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Can the ASEAN Leaders Meeting Address the Crisis in Myanmar?

Despite the many political obstacles, an ASEAN-led option seems like the best of the bad options available.

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The ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, which will host tomorrow's special meeting on Myanmar.

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The ASEAN leaders meeting to address the Myanmar crisis is [scheduled for April 24](#). Even though Brunei is the current ASEAN Chair and has issued the invitations, the Summit will take place at the ASEAN Secretariat building in Jakarta. Given the gravity of the crisis unfolding in Myanmar, observers need to hold the meeting to a higher bar than usual.

Thus far, more than 700 civilians have been killed and more than 4,000 detained by the security forces in Myanmar. As the pandemic rages on while the economy remains effectively shut down, the situation is dire. Some are suggesting the country is heading for full-blown state collapse, that it is fast becoming a “[Southeast Asian Syria](#)” or “[Asia’s next failed state](#).”

What happens in Myanmar does not stay in Myanmar. The region might witness multiple regional crises at once, from refugee flows to increased drug production. Before the coup, Myanmar was already the [fifth-largest source of refugees](#) globally, with over a million listed by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. Last year, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime warned about the [surge in the production and flow of methamphetamine](#) in and from Myanmar to the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic, virtually unaddressed since the coup, and the devastating economic effect will significantly impact the region. The geopolitics of external powers like China, Thailand, Russia, India, and the United States, each of which supports different stakeholders in the country, from the Tatmadaw and the ethnic armed organizations to the newly created National Unity Government, is another potential match in the tinderbox.

For the time being, an ASEAN-led option seems like the best of the bad options available. A United Nations-led intervention under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) mechanism is unlikely to be forthcoming for practical and political reasons. Waiting for the “[conflict to ripen](#)” over time, meanwhile, is irresponsible with the death toll mounting daily. But with the world watching closely, the summit must deliver serious steps, even if preliminary, in dealing with the crisis.

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For one thing, since coup-leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing himself is [reported to be coming](#), the meeting could be seen as lending legitimacy to his regime. With political legitimacy something that can only be determined by the people of Myanmar – not ASEAN governments – the first priority of the meeting must be an end to the violence. Inviting the general is therefore a recognition of the reality that the military is the party engaging in violence and must be called to stop.

If this seems like a tough pill to swallow, then the meeting must secure at least two commitments: an ASEAN-led mechanism to address the crisis and the adoption of a framework to end the violence and bring Myanmar back onto the path to peace and democracy.

A commitment to an ASEAN-led mechanism will show that the group can still help one of its own without an intrusive political agenda or the involvement of external parties. Whether and how such a mechanism can address both the humanitarian crisis and the political impasse will determine whether the stakeholders in Myanmar find the ASEAN option acceptable.

The summit could offer a formula that includes both the delivery of humanitarian assistance and a commitment to support and facilitate “Myanmar-owned and Myanmar-led” dialogues among the conflicting parties. But the delivery of humanitarian aid – from medical and COVID-19 relief to basic necessities – should be conditional on implementing a “humanitarian pause” that ends the violent repression against civilians and restores the delivery of public goods.

ASEAN could also mobilize resources, from its own members and dialogue partners, to observe the pause and deliver the necessary aid. The ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Center) could be one of the primary instruments in this regard.

The humanitarian pause and assistance could then hopefully create the necessary “space” for ASEAN to facilitate and support the “Myanmar-owned and Myanmar-led” dialogues. Who participates to discuss what agenda should be determined by all the stakeholders in Myanmar; ASEAN can only facilitate the meeting processes, not determine their content.

The summit should at least aim to get a commitment on these principles and framework. If the meeting could go

one step further and provide a mandate for a humanitarian taskforce, all the better. But achieving these ideal outcomes will be extremely difficult.

For one thing, there may not be enough time for ASEAN member states and all Myanmar stakeholders to work out a framework deal before the summit. The process of getting all nine ASEAN member states to first agree to a formula to be negotiated with all Myanmar stakeholders is fraught with bureaucratic and political hurdles. Not all members have equal interest and urgency in addressing the crisis, nor do they all agree on the mechanisms with which to do so.

For another, getting the stakeholders in Myanmar to then agree and commit to an ASEAN-led framework will be another herculean task given their hardening asymmetrical positions. Finally, bringing external parties with significant leverage – China, India, Russia, Japan, and the U.S. – to the fold may be necessary to get the parties in Myanmar to commit to an ASEAN-led framework, something that would require deft diplomacy due to ASEAN's limited leverage over these external parties.

Given all these diplomatic challenges, the summit could go one way or the other. If it successfully secures a commitment to an ASEAN-led framework, then the next step is to figure out how to implement it. This will include creating the authority and mandate necessary to organize a taskforce, who sits on it, and how to mobilize the funding and other resources. This might take some time, but at least there would be something to build from.

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If the summit fails to deliver, then the international community might still salvage the basic framework. In other words, we need to figure out how to deliver the same set of outcomes – ending the violence, delivering aid, and starting dialogues – through non-ASEAN means. The options range from building a Southeast Asian coalition of the willing to a collaboration between key Southeast Asian states with other regional powers and the U.N.

Either way, the [stakes are high](#), and the special summit is ASEAN's best shot at proving its central role in regional security and stability. If ASEAN cannot collectively agree

to deliver an ASEAN-led mechanism to Myanmar, member states and regional powers should consider other options to address the current and future strategic challenges arising from Myanmar's ongoing political crisis.

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