Hun Sen is right to have visited Myanmar

There is no alternative to working with the power in place, and like it or not, that is the Tatmadaw. The Cambodian Prime Minister is also well placed to break the ice for Asean.

Bilahari Kausikan

For The Straits Times

Give the Devil his due. I am not an fan of Hun Sen. I think many of his policies are not in Cambodia's long-term interest and will be modified - if not repudiated - by his own people since he has shuffled this mortician. But on Myanmar, Mr Hun Sen is absolutely right.

His visit to Naypyitaw last Friday was controversial. Some regarded it as legitimating the State Administration Council (SAC), the junta calls itself, despite it having ignored Asean's five-point consensus which, among other things, called for an immediate cessation of violence and "constructive dialogue" between all parties.

Mr Hun Sen's visit also sparked not a little confusion. An American friend, a former senior policymaker, asked whether the Cambodian leader was "stabbing Asean in the back" or just doing his job as an Asean chair? This is a legitimate question, particularly since Mr Hun Sen has hinted that he may ignore the Asean position that Myanmar be represented only by a "non-political representative" and inviting former general Min Aung Hlaing to summits under Cambodia's chairmanship this year.

DISSECTING ASEAN'S FIVE-POINT CONSENSUS

The path forward in Myanmar is far from straightforward. It will be morally ambiguous, as exits from coup could be. But two things are clear.

First, to preserve its own credibility, Asean clearly had to take some political action. The SAC blatantly flouted the five-point consensus reached by Asean leaders, including Gen Min Aung Hlaing, in April last year. It did so by excluding him and other members of the junta from Asean's November 2021 summit.

Second, of Asean's five points, it was always clear that two were non-starters.

It was always taken naively of a special lid to really believe that the Tatmadaw would lowering the use of force as long as anti-coup demonstrations at previous demonstrations. Now, that the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) has become a common cause with some Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), the Tatmadaw's struggle against the junta, it would not just be breathtakingly naive but insane to think that Myanmar's military would cease immediately ever violence.

The SAC determined to politically destroy Aung San Suu Kyi and her senior members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) by convicting them of criminal charges and jailing them. There was never any room for compromise, let alone "constructive dialogue" with the NLD. Had the Tatmadaw ever been inclined towards compromise dialogue, there would not have been a coup in the first place.

Of the five points, only three - the appointment of a special envoy, allowing whoever was made special envoy to visit Myanmar, and the provision of humanitarian assistance - were ever practical propositions. Of these three, only the first has been implemented.

Asean leaders are not naïve. They know the junta's points - cessation of violence and conducting an election with the participation of the opposition - are better understood as Asean seeking to occupy the moral high ground for a variety of immediate domestic and diplomatic reasons rather than realistic goals.

POSTURING IS NOT ENOUGH

Occupying the moral high ground is a time-tested and legitimate diplomatic tactic. But the question is how. And in this case, the two forces on the ground have a very important role to play.

One of the main questions on the moral high ground is whether or not Asean has been made to do too much of the dirty work from the military and police to the NUG. The NUG claims 2,000 soldiers and 6,000 policemen have been killed by the junta. Even if you accept these numbers, this has to be compared with a military that numbers 406,000 in all three services of arms, navy and air force, and a paramilitary force that totals 107,000, of whom 107,000 are policemen. Defectors are less than 2 per cent of the total armed forces of 533,000. This does not add up to an SAC in the process of disintegration.

The SAC and the Tatmadaw are realities that cannot be ignored forever. But key Asean countries have been stuck on moralistic positions, who can or wants to make the first move? It is political. It is political to be paid for climbing down from the moral high ground.

THE RIGHT FIT

Enter Prime Minister Samudch Akih Nhon Fahde Tcheho Hun Sen.

To put it very simply, Mr Hun Sen's international reputation has never been better. Not because he is known as a moralist. Do not know what he was expected to achieve in Naypyitaw, but the downside reputational risk to him for breaking Asean consensus was and remains minimal. Someone had to make the first move and better than Mr Hun Sen than anyone else.

Mr Hun Sen had used Asean to legitimise his coup and establish relations with Myanmar. If he had been warned, he might have never gone to Naypyitaw. If he was sure of the junta's willingness to negotiate, it would have been a coup. But unlike Thai leaders, Mr Hun Sen seems less inclined to pay even token obeisance to democracy, however that term is defined. Unlike Thailand, Cambodia's relations with Myanmar are not weighed down with historical baggage. During the 1980s through to the end of the 1990s, several Asean countries, including Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, backed the Tatmadaw to look at president Subaraj of Indonesia as a model of how it could civilise itself and gain international acceptance.

But as the three countries had not seen the paradigm shift of Gen Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC, the Tatmadaw may now be more inclined to look to Cambodia for advice. In any case, the worst that could have happened to Mr Hun Sen was to be have been coldly received or not received at all, and that was what every other country has experienced, including China. If that turned out, these minimal downside risks were probably more than balanced by the relatively warm welcome Mr Hun Sen received in Naypyitaw. He did not get to meet Mr Suu Kyi or other imprisoned NLD leaders. But whatever his goals may have been - and I do not think meeting the opposition was ever prominent among them - he has broken the ice and opened the way for Asean to play some sort of role when the Tatmadaw is ready, says the writer. PHOTO REUTERS

And if not for Asean, then Mr Hun Sen's sneakish approach has perhaps opened the door a crack for the United Nations Secretary-General's special envoy, Niall Ferguson.

The Tatmadaw gave Mr Hun Sen two small gifts. The joint press release issued after his visit announced the extension of a ceasefire with EAOs the end of this year and welcomed the participation of the special envoy of the Asean chair in ceasefire talks with the EAOs.

The joint statement also supported the convening of a meeting on humanitarian assistance, including the special envoy, the Asean Secretary-General and the Asean Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management, as well as relevant UN specialised agencies.

This is all is of course small beer, mere gestures rather than substantive changes of direction. Nor is it entirely new. But not the only gestures the SAC had hitherto been willing to make to everyone else involved the middle finger. Mr Hun Sen has achieved more than anyone else. It would be churlish not to acknowledge this.

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