

Only after extensive repair

By Lina Alexandra

ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus could help end the crisis but only after extensive repair over the sequence and method of its implementation.

There has been no significant progress on the implementation of ASEAN's Five-Points Consensus (5PC) after almost a year. I argue that the 5PC can still end the crisis but only after an extensive repair. First, we need to rethink the 5PC's implementing sequence. Second, we need to strengthen the role of the ASEAN Chair's Special Envoy. These steps are necessary to transform the 5PC from mere hope to a more realistic strategy.

The 5PC itself does not suggest any order in its implementation. But it implies that the process will start with the cessation of violence, followed by the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and then the facilitation of dialogue. After all, without the cessation of violence, it will be unsafe to deliver humanitarian assistance. Without some sort of humanitarian pause and aid delivery, dialogue is also assumed to be out of reach.

But at this stage of the conflict, insisting on a cessation of violence as the first step seems to be wishful thinking. All the conflicting parties have not indicated any sign of retreat. ASEAN,



meanwhile, does not have any capacity to “enforce” peace in this regard. The decision to invite Myanmar’s “non-political” representative to attend the ASEAN Summit last year has yet to be proven effective.

The key is to consider that the 5PC's implementing sequence was never set in stone. We could consider at least five possible sequences with different promises and pitfalls.

1. Cessation of violence → Dialogue → Humanitarian assistance
2. Humanitarian assistance → Cessation of violence → Dialogue
3. Humanitarian assistance → Dialogue → Cessation of violence
4. Dialogue → Cessation of violence → Humanitarian assistance
5. Dialogue → Humanitarian assistance → Cessation of violence

Option 1, where cessation of violence should happen first, requires ASEAN to have some sort of enforcement tool to “make” the parties stop their hostilities and start talking to each other. Since ASEAN does not have such an instrument, this option is unlikely to happen naturally or be voluntarily taken by the conflicting parties.

Option 2 assumes that humanitarian assistance might induce the parties to cease their violence. This requires access and extensive preparation to ensure the safe and inclusive delivery of aid. ASEAN does not have that access or capacity; the AHA Centre has not been given an expanded mandate to operate in this type of crisis. Without the mandate, access, and capacity, the aid mission is likely to fail and might even jeopardise the safety of humanitarian workers.

Option 3 where ASEAN can start providing assistance to persuade the conflicting parties to have a dialogue might be workable. But the Special Envoy must clearly state that he intends to work with all parties. The challenge is crafting a balanced framework backed by ASEAN leaders and strongly presented by the Special Envoy.

Options 4 and 5 which start with dialogue seem ambitious if not herculean as they begin with the most contentious point of the 5PC. But since there are no strict rules on what the dialogue agenda should be, it could focus on cessation of violence or aid delivery, rather than some grand political settlement for Myanmar’s future. These

options, in other words, require a reset on the dialogue agenda.

It was unclear whether the visit by Prak Sokhonn, Cambodia’s Special Envoy and Foreign Minister, last month to Myanmar allowed him to craft a viable framework for all the parties to engage in some sort of dialogue process. Myanmar’s violent polarisation over the past year means that “talking to the other side” could be seen as an act of betrayal. We should consider helping the Special Envoy in this regard by getting influential actors with strong interest and leverage inside Myanmar such as Thailand, Japan, and China to talk with the junta, while others like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore can engage with the pro-democracy groups.

As all parties in Myanmar are in dire conditions, the delivery of humanitarian assistance could be the primary talking points for the dialogue. Stopping the violence might be seen as creating a necessary “humanitarian pause” to allow for a dialogue over aid to take place. ASEAN could then create the specific terms of reference (TOR) for a humanitarian corridor based on the preliminary negotiations facilitated by different actors. This can be the first building block before ASEAN creates a broader mission mandate—after gaining the trust of all parties—to facilitate broader political dialogues.

These options notwithstanding, the role of the Special Envoy remains the lynchpin for the 5PC’s implementation. But we still do not have a clear TOR for the Special Envoy—

making his mandate, resources, and strategy unclear. The 5PC's designation of the Special Envoy to "facilitate mediation" requires a larger mandate to execute a range of tasks, from monitoring the cessation of violence, to the delivery of humanitarian assistance and developing a dialogue framework.

Over the past year, we have learned that the Special Envoy cannot undertake such a huge task alone. While establishing an "ASEAN Mission on Myanmar" similar to the post-Cyclone Nargis situation seems far-fetched, the proposal to create an "ASEAN Troika" (comprising of the previous, current, and next Chair) to monitor the 5PC's implementation is worth considering. The Troika members—Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia—can be assigned as "deputies" supporting the Special Envoy, for example.

ASEAN should pursue this idea, regardless of Tatmadaw resistance, and initiate a trilateral communication to create the wider TOR for the Troika-backed Special Envoy. The complexities of the crisis will require the Special Envoy's tenure to not correspond to the rotating ASEAN Chair's annual term to ensure sustainability, consistency, and coherence.

To conclude, the 5PC could be implemented. However, ASEAN must

develop a better strategy to do so.

Rearranging the steps in the 5PC while boosting the mandate and capacity of the Special Envoy would be crucial in any steps moving forward.

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