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No. 002/2024 dated 10 January 2024

ASEAN Needs to Review and Renew Its Approaches to the Myanmar Crisis

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SYNOPSIS

As the military takeover in Myanmar nears its three-year anniversary, ASEAN needs to take stock of its engagement efforts.

COMMENTARY

Since October 2023, anti-junta forces in Myanmar have made palpable headway in their campaigns against the military regime. In the wake of Operation 1027, a surprise offensive launched by the Three Brotherhood Alliance comprising the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), ethnic armed groups have collectively claimed significant gains across states in Myanmar.

While advances made by the ethnic armies may be a cause for cheer for opponents of the military junta, the shifting ground dynamics have been achieved at the expense of civilians, who remain caught in the crosshairs of the battle between the regime and anti-junta forces. As the third anniversary of the military coup draws near, ASEAN needs to review and renew its engagement efforts with Myanmar.

The Current Situation

Focusing its offensives on the northern Shan state, the Three Brotherhood Alliance had [purportedly captured](#) over 400 military outposts and wrested control of at least seven towns from the junta as of December last year. The Alliance had also thwarted the junta's hold over vital Myanmar-China trade routes by successfully securing

several key border towns and crossing points to China, including the [105-Mile Trade Zone](#) located in Muse Township, which accounts for about [70%](#) of cross-border trade with China.

Capitalising on the successes achieved by the Alliance, other ethnic armies and the pro-democracy People's Defence Forces affiliated with the National Unity Government (NUG) moved to open up new fronts in other states. Despite the military regime's resolve to [retaliate](#) and reclaim lost ground from the ethnic armies, it has yet to achieve significant breakthroughs in its operations. Moreover, the regime is becoming overstretched in the face of a coordinated axis of resistance across the country. Tellingly, the junta issued an order in November 2023 for all civil servants and former military personnel to [mobilise](#) into units in preparation for "emergency situations".

China's influence looms large against the backdrop of these developments in Myanmar. A [MNDAA spokesperson](#) listed the eradication of scam syndicates that had proliferated along the China-Myanmar border as one of the key objectives of the October offensives. With many Chinese nationals falling victim to these syndicates, China raised the need to crack down on these scam dens at several bilateral meetings with the military junta last year. The junta deferred to act on the matter as many of the syndicates were controlled by Border Guard Forces with close affiliations to the ruling regime.

In contrast to the regime's reluctance to clamp down on border crime, the Alliance pushed on with shutting down scam organisations as Operation 1027 gained ground along the northern frontier. By astutely aligning themselves with Chinese interests, the Alliance had likely secured China's [tacit approval and support](#) for their campaigns near the Chinese border, thereby furthering their tactical agenda. Subsequently, the junta's Ministry of Public Security released a [statement](#) at the end of November 2023 to announce the handover of 31,000 scam suspects to China. As one [commentator](#) puts it, both the ruling regime and ethnic forces are "vying to garner favour from China".

War comes at a great cost. A [report](#) published last December by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that more than 660,000 people have been displaced since the October clash between the junta and ethnic armed groups in the north. The Office further highlighted that about one-third of Myanmar's population now require humanitarian aid, warning that the humanitarian crisis is likely to worsen in 2024.

ASEAN's Responses Thus Far

The Five-Point Consensus (5PC), negotiated in 2021 between the leaders of ASEAN member states and the head of Myanmar's military junta, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, continues to serve as ASEAN's envisioned roadmap to peace for the country. However, Myanmar's military leadership has so far paid little heed to the 5PC. In response to the regime's unrelenting use of lethal force on dissidents and civilians alike, as well as the lack of progress on the 5PC, ASEAN has suspended Myanmar from its high-level meetings. ASEAN has also reached a [decision](#) to replace Myanmar with the Philippines as ASEAN chair in 2026.



Myanmar was noticeably absent during the US-ASEAN virtual summit in October 2021 as its military refused to send a representative after ASEAN barred Myanmar's top general, Min Aung Hlaing, from attending high-level meetings. Following the military coup in Myanmar, ASEAN leaders negotiated a Five-Point Consensus (5PC) at the 2021 ASEAN Leaders Meeting to serve as a roadmap to peace. As the third anniversary of the military coup draws near and given the lack of progress on the 5PC, ASEAN will have to review and reevaluate its engagement strategies. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

The 5PC includes the appointment of a special envoy of the ASEAN chair to facilitate a dialogue process between the military junta and opposition parties. A total of three special envoys have served in this capacity since the military takeover in Myanmar. In addition to the appointment of a special envoy, under its chairmanship last year, Indonesia made efforts to formalise the role of the special envoy by setting up the Office of the Special Envoy on Myanmar, which came under the direct purview of Indonesia's foreign minister.

ASEAN also announced the adoption of a "troika" approach in its future engagements with the military junta at one of its September meetings held in Jakarta last year. Citing the need for "[sustainability](#)" in its response to the crisis in Myanmar, the approach would entail close consultation and cooperation between the current, previous, and next ASEAN chairs in the grouping's diplomatic outreach to the military leaders.

Despite efforts to engage with the military regime and prioritising meeting agendas to address the crisis over the past year, ASEAN has made little inroads into the cessation of hostilities in Myanmar. Furthermore, ASEAN's means of engagement with the junta has led to divisions among its member states. Thailand's [unilateral overtures](#) to the military leaders, initiated by former Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha's caretaker government in June last year, were largely interpreted as bypassing ASEAN's efforts, placing the organisation's [unity under scrutiny](#).

ASEAN's Possible Next Steps

With Laos taking over from Indonesia as the new ASEAN chair and the completion of leadership transitions in several of the member states in the past year, it is timely for ASEAN to review and renew its approaches to Myanmar.

Though the ethnic armies may be making steady advances against the military forces, it would be premature to seize on these gains as indicators for the junta's imminent collapse. A regime on the defensive does not equate to a defeated regime. As such, ASEAN will have to persist in its diplomatic outreach to the ruling junta. Besides the junta and the NUG, ASEAN should also work towards engaging the ethnic armed groups as part of a broader peace-building process. By virtue of their governance of large swathes of territories and populations across states in the country, the ethnic forces should be rightly viewed as key political stakeholders in Myanmar. The inclusion of the ethnic groups in the dialogue process would no doubt be a complex task given their diversity. Nonetheless, doing so would be in line with the 5PC's goal of fostering "constructive dialogue among all parties concerned".

Recent developments in Myanmar have clearly shown that China wields significant influence over both the military regime and ethnic armed groups. In fact, China announced through its foreign ministry last December that it had brokered a [temporary ceasefire](#) between the junta and the ethnic armies, though details were sparse. ASEAN should find ways to tap into China's close relations and access to the warring groups, and coordinate its mediation efforts with China.

To complement the troika approach, ASEAN could [revisit](#) an earlier suggestion to appoint a permanent special envoy rather than one serving on a rotational basis. The Office of the Special Envoy on Myanmar could be established in the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. Working closely with the ASEAN Secretary-General, as well as ministers and senior officials from member states, a permanent special envoy with a dedicated office could function as the central coordinating body for ASEAN's political and humanitarian engagement efforts with Myanmar, ensuring continuity of ASEAN's plans.

It is also worthwhile for ASEAN to explore alternative strategies to engage with Myanmar's military regime outside of the formal 5PC process. The apparent rift caused by Thailand's re-engagement efforts should be understood as ASEAN's disapproval of actions taken without consultation and consensus from member states rather than an outright rejection of bilateral attempts to engage with the military regime. As a matter of fact, the leaders of Malaysia and the Philippines [discussed the possibility](#) of allowing "neighbouring countries" to engage Myanmar "on an informal basis". ASEAN should continue to facilitate informal bilateral dialogues for some of the issues listed in the 5PC to promote and advance discussions on the agreement. Member states intending to initiate such dialogues should provide regular status updates at ASEAN meetings. A flexible approach involving both bilateral and institutional-level engagements may help bolster ASEAN's push for the implementation of the 5PC.

A full implementation of the 5PC remains a pipe dream at the moment given the Myanmar regime's blatant disregard and outright defiance of the agreement. It would be expedient for ASEAN to set specific timelines to achieve smaller milestones under the broad framework of the 5PC and work incrementally towards its fulfilment. In 2022,

ASEAN leaders [reviewed the 5PC](#) and agreed to an implementation plan. Words must now be translated into action.

While ASEAN is under no illusion that there will be quick fixes to the Myanmar crisis, it needs to tackle the issue with renewed resolve and vigour in the year ahead.

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