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# SAVING THE CONSENSUS: THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERAL ACTION ON MYANMAR

The erosion of the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) would open the door to a “might makes right” approach in Myanmar and across the region. Unless an alternative international consensus can be forged, Myanmar’s resistance stakeholders must continue to anchor their diplomacy to the 5PC, while ASEAN should combine its procedural diplomatic engagement with a more transactional, high-level political initiative.



# SAVING THE CONSENSUS: THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERAL ACTION ON MYANMAR

## ■ Policy Problem

As Malaysia prepares to hand over the ASEAN chairmanship to the Philippines at the October 26, 2025, summit, the Myanmar crisis remains unresolved. More troublingly, the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus (5PC)—the only multilateral consensus framework still nominally accepted by all sides, from the United Nations (UN) and Western governments to China—is losing relevance. Without a credible alternative, its weakening could spell the collapse of an international policy framework on Myanmar. In that vacuum, individual states are likely to pursue their own path, engaging separately with both the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC) and resistance forces according to their national interests. Western governments such as the United States and multilateral bodies, such as the UN, the European Union (EU), may continue to apply pressure or impose sanctions. Yet without regional alignment, the effectiveness of any collective response will erode. The consensus that once gave ASEAN diplomatic leverage over Myanmar's crisis is now at risk of splintering entirely.

## ■ Context and Background

It must be recognized that during Malaysia's chairmanship, Kuala Lumpur—led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the ASEAN Special Envoy on Myanmar—made unusually bold attempts to address the Myanmar crisis in its effort to distinguish itself from previous ASEAN chairs. For the first time, resistance forces received near-equal recognition to the State Administration Council (SAC)/State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC). In April 2025, while in Thailand, Prime Minister Anwar engaged both parties, meeting SAC Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in person and NUG Prime Minister Mahn Winn Khaing Thann virtually. Following the Mandalay-Sagaing earthquake, ASEAN humanitarian aid was delivered directly to affected communities inside Myanmar.

Malaysia's approach sought not only engagement but inclusion. The ASEAN Special Envoy provided key stakeholders with a safe space and resources for dialogue, linking discussion outcomes with ASEAN's policy and integrating them into draft recommendations for submission to the ASEAN Summit. The Stakeholder Engagement Meetings (SEMs)—held in May, August, and October 2025—aimed to develop an “action plan” for dialogue among warring actors. Online consultations were arranged for those unable to attend, and the envoy's delegation visited Thailand in June 2025 for direct engagement.

Yet internal frictions blunted these efforts. Disagreements between the Joint Coordination Body (JCB), which included several key resistance groups, and the Special Envoy's office over invitation formats and differing views on a few other matters led some ethnic armed organizations to withhold senior-level participation. This weakened the SEMs' inclusiveness and momentum. Malaysia's foreign minister emphasized that



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“an election is not a priority for now, the priority is to cease all violence...”. Yet, ASEAN's diplomatic weight proved insufficient to halt the junta's escalating military offensives and its push to stage elections under its own roadmap. Despite Malaysia's sincerity and relentless efforts, ASEAN's convening power experienced tangible restraint, and progress remained limited.

## ■ Policy Options

ASEAN and Myanmar's key stakeholders now face a defining choice: revive the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus (5PC) by turning it into a workable plan backed by resources and political will, or let it quietly expire—leaving each state to pursue its own course. The latter would mean fragmented diplomacy, with governments engaging with the SSPC, the post-election administration, and resistance forces independently, according to their national interests. Time is running out.

## ● ASEAN Chairs' Engagement on the Myanmar Crisis (2021–2025)

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Chair Country	Special Envoy	Engagement Approach
Brunei (2021)	Erywan Yusof Minister of Foreign Affairs	During its ASEAN alternate chairmanship, Brunei established the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus (5PC) as a fundamental principle. Appointed a Special Envoy on Myanmar and banned Myanmar's junta leader and other political appointees from attending ASEAN summits when Myanmar failed to implement the consensus. Did not meet with the National Unity Government (NUG) or Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), but the special envoy was able to visit Myanmar.
Cambodia (2022)	Prak Sokhonn Deputy Prime Minister and Minister	Increased direct engagement with the regime, including efforts to bring back Myanmar leaders to ASEAN meetings. Prime Minister Hun Sen made an early visit to Myanmar, attempting to persuade the junta leader, a move widely criticized for conferring legitimacy on the junta. This approach triggered disagreements within ASEAN and ultimately undermined efforts to implement the 5PC. Track 1.5 meetings happened with Thailand's initiative.
Indonesia (2023)	Retno Marsudi* Minister for Foreign Affairs	Adopted an approach of active and "quiet diplomacy," establishing the Office of the ASEAN Special Envoy to coordinate engagement. Held over 100 meetings with resistance actors, including the NUG and EAOs. Initiated the ASEAN Troika mechanism and rejected the junta's election plan. This inclusive and consultative approach, involving all key stakeholders, marked a departure from ASEAN's traditional methods. Track 1.5 meetings occurred with Thailand and India's initiatives.
Laos (2024)	Alounkeo Kittikhoun Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs	Prioritized low-profile "quiet diplomacy" and stability, continuing the ASEAN Troika mechanism and sustaining ASEAN's engagement on the Myanmar issue. However, the decision to allow Myanmar representatives to rejoin certain ASEAN meetings drew criticism, and it was perceived as undermining ASEAN's unity. Overall, this approach achieved less progress compared to Indonesia's tenure. Apart from Laos, there were Track 1.5 meetings led by Thailand.
Malaysia (2025)	Tan Sri Othman Hashim Former Secretary General of Malaysia's Foreign Ministry	Demonstrated active leadership through an inclusive engagement strategy, holding dialogues with both the regime and the NUG. Managed to maintain balanced relations with all resistance forces, including EAOs. Held Stakeholder Engagement Meetings (SEMs) with the aim of enabling Myanmar's key stakeholders to develop an actionable plan. Rejected the junta's election plan. Faced calls for a stronger policy beyond the 5PC.

\* During Indonesia's 2023 ASEAN chairmanship, Retno Marsudi initiated the establishment of the Office of the ASEAN Special Envoy on Myanmar.

While the crisis burns on, ASEAN capitals are preoccupied with other pressures—from trade frictions with Washington to rising tensions in the South China Sea. In recent years, the 5PC has already been weakened amid neighboring states like China and others' pragmatic approaches, driven by security, economic, and geopolitical priorities. As the Philippines prepares to assume the ASEAN chairmanship amid escalating maritime disputes with Beijing, the Myanmar issue risks being further sidelined, deepening the divide between mainland and maritime ASEAN members. U.S. President Trump is slated to attend the October 26 ASEAN Summit. Were he to work with ASEAN within the bloc's framework—leveraging American influence through a careful mix of pressure, persuasion, and step-by-step progress—it would be an encouraging sign. Yet such an outcome appears unlikely; another round of megaphone diplomacy of routine condemnation seems far more probable.

### ■ Policy Recommendations for ASEAN and Myanmar Key Stakeholders

If ASEAN hopes to rescue the Five-Point Consensus from irrelevance, it must combine its usual procedural diplomatic intervention with a more transactional, top-level political intervention. ASEAN leaders—ideally a core group of at least three foreign ministers—should coordinate closely with Myanmar's key neighbors, notably China, India, and Thailand, to discuss practical implementation of the 5PC in parallel with the junta's electoral roadmap. To make such an intervention meaningful, traditional procedural diplomatic intervention also needs to set benchmarks for each step towards the ultimate goal. In particular, ASEAN needs structure and continuity: the Office of the ASEAN Special Envoy should operate on a fixed multi-year mandate, rather than shifting annually with the rotating chairmanship. The ASEAN Troika

should be expanded to include non-ASEAN neighbors, fostering cooperation among countries with shared objectives to pursue innovative strategies aligned with the 5PC. This would sustain institutional memory and strategic coherence. As the 5PC remains the only internationally recognized framework on Myanmar, its erosion would not only diminish ASEAN's centrality but also embolden major powers—particularly China—to disregard multilateral norms, setting a troubling precedent for regional diplomacy. It could also undermine ASEAN's interests and weaken the international roadmap for resolving the Myanmar crisis.

For Myanmar's resistance forces, the lesson is equally stark. Unless they can forge an alternative international consensus, they must continue to anchor their diplomacy to the 5PC. The failed "tripartite dialogue" of the 1990s should serve as a cautionary tale. Since the 1994 UN General Assembly resolution, repeated calls for dialogue among the Tatmadaw, democratic forces led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), and ethnic groups were undermined when the NLD pursued elections in 2012. The NLD's unilateral decision to run for the election was not based on any covenant that arose from such tripartite dialogue or step-by-step political gains based on the shared political framework, but rather based on personalistic popularity. Without securing a genuine tripartite agreement, it effectively undermined the very framework that had guided international engagement for decades. Today, if resistance movements neglect the 5PC—whether out of frustration or indifference—they risk pushing Myanmar to the margins of international diplomacy. Endorsing and strategically reinforcing the ASEAN framework, despite its flaws, remains the only viable way to keep Myanmar's crisis on the global agenda and prevent its descent into diplomatic irrelevance. ●