



Counterpoint Southeast Asia

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Can ASEAN pave a path to peace in Myanmar five years after the Five-Point Consensus?

By Barbora Valockova

More than five years after the February 2021 coup, Myanmar has a new administration led by former military chief Min Aung Hlaing. The military-organised **general election**, held in three phases between December 2025 and January 2026, excluded major opposition parties, and voting did not take place in 67 of the country's 330 townships, largely because of fighting. It delivered a landslide for the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party. Min Aung Hlaing was sworn in as president on 10 April 2026. An **April amnesty** freed former president Win Myint, while successive amnesties reduced Aung San Suu Kyi's sentence.


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Counterpoint Southeast Asia is published regularly by the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. It seeks to answer major questions of strategic significance for Southeast Asia by bringing in diverse voices from around the region. Each issue will tackle one question from three different perspectives.

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While Min Aung Hlaing presents the transition as progress towards democracy, International Crisis Group [describes](#) it as a consolidation of military rule under the 2008 constitution.

The election has not ended Myanmar's conflict. Fighting continues across multiple regions, while the Arakan Army controls most of Rakhine State despite a renewed military [counteroffensive](#). Humanitarian needs remain [severe](#). Narcotics trafficking and cyber-scam operations extend the crisis's consequences across borders. China has brokered ceasefires in northern Myanmar and explicitly supported the new government, while the European Union maintains targeted sanctions. Naypyidaw has also strengthened ties with Russia, signing a five-year [military cooperation agreement](#) in February 2026, and with [India](#), which hosted Min Aung Hlaing on an official visit from 30 May to 3 June.

For ASEAN, Myanmar remains a major test of its credibility. The [Five-Point Consensus](#) (5PC), agreed in April 2021, called for an immediate cessation of violence, dialogue among all parties, special-envoy mediation, humanitarian assistance, and an envoy visit to meet all parties. Implementation remains limited, although some humanitarian assistance has been delivered. ASEAN continues to restrict Myanmar to non-political representation at summits and foreign ministers' meetings. Its attendance at permanent-secretary level at the [May 2026 summit in Cebu](#) followed that policy. Diplomatic engagement has nevertheless increased.

On 12 July, ASEAN foreign ministers met Myanmar's foreign minister in Bangkok for their [first such in-person meeting](#) since the coup and called for "concrete and measurable steps" towards implementing the 5PC. Later that month in Manila, ministers [proposed](#) a benchmarking mechanism and considered a longer-term special envoy to improve continuity beyond the annual rotation. Individual member states have also pursued bilateral engagement with Naypyidaw, including Indonesia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

Myanmar's government has challenged ASEAN's approach. On 31 July, Min Aung Hlaing [told](#) parliament that some ASEAN member states had discriminated against Myanmar and that his government would respond to actions it considered discriminatory on a case-by-case basis. On 8 August, the foreign ministry [declared](#) the appointment and continued role of a new ASEAN Chair's Special Envoy no longer necessary, while pledging continued cooperation with the current envoy. These statements, alongside bilateral diplomatic outreach, suggest an effort to gain international legitimacy while resisting ASEAN's collective conditions for normalisation, not a withdrawal from the bloc.

This "[constructive and principled engagement](#)" raises several questions. Is ASEAN creating an opening for peace, or normalising relations with a military-backed government that controls only part of the country and has challenged the framework

ASEAN continues to uphold? Can implementation of the 5PC be adapted to the new landscape while preserving its principles? Does bilateral outreach by individual members strengthen ASEAN's leverage or dilute it? And how can engagement ensure meaningful participation by resistance forces and ethnic armed organisations that shape conditions on the ground? Singapore, which assumes the ASEAN chairmanship in 2027, will face the challenge of sustaining engagement while seeking meaningful progress towards the 5PC.

Given these developments, a central question is: **Can ASEAN pave a path to peace in Myanmar five years after the Five-Point Consensus?** To address it, the Centre on Asia and Globalisation (CAG) convened its 20th Counterpoint Southeast Asia (CSA) webinar on 15 September 2026, featuring Kyi Sin (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute), Samuel Hmung (Australian National University), and Surachanee “Hammerli” Sriyai (S&I Strategic Advisory).

Kyi Sin examines differing expectations of ASEAN within Myanmar. He argues that the regime seeks to avoid its 5PC commitments through bilateral engagement, while the National Unity Government calls for more effective implementation. Drawing on regional and Myanmar surveys, he identifies respondents' disappointment with ASEAN alongside continued expectations of its involvement. He highlights broader dialogue, institutional continuity and measurable benchmarks as ways to strengthen engagement.

Samuel Hmung analyses how the evolving conflict shapes ASEAN's options. He attributes the 5PC's lack of meaningful progress primarily to the regime's refusal to cooperate, yet sees continuing value in a framework backed by both China and the United States. He advocates benchmarks with consequences, channels of equal political weight with the regime and resistance, and engagement with the Steering Council for the Emergence of a Federal Democratic Union (SCEF), warning that bloc-wide adoption of Thailand's calibrated re-engagement would undermine the 5PC.

Surachanee “Hammerli” Sriyai examines the crisis's interconnected regional dimensions: armed conflict, transnational crime, illicit mineral extraction, digital repression and humanitarian crisis. Her central concern is how and on whose terms ASEAN engages: without meaningful conditions and inclusive dialogue, engagement risks normalising and legitimising military rule. ASEAN, she concludes, cannot sustain a credible path to peace by treating these issues separately or letting engagement become an end in itself.

Three threads connect these contributions. First, together they locate a central weakness of the 5PC in its implementation, highlighting the need for greater continuity, measurable benchmarks and consequences for non-compliance. Second, the contributions favour engagement that is inclusive and tied to tangible outcomes, while warning that poorly coordinated outreach may weaken ASEAN's collective leverage.

Third, they emphasise Myanmar's regional significance, whether through its diplomatic repercussions or the cross-border effects of crime, displacement and resource extraction. Taken together, the arguments suggest that ASEAN's contribution to peace will depend on translating commitments into sustained action, ensuring meaningful participation by resistance actors, and making bilateral engagement support rather than substitute for a coordinated regional approach.

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What Myanmar Wants from ASEAN: The 5PC and the Realities on the Ground

By Kyi Sin

Frustration with ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus reflects competing demands, not a shared rejection of regional engagement. ASEAN's credibility depends on consistent implementation, inclusive dialogue and measurable progress towards peace.

Myanmar's military-backed regime is increasingly challenging ASEAN's approach to the country's crisis. In a speech on 31 July, junta leader-turned President Min Aung Hlaing formally **rejected** ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus (5PC), saying his government would respond to the regional bloc on a "case-by-case" basis. The military-controlled parliament in Naypyitaw has likewise **rejected** the 5PC, with some hardline members suggesting Myanmar should withdraw from ASEAN. Although the regime has taken no concrete steps towards leaving the bloc and appears to recognise the benefits of remaining an ASEAN member, Min Aung Hlaing's **recent visits** to ASEAN member states and efforts to regain access to ASEAN summits suggest an attempt to bypass the 5PC through bilateral engagement and weaken ASEAN's collective position.



Image credit: Raw Pixel/ [U.S Department of State](#)

On the resistance side, particularly the opposition-led National Unity Government (NUG), calls have grown for ASEAN to move beyond the 5PC and **take stronger action** against the regime. While continuing to engage with ASEAN, the NUG has pointed to the regime's unwillingness to fulfil even its basic commitments under the consensus. It has also **rejected** the regime's 2025 election as a credible path towards political transition. Thus, while both sides have expressed frustration with the 5PC, their positions are fundamentally different. The regime seeks to reject the consensus and avoid being bound by its commitments, while the resistance has generally called for more effective ASEAN implementation and maintained constructive engagement with the bloc. This distinction is important as ASEAN considers how to respond to Myanmar's post-election political landscape.

This sentiment is reflected **in both the 2026 State of Southeast Asia (SSEA) Survey**, which surveyed 2008 opinion-makers and thought leaders across ASEAN, and a separate 2025 survey of 350 respondents from Myanmar conducted by Dr Kyaw Yin Hlaing, Senior Fellow at ISEAS's Myanmar Studies Programme.

Although the surveys cover different constituencies, they point to similar frustration with ASEAN's effectiveness and continued expectations for its engagement. Earlier SSEA survey findings also show how concerns over the 5PC evolved. In **2022**, only 11.4 percent of Myanmar respondents approved of ASEAN's response to the crisis, while 78.8 percent disapproved. In **2023**, 35.7 percent considered the 5PC fundamentally flawed, while only 9.6 percent saw it as the most suitable option. By **2024**, concern had shifted towards implementation, with 41.8 percent saying the 5PC would not work because of State Administration Council (SAC) intransigence, while 20.1 percent still considered it fundamentally flawed.

The 2026 SSEA survey points to continued concern over ASEAN's ability to respond effectively. ASEAN's slowness and ineffectiveness were the top concern for 34.7 percent of respondents across the region, rising to 45.5 percent among those from Myanmar. Another 18.1 percent cited ASEAN's inability to respond effectively to internal crises, up from 12.2 percent in 2025. The 2025 Myanmar survey found similar frustration, with 338 of 350 respondents disappointed with ASEAN's inability to bring positive change. Yet this frustration has not translated into a rejection of ASEAN. Instead, it reflects expectations that ASEAN should play a more effective role in addressing the crisis.

The surveys also indicate what a more effective role might look like. In the 2026 SSEA survey, 36.5 percent of Myanmar respondents favoured independent dialogue with all key stakeholders, including the NUG, while 20.6 percent supported limiting engagement with the regime and 15.9 percent favoured harder measures such as targeted sanctions. Only 9.5 percent supported restoring the regime's participation in ASEAN meetings. Similarly, 312 of 350 respondents in the 2025 survey supported a permanent body to address the crisis, while all identified reliance on the annually rotating ASEAN Chair as a key weakness; 307 also opposed ASEAN supporting the military's planned elections. The message is therefore not that ASEAN should disengage, but that it needs to implement its existing commitments more effectively, engage more broadly and establish a consistent mechanism to sustain its efforts.

ASEAN has begun to address some of these institutional weaknesses. In July 2026, ASEAN foreign ministers **agreed** to explore a longer-term or permanent Special Envoy on Myanmar to provide greater continuity beyond the rotating ASEAN Chair. They also agreed to develop a **benchmarking mechanism** to measure Myanmar's progress in implementing the 5PC, building on calls for demonstrable progress in ending violence, releasing political detainees and ensuring unimpeded humanitarian access. These steps address two criticisms identified in the surveys: the lack of continuity in ASEAN's Myanmar policy and the absence of clear measures for assessing progress.

They could also give ASEAN a clearer basis for assessing whether the post-election process represents meaningful political progress.

ASEAN therefore faces a challenge beyond simply deciding whether to remain engaged in Myanmar. Naypyitaw is seeking to move beyond the 5PC and use bilateral engagement to reduce the constraints imposed by ASEAN's collective approach, while the resistance continues to look to ASEAN to uphold and more effectively implement its commitments. The surveys suggest that many Myanmar respondents likewise do not want ASEAN to walk away but expect it to do more. Five years after the 5PC was adopted, its credibility will depend less on ASEAN's willingness to reaffirm the consensus than on its ability to implement it consistently, engage relevant stakeholders and establish measurable benchmarks for progress. The question for ASEAN is ultimately not whether it should remain engaged, but whether it can turn that engagement into a credible path towards peace and meaningful political change in Myanmar.

Kyi Sin is a research officer at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Guest Column

Realistic Entry Points: What Myanmar's Conflict Dynamics Mean for ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus

By Samuel Hmung

Myanmar's evolving conflict has narrowed the prospects for dialogue, exposing the limits of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus. ASEAN's realistic entry points lie in measurable benchmarks and engagement that gives the regime and resistance equal political weight.

ASEAN's peace plan, the Five-Point Consensus (5PC), for resolving Myanmar's conflict has lost its relevance in the current landscape, as it has brought no meaningful result since its adoption in April 2021. However, it remains the only viable regional framework that exists and is backed by all regional and international actors, including China and the United States. Despite criticism and pushback, both the regime and the National Unity of Government of Myanmar (NUG) continue to engage with ASEAN, although their positions on the 5PC differ fundamentally. Whether this ASEAN-led framework brings peace to Myanmar depends on how strongly ASEAN nations, as a bloc, commit to this plan and build implementation mechanisms that could realistically function as a pathway to peace.



Image credit: flickr/ASEAN Secretariat /Kusuma Pandu Wij

Myanmar's conflict has escalated and become more violent despite growing calls for ceasefire and dialogue from ASEAN and the international community following the junta-led elections in late 2025. Violence, including indiscriminate and intentional aerial attacks against civilians, is ramping up as the military regime's nationwide counteroffensive operations gain momentum following [China's intervention to end the resistance's Operation 1027](#) and the regime's implementation of a forced conscription campaign. This allowed the regime to regroup and recruit to conduct large-scale operations on multiple fronts. According to the [UN agency](#), Myanmar's conflict ranks second behind Ukraine in terms of conflict intensity and is the fourth-deadliest conflict, resulting in over 3 million internal displacements.

This conflict situation further cripples the 5PC framework, which has yielded no result primarily because the military regime refuses to cooperate. For the regime, the framework does not serve its own terms; rather, it undermines its legitimacy and narrative since the coup in 2021.

For instance, the framework's call for "Inclusive dialogue" means treating the NUG and the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) as legitimate negotiating partners. Although the regime's leader offered peace talks as part of his 100-day plan in April, the invitation is limited to ethnic armed groups while demanding the NUG's People's Defence Forces surrender. Ultimately, the regime's overarching goal is to recapture all of its lost territories since the coup and consolidate its grip on power before entering the dialogue from a position of power.

On the other side, major resistance forces that are actively involved in the Spring Revolution show no interest in any dialogue with the military regime. The peace offer was also rejected immediately. They perceive the military regime as an unreliable and untrustworthy negotiation partner because the regime shows no good faith in meaningful dialogue and its invitation does not differ from its previous calls for talks. In addition, many resistance forces remain confident in continuing their armed struggle, given they have reached their strongest military, political, and territorial positions since the country's independence. Nevertheless, the resistance camp has decided neither to reject the 5PC nor to abandon the process; rather, it continues to anchor its diplomacy to the framework because it remains the only viable regional framework and the resistance camp prefers dialogue facilitated and monitored by the international community.

So how can ASEAN's peace plan move forward while there is no commitment from the military and while both parties show no interest in dialogue? ASEAN acknowledged that the limitation is due to the lack of the military regime's political will. ASEAN Foreign ministers agreed to continue to exclude the military regime from top-level meetings and develop a benchmarking mechanism to assess "meaningful progress", which is due at the Summit in November. This benchmarking exercise could turn the 5PC into something with measurable criteria. But ASEAN still needs to set clear benchmarks on critical issues, such as ending airstrikes and artillery shelling against civilians and granting humanitarian access to conflict-affected populations, and specify real consequences if those conditions are not met.

While there is no meaningful progress, ASEAN as a bloc needs to keep its stand on treating the military-led elections as illegitimate and maintain two separate channels with the military regime and the resistance forces, but with equal political weight. Maintaining two channels avoids conceding the junta's framing that the 5PC is obsolete now, while keeping resistance forces relevant to any eventual negotiations and settlements. Allowing engagement with Naypyidaw to outpace engagement with resistance forces risks undermining the relevance of the 5PC and, ultimately, ASEAN's credibility in resolving the conflict.

To implement a co-equal track toward meaningful dialogue, ASEAN needs to institutionalise Malaysia's model set in 2025, which gives resistance actors equal political weight. During his visit to Thailand as the chair of ASEAN, **Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim** met Myanmar's regime leader in person in Bangkok and held a virtual meeting with the NUG's Prime Minister the next day. This is the clearest evidence of showing the same political weight for both parties, not just a symbolic side-meeting for resistance actors. This approach can be followed by other member states.

ASEAN should treat the Steering Council for the Emergence of a Federal Democratic Union (SCEF) as a credible dialogue partner and give it equal political weight to the military regime. By uniting the NUG, the CRPH, and major ethnic armed groups—the Karen National Union (KNU), Karenni Nationalities Progressive Party (KNPP), Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), and Chin National Front (CNF)—and **emerging local units**—the Interim Magway Federal Unit, the Interim Sagaing Federal Unit, and Mandalay Region, the SCEF consolidates the previously fragmented resistance into a single bloc capable of directly contesting the regime's post-election legitimacy claim.

Lastly, ASEAN needs to address concerns surrounding **Thailand's new calibrated re-engagement** approach. This approach is controversial and carries great risk. Thailand has reaffirmed its commitment to the 5PC and offered to **facilitate** and host future peace talks. Yet doubts are mounting over the bloc's commitment to the 5PC as more and more members pursue diplomatic and economic ties with the junta. As of mid-September, four ASEAN nations—Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia—have held bilateral visits with the junta's leader. Should ASEAN adopt this approach bloc-wide, it will validate the junta's push to replace the 5PC with its own post-election political roadmap and ultimately undermine the framework as a viable peace plan.

Samuel Hmung is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University (ANU) and a board member and researcher at the ANU's Myanmar Research Centre.

How Myanmar's Crisis Exposes Wider Regional Security and Governance Gaps

By Surachanee “Hammerli” Sriyai

Myanmar's crisis links conflict, transnational crime and digital repression, exposing wider regional governance gaps. ASEAN needs an inclusive, conditions-based approach that promotes peace without legitimising military rule.

Five years after the 2021 coup, it is clear that Myanmar's civil war is no longer simply an internal conflict between a military regime, democratic forces, and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). The country has become a test of Southeast Asia's capacity to manage the convergence of armed conflict, transnational organised crime, illicit mineral extraction, digital repression and humanitarian crisis. The deterioration of Myanmar's governance has created spaces in which criminal networks, foreign interests, and state actors interact with little to no oversight. The consequences increasingly spill across borders, exposing structural weaknesses in regional governance and raising difficult questions about whether ASEAN can sustain a credible pathway towards peace.

One of the clearest examples is the emergence of a conflict economy centred on crimes and critical minerals. Amid heightened geopolitical tensions, Myanmar has become an important source of rare earth elements,



Image Credit: istock/Aungraphr

particularly in Kachin and Shan states, where extraction has expanded amid weak regulation and contested territorial control. Much of this production ultimately enters regional supply chains, particularly those linked to China, which dominates global rare-earth processing. The result is a growing intersection between Myanmar's armed conflict, environmental degradation, and the global competition for critical minerals. However, the security implications extend beyond environmental impacts. Emerging evidence indicates that Myanmar's illicit economies are becoming interconnected. An [investigation](#) reported that people trafficked into scam compounds have subsequently been transferred into rare earth mines in eastern Shan State, effectively linking cyber-enabled organised crime with resource extraction and forced labour. This represents a dangerous evolution: the same governance vacuum can facilitate the exploitation of human beings through online fraud and the extraction of strategic resources through coercive labour. Such networks cannot be addressed through conventional counter-trafficking or mining regulations alone, as they require regional mechanisms capable of tracing money, labour, commodities, and digital infrastructure across multiple jurisdictions.

It is also well-documented that Myanmar has become a major centre for industrial-scale cyber frauds as trafficked workers are forced to scam victims from heavily fortified compounds. Recently, as governments around the world look to protect their citizens, the international response to cybercrime is increasingly entangled with—and may even coincide with—the regime’s broader effort to control the information environment. Since the coup, internet shutdowns, restrictions on VPNs, and expanded digital surveillance have made communications increasingly dangerous for journalists, humanitarian organisations and resistance networks. Satellite internet, chiefly Starlink, has consequently become a lifeline for local communities, humanitarian actors, independent media, and EAOs in conflict-affected areas where conventional telecommunications have been cut off, even as the service has also been exploited by criminal networks. SpaceX’s blanket disabling of terminals in Myanmar illustrates the dilemma wherein measures intended to disrupt criminal networks can also affect communications in the areas where they are vital to both combat operations and civilian protection.

These developments expose a wider regional governance gap. ASEAN has traditionally approached Myanmar through the Five-Point Consensus, which remains the principal regional framework, but it has failed to stop the violence or generate meaningful political dialogue. At the same time, Myanmar’s immediate neighbours and other regional

powers—including Thailand, China, and India—have maintained their own bilateral channels with the military government, driven by concerns ranging from border security and migration to trade, connectivity and strategic interests. Their engagement is not inherently problematic and can provide additional channels for humanitarian or diplomatic initiatives. However, the absence of a sufficiently coordinated regional approach also gives the junta greater room to manoeuvre between different external partners and reduces the leverage of any single diplomatic process. ASEAN’s current turn towards calibrated (re)engagement therefore deserves greater scrutiny. Diplomacy remains necessary, but engagement without meaningful conditions risks becoming normalisation; and normalisation can gradually become de facto legitimisation. The danger is particularly significant as the military seeks to translate its coercive control into political legitimacy. If ASEAN continues to pursue institutional engagement without requiring substantive changes in the regime’s behaviour, it risks not only rewarding the very actors responsible for this protracted war, but also allowing itself to be instrumentalised as an excuse for even more violence and atrocities against democratic forces, EAOs, and innocent civilians alike.

That being said, the problem is not that ASEAN engages the junta, but how and on whose terms. A sustainable peace process cannot be built around the assumption that the military government is the sole or primary political interlocutor.

ASEAN needs a broader architecture that recognises revolutionary forces as political interlocutors on an equal footing with the regime in order to provide a conducive environment for discussion. Engagement should be tied to measurable outcomes, including the cessation of attacks on civilians, humanitarian access, release of political prisoners, protection of communications infrastructure and meaningful participation of non-military stakeholders in political dialogue.

Myanmar demonstrates that Southeast Asia's security challenges are no longer neatly separated into "conflict," "cybercrimes," "human trafficking" or "economic governance"; rather, they increasingly constitute a single interconnected security ecosystem. This is ultimately a test not only of ASEAN's commitment to peace but also of its ability to redefine regional security for an era in which territorial conflict, transnational crimes, technology, and competition for critical resources are inseparable. ASEAN cannot sustain a credible pathway to peace by treating these issues as separate problems or by allowing diplomatic engagement to become an end in itself. A sustainable peace will require ASEAN to move from managing Myanmar's crisis towards addressing the conditions that allow it to persist and to ensure that engagement creates incentives for political compromise rather than legitimacy for continued military rule.

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