

ASEAN's Renewed Engagement with Naypyidaw and the Future of Federal Myanmar

Yuyun Wahyuningrum and Sarah Teitt explore whether ASEAN is on the right path as it works to engage Myanmar.

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As ASEAN foreign ministers prepare to meet in Manila from 21-22 July, a quiet but significant shift is underway in the regional bloc's approach to Myanmar. Although ASEAN remains formally committed to the Five-Point Consensus (5PC), several member states (AMS) appear to be reconsidering the collective pressure approach adopted since the 2021 coup. Rather than abandoning the 5PC, they argue that more [direct engagement with Naypyidaw](#) may be necessary to encourage its implementation.

In May, Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan travelled to Myanmar for talks with junta-appointed Foreign Minister Tin Maung Swe, [urging](#) an extension of the military's temporary ceasefire and presenting engagement as a pathway towards de-escalation and dialogue. Philippines ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting Leader and Undersecretary for Policy, [Leo Herrera-Lim](#), recently co-chaired foreign policy consultations in Naypyidaw. Indonesia's foreign minister [visited](#) Naypyidaw on 8 June and Lao PDR did so on 12 June, while Thailand has [long advocated](#) a more pragmatic approach towards Myanmar's military rulers.

There are signs that this steady trickle of bilateral outreach may carve a path for recalibrated regional relations with Myanmar. Resigned to the reality that the 5PC will remain a matter of words rather than deeds, at least without a new tactical approach, some ASEAN foreign ministers are now open to including a [virtual seat](#) for Myanmar's highly contested and dubiously credentialled new government in upcoming talks. At present, it is unclear whether high-level

representation from Myanmar is a one-off consideration or represents a new normal. What it does signal, however, is ASEAN leaders' openness to exploring additional modalities for engaging with 'post-election' Myanmar.

ASEAN seems to be, as a matter of practice if not strategy, pivoting to a "[middle ground](#)" approach between normalisation and isolation: [officially maintaining](#) a stance of collective non-recognition while increasing bilateral and unofficial outreach. Beyond the diminishing returns of its status quo approach, impetus for re-engagement is likely driven by concerns that, as Myanmar strengthens its political and strategic ties with Russia, China and more recently, [India](#), ASEAN increasingly risks becoming a marginalised partner of choice.

But does the current mode of engagement serve the interest of ASEAN centrality?

The concern is not that AMS are reopening channels with Naypyidaw. Rather, it is that engagement is increasingly taking place through bilateral initiatives rather than a coordinated regional strategy. This gives the junta greater diplomatic flexibility than it faced under ASEAN's earlier policy of collective pressure. Instead of negotiating with ASEAN collectively, Naypyidaw can engage member states separately, tailoring cooperation to their immediate concerns while sidestepping more difficult political commitments. A stark manifestation of this is [Thailand's unilateral cross-border humanitarian corridor](#), which leveraged national Red Cross societies to bypass the oversight of the ASEAN Chair's Special Envoy and normalise ties under the guise of aid. Such diplomatic 'forum shopping' allows the junta to gain regional acceptance incrementally without making meaningful progress on the 5PC. Engagement thus risks becoming a series of bilateral bargains rather than a collective effort to advance a political settlement.

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Myanmar's military has long demonstrated an ability to navigate divisions among external actors. ASEAN's apparent shift from collective pressure to nationally driven engagement risks replacing one imperfect strategy with an even weaker one: a fragmented diplomatic landscape in which the junta gains multiple channels of engagement without accepting meaningful obligations in return. In seeking to regain influence, ASEAN may inadvertently dilute the very leverage it hopes to restore.

This challenge becomes even more significant when viewed against the changing realities inside Myanmar. Much of ASEAN's diplomacy continues to assume that influence in Naypyidaw translates into influence over Myanmar as a whole. Increasingly, that assumption no longer holds. Myanmar has long contained multiple centres of authority, particularly in areas administered by ethnic armed organisations. Since 2021, the conflict has dramatically expanded geographically and politically, accelerating the [emergence](#) of new governance arrangements across resistance-controlled territories.

Authority is no longer concentrated in a central state apparatus but dispersed across multiple actors exercising varying degrees of administrative and territorial control. In many parts of the country, including Sagaing, Magway, Chin, Karenni, Rakhine and other resistance-controlled areas, local authorities have [established](#) governance structures that provide public services, administer territory and exercise varying degrees of political authority independently of the military regime. What is emerging is often described as 'federalism from below', a process

through which new forms of governance are being built at the local and regional levels rather than imposed through constitutional reform from the centre.

While Myanmar's future constitutional order remains deeply contested, political authority is being redistributed on the ground. Myanmar's trajectory increasingly points towards a more decentralised and plural political landscape in which Naypyidaw is only one among several centres of power. Yet ASEAN's diplomacy remains anchored in relations among nation-states, making Naypyidaw the most accessible and familiar point of engagement.

Myanmar's political reality is becoming progressively less state-centric than the diplomatic framework through which ASEAN seeks to engage it. This reality presents a fundamental dilemma for ASEAN. Re-engagement centred primarily on Naypyidaw risks recentralising diplomacy around a capital that no longer monopolises political authority. It may also narrow political space for discussions about Myanmar's future political order by reinforcing the perception that the junta remains the principal gateway to the country's future.

ASEAN cannot hope to influence Myanmar's future without engaging actors who continue to wield power. The danger is not pragmatic engagement itself, but that ASEAN may be adopting a narrow vision of pragmatic engagement centred mainly on relations with Naypyidaw while overlooking the wider constellation of actors who increasingly shape realities across the country. ASEAN's efforts to restore its relevance could instead leave the bloc engaging one centre of power while missing the broader political transformation underway.

ASEAN's challenge is not simply to re-engage Myanmar, but to engage a Myanmar that has fundamentally changed since 2021. Without a more coordinated regional approach and a broader understanding of the country's evolving political landscape, ASEAN risks producing the worst of both worlds: a stronger diplomatic position for Naypyidaw, weaker collective leverage for ASEAN and diminished attention to the actors likely to shape Myanmar's political order.

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