Ongoing Dimensions of Asia’s Fight Against Covid-19

Rajiv Narayan
Covid-19 has unleashed a wave of human-rights violations that hit especially hard at society’s most vulnerable members. Governments across the Asia-Pacific need to take action.

Donald K. Emmerson
The world needs to stop the blame game and seize the opportunity to fashion a common, co-operative approach to such global challenges as Covid-19.

Dominique Virgil & Roberto Lie
The coronavirus outbreak has posed an enormous challenge to ASEAN’s credibility and coherence and exposed cracks in the bloc’s commitment to marginalized communities.
Covid-19, an Asteroid and the Need to Co-operate

By Donald K. Emmerson

The blame game being played out between Washington and Beijing over who is responsible for the Covid-19 crisis is impeding the ability of the world to tackle the pandemic — and prevent future pandemics — in a concerted fashion. The world needs to wake up and seize the opportunity to develop a common, co-operative approach to such global assaults on human health, writes Donald K. Emmerson.

IMAGINE YOURSELF a small mammal alive on our planet some 66 million years ago. One day, a 90-mile-wide asteroid later named Chicxulub smashes into what is now the Yucatan Peninsula. The deadly consequences ramify outward across the planet.

Most life ends, but you survive. You are a burrowing mammal. You have hollowed out a home underground. You can self-isolate there, sheltering in place from the heat and smoke thrown off by the forests as they blaze. Before venturing out to forage for food, you shroud your snout behind a mask to protect your lungs. In the company of other mammals, you keep six feet apart, hoping to save lives lest a blazing tree limb fall on a group of you.

The Covid-19 pandemic has killed well over a third of a million people worldwide, thrown hundreds of millions out of work, and turned the status of the global precariat from already bad to much worse. The word “better” in such a horrific context has a callous ring. But if the coronavirus that has caused such massive death and damage had not first appeared in Wuhan, China, but had arrived on a small asteroid instead, the world would likely be better off. Other things being equal, the radically alien character and faraway origin of a germ-bearing asteroid would have prompted a more unified global response to a threat for which no one country could possibly have been responsible.

The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami devastated parts of the Indonesian province of Aceh. Decades of secessionist warfare there had taken some 15,000 lives. But nearly 130,000 died in the new disaster. That blow shifted priorities from conflict to recovery, incentivizing a peace agreement that ended the war. The catastrophe’s origins offshore were physically near but morally distant. Imagining that anyone on the ground could have caused the disaster was too far-fetched to gain traction in public opinion. The blame game had no players.

Luckily, a Chicxulub 2.0 has not yet plunged from the sky to test the idea that, compared with disasters attributable to human action, authorless ones are more likely to motivate their victims to co-operate in overcoming them. And other things are never exactly equal. Had astronomers with telescopes existed in the Cretaceous period, they might have been faulted for noticing the asteroid too late.

In any case, late in the first quarter of the 21st century, the game of blame, name and seemingly frame goes on. It began in a swirl of rumors and innuendo on the internet. In January 2020, a Republican senator noted that China’s only top-security virology lab, located in Wuhan, handled “the world’s most deadly pathogens” including the coronavirus.1 In February, a right-wing radio host rendered that implicit guilt by association lethal by arguing that the virus “probably” got loose while being weaponized at “a ChiCom laboratory.”2 Chinese denials followed, and in March, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman surmised that a US Army
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contingent at the Military World Games in Wuhan in October might have “brought the epidemic” to China. In April, President Donald Trump claimed to have seen secret evidence that the virus had originated at the Wuhan lab, but gave no details. In May, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called that it “terminates relationship with the World Health Organization in wake of Covid-19 pandemic.” STAT, May 29, 2020, www.statnews.com/2020/05/29/trump-us-terminate-who-relationship/

The Communist Party of China has committed itself to doubling China’s 2010 GDP by 2020. The party will observe its hundredth anniversary in 2021. What will it celebrate? Not the 6.8 percent shrinkage of China’s economy in the first quarter of 2020, let alone a 1.3 percent growth rate for the year if that IMF-estimated worst-case scenario should occur. Will the party celebrate its expansionist “wolf warrior” diplomacy in Asia and the United States? Not if the pushback from other countries convinces Xi that he should have followed Deng Xiaoping’s advice and kept China’s profile lower.

Trump’s time horizon is also short. He is fixated on November 3, when he hopes to be re-elected for another four-year presidential term. What will motivate Americans to vote for him? Not the 14.7 percent rate of unemployment in the US in April 2020, the highest since the Great Depression, despite a decline to 13.3 percent in May as the economy began to reopen. Not the 105.540 dead from the virus by the end of May, almost 30 percent of global mortality and triple the toll in the next most impacted country. He will continue to dodge responsibility and blame China instead, and China will likely reply in kind.

Defensive opacity in Beijing, thickened by Sino-American rancor, may have made it impossible to know exactly what did and did not happen less than a year ago in a wildlife market in Wuhan. But that need not preclude or impede an effort to address responsibility and blame China instead, and China need not preclude or impede an effort to address the risk that more viral outbreaks could occur in the years and decades to come. The virus behind the COVID-19 pandemic marks the third iteration of a zoonotic coronavirus (CoV) so far in the 21st century, following SARS and MERS. Seventy-five percent of the diseases discovered in the last decade alone were zoonotic in origin, as are 61 percent of all human diseases. All of us should be able to agree on the urgent need to ensure a healthier future going forward.

Markets that sell both wild and domesticated animals, dead or alive and often in close proximity, can be found in many countries. A global campaign to stop animal-to-human viral transmission could begin with the goal of closing and banning wildlife markets, wherever they are. China has already taken steps in that direction, as has Vietnam. But such countries might be more inclined to follow up if they were made part of a larger co-operative effort. The makings of such an effort already exist in the form of “One Health,” a global initiative meant to focus the attention and resources of public and private sector actors on the health implications of the interactions of human beings with animals and the environment.

Chicxulub’s arrival could not have been prevented. But a concerted global effort now could reduce the future incidence of zoonotic outbreaks and stop them from blossoming into devastating epidemics and pandemics. Looking backward, to sort out which countries were damaged most and least by Covid-19 and which national responses succeeded or made things worse, will yield instructive lessons for policy. But a campaign looking forward to protecting the future of the world will gain more support and be more effective if it imagines viral threats that may arise in the years to come as external, impersonal and preventable — if only we can muster the good sense to unite in advance against them.

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