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Why Did Myanmar Decide to Join the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits and Related Summits?

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It has been three years since the last time Myanmar joined a regional summit. In 2021, as a response to the Tatmadaw overthrowing the civilian government, ASEAN decided to bar Myanmar from attending high-level meetings unless they were represented by “non-political” representatives. Showing a strong stance, the military government opted not to participate in the summits at all. In a turn of events, the State Administration Council sent Myanmar's Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Aung Kyaw Moe, to the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits and Related Summits on October 2024. This begs questions and speculations on why there is a change of heart and why now.

Firstly, it could be viewed that the Tatmadaw is trying to gain legitimacy and international regional support through a softer approach by rejoining the high-level regional meeting. In the hope of preparing for the 2025 election, the State Administration Council could be working towards rallying for international and regional support and recognition. It seems to have always been the military's target to host an election; whether it would be legitimate, inclusive, or transparent is another question. Since the State Administration Council came to power and declared a state of emergency, the military junta has received numerous backlashes from the international system regarding its approach to power and human rights violations.

According to Section 418 of Chapter XI. Provisions on State of Emergency of Myanmar's Constitution of 2008, the State Administration Council is the legal government with power after the declaration of the state of emergency, their political legitimacy, however, is still questionable due to how it came to power for the international.¹ Many states are reluctant to work with the SAC, as it would mean legitimizing the military regime. Therefore, one way to legitimize their authority is to win a national election. According to Section 429 Chapter XI. Provisions on State of Emergency of Myanmar's Constitution of 2008, the national election was to be held within six months after the annulment of the state of emergency.² However, due to the instability and ongoing clashes in the country, the military keeps extending the state of emergency and postponing the election. This year, however, the SAC seems to be committed to the 2025 election, as it recently conducted a national census from October 1 to 15.³ Myanmar's neighboring countries seem to be supportive of the government holding the census and election, especially Thailand and China, as it would bring peace and stability to their border as well. During the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits and Related Summits, Thailand has shown support by hosting an informal consultation, "ASEAN Troika Plus," in December 2024 as a way to create political space for dialogues between political parties towards elections.⁴

Secondly, China is growing anxious of the ongoing instability in Myanmar, as it results in border conflicts and affects their investment in Myanmar. China is Myanmar's biggest trading partner, with an export value equivalent to \$9.62B in 2022.⁵ Despite the rocky relationships between the Tatmadaw and China throughout the years, the two seem to be reestablishing and strengthening their relationship with the revival of the Myitsone Dam on May 17 as part of other infrastructure

¹ "Myanmar's 2008 Constitution" Constitute, accessed October 21, 2024, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Myanmar_2008

² Ibid.

³ "Everyone must respond thoroughly to the questions, as this contributes to a data collection process that benefits themselves, their families, future generations, and the State" *The Global New Light of Myanma*, September 02, 2024, <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/everyone-must-respond-thoroughly-to-the-questions-as-this-contributes-to-a-data-collection-process-that-benefits-themselves-their-families-future-generations-and-the-state/#article-title>

⁴ Panu Wongcha-um, "ASEAN leaders meet in Laos as Thai PM urges Myanmar engagement ahead of election" *The Reuters*, October 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-holds-summit-laos-thailand-floats-new-plan-myanmar-crisis-2024-10-09/>

⁵ "Burma/China" The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), accessed October 21, 2024, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/mmr/partner/chn?measureBilateralTradeSelector=vizValueOption1&compareExports0=comparisonOption5>

projects under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.⁶ Due to the large capital investment in the country, one of China's main interests would be to restore stability in the country and resume their projects, as conflicts and instability in Myanmar would result in collateral damages to their investment. As such, China has been carefully playing on both sides of the coin by working with the Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Groups to accelerate the ceasefire and end the civil war.

In fact, in January 2024, China brokered a ceasefire between the Tatmadaw and the 3BHA, but it was unfruitful because the fighting resumed shortly after the agreement.⁷ China has also been shown to be providing support to both the Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Groups. China has a long history of working with ethnic organizations and supporting ethnic insurgencies, which is only one of the reasons why the Tatmadaw is skeptical of China. One of the main ethnic groups that is supported by China is the Three Brotherhood Alliance's very own Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army.⁸ The MNDA is one of the descendants of the Communist Party of Burma, whom China supported from the 1960s-1980s when Sino-Burma relations were at their lowest. Since then, China maintained close relations with the MNDA as a means to directly and indirectly deter Myanmar's military by arming the MNDA.⁹ Aside from the January ceasefire, China has been vocal and active in working with both conflicted parties to end the fighting. Therefore, it could be interpreted that the junta and armed groups are facing some light pushes from China to end the conflict, as China is also one of their biggest aid providers as well.

Finally, the Tatmadaw is losing ground to the opposing group due to exhausted resources and seeking to end the conflicts honorably. Since the military takeover in 2021, no groups have posed serious threats to the Tatmadaw except for the National Unity Government's military wing, the People's Defence Force, and especially the military coalition between the AA, TNLA, and MNDA called the Three Brotherhood Alliance. The Alliance was formed in 2019 and initially

⁶ Sokkosol Keo, "Concerns over the Revival of the Myitsone Dam Project" Center for Southeast Asian Studies, July, 2024, https://rupp.edu.kh/iispp/cseas/cseas_commentary-v2/2023-2024/documents/CSEAS%20Commentary%20-27.pdf

⁷ Sebastian Strangio, "Myanmar Military Breaks China-Brokered Ceasefire, Resistance Groups Say" The Diplomat, January 15, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/myanmar-military-breaks-china-brokered-ceasefire-resistance-groups-say/>

⁸ International Crisis Group, "Scam Centres and Ceasefires: China-Myanmar Ties Since the Coup", March 24, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china-myanmar/b179-scams-centres-and-ceasefires-china-myanmar-ties-coup>

⁹ Ibid.

focused on attacking the military troops in Shan and Rakhine states, territories of the AA and MNDAA.¹⁰ Since 2021, the 3BHA had some successes in pushing the Tatmadaw away from their territories, but their biggest accomplishment that led to chain reactions of the military losing more grounds was Operation 1027.

On October 17, 2023, the 3BHA launched their biggest coordinated attack on the military across the Shan, Mandalay, Chin, and Rakhine states.¹¹ Following the momentum, the AA captured Paletwa, a strategic trade town, after clearing out the military council camp on January 14, 2024.¹² On August 2, 2024, the MNDAA of the 3BHA captured another key military base in the northeastern town of Lashio of the northern Shan State bordering China.¹³ Following all of these reports on how the military has been the most pressured since the 2021 military takeover, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing publicly promoted peace talks and elections by inviting ethnic armed organizations for political dialogue in September 2024 to no avail.¹⁴ It could almost be viewed as a way for the SAC to offer a hand to cooperate with the ethnic armed organizations to carry out the census, which would eventually lead to the 2025 election. According to the military, the census is needed for an accurate voter list,¹⁵ but many critics analyzed that the census is just a way for the military to determine who supports the regime and to strengthen their conscription law.¹⁶ The Head of Myanmar's military government publicly offered another peace talk attempt on October

¹⁰ "What is Myanmar's Three Brotherhood Alliance that's resisting the military?" *The Aljazeera*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/16/what-is-myanmars-three-brotherhood-alliance-thats-resisting-the-military>

¹¹ Christian Jaffe, Christina De Paris, "Myanmar: Momentum from Operation 1027 Threatens Military Rule" *ACLEDA*, February 1, 2024, <https://acleddata.com/2024/02/01/myanmar-momentum-from-operation-1027-threatens-military-rule/>

¹² "Arakan Army Declares Victory in Paletwa, Myanmar's Chin State" *The Irrawaddy*, January 15, 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/war-against-the-junta/arakan-army-declares-victory-in-paletwa-myanmars-chin-state.html>

¹³ "Min Aung Hlaing admits pressure after Myanmar anti-coup forces claim base" *Aljazeera*, August 6, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/6/min-aung-hlaing-admits-pressure-after-myanmar-anti-coup-forces-claim-base>

¹⁴ "Myanmar military urges anti-coup forces to give up struggle and join talks" *Aljazeera*, September 27, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/27/myanmar-military-urges-anti-coup-forces-to-give-up-struggle-and-join-talks>

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 3

¹⁶ Grant Peck, "Myanmar's military government begins a census seen as a way to gather information about opponents" *The Associated Press*, October 2, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-census-civil-war-military-resistance-eafba6e479c59fb926d31a10d4b663ca>

15, and it seems like at least 12 ethnic armed groups are willing to negotiate with the Tatmadaw while some still disagree.¹⁷

To sum up, it is not coincidental that the military government has decided to gradually re-insert itself into the regional stage. As the conflict becomes protracted, the military has suffered many major losses recently. China, its biggest supporter, seems to be pressuring the Tatmadaw to pursue a ceasefire and end of conflict as soon as possible. To end the conflict peacefully in their favor would be to host and win the 2025 national election, which could be the only means for the Tatmadaw to legitimize their regime on the international stage. Interestingly, all of the major developments in Myanmar such as the implementation of the national census and the call for peace talks are all done near the 44th and 45th ASEAN Summits and Related Summits. Could it be just a method to show that the State Administration Council is willing to adopt a softer approach for the sake of gaining international and regional support and legitimacy?

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¹⁷ Head of Myanmar's military government urges ethnic rebels to join peace talks" *The Associated Press*, October 15, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-ethnic-rebels-ceasefire-dbb40b69f33c7bfcf3864341e2625d48>