

RUSSIA'S POLICY IN MYANMAR AND IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

RESEARCH PAPER



MARCH 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One year ago, on 1st February 2021, the Myanmar military regime attempted to seize power in Myanmar through a coup-d'état. In response, the West withdrew from the country, leaving the regime with few friends. Among them is Russia, which has since emerged as Myanmar's key ally from outside the region, becoming influential with the military regime and taking on a noticeable role in Southeast Asia. Rather than being a Soviet legacy, Russia's involvement in Myanmar is more a product of modern post-Soviet Russian efforts to foster profitable military-technical ties on a non-ideological basis. Since the 1990s, Russia's cooperation with the military has been steadily built through the sale of weapons and military equipment, as well as investments in human capital, such as the education of Myanmar officers. The military has been at the forefront of Russian diplomatic efforts and has developed relationships of trust with their counterparts in Myanmar. Russia's soft power, based on a common world outlook, shared belief in the value of a centralised state, and historical and cultural parallels - Buddhism is one of the traditional religions of Russia - has helped to facilitate relationships with the current powerholders that long predate the coup. Moreover, unlike other regional actors, Russia has no historical baggage in Myanmar, such as supporting domestic opponents that challenged the military, and this circumstance works to its advantage.

In 2021, the Myanmar military joined the circle of Russia's closest partners in the region. Motivated by geopolitical considerations, Russia refused to side with the West over Myanmar, opting instead to use its permanent seat at the UN Security Council to shield the military regime from international pressure, as it had done in 2007 and 2017. However, rather than adopting a new approach after the coup, Russia has opted to build on its existing policy and grasp new opportunities as they arise. Military cooperation, political engagement and Russia's international positioning are Moscow's primary tools, while economic considerations play a secondary role. Along with opportunities to break out of international isolation, Russia offers Myanmar's military regime the political backing to inspire confidence and a legitimisation narrative, presenting it as the nation's saviour.

Naval and air defence cooperation grew as Myanmar began buying more Russian weapons and contacts with the Russian navy became more prominent. As western business leaves, the military leadership is seeking new partnerships that would bring technology and investment. Russian companies are welcome, and long-term cooperation plans have been discussed. From Russia's perspective, its policy objective is to develop Myanmar as a fully-fledged strategic ally and springboard for its expanding influence in Southeast Asia. The success of this approach relies on the military regime staying in power and eventually transitioning to civilian rule, which would guarantee Russia's lasting presence. Russia is therefore likely to be a significant, although not a dominant player, as the Myanmar military will follow their own logic and make choices that are best for them.

The crisis in Myanmar gave Russia an opportunity to step up its engagement in Southeast Asia, where it has expanded its diplomatic reach by reinforcing ties with old allies, such as Vietnam, and developing new partnerships, such as Thailand and Malaysia. Military cooperation is Russia's primary asset. Political relations received an impetus as an 'Asia pivot' policy was adopted in Russia in 2001 and have been steadily built since. ASEAN, regarded by the USSR as a hostile organisation, became an engaged actor. The crisis in Myanmar made Russia's role more relevant. ASEAN's efforts to facilitate talks between opposing sides have received Russia's full support and are its preferred approach to resolving tensions, in comparison to sanctions and bans. Russia's partnership with China is its strategic advantage as both share the same goals of stability and regional security. Rather than competing, these great powers can harmonise their interests as their relative strengths are complementary: while China has many levers in economic development, Russia is focused on the military-political field. Their shared geopolitical orientation cements their relationship, and the West's critical stance towards Myanmar only adds to their determination to stay the course.