

MYANMAR UPDATE CONFERENCE • ANU 20 26

Behind Closed Doors: SDG Regression, Grassroots Resistance in Myanmar and ASEAN's Structural Paralysis

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Positionality

- 12 years working as a Ministry of Health official during Myanmar's democratization era—working directly alongside senior leadership (including the late H.E. Dr. Myint Htwe and Deputy Minister Dr. Thein Thein Htay, my PHD supervisor).
- Understand state bureaucracies from the inside while opposing state violence and militarization.
- Extensive operational exposure to ASEAN frameworks (2014–2019), co-leading state delegations across the region.
- Studied and compared ASEAN's health policies as a WHO postdoctoral fellow at Asia Health Policy Program, Stanford University, the United States.
- Transitioned into active academic resistance in 2015 Black Ribbon Movement (when my diplomatic green passport was revoked)
- After the 2021 military coup, fully participated in scientific resistance activities.
- Not a theoretical ASEAN scholar. Only driven by one motive: To reduce human sufferings.



With Late HE Dr. Myint Htwe and ASEAN consultant for health system reform under during Daw ASSK era.

ASEAN Context & Disclaimers

- **Confidentiality:** Informal, personal insights shared under strict Chatham House Rules.
- **Side-events:** Operates under Track 1.5 or Track 2 frameworks (with Track 1.5 blending civil society and off-the-record government officials).
- **Plausible Deniability Buffer:** When independent forums host controversial sessions or invite non-state actors—such as civil society critics or representatives from conflict zones—ASEAN member states benefit from the "Track 2 buffer."
- **High-level engagement:** Joined by some senior leadership (e.g., Similar level to Foreign Ministers and senior presidential advisors), creating a rare mix of career diplomats and regional actors, academics, youths etc.
- **Navigating rigidity:** Official ASEAN channels remain highly rigid, not possible to break the systemic barrier, informal side events are the only viable entry point for grassroots narratives like ours.

Informal/ personal insights



At a bunker in a frontline hospital a few years ago.

Timing a bunker dive by the Doppler shift of an approaching fighter jet vs. Navigating ASEAN's rigid diplomacy



Observations

Representation imbalance

- Non-political representation (the Permanent Secretary level), while NUG, revolutionary and grassroots perspectives were also systematically excluded.
- Myanmar nationals hardly appeared in regional events since the 2021 coup.
- Emerged as perhaps the “sole” academic directly advocating for grassroots revolutionary movements in this very tight space.
- A chance to talk about Myanmar’s grassroot resistance to some officials, regional academics, media, a few senior leadership and youth advocates (**Gen Z**).

Realpolitik

All members seemed to accept that the junta has crossed **an unpardonable threshold of inhumanity.**

- **Access to information:** While well-intentioned actors within ASEAN seek direct outreach to the people of Myanmar, formal channels constrain their reach.
- **Common answer:** Received information only from “**formal**” channels
- **Underground movements’ Security:** Grassroots education and health resistance networks in Myanmar deliberately maintain low media visibility and share intelligence only with trusted partners to protect local safety.
- **Institutional Blind Spot:** Reliance on official diplomatic sources leaves external actors without established mechanisms to connect with decentralized frontline initiatives.

Calculated Inaction by the Junta

- **The "Five-Point Consensus" Stall:** No practical enforcement, largely because the bloc lacks mechanism-backed compliance measures.
- The junta intentionally ignores the 5-Point Consensus (5PC), exploiting ASEAN's institutional inertia and non-interference principle.
- Junta Survival: Continuous diplomatic shielding and Russian-Chinese alignment limit direct Western leverage.
- Its only a matter of time for the junta and they will not respond to 5PC.

The Unavoidable China Factor

Foreign Policy Orientation	ASEAN Member States (AMS)	Strategic Calculus / Dependency
Tilting to the USA	Singapore, The Philippines	Prioritize rules-based maritime order & high security integration.
Balanced / Hedging	Viet Nam	Maintains highly calculated geopolitical equilibrium.
Tilting to China	Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia	Heavily driven by economic dependencies and geographical proximity.



Verified using comprehensive FPCI Survey empirical findings referenced in IMG_4337.jpg

Why Have SDGs and Humanitarian Arguments Lost Priority?

“Southeast Asian countries are not on track to meet any of the 17 SDGs by 2030 according to the UN.”

- Major global powers and regional institutions are currently operating under high strategic anxiety (energy insecurity, defense modernization).
- **Soft-power agendas** like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are increasingly **sidelined**.
- **Humanitarian & Donor Fatigue:** Multi-year developmental goals (SDGs) are often displaced by short-term crisis management, leaving human-centric arguments underfunded and sidelined.

Why SDGs and Humanitarian Health MUST Remain Central

- **Health and Development Are Hard Security Factors:** SDGs are not merely moral aspirations—they are structural risk mitigation tools for global security.
- **Economic Cost-Effectiveness of Prevention:** Managing disease outbreaks, mass displacement, or system collapses reactively is exponentially more expensive than investing in preventive, local health resilience.
- **Decentralized, Low-Cost Models Deliver High Impact:** Even within "deglobalized" or hostile environments, decentralized, community-led, and anonymous networks (e.g., local health and education resistance initiatives) have demonstrated that localized human-centric aid can be sustained at a fraction of the cost of top-down international bureaucracy.
- For example: under 5 immunization, drug resistance TB

ASEAN Youths Matter

- **Socio-Political Resilience & Stability:** Youth bear the largest long-term impact of systemic challenges like climate change, economic shift, and labor displacement.
- Youths are growing anxious, not trusting in current leaderships.
- **Investing** in their **employment, mental health, and civic engagement** is essential for maintaining political stability and social cohesion in ASEAN region.



ASEAN Paralysis is not Civic Paralysis

- **ASEAN Paralysis is not Civic Paralysis:** Reforming ASEAN's formal structures may be unfeasible, but official inertia does not reflect the agency of the region's people.
- **The Limits of the Bloc:** ASEAN is designed for state-level diplomacy, not community-level protection; it should not be relied upon as the sole vehicle for change or support for the revolution of Myanmar.
- **A Vibrant Regional Ecosystem:** Beyond state dynamics, Southeast Asia is driven by active youth movements, engaged vibrant growing academic networks (higher education investments is growing days after days), and intellectual solidarity getting stronger.
- **The Information Gap:** While regional civil society wants to support Myanmar's revolution, operational security (strict anonymity/encrypted protocols by our side) often obscures on-the-ground realities from potential allies. We including NUG and other actors should find ways to engage more with the people and societies beyond ASEAN.
- **Growing Grassroots Resistance:** Ground-level action continues out of sheer necessity—survival cannot wait for diplomatic alignment. After balancing the trade-offs, relevant international communities should be kept-informed about what is going on with those resistance activities.

Informal Backchannel Ecosystems

- From diplomatic perspective, Leveraging Track-2 and community-led networks as **practical tools** to navigate and bypass rigid, state-centric systems.
- The region is driven by civil society and reform-minded actors pushing for institutional change across the region from the ground.
- Youths movements must be fully guided and supported.

A Defining Takeaway

- "At the end of the day, ASEAN will and must listen to its people—because the people matter."
- Revolution/reform is not an event. It is a process.
- Soft-power is more cost-effective and humane than hard power.