

An ASEAN Peacekeeping Force in Myanmar?

By Fuadi Pitsuwan

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Does the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) want to sustain itself and hold credible weight in international politics? Does it want to develop and possess the ability to respond to potential challenges faced individually or collectively by its members? If so, then ASEAN should consider the establishment of a regional multinational standby force with a dual purpose of peacekeeping and collective defense against extra-regional threats.

An ASEAN Peacekeeping Force would have been invaluable last year, at the height of the Thai-Cambodian spat, to patrol the contested border area as part of a conflict resolution mechanism. While tensions are currently deflated, the problem endures and can re-erupt at any time. ASEAN should be prepared to react the next time. A credible multinational standby force could also demonstrate ASEAN's determination to stand together in the face of outside threats in the South China Sea and elsewhere.

Reports of chronic skirmishes between Myanmar soldiers and ethnic minorities and gross human rights abuses committed by the former against the latter again raise the question of whether the country and the region could benefit from such a stand-by force – a Southeast Asian version of NATO or a miniaturized and regional model of a UNPKO.

Myanmar has embarked on the path of political reform. The ban on the National League for Democracy was lifted, allowing Aung San Suu Kyi to run in by-elections this month. Media censorship has been loosened while labor unions and strikes are being legalized. The government has declared war on opium production and is welcoming ASEAN observers to monitor the by-elections.

But ethnic conflict continues to be a serious problem as the country seeks international acceptance. An [open letter](#) to the ASEAN Secretary General by civil society organizations notes “with concern that the recent negotiations between government representatives and ethnic armed groups have not led to an end to conflict and the Myanmar Army continues to perpetrate gross human rights abuses against ethnic civilians.” These civil society groups also allege that despite ceasefires violence and human rights violations still occur.

The Myanmar government should invite regional troops to be stationed in conflict areas while it works to settle the disputes politically and permanently. This is a win-win arrangement for both Myanmar and ASEAN in the near term, and has significant positive implications in the long run.

A decision to ask for a regional peacekeeping force – comprised of troops from 10 ASEAN member states, or, at least, from willing nations – will testify to Myanmar's commitment to ASEAN and its principles after it has been granted the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2014 and will contribute to Aung San Suu Kyi's “simple ambition” of making Myanmar a leading player in ASEAN within 10 years. Such an *invitation* from the Myanmar government would not be considered interference in domestic affairs, but merely a regional collaboration to push for further progress in Myanmar. The force should have Myanmar soldiers in the mix, or it could have a Myanmar commander to allay fears that this cooperation would be perceived as interference.

Deployment of the peacekeeping force should create a pause in the long-running conflicts between the authorities and minority groups. But it is not a substitute for a genuine peace among all stakeholders of the problem. While the troops are deployed, the Myanmar government will need to strive for a permanent solution to the disputes. It will, however, create room for all sides to breathe and talk sensibly. Min Ko Niang, a political prisoner who was recently released, explained that “We need peace across the country immediately. Then we can work toward building national reconciliation.”

Internationally, welcoming an ASEAN peacekeeping force will allow Myanmar to demonstrate its commitment to end human rights abuses and to improve its treatment of ethnic minorities. The US and the European Union have highlighted resolution of this issue as one of the main conditions for the further lifting of sanctions. The conflict between the government and ethnic minorities is the most difficult to solve because the Army is not the only perpetrator; armed ethnic groups are also guilty of abuse. When a ceasefire is reached, both sides must adhere to it. As such, there is room for an invited third party to help, while a creative solution is discussed among domestic stakeholders. When bloodshed and human rights abuses are halted, the international community will be forced to reevaluate its position on sanctions. The Myanmar government will be armed with a new diplomatic tool to bargain against sanctions. Essentially, the peacekeeping force will act as an enforcer of ceasefire agreements and an international guarantor of security in skirmish-prone zones.

The Myanmar government needs to decide whether it truly values the end of human rights abuses committed against ethnic minorities by the Army and stopping violence by both the government and rebel groups. It also needs to assess how important a quick lifting of sanctions is to the country and how seriously it takes Aung San Suu Kyi's “simple ambition” for Myanmar in ASEAN.

Meanwhile, ASEAN needs to decide whether it wants to take a more proactive role in its own security affairs and to establish itself as a credible bloc that holds serious weight in

the increasingly contested security arena of Asia-Pacific.

If the answers to these questions are yes, then ASEAN needs to get serious about the establishment of a peacekeeping and rapid response force and the Myanmar government needs to not only support such an idea but indicate its willingness to extend an invitation to such a force to help maintain security while long-term solutions are being worked out that could ensure and fast-track Myanmar's achievement of these goals.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.

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