

Myanmar crisis: will Indonesia's pleas to China, Japan and the US be heard?

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Since early February, Indonesia has been calling for an Asean-led response to the post-coup crisis in Myanmar, with President Joko Widodo on March 19 requesting a high-level meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to address the situation even as he urged an end to the violence and a return to dialogue.

While many support such an Asean-centric solution, time is running out. The death toll in Myanmar has already surpassed 400 as both the military and civilian protesters harden their positions.

Multiple new players – from leaders of the civil disobedience movement to the various ethnic armed groups – have also emerged over the past month, confusing the previous rigid dichotomy of the early post-coup days which set the Tatmadaw, as Myanmar's military is known, against the National League for Democracy of ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Indonesia, meanwhile, finds itself in a tough spot diplomatically. On the one hand, it cannot afford to do nothing. If the crisis escalates into a full-fledged civil war with regional powers playing proxies, the strategic environment in Southeast Asia would deteriorate drastically. For Indonesia, Myanmar becoming a "Southeast Asian Syria or Afghanistan" would be a nightmare, leaving its leadership of Asean – the linchpin of Jakarta's strategic outlook – effectively in tatters.

But Indonesia does not have the strategic heft or resources to push for a diplomatic initiative on its own. While Jakarta has helped lead breakthroughs on Myanmar in the past, it has not developed consistent and deep diplomatic, economic, political and security investments in the country. In other words, it does not have significant leverage over the various parties involved in the crisis.

Relying on Asean, however, means being constrained by its institutions – from the role played by that year's chair, to the consensus decision-making process, to the absence of crisis management mechanisms or membership sanctions. Asean as a group also does not have significant leverage over Myanmar. While the organisation has offered the country plenty of diplomatic cover in the past, the government in Naypyidaw – whether military or civilian – is unlikely to simply listen to what Asean has to say when its very survival and legitimacy are at stake.

Singapore and Thailand are perhaps the two Asean members with the most influence over Myanmar given their extensive economic and military ties though it is unclear how either country can wield this leverage to get the various parties involved to the table. Singapore has, along with Malaysia, publicly supported Indonesia's efforts, and Thailand, while initially reluctant to "interfere", has since privately asked the Tatmadaw to de-escalate given the brewing refugee crisis at their shared border.

But Indonesia, lacking any significant leverage over Myanmar, has no choice but to plead with those who do, with Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi engaging China, Japan, Russia, India, and the US at various points amid the crisis. Each country has a different set of economic, security, and diplomatic levers it can use to influence the various parties involved in Myanmar.

The challenge comes in trying to convince such a disparate group – whose members' strategic interests are

diametrically opposed – to use the influence they can wield in Myanmar to facilitate Asean-led talks. Unfortunately, Indonesia will struggle to get these external actors to do what they would not have done otherwise, as it does not have significant leverage over them either.

All Indonesia can do now is plead and reason. Three interrelated factors will determine whether its pleas are heard:

Firstly, any Asean-led proposals must be both workable and acceptable. Former Indonesian Ambassador to the UK, Rizal Sukma, has argued that Asean should seek a humanitarian pause to deliver aid and relief to the people of Myanmar. It could subsequently facilitate a series of dialogues among the conflicting parties, building upon the spirit of Myanmar's own Union Peace Conference – last held in August 2020 – that brings together relevant stakeholders to decide the future of democratic federalism in their own terms.

Secondly, all parties entangled in the crisis must feel the balance of power has shifted to the point that there is no choice but for them to come to the negotiating table. Such a shift could emerge internally – perhaps through a prolonged civil war or intra-military coup – or it could come from elsewhere, such as from external leverage. At present, however, the military regime appears to believe it can withstand nationwide protests and international sanctions, while civilian leaders and protesters feel the tide is turning in their favour as global condemnation and sanctions over the military's behaviour pours in.

The third factor therefore concerns whether external parties decide that inaction or double-games – such as communicating with all sides without publicly committing to one – is sufficiently detrimental to their strategic interests. If China, Japan, India, or Russia believe their interests are best served by allowing developments "to sort themselves out", they are unlikely to use their leverage to get the conflicting parties to Asean's table.

Indonesia cannot control all three factors, yet it has a strategic interest in seeing a peaceful resolution to the crisis and a return to democracy in Myanmar. Jakarta's unenviable task now is that it has to act as if it has the leverage needed for a breakthrough, even though it does not. While there are no easy answers, Indonesia needs to convince both the parties within and outside Myanmar that Asean, imperfect as it is, might be the least worst option.

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