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Japan as ASEAN's Diplomatic Partner in the Myanmar Crisis

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SYNOPSIS

Japan has successfully engaged both the military junta and pro-democracy forces in Myanmar, and therefore can support ASEAN's diplomatic efforts in the on-going Myanmar crisis.

COMMENTARY

A delegation comprising representatives from Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG) and senior political leaders from the Karen, Karenni, and Chin ethnic armed organisations embarked on a week-long visit to Tokyo in May this year. The Myanmar representatives held a [joint news conference](#) and met Japan's Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Masahiro Komura. A post-meeting [statement](#) released by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) noted the "exchange of views on the current situation in Myanmar" as well as the continuation of Japan's efforts to "find a way out of the current impasse through dialogue with various stakeholders in Myanmar".



Japan's Parliamentary Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Masahiro Komura, met with Karenni State Interim Executive Council Chairman Khu Oo Reh and Karen National Union (KNU) Chairman P'doh Saw Kwe Htoo Win in Tokyo, May 2024. Japan is one of the few countries in the region that engages with both the military junta and pro-democracy forces in Myanmar, which could prove valuable in complementing ASEAN's mediation efforts for a viable resolution in Myanmar. *Image from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.*

The May visit was widely reported in [Japanese](#) and independent [Burmese](#) news outlets, casting a diplomatic spotlight on Japan's role as an intermediary in the ongoing Myanmar crisis. Japan's move to engage with Myanmar's opposition and resistance groups has been described by some observers as a [policy shift](#) in its approach to Myanmar. Until now, Japan has primarily focused on maintaining lines of communication with the military junta. While it remains to be seen if Japan has indeed embraced a different diplomatic tact, its interlocutory attempts can complement and help plug the gaps in ASEAN's mediation efforts, making Tokyo a valuable partner in the regional grouping's search for a viable resolution in Myanmar.

Japan's "Middling" Approach

Japan is one of the few countries in the region that has successfully engaged both the military junta and pro-democracy forces in Myanmar.

Japan has strongly condemned the February 2021 coup but kept its diplomatic channels with the junta open. While the United States and most European countries have imposed coordinated sanctions on the junta's top brass as well as junta-affiliated individuals and entities, Japan is the only G7 member that has refrained from doing so as it is concerned that political isolation and a punitive sanctions package will drive Myanmar [closer to China](#).

Tokyo has also opted for a more nuanced approach with respect to economic aid. It has [suspended](#) all new official development assistance (ODA) projects and loans to Myanmar since the coup, but has pressed on with on-going aid projects, with the caveat that these projects will be subject to reviews. For instance, the [Bago River Bridge](#), financed largely by a Japanese ODA loan from an agreement concluded in 2017 and constructed jointly by Yokogawa Bridge and Sumitomo Mitsui Construction was recently completed in June following a delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Japan has, however, pulled the plug on additional ODA funding required to complete upgrading works for the [Yangon-Mandalay rail line](#), which was underway since 2018.

Japan's reluctance to fully halt all economic assistance to Myanmar has been [criticised](#) for enabling the regime's human rights atrocities against civilians and resistance forces. MOFA has [defended Japan's stance](#) by stating that the decision to continue

with existing ODA projects was made based on humanitarian considerations and not to support the regime.

The NUG does not have official diplomatic recognition, but Japan is one of [eight countries](#) where the NUG has chosen to set up a representative office. Saw Ba Hla Thein, an ethnic Karen who arrived in Japan three decades ago as a refugee, was appointed as the [NUG's representative to Japan](#). Prior to the Myanmar delegation's visit to Tokyo in May, NUG foreign minister, Zin Mar Aung, had [informally](#) met with Japanese foreign ministry officials in November last year, though the meeting was not publicised and details remain scant.

Limitations to ASEAN's Diplomacy

Since his appointment as ASEAN's Special Envoy to Myanmar in January this year, Mr Alounkeo Kittikhoun has held dialogues with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and other top junta figures over the course of two official trips he made to Naypyidaw. Mr Kittikhoun also met NUG foreign minister, Zin Mar Aung.

Despite ASEAN's expressed desire to engage with all relevant stakeholders in Myanmar, adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states fundamentally limit the grouping's outreach efforts to the NUG and ethnic armed groups. In fact, four of the member states have [refused to engage with the NUG](#). The remaining ASEAN members who have reached out to the NUG have mostly preferred to keep such interactions low-key and [out of the public limelight](#), which has led to the perception that ASEAN prioritises engagements with the junta over those with its opponents.

Japan Can Complement ASEAN's Diplomatic Efforts

Japan's relations with Myanmar have withstood the vicissitudes of Myanmar's tumultuous political history. As Myanmar alternated between military rule and experiments with democratisation, Japan persisted with its "pragmatic" approach of maintaining ties with the military regimes but leveraging on economic and humanitarian aid to coax Myanmar towards democratization – a policy which Japan has continued to pursue in the current context.

Japan's strategy has been castigated by detractors as sheer naivety. While the strategy's effectiveness is certainly questionable and debatable, Japan has built a high level of political trust and goodwill through its decades of economic support for Myanmar. ASEAN can tap on Japan's soft power capital as it seeks to engage with various key stakeholders in Myanmar.

In light of its increasing engagements with the NUG and ethnic armed organisations, Japan can help ASEAN to reach out to these groups by providing a neutral platform for further dialogues between them and ASEAN member states who are open to doing so. Coordination with ASEAN will be critical for Japan to effectively complement ASEAN's outreach efforts in this area.

Japan has consistently recognised ASEAN's central role in forging a regional response to the Myanmar crisis. The [latest statement](#) by Foreign Minister Yoko

Kamikawa reiterates Japan's "maximum support for the efforts of ASEAN to improve the situation". Given that viable political solutions to the on-going crisis in Myanmar have proven elusive, ASEAN could enlist Japan as its diplomatic partner in its mediation efforts.

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