



# Coup Year in Review Analyses Series

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## Burma's Foreign Relations Since the Coup

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### *International Condemnation and Sanctions*

The February 1 coup and the military's violent crackdowns on the ensuing protests and civil disobedience movement in Burma were strongly censured by the international community. The United States became the first among the international community to condemn the coup in Burma. President Biden issued the Executive Order on "Blocking Property with Respect to the Situation in Burma" on February 11, 2021, which allowed for the U.S. Treasury Department to impose sanctions on the Burmese military officials and their affiliate businesses.<sup>1</sup> In his announcement of the executive order, President Biden also stated that he will be freezing the \$1 billion assets formerly reserved for the Burmese government while continuing support for the healthcare system, civil society groups, and the democratic movement.<sup>2</sup>

In March 2021, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union imposed targeted sanctions on the top military and State Administrative Council (SAC) officials, as well as the military-linked business entities.<sup>3</sup> The junta leader Min Aung Hlaing, regime-appointed President U Myint Swe, the ministers of Defense and Home Affairs, and the chief of the police force were targeted for travel bans and asset freezes due to their involvement in the prosecution and killing of protesters and activists. Moreover, the Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), two business entities controlled by the military, were included in the specially designated nationals (SDN) list by the US.

In June 2021, in a rare demonstration of consensus, the United Nations General Assembly issued a resolution condemning the coup and calling for an arms embargo against the Burmese military. The resolution also called for the Burmese military to resume the democratization process and release all the political detainees.<sup>4</sup> While many arms suppliers to Burma have stopped arms flow to the country after the coup, China, Russia, India, and Serbia have continued selling and supplying arms to the Burmese military.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Executive Order on Blocking Property with Respect to the Situation in Burma", White House Briefing Room, February 11, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/11/executive-order-on-blocking-property-with-respect-to-the-situation-in-burma/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Biden orders sanctions against Myanmar after military coup", *AP*, February 10, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/biden-orders-sanctions-myanmar-coup-a078bebbe37d104d5a793408e710fdaa>

<sup>3</sup> "EU and U.S. sanctions step up pressure on Myanmar military over coup", *Reuters*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics/eu-and-u-s-sanctions-step-up-pressure-on-myanmar-military-over-coup-idUSKBN2BE074>.

<sup>4</sup> "United Nations condemns coup in Myanmar and calls for arms embargo," *the Guardian*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/18/united-nations-condemn-military-coup-in-myanmar>.

<sup>5</sup> "Stop weapons supply to Myanmar, rights expert urges," UN News, 22 February 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/112422>.

On the one-year anniversary of the coup on January 31, 2022, the US, UK, and Canada imposed joint sanctions on senior officials in the Burmese military regime. These individual sanctions target the junta's judicial officials that are involved in the prosecution of State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The junta's arms procurement directorate and businesses involved in arms dealing for the junta, including the operator of a major port in Yangon, KT Services & Logistics, were also included in the new round of sanctions. On February 21, 2022, the EU imposed a new round of sanctions on 22 individuals involved with the military junta and its four entities, including the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE).

### **ASEAN Five-Point Consensus**

The coup was initially characterized by ASEAN members as an “internal matter”.<sup>6</sup> As ASEAN continued to uphold its non-interference policy towards Burma's political crisis, the regional bloc started facing mounting pressure from the international community to act. ASEAN A.C.T (Addressing Challenges Together) stands as the official motto of Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in April 2021, ASEAN (led by Hun Sen) and the Burmese junta leader agreed to a “Five-Point Consensus” to resolve the unfolding crisis. The consensus consists of the following terms:

- 1) the immediate cessation of violence in Burma;
- 2) constructive dialogue among all parties concerned to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people;
- 3) mediation to be facilitated by an envoy of ASEAN's chair, with the assistance of the Secretary-General of ASEAN;
- 4) humanitarian assistance provided by ASEAN's AHA Centre, and
- 5) a visit by the ASEAN special envoy and delegation to Myanmar to meet all parties concerned.<sup>8</sup>

On April 26, 2021, the SAC stated that ASEAN Five-Point Consensus will be “considered”.<sup>9</sup> As of January 2022, the SAC has yet to follow through with the terms under the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus even though Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen, the current chair of ASEAN, had made it clear that Burma's invitation to the 2022 ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Summit depends on the progress the SAC makes towards the agreed-upon consensus.<sup>10</sup>

### **Battle for International Recognition**

Both the National Unity Government (NUG) and SAC have been competing to be recognized as the official government/representatives of Burma on the international stage. The United Nations (UN) Credentials Committee had repeatedly delayed deciding on who would represent Burma at the UN.<sup>11</sup> Even though the SAC controls territories through force, the NUG enjoys widespread public support through their legitimate electoral victory in the 2020 general elections.

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<sup>6</sup> “West condemns Myanmar coup but Thailand, Cambodia shrug”, *Bangkok Post*, February 1, 2021. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2060651/west-condemns-myanmar-coup-but-thailand-cambodia-shrug>

<sup>7</sup> “Cambodia's ASEAN Chairmanship”, ASEAN, February 18, 2021. <https://asean2022.mfaic.gov.kh/>

<sup>8</sup> “Five Point Consensus,” ASEAN, 24 April 2021, <https://asean.org/tag/five-point-consensus/>

<sup>9</sup> “A Timeline of the Myanmar Junta's Engagement With ASEAN”, *The Irrawaddy*, October 14, 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/a-timeline-of-the-myanmar-juntas-engagement-with-asean.html>

<sup>10</sup> “Cambodia's PM Hun Sen ASEAN invitation hinges on Myanmar junta ‘progress’”, *RFA*. Jan 25, 2022. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/invitation-01252022183402.html>

<sup>11</sup> “Myanmar: Recognition is the Name of the Game”, *FULCRUM*. Dec 6, 2021. <https://fulcrum.sg/myanmar-recognition-is-the-name-of-the-game/>

The battle for international recognition intensified when U Kyaw Moe Tun, the NLD-appointed Permanent Representative of Burma to the UN, condemned the coup leaders in support of the revolution. Even though the NUG is not officially recognized by the UN as an official government of Burma, the NUG has engaged with countries and governments around the world.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the SAC has been denied a seat in multiple international settings such as the COP26 climate meeting and ASEAN summit on grounds of legitimacy. In a recent briefing, the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M) wrote that when considering official recognition, the international community tends to look at three factors namely 1) the entity's effective control of the territory, 2) its democratic legitimacy, and 3) its adherence to international law. The SAC fails in all three criteria.<sup>13</sup> While the NUG enjoys the popular support of the people and democracies around the world, the SAC maintains a handful of strategic relationships and engagements with countries such as China and Russia.<sup>14</sup>

### **Continued Relations with the Military Junta**

Amid widespread international condemnation of the Burmese military's actions, Russia emerged as a continued ally and a key supplier of arms to the junta. Senior officials from the two militaries exchanged visits throughout 2021 following the coup.<sup>15</sup> Russia has promised continued cooperation with the Burmese military in defense procurement and technology. In return, the SAC is striving to make Russia one of Burma's top economic partners, according to the Burmese state media.

China, on the other hand, was cautious in the beginning, limiting ties and interaction with the junta while continuing to demonstrate calculated engagement with the ousted National League for Democracy (NLD) party. However, several months after the coup, Beijing began to warm up ties with the junta, resuming work on issues such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and other commercial initiatives.<sup>16</sup> In December 2021, China transferred a submarine to the Burmese Navy in a show of warming defense ties.<sup>17</sup>

It is crucial to monitor China's ties with the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in Burma, who have traditionally opposed the Burmese military. With key China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) projects passing through EAO-controlled areas, China's continued ties with EAOs are a point of tension in its normalization of relations with the Burmese military. Throwing its weight behind Cambodia's pro-engagement strategy, Beijing continues to be an international voice pushing for a dialogue with the regime to resolve the post-coup crisis.

Japan is another key international player that has maintained ties with the Burmese junta. Although Tokyo has supported Burma's pro-democracy movement, it has also maintained political, commercial, and some defense ties with the junta. As of December 2021, Japan's defense ministry was still hosting cadets from

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<sup>12</sup> "Myanmar: Recognition is the Name of the Game", *FULCRUM*. Dec 6, 2021. <https://fulcrum.sg/myanmar-recognition-is-the-name-of-the-game/>

<sup>13</sup> "Who Will Win the Battle for Myanmar's UN Seat?", *The Diplomat*, September 3, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/who-will-win-the-battle-for-myanmars-un-seat/>

<sup>14</sup> "The battle for Myanmar's seat in the UN General Assembly". *The Interpreter*, August 10, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/battle-myanmar-s-seat-un-general-assembly>

<sup>15</sup> "Myanmar and Russia's Close Post-Coup Relationship," *Irrawaddy*, November 2, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/myanmar-and-russias-close-post-coup-relationship.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "China warms up to Myanmar's military generals," *Foreign Policy*, November 17, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/17/china-myanmar-military-regime-recognition-investment/>

<sup>17</sup> "Why China transferred a submarine to Myanmar," *Channel News Asia*, January 10, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/commentary-why-china-transferred-submarine-myanmar-2416416>.

Burma.<sup>18</sup> While Tokyo has cut new aid to Burma and issued statements urging the cessation of violence and the release of all political detainees, the majority of Japanese companies are continuing their business operations in Burma, according to a survey by the Japan External Trade Organization.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Japan: Cut defense ties with Myanmar military,” Human Rights Watch, 20 December 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/21/japan-cut-defense-ties-myanmar-military>.

<sup>19</sup> “70% of Japanese firms to keep or expand business in Myanmar,” Japan Times, 10 January 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/01/10/business/myanmar-japan-business-outlook/>.