

# ASEAN's Response to COVID-19 and the Case of Vietnam

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## Abstract

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) has been leaving its imprints and implications on almost every corner of the globe. In the combat against it, while national response proves to be of determining significance, international coordination and cooperation is of increasing demand and necessity. The pandemic has, therefore, brought to the fore the question of resilience - national, regional, and global, particularly in terms of effective policy response. This article analyses the COVID-19 response by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Vietnam as the ASEAN Chair in the year 2020. The argument is that COVID-19 has served as a reminder of the importance of science, technology and innovation, the real necessity for science-based policies, and the greater demand for national and regional resilience and good governance to deal with emerging challenges. For Southeast Asia, the spirit of cohesiveness and responsiveness that Vietnam demonstrated and promoted in its

ASEAN chairmanship year 2020 has been and will be determinant in the response to COVID-19 and sustaining the relevance and resilience of the ASEAN Community further beyond.

## The COVID-19 pandemic

The world has been in the prolonged combat against the Coronavirus (COVID-19) for almost one year with encouraging results in some parts and ensuing challenges in others. Being one of the first regions of the world to be affected by the pandemic, and currently suffering its new waves, Southeast Asia is still facing a surge in infectious cases. By end of November 2020, over one million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and more than 27,000 total deaths had been reported regionwide, with the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar being the most heavily infected countries (Dezan Shira & Associates, 2020). COVID-19 is leaving its imprint on all aspects of life and raising multiple

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cross-cutting questions, domestic and international, in Southeast Asian countries and elsewhere. It has highlighted, among others, the significance of national resilience, particularly in terms of scientific capacity and policy, and necessitated regional cooperation in science, technology and innovation for epidemic combat and economic recovery. In essence, effective national and regional policy responses are in increasing demand.

### COVID-19: A powerful reminder of the decisive role of science, technology, and innovation

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the question of resilience, at all levels - national, regional, and global. They go hand in hand. The traditional emphasis of Southeast Asian politics on 'national resilience' as a prerequisite for 'regional resilience' sits well in this battle against COVID-19 (Dang, 2020). The pandemic has tested the cross-cutting issues of efficiency, relevance, and resilience of institutions - nationally and internationally. Good governance and institutional efficiency have been in high demand. Without them, critical existing problems could not be resolved while new ones would emerge, further undermining the national and international institutions' relevance and resilience as a result. In this sense, COVID-19 has been a powerful reminder that the standing of national, regional, and global institutions and players depends above all else on their performance - especially with regards to sustainable development and crisis management.

A key to sustainable development and epidemic management is science and technology. During normal times, science and technology has, for the past several decades, become an increasingly

important determinant of national, regional and global socio-economic development. Unprecedented achievements have resulted from advances of the fourth technological revolution and the rapid growth of the knowledge economy. It is more so during such crisis circumstances as the COVID-19. New technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence, and 5G have been widely used by countries across the globe in epidemic trend forecast and epidemiological investigation, which has contributed greatly to identifying infected cases and their close contacts. In countries including the Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam, technology has been used extensively to verify home quarantine and to trace contacts. Most popular was text and mobile-based software and a new serological test that can establish links among infected patients, which allows the authorities to map out the chain of transmission. COVID-19 has testified that digital inclusion and secure resilient digital infrastructure is essential for not only supporting disease controlling measures and smart health systems, but also enabling the new normal way of life - wherein physical social distancing, tele-working, and online studying have become part of everyday habits, by facilitating remote learning and working, minimizing workforce disruptions, promoting job upskilling and reskilling programmes to build up post-COVID-19 workforce preparedness. With the promotion of science and technology, the dual task of sustaining economic growth and controlling the pandemic is believed to be within reach.

As such, COVID-19 has born several implications in terms of science, technology, and innovation. Being a health crisis, it has presented a test to the capacity of national public health systems, the efficiency of research and development, and the effectiveness of scientific policies and institutions in

responding to crises. With tremendous economic and social consequences, the pandemic has necessitated greater emphasis on research and development and cooperation in science, technology, and innovation within and among countries. “Where international cooperation works and countries come together, lives will be saved. Where the lessons of science are respected, lives will be saved,” said U.N. Undersecretary-General Fabrizio Hochschild at a digital conference on science and technology in the fight against COVID-19 (Fueh, 2020). The crisis, according to UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, also demonstrated the urgency of accelerating information sharing through open science (UNDGC, 2020). Upon this awareness, the United Nations and other international institutions have been mobilizing international cooperation to harness the power of science to tackle the coronavirus pandemic, while also working with partners to explore innovative crisis response tools. In short, the actual responses to COVID-19 have illustrated with real time daily examples that adopting science-based policies and harnessing frontier technologies can make the difference between life and death (UNCTAD, 2020).

Lessons have been drawn under COVID-19 impacts on the inter-relatedness among science, policy, and society in managing, and recovering from, the pandemic and the important contribution of science towards further sustainable development goals. They included enhancing national capacities for science-based decision making, raising public trust in science and government policies, bolstering public health cooperation measures through sharing information, experience and best practices, enhancing collaborative research and development of vaccines and antiviral medicines through sharing knowledge

and data, harnessing the entrepreneurial spirit of the private sector to invest in research and development focusing on developing innovations to address social and environmental challenges and provide economic opportunities, ensuring regional and universal access to solutions, and acting with greater urgency on regional and global scientific assessments (UNDESA, 2020; UNESCAP, 2020). Calls for and commitments to greater collaboration in science and technology have been made within the framework of major global and regional cooperative institutions, including the UN, G7, EU, Inter-American Development Bank, ASEAN, and ASEAN-led mechanisms, and by leading scientific institutions and expert groups. Response to COVID-19 and its implications has, in its turn, reflected the relevance and effectiveness of cooperative mechanisms. “This outbreak is a test of solidarity - political, financial and scientific. We need to come together to fight a common enemy that does not respect borders, ensure that we have the resources necessary to bring this outbreak to an end and bring our best science to the forefront to find shared answers to shared problems. Research is an integral part of the outbreak response,” said WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus at a two-day forum held at the World Health Organization’s Geneva headquarters in February 2020 (WHO, 2020). Indeed, science, technology, and innovation serve as drivers and facilitating factors in finding solutions to the health and medical problems and to short, medium, and long-term economic and social challenges brought about by the pandemic. They also help improving preparedness of national and regional communities for future risks and crises. In short, scientific research and development proves to be of great importance in responding to COVID-19, individually and collectively.

## Fostering collective actions: the response of ASEAN

ASEAN members have taken science seriously. Specific R&D measures adopted by Southeast Asian countries included sharing experience and best practices in epidemiological research and development, clinical treatment, joint research and development of vaccines and anti-viral medicines, bolstering national and regional epidemic preparedness and response including through the possible setting up of a network of experts on public health emergencies. The new waves of the disease spread highlighted the urgent priority for research and integration of social sciences and others into the crisis response.

In a broader context, cooperation in science and technology has long been promoted by ASEAN. The grouping is one of the regional cooperation bodies in the world having regionalism served as a platform for cooperation in science and technology so early as in 1978, when the ASEAN Committee on Science and Technology was established. Since then, a series of ASEAN Plans of Action in Science and Technology (APASTs) have been developed, the most recent being the Action Plan of Action on Science, Technology, and Innovation (APASTI) 2016-2025 endorsed by the ASEAN Ministers for Science and Technology at the 16th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Science and Technology (AMMST) held on November 6, 2015 in Vientiane, Lao PDR. ASEAN leaders shared a common recognition that science and technology is a key factor in sustaining economic growth, enhancing community well-being, and promoting regional integration. They envisaged that by 2020, ASEAN would be technologically competitive, competent in strategic and enabling technologies, with an adequate pool of technologically qualified

and trained manpower, and strong networks of scientific and technological institutions and centres of excellence (ASEAN, 1997). Recognizing the crucial role of science and technology to development, strong emphasis has been placed by ASEAN states on the measures that need to be implemented to bolster science and technology cooperation in the ASEAN Community Blueprints. In the ASEAN Community Blueprint for the period 2008-2015, ASEAN science and technology cooperation was under the pillar of the ASEAN Social Cultural Community. In the period 2016-2025, it was moved to the ASEAN Economic Community pillar to support economic cooperation within the Community. Current science and technology cooperation in ASEAN focuses on nine programme areas, namely food science and technology, biotechnology, meteorology and geophysics, marine science and technology, non-conventional energy research, microelectronics and information technology, material science and technology, space technology and applications, and science and technology infrastructure and resources development. From a whole-of-Community approach, science, technology, and innovation has featured high in the dual-track approach of mitigating risk and minimizing transmission while gradually restoring socio-economic activities to normal and sustaining growth that ASEAN has taken in recent months in response to COVID-19.

While COVID-19 highlighted that national, regional, and global resilience are mutually reinforcing, it also drew attention to a widening gap between the demand for, and the supply of, regional and global governance and leadership. This stemmed, to a certain extent, from the fact that countries have been dealing with the pandemic largely on a national basis, which presented an implicit recognition of the inefficiency

of regional and global institutions. Like many other regional cooperative mechanisms, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been under scrutiny on crisis management efficiency and relevance to its member states in the hour of need. As observed by Charles Santiago, Malaysian Member of Parliament and ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights Chairperson, almost all the countries in Southeast Asia have taken a nationalistic approach over a prosper-by-neighbour one (Demetriadi, 2020). At the onset of the crisis, Southeast Asian countries, similarly to those in other regions, responded to the pandemic with various national policy decisions. The relatively slow and lack-of-coherent response of ASEAN members in the early phase of the pandemic could be partly explained by the unexpectedness of the pandemic outbreak, uneven infections, and different risk perception based on different impacts of the disease among countries (Hoang, 2020). However, the argument on the nexus between national resilience and regional resilience would suggest that extensive early measures taken by each member state are essential to curb the spread of the virus at the national level and, therefore, contributed to regional collective efforts in later phases.

As the pandemic widely hit the region, there has been an increasing policy convergence and ASEAN quickly forged a more united regional response based on consensus on the need for collective efforts to tackle COVID-19 and its impacts on member states. On February 14, 2020, ASEAN issued the Chairman's Statement on ASEAN Collective Response to the Outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019, which emphasized the importance of ASEAN solidarity and reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to collectively respond to the outbreak of the COVID-19 through utilizing and strengthening regional mechanisms for

coordination and cooperation (ASEAN, 2020a). ASEAN Defence Ministers on February 19, 2020 issued their Joint Statement on Defence Cooperation against Disease Outbreak. The 26th ASEAN Economic Ministers Retreat on March 10, 2020 in Da Nang, Viet Nam, issued a statement calling for collective action to mitigate the impact of the virus, with a particular focus on leveraging technology, digital trade, and trade facilitation platforms to foster supply chain connectivity and sustainability. ASEAN Health Ministers on April 7, 2020 convened video conference to encourage regional cooperation among various stakeholders and accelerate measures to control the spread and mitigate the pandemic. On April 9, 2020, ASEAN Foreign Ministers held an ASEAN Coordinating Council meeting on COVID-19 to discuss and exchange views on ASEAN collective response to the rapid outbreak of the COVID-19. They called for a Special ASEAN Summit, which was held five days later with a Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The Declaration appreciated the extensive measures undertaken by each ASEAN member states and reaffirmed their determination to remain united, act jointly and decisively to control the spread of the disease, and address its severe and multi-faceted challenges (ASEAN, 2020b). At the proposal made by the Summit, the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund, the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies, and the ASEAN Regional Centre on Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases were formally established at the 37th ASEAN Summit held in November 2020. Statements of sectoral bodies of ASEAN were also issued, including those of ASEAN Ministers on Agriculture and Forestry to ensure food security, food safety and nutrition in ASEAN (April 16, 2020), the ASEAN Tourism Ministers on strengthening cooperation to revitalise ASEAN tourism in the context of COVID-19 (April

29, 2020), the ASEAN Labour Ministers on response to the impact of COVID-19 on labour and employment (May 14, 2020), and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on social welfare and development on mitigating impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups (June 10, 2020). Accordingly, practical cooperative measures and initiatives have been put forward across various sectors of the ASEAN Community to strengthen regional capacity in pro-active response to the challenges of COVID-19. As Hoang Thi Ha argued, the value of raising the ASEAN flag high is to make sure that while exercising national responsibility, member states will not indulge national selfishness. Rather, national resilience is comprehended in the larger picture of regional resilience (Demetriadi, 2020).

The issued declarations and agreements reflected the coherent, comprehensive, multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder, and whole-of-Community approach taken by ASEAN to regional cooperation on COVID-19. Practical cooperation focuses on further strengthening public health cooperation measures; prioritizing the well-being of people and providing appropriate assistance and support to the nationals of ASEAN member states affected by the pandemic in each other's country or in a third country; enhancing effective and transparent public communication including updates of relevant government policies, public health and safety information, strengthening cooperation in countering misinformation and fake news, and developing a set of guidelines and possible platforms to facilitate timely sharing of information; taking collective action and coordinating policies in mitigating the economic and social impacts from the pandemic (ASEAN, 2020b).

The collective actions taken by ASEAN in tackling COVID-19 also demonstrated the relevance and effectiveness of existing intra-grouping cooperative

mechanisms. Response to the health crisis falls into the realm of the social and cultural pillar, while managing its general impacts belongs to the political-security and economic pillars of the ASEAN Community. Under the ASEAN Social and Cultural Community, the most relevant existing mechanisms are the ASEAN Health Ministers, the ASEAN Emergency Operations Centre Network (ASEAN EOC) for public health emergencies, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Centre), and the ASEAN Bio-Diaspora Virtual Centre (ASEAN BVC) for big data analytics and visualization. The advantages of ASEAN in forging cooperation against COVID-19 lay in the fact that these platforms for cooperation in the health security sector have been in existence and tested, as ASEAN had experience in utilizing these mechanisms in battling real-time epidemics like SARS, H1N1 and MERS-COV in the past.

Dialogue partnerships between ASEAN and key players in the Indo-Pacific region also provided the former with opportunities to mobilize support and assistance from the latter in the joint efforts to tackle the crisis. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, ASEAN has held many ministerial meetings and summits with its dialogue partners via video conference to exchange views and explore areas and measures of cooperation to mitigate, control and respond to the impacts of COVID-19. Major areas and measures included joint collaborations on scientific research and development of vaccines and medicines, building and maintaining resilient, open, and connected supply chains and utilizing ASEAN-led regional mechanisms to put forward people-centred healthcare, treatment, and consular assistance policies in responding to pandemics and supporting a sustained economic recovery (ASEAN, 2020c).



Specifically, ASEAN and EU agreed to boost the sharing of information, experience, and policy coordination, especially in disease diagnosis, prevention and treatment, vaccine research and development, make greater joint efforts to minimize the socio-economic impacts of the epidemic on their respective member countries, maintain trade and investment, and work out long-term economic restoration measures. ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, and the ROK) issued statements of health ministers and economic ministers on April 7 and June 4, 2020 respectively, committing to enhancing cooperation on COVID-19 response and mitigating the economic impact of the pandemic. A contribution of US\$ 300,000 has been made from the ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation Fund to the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund. Bilaterally, the Republic of Korea provided ASEAN with practical assistance in COVID-19 response, including the contribution of medical supplies and equipment and the conduct of in-country training for laboratory officers under the US\$ 5 million project on Enhancing the Detection Capacity for COVID-19 in ASEAN Member States, launched on June 16, 2020 and funded by the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF), and the COVID-19 Comprehensive Rapid Response Program. ASEAN and the Republic of Korea also adopted the ASEAN - ROK Joint Initiatives on Bolstering the Economic Connectivity in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Japan pledged to provide over US\$ 200 million worth of assistance to secure medical supplies and equipment and technical assistance to research institutions in ASEAN countries. For economic revitalization, Japan granted a total of US\$ 2.5 billion in budget support loans to Southeast Asian countries upon their request and investment to build resilient supply chains and promote the digitalization of the industry under the ASEAN - Japan Economic Resilience Action Plan.

China was also committed to providing US\$ 5 million to support ASEAN - China public health cooperation and donated medical supplies to the ASEAN Secretariat for COVID-19 prevention (Hoang, 2020). At the ASEAN-Australia meeting on November 14, 2020, Australia announced an AU\$ 550 million injection of aid to Southeast Asia, including hefty dollops of coronavirus aid with AU\$ 21 million for the ASEAN Regional Centre on Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases, and AU\$ 70 million for recovery efforts. Washington contributed US\$ 87 million to combat the coronavirus in Southeast Asia, including providing ventilators and personal protective equipment (Strangio, 2020). The U.S. government, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), also supported the ASEAN Committee on Science, Technology, and Innovation and the ASEAN Foundation in organizing annual ASEAN Science and Technology Fellowship workshop with the aim to provide opportunities for scientists in Southeast Asia to apply their knowledge and analytical skills in solving public policy challenges. One of the highlights of the 2019/2020 fellowship was the active involvement of the participants in COVID-19 mitigation efforts, from developing a thermal temperature scanner and low-cost ventilator, to volunteering in producing - and distributing - hand-sanitizer and other safety equipment (USAID, 2020). At the 15th East Asia Summit, leaders of 18 participating countries expressed their commitment to working together inclusively at the regional and global levels, in consultation with the United Nations and the World Health Organization, to address the health, economic and security implications of the COVID-19 pandemic (EAS, 2020).

Assistance from dialogue partners has been encouraging to ASEAN in its effort to jointly respond to COVID-19, given the fact that inadequate

infrastructures and resources present a formidable challenge for Southeast Asia countries in the struggle. The existing health care infrastructure in many ASEAN member states, epitomized by long waiting queues and low-quality care, will need significant ramping up to cope with the pandemic. The average ratio of doctors is estimated at only 0.8 for 1,000 people, and out-of-pocket expenditure for healthcare is at 44% in the region's five most populous nations, namely Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia (Mercado, 2020). If the disease prolongs, growing numbers of patients, shortage of protective equipment for health workers and limited facilities to provide intensive care will increase the risk of a contagion in the region that would be hard to control. However, the difficulty is that many of ASEAN dialogue partners have also been heavily hit by COVID-19, which would make their assistance to ASEAN limited and uncertain. Another obstacle to ASEAN's intra- and extra-regional cooperation lies in the considerable existing gaps in the level of development among its member countries, particularly in terms of science, technology, and innovation. These gaps might be further widened by the economic crisis that regional countries are facing when new phases of COVID-19 keep spreading in the region.

### Emphasizing cohesiveness and responsiveness: the experience of Vietnam

Vietnam has been responding to COVID-19 by deploying a whole-of-political-system and whole-of-society approach with early action, prompt, firm, and comprehensive epidemic management measures. As of the first week of December 2020, Vietnam confirmed a total of 1,366 COVID-19 infected cases,

with 35 deaths in total, among whom 1,220 have recovered and been discharged from hospitals. Vietnam ranks among the top 20 countries by COVID-19 safety, according to a report by the Deep Knowledge Group based on 130 quantitative and qualitative parameters and over 11,400 data points in categories like quarantine efficiency, monitoring and detection, health readiness, and government efficiency (Koetsier, 2020). The International Monetary Fund has revised up Vietnam's growth of 2020 to 2.4%, among the highest in the world, from its previous forecast of 1.6%. Vietnam was also anticipated to be one of the only four economies in the world that maintained growth in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Hoang Nam, 2020).

Vietnam has had several favourable, largely science- and technology-related, conditions to respond to COVID-19 effectively. Firstly, Vietnam has been long pursuing policies to develop science, technology, and innovation as key drivers of national development. During the renovation (known as Doi Moi) process which started in 1986, Vietnam has adjusted its science and technology perception and policy agenda to better meet the need for national development in the era of extensive international integration. Vietnam's science and technology policy formulation and implementation has been transformed from sectoral to multi-sectoral approach involving all the stakeholders as to deal with the inter-sectoral issues, and from a centralized and isolate decision-making process among policy makers to broader involvement of and greater participation by stakeholders in a more open process of policy dialogue, discussion, and realization. The most recent Law on Science and Technology approved in 2013 created several breakthroughs, particularly renovation of policies on the use and remuneration of human resources and



the application of research results and dissemination of scientific and technological knowledge. Usage and management of the State budget for research were also renewed, while investment in science, technology, and innovation, including from the private sector - both national and international, encouraged. Vietnam's science and technology policies focus on raising awareness and responsibility of sectors and localities in charting the development of science and technology, while continuing to improve the legal framework and the national innovation system with enterprises acting as a centre, as well as promoting close links between research institutes and universities with enterprises to accumulate intellectual property and create new sources for fast, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth (Decision No.418/QĐ-TTg, 2012).

Against this general context, science policies and institutions provide fundamental premises for the country in dealing with the COVID-19 epidemic, in terms of both curbing the spread of the disease and economic recovery. For example, Vietnam has utilized technology to maintain robust systems to collect and aggregate data from public health entities and shifted to a nearly real-time, web-based system since 2009. Since 2016, hospitals in Vietnam have been required to report notifiable diseases within 24 hours to a central database, ensuring that the Ministry of Health can track epidemiological developments across the country (Balajee; Estoundi; et al, 2020). As early as in late January 2020, the Ministry of Science and Technology of Vietnam hosted a meeting with virologists to encourage the development of diagnostic tests. In the following three months, Hanoi University of Science and Technology, Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology, and Vietnam Military Medical University respectively developed local-

made test kits that were validated by the Ministry of Defence and the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology, manufactured, and commercialized in coordination with private companies. Under COVID-19, the public has also been exhorted to download BLUEZONE, a COVID-19 contact-tracing app developed by Vietnamese technology firm BKAV and the Ministry of Information and Communications. While only about 390,000 had downloaded the app by mid-July (right before the third wave started), government figures showed a total of 17 million downloads by mid-August (The People's Daily, 2020). This is reflection of the technology-based focus on epidemic preparedness and response in Vietnam's science and technology policy and explanation for the achievements attained in the country's fight against COVID-19. With regards to economic recovery, on October 5, 2020, Hanoi launched a national programme to boost the founding of start-ups in information technology and other high-tech businesses with a view to energizing the country's growth potential under the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the economy.

Secondly, Vietnam shows potential for the vaccine production industry. Vietnam is among 39 countries that meet WHO's strict vaccine standards. It has been registered for National Regulatory Authority (NRA) standards since 2001. In May 2013, the national vaccine management was strengthened with the participation of four agencies under the Health Ministry - the Drug Administration, the Administration of Science, Technology and Training, the General Department of Preventive Medicine, and the National Institute for Control of Vaccine and Biologicals. During the past decade, vaccine manufacturers in Vietnam have been producing and supplying tens of millions of doses of various

vaccines serving local needs and for export (VNS, 2015). In response to COVID-19, Vietnam has had four COVID-19 vaccines under research and test, produced by NANOGEN, VABIOTEC, POLYVAC, and the Institute of Vaccines and Medical Biologicals (IVAC) (Le, 2020). The country was invited by the Vaccine Alliance to join in research and production of vaccine against COVID-19.

Thirdly, Vietnam had practical experiences in successfully managing the outbreak of fatal epidemics like SARS, MERS-COV, and H5N1 bird flu. They helped providing the country with both empirical lessons and institutional infrastructure to respond rapidly and operate the crisis management system flexibly and effectively, thereby sustaining national resilience in the current fight against COVID-19. Vietnam's experience with epidemic preparedness and management also served as an important factor to guarantee greater willingness among people in the country to trust, support, and comply with a central public health response.

Fourthly, Vietnam has been actively participating in international cooperation in science and technology, with special regards to public health and epidemic management. In 2014, Vietnam was one of the first to join the Global Health Security Agenda, a group of 67 countries committed to strengthening global efforts in prevention, detection, and response to infectious disease threats. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) started working with the government of Vietnam and local organizations in 1998 to build effective and sustainable public health systems. CDC provides technical expertise for evidence-based decisions to strengthen the capacity and infrastructure of Vietnam's national health systems and works closely with Vietnam to address HIV, tuberculosis, and influenza, as well as strengthening laboratory, surveillance, and workforce capacity to

respond to disease outbreaks including COVID-19. Most recently, for its unique health system experiences and expertise, including its effective COVID-19 response, Vietnam has been the only Asian country to be selected by the World Economic Forum for the Partnership for Global Health System Sustainability and Resilience (PHSSR) to apply a framework developed by the London School of Economics to conduct a review of the country's health system sustainability and resilience, and identify practical solutions to strengthen them. The review would be focusing on hospital quality management during COVID-19 and healthcare provision at the grassroots level, with a view to helping highlight lessons and experience from Vietnam and share them with other countries (Phan Anh, 2020).

As the ASEAN Chair in 2020, Viet Nam has been working closely with other ASEAN member states in promoting a whole-of-community, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach to respond to COVID-19 as a cohesive and responsive Community. Neither COVID-19 nor any clear forecast of a possible global pandemic might have been taken into consideration when the theme "Cohesive and Responsive" for the ASEAN chairmanship year 2020 was proposed by Vietnam and supported by others. Yet, the relevance of the theme has been well showcased by the outbreak and impacts of COVID-19. The pandemic presented an empirical test to the cohesiveness and responsiveness of ASEAN, while putting huge pressure on Vietnam to prove its capacity to lead the grouping towards greater cohesiveness and responsiveness as the Chair in an unprecedented context.

Through to the end of the year, ASEAN and Vietnam proved to have taken the test rather well. Vietnam demonstrated a high level of responsiveness by working hard, including behind the scenes, to bring all ASEAN members and external partners

from various time zones together, making digital diplomacy a new normal of ASEAN business (Tung, 2020). At the initiatives and proposals of Vietnam, the agendas were promptly adjusted, ASEAN community-building commitment and momentum was sustained, and ASEAN cooperation within the region and with dialogue partners was forged in combating COVID-19 and post-pandemic recovery. The cohesiveness and responsiveness of ASEAN was reflected by the shared determination to jointly respond to COVID-19 and consensus reached on creating new impetus to improve its competitiveness in the post-pandemic world, optimizing intra-bloc cooperation opportunities, applying cutting-edge technologies and sciences, improving digital transformation capacity, and developing high-quality human resources in ASEAN so as to establish its new position in the global and supply chain in the post-COVID era.

ASEAN responsiveness also resulted in the establishment of the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund and the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies to which Viet Nam has respectively committed to contributing US\$ 100,000 and US\$ 5 million worth of medical supplies. Vietnam also set an example of cohesiveness and solidarity by taking the initiative in assisting other ASEAN members, and other countries in Asia, Europe, the U.S., and South America, with masks, protective gears, and medical equipment. This was where the mutually reinforcing nexus between national resilience and regional resilience came again into the picture of COVID-19 response in Southeast Asia and ASEAN. “Vietnam has demonstrated strong leadership of ASEAN in spearheading a collective regional response to the COVID-19 pandemic”, said ASEAN Secretary General Dato Lim Jock Hoi (Pham, 2020).

## Conclusion

COVID-19 has served as a reminder of the real necessity for science-based policies as well as greater demand for national and regional resilience and good governance to deal with emerging challenges which are growing in both ferocity and scale, and with which no country can successfully contend on its own. Under its protracted spread and impacts, countries worldwide have been compelled to make their utmost domestic effort to curb, and overcome the social and economic consequences of, the pandemic. The “self-help” measures should be contributing to and complemented by collective response, given the high contagiousness of the disease and the close interconnectedness among countries in the world today. For Southeast Asia, the cohesive and responsive spirit has been and will be determinant in the response to COVID-19 and sustaining the relevance and resilience of the ASEAN Community further beyond.

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