



ASEAN's Cambodian Stress Test

TAN SRI DR MUNIR MAJID



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The Author

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Background

The running sore in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), is the situation in Myanmar, one of its member states. It is embroiled in an internal conflict, with the military overthrowing the legitimately elected government in February 2021 in a violent move. No negotiations, no compromise and no respite for the vastly inferior domestic forces seeking the restoration of democratic rule. The number of deaths has been rising as the military seeks to smash them. ASEAN could not turn away from this murderous path of an illegal regime in its midst, if it was to ever stand for anything.

In a departure from its strict non-interference policy in the domestic affairs of member countries, ASEAN last April met in Jakarta and came up with a five-point consensus, accepted by Myanmar, for cessation of hostilities and peaceful negotiations. The foreign minister of Brunei, then-ASEAN chair, was appointed to facilitate the process by visiting Myanmar to meet all parties involved in the conflict, including the National Unity Government (NUG), which holds itself to be the legitimately elected government, and Aung San Suu Kyi, the elected leader, who was arrested, hauled to court, and sentenced on spurious charges.

The Myanmar generals reneged on their promises. The ASEAN peace envoy did not make it to the country. In response, Myanmar was not invited to attend the ASEAN summit last November, the first time this has happened in its history, and the country's military leaders were

shunned from official ASEAN meetings. Myanmar was ostracised, if not quite suspended, from ASEAN membership.

Enter Cambodia

Shortly after its succession from Brunei as the ASEAN chair for 2022, Cambodia announced that its foreign minister would be the new peace envoy. Cambodia's Prime Minister, Hun Sen, made overtures to the Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Liang who he visited in Naypyidaw in January, which undermined the ASEAN's previous decision to have no official contact with the Myanmar military regime.

There was a strong sense of consternation in the ASEAN capitals. It was, however, a polite type of consternation which Hun Sen initially swept aside, declaring there could be no progress without engagement. Subsequently, Hun Sen spoke with President Jokowi of Indonesia, the largest of the ASEAN member states (Cambodia being one of the smallest), who gently advised that there must be no engagement with the Myanmar generals unless they adhered to the five-point consensus. The junta's initial acceptance was followed by the continuation of the internal violence, showing ASEAN incompetence, which engagement on their terms would only confirm. While initially appearing to take Jokowi's advice, Hun Sen subsequently blasted the Malaysian foreign minister for not 'understanding diplomacy' after the latter had publicly criticised Cambodia's violation of ASEAN policy. Hun Sen is

not one to let go, even after he may have appeared to make a retreat with his tail between his legs following that telephone call with the Indonesian president.

The Cambodian Prime Minister generally speaks the most at ASEAN meetings, which I have observed over the past seven years at various 'dialogues' ASEAN leaders hold with the ASEAN Business Advisory Council. As ASEAN chair, he comes into his own, forcing his views on ASEAN member states and making decisions as he sees fit. He takes to the regional stage some of his predispositions in domestic politics, where he has ruled with an iron fist as Prime Minister since 1985, the longest serving ASEAN leader.

The last time Cambodia chaired ASEAN, in 2012, the foreign ministers were not able to come out with a joint communique for the first time in its then 45-year history because of a reference to the South China Sea, which China did not like, and Cambodia, its closest ally in Southeast Asia, therefore did not support. Cambodia had consulted with China on this issue, thereby compromising the regional grouping's position. Subservience to China will remain a risk throughout this year. There is the South China Sea code of conduct, in place since 2002, that could seriously divide ASEAN if Cambodia acts again as the chair, as it continues to consult with and lean towards China. On Myanmar, China continues with a policy of engagement, not unlike what Cambodia is trying to

force on ASEAN, although so far ASEAN has just about kept Hun Sen in check. But there is a lot of 2022 to come.

Between 16th and 17th February, ASEAN foreign ministers met for the first time this year. They had been due to meet in January, but three foreign ministers (Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) were diplomatically unable to attend, as Cambodia launched into its Myanmar engagement initiatives without discussion with other member states. The message, some of Cambodia's partners felt, had to be made: ASEAN works on the basis of consultation and consensus. It is however premature to assume Cambodia has learned its lesson. Hun Sen can be quite unpredictable and difficult to contain.

At the February meeting, no major progress or breakthrough on Myanmar was reported. The special envoy, now the Cambodian foreign minister, will visit Myanmar in early March, although it is not clear he will get to meet those opposed to the military regime. What he will do, and what he will report back, remains to be seen. He has said that he will try to meet representatives of the NUG, but nothing is firm. There is no good augury. The Myanmar generals are digging in, knowing they can rely on ASEAN 'insiders' to set a limit on how far the regional group will go against them. Even with their exclusion from ASEAN meetings, they see cracks in ASEAN unity, which Cambodia has not been slow to expose. ASEAN may claim to be taking a 'principled' stand but it has a bigger agenda of greater economic integration to focus on, which member states do not wish to see sacrificed in place of sorting the situation in Myanmar. This is evident from the statement by the Singapore foreign minister at the end of the February retreat.¹

The call for Myanmar to make progress on the five-point consensus of last April continues even as it seems to be wearing thin. What might be deemed 'progress' can be stretched, and Cambodia is not incapable of doing this. At the retreat, although not invited, Myanmar was allowed

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to ‘listen in’, and its attendance is to be reviewed in the future on a case-by-case basis. Who was listening in online, ASEAN of course has no idea. While an argument can be made in favour of Myanmar knowing what is being said, there has obviously been some backsliding from not having Myanmar presence at official ASEAN meetings. Myanmar has a foot in the door.

ASEAN Imperfect

ASEAN seems to have been overwhelmed by the decision to involve itself in Myanmar’s domestic affairs—a striking departure from its initial non-intervention principle—and it is clear that it did not sufficiently think through how the five-point consensus was to be pursued, what kind of envoy was best suited to pursue it, and how to ensure continuity of policy. When Myanmar was barred from attending the ASEAN summit in November, another major step, it was not clear how long its isolation was to be for and at what point it would be considered as acceding to the five-point consensus. Must there be an immediate cessation of hostilities, as a *sine qua non*, to be followed by constructive dialogue which is to be facilitated by the special envoy, with the provision of humanitarian assistance and a visit by the special envoy to Myanmar? With this lack of clarity, a typical ASEAN case-by-case procedure, and Cambodia helping Myanmar push the door open, the likelihood is that Myanmar will be welcomed back after the special envoy reports some progress somewhere; which Cambodia will argue must be seized as the only great big hope.

With no proper institutional mechanism, ASEAN did not follow through with its five-point consensus, then got nervous after barring Myanmar from the summit, seen as a half-way to suspension of membership, something ASEAN does not want to contemplate. Cambodia, however, as ASEAN chair this year, has shown it will seek

to push back the half-hearted ASEAN moves against Myanmar before it gathers any force, fearing who could be next.

The ASEAN policy decisions on Myanmar were driven by Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei, with support from the Philippines. Laos was not in favour but did not make a stand. Vietnam, as usual, did not wade into troubled waters, willing to go along with what was finally decided, unless it was opposed to it. When Vietnam was the chair of ASEAN in 2020, the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, a report was submitted by the ASEAN Business Advisory Council and its international business partners which called for a number of urgent and specific initiatives including, the creation of an ASEAN High Level Special Commission to facilitate decision-making during the crisis. Vietnam was pressured, as the chair, to encourage other ASEAN leaders to adopt this. It was not willing to do so, however, and only agreed to table it without comment. In the event, not one single country opposed the proposals, some even supported them, including setting up the Commission, but nothing happened—without leadership from the chair, no progress will be made. In ASEAN, Vietnam does not wish to provide such leadership. On Myanmar, Vietnam has kept on the side-lines, which is in keeping with its *walk softly approach*.

Thailand and Cambodia were the least enthusiastic in taking a hard line stance, especially on barring Myanmar from

attending ASEAN official meetings, but could not hold back against the strong argument that Myanmar had taken ASEAN for a ride by agreeing to the five-point consensus with no intention of fulfilling any of it. They both, however, remain opposed to the ASEAN decision on exclusion of Myanmar from its meetings. The Thai military have strong links with their Myanmar counterparts. Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing trained in Bangkok and is rumoured to have been a godson of the late Prem Tinsulanonda, the eminent Thai military officer, politician and statesman. As for Cambodia, now that it holds the chair, it has wasted no time to cause cracks in the ASEAN policy—something which should have been anticipated given its past record of getting its own way when there was a chance.

After the momentous decision to intervene in Myanmar, and the barring of representatives of the military government from ASEAN meetings, the regional group is at risk this year of publically reversing these exact policies. Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are the key players who can prevent this. They must continue to speak with one voice and not allow Cambodia or Thailand to undermine the decisions that have been made. This means continued unity of purpose, coordination and no domestic distraction.

Indonesia is chairman of the G-20 this year and a lot of time and resources are being devoted to making it a success,

although much would be expected when it takes the ASEAN chair in 2023, perhaps to crown Jokowi's 10-year leadership before presidential elections in 2024. Malaysia has had three governments in the last four years and its foreign, even ASEAN, policy attention-span is sporadic, at best. It has been strong in its views on Myanmar (including its being vocal against Rohingya killings and displacement), but constant change in government has affected the weight of its presence in ASEAN. Singapore is steady, but does not move ahead of Indonesia, although it remains by far the most cerebral and least inhibited on matters of principle among all ASEAN countries. This is clear from its stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine (see statement by the ministry of foreign affairs spokesperson strongly condemning 'any unprovoked invasion of a sovereign country under any pretext' and the elaborate explanation of Singapore's stand in Parliament by its minister of law and home affairs.² ASEAN foreign ministers could only consensually come out with a statement calling for a 'peaceful dialogue', which stands in pale contrast to such a valiant stance.

In the end no ASEAN country voted against the UN General Assembly Resolution denouncing Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. Vietnam and Laos, however, abstained. Myanmar's vote for by representatives of the previous government does not represent the military junta's position which is certainly

pro-Russia. Cambodia's vote for the resolution is interesting as it deviates from China's position, but there could be a historical memory here as ASEAN fully supported Phnom Penh and condemned Vietnam when it invaded the country on Christmas Day 1978.

The Philippines, with presidential elections due in May this year, will not have its eye on the ASEAN ball. Brunei, after a good year as chair, is no longer playing such an active role, lest it be seen as not wanting to let go. So there is this danger of a 'fizzling out' of the ASEAN position that Myanmar will not be allowed to participate in ministerial and summit meetings, unless significant progress is made on the implementation of the five-point consensus.

ASEAN made a mistake by linking the position of a special envoy with the foreign ministry of the chair's nation. When Cambodia seized the moment, and announced that its foreign minister will take over as special envoy, the other member states went along with it, with some even stating this was what was understood all along. It is a mistake because there would be no continuity, as is clearly evidenced. When the five-point consensus was being discussed last April, there was the suggestion that the special envoy could be some eminent, retired ASEAN diplomat or minister, like Tommy Koh of Singapore or Marty Natalegawa of Indonesia. This would have been the better course of action, not only for continuity

but also to ensure greater professionalism and less politics in ensuring adherence to the five-point consensus. With Cambodia appointing its foreign minister as special envoy and the route he is taking, that consensus is about to be broken and the advantage being handed to the military junta in Myanmar, whose overwhelming military might is crushing all resistance to its illegal occupation of power.

It would seem the situation in Myanmar will not get any better. It is a long time to the elections the generals now promise in August 2023, an extension already to the one they promised in February 2021. The ASEAN five-point consensus, aiming to achieve peace and bring the internal violence to an end, was always going to be a long shot, which needed the persistence and drive that ASEAN is not particularly known for. Now with Cambodia in the chair it is more likely that the generals in Myanmar will be accommodated than pressed to cease all violence and get to the negotiating table with legitimate representatives of the people of that country. ■

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- 1 <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/asean-myanmar-principled-position-hijack-agenda-vivian-balakrishnan-2504641>
 - 2 <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2022/02/20220228-Ministerial-Statement>



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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has faced an unprecedented challenge since the military junta seized power in a coup in Myanmar in 2020. Departing from its initial premise of 'non-interference' in the domestic policies of its member states, the regional group decided to ban Myanmar's military representatives from meetings and summits. The five-point plan for consensus was supported by most members, however, Cambodia's tenure as Chair of this organisation has brought the plan's efficacy and longevity into question. At a time when Europe stands united against Russian actions in Ukraine, with a coherent and consistent response from states across the continent, can ASEAN do the same as it seeks to find a peaceful solution in the case of Myanmar?

