

**Conference on Covid-19 in Southeast Asia, 2020-22: Restriction, Relief, Recovery  
28 – 29 July 2022**

Welcome remarks by Mr Choi Shing Kwok, ISEAS Director and CEO,  
ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute

Mr Andreas Klein, Director of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung,  
Conference speakers and participants,  
Colleagues and friends,

A very good morning and warm welcome to the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Three big things have struck Southeast Asia these last few years, each of them making a big impact and causing considerable hardship. First, there is the military takeover in Myanmar that has plunged the country into a tragic humanitarian and political crisis, and also dragging the region into a political and legal quagmire. Secondly, there is the war in Ukraine – far away from the region but with very local inflation impact felt by everyone daily. Thirdly, there is the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the region in early 2020, a year before the Myanmar coup and two before the Ukraine war. Because of the latter two, it has receded from the headlines recently, but it remains the most widespread and impactful event for the region as a whole. That is why this conference is so important for ISEAS and also for the future welfare of the region.

As a small aside, this is our first multi-day public conference with in-person participants in more than 2 years. We are glad that the pandemic situation allows for researchers to travel in from various corners of this region to present their papers, and for us to gather in this ISEAS Seminar room just like we used to do pre-pandemic for many years.

Over the last 21/2 years, Covid-19 has plunged the world into concurrent health and socioeconomic crises, with heavy tolls on human life and livelihoods here in the region too. Some countries also weathered political storms. The breadth and depth of the pandemic's impacts and the policy responses to it are unparalleled in history, encompassing *restrictions* on mobility and economic activity, provision of *relief* and stimulus, and complex measures to facilitate recovery.

At the onset of the pandemic, the world gravitated toward lockdowns and “flattening the curve”, which shut down the economy except for essential services, methods not unlike those practised for the so-called Spanish flu a century earlier. Through 2020 amid multiple waves of Covid-19 infections, mobility restrictions and border closures were maintained in much of Southeast Asia. To counteract the economic impact of these measures, countries extended relief and stimulus to mitigate income losses and keep businesses afloat, some more effectively than others. Governments also grappled with the challenges of coordinating security, health and economic policies, as well as in coordinating between agencies and communicating information to the public. Overall, the region performed relatively well in containing Covid-19 infection when compared to other parts of the world, but almost all economies contracted significantly.

As both the virus and the means for fighting it evolved, the storyline of 2021 was markedly different. While the more transmissible Delta variant surged across the region, mobility restrictions were imposed in a more localized and graduated manner, and vaccination became a top priority, albeit hampered by lack of supplies and community hesitancy in

some cases. Economies shifted into recovery mode, while more stimulus packages rolled out. Cross-border travel re-started in late 2021 and continued into 2022, sustaining the momentum of economic recovery, although supply chain disruptions and geopolitical instability continue to pose uncertainties.

As the defining issue of these times, Covid-19 demands research attention to investigate what has happened and what lessons we can learn. I'm sure that all of us will have attended many webinars and read many reports on the subject. From the middle of 2021, a team of senior research fellows in our Regional Economic Studies programme started a project with a view to making an original and meaningful contribution to an already flourishing field. As a regional research institute, our work takes into account the uniqueness of each country while also making comparisons across countries.

Assembling a group of researchers to write papers on Southeast Asia's country experiences would readily provide material for comparing similarities and differences. However, in view of the multiple dimensions of the crisis, specific thematic investigations better serve this project rather than country-by-country case studies that attempt to cover the full scope of pandemic impacts and responses.

As such, themes were formulated and the countries grouped to take into account Southeast Asia's diversity of geography, demography, economic development and political systems. The transition economies of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar have faced particular challenges in terms of economic resources and state capacity, while also receiving international development assistance, especially from China. The more federal structures of Indonesia and Malaysia, and centralized polity of Thailand, have shaped the policy coordination processes between agencies and between national and subnational governments. The experiences of Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand in rolling out economic relief and stimulus packages have shown striking similarities as well as differences. For the populous countries of Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, the questions surrounding mobility restriction and pandemic containment are of particular significance. Vaccine rollout and border reopening, which are key to economic recovery, have been implemented across the region, including some ASEAN initiatives.

We thank the country experts who came on board this project, who presented their works in progress in an ISEAS webinar series from October 2021 to February 2022. We now look forward to the presentations of their full papers today and tomorrow. I am confident that the discussions at each panel and the interventions of discussants, as well as questions from the audience, will enrich our time together.

We are grateful to KAS for their steadfast and generous support. And it is a pleasure to welcome Andreas to ISEAS and Singapore. We hope you will enjoy your new role as KAS' Director of Political Dialogue Asia, and look forward to our continuing partnership in promoting research, discourse, and publication.

Lastly, this conference can only run smoothly thanks to our Administrative and Programme Support team. We deeply appreciate their tireless work behind the scenes.

With this, I conclude my welcome remarks, and wish everyone a robust, collegial and productive conference.