

# ASEAN's Response to Myanmar's Coup: Norms and, Non-interference

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## 1.INTRODUCTION

U Kyaw Moe Tun, the ambassador of Myanmar to the United Nations, raised the famous “Three Finger Salute,” a pop culture reference that symbolizes the fight for freedom. He employed this symbolic gesture in the context of the turmoil in Myanmar, which began on the morning of February 2, 2021. On that day, soldiers and police officers marched through the streets of Naypyidaw, Myanmar's capital, accompanied by an imposing presence of tanks and helicopters. Within hours, the military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized control of the government, cut off internet access, shut down the stock market, and arrested numerous activists and politicians, most notably Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto leader of the civilian government. The military justified this move by claiming fraud in the 2020 general elections, the Tatmadaw declared a “state of emergency”<sup>1</sup>. Placing Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the military commander-in-chief, in power for a year. Since then, his security forces have responded violently to nationwide anti-coup protests, resulting in the deaths of over 800 people<sup>2</sup>. In this situation, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is at a crossroads. It is trying to mediate the conflict while also sticking to its long-held principle of non-interference.<sup>3</sup> This paper adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on secondary sources which includes official ASEAN documents, media reports, academic literature, and policy analysis. This study contextualizes the Myanmar crisis within the overarching regional security framework and examines the intrinsic tensions between ASEAN's diplomatic methodologies and the necessities of efficient conflict resolution. Therefore to examine these tensions and ASEAN's evolving response the paper address the following research question: 1.How has the non interference and consensus principle limited the ASEAN's response to the 2021 Myanmar coup?, How have the different approaches of the members state of ASEAN hindered the Five Point Consensus?, How have the external actors weakened the ASEAN's role in the Myanmar crisis?, What are the reforms ASEAN's could take up for handling the Myanmar and future crisis?, answering these questions would allow for a critical assessment of ASEAN's diplomatic constraints and potential pathways towards greater institutional effectiveness and regional relevance.

## 2.THE ASEAN WAY

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a well-known group of governments that works to improve cooperation in the region and strengthen the economic, political, and cultural ties between its member states. ASEAN has ten member countries. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand were the first five to join in 1967. Brunei joined ASEAN in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Myanmar and Laos in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999. Over the years, the group has grown to include five more

<sup>1</sup> Mahaseth, Harsh and Tulsyan, Aryan, The Myanmar Coup and the Role of Asean (January 29, 2022). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4021075> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4021075>

<sup>2</sup> “Myanmar Coup: The People Shot Dead since the Protests Began,” BBC News, 13 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.com>; Charles Dunst, “How to Keep Myanmar from Becoming Another US Failure,” Boston Globe, 2 April 2021, <https://www.bostonglobe.com>.

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, “Myanmar coup: Military overthrows elected government amid protests,” accessed March 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55902069>.

member states. ASEAN has been an important place for Southeast Asian countries to talk and work together on many issues since it was founded. These include trade, security, and social development. The group's goals are to make the region more stable, encourage long-term economic growth, and work together to solve problems like protecting the environment, helping people after disasters, and protecting human rights. ASEAN encourages its member states to work together through a variety of programs and meetings. This helps build a sense of community and makes sure that the region's interests are put first in the world stage. The five founding members of ASEAN came up with the "ASEAN way" as the main way for the group to interact because they were worried about state sovereignty and wanted to keep peace at home<sup>4</sup>. The ASEAN is a set of diplomatic rules that member states agree to follow in the regional bloc. There are at least four things that are the same about the ASEAN way in literature, even though there are some small differences. These are the principle of non-interference, quiet diplomacy, the non-use of force, and decision-making by consensus.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.ASEAN RESPONSE TO THE COUP

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the main regional group in Southeast Asia. It has worked hard to talk to Myanmar's military government, the Tatmadaw, in order to calm down the ongoing crisis that started with the military coup in February 2021. ASEAN has to deal with a lot of pressure and high expectations from the international community to take strong action. It also has to stay important and central in the region. Even with these pressures, many of ASEAN's diplomatic efforts have not yet led to any real progress. The fact that the group can't agree on anything has made it harder for them to speak out against the Tatmadaw's violent crackdown on dissent and violations of human rights. The fact that not all of its member states agree on a single position has caused problems. This shows how complicated regional politics can be when national interests come before collective solidarity. ASEAN member states reached a breaking point after the Tatmadaw's violent response to peaceful protests led to a shocking rise in deaths. Because the situation was getting worse, they decided to hold an emergency summit in April 2021. This was a big shift in how they were dealing with the problem. The point of this summit was to start a conversation that could lead to a peaceful end to the conflict and the return of democracy in Myanmar.

This showed that ASEAN is committed to keeping the region stable and acting as a mediator in conflicts. At the emergency summit, all member states, even the Burmese junta, agreed on a five-point plan to start the peace process, but it never happened<sup>6</sup>.

The Five consensus included.

1. Immediate End to Violence: ASEAN told Myanmar's military to stop all acts of violence right away in order to stop the suffering of civilians.
2. Talking to Everyone: The agreement called for everyone involved in the conflict, including the military, the opposition, and ethnic groups, to start talking to each other so that the conflict could be resolved peacefully.
3. The appointment of a special envoy: A special envoy was to be chosen to help the two sides talk to each other. There were several envoys, but their power and authority were limited.
4. Humanitarian Aid: ASEAN is committed to helping the people of Myanmar with humanitarian aid to meet the urgent needs that have come up because of the conflict.
5. Visit to Myanmar by the envoy: The envoy was supposed to go to Myanmar to see the situation for himself, which would have given the diplomatic effort more credibility..

<sup>4</sup> Katsumata, Hiro. 2003. "Reconstruction of Diplomatic Norms in Southeast Asia: The Case for Strict Adherence to the 'ASEAN Way.'" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 25 (1): 104–121.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 105.

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Strangio, "ASEAN Envoy Cancels Planned Myanmar Trip Due to Junta Stonewalling," *The Diplomat*, October 15, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/asean-envoy-cancels-planned-myanmar-trip-due-to-junta-stonewalling/>.

However, the consensus although agreed upon by all the ASEAN states did not materialize. As a result ASEAN implemented an unprecedented move to exclude Myanmar's junta from the October 2021 ASEAN summit until Tatmadaw complies with the agreed-upon consensus<sup>7</sup>. This action can be seen as a crucial step for ASEAN in moving beyond the non-interference principle.

#### **4. ASEAN'S ROLE IN OTHER REGIONAL CRISIS**

Since its founding in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has positioned itself as a stabilizing force in a region often beset by political turbulence. Historically ASEAN has relied on consensus-based diplomacy and quite, behind-the-scenes negotiations to manage conflicts among its members. This approach characterized by consultation, dialogue, and a cautious avoidance of confrontation has allowed ASEAN to maintain unity in the face of divergent national interests. For example during the political crises in Cambodia in the late 1980s and subsequent internal disputes in member states, ASEAN members prioritized regional harmony over aggressive intervention in other's internal affairs nor supported political movements in neighboring states. The 1967 Bangkok Declaration, the ASEAN foundational document, states plainly that member states must prevent external interference to ensure domestic and regional stability<sup>8</sup>. However, ASEAN has not consistently adhered to this principle. In December 2005, for instance, its ministers criticized Myanmar, urging the then-ruling Tatmadaw junta (which was in power from 1962 to 2011) to democratize and release political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, who spent 15 years under house arrest after returning to the country in 1988<sup>9</sup>. Yet ASEAN members are nonetheless still clinging to the principle of non-interference today in no small part because the region has experienced deep democratic backsliding since 2005 and because none of these illiberal leaders want the limelight of criticism shined on them<sup>10</sup>. In recent years, the military seized control of Thailand in its own coup, Cambodia's Hun Sen further consolidated his deeply autocratic personalist regime, and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte a vocal supporter of the extrajudicial killing of drug users and other criminals. Won elections and has governed semi autocratically. ASEAN has also for years ignored Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya Muslims, natives of Myanmar's Rakhine State who are nonetheless stateless because the state denies them citizenship under a 1982 law based on the presumption that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. The bloc continued looking away in 2017 when the Tatmadaw ramped up its long-running campaign against the Rohingya<sup>11</sup>.

#### **5. CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS**

The recent coup has underscored a variety of significant challenges that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been grappling with. This situation has not only revealed the organization's limitations in effectively addressing political instability but also highlighted its inability to restore order in the region during a time of crisis. The events have made people wonder if ASEAN can work as a single unit that can help with dialogue and take collective action when tensions rise and governments fail among its member states. The paper thus delineates various challenges that have hindered ASEAN's efficacy in confronting the Junta.

<sup>7</sup> Al Jazeera. 2021. "ASEAN Summit Begins Without Myanmar After Top General Barred." *Al Jazeera*, October 26. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/26/asean-summit-begins-without-myanmar-after-top-generals-exclusion>.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Stubbs, "The ASEAN Alternative? Ideas, Institutions, and the Challenge to 'Global' Governance," *Pacific Review* 21, no. 4 (2008): 451–68.

<sup>9</sup> Update Report No. 4: Myanmar," Security Council Report, 15 December 2005, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org>.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Dunst

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Gettleman, "Rohingya Recount Atrocities: 'They Threw My Baby Into a Fire,'" *New York Times*, 11 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com>.

**5.1 The different levels of adherence to the non-interference principle among member states:**

The choice to keep Myanmar's Junta out of the ASEAN summit was a big change from the way the group usually does things. It's important to remember, though, that some member states still believe in the principle of non-interference and don't want to give it up completely. They don't want to do it because they're worried about what might happen that could hurt their own interests later on. Because of this, the response to Myanmar's junta has tended to be less harsh, which shows how hard it is to balance principled positions with regional diplomacy, for Example, Thailand with the burden of proximity and the impact on economic relationships still has not pushed highly affected countries, such as Thailand to take proactive action against Myanmar<sup>12</sup>. Soon after agreeing to the Five point consensus, Cambodia while hosting the October Summit 2021 threatened to distort ASEAN's collective action in various ways<sup>13</sup>, by welcoming the Burmese military to the 2022 ASEAN summit to be held in Cambodia, Citing Myanmar as a part of the ASEAN family. Vietnam and the Philippines have essentially put on the same view and taken a softer approach to the crisis. In maritime Southeast Asia, countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines, which lean more towards democratic governance, advocate for a more stringent stance against Myanmar in light of its ongoing political crisis. They think that a stronger response is needed to deal with the humanitarian and democratic problems that have come up since the military coup. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), on the other hand, has a lot of problems when it comes to putting these kinds of measures into action. The problem is that ASEAN's decision-making process is based on consensus, which means that all member states must agree before anything can be done. Because of this, the group can't respond quickly to the situation in Myanmar, which frustrates many member countries because they don't have any clear plans to help democracy and human rights in the area. The main reason for the varying levels of Adherence to the noninterference principle is the difference in political regimes amongst member states. The principle of noninterference can be viewed as a norm for peaceful coexistence between authoritarian and democratic states. Therefore, several authoritarian or undemocratic regimes still view this principle as a preferable choice, acting as protection from public criticism for their internal affairs<sup>14</sup>.

**5.2 ASEAN's weakness in enforcing accountability:**

Regional accountability mechanisms and sanctions are crucial tools for a regional bloc to lead the regional agenda competently. However, the ASEAN Charter does not provide for accountability mechanisms or sanctions to be implemented against its members who fail to protect human rights within their territory<sup>15</sup>. On the other hand, groups like the European Union and the African Union have set up ways to make sure that their members follow the rules. For example, the EU has put economic sanctions on Hungary and Poland for breaking democratic rules. These countries have lost funding for breaking the rule of law. The AU has also suspended and put sanctions on countries that have made unconstitutional changes to their governments. ASEAN can't deal with situations like the Coup in Myanmar because it doesn't have any enforcement tools that are similar<sup>16</sup>. The ASEAN Charter encourages a decision-making process based on consultation and consensus, stressing the need for member states to respect each other's sovereignty. Each country has its own unique and rich history of building a nation, and they all want to be able to control

<sup>12</sup> Sirijintana Worrawit. 2021. *Putting ASEAN to Test: The Roles and Challenges of Resolving the Myanmar Political Crisis After the 2021 Coup*. Graduate Review of Political Science and Public Administration Journal Vol. 1 No.2 (2022):1-16

<sup>13</sup> Sean, S. 2022. "Hun Sen's Cowboy Diplomacy: Quick Draw or Firing Blanks?" *Fulcrum*, January 10, 2022. <https://fulcrum.sg/hun-sens-cowboy-diplomacy-quick-draw-or-firing-blanks/>.

<sup>14</sup> Sirijintana Worrawit. 2021. *Putting ASEAN to Test: The Roles and Challenges of Resolving the Myanmar Political Crisis After the 2021 Coup*. Graduate Review of Political Science and Public Administration Journal Vol. 1 No.2 (2022):1-16

<sup>15</sup> Morada, Noel M. 2021. "ASEAN and the Rakhine Crisis: Balancing Non-Interference, Accountability, and Strategic Interests in Responding to Atrocities in Myanmar." *Global Responsibility to Protect* 13, no. 2–3: 131–157. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1875-984X-13020003>.

<sup>16</sup> "Thailand to host two regional meetings focused on Myanmar this week." *Reuters*, December 16, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thailand-host-two-regional-meetings-focused-myanmar-this-week-2024-12-16/>.



their own government. This commitment to sovereignty can help people feel like they belong to a nation and be proud of it, which is important for bringing people together in a region. But ASEAN can work together more effectively if it deals with threats to human security, like state violence. By recognizing these problems, member states can work together to improve political stability, social equity, and good governance. This proactive approach not only protects people's rights, but it also makes the area safer and more prosperous. ASEAN can slowly build a framework that respects national sovereignty while also putting the protection of human security first through constructive dialogue and cooperation. In this way, the organization can play a key role in turning problems into chances for its member states to grow and become stronger. As a result the absence of an accountability mechanism largely empowers the role of the ASEAN Chair to drive the bloc forward in service of its own agenda<sup>17</sup>. The lack of regional accountability mechanisms and sanctions has led to an ASEAN heavily shaped by the Chair's leadership. This situation is likely to make it harder for ASEAN to deal with Myanmar's political crisis, which makes people question whether the group will be able to handle any future crises in the area.

### **5.3 Role of the External Players**

China and Russia have significantly influenced Myanmar's political crisis since the 2021 military coup, supporting the junta with various forms of assistance. Their continued backing presents a challenge for ASEAN, as increased pressure on Myanmar could lead the country to distance itself from the organization and strengthen ties with these powerful allies.

China has supported the junta diplomatically by protecting it from criticism from other countries at places like the United Nations. This is because China has a lot of economic interests in Myanmar. Along with this support, China is making big investments in energy and infrastructure projects, which makes its economic and military power in the region even stronger. Economically China has huge investment projects with the Junta under its ambitious belt and road initiative, Chinese state led companies have signed on with several projects worth billions of US dollars.<sup>18</sup> Examining the military ties, the transfer of submarines and arms sales from China has solidified its close relationship with the Junta. One of the main reasons ASEAN accepted Myanmar into the bloc was the fear that Myanmar would fall fully under Chinese influence<sup>19</sup>.

Following the 2021 coup in Myanmar, China has not only maintained its business-as-usual approach with the Tatmadaw but has also actively undermined ASEAN's centrality in resolving the crisis. China's role as a mediator at the ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Chongqing, China, in June 2021 is a good example of this. China let Myanmar's military junta put forward its own five-point plan for disciplined democracy by controlling the meeting's agenda. This plan effectively ignored ASEAN's agreed-upon five-point consensus. This move took ASEAN out of its main role as a mediator and made it less able to affect the direction of Myanmar's politics<sup>20</sup>. In addition, China has gotten more involved in Myanmar's internal affairs by acting as a go-between for the Tatmadaw and different ethnic armed groups. This has helped Beijing strengthen its power while making it harder for ASEAN to come up with a single plan for dealing with the crisis. Because of these changes, China cannot be seen as a reliable partner for ASEAN in dealing with Myanmar's instability. Its actions make ASEAN less powerful and strengthen the junta's position.

<sup>17</sup> Sirijintana Worawit. 2021. *Putting ASEAN to Test: The Roles and Challenges of Resolving the Myanmar Political Crisis After the 2021 Coup*. Graduate Review of Political Science and Public Administration Journal Vol. 1 No.2 (2022):1-16

<sup>18</sup> Banerjee, S., and T. S. Rajoura. 2021. Growing Chinese Investments in Myanmar Post-Coup. Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/growing-chinese-investments-in-myanmar-post-coup/>.

<sup>19</sup> Masilamani, Logan, and Jürgen Peterson. 2014. "The 'ASEAN Way': The Structural Underpinnings of Constructive Engagement." *Foreign Policy Journal* 15: 1–21.

<sup>20</sup> Tower, J. 2021. "China's Subjugation of ASEAN is a Great Leap Backward for Myanmar." *Nikkei Asia*, June 16. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/China-s-subjugation-of-ASEAN-is-a-great-leap-backward-for-Myanmar>.

Russia has also given the junta military equipment and advice, which has helped it keep control in the face of widespread unrest in the country. This partnership not only shows that Russia is willing to help authoritarian governments, but it also helps Russia's strategic goals of limiting Western influence in Southeast Asia. The Tatmadaw gets a lot of its weapons from Russia. Myanmar and Russia's ongoing military ties have made sure that the Tatmadaw gets weapons, which helps keep anti-coup movements down<sup>21</sup>.

The support from China and Russia has made Myanmar's military junta much more determined, which makes it harder for the international community to respond and makes it harder to find a democratic solution to the ongoing crisis in Myanmar. These two big powers' support has made it hard for ASEAN to have any real impact on the situation. China's economic support is very important for keeping Myanmar's economy stable and preventing it from collapsing while it is under sanctions and isolated from the rest of the world. This financial support lets the junta stay in power and keep doing what it's doing without having to deal with the terrible consequences that could happen otherwise. In addition, Russia provides substantial military assistance, including a steady supply of arms and equipment, which empowers the junta to carry out its violent campaign against the opposition and civilian population. This military help lets the junta keep using its violent methods and makes it harder for ASEAN to negotiate. ASEAN is trying to put pressure on the Tatmadaw, but it could backfire and make the junta even closer to China and Russia, which would give them even more power in Myanmar.

This fragile balance makes it even harder for ASEAN to mediate or help bring back democracy, because the junta is less likely to give in to international demands when outside powers that care more about their strategic interests in the region than democratic reforms support them.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Myanmar crisis, continues to expose the structural vulnerabilities within the ASEAN, in particular its adherence to the principle of non interference and consensus driven decision making framework. These norms continuously impedes the bloc to mount a unified, decisive response to the Junta's action, that includes widespread human rights violations, suppression of dissent and the displacement of thousands. As mentioned above the responses of certain members states such as Brunei and Cambodia have often prioritized national interests over collective accountability, which has eroded ASEAN's credibility as a mediating factor. The Five point Consensus adopted in April 2021, remains a corner stone of Asean's approach, calling for an immediate cessation of violence, inclusive dialogue, humanitarian aid, the appointment of a special envoy to visit Myanmar. However, its implementation has been halted by the Junta's actions and ASEAN's internal division, allowing the crisis to stretch into 2026 without no resolution. Under Malaysia's 2025 chairmanship, ASEAN however took modest steps forward via stake holders engagement meetings with pro democracy groups and reaffirmed the Five Point Consensus in October, which rejected the Junta "sham" 2025-26 elections as illegitimate amid conflict and restrictions, however division still persists, democratic states like Indonesia and Malaysia push stricter measures, whereas Cambodia and Vietnam favour a softer approach.

External powers have further eroded ASEAN's leverage. China has its engagement with Junta through its Belt and Road investments, arms supply, and diplomatic cover at the UN, while simultaneously sidelining ASEAN by mediating its own talks with the ethnic armed groups, on the other hand, Russia's steady supply of military equipment's has enabled the repression to continue. These dynamics have allowed the

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<sup>21</sup> Sirijintana Worrawit. 2021. *Putting ASEAN to Test: The Roles and Challenges of Resolving the Myanmar Political Crisis After the 2021 Coup*. Graduate Review of Political Science and Public Administration Journal Vol. 1 No.2 (2022):1-16

Junta to stay in and consolidate power. This crisis has tested ASEAN's credibility severely. Without meaningful reform, the bloc struggles, to maintain regional stability, for which key changes are urgently needed which includes, A shift from a strict consensus to qualified majority voting on urgent humanitarian and security matters, an establishment of a formal accountable mechanisms e.g. (targeted sanctions, memberships restrictions) for non compliance with the bloc's core commitments, and lastly a deep partnership with the UN, Eun and civil society networks to counterbalance the external forces influence and amplify pressure for genuine dialogue and civilian protection.

ASEAN's response to the Myanmar crisis will largely determine whether it evolves into a guardian of regional stability or remains numb to its own founding norms. The inaction will likely see external actors play a dominant role in Myanmar which will erodes the bloc's centrality in Southeast Asia.

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