



AFP/Sai Aung Main

Murky future: People walk across a bridge on Feb. 23 amid heavy air pollution in Yangon, Myanmar.

The case for a long-term ASEAN envoy on Myanmar

Five years after Myanmar's 2021 military coup, ASEAN faces a difficult truth: The Five-Point Consensus (5PC) has not moved the country closer to peace. Violence continues, political dialogue remains stalled and humanitarian access is inconsistent. The critical question now is whether ASEAN's current diplomatic framework is adequate to deal with a prolonged and deeply fragmented civil war.

Philippine Foreign Secretary Maria Theresa Lazaro, whose country is currently the bloc's chair, has indicated that ASEAN is considering appointing a long-term special envoy on Myanmar to replace the current system of annual rotation. The discussion reflects growing recognition that the existing structure may be ill-suited to the crisis's complexity. Rather than abandoning the 5PC, the proposal seeks to strengthen the institutional support needed to implement it effectively.

Under the current arrangement, the incumbent national chair appoints a special envoy for a one-year term, a pragmatic compromise when the 5PC was adopted at the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in April 2021. Even then, disagreements surface over mandate, authority and resources.

Linking the envoy to the sitting chair provides immediate political weight and flexibility. Decisions can be made swiftly, and diplomacy can adjust to shifting conditions. Yet this model also places logistical and institutional burdens on the chair's foreign ministry.

The debate over the first envoy exposed deeper tensions within ASEAN. Indonesia proposed former foreign minister Hassan Wirajuda, seen as a figure of diplomatic gravitas. Thailand preferred Virasakdi Futrakul, viewed by some as more acceptable to the Myanmar military. Malaysia put forward Razali Ismail, a seasoned diplomat and former United Nations envoy to Myanmar.

These differences reflect-



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ed competing views about access, leverage and representation. Several democratic member states insisted that the envoy must engage all stakeholders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, a demand the junta rejected, citing legal proceedings. Concerns also arose about tenure: An annually rotating envoy would struggle to ensure continuity. The eventual compromise in August 2021, appointing then-ASEAN chair Brunei Darussalam's foreign minister, Erywan Yusof, underscored ASEAN's instinct for consensus, even at the expense of durability.

Since then, each chair has shaped the envoy's approach. Brunei drew a firm line when access to Aung San Suu Kyi was denied, leading to the unprecedented exclusion of Myanmar's political representatives from ASEAN summits. Cambodia prioritized humanitarian access, opening limited space for aid delivery while facing criticism for perceived accommodation. Indonesia invested heavily in quiet diplomacy, engaging more than 150 stakeholders across political and ethnic divides. Laos adopted a cautious, stability-oriented posture. Malaysia later reasserted pressure and strengthened coordination through the Troika mechanism linking past, present and future chairs.

Measured against the 5PC's core objectives, cessation of violence and inclusive dialogue, progress has been minimal. Yet institutionally, ASEAN has achieved three notable outcomes.

First, it normalized conditional participation, signaling that membership does not guarantee automatic political representation.

Second, it preserved multilateral engagement across political divides, preventing Myanmar from complete diplomatic isolation within the region.

Third, it gradually structured the envoy mechanism into a more coordinated regional instrument. The envoy has not ended the war, but it has kept Myanmar within ASEAN's normative framework.

Still, annual rotation produces recurring resets. Relationships must be rebuilt, strategies recalibrated, trust re-earned. Actors inside Myanmar have learned to navigate this cycle. Time becomes leverage: A firm chair can be waited out in anticipation of a more accommodating successor. The structure inadvertently incentivizes delay.

The experience of 2021-2025 makes one conclusion difficult to avoid: ASEAN's Myanmar diplomacy requires structural reform. A more durable approach would include three elements: a longer-term envoy mandate of two to three years; a permanent technical secretariat to preserve institutional memory and negotiation records; and clear, measurable benchmarks defining "substantive progress" under the 5PC.

Reform, however, is not straightforward. The current chair-based model offers considerable political authority. Because the envoy is often a sitting foreign minister, they can mobilize resources quickly and interpret ASEAN's noninterference principle with nuance. Engagement with actors such as the National Unity Government (NUG) can proceed even when full consensus among member states is fragile. In this sense, the model offers agility.

But the one-year mandate enables Myanmar's military authorities to deploy "wait-it-out" tactics. Institutional memory fragments as responsibilities shift from one capital to another. Moreover, as the envoy remains accountable primarily to their

own government, bilateral considerations, trade, border security or migration, may influence tone and strategy.

A longer-term ASEAN special envoy could mitigate some of these weaknesses. A multiyear mandate would reduce incentives for stalling and allow relationships to mature. A dedicated envoy, free from national office, could focus entirely on mediation and crisis monitoring. Yet this alternative carries risks.

An envoy appointed by unanimous consensus might emerge as a lowest-common-denominator figure, acceptable to all, assertive to none. Collective accountability could limit flexibility. Without the authority of a sitting foreign minister, mobilizing urgent political leverage may prove harder. What is gained in durability could be lost in agility.

The most pragmatic solution may therefore lie in hybridization rather than replacement. ASEAN could retain the political authority of the chair-based envoy while establishing a permanent technical support unit within the ASEAN Secretariat to preserve institutional memory and potentially a modest presence in Myanmar to sustain dialogue networks; such a structure could provide continuity beyond annual political cycles.

Strengthening the Troika mechanism would serve as a "consensus shield", ensuring that the chair's initiatives reflect collective continuity rather than unilateral preference, and cushioning the disruptive effects of annual rotation.

The debate over envoy reform is a test of ASEAN's political maturity. The next step is to demonstrate that consensus does not require institutional stagnation.

If ASEAN can recalibrate its diplomatic architecture without fracturing unity, it will do more than improve its engagement with Myanmar. It will fortify the organization itself, equipping it to navigate an era marked by internal conflicts, strategic rivalry and protracted crises.