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ASEAN-India Response to COVID-19: A Silver Lining Amidst the Health Crisis

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1. Introduction

The world is experiencing an unprecedented health crisis due to the Coronavirus pandemic. ASEAN and India have been badly affected in terms of both human health and economic conditions. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), about 8.7 million people have been infected and 4,61,715 died due to the Covid-19 virus as on 21 June 2020. ASEAN with 1,28,890 total cases (more than 50,000 active cases) and 3,793 deaths; and India with 4,10,461 total cases (more than 1,30,000 active cases) and 13,254 deaths rank among the top ten affected countries/region in the world (see Table 1). ASEAN and India at various capacities have undertaken different measures and show preparedness to tackle the present challenges. Testing, tracking and treating (3Ts) are the common objective of ASEAN countries and India to overcome the health crisis.

Besides lockdown, ASEAN countries have imposed strict travel restrictions and a ban on all mass gatherings. Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and VietNam have few confirmed Covid-19 cases. Due to less number of cases in Lao PDR, a nationwide lockdown is gradually lifted than many other ASEAN countries and most businesses have already resumed their activities, except mass gathering, which is still restricted. VietNam has taken early steps to protect the country from pandemic in ASEAN region and has been successful in controlling the spread of the virus by imposing several strict measures. Till date, none died from Covid-19 in Viet Nam,

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Cambodia and Lao PDR. On the other hand, some countries have been struggling to cope up with the Coronavirus outbreak due to lack of resources. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines have been experiencing different stages of pandemic and taken a series of measures to stop the spread of the virus and protect the economies from the ongoing crisis. India, on the other hand, has initiated several measures to control the spread including extended lockdown for more than three months, imposed travel restrictions (both domestic and international), closed public places like gyms, theatres, shopping malls, restaurants, and education institutions, etc. and has banned mass gatherings; and, at the same time, has facilitated the remote work and businesses with help of the digital technology.

Table 1: COVID-19 Scenario in India and ASEAN

Country	Cumulative Cases	Cumulative Deaths
India	4,10,461	13,254
ASEAN	1,28,890	3,793
Brunei Darussalam	141	3
Cambodia	129	0
Indonesia	45,029	2,429
Lao PDR	19	0
Malaysia	8,556	121
Myanmar	286	6
Philippines	29,400	1,150
Singapore	41,833	26
Thailand	3,148	58
Vietnam	349	0

Note: As of 21 June 2020

Source: World Health Organisation (WHO)

The Covid-19 pandemic has far-reaching impacts and implications for the economic crisis across the world. The impact of the economic crisis is deep-rooted to different sectors of the economy and has affected both poor and rich. The vulnerable sectors such as health, transport, tourism, hospitality industry, SMEs, etc. have faced the hardest hit by this crisis. Every country has been trying to deal with the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 and revive the economy by giving various stimulus packages. Both ASEAN countries and India have announced several stimulus packages. For instance, India, Indonesia and Thailand have allotted close to 10 per cent of GDP and Singapore allotted about 20 per cent of GDP as an economic stimulus package. Both ASEAN and India have also focused on MSMEs. In particular, ASEAN countries have focused primarily on four sectors, namely, travel, tourism, MSME and agriculture. India has announced a comprehensive package, which extensively covers both formal and informal sectors, supports the migrant labours through various welfare schemes; provided subsidies, tax concession and granted bank loans with no collateral to revive the MSMEs. Table 2 illustrates policy measures in response to Covid-19 by ASEAN and India.

Table 2: Policy Measures in Response to Covid-19 in ASEAN and India

Country	Stimulus Package (US\$ billion)	Share in GDP (%)	Welfare Benefits	Support to the Health care Sector	Ease of Tax	Support to MSMEs	Assistance to Priority Sector	Regulatory Measures in Banking
India	262.28	10	√	√	√	√	√	√
Brunei Darussalam			√	√	√	√		
Cambodia	0.060	0.2	√	√	√	√		√
Indonesia	79.21	7.0	√	√	√	√	√	√
Lao PDR			√			√		
Malaysia	17.02	4.0	√	√	√	√	√	
Myanmar			√	√	√	√		√
Philippines	11.89	3.1	√	√	√	√	√	√
Singapore	66.47	19.7	√	√	√	√		√
Thailand	48.36	9.6	√	√	√	√	√	√
Viet Nam	11.43	3.5		√	√	√	√	√

Note: Priority sectors include agriculture, tourism, transportation sector. Empty cell presents data/information not available

Source: Authors' own based on IMF Policy Tracker of Covid-19 and media

2. ASEAN Plus Countries Engagement in Response to Covid-19

ASEAN has engaged with several meetings with its dialogue partners and issued a joint statement in response to Covid-19 through video conferencing and telephonic conversations. The ASEAN and ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers issued a joint statement on 7 April 2020 pledging coordinated efforts to combat the virus outbreak within the ASEAN as also work with the dialogue and development partners, respectively. On 14 April 2020, ASEAN, China, Japan, and Korea held the Special ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit on Coronavirus Disease through video conference and issued a joint statement, declaring their commitment to sharing technical, material, and financial support that are critical in sustaining strained national health systems. It has even created an 'APT reserve' of essential medical supplies. Similarly, the ASEAN Plus Three Field Epidemiology Training Network (ASEAN +3 FETN) has conducted three informal video-conferences (11 May, 26 May and 1 June 2020) to exchange experiences on the latest developments of national responses to COVID-19 outbreaks and how field epidemiologists played important roles in implementing these responses.¹

At the bilateral level, ASEAN has initiated /proposed projects with China, India, Japan, Russia, EU and the United States on technical knowledge-sharing and multisectoral coordination for COVID-19 through an exclusive dialogue mechanism (see Box 1). China has committed to providing international aid over two years to support nations affected by the pandemic of about US\$ 2 billion, coordination with the UN to establish a global humanitarian crisis response hub in China and provision of any vaccine as a global public good.² South Korea has initiated a project to enhance the diagnostic capacity by providing the test kits and training of COVID-19 to the ASEAN countries. It may include personal protective equipment, chemical reagent, diagnostic test

kits and/or PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) along with on-site training.³ The United States has offered assistance to ASEAN member states to combat the spread of Covid-19, including the provision of over US\$ 35.3 million and also assured its commitment to providing international public health assistance and offered continued support in need of additional assistance. ASEAN and Japan have initiated the ASEAN-Japan Economic Resilience Action Plan by mobilizing the collective knowledge with the view to contribute to both economies overall efforts to strengthen economic resilience to the Covid-19 pandemic. The European Union (EU) has offered €350 million (US\$ 378 million) to assist ASEAN countries in the battle against COVID-19. The funds will be allocated for, among others, addressing the health crisis, strengthening healthcare systems and alleviating economic and social impacts from the pandemic.⁴ ASEAN is open to both bilateral and multilateral cooperation in response to Covid-19 with all its dialogue partners. India has also extended major support and agreed on joint initiatives to fight against the pandemic and step up cooperation to revive the economy from the ongoing crisis.

Box 1: ASEAN Engagements with ASEAN Plus in Response to Covid-19

- ASEAN Plus Three Senior Officials Meeting for Health Development (APT SOMHD) Mechanism Responding to COVID-19, 4 February 2020
- ASEAN and the European Union (EU) convened a ministerial-level video conference to discuss the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), 20 March 2020
- ASEAN-China enhance cooperation on COVID-19 pandemic response, 31 March 2020
- ASEAN Health Ministers and ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers in Enhancing Cooperation on COVID-19, 7 April 2020
- Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), 14 April 2020
- ASEAN – Japan Economic Ministers’ on Initiatives on Economic Resilience in Response to the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak, 22 April 2020
- Special ASEAN-United States Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), 23 April 2020
- The ASEAN Plus Three Field Epidemiology Training Network (ASEAN +3 FETN), 11 May; 26 May and 1 June 2020
- ASEAN-China Economic Ministers’ Joint Statement on Combating the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and Enhancing ACFTA Cooperation, 29 May 2020
- ASEAN Plus Three Economic Ministers’ Joint Statement on Mitigating the Economic Impact of The COVID-19 Pandemic, 4 June 2020
- The 20th ASEAN-India Joint Cooperation Committee Meeting, 12 June 2020
- ASEAN-Russia Foreign Ministers Meeting on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), 17 June 2020

Source: Authors’ compilation based on ASEAN Secretariat for the period between February and June 2020.
<https://asean.org/2020/>

3. India's Engagement in ASEAN in Response to Covid-19

India has reaffirmed the country's commitment to the neighbouring countries under the 'Neighbouring First' Policy, to enhance cooperation and mutual support to control and contain the spread of the virus. India outreaches the SAARC countries and Island nations (Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros and Seychelles) via video conferencing and has provided medical assistance, essential medicines and food items. India has also extended its assistance eastwards to reinforce the Act East Policy (AEP). Indian Prime Minister had video conferencing with several leaders of the ASEAN member states on a potential regional and bilateral response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Table 3).

Table 3: India's Engagement in ASEAN in Response to Covid-19

	Brunei	Cambodia	Indonesia	Lao PDR	Malaysia	Myanmar	The Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Viet Nam
Head to Head - Telephonic / Video Conferencing		√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Repatriation of stranded (Vande Bharat Mission)		√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√
Sharing information and exchange of experts			√			√	√	√	√	√
Distribution of Medical and Pharmaceutical supplies		√	√		√	√	√		√	√
India received support from ASEAN								√		

Note: As on 21 June 2020. Empty cell presents data/information not available.

Source: Authors' own based on several secondary sources

India has launched 'Vande Bharat Mission' in three extended phases of major exercise to repatriate Indian citizens across the world. Through this mission, India has repatriated thousands of Indian citizens from ASEAN countries and also extended help to ASEAN countries to bring back their citizens from India (Table 4).

India is working with ASEAN partners in supplying pharmaceutical products, exchange of experts and sharing of information in the field of public health. For instance, India has supplied Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) tablets to Malaysia. India has supplied masks, sanitizers, and medicines and medical equipment to the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia and Thailand. India has also received assistance from Singapore such as testing kits and other essential equipment. Both ASEAN and India can further cooperate under the existing mechanisms in the

area of health and pandemic preparedness and response (as per the Plan of Action (2016-2020)), including capacity building, laboratory networking, joint work to engage in research and development (R&D) to develop pharmaceutical products, traditional medicines, epidemiology, etc., encourage pharmaceutical trade and manufacturing capabilities for drugs and diagnostics.⁵ The ASEAN-India POA (2016-2020) outlines:

“3.3.1 Work together to enhance ASEAN's preparedness and capacity in responding to communicable and emerging infectious diseases including pandemics and other potential public health and biological threats. Preparedness planning, prevention efforts and capacity building would include, among others, the strengthening of areas on surveillance, laboratory networking, human resource capacities and information networking;

3.3.2. Work towards developing affordable quality medicines and traditional medicines that is accessible to the people, and explore the development of a framework for cooperation in these areas as appropriate;

3.3.3. Promote sharing of information and exchange of experts in the field of public health, medicine, health education and promotion;”⁶

Table 4: Vande Bharat Mission between India and ASEAN Countries

Phase	ASEAN	Number of Flights	Indian Cities Covered
1	Singapore	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amritsar • Ahmedabad • Bengaluru • Bhubaneshwar • Chennai • Coimbatore • Delhi • Hyderabad • Kochi • Jaipur • Mumbai • Madurai • Lucknow • Trichy • Vijayawada • Vishakhapatnam
	Malaysia	5	
	The Philippines	3	
2	Indonesia	4	
	Malaysia	5	
	Myanmar	1	
	Singapore	4	
	The Philippines	5	
	Thailand	1	
2 Additional and 2 ++	Malaysia	11	
	Singapore	18	
	Thailand	1	
	Viet Nam	1	
3	Cambodia	1	
	The Philippines	3	
	Singapore	2	
	Thailand	2	
	Viet Nam	1	

Note: Phase 2 is executed as Phase 2, Phase 2 Additional, and Phase 2 ++, respectively
Source: Authors' own based on Ministry of External Affairs of India (MEA), Government of India

ASEAN and India may initiate a Joint Statement or a Declaration on India-ASEAN COVID-19 Response to reaffirm the commitments to enhance their strategic cooperation and mutual support to stop the spread of COVID-19 and strengthen joint efforts toward post-pandemic recovery.⁷ Recently, ASEAN and India at the 20th ASEAN-India Joint Cooperation Committee (AIJCC) Meeting, held via video-conferencing on 11 June 2020, reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthen and deepen their cooperation.⁸ At this meeting, both parties also shared their commitment to complete the development of the new Plan of Action for 2021-2025 to further strengthen their strategic partnership over the next five years. Both ASEAN and India have agreed to enhance the cooperation in the areas of health emergency and medicine, transnational crime, trade and investment, environment, education, sustainable development, energy, smart cities, connectivity, people-to-people contacts as well as narrowing the development gap in ASEAN.

4. ASEAN-India Coping with New Normal

The current scenario has also created new opportunities in the areas of Information Technology and IT-enabled Services (ITeS). The significance of digital connectivity is realized in education, medical, legal and other consultancy-based services. Both bilateral and multilateral level diplomatic engagements have been happening via video-conferencing. ASEAN and India can work together to strengthen digital connectivity, where e-learning, e-commerce, on-line meetings and official interaction in the virtual platform, etc. are going to be the new normal. ASEAN countries can also explore utilizing the US\$ 1 billion special fund, provided by India to support infrastructure and digital connectivity, thereby reaffirming the outcomes of the 20th ASEAN-India JCCM. Besides, India may extend technological and financial assistance to the CLMV countries in the areas of tele-education and tele-medicine. Both ASEAN and India are rich in ancient knowledge of traditional medicines. Digital archiving and joint research and development (R&D) initiatives would help reviving the traditional medicine linkage and exchange.

The pandemic has also created an opportunity to promote trade and investment through realigning the supply chain by attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), which may likely to move out from China. Multinational corporations have also realised to look for sustainable supply chains by diversifying the plants and investments across countries, instead of relying on one single country. Therefore, ASEAN and India can leverage the emerging scenario and support each other to build new and stronger supply chains. Some of the ASEAN countries are already well integrated with the global value chains, which will help regaining the faith of the global investors. New supply chains may offer new business opportunities to MSMEs, which are presently suffering from the lack of orders.

India may consider joining the Chiang Mai Initiative (multilateral currency swap arrangement) at this time when currency swapping is an important step to stabilize the macroeconomic situation,

thereby facilitating trade and investment. As an alternative, bilateral swapping may be taken up instead of waiting for a multilateral mechanism to respond.

The new normal in the post-pandemic world has been posing anti-globalisation and anti-multilateralism challenges that may distort the global supply chains or derail the emergence of new supply chains. Therefore, ASEAN and India should work together to not only to strengthen and protect the multilateralism and reform the multilateral system but also to promote a more inclusive, responsive and participatory international governance architecture.

The nature of trade flows in post-Covid-19 may likely be technology- and health- oriented. Both ASEAN and India may focus on sectors like healthcare, education, green energy, traditional medicine for collaboration. ASEAN is one of the largest recipients of Indian tourists. ASEAN and India may adopt a road map to revive the tourism sector, which is deeply hurt due to the Covid-19. Besides, there are huge business opportunities for SMEs and Start-ups in the post-Covid-19, particularly, in digital connectivity, e-commerce, cross-border delivery services, logistics business, etc. Also, ASEAN and India can explore the value chain linkages in the pharmaceutical sector.

5. Way Forward

ASEAN and India have been effectively fighting against the Covid-19 pandemic. Both are facing similar challenges and risks. In such a situation, learning from the best practices would help the countries to effectively control the spread of COVID-19 virus and rebound the economy subsequently. Singapore, Taiwan and Korea have been following a model based on the 3Ts (test, trace and treat), which offer good lessons to ASEAN and India. Health and economic crisis have already generated several non-traditional security (NTSs) issues. Greater cooperation in the area of NTSs in times of Covid-19 may generate larger dividends while minimising the risks. Another rewarding area of cooperation between ASEAN and India would be the digital economy such as e-commerce, Fintech, etc.

ASEAN and India shall encourage the exchange of knowledge of traditional medicines, health professionals, testing kits, PPEs, medicines, etc. For example, the ASEAN-India Network of Traditional Medicines may be activated to take forward the cooperation in traditional medicine. Health ministers and officials of ASEAN and India may interact with each other regularly in order to provide collective assistance to fight against Covid-19 and the needed political direction. India may also explore offering Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) to the ASEAN countries related to public healthcare.

Under the ASEAN-India POA (2016-2020) sourcing the ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund, ASEAN and India may undertake joint projects in science, technology and innovation, including through joint research activity, and development on cross-sectoral areas such as health, communicable and emerging infectious diseases, and mitigation measures.

Good health is the priority for all. The Section 26 of the Delhi Declaration 2018 provides the regional cooperation direction of health cooperation, which outlines: “Encourage health cooperation in areas relevant to the ASEAN Post-2015 Health Development Agenda, particularly in the area of strengthening health system and access to care, as well as safe and good quality medical products and affordable quality medicines, including traditional and complementary medicines.”⁹ Therefore, ASEAN and India shall work together for a sustainable health and community building. Perhaps, building a green strategic partnership between India and ASEAN may pave the way to better meet the SDGs.

Finally, disaster management is another area which requires our utmost attention. ASEAN and India shall conduct regular consultations between the ASEAN Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) and India’s National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) to facilitate synergy among multilateral cooperation mechanisms on disaster management.

[This commentary draws upon the discussion at the Webinar on “ASEAN-India: Coping with COVID-19 Challenges and Way Forward”, organized by the ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) at RIS, held on 12 May 2020.]

End Notes

1. ASEAN+3 FETN is one of the subsidiary bodies of the ASEAN Health Cluster 2 on Responding to All Hazards and Emerging Threats. Contact points of the network consists of Field Epidemiology Training Programmes (FETP) of the ten ASEAN Member States together with China, Japan and Republic of Korea (i.e. Plus Three Countries)
2. See, Anadolu Agency (2020),
3. See, ASCC (2020)
4. Refer, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/28/eu-donates-350-million-to-help-asean-countries-battle-covid-19.html>
5. Refer also, ASEAN Secretariat (2015)
6. Refer, ASEAN-India POA (2016-2020), available at https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/August/POA_India/ASEAN-India%20POA%20-%20FINAL.pdf
7. Refer, Vijay Shakuja (2020)
8. Refer ASEAN Secretariat (2020)
9. Refer, Delhi Declaration 2018, available at https://asean.org/storage/2018/01/Delhi-Declaration_Adopted-25-Jan-2018.pdf

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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. 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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