quite a few programmes and projects in the last two years. Some of the more significant ones include the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies (ASEAN RRMS), the ASEAN Strategic Framework on Public Health Emergencies (ASF-PHE), the ASEAN Regional Centre for Public Health Emergencies (ACPHEED), the Post-Pandemic Recovery Plan which later became renamed as the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), and the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework (ATCAF) (Table 1). While the rest of this paper will expound upon two of the more prominent initiatives, the other ASEAN initiatives in response to COVID-19 are also worthy of discussion in order to have a fuller understanding of ASEAN’s commitment to regional response and recovery from the pandemic.

Table 1. ASEAN’S Response to Covid-19: Regional Initiatives

|           | <b>INITIATIVE</b>                                 | <b>KEY PROPERTIES</b>  | <b>IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS</b>   |
|-----------|---|--|---|
| <b>1.</b> | ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies (RRMS) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stockpile of medical supplies related and useful in a public health emergency</li> <li>• Stockpile is earmarked in each contributing country</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launched at end-2020</li> <li>• Current stockpile includes contribution from four Member States.</li> <li>• Interest from several partners, especially ASEAN Plus Three</li> </ul> |

|    | <b>INITIATIVE</b>  | <b>KEY PROPERTIES</b>  | <b>IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS</b>   |
|----|--|--|---|
|    |  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ASEAN Secretary-General is informed of contribution; while ASEAN Secretariat maintains inventory of all earmarked supplies</li> </ul>   |   |
| 2. | ASEAN Strategic Framework on Public Health Emergency (ASF-PHE) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard Operating Procedures meant to enhance ASEAN’s preparedness and resilience to public health emergencies.</li> <li>• Meant to complement and aligned with the existing ASEAN Public Health Emergencies Coordination System (ACPHECS) project</li> </ul>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launched in mid-2020</li> <li>• Supported by ASEAN-USAID PROSPECT</li> </ul>   |
| 3. | ASEAN Regional Centre for Public Health Emergencies (ACPHEED)  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical regional centre</li> <li>• Strategic focus: (i) Prevention and Preparedness, (ii) Detection and Risk Assessment, (iii) Response</li> <li>• Primarily funded and supported by Japan</li> <li>• Australia’s consequent contribution arrived in 2021</li> </ul>                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launch announced in November 2020</li> <li>• Resolved in May 2022 that Centre would be jointly hosted by Thailand, Indonesia, and Viet Nam, with all three Member States focusing on different aspects of work of the ACPHEED</li> </ul>   |
| 4. | ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF)                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large-scale post-pandemic recovery plan for the region</li> <li>• Captures in one document initiatives being done on longer-term scale with sectoral bodies in response to pandemic.</li> <li>• Whole-of-community exit strategy from the COVID-19 crisis</li> </ul>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ACRF is explicated by an accompanying Implementation Plan</li> <li>• Monitoring of the ACRF is supported by the ACRF Support Unit</li> <li>• Continuous updates on the progress of work of sectoral body initiatives captured in ACRF are reported bi-annually to ASEAN Member States</li> </ul> |
| 5. | ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework (ATCAF)            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meant to enhance efforts to assist in economic recovery by facilitating movement and travel for business and trade</li> <li>• Anchored by the ASEAN Declaration on an ATCAF</li> <li>• Will utilise the QR code facility meant to digitally streamline health protocol across the region</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final iteration of the Travel Corridor was completed in August 2021 and announced in November 2021</li> <li>• The ATCAF is conceived, managed, and coordinated by a dedicated Task Force set up in 2021.</li> <li>• ATCAF has not been trialled as yet</li> </ul>                                    |

|    | <b>INITIATIVE</b>                  | <b>KEY PROPERTIES</b>  | <b>IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS</b>  |
|----|------------------------------------|--|--|
| 6. | COVID-19<br>ASEAN<br>Response Fund | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedicated funding mechanism to support ASEAN Member States in the mitigation and further spread of COVID-19</li> <li>• The Fund may be used to procure medicines, emergency supplies, and support research and development related to COVID-19</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launched in November 2020</li> <li>• The Fund is held at and managed by the ASEAN Secretariat</li> <li>• Has continued to receive interest from ASEAN’s partners and counts approximately USD 30 million as pledged contributions</li> <li>• USD 10 million has been used to procure vaccines for the region</li> </ul> |

### *ASEAN RRMS*

The idea to establish a warehouse or stockpile to cater to the needs of a public health emergency was first mooted by Viet Nam as Chair of ASEAN in 2020. In suggesting the establishment of such a warehouse, ASEAN Member States remained aware of the various warehouses that are already in existence, serving the various needs of the region. The experiences of setting these up informed the Member States of the limitations of a physical warehouse, including the large costs involved. Given this and the fact that medical supplies generally have a shorter lifespan than generic life-saving emergency supplies, Viet Nam envisioned hence that the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies would stockpile earmarked essential medical supplies to support the region in addressing any possible future public health emergency situations. The premise of the ASEAN RRMS is that ASEAN Member States would set aside a voluntary number of supplies from their national stockpiles, meant for ASEAN. These supplies would be physically held in the contributing Member State while the ASEAN Secretariat would maintain an inventory of all the earmarked supplies in the region. When a particular Member States finds itself in need of a specific supply, they would write to the Secretary-General of ASEAN who would then identify the geographically closest source of the specific supply and ask for the physical transfer to hence be made. In this way, ASEAN would save costs on having to decide on, build, and maintain a physical stockpile or warehouse.

Given the uniqueness and potential flexibility of the ASEAN RRMS, considerable attention and curiosity was drawn to its set-up. Various ASEAN partners inquired of collaboration and engagement with ASEAN on the ASEAN RRMS, in hopes to positively contribute to the reserves or to utilise the Reserve to donate supplies such as vaccines to the region. In fact, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) countries (China, Japan, and Republic of Korea) had drawn up a concept note of their own proposing a collaboration with ASEAN in expanding the

ASEAN RRMS to include the Plus Three countries as contributing countries to the Reserve. However, there was surprisingly little interest amongst ASEAN Member States themselves, after the set-up of the ASEAN RRMS, to earmark their own supplies for the Reserve. Given this and the general evolution of the pandemic and its needs, there was little occasion for the mechanism of the ASEAN RRMS to be tested or trialled. At present, the ASEAN RRMS exists more veritably on paper as a concept with a fully thought-out mechanism accompanying the concept.

#### *ASF-PHE and ACPHEED*

The ASEAN Strategic Framework on Public Health Emergency and the ASEAN Regional Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases were conceived as initiatives that would inform one another. The ASF-PHE was a response to the Leaders advice to strengthen the implementation of the World Health Organization International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005) for the region. Conceived as a set of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), its intention is to enhance ASEAN's preparedness and resilience to public health emergencies, and thereby strengthening ASEAN's cooperation in the domain of health security. In 2021, the Chair of the Senior Officials Meeting on Health Development (SOMHD) – the body that discusses and manages health cooperation and health-related developments in the region – announced that the implementation of the ASF-PHE would be aligned with the implementation of the ASEAN Public Health Emergencies Coordination System (ACPHECS) project and other complementary initiatives forming a multi-year programme that is supported by the ASEAN-USAID Partnership for Regional Optimization within the Political-Security and Socio-Cultural Communities (PROSPECT).

Much like the ASF-PHE, the ACPHEED is significantly supported by an ASEAN Dialogue Partner. Japan had pledged to fund the establishment of the ACPHEED with a budget of almost USD 50 million early in the pandemic. The ACPHEED has three strategic focus pillars, specifically: Prevention and Preparedness, Detection and Risk Assessment, and Response. The launch of the ACPHEED was announced at the 37<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in November 2020. However, at that point ASEAN had yet to make a firm decision on which of the short-listed candidates among ASEAN Member States would physically host the Centre. At the end of 2021, Japan had informed that its proposed financial contribution to ACPHEED would expire. In the meantime, Australia announced that it would contribute AUD 21, 000,000. It is not until May 2022 that the final decision for Thailand, Indonesia, and Viet Nam to jointly host the Centre is made, allowing for work on the physical establishment of the Centre to begin.

## *ACRF*

The ACRF is posited as the post-pandemic recovery plan for the region. It captures the initiatives being done on the longer-term scale within sectoral bodies in response to the pandemic. The recovery plan was initially meant to include elements on mitigating a global economic recession, restoring confidence of consumers, investors and the business community, in the region. Upon consideration of the discussions, the ASEAN Secretariat had proposed that the ACRF would serve as ASEAN's whole-of-community exit strategy from the COVID-19 crisis and would look at addressing the impact of the pandemic while also addressing the periods of reopening, recovery, and long-term resilience. The Framework consists of five broad strategies: (i) enhancing health systems; (ii) strengthening human security; (iii) maximising the potential of broader economic integration; (iv) accelerating inclusive digital transformation; and (v) advancing towards a more sustainable and resilient future. Work on the ACRF is supported by an ACRF Support Unit housed within the premises of the ASEAN Secretariat; the Support Unit monitors and evaluates the progress of work of the ACRF and produces the requisite bi-annual reports for submission to the ACC.

## **Case Study 1: COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund and ASEAN's Regional Vaccine Procurement**

The COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund has proven to be one of the more successful regional COVID-19 initiatives, at least if seen from the perspective of how well-received the initiative has been portrayed in the media. Initially conceived as a way out of rechanneling stalled cooperation projects between ASEAN and its partners due to the pandemic, the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund<sup>5</sup> is a dedicated funding mechanism that may be used to provide support to ASEAN Member States in the mitigation and further spread of COVID-19. In further conceptualising the Fund, the ACC mooted the idea that the Fund would be made available for use to procure medicines, emergency supplies related to the treatment of COVID-19 related illnesses, and to support cooperation in research and development relevant to COVID-19 including research on virology, immunology, preventive vaccines, and in harvesting and sharing of best practices related to the treatment and mitigation of COVID-19.

The Fund, held at the ASEAN Secretariat, is accordingly managed by the ASEAN Secretariat and was launched at the 37<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in 2020 by the ASEAN Leaders. Since its launch, the Fund continues to receive much interest and contributions from ASEAN's

partners. To date, the Fund has received up to USD 30 million in pledges and contributions from 22 countries – a considerable amount to have been raised in the short span of two years.

In early 2021 and in consideration of the global developments of the pandemic, ASEAN Member States called for the expeditious use of the Fund to specifically procure vaccines for the region. This was in the midst of the global rollout of vaccines by the major pharmaceutical producers and the unprecedented scramble for vaccine share for most countries around the world. In August 2021, the decision was made to contract the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as procurement agent for ASEAN's regional purchase.

In the course of negotiations with UNICEF to procure vaccines for the region, it became evident that ASEAN's purchase order of USD 10 million worth of vaccines was not considered a priority purchase to be expedited by UNICEF or the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) programme given that the amount of the purchase was considered small for a regional procurement. Negotiations with UNICEF hence spanned many months and as of July 2022, the ASEAN Secretariat is only finally able to report the almost completion of the entire purchase, delivery, and administration of the COVID-19 vaccines procured through the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund.

Given the amount of time that has passed since the decision was made by ASEAN to procure vaccines till the time of the eventual delivery of the vaccines to ASEAN Member States, developments in national vaccine administration exercises had overtaken ASEAN's procurement attempt. Many Member States saw no use for the ASEAN-procured vaccines for their own citizens given that the majority of their populations had already been vaccinated through the various national vaccination exercises. These Member States then began seeking to redistribute their vaccine share to other ASEAN Member States who seemed in more need than themselves. This, undoubtedly, slowed down the processes towards seeing to the completion of the initiative. Coupled with redistribution requests, the political coup that took place in Myanmar in early 2021 also exacerbated distribution delays to the individual ASEAN Member States.

ASEAN's regional vaccine procurement initiative was also mired in the global debate on vaccine diplomacy and discrimination<sup>6</sup>. Aside from the issue of the relatively small purchase amount of vaccines that the region was attempting, questions were also raised on whether eventual delivery to the region was severely delayed because the Southeast Asian region was



considered by COVAX or the producing pharmaceutical companies as neither being in severe need nor politically prioritised, in comparison to the European region, for example. Member States like Malaysia had decried the delays as being evidence of *greed* by developed countries in buying vaccines in excess causing global delivery and supply problems which negatively affected developing economies<sup>7</sup>. To exacerbate matters, these self-same developed countries which had purchased vaccines in excess were later seen to be attempting to offload their near-expiring vaccines onto countries in the Southeast Asian region<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, UNICEF, as procurement agent for ASEAN's procurement of vaccines has been criticised as attempting to similarly press onto ASEAN Member States doses of Pfizer vaccines which in 2022 is in global supply excess, despite Member States requesting the purchase of other COVID-19 vaccines instead.

The conundrum that presents itself in ASEAN's attempt at a regional vaccine procurement is manifold. Whilst much may be said about the quick and generous contributions of ASEAN's partners to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund as being a mark of the strengths of ASEAN's cooperative and diplomatic relations, the instances of vaccine discrimination and ASEAN being caught up in the throes of vaccine supply disruptions ostensibly caused by some of these same partners puts in question the real strengths of ASEAN's diplomatic utility on the global stage. At the core of the matter, what needs to be reconciled with is the fact that diplomatic aid whether it presents itself in the form of cooperation projects or financial contributions, need to be carefully negotiated and ASEAN's ability to negotiate more favourable outcomes for itself is truly dependent on many factors beyond the issue at hand – in this instance, the crisis brought about by the pandemic.

### **Case Study 2: The ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework and Regional Reopening**

ASEAN had begun thinking about regional reopening very early on in the pandemic. At the 36<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in 2020, the ASEAN Leaders had called for an enhanced effort to assist in ASEAN's economic recovery including measures to facilitate movement and travel during the pandemic. Upon Indonesia's suggestion and consequent proposal, the setup of an ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement was mooted. Consequent to the proposal by Indonesia, the ASEAN Declaration on an ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework (ATCAF)<sup>9</sup> was adopted by the 37<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in the same year.

To operationalise the terms within the Declaration, an *Ad Hoc* Task Force on the Operationalisation of the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement Framework (TF-ATCAF) was set up by the ACCWG-PHE in March 2021. The goal of the TF-ATCAF is to draft and thereafter realise the setup of the ATCAF. As part of its initial discussions, the members of the TF-ATCAF suggested and considered drafting a set of common health protocol for travellers, as well as conduct the sharing of best practices and mechanisms that had been put in place for each Member State in their individual effort to reopen borders safely and in measured ways. It became quite evident for many around the world at this point in the pandemic that a feasible solution to harmonising disparate systems lay in utilising and leveraging digital technologies. Singapore for example, showcased its Digital Health Certificate and later, its application to track and trace the spread of COVID-19 in society – *Trace Together*.

The final iteration of the ATCAF was realised in August 2021 and the existence of the facility was noted at the 38<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in 2021. The ATCAF primarily functions on the basis of two ASEAN Member States agreeing to set up a travel corridor between themselves which would facilitate the movement of business and official travel of persons between these two countries. Following the finalisation of the ATCAF facility, the ACCWG-PHE advised the TF-ATCAF to work on the processes of implementing the travel corridor including enabling a common approach of verifying the authenticity of digital certificates, and to consider developing a common set of standards for non-digitally verifiable relevant health documents.

Following this directive, in 2022, the TF-ATCAF has conducted some discussion and has decided to utilise the SOMHD's *Digitilisation of Health Protocol: Recognition of COVID-19 Health Certificates for International Travel through the ASEAN Single Digital COVID-19 Health Certificate Verification Portal*, and the *Establishment of an ASEAN Single QR Code* initiatives. Both these initiatives seek to digitally represent verifiable health data including the vaccination status of a particular individual. The QR Code is meant to expedite travel processes in and around the region against the backdrop of the ongoing pandemic by having the individual's health data already digitally parsed through a common set of regionally agreed standards.

When the ATCAF was finally ready to be utilised as an ASEAN mechanism for border reopening, it was late 2021 and some countries outside the region had already begun to fully reopen its borders and economies. Many ASEAN Member States had also followed suit and had already begun to tentatively reopen its borders – Cambodia and Singapore for example

had allowed for all purposes of travel (whether business, official, or tourism related) into the country, albeit with some added requirements like testing and minimal quarantine. Bilateral travel corridors had also begun to be of less relevance as borders became more porous. Predictably then, the ATCAF, with its controlled use (it is only limited to travel for the purposes of business and official endeavours) and rigid setup (a corridor between two countries), became less relevant and work on its implementation began to fade from prominence.

The challenges of the ATCAF are immediately evident: the cumbersome processes of reaching consensus and agreement amongst ten ASEAN Member States could not match up to the speed with which the needs and impact of the pandemic were evolving into. By the time the ATCAF was ready for use, global development had dictated that countries had naturally begun to open up to each other without the need for intermediary mechanisms like the ATCAF, rendering the ATCAF obsolete. The restrictive nature of the ATCAF also did not suit the purposes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century pandemic where pliability and adaptability are key. Lastly, the ATCAF was also little-known amongst the general ASEAN audience. While the ACCWG-PHE had mandated the Task Force to better publicise the ATCAF, the effort was not fast enough to cater to the fast-changing needs of the pandemic.

The development of the ATCAF however is not a fruitless endeavour. When the ASEAN Leaders had advised for its set-up, it was broached from the longer-term perspective of the region having a mechanism on hand to utilise in similar circumstances in the future. The existence of the ATCAF, hence, is the beginnings of securing the readiness and responsiveness of the region to emergency situations, whether public health related or otherwise.

### **Do Multilateral Solutions Work in Responding to Pandemics?**

ASEAN's steady growth and development is undeniable; its global significance growing in tandem with the general prominence of the individual economies of the Member States. Concomitantly the ASEAN COVID-19 response has been the most ambitious and encapsulating regional response to a crisis to-date. ASEAN Member States were instinctively seeking to develop multi-faceted responses that would not only address the impact of the pandemic but also seek to mitigate its spread and see the region safely out of the crisis – in many ways, the attempt was complete in that it was an attempt to Respond, Rebuild, and

Recover from the pandemic. The question that this ambition begets is whether there was success in ASEAN's initiatives, and also whether the regional ambition is misplaced.

Though it may be argued that the impact of ASEAN's efforts in responding to the pandemic may not be as keenly felt by the individual person living in the region in comparison to the effort of the national government, the inherent premise of the organisation must not be overlooked. ASEAN seeks to bring about greater prosperity, security, and success to the region through diplomacy and regional cooperation, and thereby creating an ASEAN Community. Seen from this perspective, ASEAN's efforts take on a more positive sheen of success. In the desire to 'help' the people of the region, ASEAN's partners were ever ready to make contributions of assistance. The outpouring of aid and donations has not abated even till today as seen in the People's Republic of China's recent donation of 10 million vaccine doses to Myanmar in the month of May this year<sup>10</sup>. If success is measured in this way, it is reassuring to know that ASEAN is able to command the immediate and substantial assistance and collaboration of its partners in times of crisis.

In looking ahead, the next reasonable line of inquiry would be whether ASEAN is able to achieve success in enlarging the role of multilateralism and regionalism in dealing with crises and solving the major problems of the world. It is worthwhile to note that ASEAN may be the only multilateral organisation or institution that has attempted to mount an encompassing multi-faceted response to the crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it may be argued that ASEAN is a much different organisation than the European Union (EU) in terms of its reasons for existence and objectives for example, the EU's response to the pandemic has mostly been to enhance existing support systems to national governments especially through funding facilities and the like<sup>11</sup>. The most significant EU initiative in response to the pandemic has been its Recovery Plan for Europe – a timeline and plan for recovery from the foreseen economic fallout for the region caused by the pandemic. The EU also makes some small effort at fighting disinformation in the time of the pandemic, but its responses have mostly been to graft on existing financial resources to individual government endeavours.

ASEAN's efforts hence are laudable even if in only as an attempt to respond concertedly in a holistic manner to the crisis. The organisation has been able to leverage its role as a multinational and intergovernmental organisation, promising diplomatic cooperation to ten governments at once, and negotiating with its partners for aid and assistance. It is also noteworthy that this aid and assistance reached almost all aspects of work of the organisation – while this paper mainly discussed the initiatives which were large-scale, the work of the

sectoral bodies in the other pillars of the ASEAN Community (Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural) were also responsive to the pandemic and had also benefitted from diplomatic cooperation and assistance from ASEAN's partners.

Looking ahead, it is also clear that the main challenge for ASEAN would be to think of ways to hasten its decision-making processes to keep up with the fast-evolving pace of global developments. ASEAN's mode of policy building – through consensus – has posed its fair share of hurdles as seen in the experience of developing the ATCAF. The organisation's biggest selling point of being a multinational organisation is at times also its bane in that processes become unwieldy and ultimately irrelevant if unable to match up to the speed of change in global discourse.

The question that remains is if there is still value to ideas enshrined within the concept of regionalism. If we are at the tail-end of this COVID-19 crisis that has touched almost all aspects of life, one can reasonably argue that on balance, ASEAN's efforts are a reflection of the organisation having embraced and leveraged on all its strengths for the benefit of the people. ASEAN's experience has also demonstrated that there is value still to regionalism if only in so far that it poses as a different mode of diplomatic cooperation and Community-building experience than national and bilateral engagements do.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Press Statement by the Chairman of the ASEAN Coordinating Council, 20 February 2022, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Press-Statement-of-the-Special-ACC-20.2.2020.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers Reaffirm Collaboration to Address COVID-19 Pandemic, 7 April 2020, <https://asean.org/asean-plus-three-health-ministers-reaffirm-collaboration-to-address-covid-19-pandemic/>
- <sup>3</sup> Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), 14 April 2020, <https://asean.org/declaration-of-the-special-asean-summit-on-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/>
- <sup>4</sup> Joint Statement of the ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), 14 April 2020, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Final-Joint-Statement-of-the-Special-APT-Summit-on-COVID-19.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> Terms of Reference of The COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/53-Finalised-and-APPROVED-TOR-COVID-19-ASEAN-Response-Fund.pdf>
- <sup>6</sup> UN Committee Decries Racial Discrimination in Global COVID-19 Vaccine Access, 29 April 2022, <https://minorityrights.org/2022/04/29/covid-19-vaccine-access/>
- <sup>7</sup> 'Greedy' Countries Hoarding Vaccines led to Global Supply Problem, including in Malaysia, 12 April 2021, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/04/681731/khairy-greedy-countries-hoarding-vaccines-led-global-supply-problem>
- <sup>8</sup> US donation of 1 Million Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccines Arrives in Malaysia, 5 July 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/us-donation-of-one-million-pfizer-covid-19-vaccines-arrives-in-malaysia>
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