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## ASEAN's many challenges in Myanmar

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INDO-PACIFIC ANALYSIS BRIEFS 2025

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The Perth USAsia Centre's Indo-Pacific Analysis Briefs seek to provide perceptive and contemporary insights from across the region. The series features leading analysts from Asia, Australia and the US to deliver up-to-the-minute assessments on issues of national and regional importance. This series will shine a light on the issues that remain critically important to Australia and the Indo-Pacific at a time when global events may otherwise dominate the news cycle.



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# KEY MESSAGES

- 1** The 2021 coup in Myanmar has emerged as a critical test for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and its role in regional peace and stability.
- 2** Four years on, Myanmar is embroiled in an intractable civil war and faces a severe humanitarian crisis, with little hope for a swift resolution.
- 3** ASEAN's institutional framework is often cited as the main obstacle to compelling Myanmar's military to comply with regional decisions.
- 4** Yet Myanmar's growing fragmentation and China's prominent influence in the country have also limited ASEAN's options to respond to the crisis.

On 1 February 2021, the military in Myanmar declared a state of emergency following a coup d'état against the civilian government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The coup plunged the country into a deep political, economic, and humanitarian crisis and has emerged as a critical test for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The military detained civilian leaders and established the State Administration Council (SAC) as Myanmar's new governing body, justifying their actions with allegations of electoral fraud in the November 2020 general elections. Massive protests erupted nationwide in response to the coup. When the SAC violently cracked down on demonstrators, many took up arms. The opposition formed the shadow National Unity Government (NUG) and an armed resistance force, escalating the crisis into a full-scale civil conflict that has plunged Myanmar into deeper turmoil.

Four years on, the SAC has extended the state of emergency five times, using it to justify its continued rule and brutal repression of pro-democracy activists. Myanmar is embroiled in a seemingly intractable civil war and confronts a far-reaching humanitarian crisis – with major implications for regional peace and stability.

## ASEAN's response to the Myanmar coup

ASEAN has a longstanding track record of maintaining regional stability and promoting peaceful conflict resolution. While ASEAN's institutional framework is often cited as the main reason for its ineffective response, the complex and multidimensional nature of the conflict as well as competing and contradictory influence of major powers have limited the grouping's options to respond to the Myanmar crisis.

### The bloc has struggled to formulate a unified and effective response to the coup.

After the coup in 2021, ASEAN chair Brunei immediately issued a call to "return to normalcy" in Myanmar. It took another two months, however, for ASEAN leaders to convene a special summit to formulate a strategy to address the crisis (see Box 1: Timeline).

At its April 2021 meeting with Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief General Min Aung Hlaing, the grouping agreed on the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) to guide a joint approach to Myanmar. The 5PC called for

- an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar;
- constructive dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution among all stakeholders in the conflict;
- the appointment of a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair;
- humanitarian assistance to Myanmar; and
- a visit by the special envoy to Myanmar to facilitate the dialogue process.

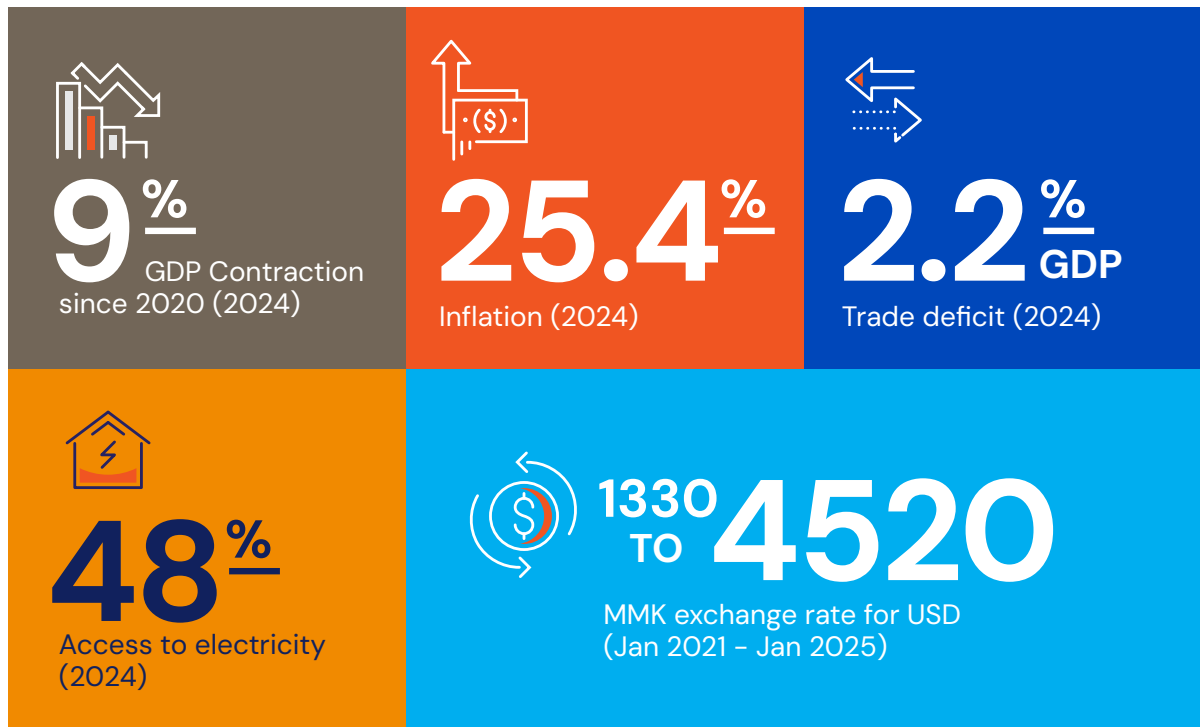
The military government, however, refused to implement the 5PC. Rather, it escalated its violent campaign, including attacks against civilians.<sup>1</sup> Frustrated by the military's unwillingness to cooperate, ASEAN took an unprecedented step by excluding the SAC's representatives from high-level ASEAN summits.

#### BOX 1: Timeline of ASEAN's response to the coup

1 Feb 2021	Myanmar's military ousts the democratically elected government.
Apr 2021	ASEAN leaders adopt the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) following a special summit with General Min Aung Hlaing.
Jul 2021	ASEAN appoints its first special envoy to Myanmar.
Oct 2021	ASEAN excludes Min Aung Hlaing from the annual leaders' summit.
Jan 2022	Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen is the first ASEAN leader to visit Myanmar since the coup, sparking criticism for legitimising the SAC.
Aug 2022	ASEAN bars Myanmar's ruling generals from the group's meetings until progress is made on the 5PC.
Jun 2023	The outgoing military-backed government of Thailand hosts an informal meeting with the SAC in Bangkok to "fully re-engage" Myanmar's leaders.
Sep 2023	Leaders decide Myanmar will not take over the rotating leadership of ASEAN as scheduled in 2026.
Oct 2024	Indonesia hosts meeting on Myanmar with UN, EU and representatives of the NUG.
Sep 2024	ASEAN establishes a "troika" of former, current and incoming ASEAN chairs to facilitate regional coordination.
Jan 2024	The military accepts ASEAN's invitation for it to send a non-political representative to the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat for the first time.
Dec 2024	Thailand hosts informal 'six-country' consultations with foreign ministers from Myanmar, Laos, China, India, and Bangladesh.
Jan 2025	ASEAN urges military to prioritise ending civil strife over plans to hold an election in 2025.
Mar 2025	ASEAN supports relief efforts after a devastating earthquake in Myanmar.

Four years later, the 5PC remains the central framework guiding the grouping's approach to Myanmar but prospects for a resolution of the conflict are low – raising questions about ASEAN's influence and relevance as a regional actor. Political instability has plunged Myanmar into a humanitarian 'polycrisis' fuelling unrest and mass displacement, with half the population now living below the poverty line—double the pre-coup level.<sup>2</sup> A devastating earthquake in March 2025 only compounded the country's humanitarian crisis, killing more than 3,300 people and causing destruction in large swathes of central Myanmar.

FIGURE 1: **Indicators of Myanmar's economic decline**



Source: UNDP<sup>3</sup>

Ongoing conflict has also created a fertile environment for transnational crime. Myanmar has become the world's leading producer of opium and heroin and one of the largest global suppliers of methamphetamines.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, cyber scam operations have rapidly expanded, promoting human trafficking and generating illicit funds for both sides of the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

**Given these stakes, ASEAN's lack of assertiveness is striking – and underscores the need to look closely at the constraints shaping the grouping's response.**

## Non-interference and ASEAN's institutional limits

ASEAN diplomacy is guided by the *ASEAN Way*, a set of principles including non-interference in members' domestic affairs, consensus-based decision-making, and peaceful conflict resolution. These principles emerged from the region's long history of external interference and guarantee that no state will be able to dominate another. They are also often cited as the main reason for the grouping's inability to effectively engage Myanmar, because they make a swift response extremely difficult.

ASEAN does not have a dedicated institutional mechanism to deal with internal political crises. Instead, the ASEAN Charter refers decisions on how to address "emergency situations affecting ASEAN" (Article 7d) as well as any "serious breach of the Charter or noncompliance" (Article 20) to the ASEAN Summit.<sup>6</sup>

Yet ASEAN members hold divergent views on the organisation's mandate and responsibility. Indonesia and Malaysia, among the most vocal ASEAN members on this matter, argue that the military's actions challenge the principles like commitment to peaceful conflict resolution, as well as respect for democratic and human rights values enshrined in ASEAN's Charter. They advocate for a tougher stance on the SAC, because it disregards regional decisions.

In contrast, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, have favoured continued engagement with Myanmar's generals. They do not support more extensive ASEAN involvement in what they see as a domestic crisis, because they want to avoid interference in their own illiberal politics and, in some cases, questionable human rights records. These divisions have caused significant tensions as evidenced by Cambodia's 2022 chairmanship, when Prime Minister Hun Sen attempted to re-engage Myanmar's generals despite significant criticism from other ASEAN members.<sup>7</sup>

Intraregional differences also enabled the military to undermine the ASEAN process. The SAC has, for example, conflated the 5PC with its own five-point roadmap released only a few weeks after the 5PC. It has also leveraged its bilateral links with some countries in the region to influence ASEAN's internal deliberations.<sup>8</sup> Thailand (where the military maintains a dominant role in politics) has hosted several rounds of informal dialogues bringing together junta leaders and other countries from in- and outside the region, overshadowing the ASEAN-led process and undermining ASEAN's joint decision to exclude Myanmar from certain activities.

### Notwithstanding, ASEAN norms are not as rigid as often claimed.

In fact, leaders have previously adopted a more interventionist stance toward Myanmar when the region's stability or the grouping's credibility were threatened. For instance, following intense international criticism over the renewed incarceration of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, ASEAN leaders pressured Myanmar to defer its chairmanship in 2005.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in 2008, ASEAN pushed Myanmar's then military regime to allow humanitarian assistance after a devastating cyclone, overcoming the regime's initial blockade of aid despite significant international pressure.

It is, therefore, important to look beyond 'non-interference' to understand the constraints ASEAN faces in formulating an effective regional response.



## Growing fragmentation in Myanmar

The current conflict in Myanmar is about more than democracy, because it intersects with previous social and ethnic conflicts that wrecked the country long before the coup.

### BOX 2: Key actors in Myanmar's conflict

TATMADAW	The military of Myanmar.
STATE ADMINISTRATION COUNCIL (SAC)	A group of senior military officials governing Myanmar, established by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing after the coup.
NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT (NUG)	A parallel government of former members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) government and representatives of some ethnic minority parties.
PEOPLE'S DEFENCE FORCE (PDF)	Armed units commanded by the National Unity Government (NUG) and its allies.
ETHNIC ARMED ORGANISATIONS	Ethnic insurgent groups fighting for greater self-determination.
THREE BROTHERHOOD ALLIANCE (3BHA)	An alliance of three ethnic armed organisations, the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA).

Most notably, several ethnic armed organisations like the Kachin Independence Army have been fighting for greater self-determination and autonomy for decades. Myanmar is highly ethnically diverse with more than one hundred officially recognized ethnic groups. But many of these minority groups have faced systemic discrimination and abuse by the military and have thus become a part of the anti-junta movement. These groups secured some major strategic victories against the military since 2023 - some analysts even predict that the coordinated campaign sustained by ethnic armed organisations may well shift the balance of power in Myanmar sufficiently to topple the junta. As of late 2024, the military only controlled 21 per cent of Myanmar's territory, whereas ethnic armies and resistance groups controlled 42 per cent of the country.<sup>10</sup>

### While both pro-democracy and ethnic groups fight the military, the dynamics between them are not straightforward.

The 2021 coup abruptly ended negotiations for a peace accord between the central government and armed ethnic organizations. Some ethnic fighters have since joined hands with the NUG to fight the Tatmadaw. But they are unlikely to accept the NUG's vision for a return to the previous democratic government without significant guarantees concerning federalism and minority rights. Other ethnic armed organisations are fighting the junta independently of the NUG.

ASEAN has limited knowledge about the relevant domestic stakeholders and their shifting relationships, as well the internal dynamics of the military itself.<sup>11</sup> This has made it difficult to determine which groups to include in “inclusive dialogue” in accordance with the 5PC, and how to effectively mediate between them.

ASEAN's efforts to promote meaningful dialogue are further limited by the fact that the military and resistance are unwilling to engage in a negotiated settlement. The military has clearly demonstrated its determination to continue its campaign at the cost of Myanmar's people. Many resistance groups, meanwhile, have come to see the conflict as a fight to end decades of military rule. Strengthened by significant wins on the battlefield, they reject any compromise that would preserve the military's power.<sup>12</sup>

The grouping has made some efforts to adjust to this reality. Indonesia, for example, conducted over 75 closed-door consultations with resistance groups and international partners during its 2023 chairmanship.<sup>13</sup> Domestic disruption in the wake of the March 2025 earthquake could also open up new opportunities for diplomatic engagement. However, the current impasse remains challenging to resolve.

### **‘Constructive’ engagement and the China factor**

ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar has long been a diplomatic dilemma, balancing its emphasis on non-interference with the need to address Myanmar's internal crises to maintain regional stability.

At the time of its admission to ASEAN in 1997, Myanmar – formerly Burma – was ruled by the State Law and Order Restoration Council, a repressive military regime sanctioned by Western powers. By integrating Myanmar more deeply with the region, ASEAN hoped they could encourage socio-economic progress and political reform. This strategy of ‘constructive engagement’ has arguably been unsuccessful. Against the backdrop of persistent illiberal politics and recurring crises such as the systematic prosecution of the Rohingya minority in 2017, ASEAN states have grown increasingly frustrated with Myanmar.

**Nonetheless Myanmar's growing dependence on China has raised fear among diplomats that any too-direct confrontation would push the country even further into China's orbit.**

China has historically been the regime's biggest supporter and continues to provide the junta with arms, investment, and diplomatic backing. Beijing's strategic interests in Myanmar are tied to its Belt and Road Initiative projects, particularly the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and key oil and gas pipelines that provide China direct access to the Indian Ocean. In February 2025, the military further allowed Chinese security firms to operate in Myanmar to protect Beijing's interests. As others noted, these forces could also provide intelligence and logistical support to the junta, or even engage in offensive operations.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, China has maintained ties to ethnic armed organisations which control territories along its border with Myanmar to retain its influence regardless of political shifts (see Box 3). These developments have diminished ASEAN's role, and leverage over Myanmar's military by reducing its reliance on the grouping for legitimacy. Beijing's overt support also deepens pre-existing divides between member states with differing geopolitical alignments.

**BOX 3: China's links to cyber scam networks in Myanmar**

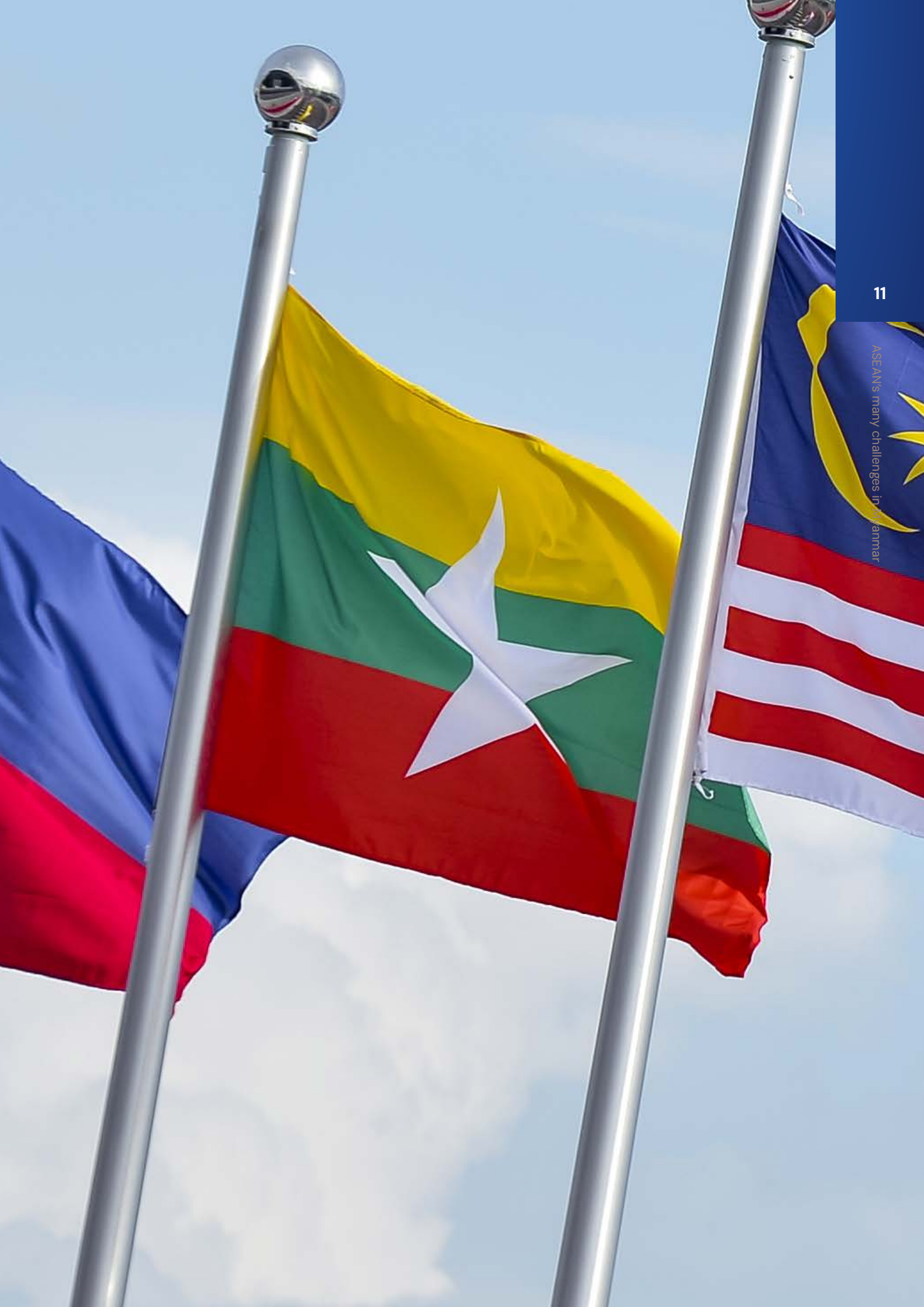
Many of the large-scale cyber scam operations in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are run by Chinese-led syndicates that settled in Southeast Asia after Beijing cracked down on corruption on its mainland (2012–2017). Their fraud and trafficking schemes often target Chinese citizens. Public dismay and high-profile cases such as that of Chinese actor Wang Xing, who was rescued from a scam centre in January 2025, have put pressure on Beijing to crack down on these operations in coordination with Myanmar authorities.

Beijing's involvement in the prosecution of cyber scams is also driven by broader strategic interests, particularly stability along the China–Myanmar border. Operation 1027, for example, was an anti-military offensive launched by the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA). A key factor in the success of Operation 1027 was Beijing's approval. Frustrated with the junta's failure to contain scam operations in the area, China saw the 3BHA's commitment to combatting cyber-scam operations as aligning with its own priorities.

**China's influence on the conflict is strengthened by a leadership vacuum on the international stage.**

To date, the West has been reluctant to provide practical assistance to the pro-democracy movement. With a major war in Ukraine and conflict in the Middle East, calls for support by Myanmar's resistance groups has ranked lower in priority for many countries – despite the junta's brutality and significant battlefield victories by the People Defence Force and ethnic armed organisations.<sup>15</sup> Recent US policy decisions further weaken the pro-democracy movement. Before the freeze of USAID, the US provided US\$141 million in humanitarian aid to support people in need across Myanmar.<sup>16</sup> President Trump has also cut off funding for the establishment of democratic provisional local governments in areas controlled by the resistance.<sup>17</sup>

Instead, the US, Europe and others have primarily imposed sanctions of varying scope and expressed their support for an ASEAN-led solution. By now it is clear, however, that ASEAN will not be able to address this crisis alone – a concerted international effort is needed to address Myanmar's multidimensional challenges.



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