

## Who will cast the first stone?

Behind the headlines **Bunn Nagara**



*Countries still steeped in criticising Asean and its 'ways' could do worse than look in the mirror and be honest with themselves at least.*

FOR decades, typical Western complaints of Asean processes and procedures have been a familiar lament.

Asean has been criticised for moving too slowly or not at all in trying to achieve its objectives. This is seen as comparing unfavourably with the supposedly prompt, planned and purposeful Western approach to getting results.

This is usually said to be a matter of cultural differentiation. Endless debates would then follow over which type of approach works better.

Events leading up to the East Asia Summit (EAS) later this week in Naypyidaw have exposed this differentiation to be largely a myth.

The somewhat intuitive and imperceptible Asian style, an aspect of the "Asean Way", has been revealed as not being unique to Asean. It is also shared by the US and Britain, together the supposed polar opposite of Asean-ness, when circumstances suit them.

Last Tuesday, the former British Governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, told a London inquiry that the British government had unduly become soft on China because of London's self-interests stemming from trade relations with Beijing.

Both Prime Minister David Cameron and Britain's Foreign Office have been criticised for lacking firmness in expressing Britain's unhappiness over the treatment of Hong Kong's pro-democracy student protests.

Critics allege that British leaders have displayed a lack of promptness, planning and purposefulness in support of the students. Yet this is not for Downing Street's lack of awareness of British interests in the situation, but rather its acute sense of them.

Like China's other critics over the matter, Patten evidently finds Britain's soft-peddalling of the issue distasteful. But whether he is right or wrong depends on the specifics of his argument.

Together with the student protesters, Patten objected to China's insistence on screening candidates for the post of Hong Kong's Chief Executive. He is right that the terms of the 1997 handover of the territory to China was based on a Joint Agreement between Britain and China, not on any unilateral declaration.

However, China may not have violated the terms that include eventual universal suffrage for Hong Kong residents. The principle of "one country, two systems" along with eventual democracy remain intact, even as the pace of getting there may be debated.



*Calling for justice: Rohingya Muslims living in Japan staging a rally outside of the Myanmar embassy in Tokyo against reported plans to relocate to settlement sites. AFP*

While the students seek to expedite the changes, Beijing prefers a slower pace. Regardless of personal or policy preferences, Cameron's government had decided to give China space to modulate the process.

Unlike other critics of the Chinese authorities perhaps, Patten does not directly allege any undue interference by Beijing. Police action was clearly left in the hands of the Chief Executive.

Patten also argued that if the Hong Kong government had given concessions to the students, these would have encouraged them to scale down their demands. That argument is highly contentious because the opposite – encouraging more student demands – could well have ensued.

Perhaps the British government had relied on quiet diplomacy in expressing its unhappiness to China. That would have meant taking a leaf from Asean's playbook, or at least a sharing of "its" methodology.

By the time US President Barack Obama arrived in Myanmar later in the week, he would certainly have become familiar with Asean's style as well. But he might just see it as pragmatic policy-dealing rather than succumbing to any regional habit.

Washington has long distinguished itself by berating certain Third World countries for perceived human rights violations. But there are studied exceptions, such as in the Arab world and Egypt, where US national interests trump criticisms.

The latest Third World beneficiary of this US exemption is Myanmar, the venue of this year's EAS. Once more, Western interests in relating to China are not unrelated and never far away.

Myanmar, long an ally of China, has lately shown some independence from Beijing. Keen for Naypyidaw to maintain this new tack, the US is now loath to criticise Myanmar for its several flaws.

Critics of Myanmar note that the reportedly reformist government of President Thein Sein has stalled on reforms and begun to slide backwards.

For them, the issues include discrimination against the minority Rohingya community, lack of progress in negotiating with rebel groups, deteriorating press freedoms and stubbornly blocking opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's presidential candidature.

It is Myanmar's other liabilities that are more serious and disturbing. The number of political prisoners is rising, again.

Thein Sein's government also appears to have run out of steam in forging peace agreements with the country's various rebel groups. Recent media clampdowns are also unwarranted and reprehensible.

Worse, harsh discriminatory laws against the Rohingyas have become the ugliest face of Naypyidaw. Besides denying the community citizenship, the government is now set to evict Rohingyas forcibly from their homes while a silent genocide is perpetrated by private groups unhindered.

Obama's staff are well aware of the terrible conditions that prevail in Myanmar. But again, Washington has decided to soft-pedal the issue in hopes that Myanmar will remain "on side" vis-à-vis China.

Obama's visit to Myanmar this time will be his second in just two years. The most that can be expected of him now is more quiet diplomacy in Thein Sein's ear, but even that may not happen.

The White House has declared that sanctions against Myanmar's military-allied rule have only been eased, not lifted entirely. But it is also no secret that any US presidential visit is likely to be taken by the host government as a positive endorsement of sorts.

The US-Myanmar-China relationship is convoluted if nothing else. More to the point perhaps, Obama will be making a state visit to Beijing right after his Naypyidaw trip.

But already the signals from Washington do not seem too encouraging. The view from Beijing may well be that if Obama is going to be silent while in Myanmar, what gives him the right to sound off in China?

Neither Britain nor the US now has any standing in criticising Asean for its perceived lack of gumption as in the past. These criticisms have been legion for decades, over Cambodia/Kampuchea, Indonesia and Myanmar – and just about every other Asean country at some point.

Little that Asean does and the ways in which it does it is actually unique. Countries everywhere use whatever tactics they deem fit to serve their own ends.

Europe itself has taken its time to confront Russia over perceived slights and challenges, and seldom to US satisfaction. That was precisely the basis for the rude reprimand of the EU expressed by the US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland.

But which country can rightfully blame another for doing what it prefers in the way it prefers to, when every other country is doing the same thing? Only hypocrites will still want to argue.

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