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ASEAN Defence Cooperation: Looking Towards Myanmar's Prospective Chairmanship in 2026

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SYNOPSIS

*Myanmar is slated to assume the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2026. **HENRICK TSJENG** considers the implications for ASEAN defence cooperation should the other ASEAN countries set aside their misgivings about the military junta in power in Naypyidaw to allow the country to take up the chairmanship.*

COMMENTARY

With Cambodia relinquishing its ASEAN chairmanship this year, the chairs for the next three years will be assumed by ASEAN member states with varying foreign and defence policy priorities. However, none of these will be as uncertain as the consequences of Myanmar taking over the chair in 2026 — or whether the other ASEAN member states would be agreeable to Naypyidaw doing so.

The Myanmar issue has become an intractable one in ASEAN since the Myanmar military, or Tatmadaw, seized power in a coup in early 2021. The 2022 ASEAN chair, Cambodia, like its Bruneian counterpart the year before, has effectively disinvited the junta's leader and its foreign minister from participating in ASEAN summits and high-level meetings by insisting that the junta send a non-political representative to those meetings, as there has been [little progress](#) made by the junta on the [Five-Point Consensus](#) agreed by ASEAN in 2021.

Defence Cooperation: Increasingly Divisive?

Cambodia has also taken the additional step of [snubbing](#) Myanmar by not inviting its defence minister to the retreat of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and

to the ADMM-Plus meeting, both in November 2022. This is significant as defence cooperation in the ASEAN context has often been viewed as a non-political and practical form of regional cooperation, targeted at non-traditional security issues such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, military medicine, and maritime security.



The Tatmadaw's political control has been a divisive issue in ASEAN, and has led to Myanmar being snubbed in a number of ASEAN meetings. [Image](#) from Wikimedia.

However, in recent years, even defence cooperation has become increasingly divisive. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the decision to exclude Myanmar's defence minister from the ADMM-Plus. But Myanmar is not the only geopolitical crisis seeping into the ADMM-Plus — Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated divisions within the ADMM-Plus. In July 2022, Australia, New Zealand and the United States [pulled out](#) from a meeting of the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group (EWG) on Counter-Terrorism, which was co-hosted by Myanmar and Russia.

This boycott will certainly raise concerns that the ADMM-Plus is unravelling. While understandable, it has nonetheless set a precedent for such courses of action to become acceptable. In future EWG sessions, the prospect of boycotts whenever a co-chair is considered to be an "unsavoury" partner, or even the refusal to co-chair with such a partner, will have adverse implications for future cooperation within the ADMM-Plus.

The Likely Approaches of Upcoming ASEAN Chairs

In the next three years, Indonesia, Laos, and Malaysia will take their respective turns to assume the ASEAN chairmanship. However, the elephant in the room will loom ever larger as Myanmar's prospective chairmanship in 2026 draws near. Should the

Myanmar crisis drag on for the next few years and show no sign of resolution by 2025, ASEAN will be faced with a major question: should ASEAN agree to Naypyidaw assuming the ASEAN chairmanship in 2026, or should the organisation skip over Myanmar and consent to the Philippines assuming the chairmanship instead? The latter step would be a repeat of 2006, when Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship was skipped over, with [Myanmar's own concurrence](#).

Indonesia, the upcoming 2023 ASEAN chair, is likely to be focused on [beefing up maritime defence capacities](#). But, given its penchant for ensuring that as many regional partners as possible have a stake in the region's security — as demonstrated by its co-hosting of the [Super Garuda Shield](#) exercises in August 2022 involving multiple countries — Indonesia is likely to follow in Cambodia's footsteps by barring high-level Myanmar leaders from ASEAN summits, as well as the ADMM and ADMM-Plus. This is to avoid the increasing risk of boycotts that the presence of the Tatmadaw brings.

Laos, on the other hand, is likely to take a different tack as the 2024 ASEAN chair. The Laotian government has made [statements](#) that shy away from criticising, or even expressing concern about, the junta's actions. Given its closeness to both China and Russia, including continuing [defence cooperation with Russia](#), Vientiane is less likely to take into consideration Western pressure on Myanmar.

Malaysia's decisions as chair in 2025 are more uncertain — given that the Malaysian political situation has been in flux in the past few years — but it is unlikely that the country's longstanding approach to multilateralism and defence cooperation will be abandoned. Malaysia has been vocal on [pushing ASEAN](#) to engage with the opposition National Unity Government of Myanmar and is likely to lobby for continued exclusion of the junta from ASEAN summits, including the ADMM and ADMM-Plus. Then opposition leader and now Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim himself issued a [statement](#) calling for the junta to respect the 2020 electoral results just after the Tatmadaw had seized power in 2021.

Possible Trajectories

Given the unlikelihood of a change in the junta's approach, there are two possible trajectories of ADMM and ADMM-Plus cooperation in the next few years.

In the first outcome, should Myanmar assume the chairmanship in 2026, ASEAN would face an extremely challenging year as the bloc would be split between those member states that prefer to continue excluding Naypyidaw and those that prefer not to do so. Western countries — and possibly even Japan and South Korea — might refuse to attend any ASEAN meeting chaired by Myanmar, including the ADMM-Plus.

This will have implications for defence cooperation. The unity of ASEAN, as well as the utility of regional defence cooperation as a confidence-building measure, would be called into question. The ADMM-Plus risks becoming a reduced forum, given the possibility of complete boycotts by Australia, New Zealand, the United States and other Plus countries. Military cooperation activities, including ADMM-Plus staples like table-top and field training exercises, may only comprise the Plus countries of China, India and Russia, along with all ASEAN member states, with US allies Japan and

South Korea potentially also boycotting the activities. Such defence engagement would run the risk of being avenues for the remaining dialogue partners to assert their dominance and influence over ASEAN.

However, in the second outcome in which Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship is suspended, the ADMM and ADMM-Plus would operate in a more business-as-usual manner. Should this happen, the ADMM-Plus could better maintain defence cooperation on an even keel by keeping all Plus countries on board. However, ASEAN's longstanding principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries would be put to the test, clashing directly with the need to uphold ASEAN Centrality and keep external stakeholders on board. Even so, Myanmar may still be allowed to participate in certain ASEAN or ADMM engagements, such as the ASEAN Air Chiefs Conference, which the junta is scheduled to [chair in 2023](#).

A Tricky Road Ahead

The ASEAN chairs in the next three years would need to carefully manage the continuing fallout from the Myanmar crisis, including where defence cooperation is concerned. If Myanmar assumes the ASEAN chairmanship in 2026, the potential boycott by Western countries and allies would reduce the ADMM-Plus from a platform that fully engages a range of dialogue partners into one where China, India and Russia are the dominant dialogue partners. However, if Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship is skipped over, defence cooperation between the rest of ASEAN and the Plus countries would operate as usual, though ASEAN will be roiled by accusations that it has abandoned non-interference as a guiding principle. Ultimately, ASEAN's leaders and defence ministers must carefully weigh the pros and cons of excluding Myanmar in order to maintain ASEAN in the driver's seat for regional cooperation.

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