

The Myanmar Coup as an ASEAN Inflection Point

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Early on the morning of 2 February 2021, soldiers and police officers marched through the streets of Naypyidaw, Myanmar's capital, accompanied by an insentient but no less imposing cadre of tanks and helicopters. Within hours, the military—the Tatmadaw—had seized control of the government, cut off Internet networks, shut down the stock market, and placed under arrest numerous activists and politicians, including, most notably, Aung San Suu Kyi, the civilian government's de facto leader. The Tatmadaw then declared a “state of emergency” in which Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the military's commander in chief, would govern for a year. His security forces have since responded viciously to nationwide anti-coup protests, killing upwards of 800 people, including young children in their own homes.¹

But this coup nonetheless remains incomplete: Many Burmese officials—diplomats, police, and even soldiers—have pushed back against or defected from the military.² The most prominent example is U Kyaw Moe Tun, Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations, who continues to side with his country's pro-democracy demonstrators and has raised the famous three-finger salute—a pan-Asian demand for freedom borrowed from *The Hunger Games* film franchise—at the United Nations (UN) in New York. The junta demanded the ambassador's resignation and charged him with high treason, but he refuses to stand down.³ (The UN General Assembly's credentials committee will not meet until September; it remains unclear if the UN would accept a junta-appointed ambassador.)

ASEAN's Response

ASEAN's response, however, has been anything but brave. Its member states are far from united: Thailand has promised not to interfere, saying that the coup is none of its business; Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines have essentially said the same; Brunei has called for a return to Myanmar's previous semidemocratic system; while Malaysia and Indonesia have expressed “disgust at the continuing deadly violence against unarmed civilians,” per the former's prime minister, and called for the restoration of democracy.⁴ But, on the whole, none are willing to truly stand up to the Tatmadaw or stand up for the Suu Kyi government. Instead, ASEAN member states are allowing Myanmar's incomplete coup to drag

on, all while offering the Tatmadaw undeserved legitimacy by allowed junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and other representatives of his government to join and speak at official virtual meetings. Malaysian diplomats have also met with junta officials (although Malaysia's foreign ministry later denied any recognition of the Tatmadaw regime),⁵ while the bloc watered down a UN resolution calling for an arms embargo on Myanmar.⁶ Min Aung Hlaing even attended the ASEAN summit in Indonesia—his first foreign trip since seizing power.⁷

By accepting the Tatmadaw regime on the grounds of non-interference in other members' domestic affairs—a firm ASEAN commitment—the bloc is undermining both Southeast Asia's stability (what happens as more refugees continue to flood out of Myanmar and when the country becomes a hotbed for illicit activity?⁸) and the region's geopolitical ambitions more broadly. Indeed, with ASEAN allowing the junta to take Myanmar's seat, the body will struggle to bring the human rights-wary United States to the table. This will leave Southeast Asian countries to engage the Americans on a bilateral basis—one that disadvantages the smaller and less powerful countries of Southeast Asia who intend to shape their collective future without relying on China or the United States. To avoid becoming a vassal for the former, Southeast Asians know that they need the Americans to be both present and engaged. But if ASEAN further legitimizes the Tatmadaw, the bloc risks driving away the United States; the agony, then, will not just be Myanmar's but also ASEAN's. And perhaps the only beneficiary, at least strategically, will be China.⁹

Intra-ASEAN relations are based on the principle of noninterference: member states should neither meddle in one another's domestic affairs nor support political movements in neighboring states. The 1967 Bangkok Declaration, ASEAN's foundational document, states plainly that member states must prevent external interference to ensure domestic and regional stability.¹⁰

But ASEAN has hardly always followed this principle. In December 2005, for example, its ministers castigated Myanmar, urging the previous Tatmadaw junta (which ruled from 1962 to 2011) to democratize and release political prisoners, including Suu Kyi, who spent some 15 years under house arrest after returning to the country in 1988.¹¹

Yet ASEAN members are nonetheless still clinging to the principle of noninterference today, in no small part because the region has experienced deep democratic backsliding since 2005 and because none of these illiberal leaders want the limelight of criticism shined *on them*. In recent years, the military seized control of Thailand in its own coup; Cambodia's Hun Sen further consolidated his deeply autocratic personalist regime; and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, a vocal sup-

porter of the extrajudicial killing of drug users and other criminals, won elections and has since governed semiautocratically.

ASEAN has also for years ignored Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya Muslims, natives of Myanmar's Rakhine State who are nonetheless stateless because the state denies them citizenship under a 1982 law based on the presumption that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even though many have lived in Myanmar for generations. The bloc continued looking away in 2017, when the Tatmadaw ramped up its long-running campaign against the Rohingya, torching their villages, raping their women, and massacring their infants.¹² During this campaign, the Tatmadaw killed somewhere around 24,000 Rohingya and drove more than 730,000 to seek refuge in Bangladesh.¹³

ASEAN's promised noninterference protects these and other bloc members from the human rights criticisms more likely to stem from the West. ASEAN members simply avoid these headaches by agreeing to collectively look the other way.

But the bloc's commitment to noninterference has undermined its geopolitical influence before. Former US president George W. Bush, during his administration, held ASEAN at arm's length because it included Myanmar's previous junta in its hosted events. At an ASEAN event, President Bush once even refused to sit at the same table as Tatmadaw leaders.¹⁴ Throughout the 2000s, meanwhile, his administration routinely sent lower-level officials to ASEAN meetings—such as the deputy to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who herself skipped at least one meeting in protest—at least partially because junta members were taking part in ASEAN pageantry.¹⁵ In 2006, the United States and European Union skipped ASEAN meetings to protest Myanmar's potential chairmanship of the bloc.¹⁶ That year, the West demanded that Myanmar release Suu Kyi from house arrest or move toward democratization before chairing the organization; Myanmar did neither and instead gave up the chairmanship.¹⁷

The situation is arguably much trickier today, though, with at least *two groups* claiming to represent Myanmar—one of which, the junta government, both the Joseph Biden administration and leading European powers deem illegitimate. The other is a National Unity Government (NUG) comprising elected members of parliament, protest leaders, and ethnic minorities; the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a shadow cabinet behind the NUG, has already confirmed Suu Kyi as its *de facto* leader.¹⁸ The NUG now hopes to win international recognition and aid before ousting the military and bringing back some form of democracy to Myanmar.¹⁹

The View from Washington

But Washington will likely not recognize the NUG, despite the fact that top officials from the US State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs have spoken with members of the CRPH.²⁰ Recognizing an unelected but democratically minded shadow government would be extremely out of character for the United States.

It is also worth considering that Suu Kyi's inclusion in the NUG may not actually help as much as the group's leaders intend. No longer the icon revered by the world for standing up to a brutal junta, she is despised in many Western circles because she was so impassive in the face of the military's anti-Rohingya violence (and later even defended it).

Too many Western elites never truly understood Myanmar and Suu Kyi's political calculations—that she would not, for all her supposed liberal ideals, stand up for a community as domestically despised as the Muslim Rohingya are in Myanmar.²¹ Her National League for Democracy (NLD) party's rank-and-file supporters, like a significant share of the Buddhist majority, believe that the Rohingya—called “Bengalis” by many Burmese—are not truly from Myanmar and simply do not deserve to live in the country.²² In 2016, Suu Kyi reflected this position by asking the US ambassador in Myanmar not to refer to the group as “Rohingya.”²³ Indeed, she herself has long refused to use the term, instead suggesting that they are not actually from Myanmar.²⁴ A decade ago, an NLD spokesman made the party's views (and seemingly those of Suu Kyi) plain: “The Rohingya are not our citizens.”²⁵

Western elites nevertheless for years projected their hopes for Myanmar onto Suu Kyi, making her a global human rights icon despite her outright hostility to criticism of human rights issues within her own country.²⁶ They expected her to stand up for minorities, even though her and her party's anti-Rohingya attitudes were obvious. Her foreign backers responded with little less than disgust when she backed the Tatmadaw after the 2017 violence in what was a plainly pragmatic effort to “be good with Min Aung Hlaing,” as one veteran Myanmar politician put it.²⁷ When the Tatmadaw faced charges of genocide at The Hague, she horrified her international admirers by showing up to defend it; she once again failed to even call the Rohingya by their name.²⁸

But Myanmar's former quasidemocratic political system gave the military 25 percent of the seats in parliament by default; positive terms with the Tatmadaw were therefore necessary for Suu Kyi. Yet even defending the Tatmadaw at The Hague could not win her the generals' trust. Standing up for them, and losing her international reputation in the process, could not keep the Tatmadaw at bay.

The situation, then, is as follows: Not only are there at least two groups claiming to represent Myanmar but also a deeply tarnished Suu Kyi remains attached to the “good” one—some of whose members have little democratic legitimacy (despite all their good intentions). So, while Washington refuses to negotiate with the junta even if doing so might be strategically wise,²⁹ and remains committed, on paper at least, to reinstalling the Suu Kyi government,³⁰ it is hard to see the United States spending the necessary geopolitical capital to do so. Myanmar is too far way, too much of a headache, and nowhere near the top of the Biden administration’s list of priorities, particularly given recent events in Afghanistan. Most likely we’ll see limited symbolic opposition, aggressive statements, and some sanctions (as we’ve seen so far), but little meaningful action. The Biden White House will not risk too much on behalf of a former peace icon turned pariah.

Yet Biden entered office with hopes of forming some kind of anti-China or at least China-skeptical bloc in Asia—a daunting task to begin with, for various economic, cultural, and political reasons. But Myanmar’s incomplete coup, ASEAN’s toleration of it, and Washington’s halfhearted commitment to Suu Kyi are throwing a wrench in these plans. Biden may want to repivot from the Middle East to Asia, but if Myanmar junta leaders are invited to events such as the ASEAN Regional Forum or East Asia Summit, he will find it difficult to attend.

Biden’s secretaries of state and defense, Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin, respectively, have taken part in virtual ASEAN events at which Tatmadaw officials represented Myanmar, but they did so begrudgingly, and they used their platforms to denounce the junta and demand ASEAN action on the coup.³¹ President Biden, however, has not allowed himself to be in the Tatmadaw’s presence; it’s hard to imagine that he will change this position moving forward. Indeed, one expects that he will continue avoiding any in-person (or even Zoom) photo-ops with Min Aung Hlaing or other junta leaders. If Min Aung Hlaing or any Tatmadaw representatives are at the ASEAN Regional Forum or East Asia Summit—which they probably will be—one should wager that Biden will not be there and that he will send a lower-level official to signal his displeasure with ASEAN.

Biden will certainly not want to appear softer on human rights compared to George W. Bush. Blinken, for his part, has in his nascent tenure moved human rights increasingly into the State Department’s forefront; it is unlikely that Biden would undo this by agreeing to pal around with the junta. One instead expects that Biden will stick to his principles by refusing to recognize the Tatmadaw or engage with Myanmar’s generals in person or even through Zoom, all while pushing in a somewhat limited manner—likely sanctions, but certainly no support for military intervention—to bring back Suu Kyi’s government.

Biden and Blinken have made and will continue to make clear their opposition to the junta and ASEAN's toleration of it, but the administration will nonetheless try to cooperate with Southeast Asia on development, trade, and pushing back against Chinese aggressiveness. Biden's goal of forming some China-skeptical bloc in the Indo-Pacific is too important to be sidelined by Myanmar's domestic difficulties.

But Washington's unwillingness to either negotiate with the junta or truly go out on a limb for Suu Kyi risks extending the incompleteness of Myanmar's coup—which would be disastrous for ASEAN. The grouping has so far shown an unwillingness to act. Its leaders will not invite members of the NUG to meetings and push the junta out of its official workings, as anticoup activists hope.³² But ASEAN's inaction will make relations with Biden difficult: he has made human rights enough of a priority that he cannot turn a blind eye to the bloc's toleration of the Tatmadaw in the name of grander strategic goals. By failing to act, then, ASEAN will rob itself of an audience with the president of the United States, which remains the only meaningful counterweight to China and on which most member states do not want to be reliant.

ASEAN's Choices

Nearly every country in region (with the exceptions of Cambodia, Laos, and now post-coup Myanmar) understands the necessity of and yearns for positive ties with both great powers. However, it does not appear that Southeast Asian leaders understand how seriously Biden is committed to his antijunta position and how limited his support for Suu Kyi remains. Southeast Asian leaders seem not to understand that their underwhelming response to the Myanmar crisis could prevent ASEAN from bringing America back on board following the chaotic years under President Donald Trump. ASEAN's lenience toward the Tatmadaw will come at the bloc's own peril.

Myanmar's incomplete coup therefore poses a serious threat not only to regional security but also to Southeast Asia's geopolitical influence at large. If ASEAN, because of its promised noninterference, cannot handle the Tatmadaw and bring the president of the United States to the proverbial (and literal) table, how can it effectively be central to regional affairs, as it has long claimed to be? How can ASEAN hope to craft any alternative to Beijing's Sinocentric plans for the region if the bloc cannot get the president of United States, the man in charge of the only other great power, to even show up?

The answer is that it cannot. If ASEAN continues to legitimize the Tatmadaw, Biden will refuse to attend events at which junta officials are present, thereby forcing members states to relate with the United States on bilateral terms—a

haphazard situation for the United States, which would prefer to work through the bloc, and a similarly unideal one for the smaller Southeast Asian countries, which will feel America's weight more when negotiating alone.

ASEAN's toleration of the Tatmadaw thus risks squandering America's renewed focus on Southeast Asia at a moment—marked by the pandemic, from which the whole region is reeling, and China's increasing military and diplomatic aggressiveness—when the region's leaders cannot afford to do just that.

For ASEAN to remain relevant, its leaders must recognize that leaving Myanmar's coup incomplete is fundamentally untenable. If the bloc hopes to engage the United States on areas of mutual concern—such as securing more American-made COVID-19 vaccines or countering China in the South China Sea—it will have to address the Myanmar crisis.

ASEAN leaders would be wise to work creatively around the principle of non-interference to prevent figures such as Min Aung Hlaing from further installing themselves in the organization's halls of power. They need to do so not on behalf of the often absent forces of good that claim to bend the arc of history toward progress, or even for liberal values, but for their own self-interest. It does not matter *why* they do the right thing, only that they actually do it. If selfishness forces ASEAN to act, the region and the United States will be better for it.

Ultimately, though, if ASEAN wants to shape Southeast Asia's future in Southeast Asians' interests by working with both the United States and China, rather than simply relying on the latter, the bloc's leaders need to wake up to Biden's reality and promptly display political bravery—a characteristic that its leaders have lacked thus far. 🌟

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