



Protesters rallying against the military coup on July 14 in Yangon. The situation in Myanmar today is not the same as Timor Leste two decades ago, and the writer hopes it will not become like Timor Leste. But he says the echoes of Timor Leste, however faint, should keep us alert to the possibility that others may have agendas that are not in accordance with their eloquent defences of democracy in Myanmar, and Asean should not be either lulled by their praises or goaded by their criticisms, nor mesmerised by our own rhetoric into taking hasty actions we may come to regret. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Myanmar, multilateralism and the limits of Asean's diplomacy

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For *The Straits Times*

In ancient times, many cultures believed that certain words had magical properties; that merely uttering those words could evoke and unleash powerful forces. In our time, in certain circles, the word "Asean" has been invested with something of those magical qualities.

Those who had practised, or are still practising, the craft of diplomacy in South-east Asia, know that the reality is far more prosaic. Asean is just one sub-genre of regional diplomacy and regional organisations like Asean are just one instrument in this generic category of diplomatic tools which we call "multilateralism". Asean is not the only tool in the tool-kit of diplomacy, nor is multilateralism always the appropriate tool. Better to conceive of Asean and multilateralism in general as part of a spectrum of diplomatic techniques with war and the threat or use of force at one extreme, and multilateralism, international law, and international organisations at the other end. All are legitimate tools of diplomacy.

As a small city-state, Singapore is fond of constantly stressing the importance of Asean in our foreign policy and that multilateralism and a world governed by international organisations and law is good for small states. All this is undoubtedly true; in fact so self-evidently axiomatic that it is akin to saying that water is wet or fire is hot. There is no harm in repeating such truisms, provided we constantly ask ourselves whether this is really such a world. Foreign policy practitioners know – or ought to know – that this is not such a world or at best only partially and occasionally such a world.

We forget this only at our own peril. The repetition of such bromides can be soporific and lull ourselves into believing our own propaganda. That is always

disastrous, and if we start to believe our own propaganda or repeat our propaganda too often and too loudly, the least of all dangers is that others – our own peoples included – may come to believe it as well. If they do, we create expectations that may be impossible to meet. This blunts the effectiveness of diplomatic tools. Something like this has happened to the notion of "Asean Centrality".

All this ought to be well known to academics who study Asean and practitioners in and out of South-east Asia. But both academics and practitioners often chose to pretend otherwise, academics because they like to believe they are cleverer than others, and practitioners for a host of other reasons which usually are only peripherally connected to the issue at hand.

This came to mind after the coup in Myanmar and in particular after United States Secretary of State Anthony Blinken had in his virtual meeting with Asean foreign ministers on July 14 "called on Asean to take joint action to urge the end of violence, the restoration of Burma's democratic transition, and the release of all those unjustly detained" and that Asean should "take immediate action to hold the Burmese regime accountable to (Asean's five-point) consensus and to appoint a special envoy". What he wanted Asean to do was what Asean was already trying to do. I wondered what an experienced diplomat like Mr Blinken really expected.

ASEAN'S DIFFICULTIES

As current Asean Chair, Brunei had already been criticised after its foreign minister visited Myanmar last month. The Jakarta Post called the trip "disastrous". This was a gross exaggeration that several Indonesian academics associated with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta – which incidentally is supported by the same family that owns the Jakarta Post – eagerly elaborated. CSIS sometimes articulates what KEMLU, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry, finds inconvenient or impolitic to say.

The Brunei trip was not perfect. The Asean Secretariat mistakenly referred to the Myanmar regime by its official title of State

Administration Council in its press release, a term which Asean had hitherto carefully avoided. But this was hardly the "fatal blunder" that the Jakarta Post claimed. The error was quickly corrected by removing the offending press release from the Asean Secretariat's website.

Asean leaders had already conferred de facto recognition to the junta when they met their leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in Jakarta in April. If Asean is to do anything, it must meet the junta. The price of any meeting is some measure of recognition.

It is true that Brunei did not succeed in getting the junta to make any firm commitments during the June visit. But would any other Asean foreign minister have done better? I doubt it, and some whose priority is clearly to profile themselves, would almost certainly have done far worse.

Indonesia's criticisms were not disinterested. One of the unfortunate realities of Asean diplomacy is that the Chair is sometimes made a scapegoat if bees buzzing about the bonnets of its members find no honey. KEMLU was disgruntled because it considered Brunei insufficiently enthusiastic about supporting the Indonesian candidate for Special Envoy, former foreign minister Hassan Wirajuda. But the Chair has to be neutral and Thailand too had a candidate. More importantly, when he was foreign minister, Mr Wirajuda had taken a very strong position against the Tatmadaw for its treatment of the Rohingya.

The Tatmadaw undoubtedly deserved all of Mr Wirajuda's criticisms, but that hardly made him the ideal person to win the confidence of the Tatmadaw for the already delicate and difficult task of negotiating a return to civilian rule. When Thailand offered a compromise by suggesting that a troika consisting of Brunei, Thailand and Indonesia be formed to negotiate with the junta, Indonesia scuttled the idea by insisting that it should lead even though Brunei is Chair.

MYANMAR REALITIES

Asean is not always self-evidently the appropriate tool. It is certainly not in the case of Myanmar, at least not for now. The harsh reality is that at present, there is no

appropriate diplomatic tool that can resolve the situation in Myanmar, indeed no tool of any kind that anyone is willing to use.

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the National League for Democracy government or civilian rule on anything but the Tatmadaw's own terms, you will have to intervene militarily and fight the Tatmadaw. No one in Asean – in fact no one anywhere – no matter how grandly they posture, is mad enough to want to do that. The Ethnic Armed Organisations have been fighting the Tatmadaw for 70 years and have got nowhere. It is a fantasy to think that those anti-coup demonstrators that have taken up arms against the Tatmadaw will do any better. Courage is not enough.

It is a mistake to think that international problems, however compelling, always have solutions, or that solutions are always immediate. Sometimes, you just have to keep some semblance of a diplomatic process going and just bide your time until the situation ripens sufficiently for diplomacy to work.

For now, even the United Nations Security Council will not be able to take any meaningful action on Myanmar. This is not just because China and Russia will certainly veto any proposal for effective action, but because none of the five permanent members really have the stomach to do anything effective. The western permanent members are all sadder but wiser after their experiences with Myanmar in the 1990s and early 2000s and are happy to hide behind China and Russia.

It is debatable whether the situation in Myanmar, bad as it undoubtedly is, is at present a threat to international peace and security within the meaning of that phrase in the UN Charter. All the permanent members have other more urgent problems of their own. But they all, perhaps with the exception of Russia, face domestic pressures to do something on Myanmar – China included, because the demonstrations against the coup quickly took an anti-Chinese turn.

THE APPEARANCE OF ACTION

Under these circumstances, one of Asean's functions is to serve as an alibi. And Asean serves as an alibi by creating the sensation or appearance of action in a situation where anybody sensible knows that there really isn't anything

effective or practical that can be done.

As long as Asean – the relevant regional organisation – is seen to be trying to do something, nobody else need do anything but the minimum to satisfy domestic pressures and grumble about Asean to make themselves look good and feel good.

Asean is not unique in this respect. Creating the sensation or appearance of action and serving as an alibi are also among the functions of the UN and of multilateralism in general. That was the meaning of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on Myanmar passed a few weeks ago. And not just on Myanmar: that is the underlying purpose of many UNGA resolutions on many issues. Creating the sensation or appearance of action and buying time is an accepted and legitimate diplomatic technique provided we do not mistake the sensation or the tactic for anything more.

Diplomacy must use the tool appropriate to the task at hand and those wielding the tools must be absolutely clear in their own minds about what really is the task at hand, and what is in the realm of the possible at any particular time. Rather than, say, trying to use a screwdriver as a hammer or a wrench, and ruining it as a screwdriver, go get yourself a hammer or a wrench, or if none is available or if no tool at hand will solve the problem, then compose yourself in patience and wait for when the appropriate tool becomes available or the situation changes enough to fit the tools at your disposal.

When small countries like Singapore hear any variant of the idea that there should be regional solutions to regional problems – whether the region is just South-east Asia or Asia more broadly conceived – a shiver should run down our spines, and we should immediately be extremely wary and ensure all our diplomatic guns are handy and loaded. Too often, regional solutions to regional problems means nothing more than the biggest country imposing its solution on the region, or other countries trying to wash their hands of problems and evade responsibility.

The implication of this hard fact is that a regional organisation like Asean is not always the solution, although it is always a tool. The skill of regional diplomacy lies in knowing when to use Asean in order to find a regional solution and, equally or more importantly, when to use Asean to prevent an inappropriate regional solution, or to prevent other countries from saddling the region with responsibilities that should be more widely distributed.

ECHOES OF TIMOR LESTE

Democracy is certainly desirable in Myanmar. Nevertheless, for neighbours, stability is more immediately necessary. Democracy and stability are not mutually exclusive choices. But as the situation in Myanmar continues to deteriorate, it evokes the memory of East Timor (as Timor Leste was then known) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As the situation in an East Timor that was clearly unprepared for independence grew more chaotic, the countries that had been most vocal in their support for East Timor's independence, became the most eager to withdraw the UN mission there prematurely and leave that unfortunate country to its own and Asean's devices.

Fortunately Singapore was then a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Mobilising Asean and working with Australia and other like-minded countries, we succeeded in getting the permanent members of the Security Council to recognise their responsibilities and extend the peace-keeping operation until the situation in East Timor stabilised.

The situation in Myanmar today is not the same as Timor Leste two decades ago and I hope it will not become like Timor Leste. But the echoes of Timor Leste, however faint, should keep us alert to the possibility that others may have agendas that are not in accordance with their eloquent defences of democracy in Myanmar.

Asean should not be either lulled by their praises or goaded by their criticisms, into actions that are not in our interests or are beyond our capabilities. For that matter, neither should we be mesmerised by our own rhetoric into taking hasty actions that we may come to regret.

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