

Guest Column

Australia, EU: 'Constructive Engagement' Stumbles Right Out of the Box in Myanmar

Tuesday 16 March 2021, by [LINTNER Bertil](#) (Date first published: 15 March 2021).

It was a major diplomatic breakthrough for Myanmar's new junta, the State Administration Council (SAC). On March 9, its vice chairman, Vice-Senior General Soe Win, met the head of the European Union's military staff Vice-Admiral Hervé Bléjean via video conferencing to discuss the SAC's efforts to establish the rule of law and community peace in accordance with Myanmar's Constitution. They also talked cordially about how Myanmar's security forces were handling current protests, the SAC's five future work plans and its COVID-19 vaccination programs.

What appeared to be an EU recognition of the SAC and endorsement of its actions came on the heels of a similar event involving Australia's second-most senior military officer Vice-Admiral David Johnston. On Feb. 22, he rang Soe Win and the two military commanders reportedly talked about the leading role of the SAC. The new governing body, Soe Win explained, works for the establishment of a democratic state based on justice and freedom, and Myanmar's security forces had not cracked down on any peaceful protesters but only used minimal force in controlling riots sweeping the country. The Australian vice-admiral then told his Myanmar colleague that his country is a development partner of Myanmar, and they also discussed cooperation between the militaries of the two countries which, Soe Win said, are both based on democratic norms and values. Johnston, on his part, promised that Australia would provide assistance to Myanmar to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

At least, that is how the military-controlled and now again strictly censored state media in Myanmar reported Soe Win's phone conversations with Bléjean and Johnston — never mind that Johnston actually rang Soe Win in an attempt to free detained Australian academic Sean Turnell and stated that "the use of lethal force and violence against peaceful protesters is unacceptable." Johnston went on to demand that restoration of democracy and immediate release of all civilian leaders who have been detained since the coup on Feb. 1.

Human rights groups in Australia slammed Johnston's phone call accusing the government in Canberra of bolstering the credibility of an illegitimate regime. But, as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported on Feb. 23: "Some analysts defended the call and said it was reasonable for the Australian government to use every opportunity to urge the military not to use violence on protesters."



Vice Admiral Herve Beljean, the head of the European Union, holds a video conference with one of the coup leaders, Vice Senior General Soe Win, on March 9.

In the same spirit, the EU said in statement issued on March 9 that the reason for Bléjean's call to Soe Win was to urge the Myanmar military to immediately stop all violence and that they should "release the democratically-elected leadership of the country including DawAung San Suu Kyi and U Win Myint as well as all other political detainees." Bléjean emphasized "the particular importance of extending an invitation to UN Special Envoy Schraner Burgener to visit Myanmar as soon as possible, allowing her to consult the view of all parties concerned and facilitate a dialogue."

The reason behind Johnston's as well as Bléjean's calls to Soe Win is obvious: the EU and Australia thought that Myanmar's new leadership would be more willing to listen to a military officer than a civilian politician and, hopefully, act accordingly.

It is, however astounding that Australia and the EU could not predict how those two calls would be perceived by SAC — and how the junta would use them in its own propaganda. It is unforgivably naive to believe that Myanmar's generals would listen to friendly advice given by any Westerner, military or civilian. They listen only to themselves.

Commenting on Westerners who believe than can "engage" Myanmar's military leadership, I wrote in The Irrawaddy of June 11, 2015 that those policies of many Western countries reflect "what amounts to a blatantly neo-colonial attitude. Words to the effect: 'We have to go and tell those funny little brown fellows how to run their country, and, because we are big and clever white guys, surely they have to listen to us.' But, at the same time, it is easy to imagine what the Myanmar generals' reaction must have been when they received those Western proponents of engagement: 'Those myaukpyu (white monkeys) are sort of amusing. But they are not very clever. So let's use them.' Or words to that effect."

The most extreme and least thought-through example of the "constructive engagement" policy is to be found in an opinion piece published in the Nikkei Asian Review of March 2. Written by Bill Hayton, who is listed as an "Associate Fellow with the Asia-Pacific Program at Chatham House" in London, it's headlined "Myanmar's monthlong 'phony war' is over."

How he could get that impression when, the same day as the article was published, anti-military protests were being held all over Myanmar, is a mystery. But those protests, in Hayton's version of events, are only "some disruptions in Yangon and Mandalay. It [the military] built itself a new capital on Naypyidaw precisely to escape the risk of disorder in the old one of Yangon...it is not to give up just because noisy urban crowds want it to do so."



A candlelight vigil is held for those who were killed by police and soldiers across the nation on Saturday night.

It is nothing short of an insult to the millions of people across the country who took to the streets and risked their lives to describe what is happening as "noisy crowds" involved in "some disruptions" which apparently are confined to Myanmar's two major cities. People marched in every city and town from Putao on the far north to Kawthaung in the deep south, including — which Hayton must have missed — Naypyidaw. All those people, and especially those who were gunned

down by Myanmar's police and military, deserve respect — and not to be dismissed as troublemakers by a Western academic sitting in peaceful comfort elsewhere in the world.

Hayton's recipe for finding a solution to the crisis in Myanmar is equally devoid of any resemblance to what is happening on the streets of the country's cities and towns, or close to anything that could realistically be done.

Having repeated the old myth of the Tatmadaw is acting as it does because it sees "itself as the guardian of the nation, the only force standing between national unity and disintegration" and not to protect its economic interests and other privileges, Hayton goes on to suggest that it is "vital" that Myanmar's neighbors and "friends around the world" — whoever they might be — "rapidly engage with the military leadership."

And for that to work, talk about "reducing the military's role in politics should be suspended." Then he goes on to say that "some face-saving compromises on claims of irregularities in the election results could be agreed upon." Hayton also believes that "this could be a moment for the US and China to find some common ground" because neither superpower "wants to see instability in Myanmar." He says that "some kind of joint initiative" between the US and China is possible on which Japan, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could "come on board."

It is hard to imagine a more unworkable plan of action for the way forward. Appeasement has never worked, nor has "constructive engagement," which initially was the name given to the policy of the US administration under Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s to justify trade and other relations with the apartheid regime in South Africa. That failed miserably because, as Stanford J. Ungar and Peter Vale wrote in the winter 1985/86 issue of *Foreign Affairs*: "Having been offered many carrots by the United States over a period of four-and-a-half years as incentives to institute meaningful reforms, the South African authorities had simply made a carrot stew and eaten it." Eventually, South Africa became a democracy but that was because of internal factors and a new, more enlightened leadership in Pretoria, not because the US and some other Western countries cozied up to a repressive regime.

And to believe that Japan, India and ASEAN would come "on board" some joint US-China initiative — even if that against all odds were to happen — is outright foolish. First of all, China would not even consider going into some kind of partnership with the US and regional foes and rivals such as Japan and India. China, which has a lot at stake in Myanmar, a strategically important neighbor, is pursuing a much more elaborate agenda to protect its own interests, which includes playing politics with a number of actors in the country without involving anybody else.



Mandalay residents stage an anti-regime protest in early March. / The Irrawaddy

And would Japan and India want to "come on board," i.e. play second fiddle, in such a grand plan? As for ASEAN, the first to suggest that it should play an important role in nudging Myanmar towards democracy was Kevin Rudd, a former Australian prime minister and now president of the Asia Society. In a BBC interview on Feb. 13, he said that the way forward is a dialogue with the coup makers under ASEAN guidance, apparently forgetting that the bloc's two guiding principles — non-

interference and consensus — make it highly ineffective as a mediator or even a player in any regional conflict.

ASEAN never made its position clear on the freedom struggle in East Timor because it was considered an “internal affair” of Indonesia, and it failed to address numerous border disputes between member nations such as Thailand and Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, and the Philippines and Malaysia. ASEAN has also been unable to articulate a common policy on the South China Sea disputes.

And who, as Hayton seems to believe, says the struggle for democracy is over? Even if street manifestations were to be suppressed completely — which even now seems unlikely as people gather in their thousands for nightly candlelight vigils — the fight will continue in different shapes and forms.

What Myanmar least of all needs is some kind of patronizing white messiahs telling anyone in the country what to do and giving bad advice to outside actors. Change will eventually come to Myanmar, but it will come from within — and that would have to involve at least some sections of the armed forces. There is a role that the international community can play, but that would have to be to support Myanmar civil society organizations without talking down on them, which too often was the case in the past. The various nationalities of Myanmar should be supported on their own terms because they and nobody else are the masters of their country and its destiny.

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P.S.

- The Irrawaddy. 15 March 2021:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/constructive-engagement-stumbles-right-box-myanmar.html>
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