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Giving the Floor to the Responsible Great Power: China as the Key Player to Solve Myanmar Crisis

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Summary

The ongoing crisis in Myanmar has attracted various negative responses from the international community. As a fellow member of ASEAN, Indonesia has tried to solve the problem by persuading ASEAN member states and ASEAN's partners, including the United States and China, to bring this issue to the upcoming ASEAN meeting. While seeking to maintain the ASEAN centrality, this effort is also seen as a strategy to prevent the possibility of turning the Myanmar crisis into a proxy battle between the United States and China. In this article, we offer an alternative suggestion that Indonesia should not only rely on ASEAN mechanism but also allow China to be the responsible great power by solving the crisis in Myanmar through a more involved direct diplomacy with Myanmar. In doing so, China would be the key player in maintaining the regional stability. By offering such suggestion, we believe that first, it is improbable to turn Myanmar's issue into proxy battle between the 2 great powers since both countries have different level of interest in Myanmar. While China has a rather a lot at stake in Myanmar, United States does not partake any vital interest in or related to Myanmar. Moreover, Myanmar is not perceived as the most significant actor in the region and hence,

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encouraging China to play a bigger role in solving this crisis may not be seen as an immense threat to the United States' position in the region.

Keywords: Myanmar, ASEAN, China, great power competition, regional stability

Background: The Myanmar Crisis and the International Response

The early February military coup in Myanmar has put the country in a prolonged instability, resulting in paralysis of various economic activities, a blackout of the internet, a significant amount of death toll due to a lethal military crackdown, and alleged torture as well as enforced disappearance of detained protesters. Such conditions have been swiftly responded to by public condemnation from numerous countries. Other countries such as United States, New Zealand, and Canada have taken even further actions by imposing economic sanctions directed at Myanmar's military leaders and military-backed companies as a way to show disagreement towards the military's handling of the situation (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Under the backdrop of the domestic crisis and increasing international pressure, Indonesia has decided to be actively involved in seeking a peaceful solution for Myanmar in order to ensure the stability in Southeast Asia.

By the end of February, Indonesia has been doing the shuttle diplomacy and communicate with involved parties in Myanmar as well as numerous countries and international organizations, including every ASEAN member states, the chair of ASEAN, the United Nations, and the two great powers involved in the region: the United States and China. The strategic goals which Indonesia wished to attain from these meetings are to maintain ASEAN centrality in regional security issues while positioning Indonesia as the leader of the regional bloc (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2021). Besides, some experts also highlighted the importance of Indonesia's shuttle diplomacy as the democratic showcase to get to the United States' good side and to prevent turning the issue into a proxy battle between the United States and China (Yuniar, 2021; Bayuni, 2021).

Indonesia's active involvement in solving this issue is understandable since this crisis is likely to produce negative spillover to the region. For example, the prolonged conflict in the Rakhine State has turned hundreds of thousands people into refugees who have sought protection in other ASEAN member states. When this situation is not readily and effectively responded by both ASEAN and its member states, the region encountered a refugee crisis and ASEAN's image in the international community steadily deteriorates (Al Jazeera, 2020; Septiari, 2020). While ASEAN has been struggling to solve the Rohingya crisis, this recent crisis due to the military coup may produce another wave of refugee influx which may contribute to the regional instability. Moreover, should ASEAN also fail to solve this swiftly, it would be another bad press about the organization's handling of human rights issues. However, with Indonesia's current strategy to solve the crisis, two questions arise: First, is Myanmar really going to be a strategic proxy battle for the great powers? Second, is it enough to rely only on the ASEAN mechanism to deal with this issue?

The Unlikelihood of turning Myanmar Crisis into Proxy Battle and the Unreliable ASEAN Mechanism

First, the fear of inducing instability in the region due to the great power competition comes from the traumatic Vietnam War during the Cold War. Since then, ASEAN has adopted a strategy to prevent another proxy conflicts in the region, which Evelyn Goh called ‘Omni-enmeshment.’ The strategy involves the active engagement of multiple great powers in the regional arrangement and enveloping them in a web of sustained interaction (Goh, 2007). Through this interaction, a formation of hierarchical regional powers is formed. In the case of Southeast Asia, the United States becomes the first superpower, with China positioned directly under the United States. This hierarchy keeps stability in the region amid the great powers rivalry and the change of this arrangement is highly undesirable for Southeast Asian countries. In this case, letting China involve too much in Myanmar’s issue may upset the hierarchy of the regional power and possibly destabilize the region.

Such a worrying scenario is highly probable since China’s interest in Myanmar seems to be pretty apparent. China has protected Myanmar from international criticism and possible intervention. If we take a look back at the history, Beijing had backed Myanmar’s junta since the 1990s and 2000s. Donald Weatherbee (2009) observed that China always has the desire to gain access to Myanmar’s resources, especially in the energy sector, and such interest was responded positively by the Junta administration in Myanmar since China was seen as a strong patron and alliance. Even though such relations experienced slight problems when the civilian government took over in 2011, Hunter Marston (2020) noted that the relations bounced back pretty fast with the signing of 33 agreements related to trade, infrastructure-related development, and special economic zones in 2020. Furthermore, China has become the strongest economic and political supporter for Myanmar during the Rohingya crisis, which triggered international condemnation and sanctions towards Myanmar. In return, Myanmar fully supports China’s Belt and Road Initiative, including China’s effort to strengthen its maritime infrastructure and presence in the Indian Ocean by building a deep-sea port in Myanmar. These conditions serve as evidences that China’s relations with Myanmar remains strong and mutually beneficial albeit some domestic changes and issues in Myanmar.

However, similar interest in Myanmar is not shown by the United States. Stephen Walt, one of the leading thinkers in International Relations, believes that the coup in Myanmar does not affect any of the United States’ vital interest in the region (Walt, 2021). Other than the moral commitment of democracy, there is no apparent benefit for the United States to involve too much in this crisis. Moreover, Myanmar is not a leading actor in the region whose alliance options, or the change of it, significantly affect the power distribution in the region. As a token of commitment towards democracy, the country has released public condemnation along with some economic sanctions. In the most rational scenario, those actions are necessary and enough to serve the United States’ interest. Rather than turning the crisis into a proxy battle without some strategic calculation, it is more probable that the Biden administration will wait and see the development of this crisis from afar.

Second, the insistence to rely on the ASEAN mechanism to solve this issue does not seem to be enough either. Currently, there is less than a handful of ASEAN member states that are seriously on board with the idea of solving the issue through the ASEAN Way. Moreover, history has proved that

ASEAN cannot solve conflicts within or between its member states in a swift manner. It took the organization more than a decade of diplomacy to solve the war between Cambodia and Vietnam, while the border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia was only solved through the International Court of Justice despite years of ASEAN diplomatic efforts. Besides, the Rohingya crisis has not found its solution despite being discussed in numerous ASEAN meetings.

Conclusion

Considering the two premises, Indonesia may need to consider encouraging China to start a more involved and active diplomacy in dealing with the Myanmar crisis. It should not be a difficult work since China has both the interest and the capacity to influence the political condition in Myanmar. Moreover, given strong ties and mutual interests between the two countries, it is more likely for the Junta to listen to China. This is not to say that China should in any way support Junta's violent action. Rather, we suggest that any possible peaceful resolution or negotiation between the Junta and the civilian groups should be brokered by China due to China's stronger ties with both groups. Besides, we also acknowledge that albeit China's close relations with the Junta, the rising anti-China sentiment among people in Myanmar (McNeil & Ting 2021) is dangerous for China's economic interests in Myanmar. Hence, the Chinese government would be a relatively neutral mediator for both parties with the sole aim to maintain good relations with the Junta and the civilian leaders.

Furthermore, we also see an opportunity for both Indonesia and ASEAN to contribute in the regional stability by supporting and involving China in solving the crisis. That way, ASEAN could effectively contribute to Myanmar's issue while also preventing any possible unilateral action from China, which may disturb the regional order. In other words, the involvement of China to stabilize Myanmar, along with the role and collaborative efforts from ASEAN, does not necessarily mean that China challenges the United States' position in the regional hierarchy. In short, involving China in this issue is relevant since Southeast Asia countries already have the tendency to enmesh great powers in the regional politics. China's involvement would reaffirm, rather than upset, the regional power hierarchy. Thus, Indonesia and ASEAN may reasonably allow China to be the responsible great power by solving the crisis in Myanmar and maintaining the stability in the region.

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