

Asean needs to come together over Covid-19 pandemic

Regional solidarity key to effective outbreak response

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An official wearing a face mask stands next to member flags during the special Association of Southeast Asian Nations Summit on the coronavirus pandemic in Hanoi on April 14, 2020. (AFP photo)

The outbreak of novel coronavirus poses a significant threat to Southeast Asia and its regional Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) bloc. This is primarily due to the region's geographical proximity to China and the high trade flow between them.

Asean has not faced anything like Covid-19 in the recent past. As of May 20, the total number of cases reported by Asean surpassed 72,590. Consequently, the massive scale of the outbreak has brought about the need for the regional bloc to act firmly as the international system has left every country to fend for itself. The optimal way for Asean to deal with the pandemic is to stand united and come together as a region.

It is important to study the impact of Covid-19 in Asean for two important reasons.

First, Asean has a huge impact on the global economy and trade. Given the importance of China and the United States to Asean, and with both countries being affected badly and the region's closeness to South Asia, Asean should not be ignored.

Another reason is that South Asia's regional South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation bloc has often struggled when it comes to the concept of unity and regional integration because of the various differences of approach among its member states. Asean, on the other hand, has managed to flourish because of the principles that drive the region's integration.

Almost all the Asean countries are now dealing with the third stage of the virus, which is the community transmission stage. One of the worst-hit countries among the member states is Singapore, with 29,364 cases of coronavirus with 22 deaths, followed by Indonesia with 19,189 cases as of May 20.

All other Asean member states have reported comparatively fewer cases when compared to western countries. However, what is troubling for Asean is that these numbers likely stem from either under-testing or under-reporting or both, and are likely to increase in the weeks ahead. Based on existing facts and figures, it is not implausible to estimate that several more thousand people across Asean will be affected, possibly causing a further significant impact on the region's economy.

Southeast Asian economies in the late 1990s could attain loans from the International Monetary Fund and strive for economic recovery. However, in the present scenario, the international market may not be ready to support Asean's growth and economy sufficiently. So, it is imperative for Asean economies to come together.

All member states must conduct more extensive testing and should come clean about the number of cases in their respective countries. What needs to be done is to develop the healthcare systems in lesser-developed Asean countries like Cambodia, Laos, and

Myanmar, as they are not efficient enough and sufficiently equipped to fight the disease on their own, especially if the virus becomes widespread.

Although Southeast Asian foreign ministers have discussed the setting up of a regional fund to respond to the pandemic, a fund alone is not nearly enough. The governments of different member states need to be more vigilant and adopt policies that are cost-efficient to help in flattening the curve. Once Asean's more medically equipped members manage to contain their outbreaks, they should start helping other Asean neighbours, as economic disparity among Asean members is apparent.

The grouping needs to respond collectively as a regional bloc. If not, the virus is not going to leave the region anytime soon. Covid-19 is not only going to impact public health, but its impact will also spill over into the socio-economic realm across the entire region.

One great leap forward for the region was the holding of a special Asean Plus Three Summit on April 14, which included the 10 Asean members, China, Japan and South Korea. The move came following heavy criticism of the slow response to the pandemic, especially in the initial stages. The ministers came up with several steps to fight the pandemic, including the establishment of Covid-19 Asean Response Fund and ways and strategies to ease the global health crisis.

Vietnam has since extended some support in the form of medical equipment, which included specialised protective clothing, medical masks, testing systems, and test kits worth US\$304,000 (9.7 million baht) to Laos and Cambodia. Vietnam's model for containing the outbreak has been considered a successful low-cost model and has attracted international attention.

The low-cost model focuses on selective but proactive prevention because of a lack of resources and has been largely effective thus far. Other Asean member states should

attempt to implement this low-cost model, as the method has worked for Vietnam with a decline in the number of cases.

While Asean should treat Covid-19 as a regional challenge, the member states should avoid the geopolitical disparities in the region and prevent being further divided because of geopolitics, especially when it comes to external players. China has been offering assistance to Asean to fight the pandemic. For instance, Beijing sent loads of medical supplies to the Philippines in March.

Asean should be cautious about China's assistance because China has always looked at Southeast Asia as a region that can be dominated. This opportunity would be perfect for China to increase its leverage over its contested claim in the South China Sea and expand its dominance in Southeast Asia. Other external players like Japan, India and South Korea are thus far not as hell-bent as China on establishing control over the region.

Given the circumstances, Asean's action plan should focus on four steps. First and foremost, the Asean member states should conduct more tests and identify as many cases as they can within their borders. Transparency of cases is key to speeding up efforts to curb the virus.

Second, Asean needs to respond collectively and proactively as a bloc through coordination, comprehensiveness, information sharing, and effective policy-making.

Third, Asean should develop cost-effective models like making cheaper test kits to flatten the curve.

Lastly, Asean should focus less on its geopolitical disparities in these unprecedented times and not let external players take advantage of the situation. If Covid-19 is not dealt with responsibly and collectively, it threatens to disrupt the grouping's existence and its accomplishments.

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