

## **All Eyes on Myanmar (2): Why ASEAN Centrality Matters**

The “**ASEAN Centrality**”, a now frequently used term in the official discourse of the Southeast regional organisation, was firstly employed in the 2019 “*ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific*”, in order **to stress both on the consensual narrative of the organisation, as well as to emphasize the importance of sovereignty and self-governance of a group of countries that witnessed fulminating economic growth and political consolidation in the aftermath of their respective colonial experiences.** The message sent by ASEAN is, in fact, a reiteration of the organisation’s *motto* recalling a united vision, identity and community.

Challenged by a threat that knows no borders, the Covid-19 pandemic, ASEAN remained faithful to the “*Centrality*” concept and managed to tackle the virulent plight by a tight coordination at the level of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, Economic Ministers, Defence Ministers, Health Ministers, ASEAN Plus Three Health Ministers, and in the framework of the initiative for cooperation with the United States and European Union. Moreover, the regional organisation has been playing a central role in diminishing the impact of the pandemic by exchanging data on government regulations and compiling statistics with regard to managing the outbreaks through the ASEAN BioDiaspora Virtual Center (ABVC). **ASEAN not only realised the importance of multilateralism and close connectivity in facing a common threat, but has also put in place the appropriate mechanisms to mitigate such a threat.**

The recent course of events in Myanmar displays similar features: **political instability, and all the dangers and consequences associated to it, represents a common threat at regional level.** The spillover effects can be neither neglected, nor ignored. **Chair’s Statement** on the occasion of the **Informal ASEAN Ministerial Meeting** on March 2 sent exactly this message: “*political stability in ASEAN Member States is essential to achieving a peaceful, stable and prosperous ASEAN Community*”.

**Despite the statement not being made directly in reference to the on-going Myanmar crisis, its relevance – and cautiousness – in the current Southeast Asian vivid and extremely important political and geo-strategic context cannot be neglected.** In fact, initially, the meeting was presented as a special initiative on Myanmar crisis. In reality, the topic, as per point 1 of the Chair’s statement was on progress of the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, other significant elements **on which the concept of ASEAN centrality is based**, as well as Coronavirus. The degree of the obvious cautiousness of the official document represents an open door for the next more concrete steps of ASEAN involvement in getting a viable and urgent solution to the ever more dramatic developments in Myanmar.

With regard to the situation in Myanmar, the **ASEAN Ministers** expressed “concern”, while calling “on all parties to refrain from instigating further violence, and for all sides to exercise utmost restraint as well as flexibility. We also called on all parties concerned to seek a peaceful solution, through constructive dialogue, and practical reconciliation in the interests of the people and their livelihood.” The Ministers expressed their “readiness to assist Myanmar in a positive, peaceful and constructive manner.”

Indeed, the **Chair’s Statement could be interpreted as a unanimous and consensual voice** complementing previous declarations of several ASEAN-level Foreign Affairs Ministers. Retno MARSUDI, the **Indonesian Foreign Minister**, emphasized that “ASEAN’s good intentions and readiness will be meaningless if Myanmar does not open its door”, while the **Singaporean Foreign Minister** warned that failing to find common grounds to resolve the crisis “would starkly underscore our lack of unity, and undermine our credibility and relevance as an organisation”. The **Malaysian and Filipino Foreign Ministers** joined the call of their Indonesian and Singaporean counterparts to release the political detainees in Myanmar.

In the meanwhile, the violence continued, as the **United Nations Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar** noted at least 38 people were killed on March 3, after security forces opened fire on protesters, referring to the tragic turn of events as “the bloodiest day since the coup happened”.

**ASEAN’s Centrality seems to remain paramount to all other international and regional organisations closely following the events.** According to recent media reports, the **United Nations Security Council** is expected to meet behind closed doors on Friday, March 5, in an extraordinary meeting requested by the United Kingdom in order to discuss the situation in Myanmar, which follows the **Informal ASEAN Ministerial Meeting**. In a similar key, the **European Union** signaled it “stands ready” to take measures with regard to the crisis in Myanmar, yet refraining to immediately act. **The reactions above may be interpreted as a sign of support for ASEAN, as the Southeast regional organisation is still expected to set the tone with regard to the exact actions to be taken, while the United Nations and the European Union would come to support, complement and legitimate the “ASEAN Centrality”.**

Naturally, it would be futile to imagine the on-going international and regional efforts to identify a positive solution without assessing the role of “Track 2 diplomacy”. While the official channels of communication may act with a sense of caution specific to the diplomatic language, undoubtedly, concrete proposals and courses of actions are discussed as I am writing this text. After all, of the advancement of such plans depends not only the success of traditional diplomatic actions, but – ultimately – the solution to the crisis *per se*.

Such a solution, however, is not in sight. The statements released by the ASEAN leaders, as well as the harsher wording employed at UN or EU level, **are yet indicate a positive, constructive and mutually accepted solution.** After all, **such a solution could represent the litmus test of the “ASEAN Centrality”.** Just like an epidemic, **outbreaks of political instability tend to spillover, if not properly mitigated.**

*The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy, position or view of IRSEA.*