

# ASEAN Regional Potentials for Combating COVID-19

Rizky Widian<sup>1</sup> and Vrameswari Omega W.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Parahyangan Catholic University, Indonesia, rizkywidian23@unpar.ac.id

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Parahyangan Catholic University, Indonesia, vrameswariomega@unpar.ac.id

## ABSTRACT

*The coronavirus disease (now known as COVID-19) has quickly spread across the world. Due to the rapid increase in the number of cases, COVID-19 has been declared by WHO as a global pandemic and has affected many aspects of human lives. Various policies have been taken by the governments at the national level such as 'lockdown' policy or advanced social distancing. The threat of this global pandemic is transnational in nature, hence, regional and multilateral cooperation would be required. In this case, ASEAN members have already discussed several collective steps at the regional level. Thus, this article intends to explore and elaborate on the potentials of ASEAN to encourage the realization of states' cooperation and commitments to fight the regional challenges under the outbreak condition.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN, COVID-19, Potentials, Regional Efforts

## COVID-19: The Spreads and Its Potential Impacts

At the end of 2019, China reported some cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei Province.<sup>1</sup> While the cause of these cases remains unknown at first<sup>2</sup>, the coronavirus disease (now known as COVID-19) quickly spread across the world. The infection rates become more and more worrying

as death counts also increase from time to time. Many government officials around the world are also infected by the virus.<sup>3</sup> It does not need a long time before fears overcome so many people. For example, panic buying happens everywhere in the wake of COVID-19.<sup>4</sup>

While many of the patients continue to recover from the disease, the next challenges

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<sup>1</sup> "WHO Timeline - COVID-19," WHO, Last modified April 12, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/08-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>.

<sup>2</sup> "Pneumonia of unknown cause – China," WHO, Last modified January 5, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unknown-cause-china/en/>.

<sup>3</sup> Several government officials around the world tests positive for Covid-19. For some examples, see: Eko Wahyudi & Fransisca Christy, "Indonesian Minister Budi Karya Tests Positive for Coronavirus," *Tempo.co*, March 14, 2020, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://en.tempo.co/read/1319630/indonesian-minister-budi-karya-tests-positive-for-coronavirus>; Mark Landler, "Prince Charles Tests Positive for Coronavirus," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2020, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/world/europe/prince-charles-coronavirus.html>; David G Rose, "Iran's deputy health minister tests positive for coronavirus," *The*

*Telegraph*, February 25, 2020, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/irans-deputy-health-minister-tests-positive-coronavirus/>.

<sup>4</sup> For example in Indonesia and Singapore, see: Nina Loasana, "Panic buying hits Jakarta supermarkets as govt announces first COVID-19 cases," *The Jakarta Post*, March 3, 2020, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/03/panic-buying-hits-jakarta-supermarkets-as-govt-announces-first-covid-19-cases.html> & Frances Mao, "Coronavirus panic: Why are people stockpiling toilet paper?," *BBC*, March 4, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-51731422>. For example in the United States, see: Gabriella Borter, "No milk, no bleach: Americans awake to coronavirus panic buying," *Reuters*, March 15, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-shoppers/no-milk-no-bleach-americans-awake-to-coronavirus-panic-buying-idUSKBN211171>.

arise. The COVID-19 is now affecting many aspects of human lives besides health. To combat the virus, governments around the world come up with several initiatives. Several countries prefer the 'lockdown'<sup>5</sup> policy and some others prefer to implement an advanced social distancing.<sup>6</sup> Countries around the world also take drastic measures such as shutting down airports even completely sealing their borders.<sup>7</sup>

People are told to stay or work at home. The virus constrains their mobility and, in the end, affects the economy in general. In Indonesia, for example, Jo Carolina, the Secretary-General of ASPELINDO (*Asosiasi Pelumas Indonesia*) stated that the COVID-19 condition has decreased lubricant oil industry revenue by at least 50%. She also mentioned that COVID-19 disease has caused the delay of imported raw materials for production because the shipments are getting quarantined for at least 14 days in international ports outside Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said that the global economy will decrease by three percent in 2020.<sup>9</sup> The IMF also stated that it is very likely that the global economy will face the worst

recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it is clear that the COVID-19 outbreak affecting our lives both in terms of our health and our economy.

### ***Current Regional Efforts***

In the face of the viral outbreak, all states around the world should continue their cooperation efforts. This outbreak becomes a security issue and has to be taken care of immediately. COVID-19 now appears as a serious threat, despite it is not traditional in nature such as a military threat to our national sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> Non-traditional does not mean that similar cases have not occurred before. There were several cases in the course of our histories such as the Black Death<sup>12</sup> and Spanish Flu<sup>13</sup> that killed millions of the world population. There are also cases of SARS, MERS, and H5N1 diseases.

Further, recently, although the magnitude of the infection rate is radically different from COVID-19, the world witnessed the outbreak of

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see: Dmitry Zaks, "Italy extends lockdown until 'at least' April 12," *The Jakarta Post*, April 6, 2020, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/06/italy-extends-lockdown-until-at-least-april-12.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Budi Sutrisno, "Indonesia to evaluate partial lockdown as companies, factories continue business as usual," *The Jakarta Post*, April 21, 2020, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/20/indonesia-to-evaluate-partial-lockdown-as-companies-factories-continue-business-as-usual.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Al Jazeera, "Coronavirus: Travel restrictions, border shutdowns by country," *Al Jazeera*, April 21, 2020, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/coronavirus-travel-restrictions-border-shutdowns-country-200318091505922.html>.

<sup>8</sup> These information gathered by direct interview and discussion with the Secretary General of ASPELINDO.

<sup>9</sup> Al Jazeera, "Timeline: How the new coronavirus spread," *Al Jazeera*, last modified April 21, 2020, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/timeline-china-coronavirus-spread-200126061554884.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Al Jazeera, "IMF says 'worst recession since Great Depression' is likely," *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2020, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/imf-worst-recession-great-depression-200414125253286.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Traditionally, security studies focus in the phenomenon of war and military threats. Nevertheless, there are several experts suggested the broadening of security studies because nonmilitary phenomena could also threatening states and individuals. For traditional conception of security, see: Stephen M. Walt, "The Renaissance of Security Studies," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Jun., 1991), p. 211-239, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2600471>. For example of the work to broadening the concept, see: Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books LTD, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> William L. Langer "The Black Death," *Scientific American*, vol. 210, no. 2 (1964): p. 114-21, [www.jstor.org/stable/24936021](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24936021).

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Flecknoe, Benjamin Charles Wakefield & Aidan Simmons, "Plagues & wars: the 'Spanish Flu' pandemic as a lesson from history," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, (2018): p. 1-3, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13623699.2018.1472892>.

the Ebola Virus in Africa.<sup>14</sup> The African Union members work together to deal with the Ebola Virus that is spreading in their region.<sup>15</sup> Several organizations, along with the African Union as African Development Bank, European Union, World Bank, Mano River Union, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), works together to contribute to the recovery effort while emergency response continues to tackle the outbreak that took place in 2014.<sup>16</sup> These prove that regional arrangements could do something concerning disease outbreak.

This is not to say that ASEAN, as the regional body of Southeast Asia, has not done anything in the face of COVID-19. There are several efforts already discussed at the regional level. For example, on 19 February 2020, Defense Ministers of ASEAN met in Ha Noi, producing the Joint Statement on Defense Cooperation against Disease Outbreak.<sup>17</sup> On 10 March 2020, ASEAN Economic Ministers, gathered in Da Nang, Viet Nam, creating a joint statement and resolve to remain committed to

keep the ASEAN market open for trade and investment to mitigate the economic impact of COVID-19.<sup>18</sup> On 14 April 2020, the Special ASEAN Summit via video conference came up with the Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).<sup>19</sup> Further, on the same day, the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) meeting also being held virtually, joined by President Xi Jinping, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, and President Moon Jae-in.<sup>20</sup> The result of these meetings is the commitment to tackle the outbreak and prepare for the post-outbreak recovery both socially and economically.

The leaders of Southeast Asian countries then agreed to establish an ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund to secure the availability of crucial medical supplies and equipment in the region.<sup>21</sup> The fund itself is a reallocation of existing available funds, technical, and financial support from ASEAN's partners, notably ASEAN Plus One and APT.<sup>22</sup> This is accompanied by the commitment to refrain from

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<sup>14</sup> BBC, "Ebola: Mapping the outbreak," *BBC*, January 14, 2016, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28755033>. The Ebola outbreak also occurs in 2018, see: "New Ebola outbreak declared in Democratic Republic of the Congo," WHO, last modified May 8, 2018, accessed April 18, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/08-05-2018-new-ebola-outbreak-declared-in-democratic-republic-of-the-congo>.

<sup>15</sup> "Timeline of AU Response to the Ebola Outbreak," African Union, last modified February 3, 2015, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://au.int/pt/newsevents/26997/timeline-au-response-ebola-outbreak>. For example of African Union responses in the recent Ebola outbreak, see: "Update On African Union Actions in Response to Recent Ebola Outbreaks," African Union, last modified June 13, 2019, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20190613/update-african-union-actions-response-recent-ebola-outbreaks>.

<sup>16</sup> UNDP and partners, *Recovering from the Ebola Crisis* (UNDP, 2015), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> "Joint Statement by The ASEAN Defence Ministers on Defense Cooperation Against Disease Outbreaks," ASEAN, last modified February 20, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://asean.org/joint-statement-asean-defence-ministers-defense-cooperation-disease-outbreaks/>.

<sup>18</sup> "Strengthening ASEAN'S Economic Resilience in Response to The Outbreak of The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)," ASEAN, last modified March 10, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://asean.org/strengthening-aseans-economic-resilience-response-outbreak-coronavirus-disease-covid-19/>.

<sup>19</sup> "Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," ASEAN, last modified April 14, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://asean.org/declaration-special-asean-summit-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/>.

<sup>20</sup> "Joint Statement of the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," ASEAN, last modified April 14, 2020, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://asean.org/joint-statement-special-asean-plus-three-summit-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/>.

<sup>21</sup> Dian Septiari, "Leaders support establishment of ASEAN COVID-19 response fund," *The Jakarta Post*, April 14, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2020/04/14/leaders-support-establishment-of-asean-covid-19-response-fund.html>.

<sup>22</sup> CNN Indonesia, "Jokowi Usul Bentuk ASEAN Covid-19 Response Fund," *CNN Indonesia*, April 14, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20200414193511->

imposing unnecessary restrictions on the flow of goods, especially strategic goods for combating COVID-19 such as medical, food, and essential supplies.<sup>23</sup> The commitments in the recent declaration reflect that ASEAN has the potential, especially in terms of goodwill and framework or a basis for cooperation, for combating the virus at the regional level.

### ***ASEAN Potentials for Regional Efforts***

The Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an important milestone, modality, and potential for regional efforts. It envisages the commitment of states to tackle the issues together without endangering the interest of others. In this time of crisis, it is understandable that every state has the interests to secure its people from dying and to keep the national economy from rolling down. This is why regional cooperation and coordination are vital. The Beggar-thy-neighbor<sup>24</sup> policy is the last thing we want to see in this situation, as history told us, especially in the case of the Great Depression in the 1930s and its aftermath, that this kind of policy would create more problems than saving us from it. Thus, the realization of the commitments in the declaration is very important.

Theoretically speaking, the fear of being cheated, that is, the condition when we cooperate and other states do not, is one of the factors that could inhibit international cooperation.<sup>25</sup> In this regard, Robert Jervis already explained that several factors make international cooperation

becomes more likely. First, the chance of cooperation will be increased if there is something that increases the incentives to cooperate or there is something that decreases the cost of being exploited by others. Second, there is something that decreases the incentives to exploit each other or there is something that makes no cooperation with each other is costly. Third, there is something that increases the expectations of countries that their counterparts are willing to cooperate.<sup>26</sup>

Those factors fit with the condition in ASEAN and could reflect the potential of the organization to address the issue in a cooperative and coordinative way. The first factor, the incentive to cooperate, is clear. Effective cooperation in securing the availability of medical equipment, for example, would certainly benefit all member states. The eradication of the virus from the regional population is, after all, the most desirable. In regards to the second factor, under the outbreak condition, it is not wise for ASEAN member states to exploit each other. Pragmatically, they need the medical equipment and regional fund to help their domestic efforts. While it is understandable if one state desires to secure its people first, exploiting each other or not cooperating is not the solution they should seek as resources are limited and there are actors nearby that could cooperate with. Lastly, the third factor is related closely to the declaration to combat the virus together. At the very least, the declaration gives a positive sign for all member states that they are willing to cooperate. Thus, the

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532-493566/jokowi-usul-bentuk-asean-covid-19-response-fund.

<sup>23</sup> "Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," ASEAN, last modified April 14, 2020, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://asean.org/declaration-special-asean-summit-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/>.

<sup>24</sup> A kind of policy that designed to improve our own country's economic situation at the expense others. For further information, see: Daniel W. Drezner, "Beggar-thy-neighbor, take one," *Foreign Policy*, October 20, 2008,

accessed April 21, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2008/10/20/beggar-thy-neighbor-take-one/>.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph M. Grieco, "Anarchy and the Limits of Cooperation: A Realist Critique of the Newest Liberal Institutionalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer, 1988), p. 487, [www.jstor.org/stable/2706787](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706787).

<sup>26</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Jan., 1978), p. 171, [www.jstor.org/stable/2009958](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2009958).

condition of the outbreak itself creates suitable incentives for ASEAN member states to cooperate. Their goodwill, then, is a potential for the coordinative and cooperative action to be conducted to effectively tackle the outbreak regionally.

While the cooperation itself is indeed important, ASEAN members should focus on regional efforts. This is related to Kenneth Oye's explanation of cooperation. The more the number of actors in cooperation, the more risks that the state will face in cooperation such as the free-riding problem. The smaller the number of actors involved in cooperation would generally increase the likelihood of cooperation.<sup>27</sup> In this case, ASEAN members should prioritize their regional efforts since it is more viable in the need for collaborative action to tackle the domestic yet transnational problems of the COVID-19 outbreak. The number of ASEAN members that is smaller than the global community as general would increase the chance of regional cooperation to work efficiently. This is not to say that ASEAN members should abandon global efforts altogether. The global efforts and frameworks, such as the cooperation and the share of information from WHO is indeed crucial and could be used to implement regional policy even further. Nevertheless, there are some initiatives already mentioned by the members such as the setting up of regional funding and the commitment to open the flow of goods, especially strategic goods for combating COVID-19, within the region. These commitments are more viable to be realized by the ASEAN member states regionally since the cooperation is more likely in smaller numbers. ASEAN, as a regional organization, provides the arena and becomes the

instrument for a smaller number of actors that could increase the chance of cooperation. The existence of ASEAN as a regional organization itself, then, could be seen as a potential for the likelihood of regional efforts.

Further, the nature of the COVID-19 as a non-traditional threat, perhaps, could also affect the likelihood of regional cooperation including ASEAN partners. In Southeast Asia, especially for ASEAN, non-traditional security is the area that allows ASEAN to steer the security agenda and involve extra-regional power such as China.<sup>28</sup> There are several sectors of non-traditional security cooperation such as in energy, health, and food sectors that involve external partners such as China, Japan, and South Korea.<sup>29</sup> This cooperation proves that cooperation in non-traditional sectors is not a foreign concept for ASEAN and its partners. Thus, these experiences of ASEAN and its partners could be a potential for the regional effort in this time of crisis.

In conclusion, ASEAN already has the potential for its members to cooperate and combat the COVID-19 together. The potentials here can be defined as the modality of ASEAN to encourage the realization of states' cooperation to tackle the regional challenge. The first potential would be the goodwill of ASEAN members, reflected in the Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The commitments in this declaration could be a basis for mitigating the beggar-thy-neighbor policy in the time of crisis where the member states agree to refrain any unnecessary restriction on the flow of goods such as medical equipment. Further, they are also willing to create the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund for the sake of facilitating

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<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Oye, "Explaining Cooperation under Anarchy: Hypotheses and Strategies," *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Oct., 1985), p.18-22, doi:10.2307/2010349.

<sup>28</sup> Ali Abdullah Wibisono, "ASEAN-China Non-Traditional Security Cooperation and the Inescapability of the Politics

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<sup>29</sup> Ali Abdullah Wibisono, "ASEAN-China Non-Traditional Security Cooperation and the Inescapability of the Politics of Security," p. 50.

regional cooperation against the virus. These commitments could increase the incentive to cooperate, discourage free-riding or defective behavior, and increase the positive expectation that all the member states are willing to cooperate. Furthermore, ASEAN, as a regional organization, has the role of the arena and instrument for its relatively limited members than the global community as a whole. This condition could increase the efficiency, coordination, and the likelihood of the regional effort itself. ASEAN also has the experiences of cooperation with China, Japan, and South Korea in non-traditional security sectors. These experiences and relations with the three partners could be a significant factor and modality for the regional effort for combating COVID-19 since the recent meeting of ASEAN also included the APT format.

Therefore, it is clear that ASEAN has the potentials for combating COVID-19 through regional efforts. All of the potentials mentioned before could make it possible for the ASEAN members to implement the commitment to work together at the regional level. These commitments, if realized effectively, would surely help the national interest of each member state. Nevertheless, a potential could not be useful if the member states do not utilize them. Although the potentials are there, the chance of the regional effort being ineffective, inefficient, or even not realized practically, surely presents. The declaration and the goodwill would become meaningless if the member states do not realize their commitment to cooperate. Then, it is vital to keep the goodwill of ASEAN members to cooperate alive so it could be realized to help each other for combating the outbreak of COVID-19.

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