

# Reinterpretation of the Non-Interference Norm in ASEAN Post-2021 Myanmar Coup: A Constructivist Analysis of Regional Governance Contestation

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## Abstract

The Myanmar military coup on February 1, 2021, has tested ASEAN's core principles like never before. The long-standing non-interference policy, central to the "ASEAN Way," has been challenged for its effectiveness in addressing Myanmar's political and humanitarian crises. This article explores how the crisis prompted a reinterpretation of the non-interference norm through debates among ASEAN leaders. Using a constructivist lens and the norm contestation framework, it analyzes official ASEAN documents, the 2021 Five-Point Consensus, and statements from member states. Early results suggest that the non-interference norm has evolved from a strict stance to a more conditional approach. The decision to exclude the Myanmar junta from top ASEAN meetings demonstrates a member-driven shift toward greater normative flexibility, which is unusual in the region's history. Overall, this situation highlights a moment of norm contestation that prompts a modest reorganization of Southeast Asian regional governance.

## Keywords

ASEAN Way, Non-Interference, Constructivism



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## INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment through the Bangkok Declaration on August 8, 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has built a regional order that is not solely based on the distribution of material power but on a social construct of a collective identity known as the ASEAN Way (Arundhati et al., 2025). Ontologically, this order is a 'human artifact' born from interactions among regional elites in an effort to maintain regional autonomy amid pressure from great powers during the Cold War. The main foundation of this identity is the norm of non-interference, which philosophically functions as a 'shield' for the sovereignty of relatively fragile post-colonial states. The norm of non-interference in Southeast Asia is rooted in a 'Lockean' anarchic culture, where states mutually recognize the absolute right to govern their domestic affairs without external intervention. This principle was then

formally institutionalized through the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), which serves as a code of ethics in inter-state relations (Itasari, 2013). In this context, sovereignty is understood not only as a legal status but also as a constitutive identity that determines the legitimacy of membership within the regional community. For decades, this norm has effectively maintained regional stability by freezing potential conflicts and avoiding open confrontation, thus forming what is often called a nascent security community (Rantau Itasari, 2015).

However, contemporary dynamics show that this norm is no longer fully capable of addressing the complexity of regional challenges. The military coup by Tatmadaw in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, became a normative shock that shook ASEAN's intersubjective consensus. Repressive actions against civilians not only triggered a humanitarian crisis but also created an 'ontological dissonance' within ASEAN's identity as a community that upholds caring and sharing values. On one hand, ASEAN is called upon to respond to the crisis to maintain moral legitimacy and international credibility; on the other hand, the norm of non-interference limits the organization's room for more decisive action (Xiao, 2009). This condition sparked an existential debate about the relevance of the ASEAN Way in the 21st century. ASEAN's inability to respond effectively to the Myanmar crisis not only threatens internal cohesion but also potentially weakens ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific geopolitical architecture. In this situation, the meaning of the norm of non-interference is no longer taken for granted but becomes an open arena for contestation and reinterpretation. Therefore, the question that arises is no longer whether ASEAN still upholds this norm but how the norm is renegotiated to remain relevant in the face of regional stability demands and humanitarian protection.

To understand these dynamics, this research employs a social constructivist approach as the main analytical framework. Referring to Alexander Wendt's thinking, the international structure is not determined solely by material power but by ideas, norms, and identities formed through social interactions ('anarchy is what states make of it'). In the ASEAN context, the interests of member states are not static entities but are continuously shaped and reproduced through socialization processes within regional institutions. Furthermore, changes in the norm of non-interference are analyzed through the concept of 'constitutive localization' proposed by Amitav Acharya (2018). This theory explains that global norms—such as democracy and human rights—are not adopted directly but undergo an adaptation process through cognitive priors embedded in the region's collective memory. This process involves mechanisms of pruning (eliminating elements deemed incompatible) and grafting

(incorporating compatible elements), resulting in a distinctive and contextual norm form.

Additionally, this dynamic can also be understood through the norm life cycle framework by Finnemore and Sikkink (Sikkink, 2010), which describes how norms evolve from emergence to internalization. However, in the case of Myanmar, what occurs is not merely norm diffusion but norm contestation, as explained by Antje Wiener (Wiener, 2018). This contestation arises when the intersubjective meaning of the norm of non-interference is again questioned under crisis pressures, opening space for reinterpretation. In this process, norm entrepreneurs—such as Indonesia—play a crucial role in pushing the shift from a rigid principle of non-interference toward a more responsive approach, such as “non-indifference.” Finally, the concept of productive power helps explain how ASEAN discursively constructs the meaning and boundaries of behavior deemed legitimate within the regional community. Through official practices and discourse, ASEAN not only reflects norms but also produces social realities that determine the position and role of member states. In the context of the Myanmar crisis, this power is evident in efforts to redefine sovereignty—from its original understanding as an absolute right to non-interference to a more conditional concept emphasizing state responsibility to its people (sovereignty as responsibility or stewardship).

Thus, this research starts from the assumption that the norm of non-interference in ASEAN is not a static principle but a dynamic norm continuously negotiated and reconstructed through social interactions, idea contestation, and contextual pressures. The main question posed is: to what extent does ASEAN still maintain the traditional norm of non-interference, and is there an ongoing process of reinterpretation of this norm in response to the Myanmar crisis and contemporary regional dynamics?

## **METHODS**

This research employs a qualitative approach with a constructivist paradigm that emphasizes the analysis of meaning, ideas, and social representations within the dynamics of regional international relations. This approach was chosen because norm changes—particularly the non-interference norm within ASEAN—cannot be understood solely through material variables but through social constructions formed by interactions, discourses, and practices of actors. Therefore, this study aims to reveal how the meaning of these norms is negotiated, debated, and reconstructed in the context of the Myanmar crisis. To achieve this, the research combines two main methods: discourse analysis and process tracing. Discourse analysis is used to

examine official ASEAN documents as representations of elite regional discourse practices. The documents analyzed include the ASEAN Charter (Kurnianingsih & Kurniawan, 2025; Shimizu, 2011), the Five-Point Consensus (Haacke, 2025; Laksmana, 2022; Tene, 2024), and the Chair's Statements from ASEAN Summits from 2021 to 2023. The main focus of the analysis is on the "speech acts" of the leaders, especially in how their language choices reflect shifts in collective attitudes. The shift from initially normative and diplomatic expressions, such as "deep concern," to more assertive expressions like "sharp criticism," is understood as an indicator of a normative boundary shift within the ASEAN Way practice.

Additionally, the process tracing method is used to systematically track the sequence of events following the Myanmar coup and the interactions among actors that contributed to regional policy changes. Through this approach, the study seeks to identify causal relationships between regional political dynamics and the evolution of the non-interference norm. Particular attention is given to Indonesia's role as an active norm entrepreneur pushing for a new consensus through intensive diplomacy, including shuttle diplomacy practices. From this tracing, crucial moments indicating norm relaxation can be identified, such as ASEAN's decision not to invite Myanmar's military junta representatives to high-level meetings—an unprecedented step within the traditional non-interference framework. To strengthen the validity of the findings, the study also applies data triangulation techniques. Besides relying on official documents, the researcher utilizes various secondary sources, including academic journal articles, international relations textbooks, and reports from regional think tanks such as the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute and the ASEAN Studies Center. This triangulation aims to ensure that interpretations of norm changes are not partial but supported by a comprehensive understanding of the broader socio-political context of Southeast Asia.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Philosophically, Southeast Asia's regional order is closely linked to shared ideas that shape the region's collective identity, known as the ASEAN Way. From a constructivist view, as Alexander Wendt explains, the international structure is not fixed but developed through social interactions and shared meanings. In ASEAN, the norm of non-interference is more than just a formal rule; it is a fundamental element that defines member states as sovereign entities respecting each other's domestic affairs (Acharya, 2014). Consequently, this norm underpins the ontological foundation that sustains the regional community.

For decades, ASEAN's traditional diplomacy has been rooted in the principle of non-interference, prioritizing informality, deliberation, and consensus in decision-making. From a constructivist perspective, this is viewed not merely as an institutional norm but as an internalized set of shared values that shape the expectations of member states. As Haacke (Haacke, 2013) explains, this pattern of interaction helps nations with diverse political systems—ranging from democracies to authoritarian regimes—remain part of a growing security community, where mutual trust diminishes the likelihood of open conflict. Furthermore, the informal ASEAN Way serves as an adaptive approach, providing flexibility in accommodating each country's domestic political sensitivities. Instead of relying on strict legal enforceability, ASEAN prefers discreet diplomacy and face-saving strategies aligned with Southeast Asian cultural values. In this context, consensus signifies more than a procedural formality; it embodies collective legitimacy, equality, and respect for sovereignty. Here, regional stability is achieved not through coercive measures like sanctions or interventions, but through the internalization of norms that voluntarily limit state conduct. As Wendt (1992) argues, compliance with these norms is motivated not solely by material interests or external pressure but by socialized identities and interests. In essence, ASEAN nations do not merely "observe" the norm of non-interference—they embody it as part of their collective identity.

Despite its success, this mechanism presents a paradox. While the norm of non-interference has maintained peace by avoiding open conflict, it also restricts ASEAN from addressing internal issues with cross-border impacts, such as human rights violations or political crises (Acharya, 2004). As a result, the diplomatic culture that has traditionally supported ASEAN can also hinder its ability to adapt to new challenges. The military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, introduced a normative shock within the constructivist framework. This event not only destabilized Myanmar's domestic politics but also challenged the intersubjective consensus that underpins the ASEAN Way. The military's repression of civilians created ontological dissonance—a mismatch between Myanmar's actual practices and ASEAN's normative identity as a 'Community that Cares and Shares'. In this context, the norm of non-interference, once a tool for stability, became a normative dilemma, limiting ASEAN's capacity to respond effectively to the humanitarian crisis (Frost, 2009).

The Myanmar crisis initiated a process of norm contestation, leading to renewed debates over sovereignty and non-interference. According to Acharya's (2004) theory of constitutive localization, ASEAN's norm changes do not happen

through straightforward adoption of global values but through a selective adaptation process. Key regional actors, particularly norm entrepreneurs like Indonesia, actively promote reinterpretations of the non-interference norm to better align with humanitarian needs and regional stability (Raharja, 2022). During this process, the rigid aspects of Westphalian sovereignty are softened, as they are seen as insufficient for modern crises. Instead, values such as humanitarian responsibility and regional stability are integrated into ASEAN diplomatic practices, making norms more flexible and context-specific (Heng, 2014).

The tangible result of reinterpreting the non-interference norm is exemplified by the emergence of the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) in April 2021. From a discourse analysis viewpoint, the 5PC is more than just a policy statement; it functions as a collective speech act with a performative role in shaping social reality (Yoshimatsu, 2023). Drawing on J.L. Austin's ideas and their application in international relations, this speech act not only articulates the crisis but also establishes a new normative framework for ASEAN's responses. In essence, the 5PC signifies that ASEAN is not merely discussing the Myanmar crisis but also actively redefining the boundaries of legitimacy for actions within the regional community (Kathuria, 2025). This instrument signifies a move towards a conditional form of engagement, where non-interference is seen not as an absolute rule immune to exceptions but as a contingent principle reliant on members' adherence to collective commitments, especially regarding human protection. In this context, the right to non-interference in internal matters is viewed not as an inherent right but as a normative privilege that can be negotiated if a country's actions threaten regional stability or ASEAN's legitimacy as a regional body.

Furthermore, this shift reflects a deeper conceptual transformation, namely from the paradigm of 'sovereignty as isolation' to 'sovereignty as stewardship.' In the old paradigm, sovereignty was understood as the exclusive authority of a state over its territory and population without external interference. However, in the new paradigm, sovereignty begins to be associated with the normative responsibility of the state toward the welfare of its people and its contribution to regional stability. This transformation aligns with the development of global discourse such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P), although within the ASEAN context, the concept has undergone localization processes to remain consistent with the region's cognitive priorities that emphasize state sovereignty. The Five-Point Consensus (5PC) serves as a convergence point between global normative pressures and local resistance, embodying a typical ASEAN compromise. It balances the principle of non-

interference, neither entirely abandoned nor rigidly upheld. This ambiguity reflects ASEAN's adaptive strategy for balancing international legitimacy with member states' political sensitivities. As a result, the 5PC is more than a temporary policy; it signifies a broader normative shift in the evolution of the ASEAN Way (Indraswari, 2022; Weatherbee, 2025).

A clear example of this reinterpretation of the norm of non-interference is the emergence of the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) in April 2021. Seen through discourse analysis, the 5PC is more than just a policy document; it functions as a collective speech act with performative effects that influence social reality. Building on J.L. Austin's ideas and applied within international relations, this speech act not only describes the crisis but also establishes a new normative framework for ASEAN's responses. Essentially, the 5PC allows ASEAN to speak about the Myanmar crisis while simultaneously redefining what actions are considered legitimate within the regional community (Haacke, 2013). This instrument signifies a move towards a form of conditional engagement, where non-interference is no longer seen as an absolute rule immune to exceptions. Instead, it is considered a contingent principle that depends on whether member states uphold their collective commitments, particularly in human protection (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Within this framework, the right to non-interference in domestic matters is viewed not as an automatic right but as a normative privilege that can be negotiated if a state's actions threaten regional stability or ASEAN's legitimacy as a regional body (Bimantara & Nugraha, 2026).

Furthermore, this change signifies a deeper conceptual shift from viewing 'sovereignty as isolation' to seeing it as 'sovereignty as stewardship.' In the previous model, sovereignty meant the state's exclusive control over its territory and population without outside interference. Meanwhile, the new view increasingly links sovereignty to the state's normative duty to ensure the welfare of its citizens and support regional stability (Agussalim & Wicaksono, 2024). This shift matches the global discourse like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), but within ASEAN, the idea has been localized to align with regional priorities that highlight national sovereignty. Thus, the 5PC can be understood as the meeting point between global normative pressure and local resistance, resulting in a characteristic ASEAN compromise. It does not entirely abandon the principle of non-interference, but it also no longer upholds it in a rigid form (Acharya, 2014; Pye & Acharya, 2001). This ambiguity actually reflects ASEAN's adaptive strategy in maintaining a balance between the need for international legitimacy and the political sensitivities of its

member states. Therefore, the 5PC is not just a temporary policy instrument but a representation of a broader normative transition phase in the evolution of the ASEAN Way.

A clear example of this reinterpretation of the non-interference norm is the emergence of the Five-Point Consensus (5PC) in April 2021. From a discourse analysis standpoint, the 5PC isn't merely a policy document but a collective speech act with performative effects that shape social reality. Drawing on J.L. Austin's ideas and applying them within international relations, this speech act does more than describe the crisis; it also establishes a new normative framework for ASEAN's response (Austin, 2014). Therefore, through the 5PC, ASEAN is not only addressing the Myanmar crisis but also redefining the boundaries of legitimacy for regional actions. This instrument indicates a shift towards conditional engagement. Rather than considering non-interference as an absolute rule, it is viewed as a contingent principle reliant on member states fulfilling collective obligations, especially regarding human protection. In this context, the right to non-interference in domestic affairs is not an inherent right but a normative privilege that can be negotiated if a country's actions jeopardize regional stability and ASEAN's legitimacy as a regional body.

Furthermore, this shift reflects a deeper conceptual transformation, from the paradigm of 'sovereignty as isolation' to 'sovereignty as stewardship.' In the old paradigm, sovereignty was understood as a state's exclusive authority over its territory and population, free from external interference. In the new paradigm, sovereignty is increasingly associated with the state's normative responsibility for the welfare of its people and its contribution to regional stability. This transformation aligns with global discourses such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), although within ASEAN, the concept has undergone localization to remain consistent with the region's cognitive priorities that emphasize state autonomy. Thus, the 5PC can be understood as a meeting point between global normative pressure and local resistance, resulting in a form of ASEAN's characteristic compromise. It does not entirely abandon the principle of non-interference, but it no longer upholds it in a rigid form. This ambiguity reflects ASEAN's adaptive strategy for maintaining a balance between the need for international legitimacy and the political sensitivities of its member states. Therefore, the 5PC is not merely a temporary policy instrument but a representation of a broader normative transition phase in the evolution of the ASEAN Way.

The Myanmar crisis ultimately forced ASEAN to confront an internal contradiction that has long been latent: the tension between a normative commitment to state sovereignty and the moral and political demands to protect humanity (Agussalim & Wicaksono, 2024). From a constructivist perspective, this contradiction does not merely reflect conflicting interests but reveals a clash between two internalized identity structures within ASEAN: on the one hand, a community of sovereign states upholding the principle of non-interference, and on the other, a normative community claiming to be a caring and sharing community. This tension shows that the norm of non-interference is no longer able to function as a fully stable “binding glue” but instead becomes an arena of contestation that opens space for reinterpretation.

Furthermore, this crisis reveals that the stability ASEAN has built so far tends to be a form of negative peace—absence of open conflict—rather than a positive peace accompanied by social justice or human rights protection. In situations like Myanmar, this approach shows its limitations, as non-intervention can prolong domestic suffering and create cross-border implications, including refugee flows, political instability, and pressures on regional legitimacy (Amasti, 2016). Thus, the Myanmar crisis serves as a “stress test” for ASEAN’s normative capacity to reconcile the principle of sovereignty with the demands of humanity. In the increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific, this dynamic has broader strategic implications. ASEAN centrality—long the foundation of the region’s role in the regional architecture—is no longer determined solely by geographic position or institutional mechanisms but also by ASEAN’s normative credibility as a rule-maker and norm entrepreneur (Muhammad Ammar Kyanto, 2019). When ASEAN fails to respond effectively to its member states’ internal crises, its legitimacy as a leader in broader forums, such as the East Asia Summit or the ASEAN Regional Forum, is also called into question by external actors.

ASEAN's capacity to stay central relies on its ability to adapt and reinterpret norms related to current issues (Bimantara & Nugraha, 2026). Reconsidering non-interference is not just a technical matter but a vital effort for ASEAN to remain a significant actor amid changing regional dynamics. If ASEAN can effectively reframe these norms—such as adopting a conditional engagement or non-indifference approach—it could enhance its role as a key normative influence in the Indo-Pacific. Otherwise, failing to adapt may reduce ASEAN to a symbolic forum with diminishing strategic importance.

Reinterpreting the non-interference norm in ASEAN shows that regional norms are dynamic social constructs, not fixed entities. They are continuously reshaped through actor interactions, idea contestation, and changing contextual pressures. Within constructivism, this suggests that ASEAN's normative stability depends on its capacity to adapt while maintaining its core identity, rather than on rigid principles. The norm of non-interference, once seen as absolute, is becoming more flexible and context-dependent, aligning with the growing need for collective responses to humanitarian crises. This change also highlights ASEAN's effort to balance two competing normative logics: one prioritizing state sovereignty, autonomy, and non-intervention, and the other emphasizing collective responsibility to protect communities from violence and instability. Reinterpreting norms does not erase previous principles; instead, it redefines them to remain relevant amidst new challenges. Essentially, ASEAN is not abandoning the ASEAN Way but gradually transforming it from within through a consensus-driven process of normative adaptation.

This insight emphasizes that ASEAN's sustainability as a regional organization relies not only on its institutional strengths and the material interests of member states but also on upholding normative legitimacy both internally and externally. In the current global landscape, characterized by complex and multidimensional crises, ASEAN's ability to adapt its norms is vital for maintaining its influence within the Indo-Pacific region (Kathuria, 2025). Therefore, reinterpreting the principle of non-interference reflects a broader normative shift, as ASEAN seeks to redefine its role—ensuring stability and fostering a more inclusive, responsive, and people-centric regional governance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the constructivist analysis above, it can be concluded that the 2021 Myanmar crisis acted as a catalyst for normative change within ASEAN. The norm of non-interference was not completely abolished but was deeply reinterpreted from strict sovereignty to a form of 'principled flexibility' or "non-indifference." Through localization efforts, regional norm entrepreneurs successfully linked global humanitarian principles with regional identity while respecting member states' sovereignty. This shift shows that the ASEAN Way can adapt and redefine itself during crises that threaten its core identity. Although practical challenges remain, the elite-level change—evidenced by the 5PC and the exclusion of the junta—marks a new chapter in Southeast Asian history, where sovereignty is no longer seen as an absolute shield against human rights abuses. ASEAN's future influence in the Indo-

Pacific depends on its members' ability to develop a collective identity as a community that not only 'shares' security challenges but also genuinely 'cares' about sovereignty as the basis for regional stability. Thus, the Myanmar crisis is more than a diplomatic challenge; it is a moment that prompts ASEAN to rethink its core philosophy toward establishing a fairer and more humane regional order.

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