

**WEBINAR PROCEEDINGS**

**5<sup>TH</sup>**

# **KATIPUNAN CONFERENCE**

**Covid-19 and the Strategic Environment:  
Change and Continuity**



**KONRAD  
ADENAUER  
STIFTUNG**





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“5th Katipunan Conference

Covid-19 and the Strategic Environment: Change and Continuity”

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# Introduction

## **Herman Joseph Kraft**

Convenor, Strategic Studies Program  
Center for Integrative and Development Studies  
University of the Philippines System

It is with great pride (and relief) that we are seeing through the publication of the proceedings of the 5th Katipunan Conference held as a webinar series in October 2020. The Katipunan Conference is conducted annually as a platform for assessing the strategic environment of the Philippines. The past few years have been about the transformations taking place in the immediate regional environment of the country, and the responses both of the Philippine government and those of the governments of neighboring countries. Ever since its inception in 2015, the Katipunan Conference has seen the region in flux, with changes in power dynamics, continuities in economic prospects, and fluidity in the future role of multilateralism and regional institutions.

When planning for this year's Katipunan Conference started, it seemed like it would be more of the same. It was supposed to be a traditional on-site meet-up of practitioners, academics, and students interested in the study of and discussing issues of peace and conflict, with special attention to the relationship between international politics, geo-strategy, diplomacy, international economics, and military power. The uncertainties

imposed, however, by Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Modified ECQ, General Community Quarantine (GCQ), and Modified GCQ protocols amidst the COVID-19 pandemic made it necessary for the organizers to rethink the actual conduct of the Conference.

The Katipunan Conference is organized annually by the Strategic Studies Program (SSP) of the University of the Philippines (UP) Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS). This year, the Philippine Office of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) had very generously agreed to co-organize this event in partnership with the Department of Political Science of the University of the Philippines in Diliman. From an on-site meeting, the organizers decided to reconfigure the structure of the Conference into a four-part webinar series held in October 2020, with the theme “COVID-19 and the Strategic Environment: Change and Continuity.” The centrality of COVID-19 in the theme and the subsequent discussion is not only an attempt to make the Conference relevant given the temporal context, as it is impossible to discuss the current strategic environment without having to put it in the context of the impact of the pandemic. Yet, it is more importantly an affirmation of the principal contention of the UP CIDS-SSP that strategic studies and strategic affairs have a connotation that is broader in scope for developing countries than the more traditional understanding that defines this scope in terms of the politico-military concerns of inter-state relations.

That the 5th Katipunan Conference was held at all “in the time of Corona[virus]” was in no small way due to the unwavering support and participation of the KAS Philippines, the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, and the Department of

Political Science of UP Diliman. For this, I would like to extend my thanks. I would also like to acknowledge that this webinar series would not have been possible without the hard work of the SSP staff, namely Maria Nikka U. Garriga, Ramon D. Bandong, Jr., and Marvin H. Bernardo.

The UP CIDS Strategic Studies Program remains committed to the building of a solid network of scholars and practitioners interested in propagation of strategic studies as a field, and to sustained productive engagement with policy-makers and other stake-holders in the country's security and resilience.



# Opening Remarks

## **Prof. Dr. Stefan Jost**

Country Director

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Philippines

Professor Dr. Stefan Jost welcomed the participants to the webinar series of the 5th Katipunan Conference and gave an introduction about the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), a German political foundation closely associated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany. KAS has been active in the Philippines since 1964 as one of the first countries in Asia where the foundation established its presence. Among its important areas of contribution include promoting and strengthening democratic political systems, rule of law, and sustainable social market economies. International relations and security policy are also a focus area of KAS for the Philippines.

According to Jost, the coronavirus (COVID-19) has dramatically accelerated some of the preexisting issues and developments in the strategic environment, thus creating a multitude of new challenges. These challenges, he added, are not just health-related: “All political fields are affected. Economy, labor market, international relations, social affairs, and culture, are also affected. The political system of numerous countries are

undergoing stress tests.. [and] the system of international relations is also changing.”

China’s behavior in the region, characterized by Jost as “the massive militarization of the South China Sea; the action of China in Hong Kong; the increasingly massive and military threat to Taiwan, and, last but not least, the actual attempt to rewrite the actual development especially [as regards] the pandemic, rejecting responsibility and trying to emerge as political winner in this global crisis” has likewise resulted in “a serious of counter movement in many parts of the world and has significantly increased in skepticism about Chinese behavior that has been building for years.”

A recent example of this countermovement is the German government’s adoption of policy guidelines for its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, which Jost stated is also a form of support for the Philippines and the international recognition of the Hague tribunal ruling on the South China Sea territorial dispute in 2016.

It is within this context that the 5th Katipunan Conference comes at an opportune time, especially considering the role of the Philippines in Southeast Asia—a region where “incisive decisions and development are taking place that will interest the international balance of power for decades if not longer.”

Jost concluded his opening remarks with a brief introduction of the speakers for the first and fourth installment of the webinar series and expressed his anticipation for the fruitful exchange of ideas and perspectives between the panelists and the participants.

# Opening Remarks

## **Prof. Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem, Ph.D.**

Executive Director, Center for Integrative and Development Studies  
University of the Philippines System

Professor Tadem opened the second and third sessions of the webinar series by providing a background on the Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), the research policy unit of the UP System.

Since its inception in 1985, the Center has sought to encompass various perspectives, methodologies, and ideologies, and its conduct of basic policy-oriented research. “Under the strategic trajectory of the University since 2017, UP CIDS aims to contribute to national development and knowledge creation through enhancing research, publications, and creative work,” she said. The Center implements its vision by hosting workshops, lecture forums, conferences, and webinars, as well as various publication outputs, such as policy briefs, discussion papers, monographs, conference proceedings, and the *Philippine Journal of Public Policy Interdisciplinary Development Perspectives*.

As one of the 12 programs under UP CIDS, the Strategic Studies Program (SSP) focuses on engagements to promote interests and discourse on significant changes in Philippine Foreign Policy and developed capacity building for strategic studies in the country.

According to Tadem, the anchor whereby SSP seeks to attain its objectives is through the Katipunan Conference. Launched in 2015, this annual conference serves as a platform for discussing current and emerging issues that impact Philippine foreign policy and the region. It also undertakes a strategic scan of the international environment from multiple perspectives to produce practical and informed policy opinions and decision-making aids for various stakeholders.

She concluded by highlighting the need to address the current issues and challenges brought about by COVID-19 and exploring what the new normal means for the strategic environment of the Philippines.



**WEBINAR 1**

# **Emerging Trends in the Regional Environment**

**6 OCTOBER 2020 | 10:00 A.M. TO 11:45 A.M.**

MODERATOR

**Julio Amador III**

Research Fellow, Ateneo Policy Center  
School of Government, Ateneo de Manila University

**Andrew Yeo, Ph.D.**

Professor and Director of Asian Studies, Department of Politics  
The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

Professor Andrew Yeo discussed the current strategic environment and the degree to which the pandemic altered the dynamics in the Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific region. “The current strategic environment does not look pretty,” he said, and central to this is the accelerating competition between the United States (US) and China. Both nations have framed the pandemic for individual gain by rallying their respective allies to contain the other’s influence and leadership aspirations. He explained that:

On the one hand, you see the [Donald] Trump Administration trying to take advantage of this crisis caused by the pandemic. But you also see [President] Xi Jinping and the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] not really backing down either. Instead, they’ve hedged their bets by predicting that US global leadership is on the wane.

As a result, Yeo said that the CCP began to consolidate its leadership and power from the domestic to the regional and international levels by “tightening rules and areas of contested sovereignty, including Xinjiang and in Hong Kong, and asserting its claims over disputed land borders and maritime space.” This development suggests that both superpowers have “sown division and tried to use the pandemic for individual gain.. rather than encourage regional and global collective action.”

While the pandemic hasn't changed the nature of the broader competition between the two, he emphasized that the impact of COVID-19 on the strategic environment is evident in two significant instances. One, it has accelerated the pace of the US-Sino rivalry leading to intensified competition, as "both sides used the pandemic to scapegoat the other and consolidate anti-China and anti-US domestic national opinion." Yeo cited the aggressive public relations campaign to demonstrate pandemic diplomacy as among the factors that have made it difficult for both nations to cooperate.

Second, the pandemic has made the potential strategic and economic fallout—as a result of growing competition between the US and China—more acute for regional actors. Besides spending billions of US dollars on COVID-19 relief, countries like Japan, South Korea, and member-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), according to Yeo, are also concerned about technology and trade, and the risks of economic coercion and decoupling from and between the US and China. Hence, these regional actors have resorted to adopting various strategies to maintain their relations with the two superpowers. This includes aligning towards one superpower, as reflected in the efforts of the US to shore up the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) or something similar like the Quad+; while others choose to develop deeper cooperation among middle powers, as seen in South Korea's New Southern Policy.

Yeo concluded by raising the possibility of coming up with diplomatic ways of moving forward for the region as the effects of COVID-19 and the Sino-US rivalry remains unfolding. ASEAN

member states are encouraged to find opportunities to develop pandemic cooperation within the region to address the challenge of trying to coordinate a global collective action in responding to COVID-19. He added:

If there is one positive remark [in terms of addressing COVID-19], it is that we are seeing a willingness on the part of China and the US to provide aid to regional actors. So, if there's a way for Southeast Asian countries to coordinate some kind of mechanism . . . of how aid is received and how it is disbursed, that might be at least a small area for cooperation.

### **Abdul Abiad, Ph.D.**

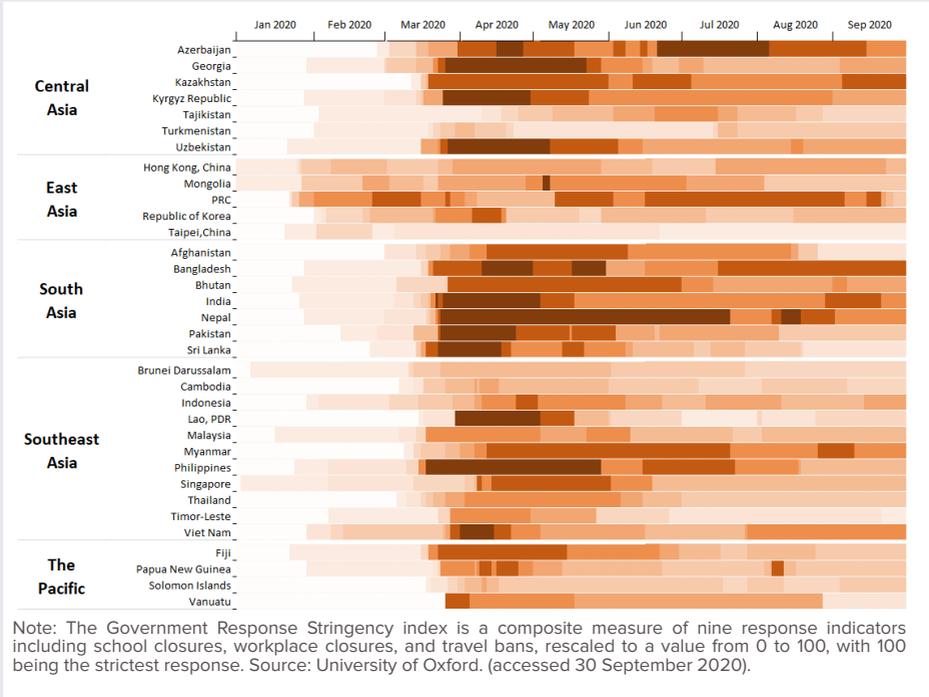
Director, Macroeconomic Research Division  
Economic Research and Regional Cooperation Department  
Asian Development Bank (ADB)

In his presentation, Abdul Abiad elaborated on the latest updates (September 2020) from the Asian Development Bank regarding the economic outlook for developing Asia in light of COVID-19. Developing Asia in this context ranges from Central to West, South, East, and Southeast Asia as well as the Pacific.

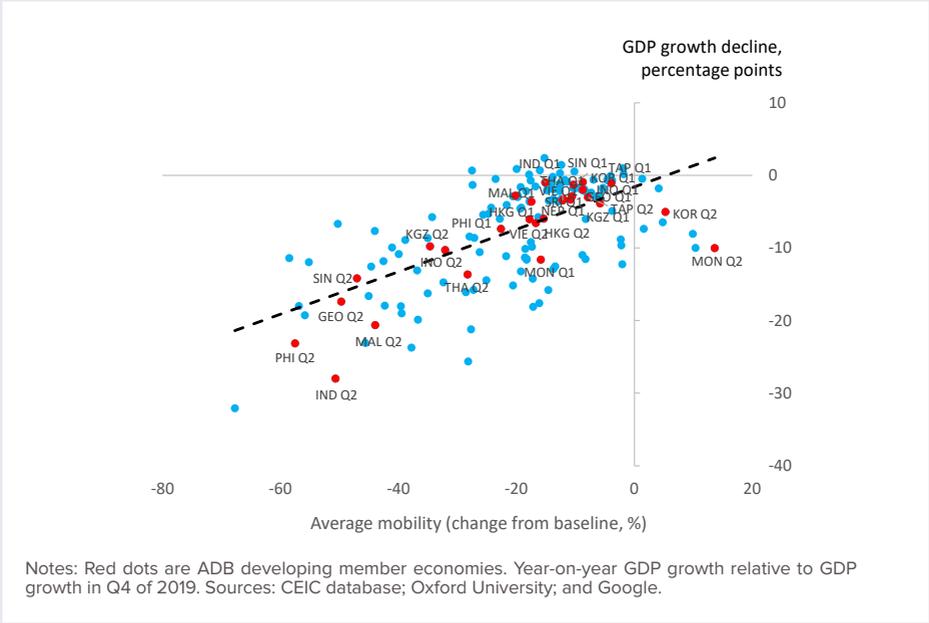
Due to a reduction in mobility and domestic activity resulting from efforts to contain the outbreak, Developing Asia is expected to experience its first contraction in over six decades at 0.75 percent. A major contributing factor to this outcome is

The outbreak and containment measures restricted mobility and domestic activity...

Stringent containment measures in Asia are now being eased...



...but the mobility reductions led to steep GDP growth declines



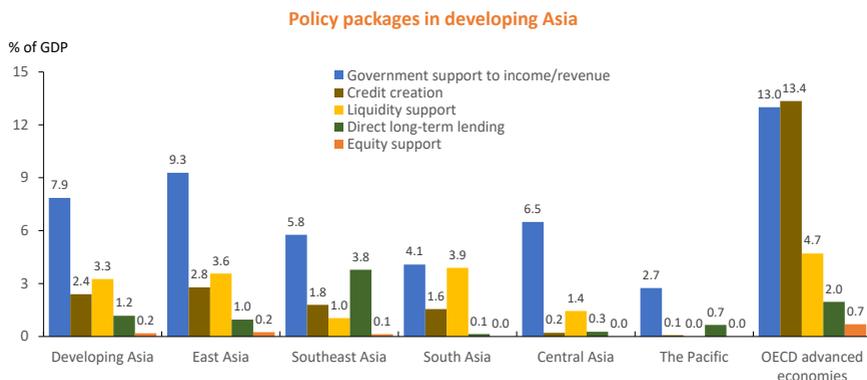
the stringent containment measures imposed by governments, especially in areas like South and Southeast Asia. He said:

Those countries were held in place by a month or two [until] it was realized that these were unsustainable, so they started easing policies. Nevertheless, what's happened is with those stringent containment measures, what you had was a reduction in mobility.

The decline in global economic activity and global trade likewise resulted in domestic economies taking a big hit. Interestingly, Abiad noted that the impact of the pandemic on trade was relatively less in Asia compared to the rest of the world. One explanation for this is that exports have been strong in certain countries and in specific sectors. He emphasized that “[i]n particular, exports of health supplies by China and other East Asian and Southeast Asian countries have been strong, so they were able to step in to fill the surging demand for health equipment and health supplies. Similarly, there has been an up-take in demand for electronics and that, as well, is sort of one of Asia’s strengths.”

Yet, major economies in Asia still recorded a slump in economic activity in the first half of the year. Data cited by Abiad attributed this downturn primarily to the decline in consumption and in investment in several economies, including India and the Philippines. Around three-fourths of the region’s economy are expected to experience negative growth this year. China, Taiwan, and Vietnam were noted as exceptions because its governments have managed to contain the outbreak early and normalize economic activity.

# Asian governments stepped in with a wide-ranging crisis response



Note: Data as of 21 September 2020.

Source: Compiled from ADB COVID-19 Policy Database, <https://covid19policy.adb.org/> (accessed on 29 September 2020).

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*A chart on policy packages in developing Asia as part of Abiad's presentation*

Abiad said that the region is slowly recovering as containment measures are being eased in many economies and a wide-range of crisis response are being implemented. This includes government support to income of households and revenue of small and medium enterprises, which account for about half of the total support in the region, as well as introducing measures to ensure the continuous flow of credit and that liquidity does not dry out.

Despite efforts to step-up support, a new wave of coronavirus is still a major concern as a prolonged pandemic could derail regional and global economic recovery. It is clear that, until a vaccine is produced, COVID-19 is not going away anytime soon. Hence, Abiad underscored the need for Asian governments to prepare for the long-term socioeconomic implications of the pandemic and for national policies that balance the need to protect lives and livelihood as there is no trade-off between the two.

## **Mely Caballero-Anthony, Ph.D.**

Professor and Head, Centre for Non-Traditional Security  
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies  
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Professor Mely Caballero-Anthony presented four emerging trends in the strategic environment of Southeast Asia in light of COVID-19: (1) the role of the US as the guarantor of security; (2) the ability of the region to recover from what is considered as the worst economic recession since the Great Depression; (3) China's increasing assertiveness; and (4) ASEAN centrality in Asia's multilateral landscape.

Even before the onset of the pandemic, the US as a resident power in Asia has been challenged by China through its display of material and military power in the region. COVID-19, however, further exposed the flaws in its ability to provide regional security and leadership. Anthony compared the display of US leadership on COVID-19 with how it handled the Ebola crisis in 2014, wherein it led a movement towards global health security that sought to make countries more prepared in “detecting, mitigating, containing, and responding to” possible outbreaks. She added:

It [the US] is in this critical juncture where the whole world is faced with an existential threat, [yet] US leadership has been very absent... [even] the way it has dealt with the pandemic in its own territory ... has been appalling and very dismal, to say the least.

The impact of COVID-19 on Southeast Asian economies is also another of significant concern, as economic progress and

stability has served as the foundation for peace and security in the region for the longest time. Anthony warned of the extent to which economic uncertainty as a result of the pandemic could further drive or exacerbate existing internal societal conflicts. These conflicts, she added, could be a possible scenario if human insecurity reaches a point where the ability of governments to respond to a prolonged crisis becomes unsustainable.

Another emerging trend is China's increasing assertiveness in the region, or its "wolf-warrior diplomacy", and how it has affected its bilateral relations with countries in Southeast Asia. Anthony cited a report by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies on the perceptions of ASEAN countries towards major powers. The survey found China as the "least trusted" of ASEAN's dialogue partners. She noted:

[This is] despite the fact that it has strong economic ties with the region and has also showed the ability to provide public goods through its Belt and Road Initiative.

Anthony explained that this indicates a sharp contrast to Xi's wish to position China's rise as beneficial to others and its statements of a common destiny for all, given its inability to exercise restraint as a responsible stakeholder in Asia.

Lastly, the onset of the pandemic has also challenged the relevance of ASEAN centrality in Asia's multilateral landscape. This includes the question of whether ASEAN-led initiatives, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN+3, ASEAN Economic Community, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, are still enough to respond to the effects

of COVID-19 and growing tensions in the region. For Anthony, despite the limitations that ASEAN has and continues to face as an institution, these initiatives will remain important pillars of regional security, stability, and prosperity. Talks about creating a regional emergency response mechanism and the significant exchange of information and cooperation among ASEAN health ministers and its experts were also noted to have contributed in the path to recovery for Southeast Asia.

## Open Forum

For the first round of questions, Abiad was asked about the sectors that are likely to recover the fastest in a post-COVID-19 scenario. An inquiry was also addressed to Anthony about ASEAN centrality and its part in reducing the extent of power competition in the current regional strategic environment. Yeo was asked about ASEAN's role in cushioning the impact of Sino-US decoupling on Southeast Asian economies without threatening its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

According to Abiad, economic sectors that are likely to recover fast will be those that are not constrained or may actually even benefit from COVID-19-induced practices, such as social distancing. This includes e-commerce, especially as countries start seeing the value of digital payments, and the electronic and health sectors. He noted, however, that the impact of the decline in domestic demand due to strict containment measures implemented at the national level remains broad-based, but their effect varies across economies.

On the impact of the Sino-US decoupling on ASEAN, Yeo explained that one way to cushion the blow is for its member-states to diversify its sources of loans and assistance, either through foreign investors from various countries or through multilateral institutions, like the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

On the question about ASEAN centrality, Anthony noted that what the regional organization has done best over the years is to be an honest broker. This particular approach by ASEAN and ASEAN-led institutions has been helpful especially in light of growing tensions in the region and in recovering from the coronavirus pandemic. She cited information sharing and capacity building among member-states in the region since the onset of the pandemic as crucial in efforts to contain the outbreak. As such, ASEAN centrality will continue to be relevant in a regional post-COVID-19 situation despite its limitations and challenges as an organization.

For the final round of questions, Yeo was asked to give his insights in terms of how ASEAN has responded to the pandemic especially given the disparity in form and structures of government. Abiad was asked whether economic liberalization will continue as the dominant economic framework in the region post-COVID-19, while Anthony was asked to give her thoughts on how ASEAN member-states can continue to advance security cooperation given constraints brought about by the pandemic in the traditional conduct of diplomacy.

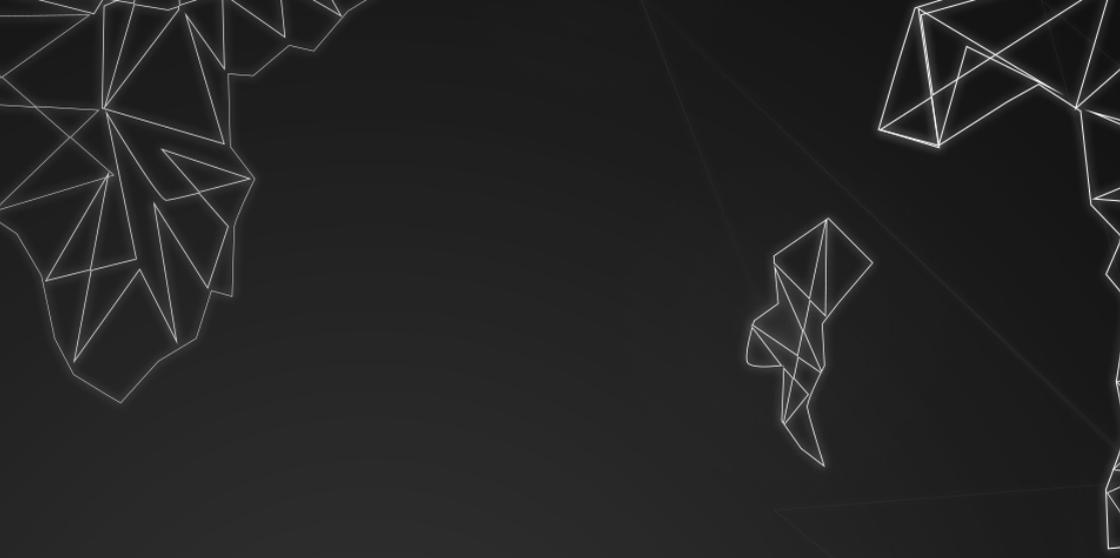
An observation of Yeo about the response of ASEAN to the pandemic was framed within the context of whether

democracy has taken a backseat as member-states attempt to contain the outbreak. Some countries have managed to have a more balanced approach, while others have resorted to strong arm tactics to help reduce the number of COVID-19 cases among their population.

While the ASEAN principle of non-interference suggests that there can be no one standard response to the pandemic for member-states, Yeo said the organization can explore other measures that would promote a more collective action in managing COVID-19, such as the suggestion raised on creating an ASEAN Center for Diseases Control.

Abiad explained that economic openness will continue to be the dominant economic framework in the region because Asia, and probably compared to other regions, has benefitted a lot from global integration. This is evident in the expansion of trade in the region during the first decade of the year 2000 and its quick recovery from the global financial crisis. While trade in other areas of the world was stagnating during the second decade of this century, trade continued to expand in Asia albeit at a slower pace. Hence, Abiad noted that Asia will most likely retain this economic framework given its contribution in driving global growth in the past decades.

In light of the coronavirus pandemic, Anthony emphasized the need for ASEAN member-states to sustain cooperation through bilateral and regional dialogues. That these nations remain interdependent only highlights the importance of strengthening and widening cooperation to ensure continuous recovery in areas of both traditional and non-traditional security.



WEBINAR 2

# Regional Norms and International Law in ASEAN

12 OCTOBER 2020 | 10:00 A.M. TO 11:30 A.M.

MODERATOR

**Jean Encinas-Franco, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science  
University of the Philippines, Diliman



## Jay Batongbacal, Ph.D.

Professor and Director

Institute for Maritime Affairs and the Law of the Sea  
College of Law, University of the Philippines, Diliman

The presentation of Professor Jay Batongbacal centered on norm-building and international law-making in the ASEAN. Historically, especially in its early stages, ASEAN mostly operated on the basis of ad hoc understandings and informal procedures. Even the Bangkok Declaration of 1967, according to Batongbacal, was more a political than a legally-binding statement because it focused more on identifying the ends and means of ASEAN as an entity. He pointed out that:

[i]t took almost a decade [1976] before the first legally binding documents were even signed by the members and this was completely [out of promoting] amity and cooperation in Southeast Asia. This was followed a preferential trading agreement in 1977. It took another 10 years before it produced the 1987 agreement for the promotion and protection of investments and agreement on non-tariff barriers.

He added that the need for a legally-binding document was only fully-demonstrated by ASEAN when it officially adopted the 1992 Agreement on the Common Effective Preferential Tariff for the ASEAN Free Trade Area because it became necessary to establish and maintain credibility between the member states and the international business community. From this series of developments, it is apparent that ASEAN

agreements have asymmetrically developed a strong focus on economic connectivity.

Yet, the regional organization still faces inherent challenges in responding to geopolitical dilemmas due to its lack of development in community building on political and security issues. Batongbacal noted that there were attempts to establish broad regional norms in these areas—such as the 1971 Declaration of Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality, the 1995 Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, and the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. However, Batongbacal said that these ultimately demonstrated that ASEAN is still mainly aspirational and idealistic in its character, and “[i]t has only been able to really create binding agreements in terms of [addressing] very specific and tangible challenges. . . What is happening is ASEAN’s attention is more focused on the smaller pieces of the broad regional context.”

Less attention has also been devoted to the organization’s sociocultural agenda—such as on culture, arts, disaster management, education, environment, health, socio-welfare—and various sectors of concerns, including labor and transboundary problems. Data cited by Batongbacal showed that out of the 84 legal instruments that have come into course within ASEAN and between its member states, 14 are designed to address political security concerns; eight on socio-cultural matters; and 62 are intended for economic community building.

While these numbers suggest that ASEAN was built for economic than political cooperation, it is also reflective of the limitations brought about by the very nature and principles of the

organization itself. For one, ASEAN's core principles of absolute sovereignty and non-interference is a challenge for norm-building and international law-making because, according to Batongbacal, creating procedures and processes within a regional framework actually implies some degree of diminution on national sovereignty because "it is required in compromises."

Another challenge identified by Batongbacal is ASEAN's diversity, which may be a strength when it comes to economic development, yet also a constraint when it comes to political community building as the regional organization still struggles to address issues of heightened competition between US and China and the latter's claims to the region's territorial waters.

What can be said about ASEAN when it comes to norm-building and international law-making given this context? It suggests that ASEAN works best with adapting existing norms, frameworks, and systems rather than creating new ones. He explained:

This is what is happening with respect to issues like the South China Sea. Here, ASEAN members are forced to improvise because it is a very specific regional concern. Each member state also has very different challenges in relating to each other, as well as with main actors like China.

In his conclusion, Batongbacal emphasized that ASEAN is still a work in progress as it tries to maintain its autonomy as an organization and its pursuit of individual and regional interest. The organization is also finding its way in the process of creating

records of practice necessary for norm-building and international law-making in the political sphere. He added:

The rule of law is seen by ASEAN members as the only way by which smaller and weaker states can really stand up on equal terms with the greater powers. That is why, despite the absence of norms in the political security field, ASEAN still tries to maintain its adherence to existing norms, such as UNCLOS [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea] and the UN Charter.

### **Charmaine Misalucha Willoughby, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor, International Studies Department  
De La Salle University, Manila

Associate Professor Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby discussed how COVID-19 has exposed the flaws in the current global system. She illustrated the distinction between known knowns, which are natural occurrences or things that people know for certain and without a doubt would happen; known unknowns, or things that people know can and will happen but do not know when; and unknown unknowns, also referred to as black swan events in international relations, or those that are so unexpected that it catches everyone by surprise and fundamentally changes the game.

While COVID-19 may be classified as a known unknown, Willoughby explained that the pandemic may also be considered as a black swan because it is the kind of crisis that could make or

break international orders. COVID-19 has prompted changes in the current global system in adapting to a post-pandemic world. She emphasized that “[b]lack swan events are fluid momentary things happening all at once. On top of the mounting number of cases, the number of deaths, the number of recoveries, the chances of finding a viable vaccine soon, the pandemic and its attendant effects continue to reverberate around the globe in various levels of analysis for some time to come.”

The world is now facing the fundamental task of how to create international orders, or “systems that are in place and are held together by widely diffused and internalized norms, practices, and ways of doing things.” Willoughby provided three possible scenarios that may be pursued to create a post-coronavirus world.

One scenario is structure-centric, where the international system stays the same but with a change in key players. Arguments on structural logic are such that the international system will remain timeless and unchanging no matter the intensity of the crisis and no matter the rise or fall of great powers. However, Willoughby noted that the coronavirus pandemic complicates matters in a number of ways. For one, China’s efforts to shift the narrative from being the epicenter of the virus to a people’s war against the diseases suggests that “how China recovers from this pandemic will redefine its identity as an emerging power and its relationship with the United States.”

Another complication has to do with the US and its role in an evolving global environment. Willoughby raised the possibility of the US letting go of some its alliances as it is forced to face the reality of great power competition and to focus more

on addressing domestic issues. Despite the change in characters, she emphasized that it will be business as usual for regional and international relations when everything is said and done. Hence, where does this lead for small and medium powers?

The second option suggests an agent-centric scenario, where transitions are ushered in by specific actors and where there is larger space for a plurality of actors interacting in a multiplicity of platforms. Willoughby explained:

For agent-centric arguments, crises take the role of percolators. They are determinants of endings and beginnings, and these transitions are ushered in by specific actors. Actors, after all, can upend structures.

Yet, if agents may not have the capacity to create international orders, the last option is centered neither on structure nor the agent—but on the process. A process-centric scenario is one where international orders are created by framing the coronavirus pandemic as the existential threat that it is. She emphasized that:

If we create the post-coronavirus world via the process of securitizing non-traditional security issues like pandemics, then we put emphasis on mechanisms that normalize the heightened tensions and emergency matters that we currently have.

Given these three scenarios, what kind of order is emerging in the region? Willoughby noted that old orders do not just disappear as the transition from one order to another “is a slow and incremental process. In the immediate post-COVID-19

world, she explained that Southeast Asia could expect intertwined threads of structure, agent, and process-driven beginnings of an emerging order. Human security issues are also expected to be emphasized. What remains to be seen, according to Willoughby, are the norms that will fuel the kind of international order that will eventually predominate.

## Open Forum

For the first round of questions, Batongbacal was asked about ASEAN's increasing references to international law especially on the maritime domain. Is this reflective of a hardening position on ASEAN regarding the South China Sea situation, or is it simply an indication of the direction of Vietnam's leadership?

According to Batongbacal, ASEAN's increasing references to international law does not necessarily change the organization's stance towards the South China Sea, nor does it change the foreign policy or posture of its member-states regarding this particular issue. It is only consistent with ASEAN's previous statements of commitment to UNCLOS and international law. He did note "that the increasing references especially in note verbales that were circulated around Malaysia's continental shuffling, were an opportunity for these countries to reiterate and express their position that international law has already been accepted and agreed upon especially as codified in UNCLOS. [These] should really be the one to be followed, instead of the continuing assertion of China of its excessive claims." Moreover, ASEAN's reference to UNCLOS also suggests that the organization sees the value of

international law and compliance on agreed systems and norms as a way for smaller states to protect themselves from more powerful states, he added.

The next two questions addressed to Willoughby centered on whether securitizing the pandemic would still require some form of agency. She was also asked if the pandemic could lead to more substantive collective action among ASEAN member-states to call out regional and extra regional parties to temper downward spiraling unilateral actions?

The securitization process can only proceed when it is initiated by a securitizing agent. According to Willoughby, ASEAN is encouraged to exercise enlightened self-interest to recreate new norms and to introduce some kind of reforms such that the way ASEAN handles regional affairs would be reflective of today's realities. She said that “[w]e need to make some changes within ASEAN and how ASEAN confronts these regional issues, and the way to do that may be to securitize certain issues. But the start of the securitization process really depends on an agent as well.”

The questions that followed were addressed to Batongbacal about the measures that can jolt or expedite the norm-building and resolution-process, particularly on the South China Sea issue, and the ways in which ASEAN can move forward with economic cooperation considering that there are security or geopolitical issues tied in with economic interests.

On the first inquiry about what can jolt or expedite the process of norm-building in ASEAN, the answer is crisis. The

challenge, according to Batongbacal, is that crises also tend towards precipitate decision making. “This means that some decisions and some norms might be made up too hastily without considering its long term impact,” he said. He added that this scenario could describe the response of ASEAN on the South China Sea issue, and “[i]t’s probably why the different ASEAN members are very wary of the potential of a crisis within the South China and they’re trying to anticipate it through the COC [Code of Conduct] negotiations. Whether this will be successful or not remains to be seen”.

On the second inquiry, ASEAN is capable of moving forward with economic cooperation despite existing security and geopolitical issues because it is able to separate both issues consistent with its organizational character. This compartmentalization seems to suggest pragmatism and practicality on the part of ASEAN, but Batongbacal warned of the danger of economic cooperation being used to coopt political and security interests. He said:

If the number of agreements is any indication, 14 [for] political security agreements vis-à-vis 62 [for] economic [community building], one could say that ASEAN has yet to develop that mechanism precisely to ensure that it is insulated against that kind of cooptation through these economic cooperation initiatives.

Both speakers were then asked how ASEAN can address the question of its diversity as a weakness in being able to innovate laws to focus on political and security concerns such as

COVID-19 or the South China Sea issue considering the self-interest of countries directly impacted such as the Philippines?

For Willoughby, one way for ASEAN to address this issue of diversity is to be creative and to level the expectations of and on ASEAN. Both speakers identified the potential of minilateralism as a way for member-states to continuously promote dialogue and sustain cooperation between them in order to settle differences before facing a major power or a common competitor.

Minilaterals, as Batongbacal pointed out, may also be helpful for ASEAN in order to maximize its efforts in effectively addressing COVID-19 because this will require all member-states to fully appreciate their potentials and limitations as stakeholders in the region.

For the second round of questions, a participant inquired if Batongbacal sees the potential for a shift in the consensus decision-making process of ASEAN and the likelihood of an ASEAN Security Council to be established in the future.

Consensus decision-making on the part of ASEAN will most likely continue regardless of challenges in the region because it is one of its founding principles. An ASEAN Security Council may not materialize at least in the next two decades, he explained, as: “The key problem there is that, when it comes to security matters, ASEAN member-state also have competing security interests. They also have border issues and territorial claims against each other. I think that hinders the formation of the common security framework and institution at this time.”

Another question raised for Willoughby had to do with her opinion on the potential for ASEAN to evolve from its post-cold war era disposition of primarily being a forum provider for major powers while lacking the necessary authority to implement regional treaties and agreement.

While the ASEAN of today will most likely remain the same for the immediate future, Willoughby noted that recent events may lead for a rethinking of how stakeholders in the region interact with each other. Some types of arrangements may work, while others may not. Addressing the latter, she added, is where some creativity and exercise of foresight on the part of ASEAN may be of merit.



**WEBINAR 3**

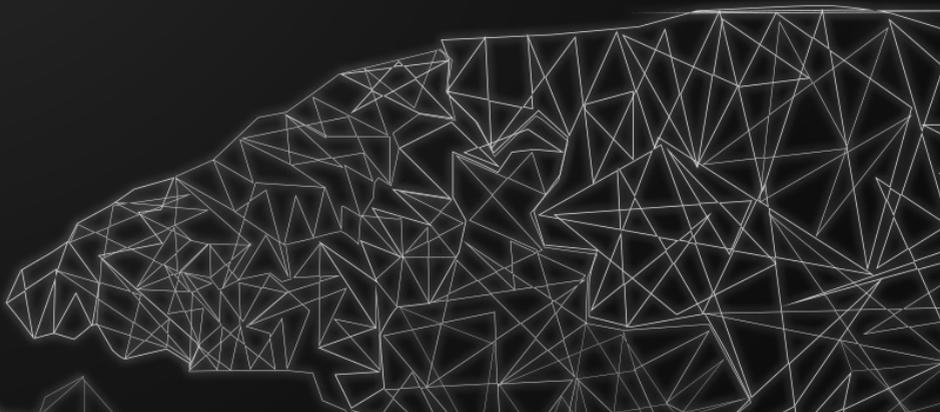
# **Regional Conflict and Security**

**19 OCTOBER 2020 | 10:00 A.M. TO 11:30 A.M.**

MODERATOR

**Dianne Faye Despi (PROF)**

Corps of Professors, Armed Forces of the Philippines



## **Rear Admiral Rommel Jude Ong (Ret.)**

Professor of PRAXIS, School of Government  
Ateneo de Manila University

Rear Admiral Rommel Jude Ong (Ret.) started his lecture with the enumeration of the three questions that he was provided to guide his presentation for the webinar. The first question was, “how would you characterize the changes brought on by the pandemic to the Strategic environment of the Asia-Pacific Region?” He added that before trying to address the question, one must look at the pandemic’s consequences and its apparent nature, i.e. that it is an example of a “black swan event” quoting Charmaine Willoughby’s presentation from the previous Katipunan Conference panel. He also added that the basic impact of the pandemic is on the global economy and we cannot separate the global and the regional economy on this end.

Ong argues that the pandemic and the regional security environment are mutually exclusive events because, according to him, there were already pre-existing regional security issues before the pandemic hit and it was transcended during the current time as we struggle with the pandemic. He added that the net affect among the Indo-Pacific nations was that they became more vulnerable and more inward-looking since they were forced to shut down and isolate themselves.

To Ong, the greatest loser of the pandemic in the region is China because it has lost its credibility or international standing. The pandemic nonetheless also accentuated the geopolitical tensions that already existed. These tensions saw the continuation

of the activities of China in the East China Sea and in the South China Sea, and the situation that these activities produce. Ong observed that China has sustained its posture in the East China Sea and in the South China Sea. It seems that this was never affected by the pandemic. He added that the movement of ships and aircraft continued even during the height of the pandemic and this has everything to do with the struggle for sea control of those seas. Ong also noted that China was able to solidify its control over Hong Kong. Consequently, he thinks that the Two Systems, One Country concept no longer exists operationally.

Other issues that Ong observed were the China-India border conflict and the Chinese expansion of economic influence in the Pacific Island states which affects the sphere of influence of Australia. He noted two schools of thought on these issues. The first is that China is trying to distract its domestic population because of the impact of the pandemic on its population, especially during the height of the pandemic in January and February 2020. Ong added that there is also a possibility that China is actually using the crisis as an opportunity to pursue its strategic objectives while most of the ASEAN countries are vulnerable. During this time, however, the trade war between the US and China was already in full bloom and he hinted that this created a more difficult situation for China.

According to Ong, there are various negative ways by which China was affected by the pandemic. The most apparent was the damage to its international reputation due to the accusation of lack of transparency and responsibility for the reporting and its dealing with the virus at the onset. The US has blamed China for the virus. It has suffered more than 200 thousand deaths

from the pandemic and this has aggravated their already tenuous relations. The negative effects on their international reputation was also shown in the uproar due to the defective personal protective equipment (PPEs) that were distributed to Europe. China's role and influence in the operations of the World Health Organization (WHO) became clear particularly when the WHO blocked Taiwan from participating in any international forum to address the pandemic. According to Ong, these cases contributed to the damage to China's international reputation.

Ong then referred to the second question given to him which is "what are the key sectors that were significantly affected and how were these changes altering the strategic environment?" He noted that the spectrum of responses to the pandemic affected the economy from one country to another and stated that those countries that have flattened the curve had already recovered economically. Ong shared the projections by many that the global economy will lose at least 2.4 percent of the value of the gross domestic product (GDP) and that the global economic growth will be down from 3 percent to 2.4 percent. He noted that the most affected is the global supply chain and the hubs of these supply chain namely China, US, Europe, and Japan. Because of the restrictions to air and sea transportation and the movement of people, the economies of these countries do not look good.

At the heart of the global supply chain, is the global value chain, in which China is the center, according to Ong. The impact to China due to the shutdown of its production facilities has led to a 13.5 percent drop in industrial production in January and February. This certainly affected both imports and exports of goods. Ong argued that the economic troubles of China, which

was a direct consequence of the pandemic has cascaded down to security issues. He added that the effect of the pandemic on many countries regarding defense and security varies. For some countries, their military forces were repurposed for pandemic response. To others including the Philippines, there was an issue of over-securitization in the pandemic response due to the overuse of military forces. Multilateral exercises and events were cancelled, and Balikatan and other military exercises were postponed. Ong also added the pandemic's impact on defense spending, particularly on modernization. As the pandemic spread, funds were realigned for its response. There is also an impact on operation tempo and readiness of military forces and some units that were infected were no longer viable for employment in the pandemic response.

Returning to the discussion of China and its trade war with the US, Ong stated that the actual motivation for the trade war was revealed to be a national security concern when the United States realized that its source of PPEs and medicine is China. He sees the US shifting its focus from China itself to the Chinese Communist Party. The target is being narrowed down towards the leadership of China.

Ong cited the statement of Secretary Pompeo and the Australian government debunking the China's Nine Dash Line in South China Sea. He sees this as a crucial development in the region. Moreover, the formal visit of US officials in Taiwan, the provision of arms and defense hardware to the island, and the signing of the Taiwan Act into law with focusing on the pandemic response are also noteworthy developments in the region as far as security is concerned.

With regard to China-EU relations, Ong believes that China has taken a step backward—reflecting on the failure of their so-called “wolf warrior diplomacy.” He observed that China has to walk back on this effort by sending its foreign minister to talk with European Union (EU) member states. Regarding its relations with ASEAN, China has renewed its interest in the completion of the Code of Conduct. China has even sent its defense minister to talk with ASEAN states to complement what they are doing in the EU states.

According to Ong, ASEAN is caught in the middle. It is now being wooed by two powers with China trying to use the Code of Conduct to bring ASEAN into its orbit and to push away US from the South China Sea on one hand. And on the other, the US is using the Pompeo statement in July to promote ASEAN alignment with US on the South China Sea issue.

The third question that was posed to Ong was, “If any changes have occurred, what do you expect would be the result in terms of challenges and opportunities?” This was accompanied by the following related question: “Is there anything that countries in the region, particularly in Southeast Asia need to do to address the situation?”

The principal challenge to the region is the impact of the US-China strategic competition with respect to ASEAN. Ong posed important questions such as “How do we deal with two major powers engaged in a rivalry over the region’s waters, particularly the South China Sea and the East China Sea?” and “How do economies recover despite the pandemic?”

He said that the pandemic would be an ongoing concern unless a sustainable solution, i.e. a vaccine, is produced. Ong provided a recommendation with regard to how countries in the region should react to China. He believes that we have to challenge the Chinese influence and operational impact on domestic politics and national security. Ong has observed that China has leveled up its influence operations to promote the Chinese narrative to an international audience. This seems to be predictable, given the negative effects of the pandemic has caused on its international standing.

In terms of opportunity, Ong believes that China right now is more open to discussion. They are affected by a food shortage and their need to recover ground lost diplomatically because of the pandemic.

Speaking from a practitioner's perspective, Ong advised that we need to look at the possibility of Xi as being vulnerable within the CCP due to his government's performance before and during the pandemic. The upcoming US Presidential Elections is also a chance for the region to review its security posture. He added that we might be looking now at the possibility of a bipolar Indo-Pacific region. Ong expressed the possibility that China and Russia could form a tandem against the Indo-Pacific quadrilateral made up of US, India, Australia and Japan, as well as the three other states from the EU - UK, Germany, and France. Ong believes that this kind of division within the region will not be a good thing in the long term as it is bound to increase tensions.

How will ASEAN step up, given this regional security environment? Ong thinks that ASEAN should step up in the

sense of trying to develop itself as a countervailing balance to the US-China competition. It has already several mechanisms in place that it can use to improve its posture. He pointed to the ASEAN Regional Forum as well as the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting. According to Ong, ASEAN can be an active player instead of an irrelevant bystander by being a balancer to the US and China. However, he believes that this still depends on how ASEAN as an institution will comport itself, given these challenges and opportunities.

### **Jaime B. Naval**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science  
University of the Philippines, Diliman

Assistant Professor Jaime Naval started by illustrating the problem that the region currently faces and likened the situation to a ship that is on fire. He stated that we have different capacities that could address the problem, but ultimately we must answer the question: how do we solve the problem?

According to Naval, 2012 is a landmark year in examining the region in terms of the geopolitical security developments. He noted, in particular, the defiant and brave actions pursued by China through its massive damaging construction and other intimidating activities in the South China Sea.

For Naval, China, along with the regional states and other concerned stakeholders, remain key to resolving the leading challenges in Southeast Asia. From one conventional perspective, the developments taking place in our region pre-pandemic and

right now with the pandemic are merely expected outcomes of patterned behavior. According to him, this behavior forebodes dangerous possibilities, which may lead to situations that are inimical to the interest of the stakeholders in our region.

Naval stated that the binary classification of traditional and non-traditional threats has not only becomes interesting but has also become more complex. He expects that the analyst in the future would have more facets to examine compared to those in the present. We have witnessed regionalism intensifying not only in Europe but also elsewhere especially in the Americas, in Australia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. This is far from the situation following the end of the Cold War and the US having the privilege and the status of being the lone superpower.

Regarding the developments in the region due to China's rise, Naval noted that it engendered deeper trade and investment relations in Southeast Asia. Domestically, the sustained development of China translated into the further legitimization of the Communist Party, and the profits of China's revisionist capitalism yielded necessary fuel for social, political, and even military advancement. China's rise has gained notice and this is shown by the US belated and frustrated effort to pivot in the Asia-Pacific. The Trump administration even pursued a trade war which according to Naval is not without negative externalities.

Naval observed that even supposed established partners in Europe and Asia had been adversely affected by the efforts of the Trump Administration to "make America great again." He pointed to a quote from US Secretary Mike Pompeo that stated that "once we have institutionalized what we are doing, the four of

us together, we can begin to build out a true security framework.” This illustrates the point that there is no master plan yet and that the QUAD powers are in an evolving and very fluid arrangement. Still, Naval thinks that the QUAD members communicate a message of a preemptive counter and that they are ready to call out China militarily.

He also added the important role of Russia in all of this and called on observers to monitor the measures it is adopting in the movements that are taking place. Naval noted that Sino-Russia confederacies are being strongly cemented, whether on disputed grounds or waters or in the office itself of the UN Security Council. This could be seen through their established strategic partnership in the economic field and Russia’s willingness to test the waters in the East China Sea, which concerned both Japan and South Korea.

Naval also noted how the Taiwan Strait and the East China Sea had remained tinderboxes, given the delicate potential to spark a conflict in the region. He advised close monitoring as miscalculations can easily erupt into a conflagration with the formidable military ability and posturing of Japan, Taiwan, and, of course, China. Certainly, human error or misguided intention can radically alter the tenuous circumstances, according to Naval.

In the Indo-Pacific, the US has also announced that it would expand US Naval power to more than 355 ships, from the current 293. This is supplemented by the inclusion of unmanned and autonomous ships, submarines, and aircraft. According to Naval, this would enable the United States to “survive high-intensity conflicts.”

Naval stated that China's fortification and other acts of intimidation in the South China Sea defy its claimed benevolence as a major power. Naval thinks that there is still a debate on whether China has indeed intensified its South China Sea campaign while the rest of the world battles Covid-19. Some experts point out that China too is responding to the dynamics taking place in the disputed South China Sea area. Nevertheless, Naval still thinks that China has been unrelenting in its assertiveness, whether there is a pandemic or not.

On the defense facet of security, the persisting tension in the region has instigated continued military expenditure. Naval cited that Taiwan is deliberating a 40.42 Billion US defense budget for next year, which reflects a 10 percent increase over the current year. Japan is also proceeding with other advanced force multiplier purchases, such as getting 105 F35 Stealth Fighters for 23 Billion dollars. Meanwhile, the US has signaled its intent to deploy long-range precision munitions such as Hypersonic missiles and tactical missiles with an extended range to combat China's A2/AD strategy in the South China Sea.

Naval also noticed the Trump Administration's approach to traditional allies. The view that deeper cooperation between the US and its allies will be critical as competition with China persists. There is also the unilateralist impulse of the United States under Trump, which is highly skeptical about the value and fairness of alliances. Describing the US approach under Trump, Naval sees it as clarity with mixed chaos. Having a poorly implemented but fundamentally correct strategy is better than having a well-implemented but ambiguous strategy.

Naval asked an interesting question about estimates of war capabilities: How many wars can a superpower like the United States or any great power wage simultaneously? Naval also pointed out the fact that this question can also be asked of China. Given its involvement in disputes in the larger region, one wonders how many wars China can afford to fight at a time?

From a purely rational actor and Sun Tzu-est perspective, Naval expects that China would prefer avoiding violent confrontations. The QUAD certainly makes things more complicated as far as China is concerned and China would want to keep relations on a level footing with its key neighbors in the region as much as possible. On a number of cases, Xi has lambasted the US due to the latter's trade war actions. Naval noticed that Xi has not directly named Trump in his latest speeches where he would castigate the US for its onerous and very troublesome trade war. Analysts are saying that this might be an indication or a sign that Xi, or China in general, is giving room for backpedaling so that in case the opportunity arises, some backroom redemptive negotiations can take place. The US can be able to navigate itself to make a U-Turn.

Naval also noted that in what would be an opportunity for China to lambaste Japan, Beijing directed no scathing criticism at Japan when it announced a statement, via Twitter, concerning Japanese Prime Minister (PM) Abe's resignation and instead segued into an anti-American discourse. In his first-ever telephone exchange with Japan's new PM, Xi said that it stands "ready to work with the new Japanese government to properly handle key

sensitive issues including historical ones. Xi even intimated that China is even willing to go on some very special economic trade, investment, and technology arrangement with Japan.

Going back to the initial question that he asked, Naval believes China is not ready and cannot manage simultaneous fires. As a conclusion to his presentation, he cited as evidence to this unreadiness China's recent behavior, which shows that it tries to navigate a position where it is trying to woo even Japan and even send out fillers open for renegotiating.

## Open Forum

The first set of questions is about the significant changes in the strategic environment, which make regional relations unpredictable. The questions are as follows: First, do you see any scenario along these lines that is the most dangerous as far as regional security and stability is concerned? Second, what is it that needs to be done to prevent this potential crisis from escalating further? Third, how concerned should we be about these scenarios?

In answering the question, Ong stated his belief that both the US and China are rational actors, which means that they would prefer not to create a situation that would lead to conflict. However, he clarified that a crisis can still happen due to one unforeseen possibility, such as a tactical miscalculations on the ground, which could escalate into a crisis. He clarified though that he does not think that it would immediately transition into a shooting war if ever a crisis happens. Ong believes that this

scenario would not happen in the immediate future. He thinks that the two countries have no appetite for that and that the two countries do not see a shooting war as a beneficial event in any case.

As a follow up question, both speakers were asked about the measures that could be taken in order to prevent a crisis from escalating. Ong stated that backchannel mechanisms between the US and Chinese militaries exist even though the two countries do not talk to each other politically. He sees this as an opportunity for operational and tactical commanders to talk to each other and prevent untoward incidents.

For Naval, conflict is unlikely because it is not in the interest of any of these countries to start it. However, he noted that the situation on the ground may be different from that of the situation at the level of policymakers whenever tensions rise and exchanges become more heated. He cited the example of a Vietnamese boat rammed by the Chinese, which was reminiscent of what happened with Gem-Ver in the summer of 2019.

Naval agrees with Ong that the tactical level is where we should be more careful because this is where mistakes and errors could take place. He also shared the idea that maritime accidents from a strict policy-making perspective are just accidents, but from a pedestrian point of view, these accidents are something else.

Naval advised that diplomacy is still an advantageous path to take and that there should be more frequent exchanges, both official and via backchannel. He also mentioned that other

participants who have equal stakes in the South China Sea should not be prevented from participating in the dialogue. Referring to Ong's statement that ASEAN is caught in the middle of the US-China rivalry, Naval thinks the issue cuts two ways as he suspects that China has been priding itself in adhering and wanting to keep ASEAN centrality. He added that the idea of an ASEAN that is able to come up with a coherent unified position is something that we would welcome. According to him, ASEAN will become a player that would be treated with greater respect if it could foster a more unified and coherent strategic position. Naval thinks ASEAN has to do this in order to respond more effectively and become an actor of central importance in the unsettled disputes in our region.

For the next round of questions, the speakers were asked to give their thoughts regarding the issues in the Indian Ocean and China's other territorial concerns, specifically the border tensions between India and China.

Ong suggested that we can look at the issue from the points of view of both China and the United States. For China, the pandemic provides an opportunity to gain some advantage given the timing of events. Ong speculated that the developments in the Indian Ocean will force the United States to further dissipate its forces, which are currently concentrated in the South China Sea.

From the perspective of the US, Ong argued that the American government wishes to have a more robust working relationship with the Indian government, and therefore they are also concerned with what is happening in the Indian Ocean. He

added that the challenge for the US, however, is to balance its forces because its forces will lose lethality if it is scattered across different theaters.

For Naval, the concepts of bipolarity and multipolarity will come up big in the future. He noted the recent statements of the Indian Minister of External Affairs, which seemed to point to how the QUAD is ushering in multipolarity due to the number of countries involved. Naval, however, raised a question of how the QUAD will be of any assistance to India given the events on its borders with China. Nonetheless, he pointed out that the recent trip of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to four Southeast Asian countries while the pandemic is still raging clearly had something to do with the India-China dispute.

The next set of questions was framed in light of the China's military development and in light of enduring geopolitical strategic challenges. Should the Philippines ramp up the development of a defense industry? The second question revolved around how the AFP modernization has been long overdue, and that the paradigm shift on security capabilities, that is from internal to external, has been viewed as necessary. The question is specifically about the causes of these delays and the role of the Philippine leadership on this.

For Ong, the talks about the development of a defense industry should have happened years ago. Any prospect of establishing a defense industry requires collaboration between government, business, and the academe. One of the critical components of defense industry is research and development, but it is something that the Philippines has not invested in. Ong

emphasized that research is something that the government and business should invest in.

Concerning the question of the modernization of the AFP, Ong explained what is going on by comparing the acquisition process of the AFP and the Philippine Coast Guard. According to him, the process followed by the Philippine Coast Guard is much simpler than the AFP's because it only has to deal with one bureaucratic layer, i.e. the Department of Transportation. The case of the AFP is different because it has to go through several layers. There is also the factor of competition between four services including the General Headquarters. All of these make the process more complicated.

As regards the actual process of modernization and the shift from internal to external defense, this had been agreed upon years ago. Ong added that the pandemic is a significant factor in the delay since the event also affected the budget due to the realignment of resources.

For Naval, the basic issue is our defense strategy and our defense doctrine. According to him, the Philippines has always been continental in nature when it comes to defense doctrine, even though the country is naturally archipelagic. Therefore, the country should have taken this as a fundamental fact and should have developed a ship building industry from the beginning. Naval stated that this would have been advantageous in two ways as it would have served a dual purpose, for civilian transport during peace time, and for military-related preparations in case the country needs to go to war. Naval, however, stressed the importance of the country's other seas, and the need to not

just focus on the South China Sea. It is also important to tap businessmen who would be able to see through the strategic necessities of putting up these industries. One example would be the San Miguel Corporation, which is currently involved in the construction of transport infrastructure in the country.

Ong added to what Naval said stating that defense is a public good and people tend to look at it as a cost. According to him, defense is a cost when you simply look at it from a cost-benefit analysis perspective but if you look at the defense industry as a component of defense, it becomes a positive input to the economy. He added that if the Philippines can develop a robust and superior product, the country can actually export it, which is a way of making it contribute to the economy.

Ong used the example of Indonesia which copied the model of their air aviation industry from us which was the Philippine Aerospace Development Corporation (PADC). However, he noted that the Indonesians are the ones who are building aircraft and ships for us, although we have superior technicians and fabricators. Ong recommends that there should be a buy in from policy-makers. We should make sure, however, that a defense industry should contribute in terms of making the products more viable.

A question was raised on the scenario of an altercation between China and countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines or Malaysia, be it through an accident involving the coast guard, fishing ships, oil rigs, or a deliberate provocation by China. Given heightened emotions or tensions, could such an incident generally unsettle the fragile strategic balance that we currently have?

Ong answered this by sharing how People's Liberation Army Navy ships and Chinese coast guard vessels operate at sea. According to him, there are two important people on board, which is the captain and the political officer. Therefore, there is no such thing as an "accident" in the South China Sea involving a Chinese naval vessel or a Chinese coast guard vessel. If something happens, it must be premeditated or under instruction from the central committee through the party.

For him, the GemVer incident was sort of a black swan event among fisherfolks. He believes that the Chinese did not want it to happen and that it is more of a professional issue on the part of the mariners or the persons manning the Chinese fishing vessel. However, Ong emphasized that nothing is an accident in the South China Sea if it involves Chinese government vessels because the political officer on board will make sure that the captain will toe the line.

Naval gave his answer to the question by suggesting that we must strive to see the context when an accident happens. He believes that it is likely that the parties involved are already aware of the futility of causing the incident to worsen. Therefore, we should be aware if the other party intentionally makes the situation more complicated. Naval also stated his concern that other countries in the region may not have the luxury of having a political officer on board and therefore make their respective situation a little more vulnerable compared to China's.

The next set of questions included the following: How do you see the US elections impacting cooperation and competition in the region? In relation to this, will the US confrontation with

China continue or even intensify with a Biden administration? The second question is, do middle powers have any role to play in the security of the region?

Ong thinks that Trump is against alliances unless he can free ride on the arrangement. This is due to him being a businessman and he looks at things in cost-benefit terms, i.e. if I am giving you support, you should pay me.

Ong noted that Trump's administration is confronting China in a different way. He believes that Trump is using the trade war as a means of separating the Chinese population from the CCP. Ong thinks that the American strategy is to try to force an internal regime change in China by placing Xi in a situation where the party might see him as more of a liability than a benefit. As for Biden, Ong said that as a democrat, Biden would be more likely to look into alliances or multilateral approaches to address the China issue. Therefore, he speculates that there be greater cooperation between the US and ASEAN, or the US and the EU or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for that matter, under a Biden administration.

On the second question, Ong noted the rise of middle powers prior to the Pompeo statement last July. This was evidenced by Japan coming to the forum and Australia as well, although not to such a degree as Japan. He noted that Japan is upping the ante in terms of engaging other countries in the region particularly Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. It is in effect conducting its own shuttle diplomacy outside the US umbrella. On the operational side, Ong noted a massive movement of Japanese

naval vessels in the South China Sea, which he thinks is a middle power adjusting with the diminished US presence.

Naval returned to the question related to maritime accidents and possible provocation issues. The Indonesian government has a deliberate policy of giving intruders and poachers a vital lesson or message by destroying their fishing boats. For Naval, this is significant because it gives us something to think about, especially if the Philippines adopts the same policy. The question is how will China react to it if ever we take a similar direction.

Naval thinks that if Biden wins the presidency, there would be greater constancy and not so much abruptness or bravado in policymaking. Like Ong, Naval sees a Biden administration to be more likely to foster alliances. As for the question on middle powers, Naval sees that the arrangement in terms of paying the maintenance cost of the US bases in Japan is a factor. Japan's creative management of its interests in the South China Sea has prevented China in directly criticizing it, unlike what it does when the US acts in the region.

According to Naval, this is due to Japan's good credibility and track record, and a clear message on where it stands on the South China Sea with the others in the region. With regard to Australia, Naval sees the country as a shadow of US interests, particularly in wanting to keep the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. This was a development from a time when Australia was silent on these issues, perhaps due to its economic relationship with China.

The last question had to do with the relative role of COVID-19 on the strategic environment, on whether it is immaterial to the developments we are discussing?

Ong clarified his earlier position and stated that he still thinks that the pandemic is a game-changer. However, he noted that if one looks at the nitty-gritty of the regional developments, the pandemic is like an overlay that was actually accentuated and highlighted. It particularly affected China by providing it with the sudden realization that since China is at the center of the global supply chain, it has become a national security issue for many countries. The examples provided were medicines and PPEs, which are both produced in China.

According to Ong, the fact that China hoarded these items sometime during the pandemic shows that the pandemic transitioned over to economic issues and then to regional security issues. The pandemic also caused other countries to realize that their industries and investments could be shifted away from China and to their own countries or to Southeast Asia. Japan is an example here.

The second impact, according to Ong, is the pandemic's effects to China's international standing. One could see Chinese diplomatic officials trying to mitigate the effect on their credibility and standing as a nation or as a state in the international community. They are trying to cover their response, the lack of transparency, and their consequent actions after the pandemic onset. Ong also believes that the views of European countries towards China have also changed and that the pandemic is a factor.

Naval noted what Jay Batongbacal had previously said about ASEAN collaborating to respond to security concerns in the region. He noted that ASEAN would come together and collaborate only in the face of a crisis. Although he agrees with this point, Naval thinks that not all crises lead to reforms.

He also agreed with what Ong has said that the pandemic is a game-changer. The pandemic tested the public health system of most countries and from an economic point of view, it revealed a disadvantage for those countries that depended too much on China's products. Naval also stressed the fact that the pandemic only showed how connected the world is. This interdependence and interconnectedness played a role in how COVID-19 spread in the first place.

Naval also cited Graham Allison's deterministic formula of the Thucydides trap. He argued that we could not simply accept this as the case in the region. Naval noted that the Greek polities and the relationships between them were unique to their time, particularly the lack of real-time information, which would undoubtedly affect their decision-making capabilities. He does not think that we should be resigned to a deterministic mode and instead have to bear in mind the larger thread that connects us. Naval placed high importance on our interconnectedness as human beings.

WEBINAR 4

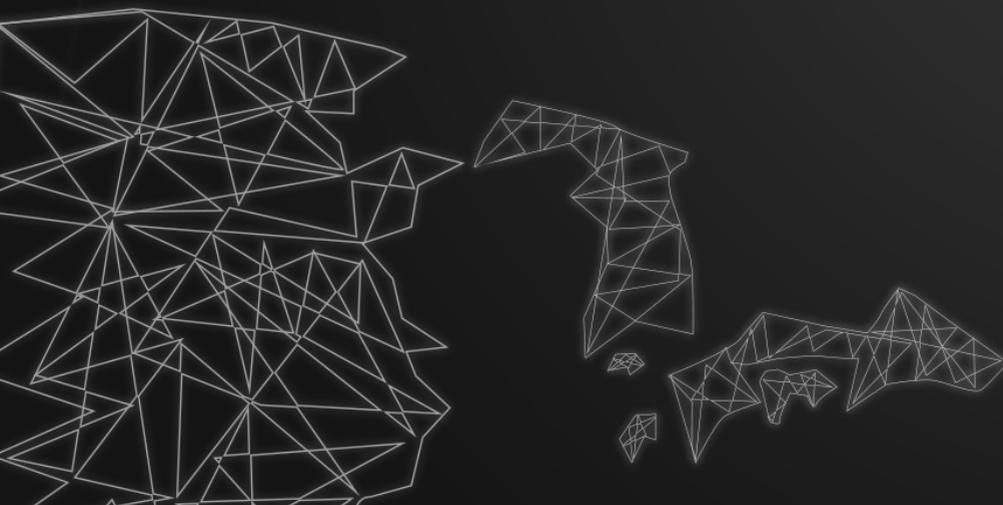
# Reading the Tea Leaves: Future Developments in the Region

26 OCTOBER 2020 | 10:00 A.M. TO 11:45 A.M.

MODERATOR

**Herman Joseph S. Kraft**

Professor, Department of Political Science  
University of the Philippines, Diliman



## **H.E. Anke Reiffenstuel**

Ambassador

German Embassy Manila

Ambassador Anke Reiffenstuel began her presentation by stating the situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and how it changed the reality and the coordinates of life of everyone. She mentioned that the pandemic has demonstrated how globally interconnected and interdependent a nation's economy and its people are. According to her, this was clearly seen when countries started closing their respective borders to protect their population. However, this has also shown us that national isolation does not work, at least for a more extended period of time.

Fortunately, mutual solidarity at the bilateral, regional and international level in Europe came up fast to provide funding and support. This includes the providing of several million Euros for the COVID response programs of international organizations like International Organization for Migration, Red Cross, and CSO. According to Reiffenstuel, this has become an important element in German and European relations with Asian countries and the world. The Ambassador also stated that the German government has also agreed to adjust ongoing projects to increase the flexibility for using of the funds to address COVID-related challenges.

Reiffenstuel also stated that we should also look at the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen the global community. A sustainable, multilateral, and united approach to finding solutions, including developing a vaccine, is also important. Reiffenstuel

has observed that the bilateral trade between Germany and the Philippines has seen a considerable downtrend due to the pressure of global economic slowdown and the recession being felt by German companies and enterprises. She noted that investments have been paused or slowed down and the movement of people for trade fairs or business negotiations has been halted as well. However, Reiffenstuel expressed optimism that relations will improve since fruitful and frank exchanges between Germany and the Philippines have been taking place.

Reiffenstuel also mentioned what Stefan Jost had stated at the start of the session about the Guidelines for Indo-Pacific adopted by the German government. She explained that these policy guidelines of the German government constitute the framework of Germany's work on this part of the world and that the cooperation it espouses not only applies to the Philippines but also to other countries in the region. According to her, the key concern is to set up new partnerships and to strengthen existing ones, as well as to maximize the potential for new cooperation. The Indo-Pacific policy guidelines emphasizes collaboration with organizations and structures such as ASEAN or the UN. Some of the issues and areas of cooperation include are climate change, peace and security in the region, human rights and the rule of law, strengthening of international free trade, improving connectivity and digitalization, and the enhancement of cultural and academic relations. Reiffenstuel emphasized that the policy guidelines that are currently adopted by the German government affirm the country's resolve to engage even more actively as a partner and to help maintain the rules-based order.

Reiffenstuel stated that the importance of the Indo-Pacific region, both in economic and political terms, has increased remarkably. With the rise of Asia, the political and economic balance is increasingly shifting towards the Indo-Pacific region as the region accounts for almost half of the global GDP. The Ambassador noted that this rise is also accompanied by challenges. The strategic competition in the region is increasing and that the geopolitical structures in the Indo-Pacific have a direct impact on Germany and Europe at large, according to her. The fact that Asian and European economies are closely connected through global supply chains have made sure that the developments in Asia are also felt in Europe. As a trading nation, this has profound effects on Germany since open markets and free trade are crucial for the country. Reiffenstuel noted that the share of the broader region, including South and East Asia, in Germany's trade balance has risen steadily in recent decades and now amounts to around 20 percent of its total trade in goods.

Reiffenstuel has stressed that the cooperation with the countries of the Indo-Pacific region is of increasing importance to Germany. She noted that Germany's interests go far beyond the economic area and that stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region are important for the country. Reiffenstuel also noted that the Indo-Pacific region has a developing science and research sector and boasts very rich culture which attracts great interest in Europe. This could offer a huge potential for partnership between Germany and the countries in the region. Reiffenstuel also emphasized the fact that as a trading nation and proponent of a rules-based international order, Germany has a great interest in participating in Asia's growth dynamics. This also includes being actively involved in the region through the upholding of global

norms in regional structures. The Ambassador believes that now is the high time that the European Union and ASEAN become full-fledged strategic partners. She shared that this is one of the issues that are a central concern of the EU Council, which is excellent given that Germany is currently the chair of the EU Council. Moreover, Reiffenstuel anticipates that Germany will strategically position itself and step up its engagement vis a vis ASEAN in the coming years. This will be done through the expansion of Germany's cooperation with ASEAN institutions and the strengthening of the role that the EU currently has as a partner of ASEAN. Reiffenstuel also expressed support for the development of a substantive and legally binding code of conduct for the South China Sea based on the principles of UNCLOS.

About the issue of climate change, Reiffenstuel stated that countries should commit to ensuring that national and economic growth is environmentally friendly and socially compatible. She added that natural resources must be managed sustainably, that the unique biodiversity is preserved, and the challenges of urbanization must be addressed. Stepping up the cooperation efforts with partners in the Indo-Pacific region in all aspects of climate policy is key according to Reiffenstuel. She also stated that the commitment of the EU, and by extension Germany, is crucial in the efforts of mitigating the effects of climate change. Increasing the bilateral and regional cooperation to reduce marine litter and to protect marine ecosystems is also part of what the European countries are looking at.

## **Junever Mahilum-West**

Assistant Secretary, Office of ASEAN Affairs  
Department of Foreign Affairs

Assistant Secretary Junever Mahilum-West outlined that her presentation will first focus on how ASEAN is responding and adapting to the challenges brought about by the pandemic; secondly, discuss the efforts made by the regional group to come up with a recovery plan; and, lastly discuss the future developments and issues important to the region.

She noted that ASEAN has been able to continue its engagements despite the limitations caused by the crisis under the able and adept chairmanship of Vietnam. She noted that important meetings including high-level ones pushed through via video conferencing. These included the 36th ASEAN Summit in June, the 53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting and related ministerial meetings in September. She stressed that the theme of a cohesive and responsive ASEAN is being lived up to.

Mahilum-West showed data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. about the reported cases of COVID-19 in ASEAN countries. The data, which was updated as of 23 October 2020, compared the number of cases in ASEAN with those in China, the United States, and the global figures. She segued to a discussion of the new priorities of ASEAN to address the pandemic in the region. These include the establishment of a COVID-19 response fund as well as the ASEAN regional reserve, which could be tapped for the acquisition of medical supplies. The ASEAN Center for

Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases was cited as one of the institutions that ASEAN has recently given priority. The development of the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework will provide a guide for ASEAN countries in the coming years. Mahilum-West also enumerated the public health networks working under the aegis of, namely the ASEAN Emergency Operations Center Network led by Malaysia, the ASEAN Plus Three Field Epidemiology Training Network, the ASEAN Biodiaspora Virtual Center, the ASEAN Risk Assessment and Risk Communication Center, and the Regional Health Laboratories Network. The establishment of the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergencies greatly improved the operations of these networks, along with the usual high-level meetings of ASEAN.

To give some idea of how the ASEAN region will recover from the pandemic, Mahilum-West quoted Foreign Affairs Secretary

| Country     | Cases      | Cases Last 24 Hr | Deaths    | Tests       | Recovered  | Cases per Million | Population    |
|-------------|------------|------------------|-----------|-------------|------------|-------------------|---------------|
| World       | 41,789,042 | 920,514          | 1,138,696 | -           | 28,392,918 | 5,359             | 7,800,000,000 |
| China       | 91,077     | 47               | 4,739     | -           | 85,936     | 63                | 1,439,324,400 |
| USA         | 8,411,262  | 136,094          | 223,059   | 128,964,596 | 3,353,056  | 25,411            | 331,003,000   |
| Indonesia   | 381,910    | 8,801            | 13,007    | 2,679,774   | 305,100    | 1,425             | 268,000,000   |
| Philippines | 365,799    | 3,556            | 6,915     | 4,518,010   | 312,691    | 3,487             | 104,900,000   |
| Vietnam     | 1,148      | 4                | 35        | 1,260,799   | 1,049      | 12                | 95,540,000    |
| Thailand    | 3,727      | 18               | 59        | 878,477     | 3,518      | 54                | 69,400,000    |
| Myanmar     | 41,008     | 2,506            | 1,005     | 454,978     | 21,144     | 768               | 53,370,000    |
| Malaysia    | 24,514     | 1,557            | 204       | 1,940,261   | 15,884     | 786               | 31,200,000    |
| Cambodia    | 286        | 0                | 0         | 10,438      | 280        | 18                | 16,010,000    |
| Laos        | 24         | 0                | 0         | 62,474      | 22         | 3                 | 6,858,000     |
| Singapore   | 57,951     | 18               | 28        | 3,486,260   | 57,829     | 10,326            | 5,612,200     |
| Brunei      | 148        | 1                | 3         | 65,083      | 143        | 345               | 428,607       |

(Sourced from the Center for Strategic and International Studies. As of 23 October 2020)

Teodoro Locsin's statement at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting last June 2020. Locsin stated that "we should not label our recovery as Post-Pandemic because now is the time to develop the ASEAN recovery plan" and that "post-pandemic connotes waiting for a vaccine or a cure that is still in the indeterminate future." Mahilum-West stressed that the statement suggests that true recovery starts at the present.

Mahilum-West also enumerated the key objectives in the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework. These are:

1. Plan holistic, broad strategies on the ASEAN region stages of recovery – from re-opening, recovery, and towards longer-term resilience.
2. Guide sectors to assess, re-align, expedite their work and priorities, and undertake new initiatives with more coordination.

## From F2F to VCF



Photo Retrieved from <https://asean.org/asean-health-ministers-enhance-cooperation-fighting-covid-19-pandemic/>

### Some of ASEAN's Engagements on COVID-19

- 1) Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 (14 April 2020)
- 2) Special APT Summit on COVID-19 (14 April 2020)
- 3) ASEAN Defence Ministers' Statement on Defence Cooperation Against Disease Outbreaks (19 February 2020)
- 4) Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting (SFMM) on COVID-19 (20 February 2020)
- 5) AEM Retreat (10 March 2020)
- 6) First meeting of ACCWG-PHE (31 March 2020)
- 7) ASEAN-US Meeting on Public Health Emergencies (1 April 2020)

3. Provide a reference and set priorities for sectors across pillars of ASEAN and the broader stakeholders, including the private sector and dialogue partners.
4. Contribute to the underlying vision of ASEAN 2025, as well as the strengthening of future resilience.

Mahilum-West quoted Deputy Secretary-General for ASEAN Economic Community, Dr. Aladdin Rillo, in his statement that COVID-19 has started off as a public health crisis that has evolved into an economic one. Therefore, effective response efforts must go beyond the health sector to mitigate the impact on and support the economy and livelihood of the people. It is in this context that she stressed that the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework will serve as the coordinated exit strategy for the region, which will make it prepared, resilient, and competitive.

Mahilum-West stated the clear fact that COVID-19 caused and still causes economic decline, which leads to governments revising their respective economic plans and forecasts. She cited the ADB's findings that the projected sub-regional GDP is down by nearly five percentage points to 3.8 percent in 2020, with a forecast rebound revised up by nearly 1 point to 5.5 percent growth in 2021. She warned that economic recovery would continue to be slow and painful since this is largely determined by developments in world trade and how long the pandemic would stay.

To address the challenges faced by ASEAN during the pandemic and after the crisis, Mahilum-West suggested some approaches. One of these approaches is the digitization of

operations and contactless engagements in ASEAN..at the same time, however, cybercrimes have escalated during the pandemic and that misinformation is rife in social media. ASEAN could focus once again on these issues since one of its priorities is connectivity with all of its digital implications. The Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity or MPAC Vision 2025 sees the emergence of a seamlessly and comprehensively reconnected and integrated ASEAN that will promote competitiveness, inclusiveness, and a greater sense of community. Mahilum-West also enumerated ASEAN's efforts to focus on five strategic areas, namely, sustainable infrastructure, digital innovation, seamless logistics, regulatory excellence, and people mobility.

She added that ASEAN is also giving attention to sub-regional arrangements and that ASEAN's various programs have created a fertile environment for the development of these arrangements. Mahilum-West cited the Brunei Darussalam-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area and the Greater Mekong Subregion as examples of these sub-regional arrangements. The ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity is increasingly becoming more significant since addressing zoonotic diseases and climate change have become more important for the region.

Mahilum-West also took the opportunity to share the plans of the Philippines regarding its chairmanship of the ASEAN Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). According to her, the Philippines will set the plan of action and engage external partners and international organizations

for support through the ASEAN TVET Council, which will improve the region's human resources and provide it with future-ready skills.

ASEAN's priority to uphold ASEAN's centrality in the regional security architecture remains extant. Mahilum-West noted that ASEAN bodies have been active in regional mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus, and the ASEAN Regional Forum. One important objective is to work towards an effective and substantive code of conduct in the South China Sea. The signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership by the end of this year could also be a step in the right direction.

She stated that during this time of global uncertainty, shifting geopolitical climate, and major power rivalry, one could see ASEAN centrality as more relevant than ever. ASEAN has played a central role in the multinational frameworks in the wider region. For Mahilum-West, ASEAN upholds centrality as a node in a cluster of networks despite its limited material power. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific also reaffirms ASEAN's central role in the evolving regional architecture in Southeast Asia and beyond. She noted that it is consistent with ASEAN's principles of inclusiveness, consensus building, and a diplomatic rather than a military approach to issues affecting the region.

With regard to the development of a Code of Conduct, Mahilum-West suggested that it must be consistent with international law, including UNCLOS since this remains our

goal. Since ASEAN has four claimant countries, it will continue to be the hub on negotiations on South China Sea matters and therefore has an invaluable role in addressing the issue.

Mahilum-West believes that ASEAN will remain a significant forum for collective action in the new normal. Traditional and emerging issues like COVID19 could be viewed as a test of ASEAN's relevance and the effectiveness of its decision-making capabilities and response actions. It is important to take advantage of ASEAN's convening power and its ability to engage external partners to drive recovery, peace, stability, and prosperity in the region. As to how present actions and response measures would contribute to recovery, this is still to be determined and the situation is still evolving.

It is clear that ASEAN centrality is a key concern as it continues to play an important role in engaging with major powers. Increasing accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia as well as expanding partnerships and participation in ASEAN-led mechanisms demonstrate ASEAN's convening power. It was also noted that ASEAN is becoming more careful not to be entangled in major power competition. We can expect ASEAN to provide the needed pushback to challenges to the rule of law. Mahilum-West stated that the Philippines welcomes the growing number of states, a number of them among ASEAN's external partners, that are recognizing and highlighting the importance of the 2016 Arbitral Award. This is an important development not just for the Philippines' cause but also for the rule of law in general.

Mahilum-West concluded her presentation by stating that it is still too early to embark on a firm economic forecast. She noted, however, there are grounds for optimism taking into consideration how ASEAN countries have responded to the pandemic. Provided that the pandemic is not prolonged and that right measures are put in place and promptly implemented. She emphasized that ASEAN sees the need to build resilience for the future emergencies through the strengthening of public health and social welfare systems, human capital development, financing in times of emergency, ensuring the smooth supply chains connectivity, digitization, promotion of green growth and smart cities, all of which are part of ASEAN's many goals in its 2025 vision.

### **Brendan Taylor, Ph.D.**

Professor, Strategic and Defense Studies Centre  
The Australian National University

Professor Brendan Taylor was the next to present and he started by introducing what he thinks are the three strategic trends that were brought about by the pandemic. The first of these trends is that the willingness and the ability of the US to continue underwriting Asia's security order is increasingly in doubt. Here, he shared the observation of Allen Ginkel, the former Head of Australia's Office of National Assessments, that it is hard to think of a global crisis over the past 50 years to which Washington has offered the international community so little response.

Taylor thinks that it is likely that Asia's US-led vision would have succumbed to this region's shifting dynamics eventually, particularly with the emergence of new power centers in China, India, and possibly in Indonesia. However, he noted that the Trump administration's America First posture and Trump's disdain for alliance relationships has hastened the incumbent order's decline.

The second strategic trend that Taylor discussed is the strategic bargain that Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong famously struck in the 1970's has now completely unraveled. This engagement strategy that successive US administrations had worked with had ultimately transformed China. However, Taylor noted that this trajectory was already apparent even prior to the pandemic. What the pandemic has done, according to Taylor, is it accelerated the deterioration in US-China relations as evidenced by the near absence of Sino-American cooperation in response to it. He compared it to what the two countries did during the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 in which they established a US-China Group of 2 (G2).

With regard to the third trend, Taylor pointed out that the pandemic had severely tested Asian multilateralism. He thinks it is fair to say that even before the pandemic struck that there was less optimism than perhaps a decade ago that Asia's multilateral groupings would be able to cope with a major crisis and it would be able to tame Asia's emerging power politics. He believes that the pandemic's severe economic effects will only hamper these groupings, citing the decrease in multilateral activities following the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis.

Taylor clarified, however, that these trends are reversible. For example, the pandemic scale and severity could yet convince Beijing and Washington, especially a Biden administration, on the need to cooperate on global challenges. However, he expressed some pessimism about the situation in the region where the importance of military power and the risk of a major conflict might increase. Taylor is also concerned about the risk of inadvertent escalation of events spiraling out of control. He thinks that as Asia becomes more contested, the militaries of the region are operating at increasingly close proximity and therefore, the chances of things getting more complicated are heightened. Taylor cited, however, the statement of the American strategic observer Hal Brands who posited that while a contemporary US-China conflict is possible, it will not be the product of an accident or inadvertence.

Taylor highlighted three features of Asia's unfolding geopolitics, which he thinks should be investigated. First, regions in Asia that might drive major power conflict should be looked into, especially those that exhibit rising nationalism. Examples given by Taylor are Northeast Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Understanding the domestic politics in these regions are also crucial especially because of the fact that the politics here are inherently fragile and unpredictable, particularly against the backdrop of lingering bilateral mistrust across the sub-region.

Secondly, advances in military technologies have been rapid and that the pathways to major power conflict will not be as linear or as predictable as it was in the Cold War era. Taylor thinks that the so-called fire brakes between conventional and nuclear are increasingly becoming blurred due to the proliferation

of dual-use missile systems, i.e nuclear and conventional systems. He also cited the advancement of modern weaponry which effectively changes how militaries operate and defend themselves in case a conflict happens. The vulnerabilities of these technologies only heighten the military technical incentives to escalate rapidly into a deepening crisis of conflicts in the area according to him.

The third feature is based on history's many examples where decision-makers had genuinely lost control of events in the heat of a crisis. The failure of these decision-makers are caused by their thinking that because such instances did not escalate into full-blown conflicts previously, they mistakenly believed that it will remain the case in the future. Taylor gave the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis as an example since it exhibited that they were not always in full control and that crisis diplomacy played a role in averting a nuclear catastrophe.

The mechanisms that were established between the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War are not sufficiently present nor applicable to Asia. An example given by Taylor was the Sino-Indian relations. Military confidence building measures were hailed by Beijing and New Delhi during the 1990's but this seems to be insufficient in preventing the outbreak of deadly violence along the Sino-Indian Border in 2020. Another example given was the cross-strait hotline agreed to by Taipei and Beijing in November 2015 but which now lies dormant. Taylor also mentioned the situation in the Korean peninsula, particularly the crisis management and avoidance mechanisms between the involved countries and how these have affected the peace process in recent years.

In conclusion, Taylor argued for a serious reinvigoration and re-imagining of the region's crisis management and avoidance mechanisms. According to him, the Cold War experience shows that even ideologically disparate governments can be convinced to forge and to adhere to such arrangements when these are perceived to be in their self-interest. It is in this thought that Taylor advocates the reevaluation of such mechanisms to manage the security situation in the region. He also believes that it might be useful to reflect upon some of the lessons offered by the pandemic and their potential applicability in the strategic realm. Putting in place stringent protective measures such as mask-wearing, rigorous testing and tracing regimes, and social distancing regulations are now seen as the equivalent of crisis management and avoidance mechanisms at the strategic level.

## Open Forum

The first question addressed to Reiffenstuel was on how much the Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific adopted by the German government would gain traction and perhaps become part of the agenda in discussions between EU and ASEAN? This is based on the EU initiative of establishing a fully-fledged strategic partnership between the EU and ASEAN considering the kinds of dynamics taking place within the EU, such as the consequences of Brexit, among other things.

Reiffenstuel responded to the question by stating that the efforts of the EU for the establishment of an EU-ASEAN strategic partnership has started a long time ago. According to

her, the EU had already seen ASEAN and the region's importance is increasing. She also cited Mahilum-West's statement in her presentation that ASEAN and its institutions have more or less created strategic partnerships with important partners that have led to institutionalized dialogue and the cooperation. Reiffenstuel thinks that this is an ongoing effort, and therefore the scaling up of the partnership into a strategic one must be a mutual effort. She added that the effort needs to grow from cooperation and constant and continuous dialogue.

A question addressed to Mahilum-West was raised about ASEAN's plan to address cybersecurity issues that are detrimental to addressing the pandemic, particularly misinformation in social media. Mahilum-West answered the question by suggesting various approaches to address the problem. She advised that a new coordinating mechanism on cybersecurity be established so that the efforts by various bodies are coordinated. With regard to fake news and misinformation in social media, she suggested that a sub-committee on information under the senior officials meeting be established.

For the next set of questions, Taylor was asked about his recommendations on specific measures to prevent inadvertent escalation from happening. An inquiry was also made on the strategic environment in Southeast Asia becoming disconnected in a pandemic situation as well as in a post-pandemic situation. This relates to ASEAN's role in the regional architecture and its capability in addressing these issues of connectivity, cooperation, and coordination. Lastly, he was asked about what he considers as possible game changers that may increase the probability of conflict in the region?

Taylor responded to the first question by identifying one example of a region-wide measure, i.e. the 2014 the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea. He thinks that this is significant because it offers a potential template for all those types of region wide measures that could lessen the likelihood of accidents at sea. The ongoing negotiations over the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea are also promising developments. Taylor added that in some cases, agreeing to a bilateral arrangement could possibly be a more viable way to go, at least in the short term. Here, he gave the example of the communication mechanism established by the Chinese and the Japanese which seems to be operating effectively and reducing the risk of accidental clashes in the East China Sea. Multilateral groupings could also have a role as long as the interested parties see them as having the potential to address issues.

Regarding the second question, Taylor clarified that what he meant by a darker and disconnected region does not mean a complete decoupling as far as the US and China are concerned. He also thinks that the US-China relationship will become more difficult for both countries under a Biden administration and that the region will feel the effects of that. Regardless, Taylor thinks that ASEAN has a role to play but that would depend on the pandemic's impact on each of the countries within the region.

As for game-changers, Taylor is concerned about the military forces of the region being in close proximity to each other. An incident that happens at the wrong place or at the wrong time, which then spirals out of control in the absence of robust and crisis management mechanisms, would be dangerous. He cited the incident that occurred on the first of July 2016 when a Taiwanese destroyer anchored off Kaohsiung accidentally fired a missile

in the direction of Mainland China which fortunately missed. Taylor believes that the situation will be more dire if that incident happened exactly five years later during the 100th Anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party given the kind of nationalistically charged atmosphere and in the absence of any formal crisis management mechanism. For him, this incident could be similar to what happened in April 2001 when a Chinese Jetfighter and a US surveillance aircraft collided in mid-air which created serious tension between the US and China.

For Mahilum-West, the next question was about ASEAN being careful not to be entangled in the major powers competition and her thoughts about the capability of ASEAN to not get too involved and remain outside of that competition. Reiffenstuel was asked for her insights about the capacity of the EU, through Germany's chairmanship, to play a role in the complex geopolitical challenges in the region.

Mahilum-West addressed the question by stressing that ASEAN still does not want to be entangled in these kinds of competition and that ASEAN countries do not want to be client states or proxy states. This is the aspiration according to her but she also acknowledges the extent of relations of the ASEAN states with these powers. Mahilum-West emphasized that this should be considered in order to realistically assess what is going to happen in the region in the future.

Reiffenstuel started by noting that the EU and ASEAN are often wrongly used in analogies. It is in this context that she says we could understand how the EU and ASEAN could work together more effectively. A number of multilateral fora that ASEAN leads

enhance the cooperation in certain areas without being forced to do everything jointly. This is a very interesting approach and concept, which Reiffenstuel thinks that EU could learn a lot from.

A follow-up question was addressed to Reiffenstuel regarding specific initiatives that might be of interest to Germany as far as the Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific is concerned. Can these actually find their way in the dialogue between the EU and ASEAN on that strategic partnership?

Reiffenstuel answered the question by citing the International Climate Initiative and the work it has done to provide funds for climate training-related measures and programs. According to her, the initiative had been launched more than five years ago and there have been several countries that have been identified as priority partners. The Philippines is one of them. ICI engages Philippine government institutions as well as NGOs to address the impact of climate change. Reiffenstuel noted that the interesting thing is that it adopts a regional approach since there are programs and projects that have a broader approach that involves as many as five countries.

The last question was addressed to Taylor about his points on the US-China tensions which intensified during the pandemic and its relation to the flashpoints idea that he introduced in his recent book. To what extent can it be said that the overall regional security situation is becoming hotter and if it is, how can we reverse or improve that particular situation?

Taylor responded by reviewing the various flashpoints in history and pointed out the fact that some of these flashpoints

tended to heat up and others to cool down. He emphasized that it is never a static situation and cited the Sino-Indian border issue as an example of a flashpoint suddenly heating up. The situation involving Taiwan has also heated up, according to Taylor and this could be related to the kind of crisis management and avoidance mechanisms that exist between the parties involved. He thinks that updating these mechanisms could make things less worrying.

To conclude, Mahilum-West reiterated that it is too early to assess ASEAN's performance during this critical period but she says that we are witness to how ASEAN has adapted to the challenges of the crisis by adjusting its goals and tweaking its ways to properly and efficiently respond to the problem at hand. She highlighted the importance of multilateralism and how the relevance of ASEAN is highlighted even further by a crisis like COVID-19. Mahilum-West stressed that the lessons of the pandemic remind us of the need to work together, to stick together, and to address each issue that recognize no borders. As a final statement, she stated that countries might engage in actions in pursuit of national interest, but the lessons of ASEAN show us that they can also pursue a collective interest.

Reiffenstuel also stressed that the position that is stated in the Guideline on the Indo-Pacific policy has been confirmed by the discussions and that the efforts being done by Germany with regard to the region are correct. The growing relevance of ASEAN in the region and as a partner of Germany affirms this position. Lastly, she expressed her optimism about the intensifying cooperation between the German Embassy and the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs since the Philippines will be taking over the role of coordinator for the EU-ASEAN relations.

The Strategic Studies Program (SSP) of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) aims to promote interest and discourse on significant changes in Philippine foreign policy and develop capacity-building for strategic studies in the country. The program views the Philippines' latest engagement with the great powers and multilateral cooperation with other states in the Asia-Pacific region as a catalyst to further collaborative and multidisciplinary research between the intellectual communities within East Asia.

Strategic studies is an interdisciplinary academic field centered on the study of peace and conflict, often devoting special attention to the relationship between international politics, geo-strategy, diplomacy, international economics, and military power. While traditionally centered on the use of military power for defense and security purposes, strategic studies have now evolved to embrace human and multidimensional aspects of security.

The Program will continue to bring issues of strategic importance to a Philippine public that tends to be very inward looking in its appreciation of its immediate environment. There will be a clear focus on reinforcing and strengthening a core group of experts and academic research interested in strategic concerns within the University and the consolidation of networks that link this core group with institutions in government and the private sector that might be interested in developments around the region and internationally that affect the policy options of the Philippines.