

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GETS GOING: COVID 19 AND ASEAN'S EFFORT

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is one phrase that nearly every leader and foreign minister of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) has used to describe the management of the region's security issues: the 'ASEAN Way'. At the meetings of ASEAN, when a question was posed to the ASEAN foreign ministers, for instance, how ASEAN intended to deal with the political turmoil and the military coup d'état in Myanmar now - the answer was: "We deal with all our members the ASEAN Way. It will be no different with Myanmar". The ASEAN Way theme has been echoed among ASEAN leaders for the past few decades. The states in the Southeast Asia region perceive there are unique or "different predominant strategic preferences" for managing security. However, despite such conclusions, some commentators argue otherwise. According to these analysts, the notion of the ASEAN Way was simply exaggerated and fallacious. These analysts argue that one of the most critical foundations that underpin ASEAN's credibility as a regional organisation is its capacity to play a central role in addressing regional affairs and in shaping the regional order. According to these skeptics, ASEAN continues to pay lip service to its myriad principles, norms, and aspirations, especially about issues like pandemic Covid 19.

So, to what extent ASEAN as a regional organisation has stood to the common English proverb that says, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going". From the still raging COVID-19 pandemic to the current scramble for the virus vaccines, from the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea to the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar one shock after another has hit the region. How resilient is ASEAN as a regional institution to deal with such issues? The objective of this paper is to analyse how ASEAN as a regional organization has addressed the Covid19 pandemic individually and collectively. The paper first, explores the nature of the ASEAN Way, and second, apply the conceptual discussion to the case of the Covid-19 pandemic to show the efforts made by ASEAN.

2. THE ASEAN WAY

The term the ASEAN Way defies any precise definition. Numerous terminologies have been used to describe how ASEAN manages its security. However, defined loosely, the ASEAN Way is a product of years of socializing between the member states of ASEAN. It is based on cooperation and consensus where informality, courtesy, and politeness are the order of the day (Alan Dupont, 1996). Foreign policy is not conducted in full public view thereby risking the possible public loss of face. If a dispute cannot be resolved, it is left for another day, while the ASEAN members agree to disagree in the interim. These norms have been codified in various documents. Thailand's deputy foreign affairs minister, Surin Pitsuwan, for example,

argued that the ASEAN Way is enshrined in the Bangkok Declaration of 1967, the ZOPFAN Declaration of 1971, the ASEAN Concord, and the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation of 1976 (Hsien-Li, 2020).

Since ASEAN's inception in 1967, the ASEAN Way norms and principles have been used by its members as guiding behaviour and modes of interaction. They have been observed at all levels, ranging from the meetings of the heads of government down to ministerial and official meetings. The ASEAN Way derived not only from the experience of dealing with challenges that the Association faced back in 1967, but the ASEAN Way has its own distinctive security culture and operational doctrine in managing security. The ASEAN Way is a framework that has evolved over a period from the experience of dealing with challenges that the organization has faced. By adhering to this approach ASEAN member states have already been successful in preventing serious inter-state conflict not only within the grouping but also with neighbouring states. The ASEAN Way involves a high degree of discretion, informality, pragmatism, consensus building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles. For ASEAN state members the point of dialogue is to build good diplomatic relationships. By enhancing good diplomatic relationships formal agreements are not necessary. Although there are differences of emphasis in adopting the principles of the ASEAN Way, the common elements and beliefs of the ASEAN Way can be encapsulated by five key elements (Kusuma, 1995).

First, the ASEAN Way consists of a framework of *consultation* and *consensus* on subjects of mutual interest as means of fostering better understanding, good neighbourliness, and cooperation. The term consultation (*musyawarah*) means making decisions through the process of discussion, while the term consensus (*muafakat*) is a way by which leaders make important decisions. The decision-making style in dealing with intramural differences has also become a hallmark of the ASEAN Way and distinguishes ASEAN from other regional organizations. The second important aspect of the ASEAN Way is *conflict management* (or avoidance) as against conflict resolution in intra-ASEAN security relations. Unlike other regional organizations that seek to settle disputes to facilitate cooperation, ASEAN countries have, in contrast, found common areas of cooperation while shelving disputes. The third feature of the ASEAN Way is the requirement to abide by the norm of *non-interference* in each other's domestic affairs. ASEAN has grown into one of the most successful regional groupings because of this policy of non-interference. ASEAN members have come to accept rules of conduct (as enshrined in the TAC) such that they agree to refrain from interfering in each other's internal affairs and to settle their disagreement peacefully and without outside interference. However, the change in the security environment and the intense non-traditional security issues have posed a threat, dilemma, and criticism among the observers. The fourth distinctive characteristic of the ASEAN Way is its preference for *informal bilateral arrangements* and the avoidance of excessive institutionalization. A great deal of intra-ASEAN co-operation is based on inter-personal contacts, rather than on the formal institutions. The virtues of informality over-structured, formalistic, and legalistic procedures have been perceived by decision-makers in Southeast Asia as an important feature of intra-regional relations. Adopting this informal approach raises the level of comfort among the participants and creates a flexible decision-making environment. The fifth and last element of the ASEAN Way is the *avoidance of formal multilateral security arrangements*. The ASEAN states generally chose to pursue either national self-reliance or informal multilateral security arrangements (Kusuma S. 1995). In ASEAN, where institutionalized consultation has become more acceptable, some concerns formalised multilateral security arrangements could prove to be counter-productive, encouraging antagonism rather than promoting harmony. Hence,

regional institution building in ASEAN has emerged from unique historical circumstances and will likely evolve in its way.

Overall, for almost half a decade, ASEAN has been adhering to these five elements of the ASEAN Way in managing its security. However, in the last two years, the ASEAN Way of a gradualist, consensus, consultation, informal, and non-interference approach was openly questioned as to whether it is genuinely practiced especially when addressing humanitarian issues in Myanmar and the Covid 19 pandemic.

3. ASEAN'S EFFORTS IN DEALING WITH COVID-19

COVID-19 has affected all nations in Southeast Asia. Apart from the human cost, the Covid-19 has caused enormous cascading economic losses to the ASEAN member countries. Some ASEAN countries have shown impressive results in managing and controlling the pandemic, especially Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and Cambodia. However, Indonesia, the Philippines, and, more recently, Myanmar and Thailand, continue to struggle with the pandemic which is escalating within their national border. ASEAN members. Nevertheless, ASEAN countries as individuals and as a group had taken all the actions to come together and address the Covid-19 (Hsien-Li, 2020).

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ASEAN had responded to the Covid-19 outbreak by listing several mechanisms using various platforms, forums and avenues (<https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-asean-member-states-02f828a2/>). Among those are through ASEAN Plus Three Senior Officials Meeting, ASEAN Emergency Operation Centre Network (ASEAN EOC Network), ASEAN Plus Three Field Epidemiology Training Network, ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Centre, ASEAN Risk Assessment & Risk Communication Centre, Public health laboratories network under the purview ASEAN Health Cluster2 on Responding to all Hazards and Emerging Threats and finally, the Regional Public Health Laboratories Network (RPHL) led by Thailand through the Global Health Security Agenda platform. under the purview. The responsibilities of this mechanism vary. Such as ASEAN EOC Network responsibilities was to facilitate timely and accurate exchanges of information and technical inputs, including the circulation of daily situational updates and information on prevention, detection, and response measures, complemented by real-time information sharing through mobile instant meetings. Furthermore, ASEAN Health Sector Cooperation platforms support the conduct of special video conferences to further exchange situation updates and critical information and discuss in-depth specific issues within the ASEAN Health Sector with non-health ASEAN Sectors, and with Dialogue and Development Partners. ASEAN also provided an avenue to produce and circulate reports of Risk Assessment for International Dissemination of the Covid-19 ASEAN region. ASEAN also conducted several virtual meetings with external powers such as the United States, China, ASEAN+3, and European

Union. The general statement in the meeting called for a post-pandemic plan to i) restore ASEAN's connectivity, tourism, normal business, and social activities, to prevent potential economic downturns; ii) ensure ASEAN critical infrastructure for trade and trading routes via air, land, and seaports remain open; and iii) refrain from imposing unnecessary restrictions on the flow of medical, food and essential supplies. The emphasis on sharing information and best practices at every ASEAN Covid-19 meeting was to produce valuable exchanges and enable national agencies to act against virus importation and disinformation.

Besides making regional efforts, almost all individual ASEAN countries executed their measures to reduce the Covid-19 cases. Singapore is one country that took very widespread measures such as extensive testing, contact tracing, and strict quarantine. Besides the international border closure and nationwide lockdown (7th April 2020 – 1st June 2020), Singapore intensifies testing on migrant workers in 43 dormitories with almost 200,000 migrant employees. Singapore government also provided financial support such as Temporary Relief Fund i.e. one-off interim assistance for Singaporeans and PR that lost their job, Covid-19 Support Grant (scheme for unemployed due to retrenchment or contract termination), and The Courage Fund (mainly for lower-income households which family members affected by Covid-19 or under Home Quarantine (<https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/12/covid-19-a-regional-response-is-key-for-asean/>)).

In general, all ASEAN countries imposed several measures such as temporary restrictions for domestic and international flights, imposed social isolation to encourage people to stay at home and minimize domestic travel, provided an affordable testing kit for their citizens. Besides that, some ASEAN member states also conducted tax reduction measures, implement cash transfers to the poor and near-poor households, special aids for healthcare workers and individuals, and introduced economic stimulus for micro, small and medium enterprises.

4. CONCLUSION

ASEAN as an organization has shown some recommendable efforts if dealing with Covid 19. Covid-19 is not the first health security issue that ASEAN is facing. ASEAN's experiences with previous pandemics such as SARS, avian flu, and swine influenzas have led ASEAN member states to take Covid-19 as a prominent health security issue. There have been some good outcomes in general amongst ASEAN member states such as acceleration of the digital economy in the region, an increase of digital healthcare, public awareness on the pandemic, and finally the emergence of health and science diplomacy. Hence, the decisiveness, balancing between public health and the economy, and preparedness approach of ASEAN is to be applauded for. While these efforts only partly mitigate the grave impact of COVID-19, they show that ASEAN members are stepping up to cooperate substantively during a crisis. The way ASEAN approached as a whole government, whole society, along with international and regional cooperation has been successful.

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