

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

THE COMPLEXITY IN SINGAPORE-MYANMAR RELATIONS

By Yen Zhi Yi

SYNOPSIS

In 2023, a report by a United Nations Special Rapporteur claimed that Singapore-based firms were involved in arms trading with the Myanmar military regime. Singapore responded to this report, stating that it took a principled stand against the Myanmar military's use of force against unarmed civilians and has worked to prevent the flow of arms into Myanmar. How should we understand Singapore's position towards Myanmar?

COMMENTARY

Over the past two years, reports that Singapore-based firms were allegedly involved in weapons trading with Myanmar have emerged, sparking concerns over Singapore's position towards the military regime. Given the larger political context of the 2021 coup, the ongoing civil war and the recent [extension of the state of emergency](#), it is helpful to examine how Singapore continues to balance its relations with Myanmar.

Allegations of Arms Trading

Allegations that Singapore firms are involved in arms trading with the Myanmar military were reported by UN Special Rapporteur [Tom Andrews](#), who noted that several countries had not ceased their weapon shipments to the military junta despite the United Nations General Assembly adopting a [resolution](#) after the coup calling upon all member states to prevent arms flows into Myanmar.

The 2023 report, titled "[The Billion-Dollar Death Trade](#)", claimed that private entities from various countries were supplying weapons and raw materials to the military junta, also known as the State Administration Council (SAC) of Myanmar. A total of US\$254 million worth of arms were reportedly from Singapore-based companies – with at least

138 of them serving as intermediaries for the junta since the coup – and local banks being used extensively by arms dealers in Myanmar.

In March 2024, Andrews [gave a rundown](#) of the human rights situation in Myanmar to the UN Human Rights Council. He lauded the Singapore government for launching prompt investigations, which led to a drop of 83 per cent in arms transfers from Singapore-based companies to the Myanmar junta.

A more recent report by Andrews in June 2024 noted that the Myanmar military was increasingly [switching from Singapore banks to Thai banks](#) for weapons procurement. This indicated that relevant entities in Singapore had responded to his earlier report.

Singapore-Myanmar Relations

Singapore has attempted to position itself towards Myanmar by drawing a fine line between sustaining political pressure as part of ASEAN's response and ensuring that collective actions do not negatively impact Myanmar citizens.

Singapore's stance on the situation in Myanmar has focused on humanitarian needs. Official statements by Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) have constantly highlighted the need to prioritise civilian safety, humanitarian assistance and human rights while condemning the use of violence against unarmed civilians.

Singapore has also played an important role in mitigating the situation, with Singaporean [Noeleen Heyzer](#) being the former UN Special Envoy to Myanmar. During her tenure from October 2021 to June 2023, she made a trip to Myanmar. She met with regime strongman General Min Aung Hlaing, who agreed to have [“frank conversations”](#) and [“inclusive solutions”](#). However, the military junta failed to follow up on further actions after her visit. It remains challenging for Singapore and other ASEAN member states to maintain an open window to dialogue with the SAC without outrightly conferring legitimacy to its rule.

The military junta has been [challenged increasingly by resistance movements](#), especially after a coordinated military operation launched in October 2023 – known as [Operation 1027](#) – by ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and their allies, including the People's Defence Force (PDF) under the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG).

With the complex domestic political situation, multi-level socio-political issues, and continuing outbreaks of violence, external players have little room to influence local developments directly. This could explain why ASEAN member states, including Singapore, have thus far adhered to the long-held principle of non-interference – instead of being overtly proactive and applying pressure as [states in the West](#) have called for.

Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan [reiterated](#) this position when he acknowledged the complexity of Myanmar's situation and the dangers of external interference during the 57th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting and related meetings held in Vientiane in July 2024.

In response to reports about the involvement of locally-based firms in the weapons trade with Myanmar, Singapore's MFA has emphasised repeatedly that the country takes a "[principled position](#)" against the junta's use of force against civilians while also taking measures to block arms trading with Myanmar. However, Singapore is also careful not to block [legitimate trade](#) and financial links that "support the livelihoods of the Myanmar people".

Balakrishnan has addressed the issue in the Singapore Parliament, reiterating the country's position on the alleged arms transfers. He also [stated](#) in a press interview that engagement with Myanmar on a principled basis would continue to be Singapore's position and that ASEAN members have never excluded the country from senior-level discussions.

As for ASEAN, the grouping has continued to stress the salience of the [Five-Point Consensus](#) (5PC), which calls for the end of violence and the release of political prisoners. However, the military junta had reneged on the agreed terms, making it difficult for further progress. Some ASEAN states have also resorted to bilateral engagements outside the ASEAN framework, such as the Thai foreign minister's meeting with imprisoned National League for Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi in July 2023 and Indonesia's [behind-the-scenes engagement](#) with relevant Myanmar parties.

Singapore Harden's Its Stance

Singapore has adopted [more stringent language](#) towards the Myanmar regime ever since it used lethal force against anti-coup protestors, a departure from its usually reserved response to the internal affairs of ASEAN members. It has strived to attend regular ASEAN meetings on the Myanmar situation to enhance the organisation's credibility and centrality. It was also quick to take action following the UN report on Singapore firms engaging in the arms trade with the Myanmar junta.

Singapore agencies and stakeholders like the Monetary Association of Singapore and local banks have also [taken action](#) to cut economic links to the arms trade, with [the United Overseas Bank](#) having cut off its counterparts in Myanmar. Such actions demonstrate responsibility and credibility in the face of sensitive issues where inaction could lead to more repercussions.

However, Singapore is Myanmar's largest foreign investor and an importer of some of its labour, which makes it unviable to impose trade embargoes or stringent travel restrictions. Nevertheless, it remains crucial to monitor actions taken by the military junta that could impact Singapore, such as its decision to [revoke the passports](#) of several Singapore permanent residents, allegedly over their anti-coup views.

Local-level dynamics in Myanmar and mutual economic interdependence will hence require Singapore to maintain flexibility in its engagement with the military junta. Political developments in Myanmar should not be viewed in isolation from the needs of the population, especially given that the country has undergone a complicated domestic political crisis for years with no clear resolution.

Conclusion

Singapore's stance on Myanmar reflects its careful management of relations with countries that some in the international community may regard as "problematic". However, given that Myanmar is a member of ASEAN, Singapore cannot ignore its mutual interdependence with other members of the grouping, nor can Singapore afford the repercussions of isolating it.

Any resolution to the Myanmar crisis would have to involve all parties, namely, the SAC, the NUG, the EAOs and, most importantly, the citizens. Nonetheless, the chances of having ample political space for such dialogue remain slim due to the deep-rooted complexities surrounding national reconciliation in Myanmar. External actors like Singapore remain constrained in what they can do to manage the situation from the outside.

Yen Zhi Yi is a Senior Analyst in the National Security Studies Programme (NSSP), at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Her research interests include Southeast Asian Politics, Civil-Military Relations in Asia, and ASEAN Regionalism and Regional Order.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798