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## **Myanmar: Time for New Regional Diplomacy**

*By Alistair D. B. Cook*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*As the confrontation between the protestors and the military in Myanmar continues to deteriorate, now more than ever is the time for regional diplomacy. Countries in the region can be the bridge needed to the people in Myanmar and the wider international community.*

### **COMMENTARY**

THE DETENTION and arrest of elected politicians, officials, community leaders along with a full military takeover of government in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 has demonstrated the fragility of the supposed transition to democracy. Responses from the international community have so far generated toothless statements of concern with some pursuing sanctions.

Only New Zealand has suspended diplomatic relations. The international community needs to reflect on its limited actions to date and recognise the changed dynamics in Myanmar, all within the context of a fractured multilateral world.

### **Regional Focus**

Since the military takeover, countries around the world have delivered a series of statements ranging from condemnation to comments about these developments being an internal affair. There is nothing new here about which countries fell on what side of that debate.

One of the first statements was delivered on 1 February by Brunei, the ASEAN Chair for 2021, referencing the ASEAN Charter, the need for political stability and the pursuit of dialogue. Within ASEAN, individual statements calling for a return to normalcy came

from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in contrast to the notable positions of Cambodia, Philippines and Thailand asserting it as a matter of Myanmar's internal affairs.

While the ASEAN Charter is legally-binding, enforcement needs the collective support of the 10 member states. Within the ASEAN Charter there are provisions for the activation of the good offices of the Secretary-General to engage member states such as that of Surin Pitsuwan in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

We have also witnessed shuttle diplomacy of regional political figures in past political crises. While ASEAN member states have the process to facilitate action, the diversity of opinion within the regional grouping means a more bespoke approach is required.

### **International Interests**

As many observers have noted, the military removal of the elected government in Myanmar has implications beyond ASEAN. China is deemed a key supporter of Myanmar and Beijing has enjoyed a relatively productive and stable relationship with the National League for Democracy (NLD) government under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Russia has emerged as a key security partner over the past decade for major arms imports and military training to the Myanmar military as reported in the media. The reliance on Moscow's support and engagement is perceived as a calculated move by the Myanmar military to counter rising dependence on China as a result of deteriorating relations with the United States and other international players.

The US under the new Biden administration has announced sanctions against Myanmar's military leaders, family members and their business interests. These targeted sanctions reflect a calibrated response as it weighs US options and interests regarding its relations and leadership in the wider Indo-Pacific region. The US may well look to regional partners and allies to provide a more collective, or at least coordinated, response.

Japan has invested significantly in Myanmar, and more so under the partially civilian government led by the NLD. Tokyo wants peace and stability in the country. The Japanese government has displayed a keen interest in mediation in Myanmar in previous crises.

Australia has recently signed a large aid package and increased its engagement with ASEAN. Canberra will be keen to activate its role as a regional player to support a peaceful resolution of the political turmoil and transition to democracy in Myanmar.

Immediate neighbour India has issued a broad statement supporting the democratic transition in Myanmar. New Delhi has been cautiously watching developments in Myanmar and avoiding saying more since the two countries' military forces are delicately negotiating more security along their common borders.

### **Regional Diplomacy: ASEAN+ Model for Reconciliation?**

Australia, China, India, Japan, Russia and the US are all important partners for Southeast Asian economic development and regional security. While each of them has diverging interests, it is in their common interest to support the peaceful resolution of the political turmoil in Myanmar.

With Japan and Australia as likely partners, efforts to coordinate an effective response may lie in Jakarta. Indonesia is the largest country in ASEAN, has evolved from its own authoritarian past, and is an essential part of the envisioned ASEAN Community. The Indonesian experience was studiously examined by the Myanmar military leaders in their own democratisation process.

With its substantial bilateral relationship with Australia and successful partnership with Japan, the Indonesians can activate a diplomatic coalition with ASEAN characteristics to pave the way for dialogue, peaceful resolution and avoid more bloodshed. It behooves ASEAN member states as well as other regional countries to encourage such an initiative for reconciliation and unity.

### **Reimagined Myanmar?**

A practical coalition of willing ASEAN member states and regional partners presents a pathway to support the people in Myanmar and promote greater stability across the region. Will it be enough to reconcile the opposing forces and continue the transition to democracy in Myanmar? The answer lies in what the alternative is.

The fact is an entire generation of young people in Myanmar has come of age since the 2008 constitution. They are internet-savvy and energetic. Their quenchless desire for change and a viable future cannot be dismissed any longer. At the international level, the COVID-19 pandemic is still raging and the world order is under stress from a multitude of structural issues and geopolitical dilemmas.

The challenges faced by Myanmar and ASEAN cannot be attended to in a half-hearted way with worn-out ideas and pessimism. It is time for substantive and creative regional diplomacy if the region is to move from a subdued interval to a sustainable future that delivers people-centered peace and security.

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