

# Covid-19: EU Engagement in Southeast Asia

*S. Nanthini*

## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic has proven to be much more formidable than previous zoonotic illness such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the H1N1 influenza virus. More than 231.5 million cases and 4.7 million deaths have been reported globally as of September 2021.<sup>1</sup> The first region affected by the Covid-19 pandemic outside of China – Southeast Asia – saw its first case in Thailand on 13 January 2020.<sup>2</sup> While most countries in the region have been able to gain a measure of control over the pandemic, others have not. As of September 2021, the number of known Covid-19 cases in ASEAN countries has exceeded 11.7 million with the currently dominant Delta variant causing surges of cases, even in countries which had previously had control of the outbreak.<sup>3</sup> Since Covid-19 began its reign of terror over the world, its effects have exceeded its original status as a public health emergency, turning into a full-blown humanitarian crisis – one which has affected almost every part of modern life, making any one-note/single-sectoral approach response ineffective. After all, in Southeast Asia, a region with one of the highest incidences of natural disaster events, any response to the pandemic will necessarily have to take into account the likelihood of concurrent disasters – a likelihood which, as can be seen by volcanic eruptions, typhoons, floods and other disasters which

---

1. World Health Organisation. 2020. WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. (<https://covid19.who.int>).

2. WHO. 29 January 2021. Timeline of WHO's Response to COVID-19. (<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>).

3. Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2021. Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker. (<https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0#ASEAN>).

have occurred over the duration of the pandemic, is relatively high.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as clearly highlighted in the 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, disasters in the region are likely to further increase in frequency and intensity as a result of climate change and environmental degradation.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is of utmost importance that a multi-sectoral approach be taken by not just ASEAN, but also its various partners in managing Southeast Asia's response to Covid-19 and its broader crisis management system. As a long-time dialogue partner, key trading partner and recent strategic partner of ASEAN, the European Union (EU) has naturally been actively involved in Southeast Asia's Covid-19 response, pandemic preparedness and overall disaster cooperation activities. Instead of being limited by sectoral silos, the EU should thus adopt a nexus approach to bridge the sectoral silos in its activities – in particular, between the health and disaster management systems – in order to reinvigorate its own activities in the region and maintain the relevance of the ASEAN-EU relationship.

## SOUTHEAST ASIA AND COVID-19

Since the Covid-19 outbreak, it has become clear that the pandemic poses a significant non-traditional security threat. The nature of a pandemic presents a multi-dimensional security threat, as highlighted by its impacts having gone far beyond public health, to other sectors, including human livelihood and mobility.<sup>6</sup> In Southeast Asia, a region which relies heavily on tourism, manufacturing, international trade and labour migration, such a crisis in which human mobility is limited could have catastrophic long-term consequences for the region.<sup>7</sup>

In Southeast Asia, the first region to be affected outside of China, there have been over 10 million cases and nearly 250,000 deaths (as of September 2021).<sup>8</sup>

---

4. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). 2020. The Disaster Riskscape across South-East Asia: Key Takeaways for Stakeholders. (<https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/IDD-APDR-Subreport-SEA.pdf>).

5. IPCC. 2021. Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. ([https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_Full_Report.pdf)).

6. Kliem, Frederick. 13 March 2021. ASEAN and the EU amidst COVID-19: overcoming the self-fulfilling prophecy of realism. *Asia Europe journal*, 1-19. (doi:10.1007/s10308-021-00604-8).

7. Asian Development Bank. December 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Developing Asia: The Pandemic Extends into 2021. ADB Briefs. (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/656521/impact-covid-19-developing-asia-extends-2021.pdf>).

8. Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2021. Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker. (<https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0#ASEAN>).

Overall, the pandemic has cost the global economy between USD\$4.8 trillion and USD\$7.4 trillion in 2020, with a likely additional impact of between USD\$3.1 trillion and USD\$5.4 trillion in 2021.<sup>9</sup> With around 28 percent of these losses incurred by developing countries in Asia and the global extreme poverty rate increasing for the first time since 1998 due to the likelihood of between 71 million and 100 million people being pushed into extreme poverty in 2020, Covid-19 is threatening years if not decades of hard-won developmental and economic progress in the region.<sup>10</sup>

As part of the region's response to Covid-19, the pandemic was securitised early on at the national level, if not at the regional level. While the extent and timing vary, most ASEAN countries imposed some pandemic restrictions, including lockdowns, mobility restrictions and border closures, relatively early in the timeline of the pandemic, which in turn helped to control the pandemic to some extent.<sup>11</sup> With their previous experience of the 2003 SARS outbreak, ASEAN had already realised the importance of a coordinated early regional response, particularly in areas such as reporting and information-sharing. As such, the organisation convened a Special ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) on Covid-19 in February 2020 and shortly after, the ACC Working Group on Public Health Emergencies (APCCWG – PHE), whose members consisted of representatives from the various Sectoral Bodies of ASEAN's Community Pillars.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, with countries in the region having significant differences in the capacity of their medical systems, there was a need for countries to compensate for each other bilaterally and/or regionally. As the operational arm of ASEAN's disaster management system, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) opened its warehouses of relief stockpiles for ASEAN member states, upon the request of their National Disaster Management Organisations (NDMOs) to fill the supply gaps in their national responses.<sup>13</sup>

---

9. Asian Development Bank. December 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Developing Asia: The Pandemic Extends into 2021. ADB Briefs, December 2020. (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/656521/impact-covid-19-developing-asia-extends-2021.pdf>).

10. World Bank. 8 June 2020. Projected poverty impacts of COVID-19 (coronavirus). (<https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/461601591649316722-0090022020/original/ProjectedpovertyimpactsOfCOVID19.pdf>).

11. Kliem, Frederick. 13 March 2021. ASEAN and the EU amidst COVID-19: overcoming the self-fulfilling prophecy of realism. *Asia Europe Journal*, 1-19. (doi:10.1007/s10308-021-00604-8).

12. ASEAN Secretariat. July 2020. Annual Report 2019-2020 – ASEAN 2020: Cohesive and Responsive. (<https://asean.org/storage/2020/09/Annual-Report-ASEAN-2019-2020-Web-Version-v2.pdf>).

13. Ina Rachamawati. Mobilising DELSA Relief Items For Covid-19 Response. *The Column*, vol 61. (<https://thecolumn.ahacentre.org/posts/highlight/vol-61-mobilising-delsa-relief-items-for-covid-19-response/>).

Covid-19 has pushed the region to realise the importance of a cohesive co-ordinated response. Although ASEAN had many sectoral mechanisms, including the ASEAN Emergency Operations Network and the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communications Centre, the need for a single body to coordinate the region's health governance in the face of public health emergencies was clear. In line with this need to institutionalise public health governance in Southeast Asia, the establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED) is a good first step. Similar to the AHA Centre and its role in disaster management, this body will enable ASEAN to not only improve the coordination among member states, but also enhance their regional capacity to respond to public health emergencies.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, while the region's prior experience with SARS in 2003 helped to prepare them somewhat, the scale of Covid-19 has dwarfed previous pandemics, especially with recent waves of the now-dominant Delta variant leading to record cases across the region. This more transmissible variant has ripped through the world, even overwhelming early leaders in the region, such as Singapore and Vietnam, where some modicum of control over Covid-19 had been established. Moreover, with relatively low vaccination supplies and rates across the region, it is harder for countries to get any kind of a handle on the current pandemic situation. For example, in Southeast Asia, other than Cambodia at 82.6 percent of its population fully vaccinated, Malaysia at 79.7 percent, Singapore at 89.3 percent, and Brunei at 71.2 percent (as of November 2021), the rest of the region have less than half of their populations vaccinated – still short of any possible attempts at herd immunity.<sup>15</sup>

## **EU ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA DURING COVID-19: WHAT HAS IT DONE?**

Transboundary disasters such as pandemics inevitably need a multilateral response for any hope of a long-term resolution. In line with this realisation, the leaders of ASEAN held video conferences with its external partners as early as March 2020.

---

14. ASEAN Secretariat. 14 October 2020. ASEAN, Japan Enhance Cooperation towards Post-Pandemic Recovery. (<https://asean.org/asean-japan-enhance-cooperation-towards-post-pandemic-recovery/>); Prime Minister of Australia. 2020. Investing in our Southeast Asian partnerships. Media Release, 14 November 2020. (<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/investing-our-southeast-asian-partnerships>).

15. Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2021. Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker. (<https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0#ASEAN>).

The first virtual EU-ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting, focusing on cooperation on mitigating the social and economic impacts in both regions, keeping supply chains open and advancing scientific research in the field, was held on 20 March 2020.<sup>16</sup> As a close partner of ASEAN, the EU has been involved in providing assistance not just multilaterally, but also bilaterally to the individual ASEAN member states as well.

## Assistance

The EU's assistance to ASEAN is being delivered as part of its "Team Europe" package, a specialised package combining resources from the EU, its member states, and financial institutions to support partner countries.<sup>17</sup> Valued at more than €20 billion in total, this package has been aimed at responding to the immediate public health crisis caused by Covid-19 and its resulting humanitarian needs, strengthening the capacities and preparedness of partner countries to deal with the pandemic as well as mitigating the immediate social and economic consequences.<sup>18</sup>

In Southeast Asia, the EU has provided over €800 million to the region to date.<sup>19</sup> This has taken the form of financial assistance, resource support such as provisions of personal protective equipment and health facilities as well as technical assistance.<sup>20</sup> For example, Indonesia has received over €200 million in grants, donations of medical supplies and equipment and technical support from "Team Europe" – with different countries and EU bodies providing various forms of support.<sup>21</sup> Individual EU countries are also providing support to ASEAN regional mechanisms,

---

16. EU Mission to ASEAN. 2021. EU ASEAN STRATEGIC PARTNERS: Blue Book 2021. (<https://euinasean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Blue-Book-2021.pdf>).

17. European External Action Service. 8 April 2020. Coronavirus: European Union launches "Team Europe" package to support partner countries with more than €20 billion. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/77326/Coronavirus:%20European%20Union%20launches%20"Team%20Europe"%20package%20to%20support%20partner%20countries%20with%20more%20than%20%20%20billion](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/77326/Coronavirus:%20European%20Union%20launches%20%20Team%20Europe)).

18. Ibid.

19. European External Action Service. 2 June 2021. EU and ASEAN launch "Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness" project. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness"-project\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness)).

20. Ibid.

21. European External Action Service. 16 December 2020. Team Europe response to coronavirus in Indonesia. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/australia/80574/team-europe-response-coronavirus-indonesia\\_tg](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/australia/80574/team-europe-response-coronavirus-indonesia_tg)).

as seen by Germany's contribution of €5 million to the ASEAN Covid Response Fund.<sup>22</sup>

Part of the EU's engagement in the region also includes collaborating with ASEAN on matters of technical expertise and institutional support. For example, the EU participated in a series of EU-ASEAN Experts' Dialogues on Covid-19 Vaccines, held on 8 December 2020 and 25 May 2021, respectively. These dialogue sessions provided an opportunity for two-way engagement, allowing both regional organisations to collaborate in exchanging views on a myriad of pandemic-related issues, including the emergence of new Covid-19 variants as well discussion of best practices in Covid-19 responses, vaccine rollouts and the scaling up of manufacturing capacities.<sup>23</sup>

In line with its reputation as a multilateral actor, the EU seems to be also generating some of its assistance through not the EU itself, but other coordinated multilateral projects, as demonstrated by its €20-million "Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness" project. Although the EU is funding this project, the project will be implemented by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to enhance coordination of ASEAN's regional Covid-19 response and strengthen the capacity of public health systems in Southeast Asia in preparation for potential future health emergencies.<sup>24</sup> Other multilateral projects include the UN Multi Sector Response Plan and, in particular, Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access, the global vaccines sharing scheme better known as COVAX. In fact, the major part of the EU's global contribution has been through the COVAX scheme.

As the vaccine pillar of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, the aim for COVAX was to "accelerate the development and manufacture of Covid-19 vaccines, and to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world".<sup>25</sup> Particularly important for the non-self-financing governments who are likely to have limited financial capabilities to purchase the vaccines directly from the manufacturers, this scheme provides an opportunity for them to ensure doses for at least 20 percent of their populations.<sup>26</sup> As part of "Team Europe", the EU, its associated

---

22. EU Mission to ASEAN. 2021. EU ASEAN STRATEGIC PARTNERS: Blue Book 2021. (<https://euinasean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Blue-Book-2021.pdf>).

23. ASEAN Secretariat. 25 May 2021. ASEAN, EU experts hold second dialogue on COVID-19 vaccines. (<https://asean.org/asean-eu-experts-hold-second-dialogue-on-covid-19-vaccines/>).

24. European External Action Service. 2 June 2021. EU and ASEAN launch "Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness" project. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness"-project\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness)).

25. WHO. 2021. COVAX. (<https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>).

26. Ibid.

bodies and member countries have contributed €2.2 billion to the COVAX Facility, allowing them to secure 1.3 billion doses of vaccines for 92 low- and middle-income countries, including ASEAN member states of that category.<sup>27</sup>

## EU and Vaccine Diplomacy

As countries ramp up their inoculation drives to cope with the rapidly shifting Covid-19 pandemic and its myriad of virus variants, securing sufficient vaccines for their populations in a timely manner has become their top priority. With the ongoing global supply crunch, vaccines have become regarded as a commodity with its access and availability depending on the purchasing power of a country. This is clear when looking at a global map of vaccination rates: the percentages of vaccinated populations in developed countries are generally ahead of that of populations in developing countries, with some developed countries even having started “booster shots”.<sup>28</sup> Even in Southeast Asia, the difference is stark, with Singapore having vaccinated over 80 percent of its population while Myanmar has only vaccinated 15.5 percent of its population.<sup>29</sup> With vaccines now regarded as a strategic commodity that enables a country not just to safeguard its population but also potentially reopen its bleeding economy, global powers are taking the opportunity to donate vaccines to other countries as a form of “vaccine diplomacy”, not least in an effort to gain goodwill among populations.

While the terms “vaccine diplomacy” and “disease diplomacy” may have only recently emerged onto the public consciousness when countries began their global vaccine donation programmes, it is not a new concept. Instead, it is related to the concept of “disaster diplomacy”, in which disaster-related activities, including the distribution of relief supplies during public health disasters, are used to pursue a country’s foreign policy goals.<sup>30</sup> However, while these disaster-related activities may sometimes catalyse or bolster short-term outcomes for which there is already a pre-existing foundation, there is limited evidence that these can shape new,

---

27. European External Action Service. 2 June 2021. EU and ASEAN launch “Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness” project. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness"-project\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness)).

28. Josh Hodler. 13 September 2021. Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World. The New York Times. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/world/covid-vaccinations-tracker.html>).

29. Center for Strategic & International Studies. 2021. Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker. (<https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0#ASEAN>).

30. Charlie Whittaker et al. 2018. A disaster diplomacy perspective of acute public health events. *Disasters*, 42, S2(2018): S173–S195.

long-term diplomatic outcomes, particularly when there are pre-existing political complications which may hinder these endeavours.<sup>31</sup> As such, a pre-existing foundation to a relationship is needed.

In the current pandemic context, China was the first major power to offer and deliver large quantities of its vaccines to developing countries – while most of the developed world was still engaged in nationalist vaccine procurement activities.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the EU, which has been donating vaccines through the multilateral route of COVAX as the second biggest contributor after the US, China has explicitly linked its vaccine donations to the “Health Silk Road” and thus, its Belt and Road Initiative and broader foreign policy agenda.<sup>33</sup> With the EU’s multilateral approach, while in line with its role as a champion of multilateralism in the global system, it has also reduced the visibility of their efforts. Already suffering from what Igor Driesmans, the Head of EU’s Mission to ASEAN, refers to as a “visibility deficit” in the region, this method further limits public exposure, inhibiting “good press”.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the EU also provides public, direct support for ASEAN’s Covid-19 response in the form of financial assistance, resource support as well as technical assistance for capacity-building.<sup>35</sup> This support is likely to contribute to the strengthening of the EU’s foundation in the region, paving a route for the EU to achieve its goal of playing a bigger role in the region.

## FUTURE EU ENGAGEMENT IN ASEAN

With ASEAN having upgraded its relationship with the EU to a “strategic partnership” during the 23rd EU-ASEAN Ministerial meeting on 1 December 2020, the

---

31. Ibid.; Ilan Kelman. 2019. Do Health Interventions Support Peace Through “Disaster Diplomacy?” *Peace Review* no. 31, 2 (2019):158-167.

32. Laura Zhou. 10 September 2021. Southeast Asia a priority for Chinese vaccines as Delta fuels surge in Covid-19 cases, Vice-President Wang Qishan says. *South China Morning Post*. (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3148306/southeast-asia-priority-chinese-vaccines-delta-fuels-surge>).

33. David Hutt. 23 March 2021. Coronavirus: Why EU lags behind China and Russia in ASEAN vaccine diplomacy. *DW*. (<https://www.dw.com/en/eu-china-asean-covid-vaccines/a-56960283>); Luisa Evangelista Chainferber. 5 May 2021. Vaccine Diplomacy: Who is Leading the Race? *Diplomatic Envoy*. (<https://blogs.shu.edu/thediplomaticenvoy/2021/05/05/vaccine-diplomacy-who-is-leading-the-race/>).

34. David Hutt. 13 November 2020. “The EU is ready to seize the future opportunities to engage with the US on ASEAN matters,” says EU ambassador to ASEAN. *Watching Europe in Southeast Asia*, 13 November 2020. (<https://europeinseasia.substack.com/p/the-eu-is-ready-to-seize-the-future>).

35. European External Action Service. 2 June 2021. EU and ASEAN launch “Southeast Asia Health Pandemic Response and Preparedness” project. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness-project\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lebanon/99404/eu-and-asean-launch-southeast-asia-health-pandemic-response-and-preparedness-project_en)).



question now arises: What does this mean for the EU's engagement with ASEAN?<sup>36</sup> This question is particularly pertinent in the current context, with this upgrade taking place against the backdrop of a global crisis. By moving from a donor-recipient relationship to a more equitable partnership, a "mutually beneficial" relationship, this new strategic partnership is the consolidation of the EU's various cooperative activities and programmes in the region, which run the gamut from climate change to maritime cooperation to Covid-19 response. This idea of a "mutually beneficial" relationship has also been reflected in the EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy, which lays out the bloc's continued engagement with the region.

Moreover, the global Covid-19 outbreak has clearly highlighted the consequences of a multi-dimensional crisis which cannot be met with a single-sectoral response. With Europe eager to make its presence more visible in the region, the effectiveness of its new strategy and programmes are therefore vital. By using a multi-sectoral nexus approach, the EU would be able to increase this effectiveness and therefore, visibility in the region, particularly in the area of pandemic preparedness and response.

## **Nexus Approach as a Framework for European Engagement**

Put simply, the nexus approach is a multi-sectoral approach requiring collaboration among various actors or sectors. By considering the long-term implications of any project across multiple sectors, this approach centres on a diverse range of actors working towards a collective outcome. As such, it allows for the balancing of multiple perspectives – including social, economic and environmental – which is particularly apt for such a complex issue as pandemic preparedness and response where sectoral boundaries can be amorphous.<sup>37</sup> Rather than continue to be stymied by sectoral silos, the EU should invigorate its relationship with ASEAN with the use of a nexus approach as the framework for engagement with ASEAN.

Moreover, the nexus approach is not new to the EU. This approach has been operationalised in the form of the "Humanitarian Development Nexus" as part of the conclusions of the Council of the European Union in 2017 in the face of

---

36. Delegation of the European Union to ASEAN. 2021. The EU and ASEAN. (<https://euinasean.eu/the-eu-asean/>).

37. Alistair D. B. Cook and S. Nanthini. 1 July 2021. Disasters in COVID-19: Implications for Nexus Governance. NTS Insight. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/disasters-in-covid-19-implications-for-nexus-governance/#.YVaKRS0Rqv5>).

protracted crises.<sup>38</sup> What is Covid-19 but another protracted crisis – except on a global scale? By adopting the nexus approach as its framework for engagement in the region, European actors will be able to move beyond sectoral silos and tap on their previous projects in the region – particularly those in the development and disaster management sectors. This also allows them to overcome the silo-ed nature of health/disaster sectors in areas such as pandemic preparedness which do not strictly adhere to one or the other.

There are several pathways to how the EU can put this approach into practice in its pandemic preparedness and response activities in the region. First, there is a need to establish a framework for EU engagement in this area by tying together the disparate individual programmes, assessments and activities into a coherent whole. Questions that should be asked when creating such a framework include: What are the goals for the EU? What are the various programmes that are related to pandemic preparedness? What are the pre-existing programmes in ASEAN, and how can the EU contribute? Is this building resilience over the long term? Before the creation and prioritisation of specific programming approaches for responding to the impacts of Covid-19 as well as building ASEAN's pandemic preparedness and response, it is important to first identify if there are existing programmes and if so, how to adapt or scale up.<sup>39</sup>

One existing framework in ASEAN directly related to the regional Covid-19 response is the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF). Adopted at the 37th ASEAN Summit in November 2020, this framework, together with its implementation plan, serves as the region's consolidated exit strategy from the Covid-19 crisis.<sup>40</sup> Not only does it lay out ASEAN's response to the currently ongoing Covid-19 crisis, but the framework also charts out the different stages of recovery. By focusing on the areas and people most affected by the pandemic in the region, it charts particular strategies and identifies focused measures based on their needs as well as the priorities of the sector and overall region.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, in order to maintain the flexibility to keep up with the constantly shifting crisis, the implementation plan

---

38. European Commission. 1 March 2021. Resilience and Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. ([https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/resilience\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/resilience_en)).

39. Sarah Dalrymple. 8 April 2020. Looking at the coronavirus crisis through the nexus lens – what needs to be done. Development Initiatives. (<https://devinit.org/blog/looking-at-the-coronavirus-crisis-through-the-nexus-lens-what-needs-to-be-done/?nav=more-about>).

40. ASEAN Secretariat. 2020. ASEAN Comprehensive Framework Plan. ([https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ASEAN-Comprehensive-Recovery-Framework\\_Pub\\_2020\\_1.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ASEAN-Comprehensive-Recovery-Framework_Pub_2020_1.pdf)).

41. Ibid.

is a living document that will be constantly updated based on the changing conditions in the region.<sup>42</sup> In order for the EU to establish its own framework for pandemic preparedness, the ACRF, particularly its strategies on “Enhancing Health Systems”, “Strengthening Human Security” and “Advancing Towards a More Sustainable and Resilient Future”, must be taken into account, allowing the EU to fill in the gaps and scale up where there is space.

The creation of a framework for EU engagement in pandemic preparedness should also consider the region’s sophisticated disaster management eco-system. Due to the high prevalence of natural hazards in the region, ASEAN has understandably prioritised its management of natural disasters over that of other disasters such as pandemics. It has built a strong institutional capacity for dealing with such disasters, including the creation of a legal instrument, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in 2005, the development of work programmes, including the recent 2021-2025 AADMER Work Programme, and the establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) in 2011.<sup>43</sup> However, this prioritisation has led to uneven development in other governance areas – in particular, the pandemic preparedness and response sector, as has been highlighted during this outbreak.<sup>44</sup>

With the EU already involved in disaster management in the region such as through the 2020 Integrated Programme in Enhancing the Capacity of AHA Centre and ASEAN Emergency Response Mechanisms, and its funding contributions to ASEAN mechanisms and ASEAN member states, this would be an opportunity to further build resilience in this space.<sup>45</sup> Part of its future engagement should therefore be to continue to support local mechanisms where they exist, such as via direct financial contributions, resource provisions or technical expertise using EU experts and mechanisms. In particular, the EU should look at collaboration with ASEAN

---

42. ASEAN Secretariat. 2020. ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework: implementation plan. (<https://asean.org/book/asean-comprehensive-recovery-framework-implementation-plan/>).

43. Mely Caballero-Anthony. 2019. Negotiating Governance on Non-Traditional Security in Southeast Asia and Beyond. New York: Columbia University Press, 146-50; Angela Pennisi di Floristella. 2016. Dealing with Natural Disasters: Risk Society and ASEAN: A New Approach to Disaster Management. *The Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2016): 296-297.

44. Lina Gong and S. Nanthini. 2020. The COVID-19 Catalyst: Implications for Disaster Governance in ASEAN. *NTS Insight*. (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/the-covid-19-catalyst-implications-for-disaster-governance-in-asean/#.YVbfri0Rqv5>).

45. Ina Rachmawati and Dipo Summa. 2020. THE AHA CENTRE AND EUROPEAN UNION ANNOUNCE SUPPORT FOR HUMANITARIAN AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN ASEAN. *The Column*. (<https://thecolumn.ahacentre.org/posts/highlight/vol-58-the-aha-centre-and-european-union-announce-support-for-in-asean-humanitarian-and-emergency-response-in-asean/>).

mechanisms directly related to pandemic preparedness, such as ACPHEED, which once established will become the operational arm of ASEAN's regional health security, sustaining preparedness and resilience to public health emergencies in the region – similar to the AHA Centre and disaster management.

## The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Health and Pandemic Preparedness

The EU Strategy for Cooperation is a good first step in the EU's attempts to expand its influence in this region, particularly for ASEAN. With its description of ASEAN as an “increasingly important partner for the EU”, and its constant reference to several of its mechanisms, ASEAN seems to be the linchpin of its strategy – in line with previous EU approaches to the region. Published in September 2021, the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, in the wake of the EU's relationship upgrade with ASEAN, highlights the bloc's increased interest in engagement with and within the region.<sup>46</sup> While there does not seem to be any specific references to a nexus approach in the strategy, as seen by its multiple priority areas, there is nonetheless an implicit acceptance of the need for a multi-sectoral strategy in order to properly engage with a region still in the grip of the Covid-19 crisis.

Of relevance to this article is its priority area of human security – which focuses specifically on the area of health and disaster management. Current projects in the region include their contributions to the COVAX facility as well as their various individual projects as part of the EU's “Team Europe” package. The strategy also highlights areas of future cooperation, including the issue of securing medical and health-related supply chains – a key need for ASEAN as mentioned in the ACRF – an area that is likely to be of significant interest to the region, considering the still significant gaps in vaccine and medical resource availability. Beyond purely “health” issues, the issue of interoperability was also clearly a key concern for the bloc with the mention of the public availability of their interoperable “Covid-19 certificate systems”, which ASEAN could use within its own member states.

While the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is a milestone for its foreign policy and provides a useful outlook as to the future pathway of EU engagement in this region, it seems a little too broad. Particularly in the area of human security, there is little mention of *how* and with *whom* this cooperation is taking place. Is the EU planning on taking advantage of mechanisms such as ACPHEED? While there is mention of “supporting disaster management capacity building” with

---

46. ([https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf)).

pre-existing mechanisms such as the AHA Centre, there is little specificity about the direction this support will take. There is limited new information about its future engagement with the region, with this strategy seemingly a continuation of the current EU policy, at least in terms of its approach towards health and pandemic preparedness. Nevertheless, with its focus on building on and strengthening established partnerships, this strategy will likely allow the EU to improve its visibility in the region, thereby enabling them to play a bigger role in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

## CONCLUSION

After 43 years as dialogue partners, ASEAN and the EU upgraded their relationship to “strategic partners” in December 2020, an important step forward for the two most sophisticated regional organisations today. The timing of this upgrade is of particular significance, clearly highlighting the importance of inter-regional collaboration and cooperation during times of crises. The current global crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has proved to be a significant shock to the international system and its many constituent elements. It has strained resources all over the world, causing countries to turn towards nationalist policies at a time when multilateralism is needed the most.

After an initial inward turn at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak in Europe, the EU has aggressively moved towards a multilateral solution as the way out of this crisis. This is evident in its “Team Europe” package. Worth over €20 billion, this package has been aimed at responding to the immediate public health crisis caused by Covid-19 and its resulting humanitarian needs, with specific goals of strengthening the capacities and preparedness of partner countries to not only deal with the pandemic, but also mitigate the immediate social and economic consequences. Team Europe’s assistance to Southeast Asia has reached over €800 million and has taken the form of financial assistance, resource support and mobilisation as well as technical expertise.

In order to deal with the complexity of the effects of Covid-19, particular in terms of pandemic preparedness and response, the EU should use a multi-sectoral approach in its development of a framework for its engagement with the region. The nexus approach is one such approach. With the outbreak highlighting the need to be better prepared for a more complex and uncertain future, the nexus approach considers the short-, medium- and long-term implications for programmes across multiple areas – making it particularly apt for use in protracted crises, as has been done by the EU. After all, with Covid-19 unlikely to fade away in the short term

and the probability of infectious diseases increasing, the ASEAN-EU relationship in this regard is set to continue to be significant in the future. After all, a transboundary problem needs transboundary solutions.

**S. Nanthini** is Senior Analyst in the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Programme at the Centre of Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Her research interests include human security in Southeast Asia, looking at the HADR landscape through a gendered lens and the role of multilateralism in the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific.