

MYANMAR: Political change in Thailand could drive Yangon into deeper isolation

- Another attempt by Thailand to intermediate between the junta and other countries in the region has had little traction.
- Myanmar's generals could find a less vocal advocate for re-engagement after the change in government in Bangkok.
- The junta's political isolation is likely to persist or even get worse, resulting in continued opportunities for Beijing and Moscow to gain influence.

Thailand's government again attempted to bridge the gap between the generals in Yangon and the rest of the region by hosting what it described as an informal dialogue between foreign ministers on 18-19 June in Pattaya. Only the foreign ministers of Thailand and Laos were present, together with the junta's designated foreign minister. Four other member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as China and India, sent mid-level representatives.

However, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia declined to attend. Jakarta pointedly said the meeting undermined "the rules of the game," referring to the five-point plan agreed upon two years ago as the basis for any action by ASEAN. And Singapore's foreign minister said engagement with the junta at the summit or foreign minister level was "premature" because of the lack of progress in fulfilling the plan. Indonesia likely sees Thailand's ad-hoc effort as undermining its shuttle diplomacy over the past few months to engage not only with the generals but also the opposition without using what it described as "megaphone diplomacy." Indonesian president Joko Widodo openly stated in early May that there has been no real progress on the five-point plan.

Nonetheless, Thailand has been among the more aggressive countries over the past two years in attempts to intermediate between the junta and ASEAN's more critical governments. Its 2,400 km-long shared land border makes it in Thailand's national interest to resolve the crisis, according to Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai. He highlighted how sustained internal conflict generates risks from refugee flows, the drug trade, and arms trafficking — all of which are high priorities for the Thai military.

But aside from these security concerns, Thailand also has substantial public and private economic interests in the country, including sourcing a substantial portion of its gas for electricity generation, which could suffer from longer or more severe sanctions. And to a certain extent, Bangkok gets support from other Mekong countries, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, due to their geographic proximity and aversion to external pressure on their own issues, from human rights to environmental protection.

A less receptive Bangkok?

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MFP leader and Thai PM candidate Pita Limjaroenrat said his party supports actions taken within the ASEAN framework in a rejection of the caretaker government's ad-hoc efforts. However, Pita would likely find it too difficult to fully reverse Bangkok's existing policy given the higher stakes for Thailand and the military's belief that the junta should not be isolated, but he would likely be more mindful of ASEAN's priorities and processes. A For Thais (PT)-led government would be more inclined to push for re-engagement compared to an MFP one because of Thaksin's former business ties in Myanmar. Still, the PT has also criticized the coup and would also be more sensitive to the perceptions of ASEAN and the West.

Therefore, there is a significant chance that Myanmar could find a less vocal advocate in Bangkok should MFP either lead the next government or be a significant part of it. This could push Myanmar into greater political isolation. Some of the junta's senior officials reportedly met with Aung San Suu Kyi on 27 May and 4 June to seek her help on the peace process and political violence but were rebuffed. It is unclear whether their efforts reflect a recognition that her status and acceptance of any political compromise is critical both domestically and abroad (and thus keeps the hope of a negotiated settlement alive) or is simply a pro-forma attempt. And Indonesia has stated that ASEAN formally acting in coordination with only one stakeholder — the generals — is not aligned with the five-point consensus.

Without this effective domestic engagement between the junta and the opposition, symbolized by Aung San Suu Kyi, or some progress on the five-point plan characterized by a reduction in political suppression, ASEAN will find it difficult to achieve consensus on moving forward, at least in the near term. Ultimately the junta will need to concede some loss of control over the situation, but it remains unwilling because it might see this as a slippery slope toward losing power. In the generals' minds, any loosening in political control will likely result in protests, while free and fair elections would likely see it defeated again. For instance, in a reversion to the early 2000s, NGOs such as Human Rights Watch say the regime is refusing to reduce onerous requirements for the entry of aid workers and goods to the areas that were the hardest hit by cyclone Mocha last month.

With the next Thai government likely to be more mindful of ASEAN's priorities, Yangon will find it difficult to undermine the position taken by several of the larger countries that any progress in Myanmar's political reintegration requires progress on the five-point peace plan. This, in turn, allows China and Russia to gain greater influence by providing the junta with international diplomatic cover, military and economic resources, and support for its domestic politics.

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