



## CDiSS COMMENTARY

National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM)  
Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDiSS)

[cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my](http://cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my)

No. 45 – 21 July 2021

*CDiSS NDUM Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. CDiSS commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from CDiSS and due recognition to the author(s) and CDiSS. To contribute article and provide comment or feedback, please email the Editor at [bahamzah8@hotmail.com](mailto:bahamzah8@hotmail.com)*

### ASEAN AND CHINA HAVE ENTERED THE ‘ZERO GRAVITY ZONE’ IN MYANMAR

By

Phar Kim Beng and Nik Luqman

*Neither has shown that it has the ability, let alone the willingness, to address the country’s escalating crisis.*

During a virtual conference in April 2021, Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu told his counterparts in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that it would be good to “meet face to face” again after more than a year of diplomacy-via-Zoom.

Instead, ASEAN has granted this privilege to China, twice: first in Fujian province and again in Chongqing, just weeks apart. It is no surprise that Southeast Asian countries would wish to speak with China. Despite the pandemic, ASEAN’s volume of trade with China increased to an all-time high of \$731.9 billion (excluding services), and China will likely play a central role in the region’s recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

China’s decision to host the foreign ministers of the 10 ASEAN member states in Chongqing was also important in that it was attended by Wunna Maung Lwin, the foreign minister of the military junta led by Sen. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing that came to power in a coup in February. To many, this amounted to a de facto recognition of the military takeover, and a tacit endorsement of the violent measures – the military has killed at least 880 people since February – that it has taken to quash the widespread public opposition to the coup.

Whether or not the member states of ASEAN are aware, the fact is that Myanmar’s democratic transition in 2011, and its sudden collapse into military

dictatorship, has brought increasing Western scrutiny on the country, which is nestled strategically between India and China.

For instance, at last month's G7 meeting in Cornwall, England, the crisis in Myanmar, and the global retreat of liberal values more generally, was near the top of its agenda. To fend off the further rise of authoritarian powers with revisionist aims, whether China or Russia, U.S. President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that democratic powers should hold true to their values. The G7 concluded with an updated version of the Atlantic Charter. The reference to a document created in 1941, at the height of the showdown between the Allies and the dictatorial Axis powers, implied the gravity of the current historical epoch.

In the case of Myanmar, most Western democracies have condemned the coup and called for sanctions and arms embargoes. The U.K. and EU, for instance, have imposed sanctions on ten Myanmar individuals and two military-controlled conglomerates. Meanwhile, the United Nations General Assembly last month adopted a nonbinding resolution calling for a global arms embargo against the junta. The resolution was supported by 119 countries, while China, Russia, Mali, Iran, and Egypt, and four fellow ASEAN member states - Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand - abstained.

At the same time, the two diplomatic actors that could perhaps be expected to play the most constructive roles in the Myanmar crisis - China and ASEAN - have been missing in action. As evidenced by its invitation to Wunna Maung Lwin to attend the meeting in Chongqing, the Chinese government seems to have made a decision to accept the coup as a fait accompli and recognize the military government. During that meeting it referred to Wunna Maung Lwin as "Myanmar's foreign minister," while the Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar reportedly recently referred to Min Aung Hlaing as "Myanmar's leader."

ASEAN, meanwhile, has pushed forward with its own anemic efforts to end the crisis. Nearly three months after the military coup in Myanmar, at the urging of Indonesia, ASEAN convened in Jakarta on April 24 to address the country's worsening crisis. The meeting subsequently issued a Five-Point Consensus. Of the five points of consensus, three are outcomes that ASEAN is seeking: the cessation of violence; the delivery of humanitarian aid through the ASEAN Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance; and the beginning of political dialogue to end the crisis. The other two are mechanisms to achieve these outcomes: the appointment of an ASEAN special envoy and the dispatch of a delegation to Myanmar to meet all relevant stakeholders.

But ASEAN's efforts have so far failed to bear much fruit. For one thing, Myanmar's junta leader Min Aung Hlaing has refused to play ball. The general said in a statement that he regarded the "five-point consensus" as a suite of "constructive suggestions" but that his government would consider the proposals only "after stabilizing the country." The junta's statement has put ASEAN in an awkward position, signaling that the regional body - like most outside powers - has little means of compelling the junta.

Then, nearly two months after the Jakarta meeting, two top Bruneian diplomats called on Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyidaw to present candidates for ASEAN's special envoy, without making any concrete demands of the military junta. With ASEAN Secretary-General Lim Jock Hoi unable to name a special envoy to speak on behalf of ASEAN, let alone to undertake a preliminary national assessment of the situation there, it is clear that ASEAN has no solution to the country's crisis.

ASEAN's failure seems to suggest the limits of the bloc's cherished principle of "non-intervention" and its preference for the form of "quiet diplomacy" that ASEAN has favored since its founding in 1967. While this approach seemed to work during the Cold War, helping to preserve the peace between ASEAN's members, the post-Cold War world has brought fresh challenge that ASEAN has done little to adjust itself to. Since the end of the Cold War, ASEAN has made just one major institutional reform: the creation of the ASEAN Charter in 2009. But the Charter lacks provisions to evict or punish any errant member state.

And so ASEAN is permanently stuck with Myanmar, and China is trapped with it too, since, despite China's growing complement of air, sea, and space power, Beijing does not necessarily have much influence on Myanmar. As Myanmar's crisis continues, ASEAN and China are now in a gravity-free zone. Unlike the Western nations, they have no positive "values" to anchor them to anything, and neither can they display the heft or power necessary to compel Min Aung Hlaing to do what he otherwise would be loath to do: restore democracy and return to the barracks, with the promise to respect the wishes of the people.

---

**Phar Kim Beng** is the founder and CEO of Strategic Pan Indo-Pacific Strategy Arena.

**Nik Luqman** is Senior Research Fellow at Strategic Pan Indo-Pacific Strategy Arena.

This article was published in *The Diplomat* dated 8 July 2021. Republished with permission from *The Diplomat*.

---

**CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES (CDISS)**

National Defence University of Malaysia

Sungai Besi Camp, 57000 Kuala Lumpur

Phone: (+603) 9051 3400 ext. 4618

Fax: (+603) 9051 3031

E-mail: [cdiss@upnm.edu.my](mailto:cdiss@upnm.edu.my)