Asean’s response to Covid-19: A report card

5 Q&As on how prepared the regional grouping was for the virus

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The focus of this essay is on Asean, the regional organisation.

In this issue, we want to find out whether Asean was prepared for the pandemic. Second, has Asean responded in a timely and effective manner to the pandemic? Third, did Asean try to coordinate its efforts with those of its dialogue partners? Fourth, was the doctrine of Asean solidarity reflected in the behaviour of the Asean member states?

1. What is Asean’s attitude towards the World Health Organisation (WHO)?

A: In 2001, the region was hit by the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars). Learning from that and other health emergencies, Asean set up five things to prepare itself: These are: a Network for Public Health Emergencies, the Malaysian-Maldives Regional Virtual Centre, the Philippine National Health Laboratory Network, led by Thailand; the Asean Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Centre; and a rice stockpile, co-organised with China, Japan and South Korea. Asean should continue to develop this kind of essential medical products.

2. Why was Asean’s response prompt and effective?

A: Asean’s health ministers reacted promptly to the growing threat of Covid-19. They met on Jan 30. This was followed by the meetings of Asean ministers for defence, economy, agriculture and forestry, foreign affairs, tourism and labour. The most important meeting was the Asean Summit, held via video conference on April 14.

3. What are the most important outcomes of the Asean meetings?

A: Asean will not turn inward and become protectionist. Instead, Asean will remain open and continue to support a rules-based international trading system. Asean will also work to build a rules-based economic integration.