



Fork on the Road: National Security as One of the Driving Forces behind Thailand's Unilateral Move towards the Myanmar Crisis

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ABSTRACT

In June 2023, Thailand took a unilateral move to engage with Myanmar's junta government, surprising ASEAN. It occurred in the midst of the lack of progress that ASEAN has made in addressing the Myanmar crisis, which directly affects Thailand as Myanmar's closest neighbor. Although Thailand's move did not worsen the situation, other ASEAN countries criticised it as going against ASEAN's stance on the crisis. This article argues that Thailand's decision was largely driven by concerns about its own national security. In terms of the research method, this article employs a qualitative approach. In particular, national security concepts and rational choice theory are employed to build the analysis. This study shows how the Myanmar crisis impacts Thailand's security, such as refugee inflow and airspace violation. ASEAN's lack of progress, Thailand's experience in engaging with Myanmar, and the presence of a precedent by Cambodia can also be seen as some of the driving forces behind its eventual move.

KEYWORDS

Myanmar crisis; National security; Rational choice theory; Thailand; Unilateral move

INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War has brought about vast changes to the international system, from the rise of US world order all the way to noteworthy growth of other regions across the globe. One such region is the Indo-Pacific, a region known as one of the fastest growing regions in the world ([Yadav, 2022](#)). Being the heart of the Indo-Pacific, it does not come out as a surprise that Southeast Asia would also get the lion share of the attention and ripples the region receives. The lustre of the region can be seen in the many regional powers it hosts, from the likes of Indonesia and Singapore, to the regional bloc that encompasses almost, if not all, the entirety of Southeast Asia itself, ASEAN.

A tumultuous chapter in the contemporary development of Southeast Asia is present in the ongoing Myanmar crisis. Myanmar, in the past, has been quite the wildcard among other ASEAN member states ([Kurlantzick, 2021](#)). It has undergone numerous coups that witnessed nationwide instabilities with far-reaching repercussions for Southeast Asia's regional security. A striking example can be made out of the Rohingya crisis resulting from the government's human right abuses that has forced many people of that ethnic group to set sail abroad ([Matthew, 2020](#)). The cracks that led to the crisis have made their appearances along the stages of Myanmar's development over the years. All the cracks on the walls would eventually culminate around early 2021 following the enactment of a general election that saw the victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) party.

In the months following the coup, the international community was all abuzz with what Myanmar was going through. Concerns and hope for a proper solution were expressed from the mouths of many leaders across the globe. It was inevitable for the issue to eventually be deliberated upon in the United Nations (UN). But as opposed to getting the entire UN to dive headfirst into the crisis, the UN settled with giving the lion share of the duty to ASEAN, while the UN, along with the international community, are at its beck and call ([Chongkittavorn, 2021a](#)). As mentioned by António Guterres in April 2021, he expressed his acknowledgement of ASEAN's central role in the handling of the crisis given the regional bloc's history with the ups and downs of Southeast Asia ([UN News, 2021](#)). Indeed, ASEAN would take some important strides that signalled the regional bloc's commitment to see the crisis through to the end. A prominent proof of said strides can be seen in the form of the ASEAN 5 Points Consensus that would later guide both ASEAN and the junta government as to how the crisis would be handled.

Alas, that was one of the few concrete strides that ASEAN as a whole made over the years in facing the threat towards its regional security. The lack of progress would resonate in the aforementioned consensus as it would not bear any considerable fruit for the crisis's handling in months ahead ([Kusumawardhana, 2022](#)) ASEAN's little to no progress over the years have bred pessimism over what the regional bloc could do as the spearhead that would pierce any problems materialising in the region. The security landscape is all the more bleak

given how things are progressively going south in Myanmar with the rise of military operations carried out under the junta government and countless outflow of refugees to neighbouring countries. It is not surprising therefore that many fear persisting lack of progress on ASEAN's part would raise the crisis's ante towards the regional security of Southeast Asia given its considerable far-reaching implication and the strong interconnectedness in the region ([Hayes & Weber, 2021](#)).

A beacon of hope would then come following the shift of ASEAN chairmanship to Indonesia for the year of 2023. Being known as the de facto leader of ASEAN, many have hoped that Indonesia's chairmanship would give rise to concrete progress on the handling of the crisis. However, following the coming months of its chairmanship, not much progress has been made for a foreseeable end to the crisis. As opposed to progress, delay of joint communique and further deadlock that the regional bloc face appear to show what has been called the Myanmar fatigue ([Aqil, 2023](#)). Amidst the already arduous geopolitical terrain, the regional bloc would be faced with another unexpected happening to the Myanmar crisis which would come from its own founding member, Thailand.

The aforementioned shock came about following the unilateral move that Thailand took back in June 2023. In its initiative, Thailand set out on its way to re-engage with the junta government of Myanmar in an informal meeting held in Thailand ([Wongcha-um et. al., 2023](#)). Said initiative is against the stance that ASEAN holds as apparent in the decision to not invite the junta government to any ASEAN summit meetings. While the move did not aggravate the already difficult problem on ASEAN's plate, it still demonstrates how the so-called ASEAN centrality and the rest of ASEAN principles do not really hold reign over all of its member states. Referring to the two levels of ASEAN centrality, the move rattles the internal level of said centrality ([Indraswari, 2022](#)). Moreover, such a move is claimed to undermine Indonesia's power as ASEAN's chairman for the year ([Yuniar, 2023](#)). In the end, despite the shock it gave, many ASEAN member states declined to attend the meeting altogether ([Strangio, 2023](#)).

The stride that Thailand took has a good reason to take the rest of ASEAN member states by surprise. Given its status as one of the original founding members of ASEAN, many would reckon that Thailand would adhere to the principles or stance ASEAN takes in the face of regional problems which in this case is the Myanmar crisis. Unfortunately, that did not appear to be the case as at the end of the day, Thailand's own national interest prevailed over the considerations of ASEAN's principles or stance. To that regard, one can look at the many national security repercussions that the ongoing crisis has brought to Thailand over the years and how little ASEAN has yet to put an end to it for years ([Fishbein, 2022](#)).

Being situated as one of Myanmar's direct neighbours, it is no surprise that Thailand's national security would take the brunt of the instabilities surrounding the Myanmar crisis. The repercussions brought about by the crisis towards Southeast Asia would make its first steps into Thailand first as apparent in the influx of refugees it has witnessed over the years.

Referring to the two elements of security studies from Buzan (2016), that being threat and vulnerability, it can be understood how Thailand's vulnerability lies in its close proximity with Myanmar compared to other ASEAN member states. This vulnerability is faced against the threat emanating from the ongoing Myanmar crisis which has remained in place for years, not to mention the lack of progress from ASEAN. When concerns over the regional security implication of the crisis took the attention of ASEAN member states, Thailand would also share the same if not more of it as it also has its own national security at stake apart from the regional consideration. Such is the case as Thailand has taken the lion share of the security implications from the crisis, from the aforementioned influx of refugees to air-space violation. Such a plight could be exacerbated considering the volatility of the crisis as apparent in the escalating civil war in Myanmar (Theresa, 2023). In a way, it can be understood how further reliance on ASEAN, which has yet to yield any fruitful result, would only expose Thailand's national security to said crisis with no clear end in sight.

Moving on, the novelty that authors seek to bring onto the field is the discussion on Thailand's unilateral initiative towards the Myanmar crisis. To be more precise, the writer seeks to argue how the unilateral initiative Thailand carried out is motivated by its very own national security which has been taking the burnt throughout the crisis's existence. In carrying out the research, the paper utilises the rational choice theory along with national security as the guiding conceptual frameworks to build the argument and analysis in the following sections. The national security concept is used to provide a more nuanced view to the issue at hand, as apparent in the security implication of the crisis towards Thailand, whereas the rational choice theory is utilised to guide said national security considerations within Thailand as a rational actor in the international system. The novelty contained in this work is also a result of a look into the present academic landscape over the topic. While there is little to no preceding works over the initiative, there lies a handful of academic works that are relevant to some matters the paper seeks to shine light on.

For example, a research titled Critical analysis of Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and its impact on neighbouring countries done by Mustafa et al. (2019). The paper lays out how Thailand has long been exposed to threats emanating from Myanmar's instability even before the 2021 coup. Another research done over Thailand's initiative with other countries is also present in research done by AM et. al. (2023) can be referred to. In its effort for development, Thailand has cooperated with numerous states including those outside of ASEAN like China. Through the use of the neorealism school of thought, the article explains why Thailand settled on cooperating with China to bring the project to fruition. The benefit that Thailand would reap as a result of the cooperation over the high speed railway would make it a rational and beneficial move for its welfare and development. While it is not related to the national security lens or the specific unilateral initiative this article seeks to bring forward, the aforementioned

article provides another example of the rationality behind Thailand's international initiative that revolves around its interest.

Moving to the paper's structure, the elaboration on the aforementioned theoretical framework is provided which would be followed by the research method. Following that, the paper gets to its discussion section which would lay out the deliberation into Thailand's national security consideration over the Myanmar crisis that eventually amounted to its unilateral initiative. The results contained in the discussion would then be touched upon in the conclusion section of the paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rational Choice Theory

Amidst an anarchic international system, there lies states as the rational composing units of it. Its rationality stems from its need and desire to survive or maintain its existence amidst said system where no overarching entity polices the system to maintain order. The rational disposition that states have as the actors in the anarchic international system push them to behave and go about their business in such a manner. To that regard, the many policies and initiatives states have made over their existence do not come out of a whim, rather they are the very product of the states' rational disposition itself. In understanding the way states go about their businesses as apparent in the policies or undertakings, the rational choice theory posits some stages with which it can be done. The four stages are the problem recognition & definition, goals selection, options & alternatives identification, and the choice ([Blanton & Kegley, 2020](#)). All four stages, as the theory posits, explains the way in which states come to settle on a choice, in the form of an international policy or initiative, that contributes to the interplay of interaction in the international system.

The first stage, as the name suggests, refers to the way in which states recognize and eventually define a problem they are being faced with. States would assess the event, either domestic or international, and see the way it affects its own condition. Given the interconnectedness that characterises the system, states can also assess the environment and other related parties to the problem at hand. Should it pose a threat either in the short or long run, states then have the reason to deem it as such. Following the definition, it has arrived at, states would assess what it seeks to attain in its stride to respond to said problem. In this stage, there are many kinds of goals or national interests that states may wish to pursue, from the economic ones to one involving its national security ([Christiana, 2022](#)). The goals that states may seek to pursue would affect the means it would employ in the attainment of said goals. Such means would then be contemplated in the following stage.

Moving on to the next stage, the options & alternative identification is where states decide the way or means it will use to attain the selected goals. In weighing the options they have, states can broaden up their horizons so they can settle on the means they see fit so as to

avoid throwing all their eggs to one basket, especially if it's being faced with a noxious matter. Should the problem be something that jeopardises vital matters like the state's national security, it is not startling for states to go all the way with the resources it can pour to the means it sees fit.

The considerations and assessment that have been done in the previous stages would amount to the final stage on the choice that will be made. Here, states would choose among the forks in the road they find themselves in. Among the options a state has identified in the previous stage, it can choose one or more it sees fit through considerations of cost and benefit ([Ramadani & Trisni, 2019](#)). Such a consideration can be done so as states can be aware of which one can bring them closer to attain the goals it selected or bring the least negative repercussions should it be the case.

National Security

National security can be understood as an area of the security study that concerns itself with security on the state level. As the name suggests, national security has the state's survival as one of its primary referent objects or what needs to have its security maintained ([Jackson-Preece, 2011](#)). When discussing national security, there are two key concepts to it, that being vulnerability and threat. The two concepts also provide us with a general or simplified idea of how national security can be attained, that is through either the elimination of threat or the vulnerability itself. The many policies or strides that states would pursue to that end, therefore, could be imbued by either of the two.

There are many types of threat to a state's national security. It can range from economic threats, political threats, and among other kinds of threats, environmental ones as well. In assessing a threat that something can pose towards a state, we can refer to some parameters or lenses that Buzan laid out. As laid out in the table, the components below touch upon the attributes to a threat that could determine its intensity, either low or high, to the concerned state. Both terms refer to how an event in the international system may bring about its implication to the state's security. To know whether or not a phenomenon falls under either one of the said categories, we may resort to note its characteristics in regard to the proximity (both time and space), probability, repercussion, and whether or not it is historically amplified. Hence, any events going on the system that happens to fulfil most if not all of the aforementioned matters would push states to give the needed response.

Table 1. Intensity of threats according to Buzan

No	Low intensity	High intensity
1	Diffuse	Specific
2	Distant (Time)	Close (Time)
3	Distant (Space)	Close (Space)
4	Low probability	High probability
5	Low consequences	High consequences
6	Historically neutral	Historically amplified

Source: [Buzan \(2016\)](#)

Threats to national security come in some variations on its origin, type or even who set it in motion. The vast array of things that the states engage in makes it possible for it to be confronted with an abundant range of threats. Threats towards national security can take the form or be based on the military, economic, ecological, political and other areas as well ([Buzan et. al., 2013](#)). The wide scope of threats can be attributed to the many sectors that encompass the states' activities in its existence.

Moreover, depending on the severity or scale of the threat, it is also possible for one to possess more than one of the aforementioned traits. The occurrence of war can be pointed out as an example given the many fields it can grasp on. In regard to its origin, a threat may emanate from within a state's territory and population or instead from abroad. The latter is amplified given the vast webs of interconnectedness that imbued the many levels of the international system, from the regional to global ones. The interconnectedness can also make an issue that does not involve or be directed to a state to still have an impact on them in other indirect manners, from disturbing the regional stability to hindering the states' activity or domestic matters (international trade to even food security).

The many things that national security encompasses makes it a central concern or interest of states in the system. However, given the subjective nature of the threat and what kind of national security each state seeks to attain, one cannot make ascertain right off the bat whether or not what a state perceives as a threat resonates with the view of other states ([Beckley, 2018](#)). What a state perceives as an existential threat to its national security could be viewed as a threat of lesser degree given the difference in states capacity that would give rise to the different degree of vulnerability they have. In addition to the differences inherent to states, the attributes of the threats, where it takes place and what it entails, itself could also affect the way states perceive it as well. Hence, it is difficult to perceive any panacea to fend off any threats to it ([Shrivastav, 2021](#)). The many matters to take into account for respective cases or states make it difficult to extrapolate the exact implication of a threat to a certain state.

METHODS

In carrying out the research, the writer employs the qualitative research method. The qualitative research method can be understood as a research method that seeks to comprehend phenomena or events by involving perception, action, and preferences ([Moleong, 2018](#)). Through employing the qualitative research method, the writer would then qualitatively examine and interpret the data to build upon its contents ([Lamont, 2015](#)). The data that is used in the article is procured from literature studies and internet-based research in the forms of past studies, official documents, as well as relevant media coverage. In building its analysis, the article also puts to use relevant concepts like national security along with the rational choice theory. Then, the first two components of the rational choice theory would be used to elaborate on the second discussion point. Amidst the use of the rational choice theory, ideas from the national security concept would also be utilised to elaborate more on the national security aspect of the issue at hand. Following the second discussion point, the last two components of the rational choice theory would then be used to analyse its share of the problem as well.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Deadlock over the horizon and the make-believe solution: Thailand's unilateral move

Being one of those frontier states, Thailand can be considered as one of the chief burdens of the Myanmar crisis. Even before the outbreak of the 2021 coup that opened the door for the present crisis, Thailand has taken the lion's share of other issues emanating from Myanmar. One of such issues is present in the Rohingya refugees which has garnered the attention of many ASEAN member states, including Thailand. The influx of refugees have strained Thailand's resources and even jeopardise its national security in either direct or indirect manner ([Mustafa et. al., 2019](#)). Moving to present times, the 2,400 km long border it shares with Myanmar has witnessed a similar yet different echo of the issue, albeit now it emanates from the 2021 Myanmar coup.

The coup has opened the door for another civil war taking place in the country. Now, the landscape is filled with the junta government forces, the National Unity Government (NUG), and many ethnic groups ([Thawngmung & Noah, 2021](#)). Moreover, the grim prospect of the crisis's development can also be seen in the death toll it has raked up. For example, the crisis has witnessed more than 10,000 government soldier's dead, not to mention other factions' casualties along with the civilians ([Hein, 2023](#)). To strengthen its grip over Myanmar, the junta government has enacted numerous military operations aimed to obliterate its opposition, even at the cost of the security of its people. It is no surprise therefore that over 1 million people have been displaced and strewn around Myanmar as a result of the perilous clashes ([Khai, 2023](#)). The ensuing clashes in Myanmar would have its repercussions on its direct neighbour like Thailand as well. Over the years that the conflict continues, Thailand has

been flooded with refugees seeking to escape the instability-ridden Myanmar. Such a case is an exacerbation of internally displaced people in Myanmar as a result of the ongoing clashes that has raised the ante as apparent in the scale of destruction. Referring to a report released by the UNHCR, Thailand has witnessed more than 90.000 refugees flowing from Myanmar following the outbreak of the coup ([UNHCR, 2023a](#)). Many of them are housed in settlements around the border where they could either be sent back home or remained there for a long stay. Either way, the government has been tasked to take the needed measures as laid out by the UNHCR to provide care and other necessities the refugees need ([Fishbein, 2022](#)). The aforementioned matters would require a lot of resources from Thailand, not to mention how such enterprise would last long as apparent in the present state of the crisis and influx of refugees ([UNHCR, 2023b](#)). While in the past it has witnessed a similar case in the Rohingya case, the present one is more aggravating given the pulsating turmoil beyond its border.

While the threats that the crisis engenders are non-traditional in nature, it is still a threat that Thailand has been exposed to over the course of the crisis. An economic echo of the issue is also present as the dense influx of refugees would demand considerable funding for their accommodation as well. Something that over the years has strained Thailand's economy as it also had to struggle with other issues inherent to it. Moreover, the crisis has also rattled the stability around the border vicinity. This is apparent in how there have been cases of Thai airspace violation done by the Myanmar air force. Despite the absence of destruction, the occurrences have caused panic over the nearby settlements as people fled for nearby bomb shelters ([CNA, 2023](#)). While the government has issued a warning to the Myanmar air force, there is no guarantee that a repetition is out of the window given the growing clashes in Myanmar. The aforementioned bombing is also part of a bigger one that is occurring back in Myanmar, something that acts as a catalyst to the refugee problem Thailand is witnessing ([Goldberg, 2021](#)).

Another important feature of the crisis to highlight is the ongoing deadlock that riddles ASEAN, the regional entity that seeks to overcome the issue. While in the past some progress has been made to address and push for positive development like the 5 point consensus along with the many summits that have been held to deliberate on the issue, it has not brought about any immediate nor significant changes. Over the years, as the chairman shifts, the conflict remains present with no significant milestone achieved. However, hope would then surge as in 2023, it was the turn for ASEAN's de facto leader, Indonesia, to take on the chairmanship mandate over ASEAN. Given the record Indonesia has, many put high hope on Indonesia's leadership to set in motion positive developments to the crisis's handling, something that would alleviate the plight of the region and its most affected states like Thailand.

Unfortunately, the deadlock still remains present under Indonesia chairmanship that many believe to be the game changer. Some have pointed out that the hindrance to move forward with the crisis does not only emanate from the crisis itself, rather it also emerges from

ASEAN's principles of non-interference as well as the need for consensus ([Djuyandi et. al., 2022](#)). Amidst the delicate issue ASEAN is facing, it is expected and imperative for the member states to remain united behind ASEAN's stance. For this case, ASEAN member states need to be at the beck and call of any ASEAN enterprises and to not engage in strides that are against ASEAN's stance. All in all, ASEAN member states would need to keep their mettle amidst the Myanmar crisis, including frontier states like Thailand that have taken the brunt since 2021.

However, the ongoing deadlock also means that Thailand will still have to endure the many implications that the crisis would bring. As one of the most affected frontier states in the region, it is not in Thailand's interest to have its plight continue to remain. Hence, as opposed to following the regional bloc's stride in facing the crisis, Thailand eventually decided on taking matters into its own hands. As shown in June 2023, Thailand carried out its unilateral initiative in the form of an informal meeting involving its Myanmar counterpart along with other countries affected by the crisis. As mentioned before, the informal meeting would come out as a surprise as it was against the stance ASEAN has taken following the crisis. Such is the case as through the meeting, Thailand would engage with the junta government of Myanmar.

In the meeting that would be attended by the Junta, Thailand would engage with the junta government on issues regarding the ongoing crisis along with the implications it has engendered over the years, especially towards frontier states like Thailand. Hence, despite criticism arising from other ASEAN member states, Thailand still deemed it necessary, citing how it has suffered more than other member states ([Reuters, 2023a](#)). The meeting in Thailand would be attended to by the junta-appointed foreign minister. The significance of this initiative from Thailand can be seen in how it went against the hitherto established ASEAN stance towards the crisis, as in engaging with the junta government, as well as how said initiative also entailed the presence of other states within and beyond ASEAN. Another noteworthy feature of the meeting is how it was carried out by Thailand when Indonesia was ASEAN's chairman for 2023, not to mention the little to none consultation with Indonesia or other member states. However, amidst strong criticism, the informal meeting and engagement with the Junta government still took place.

In carrying out its initiative, Thailand also sought to get the support from other ASEAN member states as well as other states beyond Southeast Asia like India and China. The aforementioned states were involved given the influence and how they are also affected by the persisting Myanmar crisis. Many ASEAN member states, notably Indonesia, Malaysia, have voiced their criticism, especially towards how the move betrays ASEAN unity and effort ([Reuters, 2023b](#)). Despite the absence of adequate support to its initiative, Thailand still went on with its initiative towards Myanmar. Thailand argued how despite the initiative being carried out without ASEAN's knowledge and agreement, it was nonetheless done to support

the overall ASEAN effort. Thailand also stated how it wished ASEAN would use its full potential to restore Southeast Asia's security and stability amidst the crisis ([Chetchotiros, 2023](#)). Something that has been hindered given the ongoing deadlock ASEAN is undergoing. In the end, while there has not appeared to be any immediate setbacks to the existing deadlock ASEAN finds itself in, the move is nonetheless still an unwelcome development ([Visapra, 2023](#)). It further puts ASEAN's centrality, which has given rise to the regional actor's development, under scrutiny. Such is the case given how it indicates the growing hairline crack within ASEAN as it is faced with the delicate Myanmar crisis. The crack is also accentuated by how Thailand, despite being one of the founding members of ASEAN, is the member state that spearheaded the move. That very feature invites reservation to the centrality of ASEAN to its member states as well as to its capacity to overcome the Myanmar crisis.

Unravelling the weave: The Problem definition & recognition

In understanding why Thailand eventually resorted to its unilateral initiative, one needs to go over the repercussions of the Myanmar crisis towards Thailand with a fine toothed comb.

The many features of the Myanmar crisis, notably how it poses a threat to Thailand's national security, can be understood through the threat intensity framework that Buzan provided which consists of a low and high intensity category that has its respective components ([Buzan, 2016](#)).

To start things off, the threat that the Myanmar crisis emanates falls under the specific category. Such is the case due to the clear source of the threat, that being the internal instability that infested Myanmar, along with the many impacts that Thailand has witnessed over the course of the crisis.

Distance-wise, the Myanmar crisis's threat towards Thailand can be seen through Thailand's geographical position. The close proximity between the source of the threat and the referent object (Thailand's national security) would have a strong implication to the when and how quick the threat can materialise. As for the time or temporal component, the Myanmar crisis has brought about an ongoing set of problems to Thailand following its inception and presence to this day. The ongoing status of the issue along with its implication allow this type of threat to remain in a constant state of becoming worse. The two components are intertwined as the former can strongly affect the latter upon looking at the problem. For this regard, Myanmar status as one of Thailand's immediate neighbours would allow the many impacts of the crisis in both spatial and temporal senses.

A mix of the two components can be seen in some implications the crisis brings about, like the influx of refugees from Myanmar along with the occasional territorial violations as a result of military operations taking place in the country. The former can occur as a result of the close proximity between Thailand and Myanmar that allows people to flood in the border

following the 2021 coup. The temporal dimension is present in how the influx of refugees remains consistent if not on the rise as the crisis keeps on progressing in Myanmar ([Sipalan, 2023](#)). The same is also present in the latter as apart from the close proximity between the two countries, incursions done by the Myanmar military, notably its air force, over Thailand's airspace have occurred in a spontaneous manner. The sudden nature of the issue would leave no leeway for Thailand to properly prepare for any mishappening arising from it. This is apparent in the chaos that ensued following an incursion by the Myanmar air force over a settlement near the border. While it is true that there have been no casualties arising from the air space violations, it still leaves Thailand with detrimental risks from the bombing's repercussions ([Reuters, 2022a](#)). A look into the bombings that have occurred in Myanmar over the years can support such a notion. The recent attack in the Sagaing region has forced more than 20.000 civilians to flee their homes as fighting ensued ([Knowledge Hub Myanmar, 2023](#)). Despite being aimed at the militia groups, the bombings and attacks have also raked up civilian lives aside from the combatants.

Thailand's perception towards the Myanmar crisis is also shaped by its historical experience of seeing it unfolded in the past. As hitherto touched upon, the present Myanmar crisis is not the first issue stemming from Myanmar. Before the present crisis arising from the 2021 coup, Myanmar has seen its share of domestic turmoil that also affected Thailand. Throughout those perilous periods, Thailand has been the chief burden of its repercussions among other neighbouring countries. Despite said condition, Thailand has opened the door for aid to be sent to the people of Myanmar under careful scrutiny whenever it is viable to do so ([Aljazeera English, 2021](#)). Therefore, the historical amplification provided by Thailand's prior experiences is another contributing factor to the strong intensity as a threat that the Myanmar crisis emanates to Thailand.

In regard to the probability for exacerbation, the repercussions brought about by the crisis can develop another way of threatening Thailand's national security. The many possibilities that can materialise would stem from the development of Myanmar's crisis. For this matter, it is important how what initially began with mass protests now have grown into a full-blown civil war involving many factions in Myanmar. The junta government has deployed the military, including its air force, to suppress protests and crackdowns on the civilians. As of 2023, the aforementioned steps that the government took has taken up the lives of around 6,337 civilians. The probability of exacerbation is arguably palpable here as the casualties have more than doubled the amount back in 2021 ([Prio, 2023](#)). The aforementioned strides exacerbate the general population stance as many would join to take arms under many factions against the junta government.

Given the instability of the crisis, it is highly possible for it to give rise to numerous security implications abroad. One of such probabilities can materialise through Southeast Asia's regional security. Moreover, fear surrounding the regional security implication of the

crisis has loomed over the region and beyond following the outbreak of the coup. Given the strong interconnectedness that characterises Southeast Asia, instability arising from Myanmar, as apparent in the ongoing civil war, can bring about repercussions to the region as a whole. This particular concern was also voiced by Thailand's then foreign minister, Don Pramudwinai, as he highlighted the regional implication the crisis can emanate to the whole region should it not be overcome.

Moving beyond the domestic actors in the crisis, the involvement of outsiders in the scheme of the conflict is also another supporting proof for future exacerbation. Such an argument can be lodged given the support that China and Russia provide to the junta government. As a result of the aforementioned support, the junta government has got its hands-on new armament from jets to artilleries that can fuel the already abound military operations ([Reuters, 2022b](#)). The involvement does not only give rise to further havoc in the country, but it also shows how there are now outsiders who also hold the reins of the Myanmar crisis ([Zeeshan, 2022](#)). The aforementioned addition would then be another hindrance to the already intricate weave the crisis has to offer, especially for ASEAN. Against that backdrop of threat intensity and grim developments, it is not ludicrous for Thailand to expect future upheaval of the existing problems.

The aforementioned features of the recognized problem could then be defined in relation to Thailand's national security. To this end, a look into Thailand national security plan that sets out its outlook. In the plan, Thailand defines its national security as a condition in which it is free from any threat to its sovereignty, territorial integrity, public safety, etc., which could affect its national interest among other things ([Thailand NSC, 2020](#)). The threat that the Myanmar crisis gives rise to fits the regional security environment that Thailand seeks to maintain given the strategic value it puts over it, not to mention how the threat also comes from its own direct neighbour ([Thailand NSC, 2022](#)). In this matter, it is important how the crisis poses a threat in both direct (apparent in the direct repercussions Thailand has undergone) and indirect (the regional implication that the crisis might bring to the region) senses. The former sense is also in line with the 4th point of the plan on Thailand's border security and national interest in its overall national security given the strong cross border implication that the crisis has emanated. The vision that is laid out in the plan is in stark contrast to what Thailand is having on its plate as a result of the Myanmar crisis, not to mention how it can get worse later down the road. Therefore, the threat arising from the Myanmar crisis can then be defined in accordance with Thailand's national security perspective as laid out in the national security policy and plan.

The goals selection stage: The fruit of national security

Following the recognition and definition of the issue at hand, we can then move to the goals selection stage. As a rational actor in the system, states seek to attain their respective national interests and overcome hindrances that may jeopardise its path. Hence, when being faced against a problem that threatens its interests, states would take the needed response to avert or overcome said problem. In lieu of Thailand, it has its own set of national interests and needs that it seeks to attain amidst the maelstrom of the Myanmar crisis ([Banerjee, 2022](#)). As previously elaborated, the ongoing crisis has given rise to numerous repercussions that Thailand has been exposed to over the years. From the growing influx of refugees across its border to air-space violations done by the junta security forces, it is important for Thailand to uphold its national security amidst such a landscape ([Olarn & Regan, 2021](#)). Moreover, the threat it is being faced with also has the prospect of bringing forth a regional implication that would not only engulf Thailand but also other states in the region ([Harding & Tower, 2021](#)).

The intensity of the threat along with the impact it engenders towards Thailand's national security, among other fields, could be one of the goals Thailand settled on. The centrality of national security, especially amidst a threat with such an intensity, would make it important for Thailand to uphold as it is no malleable matter. Such an argument is also in line given that a state's survival strongly depends on the maintenance of its national security. National security's centrality for Thailand is also accentuated by the many matters it encompasses. National security plays an important role in the attainment of Thailand's many national interests, from enacting its own development to ensuring the safety of its people and national institutions ([Thailand NSC, 2022](#)). In attaining its national security interest, as set out in the national security policy and plan, Thailand seeks to exercise a balanced international relation that would allow it to pursue its national interests in the region. To this end, Thailand could take the necessary measures it deems necessary to preserve or assist in the attainment of its interest. Such an undertaking is all the more important should security be the very thing at stake which is exactly what the Myanmar crisis has.

Therefore, amidst the presence of such a threat with that intensity, it is rational for Thailand to have national security as one of its key driving forces behind its eventual move. This point is also supported by Thailand's erstwhile foreign minister's claim over how the initiative encompasses Thailand's interest amidst the Myanmar crisis potential regional implication.

Upon such an inspection, it can be surmised how national security is one of the key considerations to Thailand's unilateral move towards the Myanmar crisis. Its concern towards its national security, as one of the goals it selected, would then bring into fruition the unilateral initiative it would opt for in the following stages.

Onward with the cause: Options & alternatives identification along with the forthcoming choice

Following the goals selection stage, Thailand could then identify and opt for the options it deems fit to pursue its hitherto chosen goal. In facing the Myanmar crisis and its implication to its national security, a fork on the road was present ahead of Thailand. The aforementioned condition refers to the two options Thailand can resort to, either to adhere to ASEAN's stance and wait for an ASEAN-led initiative or it could carry out its own initiative. The fork on the road that Thailand may have encountered each has their own features that can affect the manner in which it seeks to attain the goal it has chosen.

Being one of ASEAN's founding member states, Thailand has maintained a good reputation in ASEAN as one of its active members in many of its initiatives ([Chambers & Bunyavejchewin, 2023](#)). However, amidst the scheme of the crisis, despite the huge expectation bestowed upon ASEAN, it has yet to find a way around the Myanmar crisis. In such absence, Thailand has been exposed and taking the brunt that affects its national security from the Myanmar crisis as it remains unsolved. Thailand's then foreign minister even claimed how Indonesia, which is ASEAN's chairman for 2023, does not understand how Thailand has taken the brunt of the Myanmar crisis ([Fajri, 2023](#)). For this condition, it can be understood how Thailand's sole reliance on ASEAN's initiatives means it would remain exposed to the many repercussions the crisis brings to itself. Given the recent dynamics the region has witnessed over the years, no states can tell what the future could bring. Such a misty landscape could make states unwilling to have their interests, notably one involving their national security, play second fiddle. Therefore, the primacy lies in a state's interest over one concerning the others, even in the face of a regional bloc like ASEAN. For that reason, it is not beneficial for Thailand to solely take on the ASEAN path given the present absence of progress along with the uncertainty that lies ahead.

Departing from the path of ASEAN initiatives, one can then take a gander into the path of Thailand's unilateral initiative. Upon first glance, it can be understood how such a move is quite precarious as it might exacerbate the crisis. How an argument for the risk can be turned down given the existence of a precedent in regard to the Myanmar crisis. The path to go against ASEAN's overarching stance is not one that Thailand spearheaded with its recent move. During Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2022, it also took a similar stride albeit in a different scale in comparison to that of Thailand. The move was done amidst absence of progress from ASEAN with Cambodia's prime minister meeting with its Myanmar counterpart for deliberation on the ongoing crisis and its repercussions ([Kapur, 2022](#)). While it is true that the step Cambodia took did not bear any significant fruit to push ASEAN beyond its deadlock, neither did it bring any significant blow to itself. The lack of any meaningful reprise from ASEAN is also supported by the ongoing deadlock that ASEAN has been faced with for years. This particular matter can be seen as one of the lessons that Thailand took that

motivated it to resort to its unilateral path. The little to no consequences that Thailand would receive makes the path a lot more attractive, especially in a cost and benefit rumination.

Apart from viewing ASEAN as an opposing actor to Thailand's initiative as a whole, Thailand could also deem or frame its effort as one aimed to supplement ASEAN's existing efforts. While it is true that the move was still done with no consensus from ASEAN, let alone the chairman, it can at least assist in garnering any available support from other states. In retrospect, this view would not only provide the leeway for justifying the enterprise as it may as well boost its overall prospect. Hence, should the plan go awry or end up as a fruitless enterprise, Thailand would not receive any significant setback that would be worse than the status quo it finds itself in now.

Another point that can be referred to is the experience Thailand has garnered over the years in dealing with issues stemming from Myanmar. As previously elaborated, Thailand has witnessed numerous issues stemming from its direct neighbour over the years. Thailand has also partaken in the effort, either led by ASEAN or by itself, to piece together the needed solution. During the early months of the crisis, Thailand actively proposed numerous efforts that ASEAN should take in response to the crisis. An example can be made from an international donor conference, aimed to gather funds for sustainable humanitarian missions for the people of Myanmar, organised by the ASEAN Secretariat that was proposed by Thailand ([Chongkittavorn, 2021b](#)). Against that backdrop, it can be understood how Thailand is experienced and well versed in issues from its direct neighbour. Such a claim is also resonated by Thailand's ministry of foreign affairs, as laid out in the meeting's press release, in regard to Thailand's prior experiences in responding to the Myanmar crisis ([Thailand MOFA, 2023](#)). Therefore, the many experiences it has garnered over the years can be seen as another supporting element to Thailand's eventual stride.

Against such a backdrop, it is rational for Thailand to take control over the course in which it can pursue its interest, notably one involving its very own security. Indeed, Thailand is one of the founding fathers of ASEAN and it has weaved its long track of adherence to the regional bloc's stance in the past. However, given the rational disposition of states, it is not out of nature for them, as in the case of Thailand, to stray out of the path it has set for years to resort to means it sees fit for its present interest. Additionally, such a path is also supported by the little to none negative repercussions along with prior experiences inherent to Thailand that it can put to use. Such a feature is also present in regard to the crisis as a whole as despite not bearing the expected result, the effort did not exacerbate the existing plight Thailand had set out from in the beginning. Hence, the absence of any meaningful blow to Thailand from ASEAN, Thailand's prior experiences, ASEAN's lack of progress along with the uncertainty that lies ahead of idleness can be pointed out as some of the factors that led Thailand to its eventual move in June 2023.

CONCLUSION

The ongoing Myanmar crisis that has remained present for the last few years amidst ASEAN deadlock has brought about some implications for the states there. Thailand, being a frontier state in the scheme of the crisis, has taken the brunt of many of its repercussions, from the growing influx of refugees to airspace violations done by the junta security forces. Against that backdrop it can then be argued how national security is one of the key driving forces behind its unilateral initiative in June 2023. Amidst the regional landscape, Thailand sought to maintain its national security given the persistence of the Myanmar crisis and the lack of ASEAN progress which would make Thailand remain exposed to the crisis's repercussions.

Such is the case following the elaboration from the rational choice theory's first step of problem recognition and definition. In this regard, the crisis has brought about numerous repercussions to Thailand's national security. Such a condition could then be defined as a threat to Thailand's national security given the outlook Thailand has in its national security policy and plan. Eventually, to attain the national security goal it has settled on, Thailand opted to do so by carrying out its unilateral initiative considering its experiences with issues stemming from Myanmar along with the existence of a precedent move done by Cambodia. In the end, Thailand carried the initiative out despite the criticism from other ASEAN member states.

As for future endeavours departing from this study, the writers would like to recommend a tap into other areas of the topic. For the case of Thailand's unilateral initiative towards the Myanmar crisis, future undertakings could also take into account other sets of national interests aside from national security. Also, for that issue, a descriptive and in depth look can also be done over ASEAN's initiatives to alleviate the plight of frontier states affected by the Myanmar crisis or the lack thereof. Taking a step back beyond Thailand's unilateral move, a similar stride can also be carried out concerning the recent development of ASEAN centrality amidst the Myanmar crisis. For that end, the case of either Thailand or Cambodia's initiatives can be further inspected given the way they reflect the move to stray from the aforementioned centrality.

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