1. Southeast Asia comprises numerous countries that have distinct regime types, socio-cultural experiences and memories, and policy priorities. Which governments have had the most successful responses to the global pandemic and why? Which countries are struggling to respond? How reliable are the data coming out about virus-related figures (such as CSIS’ helpful Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker)?

These are all great questions, and will get us started in understanding the region’s response. Every government in the world has taken some missteps and positive steps in their handling of the Covid-19 crisis. It is too early, perhaps, to declare any sort of “success”, but there are clear indications of what has worked to control the spread of the virus in certain countries, while others have failed to exercise the right urgency in policymaking and public health messaging, and enforce rules that literally will save lives.

To me, it is a matter less of regime type, and more about sound decisions and choices, each country’s infrastructure and public health capacity. In addition, a big factor is how receptive the national leadership is in listening to and acting on advice from health experts. It is not about how rich or strong they are in traditional international relations terms, if you will.

In my view, the ones with the most effective responses were those that took quick steps early on in the first quarter of 2020, as early as February and March, to get their citizens to wear masks and wash hands, and generally be careful of this ‘new’ virus, even before we fully understood how dangerous it was, and how quickly it could spread. Southeast Asia, like other parts of Asia, suffered from the SARS crisis in 2002-4, and also various bouts of swine and bird flu, and so in some ways this ‘muscle memory’ of how to deal with a potentially deadly virus is constantly being flexed and used.

The regimes that struggled – both in and outside SE Asia - are ironically the more liberal and open ones, whose leadership took the view either that government could not impose on certain “liberties” of movement, action, and that stuck to a message that placed the ultimate responsibility on individual citizens to deal with their own health concerns. Such countries either did not impose quarantines or lockdowns, or froze their borders too late, even to visitors from known hotspots for Covid-19.

So for instance, Singapore closed its borders to all foreign visitors as early as end January 2020. Chinese visitors were barred from entry, and steps were taken to evacuate Singapore citizens from Wuhan, China. This was at a very high cost to Singapore; overnight, the country lost a significant amount of tourism revenue, which
has trickle down effects on a range of economic sectors. (Chinese visitors made up 18% of all visitors to Singapore in 2019.) Singapore then closed its borders to all short-term foreign visitors by the third week of March 2020, the day after its first two deaths from the virus.

Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand made similar steps to control the domestic movement of people and to bar foreign visitors. The two largest majority Muslim nation-states in Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Indonesia significantly restricted domestic travel, even though in the third week of May, one of the most important Muslim holidays – Hari Raya Idulfitri or Puasa, the end of Ramadan – which is marked by visiting and sharing meals with one’s family and friends, would occur.

Each country was prepared to make a national sacrifice, as it were, and call upon its populace to be disciplined about public health.

Populist leaders have failed to control the crisis. Leaders of democratic regimes have found it hard to impose limits on individual liberty. Leaders of autocratic regimes have had more success in locking down or shutting down entire sectors of their economies or countries, but I am waiting to see what human costs in terms of weakened mental health, poorer educational and other outcomes for the youth and children in these places, and gender inequality will result in one to five, and 10 to 20 years from now.]

Regarding data reliability on the crisis: I daresay the data emerging from the region as a whole is probably quite accurate, although for certain countries, especially the larger ones where in some rural areas cases might have gone undetected, and/or where there was initial denial of any presence of Covid-19, there is probably quite a bit of under-counting. For more developed countries like Singapore, which track each case down to the individual’s age, occupation, places visited, close contacts, et cetera, I would use the data with the highest confidence. Now, large aggregations of data from around the world are available from places like The Johns Hopkins university, which the Center for Strategic and International Studies cites in its Covid-19 tracker tool, and even Google has a pretty impressive collation of data. For instance, if you search google.com for “Covid statistics (name of country)”, it gives you the total number of cases, a provincial or state by state breakdown, if available, the death toll, et cetera.

But what is more useful would be to understand each set of data points or numbers by assessing contextually the individual country conditions and overlay the political, cultural, and societal factors affecting effectiveness at fighting this pandemic. That is my bias as a more qualitative researcher, but without knowing what else is going on politically and socio-economically, and even culturally, numbers can only say so much.

2. How has history and collective memory of the past – such as the SARS outbreak in 2002-3, military rule, and other significant events – influenced government and societal responses in Southeast and East Asia to COVID-19? How will the current pandemic serve as collective memory in the future?

I appreciate this question because it ties in so many different strands of research and works well with my actual area of research in recent years, which is collective memory in the case of WWII.
This pandemic and its aftermath will indeed be one of the more traumatic episodes across the region. Without going too much into the academic theories, collective memory and public trauma or grief can be positive and negative, and used positively or negatively by the national leadership in future. This crisis has brought home the importance of sound public policy, good governance and leadership at the national level. At the very least, it is putting all governments under the spotlight. For the less democratic regimes in Southeast Asia, it has revealed certain weaknesses that might not have been evident without the consequences of Covid-19. Societies across Southeast Asia vary greatly in terms of culture, but certain commonalities like putting society above self and a general deference to authority have influenced these countries’ responses.

I think in the case of Asia, and Southeast Asia in particular, the SARS crisis definitely allowed the nation-states that had the capacity to build up expertise and put in place cautionary and reactive measures. This can be seen in workplaces, hospitals and clinics, and other institutions that we see helping avert more drastic outcomes in this current pandemic. (I was still working in Singapore’s Ministry of Defence during the SARS outbreak, and as part of our work procedures all managers had to think about and implement plans to switch to 50-50 teams (that is, half the team at home and half the team carrying the full load of work if need be), together with preventive measures like how to prevent each half of a team from meeting up either in the office or outside of it). Singapore lost 33 lives (out of 238 cases) during the SARS crisis. For a small country that cannot afford to lose even one citizen’s life, we mourned the losses deeply. [That the current death toll in Singapore is just 26 (out of over 43,000 cases detected) speaks to how seriously the people and government have taken the crisis and how effective those preventive measures have been.]

3. How would you evaluate civil-military relations in government responses to the pandemic in Southeast Asia, and what are public reactions to these issues? Which countries lean more strongly in one direction versus the other? In Indonesia, for instance, army general Doni Monardo leads both the country’s coronavirus task force and its Disaster Management Agency.

My answer might surprise you, but the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia) is the best agency to deal with Indonesian situation given their singular reach across the archipelago. No other organization has the infrastructure at the provincial, regency, and village level in that country. It is not unusual even in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, China, and others for the military to support civilian leadership in times of crisis. There are some parallels to how the military was instrumental in the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, especially in Aceh, Indonesia, although that was a natural disaster of a different sort and more localized in impact. Any military worth its salt should be apt at handling logistics and in large countries with difficult conditions like Indonesia, should be the first resort for distributing emergency health and other supplies.

(Other examples: Mask distribution in Singapore – got national service soldiers to pack and send out masks per household across Singapore)

At this point, I would daresay there are no signs of military overreach. [Reading too much into the military side of things is too early for now – maybe this might disrupt politics later on, but too early to tell.]
4. How are economic, trade, and business concerns playing out in pandemic responses in Southeast Asia? Several countries – including Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia – are preparing to implement reopening plans this summer in part because of concerns about the impact of reductions in tourism and economic activity. How ready are Southeast Asian countries to reopen?

Certainly the economies will all suffer; Singapore for instance is projecting at least a negative 5-7% for GDP in 2020; they have frozen civil service bonuses (typically given at the half-year and end-year mark), and cut the pay of senior civil servants (whose salaries are pegged to econ performance of country). Even the most optimistic scenarios involve decline, there is no good news story in that sense. Indonesia and Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries are also predicting declines in annual GDP and regionally, trade and tourism are down, significantly.

Tourism is the most obvious sector that has taken a hit from Covid-19. Even so, we are seeing some early encouraging signs of Indonesia discussing ‘green lane’ type arrangements with Australia (their largest market, especially for Bali) and New Zealand tourists, since those two countries seem to be controlling the spread of the virus somewhat (cf. 2nd wave in Australia).

Singapore and Malaysia have deep seated longstanding ties where day workers, families, and students used to commute daily from Malaysia to Singapore via bus or car, and both countries are also trying to figure out how to restart these arrangements without jeopardizing public health unnecessarily. Farther afield, Singapore is discussing with China how to have a “green lane” arrangement or expedited travel for business travelers and officials.

Basically, the region cannot wait much longer to kickstart trade, exchanges, people-to-people and familial visits. One policy decision that all countries have to make is whether to impose quarantine on incoming visitors from Europe and the USA, who tend to be the larger spenders next to the Chinese and Japanese making up the bulk of tourists to certain regions. The less developed “CLMV” (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam) countries are hurting disproportionally due to a severe reliance on and the drop in China visitors, but the numbers are showing that these four countries were also the least affected in terms of Covid-19 cases, so maybe Chinese visitors will start traveling there sooner than to the rest of ASEAN.

Those with a domestic population that is large enough to kickstart local tourism will no doubt recover slightly first, but there is no way domestic travel can replace or fill completely the void left by foreign tourist numbers and spending. Of course, the flip side and great risk is what might happen once borders are re-opened. Even as countries lift their restrictive stay-at-home orders, case numbers are slowly creeping up again.

5. How are pressing social issues – in particular gender and race issues – in Southeast and East Asia being impacted by the pandemic, and vice versa? How would you evaluate government and society leadership in pandemic responses with regards to gender and racial identification of leaders?

Gender – across the world disproportionate impact on girls and women.
There have been a couple of think pieces on whether the gender of national leadership has affected countries’ responses. I would argue it is less about gender and more about humility and speed / agility of decision-making, which is genderless or independent of a leader’s gender. It is true that New Zealand’s Jacinda Ardern, Germany’s Angela Merkel, and Taiwan’s Tsai Ing-Wen have all admirably handled their respective countries’ responses to Covid-19, while certain male leaders in various continents whom I shall not name have blustered and bungled their way through the initial and middle phase of the pandemic, and are still playing catch-up, but I don’t think gender in and of itself is the real thing doing the work here.

Workplace / home as office - the ‘second shift’ for women has become in some cases their only shift or third shift, if a person is a single parent with two jobs. It is clear that mothers worldwide, even in countries with more gender equality, are more likely to be responsible and undertake duties for their children’s education and online learning compared to the fathers, if the fathers are still living in the same household. The gender differences in how the crisis has impacted men and women of all economic strata is indeed stark, and not a little depressing.

In addition, serious mental health and other challenges await. We are only just finding out how many more domestic abuse cases, child abuse cases, have occurred during enforced lockdowns or shelter-in-place orders. To be clear, I am not saying that victims of such abuse are only women and girls, or that men and boys cannot also be victims of abuse. It is that the statistics show a disproportionate impact on girls and women. One key area of concern is education. Girls were already less likely to school in poorer countries (even before Covid-19 struck), this will set girls from all lower-income households back a generation or two, sadly.

In SE Asia, race a less salient issue at least for now, no clear picture or data. People do not seem to be concerned about this, at least not the way it is unfolding in the US with the recent George Floyd tragedy and other racial disparities, especially the disproportionate Black, Latinx and Asian suffering in terms of Covid-19 cases plus unemployment cf. the general white population across all US states.

6. How are foreign policy priorities and globalization influencing pandemic responses in Southeast and East Asia? How do you evaluate government responses to the pandemic by regime type, and what is the recipe for a successful response?

(This overlaps with first couple of questions.) Less regime type (authoritarian, autocratic, democratic, mixed) than strength of infrastructure, ability to adapt and pivot in crises, and true whole-of-government action.

I would like to think maybe the time has come for international relations theorists to seriously come up with a proper theory on the power of small and medium powers or states to handle crises like pandemics. In IR as a field, there is a reification of concepts like hegemony and the status of superpowers or poles. In this crisis, small and medium states have displayed an immense capacity for tenacity, resilience, and the ability to pivot quickly to handle the repercussions of Covid-19, in a way that larger states cannot match. This is of course a generalization, but there might be something there for a more substantial theory. This will come in time, as we see more of the repercussions play out in the next year or more.
[Overlap with answer on gender… As said before, New Zealand, Germany, Taiwan are all success stories, which all happen to be led by female leaders. *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* have both done features on these leaders earlier on in the crisis to try to determine how and why these countries “got it right” when so many others did not. Ardern for her truth speaking, humility, quickness of action and decision; Merkel for not shirking the information and responsibility; Tsai for implementing lessons learned from SARS and being willing to push society to enforce discipline and ‘sacrifice’ so that lives are not lost. Many of the other major world powers lacked such focus and singlemindedness in handling their respective domestic situations until it was too late.]

- Humility and willingness to kill sacred cos and nimbleness in response more than regime type, which is an artificial or straw man argument – combinations of all types of regimes have been successful e.g. Vietnam (socialist), Singapore (semi-democratic / more socialist than a true democracy), S Korea (half success), Japan (cultural, democratic), Taiwan

- More cultural also, plus collective memory from SARS crisis which disproportionately affected Asia – but put in place the infrastructure and institutional memory that the West, both Europe and N America – lacks sorely now in pandemic. Community over self vs ‘independence’ or ‘individual liberty’. Certainly in NE Asia success underpinned e.g. by mask wearing and washing hands

7. Which resources might you suggest consulting in researching and understanding pandemic politics in Southeast Asia?

Google etc all have covid stats aggregators, but I do not know the source they get primary info from – **so use with caution or check national news to corroborate numbers**

National news sites, including ex-SE Asia like SCMP

Country-specific tracker with graphics and easy to understand numbers

*Indonesia* – English readers Jakarta Post, Bahasa readers detik.co.id, republika.com, etc

*Malaysia* – mainstream English paper, Bahasa papers, for a different slant no doubt Chinese papers

*Thailand* – Bangkok Post, The Nation; Thai vernacular for those who read


News magazines / Thinktanks – CSIS covid tracker, and bigger publications like *The Economist, National Geographic, The Atlantic* – all with slightly less Asia-centric focus, but good to browse