

# Hard truths about Myanmar and the military coup

As Asean holds a meeting about the Myanmar situation, the reality is that nobody has much leverage over the country. Still, Asean is better off being even-handed and not shunning the Tatmadaw.

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For *The Straits Times*

Today, Asean foreign ministers will, at Indonesia's initiative, hold a virtual informal meeting to discuss the situation in Myanmar.

What can we expect? The short answer is: Not very much. The hard fact is that nobody, regionally or internationally, has much leverage over Myanmar, and that includes Asean.

But having realistic expectations is not to say that the meeting will be a waste of time. Much of diplomacy is about perception and it is important that Asean not be regarded as passive.

The meeting begins the process of defining a common position. The foreign ministers will almost certainly not succeed in agreeing on one today. But as this is an informal meeting, a joint statement was never on the cards. However, the Brunei chair is expected to issue a chairman's statement, as it did on Feb 1, just after the coup.

That day, state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior figures from the ruling party were detained in an early morning raid. The military seized control – after a general election in which Ms Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won by a landslide – and declared a year-long state of emergency. Street protests have erupted, met with bloody suppression.

The chair's statement will be anodyne, as was the Feb 1 statement. This is only to be expected. Chairman's statements are not negotiated documents, but the chair will consult other members. The Myanmar Foreign Minister will not agree to condemn the government of which he is a part, and there is utility in not using harsh language so as not to foreclose channels of communication with the military regime.

United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken has asked for a meeting with Asean to discuss Myanmar. The Chinese Foreign Minister has spoken to the Indonesian Foreign Minister and the Brunei chair. Washington and Beijing are acutely aware that the crisis in Myanmar is unfolding against the backdrop of their strategic rivalry. To avoid giving the other an advantage, both want to hide behind Asean. This is – in however left-handed a manner –



Anti-riot police officers securing the area after dispersing protesters in Yangon yesterday. Preventing further bloodshed requires Asean and other countries to call for both sides to exercise restraint: the protesters as well as the Tatmadaw, says the writer. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

an acknowledgement of Asean's "centrality".

Asean can neither indefinitely refuse to meet the US, nor meet it without at least the semblance of a common position. Whether the chair's statement is sufficient for this purpose, and whether Myanmar will agree to a meeting, remains to be seen.

But it is notable that the US has intimated that it is willing to meet all 10 members. The Myanmar Foreign Minister would be well advised to go along, as meeting the US Secretary of State can be taken as de facto recognition of the new regime.

## THE MILITARY'S CONSIDERATIONS

The State Administration Council – the name the military regime has given itself – has said it will hold elections after a year. One has to take this with a huge dose of salt.

The Tatmadaw, as the military is called, will not relinquish power until it is confident that its position is secure. Pressure and sanctions will not shift them. Myanmar cannot be totally isolated. It will always have a back-door to China and a side-door to India.

In any case, the Myanmar military does not fear isolation. For

most of Myanmar's post-independence history, they isolated themselves.

Twenty years of sanctions after 1988, when nationwide protests erupted after decades of military rule, did not move the military towards constitutional rule. Sanctions only made those imposing them feel good about themselves rather than do any good. Sanctions hurt ordinary Myanmar citizens and drove the military into China's arms.

This was not a situation that the Tatmadaw, which deeply distrusts China, found comfortable. One of the main reasons for their experiment in constitutional government was to broaden their international options. But compared to holding on to power, increasing diplomatic space and economic development are second-order considerations to the Tatmadaw.

After 1988, Asean took two decades to persuade the Tatmadaw to look to Indonesia as a model of how the military could retain a political role without wearing uniforms. President Suharto's fall in 1998 spooked the Tatmadaw.

It was not until 2003 that the Tatmadaw was confident enough to announce its "Seven-point

Roadmap for National Reconciliation and Democratic Transition". The military-drafted Constitution was approved in 2008, and elections were held under its ambit for the first time in 2010. The ruling NLD boycotted that election and its leader Suu Kyi was not elected until a by-election was held in 2012. The NLD won a sweeping victory in 2015, and Ms Suu Kyi assumed power in a specially created role of state counsellor.

Clearly, patience is required and no resolution can be expected in the immediate future. Confidence is key. Only Tatmadaw generals can change the minds of Tatmadaw generals. It was only when the Tatmadaw felt secure enough that things began to change in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

## THE AUNG SAN SUU KYI FACTOR

This time, the Tatmadaw will not budge until they have rendered Ms Suu Kyi totally politically irrelevant. They have charged her with various offences – including

one under an obscure import and export law, over walkie-talkies that were found in her home during a search, and of violating the country's disaster management law. The charges are meant to debar her from contesting the next elections, whenever they may be. The military also reportedly plans to abolish the state counsellor position she currently holds.

But even stripped of her title and in jail, Ms Suu Kyi will still be a political force, perhaps even more so, and a prolonged impasse is likely.

That is yet another hard fact that the protesters, and those encouraging them from the safety of foreign countries, should heed.

Protests only make the military feel more insecure. The number of protesters killed has risen significantly – from three to at least 18. This is still relatively small in absolute terms, but the situation is volatile, and a bloodbath on the scale of the 1988 protests and crackdown when an estimated 3,500 people were killed cannot be ruled out.

The young protesters probably have no memory of what occurred in 1988. They draw inspiration from recent protests in Thailand and Hong Kong. But the Tatmadaw

is not the Thai military or even the People's Liberation Army. It has been in almost continuous combat for more than 70 years since independence. This has instilled an ethos of brutality and absolute obedience in the Tatmadaw. If ordered, it will shoot.

Did the Tatmadaw, and in particular Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, miscalculate the extent of popular resistance when they decided on a coup? This is entirely possible. The Tatmadaw does not seem to have a good grasp of ground sentiments and was taken aback by the extent of the NLD's victories in 2015 and last year.

But if the Tatmadaw did miscalculate, that makes it all the more difficult for it to back down in the face of protests. The Tatmadaw will fear retribution if civilian government is restored without safeguards for the institution and key individuals.

With a return to constitutional government a distant prospect, the priority should be on avoiding bloodshed. Another massacre will only make a political solution more difficult. Preventing further bloodshed requires Asean and other countries to call for both sides to exercise restraint: the protesters as well as the Tatmadaw.

This is undoubtedly unfair because the protests are of the military's making. But fairness is not the most important consideration at present.

Unless the Tatmadaw is assured that Asean and others are not ignoring its interests, it will not listen. Nothing is to be gained from shunning the Tatmadaw.

When Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi recently called for new elections, the protesters, who want the elected government to be restored immediately, reacted with outrage. She was forced to back off, but she was not wrong to try and reassure the Tatmadaw.

Since independence, the Tatmadaw has been the central reality of Myanmar politics. Like it or not, no matter how this current crisis ends, the Tatmadaw will remain a central reality of Myanmar politics.

Ms Suu Kyi cannot be unaware of this fact. By not giving sufficient weight to this hard reality and taking an unyielding stance, she must bear some responsibility for the current crisis.

The core of the problem is that Ms Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw are too alike for either's comfort. Both their instincts are autocratic, inclined to see politics as a zero-sum game. Compromise does not come naturally to either. For both, ultimately this is about power, not principle.

Both have a great sense of entitlement to power: Ms Suu Kyi because of her lineage and the personal sacrifices she has made; the Tatmadaw because it has shed blood in interminable wars to preserve Myanmar's territorial integrity. The tragedy of Myanmar is that there is some truth in both their claims.

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