



Myanmar leader Than Shwe (left) walking with Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. AFP

# Indonesia's quest for a 'middle way' for Myanmar

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THE issue of Myanmar and its future political development came up once again during the 16th Summit of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (Asean) in Hanoi earlier this month.

And according to the local press in Jakarta, there now appears more expectation for Indonesia to play a bigger, more decisive role in pushing the matter forward.

In fact, with Indonesia set to take over the Asean Chair next year – following an unusual swap with Brunei – some are speculating whether Jakarta might use the opportunity to launch a new bilateral or regional initiative to press on for more meaningful change in Myanmar.

Such expectations could either be a recognition of Jakarta's regional leadership capability, or simply the fact that Indonesia is left holding the hot potato that no one seems to want – or perhaps a little of both.

Nevertheless, any future initiative from Jakarta to push for change in Myanmar would be fraught with complex challenges. A recent report published by the New York-based Asia Society – which was submitted by Jakarta's Centre for Strategic and International Studies – highlights some of these challenges.

First, for all the rhetoric and chest-beating on democracy, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono seems unwilling to invest heavy personal, political and financial capital to solve the Myanmar problem seriously.

In this regard, minimal chances of success with Myanmar may have explained his apparent "reluctance". Yet, at the same time, the stakes for Indonesia are high.

Failure to even try to act would lend credence to the notion that Indonesia is unfit for the mantle of regional leadership. If, however, Indonesia decides to act but fails, the repercussions would most likely be less damaging given the incredibly complex dimensions of the Myanmar problem.

Second, as a consequence of Mr Yudhoyono's lack of personal involvement, there is less of a unified approach within Indonesia's political and foreign policy establishment with regards to Myanmar.

Aside from the government's typical indecisive policy-making style, the lack, or even absence, of a sense of urgency within the National Parliament (DPR) and among the general public often provides the pretext, if not justification, for Indonesia's lack of full commitment.

This highlights the critical role of the post-Suharto DPR in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy direction. The problem here lies in the reality that there are few MPs, especially in this current term (2009-2014), who are not only qualified in foreign policy-making, but also willing to set aside

political posturing for the sake of another country.

Consequently, the task of crafting a credible, unified and comprehensive initiative simply seems too huge to tackle.

Third, Jakarta also realises that current domestic conditions within Myanmar still favour the ruling junta. Not only do they remain the strongest force within the country, but its control over the state's natural resources, especially oil and gas, seems to be a trump card, if not life insurance, to sustain its leverage against external pressures.

Also, the near absence of a credible counterpart in Naypyidaw further complicates any dialogue or engagement plans. This condition is further worsened by the factionalised state of dissidents and political exiles.

Of course, the sudden transfer of Myanmar's capital from Yangon to Naypyidaw in 2005 has made any assessment of the conditions on the ground more difficult to verify.

Finally, Jakarta also believes that any meaningful engagement with Myanmar would have a better chance of success if it involves a regional concert of powers that incorporates not only key Asean states, but China and India, as well.

In this regard, pundits have acknowledged the "counter-productiveness" of utilising Asean as a political vehicle to put pressure on Myanmar. Instead, bringing key stakeholders – like Thailand, Singapore, China and India, which have been heavily investing in Myanmar – together might have a better chance of sobering up the ruling junta about the need for change.

The problem here, however, is that from a geoeconomic and geostrategic perspective, these major stakeholders have diametrically opposing interests. And since Indonesia itself cannot find its strategic interests tied to the development of Myanmar, the prospects of bringing all the concerned parties together under a neutral arbiter remain slim.

Given these roadblocks, Jakarta's approach to the Myanmar issue can be described as a search for a new "middle way": Between a full-fledged sanction against the junta or whole-hearted defence of it under the Asean banner; between bilateral or multilateral approach, between pushing for change from within or without, and between a government-to-government or a people-to-people engagement.

This approach, however, takes time. And when we consider the possible political and security crisis surrounding the upcoming general elections in Myanmar, time may be a luxury that Jakarta cannot afford. ■

The writer is a researcher with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta.

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