

Wheel Has Come Full Circle in Myanmar

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***Aung San Suu Kyi**, the iconic figure of Myanmar politics, has been moved from prison to house arrest. This may seem a baby step, but make no mistake, the journey of a thousand steps begins with one step, as the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu had said.*

This development signifies stirrings in the air, a willingness to explore dialogue, and must be welcomed by neighbouring countries — in particular, India, China and Thailand.

If the past is any guide, the military leadership in Myanmar has either been talking to Suu Kyi behind the scenes or is hoping to re-engage her in a meaningful conversation. The fact that Thailand's foreign minister **Don Pramudwinai** paid a secret visit to Nay Pyi Taw three weeks ago and met with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and Suu Kyi in prison suggests pivotal undercurrents.

Don travelled on a special military plane. Evidently, the powerful Thai military was on board, which is only to be expected as the generals in Bangkok are also locked in an existential struggle of sorts with the very same western powers who are igniting a guerrilla war in Myanmar.

The paradox is, Western intelligence agencies are fuelling an armed rebellion against the Myanmar generals in power from the hideouts in Thailand while also promoting a colour revolution and regime change in Thailand itself. The Myanmar and Thai militaries traditionally kept close fraternal ties.

Don described his trip to Nay Pyi Taw as "an approach of the friends of Myanmar, who would like to see a peaceful settlement". Interestingly, his trip took place just days before the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in Jakarta on July 11-12. The timing suggests that Don's mission provided a vital input for the ASEAN deliberations on Myanmar.

The ASEAN faces a Hobson's choice. To reconcile with the military coup in Myanmar is a bitter pill to swallow. On the other hand, the western pressure to isolate Myanmar is a road to nowhere; the generals in Nay Pyi Taw simply hunkered down. And in the process, ASEAN unity got eroded.

The ASEAN cannot be unaware that it is in Washington's crosshairs, since the group stubbornly refuses to take sides in the US's rivalry with China. The QUAD members once swore passionately by "ASEAN centrality," but today a fragmented ASEAN suits US interests in the Indo-Pacific — 'you are either with us, or against us.'

All these subplots make the geopolitics of Myanmar very complex. But it is possible to be cautiously optimistic. Importantly, the joint communique issued after the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting avoided polemical references to Myanmar and even complimented the authorities in Nay Pyi Taw over their implementation of the pilot repatriation project with Bangladesh to facilitate 7,000 Rakhine refugees to return by the end of this year.

The ASEAN joint communique stated:

"We reaffirmed ASEAN's continued support for Myanmar's efforts to bring peace, stability, the rule of law, promote harmony and reconciliation among the various communities, as well as ensure sustainable and equitable development in Rakhine State...

"We discussed the developments in Myanmar and reaffirmed our united position that the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) remains our main reference to address the political crisis in Myanmar. We strongly condemned the continued acts of violence, including air strikes, artillery shelling, and destruction of public facilities and **urged all parties involved** to take concrete action to immediately halt indiscriminate violence, **denounce any escalation**, and create a conducive environment for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and inclusive national dialogue." [Emphasis added.]

The ASEAN didn't openly identify with Don's trip to Myanmar but, significantly, the joint communique made it a point to mention that "a number of ASEAN member states viewed as a positive development" the initiative by Thailand, without elaborating or specifying which states were in support.

Equally significant, Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia which are known to have taken a strong stand against any engagement with Nay Pyi Taw that could be perceived as recognising Myanmar's top generals as legitimate leaders, piped down their rhetoric. The Indonesian **Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi**, host of the summit in Jakarta, avoided commenting on Don's meeting with Suu Kyi.

Meanwhile, the military leaders in Nay Pyi Taw are watching keenly the political developments in Thailand, which point toward emasculating the colour revolution sponsored by the West.

The Thai military is making sure that Pita Limjaroenrat, a rich playboy retreaded through Harvard University and pitchforked to the vanguard of the colour revolution in Bangkok will not get the requisite majority support in the parliament to form a government.

Pita's electoral alliance is unravelling leaving him in limbo. The second biggest constituent of his electoral alliance, Pheu Thai party, is seeking a modus vivendi with the politico-

military establishment in Bangkok (backed by the monarchy) to work out a power-sharing arrangement that nips in the bud Washington's best-laid plans to turn Thailand into a vassal state an anti-China base — an Ukraine in Asia on China's doorstep.

Pita had made it abundantly clear that once in power, he would do all he could to evict the generals in power in Myanmar. Indeed, the Western strategy is to turn Thailand into a staging post to destabilise the countries along China's "soft underbelly" — Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. Washington pinned high hopes on Pita who also possesses, curiously, the communication skills comparable to Ukraine's Zelensky.

However, the Thai military is digging in, with support from the monarchy, to thwart the Western game plan to "lock in" their country as a base camp of the Indo-Pacific strategy to encircle China. The heart of the matter is that although the US-Thai alliance is decades-old and served mutual interests, times have changed, and today, the two countries share few strategic interests.

Relatedly, the military-backed elites in Bangkok are interested in closer ties with Beijing, whom it sees as a more reliable defence and economic partner. A strategic drift has been building up over the recent decades and Thailand no longer shares strategic interests with the US.

Perceptions changed in 1998, when the US failed to bail out Thailand during the Asian economic crisis. Thailand does not view China as a revisionist power or a military threat. Instead, Bangkok considers Beijing as the country's largest economic partner, and an ally. Succinctly put, American and Thai strategic concerns are sharply out of alignment.

Suffice to say, the political developments in Thailand and Myanmar are intertwined. The Thai establishment's advice to the Myanmarese generals would be, conceivably, to "weaponise" electoral politics as they are doing in Bangkok and defang and assimilate the opposition, so as to keep the wolves away. It seems the generals in Nay Pyi Taw heeded Don's message.

The ASEAN too is not wanting matters to be taken to a point of no return and will be quietly pleased that Don's consultations broke the political stalemate in Myanmar. After all, both the Myanmarese military leadership and Suu Kyi are staunch nationalists and cannot be happy with the state of their beloved country becoming prey to predatory foreign powers.

Suu Kyi's absence worked well for the western proxies to try to usurp the democratic leadership in the country. Her return poses a dilemma for the Western powers.

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