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Facing up to Myanmar realities

It is not without risks, but 'alibi diplomacy' by Asean can help defuse the pressures presented by the Tatmadaw and great power rivalry over Myanmar

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Myanmar soldiers standing guard during an anti-coup demonstration in Yangon in mid-February. The military, or Tatmadaw, has always played a central role in the Myanmar polity. If further bloodshed is to be minimised, the Tatmadaw's institutional interests cannot be ignored, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Myanmar (then called Burma) became independent in 1948. In 1962, General Ne Win seized power in a coup. Thereafter, until 2011, Myanmar was under the rule of the Tatmadaw, as the Myanmar military is called. For much of this half-century of military rule, Myanmar isolated itself from the rest of the world.

Pursuing the "Burmese Way to Socialism", Myanmar shunned both Cold War blocs, even withdrawing from the Non-Aligned Movement. The world, and in particular the West – by which I mean the United States, Canada and Europe – returned the compliment by largely ignoring Myanmar. The country descended into economic ruin and irrelevance.

It was only after 1988, when student demonstrations against military rule precipitated a bloody crackdown in which an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 demonstrators were killed that the West began to take notice of Myanmar. The timing could not have been worse. The Cold War was winding down. In the Soviet Union, Mr Mikhail Gorbachev had taken over and was pursuing perestroika, an implicit admission of the failure of the Soviet system. The West was feeling triumphant, an attitude that soon morphed into hubris.

The West approached Myanmar through a misplaced sense of moral superiority rather than strategic calculation. Regarding Myanmar as strategically irrelevant, Western policies were hypocritical and did nothing to change the Tatmadaw's behaviour. Western sanctions were often subject to carve-outs in areas where Western companies had interests, such as the energy sector. The policies of most Western countries were intended to make themselves look and feel good, rather than do good.

On Feb 1 this year, the world woke up to find that the Tatmadaw had launched a coup against the elected government of Ms Aung San Suu Kyi. After the initial shock, many felt a sense of deja vu. In the 1990s and now, the situation in Myanmar is a congenial backdrop for poseurs who enjoy striking sanctimonious attitudes, brave because they are beyond the reach of the Tatmadaw. We have some in Singapore, too. But for everyone anywhere who wants to do good rather than just feel good, here are five hard truths about Myanmar.

1 Policy must be informed by a pragmatic appreciation of strategy

Rivalry between the US and its allies and partners and China is now the central strategic reality of international relations. In the late 1980s through the decade of the 1990s, the West harboured the delusion that there was no alternative to its system, and all countries – China included – would sooner or later converge to some variant of its system. It thus fundamentally misread the strategic context and pursued policies that only pushed the Tatmadaw into China's embrace without any effect on the Tatmadaw's internal behaviour.

Authoritarian though both may be, there is no natural affinity between the Tatmadaw and China.

Since independence, the Tatmadaw has continually fought against various insurgencies. The Burmese Communist Party supported by China was the immediate post-independence threat. Despite numerous ceasefires, insurgencies by ethnic minorities are still a real and present danger. Many of these insurgencies are still armed, or otherwise directly or indirectly supported by China.

The Tatmadaw deeply distrusts China and a key reason for its experiment with constitutional civilian rule was to broaden its strategic options.

China was as surprised as any other country by the coup. Its attitude towards the State Administration Council (SAC), as the junta calls itself, has been correct but cool. China values stability and predictability, and the situation in Myanmar is now unstable and dangerously unpredictable.

Beijing had spent much effort cultivating – successfully – the deposed civilian government. The anti-military demonstrations have taken on an anti-Chinese slant. Beijing is nevertheless coldly pragmatic. Unburdened with illusions about value promotion being the most important goal of foreign policy, it will go further than the West to accommodate the SAC to protect Chinese interests and seek strategic advantage.

The restoration of "democracy", as the West understands that protean term, should therefore not be the goal of its policies. That will be strongly resisted by the Tatmadaw. Asean will be ambivalent, given the diversity of the political systems of its members. Even America's Indo-Pacific allies and partners such as Japan, Australia and India – all democracies – will be unenthusiastic about an approach that could hand China an advantage.

Instead, the goal should be restoration of some form or semblance of civilian and constitutional rule. This is not the same thing as the restoration of "democracy". That can be left as a distant aspiration. But to stabilise the situation and minimise bloodshed, settle for the practical rather than the ideal.

The Tatmadaw has said it will hold new elections after a year and hand over power to whoever wins them. The deadline will probably not be kept. And when elections are eventually held, it is unlikely that they will be "free and fair" as the West understands those terms.

But even under civilian rule, Myanmar was far from a perfect "democracy" as the Tatmadaw-drafted Constitution built in a privileged political role for itself. There are no good options. Setting new elections and making civilian rule, rather than "democracy", as the goals of Western policy are the least bad options. This holds out the possibility that Western goals can intersect with those of the Tatmadaw. This approach will be supported by Asean, America's Indo-Pacific allies and partners, and even China.

2 The Tatmadaw is not just the problem but also an irreplaceable part of any solution

The Tatmadaw's origins are in the Imperial Japanese Army. It is the only military force in the world that has been in continuous combat for more than 70 years since independence. This has instilled a culture of unquestioning obedience to superiors and extreme brutality. Furthermore, the Tatmadaw is very largely a self-referencing and highly privileged state-within-the-state, with even ordinary soldiers and their families leading lives far removed from other Myanmar citizens. If ordered to shoot at civilians, they will do so and have already done so. Appalling though its behaviour may be to everybody else, so far by its own standards, the Tatmadaw has been restrained in dealing with the demonstrations.

Myanmar officially recognises 135 ethnic minorities. Several of these ethnic minorities have taken up arms against the Myanmar state since independence. The Tatmadaw's claim that it is entitled to a political role because it has held the Myanmar state together is not without basis.

Recently, some armed ethnic minority groups have issued vaguely worded statements that could be interpreted as support for the anti-military demonstrators. These groups have their own agendas. If the Tatmadaw is seriously weakened, splits, or worse of all, is somehow dismantled, Myanmar could fragment, and descend into civil war and chaos.

We have the sobering examples of Iraq, Syria and Libya before us. The destabilising effects of such a scenario will not be confined within Myanmar's borders. There are still a million or so refugees and their children from 1988 in camps in Thailand.

Beyond maintaining Myanmar's territorial integrity, the Tatmadaw, incompetent – particularly in economic policy – though it may be, is nevertheless the best functioning institution in Myanmar. After 50 years of military rule, civilian institutions have atrophied and decayed. They are weak, inefficient and as corrupt as the military. Their condition will not magically change overnight if civilian rule is restored. The process of rebuilding civilian institutions had only just begun before the coup. We should not idealise Myanmar's civilian institutions. Rebuilding civilian capabilities will take a long time.

For the foreseeable future, governing Myanmar without the participation of the military is simply not a practical proposition. The Tatmadaw has always played a central role in the Myanmar polity. In all but the most extreme scenarios – which are in no one's interests – it will retain a central role after the current situation is resolved. If further bloodshed is to be minimised, the Tatmadaw's institutional interests cannot be ignored. Both sides must exercise restraint.

3 Suu Kyi is not without responsibility for current imbroglio

A friend of mine, an expert on Myanmar, once quipped that the problem with Myanmar is that it is ruled by a queen and a king, but they are not married to each other. Ms Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw are too much alike in fundamental ways to make working together comfortable for either. Both have a strong sense of entitlement to rule: Ms Suu Kyi because of her family lineage and the sacrifices she has made; the Tatmadaw because of its vital role in holding Myanmar together. That both their claims contain elements of truth makes compromise all the more difficult, and both see politics as a zero-sum game.

To the West, Ms Suu Kyi was an icon of democracy. But she led her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), imperiously. Many talented NLD members left in frustration, strengthening her personal position, but weakening the NLD institutionally. Her attitude towards the Rohingya was no different from that of the Tatmadaw and almost all Bamar, the majority ethnic group. Her defence of the Tatmadaw at The Hague against charges of genocide made her immensely popular with her people, which probably increased the Tatmadaw's jealousy and distrust of her.

Ms Suu Kyi did little to assuage the Tatmadaw's distrust. Her reluctance to convene the National Defence and Security Council, which is constitutionally the highest executive authority and the formal means through which the Tatmadaw participates in the government, as well as her attempts to amend the Constitution to allow herself to become president, must have increased the Tatmadaw's mistrust. As the daughter of Aung San, the founder of the Tatmadaw, she must have understood its central role in Myanmar; indeed, she once told a friend of mine that when she was a little girl, she wanted to be a general like her father. Ultimately, the differences between Ms Suu Kyi and the Tatmadaw are about power, not principle.

As state counsellor, she already had all the powers of the head of state and government. It is difficult to attribute her obsession with becoming president de jure as well as de facto to anything except a sense of entitlement. It seems clear that the Tatmadaw now considers the Constitution under which Ms Suu Kyi won a landslide victory in the November 2020 election to have given her too much of an advantage, even though it was skewed in the Tatmadaw's favour.

The purpose of the criminal charges the SAC has brought against Ms Suu Kyi, which include corruption and breach of the Official Secrets Act, are intended to neuter her politically and bar her from again standing for elections. The Tatmadaw will not accept any solution that entails a return to the status quo ante after the November 2020 election.

The price of holding new elections will be to jettison Ms Suu Kyi as a politician and instead, secure assurances only about her personal safety. Herein lies a dilemma. Asean, and perhaps even some in the West who now understand that Ms Suu Kyi is not a saint, may be prepared to swallow this. But will the Myanmar people? Being jailed will not diminish her popularity with the people and may even enhance it. The bravery of the demonstrators needs to be tempered with a realistic sense of what is practical. Otherwise, the impasse in Myanmar will thus be prolonged and fraught with danger.

4 Sanctions do not work

Two decades of sanctions after 1988 did not change the Tatmadaw's behaviour. Myanmar cannot really be isolated because it will always have a back door to China, a side door to India, and Asean will not shun a neighbour.

After 1988, Asean had consistently told the West that its blanket sanctions would only hurt the people, not the Tatmadaw, and isolating Myanmar would only erode Western influence. But it was politically necessary for the West to respond in some way to the 1988 massacre, not least as a sop to domestic pressures. A friend of mine, who was advising the foreign minister of a major Western power during that time, told me he had once asked his boss why Asean's advice was not taken. The cynical reply was that "we'll give this one to the NGOs (non-governmental organisations)".

That insouciant attitude is no longer tenable, given the new strategic context. Of course, the West still needs to do something. But so far, at least, Western sanctions have been targeted at the Tatmadaw. As it was already under sanctions over the Rohingya issue, it can live with this. But as the number of protesters killed mounts, the domestic pressures on Western governments to do more will also rise. The Tatmadaw had clearly miscalculated the extent of popular resistance to the coup. But it will not bow to pressure. Additional sanctions will only make it even more difficult for the Tatmadaw to climb down from the position it has taken. This brings me to the final hard truth.

5 However difficult it may be, governments must muster political courage to be patient

The need for Western democratic governments to compose themselves in patience may be the hardest truth of all. This is particularly so in the age of social media when the pressures of public opinion are immediate and constant, fed by real-time accounts of an unfolding crisis.

We are perhaps fortunate that the imperatives of dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic are absorbing much of the West's attention. But it is precisely when there are competing demands for attention that it is more crucial than ever that policy be made on the basis of clinical calculations rather than emotional responses. No crisis is ever resolved before it is ripe for resolution. The Myanmar crisis is far from ripe and is at a stage where precipitate action by external parties could be very dangerous.

This is where Asean comes in. A day after the coup, Brunei quickly consulted other foreign ministers and put together a chairman's statement in record time. On March 2, Brunei convened an informal virtual Asean foreign ministers' meeting and put out another chairman's statement. Anyone familiar with Asean would recognise these as not inconsequential achievements. Indonesia has been active. Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi has been indefatigable in consulting her colleagues, including Mr Wunna Maung Lwin, whom the Tatmadaw has put in charge of foreign affairs.

Indonesia's President Joko Widodo has proposed a special leaders' meeting on Myanmar. Nothing should be taken for granted, but a general consensus on a leaders' meeting seems to have emerged. Even Myanmar has reportedly said it will attend if it is held.

Expectations will be high and must be managed. If the leaders do meet, I expect that Asean's many armchair critics will say that it achieved nothing, just as they have over the two chairman's statements. Such criticisms will not be entirely wrong, but are beside the point. One never openly acknowledged aspect of Asean's "centrality" is to act as an alibi. A leaders' meeting should be regarded as a step in Asean's alibi diplomacy.

The US, China and Europe do not really want to do more than they have already done. Their priority is dealing with the health and economic consequences of the pandemic. The US and China are acutely aware of the strategic context of their rivalry. Neither wants to inadvertently give the other an advantage in Myanmar. But both could be pressed by domestic pressures into actions that they know to be strategically imprudent: the US because of the Tatmadaw's growing human rights abuses; China because the demonstrations have taken an anti-Chinese turn.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has asked for a meeting with all 10 Asean members to discuss Myanmar, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke to his Bruneian and Indonesian counterparts early in the crisis, and recently met the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore in Fujian. Realistically, at present, there is not very much that Asean or any country can do to influence events in Myanmar. All the Asean leaders can do is discuss the situation and make another statement.

But as long as Asean gives the appearance of activity, other countries can let Asean take the lead in the name of its "centrality". This staves off pressure to do more themselves, or to do anything that could make an eventual return to at least a fig leaf of constitutional rule in Myanmar even more difficult. Worse still, Western actions undertaken for largely domestic reasons may be misread by the demonstrators as holding out the false hope of intervention in their favour. This could embolden them and catalyse even more killings.

Activity as a substitute for action or as an alibi is a legitimate diplomatic tactic. But it is not without risk. Asean must maintain a delicate balance. The leaders are Asean's heaviest guns. Whatever they say or do should be strong enough to maintain Asean's credibility as an effective alibi to prevent premature or imprudent action, but not so tough as to alienate the Tatmadaw and so foreclose the possibility of Asean playing a substantive role in the future when the Tatmadaw feels secure enough to move and needs a ladder to climb down.

Asean can manage the risks and maintain such a balance, provided its friends and dialogue partners in the West understand the complexity of the situation, muster the political courage to be patient, and resist the temptation to abuse the alibi Asean is providing by making unrealistic demands on it.

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