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# Myanmar's Evolving Crisis and Its Regional Implications:

Insights from the CSCAP Study Group

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People pass a sign promoting voter participation in downtown in Yangon, Burma, December 26, 2025. Photo by Lauren DeCicca via Getty Images

## The Evolving Crisis in Myanmar

Since the military coup of February 2021, Myanmar has experienced a profound political and humanitarian crisis marked by mass protests, violent repression, the emergence of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the formation of the National Unity Government, and the expansion of armed resistance involving both the People's Defence Forces and long-established ethnic armed organizations. The post-coup period has accelerated state fragmentation, weakened central governance, and intensified humanitarian displacement across multiple border regions.

Against this backdrop, developments surrounding the electoral process announced by the Myanmar authorities between December 2025 and January 2026 have further complicated an already fragile political and security landscape. While presented as a potential step toward political

normalization, the electoral process unfolded under severe structural and security constraints. Of an estimated 35 million eligible voters, only approximately 13.1 million, or 38 percent, cast ballots—about half of the 25.9 million in the 2020 general election. At the same time, around 10.5 million voters, representing 30 percent of the electorate, were excluded from the process, and a further 11 million abstained, indicating both restricted access and widespread disengagement. The election was conducted in only 39.86 percent of the country's territory, with more than 67 townships excluded and over 4 million voters unable to participate (ALTSEAN Burma 2026, 1–4). Even within areas where voting occurred, turnout remained uneven, including record-low participation in Yangon and less than 5 percent turnout in parts of Chin State. The number of polling stations declined from 39,963 in 2020 to approximately 21,517, further limiting voter access (ACLEDD 2026; UNHRC 2024).

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Myanmar, October 28, 2021. Photo by Pyae Sone Htun via Unsplash

Concerns regarding the conditions of the electoral process surpass its limitations. Reports documented coercive practices, administrative pressure, and procedural irregularities, alongside restrictions on political competition, following the exclusion or dissolution of major parties that had previously secured over 90 percent of the seats in parliament in the 2020 election. These developments unfolded in parallel with continued armed conflict, including more than 1,288 recorded attacks and 308 airstrikes during the electoral period. Taken together, these empirical indicators suggest that the electoral process remained embedded within the broader conflict and had limited

impact in addressing the underlying crisis (IFES 2026).

Prior to this recent electoral process, the first meeting of the CSCAP Study Group on the Situation in Myanmar, was held September 25–26, 2025, in Bangkok, marking the formal initiation of a Track II effort to address the crisis within a broader regional and geopolitical context. The establishment of the Study Group reflects a recognition that the situation in Myanmar extends beyond a domestic political impasse, and carries wider implications for regional stability that require sustained and structured dialogue. Rather than

seeking to alter Myanmar’s internal political order, the initiative is oriented toward pragmatic engagement aimed at mitigating political, economic, and social spillovers across the region.

Discussions within the Study Group highlighted three interrelated dimensions of Myanmar’s evolving crisis: (1) its structural roots in unresolved questions of state formation and civil-military tensions; (2) its growing implications for regional security and ASEAN cohesion; and (3) the varied responses of neighbouring states and regional mechanisms seeking to mitigate its cross-border consequences.

## The Structural Roots of Myanmar's Crisis

Discussions within the CSCAP Study Group highlighted that Myanmar's crisis is fundamentally rooted in the so-called politics of state formation: shaped by the enduring role of the Tatmadaw and unresolved tensions over the structure of the state (Preecharush 2023, 19–30). Participants noted that the military's institutional identity predates the modern state and is grounded in a persistent self-perception as the guardian of national unity, which has been reinforced through repeated interventions during periods of crisis. This identity makes its withdrawal from politics unlikely (Callahan 2003, 172–73).

At present, Myanmar's political landscape reflects a fragmented and multilayered distribution of authority. The Tatmadaw maintains control primarily in Naypyidaw and parts of Yangon, while large areas are contested or administered by ethnic armed organizations and forces aligned with the National Unity Government. In regions such as Chin and Karenni, local consultative councils function as parallel governance structures, illustrating the emergence of alternative administrative orders (ALTSEAN Burma 2026, 2). This territorial fragmentation is closely tied to competing models

of federalism. The Tatmadaw advances a top-down model of federalism within a centralized hybrid system, while the National Unity Government promotes a bottom-up federal democratic approach. In contrast, several ethnic organizations advocate forms of confederalism that prioritize extensive autonomy. This tension between federalism and confederalism reflects fundamentally divergent visions of sovereignty and political order.

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For that reason, Myanmar's peace processes have historically produced only partial outcomes. From amnesties in the 1950s to bilateral ceasefire arrangements between 1989 and 2010, and subsequent initiatives since 2011, multiple efforts have failed to generate a comprehensive settlement. As highlighted in the CSCAP Study Group, the current situation reflects the continued armed conflict, shaped by governance deficits, protracted negotiation processes, and deep mistrust arising from repeatedly unmet commitments.

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### **Implications for Regional Security and ASEAN Cohesion**

One of the key conclusions of the Study Group is that Myanmar’s crisis has evolved into a multidimensional challenge for regional security and ASEAN cohesion, reflecting both the scale of internal conflict in Myanmar and its expanding cross-border implications. The intensity of violence has increased to the extent that Myanmar is now ranked as the second-most conflict-affected country globally after Palestine, underscoring the severity of instability within the region. This escalation has been accompanied by a visible erosion of state institutions, including the weakening of financial systems, which has facilitated the growth of illicit economies and strengthened the operational capacity of armed actors across multiple territories.

ASEAN’s response, primarily articulated through the Five Point Consensus or 5PC (ASEAN 2021), has remained limited

in its effectiveness. Although mechanisms such as the rotating special envoy and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance provide a degree of operational engagement (ASEAN n.d.), these efforts have not matched the scale and complexity of the crisis (Siahaan 2024, 1–3). The absence of clear enforcement mechanisms and measurable compliance frameworks has further contributed to growing doubt regarding the viability of the 5PC, particularly in the context of continued non-compliance.

At the structural level, the crisis has also exposed underlying fault lines in ASEAN’s structure. Divergent national interests and continued reliance on consensus-based decision-making have limited the organization’s capacity to articulate a unified and decisive response. At the same time, Myanmar’s increasing role as a hub for transnational crime has introduced additional security risks, reinforcing the need for more coordinated regional approaches

that extend beyond conventional diplomatic engagement. Taken together, these developments indicate that Myanmar’s crisis now constitutes not only a domestic conflict but a broader test of ASEAN’s institutional capacity, requiring a recalibration of engagement that balances dialogue, accountability, and regional stability (International Crisis Group 2022).

Moreover, external stakeholder dynamics play a decisive role in shaping Myanmar’s trajectory, as regional and major powers pursue pragmatic and interest-driven engagement that both stabilizes and complicates the crisis. China remains the most influential external actor, with deeply intertwined economic, strategic, and security interests in the country (International Crisis Group 2020). Myanmar serves as a critical corridor for China to bypass the Malacca Strait and access natural resources, including rare-earth minerals, and thus Beijing continues to shield Naypyidaw from

substantive action at the United Nations Security Council (Strangio 2022). Russia provides sustained military, economic, and diplomatic support, driven by arms sales, resource access, and its ambition to expand influence in Southeast Asia (Storey 2023, 1–8).

India's engagement is shaped by its geographic proximity to Myanmar, as they share a land border of approximately 1,600 kilometers. This contiguity has generated direct security challenges, including displacement and transnational crime. Nearly 90,000 civilians have crossed into India during periods of intensified conflict, while illicit trafficking remains significant—as illustrated by a series of major crystalline-methamphetamine trafficking cases through the Andaman Sea between 2018 and 2019, including seizures ranging from more than 1–2 tons per incident, reflecting the growing scale and sophistication of maritime drug-trafficking networks in the region (UNODC 2019). Bangladesh faces similar pressures,

particularly in managing border security and the unresolved issue of Rohingya repatriation.

Other external actors have adopted varied but largely pragmatic approaches. The European Union remains the largest humanitarian donor, while Australia has sustained support despite donor fatigue (DFAT n.d.; European Commission 2026). The United Kingdom retains influence through its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and Japan continues engagement as both a development partner and interlocutor (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2026). Overall, external involvement remains cautious and interest-driven, with limited capacity to produce transformative change.

### **Responses of Neighbouring States and Regional Mechanisms**

Regional responses to Myanmar's crisis reflect a combination of sustained engagement and pragmatic adjustment, circumscribed by the structural

limitations of ASEAN-led mechanisms. A consistent approach has been the maintenance of calibrated pressure alongside continued humanitarian assistance. Since 2001, ASEAN has repeatedly encouraged political reform in Myanmar. While these efforts have produced only limited compliance, sustained pressure remains necessary to prevent further regional destabilization, maintain diplomatic leverage over the junta, preserve ASEAN's credibility and centrality, and keep open the possibility of gradual political engagement and humanitarian access. The modest effectiveness of past measures therefore reflects not the irrelevance of pressure, but the structural complexity of the Myanmar crisis and the absence of viable alternatives. At the same time, humanitarian engagement remains a critical entry point. Since Cyclone Nargis in 2008, Myanmar has accepted international assistance, particularly from United Nations agencies, thus providing a continued basis for regional involvement (UNOCHA 2008).

The 5PC remains the central framework guiding ASEAN's response, but its implementation has been uneven. The absence of enforcement mechanisms and measurable benchmarks has limited its effectiveness and contributed to growing doubts about its long-term viability. In response, proposals have emerged to strengthen the framework through more precise compliance measures and monitoring tools. At the operational level, humanitarian access and conflict de-escalation have been identified as immediate priorities, particularly following major military operations such as Operation 1027, which enabled ethnic armed organizations to expand territorial control in several areas (International Crisis Group 2024, 4–6).

Neighbouring states have responded according to proximity. Thailand, in particular, has taken a more proactive humanitarian role than it had in previous phases of the crisis, including attempting to establish humanitarian corridors in border areas, particularly in Tak Province, in coordination with local networks and non-state actors. India has combined humanitarian

assistance with border-stabilization efforts, while Malaysia has pursued diplomatic coordination with regional partners, particularly Thailand, reflecting efforts to maintain cohesion within ASEAN. At the same time, ASEAN faces increasing pressure to sustain its relevance and centrality amid competing global crises, including Ukraine and Palestine, which risk diverting international diplomatic attention, humanitarian resources, and great-power engagement away from Southeast Asia. This, in turn, may weaken ASEAN's capacity to maintain international focus and coordinated pressure on the Myanmar crisis (UNOCHA 2023; AHA Centre n.d.).

### **Conclusion: Human Security in ASEAN's Approach to Myanmar**

Reflections from the Study Group suggest that Myanmar's crisis presents a profound test for ASEAN's approach to human rights, particularly in navigating the tension between non-interference and the growing urgency of human-security concerns. The persistence of conflict within Myanmar since 1988, marked by recurring cycles of resistance and repression,

reflects deep structural grievances that continue to elude resolution. Following the 2021 military coup, these long-standing tensions once again escalated into a renewed crisis that prompted ASEAN to adopt the 5PC as its principal regional framework. Yet continued non-compliance and the framework's limited enforcement capacity have exposed the constraints of ASEAN's existing approach to accountability, particularly its inability to impose meaningful punitive measures, ensure compliance with agreed commitments, or hold key actors responsible for violations linked to the crisis.

A humanitarian response and conflict de-escalation therefore emerge not simply as policy priorities, but as essential conditions for safeguarding human rights. Expanding access to assistance requires pragmatic engagement with all relevant actors, including both the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed organizations, while ensuring protection for displaced populations and vulnerable communities. The failure to implement earlier initiatives, most notably the 88 recommendations of the Advisory Commission on

Rakhine State, illustrates the consequences of delayed action and reinforces the cumulative mistrust that continues to hinder progress.

At the institutional level, these challenges reveal the limitations of ASEAN's consensus-based approach when confronted with a protracted crisis. Mechanisms such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights remain underutilized, despite their potential to support dialogue and confidence building (ASEAN 2009; Wahyuningrum 2021, 170-72). Greater coordination between Track II, Track 1.5, and formal ASEAN processes could enable more flexible and sustained engagement, while preserving ASEAN's normative framework. Maintaining communication with both *de facto* and *de jure* actors, alongside making gradual efforts to strengthen accountability, reflects a pragmatic pathway consistent with regional practice. Ultimately, ASEAN's credibility will depend on its ability to embed human rights within a broader strategy of engagement, where humanitarian action, political dialogue, and regional stability are pursued as mutually reinforcing objectives.

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