

21ST ASIA SECURITY SUMMIT

THE SHANGRI-LA DIALOGUE

SIMULTANEOUS SPECIAL SESSIONS – SESSION 3

**MYANMAR: OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIPLOMACY AMID
DIFFERENT VISIONS FOR PEACE**

FRIDAY 31 MAY 2024

IGOR DRIESMANS

**SPECIAL ENVOY FOR MYANMAR, EUROPEAN
EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE, EUROPEAN UNION**

Aaron Connelly, Senior Fellow for Southeast Asian Politics and Foreign Policy, IISS–Asia

I will now turn to Ambassador Igor Driesmans. We have heard from the perholder at the Security Council in the UK and the future Chair of ASEAN. The European Union has taken a very active role on Myanmar over the last three years and you have been a big part of that, Ambassador, so I am very keen to hear from you.

Igor Driesmans, Special Envoy for Myanmar, European External Action Service, European Union

Thank you very much, Aaron, also for bringing us together today.

Ladies and gentlemen, Excellencies, the objectives of the EU in Myanmar since the coup have been very clear. We have to help the country to return to its path towards democracy and we have to support the people of Myanmar. So we have basically followed a double-track approach to pressure the junta to change its behaviour, condemning in the strongest possible terms the violence that the military regime perpetrates against its own people. We have issued eight rounds of sanctions against those perpetrators, as well as to entities financing the military. Let me underline that those sanctions are targeted to avoid harming civilians. We also have an arms embargo in place, as well as an export ban on dual goods. In parallel to that, we have been putting in place a number of instruments to alleviate the people's critical needs. Between 2021 and 2023, we committed more than €180 million to development aid, as well as €85m in humanitarian aid. All of that, I stress, was channelled through international organisations or non-governmental organisations, including many national ones, and reaching all parts of the country.

We will continue to follow that dual track but, like many others for sure, we have to acknowledge that these actions alone will not have a decisive influence on the course of the conflict. Like many other partners too, including here at this table, we are deeply concerned that there is not much progress on the Five Point Consensus. Violence has not ceased – on the contrary – and we are far away from a constructive dialogue among all parties. I think it is fair to say that the junta has been unwilling to implement the Five Point Consensus in earnest – a consensus that we all subscribe to.

On the battlefield, since 2023 the military has suffered a series of setbacks, losing territory, bases and towns to ethnic armed organisations along the country's periphery, and it is no longer in control of a large part of its own borders. If the current trajectory continues, various ethnic groups will tighten their grip on autonomous statelets in the periphery, while for now at least the weakened military, in a very brutal way, manages to control the centre.

The military is continuing to target civilians, ordinary citizens and villagers throughout the country and, as we speak – and the Minister spoke about it – we see other layers of complexity in Rakhine following the forced recruitment of Rohingya, dividing communities and exploiting tensions and mistrust, fuelled by misinformation and fuelled by hate speech.

How can we international partners create a more conducive environment to overcome this escalation and adjust to this new environment which we see in Myanmar? What more can we do? Or rather, what can we do differently? Let me maybe offer four points. They are more of method rather than anything else.

Firstly, any processes or mediation have to be inclusive. We have seen it over the last couple of months, but I dare say over the last couple of decades, that partial solutions and partial ceasefires also will not hold. They only feed more distrust. We need to engage all stakeholders. Let me praise the Indonesian chairmanship last year for having started such a process, and we do hope that Laos will take this forward, because it is absolutely critical.

Secondly, trust. I know it sounds a bit alien at this particular juncture to speak about trust, but we need some basic trust between the different parties to come to a solution but also to make sure that solution will prove sustainable. We will put our shoulders to any initiative that leads to more confidence building between different parties.

Thirdly, and in this sense I echo what our Malaysian colleague has said, we need to create more space where regional and international partners talk among themselves. Aaron, you said there are different visions of peace. That is of course true to a certain extent, but there are also many things that we share as an international community. Of course, there is huge – and it is on display here these days – international competition and geopolitical rivalry, but when it comes to Myanmar, we all want peace, we all want stability and we all want to avoid fragmentation of the country. So we need to try and bridge the differences that do exist among ourselves, and we can only do so if we speak more to each other, also collectively, as partners of Myanmar. I am afraid we do not do enough of that.

Fourthly and finally – and there, too, I join the previous speakers – as much as we can help from the outside, it will be national stakeholders that will define themselves a concrete solution that will satisfy the aspirations of the people. We see local initiatives towards state building and ethnically inclusive federalism that accommodate those aspirations and that do deserve our support. Again, no one wants to see fragmentation of the country, but we need to take account of these aspirations of all subnational units and engage them as such.

I will end it here. I know there are many crises ongoing around the world that also deserve our attention, but it is good that we have this conversation today and it is good that we renew our thinking as international partners for the sake of the people of Myanmar, but also, frankly, for our own sake. The EU is ready to do its part.

Thank you.

Aaron Connelly, Senior Fellow for Southeast Asian Politics and Foreign Policy, IISS-Asia

Thank you, Ambassador.