

Chapter 15

The Impact of the Myanmar Coup on Regional Security in Southeast Asia

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I. Introduction

The military coup in Burma in February 2021, which overthrew the then-legal government, is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and its internal political turmoil will affect ASEAN's regional security and peace and stability. In addition, China, the U.S., Russia, and other major powers are all highly concerned about the Myanmar coup and the development of ASEAN regional security and are waiting for the opportunity to act in their best interests. This publication will analyze the impact and trend of the coup in Burma from the beginning and end of the coup, the attitude of various sectors toward the coup, and the impact of the coup on regional security in Southeast Asia.

II. History of the Myanmar Coup

In post-World War II Myanmar, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), led by General Ne Win, was a one-party military dictatorship from 1962 to 1988.¹ In December 1990, the military government held national elections in 1990. The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won the

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¹ "Myanmar Profile-Timeline," *BBC News*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12992883>.

elections, but the military government declared the United National Government of the Union of Burma (UNGUB) illegal, and the government became a government in exile.² Since then, the military government has held power in Burma. However, in October 2010, the State Peace and Development Council issued a decree changing the country's name from the Union of Burma to the Union Republic of Burma, still under a military government.³ In November 2015, Burma held its first general election in 25 years, in which the NLD, led by U Aung Mye Thaw, came to power, ending 54 years of military rule, and the NLD and the military formed a government in accordance with the constitution, with U Aung Mye Thaw serving as a state minister.

Three months before the coup, in the 2020 parliamentary elections in Myanmar, the NLD won the election, and the Burmese military disputed the results, claiming electoral fraud.² In January 2021, Burmese military spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun again called on the election commission to provide a final list of voters for a vote count. The Burmese National Defence Force commander-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing, raised the possibility of abolishing the constitution.⁴

On January 28, 2021, the Union Election Commission of Burma denied the fraud. In the early hours of February 1 of the same year, the Burmese National Defense Force (MNDF) launched a military coup on the grounds that the 2020 parliamentary elections were fraudulent, and the military government declared a one-year state of emergency in Burma. U Aung Mye Thaw, members of the central government cabinet, and 14 provinces and states leaders were arrested. Subsequently, anti-coup demonstrations erupted across Burma, and the military used heavy-handed tactics to suppress them, resulting in some 1,000 deaths and thousands of detainees.⁵

² "Coups in Burma: Implications for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, May 12, 2021 Congressional, p. 4.

³ "Myanmar Profile-Timeline," *BBC News*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12992883>.

⁴ "Commander-in-chief Says 'Constitution Can be Repeated'," *Myanmar Now*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/commander-in-chief-says-constitution-can-be-repealed>.

⁵ "Myanmar's Coup and Violence, Explained," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/myanmar-news-protests-coup.html>.

By August 2021, more than 960 people had been killed and thousands arrested or detained, including foreigners and more than 100 children. In the same month, Min Aung Hlaing appointed himself prime minister and promised to hold elections by 2023.⁶

III. Stances toward the coup in Myanmar

1. The United Nations

In June 2021, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the Burmese military government, calling the Burmese military to release political prisoners such as Onsan Suu Kyi and other detainees, the crackdown on protesters, and calling on countries to stop selling arms to Burma. The resolution was supported by 119 countries, with Belarus being the only country to vote against it and 36 other countries abstaining, such as Thailand and Cambodia, both members of the ASEAN, and Russia and China, the two largest suppliers of arms the Burmese military.⁷

The resolution is not binding under international law. However, it has political significance, with EU Ambassador Olof Skoog stating that it “delegitimizes the military government and condemns its violence and abuse of its people, demonstrating the global isolation of the Burmese military government.”⁸

In August 2021, UN Special Envoy to Burma Christine Schraner Burgener told a press conference in New York that six months after the coup, Burma’s military leaders now appear to be consolidating their rule, and that the junta may forcibly dissolve the NLD, and that the situation in Burma remains very worrying in the face of a severe third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹

⁶ “Myanmar Military Leaders Attempting to Legitimize Power: UN Special Envoy,” *UN News*, August 10, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097452>.

⁷ “Myanmar: Timely Support and Action by Security Council ‘Really Paramount,’ Says UN Special Envoy,” *UN News*, June 18, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/06/1094322>.

⁸ “Myanmar Coup: UN Calls for Arms Embargo Against Military,” *BBC News*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57536032>.

⁹ “Myanmar Military Leaders Attempting to Legitimize Power: UN Special Envoy,” *UN News*, August 10, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/08/1097452>.

2. ASEAN

The ASEAN invited Myanmar's military leader Min Aung Hlaing to a summit meeting on April 24, 2021, and reached a consensus on five points,¹⁰ which were as follows:

- (1) All parties must immediately end violence and maximum self-control.
- (2) The parties should start a dialogue to find a peaceful solution for the people.
- (3) The ASEAN Chairman appointed a special envoy to Myanmar to facilitate and mediate the dialogue process.
- (4) ASEAN provides humanitarian assistance.
- (5) The Special Envoy goes to Myanmar to meet with the parties.

After the ASEAN summit reached the “five-point consensus,” Indonesian President Joko Widodo and former Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin said that Min Aung Hlaing had committed. However, the Burmese military said in a statement on April 26 that it would “carefully consider ASEAN’s constructive proposals once the situation has stabilized”.¹¹

The foreign ministers of Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Singapore jointly called on the military to release Onsan Suu Kyi and others. Despite the ASEAN’s claims of solidarity, individual countries have been inconsistent. Singapore, the largest foreign investor in Burma, has been more forceful, expressing “grave concern” in a statement and describing the use of lethal force against protesters as “unforgivable”. Even so, Singapore, whose economic priorities are paramount, is reluctant to impose economic sanctions on the Burmese military.¹²

¹⁰ “ASEAN Changed Myanmar Statement on Release of Political Detainees-sources,” *Reuters*, April 25, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-changed-myanmar-statement-release-political-detainees-sources-2021-04-25/>.

¹¹ “Special Column, Myanmar Military’s Continued Military Repression of ASEAN Summit 5 Consensus May Become Empty Talk,” *Central News Agency*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/202105070357.aspx>.

¹² “Soldiers’ Intervention in Politics Has no Solution in the Short Term! The Sino-Russian Siege, the Neighboring Countries Plan to Sanction Myanmar, only the United States Can’t Win,” *China Central Radio*, June 24, 2021, <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2103576>.

With the support of Cambodia and Laos, Thailand and Vietnam advocated accepting the coup in keeping with the ASEAN tradition of non-interference in the internal affairs of states. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore condemned the Burmese military government's force against unarmed civilians. It noted that the ASEAN member states' constitutional commitments included "respect for fundamental freedoms, promotion and protection of human rights, and promotion of social justice" and that positive action should be taken. Therefore, there was no unanimity within ASEAN regarding the coup in Burma.¹³

3. China

The U.S. and European countries urged the international community to sanction trade, investment, military exchanges, and the supply of military equipment to Burma. However, the military government did not take the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and European countries seriously because they were not significant participants in Burma's economy. Burma's neighbors China, India, Thailand, and Bangladesh, are crucial international trading partners and have not yet discontinued trade with Burma; Japan and some Asian companies have reduced or cut off business with the Burmese military, but their official governments have not formally imposed economic sanctions on Burma. In addition, the two largest suppliers of arms to Burma, China, and Russia, remain in close contact with the Burmese military and have prevented the UN Security Council from passing a resolution banning arms sales to Burma.¹⁴ In other words, economic sanctions have not impacted the Burmese military government.

The Chinese government has had close ties with Burma's authoritarian military leaders over the past several decades, and Beijing's influence in Burma has grown in recent years through its "One Belt, One Road" program. The Chinese government did not explicitly express support for the Burmese military at the beginning of the coup, but its refusal to condemn the military takeover at the UN

¹³ "ASEAN's Myanmar Dilemma," *East Asia Forum*, May 23, 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/05/23/aseans-myanmar-dilemma/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Security Council¹⁵ is indicative of its true intentions.

On June 7, 2021, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated China's position on the current situation in Myanmar when he chaired an extraordinary foreign ministers' meeting on the 30th anniversary of the China-ASEAN dialogue: "China supports ASEAN in playing a constructive role inadequately addressing Myanmar's internal problems, and as China is also a close neighbor of Myanmar, the situation in Myanmar directly concerns China's interests. China is also highly concerned about the situation in Myanmar and is willing to continue to play a constructive role in its way."¹⁶

China's Permanent Representative to the UN, Zhang Jun, also said during the Security Council's deliberations on Burma, "I hope that all parties will respect Burma's sovereignty and that the current problems in Burma are internal. China hopes that all parties will adhere to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, respect Burma's sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity, and national unity, uphold an objective and impartial attitude, support the efforts of regional states, and avoid unilateral sanctions and inappropriate intervention."¹⁷

In August 2021, the foreign ministry under Burma's military government announced that China would fund more than \$6 million of Burma's military government's development. This was a sign of renewed cooperation between Beijing and the Burmese military government; Burmese anti-coup activists criticized this move as tantamount to supporting a violent coup by the Burmese military government.¹⁸ From experience, it can be concluded that China was once again happy to take advantage of this coup to actively build a new political and military presence in Burma and intervene in the political direction of Burma.

¹⁵ Myanmar Coup: UN Passes Resolution to Urge Countries to Abstain from Arms Embargo on Myanmar, China and Russia," *BBC Chinese*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/world-57536841>.

¹⁶ "Wang Yi Talks about the Situation in Myanmar," *CCTV News*, June 7, 2021, <http://m.news.cctv.com/2021/06/08/ARTI2HC7HQTB5zkxhMcBBA8T210608.shtml>.

¹⁷ "Chinese Representative Calls on All Parties to Create Favorable External Environment for Myanmar's Domestic Political Reconciliation," *Xinhua Net*, June 19, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2021-06/19/c_1127578152.htm.

¹⁸ "China to Fund Myanmar Projects in Agreement with Junta," *Reuters*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-fund-myanmar-projects-agreement-with-junta-2021-08-11/>.

4. The United States

In February 2021, President Joe Biden called on U.S. allies and the international community to unite to support the defense of democracy in Burma. In the weeks following the coup, the Biden administration imposed a series of economic sanctions, including strict export controls on companies associated with the Burmese junta, such as Myanmar Economic Corporation, Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd., and state-owned timber and gemstone companies. The U.S. government also issued entry restrictions on military leaders and their families to limit the military government's access to aid funds.¹⁹

In March of that year, the Biden Administration announced that it would provide humanitarian protection to Burmese nationals and residents in the United States. The U.S. Trade Representative's Office announced the immediate suspension of all trade transactions with Burma under the 2013 Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).²⁰

In July of the same year, Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed "grave concern" about the military coup in Burma and called on Southeast Asian countries to end the violence and restore democracy in Burma. State Department spokesman Ned Price issued a statement noting that Blinken called on the ASEAN countries to take "immediate action" on Burma in accordance with the five-point consensus reached in April of the same year.²¹

In August of the same year, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke with Zin Mar Aung, acting foreign minister of the National Unity Government, a shadow government formed by anti-military elements. In a statement, Price said the U.S. would continue to support the Burmese pro-democracy movement, assist with Burma's warming COVID-19 pandemic, and provide humanitarian assistance

¹⁹ "Coup in Burma: Implications for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, May 12, 2021 Congressional, p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹ "Blinken Urges ASEAN to Take Action on Myanmar Coup," *China Central Radio*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2105413>.

to the Burmese people.²²

IV. The Impact of the Myanmar Coup on Regional Security in Southeast Asia

The coup in Myanmar drew international condemnation, but the Burmese military ignored international pressure and denied entry to UN Special Envoy to Myanmar, Burghardt, and the ASEAN diplomatic envoy.²³

The April 2021 ASEAN summit was Min Aung Hlaing's first visit since the coup took power. After reaching a five-point consensus on Burma, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) representative from Indonesia, Yu Yun, considered ASEAN's failure to include the release of political prisoners in the "five-point consensus" to be of limited use. Charles Santiago, chairman of the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) and a member of the Malaysian parliament, said that ASEAN should put forward a clear timetable as soon as possible and insist that Min Aung Hlaing fulfill its promise and release political prisoners.²⁴

Since the establishment of the ASEAN in 1967, there have been numerous military coups in Thailand, one of the founding countries, but the ASEAN has never convened a meeting on this issue. Therefore, the international community is particularly concerned about whether the April summit will challenge the long-standing ASEAN principle of "non-interference in the internal affairs of member states." However, Indonesia successfully convened the summit, but Thai Prime

²² "Asean's Special Envoy to Myanmar, US Deputy Secretary of State Calls with Representatives of the Shadow Government," *China Central News Agency*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aopl/202108050060.aspx>.

²³ "Myanmar Junta Refuses UN Envoy Visit," *The Star*, April 10, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2021/04/10/myanmar-junta-refuses-un-envoy-visit>; "Myanmar Junta Says no ASEAN Envoy Visit Until Stability Restored," *Reuters*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-junta-says-seeks-stability-before-allowing-asean-envoy-visit-2021-05-07/>.

²⁴ Shi Xiujuan, "Special Column, Burmese Military's Continued Military Suppression of ASEAN Summit 5 Consensus May Become Empty Talk," *Central News Agency*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/202105070357.aspx>.

Minister Prayut Chan-ocha and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte chose not to attend the meeting,²⁵ indicating the negative attitude of Thailand and the Philippines towards the Burmese coup.

Thailand's language on the Burma coup was milder than that of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, stating only that it was "gravely concerned" about the escalating bloodshed since the Burma coup, although its geographical location and tradition of cautious diplomacy explain its caution in commenting on the coup, given that the border between Thailand and Burma is 2,400 kilometers long and the economic, trade, and refugee issues at stake are more complex than those of any other ASEAN member state.²⁶

Although the Philippines was absent from the summit, the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs emphasized Manila's support for Burma's sovereignty and territorial integrity²⁷ and its opposition to regional or multilateral framework solutions imposed by outside powers.²⁸ This suggests that the Philippines does not believe that the international community or ASEAN should take too aggressive a sanction to avoid violating the principle of "non-interference in the internal affairs of member states.

Drawing on historical experience, in September 2007, monks and people in Burma took to the streets to protest rising oil prices and government tyranny, only to be brutally suppressed by government forces, causing a worldwide outcry and condemnation. The ASEAN Summit in November of that year did not formally condemn the incident but merely backed off, conceded, and returned to

²⁵ Tang Nanfa, "The Road to Hell Paved by Diplomacy: Why Is ASEAN's 'Myanmar Peace Plan' Doomed to Bloody?," *UDN*, May 6, 2021, https://global.udn.com/global_vision/story/8663/5438497.

²⁶ "Analysis: Myanmar's Neighbour Thailand Unlikely to Toughen Stance on Coup," *Reuters*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-thailand-analysis-idUSKBN2BP0LN>.

²⁷ "Citing Myanmar's Sovereignty, PH Won't Join UN Resolution vs. Military Takeover," *CNN Philippines*, February 13, 2021, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/2/13/philippines-myanmar-military-coup-un-human-rights-council.html>.

²⁸ "Philippine Statement for the Special Session of the Human Rights Council on the Human Rights Implications of the Crisis in Myanmar on 12 February 2021," *Department of Foreign Affairs, Philippines*, February 12, 2021, <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriesupdate/28619-philippine-statement-for-the-special-session-of-the-human-rights-council-on-the-human-rights-implications-of-the-crisis-in-myanmar-12-february-2021>.

its fundamental principles, reiterating “non-interference in the internal affairs of ASEAN member states” and calling for “respect for the right of each member state to exist free from external interference, subversion, or coercion.” The ASEAN Chairman’s Declaration weakly calls for the Burmese military ruling party to “work toward peaceful transfer and democracy” and lift restrictions on Onsan Suu Kyi. In terms of building a broad regional community, no matter how the ASEAN strategy changes, it is a fact that cannot be hidden that weak states cannot shape the destiny of solid states.²⁹ ASEAN is a regional organization that has never had any real influence on the internal affairs of states, or even stood by and watched from the sidelines, and is by nature a highly heterogeneous group, with different political and economic cultures among its member states, making it fundamentally challenging to develop a common identity. It is fundamentally challenging to develop a common identity. In this way, the U.S., China, Russia, and other major powers have intervened in the coup d’état of each country. While the significant powers superficially agree to maintain the peaceful consensus and operation of ASEAN, in reality, they each use their military and economic strength to draw in and build strategic power from ASEAN countries, making it even more challenging to form a consensus within the ASEAN member states, which are already at odds with each other. What is more, the strong countries will use their political and economic power to hijack the vulnerable countries in ASEAN. The weak countries can express their positions in the international arena for their strategic interests and secretly manipulate the operation of ASEAN.

V. Conclusion

Since the 1970s, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in Southeast Asia have fallen to the Soviet Union, creating a “red threat.” During Min Aung’s visit to Moscow in June 2021, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that Russia regards

²⁹ Song Xingzhou, Lin Peini, “Southeast Asian Nations Association and Regional Security,” *Global Political Review*, No. 25, 2009, pp. 22, 44.

Myanmar as a long-tested strategic partner and reliable ally in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region.³⁰

In addition, China has long had a close relationship with the Burmese military government, and this time China has directed the coup in Burma toward its internal political issues, just as it has asked the international community not to interfere in China's internal political issues, and has backstabbed the military government in an attempt to make it more pro-China. Burma's domestic political and economic problems have been exacerbated by deepening international influence in Southeast Asia. The U.S. used to have a certain degree of influence in Burma, but its influence in Burma has declined in recent years.

Burma's political instability has had a knock-on effect on economic and commercial interests throughout Southeast Asia. However, the ASEAN countries have their calculations and have not yet taken active steps to avoid affecting their interests, citing their reluctance to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. The Burmese military government is moving between Russia, China, the United States, and other major powers in the diplomatic, military, political, and economic spheres to consolidate the new relationship and obtain the best benefits. As a result, the political turmoil in Burma is likely to continue for several years.

³⁰ "Myanmar Coup Turns Russian Power Back into Southeast Asia," *Central Radio*, July 14, 2021, <https://www.rti.org.tw/news/view/id/2104947>.

