Myanmar’s coup, ASEAN’s crisis
And the Implications for Australia

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and Hillary Mansour

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The Tatmadaw’s 1 February 2021 *coup d'état* and its brutal behaviour since have destabilised Myanmar and is jeopardising the regional peace and stability that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—of which Myanmar is a member since 1997—has helped maintain for over five decades.

ASEAN’s constructive engagement policies have allowed it to unite diverse political systems and promote a shared goal of regional coherence, progress and economic development. It played a positive role in Myanmar’s democratic transition less than a decade ago. But the recent Tatmadaw’s actions have created a multifaceted crisis for ASEAN. By flagrantly violating the governance and human rights principles enshrined in ASEAN’s Charter, the junta has not just crushed the democratic aspirations of the nation’s people. It has sparked deadly internal conflict whose consequences risk spilling across the nation’s borders.

This has required ASEAN to act. But to date it has not done so effectively and credibly. Its efforts to mediate a resolution acceptable to all parties have been tardy and ineffectual, undermining its standing as the region’s mediator. Constrained by the non-interference principle, its response to the junta’s recalcitrance and disregard of obligations to accept ASEAN’s envoy has often been supine.

In the face of widespread criticism, a core group of member states belatedly succeeded in having the organisation disinvite the junta’s leader, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, from the ASEAN Leaders Summit in late October. Min Aung Hlaing condemned the move as a violation of ASEAN’s consensus principle and refused to send any “non-political representation” to the gathering, as ASEAN had permitted. The result was Myanmar’s informal “suspension” from the grouping. This development at least allowed ASEAN to avoid the condemnation that would have accompanied the junta leader’s attendance but has done little to restore its credibility.

The situation in Myanmar is not just a security concern for Southeast Asia. Myanmar’s strategic importance to India and China means both those nations are keeping close to the regime. These developments affect an array of Australian interests, ranging from geostrategic implications to transnational security threats. Above all, Australia has an interest in seeing the Indo-Pacific region’s future determined as much as possible through diplomacy rather than the simple exercise of power.

Whether ASEAN makes the changes necessary for its enduring utility and relevance of its centrality in regional affairs is entirely in the hands of member states. Even so, the interests that Australia has in an effective ASEAN warrant the best possible effort to encourage or persuade them to do what is necessary to ensure this, above all by reviewing ASEAN’s *modus operandi* in line with proposals from within ASEAN.

This requires more than an announcement of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. **It requires more intensive and sustained diplomacy**, a commitment to acting more purposefully and constructively with others towards changing ASEAN’s direction. The government should aim at reassuring interlocutors that Australia values the role an effective ASEAN can play in mediating great-power tensions while warning that it can’t perform that role credibly if it fails to heed internal calls for reform. For many ASEAN partners, such forthrightness in urging the association to make its own adjustments would likely ring truer than formulaic blandishments about ASEAN’s centrality.
Introduction

The rapidly unfolding Myanmar crisis is presenting Southeast Asia with one of its most severe security and stability threats in the past three decades. While the region is certainly familiar with military coups and violent changes of government, the ongoing crisis in Myanmar carries risks far more acute than previous coups d’etat in the region. One of them is the risk to the sustained *modus operandi* of the region’s key institution—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The outcome of ASEAN’s involvement in the Myanmar crisis is consequential not only for the Myanmar people, but also for the association’s ability to credibly lead efforts to preserve peace and security in the region into the future.

In this report, we assess the security situation in Myanmar, ASEAN’s collective response and the individual roles of key ASEAN member states in the mediating process. We focus on the effect that the Myanmar crisis has on the overall ASEAN political and security situation, and highlight Indonesia’s leadership, and limitations, in the process. We also detail the legal instruments and responsibility of ASEAN—in the form of the ASEAN Charter—to uphold the rule of law. The report concludes with some policy implications for the wider region, particularly Australia.
What has happened

The coup, the SAC, the NUG and the CDM

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar’s Tatmadaw (military), under the leadership of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, arrested the country’s legitimate civil government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), which had been re-elected in November 2020.1 Proclaiming martial law, the Tatmadaw announced that it would take control for a year under the guise of the State Administration Council (SAC).2 It detained the NLD’s leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, along with members of the re-elected civilian government (who have since remained locked up), and arrested numerous other leaders of Myanmar’s civil society.

The NLD responded by forming the National Unity Government (NUG), which is a new multi-ethnic body consisting of ethnic minority group leaders and some deposed NLD figures. Claiming that it’s the nation’s legitimate government, this new political group-in-hiding seems to have broken with the prior NLD policy stance on Rohingya Muslims minority group, which may signal a shift towards a more inclusive political vision than before.3

Many Myanmar civilians also joined a broad and rapidly evolving passive resistance group with the goal of restoring democracy known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The CDM movement aims to undermine the military’s economic capacity by cutting off key industries and resources through a widespread boycott in all sectors. The movement followed Aung San Suu Kyi’s call for supporters to oppose the coup and, despite the growing numbers of casualties, has been enormously popular.4

The CDM’s actions, however, in the longer term risk creating more financially detrimental effects to the people of Myanmar than to the junta. The political crisis has already left thousands of families participating in the CDM without income, and many small businesses have folded. The movement is attempting to gather and distribute funds to those in need, but it’s also been hindered, ironically, by the disruption to critical services.

This civil conflict has been especially consequential in the medical sector and Myanmar’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The public healthcare system, which accounts for 80% of Myanmar’s medical sector, “vanished overnight”.5 The military is mainly responsible for this, having failed to secure vaccines and oxygen, disrupted nationwide testing and treatment, and prevented the public from accessing military hospitals while sequestering public hospitals to billet soldiers from rural communities.6 The impacts have been dire, leading to record high daily case numbers in a deadly third wave7 resulting in many thousands of deaths.8 Health experts have attempted to administer medical services informally, but they have faced intimidation and violent persecution by the military.9

Table 1: Public health disruptions by the military, and current Covid-19 statistics.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reported incidents of military attacks and threats against health workers</th>
<th>Healthcare workers killed by military</th>
<th>Healthcare workers arrested</th>
<th>Covid-19-related deaths</th>
<th>Vaccination rates</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>29729</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21011</td>
<td>over 18,62212</td>
<td>approx. 14.6% of population13</td>
</tr>
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Source: Authors’ compilation based on various sources.14
Economically, the coup and its aftermath has also been disastrous. A US dollar shortage, driven by the dramatic reduction in both overseas humanitarian assistance and foreign investor confidence, has triggered inflation and reduced Myanmar’s currency value by 50%.\(^{15}\)

Foreign companies are exiting the market on the grounds that operations in such an environment are no longer tenable.\(^{16}\) This has reversed the benefits of nearly a decade of increased liberalisation and international investment in several industries and will have significant consequences for the nation’s economic recovery.\(^ {17}\) One significant withdrawal was Norway’s Telenor, which had accounted for 30% of Myanmar’s telecommunications activity, but its rushed divestment to Lebanon’s M1 (a company with ties to the Tatmadaw and a track record of investing in authoritarian regimes) highlights the potential for organisations with less rigorous human rights and governance standards to take advantage.\(^ {18}\) This poses longer term dangers for Myanmar’s people and economic future,\(^ {19}\) if not for the vested commercial interests of the junta.\(^ {20}\)

The junta has called CDM participants disloyal to their nation and fellow citizens and attempted to target people’s financial anxieties with promises of job opportunities. Alongside prosecutions and violence, the Tatmadaw has cracked down on the CDM through official means, including by revoking the credentials of university staff who participate in the movement and suspending nearly two-thirds of tertiary educators from work.\(^ {21}\) Protests have broken out in major cities, often responding to online campaigns. A series of organised marches and ‘flash mobs’ on 8 August commemorated Myanmar’s 1988 uprising and echoed its pro-democratic legacy.\(^ {22}\)

Collective rejection of the junta has also forged new social alliances, notably between members of the CDM and ethnic minorities with prior experience of oppression by the Tatmadaw, such as the Rohingya. Facing a common enemy, many young protesters have indicated their new empathy with oppressed voices, even leading to apologies on social media.\(^ {23}\) The CDM has been widely applauded internationally, receiving nominations for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize.\(^ {24}\)

Armed resistance, however, has also increased. The NUG-aligned People’s Defence Force (PDF) has drawn significant civilian numbers and been met with extreme violence by the Tatmadaw.\(^ {25}\) On 7 September, NUG’s acting President Duwa Lashi La declared war on the junta, called on the PDF and other civilian militias to wage a violent resistance struggle, and encouraged the public to store food and avoid non-essential travel in preparation for imminent attacks.\(^ {26}\) Young Myanmarese in their thousands have opted to undergo combat training alongside various ethnic armed groups with histories of long standing opposition to the military, to engage in guerrilla warfare against the Tatmadaw.\(^ {27}\)

Gunfights have ensued in major cities and villages alike. The Tatmadaw has responded by deploying reinforcements, planting landmines, and raiding villages, where they have burned houses and fired indiscriminately on civilians.\(^ {28}\) Civilian militias have assisted thousands of villagers as they flee these military crackdowns.

These multiple conflicts and crackdowns on protests have caused at least 1160 civilian deaths, and led to over 8800 arrests.\(^ {29}\) Even if the Tatmadaw fulfills its recent promise to release 5600 political prisoners, thousands will still remain.\(^ {30}\)

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has estimated that political unrest has internally displaced 219,000 people since the beginning of the coup.\(^ {31}\) The full extent of human displacement is unknown, as press restrictions and a reduced humanitarian presence in Myanmar have hampered data collection.\(^ {32}\)

ASEAN’s lack of practical action is leading many Myanmar people, especially among the youth, to turn to the internet as an alternative means of rousing resistance. The CDM has used Twitter to inform and seek support from international audiences and to demand that ASEAN stop claiming ‘centrality’ in the region if it can’t find an answer to the Myanmar problem.\(^ {33}\) Myanmar’s youth have found a platform in the pro-democratic, Twitter-based pan-Asian ‘Milk Tea Alliance’, which was prominent in protest movements in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand, and are using it to reach international audiences and promote action.\(^ {34}\)
For over a million Rohingya refugees outside Myanmar, the coup has made prospects of repatriation—and reconciliation—even less likely. The group are excluded from voting in Myanmar’s national elections and have faced atrocities by the Tatmadaw for decades. Displaced Rohingya communities are scattered across around 100 overcrowded displacement zones within and outside of Myanmar. They remain one of the groups most vulnerable to Covid-19, and their access to health care, clean water and sanitation is often dependent on humanitarian efforts.

Figure 1 shows the timing of important events since Myanmar’s 2020 general elections.

Figure 1: Timeline of key events since the 2020 general elections

Source: Authors’ compilation.
ASEAN’s response: too little, always late

ASEAN was quick to respond rhetorically to the coup and project itself as the natural mediator. Under the leadership of its 2020 chair, Brunei, it issued a diplomatic note on the day of the coup calling on all parties to refrain from violence but stopping short of labelling the event a military coup.38 But a diplomatic statement was hardly a commensurate response to the violent events that ensued.

Under-resourced and unprepared for what happened, and focused on overseeing ASEAN’s response to the Covid-19 crisis, Brunei showed only weak and distracted leadership on Myanmar. It fell to more exercised and capable states, notably Indonesia, Singapore, and more recently Malaysia and the Philippines, to take more of the reins. From the beginning, Indonesia’s Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, publicly lamented the junta’s actions and defined the “safety and well being of the people of Myanmar and restoration of democracy” as “our top priority”.39 Her ministry’s spokesperson urged Myanmar to act in accordance with its obligations, specifically referring to a clause of the ASEAN Charter covering human rights. She shuttled around the region lobbying regional counterparts to hold a meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers a month after the coup.

Due largely to Indonesia’s activism, ASEAN sought to pursue a more constructive course. Its leaders met in Jakarta for a special meeting with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on 24 April 2021—a controversial move that aimed at applying ASEAN’s *modus operandi* of constructive engagement but risked legitimising the coup leader’s position.40 The NUG condemned the move, pointing out that its representatives hadn’t been invited.

The outcome was a ‘five-point consensus’ on a way forward:

- “First, there shall be immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.
- Second, constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people.
- Third, a special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with the assistance of the Secretary General of ASEAN.
- Fourth, ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the [ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance].
- Fifth, the special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all parties concerned.”41

ASEAN’s leaders hailed the five-point consensus as a diplomatic success, largely on the basis that Min Aung Hlaing himself had accepted an invitation to participate and thus had agreed to the meeting’s declaration. But its shortcomings were soon apparent. Among them was its implied equivalence of the junta and the legitimate government that the junta had illegally toppled, as if both sides were equally responsible for the violence and hence equally responsible for ending it. Others were its lack of any concrete timeline for the steps outlined and, above all, its lack of any provision for enforcing the meeting’s resolutions and addressing any party’s wilful failure to comply.

That played into Min Aung Hlaing’s hands. By conceding his presence at the summit as Myanmar’s *de facto* leader, ASEAN effectively denied the results of the November 2020 elections and tolerated the junta’s bogus claims that the vote was conducted fraudulently.42 He returned to Naypyidaw confident that ASEAN wasn’t inclined to hold the junta to account for overthrowing a legitimate government and killing hundreds of protesters. He soon dashed any hopes that the Tatmadaw and NLD would come to some sort of power-sharing compromise, blithely ignoring his obligations under the consensus and stepping up the violent repression. Labelling the documents as “a constructive suggestion”, he reportedly declared that the state’s suppression of dissent would cease only after the country achieved “stabilisation and tranquility”.43

However much that annoyed or disappointed his ASEAN counterparts, it didn’t deter Brunei’s Second Foreign Minister, Erywan Yusof, and ASEAN Secretary General Lim Jock Hoi from meeting Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyidaw in early June in a visit that only elicited more consternation among some governments and civil society groups across the region.44
Nor did it stop the group holding other gatherings at which the junta’s officials were present. In mid-June, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus took place with representatives of Tatmadaw at the same virtual ‘table’ as the legitimate representatives of not only ASEAN countries, but also the Plus partners (US, Australia, Japan, China, Russia etc.). Similarly, in the first US–ASEAN virtual meeting with new US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, on 14 July, the Tatmadaw representative was present.45

Nothing exemplified the junta’s intransigence and ASEAN’s insipid response better than the remarks of Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan on the margins of a China–ASEAN meeting in Chongqing on 7 June 2021. After bemoaning the “very, very slow progress” in implementing the five-point consensus, Balakrishnan stressed that:

ASEAN’s main role is not to interfere. Because in the end, only the people themselves within Myanmar can determine its future. But ASEAN stands ready to help, to be supportive, and to facilitate mediation, if possible. But we will have to wait and see.46

The NUG, on the other hand, failed to gain international recognition either from ASEAN or the Western democracies, including those that have imposed sanctions as a result of the Tatmadaw’s coup, or the likes of China, which didn’t invite NUG representatives to the meeting held in Chongqing in June.

The pusillanimity (or tacit acquiescence) that at least some of the ASEAN member states exhibited towards the junta within their own forums was again on show in the UN General Assembly in mid-June. Most ASEAN member states voted with the clear majority in favour of a resolution calling for a stop to the flow of weapons into Myanmar. Cambodia, Laos and Thailand joined a much smaller group (which included China, India and Bangladesh) in abstaining (Figure 2). Min Aung Hlaing promptly headed off later that month on a second foreign trip to Russia,47 which is one of Myanmar’s key arms suppliers and another of those that had abstained.

Figure 2: The UN General Assembly voting on stopping the flow of arms to Myanmar, 18 June 2021

Far from heeding the “five-point consensus” demands, on 1 August Min Aung Hlaing formally declared the SAC to be the nation’s “caretaker government” and himself its prime minister, and extended the deadline for lifting the state of emergency and holding elections until 2023, 18 months longer than initially promised. This move followed the junta’s cancelling of the election results on the spurious grounds that it had uncovered 11 million illegal ballots. In these circumstances, his “pledge to hold multi-party elections without fail” is hardly believable.48

After months of delay and wrangling (especially in the days up to and during their 54th official meeting on 2 August), ASEAN’s foreign ministers finally announced on 4 August that one of those who met Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyidaw on 5 and 6 June, Erywan Yusof, had been appointed as the ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar.49 Yusof had been among four candidates for the role, the others being former Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda, former Thai Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Virasakdi Futrakul (who served as an ambassador to Myanmar in the 1990s), and Razali Ismail, a veteran Malaysian diplomat who until 2005 was the special envoy of the Secretary-General for Myanmar and had played a role in advocating for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Having served previously as chairman of Malaysia’s Human Rights Commission and the 51st President of the UN’s General Assembly, Ismail (like Wirajuda) might have had some impact in this role, but not one that the Tatmadaw may have found desirable. By appointing Yusof, on the other hand, ASEAN resorted to the lowest common denominator in a compromise that those with conflicting opinions within the group could reach. The appointment followed Thailand’s withdrawal of Virasakdi’s candidacy, which the Tatmadaw had earlier favoured. The timeline of Yusof’s role remained unclarified, however, including when the junta would allow him into the country.

The joint communique that the ministers issued following their meeting marked the first time that the group issued a joint document with Myanmar under the Tatmadaw representation, again implicitly recognising and de facto legitimising its rule. It was a document of which Sir Humphrey Appleby would be proud, and nowhere more so than in its statement on Myanmar.50 Listed as the 93rd clause in the 95-clause document, the reference simply acknowledged that the issue had been discussed and that the ministers had “heard calls for the release of political detainees, including foreigners”. In a display of breathtaking Applebyan humbug, they even “welcomed Myanmar’s commitment to the Five-Point Consensus of the ASEAN Leaders Meeting on 24 April 2021 and acceptance for the timely and complete implementation of the Five-Point Consensus”.

Nine months on from the coup, however, ASEAN’s interventions remained fruitless. The junta continued to ignore ASEAN’s overtures and did not cooperate with its Special Envoy (including by not granting Yusof permission to meet Aung San Suu Kyi). As the prominent Indonesian human rights activist (and former Attorney-General), Marzuki Darusman, observed, “the five-point plan remains little more than a piece of paper.”51

Frustrated with the lack of progress and cooperation on the MAH’s part, some of the member states flagged the idea of not inviting Min Aung Hlaing to the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits on 26-28 October, a move that would amount to Myanmar’s de facto suspension from the association. Malaysia’s foreign minister, Saifuddin Abdullah, said that without progress in the Envoy’s work, “it would be difficult to have the Chairman of the SAC at the ASEAN Summit.” Marsudi echoed these sentiments, observing that the junta had “not responded positively to the efforts of the Special Envoy” and that some member countries were “of the view that ASEAN should not act ‘business as usual’ with regards to this development”. It was time, she argued, “for ASEAN foreign ministers to report this situation to the nine ASEAN leaders, and to receive a directive on how ASEAN should engage with Myanmar, especially in connection with the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits”.52

Accordingly, ASEAN met for an Emergency Meeting on 15 October and decided that Min Aung Hlaing would not be invited to the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits. Instead, the parties would allow a “non-political representation” for Myanmar.53

By effectively ignoring the consensus principle in this act, ASEAN was hailed in some quarters as being unusually activist and decisive, but in fact the move reflected its inability to conclude any decision. ASEAN was not able to appoint anyone that Min Aung Hlaing would accept to represent Myanmar, and the definition of a “non-political representation” in a civil-war torn country was flawed in its impracticality.
The junta’s behaviour did, however, prompt Malaysia’s foreign minister, Saifuddin Abdullah, to suggest a groundbreaking change in ASEAN’s diplomacy. During a virtual dialogue on human rights on 21 October, Abdullah said that ASEAN should do some “soul searching” over its non-interference principle in light of what was happening in Myanmar. In later social media commentary, he elaborated on this by arguing that ASEAN’s stakeholders should question whether the organisation could now move to a principle of “constructive engagement” and “non-indifference”. “As much as the issue in Myanmar is local and national”, he explained, “it has an impact on the region, and we should also recognise the concerns of the other nine member states”.

As it happened, the meetings went on with no Myanmar participation whatsoever. The regime responded to the disinvitation by refusing to send a delegate and condemning the ASEAN move as a violation of ASEAN’s Charter, specifically in terms of its consensus principle. As the incoming ASEAN Chair, Cambodia’s Hun Sen, later explained, “Today, ASEAN did not expel Myanmar from [the] ASEAN framework. Myanmar abandoned its right. Now we are in the situation of ASEAN minus one. It is not because of ASEAN, but because of Myanmar.” After the summits, Hun Sen also disinvited Min Aung Hlaing to attend the 13th Asia–Europe Meeting summit in November, which Cambodia chairs.
Why the Myanmar crisis is a test for ASEAN

The ASEAN Way and its limits

In essence, ASEAN’s unedifying performance reflects the disparate priorities of ASEAN’s current 10-nation membership and the constraints that this imposes on the group’s diplomacy. It also highlights that the ASEAN processes are not designed to resolve such crises as the one unfolding in Myanmar.

Almost all ASEAN states have in common the scars of war and conflict, in many cases due to great-power rivalries that have infected their own politics and strategic environment. Critically, all states, bar Thailand, were once colonies of foreign powers.

Driven largely by that history and the desire for unity out of its deep diversity, ASEAN sees its fundamental mandate as protecting the region’s peace and stability and serving the region’s people. Among its key points, the 1967 ASEAN Declaration stressed that ASEAN was established to “promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter”.

The “ASEAN way” of diplomacy is the ASEAN member states’ preferred means of achieving the goals of peace and stability. Central to this notion are the ideals and norms of consensus seeking, non-interference in domestic matters, and constructive engagement. Those norms have allowed ASEAN to broker positive diplomatic outcomes in the past, and the special summit in Jakarta on 24 April 2021 was held in that spirit with a view to engaging the Tatmadaw in constructive dialogue rather than isolating it.

Nevertheless, members’ differences hamper ASEAN’s decision-making mechanism. All member states might share a common interest in preserving peace and security in their region, but their interests specifically in Myanmar differ markedly.

Singapore, for example, is Myanmar’s largest foreign investor (overtaking China in 2019) and has capital in real estate projects, banking, shipping, sand exports and construction, as well as arms sales. With that economic leverage, Singapore has come under pressure to respond more assertively to the crisis. Instead, however, it has pursued mediation through “constructive engagement” with the Tatmadaw. Balakrishnan has disapproved of the approach of imposing generalised sanctions on Myanmar, reportedly arguing that “it is crucial we maintain the separation between politics and business, and let businesses make commercial and investment decisions on their own merits”.

Traditionally an important next-door neighbour, Thailand has found itself in a unique position in this crisis. Its current leadership also gained power through a military coup in 2014, and Min Aung Hlaing might have been inclined to look up General Prayut Chan-o-cha’s ‘playbook’ for successfully normalising the coup and legitimising power. This is why one of the first attempts at ‘shuttle diplomacy’ meetings among key ASEAN leaders was in Bangkok. Prayut’s government, however, has maintained an arm’s-length attitude, at least publicly. Prayut was among three leaders (along with Philippines President Duterte and new Laotian Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh) who sent foreign ministers instead of attending the special meeting.
Others have taken a more reticent approach to addressing the crisis. Vietnam, last year’s ASEAN chair, had been an active contributor to the ASEAN process and a strong supporter of the security agenda of the group, particularly as it related to the South China Sea and Mekong River. It has been far less active in Myanmar, however. Until recently, Malaysia too has been passive even in its diplomatic efforts to address the current crisis, perhaps due to its complex and shifting relationship with earlier waves of Myanmar’s refugees. It’s been a preferred destination for Rohingya immigrants in recent years, and an estimated half a million undocumented Rohingya refugees were in Malaysia prior to the coup.\textsuperscript{62} (Indonesia’s approach is covered at length separately below.)

Nor is the organisation itself about to find sufficient capacity internally to rise to the challenge. As an institution, ASEAN is arguably in its weakest shape in the organisation’s 54-year history. Its current generation of leaders and eminent persons lack the statesmanship, idealism and other qualities necessary for successful negotiations and crisis management that were evident among many of ASEAN’s founding fathers. Few, if any, appear as committed to the institution and its processes as many of their predecessors. The diversity of members’ strategic interests has been widening rather than narrowing, challenging ASEAN’s own unity and ability to respond cohesively in security crises. Even the ASEAN Economic Community has become a distant vision, and post-Covid-19 complications may make it even less a reality.
Additionally, ASEAN’s core mission has been diluted for some time because external powers have been able to offer the member states more incentives than the organisation itself can. As historian Thant Myint-U has assessed, ASEAN’s diplomacy has shown it to be “far less significant” in influencing the junta than individual countries such as Thailand, India, Japan and China. Moreover, the US’s ability to constructively engage with China diplomatically remains essential in influencing the UN, especially the UN Security Council’s role in preventing the “impending disaster”.63

Weak chairmanship of the organisation has exacerbated this problem. ASEAN has functioned best under chairs that set the tone and take a lead in driving collective action. Brunei proved not up to such a difficult task of chairing ASEAN in a time of crisis. It essentially avoided the responsibility, explaining its passive approach (including its abstention from the UN vote on banning sales of weapons to Myanmar) by unconvincingly asserting its “neutrality”. It left the impression that it regarded the coup as an inconvenient distraction from the grand task it had set for itself of guiding the region towards a post-Covid-19 recovery era.64 Brunei’s goal for 2021 was to protect the ASEAN community by prioritising swift recovery methods and vaccine distribution and protecting online conduct through cybersecurity.65

Even after the coup in Myanmar erupted, Brunei hoped that the crisis wouldn’t overtake the agenda it had for its chairmanship and largely worked according to the plans it had set, including focusing on the Regional Cooperative Economic Partnership (RCEP) to support more non-tariff measures, revive industry sectors, optimise e-commerce and promote sustainable economic growth. Erywan Yusof’s selection as ASEAN’s Special Envoy might have injected more purpose into Brunei’s efforts towards corralling its ASEAN partners into more constructive action on Myanmar, but its actions, coupled with its lack of diplomatic capability and clout, offered little cause for hope.

Moreover, Covid-19 restrictions on face-to-face contact have hindered the ASEAN style of frequent communication and informal discussions. Virtual meetings are less effective in challenging negotiations.

The pot-holed path to a rules-based solution

The ASEAN member states are also far from united when it comes to values and their force in international affairs. The members range from ostensible democracies of various shades of liberalism and authoritarianism, to monarchies whose rulers enjoy powerful constitutional and political privileges, to military regimes and communist one-party states.

Consequently, notwithstanding provisions codifying liberal norms such as democratic political and human rights in the 2007 ASEAN Charter, in practice the ASEAN member states share a relatively limited set of values, principal among them being a devotion to national sovereignty. The prospects for concerted punitive action by the organisation against a member state for violating those norms, as some ASEAN leaders and observers have demanded.66

The inherent inadequacies of ASEAN’s Charter as an instrument capable of providing a rules-based remedy for flagrant violations of members’ obligations under the charter compound this problem. Two clauses of the charter are especially apposite for Myanmar’s obligations not just for peace and stability but specifically for human rights, democracy and good governance. Clause 2.h of article 2 (which deals with principles with which member states must “act in accordance”) expressly demands that member states adhere to “the rule of law, good governance, the principles of democracy and constitutional government”.67 Article 2.2.i requires member states to “respect … fundamental freedoms” and to promote human rights and social justice.

The junta’s behaviour unarguably violates Myanmar’s obligations under those clauses. The problem is that the ASEAN Charter provides no express penalty for any such violations, no matter how egregious. While clause 2 of article 5 (which covers member states’ obligations) insists that “Member states shall take all necessary measures … to effectively implement the provisions of the Charter and to comply with all obligations of membership”, the clause that immediately follows it dictates only that, in the event of a “serious breach … or non-compliance, the matter shall be referred to Article 20”.68
Yet article 20, which ostensibly goes to “consultation and consensus”, offers nothing except a classic display of Applebyan casuistry. After reaffirming that, as “a basic principle, decision-making in ASEAN shall be based on consultation and consensus” (article 20.1), and that the ASEAN Summit “may decide how a specific decision can be made” should consensus not be reached (article 20.2), the article’s final clause simply says that any “serious breach of the Charter or non-compliance … shall be referred to the ASEAN Summit for decision”.

In other words, ASEAN member states are essentially obliged to refer a case such as Myanmar to the summit, and once that happens they can theoretically take any decision against a noncompliant member state they may choose, but first they would need to decide how they were going to decide. Only after cracking that nut could they even begin the task of deciding what, if anything, they would collectively impose on their recalcitrant fellow members. In reality, this process would rest entirely on their calculations of any decision’s impact on their national interests—calculations that they would have already made in considering the prior question of how to decide on how they would decide.

The move not to invite Min Aung Hlaing to the ASEAN Summit was in effect an instance of the partial application of this process.

But it remains to be seen whether the nine countries that agreed to it would ever be prepared to take advantage of article 20’s vagueness to exact an actual penalty (such as formal suspension from the group) for stamping out democracy and brutally violating human rights. Given the economic and strategic interests that key ASEAN states have in not alienating the junta, coupled with the undemocratic character of many ASEAN regimes and their own preoccupations with being criticised (and conceivably sanctioned) for violations of clauses 2.h and 2.i of article 2, the likelihood is presently small.

In the final analysis, therefore, unless the ASEAN member states see it in their interests to turn a blind eye to the principles of non-interference and consensus in order to sanction Myanmar with at least formal suspension, their interventions will remain passive, ineffectual and subject to rising levels of criticism from within Myanmar and the region more generally.

Indonesia: limited leadership

This even applies to the ASEAN member state perhaps most exercised by the events in Myanmar: Indonesia. Traditionally held up as the region’s de facto leader, Indonesia offers a case study of the gap between ASEAN’s ideals and aspirations on questions like Myanmar and its reality.

As ASEAN’s largest state and arguably its most liberal democracy, Indonesia has assumed a particular responsibility in addressing the crisis. Under its then president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his foreign minister, Hassan Wirajuda, Indonesia played a lead role in ensuring that the principles of democracy and human rights were incorporated into the ASEAN Charter when it was drafted. Yudhoyono, Wirajuda and his successor, Marty Natalegawa, strove (with debatable success) to nudge the former ruling junta into transitioning Myanmar into the circumscribed democracy that Min Aung Hlaing overthrew.

Retno Marsudi has worked to defend her predecessors’ legacy. She has appeared as alert as any of her regional counterparts to the blot on ASEAN’s landscape that the coup and its aftermath have left. She would want Myanmar to return to the status quo ante as soon as possible, in part because that would reaffirm the efficacy of the body whose centrality she continues to assert lies at the heart of Indonesia’s foreign policy and its hopes for regional peace and security.

Marsudi’s evident frustration with the lack of progress from a process in which she and her president have already invested themselves is therefore understandable. She’s unlikely to welcome the criticism of ASEAN’s efforts and calls for firmer measures coming from leading figures among Indonesia’s foreign policy establishment, given that they imply criticism of her for her inability to achieve Indonesia’s diplomatic objectives. In this respect, ASEAN’s failure to select the eminently worthy Wirajuda as its Special Envoy to Myanmar would have been a blow.
But the limits of Indonesia’s leadership on this issue have been evident. In the first place, Jokowi’s commitment to such a values-centred foreign policy task is highly doubtful. He has displayed little interest in international affairs that don’t go to economic and commercial imperatives linked to his domestic development agenda, from which the focus of his attention has rarely departed. The Covid-19 crisis has sharpened that focus more than ever (irrespective of how well one might assess that he has met that challenge).71

More to the point, the illiberal drift in Indonesia that Jokowi’s critics have perceived during his presidency suggests that his own view of democracy is little more than pragmatic.72 He offers no cause for imagining that he would be so interested in championing democracy elsewhere in the region as to expend the personal and diplomatic capital that this would require. Others closest to him, above all the former general and current Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment, Luhut Pandjaitan, and Vice President Ma’ruf Amin, are also hardly renowned for their passionate commitment to democracy, liberal values and human rights.

Marsudi, too, has offered reasons for querying how much value she places in the principles expressed in clauses 2.h and 2.i of article 2 of the ASEAN Charter, especially vis-a-vis article 2.2.e.73 Under her stewardship, Indonesia has maintained its international efforts to project itself as a Muslim-majority democracy cognisant of its obligations under UN instruments relating to human rights. But Indonesia’s decision in May this year to oppose a UN resolution on the responsibility to protect (R2P) placed it among a small group of authoritarian states and, as many Indonesian and foreign commentators observed at the time, reaffirmed the impression that Indonesia remains more attached to the notion of non-interference than to any other principle.74

A capable bureaucrat, Marsudi would also be particularly alert to the risk of trying to inspire a metaphorical charge into the guns of regional autocracy that she would know few, if any, other member states would join. The casualties in such an enterprise would not only be her own credibility and prestige but also those of her president, and at a time when his domestic standing is already waning because of Covid-19 and other factors.

The bottom line is that, given the current nature of ASEAN’s member states and the interests at stake, even the most authoritative and determined of Indonesia’s past leaders and foreign ministers would have struggled to drag the rest of the group behind them and either pressure the junta into dialogue and a return to the barracks or punish it for doing none of that. It would be naive, therefore, to pin high hopes on the Jokowi administration becoming the dynamo of a renewed ASEAN push to compel Myanmar’s compliance with its five-point consensus obligations, let alone with those under the ASEAN Charter, or to punish it for its persistent noncompliance.
18 Myanmar’s coup, ASEAN’s crisis: And the implications for Australia

The role of extra-regional actors

Nestled between India and China, Myanmar matters geostrategically.

Besides viewing Myanmar as a useful piece on its strategic chessboard vis-a-vis India, China sees its land transport connectivity with the country not just in bilateral trade terms but also as vital for mitigating its strategic vulnerabilities with respect to the Malacca Strait. To that end, Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative has supported the development of a China–Myanmar Corridor, notably featuring rail links, ports and gas and oil pipelines (Figure 4).75 Regardless of the suspicions about China’s ambitions that some Myanmar people would harbour, Beijing’s influence over the generals is likely to grow the more it looms as the only sustaining source of economic and political support. Ironically, Myanmar has the rotational duty of Coordinator for ASEAN-China relations for the period 2021-2024.76

Figure 4: Map of the oil pipeline between China’s Kunming and Myanmar’s Kyaukpyu Port

India has powerful economic and strategic interests in keeping Myanmar from falling completely within China’s sphere of influence, and those interests will prevail over any it may have in restoring democracy in Myanmar. Specifically, Beijing’s financing of a deepwater port at Kyaukpyu would add another ‘pearl’ to the string of Chinese-funded, potentially dual-purpose ports that New Delhi has long perceived as threatening to its own strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. For these and other reasons related to the development of its own northeastern territories, India has financed infrastructure projects in Myanmar (including roads, pipelines and a deep-water port at Sittwe) under its Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which is a collaboration signed with the previous military regime.77

Itself hardly a beacon of liberal democracy and human rights, the Modi government therefore has no interest in aligning itself with any well-meaning effort by Western democracies to impose sanctions in the hope of evicting the junta from power. And, given that selling weapons to its neighbour offers a means of retaining influence with the generals, it was no surprise to see India among those countries abstaining in the UN General Assembly vote.78
The future for Myanmar unfortunately looks far more bleak than hopeful. The Myanmar people seem more likely to continue engaging in the CDM than accept the Tatmadaw’s rule. The junta is most unlikely to retreat from the path it’s on, including when it comes to using lethal force to suppress dissent. The violence, then, is set to continue.

The economy’s prognosis is equally dire. The World Bank’s June report forecast an 18% contraction of Myanmar’s economy, nearly doubling the contraction predicted three months earlier in March, which forecast a 10% slowdown. The junta’s brutal behaviour and the CDM’s actions look likely to continue driving out investment as well as domestic economic activity. Due to the Delta strain, the country’s inadequate health infrastructure and the shortage of effective vaccines, the Covid-19 pandemic continues to inflict terrible health and economic costs.

Politically, three distinct scenarios loom in Myanmar:

**SCENARIO ONE**
The resistance triumphs over the junta, leading to a federal democracy.

**SCENARIO TWO**
The junta stubbornly consolidates its power, and the international community gradually tolerates it *de facto* without accepting it *de jure*.

**SCENARIO THREE**
Myanmar descends into a failed, war-torn state.

The first scenario is looking increasingly unlikely. The chances of a democratic restoration are slim. The CDM’s resources are scarce, especially relative to those of the Tatmadaw. The raging pandemic will distract from efforts to conduct sustained mass resistance. The NUG lacks international support, even from those Western democracies that have imposed sanctions as a result of the Tatmadaw’s coup. China didn’t invite representatives of the NUG to the China–ASEAN meeting in Chongqing in June. Aung San Suu Kyi’s track record on the Rohingyas had seriously tarnished her standing among Western countries, and the democratic retreat globally, and particularly in Southeast Asia, works against the movement’s prospects. There’s little incentive, therefore, for Min Aung Hlaing to even consider sharing power with the NUG in the prevailing circumstances, let alone give it up.
The second scenario’s likelihood is most likely. The Tatmadaw has launched a campaign to legally prevent the return of NLD members to power and to discredit the 2020 elections. If few foreign governments have recognised the regime, the international community has largely begun engaging with it as if it were the country’s official authority. If no action is taken to reverse this, the regime’s de facto international recognition would be inevitable.

Tragically, the third scenario is also more likely than the first.81 The divisions between the central authority and its opponents, whether supporters of the NUG or the ethnic minorities, are set to deepen, increasing the risk of escalating violence. The internal division among the country’s ethnic and religious groups will also probably continue to widen and lead to further decentralisation and even conflict. Without a government legitimately elected by most of the peoples of Myanmar, individual armed groups are likely to continue exploiting the chaos. In Rakhine State, for example, the Arakan Army is likely to try to expand its territory. Organised crime groups are also set to take advantage of any governance vacuum. And the more Myanmar descends into turmoil and violent division, the narrower the window for negotiation among the contending parties is set to become.

Among the ramifications of this would be those relating to ASEAN’s aspirations and goals. ASEAN can’t progress with its ASEAN Political–Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural communities agenda with a failed state among its members. The Southeast Asian region can’t prosper and enjoy stability if one of its integral parts is sliding into chaos. The likelihood of ASEAN mediating a satisfactory resolution—i.e, one acceptable to all parties in Myanmar—looks distant. The factors that have worked against any meaningful intervention so far, above all members’ disparate national interests and values, aren’t about to change. They all lack both the appetite for intervention (least of all on the grounds of R2P) and the ability to do it alone.

That Hun Sen’s Cambodia has taken over as ASEAN Chair hardly bodes well for the organisation’s ability to make progress. Hun Sen himself seems disinclined to veto those ASEAN partners that are determined to apply some pressure on the junta, however impactful this might be in the current circumstances. And he is likely to be a more charismatic ASEAN chair and more involved than his Bruneian predecessor. That said, his own illiberal governance of Cambodia would also suggest that he is most unlikely to show the dedicated leadership necessary to have any hope of achieving a resolution based on democratic and human rights principles.

How ASEAN eventually resolves the issue of recognition, whether de facto or de jure, will be a key indicator of its approach and credibility. Thus far, it hasn’t formally recognised the Tatmadaw, but it hasn’t denounced it. By not inviting Min Aung Hlaing to the Summit, it signalled its displeasure with the regime but stopped well short of disavowing its legitimacy and has not engaged it. It remains unlikely to recognise the NUG as the legitimate government, or even of granting it the same standing as the SAC (ASEAN has the option of allowing both the NUG and the SAC to sit in as observers to its meetings without speaking rights).82 If this situation persists, ASEAN will effectively have taken a side and could no longer claim neutrality and impartiality.

With ASEAN on this trajectory, its prospects for responding well to either of the two most likely Myanmar scenarios are poor. In this event, questions about ASEAN’s relevance will only intensify, including as regards the utility of its cherished ‘centrality’ in Indo-Pacific affairs. Many will increasingly ask how ASEAN could credibly claim and perform such a role if it cannot even resolve its own internal problems, especially when those problems stem from patent violations of its own stated principles. How can ASEAN’s insistence that the way to regional stability and peace lies in cooperating and observing the principles and rules of international law under its leadership carry any weight if its own principles carry no weight when it comes to constraining the behaviour of a recalcitrant member state?

Already, ASEAN’s flaccid retort to the junta, like the ineffectiveness in the face of Beijing’s assertiveness and outright bullying in the South China Sea, has reinforced charges coming from many within ASEAN itself that the organisation has become unfit for purpose. It is adding more justification to demands for the organisation’s reform to make it more relevant for its contemporary challenges, whether internal or external, and more useful in meeting them. Of these, Saifuddin Abdullah’s suggestion of moving away from the non-interference principle, as tentative and
cryptic as his alternative formulation appears, represents potentially the most significant shift in ASEAN’s identity and practice. Unfortunately, however, Abdullah’s musings and the demands of ASEAN’s other critics are unlikely to lead to anything any time soon because its internal dynamics and the self-interests of its members work powerfully against change.

Accordingly, ASEAN’s failures in the Myanmar crisis risk accelerating its slide into functional irrelevance at a time of growing great power competition in the region, when the need for it to perform the role it claims for itself is likely to be more acute than ever. Resolving the crisis consistent with its Charter principles wouldn’t reassure its critics (let alone the major powers) that ASEAN is up to the still harder task of mediating the region’s geopolitics. But failing to do so - and, worst of all, according de facto recognition to the junta - will underscore the gap between reality and ASEAN’s ideals of conflict resolution through dialogue and cooperation under its banner.
The two most likely future scenarios for Myanmar have implications for Australia that include transnational security threats stemming directly from Myanmar, as well as others (for example, the impact on Australia’s commercial interests, and the case of the detained Australian citizen, Prof. Sean Turnell) that this report does not cover. They also include regional security and strategic issues stemming from ASEAN’s mishandling of the crisis. This report is primarily focused on these matters.

**Should the junta consolidate its grip on power and reconstitute the regime that previously governed Myanmar for a quarter of a century from 1990, the impact on Australian strategic interests would likely not be significant.** The generals may be more prone to taking Beijing’s lures than a democratic administration. But so long as they also see workable relations with New Delhi as also serving their interests, they are not likely to become mere clients of China and obedient to its exclusive demands.

By the same token, in this scenario India’s exercise in *realpolitik* can serve Australia’s interest in helping to preserve a strategic balance in that part of the Indo-Pacific even though it would be at odds with Australia’s (and others’) interests in seeing concerted international pressure restore a democratic government and build an Indo-Pacific region governed by the rule of law.

**Should Myanmar descend into full-scale civil war, the calculus of interests for Australia and others should—and likely will—change. The region would then face grave risks of security problems spilling over Myanmar’s borders.**

As regards non-strategic security threats, the most serious for Australia lies in the impact on the illegal narcotics trade. Already Myanmar is the principal source of heroin and methamphetamines sold in Australia. The more ungovernable and war-ravaged it becomes, the greater the risk of Myanmar tipping over into a fully-fledged narcostate. The risk is just as severe should the junta, having crushed all opposition, then retreat into a North Korea–like crouch and, like Pyongyang’s regime, see drugs not just as an opportunity for personal enrichment but also as a state revenue source.

Another transnational security problem would be higher levels of irregular movement of people. Even larger scale internal displacement and large-scale flows of ethnic minorities across borders than is currently the case would be likely to ensue in the circumstances. Australia would face a growing push factor for irregular migration flows in our direction.

At the same time, the more the generals’ brutality destabilises Myanmar and its neighbourhood, the more those developments conflict with Australia’s (and ASEAN members’) interest in a stable ASEAN focused on common economic, social and political goals, and whose ‘unity in diversity’ isn’t facing an acute risk of fracturing. As Foreign Minister Marise Payne has stated, the “political stability of ASEAN member states is essential to achieving our vision for a secure, peaceful, prosperous and open Indo-Pacific region with ASEAN at its centre.”

The coup has also disrupted a part of Australia’s own plans to play a greater role in the region. One of the ways that Canberra intended to do so was by means of a “package” of assistance to Southeast Asia worth over A$500 million that was announced at the East Asia Summit in November 2020. Along with other pledges for vaccines to Southeast Asia, this is considered Australia’s largest funding commitment to the region since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

By removing the legitimate government, the junta has driven Australia to delay and divert its support to more acceptable channels, reducing whatever strategic benefits the commitment might otherwise have begun accruing. One of its key components was the establishment of the Australia-Mekong Partnership to support sustainable, high-quality development in the subregion. The partnership’s liaison office was planned (before the coup) to be located in Naypyidaw, and support to Myanmar was to be a central plank of the initiative.

Finally, by exposing the inadequacies of ASEAN’s processes of mediation and conflict resolution, both scenarios would have implications for Australia in terms of the value we attach to regional multilateralism in addressing regional strategic challenges.

Recent developments hint at what that value currently is. The elevation of the Quad and the formation of AUKUS show that, like its partners, Australia has already concluded that a strategy based on the balance of hard power is a more prudent course in the prevailing circumstances than one centred on ASEAN’s mediation, notwithstanding official statements nodding to its centrality. (Indeed, the positive reaction of some prominent ASEAN states to these developments shows that they have for all intents and purposes reached the same frustrated conclusion, again notwithstanding obligatory recitations by all ASEAN states to the contrary). The bigger the peace dividend that this investment in deterrence yields, the more prudent this strategy will prove.

But pursuing peace through such means carries its own risks. And as a regional ‘middle power’, Australia retains an interest in seeing the Indo-Pacific region’s future determined as much as possible through diplomacy rather than the simple exercise of power. In this regard, then, the opportunity cost to Australia (and others) of the decline into irrelevance of the only practicable avenue for meaningful regional diplomacy is considerable. Gone for all practical purposes would be a potentially helpful supplement to its Quad and AUKUS-based contribution to maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific.
Policy recommendations for Australia

How the Australian Government should deal with the Tatmadaw regime (for example, whether it should adopt targeted sanctions against its leaders, how it should address the Turnell case) is generally outside the ambit of this report. The Australian Government needs to plan, however, for the likelihood of a Tatmadaw entrenched in power and set to rule the country much as it did and as long as it did before the NLD’s relatively brief hold on power.

Given Australia’s enduring transnational security interests in Myanmar, the government will have to respond to prevailing circumstances with the same pragmatism that it has shown in the past. Earlier Australian governments managed to deal with the previous incarnation of the Tatmadaw regime to combat the drug trade. The current and future governments have no practical choice but to do the same. The same would be true were higher levels of irregular immigration (either because of worsening conflict in Myanmar or the regime’s repression) necessitate closer cooperation with Myanmar’s authorities, including through multilateral processes.

Dealing with the implications of ASEAN’s actions (or inaction) on Myanmar for its relevance and utility in regional strategic affairs presents policy challenges of a different nature and magnitude.

On Myanmar specifically, the government should step up its coordination with key ASEAN partners and intensify its efforts to urge them into applying greater pressure on the junta to conform with its obligations under the five-point consensus.

It should work especially closely with Bangkok, Singapore, and Jakarta. The first would be the hardest to influence given the Thai Government’s own interests and not-to-distant origins in a military coup. But its familiarity with (and prospective influence on) Myanmar’s generals are unequalled in ASEAN. It also is likely to be relatively influential with respect to Cambodia, the new ASEAN chair. Singapore is the ASEAN partner with which Australia can normally work most constructively, notwithstanding some differences, and none has a greater stake in a viable ASEAN and a regionally-engineered resolution of the crisis. Its leadership also enjoys a level of access and influence in Jakarta that Australia lacks. And Jakarta, for all its current hesitancy in exercising the de facto authority that comes with being primus inter pares in ASEAN, retains the latent capacity to lead the group authoritatively and with enough effect to make a difference if it really asserted itself.

Canberra has no choice but also to step up its dealings with Phnom Penh in light of its assuming the ASEAN leadership for 2022. In doing so, its message should focus more on Hun Sen’s merits as ASEAN Chair were some progress in ASEAN’s diplomacy achieved on his watch than arguments based on the merits of liberal democracy.

More generally, too, our advocacy should focus on the importance and value of enacting ASEAN’s own principles rather than the liberal democratic values underlying some of them. It should allude to the arguments for this measure coming from eminent figures from within ASEAN.
Canberra should distinguish between what states might do with the junta in pursuit of their individual national interests and what they should do as ASEAN members given the ASEAN Charter’s principles and the obligations these impose on members. It should underscore that these states would serve their collective interests in preserving a viable and credible ASEAN by acting firmly against a regime whose behaviour risks discrediting their organisation while destabilising part of mainland South-East Asia.

Accordingly, the Australian Government should urge these countries to ensure ASEAN sets firm deadlines for Myanmar to meet its obligations under the five-point consensus, and suspends Myanmar’s membership by applying Article 20 of the Charter should the junta not do so. It should stress that irrespective of whether such a step would likely change the junta’s behaviour—it probably wouldn’t—it would underscore ASEAN’s authority. Only by instituting meaningful reforms, including the very decision-making mechanism, could ASEAN sustain an argument for the utility and relevance of its centrality in regional affairs. Whether this happens is entirely in the hands of member states.

Even so, the interests that Australia has in an effective ASEAN warrant the best possible effort at encouraging or persuading them to do what is necessary to ensure this.

This requires more than platitudes about ASEAN centrality that sit starkly at odds with Canberra’s increasingly muscular deeds. Such words may be diplomatically expedient but they likely carry no more weight than that with ASEAN members.

It also requires more than merely declaring that the relationship Australia can now claim with ASEAN is a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) and decorating it with aid packages, however beneficial they might be. If this freshly bestowed status is to have any practical meaning in strategic terms, Canberra should use it as an opportunity to get beyond soothing rhetoric about Australia’s fealty to a conception of ASEAN that the organisation’s performance is causing even some of its most internationally engaged citizens to question, and defensiveness over our military build-up.

Instead, it should unapologetically underscore Australia’s importance to ASEAN member states as a middle power capable of contributing to the region’s stability and security through both its enhanced hard-power capabilities and economic cooperation. In this endeavour, it should focus on its bilateral advocacy on Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines, the last three of which appear predisposed to welcoming this fact.

At the same time, the new CSP should also be the catalyst for more active, sustained and purposive regional diplomacy, from the Minister of Foreign Affairs down, aimed at encouraging and supporting ASEAN to make itself fitter for the purpose it claims for itself and which it alone can perform, including by re-examining some of the shibboleths that shackle it.

The government should aim to reassure interlocutors, both through the ASEAN Secretariat and members’ capitals, that Australia values the role that an effective, credible ASEAN can play in mediating great power tensions while warning that it can’t perform that role credibly if it fails to heed internal calls for reforms necessary for addressing its own internal problems.

Given the dimensions of the challenge, this quest will require levels of energy and effort well beyond those going into AUKUS and the Quad.

Provided we engage ASEAN seriously and respectfully, we should not fret over offending through such frankness. Delivered politely and through official channels—not through a megaphone—the message would chime with those coming from a growing proportion of ASEAN’s own commentariat. Such forthrightness in urging the association to make its own adjustments towards hard-edged reality in order to perform the role that ideally it should do would likely ring truer coming from our mouths than formulaic blandishments about ASEAN’s centrality.
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### Acronyms and abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of South-East Asian Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>AUKUS</td>
<td>Trilateral technology sharing agreement between Australia, the UK and the US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDM</td>
<td>Civil Disobedience Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-government organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLD</td>
<td>National League for Democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>NUG</td>
<td>National Unity Government of Myanmar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quad</td>
<td>Quadrilateral Security Dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>R2P</td>
<td>responsibility to protect</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAC</td>
<td>State Administration Council (a.k.a. Myanmar’s military junta)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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And implications for Australia