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The Spectre of COVID-19 on ASEAN: Effect and Response

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Introduction

On 14th April 2020, the leaders of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) met virtually in a special summit, chaired by Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc of Viet Nam, to form a joint front against the common nemesis Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) the pandemic wreaking havoc world over. The summit demonstrated possibilities and limitations of modern technology and underscored the importance of interconnectedness as well as vulnerabilities. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emphasised the need to mount a united response from ASEAN countries due to seamless connectivity and interdependence. The seriousness of the situation can be gauged from the fact that COVID-19 cases have rapidly soared to over a total of 22,869 confirmed cases, with 975 deaths, and 6,151 recoveries¹. Though, some epidemiologists suspect that the real number of COVID-19 cases in ASEAN could be higher due to ill-equipped health care system with limited testing facilities in several countries. Despite mounting concerns in the neighbourhood which needed to scale up preparedness, several ASEAN countries could not act to control the pandemics on time. For example, Indonesian health minister Terawan Agus Putranto advised people to relax and noted a good immune system was enough to ward off the threat of COVID-19. While Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen in an incautious manner told a press conference that he would kick anyone out for wearing a protective mask as it creates a climate of fear². China, where the pandemic originated, shares a close geographical proximity and strong trade, commerce and people-to-people relations with ASEAN member states. This was the reason enough for ASEAN countries to take a pragmatic and united stand against the onslaught of COVID-19. Thus, ASEAN's delayed action in the early days in

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taking concrete step to arrest the spread of COVID-19 came at an enormous price resulting in loss of precious lives and putting the economy in disarray due to lockdown and embargoes.³

The Gathering Storm

A multiplicity in assessment of the pandemic implications led each ASEAN countries to chart out their own response in fighting COVID-19 initially. This highlighted the gap in mounting a sustainable campaign against the pandemic. For example, Malaysia, one of the worst affected countries in the region, allowed large religious gatherings which became superspreaders of COVID-19. By the time government authorities realised the gravity of the situation, the damage was done in the whole Southeast Asian region with countries like Indonesia and the Philippines seeing a drastic rise in cases with citizens infected with COVID-19 returning from Malaysian congregation. Similarly, the casual approach by Thai authorities in allowing a Muay Thai competition at Bangkok's indoor Lumpini Stadium on 6 March 2020 with fans from all over Thailand attending the event became a source of dispersion of the pandemic with the fans unwillingly spreading it all over Thailand.⁴ Thailand now has over 2700 confirmed cases with 47 deaths⁵, while there are growing concerns of asymptomatic cases. Thai people are exasperated with government inconsistency in releasing information and lack of transparency. Similarly, the belated realisation by Indonesia to the colossal damage the COVID-19 could wreck is haunting the country. Indonesia's situation is dreadful, which has confirmed cases of 5923 and 520 reported deaths and has the highest fatality count in the ASEAN region.⁶ In the Philippines, the situation is equally alarming with 5,878 confirmed cases and 387 reported deaths.⁷ Despite early preventive measures, there is a steady increase in cases in the Philippines due to a lack of enforcement.

The Ray of Hope

Despite some hiccups, the 14 April 2020 special virtual summit displayed understanding of the gravity of the situation among ASEAN leaders and their willingness to work together. Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc said "It is in these grim hours that the solidarity of the ASEAN community shines like a beacon in the dark."⁸ This unity of show and the determination to fight the pandemic unitedly sent a strong message not only in ASEAN region but also to the world at large. The summit declaration reiterated a united front through a comprehensive policy and a mechanism for joint action.⁹ Singapore has been one of the few countries to detect COVID-19 early and through its robust health system, proactive tracing and containment measures and a disciplined citizenry. However, the number of positive cases in Singapore has spiked (5,992 confirmed cases and 9 reported deaths) in the last few days despite proactive measures taken by the government, perhaps due to the increase of infections among the foreign workers staying in crowded dormitories with low hygiene standards. Nevertheless, the death rate is low, and people are recovering. Singapore is not only enforcing strict measures of quarantine and social distancing but also with a touch of empathy. All hospitalisation costs including testing and treatment is borne by the government. All self-employed people are provided with a sustenance allowance of S\$ 75

daily. Government regularly in a transparent manner shares public health communication.¹⁰ The Viet Nam offensive against COVID-19 is inspiring and offers a ray of hope in the fight against the pandemic. Viet Nam despite sharing a border with China has only 268 reported cases, of which 171 persons have recovered and have been discharged from hospitals. As of now, there has been no reported case of death due to COVID-19.¹¹ Viet Nam took early measures like suspending all flights from China from 1 February 2020. Schools were kept closed after Lunar New Year break and imposed a 21-day quarantine from the third week of February 2020 in Vinh Phuc province with migrant workers returning from Wuhan seems to have paid rich dividend in arresting the spread of the Coronavirus.¹² Viet Nam's health ministry has been transparent about COVID-19 and sends regular text messages to update and health tips in fighting COVID-19.¹³ Other ASEAN countries show varied performance. For example, Myanmar with 74 confirmed cases and 4 reported deaths, Cambodia with 122 confirmed cases and no death, Lao PDR with 19 confirmed cases and no death, Brunei with 136 confirmed cases and one reported death.¹⁴ These four countries are in the early phase of COVID-19 with proactive measures and strong enforcement mechanism that can stop the pandemic. The declaration of the COVID-19 Summit¹⁵ emphasised to strengthen public health cooperation measures to contain the pandemic and protect the people, to enhance practical cooperation among ASEAN defence establishments to organise information and best practice sharing activities, and with our external partners, bilaterally or multilaterally, including the holding of a tabletop exercise on public health emergencies response by the ASEAN Center of Military Medicine (ACMM); and the Network of ASEAN Chemical, Biological and Radiological Defence Experts in promoting scientific cooperation and enhancing professional linkages,

The special ASEAN summit on Coronavirus was followed by the special ASEAN Plus Three (APT) summit on 14 April 2020.¹⁶ The Leaders not only acknowledged the commitment expressed by the G20 Leaders in their Extraordinary Summit on 26 March 2020 to present a united front against the common threat of COVID-19, but reaffirmed their shared commitment to enhance cooperation and mutual support among the APT countries to control and contain the spread of the pandemic, and to strengthen joint efforts toward post- pandemic recovery. In fact, China, Japan and Korea have already extended support by sending essential supplies including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), test kits and medical teams. Japan also promised to help ASEAN countries in establishing an ASEAN centre for infectious diseases. The APT summit also looked at financing sources to steer through the pandemic and an ASEAN Response Fund (ARF) has been constituted.

India under its Act East Policy (AEP) has close ties with ASEAN countries and is working closely with them. India and ASEAN have existing mechanisms of collaboration in the areas of health and pandemic preparedness and response, which include capacity building to strengthen areas on surveillance, laboratory networking, human resource capacities and information networking; working together to develop affordable quality medicines and traditional medicines that is accessible to the people, and sharing of information and exchange of experts in the field of public health, medicine, health education and promotion. India needs to strengthen its collaborations in these fields. In fact, India is already working

with ASEAN partners with continued supply of life saving drugs and food items, extending support in the evacuation of citizens among others.

Road Ahead

A united stand is not only required but also the need of the hour. First and foremost is the need to isolate and quarantine the infected persons with not only strict monitoring and enforcement but also by making citizens equal stakeholder in this battle against COVID-19 by educating them through all mediums of communication. Lockdown and quarantine measures are essential to arrest the spread of the pandemic, but it has resulted in severe economic disruptions. The worst affected are the daily wage labourers, workers in restaurants and SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) are the hardest hit. They are faced with the risk of venturing out for work and risk infection or starve. A pro-people social safety net must be implemented providing food and severance allowance. In large cities migrant labourers are the underbelly of the economy and are the most vulnerable they should not be allowed to go to hinterland as it risks spreading the pandemic and be safely quarantined in cities. There must be smooth flow of essential commodities, such as foods, critical agricultural products, lifesaving drugs, medical equipment, etc. for it to happen a robust supply chain is needed with least bureaucratic hurdle in their movement. Key and basic sectors of the economy such as power plants, information and communication services, pharmaceutical units, banking and financial services, industries manufacturing essential goods need to function. It must be ensured their optimum utilization and safety measures are being followed with minimum intrusion. The economic scenario is grim as manufacturing, aviation, tourism, and hospitality are the hardest hit in the region. It also exposed ASEAN heavy reliance on China. It is pertinent that ASEAN rethink its strategy of keeping all eggs in one basket. World over there is an undercurrent against China for handling the pandemic. Australian and European countries have blocked moves by Chinese companies to buy stressed assets. While the US-China relation is all time low post COVID-19 fallout. Japanese companies are nudged by the Japanese government with a stimulus package to move out of China. ASEAN countries not only need to increase the intra-regional trade among themselves but also deepen their trade engagement with Japan and India. Perhaps, a virtual summit between India and ASEAN members will give momentum to already going collaborations. ASEAN countries should jointly formulate a stimulus package for the region to revitalise the economy with special emphasis on the SMEs, informal sector and gig economy workers.

Conclusion

Pandemic like COVID-19 which is raging around the world with devastating effects causing massive economic disruptions and extracting a heavy toll on human lives. It showed interconnectedness and vulnerabilities how an event in one part of the world has impact on the other end, and ASEAN region is no different. The pandemic has to be stopped through active partnership between ASEAN member states, their partner countries, international organizations, civil societies and local bodies. Effective storage and distribution of food,

medicine and PPE on war footing in the region is needed. A joint cadre of disaster management and medical specialists to help fight the pandemic in the region could be developed. The poor are the worst affected and are in dire need for sustenance and succour. A robust social safety net is the need of the hour, which takes care of their basic needs and hope for the future. The ASEAN countries need to set aside their differences and deepen cooperation and re-evaluate their economic and strategic policies in the light of changing scenarios of world politics. The road to recovery and stability would be long and torturous. It is the time to act with empathy, cooperation and pragmatism in its fight against COVID-19.

Endnotes

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About AIC

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. The AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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