

All Eyes on Myanmar (6):

Crisis Mitigation Efforts Meet Certain Hurdles, “ASEAN Centrality” Essential

On February 20, 2022, the Foreign Ministry of the self-proclaimed military government of Myanmar released a statement expressing it would promote *“constructive cooperation with ASEAN, including the Special Envoy,”* adding, however, that it could not accept that the latter would meet *“illegal associations and terrorist groups”* provided that such groups are allegedly *“perpetrating violence and pursuing a totally destructive path”*. **The military government of Myanmar has thus rejected the request of the Special Envoy of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Prak Sokhonn, to meet the members of the National Unity Government (NUG), born in opposition to the military and considered by the self-proclaimed government to be a terrorist group.**

In its statement, the Foreign Ministry of the Military Junta added that suggesting such a meeting not only goes against the principles of the ASEAN Charter, but would also threaten the regional organisation's counter-terrorism efforts.

The statement came after **Prak Sokhonn, also Foreign Minister of Cambodia, expressed, on February 17, 2022, his desire to visit Myanmar in March 2022 and meet with senior officials of the Burmese military government. The Cambodian Foreign Minister similarly stated his intention to meet the members of the so-called NUG.** According to regional analysts, most of the NUG members are either in exile or in hiding; Prak Sokhonn did not provide further details on where or when such a hypothetical future meeting might take place.

Further hurdles in addressing the Myanmar crisis have been signalled on February 22, 2022, by the **UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, who revealed that two UN Security Council members – Russia and China – as well as Serbia, continued to supply weapons to the self-proclaimed military government in Myanmar.**

The United Nations report detailed which states the junta has been receiving weapons from, since the February 1, 2021 coup. The UN Special Rapporteur highlighted that the main suppliers of the self-proclaimed military executive continue to be Russia and China. **As the two states are also permanent members of the UN Security Council, they are in a position to hold the veto power to the decisions taken by the United Nations regarding Myanmar. To this avail, the Special Rapporteur urged the UN Security Council to convene an emergency session “to discuss and vote on a resolution banning arm transfers to the Myanmar military”.** The UN human rights expert also recalled the country's military authorities are known to use violent means against the local population.

“Despite the evidence of the military junta's atrocity crimes being committed with impunity since launching a coup last year, UN Security Council members Russia and China continue to provide the Myanmar military junta with numerous fighter jets, armored vehicles, and in the case of Russia, the promise of further arms”, the UN Rapporteur

claimed, adding that *"During this same period, Serbia has authorized rockets and artillery for export to the Myanmar military"*.

While the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation in Myanmar has been appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council, he does not possess the credence to speak on behalf of the organization.

Following the coup d'état on *February 1, 2021*, the legislative, executive and judicial powers have been transferred to the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, General Min Aung Hlaing, while General Myint Swe has been named interim president of the country. On the same day, leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other prominent civil government figures, including President Win Myint, have been arrested. The Army attempted to justify its actions by denouncing the electoral fraud occurred during the elections of last *November 8*, whose results indicated a landslide victory, with 83% of the votes, for the National League for Democracy (NDL), the governing party prior to the coup.

In the aftermath of the coup, Myanmar has allegedly witnessed internal upheavals on several fronts. According to regional media, starting by *February 6, 2021*, a civil disobedience movement has been formed, resulting in multiple civil servants leaving their jobs. Allegedly, the protests of the population have been violently repressed by the military. The Army is described to have resumed fighting against various ethnic militias, accused to have approached the demonstrators, having provided them with military training. On *April 16, 2021*, further members of the Myanmar Parliament have been deposed. Consequently, certain leaders of the protests and other representatives of ethnic minorities in the country have established a National Unity Government (NUG), which, since *May 5, 2021*, has claimed to bolster an armed body, self-styled People's Defense Force. The NUG and its militias have been classified as a terrorist group by the self-proclaimed military government on *May 8, 2021*.

In the light of the deteriorating situation in the country, on *April 24, 2021*, following a meeting with Min Aung Hlaing, ASEAN and the self-proclaimed military government of Myanmar have reached the so-called **"Five-point Consensus"**, which envisaged an end to the violence, a constructive dialogue between all parties, the appointment of a Special Envoy from ASEAN to facilitate internal dialogue, aid acceptance and a visit of the Special Envoy to Myanmar. While the *"Five-point Consensus"* has encountered certain hurdles and faced an arguably slow implementation, the Southeast Asian regional association maintained consistency in its approach to Myanmar and currently seems to pursue the exclusion of high-level military government officials from its meetings, in the light of the slow compliance of the junta with the mutually agreed solution.

Certainly, the recent UN Rapport on the alleged supply of weapons to the military government of Myanmar by Russia, China and Serbia has the potential to further complicate the already complex relations between the junta and ASEAN, as well as generate further discussions between ASEAN and the three fore-mentioned state actors associated with the sale of weapons to the Myanmar junta. An active promoter of the *"ASEAN Centrality"* in the region, the Southeast Asian regional association could possibly regard such weapons delivery to the military government of Myanmar as a potential threat to destabilize the peace and security in Asia-Pacific.

While, so far, the Myanmar crisis has been generally regarded as an intra-ASEAN matter, the recent refusal of the junta to allow the ASEAN Envoy to meet and talk to all concerned parties and, especially, the allegations of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of arms delivery to Myanmar, may signal not only a

considerably lengthy crisis mitigation process to be envisaged but, similarly, reveal the involvement of extra-ASEAN state actors into the crisis.

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