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ASEAN's Special Summit: Can It Resolve the Myanmar Crisis?

By Joel Ng

SYNOPSIS

The ASEAN special summit outlined a set of initial, necessary conditions to the resolution of the Myanmar crisis, but it is only the start of a long and difficult process.

COMMENTARY

THE ASEAN special summit in Jakarta on 24 April 2021 has concluded with a five-point consensus on the Myanmar crisis. It called for cessation of violence, commencement of political dialogue, a constructive role for ASEAN including an opening for an ASEAN delegation, and the allowance of humanitarian assistance.

At first glance, analysis of the Chair's statement showed signs of division – for instance, a lack of consensus on the release of political prisoners, a necessary precondition for dialogue to begin. Activists criticised that the statement did not go far enough, appearing to show that the summit achieved little. Yet if politics is, to quote the German statesman Otto von Bismarck, about the 'art of the possible', then it is necessary to set the outcome against a context of impossibilities, dead ends or worse, into which ASEAN did not throw itself.

Difficulties with Intervention

Disappointment with the summit may be seen in the context of calls for external intervention in Myanmar. This desire to remove the Tatmadaw should be tempered by the reality that this would be costly, risky, and no guarantee of a solution. Nevertheless, criticisms have continued about the failure to take a harder line against the junta, either through the UN or ASEAN, with neither path opening after the summit.

The UN Security Council is deadlocked, where China and Russia would likely block

moves by Western powers. While some therefore conclude that the UN system is broken, one should think about the scenario where a liberal intervention proceeded without other states' consent:

Myanmar could well become the first proxy battleground in a new front of an emerging "Cold War 2.0", with the conflict sharpening and possibly accelerating US-China confrontation. Mainland Southeast Asian states are not unreasonable to baulk at suggestions in this direction, given their experiences during the Cold War.

At the regional level, ASEAN's options are tempered by the political diversity of its membership and its own historical experiences. When Western powers intervened in post-colonial times, they never did so purely for the sake of democratic values, but always when there was a convergence of material interests to do so, with a barely-concealed desire to secure those interests in-country for themselves. Iraq, Libya, Syria, and others provide a litany of examples of long, costly, and complex crises, with the West's own role itself intrinsically linked to the continuation of those conflicts.

In each case, domestic divisions interwove with foreign interests to amplify the conflicts. Roll back further in time and one finds the price of intervention was to have to accept brutal military leaders for whom loyalty to their patron was the primary factor for their grip on power. Post-colonial states in Southeast Asia rightfully reject this option.

One thing ASEAN has done well is ensure that cultural and ideological diversity among its members did not lead to conflict. Breaking that formula in order to "fix" Myanmar risks opening Pandora's Box for ASEAN member states, and this dismal conclusion unites them notwithstanding sometimes diametrically opposed political systems.

Summit's High Points

Within these constraints, therefore, ASEAN has little room for manoeuvre. Yet it managed to accomplish several key things at the summit.

First, Tatmadaw Senior General Min Aung Hlaing attended, which was uncertain even days before the summit. He chose to talk to ASEAN and virtually no one else, providing a necessary opening from which a solution must be found. Under the gaze of ASEAN leaders, he could not decline ASEAN's offer, something which he would have de facto accomplished by simply failing to show up.

Second, he met UN Special Envoy on Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit. While what transpired has been kept under wraps, the mere fact of meeting would have been impossible without his arrival in Jakarta.

Third, on ASEAN's part, it presented one of the most public and interventionist outcome statements the regional grouping has ever delivered to another member state. This represented a big step beyond ASEAN's usual practices and demonstrated their view of its potential impact on regional security and the importance they have placed on resolution to the crisis.

Next Steps

While critics lambasted the lack of details, this is overstated. There are few details because ASEAN is in uncharted waters, never having done such action before – itself a sign of how far ASEAN went to secure this outcome. ASEAN does not commit to things it does not believe it can do. Implementation details will be hammered out in ASEAN capitals and the ASEAN Secretariat soon. However, this is just the start of a long process.

While the outcome was a big step for ASEAN, the path out of crisis for Myanmar will be a much longer journey. ASEAN has led the figurative horse to water, but it cannot make it drink. During Myanmar's short-lived democracy, the National League for Democracy (NLD), failed to resolve federal questions about the country and the Tatmadaw did not learn the soft skills it needed to become a guardian of the country's future.

The Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw has taken first steps to build a more inclusive framework and draw in allies through the new National Unity Government (NUG).

While the NUG has the soft power, it is the Tatmadaw with the hard power. Both are necessary elements for governance in Myanmar, and only when the parties are willing to begin dialogue will a sustainable solution to the Myanmar crisis become possible.

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