

When Senior General Min Aung Hlaing stepped off his aircraft at Bangkok's Don Mueang Airport, inspectable under a full military honor guard and flanked by smiling Thai officials, the symbolism was unmistakable. Gone was the olive-drab fatigues of the general who seized power in a brutal February 2021 coup. In their place was a dark business suit, fitting his newly minted title as "President" following a tightly orchestrated, opposition-free election.

For the regime in Naypyitaw, the two-day official visit to Thailand was designed as a masterclass in performative normalization. By signing memorandums of understanding on labor and cross-border river management, addressing a bilateral business forum, and posing alongside Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, Min Aung Hlaing sought to send a clear message to Southeast Asia: *The junta is here to stay, and it is time to do business.*

Yet beneath the diplomatic choreography lies a fundamental question that will shape the geopolitics of Southeast Asia for the next decade: Can Myanmar's military regime buy regional legitimacy through mainland diplomacy, or will the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) hold the line?

The Strategy of "Calibrated Re-engagement"

Min Aung Hlaing's journey to Bangkok was not an isolated event. It was the culmination of a deliberate strategy to re-enter the international fold through the back door. Having already completed visits to Beijing, New Delhi, and Vientiane, Naypyitaw has systematically targeted its immediate land neighbors—nations whose economic and security anxieties outweigh their commitment to democratic norms.

In Thailand, the junta found an eager partner. Under Prime Minister Anutin, Bangkok has championed what it calls a policy of "calibrated re-engagement." For Thai policymakers, the rationale is driven by proximity and self-interest. Thailand shares a porous 1,500-mile border with Myanmar—a frontier plagued by an influx of refugees, environmental pollution, illicit

narcotics, and sprawling border cyber-scam syndicates that prey on regional citizens.

Bangkok argues that ignoring Naypyitaw does not solve these crises; it exacerbates them. By offering a red carpet, Thailand hopes to secure cooperation on border security and revive stalled infrastructure investments, including the ambitious Dawei Special Economic Zone, which would link the Andaman Sea to Bangkok's industrial heartland.

To sweeten the deal for regional skeptics, the regime even orchestrated a carefully timed gesture: allowing a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit detained pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. It was a calculated concession aimed at giving ASEAN moderates a pretext to claim that engagement is yielding results.

ASEAN's Growing Fault Line

However, Thailand's embrace of Naypyitaw highlights a dangerous schism within ASEAN itself.

Since 2021, ASEAN's official stance has been guided by its "Five-Point Consensus," which calls for an immediate cessation of violence, inclusive political dialogue, and the delivery of humanitarian aid. Because the junta flagrantly ignored these conditions, ASEAN took the unprecedented step of barring Myanmar's political leaders from its high-level summits.

This consensus is now fraying along geographic and political lines:

- Mainland ASEAN (Thailand, Laos, Cambodia): Favors pragmatic co-existence, prioritizing border stability, trade routes, and immediate security concerns over political reform in Naypyitaw.
- Maritime ASEAN (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines): Remains staunchly opposed to legitimizing the regime without genuine political progress. Countries like

Indonesia and Malaysia view Naypyitaw's sham elections and cosmetic presidential title as an insult to the bloc's credibility.

When ASEAN's special envoy recently noted that full normalization of ties remains "still far off," she reflected the firm stance of the maritime bloc. Yet, by conducting high-profile bilateral visits outside the official ASEAN framework, Min Aung Hlaing is betting that he can render the bloc's collective ban meaningless. If individual ASEAN capitals treat him as a legitimate head of state, ASEAN's collective leverage evaporates.

The Illusion of Control

The fatal flaw in Naypyitaw's diplomatic charm offensive is that it is built on a grand illusion: the assumption that the military regime actually controls Myanmar.

More than five years after the coup, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) is weaker and more overstretched than at any point in modern history. A coalition of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and People's Defense Forces (PDFs) has systematically stripped the junta of territorial control across the country's periphery. Crucial trade corridors to China and India, vast agricultural heartlands, and major border crossings are no longer under Naypyitaw's command.

Min Aung Hlaing may wear a tailored suit in Bangkok, but back home, his military relies on indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery bombardments against his own civilian population to maintain a fragile hold on major cities. Re-labeling the junta as an elected civilian presidency does not restore its capacity to govern, nor does it suppress the armed resistance that enjoys overwhelming popular support.

For Thai investors and regional executives tempted by the regime's business forums, the economic reality is equally grim. Myanmar's economy is in tatters, crippled by sky-high

inflation, severe foreign currency shortages, energy blackouts, and Western sanctions targeted at the junta's financial lifelines. Signing MoUs in Bangkok's air-conditioned conference halls will not alter the fact that supply chains inside Myanmar cross active battlefields.

What ASEAN Must Recognize

If ASEAN yields to the temptation of "business as usual," it will commit a strategic blunder with consequences far beyond Myanmar's borders.

First, validating Min Aung Hlaing's regime will permanently damage ASEAN's credibility as a regional anchor. It will signal to powers across the Indo-Pacific that ASEAN's commitments to international law and human rights are mere rhetoric easily brushed aside by military force.

Second, engagement without accountability will not bring stability. A regime that lacks legitimacy among its people cannot enforce border security, eradicate criminal syndicates, or guarantee safe trade. By bolstering a weak dictator, regional neighbors risk prolonging the civil war and guaranteeing years of chaos along their borders.

ASEAN leaders—particularly those in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore—must remain firm. Re-engaging Naypyitaw must be contingent on concrete, verifiable actions: an immediate cessation of violence against civilians, the unconditional release of political prisoners, and genuine dialogue with all stakeholders, including the National Unity Government and ethnic resistance forces.

Min Aung Hlaing came to Bangkok searching for a rubber stamp of legitimacy. ASEAN should refuse to provide it. Shaking the hand of a dictator in a business suit does not make him a president, and treating a war-torn country as a stable market does not make it one.