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Can Laos as ASEAN Chair Seek External Assistance in the Myanmar Crisis?

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SYNOPSIS

As the ASEAN chair, Laos can be credited with facilitating small initial steps towards the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar. However, much work remains to be done. What are the prospects of non-ASEAN assistance in mediation efforts, and how should Laos maintain ASEAN Centrality in the process?

COMMENTARY

The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat concluded on a somewhat optimistic note at the end of January 2024. Seen largely as an introduction to Laos' ASEAN chairmanship this year, the retreat demonstrated Vientiane's determination to follow its 2016 approach – keeping ASEAN's relations with the major powers on an even keel and managing various issues in a [low-key and neutral manner](#).

The retreat showed Laos' determination to push through engagement with Myanmar according to the [Five-Point Consensus \(5PC\)](#). However, these steps may not be sufficient, and Laos as ASEAN chair may seek to coordinate mediation efforts with non-ASEAN countries on Myanmar.



Pha That Luang in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. As the new ASEAN chair, Laos is determined to tackle the Myanmar crisis and work towards implementing the Five-Point Consensus (5PC), possibly in collaboration with other non-ASEAN countries while maintaining ASEAN Centrality. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Small Steps towards the 5PC

The Laotian ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar, [Alounkeo Kittikhoun](#), wasted no time in visiting Naypyidaw [in January](#), signalling the urgency Laos places in engaging the Myanmar military government, officially known as the State Administration Council (SAC). In what appears to be a promising sign, the SAC even [requested](#) that representatives from several ethnic armies and heads of political parties meet with the Special Envoy, possibly a result of [recent battlefield losses](#) to the Three Brotherhood Alliance – a coalition of three ethnic armed organisations – since late 2023.

One notable development at the retreat was the [attendance](#) of Marlar Than Htike, a Myanmar senior foreign ministry bureaucrat, marking the first time the military government has sent a [non-political representative](#) to a high-level ASEAN meeting since its military leaders were progressively barred [starting from 2021](#). Additionally, Thailand is leading a [humanitarian initiative](#) – endorsed by the retreat – to establish a safe zone at the Thai-Myanmar border to send food and medical supplies to local communities and displaced people.

Laos' muted criticism of the junta compared to other ASEAN member states may have paved the way for Myanmar's participation in the retreat. This could provide Vientiane an opportunity as chair to steer ASEAN in ramping up engagement with the SAC and other groups in Myanmar. However, it remains unclear how much more ASEAN under Laos' chairmanship can persuade the SAC to take further steps, given that the junta is not letting up its struggle against its opponents with the [extension of Myanmar's state of emergency](#) by six months and the imposition of [mandatory military service](#).

Prospects for Non-ASEAN Involvement

Some commentators have underscored that [ASEAN](#) may need to [work with external parties](#) to [assist in tackling](#) the [Myanmar crisis](#), particularly when it comes to playing a

mediating role in the implementation of the first two points of the 5PC: for all parties to cease violence; as well as to begin constructive dialogue towards a peaceful resolution. This is especially since the [junta's collapse](#) is [by no means](#) a [foregone conclusion](#), despite its recent setbacks. Nonetheless, this would test Laos' ability to ensure ASEAN's non-alignment and centrality.

The involvement of Western countries like the [United States](#) would be difficult, given their [vocal condemnation](#) of the junta, their imposition of [sanctions](#), and their lack of access to most parties in Myanmar except the opposition [National Unity Government \(NUG\)](#). The Myanmar military's historically hostile attitude towards them brings further complications.

Involving non-Western countries may be less difficult, but their involvement will bring their own sets of challenges.

Laos enjoys [warm ties with Russia](#), which also maintains [close relations](#) with the SAC, including arms sales to the military. However, Russia only appears interested in propping up the SAC, with little concern towards Myanmar's other groups. Further reports suggest that [Russia is re-importing arms parts](#) sold to Myanmar for use in its war against Ukraine. The prospects of Russia persuading the SAC to come to the negotiating table thus look remote, given Moscow's desire to cultivate a reliable partner in Naypyidaw as part of its efforts to circumvent its political isolation since its invasion of Ukraine.

China: A Double-Edged Sword

China is possibly the most influential partner for ASEAN's outreach to the SAC and the opposition, and Vientiane also enjoys friendly relations with Beijing. However, any ASEAN engagement with China over the Myanmar crisis is inherently a double-edged sword.

ASEAN and China share common interests in seeing an end to Myanmar's civil war, with Beijing focusing on clamping down on [scam syndicates](#) that have popped up in areas bordering China. Moreover, China recently brokered a [temporary ceasefire](#) between the SAC and the Three Brotherhood Alliance. Although this ceasefire already seems to have been [broken](#), the fact that any ceasefire was brokered at all demonstrates Beijing's heft over both the SAC and some of the ethnic armed groups. Even the NUG – often seen to be closer to the [West](#) – has made [overtures](#) to China, providing Beijing a channel of communication that ASEAN could tap into.

However, engaging China potentially comes at a cost for ASEAN. Beijing's willingness to facilitate ASEAN access to all groups in Myanmar may come with strings attached that are favourable only to Chinese interests. For example, such access might only be granted on the condition that Vientiane, as ASEAN chair, downplays the South China Sea disputes or pushes ASEAN to make concessions to Beijing in the ongoing negotiations for the Code of Conduct, with Laos' [mounting debt exposure](#) to China used as additional pressure. Given Beijing's [history of sowing divisions within ASEAN](#), such a Machiavellian approach cannot be ruled out.

India and Japan: Possible Counterweights to China

However, China is not the only partner that ASEAN and Laos could work with. New Delhi has a [longstanding relationship](#) with the Myanmar military arising from cooperation in [preventing rebel groups](#) in northeast India from using Myanmar as a safe haven. New Delhi has taken small steps to coax the junta to return to normalcy, such as by reminding Myanmar to return to “[federal democracy](#)”, a key term used by [the NUG to describe its political aims](#). While India’s informal [links](#) to the NUG and other ethnic armed organisations are tenuous at best, trying to get India to play a mediating role would be challenging but not impossible. After all, India hosted [a Track 1.5 dialogue](#) in May 2023 involving mid-level officials from some ASEAN countries, including Myanmar and then-ASEAN chair Indonesia.

Laos could also lean on Japan. [Tokyo](#) maintains some links with the SAC despite its own criticism of the junta’s actions, and it has undertaken mediation efforts before. In November 2022, Nippon Foundation chairperson Yohei Sasakawa [brokered a temporary ceasefire](#) between the Arakan Army and the SAC – demonstrating that Japan does hold some influence with certain parties in Myanmar.

A Tough Road Ahead for the ASEAN Chair

As ASEAN chair, Laos has the responsibility to ensure that ASEAN remains central in dealing with Myanmar by always involving ASEAN in coordinating mediation efforts with non-ASEAN countries. One way to ensure this is for Laos to adhere to the [Troika format](#) – consisting of the current, previous, and upcoming ASEAN chairs – set up during Indonesia’s chairmanship to ensure continuity in ASEAN’s engagement process with Myanmar, so that Laos is supported by the previous and upcoming ASEAN chairs.

Vientiane should also avoid following Thailand’s actions in June 2023, when Bangkok held a [meeting](#) with the junta and a few other Southeast Asian countries without agreement from ASEAN and sidelined the association from the process. Finally, Laos should not rely solely on China for access and mediation efforts, but also seek the help of India and Japan as counterweights against any potential Chinese pressure against ASEAN.

If Laos’ 2016 chairmanship is any guide, Vientiane seems intent on handling key security issues in Southeast Asia in a neutral and low-key manner. However, when it comes to resolving the Myanmar crisis, ASEAN’s most pressing political and humanitarian challenge, only a tough road lies ahead for Laos as the ASEAN chair.

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