Will China’s ‘COVID-aid’ offensive reshape ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific Outlook?

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As the COVID-19 crisis spreads around the world, China has used ‘COVID-aid’ as a means to build diplomatic relationships. Southeast Asian governments – which are badly affected by the pandemic – have been leading recipients of this aid. It comes at a time when ASEAN is attempting to reappraise its position with respect to the US and China, given accelerating competition between the two powers. ASEAN recently adopted an Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which advocated an inclusive approach to regionalism and warned against great power competition. As China’s international response to the COVID crisis has been significantly more effective than that of the US, ASEAN governments may reappraise their position in coming months.

KEY POINTS

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As countries struggle to manage their domestic COVID-19 outbreaks, many initiatives have been launched to encourage international cooperation among countries. One of the most significant has come from the Chinese government, which has offered considerable amounts of ‘COVID-aid’ to affected countries around the world.

While China is still working to control its own COVID-19 outbreak and restart its economy, it has not wasted time in rendering assistance to partners. But for ASEAN, China’s support in combating COVID-19 may also present a geopolitical challenge, especially to its recent Indo-Pacific Outlook which adopted the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept into the ASEAN foreign policy lexicon.

Will China’s assistance strengthen the ASEAN’s commitment to an Indo-Pacific outlook? Or will it create more complicated relations between ASEAN member countries and China, as well as the US? Differences between the approach of the US and China in combating COVID-19 may affect how ASEAN countries relate to both major powers, as well as their broader Indo-Pacific orientations.

Predictably, global acceptance of China’s COVID-aid has been varied. Some perceive it in a more suspicious light, while others are more welcoming. The sceptical response is understandable, since even before the COVID-19 outbreak there were tensions regarding China’s regional role, particularly surrounding its Belt and Road Initiative and its behaviour in the South China Sea dispute. Some analysts have criticised China’s aid response as ‘mask diplomacy’, suggesting it is largely motivated to deflect criticism over its negligence in the early stage of the pandemic, and also to smooth over pre-existing political tensions.

For ASEAN members struggling with COVID-19, any foreign assistance is going to be welcomed. The latest data from the Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker, collated by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, reveals that there are more than 40,742 cases and has claimed 1,445 lives in ASEAN since its first report on the case. As several ASEAN members are developing economies with strained public health systems, foreign assistance will prove critical in controlling the spread of disease and successfully treating cases as they arise.

The debate over China’s COVID-aid comes at a time when there were already questions regarding ASEAN-China relations.

In June 2019, ASEAN adopted a formal Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which saw the bloc begin to use the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept in its approach to regional affairs. As the Indo-Pacific concept has been supported by several governments (including the US, Australia, New Zealand and Japan), but has been formally opposed by China, the simple adoption of this term was an important signal for how ASEAN positions itself within its broader region.

When ASEAN adopted the Outlook, it intended to reaffirm the notion of ‘ASEAN Centrality’ within Asian regionalism. ASEAN has initiated its own stance on the Indo-Pacific as a response to the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) which some view as exclusionary towards China. It was also ASEAN’s reaction to other visions for cooperation in the region proposed by Australia, Japan and India. More importantly, it was also undertaken at the height of the US-China trade war, at a time when regional governments were facing pressure to ‘choose sides’ between the two.
The Outlook was thus important in signalling ASEAN’s affirmation of neutrality between the US and China. Unlike other Indo-Pacific outlooks, it explicitly emphasised inclusivity and collective leadership; and while not mentioning China by name clearly ensured it ‘had a space’ at the regional table. It also explicitly warned against great power competition, arguing governments must “[avoid the] deepening of mistrust, miscalculation, and patterns of behavior based on a zero-sum game”.

In this regard, it is interesting to observe ASEAN’s attitude towards the two superpowers has been affected as they have now also entered into a major conflict over the response to COVID-19.

Despite China’s early mishandling of its response to COVID-19, which attracted global criticism, later developments have shown China has re-charted its course. Importantly, this included not just domestic control and mitigation measures, but also international assistance for other countries’ effort to fight the virus.

China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs pledged on 20 March 2020 to provide global assistance to combat COVID-19 for around 82 countries. The assistance will be implemented through several channels: government-to-government assistance and via Chinese companies. International aid provided by the Chinese government includes sending medical teams and essential supplies.

Indonesia was among the recipients of countries that receive medical aid including disposable masks, N-95 masks, protective clothing, goggles, gloves, shoe covers, infrared thermometers and surgical caps. These supplies are urgently needed, since Indonesia is among a number of ASEAN member countries that still have limited healthcare capacity and are experiencing shortages of medical equipment.

At the same time, the world has witnessed a catastrophic failure in US leadership due to the Trump Administration’s isolationist approach to the pandemic. A notable example was the failure of to secure a G7 communique on COVID-19 responses, which foundered due to a US veto. It has been reported that the US veto was due to an insistence – refused by other G7 governments – to refer to COVID-19 as the “Wuhan virus” in the communique.

Its failure to display leadership in tackling COVID-19 is in sharp contrast with its strong response during the Ebola outbreak under the Obama Administration in 2014. US assistance to West Africa at that time was perceived as one of the largest American interventions in a global health crisis.
A US international response to COVID-19 was in contrast slow. Almost a week after the Chinese government first announced its global response, the US Secretary of State finally launched its own. The US government has pledged to provide US$274 million to assist around 64 of the world’s most affected countries. In late March, the US government announced it would provide around US$18.3 million to assist ASEAN member states.

It is evident that China’s assistance during COVID-19 has been especially proactive, attempting to deliver a strong signal regarding its leadership in the region. It also reinforces the importance of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, particularly its emphasis on inclusivity and stance against great power competition. The utility of this position has now been revealed given the deterioration in the US-China relationship during the crisis.

It is worth noting, however, that as several ASEAN member countries have limited public health capacity, China’s support is likely to prove instrument in the coming months. This may intensify ASEAN members’ economic dependence on China. If Southeast Asian governments feel it appropriate to politically move closer to China as a result, it may create pressures to alter ASEAN’s declared neutrality in the deepening US-China rivalry.

It is too soon to tell how these dynamics will play out, and it will not be until the COVID-19 crisis passes that the outcomes will be fully apparent. Whether China’s COVID aid will soften ASEAN members’ reticence about it increasingly assertive regional role remains to be seen. It will be important to monitor how governments approach key regional issues – particularly, but not only, the South China Sea dispute – to gauge the extent of this shift.

In coming months, we will see whether ASEAN countries’ acceptance of China’s COVID aid will also translate into a broader acceptance of China or not.

Endnotes

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