

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Myanmar Crisis Needs Concerted Democracy Support from Asian Middle Powers

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1. Introduction

On April 23, leaders of ASEAN countries undertook the first meaningful initiative in Jakarta since the February 1 military coup. A belated Five-Point Consensus was made in order to stop state violence, which had resulted in the deaths of 774 victims, including young people, university students, and women and children as of early May (AAPP, 2021.5.8). Countries demanded the immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogue to reach a peaceful solution, mediation by a special envoy from ASEAN's chair, humanitarian assistance, and a visit by a special envoy and delegation. However, even after the consensus, there were an additional 40 fatalities and 439 casualties over the course of the following two weeks. The nationwide civil disobedience movement (CDM) is still ongoing and the National Unity Government (NUG) was formally established. ASEAN has been backed by the international community as the legitimate focal body to resolve the crisis, while major Western countries including the US introduced sanctions targeted only against military leaders and their financial networks.

Foreign and development ministers from G7 countries made a joint statement in London on May 7 and warned that more effective measures including preventing the supply, sale, or transfer of weapons, exercising due diligence in conducting business with military-affiliated business, and relocating development aid from the military regime to the Burmese people. However, prospects for an imminent implementation of such measures remain gloomy. Big businesses who have been working closely with the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), the single largest source of revenue, are vigorously lobbying G7 governments against further sanctions. Moreover, China, with a definite "Three Support and Three Avoids" policy on Myanmar, objects to any "inappropriate intervention" by the UN Security Council (UNSC) or "external forces from fueling the unrest."

The purpose of outside intervention on the current crisis falls somewhere between taking a minimal position of preventing the Myanmar military from seizing the lives of more civilian protestors and a maximal position of recognizing the NUG as the legitimate government of Myanmar and punishing coup leaders by indicting them to the International Criminal Court.¹ The common demand of the international community is to urge the military to stop the brutal crackdown

¹ For example, former Timor-Leste President J. Ramos-Horta addressed these points in his keynote speech at the ADRN Online Seminar "The Voice of Solidarity for the Restoration of Democracy in Myanmar" on April 29, 2021. (http://www.eai.or.kr/new/en/pub/view.asp?intSeq=20489&board=eng_multimedia&keyword_option=&keyword=&more=)

and release arrested politicians and protestors. Outsiders also encourage dialogue among major domestic parties to return to the hybrid government under the 2008 constitution either by honoring the results of the previous November elections or by holding a new election within this year as promised by the coup leader Min Aung Hlaing. The direction of the further development of the democracy of Myanmar must be negotiated and navigated through the free will of local stakeholders themselves through democratic processes. However, military leaders are not responding to these calls. If the international community tolerates illegitimate military rule in Myanmar as if nothing has happened, there is potential for further exacerbation of democratic backsliding in the region.

Witnessing the grave critical juncture in Myanmar democracy, both the governments and the civil societies of middle power democracies of India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea have made significant moves against the military coup and its subsequent violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations. Can these four middle power democracies help Myanmar exit from chaotic conflict? This issue brief aims to overview Asian middle power democracies' responses to the Myanmar crisis and explore what further contributions they can make to support a peaceful resolution.

2. Asian Middle Powers' Myanmar Democracy Support

Both the governments and civil societies in Asian middle power democracies quickly responded to the Myanmar coup. Taking into account their diplomatic relations with the Tatmadaw or geopolitical considerations, the four middle power democracies took somewhat different approaches. Japan and India, for example, undertook quiet diplomacy with low-key moves while South Korea undertook a more assertive and vocal diplomacy. India and Indonesia took a more pragmatic and conciliatory approach due to their past relationships with the country. However, at the core, every country shared its deepest concerns about the military coup and the following bloody suppression of peaceful protestors. Additionally, civil societies in all four Asian democracies were alert and highly attentive to the situation and engaged in organized support for protestors in Myanmar.

Government Responses

Among the four democracies examined here, the South Korean government has issued strong statements and announced sanctions. This assertiveness is unusual and unprecedented for Korean diplomacy. President Moon Jae-in issued SNS messages several times.² High-level officers in the foreign and justice ministries met with the Myanmar ambassador, students, and residents to pay heed to their concerns. The National Assembly adopted a resolution on February 26, referring the coup to a “serious defiance of democracy.” So far, five measures are in place. First, the government suspended new exchanges and cooperation in the field of defense and security. Second, the government ceased the exports of military supplies and decided to strictly control exports of dual-use items. Third, the government is under review of official development assistance (ODA) while continuing projects which are directly linked to the livelihoods of the people and humanitarian

² He expressed “deep concern (February 2),” “condemned the use of violence (February 28),” and said “deeply shocked... and strongly condemns the continuing brutal violence (March 28).”

assistance. Fourth, the government implemented special humanitarian measures that permit Burmese residents in Korea extend their stay until the situation stabilizes. Fifth, the government raised travel advisories to all areas of Myanmar.

On the other hand, both the Japanese and Indian governments have taken a soft and low-key approach to diplomacy. They took similar routes in condemning the coup and delivering deep concerns over the military violence. As the third largest investor and the largest donor to Myanmar, Japan brokered a cease-fire last November between the Tatmadaw and the rebel Arakan Army. Using such leverage, the Japanese government has tried to establish connections with the Tatmadaw to build channels for communication regarding the current crisis. However, the Japanese government was unequivocal in expressing its strong condemnation of the military's use of violence against protestors and demanding the release of political prisoners. The Japanese government has decided to not offer new ODA and is considering the idea of banning existing ODA as well. Japan has also cooperated with India for backroom negotiations with the Tatmadaw inside the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.³

India has unique geopolitical interests regarding the Myanmar conflict. Sharing a border longer than 1,600 km, New Delhi's low-key responses are guarded by the domain of security. As Myanmar's armed insurgent groups are operating in the bordering region, the Indian government developed a close rapport with the Tatmadaw for border security. Also, India launched major infrastructure initiatives such as the Kalada Multi-Modal Transit Transportation Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway to compete with China, regarding its massive infrastructure projects in Myanmar. India also provides more than \$1 billion to Myanmar to strengthen its electoral process and provide technical assistance in education and health care services. Despite close ties with the Tatmadaw, however, Indian representatives such as Indra Pandey, Indian representative at the United Nations Human Rights Council, made a statement demanding the rule of law and the democratic process. As a non-permanent UN Security Council member this year, the Indian government put efforts to move the council forward. For example, it played a key role in pushing the UN Security Council to issue the first press statement calling for the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other government officials on February 4.

On the other hand, Indonesia sought more concerted actions using its ASEAN based leadership. Indonesia's foreign minister visited several member countries for consultation on the crisis. President Joko Widodo at the ASEAN Summit on April 24 stated that "The situation in Myanmar is something that is unacceptable...and violence must be stopped, and democracy, stability, and peace in Myanmar must be restored."⁴ Indonesia believes that an ASEAN-led option is the best among the worst and ASEAN should offer a formula that can make conflicting parties commit to "Myanmar-owned and Myanmar-led" dialogues. How Indonesia, together with Singapore and Malaysia, two other ASEAN members that have manifested an attitude to take action regarding the crisis, can persuade the less willing Tatmadaw remains to be seen. In the meantime, many consider that the principle of ASEAN centrality would fail to deliver a breakthrough in resolving the crisis.

³ Sahoo, Niranjan and Ichihara, Maiko. "The Quad Can End the Crisis in Myanmar," *Foreign Policy*, March 18, 2021.

⁴ Paddock, Richard C. "General Who Led Myanmar's Coup Joins Regional Talks on the Crisis," *New York Times*, April 24, 2021.

Civil Society Responses

Civil societies in Asian democracies have also been active in supporting the Myanmar protestors and their CDM. Such supportive activities are divided into three types.

First, civil society organizations in Asian democracies actively supported the Myanmar protestors through rallies, petitions, and fundraising. In Japan, for example, fundraising activities have taken place both online and offline. In South Korea, about 240 civil society organizations formed an umbrella network supporting democracy in Myanmar and organized several awareness campaigns and political rallies. This network, along with individual citizens, local government branches, and local parliaments has raised funds for CDM. The most active organizations are related to organizations revolving around the Gwangju democratic movement that commemorate the citizen uprising in Gwangju on May 18, 1980 against the military and individual citizens of Gwangju. This is mainly due to the similarity between the two events in terms of how the coup and massacres are unfolding, but the connection has already been established a decade ago when the 5.18 Memorial Foundation actively reached out to support fledgling Southeast Asian democracies.

Second, civil society organizations in Asian democracies not only support Myanmar protestors, but also further exert pressure upon their own governments and businesses working closely with the Myanmar military. In Japan, there are ongoing petition campaigns led by university students aimed to pressure the Japanese government's diplomacy. In India, civil society voices and public opinion in Mizoram are pressuring somewhat passive regional governments to take a more active position in supporting Myanmar protestors and CDM. In South Korea, university students and the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) are protesting in front of companies whose investments are tightly linked to the military. Upon such pressure, one of the companies decided to terminate a joint venture with the Myanmar Economic Holdings Public Limited (MEHL).

Third, other actors such as the media, think tanks, and scholars in Asian democracies are supporting protestors. Both traditional and new media such as SNS have made efforts to spread the word and support protestors. *Sisain*, a progressive South Korean media, is providing an outlet for local Myanmar reporters whose voices have been suppressed. SNS users who have previously worked in Myanmar are posting first-hand stories from Myanmar friends. In India, national media broadcasted the flight of Myanmar refugees and has helped direct public opinion. Moreover, research institutes and scholars in Japan and South Korea show support for Myanmar democracy by signing petitions, publicizing their research on the fairness of elections based on survey research, or organizing scholarly events supporting protestors.

3. More Concerted Actions among Asian Middle Power Democracies are Necessary

Despite the abovementioned efforts on the Myanmar crisis made by the four middle power democracies, it is apparent that there is a huge lack of consultation and concerted actions among themselves. While government and civil societies of these four countries developed a like-minded cause and positions, i.e., helping Myanmar people achieve their aspirations of restoring their democracy, they are not coordinating their actions as an ad-hoc plurilateral network. Although bilateral options are still important, emphasis should be put on multilateral options since “enhancing

solidarity” among middle power democracies is an important feature in the current geopolitical configuration (Keleinfeld et al. 2021). Informal consultation and coordinated actions among like-minded middle power democracies on the Myanmar crisis can be a good issue-specific middle-power campaign integrating governmental and nongovernmental actors and linking diverse multilateral spaces and venues (Paris, 2019).⁵ Here are some measures through which middle power democracies can coordinate utilizing their bilateral relations with Myanmar and their actions in regional and global organizations.

Bilateral measures to coordinate

First of all, all middle power democracies can enhance humanitarian assistance to the people in Myanmar. In addition to the prevailing pandemic situation, many shops are closed and economic sustainability has been greatly undermined amid the violent crackdowns. Vulnerable populations such as women, children, injured people, and internally displaced people should be prioritized. Myanmar is one of poorest countries and its economic situation has further exacerbated with the CDM. A recent estimate from the World Bank shows a possible 9.8% contraction from earlier predictions, illustrative of the serious decline of the economic condition of the country. Myanmar is in desperate need of funding to continue CDM and other projects directly linked to the lives of Myanmar people.

Second, while more humanitarian aid is essential, ODA to the energy industries and infrastructure buildings that are related to the Tatmadaw should be suspended. China is by far the largest trade partner to Myanmar, accounting for one third of exports and imports from and to Myanmar. On the other hand, Japan and India are, respectively, the third and fourth largest partners that receive Myanmar’s exports. In terms of foreign investment, Singapore accounts for more than a quarter of the total, which has provided some leverage for Singapore. Since these goods are closely tied with ordinary people’s income, export reduction is not a good option. Instead, pulling the ODA card, with humanitarian aid out of the picture, can be coordinated among middle power donors.

Third, coordination regarding migration and refugee policy is necessary to cope with Myanmar students, workers, and residents who are already in their country. South Korea’s policy, which guaranteed Myanmar people’s safety by delaying their return to their home country depending on the political situation, could be a good model. This immigration policy has been in effect since March 15. They can also implement common travel bans and restrictions against military leaders and their families.

Fourth, it is reported that besides China, North Korea, and Russia, democracies such as India, Israel, the Philippines, and Ukraine sold arms to Myanmar. Asian democracies, at least temporarily, should cease the exports of military supplies and strictly control the exports of dual-use items. This, with no doubt, will eventually lead to imposing an international arms embargo on Myanmar. Concerted policies led by democratic countries will send a strong message to the military, condemning their violent suppression of peaceful protesters.

Multilateral options

⁵ Paris, Roland, “Can Middle Powers Save the Liberal World Order?,” *Chatham House Briefing*, June 2019.

First, ASEAN is the most relevant forum in resolving the Myanmar crisis since the Consensus is the only international document that the Myanmar military has committed to so far. Asian middle power democracies must support ASEAN to move forward and actually implement effective measures in the Consensus – i.e. selecting, sending, and administrating mediation by a special envoy and also guarantee humanitarian assistance. Support from regional middle power democracies such as South Korea, Japan, and India would certainly help when it is further backed up by China and the US.

Second, another way is to start from international human rights conventions which Myanmar is a state party to – International Covenant on Economic, Social, Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The first starting point would be the 2012 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. A commonality among regional and international conventions is their involvement of women and children. The proportion of women in the protests is high; the fact that there are women and child victims of violence is also appalling. The international society should eventually hold the military accountable for all atrocities committed either by using domestic measures like trials or truth commissions using universal jurisdiction or international measures like the International Criminal Court. However, the first criteria to examine should be what Myanmar itself has already committed to comply.

Third, the UNSC, the body with the most effective tool to address this issue, is in a gridlock due to China and Russia. So far, the UNSC has only issued a presidential press statement (February 4, 2021), a presidential statement (March 10, 2021), and a press element (April 1, 2021), which fall short of resolutions. Moreover, the content of these documents was disappointing as it not only lacked specific follow-up measures, but also did not specifically underline responsible parties and the nature of the political turmoil – i.e. the military coup. The UNSC also had an Arria-formula meeting on April 9, 2021 and several consultation meetings with experts and UN officials. Asia middle power democratic countries should press the UNSC for further action using other UN bodies such as the UN General Assembly or Human Rights Council (HRC).

4. Conclusion

Middle power democracies have been increasingly called upon to address their region's democratic crisis and revamp global support for democracy using their comparative strengths.⁶ The current crisis in Myanmar has more actively engaged Asian middle power democracies. Beyond the conventional ASEAN-led noninterventionist diplomacy, several non-ASEAN Asian countries like South Korea have taken unprecedentedly engaging measures. Above all, civil societies of Asian middle power democracies have shown moral and financial support to the CDM in Myanmar. There are unusually high levels of empathy and support for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar, placing increasing levels of pressure for their governments to engage in the region's democratic crisis.

⁶ Kleinfeld, Rachel, et al. "How Middle-Power Democracies Can Help Renovate Global Democracy Support," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 4, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/02/04/how-middle-power-democracies-can-help-renovate-global-democracy-support-pub-83809>.

For now, the most pressing issue is how to sustain such governmental and civil society support and facilitate change towards a desirable democratic transition. First of all, Asian middle power democracies should seek solidarity with each other. When they know they are standing alongside like-minded countries in addressing the Myanmar crisis, they can create impacts through consultation and coordination. When individual countries' responses are coordinated, the scale of their leverage can be strong enough to encourage change beyond the current stalemate. While strengthening ASEAN-led dialogues, Asian middle power democracies should also seek a series of Myanmar democracy campaigns using bigger platforms like the Asian Regional Forum or the European human rights organization, not to mention the UN and its agencies. Both the governments and civil societies of conventional roles of middle powers have been a facilitator, a mediator or an agenda setter in regional and global affairs. Asian middle power democracies have not accumulated such experiences compared to conventional Western middle powers.⁷ However, Asian middle powers should take more bold actions at this urgent time to help the Myanmar people out of the crisis with resource power and committed democratic values. ■

➤ *This Issue Briefing is a follow-up to the EAI Online Seminar “The Voice of Solidarity for the Restoration of Democracy in Myanmar,” held on April 29, 2021.*

⁷ Lee, Sook Jong eds., *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016).

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