

Time for a coordinated ASEAN-UN response to Myanmar's coup

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Author: Alistair DB Cook, RSIS

The international community needs new ways of working together to respond to the violence deployed against protesters in Myanmar.



Since the military seized power on 1 February 2021, over 600 people have been killed. As of 10 April, over [2800 are in detention](#), have outstanding charges or are evading arrest. Communities across the country continue to [protest](#), despite increasingly lethal violence.

The international community continues to make statements denouncing the use of violence against protestors. They encourage regional efforts to support peaceful **resolution and a return to the democratic transition. But protesters don't want a** return to the previous situation — they are calling for fundamental political change.

The Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) has entrenched its position. More lethal force and violence is expected. It is time for ASEAN and the UN to collaborate on developing a joint mechanism to coordinate regional and international diplomatic efforts, and provide humanitarian assistance to respond to the deteriorating situation.

ASEAN is constrained by its consensus-based approach to decision-making and limited investment in regional institutional architecture. The [divergence of opinion](#) over the situation in Myanmar between member states is well documented. This limits ASEAN from acting collectively.

But treating ASEAN as an enforcement mechanism in the ways that some in the international community have suggested misses the point. ASEAN has evolved as a

forum for dialogue at the regional level. Its successes have been in initiating and contributing to the sustainable development of its member states, while engaging extra-regional players.

The UN has several constraints working in Southeast Asia, the most prominent being that many countries in the region prefer a localised approach to peace and security. The UN has strengthened its position in the region by partnering with ASEAN in several key areas, notably in disaster management and emergency response. A greater focus on these successes is needed to develop an ASEAN–UN partnership.

A joint mechanism would build on past successes. There have been notable developments since the signing of the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response in 2008, suggesting that a more coordinated approach is possible between global and regional organisations. In October 2016, the UN Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the ASEAN Secretary-General met alongside the UN General Assembly and the annual ASEAN–UN Secretariat-to-Secretariat Dialogue. They agreed to capture and institutionalise practical, experience-based arrangements.

This notably took shape in the response to the 2018 Sulawesi Earthquake in Indonesia. The Indonesian government mandated that the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) be the platform through which international partners and the private sector coordinate their humanitarian efforts. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs worked in the AHA Emergency Operations Centre to facilitate coordination between ASEAN and the UN. The experience was commended and pointed to as a new way of working between the two entities.

There remains a lack of significant investment in regional institutions, limiting both their mandate and their capacity. The ASEAN Charter remains the lynchpin for upholding the ASEAN community and provides the foundation for action. But it lacks triggers to initiate substantive responses and relies on the convening of an ASEAN Leaders Summit to address member states that fall foul of their commitments. And the ASEAN Secretariat only has a few hundred employees — limiting its ability to implement its broad-based mandate effectively.

Forging an ASEAN–UN partnership could help coordinate diplomatic efforts and deliver humanitarian assistance to people in Myanmar. It could draw on the expertise of the 6600 ASEAN citizens currently staffing the United Nations system **to create a joint mechanism anchored in the 'ASEAN way' that combines the trust of ASEAN with the capacity of the United Nations.**

In response to the devastating impact of Cyclone Nargis in 2008, ASEAN established the ASEAN Humanitarian Taskforce. The taskforce was made up of the ASEAN member states chaired by the ASEAN Secretary-General and an advisory **group made up of Myanmar's neighbouring countries, the UN, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.** It facilitated engagement between parties and provided a model for an ASEAN–UN mechanism.

A partnership between ASEAN and the United Nations will provide a more coordinated international response to the increasingly fraught situation in Myanmar. If ASEAN leadership fails, it will fall upon the wider international community and individual ASEAN members — **undermining the organisation's regional centrality.**

A path that does not engage ASEAN faces numerous hurdles and diverging interests. It is time to move beyond broad commitments to region-led approaches. Actors must find innovative ways of collaborating if regional and international efforts are to support people in Myanmar.

Alistair DB Cook is Coordinator of the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Programme and Senior Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.