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ASEAN CONFRONTS DUAL CRISES

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The Feb. 1 [coup](#) in Myanmar dealt a serious blow to the ASEAN diplomatic order and presented the incoming Biden administration with its first major policy challenge in Southeast Asia. More profoundly, the coup set into motion a political and humanitarian crisis that has pushed Myanmar into an economic free fall. The [imposition](#) of Western sanctions gave China and Russia an opening to strengthen ties with the Tatmadaw. Myanmar was an extreme example of political turmoil, but the instability surrounding Thailand's anti-regime and anti-monarchy movement [persisted](#) into the new year. In January, Vietnam [embarked](#) upon a more orderly political transition through the 13th National Party Congress, resulting in a leadership structure focused on ensuring stability, both external and internal.

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Political turmoil and transition in Southeast Asia has taken place against a backdrop of the continued COVID-19 crisis. A second surge has [hit](#) the region, fueled by variants, delaying economic recovery and curtailing diplomatic and security relations with regional partners. COVID has limited joint exercises between the US Indo-Pacific Command and their Southeast Asian partners, and the flagship Cobra Gold Exercises, co-chaired by Thailand and the United States, have been deferred to the second half of the year. Attention has focused instead on the US-Philippines alliance as Washington and Manila [opened talks](#) on renewing the Visiting Forces Agreement. In early 2021, the United States entered the “vaccine race” to provide COVID vaccines to Southeast Asia and other areas of the Indo-Pacific with the announcement in March of a large distribution program through the Quad. However, COVID’s [dramatic surge](#) in India may delay, although probably not upend, that effort.

Myanmar’s Military Upends Democracy

The timing of Tatmadaw Commander Min Aung Hlaing’s [overthrow](#) of the newly elected (in November 2020) government in Myanmar on Feb. 1 was very precise. The parliament was on the verge of opening in Naypyidaw, the capital compound that was accessible through a broad highway but easily sealed off, after which the new cabinet was to be announced. Min Aung Hlaing’s discontent with the results of general elections on Nov. 8, 2020, which gave the National League for Democracy (NLD) a strong majority in parliament and weakened the military’s role in the legislature. The two sides had been in closed-door talks in the run-up to the opening, reportedly on the composition of the new government, and they were presumed to have blunted the edge of the military’s resentment. However, the events of Feb. 1 point to a broader and deeper set of grievances than an election loss. The NLD’s determination to strengthen ties with the ethnic political parties by bringing them into the government would have affected the Tatmadaw’s hold on some conflict areas. Moreover, the party’s signal that the government—rather than the military—would issue licenses to foreign banks and other changes in economic policy threatened the military leadership’s control of certain economic sectors and, thus, a major source of income.

The junta reorganized into the State Administrative Council (SAC), with Min Aung Hlaing as the chair. The SAC’s immediate action was to [detain](#) Aung San Suu Kyi and top NLD leaders, including President Myint Win, alleging that the November elections had been fraudulent and calling for new polls. In the ensuing weeks, a [variety](#) of criminal charges were brought against the leaders, ranging from violating COVID restrictions during the campaign to the possession of illegal communications equipment. These charges are intended to sideline leaders elected in November for months, and possibly years, presumably until the junta can redirect Myanmar’s political trajectory back to greater military influence.

However, if the SAC’s objective was to turn the clock back to the 1990s, when the military ruled directly but allowed the theoretical possibility of an eventual elected government, it had not reckoned on generational changes in Myanmar’s population. A broad-based and nation-wide civil disobedience movement (CDM) has [emerged](#) that protests the military overthrow but also seeks to disrupt the normal course and pace of business with strikes and slowdowns. The health care sector and banking sectors were the movement’s first targets, the latter because it is largely under the Tatmadaw’s control through military holding companies.

The resistance movement has [persisted](#), and the crackdown [continues](#) to be swift and brutal. The junta moved quickly to use live fire ammunition against demonstrators and [announced](#) publicly that it would shoot resisters in the head. According to the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#) (AAPP), which tallies casualties from its base in Thailand, by the end of April over 750 civilians had been killed, including children caught in the crossfire; over 4,500 arrested; and more than 3400 still in detention. The SAC has [restricted](#) internet service, usually allowing it during business hours but cutting it off at other times, and has [put into place](#) a series of martial laws making it a crime to oppose the regime.

The elected government in internal exile and protest leaders have [formed](#) the National Unity Government (NUG), intended to raise their profile in the international community and, they hope, to function as a shadow government. In the meantime, Myanmar’s economic state is rapidly deteriorating; in mid-April the World Bank [calculated](#) that the economy had

contracted by 10%. Food prices have [doubled](#) and fuel prices have [risen](#) by 15%. The disruption to the daily conduct of business and to vital supply chains, already damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic could, according to the United Nations Development Program, push half the population into poverty by the end of the year.



Figure 1 Protesters, wearing red makeup to simulate tears of blood, making the three-finger salute during a demonstration against the military coup in Hlaing Township, Yangon, Myanmar, April 1, 2021. Photo: AFP via Getty Images

ASEAN's Dilemma

Although the coup caught ASEAN by surprise, as the 2021 chair Brunei was quick to [issue](#) a statement calling for restraint and reconciliation between the parties. From the outset, however, cracks were evident, making a common position for the group difficult, if not impossible, to formulate. Indonesia and Malaysia were quick to condemn the violence; Singapore joined Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur, but [cautioned](#) the international community against the implementation of broad-based sanctions like those imposed by the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. Manila and Bangkok were reticent, not wanting to draw attention to their own human rights situations. The Feb. 1 coup was particularly awkward for Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, who began his own rule as a coup leader in 2014, although he transitioned to the role of an elected prime minister in 2019, albeit under a new constitution that the military had crafted. Moreover, the strength and determination of Myanmar's resistance movement has re-energized Thai protests against his administration. Min Aung Hlaing's early [appeal](#) to Prayuth for support has only worsened this dilemma for Prayuth. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were categorically reluctant to criticize the internal affairs of another ASEAN member.

ASEAN rarely attempts to mediate between parties in a member state, but the severity of the situation in Myanmar led Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi to [engage](#) Min Aung Hlaing in Bangkok on Feb. 24, with Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai; there were no tangible results, but the meeting drew ire from protestors within Myanmar, who feared that ASEAN was on a path to *de facto* recognition of the SAC as the legal government of Myanmar. Complaints intensified when the ASEAN foreign ministers [held](#) a virtual meeting on March 2 with Min Aung Hlaing in an attempt to persuade him to stop the use of lethal force against civilians and to release political detainees. Brunei insisted that they were engaging the junta as a military rather than a government, an explanation that drew scorn and disbelief in the resistance movement. ASEAN's initial aim is to reduce the violence of the coup's aftermath and, with the SAC's refusal to release Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders or to grant international access to them, ASEAN is not in a position to broker talks between the parties and views engaging Min Aung Hlaing as its only option.

This dilemma deepened in late April, when ASEAN [convened](#) an in-person "special meeting" on Myanmar in Jakarta, which hosts the ASEAN Secretariat. Although it was originally intended to be a summit, the fact that three countries—Thailand, the Philippines, and Laos—sent their foreign ministers instead of heads of government prevented that. The chairman's statement from the meeting [outlined](#) five "points of consensus": (1) There should be an immediate cessation of violence on the part of all sides of the conflict; (2) The conflict in general should be resolved through dialogue among the parties; (3) ASEAN will appoint a special envoy to act as an interlocutor between the parties to help resolve the conflict; (4) ASEAN will dispatch a delegation to Myanmar to confer with the parties led by the special envoy; and, Myanmar will accept humanitarian aid and utilize ASEAN HA/DR mechanisms to receive international assistance.

What is missing from this list is as important as what ASEAN managed to include. Most obvious was a call for the release of political prisoners, although the chairman's statement duly noted that the group had "heard calls" for a release. Nor is there an explicit call to halt the killing of civilians or otherwise protect them. Finally, the list contained no point calling for the results of

the November 2020 elections to be honored, much less for a broader return to elected government in Myanmar. The consensus points demonstrate that ASEAN is likely to be effective only in helping to put a tourniquet on the violence at this point, but as a near-term possibility even that is in doubt: on April 26, the SAC [released](#) a statement that it would “consider” the ASEAN consensus points only after the situation had become “stable,” the definition of which is left to the junta. Although the five-point plan has been praised by the international community and represents the most likely path forward, for the time being it will remain on the shelf.

In the Myanmar crisis, ASEAN is more constrained in its ability to broker a solution than it might be with a third country. The group is hampered by its two most longstanding principles: non-interference in the internal affairs of a member state and decision-making by consensus. The ASEAN Charter, agreed upon in 2007, has no provision for the expulsion of a member state. Moreover, Myanmar’s conflict and its growing status in the international community as a pariah state could make a range of ASEAN plans for regional integration and for strengthening relations with external partners, particularly the United States and the European Union, more difficult.

The International Response

Western response to the February coup was swift and primarily targeted at the military rather than the broader population in Myanmar. For the time being, Washington aims to maintain a program of targeted sanctions that will isolate the coup leaders and restrict their access to revenue, both international and domestic. Under President Biden’s Feb. 11 [Executive Order](#), the United States has employed a ladder of sanctions that now include visa and financial restrictions on junta leaders and other top security officials; freezing the Myanmar governments’ \$1 billion in assets in the United States; sanctions on the adult children of military leaders; and, sanctions on economic entities controlled by or associated with the military, including two large holding companies.

Other Western countries and groups—the United Kingdom, the European Union, New Zealand, and Australia—have followed suit with sanctions on top military leaders, many adding

to restrictions that were already imposed after the 2017 crackdown on the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine State. Moreover, the coup and its aftermath sparked an unprecedented [statement](#) from the defense chiefs of 12 countries (the US, UK, Australia, Canada, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and South Korea) on March 27, condemning the use of lethal force and calling on the junta to follow international standards of military professionalism.

However, some countries are less inclined to follow with sanctions on companies that are linked to the military. Japan has spoken out against the violence but is warier of applying economic instruments; however, some Japanese companies in Myanmar have severed relations with their in-country partners, fearing the impact of Western sanctions. French energy giant Total has [declined](#) to halt production in Myanmar, arguing that it would only contribute to the country’s dysfunction by further disrupting the power supply. In reality, the West—Washington in particular—has little economic leverage on Myanmar: the United States is Myanmar’s 84th-largest trading partner. Moreover, Japan and India have greater influence in Myanmar, and with the military, than other Western countries, and will likely be key interlocutors if and when the situation allows dialogue.

Without doubt, the return to direct military rule in Myanmar increases the influence of China and Russia, the Tatmadaw’s two closest partners. China is the largest provider of arms to Myanmar, with Russia second in place. Moscow was quick to capitalize on the opportunity by [sending](#) Deputy Defense Minister Aleksandr Fomin to Myanmar in late March for the Tatmadaw’s Armed Forces Day, for which he received a medal from Min Aung Hlaing. China is in a more difficult position, given its prominent economic presence in Myanmar. Several Chinese factories have been targeted by protestors, causing Beijing to issue a mild statement calling for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Moreover, thanks to their shared border, China is affected by the [conflict](#) between the military and ethnic armed insurgent groups, some of which support the elected government and some of which support the military. Beijing is particularly wary of conflict that could spill over from Chin State, which has spiked since the coup.

Vietnam Transitions to (Partly) New Leadership

At the 13th Vietnamese National Party Congress in January President Nguyen Phu Trong [retained](#) his position as party Secretary-General for an unprecedented third term. Most likely Trong chose to stay on—a decision that was not without controversy—because he was unable to get his preferred successor, Tran Quoc Vuong, elected to the top slot. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc replaced Trong as president later in the spring and, on April 5, the Vietnamese National Assembly confirmed Pham Minh Chinh as prime minister, completing the leadership transition. Also of note was the increase in the Politburo and the Party Central Committee of military members; the 23 military officials now hold the largest voting bloc in the committee.



Figure 2 Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong delivers the closing remarks of the 13th National Party Congress on Feb. 1. Photo: VNA

National Party Congresses and their leadership line-ups telegraph the policy objectives and concerns. The bottom line for the 13th NPC is a greater concern for security, both external and internal. Trong's extended tenure will also ensure that his anti-corruption campaign, in the party and the government, will likely continue for the next five years.

Trong's inability to have his favorite succeed him was a sign of growing factionalism in the Vietnamese Communist Party, which the aging and ailing Party Secretary-General is unlikely to reduce. He has enough confidence from the party—given Vietnam's relative success in fighting COVID and its relative economic health as compared to its Southeast Asian neighbors—to hold onto power, but party officials worry that he may not be the right leader to face Vietnam's domestic and foreign policy challenges going

forward. The safety net will be Phuc as president.

Prime Minister Chinh is a former Deputy Minister of Public Security, an agency responsible for internal security, which includes the response to political opposition as well as foreign intelligence. Chinh is the first prime minister not to have held the post of deputy prime minister before his ascension since 1988. His background—as an intelligence officer covering the United States before normalization and, more recently, as party chief in Quang Ninh province bordering China—is expected to help Hanoi walk a delicate line between Washington and Beijing.

The US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement: Down to the Wire

Washington and Manila have until August to renegotiate the 1998 US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) before the pact expires. The timing of these bilateral talks favors Washington: Manila is increasingly challenged by China's actions in the South China Sea and continues to face threats to internal security from multiple insurgency groups. In March the Biden opened negotiations with a “2+2” framework (Defense and Foreign Affairs Ministries/Departments), President Rodrigo Duterte has expressed ambivalence about renewing the VFA, although he agreed to final window for negotiations, and will likely draw out the process as long as possible. In February, he [demanded](#) a four-fold increase in US assistance in return for renewal of the VFA; although Washington has not made its counter-offer public, Ministry of Defense officials have signaled their approval of the package, to Duterte's chagrin.

In early 2021 China's maritime actions have brought the VFA negotiations into the spotlight. In the January announcement of its [new coast guard law](#), Beijing claims the right for Chinese vessels to attack foreign ships and boats that are deemed to threaten Chinese security, including disputed island features in the South China Sea. Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin, Jr., lodged a diplomatic protest and [labeled](#) the announcement of the law “a verbal threat of war.”

Equally alarming for Manila was the prolonged [presence](#) of 200 Chinese vessels around Whitsun Reef, 170 nautical miles west of Palawan in the

northern Spratly Islands. The Philippines claims the reef lies within its Exclusive Economic Zone, causing Locsin to summon the Chinese ambassador in Manila for discussions. When the ships appeared in mid-March, Manila claimed them to be a “maritime militia” under the command of the PLA Navy, while Beijing maintained they were fishing vessels sheltering from bad weather, although satellite photos showed little evidence of fishing equipment. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana characterized the move as a tipping point in Chinese intentions to occupy additional features in the West Philippine Sea.

Washington was quick to express support for Manila, in a State Department tweet that incorporated the “maritime militia” label and, in April, [moved](#) the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and the USS Makin Island into the South China Sea. By mid-April, only a small number of Chinese ships remained around the reef. Analysts view the incident as an attempt by China to demonstrate its greater leverage against the United States in the South China Sea with a new administration in Washington and renegotiation of the VFA in progress. The outcome of VFA negotiations will be one indication of whether Beijing has miscalculated.



Figure 3 An American soldier with Philippine counterparts during an exercise in 2015. Joint exercises are authorized by the US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement, presently under negotiation for renewal. Photo: Ted Aljibe/AFP via Getty Images

The Immediate Outlook for US–Southeast Asian Relations

For the most part, the prospects for positive US relations with Southeast Asia in the Biden administration are good, but Washington has little to show for it at this point. This is due, in large part, to the restrictions of the COVID-19

pandemic, as well as the delays attendant any incoming administration. Indeed, in comparison to the Trump administration, Biden is expected to pay greater attention to diplomacy with Southeast Asia, with consistent and high-level representation at regional meetings, such as the East Asia Summit. He is also likely to appoint a US Ambassador to ASEAN, which Trump failed to do.

However, two major questions hang over a honeymoon period in US–Southeast Asian relations. The first is the role of US security allies in the region in the context of Biden’s larger push to work with allies in his foreign policy. Shortly after his inauguration, Biden spoke by telephone with his counterparts in [Tokyo](#) and [Seoul](#), but he has yet to talk with Prime Minister Prayuth or President Duterte. In addition, on March 3 the administration released its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, which highlighted US security partnerships with Singapore and Vietnam but failed to mention the Philippines or Thailand.

This is likely a temporary problem. Negotiations on renewal of the US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement and continued concern over the security of the South China Sea will keep the US–Philippines alliance on the policy screen. Security relations with Bangkok took a hit when the multilateral Cobra Gold Exercises, co-hosted by Thailand and the United States, were forced to postpone field exercises this year because of COVID-19. They have been tentatively rescheduled for early August. Nevertheless, in view of these issues, Southeast Asians will pay particular attention to remarks by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin when he attends the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore in June.

A second overhanging question will be more difficult for Washington to address in the near-term. Some Southeast Asians hope that a turn away from Trump will send the United States back to the multilateral trade arena in the Asia-Pacific. There are few, if any, signs that Biden intends to do that in a first term, or at least in the first two years of this term. The prospect for keeping, or increasing, a Democratic majority in either House of Congress is by no means assured, and Biden will not want to risk alienating the progressive Democratic base. However, it will be important that his administration articulate a trade policy for Southeast Asia beyond that of the Trump

administration, which was primarily based on reducing American trade deficits.

Washington's credibility in Southeast Asia will also depend on its actions to mitigate the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, relative to other COVID "hotspots," including the United States, Southeast Asia appeared to have a lighter number of cases, although lockdowns and supply chain disruptions brought the region's economic growth rate for the year close to zero. Projections for recovery in 2021 were optimistic, and growth was forecast at a robust 6–7% for the region. However, the early months of 2021 have seen second surges of the coronavirus in Southeast Asia, with nearly every country [seeing](#) a sharp rise in cases, and more modest expectations for quick economic recovery. Moreover, it is not clear whether Myanmar's nascent vaccination program has continued in the wake of the February coup, and health officials fear that it could increase the number of cases in the region.

For the most part, Southeast Asians were heartened by the March 12 [announcement](#) of the Quad's initiative to finance, produce, and distribute 1 billion doses of the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine in the Indo-Pacific region by the end of 2022. The initiative marked the debut of the United States and Japan in the regional "vaccine race," heretofore dominated by China, India, and Russia. India will serve as the Quad's production base for the vaccine, despite the fact that the World Health Organization continually warned that the country was focusing more on its export of vaccine than in vaccinations within the country.

By late April, the total number of COVID cases in India exceeded 20 million, with more than 400,000 new cases being reported daily, while the country's vaccination rate is less than 5%. Although US officials insist that the Quad initiative is still on track and "moving forward expeditiously," it is not clear whether the program will meet its target dates for vaccine distribution. The United States is the largest donor to the WHO's COVAX vaccination distribution program, which will mitigate perceptions that the United States is a non-starter in the "vaccine race." However, Washington will have to step up its diplomacy in the region to assure Southeast Asian leaders that it is a reliable partner in fighting the pandemic.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 1, 2021: Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien-Loong and Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin [issue](#) a joint announcement that the agreement between the two countries to construct a high-speed rail between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore is officially terminated. The two leaders ultimately decide to end cooperation on the project, which was inaugurated in 2013, because of disagreements over cost.

Jan. 12, 2021: King Abdullah of Malaysia [agrees](#) to declare a state of emergency, in an attempt to curb coronavirus infections. The emergency, which suspends parliament, is also a boon to beleaguered Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, in that it prevents an immediate challenge to his leadership and gives him extraordinary powers, including the authority to introduce laws without the approval of the legislature.

Jan. 20, 2021: The United States [contributes](#) \$1 million worth of vehicles and equipment to the UXO Lao Training Center in Vientiane, Laos, to aid UXO removal teams working in five provinces.

Jan. 21, 2021: The 13th National Party Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam [opens](#) to select the top leadership of the party as well as choosing members of the Politburo, and to set policy goals for the next five years.

Jan. 22, 2021: China [announces](#) a coast guard law which comes into effect on Feb. 1, defining the conditions in which Chinese vessels will be permitted to attack foreign vessels. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs files a diplomatic protest over the law, claiming that it is a “threat of war to any country that defies China.”

Feb. 1, 2021: Hours before the newly-elected parliament of Myanmar is scheduled to convene in Naypyidaw, Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing and a high-ranking group of officers [overthrow](#) the new government and detain State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders of the National League for Democracy. As the 2021 ASEAN Chair, Brunei [issues](#) a statement referencing human rights principles in the ASEAN Charter and calling for dialogue, reconciliation and “the return to normalcy” in Myanmar.

Feb. 1, 2021: The Vietnamese Community Party’s 13th National Party Congress adjourns a day early because of a rise in COVID-19 cases.

Feb. 2, 2021: Biden administration officially [designates](#) the Burmese military’s actions of Feb. 1 to be a coup, a legal action which paves the way for US sanctions.

Feb. 5, 2021: USS *John McCain* [conducts](#) a freedom of navigation operation in the vicinity of the Paracel Islands, the sovereignty of which is claimed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

Feb. 11, 2021: President Biden [signs](#) Executive Order 14014, which authorizes an initial round of sanctions on top military leaders in Myanmar who were involved in the Feb. 1 coup, among other possible actions. The Treasury Department subsequently announces the names of coup leaders to be sanctioned, including Min Aung Hlaing.

Feb. 11, 2021: Official negotiations [open](#) on renewal of the US–Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), triggering a 180-day countdown in which the agreement must be renewed or terminated.

Feb. 20, 2021: Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and nine ministers [survive](#) a no-confidence motion in parliament following a four-day censure debate. Protests calling for his resignation resume. The vote marks the second no-confidence vote Prayuth’s government has faced since taking office in July 2019.

Feb. 21, 2021: Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte [demands](#) \$16 billion in assistance from the United States in return for renewal of the Visiting Forces Agreement. The amount would quadruple the current size of US aid to the Philippines.

Feb. 22, 2021: Biden administration [designates](#) two State Administrative Council (SAC) members Maung Maung Kyaw and Moe Mying Tun for sanctions.

Feb. 23, 2021: G7 foreign ministers [issue](#) a statement condemning the violence committed in Myanmar against protestors and calling upon the security forces to exercise “utmost restraint and respect human rights and international law.”

Feb. 24, 2021: Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai [meet](#) with Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in Bangkok for an initial discussion on the violent aftermath of the Feb. 1 coup.

March 2, 2021: ASEAN foreign ministers [hold](#) a virtual meeting with Myanmar coup leader Min Aung Hlaing in an attempt to persuade him to reduce levels of violence in the continued internal conflict.

March 2, 2021: 324,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford COVID-19 vaccine [arrive](#) in Cambodia through the COVAX Advance Market Commitment, which supports equitable access to COVID vaccines.

March 10, 2021: United States [designates](#) the adult children of three top junta officials in Myanmar for sanctions, as well as six entities owned or controlled by these individuals.

March 12, 2021: At a virtual summit of the Quad, the United States, Japan, Australia and India [announced](#) that they will provide 1 billion doses of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, to be produced in India, to countries of the Indo-Pacific by the end of 2022.

March 18, 2021: US State Department [launches](#) the US–Mekong Partnership Track 1.5 Policy Dialogue, presently online.

March 22, 2021: The United States [adds](#) two individuals to the Myanmar sanctions list, the national Chief of Police Than Hlaing and Bureau of Special Operations Commander General Aung Soe, as well as two army units, the 33rd and 77th Light Infantry Divisions.

March 22, 2021: Laos [receives](#) its first shipment of COVID-19 vaccination through the COVAX facility, consisting of 132,000 doses of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine.

March 23, 2021: Philippine Defense Minister Delfin Lorenzana [calls](#) upon the 220 Chinese vessels surrounding Whitsun Reef to withdraw, claiming they are violating the Philippines’ rights under international maritime law.

March 24, 2021: On Twitter, the US State Department expresses support for the Philippines and concern over the gathering of “PRC maritime militia vessels” near Whitsun Reef. The Chinese embassy in Manila responds, also through tweets, that the United States is “fanning flames and provoking confrontation in the region.”

March 25, 2021: Biden administration [announces](#) new sanctions relative to Executive Order 14014, designating two large conglomerates, the Myanmar Economic Holdings Public Company (MEHL) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) for sanctions.

March 26, 2021: World Bank [announces](#) that the economy of Myanmar has contracted by 10% since the Feb. 1 coup. Food prices have doubled, and the cost of fuel has risen by 15%.

March 26, 2021: President Biden [announces](#) his intention to nominate Daniel Kritenbrink to serve as assistant secretary of state for East Asia/Pacific. Kritenbrink has a combination of diplomatic experience in Northeast and Southeast Asia, and was most recently US ambassador to Vietnam.

March 27, 2021: Twelve defense chiefs, including Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley, [issue](#) a statement condemning the use of lethal force against civilians in Myanmar and calling on the Tatmadaw to observe international standards of military professionalism.

April 8, 2021: US Treasury Department [designates](#) Myanmar Gem Enterprise for sanctions, noting that military leaders participate in an ongoing gems emporium under the company's auspices.

April 9, 2021: The Indo-Pacific Command [moves](#) the US carrier strike group USS Theodore Roosevelt and the amphibious ready group USS Makin Island into the South China Sea, partly in response to the presence of Chinese vessels off Whitsun Reef, a perceived threat against the maritime security of the Philippines.

April 12–23, 2021: Armed Forces of the Philippines and the United States Armed Forces [conduct](#) the 36th iteration of the *Balikatan* (“Shoulder-to-Shoulder”) exercises. Although the exercises were scaled down because of COVID-19, 222 US military and 415 AFP personnel participated in combined air operations, staff seminars and humanitarian activities.

April 17, 2021: US Treasury Department [determines](#) that Vietnam has tripped the threshold for currency manipulation but does not formally declare Hanoi a currency manipulator.

April 21, 2021: US Treasury Department [announces](#) sanctions on two state-owned enterprises in Myanmar, the Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE) and the Myanmar Pearl Enterprise (MPE)

April 24, 2021: ASEAN [holds](#) a “special meeting” on the Myanmar crisis in Jakarta. The chairman’s statement lists five “points of consensus,” intended to stop the violence and promote dialogue among the parties.

April 26, 2021: State Administrative Council in Myanmar [says](#) in a statement that it will “consider” ASEAN’s points of consensus only when “genuine stability” has been reached in the crisis.

April 26, 2021: The State Department [issues](#) a statement of concern over the April 20 arrests of 4 journalists affiliated with the Bao Sach (Clean Journalism) movement.

April 26, 2021: After a five-day search, wreckage from the Indonesian submarine KRI Nanggala is [discovered](#) at a depth of more than 800 meters in the Bali Sea. There were no survivors among the 53-person crew.

April 28, 2021: Under the 2018 anti-terrorism law, the Indonesian government [designates](#) the National Liberation Army of West Papua as a terrorist group following an attack on April 25 in which they killed an army general, a policeman, and four civilians.

April 30, 2021: United Nations Development Program [issues](#) a report warning that turmoil and violence in Myanmar has doubled the number of people in poverty, and could force half the population into poverty by early 2022, if the situation continues unchecked. Since the coup, 11% of the population has been pushed into poverty.