

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The thesis shall describe the threat that the pandemic poses to the region and how it is necessary for the member states of ASEAN to work together in order to address the threat. The writer will focus on the roles ASEAN plays as a regional organization in responding to a crisis that transcends multiple state borders such as that of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first chapter shall comprise of the following sections: the background of the thesis, the research question proposed, the theoretical framework used, the author's hypothesis, the writing purposes, methodology, research area, and the writing systematics of the entire thesis.

A. Background

ASEAN stands for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a regional intergovernmental organization dedicated to cooperation in the pursuit of regional peace, stability, and economic prosperity (Weatherbee, 2019). The organization is comprised of ten countries and was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, marked by the signing of the ASEAN Declaration, or also known as the Bangkok Declaration. This document came into fruition as a result of the efforts of the Founding Fathers of ASEAN: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. They were joined in the following years by Brunei Darussalam on 7 January 1984, Vietnam on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999 (History, n.d.)

Fifty years after its formation, ASEAN is now renowned as the world's second-most successful regional intergovernmental organization after the European Union. Its geographic region comprises of a total land area of 4.5 million

square kilometers and a population of 640 million people. This number is nearly twice the population of the United States and more than that of the European Union. ASEAN also prides itself on its economic growth. In 2016, their GDP at current prices stood at \$2,559 billion, making it the third largest in Asia after China and Japan, and sixth in the world. It makes up 3.4 percent share of the global GDP. In addition, over the last decade, ASEAN's GDP grew at a rate nearly as much as China and India (Weatherbee, 2019).

At current, ASEAN's regional peace and stability faces the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). As of today, this virus has infected over 347 million people worldwide and taken the lives of 5.6 million citizens (COVID Live - Coronavirus Statistics - Worldometer, n.d.). The dangers of the virus lie in its easily transmissible character, not the mention the high case fatality rate for those who are infected. The virus, which originated from Wuhan, China, spreads from an infected person's mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing, or even breathe. Those infected with the virus have might experience mild to moderate respiratory illness. Though some can recover without requiring special treatment, others will become seriously ill and die at any age (World Health Organization, n.d.). The virus was first detected in the ASEAN region in early 2020, wherein on 13 January 2020, Thailand was the first country to have a confirmed case. Shortly after, other member states reported positive cases with the final country to confirm a case being Lao PDR on 24 March 2020 (Fernando et al., 2020). The first death in ASEAN was reported on 1 February 2020 in the Philippines, making it also the first death outside of China.

Though the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis, it has also had a broader impact in ASEAN on jobs, livelihoods, education, and social welfare. It has disrupted economic activities across the region. This can be seen from the decline in tourism flows, disruption in air travels, and weakening in consumer and business confidence, caused by countries enforcing lockdowns, community quarantines, orders

to stay-at-home, temporary business closures, and travel restrictions or prohibitions to contain the virus.

Travel and tourism have been significantly affected by the travel restrictions from/to China, Japan, and Korea. East Asian economies were among the largest sources of tourists to ASEAN. Cancelling flight connections, tightening, and closing border crossings led to mass cancellation of bookings within the tourism industry, affecting businesses and workers. When the first cases appeared in the ASEAN member states, this further impacted tourism in the region as tourists feared of getting infected. This led to the early stimulus measure targeted to aid the tourism and allied industries. Hotels, restaurants, airlines, and small businesses hit by the pandemic were granted tax breaks and/or emergency loans and workers were given subsidies/cash assistance. However, as more mitigating measures were put in place - social distancing; temporary closure of schools, offices, and non-essential businesses; lockdowns; and quarantines – the economy was even more affected. This caused stoppage in production, disruptions in business operations, and widespread restrictions on the movement of people resulted in losses for businesses and loss of livelihood and income for workers (ASEAN, 2020d).

It can be inferred that other than the tourism sector, the pandemic has also affected ASEAN's labor sector. The first is through lockdowns that were imposed at nationally or local levels. These lockdowns forced workers from all employment sectors, excluding essential workers, to either work remotely or not work throughout the period of the lockdown. The second is through the social or physical distancing, as travel restrictions are part of the means to implement social distancing. Not only do these restrictions affect tourism and travel dependent work, but also work that requires people to meet in a closed or relatively small area. The third effect of the pandemic against labor is through the reduction of aggregate demand. Due to the reduced purchasing power within countries and abroad, household and business incomes shrunk. This further lead to the downsizing or closure of affected firms, reduced working hours, and the retrenchment of workers. Finally, the pandemic has also

disrupted the supply chain. Limited land, air, and sea transport has affected the supply of inputs to production. For some instances it has caused factories to operate at lower capacity or halt their operations entirely (ASEAN Rapid Assessment, 2020).

According to previous studies, international cooperation responses are the key to recovery, since countries will attempt to return to normal through reopening their borders and improving global supply chains (COVID-19, n.d.). The reopening of borders means movement of people and possibility of continued spread of the virus. Through ASEAN, member states have an important platform to work together, drawing on the region's collective resources and contributions from dialogue partners, to shape a new normal by investing in people.

ASEAN has had experience in dealing with pandemics and transnational viruses whose spread transcend borders, such as that of SARS, the avian influenza, the H1N1, and HIV/AIDS. In the case of the SARS outbreak, ASEAN attempted several coordinated measures such as the ASEAN+3 Ministers of Health Special Meeting on SARS, which was held in Kuala Lumpur on 26 April. Through this meeting, it was acknowledged that a comprehensive cross-border approach was required to contain and prevent the spread of the disease. There was also the Special ASEAN Leaders' Meeting on SARS on 29 April 2003. Here, the Heads of ASEAN states and the leaders of the +3 countries, along with Hong Kong, exchanged information and approved initiatives drawn up earlier by regional health ministers and senior officials to address the SARS outbreak (Curley & Thomas, 2004). This led to the establishment of an ad-hoc ministerial-level Joint Task Force to follow-up the decisions made and the creation of an ASEAN SARS Containment Information Network to share information. Although the summit reaffirmed ASEAN's international image as the most relevant group to combat SARS, a uniform approach among its members could not be made. Critics have mentioned that the regional response of ASEAN was not as rapid as those taken by individual Southeast Asian countries.

ASEAN made similar approaches when dealing with the avian influenza (AI). On 29-30 November 2004, the tenth ASEAN Summit in Vientiane was held wherein the member states ranked AI as a top regional threat. This led to the establishment of the ASEAN Outbreak Response Teams and further collaborations to combat AI. AI remained the dominant topic during the 11th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur on 12–14 December 2005. Together the ASEAN leaders created the HPAI Task Force, an ASEAN Expert Group on Communicable Diseases, a Regional Framework for Control and Eradication of HPAI and an ASEAN Animal Health Trust Fund. The member states of ASEAN were committed to regional coordination, information-sharing and collaboration that was to be pursued within the ASEAN Health Ministers Meeting (AHMM) and the ASEAN Ministers Meeting on Agriculture and Forestry (AMMAF). A work plan was also designed and published In the ASEAN Secretariat’s report, ASEAN Response to Combat Avian Influenza. ASEAN attempted synergies with international agencies envisaged and tasks distributed to individual state and ASEAN intergovernmental authorities to improve prevention, control eradication of the virus over a three-year period (Maier-Knapp, 2011).

Though the existing health security cooperation programs and health sector mechanisms indicate ASEAN as a regional organization has had experience in handling pandemics, there are few studies that analyze ASEAN’s role as a regional organization in these crises. Such is the case of the study conducted by Curley and Thomas, which describes the spread and impact of the SARS virus that also threatened the stability and prosperity of Southeast Asian countries from a human security perspective. Other preexisting studies are a policy science of how ASEAN and the individual ASEAN member states respond to COVID-19. In it are details of the impacts on ASEAN, the ASEAN health sector efforts towards the virus, country specific responses and a comparison of the policies of the 10 member states. However, the study only focused on analyzing the failure and success of the policy and decision making process and did not analyze the role of ASEAN

itself and how the organization implements cooperation (Djalante et al., 2020). Another study discusses the challenges faced by ASEAN in facing the pandemic and its strategy to enhance international cooperation, but focuses on the struggle of the two-axis of power in the international system caused by the US and China (Mursitama et al., 2021).

This study aims to discover whether ASEAN as a regional organization has played a role in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and to determine what roles it played.

B. Research Question

According to the background of the problem that has been mentioned above, the research question of this study is how does ASEAN play its role as a regional organization in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic?

C. Theoretical Framework

Theory of international organizations

This thesis will analyze the role of ASEAN using Clive Archer's theory of international organizations. According to Archer, an international organization is a formal and sustainable structure that is formed by its member-states, both government and non-government, made up of two or more sovereign states who are gathered to discuss certain issues or to achieve similar interests.

Archer states that an international organization has three major roles. First as an instrument, which is the role of international organization as a tool to gain foreign policy objectives for its member states. Second, arena is the role of international organization as forums where decisions are taken place. The third role of international organizations is as an actor. This means that an international organization can act as their own within the international system without being affected by outside forces (Archer, 2001).

As an instrument, an intergovernmental organization may seem like something above the national states or their member states, but in reality, they are the instruments for the policies of individual governments. An international organization is

importance to pursue national policies as long as their multilateral coordination is the continuation of the aim of national governments. The way that decisions are taken in an international organization demonstrates how they are used to pursue national policies. The constitutions of most international organizations function to limit the powers of an organization's secretariat. They also do not allow major decision to be made that may bind member states that have voted against them (Archer, 2001).

One of the aims of ASEAN is to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific, and administrative fields. It can be seen ASEAN allows its member states to gain their foreign policy objectives by assisting one another. This assistance comes in many forms, for example training and research facilities in the educational, professional, technical and administrative spheres (What We Do, n.d.).

In their relations with one another, the ten countries of ASEAN follow fundamental principles contained in their Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) of 1976. The principles contained in the TAC are institutional frameworks that enable to organization to work and manage each member states, making sure their power is limited. These principles include: Mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations; The right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion; Non-interference in the internal affairs of one another; Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful manner; Renunciation of the threat or use of force; and Effective cooperation among themselves (What We Do, n.d.).

Second, is the role of an international organization as an arena. International organizations serve as a meeting place for their members to discuss, argue, cooperate, or disagree. These arenas are neutral, and they provide states the opportunity of proposing their own viewpoints and suggestions in a public forum that is more open compared to bilateral diplomacy. The

image of the role of an international organization is reflected in the working of its institutions.

Third, the role of international organization as an independent actor. This can be indicated from two characteristics; that their responses are not predicated and that they have a stable and decision-making machinery within its boundaries. International organizations have institutional frameworks that enable them to achieve greater things compared to if the individual states within the organization were to work on their own. The very existence and the strength of an organization lies in the ability of those representing the institution are able to make their own decisions, can act against the wishes of some members, and can affect the actions of other members. It must be noted that the presence of these international organizations collectively and individually has an effect on the international system. Some of these institutions are more active than some of the weaker sovereign states.

Based on data that the author obtained, ASEAN plays a larger role as an arena compared to as an instrument and actor. The organizational structure of ASEAN and their decision-making process is what makes ASEAN's role as an arena more dominant. ASEAN is comprised of Sectoral Ministerial bodies, officials, and health experts who convene in meetings. The ASEAN Summit, which is comprised of the heads of ASEAN Member States' governments, is the highest policy-making body in the organization. In these meetings, decisions taken place to address issues in the region. As for its role as an instrument, the foreign policy objectives of ASEAN member states is to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic poses the largest threat to the health and economy sectors. That is why the member states use ASEAN as a tool to achieve health security and economic recovery. Regarding the third role, since the theory of an international organization's role as an actor remains debatable by scholars to this day, the author has decided to exclude it out of the analysis.

D. Hypothesis

The roles of ASEAN in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic are:

1. As an arena, wherein ASEAN provides a forum for its member states to discuss and exchange information among each other and with non-member states.
2. ASEAN as an instrument for the ASEAN Member States to achieve their health security and economic recovery.

E. Writing Purposes

The purpose of this research is to analyze the role of a regional organization such as that of ASEAN plays in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. For academic institutions, this research benefits in the way it will provide information and data to the study of international relations. ASEAN as a regional organization has always played an essential role in cooperation between states. Moreover, this is a study of a new form of crisis affecting the region, which is the COVID-19 pandemic. The author hopes that the results from this study can benefit policy makers, institutions, or any person needing data regarding regional organizations' response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

F. Methodology

This study will focus on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which is a regional intergovernmental organization. The study will be conducted through qualitative method using literature review and secondary data. The data will be collected from various published material issued by and accessible from the ASEAN official website. Supporting documents will come from books, newspaper articles, and articles published by academic journals focusing on ASEAN's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The sources that are obtained will then be analyzed using Archer's theory of international organizations.

G. Research Area

In writing this undergraduate thesis, the author limits the discussion to The Role of ASEAN in Addressing the COVID-19 Pandemic from December 2019 when the first COVID-19 case emerged until early 2022 at the time this thesis was written. The focus of the study is ASEAN the regional organization, not the individual states within this region.

H. Writing Systematics

This thesis shall consist of three chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, the second chapter is the discussion, and the third chapter is the conclusion. The details of each chapter are explained as follows:

Chapter I: This chapter contains the introduction of the topic. It is comprised of the Background of the issue, Research Question, Theoretical Framework, Hypothesis, Methodology of Writing, Research Area, and Organization of Writing.

Chapter II: This chapter contains the discussion section of the thesis. In it are the findings of responses that ASEAN has made to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. It discusses challenges that ASEAN faced in addressing the pandemic and what role that ASEAN plays as an instrument and as an arena.

Chapter III: This chapter concludes the discussion and analysis of the thesis.