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China's consolidation as a Regional Leader

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The initial handling of COVID 19 pandemic by the Chinese leadership and the subsequent suppression of facts about the details of the novel corona virus was possibly out of fear that it would create an anti-China sentiment across the world. Instead, the crisis has helped to cement Chinese leadership – especially in the Southeast Asian region – through generous medical support and deft diplomacy. Unlike the western countries that are targeting China that Beijing could have prevented the contagion before spreading out to other parts of the world, none of the Southeast Asian countries have taken a position that goes against the Chinese interests. Rather, they are trying to emulate the Chinese practices and standards, utilizing the crisis to embolden the government's control over their respective citizens.

The US termed the new virus as the 'Wuhan virus' because of its origin from Wuhan, an aspersion of inept handling by China's authoritarian system and the Chinese government's failure to warn the world about its dangers. The Chinese have hit back at the US through official as well as social media that the

US is behind the manufacture and spread of the virus. China's Foreign Ministry blamed the US military for the emergence of the novel coronavirus in Wuhan, and the bilateral relations between the US and China hit rock-bottom, sidelining the rapprochement on trade both countries had reached before the pandemic began.

Also, criticism was levelled against the World Health Organization (WHO) for underplaying the global threat posed by the virus and its alleged protection of China for not having publicly acknowledged the imminent threat of the possibility of its global spread. WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus endorsed the measures taken by China at the initial stage to contain the virus in Wuhan and other cities and declared that the measures are effective and the crisis is short in duration. As a result WHO didn't recommend a broader restriction on travel or trade. Foreign travel continued from Wuhan to various parts of the world which caused the spread of the virus across the globe. While individual countries took measures to reduce the threat, but there has

been no constructive cooperation between countries to contain the contagion.

China's lackadaisical response to the pandemic by hiding the outbreak of the virus and the actions against Chinese doctors who acted as whistleblowers about the virus (who were summarily discarded by the Chinese government as rumor-mongers) compounded the problem. The lockdown and the subsequent stringent measures have emboldened the Chinese Communist Party which believes that a message has been sent that the authoritarian regime (in China) can handle internal issues like corona type pandemic better than the democratic set up in the West.

Southeast Asia has been hit hard by the novel corona virus, with a surge of new cases in all countries, including Singapore (which initially was able to prevent the expansion of the pandemic). As of April 27, the total reported infected cases in Southeast Asia are 40,742, while 1445 people have died.¹ In this crisis, however, China has ensured that the geopolitical advantage it has cultivated over the years with Southeast Asian countries should not be lost at any cost. Beijing stressed that these countries were fully behind China's anti-coronavirus effort. Chinese official media cited remarks by leaders of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Brunei, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore expressing support for and solidarity with China.² A Xinhua article carried Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's remarks

calling on countries to work together and to keep anti-Chinese sentiments in check. In particular, it mentioned PM Lee as saying that: "the virus may have started in Wuhan but it doesn't respect nationality or race. It doesn't check your passport before it goes into your body and anybody can be infected".³

The political situation in Southeast Asia has been helpful for China as most of the countries are currently autocratic or semi-autocratic who preferred Chinese practices and standards as a suitable way to "flattening the curve". China's actions against the pandemic had received wide appreciation in Southeast Asia that Myanmar President Win Myint sent a message of support to Xi Jinping, praising the merits of "Xi's able leadership and those of China's advanced medical technology"; in a phone conversation with China's president on February 13, then-Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad congratulated Xi for his "great efforts"; Singaporean President Halimah Yaacob commended Xi's "decisive measures" while Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong applauded "China's firm and decisive response."⁴

Although China posed a threat to Southeast Asia in its failure to prevent the contagion from reaching the region, no blame was publically expressed in the region against China. Southeast Asia had all the ingredients for the rapid spread of the virus-mostly weak public health system, crowded cities, poverty, and significant migrant worker flows. However, the government heads

were cautious not to antagonize China. Singaporean Prime Minister Lee said that 'blaming China for the spread of COVID 19 pandemic is unfair'. The sentiment across the region was that 'China will recognize its friends' and will provide 'support and help' not only to tide over the pandemic but also for overcoming the economic hardship due to the lockdown with its attendant financial loss. China is the largest exporter as well as the biggest source of import for Southeast Asian countries. The region seems to expect a benevolent response from China in much the same way that China bailed out Southeast Asia during the 1997 financial crisis.

Broadly, China has worked hard in Southeast Asia to limit what it calls 'excessive measures' in response to the pandemic such as travel ban on China-bound travelers and promoted a positive narrative of its 'resolute' and 'highly responsible' efforts to fight the virus. Only Singapore and Vietnam, who had a bad experience from the SARS virus that originated in China in 2003, imposed travel restrictions in early January, blocking entry not only for passengers but for all visitors who had been to China in the last 14 days.

When the first novel corona virus case was reported in Southeast Asia, China provided technical advice on how to beat the pandemic and shipped large quantities of medical supplies to the region. In February, when China was still trying to contain the coronavirus spread, Beijing donated 100,000 testing kits, 10,000 N95 masks,

10,000 personal protective equipment sets, and 100,000 surgical masks to the Philippines.⁵ In March, China provided Cambodia an unspecified amount of detection reagent, hazmat suits, surgical masks, and other related materials.⁶

Besides, China is ready to continue its financial support to the region under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), work for which was slowed or stopped due to corona virus induced lockdown and financial stress. However, China has assured its continued financial support for projects like 640km East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia and a \$5.9 billion 150 km Jakarta-Bandung High Speed Rail (JBHSR) in Indonesia. The China Development Bank has expressed its decisions to offer financial support by various means to support high-quality Belt Road projects and enterprises affected by the epidemic which include providing low-cost loans and foreign exchange working capital loans; providing local and foreign currency loans for enterprises to resume work and production; extending loan repayment periods; and accelerating the opening up of 'green channels' for foreign exchange and overseas RMB business affected by the epidemic.⁷

Although China's economy has been adversely affected due to the disruption in the global supply chain, China's ability to sustain its BRI will be dependent on its financial prowess, with Southeast Asia continuing to be the main focus. Southeast Asia is dependent on China for raw materials for its export oriented industries

as well as Chinese market for finished goods. According to International Monetary Fund (IMF), growth in Asia is expected to stall at zero percent in 2020, the worst growth performance in almost 60 years. China will face one of the worst financial performance in the coming period as China's growth is projected to decline from 6.1 per cent in 2019 to 1.2 per cent in 2020.⁸ Similarly, Singapore's economy contracted by 2.2 percent in the first quarter of 2020 from a year ago, while Malaysia's economy is expected to contract by as much as 2.9 percent in 2020, with some 2.4 million job losses.⁹ However, the economic contraction in China will not affect its economic dominance in Southeast Asia because no other country can marginalise China in terms of investment and trade opportunities. USA, Japan, and Australia are all seriously affected by the coronavirus so they are in no position to extend financial support to Southeast Asia. Therefore, Southeast Asia's dependence on China is likely to continue in the year(s) ahead.

Implications for India

With the assistance provided to South East Asia by China during the ongoing pandemic, there has been an indisputable improvement in its soft power appeal in the region; this has reduced the significance of other traditional friends of the region such as Japan and India. India has had a strong linkage with the regional countries who sought support from India during the crisis brought about by the 2004 Tsunami. The Chinese support during the ongoing corona virus

pandemic is likely to strengthen its bonds with the countries of the region. This development needs to be watched carefully by those nations who see Chinese dominance in Asia a real concern for their own strategic interests.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ "CSIS Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker", April 28, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0>

² World leaders positively evaluate, support China's fight against virus outbreak", *People's Daily*, 31 January 2020. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0131/c90000-9652933.html>

³ "Xinhua Headlines: 'You are not alone' - countries worldwide offer support, aid to China's fight against coronavirus", *Xinhuanet*, 17 February 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/17/c_138792313.htm

⁴ Sophie Boisseau du Rocher, "What COVID-19 Reveals About China-Southeast Asia Relations", *The Diplomat*, April 08, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/what-covid-19-reveals-about-china-southeast-asia-relations/>

⁵ "Duterte thanks Xi again during coronavirus briefing", April 14, 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/257909-duterte-thanks-china-xi-again-coronavirus-briefing-april-13-2020>

⁶ "COVID-19: China medical supplies for Cambodia arrive", *Khmer Times*, 18 March 2020. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/703027/covid-19-china-medical-supplies-for-cambodia-arrive/>

⁷ "China Development Bank To Provide Financial Support To Belt & Road Projects Affected By Covid-19", Mar 27, 2020. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/03/27/china-development-bank-provide-financial-support-belt-road-projects-affected-covid-19/>

⁸ Chang Yong Rhee, "COVID-19 Pandemic and the Asia-Pacific Region: Lowest Growth Since the 1960s", IMF Blog, APRIL 15, 2020. <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/15/covid-19-pandemic-and-the-asia-pacific-region-lowest-growth-since-the-1960s/>

⁹ Sophie Boisseau du Rocher, "What COVID-19 Reveals About China-Southeast Asia Relations"