“Myanmar: The Situation One Year Post-Coup”

DATE
Wednesday, February 2, 2022 at 10:00 a.m. ET

FEATURING
Derek Chollet
Counselor, U.S. Department of State

Moe Thuzar
Co-coordinator, Myanmar Studies Program, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute

Wai Wai Nu
Executive Director,
Women’s Peace Network in Myanmar

CSIS EXPERTS
Gregory B. Poling
Senior Fellow and Director, Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS

Michael Martin
Adjunct Fellow (Non-resident), Southeast Asia Program, CSIS

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com
Good morning, everybody. Or good morning for those of you joining us in the U.S.; good evening for those joining in Asia. My name’s Gregory Poling and I run the Southeast Asia Program and the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative here at CSIS. Thank you so much for tuning in for our event on “Myanmar: The Situation One Year Post-Coup.”

We’re going to have a great discussion in two parts. First, we’re going to hear from State Department Counselor Derek Chollet, who I’ll introduce in a second, and then we’ve got a really great virtual armchair discussion with a panel of experts. And I want to hear questions from all of you tuning in either through CSIS.org or through YouTube.

First, let me get some of the housekeeping out of the way. Everything you hear today is going to be on the record. The videos will be available afterward on YouTube and CSIS in case you miss anything. The event’s made possible by general support from the Southeast Asia Program at CSIS.

And with that, let me turn to our guest of honor. So first we’re going to hear remarks from Derek Chollet, who’s the counselor of the U.S. Department of State, where he serves at the rank of undersecretary as a senior policy advisor to Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Previously, Mr. Chollet served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs and as the Principal Deputy Director of the Policy Planning staff. And Derek has really been taking point on a lot of our Burma/Myanmar policy, including with his trip out to the region in October and a series of meetings with other outside parties since then to discuss the crisis.

So, Derek, let me turn the virtual floor over to you.

Great. Thanks, Greg. It’s great to be with you and it’s great to be back at CSIS. I spent a couple years here years ago as a fellow at CSIS, so it’s always a thrill to be with you again. And thanks for that kind introduction.

It’s really a pleasure to be with this entire group and all of you listening in to discuss the ongoing crisis in Burma. The situation there, as everyone knows, is deeply concerning. And despite all that’s going on in the world, it remains a focus of our attention here in Washington.

One year ago yesterday, as you all know, the Burmese military launched a coup that reversed a decade of democratic and economic gains. That has led this country in the heart of Asia to the brink of collapse. I can say I was on the transition team here on January 20th last year, and of the many things that we were preparing for in those early days the coup in Burma was something that was an unwelcome surprise even though we, of course, had been watching the turmoil since the election in late 2020 very closely. This
was a major setback and something that we responded to very, very quickly a year ago.

Look, since last February 1st, the year has been an economic, political, and a humanitarian disaster. The facts are well-known to everyone listening in. The regime's killed nearly 1,500 people, detained more than 10,000, tortured or sexually abused countless innocents. Its brutal crackdowns have included destroying whole villages, burning places of worship, and using innocents as human shields. All told, over 400,000 people have been displaced internally and thousands more have fled to neighboring countries. The regime has grossly mismanaged the economy, leaving millions in need of aid. And it continues to impede access to health and aid workers in the midst of a once-in-a-century pandemic.

The United States is committed to supporting the people of Burma as they seek to return their country to the path of inclusive democracy. Through our actions, we are pressuring the regime to do exactly that, to return to the path of inclusive democracy, to release all of those unjustly detained, and to allow unhindered humanitarian access.

We have made this clear from the highest levels of our government. One year ago, President Biden, right out of the gate, supported the people of Burma continuous and he’s done so continuously since then, and reinforced this perspective just this week in his statement marking the anniversary of the coup, as well as in his engagements last year in the ASEAN leaders summit that was virtual.

I can say that the situation in Myanmar will, of course, be very, very high on the agenda later this spring when the president hosts ASEAN counterparts here in Washington for the special U.S.-ASEAN Summit.

Secretary Blinken has delivered the same message over the last year in his three ASEAN ministerials well as on his travel to Indonesia and Malaysia late last year, and he also discusses the situation in Myanmar regularly in his interactions with counterparts, whether in Asia or all around the world.

Other senior colleagues here have been very involved in this. Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman, our ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, both made the situation in Myanmar a central point of their visits to Southeast Asia last year. My friend, Dan Kritenbrink, our Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, has been intensively engaged, as has our terrific ambassador on the ground in Myanmar, Tom Vajda, who has handled an extraordinarily difficult situation with great skill.

Greg, as you mentioned, I've traveled twice to the region in the last few months of the year – last year – to advance these priorities, talk to our
partners in the region about the way forward. Last October, I led an interagency delegation to Bangkok, Jakarta, Singapore, and Tokyo. This was just before the ASEAN summits, and our message then for ASEAN colleagues was to do whatever they could to hold the regime accountable. We strongly supported ASEAN’s decisions to withhold senior-level invitations from the regime until meaningful progress was made on implementing ASEAN’s Five-Point Consensus.

And then last December, I joined the secretary on his trip to Southeast Asia, and before that I went on my own to Phnom Penh, to Cambodia, to check in with the Cambodians before they took the ASEAN chair this year. I urged Foreign Minister Sokhonn, who’s, of course, now the ASEAN special envoy, to engage with all parties to adhere to the Five-Point Consensus. I shared, at the time, my concern with the planned visit of Prime Minister Hun Sen to Myanmar just a few days after they took the chair of ASEAN. Unfortunately, I have to say many of the concerns that I expressed about that visit have played out.

So, look, these high-level engagements represent the foundation of our approach to the situation in Myanmar, which is to stay as closely aligned as we can to our allies and partners in our response to this crisis.

There are four pillars to our approach. The first is going to be pressure on the regime; second is support for the civilian democratic opposition; third, our efforts along with others to ease the humanitarian suffering of the Burmese people. And these are all more effective, as I said, when we are working alongside and doing all of this work with our allies and partners, and so that’s the fourth pillar of our strategy.

So why don't I start with that? I'll start with diplomacy – working with our partners every day to coordinate our efforts, our accountability actions, and our public messages. Just a few hours ago, I had another phone call with the Indian foreign secretary about their perspectives on the crisis. Foreign Secretary Shringla had made a visit to Myanmar late last year and wanted to check in on his visit as well as talk about humanitarian relief issues.

Our goal in all of these engagements with our partners is to deny the regime access and credibility, and to push it to take meaningful steps towards constructive dialogue among all parties, and by all parties we mean leaders from Burma’s deposed government, its ethnic groups, its civil society, and other pro-democracy leaders, including the unjustly detained Aung San Suu Kyi.

We’re also working closely with ASEAN partners in their own diplomatic efforts, starting by doing what we can to reinforce and strengthen the framework provided by the Five-Point Consensus. As I said, we strongly
support ASEAN’s decision made last year to invite only nonpolitical representatives from Burma to high-level meetings until meaningful progress is made in the peace process, and this is something we very much hope that ASEAN sticks to in the days ahead.

Second, we are working to increase pressure on the junta to put Burma back on the democratic path, and we will continue to hold the regime accountable for its actions and violence. This includes restricting its revenue while also avoiding exacerbating the dire humanitarian situation inside Burma.

Immediately following the coup last year, President Biden signed a new executive order to impose sanctions on those who were part of the coup or anyone else who’s connected with undermining democracy. So here’s what we’ve done since that order was signed. Including our sanctions that were announced earlier this week, the United States has sanctioned 65 individuals and sanctioned or placed export controls on an additional 26 organizations with close regime ties, and we’re not done. I want to be very clear here that we are continuously assessing our options and other ways to exert our leverage.

Third, we are regularly coordinating with the pro-democracy movement, including the National Unity Government. Just late last week, I had another interaction with the National Unity Government leadership, including the acting president, the prime minister, and the foreign minister. This was the third engagement that I’ve had with them virtually in the last several months, but other colleagues here in the department, from Wendy Sherman to Jake Sullivan, our National Security Adviser, has also engaged with the NUG and that’s something we will continue to do in the days and weeks and months ahead.

We very much value the efforts of pro-democracy groups and their ongoing work to forge an inclusive democratic Burma through outreach to a wide range of ethnic and religious groups, including the Rohingya communities, and this week we have pushed forward on each of these dimensions both in terms of pressure and engagement. As I said, we designated an additional seven individuals and two entities in coordination with the United Kingdom and with Canada.

We released a detailed business advisory last week on Burma, which is urging responsible investment that does not benefit the regime. We released a joint statement with allies and partners including the European Union, the United Kingdom, Canada, South Korea, and others, which condemns the junta’s behavior and also calls for the end to the sales and transfer of arms to the junta. We worked with partners in the U.N. Security Council to have a U.N. Security Council session last week with briefings from the new U.N. Special Envoy Noeleen Heyzer, as well as the ASEAN special envoy. And, as I
said, our senior officials continue to engage and meet with partners in and out of Burma and including the NUG leadership.

So, fourth and finally, we are prioritizing the delivery of assistance to the people of Burma. Since the coup last year, the United States has provided nearly half a billion dollars in aid to vulnerable communities inside Burma, and to those who have fled Burma seeking refuge in other countries. This includes over $24 million in COVID-19 assistance. We’re also working closely with other countries and international partners to provide additional support and ensure access so that assistance reaches people in need without bolstering the regime.

So these steps, when taken together – pressure, support for the opposition, humanitarian assistance – all undergirded by close cooperation and coordination with our allies and partners. These steps have directly supported the people of Burma and their aspirations. But we know that more work needs to be done. And to that end, we will continue ratcheting up pressure against the regime, once again doing so in a way that, A, has the most likelihood of changing the regime’s behavior and, B, does not compound the suffering of the Burmese people.

In the coming weeks, we will deepen and broaden our engagement with all parties working to build a common vision for an inclusive multiparty democracy, and to put Burma on that path. We will continue to work closely with ASEAN and the U.N. special envoy on Burma to create the conditions for peaceful dialogue. We will continue to provide lifesaving humanitarian assistance and invest more in Burma’s civil society. And we’re going to continue to move in lockstep with our partners abroad, with the Congress, and all of those outside government who are doing so much to help try to build a better future for Burma – people like all of you tuning in today.

Let me pause here just to say that we, in the Biden administration, have been very grateful for all the attention the crisis in Burma has received from the U.S. Congress, in particular, and America’s commitment to Burma’s democratic future is bipartisan. And at a time in Washington when it seems that the political parties often have a hard time agreeing on much, there’s a lot of agreement about the importance of Burma to U.S. interests and our common commitment to help build a better future for the people of Burma. We will continue to work closely with the Congress in the coming year as we continue to refine our strategy.

And we’re also grateful for all of your efforts. And this is a good place to close. We’re going to need the help of everyone who cares about Burma. We’re going to continue to rely on all of your expertise, on your ideas, on your hard work, on your feedback. We need it. We have to be very cleareyed about the challenges ahead. Burma’s first coup was six decades ago in 1962.
And it has been a very long struggle. And we are determined to do everything we can to help the people of Burma to put their country back on the path of inclusive democracy, and to help this country, that has seen so much hardship but has such great potential, help those people build a better future.

So I want to thank you for giving me the chance to speak with you briefly here today. Thanks for everything you’re doing. And I’m looking forward to taking any questions or comments you may have. Thanks, Greg.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Derek. I really appreciate that. And we’re going to try to get through as many of these questions as we can. If you have a question for Counselor Chollet, please go ahead and type it into the form you see on your screen and identify yourself. That’s always helpful. If we don’t get through it now, we’ll try to save some of these questions for our expert panel afterwards.

So let me give the first question to Yuichi Nitta with Nikkei Asia. Yuichi points out that on January 31st the U.S. sanctioned Ta Za, which is the first individual under targeted sanction, not directly connected – or, not directly a member of the regime. Does the U.S. intend to extend sanctions to other private sector individuals in Burma? And if so, what would the criteria be?

Mr. Chollet: Well, sure. It’s a great question. As I said, we’ve – the announcements made just a few days ago were just the latest in a series of announcements we’ve made from the first few weeks after the coup last year, up until last week. And as I said, we’re not done yet. We are continuing to refine our strategy, to assess who – obviously, there are those who are behind the coup, or helped the coup. There’s also those who are working to undermine the democratic path inside Burma. And we will continue to look closely at any individual or entity that is part of that.

And this is something that we are – of course, very much value input from those who watch the situation in Myanmar very closely outside of government, but also in our Congress. And we will continue to work this. So I do expect that, unfortunately, if the path we’re on continues – which is further hardship and lack of cooperation on the side of the junta – there will be more announcements like the one we made – just made this week coming with other individuals and entities.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. Let’s go to Anthony Faiola with The Washington Post, who said: There have been various assessments that the conflict isn’t going well for the military due to its low morale and desertions. What is your assessment? Can you offer any insights into where and how the Tatmadaw is losing ground?
Mr. Chollet: Yeah. We’ve – I’ve watched those. Thanks for your question. I’ve seen those reports as well. Look, I think there’s no question the Tatmadaw is under pressure. I think things have not gone as well as perhaps they thought they would have a year ago. I think the fight is much harder. The resilience of Burmese society is much stronger. What we saw happen yesterday with the silent protests I think was a very powerful signal of the – of the public’s desire to get back on the democratic path. And that was – my understanding, the protest yesterday was in spite and in the face of a lot of regime threats and efforts to try to not have that sort of demonstration of discontent with the regime.

So I think there’s no question that they are under pressure. And that’s a combination of things. I think that’s – I like I think it’s some of the actions that we’ve imposed on them, along with others. It’s also the resilience of the opposition, and the work that the opposition has been doing to build up its capacity. But I think the message that the Tatmadaw I hope would take from all of this is that whether looking from the outside or from within, from their own people or from those who are leaving the service because they do not want to be committing war crimes or compounding the hardship of the Burmese people that they want to leave the military, that this is – this is a losing bargain for them. And the Tatmadaw should be changing its ways, restoring Burma on the democratic path. That’s really the only viable answer here. And that’s what we’ll be sticking to.

Mr. Poling: Great. Thank you. Next we have Simon Billenness with the International Campaign for the Rohingya. Simon asks: What is the likelihood of Singapore freezing the Myanmar military’s bank accounts to block the flow of gas, gem, and timber revenue to the junta?

Mr. Chollet: Yeah. It’s a great question. When I was in Singapore last fall we had great conversations with Singapore officials, both at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but also with the – with the finance folks. We are in constant contact with them. Our Treasury colleagues in particular are working very, very intensively with them. I think Singapore has been a real leader within ASEAN in particular on maintaining the five-point consensus, keeping ASEAN strong and united against the Tatmadaw, or at least to encourage the Tatmadaw to live up to its own commitments in the five-point consensus.

So I expect that we will continue this close cooperation with Singapore. As I said, we’ve been successful thus far. And I think they will be obviously, given their importance in the financial sector, a critical piece in this moving forward, as we continue to modify our pressure approach, find different points of leverage, and see the different ways we can use these financial instruments to influence and hopefully change the Tatmadaw’s thinking.
Mr. Poling: We have a question from Mike with the DOD. A mysterious Mike, who asked about India’s approach to engaging the military regime. Do you see this as a sign of geostrategic realism from Delhi? Is it a sign of limited diplomatic bandwidth? How do we explain this?

Mr. Chollet: We've been very – in close touch with the Indians throughout this process. As I said, just a few hours ago I spoke to the foreign secretary of India again about the situation there. They, obviously, have a critical role to play. They have – they have their own core national security interest at play. They’re very focused on their own the border situation and the refugee situation. We in particular are interested in working with them on the cross-border assistance issue, and that’s something that should get more humanitarian relief inside Burma to the folks who need it most.

So, you know, I’ll let the Indians speak for themselves in terms of their own interests, but this is something, given their influence on the ground, we’ve been very focused on working closely with them in addition to our ASEAN partners. And I should say that goes also to the Japanese and the Koreans, the Australians, the Brits. Really, anyone who’s got a role to play here, we have been in the last several months really trying to amp up our engagement with them.

Mr. Poling: Thanks. We’ve got only five minutes left and a lot more than five minutes’ worth of questions, so I’m going to apologize in advance that we won’t get through all of them.

Mr. Chollet: Leave a lot for the panel. (Laughs.)

Mr. Poling: That’s right. It'll be left to our expert panel to discuss.

So let’s go next to Daniel Sullivan with Refugees International. Daniel points out the number of people forcibly displaced has skyrocketed; 400,000 new IDPs. Those in need of humanitarian aid has grown from 1 million pre-coup to 14 million now. What immediate steps are being taken to mitigate humanitarian suffering? And has there been any progress on cross-border delivery of aid through networks on the Myanmar border?

Mr. Chollet: Yeah, absolutely. As I said, we’ve – the United States has itself put forth nearly half-a-billion dollars in humanitarian assistance over the last year inside Myanmar. We're going to continue that next year and try to build on that and do even more.

The delivery of that assistance has been a challenge, of course. And that’s something that we’ve – we're trying to work on with our allies and partners because we want to ensure that the assistance gets to the people who need it
the most and also it’s delivered in a way that doesn’t in any way bolster the junta.

Cross-border has been a big topic, obviously, with our Thai colleagues. And when I was in Bangkok last fall, it’s something – we spent hours talking with our – with our Thai colleagues about the cross-border assistance. Their foreign minister was in Myanmar late last year, I guess, and came up with some ideas along these lines. And I should say that the new U.N. special envoy, Noeleen Heyzer – new; she’s been around for a couple months now, I guess – but she is particularly focused on this issue. It’s something she briefed the Council on last week and it’s something that we will follow up with her in the coming weeks about trying to see if there’s ways we can implement some of the ideas that she’s been putting together on humanitarian assistance.

So, you know, of the four lines of effort we have no one is more important than the other, but certainly the humanitarian situation, given the dire needs of the people inside Myanmar and the trajectory that the country’s on – which, I regret to say, only seems to be that things will get worse – it’s something we’ve been intensively focused on here, along with our colleagues at USAID.

Mr. Poling: Thanks, Derek.

Next we’ve got Murray Hiebert, a Nonresident Senior Advisor with our team here at CSIS. He asked if you’re concerned that Hun Sen, as chair of ASEAN, will make the grouping’s consensus more difficult. And if President Biden hosts the ASEAN leaders, who would be welcomed from Myanmar?

Mr. Chollet: Right. Well, Cambodia’s been off to – it’s a pretty rough start for the first few weeks of its ASEAN chairmanship on this issue. As I said, when I was in Phnom Penh just before the holidays, I made clear – at that point it was not – Hun Sen was making noises of going to Myanmar, but the trip had not yet been formally planned. I made clear the concerns that we had about the timing of the trip coming after the new year.

Of course, countries have been engaging the junta throughout this crisis, but because of all of the – of the drama last fall about trying to get the ASEAN special envoy – then-envoy the foreign minister of Brunei, Erywan, into Myanmar and his inability to come to an agreement with the Tatmadaw who he would be able to see in his capacity as special envoy, I think the optics are unmistakable in terms of Prime Minister Hun Sen going soon after the new year just as Cambodia had taken the chair. Not much was produced out of that visit, and I think that raised some concerns within ASEAN about the way forward. I know the leaders – or, the ministers’ retreat that was scheduled
for a few weeks ago is now, in my understanding, probably going to happen in mid-February.

And the new ASEAN special envoy, the Cambodian foreign minister, I expect soon after that will start talking about making a trip to Myanmar. We do think it’s very important when an ASEAN special envoy goes that the – that person have the ability to interact with whomever they wish. So I think we very much hope that the Tatmadaw would allow the Cambodian foreign minister to do that when he goes to Myanmar in his capacity as ASEAN Special Envoy.

In terms of the special summit, that’s being planned and we’re hoping that that can be done soon, COVID permitting. I think the United States will stand by our view that the ASEAN decision taken last fall – which, of course, was ASEAN’s decision to make, but something we very much supported, which is that the – any kind of high-level meeting, the political leadership of Myanmar, the junta, not be present, and that if there is a representative from Myanmar it is a nonpolitical representative. I think that’s something – in several of the engagements Secretary Blinken had last year before this decision was taken with ASEAN ministers, the Myanmar – the foreign minister from Myanmar was there before ASEAN had taken its decision. And it did not sit right with us either that, you know, here that someone who had – was part of a coup was sitting around the table and getting the benefits of participation and the benefits of membership in many ways with – while defying ASEAN’s wishes and their own commitments made through the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus.

So that special summit will be an important moment for U.S.-ASEAN relations not just on Myanmar, but across a whole range of issues. But, obviously, the situation in Myanmar will be one of the main topics discussed.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Derek. Well, you’ve been extremely generous with your time. I appreciate you joining us here today. I’d like to ask everybody to, you know, give a warm virtual welcome, standing round of applause even though he can’t hear it, to Counselor Chollet. And we’ll let you go and bring on our expert panel. Thank you again.

Mr. Chollet: Great. Thanks, everybody. I really appreciate you tuning in. And I’m sure we left a lot of questions on the table, so feel free to reach out, email me, because we do need the feedback. We do need the ideas, the constructive criticism as well, because this crisis is very complex. And we’re going to really rely on your expertise and thoughts on the way forward. So thank you again for participating and I look forward to staying in touch.

Mr. Poling: Thank you.

Mr. Chollet: Bye-bye.

Mr. Poling: So now let me introduce our fantastic panel. So we’re going to hear from three great experts today. And we’ll have a quick discussion, and then again turn back to your questions from the audience.

So we have with us Wai Wai Nu, who is the founder of the Women’s Peace Network in Myanmar and an advocate for human rights and women’s rights in Burma. Currently Wai Wai is a visiting scholar with the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley.

Next, we have Moe Thuzar, who is a fellow and the co-coordinator of the Myanmar Studies Program at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. In addition, Dr. Moe Thuzar provides analyses on ASEAN and Myanmar for China News Asia news program for Singapore.

And finally, Michael Martin, who is a Nonresident Adjunct Fellow with my team here in the South Asia Program at CSIS, focusing on political and economic developments in Myanmar, Hong Kong, and Vietnam. He was previously the assistant chief economist for the Hong Kong Trade Development Council and an Asia affairs specialist at the Congressional Research Service.

Wai, Moe, Mike, thanks so much for joining us. Let me start first with Wai. I’d like you to pick up on some of the discussion that we had with Counselor Chollet regarding the humanitarian situation in Myanmar. Where do things stand? What do you think is the most critical role right now for the international community? Not just for those IDPs within the country, but also with those who have been displaced across the border, and the refugee community remaining in Bangladesh?

Wai Wai Nu: Thank you so much. Thank you for this opportunity to join this important discussion. It was great to hear from Counselor Chollet. I think, looking back a year-long response from the international community and the United States, we find it very frustrating. We find it very inadequate and ineffective, with the base – in a situation where these militaries – the militaries which has the history of committing serious human rights violations and international crimes, such as genocides, it was entirely inadequate and ineffective. And I think that’s why the military continue to be emboldened to commit mass atrocities all over the country now.

So basically, we actually appreciate recent coordinated effort and response on sanctions policies by the U.S., and U.K. and Canada. We – in the future we would like to see more of this coordinated responses in a more
comprehensive manner. And we are actually hoping that this will lead to sanctioning MOG and, you know, basically come up with a more holistic approach to put on the economic sanctions.

The situations, you know, to sum up for us, you know, this junta’s strategic and widespread attacks on the violence against people of Myanmar are actually connected to the decade-long systemic oppressions and persecutions of ethnic minorities, including Rohingya. As I wrote in my Foreign Policy op-ed, issued yesterday, what’s happening in Myanmar today is the result of the international community’s failure to hold the Myanmar military accountable for their mass atrocity crimes against ethnic minority groups. And Myanmar military was, thus, emboldened to actually overthrow an elected government and use widespread and systematic violence against civilians, you know, calling for democracy, freedom, and justice.

So I guess, you know, the key here is to address the accountability. Without – with soft and with quiet diplomacy I don’t think we’re going to – we’re going to be having any result any time soon. The international community has wasted one year and, you know, sacrificed – we had to sacrifice so many lives for the past year with this soft and quiet diplomacy. And now it’s time to actually change that approach, and thinking, and strategy. Without accountability, I do not believe that the military will actually, you know, step down and really – you know, we will be able to track the situations back, as Counselor Chollet was mentioning.

There is no pathway to inclusive democracy until and unless the military is held accountable. Otherwise, it’s not only putting the entire country to the risk of more mass atrocity crimes, but also there is a greater risk for the – and greater and unique risks for the Rohingya community to continue to suffer more atrocity crimes. And we have seen – since the February 1st coup, we have seen the military reintroducing or resuming some of the very repressive policies in Rakhine state, where Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are continuing to suffer in squalid camps.

And over the past couple of years, the situations in the camps have seriously deteriorated, from all perspective – security-wise, on educations, on livelihood. And the Bangladesh government has demolished small Rohingya shops that they – that a source of income generations for the refugees. And they have ordered to close down the Rohingya refugee-led really, you know, small education centers that they used not only for the – to educate young children, but also, you know, as a form of giving hope to the younger kids. And they actually destroyed some of the centers, as well as there has been fire, and there has been, you know, fencing over the camp.

And people are – living situations in Bangladesh has become extremely concerning. And it’s somehow for us, we’ve seen, as a human rights crisis
now. And until and unless we’re able to address the situations in Myanmar, and we’re able to end the military’s accountability in Myanmar, there is no prospect of repatriations for the Rohingya refugees. For us to be able to end all of the suffering of the people in Bangladesh – Burmese people in Bangladesh or in other borders area or inside Myanmar, the key is to address the accountability in addition to, you know, putting economic sanctions, in addition to the global arms embargo, in addition to, you know, other support for the – for the Burmese democracy movement and cross-border support.

It is critical to realize that this is time for the U.S. to take leadership to address the criminal accountability of the Myanmar military. That includes making atrocity determinations at this – by the State Department, by the U.S. government. There are evidences already available for the U.S. government that they have already research, and this is time to make the atrocity determinations and, you know, basically name the crimes as it is, genocide, as well as take leadership at the U.N. Security Council to really adopt resolutions that include a referral of the situation to ICC, or creating an ad hoc tribunal if you are very sensitive to ICC, and, you know, imposing global arms embargo and economic sanctions.

Yes. I’ll stop here, I guess.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Wai.

Mike, let me – let me turn to you next. What do we think 2022 is going to look like, both in terms of violence on the ground, the continued economic freefall? And what do you want to see the U.S. do about it?

Michael Martin: OK. And I want to thank counselor – for CSIS for having me on this amazing panel and also Counselor Chollet for his comments. I was a – there are a couple aspects of his presentation that I find reflect a continuation of a perspective on what’s going on in Myanmar that is now dated, and in some ways this fits in with what Wai Wai is saying.

The U.N. is now calling it a civil war. I would argue it’s actually been a civil war for decades, varying degrees of intensity. But to see the international community, particularly the U.N., saying, yes, we have a civil war going on, it is indeed.

I have no magic crystal ball for the year ahead, but I would expect the fighting to intensify in the areas where there’s fighting going on, as well as I would expect to see the distinct possibility of it spreading to areas where there currently isn’t significant fighting.

For example, the leader of the Arakan Army – and the Arakan Army has effectively taken control of all of northern Rakhine state at this point,
up their own government in that area – he indicated in a recent interview that he expects that the informal ceasefire with the junta will break down in this coming year. So I think there’s a distinct possibility of return of fighting in Arakan state – or, Rakhine state. There’s fighting going on in Chin and Sagaing.

Interesting, the United Wa State Army leadership also indicated that they may launch an offensive against the Shan State Army-South, which has been informally working with the junta in Shan state. So I think we can see an expansion of fighting in Shan state, as well, in the year ahead.

In Kachin state, things have been relatively quiet. But if you look at the data that organizations like Aklid have published about the amount of violence that’s going on in terms of the civil war, it’s almost looking like the Omicron charts of the number of cases as they’ve emerged in the United States. It’s this amazing spike going on in a short period of time, and I think that spike’s just going to get higher in 2022.

So what that brings to mind is to have Counselor Chollet talk about a return to the path of an inclusive democracy, I think we’re not in an environment where there’s a way of getting the Tatmadaw and leaders of the opposition to negotiate a peaceful resolution of what’s going on. As much as we might want that, when you’re seeing leaders of the PDFs and some of the ethnic armed organizations – people defense forces, for those who may not know the term – say we are involved in a revolution with the ultimate goal of disbanding the Tatmadaw, how do you see negotiations taking place?

So what I would – skipping the economic part for a moment, I think what that means is the U.S. – the Biden administration and Congress should start reframing how they look at what’s going on. You have a full-fledged civil war, and we need to make a determination on which side are we on. And in that environment we should also recognize the sides are ones involved in a conflict, not in a negotiation between political groups for some sort of negotiation of a return to a path for inclusive democracy. So I’ll stop there. Happy to talk to the economic issues in a moment.

Mr. Poling: Thanks, Mike. Yeah, and there’s – you know, I think there’s plenty of things that we won’t be able to address today. But I hope that those in the audience will throw in some more back and forth in the Q&A.

Let’s go to Moe because I think what both you and Wai – one of the things that you’ve touched on is a sentiment that ASEAN and the ASEAN five-point consensus has kind of been left behind in all of this.
Moe, I wonder, what do you view as the role of ASEAN, the state of the five-point consensus, and the, you know, continued effort by those like the U.S. to say that we support the ASEAN consensus and kind of, you know, give the ball to ASEAN to find a path forward?

Ms. Thuzar: Well, thanks for those questions, Greg. Let me add my thanks and appreciation to those that Wai Wai and Mike have expressed both to CSIS as well as to Counselor Chollet for that overview of what’s happening in Myanmar and U.S. policy – the U.S. position – and I’d also like to link my answer to some of the points that Counselor Chollet’s statement had mentioned about working with allies, in particular, ASEAN, in this context, and the very bleak – I think, unrelentingly bleak situation that both Wai Wai and Mike have highlighted from different aspects.

Now, I think 2022 we’re looking at probably ASEAN reviewing what happened with its five-point consensus – well, its attempts to implement the five-point consensus in 2021 and the lessons learned from that and, really, you know, building on that experience in 2021 to now looking at how can ASEAN as a group can collectively manage the state administration council junta in the sense that, you know, they’ve ratcheted up the diplomatic pressure. We’ve seen that.

But it’s very recent, as of October 2021, and I think what’s becoming clear only now is what was limited to the summit, which is ASEAN’s highest key political level meeting now seems to be expanding towards ministerial-level meetings. We’re looking at the dynamics surrounding this postponement of the ASEAN foreign ministers retreat, which happens annually for the chair – the rotational chair – to discuss what it wants to do for the year, map out the agenda and the implementation plan, and, of course, for 2022, very much ASEAN’s internal challenge and priority continues to be its response to the Myanmar crisis.

Now, the five-point consensus is something that was crafted last year to address the situation of the unfolding political, economic, and humanitarian crisis, focusing more on, perhaps, the political and economic – sorry, political and humanitarian aspects.

So it doesn’t really look forward to, say, a situation where there can be elections or ASEAN could have been implicitly maybe working on that basis that, OK, let’s move for immediate cessation of violence first and then see how we could bring people to the table to talk about this – you know, this inclusive multiparty democracy that Counselor Chollet was also referring to.

But Min Aung Hlaing’s manipulation of the ASEAN space very quickly, I think, disabused many who wanted to hark back to ASEAN’s past experiences of, you know, having different shifts in how it dealt with Myanmar all these
decades and, you know, trying to fall back on those better practices, if you
will, and even, I think, the focus on humanitarian assistance, it is important
and, you know, various speakers have also highlighted it. Counselor Chollet
have highlighted it.

But the point to note here, of course, is that how the junta has manipulated
the ASEAN space is, you know, ASEAN operates on this principle of state
consent when they want to, you know, coordinate and deliver humanitarian
assistance or have a presence on the ground. Clearly, there is no kind of
consent from the member state under the military regime that is in Myanmar
right now. And that has hampered how ASEAN has wanted to coordinate and
deliver humanitarian assistance. Because it has to go through state channels
and because there can't be any humanitarian boots on the ground, the
reliance is on a local partner, in this case the Myanmar Red Cross Society, to
coordinate that delivery. So we don't know how that humanitarian
assistance, which, you know, is being delivered in phases, is reaching the
communities really in need.

So I think here, in 2022, we would probably also need to look at that
component, that focus that ASEAN also wants to look at with now Special
Envoy Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, prioritizing that as part of her efforts as well, on
working with existing networks on the ground that have really great,
practical on-ground experience in reaching through informal community
channels communities in need. I think on the eastern side of the country,
there are these ethnic health and education networks that have been
mobilized for the COVID-19 task force that the National Unity Government
tried to institute, and there are also informal channels and networks that can
be utilized for the western part of the country, again, working with civil
society groups and organizations on the ground. And so the capacities that
need to be, I think, supported and built need to be there, and ASEAN
probably needs to focus on that.

But at the political level, of course, the main thing is this very important need
to hold the line on that diplomatic pressure and to keep, I think, maintaining
that as long as the junta is recalcitrant to implementing even the Five-Point
Consensus's broad framework, there should be no participation at key
political meetings. And we see the move now, as I mentioned, trying to be
expanded now to even ministerial-level meetings. And at the same time, I
think another part of this, you know, speaking softly, using a big stick kind of
strategy is to really step up the kind of communications that have been
taking place unilaterally at the informal level with representatives of the
National Unity government, because talking to key stakeholders is part of
ASEAN's consensus and the National Unity Government, the National Unity
Consultative Council are all key stakeholders, and at some point in time I
think better understanding of how the ethnic armed organizations – some
are being called ethnic resistance organizations – you know, they have joined
in the resistance against the junta. I think engaging with them, talking to them, finding out what their interests and aspirations are will also help all of us, I think, wanting to help Myanmar the country, Myanmar the people move out of this continuing nightmare. I think the task is on all of us to really try to find different aspects and aspirations.

And one important point here – I know I've taken a bit too much of the microphone time – is ASEAN has also consistently included a paragraph in its statements since 2017 on responding to the Rohingya crisis, particularly focusing on repatriation. Now, Rohingya repatriation, dealing with disasters arising from human-induced, man-made situations is something that ASEAN does not have capacity. So I think here we need to look at also how at the political level the kind of diplomatic pressure that ASEAN can do becomes more visible, more vocal with several key countries in ASEAN helping to hold the line while, at the same time, looking at how we can balance that with trying to reach as many communities as we can on the ground using creative means available unilaterally, bilaterally, sub-regionally.

I’ll stop there for the moment.

Mr. Poling: Thanks, Moe.

Let me try to bundle a couple of the questions that we have in the queue here and see how many we can get through in the next five or six minutes.

So there were outstanding questions for Counselor Chollet from Alexa Refa with the Bridge Foundation about the role of U.N. Special Envoy Noeleen Heyzer and from Tony Raymond on how likely the U.S. is to get the U.N. Security Council to adopt an arms ban. So maybe I can just bundle those and ask each of you, or whoever wants to, what is the role of the U.N. in all of this, and should we expect anything? Mike, you want to jump – please, Wai, go ahead.

Ms. Nu: Maybe I’ll go first as I have to leave soon too.

So regarding the U.N., I think the U.N., you know, we understand that U.N. is composed of member states, right, so it’s not easy to make any decisions, particularly at the Security Council. However, U.N. has obligation to protect people, and U.N. – from the U.N. general secretary to the U.N. Security Council it has obligation to protect people from mass atrocity crimes and genocides and war crimes and crimes against humanity. So far, U.N. hasn’t done enough, apart from issuing a statement, and having heavy focus or reliance on the ASEAN was a mistake, we believe. ASEAN should not be in the centrality of these discussions or a lead in the Burma response. The U.S. government and the U.N., United Nations specifically, the U.N. Security Council has to step up, and they need to actually follow their mandate and
their obligation to protect people. And, you know, when we talk about U.N. Security Council resolutions, it’s often the U.S. and the U.K., you know, saying that they will be vetoed by Russia and China. We understand that. You know, it’s – I mean, we understand it is unlikely any resolution, specifically in relation to country situations, is passed.

But there is – for us this is time to see who supports what clearly, without necessarily, you know, giving us excuses and not really taking actions. One, people of Myanmar deserve to see who stands for what, and two, people of Myanmar need to feel that there are some sort of protections mechanisms available. Three, we believe if they try, you know, given this mountain amounts of evidences that are available for – by the U.N. fact-finding mission, various human rights investigation reports on Myanmar over the past several years, there are more than enough evidence that, you know, the situations in Myanmar is genocide, now crimes against humanity, and war crimes. And that has to be stopped and U.N. actually used that to really start to begin proposing or, you know, introducing a resolution. And it can get vetoed. But in the case of Syria, it was 16 time when the resolution was vetoed. Right? But then, at the end of the day, they were able to pass. Now, in the case of Myanmar, we want that leadership. We want to see that. You know, the U.K., the U.S., the French, the like-minded country, need to take leadership and introduce the resolution, regardless of fear of veto, and that’s what we’re calling for. And if they are committed and if they show the political leadership, and I think the resolution – it is – there is a prospect of passing a resolution at the U.N. Security Council.

Mr. Poling: Thanks, Wai.

Let me close with this: We’ve got a couple questions I broadly put in the kind of sanctions basket and so, you know, this is often the U.S.’s favorite or default policy tool. So I wonder, Mike, Moe, do you have thoughts? Are sanctions effective? Can they be effective? What kind of sanctions would be effective, if so?

Ms. Thuzar: Well, very quickly –

Dr. Martin: Moe, do you want to start?

Ms. Thuzar: Yeah. Sorry, Mike.

Greg, very quickly: I think the kind of sanctions that people are looking for is the ones that really cut off the military’s revenue stream. And so targeted sanctions approach that has been taken this time around is finding, I guess, more receptivity or traction. But again, of course, you know, there will be the inevitable consequences, because there are people whose livelihoods, whose
employment in the country, whose very survival I think is all intricately kind of caught up in all of this.

But the sentiment and the minds of the people in Myanmar right now is that they are aware of the limitations and the sluggishness of international diplomacy. And they have – I think they’ve shifted. Early on, in the months after the coup, you know, the sentiment was, you know, we need the international community to come in and intervene somehow, and we need the invocation of the Responsibility to Protect Principle. But that’s now shifted very much towards, look, we’re in this. It’s our future. And we have to take things into our own hands.

So I think they are – at this point in time, where sentiments are such that, you know, they are willing to go through hardships to deal with this once and for all, and then – and then look at recovery, rebuilding, and so on. So I think that’s how attitudes towards sanctions, I think, across a broad swath of people in Myanmar, the Myanmar people are viewing it. But it’s very much now focused on cut the revenue and income that prolongs the junta’s life and longevity.

Dr. Martin: You know, what I would add, first, back when I was working at CRS and was meeting with senior officials of the previous military junta, the very first topic they wanted to talk about was now to get rid of the sanctions the United States, the international community had on us. And I would argue that one of the major reasons that they implemented the political changes that they did was to get rid of those sanctions. So I think sanctions can be, done properly, quite effective.

Second point, and I would echo what Moe is saying. From my communications with people in the country. They said – they’re basically saying: Don’t worry about it harming us. Cut off the military junta’s revenue. They have informal ways of taking care of themselves temporarily economically inside the country. So the counselor’s caution about we don’t want to do harm to the domestic population, what I’m hearing from the domestic population is: Please don’t worry about that. Hurt the junta financially as much as you possibly can. So the targeted, limited sanctions have been somewhat effective, but perhaps are not as broad.

But it isn’t just sanctions that the United States can look at. I think we need to start looking at ways that we can actually more creatively and productively help the opposition, beyond meeting with them and saying, you know, we support you. I thought it was interesting that he talked about, you know, opposition groups, pro-democracy groups. He didn’t mention the ethnic armed organizations at all. I think there should be open meetings with them. I think we should really include them in that. They’re part of the NUCC. They need to be part of the political solution in the country.
And even beyond that, Moe, you talked about the propensity for ASEAN and the U.N. to provide humanitarian assistance through state agencies. There isn’t a state right now in Myanmar that’s effective. We need to look at nonstate ways of delivery. And the Thai Border Consortium has those experience. We used to do it, the United States. The international community used to do it, without having the government in Yangon or Naypyidaw involved in delivery of humanitarian assistance. There are mechanisms whereby that could be done. But right now, from what I heard from the counselor, we’re still sort of locked into this framework of we need to use normal diplomatic channels to do things. We’re not in a normal diplomatic environment.

Provide assistance, food, supplies. I suspect that, for example, the Chinland Defense Force, along with the Chin National Front would be happy to provide security for international relief agencies providing humanitarian assistance in Chin state. Similarly, the KNU and the KNLA would be happy to do that along the Thai border, if we’re open to it. I’m not necessarily advocating it, but I think these alternative channels for humanitarian assistance delivery should be considered, because it’ll bolster the opposition. It’ll make it more likely that the Tatmadaw will see that they’re facing an existential threat and unless they change their path, their choice is either victory on the battlefield or destruction. And right now, it looks more like destruction is the eventual outcome for the Tatmadaw.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Mike. Well, we are over time, not surprising given the attempt to deal with such a complex issue in just an hour. I want to thank Mike Martin and Moe Thuzar, as well as Wai Wai Nu had to hop off, and of course Counselor Derek Chollet. And thank all of you for tuning in. Unfortunately, this tragedy isn’t going anywhere anytime soon, so I think this is exactly the kind of detailed and honest conversations we need to be having more around town. So thank you all very much, and stay safe.