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*Global Health Security*

## **COVID-19 and Global Health Diplomacy: Can Asia Rise to the Challenge?**

*By Mely Caballero-Anthony*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Averting the catastrophic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic requires no less than a coordinated and effective global response with the participation of all actors at multiple levels of governance. Asia must seize the opportunity to define its role in this endeavour.*

### **COMMENTARY**

PEOPLE AROUND the globe are waking up to a new reality of a world shutting down, as countries desperately try to contain the spread of this raging COVID-19 virus. In three months since the outbreak of this disease, people's lives have severely upended with cities locked down, millions of jobs gone, and thousands of lives lost.

With no end in sight as to when the spread of the disease can be contained, countries are grappling to prevent the collapse of their national health systems and averting catastrophic consequences. With 170 countries already affected, the effects of closing national borders and stopping international and domestic travels point to a long-drawn-out global economic recession, signalling more pain and human suffering.

### **Missed Opportunity?**

Against an apocalyptic scenario where humanity faces a singular existential threat to human and state security, it would need the collective will, effort and commitment of the whole international community to put their resources together and fight the disease. Sadly, this show of collective effort and solidarity have been slow in coming.

The lack of a concerted global effort is significantly hampered by the inability of the two global powers, the United States and China, to work closely together and lead a coordinated and effective international response to contain and stop the pandemic.

Much has already been said about the failure of governments to act swiftly to prepare against the pandemic. The World Health Organisation's Director General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, described the delay as a "[missed opportunity](#)" given that there was a window of time during its first outbreak in China when other parts of the world could have prepared aggressively to respond when the COVID-19 reached their borders.

Given the dire situation facing the global community today, there is clearly no point for recrimination nor dwell on the 'what-ifs'. Instead, the impetus to push for a more concrete global action at multiple levels to fight the pandemic has become more urgent than ever.

Notwithstanding US-China tensions, there are already several initiatives undertaken by a range of actors at different levels to respond and contain the spread of COVID-19. Awareness of these emerging international efforts helps generate more support and allows for spawning more initiatives geared towards helping more countries and communities contain the disease.

### **Strengthening Global Health Diplomacy**

The WHO, UN Foundation and the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation have launched the [Solidarity Response Fund](#) to help countries, particularly the less resourced and those with weak health systems to prepare and respond to the disease. These include improving detection capacity, providing protective equipment for medical workers, and helping scale up public health systems.

In the race to find a vaccine for COVID-19, groups like the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation (CEPI) are now spearheading efforts to [finance and coordinate vaccine development](#) with the University of Oxford and Novavax, a US-based biotechnology company. Meanwhile, the WHO has also launched its Global Solidarity Project that aims to start "[global megatrials](#)" of potential coronavirus therapies.

A number of countries have already indicated their willingness to participate in these multi-country clinical trials including Thailand and Malaysia. Other private foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Facebook have [teamed up to donate US\\$25 million](#) for more research on vaccines and other therapeutics.

Most recently, amidst fears of prolonged recession, the G-20 countries have [pledged US\\$5 trillion](#) as economic stimulus to help restore global growth and provide market stability. G-20 trade ministers [affirmed their commitment](#) to trade and reduce risks to the global health supply chain.

### **Can Asia Rise to the Challenge?**

While international efforts to raise financial resources and develop vaccines take time to materialise, there are things that Asia can do as part of the global efforts to fight COVID-19.

### *Setting Standards and Norms in Pandemic Preparedness and Response*

Many medical experts and analysts are pointing to the way Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Vietnam have effectively responded to the COVID-19 outbreak. The speed, decisiveness and the extent to which their governments have gone to control the virus spread -- from strict restrictions on travel and movements of people, social distancing, massive testing and lockdown -- have gone a long way in “flattening the curve” of new infections.

While lessons are being learnt, the measures adopted by these countries constitute the core set of norms in pandemic preparedness and response that the WHO and health officials worldwide have encouraged countries to adopt in their national pandemic preparedness plans (NPPs).

Since 2003, when Asia had to deal with the SARS, H1N1 and MERs, the WHO had urged countries to review and strengthen their NPPs to prepare for the prospect of a pandemic of global proportions. A number of table-top exercises by health officials had also been held. Looking ahead, more of these kinds of exercises should be organised in the region to better institutionalise the best practices and norms of pandemic preparedness.

### *Strengthening Regional Cooperation: Three Priorities*

Within ASEAN and ASEAN Plus Three frameworks, existing mechanisms among health officials and health ministers that promote cooperation in public health emergencies, such as regular technical updates and information exchange on pandemic response, can be developed further. This is to address three critical problems related to containment and mitigation of COVID-19 and future pandemics.

First, is resource constraints. In the short-term, the leaders of ASEAN Plus Three should come together and work with their health officials and related agencies to craft a mechanism to build a regional stockpile of critical medical equipment for distribution to countries that are in dire need of items like PPEs, masks, gloves and even ventilators. Building a supply of anti-virals and vaccines (when available) as part of this regional stockpile should also be explored.

The region already has logistical systems in place that can be used to help with the distribution of these items as and when they are needed. These include the Disaster Emergency Logistics Systems of ASEAN (DELSA) that store a number of relief items donated by countries like Japan, China and the European Union. DELSA can be readily mobilised and deployed in times of natural disasters through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) Centre.

Second, is creating a pool of medical experts. Just as China and Cuba have started to send their doctors to beleaguered Italy to help, the idea of creating a pool of regional

medical experts to help advise countries on containment and mitigation strategies should be considered.

Third, given the likelihood that more pandemics can emerge, strengthening public awareness is another crucial agenda that the region should work together on. The media, civil society and local groups of communities across the region must be actively engaged as important partners in conveying the right messages to the public and fight 'fake' news.

The COVID-19 pandemic is described arguably as a "once in lifetime" health threat. Asia should learn more and seize the opportunity to shape its role in global health diplomacy.

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