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No. 019/2025 dated 27 February 2025

Malaysia's Chairmanship of ASEAN: Between Continuation and Adaptation of the Myanmar Crisis

Pui Yee Choong

SYNOPSIS

The ongoing civil strife in Myanmar has escalated into a humanitarian crisis and is one of ASEAN's pressing challenges. Malaysia can seize its role as the 2025 ASEAN Chair to manage the crisis somewhat differently. However, the support of all ASEAN members is necessitated.

COMMENTARY

With the theme "Inclusivity and Sustainability", Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN officially started on 1 January 2025. One of the pressing concerns for Malaysia is the ongoing civil strife in Myanmar. The severity of the crisis and its implications for civilians in Myanmar are reasons that compel Malaysia to prioritise the issue. As the ASEAN Chair, Malaysia is also responsible for upholding ASEAN's credibility in addressing the turmoil in Myanmar.

Navigating Myanmar's crisis for any ASEAN Chair is complicated and challenging. ASEAN must abide by the ASEAN Way, which upholds the non-interference policy and the importance of consensus while working towards a breakthrough in the conflict. At the same time, the intensification of the armed conflict and the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar further complicates any enduring solution. Importantly, it requires the political will of multiple stakeholders, and honest brokers within and outside of Myanmar, to help broker peace in the country.

Malaysia can capitalise on its role as the ASEAN Chair to manage the Myanmar situation slightly differently.



As the 2025 ASEAN Chair, Malaysia can champion new norms and innovative solutions to address the Myanmar crisis. *Image source: ASEAN Secretariat.*

Malaysia as ASEAN Chair and the Myanmar Crisis

As the Chair of ASEAN in 1997, Malaysia with the support of all ASEAN member states, included Myanmar into ASEAN despite widespread criticism from Western countries against the military government in Myanmar.

Fast forward to 2021, Myanmar has become ASEAN's embarrassment. The coup d'état in Myanmar has escalated into a protracted civil war and turned into a humanitarian crisis. The crisis has also been exploited by arms dealers, drug warlords, and human trafficking syndicates, making Myanmar a hotspot for transnational crimes and threatening regional stability. Furthermore, different insurgent groups have threatened the junta's hold on power. These insurgents are now controlling different parts of the country and complicating the evolving conflict dynamics.

To date, ASEAN's most significant proposal to deal with the conflict in Myanmar is the Five-Point Consensus (5PC), which the junta leader, General Min Aung Hlaing, had accepted initially but failed to implement subsequently. While supportive of ASEAN's efforts, Malaysia has exhorted ASEAN to take a stronger approach against the junta. For instance, Malaysia has urged ASEAN to strongly condemn the Myanmar junta's actions of killing, torturing, and imprisoning the country's citizens. Malaysia has strongly condemned the military junta's execution of four activists in 2022 and called for the suspension of Myanmar military regime representatives in any ASEAN foreign ministers' meetings.

Separately, Malaysia has also [suggested ASEAN informally engage Myanmar's shadow government](#) — the National Unity Government (NUG) — to facilitate the channelling of humanitarian aid to the people of Myanmar. This was rejected by the Myanmar junta.

Maintaining Previous Efforts, Introducing New Mechanisms

Malaysia's consistency in speaking out against the military junta regime offers glimpses of hope that it will take the lead to steer ASEAN to take a proactive approach

on the Myanmar crisis. Challenging as it may be, continuing previous approaches with modification and introducing new norms may be the way forward.

First, maintaining the previous efforts introduced in the 5PC must be continued despite the limited results. At the same time, Malaysia must champion some form of adaptation, especially in the area of dialogues with all parties. In particular, the NUG in exile needs to be engaged in the discussion — if not with the State Administration Council (SAC) and ASEAN, then separately and informally. ASEAN may not be able to find a consensus in recognising the NUG, but it must acknowledge that the NUG is a critical player. It may be ASEAN's best bet to convince, if not all, but some of the insurgent groups to accept a ceasefire. To this end, Malaysia can rely on Indonesia to use Jakarta's experience in ASEAN shuttle diplomacy.

Second, Malaysia can urge China to work with ASEAN to influence Myanmar. China has close bilateral relations with the military junta in Myanmar. China is an important dialogue partner of ASEAN, and has good relations with Malaysia. China's role in the Myanmar crisis should not be underestimated. The shared concern over transnational crimes can be leveraged to convince China to play this role, as Chinese citizens have also fallen prey to digital online scamming syndicates. One way is to adopt and adapt the ASEAN Troika approach. In other words, an ASEAN Troika Plus One format, allowing China to have a slightly bigger role in the Myanmar crisis, yet without compromising ASEAN Centrality. Beyond keeping track of the crisis, the ASEAN Troika Plus One can be given a stronger mandate to coordinate informal diplomacy or even allow targeted sanctions.

Third, Malaysia can introduce new norms for ASEAN to pave the way for a breakthrough in Myanmar. For instance, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim had introduced the idea of the Asian Renaissance in 1996 and revived that idea recently in a [commentary](#) published last December. In general, the idea promotes inclusivity, pragmatism, and shared prosperity. Most importantly, it stated that ASEAN's vision includes ending the turmoil in Myanmar. Building on the broad idea of the Asian Renaissance, Malaysia can introduce new norms to tackle the Myanmar crisis.

For example, Malaysia can begin advocating an ASEAN version of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to tackle the Myanmar conflict. It must be underscored that ASEAN adopted the principle in 2005 but has not truly promoted it. R2P may seem controversial, but it converges with the values of ASEAN's aspiration of a people-centred community. The regional body does not need to follow the R2P doctrine entirely but can use it as a guide, building upon the goals of the ASEAN Community, and finally devise an ASEAN version of the mechanism to address the humanitarian issue in Myanmar.

Conclusion

As the 2025 ASEAN Chair, Malaysia must seize this opportunity to push for (i) renewed commitment among ASEAN member states; and (ii) adaptation and introduction of new ways to address the Myanmar crisis. It is also important for Malaysia to maintain or even increase its regional influence, but also to restore the credibility of ASEAN.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. Malaysia needs the support of all ASEAN member states to push for any creative and innovative proposals. The ASEAN Way seems to remain a hurdle rather than an impetus in this case. The need to maintain regional peace, progress, and prosperity is compelling. The other challenge is to engage all the stakeholders within Myanmar. As the crisis continues to evolve, the military junta and the NUG may not be the only actors that ASEAN has to engage, whether formally or informally. The guiding principle must be to seek an enduring domestic process to tackle the civil strife in Myanmar without undermining its territorial integrity and its multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society. It remains to be seen if ASEAN can be truly inclusive.

Pui Yee Choong is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Malaya. She contributed this IDSS paper to the Malaysia Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798