

This Week in Asia/ Opinion

## Forget Asean bureaucracy, Brunei must decide on Myanmar special envoy with urgency

The special envoy is the strategic linchpin in Asean's effort to implement the five-point consensus issued after the leaders' meeting on April 24

The willingness of Brunei Darussalam as Asean Chair to seize the momentum is absolutely paramount



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Following the Asean Leaders Meeting ([ALM](#)) in Jakarta on April 24, the group issued a “five-point consensus” on [Myanmar](#).

It calls for an immediate cessation of violence, a constructive dialogue among all parties facilitated by a Special Envoy of the Asean Chair and assisted by the Secretary General, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and the visit by an [Asean](#) delegation to Myanmar.

There are three primary outcomes to achieve: ending violence, delivering aid, and an inclusive dialogue among all Myanmar stakeholders. The other two – the appointment of a Special Envoy and the visit to Myanmar – are among the primary methods to deliver these outcomes.

Collectively, the consensus are the “basic ingredients” for an Asean-led mechanism to address the crisis. How the grouping can find the formula, including the sequence of policies, to implement the consensus will be the ultimate test of Asean's efforts.

One option to consider is to view the consensus as a “package deal” that ties all the elements into a single, overarching framework for Asean to play a central role in ending the violence, delivering aid, and facilitating an inclusive dialogue towards some form of political settlement.

In this integrated approach, Asean would need to empower the Special Envoy with a dedicated task force to help monitor the cessation of violence, deliver aid through the AHA Centre, and facilitate an inclusive dialogue among all stakeholders.

After the Special Envoy is announced, his or her first order of business should be to negotiate terms for the first visit to Myanmar. The visit should work on benchmarks for ending the violence, the release of prisoners, the delivery of aid, and the framework for an inclusive dialogue.

The delegation should therefore meet with all parties in Myanmar – as the ALM mandates – and include a team from the humanitarian AHA Centre to provide a preliminary aid needs assessment.

Under the best-case scenario where the stakeholders in Myanmar all agree to work with the Special Envoy, such a comprehensive effort might take at least two years.

The duration and mandate of Asean's involvement may not be immediately apparent to all Asean leaders during the ALM. But when it comes to helping Myanmar, it is better to do it right than to do it quickly. There are plenty of tasks and details to be worked out and too little time to waste.

Post-ALM, Asean has the responsibility to see the problem through to the end and not abandon the people of Myanmar midway through. It is important therefore that Asean leaders have an endgame planned out with the Special Envoy and the stakeholders in Myanmar. This endgame should then be the parameters for Asean's efforts moving forward.

But the final sequence of policies and formula depends on how the Special Envoy envisions the implementation of the consensus. It is possible, for example, that he or she chooses either seeing the consensus as a full package with inseparable components, or consider them as separate lines of effort that could be achieved through different ways. The Special Envoy is therefore the strategic linchpin in Asean's effort to implement the five-point consensus.

The willingness of Brunei Darussalam as Asean Chair to seize the momentum is absolutely paramount. It has been almost two weeks since the ALM and we have yet to hear any decision on the first and most important task: the appointment of the Special Envoy.

For the past three months since the coup, the Chair appears to generally favour a more bureaucratic approach to decision-making. In the lead up to the ALM, for example, the Chair had preferred the agenda to be negotiated slowly from the senior officials' level to the foreign ministers and then the leaders' level.

While this logic follows the "normal" Asean workflow, the unfolding humanitarian crisis requires us to sidestep this process.

The Chair should not wait any longer to decide on the Special Envoy, nor should it wait for the "normal" Asean decision-making to take its course. We certainly cannot wait until the next scheduled Asean foreign ministers' meeting in August or the Asean Summit in October to implement the consensus. The very fact that we had the ALM already confirms that the problems in Myanmar requires a swift response, not the typical Asean snail-paced processes.

The Asean option is the only diplomatic opening gambit there is. Regional powers including China, India and Japan, as well as the United Nations and the international community, should find ways to support Asean's efforts. The group could certainly use all the help it can get.

But it is Brunei's responsibility to quickly announce the Special Envoy so that Asean can begin to implement the consensus. Brunei might also consult the appointment with the next several Asean Chairs – Cambodia in 2022 and Indonesia in 2023 – as fully implementing the consensus might be a multi-year and multi-Chair process.

In any case, now that Asean is all in addressing the crisis, it should get to work as soon as possible, lest it be accused of dereliction of duty to the people of Myanmar.