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Myanmar crisis – How should other countries respond?

Before widening sanctions, consider the impact and other realities on the ground

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For The Straits Times

The military intervention in Myanmar this week is leading many outsiders to consider an appropriate response. The new Biden administration in the United States and the European Union (EU) are evaluating economic sanctions. In contrast, others including neighbouring China, Thailand and Cambodia consider this to be a domestic matter to be left to Myanmar.

Certainly, the main factors are domestic. The sweep of the 2020 elections by Ms Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League of Democracy (NLD) triggered the military response. Underlying this is distrust and the lack of communication and compromise.

Another huge domestic factor is the anxiety and frustration of Myanmar citizens who clearly voted for the NLD. If crowds respond with protest in the street or by other forms of civil disobedience, this could provoke clampdowns. The situation is fluid and events can be fast-moving, even if the present seems stilled.

Although dressed up as a "State of Emergency" by the 2008 Constitution drafted by the military, the seizure of power seems a replay of past Tatmadaw coups. Responses need not however replay the past when the West used blanket sanctions and treated the country as a "pariah".

Yet neither can the international community simply stand by and carry on with business as usual, as if nothing has happened. What are the alternatives?

THE POINT AND DISAPPOINTMENT OF SANCTIONS

Sanctions were the instrument of choice by the United States and the European Union, after the generals refused to respect the vote of 1990, brutally put down street protests and detained the NLD leadership. These sanctions choked off trade and investment and severely curtailed travel into and out of the country for decades. Despite reforms by the military-backed government of President Thein Sein in 2011, the US lifted the bulk of sanctions in 2016, only after the NLD won the 2015 elections.

Given the current situation, calls are growing to re-impose sanctions. Indeed, following international outrage over events in the Rakhine state, selective sanctions have already targeted some of the military, including General Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief who has now taken power.

Yet there are factors to consider before imposing even wider sanctions.

First, such measures inflict collateral damage. They were a major reason why so many of Myanmar's near 55 million citizens are mired in poverty. The impact today will be even harsher given the health and economic impacts of the pandemic, still far from under control. If major investors pull out, the fallout could be devastating, leading possibly to economic collapse.

Second, the generals do not fear sanctions. Much of the country's trade flows across broad and porous land borders with China and Thailand. Even during the decades of sanctions, the generals got almost all they need and want, even lavish luxury items.

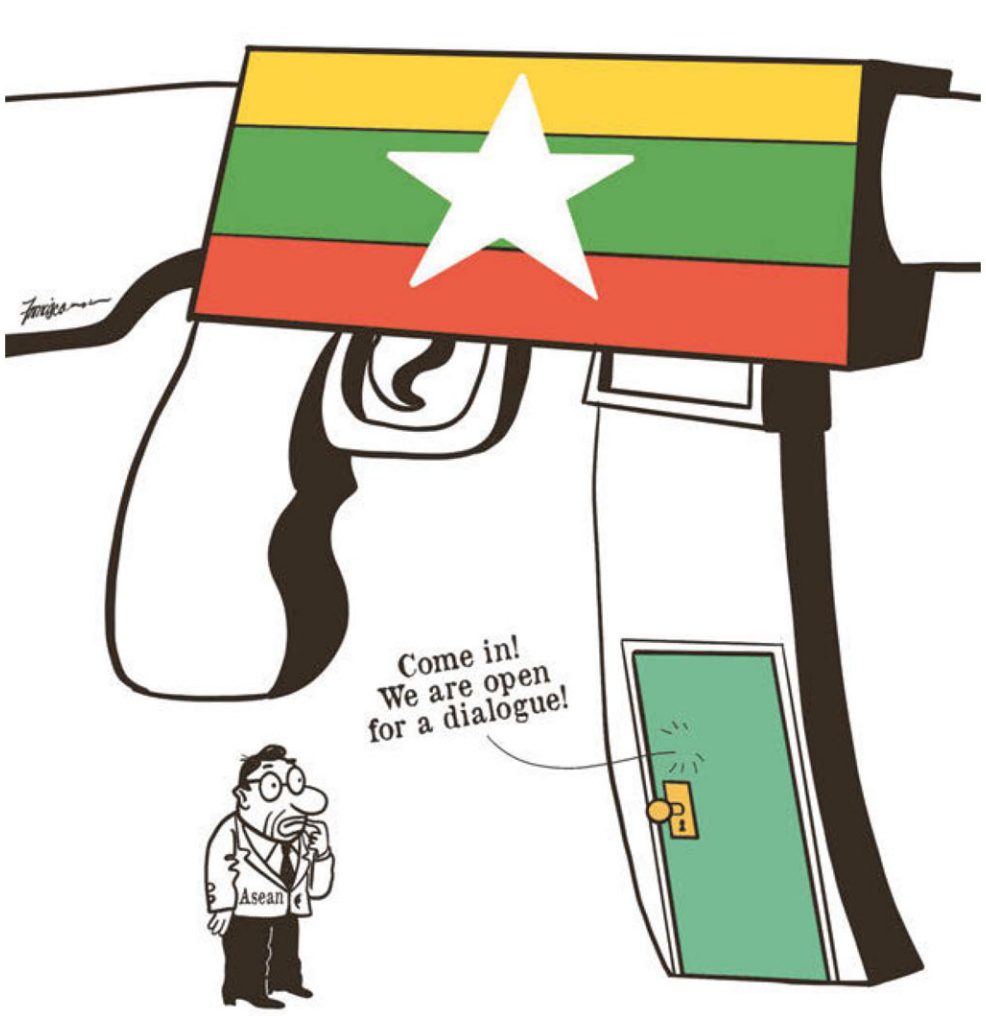
Third are the geopolitical consequences. When Myanmar was sanctioned by the West, China's influence grew to near-dominance. One reason the Thein Sein administration initiated reforms and opened up the country was the desire for non-China options and to court the West. Yet even a decade after, not much has materialised. Japan's presence has grown significantly but American and European investment remain marginal.

Re-imposing sanctions is a tempting low-cost option for Western powers to assert a moral point. Yet they would be quite pointless in making a practical and positive contribution.

REBOOTING CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT

There is little basis to believe that all of Myanmar's neighbours will join to impose sanctions. While Asean largely adheres to a principle of non-interference, this is not a blank cheque; Article 1:7 of the Asean Charter upholds human rights, democracy and rule of law as a purpose of the group.

While there are differences of interpretation among the 10 members of the group, some examples suggest there is a threshold for regional response. In 2007, the military regime in Yangon fired on civilian protesters and monks in what was called the Saffron Revolution, resulting in a number of deaths. Asean expressed its "revulsion", a strong statement agreed by all. In contrast, in Thailand's 2014 military coup, neighbours did not condemn the military's action, which was largely non-violent. These examples suggest drawing a line where there is violence and widespread unrest.



Should the situation descend into violence, expressions of concern by neighbours will harden to criticism. Already, there is little willingness in Asean to defend the generals.

In an indication of where they stand, the leaders of Indonesia and Malaysia yesterday issued a joint statement noting that "to demonstrate the vision of the Asean community, it is important for all of us to continue to respect the principles of the Asean Charter, especially the principles of rule of law, good governance, democracy and human rights and constitutional governance".

Malaysia's Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who was on a visit to Jakarta, described the political situation in Myanmar as "a step backwards in the country's democratic process".

Beyond sanctions and criticism, efforts of the international community for positive change should also include engagement and incentives as carrots. Projects that have been green-lighted with intergovernmental banks and foreigner donors should continue, unless there is evidence of clear meddling and change of substantial terms by the military. Businesses that belong to the military or have close ties to the generals are already under closer scrutiny and efforts to monitor their activities and investments will inevitably increase.

Few – even in the military – wish to return to the decades of inward-looking and autocratic government. Continuing economic engagement can complement and assist to improve the likelihood of political solutions within the country.

There is precedent for this. When Myanmar sought admission into Asean, this was based on a principle of "constructive engagement". This meant that interactions with the military government were not only to be functional but play a role in opening up mindsets and encourage progress towards peace. That approach can usefully be rebooted and expanded.

Principles to re-emphasise include sustainability and against corruption. The effort to engage the military constructively can also go beyond Asean to other regional partners like Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia. China too, with its long-term interest in stability and its complex relations with different actors in Myanmar, should be encouraged to take a similar approach in dealings with the generals.

COMPROMISE OR IMPENDING COLLISION?

The international community can have an influence on what happens next in Myanmar. So can international investors. But there needs to be a sense of reality about the aims and extent of any influence from the outside.

The roots of the crisis are in Myanmar and driven by different actors there. While many focus on the NLD's sweep of the 2020 elections, most fail or refuse to recognise the on-going constitutional role of the military. While some considered the Tatmadaw as a rejected and spent force, the military intervention now underlines the unvarnished realities.

To have any real influence, outsiders will have to put aside pre-conceived absolutes about right and wrong, and engage with Myanmar as it is, rather than as they would wish. To think of all the generals as genocidal, or else Beijing's puppets, would be most unhelpful.

Dialogue needs be fostered between the generals and Ms Suu Kyi and her NLD. A level of trust and the willingness on each side to seek compromise will be essential if a workable route forward is to be found.

Some may reckon that there is no longer any point in talking to the generals.

Yet consider the end days of apartheid in South Africa. International sanctions continued but the key change came when dialogue opened domestically between the opposing sides. While the charismatic figure of Mr Nelson Mandela dominated global attention, the critical reciprocal role was played by then President Frederik De Klerk. In Myanmar similarly, engagement will inevitably depend on the willingness of both sides to seek compromise, rather than a winner-take-all attitude.

The opening of Myanmar began as part of a "road map to democracy" that the military announced in 2003. This outlined seven stages, culminating in the 2008 Constitution and elections, so that the leaders and Parliament might "continue with the task of constructing a new democratic state".

That road map seemed to have ended with the elections of 2015, when the NLD came into power. Current events tell us, however, that the transition to democracy is incomplete. The path ahead is uncharted and off-the-road. Those in the international community that might care for progress in Myanmar can only work towards ensuring this is neither a dead end nor an impending deadly collision.

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