



How Has Malaysia as ASEAN Chair Fared in Handling the Myanmar Crisis?

Henrick Tsjeng



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Malaysia should be credited for its robust approach on the Myanmar crisis as ASEAN chair.
- Nonetheless, the crisis remains largely unresolved owing to a few factors: divergences in views on handling the crisis among ASEAN's members; the intransigence of the junta; and China's influence in the country and support for the junta.
- ASEAN needs to engage China in response to its growing influence in Myanmar, including through the ASEAN Troika on Myanmar. ASEAN should also engage other external stakeholders and consider appointing a longer-term or permanent special envoy for Myanmar.

COMMENTARY

The first phase of the Myanmar elections concluded recently, with the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) – largely seen as the civilian representative of the armed forces of Myanmar, or Tatmadaw – winning a whopping [90% of the lower house seats](#). The elections have mostly been criticised as a “[sham](#)” that the Tatmadaw is using to legitimise its hold on power.

With reports that [violence](#) continued through the elections and with areas not within military control excluded from the polls, the ongoing civil war does not look like it will end in the near term. The continuing crisis will have implications for ASEAN. It will therefore be instructive to review how Malaysia, as the 2025 ASEAN chair, handled the crisis, and what this means for future ASEAN chairs.

Malaysia's Chairmanship: A More Robust Approach

Malaysia, right from the start of its chairmanship, had signalled a more [robust](#) approach than in the past, one that prioritised [accountability](#) for the junta's behaviour and humanitarian assistance. As early as January 2025, Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan had [emphasised](#) that the junta's plan to hold elections should not be the priority; instead, Naypyidaw should focus on ending the civil war and starting inclusive dialogue. Malaysia wasted no time in [appointing](#) Tan Sri Othman Hashim as the new ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar that same month.

Following a devastating earthquake in Myanmar, Malaysia [convened](#) a Special Emergency Meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers at the end of March, following up with a joint humanitarian [visit](#) by the Thai and Malaysian foreign ministers in April. This allowed all ASEAN member states to contribute aid to the stricken country through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre).

In May, Malaysia had started [separate talks](#) with both the military government and the opposition National Unity Government (NUG), backing its calls for inclusive dialogue with action. Malaysia even reportedly obtained [ceasefire commitments](#) from all sides, though the integrity of these commitments may be questionable at best. The Malaysian foreign minister further indicated that his team would meet with the military regime and [present](#) a "wishlist" from the various ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). This meeting took place as a working [visit](#) by the Malaysian foreign minister to Naypyidaw in October 2025.

During the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in late October, the [ASEAN Leaders' Review](#) and Decision on the Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus (ASEAN's official response to the Tatmadaw's seizure of power in 2021; 5PC for short) was released. It called for further actions to tackle the crisis, including the consideration of a [longer-term special envoy](#) to ensure greater continuity, the continued use of the AHA Centre to channel humanitarian assistance into the country, and greater involvement of extra-regional partners in working with ASEAN.

Challenges Remain

Indeed, slow and steady progress has been made by ASEAN under the Malaysian chair, with Putrajaya making the most progress in the provision of humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Malaysia has also been [vocal](#) in pressing Naypyidaw to abide by the 5PC and has been more willing to engage with numerous stakeholders, including the NUG. The ASEAN Leaders' Review set the way forward for upcoming ASEAN chairs to follow up, enabling continuity in addressing a challenge that clearly requires an incremental process. The idea of a longer-term special envoy also remains a work in progress.

Putrajaya should be commended for working with ASEAN towards these outcomes. However, the Myanmar crisis remains unresolved. This is not the fault of Malaysia, but rather due to the constraints put on the Malaysian chair because of divisions within ASEAN and developments in the external environment.

First, [divergences](#) among ASEAN member states have long been known to hamper effective actions by ASEAN. Cambodia, Laos and Thailand appear to favour more accommodating approaches, while the other ASEAN members seem to prefer a tougher line towards the military government. Obtaining consensus from all ASEAN member states has proven difficult, given their varying interests and views on the Myanmar crisis.

Second, the Tatmadaw has continued to be intractable in its relations with ASEAN. The military government has largely [ignored](#) the provisions of the 5PC. A key request unheeded by Naypyidaw is Malaysia's insistence that the fighting be stopped and inclusive dialogue commenced before the elections. The ASEAN Leaders' Review had fully acknowledged Naypyidaw's failure to show progress on the 5PC.

Third, China's relations with Naypyidaw continue to sidestep ASEAN's processes. ASEAN's efforts appear unable to move the needle on the crisis. Instead, it is China that has the initiative, [brokering ceasefires](#) and [engaging](#) with various parties in a way that ASEAN has been unable to. Beijing has also pressured other countries, such as Thailand, to deal with the [scam centres](#) operating in Myanmar's border regions without going through ASEAN. Most of all, Beijing is increasingly [supporting](#) the military government, shielding it from any punitive actions, be they sanctions by the international community or diplomatic censure by ASEAN.



While Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN chairmanship advanced accountability and humanitarian aid in Myanmar, internal ASEAN divisions and China's influence continue to pose challenges.

Image credit: ASEAN Secretariat.

Few Good Options for ASEAN

Given these challenges, ASEAN will continue to face a profoundly difficult problem in Myanmar and has few good options. But it can take some incremental steps towards resolution even if immediate success is elusive.

One of ASEAN's key tasks is to engage China. As much as China has its own interests in Myanmar, Beijing – a key partner to the military government even as it maintains engagement with some of the EAOs – is indispensable to ASEAN for any path forward. The challenge is to ensure that China does not exclude ASEAN in its engagements with the parties in Myanmar, as currently appears [to be the case](#), but instead actively involves the organisation in brokering ceasefires.

This is easier said than done. The upcoming ASEAN chair for 2026 is the Philippines, which is facing off Beijing over disputes in the South China Sea. It remains to be seen whether Manila can set aside its dispute with Beijing to collaborate on finding workable solutions in Myanmar.

Nonetheless, ASEAN could develop a way to get through to China. A possible way would be to have the full [ASEAN Troika on Myanmar](#) engage Beijing. In 2026, this will consist of Malaysia and Singapore alongside the Philippines, making it more palatable for China.

Moreover, ASEAN's engagement of other countries, like India and South Korea, should not be ruled out. While Japan may be another option given its [record](#) of engaging with all parties in Myanmar, ASEAN must tread carefully, given the recent spike in [Sino-Japanese tensions](#). It would therefore be prudent for ASEAN to engage Japan in as low-key a manner as possible.

Finally, ASEAN should proceed with the decisions outlined in the ASEAN Leaders' Review. In particular, ASEAN should fully consider the appointment of a permanent or longer-term ASEAN special envoy. This would allow the special envoy a longer time frame to address the crisis based on a single agenda, rather than having the framework shift on an annual basis, allowing for greater continuity and cohesion. Moreover, this would give ASEAN the leeway to appoint a special envoy from a neutral country acceptable to all ASEAN members and its external partners.

ASEAN's road ahead in tackling the Myanmar crisis remains highly complex. While the conclusion of Malaysia's chairmanship has not yielded results where resolution is concerned, Malaysia should be credited for its more robust approach and for setting the way forward for the next few ASEAN chairs.

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