

Rethinking Thailand's Strategic Posture toward Myanmar (II): The Regional Layer

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Executive Summary

- Myanmar's prolonged instability has evolved from an internal political crisis into a multidimensional regional security challenge affecting border security, transnational crime, humanitarian conditions, public health, environmental governance, and regional connectivity.
- No existing regional institution possesses the mandate, capacity, or political leverage to manage the full spectrum of transboundary risks generated by the Myanmar conflict.
- Thailand should therefore shift its strategic objective from attempting to influence Myanmar's internal political trajectory toward managing the regional consequences of prolonged instability.
- Achieving this objective requires a layered strategy that combines regional institutions, bilateral partnerships, and strengthened national coordination rather than relying on any single diplomatic framework.
- Thailand's comparative advantage lies not in exercising formal regional leadership but in serving as a trusted regional risk coordinator, connecting institutions, partners, and practical cooperation while preserving ASEAN centrality and Thailand's strategic autonomy.

The prolonged conflict in Myanmar has entered a new strategic phase. More than five years after the military takeover in 2021, the fragmentation of state authority has transformed the crisis into a long-term source of regional instability. The armed conflict now generates transboundary risks extending well beyond Myanmar's borders, including cyber scam operations, narcotics trafficking, irregular migration, refugee movements, communicable diseases, environmental degradation, disruptions to regional connectivity, and growing pressures on border communities. These risks directly affect Thailand's national security and economic interests and are unlikely to disappear even if military dynamics inside Myanmar change.

The report argues that Thailand can no longer base its Myanmar policy solely on bilateral diplomacy or on expectations that ASEAN alone

will restore peace and reconciliation. Rather than seeking to shape Myanmar's internal political outcome—a goal beyond the capacity of any external actor—Thailand should concentrate on managing the cross-border consequences of instability while supporting conditions conducive to an eventual political settlement. This requires repositioning Thailand from a reactive neighbour to a proactive regional risk coordinator.

To achieve this objective, the report proposes a three-layer strategic framework.

The first layer strengthens regional cooperation. ASEAN remains the indispensable political framework for regional diplomacy and the implementation of the Five-Point Consensus, but its limitations require complementary mechanisms. The Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework provides practical opportunities to engage China and Myanmar on border security, transnational crime, environmental governance, and water management. BIMSTEC offers a platform for addressing the western and maritime consequences of instability through closer cooperation with India. The Mekong River Commission (MRC) contributes scientific expertise and technical cooperation on transboundary water governance, particularly in response to growing concerns over pollution in the Kok, Sai, Ruak, and Mekong river systems. Informal dialogue among Myanmar's neighbouring countries complements these formal institutions by providing flexible channels for consultation and confidence-building. The report concludes that none of these mechanisms is sufficient individually; together, however, they constitute a complementary regional architecture capable of addressing different dimensions of the crisis.

The second layer broadens Thailand's bilateral partnerships to mobilize influence, technical expertise, and development resources that regional organizations alone cannot provide. China remains an indispensable partner because of its influence over developments in northern Myanmar and its central role in border security, infrastructure, and transnational crime. India represents an underutilized strategic partner whose growing engagement with Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal offers opportunities for institutional cooperation, connectivity, and maritime security. Japan provides long-term development assistance, technical expertise, and growing support for environmental governance, making it an important partner in border health, human security, and transboundary environmental management. Other partners—including South Korea, Australia, the European Union, and the United States—provide complementary capabilities in humanitarian assistance, governance, economic resilience, institutional development, and international political support. These bilateral partnerships should reinforce, rather than compete with, ASEAN-led regional efforts.

The third layer focuses on implementation within Thailand. Drawing upon a risk assessment matrix, the report recommends prioritizing policy responses according to the likelihood and strategic impact of transboundary threats. Immediate priorities include cyber scam networks, transnational organised crime, border health security, environmental pollution affecting shared river systems, humanitarian preparedness, and disruptions to regional connectivity. Medium-term priorities include institutionalising regional and bilateral coordination mechanisms, strengthening technical cooperation, improving strategic intelligence and information-sharing, and expanding regional contingency planning. Longer-term efforts should focus on embedding Thailand's role as a trusted regional risk coordinator through sustained diplomatic engagement, diversified partnerships, stronger national coordination, and resilient regional institutions.

The report does not recommend creating new regional organizations or pursuing formal regional leadership. Instead, it argues that Thailand should maximise the effectiveness of existing institutions by connecting their comparative advantages. Regional mechanisms provide legitimacy and functional platforms for cooperation, while bilateral partnerships contribute influence, technical expertise, financial resources, and political leverage. National coordination ensures that these external partnerships are translated into coherent policy implementation. Together, these three layers provide Thailand with a realistic strategy for managing the increasingly complex regional consequences of Myanmar's instability.

Strategic Recommendations

The report makes five principal recommendations.

1. Reposition Thailand as a regional risk coordinator, focusing on managing the transboundary consequences of Myanmar's instability while supporting conditions conducive to a future political settlement.
2. Adopt a layered regional strategy that combines ASEAN, LMC, BIMSTEC, MRC, and informal regional dialogue, recognising that each framework contributes distinct comparative advantages while compensating for the limitations of others.
3. Strengthen diversified bilateral partnerships with China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, the European Union, and the United States, ensuring that these relationships complement rather than substitute for ASEAN-centred regional diplomacy.
4. Implement a risk-based national coordination framework that prioritises immediate threats—including cyber scam operations, transnational crime, environmental security, border health,

humanitarian preparedness, and regional connectivity—while strengthening institutional resilience over the medium and long term.

5. Preserve Thailand's strategic autonomy by pursuing interest-based cooperation without strategic dependence, guided by the principles of engagement without alignment, cooperation without dependence, and regional coordination without seeking formal leadership.

Myanmar's conflict is unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. The more immediate challenge for Thailand is therefore not determining Myanmar's political future but protecting Thailand's own national interests while contributing to regional stability. By integrating regional institutions, bilateral partnerships, and national implementation into a coherent strategy, Thailand can strengthen its role as a trusted regional coordinator capable of connecting institutions, partners, and practical solutions to one of Southeast Asia's most enduring security challenges.

List of Acronyms

ACMECS:	Ayeyawady–Chao Phraya–Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy
ACPHEED:	ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases
ADMM:	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting
AADMER:	ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response
ADMM-Plus:	ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus
AFP:	Australian Federal Police
AMLO:	Anti-Money Laundering Office
AMM:	ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting
AHA Center:	ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management
ASEAN:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AusAID:	Australian Agency for International Development
BCWC:	BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate Cooperation
BIMSTEC:	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
CMEC:	China–Myanmar Economic Corridor
COVID-19:	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO:	Civil Society Organization
DEA:	Drug Enforcement Administration
DELSA:	The Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN
DFAT:	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EAO:	Ethnic Armed Organization
EEC:	Eastern Economic Corridor
EU:	European Union
FinCEN:	Financial Crimes Enforcement Network
FTA:	Free Trade Agreement

GDP:	Gross Domestic Product
GMS:	Greater Mekong Subregion
GSP:	Generalized System of Preference
IAEA:	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICRC:	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IMT Trilateral Highway:	India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway
IOM:	International Organization for Migration
JICA:	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KIA:	Kachin Independence Army
KNU:	Karen National Union
KOICA:	Korea International Cooperation Agency
LMC:	Lancang–Mekong Cooperation
LMLECC:	Lancang–Mekong Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Center
LNG:	Liquefied Natural Gas
LPG:	Liquefied Petroleum Gas
MNDAA:	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
MRC:	Mekong River Commission
NDAA:	The National Democratic Alliance Army
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organization
NUG:	National Unity Government
ODA:	Official Development Assistance
ONCB:	Office of Narcotic Control Board
PM2.5:	Particulate Matter with a diameter of 2.5 micrometres or less
SAC:	State Administration Council
SDGs:	Sustainable Development Goals
SEZ:	Special Economic Zone
SSA-N:	Shan State Army–North
SSPC:	State Security and Peace Commission
TNLA:	Ta'ang National Liberation Army
UAV:	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UK:	United Kingdoms
UN:	United Nations
UNDP:	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR:	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US:	United States
UWSA:	United Wa State Army
WHO:	World Health Organization

Chapter I: Why Thailand Needs a Regional Layer

Myanmar's prolonged instability has fundamentally altered Thailand's strategic environment. What began as a political crisis following the military takeover in February 2021 has evolved into a protracted armed conflict with consequences that increasingly transcend national borders. The fragmentation of state authority inside Myanmar has generated a complex web of transboundary challenges—including refugee movements, irregular migration, cyber scam operations, narcotics trafficking, environmental degradation, public health risks, and disruptions to regional connectivity—that directly affect Thailand's national security and economic interests. These challenges are no longer confined to the border provinces. They increasingly involve multiple countries, diverse state and non-state actors, and overlapping regional institutions whose responses are often fragmented and inadequately coordinated.

For decades, Thailand's Myanmar policy was primarily shaped by bilateral diplomacy and border management. The emphasis was on maintaining stability along the shared frontier, facilitating trade, managing labour migration, and preserving working relations with successive governments in Nay Pyi Taw. While these priorities remain important, they are no longer sufficient. Many of today's security challenges originate beyond the immediate border and cannot be effectively managed through bilateral engagement alone. Cyber scam syndicates operate across multiple jurisdictions; environmental pollution travels downstream through shared river systems; infectious diseases disregard national boundaries; illicit financial flows move through regional banking networks; and humanitarian crises increasingly require cooperation among governments, international organisations, and non-state actors.

At the same time, the regional governance landscape has become increasingly crowded yet insufficient. ASEAN remains the principal political framework for addressing the Myanmar crisis, but its consensus-based decision-making has constrained implementation of the Five-Point Consensus. Other regional mechanisms—including the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC), Bay of Bengal Initiative Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation BIMSTEC, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), and various informal dialogue processes—offer valuable functional capabilities but operate within narrower mandates and are not designed to address the full spectrum of regional spillovers. No single institution possesses the political legitimacy, operational capacity, technical expertise, or strategic influence necessary to manage the multidimensional consequences of Myanmar's continuing instability.

This report argues that Thailand therefore requires a regional layer in its Myanmar strategy. The objective is not to replace bilateral

diplomacy or create new regional institutions, but to connect existing mechanisms into a more coherent and complementary architecture capable of addressing transboundary risks. Regional institutions provide political legitimacy, technical expertise, operational platforms, and opportunities for burden-sharing that bilateral diplomacy alone cannot deliver. At the same time, they allow Thailand to engage major external partners—including China, India, Japan, Australia, the European Union, and the United States—through frameworks that reinforce rather than compete with ASEAN centrality.

The central proposition of this report is that Thailand can no longer approach Myanmar primarily as a neighbouring country experiencing domestic instability. Instead, Myanmar should be understood as a source of long-term regional risks that require coordinated regional responses. Thailand's strategic objective should therefore shift from attempting to influence Myanmar's internal political trajectory to managing the regional consequences of prolonged instability. Building such a strategy requires a layered approach that combines regional institutions, bilateral partnerships, and strengthened national coordination. Only by integrating these three dimensions can Thailand protect its national interests while contributing to a more resilient and stable regional order.

1.1 From Border Management to Regional Risk Management

Core Argument

For much of the past three decades, Thailand has approached Myanmar through the lens of border management — a framework oriented toward controlling flows of people, goods, and occasional conflict across a shared frontier of over 2,400 kilometres. This approach was rational given the context of the 1990s and 2000s, when Myanmar's instability was chronic but largely contained, the international community maintained some diplomatic pressure on the junta, and Thailand's own economic and security interests could be broadly defended through bilateral arrangements, military-to-military coordination, and selective border closures.

That framework has now reached its structural limits. The post-2021 military coup and the subsequent collapse of central governance in large parts of Myanmar have transformed what was once a manageable border challenge into a multi-domain regional risk. Thailand can no longer treat the Myanmar file as a perimeter problem to be handled by border patrol units, immigration officials, and local military commanders. The crisis has migrated inward — into Thailand's labour supply chains, public health systems, energy infrastructure, river basins, and internal security landscape. It has also expanded outward, affecting Thailand's ties with ASEAN, China, India, and the wider international community.

The Structural Limits of a Border-Only Strategy

Conflict spillovers.

Thailand's strategy of focusing only on its borders was based on the belief that the ongoing conflict in Myanmar could be contained within its own territory. However, this belief was never entirely accurate; issues such as cross-border shelling, the movement of refugees, and activity by ethnic armed organizations regularly challenged Thailand's border controls. Still, the approach managed to work as long as the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) maintained control over its territory and the fighting remained occasional rather than widespread.

Following the 2021 coup and the subsequent rise of a nationwide resistance comprised of the People's Defence Forces (PDF) and a renewed coalition of Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), earlier assumptions have been entirely invalidated. Armed conflicts are now widespread, occurring across nearly all states and regions bordering Thailand with a frequency and scope that have rendered traditional approaches to border management largely reactive and strained. Artillery rounds and weaponized drones have impacted Thai territory, and population displacements have increased dramatically, overwhelming both temporary shelters and improvised reception facilities.

Transnational crime.

The erosion of central authority in Myanmar has created a governance vacuum that criminal networks have exploited with remarkable speed and sophistication. Scam compound operations — many operating out of special economic zones nominally under EAO or border guard force control in Karen State and the Shan plateau — have become a major regional security concern, luring victims from Thailand, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, India, and beyond. Human trafficking networks have adapted to wartime conditions, routing trafficked persons through forested border corridors that are beyond the reach of formal checkpoint infrastructure. Methamphetamine and synthetic drug production, already elevated along the northern border, has intensified as conflict disrupts licit livelihoods and armed groups seek revenue. These are not border problems. They are networked criminal enterprises with logistical chains, financial flows, and recruitment operations that reach deep into Thai territory, neighbouring countries, and the global financial system.

Labour migration.

Thailand's dependence on Myanmar labour is structural. International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates approximately 4.1 million Myanmar nationals reside in Thailand, of whom 2,270,382 are registered migrant workers as of January 2025 — the highest on record, representing 68 per cent of all registered migrants — alongside

an estimated 1.7 million in irregular status. They are concentrated in construction, agriculture, fishery, and manufacturing, sectors. Post-2021 conflict has not reduced this dependence; it has made management more precarious. Irregular migration has surged as formal recruitment and documentation channels broke down on the Myanmar side, leaving workers with less documentation, greater vulnerability to exploitation, and less legal recourse. Thailand's registration and work-permit systems — already strained — are routinely overwhelmed.¹

Disease transmission.

Myanmar's public health infrastructure, already fragile before 2021, has been systematically degraded by the coup and the subsequent conflict. Military attacks on health facilities, the flight of trained medical personnel, the collapse of vaccination programmes, and the disruption of supply chains for essential medicines have created conditions in which communicable diseases circulate with reduced surveillance and diminished containment capacity. Tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV — diseases for which Myanmar carried a significant regional burden even before the coup — have seen programme disruptions that will produce elevated transmission for years. The emergence of conflict-driven displacement along the Thai border creates vectors for disease spread into Thai border communities and beyond. A border-only public health response — screening at checkpoints, treatment of acute cases at border facilities — does not address the upstream collapse of Myanmar's disease surveillance and containment system.

Environmental degradation.

Conflict-driven displacement has accelerated deforestation as communities clear land for subsistence agriculture and charcoal production. The breakdown of environmental governance in Myanmar has facilitated illegal logging, wildlife trafficking, and unregulated mining — activities that degrade shared watersheds and biodiversity corridors. Dams on the upper Salween and its tributaries, pursued by Chinese and domestic investors amid weakened environmental oversight, affect downstream water security in both Myanmar and Thailand. Seasonal smoke from agricultural burning and conflict-related fires in Myanmar is a recurring source of transboundary air quality degradation in northern Thailand, contributing to haze episodes that impose measurable public health and economic costs.²

Energy vulnerability.

Thailand relies on natural gas imports from Myanmar's offshore fields—especially through the Yadana and Zawtika pipelines—which have long played a significant role in powering its electricity grid. Since

¹ IOM Thailand, Overview of Myanmar Nationals in Thailand, January 2025.

² Hannah Beech, "The Wartime Mining Boom Exporting Rare Earths, and Toxins." New York Times, July 11, 2025.

2021, however, political and security challenges have added uncertainty to this energy partnership: concerns have arisen about whether production will continue, the safety of infrastructure, and the prospects for future upstream investments. Meanwhile, Thailand's own goals for integrating regional power grids—such as importing hydropower from Laos or connecting with other Southeast Asian neighbours—are threatened by instability and governance issues in Myanmar.

Myanmar as a Regional Systemic Risk

Why Thailand cannot insulate itself.

The instinct to insulate — to erect stronger barriers, tighten border controls, reduce engagement, and wait out the crisis — is understandable but structurally impossible. The interdependencies described above are not incidental features of the Thai-Myanmar relationship that can be severed by political will. They are properties of geographic proximity, economic integration, ecological connectivity, and demographic complementarity. Myanmar workers are embedded in Thai supply chains that cannot be rapidly re-sourced. Myanmar gas flows through pipelines that cannot be instantly replaced.

The collapse of the buffer state assumption.

Thailand's strategic posture toward Myanmar has historically rested, partly consciously and partly by default, on the assumption that Myanmar functions as a buffer — absorbing external pressures, containing its own instability, and separating Thailand from the more volatile dynamics of South Asia and the Chinese periphery. This assumption derived some validity from the period when Myanmar's military government, however repressive, maintained territorial coherence and some predictable bilateral engagement. That assumption is no longer operative. Myanmar is not buffering instability; it is generating and transmitting it. The Tatmadaw's loss of control over large swaths of border territory has created ungoverned spaces that cannot perform any buffering function.

The buffer concept also applies to the EAOs along the Thai-Myanmar border, but in a more complex, stratified, and now increasingly unstable form than the state-level buffer assumption. Thailand has historically maintained a dual-layer buffer logic: Myanmar as a territorial buffer between Thailand and the broader regional disorder of South Asia and the Chinese periphery, and the EAOs — particularly along the central and southern border — as a sub-state buffer between the Thai frontier and the Myanmar military itself. The EAO buffer logic was most explicitly articulated during the Cold War, and it had both a security and an ideological dimension.³

³ Paul Chambers, Kridsana Chotisut, "Neighbor to Civil War: Thailand's Relations with Myanmar in 2024," *Fulcrum*, July 8, 2024.

In January 1995, the main Karen National Union (KNU) headquarters at Manerplaw fell to the Tatmadaw, closely followed by other major KNU bases along the border, and over 9,000 Karen civilians were evacuated to Thailand. The dismantling of the EAO buffer produced the first major refugee crisis on the Thai-Myanmar border — a direct consequence of Thailand's strategic choice to abandon the sub-state buffer in favour of state-to-state normalisation. The fall of Manerplaw established a pattern that has recurred: when Thailand's relationship with the Myanmar state is functional, it deprioritises EAO relationships; when it deteriorates, it rediscovers the operational value of those relationships.⁴

Spillovers into mainland Southeast Asia.

Myanmar's crisis is not bilateral; it is regional. The displacement of populations, the disruption of trade routes, the proliferation of criminal networks, and the weakening of public health systems create externalities that fall on Thailand, but also on Laos, China's Yunnan province, Bangladesh, and India's Manipur and Mizoram states. The Mekong subregion — already a zone of intensifying competition over water, infrastructure, and economic influence — cannot sustain the development trajectory that ASEAN and its dialogue partners have envisioned if Myanmar continues its current trajectory of state fragmentation. Thailand's exposure to these spillovers is among the highest of any Myanmar neighbour, given the length of the shared border, the depth of economic integration, and the scale of population movement.

The Logic of Regionalization

Why bilateral Thailand–Myanmar engagement is insufficient.

For decades, Thailand and Myanmar have relied mainly on bilateral engagement to manage their relationship, which remains useful for certain tasks such as border security coordination, labour negotiations, and energy contract management. However, this approach is fundamentally insufficient for today's challenges for three key reasons. First, successful bilateral engagement depends on having a capable and legitimate partner on the Myanmar side—a government that can make and carry out agreements. President Min Aung Hliang's government lacks this authority in many regions; meanwhile, the National Unity Government (NUG) and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) control areas and populations beyond Naypyidaw's reach. Second, the dangers from Myanmar's crisis extend beyond just Thailand; they are regional problems that impact neighbouring countries and demand collective solutions.

⁴ Asia Pacific Centre – Responsibility to Protect, “Ad hoc and as usual: Thai government's responses to the Myanmar crisis since the 2021 Coup,” April 2022, p.13.

Why Thailand needs functional regionalism.

Functional regionalism does not mean grand institutional design or the creation of new permanent bureaucracies. It means building issue-specific cooperative arrangements among the states most directly affected by Myanmar's instability.

Thailand as a risk coordinator, not a hegemon.

Thailand's regional role on Myanmar should be defined by function, not prestige. Thailand does not seek, and cannot sustain, a hegemonic role in Myanmar's political resolution. It is counterproductive to overestimate Thailand's leverage, antagonise China, and invite internal contestation within ASEAN. What Thailand can do, and what its geographic position and stake in the outcome uniquely qualify it to do, is play a coordinating role: convening relevant actors, facilitating information sharing, proposing and hosting mechanisms for specific functional cooperation, and providing a platform through which the international community can engage with the Myanmar crisis constructively.

1.2 Strategic Context: The Limits of Existing Regional Governance

Purpose

Thailand cannot be expected to play a larger regional role until there is a transparent examination of why current governance systems have failed to manage Myanmar's crisis—failures that are rooted in structural issues, not just political motivation or diplomatic skill. Overly high hopes placed on ASEAN and other multilateral bodies, followed by inevitable disappointment, have created a cycle where problems with collective action are recognized but never resolved. This section sets practical boundaries: it clarifies the abilities and limitations of current frameworks, points out their shortcomings, and lays out how Thailand's coordination could offer a practical boost rather than replace regional institutions.

ASEAN's Structural Constraints

The consensus rule.

ASEAN's foundational operating principle — that decisions require the consensus of all ten member states — was designed to build trust among a diverse grouping of states with contested histories, divergent political systems, and acute sensitivities about sovereignty. For much of ASEAN's history, the consensus rule served this purpose tolerably well, enabling the grouping to function as a forum for dialogue and norm-setting without requiring members to subordinate national interest to collective judgment. In the context of Myanmar's post-2021 crisis, however, the consensus rule has become a structural obstacle

to effective response. Myanmar itself is a member state, and the Naypyidaw government — despite its contested legitimacy — retains a seat and formally participates in ASEAN deliberations. Any measure that Myanmar's rulers regard as interference in internal affairs can be blocked or diluted at the consensus stage.

The limits of the Five-Point Consensus.

The Five-Point Consensus (5PC), adopted at the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in April 2021, was the organisation's most substantive collective response to the coup. Its five elements — an immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogue, appointment of a special envoy, humanitarian assistance through ASEAN channels, and a special envoy visit to all parties — set out a framework that, had it been implemented, would have provided a basis for de-escalation. More than four years on, the 5PC has not been implemented. Myanmar has dramatically escalated violence, including air strikes on civilians. The special envoy mechanism has been hobbled by the Myanmar's refusal to grant access to key political actors, including Aung San Suu Kyi. Humanitarian assistance through ASEAN channels has been marginal.

Why ASEAN cannot impose a political settlement.

Misplaced expectations distort policy. ASEAN cannot impose a political settlement in Myanmar because the regional grouping has no enforcement mechanism. ASEAN's normative framework explicitly forecloses interference in members' internal political affairs, meaning any ASEAN-brokered arrangement requires the consent of the parties. ASEAN's membership includes states — most notably Cambodia and Laos, with China's influence operative in the background — that have consistently moderated collective positions toward Myanmar.⁵

The Fragmentation of Regional Responses

China's bilateralism.

China's engagement with Myanmar's crisis features calibrated bilateralism — a strategy of managing relationships with multiple armed actors simultaneously while resisting any multilateral framework that would dilute Chinese influence or introduce external actors into what Beijing treats as its strategic backyard. China maintains working relationships with the Myanmar government, with the major northern EAOs (the United Wa State Army, the National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Shan State Army-North, among others), and to a varying degree with the broader resistance movement. This multidirectional engagement gives China significant leverage across the conflict landscape, but it is exercised bilaterally and transactionally rather than through regional institutions. China's primary interests in Myanmar

⁵ Denying access to political prisoners, rejecting dialogue with the opposition, repudiating the five-point consensus (5PC), boycotting high-level summits are some of the examples of how the then SAC blocked key ASEAN initiatives.

are infrastructure connectivity (the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor), border stability in Yunnan, suppress narcotics flows, and the exclusion of what it perceives as Western influence from its strategic periphery. These interests are best served by bilateral arrangements that China can manage on its own terms, not by regional governance frameworks that would introduce transparency, accountability, and the involvement of actors — including ASEAN dialogue partners and Western donors — that China regards with suspicion.⁶

Competing external actors.

The external actor landscape in Myanmar has become increasingly crowded and competitive, impeding coherent regional governance. India engages bilaterally with both Myanmar and selected EAOs along its northeastern border, motivated by security concerns in Manipur and Mizoram, the trilateral highway investment, and competition with China. Western governments — the United States, the EU, and the UK — have imposed sanctions, supported the NUG and civil society, but lack the proximity and leverage to translate positions into on-the-ground outcomes. Japan has maintained engagement alongside civil society support, reflecting long-term economic interests and a view that isolation is counterproductive. The result is a landscape of competing bilateral engagements that do not add up to a coherent regional approach. In other words, external actors pursue individual interests in a fragmented field.

Lack of operational coordination.

The most significant issue in regional governance isn't just the absence of political agreement—which tends to attract attention—but rather the lack of practical cooperation among those working directly in the field. Humanitarian organizations in Myanmar's conflict zones have very limited interaction with neighbouring governments, even though supplies and staff must transit their territories. Thailand's border management rarely engages with ASEAN's humanitarian systems, which themselves offer little real operational support. Information about conflict situations, refugee movements, and criminal activities is kept within individual countries and only shared sporadically. There is currently no effective regional early warning system for displacement, disease outbreaks, or environmental crises that could enable proactive responses instead of merely reacting after the fact.

Why Thailand Must Fill the Gap

Geography.

Thailand shares the longest land border with Myanmar of any ASEAN state — more than 2,400 kilometres, running from the Thai-Myanmar-

⁶ Sai Wansai, "UWSA opting out of supporter role: Effects of Armaments and Financial Blockage on the Anti-Junta Forces," Shan Herald Agency for News, August 22, 2025. Further reading: Don Pathan, "Thailand and the UWSA: A Complex Border Challenge," Mizzima News, June 2, 2025.

Laos tripoint in the north to the Andaman coast in the south. This border traverses the territories of multiple ethnic armed organisations, crosses systems that constitute shared ecological commons, and connects Thai border provinces to Myanmar's most conflict-affected states. No other ASEAN member state is exposed to all Myanmar's cross-border externalities in the way that Thailand is. This geographic exposure is also a geographic asset: Thailand has developed, by necessity, more operational knowledge of Myanmar's border landscape — its armed actors, population flows, infrastructure corridors, and ecological systems — than any other regional state.

Institutional capability.

Thailand possesses the institutional infrastructure that regional coordination requires. It has a professional intelligence agency and foreign ministry with extensive Myanmar experience, a military establishment with decades of border engagement, public health agencies that have managed cross-border disease programmes, a labour ministry experienced in managing large-scale migrant worker registration, and a network of international relationships — with ASEAN partners, with dialogue partners, with international organisations — that give it convening credibility. These capabilities are not fully mobilised for the Myanmar challenge; they are fragmented across ministries and often oriented toward bilateral rather than regional objectives.

Border experience.

Thailand's border experience with Myanmar is accumulated over decades and spans multiple domains — security, labour, health, trade, and humanitarian response. Thai border officials, military commanders, health workers, and civil society organisations have developed working relationships, operational procedures, and contextual knowledge that constitute an irreplaceable institutional asset. This experience is embodied in the networks of relationships between Thai provincial authorities and their counterparts in Myanmar's border regions — relationships that persist across political transitions and conflict episodes because they are grounded in shared practical problems rather than formal diplomatic protocols. It is precisely this experiential depth that equips Thailand to play a coordination role that a state with less border exposure could not play credibly.

Functional legitimacy.

Thailand's legitimacy as a regional coordinator derives not from formal authority — no ASEAN mandate or international designation has conferred that role — but from functional necessity and demonstrated capability. Functional legitimacy is earned by doing things that need to be done and that others cannot or will not do. In the context of Myanmar's crisis, this means Thailand engaging with all Myanmar's

political and armed actors not because it endorses any particular faction but because maintaining communication channels serves the regional interest in de-escalation and humanitarian access. It means Thailand convening sub-regional consultations on specific cross-border challenges — disease surveillance, labour mobility, criminal network disruption — that go beyond what ASEAN's formal architecture can deliver.

1.3 Strategic Repositioning: From Passive Neighbour to Regional Risk Coordinator

Key Framing

The previous analysis leads to a clear main point: Thailand needs a major strategic shift in its approach to Myanmar. This change isn't about allocating more resources or conducting more diplomacy—Thailand is already heavily involved with the challenges created by instability along the border. Instead, the adjustment is about rethinking Thailand's approach.

From bilateral to multilateral framing.

Thailand's primary operational reflex when facing a Myanmar-related challenge has been to reach for the bilateral instrument — a phone call to Nay Pyi Taw or an EAO commander, Regional Border Committee (RBC) meeting, a labour agreement negotiated government to government. These bilateral instruments retain utility for specific operational purposes, but they are insufficient as the primary architecture for managing a crisis that is regional in scope and involves actors — EAOs, the NUG, international organisations, external powers — that bilateral engagement with the Myanmar cannot reach. Strategic repositioning means Thailand consistently framing its Myanmar-related engagements in regional terms: not “what does Thailand need from Myanmar” but “what does the region need to manage Myanmar's instability, and how can Thailand help provide it.”⁷

From reactive to anticipatory.

Thailand's border management posture is overwhelmingly reactive — responding to displacement surges, drug interdiction events, disease outbreaks, and criminal network activities after they have materialised. Anticipatory risk coordination means investing in the early warning, information-sharing, and pre-positioning capabilities that allow Thailand and its regional partners to identify emerging risks before they become crises. It means building the analytical infrastructure — in government agencies, think tanks, and civil

⁷ A case in point is when the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) handed over the final fugitive gunman, Lieutenant Wirote Ketmanee, allegedly behind the assassination attempt of MP Kamolsak Leewamoh, to Thai authorities at the Thai Myanmar. “Gunman in MP shooting confesses, mastermind still unknown,” Bangkok Post, April 23, 2026.

society organisations — that can track conflict dynamics, population movements, and governance trends in Myanmar and translate that tracking into actionable policy inputs.

From reluctant participant to willing architect.

Thailand has historically been a reluctant participant in regional frameworks for managing Myanmar — present at the table but cautious about assuming leadership, concerned about the domestic political costs of visible engagement, and wary of antagonising Myanmar or, more consequentially, China. Strategic repositioning requires a different calculus. The costs of passivity — measured in continued security spillovers, economic disruption, public health risks, and the progressive erosion of the regional governance architecture that protects Thailand's broader interests — now exceed the costs of engagement. Thailand does not need to position itself as the champion of democracy in Myanmar, the enforcer of international norms, or the rival of Chinese influence.

The chapters that follow elaborate what this repositioned posture looks like in practice: the institutional architecture it requires, the relationships it needs to cultivate, the policy instruments it must deploy, and the sequencing through which a reactive border manager becomes a functional regional coordinator.

Chapter II: What a Regional Layer Looks Like — Architecture, Mechanisms, and Priorities

Purpose

As the previous chapter established the diagnostic, Thailand's Myanmar challenge has outgrown bilateral and border-only frameworks; existing regional governance mechanisms have structural limits that cannot be wished away, and Thailand has the geography and accumulated border experience to anchor a more functional regional coordination architecture. Chapter II turns from diagnosis to design. It asks: what does that architecture actually look like? What mechanisms does it require? How should priorities be sequenced?

The answer proposed here is neither a grand new institution nor a rebranding of existing frameworks. It is a layered, functional architecture built around five operational domains where regional coordination is both urgently needed and practically achievable: humanitarian access and displacement management; transnational security and criminal network disruption; labour mobility and migrant protection; public health and disease surveillance; and environmental and energy resilience. Each domain requires distinct institutional arrangements, partner configurations, and relationships with existing frameworks.

2.1 ASEAN: Functional Leadership without Formal Leadership

ASEAN remains the cornerstone of Thailand's regional strategy toward Myanmar. Despite widespread criticism regarding its inability to significantly influence developments inside Myanmar since the military takeover in 2021, no alternative regional mechanism possesses comparable political legitimacy, convening power, or regional acceptance. For Thailand, ASEAN remains the most important platform through which regional responses to the Myanmar crisis can be mobilized, coordinated, and sustained.

The limitations of ASEAN are well known. Consensus-based decision-making often constrains the organization's ability to respond rapidly to changing developments. Member states continue to hold differing views regarding the balance between non-interference, political engagement, humanitarian assistance, and pressure on Myanmar's authorities. The Five-Point Consensus (5PC), adopted in April 2021,⁸ remains ASEAN's primary framework for addressing the crisis, yet its implementation has yielded only limited progress in reducing violence or advancing meaningful political dialogue. ASEAN was also not designed as a conflict-resolution organization and lacks many of the instruments associated with peace operations, enforcement mechanisms, or coercive diplomacy.⁹

However, these limitations should not obscure ASEAN's enduring strategic relevance.

ASEAN continues to provide the only politically acceptable framework through which member states, Myanmar stakeholders, external partners, and international organizations can engage on the crisis. It preserves regional ownership of the issue, reduces the risk of great-power competition overshadowing regional interests, and provides a degree of legitimacy that no individual country or external actor can replicate. Even where consensus proves difficult, ASEAN remains indispensable because no alternative institution enjoys comparable acceptance among all relevant stakeholders.

Importantly, ASEAN's role should not be evaluated solely through the lens of conflict resolution. Much of the criticism directed at ASEAN assumes that the organization should be judged according to its ability to end Myanmar's civil war or compel political outcomes inside the country. Such expectations may overlook ASEAN's original purpose as a platform for regional cooperation rather than a mechanism for enforcing political settlements.

⁸ Chairman Statement of the ASEAN Leaders Meeting. April 24, 2021 Jakarta, Indonesia

⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies. Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2026. May 28, 2026.

Recent debates within ASEAN policy circles suggest that a more useful question may be how ASEAN can reduce the regional consequences of Myanmar's continuing instability rather than how ASEAN can single-handedly resolve the conflict itself.¹⁰

This distinction is important. The challenge facing ASEAN is not whether to abandon the Five-Point Consensus, but how to operationalize it more effectively under increasingly difficult circumstances. The principles embodied in the 5PC—including violence reduction, dialogue, humanitarian assistance, and ASEAN engagement—remain relevant. The problem lies less in the framework itself than in the absence of practical mechanisms capable of supporting implementation on the ground.¹¹

The experience of the past five years suggests that diplomatic engagement alone is insufficient. ASEAN must complement its political efforts with practical initiatives that address humanitarian, security, public health, criminal, and governance consequences of the crisis. Strengthening ASEAN's operational capacity should therefore be viewed not as an alternative to the Five-Point Consensus but as a means of reinforcing its implementation.

Encouragingly, ASEAN itself appears to be moving in this direction. The 48th ASEAN Summit in Cebu reaffirmed cooperation on regional health security, disaster preparedness, humanitarian coordination, transnational crime, cybersecurity, and broader resilience-building efforts. These initiatives suggest a gradual evolution from a predominantly diplomatic approach toward a more functional and operational response to regional challenges.¹²

For Thailand, this evolving environment creates an opportunity to exercise what may be termed functional leadership without formal leadership.

Thailand should not seek political leadership over ASEAN's Myanmar agenda. Such an ambition would neither be realistic nor consistent with ASEAN's institutional culture. ASEAN remains highly sensitive to perceptions of dominance by any single member state, and Thailand lacks the political, economic, and diplomatic resources required to assume such a role. Moreover, attempting to lead politically would risk generating resistance among member states and potentially undermining ASEAN unity.

¹⁰ Renee Louise Co. "From Consensus to Consequence: Rethinking ASEAN's Myanmar Approach." *The Diplomat* May 5, 2026 [<https://thediplomat.com/2026/05/from-consensus-to-consequence-rethinking-aseans-myanmar-approach/>]

¹¹ Chairman Statement on the ASEAN Leaders Meeting April 24, 2021 [<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>]

¹² Chairman Statement of the 48th ASEAN Summit May 8, 2026 [<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/FINAL-Chairs-Statement-of-the-48th-ASEAN-Summit-as-of-09-May-2026-1200H.pdf>]

Instead, Thailand should pursue functional leadership by helping ASEAN address practical problems that directly affect regional stability. Functional leadership refers to the ability of a state to mobilize collective action through the provision of practical solutions, institutional coordination, and regional public goods without seeking political dominance over other actors. Unlike political leadership, which seeks to shape the preferences of others, functional leadership focuses on solving common problems and facilitating cooperation in areas of shared interest.

In the context of Myanmar, Thailand's comparative advantage lies not in proposing new political frameworks or replacing existing ASEAN mechanisms. Rather, it lies in helping ASEAN translate political commitments into operational initiatives capable of reducing the consequences of instability. In practical terms, Thailand can contribute as a peace process facilitator, technical convener, operational hub, and regional risk manager.

The objective is therefore not to replace the Five-Point Consensus, but to strengthen ASEAN's ability to implement it through practical cooperation in areas where regional interests converge. This approach reflects a broader recognition that ASEAN's success should not be judged solely by its ability to influence political developments inside Myanmar. It should also be assessed by its capacity to reduce the humanitarian, security, public health, environmental, and criminal consequences of the crisis for the wider region.¹³

2.1.1 Thailand's Role within ASEAN

If ASEAN remains the primary framework for regional engagement with Myanmar, the question for Thailand is not whether it should lead ASEAN politically, but how it can contribute to making ASEAN more effective in addressing the consequences of the crisis. Thailand's comparative advantage lies not in its ability to shape political outcomes inside Myanmar, but in its capacity to facilitate cooperation, mobilize practical initiatives, and connect regional mechanisms with realities on the ground.

In this context, Thailand should exercise functional leadership through four complementary roles: peace process facilitator, technical convener, operational hub, and regional risk manager.

Peace Process Facilitator

Thailand should continue supporting ASEAN-led efforts to promote dialogue and confidence-building among relevant stakeholders. Such efforts should be undertaken in close coordination with the ASEAN

¹³ Renee Louise Co. "From Consensus to Consequence: Rethinking ASEAN's Myanmar Approach." *The Diplomat* May 5, 2026 [<https://thediplomat.com/2026/05/from-consensus-to-consequence-rethinking-aseans-myanmar-approach/>]

Chair and the ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar in order to reinforce rather than compete with existing ASEAN mechanisms.

Thailand's role should not be that of a mediator seeking to determine Myanmar's political future. Instead, it should focus on creating space for communication, supporting informal dialogue channels, facilitating Track 1.5 and Track 2 consultations, and encouraging practical confidence-building measures where opportunities arise.

Given Thailand's geographic proximity, longstanding engagement with Myanmar, and relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, it is well positioned to serve as a venue for dialogue and consultation. Such efforts would complement ASEAN's diplomatic initiatives while helping to sustain communication in periods when formal political engagement remains difficult.

Technical Convener

Many of the challenges generated by Myanmar's instability cannot be addressed solely through diplomatic engagement. Public health threats, cybercrime, human trafficking, illicit financial flows, environmental degradation, and humanitarian crises require cooperation among technical agencies and practitioners regardless of political developments.

Thailand should therefore leverage its institutional networks to convene technical cooperation among public health authorities, law-enforcement agencies, financial intelligence units, humanitarian organizations, development agencies, and relevant international partners.

Such cooperation offers a practical pathway for maintaining regional engagement even when political dialogue remains stalled. By focusing on shared problems rather than contested political questions, technical cooperation can help build confidence, strengthen institutional relationships, and generate tangible outcomes that contribute to regional stability.

Operational Hub

Thailand possesses significant comparative advantages as a regional operational platform. Its transportation infrastructure, border crossings, healthcare facilities, logistics networks, humanitarian organizations, and international partnerships provide capabilities that few countries in the region can easily replicate.

Border provinces such as Tak already serve as important gateways for humanitarian assistance, trade, migration management, and cross-border cooperation. Over time, Thailand should seek to strengthen its role as an operational hub linking ASEAN initiatives with conditions on the ground in Myanmar.

Mae Sot is particularly well-positioned to support such a role. Located adjacent to one of Myanmar's most important border corridors, it possesses the infrastructure, connectivity, and institutional ecosystem necessary to support humanitarian operations, health-security initiatives, and regional coordination mechanisms.

Regional Risk Manager

Perhaps Thailand's most important contribution lies in helping ASEAN manage the transboundary risks generated by Myanmar's continuing instability. While ASEAN may have limited influence over the internal dynamics of Myanmar's conflict, it possesses greater opportunities to reduce the regional consequences of that conflict. Thailand should therefore encourage ASEAN to focus greater attention on managing risks associated with refugee movements, public health emergencies, cyber scam networks, human trafficking, illicit finance, environmental degradation, and disruptions to regional connectivity.

Success should not be measured solely by political breakthroughs in Myanmar. It should also be assessed by ASEAN's ability to reduce regional vulnerabilities and strengthen collective resilience against the spillover effects of instability.

2.1.2 Priority Initiatives

To translate ASEAN's political commitments into practical outcomes, Thailand should champion three mutually reinforcing initiatives that address some of the most significant transboundary consequences of Myanmar's fragmentation. These initiatives are intended to complement, rather than replace, the Five-Point Consensus by strengthening ASEAN's operational capacity in areas directly affecting regional stability.

ASEAN Border Health Security Initiative

The fragmentation of governance in Myanmar has created growing public health vulnerabilities along the region's borders. Disease outbreaks, limited healthcare access, population displacement, and uneven health-service provision create risks that extend beyond national boundaries. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the importance of regional health cooperation and highlighted the need for more effective cross-border surveillance and response mechanisms.

Thailand should propose an ASEAN Border Health Security Initiative built around four components.

First, ASEAN should establish a strengthened regional early-warning mechanism capable of facilitating rapid information sharing on disease outbreaks and emerging health threats in border areas.

Second, ASEAN should develop joint epidemiological surveillance systems focused on high-risk border regions. Such systems should

support data sharing, disease monitoring, and coordinated responses among member states.

Third, ASEAN should establish mobile health teams capable of operating in remote and vulnerable communities affected by displacement, conflict, or limited healthcare access.

Fourth, ASEAN should explore practical mechanisms for engagement with non-state health providers operating in areas where state health services remain absent or limited. In many parts of Myanmar, healthcare services are provided by ethnic health organizations, community-based organizations, and local civil-society networks. While politically sensitive, effective health security requires practical cooperation with actors capable of delivering services on the ground.¹⁴

ASEAN Transnational Crime Disruption Platform

The growth of cyber scam operations, human trafficking networks, illicit financial flows, and organized criminal enterprises has emerged as one of the most serious consequences of governance fragmentation in Myanmar and neighbouring border areas.

This challenge affects all ASEAN member states regardless of their position on Myanmar's political situation. As such, transnational crime represents one of the most politically feasible areas for enhanced regional cooperation.

Thailand should advocate the establishment of an ASEAN Transnational Crime Disruption Platform focused on four priorities:

- disrupting cyber scam networks;
- combating human trafficking;
- addressing illicit financial flows and money laundering;
- strengthening financial intelligence cooperation.

Rather than creating a new institution, the platform should improve coordination among existing ASEAN mechanisms, national law-enforcement agencies, financial intelligence units, and relevant external partners.

Such an initiative would directly support ASEAN's broader efforts to strengthen cybersecurity, combat transnational crime, and protect vulnerable populations from criminal exploitation.¹⁵

¹⁴ Thai Foreign Ministry's Press Release. "Thailand advocates for the conclusion of the Establishment Agreement of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases." July 5, 2025 [<https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/acpheedeng?cate=>]

¹⁵ Chairman Statement of the 48th ASEAN Summit May 8, 2026 [<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/FINAL-Chairs-Statement-of-the-48th-ASEAN-Summit-as-of-09-May-2026-1200H.pdf>]

ASEAN Humanitarian Logistics Network

Humanitarian access remains one of the most persistent challenges associated with the Myanmar crisis. While ASEAN possesses important humanitarian mechanisms through the AHA Centre, DELSA, and AADMER, the scale and complexity of the crisis suggest a need for stronger operational capabilities.

Thailand should propose the establishment of an ASEAN Humanitarian Logistics Network designed to strengthen regional preparedness and response capacity.

Key elements should include:

- pre-positioned humanitarian stockpiles located at strategic regional locations;
- development of Mae Sot as a humanitarian logistics sub-hub linked to existing ASEAN mechanisms;
- support for neutral, impartial, and needs-based humanitarian access;
- establishment of an ASEAN rapid-response roster consisting of medical personnel, logisticians, humanitarian specialists, and emergency-response experts.

Such a network would not require ASEAN to resolve political questions regarding Myanmar's future. Instead, it would enhance the organization's ability to respond rapidly to humanitarian needs arising from conflict, displacement, disease outbreaks, or natural disasters.¹⁶

2.1.3 Political Feasibility

The success of these initiatives will depend not only on their technical merits but also on their political feasibility.

Thailand should work closely with the ASEAN Chair, the ASEAN Secretariat, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre), the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED), and like-minded member states to ensure that proposed initiatives reinforce rather than bypass existing ASEAN mechanisms. Preserving ASEAN Centrality remains essential for maintaining broad regional support.

Equally important, Thailand should avoid framing these initiatives as alternatives to the Five-Point Consensus. Rather, they should be presented as practical mechanisms that support the implementation of ASEAN's existing commitments while addressing the regional consequences of continuing instability.

¹⁶ AHA Center. Operationalizing One ASEAN One Response: Speed, Scale and Solidarity. March 2018

A key lesson from the Myanmar crisis is that ASEAN is most vulnerable to paralysis when member states are asked to agree on political outcomes inside Myanmar. By contrast, ASEAN cooperation tends to be more effective when member states are asked to address practical challenges that affect regional stability.

Thailand should therefore focus on building coalitions around functions rather than around political preferences. Member states may disagree on Myanmar's future political order, but they share common interests in reducing transnational crime, preventing humanitarian crises, protecting public health, and maintaining regional resilience.

This approach reflects the essence of functional leadership without formal leadership. Thailand does not seek to lead ASEAN politically. Rather, it seeks to strengthen ASEAN's ability to translate political commitments into practical action by mobilizing cooperation in areas where regional interests converge.

2.2 Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC): Engaging China while Preserving Strategic Autonomy

Strategic Rationale

No regional strategy toward Myanmar can ignore China. As Myanmar's largest neighbour and the most influential external actor in mainland Southeast Asia, China possesses significant leverage over developments along the China–Myanmar border and plays an increasingly important role in shaping the region's economic, security, and environmental landscape.

For Thailand, engagement with China is therefore a strategic necessity rather than a policy option. However, Thailand should avoid viewing the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework as the sole or dominant platform for regional engagement. While China provides important resources, influence, and capabilities, excessive reliance on any single external partner would reduce Thailand's strategic flexibility and constrain its ability to pursue a balanced regional strategy.

The challenge for Thailand is therefore neither to align with nor to resist China. Rather, it is to engage China where cooperation serves Thailand's interests while preserving the ability to work through ASEAN, BIMSTEC, ACMECS, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), and other regional and international partnerships.

In this context, LMC should be viewed as one component of broader regional architecture rather than as a substitute for existing mechanisms. This approach is also consistent with the origins of the framework itself. Although China subsequently became the principal driving force behind LMC, the original concept emerged from Thailand's earlier proposal for sustainable development cooperation

among the six Lancang–Mekong countries, highlighting Thailand's longstanding role in shaping subregional cooperation.

The strategic value of LMC lies in providing a practical platform through which Thailand and other Mekong countries can engage China on transboundary challenges affecting regional stability while ensuring that Chinese influence is channelled through a multilateral framework rather than managed solely through bilateral arrangements.

While some observers have expressed concern that China's economic weight and political influence could create asymmetries within the framework,¹⁷ these concerns should not obscure the practical value of cooperation. For Thailand, the relevant question is not whether LMC serves Chinese interests, but whether participation in LMC advances Thai interests. On issues ranging from transnational crime and border stability to environmental monitoring and resource governance, cooperation with China remains indispensable. The challenge is therefore not to avoid engagement, but to ensure that engagement occurs within a balanced and diversified regional strategy.

Why LMC Matters

Border Stability and Crime Suppression

One of the most immediate consequences of Myanmar's continuing instability has been the expansion of transnational security challenges across the region. Weak governance, fragmented territorial control, and ongoing conflict have created opportunities for cyber scam operations, human trafficking networks, illicit financial flows, narcotics trafficking, and other forms of organized crime.

These challenges increasingly transcend national boundaries and affect all countries in the Mekong subregion. They undermine public security, damage investor confidence, facilitate corruption, and create humanitarian challenges that no country can effectively address alone.

Recognizing the growing severity of these threats, the six LMC member countries adopted the Joint Statement on Strengthening Cooperation in Combating Transboundary Crimes at the Ninth LMC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Chiang Mai in August 2024. The statement identified telecommunication fraud, online gambling, human trafficking, narcotics trafficking, cybercrime, firearms smuggling, terrorism, and other forms of organized crime as common threats to regional security and stability. The six countries further committed themselves to strengthening information-sharing, border control, law-enforcement cooperation, and coordinated action against criminal networks.¹⁸

¹⁷ Sung Chull Kim. *China and Its Neighbors: Asymmetrical Economies and Vulnerability to Coercion*. Issues & Studies: Vol. 55, No. 4 (December 2019)

¹⁸ Joint Statement on Strengthening Cooperation in Combating Transboundary Crimes under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Framework. August 19, 2024 [<http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/>]

Thailand should utilize these existing commitments as the foundation for practical cooperation rather than seeking to create new institutions. Existing mechanisms such as the Safe Lancang–Mekong Operation and the Lancang–Mekong Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Center (LMLECC) already provide a framework for cooperation that can be strengthened and adapted to address emerging challenges associated with Myanmar's instability.

China's role is particularly important in this regard. Beijing possesses influence over developments along Myanmar's northern border and has demonstrated a growing willingness to cooperate in suppressing cyber scam compounds and transnational criminal networks that affect Chinese citizens and interests. For Thailand, LMC therefore offers a valuable platform for engaging China on shared security concerns while reducing the transboundary consequences of instability.

Nevertheless, Thailand should avoid becoming dependent on Chinese influence as the primary means of managing regional security challenges. Border stability and crime suppression must remain part of a broader regional effort involving ASEAN, bilateral diplomacy, and cooperation with other regional and international partners.

Environmental Governance and Monitoring

Environmental challenges are emerging as one of the most significant dimensions of regional cooperation in the Mekong subregion. While earlier discussions of Mekong cooperation often focused on hydropower development and river-flow management, emerging concerns increasingly relate to pollution, natural resource extraction, environmental degradation, water quality, and public health impacts that transcend national borders.

Recent concerns regarding pollution in the Kok, Sai, and Ruak river systems illustrate the growing interconnectedness between environmental governance and regional stability. Environmental risks originating beyond Thailand's borders can directly affect local livelihoods, agriculture, tourism, water security, and public health. Likewise, growing concerns regarding mining activities and their environmental consequences highlight the importance of strengthening regional monitoring and transparency mechanisms.

The Initiative on Deepening Lancang–Mekong Water Resources Cooperation, adopted in 2024, provides an important foundation for addressing these challenges. The initiative calls for strengthened cooperation on hydrological information sharing, water-related data exchange, monitoring, disaster-risk reduction, whole-basin management, and scientific cooperation. It also encourages greater utilization of the LMC Water Center as a platform for technical cooperation and capacity building.¹⁹

zywj/202512/t20251224_11782416.html

¹⁹ Initiative on Deepening Lancang–Mekong Water Resources Cooperation. August 16, 2024 [http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/zywj/202512/t20251224_11782417.html]

Thailand should seek to build upon these existing commitments by promoting stronger environmental monitoring, pollution reporting mechanisms, water-quality assessments, scientific cooperation, and joint research relating to environmental risks that may affect the wider Mekong subregion. Particular attention should be given to environmental impacts associated with mining activities, river contamination, watershed degradation, and other forms of transboundary pollution.

Air pollution represents another increasingly important area of cooperation. Recognizing the growing impact of PM_{2.5} pollution on public health, ecosystems, and economic activities, the six LMC countries adopted the Joint Statement on the Lancang–Mekong Clean Air Initiative in 2024. The statement acknowledged that agricultural burning, forest fires, and shifting cultivation contribute significantly to air pollution and called for stronger cooperation on monitoring, research, public awareness, and mitigation measures.²⁰

For Thailand, this creates an opportunity to strengthen cooperation on haze monitoring, hotspot detection, forest-fire management, agricultural burning reduction, and environmental data-sharing, particularly in northern border areas that are frequently affected by seasonal PM_{2.5} pollution. While ASEAN remains the primary framework for addressing transboundary haze pollution, LMC can play an important complementary role through scientific cooperation, technical assistance, and regional monitoring initiatives.

Thailand's Priorities

Against this backdrop, Thailand should focus on four priorities within the LMC framework.

First, Thailand should strengthen existing mechanisms for environmental monitoring, including joint river monitoring, pollution reporting, water-quality assessments, and environmental data-sharing. The objective should be to improve transparency and enable earlier responses to emerging environmental risks.

Second, Thailand should promote greater cooperation on air-quality management under the Lancang–Mekong Clean Air Initiative, including regional monitoring systems, joint research, forest-fire prevention, and sustainable agricultural practices aimed at reducing PM_{2.5} pollution.

Third, Thailand should strengthen cooperation against transnational crime by utilizing existing LMC commitments and institutions to address cyber scams, human trafficking, narcotics trafficking, and illicit financial flows.

Fourth, Thailand should use LMC as a multilateral platform for

²⁰ Joint Statement on the Lancang-Mekong Clean Air Initiative. August 19, 2024 [http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/zywj/202512/t20251224_11782415.html]

engaging China on sensitive regional issues. The value of LMC lies not in reducing Chinese influence but in ensuring that Chinese influence is exercised within a cooperative framework involving multiple stakeholders. Such an approach can improve transparency, reduce asymmetries, and provide smaller countries with greater opportunities to shape regional agendas.

Strategic Caution

While LMC offers important opportunities for cooperation, Thailand should approach the mechanism with strategic caution.

First, Thailand should avoid overdependence on LMC as the principal vehicle for regional engagement. LMC is an important instrument, but it cannot substitute for ASEAN, BIMSTEC, ACMECS, the MRC, or Thailand's broader network of bilateral and multilateral partnerships.

Second, Thailand should preserve strategic autonomy by maintaining diversified relationships with a broad range of regional and international partners. Engagement with China should strengthen Thailand's policy options rather than narrow them.

Third, Thailand should ensure that cooperation under LMC remains focused on practical and transboundary challenges. While security cooperation may be necessary in certain areas, Thailand should avoid arrangements that create excessive reliance on external actors or undermine national decision-making autonomy.

Finally, Thailand should continue to support greater synergy between LMC and other regional mechanisms. Notably, the 2024 Initiative on Deepening Lancang–Mekong Water Resources Cooperation explicitly calls for stronger exchanges and coordination with ASEAN, ACMECS, GMS, and MRC. This reinforces the view that LMC should be understood as one component of a broader regional architecture rather than a standalone framework for addressing regional challenges.

Ultimately, the value of LMC for Thailand lies neither in balancing against China nor aligning with China. Rather, it lies in providing a pragmatic framework through which Thailand can engage the region's most influential external actor, address shared transboundary challenges, and channel Chinese resources and influence toward mutually beneficial outcomes while preserving strategic flexibility. Such an approach is fully consistent with Thailand's broader objective of serving as a regional risk coordinator rather than a participant in great-power competition.

2.3 BIMSTEC: The Bay of Bengal and Western Myanmar Corridor

Strategic Rationale

While ASEAN remains the principal regional framework for addressing the political dimensions of the Myanmar crisis and the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism provides an important platform for managing challenges affecting Myanmar's northern frontier, BIMSTEC offers Thailand an opportunity to engage the western and maritime dimensions of instability.

Developments in western Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State and along the Bay of Bengal coast, increasingly affect regional connectivity, maritime security, humanitarian crisis, irregular migration, and transnational crime. Although BIMSTEC is not designed as a conflict-resolution mechanism and possesses limited capacity to influence Myanmar's internal political trajectory, it can help mitigate the regional consequences of instability through practical cooperation among affected states.

Myanmar occupies a unique position within BIMSTEC. Geographically, it serves as the only member linking South Asia and Southeast Asia, making stability in Myanmar essential to BIMSTEC's broader objective of enhancing regional connectivity and integration.²¹

For Thailand, BIMSTEC provides an institutional platform through which Bangkok can engage India and other Bay of Bengal partners on practical challenges arising from the Myanmar crisis without becoming directly involved in Myanmar's internal political contestation. The value of BIMSTEC lies less in political mediation and more in promoting resilience, connectivity, maritime cooperation, humanitarian preparedness, and disaster response.

Why BIMSTEC Matters

Energy Security and Maritime Connectivity

Western Myanmar occupies an important position in the Bay of Bengal and hosts strategic maritime infrastructure, energy resources, and transport corridors linking South Asia and Southeast Asia. Instability in Myanmar therefore affects not only national development but also broader regional efforts to improve connectivity, trade, and energy cooperation.

BIMSTEC already possesses institutional foundations for cooperation in these areas. The BIMSTEC Energy Centre was established to promote regional cooperation, facilitate information sharing, support project development, and strengthen capacity-building in the energy sector.²²

²¹ BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity. April 2022

²² Memorandum of Association among the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Member Countries for Establishment of BIMSTEC Energy Centre. January 22, 2011

Similarly, the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity identifies maritime transport, ports, coastal shipping, multimodal connectivity, and transport corridors as essential components of regional integration. The Master Plan explicitly recognizes BIMSTEC's role as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia, with Myanmar and Thailand serving as key connecting nodes.²³

For Thailand, preserving and strengthening maritime connectivity across the Bay of Bengal remains important regardless of the pace of political developments inside Myanmar. Existing frameworks such as the BIMSTEC Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation provide a useful basis for promoting maritime connectivity, coastal shipping, port cooperation, and long-term economic integration.²⁴

Maritime Security, Humanitarian Coordination and Disaster Response

Instability in western Myanmar has increasingly generated transboundary challenges that extend beyond Myanmar's borders. These include irregular migration, human trafficking, maritime smuggling, humanitarian emergencies, and natural disasters that affect multiple BIMSTEC member states.

The Rohingya crisis demonstrates the regional nature of these challenges. While BIMSTEC is not positioned to address the underlying political causes of displacement or determine long-term solutions, it can provide a useful platform for coordinating responses to the transboundary consequences of the crisis. Humanitarian preparedness, migration management, maritime safety, and anti-trafficking efforts all represent areas where practical cooperation is both necessary and politically feasible.

BIMSTEC's Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking provides a legal and political foundation for enhanced cooperation against trafficking networks, organized criminal groups, and other cross-border security threats.²⁵

These issues are particularly relevant in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, where maritime trafficking routes, irregular migration, and transnational criminal activities increasingly intersect with humanitarian challenges arising from instability in western Myanmar.

Disaster response represents another area where BIMSTEC can make meaningful contributions. The Bay of Bengal remains highly vulnerable to cyclones, flooding, storm surges, and other climate-related disasters. Such events often produce humanitarian consequences that transcend national boundaries and are further exacerbated by conflict and weak governance.

²³ BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity. March 30, 2022

²⁴ Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation (AMTC) April 3, 2025

²⁵ The BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, 30 March 30, 2022

In this regard, the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate Cooperation (BCWC) provides an important platform for scientific cooperation, climate monitoring, information-sharing, weather forecasting, and disaster preparedness²⁶

Strengthening regional early-warning systems, disaster preparedness mechanisms, humanitarian logistics planning, and information-sharing arrangements should therefore remain important priorities within the BIMSTEC framework.

Policy Agenda

Against this backdrop, Thailand should pursue five priorities within BIMSTEC. First, Thailand should strengthen maritime security cooperation among BIMSTEC members, particularly in relation to trafficking networks, maritime crime, irregular migration, maritime domain awareness, and law-enforcement coordination in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. Existing security cooperation frameworks provide an adequate basis for such efforts.

Second, Thailand should support greater humanitarian coordination among BIMSTEC members, focusing on preparedness, emergency response, humanitarian logistics, and migration management rather than politically sensitive questions relating to conflict settlement or refugee repatriation.

Third, Thailand should promote enhanced disaster-response cooperation through the BCWC framework, including climate-risk monitoring, early-warning systems, disaster preparedness exercises, and capacity-building initiatives for relevant agencies.

Fourth, Thailand should encourage the gradual development of an Andaman maritime governance agenda. Existing BIMSTEC cooperation on maritime transport, coastal shipping, connectivity, and maritime safety provides a foundation upon which broader discussions on environmental protection, maritime resilience, disaster preparedness, and sustainable maritime development can be built.

Fifth, Thailand should deepen coordination with India through BIMSTEC. As India's interests in Myanmar increasingly intersect with concerns relating to connectivity, border stability, maritime security, and regional development, BIMSTEC provides a useful platform through which Thailand and India can coordinate policies, exchange assessments, and pursue practical cooperation on challenges affecting western Myanmar and the Bay of Bengal region.

²⁶ Memorandum of Association among the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Member Countries Concerning Establishment of a BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate. March 2014

Strategic Caution

While BIMSTEC offers useful opportunities for regional cooperation, expectations should remain realistic. The organization lacks the political leverage, institutional capacity, and operational mechanisms necessary to influence the course of Myanmar's internal conflict directly. It should therefore not be viewed as an alternative to ASEAN's engagement with Myanmar or as a platform for political mediation.

Instead, BIMSTEC's comparative advantage lies in addressing the secondary effects of instability. By focusing on connectivity, maritime security, humanitarian coordination, disaster response, and practical cooperation, BIMSTEC can contribute to regional stability without becoming entangled in the political complexities of Myanmar's internal conflict.

For Thailand, the strategic value of BIMSTEC ultimately lies in its ability to broaden regional partnerships, strengthen engagement with India, and manage the western and maritime spillovers of instability. Such an approach complements Thailand's broader objective of acting as a regional risk coordinator while preserving strategic flexibility and avoiding excessive dependence on any single partner or institution.

2.4 Mekong River Commission (MRC): Limited Cooperation for Water Quality Governance

Strategic Rationale

While ASEAN, LMC, and BIMSTEC provide important platforms for addressing the political, security, and geopolitical dimensions of Myanmar's instability, environmental challenges require a different type of cooperation. Issues relating to water quality, pollution, ecosystem degradation, and public health are often highly technical in nature and require scientific monitoring, data-sharing, and evidence-based assessments rather than political negotiations.

In this regard, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) occupies a unique position within the regional architecture. Established to promote cooperation in the sustainable development and management of the Mekong River Basin, the MRC possesses technical expertise, monitoring capabilities, and scientific credibility that few other regional organizations can match. Although the Commission was not designed to address the Myanmar crisis, recent concerns regarding pollution in the Kok, Sai, Ruak, and Mekong river systems²⁷ have highlighted its relevance to Thailand's broader regional strategy.

²⁷ For a comprehensive survey of cross-border water pollution, please see: Regan Kwan and Brian Eyler. *Unregulated Mining Along Rivers in Mainland Southeast Asia*. Stimson, November 24, 2025 [<https://www.stimson.org/2025/unregulated-mining-along-rivers-in-mainland-southeast-asia/>]

For Thailand, the MRC provides an important mechanism through which environmental concerns can be addressed through technical cooperation rather than political confrontation. This function is particularly valuable when dealing with sensitive issues involving transboundary pollution, mining activities, water quality, and environmental risks that affect multiple countries simultaneously.

Why MRC Matters

Technical Capacity and Scientific Cooperation

The principal strength of the MRC lies in its technical capacity. Unlike many regional organizations that focus primarily on diplomacy and political coordination, the Commission is equipped to conduct scientific assessments, environmental monitoring, data collection, risk analysis, and technical consultations among member states.

Recent concerns regarding water quality in the Kok, Sai, and Ruak river systems demonstrate the importance of such capabilities. In response to reports of arsenic contamination and other environmental concerns, the MRC has mobilized technical experts, coordinated with national agencies, conducted water-quality assessments, and facilitated information-sharing among affected countries.²⁸

These activities may not immediately resolve environmental disputes, but they provide an essential foundation for evidence-based policymaking and regional cooperation. By generating credible scientific data and promoting transparency, the MRC helps reduce uncertainty and allows governments to respond more effectively to emerging environmental risks.

Water Quality and Environmental Governance

The growing attention given to the Kok, Sai, and Ruak rivers reflects a broader shift in regional environmental challenges. Historically, Mekong cooperation focused largely on mainstream river management, hydropower development, and water allocation. Today, however, concerns increasingly relate to water quality, pollution, mining activities, ecosystem degradation, and the cumulative impacts of economic activities occurring beyond national borders.

Recent reports concerning potential contamination linked to mining operations in upstream areas illustrate the complexity of these challenges. Environmental risks originating in one jurisdiction may directly affect communities, agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and public health in another. Such challenges cannot be addressed through unilateral action alone.

²⁸ Mekong River Commission. Press Release. MRC Supports Constructive Cooperation Between Myanmar and Thailand Over Kok River Water Quality Through Joint Monitoring Effort. May 23, 2025.

In this context, the MRC provides an important platform for basin-wide monitoring, scientific assessment, and technical dialogue. The Commission's role is not to assign blame or adjudicate political disputes, but rather to establish a common factual understanding of environmental conditions and potential risks. This function becomes particularly important in politically sensitive situations where differing narratives and limited information can complicate decision-making.

Limitations of the MRC

Despite its strengths, the MRC faces significant institutional limitations. Most importantly, not all riparian states participate as full members of the Commission. While Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam are members, Myanmar and China participate only as Dialogue Partners. As a result, the MRC's ability to investigate, monitor, and respond to environmental risks originating in non-member countries depends largely on voluntary cooperation and information-sharing.

This limitation is particularly relevant in the context of recent concerns regarding pollution in the Kok, Sai, and Ruak river systems. Many of the environmental risks affecting Thailand may originate beyond the jurisdiction of MRC member states, limiting the Commission's ability to influence activities at their source.

In addition, the MRC possesses no enforcement authority. It can monitor, assess, advise, and coordinate, but it cannot compel governments or private actors to change their behaviour. The Commission's effectiveness therefore depends on the willingness of governments to cooperate and act upon its recommendations.

Furthermore, contemporary environmental challenges increasingly emerge from areas characterized by weak governance, conflict, and limited regulatory oversight. In such environments, access for monitoring and verification may be constrained, while responsibilities for environmental management may be fragmented among multiple authorities. These conditions can complicate the implementation of technical solutions and reduce the effectiveness of existing institutional mechanisms.

For these reasons, the MRC should be viewed as a necessary but insufficient instrument for addressing transboundary environmental risks associated with Myanmar's instability.

Thailand's Role

Given these constraints, Thailand should pursue a pragmatic approach toward the MRC. First, Thailand should continue to support the Commission's role as a neutral platform for scientific monitoring, technical assessment, and environmental information-sharing. Strengthening the credibility and transparency of monitoring systems will be essential for building confidence among affected communities and neighbouring countries.

Second, Thailand should advocate enhanced water-quality monitoring in the Kok, Sai, Ruak, and Mekong river systems, including regular sampling, joint investigations, pollution reporting mechanisms, and improved public access to environmental data.²⁹

Third, Thailand should encourage closer cooperation between the MRC and other regional frameworks, particularly the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation mechanism. While the MRC provides technical expertise and scientific assessments, LMC includes both Myanmar and China and may offer additional channels for political engagement and practical cooperation on environmental issues.

Fourth, Thailand should promote greater regional attention to environmental risks associated with mining activities, watershed degradation, and transboundary pollution. The objective should not be to politicize environmental issues but to strengthen preventive measures and improve the capacity of regional institutions to identify and respond to emerging risks before they escalate into broader disputes.

Strategic Assessment

The MRC cannot resolve the political dimensions of the Myanmar crisis, nor can it eliminate the environmental risks generated by weak governance and conflict. Nevertheless, it remains an indispensable component of the regional architecture because it provides something that other mechanisms cannot: credible scientific assessments, technical expertise, and a platform for evidence-based cooperation.

For Thailand, the Commission's greatest value lies not in its ability to enforce compliance but in its ability to establish a shared understanding of environmental conditions and risks. In an increasingly complex regional environment, such technical cooperation serves as an important complement to the political, security, and diplomatic efforts undertaken through ASEAN, LMC, BIMSTEC, and bilateral channels.

The experience of the Kok, Sai, and Ruak river systems demonstrates both the value and the limitations of the MRC. It highlights the importance of scientific cooperation while also underscoring the need for a broader regional strategy capable of linking technical expertise with political engagement, environmental governance, and practical cooperation. In this sense, the MRC should be viewed as one component of Thailand's wider effort to manage the transboundary consequences of instability in Myanmar.

²⁹ Mekong River Commission. Press Release. MRC Steps Up Regional Action as Monitoring Highlights Localised Arsenic Concerns. April 29, 2026

2.6 Informal Regional Dialogue with Myanmar's Neighbours

Strategic Rationale

In addition to formal regional mechanisms, Thailand should continue to support informal consultations among countries directly affected by developments in Myanmar. Such dialogue provides a flexible channel for exchanging assessments, identifying emerging risks, and exploring practical areas of cooperation that may be difficult to address through formal institutional frameworks.

Unlike ASEAN, LMC, BIMSTEC, or MRC, informal dialogue is not constrained by formal mandates, consensus requirements, or bureaucratic procedures. Its principal value lies in its flexibility and ability to facilitate candid discussions among neighbouring countries that share common interests in regional stability.

The mechanism emerged under previous Thai administrations as an informal platform for consultations among Myanmar's neighbouring countries and interested regional stakeholders. While the dialogue generated useful exchanges on humanitarian concerns, border management, economic disruptions, and regional security implications, it has yet to evolve into a fully institutionalized process with clearly defined objectives, work plans, or follow-up mechanisms. As a result, its future direction remains uncertain.

Opportunities and Challenges

The dialogue also generated controversy. Some ASEAN member states and regional observers expressed concern that the participation of representatives associated with Myanmar's military authorities could be interpreted as conferring legitimacy upon one party to the conflict or creating an alternative diplomatic track that might dilute ASEAN's collective efforts under the Five-Point Consensus. These concerns reflected broader sensitivities regarding the appropriate balance between engagement and legitimacy in regional approaches toward Myanmar.

The experience nevertheless offers useful lessons. The challenge is not whether neighbouring countries should engage in informal consultations on Myanmar, but how such consultations can be conducted in ways that complement rather than compete with ASEAN-led efforts. Future dialogue initiatives should therefore avoid creating the perception of a parallel peace process or an alternative diplomatic framework. Instead, they should focus on practical issues where neighbouring countries possess shared interests and face common risks.

Despite uncertainty regarding its future direction, several participating countries continue to regard the dialogue as a useful platform for exchanging assessments and coordinating responses to developments

in Myanmar. India in particular has shown continued interest in maintaining consultations among neighbouring countries, reflecting the growing impact of instability in Myanmar on regional connectivity, border security, humanitarian conditions, and maritime affairs.

Thailand's Role

Thailand should preserve and gradually refine this diplomatic asset rather than allow it to lapse. The objective should not be to create another regional institution or duplicate the work of ASEAN, but to provide an informal venue where neighbouring countries can share information, compare assessments, and identify opportunities for practical cooperation.

Priority issues could include humanitarian preparedness, migration management, transnational crime, border security, environmental risks, disaster response, and connectivity disruptions arising from instability in Myanmar. Discussions on these matters can often proceed more openly in informal settings than in formal multilateral forums.

To ensure consistency with Thailand's broader regional strategy, any future dialogue should be conducted transparently, coordinated closely with the ASEAN Chair, and framed explicitly as a complementary mechanism supporting existing regional efforts. Such an approach would help mitigate concerns regarding duplication, institutional competition, or the political legitimacy of participating actors.

Strategic Assessment

The experience of the informal regional dialogue illustrates both the opportunities and limitations of flexible diplomacy. While informal mechanisms can facilitate communication and policy coordination, they are vulnerable to questions of legitimacy, continuity, and political support. Their effectiveness ultimately depends on sustained political commitment and careful management of regional perceptions.

Nevertheless, the forum remains a useful complement to formal regional mechanisms. ASEAN provides political legitimacy, LMC facilitates engagement with China, BIMSTEC addresses western and maritime spillovers, and the MRC contributes technical expertise on environmental governance. Informal dialogue can help bridge gaps among these frameworks by providing a flexible channel for consultation among countries directly affected by developments in Myanmar.

The principal lesson is that no single institution is capable of addressing the full spectrum of challenges generated by Myanmar's continuing instability. Thailand should therefore pursue a layered regional approach that combines formal institutions with flexible diplomatic arrangements, leveraging the strengths of each while mitigating their respective limitations. Such an approach is consistent with Thailand's broader objective of acting as a regional risk coordinator and promoting practical cooperation in support of regional stability.

Chapter III: Thailand's Bilateral Strategy toward Key External Powers

Purpose

The regional architecture described in Chapter II does not operate in a geopolitical vacuum. Every domain of functional cooperation Thailand seeks to build — from humanitarian access to criminal network disruption to labour mobility — intersects with the strategic interests of external powers whose Myanmar policies directly shape what is possible on the ground. Thailand cannot coordinate regional responses to Myanmar's instability without managing its relationships with those powers that are simultaneously honest about divergence and constructive about convergence. This chapter maps those relationships applying a consistent analytical framework — Strategic Interest, Shared Concern, Opportunities, Risks, and Action Plan — to each major external actor.

The chapter does not assume that Thailand must choose sides in the broader geopolitical competition that Myanmar's crisis has attracted. That competition is real, and its dynamics constrain Thailand's options. But Thailand's interests are best served by a strategy of functional differentiation — engaging each external power on the specific issues where cooperation serves Thai interests, maintaining independence on issues where it does not, and consistently framing Thailand's role as regional risk coordinator rather than geopolitical ally of any single power.

3.1 China: Necessary Partner, Strategic Constraint

Strategic Interest

China's interest in Myanmar is among the most deeply structured of any external power, rooted in geography, infrastructure investment, ethnic minority governance, and strategic competition. Yunnan Province shares a long border with Myanmar's Shan, Kachin, and Sagaing regions, and China's border security — narcotics control, management of cross-border ethnic communities, and containment of conflict — is a primary driver of Beijing's engagement. China has invested heavily in the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), encompassing oil and gas pipelines, road and rail connectivity, and the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone — a deep-water port providing Indian Ocean access that reduces dependence on the Strait of Malacca.

Myanmar's military leaders have started public consultations to resume the \$3.6 billion, Chinese-backed Myitsone Dam, which was suspended over a decade ago due to strong opposition. Analysts warn this could renew conflict with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which controls much of the area. China also maintains structured relationships with the major northern EAOs — the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA),

and Shan State Army- North (SSA-North) — providing political cover, economic linkages, and implicit security guarantees that make their territories extensions of Chinese influence.³⁰

China has also demonstrated increasing pragmatism in pursuing these interests. While Beijing maintains working relations with the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPC), formerly the State Administration Council (SAC), it has shown a willingness to exert pressure on Myanmar's military leadership when developments threaten China's strategic priorities. Following major battlefield reversals in northern Myanmar and growing concerns over cross-border scam operations, Beijing reportedly pressed the SSPC to cooperate more actively in restoring stability and protecting Chinese interests. Rather than supporting any single political actor unconditionally, China's overriding objective is to preserve border stability, protect strategic infrastructure, and maintain influence over the evolving political and security landscape.³¹

Shared Concern

Despite the asymmetries in the Thailand-China relationship and the divergences in their Myanmar strategies, several concerns are genuinely shared. Both countries are primary victims of Myanmar-based scam compound operations — Chinese nationals constitute the largest single group of trafficking victims in the scam compounds, and the financial flows from these operations create money laundering pressures in both Chinese and Thai financial systems. Both countries have a direct interest in border stability: ungoverned spaces along the Myanmar frontier generate narcotics flows, pollution, irregular migration, and criminal network activity that impose costs on both Yunnan and Thailand's northern provinces. Both countries share an interest in the continued operation of Myanmar's energy infrastructure: Chinese oil and gas pipelines crisscross Myanmar territory alongside Thailand's energy relationship with Myanmar's offshore fields, and both are exposed to infrastructure insecurity. Both have reason to be concerned about the environmental degradation of shared river systems — the Salween and its tributaries drain into both Yunnan and Thailand — and about the conflict-driven deforestation and mining that are accelerating that degradation.³²

Opportunities

The scam compound crisis offers the most immediate and tractable opportunity for Thailand-China cooperation. Beijing has demonstrated

³⁰ Sai Wansai, "UWSA opting out of supporter role: Effects of Armaments and Financial Blockage on the Anti-Junta Forces," Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), August 22, 2025.

³¹ Marwaan Macan-Markar, "Myanmar's Min Aung Hlaing under the gun after China applies pressure" Nikkei Asia. June 19, 2026 [<https://asia.nikkei.com/spotlight/myanmar-crisis/myanmar-s-min-aung-hlaing-under-the-gun-after-china-applies-pressure>]

³² Don Pathan, "Thailand, Myanmar and the Pollution of Thai Waterways," Mizzima News, August 26, 2026.

willingness to pressure EAOs hosting scam operations — the forced handover of operators to Chinese authorities in 2023 and 2024 reflected pressure on the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and other northern EAOs — and Thailand has parallel interests in disrupting the networks running through its territory. A joint financial intelligence working group — linking Thailand's Anti-Money Laundering Office and China's equivalent — would create the structured information-sharing channel both countries need to trace scam financial flows across jurisdictions. On narcotics, the Thailand-China-Laos-Myanmar drug control mechanism can be upgraded to address post-2021 synthetic drug expansion. Regarding the environment, Thailand can engage China through both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism, to advocate standards for infrastructure and extractive projects in shared watersheds.

Risks

China's Myanmar strategy poses three risks to Thailand's coordinating role. First, security presence creep: as China deepens engagement with EAOs — providing training, equipment, and implicit security guarantees — it gradually replaces the pluralistic arrangements that Thailand's role depends on with a Chinese security architecture. A border landscape in which all significant EAOs are effectively Chinese clients leaves Thailand with diminishing operational space. Second, economic coercion: Thailand's dependence on China as a trade partner, investment source, and export market gives Beijing leverage to influence Thai foreign policy. Thailand's independent coordinating role is constrained by the awareness that diverging from Chinese preferences carries economic costs. Third, junta stabilization bias: China's preference for a stable, if repressive, Myanmar government — protecting CMEC investments and predictable border arrangements — conflicts with Thailand's need to engage resistance actors.

Action Plan

Thailand should pursue functional cooperation without strategic alignment toward China on Myanmar. This means five things.

- First, establish the joint financial intelligence working group on scams and money laundering as the immediate priority.
- Second, use the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation framework as the primary vehicle for engaging China on environmental and water governance in shared watersheds, framing positions as technical rather than political.
- Third, maintain regular senior-level diplomatic consultations at director-general level or above to exchange assessments and manage divergences — ensuring both sides understand each other's limits.

- Fourth, develop economic diversification sufficiently to reduce vulnerability to Chinese coercion — a long-term structural project but a prerequisite for sustained independence.
- Fifth, institutionalize strategic dialogue with China on Myanmar beyond crisis management. -- to exchange strategic assessments on border stability, transnational crime, humanitarian developments, and environmental risks. Sustained dialogue would help identify areas of convergence, manage differences, and reduce the risk of policy misunderstandings.

3.2 India: Underused Strategic Partner

Strategic Interest

India's interest in Myanmar combines geographic proximity, strategic competition with China, infrastructure ambition, and border security anxiety. India shares a 1,600-kilometre border with Myanmar across Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. Its Act East Policy assigns Myanmar a pivotal role: the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is envisioned as the corridor through which Indian influence projects into mainland Southeast Asia. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project — connecting Kolkata to Mizoram via Sittwe port — provides parallel connectivity reducing dependence on Chinese-dominated routes. Both projects have been severely disrupted by post-2021 conflict and the junta loss of territorial control.

Although many Western countries reduced engagement with Myanmar following the 2021 coup, India has maintained high-level contacts with the military authorities, viewing continued engagement as necessary to protect its border security, connectivity projects, and strategic interests in the Bay of Bengal. The recent visit of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to New Delhi illustrates India's preference for pragmatic engagement rather than diplomatic isolation.³³ For New Delhi, maintaining channels of communication with Nay Pyi Taw is seen as essential for safeguarding the Act East Policy, managing instability along the India-Myanmar border, protecting its economic interest, and balancing China's growing influence in Myanmar.³⁴

Shared Concern

Thailand and India share several genuinely convergent concerns on Myanmar. Both are directly affected by the disruption of the trilateral highway corridor — Thailand, because the corridor represents its own connectivity to the Indian market and to the Bay of Bengal, India, because it represents the material infrastructure of Act East. Both

³³ Michael Sullivan. "Myanmar's Min Aung Hlaing takes first foreign tour as leader, with visit to India." NPR May 30, 2026 [<https://www.npr.org/2026/05/30/nx-s1-5838637/myanmar-hlaing-india-tour>]

³⁴ "Neighbors in Need: Six Key Takeaways from Min Aung Hlaing's India Trip" Irrawaddy. June 5, 2026 [<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/neighbors-in-need-six-key-takeaways-from-min-aung-hlaings-india-trip.html>]

have an interest in preventing Myanmar from becoming a Chinese strategic space exclusively: Thai and Indian interests both argue for a Myanmar that maintains some political pluralism and openness to diverse external relationships, rather than one consolidated under Myanmar authority as a Chinese client state. Both are concerned about the maritime security dimensions of Myanmar's instability — the Bay of Bengal is a zone of Indian strategic priority and of Thai commercial interest, and ungoverned spaces on Myanmar's Rakhine coast create maritime security risks that affect both. Both share concern about the spillover of armed conflict and criminal networks into their respective border areas. In the meantime, both of them also increasingly recognize that continued engagement with actors inside Myanmar remains necessary despite profound political disagreements. Neither Thailand nor India has an interest in complete diplomatic isolation, as sustained communication is essential for addressing practical challenges such as border management, humanitarian access, connectivity, and transnational crime.

Opportunities

The India-Thailand relationship on Myanmar is the most under-operationalised significant bilateral in the regional landscape. Strategic interests converge but institutional architecture is almost absent. Several opportunities exist. A structured security dialogue on Myanmar — at senior level between both foreign ministries, with defence participation — would create a channel for shared assessment currently lacking. Maritime intelligence sharing on Bay of Bengal developments — displacement, drug trafficking, irregular migration, and Chinese naval activity off Rakhine — serves both countries' interests and could be institutionalised within existing bilateral naval cooperation. On connectivity, Thailand and India should develop a joint advocacy position within ASEAN and the Quad³⁵ for restoring the trilateral highway, mapping which EAOs control which corridor segments and coordinating engagement accordingly. Regular consultations would also enable Thailand and India to exchange assessments of political and security developments inside Myanmar, identify areas where coordinated diplomatic messaging may be beneficial, and reduce the risk of pursuing disconnected or contradictory initiatives toward key stakeholders.

Risks

India's Myanmar strategy presents several challenges that Thailand will need to navigate carefully.

³⁵ In this context, the Quad refers to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue — the informal strategic grouping comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. See also: Patrick Gerard Buchan and Benjamin Rimland, CSIS Brief, "Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue," March 16, 2020.

- First, although Thailand and India share many strategic interests, they do not always share the same priorities. India's engagement with Myanmar is primarily driven by border security, connectivity, and strategic competition with China. Consequently, New Delhi has maintained working relations with the governments in Nay Pyi Taw, including defence cooperation that has drawn international criticism, because continued engagement better serves India's long-term security interests than diplomatic isolation. Thailand similarly recognises the necessity of engaging the authorities in Nay Pyi Taw, but its broader objective is to facilitate regional stability through engagement with all relevant stakeholders, including resistance groups, ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), neighbouring countries, and ASEAN partners. Balancing these different approaches will require careful diplomacy.
- Second, India's security concerns along its northeastern frontier may encourage a more securitised approach to Myanmar. The management of cross-border insurgent groups, refugee movements, and ethnic communities spanning the India–Myanmar border often places immediate security considerations ahead of broader political or humanitarian objectives. While understandable from India's perspective, this emphasis may at times limit opportunities for wider regional cooperation on conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance, and inclusive political dialogue.
- Third, India's increasing strategic interest in Myanmar is closely linked to its broader competition with China. Although Thailand shares India's interest in preventing Myanmar from falling under the exclusive influence of any single external power, Bangkok should avoid allowing regional cooperation on Myanmar to become framed primarily through the lens of geopolitical rivalry. Thailand's role as a regional risk coordinator depends upon maintaining constructive relations with all major partners, including both India and China, while preserving sufficient strategic autonomy to engage each according to Thailand's own national interests.

For Thailand, these differences do not diminish the importance of India as a strategic partner. Rather, they underline the need for sustained policy dialogue to identify areas where interests converge, manage areas of divergence, and ensure that bilateral cooperation remains focused on practical outcomes rather than broader geopolitical competition.

Action Plan

Thailand should regard India as the bilateral partner with the greatest untapped potential for regional coordination on Myanmar and invest diplomatic capital in building an institutional architecture that translates strategic convergence into practical cooperation. Five priorities are recommended.

First, establish a dedicated Thailand–India–Myanmar Working Group at the senior official level within the foreign ministries of both countries. Meeting at least twice annually, the Working Group should serve as the principal bilateral mechanism for exchanging strategic assessments, identifying shared priorities, coordinating positions in regional and multilateral forums, and exploring new areas of practical cooperation. To support evidence-based policymaking, it should also produce an annual joint strategic assessment of developments in Myanmar, highlighting emerging risks, opportunities, and implications for both countries.

Second, strengthen operational cooperation on maritime and border security by expanding existing bilateral security dialogue and naval cooperation. Priority areas should include maritime domain awareness in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, monitoring irregular migration and displacement, combating drug trafficking and transnational crime, and exchanging assessments on humanitarian developments affecting western Myanmar.

Third, develop a joint strategy to restore regional connectivity through Myanmar. Beyond supporting the completion of the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway, Thailand and India should jointly assess the security environment along major transport corridors, identify the authorities exercising effective control over different sections of the route, and coordinate engagement with relevant stakeholders—including local administrations, ethnic armed organisations, and other actors—to improve infrastructure security and reduce implementation risks.

Fourth, work together to revitalise BIMSTEC as the principal regional platform linking South and Southeast Asia on issues arising from Myanmar's instability. Rather than attempting to duplicate ASEAN's political role, Thailand and India should focus BIMSTEC on practical cooperation in maritime security, connectivity, humanitarian preparedness, disaster response, and the management of western and maritime spillovers from the conflict.

Fifth, strengthen Thailand–India cooperation on humanitarian preparedness and disaster response. Building upon BIMSTEC and other regional mechanisms, both countries should coordinate contingency planning for refugee movements, maritime search and rescue, disaster relief, and humanitarian logistics arising from conflict or natural disasters in western Myanmar. Such cooperation would reinforce regional resilience while avoiding politically contentious questions relating to Myanmar's internal political settlement.

3.3 Malaysia, Japan, and South Korea: Middle-Power Stabilisation Partners

Purpose

The three middle powers addressed in this section occupy a distinctive position in the Myanmar landscape: each has specific, high-value capabilities that Thailand's regional coordination architecture requires, and each is politically positioned to engage on functional issues without triggering the geopolitical sensitivities that complicate engagement with the major powers. They are, the operational backbone of a functional regional architecture — less visible than China or the United States in the strategic narrative, but often more effective in the domains where coordinated action most directly improves outcomes on the ground.

Malaysia

Strategic Interest.

Malaysia's interests in Myanmar are shaped by three interrelated considerations: ASEAN's credibility, domestic political sensitivities, and regional stability.

As one of ASEAN's more active members on the Myanmar issue, Malaysia has consistently argued that the crisis represents a challenge not only to Myanmar itself but also to ASEAN's unity, credibility, and centrality. Kuala Lumpur has generally supported a more proactive implementation of the Five-Point Consensus while encouraging greater regional engagement to advance a political solution. More recently, however, Malaysia has also demonstrated increasing pragmatism by expressing a willingness to engage Myanmar's new administration where such engagement can contribute to ASEAN's diplomatic efforts, reflecting a gradual shift from a policy centred primarily on pressure toward one combining principled engagement with practical diplomacy.³⁶

Malaysia's domestic political environment also gives Myanmar greater prominence than in many other ASEAN countries. The plight of the Rohingya remains an important public issue, influenced by Malaysia's Muslim-majority population, active civil society organisations, and humanitarian concerns. Successive Malaysian governments have therefore faced stronger domestic expectations to remain engaged on Myanmar than many of their regional counterparts.

At the same time, Malaysia shares structural challenges with Thailand as a major destination for Myanmar migrant workers. Large migrant communities, irregular migration, labour exploitation, trafficking

³⁶ Arfa Yunua and Qistina Sallehuddin. "Malaysia maintains stance on Myanmar's new government amid diplomatic efforts" *The Star*. June 25, 2026 [<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2026/06/25/malaysia-maintains-stance-on-myanmars-new-government-amid-diplomatic-efforts>]

networks, and refugee movements create governance challenges that cannot be addressed through border control alone. Effective management requires sustained engagement with Myanmar's evolving political landscape and close cooperation with regional partners.

Shared Concern.

For Thailand, Malaysia represents an important ASEAN partner whose growing emphasis on pragmatic engagement provides opportunities for closer policy coordination. While differences in emphasis may remain, both countries increasingly recognise that regional stability will require continued dialogue with relevant stakeholders inside Myanmar while maintaining ASEAN's central role in the peace process.

Thailand and Malaysia share the most directly parallel Myanmar-related governance challenges of any ASEAN bilateral pair. Both countries host large Myanmar migrant worker populations under conditions of inadequate documentation and legal protection. Both countries are destination points for human trafficking networks that exploit the documentation chaos of Myanmar's conflict. Both have Rohingya populations — Thailand's is smaller and less documented than Malaysia's — whose status generates humanitarian and political tensions. Both have experienced the use of their financial systems for money laundering by Myanmar-based criminal networks, including scam compound operators.

Opportunities.

The most immediately actionable cooperation area between Thailand and Malaysia on Myanmar is joint labour governance and migrant protection. A bilateral working mechanism between Thai and Malaysian labour and immigration authorities, with civil society participation, that coordinates approaches to Myanmar worker documentation, combats trafficking networks that operate across both countries, and shares intelligence on exploitative recruitment practices would address a shared governance gap with direct human rights and economic benefits. On the trafficking issue, both countries' law enforcement agencies have developed significant operational knowledge of the networks operating across the southern Thailand-northern Malaysia corridor, and joint disruption operations — modelled on successful bilateral law enforcement cooperation in other domains — would be more effective than the currently siloed national approaches.

Risks.

Malaysia's Rohingya politics creates the primary tension in the bilateral relationship on Myanmar. Malaysia's domestic pressure to advocate for Rohingya political rights and accountability for the Tatmadaw's atrocities against the Rohingya population pulls toward positions — including support for International Criminal Court processes and strong condemnation of the Myanmar government — that Thailand

has been reluctant to adopt publicly. Managing this divergence requires diplomatic sensitivity: Thailand should acknowledge Malaysia's Rohingya advocacy, avoid actively undermining it, and, where possible, coordinate on humanitarian dimensions, while maintaining Thailand's own posture of functional engagement rather than political condemnation.

Action Plan.

Establish a joint Thailand-Malaysia labour governance and anti-trafficking working mechanism as the immediate priority. Develop coordinated ASEAN positions on Myanmar through regular senior foreign ministry consultations. Share financial intelligence on scam and trafficking network financial flows through existing bilateral law enforcement channels. Engage Malaysia as a co-sponsor of any Thailand-led initiative to revitalise ASEAN's humanitarian coordination on Myanmar.

Japan

Strategic Interest

Japan's engagement with Myanmar is among the most distinctive of any external actor, reflecting a long-standing development partnership, a pragmatic theory of engagement, and deep institutional relationships built over several decades. During Myanmar's democratic transition, Japan was one of the country's largest development partners, investing extensively in infrastructure, health, education, governance, and human resource development through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Official Development Assistance (ODA) programmes. Japanese companies were also among the largest foreign investors during Myanmar's economic liberalisation.

Following the 2021 military takeover, Japan adopted a more nuanced approach than many Western partners. While expressing concern over the political and humanitarian situation and maintaining support for civil society and local communities, Tokyo continued limited engagement with the SAC on practical issues. This approach reflects Japan's long-standing assessment that complete diplomatic isolation would reduce its influence, undermine decades of development investment, and accelerate Myanmar's dependence on China.

In recent years, Japan has also expanded cooperation on environmental governance, pollution control, and sustainable resource management. Its growing technical engagement on transboundary environmental issues—including support for scientific assessments of water quality in northern Thailand³⁷—demonstrates Japan's increasing contribution to regional environmental security alongside its traditional development role. This broadens Japan's comparative advantage beyond development

³⁷ "Japan to help investigate toxic rivers in Myanmar" Bangkok Post February 26, 2026 [<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/3205295/japan-to-help-investigate-toxic-rivers-in-myanmar>]

assistance to include technical expertise on emerging transboundary challenges.

Shared Concerns

Thailand and Japan share a long-term interest in Myanmar's recovery as a stable, prosperous, and economically integrated member of the region. Both countries have invested significantly in Myanmar's human capital, institutional development, and economic modernization and would benefit from a gradual restoration of peace and development.

Both countries are also concerned about the humanitarian consequences of prolonged conflict, although they often frame these concerns differently. Japan approaches Myanmar through its long-standing Human Security framework, while Thailand's priorities are driven primarily by border management, humanitarian spillovers, and regional stability. These approaches are complementary rather than contradictory and provide opportunities for practical cooperation.

Health security represents another area of convergence. Japan has supported health systems strengthening in Myanmar and neighbouring countries through JICA for many years, while Thailand faces growing cross-border public health challenges arising from refugee movements, communicable diseases, and fragile healthcare systems in Myanmar's border areas.

Environmental security has recently emerged as another important shared concern. Growing evidence of pollution associated with mining activities and deteriorating water quality in the Kok, Sai, Ruak, and Mekong river systems has highlighted the need for scientific cooperation, environmental monitoring, and technical capacity-building. Japan's expertise in environmental management complements Thailand's efforts to strengthen regional environmental governance through the Mekong River Commission (MRC), the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework, and bilateral cooperation with neighbouring countries.

Opportunities

Japan's principal contribution to Thailand's regional coordination strategy lies in its ability to provide technical expertise, institutional capacity, and long-term development support.

First, border health cooperation should remain a priority. JICA already possesses extensive partnerships with Thai public health authorities and long-standing experience supporting health systems in Myanmar. Thailand should work with Japan to expand these programmes into a regional platform for cross-border disease surveillance, emergency preparedness, health information-sharing, and capacity-building for border health services.

Second, Thailand should deepen cooperation with Japan on human security. Japan's Human Security framework—developed through the United Nations and operationalised through JICA and Japanese civil society organisations—offers a practical and politically acceptable basis for supporting conflict-affected communities, strengthening local resilience, and engaging with non-state actors in Myanmar. This approach complements Thailand's functional strategy while remaining broadly compatible with ASEAN's emphasis on consensus and non-confrontation.

Third, environmental governance should become an emerging pillar of Thailand–Japan cooperation. Japan possesses considerable expertise in water-quality monitoring, pollution assessment, environmental regulation, watershed management, and scientific research. Thailand should engage Japan as a technical partner in strengthening laboratory capacity, environmental monitoring systems, pollution assessment, and institutional cooperation relating to transboundary environmental risks affecting the Kok, Sai, Ruak, and Mekong river systems. Such cooperation would reinforce the technical work of the MRC while complementing broader regional efforts under the LMC and other frameworks.

Finally, Thailand and Japan should explore joint development financing for border infrastructure that supports regional resilience, including cross-border health facilities, logistics infrastructure, environmental monitoring stations, and sustainable border economic development. These investments would support Thailand's broader objective of strengthening regional stability while preserving Japan's long-term development partnership with Myanmar.

Risks

Japan's engagement with Myanmar nevertheless presents several challenges. Continued practical engagement with the SAC may generate reputational concerns among some civil society organisations and resistance groups that remain sceptical of any external cooperation involving the military authorities. Thailand should therefore ensure that cooperation with Japan on technical and humanitarian issues does not undermine its own credibility with the broad range of stakeholders that its regional coordinating role requires it to engage.

A second challenge concerns political continuity. Japan's long-term commitment to Myanmar has generally remained consistent, but the level of political attention devoted to Myanmar fluctuates according to domestic priorities and broader international developments. Thailand should therefore seek to institutionalise cooperation through long-term programmes implemented by JICA, technical agencies, universities, and research institutions rather than relying solely on high-level political engagement.

Action Plan

Thailand should position Japan as its principal technical partner for regional capacity-building relating to Myanmar.

- First, formally invite JICA to expand its role in supporting regional coordination on border health, humanitarian preparedness, and cross-border public health cooperation.
- Second, establish a Thailand–Japan Human Security Dialogue that brings together government agencies, humanitarian organisations, academic institutions, and selected non-state stakeholders to exchange experiences and develop practical approaches for assisting conflict-affected communities along the Myanmar border.
- Third, launch a Thailand–Japan Environmental Security Partnership focused on transboundary water governance. Building upon Japan's technical expertise and ongoing cooperation on environmental monitoring, the partnership should support joint research, laboratory cooperation, pollution assessment, watershed management, and capacity-building related to water quality in the Kok, Sai, Ruak, and Mekong river systems. This initiative should complement the technical work of the MRC while strengthening Thailand's broader regional environmental strategy.
- Fourth, explore joint financing for border infrastructure projects—including health facilities, environmental monitoring systems, logistics corridors, and resilient border communities—that contribute simultaneously to Thailand's regional coordination strategy and Japan's long-term development objectives in Myanmar.

South Korea

Strategic Interest.

South Korea's engagement with Myanmar has developed rapidly over the past decade, driven by the Korean Wave's cultural penetration of Myanmar's young urban population, Korean corporate investment in manufacturing and infrastructure, and the development finance ambitions of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). South Korea has a specific and growing concern about the scam compound crisis: Korean nationals have been trafficked to Myanmar's scam compounds in significant numbers, and the digital crime infrastructure of the compounds — sophisticated fraud operations targeting Korean speakers — has made the issue a domestic political priority. South Korea also has interests in Myanmar's labour market: Korean manufacturing and agricultural sectors employ significant numbers of Southeast Asian workers, and the disruption of Myanmar's formal labour export systems affects Korean industries that have come to depend on Myanmar labour.

Shared Concern.

Thailand and South Korea share a direct common interest in scam compound disruption — both are source countries for trafficking victims and both are targets for the fraud operations that the compounds conduct. Both countries' financial systems are used for money laundering by scam networks. Both have significant Myanmar diaspora populations — South Korea's is smaller than Thailand's but politically active — that create domestic pressure for engagement on the humanitarian situation.

Opportunities.

South Korea offers Thailand three specific cooperation opportunities. First, on digital crime and cyber-enabled fraud, South Korea has among the most sophisticated financial crime investigation capabilities in Asia, and the Korea Financial Intelligence Unit has developed specific expertise in tracing crypto-asset flows that are central to scam compound financial operations. A structured intelligence-sharing arrangement between Thai and Korean financial crime agencies would enhance both countries' capacity to trace and disrupt these flows. Second, on labour governance, South Korea's Employment Permit System — a managed labour mobility programme that has been developed over two decades and is regarded as one of the more effective managed migration systems in Asia — provides a model and potential partnership framework for developing the conflict-adapted labour documentation pathways that Thailand needs for Myanmar workers.

Risks.

South Korea's engagement with Myanmar is less geopolitically sensitive than China's or the United States', but it is also shallower institutionally, meaning that cooperation arrangements are more dependent on political-level attention and more vulnerable to the disruptions of domestic political cycles. South Korea's strong public opinion on the Myanmar human rights situation — driven partly by the Korean Wave's connection to Myanmar's young population and partly by evangelical Christian communities with long ties to Myanmar's ethnic minority communities — can generate political pressure for positions that complicate Thailand's functional engagement approach. Managing South Korean civil society expectations about Thailand's role will require active public communication about what Thailand's coordinating function is and is not.

Action Plan.

Establish a financial intelligence sharing mechanism on digital crime and crypto-asset money laundering as the immediate priority, building on existing bilateral law enforcement cooperation. Engage South Korea's Employment Permit System administrators as technical

partners for the conflict-adapted labour documentation pathways Thailand is developing. Explore KOICA co-financing for civil society integration and analytical capacity components of Thailand's regional coordination architecture.

3.4 United States, European Union, and Australia: Western Partners in Functional Cooperation

Purpose

The Western partners present Thailand with the most diplomatically complex management challenge in the bilateral landscape. Their policy frameworks on Myanmar — built around sanctions, accountability, democracy promotion, and support for the resistance movement — are structurally in tension with Thailand's functional engagement approach and with the managed relationship with China that Thailand's coordinating role requires. At the same time, Western partners offer capabilities — intelligence, financial crime investigation, humanitarian funding, regulatory leverage — that are directly relevant to Thailand's regional architecture and that no other partner group can provide.

United States

Strategic Interest.

The United States' interest in Myanmar has multiple dimensions. The State Department's democracy promotion and human rights agenda drives strong public support for the NUG and civil society, significant sanctions pressure on the SAC and Min Aung Hlaing government, and rhetorical advocacy for accountability. The intelligence community has a direct operational interest in Myanmar as a narcotics source country, a money laundering hub, and an increasingly significant node in transnational criminal networks of concern to US domestic security. The Treasury Department's financial sanctions programme against Myanmar-connected entities requires intelligence and financial system cooperation from regional partners to be effective. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has long-established relationships with Thai counterpart agencies and has developed specific intelligence on Myanmar-based drug production and distribution networks. The Department of Defense has interests in the regional balance of power, specifically in monitoring and constraining China's security footprint along Myanmar's borders.

Shared Concern.

Thailand and the United States share direct operational interests in scam network disruption, drug trafficking interdiction, financial crime investigation, and humanitarian access. The convergence is most complete in the law enforcement and financial intelligence domains, where US capabilities are directly relevant to Thai operational needs

and where the intelligence relationship between the two countries has historical depth. Both countries have interests — though they frame them differently — in preventing Myanmar from becoming a Chinese strategic space exclusively.

Opportunities.

Intelligence cooperation on drug trafficking and criminal networks, through the existing DEA-Office of Narcotic Control Board (ONCB) relationship and through the Five Eyes-adjacent intelligence sharing arrangements that Thailand participates in on a selective basis, is the domain where US-Thailand cooperation on Myanmar is most directly actionable and least politically sensitive. Financial intelligence cooperation — bringing Thailand's Anti-Money Laundering Office (AMLO) into structured information exchange with the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network on Myanmar-related money laundering — would enhance Thailand's capacity to trace scam and drug trafficking proceeds across its financial system. On critical minerals, Thailand can engage the United States on developing governance frameworks for Myanmar's extractive sector that reduce Myanmar's and armed groups' ability to use mineral revenues to finance the conflict — a shared interest that is framed in economic governance rather than geopolitical terms.

Risks.

The primary risk in US engagement is the anti-China containment framing that US strategic communication consistently applies to Southeast Asian partnerships. US officials will seek to frame Thailand's coordinating role as part of a broader democratic coalition or Indo-Pacific partnership that implicitly positions Thailand against China — a framing that would compromise Thailand's functional legitimacy with Chinese partners and with the ASEAN members who are most sensitive to great-power competition in the region. Thailand must consistently and explicitly resist this framing in public and private diplomatic communications, while maintaining the functional cooperation that serves Thai interests. The secondary risk is the sanctions dimension: US sanctions against Myanmar-connected entities, and the secondary sanctions risk they create for financial institutions doing business with sanctioned parties, create legal and reputational complications for Thai financial institutions operating in Myanmar.

Action Plan.

Maintain and deepen the DEA-ONCB relationship as the primary operational channel for drug trafficking intelligence cooperation. Establish a structured AMLO-FinCEN information exchange on Myanmar-related money laundering and scam network financial flows. Engage the State Department on humanitarian funding for Thailand's border coordination architecture, framing requests in operational rather

than political terms. Develop a joint position on Myanmar's critical minerals governance that frames the issue as economic governance and anti-corruption rather than strategic competition.

European Union

Strategic Interest.

The European Union's engagement with Myanmar is driven primarily by the trade and regulatory architecture that connects the EU to Myanmar's economy, the human rights and accountability framework that is central to EU foreign policy identity, and the development finance programmes through which the EU has sustained engagement with Myanmar's civil society and humanitarian sector since the coup. The EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSPs) — which provided Myanmar with preferential trade access to the EU market — was partially suspended in 2020 in response to the Rohingya crisis and has not been restored under SAC rule or the new government of President Min Aung Hlaing. The EU has imposed targeted sanctions against Myanmar officials and military-connected enterprises.

Shared Concern.

Thailand and the EU share concern about labour standards and supply chain integrity: both are affected by the reputational and regulatory consequences of exploitative labour practices in Myanmar-linked supply chains. The EU's due diligence framework creates regulatory pressure that affects Thai exporters supplying European markets, and Thailand's interest in cleaning up Myanmar labour governance aligns with EU regulatory requirements. Both are committed to humanitarian access and are significant funders of the international humanitarian response in Myanmar's border areas.

Opportunities.

Regulatory alignment regarding supply chain due diligence represents a unique avenue for cooperation offered by the European Union. Thailand may leverage the EU's due diligence framework as both a compliance mechanism and a policy tool; establishing Thai regulatory standards for Myanmar labour practices within Thai supply chains that are consistent with EU requirements fosters a shared governance approach. This approach encourages Thai employers to enhance conditions for Myanmar workers. Collaborative initiatives in labour standards monitoring—incorporating Thai government agencies, European importers, and civil society organisations into an integrated oversight structure—would address both Thailand's labour governance objectives and the EU's regulatory compliance priorities. Furthermore, the EU's humanitarian funding and its extensive NGO network along Myanmar's borders provide valuable resources and operational capacity that Thailand can strategically incorporate through structured partnerships

Risks.

The EU's approach to human rights conditionality increases political friction with Thailand's emphasis on functional engagement. In statements regarding Myanmar, the EU consistently highlights accountability, sanctions, and support for the resistance, often implying that any partner working with Myanmar's government could be seen as complicit. Thailand's active cooperation with Myanmar—on border management, energy, and labour issues for practical coordination—is portrayed by EU civil society and media as inadvertently legitimising the junta, which pressures Thai officials to protect their reputation. There is also a trade risk: the EU's GSP benefits for Thailand are not guaranteed, and Thai oversight of labour practices—including those affecting Myanmar migrants—are subject to EU review under its conditionality framework.

Action Plan.

Develop a joint supply chain due diligence framework for Myanmar-linked labour in Thai industries supplying EU markets, positioning Thailand as a proactive regulatory partner rather than a compliance target. Engage EU humanitarian funding for specific components of Thailand's border coordination architecture, with structured accountability mechanisms that satisfy EU fiduciary requirements. Use the EU-Thailand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations — when it is passed — as a vehicle for embedding labour governance commitments related to Myanmar workers into the bilateral trade framework.

Australia

Strategic Interest.

Australia's interest in Myanmar reflects its Indo-Pacific strategic positioning, its significant humanitarian aid investment in mainland Southeast Asian refugee populations, its longstanding engagement with Thai and Myanmar civil society through AusAID and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) programming, and its specific expertise in border governance and refugee management that derives from Australia's own — contested — experience with irregular maritime migration. Australia is among the largest donors to humanitarian programmes in Thailand's Myanmar border area, including significant funding for refugee camp operations and for cross-border health and education programming. Australia also has a specific interest in anti-trafficking, where Australian Federal Police (AFP) cooperation with Thai counterparts has historical depth, and in the governance of irregular maritime migration in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, which affects Australian interests in regional migration management.

Shared Concern.

Thailand and Australia share direct operational interests in humanitarian border management, anti-trafficking, and refugee management. Both have invested significantly in the governance of irregular migration — Australia through its offshore processing framework and regional migration policy engagement, Thailand through its border management infrastructure and refugee camp system — and both have interests in the regional architecture for managing Myanmar-driven displacement. Both have concerns about trafficking networks operating through maritime and land routes in the Thailand-Malaysia-Indonesia-Australia corridor.

Opportunities.

Australia offers Thailand three specific cooperation opportunities that are practically significant and politically tractable. First, on humanitarian border governance, Australia's DFAT has both the funding and the technical expertise — developed through decades of regional engagement on irregular migration — to be a structured partner for the displacement management components of Thailand's regional coordination architecture. Australian funding and technical assistance for Thailand's early warning system, reception capacity, and case management systems for displaced Myanmar persons would strengthen the operational infrastructure that Thailand needs. Second, on anti-trafficking, the Australian Federal Police's cooperation with Thai counterparts provides an existing operational channel that can be expanded specifically to address Myanmar-linked trafficking networks — both the scam compound trafficking networks and the more traditional labour trafficking routes through Thailand's border provinces.

Risks.

Australia's domestic politics on asylum and migration sometimes conflict with Thailand's humanitarian approach, leading Australian officials to prioritize deterrence. Australia's stance on Myanmar accountability poses some political risks for Thailand, though they are less significant than those associated with the United States. The main issue is fragmented programming: Australian funding for Myanmar-related projects comes through various channels and, without coordination with Thailand's framework, may duplicate efforts instead of enhancing collaboration.

Action Plan.

Propose a structured partnership with DFAT for the displacement early warning and reception capacity components of Thailand's regional coordination architecture, with Australian technical and financial contributions embedded in the Thai-led framework rather than operating in parallel. Expand AFP-Thai Police cooperation on

trafficking networks to specifically address scam compound and Myanmar-linked trafficking routes. Engage Australia as an advocate for third-country resettlement from Thailand's border camps, reducing the long-term protection burden while maintaining the functional distinction between resettlement and refoulement.

Overarching Principle for Western Engagement

The three Western partners addressed in this section — the United States, the European Union, and Australia — share a normative framework that emphasises accountability, democracy, and human rights that are genuinely important but that must be managed carefully amid Thailand's coordinating role. The overarching principle is functional cooperation without geopolitical alignment: Thailand engages each Western partner in the specific domains where capabilities and interests align — intelligence, financial crime, humanitarian funding, labour governance, anti-trafficking — while consistently declining the invitation to position Thailand's Myanmar role as part of a Western-led coalition against either China or the Myanmar government. Not moral equivalence; Thailand can and should express its own values clearly and engage constructively on accountability when the opportunity arises.

3.5 Russia: Myanmar's External Lifeline and an Emerging Complication for Thailand

Strategic Interest

Russia's interest in Myanmar is narrower than China's and has become more noticable since 2021; the interest is driven by three convergent objectives: sustaining a reliable arms client in a region where many traditional suppliers have curtailed defence cooperation with the junta; finding new outlets for energy exports, finance, and technology cooperation as Western sanctions close off markets; and demonstrating, through a high-profile partnership with an internationally isolated regime, that Russia retains influence and “multipolar” relevance in Southeast Asia despite its isolation over Ukraine.

Since the 2021 coup, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has travelled to Russia seven times, including four visits in 2025 alone, most recently to attend the World Atomic Week Forum in Moscow in September 2025, where he held a private meeting with President Vladimir Putin. Russia and China remain Myanmar's principal arms suppliers; Russian-supplied aircraft, helicopters and drones — including the first export delivery of Mi-38 helicopters in 2025³⁸ — have been used directly in the Myanmar's air campaign against opposition-held areas, and Russian technical advisors are reportedly present at multiple Myanmar defence

³⁸ Rojoef Manuel. “Russia's Mi-38T Helicopters Enter Service Abroad for First Time in Myanmar” The Defense Post, November 10, 2025 [<https://thedefensepost.com/2025/11/10/myanmar-mi38t-helicopter-russia/>]

facilities. The relationship has acquired a reciprocal dimension as well: Myanmar reportedly supplies Russia with mortar rounds and other munitions for use in Ukraine, and discussions on expanding drone and UAV production for Russian use are said to be underway. Energy has become the most structurally significant dimension of the relationship. Myanmar now sources more than 90 percent of its oil products from Russia, with bilateral trade reaching close to USD 2 billion by the end of 2024 — a roughly 40 percent annual increase — and an April 2026 long-term agreement is intended to secure a continuous Russian supply of crude oil, LNG, LPG and fertilizer at discounted rates.³⁹

In February 2025, Russia and Myanmar agreed to jointly develop the Dawei Special Economic Zone (SEZ)⁴⁰ in Tanintharyi Region, including a deep-sea port with a planned capacity of 10 million tonnes and an oil refinery designed to process 100,000 barrels per day, alongside discussion of a gas pipeline to Yangon and a Russian-supported nuclear research facility. Nuclear cooperation has deepened steadily since the 2007 agreement: Russia's Rosatom opened a Nuclear Technology Information Centre in Yangon in 2023, and in September 2025 Min Aung Hlaing and Putin signed a roadmap for a small modular reactor of roughly 110 MW alongside a separate Roscosmos space-cooperation agreement.⁴¹ Russia has consistently used its position at the UN Security Council and its broader diplomatic weight to shield Myanmar from international censure, and Putin publicly reiterated his support for the country's controversial December 2025–January 2026 election process.

Shared Concern

Genuine convergence between Thai and Russian interests on Myanmar is limited, and Thailand should not overstate it. The clearest point of functional overlap is geographic and commercial rather than strategic: the Dawei SEZ that Russia and Myanmar agreed to develop sits in the same Tanintharyi corridor that this report's corridor-resilience planning (Chapter IV) identifies as a priority connectivity asset linking Thailand to the Andaman coast. A functioning Dawei port and refinery — whoever finances it — would in principle serve Thailand's longstanding interest in a western maritime outlet, and Myanmar's pipeline network toward Yunnan could in theory be used to move energy products toward Thai and Chinese markets as well.

Thailand and Russia both play a role in their broader bilateral relationship beyond Myanmar. Russia stands as one of Thailand's main sources of tourism, with a projected 1.9 million visitors in 2025, and both governments are working to boost cultural exchange and explore an ASEAN-Russia

³⁹ Statements following Russian-Myanmar talks. Events. President of Russia. The Kremlin, Moscow, March 4, 2025. [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/76404>]

⁴⁰ "Russia signs memorandum to build port, oil refinery in Myanmar" Reuters February 23, 2025 [<https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-signs-memorandum-build-port-oil-refinery-myanmar-2025-02-23/>]

⁴¹ "Russia, Myanmar sign peaceful nuclear roadmap — Rosatom" Tass September 26, 2025. [<https://tass.com/economy/2021903>]

free trade deal. While these areas create genuine connections between the two countries, they remain separate from Thailand's main goals for Myanmar; humanitarian aid, de-escalation, and managing risks are in sharp contrast with Russian interests inside the country.

Opportunities

Russia offers Thailand limited and mostly defensive options for its Myanmar strategy. As Russia now maintains a closer relationship with Myanmar than any other external nation except China, it stands out as one of the few players with possible influence over how the junta manages its air campaign. Thailand could, through existing diplomatic channels and without expectation of a major shift, signal that continued Russian-enabled airstrikes on humanitarian and medical facilities complicate the broader regional environment in which Myanmar's neighbours operate. Second, Thailand's own bilateral relationship with Russia — cultural, tourism, and increasingly commercial — gives Bangkok a channel of communication with Moscow that most ASEAN states lack, which could be useful for low-key information exchange on conflict developments that affect the border, separate from any endorsement of Russia's role in Myanmar. Third, on the nuclear dimension, Thailand has standing — as a neighboring state sharing river systems and located within range of any radiological release — to press, through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and other multilateral channels, for transparency, independent safety assessment, and adherence to international safeguards for any Russia-supported facility in Myanmar. This is consistent with the report's "functionality over formality" principle, framing the issue as technical safety rather than geopolitical alignment.

Risks

Russia's deepening role in Myanmar creates risks for Thailand across almost every domain addressed in this report, and on balance its net effect on Thailand's Myanmar strategy is negative.

First, and most directly, Russian arms and the airpower they enable are a primary driver of the conflict dynamics that produce the displacement, civilian casualties and humanitarian access crises that Chapter II identifies as Thailand's most urgent coordination priority. Documented airstrikes on IDP camps, hospitals, schools and markets through 2025 — many involving aircraft of Russian origin or maintained with Russian support — drove a surge in airstrike frequency, with 1,134 recorded between January and May 2025⁴² compared with 197 over the same period of 2023. Russia's supply relationship therefore works directly against the de-escalation and humanitarian-corridor objectives that Thailand's coordinating role is meant to advance, and reduces the junta's incentive to negotiate.

⁴² Ian Storey "Russia's Critical Military Role in Myanmar's Civil War" Fulcrum. February 27, 2026. [<https://fulcrum.sg/russias-critical-military-role-in-myanmars-civil-war/>]

Second, Russia's diplomatic backing — including its position at the UN Security Council and its public endorsement of the junta's controversial December 2025–January 2026 election process — reinforces the junta's confidence that it can weather international pressure without compromise. This complicates Thailand's Track 1.5 facilitation efforts (Chapter IV) by reducing the junta's incentive to engage seriously with confidence-building measures. It also sharpens the great-power framing — Russia and China versus the West — that Thailand has consistently sought to avoid being drawn into.

Third, the nuclear issue presents significant safety and proliferation considerations for Thailand. Myanmar's location in a seismically active region—as evidenced by the March 2025 earthquake, which did not alter the country's nuclear development plans—combined with limited regulatory oversight, ongoing civil conflict, and restricted international supervision, poses potential transboundary risks to Thailand via shared river systems and prevailing weather conditions.

Fourth, Thailand's growing role as a hub for Russian trade increases its risk of financial crime and international sanctions. By 2026, Russian investments in the region via Thailand are expected to top USD 1 billion. Additionally, if Myanmar helps re-export sanctioned Russian energy into Thailand, Thai financial, energy, and trade industries could face secondary sanctions. This introduces a major obstacle for Thailand's EU FTA negotiations and supply-chain oversight, disrupting its traditional strategy for managing foreign influence in Myanmar.

Action Plan

Thailand's posture toward Russia on Myanmar should differ in kind from its posture toward the partners addressed elsewhere in this chapter: rather than seeking functional cooperation, Thailand's primary objective should be containing the spillover risks that Russia's role generates, while preserving the unrelated bilateral relationship — tourism, culture, trade — on its own terms.

- First, Thailand must prevent itself from becoming an inadvertent hub for sanctions evasion and protect its institutions from secondary sanctions. To achieve this, key financial intelligence and customs agencies—specifically AMLO, the Customs Department, and the Bank of Thailand—should implement stricter due-diligence procedures for trade and investments linked to Russian entities operating in or through Myanmar. Furthermore, these efforts should align with Thailand's existing financial-intelligence partnerships with China, the United States, and the EU.
- Second, Thailand should raise the safety and transparency of Russia-Myanmar nuclear cooperation through the IAEA and other relevant multilateral forums, framed explicitly as a technical and

environmental safety matter consistent with Thailand's position as a neighboring state sharing river system — not as criticism of Russia's broader Myanmar policy, in keeping with Principle One of Chapter IV.

- Third, the Myanmar Regional Coordination Taskforce—along with the corridor-resilience assessment proposed in Chapter IV—should simulate a scenario where the Dawei SEZ operates as a Russia-Myanmar joint venture. The assessment needs to determine how Thailand can protect its western connectivity interests through targeted investments, alternative corridors, or diplomatic engagement with Myanmar authorities and relevant EAOs.
- Fourth, Thailand should continue to develop the bilateral relationship with Russia in domains unconnected to Myanmar — tourism, cultural exchange, and any prospective ASEAN-Russia trade arrangements — on its own merits, while ensuring that Thai officials and institutions clearly compartmentalise this relationship from Myanmar-related risk management, so that legitimate bilateral engagement does not become a vector for the risks identified above.

Chapter IV: Strategic Recommendations and Action Plan

Purpose

The preceding chapters have established the diagnostic foundation — why Thailand's border-only framework has reached its structural limits, why existing regional governance mechanisms cannot fill the gap, how a multilateral architecture can be built across five operational domains, and how Thailand should manage its bilateral relationships with key external powers. This chapter translates that analysis into policy. It organises recommendations around five strategic principles that should govern Thailand's posture, a short-term action plan for the first two years focused on establishing the foundational mechanisms, and a medium-term action plan for years three through five focused on institutionalising and scaling what works.

The recommendations are sequenced deliberately. The short-term actions are chosen because they are operationally achievable within existing institutional capacity, politically defensible within Thailand's domestic constraints, and productive of the early results that build momentum for more ambitious medium-term initiatives. The medium-term actions assume that the short-term foundations have been laid and that Thailand has accumulated the diplomatic credibility, institutional experience, and partner relationships that more permanent architecture requires.

4.1 Strategic Principles

Five principles should govern Thailand's Myanmar strategy across both time horizons. They are not aspirational values; they are operational constraints derived from the analysis in preceding chapters, and departing from them would undermine the coherence and credibility of Thailand's coordinating role.

Principle One: Functional over ideological diplomacy.

Thailand's comparative advantage in the Myanmar landscape is its capacity to engage all actors — the Myanmar government, the NUG, EAOs, external powers with divergent interests — based on shared practical problems rather than shared political values. This capacity depends on Thailand being perceived as a state that pursues functional outcomes rather than ideological positions. It does not mean moral indifference: Thailand can and should express its values clearly in appropriate forums. But it means that Thailand's primary diplomatic currency is its ability to convene, coordinate, and deliver on specific operational objectives, and that this currency is debased whenever Thailand allows ideological alignment with any single bloc — whether the Western democracy promotion coalition or the Chinese non-interference camp — to substitute for functional engagement.

Principle Two: Regionalisation over unilateralism.

Thailand's Myanmar challenge cannot be managed through bilateral or unilateral instruments, and Thailand's coordinating role is premised on adding value to a regional system rather than substituting Thai national action for collective response. This principle has two practical implications. First, Thailand should consistently frame its initiatives in regional terms — as contributions to a shared regional architecture rather than expressions of Thai national interest — even when the immediate impetus is domestic. Second, Thailand should resist the temptation to act unilaterally when multilateral coordination is slow or difficult, because unilateral action — however effective in the short term — erodes the regional architecture that Thailand's long-term security depends on.

Principle Three: Risk coordination over political leadership.

Thailand does not seek to determine Myanmar's political future, to position itself as the arbiter of legitimacy among Myanmar's competing factions, or to lead a regional coalition with a defined political agenda for Myanmar's resolution. Its role is more modest and more durable: to coordinate regional responses to the risks that Myanmar's instability generates, regardless of how Myanmar's internal political contest eventually resolves. This principle protects Thailand from overreach — from committing political capital to outcomes it cannot control — while ensuring that Thailand's coordinating function remains relevant across different scenarios for Myanmar's political trajectory.

Principle Four: Diversification over dependence.

Thailand's strategic autonomy on Myanmar — and on the external powers whose Myanmar policies it must navigate — depends on reducing single-source dependencies in every domain: energy, trade, investment, intelligence, and diplomatic support. Dependence on Chinese energy infrastructure, on Chinese diplomatic cover within ASEAN, on US intelligence sharing, or on any single partner's humanitarian funding creates leverage that constrains Thailand's ability to maintain the independent coordinating role that its strategy requires. Diversification is not autarky; Thailand will continue to have deep dependencies on multiple partners.

Principle Five: Flexibility over alignment.

Myanmar's conflict features rapid shifts in the balance of armed force, in the political positions of key actors, and in the external environment. Thailand's strategy must be built for adaptation rather than optimised for a single scenario.

4.2 Short-Term Action Plan (Years 1–2)

The short-term action plan is organised across four domains: diplomatic, security, humanitarian, and economic. Each action is specified in its primary objective, the lead Thai institution responsible, the key partners required, and the primary metric by which progress should be assessed.

Diplomatic

Establish a Myanmar Regional Coordination Taskforce.

Thailand should establish, within the first year, a dedicated inter-agency Myanmar Regional Coordination Taskforce in the Prime Minister's Office or the National Security Council, with deputy minister-level representation from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Defence, Labour, and Public Health. The Taskforce's mandate is to coordinate Thailand's cross-domain Myanmar engagement, develop the regional architecture described in Chapter II, and serve as the institutional anchor for the external coordination initiatives described below. If ASEAN's standing special envoy mechanism is revitalised and operationalised under a credible mandate — which would require SAC consent that is currently not forthcoming — Thailand should position itself as the primary ASEAN-side support structure for that mechanism. If the special envoy mechanism remains inoperative, Thailand should treat the Taskforce as the de facto coordination hub and pursue ASEAN legitimisation through other channels.

Convene informal stakeholder dialogues on the peace process.

Thailand should use its relationships with all Myanmar political and armed actors to convene a series of informal Track 1.5 dialogues

— bringing together mid-level officials, EAO representatives, NUG figures, civil society leaders, and external partner representatives — focused specifically on taking stock of the current state of Myanmar's fragmented peace process. These dialogues are not negotiations and should not be presented as such; their purpose is to create a shared assessment of where the various strands of the peace process stand, what the obstacles to progress are, and what confidence-building measures might be achievable soon. Thailand should host these dialogues in a format that provides political cover for all participants — informal enough that EAO and NUG representatives can attend without it being characterised as Thai recognition of their status, but structured enough that assessments can be recorded and built upon.

Facilitate informal peace talks.

Building on the stakeholder dialogues, Thailand should identify one or two specific confidence-building measures — a localised ceasefire, a humanitarian corridor agreement, a prisoner exchange — where its relationships with multiple parties give it the ability to facilitate agreement without requiring formal negotiations. Thailand's facilitation role should be conducted quietly, through existing relationship channels, without public announcements that would create expectations that cannot be met and that would invite spoiler behaviour from actors who prefer the status quo. The objective is not to achieve a comprehensive political settlement — which is beyond Thailand's capacity to deliver — but to demonstrate that Thai facilitation can produce tangible outcomes, building the functional legitimacy that more ambitious facilitation efforts will require.

Put environmental issues on the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation agenda.

Thailand should use its participation in the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework — China's primary multilateral vehicle for Mekong subregion engagement — to formally propose the inclusion of Myanmar-related environmental issues on the LMC's agenda. Thailand should propose a Mekong-Salween environmental monitoring initiative under LMC auspices, focused on water quality, deforestation, and conflict-related environmental degradation in the shared watersheds. Framing this as an environmental governance initiative within an existing China-led framework makes it politically acceptable to Beijing while advancing Thailand's interest in building regional environmental governance capacity.

Security

Establish a joint anti-scam intelligence mechanism.

Thailand should formalise, within the first year, a structured intelligence-sharing mechanism on scam compound operations and associated money laundering networks, initially with China and

subsequently expanded to include Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia. The mechanism should operate in financial intelligence units and law enforcement agencies — Thailand's AMLO, Royal Thai Police, and ONCB as the Thai side — and should have a specific mandate to trace the financial flows, logistics networks, and recruitment infrastructure of Myanmar-based scam operations. Regular reporting to a senior inter-agency committee ensures that intelligence outputs are translated into operational action rather than accumulating in agency silos.

Establish a Financial Intelligence Hub in Chiang Rai.

Thailand should establish a dedicated financial intelligence and law enforcement coordination hub in Chiang Rai — the Thai province most directly exposed to the northern Myanmar criminal economy — that collocates representatives from AMLO, the Royal Thai Police's Economic Crime Suppression Division, the ONCB, and the Department of Special Investigation, with liaison positions available to partner country agencies and international organisations. The Chiang Rai hub is not a new institution; it is a physical coordination node that brings existing agencies into the same operational space, enabling real-time information sharing and joint operational planning that geographically dispersed Bangkok-based agencies cannot achieve. The hub should have a secure communications link to the Myanmar Regional Coordination Taskforce and should provide regular operational briefings to the Taskforce on criminal network developments in the northern border area.

Establish a rare earth and critical minerals monitoring mechanism.

Thailand should develop, in coordination with the Myanmar Regional Coordination Taskforce and with international partners including the United States and Australia, a monitoring mechanism for rare earth and critical mineral extraction in Myanmar's conflict zones. The mechanism's purpose is twofold: to track the flow of conflict minerals through Thai territory and supply chains, reducing Thailand's exposure to reputational and regulatory risk from conflict mineral association; and to build a shared evidentiary base on mineral revenue flows to armed groups that can inform both Thai policy and international engagement on Myanmar's political economy. The monitoring mechanism should draw on satellite imagery analysis, civil society reporting networks in Myanmar's mining areas, and customs data on mineral exports through Thai border crossings.

Develop a standardised transboundary pollution index.

Thailand should work with the Pollution Control Department, the Meteorological Department, and equivalent agencies in Laos and China's Yunnan Province to develop a standardised transboundary

pollution monitoring index covering air quality, water quality, and deforestation-related environmental degradation in the shared Myanmar border area. The index serves two purposes: it provides an agreed, objective basis for assessing the environmental costs of Myanmar's conflict and associated unregulated extraction activities; and it creates a reporting mechanism that can be presented to LMC and ASEAN Environmental Ministers' meetings as evidence for the need for Myanmar-inclusive environmental governance. The index should be publicly reported creating civil society and media accountability for environmental deterioration and building political support for the environmental governance initiatives in the medium-term plan.

Humanitarian

Establish Mae Sot as a humanitarian logistics hub.

Thailand should designate Mae Sot — the primary border town opposite Myanmar's Myawaddy in Karen State — as a formal humanitarian logistics hub, with dedicated infrastructure, agreed customs procedures, and a standing coordination mechanism among humanitarian organisations operating cross-border into Karen and Karenni states. Mae Sot already functions informally as the primary logistics node for cross-border humanitarian operations in the central border area; formal designation would reduce the administrative friction that currently impedes supply movements, provide a legal basis for the temporary warehousing of humanitarian supplies, and create a coordination forum that brings UNHCR, key international NGOs, Thai border authorities, and — as operational partners — the Karen National Union's humanitarian structures into regular structured contact. The Mae Sot hub model, once established, can be replicated at Mae Hong Son for the northern border area and at border points serving the Tanintharyi corridor in the south.

Establish a cross-border disease surveillance system.

Thailand should operationalise, within eighteen months, the cross-border disease surveillance platform described in Chapter II — integrating data from Thai provincial health offices, community health networks in Myanmar's border areas, and international health surveillance systems into a shared early warning mechanism. The platform's initial focus should be on the three disease areas of highest immediate concern: drug-resistant tuberculosis, malaria in forest border corridors, and outbreak-prone diseases in displacement settings. Thailand's Ministry of Public Health should serve as the platform's anchor institution, with JICA and WHO as technical and financial partners, and with formal data-sharing agreements with EAO health departments along the border as the critical non-state component.

Establish an ASEAN emergency roster for Myanmar border response.

Thailand should propose, within ASEAN's humanitarian coordination framework, the establishment of a standing emergency roster — a pre-identified pool of humanitarian personnel, logistical assets, and medical supplies from ASEAN member states and ASEAN dialogue partners that can be deployed rapidly to Thailand's border area in response to major displacement events. The roster does not require new ASEAN institutions; it requires a pre-commitment from member states and partners to make specific resources available on defined timelines, and a coordination mechanism — housed in the Thailand-led Mae Sot hub — that can activate and direct those resources. The proposal should be advanced during Thailand's next ASEAN engagement, framed as a practical operationalisation of ASEAN's existing humanitarian coordination commitments rather than as a new initiative.

Economic

Reform labour documentation for conflict-affected Myanmar workers.

Thailand should, within the first year, develop and implement a simplified labour documentation pathway specifically designed for Myanmar workers who cannot access the standard formal recruitment process due to conflict-related disruption of Myanmar government administrative infrastructure. The pathway should allow workers from conflict-affected areas to access work authorisation through a combination of identity documents issued by EAO administrative structures, community attestation, and Thai employer sponsorship, without requiring Myanmar government-issued documents that are unavailable to workers from areas outside SAC control. The reform requires inter-ministerial coordination between the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Interior, and should be developed in consultation with civil society organisations that have operational knowledge of the documentation barriers that workers face.

Accelerate migrant regularisation.

Building on the documentation reform, Thailand should launch a time-limited migrant regularisation programme specifically targeting Myanmar nationals who entered Thailand irregularly following the 2021 coup and who are currently in undocumented status. The programme should offer a pathway to work authorisation — not permanent residency — conditional on employer registration, health screening, and basic documentation. The precedent for such programmes exists in Thailand's previous regularisation exercises; what is needed is a programme specifically calibrated to the conflict context, with extended timelines and simplified requirements that acknowledge the extraordinary circumstances of post-coup displacement.

Develop corridor resilience planning.

Thailand should commission, through the Myanmar Regional Coordination Taskforce, a comprehensive assessment of its economic corridors into and through Myanmar — including the western corridor through Karen State to the Andaman coast, the northern corridor through Shan State toward Yunnan, and the trilateral highway corridor toward India — identifying which segments are under whose control, what the current security and logistics constraints are, and what the minimum governance and infrastructure investments required to maintain corridor functionality are. The assessment should inform both Thailand's bilateral engagements with EAOs and external powers on corridor security, and Thailand's domestic infrastructure investment decisions on the Thai side of the border. Corridor resilience planning is not contingent on Myanmar's political resolution; it is a risk management exercise that identifies what Thailand can do to maintain economic connectivity under continued instability.

Pursue infrastructure development cooperation.

Thailand should engage Japan, South Korea, and Australia — through the bilateral frameworks described in Chapter III — in joint financing and technical cooperation for border infrastructure on the Thai side of the Myanmar border: border economic zones, cross-border logistics facilities, health infrastructure, and connectivity improvements that serve both Thailand's economic interests and the regional coordination architecture being built. This infrastructure investment should be explicitly framed as part of Thailand's regional coordination role — not as Thai development assistance to Myanmar, which would be politically fraught, but as investment in the Thai-side infrastructure that makes regional coordination more effective. Japan's JICA and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, South Korea's KOICA, and Australia's DFAT infrastructure financing programmes are the primary targets for co-financing proposals.

4.3 Medium-Term Action Plan (Years 3–5)

The medium-term action plan assumes that the short-term foundations have been established — that the Taskforce is functional, the Mae Sot hub is operational, the cross-border health platform is producing results, and Thailand has accumulated the diplomatic credibility from its early facilitation efforts that more permanent institutional architecture requires. It moves from establishing mechanisms to institutionalising them, from bilateral to multilateral architecture, and from managing immediate risks to building structural resilience.

Institutional Architecture

Establish a permanent Myanmar Strategy Secretariat.

By year three, the inter-agency Myanmar Regional Coordination Taskforce should be transitioned into a permanent Myanmar Strategy Secretariat — a dedicated inter-agency body with its own small professional staff, a sustained analytical function, and a formal mandate within Thailand's national security architecture. The Secretariat should be housed at the National Security Council level, with reporting lines to the Prime Minister and substantive engagement rights with all relevant line ministries. Its core functions are: producing quarterly Myanmar risk assessments for senior government use; coordinating Thailand's positions across bilateral and multilateral forums; managing the external partner relationships described in Chapter III; and overseeing the operational coordination mechanisms established in the short-term phase.

Establish a regional coordination platform.

Building on the informal stakeholder dialogues of the short-term phase, Thailand should, by year four, convene a formal — though not treaty-based — Regional Coordination Platform on Myanmar that brings together the governments most directly affected by Myanmar's instability: Thailand, China, India, Bangladesh, and — where politically feasible — representatives of Myanmar's major political and armed actors. The Platform's mandate is not political negotiation but operational coordination: sharing assessments, coordinating functional responses, and building the institutional habits of consultation that are prerequisites for more ambitious cooperation. The Platform should meet at senior official level twice annually, with working-level technical meetings on specific domains between sessions.

Build a regional humanitarian logistics system.

The Mae Sot hub established in the short-term phase should be the anchor point for a broader regional humanitarian logistics system — a network of pre-positioned supplies, trained personnel, and logistics capacity distributed across Thailand's border provinces and, where access permits, within Myanmar's border areas. The system should be capable of responding to major displacement events within seventy-two hours, moving from the current situation of improvised response to pre-planned, pre-positioned reaction. The logistics system should be funded through a combination of ASEAN humanitarian coordination funding, bilateral contributions from dialogue partners, and Thailand's own defence and interior ministry resources.

Establish an ASEAN cybercrime and digital crime mechanism.

Thailand should propose, within the ASEAN framework, the

establishment of a dedicated cybercrime and digital crime coordination mechanism specifically addressing Myanmar-based operations — scam compounds, online fraud, crypto-asset money laundering — that affect multiple ASEAN member states and their dialogue partners. The mechanism should bring together financial intelligence units, cybercrime police units, and telecommunications regulators from interested ASEAN members, with a specific operational mandate to conduct joint investigations and share intelligence on digital crime infrastructure. Thailand should position the Chiang Rai Financial Intelligence Hub as the mechanism's operational anchor on the mainland Southeast Asian side, and should engage Singapore — with its sophisticated financial crime investigation capacity — as the mechanism's primary technical partner.

Develop a Mekong-Salween environmental monitoring system.

The transboundary pollution index established in the short-term phase should be developed, by year four, into a comprehensive Mekong-Salween environmental monitoring system — a shared platform that integrates satellite imagery, ground-level sensor data, community reporting networks, and government agency data from Thailand, Laos, China, and — where feasible — Myanmar-side civil society organisations. The system should produce public environmental reporting on a quarterly basis and should provide the evidentiary basis for diplomatic engagement with both the SAC and EAOs on environmental governance in shared watersheds. Thailand should propose the system's formal adoption within the LMC framework, providing it with Chinese political support and multi-country institutional buy-in that gives it durability beyond Thai initiative alone.

Strategic Diversification

Reduce overdependence on China.

By year five, Thailand should have made measurable progress on two dimensions of reducing China dependency that are directly relevant to its Myanmar strategy. First, energy: Thailand should have developed and begun implementing a diversification plan for its electricity generation mix that reduces dependence on Myanmar gas imports — which are exposed to both conflict risk and Chinese infrastructure leverage — through accelerated investment in domestic renewable energy, expanded power purchase agreements with Laos, and strategic reserve development. The target is not energy independence from China or Myanmar, but a reduction in single-source vulnerability sufficient to maintain strategic autonomy in the Myanmar relationship. Second, trade and investment: Thailand should have deliberately deepened economic relationships with India, South Korea, and Australia — through FTA negotiations, investment promotion, and supply chain integration — that provide meaningful economic alternatives to exclusive China dependence.

Expand India and Japan strategic partnerships.

The bilateral frameworks established with India and Japan in the short-term phase should, by year five, be institutionalised as structured strategic partnerships with regular high-level dialogue, joint programming in Myanmar's border areas, and coordinated positions in multilateral forums. For India, the key milestone is the operationalisation of the joint Myanmar Working Group and the development of a shared trilateral highway restoration strategy that has been socialized with the relevant EAOs. For Japan, the key milestone is the formal expansion of JICA's border health and humanitarian programming into a Thailand-anchored regional coordination support function, and the establishment of a joint development finance facility for border infrastructure.

Energy and Infrastructure Resilience

Protect the western Myanmar energy corridor.

Thailand's natural gas imports from Myanmar's offshore fields — primarily the Yadana and Zawtika pipelines — transit onshore infrastructure that passes through Karen State, where armed conflict has intensified since 2021. Thailand should, by year three, have completed a comprehensive security and continuity assessment of this corridor, including the identification of which EAOs have effective control over pipeline-adjacent territory, what their interests and demands on pipeline operations are, and what combination of security measures, revenue sharing arrangements, and diplomatic engagement would most reliably protect continuity of supply. This assessment should inform a structured engagement with the Karen National Union and other relevant EAOs on pipeline corridor security — not as a commercial negotiation between a company and an armed group, but as a component of Thailand's broader EAO engagement framework, conducted with the full awareness of the SAC and managed in a way that does not constitute recognition of EAO authority over national infrastructure.

Risk-proof transport corridors.

Thailand's economic connectivity to Myanmar and beyond — through the western corridor to the Andaman coast, the northern corridor to Yunnan, and the trilateral highway toward India — is exposed to conflict disruption, EAO checkpoint governance, and infrastructure deterioration. By year five, Thailand should have implemented a corridor resilience strategy that includes three components: physical redundancy, developing alternative route options and logistics infrastructure that reduce dependence on single corridor segments; governance engagement, building working relationships with the EAOs and local authorities that exercise de facto control over key corridor segments, such that disruption events can be managed

through negotiation rather than simply absorbed; and diplomatic pre-positioning, having the bilateral frameworks with China, India, and key EAOs in place to rapidly negotiate corridor restoration in the event of major disruption. The corridor resilience strategy should be integrated with the broader regional coordination architecture — treated not as a separate commercial issue but as a component of Thailand's regional risk management responsibility.

4.4 Risk Assessment and Mitigation Matrix

The following matrix identifies the principal risks to implementation of Thailand's regional coordination strategy, assesses their likelihood and potential impact, and specifies the mitigation measures available. The matrix is designed to be reviewed and updated annually by the Myanmar Strategy Secretariat as conditions change.

Principle Risks	Likelihood	Potential Impact	Measures Available
Myanmar actively obstructs Thai coordination role — Myanmar perceives Thailand's engagement with EAOs and NUG as hostile and retaliates by restricting bilateral cooperation, expelling Thai diplomats, or cutting energy supply.	Medium	High	Maintain consistent messaging that Thai engagement with non-state actors is functional and non-political. Keep bilateral SAC channels open at senior level. Ensure energy diversification reduces vulnerability to supply cutoff.
China pressures Thailand to limit engagement with EAOs or Western partners — Beijing signals displeasure with specific Thai coordination activities and applies economic or diplomatic leverage.	Medium-High	High	Pursue functional cooperation with China in parallel, giving Beijing a stake in the architecture. Frame all EAO engagement in humanitarian and operational terms. Accelerate economic diversification to reduce leverage exposure.

Principle Risks	Likelihood	Potential Impact	Measures Available
Domestic political transition disrupts strategy continuity — A change of Thai government produces a foreign policy shift that de-prioritises Myanmar coordination or abandons specific initiatives.	Medium	High	Embed strategy in permanent institutional architecture — the Secretariat, the Taskforce — rather than in ministerial preferences. Develop cross-party consensus on Myanmar risk through parliamentary briefings and public risk communication.
Myanmar conflict escalates beyond manageable threshold — A major Tatmadaw offensive produces a displacement surge that overwhelms Thailand's reception capacity and forces improvised border closure.	Medium-High	Very High	Operationalise the early warning system and ASEAN emergency roster as priority short-term actions. Develop and exercise border surge protocols annually. Pre-position reception infrastructure at Mae Sot and Mae Hong Son.
Scam compound operators adapt to disruption measures — Criminal networks relocate operations or diversify methods faster than coordination mechanisms can track and disrupt.	High	Medium	Design intelligence mechanisms for adaptability — focusing on network architecture and financial flows rather than fixed locations. Invest in the analytical capacity to track operational shifts in real time.

Principle Risks	Likelihood	Potential Impact	Measures Available
ASEAN consensus blocks Thailand's sub-regional initiatives — Other ASEAN members — particularly Cambodia or Laos — object to Thailand's coordination architecture as undermining ASEAN centrality or their own bilateral relationships with Myanmar.	Medium	Medium	Frame all sub-regional initiatives as complementary to ASEAN, not competitive. Share outputs from Thailand's coordination mechanisms with ASEAN's special envoy. Engage Cambodia and Laos bilaterally on specific shared interests before proposing initiatives in ASEAN forums.
Partner fatigue reduces external support — Key partners — Japan, Australia, the US — reduce their Myanmar engagement due to competing foreign policy priorities, leaving Thailand's architecture under-resourced.	Medium	Medium	Diversify the partner base — reduce dependence on any single external funder or technical partner. Develop Thailand's own institutional capacity so the architecture can function at reduced intensity if external support contracts.
EAO political dynamics shift against Thai engagement — A major EAO that has cooperated with Thailand's coordination role experiences internal political change or external pressure that causes it to restrict cooperation.	Medium	Medium-High	Maintain relationships across the internal political spectrum of major EAOs rather than relying on specific individuals. Build institutional rather than personal relationships where possible. Treat disruptions as temporary and maintain channels even when they are inactive.

Principle Risks	Likelihood	Potential Impact	Measures Available
Environmental crisis triggers unmanaged regional spillover — A major river pollution event, drought, or deforestation-driven flood in shared Myanmar watersheds produces political crisis that Thailand's monitoring systems are not yet ready to manage.	Medium	High	Accelerate the transboundary pollution index and Mekong-Salween monitoring system as short-term priorities. Develop and communicate emergency environmental response protocols with Laos and China's Yunnan authorities.
Labour reform generates domestic political backlash — Migrant regularisation and labour documentation reform provoke nationalist opposition within Thailand, forcing the government to reverse or dilute key measures.	Medium	Medium	Frame labour reforms in economic rather than humanitarian terms — emphasising the Thai industries that depend on Myanmar labour and the GDP consequences of supply disruption. Build employer association support as a political counterweight to nationalist opposition. Sequence reforms to demonstrate economic benefits before expanding scope.

Reading the Matrix

Three patterns in the risk matrix deserve specific attention. First, the highest-impact risks — Myanmar obstruction, Chinese pressure, domestic political disruption, and conflict escalation — are all risks to Thailand's political autonomy and institutional continuity rather than to specific operational mechanisms. This underlines the importance of the structural investments in the medium-term plan: permanent institutions, diversified partnerships, and economic resilience are the mitigation strategies for existential risks, not just operational improvements. Second, several medium-impact risks — scam network adaptation, partner fatigue, EAO political shifts — are risks of tactical disruption rather than strategic failure. These are managed through the design principles of the architecture: adaptability, distributed partnership, and institutional rather than personal relationships. Third, the domestic political backlash risk — particularly on labour reform — is the risk most directly within Thailand's control and therefore the one that rewards the most focused mitigation investment.

Chapter V: Conclusion — Thailand's Strategic Moment

The Argument Assembled

This report began with a deceptively simple observation: Thailand's approach to Myanmar has outgrown the framework within which it has been managed. What was once a border challenge — manageable through checkpoint administration, bilateral military coordination, and selective engagement with ethnic armed organisations along a shared frontier — has become a multi-domain regional risk whose consequences permeate Thailand's labour markets, public health systems, energy infrastructure, river basins, financial institutions, and internal security landscape. The border has not disappeared as a category of concern; it has been overtaken by the scale and systemic nature of what Myanmar's collapse is producing.

The five chapters of this report build a cumulative strategic argument. Chapter I explains why Thailand can no longer manage Myanmar primarily as a border-management issue. It demonstrates that Myanmar's prolonged instability has evolved into a regional systemic risk whose consequences increasingly transcend national borders, requiring Thailand to adopt a broader regional strategy alongside bilateral engagement. Chapter II translates this strategic rationale into a practical regional architecture. Rather than relying on a single institution, it examines how ASEAN, the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC), BIMSTEC, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), and informal regional dialogue each contribute distinct comparative advantages in addressing different dimensions of Myanmar's regional spillovers. Together, these mechanisms form a complementary regional layer that is more effective than any individual framework acting alone.

Chapter III complements the regional layer by examining Thailand's bilateral engagement with seven key external partners. For each partner, the report assesses strategic interests, shared concerns, opportunities, risks, and concrete policy recommendations, demonstrating how bilateral partnerships can mobilize political influence, technical expertise, financial resources, and operational capabilities that regional institutions alone cannot provide. Chapter IV then integrates these regional and bilateral instruments into a coherent implementation strategy. Guided by a comprehensive risk assessment matrix, it recommends priorities, institutional reforms, and phased actions that enable Thailand to manage the transboundary consequences of Myanmar's instability while preserving strategic autonomy and reinforcing ASEAN centrality. What emerges from the assembled argument is not a vision of Thailand as a great power or a regional hegemon. It is something more modest: a vision of Thailand as the state that makes regional risk management work and one that builds the coordination infrastructure, maintains the communication channels, convenes the relevant actors, and produces the functional outcomes that no other state in the region is positioned to deliver.

Why This Moment Is Different

Thailand has faced Myanmar-related instability before. The long history of the Thai-Myanmar relationship is punctuated by refugee influxes, border conflicts, narcotics flows, and the management of ethnic armed organisations that have used Thai territory as rear bases, trading partners, and diplomatic interlocutors. Thailand has navigated all of these challenges with a combination of pragmatism, selective engagement, and strategic ambiguity that has served its interests tolerably well across multiple decades and multiple Myanmar governments.

- Why is the current moment different? The answer is threefold. First, the scale and simultaneity of the crisis are without precedent in the postwar history of the Thai-Myanmar relationship. Previous crises were episodic and geographically bounded — a surge of Karen refugees, a northern Shan drug trafficking episode, a border incident in Tanintharyi. The current crisis is nationwide, multi-domain, and self-reinforcing: conflict drives displacement, which drives labour market disruption, which drives irregular migration, which drives criminal network exploitation, which generates financial flows that fund further conflict.
- Second, shifts in the external environment are making Thailand's traditional strategy of ambiguity increasingly difficult to sustain. With the rise of intense competition among major powers in Southeast Asia—such as China expanding its influence in Myanmar, the United States promoting its Indo-Pacific strategy, and India pursuing its Act East policy—Thailand can no longer maintain equal distance from all sides without significant costs. The demand to choose sides or signal strategic preferences is stronger now than at any time since the Cold War. For Thailand to keep its coordinating role effective, it must resist these pressures and show that a middle power can navigate great-power rivalry through practical differentiation instead of choosing strict alliances.
- Third, the opportunity to establish the coordinating architecture may be diminishing. Although Myanmar's conflict has not yet resulted in irreversible fragmentation, there are still political actors, armed groups, and civil society organizations dedicated to pursuing a national political agreement, despite current challenges. The regional coordination framework described in this report is both more valuable and feasible while the prospect of settlement persists, rather than after Myanmar becomes a collection of permanently opposed factions lacking any shared political vision.

What Thailand Brings That Others Cannot

The case for Thailand as regional risk coordinator rests ultimately on a convergence of factors that no other state in the regional landscape can replicate. Geography places Thailand at the intersection of Myanmar's most consequential cross-border dynamics. Institutional depth — accumulated across decades of operational border engagement in health, security, labour, and humanitarian domains — gives Thailand the practical knowledge base that effective coordination requires. Relationships — with all Myanmar's political and armed actors, with ASEAN partners, with all the major external powers — give Thailand the convening credibility that its coordinating role depends upon.

None of these factors is sufficient alone. Geography without institutional capacity produces exposure without response. Relationships without strategic principle produce engagement without direction. Strategic interest without political will produces analysis without action. What the strategic repositioning proposed in this report does is align these factors into a coherent posture — one in which Thailand's geographic exposure, institutional capability, relational depth, and strategic interest all point in the same direction and reinforce each other.

What Thailand also brings — this is perhaps the most under-appreciated asset in its coordinating repertoire — is the quality of restraint. Thailand does not seek to determine Myanmar's political outcome. It does not seek to build a coalition against China, to champion a particular armed faction, or to use the Myanmar crisis as a vehicle for projecting regional dominance. Its coordinating role is defined by function rather than ideology, by outcomes rather than positions.

The Domestic Precondition

No external strategy is sustainable without domestic political foundations. Thailand's coordinating role on Myanmar requires, at minimum, three domestic conditions that cannot be assumed and must be actively cultivated.

The first is inter-agency coherence. The policy recommendations in Chapter IV — across diplomatic, security, humanitarian, and economic domains — span multiple Thai ministries whose institutional cultures and bureaucratic incentives do not naturally align. The Myanmar Regional Coordination Taskforce and the permanent Myanmar Strategy Secretariat proposed in Chapter IV are the institutional answer to this problem, but their effectiveness depends on political-level commitment to inter-agency coordination that overrides the centrifugal pressures of ministerial autonomy.

The second is public understanding of the stakes. Thailand's political system is not immune to nationalist pressures on Myanmar-related issues; migrant workers, refugees, border security, and criminal networks are all subjects on which domestic political entrepreneurs can mobilise sentiment that conflicts with the functional engagement approach this report recommends. Sustaining the political space for a coordinating strategy requires an active public communication effort that frames Myanmar's risks accurately — not as problems caused by Myanmar people, but as systemic regional risks that Thailand manages more effectively through coordination than through restriction. This communication effort must be grounded in evidence: the economic contribution of Myanmar labour, the public health benefits of cross-border disease surveillance, the security dividends of intelligence cooperation.

The third factor is maintaining strategic consistency during political transitions. As Thailand's governments and foreign policy priorities change, there's a risk that new administrations will dismantle previous coordination efforts. This risk should be addressed through effective institutional design.

A Note on Uncertainty

Myanmar's conflict is among the most complex and least predictable in contemporary Asia. The balance of armed force shifts rapidly; the political positions of key actors change that are difficult to anticipate; the external environment — including great-power competition, global commodity markets, and the international humanitarian system's funding landscape — introduces variables that no national strategy can fully control.

The strategic reasoning behind these recommendations should stay unchanged. Prioritising practical over ideological diplomacy, favouring regional cooperation over acting alone, and coordinating risk instead of relying on political leadership are not just suggestions tailored to Myanmar's situation. These approaches come from Thailand's long-term interests and capabilities and remain relevant regardless of what happens in Myanmar—whether fragmentation continues, one group gains partial control, a negotiated solution is reached, or a stalemate persists.

A robust strategy should not be judged by its ability to predict the future, but by how effectively it enables the state to navigate uncertainty, irrespective of which eventualities occur. The approach outlined in this report satisfies this criterion. It does not rely on Myanmar resolving, China adopting a cooperative stance, ASEAN asserting itself, or any other optimistic assumptions regarding external factors.

The Opportunity in the Obligation

There is a temptation, in a report of this kind, to conclude with warning rather than opportunity — to emphasise the costs of inaction, the risks of continued passivity, the dangers of strategic drift. Those warnings are warranted and have been made throughout this report. But they should not obscure a genuine opportunity that Thailand's situation presents.

Thailand is, at this moment, one of the few states in Southeast Asia with the combination of geographic position, institutional depth, relational capital, and strategic interest to play a consequential role in managing one of the region's most significant crises. That combination is not permanent — it reflects the specific conjuncture of Thailand's border experience, its accumulated Myanmar relationships, and its exposure to cross-domain risks — and it will erode if Thailand does not act on it.

A Thailand that successfully builds and sustains the regional coordination architecture described in this report will not merely be managing Myanmar's risks more effectively. It will be establishing itself as the state that Southeast Asia turns to when functional coordination is needed — a role that strengthens Thailand's diplomatic standing, deepens its partner relationships, and builds the institutional capacity that serves Thailand's interests across a far wider range of future challenges than Myanmar alone. Regional coordination, done well, is not a burden assumed reluctantly in response to crisis.

Myanmar's instability is not a problem Thailand chose. But Thailand's response to it is a choice — and the quality of that choice will define Thailand's regional standing, and the security of its people, for a generation.

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