



to the WHO is to locate all 10 Asean countries in the South-east Asia region.

Asean invited the director-general of WHO, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, to participate in the Asean+3 Special Summit on April 14. This is a vote of confidence in him and the WHO.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I think that Asean, led ably by Vietnam, has responded quite well to the pandemic. I want to make three additional comments.

First, Asean is an inter-governmental organisation. It is not a supranational institution. The response of the region to Covid-19 depends less on Asean than on the member states themselves.

The response of the member states has been uneven, given the disparities among them. Some member states like Singapore have world-class healthcare systems. Others do not.

Some member states, like Vietnam, responded promptly and decisively to Covid-19. Others did not. Some member states had the financial means to procure masks, test kits, PPE and ventilators. Others did not have such means. For an excellent review of how the 10 Asean countries have responded to Covid-19, see this article by Mr Choi Shing Kwok: Covid-19 battle: How have South-east Asian nations fared? in *The Straits Times* on May 9.

Second, I refer to an article, written by my good friend Nicholas Robinson and Christian Walzer: How do we prevent the next outbreak, in the *Scientific American* on March 25.

The authors wrote: "The health of all life on the planet is connected. The Covid-19 outbreak starkly reminds us of a basic fact that cannot be ignored: Human, animal, plant and environmental health and well-being are all intrinsically connected and profoundly influenced by human activities."

Third, I refer to a paper written by Ms Sharon Seah, the coordinator of the Asean Studies Centre at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute: Asean Covid-19 pandemic response: Practical next steps, May 18.

In her paper, Ms Seah calls on Indonesia to ratify the Asean agreement on the establishment of a Coordinating Centre on Animal Health and Zoonoses. With Indonesia's ratification, the agreement will come into force.

Why is the agreement important? Because it will facilitate cooperation among Asean member states and between Asean and such international organisations as the WHO, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Organisation for Animal Health.

It will also speed up regional coordination for the prevention and control of zoonotic diseases (which can be transmitted from animals to people). Covid-19 is not the first, nor will it be the last zoonotic disease.

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By Invitation

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

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



Tommy Koh

For *The Straits Times*

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

First, I 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 and 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? Fifth, what is Asean's attitude towards the World Health Organisation (WHO)?

Q1: Was Asean prepared?

A In 2003, 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, led by Malaysia; a Biodiaspora Regional Virtual Centre, led by the Philippines; a Regional Public Health Laboratories 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 consider having a stockpile of essential medical products.

With these five assets in place,

Asean was not unprepared when Covid-19 arrived.

Q2: 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.

What are the most important outcomes of the Asean meetings?

First, Asean will not turn inward and become protectionist. Instead, Asean will remain open and continue to support a rules-based international trading system.

Second, Asean will keep its markets open. It will facilitate, not

hinder, the flow of food and essential goods, especially medical products. Third, Asean will maintain its productive capacity and seek to minimise any disruption to the region's supply chains. Fourth, Asean will exchange timely information and best practices, and cooperate to fight the virus.

Q3: Did Asean try and coordinate its efforts with its dialogue partners?

A Asean was proactive in seeking to coordinate its efforts with its dialogue partners. The most important initiative was the special summit between Asean and China, Japan and South Korea (Asean+3) on April 14.

Asean ministers also held bilateral meetings with the ministers of the European Union and Japan.

Relations between China and the United States have become increasingly hostile. Asean foreign ministers held a physical meeting

with Foreign Minister Wang Yi of China on Feb 20 and a virtual meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on April 23.

Asean's policy is to be on good terms with the two rival powers and not to take sides in their disputes.

Q4: Was the doctrine of Asean solidarity reflected in the conduct of member states?

A Solidarity and cooperation are two of the most important values of the Asean family. Have the Asean countries lived up to their own professed values?

I find many examples of Asean solidarity in practice. Brunei and Vietnam have donated test kits to other Asean countries. Vietnam has donated personal protective equipment (PPE) to Laos.

Singapore has donated test kits to Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia and Laos.

Singapore has also donated ventilators and polymerase chain reaction machines to the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia and Laos. Singapore has looked after the Malaysian workers stranded in the Republic. Malaysia has, in turn, helped Singapore to bring its citizens home from various countries, including Egypt.

Q5: What is Asean's attitude towards the WHO?

A Asean has a favourable attitude towards the WHO. All 10 Asean members are members of the WHO. It is, however, illogical for the WHO to assign three of them –

Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand – to the South-east Asia region, and the remaining seven countries to the Western Pacific region. My plea