

# PERSPECTIVE

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Singapore | 21 November 2023

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## Myanmar-Russia Relations Since the Coup: An Ever Tighter Embrace

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*Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing on the sidelines of the 2022 Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok on 7 September 2022. (Photo by Valery SHARIFULIN/SPUTNIK/AFP).*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Myanmar-Russia relations have strengthened considerably since Moscow acknowledged the Tatmadaw's seizure of power on 1 February 2021, and the junta endorsed the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.
- Coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing views Russia as the ruling State Administration Council's (SAC) preferred major power partner.
- Russia is now Myanmar's largest source of military assistance. The Tatmadaw relies heavily on Russian-made aircraft to suppress anti-SAC forces.
- Myanmar is the only Southeast Asian country to transfer military supplies to the Russian armed forces for use in occupied areas of Ukraine.
- Naypyidaw seeks cooperation with Moscow to resolve the country's energy crisis by importing Russian oil and partnering with Russian energy companies to exploit the country's hydrocarbon reserves and develop renewable energy sources including wind, hydro and nuclear.
- The SAC wants Russia to provide Myanmar with nuclear power by transferring small modular reactors. Naypyidaw's atomic power ambitions have renewed fears that the junta seeks to acquire nuclear weapons, despite the absence of solid evidence.
- While China remains Myanmar's most important source of trade and investment, the SAC and the Kremlin have agreed to boost commerce and tourism.

## INTRODUCTION

In February 2023, Myanmar and Russia marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. For most of that period, relations have been insubstantial. It was only in the 2010s that the two countries began to move closer together, primarily due to the Myanmar military's (Tatmadaw) growing preference for Russian-made arms over Chinese-manufactured equipment. Since the Tatmadaw seized power in a coup on 1 February 2021, and Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the two countries have entered into a much tighter embrace. In the face of international disapprobation and Western sanctions, Naypyidaw and Moscow have forged closer diplomatic and political ties and moved to deepen military and economic cooperation.

Nearly three years on from the coup, Myanmar has become the second most important country for Russia in Southeast Asia after Vietnam. For Myanmar, although China remains its largest source of trade and investment, Russia is the junta's preferred major power partner. Significantly, Russia was the only major power to acknowledge the Tatmadaw's 2021 power grab, while Myanmar was the only ASEAN member state to endorse Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and to send military supplies to Russia's armed forces.

This article focuses on the four main areas of Myanmar-Russia cooperation since the coup: diplomatic validation; defence; energy; and commerce and tourism.

## MUTUAL DIPLOMATIC VALIDATION

On 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw ousted the democratically-elected government of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. Senior NLD leaders were detained on trumped up charges and a state of emergency was declared. Coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing appointed himself chairman of the State Administration Council (SAC) and later prime minister of a provisional government. The junta used violence to suppress anti-SAC protests, which ultimately escalated into a civil war that has engulfed every part of the country.

The coup elicited international condemnation. Western countries denounced the takeover and imposed sanctions on SAC leaders. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) also condemned the coup. Min Aung Hlaing attended a special ASEAN leaders' meeting in Jakarta where he reluctantly accepted a Five-Point Consensus (FPC) designed to end the escalating violence and encourage political dialogue among all parties. However, the SAC refused to take the initiative seriously, leading ASEAN to ban SAC officials from attending the organisation's high-level meetings. China, which had established close ties with the Tatmadaw following an earlier coup in 1988, was taken aback by the putsch and did not immediately recognise the SAC's authority. Although Beijing has sought to protect its sizeable economic interests in Myanmar, politically, it has kept the SAC at arm's length. Min Aung Hlaing himself appears to view China with distrust, especially its close relations with several Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) which have been in conflict with the central government for decades. Since seizing power, the SAC Chairman has not visited China nor met with any senior Chinese leaders. When Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Bagan to attend a foreign ministers' meeting of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Forum in July 2022 he pointedly did not travel

to Naypyidaw to see the SAC chairman.<sup>1</sup> Beijing did not invite Min Aung Hlaing to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Summit in Beijing in October 2023, even though China has financed a number of major BRI projects in Myanmar.<sup>2</sup> The SAC's relations with Beijing have deteriorated since a coalition of EAOs launched a sustained military offensive against the Tatmadaw in late October in northern Shan State, blocking trade routes to China.<sup>3</sup>

In sharp contrast, the Kremlin viewed the 2021 coup as a golden opportunity to advance Russia's interests in Myanmar, particularly arms sales which have fallen in other Southeast Asian countries, particularly Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> Moscow moved quickly to consolidate relations with the SAC by utilising strong personal connections between the two countries' military leaders. After his appointment as commander-in-chief of the armed forces in 2011, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing visited Russia on several occasions, during which he forged a good rapport with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and his deputy Colonel-General Alexander Fomin. A few weeks after the coup, Fomin travelled to Myanmar and was the highest-ranking foreign dignitary to attend the Armed Forces Day parade in Naypyidaw on 27 March.<sup>5</sup>

In a clear indication of the position Russia occupies in the hierarchy of the SAC's foreign relations, three of the four overseas trips Min Aung Hlaing has undertaken since the coup have been to Russia: to Moscow, Kazan and Irkutsk in June 2021;<sup>6</sup> Moscow again in July 2022;<sup>7</sup> and Vladivostok and Irkutsk in September 2022.<sup>8</sup> Min Aung Hlaing has used these visits to convey the impression that Myanmar is not internationally isolated, to cement relations with the Kremlin leadership (though he has only met President Vladimir Putin once, on his third trip<sup>9</sup>) and to promote bilateral cooperation in areas such as defence, energy and trade. The SAC chairman has repeatedly praised Putin as a leader,<sup>10</sup> and expressed his gratitude to the Kremlin for its assistance since the coup, including the supply of Russia's Sputnik COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>11</sup> In a media interview during his first trip to Moscow as SAC chairman, he pointedly referred to Russia as Myanmar's "forever friend", relegating China and India to the rank of "close friends".<sup>12</sup>

To reciprocate the Kremlin's solidarity following the coup, the SAC immediately endorsed Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, significantly the only ASEAN member state to do so.<sup>13</sup> However, as Myanmar's NLD-appointed ambassador to the United Nations was able to retain his position due to support from the United States (with no objection from China or Russia), Myanmar has consistently voted for UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The exiled National Unity Government (NUG) – composed of ousted NLD parliamentarians and representatives from various ethnic groups – has also denounced Russian aggression.<sup>14</sup> Kremlin leaders have repeatedly expressed their appreciation for the SAC's criticism of Western sanctions and for "understanding" its rationales for invading Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> Moscow agrees with Naypyidaw that anti-SAC resistance fighters are "terrorists" while Naypyidaw accepts the Kremlin's narrative that Ukrainian forces are "terrorists" (leading some of ASEAN's dialogue partners to boycott meetings of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus experts working group on counter-terrorism, which is co-chaired by Myanmar and Russia).<sup>16</sup>

Russia has helped provide Myanmar with other opportunities to break out of its diplomatic isolation. As Myanmar's relations with ASEAN have soured due to the SAC's failure to implement the FPC, the junta has looked to associate itself with other multilateral forums,

especially those in which Russia (and China) play key roles. These include the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to which Myanmar became a dialogue partner in September 2022.<sup>17</sup> The Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) grouping agreed this year to accept new members starting from 2024, and Myanmar is expected to submit a formal membership application soon. The SCO and BRICS not only provide Myanmar with alternative diplomatic options to ASEAN, but are also viewed by the SAC as potentially important avenues of economic cooperation. Myanmar has courted investments from SCO members in its energy sector and seeks access to financial loans through the BRICS' New Development Bank.<sup>18</sup> Myanmar has also expressed an interest in forging closer ties with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), presumably with a view to negotiating a free trade agreement (as Vietnam and Singapore did in 2015 and 2019, respectively).<sup>19</sup>

Russia and Myanmar have also initiated cooperation in areas that support each other's authoritarian rule. Moscow has voiced support for the SAC's plans to hold legislative elections (probably in 2025), which Western countries have already derided as a sham.<sup>20</sup> In May 2023, the election bodies of Myanmar and Russia signed an MOU on electoral cooperation.<sup>21</sup> In an effort to counter negative reporting about Myanmar and Russia in the international press, in September 2023 Russia's state-owned news agency Sputnik signed a content-sharing agreement with the SAC's mouthpiece *The Global New Light Of Myanmar*.<sup>22</sup>

## THE DEFENCE NEXUS

In the 1990s, China became Myanmar's main weapons supplier. Under Western sanctions, and with Russia's defence industrial sector in disarray following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Tatmadaw had few other choices. However, by the early 2000s the junta had moved to diversify its arms imports away from China, both because of dissatisfaction with the quality and reliability of Chinese-made equipment and as part of an overall policy aimed at reducing the country's dependence on Beijing. Russia was the main beneficiary of this policy. In the 2000s, Myanmar purchased Russian-made MiG-29 Fulcrum multi-role jet fighters, Mi-35 attack helicopters and Mi-17 transport helicopters.<sup>23</sup> These formidable aircraft enabled the Myanmar Air Force (MAF) to step up attacks on EAOs along the country's periphery, including in the Kachin, Kayin, Shan and Chin States that had been in conflict with the central government for decades.<sup>24</sup>

Myanmar's defence ties with Russia moved into a higher gear following the appointment of General Min Aung Hlaing as commander-in-chief of the armed forces in 2011. He not only considers Russian weapon systems to be superior to Chinese equipment but also distrusts Beijing's intentions in Myanmar, especially its close ties with several EAOs. Between 2013 and 2020, Min Aung Hlaing visited Russia four times, forming close personal bonds with the Russian armed forces' senior leadership. Even during the NLD's six years in office (2015-21), defence cooperation remained the mainstay of Myanmar-Russia relations. Between 2017 and 2021, the Tatmadaw placed orders with Russia for a significant quantity of military hardware, including 22 Yak-130 light-combat aircraft, six SU-30MK Flanker fighter jets, 20 BRDM-2 armoured reconnaissance vehicles, Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missiles and Orlan-10E surveillance drones.<sup>25</sup>

Since the military takeover, Myanmar's defence cooperation with Russia has become even more vital. As civil war has engulfed Myanmar, and conflict has spread from the periphery to the Burmese heartland, the SAC has lost control over large parts of the country and suffered heavy combat losses. In response, the Tatmadaw has been forced to become more reliant on air power to counter anti-SAC resistance forces, including the armed wing of the NUG, the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and various EAOs. MAF fighter jets have targeted NUG-aligned administration centres and local service providers, including schools, clinics and displaced persons camps. Air strikes against civilian targets have led to numerous atrocities.<sup>26</sup> For example, on 11 April, the MAF attacked the opening ceremony of an NUG administration office in Pazigyi village in the Sagaing region, killing 170 civilians including 40 children.<sup>27</sup> According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, and various NGOs that monitor the conflict in Myanmar, the majority of MAF air strikes have been carried out using military aircraft from Russia and China, especially the former.<sup>28</sup> In particular, the MAF has relied heavily on its Yak-130s and Mi-35s, including in the attack on Pazigyi village.<sup>29</sup> Andrews has accused Russia and China of being complicit in probable war crimes and crimes against humanity perpetrated by the SAC.<sup>30</sup>

Both Russia and China have resisted calls to impose an international ban on arms sales to Myanmar. On 18 June 2021, Russia joined with China in abstaining from a vote on a non-binding resolution at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) calling for member states to cease all arms transfers to Myanmar.<sup>31</sup> The SAC rejected the vote (adopted by 119 countries) as interference in its internal affairs. To underscore his scorn for the UNGA resolution, a few days after the vote, Min Aung Hlaing travelled to Russia and visited the headquarters of the state-run arms exporter Rosoboronexport in Moscow, the production facilities of the Kazan Helicopter Company in Kazan, and the United Aircraft Corporation in Irkutsk, the makers of Sukhoi fast jets.<sup>32</sup> Over the past two years, Myanmar and Russia have exchanged numerous high-level defence delegations.

Since the coup, Russia has displaced China to become the largest provider of military assistance to Myanmar. According to the Swedish think tank SIPRI, between 2021 and 2022, Russia provided Myanmar with US\$276 million in military supplies, compared to US\$156 million from China.<sup>33</sup> The UN estimates that during the same period, Russian commercial entities transferred US\$406 million in defence supplies to Myanmar, with China in second place at US\$267 million.<sup>34</sup> It should be noted, however, that the SAC and Russia have not signed any new big defence contracts since the coup.

The SAC has shown its appreciation for the Kremlin's military support in two ways. First, and most importantly, the junta has returned the favour. In early 2023, the head of Ukraine's military intelligence, Lieutenant-General Kyrylo Budanov, revealed that Moscow had requested military supplies from a number of countries using Russian-made weaponry, including Myanmar, to make up for equipment shortfalls which were hampering its combat operations in Ukraine.<sup>35</sup> A few months later, it was reported that Russian tank manufacturer Uralvagonzavod had imported optical targeting systems from Myanmar to upgrade T-72 tanks which had been taken out of storage, refurbished and sent to the frontline in Ukraine to make up for the Russian army's huge tank losses.<sup>36</sup> The spare parts had been provided by Uralvagonzavod to the Myanmar army for its own T-72 tanks which it had purchased from Ukraine in the early 2000s.<sup>37</sup> In July, reports emerged that Russian forces were using 120mm

mortar rounds manufactured in Myanmar.<sup>38</sup> While the SAC's transfer of munitions and spare parts will not have a decisive impact on Russia's war efforts in Ukraine, they underscore how close relations between the two countries' armed forces have become since 2021. No other country in Southeast Asia has responded positively to Moscow's request for military assistance, including Vietnam, its closest partner in the region. Second, the SAC has bestowed personal honours on officials in the Russian government who have played a key role in promoting defence ties between the two countries. Thus, in November 2022, the SAC awarded honorary titles to three Russian defence officials: Defence Minister Shoigu was awarded the title *Sithu* (the lowest order awarded to people who are deemed to have done 'great work' for the country); Colonel-General Fomin was named *Thiri Pyanchi* (for 'outstanding performance'); and Alexander Ostrovsky from the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation was awarded an 'excellent administrative performance' medal.<sup>39</sup>

## ENERGY COOPERATION

The coup turned Myanmar's existing electricity generation problems into a full-blown energy crisis. The country's power infrastructure has been damaged in fighting between the Tatmadaw and PDFs, resulting in rolling blackouts in major towns and cities. Rising global oil prices and the falling value of the currency have created fuel shortages for the population, while the withdrawal of Western energy companies from offshore gas fields has halted upstream production.<sup>40</sup>

To find solutions to the country's energy crisis, the SAC has turned primarily to Russia.

As a short-term measure, Myanmar has begun importing Russian crude oil which Moscow is offering to non-sanctioning countries at discounted prices. Between March and June 2023, Russian oil exports to Myanmar jumped from almost nothing to 8.36 million barrels of oil.<sup>41</sup> A proportion of that oil is likely to have been jet fuel for use by MAF aircraft to conduct air strikes. However, not all Russian oil shipped to Myanmar is for domestic consumption. According to *Energy Intelligence*, from February 2023 Russia began delivering an estimated 70,000 barrels of oil per day to China using a Chinese-funded oil pipeline from the port of Kyaukphyu in Myanmar to Kunming in Yunnan Province.<sup>42</sup>

As a longer-term solution to the problem, the SAC seeks to achieve a higher level of energy self-sufficiency by exploiting hydrocarbon resources and developing renewable energy sources. The junta has requested technical assistance from Russian energy companies to develop inland and offshore oil and gas fields – presumably including those from which Western and Japanese companies have withdrawn – and the construction of additional oil pipelines and oil refineries.<sup>43</sup> For renewable energy sources, the SAC has partnered with Russia's state-owned energy giant Rosatom to develop hydro, wind and, controversially, nuclear power.<sup>44</sup>

In the early 2000s, the previous junta signed a series of MOUs with Rosatom to develop nuclear power capabilities. The NLD government shelved those plans but after the coup, the atomic power option was urgently revisited. In 2022, the SAC and Rosatom signed three MOUs<sup>45</sup> with the ultimate aim of providing Myanmar with a small modular reactor (SMR). SMRs are much cheaper, more mobile and reputedly safer than conventional nuclear power plants.<sup>46</sup> In

February 2023, the first concrete outcome of these MOUs was the opening of a Nuclear Technology Information Centre in Yangon.<sup>47</sup> A fourth MOU on nuclear cooperation between Myanmar and Rosatom was signed during *Russia Energy Week* in Moscow in October 2023.<sup>48</sup>

In December 2022, SAC spokesman Zaw Min Tun predicted: “We expect construction of a small-scale nuclear reactor to start within a few years.”<sup>49</sup> However, achieving that goal is an ambitious target for Myanmar. Questions include who would run the nuclear facilities (Myanmar or Russian technicians, or both?), how would a cash-strapped Myanmar pay for such a costly programme, and whether a Russian-supplied SMR would be subject to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards.<sup>50</sup> The SAC’s quest for atomic power has also rekindled speculation that the Tatmadaw has ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons,<sup>51</sup> despite no solid evidence that a ‘Burmese Bomb’ is indeed the SAC’s ultimate goal.<sup>52</sup>

## COMMERCE AND TOURISM

In addition to arms sales and energy projects, Myanmar and Russia have sought to circumvent Western sanctions and strengthen commercial ties. Myanmar’s economy is in a dire state. The coup effectively wiped out a decade of GDP growth as Western companies pulled out, exports plummeted, energy costs rose, trade revenue fell, inflation soared and the value of the kyat collapsed.

Since the coup, Myanmar and Russia have regularly held government-to-government talks on how to promote closer trade and investment ties and exchanged high-level business delegations. Myanmar business people have attended the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum and the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok. In late 2022, in an effort to evade Western financial sanctions on both countries, the Russian and Myanmar central banks agreed to direct ruble-kyat payments to facilitate commercial transactions, presumably including arms sales. Economic ties between Myanmar and Russia should be kept in proportion. Commerce between the two countries is minuscule. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2020, two-way trade amounted to a mere US\$58.3 million before falling to US\$34.5 million in 2021.<sup>53</sup> In 2022, it had risen to US\$104.4 million. In the same year, however, Myanmar-China trade was worth US\$11.5 billion.

Myanmar has been keen to attract Russian tourists, especially to its beach resorts in areas such as Rakhine State.<sup>54</sup> Post-coup, Russian visitors have been offered visa-free travel to Myanmar and allowed to use Russian-issued Mir credit cards, one of only a handful of countries to do so.<sup>55</sup> During 2022, the two sides discussed establishing direct air links between Yangon and Mandalay and several Russian cities including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk and Vladivostok. In August 2023 it was announced that from September, Myanmar Airways International (MAI) would fly twice a week from Yangon and Mandalay to Novosibirsk.<sup>56</sup> Located in Siberia, Novosibirsk is Russia’s third largest city and appears to have been given priority over Moscow and St. Petersburg because it is home to the company that manufactures the SU-34 fighter-bomber (which the MAF appears keen to acquire due to its central role in suppressing anti-Assad forces in Syria since 2015) and a Rosatom facility that processes uranium and fabricates nuclear fuel.<sup>57</sup> Direct flights between Yangon and Moscow with MAI are expected to start in 2024.

## CONCLUSION

The Tatmadaw's ouster of the NLD government in February 2021, and the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine a year later, have pushed Myanmar and Russia much closer together. The Russian government has taken advantage of the coup to promote its arms sales and other economic interests in Myanmar. Wary of becoming dependent on China, coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has looked to Russia as his preferred major power partner, and has sought Moscow's assistance to resolve two major problems: defeat anti-SAC resistance forces and solve the country's energy crisis. Russia's military assistance is prolonging the conflict in Myanmar and its estrangement from ASEAN, and Moscow may be complicit in SAC war crimes. So long as the SAC holds power, and the conflict in Europe drags on, the Myanmar-Russia embrace will grow ever tighter.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>11</sup> Following a visit to Russia in June 2021, SAC Chairman Min Aung Hlaing said that Russia had agreed to supply seven million doses of Sputnik V. By mid-August, however, Myanmar had only delivered 900 doses. "China, India and Russia Donate COVID-19 Vaccines to Myanmar Military", *The Irrawaddy*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/china-india-and-russia-donate-covid-19-vaccines-to-myanmar-military.html>. In January 2022, however, Russia donated

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