GENEVA peacebuilding PLATFORM

White Paper Series No.9

Southeast Asia

Regional perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding

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Introduction

Covering some eleven countries with an estimated total population of 618 million people stretching across an area of 4,500,000 square kilometres, Southeast Asia represents a region with enormous peacebuilding challenges and opportunities. More than two thirds of the people in the region live in countries that have either experienced armed conflicts or are living through periods of transition towards less conflictive and more participative societies thanks to peace agreements that have been forged or peace processes currently in progress. However, a few of these peace negotiations are undergoing a painstaking period of review, if not reversal. Moreover, momentous developments in the regional aggrupation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are underway that in the next two years could help provide a climate more conducive to the peaceful resolution of conflicts among and within the countries in the region. It is perhaps in this area where the mandate, the expertise and the support of the United Nations (UN), its allied agencies and partners could be most valuable and could have the most long-lasting impact, while at the same time contributing to the efforts to make and build peace in the countries confronting violent conflict in the region.

By 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) will be put in place providing enormous possibilities for addressing some of the underlying causes of conflict in the region, in particular the opportunity to deal with questions of economic inclusion and inequality. The ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) could likewise provide a more regular and effective venue for constructive dialogue and the meeting of minds on critical issues – once again providing the opportunity for employing a 'peace lens' in understanding the more contentious situations in the region.

The establishment of the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation launched at the 21st ASEAN Summit in 2012 has been envisioned to provide support for conflict management and resolution so as to contribute towards the

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attainment of peace, security and stability in the region. Finally, the progress made in forming an inter-governmental regional human rights body and the drafting of an ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, though modest, are nevertheless landmark achievements for an aggrupation that has been somewhat rather reticent in the combat against regimes of impunity that undermine the rule of law.

In brief, over the next two years in Southeast Asia, the possibilities of creating institutional support for efforts to make and build peace exist, given adequate and timely support from intergovernmental organisations, principally the UN with its rich experience and the work of its allied agencies on the ground, as well as civil society organisations, both international and local.

Challenges to building peace in Southeast Asia

The annual analysis published by the Escola de Pau (School of Peace) at the Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona and the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme of Uppsala University covering armed conflicts with specified battle-related deaths in the recent period up until the present have regularly included references to a number of countries in the region, namely, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Burma. In the distant past, major violent conflicts had taken place in mainland Southeast Asia, namely, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Before focusing on the particular situations of violent conflict in each country, it is helpful to reiterate a number of observations that may have an impact on the understanding of the peacebuilding challenges in the region:

The protracted nature of violent conflicts in the region. Contemporary studies on armed conflicts in Southeast Asia have focused on the protracted nature of the conflicts, their underlying causes and the fact that the armed conflicts in the region are equally characterised by the subnational dimension of the conflict.[1] Poverty and inequality, landlessness and livelihood insecurity, a political economy of exclusion, the question of identity and the respect for diverse cultures have figured prominently among the factors that have fuelled conflicts in the region. In this context, it is therefore important to reframe the pursuit of a negotiated political settlement – re-focusing on approaches that are more comprehensive, inter-related and country-specific, while sensitive to the sub-national dimensions of the conflicts in the region. In this manner, there will be a greater chance of pursuing more sustainable paths to peace.

The subnational character of regional conflicts. In general, the contours of conflict in the region are primarily subnational in character, for example Mindanao in the southern Philippines, the Patani insurgency in Southern Thailand, the processes in Aceh and West Papua in Indonesia and the Myanmar Border Areas including the Rohingya Muslim minorities in the state of Rakhine, among others. Even the armed struggle waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines have sub-regional expressions in the Compostela Valley in Mindanao, the Leyte and Samar provinces in Eastern Visayas, the Bicol and the Southern and Central Tagalog regions – areas that have high indices of poverty, as well as high levels of inequality and more pronounced levels of violence. The subnational perspective thus for a large part provides a more realistic lens in addressing a good number of the more intractable conflicts confronted by peace advocates working on Southeast Asia.

[1] Asia Foundation, The Contested Corners of Asia: Subnational Conflict, 2013. The research publication deals with subnational conflicts identified as the most enduring form of violent conflict in Asia.

Linking the subnational, national and regional approaches in pursuing relevant roadmaps to peace. In light of this, it is important to analyse the sub-regional causes of conflict and to explore ways in which a more inclusive development path may be pursued in the economic and political terrains. To this end, improved methods of designing, pursuing and implementing more relevant roadmaps to peace can be considered. Understanding the sub-national character of the conflicts can thus underpin the search for national approaches and solutions. Moreover, as the Southeast region approaches another stage in the development of the ASEAN into the ASEAN Economic Community in the coming year, as well as the ASEAN Political and Security Community, it is important to consider the impact on the imbalances among the countries in the region and between their different sub-regions.

The challenge of resolute peace-related leadership and addressing people's aspirations. Undoubtedly, the resolve of political leaders in the countries in the region is critical in the realisation of a just peace in areas of conflict. A particular challenge in the region is how to create greater coherence between resolute peace-related leadership that is able to meet the people's aspirations to improve their lives, to better protect their basic rights and to participate more meaningfully in the formulation and implementation of policies. To consolidate gains made around the peace table, it is vital that political leaders in countries emerging from violent conflict are able to establish durable institutions, encourage more effective practices in governance and put on track sustainable economic development that will meet the needs of the most vulnerable in hitherto divided societies.

Three major thematic peace-related challenges that deal with the critical stages of peace processes in Southeast Asia can be identified:

- ***Implementing peace agreements.*** Two important peace agreements signed within the last decade have been forged in the Southeast Asian region, namely, the 2005 Memorandum of Understanding in Aceh and the more recent March 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro in Mindanao. It is a truism to say that the period after the signing of an agreement is the most difficult part. Implementing the provisions of the agreements, ensuring that enabling legislation is passed and that the parties to the accord comply with the spirit and letter of the accord are the imperatives in this period. In what way can the guarantors of these agreements be assisted to ensure that compliance is prompt and comprehensive? Can a peace constituency not only in the regions affected by the conflict but throughout the country be mobilised so that the people remain vigilant and put pressure on the conflict parties to abide by responsibilities that they have acquired by signing-up to the peace accords? Civil society peace advocates can further efforts to improve good governance, the protection of the rights of the most vulnerable in society, the greater involvement of peasants, workers, fisherfolk and the urban poor, among others, and the protection of the environment to meet the challenges of climate change, which is most acute in the Southeast Asian region.

- ***Accompanying processes of peace negotiations.*** In processes where peace negotiations are either ongoing or stalled, such as those between the Philippine Government and the National Democratic Front (negotiating on behalf of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army), can the principal facilitators, such as the Norwegian envoys, be assisted directly or indirectly by friends of the process – whether governmental, inter-governmental or non-governmental, national, local or international – so as to break the current impasse? The juncture in Southern Thailand as well as in West Papua in Indonesia present similar challenges of reconvening conflicting parties to enter more

seriously into negotiations that can be owned by local actors so that their negotiated outcomes can be truly trusted.

- ***Assisting efforts towards more participative democratic transitions.*** In those situations working towards a period of democratic transition, it may be important to highlight the challenges that a more inclusive and participative approach can bring. Dealing with the multi-faceted conflicts on the borders of Myanmar can be enhanced if the transition to democracy is more fully realised. The same is true for dealing with the conflicts in southern Thailand, which could be pursued more vigorously if the stand-off between the opposing political forces in the capital and in other parts of the country is resolved by more parliamentary and less contentious means that carry the risk of pushing the country to the brink of political breakdown. The elections in Indonesia provide another opening for dealing with greater restraint and magnanimity regarding the other conflicts in the more outlying parts of the vast country. Once a more authentic and participative democratic culture is installed in countries confronting violent conflicts, then the conditions become more conducive for meeting major challenges with greater confidence and with more chance of success.

Opportunities for building peace in Southeast Asia

In identifying key opportunities for building peace in Southeast Asia in the next two years, it might be helpful to take an individual country approach and a long-term regional approach.

The Philippines: Bangsamoro and the Communist Challenge. The most important opportunity that presents itself in the country and wider region is perhaps how to consolidate the gains embodied in the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro.[2] It has four annexes: the first, on power-sharing; the second, on wealth-sharing; the third, on normalisation, which includes decommissioning as well as the redeployment of forces; and the fourth, on the transitional arrangements and institutions leading up to the 2016 elections. If the agreement holds and the provisions are implemented according to the spirit and letter of the accord, then it would provide an important example as well as a template to other conflict parties in similar situations in the region seeking peaceful outcomes.

Given the context of recurring humanitarian disasters in the country and the momentum for peace which the Mindanao Accord provides, perhaps there can now be an opportunity for breaking the prolonged stalemate which has resulted in a standstill in the Norwegian-brokered peace negotiations between the Philippine Government and the National Democratic Front. But the ground has to be prepared and the process anchored on four distinct fronts: human rights, socio-economic reforms and policy directions, electoral and political reforms, and harnessing broader support for the process that could subsequently result in the reduction and elimination of protracted violence in the country.

Indonesia: Aceh and the period of political transition. The experience of forging the Memorandum of Understanding of 2005 and the subsequent largely peaceful alternance in political power in the hitherto divided Aech region has given Indonesia sufficient confidence in

[2] For a full copy of the Comprehensive Agreement on Bangsamoro and its four annexes, please see the website of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace Processes (OPAPP) for the Philippines: www.opapp.gov.ph.

consolidating the gains of the historic agreement. The question of 'political infighting' among the political forces in contention in the area and the recurrent clamour on behalf of provinces outside of Banda Aceh and the central region to seek a 'separate status' so to speak, have constituted sources of tension. Nevertheless, the agreement has provided the necessary resolve and space to consider ways in which to pursue relevant peace efforts in other parts of the country, such as West Papua/Papua, which has previously undergone periods of relative and sporadic violence.

Thailand: the southern question. The contentious issue of national political leadership that has seen contending forces and their respective following play out their differences on the streets of the capital and outlying areas has resulted in political gridlock and the inability to focus on addressing the unresolved issues in the southernmost part of the country. Although there have been tentative efforts in the recent past, it is worth noting the determination of voices on the ground to advance their aspirations to break the vicious cycles of the past. It is important to identify examples of key citizen peace initiatives and explore ways in which support can be provided for efforts that emerge from the ground, such as the following: the Southern Thailand Peace Dialogues; the Civil Society Council of Southernmost Thailand, composed of some twenty civil society organisations that explore proposals towards political decentralisation; the so-called 'Patani Peace Process', with their ground-breaking efforts in convening an 'insiders' peacebuilders' platform' joined by some fifty influential individuals whose credibility has inspired respect; and, the Patani People's Peace Forum, which has focused on work to draft the possible contents of a peace agenda.[3]

Myanmar/Burma: democratic transition and border areas. There have been dramatic political changes in the country, resulting in a rare 'democratic' opening, which, though limited, is unprecedented in this land-locked country. The release of political opposition figures, including the engagement of Aung San Suu Kyi in parliament itself, has led to marked changes that were hitherto unheard of in the country. Ceasefire arrangements sealed with various forces representing ethnic constituents within the country's borders have to a large extent been honoured. However, violence has been inflicted on the Rohingya Muslim minorities in the state of Rakhine who, besides expressing a different belief, have not been adequately recognised and have to a large extent been excluded from the benefits of democratic openings that the country has enjoyed in the recent past.

The Regional Approach: Support for the ASEAN initiatives. The coming two years may be critical for ASEAN's historic resolve to forge an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), as well as an ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), including an ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR). With such promising initiatives scheduled for the coming year, the opportunity for building peace in the region is further enhanced, provided governments and non-state actors, as well as civil society peace advocates, are able to avail of such instruments, recognising their possibilities as well as their limitations.

[3] S. Iglesias, 'The Role of Civil Society in Peacebuilding: Southeast Asia in Focus', paper prepared for Civil Society Dialogue Roundtable in Brussels, Belgium, 2013.

Required support for building peace and the role of the UN

In general, there seems to be a number of critical roles that the UN, its allied agencies and its partner organisations can play in Southeast Asia in the coming two years. The following strands provide the most promise given the current regional context and the 'niche strengths' of the UN and its allied agencies and partners, including civil society peace advocates:

Human rights and humanitarian principles. Ensuring compliance with human rights standards and humanitarian principles; designating human rights rapporteurs or experts in particular peace processes, such as those in the Philippines between the Government and the National Democratic Front (NDF), in Southern Thailand, in Indonesia and in Myanmar may largely contribute to creating conditions more conducive to peacebuilding. In the case of the Philippines, a vigorous consortium of human rights monitors provides support for better compliance with human rights standards and the creation of a critical peace constituency. The historic contributions of organisations such as the Task Force Detainees, the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates and Karapatan, among others, provide testimony to the valuable role played by civil society organisations in advancing efforts towards a rights-based peace.

Human security and security sector reform. In the countries mentioned, but particularly in Southern Thailand and Myanmar, linking human security to security sector reform, including civilian oversight over the military, is a priority. Allied with the efforts to further advance in the compliance with the UN Millennium Development Goals, it is imperative to link peacebuilding with efforts to reach verifiable targets that will benefit people's lives, while placing the safety and security of people as a priority concern of all stakeholders in the respective conflict countries and the Southeast Asian region at large. The efforts of the Mindanao People's Caucus and an alliance of people's organisations in the southern Philippine regions have led to the protection of the rights of internally-displaced peoples in initiatives such as 'Bakwit' (dealing with the rights of displaced peoples), the zones and sanctuaries of peace, and citizens initiatives towards timely and meaningful ceasefires. Other examples are measures to empower women and their efforts to better care for the health and educational needs of their children to advance human security to benefit the next generation.

Democratic transition and building capacities. To support processes of democratic transition, capacity-building in 'good governance' for local leaders in the aftermath of the Bangsamoro Peace Agreement forged in Mindanao and the continuing process of democratization in Aceh in the aftermath of the earlier Memorandum of Understanding are both imperative measures to ensure that the gains made are irreversible. Moreover, to ensure that sufficient resources and expertise are made available by the UN for the political leaders managing these periods of transition, as well as to ensure that civil society organisations remain vigilant and have the capacity to monitor efforts.

Conclusion: No turning back

To ensure that the peace processes are supported, that peace advocates are strengthened and that the peace agreements so far forged are irreversible as far as possible, it is worthwhile considering three related themes.

Building peace constituencies. There can be no sustainable peace in the above-mentioned conflict situations and countries concerned without building a solid peace constituency that could advance the peace agenda in the country in season and out of season. Peace

processes have their ups and downs, moments of opportunities and downturns. No government is monolithic, and to strengthen the more peace-inclined leaders in the country, it is imperative to ensure that pressure is applied constantly and consistently to advance the process, to consolidate the peace gains so far achieved and to realise the peace dividends that most agreements bring.

Seeking regional collaboration and the relevance of Islamic diplomacy. In the case of Southeast Asia, regional collaboration is most timely given the momentum of developments within ASEAN and the region. It is worth noting that the role played by Islamic diplomacy has been critical, not to say indispensable, particularly in the case of Mindanao in the southern Philippines. This could similarly hold relevance in southern Thailand, as well as in Indonesia. The role of the UN as a friend of the process, as well as moral guarantor, can likewise be explored.

Supporting local Initiatives with UN capacities, expertise and linkages. The groundswell of support from local peoples and the increasing interest demonstrated by regional bodies seem to provide a welcome opportunity for the UN to provide capacities, expertise and linkages when requested, particularly through its allied agencies such as UNDP, UNHCR, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNIFEM and the Mediation Support Unit under the UN Secretary-General's Political Affairs Department.

About the author: Ed Garcia is an independent peace consultant. He has worked in diverse regions of conflict while serving as senior policy advisor of International Alert for nearly two decades. He has also worked as senior researcher at the international secretariat of Amnesty International. He has taught political science at the University of the Philippines and at the Ateneo de Manila University. He was a member of the Commission that drafted the Philippine Constitution. He currently serves as consultant on formation at the Far Eastern University.

About this Paper: This paper is part of a series providing regional peacebuilding perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding. The authors' task was to provide an authentic, original and honest analysis about three questions: (1) What are the main challenges for building peace in your region? (2) What are the key opportunities for building peace in your region over the next one or two years? (3) What would be the key support necessary to build peace in your region over the next one or two years? Is there any specific role for the UN?

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About the White Paper on Peacebuilding: The White Paper on Peacebuilding is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process initiated by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has the objective to situate UN peacebuilding within the broader peacebuilding universe and to articulate visions for the future for building peace in violent and fragile contexts. The White Paper places peacebuilding within the changing characteristics of armed violence and security, and within the practical evidence of engagements in peacebuilding contexts emanating from a diversity of fields. Ensuring a better relationship between UN peacebuilding and the broader peacebuilding field is a complementary effort to the existing work surrounding the 10-year review of the UN peacebuilding architecture and an effort to take stock of the nature and evolution of the broader peacebuilding universe.

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