BRIEF ISSUE

29
2014

The EU in Myanmar:
Preventive diplomacy in action?

by Guy Banim

Just as Catherine Ashton and the second Barroso Commission are stepping down, Myanmar's President Thein Sein has opened unprecedented talks with both the army and the opposition – including Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. US President Barack Obama, who is visiting the country next month, has also underlined "the need for an inclusive and credible process" in the run-up to the planned 2015 elections. Yet, if Myanmar seems closer today to the path to democracy, the European Union can claim to have played a major role in supporting and channelling the long transition from military rule to the rule of law and accountable government.

The background

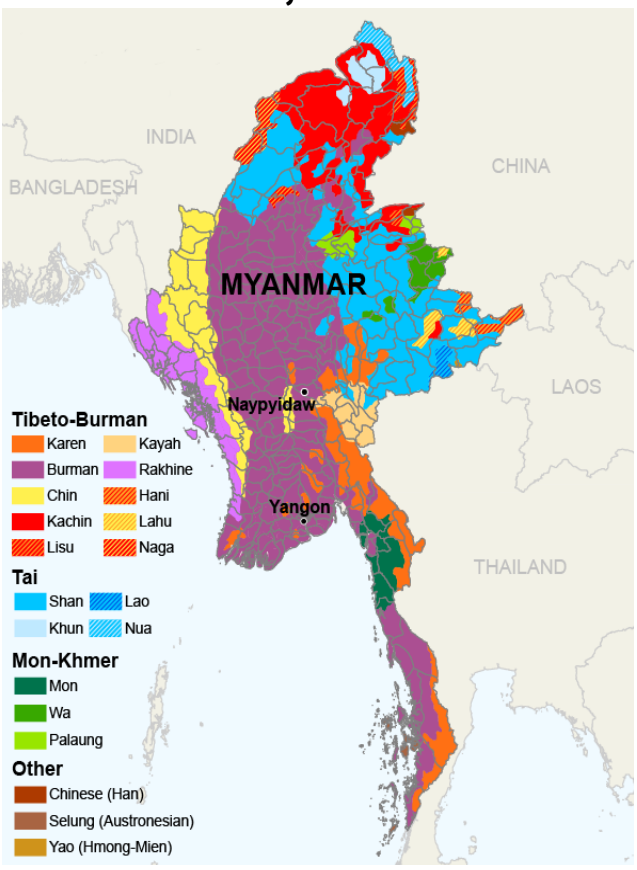
Since 2011, Myanmar/Burma has changed dramatically. Any visitor to the former capital Yangon today cannot fail to be struck by the potential and promise of multiple transitions: from war to peace, from dictatorship to democracy and, in due time, from poverty to prosperity.

The opening of the country marked an end to 50 years of military dictatorship. Popular uprisings in 1988 and 2007 were violently repressed and cost thousands of lives. The protestors had demanded democracy and free elections, pitting Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy against the generals of the Myanmar Armed Forces (the *tatmadaw*).

Widespread ethnic and religious conflicts have plagued the country since before its independence from Britain in 1948. A diverse mosaic of ethnic nationalities make up about a third of Myanmar's population, and their homelands cover approximately 60% of its territory. Government crackdowns on movements demanding greater political autonomy has led to a proliferation of non-state armed groups claiming to represent peoples such as the Karen, Kachin, Karenni, Shan, Mon, Wa and Chin, and the emergence of a complex array of alliances against the government.

In March 2011, President Thein Sein stated in his inaugural speech that his top priority was to address the armed conflicts with the various ethnic groups. After several rounds of talks between the government and 17 armed movements, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement is now tantalisingly close. Meanwhile, Myanmar is due to hold parliamentary elections by the end of 2015. Initialling a ceasefire and holding

Electoral constituencies and ethnic groups in Myanmar



Source: The New York Times

the elections will be important milestones in the ongoing political transition of the country. However, the legacy of conflict, poverty, oppression and weak institutions will not be overcome within one electoral cycle. Continuous intercommunal violence – including the repression of Rohingya Muslims in the west of the country – is a reminder that transition is the work of decades. Success will require sustained political leadership at the domestic level, as well as support, if not proactive engagement, from its international partners.

A comprehensive approach

The EU was one of the first to respond to the country's political opening, suspending its restrictive measures on 23 April 2012 and fully lifting sanctions the following year, except for an arms embargo. The Union has subsequently sought collaboration with the government to assist the reform process and to contribute to political, economic and social development through the Comprehensive Framework for Myanmar, adopted in 2013.

The 2013 EU-Myanmar Task Force set out four priority areas for development assistance for 2014-2020: rural development, agriculture and food security; education; good governance, rule of law and capacity building; and peacebuilding support. To achieve its goals, the Union allocated €688 million in development aid, making it one of the biggest donors to the country during the transition period.

The strong political and financial support to the peace process aims to maximise the chances of a successful shift towards democracy and stability. At the same time, it is in line with the EU's core foreign policy goal to help 'preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security, in accordance with the United Nations Charter'. Myanmar thus provides an example of a complex and, so far, relatively successful transition where the EU has sought to play a high-profile role.

Peacebuilding in context

Experience has taught that good context analysis, providing a clear understanding of the local political, cultural and economic environment, must underpin any preventive diplomacy efforts.

Three factors have contributed to the EU's well-informed analysis of the conflict dynamics in Myanmar. First, the Union has gained a solid understanding of the situation in the country through its long-term field presence in humanitarian and development programmes in conflict-affected areas. This was reinforced when an EU delegation was opened in Yangon in April 2012 and additional political and peacebuilding advisers recruited. Second, high-level political engagement granted the EU unique access and insight. Third, support was provided by the EEAS Mediation Support Team which mobilised internal and external expertise to identify potential scenarios for the peace process.

Myanmar exhibits some typical features of a fragile state: outbreaks of violence and a non-inclusive political system, leaving large parts of the population disenfranchised. The internationally agreed 'Peace-building and State-building Goals for Fragile States' were therefore a useful benchmark for developing an appropriate strategy. The Union's approach was also shaped by its 'Political Economy Analysis' of the country, which identified four key areas for action: better delivery of social services, the promotion of broad based economic growth, the improvement of

governance, and sustained peacebuilding efforts.

Diplomatic support

Myanmar has featured prominently on the EU diplomatic agenda over the past three years. President Barroso visited Yangon in November 2012, and three official visits were made by HR/VP Catherine Ashton. President Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi then reciprocated with visits to Brussels in March and October 2013, respectively. The EU has consistently used such opportunities to call for an immediate end to hostilities across the country and the holding of inclusive political negotiations which involve all stakeholders. It also encouraged government, opposition and civic leaders to increase efforts to prevent intercommunal violence and address the root causes of social instability.

The EU head of delegation plays a prominent role in the Peace Donor Support Group (PDSG) that was set up to provide both political and practical backing to the peace efforts. This grouping of international partners (which includes Australia, EU, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, UK, UN, US, and the World Bank) was first convened in June 2012 at the request of President Thein Sein. Its purpose is to serve as a platform for dialogue between the donor community and the government of Myanmar, and to better coordinate the provision of aid to conflict-affected areas. PDSG meetings have provided a venue for the EU to demonstrate political support for the process, understand the needs of the different stakeholders, enhance coordination between donors, and facilitate exchanges on relevant international experiences.

...advice, expertise...

From the outset, expectations of the EU were high due to its experience in successfully orchestrating peaceful transitions in Europe (and beyond), as well as its perceived impartiality. Although advice and expertise has been offered through many channels, the primary route has been through locally-based staff and the political section of the EU delegation. They have facilitated direct responses to requests from Myanmar counterparts on specific issues arising during the peace process, such as governance arrangements, citizenship rights, funding mechanisms, relations with armed groups or the monitoring of ceasefires.

What is preventive diplomacy?

The range of EU activities in Myanmar provides a unique case study of preventive diplomacy in the ASEAN region. The term encompasses actions taken to prevent disputes arising between parties, prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts, and to limit the spread of the latter should they occur. It includes the direct application of methods such as diplomacy, negotiation, enquiry, mediation and conciliation, as well as activities that are designed to indirectly reduce the risk of conflict by tackling structural causes.

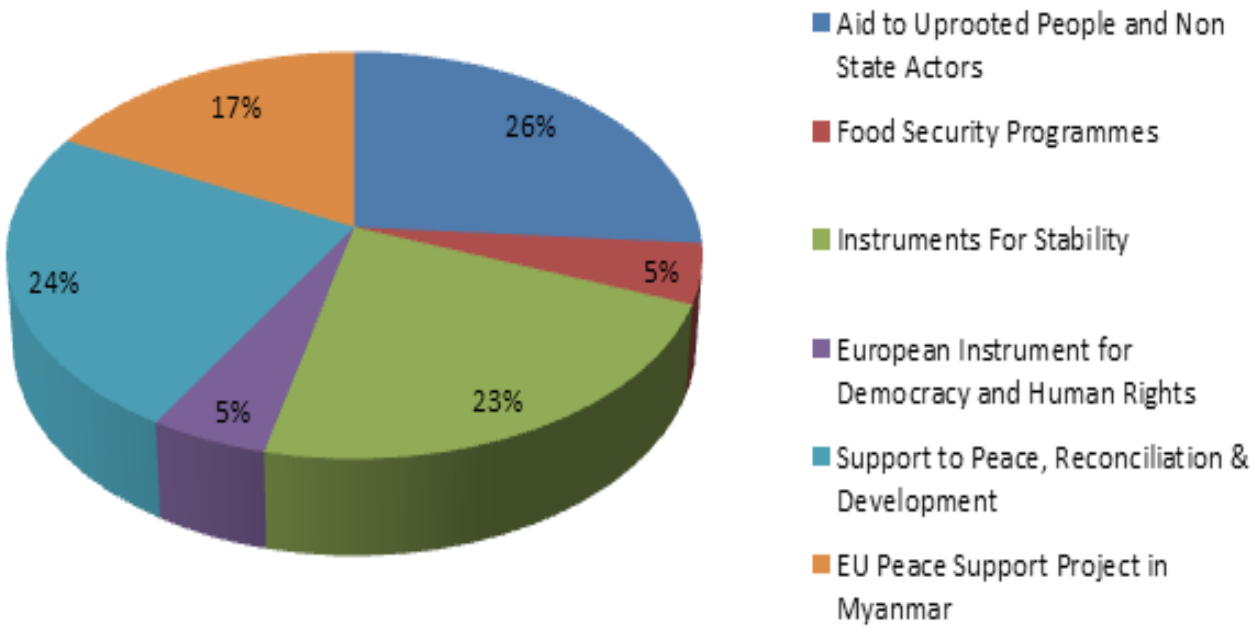
Whilst in UN usage, preventive diplomacy is applied both to internal as well as inter-state conflict, there has been a desire within the ASEAN Regional Forum to limit its use to conflicts between states. Given that the conflicts addressed in the Myanmar peace process are internal (albeit with international dimensions), it could be argued that EU peace support efforts there cannot be labelled that way. That said, most would accept that the Union has prioritised Myanmar with the strategic goal of preventing and resolving conflict, thus making it possible to speak of EU preventive diplomacy in the country.

In general, however, the level of demand has exceeded the EU's ability to supply its expertise in a contextually relevant and timely way. One approach to step up the response has been through *ad hoc* lectures, training sessions and exchanges of views on issues ranging from gender to political inclusion. The national dialogue process was also facilitated by meetings of the Civil Society Dialogue Network – one held in Brussels and one in Yangon. This approach has proved a practical way to offer mediation support, all the while leaving the initiative firmly in the hands of the local actors.

The renegotiation of power relations is always at the heart of any peace process. EU political and financial support to awareness-raising initiatives with various ethnic groups and to the Myanmar Peace Centre (MPC) was a deliberate effort to make best practices in peace building as transparent and publicly accessible as possible.

The government of Myanmar requested EU support to conduct a study of the priorities in conflict-affected areas. A Joint Peacebuilding Needs Assessment (JPNA) was subsequently prepared by experts from the EU, the UN, and the World Bank. The core objective of this exercise was to build a shared understanding of the needs and priorities of communities emerging from armed

EU funding to peacebuilding initiatives in Myanmar (€103 million)



Source: European Union Delegation to Myanmar

conflict. The findings can serve as a guide for the international community in future interventions.

...and funding

Peace and conflict resolution will remain key targets of EU financial engagement in the future. Currently, the EU provides 80% of total reported peace-related funding in Myanmar. Contrary to a widely held perception amongst civil society activists, EU support to the government-led Myanmar Peace Centre amounts to less than 15% of the overall support to the sector – with most of the funding channelled through local and international NGOs and UN agencies.

An €18 million programme 'EU Peace Support Project in Myanmar' is under consideration to help the next stages of the peace process. This will focus on developing a joint monitoring mechanism, encouraging national dialogue on political transition, providing aid in ethnic controlled territories, and ensuring the accountablity of the security sector.

Not built in a day

The EU's preventitive diplomacy in Myanmar is an example of a deliberate effort to help pre-empt violence by building structures that can withstand the inevitable setbacks of a complex political transition. This has allowed the EU to take the risks necessary to operate as a diplomatic actor – and not only as an aid donor – in a difficult environment. It was also able to largely fulfil the expectations of its Myanmar counterparts that it would bring to bear sufficient political leverage and expertise. Moreover, the Union's involvement proves that preventive diplomacy activities in the ASEAN region can be directed at an internal conflict without being perceived as unnecessarily 'interventionist'.

Reaching a political settlement that meets the needs and aspirations of all the people of Myanmar will be an arduous task. In any case, it will not be something that comes about solely as a result of the actions of the EU and other partners. Peace is not something that can be bought and paid for through international assistance – but active support can help.

Guy Banim is a former Peace Mediation Advisor at the EEAS.