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STUDENT ESSAY COMPETITION

The ASEAN Political-Security Community: A Flawed Project in Crisis Management

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The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), which was intended to be a pillar for regional peace and political stability in Southeast Asia, has fallen short in its response to the Myanmar civil war. Originally established to promote a resilient, dynamic, and rules-based community built on shared values and norms, the APSC has been hindered by ASEAN's traditional principles, leaving it poorly equipped to address crises that threaten not just individual members, but the entire region.

The ongoing Myanmar civil war has starkly exposed the limitations of ASEAN and the APSC, demanding a re-evaluation of ASEAN's role as a regional stabiliser.

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This essay critiques the APSC's ineffective response in Myanmar, arguing that without significant reform, ASEAN's relevance and credibility will continue to diminish.

The Illusory Aims of the APSC

The APSC's mission to maintain peace and security through principles of democracy, rule of law, and good governance has remained largely symbolic. In practice, ASEAN's adherence to non-interference and consensus building has undermined its ability to realise these ideals when it matters most. This approach has faced challenges, limiting ASEAN's ability to effectively address glaring human rights abuses within its borders. The APSC's supposed commitment to regional stability is thus contradicted by its reluctance to act decisively when a member state's actions destabilise the ASEAN community.

Myanmar's Civil War: A Case Study in ASEAN's Failure

Myanmar's descent into violent turmoil following the 2021 coup highlights the APSC's inability to manage internal conflicts effectively. ASEAN's attempts at engagement have been largely dismissed by the junta, further undermining the bloc's effectiveness and credibility.

The Five-Point Consensus, ASEAN's primary strategy for addressing the Myanmar crisis through diplomatic

means, has made little progress. Lacking enforcement mechanisms, ASEAN has been unable to apply any meaningful pressure on Myanmar's military leadership. Initial diplomatic attempts to isolate the junta, such as barring it from high-level ASEAN meetings, proved short-lived.

Far from fostering peace, the APSC's approach has allowed the Myanmar crisis to deepen, further undermining trust in ASEAN's authority and ability to uphold regional stability.

Systemic Weaknesses Behind ASEAN's Inaction

(1) **The Curse of Non-Interference:** The fixation on non-interference has severely limited ASEAN's capacity to respond effectively to the crisis in Myanmar. Originally intended to protect national sovereignty, this principle has now become an excuse for inaction in the face of a humanitarian disaster. While ASEAN has attempted a strategy of flexible and constructive engagement, the ongoing crisis highlights the limitations of this approach.

(2) **Consensus as a Barrier to Accountability:** ASEAN's consensus-based decision-making process, touted as a symbol of unity, has become a profound weakness. With member states divided on how to handle the crisis in Myanmar, ASEAN has been paralysed by its inability to reach a decisive, collective stance.

This lack of unity not only hampers ASEAN's effectiveness but also allows more authoritarian regimes to avoid taking accountability. In Myanmar's case, ASEAN's approach has only emboldened the junta, with the assurance that ASEAN lacks the capacity to impose consequences.

(3) Absence of Crisis-Management

Tools: The APSC's glaring lack of crisis-response mechanisms such as a peacekeeping force or enforceable sanctions, highlights its failure to adapt and address modern security threats. ASEAN's sole reliance on diplomatic channels has proven insufficient. Without the means to respond directly to security crises, ASEAN's ambitions for the APSC appear naïve and misplaced. The result is a hollow framework that leaves ASEAN unable to defend its own community in moments of crisis.

The Broader Impact on ASEAN's Credibility

ASEAN's lack of substantive action in Myanmar has repercussions far beyond the conflict itself. Critics increasingly perceive ASEAN as an irrelevant organisation known for its rhetoric rather than results. Its failure to meaningfully intervene in Myanmar has compromised its credibility as a regional leader in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, external actors, such as China, have exploited the power vacuum left by ASEAN's inaction, with Beijing's support for the junta further complicating the dynamics of the

Myanmar crisis. This inability to address internal conflicts not only undermines ASEAN's diplomatic standing but also jeopardises the future of the APSC.

Necessary Reforms for ASEAN's Survival

The APSC must reform to salvage ASEAN's reputation and ensure the longevity of the project:

(1) Redefine Non-Interference: ASEAN must recognise that in cases of severe conflict or humanitarian crises, rigid adherence to non-interference only perpetuates suffering and instability. Adopting a conditional approach and allowing ASEAN to act decisively when internal issues have regional consequences, could make the APSC more effective in promoting peace and security.

(2) Create a Human Rights Mechanism with Teeth: To strengthen its response to crisis, ASEAN should establish an independent body with the authority to monitor human rights and intervene in cases of gross violations. The situation in Myanmar and ASEAN's inaction highlights the need for developing more robust mechanisms to uphold enforceable standards on democracy and human rights.

(3) Develop a Regional Peacekeeping Framework: Establishing a peacekeeping force, even on a modest scale, would enable the APSC to respond directly to security crises.

The lack of a military response mechanism, even in cases of a civil war within member states, illustrates a major gap in ASEAN's infrastructure and crisis management. While politically challenging, such a step is necessary if ASEAN hopes to gain credibility as a legitimate security actor.

(4) Moving Beyond a Consensus-driven

Approach: ASEAN's inability to reach consensus on pressing issues like Myanmar has left it paralysed. By introducing majority voting on matters of urgent security and human rights concerns, ASEAN could sidestep the gridlock and take decisive action, while still respecting diverse perspectives. While there has been a precedent for the economic-based ASEAN minus X mechanism, it is insufficient for political decision-making and for demonstrating the political unity necessary for effective punitive measures. Its allowance for delayed action and member opt-outs undermines the goal of a united approach.

Conclusion

The Myanmar crisis has highlighted significant weaknesses within the APSC, with ASEAN's insistence on consensus and non-interference limiting its ability to address human rights abuses. This raises concerns about the organisation's capacity to fulfil its core mission. If ASEAN cannot respond decisively to a crisis of this magnitude within its own ranks, its ability

to navigate broader regional challenges will be questioned. ASEAN's credibility and relevance now hinge on its willingness and ability to reform the APSC to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing and volatile region. Without meaningful reforms, the APSC risks becoming an empty promise—a project that was built on ideals but has neither the will nor the capacity to uphold them.

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