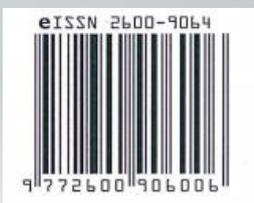


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**THE DOMESTIC AND  
INTERNATIONAL  
IMPLICATIONS OF  
MYANMAR'S 2021 MILITARY  
COUP**

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## **The Domestic and International Implications of Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup**

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## ABSTRACT

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar's armed forces staged a coup that returned the country to a troubled past, ending a decade-long transition from military rule. In the following six months, the army's power grab triggered mounting domestic protests, which were harshly repressed by the self-proclaimed junta. On top of that, the progressive escalation of the Burmese political crisis led to an 'East vs. West' divide on how to deal with Myanmar's military regime, thus hampering the prospects of an international unified front to resolve the crisis. Between the punitive approach favored by the Western countries and the unwavering support for the junta provided by Russia and China, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has opted for a quieter and more pragmatic posture, encouraging the junta to move towards national reconciliation in phases. Whether ASEAN's 'five-point consensus' will succeed in brokering a negotiated solution lies in the Association's ability to speak with one voice, while projecting impartiality between the military cabinet led by General Min Aung Hlaing and the shadow government representing Myanmar's 'civil disobedience movement' (CDM).

Keywords: Myanmar; military coup; civil disobedience movement; ASEAN; UN; China.

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List of Abbreviations:

ARSA	Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organizations
EU	European Union
MEC	Myanmar Economic Corporation
MEHL	Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited
MOGE	Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government
PDF	People's Defence Force
PRC	People's Republic of China
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
SAC	State Administration Council
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

## **Introduction**

In the early morning of February 1, 2021, Myanmar's armed forces (known as the Tatmadaw) launched a series of simultaneous raids in the capital Naypyidaw and in the country's largest city, Yangon, to seize power from the democratically elected government led by the 'National League of Democracy' (NLD). The military takeover occurred just a few hours before the swearing-in of Myanmar's new Union Assembly, which composition reflected the NLD's landslide victory at the November 2020 general elections. In that occasion, the progressive party guided by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi had secured a total of 396 parliamentary seats in both houses of the Burmese parliament, thus topping its epochal victory at the 2015 elections that had led to the appointment of 390 NLD lawmakers and the choice of the next President (Grafilo, 15 November 2020). In the wake of the polls, however, both the Tatmadaw and the pro-military 'Union Solidarity and Development Party' (USDP) alleged fraud and refused to recognize the results of the November 8 elections, without substantial evidence to back their claims. In January 2021, when the NLD and Myanmar's Election Commission dismissed the fraud allegations, military spokesperson Zaw Min Tun raised the prospects of a coup, warning that the Tatmadaw could 'take action' to purportedly uphold the rule of law and defend the 2008 constitution (Marston, 12 February 2021).

A few days later, these threats became reality as the army's Commander in chief, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, staged a coup that led to the detention of more than 100 prominent political figures associated with the NLD, including President Win Myint, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as several senior members of the elected government. Immediately afterwards, the Tatmadaw invoked a one-year state of emergency, transferring all judicial, executive, and legislative powers to Min Aung Hlaing, and also announced the formation of a junta named 'State Administration Council' (SAC) tasked with investigating the allegations of electoral fraud and coordinating Myanmar's response to the COVID-19

pandemic.<sup>1</sup> On August 1, six months after the coup, Min Aung Hlaing announced on television the extension of the state of emergency until August 2023, pledging to hold free and fair elections at the end of this period. On the same day, Myanmar's State media reported the formation of a new 'caretaker cabinet' led by Min Aung Hlaing as Prime Minister and the SAC's parallel dissolution, in a move arguably aimed at achieving a cosmetic reshuffle of the junta's structure to garner international recognition.

Hence, from a political and historical standpoint the events that occurred in Myanmar during the first half of 2021 were a major milestone that ended the hybrid institutional architecture in place since the drafting of the 2008 constitution. Back then, the new charter had envisioned Burmese politics gradually moving away from direct military rule through the establishment of a power-sharing agreement between civilian and military leaders. As a result, a 'seven-step roadmap' towards a so-called 'discipline-flourishing democracy' was laid out. In line with these efforts, which sought to erase the image of Myanmar as a 'pariah state' by reintegrating it into the international community, the Tatmadaw agreed to step back from a direct and unrestricted exercise of its powers, while remaining the country's supreme political authority. Among its vast privileges enshrined in the constitution, the army retained control of three key ministries (Defence, Border and Home Affairs) and also granted itself insuperable veto power over future constitutional changes, by crafting a charter that not only reserved 25 per cent of Union Assembly seats for military cadres, but also required a parliamentary threshold of more than 75 per cent to pass proposals to amend the constitution. Despite its limits and biases, the 2008 top-down transition and the ratification of the new constitution laid the foundations for a historic metamorphosis of Myanmar's State-society relations, characterized by a progressive relaxation of the military's most draconian traits. As a result, between 2010 and 2015 Myanmar witnessed such landmark accomplishments as: the disbanding of the military junta that had ruled Myanmar with an iron fist since 1988; the election of the first semi-civilian government in

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<sup>1</sup> Upon assuming office, the SAC was composed of 11 members, of which eight were senior members of the Tatmadaw and three were civilians. Min Aung Hlaing assumed the apical post of Chairman, while the Vice Commander in chief of the army, Sen. General Soe Win, was sworn in as Vice Chairman. For an exhaustive investigation of their backgrounds and military careers, see: Htet et al. 2021.

nearly fifty years; the re-establishment of multiparty parliamentary politics; the release of more than 2.000 political prisoners; the legalization of pro-democracy opposition forces spearheaded by the NLD; as well as a steady rapprochement with the West, evidenced by the lifting of economic sanctions.

In late 2015, however, this reform and opening-up process reached its zenith with the epochal electoral triumph of the NLD, that led many to believe that Myanmar was finally on the verge of a full-fledged democratic transition. Since then, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party have largely failed to maintain the momentum of socio-economic reforms and to achieve an agenda of national reconciliation between Myanmar's Bamar majority and its ethnic minorities. Against this backdrop, in August 2017 the Tatmadaw launched 'clearance operations' in Rakhine State against the 'Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army' (ARSA), highlighting the systematic discrimination of ethnic and religious groups. These brutal counter-insurgency campaigns, later equated by the UN to a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing', led to mass killings and the forced migration of nearly 800,000 Rohingya to neighboring Bangladesh, in what appeared as the largest human exodus in Asia since the Vietnam War (Nebehay and Lewis, 11 September 2017).

On top of that, the Rohingya crisis also abruptly terminated the diplomatic 'honeymoon' between Myanmar and Western stakeholders, as it dealt a massive blow to Aung San Suu Kyi's personal image and political legitimation, both inside Myanmar and in the international arena. While unsuccessful in achieving peace and progress, during her last two years in office Aung San Suu Kyi retained the strong support of the Bamar-Buddhist communities by progressively relying on a nationalist and xenophobic narrative. This trend was on full display in December 2019 when the Nobel Peace Prize winner and former human rights icon headed Myanmar's delegation at the International Court of Justice to defend the Tatmadaw's brutalities in Rakhine State against a genocide case filed by Gambia. Thanks to Aung San Suu Kyi's populist shift, charismatic authority, and cult-like following among Bamar constituencies, the NLD won another landslide victory at the November 2020 elections, which put it at the helm of Burmese politics in tandem with the Tatmadaw for

another five-year term. On February 1, however, as the new parliament gathered in Naypyidaw for its inaugural session, the army seized power and returned Myanmar to a not-so-distant past, undoing a decade of incremental reforms. Still, in the aftermath of a coup d'état initially orchestrated by the Generals as a swift and trouble-free forced reshuffle, the putsch triggered mounting and largely unanticipated popular resistance, with the effect of dragging Myanmar to the brink of a dramatic civil war.

### **The Coup and Its Domestic Implications**

Myanmar's civil society reacted to the military takeover with a totally unprecedented display of resolve and activism that was unparalleled in the country's multiple experiences with military coups.<sup>2</sup> Since February 2, the putsch has led to mass nationwide strikes and boycott campaigns aimed at damaging the Tatmadaw's economic interests and shadowy businesses, essentially centered on two powerful conglomerates: the 'Myanmar Economic Corporation' (MEC) and the 'Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited' (MEHL). During the first stage of the protests, this 'Civil Disobedience Movement' (CDM) successfully brought together various segments of Burmese society, ranging from students and monks to white collar workers and grassroots campaigners. A younger cohort of activists, in particular, enlisted participants from the 'Generation Z', a demographic encompassing those born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s. Thanks to its digital prowess and transnational links consolidated online, the 'Generation Z' activists not only coordinated the protests via social media and bypassed the internet shutdowns imposed by the SAC, but also linked Myanmar's political crisis with a broader regional scenario involving networks of netizens advocating democratic reforms in Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, under the banner of the 'Milk Tea Alliance'. Caught off guard by the massive outpouring of popular anger, the ruling junta increasingly resorted to violent means and lethal weapons, as well as anti-insurgency tactics borrowed from its longstanding 'four cuts' strategy against ethnic armed

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding Myanmar's past record of military takeovers, the three key precedents are the 1958, 1962, and 1988 coups. The latter, most notably, prompted wide popular protests spearheaded by student activists that were brutally crushed by the ruling junta, leading to mass killings and incarcerations. For a more detailed analysis, see Yitri 1989.

organizations (EAOs).<sup>3</sup> In addition to this campaign of repression, the Tatmadaw also enlisted hundreds of agitators, vigilantes, and ‘death squads’, as epitomized by the hardline nationalist group ‘Pyusawhti’ whose main tasks are aimed at discrediting the CDM and provoking civil unrest through physical provocations and fake news (Frontier Myanmar, 14 July 2021). Since mid-February, the confrontation has escalated further as the SAC used the pretext of illegal possession of walkie-talkies to charge Aung San Suu Kyi with breaching Myanmar’s import-export law.

According to the Myanmar’s Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), in the six months following the takeover the fierce repression of protests resulted in 936 deaths, 6,946 arrests, and more than 200,000 internally displaced individuals (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 28 July 2021). To make things worse, the almost total paralysis of Myanmar’s health system and the parallel spread of the COVID-19 delta variant have led to 3,921 casualties in June and July alone, as the country rapidly succumbs to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis (The Irrawaddy, 26 July 2021a). In July 2021, while commenting on the situation in Myanmar, UN Special Rapporteur Tom Andrews equated this combination of challenges to a ‘perfect storm’, potentially capable of turning the country into a failed state (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 14 July 2021). As could be expected, the mounting recourse to violence by the Tatmadaw and the growing polarization in the standoff between the SAC and the CDM have increasingly radicalized the demonstrators’ goals and tactics. The resistance movement has thus shifted from using such non-violent means as sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and strikes which characterized the first stage of the protests, to guerrilla operations often conducted in tandem with several EAOs (Fawthrop, 27 February 2021). In terms of its mission, the CDM is also approaching what increasingly appears to be an existential struggle with the regime by progressively escalating its demands for a peaceful solution to the crisis. In the immediate aftermath of the putsch, the CDM’s central requests revolved around the restoration of the NLD government and the release of its cadres, but recently the disobedience movement has

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<sup>3</sup> The ‘four cuts’ strategy was originally developed by the Tatmadaw in the mid-1960s as a counter-guerrilla doctrine against the Karen army and the Communist Party of Burma (CPB). It prescribed cutting off food supplies, recruits, funds, and intelligence. For an elaborated account, see Maung 2009.

raised the bar by demanding the repeal of the 2008 constitution as the key prerequisite to kick-start bottom-up democratization. In the event of formal negotiations between the two entities, however, similar conditions would most probably be dismissed by the Generals as totally unfeasible, thus increasing the prospects of full-fledged civil war in Myanmar. On the other hand, the SAC has further displayed its uncompromising stance by passing repressive laws aimed at strengthening its grip on power, which include draft regulations to completely disband the NLD (Reuters, 21 May 2021).

Another key challenge faced by the resistance movement is the plethora of local leaders who seek to advance their own agendas. In mid-April, to encourage the CDM to speak with one voice, a group of ousted NLD lawmakers, activists, and delegates from the various EAOs formed Myanmar's 'National Unity Government' (NUG), a shadow cabinet that claims to act as the legitimate representative of the democratically elected administration overthrown on February 1. A few weeks later, the NUG proceeded to establish a 'People's Defence Force' (PDF) as the armed wing of the resistance front, while also endeavoring to obtain international recognition. On top of that, the ongoing political crisis has also had devastating consequences on Myanmar's economic outlook. According to World Bank estimates, Myanmar's GDP is set to plunge by 18 percent by the end of 2021, after a 10 percent contraction in 2020 as a result of the global pandemic (The Irrawaddy, 26 July 2021b). Furthermore, the Burmese economy is also in the midst of a looming bank crisis characterized by acute cash-flow difficulties and a severe reduction of industrial output, due to recurring strikes and the damage of critical infrastructures. Moreover, fuel and food prices have spiked to a record high, as the poorest segments of Burmese society bear most of the cost of Myanmar's incipient civil war. International investors, losing confidence in Myanmar's post-coup prospects, have rapidly retreated. Oxford Economics, a global economic forecasting company, estimates that the political turmoil may have jeopardized USD 3.5 billion in FDI proposals waiting for approval before the military takeover (Pandey, 9 February 2021). An example of this concerning trend was the sale in early July of Norwegian telecom operator Telenor's assets in Myanmar. Telenor blamed the rapid deterioration of Myanmar's business and political environment.

Considering the massive repercussions of the coup, analysts and foreign policymakers have wondered about the reasons that pushed the Tatmadaw to end the hybrid political architecture that it had carefully crafted since the early 2000s. In fact, at first glance the Generals' power grab appears irrational, as the NLD administration had been quite deferential to the military and refrained from openly challenging the Tatmadaw's self-designated role as the highest authority in Burmese politics. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the army's actions may be motivated by two sets of factors. The first is related to Min Aung Hlaing's personal interests and his looming compulsory retirement in August 2021 because of an age limit. Hence, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's armed forces might have overthrown the NLD government to avoid losing his posts and powers, seeking to protect the extensive economic fortunes accumulated by his family and cronies via the MEC and MEHL. As further support for this explanation, it should be noted that in the runup to the 2020 elections Min Aung Hlaing had launched a bid to become the next President of Myanmar, which was eventually frustrated by the USDP's electoral fiasco. Unsurprisingly, in the immediate aftermath of the coup the SAC scrapped the age limit for senior military posts, in order to allow the current junta to keep its firm grip on power. A second interpretation of the unfolding events points to the Tatmadaw's growing dissatisfaction with the NLD's blatant dismissal of its fraud allegations in the November 2020 elections. Accordingly, the Generals might have felt insulted by the NLD's refusal to take their allegations seriously, interpreting the refusal as a sign that, after its electoral triumph, the NLD finally felt confident enough to openly challenge the foundations of the 'disciplined democracy' established with the 2008 constitution. Regardless of the reasons that led the Tatmadaw to stage its coup, the ensuing popular upheaval undoubtedly caught the armed forces by surprise, forcing them to cope with a totally unforeseen scenario. Faced with the intensification and radicalization of the struggle between the SAC and the CDM, the army has thus resorted to its traditional playbook of repression and coercion, pushing the entire country towards an increasingly deadly stalemate that will determine Myanmar's fate for the foreseeable future.

## **The International Dimension of the Myanmar Crisis**

Myanmar's ongoing political conundrum is best depicted as a multi-layered confrontation, fought on three distinct battlegrounds: the streets of Burmese cities and the country's war-torn ethnic areas, where the two sides clash daily with growing violence; the online domain where rival netizens compete with different narratives and propaganda operations; and the international arena, which is likely to play a crucial role in the coming months as the two parties strive for international recognition and diplomatic support. Against this backdrop, it should be highlighted that the Tatmadaw's power grab has paved the way for a highly polarized reaction, reminiscent of the visible split into two distinct camps in the wake of the 2017 Rohingya crisis and the 1988 military coup. As a result, immediately after the putsch the international community again displayed a 'West vs. East' divide on how to deal with the abrupt interruption of Myanmar's transition from authoritarian rule. On one hand, the normative, moral, and somewhat messianic posture that characterizes the foreign policy agenda of Western stakeholders has pushed the U.S. and its European partners to quickly condemn the military takeover, through the imposition of new sanctions against the SAC's top cadres. One week after the coup, U.S. President Biden announced measures that froze more than USD1 billion in foreign financial assets held by the Tatmadaw's leadership, as well as the redirection of U.S. development assistance to Burmese civil society. The White House is also reviewing the former Trump administration's low-profile attitude vis-à-vis the Rohingyas' plight, as a step towards the formal designation of the Tatmadaw's atrocities in Rakhine State as genocide. However, President Biden has refrained from penalizing Myanmar's state-owned oil and gas industry, amidst pressure from lobbies and interest groups associated with California-based hydrocarbon giant Chevron, which operates one of the largest offshore oilfields off the coast of Myanmar (Jakes, 30 June 2021).

Likewise, in the six months following the putsch the European Union (EU) imposed three rounds of sanctions, targeting a total of 43 individuals and four economic entities controlled by the Tatmadaw. On top of that, Brussels further strengthened its long-standing arms embargo, first introduced in 1996, to cover equipment that might be used for the violent

repression of domestic dissent. Yet, like the Biden administration, the EU's response fell short of cutting off the massive revenues that support the state-owned 'Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise' (MOGE), which intimate ties with European firms is symbolized by its joint venture with French company, Total, in the exploitation of the Yadana gas fields (Hutt, 9 June 2021). Similarly, the UK tightened its sanctions against enterprises and individuals connected to the junta, such as the 'Myanmar Gems Enterprise', while backing a joint statement at the UN Security Council (UNSC) against the military takeover, which was eventually blocked by the Chinese veto. Overall, Western condemnation of the coup thus focused on the release of detained NLD politicians and the restoration of the Aung San Suu Kyi cabinet, but refrained from switching diplomatic recognition from the military junta to the NUG. In fact, a decision to recognize the shadow government that has emerged from Myanmar's civil disobedience movement would automatically trigger a total suspension of interactions between Western stakeholders and the Min Aung Hlaing caretaker government, causing not only immediate closures of their diplomatic missions in Myanmar, but also a complete loss of political leverage with the Generals.

The imperatives of realpolitik, and the related concerns of surrendering Myanmar to the unchecked and unrivaled influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC), have therefore persuaded Western actors not to establish official ties with the NUG, with the net effect of significantly weakening its claim to act as the legitimate government in Myanmar. However, the crucial struggle for recognition between the two sides is not over yet. In June, to raise its democratic credentials and win international support, the NUG formally committed to repealing the infamous 1982 Citizenship law that laid the foundations for systematic discrimination of the Rohingya community, while voicing its support for a genuine federal evolution of Myanmar's constitutional architecture (The Irrawaddy, 5 April 2021). Arguably, this battle for diplomatic recognition will be fought primarily at the level of international institutions, which will have the last word on the international recognition of Myanmar's lawful government. Thus far, international bodies have adopted a 'wait-and-see' attitude: the International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN Human Rights Council, and the World Health Organization have temporarily suspended Myanmar's memberships

to buy time in the runup to the 2021 UN General Assembly (UNGA), scheduled for September. On that occasion, both the junta and the NUG are expected to present competing requests to the UNGA's Credentials Committee in what is expected to be a key turning point in the diplomatic struggle between the two sides.

Further complications ensued when, in the wake of the power grab, Myanmar's permanent mission to the UN split into two factions, with the Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun pledging his loyalty to the NUG and several mid-rank members of the Myanmar delegation siding with the caretaker government. Since then, the UN has rejected a military-approved replacement as Myanmar's head of mission and temporarily allowed Kyaw Moe Tun to retain his seat, while deferring the issue to its Credentials Committee. During the 74<sup>th</sup> session of the UNGA, the nine-member body entrusted with validating diplomatic credentials was made up of representatives of Russia, China, the U.S., Cameroon, Iceland, Papua New Guinea, Uruguay, Trinidad and Tobago, and Tanzania. At the inauguration of the 75<sup>th</sup> UNGA, scheduled for September 14, a new Credentials Committee will be tasked to settle the standoff by setting a precedent binding on all UN agencies. In this regard, the committee may also decide to leave Myanmar's seat vacant. In mid-June 2021, the UNGA voted in favor of a motion condemning the coup and calling for a halt of weapons exports to Myanmar, notwithstanding Moscow and Beijing's abstentions. Amongst the ASEAN countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Vietnam backed the motion, while Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Brunei abstained. The vote thus exposed some key challenges to a diplomatic solution of the crisis, as epitomized by the unwavering protection provided to the junta by China and Russia and the inability of the ASEAN bloc to speak with a single voice.

On the other side of this West-East divide, Asian stakeholders have dealt with the Tatmadaw's power grab pragmatically, working behind the scenes to deescalate the crisis. The PRC, most notably, has resorted to its traditional role of external patron and key supporter of Burmese military regimes, as it did in 2007–2008 and 2017 when Beijing strenuously fended off the imposition of UN-sponsored sanctions in response, respectively,

to the harsh repression of the 'Saffron revolution' and the outbreak of the Rohingya crisis. In line with the PRC's strict adherence to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other nations, in the days following the military takeover Chinese State media labelled the seizure of power from the NLD government as a 'major cabinet reshuffle', with a carefully worded euphemism that speaks volumes about Beijing's posture (The Straits Times, 2 February 2021). To a large extent, China's pragmatism stems from its enormous assets and stakes in Myanmar, which dictate to maintain close ties with whoever wields power in Naypyidaw. In fact, Myanmar embodies an essential piece in Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), as demonstrated by the diplomatic charm offensive unleashed by the PRC between 2016 and 2021 to enlist the support of the Aung San Suu Kyi cabinet for the infrastructural megaproject. In 2018, Beijing's good offices paved the way for the establishment of the 'China-Myanmar Economic Corridor', a key corollary of the BRI that aggregated under its banner a plethora of bilateral agreements for the realization of critical infrastructure projects such as the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port. In addition, the PRC controls more than 40 per cent of Myanmar's overall national debt with a financial exposure of nearly USD 4 billion, and in 2020 alone China directed towards Myanmar almost USD2 billion in approved FDIs by the now-ousted NLD administration (Wallace, 17 March 2021). Furthermore, the two countries also share extensive commercial links that are now expected to shrink due to the combined impact of Myanmar's health crisis and political unrest, as well as a mostly porous 2,000-kilometer land border that has facilitated the spread of Covid-19 in China's southern provinces.

Hence, it can be argued that Beijing's overarching goal in Myanmar coincides with the protection and growth of its vast economic interests, which would definitely benefit from the re-establishment of a semblance of order and stability in the Burmese political arena. Accordingly, the PRC has urged all parties involved to maintain dialogue and exercise restraint, but it also resorted to a much more assertive stance when Chinese factories in Myanmar were burnt and looted. In March 2021 alone, Burmese protestors stormed 32 Chinese-backed plants in Yangon's Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone, resulting in property losses of USD37.8 million and two Chinese workers wounded (Wang and Zheng, 15 March

2021). The attacks highlighted, once again, the extent and pervasiveness of anti-Chinese sentiments in Myanmar, where Beijing is widely perceived as a key sponsor of the Tatmadaw and the main guarantor of its impunity. In response to the torching of Chinese factories, Chinese media warned that the PRC might be forced to take 'more drastic actions' to protect its interests, pushing the Tatmadaw to impose martial law in the areas surrounding Yangon's Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone (Strangio, 16 March 2021). Likewise, at the peak of Myanmar's street protests China issued an evacuation order for non-essential Chinese workers employed in Burmese plants, locked down the Ruili border crossing, and sped-up the construction of the so-called 'southern great wall', a 660-kilometres barbed-wire fence along the border with Myanmar's Shan State aimed at curbing illegal migration. In June 2021, moreover, the Chinese embassy in Myanmar voiced a *de facto* recognition of the SAC by referring to Min Aung Hlaing for the first time as the 'leader of Myanmar', in a move that stirred further resentment and acrimony amongst the CDM. Although the PRC is arguably the only external actor which is capable of persuading the Burmese Generals to join the negotiating table for a phased de-escalation of the crisis, Chinese policymakers have decided instead to protect their interests in Myanmar by pleasing the Tatmadaw, which they regard as the sole entity that can hold Myanmar together and prevent its total collapse.

On the international stage, however, China is not alone in its strenuous advocacy of Min Aung Hlaing's caretaker government. Equally important is the legitimation provided by the Russian Federation. In fact, in the multifaceted landscape of external actors competing for influence inside Myanmar, Moscow stands out for its recent efforts to enhance its political and economic influence in Myanmar. To accomplish this goal, Russia has asserted itself as a key provider of military hardware for the Tatmadaw. According to the Stockholm International Research Peace Institute (SIPRI), between 1999 and 2018 Moscow's lucrative contracts for the provision of military equipment totaled USD1.5 billion, accounting for 39 per cent of Myanmar's overall arms import (Myanmar Now, 6 July 2021). Likewise, in recent years Moscow has provided university scholarships and army training to over 7,000 Tatmadaw officers, further strengthening its credentials as a key partner of Myanmar's armed forces.

It is no coincidence that Min Aung Hlaing's second trip abroad after the February coup was a one-week official visit to the Russian Federation, where he arrived on June 20. His arrival in Moscow followed shortly after Russia's abstention vote at the UNGA, and during the visit Min Aung Hlaing expressed his gratitude to Defense Minister Gen. Sergey Shoigu for the Kremlin's staunch support in rebuffing Western pressure. In addition, Min Aung Hlaing toured military training schools as well as the production plants of several Russian arms exporters, and also attended the International Maritime Defense Show in St. Petersburg. According to Russian media, the presence of the Tatmadaw's Commander and the self-proclaimed Prime Minister of Myanmar in the country prompted additional arms deals between the two sides, which in recent years have included the sale of surface-to-air missile systems, radar facilities, reconnaissance drones, and six Su-30 fighter jets to be delivered by the end of 2021 (The Moscow Times, 23 July 2021). Hence, as argued by experienced Myanmar watcher Bertil Lintner, the Kremlin has sought to increase its influence in Myanmar by seemingly putting all its eggs in the Tatmadaw's basket, as opposed to China's more diversified ties that encompass the army, Myanmar's EAOs, and even segments of the NLD (Lintner, 5 July 2021). Nonetheless, through its deepening partnership with the Burmese Generals the Russian Federation is actively countering Western efforts to uphold liberal democracy in Southeast Asia, and Moscow's provision of weapons to the Tatmadaw may play a key role in the suppression of the CDM.

Finally, a comprehensive assessment of international reactions to the putsch must consider the postures and agendas of two pivotal interlocutors of Myanmar on the regional stage, namely Japan and India. Both countries, most notably, have opted for a low-profile attitude when referring to the coup and its repercussions, which is rooted in a shared fear of losing ground in the country vis-à-vis the PRC. In the wake of the Tatmadaw's seizure of power, Japanese Defense Minister Yasuhide Nakayama candidly told journalists: 'if we do not approach this well, Myanmar could grow further away from politically free democratic nations and join the league of China' (Reuters, 2 February 2021). As a result, Tokyo refrained from participating in the joint declaration by foreign ambassadors issued on February 15 to condemn the power grab and the repression of street protests. In a similar fashion, the

Japanese government has ruled out severing its official development assistance program with Myanmar. Again, Nakayama explained this choice in terms of a zero-sum competition for influence with the PRC. In his words, 'if we stop the Myanmar military's relationship with China's army will get stronger, and they will further grow distant from free nations including United States, Japan and the United Kingdom. I think that would pose a risk to the security of the region' (Reuters, 2 February 2021). In line with this view, at the beginning of March the Japanese Ambassador to Myanmar, Ichiro Maruyama, met with newly appointed Burmese Foreign Minister U Wanna Maung Lwin, in a move that attracted both domestic and international criticism for its significance in increasing the legitimacy of the junta. On the other hand, Tokyo supported the UNGA declaration inked on June 18 urging the SAC to stop the violence, in a noticeable change of position compared to its voting patterns at the UN during the Rohingya crisis. As noted by Patrick Strefford, Japan has thus decided to navigate Myanmar's political crisis by walking a problematic diplomatic tightrope, as it seeks to project a middle position between the vocal criticisms of Western countries and the muted approach of East Asian governments, all of which have clearly prioritized the importance of stability and order over the promotion of democracy and human rights (Strefford, 17 April 2021).

In a similar fashion, India has tackled the military takeover with a very cautious attitude that came to the fore since the coup's immediate aftermath. Consequently, in the days following the putsch New Delhi voiced its formal condemnation, while diluting its stance with moves aimed at not alienating Min Aung Hlaing's caretaker government. On March 27, for example, the Indian military attaché stood out as one of eight foreign dignitaries who attended Myanmar's Armed Forces Day parade, prompting harsh critiques from the CDM. On that very same day, in fact, the Tatmadaw carried out one of its deadliest crackdowns on protesters, which saw at least 100 civilians were killed (Graham-Harrison, 27 March 2021). Hence, like its Japanese counterpart the Indian government appears stuck between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, India's growing competition with the PRC in Southeast Asia and the related imperative of nurturing Modi's 'Look East' policy by safeguarding close ties with the Burmese rulers dictate a pragmatic stance, aimed at regaining a

semblance of stability especially along the India-Myanmar border. On the other, India's status as the world's largest democracy has raised international expectations of a more proactive role in bringing Myanmar's crisis to an end, and its inability to meet these expectations may significantly tarnish New Delhi's image and prestige amongst the Burmese population.

All in all, the highly polarized reactions to the coup displayed by key external actors and the pervasive role of realpolitik in shaping the conduct of regional powers have thus contributed to the emergence of a dramatic stalemate, while reducing the prospects of a negotiated solution. In this regard, the existential struggle between the CDM and the military junta is progressively turning into a wider confrontation between the Western and the Sino-Russian camps, which can potentially escalate into full-fledged civil war fueled by powerful proxies. To defuse this threat, in the wake of the putsch many placed their bets on ASEAN as the most suitable broker for a peaceful settlement of the crisis. Yet, as mentioned above the Association has visibly struggled to project a unified and coherent position on the matter, dashing the hopes of those who had praised its ability to quietly engage praetorian regimes.

### **The Role of ASEAN**

In assessing ASEAN's role in the six months following the Tatmadaw's seizure of power, it should be noted that Myanmar's current political conundrum represents the most serious challenge faced by the Association since the ratification of the Paris Peace Agreement (1991) that marked the end of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. Accordingly, Myanmar's ongoing crisis has increasingly pushed several influential voices in Southeast Asia to question ASEAN's unwavering reliance on a strict interpretation of the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member States, which, since the late 1960s, has been a central tenet of the so-called 'ASEAN Way' to regional integration. Against this backdrop,

various commentators have argued that the unfolding events in Myanmar may expose an intrinsic contradiction between the Association's firm faith in non-involvement and its rhetoric based on the idea of 'ASEAN centrality', a frequently used slogan aimed at highlighting ASEAN's pivotal role in fostering a sense of community and 'we-ness' amongst countries characterized by quite heterogeneous historical, political, religious, and cultural backgrounds (Ryu, Minn, and Mon 2021: 5-6). Others have presented the ongoing challenge brought about by the Tatmadaw's power grab as a litmus test for the application of the provisions enshrined in the 2007 ASEAN Charter, while also emphasizing the tangible inconsistencies of this document (Laksmana, 21 June 2021). In fact, amongst its founding values the ASEAN charter endorses both the importance of non-interference and the relevance of rule of law, democracy, and constitutional government. Hence, ASEAN States are formally obliged not to recognize unconstitutional seizures of power, while respecting at the same time their commitment to not meddle in the internal affairs of other members. On top of that, the risks of inaction also include the prospects of leaving Myanmar open to the intrusions of external actors, which would threaten the bloc's historical mission that is centered on the maintenance of a space of relative peace and autonomy from great powers' rivalries.

Considering these massive stakes, in the wake of the military takeover the Association opted for a hesitant and non-committal reaction, reminiscent of its posture in the aftermath of Thailand's 2014 putsch. At the start of March, the first official statement issued by ASEAN on the Myanmar crisis described the situation on the ground as 'concerning' and invited all the parties involved to exercise dialogue, flexibility, and reconciliation (Strangio, 3 March 2021). Meanwhile, the Association's individual members were already showing highly divergent views on the meaning and implications of the coup in Myanmar, ranging from Thailand's unobtrusive description of the power grab as merely 'internal affairs' to Indonesia and Malaysia's reiterated calls for a special ASEAN summit aimed at drafting a common position and negotiated roadmap for a de-escalation of the crisis (Bangkok Post, 1 February 2021). The meeting was eventually convened in Jakarta on April 24 and saw the direct participation of Min Aung Hlaing, while the NUG's repeated requests for its

delegation to attend were ignored. At the end of the summit, ASEAN issued a 'five-point consensus' entailing an immediate cessation of violence from both sides, the start of a constructive and inclusive dialogue between the NUG and the SAC, the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the civilian population through ASEAN agencies, the designation of an ASEAN Special Envoy to facilitate mediation, and a future visit of said Special Envoy to Myanmar to engage in talks with all parties concerned. Yet, the five-point platform attracted a rather tepid reaction from Min Aung Hlaing, who discredited it on the sidelines of the summit as 'constructive suggestions' that might be taken into consideration in the future 'after stabilizing the country' (Jaipragas, 27 April 2021).

Accordingly, in the months following the Jakarta meeting ASEAN was not only increasingly gridlocked on the implementation of the five-point consensus, but also appeared delegitimized by the junta's utter disregard of the roadmap laid out in the Indonesian capital. Critics, moreover, have denounced the unfair treatment of the NUG by Brunei, the Association's rotational chair, claiming that the decision to exclude the NUG from the talks would be tantamount to a de facto recognition of the military junta. In this perspective, the most controversial aspect of the ASEAN-sponsored consensus was the selection of the Special Envoy. According to ASEAN sources, the four candidates for this important and sensitive position were Virasakdi Futrakul, a former Thai deputy foreign minister who can count on Ming Aung Hlaing's personal endorsement; Hassan Wirajuda, who had served as Indonesia's foreign minister from 2001 to 2009; Razali Ismail, a veteran Malaysian diplomat who had already acted as UN Special Envoy to Myanmar in the early 2000s; and Brunei's second foreign minister Erywan Yusof, who, at the time of writing, is emerging as the leading contender for the post (Gomez and Ng, 3 August 2021). Arguably, a major challenge for the ASEAN envoy will be regaining the faith of ousted government officials and NUG representatives, through the adoption of a more impartial stance vis-à-vis the two sides. On top of that, the bloc must also ensure compliance with its provisions from both sides, notwithstanding its lack of coercive tools.

Street demonstrators and netizens in Myanmar have also urged the Association to invoke the concept of ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P), which stands at odds with the ‘ASEAN Way’ and its unfaltering faith in the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other nations. Adopted by the UN in 2005, the notion of R2P contends that the international community has a responsibility to act in protecting civilian populations from crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocides, in order to avoid a repetition of the 1990s massacres perpetrated in the Balkans and Rwanda. To achieve this goal, the R2P doctrine prescribes the use of both military and non-coercive tools to uphold universal rights and hold the perpetrators of such brutalities accountable. In particular, one of the R2P’s paradigmatic contingencies that can trigger an international response to domestic crisis revolves around the case of ‘failed states’, that are unable or unwilling to protect their own people. In such instances, the R2P doctrine calls on the international community to take collective action that may encompass military intervention, pending formal endorsement by the UNSC. This also explains why the R2P was only implemented in Libya in 2011, while it was not invoked in the Syrian civil war (2011 –) because of the Russian veto. In April 2021, former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans joined the chorus of those who view the Burmese conundrum as one that ‘unequivocally demands the application of R2P principles’ (Evans, 8 April 2021). Nonetheless, ASEAN’s invocation of the R2P appears quite far-fetched, given its deep-rooted inclination to follow a much more nuanced crisis diplomacy, as well as China and Russia’s staunch resolve in vetoing any UN-sponsored resolution that may lead to coercive measures (either economic or military) against Min Aung Hlaing’s caretaker government.

Hence, what can ASEAN do to ensure that the junta complies with its five-point consensus? Which ‘sticks’ should be used to achieve immediate cessation of violence? Given the unviability of coordinated economic sanctions or military action, because of UNSC vetoes and the lack of political will from Southeast Asian countries to pursue this route, several observers have encouraged ASEAN to resort to ‘naming and shaming’ (Noor, 13 April 2021). According to this view, the Association should consider formally condemning the Myanmar regime and suspending its membership in the bloc in response to its utter

disregard of the provisions enshrined in the ASEAN-backed consensus. However, a similar strategy would present numerous risks and impediments, both from a procedural and conceptual standpoint. Technically, the Association's founding treaty and the ASEAN Charter do not mention the possibility of suspending a member for a serious breach of its values, as opposed to the rules and regulations endorsed by other regional organizations such as the African Union, the EU, and the Arab League. Besides that, closing ASEAN's doors to the junta may backfire from a political and diplomatic standpoint, pushing Min Aung Hlaing and his associates to further accentuate their reactionary and isolationist tendencies. Additionally, such a stance would leave China and Russia as the only international stakeholders capable of engaging the junta in an attempt to broker a phased de-escalation of the crisis, notwithstanding their highly partial approach to the ongoing struggle between the NUG and the military cabinet.

For all these reasons, those who anticipate or expect the Association to adopt a more assertive and vocal posture will likely see their expectations dashed. As illustrated above, the 'Myanmar dilemma' has already exposed a series of fissures and fault lines within ASEAN's ranks, highlighting a visible polarization between such authoritarian regimes as Thailand and Cambodia, that tacitly accepted the military takeover as a *fait accompli*, and other member States as Indonesia and Malaysia which condemned the Tatmadaw's seizure of power in light of their stronger democratic credentials. Yet, despite its limits the Association still embodies the most credible alternative for multilateral mediation to the bloody standoff between the NUG and Min Aung Hlaing's caretaker government, given also the UNSC's gridlocked position on the matter. Whether the ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar will be successful will depend on the bloc's ability to project a genuinely impartial and constructive stance, that is conducive to the effective engagement of both sides to immediately cease the violence. To accomplish this goal, the Envoy should focus on a preliminary and yet crucial step for the present and future well-being of Burmese civilians, through the establishment of an ASEAN-brokered humanitarian ceasefire and the opening of supply corridors across Myanmar's borders, aimed at assisting the country in its struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, such an initiative would supposedly receive the

endorsements of relevant stakeholders such as China, India, and Thailand, which share the same concerns in terms of the spread of new variants of the COVID-19 virus through their land borders with Myanmar, with the effect of reinvigorating the Association's bid to play a central role in Southeast Asian politics.

### **Conclusion: What Way Forward for Post-Coup Myanmar?**

Given the total impasse that surrounds Myanmar's political upheaval both domestically and in the international arena, numerous analysts and practitioners have explored the possible outcomes of the ongoing confrontation between the NUG and the Generals who seized power on February 1. Unsurprisingly, their opinions and speculations differ widely and can be categorized under three different scenarios. The first group is embodied by those who are optimistic about the CDM successfully forcing the junta to step down, including important protagonists who are directly involved in the international dimension of the Burmese crisis, such as the UN Special Rapporteur for Myanmar Tom Andrews. In a recent interview with Radio Free Asia, Andrews sounded extremely confident about the prospects of the bottom-up revolution eventually toppling the military regime, adding that 'if I were a betting person, I will be betting for the protesters. I think they are going to prevail' (Thawngmung 2021: 3). To substantiate his assessment, the UN Special Rapporteur pointed to the junta's lack of resources, capabilities, and political legitimacy to control the street protests and the simultaneous spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, his predecessor Yanghee Lee believes that the ultimate outcome of the ongoing turmoil will be a failed coup, rather than a failed state, if and only if the international community takes action to hold the Tatmadaw accountable for its brutal repression of Myanmar's civil society (Lee, Sidoti, and Darusman, 3 August 2021).

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the 'pessimists' have placed their bets on the success of the Min Aung Hlaing cabinet in gradually silencing the protests and in consolidating a revival of the arbitrary regime that had ruled the country with an iron fist between 1988 and 2011, given its considerable resources and experience with previous military takeovers

(Davis, 18 February 2021). Similar diagnosis, most notably, have highlighted the Tatmadaw's ability to rapidly adapt to changing tactics and new battlefields of contemporary civil wars, through a growing recourse to digital warfare, fake news, fifth columns, and 'keyboard armies'. Finally, a third group of prominent experts have opted for a far more cautious analysis of the unfolding events, voicing their doubts in foreseeing the end results of Myanmar's conundrum. In a recent tweet, for instance, renowned Burmese historian Thant Myint-U candidly conceded: 'I have been a student of Myanmar history and politics my entire adult life; I've lived and worked in the country for over a dozen years; I know all the key actors in the present drama; and I can honestly say I don't know what the coming months will bring' (Thawngmung 2021: 3).

Against this backdrop, it can be thus argued that Myanmar faces three possible scenarios that might define the country's future for decades to come. The first, which at the time of writing appears to be the least probable, depicts the popular revolts against the military junta being triumphant. The materialization of this outcome, in fact, will depend on the almost simultaneous emergence of at least two crucial developments. Domestically, the Tatmadaw would give up on its existential struggle with the NUG and the CDM only if confronted by a significant split in its ranks, marked by widespread defections and a resulting mutiny against Min Aung Hlaing and his closest associates. On top of that, the international community would need to validate and legitimize the successful revolution spearheaded by Myanmar's bottom-up forces, by granting formal recognition to the NUG. This pivotal development, however, would trigger an even wider confrontation on the regional and global stage between the Western bloc and the Sino-Russian axis, with Moscow and Beijing increasingly pressured to consider an embarrassing diplomatic U-turn from the junta that would hamper their standing and prestige. For the time being, however, the occurrence of these preconditions seems quite far-fetched. Notwithstanding a recent increase in defections from Tatmadaw's mid-rank officers, Myanmar's armed forces still display a high degree of cohesiveness, forged by decades-long, low-intensity guerrilla warfare with EAOs. Likewise, in recent years the emergence among the army's top-echelons of a 'reformist wing', modelled around the political legacy of the former President Thein

Sein (2011 – 2016), has been significantly frustrated by Min Aung Hlaing's absolute control over the Tatmadaw's apparatus and business interests. In addition, a victorious NUG would be probably confronted by challenging dilemmas related to its peace demands, that could potentially lead to a fragmentation of the anti-coup movement. As already mentioned, in the immediate aftermath of the putsch the CDM demanded the liberation of all political prisoners and the restoration of the NLD government as two non-negotiable conditions for a de-escalation of the crisis. Yet, the harsh repression of street rallies by the Tatmadaw has progressively resulted in a radicalization of the methods and purposes of the popular protests, which are now requesting the repeal of the 2008 constitution and the disbandment of the Tatmadaw. Needless to say, Myanmar's armed forces would consider such an outcome only when confronted by utter and complete military capitulation to its domestic adversaries. Still, the disparity in size and available equipment between the 350,000-strong Tatmadaw and the EAOs-PDF alliance helps explain the high confidence of the army in its final triumph.

A second and slightly more realistic scenario entails the gradual and inexorable suppression of Myanmar's domestic dissent by physical coercion and highly repressive laws, coupled with the NUG's progressive marginalization on the international arena. With regards to the first point, it should be noted that the combined effects of the Tatmadaw's violent methods, the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that is ravaging the country, and the economic meltdown have already pushed a relevant segment of the CDM out of Burmese streets, while the overwhelming majority of the civilian population tries to cope with increasingly precarious living conditions. According to World Bank estimates, 5 per cent of Myanmar's total working force may lose their jobs by the beginning of 2022, while the population surviving below the poverty line will nearly double (Barrett, 26 July 2021). In this case, after prevailing over protesters the Min Aung Hlaing cabinet would ideally face a major dilemma concerning its future plans for a long-term pacification of Myanmar. On one hand, it may decide to retain absolute power, thus disavowing its own announcements in the wake of the coup through further deferment of new elections. The recent extension of the state of emergency until 2023 suggests that the regime is carefully considering a similar option.

More generally, a similar pathway would involve a revival of the trajectory pursued by Myanmar's past juntas: in 1958, for example, the emergence of what was supposedly a temporary caretaker government under the leadership of General Ne Win paved the way for the gradual consolidation of a praetorian regime that dominated Burmese politics for the following thirty years, before it handed power to a younger and more radicalized generation of military cadres.

Arguably, as a corollary of this plan the Min Aung Hlaing cabinet may also opt to dissolve the NLD, as happened in the aftermath of the 1990 elections when the ruling junta nullified the results of the polls, while also banning Aung San Suu Kyi's progressive party. Yet, what makes this scenario unlikely is the Tatmadaw's absolute need to base its rule on some form of political legitimation, instead of mere coercion. In this respect, the Tatmadaw may obtain some degree of political authority by resuming delivery of public goods to the civilian population, for instance by coordinating a more effective vaccination campaign against COVID-19. Alternatively, the military junta might adopt a more sophisticated strategy entailing a future devolution of powers to a civilian cabinet, ideally drafted from the pro-military USDP party. This possibility would resonate with the logic that inspired the transition towards a hybrid regime between 2008 and 2011, when the Tatmadaw stepped back by allowing the formation of the first semi-civilian government after nearly five decades of military rule. Potentially, the return to a phased roadmap towards the realization of a 'discipline-flourishing democracy' may also bring about several corrections to the 2008 constitution, for example via a recalibration of the electoral system that would prevent opposition parties from gaining the majority of parliamentary seats.

Finally, another scenario that deserves further scrutiny is the possibility that nobody wins. This outcome would embody the most dramatic result of the Burmese crisis, dragging the entire country into a state of chaos and unrest marked by the collapse of basic public services. Myanmar would then assume the traits of a failed State in the heart of Southeast Asia, with the low-intensity guerrilla warfare that ravaged its border regions for decades spreading to the urban areas located in its central plains. Unfortunately, this end result

becomes more likely as Myanmar's political crisis, both domestically and internationally, continues. At the time of writing, what makes a similar scenario increasingly plausible is the uncompromising attitude displayed by both sides, which have repeatedly warned that there is no going back. As a result, the prospects and room for a power-sharing agreement between the NUG and the Tatmadaw have rapidly shrunk, while the total absence of similar compromises in Myanmar's troubled history with military regimes further reduces the viability of such a route. In this respect, the possibility of a prolonged deadlock with devastating consequences for the Burmese people has been vividly described by Thant Myint-U, who noted: 'the junta could partially consolidate its rule over the coming year, but that would not lead to stability. Myanmar's pressing economic and social challenges are too complex, and the depth of animosity toward the military too great, for an isolated and anachronistic institution to manage. At the same time, the revolutionaries will not be able to deal a knockout blow anytime soon (Thant 2021). From an international standpoint, moreover, a sustained standoff would arguably expose ASEAN's fissures even further, potentially leading to an even wider polarization amongst its member States. In such perspective, the already mentioned decision by the UNGA on September 14, 2021 on the legality of the NUG's formal request for a seat at the United Nations will certainly mark a crucial turning point in the tussle for diplomatic recognition amongst the two entities, which will shape the evolution of Myanmar's politics for decades to come.

### **Addendum – August 2021**

During the seventh month of popular demonstrations since the February coup, the ongoing confrontation between Min Aung Hlaing's 'caretaker government' and the CDM escalated even further, while the international community largely failed to overcome its impasse. ASEAN's inaction, in particular, attracted mounting criticism both in the region and inside Myanmar, where protesters displayed their anger and disappointment with online petitions and marches marked by the burning of the Association's flag. This sense of frustration, however, should not come as a surprise: ASEAN took nearly three months to convene its special meeting on Myanmar, and a further three months elapsed before the bloc finally reached a consensus on August 4 on the appointment of Brunei's Erywan Yusof as its

Special Envoy to Myanmar. One month after designation, the special envoy has neither scheduled a visit to Myanmar, nor provided specific indications on how he plans to implement the five-point consensus that was drafted in April.

Simultaneously, the junta continues to kill indiscriminately and arrest arbitrarily to crush domestic dissent. In mid-August, the total death toll of the 'spring revolution' topped 1,000 casualties, while the number of arrests currently stands at nearly 8,000. Among them, 324 NLD cadres (98 of whom are also members of parliament) are still in custody, facing charges of high treason, corruption, and incitement. The military authorities have also announced that the Rohingya community will be excluded from the COVID-19 national immunization program, in a further testament to the junta's resolve in weaponizing the COVID-19 pandemic against its domestic adversaries. In recent weeks, another significant trend that has emerged revolves around a growing split between the NUG's two main components, namely the more conservatory faction embodied by NLD loyalists and the progressive wing composed of younger activists. Despite these divisions and growing factionalism, in late August the NUG issued a formal declaration to accept the International Court of Justice's jurisdiction on the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Myanmar military in Rakhine State. Yet, the NUG's 'old guard' and the new generation of protestors appear to be much more irreconcilable in terms of Myanmar's future political architecture, with the former supporting a confederate institutional framework and a higher degree of state centralism, and the latter championing the idea of a federal union characterized by significant devolution of powers to local governments.

Finally, another important development was brought about by the NUG's lobbying efforts with the EU to avoid a suspension of the 'everything but arms' agreement between the two sides, which would unleash devastating effects on Myanmar's garment industry and the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of Burmese workers. On the other side of the ongoing struggle between the military and the CDM, the junta has increasingly gravitated towards the Russian and Chinese orbits. Beijing, in particular, seems determined to relaunch its infrastructural projects in Myanmar and is reportedly stepping-up its pressure on the

Tatmadaw to de-escalate the crisis and avoid the prospects of an all-out civil war. Accordingly, the PRC has voiced its concerns about Min Aung Hlaing's plans to permanently disband the NLD, while also speeding-up the construction on the Chinese side of the border of a new rail line that would provide China with direct access to the Indian Ocean. The infrastructure stretches from Chengdu to the Yunnan province, and is expected to significantly reduce the cost and time needed to import cargo to Western China via the ports of Singapore and Yangon.

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