

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

RESEARCH PAPER



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
ICT	information and communication technology
IS	Islamic State
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NLD	National League for Democracy
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SEA	Southeast Asia
WWII	World War Two

FOREWORD

This research was commissioned by the PeaceNexus Foundation in response to a request by our Myanmar civil society partners to improve their understanding of Russia-Myanmar relations given Russia's prominent support for the Tatmadaw, or Myanmar Army.

PeaceNexus' partner organisations have chosen to remain anonymous given the threats that they are currently facing in Myanmar following the Myanmar military's attempted coup on 1 February 2021. For this reason, they have asked that the Foundation publish the paper on their behalf, noting that its findings may be useful for others.

The research is an independent piece of work that presents the author's findings and analysis. All views expressed in the report belong to the author and are not necessarily those of the PeaceNexus Foundation.

The research was conducted in December 2021 and January 2022, and the paper was written before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We recognize that Russia's actions in Ukraine have dramatically impacted the geopolitical landscape, and at present it is too early to definitively assess the implications for the Myanmar military regime and Russia – Myanmar relations. However, the Myanmar military council was quick to express its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Its spokesperson, Zaw Min Tun, made the following two points in an interview with VOA on 25 February: "No.1 is that Russia has worked to consolidate its sovereignty. I think that is the right thing to do. No. 2 is to show the world that Russia is a world power".

PeaceNexus stands in solidarity with the people of Myanmar, Ukraine and Russia who, in response to illegal state-sponsored violence and crimes against humanity, are risking their lives to defend the principles and practices of democracy and freedom of expression.



Catriona Gourlay
Executive Director
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SUMMARY : INFLUENCE IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIP

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.

INTRODUCTION

This research paper was prepared by Dr. Anna Matveeva on behalf of the PeaceNexus Foundation in January 2022 on the little-explored subject of Russia's policy in Myanmar and the wider region. The paper is structured as follows: it firstly outlines the Soviet background in Southeast Asia (SEA) and changes that have occurred since the emergence of post-Soviet Russia. It then zooms in on the bilateral relationship between Russia and Myanmar, assesses Russia's interests in Myanmar and the potential for the expansion of its influence in the country. The analysis then expands to the regional level, exploring Russia's interests in Southeast Asia, ASEAN and its policy vis-a-vis the role of China.

The paper argues that Myanmar has emerged as one of the most important strategic allies for Russia in the region. While Russia's influence in Myanmar is significant due to its consistent efforts to develop its relationship with Myanmar's military over the last twenty years, its continuation depends on the military regime staying in power and eventually transitioning to civilian rule, which would guarantee Russia's lasting presence. The crisis in Myanmar brought Russia's growing influence in Southeast Asia to the forefront, and its relationship with China is an advantage as both seek the same goals of stability and regional security. These great powers are capable of harmonising their interests rather than competing, especially since their relative strengths are complementary: China has a strategic advantage in economic development, while Russia's strength lies in the military-political field.

The paper seeks to explain Russia's position, approach and underlying values without passing judgement, in a belief that understanding them is important as they form the basis for policy and action. The paper is based on original research into primary and secondary sources and a number of key expert interviews conducted in Russia by the author. The cut-off point for data gathering for this paper was 15 January 2022.

From Soviet Legacy to the Modern Times

The USSR, Russia's predecessor state, had developed strategic assets and cultivated long-term allies in Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. It had a history of aiding its allies when the times were hard and significantly contributing to their national survival when they needed it most: Northern Vietnam benefitted from Soviet military aid during the Vietnam war ending in 1975, and the USSR was Cambodia's main economic partner and aid provider when it was isolated and under sanctions from 1978 into the 1980s. Soviet aid to Southeast Asian allies was multifaceted, ranging from close military cooperation, economic aid and development projects, to the education of national elites in Soviet universities and investments in healthcare. This approach allowed Moscow to create strategic depth in the region.

Such depth was important because the Soviet Union existed in competition with rival powers – notably, the US had regional allies in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was viewed as a hostile organisation dominated by anti-Soviet US satellites. Relations with China had been adversarial since the 1960s, with incidents of armed clashes over their contested border. Having military allies on China's borders, such as Vietnam, was considered a strategic advantage by the Soviet high command. The Soviet Union maintained troops in Mongolia, to the considerable irritation of the Chinese leadership.

In the 1990s, after the dissolution of the USSR, Yeltsin's Russia gave up many of its global assets in exchange for a partnership with the West, betraying its allies in the process and cutting off economic aid. The emergent state of Russia could not render political support, while the end of the socialist ideology was a painful blow to those who shared it. Left to survive on their own, the USSR's former allies built relationships with new partners who eventually became Russian competitors. As NATO's eastward expansion deposed it from its backyard, Russian leadership learnt a bitter lesson: allies are hard to gain and easy to lose, and those who trust you should not be let down.

Hence, to restore faith in the credibility of its commitments, loyalty to its allies became the paramount principle of Russian diplomacy. However, while its strong global network of military bases and numerous trusted partners allowed the Soviet Union to pick and choose its allies, Russia finds itself in a less favourable environment with relatively limited choices¹.

At the same time, freed from the ideological constraints, security concerns and the great power rivalry unleashed by its predecessor, Russia could explore new prospects. Rebuilding its relationship with China has been Russia's most important regional and global success, as it has turned its powerful neighbour from an adversary to a partner, and sometimes even an ally. Russia has also sought to become a player on the SEA regional scene, reaching out to the ASEAN and investing in bilateral relations with its more powerful states, such as Indonesia. Tourism has also facilitated greater exchanges between Russia and SEA, with several countries introducing direct flights and visa-free travel for Russian citizens.

Russia – Myanmar Bilateral Relations

A short history

While Burma² was a country of interest for Soviet foreign policymakers, the Burmese military leadership was unreceptive to the Soviet development principles and ideological model. The regime's policy was not conducive to the strengthening of ties with the Soviet Union and, mindful of China's desire to curtail Soviet influence, its leadership scaled back ties with Moscow that were initially established when Burma acquired independence³. An isolationist turn in the 1970s also made Burma a difficult partner – it took five years to negotiate a trade agreement, in which tender conditions for international energy contracts were ultimately drawn in a way that disadvantaged Soviet companies. The military strictly regulated economic activity and were very fearful of upsetting China. As a result, 'bilateral relations were largely without content,'⁴ with Soviet officials in Burma feeling isolated and lengthy processes leading to meagre achievements⁵.

The situation started to change in the 1980s with Myanmar's growing interest in Russia. As Myanmar faced international sanctions throughout the 1980s and 1990s and was shunned by the West, Russia provided military assistance and education for nearly two thousand officers and students in various fields, including nuclear science. However, Myanmar played a modest role in

1. Sergei Malinkovich, 'Зачем России Мьянма, а Мьянме – демократия?' (Why Russia needs Myanmar, and Myanmar – democracy?), RIA, 1 March 2021, <https://riafan.ru/1396140-zachem-rossii-myanma-a-myanme-demokratiya-kolonka-sergeya-malinkovicha>

2. The old name of the country is used in the reference to the past period.

3. Lutz-Auras, Ludmila (2015) 'Russia and Myanmar – friends in need?' *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 34 (2): 165–98.

4. Kristian Lundby Gjerde. (2017). 'Russia's turn to Asia: Myanmar seen from Moscow,' Policy Brief, Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI).

5. Author's interview with Victor Sumlyonov, a former Soviet Trade Representative to Burma (1970 – 1972), December 2021.

the foreign policy of new Russia, as its economic interests and military contracts took up only a small portion of its global arms trade. It is important to stress that Myanmar is one of the few countries in which Russia's current influence is not predominantly derived from its Soviet past.

Overall approach

Russia's role in Myanmar before the coup has been arguably overlooked by the analytical and policy community. Donor policies discouraged international organisations, foundations and agencies from engaging with Myanmar's military, and the processes underway in the military part of the government went largely unnoticed. Yet Russia has been consistently building assets in Myanmar and, as a result, has come out as a far more influential player than envisaged. In 2021, Myanmar's place in Russia's foreign policy in SEA further grew as the country turned into a key strategic partner, ally and client⁶.

Russia's initial approach was opportunistic: in the 1990s, the foreign military establishment saw a demand in Myanmar that matched the Russian capacities it had to offer, and in 20 years, this opportunity paid off. The military coup on 1st February 2021 presented the Russian establishment with a choice – to stay on course or to alter it. By joining the West in condemning the coup, it had nothing to gain. Moscow believed that its siding with the condemnation chorus would not be appreciated – as was the case with its tacit endorsement of Libya's bombing campaign in 2011 – and that it would fail to lead to any improvement in its relationship with the West. Moreover, it stood to lose a lucrative weapons' market and political influence gained from military cooperation. By contrast, staying on course could improve Russia's position in the global arms market and present it with new opportunities. The Russian military knew which side they were on. Thus, when 119 countries voted at the UN General Assembly in June 2021 in favour of banning arms sales to Myanmar's military regime amid its crackdown on civilians, Russia was among the 36 countries that abstained.

The West's critical stance towards Myanmar strengthened Russia's resolve and, from time to time, provided it with opportunities to make the country a link in the chain of its existential opposition to the West. Russian officials criticised Western attempts to isolate and put pressure on Myanmar, and portrayed western sanctions as counterproductive and an obstacle to development. Moscow presented the two countries as united by a shared outlook on international politics. 'The idea that most of the world's countries have more in common with Russia's vision of international politics than with those of the West is a key intellectual premise for the Russian foreign policy establishment⁷,' and Myanmar is a case in point.

Russia provided diplomatic support to Myanmar in international fora, such as the 2007 Russian veto (joined by China) against a draft UN Security Council Resolution condemning Myanmar for its human rights record and framing the military leadership as a threat to international security. When the Myanmar military stood accused of the Rohingya genocide in 2017, Russia blocked a UN Security Council statement and refused to cooperate in the adoption of a UN Security Council Resolution, reducing it instead to a November 2017 presidential statement which is ultimately not enforceable. Since then, and especially after the 2019 International Court of Justice in the Hague, Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) government found itself without reliable external allies as its hopes of building closer ties with

6. Kristian Lundby Gjerde (2017). 'Russia's turn to Asia: Myanmar seen from Moscow,' Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI) Dmitri Kossyrev, Asia expert, author and media commentator, interview with the author, January 2022.

7. Kristian Lundby Gjerde (2017). 'Russia's turn to Asia: Myanmar seen from Moscow,' Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI)

2021 following the Russian Navy chief's visit in June. Victor Sumskii concludes that although Russia is not seeking basing rights, it 'would not refuse an opportunity for its navy ships to enter into ports of friendly countries, and the expansion of military-technical cooperation with them.'¹³

Myanmar became the 5th ASEAN country to acquire submarines, reportedly owing to the Min Aung Hlaing's personal ambition to build a submarine fleet¹⁴. The strategic reasoning for Myanmar to arm itself with submarines is unclear, but 'the military have their own logic. One possible reason may be military prestige vis-à-vis the regional neighbours and a pariah country syndrome.'¹⁵ In 2020, Myanmar bought a refurbished Soviet submarine from India using credit intended to strengthen defence ties, and in December 2021 received an UMS Minye Kyaw Htin submarine from China, reportedly for free as a donation to Myanmar's Navy¹⁶. Nay Pyi Taw initiated negotiations with Russia to purchase Varshavyanka-class submarines, referred to as the advanced Kilo-class. These negotiations might result in a sale given that Min Aung Hlaing 'appears to prefer Russian military hardware over Chinese-manufactured equipment because of their better quality and because he doesn't want to become too dependent on Beijing.'¹⁷

Air defence cooperation is even more prominent. Myanmar already has Russian Pechora-2 air defence missile systems, six MiG-29 interceptors (fighter jets), Yak-130 defence training aircraft, and Mi-17 and Mi-24 helicopters. In January 2021, an agreement was signed to supply short-range air defence missiles and Pantsir (Shield) – C1 canon systems, Orlan – 10E surveillance drones and radio listening devices. The drone sale is the first of its kind and is expected to generate interest in other potential clients. The coup did not disrupt but rather cemented these ties: it was announced during the March 2021 visit of the deputy defence minister Alexander Fomin, who is in charge of foreign military relations, that Myanmar would receive more Russian military aircraft, air defence systems and armoured vehicles. Deliveries of SU-30 fighter jets should be finalised by 2022. Min Aung Hlaing held further talks to acquire air defence systems during his visit to Russia in June 2021. Russia sold an additional US\$2.3 billion worth of weapons during that trip¹⁸. According to the Russian analysts' narrative, stronger air defences and the acquisition of military aircraft are needed to combat drug cartels in the Golden Triangle, as well as to protect the country from an attack from Bangladesh, which is thought to be one of the Islamic State's (IS) nesting grounds¹⁹.

Regular senior-level dialogue takes place between Russia's and Myanmar's military. Minister Shoigu visited Myanmar several times - most recently in January 2021, days before the coup. National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev met with Min Aung Hlaing in June 2021 to discuss regional security and the fight against terrorism. In August 2021, Deputy Minister Fomin met with the General Chief of Staff Maung Maung Aye, who attended "Army 2021" Military Technical Forum in Russia. Building ties between the rank-and-file is also encouraged, with Russia offering a unique opportunity for Myanmar's military to gain exposure to the outside world. In August 2021, a Myanmar delegation participated in the International Army Games, with its tank crew coming in third place. Soldiers from Myanmar took part in an international paratrooper competition in the Russian Ryazan region and its navy participated in a drill of the Russian Pacific fleet together with China.

12. Cited in Kristina Kironka, 'What does Russian Federation want to achieve in Myanmar?' CEIAS Insights, 20 September 2021.

13. Victor Sumskii, in correspondence with the author, January 2022.

14. 'Морской щит страны золотых пагод,' (Naval Shield of the land of golden pagodas), Krasnaya Zvezda, 18 December 2019, <http://redstar.ru/morskoj-shhit-strany-zolotykh-pagod/>

15. Tsvetov interview.

16. <https://aagth1.blogspot.com/2021/12/type-035-ums-minye-kyaw-htin.html>

17. Ian Storey, 'Myanmar's Submarines: The Race is on Between China and Russia,' Fulcrum, 4 January 2022, <https://fulcrum.sg/myanmars-submarines-the-race-is-on-between-china-and-russia/>

18. 'Myanmar and Russia's Close Post-Coup Relationship,' The Irrawaddy, 2 November 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/specials/myanmar-and-russias-close-post-coup-relationship.html>

19. Vladimir Mukhin. 'Армию Мьянмы усилит Россия, а не Китай. По вкладу в бирманскую экономику Поднебесная пока серьезно обходит РФ' (Russia will strengthen Myanmar's army and not China. Heavenly country is seriously ahead of the Russian Federation) Обозреватель «Независимой газеты», Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 24 January 2021.

Political dimension

In contrast to their military cooperation, Russia's diplomatic engagement with Myanmar has been less public. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Myanmar only once in 2013, followed by Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev's attendance of the East Asia Summit in Myanmar in 2014 and 2015, during which he met with Myanmar's leadership on the sidelines of the event. After the coup, Russian officials repeatedly stated that a strategy of pro-actively developing relations with Myanmar has been adopted²⁰.

From the Russian perspective, its policy has not changed since February 2021 because its main pillar - military cooperation - has been a long-term trend. While the context in which this policy unfolds has changed, Moscow chose not to make its approach dependent on these circumstances, and as other players withdrew, Russia's role became more prominent. For example, when Min Aung Hlaing attended a military parade in Moscow for the 75th WWII Victory anniversary in 2020, it was hardly news, but when Deputy Minister Fomin attended a parade in Nay Pyi Taw in 2021, it was seen as a significant development.

The key political premise is that Russia views the internal affairs of its partners as a black box. Unlike its Soviet predecessor, it does not insist they share its ideology nor test them on their compliance with Marxist – Leninist doctrine. Russia's official line is that it supports the right of every nation to determine its fate instead of becoming a pawn in the geopolitical game. What Russia offered to partners was a vocal and independent position on the international arena, which in turn allowed Russia freedom of manoeuvre, influence, and stability of contractual commitments with these partners²¹.

Nevertheless, Russia did not politically endorse the coup. Although Russia blocked a stronger condemnation of the coup and opposed sanctions against the military regime, it supported the UN Security Council statement condemning violence against peaceful protestors. Neither President Putin, nor Premier Mishustin or the State Duma Speaker Volodin ever met with Min Aung Hlaing, whose level is the Russian Defence Minister and other security counterparts. While the Kremlin has stated that it considers the events of 1 February 2021 an internal matter, it has also called for dialogue on several occasions and expressed hope that Myanmar's military would move towards finding a peaceful solution. Presidential spokesman Dmitri Peskov stated that bilateral ties between Russia and Myanmar are not an endorsement of 'the tragic events that are taking place' and expressed concern over the growing number of civilian casualties²².

It could be argued that Russian support supplies the Myanmar's military regime with legitimisation. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia shields Myanmar from the wrath of the international community; yet, it is far from certain whether key Western members are eager to intervene after their setbacks in Libya, pull-out from Afghanistan, partial withdrawal from Iraq and Syria, and quagmire in Yemen. Rather, Russia helps Myanmar avoid becoming an international pariah subject to more painful sanctions.

Geopolitics and shared values are a mighty factor in this political equation. Unity, security and state survival are at the core of Russia's political philosophy, while economic matters are seen as

20. See, for example, Alexander Fomin's interview in Red Star, <http://redstar.ru/v-duhe-strategicheskogo-partnyorstva-5/>

21. Sergei Malinkovich article.

22. 'Песков сообщил, что Россия обеспокоена ростом числа жертв в ходе столкновений' (Peskov stated that Russia is concerned about the growth in casualties in the course of confrontations), TASS, 29 March 2021, <https://tass.ru/politika/11018817>

secondary and which can be sacrificed in times of crisis²³. Russia was quick to interpret the violence in Myanmar as a battle between patriotic security actors and an array of forces of chaos that threaten to tear the country apart. At the heart of Russian diplomacy lies an ideology based on the principles of non-interference, sovereignty and opposition to the West's perceived attempts to export democracy. Seen through this prism, it is discouraged and undesirable for governments to come to power through popular rebellion. Protests against the military regime may in fact strengthen Moscow's resolve to ensure its survival. The only scenario in which Russia's gambit in Myanmar can pay off is that in which the military remains its power²⁴.

A narrative that legitimises the Myanmar military's political lens and justifies its actions has been taking shape. For example, senior diplomat and former Russian ambassador to Myanmar (1997 – 2001) Gleb Ivashentsov, who is the vice-president of Russia's official foreign policy think tank, the Russian Council on Foreign Affairs, draws a comparison between the Rohingya and Kosovars. This interpretation compares the West's stance on the Rohingya to its support of local rebellions in favour of Kosovo's secession from Yugoslavia, arguing that Myanmar's military are being misrepresented as war criminals akin to the Serbs. From this perspective, the Rohingya are a link in the global Islamist radical network and present a threat²⁵. Myanmar's military, by contrast, is characterised as the main unifier of a hugely complex country with many ethnic and religious groups with centrifugal tendencies, a vague sense of national identity and weak inter-group bonds. From Moscow's perspective, the military are the only backbone that can pull and hold the country together; otherwise, it is too diverse, ethnic groups have little in common and 'national consciousness' is poorly developed. According to this narrative, without a strong national institution, the country can easily go down the Balkan route and fall apart.

In the assessment of Victor Sumsii, head of the ASEAN research centre of the Moscow State Institute of International Affairs (MGIMO, attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Russia's primary interest as a global power is that Myanmar does not turn into a state like Afghanistan. Given the high permeability of Asian borders, and the often fragile regions through which they pass, the consequences could be devastating for both Myanmar and its neighbours - India, China, and the rest of Southeast Asia. Avoiding such a scenario is the most important motive for Moscow to cooperate with Myanmar's military, which is seen as the only force capable of ruling over this extremely difficult country to govern, to defend its sovereignty and thereby avoid chaos²⁶.

The coup and its aftermath are seen as follows: Myanmar's previous pro-western positioning was a raw deal for Myanmar's military as the NLD's policy would have led to the generals eventually losing their power, and the generals had a stake in preventing this from happening. When the NLD refused to investigate claims of electoral fraud in November 2021, the military remained peaceful and persistent with their allegations. As the first-past-the-post system was undemocratic and failed to accurately reflect public support for individual parties, the military called for the adoption of a representational system that would allow for coalition governments to be formed. When the NLD refused, the military exercised its constitutional right to take control in the case of a national emergency.

23. Mosyakov interview.

24. Ivan Klyshch, 'Мьянманский гамбит России,' (Myanmar's Russian Gambit), RIDL, 6 May 2021, <https://www.ridl.io/ru/mjanmanskij-gambit-rossii/>

25. Gleb Ivashentsov, Russia's Ambassador Plenipotentiary, 'Мьянманская спираль,' (Myanmar Spiral), Russia's Council on Foreign Affairs, 24 June 2021 https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/myanmanskaya-spiral/?sphrase_id=86863991

26. Victor Sumsii, in correspondence with the author, January 2022.

According to this narrative, Myanmar military's rule is a national salvation, albeit temporary, that will guarantee that Myanmar does not plunge into chaos. The military will restore democracy as the situation stabilises and initiate electoral reform. The position of this narrative is that violence is regrettable, but it should be qualified: casualties are sustained on both sides as protestors chase and kill 'traitors' who collaborate with the military regime. They are not peaceful civilians but are armed and trained in ethnic armed organisations. The belief is that troops respond brutally to protestors because of the perceived class struggle: soldiers come from poor villages and envy the affluence of the cities in which the protests take place²⁷.

Economy and Infrastructure

Myanmar is a resource and energy-rich country, with huge mining potential, as well as a superb geographic location with access to both land and sea routes. Russia is well-aware of Myanmar's geostrategic and economic significance; however, exploiting it requires not only the investment of resources but also long-term commitment. The moment is fortunate – with many foreign investors leaving, reduced competition is creating opportunities for Russia to engage. At the same time, economic diplomacy is the least developed pillar of Russia's foreign policy and they are realistic about what they can offer. Russia's resources are limited and, unlike the USSR, it does not render free economic aid. While its preferred approach would be to enter into partnerships with other foreign companies to spread the risk, it has not yet found such partners.

Russia, similarly to Myanmar, provides state support to its major business operating abroad, especially in high-risk contexts. It has developed the institutional infrastructure to support this approach, under the umbrella structure of the Russia-Myanmar Association for Friendship and Cooperation (vice-president Anatoly Bulochnikov²⁸). The Intergovernmental Russian-Myanmar Joint Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation was set up in 2014 and the 3rd Commission meeting was hosted by Myanmar in December 2021. More initiatives have emerged following the coup. The first Business-to-Business Dialogue was held on 28 September 2021, with representation from the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Siberian Association for International Cooperation with Asia, which is geographically closer to Myanmar and reflects Russia's Asian identity. The Friendship Association signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Myanmar-Russia Business Development Association on 26 October 2021 and a Russia-Myanmar financial cooperation committee is being established in its framework.

Myanmar sources reported that:

The Minister for Investment and Foreign Economic Relations Aung Naing Oo held a meeting with the Vice-President of the Russia-Myanmar Association for Friendship and Cooperation Anatoly Bulochnikov on matters concerning electricity, the oil and gas sector, cooperation between financial sectors, the production of cement and iron related materials for construction works, fertilizer manufacturing for agriculture, information and technology, importing of value-added food stuff, and pharmaceutical research.

Mr. Bulochnikov discussed strengthening financial cooperation to carry out bilateral trade and investments and supporting Russian investments to the benefit of both Myanmar and Russia.

27. 'Жесткая перезагрузка. Смена власти в Мьянме и ее последствия,' (Hard Reset. Power Change in Myanmar and its Consequences). Russian Experts' Programme, Radio Sputnik, 14 December 2021, <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20211214/1763640208.html>

28. Please refer to the organisation's website at <http://druzhbarm.ru/contacts/>

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between RMFAC and the Myanmar-Russia Business Development Association (MRBDA) in Yangon on October 26, attended by Mr. Bulochnikov and the Chairman of MRBDA Than Zaw, who also signed an MOU on the promotion of trade and economic relations between two countries²⁹.

Deal-making tends to work differently in practice. Negotiations and contracts often bypass these channels due to the way Russian business operates abroad, especially when they enter a new country. Typically, projects are initiated by specific individuals who are presented with a business opportunity and have ties with the relevant Russian ministries. They can help to include and link such projects to Russian foreign investment plans that shield companies from high risk exposure in the emerging markets and provide them with some level of state support³⁰.

Excluding the arms trade, economic ties between Russia and Myanmar were not well developed. Russia ranks only 9th among Myanmar's European trade partners. In 2019, exports from Myanmar to Russia totalled \$130 million, and imports were \$170 million, out of which crude oil made up one-third³¹. Bilateral trade remains low, reaching \$387 million in 2019³². Russia's exports to Myanmar include machinery and industrial equipment, while its imports consist mostly of textiles and agricultural products. Russia is involved in the metallurgy field. Its companies operate the No. 2 Steel Mill (Pinpet) in Taunggyi in Shan state. The military regime has taken steps to restart the factory, which was suspended under the NLD government due to its environmental impact and doubts about commercial viability. In 2021, Moscow wrote off some previous projects, such as the iron smelting factory built by state company Rostech which asked the government to be exempt from returning their state subsidy as the factory was left unfinished due to the coup³³.

Russia has been interested in Myanmar's energy sector since the Soviet era and has sought to expand its oil and gas exploration efforts since 2013. Rosneft stated its plans to drill an exploratory well for a promising structure of the EP-4 block project, as the first stage of its work in central Myanmar through a subsidiary of ANC Bashneft in 2021. The production sharing agreement was signed in 2014 between Bashneft International B.V. (90%, operator), Sun Apex Holdings Limited (10%) and the Myanmar state regulator Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise³⁴. However, the energy field is crowded by the presence of Chinese, Indian, French, British and American companies, though it is uncertain how many Western actors will stay. Nuclear energy is a more promising area of cooperation: the two countries recently boosted their commitment to cooperation and can revive plans to construct a nuclear reactor by Rosatom³⁵. However, the original agreement, dating back to 2001, has stalled because of Myanmar's inaction, which is said to be waiting to first see how Russian projects perform in Vietnam³⁶.

Cooperation in information and communication technology (ICT), where Russia has an advantage, was pursued before the coup. Russian deputy ICT minister Alexei Volin visited the country in 2019 to discuss cybersecurity, the introduction of digital TV, smart cities and e-governance programmes, and 5G development. Russia was also interested in gaining media

29. Discussion held to make Russian investments in electricity, oil and gas, pharmaceutical research in Myanmar, Elevenmyanmar, 30 October 2021,

<https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/discussion-held-to-make-russian-investments-in-electricity-oil-and-gas-pharmaceutical>

30. Kossyrev interview with the author.

31. Ivan Klyshch, 'Мьянманский гамбит России,' 6 May 2021, RIDL, <https://www.ridl.io/ru/mjanmanskij-gambit-rossii/>

32. Nivedita Kapoor, 'Russia's search for influence in Myanmar.'

33. Reported in Kironaka.

34. <https://www.finam.ru/analysis/newsitem/rosneft-planiruet-proburit-poiskovuyu-skvazhinu-v-myanme-v-2021-godu-20210430-140930/>

35. Reported in Alexander Bukh.

36. Kossyrev interview.

influence and sought to link the official information agency Russia Today and the RT TV channel with Myanmar's mass media. Volin met with leading media representatives, including the military-owned Myawadi TV channel³⁷.

Looking to the future, Russia can commit to long-term investments and significant infrastructure and technology projects only if it is confident that Myanmar's military will stay in power. Business opportunities are coming its way: the generals are isolated and in need of extra-regional ties, for which Russia was the prime candidate until it got isolated as a result of its invasion of Ukraine. Myanmar wants to have diverse economic partners to avoid overreliance on China. In Russian experts' discourse, the military's rule over Myanmar could actually benefit the economy: the generals' steady hand is crucial in ensuring performance and discipline. Only those countries in Asia that had a strong central authority at a crucial stage achieved success, even if certain rights were circumvented as a result³⁸. The military regime seems to feel the same way - it preserved previously introduced economic freedoms to maintain a favourable business climate.

In this context, Min Aung Hlaing and his entourage have encouraged Russian business. In 2021, Min Aung Hlaing invited Russian actors to participate in manufacturing and machine building projects, and enhance Myanmar's industrial potential. Banking and insurance, agriculture, food processing and fisheries, energy and electricity generation, and mining present potential areas of cooperation³⁹. In October 2021, Min Aung Hlaing personally met representatives of the Russia-Myanmar Friendship Association to discuss Russia's investment and cooperation in the production of fuel, cement, steel, fertiliser, electricity supplies and electric public transport. Among his aims are combating pollution in the cities, increasing self-sufficiency and reducing reliance on imports. The Myanmar military's Planning and Finance Minister attended the 6th Eastern Economic Forum, a grand event in Russia, and held talks with the Director-General of Interstate Development Corporation and the Chairman of the Russia-ASEAN Economic Council. According to the Myanmar military-controlled newspapers, Russian businessmen discussed value-added agricultural produce, electricity generation, crude oil exploration and port industries in Myanmar. It is not certain at this stage how far these plans have progressed.

Soft Power

Though it warrants attention, Russia's successful deployment of soft power in Myanmar has been largely overlooked. It has built upon a certain commonality in outlook and values, and has no previous history of support to the armed opponents of Myanmar's military, no large-scale controversial investment projects, no involvement into Myanmar's complex identity politics and no previous attempts at expansionism.

One route for soft power is religion. Russia is both a European and an Asian country, and Buddhism is one of its historic faiths. In 1764, as the Russian Empire was moving to the East, Katherine the Great established the post of Pandit-Hambo-Lama - the head of the Buddhists of Eastern Siberia and the Baikal region - which is considered a landmark of the recognition of Buddhism as a state religion of Russia. The traditional Buddhist areas are Tyva, Altai, Buryatia

37. 'Россия и Мьянма договорились о сотрудничестве в сфере ИКТ,' (Russia and Myanmar agreed on cooperation in ICT sphere), Ministry of Digital Development and Mass Communications of the Russian Federation, 19 September 2019, <https://digital.gov.ru/ru/events/39342>

38. Gleb Ivashentsov, 'Myanmar Spiral', 24 June 2021 https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/comments/myanmanskaya-spiral/?sphrase_id=86863991

39. '1st Business to Business Dialogue On Promoting Bilateral Trade And Investment Cooperation Between Myanmar And Russia Holds,' 28 September 2021 <https://www.dica.gov.mm/en/news/1st-business-business-dialogue-promoting-bilateral-trade-and-investment-cooperation-between>

and Kalmykia. According to different estimates, the country has between a half a million and two million practicing Buddhists and several Buddhist umbrella organisations, such as Russia's Buddhism Traditional Sangha and Russian Buddhist Association. Russia's connection to Buddhism has helped its relationship with Myanmar: Min Aung Hlaing visited a Buddhist temple in Moscow during his trip in June 2021 and the influential Buddhist monk Sitagu Sayadaw accompanied Vice Snr. Gen. Soe Win on his trip to Russia in September 2021. It is worth noting that Shoigu comes from the historically Buddhist region of Tyva. Though there is no evidence that Shoigu with a Tyvan father and a Russian mother is a practicing Buddhist, he comes from a Buddhist area and is aware of its customs and symbolisms.

Education and health present another lever of soft power. In Soviet times, the USSR built an institute of technology and a hospital in Burma. Myanmar became the first Southeast Asian country to approve the Sputnik V vaccine and Min Aung Hlaing praised it in an interview with a Russian broadsheet. Cooperation in the area of education has been ongoing since the Soviet era, and the military have not been the only beneficiaries – in 2016 alone, the Russian government allocated 300 scholarships for Myanmar students to study at Russian universities

Thirdly, efforts to build relationships and appoint the right people in key positions have is an advantage. Trust and affection between specific individuals play an important role: senior Myanmar and Russian officers 'just found a match in each other.'⁴⁰ Diplomacy depends on representation and, in the case of Myanmar, Ambassador Nikolai Listopadov has been a great Russian asset. As a skilful diplomat and titled academic who is an expert on Myanmar and speaks the language, Listopadov built a network of personal relationships with counterparts within the country⁴¹. While foreign actors have struggled to achieve personal rapport with Myanmar's military leadership due to their closed and hierarchical nature, Russia's military command succeeded in this feat. Myanmar's senior command sees the Russian officers, with all their cultural caveats, as with understandable life strategies, similar motivations and value systems⁴².

Russian relations with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing have been consistently built since he came to lead Myanmar's military in 2011. The general grew to appreciate the Russian side early on. He met with high-level Russian security officials every year, visited Moscow six times and has an account on the Russian social media network V Kontakte. The general perceives the two countries as sharing a similar history – a monarchic period, followed by experience of construction of socialism and currently, the fight against terrorism. Under his leadership, Myanmar began to procure more Russian weapons and military technology, and educating officers in Russian academies was considered more conducive to the formation of a nationally-oriented elite than the available alternatives⁴³. In Min Aung Hlaing's own assessment, Myanmar's military is one of the

40. This is historically true as well. General Ne Win is believed to have taken a dislike to Nikita Khrushchev when he visited Burma, while Daw ASSK always inspired suspicion among the Russian side, - Dmitri Mosyakov interview, January 2022.

41. Tsvetov interview with the author. See profile at <https://myanmar.mid.ru/ru/embassy/ambassador/>

42. Interviews with Pyotr Tsvetov and Dmitrii Mosyakov. See also 'Далекая экзотика (Faraway Exotics): как Россия помогает крепить боевое могущество армии Мьянмы. «Военная приемка» в Мьянме. Часть I. Воины Будды', <http://druzhbarm.ru/2018/05/06/dalekaya-ekzotika-kak-rossiya-pomogaet-krepit-boevoe-mogushhestvo-armii-myanmy/>

43. Pyotr Akopov, 'Почему Россия не осуждает взявших власть генералов,' (Why Russia does not condemn the generals who took power),

strongest armies in the region due to Russian support⁴⁴. He stated that:

The participation of the Russian delegation in our parade is proof of friendship and support from Russia during a difficult period for us. By coming to us, you have proved once again that our friendship does not depend on various external factors⁴⁵.

Since the coup, Russia's political support supplied the military leader with the confidence required to undertake foreign trips and show that the military regime is not an outcast and can break out of isolation⁴⁶. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's visit to Russia in June 2021 should be viewed as a continuation of the existing trend. It was certainly not a state visit, but still staged in the spirit of a welcome reception. His personality has helped build and facilitate this warm relationship - Min Aung Hlaing is comfortable with the Russian military (unlike with his Chinese counterparts, with whom he has a more formal relationship) and considers Shoigu a friend⁴⁷. Sergei Shoigu reciprocates: he addressed the general in Myanmar language during the meeting, calling him a 'dear friend.'⁴⁸ The general held many meetings, enjoyed friendly publicity with interviews with Russia 24 TV channel and RIA Novosti information agency, and visited arms manufacturers, pharmaceutical companies and military academies. The Russian Military University conferred an honorary professorship on Min Aung Hlaing⁴⁹. The general travelled to Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, to visit helicopter, shipbuilding and car factories, where he held talks with Tatarstan's President about cooperation in the areas of natural gas exploration, manufacturing and education. His deputy Vice Senior General Soe Win and former Myanmar Air Force chief general Maung Maung Kyaw have also both visited Russia since the coup.

The Russian government hopes Myanmar's military will be able to legitimise its rule through vaguely respectable elections and rely on a greater degree of acquiescence and co-option than it does currently. However, Moscow cannot be sure that the military's rule will last. Scenarios of collapse of the military rule under internal contradictions or mounting resistance, making the country ungovernable, are also plausible, even if they do not seem likely at the moment. Presently, Russia has placed all its bets on the military – should it be overthrown, a successive government will most certainly halt ties with Russia and have to maintain a relationship with China. This uncertainty means that while plans have been developed, especially in the area of nuclear power, in which Myanmar engineers have been trained over a number of years, there will be a waiting period before the plans can be put into action and Russian credit lines are opened. There are more immediate opportunities for cooperation, such as in naval and logistical facilities in the Indian Ocean, and the restructuring of Myanmar's military in line with Russian standards and weapons' systems, including the education of more officers.

44. 'Шойгу встретился с главкомом ВС Мьянмы,' (Shoigu met with Myanmar's military leader), TASS, 22 June 2022, <https://ria.ru/20210622/vs-1738129246.html>, also reported by Interfax news agency, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/773409>

45. Pavel Gusev, 'Interview with Min Aung Hlaing', Moskovskii Komsomolets, 26 March 2021, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2021/03/26/glavkoverkh-myanmy-my-zhdem-rossiyskikh-biznesmenov-i-turistov.html>

46. Mosyakov interview.

47. Nivedita Kapoor, 'Russia's search for influence in Myanmar,' Observer Research Foundation, 2 March 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russias-search-for-influence-in-myanmar/>

48. Shoigu thanked Min Aung Hlaing for his personal participation in the 9th Moscow International Security Conference and addressing the plenary, reported in 'Шойгу встретился с главкомом ВС Мьянмы,' TASS, Moscow, 22 June 2021.

49. The Irrawaddy, Ibid., 2 November 2021.

Russia's interests in Southeast Asia

Russia's relations with the region

After its decline in the 1990s, Russia made a comeback on the international scene, and noticeably so in Asia. As the West deposed Russia from its western neighbourhood, it pivoted to capitalise on nascent anti-Americanism in the East. However, Russia had to prove anew that, despite its diminished weight, it was still a significant actor with relevant assets to offer its allies. Presently, Vietnam and Myanmar are its most important partners, and ties with Cambodia are growing.

Russia declared increasing its engagement with Asian countries as a priority over two decades ago, with President Putin announcing this intention in his Krasnoyarsk speech in 2001. Already under President Yeltsin, Russia's decision to join the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1998 signalled a 'turning to the East'. The APEC summit in Vladivostok in 2012 was a significant demonstration of this intent. This strategy appears to be driven both by internal considerations (developing Russia's Far East) and external ones (participation in lucrative Asian markets). After its fallout with the West in 2014, the Kremlin became more focused on pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy and building relationships beyond the West.

While Russia's interest in developing ties with Asia increased, it is not new. Although its strategy towards SEA is not formulated in any official documents, Russia's goals are clear: to elevate its political and economic relations with the Asia Pacific and SEA to the level achieved with Europe. This is considered essential for the development and security of Russia's Far East⁵⁰. While this goal has not yet been achieved, Russia's relationship with China has markedly improved and remains its most significant asset in Asia. Russia's strategic interests in Southeast Asia are two-fold – one is to benefit from being included into benefitting from regional economic integration, and the second one is to enhance the region's peace and stability. While the Soviet Union shared the same strategic priorities, Russia has placed a greater emphasis on economic considerations. The USSR also sought to promote its peace and security agenda, but SEA countries did not support its initiatives until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and took concrete steps, such as normalising relations with China, withdrawing Soviet troops from Mongolia and helping settle the conflict in Cambodia⁵¹.

One of Russia's advantages is its leading role in the arms trade. It sells weapons to old allies, such as Vietnam and Laos, and new clients alike, including Malaysia and Thailand. Access to the Russian arms market allows them to avoid becoming overdependent on the West, which is seen as unreliable and at risk of introducing arms sales bans based on domestic rights infringements, as happened to Duterte in the Philippines. Russia's relationships with SEA militaries are strong across the board, including with countries that were once its adversaries. While the arms trade facilitates these relationships, they are not solely derived from it, and intelligence sharing, anti-terrorism and a common outlook on regional security are also important factors. Russia's effective experience in dealing with emergencies and natural disasters is also appreciated⁵².

Another area of interest is energy cooperation. However, unlike in the Soviet times when aid was granted for free, Russia has profit in mind and does not provide free economic aid other

50. Pyotr Tsvetov interview, Russian Diplomatic Academy, 10 January 2022.

51. The main priorities are outlined in the Joint Statement of the 4th ASEAN-Russia Summit: Building A Peaceful, Stable and Sustainable Region, 28 October 2021,

52. Kossyrev interview.

than humanitarian assistance. It offers preferential credit lines for major projects. Moreover, SEA is disconnected and far from Russia's usual supply routes and transportation channels, which presents a logistical challenge. Most of Russia's energy exports focus on long-term contracts with reliable and wealthy customers in Northeast Asia—China, Japan, and South Korea—and its role in the SEA energy market is fairly limited. At the same time, energy cooperation in oil production and hydropower is the most rapidly expanding sector in Russia's economic relations with Vietnam. Rosatom is also proactively seeking nuclear power contracts, such as with Myanmar, although there is considerable caution towards putting nuclear reactors in a seismically active area after the Fukushima disaster. Other trade relations are negligible and include exports of Russian wheat and vegetable oil.

The Soviet Union had invested greatly in educating and teaching Russian to cadres from the region. However, these Russia's 'soft power' aspects have declined as the demand for English has grown, with Russia's Ministry of Culture doing little to promote Russian culture and alumni from Soviet universities receiving very little attention. At the same time, tourism from Russia is a growing source of income, and more and more Russian citizens are settling and setting up businesses in SEA. Russian tourists do not frequent Myanmar, but Russia is interested in developing tourism and has raised the subject of a visa-free regime and direct flights between the two countries with Min Aung Hlain.

While ASEAN was considered a hostile organisation in the Soviet era, times have changed. The accession of Vietnam and other former Soviet allies made it more Russia-friendly, and Vietnam became the biggest promoter of Russia's interests within ASEAN⁵³. Moscow appreciates ASEAN's non-ideological stance and aligns with its key principles of multipolarity, sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. Russia believes that ASEAN should play a central role in peace and security in the region (rather than the US military)⁵⁴.

The 2016 Russia-ASEAN summit in Sochi led to a meeting at the presidential level, during which President Putin presented regional security architecture and the realisation of the countries' rich economic potential as priorities for Russia's partnership with ASEAN⁵⁵. As Victor Sumskii assesses,

ASEAN's commitment to maintain the inclusiveness of integration processes in Asia; its emphasis on reaching compromise to resolve international disputes; the Association's "central role" in building a "new architecture of regional security and cooperation" in the Asia-Pacific region since the early 1990s are quite sufficient grounds (not to mention the economic dynamism of the Southeast Asian countries) for the mutual rapprochement of Russia with ASEAN⁵⁶.

However, Moscow also considers the consensus-based organisation to be a slow decision-maker, and views the US strengthening bilateral relations with key SEA states as an effort to weaken regional unity. While economic progress is slow, Russian cybersecurity technology is a promising area of cooperation and Kaspersky software is well-represented in ASEAN countries. A narrative that portrays ASEAN as important to Russia is gaining traction, including the idea that some of the grand plans from the 1990s need to be realised for Russia to project its influence there⁵⁷.

53. 'PM stresses significance of Việt Nam-Russia strategic partnership,' Vietnam News, 28 October 2021, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/1067815/pm-stresses-significance-of-viet-nam-russia-strategic-partnership.html>

54. Tsvetov interview.

55. 'President's address to the Russia-ASEAN Summit participants,' President of Russia website, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51899>

56. Victor Sumskii in correspondence with the author, January 2022.

57. Kossyrev interview.

Russia and SEA on Myanmar

Myanmar could be a potentially valuable launchpad for Russia to expand its diplomatic influence in Southeast Asia. The crisis gives Russia the opportunity to engage with ASEAN on matters of regional security; for example, Moscow managed to find common ground over the Myanmar issue with Thailand and the Philippines, which have been traditionally influenced by the US. Russia's position on Myanmar also offers other ASEAN members an alternative to US diplomacy in the region: if they were to experience problems domestically, Russia would be prepared to work with them and not lecture them on human rights and democratic norms, which are the focus of Biden's administration.

At the same time, as Sumskii notes, 'at this stage, the Russian line of cooperation with military authorities causes an ambiguous reaction in Myanmar itself and in other Southeast Asian countries. Nevertheless, objectively, this line meets both Myanmar's national interests and the regional security needs. It is therefore possible that in the medium term, Russia and ASEAN will be able to bring their positions closer together on ways to stabilize the situation in Myanmar. Such a turn in itself would indicate the strengthening of Russian positions both in that country and in the entire region.'⁵⁸

Initially, ASEAN was ambivalent towards the crisis in its neighbourhood: several of its members hope to see a restoration of democracy, while others are more prepared to tolerate Myanmar's military in power⁵⁹. ASEAN has not issued a strong condemnation of the coup and its aftermath, believing that an outright rejection would only push Myanmar even closer to China and award it more influence. Russia welcomed ASEAN's approach and the appointment of the Special Envoy on Myanmar. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Russia supports the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus, which corresponds to Russia's position - the need to stop violence, exercise moderation and restraint by all sides, and open dialogue to stabilise the situation and achieve civil peace. Russia stated its appreciation of the contacts with the Myanmar military sustained within the ASEAN framework. Another point of commonality, from Russia's perspective, is that both ASEAN and Russia reject the policy of unilateral sanctions, threats and interference in Myanmar's internal affairs⁶⁰.

However, to date, Myanmar's military regime has been unresponsive to ASEAN's peace efforts. In October 2021, Russia and ASEAN expressed concern over the situation in Myanmar, where violence continues and casualties mount. They called for the implementation of the April Accords, the immediate cessation of hostilities and for all parties to exercise restraint⁶¹. Presently, Russia is likely to join the bandwagon of ASEAN's peace offering rather than pursue its own initiative, but this might change.

While Russia perceives itself as locked in a competition with the West, and primarily the US, this is not the case with China or any other Asian power. Given its reputation as a 'the world's chief villain', further reputational damage in the eyes of the West does not present a concern for Russia. According to Russia, the West is also no white knight: although Thailand's generals also

58. Victor Sumskii in correspondence with the author, January 2022.

59. In January 2022, Thai prime minister Hun Sen went on a state visit to Myanmar, in 'Cambodian PM Hun Sen's visit with Myanmar military chief sparks protests,' The Guardian, 8 January 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/08/cambodian-pm-hun-sen-visit-with-myanmar-military-chief-sparks-protests>

60. Sergei Lavrov: 'Россия последовательно выступает за укрепление центральной роли АСЕАН в АТР,' (Russia consistently supports strengthening the central role of ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific region) Interview of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs to Indonesian newspaper «Rakyat Merdeka», Moscow, 6 July 2021.

61. 'Россия и АСЕАН обеспокоены развитием ситуации в Мьянме,' (Russia and ASEAN are concerned about the development of the situation in Myanmar), TASS, Singapore, 28 October 2021.

limit democratic freedoms, they escape stronger criticism since they are a Western ally. This political symbolism and messaging don't go unnoticed in Southeast Asia and comparisons are easily drawn.

Transregionalism

Russia has a vested interest and plays a key role in promoting transregionalism through the integration of ASEAN and other Asian bodies, in line with President Putin's general line on deepening integration processes between regional organisations and structures. One such structure is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) which was promoted bilaterally and through ASEAN, and has sparked the interest of Vietnam and Thailand. The EEU has already offered the EEU Common System of Tariff Preferences to Myanmar, which it can benefit from and apply to its exports to Russia⁶². Vietnam signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EEU in 2015 and suggested at the Vladivostok Eastern Economic Forum that it could serve as a bridge between ASEAN and the EEU: 'an ASEAN-EEU FTA would create a market with a GDP of US\$11 trillion and a population of 850 million.'⁶³ Still, cooperation remains more of a prospect than a reality, as it is constrained by trade imbalances, weak institutional frameworks and a lack of opportunities to expand business interactions⁶⁴.

ASEAN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in which Russia and China play leading roles, signed an MoU in 2005 which stipulates transnational crime as a priority area of cooperation, alongside other topics, such as social development and the economy⁶⁵. So far, the countries have preferred direct bilateral relations with Russia and the MoUs remain an institutional framework with little substance, though they might become useful in future.

Ultimately, Russia will be able to expand its influence in the region, if and when Russia's Far East begins to attract capital, goods, people and technology, growing into a hub for regional cooperation. Although many steps have been taken to present Vladivostok as an attractive investment opportunity and gateway for further regional development, there is still a long way to go.

Russia matching its policies vis-à-vis China in Myanmar

Russia does not perceive China as a rival or as trying to displace or compete for the same assets and opportunities. China, in turn, does not put itself in the way or in direct opposition to Russia's interests. Doing so would contradict the whole philosophy of Sino-Russian relations based on the principles of harmony and complementarity, and the values proclaimed by the Chinese leadership - good neighbourly relations and non-expansionism - that resonate with Russia. Moreover, Russian diplomats are sufficiently realistic to appreciate that China has much greater capabilities and can sponsor dedicated state programmes in the region. Victor Sumskii believes that 'if the current bilateral dynamics continue in the foreseeable future (which is quite likely), then the complementarity of Moscow's and Beijing's interests and modii operandi in Southeast Asia has every chance of increasing.'⁶⁶

62. 1st business to business dialogue on promoting bilateral trade and investment cooperation between Myanmar and Russia holds, 28 SEPTEMBER 2021 <https://www.dica.gov.mm/en/news/1st-business-business-dialogue-promoting-bilateral-trade-and-investment-cooperation-between>

63. 'Vietnam Suggests An ASEAN Free Trade Zone With The Eurasian Economic Union,' Russia Briefing, 2 September 2021, <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/vietnam-suggests-an-asean-free-trade-zone-with-the-eurasian-economic-union.html/>

64. Kanaev E., Korolev A. 'EAEU-ASEAN: Results and Prospects of Cooperation.' *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, 2020, vol. 64, No 1, pp. 64-72. <https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2020-64-1-64-72>

65. 'Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretariat of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Secretariat of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,' Jakarta, April 2005.

66. Victor Sumskii in correspondence with the author, January 2022.

Moscow has always been mindful of China's strong presence in Southeast Asia and sought to tailor its approach as not to encroach on its neighbour's interests. For example, it did not challenge China's role in Cambodia, although it replaced the USSR/Russia as its main weapons' supplier. It plays the same role in Myanmar⁶⁷. Still, China was said to implicitly consider Southeast Asia as a 'Chinese zone of influence' in which other actors are unwelcome. While Chinese companies enter partnerships with their Russian counterparts in other regions, they avoid doing so in SEA despite Russian proposals⁶⁸. Russia, however, is capable of pursuing its business agenda even in the face of Chinese objections, as was the case when Gazprom started drilling for oil in the South China Sea in Vietnam⁶⁹.

However, Russia has strengthened its role in the region and shown that it is prepared to act decisively and if necessary, alone, as the Kremlin does not feel it needs consent for its decisions. It is also true that the public's sentiment in SEA towards China can be controversial, as Sinophobia is common and the role of China can inspire negative emotions due to its history in the region. Looking ahead, a military – political alliance between Russia and China has been announced; if established, it would leave the US with little room in their shared neighbourhoods. Such an alliance could be advantageous for SEA states, as many regard China with apprehension and would view Russia as restraining Chinese power⁷⁰.

For many decades, Moscow has cultivated deeper ties with New Delhi, particularly through the sale of arms. As cited by Gabuev, Russian weapons sales to India have grown significantly in the last five years, accounting for 23 percent of Moscow's global arms exports between 2016 and 2020. Historically, China has viewed Russia's arms trade with India and Vietnam as an irritant, but has refrained from elevating the issue to become a strain on the bilateral relationship. Gabuev further notes that China's recent successes to extend its security presence in the South China Sea and along its border with India has caused serious friction with Vietnam and India. Amid this shifting security landscape, Beijing has the opportunity and rationale to pressure Moscow to limit its partnership with India⁷¹. It is not known whether it has indeed done so.

Conclusions

In 2021, Myanmar joined the inner circle of Russia's trusted friends in the region. The fact that Russia's efforts to build assets in Myanmar have been underestimated, despite occurring in plain sight, is telling. After the coup, Moscow did not adopt a new approach, but instead built on their existing policy, expanding into and grasping 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. Russia does not have the resources to make long-term investment in a faraway country merely to claim a stake abroad amidst its more important priorities. Thus, another extreme should be avoided – while Russia's role is important, it does not dominate Myanmar's politics and there is no guarantee that the generals would listen to Russia's advice on all occasions, as they have other partners in the region and Russia's economic offer is modest. Russia is therefore likely to be a significant, but not a

67. See more in Lucas Myers, *Ibid*.

68. Kossyrev interview.


69. Interview with Pyotr Tsvetov, see also in Lucas Myers, 'Too Close for Comfort: Southeast Asia's Attempt to Balance with Russia Against China,' Wilson Center Blogpost, December 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/too-close-comfort-southeast-asias-attempt-balance-russia-against-china>

70. Mosyakov interview.

71. Alexander Gabuev, 'Neighbours, Partners, Competitors: Drivers and Limitations of China-Russia Relations Russia in the Asia-Pacific,' Carnegie Moscow Center, 31 December 2021, <https://carnegie.moscow.org/commentary/86104>

dominant player, and the military regime will follow its own logic rather than become a Russian puppet.

The crisis in Myanmar gave Russia an opportunity to step up its engagement in Southeast Asia. Its position on the resolution of Myanmar's crisis is aligned with that of ASEAN, and Russia will support and facilitate ASEAN's mediation efforts where necessary. Should this approach fail, it might offer its own expertise to the military regime. As for a perceived 'Sino-Russian competition', this is a western interpretation. Asian countries (which Russia is, to an extent) tend to avoid conflict and zero-sum outcomes where possible, and instead seek to achieve complementarity and preserve their relationship even if it occasionally requires taming their ambitions. China expands its influence primarily through economic means, while Russia's strength lies in the military-political sphere.



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