

China, ASEAN, and the Covid-19 Pandemic

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For Southeast Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic was not only a public health crisis. It also provided an occasion for China to deepen its engagement in the region by dint of its own successful containment of the virus within its borders, and the resources it possessed to extend help to regional countries battling COVID-19 and its consequences, including economic, on their own shores. While Chinese help was welcomed, Southeast Asia also sought to avoid being beholden to any single external power. To that end, Southeast Asian states have actively pursued such diversification not only through efforts at reinforcing cooperation within ASEAN but also by using ASEAN as a vehicle to engage external powers.

At the end of 2019, Chinese health authorities reported a cluster of pneumonia cases that had emerged in Wuhan, in the province of Hubei, which eventually led to the confirmation of a novel coronavirus. Several weeks later in January, the pandemic struck Southeast Asian shores when the first case outside of China was detected in Thailand. Within a few months, the world found itself in the grip of a global pandemic. By the end of January 2021, there were more than 100 million recorded cases of the COVID-19 infection, with over two million deaths. While the fatality rates are lower than those of previous pandemics of the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) strain, it has by far been the most infectious, prompting Singapore foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan to opine that with the pandemic “we are facing a global life and death crisis which requires extraordinary measures.”¹

Threats posed by pandemics are not new to Southeast Asia. In the last two decades alone, the region had been beset by several transnational health crises, of which SARS and the H5N1 Avian Flu were arguably the most lethal. What is striking about the current climate, however, is the backdrop against which the pandemic is playing out: the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened the further bifurcation of an international order that was already threatening to come undone because of the intensification of Sino-U.S. rivalry and American withdrawal from multilateralism under Donald J. Trump. Southeast Asian states found themselves increasingly compelled to reassess their relationships with external powers. Taking the present pandemic as a point of entry, this paper considers its impact on Southeast Asia’s relations with China and the U.S.

The paper makes three main arguments. First, it contends that Sino-U.S. rivalry has sharpened over the COVID-19 pandemic by dint of the politicization of this public health crisis by both parties. Second, it argues that China has identified and seized upon opportunities presented by the pandemic to enhance its regional and global standing through continued support for multilateralism and economic engagement through initiatives such as the BRI, in turn creating favorable conditions for the advancement of its foreign policy interests. Conversely, because of the severe deficiencies in how the Trump administration handled the pandemic domestically, the Biden administration will have to prioritize its domestic challenges at the expense of greater bandwidth and resources for foreign policy, especially in Southeast Asia, a region that since the end of the Vietnam War has never featured prominently in Washington’s pursuit of its overseas interests. Third, it posits that while Southeast Asia has doubtless benefited from Chinese support during this crisis, the region remains skeptical of Chinese strategic intent and concerned about overreliance. States have tried to diversify relations with regional powers while strengthening cooperation within ASEAN. The paper first looks, by way of background, at how the pandemic emerged as

the latest arena of Sino-U.S. rivalry. It then explores how China has handled the pandemic domestically, where its success has allowed it to expand its influence as a putative provider of “global public goods.” In the interest of brevity, the paper then focuses on ASEAN by documenting collective regional efforts and strategies to navigate great power rivalry in the realm of global public health.

COVID-19 and the (Re)Framing of Sino-U.S. Rivalry

That the global order is currently undergoing momentous geopolitical and geo-economic tectonic shifts with potentially grave consequences is hardly a novel observation. Many have identified the changing distribution of power between the U.S. and China as the definitive dynamic that is shaping the world. The onset of the pandemic merely thrust public health to the fore as a new, “non-traditional security” arena in which the latest iteration of great power rivalry is playing out. Instead of hastening much-needed cooperation, issues regarding the origin, impact, and control of the pandemic have come to be politicized amid rising Sino-U.S. tensions. Unlike previous episodes of international public health crises such as SARS and Ebola, when Washington and Beijing managed to set aside the competition that had begun to define their relationship, and eschew zero-sum strategic logic in favor of the pursuit of mutual interests through bilateral cooperation, the pandemic has seen the ties between China and the U.S. spiral downward into an acrimonious blame game, with each propounding a different - and divergent - narrative on the origin of the virus. Not only has this worsened the bilateral relationship; it has also denied the international community leadership in a time of a global health crisis, delaying coordinated global responses to a transnational threat.

Guided by a national security strategy that identifies China as a rival and revisionist power, the Trump administration quickly seized upon the opportunity presented by revelations of a novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, to discomfit Beijing, with the president himself pejoratively referring to the virus as “Kung Flu” and “the Coronavirus Chinese Virus.”² As the Chinese leadership sought to silence warnings about the potential severity of the new disease, U.S. officials took aim at these initial Chinese efforts to conceal information, calling into question the absence of transparency. This gained traction with domestic constituencies in the U.S., translating to historically high disapproval of China in American public opinion.³

The COVID-19 pandemic further hardened American resolve to pursue decoupling, as global manufacturing disruptions and medical equipment shortages in the U.S. highlighted the danger of overreliance on Chinese factories.⁴ These moves pose challenges for the Biden administration’s efforts to repair some of the damage in relations with China. Meanwhile, China swiftly hit back at U.S. claims with its own narrative on the virus predicated on: 1) consciously pushing back on claims that China had mismanaged the pandemic in its early stages; 2) playing up the failure of the Trump administration to contain the pandemic in the U.S.; 3) promoting China’s model of pandemic management and role as a provider of global public health goods through “mask diplomacy”; and 4) framing the origins of the virus as “yet undecided,” including alleging sabotage by the U.S.⁵

An unfortunate outcome of Sino-U.S. politicking over the pandemic has been the enervation of multilateralism. Already suspicious of multilateral initiatives, which it maintained were at odds with U.S. national interests captured in their “Make America Great Again” slogan, the Trump administration alleged Chinese infiltration of the World Health Organization (WHO) which resulted in the latter’s reluctance to label the pandemic a global emergency, halted its funding of the multilateral body, and eventually withdrew from the WHO. The withdrawal severely compromised not only the standing of the WHO, but also its ability to coordinate collective efforts to control the global spread of the pandemic. Sino-U.S. disagreements over the WHO even spilled over into the G-7, resulting in a last-minute cancellation of an online summit in April, and into the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), leading to a deadlock over the articulation of a COVID-19 ceasefire resolution. The deadlock was not broken until more than three months later, on July 1, when the UNSC managed to adopt the resolution.⁶ Similarly, the G-7 meeting in March 2020 failed to produce a joint declaration after the U.S. insisted on calling COVID-19 the “Wuhan virus.”⁷

To an extent, the flare-ups in Sino-U.S. relations over the pandemic can be attributed to the sense of insecurity that the prevailing circumstances created for their leaderships. Clearly, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership was concerned about its international reputation and also its domestic legitimacy, given that the authority of President Xi Jinping appeared to take a hit in the early weeks of the outbreak in China. It had become evident that this mishandled pandemic could materialize into the most serious challenge to the CCP’s standing and performance-based legitimacy since the Tiananmen incident of 1989.

Evidently, Xi learned of the outbreak as early as January 7, when he convened the Politburo Standing Committee to discuss how to respond and evidently made a request for control of the coronavirus epidemic situation.⁸ Curiously, despite his repeated instructions, Chinese officials resisted sounding the alarm for a public health emergency; nor did Xi cancel his planned state visit to Myanmar, which took place on January 17-18. The critical decision to wage an all-out war to contain the virus was not made until January 20, two days after he returned to Beijing. Xi’s absence from the front line during the first two weeks of the crisis—particularly his decision to send Premier Li Keqiang to the epicenter of the outbreak in Wuhan rather than making the visit himself—prompted questions about his leadership. The high point of the brewing legitimacy crisis was the case of Li Wenliang, the medical doctor and whistleblower widely seen by Chinese citizens (especially netizens) to have been unfairly persecuted for sounding the alarm about the novel coronavirus within medical and healthcare circles. In the course of treating patients of the virus, Li was himself infected, and his death on February 7 precipitated an explosion of protests on Chinese social media. Demonstrative of the resistance that Li personified, is the fact that a day before his passing, Weibo, had already witnessed 20 million searches (on his name), 540 million hits, and 730,000 discussion notes about his impending death. “#LiWenliangHasPassedAway” was the number one trending topic on Weibo, with 10 billion mentions within several hours of his passing February 7.⁹ His words of caution: “I think there should be more than one voice in a healthy society, and I don’t approve of using public power for excessive interference” not only resonated with a frightened and enraged public, but soon became a mantra in public political discourse.

There were other instances of strain on Xi and his leadership. On January 28, Xi informed visiting WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, that he had taken personal charge of the anti-coronavirus operation. However, the next day, Xinhua News Agency suppressed this message and instead emphasized that the operation was being overseen by the collective efforts of the leadership. After January 29, Xi disappeared from public view for seven days. CCTV had no reports on his whereabouts. It reported on Xi chairing the PSC meeting on February 3, but the report had only the announcer reading the news and did not carry any footage of Xi or his colleagues at the meeting, as would normally be the case. Rumors about his physical and political health then started to spread. It was only on February 5 that Xi reappeared to receive a visit from Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia.

For Xi, the timing of the coronavirus outbreak was unpropitious, given that his leadership was already straining from difficult challenges in terms of the Hong Kong protest, the Sino-U.S. trade dispute, and a rapidly deteriorating economic situation. Nevertheless, Beijing managed to steady the ship, bring the pandemic under control, and head off further domestic criticism. This turn of events was brought about not only through an unprecedented lockdown in Wuhan (announced on January 23) followed closely by the implementation of other draconian measures using the levers of state power, but also through a massive propaganda effort to shift the narrative. For example, Li Wenliang was included in the party's pantheon of heroes who contributed to the national fight against the coronavirus. The Wuhan local government was made to apologize publicly, and the governor of Hubei province was removed and replaced by Wang Xiaodong, a Xi loyalist. These moves proved consequential to placating public disaffection. By early March, COVID-19 cases in China started to gradually decline while cases in Europe and the U.S. exploded.

Trump took a defiant stance in the face of growing criticism of his administration's handling of the pandemic as seen in: 1) the position that whatever economic momentum had been generated by tax reform had to be maintained at all costs as Trump entered the cauldron of an election; 2) individual rights were to be prioritized over public health.¹⁰ At a more mundane level the president himself created confusion with contradictory statements even as he openly took issue with advice from members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force. For fear of the deleterious effect on the economy, the White House demurred over lockdowns, which inevitably caused infections to spike. While China adopted strict virus control measures augmented with advanced surveillance technologies, the COVID-19 response of the U.S. was bogged down by indecision, grandstanding, red tape, and infighting within the administration. For example, the White House dithered on a travel ban for Europe and rolled out faulty test kits while the president himself spread misinformation about the virus and its cure. Moreover, because COVID-19 infections were gathering pace as election campaigning was reaching its height., the traction that could be gained from a tougher line on China was not lost to either camp. No doubt, playing the China card on COVID-19 helped the Trump campaign secure some measure of domestic support, yet the Democrats were themselves not averse to saber-rattling in order to accrue political mileage: Democrat candidates called out Trump for his soft stance on China in the early weeks of the pandemic, with Biden criticizing Trump in a campaign video for praising China's efforts to contain the virus.¹¹

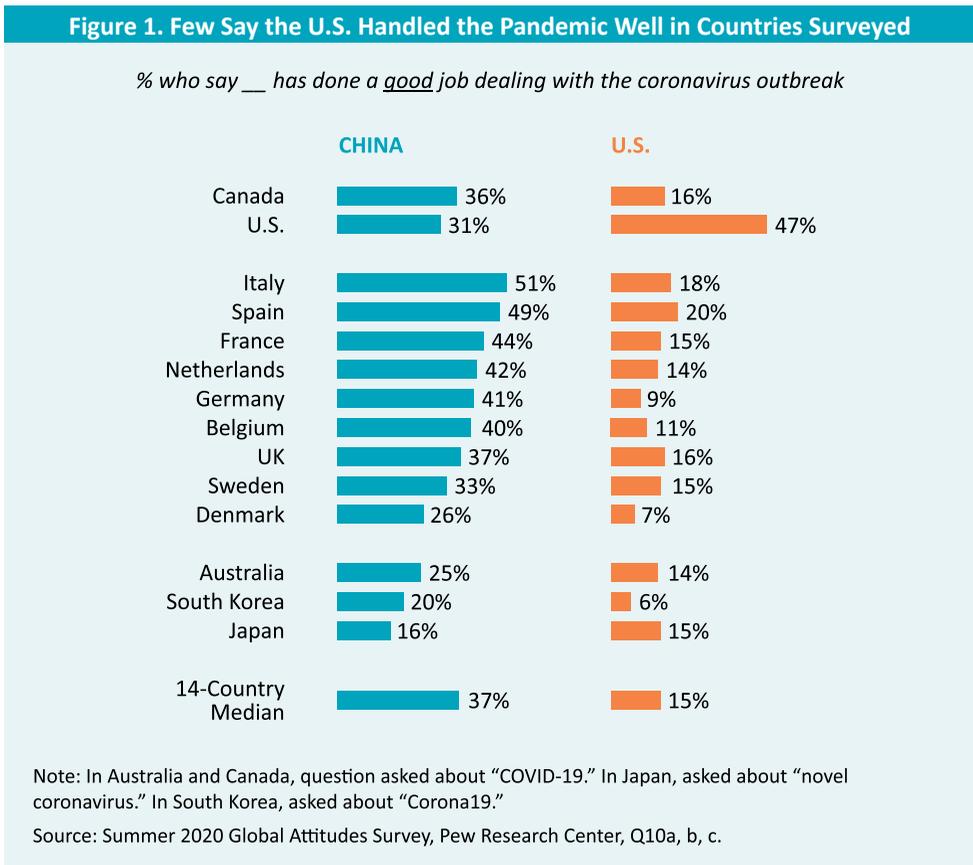
(Re)Shaping Public Health Discourse and Diplomacy

Initial popular misgivings soon gave way to an acknowledgement of—if not pride in—the efficacy of the Chinese approach.¹² In the eyes of its citizenry, the fact that the Chinese state was able to send medical resources across the vast country on short notice to deal with scattered outbreaks, or that it managed to control the spread of the virus internally through strict travel curbs with the help of surveillance technologies like facial recognition and QR codes, was compelling evidence that the Chinese model of centralized, authoritarian governance was best suited to ensure the health and safety of its population. It allowed China to craft a COVID-19 narrative that turned on the superiority of its social and political system even as it elided the question of the origins of the virus.

The battle between narratives and political systems gathered pace with the onset of competition over vaccine development. As the most scientifically advanced economy in the world, the U.S. invested more than \$12 billion in Operation Warp Speed to accelerate vaccine research and development.¹³ In keeping with its efforts to shift the global narrative away from origins to solution, and not to be outdone by the U.S., China also mobilized its considerable public and private resources in the vaccine push, to the point of even experimenting on military personnel and fostering military-private sector collaboration.¹⁴ Ironically, Chinese efforts to develop effective vaccines have been somewhat hampered by its success in controlling the pandemic. Vaccine development had to initiate offshore trials in countries such as Brazil and Indonesia since China itself no longer had sufficient cases for Stage Three tests. This prompted speculation about quid pro quo arrangements that might be struck between China and these countries, which would involve approval for trials in exchange for access to vaccines, and how these conditions would afford China a reservoir of political leverage.¹⁵ While Chinese vaccines may be using less sophisticated technologies, the conditions of vaccine diplomacy combined with the considerably lower cost and general satisfactory efficacy rates of its vaccines have allowed Beijing to secure significant market share especially in developing countries.¹⁶ Moreover, the fact that China joined the global vaccine sharing program COVAX last October, while the U.S. dragged its feet and signed up only this January, furthered the appeal that China may hold for some developing countries.

The success of its response to COVID-19 has facilitated economic recovery in China, and its recorded growth rate for a virus-ravaged 2020—2.3 percent—departed sharply from that of the other major economies of the world, all of which registered negative growth.¹⁷ Needless to say, this stellar economic performance has in turn positioned Beijing to assume a leadership role in the global effort to counter the COVID-19 pandemic, predicated on the mantra of “a global community of health for all,” while the U.S. remained mired in economic, public health, and political distress.¹⁸ According to statistics provided by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by the end of 2020 China had provided more than 220 billion masks, 2.25 billion sets of personal protective equipment, and 1.02 billion testing kits to other countries.¹⁹ In addition, China has dispatched 36 medical teams to 34 countries worldwide. Having joined the multilateral COVAX initiative fronted by the WHO in October

2020, China guaranteed provision of 10 million doses of vaccines to contribute to efforts to secure “fair and equitable access” to, vaccines especially for less affluent countries.²⁰ Even prior to confirming its contribution to COVAX, Chinese vaccines were already being rolled out in several developing countries.²¹ In the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates was the first country in the world to approve a Sinopharm vaccine, on December 9, 2020, while Bahrain followed suit on December 13.²² These moves were taken even before China authorized its own Sinopharm vaccine for domestic use, and were thereby telling not only of the level of trust that some Arab countries were prepared to place in the Chinese vaccine, but also the progress that Sino-Arab ties had made more broadly. The first batch of Chinese vaccines sent to Africa arrived in Equatorial Guinea on February 11, making good on a pledge by Xi Jinping guaranteeing vaccine accessibility for Africa at the special China-Africa Summit on COVID-19 last June.²³ Consequently, most advanced economies have rated China more positively than the U.S. on the question of pandemic management, according to a Pew research study (Figure 1).²⁴



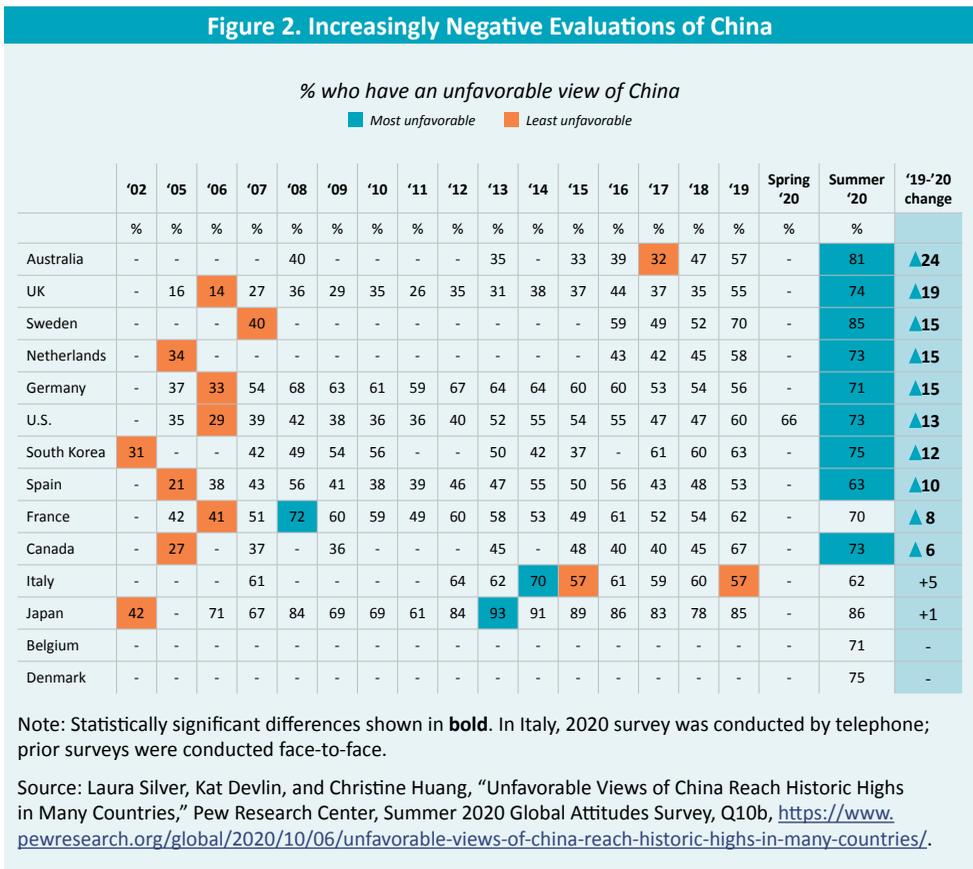
Chinese diplomatic activism during the pandemic period was not confined to vaccine diplomacy. Significant steps were taken in other areas as well: most notably, the conclusion of the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) on November 15, 2020 and the Comprehensive Investment Agreement with the EU on December 30, both of which reinforced prevailing views not only of Chinese economic heft, but its centrality to growth in the respective regions. In a move that surprised many, on November 20 China also expressed interest to join the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership), the successor to the stillborn TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership).²⁵ This period also witnessed Beijing's pledge to enhance its commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 2030, towards the objective of achieving carbon neutrality, as scheduled, by 2060, and to donate \$30 million to the WHO following the U.S. decision to suspend funding to the organization. These efforts juxtapose favorably against the unilateralism of the Trump administration.

China has sought to consolidate its strategic position while the U.S. was preoccupied with domestic politics, and the rest of the world was preoccupied with the COVID-19 pandemic. The CCP moved decisively to impose a controversial National Security Law on Hong Kong on June 30, while the PLA stepped up patrols and military exercises in the South China Sea, continued (if not increased) military activity around Taiwan, and clashed with the Indian military in the summer. There is precedent to Chinese foreign policy adventurism during periods of political transition in the U.S.: in December 2008, a month before the inauguration of President Barack Obama, Chinese vessels entered the Diaoyu/Senkaku waters, where they are, to this day, locked in a dispute with Japan. Just two days after the inauguration of President Joe Biden, Beijing passed a new Coast Guard Law to defend its maritime interests in the South and East China seas. The day after, Taiwan reported a large incursion by the PLA Air Force, which according to Chinese sources, was undertaken as a "solemn warning to external forces."²⁶

In considering the impetus behind these moves, several factors come into play. First, there was Chinese strategic opportunism at work, as the U.S. was consumed by a political crisis. Second, China projected an image of strength in response to not only international pressure to account for the origins of the virus, but also in response to domestic challenges in the form of early criticisms on the handling of the pandemic and the economic downturn it threatened. The legitimacy of the CCP is ultimately anchored on its ability to deliver economic growth, and leaders continue to harbor deep anxieties that external forces could exploit signs of weakness.²⁷ Third, China and the U.S. have been locked into a security dilemma escalating since the introduction of the Obama administration's "rebalance" strategy. Recent Chinese activities are, arguably, but an extension of the deepening structural rivalry between the two great powers, and Beijing's acute threat perceptions towards the American naval presence in its surrounding waters.

As much as China views COVID-19 as an opportunity to demonstrate global leadership and steal a march on U.S. regional engagement, doubts linger as to its intent. This comes as the U.S. relentlessly criticizes the refusal to acknowledge the origins of the pandemic or share more information on the early spread of the virus in Wuhan. This intransigence has cast a long

shadow over attempts to portray China as a benevolent global power prepared to provide global public goods, given the urgent need to uncover how a debilitating infectious disease such as COVID-19 could bring the global economy almost to a standstill. Further doubts have been occasioned by the conditions apparently attached to the COVID-19 related aid. When the European Union sounded caution towards the “politics of generosity” associated with Chinese aid, Huawei was instructed to freeze donations to several European countries, including Italy and the Netherlands.²⁹ As seen in Figure 2, a Pew Research Center survey indicated that negativity towards China had risen in 12 developed economies between 2019 and the summer of 2020:³⁰



A considerable number of states aligned themselves with the call from Australia and the European Union for a probe into the origin of the virus, among these Indonesia and Malaysia, and a collection of 47 African states. Despite initial vehement protests, the winds of international opinion eventually compelled China to agree with the resolution, though not without first reframing it away from the original Australian call for an independent inquiry.³¹ A WHO team subsequently arrived in Wuhan to begin the investigation on January 14, 2021.

The BRI Amidst the Pandemic

Much has been made of the BRI not only as a signature initiative of Xi Jinping but as a vehicle through which China may be seeking to advance its strategic interest as a global power.³² China has continued to push this flagship initiative despite disruptions caused by the pandemic, sometimes by coupling infrastructure investments with vaccine diplomacy.³³ According to statistics produced by the Commerce Ministry, Chinese non-financial direct investments in BRI countries reached \$17.79 billion, clocking an 18.3 percent year-on-year increase, in 2020. Meanwhile, the value of new BRI contracts amounted to \$141.46 billion in 2020, equivalent of a 8.7 percent year-on-year fall, and China's total FDI posted a 3.3 percent year-on-year increase to \$132.94 billion in 2020.³⁴ This was significant given that UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) reported a significant decline in FDI globally from \$1.5 trillion in 2019 to an estimated \$859 billion in 2020, as the pandemic weighed on developed economies.³⁵ China also inked debt relief deals with 12 African countries in 2020, and participated in the G-20 debt suspension program while developing countries struggled with the economic fallout amid the pandemic. However, *The Wall Street Journal* reported last April that China was demanding collateral—including strategic state assets—in exchange for debt deferral or forgiveness.³⁶ Elsewhere, some stakeholders also lamented China's lack of transparency in fulfilling its debt relief promises.³⁷

While the datasets from the Commerce Ministry of China tell one story, other datasets outline another. Moody's Investors Service estimated that the value of Chinese-led new contracts and investments in BRI countries stood at \$23.5 billion in H1 2020, a far cry from the figure of \$104.7 billion recorded in 2019—a decline attributed to credit stress experienced by some BRI countries amid the pandemic.³⁸ Meanwhile according to the *China Global Investment Tracker* of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), which collates investment and construction transactions worth \$95 million or more, Chinese investments in BRI countries amounted to \$26.14 billion in 2020, a sharp fall from the 2019 figure of \$86.91 billion. Even with contract values taken into account, Chinese funding would reach only \$63.41 billion in 2020, trailing far behind the 2019 figure of \$159.28 billion.³⁹ The report further argued that the decline predated the pandemic: it was prompted by Beijing's tightening of control of outbound investments and growing reservations towards Chinese intentions on the part of potential recipient countries which have worsened amid the pandemic, and increasingly vocal anti-China sentiments being articulated in the West.

While the data from China may be debated, it remains that China has doubled down on its commitment to the BRI even as global FDI diminished in the wake of the pandemic, and China itself has become more conservative on foreign investments under the dual circulation strategy. Beijing has attempted to balance the need for economic prudence with the strategic imperative of global leadership; e.g., “green development” has become a priority in infrastructure construction, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi pledging to strengthen the BRI International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC), the BRI Green Investment Principles, and the BRI Green Investment Fund.⁴⁰ Moreover, the BRI is set to adopt eco-classification standards soon, as recommended by the BRIGC. Moody's has also observed that the BRI has become greener, with renewables accounting for around 58 percent of new BRI contract values in H1 2020, up from 18.5 percent when projects began in 2014.⁴¹ This trend parallels that which has been identified by the AEI database, where BRI green energy projects have grown its share of overall energy investments from 2.03 percent

in 2019 to 10.47 percent in 2020.⁴² The green focus of the BRI has been consistent with pledges from Xi Jinping in 2019 and 2020 to make the BRI more sustainable and to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. This comes as China showcased green development—including green finance and green buildings—in its 14th Five Year Plan.⁴³ The BRI has also begun emphasizing the “Digital Silk Road” (DSR) initiative launched in 2015, and the “Health Silk Road” (HSR) project officially introduced in 2017. This comes as COVID-19 has exposed gaps in global healthcare and communications infrastructure.

First termed the “Information Silk Road,” the DSR refers to the building of optical cable and satellite networks to facilitate information exchange and cooperation. The concept grew to encompass: digital infrastructure investment such as data centers, cross-border fiber optic cables via the China-ASEAN Information Harbor, development of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing, e-commerce and its promotion through digital free trade zones, and the establishment of global standards for telecommunications and cyber-sovereignty through multilateral platforms. This digital dimension, in particular, was identified as “a priority area for BRI cooperation in the next stage” in a speech by Wang Yi last December, and comes as China introduced the Global Initiative on Data Security last September to counter the U.S. attacks on its data security platforms.⁴⁴ The DSR is to be boosted by the HSR, which taps the BRI to coordinate public health policy cooperation via information sharing and medical assistance. Even before the pandemic, China was already making progress on the HSR through regional forums with ASEAN (with which it implemented a China-ASEAN Human Resources Training Programme on the Health Silk Road), Central and Eastern Europe, and the Arab world. The pandemic has hastened the relevance of the HSR, and Beijing has not hesitated to showcase the full measure of its advanced technologies for public health purposes during a pandemic.

Implementation of the DSR and HDR will not be devoid of challenges. The strict control of information flows that exists in China, for one, is at odds with the importance of accessibility of data, which is the *sine qua non* of digital transactions in the information age. In fact, Chinese technology companies are already facing scrutiny abroad amid Sino-U.S. tensions even as the U.S. is offering alternative products like its Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership to regional countries. Nor is the HSR immune to geopolitical competition. In order to head off China’s growing influence in Southeast Asia, amidst the pandemic, the Trump administration launched the U.S.-ASEAN Health Futures Initiative last April, and the Biden administration can be expected to continue, if not augment, American commitment under its banner.⁴⁵

Pandemic Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

The infectious nature of the disease, geographical proximity, and the depth of its people-to-people links with China contrived to render Southeast Asia especially vulnerable to the novel coronavirus when it was first discovered in Wuhan. It was hardly surprising that the first confirmed case detected outside of China was in Thailand. Within three days of China informing the WHO that the disease had surfaced within its borders, the ASEAN Secretariat Health Division alerted senior health officials in member states to the outbreak. The fact that regional leaders swiftly pledged to keep ASEAN open, to facilitate flows of goods, to reduce disruptions to the regional supply chain, and to exchange timely information and best

practices, suggested the primacy of economic considerations.⁴⁶ The ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergencies convened in March and was tasked to supervise regional efforts to combat the virus, including the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund (approved in April), the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies (launched last November), and the Japanese-supported ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases, which was established last November with guidance from the ASEAN Strategic Framework for Public Health Emergencies.

ASEAN economic ministers further adopted the Hanoi Plan of Action on *Strengthening ASEAN Economic Cooperation and Supply Chain Connectivity in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* last June, in a bid to protect the free flow of essential goods—especially medical goods and food supplies—and to keep critical infrastructure and trading routes open.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, ASEAN ministries of agriculture and trade have leveraged the ASEAN Food Security Information System and ASEAN+3 Emergency Rice Reserve to ensure sufficient food supplies even as the pandemic gathers pace and disrupts regional supply chains.⁴⁸ Information sharing was facilitated by the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre Network, the ASEAN Bio-Diaspora Regional Virtual Centre, and the ASEAN+3 Field Epidemiology Training Network, providing regional governments with timely data and guidance to guard against misinformation and enable appropriate measures to be undertaken.⁴⁹

As an intergovernmental organization rather than a supranational body, ASEAN does recognize its policy and resource limitations and has reached out to dialogue partners for support. The most important of such outreach initiatives was the Special ASEAN+3 Summit with China, Japan, and South Korea, which convened on April 14, 2020, where all parties agreed to work together in order to promote regional multi-sector cooperation in health, foreign affairs, and tourism.⁵⁰ As early as February 20, when China was still dealing with its domestic outbreak and the region was only beginning to see its first COVID-19 cases, Wang Yi met with his ASEAN counterparts in Laos in the organization's first COVID-19 summit with an external power. The conference expressed "full confidence" in China's ability to handle the crisis and pledged to step up cooperation under the ASEAN-China Health Ministers Meeting and the ASEAN-China Senior Officials Meeting on Health Development.⁵¹ At the time, this was a significant goodwill gesture to China as it faced international backlash for its handling of the epidemic. To that end, even though China may not have been pleased with the fact that some Southeast Asian countries were imposing travel restrictions on travelers from the Chinese mainland, it was recognized that the wording in the statement from the meeting, which articulated the desire of both parties to "resume normal people-to-people exchanges and practical cooperation at an early date," was noticeably less harsh compared to the views that were being expressed by the Trump administration, calling for the evacuation of personnel from its consulate in Wuhan and the imposition of an outright travel ban on Chinese travelers.⁵² The economic exigencies posed by the pandemic also catalyzed deeper economic cooperation between China and ASEAN. Economic ministers met on May 29 and renewed their commitment to the implementation of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement.⁵³ Both sides also launched the ASEAN-China Year of Digital Economy Cooperation in June, which covered areas such as smart cities, big data, and artificial intelligence, all of which dovetailed with China's Digital Silk Road initiative discussed above.⁵⁴ With regards to connectivity, ASEAN and Chinese transport ministers promised to enhance cooperation in transport and logistics.⁵⁵

As COVID-19 infections surged in the region, China moved swiftly to extend support. Cambodia and the Philippines were the first ASEAN member states to receive Chinese assistance in the form of test kits, surgical masks, protective suits, and ventilators, not least because of their close ties with China. With senior U.S. officials minimally engaged in the region owing to their own preoccupation with the pandemic and acrimonious domestic politics, the Chinese foreign minister visited Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos, Thailand, and Singapore last October, and visited Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines ahead of Biden’s inauguration this January. Meanwhile, China aggressively promoted its COVID-19 vaccines and the BRI, both of which would be central to the efforts of regional states to jumpstart their virus-battered economy.⁵⁶ For example, Wang Yi promised to donate 300,000 vaccine shots to Myanmar during his visit, one day after both sides planned to conduct a feasibility study on a railway which would offer China direct access to the Indian Ocean.⁵⁷ Wang Yi also promised the Philippines 500,000 doses along with \$1.34 billion in loans and \$77 million in grants for infrastructure projects.⁵⁸ In July, Beijing promised Manila priority access to the vaccine the day after President Rodrigo Duterte said he “made a plea” to Xi and recognized that Beijing was “in possession” of the disputed South China Sea.⁵⁹

Nor did equivocal efficacy results from tests on the Sinovac vaccine deter Southeast Asian countries—including Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia—from placing early orders in large quantities.⁶⁰ China was especially enthusiastic about engaging Indonesia on vaccine partnership, where it was prepared to supply generous quantities of vaccines in exchange for access to a sufficiently large caseload for efficacy tests, and presumably, more muted responses by Jakarta to the presence of Chinese coastguard vessels in the disputed waters of the South China Sea.⁶¹ Chinese leaders made clear that Southeast Asia was to be an important beneficiary of mask and vaccine diplomacy, and that China was prepared to “respond with no delay to reciprocate acts of friendship and kindness from ASEAN.”⁶² At the China-ASEAN Summit in November, Li Keqiang reinforced the cordial and cooperative state of play in Sino-ASEAN relations by highlighting the gratitude shown by ASEAN for the “contributions to their fight against COVID-19” made by China, and their receptiveness to Chinese vaccines as a “global public good.”⁶³ Later that month during the China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit, Xi Jinping promised to “actively consider the needs of ASEAN countries” when the vaccine becomes available, to contribute to the response fund and the medical supplies reserve, to launch a Liaison Mechanism for Public Health Emergencies with ASEAN, and to implement the China-ASEAN Human Resources Training Programme of Health Silk Road.⁶⁴

Though China may have exaggerated the extent of gratitude, Chinese gestures were in all likelihood agreeably received in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN Chairman’s Statement released at the conclusion of the September Post-Ministerial Conference with China stated that the association welcomes and looks forward to China’s donations to the response fund and the medical supplies reserve and that it welcomes support from China as the region recovers from COVID-19.⁶⁵ A survey by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute conducted from November 18, 2020, to January 10, 2021, also found that the ASEAN public selected China (44.2 percent) as the most helpful external power during COVID-19, followed some distance behind by Japan (18.2 percent) and the European Union (10.3 percent).⁶⁶ Given its strong economic rebound and the fact that Southeast Asia remains cardinal to Chinese interests, Beijing is expected to expand its presence in the region through the vehicles of public health and economic recovery.

Southeast Asia is acutely aware of the downsides of excessive reliance on China, whether for support during the pandemic or to confront the anticipated challenges of economic recovery after.⁶⁷ Despite an intensive diplomatic push on the back of COVID-19 health emergencies on the part of China, the survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute pointed out the reality that more Southeast Asians indicated they would prefer the U.S. if forced to choose between the two superpowers, up from 53.6 percent in 2020 to 61.5 percent in 2021, while China's share dropped from 46.4 percent to 38.5 percent. The same survey found that concern for Chinese political-strategic influence increased from 85.4 percent in 2020 to 88.6 percent in 2021, while concerns with China's economic clout inched up from 71.9 percent in 2020 to 72.3 percent in 2021. Equally striking was the fact that 46.3 percent of the respondents were of the view that China is a revisionist power intent on turning the region into its sphere of influence, up from 38.2 percent last year.⁶⁸

Notwithstanding the preoccupation of the U.S. administration with domestic crises, ASEAN persisted in efforts to engage Washington as part of its strategy of maintaining equidistance from the two great powers.⁶⁹ A virtual meeting was convened with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on April 23, followed by a meeting between health ministers a week later. The U.S. also launched the U.S.-ASEAN Health Futures Initiative that was envisaged to facilitate research, improve health system capacities, and develop human capital.⁷⁰ Flowing from this initiative was the establishment of the US-ASEAN Infection, Prevention, and Control Task Force to the tune of more than \$2.5 million.⁷¹ The U.S. further introduced a health component to the U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership, formed in 2018, and earmarked \$1.5 million to support the development of an ASEAN Public Health Emergency Coordination System to help the association respond better to future crises. As of September 9, the U.S. had allocated more than \$87 million to assist ASEAN's COVID-19 responses, mostly covering the training of medical workers, technical expert visits, and health system enhancement, since the U.S. priorities did not permit the export of medical equipment overseas in large quantities.

Significantly, Southeast Asia has also sought to engage other regional powers in its efforts to battle the pandemic while avoiding overreliance on a single power for support. Japan has provided medical supplies and equipment, pledged \$50 million for the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases, and contributed \$1 million for the ASEAN Response Fund.⁷² Japan and ASEAN adopted an economic resilience action plan in April and upgraded the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership in August to help boost bilateral trade and investments. The new prime minister, Suga Yoshihide, picked Southeast Asia for his first overseas tour, where he advocated for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, underlining the importance of the region to Japan. South Korea also weighed in to Southeast Asian efforts against COVID-19 by providing medical supplies, donating to the ASEAN Respond Fund, and committing \$5 million to enhance ASEAN COVID-19 detection capacity.⁷³

ASEAN has also engaged the European Union and Australia. The EU has committed €800 million to help ASEAN bolster its COVID-19 response capacity, more than what either China or the U.S. has contributed, as they upgraded relations with the association from dialogue partnership to strategic partnership as part of the EU's efforts to articulate an

Indo-Pacific strategy.⁷⁴ Australia has similarly pledged AU\$1 million to the ASEAN Respond Fund, AU\$21 million to the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases, and AU\$23 million to fund a new ASEAN-Australia Health Security Initiative to prevent and mitigate future pandemics.⁷⁵ It has also articulated support for a new five-year ASEAN-Australia Political-Security Partnership covering maritime, cybersecurity, and other risks for regional stability amid the pandemic. In September, Australia announced the rollout of an AU\$60 million initiative to monitor wastewater for traces of COVID-19 in the Mekong region, but which would also support other activities that would advance economic integration and digital connectivity with ASEAN.⁷⁶

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic poses significant challenges to humanity, threatening the lives and health of citizens of nearly every country in the world. But the challenges have not been confined to public health and well-being. Indeed, in keeping with the pattern of contemporary geopolitics and relations between the two great powers of the day, COVID-19 became yet another arena for facets of Sino-U.S. rivalry to be played out. Both powers were swift to engage in a blame-game, even as they proved considerably slower in taking necessary measures to curb the spread of the virus (although this could also be attributed to the medical community's lack of familiarity with and understanding of the novel coronavirus in its early days), let alone in setting aside differences to lead global efforts to contain it. For the states of Southeast Asia, a region that lies at the geographical and strategic crossroads of major external powers, adjusting to this rivalry as it manifested against the backdrop of the pandemic without compromising autonomy, has been a priority.

For Southeast Asia, COVID-19 drove home the stark reality of the need to balance growing disquiet with Chinese assertiveness—at times, aggression—with the need to maintain, if not deepen, economic and political ties with Beijing. Clearly, China has succeeded in its battle against the COVID-19 pandemic within its borders. Concomitantly, this success has injected added impetus and provided a platform for it to pursue its foreign policy objectives, which it has done through the provision of medical supplies and vaccine diplomacy, together with continued economic engagement, particularly with states struggling to control the pandemic and its effects. Many Southeast Asian states continue to nurse misgivings toward growing Chinese assertiveness in the region, and these sentiments show no signs of abating despite Chinese assistance in this time of need. This ambivalence is not entirely surprising given China's persistence in asserting its territorial claims in the South China Sea, its exercise of geopolitical dominance of the Mekong region, its display of foreign policy adventurism elsewhere in Asia (including the use of coercion), and its tendency to dangle the tantalizing prospect of development in exchange for some degree of foreign policy alignment, especially towards Southeast Asian states that have already shown a predisposition to such tactics. These misgivings have arguably been exacerbated by the uncertainties surrounding the future of American engagement in the region. Reeling from their own struggles with the pandemic, not to mention the dire state of its domestic politics, it remains to be seen if the U.S. will have the bandwidth to play the larger role in regional affairs that Southeast Asian states are hoping for.

The exercise of agency and autonomy through the diversification of strategic engagements has proven a vital element of regional diplomacy. In response to the pandemic, Southeast Asian states have actively pursued such diversification not only through efforts at reinforcing cooperation within ASEAN but also by using ASEAN as a vehicle to engage external powers. This has been expressed in the form of a range of agreements signed with their dialogue partners that serve the goal of not only procuring much-needed aid and support for the public health crises in the region, but also the goal of clearly demonstrating that the region is not prepared to be beholden to any one major power.

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