

Putting ASEAN to Test: The Roles and Challenges of Resolving the Myanmar Political Crisis After the 2021 Coup

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Abstract

The 2021 Myanmar coup has created an opportunity for ASEAN to discard its longstanding non-interference principle. However, despite several attempts to solve the impasse, ASEAN has not delivered notable progress, calling into question the challenges that ASEAN faces in tackling the Myanmar impasse following the 2021 coup. As such, this paper aims to explain those challenges and how they contribute to the ineffectiveness of ASEAN in responding to Myanmar's political crisis. Through documentary research utilizing secondary data, it further suggests that ASEAN work to overcome its challenges and act together to solve the crisis. From the framework developed in Noel Morada's paper (2021), which proposes three factors that have contributed to ASEAN's ineffectiveness during the Rohingya crisis, namely 1) constructive engagement, 2) accountability for atrocities, and 3) strategic considerations; this paper argues that although ASEAN has moved beyond its non-interference principle in the case of Myanmar's post-2021 coup political crisis, it has struggled to maintain its centrality in Southeast Asia. ASEAN's inability to effectively pressure Myanmar's junta derives from three challenges: 1) the different degrees of adherence to the non-interference principle among member states, 2) the absence of regional accountability mechanisms and sanctions against member states, and 3) ASEAN's strategic interests vis-à-vis great powers' growing influence in Myanmar. Therefore, it is recommended that ASEAN and its member states consider 1) initiating a new mode of engagement in the ASEAN Charter to officially move beyond the principle of non-interference, 2) enhancing ASEAN's regional accountability, including sanctions and punishments, in order to maintain collective action, and 3) developing its pivotal role in Southeast Asia through the establishment of more effective communication channels with the Tatmadaw.

Keywords ASEAN, 2021 Myanmar Coup, Principle of Non-interference, Challenges

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1. Introduction

ASEAN is a major intergovernmental organization in Southeast Asia that consists of ten member states, including the five founding members (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand) and another five states that joined later (Brunei, 1984; Vietnam, 1995; Myanmar, 1997; Laos, 1997; Cambodia, 1999). Since its establishment, ASEAN has been a forum in which any issues related to Southeast Asia are discussed.

Due to concerns regarding state sovereignty and their policy priorities of maintaining domestic stability, the five founding member states developed the ASEAN Way as the main principle of interaction within the group (Katsumata, 2003; Ramcharan, 2000). The ASEAN Way refers to the diplomatic norms that member states respectfully commit to within the regional bloc. Despite minor differences regarding the ASEAN Way in literature, there are at least four common elements: the principle of non-interference, quiet diplomacy, the non-use of force, and decision-making via consensus (Katsumata, 2003). Most of the principles are derived from global-level norms, such as the UN Charter (Ramcharan, 2000).

Although the ASEAN Way has been respected by member states for a long time, the dynamic has changed since the admission of Myanmar. Several scholars argue that ASEAN has breached its longstanding principles, interfering in Myanmar's domestic crises several times throughout the last few decades. However, these scholars could not agree on how to refer to these new diplomatic norms, resulting in various terminologies such as 'enhanced interaction' and 'critical disengagement' (Haacke, 2005; Jones, 2008; Katanyuu, 2006). Until now, the principle of non-interference in the ASEAN Charter has remained untouched and is still occasionally cited by member states when they desire not to comment on regional issues. In 2021, however, the opportunity to eradicate the non-interference principle from the ASEAN Charter appeared again following the most recent Myanmar coup, particularly as ASEAN had clearly breached the non-interference principle in order to implement several unprecedented moves to pressurize the Burmese junta².

The 2021 Myanmar coup occurred after the defeat of military-backed parties in the 2020 general elections, putting an end to a decade of democratization. The Tatmadaw (Myanmar's official armed forces) revealed no intention of leaving the country in civilian hands. As of June 9th, 2022, the situation in Myanmar remains compounded. The uncompromising stakeholders have pushed Myanmar toward civil war, with each side seeking ways to enhance its leverage over the other. Currently, the junta seeks to build its legitimacy and recognition by establishing relationships with its international counterparts,

² The words, junta, Burmese military government, and Tatmadaw, are used interchangeably in this article.

including China, Russia, and Thailand (GNLM, 2022; NIKKEIAsia, 2021; The Irrawaddy, 2021b). In contrast, anti-military coalitions have jointly agreed on piloting Myanmar toward federalism (Aung, 2022). Inevitably, the tension between the two sides continues to escalate, leading to a political crisis.

The ongoing political crisis in Myanmar has raised concerns amongst ASEAN leaders as the international community expects ASEAN, as a regional bloc, to play a substantial role in delivering peace to Myanmar. Since the coup, ASEAN has attempted to reduce violence by engaging with the Tatmadaw. However, it has struggled to advance its pivotal role in resolving the crisis. The five-point consensus agreed upon during the April 2021 ASEAN Summit remains unfulfilled. Although ASEAN has introduced unprecedented moves, such as barring the Burmese military government from the ASEAN Summit, they still could not deliver notable progress to the public. Even worse, the Chair's rotation to Cambodia in 2022 has posed questions regarding ASEAN's outlook toward the Burmese junta.

Although ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar since the 2021 coup has reflected a shift in adherence to the principle of non-interference (Iannone, 2022; Lee, 2021), it lacks competence in delivering progress, such as collectively urging the Tatmadaw back to the negotiation table. This calls into question ASEAN's efficiency in regional crisis management. Therefore, this paper seeks to determine the challenges that ASEAN faces in tackling the Myanmar impasse following the 2021 coup. Furthermore, this paper will also detail the challenges that contribute to ASEAN's ineffective response and suggests that ASEAN work to overcome its challenges and act together to solve the crises. It utilizes documentary research using secondary data, including journal articles, news, and media. Though existing literature highlights several limitations on ASEAN's role in mitigating member states' crises (Cheong et al., 2019; Ghoshal, 2008; Morada, 2021; Limsiritong, 2017), the literature focused specifically on ASEAN's challenges in tackling Myanmar's political crisis following the 2021 coup remains unfulfilled.

This paper develops its argument from Noel Morada's paper (2021), which proposes three factors that have contributed to ASEAN's ineffectiveness during the Rohingya crisis: 1) constructive engagement, 2) accountability for atrocities, and 3) strategic considerations that ASEAN had to balance with Myanmar. However, in the case of the post-2021 coup political crisis, ASEAN has actively responded with constructive engagement, aiming to preserve its centrality in Southeast Asia. Therefore, it is necessary to modify the above three factors to fit the context of ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar following the 2021 coup. The first factor is the different degrees of adherence to the non-interference principle among member states. Although ASEAN does not firmly maintain this principle anymore, the degrees of upholding remain unequal amongst member states. Second is the absence of regional accountability

mechanisms and sanctions against member states, which leads to heavy reliance on the Chair. Unfortunately, the rotation of ASEAN chairmanship to Cambodia in 2022 has posed several questions about its plan toward Myanmar due to Hun Sen's cowboy diplomacy³. Third is ASEAN's strategic interests vis-à-vis the growing influence of the great powers within Myanmar. China and Russia are the primary concerns, as their business-as-usual approach enhances the junta government's leverage, allowing them to step away from ASEAN's negotiation table.

This paper proceeds as follows: it first provides a literature review focused on ASEAN's upholding of the non-interference principle towards Myanmar, proposing that there have been several recent breaches. It then explores the ASEAN response to Myanmar's situation after the 2021 coup, arguing that ASEAN has once again shifted its normative framework toward interference. However, due to the lack of notable progress, it further explores the challenges that ASEAN faces in solving the Myanmar impasse through the lens of three main concerns. Finally, it concludes with recommendations to ASEAN and its member states to act in favor of the Burmese people as citizens of ASEAN, as well as for the economic prosperity and regional security of Southeast Asia.

2. ASEAN and its Adherence to the Non-Interference Principle in Regard to Myanmar

The aim of the literature review on ASEAN and its adherence to the non-interference principle in regard to Myanmar is to detail ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar since the country's admission as a member state in 1997. In the literature, there are two streams of discussion on adherence to the ASEAN Way. On the one hand, scholars highlight the importance of the ASEAN Way, citing it as a norm of engagement since its establishment (Amador, 2009; Katsumata, 2003; Limsiritong, 2017). On the other hand, however, a counterargument explains that member states have violated the non-interference principle several times. This creates doubt about ASEAN's adherence to regional norms (Jones, 2008; Katanyuu, 2006; Nguyen, 2016). As a result, the degree of adherence to the principle of non-interference remains ambiguous for ASEAN.

This paper begins with the period following Myanmar's 1997 admission as an ASEAN member state. Since then, ASEAN has faced immense international pressure from the West, including several threats of boycotts. This forced ASEAN to realize that Myanmar's internal affairs carried implications for the region. The bloc then broke the non-interference principle, resulting in a series of actions from urging Myanmar to release Aung San Suu Kyi to forcing

³ Cowboy diplomacy refers to the risky and harsh diplomatic tactics that Hun Sen is accused of, as he tends to proceed without consideration of other member states.

the forfeit of its position as Chair in 2006 (Jones, 2008; Katanyuu, 2006; Nguyen, 2016). Jones (2008) argues that ASEAN does not strictly commit to the non-interference principle, citing ASEAN's encouragement of political change in Myanmar as a response to ASEAN's ruling class viewing Burma's continued intransigence as a threat to ASEAN as a whole. Nguyen (2016) agrees with Jones, suggesting further that there is a double standard in adherence to the non-interference principle, as only relatively new and weak members like Myanmar and Cambodia have faced interference. In contrast, domestic conflicts within the five founding member states did not result in ASEAN's interference. This demonstrates that in the first decade since Myanmar's admission to ASEAN, the principle of non-interference was not respected by member states.

While we have noted that ASEAN breached the non-interference principle, there have also been some constraints posed to ASEAN whilst attempting to engage with Myanmar. For example, after ASEAN nudged Myanmar to begin a path to democratization, the massively destructive cyclone Nargis hit the country. Amador III (2009) argues that ASEAN's humanitarian response could have been more effective had there been no non-interference principle, as it took ASEAN sixteen days to develop a policy for implementing humanitarian assistance within Myanmar. The delayed response led to questions regarding the appropriateness of adhering so strictly to the principle, as a faster response would have saved countless lives.

After cyclone Nargis, the Burmese military began its regime of violence against the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority group. Limsiritong (2017) reveals that legally speaking, the ASEAN Charter is not applicable to the Rohingya crisis as it values the principle of non-interference and includes Myanmar as a decision-making stakeholder. However, as the situation developed, the Tatmadaw's notorious clearing operations caught international attention in 2017. Morada (2021) argues that although the violence was reported as early as 2012, ASEAN did not directly respond to the incident or take any action until its international reputation was affected. Rather, the constructive engagement and non-interference principles were upheld until the subsequent 2017 clearing operation in Rakhine State.

In summary, ever since Myanmar joined ASEAN as a member state, ASEAN has played a prominent role in addressing Myanmar's internal crises, particularly those related to the protection of human rights. Although ASEAN chose not to adhere to its non-interference principle several times, there are also many cases in which the principle remained upheld. After the Tatmadaw's overthrow of the recently democratically elected government, ASEAN has once again had to decide to what extent it would engage with the military government. As the literature outlines, ASEAN's adherence to non-interference remains diverse and context specific. Therefore, the following section details the

development of Myanmar's political crisis, as well as ASEAN's reaction to the military government, following the 2021 coup.

3. Myanmar's Situation and ASEAN's Response Following the 2021 Coup

After a decade of democratization, the Tatmadaw once again took over the regime on the dawn of February 1st, 2021. It accused the NLD – the democratically elected ruling party led by Aung San Suu Kyi – of electoral fraud after the military-backed USDP party was utterly defeated in the 2020 elections (Goodman, 2021; Kipgen, 2021). Following the military's takeover, massive nationwide protests occurred almost every single day for the first few months. Several demonstrations were led by the younger generation, who stood against the return of the military regime. However, the Tatmadaw showed no sign of compromise, dragging Myanmar into a political impasse. Thus far, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (2022), the death toll has surpassed 1,900 people. More than 10,000 are still under detention.

Each side has developed strategies to enhance its leverage over another. Currently, the junta seeks to build its legitimacy and recognition by establishing relationships with its international counterparts, particularly China, Russia, and Thailand (GNLM, 2022; NIKKEIAsia, 2021; The Irrawaddy, 2021b). In contrast, anti-military coalitions, including the National Unity Government (NUG), the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and various Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), have jointly agreed on steering Myanmar toward federalism (Aung, 2022). As a result, the tension between the two sides remains compounded, requiring external intervention and/or assistance.

Acting as the primary regional bloc in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has engaged with the Tatmadaw, hoping to deescalate the situation. With high expectations from the international community, ASEAN must maintain its relevance and centrality within the region. However, ASEAN's several diplomatic attempts have shown no significant progress. The lack of a collective voice refrained ASEAN from strongly criticizing the Tatmadaw's actions. However, after a shocking spike in fatalities, ASEAN member states finally determined a joint action, pushing for an emergency summit in April 2021. At the emergency summit, all member states, including the Burmese junta, agreed on a five-point consensus as an initial step toward peace, which never materialized. The ASEAN Special Envoy was never permitted to meet all parties involved in the conflict, as was provided in the consensus (Strangio, 2021). Although the result of the special ASEAN summit was welcomed by several parties, the pledge has yet to be delivered. As a result, ASEAN implemented an unprecedented move to exclude Myanmar's junta from the October 2021

ASEAN summit until the Tatmadaw complies with the agreed-upon consensus (Aljazeera, 2021). This action can be seen as a crucial step for ASEAN in moving beyond the non-interference principle.

However, after the October 2021 Summit, the uncertainty of ASEAN's future engagement with Myanmar has been raised due to the Chair's rotation to Cambodia. Through use of cowboy diplomacy, Hun Sen – the prime minister of Cambodia who has held this position for over 35 years – threatened to distort ASEAN's collective action in various ways (Seah, 2022). First, he stated his intention to welcome the Burmese military government to the 2022 ASEAN summit to be held in Cambodia, citing Myanmar as a part of the ASEAN family. Second, Hun Sen visited military leaders in Myanmar in January. Third, his attempt to include the Burmese military's representatives in the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting nearly created a conflict zone with Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Thus far, ASEAN has responded and engaged with Myanmar collectively since the 2021 coup, despite the Chair's rotation to Cambodia. Fortunately, the turbulence following the Chair's rotation to Cambodia remains under control. However, ASEAN's leadership under the prime minister of Cambodia is questionable as it will likely follow a softer approach toward Myanmar's military government, especially considering that Hun Sen's own source of power is widely known as having been achieved in an undemocratic manner. Moreover, the Chair's rotation also affects the Special Envoy, as the candidate must be nominated by the Chair. The transition of a Special Envoy to Cambodia may change the entire situation, as the ambiguity of consensus allows the Envoy to act independently.

Since the 2021 Myanmar coup, ASEAN has clearly shifted away from its longstanding diplomatic norm of so-called non-interference by pushing against the Burmese military government. With international support, ASEAN's attempts to solve the political crisis began by agreeing on the five-point consensus. Later, it barred Myanmar's military government from the ASEAN Summit due to its inaction regarding the consensus. However, the 2022 rotation of the ASEAN Chair to Cambodia has created uncertainty regarding ASEAN's future engagements with the Myanmar military government. Moreover, it is unlikely that ASEAN is capable of delivering a resolution that will satisfy all stakeholders, as such resolution would require the Tatmadaw's approval. Although it has made several attempts, ASEAN has not been successful in stopping the violence against dissidents and ethnic groups within Myanmar. As ASEAN's leverage toward Myanmar remains uncompetitive, it should reconsider the effectiveness of its efforts to push the junta back to the negotiation table. The following section discusses the challenges that ASEAN faces in addressing the Myanmar impasse following the 2021 coup.

4. Moving Forward: ASEAN's Challenges in Addressing the Myanmar Crisis

The previous section discusses Myanmar's situation and the relative role of ASEAN. This section seeks to explain ASEAN's challenges in addressing the Myanmar impasse following the 2021 coup. There are several obstacles to be discussed. While some research details ASEAN's challenges in dealing with its members' affairs (Cheong et al., 2019; Ghoshal, 2008; Limsiritong, 2017; Morada, 2021; Thi Ha & Htut, 2016), the literature still lacks a framework that fits the context of ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar post-2021 coup.

Therefore, this paper seeks to build upon the framework initially presented by Morada (2021), whose work focuses on ASEAN's role in the Rohingya crisis and argues that the lack of effective regional response is not entirely due to its members' strict adherence to the non-interference principle. He identifies three main concerns, namely 1) ASEAN's adherence to the non-interference principle while constructively engaging with Nay Pyi Daw, 2) the pursuit of justice in the absence of regional accountability mechanisms or sanctions against an erring member, and 3) ASEAN's balance of its strategic interests vis-à-vis China's growing influence in Myanmar, resulting in the lack of effectiveness.

After gathering data from several sources, this paper argues that although the second concern remains relevant, the first and third require modification to fit the challenges ASEAN faces in addressing Myanmar's political crisis following the 2021 coup. Regarding the first concern, ASEAN has collectively moved beyond constructive engagement and the non-interference principle since Myanmar's 2021 coup. However, the varying degrees of adherence to the non-interference principle amongst ASEAN leaders remains an obstacle to effectiveness, as some leaders prefer a softer approach. Regarding the third concern, external actors, including China and Russia, seek to expand their influence in Myanmar, particularly following the 2021 coup. As a result, this paper identifies the following three challenges that have led to ASEAN's ineffectiveness in pressuring the junta: 1) the varying degrees of adherence to the non-interference principle amongst member states, 2) the absence of regional accountability mechanisms or sanctions against errant member states, and 3) ASEAN's inability to balance its strategic interests vis-à-vis the growing influence of great powers in Myanmar.

4.1 The Varying Degrees of Adherence to the Non-Interference Principle Amongst Member States

While barring Myanmar's junta from the ASEAN Summit was indeed an unprecedented decision that demonstrated a shift in longstanding norms, it is likely that some member states will maintain the principle of non-interference. Several member states have shown reluctance to abandon the non-interference

principle permanently, as it could lead to drawbacks for them in the future. As such, the collective approach in addressing Myanmar's junta is rather soft.

It is evident that the 2021 Myanmar coup has imposed several consequences on ASEAN member states. However, the burden of proximity and the impact on economic relationships still have not pushed highly affected countries, such as Thailand, to take proactive action. Thailand has experienced an influx of migrants since the Tatmadaw began military operations in several areas controlled by ethnic armed groups. Also, several clashes between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups near Thailand's borders are causing security concerns as small Thai villages nearby have experienced collateral damage (Nanuam, 2021). Moreover, Thailand has many economic investment projects in Myanmar and these businesses are significantly impacted by ongoing, unexpected change. However, these consequences have not yet influenced the Thai government to engage proactively with Myanmar.

The main reason for the varying levels of adherence to the non-interference principle is the difference in political regimes amongst member states. The principle of non-interference can be viewed as a norm for peaceful coexistence between authoritarian and democratic states. Therefore, several authoritarian or undemocratic regimes still view this principle as a preferable choice, acting as protection from public criticism for their internal affairs, especially regarding the violation of human rights or the persecution of anti-regime leaders. ASEAN member states remain distinctive in their political systems. Most mainland member states are controlled, or heavily influenced, by military juntas and authoritarian leaders, while maritime Southeast Asia is partially democratic (Hunt, 2022). Without this principle, ASEAN might not be able to facilitate an effective discussion forum for Southeast Asian countries.

Although Myanmar's 2021 coup posed undeniable concerns to ASEAN, mainland member states are still reluctant to actively criticize Myanmar further. Countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos maintain their interactions with the Burmese military government, both directly and indirectly. Instead, these countries remain inactively critical, describing the political crisis as an internal matter (Piromya, 2022). In contrast, the more democratic members in maritime Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines, are in favor of a tougher approach. However, ASEAN is unable to implement a harsh approach towards Myanmar due to the consensus-based decision-making process. As a result, ASEAN must mediate between stakeholders and the collective response is the product of compromise between ASEAN member states.

Although it can be said that ASEAN, as a whole, has moved beyond the non-interference principle, it still struggles to introduce a tougher collective approach towards Myanmar's military junta due to the varying degrees of adherence amongst member states.

4.2 The Absence of Regional Accountability Mechanisms or Sanctions Against Errant Member States

Regional accountability mechanisms and sanctions are crucial tools for a regional bloc to be able to lead the regional agenda competently. However, the ASEAN Charter does not provide for accountability mechanisms or sanctions to be implemented against its members who fail to protect human rights within their territory (Morada, 2021). According to the ASEAN Charter, the decision-making process is based on consultation and consensus. As many countries within the region maintain long histories of nation-building, they prefer to ensure total control over their own sovereignty. Therefore, threats to human security, such as state violence, remain widely prevalent within ASEAN member states.

As a result, the absence of accountability mechanisms largely empowers the role of the ASEAN Chair to drive the bloc forward in service of its own agenda. In 2021, Brunei, a small power that rarely plays a pivotal role at the regional level, was the ASEAN Chair during the Myanmar coup. Lacking proactive strength, Brunei struggled to deliver any notable outcomes from the Special Envoy's visit. Starting in 2022, the rotation of Chairmanship is likely to yield a negative result for anti-military dissidents and the military opposition as it is Cambodia's turn. His state visit to Myanmar made Hun Sen the first foreign leader to set foot in Myanmar following the 2021 coup; his photos with the junta leader Min Aung Hlaing spreading on social media. His attempts to distort ASEAN's collective action have posed concerns to other member states. Just as in the past, we are now seeing Cambodia expose its role as a representative of China's voice within ASEAN by blocking the publication of a joint communique (BBC, 2012). As such, there is no guarantee that Cambodia's prime minister will act upon ASEAN's last year consensus. It is likely just a matter of time before Hun Sen will distort the ASEAN collective action for his own agenda.

The absence of regional accountability mechanisms and sanctions has created an ASEAN that is heavily influenced by the Chair's leadership. This has the potential to significantly impact ASEAN's effectiveness in addressing Myanmar's political crisis. In 2022, Cambodia acquired the most significant seat in driving the bloc forward. Thus far, the Cambodian government has created ambiguity about ASEAN's centrality and its collective voice. In the long-term, these factors could indirectly lead to the recognition and legitimization of Myanmar's junta in ASEAN.

4.3 ASEAN's Inability to Balance Its Strategic Interests vis-à-vis the Growing Influence of Great Powers in Myanmar

ASEAN is not the only entity that holds strategic interest in Myanmar. Several great powers also view Myanmar as an essential strategic partner, both militarily and economically. Therefore, regardless of recent changes in Myanmar, their approach remains business-as-usual. Two great powers, namely

China and Russia, currently pose a significant threat to ASEAN – if ASEAN were to pressure Myanmar further, Myanmar may decide to distance itself from ASEAN and deepen its relationship with these great powers instead.

China's growing regional influence has been a longstanding obstacle in addressing Myanmar's political crises. One of the main reasons ASEAN accepted Myanmar into the bloc was the fear that Myanmar would fall fully under Chinese influence (Masilamani & Peterson, 2014). Therefore, constructive engagement was introduced as a method by which to open a channel with Myanmar. Following Myanmar's 2021 coup, however, China has greatly enhanced its economic and military relations with the country. In the economic dimension, China continues to work on its investment projects with the military junta, of which, most belong to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese state-led companies have signed on with several projects worth billions of US dollars (Banerjee & Rajaura, 2021), meaning that the Chinese government believes in, and supports, the Tatmadaw's power in Myanmar. With vast infrastructure development led by China, Myanmar's military junta is adamant that their economy can survive. In terms of military relations, the transfer of submarine and arms sales from China have guaranteed its close connection with the Tatmadaw.

Following the coup, then, China has not only maintained a business-as-usual approach with the Tatmadaw but has also shattered ASEAN's centrality. For example, China served as mediator during the June 2021 ASEAN-China Foreign Minister's Meeting in Chongqing, China, by which it was able to control the meeting's agenda, allowing Myanmar's military junta to propose its own five-point blueprint for disciplined democracy. As a result, the meeting effectively bypassed ASEAN's collective, agreed-upon five-point consensus (Tower, 2021). Moreover, China continues to expand its influence in Myanmar's internal affairs by playing the role of a mediator between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed organizations (The Irrawaddy, 2021a). For these reasons, China cannot be reliable partner for ASEAN in addressing Myanmar's crises, as its role lessens ASEAN's leverage.

The second great power is Russia. The military relationship between Myanmar and Russia is important as Russia is a major arms supplier to the Tatmadaw. Many interactions can confirm these close ties, including when the Russian Deputy Defense Minister flew from Moscow to attend the annual Armed Forces Day in Nay Pyi Daw, just one month after the coup. Moreover, Min Aung Hlaing's trip to Russia in June 2021 clearly signaled their close relationship, as during the visit he was reported to have met several arms companies (NIKKEIAsia, 2021). The continued military relationship between Myanmar and Russia has ensured the flow of arms to the Tatmadaw, further ensuring the suppression of anti-coup movements.

In short, Myanmar's military government receiving the backing of these two great powers has significantly challenged ASEAN's ability to gain leverage. China follows a business-as-usual approach in an effort to protect the economy from full collapse. Russia ensures a continuous arms flow, supplying the Tatmadaw directly. As a result, ASEAN has less leverage in negotiating with the junta, as these great powers provide the necessary support. The harder ASEAN pushes the Tatmadaw into the corner, the more likely it will defect to the side of China and Russia.

In summary, ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar following the 2021 coup has experienced three main challenges leading to ineffectiveness and lack of progress. The first two challenges can be viewed as internal challenges within ASEAN itself. While the varying degrees of adherence to the principle of non-interference amongst member states has prevented ASEAN from implementing a tougher approach to pressure the junta, the absence of regional accountability mechanisms and sanctions has pushed ASEAN to rely heavily on the Chair. With the current Chair held by Cambodia, ASEAN has shifted to an even softer approach towards the Tatmadaw. The last challenge – ASEAN's inability to balance its strategic interests vis-à-vis the growing influence of great powers in Myanmar – is considered an external challenge. The deepening relationships between Myanmar and other great powers lessen ASEAN's leverage in negotiating with Myanmar's military government, as Myanmar is able to maintain control without ASEAN support.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper explores the challenges that ASEAN faces in addressing the Myanmar political crisis following the 2021 coup. ASEAN had once again acted out of alignment with the non-interference principle and is now struggling to develop a strategy by which it can overcome three main challenges: 1) the varying degrees of adherence to the non-interference principle amongst member states, 2) the absence of regional accountability mechanisms or sanctions against errant member states, and 3) ASEAN's inability to balance its strategic interests vis-à-vis the growing influence of great powers in Myanmar. Failure to overcome these challenges could lead to an undesirable outcome for Burmese dissidents, further empowering the military junta. Thus, ASEAN member states must collectively address these challenges in order to regain ASEAN centrality for the sake of regional interest.

This paper, therefore, proposes three recommendations for ASEAN and its member states in response to the three challenges: 1) initiate a new mode of engagement in the ASEAN Charter that can be used as reference when interacting at the ASEAN level and can serve as the starting point by which to officially

move beyond the principle of non-interference; 2) enhance ASEAN's regional accountability through the establishment of accountability mechanisms and sanctions in order to maintain the collective agenda and increase competence in addressing regional issues; 3) send a strong message to regional great powers, namely China and Russia, which are still utilizing the business-as-usual approach, to call for increased accountability for the ongoing violence in Myanmar. If ASEAN collectively follows these recommendations, it is likely to regain leverage by demonstrating its strong commitment to addressing Myanmar's political crisis. However, ASEAN currently still relies on the willingness of member states to deliver a better and more effective outcome. Accordingly, this paper suggests further research into ASEAN member states' individual responses towards Myanmar in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of each member's policy priorities.

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