

Reviving Multilateralism in East Asia: Small and Medium Powers, Connectivity and Covid-19

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INTRODUCTION

In the post-Cold War era, “multilateralism” has been one of the most spoken-about terms in the region. Especially after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the region observed a mushrooming number of multilateral institutions for cooperation. However, initial hopes were quickly brushed aside by rising criticism of the poor performance of these institutions. Multilateral cooperation was not quite able to produce concrete results. Institutions by and large failed to be consolidated on a strong legal and institutional basis. Nevertheless, once institutions were set up, they seldom disappeared despite rather poor performance. Consequently, there are an unmanageable number of criss-crossing and overlapping multilateral institutions in the region – an excess of institutions.

It is not fair to say that the institutions have produced nothing. There are both bright sides and dark sides here. For example, there has been some progress in some institutions. These are invariably focused on tangible and visible issues such as economic cooperation. On the other hand, there has been less than impressive progress in less visible and less tangible areas such as trust or confidence building, habits of cooperation, the creation of a shared identity, etc. One can offer numbers – number of institutions, of meetings, of people exchanges and interaction, of extra economic gains out of cooperation, and more – to defend the achievements. This, however, has not translated into a solid development of trust among regional countries and a basis for rules-based and institutionalised cooperation.

This paper argues that East Asian multilateralism can be revitalised and strengthened through small and medium powers’ role and leadership focusing on connectivity cooperation and cooperation on newly emerging threats. First, regional small and medium powers, replacing superpowers mired in strategic competition, should take the leadership role in regional multilateral cooperation.

Second, it is now time to put more emphasis on boosting connectivity, which offers concrete benefits and thus provides strong incentive for regional countries to engage in cooperation. Multilateralism is the best way to coordinate the various existing bilateral and regional efforts for enhancing connectivity. Finally, regional countries have to focus more on emerging threats like Covid-19 that have widespread and devastating impacts on ordinary people's lives and prosperity.

With this backdrop, this article will touch upon three issues. First, it will examine the current status of regional multilateral institutions. It will argue that regional multilateral institutions are increasingly becoming venues for competition and contestation. Second, the role of regional middle powers or small and medium powers (SMPs) is discussed to see if they are a new hope to revive multilateral institutions. Last but not least, it will examine the areas of cooperation in East Asian multilateralism. This includes enhancing regional connectivity in a multilateral context and responding to regional human security issues, including the current Covid-19 pandemic.

EAST ASIAN MULTILATERALISM UNFOLDING: INITIAL HOPES AND SUPERPOWER HIJACKING

Multilateral cooperation and institutions are a rather recent development in East Asia. It is a post-Cold War phenomenon. East Asian countries were put under the Cold War order as soon as they built independent nation-states. The order did not allow room for regional countries to pursue multilateral cooperation. The United States – and the Soviet Union and China for the communist bloc countries – provided the needed security assurances, economic assistance and market access.¹ As long as they managed bilateral relations with the United States well, they did not need to seek bilateral or multilateral cooperation with their neighbours, which was costlier given the lack of experience in multilateral cooperation and of mutual confidence among them.

With the collapse of the Cold War order, regional countries were set free from the Cold War constraints. The US reduced its presence in the region while the Soviet Union collapsed, and China was not yet strong enough to challenge for regional leadership. In this vacuum, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) came up with a new idea for multilateral security cooperation – the ASEAN Regional

¹ Regarding the hub and spokes system in the region, see John Ikenberry. 2004. "American hegemony and East Asian Order", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. 58:3. Pp. 353-367.

Forum (ARF), formed in 1994.² It was the beginning of multilateral institutions for cooperation in wider East Asia. A crucial turning point for regional multilateralism came with the Asian Financial Crisis. The ASEAN+3, which was initially convened in 1997 with a call from ASEAN, was regularised and consolidated after the crisis when regional leaders recognised the devastating impacts of the Asian Financial Crisis.³ The leaders acknowledged a need to work together to overcome the economic crisis that almost simultaneously undermined the economies in Northeast and Southeast Asia.

The initial high hopes invested in ASEAN+3 and the later East Asia Summit (EAS), formed in 2005 with additional members, Australia, India, and New Zealand, in addition to the 13 ASEAN+3 countries, soon dissipated. The shared sense of crisis that fuelled cooperation was short-lived due to the quick recovery of regional economies. On top of this, growing superpower strategic competition overlapped. The US joining the EAS in 2011 was another turning point. China, in the 2000s, became increasingly assertive, notably in the South China Sea. Pulling out of the Middle East, the Obama administration pivoted to Asia in the late 2000s. Growing Chinese assertiveness and the US pivot were ideal sparks for superpower contestation. With the US joining the EAS, contestation began to unfold in the regional multilateral institutions.

There have been plenty of occasions when the two superpowers pointed fingers at each other in recent multilateral forums. Regional mass media covered the exchanges prominently, drawing audience attention. For example, at the 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue, then US Secretary of Defence James Mattis touched upon the Taiwan issue. This extracted a rebuke from a senior PLA officer, criticising the US' meddling in the One China Policy.⁴ Again in 2018, at the next Shangri-La Dialogue, the two clashed over South China Sea issues. James Mattis criticised Chinese militarisation attempts in the South China Sea.⁵ And the Chinese military delegation

² Alice Ba. 2009. *[Re]Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region, Regionalism and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations*. Stanford University Press: Stanford. Ch. 6.

³ See, Richard Stubbs. 2002. "ASEAN Plus Three: Emerging East Asian Regionalism?" *Asian Survey*. 42:3.

⁴ Minnie Chan. 2017. "Mattis outrages Beijing with explicit commitment to defend Taiwan." *South China Morning Post*. 3 June.

⁵ Thomas Gibbons-Neff. 2018. "Mattis Accuses Beijing of Intimidation and Coercion in South China Sea." *The New York Times*. 1 June.

defended the Chinese position and cast suspicion on the US intention of intervening in a regional issue.⁶

The most recent example was the verbal exchanges at the APEC 2018 meeting, which was held right after the East Asia Summit 2018 in Singapore. US Vice President Mike Pence described the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as “dangerous debt diplomacy” and asserted, “[US Indo-Pacific] will stand in sharp contrast to the dangerous debt diplomacy that China has been engaging in in the region.”⁷ Against this, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson criticised US promises under the Indo-Pacific, saying, “We take note that some voices worry whether the US can make good on its promises and whether they’re just paying lip service,” and further put blame on the US’ unilateralism for the failure to reach a consensus on the APEC joint communiqué.⁸

More recently, US State Secretary Mike Pompeo criticised China after meeting his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi. At the occasion of the 2019 ARF in Bangkok, the two had a bilateral meeting on 1 August. After the meeting, Wang Yi made diplomatic remarks regarding the meeting, saying, “There may be at various times issues and problems between China and the United States, but no matter how many problems, it is important for both sides to sit down and have face-to-face discussions.” Meanwhile, Pompeo was less diplomatic and was critical of China’s actions in the region. He, warning of Chinese “coercion” of ASEAN countries in the issue of the South China Sea disputes, remarked, “We are working with them on many fronts... But we are also very candid about the places we are hoping China will behave in ways that they are not behaving today and we talked about each of those as well.”⁹

Over the years the number of issues and the intensity of the contestation in regional multilateral institutions have increased. Each side has tried to outwit its rival and to attract regional countries to its side. Every time the two countries exchanged criticisms, regional mass media sensationalised the contestation, depicting the regional institutions as a major venue for contestation. Perception dictates reality. Increasingly, regional countries view the institutions as a venue for superpower

⁶ William Gallo. 2018. “ Mattis: China Trying to Intimidate Neighbours in S. China Sea.” *VOA*. 2 June.

⁷ Bhavan Jaipragas. 2018. “Mike Pence to unveil rival to dangerous Belt and Road Initiative at Apec summit.” *South China Morning Post*. 15 November.

⁸ Straits Times. 2018. “China blames protectionism for discord in Apec.” *The Straits Times*. 21 November.

⁹ Cate Cadell and Patpicha Tanakasempipat. 2019. “Pompeo criticized China after meeting top diplomat in Bangkok.” *Reuters*. 1 August.

rivalry rather than as a venue for practical cooperation, despite the fact that institutional cooperation had brought about reasonable benefits to them.

CAN REGIONAL SMALL AND MEDIUM POWERS BE A NEW HOPE?

There are growing arguments that regional middle powers or small and medium powers (SMPs) have to come out – and are able to come out – to sustain and strengthen the regional rules-based order.¹⁰ The order, including elements like multilateralism, free trade, democracy, human rights, rule of law, etc., has maintained peace and prosperity in the region but is being challenged by China and the US. One is challenging and undermining the existing order and the other gave up its traditional role as the lynchpin of the order. Regional middle powers, having enjoyed the fruits of the existing order, have reason and capacity to bolster the order for self-interests and for the region in general.

This argument makes perfect sense logically. Middle powers like ASEAN, Australia, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, etc. are interested in keeping the order since it is the best option for them as proven in the post-WWII period. What is more, middle powers collectively have the power and leverage to put pressure on superpowers and to shape the regional order. The concerted effort of middle powers can strengthen multilateral institutions as a part of the regional order. At the same time, they have reason to strengthen it intentionally since it is a strong weapon they could utilise against superpowers' unilateral behaviours.

This, nevertheless, is easier said than done. There are limits and challenges – a collective action dilemma. It should be first mentioned that the root of this problem is the trust or confidence deficit among regional middle powers. This is largely because of their experiences in the Cold War order and of the relatively short history of multilateralism in East Asia. Regional middle powers, with the deficit, are finding it difficult to build an effectively working framework through which they can exert a

¹⁰ For example, see Matthew Stephens. 2013. "The concept and role of middle powers during global rebalancing." *Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 14:2; Paul Evans. 2015. "Searching for Cooperative Security 2.0." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 1:4, 537-551.; Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo. 2015. "Regional security strategies of middle powers in the Asia-Pacific." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*. 15: 2, 185-216.; John Ikenberry. 2016. "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia." *Political Science Quarterly* 131: 1, 9-43.; Tanguy Struye de Swielande. 2019. "Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific: Potential Pacifiers Guaranteeing Stability in the Indo-Pacific?" *Asian Politics & Policy* 11:2, 190-207.

concerted influence in the region, although this does not preclude the possibility of one being built in the near future.

Individually, regional middle powers or SMPs are swinging back and forth between principles and narrowly defined national interests. Some of them have been quite opportunistic in their foreign policy behaviours. On the one hand, they speak of principles and values such as rules-based order, free trade, multilateralism, rule of law and so on.¹¹ But on the other hand, they prioritise narrow national interests over values and principles. In short, they speak like liberals or idealists, but act like realists. The coalition's united front is fragile and would be plagued by constant defection problems. Individual states, afraid of being abandoned by superpowers on whom they are dependent for their security and economy, are always tempted to defect, undermining the united front of middle powers.

The question at this point is how to identify ideal areas of cooperation for regional small and medium powers that are swinging back and forth between idealist principles and realist impulses. The areas of cooperation first have to meet the imperative of idealist principles – strengthening regional multilateralism in line with the existing regional liberal order. This could be met by fostering a habit of cooperation among regional countries through continued cooperation in a multilateral context. Subsequently, the habit of cooperation will make regional multilateralism deep-rooted. At the same time, it has to serve individual countries' realist demands – national interests. It has to provide some concrete results and benefits of cooperation for the regional countries so that they can have strong incentives to continue cooperation.

ENHANCING CONNECTIVITY THROUGH MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

It is not easy to name specific areas that are promising for cooperation. Nevertheless, we can describe some characteristics of the areas and issues that are more auspicious for cooperation than others. First, let us go back to the experience of ASEAN+3. The multilateral cooperation forum focused on economic cooperation and related institutions at the early stage. A classic example of this was the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI). CMI, a regional multilateral currency swap agreement,

¹¹ Regarding the debate on what constitutes a rules-based order, see Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry. 2018. "Liberal Order: The Resilient Order." *Foreign Affairs*. July-August. Pp. 16-24; and Hans Kundnani. 2017. "What is the Liberal International Order." German Marshall Fund Policy Essay. No. 17.

was designed to provide much-needed assistance for crisis-hit countries. This is a central part of ASEAN+3 since the institution's goal was to jointly overcome the financial crisis and to prepare for rainy days in the future. The initial set up – overlapping bilateral swap agreements – soon expanded into a multilateralised format, the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation or CMIM. The fund promised increased from USD 78 billion in 2000 to USD 240 billion in 2012.

This is a good example of a low-hanging fruit of multilateral cooperation. It is easy to start and to continue cooperation when the cooperation results are immediately visible and more tangible. The expected benefits of economic cooperation are suggested in the form of numbers. For leaders, it is much easier to persuade a domestic audience with the numbers. Regional countries can build mutual confidence and a habit of cooperation by the time they finish the low-hanging fruits. The confidence built is the basis for a higher level of multilateral cooperation and more effective institutions. East Asian regional multilateral institutions have been no exception. Starting from CMI, East Asian countries mainly focused on more visible and tangible cooperation such as economic cooperation and non-traditional and human security cooperation, which are less politically sensitive.

Connectivity is an ideal agenda for multilateral cooperation in the region. First, it is a low-hanging topic in the sense that the agenda is already recognised by ASEAN and other regional cooperation schemes. ASEAN has been pushing connectivity forwards for a while. The first ASEAN masterplan on ASEAN connectivity was published in 2010 after a few years of toying with the concept. Since then, the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2025 in 2015 and other ASEAN major declarations and plans such as ASEAN Community Blueprints have put connectivity as one of the most important agenda of cooperation.¹² The most recent comprehensive document on ASEAN connectivity, Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, indicates five focal areas of ASEAN connectivity – sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence and people mobility.¹³ Externally, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) suggests the need for connectivity between ASEAN and other regional cooperation frameworks such as Indian Ocean

¹² See ASEAN Secretariat. 2015. ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/67.-December-2015-ASEAN-2025-Forging-Ahead-Together-2nd-Reprint.pdf>.

¹³ See ASEAN Secretariat. 2016. Masterplan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. <https://asean.org/storage/2016/09/Master-Plan-on-ASEAN-Connectivity-20251.pdf>.

Rim Association (IORA), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), BIMP-EAGA,¹⁴ Mekong subregion etc.¹⁵

Connectivity is an agenda put forward by major regional cooperation schemes other than ASEAN, i.e., ASEAN+3, EAS, US Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). ASEAN+3 has various connectivity initiatives concerning political-security, economic and socio-cultural cooperation involving ASEAN and Northeast Asian countries. A particular emphasis of ASEAN+3 is on supporting connectivity among ASEAN countries guided by the ASEAN Connectivity 2025 Masterplan.¹⁶ The chairman's statement of the 13th EAS announced in Singapore 2018 identifies eight areas of major cooperation, including supporting ASEAN connectivity initiatives and ASEAN Smart Cities Network.¹⁷ The US strategy for the Indo-Pacific also indicates connectivity as one of the values that the US has been promoting in the region and proposes the connectivity agenda, especially in the area of the digital economy and people-to-people exchanges.¹⁸ The BRI too suggests various connectivity issues – geographical connectivity, connectivity in the areas of infrastructure, telecommunications, energy, people-to-people exchanges and maritime connectivity.¹⁹

Second, connectivity and multilateralism are mutually fortifying. Connectivity cooperation creates concrete results and benefits for the participating countries. Connectivity in infrastructure not only links regional economies but also provides roads, railways and other types of infrastructure needed for regional developing countries, who would otherwise have difficulties in financing the infrastructure building. Connectivity of telecommunications and value chains and even people-to-

¹⁴ BIMP-EAGA stands for Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area.

¹⁵ Refer to "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", announced in 2019. https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

¹⁶ Refer to ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation Work Plan 2018-2022. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/APT-Corp-WorkPlan-2018-2022-Final.pdf>.

¹⁷ Refer to Chairman's Statement of the 13th East Asia Summit, Singapore, 15 November 2018. The items include 1) Environment and energy, 2) Education, 3) Finance, 4) Global Health issue and pandemic diseases, 5) ASEAN connectivity, 6) Economic cooperation and trade, 7) Food Security and 8) Information and communication technology.

¹⁸ Refer to the US Department of States. 2019. "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision". <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.

¹⁹ Refer to Office of the Leading Groups for the Belt and Road Initiative. 2017. *Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice and China's Contribution*. Foreign Language Press: Beijing.

people connectivity can be mobilised for individual countries' economic growth and benefits. Individual countries may then have strong incentives to keep participating in multilateral cooperation. This process ingrains the habit of cooperation among regional countries. In this way, multilateral cooperation focusing on connectivity creates momentum for continuing and consolidating multilateralism in the region.

In reverse, multilateralism works for better connectivity. As mentioned above, there are plenty of connectivity initiatives offered by different regional cooperation schemes. A careful coordination of those initiatives is needed. The overlapping and not-so-well-coordinated connectivity initiatives may cause a waste of resources with redundant investments. Competition among different connectivity projects may bring about a race to the bottom in the worst case. If regional countries can put various connectivity initiatives in a basket and sort redundant investments and competitions out, it would enhance the effectiveness of investments for connectivity and save efforts and resources. Multilateral cooperation is the best instrument through which regional countries can coordinate the different connectivity projects. In short, connectivity is a cooperation agenda that brings regional countries into multilateralism and multilateralism is the most effective instrument to pursue connectivity cooperation.

REACTIVE REGIONALISMS AND HUMAN SECURITY COOPERATION

Another way to find a clue on how to re-strengthen regional multilateral cooperation is to look back at the past footprints of multilateral cooperation in the region. Put simply, multilateral cooperation in East Asia has been stimulated by major regional crises or shared threats. This is the typical characteristics of reactive regionalism. ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was an ASEAN response to the power vacuum left behind by the end of the Cold War. It was regional countries' collective reaction to the devastating Asian Financial Crisis that propelled ASEAN+3. Most regional multilateral cooperation frameworks are reactions to threats and crises, real or imagined. Thus, ASEAN+3 started to lose momentum when regional countries quickly recovered from the Asian Financial Crisis – the removal of a jointly shared sense of crisis or threat. It can be generalised that shared threat perceptions or a shared sense of crisis propels regional countries to sit together. Countries that do not share a sense of crisis or threats hardly gear up for cooperation.

Any cooperation area with acute challenges is therefore very promising for regional cooperation. If the threat is shared by regional countries, it is easier to reach a consensus to set up cooperative institutions and to sustain the momentum. Some

promising areas of cooperation include cooperation to overcome or to prevent another regional economic crisis. Transnational issues such as transborder crimes, people and drug smuggling, small arms trading, terrorism, natural disasters and so on are in this category too. In contrast, cooperation areas or items where the threat and challenge is shared by only a limited number of countries are less likely to bear fruits in the form of institution building. What is more, if an issue involves both potential victims and the source of threat within a region, then cooperation on this issue hardly ever makes progress. Notable examples include cyber security and maritime security.

At this point in time, the Covid-19 pandemic is sweeping across the whole world, including this region. Starting from China, most regional countries, to varying degrees, are affected. In most regional countries, the number of cases is still increasing and so is the number of deaths. Some countries have performed well in responding to the pandemic and some others have not. Most regional countries' borders are effectively closed and the domestic movement of people is restricted. As a consequence of partial or all-out shutdowns to contain Covid-19, national economies are suffering. Most countries are likely to record negative economic growth and the economic gap domestically and regionally is expected to widen. In the longer term, Covid-19 is likely to change the socio-economic environments in which ordinary people and governments work and interact with each other. Put simply, there is a high chance that the pandemic will have fundamental impacts on every aspect of personal life, the social environment, and the work of nations that we used to take for granted.

Table 1. Impact of Covid-19 in Selected Regional Economies, as of 13 May 2020.

	Cases	Death	Cases/mil. Pop.	2019 GDP Growth, %	2020 GDP (est.) Growth, %*
Brunei	141	1	322	3.9	2.0
Cambodia	122	-	7	7.1	2.3
Indonesia	15,438	1,028	56	5.0	2.5
Laos	19	-	3	5.0	3.5
Malaysia	6,779	111	209	4.3	0.5
Myanmar	180	6	3	6.8	4.2
Philippines	11,618	772	106	5.9	2.0
Singapore	25,346	21	4,332	0.7	0.2
Thailand	3,017	56	43	2.4	-4.8
Vietnam	288	-	3	7.0	4.8
China	82,926	4,633	58	6.1	2.3
Hong Kong	1,051	4	140	5.4	2.0
Japan	15,968	657	126	0.5	-1.5
S. Korea	10,962	259	214	2.0	1.3
Taiwan	440	7	18	2.7	1.8
India	74,925	2,436	54	5.0	4.0

Note: * ADB's Asia Development Outlook is dated April 2020. It means the GDP growth estimation for 2020 was made much earlier and the impacts of Covid-19 might have been underestimated in the forecast. For example, the estimated growth of Republic of Korea is -1.2 according to IMF's forecast in mid-April 2020. Refer to *Yonhap News*. 2020. "S. Korea's economy to shrink 1.2 pct in 2020 due to coronavirus: IMF", *Yonhap News*. 14 April.

Source: Worldometer. www.worldometers.info/coronavirus; ADB. 2020. Asia Development Outlook 2020. www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/575626/ado2020.pdf.

What is more, there is a growing sense that this kind of pandemics will visit the region periodically again and again or that Covid-19 is expected to recur over the years.²⁰ In recent decades, this region has been affected by many regional pandem-

²⁰ United Nations Development Program (UNDP). 2020. "COVID-19 pandemic Humanity needs leadership and solidarity to defeat the coronavirus". <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/coronavirus.html>; Sharon Begley. 2020. "Three potential futures for Covid-19: recurring small outbreaks, a monster wave, or a persistent crisis" *StatNews*. 1 May; Tom Jefferson and Carl Heneghan. 2020. "Covid 19 – Epidemic Waves", *The Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine*, Oxford University. 30 April.

ics, old and new. Pandemics like SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), Bird Flu (or Avian Flu, H5N1), Swine Flu (H1N1 flu Virus), Zika virus, MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) and so on left their footprints in the region after the 2000s. They caused a substantial number of casualties and devastating economic impacts. According to statistics from the World Health Organisation (WHO), the numbers of confirmed SARS cases and deaths in 13 regional countries were 8,074 and 773 respectively.²¹ A study suggested that the Chinese GDP shrank 3.1% in the second half of 2003, while the economic damages for Hong Kong and Singapore, the two economies most severely hit by SARS along with China, could be US\$3.7 billion and US\$5 billion respectively.²²

When the human, economic and sociocultural impacts of regional pandemics are massive and the pandemic is likely to recur periodically, it requires a whole-of-the-region approach to tackle the issue. The impacts of regional pandemics are not confined to a single country or to several regional countries. Even if a regional country, fortunately, escapes from the impact, the crisis in neighbouring countries would have implications for the country given the highly inter-connected economic activities and the massive movements of goods and people in the region. It requires the joint effort of regional countries in a multilateral form. So much so that it is the right time for regional countries to seriously consider how to upgrade regional multilateral cooperation on pandemics. This could have spillover effects on multilateral cooperation in other areas.

CONCLUSION

This paper covers two related issues – reviving regional multilateralism and enhancing connectivity in the region. Despite initial high hopes invested in regional multilateralism, the current status of multilateral cooperation in the region does not meet the early expectations. The crisis-driven regional multilateralism in East Asia is easily forgotten once regional countries overcome the crisis. More importantly, unlike what happened in the European context after the Second World War, major countries or superpowers in the region exploited regional multilateral

²¹ WHO. "Cumulative Number of Reported Probable Cases of SARS". https://www.who.int/csr/sars/country/2003_07_11/en/. These 13 regional countries include Australia, China (including Hong Kong and Macau), Taiwan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, The Philippines, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

²² Kai Ostwald. 2014. "Ebola, SARS, and the Economies of Southeast Asia", ISEAS Perspective. #63.

institutions for their strategic goals – outwitting opponents in regional multilateral institutions – rather than leading the cooperation. In some cases, superpowers neglected regional institutions by proposing their own unilateral regional cooperation architectures. It is in this context that regional small and medium powers emerged as an alternative to push regional multilateral cooperation forward and to sustain the existing regional order.

The potential of the small and medium powers in the region is, nevertheless, neither given nor granted. Those countries have to identify areas of cooperation through which they can effectively push regional multilateral cooperation forward. Two past experiences of East Asian multilateral cooperation provide clues on how to realise this. A cooperation agenda that provides concrete and tangible benefits to participating countries is a good starter, as was the case with the economic cooperation of ASEAN+3, particularly the Chiang Mai Initiative. Building regional connectivity in many different areas such as infrastructure, the digital economy, and people-to-people connection can provide concrete results and benefits through multilateral cooperation and thus ingrain the habit of cooperation needed to institutionalise multilateral cooperation in the region. In addition, a multilateral context is ideal for connectivity cooperation since it saves resources and efforts invested in connectivity projects through careful multilateral coordination.

Finally, multilateral cooperation in East Asia has been reactive. Major multilateral cooperation frameworks were set up to cope with specific region-wide crises or shared threats. Potentially rewarding and politically less-sensitive issues such as non-traditional security or human security issues are ideal items to re-boost regional multilateralism. When a crisis or a threat is widespread in the region without the sources of the problem or common enemies being present in the region, it is easier for regional countries to put their hands together. Currently, the Covid-19 pandemic has placed regional governments, economies, societies and individuals in a severe test. A serious effort to revive and re-strengthen regional multilateral cooperation could start with cooperation to manage regional pandemics that are expected to recur at any time.

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