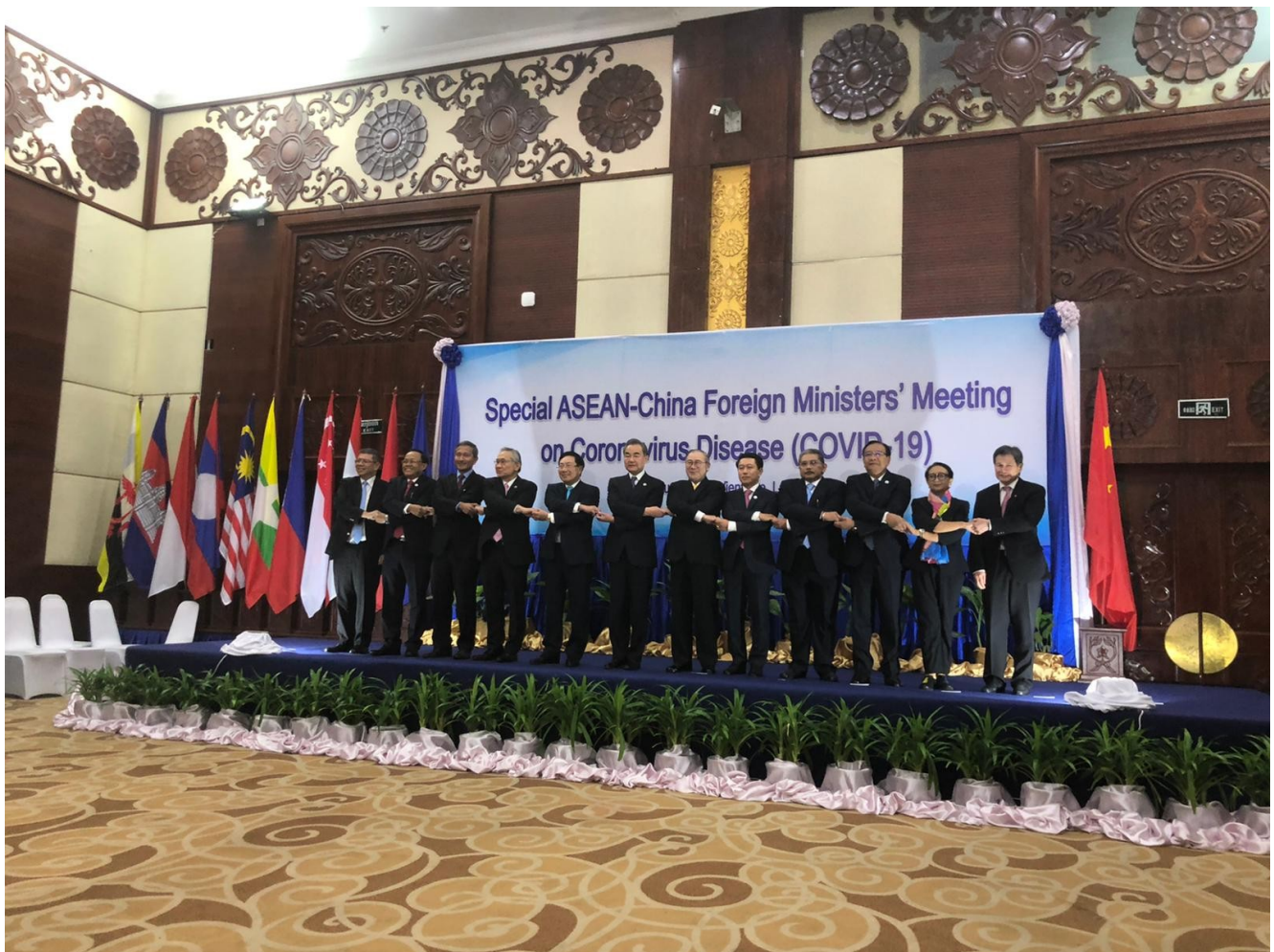


China, Asean foreign ministers begin emergency meeting on coronavirus in Vientiane

- The event is the first major multilateral meeting seeking a coordinated effort to combat the public health crisis
- A day before, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi met his Philippine and Singapore counterparts and thanked them for supporting China 'in difficult times'



The foreign ministers of China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean [1]) on Thursday began a special meeting in Vientiane, Laos, to discuss measures adopted by Beijing to contain the spread of the coronavirus [2]

As leaders joined hands for a photo at the start of the event, the crowd cheered

and called out: “Stay strong Wuhan, stay strong China, stay strong Asean.” A video showing comments by Asean leaders on the outbreak, including from Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Thai leader Prayuth Chan-ocha, was also screened.

The emergency meeting is the first major multilateral event seeking to coordinate a public health crisis that experts say could drag on for months. It is co-chaired by China’s Wang Yi and Philippine [3] foreign secretary Teodoro Locsin Jnr, who is also the country coordinator of Asean-China Dialogue Relations.



The emergency meeting is co-chaired by Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jnr and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Photo: Xinhua

In an opening speech, Locsin said apart from the health impacts of the Covid-19 disease, the outbreak has been “massively detrimental” to trade, travel, and the global economy.

While acknowledging China’s handling of the virus was “unprecedented” and “quick”, the Philippine minister stressed the need for collective efforts, saying that states hoped to work toward a “consolidated response”.

“Enemies such as the Covid-19 demand action, compassion, and cooperation,” Locsin said. “Strengthening cooperation can help pave the way to subduing this

enemy.”

Asean leaders in a statement on February 15 expressed “serious concerns over the outbreak”. They said it “poses severe challenges to the well-being of the peoples and the development of our respective countries and the region and the world”.

At least 75,000 people have tested positive for the Covid-19 disease, and more than 2,100 have died, mostly in mainland China [5].

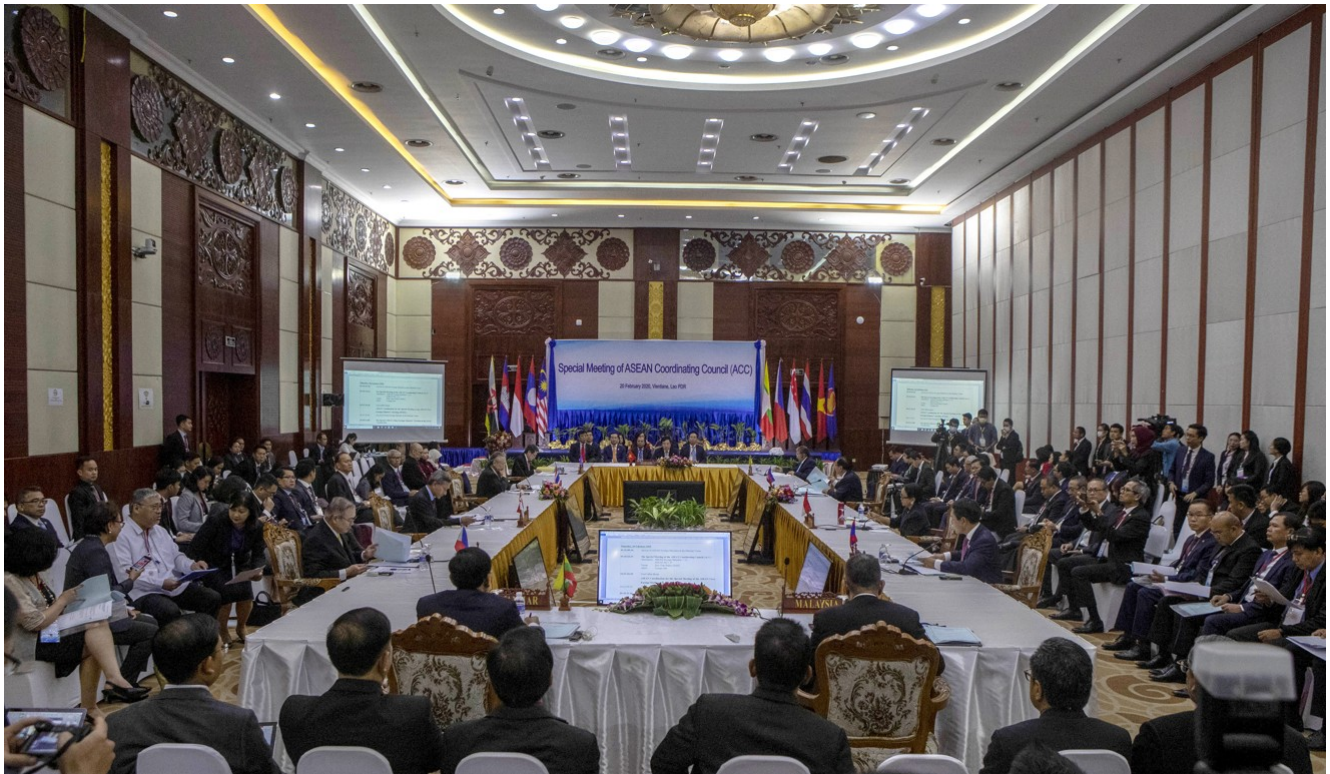
The latest Chinese health guidelines say aerosol transmission is possible in certain conditions but the main cause of spread remains close contact.

Special ASEAN-China Foreign Minister’s Meeting on #COVID19 [6] to be held tomorrow in Vientiane, LAO PDR. My colleagues made a video as appreciation to AMS governments and people who show deep sympathy, solidarity and heartfelt support to China.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi said the only goal that China and Asean member states had was to collaboratively fight the challenges brought on by the outbreak.

Wang said China and Asean nations were “connected by rivers and mountains” and shared the same fate, and that they had a tradition of watching out for and supporting one another.

“This epidemic knows no borders. The virus is our common enemy,” said Wang. “At this moment, we should work together and through closer and active cooperation, effectively prevent the spread of the epidemic and protect our people’s lives.”



Delegates and Asean foreign ministers gather in Vientiane, Laos, on February 20, 2020. Photo: AP

Wang arrived in Vientiane on Wednesday evening and was seen leaving the hotel with a delegation for Lao Plaza Hotel, where he met his Asean counterparts for a welcome dinner hosted by Laotian foreign minister Saleumxay Kommasith.

He also held bilateral meetings with Locsin and Singapore foreign minister Vivian Balakrishnan, where he thanked both the Philippines and Singapore for their support. According to state news agency Xinhua, Wang said Singapore's efforts underscored their long-standing tradition of "helping each other in difficult times".

In a speech at the dinner event, Wang said China was confident in winning the fight against the coronavirus, noting that the number of recovered patients was rising, Xinhua said.

Wang thanked Asean members for offering support to China during the outbreak. "We hardly feel the winter chill and spring is approaching," he said.

Asean Secretary-General Lim Jock Hoi on Wednesday said the regional group, together with Japan and South Korea, was willing to work with China to

strengthen cooperation on health security.

FM Don met with H.E. Mr. Wang Yi, State Councillor and FM of #China [12] before #MLC [13] Meeting and Special #ASEAN [14] -China Meeting on #Coronavirus2019 [15] in Lao PDR. China showed gratitude to Thailand's support and sympathy and discussed sustainable solutions for this problem. (19 Feb 20) pic.twitter.com/2tJ10fARz2 [16]

– กระทรวงการต่างประเทศ | MFA of Thailand (@MFAThail) February 19, 2020 [17]

The epidemic [18] has disrupted trade and supply chains and slowed regional tourism, forcing countries to downgrade their growth forecasts for the year and plan stimulus measures to help businesses stay afloat.

The emergency meeting is taking place at the Don Chan Palace Hotel, before a previously scheduled afternoon session for Wang and his counterparts from the five countries in the Lancang Mekong Cooperation initiative – a Beijing-backed development drive for the Mekong River.

Asean foreign ministers gathered earlier in the morning before meeting Wang, with the session expected to last for 90 minutes before a press conference. A temperature screening checkpoint was set up at the entrance of the Don Chan Palace Hotel, with sanitizers and disinfectant wipes also on hand.

In recent days, the Chinese government has fended off criticism it had concealed information and was slow to react to the virus outbreak, which began in the central province of Hubei.

Beijing has also criticized moves by several nations to ramp up measures to contain the

outbreak [20], including restricting entry to travelers arriving from China, with Wang describing these actions as triggering “unnecessary panic”.

As cases of the virus rose in Southeast Asia [21], nations ramped up measures to contain its spread, including restricting entry to travelers arriving from China, a move that Wang criticized as an overreaction “that triggered unnecessary panic”. Singapore [22], for example, was one of the first countries to impose a ban on all foreigners who have recently traveled to mainland China, with Indonesia [23] and the Philippines [24] following suit.

Malaysia has banned travelers from the Hubei Province, the epicenter of the virus

outbreak, and this week said it would temporarily block international cruise ships [26] that have departed or transited from any ports in China.

Vietnam [27] has closed its land border with China. Thailand [28] has not placed any travel restrictions on mainland Chinese tourists [29], a move that has sparked internal debates within its Cabinet.



Mask-clad tourists visit the Grand Palace in Bangkok on February 1, 2020. Photo: EPA-EFE

A similar meeting between Asean [30] foreign ministers and China was held in April 2003 in the wake of the Severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) outbreak.

During that meeting, leaders recognized the need for collective regional efforts to tackle the virus and called for the exchange of information and sharing of experience to control and prevent the spread of Sars, as well as for the closer cooperation among countries' immigration and customs departments.

China had also pledged a 10 million yuan (US\$1.4 million) sum to support China-Asean [31] bilateral programs to prevent and eradicate the coronavirus [32].

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[4]

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