ASEAN's Diplomatic Tasks During the Pandemic

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Received: 11 February 2021 / Accepted: 25 May 2021 / Published online: 31 August 2021

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Abstract

What are the implications of COVID-19 for the diplomacy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)? What kinds of diplomatic tasks has the pandemic imposed on ASEAN, and in what way has the Southeast Asian association handled them? ASEAN's most fundamental diplomatic task has of course been to continue building ASEAN communities, but the ability of the association of minor powers in Southeast Asia is limited. Hence, it can be said that ASEAN's most important diplomatic task has been to maintain favorable relations with external powers, in particular, with China and the United States. The present study argues that ASEAN has managed to maintain favorable relations with and receive support from both of these external powers by conducting "equidistant diplomacy" with them. In concrete terms, it has fostered favorable relations with China. Yet, without relying excessively on Beijing, it made sure to foster such relations with the United States as well, thereby striking a reasonable balance between these two external powers.

Keywords Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) · COVID-19 pandemic · Equidistant diplomacy · Hedging

Introduction

Southeast Asia has been badly affected by the global spread of COVID-19. Due to its geographical proximity and dense links to China, it was the first region outside China to be hit by the pandemic. The first confirmed case outside China was recorded in Thailand on 13 January 2020 [54], and the first COVID-19 death outside China was identified in the Philippines on 2 February 2020 [17]. Since then, the virus rapidly spread across the entire Southeast Asian region, and by the end of March, all ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had been hit by the pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO),

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at the time of writing this article, Indonesia has cumulatively more than 1,500,000 confirmed cases, the Philippines has more than 900,000, Malaysia has more than 370,000, and Myanmar has more than 140,000 confirmed cases [55]. These figures only cover officially recorded cases, and the actual numbers of cases are beyond calculation. Many scientists believe that, due to the insufficiency of testing, the official tallies announced by the Southeast Asian governments are far lower than the actual numbers [33, 40]. The situation on the ground is severe in any case, given the insufficient quality of the healthcare systems in the region. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), every ASEAN member has fewer hospital resources per capita than the OECD average, in terms of both personnel and physical infrastructure [38: 12].

This being so, what are the implications of COVID-19 for ASEAN diplomacy? What kinds of diplomatic tasks has the pandemic imposed on ASEAN, and in what way has the Southeast Asian association handled them? Since the establishment of their association in 1967, the ASEAN members have dealt with several regional security challenges, such as the Cambodian conflict and the South China Sea disputes, not only individually but also collectively. COVID-19 has undoubtedly been one of the most serious non-traditional security challenges which have hit the entire Southeast Asian region. Although the extent of the damage each ASEAN member has suffered differs, COVID-19 can undoubtedly be regarded as a serious regional security challenge which requires collective responses. Hence, it is worth exploring the ways in which the members have dealt with the pandemic collectively within the framework of their association, while leaving the task of examining the foreign policy of each member to future studies.

Following this introductory section, this article has four sections. The first section addresses the most fundamental diplomatic task COVID-19 has imposed on ASEAN: to continue building ASEAN communities. It argues that, although the ability of the association of minor powers in Southeast Asia is limited, its members have at least managed to maintain their unity in addressing the COVID-19 crisis. The second section addresses the most important diplomatic task COVID-19 has imposed on the association, in terms of its external relations: to maintain favorable relations with both China and the United States. It argues that ASEAN has managed to maintain favorable relations with and receive support from both of these external powers by conducting “equidistant diplomacy” with them. The concluding section looks to the future, stating that the Southeast Asian association should articulate its own vision for an Asia–Pacific regional order, so as to secure its centrality to Asia–Pacific regional cooperation in a post-COVID-19 era.

Internal Task

The most fundamental diplomatic task COVID-19 has imposed on ASEAN is to continue building ASEAN communities. The pandemic has made ASEAN community building difficult by presenting serious challenges to the three communities: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). First, by threatening the

well-being of individuals, it has presented a considerable challenge to the APSC. Since the very beginning of the planning for a security community in the early 2000s, ASEAN has subscribed to the principle of “comprehensive security” [2], which “goes beyond the requirements of traditional security ... [and] takes into account non-traditional aspects vital to regional and national resilience” [4: 9]. In this respect, not only the military security of territorial states but also the well-being of individuals matters in the APSC.

Next, by limiting the movement of goods, services, and workers within and across national boundaries, COVID-19 has posed a severe challenge to the AEC. The free movement of these elements is an integral component of the AEC, in which the formation of a single market and production base in Southeast Asia has been sought for a long time [3]. Importantly, COVID-19 has forced some ASEAN members to stop receiving manual and domestic workers from other members, thereby causing severe economic damage to both parties. Although the international movement of skilled workers is featured in the AEC, that of manual and domestic workers is also essential for many of the ASEAN members.

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, as a new communicable disease, COVID-19 has undoubtedly posed a direct challenge to the ASCC, the core components of which include the enhancement of “regional preparedness and capacity through integrated approaches to prevention, surveillance and timely response to communicable and emerging infectious diseases” [14: 21–22]. The spread of COVID-19 in 2020 came as a surprise, as few in Southeast Asia had anticipated the sudden spread of a new communicable disease. When the ASEAN members drafted a new “blueprint” and “scorecard” for the ASCC in 2015/2016, what they had in mind as serious communicable and infectious diseases were malaria, rabies, dengue, HIV, and tuberculosis [14: 21–23, 15: 2]. However, COVID-19 has turned out to be one of the most serious communicable diseases in history, prompting them to strengthen their community-building efforts.

Since it is little more than an association of minor powers in Southeast Asia, ASEAN’s ability to address these challenges is limited, but its members have at least managed to maintain their unity in addressing the COVID-19 crisis. As early as mid-February, they “emphasize[d] the importance of ASEAN solidarity ... in facing the outbreak of the COVID-19 and similar challenges” [8]. At their special summit on COVID-19 in April 2020, they pledged to “remain united and vigilant against COVID-19 ... while sustaining ASEAN Community building momentum”, and agreed to “strengthen public health cooperation measures to contain the pandemic” and to “intensify cooperation for adequate provision of medicines, essential medical supplies and equipment” [9]. In this meeting, they also decided to establish the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, and in February 2021, they agreed to use a large portion of the funds to buy vaccines [51]. To be sure, there have been some minor instances in which the ASEAN members failed to make their best efforts to maintain their unity. For example, in August 2020 when the number of confirmed cases in the Philippines increased rapidly and overtook that in Indonesia, Manila emphasized that the number increased simply because it had conducted as much as three times more testing than Jakarta had done [32]. By doing so, it effectively stated that Indonesia continued to be the country with the highest number of cases in

Southeast Asia. Yet, overall, it is fair to say that the members have upheld the spirit of ASEAN unity during the pandemic.

This of course does not mean that ASEAN's response to COVID-19 has been sufficient, and two issues should be mentioned here. The first issue concerns the treatment of human rights on the part of some of the association's members. In one way or another, most of the governments in Southeast Asia have taken emergency measures against COVID-19, thereby strengthening the control of their domestic society. In some cases, this has led to the violation of human rights, according to some activists and experts [24, 27, 29]. The second issue concerns the Southeast Asian association's relations with external powers. Given the limited resources and capabilities its members have, this association has had to seek support from external powers. The status of the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund is illustrative: by February 2021, it had received more than 15 million US dollars, but this amount includes support from external powers [51]. This is hardly new, in that ASEAN also sought support from external powers when it institutionalized regional measures to deal with communicable and infectious diseases in the aftermath of the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003 [18]. However, in terms of its external relations, COVID-19 has given a particular task to ASEAN, which will be discussed next.

External Task

In terms of ASEAN's external relations, the most important diplomatic task COVID-19 has imposed on the association is to maintain favorable relations with both China and the United States — the two external powers from which the Southeast Asian association has to seek support. The pandemic has made the management of ASEAN's external relations difficult by instigating a new series of diplomatic conflicts between Beijing and Washington. Indeed, a major difference between SARS and COVID-19 is that, unlike the former, the latter has instigated a new series of diplomatic conflicts between these two external powers, leading some observers to describe their relations in terms of a “tragedy” or “new Cold War” [21, 42, 47].

While various difficulties existed between China and the United States prior to the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, the pandemic gradually instigated a new series of diplomatic conflicts between them. In January 2020, the attitude of Washington was by no means offensive. President Trump even expressed his gratitude for China's effort to deal with COVID-19, tweeting that “China [had] been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus” and “on behalf of the American People, [he wanted] to thank President Xi” [44]. However, Washington's attitude changed, as the virus spread across the country and beyond. By March, President Trump and several other US politicians had begun to call COVID-19 the “China virus” or “Wuhan virus.” Beijing gave a fierce response, condemning the “despicable practice of individual US politicians eagerly stigmatizing China and Wuhan” [45].

Since spring, Washington has held the “Chinese Communist Party accountable for the Covid-19 pandemic,” as the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Robert O'Brien, acknowledges [37: 3]. In May, President Trump went as

far as to state that the world suffered as a “result of the malfeasance of the Chinese government,” and that “China’s cover-up of the Wuhan virus allowed the disease to spread all over the world, instigating a global pandemic” [52]. Beijing’s defense against a series of US attacks was based on the position that the WHO and the international community had “expressed clear objection to associating a virus with a specific country or region and acts of stigmatization” [19]. President Trump announced his intention to withdraw from the WHO in May and officially submitted a notice of withdrawal to the United Nations (UN) Secretary General in July, in the belief that China had “total control” over the organization [52]. In September, at the UN General Assembly, he openly accused China and the WHO of disseminating false information on the possibility of the human-to-human transmission of COVID-19 [53]. Beijing rejected what it sees as a “baseless accusation” against it, and instead accused the United States of spreading “political virus” at the UN [20].

To be sure, ASEAN’s diplomatic partners are not limited to China and the United States, but the series of diplomatic conflicts described above made it more difficult for the Southeast Asian association to manage its relations with these two than with its other partners, such as Japan and Australia. Unsurprisingly, in their analyses of ASEAN’s external relations during the pandemic, most experts seem to focus on the association’s relations with China and the United States. In fact, in one way or another, most of them have shown that ASEAN has managed to maintain favorable relations with both of these external powers [46, 49, 50]. The obvious question here is in what way the association has managed to do so.

Against the background of the series of diplomatic conflicts between Beijing and Washington, ASEAN has managed to maintain favorable relations with and receive support from both of these external powers by conducting “equidistant diplomacy” with them, without becoming too remote from or too close to either one of them. In concrete terms, it has fostered favorable relations with China. Yet, without relying excessively on Beijing, it made sure to foster such relations with the United States as well, thereby striking a reasonable balance between these two external powers. In this way, it has reaped benefits from its favorable relations with each of them and received as much support as possible from each of them to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.¹

On the one hand, it has responded positively to the so-called “mask diplomacy” of China, thereby receiving as much support as possible from the country. From the beginning of the crisis, the Southeast Asian association has carefully avoided pointing the finger at Beijing and has instead shown solidarity with it, on the basis of the recognition that the two parties are “in the same boat” when it comes to regional affairs [26]. As early as 20 February 2020, in Vientiane, the association held a special meeting of foreign ministers with China on COVID-19 and agreed to strengthen

¹ A few authors have argued that ASEAN members have maintained equidistant diplomatic relations with external powers. For example, Evan Laksmana has used the notion of “pragmatic equidistance” to understand Indonesia’s relations with both Beijing and Washington [31]. Oh Ei Sun and David Han have argued that Malaysia has sought to build equidistant relations with both China and the United States [39]. With Shingo Nagata, the present author has maintained that, in its dealings with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, ASEAN has conducted equidistant diplomacy with Beijing and Washington [28].

cooperation in a “comprehensive and effective manner” [11]. At a summit meeting with China in November, the association welcomed Beijing’s support for various public sector programs and its provision of medical supplies and equipment to Southeast Asia, and also expressed appreciation for Beijing’s commitment to providing COVID-19 vaccine to Southeast Asia on a priority basis once it is developed [10]. All these are understandable, given that the Southeast Asian nations have seen China as their best opportunity for post-COVID-19 economic recovery [49]. In fact, experts who have examined ASEAN’s relations with China and the United States amid the COVID-19 crisis seem to share the view that the relevance of the former has become more salient than that of the latter [34, 36, 46, 48, 49].

Still, on the other hand, ASEAN has cautiously avoided becoming over-dependent on China, and cleverly strengthened its ties to the United States as well, thereby receiving a large amount of economic aid and other forms of assistance from Washington. Most remarkably, it has received various forms of support for capacity building, on the basis of the existing arrangements not only at the official but also at the grass-roots level, which have been built through the two parties’ favorable relations over the last several decades — for example, arrangements between hospitals in Southeast Asia and universities in the United States. Indeed, in their special meeting of foreign ministers in April 2020, the two parties highlighted the importance of their “decades-long collaboration in supporting international cooperation ... to prevent, detect, and respond to infectious diseases” [12 also see 13]. ASEAN has put importance on Washington’s Health Futures initiative, announced by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo during this ministerial meeting to “enhance [its] efforts in health security through research, public health, and training the next generation of ASEAN health professionals” [41 also see 35]. It has continued to strengthen its relations with the United States under the Biden administration since 2021, jointly highlighting with this administration the “importance of collaboration towards post COVID-19 recovery” [16].

The diplomatic practice described above can be regarded as ASEAN’s *modus operandi*. For the association of minor powers in Southeast Asia, the proper management of its relations with China and the United States through the exercise of equidistant diplomacy has always been crucial in the post-Cold War Asia-Pacific. Thus, for example, in response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative since the mid-2010s, while committing itself to Beijing’s initiative, this association has cleverly strengthened its economic and security relations with the United States [28]. The statement that ASEAN commonly conducts equidistant diplomacy largely resonates with the view that its members commonly implement the strategy of hedging. However, the notion of equidistant diplomacy and that of hedging capture different meanings. The former applies to the collective practice of ASEAN as a whole. The ASEAN members deal with many issues collectively, and thus their association acts as a single entity on many occasions – for example, signing agreements or concluding partnerships with various external powers. The long-term trend in its external relations can best be encapsulated in the notion of equidistant diplomacy. The latter is more useful for capturing the strategies of individual members. Each member has its own policies toward China and the United States, putting more emphasis on one over the other. The extent to which each member hedges against the deterioration of

its relations with external powers also differs. Some members are “heavy hedgers,” while others are “light hedgers” [30].²

Conclusions

What should ASEAN do in a post-COVID-19 era? In short, the Southeast Asian association should articulate its own vision for an Asia–Pacific regional order, bearing in mind that it will probably become harder for this association to secure its centrality to Asia–Pacific regional cooperation in a post-COVID-19 era. The ultimate aim of ASEAN diplomacy in the Asia–Pacific is to secure the association’s centrality to regional cooperation there, founded on its mega-regional institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference, East Asia Summit, and ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus.³ Equidistant diplomacy contributes to the achievement of this aim, to the extent that it concerns the avoidance of overdependence on a particular external power.

In a post-COVID-19 era, the maintenance of ASEAN’s centrality will probably become harder partly due to some well-known developments, such as the growing influence of China and long-term economic and social damage to ASEAN caused by the spread of the virus. Yet it will also become harder due to an unprecedented development, namely, the partial replacement of onsite meetings with online ones through the advancement of digital diplomacy, which ironically is considered to favor small and developing nations by giving more opportunities for such nations to be represented and heard [see 23, 43: 82]. Onsite meetings of the mega-regional institutions mentioned above have more symbolic value than online ones, in that the former essentially signify ASEAN’s centrality to Asia–Pacific regional cooperation. They are held in the Southeast Asian region throughout the year, always serving as an occasion in which representatives of major powers travel to this region to attend an event hosted by an association of minor powers there. These representatives include not only desk officers and senior officials but also ministers and heads of states. Nevertheless, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis in early 2020, almost all the meetings have been held online. Even in a post-COVID-19 era, some of the meetings will likely be held online while many others will likely be a hybrid of onsite and online meetings.⁴ This is because COVID-19 has taught the utility of digital tools to many across the world, including those in governments and international organizations in the Asia–Pacific. According to the DiploFoundation, online meetings are no longer seen as a poor substitute for onsite meetings, but as an indispensable component of global governance [22].

² A majority of existing studies on hedging in Southeast Asia concentrate on the strategies of individual ASEAN members [for a review, see 25: 381–388].

³ Few key declarations issued by ASEAN have failed to highlight the need to secure the association’s centrality to Asia–Pacific regional cooperation see [5, 6].

⁴ Experts and practitioners identified a hybrid of onsite and online meetings as a component of future diplomatic encounters, in the “Future of Meetings” conference organized by the DiploFoundation and the Geneva Internet Platform in May 2020 [23].

This means that ASEAN must make very serious efforts to secure its centrality to Asia–Pacific regional cooperation in a post-COVID-19 era. ASEAN is little more than an association of minor powers with insufficient material capabilities, and the exercise of hegemonic leadership is not an option for it. Therefore, it should exercise ideational leadership by articulating its own vision for an Asia–Pacific regional order. The conceptualization in 2019 of an “ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific” can be considered a positive development in this respect. This outlook aims to “generate momentum for building strategic trust and win–win cooperation in the region” [7] and is thus in line with a set of ASEAN’s cooperative norms, enshrined in its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation — the treaty to which most of the major powers in the Asia–Pacific have subscribed [1]. It is more accommodative, and hence must be more acceptable to most countries in the Asia–Pacific than the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concept promoted by the United States and its allies is. The articulation of a vision for an Asia–Pacific regional order which is acceptable to many must be a prerequisite for the Southeast Asian association to establish its mega-regional presence in a post-COVID-19 era.

Author Contribution NA

Availability of Data and Material NA

Code Availability NA

Declarations

Ethics Approval NA

Consent for Publication NA

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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