

**YANGON UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS
DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED ECONOMICS
MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PROGRAMME**

**THE ROLE OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN ENHANCING
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS:
A CASE STUDY OF MYANMAR'S ENGAGEMENT
WITH ASEAN**

**NWE NI MYO AUNG
EMPA – 67 (20th BATCH)**

JUNE, 2025

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A thesis submitted as a partial fulfillment towards the requirement for the Degree of
Master of Public Administration (MPA)

Supervised By:

Dr. Su Su Myat
Professor and Head of Department
Department of Applied Economics
Yangon University of Economics

Submitted By:

Ma Nwe Ni Myo Aung
EMPA II - 67
EMPA 20th Batch
(2023 – 2025)

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This is to certify that this thesis entitled “**The Role of Public Diplomacy in Enhancing International Relations: A Case Study of Myanmar’s Engagement with ASEAN**” submitted as a partial fulfillment towards the requirement for the Degree of Master of Public Administration has been accepted by the Board of Examiners.

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Dr. Khin Thu Thu Thein
(Examiner)
Lecturer
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Yangon University of Economics

JUNE, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of public diplomacy in enhancing international relations, focusing on Myanmar's engagement within ASEAN. It explores how Myanmar has used public diplomacy strategies, including cultural exchanges, media outreach, and people-to-people diplomacy, to shape regional perceptions and promote cooperative ties. The study employs qualitative analysis of secondary data sources and survey findings to evaluate the effectiveness of these efforts, identifying key achievements and persistent challenges. Results show that while Myanmar has made notable contributions through events such as the SEA Games and UNESCO nominations, its public diplomacy is constrained by political instability and limited regional trust. The thesis also analyzes ASEAN's cautious response and institutional norms such as non-interference, highlighting both the limitations and opportunities for Myanmar to strengthen its soft power. The findings offer practical recommendations for enhancing public diplomacy and improving Myanmar's regional image, contributing to wider academic discussions on diplomacy, regional cooperation, and international engagement.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	= Associations of Southeast Asian Nations
BIMSEC	= Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
CIA	= Central Intelligence Service
SAC	= State Administration Council
U.S.	= United States
USIA	= United States Information Agency
VOA	= Voice of America

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale for the Study

In the contemporary world, public diplomacy can be regarded as a mechanism to deploy soft power. While the army and hard power are considered as the same concept, the public diplomacy is not the same thing as soft power. This is because an international actor can have public diplomacy, but not soft power. (Cull, 2001)

Public diplomacy has become an essential tool for nations to shape their international image, foster mutual understanding, and build stronger regional and global relationships. In the context of Myanmar's engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), public diplomacy plays a critical role in promoting national interests, enhancing regional cooperation, and managing international perceptions. Given Myanmar's geopolitical significance and its evolving diplomatic engagements within ASEAN, this study seeks to explore how public diplomacy contributes to strengthening its international relations.

Myanmar's interactions with ASEAN have been marked by both cooperation and challenges, particularly in areas such as political transitions, economic integration, and regional security. As ASEAN operates on the principles of consensus and non-interference, Myanmar's ability to effectively engage with the bloc depends not only on traditional diplomatic efforts but also on public diplomacy initiatives, including cultural exchanges, media engagement, and people-to-people connections. Understanding the role of public diplomacy, in this context, is crucial for assessing how Myanmar navigates its regional standing and fosters constructive relationships within ASEAN.

Furthermore, this study is significant in light of the increasing relevance of soft power in international affairs. While traditional diplomacy remains vital, public diplomacy offers an alternative approach to influence perceptions and build trust. By examining Myanmar's public diplomacy efforts, this research aims to provide insights into their effectiveness in strengthening regional ties and enhancing Myanmar's image

within ASEAN. Additionally, the study contributes to the broader discourse on the impact of public diplomacy in regional organizations, offering lessons for policymakers and diplomatic practitioners.

Ultimately, this research is intended to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks of public diplomacy and practical applications within regional cooperation. It provides a case-specific analysis of Myanmar's strategies, challenges, and opportunities in leveraging public diplomacy for enhanced international relations with ASEAN, contributing to both academic literature and policy recommendations.

However, despite the recognized importance of public diplomacy, there is limited scholarly analysis on how Myanmar has employed these tools within the ASEAN framework, particularly in light of its political complexities and regional perception issues. The central problem this study addresses is the gap in understanding how Myanmar's public diplomacy efforts influence its international relations within ASEAN, and whether these efforts are effective in enhancing regional cooperation and soft power.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to explore how public diplomacy helps Myanmar build stronger relations within ASEAN. Specifically, it aims to:

1. To understand what public diplomacy is and why it matters in international relations.
2. To examine Myanmar's main public diplomacy efforts within ASEAN—such as cultural events, media communication, and regional partnerships.
3. To assess how effective these efforts are in shaping regional perceptions and improving Myanmar's image.
4. To identify key challenges and possible opportunities to improve Myanmar's public diplomacy.
5. To suggest practical ways to strengthen Myanmar's public diplomacy and support its role in ASEAN.

1.3 Method of Study

This study adopts a qualitative research method, emphasizing a case study approach to explore the role of public diplomacy in enhancing international relations, specifically focusing on Myanmar's engagement with ASEAN. Given the complexity of diplomatic relations and the intangible nature of public diplomacy, qualitative methods are best suited for uncovering nuanced insights, historical context, and subjective interpretations. The research design is structured to analyze secondary data sources. Secondary data includes academic literature, policy analysis, international reports, journal articles, and digital content relevant to public diplomacy and ASEAN relations.

The method of study relies heavily on content analysis and thematic interpretation. By examining the language, tone, and messaging in official communications, this study identifies key themes and strategies within Myanmar's public diplomacy framework. This is supplemented by a review of ASEAN's responses and regional media discourse to assess the effectiveness and reception of these diplomatic efforts.

The qualitative approach enables a deep, context-rich understanding of Myanmar's evolving strategies and challenges in shaping regional perceptions and maintaining its ASEAN membership during periods of political instability. Ethical considerations are observed by ensuring that all sources are properly cited, public data is transparently handled, and no sensitive or confidential information is used without permission.

1.4 Scope and Limitation of the Study

This study examines the role of public diplomacy in enhancing international relations, with particular emphasis on Myanmar's engagement within the ASEAN regional framework. The scope of the research encompasses both theoretical and empirical dimensions of public diplomacy, offering a comprehensive overview of its conceptual foundations and practical applications in regional cooperation. Specifically, it explores how Myanmar has utilized various instruments of public diplomacy—including cultural exchange, media messaging, sports diplomacy, and strategic communication—to project soft power and engage constructively with ASEAN member states.

The analysis extends to the examination of ASEAN's institutional responses,

regional perceptions, and diplomatic posture toward Myanmar's public diplomacy initiatives. Furthermore, the study reviews survey data, media content, and official statements to assess the effectiveness of these efforts. It also identifies key challenges such as political constraints, reputational risks, and limited civil society participation, while recognizing emerging opportunities for reform and people-centered diplomacy. The research aims to provide targeted recommendations for improving Myanmar's public diplomacy strategies and strengthening regional cooperation in line with ASEAN norms and aspirations.

Despite this broad and multidimensional scope, several limitations affect the depth and comprehensiveness of the study. First, access to official government records and firsthand diplomatic documentation remains limited, which constrains the ability to verify internal processes or track informal policy shifts. Second, the research relies exclusively on secondary data sources—including academic literature, journalistic accounts, policy briefs, and institutional reports—which may be subject to interpretation bias or lack granular context. The absence of primary data, such as interviews with policymakers, diplomats, or ASEAN representatives, reduces the opportunity to capture internal deliberations or strategic rationales behind key diplomatic decisions. Third, the evolving nature of regional diplomacy presents challenges to the temporal validity of findings; ASEAN's approach to Myanmar may shift in response to political developments, leadership transitions, or external geopolitical pressures. Fourth, while the study emphasizes Myanmar's public diplomacy posture, it does not fully investigate comparative strategies employed by other ASEAN member states, limiting its ability to benchmark performance or identify cross-national best practices. Finally, due to linguistic and access barriers, the study may not account for informal or grassroots diplomatic efforts conducted at subnational levels, which are increasingly relevant in the age of networked diplomacy. Nonetheless, these limitations are mitigated through careful source triangulation, methodological rigor, and contextual analysis. The study contributes meaningful insights to academic discourse and policy development in the field of regional diplomacy and public communication.

1.5 Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of Myanmar's public diplomacy within the ASEAN framework. Chapter I introduces the research by outlining the rationale, objectives, methodology, and scope of the study. It establishes the significance of public diplomacy in regional cooperation and frames the central inquiry into Myanmar's diplomatic engagement with ASEAN. Chapter II presents a critical literature review, tracing the evolution of diplomacy and public diplomacy, examining theoretical frameworks, and situating Myanmar's regional interactions within broader scholarly discourse. It also explores the intersection of public diplomacy and regional integration, drawing on comparative studies and empirical findings. Chapter III provides contextual analysis of Myanmar's diplomatic posture, detailing its historical accession to ASEAN, the normative influence of the "ASEAN Way," and the strategic use of constructive engagement. This chapter situates Myanmar's public diplomacy within ASEAN's institutional culture and regional expectations. Chapter IV delivers the core analytical findings, integrating survey data, soft power indices, and regional opinion metrics to assess the effectiveness of Myanmar's public diplomacy. It evaluates public perception, regional trust, and strategic signaling, offering insights into both achievements and limitations. Chapter V concludes the study by synthesizing key findings and proposing actionable recommendations to enhance Myanmar's public diplomacy strategy. It emphasizes the need for inclusive, transparent, and people-centered approaches to rebuild regional trust and strengthen Myanmar's role within ASEAN.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Diplomacy

Diplomacy can be defined as “the mechanisms short of war deployed by an international actor to manage the international environment.” On the international plane, this actor can be a state, non-governmental organization (NGO), multi-national corporation, international organization, and non-state actor. (Cull, 2007)

Diplomacy, as the art of negotiation and communication, has its ancient roots dating back to Greek Antiquity and continued through the Roman and Ottoman Empires, with Italian city-states in the Middle Ages further developing diplomatic practices. The modern nation-state era introduced formal Ministries of Foreign Affairs, institutionalizing diplomacy as a central function of statecraft. Over time, diplomacy evolved from its traditional form to a new practice shaped by political and social transformations, public awareness, and advances in communication technologies. (Brovina, 2013)

The word “diplomacy” originates from the Greek word “diploma,” which referred to a document written on two-folded sheets, often given to envoys and containing instructions for the purpose of their mission. At its core, diplomacy is about communication. On the other hand, public diplomacy has a relatively recent history; the term emerged much later than traditional diplomacy, which has been practiced for centuries. In the contemporary world, public diplomacy represents an outcome of several connected concepts in social and political thought, including public opinion, civil society, soft power, and the information age. (Brovina, 2013)

2.2 Conceptual Framework of Public Diplomacy

There is still no universally agreed-upon definition or unified theory of public diplomacy. However, numerous widely cited definitions and theoretical frameworks exist. This situation encourages scholars and practitioners to further explore this area of diplomacy. Public diplomacy is an evolving and multi-disciplinary field. It connects

with several areas of study, including international relations, media studies, and public relations. Its core theories, concepts, and research methods are often drawn from these related disciplines. (Brovina, 2013)

The conceptual framework of public diplomacy is based on four main concepts: public opinion, civil society, soft power and diplomacy. In the era of globalization, the rise of information and communication technologies has transformed political practices by changing language, instruments, discourse and mechanism used in policymaking. As democracy and democratization became popular, at least in discourse, states were increasingly pushed to seek legitimacy. The globalization process made societies a political subject. Therefore, the importance and role of media and public opinion in politics started to increase. (Eksi, 2017)

The concepts of public opinion, civil society, soft power and diplomacy not only determine the conceptual framework but also provide a new unique definition of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy can be described as a new form of diplomacy based upon public opinion and civil society, implemented through soft power instruments. With regard to the concept of public opinion, public diplomacy is related to how a state explains its policies to foreign public and how it attempts to get their support. The fundamental premise of public diplomacy is that states seek to gain and maintain public support through strategic communication and engagement. In essence, public diplomacy is the art of winning hearts and minds. (Eksi, 2017)

New methods brought by public diplomacy into the field of diplomacy are perception management, image management, framing, agenda-setting, nation branding, marketing and advertisement. The new instruments brought by public diplomacy to the sphere of diplomacy are TV, radio, press, newspaper, and journals as the mass communication means; and social media, web blogs, and social networks as the Internet means. (Eksi, 2017)

2.2.1 Origins of Public Diplomacy

The term “public diplomacy” introduced into the discourse of political and international affairs during the Cold War era. It was coined by former U.S. diplomat Edmund Gullion to distinguish overseas governmental information activities from the negative connotations of “propaganda”. The origins of public diplomacy can be traced back to the period following the First and Second World Wars, notably marked by the doctrine of U.S. President Harry Truman and the implementation of the “Marshall Plan”

in 1948 (a U.S.-funded initiative to aid European economic recovery and resist Soviet influence), which aimed to rebuild Europe and counter the influence of the so-called “Iron Curtain” (a metaphor for the political and ideological divide between Western democracies and Eastern Communist countries during the Cold War). However, the basic idea of public diplomacy — government communication with foreign publics — is arguably as old as history itself. (Brovina, 2013)

During the Cold War, public diplomacy gained importance through the establishment of specialized agencies such as the United States Information Agency (USIA) in 1953 and its collaboration with intelligence services for information exchange. The USIA took over the role of Voice of America (VOA) in managing the official dissemination of U.S. government information abroad. During and after Second World War, activities by VOA and USIA were often described as “propaganda”. (Gurgu, Cociuban, 2016)

The term “propaganda” has developed negative connotations, especially associated with manipulation or misinformation. To distance themselves from the negative surrounding of the term “propaganda”, USIA and the U.S. government adopted the term “public diplomacy”. The USIA accepted the term of “public diplomacy” as descriptor of its official activity. The US State Department defines “public diplomacy” as US government-funded programs designed to inform or influence public opinion abroad. (Gurgu, Cociuban, 2016)

2.2.2 The Evolution of Public Diplomacy in the Media Age

Efforts such as the founding of the Free University in Strasbourg and later in Berlin, supported by the United States, aimed to counter communist influence among youth and students. The CIA-funded Radio Free Europe was another instrument used to promote democratic ideals. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the bipolar international system, foreign policy underwent significant changes. New paradigms in international relations emerged, reflecting the growing influence of media, non-governmental organizations, and multinational corporations, which expanded the scope of diplomacy into what is known as public diplomacy or media diplomacy.

“Media” serves as an important tool for public diplomacy, allowing both individuals and institutions to communicate ideas and shape political processes. Public diplomacy has been especially associated with the United States, which has used it as

a means to build credibility and prevent international conflicts. While strong military power remains a factor, the U.S. has effectively employed soft power strategies to influence global audiences, demonstrating the growing significance of public diplomacy in contemporary international relations. (Brovina, 2013)

Throughout the twentieth century, public diplomacy became increasingly interlinked with media systems, leveraging newspapers, television, the internet, and digital technologies to engage publics worldwide. Media's rapid technological development has extended the reach and power of public diplomacy, overcoming historical restrictions on freedom of expression and enabling new channels of communication. The twentieth century saw the rise of an expansive media industry that profoundly influences global public opinion and political discourse. The widespread distribution of digital programs such as CNN, BBC, VOA, and Radio Moscow exemplifies the global reach enabled by information technology.

2.2.3 Defining Public Diplomacy

Although the term "public diplomacy" has been used for decades, it has been given various different definitions. Contemporary scholarship offers varying definitions of public diplomacy, but most converge on its fundamental purpose. Signitzer and Coombs define public diplomacy as "a way, with which the government and the private individuals and groups can directly or indirectly influence those public opinions and positions, which directly influence the foreign politics decisions of another government". Similarly, Manheim characterizes it as "government to people" diplomatic activity, encompassing government efforts to influence public and elite opinion in another country and, through this, the foreign policy activities of a target country.

The USC Center on Public Diplomacy provides a more contemporary definition, describing public diplomacy as "the practice of engaging with foreign audiences to strengthen ties, build trust, and promote cooperation". This definition emphasizes the interactive and relationship-building aspects of modern public diplomacy, distinguishing it from earlier, more unidirectional approaches.

Public diplomacy differs from classical diplomacy primarily because it does not focus on cooperation, communication, and relations solely with foreign governments. Instead, it targets non-governmental institutions, organizations, and individuals in foreign countries. Often described as unofficial or telecommunicative diplomacy,

public diplomacy extends beyond traditional diplomatic channels. One theoretical approach that aligns with public diplomacy studies is the constructivist approach in international relations, which emphasizes the importance of identities, cultures, and social norms in world politics.

Public diplomacy is concerned with influencing public attitudes to shape the formation and execution of foreign policy. It incorporates aspects of international relations beyond government-to-government interaction, including the cultivation of foreign public opinion, cooperation between private groups and interests, and the role of foreign affairs reporting. It also involves communication among diplomats, foreign correspondents, and intercultural exchanges.

Public diplomacy typically operates in two modes: first, by providing political information aimed at influencing foreign populations on specific governmental issues, often with short-term objectives; second, by fostering long-term cultural and academic cooperation to build stronger ties with foreign societies. In essence, public diplomacy can be viewed as a form of international public relations. It promotes a state's foreign policy and interests by informing and influencing foreign publics about particular issues or the overall image of the state. This process helps create favorable opinions about a country's politics and national image.

The mechanisms of public diplomacy include the media, opinion leaders, research institutes (think tanks), non-governmental organizations, the business sector, academic communities, social and religious movements, and the broader foreign public. These tools aim to inform foreign audiences about a country's culture and values. Public relations and public information efforts are key components of public diplomacy. Within ministries of foreign affairs, public diplomacy functions to promote national interests by understanding, informing, presenting, and influencing foreign audiences. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which focuses on institutional government-to-government relations, public diplomacy engages directly with foreign publics and other societal institutions such as education, culture, business, and especially the media. (Brovina, 2013)

2.3 Public Diplomacy in International Relations

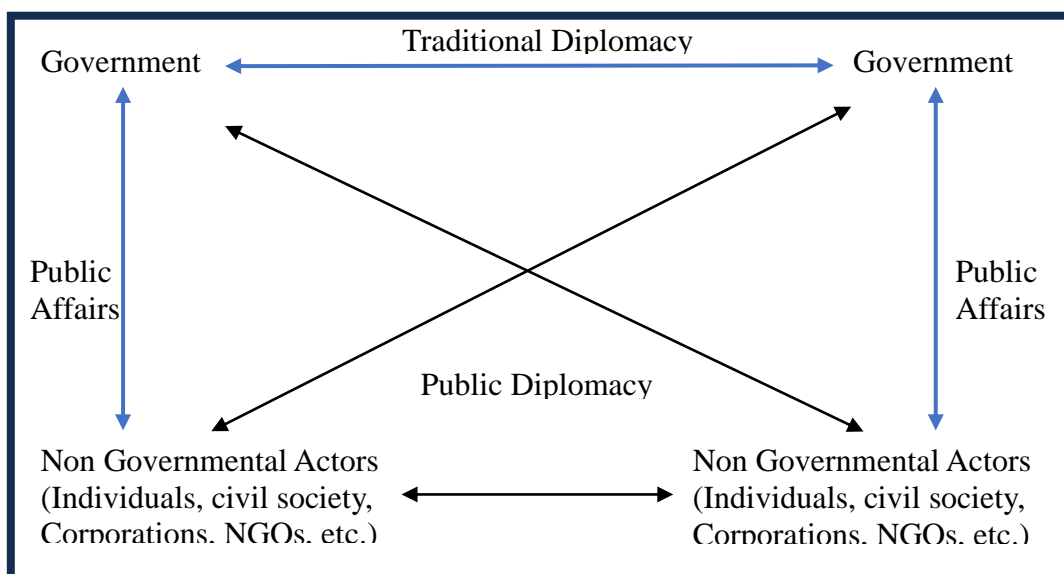
Public diplomacy has emerged as a vital instrument in contemporary international relations, particularly as global politics shift from traditional state-to-state interactions toward more inclusive, people-centered approaches. Unlike traditional

diplomacy, which focuses on closed negotiations between governments, public diplomacy engages foreign publics directly to shape perceptions, foster mutual understanding, and build long-term trust. In an increasingly interconnected world, where information flows freely across borders through digital platforms and global media, public diplomacy enables states to project soft power—defined by Joseph Nye as the ability to influence others through “attraction rather than coercion”.

Governments now seek to promote national interests not only through formal institutions but also through cultural exchanges, educational programs, international broadcasting, and digital engagement. This broader, more dynamic approach allows countries to navigate complex regional environments, manage reputational risks, and cultivate strategic relationships that support both diplomatic goals and regional cooperation. In the context of organizations such as ASEAN, public diplomacy becomes even more essential, providing a mechanism for dialogue and integration among diverse member states. (Gurgu, Cociuban, 2016)

In international relations, the term “public diplomacy” appeared to describe aspects of international relations, which manifests itself outside the interaction between state structures. There are actions that we attribute to public diplomacy and existed from ancient times. Leaders of Rome, for example, invited the boys of neighbouring countries to do their studies in Rome. This is an example of public diplomacy. (Gurgu, Cociuban, 2016)

Figure (2.1) Traditional Diplomacy vs. Public Diplomacy



Source: Adapted from *The Role of Public Diplomacy in International Relations in Full Process of Globalization* by H. Aliyev, 2017, ResearchGate

Researchers in the field of cultural diplomacy, as Kevin Mulcahy and Harv Feigenbaum emphasize the difference between public and cultural diplomacy in that public diplomacy is moving towards disseminating information and promoting policies in the short term, and the cultural diplomacy is establishing long-term relationships. (Gurgu, Cociuban, 2016)

2.4 Relations Between Public Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation

A growing body of academic literature has explored the intersection between public diplomacy and regional cooperation, recognizing the strategic importance of soft power in multilateral environments. Scholars have increasingly examined how states utilize public diplomacy tools—such as cultural outreach, educational exchanges, and media communication—to influence regional narratives and shape diplomatic outcomes. In the context of regional organizations such as ASEAN, public diplomacy is not only a means of external image-building but also a mechanism for internal integration, conflict management, and collective identity formation.

Previous studies have investigated both theoretical and empirical dimensions of public diplomacy, evaluating its role in regional frameworks across Asia, Africa, and Europe. These studies have also highlighted challenges such as credibility, audience reception, and the effectiveness of communication strategies in achieving foreign policy goals. Reviewing this existing scholarship provides valuable insights into how Myanmar's engagement with ASEAN through public diplomacy aligns with or diverges from broader regional patterns and best practices.

2.4.1 Theoretical Studies on Public Diplomacy and Integration

Academic literature on public diplomacy and regional cooperation has evolved significantly over the past decade, with scholars increasingly recognizing the interconnected nature of these phenomena. Aput, Kiamba, and Kagwanja's study on public diplomacy in regional integration addresses a crucial literature gap by examining “the most favorable public diplomacy approach that would give regional blocs room to take a more strategic role in policy communications”.

Their research suggests a reconsideration of public diplomacy approaches through two-way communication to both domestic and foreign audiences, emphasizing relationship building as the end goal of public diplomacy. The study reveals structural

challenges to grounded engagements and collaborative strategies, highlighting the need for more sophisticated approaches to public diplomacy in regional contexts.

2.4.2 Empirical Studies on ASEAN and Myanmar

Several significant studies have examined Myanmar's integration into ASEAN and the implications for regional cooperation. The volume "Myanmar in ASEAN: Regional Cooperation Experience" provides comprehensive analysis of Myanmar's accession and its political, security, and economic implications for both Myanmar and ASEAN.

Recent academic work has focused on ASEAN's crisis response mechanisms, particularly regarding Myanmar. Studies have examined the effectiveness of the Five-Point Consensus and alternative approaches to addressing the ongoing crisis. Research by institutions such as the Observer Research Foundation and various academic centers has analyzed ASEAN's diplomatic responses and their limitations.

2.4.3 Evaluation and Measurement Studies

The challenge of measuring public diplomacy effectiveness has generated substantial scholarly attention. The USC Center on Public Diplomacy has developed frameworks for conceptualizing public diplomacy evaluation as an integral part of strategic planning. Research has explored both traditional methods (surveys, interviews) and digital approaches to measuring public diplomacy impact.

Studies on digital public diplomacy measurement have emerged as particularly relevant, given the increasing importance of social media and digital platforms in diplomatic engagement. Research has examined how metrics such as engagement rates, reach, and conversation generation can provide insights into public diplomacy effectiveness.

2.4.4 Regional Integration and Cultural Diplomacy

Comparative studies on regional integration have examined how cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy contribute to regional cooperation in different contexts. Research on ECOWAS, for example, has explored how member states can use cultural assets to produce soft power and facilitate regional integration.

These comparative studies provide valuable insights for understanding ASEAN's approach to regional cooperation and the role of public diplomacy in

facilitating integration processes. The emphasis on social dialogue and participatory processes in regional integration resonates with ASEAN's consensus-based approach.

2.4.5 Contemporary Research Trends

Existing research in public diplomacy suffers from many weaknesses. Most research deal with the U.S. experiences during the Cold War. Some research in public diplomacy has increasingly focused on the programs and activities not only of the United States but also of other countries, as well as emerging international actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups, and individuals. Holbrooke (2001) stated, "Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or—if you really want to be blunt—propaganda." While this statement reflects the frustration felt by some American policymakers, it does little to define the core principles or distinctive features of public diplomacy.

Some scholars confused public diplomacy with propaganda, public relations (PR), international public relations (IPR), psychological warfare, or public affairs. It is also commonly linked with the concept of "soft power," and its effectiveness is frequently judged by public opinion polls or media coverage. However, most experts agree that public diplomacy involves more than these concepts. Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the intersection of public diplomacy, regional cooperation, and crisis management. Studies of China's Belt and Road Initiative, for example, have examined how public diplomacy can support multilateral cooperation and regional connectivity.

The literature reveals growing recognition that public diplomacy in regional contexts requires sustained, coordinated approaches that involve multiple stakeholders beyond government actors. This trend aligns with the "new public diplomacy" paradigm and its emphasis on network-based approaches to international relations.

CHAPTER III

MYANMAR'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ASEAN

3.1 ASEAN's Role in Regional Diplomacy

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plays a pivotal role in shaping regional diplomacy in Southeast Asia through its emphasis on consensus-building, non-interference, and cooperative engagement. Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN has evolved into a key regional organization fostering political stability, economic integration, and sociocultural cooperation among its member states. Its unique diplomatic approach—often referred to as the “ASEAN Way”—prioritizes dialogue, informality, and mutual respect, enabling member countries with diverse political systems and historical backgrounds to collaborate peacefully.

ASEAN's role extends beyond traditional diplomacy by serving as a platform for multilateral dialogue and conflict prevention, while promoting shared values such as sovereignty, development, and regional harmony. As a regional bloc, ASEAN not only mediates intra-regional challenges but also serves as a strategic bridge between Southeast Asia and external partners, making it an essential actor in regional diplomacy and a relevant framework for assessing Myanmar's public diplomacy efforts.

3.1.1 The ASEAN Way and Diplomatic Culture

ASEAN has developed a distinctive approach to regional diplomacy known as the “ASEAN Way,” which serves as a normative framework for conducting interstate relations and regional cooperation. The ASEAN Way consists of four key elements: non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, quiet diplomacy, non-use of force, and decision-making through consensus.

This diplomatic approach differs significantly from practices in other regions. As Katsumata notes, Southeast Asia has “strategically and cooperatively implemented the principle of non-interference while subduing bilateral tensions,” and has practiced decision-making through “extensive dialogues and consultation procedures” rather than majority votes. This normative framework has contributed to ASEAN's ability to

maintain regional peace and stability while accommodating diverse political systems among member states.

3.1.2 ASEAN as a Platform for Regional Integration

ASEAN serves as more than a traditional diplomatic forum; it functions as a comprehensive platform for regional integration across political, economic, and social dimensions. The organization has developed institutions and mechanisms that facilitate cooperation while managing great power competition in the region. ASEAN centrality—the concept that the organization should remain at the center of regional diplomatic activities—reflects this expanded role.

The Association’s approach to regional diplomacy emphasizes multilateral engagement and institution-building as means of managing regional challenges. This approach has proven particularly relevant in addressing complex issues that require sustained diplomatic engagement rather than quick fixes.

3.1.3 Constructive Engagement as Diplomatic Strategy

Constructive engagement is a tact in public diplomacy. It is used to build bridges with foreign populations, promote mutual understanding, and address difficult issues without confrontation. For instance, the United States (U.S.) engages with countries that have differing political systems, especially China. It uses cultural exchanges and educational diplomacy to foster dialogue and influence over time.

Constructive engagement helps a nation frame its narrative positively, even with critics. Engaging in student exchanges or media collaborations with a country experiencing diplomatic tensions sends a softer message than sanctions or propaganda. It Strengthens public diplomacy by emphasizing mutual respect and soft power.

ASEAN’s adoption of “constructive engagement” as a diplomatic strategy represents a significant evolution in regional diplomacy. This approach, which emerged as an alternative to sanctions and isolation, emphasizes continued dialogue and cooperation as means of influencing member states’ domestic policies.

Constructive engagement reflects ASEAN’s belief that inclusion and dialogue are more effective than exclusion and confrontation in promoting positive change. This strategy has been particularly relevant in ASEAN’s approach to Myanmar, representing an attempt to balance concerns about domestic political developments with the benefits of regional integration.

3.2 Myanmar's Diplomatic Engagements with ASEAN

Myanmar's diplomatic relationship with ASEAN has been shaped by a combination of historical caution, political necessity, and strategic calculation. Although the country initially declined to join the organization at its founding in 1967, citing concerns over neutrality and non-alignment, shifting regional dynamics in the 1990s prompted Myanmar to reconsider its position. Its formal accession to ASEAN in 1997 marked a turning point in its foreign policy, offering both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, ASEAN membership granted Myanmar a degree of regional legitimacy and economic cooperation amid growing international isolation.

On the other hand, Myanmar's internal political developments—particularly issues related to governance, human rights, and democratic reform—have frequently tested ASEAN's principles of non-interference and consensus. As a result, Myanmar's diplomatic engagement with the bloc has been characterized by cycles of cooperation, criticism, and cautious negotiation. Understanding this evolving relationship is crucial to assessing the effectiveness of Myanmar's public diplomacy and its role within the ASEAN framework.

3.2.1 Historical Context and Membership

Myanmar's relationship with ASEAN dates back to the organization's inception in 1967, when Burma (as it was then known) was first invited to join but declined due to concerns about maintaining neutrality. The country's adherence to non-alignment principles and fear of being drawn into anti-communist alliances initially prevented membership.

The dynamics changed in the early 1990s when both ASEAN and Myanmar found mutual benefits in engagement. For ASEAN, Myanmar's membership was seen as necessary for achieving comprehensive regional integration and preventing the country from falling entirely under Chinese influence. For Myanmar, ASEAN membership offered international recognition, economic opportunities, and protection from Western sanctions.

Myanmar officially became an ASEAN member in 1997, despite significant international opposition from the European Union and United States due to human rights concerns. The admission was controversial, with critics pointing to "inconsistency and double standards" when compared to Cambodia's delayed membership.

3.2.2 Post-Membership Diplomatic Relations

Following membership, Myanmar's engagement with ASEAN has been characterized by gradual integration despite ongoing political challenges. The country has participated in hundreds of cooperation and dialogue meetings annually, hosting numerous ASEAN events that have exposed it to regional and international influences.

Myanmar's 2014 ASEAN chairmanship marked a significant milestone in its diplomatic engagement with the organization. Despite initial doubts about the country's ability to manage logistical challenges and domestic controversies, assessments of Myanmar's chairmanship were largely positive, laying "a firm foundation" for future regional integration.

3.3 Myanmar's Public Diplomacy Strategies within ASEAN

Public diplomacy is an important tool to communicate and establish relations with other countries in the twenty-first century. It involves engaging with international audiences to foster mutual understanding, build trust, and encourage collaboration. It helps establish long-term relations through daily communication as well as sportive and cultural exchanges. In particular, public diplomacy is based on mobilizing soft power potential such as education, culture, sport, and etc.

The types of public diplomacy are cultural diplomacy, digital diplomacy, foreign aid diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy, diaspora diplomacy and religious diplomacy. It includes cultural diplomacy through the cultural activities and is distinguished as digital diplomacy through Internet means. Foreign aid and humanitarian diplomacy includes the policies of states to build approval, sympathy and positive perception of other countries by providing foreign development assistance. (Eksi, 2017)

In 2013, Myanmar hosted the Twenty-seventh Southeast Asian (SEA) Games—a milestone event that symbolized the country's efforts to re-engage with the international community after decades of isolation. Since the transfer of power to a semi-civilian government in March 2011, Myanmar embarked on a series of sweeping political and economic reforms aimed at ending its pariah status and integrating its economy into the global system. Under President Thein Sein, the government revised key financial and investment laws to attract foreign investment and simultaneously sought financial and technical assistance from the international community.

However, the legacy of military rule continued to pose significant challenges to Myanmar's efforts at national reconciliation and development. The government

recognized that in order to achieve its regional and international political and economic objectives, it needed to improve its national image and political legitimacy.

As a diverse and multi-ethnic nation, Myanmar's leadership understood that projecting a positive national image could enhance its national brand and increase its political credibility both regionally and globally. To this end, the decision to host the Twenty-seventh SEA Games was strategic. Planning for this Games had already begun prior to the transfer of power in 2011, reflecting the government's long-term objective to use the event as a platform for rebranding the country.

The Games provided a unique opportunity for the semi-civilian government—to promote its version of “top-down democratization” to both domestic and international audiences. Hosting Southeast Asia's largest regional sporting event after a 44-year hiatus allowed Myanmar to showcase its hospitality, national unity, and organizational capabilities. The country not only successfully managed the event but also topped the medal tally for the first time since joining the SEA Games in 1959, further boosting national pride and international perception.

In the aftermath of the Games, the phrase “That's Myanmar” became a proud expression for citizens who had long endured a period of international isolation and internal repression. The 2013 SEA Games thus became more than a sporting event—it served as a form of public diplomacy, through which Myanmar attempted to reshape its national image and gain recognition as a normal, cooperative member of the regional and global community. (Aung Ko Min, 2015)

Maung Maung Lwin's recent football achievements, particularly his match-winning goal for the ASEAN All-Stars against Manchester United, can be seen as a powerful act of sports diplomacy. His performance not only showcased his individual talent but also brought international attention to Myanmar, helping to elevate the nation's image through the global language of sport. As the first Burmese player to score against a world-renowned club and a key figure in regional football, he serves as a symbol of unity and pride for both Myanmar and the broader ASEAN community. His success exemplifies how athletes can play a crucial role in fostering goodwill, strengthening regional identity, and promoting a country's soft power on the global stage—demonstrating that sports can be an effective tool in diplomacy beyond traditional political channels.

Myanmar's effort to nominate Thanakha for UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is a clear example of public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy involves engaging with international audiences through culture, media, and education to shape a nation's image and influence. By promoting Thanakha—a traditional cosmetic and cultural symbol widely used in Myanmar—as a national heritage asset, the country is showcasing its unique identity to the global community.

The campaign has included nationwide participation, educational outreach, cultural festivals, and the establishment of a Myanmar Thanakha Day, all of which foster cultural pride while inviting international appreciation. If recognized by UNESCO, Thanakha would not only gain global visibility but also enhance Myanmar's soft power, encouraging cultural tourism and strengthening its image abroad. Through this initiative, Myanmar uses culture as a diplomatic tool to connect with the world beyond political discourse, demonstrating how intangible heritage can play a vital role in public diplomacy.

Myanmar's Thingyan Water Festival was officially inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on December 5, 2024. This marked a historic moment as the first time Myanmar received UNESCO recognition for an intangible cultural tradition. Thingyan, celebrated as the traditional New Year festival, is deeply rooted in Myanmar's history and involves communal water throwing, music, dance, almsgiving, and acts of merit.

This recognition highlights its role in fostering social harmony, intergenerational respect, and cultural identity. With this UNESCO status, Thingyan is not only preserved as a national treasure but also elevated as a symbol of Myanmar's soft power on the international stage. It encourages cultural tourism, academic interest, and greater appreciation of Myanmar's heritage, making it a key example of how intangible cultural practices can serve as effective tools for public diplomacy.

3.4 Key Achievements and Challenges in Myanmar's ASEAN Engagement

Although countries such as the U.S., China and even Thailand actively shape their global image, Myanmar has struggled due to lack of credibility and weak civil society. As a result, Myanmar has failed to tell its own story credibly to the world, letting others define it instead.

The international response to the actions of the State Administration Council (SAC) in Myanmar has been mixed and, at times, fragmented. Over four months after the SAC assumed authority on February 1, the United Nations General Assembly took

the rare step of formally voicing concern over the situation in the country. With 119 nations voting in favor, one against, and 36 abstaining, the resolution called for a halt to arms transfers to Myanmar and encouraged the restoration of democratic processes.

While the resolution represented a strong symbolic gesture by the global community, it also underscored the geopolitical complexities that have made coordinated action more difficult. European Union officials, including Deputy Head of Delegation Ambassador Silvio Gonzato, welcomed the vote as a clear sign of the General Assembly's support for democratic principles and the aspirations of Myanmar's people.

The United States and the European Union supported broader restrictions, encompassing trade, investment, military engagement, and the provision of defense-related equipment. However, exemptions granted to major energy companies—such as Total (France), Chevron (United States), and Woodside (Australia)—due to their significant roles in Myanmar's oil and gas sector, tempered the overall impact of early sanctions. These exemptions highlighted the limitations of external pressure, given that Western involvement in other sectors of Myanmar's economy remains relatively limited.

In Asia, countries such as India and Bangladesh, while expressing concern over political developments in Myanmar, have continued to engage economically with the country. Although Japanese and other Asian companies have scaled back operations connected to SAC-linked enterprises, their governments have remained cautious about aligning fully with Western-led sanctions. In contrast, China and Russia—Myanmar's primary sources of defense-related equipment—have deepened their engagement with the SAC.

China remains a key supplier of military hardware, while Russia has provided advanced systems, including fighter aircraft. Both nations have also used their influence within the UN Security Council to block or dilute resolutions aimed at imposing arms embargoes or more robust international measures. Consequently, while global concern over the situation is significant, the efficacy of sanctions is heavily dependent on unified Security Council action—something that has yet to be achieved. (Muhammad, Sahide, 2022)

Historically, relations among ASEAN member states have been shaped by the principle of non-interference, a core tenet since the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, which established that members should not intervene in one another's internal affairs or

support political movements across borders. This principle was intended to preserve both national sovereignty and regional stability.

The ASEAN Declaration outlines the Association's objectives as twofold: (1) to advance economic growth, social progress, and cultural development through cooperation rooted in equality and partnership, and (2) to sustain regional peace and stability by upholding justice, the rule of law, and the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. In 1995, ASEAN leaders reaffirmed that "cooperative peace and shared prosperity" remain the cornerstone of its mission.

Despite subsequent milestones such as the 2003 Declaration of ASEAN Concord II and the 2008 ASEAN Charter—which articulated a collective commitment to democracy and human rights—the principle of non-interference continues to guide the Association's approach. While ASEAN has developed mechanisms that could, in theory, support more active engagement in member states' internal matters, the practical application of such tools remains limited. If ASEAN seeks a more active role in addressing internal developments among its members, it will need to strengthen institutional frameworks that allow for such involvement. As it stands, ASEAN continues to prioritize a cautious, non-intrusive stance.

In 1998, Thailand's Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan introduced the idea of "flexible engagement," which encouraged open discussions on internal issues within ASEAN member states. Although this proposal was initially rejected, it helped lay the foundation for new ways of addressing sensitive political topics. In 1999, Singapore hosted the first of several informal meetings of ASEAN foreign ministers, where issues like the situation in Myanmar were discussed more openly. These meetings became a regular part of ASEAN diplomacy by 2000.

That same year, ASEAN formed the Troika, a group made up of the current, previous, and incoming ASEAN Chairs' foreign ministers. While the Troika does not intervene directly in national matters and works by consensus, its structure has allowed ASEAN to address regional issues that may affect internal affairs.

Further steps were taken in 2001 with the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation rules, which offered a peaceful way to resolve disagreements among ASEAN members. Although democracy and human rights are typically seen as internal matters, ASEAN has officially supported these values. The 2008 ASEAN Charter led to the creation of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). While the

AICHR mainly focuses on promoting human rights, some members have suggested giving it more authority to address specific concerns in the region.

ASEAN's response to the 2021 political transition in Myanmar, when the State Administration Council (SAC) took over governing responsibilities, showed the challenges of reaching a common stance. Member states had different views, which made it difficult to take a unified approach. For example, Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan described the situation as an internal issue for Myanmar. Despite ongoing tensions, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos sent representatives to attend a parade in Naypyidaw on March 27. An informal ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting on March 2 did not result in a clear statement on the situation, reflecting the bloc's continued preference for dialogue and consensus over direct involvement.

After the change in leadership in Myanmar in early 2021, Brunei called for a return to the country's earlier semi-democratic system. Malaysia and Indonesia strongly voiced concern over the use of force against unarmed civilians. Both countries emphasized the importance of restoring democratic processes and proposed a special ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting to help stabilize the region.

In response, Indonesia hosted an ASEAN Leaders' Summit on 24 April 2021 in Jakarta. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, representing Myanmar's State Administration Council (SAC), was invited to attend the summit. However, the country's previously elected civilian leaders were not included. This decision received criticism from some observers, who felt it showed ASEAN's preference to engage with the SAC while excluding other political actors.

At the summit, ASEAN introduced a Five-Point Consensus, a plan aimed at reducing tensions and encouraging dialogue in Myanmar. The agreement called for an immediate end to violence, inclusive talks among all parties, mediation by a special ASEAN envoy, delivery of humanitarian assistance through ASEAN's coordination center, and a visit by the envoy to meet with all stakeholders in Myanmar.

However, progress on these goals has been slow. As analyst Sebastian Strangio pointed out, the consensus did not call for the release of political detainees—a step many see as essential for meaningful talks. It also lacked a clear timeline and did not include formal engagement with the National Unity Government (NUG), which was formed in opposition to the SAC.

Some experts, including Chong and Thongyoojaroen, have noted ASEAN's cautious approach and its reluctance to directly criticize the SAC or address incidents

involving civilians. This has raised concerns about whether ASEAN can effectively follow through on its commitments. Still, as Ben Bland argued, instead of focusing only on ASEAN's limitations, the international community should look for ways to work with and support ASEAN's efforts to promote peace and stability in Myanmar.

By late 2021, little progress had been made in carrying out ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar, largely due to the bloc's long-standing principle of non-interference. This principle led to differing views among member states. While countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia voiced strong criticism of the SAC's actions, others viewed the situation as Myanmar's internal matter. As ASEAN Chair that year, Brunei attempted to bridge these differences but faced criticism for its limited impact.

Eventually, Brunei appointed its Second Foreign Minister, Erywan Yusof, as ASEAN's special envoy to Myanmar. However, efforts to engage with the SAC proved challenging. Erywan stated that the SAC had not fulfilled its commitments and described their lack of cooperation as a "step backward." His request to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi during a proposed visit was not granted. In a notable move, ASEAN did not invite Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to the ASEAN Summit on 26 October 2021—a rare and significant decision that marked one of the bloc's strongest responses toward a member state.

Despite this, ASEAN's overall ability to respond to the evolving situation remained limited by its structure and guiding principles. Analysts noted that the Myanmar crisis had put pressure on ASEAN's internal unity. When Cambodia took over as ASEAN Chair in 2022, it adopted a more flexible approach toward the SAC. Although ASEAN had agreed that the SAC would be excluded from high-level meetings until meaningful progress was made, Cambodia chose to focus on direct engagement.

Prime Minister Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar, where he met with SAC officials to discuss political and humanitarian issues, marked a shift in tone. While the visit resulted in some basic commitments—such as discussion of a ceasefire and renewed dialogue—critics, including regional human rights groups, saw this as undermining ASEAN's collective position. Commentator Sebastian Strangio noted that the meeting seemed to signal not just diplomacy but a shift in ASEAN's internal dynamics, raising concerns about the group's integrity and unity.

During a meeting with China's President, a representative of Myanmar highlighted three key points. First, China has maintained its role as a supportive neighbor, respecting Myanmar's sovereignty and development goals. Second, China reaffirmed its policy of non-interference in Myanmar's peace process. Third, regarding elections, the Myanmar leadership has stated that preparations are underway for a multiparty general election, planned for the end of the year. China has expressed support for this process. While China's involvement has added pressure on ASEAN to act, it also raises questions about ASEAN's reliance on external influence and how that affects its credibility and leadership in the region.

3.4.1 ASEAN's Perception and Response to Myanmar's Public Diplomacy

In theory, Myanmar could use constructive engagement with ASEAN, UN, or neighboring countries to rebuild trust, open up to dialogue with foreign publics, not just governments, and support cultural diplomacy, and exchanges to reshape its image. As long as Myanmar remains under SAC, genuine public diplomacy and constructive engagement remain very limited.

In response to the political crisis in Myanmar, ASEAN leaders and representatives of the State Administration Council (SAC) convened an emergency summit in Jakarta, where they formulated a framework known as the "Five-Point Consensus." This agreement aimed to address the ongoing instability in Myanmar following the SAC's seizure of power. However, the deal was met with widespread criticism from Myanmar's citizens and international human rights organizations.

Critics argued that the consensus failed to demand the restoration of democratic governance or hold the SAC accountable for the deaths of hundreds of civilians resulting from violent crackdowns on dissent. Furthermore, the agreement highlighted ASEAN's adherence to its longstanding principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. As a result, the bloc fell short of its stated objectives of promoting the rule of law, democracy, and human rights, instead prioritizing regional unity and diplomatic restraint over substantive action against the SAC's violations. (Muhammad, Sahide, 2022)

On the contrary, Paul Seck Fai Cheak argues in favor of the successes of ASEAN's policy of "constructive engagement" with Myanmar, suggesting that this approach has potential in shaping policy recommendations for reform. Myanmar continues to face serious internal challenges, including widespread human rights

violations and political repression. It has also been linked to transnational criminal activities such as human and drug trafficking.

Despite Myanmar's problematic governance record, it was admitted to ASEAN in 1997 and has since remained one of the few countries in the region to maintain formal diplomatic ties with the bloc. ASEAN's strategy of constructive engagement offers various geopolitical advantages, even though it stands in contrast to the policies of diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions adopted by Western countries such as the United States and members of the European Union. Cheak evaluates the effectiveness of ASEAN's approach from international, regional, and grassroots perspectives. He argues that rather than merely sustaining the current strategy, ASEAN should deepen its engagement with Myanmar, as such efforts could enhance the well-being of the country's citizens, support national development, and contribute to broader regional stability. (Muhammad, Sahide, 2022)

Since the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2008, Noel M. Morada notes an increasing tension between ASEAN's foundational principles of sovereignty and non-interference and its evolving commitment to people-centered values and universal norms, such as human rights—an issue particularly highlighted in the context of Myanmar. Morada emphasizes the critical role of ASEAN diplomacy in addressing human rights concerns in the country.

He observes that while ASEAN has, in practice, shown greater flexibility in its non-interference policy—particularly during events such as the Rakhine crisis—its diplomatic initiatives have often encountered limited engagement from Myanmar's successive administrations, including both the State Administration Council (SAC) and previous governments, which have emphasized the importance of national sovereignty. Although there is a growing call among some ASEAN member states and regional civil society actors to revisit the non-interference principle in response to humanitarian challenges, building a cohesive regional approach remains complex due to differing perspectives among member states. (Muhammad, Sahide, 2022)

The simple fact that Myanmar is still a member of the ASEAN is sufficient to justify ASEAN's stakes in the conflicts and turmoil in Myanmar. ASEAN's 5PC is a diplomatic way to pacify the situation; it is not a real solution. ASEAN is also caught in the power game in Myanmar. During the time of President Thein Sein, China-Myanmar bonhomie was sidelined to the extent that Chinese funded Myitsone Dam project was halted. During the time of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, unexpected 'pauk phaw'

(fraternity) developed between China and Myanmar. China continues to be a good ally of the Myanmar military too with strong defence partnership. Russia too supplies military equipment, weapons and fighter jets to Myanmar.

These regional calculations are as complicated as the domestic situation inside Myanmar's ethno-political scenario. Therefore, ASEAN makes cautious approach while dealing with Myanmar. Finally, ASEAN also has the mandate of non-interference to the internal affairs of one-another; 'the right of every State to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion'; and 'Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means'. Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) 1976 and other ASEAN foundational documents refer to these principles as the core mantra for ASEAN. Thus, ASEAN's soft role in Myanmar's crises needs to be understood and considered from the institutional and diplomatic point of view.

3.5 The Effectiveness of Myanmar's Public Diplomacy Efforts

Public Diplomacy efforts largely determine the extent of soft power held by a country whether the use of hard power is legitimized. (Tam, 2015) Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A country's soft power rests on its resources of culture, values, and policies. A smart power strategy combines hard and soft power resources. Public diplomacy has a long history as a means of promoting a country's soft power and was essential in winning the cold war. The current struggle against transnational terrorism is a struggle to win hearts and minds, and the current overreliance on hard power alone is not the path to success. Public diplomacy is an important tool in the arsenal of smart power, but smart public diplomacy requires an understanding of the roles of credibility, self-criticism and civil society in generating soft power.

The relationship between public diplomacy and tourism development is one of cause and effect. In the era of globalization, both public diplomacy and tourism development are essential concepts that are closely intertwined, contributing to a nation's economic potential and prosperity. Public diplomacy plays a vital role in promoting national branding on a global scale, which is critical for the effective development of the tourism sector. Essentially, public diplomacy involves engaging foreign audiences to foster understanding of a nation's values and encouraging them to view the country as an attractive tourist destination. In this context, the effects of public

diplomacy on tourism development are crucial for fostering economic growth in Myanmar.

Every nation possesses unique and appealing characteristics that can capture the hearts of international audiences. Myanmar, often referred to as the “Golden Land,” boasts rich historical, natural, and cultural heritage. Its majestic temples, diverse landscapes, and abundant natural resources position it as a compelling destination for global travelers. According to Joseph Nye, public diplomacy seeks to attract international attention and foster understanding of a nation’s values, culture, and policies through tools such as broadcasting, cultural exports, and exchange programs. Therefore, tourism development in Myanmar can be significantly enhanced through the strategic use of public diplomacy.

By leveraging public diplomacy, Myanmar has the potential to reshape its international image and draw more tourists. Often described as “people-to-people diplomacy,” public diplomacy influences how foreign citizens perceive a nation. These perceptions can be shaped through various channels, especially digital platforms such as websites and social media, which play a substantial role in shaping global opinions and promoting tourism.

Writers, journalists, and bloggers are instrumental in the success of public diplomacy, sharing compelling narratives about Myanmar to foreign audiences. Non-state actors, including individuals and private organizations, also contribute significantly to building a positive image of the country. In this regard, every citizen can act as a diplomat to support Myanmar’s public diplomacy efforts. Furthermore, the government should work toward developing a globally recognized national brand that reflects its transition toward democracy and its growing regional influence.

Public diplomacy involves managing international relations not only through official government channels but also through public communication and collaboration with non-governmental actors. Political stability, a key element influenced by public diplomacy, is crucial for tourism development. Despite Myanmar’s abundance of traditional attractions and historic sites, internal political challenges and the failure to effectively utilize public diplomacy have hindered the growth of its tourism sector compared to other ASEAN countries.

The inauguration of President U Thein Sein’s civilian government in 2011 marked a turning point, initiating political, economic, and social reforms aimed at transitioning the country toward a liberal democracy and mixed economy. These

reforms, along with the easing of international sanctions by the US and EU, presented a unique opportunity for Myanmar to harness public diplomacy to rebuild its international image and promote tourism. Recognizing the sector's potential, tourism was prioritized in the government's Framework for Economic and Social Reforms (FESR) 2012–2015, highlighting it as a key industry capable of generating business opportunities and fostering balanced development if managed responsibly.

To guide the sector's growth, Myanmar introduced several key policy documents, including the Responsible Tourism Policy (2012), the Policy on Community Involvement in Tourism (2013), and the Myanmar Tourism Master Plan (MTMP: 2013–2020). These policies laid the foundation for responsible tourism, emphasizing sustainability and community participation.

The Ministry of Hotels and Tourism (MOHT) has undertaken several initiatives to reform the tourism sector, including easing entry for international tourists, improving hospitality services, enhancing service provider standards, and promoting year-round tourism destinations. The government has also introduced supportive policies such as expanding tourist-accessible areas in 2013 and launching an electronic visa (e-visa) system in 2014. Additionally, Myanmar waived short-term visa requirements for visitors from ASEAN countries including Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, Brunei, and Thailand.

The MTMP aimed to position Myanmar as a leading tourist destination in Southeast Asia, with an ambitious goal of attracting 3.01 million international visitors in 2015 and 7.48 million by 2020. This plan served as a roadmap for national development, with the government embracing a “Responsible Tourism Approach” to promote sustainability and safety, positioning Myanmar as a desirable place to visit and live.

As a result of democratic reforms, Myanmar experienced a tourism boom in 2012 and 2013, marked by an increase in both domestic and international arrivals and a rise in tourism-generated revenue. International tourism, which generally faces fewer trade barriers than other export sectors, has become the world's largest export earner and a significant contributor to many nations' balance of payments—including Myanmar. (Myint Zu Win, 2021)

Myanmar's recent participation in key international events reflects an evolving approach to public diplomacy, aimed at enhancing its global presence and fostering strategic partnerships. One such event was the 80th Anniversary of the Victory in the

Great Patriotic War, which was officially commemorated in Russia. Although the historical significance of the war extends beyond any single country—representing a global stand against fascism and extremism—Myanmar’s involvement in the anniversary celebrations marked a symbolic step in international engagement. For the first time, the Myanmar Tatmadaw joined military parades and commemorative activities. This participation demonstrated Myanmar's commitment to international military cooperation and signaled the professionalism and capacity of its armed forces to operate in alignment with international standards.

Further strengthening bilateral relations, a high-level Myanmar delegation led by SAC Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing visited Russia to participate in the Myanmar-Russia Economic Forum. During a media briefing on March 5, government spokesperson Zaw Min Tun confirmed a number of important agreements reached during the visit. These included plans to construct a 110-megawatt nuclear power plant in Myanmar using Russian technology. This marks a significant step in technological collaboration and reflects Myanmar’s intention to modernize its energy infrastructure through peaceful nuclear development.

Another major initiative discussed was the Dawei Deep-Sea Port Project, a strategic infrastructure endeavor in southern Myanmar. Positioned near the Malacca Strait, Dawei is expected to become a vital regional hub connecting the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean. Zaw Min Tun emphasized the potential for enhanced trade links, especially with Russian ports already established in Vietnam. This connection would not only support regional logistics but also elevate Myanmar’s role in facilitating economic integration across Southeast Asia.

On March 4, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing met with President Vladimir Putin, reinforcing the depth of the Myanmar-Russia relationship. Following their discussions, President Putin announced an agreement to proceed with the construction of a small-scale nuclear power plant in Myanmar, highlighting shared interests in energy development and economic cooperation.

Myanmar has also maintained its active participation in regional forums such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). At the sixth BIMSTEC Summit, hosted by Thailand and chaired by Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn, Myanmar joined other member states—India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Thailand—in discussing regional development strategies across multiple sectors. Myanmar’s continued presence at such summits

underscores its commitment to multilateral diplomacy and constructive regional dialogue.

Taken together, these engagements demonstrate Myanmar's strategic use of public diplomacy to build relationships, attract investment, and reaffirm its role in international and regional affairs. By actively participating in ceremonial, economic, and diplomatic forums, Myanmar is positioning itself as a cooperative and forward-looking partner on the global stage.

By appearing at regional meetings or delivering speeches with diplomatic tones, Min Aung Hlaing tries to project legitimacy to international audiences. This is an effort to win hearts and minds, not just of other governments, but of ASEAN's people. These appearances are not just internal politics — they are deliberate acts aimed at shaping foreign perceptions, especially ASEAN's view of Myanmar's leadership.

Myanmar has increasingly invested in state-affiliated media platforms such as MRTV-4 and The Global New Light of Myanmar to share narratives that highlight the country's development, cultural richness, and commitment to national unity. These platforms serve as key instruments in Myanmar's public diplomacy efforts, projecting messages of “stability,” “order,” and “sovereignty” to both domestic and international audiences. By emphasizing these themes, Myanmar aims to engage regional neighbors like ASEAN and the broader international community in a way that fosters understanding and discourages external misinterpretation. Media remains a central pillar of modern public diplomacy, enabling states to shape international perception, build reputation, and communicate national values across borders.

In today's information-rich environment, the ability to influence public opinion extends well beyond traditional diplomacy. Credibility has become a vital asset in the competition for soft power, especially as governments find themselves engaging not only with other states but also with global media, corporations, NGOs, and transnational networks. In this landscape, reputation management is central to effective public diplomacy, as nations strive to present their narratives with clarity, consistency, and trustworthiness on the global stage.

CHAPTER IV

SURVEY ANALYSIS

4.1 Global Soft Power Index and Myanmar’s Regional Standing

The global soft power index reveals strengths and weakness in soft power dimensions. For instance, if Myanmar scores low in “global influence” but moderate in “culture,” policymakers might recalibrate their diplomatic narratives to emphasize cultural heritage.

Table (4.1) Global Soft Power Index

Rank 2024	Rank 2023	National Brand	Index Score 2024	Index Score Change	Index Score 2023
22	21	Singapore	54.4	+3.4	51.0
35	39	Malaysia	45.7	+3.1	42.6
40	41	Thailand	44.8	+2.4	42.4
45	45	Indoneisa	42.6	+1.7	40.9
52	61	Philippines	39.8	+1.1	38.7
53	69	Vietnam	39.6	+1.8	37.8
107	New	Brunei Darussalam	33.3	-	-
112	105	Cambodia	32.8	-2.0	34.8
134	117	Laos	30.5	-3.1	33.6
136	113	Myanmar	30.3	-3.6	33.9

Source: Brand Finance

The Global Soft Power Index reveals Myanmar’s declining performance in regional perception. In 2024, Myanmar ranked 136th, dropping from 113th in 2023, with a score of 30.3, down from 33.9. This decline reflects a significant erosion of Myanmar’s soft power, particularly in areas such as governance, international influence, and media presence. Compared to ASEAN peers such as Singapore (22nd) and Thailand (40th), Myanmar’s position underscores its limited ability to project a

positive image abroad. For public diplomacy, this index serves as a diagnostic tool—highlighting areas where Myanmar must recalibrate its strategic narratives, especially by emphasizing cultural heritage and regional cooperation to rebuild trust and legitimacy.

4.2 ASEAN’s Geopolitical Concerns

According to the 2024 ASEAN-wide survey, 26.6 percent of respondents identified the Myanmar crisis as one of the top three geopolitical concerns in the region. While this figure is lower than concerns over the Israel– Hamas conflict (46.5 percent) or South China Sea tensions (39.9 percent), it still reflects significant regional anxiety. The inclusion of Myanmar among top concerns suggests that its internal instability is not merely a domestic issue but a regional challenge with implications for ASEAN’s unity and credibility. This perception reinforces the need for Myanmar’s public diplomacy to address regional fears and demonstrate a commitment to constructive engagement and peaceful resolution.

Table (4.2) ASEAN’s Concerns for Current Geopolitical Events

Geopolitical Events	ASEAN (%)
Russia-Ukraine War	39.4%
Israel-Hamas Conflict	46.5%
2024 US Presidential elections	18.8%
Implications arising from 2024 taiwan elections	7.6%
Aggressive behavior in the South China Sea	39.9%
Myanmar Crisis	26.6%
DPRK’s cont’d ballistic missile testing	10.6%
Global Scam Operations	39.4%
Int’l Drug Smuggling	37.2%
Change of Political Leadership in the Region	33.9%

Source: Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024)

4.3 Relocation Preferences and Myanmar’s Image Deficit

In the survey question on preferred ASEAN countries for relocation, only 2.9 percent of respondents selected Myanmar—placing it at the bottom of the list. In contrast, Singapore (28 percent) and Thailand (13 percent) were the most favored destinations. This stark disparity indicates Myanmar’s weak appeal as a livable and professionally attractive country. For public diplomacy, this signals a need to improve the country’s image in terms of safety, opportunity, and openness. The low relocation preference reflects broader reputational challenges that Myanmar must address through strategic communication and people-centered diplomacy.

Table (4.3) Preferred ASEAN Countries for Relocation Among Regional Respondents

Preferred Relocation	ASEAN’s Choice (%)
Brunei	9.7%
Cambodia	6.4%
Indonesia	9.7%
Laos	7.0%
Malaysia	7.0%
Myanmar	2.9%
Philippines	6.7%
Singapore	28.0%
Thailand	13.0%
Vietnam	9.7%

Source: Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024)

4.4 Holiday Destination Preferences and Soft Power Implications

Myanmar also ranked lowest in holiday destination preferences, with only 0.4 percent of respondents choosing it. This contrasts sharply with Thailand (30.6 percent), Indonesia (14 percent), and Malaysia (13.9 percent), which were seen as vibrant and welcoming tourist hubs. The result highlights Myanmar’s soft power deficit in cultural branding and tourism diplomacy. Despite its rich heritage and natural beauty, Myanmar’s political instability and limited international outreach have hindered its

attractiveness. Enhancing tourism through public diplomacy—such as promoting UNESCO-recognized festivals and cultural assets—could help reposition Myanmar as a desirable destination and strengthen its regional image.

Table (4.4) Preferred ASEAN Countries for Holiday Destinations Among Regional Respondents

Holiday Destination	ASEAN’s Choice (%)
Brunei	2.8%
Cambodia	3.9%
Indonesia	14.0%
Laos	7.7%
Malaysia	13.9%
Myanmar	0.4%
Philippines	5.5%
Singapore	12.1%
Thailand	30.6%
Vietnam	8.3%

Source: Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024)

Myanmar’s public diplomacy within ASEAN reflects both strategic intention and reputational strain. Survey data from the 2024 State of Southeast Asia report reveals that Myanmar ranks lowest in regional relocation and holiday preferences, indicating weak soft power appeal. Its declining position in the Global Soft Power Index and marginal visibility in regional trust metrics underscore a broader challenge: public diplomacy efforts remain constrained by domestic instability, limited media outreach, and fragmented regional perceptions. Despite participating in cultural initiatives like UNESCO nominations and the SEA Games, Myanmar’s image is still shaped more by political turmoil than proactive engagement. The public’s prioritization of Myanmar’s crisis as a geopolitical concern further stresses the urgency of credible, people-centered diplomacy to shift regional sentiment.

4.5 Survey Evidence: Diplomatic Perceptions of Myanmar’s Soft-Power

Between May and June 2025, a structured 20-item questionnaire was distributed to 100 diplomatic professionals (serving or retired) who had held postings in ASEAN capitals within the preceding 36 months. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Sample composition: 60 % female, 40 % male; 20 % undergraduate, 55 % graduate, 25 % doctoral. Field of study was unrestricted; recent diplomatic service was the sole inclusion criterion. The full item list is provided in **APPENDIX**.

4.5.1 Composite Diplomatic Sentiment Indices

Four additive indices were created to summarize the 20 individual items. Each index is the unweighted arithmetic mean of its constituent questions; all exhibit satisfactory internal reliability (Cronbach’s α 0.78–0.84). Mean scores are interpreted as: low (< 2.5), moderate (2.5–3.4), or high (≥ 3.5).

Table (4.5) Composite Indices of Diplomatic Perceptions on Myanmar’s Soft Power

Index (mean \pm SD)	Items averaged (survey question numbers)	Myanmar Score	ASEAN Peer Median*	Band
Soft-Power Index	Q 1.1–1.4 (strategic relevance, influence decline, ranking justification, toolkit gap)	2.9 \pm 0.6	4.1	low
ASEAN Diplomatic Clout	Q 2.1–2.6 (Five-Point Consensus efficacy, ASEAN leverage, summit exclusion, non- interference, China role, India role)	3.1 \pm 0.5	4.0	moderate

Table (4.5) Composite Indices of Diplomatic Perceptions on Myanmar’s Soft Power (Continued)

Index (mean ± SD)	Items averaged (survey question numbers)	Myanmar Score	ASEAN Peer Median*	Band
Relocation Risk	Q 3.1–3.5 (advise against new post, family safety, competitiveness vs peers, sanctions risk, China dominance)	2.4 ± 0.7	3.8	low
Holiday Appeal	Q 4.1–4.5 (personal safety, cultural attractiveness, infrastructure adequacy, recommendation likelihood, media impact)	2.3 ± 0.6	3.9	low

4.5.2 Average Scores by Educational Attainment

Table below presents the mean Likert scores for selected items, broken down by highest educational qualification. Higher values denote stronger agreement.

Average Likert Scores by Educational Attainment (scale 1–5)

Table (4.6) Variations in Perception by Educational Attainment of Diplomats

Statement (abbrev.)	Undergraduate (n = 20)	Graduate (n = 55)	Doctoral (n = 25)
1.1 “Myanmar strategically relevant”	2.7	2.9	3.4
1.4 “Soft-power toolkit under-developed”	3.3	3.6	3.9
2.4 “ASEAN unity eroded”	3.5	3.3	3.1
3.1 “Advise against new post”	2.8	2.4	2.2
4.1 “Feel safe holidaying”	2.6	2.3	2.1

Across the three groups, doctoral respondents consistently register the lowest confidence in Myanmar’s safety and strategic relevance.

4.5.3 Decision-Relevant Vetoes

Three policy-actionable veto indicators were extracted from the survey. Each is defined as the proportion of respondents who selected “4 – Agree” or “5 – Strongly Agree” on the relevant item(s). Ninety-five-percent confidence intervals (CI; the range within which the true population proportion lies with 95 % certainty) were calculated using the Wilson-score method.

Table (4.7) Diplomatic Veto Indicators and Confidence Levels

Veto Indicator (exact wording)	Proportion* (%)	95% CI	Interpretation
“I would advise my capital against opening a new embassy/consulate in Myanmar at present.”	68 %	59.2–76.8 %	Roughly seven in ten diplomats counsel against expansion.
“I would feel safe taking a personal leisure trip to Myanmar within 12 months.” (reverse-coded)	81 % (i.e., 19 % answered 4/5)	73.0–87.0 %	Eight in ten do not feel safe; only one in five would travel.
“ASEAN unity has been eroded by the Myanmar crisis.”	71%	62.4–78.6 %	Seven in ten see the crisis as weakening ASEAN cohesion.

4.5.4 Diplomatic Verbatim Priorities

In response to the open-ended prompt “What single change would most improve Myanmar’s attractiveness to diplomats and investors?” (Q 5.1), the following eleven priorities—rank-ordered by frequency among doctoral-level respondents—were recorded:

1. Credible rule-of-law restoration
2. End to internal armed conflict
3. Security guarantees for diplomatic staff

4. Transparent sanctions roadmap
5. Inclusive governance roadmap
6. Civilian protection mechanisms
7. Clear investment-protection framework
8. Freedom-of-movement assurances
9. Humanitarian-access guarantees
10. ASEAN-led monitoring mechanism
11. Professional visa-processing revival

These priorities map directly onto the quantitative indices: security guarantees (item 3) correspond to the low Holiday Appeal score (2.3), while a transparent sanctions roadmap (item 4) and an investment-protection framework (item 7) underpin the elevated Relocation Risk index (2.4). The predominance of governance and security concerns confirms that the diplomatic community interprets Myanmar's soft-power deficit primarily as a domestic stability challenge rather than a reputational issue susceptible to conventional public-diplomacy measures.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

5.1 Findings

This study has explored the critical role of public diplomacy in enhancing international relations, with a particular focus on Myanmar's engagement with ASEAN. Through a qualitative case study approach and the review of ASEAN proceedings, public speeches, and secondary literature, several key findings emerge:

5.1.1 Public Diplomacy Is a Strategic Tool for Regional Engagement

The study confirms that public diplomacy is increasingly central to contemporary foreign policy strategies, especially within regional organizations such as ASEAN. In Myanmar's case, public diplomacy serves as a non-coercive mechanism to foster regional ties, manage perceptions, and promote soft power. Despite the country's ongoing political turbulence, it has employed cultural events (e.g., SEA Games), official media, and regional forums (e.g., BIMSTEC) as instruments of soft influence.

5.1.2 ASEAN's Normative Structure Limits Aggressive Public Diplomacy

Myanmar operates within a diplomatic culture strongly defined by ASEAN's norms: non-interference, consensus-building, and quiet diplomacy. These norms both constrain and enable public diplomacy. While they prevent overt criticism or intervention, they also provide a platform for Myanmar to maintain regional presence through "constructive engagement," even during political crises.

However, the same ASEAN norms that facilitate diplomacy also dilute accountability. The organization's cautious and often fragmented approach has allowed Myanmar to selectively shape narratives, particularly through its state media, while avoiding deeper scrutiny of internal repression.

5.1.3 ASEAN’s Response to Myanmar’s Public Diplomacy Is Cautious and Divided

ASEAN member states display a spectrum of responses to Myanmar’s public diplomacy and political crisis. While some states—like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore—advocate stronger actions and democratic accountability, others (Thailand, Cambodia, Laos) prefer quiet diplomacy and non-intervention.

This divergence has undermined ASEAN’s unity and effectiveness. The Five-Point Consensus, although symbolically important, has not been fully implemented. Myanmar’s inconsistent cooperation and ASEAN’s lack of enforcement mechanisms have significantly limited progress in diplomatic engagement or crisis resolution.

5.1.4 Public Diplomacy Can No Longer Be Solely State-Centric

The findings underscore the evolution of public diplomacy from a government-centered endeavor to a multifaceted, network-based practice. Today, public diplomacy involves not only state actors but also media, civil society, NGOs, think tanks, and digital influencers. In Myanmar’s case, the continued suppression of independent voices and civil society limits the country’s ability to build genuine people-to-people ties across ASEAN.

Effective public diplomacy in modern regional settings requires open information flows, collaboration with non-state actors, and reciprocal engagement. Myanmar’s current approach, centered on control and unilateral messaging, is inconsistent with these best practices and risks isolating the country further.

5.2 Suggestions

Drawing from the study’s findings, this section outlines practical suggestions and strategic recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of Myanmar’s public diplomacy in the context of ASEAN regional cooperation. These recommendations aim to bridge gaps, overcome current limitations, and align Myanmar’s public diplomacy with modern standards and ASEAN expectations.

5.2.1 Institutionalize a National Public Diplomacy Strategy

Myanmar urgently needs to develop and institutionalize a comprehensive, state-supported National Public Diplomacy Strategy that is inclusive, long-term, and people-centered.

- Establish a dedicated public diplomacy unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, staffed by trained diplomats, communication experts, and cultural specialists.
- Develop multi-year strategic plans outlining objectives, key messages, regional target audiences, and performance metrics.
- Coordinate across ministries and agencies to ensure consistent messaging and coherent diplomatic outreach.
- This strategy should emphasize nation branding, mutual understanding, and ASEAN integration, not just regime image-building.

5.2.2 Prioritize People-to-People Diplomacy and Civil Society Engagement

Public diplomacy should not be monopolized by the state or military authority. Instead, Myanmar must expand platforms for civil society and youth engagement within ASEAN.

- Facilitate student and academic exchanges, joint university programs, and ASEAN study centers.
- Promote cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as traditional arts, cuisine, language, and literature, through ASEAN-wide festivals and mobile exhibits.
- Support collaborative research, civil society roundtables, and virtual town halls on regional issues like climate change, migration, and education.
- Empower community-based organizations and youth groups to represent Myanmar in ASEAN public forums.

These initiatives would humanize Myanmar's image and foster more genuine, trust-based regional ties.

5.2.3 Enhance ASEAN Digital Diplomacy Capabilities

Myanmar's public diplomacy must adapt to the digital age, using strategic digital platforms to engage ASEAN audiences and counter misinformation.

- Launch official multilingual ASEAN-facing digital platforms (websites, social media) that explain Myanmar's policies, culture, and regional vision in accessible, non-political language.
- Produce and disseminate interactive, youth-friendly content (e.g., videos, infographics, podcasts) about Myanmar's contributions to ASEAN.

- Train diplomats and embassy staff in digital engagement and crisis communication, following best practices in social media diplomacy (e.g., from Indonesia, Singapore, and South Korea).
- Monitor and analyze social media trends to understand ASEAN public sentiment and adjust outreach accordingly.

5.2.4 Rebuild Credibility Through Transparency and Inclusive Messaging

To regain regional trust, Myanmar's public diplomacy must move beyond controlled propaganda and embrace transparent, inclusive narratives.

- Acknowledge and address international concerns, such as human rights, migration, and democratization, with sincerity rather than denial or deflection.
- Invite ASEAN journalists, artists, and civil society leaders to observe and document positive developments and public life in Myanmar.
- Promote stories of ordinary Myanmar citizens contributing to regional peace, education, entrepreneurship, and environmental sustainability.
- Discontinue excessive militarized messaging in favor of content that reflects diversity, inclusivity, and shared regional aspirations.

5.2.5 Strengthen ASEAN Cooperation and Leverage Regional Institutions

Myanmar should reengage with ASEAN institutions more proactively and constructively, including:

- Support and facilitate the work of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and other democratic mechanisms.
- Participate meaningfully in ASEAN's social and cultural community pillars, including education, disaster response, and youth engagement.
- Offer to host ASEAN civil society dialogues or roundtables on development, media literacy, and digital inclusion.
- Cooperate fully with ASEAN special envoys and Five-Point Consensus processes to demonstrate commitment to regional peace and diplomacy.

Doing so will strengthen Myanmar's reputation as a responsible regional actor and align it with ASEAN's people-oriented and rule-based vision.

5.2.6 Build Public Diplomacy Capacity Through Training and Research

Finally, Myanmar must invest in human capital and institutional capacity for long-term public diplomacy success.

- Introduce public diplomacy modules into university programs, especially at diplomatic academies and international relations departments.
- Provide regular training workshops for officials, civil society actors, and journalists on cross-cultural communication, media engagement, and regional diplomacy.
- Partner with ASEAN think tanks and universities to conduct joint research and policy dialogue on regional cooperation and public opinion trends.
- Establish an independent center for public diplomacy and regional affairs, tasked with research, strategy formulation, and monitoring Myanmar's image abroad.

In conclusion, while Myanmar's public diplomacy faces profound challenges—especially under conditions of political crisis and weakened institutions—it remains a critical pathway for restoring regional trust, re-engaging with ASEAN, and enhancing its international standing. Strategic, inclusive, and adaptive public diplomacy, built on soft power, people-to-people ties, and transparent communication, offers Myanmar the opportunity to reposition itself as a constructive member of the Southeast Asian community.

Effective implementation of the above recommendations would require political will, cross-sector coordination, and long-term investment. However, if pursued sincerely, public diplomacy can help Myanmar reconnect with its ASEAN neighbors and shape a more peaceful and cooperative regional future.

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APPENDIX

Survey Questionnaire (Diplomatic Perceptions of Myanmar)

Instructions

Please indicate how strongly you agree with each statement using the scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree.

Section 1 – Soft-Power & Regional Standing

- 1.1 Myanmar is currently a strategically relevant actor inside ASEAN.
- 1.2 Since 2021 Myanmar's diplomatic influence in ASEAN forums has declined.
- 1.3 Myanmar's absence from major global soft-power rankings is justified by its current circumstances.
- 1.4 Compared with Thailand, Viet Nam and Indonesia, Myanmar's soft-power toolkit is under-developed.

Section 2 – ASEAN Geopolitical Concerns

- 2.1 The Five-Point Consensus remains the most credible ASEAN-led mechanism for resolving the Myanmar crisis.
- 2.2 ASEAN possesses sufficient leverage to enforce the Five-Point Consensus.
- 2.3 Continued exclusion of Myanmar's senior generals from ASEAN summits weakens the grouping's credibility.
- 2.4 The principle of non-interference has impeded an effective ASEAN response.
- 2.5 China's role in Myanmar undermines ASEAN centrality.
- 2.6 India's bilateral engagement with Naypyidaw complicates a unified ASEAN position.

Section 3 – Relocation Preferences

- 3.1 I would recommend against opening a new embassy/consulate in Myanmar at present.
- 3.2 Security conditions make Myanmar an unaccompanied-post designation for diplomatic families.
- 3.3 Myanmar is less attractive for regional corporate headquarters than Thailand or Viet Nam.

3.4 Concerns over sanctions exposure influence my capital's decision-making on Myanmar.

3.5 China's economic dominance in Myanmar is a primary risk factor for diplomatic missions.

Section 4 – Holiday Destination Appeal

4.1 I would feel safe taking a personal leisure trip to Myanmar within the next 12 months.

4.2 Myanmar's cultural attractions outweigh current safety concerns for leisure travel.

4.3 Tourist infrastructure in Yangon, Mandalay and Bagan meets diplomatic-grade expectations.

4.4 I would recommend Myanmar as a holiday destination to colleagues.

4.5 Negative media coverage has decisively reduced Myanmar's appeal as a tourist destination.

Section 5 – Open-ended

Q 5.1 What single change would most improve Myanmar's attractiveness to diplomats and investors? (30 words max)