

35th ASEAN ROUNDTABLE
THE COVID-19 CRISIS: IMPACT ON ASEAN AND THE WAY FORWARD

21 - 23 October 2020
ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute

Opening Remarks

Mr Choi Shing Kwok
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Head, ASEAN Studies Centre

Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

A very good morning to all.

On behalf of the ASEAN Studies Centre, I warmly welcome you to the 35th ASEAN Roundtable on “The COVID-19 Crisis: Impact on ASEAN and the Way Forward”. First, we are honoured to have Dr Koh Poh Koon, Senior Minister of State for Health, deliver the keynote message on the state of ASEAN regional cooperation and how ASEAN can work collaboratively to overcome the Covid-19 crisis. Second, I wish to express my gratitude to Konrad Adenauer Stiftung for their continuous generous support to this annual event. The Konrad Adenauer Stiftung has been a long-time supporter of the ASEAN Studies Centre’s work and, importantly, of ASEAN regionalism. Finally, I wish to extend my sincere thanks to our esteemed speakers and moderators who have invested significant time to enrich our discussions over the next three days. I believe that we will benefit greatly from your insights.

Most of us will agree that COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the world. Healthwise, the global death toll continues to climb, with a second wave just beginning in some places while it seems to be receding in others. The approach of the northern winter's cooler temperatures, in which the virus is known to be more active, will not help. But the pandemic is far from just a public health crisis. It has also severely affected the global economy and exacerbated existing geopolitical fractures. The pandemic has compounded and complicated the existing challenges in the regional and global arenas. Even before the pandemic, centrifugal forces such as the US-China strategic rivalry and the shift away from multilateralism towards nativism and protectionism have threatened global cooperation. These challenges have now been further exacerbated by the acute disruptions triggered by the pandemic. At the same time, we are also faced with other pressing issues such as an astonishing array of misinformation and disinformation about the disease, the threat of vaccine nationalism, and gaps in institutional accountability.

Amidst these shifting geopolitical and strategic realities, regional cooperation is critical for the maintenance of peace and stability in Southeast Asia. The theme of Vietnam's ASEAN Chairmanship this year, "Cohesive and Responsive", though crafted pre-COVID, remains relevant as a rally call for ASEAN to work together to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, chart a path towards post-pandemic recovery, and strengthen regional resilience against future shocks, in order to maintain its relevance in a rapidly changing world order. ASEAN has put together a coordinated approach to tackle the pandemic through the provision of essential medical supplies and test kits, sharing of information and best practices, and the establishment of regional initiatives such as the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund as well as the forthcoming ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework and Implementation Plan. Beyond the health sector, the region has also worked on keeping supply chains and trade open, restoring travel and connectivity and continued collaboration in other areas such as the ASEAN Smart Cities Network, cybersecurity, transnational crime, and climate change.

The pandemic has also brought into focus a few bright spots and opportunities that should be tapped and developed as governments and businesses rethink their approaches and operations in a post-pandemic world. ASEAN's internal and external collaborative efforts in fighting COVID-19 is testament to the necessity and benefits of multilateralism. Far from turning inward, ASEAN has persisted in pursuing open and rules-based economic partnerships such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which are not only important in contributing to post-pandemic recovery but also for enhancing regional integration beyond the crisis. While ASEAN countries have leveraged digitalisation to sustain economic activity, enable business continuity, and mitigate the spread of the virus, such accelerated adoption of digital technology will open up further growth opportunities and shore up ASEAN's resilience in the long term.

This is the first time that the ASEAN Roundtable is being organised as a virtual event since the Roundtable's inception. Although the current situation has dealt a blow by not permitting us to meet in person, the use of technology has also greatly enriched the event by enabling us to connect with speakers and guests from other parts of the world. I am confident that this year's ASEAN Roundtable can still serve as an effective platform for a meeting of minds to tackle these complex topics, and act as a catalyst to forging a better post-pandemic future for ASEAN. Once again, I convey my sincere thanks to Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and our speakers and moderators. Finally, I wish everyone a fruitful discussion. Thank you.