

ARGUMENT

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ASEAN's Future Will Be Decided in Myanmar

The prospect of an open-ended mission to restore democracy in Myanmar is making the Southeast Asian bloc's leaders uneasy.

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Can the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) thrive amid worsening regional flash points, from the South China Sea to the crisis in Myanmar? Set up in 1967 to promote regional stability and economic growth, ASEAN has never coalesced into a powerful, integrated community like the European Union, nor does it seek to become one. But the bloc has nonetheless been useful: It has largely kept the peace in the region, mainly through slow-burning dialogues and confidence building among its members, which, in turn, has allowed Southeast Asian countries to focus on domestic stability and economic development.

Now, the group is facing severe external and internal challenges. China's growing power, its aggressive behavior in the South China Sea, and its brewing strategic competition with the United States are perhaps ASEAN's greatest external challenges. Within the bloc, however, the unfolding crisis in Myanmar since the February coup may be its biggest challenge yet. Although ASEAN still has time to manage great-power politics, it urgently needs to

deal with the Myanmar crisis, which could engulf the region and determine the bloc's strategic future.

After expanding its membership to include Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar in the 1980s and 1990s, the bloc adopted the ASEAN Charter in 2007. Theoretically, the charter set up ASEAN as an institutionalized, multilateral group and gave it a framework for concerted action, turning what was only a loose intergovernmental forum into a nascent community of nations capable of strategic action.

But the charter is a double-edged sword. Among the principles the treaty enshrines are non-interference in the internal affairs of member states and adherence to the rule of law, good governance, the principles of democracy and constitutional government. In other words, ASEAN is obliged to reject a member's unconstitutional change of government while simultaneously respecting its so-called internal affairs. ASEAN's own principles are therefore in conflict with one another—and that conflict has come to life in ASEAN's splintering efforts in Myanmar.

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On the one hand, ASEAN's first instinct was to not interfere—just like it accepted Thailand's 2014 coup. But the scale of the Tatmadaw's violent repression and the gravity of the unfolding crisis has sent shock waves throughout the region. If the crisis worsens, Southeast Asia could be overwhelmed with multiple crises, from refugees fleeing Myanmar and exploding drug trafficking and transnational crime to a worsening pandemic and slower economic recovery.

Realizing that what happens in Myanmar does not stay in Myanmar, Indonesian President Joko Widodo called for a special ASEAN summit. The meeting took place in Jakarta on April 24, was attended by Myanmar coup leader

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Min Aung Hlaing, and issued a Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar. Three of these points are the outcomes ASEAN is seeking: the cessation of violence, the delivery of humanitarian aid through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA Center), and the start of an inclusive political dialogue. The other two points are about the methods to deliver them: a call to create a special ASEAN envoy and a visit with a delegation to Myanmar.

But since then, there has been hardly any meaningful progress. For one thing, the Tatmadaw has used the junta leader's participation in the meeting as a domestic propaganda tool—suggesting the new regime has been accepted by its neighbors—while backtracking from the consensus.

Meanwhile, violence in Myanmar continues unabated with more than 870 people killed—at least 140 people since the meeting—and more than 6,100 people detained so far. For another, despite the consensus, ASEAN members differ in their stakes, leverage, and sense of urgency in dealing with the crisis.

Singapore and Thailand are perhaps the two members with the most at stake and the most leverage over Myanmar, given their extensive economic and military ties. But it is Indonesia, which has hardly any leverage on Myanmar, that is consistently providing the ideas and energy to keep ASEAN on top of the problem. Although Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have expressed their support for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, they have largely been quiet.

The Philippines has been inconsistent, initially calling the crisis an internal affair but then rallying around the meeting.

But most importantly, Brunei—which currently holds the rotating ASEAN chair—has been missing in action. Indeed, Brunei’s leaders seem unhappy the crisis has pushed their own chairmanship agenda to the sidelines. Some ASEAN members had to plead with and prod Brunei to act, including the push for ASEAN to issue a joint position after the coup and organize the summit.

And almost two months after the Jakarta meeting, Brunei has yet to appoint a special envoy. Instead, Brunei seems content with letting the junta choose the envoy from a list of nominees. Brunei’s so-called concept paper for the envoy has also been widely criticized. It limits, for example, the envoy’s job to only a mediating role, doesn’t base the envoy in Myanmar, and only envisions a small staff paid for by the envoy’s own country.

Given that the special Myanmar envoy is the lynchpin of ASEAN’s engagement, Brunei’s behavior is fracturing the Five-Point Consensus, which members increasingly disagree over how to implement. Some believe the consensus might be best delivered as separate lines of effort. If, for example, ASEAN can deliver humanitarian aid without having to wait for political progress, then it should proceed given the unfolding crisis.

But by allowing aid to be delivered by the AHA Center independently from the political process, ASEAN could lose significant leverage to stop the violence and jump-start the dialogue. The Tatmadaw seems likely to favor this option. After all, Myanmar’s Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement sits on the governing board of the AHA Center. The junta could thus significantly shape how ASEAN’s aid will be administered and delivered—including the possibility of not giving any of it to the people—and simply ignore the other parts of the consensus.

One possible solution is to embed teams from the AHA Center in a dedicated and well-funded ASEAN mission on Myanmar led by the special envoy. The mission should seek to deliver aid as part of an overarching framework, which will also seek to end the violence and facilitate an inclusive dialogue. In other words, ASEAN could implement the Five-Point Consensus as a package deal rather than separate lines of effort.

But such a comprehensive process of monitoring the cessation of violence, delivering aid, and facilitating Myanmar-led and Myanmar-owned dialogues is unlikely to be completed in less than two years. Delivering the consensus as a full package, therefore, requires venturing into uncharted territory and having members commit to a multiyear effort continued by the various countries holding the ASEAN chair.

That different ASEAN members hold different views on the role of external parties—such as China, Japan, India, Russia, and the United States—exacerbates the problem.

This would be new territory for ASEAN as an organization. The prospect of an open-ended mission to restore democracy in Myanmar is thus making some ASEAN leaders uneasy. That may also be the main reason why the appointment of the special envoy—Brunei’s prerogative—has been fraught with delays and plagued by divergent views.

If ASEAN is committed to deliver the Five-Point Consensus as a package deal, for example, the special envoy would need a different set of qualifications to fulfill a different set of mandates and responsibilities than if he or she were limited to the much smaller role of dialogue facilitator. Appointing the special envoy for only the tenure of current chair (Brunei has

less than six months left) would make little sense if he or she has to engage in a multiyear, multichair effort.

ASEAN members also disagree on whether the special envoy needs assistance and supervision. Some propose a “Friends of the Chair” group to advise and coordinate all parties—and perhaps also to keep the special envoy in line. Others suggest the formation of an ASEAN Troika made up of representatives from the previous chair (Vietnam), current chair (Brunei), and next chair (Cambodia) to coordinate the effort and ensure continuity. In any case, ASEAN has yet to forge a common view on the special envoy’s role, mandate, and authority.

These contending views are another reason—besides the continuing crisis in Myanmar—why Brunei should have acted with more urgency rather than dawdling. That said, ASEAN’s divergent interests have not made things easier for Brunei. That different members also hold different views on the role of external parties—such as China, Japan, India, Russia, and the United States—exacerbates the problem. As these countries have more leverage on Myanmar than ASEAN, the absence of a coordinated strategy has been counterproductive.

In the short term, Brunei has the unenviable task of keeping the Five-Point Consensus from fracturing further. But for ASEAN to thrive in the long run, it needs to seriously review and revise the ASEAN Charter, clarifying conflicting principles and streamlining cooperation. Short of such a change, ASEAN still has a responsibility to implement the Five-Point Consensus. If ASEAN fails to deliver in the coming weeks, the international community should seek better options to help the people of Myanmar.

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