

Can Vietnam afford the reputational costs of friendship with Myanmar junta?

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- **Vietnam eyes a higher international standing but its response to Myanmar's political unrest has undermined its global ambitions**
- **Vietnam's leaders likely have domestic political, economic considerations that are holding them back from speaking against the junta**

On August 25, 2017, [Vietnam](#) and [Myanmar](#) signed a comprehensive partnership, which prioritises political, defence and security, economic, cultural and social, and people-to-people cooperation. Their joint statement on the partnership stressed the importance of sustainable and effective management and the utilisation of the Mekong River's resources. Notably, Myanmar – a non-claimant in the [South China Sea](#) dispute – agreed with Vietnam on the importance of complying with international laws, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

A comprehensive partnership with Myanmar is in line with Vietnam's overall foreign policy of prioritising relations with its neighbouring countries. However, the Vietnamese government's responses to the [Rohingya crisis](#) and the 2021 coup d'état and subsequent violence in Myanmar have likely undermined Vietnam's ambition to elevate its international status.

At the 11th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) in 2011, Vietnam announced the goal of raising its international standing. This proclamation came after Vietnam's successful term as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) from 2008 to 2009 and its chairmanship of [Asean](#) in 2010.

The 2016 political report of the CPV reaffirmed Vietnam's commitment to be a responsible member of the international community. However, Hanoi has not responded to the political unrest in Myanmar in a way that befits its foreign policy aspirations.

On August 25, 2017, the same day of the signing of the comprehensive partnership, Myanmar's military launched a ruthless campaign of massacres, rape, and arson against the Rohingya, in response to attacks on army and police posts by a militant group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Myanmar's successive governments have implemented systematic discriminatory policies against Muslim Rohingya since the late 1970s. This has forced millions of Rohingya to flee their homes and take refuge in nearby countries, especially in the past several years.

While the talks on the Myanmar-Vietnam comprehensive partnership started long before the 2017 Rohingya crisis, Hanoi could have paused the process when it became clear that even Myanmar's first democratically elected government, which came to power in 2016, was doing nothing to help the [Muslim Rohingya](#) population for fear of alienating Buddhist nationalists and jeopardising its power-sharing agreement with the military.

Vietnam instead turned a blind eye to the Rohingya issue and the resulting humanitarian and refugee crisis outside Myanmar's borders. In fact, Asean as an institution has been mostly silent on Myanmar's mistreatment of the Rohingya and the refugee crisis, as its member states cleave to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs.

It is well known that after the February 1, 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the ruling regime there has engaged in deadly violence against its own citizens. By one count, the regime has killed at least 2,500 and detained more than 16,400 people as of November 2022. [Cambodia, Thailand, and initially, the Philippines](#) described the coup as an internal matter and refused to criticise the junta.

The Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son said that Vietnam would "keep an eye on Myanmar" but called for "a gradual approach ... without haste" in January 2022 when he spoke with Dr Noeleen Heyzer, the UN Secretary-General's special envoy for Myanmar. Bui indirectly referred to Asean's principle of non-interference by stressing the spirit of respecting Myanmar's independence, sovereignty, and integrity.

Almost two years on, Vietnam has done nothing to help end the bloodshed in Myanmar. Instead, Hanoi has tried to dampen criticism of the junta at international and regional forums and worked against earlier Malaysian-led attempts to disinvite the military leadership from Asean meetings.

On March 10, 2021, for instance, as a non-permanent member of the UNSC, Vietnam (with [China](#), [India](#), and [Russia](#)) objected to the language condemning Myanmar's military junta in a draft statement. Notably, the official statement "strongly" condemned "the violence against peaceful protesters" and called for the immediate release of arbitrarily detained prisoners.

Video: Myanmar's military coup raises uncertainty over repatriation of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

Despite Myanmar's bloody military crackdowns on protesters, Vietnam still attended the junta's Armed Forces Day parade in Naypyidaw on March 27, 2021. Guests from around 30 countries usually attend the annual event, but in 2021 only eight – including Vietnam – sent their officials. Thailand and [Laos](#) from Asean, China, Russia, India, [Bangladesh](#) and [Pakistan](#) were also represented.

One reporter described as "jarring" the sight of Myanmar's top general in his ceremonial whites at a lavish party held on the same night his troops had killed 114 civilians, including children, earlier that day.

Vietnam's unwavering support for the Myanmar military can be partly explained by its domestic political and economic considerations. As a one-party state led by a communist party, Hanoi resolutely defends Asean's principle of non-interference because the regime fears external criticism of its own political system and human rights record. Vietnam's responses to the Myanmar issue have been seen by one commentator as "one authoritarian state sticking up for another".

Meanwhile, although the volume of bilateral trade is low, at only US\$796 million in 2021, Myanmar is the fifth largest destination for Vietnam's outward direct investment after Laos, Cambodia, [Venezuela](#), and Russia. As of December 31, 2021, Vietnam's total registered investment capital in Myanmar reached US\$1.47 billion.

The Vietnamese military-industrial complex stands to lose if Myanmar's economy takes a nosedive. For instance, Mytel, a mobile carrier related to the Myanmar military, is effectively half-owned by Viettel (a conglomerate owned by the Vietnamese Ministry of Defence) with a 49 per cent stake.

Hanoi wants to have its cake and eat it, too. It wishes to enhance its international image and reputation but refrains from defending universal norms and values to protect its economic interests and domestic regime.

At this juncture, Hanoi needs to reconcile its behaviour with its aspiration. It could either maintain the current approach towards Myanmar and undermine Vietnam's ambition to elevate its international status, or work with other Asean members to ensure that the junta stops oppressing its people.

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<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3202697/can-vietnam-afford-reputational-costs-friendship-myanmar-junta>

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