

Japan must use its special relationship with Myanmar to facilitate peace

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Ever since widespread protests by Myanmar citizens erupted against the military coup, more than 750 people have died in crackdowns by the Tatmadaw (the national army) and police forces. Many refugees have fled to neighboring countries. This domestic turmoil is causing much concern and becoming an issue with serious regional and international implications.

Despite harsh criticisms leveled against the violence and sanctions being imposed by some international community members, the Tatmadaw has shown no signs of easing up on the crackdown.

The declared state of emergency appears likely to last longer than one year. The protracted conflict has already led to the disruption of the national economy, destabilized people's lives and livelihoods and fed concerns about the possibility of becoming a failed state. If the conflict escalates between the Tatmadaw and the National Unity Government (NUG) and the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the danger of a greater civil war breaking out will likely increase.

To prevent Myanmar from descending into war and chaos, the government of Japan should take immediate steps to help stabilize the situation through active diplomatic efforts. And given the circumstances, supporting or partnering with ASEAN, of which Myanmar is a member, will be the best possible avenue to help resolve the difficult situation, stop the violence, facilitate the release of political prisoners, mitigate further risks to the region and eventually realize democratic governance.

Japan can play a unique role here. Tokyo has ties and contacts with the Tatmadaw, the National League of Democracy, and other

domestic political forces and citizen groups in the country. Japan also has a close relationship with other ASEAN members and neighboring Asian countries. Now is the time for Tokyo to reinvigorate its diplomatic initiatives and take advantage of its unique position.

The current crisis in Myanmar was not caused by the intervention of foreign powers, rather it is the manifestation of a confrontation — political in nature — between the Tatmadaw and citizens demanding democratic governance.

As such, the United Nations and ASEAN have attempted to address the Myanmar crisis. In the U.N., there are apparently divisions among key members in the Security Council and no effective actions have yet been taken. Although ASEAN, for its part, adheres to a principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of member states, it has started to try and find a realistic response to help alleviate the situation in Myanmar.

ASEAN held its leaders' meeting in Jakarta on April 24th to address the ongoing situation in Myanmar, reaching a consensus on five points. We welcome the proposals embodied in this consensus as realistic and achievable, particularly the appointment of a special ASEAN envoy.

In our view, the new envoy should be appointed as soon as possible, be able to visit Myanmar without any conditions and should meet with the concerned parties, including the Tatmadaw and the supporters of the NUG/CRPH. The ASEAN consensus has provided Japan with a framework that will allow it to be diplomatically proactive and to promote comprehensive measures to help resolve the conflict and restore a long-lasting peace.

To achieve its objectives, Japan can take the following steps in the future:

First, Tokyo should make full use of all communication channels at its disposal in addition to official diplomatic channels. The goals should be to persuade Myanmar's

military leaders to exercise maximum self-restraint and stop the violence; to prevent opposition groups from engaging in armed conflict; to convince all parties and actors in the conflict to act calmly; to avoid more casualties; and to prevent the country from falling into a civil war.

Second, given the current situation surrounding Myanmar, we consider it appropriate that Japan fully respect and support ASEAN's leadership in forming a unified, proactive position to facilitate a timely resolution to the conflict by consulting closely with all concerned parties.

Tokyo should also consider utilizing the ASEAN-Plus-3 framework, which includes Japan, China and South Korea. The involvement of the broader community of Asian countries outside ASEAN will help alleviate the conflict-prone structures in the region and attract positive attention from the international community — particularly Europe and the United States.

Third, Japan should actively support the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance for Disaster Management as proposed in the five-point consensus. The heavy civilian casualties caused by the conflict, particularly children, are undeniably part of a serious human rights and humanitarian tragedy, which must be stopped immediately.

Still, it should be recognized that the Myanmar crisis stems from deep-seated historical, political and other complex issues. As such, the peoples of Myanmar must come together and create their own solutions. That's why a paradigm shift is needed regarding the ways and means by which the international community extends its support. Here, ASEAN should take the lead in helping Myanmar to resolve its problems.

We also propose the establishment of a group called "Asian Friends for Sustainable Peace and Development in Myanmar" at an appropriate stage to provide mediation and support reconciliation efforts. That group



Myanmar's junta chief and head of the Tatmadaw, Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, presides over an military parade on Armed Forces Day in Naypyitaw on March 27. REUTERS

should include not only China, Japan and South Korea, but also India and other like-minded countries. Such a project would require vigorous diplomatic efforts from all concerned as well as the support and endorsement of ASEAN. We recommend the Government of Japan to take preparatory actions in anticipation of this possible outcome.

And fourth, if and when the engagement of the United Nations is called for, a new mechanism, such as a hybrid ASEAN-U.N. mission, may be contemplated. The wider international community could then provide the needed political and other support to ensure peace and further development in the country.

Japan has vast experience in assisting the development, stability, and prosperity of countries in Southeast Asia, including Myanmar. Such endeavors include making active contributions in conflict resolution and post-conflict peace building efforts in places like Cambodia, Timor-Leste and Afghanistan.

That's why we believe Japan can and should play an active role in helping overcome the stalemate in Myanmar. Japan is one of the few countries that many in Myanmar hold in trust, given it has no special agenda, hidden or otherwise.

It is imperative that Japan make its experience and diplomatic assets available to

help facilitate peace and bring resolution to the Myanmar crisis. Japan's proactive peace diplomacy in Myanmar will be fully compatible with the letter and spirit enshrined in our Constitution.

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