

The COVID-19 situation is turning from bad to worse, a semblance of relief comes from Thailand updating the world on '0' community borne COVID cases in the country for the past 100 days. Being next to mainland China, it was the first region to have reported a COVID-19 case, which was on 13th January in Thailand. Thus, it is high time to discuss how South East Asia at large is dealing with the pandemic and what has been its high and low points vis a vis the whole socio-economic situation and impact of the pandemic. The continuing situation in South East Asia can be best illustrated by a sine-cosine curve depending on how you look at it. In the following write-up, we will try to focus on certain countries to make the argument more compelling and understandable.

With the early appreciation of Vietnam of being able to contain the spread of the virus, it saw a sudden upsurge in the number of cases, making it quite obvious, that one cannot be certain that they have defeated the virus, it can creep into the populace very fast very easily. Making the fight against COVID a mix of victories and defeats as well as a constant feeling of vulnerability. Let us start with the case of Viet Nam for understanding the complexity in dealing with the virus.



Vietnam/ Image source: Reuters

Viet Nam

Vietnam Model was something which was touted as one of the most effective ways of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The earlier success of the country in dealing with the pandemic was due to swift action coupled with a robust policy application, despite the limited resources at its disposal. However, after everything had returned to normal and the country started opening up, the tourist destination of Danang saw an uptick in cases and it started spreading into other cities, this was when Hanoi recorded its first set of deaths. Responding swiftly, they were able to control the cases and the epicentre is now under control. Although the probability is never zero as the economic activities are picking up and the country is opening up as well.

In retrospect, with its initial success in containing the virus, Vietnam started issuing e-visas by the 1st of July to foreign visitors from 80 countries. It resumed the flights to & from China on the 13th of the same month, all this led to opening up the flood gates. With the new cases coming out in Danang, the government moved ahead with the lockdown there and began the evacuation process of 80000 people. It recorded its first two deaths due to COVID-19 on 31st July. It was accompanied by the second-largest outbreak in Quang Nam Province; the response was quick countermeasures plus suspension of all non-essential activities on 13th August.

Vietnam registered to buy the Russian Vaccine as announced on state television on 14th August while keeping up its vaccine research. Although the situation is improving by the day, the government is not taking any chances this time.

Thailand

It has been one of the success stories, but the pertaining question is “at what cost?”. Being the first country outside the mainland where the virus was found on 13th January, the Thai dispensation understood the severity beforehand and with a decisive and quick lockdown, an effective test-and-trace rollout catalysed by an already existing universal healthcare system. As on September 6, it has gone 105 days without any community transmission.



Thailand/ Image source: Bangkok Post

One may find it to be the plan to follow, but in reality, it has multiple facets and many of which are not so bright. The elongated lockdown although necessary stagnated the Thai economy; with the tourism sector (one of the biggest contributors to its GDP) and other economic activities too at a halt culminated into an economic downturn of an unprecedented level. It resulted in pro-democracy protests and can have further adverse effects going ahead.

Going ahead the country is witnessing easing up of lockdown and in September further lifting of restrictions is expected under phase 6 of loosening restrictions.

The Philippines

It is a special case, as the leadership at Manila did not give much heed to the virus turning into a pandemic. Following other nations in the region, it has taken similar steps, but could

not be decisive in choosing between economy and public health. Kudos to its inconsistency, the Philippines could neither save its economic downturn nor control the number of cases effectively. As on 6th August, the Philippines surpassed Indonesia for the most reported cases in South East Asia. However, granting the medical community's appeal, President Rodrigo Duterte reimposed stricter Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ) in Metro Manila on 4th August.



The Philippines: Image source: Reuters

By September, the country is concluding that it has to learn to live with this virus. That is, lockdowns should not be in general but pragmatically and strategically placed on containing zones and changing them studying the pattern of the progress of virus in real-time.

After discussing these three countries, let us now look briefly how the ASEAN as an organization thinking about solving the issue at hand or the least dealing with it.

Recently, in the ASEAN Economic Minister's Meeting in late August, pledged to cooperate for the cooperation in the development of COVID-19 vaccine development by sharing key clinical data and reports. Before this, on 14th August the members agreed to deepen cooperation in the fight against COVID-19 at ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly Caucus.

The Chinese & American Assistance Diplomacy

The Chinese challenge to the USA's hegemony in Asia-Pacific has been consistent with their ways of making countries their bilateral dependents and in turn, make them kowtow to the Middle Kingdom. However, it is this COVID-19 and the reality of the CCP trying to hide the virus and bide its time, which has made people oblivious of any hope from the People's Republic of China becoming a responsible superpower.

In the pursuit of the regional supremacy and saving its face, PRC has indulged in Mask diplomacy and financial assistance. The thing to keep in mind is that all these efforts to help the ASEAN countries are based on a bilateral reaching out to the nations. And the aid has been in both public and private formulations.

The probability that China would & could do anything it wants with the USA just being an observer is minuscule. And proving our point, Washington out of its USD 1 billion commitment, it has earmarked USD 76.9 million for South-East Asian countries. The U.S. philanthropic assistance has come from various sources, namely Rockefeller Foundation, Give2Asia, PepsiCo Foundation, and many U.S. businesses have also made donations. All in all, it can be estimated to a roundabout USD 110.3 million.

Assistance has come from multiple places, countries like India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, the U.K., France, etc. as well as multinational organizations, be it Asian Development Bank (ADB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), United Nations (UN) & The Livelihoods and Food Security Fund.

Conclusion

The problem at hand is something unprecedented, no one country or person can exclaim to have found the perfect solution. There are sacrifices to be made, and the states have to decide what can be lesser of the two evils. Keep the economy running with some measures to contain the spread, which may lead to an increased risk of healthcare failure as the number of patients may overwhelm the medical infrastructure. However, if long and stringent lockdowns are practised, it may lead to severe economic distress and tearing up of social fabric.

The solution does not lie in the extreme and any analysis, commentary or opinion presented will become archaic in a day or two and would require updated suggestions. Thus, what is required is the policymakers, economists, medical fraternity and other stakeholders coming together with updated solutions and long-term goals.

Here, we may have painted a grim picture of South East Asia, but comparatively the region is doing much better than many others. Working together and making full use of ASEAN as a multilateral regional institution can be a long-term strategy.

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