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RESPONSES OF THAILAND TO MYANMAR  
CRISIS SINCE THE 2021 COUP:



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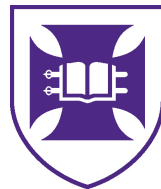
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## Acronyms

AA	Arakan Army
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement (Myanmar)
CNF	Chin National Front (Myanmar)
CRPH	Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Myanmar)
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organization (Myanmar)
EROs	Ethnic Resistance Organization (Myanmar)
G2G	Government to Government
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization (Myanmar)
KNU	Karen National Union (Myanmar)
KNPLF	Karenni National People's Liberation Front (Myanmar)
M2M	Military to Military
MFP	Move Forward Party (Thailand)
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (Myanmar)
NLD	National League for Democracy (Myanmar)
NUG	National Unity Government (Myanmar)
NUCC	National Unity Consultative Council (Myanmar)
PDF	People's Defense Force (Myanmar)
RTA	Royal Thai Army (Thailand)
RTAF-HQ	Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters (Thailand)
SAC	State Administration Council (Myanmar)
TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army

## **Abstract**

This study explores how major political actors in Thailand, including the Thai government and opposition, view the ongoing conflict situations in Myanmar since the 2021 Myanmar Coup and what they have pursued to respond to unfolding crises in Myanmar. It drew insights from primary and secondary data from various sources, including desk reviews, participant observation, field visits, conversations with officials, and participation in academic conferences and seminars. Building on the previous study by Jittiang, Sirijintana, and Wangpuchakane (2022), this report argues that, over the periods of two administrations in three years, Thailand's responses to the crisis in Myanmar have remained reactive and continued to pursue a business-as-usual approach towards the military regime in Myanmar. The Thai government has only paid closer attention and has some engagements with wider stakeholders in Myanmar after the intensified violence in Myawaddy in April 2024. Different interest groups in Thailand, including opposition parties and civil society organizations, have limited influence over the Thai government's Myanmar policy consideration. However, since the Move Forward Party has become the major opposition in the parliament, it has also leveraged parliamentary mechanisms to remain relevant to Myanmar affairs, providing another channel for Thailand to engage with opposition forces inside Myanmar. Despite these various actions, the report concludes that Thailand could have done more by pursuing proactive engagement with Myanmar, but that may require comprehensive and concrete foreign policy action and the important role of active agents of change on the Thai side.

## Introduction

Three years have passed since the conflicts and violence in Myanmar intensified as a result of the 2021 military coup. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing led the Myanmar Armed Forces (known as *Tatmadaw*) to seize control of the country on the pretext of alleging widespread fraud in the 2020 November elections, in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide victory. The military eventually declared a state of emergency and established the State Administration Council (SAC), with Min Aung Hlaing as the head of the regime (Reuters 2021).

The power grab, however, faced strong opposition from a broad swath of Myanmar society, including ordinary citizens, celebrities, civil servants, businesspeople, professionals, top politicians, and some political allies of the Burma military. The resistance groups and protestors have morphed into a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), initially adopting non-violence tactics in demonstrating against the junta before dispersing to adopt other strategies; some organizations have also collectively formed the General Strike Committee (GSC) (The Irrawaddy 2022) to coordinate strike and protests against the junta. GSC was also established in ethnic-controlled areas as the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN), with the goal of establishing a federal democracy and equal representation of ethnic nationalities in government.

The coup also pushed the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), such as the Karen National Union (KNU), Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), and Chin National Front (CNF), some of which are now known as ethnic resistance organizations (EROs), to become more militarily and politically active in fighting against the junta. All of them have attempted to formalize their political institutions, preparing for the formation of the new federal Myanmar. As SAC could hardly penetrate ERO-controlled areas due to ground forces' limited mobility, the regime has become more reliant on air and drone strikes, which caused mass casualties, affecting both innocent civilians and combat troops alike (Insecurity Insight 2024). Since the coup, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) reported, as of January 31, 2024, that 4,474 people have been killed by the military regime, with a total of 25,931 people have been arrested—19,993 of whom remain in detention (Myanmar Mission To UN 2024).

Politically, new actors have also emerged in the conflict landscape, including (1) the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), formed by a group of ousted elected NLD lawmakers and other members of parliament, claiming a legitimate right as a legislative body in exile; (2) the National Unity Government (NUG), an interim executive body serving as the government in exile; (3) the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), a body formed to convene discussion and consultation about the political future of Burma among various parties, including CRPH, NUG, EROs, as well as GSC. These parties have also engaged in high-stakes political dialogues with various governments and organizations, hoping to win political support and leverage over the SAC and bring an end to the ongoing violence and atrocities in Burma (Thuzar and Tun 2022).

Amid the ongoing armed conflict since the coup, the most momentous group that emerged is arguably the People's Defense Force (PDF), formed based on the grievance and resentment towards the military's brutality against its own citizens. Most are civilians or CDMers who have resorted to armed and guerilla warfare to resist military oppression. The exact number of PDFs remains unknown, but analysts approximate that there are currently 600 groups operating across the countries. Some have affiliated with NUG, NUCC, or EROs, but most have been atomized and operated in isolation (Al Jazeera 2024). PDFs have been active primarily in the dry zones of the countries, including the Sagaing and Magway regions, dominated by the Bamar people—Myanmar's major ethnicity that used to support the military greatly (Frontier Myanmar 2022).

While the myriad opposition forces have made significant territorial gains in all regions of Burma before October 2023, shrinking the area of SAC control on the map to less than half of the country, the latter forces continue to dominate major cities across the country, including Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw, and Mandalay and strategic townships (Brenner 2024). Nonetheless, Operation 1027, led by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, including the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Arakan Army (AA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), arguably brought the most consequential development in the conflict momentum. The Brotherhood seized control of major townships in the Northern Shan State, including Chin Shaw Haw, Kunglong, and Laukkai, located at the strategic point connecting Myanmar to China. Most political observers suggested that the operation would hardly be successful without a green light from China—especially since Beijing has not seen significant progress from SAC in responding to its request to crack down on illicit businesses, especially scam centers, in the area, which affected Chinese interests (Crisis Group Asia Briefing N°179 2024). Operation 1027 has also emboldened other ethnic armed groups to take more aggressive military campaigns against Tatmadaw, leading to subsequent operations, such as Operation 1111, in which Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), Karenni Army and local PDFs launched offensives aiming to take control of Loikaw, the capital of Kayah State (Kha 2023). The wave of military actions led by various militia groups has shaken the Myanmar military's political position and weakened its strengths, leading some scholars to contend for the junta's looming downfall (The Irrawaddy 2024).

In light of the recent developments, Peter Morris (2024) argues that China and Thailand “are finally realizing that the [Myanmar] junta is ‘actively collapsing,’ so they will eventually need to change their policies anyway.” The extent to which this statement is accurate remains obscure—especially on the part of Thailand, given that the Thai government continues to actively keep the communication channels open with the SAC while refraining from officially endorsing parallel political institutions, including NUG, NUCC, and other emerging ethnic-based establishments. The political development in early April 2024 since the KNU’s partial capture of Myawaddy, a strategic border town connecting Thailand and Myanmar through the Asian Highway 1 (AH1), further reiterates Morris’s argument, showing the potential weakening of the Min Aung Hlaing regime and how the resistance groups have gained strength (Morris 2024). However, the extent to which Thailand has shifted its policies is left underexplored and will be assessed in the present report.

Throughout the political developments in Myanmar since February 1, the role of Thailand, a neighboring country sharing 2,401 kilometers with Myanmar, has always been of interest, given that the Thai government has an opaque view of the political developments in Myanmar. In fact, Thailand continues mundane engagements with SAC with little activities with other resistance groups. A path toward a clearer position has only emerged after the general elections in 2023, during which political parties, such as the Move Forward Party (MFP), have proposed a humanitarian policy to assist the forcibly displaced (Prachatai 2023a). However, since the MFP was unsuccessful in forming a government, the Pheu Thai Party—under Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin—has gradually formulated approaches to respond to the Myanmar situations, especially on the humanitarian ground. Pheu Thai’s approaches are distinguished from those of the MFP, including the formalization of humanitarian initiatives starting with the engagement with the Myanmar Red Cross (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). Even so, critics argue the Thai approach remains tenuous—especially since the Royal Thai Government has partnered up with the Myanmar Red Cross—known to be operated and significantly influenced by the Myanmar military, bringing into question the extent to which decision-makers within the Thai government understand the complexity of Myanmar’s political landscape (Nikkei Asia. 2024b).

Building on the previous study by Jittiang, Sirijintana, and Wangpuchakane (2022), this report investigates continuities and changes in policy and responses from Thailand towards Myanmar situations since the 2021 coup, reflecting on Thailand’s foreign policy position, policy actions, and policy implementation approaches over the past three years. It also explores how the new government of Thailand led by Srettha Thavisin of the Pheu Thai Party has addressed the Myanmar crisis. The report will additionally incorporate how the Move Forward Party, an opposition in the parliament, also leverages its control of key committees in the House of Representatives to amplify the significance of Myanmar conflicts to the Thai public and continue to be relevant to Myanmar policies. The present report asks: How do major political actors in Thailand, including the Thai government and opposition, view the ongoing conflict situations in Myanmar since the 2021 Myanmar Coup, and what have key actors in Thailand pursued to respond to unfolding crises in Myanmar?

## **Data and Methods**

This report used primary and secondary data from various sources, including desk reviews, participant observation, field visits, conversations with officials, and participation in academic conferences and seminars.

For this report, I reviewed publications related to Thailand’s foreign policy and opinions of Thai officials toward the situations in Myanmar using official materials such as news releases, reports, and statements published on the websites of the Office of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, Office of the National Security Council. I also drew additional insights from various outlets of printed media, online media, and social media, including the Reporter, the Transborder News, Matichon, Bangkok Post, the Irrawaddy, etc. Additionally, I reviewed several reports and updates regarding changing situations in Myanmar such as those of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Institute for Strategy and Policy (ISP) – Myanmar, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), and various UN agencies.

At the same time, I also conducted multiple field visits to the cities of Mae Sot, Chiang Mai, Mae Sariang Chiang Rai, and Mae Sai. During these visits, I discussed and talked to staff of local organizations, individuals with working experiences with Thai officials, and some local officials who have implemented the Thai government’s policy and directives. Verbal consent was requested before each informal and formal discussion. The names and positions of each individual are anonymized both in the fieldnotes and throughout the report for their confidentiality.

Furthermore, I attended various academic conferences related to Myanmar, such as the Conference on Border Studies and International Development organized by Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai Province in 2021, the International Pre-Conference Workshop organized by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at the Kamphaengphet Rajabhat University Maesot, Tak Province in 2023, and a Seminar on Burma Issue organized by the Thai parliament in March 2024. At these various events, I met with key figures from Thailand and Myanmar who worked on myriad issues related to the conflict situations inside Myanmar. They provided additional insights into Myanmar’s ongoing conflict and political landscapes, as well as the responses of the Thai government and relevant stakeholders.

## Structure of the Report

This report is organized into three sections as it examines Thailand's responses to conflict situations in Myanmar since the February 2021 coup. Specifically, it covers the transition within the Thai government under General Prayuth Chan-o-cha and Mr. Srettha Thavisin.

The first section discusses Thailand's view and responses during the Prayuth Administration, in which I characterized the Thai government's approach as 'business-as-usual with SAC,' which was also highlighted by Jittiang, Sirijintana, and Wangpuchakane (2022). Beyond the government's actions, this section also discusses the attempts of a few civil society organizations to report on situations in Myanmar and find a way to assist displaced populations from the country.

The second section discusses the period between the 2023 Thai general elections, from which Srettha Thavisin and the Phue Thai Party were able to form a government, and the first quarter of 2024. This section highlights how Myanmar conflicts have become politicized in the Thai domestic context and how the Srettha Administration's humanitarian initiative has seemingly fumbled.

The last section provides a summary of the key points and concludes with some recommendations on the way forward for Thailand in engaging with the ongoing conflicts in Myanmar.

### **Business-as-usual with SAC: Thailand's Responses During the Prayuth Administration**

During the Prayuth Administration, Thailand's responses to conflict situations in Myanmar could be classified as business-as-usual, given that the Thai government, in particular, has been more reactive and has depended on existing means only when necessary for responses. I argue that business-as-usual was initially adopted as the approach given that, in the view of Thai officials and politicians, Myanmar is a country with longstanding conflicts, and the 2021 epoch was arguably another one of them. With the Myanmar military being the only continuing establishment, Thai officials and politicians believe that it could soon restore peace and order—like before (Jittiang, Sirijintana, & Wangpuchakane 2021). For this reason, during the Prayuth Administration, Thailand only monitored the developments in Myanmar and failed to engage with other stakeholders. At best, Thailand only took certain ad hoc actions when necessary, especially along the border, such as the arrangement of the temporary safe zone. Despite being pressured to do more by the international community as the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar deepened, Thailand does not regress much from pursuing business-as-usual in response to the ongoing situation in Myanmar. Thailand has continued to depend on military-to-military ties and government-to-government relations with the regime in Nay Pyi Taw. The appointment of a special Thai envoy, as another ad hoc measure, was introduced but only helped serve the business-as-usual conduct with SAC, with no concrete plan of action to change the course of its approach.

### ***Continuities in Military-to-Military (M2M) Ties Between Thailand and Myanmar***

The formal relations between Thailand and Myanmar was established in 1948 (Han 2018); however, the Thai government has continued to lack trust in the Myanmar government. Partially because the history of Thai and Myanmar relations has long been plagued by contentions, especially from the Thai history textbooks. Thailand continues to portray Myanmar as a rival and enemy who once ruined and destroyed the former Ayutthaya Kingdom, the former Kingdom before the establishment of Bangkok (Chutintaranond 1993). Accordingly, most Thai have acquired negative views towards Myanmar and their people since a young age (Arphattananon 2021, pp. 421-422). The lack of trust between Thailand and Myanmar was invigorated during the Cold War when Thailand sided with the US and its allies while General Ne Win embraced socialism. During this time, Thailand developed better relationships with ethnic groups along the Thai borders and turned them into a buffer (Atipatya 2001).

In the early 1970s, the relationship between Thailand and the federal government of Myanmar gradually improved, and it reached the point of normalization in 1994, at the end of the Cold War. Sirimon Atipatya (2001) argues that this achievement was made with the key role of the Thai military generals, especially General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who leveraged his personal relationship with General Maung Aye, the then Deputy of Senior General Than Shwe, to foster closer bilateral ties with Myanmar. Parts of the personal connection were developed from the two sides' working relationship in defending borders, with Maung Aye holding several posts in the eastern frontiers of Myanmar bordering Thailand. The ties were also developed through several rounds of high-level visits and other leisure activities, such as playing golf. According to Atipatya (2001), Myanmar military personnel prefer a casual and personal relationship. This informal personal approach permeates the conduct of official affairs and plays an essential role in developing closer military-to-military relations between Thailand and Myanmar.

The personal ties between the Thai and Myanmar militaries have continued and strengthened into the modern day through various visits and exchanges and have also deepened at the personal level. Based on multiple news reports, Min Aung Hlaing seems to have a close relationship with several key generals in the Thai Armed Forces, such as General Thanasak Patimaprakorn, who was once Thailand's Chief of the Royal Thai Armed Forces and Deputy Prime Minister under General Chan-o-cha's military regime (2014 – 2019). According to the report, General Thanasak brought Min Aung Hlaing to meet with the late General Prem Tinsulanonda, a former Prime Minister and President of the Privy Council of Thailand, a few times, and from one of the meetings in 2012, Min Aung Hlaing asked to become General Prem's adopted son, hoping to boost tighter connection with the Thai military (Thairath 2014).

News reports from the early 2010s also indicated that the close relationship between the Thai and Burmese military was cozy to the point where various contentions between the two countries could be evaded with 'one phone call' (Thairath 2014). Such a strong tie can help explain why General Prayuth Chan-o-cha also chose to visit Myanmar in his first official visit after staging a military coup in 2014 and assuming premiership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand 2014) and the reluctance of the Thai government to condemn the 2021 coup led by Min Aung Hlaing, which led to grave violence across Myanmar (Al Jazeera 2023). After the coup, the Thai military continued business-as-usual with Myanmar, including joining a military parade on March 27 to commemorate Myanmar's Armed Forces Day (Nikkei Asia 2024a).

The business-as-usual operations in the conduct of affairs between the Thai and Burmese militaries occur at multiple levels through various mechanisms, including:

- The High-Level Committee (HLC)

The HLC is chaired by the Chief of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, with the Army Chief as a deputy. It is tasked to consider the scope of joint activities and projects between the two countries and serves as a platform for discussing regional security issues that could affect military-to-military ties between Thailand and Myanmar. The HLC also supervises the activities of the Regional Border Committees (RBCs) and Township Border Committees (TBCs) (Border Affairs Department, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters 2018, pp. 28-29). The most recent HLC meeting was organized during the fighting in Myanmar's resort town of Ngapali, Rakhine State, between January 19 and 21, 2023. General Chalermpol Srisawat and Senior General Min Aung Hlaing attended the meeting (The Irrawaddy 2023).

- The Regional Border Committee (RBC)

The RBCs are tasked with the authority to consult and respond to common security challenges along the border between Thailand and Myanmar and oversee the operations of TBCs. There are three RBCs in the Thai-Myanmar military-to-military relations. Each is headed by the Royal Thai Army Area Commander, who supervises different areas along the Thai-Myanmar border, including Army Areas 1, 3, and 4 (Border Affairs Department, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters 2018, pp. 29-30).

- The Township Border Committees (TBC)

The TBCs must coordinate border security issues as they see appropriate and manage communication channels at the local level between two counties. TBCs also hold regular meetings to discuss border situations. There are five TBCs in the Thai-Myanmar military-to-military relations in Mae Sai, Muang Mae Hong Son, Mae Sot, Sangkhaburi, and Muang Ranong. Each is headed by the Royal Thai Army's Commander of local Regiments (Border Affairs Department, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters 2018, pp. 30-31).



Thailand		Myanmar	
High-Level Committee		High-Level Committee	
Regional Border Committee	Army Area 1	South Eastern Command	Regional Border Committee
	Army Area 3	Eastern Command	
	Army Area 4	Coastal Region Command	
Township Border Committee	Mae Sai, Chiang Rai Province	Tachileik	Township Border Committee
	Muang Mae Hong Son, Mae Hong Son Province	Huai Pong Lao	
	Mae Sot, Tak Province	Myawaddy	
	Sangkhlaburi, Kanchanaburi Province	Payathonzu	
	Muang Ranong, Ranong Province	Kawthoung	

Table 1. Structure of the M2M Relations between Thailand and Myanmar

These M2M mechanisms have operated uninterrupted with regular meetings and engagements since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar and throughout the Prayuth Administration, demonstrating how the Thai government has continued business-as-usual with Myanmar at the high, regional, and local levels.

Beyond these mechanisms, the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters (RTAF-HQ) and the Royal Thai Army (RTA) also had other units working on matters related to Myanmar. RTAF-HQ has the Border Affairs Department, which has a specific Division overseeing Thai-Myanmar border security issues (Department of Border Affairs n.d.). At the RTA, each Army Area also has an Operation Center to command the force movements, some overseeing the Thai-Myanmar border security issues and activities (Border Affairs Department, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters 2018). These different units with overlapping and closely related tasks and mandates also run their own operations related to Myanmar, leveraging their own contacts and channels of information to continue engaging with their SAC counterparts.

Their existence brings the unity of the Thai military into question. While these units may serve business-as-usual in the engagement with SAC, for me, their presence also signifies the potential lack of a comprehensive approach to responding to the Myanmar situation within the Thai military since these agencies are usually competitive and may not appropriately share information. I argue for this scenario considering how promotion works within the Thai military. Those not promoted to five major command positions in the Royal Thai Army are often placed at the Ministry of Defense or the Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, with no actual command power (Border Affairs Department, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters 2018, pp. 28-31). As a result, these parallel mechanisms within the Thai military exist—not for check and balance—but for strategic competition for fame, prestige, or recognition among senior generals placed in different positions.

### ***Government-to-Government (G2G) Relations and Engagement at the Multilateral Level***

Since the 2021 Coup in Myanmar, the government-to-government relations between Thailand and SAC led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have continued as usual, too, despite the emergence of parallel political institutions in Myanmar, such as the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) and the National Unity Government (NUG), claiming legitimacy as a representative of the Myanmar people and government. According to an interview with a Thai diplomat in 2021 by Jittiang, Sirijintana, and Wangpuchakane (2021, p.12), “Thai government does not believe that sanctioning and abandoning Myanmar [government in Nay Pyi Taw] would help bring changes to the country. Besides, Thailand does not have the leverage to do so, given its burden of proximity. Thus, improving the relationship with the new [military] regime, emphasizing the importance of trust-building with the junta and humanitarianism, were seen as a more appropriate approach.” This attitude reflects how Thai officials believed that the Myanmar military remained the only strong establishment in the country then.

Based on this view, key G2G mechanisms in the relations between Thailand and Myanmar operate as usual between the Thai government and the SAC regime, especially in the area of trade and investment. Almost immediately after the Myanmar coup, the Prayuth government appointed a team to renegotiate the development of the Dawei Special Economic Zone, which was terminated during the government of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Besides, as multiple Western companies pulled out of Myanmar following the coup, Thai companies, including PTT Public Company Limited, have expanded their operations inside Myanmar and become major shareholders in major gas fields such as Yadana (BBC 2022). Thai company also invests significantly in the Thilawa Special Economic Zone (TSEZ), second only after Japanese investments (Thilawa SEZ Management Committee 2024). This further investment suggests how the Thai government and major Thai companies see the coup as an opportunity and an avenue to advance economic interests. It is also imperative to note that the volume of border trade between Thailand and Myanmar has also increased significantly since the coup, too. Trade between April and June 2023 increased by 161 million USD compared to the previous year (ISP-Myanmar 2022). However, this was not a result of the ties between Thailand and SAC alone but because of the reduction of production capacity inside Myanmar and people's boycotts of Burmese military-business products.

Regarding foreign diplomacy, Thailand continues high-level exchanges and visits with Myanmar officials and junta representatives. The Thai government received the visits of Wunna Maung Lwin, the then foreign minister of SAC, immediately after the coup in February 2021 (Bangkok Post 2021a) and again for another meeting in December 2022 (MGROnline 2022). Don Pramudwinai, the Thai Foreign Minister, had visited Nay Pyi Taw several times since the coup. His most recent was in July 2023, before the term expiry of Prayuth's premiership. All these visits of Thai foreign ministers have drawn criticisms from the international community (Wongcha-um, Mcpherson, and Teresia 2023) and junta oppositions, given that they seemingly provide legitimacy to SAC. From the Thai government's perspective, however, these visits aim to preserve and protect Thailand's national interests due to the burden of proximity with Myanmar (Jit-tiang, Sirijintana, & Wangpuchakane 2021), which reflects business-as-usual in the conduct of G2G relations between Thailand and Myanmar.

### ***Thailand's Special Envoy for Myanmar***

The conduct of Thailand's foreign affairs with Myanmar has always been complicated, but the business-as-usual between Thailand and the military regime over the years allowed Bangkok to gain the trust of the Myanmar junta. It makes Thailand a go-to country when the Myanmar regime is in trouble. This higher level of trust previously worked favorably for the Myanmar military while enabling Thailand to take the lead in certain international engagements with Myanmar. For example, after Cyclone Nargis raged through the country, affecting millions of Myanmar people, the Myanmar junta agreed with the constructive engagement approach of Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, a Thai Secretary General of ASEAN, to allow humanitarian aid delivery. Thailand also sent in-kind and cash assistance, 12.5 million USD, to support Myanmar.

Amid the new wave of crisis since the 2021 coup, Thailand was also instrumental in allowing Myanmar to continue engaging with ASEAN, which led to Min Aung Hlaing attending the Special ASEAN Summit in April 2021 and agreeing with the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) (Srisangnam 2021). However, other ASEAN member states did not view positively the Thai business-as-usual approach with the Myanmar junta. It was seen as counter-productive to ASEAN initiatives. For this reason, Thailand's proposal for the Thailand-led Special Envoy was also shot down, signifying the lack of trust among ASEAN leaders in Thailand's leadership in responding to the Myanmar crisis since the 2021 coup (Bangkok Post 2021b). Nevertheless, Thailand endorses various ASEAN positions related to Myanmar, including the decision to leave Myanmar's seat empty in high-level meetings. Although international pressure may cause Thailand to make decisions at odds with the interests of the Myanmar regime, the Thai government during the Prayuth Administration did not abandon business-as-usual with the Myanmar regime. This is clearly demonstrated in the appointment of the Thai Foreign Ministry's Special Envoy on Myanmar.

In April 2022, Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai attempted to ease international pressure, urging Thailand to do more on Myanmar by appointing Ms. Pornpimol "Pauline" Kanchanalak, his advisor, to serve as a Special Envoy on Myanmar. In this role, Don allowed Pauline to play an instrumental role in monitoring and engaging with Myanmar, attending high-level meetings related to Myanmar on his behalf, and reporting Myanmar's situation directly to him. Pauline visited Myanmar multiple times as a Special Thai Envoy; however, her engagements lacked inclusivity because she mainly focused on maintaining relationships and ties with SAC and failed to engage with other stakeholders from Myanmar. Her meetings often focused on senior officials from SAC, such as the Minister for International Cooperation (Prachatai 2023b), to discuss the advancement of bilateral relations and Thailand's existing business interests.

In an interview with *Matichon*, Pauline stated that her engagement with Myanmar started before she was appointed a Special Thai Envoy. She saw her role more as a coordinator and an executor of the Foreign Minister's policy decisions. Pauline also cited the attempt of Thailand to set up a Humanitarian Task Force working through the Burmese Red Cross to assist populations affected by the coup and foster Track 1.5 diplomacy to consult with various stakeholders for peaceful solutions to conflicts in Myanmar (Matichon 2022). However, these initiatives did not result in any fruitful or concrete outcomes. The appointment of Pauline and her actions also drew criticisms since they were viewed as primarily promoting the legitimacy of the SAC in the international arena but failed to put pressure on the junta to halt or reduce the level of violence in the country. Thus, although the appointment of a Special Thai Envoy for Myanmar is a slight deviation from the business-as-usual approach conducted using M2M and G2G mechanisms, her role and actions only complemented the conduct of daily business affairs between Thailand and Myanmar.

During the Prayuth Administration, the business-as-usual prevailed as the major approach for Thailand's engagement with Myanmar, with bureaucrats playing a significant role in maintaining foreign relations, especially with the SAC regime. The Thai government was influenced minimally by various groups—especially civil society organizations (CSOs) and academics who recognized the importance of assisting the internally displaced persons who fled to Thailand. During these periods, various CSO networks in Myanmar also emerged, especially those working on humanitarian assistance for the forcibly displaced, such as the Myanmar Response Network (MRN). This network offers legal services, provides humanitarian aid in border towns like Mae Sot, and advocates for policy changes (Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network 2024). Their advocacy was not very successful due to the limited channels by which they could influence the Prayuth Administration.

In a final bid to take action in response to the Myanmar crisis before the caretaker government's term expired, Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai sent a letter in June 2023 to ASEAN member governments and Myanmar's neighbors calling for an informal meeting on the situation in Myanmar. The Thai Foreign Ministry said, "Although [the meeting] is not being held within the ASEAN framework, it is aimed at supporting regional efforts to resolve the situation in Myanmar" (The Nation 2023). Several countries in ASEAN snubbed the meeting. For example, the Foreign Minister of Singapore suggested that it remains "premature to reengage with the junta," especially since the regime has not made any significant progress based on Five Point Consensus (5PC) (Suhenda 2023). Ultimately, the meeting organized by Thailand was attended by representatives from seven countries, including China and India (Bangkok Post 2023). The immediate impacts of the meeting were limited. Nonetheless, it was the last attempt of the Prayuth Administration to demonstrate that Thailand can develop new initiatives, too; however, this did not mean that Bangkok would equally engage with other parties inside Myanmar at the same level as SAC. Thailand's business-as-usual remained the primary approach in engaging with the military regime in Nay Pyi Taw.

### **Responses Under the Srettha Administration: Domestic Competition and Humanitarian Fumble?**

After Thailand's general elections in May 2023, major political parties started to discuss Bangkok's responses to the Myanmar crisis. This is especially so in the case of the Move Forward Party (MFP), which won the largest number of seats in the parliament. MFP leveraged Myanmar situation during the formation of the new government to showcase its foreign policy vision. Pita Limjaroenrat, leader of the Move Forward Party and then prime minister hopeful, announced during a press meeting that his foreign affairs team is monitoring the situation in Myanmar closely and will soon announce engagement approaches. Later, in June 2023, Pita also announced Myanmar policies and strategies for responding to the Myanmar crisis—especially the movement of refugees and migrants into Thailand. His rise to power brought hope to Myanmar's opposition, leading them to acquire ways to engage with Pita and his party.

However, due to the complexity of the system for electing the Thai prime minister, which also involved the Thai Senate, the Move Forward Party could not secure enough votes for Pita's premiership. A political coalition was rearranged, and the Pheu Thai party, the second largest party in the parliament, successfully formed a government, leading Srettha Thavisin to be elected prime minister. The coalition realignment pushed the Move Forward Party to engage with Myanmar issues using parliamentary platforms where they remain the major party in the House of Representatives.

### ***Continuities of Business-as-usual with SAC in Thailand's Engagement with Myanmar?***

The Myanmar crisis was not a priority for the Pheu Thai Party's foreign affairs from the beginning because the party was more focused on economic and trade issues. The appointment of Panpree Bahiddha-nukara, a former Thailand trade representative, also reflected the economic priorities of the foreign policy of the Srettha government. However, Operation 1027, from which Myanmar opposition forces were able to demonstrate and show their capability to defeat the Myanmar military in strategic military outposts, has awakened the Thai security community to pay closer attention

to the Myanmar crisis. I observe that, since then, both the Thai military and civil officials have been juggling to assess the strengths of the Myanmar regime, given various reports of their reduced areas of control, and to learn more about strategic plans and thinking of different opposition groups—especially ethnic armed organizations, such as Karen National Union, Arakan Army, and MNDAA.

Since November 2021, the Thai government started reassessing the situation in Myanmar. Sihasak Phuangketkeow, a retired diplomat and former Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Ministry who serves as a vice minister, emerged as one of the key players in crafting Thailand's responses to Myanmar. It is unclear why Sihasak has a strong interest in the Myanmar crisis. In one public talk before joining Panpree's team, Sihasak mentioned his concern about the situation in Myanmar and hoped to ease the tension in the country (Indian Council of World Affairs 2024). It can be argued that Sihasak is instrumental in developing a more systematic response to the Myanmar crisis during the present government of Srettha Thavisin.

Since Operation 1027 by anti-coup resistance forces in Myanmar, despite the continuation of the business-as-usual approach with the SAC regime, the Srettha government also used other discreet channels to gather more input about opposition groups in Myanmar upon the recommendation of Panpree and Sihasak. While official and high-level engagements between the Thai government and Myanmar opposition forces remain opaque, lower-level engagements by field and desk officers may have already started, but only informally. However, the most concrete shift towards Myanmar during the Srettha government came with the formalization of the humanitarian initiative to assist those affected by violence and conflicts inside Myanmar, which started in late March 2024.

According to the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the humanitarian initiative formalizes humanitarian assistance in order to engage with parties inside Myanmar in a constructive manner, and SAC also endorsed this decision. However, as the assistance was paired with the Myanmar Red Cross, the Thai initiative also drew criticisms from opposition parties (Nikkei Asia. 2024b). Most argue that the assistance may not be genuine enough since it is not designed to reach those in need but rather to boost Bangkok's diplomacy by allowing Thailand to be seen as a caring neighbor and show more engagement in the Myanmar crisis. Even with this more formalized initiative, it can be argued that the initiative remains reactive since Thailand lacks a comprehensive plan to respond to the situation in Myanmar. The Srettha Administration, however, hoped that the humanitarian initiative would provide a stepping stone for Thailand to play a more proactive role in engaging with Myanmar in the long run.

The fall of Myawaddy, a town at the border between Thailand and Myanmar, in early April 2024, which affected border trade and crossings between the two countries, forced the Thai government to be on high alert and required close monitoring of the situation in Myanmar. For its part, the Thai media continued for the entire week to discuss the potential scenarios of the Myanmar military's collapse. This event was the very first time since the Myanmar coup in 2021 that the Thai government seems to take conflicts in Myanmar seriously and recognized the need for a new strategy for engagement. On the morning of April 9, 2024, Srettha called for a meeting with key security policy personnel, including Foreign Minister and Vice Minister Sihasak, the Chief of Armed Forces, the Army Chief, and the Secretary General of the National Security Council (News NBT2HD 2024). The meeting eventually led to the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee Administering Situations in Myanmar, chaired by the Foreign Minister, deputized by Sihasak, with other members including permanent secretaries from the Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Interior, Chief of Armed Forces, Army Chief, Commissioner General of the Royal Thai Police, Chief of National Intelligence, three director generals from Foreign Ministry (namely Department of Information, Department of International Organizations, and Department of East Asian Affairs), and Secretary General of the National Security Council.

This committee was vested with seven duties, including key tasks, namely, monitoring situations in Myanmar that may affect Thailand's national interest and studying the positions and stances of various stakeholders related to the Myanmar crisis; and recommending, coordinating, and following up on different measures and policy implementations in Myanmar; as well as executing proactive diplomacy when necessary to facilitate peace process in Myanmar in accordance with the Thai foreign policy and national strategic plan. Looking at the key assigned tasks, it is imperative that this committee was meant to make Thailand become more proactive in engaging with Myanmar. Moreover, towards the end of April, Thailand also submitted a proposal for ASEAN Troika Plus to Laos, the current Chair of ASEAN, hoping that this model would allow ASEAN to help ease tension in Myanmar while maintaining the possibility of providing humanitarian assistance and promoting peace (Tangsathaporn 2024). However, with the cabinet reshuffle on April 28, 2024, which subsequently led to the resignation of Foreign Minister Panpree, progress in the work of Thailand's Myanmar Committee was stalled because his resignation also meant the termination of all political appointees under Panpree, including Sihasak. Whether the Srettha government will continue a proactive Myanmar policy remains uncertain under the newly appointed Foreign Minister, Maris Sangiampongsa, a retired diplomat and close affiliate of the Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a patriarch of the Pheu Thai Party.

## ***Move Forward Party's Bid to Stay Relevant on the Myanmar Crisis***

Although the Move Forward Party could not form a government, it is now a strong opposition party in the parliament. Specifically, it is in command of the major parliamentary committees in the House of Representatives, including the powerful Committee on National Security, Border Affairs, National Strategy, and National Reform. Under this committee, the MFP set up a few sub-committees to study the situation in Myanmar, which may affect Thailand's national interest and security, focusing on assisting refugees and providing humanitarian assistance to those in need. Through these different sub-committees, various CSOs working on Myanmar-related issues could engage and influence policy at the parliamentary level. Some have worked in a working group or as a sub-committee member themselves. The sub-committees have invited various stakeholders to provide information and insights, which were eventually analyzed and synthesized as policy recommendations for the parliament and the government. The sub-committees set by the Move Forward Party have thus far produced several insightful reports on the situations of displaced persons from Myanmar since the 2021 coup (State Security Commission Working Group, Thai Border Affairs, National Strategy and National Reform 2023); however, these reports have not yet been well considered by the government—partially because of the party competition in the political game in which each party would like to make their own political legacy in their own way.

Under the same parliamentary committee, the Move Forward Party organized a two-day international conference on Myanmar entitled “Three Years After the Coup: Towards a Democratic Myanmar and Its Impact on Security Along the Thai Border” on March 2-3, 2024, at the Thai Parliament. The event included key speakers from various groups in Myanmar, including the National Unity Government's Foreign Minister, representatives from ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and political activities. It also included experts on Myanmar and security from within Thailand and various parts of the globe. In the initial program, Foreign Minister Panprea was scheduled to deliver a Keynote Address, and some officials in Thailand's security sectors were also supposed to join a panel discussion (The Standard 2024). The program, however, was all changed at the last minute. The event was also strongly objected to by the Myanmar junta, who sent an Official Rebuke through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating that the seminar could “create negative impacts on bilateral relations [with the SAC] (Reuters 2024).” The event, however, was praised by the Myanmar opposition forces and the Move Forward Party also held it as successful. To what extent this seminar was impactful remains unknown; however, several officials in the Thai security sectors attended the event to gather information. Thus, the event provided a platform for Thai officials to learn more about the conflict landscapes inside Myanmar from various perspectives and to make Thailand understand more about the humanitarian needs of the Myanmar people, which could jeopardize Thailand's security without Thailand's active actions.

While the actions of the Thai opposition party may not align with the Srettha government's actions and policies, the Thai opposition's actions provide Bangkok with additional channels to engage with other parties inside Myanmar over the long term. Given that Myanmar opposition groups are currently being neglected by the Thai government, the MFP's engagement with them is significant in the event that the junta administration crumbles. Rather than being a competition, it can therefore be argued that the actions of the Move Forward Party are complementary to those of the Thai government. Specifically, it provides Thailand with more inclusive access to other groups in Myanmar, which may potentially become successful and shape Myanmar's policy towards Thailand and contribute to ensuring the latter's national security.

Under the Srettha Administration, Thailand has clearly given more priority to the fluid conflict situations in Myanmar, and the attention comes from both the government and the opposition. They both recognize that the crisis in Myanmar has an immediate impact on Thailand's security. However, the extent to which Thai policymakers understand the complexity of the ongoing Myanmar crisis remains opaque. Conversations in Thai policy circles have mostly revolved around fighting and violence inside Myanmar, which affects Thai business interests and leads to the potential large movement of displaced persons from Myanmar. Thai policymakers have also been obsessed with peace-building in Myanmar, even though it remains to be seen with whom Thailand should initiate a peace dialogue. However, there are other related issues to which Thai policymakers have yet to pay close attention. This includes the expansion of Chinese influence within the border areas between Thailand and Myanmar with the growth of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) or the enlargement of the Chinese illicit business in Shwe Kokko, close to Myawaddy, which have drawn direct involvement of Beijing in cracking down on Chinese citizens. How Thailand would respond to these emerging challenges, therefore, remains an open question for now and in the medium-term. Without a systematic response to these issues and an eager team of policymakers who are capable of comprehensively understanding the Myanmar crisis, a business-as-usual will continue prevail in the short-term. This also means negligence or a downplaying of some security issues that can affect Thailand's national security in the long run.

## Key Lessons and Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that Thailand's responses to the Myanmar crisis over the last three years since the February 2021 coup have the following key features:

1. *Perceiving the Myanmar Military as the Strongest Establishment.* From the point of view of the Thai government and bureaucrats, engagement with the Myanmar military is seen as favorable because it has been able to consolidate political power for a long time. For this reason, Thailand has continued to maintain a business-as-usual approach towards the military-led SAC administration. Specifically, this is based on the belief that the military will likely be able to restore peace and order in Myanmar. Arguably, this is anchored on the level of trust developed through personal ties the Thai military as well as officials have fostered with the Myanmar generals over decades. Thailand also recognizes that contact with SAC is essential for maintaining the country's business interests—especially in major cities where the junta retains control. Thus, it is evident that there is no difference in this view between the administrations of Prayuth and Srettha, even after the latter administration set up a new committee to manage and respond to the crisis in Myanmar, which will facilitate more engagement with other stakeholders inside the country. This does not mean, however, that the Thai government will abandon or reduce the level of interaction with the Myanmar military and SAC.
- 2.
3. *Reactive Policy.* Regardless of who is in power, Thailand has yet to develop a more concrete proactive policy and response to the situation in Myanmar. Currently, Thailand's foreign policy actions and worldviews remain reactive. Depending on the emerging issues, such as forced displacement, Thailand would respond accordingly with existing protocol and without any clear policy forecasting at the highest level. Judging from the reactive responses, it is imperative to assume that senior officials in the Thai government may not fully understand the complexities and landscapes of Myanmar conflicts and relevant issues. Such a situation is particularly concerning for Thailand's national interest and national security because it signifies Thailand's lack of comprehensive foreign policy towards its neighbour throughout all these years.
4. *Preference for Bilateralism.* In pursuit of its reactive responses towards Myanmar, it is also clear that the Thai government prefers a bilateral engagement with Myanmar. This is reflected in the way Bangkok has developed its own approach in parallel with the ASEAN initiatives. However, this is unsurprising given that Myanmar is an immediate neighbor of Thailand. Therefore, the Thai government always needs bilateral channels to reach those in power in Myanmar. In fact, through the bilateral ties, the Thai government has developed close M2M and G2G contacts with the military government in Myanmar.
5. *Lack of Inclusive Engagement with Other Stakeholders in Myanmar.* Since the February 2021 coup, the Thai government's engagements with Myanmar focused on the SAC with minimal to almost non-engagement with other stakeholders, including parallel political institutions emerging after the coup, such as the NUG and NUCC. This is also due to the perception of Thai officials that the Myanmar military remains the only viable institution in the country. Even if field officials during the Srettha government attempted to informally engage more with other groups, the level of contact is still minimal. Similarly, on the side of the Thai opposition parties and CSOs, its engagement with groups in Myanmar has also focused exclusively on the Myanmar opposition forces since they do not feel compelled to engage with SAC, which they perceive as being illegitimate authority and does not represent the Myanmar people. Nevertheless, if we look at the positions and actions of both the Thai government and the opposition, their responses to the Myanmar crisis are complementary. They both provide Bangkok with communication channels with various Myanmar political groups that may be essential for Thailand's national security interests in the long run.
6. *Importance of Agents of Change.* Changing the direction of Bangkok's Myanmar policy or actions certainly requires agents of change who are keen on both pursuing initiatives and managing Thailand's strategic interests. This reflection comes from a comparison between the roles of Pauline and Sihasak. The emergence of Sihasak as a vice minister who paid great interest to the situation in Myanmar and hoped to make a difference led to some new systematic initiatives towards the Myanmar crisis. Even though these initiatives have their limitations, they at least explored alternative approaches and options for managing Thailand's responses towards Myanmar. However, the government's dependence on agents of change is also risky, especially when there is a sudden change in the political wind. For example, with recent resignation of the Thai Foreign Minister, the path towards a more effective response to the Myanmar crisis is suddenly left murky. Besides, the agent of change may pay attention to some specific issues and neglect other relevant challenges which may be equally important. For example, Sihasak focused more on conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Myanmar, with less emphasis on the expansion of Chinese influence and transnational criminal activities along the Thai and Myanmar border.

Although Thailand has pursued a more constructive response to the Myanmar crisis over the past three years, most reactions from the Thai government essentially revolved around business-as-usual towards SAC but with a few new initiatives in response to some major events. Thai governments have also opened limited channels for other interest groups, especially CSOs within Thailand, to influence its Myanmar policies. This left some of these stakeholders with no other option but to join the opposition party and use their own platform to engage with Myanmar affairs. Fortunately, this served to complement the Thai government's actions by allowing Thailand to have engagements with other groups inside Myanmar beyond the SAC. Nevertheless, the lack of concrete plans and policies, as well as more proactive actions remain a big challenge for Thailand's engagement with Myanmar. Without a clear framework or path forward, it can be argued that Thailand may be unable to defend its national interests due to the spillover effects of the Myanmar conflicts. More than a need for an agent of change to push Thailand to rethink its foreign policy, Bangkok needs a comprehensive and dynamic foreign policy that would provide a clear direction on how the government should systematically and strategically engage with Myanmar.

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