

PERSPECTIVE

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ASEAN's Myanmar Dilemma

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Myanmar is under intense international pressure over the Rohingya refugee crisis caused by the Myanmar military's response to militant armed attacks in August 2017.
- The origins of the current crisis and the circumstances surrounding the treatment of the Rohingya community are complex and deep-rooted.
- Decades of military rule, with a host of perceived and real internal and external threats, have compounded the problem.
- ASEAN has been criticised for its seeming lack of unity in addressing the humanitarian and regional security concerns arising from the crisis. Behind weak public pronouncements, however, frank closed door discussions have been taking place.
- Myanmar's recourse to ASEAN to discuss the Rohingya issue provides ASEAN an opportunity to nudge Myanmar towards a constructive approach to peace and development in Rakhine State.

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INTRODUCTION

This Perspective expands an initial analysis of the major risk to Myanmar's political moment in 2018,¹ and discusses possible options for ASEAN, of which Myanmar has been a member since 1997, to address the humanitarian and longer-term implications of the Rakhine/Rohingya issue. ASEAN centrality, and by extension ASEAN's resilience, is being tested by the security implications of the issue. Additionally, resolving tensions in Rakhine State in the near term is hard to imagine without some form of external involvement that helps to bridge existing information and understanding gaps.

A harsh military crackdown in the northern part of Rakhine State in response to the August 24, 2017 attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) has prompted widespread criticism of Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) government. The plight of over 600,000 refugees² from the (self-identified) Rohingya ethnic group who fled to Bangladesh has polarised debate on many platforms, including online and print media.

Over the past 75 years, periodic clashes in Rakhine State have caused Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.³ Many have also fled Myanmar by boat. International media attention on this in 2009⁴ prompted ASEAN foreign ministers to discuss the Rohingya issue for the first time, not on their formal agenda, but on the sidelines of their annual meeting. Then Myanmar foreign minister U Nyan Win insisted on labelling this community "Bengali" instead of Rohingya.⁵

There was more international reporting on the Rohingya in the aftermath of communal clashes in 2012, and again in 2015 when another wave of Rohingya fled Myanmar by boat. This was viewed by a large swathe of the Myanmar population as a lack of empathy on the part of the international community with the constraints faced by the Myanmar

¹ ISEAS Research Staff. "Southeast Asia Outlook 2018", ISEAS Perspective 2018/1, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2018.

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_1@50.pdf

² United Nations estimates place the total number of Rohingyas in camps in Bangladesh at over 860,000, of which some 250,000 are residual from the 1991-92 exodus. See section on "Rohingya Refugee Crisis" provided on the website of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), at url: <https://www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis> (accessed November 30, 2017, December 15, 2017; January 1, 2018). In addition, there are about 250,000 Rohingyas remaining in Myanmar, mostly in camps for internally displaced persons. Some 700,000 live in Pakistan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and India.

³ Exoduses in 1978 and 1991-92 occasioned ministerial-level discussions on repatriation of refugees. The 1991-92 exodus also occasioned comments from ASEAN countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, although Myanmar was not then an ASEAN member.

⁴ Human Rights Watch, 2009. "Perilous Plight: Burma's Rohingya Take to the Seas", May 26, 2009. (2017, September 12). Retrieved October 28, 2017, from <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/05/26/perilous-plight.burmas-rohingya-take-seas>

⁵ Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, 2009. "Rights groups question Myanmar offer to take Rohingya migrants. (n.d.). Relief Web, February 27, 2009. Retrieved October 28, 2017, from <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/rights-groups-question-myanmar-offer-take-rohingya-migrants>

government on the issue, and gave rise to negative attitudes toward foreigners advocating humanitarian interventions.

Myanmar now seems to prefer bilateral mechanisms over international options.⁶ Indonesia delivered basic needs assistance and constructed schools in Rakhine State in 2016, and started a hospital construction project in November 2017.⁷ The ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management delivered humanitarian aid to Rakhine in October 2017.⁸ Since August 2017, the government has received a steady flow of emissaries from UN bodies, regional organizations, neighboring and distant countries, and global personalities.⁹ Of these, the visits of US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi were widely reported. Secretary Tillerson offered US\$47 million in aid for Rohingya refugees and also discussed the possibility of targeted sanctions¹⁰, while Mr Wang Yi laid out a three-point proposal calling for a ceasefire to restore stability in Rakhine State, greater bilateral interactions between Myanmar and Bangladesh, and international support for peace and development in Rakhine State.¹¹ Another prominent visitor, Pope Francis, was received by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing as well as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and made a point of not using “Rohingya” in his public statements while urging “forgiveness and compassion”.¹² The Pope’s approach, similar to ASEAN’s, emphasized discussing sensitive matters privately.

But external political pressure continued to rise. In early December 2017, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution “condemning ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya” and calling for restoration of humanitarian access to Rakhine State.¹³ On December 5, 2017,

⁶ “Myanmar’s 2018 foreign policy outlook”, Myanmar Times, December 29, 2017. Retrieved January 01, 2018, from <https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/myanmars-2018-foreign-policy-outlook.html>

⁷ The projects were offered as “contributions from Indonesia’s people to the people of Rakhine State”. See: “Construction of Indonesian Hospital in Rakhine State Begins”, ReliefWeb, citing report from the Government of Indonesia. Retrieved January 04, 2018 from <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/construction-indonesian-hospital-rakhine-state-begins>.

⁸ News update by Indonesia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs on its website. Retrieved January 04, 2018 from <https://www.kemlu.go.id/en/berita/Pages/AHA-Centre%E2%80%99s-Humanitarian-Aid-for-Rakhine-State-Arrived-in-Myanmar.aspx>

⁹ However, Myanmar recently denied entry to Ms Yang Hee Lee, the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights. See The Jakarta Post. “Myanmar bans UN rights envoy from country.” The Jakarta Post. Accessed January 03, 2018. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2017/12/20/myanmar-bans-un-rights-envoy-from-country-.html>.

¹⁰ News, VOA. “Tillerson in Myanmar on Mission to Resolve Rohingya Crisis.” VOA. November 16, 2017. Retrieved December 04, 2018 from <https://www.voanews.com/a/tillerson-trip-to-myanmar/4115765.html>.

¹¹ “China lays out three-point plan to ease Rohingya crisis.” South China Morning Post. November 19, 2017. Retrieved December 04, 2018 from <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2120607/china-lays-out-three-point-plan-ease-rohingya-crisis>.

¹² Yuchi Nitta and Thurein Hla Htway, “Pope Francis calls for forgiveness in Myanmar, Nikkei Asian Review, November 29, 2017. Retrieved December 2, 2017 from <https://asia.nikkei.com/print/article/318329>.

¹³ House of Representatives concurrent resolution 90 (2017). H.Con.Res.90 - Condemning ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya and calling for an end to the violence in and an immediate restoration of humanitarian access to the state of Rakhine in Burma, sponsored by Joseph Crowley (D-NY-14)

the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, briefing the UN Human Rights Council on the situation in Myanmar, asked the Council to “urgently call on the Myanmar authorities to put an immediate and absolute halt to the violence targeting the Rohingya”. The same day, the 27th Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on the human rights situation of the Rohingya.¹⁴

Some of the international clamor over the world’s inability to respond to the current humanitarian crisis in proportion to its severity is directed at ASEAN. Individual members such as Malaysia and Indonesia have been vocal in expressing concern to domestic audiences and to Myanmar. However, ASEAN as a whole has limited its formal statements to calling for peaceful resolution of the conflict, as reflected in the ASEAN Chairman’s “Statement on the Humanitarian Situation in Rakhine State” issued on September 24, 2017. This is not the first time that ASEAN has had to deal with criticism of Myanmar. Most Western governments expressed concern over ASEAN’s admission of Myanmar in 1997 because of the military junta’s well-documented human rights violations. ASEAN’s view, however, was, “in order to promote human rights in Myanmar and elsewhere, it would be far better and more effective to engage than isolate, to persuade rather than posture and gesture – which in any case, would be ineffectual at best and counter-productive at worst”.¹⁵

CONTEXTUALISING THE CRISIS

Any external effort to assist Myanmar in managing the conflict in Rakhine State will need to bear in mind three intertwined characteristics.

- ***The historical context of Rakhine-Bamar relations*** has been shaped by past Burmese aggressions against the then separate kingdom of Arakan since the Konbaung dynasty’s early rulers in the 18th century.¹⁶ This started the long process of hardening sentiments about “what it means to be Rakhine”,¹⁷ reinforced by actions of the post-independence Bamar-dominant military regimes.¹⁸ Today, the Rakhine State parliament is the only sub-national assembly where the ruling NLD does not have a majority.

on December 11, 2017, and referred to the Committee on Foreign Relations on December 12, 2017. Retrieved December 19, 2017 from <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-concurrent-resolution/90/text>

¹⁴ OHCHR. Special Session of the Human Rights Council on the human rights situation of the minority Rohingya Muslim population and other minorities in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. Retrieved December 20, 2017 from

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22487&LangID=E>

¹⁵ According to Rodolfo Severino, as cited by Michael Vatikiotis. See Vatikiotis, Michel RJ. “ASEAN 10: The Political and Cultural Dimensions of Southeast Asian Unity”, Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science, Vol. 27, No. 1, Special Focus: Reconceptualizing Southeast Asia (Brill, 1999), pp. 77-88., Retrieved May 7, 2017 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24492981>

¹⁶ Thant Myint-U, 2001. The Making of Modern Burma, Cambridge University Press, 2001. pp.13-14, 24, 219.

¹⁷ This is despite the cultural and religious similarities; Rakhine and Bamar are Buddhist, and their language are similar.

¹⁸ Francis Wade, 2017. Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of A Muslim ‘Other’, Zed Books Ltd, London, 2017. p. 59.

- ***Conflation of nationalism with Bamar-Buddhist identity*** has influenced attitudes towards external interventions, and interactions between the Bamar majority and each ethnic minority. The “negative consequence of cultural consciousness”¹⁹ has also affected how the Rohingya community is perceived. The entrenchment of Burmese ethnic nationalism, together with institutional weakness, have been described as one of “two colonial legacies, often ignored”.²⁰ The institutional vacuum at independence in 1948 was filled by the army, which consolidated itself around a central Bamar-Buddhist identity. This in turn contributed to the uninterrupted state of civil war, which still serves to justify the military’s dominance in Myanmar society.
- ***The balance of power between the government and the military*** is also shaped by the continuing notion of the military’s role. In the past, the NLD (then leading the democracy movement) and the ethnic minorities distrusted and resisted the imposition of what was perceived as Burman-Buddhist centric military rule, but also sought recognition from the military leaders. This legacy continues to challenge the uneasy power-sharing arrangement between the NLD government and the military today. The nationwide ceasefire agreement brokered by the USDP government now continues as the 21st Century Panglong Process led by the NLD government. But fighting in northern Myanmar has not abated. The Tatmadaw, Myanmar’s armed forces, views itself as the sole guardian and protector of the state, and has unmatched power on the battleground and in the bureaucracy.²¹

ASEAN POLICIES AND PRECEDENTS

Founded in 1967 with five members,²² ASEAN has been criticized more for its slow pace of progress than praised for its accomplishments. Nevertheless, the organisation has developed a unique geopolitical role with its “strategic diplomacy”²³ in managing interstate relations despite Southeast Asia’s high degree of ethnic, religious, political, and economic diversity. While this presents a potential for ASEAN to be helpful in assisting Myanmar overcome the current crisis, there are few precedents. One of these precedents was ASEAN’s response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008. A second was the meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers convened by Daw Suu in November 2016 to discuss the conflict in Rakhine State.

¹⁹ Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2013. “Introduction: Opening the Debate on the nation building process in Myanmar”, Nation-Building in Myanmar, Myanmar Peace Center, 2013 (second edition, October 2014). p. 3

²⁰ Thant Myint-u, op.cit. p. 241

²¹ Mary Callahan, 2005. “Making Enemies: War and State-Building in Burma”, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005.

²² The original five were Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, and Brunei joined in 1984 after independence. Vietnam was admitted in 1995, followed by Laos and Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999.

²³ Kishore Mahbubani. “ASEAN’s strategic diplomacy underpins regional stability”, East Asia Forum, June 18, 2017. (2017, July 02). Retrieved January 02, 2018, from <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/06/18/aseans-strategic-diplomacy-underpins-regional-stability/>

On May 19, 2008, ASEAN foreign ministers held a special meeting to discuss humanitarian relief options two weeks after Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar's delta. Six months earlier, then Myanmar Prime Minister Thein Sein had rejected ASEAN's suggestion to have the UN Secretary-General's special envoy Ibrahim Gambari brief the ASEAN Summit in Singapore on the September 2007 Saffron Revolution.²⁴ Myanmar had less scope in 2008 for resisting international interventions in the case of Nargis, and ASEAN laid out three options: (a) a UN-led mechanism; (b) an ASEAN-led mechanism working with the Myanmar government; or (c) the other nine ASEAN members directly delivering aid to cyclone survivors based on the R2P²⁵ principle. Myanmar agreed to the second option, and allowed relief workers into the country irrespective of nationality four days after the special ASEAN meeting. ASEAN's implementation mechanism for the Nargis response, the Tripartite Core Group comprising ASEAN, the UN and Myanmar, showed Myanmar officials new ways of working with a wide range of domestic and foreign partners without upsetting the established political order. Since then, ASEAN's coordination role has been better defined.

The second precedent was the special ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting held in Myanmar on November 19, 2016 to discuss the situation in Rakhine State. The November 2016 meeting seems to demonstrate the effectiveness of ASEAN's quiet diplomacy approach, in this case led by Indonesian foreign minister Retno Masurdi. But Ms Masurdi's efforts in the wake of the ARSA attacks in August 2017 did not produce a second special meeting. Instead, Daw Suu broke her silence shortly after a visit by Ms Masurdi, and gave a briefing to the diplomatic corps based in Myanmar on September 19, 2017. She also briefed her ASEAN counterparts in the Leaders' retreat at the 30th ASEAN Summit in November 2017.

ASEAN's non-interference principle does not necessarily stop its members from expressing concerns about the internal affairs of other members. Nor does it prevent an ASEAN member from volunteering updates to its regional partners. Indonesia's Foreign Minister in 2003 updated his counterparts on his government's response to the secessionist Free Aceh Movement, leading to negotiation of a durable peace deal for Aceh.²⁶ There have also been instances where a member state has welcomed ASEAN's assistance on an internal matter. At the request of the Philippine government, for example, several ASEAN countries have

²⁴ In September 2007, after the informal ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in New York, ASEAN had issued an exceptionally strong ASEAN Chair's statement expressing "revulsion" at the military's crackdown on peaceful protests. The text of the statement was consulted with ASEAN members, including Myanmar.

²⁵ The Responsibility to Protect principle is a global commitment made by UN member states at the 2005 high-level UN World Summit meeting. It aims primarily to shore up gaps in humanitarian and human rights responses in the aftermath of "genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity". Implementation of the R2P principle involves a range of measures including mediation, early warnings, and sanctions, among others, and places the responsibility to prevent further atrocities primarily on the shoulders of the sovereign government. Use of force (violation of sovereignty) is the last resort measure. See <http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.html>

²⁶ "Aceh redux: The tsunami that helped stop a war." IRIN. December 01, 2015. Accessed September 19, 2017. <http://www.irinnews.org/report/100960/aceh-redux-tsunami-helped-stop-war>. See also: Morfit, M., 2007, 'The Road To Helsinki: The Aceh Agreement and Indonesia's Democratic Development', *International Negotiation*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 111-143.

provided assistance in addressing the conflict in Mindanao, including the siege of Marawi in early 2017.²⁷

ASEAN's experiences with Myanmar²⁸ provide food for thought in seeking a workable approach to the present conflict in Rakhine State. There seem to be equal measures of hope and scepticism regionally and internationally for ASEAN to take a mediator role in Myanmar which is similar to efforts in 2008. The existing sensitivities in Rakhine State represent a world of difference from the Cyclone Nargis response. At the same time, there is a sense of urgency as the potential for terrorism emanating to other ASEAN nations cannot be discounted. Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, highlighted this challenge on December 5, 2017, when outlining the priorities for Singapore's ASEAN chairmanship in 2018.²⁹ ASEAN's concern about Rakhine State, Dr Balakrishnan explained, is related to the "anxiety that this becomes another sanctuary, another hotbed, for extremism and terrorism". He called for "multilateral mutual respect, interdependence and cooperation" in a collective effort to deal with such situations.³⁰

OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

Under Singapore's ASEAN chairmanship in 2018, few options for promoting peace and development in Rakhine State appear politically feasible. Myanmar can become a test case for an unconventional ASEAN strategy to engage its members on sensitive issues with transboundary implications. With existing realities in mind, five options are worth considering.

A regional peacekeeping force. This option is the most intrusive. While the all five founding ASEAN members plus Brunei, Cambodia, and Vietnam³¹ have contributed units to UN peacekeeping operations in other parts of the world, there was no ASEAN peacekeeping

²⁷ Frances Mangosing. "Lorenzana thanks partner countries for help in Marawi siege." Inquirer Global Nation, October 23, 2017. Retrieved October 29, 2017 from <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/161038/philippine-news-updates-marawi-siege-marawi-liberation-maute-group-islamic-state-delfin-lorenzana-us-china-indonesia-australia-malaysia-brunei-singapore> .

²⁸ ASEAN has regularly announced its collective position on Myanmar for more than a decade, from 2001 to 2015, mainly in the communiqués of its annual foreign ministers' meetings and in its annual Summit statements. These formal statements represent the official record for a series of extensive briefings that the ASEAN members have required of their Myanmar partner behind closed doors.

²⁹ ASEAN Lecture on "ASEAN: Next 50", ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017. Accessed December 5, 2017 from <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/event-highlights/item/6698-asean-lecture-on-asean-next-50> "

³⁰ The full transcript of Dr Balakrishnan's ASEAN Lecture is available on the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute website at: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/event-highlights/item/6698-asean-lecture-on-asean-next-50>

³¹ David Capie, "Evolving Attitudes to Peacekeeping in ASEAN", paper presented at the 17th International Symposium on Security Affairs, November 5, 2014, National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan. Retrieved December 2, 2017 from <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/event/symposium/pdf/2014/E-06.pdf>

force mounted for the conflict in East Timor in 1999, when ASEAN members opted instead to contribute troops to the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor.³² An ASEAN peacekeeping centres' network, established in 2012³³, functions mainly for information-sharing and capacity-building among those ASEAN states already involved in peace-keeping activities³⁴. Lack of precedent, incompatibility with ASEAN's non-interference principle, and the difficulty of finding an acceptable funding formula make this option extremely infeasible. The reaction of the Tatmadaw would presumably be "over our dead bodies".

An ASEAN-led coordination model. A less intrusive option with some precedent would be to create a coordinating body like the Tripartite Core Group that managed cyclone relief efforts in 2008. It is timely to consider an ASEAN-led revival of the "Group of Friends on Myanmar", which was established as an informal advisory group to the UN Secretary-General following the Saffron Revolution in 2007.³⁵ This precedent is similar to the Tripartite Core Group model in which ASEAN can take the lead to negotiate and coordinate international assistance for peace and development in Rakhine State. As Daw Suu recognises the need to keep her ASEAN counterparts updated on the situation in the country, ASEAN is in a position to give the necessary gravitas to discussions, without undue politicisation of the issue. ASEAN can lead the establishment of a second "Group of Friends on Myanmar" in an ASEAN (rather than UN) setting, to show effective leadership in engaging Myanmar.

While Myanmar's NLD-led government might find this acceptable, the Tatmadaw would probably be reluctant to agree, in large part because of the concern about weakening its security role and about helping the Rohingya. The delicate relationship between the NLD government and the military, and also the perception that the Rohingya are "illegal Muslim immigrants" will affect consideration of this option. There is also weaker cross-ASEAN consensus on a wide range of issues than was the case in 2008, compounded by greater uncertainty in the global political climate. However, it is possible to envision ASEAN leading a Group of Friends on Myanmar. Former ASEAN Secretary-General Dr Surin

³² Thayer, Carl. "ASEAN and UN Peacekeeping." *The Diplomat*. April 25, 2014. Accessed December 8, 2017 from <https://thediplomat.com/2014/04/asean-and-un-peacekeeping/>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Brokering Peace in Southeast Asia's Conflict Areas: Debating the Merits of an ASEAN Peacekeeping Force." Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung South East Asia. Retrieved December 2, 2017 from <https://th.boell.org/en/2017/08/07/brokering-peace-southeast-asias-conflict-areas-debating-merits-asean-peacekeeping-force>

³⁵ The loose group around the UN Secretary-General was called the "Group of Friends on Myanmar", the full name being "Group of Friends of the Secretary-General on Myanmar". It was established after the Saffron Revolution in 2007. The Group included ASEAN member states such as Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Other members were Australia, United Kingdom, France, United States, China, Japan, Russia, Norway, India and Portugal. At the time, the UN Secretary-General's special envoy to Myanmar was Mr Ibrahim Gambari. The Group of Friends continued to be active throughout the years of the USDP administration, but in light of the changes taking place, it decided to rename itself in 2013 and reorient its mission as a "Partnership Group for Peace, Development and Democracy in Myanmar".

Pitsuwan, before his untimely demise on 30 November 2017, was discussing with senior ASEAN statesmen on how to revive ASEAN's honest broker role.³⁶

An informal mediator. A still less intrusive option to accompany the Group of Friends option is for ASEAN to serve as a behind-the-scenes mediator. One analyst has stressed the importance of working with the Bangladesh government to provide better humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, as well as devising a process for either returning many if not all these refugees to Myanmar or settling them in third countries.³⁷ As Bangladesh and Myanmar have inked a repatriation agreement in November 2017,³⁸ ASEAN's mediation may not be required. Still, the agreement's implementation may provide an opening for ASEAN to build capacity in the repatriation or resettlement process.

Facilitating Tatmadaw involvement. An approach that is Myanmar-led but involves ASEAN as the key partner may be politically feasible. The ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) could be such a partner. The ADMM mandate emphasizes confidence-building and dialogue, but it also includes humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as an area for regional cooperation. While it seems unlikely that the Tatmadaw can be persuaded to initiate a serious peace effort in Rakhine State under present circumstances, there is a slim hope that the Tatmadaw's ASEAN counterparts or partners can quietly but strongly press the Tatmadaw to lay out a strategy deserving of ASEAN's respect and support.

Going with the flow. The easiest option for ASEAN would be to respond generously to any request for involvement from the NLD government. This option – hopefully married with the Group of Friends option – has the advantage of being most in line with prevailing preferences. It may be worth examining the “areas for adoption” offered by the Union Enterprise on Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine launched in October 2017 with a civilian ministry as coordinator.³⁹ A possible improvement on this option would be to focus ASEAN efforts on one or more key social sectors identified in the Annan Commission report⁴⁰, where bilateral or regional approaches can assist

³⁶ Michael Vatikiotis, “Statesman who raised ASEAN's international profile” Nikkei Asian Review, December 01, 2017. Retrieved December 1, 2017 from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Michael-Vatikiotis/Statesman-who-raised-ASEAN-s-international-profile>

³⁷ Sanghetta Yogendran. “Turning to ASEAN: Response to the Rakhine Crisis.” RSIS Commentary, December 14, 2016. Retrieved December 14, 2016 from <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/CO16302.pdf>

³⁸ “Myanmar, Bangladesh ink Rohingya return deal.” Channel NewsAsia. November 23, 2017. Retrieved November 23, 2017 from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/myanmar-bangladesh-ink-rohingya-return-deal-9432828>.

³⁹ The Union Enterprise on Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development in Rakhine was established on 17 October 2017, with a concurrent website that includes options for donations in MMK and USD, as well as to “Adopt an Area”. It has its own website: <http://rakhine.unionenterprise.org/latest-news/143-establishment-of-the-committee-for-the-uehrd>, and is coordinated by the Ministry for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement.

⁴⁰ An Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, headed by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (thus, the Annan Commission) was formed on August 24, 2016 as part of the NLD

implementation and provide the basis for an ASEAN coordinating presence on the ground in Myanmar, in a non-political, non-threatening form. Education, health and social services are prime candidates.⁴¹

One clear constraint to all these options is funding. Both the NLD-led government and ASEAN as an organization are budget-constrained, although it is possible to imagine ASEAN negotiating a funding commitment from its Dialogue, Development, and Sectoral Partners⁴², several of whom have bilateral programmes with Myanmar. But any effort involving substantial international participation will only be broadly accepted within Myanmar if it is directed primarily at the Rakhine Buddhist population, with a less prominent component for the Rohingya. This implies an emphasis on development over peace, with major investments in infrastructure, education, health, and other social services.

Resolving conflicts like the one in Rakhine State also depends on the emergence of “bridge-builders”: individuals and organisations capable of working across communal divisions.

ASEAN may yet achieve some modest success in pursuing a new strategy of engaging Myanmar. Given the strong hand of the Tatmadaw in every conflict situation in the country, any attempt at peace and reconciliation in Rakhine State will also have to have the Tatmadaw as an integral part of the solution.

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government’s efforts to re-establish trust through socio-economic development in Rakhine. It has an advisory mandate, and submitted its findings and recommendations on August 23, 2017.

⁴¹ Similar to Indonesia, Japan’s Nippon Foundation had started school projects in Rakhine State since since 2012, as part of its overall programme focusing on peace and development in Myanmar. See Nippon Foundation Group Projects in Myanmar, September 2016. Retrieved December 4, 2017 from <https://www.nippon-foundation.or.jp/en/what/projects/myanmar/img/5.pdf>

⁴² ASEAN has ten Dialogue Partners (Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, India, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, the United States, and the United Nations), one Development Partner (Germany), and three Sectoral Dialogue Partners (Pakistan, Switzerland, and Norway).