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## Disruption Redux

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**Lessons from  
virtual APR**

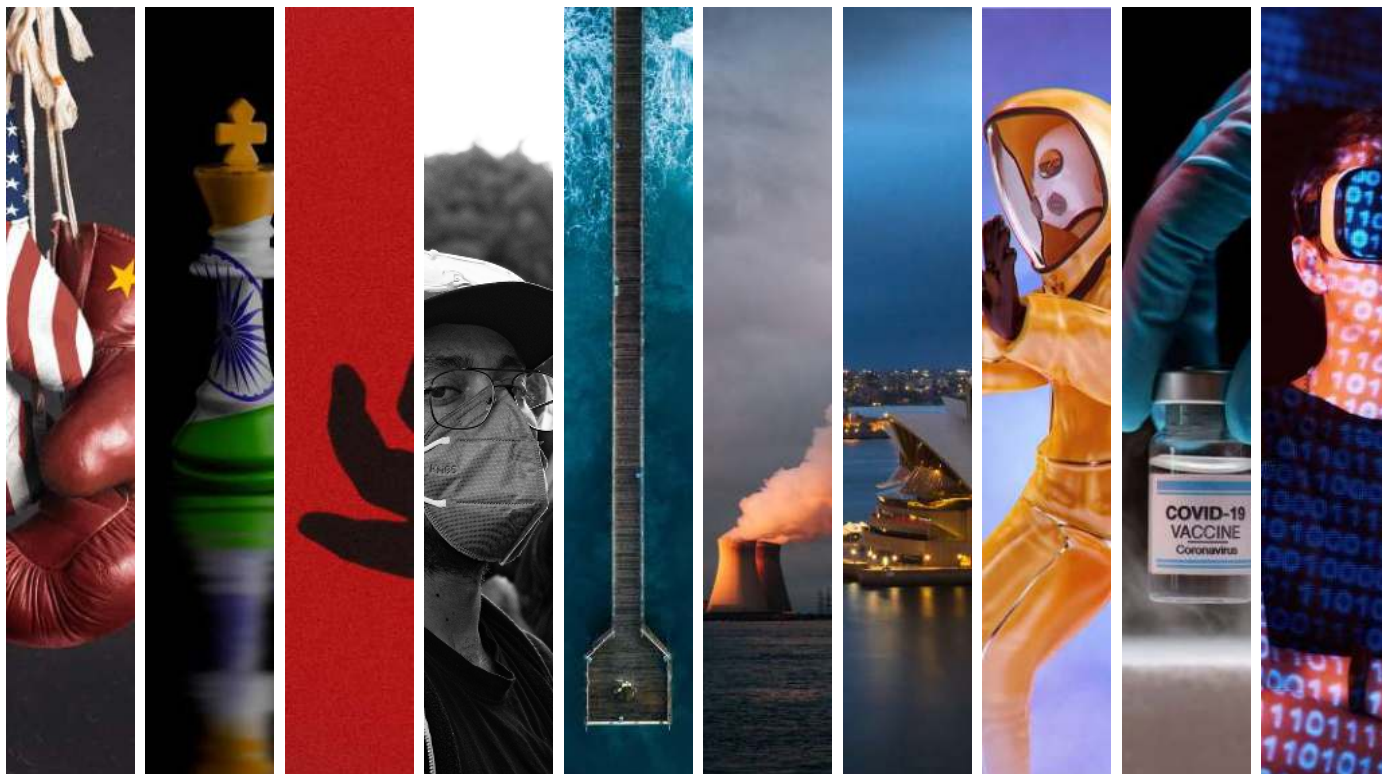
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**If we unite, we  
can defeat  
pandemic**

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**Australia and  
Southeast Asia:  
Outlining  
Canberra's  
common vision  
for the region**

# Content



## 02 Covid's 'failure' to realign Asia-Pacific geopolitics

By Zarina Zainuddin & Muhammad Sinatra

## 05 India-US dynamics will determine Quad's relevance in Southeast Asia

By Yanitha Meena Louis

## 08 Transnational crime still thriving despite lockdowns

By Izzah Ibrahim

## 11 How nations used Covid-19 to chip away at rights

By Tashny Sukumaran

## 14 The South China Sea during Covid-19: Strategic opportunism or failed diplomacy?

By Angeline Tan

## 17 Lessons from virtual APR

By Tan Wan-Peng

## 20 Australia and Southeast Asia: Outlining Canberra's common vision for the region

By Dr Justin Lee

## 23 If we unite, we can defeat pandemic

By Ouyang Yujing

## 26 Recovery elusive, as long as vaccines not distributed equitably

By Harris Zainul

## 29 'Safe' cyberspace requires multi-stakeholder solutions

By Farlina Said

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# Editor's Note

## Our response to age of disruption

**T**he “focus” of this edition of *ISIS Focus* is centred on the conversations that shaped *ISIS* Malaysia’s flagship regional conference, the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR). In some respects, the roundtable which was convened for the 34th time on 17 and 18 August 2021, reflected its theme of Disruption Redux. It was not only the first APR to be held virtually, but the first APR that was forcibly postponed.

Disruption has long been a buzzword in the academic and think-tank circuits. Some of the disruptions were then new – ripple effects of the ongoing tech/cyber evolution, challenges to the resource-energy nexus and the enmeshment of climate change to “traditional” security challenges among others. Many are now well ingrained in the smorgasbord of interlinked challenges policymakers have to address.

Other disruptions were more familiar – major power rivalry, terrorism, pandemics and movements by refugees. These are now back with a vengeance, compounded by fissures that were perhaps wilfully ignored and more recent challenges.

We begin this special edition of *Focus* by examining how the pandemic has failed to “align” the geopolitical focus of the Asia-Pacific region and has instead been amalgamated existing geopolitical inflection points. How will the region fare in its long journey to recovery as strategic competition between the United States and China continue to define this region and its architectures?

On that score, we also hear of how a combination of vaccines, tech and security outreach by members of

the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue can enhance its cooperation with Asean, and whether progress, or lack of, in the South China Sea dispute has been marked by strategic opportunism or a failure in diplomacy.

Closer to home, longstanding and familiar challenges remain seemingly unshaken by the pandemic. The most vulnerable in Southeast Asia continue to suffer the brunt of what has shaped up to be an unequal pandemic – requiring urgent coordination of best practices, resources and policies by governments and regional organisations.

In some countries, pandemic mitigation seemed to come hand in hand with increasingly authoritarian governance that chipped away at hard won civil liberties and standards of accountability.

The architectures and norms that shape both national and regional policymaking are in the midst of their greatest disruptive phase since the Second World War. It has been severe enough that the new normal of policymaking appears to be reactive, rather than proactive. This in turn will continue to plague both policymakers and the people whose lives are directly impacted by the decisions of the former. Like it not, uncertainty that comes with this flux and disruptiveness appears to be our new normal, at least for some time to come.

The editors of *ISIS Focus* remain ever grateful to all contributors and readers for your continued support.

**We wish you a happy and productive reading!**



# Covid's 'failure' to realign Asia-Pacific geopolitics

*By Zarina Zainuddin & Muhammad Sinatra*

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*Pandemic amplifies US-China strategic contention in Asean, while region working towards recovery.*



**E**ighteen months into the pandemic, we have witnessed how Covid-19 has emerged as a political variable that can recalibrate states. We see this in the domestic setting of some countries where the pandemic contributed to a change in administration.

Despite the pandemic's threat and ensuing crisis, it has not instigated a realignment of global power that lean towards cooperation among countries. In some respects, it even accentuates the strategic contention that has posed political and security dilemmas for decades.

In Asia-Pacific, this is most evident in the relationship between the two major powers, the United States and China. The pandemic amplified the strategic contention between the US and China, which began long before Covid-19 first emerged, and intensified it.

From a big picture perspective, the claim that the pandemic has facilitated a climate of cooperation and mutual assistance appears to be too optimistic.

For example, Washington's "China-containment" policy was seeded during the time of president Barack Obama. Through policies such as the "Pivot to Asia", Obama's administration diverged from the traditional strategy of engaging China, as institutionalised by former secretary of state Henry Kissinger.

President Donald Trump did take this approach to another level. His administration attempted to push the US into a global hegemon, emphasised the principle of unilateralism and elevated strategic contention against China.

The trade war, battle for control over market share, decoupling over tech industries were some instances of the heightened tension.

Trump's decision to refer Covid-19 as the "Wuhan virus" sharpened the contention at a time when multilateral efforts were needed to manage the pandemic.

The pandemic, however, put a dent in the hawks' plan to contain China via the Quadrilateral Security Architecture (the Quad). Often perceived as an architecture aimed at countering China's influence, the Quad leadership suffered a setback when two strongmen in

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**... conflict between the US and China could derail the region's attempt to rebound from the pandemic.**

its cohort faced scrutiny at home. Trump lost office partly because of mismanaging the pandemic while Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity plunged because of the deadly second Covid wave.

President Joe Biden's win returned the US leadership in international arena to normalcy. Biden's initial success at increasing vaccination rates – followed by the end of

lockdown and the opening of the country – not only gave a glimmer of hope to the rest of the world but restored American lustre.

Under Biden's administration, the US re-joined multilateral engagements. Biden sought to re-engage allies, such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, India and others in the region, in the spirit of fostering multilateral cooperation that frayed during Trump's era.

Still, the US did not commit a U-turn on China, merely changing its approach away from unilateral actions that characterised Trump's policies. In that way, Biden merely retained the distance, which has been growing since Obama's time.

Less than three months into the Biden presidency, the Quad – which refers to itself as a grouping of like-minded democracies – had its first summit virtually, promising a donation of one billion doses of vaccine to Asia and a concerted approach towards China.

There is even synchronicity in the lingo as the Quad members favoured the term "Indo-Pacific" over "Asia-Pacific" in reference to the region. The shift in terminology signals the attempt to move the region's centre of gravity away from China.

The continued strategic contention between the US and China will push the latter to seek its own allies. Before the pandemic, China had been rigorously embarking on a soft-power campaign through its Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI).

This course might not be as tenable now. The economic recovery processes from Covid-19 and the severe global financial constraints would make it difficult for China to resume its vigour in promoting the BRI. China has also yet to respond to criticism and pushbacks against some of the BRI projects.

China's likely course of action would be through vaccine diplomacy. This is in place with Sinovac and Sinopharm used in Indonesia, Cambodia and Malaysia, among others. The Chinese move would likely put them on a collision course with other exporting countries hoping to embark on vaccine diplomacy as well.

A competition in vaccine diplomacy may not be so bad. It could lead to a faster distribution, particularly to the countries that need it most and not just to those that serve strategic interests.

China and Russia deepened during the pandemic, particularly after Trump, with whom President Vladimir Putin enjoyed a rapport, lost his re-election and China had to contend with US-led alliances in its backyard. There is danger that these ideological-based alliances would set the stage for a return of the "us vs them" scenario at the regional level.

The pandemic also appears to facilitate certain trends in Asean. Years of efforts at navigating the uncertainty resulting from the US-

while the recovery rate differs from one member state to another.

On a brighter note, Asean is aware of the difficulties ahead and has engaged in consultation and cooperation to combat Covid-19. Asean is aware that its relevancy depends on preserving its centrality and its future prosperity hinges on actions it has and will have to take.

The pandemic did not lead to a global realignment, it merely accentuated its possibility. This is where the US and China need to show leadership in a time when it is needed most. The two must also create a conducive environment for the rest of the world to rebound and rebuild their shattered economies as well as societies.



A Vietnam-led anti-China protest in London. Asean risks being torn apart if its member states are forced to choose between the US and China.

In the long run, China may continue with efforts to increase its influence within Asia-Pacific as demonstrated by its push for a free-trade agreement. Even as the US assured the region that the Indo-Pacific strategy is a redefining exercise and not a collective coalition to contain China, it should not be surprising if an Indo-Pacific vs Asia-Pacific narrative turns into a proxy US-China competition.

Meanwhile, the relationship between

China strategic competition may culminate in an Asean torn apart at its seams if member states are forced to choose sides. This scenario is likely as both powers seek regional allies through aid, vaccine diplomacy and bilateral deals.

Heightened tension or a tit-for-tat conflict between the US and China could derail the region's attempt to rebound from the pandemic. This is made more difficult by the fact that the region lacks a unified approach



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# India-US dynamics will determine Quad's relevance in Southeast Asia

By Yanitha Meena Louis

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*Vaccines, security, tech among ways to enhance  
the Quad's presence in Asean.*





The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's (Quad) first-ever summit early this year put the spotlight on a number of things – the new Biden administration's commitment to the Quad, particularly after Donald Trump reiterated the United States' unwavering support for it.

In February 2020, during his visit to India, former US president Trump, speaking alongside Indian Prime Minister Modi, referenced the "Quad initiative". The mention signalled a top-level endorsement of the concept, which had remained at the working level until then. Against the backdrop of revitalised India-US ties, reaffirmed by the Modi-Trump friendship, it was clear that Washington's relationship with New Delhi would significantly shape the trajectory of the Quad.

When Biden took office, the focus fell on whether he would pursue Quad initiatives and more importantly, how India-US relations would continue under his leadership. The summit in March was an indication that the Quad would feature prominently in Biden's foreign policy. It was also a mechanism to ease into working relations with New Delhi since the Democrats allegedly have serious concerns about Modi's government.



The summit launched three working groups – the vaccine experts, climate, and critical and emerging technology. It also articulated a clear focus on Southeast Asia as beneficiaries of these initiatives, particularly with the Quad's commitment to deliver up to one billion vaccine doses to Asean, the Indo-Pacific and beyond by the end of 2022.

Driven by "complex financing vehicles" to increase exponentially vaccine production capacity, the Quad looked to tap on the strengths of each member, with India as the main vaccine manufacturing hub. India's deadly second Covid-19 wave, however, threw the Quad off pace for a bit.

Initial gusto waned when the US was accused of being apprehensive about extending assistance and solidarity message to India. India's competitors, China and Pakistan, seized on the moment and were quick to respond and empathise with the predicament. India's traditional, time-tested ally Russia was also one of the first countries to respond.

With criticism pouring in over the Americans' sluggish response and questions over the relevance of the Quad, Washington eventually extended financial aid and sent medical supplies to India. This brief incident raised questions about the Quad's cohesiveness.

In fact, narratives regressed to reflect the "inorganic" nature of the grouping during this time. Above all, India-US ties under Biden were scrutinised and it did not take long for doubts to crop up vis-à-vis the Quad's vaccine commitments to Southeast Asia.

Washington has, since then, gone the extra mile to support New Delhi on the pandemic front. These efforts have not only contributed to strengthening India-US relations, but

also improving the Quad's internal dynamics and getting back on track to fulfilling the billion-dose promise.

As of August 2021, the US has declared that the Quad is on track to produce the billion doses of Covid-19 vaccine in India for Asia by the end of 2022, bouncing back from the delays caused by India's second wave. The "I'll cover you" dynamic that exists between India and the US within the Quad framework will effectively reassert the grouping's presence in Southeast Asia.

During his visit to India in July, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stressed that the India-US partnership is critical in delivering stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. This hinted at the enhanced role Washington and New Delhi would adopt in engaging with Southeast Asia.

“  
... the Quad has already indicated that it would play a more enhanced role in countering China's escalation.”





Former US president Donald Trump emphasised the “Quad initiative” during his visit to India last year, an initiative being continued by Joe Biden.

There are distinct commonalities between Washington’s Asia policy and New Delhi’s Act East policy. These emphasise on preserving the institutional centrality of Asean; enhancing diplomatic, economic and military linkages with Southeast Asia to maintain stability in the region; and managing China’s influence through its Belt and Road Initiative and more recently, its extensive vaccine diplomacy.

At a time when the Quad is viewed as a threat to Asean centrality, only initiatives that yield tangible outputs will reassure Southeast Asia of its intentions and the New Delhi-Washington equation in these efforts is pivotal.

The Quad’s push for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, which underscores Asean centrality, will complement and benefit from India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, the US co-led Blue Dot Network and also the India-US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership. Notably, the strategic partnership is contingent on the recognition of Asean centrality and adherence to international law and good governance.

Why is the India-US dynamic especially important for the Quad and its acceptance in Southeast Asia? There are three reasons. One, even though Biden is building on Trump’s Indo-Pacific pivot, this is still a new human rights-championing Democrat administration, and it remains to be seen how sustainable the favourable India-US ties will be in the long run. The slightest fissure in these relations will have long-term repercussions for the Quad, including possible stagnation of efforts.

Two, given how India’s eastward engagement initiatives and the US’ Asia policies always seemed to fall short in the past, both countries are approaching Southeast Asia with a new vehicle but old, shared challenges. Harmonising the approach to Southeast Asia by pooling resources, pursuing collaborative outreach methods and basically, endorsing each other as partners will be crucial not only for bilateral ties, but for the Quad in the grand scheme of things.

The third reason is simply, the China factor. New Delhi and Washington face similar problems with the rise of China, mainly security threats and

economic competition. India and the US, as a united front will have a more pronounced voice in using the Quad mechanism to pursue security-related goals.

Southeast Asian nations face similar threats in the South China Sea and the Quad has already indicated that it would play a more enhanced role in countering China’s escalation.

As the Quad looks to make inroads into Southeast Asia, the New Delhi-Washington equation will be a major determinant of its reception. A resilient India-US partnership will ensure the Quad, too, is in Southeast Asia.



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# Transnational crime still thriving despite lockdowns

By Izzah Ibrahim

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*Asean must stop 'us first' mentality and invest in human capital, resources to help vulnerable groups during Covid-19.*





**L**ockdowns and border closures are among the notable attempts to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. However, they are unable to produce consistent results in Southeast Asia, as seen with cross-border movements. Unhindered by such restrictions, growing criminal opportunism and adaptations have not only highlighted the difficulties inherent in securing porous borders but also the limitations of individual states in tackling transnational crime alone.

An interconnected and interdependent world has reduced the space for states to operate in isolation. This is especially so for Southeast Asia, as much of the region depends on connections for export-driven growth and regional infrastructural developments to thrive.



## “Criminal groups are exploiting weaknesses, creating additional pressures on the political and socio-economic stability of a state.”

While “development corridors” like those in the Master Plan on Asean Connectivity do lower trade costs and boost growth, organised criminal groups can also exploit these links to smuggle illicit goods and people across borders. To manage such threats requires both bilateral and multilateral cooperation, which has been hindered by bureaucratic obstacles and clashing domestic interests. The pandemic has eclipsed such concerns as states started prioritising their own recovery at the expense of multilateral cooperation.

Transnational criminal activity has adapted and profited from pandemic-induced circumstances. One example of such “non disruption” is the supply and

distribution of synthetic drugs. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that the Southeast Asian drug trade increased 20% in 2020 from the previous year. It expanded from beyond the Golden Triangle, an area within the borders of Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. The growth was enabled by more resilient means of production and the digital space to access new markets, consumers and distribution channels. Distribution of contraband also shifted to the sea to circumvent restricted air travel, as noted from Malaysia’s growing challenges with increased trafficking attempts off the coast of Penang.

Border closures have also increased the irregular movement of people. Such escalation in activity emphasises the pandemic’s effects on poverty, limited socio-economic opportunities and inadequate labour protection in the region. Other developments, such as the aftermath of the Myanmar coup in February 2021, have also contributed to people smuggling. As the majority of irregular migrants, refugees and asylum seekers depend on smuggling networks, it leaves them vulnerable to further exploitation. Services and resources dedicated to irregular migration, now strained by the pandemic, will leave many in limbo and unable to reach external assistance.

As the likelihood of being constrained by a protracted health crisis becomes a reality, uncertainty surrounds the region’s ability to manage transnational crime alongside national recovery efforts.

Transnational crime also exacts a political cost, which have broader implications on a state’s capabilities and resilience beyond their immediate responses to the pandemic. It questions a state’s law enforcement efforts and general socio-economic support for its citizens, all considered as important

Stricter border controls caused by Covid-19 lockdowns have not seen a decrease in transnational crime. Instead, the Southeast Asian drug trade saw a 20% increase in 2020, during the height of the pandemic.



Asylum seekers awaiting vaccination at a refugee camp in Pekanbaru, Indonesia.

mitigating factors against criminal exploitation.

Realigning state resources, especially law enforcement, will affect a state's response and perceptions of legitimacy and trust among its citizens. Heavy handed law enforcement such as the use of the armed forces and militarisation of the police can diminish that trust. This raises concerns about political stability, a sentiment prevalent across the region. The widespread demand for order and certainty during the pandemic can harden positions on matters such as crime. This could lead to policies that limit rights and freedoms to achieve the desired effects.

The social costs have the most direct impact on the region's citizens, as demonstrated by the lockdown-induced isolation and financial losses. The problem is amplified among vulnerable groups who are on the margins of society, including

migrants, refugees and victims of human trafficking.

More social assistance should be extended to these groups, not only monetary aid but also protection from criminal exploitation. A failure to invest in such communities presents more opportunities to criminal groups, especially in areas where they hold significant territorial presence or influence. The current preoccupations with the pandemic have deepened existing weaknesses in local public infrastructure and complicated efforts to address them.

Momentum ultimately depends on the state, but current transnational criminal activities are a clear sign that it cannot be solved in isolation. Asean has devised a Plan of Action in Combating Transnational Crime aimed to enhance the institutional capacity to prevent and address transnational crime. Similarly, the South East Asia Justice Network (SEAJust) shows the combined effort

of prosecutors, national police and law enforcement from nine Asean member states and East Timor, assisted by Japan and the UNODC, to lower hurdles in pursuit of justice. Unfortunately, the pandemic created additional obstacles for authorities to cooperate.

Prior cooperation was hampered by traditional diplomatic channels and bureaucratic processes that differ in language, legal system and practice. These difficulties emphasise the importance of political will and need to invest in human capital and resources to produce desirable and tangible results.

By its very nature, transnational crime transcends borders, so it is often assumed effective border control is a key element in tackling the problem. However, current border changes produced unexpected results that complicate the equation.

The reprioritisation of citizenry, interruption of services and supply chains have disrupted the region. Policies made to contain the pandemic became co-opted to restrict movement, assembly and speech. Criminal groups are exploiting weaknesses, creating additional pressures on the political and socio-economic stability of a state. The "us first" mentality is pressuring social cohesion and the integration of communities that have long been the economic drivers for markets and the foundations of an interconnected international community.



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Researcher

Izzah's research interests include the regional dynamics of Southeast Asia, nuclear politics and the role of intelligence in security.



# How nations used Covid-19 to chip away at rights

By Tashny Sukumaran

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*Southeast Asia relied on lockdowns during the pandemic,  
but civil society groups were forced to step in when  
governments failed citizens.*



**S**outheast Asia has over the past two years been buffeted by external challenges: chiefly the Covid-19 pandemic but also questions of geopolitical competition and vaccine diplomacy.

However, it is arguable that the challenges that stand to shift national landscapes are not merely these global questions but also those of democracy and fair governance. Already burdened with a reputation for state authoritarianism, many Southeast Asian nations have responded to the pandemic by further chipping away at certain civil liberties.

In Malaysia, the emergency ordinance and other rules to curb the spread of Covid-19 were seen by many as tools to consolidate power rather than solely predicated on public health concerns.

In Vietnam, the government succeeded in quelling the infection rate through a strict lockdown but human rights watchdogs noted that this came at the cost of further violations of freedom of the media, freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. In Indonesia, people were arrested not just for spreading misinformation on the pandemic but also insulting the administration.

The most widely highlighted example of Covid-19 measures straining civil liberties and becoming a political tool comes from the Philippines, where the number of extrajudicial killings skyrocketed during the lockdown last year and those who breached stay-home rules were packed into crowded jails.

In Myanmar, a military coup saw protesters take to the streets against the army, resulting in loss of life and greater risks of contracting the virus.

The question now is what has the pandemic done to democracy

# “ Old methods of physical protest have been joined by increasingly popular online protests... now seen as an equally valid way of expressing dissent.”

in Southeast Asia – Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia have at different points postponed elections or plebiscites, international watchdogs have sounded the alarm over declining freedom of speech rights, and lockdowns have seen the throttling of protest culture in many nations.

Of course, there are notable exceptions: in Myanmar, protesters have expressed that they had little choice other than to take to the streets where military forces responded with extreme violence and force.

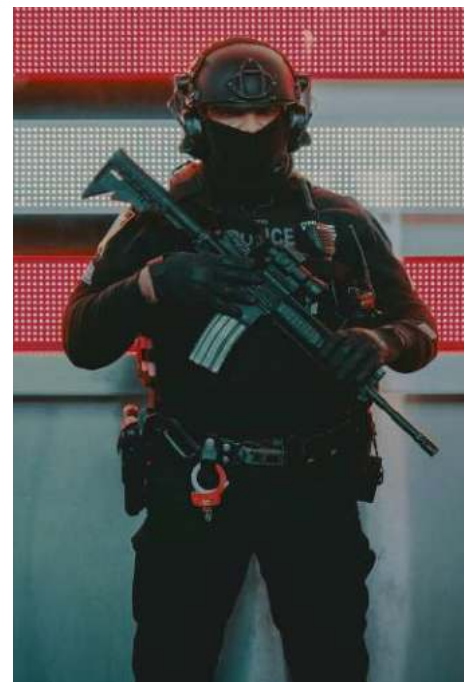
Singapore managed to hold smooth

elections – the results of which saw an unprecedented groundswell of support for its opposition Workers' Party – last July, although the nation's small size and concentration of clusters among migrant workers did simplify the process.

However, it is undeniable that democracy and civil liberties have been dealt severe blows in the last 20 months, resulting in a pronounced shift in activism and grassroots movements. Old methods of physical protest have been joined by increasingly popular online protests that are now seen as an equally valid way of expressing dissent.

In Malaysia, the recent anti-government #Lawan (resist) rally saw stringent social distancing and masking rules and, for the first time in the nation's history, a protest's success was gauged not by turnout (relatively low) but the lack of any Covid-19 cluster despite hundreds gathering in an area.

“Digital revolutions” are not a new concept – having gained popularity over the last five years in Southeast Asia – but in a region that has long been the staging area for bodies







The July 2021 #Lawan rally was a prime example of an online movement gaining steam and resulting in a physical protest.

on the streets calling for change, it is notable that the information superhighway as a protest platform is now treated as equally valid rather than the somewhat ableist notion that online protests are a weaker, secondary option.

In Myanmar, Facebook is used to share “counter-propaganda” that criticises the army, and the #MilkTeaAlliance is alive and well on Twitter and other social media spaces. Other examples include Malaysia’s #MigranJugaManusia (migrants are people too) movement calling for fair treatment of migrant workers and refugees, and in Thailand the “Royalist Marketplace” Facebook group which uses satire to trigger political debate is one of the largest worldwide.

The pandemic has also resulted in different civil society groups coming to the frontlines of the battle for civil liberties and rights, with aid groups seeking to fill the gaps left by governments in feeding and caring for the people.

In Malaysia, various movements have distributed food, crowd-funded financial aid and even pet food. Indonesia saw a proliferation of mobile “soup kitchen” volunteerism and Singapore’s informal Migrant Support Coalition and other grassroots groups banded together to distribute food packs and essential items to foreign workers.

Where governments have fallen short on concrete aid – some while simultaneously using the pandemic as an opportunity to broaden and strengthen their remit – these groups have mobilised to address the shortfall and proven their indispensability. This is a clear sign that regardless of how much power and resource is concentrated in one political or administrative body by way of laws and lockdown rules, a singular group (even with multiple branches) cannot be effective without the assistance of civil society.

The pandemic has led to governments wielding all sorts of powers of the sort which would not have been as tolerated in the past. In

many nations, democracy suffered and dissent was crushed.

But we have also seen that where there has been space for civil society groups, their roles have expanded in some places and waned in others. Democratic activism has suffered, freedom of speech suppressed but on “practical” matters, civil society groups have stepped in to assist the marginalised.



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Tashny’s research focuses on domestic politics, labour migration, gender parity and equality, and the regional role and position of international human rights mechanisms.





# The South China Sea during Covid-19: Strategic opportunism or failed diplomacy?

*By Angeline Tan*

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*Code of Conduct still languishing after  
25 years of talks, allowing Beijing to act  
with impunity in disputed waters.*



**“  
... recent  
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**D**espite the Covid-19 pandemic, tensions in the South China Sea show no signs of abating. The long-awaited Code of Conduct (COC) was once seen as the key to settling diplomatic disputes in these waters but 25 years later, a conclusion remains as elusive as when negotiations first started.

The COC outlines a set of rules that regulate maritime behaviour in the South China Sea. In managing and preventing maritime disputes between the claimant states, enforcing the COC would demonstrate Asean’s ability to manage regional affairs.

As a claimant state, Vietnam’s Asean chairmanship in 2020 anticipated a strengthened discourse on the South China Sea and progress on COC negotiations. The target to finalise the code was also ambitiously set for 2021. However, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the ability of Vietnam to enhance the maritime agenda, which also halted talks for the COC.

Against the backdrop of the Covid crisis, several analyses have described China’s behaviour in the maritime region as expansionary and strategically opportunistic. Throughout the pandemic, Southeast Asian claimant states have faced diplomatic spats with Beijing as Chinese vessels encroached on disputed waters.

In April 2020, China announced two new administrative districts covering the Parcel and Spratly Islands, a move which formalises Beijing’s control over the disputed territories. Moreover, the sinking of the Vietnamese fishing boats near the Parcel Islands, the “illegal lingering” of 200 Chinese fishing boats in the Philippines’ disputed exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the harassment of a Malaysian oil and gas development project all suggested that Beijing is becoming

more intimidating in the South China Sea.

Despite these developments, recent Chinese maritime activities should not be considered new or strategically opportunistic. China’s policy and behaviour remain consistent, demonstrating more continuity than change. The pandemic has not set up an environment that enables a more assertive China. Instead, what has changed is the ability of Southeast Asian littoral states to respond to Chinese activities.

Besieged by the ongoing health crisis, Asean member states have had to reconsider their immediate strategic priorities. While this does allow Beijing to exploit existing vulnerabilities, its overall maritime behaviour is neither new nor more assertive. Chinese maritime activities were not more pronounced during the pandemic and thus not the key issue at hand.

In a wider view, the real effects of the pandemic in the South China Sea lie in the increasing inability to resolve issues at stake if the COC is not concluded while Beijing gains an upper hand.

Beijing will continue to posture itself as cooperative and call for political will in finding a quick conclusion to the COC. However, if Asean loses its ability to pressure China to behave, it is unlikely that Beijing will work towards a code that can adequately manage the disputes.

To be clear, the lack of a COC does not limit the claimant states’ ability to respond to disputes. In the absence of a code, Southeast Asian claimants have been able to find diplomatic means of responding to China, such as the 2016 tribunal ruling which concluded that Beijing’s territorial claims within the nine-dash line were legally invalid.

On the one hand, the ruling

pressured China to advance negotiations on the COC after years of inactivity. On the other hand, Beijing's rejection of the ruling means it continues to make advances in the South China Sea. While the COC may not be an end-all, it does provide a regionally established framework with a set of norms that holds Beijing accountable. Hence, a stringent framework is paramount to settling the diplomatic tensions in the South China Sea.

claims, the COC tiptoes around the issue of territory and sovereignty. The lack of territorial boundaries of the maritime region and absence of what features should be included render the code meaningless.

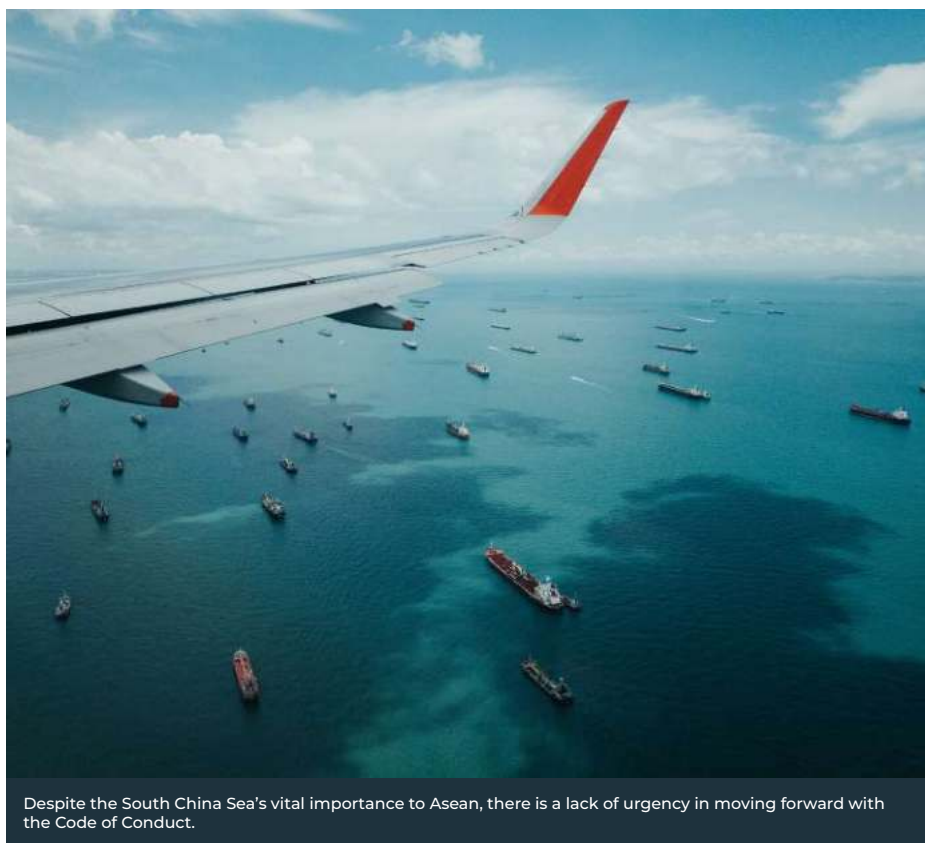
Second, the current draft suggests that the COC is not legally binding. While the SDNT does refer to international law, it does not mandate signatories to comply. As Chair, Vietnam was expected to emphasise the role of international law in the South China Sea and push

Without a proper legal framework, the COC is reduced to a list of norms which are toothless in the event of misbehaviour.

This leads to the third challenge of dispute resolution. From its inception, the COC aimed to manage maritime disputes, yet the SDNT does not. The SDNT addresses issues of prevention, management and settlement of maritime disputes, but not how to enforce them. Taken together with the second challenge of legal status, there are no means of implementing the COC in any meaningful way.

Regardless of pandemic-induced delays, it is unlikely that the code will be finalised anytime soon. The problem of the COC's stalemate is not a lack of political will to cooperate, but the contradictory need to compromise, especially on sensitive issues such as sovereignty. The devil lies in the details, and Asean has not been able to demonstrate improved cohesion on issues as basic as geographical scope.

Should a code be finalised soon, it will be more symbolic in content than substantive. Despite Beijing's urging, it is more important to find meaningful consensus than draw quick conclusions. To do so, there needs to be renewed urgency on this matter and it needs to be felt by China. Asean should not hesitate to step on Beijing's pressure points. Otherwise, it risks the South China Sea running deeper into Beijing's grasp.



Despite the South China Sea's vital importance to Asean, there is a lack of urgency in moving forward with the Code of Conduct.

The most significant progress thus far lies in the 2018 Single Draft Negotiating Text (SDNT), which provides a framework for the COC. At a glance, the SDNT's usefulness is questionable as it does not aim to settle territorial disputes. Three key issues are noticeably absent in the draft.

First, it lacks a precise geographic scope of the South China Sea. Due to sensitivities of the overlapping

this agenda on the COC negotiations.

Collectively, Asean recognises the importance of upholding international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) 1982, and strongly prefers a code that reflects this. However, at the individual state level, it is difficult to form an Asean-wide consensus as not all member states view the South China Sea with the same strategic priority.



**Angeline Tan**  
Researcher

Angeline's research interests include Chinese foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia, Sino-Japanese relations and the geopolitics of climate change.



# Lessons from virtual APR

By Tan Wan-Peng

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*ISIS' Thomas Daniel shares why the show must go on and foreign policy must shake its 'elitist' image.*





**A**s Covid-19 upended lives and affected every corner of the globe in 2020, the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia made the difficult decision to postpone its flagship conference – the Asia-Pacific Roundtable (APR) – but as 2021 rolled in, there was still some optimism that ISIS would be able to host a hybrid event.

The two-day conference went 100% virtual in August, focusing on the pandemic's disruptive nature and centred on Covid-19's impact on the region. Thomas Daniel, a member of the 34th APR organising committee, discusses some of the challenges of hosting ISIS Malaysia's first virtual conference and why foreign policy must claim some public sphere as Southeast Asia confronts geopolitical tensions in the region.

"There was no question that the 34th APR was going to be a fully virtual event. At the very least, a hybrid event and to most people at ISIS that it was going to be anything like the 33rd APR," says the senior fellow in the foreign policy and security studies programme, the team tasked with overseeing the APR.

The APR traditionally takes place in late May or June. This year, it was held in August because there was some hope late last year that ISIS could hold a hybrid event where local participants could show up while international participants would tune in.

"It is good that we came back after one year hiatus. It is important for conferences, roundtables like the APR to continue," says Thomas, when asked to assess the pros and cons of hosting a virtual event, which also happens to be one of the top 20 security roundtables.

What was important for ISIS as the organiser was to adapt, not only to the disruptive forces of Covid-19, but to the realities in the horizon, he



34th Asia-Pacific Roundtable organising chair Thomas Daniel urges foreign policy observers and practitioners to adopt a more consultative, open and democratic stance in foreign policy to better convey the challenges the nation faces.

notes. The next few APRs will likely be virtual or hybrid, taking logistics into consideration.

For ISIS, the concerns over the 34th APR were finding the right platform and trying to get the mix right.

"In a normal APR, it's a 90-minute conversation. That's different from a one-hour virtual session. Back-to-back sessions could lead to fatigue at the end of the conference. The other concern was finding a right time zone that will improve core audiences."

For a niche strategic conference, the turnout this year was bolstered by the fact that it was free although Thomas notes that while more people signed in, many did not stay on for the duration.

One of the takeaways, says the organising chair who worked on his sixth APR, is the possibility of reinstating modest fees next year even if the conference remains virtual.

### Foreign policy to the fore

Another challenge, which became apparent from opening the roundtable to a "non-traditional audience", is to raise awareness about foreign policy and its "relevancy" to those with little understanding of what it constitutes.

"A lot of people think foreign policy

is detached from their daily lives. Maybe it's the way foreign policy is talked about and practised in this country," admits Thomas.

In [his own writings](#), Thomas has urged policymakers to adopt a more consultative, open and democratic space in foreign policy. This is important to convey the choices, decisions, nuances, realities and challenges the nation faces on that front.

"Perhaps most of us observers and practitioners need to find a better way to make it applicable to the average Malaysian," says Thomas, who acknowledges that while the space for discussion has grown in the last few years, the way foreign policy is structured and practised would never have mass-market appeal.

What is important is that foreign policy should not be more politicised, he cautions, because it significantly limits the space for foreign policymakers to make hard and tough decisions in their international engagements.

"These nuances are not always understood by the broader electorate. By not politicising it, not having it ingrained in mainstream conversation, it has allowed Malaysia to practise a practical and nuanced foreign policy, unburdened by the swaying demand of the electorate."

While it is understandable that civil



servants and bureaucrats are a bit guarded about “opening up the space” or adopting a “consultative approach”, Thomas says it’s important to jolt their single-tracked, single-issue mindset.

“The real limitations that we face are often ignored and conversely, our opportunities and strengths are missed.”

Malaysian foreign policy cannot operate in a vacuum anymore or be elite driven, he cautions. For many, the goal is for a more robust Malaysia in the international arena as part of the nation-building process.

#### Geopolitical competition

Malaysia, as Thomas points out, tries to portray itself as a proactive member of the developing world but the reality is it has transitioned to a middle-income, almost-developed stage.

We have done well in areas, such as controls on nuclear proliferation, sustainable development, he says, but for some reason, people don’t talk much about them.

Trade is another strong area. There is a realisation by policymakers, no matter what their political persuasion, that this country is a trading country.

“We need to be on the ball in



## “ Our policies must stop being reactive and we must start being proactive, planning and acting in our national interests...”

international trade,” says Thomas, urging the nation to have serious conversations about upcoming trends and challenges that it is going to face.

Our policies must stop being reactive and we must start being proactive, planning and acting in our national interests, he advises.

We need to plan and execute on how to leverage on our strategic and comparative advantages. There is a need to focus on what we can do well, which is even more imperative in a time of geopolitical competition.

How do we position ourselves? We need to be cognisant that we operate in an environment where perception is key. And when we

are not out there shaping our own image, others will do so, says the foreign policy expert.

Against this backdrop is the US-China rivalry taking place in our region. We must bear in mind that the relationship with China is shaped by a bilateral/multilateral trade relationship, combined with strong tourism, cultural and political ties.

Malaysia has compartmentalised its relationship with China to its advantage, notes Thomas, but we also enjoy a productive relationship with US.

For Malaysia, the question is how to manage and navigate these relationships amid multisectoral competition while the links between the Americans and Chinese are being disentangled.

“We are tied in the global supply chain, if that relationship goes south, the ripple effects will cause collateral damage,” he says, citing digital trade as one area where both sides are disengaging from each other and the need for Malaysia and the region to ensure they are not caught out in this.

One danger is the belief that the region can influence the way things are going. “Southeast Asia has failed to play a moderating or influencing role on actions by China and with the US increasing multilateral alliances and agreements against China also shows that Asean has failed to play a moderating role in the geopolitical competition. We need to recognise and plan for it.”



**Tan Wan-Peng**  
Publications executive

Wan-Peng was a former journalist in the print and online media. She is part of the ISIS Malaysia team overseeing editorial, publication and publicity matters.

# Australia and Southeast Asia: Outlining Canberra's common vision for the region

By Dr Justin Lee

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*Australia's decades-long friendship with Southeast Asia pushes pandemic recovery to forefront.*

The past two years have been testing, as we all know. Our region has felt the full impact of the pandemic. The focus of this year's Asia-Pacific Roundtable – Disruption Redux – was, therefore, very fitting. At times of great disruption, the open exchange of views and experiences is critical.

Times of great disruption are also when close friends come to the fore.

Australia's friendships with the countries of Southeast Asia are longstanding and based on trust, openness, respect and a willingness to support each other through good and bad times. For many decades, we have helped the region grow economically and built human capital through our engagement on defence, security, education, trade and tourism.

Australia's relationship with Malaysia is a great example. Diplomatic relations go back 65 years and defence and education ties are deep and long standing, underpinning the people-to-people links that sustain the modern-day relationship.

This year, in an acknowledgement of the importance both Australia and Malaysia place on working



closely into the future, our respective prime ministers elevated the relationship by agreeing a new, bilateral Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

Australia's relationship with Asean has followed a similar growth trajectory. We were Asean's first dialogue partner almost 50 years ago and engagement has steadily grown. We became strategic partners in 2014, held the landmark Asean-Australia Special Summit in 2018 and last year marked a new chapter in the relationship with agreement to hold annual leaders' summits starting in 2021.

What has become increasingly evident in the pandemic is that Southeast Asia's priorities are Australia's priorities. And there is no higher priority right now than responding to the region's health needs. Accordingly, Australia has forged closer, more practical, health engagement with the region, including through the provision of medical equipment, One Health scholarships, mental health exchanges, and funding to combat other infectious diseases.

We want all countries to have access to safe, effective and affordable Covid-19 vaccines. Australia has

made a A\$300 million (RM909 million) commitment to Southeast Asia under our A\$523 million vaccine access and health security initiative. This includes a A\$21 million contribution to the Asean Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases to better prepare the region for future pandemics. We have also made a A\$1 million contribution to the Asean Covid-19 Response Fund.

We are providing A\$100 million through the Quad vaccine partnership to support the delivery of vaccine doses to Southeast Asia by the end of 2022. And at the G7, Prime Minister Scott Morrison committed to providing at least 20 million doses from Australian supplies to the Indo-Pacific by mid-2022. We will deliver more than 4.5 million vaccine doses to our neighbours in Indonesia, Timor-Leste and Vietnam by the end of 2021.

At the same time, we can't lose sight of the evolving strategic landscape, which is becoming more complex. This landscape will influence our region's shared recovery, resilience and prosperity. Just as we need to cooperate on the pandemic, we must work together to further a common vision for an open, inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific.

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**What has become increasingly evident in the pandemic is that Southeast Asia's priorities are Australia's priorities.**



Southeast Asian countries, Asean and its forums play a crucial role in ensuring that our region remains one in which disputes are resolved peacefully, without coercion and in accordance with international law. Australia strongly supports the Asean Outlook on the Indo-Pacific based on our firm belief that a region underpinned by rules, norms and respect for sovereignty is in all of our interests.

Nowhere are rules and norms more important than in the maritime domain. The oceans and seas are becoming more congested and contested. Many maritime disputes remain unresolved, old security threats like piracy, smuggling and illegal fishing endure, and climate change and environmental challenges such as the spread of marine plastic debris and deteriorating maritime habitats have come to the fore. Covid-19 has exacerbated these pressures, not least by reducing the financial and human resources we have for tackling them.

The South China Sea is where we see pressures on rules and norms particularly acutely. We have serious concerns about actions in the South China Sea that are destabilising and could lead to escalation, including the ongoing militarisation of disputed features and disruption of other states' use of their marine resources. This concern is not academic.

The South China Sea is a crucial international waterway in which Australia has substantial interests, not least because it is a major trading route for us and many of our friends and partners, including China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and the United States.

Of course, competition is a feature of our strategic environment that is likely to remain with us, including in the South China Sea. Fortunately, there are agreed rules to regulate



Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne: "Adherence to international law is fundamental to the continuing peace, prosperity and stability of our region."

state behaviour in the maritime domain. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out. It has rules that apply to all countries for maritime claims, the use of maritime spaces, including freedoms of navigation and overflight, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Australia has been a strong and consistent advocate for the importance of adherence to international law, including UNCLOS. As Australia's Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, recently said, "adherence to international law is fundamental to the continuing peace, prosperity and stability of our region. It allows all states – big and small – to resolve disputes peacefully."

Our present operations in the Indo-Pacific region make important contributions to peace and security. Australia is also a longstanding partner for Asean on practical marine cooperation. Prime Minister Morrison

announced at the Asean leaders' meetings last year that Australia will support key Southeast Asian partners on marine resource management through a new four-year programme.

We are also rolling out a new programme to help foster regional responses to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. In Asean, we co-chaired with Vietnam and the European Union, the Asean Regional Forum's maritime security work stream for the past three years. And we have worked closely with Malaysia in the EAS and ARF, co chairing important seminars on dispute settlement and international law in the maritime domain.

Bilaterally, we enjoy close and longstanding relationships with many of the defence forces and civil maritime law enforcement agencies across the region and collaborate with Southeast Asian partners in areas like maritime domain awareness, academic exchange, combatting marine plastics and building knowledge on law of the sea.

Australia and the countries of our region are connected by a common purpose. It is to provide safety and security for our societies, provide economic opportunities to our people, and to ensure our communities are healthy and educated. To empower our people to earn a living, grow businesses and support their families. And to recover and rebuild from Covid-19.

Australia will continue to find ways to support the region in rebounding from the pandemic and safeguarding security and stability. We are with Southeast Asia every step of the way.



**Dr Justin Lee**  
Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia



# If we unite, we can defeat pandemic

By Ouyang Yujing

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*China will continue to share vaccines, shape 'green economy' to spur global recovery.*



# “ Our top priority should be distributing vaccines fairly and equitably around the world...”

The year 2020 was a watershed in human history. The sudden onslaught of Covid-19 triggered a global crisis. Non-traditional security challenges kept cropping up and regional hot spot issues remain complicated and unsolved. Defeating the pandemic in the early days, restoring economic growth and jointly coping with challenges were our common wishes.

First, we must stick to solidarity to defeat the Covid-19 pandemic. We live in one global village, a community with a shared future for mankind. Our top priority should be distributing vaccines fairly and equitably around the world, especially in developing countries.

However, insufficient production, inequitable distribution and unbalanced vaccination remain prominent challenges. To win this fight where humanity's future is at stake, we don't have other choices besides solidarity and cooperation.

China is always standing firmly against vaccine nationalism and immunisation gap, upholding justice and stepping up support to developing countries. China has no political motive and does not attach any political string while carrying out vaccine cooperation. The only purpose of China is to make vaccines a global public good. To achieve this aim, China has provided more than 770 million doses worldwide, the largest in the world.

On the first Meeting of the International Forum on Covid-19 Vaccine Cooperation, President Xi Jinping announced that China will strive to supply two billion doses to the world throughout this year and offer US\$100 million (RM420 million) to the Covid-19 Vaccine Global Access (Covax) facility. China will continue to deepen cooperation with developing countries on vaccine technology transfer and co-production.

The pandemic is still ravaging the world. It is science and solidarity that we should pursue, not political manipulation or stigmatisation. Unfortunately, however, one country has made every effort to politicise the pandemic, stigmatise the virus, and use origin-tracing as a tool. It even instructed its intelligence agency in public to carry out an origin-tracing investigation into the Covid-19.

Virus origin-tracing is a serious scientific issue. Scientists should be entitled to study the origins of Covid-19 to prevent future risks. The aim of origin-tracing is not to blame a certain country, let alone splitting the international community. Only when we unite can we defeat the virus.

Second, we must stick to solidarity to promote economic recovery. Asia-Pacific is the fastest-growing region with the greatest potential and most dynamic cooperation in the world. It should be a pacesetter of development and cooperation, not a chessboard for geopolitics. Because of the pandemic, Asia-Pacific countries are suffering from



China will be placing a larger focus on growing its digital economy in the coming years.



a recession. Going beyond the pandemic, we need to pursue an open, green and innovative economy.

We need to stick to opening-up and inclusiveness and deepen regional economic integration. It is important that we promote the liberalisation and facilitation of trade and investment and uphold the multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organisation at its core. In this age of economic globalisation, openness and integration is an unstoppable historical trend. China is among the first to ratify the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and looks forward to its going into force this year.

We need to uphold green homeland and promote sustainable development. We will firmly pursue a green, low-carbon and sustainable development path. President Xi announced officially that China will strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. China stands ready to work with Malaysia and other countries to tackle climate change, pursue a path forward for man and nature to live in harmony and strengthen cooperation on green economy.

We need to seize opportunities from innovation and develop the digital economy. The digital economy is an important area for the future growth of the global economy. We need to boost the digital economy, step up exchanges and cooperation in areas such as artificial intelligence, 5G, cloud computing, biomedicine and modern energy, develop digital infrastructure, work for a digital business environment that is open, fair and non-discriminatory, so that the fruits of scientific and technological innovation can be turned into greater benefits for all countries.

Third, we must stick to solidarity to



China has promised to supply two billion doses of Covid-19 vaccine throughout 2021.

break down barriers in our mind. The Covid-19 pandemic posed challenges to global development but it also united many of us in an unprecedented way. The world is facing terrorism, climate change, food security, cybersecurity and other global issues, which demand a joint attempt to find solutions.

We should uphold true multilateralism, guard against the increasingly dangerous practices of creating imaginary enemies, stoking interstate division, escalating regional tensions and building exclusive blocs. We should work together to promote dialogues of civilisations rather than clash of civilisations, to pursue win-win cooperation instead of a zero-sum game.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Over the past 100 years, the CPC has united and led the Chinese people in an unrelenting endeavour to achieve the tremendous transformation from standing up and growing prosperous to becoming strong. At present, China has effectively controlled the pandemic and maintained the momentum of economic growth. In the first half of 2021, China's GDP expanded 12.7% year on year, which has greatly boosted confidence in global economic recovery.

Seeking goodwill with neighbours and harmony with all nations is the Chinese way of engaging with the

world. China will stay committed to peaceful development, to an independent foreign policy of peace, and to handle differences through friendly consultations instead of threat of force.

China will stay committed to openness and inclusiveness instead of the old and rigid path of isolation. China will actively promote high-quality Belt and Road cooperation and use our own achievements in development to provide the world with more opportunities. China will stay committed to multilateralism, and to safeguard the international system centred on the United Nations and the international order based on international law. We want to "have friends in every corner of the world".

Although we are confronted with common challenges to combat the virus and revive our economy, I believe that hope is around the corner and the road is under our feet. As long as we stick to solidarity, rise above differences in ideology, social system and development phase, uphold the common values of humanity, we will prevail over this outbreak, recover the economy and embrace a brighter future for mankind.



**Ouyang Yujing**  
Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Malaysia

# Recovery elusive, as long as vaccines not distributed equitably

*By Harris Zainul*

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*Low-income countries could become hotbeds for virus mutations  
unless rich nations learn to share supplies.*





It is nothing short of a modern marvel that it took merely 12 months from China reporting the earliest known cases of Covid-19 in December 2019, sequencing its genome by January 2020, and for a safe and efficacious vaccine to be developed, trialled, manufactured, delivered, and administered into the arm of Margaret Keenan, a 91-year-old in the United Kingdom, the first person to receive a Covid-19 vaccine in December 2020.

At the time of writing, 20 months after Covid-19 was first detected, more than five billion doses of the Covid-19 vaccines have been safely administered globally, with 36.2 million doses administered with each passing day. As it stands, 33% of the world population have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

Standing out amid these achievements, however, is that the vaccines have only found its way into

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... the vaccines have only found its way into the arms of a mere 1.6% of people living in low-income countries.

the arms of a mere 1.6% of people living in low-income countries. What is more regrettable is how this is not solely due to manufacturing capacity – although this consideration should not be discounted in its entirety – but because of the hoarding of vaccine supplies by certain high-income countries.

Due to a combination of strong public and political pressures, coupled with concerns of waning immunity levels, some countries with high vaccine availability are stockpiling it to prioritise rapid access for their population. On top of moral considerations of how these vaccines ought to be delivered to those who need it the most, there is also the growing risk of these vaccines going unused by its expiry date.

While the vaccines were developed in a “miraculous” 12 months, it is also no less than a stain on humanity that there were more deaths from Covid-19 in the first half of 2021, when vaccines are available, than the whole of 2020. With the highly transmissible Delta variant detected in more than 130 countries and territories, the need to vaccinate equitably and quickly must not be understated.

With low vaccination rates concentrated among low-income countries, which often have less developed healthcare facilities to cope with a rise in Covid-19 infections, more entirely avoidable deaths are only to be expected.

Further, should many countries or entire regions not be able to vaccinate, this provides the virus with more opportunities to mutate. It was large outbreaks that led to the highly contagious Delta variant, first identified in India in December 2020. With further opportunities for mutation, the odds of a variant that can escape immunity responses will be there, although the chance for a total immune escape is far from certain.



A girl getting vaccinated in Gambia. Vaccine distribution is a major issue facing developing nations.

On top of the public health consequences, failure to vaccinate sooner would lead to the prolonging of the pandemic, which has inflicted great economic damage. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that the global economy shrank 3.3% last year, putting the decline many magnitudes greater than the 2008 global financial crisis.

Beneath the headline amount, one of the commonest measures imposed to stop the spread of Covid-19 is lockdown. Lockdowns have disproportionately affected small businesses that are unable to digitalise, the mental wellbeing of people, and those without a safe and conducive home environment. Conversely, countries with high vaccination rates are able to cautiously reopen their economies while those without access to vaccines become economic have-nots, thus deepening inequality levels.

Some effort has been spared towards ensuring global equity of the vaccines through donations

and funding. According to the Duke Global Health Innovation Centre's Launch and Scale Speedometer, almost a billion doses have been donated, or pledged, by more than 30 countries, with the United States, United Kingdom, France, China and Japan leading the way. Covax, the global initiative aimed at equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines, is the largest recipient, accounting for nearly 73% of all donations, followed by Asia (7.6%), Africa (4.6%), South and Central America (2.2%), Oceania (1.2%), North America (1%), Europe (0.9%), and Latin America (0.8%).

Yet, as of 24 August, Covax has shipped a mere 215 million doses to 138 participants of the initiative. This is far from satisfactory, with BBC reporting that Africa had only received 12 million doses from Covax in July, and as of early August, only 24 million people (1.7%) on the continent have been vaccinated fully.

That said, multilateral mechanisms and cooperation remain the best

way forward to ensure vaccine equity – and the baby need not be thrown out with the bathwater. Greater global solidarity to end vaccine inequity must be mustered. Options, such as sharing or waiving the vaccines' intellectual property rights temporarily, should be considered, as this can lead to better distribution of manufacturing capabilities. Concerns over the complicated and highly technical process to manufacture vaccines should be addressed earnestly, rather than the final fact on the matter.

To stop the pandemic, according to the World Health Organisation, 40% of the population in every country and territory must be vaccinated by the end of 2021, and at least 70% by the first half of 2022. However, despite all the talk on building back better, and how the pandemic has taught us that no man is an island, it is no less than sad that less than 2% of the population in low-income countries have received a jab. It is reprehensible that this remains the

case when certain countries have enough vaccines for 400-500% of their population.

In making it out of this long dark tunnel, it is worth to remember that the pandemic is not over until it is over everywhere, and when it is all said and done, some countries need to consider which side of history they want to be on.



**Harris Zainul**  
Senior analyst

Harris' research focuses on policy responses to mis- and disinformation, Southeast Asian and Malaysian politics, human rights and democratisation.



The BBC has reported that as of July 2021, Africa has only received 12 million doses from Covax.





# 'Safe' cyberspace requires multi-stakeholder solutions

*By Farlina Said*

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*National security cannot be guaranteed unless governments work with private sector on digital sovereignty, practices.*



The divergences of interest between cyber stakeholders can impact on any business. From Telenor withdrawing from Myanmar due to [frequent orders of network shutdowns and concerns over the safety of employees](#) to governments banding behind the [Christchurch Call](#) to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online, these are examples of where government interests diverge from the private sector.

And then there is the “public” factor adding to the tension, such as [Russian banning Telegram](#) because of the app’s popularity with the opposition or the [use of social media to amplify the infodemic](#) around Covid-19. Cyberspace becomes a domain with consistent tensions between governments, the private sector and the expected delivery of services or safekeeping of national security for the public.

However, the national security issues caused by the diffusion of technologies are complex. For most companies manning any technological component, security of computer systems and the supply chain is of utmost importance.

Between [2020 and 2021](#), sophisticated and specifically designed ransomware have impacted systems, such as REvil successfully exploiting foreign exchange company Travelex for US\$2.3 million (RM9.7 million) or WastedLocker in 2020 targeting Garmin, the GPS-technology, and withholding its data for US\$10 million.

Vulnerabilities in one part of the system can impact on others as exemplified by the recent attack on virtual system administrator service provider [Kaseya](#). The ransomware against the US-based system cascaded to [1,500 clients, including nurseries, schools, pharmacies and supermarkets in 17 countries](#).

Private sector operators in cyberspace include those offering content-related services. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp and Instagram’s main trade is user-generated content, where users – around 8 billion accounts – would produce content which amplify certain messages.

In most situations, it can be a means of communication. In others, the content could incite systemic violence, as was attributed to Facebook by the [UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission to Myanmar chairman](#) or [YouTube](#) superseding forums, such as 4chan or 8chan, as a source of radicalisation for the terrorist behind the mosque attacks in Christchurch.

The regulation of content can challenge governments on liberties and thresholds of national security concerns. Making matters difficult is the fact that governments themselves may not be able to agree

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**The regulation of content can challenge governments on liberties and thresholds of national security concerns.**

on the defined rules in cyberspace.

Conversations on international platforms, such as the UN, are impacted by the different state views on cyberspace. The first [UN Group of Governmental Experts on Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security session](#) held in 2004 could not ascertain if discussions should focus on information content or information infrastructure.

The different definitions in cyberspace have slowed down processes for the development of norms and rules of responsible state behaviour as they lead to disputes on what should be securitised by the state and securitisation practices.

These are exemplified by differences in interpretations of sovereignty as raised in the 34th Asia-Pacific Roundtable session on digital sovereignty. The European Union has identified the challenges of digital sovereignty to include dependency on foreign technology, unregulated data collection by non-EU technology companies, overdependence on one equipment supplier and nomination of non-EU-based online platforms.

Meanwhile, China’s concept of sovereignty in cyberspace is based on [President Xi Jinping’s 2015 World Internet Conference speech](#), which touched on the right to their own path of cyber development, construct legal mechanisms domestically and participate in international cyberspace governance on an equal footing. China’s concept of sovereignty is further sharpened by initiatives, such as the development of the Digital Silk Road, Global Initiative on Data Security and the China Standards 2035 plan.

The differences in interpretation equate to different sets of values, priorities and practices



in cybersecurity. Both China and EU, for instance, have identified data governance as an area of great concern but with diverging approaches to it. China's data practices include data localisation requirements, a tight control of information flow in internet governance via the Great Firewall of China and international participation to shape the global internet – inclusive of parts attached to cyberspace such as telecommunications.

The EU, viewing privacy as an area of great concern, launched the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a far-reaching rule that addresses the transfer of personal data outside the EU. For a region such as Asean, concerns with data governance start with setting up the necessary institutions and legislations. Thus, the first Asean digital senior officials' meeting in January 2021 endorsed the Asean Data Management Framework that discusses the foundational concepts of data management and building the mechanisms for countries, such as Laos and Cambodia.

The differences in development and approaches to uphold nation-state values may be complicated for the private sector. With differences in obligations, oversight and cybersecurity priorities, the private sector must develop internal policies to tackle both issues in their supply chain as well as content-related concerns to ensure cybersecurity

obligations are met while delivering services to the public.

For instance, Axiata, functioning in 11 countries across Asean and South Asia, would develop internal guidelines to secure its supply chain. Facebook and Twitter have produced community policies on engagements which include concerns on terrorism, hate speech or those that incite violence.

The latter violation resulted in the ban on former US president Donald Trump's account (Facebook [suspended until 2023](#) and [permanent ban on Twitter](#)). Meanwhile, popular messaging app, WhatsApp, introduced an encryption policy in 2016 to safeguard users' privacy and communication. The policy resulted in legislation penalising administrators of chat groups in places like [India](#) and [Malaysia](#).

However, private companies caught in the crossfires of international technological rivalry can find themselves in a political predicament. In July this year, [the US](#), [Nato](#), [Canada](#) and [the UK](#) issued a statement on malicious cyber activities, including those on the Microsoft exchange servers, which [ZDnet](#) estimates to have had impacted up to 30,000 organisations in the US to 125,000 unpatched servers worldwide in early March.

The attacks were attributed by the US, Canada and the UK to China. The Microsoft digital defence report 2020 traced many cyber operations, including reconnaissance, credential harvesting, malware and virtual private network exploits, to Iran, Russia, China, North Korea and South Korea. While internal mechanisms and cybersecurity practices could address and patch some of these vulnerabilities, greater progress would be needed to address issues of responsible state behaviour.

Thus, while diverging cybersecurity

issues and priorities can shape a nation-state's approach to digital sovereignty, there must be more engagements on responsible state behaviour. These engagements should include the private sector, which can be potential victims, operators and bases for jurisdiction in cyberspace.

Identifying potential roles for the private sector would be useful to chart a comprehensive and detailed agenda for public-private partnerships in cybersecurity. This could include those that elevate cybersecurity practices in a country or facilitate and enable responsible behaviour, whether this is between states or for better practices in the private sector.

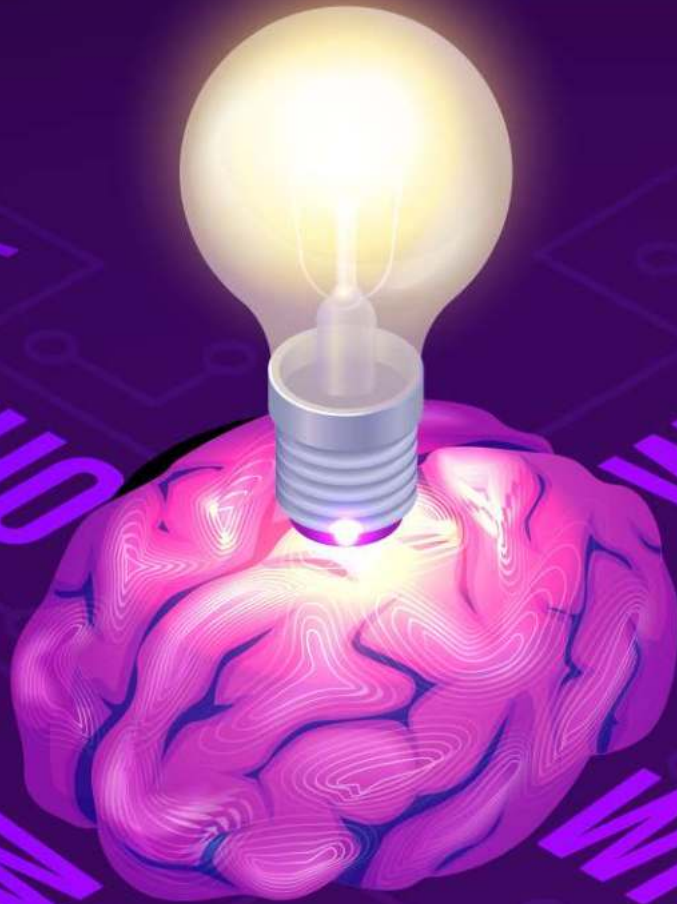
For the first, programmes, such as Axiata's internal cybersecurity guidelines, can serve as useful tools for the business sector. The latter may consider transparency mechanisms, such as the Microsoft reports on cyber operations or consultation mechanisms on holding online platforms responsible for content moderation.

As cyber is a multi-stakeholder domain, it would require a whole-of-society approach to ensure stability and security of cyberspaces. Developing such mechanisms could chart the way forward for a safe cyberspace.



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Farlina's research interests include cybersecurity, radicalisation and Malaysia-Korea relations. Her work and comments have appeared in *The New Straits Times*, *The Edge* and *South China Morning Post*.



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