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## **ASEAN: DIALOGUE AND DIPLOMACY**

*By Dr Marty Natalegawa*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Informal or quiet diplomacy to prevent, manage or resolve disputes within and between its member states has been an invaluable piece in the diplomatic toolbox of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Its efficacy may yet be tested as ASEAN seeks to restore civilian rule in Myanmar.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Whether to prevent or to manage the potentials for conflicts, or to contain their ramifications once conflicts erupt, and to eventually resolve the conflicts, leaders of Southeast Asian nations have been adroit in pursuing dialogue and diplomacy. As a result, ASEAN has ensured that the path to peaceful political solutions continue to remain open, even in the most difficult and egregious of circumstances. The past is certainly not without examples.

#### **Internal Conflicts**

The Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM) process launched at a meeting of all the involved parties in Bogor, Indonesia, in 1988 and the associated “cocktail party” framework that made possible the initiation of contacts between the warring Cambodian factions and their external backers paved the way for the eventual comprehensive Cambodia Peace Agreements signed in Paris in 1991.

While the JIM process had public and formal forms, it was infused with well calibrated and nuanced approaches, both in terms of substance as well as procedure, that succeeded in avoiding multiple diplomatic tripwires, including the all-too-familiar internal-external issues debate, as well as regional-global nexuses, that could have stopped the talks before they could even begin.

The management of the complex situation in the southern Philippines and negotiations between the Government of the Philippines and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) benefitted from the well calibrated and nuanced facilitation efforts by neighbouring countries, notably Indonesia and Malaysia.

Similarly, the ending of the decades-old conflict in Indonesia's Aceh province, benefitted from – following intensive informal contact by and requests from the Government of Indonesia – the participation of countries of the region in observing the implementation of the agreement between the Indonesian government and the secessionist group.

### **Myanmar Crisis**

Significant in the current context, another example of the region's capacity to effectively pursue well calibrated diplomatic efforts on internal challenges being faced by a country of the region has been ASEAN's past engagement on Myanmar.

It is important to recall that some of the most progressive and transformative moments in Myanmar's transition to democracy prior to 2015 – now sadly gone off track – were accompanied by low-key, often informal but intensive cajoling, prodding, and encouragement to Myanmar from some of its neighbours. Indonesia, sharing experiences from its own travails and gains as it went through its reform process post-1998, had pressed Myanmar relentlessly to remain on the path of democratic reform.

Southeast Asian countries carried out frank and robust discussions on the situation in Myanmar and were forthright in expressing their expectations, often through informal ASEAN foreign ministers' meetings. Indonesia, including as chair of ASEAN in 2011 when it secured a direct talk with Aung Sang Suu Kyi, worked purposefully behind the scenes to press for progress on democratic reform in Myanmar. Notably, all these were done without any compromise to ASEAN principles and unity.

### **State-to-State Crisis**

Beyond internal conflict situations, informal or quiet diplomacy was often the preferred mode in managing difficult bilateral issues between ASEAN member states.

Southeast Asia abounds with examples of effective management of complex bilateral dynamics through inter-personal efforts at the highest levels. These were often conducted in informal settings, conducive to frank and candid deliberations and, not least, in promoting a sense of camaraderie and trust needed to manage complex issues.

At critical moments years past, Indonesia's relations with Singapore and Malaysia, for instance, had certainly benefited from such an approach. Hence, significant efforts were made to nurture ties at various levels of decision and policy makers.

There was also a case of third-party facilitation efforts in which an ASEAN member state mediated in a dispute between two fellow members. This was the management

and avoidance of armed conflict between Thailand and Cambodia in 2011 over their border dispute.

Although the management of the issue by ASEAN, then under Indonesia's chairmanship, was quite public and formal – it included shuttle diplomacy to Phnom Penh and Bangkok on 7-8 February 2011, within days of armed incidents; the UN Security Council meeting on 14 February 2011 which endorsed ASEAN's efforts; and the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting on 22 February 2011 – most of the heavy-lifting was done quietly and informally by Indonesia as it mediated between the two disputing parties. Away from the glare of public attention, personal trust and confidence among the principals concerned grew and found traction, ideas were tested informally, and the emerging consensus owned by Indonesia as facilitator was endorsed collectively by ASEAN member states.

The South China Sea workshop series was launched by Indonesia in the late 1980s to transform the potentials for conflict in the South China Sea to that of cooperation. This was at a time when few in the region and beyond regarded the issue to be of much significance. The workshops paved the way for ASEAN and China to manage the potentials for conflict in the South China Sea more formally as evidenced by the 1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea and the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC). The initial adoption of the informal track 1.5 approach was indispensable in fostering the habit of dialogue, hitherto absent, among the parties concerned.

### **Wider Diplomatic Engagement**

The benefits of using informal or quiet diplomacy in managing competitive dynamics between extra-regional powers were manifested when ASEAN-led processes, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), provided the avenues, often informal and low key, for diplomatic contacts between parties in disputes and for their intent to be discerned.

This has certainly been the case as far as the complex dynamics of the Korean peninsula are concerned. On occasions, Indonesia, both as ARF chair or as ARF participant, sought to create a conducive and friendly setting, during a pre-dinner reception for instance, for the contending parties to interact amicably, thereby opening the way for the resumption of formal dialogue. This was the case, for instance, at the 2011 ARF in Bali which reopened dialogue between North Korea and South Korea, and between North Korea and the US, which was hitherto frozen.

Likewise, the East Asia Summit (EAS) – with membership which includes key countries of the Indo-Pacific, long before the latter term came into vogue – was intended to provide the wherewithal for leaders of the region to directly interact and deliberate on strategic issues before them. The EAS is now an important forum for Indo-Pacific leaders' strategic dialogue and interactions.

### **Next Move on Myanmar**

Today, the situation in Myanmar poses severe tests for ASEAN's diplomatic capacity. Having started with much promise – as in the adoption of the Five-Point Consensus,

and the commendable principled decision of inviting only non-political figures from Myanmar to ASEAN summits and foreign ministers' meetings – the momentum to break the diplomatic impasse and to facilitate a solution to the crisis needs to be stepped up. Whether successive ASEAN chairs wish to or not, the situation in Myanmar cannot be ignored and demands priority attention.

More than a litmus test of ASEAN's credibility, any perceived lack of ASEAN's response to the situation in Myanmar risks undermining the very foundations of the ASEAN Community. Thus, ASEAN must leverage on its decades-old experience in conflict resolution, including the use of sustained and robust diplomatic efforts, and innovative and principled approaches, to urgently realise the Five-Point Consensus, and to initiate constructive steps to restore civilian rule in Myanmar. The full gamut of diplomatic tools – formal and informal, public and low-key – must be deployed. Pressure on the junta must be sustained, and indeed, raised.

The choice confronting ASEAN is clear: deliver on the promise of an ASEAN Community and emerge stronger, or wither into irrelevance as Myanmar's democratic reform is allowed to be reversed. Can the tested way of ASEAN informal or quiet diplomacy deliver its magic again?

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*Dr Marty Natalegawa is a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He was the Foreign Minister of Indonesia (2009-14), and author of "Does ASEAN Matter?: A View from Within" (ISEAS, 2018).*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: [rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg) | W: [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)