



Myanmar Crisis Two Years On: Still Relevant for the International Community?

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Two years on, Myanmar has still been in deep trouble since the Tatmadaw staged a military coup on 1 February 2021. The country has still been under crises with multiple dimensions, causing tragedies for the people in Myanmar.

As the world has been dominated by the ongoing Russia's War in Ukraine since 24 February 2022, there are some concerns from some quarters that the Myanmar crisis is sidelined from various regional and international discussions, given the strategic weight of the former is heavier than the latter. Some view that the international community seems to have a lukewarm commitment to Myanmar.¹ There might be some truths in these concerns. But undeniably, the Myanmar crisis and its subsequent consequences will continue to warrant attention in regional and international agendas, particularly in ASEAN and Friends of Myanmar.²

First, the turmoil in Myanmar has spill-over effects on Myanmar's neighbors. Spill-over effects have been witnessed recently, like the steadily increasing of refugees and armed-clashes over the border. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that as of 6 March 2023, there were more than 1 million internally displaced persons in Myanmar, while around 75,000 people fled from the country to the neighboring countries.³ More than that, there are reports witnessing the clashes among parties in Myanmar have spilled to Myanmar-Thai border towns.⁴ All of these could cause many potential concerns, such as the increasing of transnational crimes.

Second, the issue in Myanmar is still a stumbling block for many regional mechanisms in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Mekong Subregion. There are many

¹ ABC News In-Depth. 13 March 2023. Myanmar's Forgotten War Explained: The Military Coup, Revolution, NUG, Rohingya | 2023 Latest News. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StDA-aki1gk>

² Friends of Myanmar is an informal group initiated in 2021 by Brunei Darussalam when it was the ASEAN Chair. The actual countries that have been involved are not known publicly. However, it can be observed that there are countries attaching importance of the Myanmar crisis, such as involving in regional and international discussions, and providing humanitarian assistance to Myanmar. Primarily, those countries are Australia, China, the EU, Japan, South Korea, the UK, the US, among others. For more details, see <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/mm/2023-01-27/crp-sr-myanmar-2023-01-31.pdf>

³ UNHCR. 6 March 2023. Myanmar Emergency Update. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/4475>

⁴ Saksith Saiyasombut and Darrelle Ng. 4 February 2023. 'We're not part of this war': Towns bordering Myanmar brought close to conflict as violence spills over. Channel News Asia. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/myanmar-coup-thailand-border-town-conflict-spills-over-3254171>

mechanisms within both ASEAN and the Mekong. ASEAN has many platforms, including ASEAN Summits, ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meetings, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), and many other meetings with ASEAN's Dialogue Partners. The Mekong, on the other hand, has around 10 mechanisms with development partners, including the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), Mekong-US Partnership (MUSP), Mekong-Japan, Mekong-India, Mekong-ROK, to name a few.

The situation in Myanmar is still among the most pressing issues for ASEAN. Since April 2021, ASEAN has had a consensus on the Five-Point Consensus (5PC). Yet, from time to time, ASEAN countries have expressed disappointment with the Myanmar military authority over the implementation of the ASEAN's formula. On October 2021, under the Bruneian Chairmanship, ASEAN came up with an unprecedented formula to bar Myanmar's political representatives from joining the bloc's foreign ministers' meetings and leaders' summits.⁵ At that time, non-political representative from the military-quota Foreign Ministry was invited, but the military authority rejected, leaving Myanmar seat empty at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meetings, ASEAN Summits, and later in 2022 at the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meetings.⁶

This decision was seen as the preservation of ASEAN's credibility in the international arena, especially saving ASEAN from the concern of being boycotted by other Western Powers.⁷ Nevertheless, it later exposed a division between the Mainland and the Maritime ASEAN Member States. There is a report finding that the Mainland ASEAN countries supported the engagement with the State Administrative Council (SAC) – the Myanmar junta's official name, while the Maritime ASEAN countries have favored a tougher stance on the SAC.⁸ The most outstanding event was the Non-ASEAN Meeting on Myanmar hosted by Thailand back in December 2022.⁹ In that time, Myanmar military-appointed Foreign Minister came to meet with only mainland ASEAN Member States, while the Maritime refused to join.¹⁰ Recently at the ASEAN Retreat at Jakarta, ASEAN did not have the consensus to adopt a joint statement on the two year anniversary of the coup in Myanmar.¹¹

⁵ Ain Bandial. 17 October 2021. ASEAN excludes Myanmar junta leader from summit in rare move. Reuters. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-chair-brunei-confirms-junta-leader-not-invited-summit-2021-10-16/>

⁶ Al Jazeera. 26 October 2021. ASEAN summit begins without Myanmar after top general barred. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/26/asean-summit-begins-without-myanmar-after-top-generals-exclusion>

⁷ Barry Desker. 19 October 2021. Asean's Myanmar snub - a necessary first step. Straits Time. Available at <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/aseans-myanmar-snub-a-necessary-first-step>; Reuters. 15 October 2021. UN chief delayed Asean talks to avoid Myanmar junta envoy. Bangkok Post. Available at https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2198319/un-chief-delayed-asean-talks-to-avoid-myanmar-junta-envoy?fbclid=IwAR1vo0IJzP8Ba0_g9EiqOgNnkvn1-PaqWpT1rYZut3EQNxerJFwOqxgv7-I

⁸ Thomas Andrews. 31 January 2023. "Illegal and Illegitimate: Examining the Myanmar Military's Claim as the Government of Myanmar and the International Response". United Nations Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/mm/2023-01-27/crp-sr-myanmar-2023-01-31.pdf>

⁹ Kyodo News. 22 December 2022. ASEAN exposes divisions over political crisis in Myanmar. Available at <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/12/1cc78b8b1c12-asean-exposes-divisions-over-political-crisis-in-myanmar.html>

¹⁰ Reuters. 23 December 2022. Thailand hosts Myanmar junta figures in talks, key ASEAN nations skip. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-junta-minister-attend-talks-hosted-by-thailand-key-asean-players-absent-2022-12-22/>

¹¹ Christine Tjandraningsih and Puy Kea. ASEAN in talks with junta, factions over solutions to Myanmar crisis. Kyodo News. Available at <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2023/02/4f44597016a5-asean-foreign-ministers-discuss-myanmar-political-crisis.html>

Other key questions will further test ASEAN's unity on the Myanmar crisis. The question is what the alternative approach for ASEAN toward the crisis in Myanmar in the immediate term should be. So far, ASEAN has agreed to have "implementation plan" of 5PC, decided in Phnom Penh late last year and followed up in the ASEAN Retreat this February in Jakarta.¹² Other than that, earlier this year, Indonesia planned to set up the Office of the ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar led by its Foreign Minister.¹³ It planned to send its general meet with the military authority in Myanmar.¹⁴ Nevertheless, all of these remain to be seen.

Other than this, another critical question concerns the potential junta-organized election, particularly how ASEAN should respond to such elections widely believed to be a sham. There is one account claiming that ASEAN has yet had a policy to respond to the election question.¹⁵ If this is true, it is important that ASEAN has an agreeable position and plan to deal with such event.

Looking at the Mekong development mechanisms, the issue of Myanmar representative caused the delay of the Summits and Foreign Ministers' meetings, especially with the West, like the US, Japan, and South Korea. There is one account stating that China did not respond to Myanmar's request to host the LMC Summit.¹⁶ These Mekong mechanisms so far have been operated on the working level as seen on a recent Informal Senior Official Meeting.¹⁷ However, the delay engagements with Mekong partners could also prevent those mechanisms from moving forward fruitfully.

In addition, there are also potential concerns that could also harm the interests of Myanmar's neighboring countries, Southeast Asia, and the wider region.

First, the primary concern is that there is a growing possibility of becoming a failed state.¹⁸ In such an event, there is a potential concern that Myanmar would be under heavy influence by external countries. Myanmar has a history of long isolation; therefore, it is prone that internal parties seek the support from only powers to maintain their survival.¹⁹ Regime survival in Myanmar by

¹² A. Muh. Ibnu Aqil and Yvette Tanamal. Indonesia pushes for implementation of Myanmar peace plan, resumption of COC talks. Jakarta Post. Available at <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2023/02/05/indonesia-pushes-for-implementation-of-myanmar-peace-plan-resumption-of-coc-talks>

¹³ Erwida Maulia. 11 January 2023. Indonesia to set up office of ASEAN special envoy on Myanmar. Nikkei Asian Review. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Indonesia-to-set-up-office-of-ASEAN-special-envoy-on-Myanmar>

¹⁴ Kate Lamb, Gayatri Suroyo and Ananda Teresia. 1 February 2023. Exclusive: Indonesia to send general to Myanmar to highlight transition, president says. Reuters. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-send-general-myanmar-highlight-transition-president-says-2023-02-01/>

¹⁵ David Hutt. 16 February 2023. Myanmar election ploy threatens to split ASEAN and West. Asia Time. <https://asiatimes.com/2023/02/myanmar-election-plot-threatens-to-split-asean-and-west/>

¹⁶ A.T. 31 January 2023. Beijing's Engagement With Myanmar In 2023: Walking A Tight Rope? Fulcrum. <https://fulcrum.sg/beijings-engagement-with-myanmar-in-2023-walking-a-tight-rope/>

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Cambodia. 10 March 2023. Available at <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/Posts/2023-03-11-News-Informal-Mekong-Senior-Officials--Meeting---10-March-2023---11-06-05>

¹⁸ United Nations. 21 September 2022. Myanmar spiralling 'from bad to worse, to horrific', Human Rights Council hears. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127361>; Joshua Kurlantzick. 16 September 2021. Myanmar Is a Failing State—and Could Be a Danger to Its Neighbors. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/myanmar-failing-state-covid-19-crisis-global-response>; Luke Hunt. 20 March 2023. Should Myanmar Be Declared a Failed State? The Diplomat. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/should-myanmar-be-declared-a-failed-state/>

¹⁹ Renaud Egretreau and Larry Jagan. 2008. Chapter One. Isolation chosen or endured? A Burmese history of isolationist withdrawals since Independence. *Back to Old Habit: Isolationism of the Self-Preservation of Burma's*

overdependence on one power would not only undermine the sovereignty and independence of Myanmar, but also would cause stress and anxiety to countries in Southeast Asia, and beyond.

Beyond this, the intricacy of the Myanmar crisis has now become increasingly complex. The possibility of having prolonged and protracted proxy wars in Myanmar is imminent. It is observed that the military authority has deep connections with Russia.²⁰ Reports showed that there have been many engagements between the military authority in Myanmar with Russia, from increasing trade and investment to military and defense cooperation.²¹

On the other side, the National Unity Government (NUG) and its allied ethnic armed group received quasi-diplomatic support from the West. NUG has opened its offices across some western countries, and lately in Washington D.C., in order to liaise engagements between the Shadow Government and the US.²² This office occurred after the US passed BURMA Act.²³ The Act stated that it is up to the Administration to impose sanctions against the SAC, and also provide “non-lethal aid” to NUG, the Ethnic-Armed Organizations (EAO) and the People’s Defense Force (PDF) directly. Therefore, this Act enables the US government to provide assistance directly to anti-junta groups.

Second, it is concerned that the instability in Myanmar could cause unforeseen effects on the neighboring countries. For instance, foreign powers could sponsor parties in Myanmar under covert assistance in order to go against Myanmar’s neighbors. This had happened before.

Along the border with India, as of 2022, some Indian ethnic minorities armed insurgents have used Myanmar territory for shelter.²⁴ After the 2021 coup, the conflict was worsened as there has been fighting between the Indian ethnic armies, Myanmar’s ethnic groups, and the Tatmadaw.²⁵ Along the border with Thailand, on the other hand, during the Cold War era, there was a study stating that Thailand utilized ethnic armed groups in Myanmar side for “strategic buffer” with the Burmese and to contain Thai Communist.²⁶ More interestingly, Myanmar territory was ever used by the Chinese Nationalist Army or Kuomintang (KMT) to fight against the People’s Republic of China back in the 1950s and 1960s after their defeat in the Chinese civil war prior years. KMT in the then-Burma was quelled by the joint-collaboration between the People’s Republic of China and the Burmese military.²⁷ All of these events have highly violated Myanmar’s sovereignty. Not only

Military Regime. Research on Contemporary Southeast Asia. Available at <https://books.openedition.org/irasec/517?lang=en>

²⁰ International Crisis Group. 4 August 2022. Coming to Terms with Myanmar’s Russia Embrace. Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°173. Available at <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/b173-myanmar-russia-embrace.pdf>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sebastian Strangio. 16 February 2023. Myanmar’s National Unity Government Opens Office in Washington. The Diplomat. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/myanmars-national-unity-government-opens-office-in-washington/>

²³ Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act of 2021 or the BURMA Act of 2021. Available at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/2937>

²⁴ Makepeace Sitlhou and Ninglun Hanghal. 19 June 2022. Insurgents from India add fuel to fire in Myanmar’s restive north. Nikkei Asian Review. Available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Insurgents-from-India-add-fuel-to-fire-in-Myanmar-s-restive-north>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Su-Ann Oh. 21 March 2022. Separatists, Conflict and Refugees: Geopolitics Along Thailand and India’s Myanmar Border. Fulcrum. <https://fulcrum.sg/separatists-conflict-and-refugees-geopolitics-along-thailand-and-indias-myanmar-border/>

²⁷ Alice Dawkins. 14 July 2016. Myanmar’s Kuomintang ‘Incursion’. The Diplomat. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/myanmars-kuomintang-incursion/>

that, there were many spill-over effects from these external involvements, especially humanitarian crises.

Although this concern of potential external involvements in Myanmar might or might not happen in the future, it is important that ASEAN and Friends to Myanmar should think about how to manage these apprehensions and how to prevent some of the eminent concerns from being developed; otherwise those concerns would risk guaranteeing Myanmar decades in deep crises.

The Myanmar crisis is still very relevant to the current geopolitical landscape. ASEAN and the wider international community have had difficulties in dealing with the situation in Myanmar. What happens in Myanmar now could have potentially acute ramifications that could entrench the country for decades of instability and wars, which are no longer caused solely by internal factors.

Thus, concerted and outside-of-the-box efforts from ASEAN and Friends to Myanmar are needed to ensure there are some forms of political negotiations by all parties concerned in Myanmar as soon as possible to help return the country to normalcy. ASEAN and Friends to Myanmar need to consistently keep this crisis on the regional and international agenda, and do whatever possible to prevent this crisis from worsening.

These efforts should be made not mainly because ASEAN and Friends to Myanmar are keen on having good feelings to help Myanmar but because it is within their interests to do so for the sake of maintaining regional peace and stability. A failed Myanmar would be not merely a disappointment but a severe threat to ASEAN and sincere Friends to Myanmar.

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