

Guest Column

Thailand's Bankrupt Myanmar Policy

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Few signboards foretell the global issues of our time better than what is addressed at the annual meetings of the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) in Singapore. After a pandemic-induced two-year hiatus, the most recent SLD covered the gamut on the main stage, from the United States-China geostrategic competition and military modernization to security cooperation and climate change. The only anomalous single- and small-country focus in a special session was Myanmar.

The main reason Myanmar commands its own show is because so much is going wrong with the country. Myanmar is a four-layered conundrum.

First, the country is beset by a raging civil war after its military seized power and unplugged a decade of political liberalization, economic reform and development progress. Myanmar's military used to be known with dignity and respect as the Tatmadaw but lately locals are referring to it as "Sit-tat", just an ordinary armed force oppressing and killing its own people at will.

Second, Myanmar, apart from its internal turmoil, has become ASEAN's sick and contested member. Myanmar's representation in regional and international meetings is problematic because it effectively has two parallel governments, the junta-led one under the State Administration Council (SAC) reporting to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and the civilian-directed one under the National Unity Government, an umbrella for the anti-military opposition alliance, which includes the People's Defense Force, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Ethnic Armed Organizations. Since the coup on Feb. 1 last year, ASEAN's grouping has virtually been reduced from 10 to nine, as major partners have boycotted or threatened to do so if the SAC represents the country. As international sanctions have piled on Myanmar's ruling generals and their families, ASEAN's "five-point" consensus aimed at navigating a way out of the morass has floundered.

Third, Myanmar is a thorn in the side of the international community. The United Nations and major countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and European Union nations, have demanded a return to the pre-coup democratic process and the release of political prisoners, including former leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Finally, it's not just states and governments that are stakeholders; the international society has also tuned in to the Myanmar drama. News headlines, and even Hollywood movies about Myanmar's plight and long journey to freedom and openness, have captured worldwide audiences.

With so much at stake and so little progress on the ground, there is desperation to find "a way forward", as the SLD session was titled. Apart from ASEAN officials, UN types and representatives of other major players, Thailand has long been looked at as the key mover on Myanmar. Yet under Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, himself a former general and coup maker, the government appears to be out for a long lunch on its next-door neighbor with which it shares the longest of four country borders and common issues and challenges, such as migrant labor and human and drug trafficking.

So when Thailand's Foreign Affairs Minister Don Pramudwinai recently appointed Pornpimol Kanchanalak as "special envoy" for Myanmar, the move raised antennae among Myanmar watchers, with expectations that perhaps Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a plan to make a difference. Never mind that Pornpimol is cited on Google as having been charged by the US government and convicted in the late 1990s over her involvement in illegal campaign donations.

This does not seem like a big deal when Prayut's former cabinet member was found to have been convicted and jailed in Australia for drug trafficking. Thailand's Constitutional Court ruled that such a criminal offense is not a disqualification because it did not take place on Thai soil. Let's just say it would all be acceptable if Pornpimol's "envoyship" can make a splash and somehow break the deadly impasse we are seeing in Myanmar.

An official and explicit "envoy" for any policy issue is uncommon in the Thai foreign policy-making system because usually, lead movers and contact points are implicit. Thai ministers are notoriously prickly and protective of their turf. Appointing an outright "envoy" could outshine and undermine the minister's own stature and standing. But Foreign Affairs Minister Don must have had his own good reasons.

In her SLD remarks, it became clear there was nothing new from Thailand on Myanmar. In fact, the Thai position can be likened to the old "constructive engagement" of the 1990s, appeasing and allowing the Myanmar military regime to call the shots and take its pledges at face value. In fact, the Thai envoy conceded as much by recognizing the SAC's promise to hold elections by August 2023. If held, such a poll would be deeply flawed and roundly illegitimate because the Myanmar military is facing a nationwide revolt from its own people. The big difference between now and back in the 1990s and 2000s is that the Myanmar people are standing up and gradually winning their guerrilla-style fight against uniformed soldiers in ubiquitous townships.

What is needed from Thailand is both more pressure and accommodation. Thailand needs to engage the NUG, as some ASEAN members, such as Malaysia, have done. As more governments beyond the EU, the US and UK acknowledge the NUG's role, Thailand risks being caught out and left behind. At the same time, the SAC—not Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing per se—should be reassured that it is part of the equation at any negotiating table. Thailand can facilitate more border relief agencies for humanitarian assistance and safe havens for displaced persons coming out of Myanmar.

The Thai envoy was right that the Myanmar coup cannot be undone but returning to pre-coup conditions of democratic process and fluid civil-military power-sharing can be achieved and should be the goal. Appeasement needs no envoy. If Pornpimol is going to be the Thai government's mouthpiece on Myanmar, we already have spokespersons for that. There is no need for a special envoy if no messaging is being done to broker a compromise and chart a forward movement.

Perhaps it was telling that Pornpimol began her SLD remarks with a false analogy using a quote from the late Sir Winston S Churchill. To be sure, Churchill was a quintessential British imperialist with unrivaled talents who received a call from history that a dark fascist tyranny was looming and answered it with gusto in his finest performance during his country's finest hour. In March 1944, Churchill in front of the Royal College of Physicians said "the longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward", a case for his instrumental role in the creation of the UK's famed National Health Service. Yet Pornpimol cited this quote to justify the Myanmar military's roadmap.

For his timeless words, wit and wisdom, Churchill, possibly the greatest statesman of the 20th century, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1953. He surely had at least a thousand catchy lines against the kind of tyranny and dictatorship we are seeing in Myanmar. When one gets a Churchillian quip and quote wrong, everything else is unlikely to be right.

P.S.

- The Irrawaddy. 18 June 2022:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/thailands-bankrupt-myanmar-policy.html>

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- Thitinan Pongsudhirak is a professor and director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Political Science.