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# From Ballots to Battlefields

Elections without Authority in a Fragmented  
and Contested Myanmar

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## AIIES COMMENT

## From Ballots to Battlefields Elections without Authority in a Fragmented and Contested Myanmar

### A Government without Authority: Myanmar after the 2025–26 Elections

As voting has concluded in the Myanmar general election and the armed forces (Tatmadaw) backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) has secured a resounding victory<sup>1</sup>, winning 232 of the 263 seats in the lower house and 109 of the 157 declared seats in the upper house,<sup>2</sup> the country continues to hang in a limbo between a deadly civil war, regional powers fighting for influence and the actions of transnational criminal networks. The elections, conducted in three phases on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2025 as well as 11<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of January, were internationally criticized for taking place during a civil war while the military junta only rules over about 20 percent of Myanmar. However, it still has a tight grip on the economic centers and large parts of the Bamar heartland of the country.<sup>3</sup>

Critics of the elections remarked that opposition figures – including Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) – remained sidelined, since the military junta dissolved the NLD along with 39 other political parties in 2023<sup>4</sup> and arrested Suu Kyi after the coup d'état in 2021.<sup>5</sup> The Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Myanmar remains a member while the military junta is excluded from high-level summits<sup>6</sup>, neither en-

dorsed<sup>7</sup> the elections nor recognized their results.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the elections were called a sham by the European Parliament, the United Kingdom and the United Nations.<sup>9</sup>

All the while, the civil war ravaging Myanmar since 2021 remains one of the world's largest humanitarian crises with the number of internally displaced persons expected to rise towards 4 million in 2026 and over 16 million people expected to be in need of humanitarian assistance according to UN estimates.<sup>10</sup> Large parts of the country are under the rule of different ethnic armed organizations (EAO).

Among the most important rank the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) as well as the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) both active in different parts of Shan State. These EAOs have formed the Three Brotherhood Alliance since 2019, rising to increased prominence in 2023 after starting a joint military offensive against the Tatmadaw in Shan State, called Operation 1027.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the National Unity Government (NUG) and its armed wing, the People's Defense Forces (PDF), have started to gain increased territorial control.<sup>12</sup>

With the Tatmadaw viewing the results of the elections as a mandate legitimizing its continued rule over Myanmar, new debates about engaging the junta, how to deal with the various EAOs and

how to handle regional security issues involving Myanmar will undoubtedly arise. With regional powers like China and India having vested interests in Myanmar, as well as outside powers such as Russia wielding influence over the junta, the country stands to continue being a theatre of power competition. At the same time scam centers, part of a global multibillion dollar fraud industry, operated by transnational crime networks continue to be a major concern. Activities connected to these scam centers include fraud, human trafficking, slavery and money laundering. In Myanmar, 120 000 people are estimated to be held captive as forced laborers at such compounds.<sup>13</sup>

### Myanmar's Disintegration and the Opening for External Powers

The conflict in Myanmar, which has endured in different forms since independence in 1948, is partly rooted in the country's diverse ethnic composition.<sup>14</sup> While the ethnic Bamar people, populating the central lowlands of the country, form the majority with about 68 percent of the population, a range of different ethnic minorities populate the peripheries of Myanmar's territory.

The 2021 coup d'état has, however, given new life to many EAOs and the weak legitimacy of the Tatmadaw among Myanmar's ethnic minorities has strengthened their position in some parts of the country. The

fact that elections could not be held in more than a third of Myanmar's townships due to infrastructural deficiencies<sup>15</sup> underscores the weak internal legitimacy of the central government in Naypyidaw. This is amplified by the Tatmadaw's cancellation of voting in parts of Myanmar between the voting phases due to ongoing clashes and increased violence.<sup>16</sup>

Myanmar's ongoing internal fragmentation has led to a situation in which some observers view a permanent balkanization of Myanmar as inevitable.<sup>17</sup> This development, however, opens opportunities for increased external involvement in Myanmar. While China has good relations with the Tatmadaw, it has also been involved in making deals with EAOs which operate in strategically important areas of Myanmar. India, on the other hand, has a long border with Myanmar on its own northeastern periphery and has increasingly tried to make inroads into Rakhine State and adjacent areas.

### **Beijing's Stakes in Myanmar: CMEC, Security and Influence**

China's engagement in Myanmar is driven by the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), an economic corridor designed to provide fast sea access for China's landlocked western provinces aiming to connect Yunnan province with the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port in Rakhine State (Figure 1). Formalized in 2018, CMEC would, if completed, already be connected to the existing Sino-Myanmar Oil and Gas pipelines linking Kunming to the Kyaukphyu oil and gas terminals.<sup>18</sup>

However, even before the 2021 coup d'état, CMEC was troubled by domestic concerns in Myanmar, but more importantly by ethnically motivated violence in the vicinity of cornerstone CMEC projects like the Kunming-Mandalay railway.<sup>19</sup> These problems for CMEC were amplified after the 2021 coup d'état, as the \$15 billion project crosses over 1000 kilometers and several front lines in Myanmar.<sup>20</sup>

China remains one of the military junta's most important international partners and continues to cooperate with it on CMEC-related projects. Realities on the ground in Myanmar, however, have forced China to engage with EAOs, like the AA<sup>21</sup> and the United Wa State Army<sup>22</sup>. While in some contexts EAOs profited from their ties to China, in other instances China pressured them to retreat from territory they had captured. This was prominently displayed when China cut off electricity, water and internet to the Kokang region – home of the MNDAA – after it captured the commercial hub of the northern Shan State, Lashio, from the Tatmadaw.<sup>23</sup> Beijing did so as it punished and pressured the MNDAA to halt its offensive, return territory and enter into negotiations with the Tatmadaw to ultimately serve Beijing's interest of keeping its border stable and secure.<sup>24</sup>

### **India's Connectivity Strategy: Securing Maritime Access for the Northeast**

India's northeastern states, which have been the place of long-standing ethnically motivated insurgencies, form a long border with Myanmar. While the

border politically separates India and Myanmar, many similarities persist among ethnic communities on both sides. The border region has been heavily impacted by instability and violence in Myanmar, as evidenced by surges in drug and weapons trafficking<sup>25</sup> and refugee influxes. For instance, 60 000 refugees have sought shelter in India with 33 000 fleeing to Mizoram.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, areas in Myanmar adjacent to India are still home to camps and training facilities of separatist groups operating in Northeastern India.<sup>27</sup>

To increase the development and connectivity of its northeastern states, India has planned projects like the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway (IMT Highway) and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP). These initiatives are moreover part of India's Act-East policy towards Southeast Asia, in which Myanmar is seen as a bridge to the rest of the region.<sup>28</sup> The IMT Highway and particularly the KMMTTP additionally serve to connect the landlocked northeastern states to the Bay of Bengal and the rest of India.<sup>29</sup> The KMMTTP (Figure 2) - which aims to connect Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, with Sittwe in Rakhine state, Paletwa in Chin state and Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram – has gained particular strategic importance in New Delhi since the fall of the Hasina regime in Bangladesh in 2024.<sup>30</sup> As Rakhine State and Chin State are central to the success of the IMT Highway and KMMTTP the AA has increasingly been engaged by India. While India still upholds close relations to Naypyidaw, it cannot ignore the subnational

fragmentation of Myanmar, as most of the India-Myanmar border is controlled by non-state actors on the Myanmar side.<sup>31</sup>

### **Russia and Belarus:** **Authoritarian Lifelines for the Junta**

Another actor that is of particular importance to the Tatmadaw is Russia. According to SIPRI, Russia has provided the junta with 61 percent of weapons supplies between 2022 and 2024, with China being a distant second supplying 33 percent of weapons.<sup>32</sup> A particular aspect of Russian military support to Myanmar is its supplies of drones needed for the Tatmadaw's extensive aerial warfare. According to data collected by ACLED, more than 2100 drone strikes were recorded in the civil war up to May 2025.<sup>33</sup> While some EAO's like the Karen National Union (KNU) have drone-strike capabilities of their own, the Tatmadaw have clear air superiority over battlefields.<sup>34</sup>

Russian drone supplies deployed in Myanmar include reconnaissance drones, like the Orlan-30s, Zala Lancet suicide drones, as well as defensive anti-drone equipment like the RB-504A-E jamming system.<sup>35</sup> Apart from military support, Russia and Myanmar have increased their nuclear cooperation since a 2023 agreement between the Myanmar government and the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation (ROSATOM) to establish a Nuclear Technology and Information Center in Yangon, while also proposing to construct a 110 MW small modular reactor, consisting of two 55 MW units provided by ROSATOM.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, during a 2025 visit to Russia by Tatmadaw leader Min Aung Hlaing, Russia confirmed an investment in the Dawei Deep Sea-port and a special economic zone in the Tanintharyi region. This project could give Russia access to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, while strengthening its position along regional trade and energy routes in Southeast Asia.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, the Tatmadaw has developed close ties to Belarus and its president Alyaksandr Lukashenka. In November 2025, he became the first foreign head of state to visit Myanmar since the 2021 coup d'état. Belarus – the only country to vote against a 2021 UN resolution condemning the coup d'état – and Myanmar agreed to further cooperation in the domains of “*pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, machinery and technologies, science, education, and the military-industrial complex*”.<sup>38</sup>

### **The EU's Role: Between Moral Credibility and Strategic Marginalization**

Having heavily supported the liberalization and democratization of Myanmar in the 2010s<sup>39</sup>, the EU finds itself increasingly sidelined since 2021, as the EU does not recognize the military junta's legitimacy and has condemned the 2021 coup d'état.<sup>40</sup> It, however, enjoys good credibility among Myanmar's population due to its heavy focus on contributing humanitarian aid to Myanmar without engaging the Tatmadaw.<sup>41</sup> It is seen as a morally credible actor and enjoys a high degree of trust within Myanmar's population.<sup>42</sup>

As the EU does not recognize the current regime in Naypyidaw as legitimate, it declined to send an observation mission to the 2025-26 elections and has imposed repeated rounds of sanctions. It maintains an arms embargo and withholds development assistance except for humanitarian aid directed at the most vulnerable communities under its back-to-basics approach.<sup>43</sup> The EU remains one of the largest humanitarian donors engaging civil society actors, international organizations and non-governmental organizations in Myanmar. Between 2021 and 2024, it contributed €219 million to Myanmar, while it plans to fund €99 million between 2025 and 2027. After the disastrous March 2025 earthquake, it also allocated €2.5 million in immediate emergency aid.<sup>44</sup> The EU has also been particularly vocal about the situation of the Muslim Rohingya minority, launching the 2025-2026 Joint Responsive Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis which intends to support Bangladeshi host communities of Rohingya refugees with €32.3 million.<sup>45</sup>

The EU however needs to ask itself uncomfortable questions about its engagement in Myanmar and how it plans to engage a country torn apart between competing domestic actors and caught between external actors fighting for influence. While the EU should continue to aid Myanmar's civil population and uphold its promise to push for human rights and a democratic transition, it must also face the reality on the ground and clearly

articulate its geopolitical interests in Myanmar. It should engage relevant sub-national and regional actors that can help it achieve geostrategic gains vis-à-vis the Tatmadaw's cooperation with strategic adversaries like China, Russia and Belarus and use the leverage it has with India and ASEAN to push for real political change in Myanmar.

The 2026 ASEAN chairmanship of the Philippines presents the EU with ample opportunities to do so. Arguably the most pro-western country in ASEAN, the Philippines have already signaled a change in course on how they aim to handle the situation in Myanmar as compared to 2025 ASEAN chair Malaysia. While the mostly ineffective 5PC will remain part of ASEAN's policy towards Myanmar, the new ASEAN special envoy to Myanmar and Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs – Theresa Lazaro – said that she aims to include more anti-junta forces.<sup>46</sup>

This sentiment was already on display during a two day stakeholder meeting on Myanmar in January 2026, which the Chin National Front attended.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the accession of Timor-Leste to ASEAN in 2025 introduced a new member to the regional bloc that has been outspoken in its support for the NUG and a democratic transition in Myanmar, as East-Timorese President José Ramos Horta even went as far as meeting with NUG Minister of Foreign Affairs Daw Zin Mar Aung in June 2024.<sup>48</sup> With Timor-Leste having a track record as the most democratic country in Southeast

Asia<sup>49</sup> joining ASEAN, the EU could gain a promising new partner in the region. The EU would be wise to consider the former Portuguese colony as a partner in pushing for democracy and human rights in the region, especially given the personal background of the President of the European Council – Antonio Costa – the former Prime Minister of Portugal.

Whether Myanmar could become a unified state in the future seems unlikely at the moment.

Having strong interests in improving interregional relations with ASEAN countries – as displayed in bilateral trade agreements with Vietnam and Singapore, and ongoing negotiations with Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand<sup>50</sup> – stepping up security cooperation on Myanmar would give a considerable boost to the EU's interest to sustainably engage ASEAN countries as eye-to-eye partners. Ongoing EU projects like Enhancing the EU's security cooperation with Asia and Indo-Pacific Plus (ESIWA+), should be expanded to have a Myanmar domain and to reach out to sub-national actors, in cooperation with like-minded regional partners. As ESIWA+ aims to address among other things maritime security, crisis management, hybrid threats and cyber security<sup>51</sup>, expanding its portfolio to Myanmar would be a needed addition to the EU's security presence in the region.

Moreover, the EU should collaborate with regional partners to counter scam operations conducted by transnational criminal networks in Myanmar. These scam centers threaten regional stability and citizens around the globe, including in China, India, the United States and Europe. To be seen as a credible actor invested in regional stability, the EU should propose a joint task force with affected countries to collaboratively combat these operations. As the United States established a Scam Center Strike Force in 2025 targeting such operations in Southeast Asia<sup>52</sup>, EUROPOL should be at the center of EU engagement on this matter.

Since Thailand is central for the enablement of the scam industry<sup>53</sup>, pressuring Thai authorities to a meaningful and honest collaboration is key to a sustainable solution. While Thailand has cooperated in the past on this issue, it has also been accused of enhancing actors that have an interest in these illicit operations.<sup>54</sup> As the Thai government aims to conclude a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EU, the EU must address the scam compounds in the agreement negotiations. Moreover, to successfully conclude the deal, clauses to suppress illicit actions on the Thailand-Myanmar border must be included in the FTA. Additionally, the KNU as the main resistance group operating on the Myanmar-Thailand border should be part of the coalition against scam operations. Having changed course on the matter, the KNU has decisively turned against the syndicates operating

the centers and has gained a reputation for sustainably combating scamming compounds along the border,<sup>55</sup> as seen in it seizing two compounds in late 2025 in Myawaddy township<sup>56</sup> and Shunda Park.<sup>57</sup>

### Accepting Reality: Pragmatic Engagement in a Fragmented Myanmar

The elections in Myanmar may have ended, but real political change will not follow. The Tatmadaw will continue to sit at the helm of the Naypyidaw government and with Russian and Chinese military support they will continue to fight a deadly civil war against the various EAO's as well as the NUG's opposition forces. At the same time, outside powers will continue to have vested interests in Myanmar and will look to pursue their interests, be it by engaging the Tatmadaw or subnational actors. All of this will deepen the disastrous humanitarian crisis taking place in Myanmar and contribute to the increasing internal political fragmentation of Myanmar.

All the while, serious security concerns will continue to reverberate due to the continued presence of scam operations and Sino-Russian interests in exploiting Myanmar's vast coastline on the Bay of Bengal for economic profit and geopolitical gains. The future may look grim for Myanmar now, but it is for ASEAN and the EU to collaborate in order to at least mitigate the crisis. Whether Myanmar could become a unified state in the future seems unlikely at the moment. Myanmar's history, however, should remind observers that it never truly has been a united country. Thus, subnational stakeholders, such as the AA and KNU, should be accepted as legitimate situational partners in order to achieve tangible results, both in safeguarding European interests and pushing for humanitarian improvement. Deepening relations with the AA – which stands accused of committing human rights abuses against the Rohingya<sup>58</sup> – must however result in improved living conditions for the Rohingya in their native Rakhine State.

Myanmar's crisis will not be solved in the short run, but it will require a sustained commitment. In an increasingly divided world, Myanmar nonetheless presents the EU with a unique chance to step up its engagement and act as a credible actor for positive change in a region in which it still largely runs under the radar.

#### About the Author

Calvin Nixon holds a degree in Political Science and South Asian Studies from Heidelberg University, as well as a degree in International Relations from Leiden University. He has several years of professional experience at the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, where his work focused primarily on conflicts in Southeast Asia. In addition, he has gained relevant experience in development cooperation and at various European think tanks. At the AIIES, Calvin Nixon worked as an intern from May to September 2024 and has been an Associate Fellow since 2026. His research focuses on South and South-east Asia.

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