

# PATHWAYS TO PEACE IN MYANMAR

A YCCS PEACE LAB PROJECT



**Pathways to Peace in Myanmar:  
A YCCS-Peace Lab Project Background Paper**

***Post-Coup Myanmar:  
National and International Conflict Dynamics and  
Potential Entry Points for Peace***

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## **Introduction**

In this background paper, we provide an overview of the ongoing conflict between the military junta and opposition forces in Myanmar following the 2021 coup, a conflict which has resulted in widespread civilian death, injury, displacement, and humanitarian crises. We consider the major domestic, regional, and international approaches to the conflict, and analyse the potential entry points for external actors to assist a more peaceful resolution to the conflict. Our findings are aimed at an informed public audience, including policymakers, practitioners and students.

We first present a summary of the domestic and regional dynamics of the conflict. Here, we map out the entangled and complex relationships between Myanmar's major conflict actors. We summarise current domestic strategies, highlighting the roles and composition of both the opposition movement and post-coup regime in the face of escalating conflict. In the second part we provide a detailed picture of regional and international approaches to, and interventions from, the major external actors, including ASEAN, China, India, Russia and Western governments, along with international organisations. Here we analyse ASEAN's focus on quiet diplomacy, China's strategic economic approach, India's pragmatic engagement approach, Russia's militarised pro-regime approach, and the pro-ASEAN approach of Western governments and international organisations. In the final section we conclude with a summary of preliminary findings and suggest potential entry points for external actors to support a more peaceful resolution to the conflict in Myanmar.



# MYANMAR: PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

## International Approaches

### ASEAN: QUIET DIPLOMACY/ CONSENSUS APPROACH

#### Five-Point Consensus

- Shall be an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar, and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint
- Constructive dialogue among all parties shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the people's interests
- Special envoy of the ASEAN chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process with the assistance of the secretary general of ASEAN
- ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre
- Special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned

### INDIA: PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT

- Historically, diplomatically isolated the Burmese dictatorship, but the federal government is now pursuing a policy of pragmatic engagement
- Engaging diplomatically with the junta and resistance groups whilst also securing Indian national interests
- Maintained the FMR with Myanmar, allowing border residents to travel freely between the two countries
- Simultaneously erecting border fences and deporting Myanmarese refugees from its northeastern states

### RUSSIA: PRO-REGIME MILITARISED APPROACH

- Takes advantage of chaos in Myanmar to sell military hardware to the junta
- Seems to be following a policy of disruption, as with wider global approach



## Domestic Approaches

### POST-COUP REGIME (POST FEB 2021)

- Led by General Min Aung Hlaing (Commander in Chief), based in Nyapitaw
- Previously in control of the hybrid system of governance (2015-2020)
- Praetorian role shaped by the 1962 coup
- Continuing casualties and loss of territories
- Supported by EAOs: UWSA and SSA
- Supported by Border Guard Forces that were created during the democratic transition
- Limited success pre-coup to reconcile with EAOs
- Struggling to maintain a functioning state in the face of military losses, crumbling position of Min Aung Hlaing.

#### Dry Zone / Heartlands

- ‘Military Controlled Zone’
- Increasingly polarised between pro-coup Pyu Saw Htee groups (small pro-junta militias) and anti-coup PDFs
- Tit-for-tat killings causing deep divisions which pose a threat to future peace prospects (Sagaing Hotspot)
- Declining relationship between the Burman ethnic majority in these areas and the Military - exacerbated by the activation of conscription laws

#### Rakhine State:

- The AA now controls almost all of the territories of Rakhine State
- Reports of Rohingya cooperation with regime has fuelled violence against Rohingya by the AA.
- Regime has blocked and destroyed waterways and roads out of the state and is known to be using human shields against the approaching AA.
- As elsewhere, regimeshelling has followed AA advances.
- IDPs are fleeing into Ayeyarwaddy but this remains difficult as regime has cut main roads across the hoghlands.

### RESISTANCE MOVEMENT

- Led by NUG (leadership comprised of former NLD government)
- Majority of military successes have been won by EAOs across the borderlands
- United through common enemy of Tatmadaw, but have competing visions
- Supported by PDFs, some of which are trained by EAOs
- Anti-junta civilian groups such as People’s Embrace play an important role in undermining the regime’s power
- Both Generation Z and the CDM grew in the Spring Revolution (February 2021) and are now significant actors

#### Kachin State:

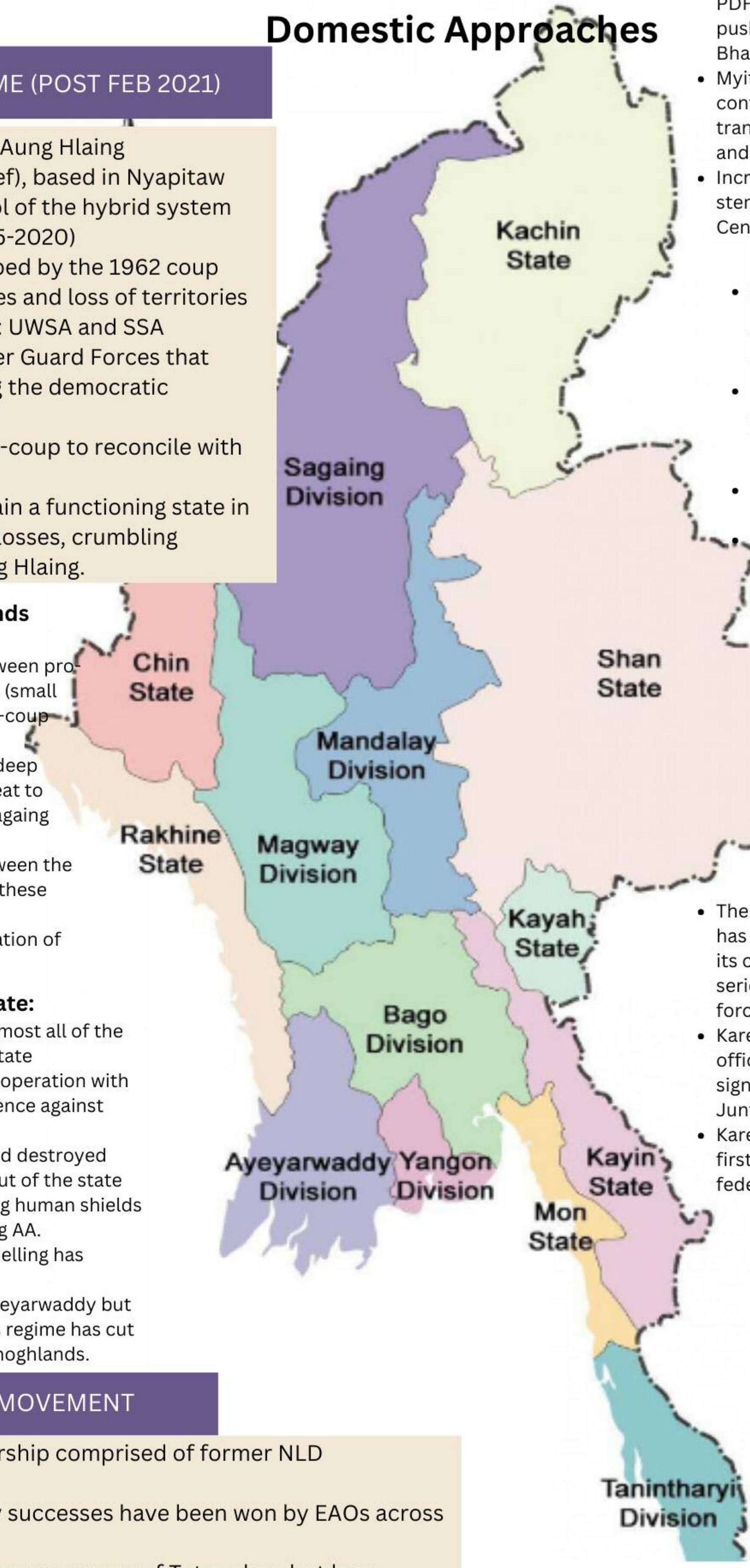
- The anti-junta KIA and supporting PDFs continue to make progress - pushing the Tatmadaw down to Bhamo
- Myitkyina - Bhamo road is highly contested and vitally important for transport and import links to China and Shan State
- Increased Chinese role in Kachin state stemming from interest in Scam Centres

#### Shan State

- Shan State increasingly controlled by two main anti-regime EAOs, the TNLA and MNDAA, and an area of interest for China
- Patterns of surrenders and defections in Northern Shan State indicates fracturing of Tatmadaw Unity
- MNDAA and TNLA now control Lashio and surrounding area.
- Evident tensions between the MNDAA and wider resistance in the face of increasing pressure from China. But support on the ground is likely to persist

#### Kayin State

- The main EAO of Kayin State, the KNU, has actively sought to bring PDFs under its command structure and poses a serious threat to remaining Tatmadaw forces in the state.
- Karen Border Guard Force (KBGF, though officially non-partisan) playing a significant role in supporting remaining Junta forces.
- Karenni State Interim Agreement presents first codified example of bottom-up federal democracy.



#### Key terms (Domestic)

**AA:** Arakan Army  
**CDM:** Civil Disobedience Movement  
**EAO:** Ethnic Armed Organisation  
**KIA:** Kachin Independence Army  
**KNU:** Karen National Union  
**MNDAA:** Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army  
**NUG:** National Unity Government  
**PDF:** People’s Defense Forces  
**Tatmadaw:** Myanmar Military  
**TNLA:** Ta’ang National Liberation Army  
**SSA:** Shan State Army  
**UWSA:** United Wa State Army

#### Key terms (International)

**AHA:** ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management  
**EU:** European Union  
**FMR:** Free Movement Regime  
**SG:** Singapore  
**ID:** Indonesia  
**MY:** Malaysia  
**TH:** Thailand  
**UN:** United Nations  
**UK:** United Kingdom  
**US:** United States  
**5PC:** Five-Point Consensus

## Preliminary Findings on Prospects for Peace:

- As of 2024, lack of unity over, & contest around, the future governance of Myanmar (both domestically and internationally) forms the most significant barrier to the formation of comprehensive peace negotiations
- Two major competing sides see armed victory as the best route to peace for Myanmar, with limited interest/incentives to negotiate at present, and no external actor actively supporting substantive peace talks (only limited peace engagements)
- Most members of the resistance movement have competing reasons to defeat Myanmar military based on vastly different experiences with the regime (since 1962, & some longer) and rooted in ethnic and religious differences.
- Various international actors have conflicting visions for peace, and the lack of a powerful enough, legitimate, trusted, and interested mediator exacerbates the conflict situation
- Patterns of success for the resistance movement - especially by EAOs - against regime forces, increasing numbers of surrenders and defections, and the activation of conscription laws by the regime, all indicate an increasingly weak position of the regime, but there is no alternative/viable option for ending armed conflict open to it
- Current entry points to peace are limited to sub-national and borderland ceasefire arrangements



For further findings and analysis on the situation in Myanmar please scan this QR



## 1. Summary: Current status of and regional approaches to the conflict

### Key conflict statistics: \*

Deaths: 5,350 - 5,886 (UNHCR, 2024; AAPP, 2024)

Internally Displaced People: 3,203,400 - 3,402,737 (2,913,400 of which displaced since the coup) (UNHCR, 2024; MMPM, 2024)

Refugees: 1,139,500 - 2 million (UNHCR, 2024; Sources close to TNLA, 2024)

Arrests: 27,400 - 27,580 (UNHCR, 2024; AAPP 2024)

Airstrikes: 1,595+ (MMPM, 2024)

*\*as of November 2024.*

On 1 February 2021, the military junta led by General Min Aung Hlaing declared a coup d'état in Myanmar, ousting the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD), which had been making incremental democratic reforms and threatening the economic control of the military since it gained electoral power. From this date, the disputed governance of the junta, operating from its seat of power in Naypyitaw, has been actively opposed by a fragile coalition of Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), political opposition groups, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), 'Generation Z' youth organisations, and smaller localised armed opposition groups known as People's Defence Forces (PDFs). Whilst the reaction from civil society initially came in the form of non-violent protest, the violent reaction of the junta fuelled an escalation into the 2021 Spring Revolution and eventual all-out war between the junta, various EAOs and opposition forces (Stokke and Kaw, 2024 and Matelski, 2024).

Between 2021 and 2024 a new alliance of opposition forces (both on the political and military fronts) emerged to challenge the military junta. The National Unity Government (NUG), composed primarily of former NLD representatives and supported by some members of the CDM, GenZ, and local CSOs, alongside the political wings of Ethnic Armed Groups (EAOs) led the opposition on the political front. EAOs, many of which had fought the regime for decades, alongside the PDFs, led the opposition on the military front (Stokke and Kaw, 2024). The opposition forces received support from the diaspora community and local CSOs (some of which have been allied to EAOs and NLD). These local CSOs receive financial aid and humanitarian support from Western governments and international NGOs. Despite the emergence of this new alliance, coordination amongst all the groups remains a challenge as an attempt to establish a joint command by the NUG has largely failed (Ye Myo Hein, 2024). A recent shift in the support of China - lending greater support to the regime - has caused further fractures within the opposition alliance, most notably between the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the National Unity Government (NUG).

The codification of the 'Three Brotherhood Alliance' between three of the most powerful EAOs in the country (TNLA, MNDAA, and AA) transformed the face of the conflict as the opposition launched its first major offensive movement - Operation 1027, so named for its commencement date in late October 2023. The operation was characterised by territorial gains across Myanmar (most notably in Northern Shan State), a pattern of regime surrenders and defections, and an increase in tit-for-tat

killings in small communities divided by the conflict (Irawaddy, 2024). Notably, there has been ‘overwhelming evidence’ that China initially supported the operation as the MNDAA and TNLA provided a means by which China could target the scam centres just across from its border that had been targeting Chinese civilians (USIP, 2024). Once this goal had been achieved, the Haigeng Agreement (a Chinese-brokered ceasefire) was intended to provide breathing space for both sides of the conflict and potentially provide the possibility of negotiations. However, on the ground, small arms and mortar fire continued to be traded sporadically and the ceasefire collapsed as Operation 1027 (Part 2) was launched by the Brotherhood Alliance on 24 June 2024. This new iteration of conflict continued the older pattern of territorial and strategic advance. In the Northeast this led to the advance of the TNLA and MNDAA into Sagaing and the capture of the strategic Lashio Township in August 2024, and in the West, it meant the almost complete expulsion of regime forces in the entirety of Rakhine state. Following a series of defeats in September and October 2024, most notably in Thandwe, Ann and Maungdaw, the military has focused on creating huge tolls on civilians attempting to cross into Ayerwaddy towards Yangon (Irawaddy, 2024; Myanmar Now, 2024; Frontier Myanmar, 2024).

The increasingly heretic and mobile nature of the conflict since 2021 has driven the growing refugee and Internally Displaced People (IDP) crises. With an estimated 2,914,000 IDPs removed from their homes by late 2024, and between 120,000 and 200,000 refugees fleeing into Bangladesh and Thailand (ISP, 2024; Sources close to the TNLA), the dislocation of civilians remains a fundamental problem to be addressed by any aid getting into the country, and any future governance and public service system. The patterns of movement by IDPs has been sporadic as the volatility of different areas of combat changes regularly, and as the number of civilian casualties has continued to rise. The UNHCR estimates that there have been over 5,350 civilians killed since the coup as of August 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). In the ACLED Conflict Index, Myanmar was considered the “most violent and most fragmented” conflict in 2024, and the “sole Asian country with extreme violence” which has “not garnered sufficient attention” and support (ACLEd, 2024). In the more recent update from ACLED the conflict was ranked the second most violent in the world: it was also the most fragmented and the third deadliest.

Nevertheless, as of November 2024 the military junta maintained superior firepower over the opposition forces, with Russia as the suspected major arms supplier, though this is unconfirmed. The regime is also supported by Pyusawhti militias, established in reaction to the rise in numbers of PDFs across the country and which have provided significant support to the regime. Since Operation 1027, attacks on the civilian population have escalated and the junta has engaged in indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery attacks against the civilian population. Since the beginning of Operation Part Two in June 2024, a newly emboldened regime has become increasingly willing to conduct widespread and indiscriminate bombing in civilian areas - with an estimated 50 strikes in Shan State alone within the month of September 2024 (Irawaddy, 2024). Furthermore, following the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in Mid-August 2024, the regime significantly increased its aerial attacks on civilian areas in the proximity of townships controlled by opposition groups (Irawaddy, 2024).

In terms of international interventions between 2021 and 2024, the ASEAN Five-Point Agenda remains the most enduring pledge to institute dialogue (a traditional peacemaking pathway, broadly acceptable in principle within the region) and call for cessation of hostilities. Implementing the plan, however, has proved a major challenge up to November 2024. Lao PDR handed the chairmanship of ASEAN to Malaysia on October 11th, 2024. Lao PDR has focused on a quiet diplomacy approach towards Myanmar, opting not to publicise its visits to General Min Aung Hlaing and EAOs as of mid 2024. Analysts argue that even though Lao PDR may have had some intention to bring the junta towards negotiations, it lacked the legitimacy and resources to do so (Mendelson, 2024).

Other ASEAN countries including Singapore and Malaysia have taken separate but more active stances against the military junta, with the former taking action against arm sales to Myanmar. Thailand - in contrast - has advocated the need to engage most closely with the Myanmar regime, as their border territories with Myanmar have been greatly impacted by the conflict (Reuters, 2024). Thailand's policy up to November 2024 involves broad engagement with Myanmar nationals, NGOs, the military junta, and discrete interactions with the NUG, through ASEAN and independently.

Two of Myanmar's closest and most influential neighbours, China and India, have taken their own approaches towards interacting with Myanmar during the conflict. Chinese involvement in Myanmar has included ceasefire negotiations and arms support, guided by their strategic and economic interests, which entails working with both sides of the conflict in an attempt to maintain a stability that is favourable to their interests in the region. China has also engaged diplomatically, legitimising the junta in their stance as the official government, whilst simultaneously engaging with rebel groups by providing them with funding. Meanwhile, India has also engaged with several actors in the conflict, including EAOs, the military junta, and the NUG. Prior to the coup, the Indian government was engaging in development projects throughout Myanmar to create transport links to its landlocked states, but these have stalled through the civil war. India has also kept a close watch on Chinese development projects in the region, especially in the Bay of Bengal, a key strategic naval and resource-rich centrepiece for India.

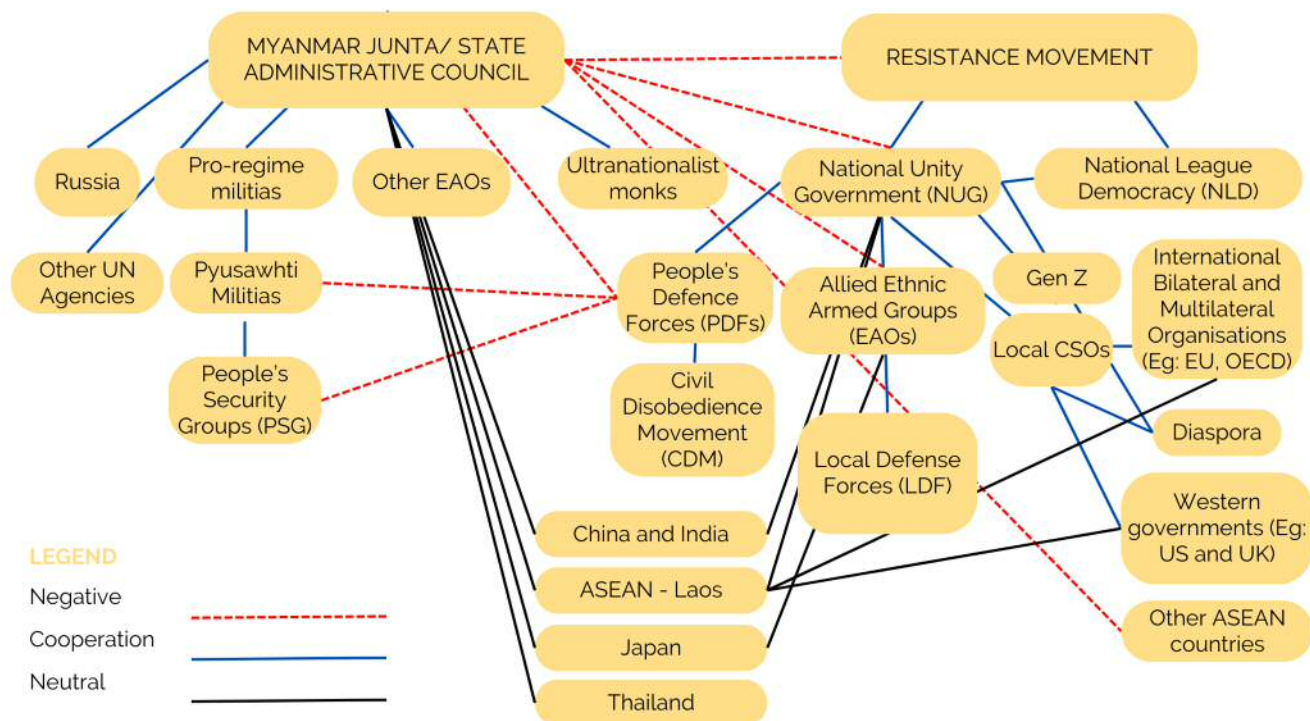
On the 10th of December, 2021, the UK government imposed some military restrictions while also providing aid to Myanmar, towards humanitarian aid, education, and support for civil society groups. Overall, the UK's approach is underpinned by cooperation with and support for ASEAN as an indirect means to try to address the conflict. The UK has been joined by other Western governments and international organisations in these efforts and in calling for the cessation of violence and the safeguarding of human rights. These statements have done little to stem the war, or the junta's actions, as they can rely on allied states to provide them with diplomatic and economic support.

Similarly to the United Kingdom, the United States unveiled a series of economic sanctions and aid packages in 2022, targeting top military officials and prohibiting weapons sales. The US has officially condemned the violence in Myanmar, and warned against escalation from the junta. Military assistance remains unlikely, as the BURMA act prevents any hardware to be sold that might cause loss of life. The United Nations, after facing international criticism for overall lack of action on the conflict, appointed a Special Envoy (Julie Bishop) in April 2024 to attempt to bring conflict actors to

the table. Similarly to the US, official statements have condemned the violence, but with minimal effect on the conduct of key actors.

## 2. Domestic dynamics and approaches to the conflict

### Map of Major Actors in the Myanmar Conflict (2021-2024)



### Summary Composition of Pro-Regime Forces

Pro-regime actors in Myanmar are united by their support of the Tatmadaw (Royal Armed Forces) under the SAC, led by General Min Aung Hlaing, who initiated the 2021 coup in reaction to the successes of the NLD and the lack of public support won by the USDP (the military's political party) in the late 2020 national elections. The Tatmadaw itself is characterised by its praetorian approach to the role of the military in protecting the nation (and especially the ethnic Bamar majority) from foreign *but especially domestic* threats (Sleth 2001). This ideology presents a fundamental barrier to the possibility of negotiated settlements and will continue to guide the actions of the regime (Bunte, 2022).

Pro-military EAOs continue to provide significant support to the regime along with a smaller number of Border Guard Forces (BGFs). The Tatmadaw has maintained support from these groups (especially from the Wa State Army) by appeasing their calls for greater autonomy. But China also influences

some of these groups, seen for example in the Wa State Army's 'five-cuts' against the MNDA (Irawaddy, 2024; Myanmar Now, 2024).

The regime has been further supported by Pyusawhti militias – these are small pro-regime armed groups named after a semi-mythical warrior-King from the Burmese Chronicles. These were established in reaction to the rise in numbers of PDFs across the country, but especially in the 'Military Controlled Zone'. These groups, whose members mostly belong to the Bamar ethnic majority, have been reported to be relatively limited to the role of protecting the Tatmadaw and are effectively afforded impunity for targeting civilians.

Earlier in 2021, there was a high numbers of defections and surrenders by the Tatmadaw and supporting Pyusawhti groups in the initial Spring Revolution in early 2021, and later as Operation 1027 gained momentum in late 2023 through 2024, placing the regime in an increasingly fragile position and fuelling their need to reintroduce conscription laws. The poor training of conscripted troops has resulted in a weak opposition to the advances of EAOs. The fifth round of the draft of young people in September 2024 added to the 15,000 troops that had already been forcefully conscripted since the activation of the conscription laws. Importantly, however, reports of these conscripted troops in combat suggest limited capacity when faced with experienced opposition fighters (Irawaddy, 2024; Frontier Myanmar, 2024).

### **Summary Composition of the Opposition Movement**

The opposition movement is primarily led by the NUG, which itself is composed mainly of former NLD representatives who governed under the hybrid system of 2016-2020. Whilst the NUG holds a claim to legitimacy based on the electoral successes in 1990, 2015, and 2020, it is working *in parallel* with EAOs and they are not subordinate to it, with the MNDA publicly rejecting the leadership of the NUG in October 2024, following increasing pressure from China (Irawaddy, 2024; Frontier Myanmar, 2024).

The vast majority of military successes against the regime between 2021 and 2024 have been won by the long established EAOs, who have continued to enjoy victories in Shan, Rakhine, Kachin, and Kayin States in both stages of Operation 1027. Importantly, there has been an increase in the number of retaliatory airstrikes in civilian areas that follow territorial gains by EAOs, but rather than undermining support among the civilian population for EAOs, they widely appear to be doing the opposite. EAOs variously have tacit and direct support from groups within Thailand and China where they have control of border areas and sites of strategic economic interest to these countries.

People's Defence Forces (PDFs) have also emerged since the coup – these are small, localised militia, often trained by EAOs to defend themselves against the Tatmadaw. These have, up to November 2024, played an increasingly important role in supporting EAOs and undermining the authority of the regime, especially in the Sagaing region as well as Kachin and Kayin States.

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which grew out of the Spring Revolution (February 2021), and has been a powerful motivator for defections, remains a significant player in the opposition



movement. The CDM is supported by Gen Z protesters, who are mostly located in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay. Notably however, the Gen Z population in these areas has all but disappeared as of November 2024, as young people have been conscripted into the Tatmadaw, or have moved out of the area either to escape the conflict or to join PDFs. The CDM is also supported by broader civil society – people-led organisations in the borderlands, including those who have been allied (in structure) with the EAOs. They also have widespread support from the diaspora community, and some Western governments, who have channelled financial aid through local CSOs via NGOs.

All opposition groups are united through the common enemy of the Tatmadaw, but they also hold competing visions for the future governance structures within Myanmar, premised upon deep rooted inter-ethnic and historical differences, as well as recent experiences in combat and in opposition with the junta and its allied forces. These differences, along with diverse territorial and economic interests, are likely to present significant challenges to a lasting peace settlement in the future.

### **3. Barriers to political dialogue as a route to peace**

As of late 2024, three main factors present the main challenges to forming a political dialogue that could lead to a future political settlement to end violent conflict in Myanmar: - escalating violence, fragmentation (across all sides), and directly competing visions of post-conflict governance.

#### **Conflict escalation**

The 2021 military coup was met with shock from the majority of the international community, in the wake of an apparently successful democratic transition since 2015. However, the coup was not unprecedented, but instead should be understood as the next stage in Myanmar's complex post-independence history of internal military conflicts. The disproportionate, violent response of the Tatmadaw to the civilian protests that followed the coup (mostly led by Generation Z) and the violent escalation that followed has only further revealed underlying conflicts between the military and EAOs across the borderlands of the country. What separates this recent escalation of conflict from those before 2021 has been the level of cooperation between different EAOs and the NUG, across a loose coalition of anti-regime forces. By late 2024 it was becoming increasingly evident that following various military successes of EAOs, and important territorial gains, along with growing anti-regime coalitions, that the military was no longer going to be the obvious victor in the conflict. Further, as the violence in the conflict escalates, the scope for political negotiations has been reduced.

As of late 2024, the violence has escalated towards the Bamar ethnic majority heartland, traditionally held by the military. Dozens of independent militia groups have been active across the country. EAOs frequently carry out major offensives (via Op1027 Parts I and II) and have gained significant territories in the West and Northeast of Myanmar. Importantly, with the MNDA and TNLA having now taken control of Lashio in Shan State in October 2024, armed opposition groups grew closer in proximity to Mandalay. If the conflict reaches Mandalay, whether headed by EAOs or PDFs, the military will find themselves no longer retaliating against towns and villages, but against entire cities.



(mostly housing the Bamar ethnic majority). The IDP crisis is therefore likely to worsen as the fighting moves towards these more populated areas and will more increasingly affect the Bamar ethnic majority, potentially undermining support for the regime among their core ethnic supporters.

Alongside these opposition gains, the regime has increasingly used indiscriminate retaliatory airstrikes (Irawaddy, 2024; Frontier Myanmar, 2024; ISP, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). Between February 2021 and October 2024 there have been over 1600 airstrikes, generally hitting civilian areas and frequently causing the deaths of non-combatants, including children, across Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin States (Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2024). Beyond the death toll of these strikes, they have directly increased the number of IDPs and refugees as civilians attempt to stay away from the conflict. Between 3,203,400 and 3,402,737 IDPs have been forced from their homes and in many cases they will be unable to return to their homes even if the violence abates, as the regime continues to flatten towns as they pass through them, as of October 2024. The combination of increased opposition gains, especially as they move into the Bamar heartlands, and increasing air responses by the junta, has resulted in severe conflict escalation. As the conflict becomes more fractious, the challenges to opening political dialogue become even greater.

### **Increasing fragmentation**

The territorial advances of the opposition by late 2024 present a serious threat to the unified organisation of the regime across their existing strongholds. For the regime, the fragile position of Min Aung Hlaing, paired with a long history of nepotism and corruption, signals a crisis of leadership and a possible imminent power struggle. The Myanmar military has a distinctive identity and ideology, guiding its operations since its inception. It has always been a highly politicised and ethno-centric organisation committed to protect the Bamar ethnic majority from what they perceive as foreign and domestic enemies (Maung, 2014). In practice, it has only fought internal actors, in extended conflicts that it has not won, in some cases for over 70 years. As of late 2024, its main external ally, China, appears increasingly frustrated with the regime, while it continues to face significant territorial and personnel losses on several fronts across the country. This dynamic has exacerbated underlying fragmentation within the military, with Min Aung Hlaing's leadership in an increasingly perilous state (Irawaddy, 2024; Frontier Myanmar, 2024).

Furthermore, the regime's alignment with the Bamar ethnic majority in the heartlands of the country has come under increasing strain with new conscription laws, in effect since January 2024. This potential crisis challenges its core reason for its existence (the protection of that majority). Indeed, if the most active EAOs and PDFs continue to press their offensive beyond Lashio deeper into Sagaing, Mandalay, and further into the heartland, then not only will the regime have failed in its task of keeping EAOs out of those areas, it may also begin to face declining support as EAOs come into contact with the Bamar majority (Time, 2024). The military strategy of bombing civilian infrastructure will have profoundly different effects when conducted in Bamar ethnic areas rather than in the minority ethnic borderlands.

On the other side of the conflict, for the opposition, the common goal of defeating the regime has been the most significant (if not the only) motivation for the unprecedented levels of cooperation across



highly diverse groups since the coup. But as EAOs successfully expand the occupation areas inhabited (or claimed) by their ethnic groups, their motivations for continued advances beyond these areas can be reduced - some observers predict the EAOs would rather (in this situation) leave further territorial advances to the PDFs.

Since the beginning of the post-coup opposition movement, the opposition has fragmented around conflicting visions over future governance plans at both the national and sub-national level. These opposing visions have been shaped and fuelled by long standing ethnic divisions and territorial claims. Despite the emergence of a [new] alliance since the coup, coordination amongst all the opposition groups remains a serious challenge, and an attempt to establish a joint command by the NUG has largely failed (Ye Myo Hein, 2024). Fragmentation within the opposition is almost inevitable given its complex composition, including several powerful EAOs, their political wings, dozens of PDFs, and the NUG, and membership of each is scattered across the country and the globe. The relatively high levels of cooperation between different actors in opposition to the regime is explained solely by the coup that preceded it. As territories are won, not only are different EAOs coming into closer proximity with each other (occasionally leading to inter-EAO territorial disputes), but, their core strategic objectives are being fulfilled, removing the incentive for a continued offensive against the regime.

Since their establishment, PDFs pose another potential issue in relation to fragmentation among the opposition forces. As highly localised militia, whilst they may be ideologically aligned with the NUG under the goal of federal democracy and against the regime, they are often not controlled by a centralised structure and lack accountability. This lack of accountability has fuelled a descent into tit-for-tat killings between PDFs, Pyusawhti militias, and the Tatmadaw, which poses another significant challenge to establishing an organised end to armed conflict in the 'Dry Zone' (International Crisis Group, 2024).

### **Opposing post-conflict governance models**

Underlying opposing visions for the future of the governance of and within Myanmar stem from the fact that the interests of most EAOs are not only disparate in substance but highly localised. As their name exhibits, EAOs are primarily concerned with the protection, liberty, and free governance of their respective ethnic and territorial groups. Therefore, support amongst EAOs for offences beyond their respective territories in the future is highly likely to be fragile (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The effects of the conflict have also created a barrier to potential negotiations between EAOs and the regime. Violent, disproportionate military action by the Tatmadaw, which has largely failed to discriminate between legal and illegal targets (UNHCR, 2024; Irawaddy, 2024; Frontier Myanmar, 2024), has compounded existing ideological and personal divisions between the regime and EAOs. The influence of China has also had a negative effect on the prospects for a unified future of Myanmar, as well as the unity and composition of the opposition. Most notably, following talks with China, the MNDAA separated from the NUG and rest of the opposition in September 2024 - this indicates how regions in which China has a strategic interest can take new and opposing directions to other groups



within the opposition, thus further undermining a united front (Irawaddy, 2024; Myanmar Now, 2024). Both of these features of the conflict means that the likelihood of a negotiated settlement to the conflict remains low.

While some opposition groups are broadly aligned to the aim of “inclusive federal democracy”, there remain substantive differences on the form it should take and the means to achieving it. Furthermore, while the idea of asymmetric federal democracy works for some groups, especially the NUG, as the best potential solution to the conflict, many EAOs do not seek to pursue this goal via either armed or negotiated approaches. Most EAOs have relatively localised territorial aims and ideas of local governance, and they are organisationally independent from the NUG. The objective of an ‘inclusive’ federal democracy is also undermined by ethnic divisions within states such as Rakhine, in which the Arakan aim of self-governance holds no place for the Rohingya Muslim Community leading to human rights abuses and fuelling the crisis of Refugees and IDPs (Irawaddy, 2024).

Overall, then, as of late 2024, three main factors - currently escalating violence, increased fragmentation (across all sides), and competing visions of post-conflict governance - together present a serious challenges to the scope for political dialogue that could lead to a future political settlement to end violent conflict in Myanmar.

#### **4. International approaches to the conflict**

The conflict in Myanmar outlined above has resulted in the complex engagement of a range of regional and international actors. Involvement ranges from international norm-signalling and sanctions against senior junta leaders, to humanitarian aid, to political support and arms sales. Major external actors engaged in the conflict include the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China, India, Russia, the United Nations and Western powers, including the United States and the United Kingdom. Other involvement from those allied with the junta has produced a narrative dissuading foreign intervention and emphasising the legitimacy of the military dictatorship.

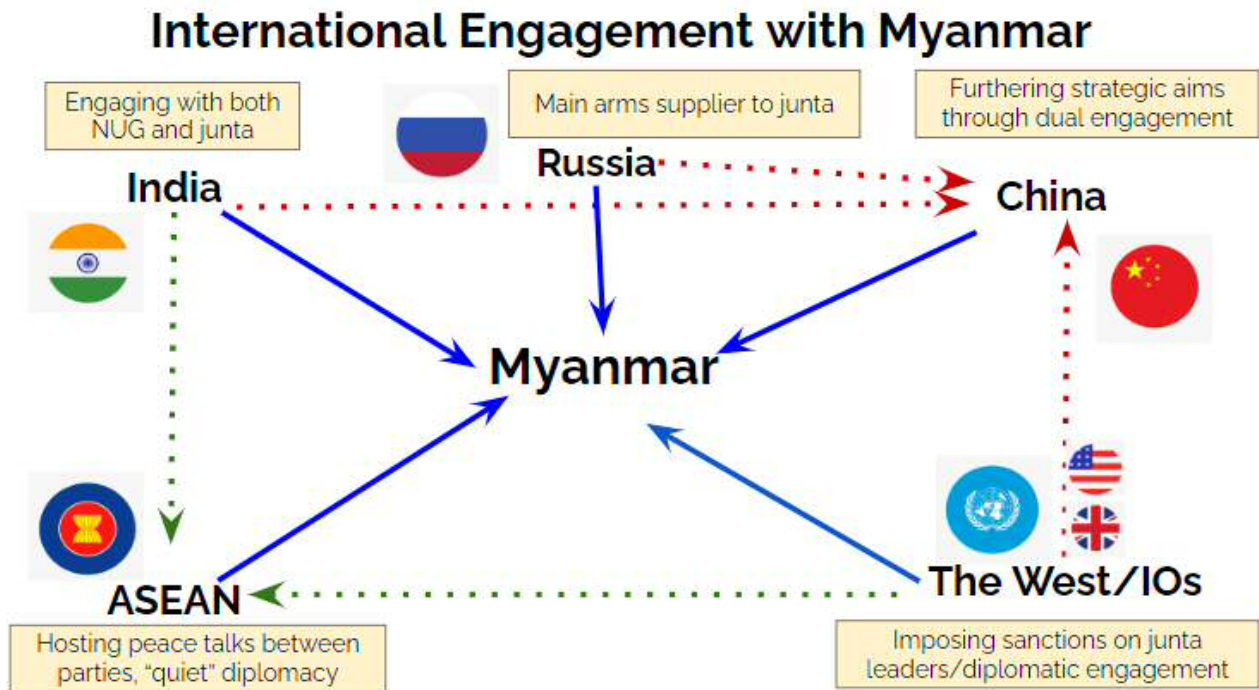


Figure 3: Mindmap outlining major international actors in Myanmar and their relationships.

## Regional powers

### China

China's response to the unfolding Myanmar civil war has been among the most dynamic of all the regional actors. As China directly borders the state and holds significant cultural ties to these border regions their approach was markedly different from ASEAN, with little restraint on their political or economic involvement. Chinese strategic and economic interests guided their policy and their involvement in Myanmar, with the CCP utilising varied methods to gain access to natural resources and control the conflict in a way that is beneficial to China (United States Institute of Peace and Tower, 2022).

For instance, the Hongmen Association (partially funded by the BRI initiative) is presided over by Wan Kuok-Kui, the 14K Triad Cartel leader in Myanmar. This triad maintains control over territory in Myanmar and has cooperated with the CCP's strategic infrastructure development. Kuok-Kui founded his own beverage company and chain of restaurants and was named by the Chair of the Overseas United Working Committee of China For Promoting International Economic and Technical Cooperation as a 'patriotic citizen' (South China Morning Post and Fraser, 2021). Additionally, the CCP maintained control over a 100-megawatt Chipwi Nge hydropower plant in Kachin state, which supplies the Myanmar national grid.

The CCP was also interested in gaining access to the Indian Ocean (traditionally a sphere of influence for India). As such, China established listening posts and was keen to establish naval bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands offshore Myanmar as a means of monitoring activity in the Indian Ocean (Wilson Center and Myers, 2020). The Chinese military has often been deployed to



protect the infrastructure and industrial projects undertaken by the Chinese government. Two significant projects in the Yunnan Province are critical to China's vision of a Myanmar-China economic corridor. Firstly, a dual-use port on the Indian Ocean at Kyaukphyu and the Muse-Mandalay Railroad project, a \$9 billion, 431-kilometre railway project to connect Kunming (the capital of the Yunnan province) to Mandalay in central Myanmar (Wilson Center and Myers, 2020). We can surmise based on this activity that the CCP was interested in developing new shipping routes for goods and energy resources that would allow them to bypass the Malacca Strait.

As well as continual economic and infrastructure-based involvement, China also involved itself diplomatically in the conflict, legitimising the junta government in their stance as the official government, whilst simultaneously engaging rebel groups and providing them with funding. Using the Lancang Mekong Cooperation Forum (a Chinese-led sub-regional framework), the Chinese government met with several representatives of the junta (United States Institute of Peace and Tower, 2022). The Chinese foreign secretary has also visited Naypyidaw to further legitimise the junta's position, as well as high-ranking Myanmar officials visiting Beijing. Similarly, meetings (such as between the KIA Leader and the Chinese Ambassador) between high level officials and members of EAOs have demonstrated the CCP's ability to exercise control over multiple actors in the conflict.

Nevertheless, the Myanmar regime's agency in this relationship has been crucial, even in the face of Chinese power. Junta members were aware that the Chinese government has been supporting crime syndicates and opposing factions in the war (Tan and Yoo, 2022). Traditionally, the Myanmar regime has undertaken foreign policy based on the concept of hedging, balancing powerful actors in its self-interest. Additionally, local and sub-national actors roles should also be emphasised. Infrastructure development projects are under nearly constant threat due to the volatile nature of Myanmar's war, and protestors targeted Chinese development projects (Chan and Pun, 2020).

Evidence suggests that the CCP was not interested in outright control of Myanmar, but rather their actions demonstrate a form of 'Authoritarian Conflict Management', wherein China attempts to steer and constrain the conflict in their interests. China's support has increasingly favoured the regime as indicated by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's visit to Aung Hlaing in mid-August, since then the regime has since its aerial attacks on towns controlled by opposition groups. (BBC News and Head, 2024)

Leaked minutes from meetings in 2024 reveal that it is a priority for Myanmar to remain a nation-state for the CCP. It would be unacceptable to them to have a divided nation with separate political entities (The Irrawaddy, 2024). The CCP has also been acutely aware of Russian involvement and engagement with the junta - and has attempted to balance their influence against their nominal ally (The Irrawaddy, 2024)

There has been an important shift in the actions of China since the unprecedented success of Operation 1027 and its subsequent action of brokering a ceasefire under the Haigeng agreement between the Three Brotherhood Alliance, and the Regime (Irawaddt, 2024). With the ISP finding that over 35% of Border Trade is now controlled by EAOs (as of June this year - and likely to have raised significantly since then) and with China refusing to trade with EAOs on its borders, Myanmar is estimated to have lost \$9.35Bn since the coup (ISP, 2024).

Importantly, China's involvement in the conflict, whilst sporadic, has been, and will continue to be, guided by two realities; the need to protect Chinese investments in Myanmar and Chinese access to the Indian Ocean through Myanmar, and the fact that Myanmar is not at the top of China's

agenda (USIP, 2024; ICG, 2024). This means that regions and EAOs within Myanmar that do not directly affect China's interests will not see its influence, unlike those areas that do. As such, China has been unlikely to play a national or regional role in managing the conflict, operating only more directly in regions and areas that directly affect its interests.

### **ASEAN and the Five-Point Consensus (5PC)**

After China, ASEAN has been the most important regional grouping of actors politically involved in the Myanmar conflict. ASEAN recommended implementing a five-point consensus in Myanmar on April 21st, 2021, which was agreed upon with Min Hung Hlaing, the junta's leader (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021; ASEAN Parliamentarians For Human Rights, 2023; Reuters, 2022).

These five points of agreement are as follows: -

1. There shall be an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar, and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.
2. Constructive dialogue among all parties shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the people's interests.
3. A special envoy of the ASEAN chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process with the assistance of the secretary general of ASEAN.
4. ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Centre
5. The special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned

In *de jure* terms, ASEAN's approach has appeared unified and effective, especially the support for the dialogue process and the cessation of violence. In *de facto* terms, however, the nature of ASEAN has meant that implementing the plan has been difficult, if not impossible, in the ongoing context. The organisation emphasises open dialogue and the resolution of conflicts through continual engagement, which means that even though the junta has ignored many of the consensus points (such as exercising restraint), ASEAN must continue to engage institutionally with the junta. ASEAN has traditionally been hesitant about involving themselves in member states' affairs and has emphasised the value of continual engagement with parties as opposed to outright criticism and direct sanctions - they pursued a similar line during Myanmar's last dictatorship.

However, there has been a quiet schism between the members of ASEAN, with some members being frustrated at the lack of progress made on the dialogue front. Two sides emerged from this schism - with one side (Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) favouring a softer approach, and in contrast a more directly critical approach favoured by Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore (Ingyin Naing; Voice of America, 2024) (Frontier Myanmar, 2024). Notably, those nations who favoured a softer approach to the junta were also those who hold closer ties with China, and who are authoritarian powers themselves.

The emerging schism within ASEAN has been important, as ASEAN has historically expressed discomfort in involving themselves in member states' internal affairs. ASEAN's intention to provide humanitarian aid has been stymied by a lack of resources and genuine commitment (ASEAN Parliaments for Human Rights, 2023); "ASEAN's weak-willed approach toward the junta is a complete disgrace. Even after it finally criticised the junta's airstrikes in Sagaing, the ASEAN



Secretary-General still met with the junta's permanent representative to ASEAN, making any statement of condemnation little more than lip service," said AHR Co-chair and former Malaysian member of parliament Charles Santiago. "ASEAN needs to live up to its role as a regional mediator, and it needs to do so immediately, starting with Indonesia as chair. Closed-door and informal meetings are no longer enough," said Santiago. "It is clear that ASEAN needs to negotiate a new agreement that includes the National Unity Government and the representatives of ethnic minorities while providing clear enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the agreement is upheld." (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, 2023).

A challenge found among ASEAN members has been the disconnect between rhetoric and action. All states have emphasised the need to end the war and have critiqued the junta for their military actions - often whilst providing military and humanitarian aid to the state. In October 2024; an ASEAN summit made it clear that ASEAN members are frustrated with the lack of progress that the organisation has made - with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr openly admitting that 'we have not been very successful in actually changing the situation' (Naing; Voice of America, 2024)

## **Singapore**

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the Singapore government stressed that there should be no misconceptions that ASEAN can handle the issues independently because the problems are essentially political, which requires political leaders in Myanmar to reconcile and engage in direct negotiations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, 2024). Singapore held that all political leaders must engage in direct, face-to-face conversations in good faith. Though the circumstances are complicated, it appeared likely that Singapore would stick to its stance.

Singapore took significant action against arms sales to Myanmar in response to United Nations pressure, severely impacting Myanmar's military leaders. According to Thomas Andrews, the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Singapore's government quickly reacted to his 2023 report, which identified Singapore-based entities as major weapons suppliers to Myanmar. Consequently, arms exports from Singapore to Myanmar dropped by 83%, demonstrating a positive step forward (Al Jazeera, 2024). This crackdown increased costs for Myanmar's army chief, Min Aung Hlaing, who was grappling with severe battlefield challenges and opposition forces. In desperation, the generals imposed a sweeping conscription law. Andrews's report, "The Billion Dollar Death Trade," detailed over \$1 billion in arms transfers to Myanmar, with 138 Singapore-based firms involved in \$254 million worth of weapons materials from 2021 to 2022. Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs appreciated Andrews's information, aiding their investigations and reinforcing their stance against the Myanmar military's violence (Chau; Al Jazeera News, 2024)

## **Indonesia**

Indonesia took its duty as Chair of ASEAN in 2023 particularly seriously in relation to the Myanmar crisis, including implementing and leading the Five-Point Consensus. Retno Marsudi, until late 2024 the highly active Indonesian Foreign Minister, took a strong leadership role as Chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in relation to Myanmar. Even outside of its capacity as ASEAN chair, Indonesia has been quietly trying to resolve the issue by holding more "engagements" with all relevant parties. Indonesia engaged and hosted 195 ASEAN meetings, which

were dominated by concerns over the Myanmar conflict, regional tensions between rival powers, the United States and China, and mediation talks from various parties (Lamb and Teresia, 2023; Arshad, Baharudin, and The Straits Times, 2023).

Additionally, on the 4th October 2024, Indonesia held talks with representatives from the UN, the EU and ASEAN alongside members of anti-junta forces in Myanmar to discuss issues around peacebuilding in the nation - providing space for opposition actors to convene and engage diplomatically with international actors (Strangio; Reuters, 2024). News about the progress and success and/or failure of the talks has been increasingly complex to measure - as Indonesia has emphasised a 'non-megaphone diplomacy' approach and prefers to secretly engage actors involved in the conflict, as well as regional powers, including China and India. Indonesia's proactive stance may speak to their regional desire to take more of a leading role in Southeast Asian politics in the coming years.

## **Malaysia**

Malaysia has criticised the junta for its bombing of civilians and the spillover of refugees into neighbouring states. However, it continued deporting refugees under newly implemented laws despite serious concerns for their safety (Al Jazeera, 2023). Rohingya refugees, a severe concern to the UN, have also been under threat from these deportation laws, despite the Malaysian government's rhetoric of condemnation for the regime regarding their treatment of the Rohingya people.

Malaysia committed to working closely with ASEAN member states to help Myanmar achieve a peaceful and sustainable resolution to its crisis, while also remaining one of the more critical ASEAN members towards the regime. Malaysia emphasised the need to fully implement the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) adopted by ASEAN leaders in April 2021. It has also supported ASEAN's efforts under Indonesia's chairmanship and its Special Envoy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2022).

Prime Minister Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim, in a keynote address to the Malaysia-Thailand Chamber of Commerce, stressed the importance of building consensus to send a strong message to the Myanmar regime to end discrimination, marginalisation, intimidation, and violence against its people. This stance aligns with Malaysia's foreign policy principles and international advocacy position. The Prime Minister also suggested that while Myanmar's issues should not distract ASEAN, the rest of the member states should continue strengthening collaboration to promote peace, security, and prosperity for the ASEAN Community.

As Malaysia assumes the ASEAN chair in 2025, it will be closely watched, as one of the loudest voices in opposition to the junta in the region (Root; International Bar Association, 2024). Malaysia has cited their criticism of Myanmar's government during the Rohingya crisis in its ascendancy to the ASEAN chair (Win; The Diplomat, 2024). Regional commentators cite Malaysia's democratic credentials when compared to Laos and put more hope in Malaysia's focus on the Myanmar crisis as potentially opening up routes towards a sustained political dialogue.

## **Thailand**

Thailand has been vocal about the need to engage in a more substantive peace process, as their border territories with Myanmar have felt directly the impact of the conflict (Reuters, 2024), as well



as the possibility that a military solution might be increasingly unfeasible. The Thai government also hosted numerous diplomatic engagements between the military junta and opposition forces and offered to host an informal consultation on the conflict (Bangkok Post and Tangsathaporn, 2024).

Thailand has received thousands of refugees fleeing the conflict since 2021, building on the many thousands already living in Thailand from previous conflicts.. It has arranged evacuation flights for civilians from Myanmar, as well as positioning armed guards and border security along the border to contain the conflict (The Nation, 2024). They have also been incredibly concerned about the flow of drug trade from Myanmar, as policing the crime syndicates became increasingly difficult due to the collapse of central state authority.

Thailand has been vocal about the need to begin inclusive peace talks - even going so far as to host anti-government forces, and senior foreign ministry sources have been quoted as saying that the regime is 'losing strength'. Thailand's policy, led by its foreign minister and special adviser Pornpimol Kanchanalak, involves broad engagement with Myanmar nationals, NGOs, the State Administration Council (SAC), and discrete interactions with the National Unity Government (NUG). This policy aims to reset relations through humanitarian assistance, leading to mutually beneficial development (Ganesan, 2023).

Several problems can be found with Thailand's bilateral policy. While critical, it legitimises the SAC, which is controversial within ASEAN, and Thailand needs to persuade other ASEAN members to support this strategy. The upcoming Thai election could affect policy continuity, especially if a non-military-affiliated prime minister succeeds Chan-ocha. Additionally, Thai public sympathy towards Myanmar citizens and opposition to both militaries could complicate the policy. Despite these issues, Thailand's engagement with those in power might ultimately prove successful.

## India

Like China, India shares significant cultural ties with Myanmar, with its Northeastern regions sharing significant cultural ties with their Burmese neighbours. Historically, India has been a vocal critic of the Tatmadaw regime, but has failed overall to develop a clear long term economic and diplomatic relationship with Myanmar (Malik, 2016)

However, with the advent of the "Look East" Policy, which has spanned political divides, from the Congress Party to the BJP, the Indian government has begun to develop a far more pragmatic approach, utilising development projects and diplomatic ties to Myanmar (Grare, 2017). The Indian government's approach has been based on attempts at broad engagement with both the junta and opposition forces. For instance, representatives from the Indian state government met with the Arakan Army in Southern China state to discuss the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project, a large, India-funded transregional connectivity initiative to provide access to landlocked Northeast India through Western Myanmar (Choudhury, 2024). This provides a degree of legitimacy to major opposition forces, whilst maintaining diplomatic ties with the military government.

The Indian government had been engaging with several actors more recently in the conflict, including ethnic armed groups, the SAC and even the NUG, some of whom are understood to be in exile in New Dehli. Recently, an unprecedented invite was extended to opposition forces from Myanmar to attend an international conference in New Dehli, attended by senior federal cabinet ministers (Lone, Ghoshal and Reuters, 2024)

However, India has not officially condemned the coup and is still engaging with the regime diplomatically. India is also concerned about the Chinese development projects in the region, especially in the Bay of Bengal. The Indian government seems to have the narrative of grand engagement and development of infrastructure but has placed few resources in doing so in Myanmar. Their aim appears to be engagement and containment, but it remains to be seen whether Chinese involvement in Myanmar will spur the BJP to greater action regarding managing the crisis.

## **Russia**

Russia has been a close ally of the junta since the 2021 coup, and alongside China, is Myanmar's most reliable partner. Their relationship with the junta has been primarily based on arms exports to the Myanmar military. This ranges from weaponry such as machine guns to more expensive hardware including fighter jets, which provided the Tatmadaw with aerial superiority over the forces locked in fighting (International Crisis Group, 2022). These weapons sales also serve to benefit Russia. Much military hardware has been sold on a lend-lease basis, meaning Russia can recall the hardware as required. This was seen in January 2023, when Russia recalled tanks from the junta in order to deploy them in Ukraine (Naing, 2023). Russia's strategy has appeared to be one of supporting regional authoritarian conflict management, or coercive counterinsurgency, as it did with the Assad regime in Syria. Russia has acknowledged the junta as the rightful government of Myanmar, and have established themselves, alongside China, as Myanmar's biggest ally.

## **Western allies and international organisations**

### **U.K.**

At the UN Security Council, the UK has emphasised its strong support for ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus, calling for an immediate end to violence in Myanmar. The UNSC aims to hold the military accountable and show solidarity with Myanmar's people and highlighted the worsening humanitarian crisis, citing military-imposed restrictions on aid and forced hospital closures in Rakhine State, and reiterated the need for safe and unhindered humanitarian access (UK Government, 2024). The UK addressed the UNSC, emphasising that the resolution responding to ASEAN's call for support sends a firm message to Myanmar's military.

Since 2017, the UK has provided over \$56 million in aid for the Rohingya (Woodward and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2024) and other Muslim minorities in Rakhine State. The UK also noted that conditions are not suitable for Rohingya repatriation and praised Bangladesh for hosting refugees. The UK called for renewed efforts toward a peaceful and inclusive Myanmar and urged the UN to appoint a Special Envoy to advance these efforts.

The UK is also a major contributor to humanitarian aid in Myanmar, having provided £120 million since February 2021. This funding has gone towards essential aid, emergency healthcare, education, and support for civil society. Following Cyclone Mocha on May 14, 2023, the UK added another £2 million to bolster the humanitarian response (UK Government, 2023a). The UK



significantly supports the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund, the IFRC's Disaster Relief Emergency Fund, and the NGO Start Fund. In 2022, these combined funds provided over £31 million in aid to the ASEAN region.

The joint statement by Australia, Canada, the EU, the UK, the US, Switzerland, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea recalls the International Court of Justice's provisional measures to safeguard human rights in Myanmar and welcomes UN Security Council Resolution 2669, which calls for an immediate end to violence, respect for human rights, and full humanitarian access (UK Government, 2024a).

While ASEAN and the UK have yet to detail specific new initiatives solely focused on Myanmar, their broad cooperation areas and commitments to regional stability and development indirectly indicates support for efforts to address the crisis in Myanmar. By supporting economic stability, security, and sustainable development and maintaining a coordinated diplomatic focus on the region, they aim to create an environment conducive to resolving Myanmar's political and humanitarian issues (ASEAN, 2024), although they do not appear likely to work directly in promoting political dialogue in the region.

As of November 2024, the UK also imposed significant economic sanctions on the military junta - combining to see a decrease of trade of 43.7% between the two nations. There remains an expectation of further sanctions and decreased trade with continued hostilities from the junta (Department for Business & Trade, 2024)

Despite these separate actions, the question remains of what concrete action may be taken by the UK in relation to the conflict. The UK government appears eager to support regional peace initiatives, but not to divert personnel or initiatives to directly stem the violence on the ground, and certainly not outside of any ASEAN approved framework for action. More resources could be diverted to aiding regional actors with whom the UK has established relationships and partnerships and in formulating further diplomatic initiatives to bring about alternative routes to political dialogue.

## United States

The US was among the first countries to condemn the military junta and their democratic repression, passing the BURMA 2022 act through Congress with bipartisan support to enforce numerous sanctions prohibiting the sale of American weaponry to the junta, as well as economic sanctions on top military leaders (United States Congress, 2021). A new bipartisan congressional 'Burma Caucus' was created in May 2024 to advise on policy and build upon the '22 sanctions (Matamis, 2024). Humanitarian aid has totalled \$141 million (U.S. Embassy in Burma, 2024).

However, military support to the opposition has been limited. The Burma Act prevents non-lethal assistance to the opposition (United States Congress, 2021), as the US government could be aware that intervening in the conflict would be taken as an aggressive move by the CCP. ASEAN and the United States remain in contact over the issue, with the US heavily leaning on members (such as Singapore) to take a more hardline approach (U.S. Embassy Singapore, 2024). Countries with stronger relations and ties with the US (such as Singapore) have been more receptive to changing their policies to reflect the directly anti-junta stance the US government has taken.

## United Nations

The United Nations has stated that it plans to continue to complement the work of ASEAN (United Nations, 2024) and support its efforts to implement its Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar. UN discussion has featured diverging views on whether the Myanmar crisis merits greater Security Council attention (United Nations, 2024). Many speakers expressed frustration that the Council has not been able to agree on a press statement or other products on Myanmar for more than 15 months, while others emphasised the centrality of ASEAN in facilitating a solution to the crisis (United Nations, 2024). Example statements include the following: - “Currently, no UN Special Envoy, no UN Resident Coordinator, no regular meetings or a reporting mechanism of the Security Council” - Representative of the Republic of Korea; “The absence of a UN Special Envoy and humanitarian coordinator limits the active engagement of the UN and the international community in Myanmar” – Bangladesh; “Myanmar does not pose a threat to international security. The Russian Federation opposes using the Council to pressure Naypyidaw and condemns Western delegations' attempts to politicise the Myanmar dossier – Russia.

With the appointment of a new UN Special Envoy Julie Bishop in April 2024, the UN has been exerting more diplomatic pressure on actors to end the conflict (Lowy Institute and Pedersen, 2024). The Secretary General of the UN urged ASEAN member states to leverage their influence to bring about peace before irreversible damage was formed to the region (United Nations, 2024). The UN is also working with those ASEAN members who take a more critical approach to the junta to take a more proactive approach to bring actors to the diplomatic table. However, similarly to ASEAN, the UN is filled with diverging interests and views on the conflict in Myanmar. The UN Security Council has been rendered defunct in delivering consensus in approaching a peaceful resolution to the conflict, given its membership. China and Russia form the main opposition to outright intervention against the conflict, following the long-standing pattern from when China directly opposed intervention in the 2008 uprisings in Myanmar under the previous dictatorship. As permanent members of the Security Council China and Russia are directly opposed to an interventionist UN mandate, it remains unlikely that the UN will propose any concrete interventions against the regime.



## 5. Preliminary Conclusions

### International Approaches to the Myanmar Conflict

'ASEAN Way'	Pragmatic Engagement	Conflict Containment/ Management	Disruption
ASEAN/ IOs, 'West'	India	China	Russia
Broadly desire return to democratic governance & cessation of violence, but without confrontation	Satisfied with peaceful neighbour, desire end to hostilities, non-confrontational approach, with dialogue from a range of parties	Focused on containing/ managing the conflict at subnational/border level to maintain strategic regional goals	Acknowledged the junta as the rightful government of Myanmar, and have established themselves (apart from China) as Myanmar's biggest ally

As of November 2024, at the time of concluding the research for this background paper, the Myanmar conflict remains marked by a highly dynamic and fragmented web of domestic conflict actors, each with competing goals, temporarily united in loose coalitions across the opposition, and fighting an increasingly fragile and violent military regime. This set of dynamics, along with the proximity of active spoilers, as well as major global actors disinterested in active peacemaking, means that it is highly unlikely that any form of negotiated political settlement will be possible between the SAC, NUG, and EAOs at any point soon.

Indeed, the two major factions engaged in armed competition currently view military armed victory as the best route to ending the conflict for Myanmar, with limited interests and incentives towards political negotiations. Each of these factions have, since their conception, been orientated towards the destruction of the other (Bunte, 2022). Furthermore, there is no external actor actively supporting substantive peace talks, with only limited diplomatic engagements, mainly from within ASEAN. Unlike other conflicts globally, the Myanmar conflict does not appear to threaten international security, which has resulted in limited international interest in resolving or containing it. In fact, states allied with the junta have defended a non-interventionist approach at the UN, citing the legitimacy of the junta. In addition, various key actors have conflicting visions for how a peaceful resolution to the conflict could be reached, and the lack of a legitimate, trusted, neutral and powerful enough mediator further exacerbates this situation. Although powerful, two of Myanmar's closest neighbours, China and India, have limited interests in working as an overall broker or mediator. China has however played a critical role in brokering localised ceasefires, playing one of the most active roles in ending violence of any regional power engaged in the conflict to date. However, it is

only when China has felt directly threatened on its border region that it has intervened sub-nationally in Myanmar, supporting whichever armed actor necessary to help to meet its own strategic goals. States within ASEAN do not have the leverage or interest to take on the risk of mediating in the conflict, without greater political and military support from allied Western governments, or the UN, both of which remain highly unlikely. ASEAN's lack of track record in and resources committed to enabling full political negotiations, despite positive action in supporting more limited regional talks, mean it is not in a strong position to take on a full mediator's role without sustained support from allied Western states - especially given the risks of confronting China's interests in the regional conflict.

Without significant unified action within the region, and with no forthcoming concrete support from allied Western states, within Myanmar the conflict continues apace. It has reached a potential turning point at which it appears the military regime will be unable to continue with its current level of control in the long or possibly even medium term (Time, 2024; Irrawaddy, 2024). The unprecedented cooperation within the opposition has led to significant territorial advances, which means EAOs hold control of large stretches along the borders with China, Thailand, and Bangladesh, which in turn applies pressure to the regime's capacity to trade (ISP, 2024). These territorial advances, however, have also had the effect of uncovering fragmentation within the opposition, both in terms of territorial disputes (Irawaddy, 2024), and in terms of their willingness to continue to advance beyond the territories to which they hold a claim. PDFs are likely to continue the fight with or without EAO support, but training by these larger armed organisations is likely to continue. However, without outright military support from these ethnic armies, progress will be slow, and casualties will likely be high for the PDFs. As such, the conflict has escalated significantly and is likely to continue to do so as these trends persist.

The military regime's response to their recent losses has been an escalation of air strikes from mid to late 2024, more frequently targeting civilian areas, and the introduction of the draft in January 2024, since when over 1,000 young people have been drafted (Irawaddy, 2024). Both of these actions have had, and will continue to have, adverse effects on the relationship between the Bamar ethnic majority and the military, foregrounded by an increasing awareness among ethnic Burmese people of the ethnic issues facing communities in the borderlands.

Humanitarian responses and the imposition of sanctions have been central to Western government's interventions in Myanmar, including those by the UK Government. These actions continue to provide international aid through NGOs and local CSOs in Myanmar. In this way, these organisations may be able to build bridges between groups at the local level in the future. However, this approach will not lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict at the elite level, across such diverse and antagonised groups, which would require much greater political and economic pressure to engage in sustained support for dialogue across the warring parties. The role of pro-democratic international actors in Myanmar, in the interest of upholding international law and promoting democratic governance, remains inadequate and ill defined.



Nevertheless, as the regime continues to concede territories and bomb civilian areas, as EAOs continue to establish their own localised form of governance, and as the IDP crisis grows, it is necessary that any future increase in humanitarian action deals with sub-national actors as much as, if not more than, national figures, in order to reach the civilian population. The military power of EAOs means that imposing governance on them through a centralised structure will be a near-insurmountable task. However, the maintenance of relative peace between EAOs has proven possible since the 2021 coup and should be supported. It is therefore necessary that any external engagement with Myanmar requires an in-depth understanding of each ethnic armed organisation, their specific histories, the legacy of the junta in relation with each group, alongside the nature of PDFs and Pyusawhti militias in each region. A nuanced grasp of the interests across these groups, which varies greatly region by region, is necessary to support - rather than potentially undermine - future peace efforts before they have begun.

New crises will continue to emerge in Myanmar as the conflict escalates, as seen in the UN declaration of impending famine for two million people in Rakhine State in November 2024 (UN, 2024). Humanitarian aid programmes will continue to be needed in the short to medium term. Once again, an awareness of the deep history to these regional ethnic conflicts, and the highly localised political, religious and ethnic histories across the country, is vital for any aid delivery to improve rather than exacerbate humanitarian crises. Regionally nuanced understanding, along with a willingness to support sustained dialogue across all parties, is required of any regional actor, or group of actors, to have any sort of positive impact on future conditions for the citizens of Myanmar.

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