

THE JOURNAL OF

INDO-PACIFIC AFFAIRS

VOL. 4, NO. 6
SPECIAL ISSUE



MYANMAR CRISIS

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With additional assistance from the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers

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Visit *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* online at <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/>.

ISSN 2576-5361 (Print) ISSN 2576-537X (Online)

Published by the Air University Press, *The Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs (JIPA)* is a professional journal of the Department of the Air Force and a forum for worldwide dialogue regarding the Indo-Pacific region, spanning from the west coasts of the Americas to the eastern shores of Africa and covering much of Asia and all of Oceania. The journal fosters intellectual and professional development for members of the Air and Space Forces and the world's other English-speaking militaries and informs decision makers and academicians around the globe.

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Myanmar Probably Needs a Military ... Just Not the One It Has

AMBASSADOR SCOT MARCIEL

Much of the world has expressed regret (if not outrage) at Myanmar's military coup on 1 February 2021 and the brutal crackdown on the population in its aftermath. Nevertheless, some international analysts continue to contend that the Tatmadaw (the official name of the armed forces) remains an essential force in a country that is riven by ethnic conflict and that otherwise lacks strong institutions.¹ As a result—or so the argument goes—any solution to the current crisis in Myanmar (formerly Burma) requires a deal that allows the Tatmadaw to continue largely intact and maintain significant power.

The current realities on the ground—the Tatmadaw's overwhelming force and willingness to use it, its dogged determination to remain in power, and the scattered and poorly resourced nature of its opponents—could lead those advocating a negotiated settlement to accept that the military would have to remain in place in something close to its precoup shape and form. Accepting the possibility of such an outcome, however, does not mean that it would be healthy or sustainable.

Taking the position that the Tatmadaw is an essential institution ignores two fundamental realities: its own record of fostering conflict and division, mismanaging and subordinating the country's interests to its own obsession with power; and the near unanimity with which the Myanmar population despises the armed forces and will no longer live peacefully under its control. The February 2021 coup sparked a national uprising of a magnitude that should have everyone questioning long-held assumptions about the centers of power in the years ahead.

Fifty Years of Damage

For at least a half-century, the military has been an unrelentingly negative force in Myanmar in nearly every respect. In fact, it is hard to think of another institution anywhere that has done more damage to a country and society over such a long period. The Tatmadaw has been and remains, in the words of David Mathieson, an "Army of Darkness."²

To understand the military's role, one must start with the fact that Myanmar is what the historian Thant Myint-U has called an "unfinished nation,"³ meaning that its hundreds of ethnic groups have never been united by a collective sense of national identity. For much of its modern history, the country has seen a struggle

between the forces of Burman (or Bamar) nationalism, representing the country's majority, and the many ethnic minority communities who demand autonomy or some form of federalism to safeguard their rights and cultures.

During the colonial period, the British reinforced ethnic divisions and identities, brought in large numbers of immigrants from India, and favored certain ethnic groups over the majority Bamar. During World War II, Bamar nationalists led by Aung San sided with the Japanese, while some ethnic minority groups fought alongside the British, resulting in multiple clashes and several horrific massacres. In the leadup to independence in 1948, Aung San sought to unify the country based on the promise of autonomy for ethnic minority communities (the so-called Panglong Agreement), but his 1947 assassination prevented that promise from being implemented.

Army commander General Ne Win led a coup in 1962 that ended the country's messy postindependence democratic experiment and reasserted the dominance of the Bamar majority. The coup, and the policies that Ne Win subsequently enacted, placed the country on a downhill trajectory that lasted for decades. Ne Win's Bamar-Buddhist nationalism and fear of outside intervention led him to isolate the country, expel much of the large Indian population—which included many able administrators and entrepreneurs—and nationalize the economy under military control, calling it the “Burmese Way to Socialism.” He banished foreign education institutions, including missionary schools along with the Ford Foundation and Asia Foundation, and pursued a disastrous socialist-autarkic economic strategy that sent the country in the wrong direction. By 1987, Ne Win's economic policies had so impoverished Burma that it won admission to the United Nations' group of “Least Developed Countries,” officially marking it as one of the globe's poorest states.⁴

Across five decades of rule, Ne Win and successor military leaders would reject any ideas of autonomy or federalism, insisting on a strong Bamar-dominated unitary state and engaging in regular battles with a variety of ethnic minority insurgent groups, largely in border areas, that were seeking autonomy. The autocrats also institutionalized deeply problematic concepts of ethnicity and identity that deprived those not considered indigenous (or “national races”), such as the Rohingya, of basic rights. They paid lip service to the concept of diversity while practicing “Burmanization” of the country's history, language, education, and culture, pressuring all other ethnic groups to assimilate and suppressing attempts to develop or keep alive ethnic minority heritage. Rather than using institutions such as the military to integrate the country, they ensured such institutions became the near-exclusive domain of the Bamar, who in their view were the only group that maintained unquestioned loyalty to the country. By refusing to recog-

nize the legitimate grievances of ethnic minority populations and in fact brutally suppressing them, Ne Win's regime deepened the country's communal divisions and stoked even greater conflict.

Politically, Ne Win arrested thousands of opponents, suppressed civil and political liberties, and imprisoned ethnic minority leaders, including the country's first president, the Shan prince Sao Shwe Thaik, who died in prison. In border areas, the Tatmadaw pursued its brutal counterinsurgency doctrine, known as the "four cuts" strategy⁵—cutting off food, funds, intelligence, and recruits—to try to defeat ethnic insurgent forces such as the Kachin Independence Organization, Shan State Army, and Karen National Union, as well as the Chinese-backed Communist Party of Burma. The Communist Party of Burma eventually imploded in 1989, but many ethnic insurgent groups continued to fight.

In 1988, sharply deteriorating economic conditions and widespread frustration spawned a mass protest movement led by students. The protests led to Ne Win's resignation, but a new cadre of generals took charge and bloodily suppressed the demonstrations, resulting in thousands of deaths and many more imprisoned. These generals, who gave their regime the Orwellian name SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council), ended the pretense of socialism but maintained military control over the economy, with an element of deeply corrupt capitalism that ruthlessly exploited the nation's natural resources and concentrated wealth in the hands of the military elite and their cronies, leaving most of the rest of the population impoverished.

For the next two decades, the generals continued the repressive practices and economic mismanagement that had characterized Ne Win's rule, propelling the country further backward in almost every respect. The SLORC held elections in 1990, but it ignored the results when Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won an overwhelming majority, imprisoning many NLD and other prodemocracy leaders and continuing military rule for another 20 years. The generals suppressed most political activity, strictly censored and controlled the media, imprisoned dissidents, and blatantly manipulated the country's judiciary.

Although the economy probably enjoyed modest growth from 1990 to 2010 (the official figures are questionable, to say the least), much of that growth appeared to come from resource exploitation—amid much corruption—and was neither sustainable nor equitable. According to the World Bank, as late as 2014 the poverty rate was still above 37 percent (the highest within ASEAN), and per capita income was just above \$1,000. The military also failed to invest in infrastructure; the country's electricity grid reached only one-third of the population, and the density of the road network was well below most neighbors.⁶ Few had

access to the internet, and a SIM card cost \$2,500 in 2010. More broadly, military officers regularly interfered in the running of the economy, telling farmers what to grow and when, operating as many as 11 exchange rates (which created huge profit opportunities for them and those connected to them), and overseeing a banking sector better known for money laundering than lending. At the same time, the regime was collecting huge proceeds from its control of the country's state-owned enterprises, which operated most of the extractive industries.

The generals collected few taxes and funneled much of the nation's severely inadequate budget to the military itself, starving the educational and health care systems. According to the World Bank, the military received about 40 percent of the national budget in 2000, compared to only 1.5 percent going to health care.⁷ The World Health Organization's 2000 report ranked Myanmar's health care performance at 190th out of 191 countries, ahead of only Sierra Leone.⁸ That same year, the military regime was spending only 0.5 percent of GDP on education, and more than half the population could not afford even basic education.⁹

The combination of high poverty rates and low investments in education and health had predictable results. According to the World Bank, as the country entered its reform period after 2010, it had the lowest life expectancy in ASEAN and the second highest level of child and infant mortality. Roughly 30 percent of students finished high school, with a quarter going no farther than primary school.¹⁰

The military regime also failed miserably—indeed, it did not even try—to ease the longstanding tensions and mistrust between ethnic minority communities and the Bamar majority that had plagued the country for decades. And though the military did not begin the process of dividing the country by ethnicity, it certainly reinforced it. It sought to “unify” the nation by forcing assimilation, banning the teaching of ethnic minority languages and history, force-feeding the population a Bamar-centric educational curriculum, backed by constant propaganda, and harshly suppressing ethnic insurgencies that sought autonomy. In doing so, it reinforced prejudices, amplified mistrust, and exacerbated the very divisions that were the root causes of decades of conflict and despair.

The military combined brutal counterinsurgency campaigns, with constant efforts to exploit and expand the divisions among the different ethnic groups. Its four-cuts tactics involved massive human rights violations—forced labor, systemic use of rape as a weapon of war, indiscriminate shelling, wholesale destruction of villages, and widespread torture and murder—that among other things produced hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people.¹¹

Starting in the early 1990s, the military entered several cease-fire agreements, mostly so it could concentrate its forces against other insurgent groups. It also

struck deals with certain groups that, in effect, turned them into proxy militias in return for virtual licenses to engage in smuggling, illegal timber trade, and narcotics production and distribution. The military, in that sense, is largely responsible for the massive expansion of illicit activity, including one of the world's biggest narcotics industries, which is wreaking havoc inside the country and causing widespread suffering outside.

By 2011, when a newly elected government led by general Thein Sein unexpectedly began to reform and open the country, the military had directly or indirectly run the country for nearly 50 years. During that time, Burma—it has been known as Myanmar since 1989—had regressed from a country that was near the forefront or at least in the middle ranks of the various Southeast Asian nations on a number of indexes (economy, education system, rice exports, and quality of civil service) to a deeply impoverished, conflict-ridden, and isolated state known more for its horrific human rights record and for producing drugs, refugees, and fear than anything else. It is hard to think of any positive contribution the military made to the country during that time. It reflected one of the worst records of rule and governance of any institution in the world.

The Military During the Reform Period

The Thein Sein government introduced significant reforms and established a nascent national peace process. Between 2011 and 2015, it freed political prisoners; allowed the establishment of political parties, independent media, and civil society; ended censorship; boosted spending on health and education; and liberalized the economy—all while opening the country to the world. The military largely accepted these reforms while maintaining its monopoly of power over security issues and 25 percent of seats in parliament—both guaranteed by the 2008 constitution that the generals had written. The military also—however reluctantly—accepted the 2015 elections results, which brought longtime opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD party to power. In addition, it began working with the International Labor Organization and others on issues such as recruitment of child soldiers.

During this period, some Western countries, included the United States, held out hope that the military could be persuaded to accept further reform in return for the prospect of greater international recognition and—over time—an enhanced ability to engage and work with Western militaries. As US ambassador to Myanmar beginning in early 2016, I had multiple conversations with General Min Aung Hlaing and other military leaders in which I made clear that further reform and increased respect for human rights could lead to greater engagement from the US military.

The generals insisted they supported the democratization process and looked forward to increased military-to-military engagement, but over time it became clear they were not willing to change the military's behavior. The Tatmadaw continued its habitualized "four cuts" approach, particularly in operations against the Kachin Independence Army in the northeast, with no improvement in its human rights performance. It also greatly hindered progress in the national peace process, insisting that ethnic armed groups surrender their arms and also failing to honor agreements embedded in the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. While the generals for the first time allowed discussion of the concept of federalism, they made it clear through words and actions that they still did not accept anything less than a Bamar-dominated political system in which the military continued to play a leading role.

Then, in late 2016 and again in mid-2017, the Tatmadaw responded to attacks by a small group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), by launching a horrific, bloody operation against the Rohingya population in northern Rakhine State. Amid widespread reports of rape, torture, and murder, the security forces razed hundreds of Rohingya villages, causing more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. The United States determined that the operation constituted ethnic cleansing; others characterized it genocide.

It is true that the mistreatment of the Rohingya, which goes back decades, was not just an issue of the Tatmadaw. Aung San Suu Kyi and her government—along with much of the media and, it seemed, the population—failed to support Rohingya rights and even defended the military's operation, denying the widespread allegations of severe human rights violations. Nevertheless, it was the Tatmadaw that actually carried out the ethnic cleansing, proving once again that its behavior had not changed and that it continued to operate with impunity. Conversations with military officials during this time bordered on the bizarre, with top generals insisting there had been no human rights abuses and wondering aloud why the world did not believe them. In one meeting, military commander General Min Aung Hlaing brought out a photo album filled with gruesome pictures of dead soldiers and police as evidence of ARSA atrocities, as if that somehow justified the military's ethnic cleansing operation against the entire Rohingya community.

Ahead of 2020 national elections, the military again showed its hostility to reform by blocking proposed constitutional changes that, among other things, would have gradually reduced the Tatmadaw's role in parliament. Then, when the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the NLD in the election, the Tatmadaw cried foul, demanded an investigation into alleged electoral fraud, and then—when the NLD rejected its demands—staged a coup on 1 February 2021.

When a Country Despises Its Military

The coup and the military's subsequent brutal suppression of protests, along with its aggressive attacks against several ethnic armed groups and newly formed "people's defense forces" that also opposed the coup, have revealed a Tatmadaw that operates—and is seen by the public—more like a foreign occupying force than a legitimate national institution. First, the coup itself had no legitimate justification; the military simply wanted to seize power. Second, the widespread, indiscriminate violence, torture, and looting the military has inflicted on the civilian population clearly have been designed to terrorize or cow the public into submission, an outrage that has stripped the Tatmadaw of what little support and respect it previously enjoyed in the country. Third, the military's actions have revealed that it continues to operate and to think inside its own cocoon, almost hermetically sealed from the society at large. It engages in constant self-aggrandizing propaganda, is largely oblivious to the thinking and attitudes of the public, and indoctrinates its members to see anyone who disagrees as an enemy.

The Tatmadaw enjoys almost no support among the public, save for a few who are either related to military officers or financially connected to the organization. In fact, the overwhelming sentiment of Myanmar's population appears to be that there is neither hope nor opportunity for the country as long as the military remains in power. The dominant view among protestors and others resisting the coup is not to return to the status quo ante but rather to eliminate the military as an independent political actor and to fundamentally reform the institution. Some of the ethnic armed groups—more accustomed to dealing with the military and perhaps more aware of its force superiority—might be amenable to cutting a deal in return for greater autonomy, but that is not where the majority of the country's population is now.

In sum, nearly 60 years after it seized power, the Tatmadaw has shown itself to be a driver of conflict and division, not a force for unity. It has failed miserably at economic management, not to mention developing health and education systems. It has fostered corruption and a massive illicit economy, including one of the largest narcotics production operations in the world. It has promoted the dominance of the majority Bamar-Buddhist community in a country that has no chance of peace and success absent the establishment of some form of federalism that addresses the grievances and aspirations of its significant minority populations. And in the past several months, its obsession with power, its brutality, and its failure to understand today's Myanmar society has sparked a national revolt and created massive turmoil and instability that it has almost no chance of ending.

Hypothetically, one can make a good argument that Myanmar needs a military to serve as a national institution and as a force for unity in a country full of conflict and centrifugal forces. There is, however, no evidence that the current military—the Tatmadaw—is serving or can serve in these roles. The Tatmadaw is a cancer. Until and unless it changes dramatically, there is little hope for Myanmar to achieve peace, unity, economic development, or any true sense of nation.

If Myanmar is to enjoy a truly national military, the current institution needs to be torn down, at least in part, and rebuilt with new leadership, a different culture, and a new vision. The Myanmar people will need to create their own vision for what a better military might look like. Presumably, it would be an integrated institution, answerable to elected civilians, without economic interests, and with a different culture that respects human rights and prizes accountability. It likely will require years if not decades of transition, but it is critical now for the Myanmar people to develop a vision for such a military, and then they can begin to discuss steps needed to achieve it. Maybe a new national military college that is fully integrated can be a first step, in addition to eliminating ethnic identity from any military documents and developing a completely new training regimen.

Implications

The obvious question remains what good this analysis even offers given that the Tatmadaw right now seems entrenched in power, uninterested in reforming itself, and far from a position in which it would be compelled to accept restructuring or major reform.

The answer comes in three parts. First, it should lead analysts and foreign governments to recognize that Myanmar is likely to continue to suffer from conflict and instability (and be a headache for ASEAN) for as long as the Tatmadaw (a) remains in power and (b) continues to operate in its current form and in an overbearing political and economic role. The Myanmar people already know this. It would be helpful if foreign analysts and foreign ministries also understood it and thus stopped arguing that the Tatmadaw is an essential institution that needs to be maintained.

Second, given this analysis, foreign governments and other actors ideally will resist the temptation to think that the current crisis will either ease on its own or be satisfactorily resolved via limited compromises that free a few political prisoners, offer promises of future elections, or propose yet another long-term road map to better politics. While a deal that ends or reduces the violence and/or allows humanitarian assistance to reach vulnerable populations would be welcome, it would not resolve the underlying problem or restore stability.

The third aspect should be a greater effort on the part of foreign governments to support the efforts of the Myanmar people to compel the Myanmar military to change as a precondition to any political resolution. This is not a call to arm the resistance but rather to do everything possible to ratchet up the pressure on the military. Many people believe the Tatmadaw cannot be defeated militarily. They might be right, but today everything in Myanmar is up in the air, and nothing should be taken for granted. As the analyst Zaw Tuseng recently wrote: “There is nothing pre-determined about what will happen in Myanmar, certainly not the Tatmadaw’s survival.”¹² Even if the Tatmadaw is not defeated militarily on the battlefield, it is possible that the intense pressure it is under—if sustained and even increased—will force it to make concessions that right now seem unimaginable. This is not a prediction but a potential scenario.

In the near term, the only positive way ahead is for enough officers in the Tatmadaw to recognize that the current situation is not viable and to look for a way out that would involve negotiations that lead to at least the beginning of reform of the military itself, as well as restoration of the many earlier reforms that the postcoup regime has reversed. That will require intense pressure on the Tatmadaw in all forms, including financial, combined with a clear message that the goal is not to eliminate the military or to punish all members but rather to initiate significant restructuring and reform while pursuing justice—including in international legal forums—against top generals and some individuals clearly involved in massive violations. The key is to encourage more defections from the rank and file as well as new calculations from more senior officers.

For the international community to play a constructive role in resolving the chaos in Myanmar, it must adopt strategies that recognize there is no sustainable solution to Myanmar’s woes without substantial reform of the Tatmadaw and that reasoning with the current leadership in the hope it will change its behavior is fruitless. Compelling change within the military might seem unthinkable right now—and efforts might well fail—but the alternative is to accept that Myanmar will remain a source of instability, conflict, refugees, narcotics, and distress for the foreseeable future. ★

Ambassador Scot Marciel

Ambassador Marciel (MA, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy; BA, international relations,, University of California at Davis) is a Visiting Scholar, Visiting Practitioner Fellow on Southeast Asia, at Stanford University’s Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center. He served as US Ambassador to Myanmar from March 2016 through May 2020, leading a mission of 500 employees during the difficult Rohingya crisis and a challenging time for Myanmar’s democratic transition and the United States–Myanmar relationship. Prior to serving in Myanmar, Ambassador Marciel served as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific at the Department of State (DOS), where he oversaw US relations with Southeast Asia. From 2010 to 2013, he served as US Amba-

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Ambassador Marciel is a career diplomat with 35 years of experience in Asia and around the world. In addition to the assignments noted above, he has served at US missions in Turkey, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Brazil, and the Philippines. At the DOS in Washington, he served as Director of the Office of Maritime Southeast Asia, Director of the Office of Mainland Southeast Asia, and Director of the Office of Southern European Affairs. He also was Deputy Director of the Office of Monetary Affairs in the Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs.

Notes

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Women on the Front Lines in Myanmar's Fight for Democracy

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Since Myanmar's newly established State Administration Council, led by the commander in chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, staged a coup on 1 February 2021, the country has descended into violent chaos. When millions of protesters peacefully took to the street demanding to restore the democratically elected government, they were met with the military's signature brutal crackdown. The very first fatality of the military's ruthless suppression was a 19-year-old woman named Mya Thwet Khine. A sniper fatally shot her in the head while she participated in a rally near Nay Pyi Taw, the country's capital city.¹ Since her death, many more female protesters have been killed, arrested, and assaulted by the military as they demonstrated against the coup. The military raided homes in the middle of the night, dragged the women off to jail, and locked them up without due process. Once in captivity, many of them were subjected to tortured interrogations and sexual assaults.² "Despite the risks, women have stood at the forefront of Myanmar's protest movement, sending a powerful rebuke to the generals who ousted a female civilian leader and reimposed a patriarchal order that has suppressed women for a half a century."³ According to one of the protesters, "as a mum, in the deep down of my heart, I realized that the future of my daughter, and the future of all young people in the country will be drawn back to dark." Women know that they have more to lose. Therefore, about 60 percent of protesters are women, according to the Women's League of Burma.⁴ The mass number of women in the front line of this political uprising defies their stereotypical role.

Traditional Role of Women in Myanmar Society

While Myanmar women traditionally enjoyed considerable agency and rights, their roles were constricted over time. Following the 1962 coup, successive military regimes used isolationist policies to control and subjugate the population by cutting off the country from the rest of the world. The regimes aimed to keep out the "undesirable foreign influences."⁵ The military regimes were largely successful in keeping the people ignorant by deliberately dismantling the public education and health systems. They controlled the population by clamping down on civil society and using state-sanctioned violence against those who oppose the regime.

All these tactics had particularly detrimental effects on women's rights and roles over the years. For example, the military regime promoted nationalism by amending the interfaith marriage law to the detriment of the women. The new law stripped women who marry non-Buddhist or non-Burmese men of their property rights. Also, the military regime prohibited women's networking alliances. The regime allowed only organizations that will purportedly preserve Myanmar culture, which means strengthening the traditional gender roles and bolstering males' privileged position within the society.⁶

Although the women actively participated in the anticolonial struggle for independence from the United Kingdom in the 1930s, they were still subordinated under the men. Due to engrained beliefs about appropriate gender roles, it was difficult for women to achieve the same levels of authority and influence as men.⁷ After the independence from the British, now under Myanmar military rule, women were further relegated to the sidelines since the Myanmar military is an extremely chauvinistic organization. The military's top-down structure and culture reinforced the concept of male superiority and discouraged women from participating in political activities. As such, women were perpetually underrepresented in the leadership positions of the government bureaucracy. Authorities disproportionately targeted and punished women who dared to oppose or challenge the status quo.⁸ It was not surprising that the military sniper chose to shoot a young woman as the first victim in this current uprising. According to the state-run MRTV, the military snipers were ordered to purposefully shoot the protesters in the head to create a sense of horror for the onlookers.⁹ Instead of being frightened, more women came out to protest against the military regime after 1 February.

Changing Role of Women in Myanmar Society

Beginning around 2011, the country's opening and the process of transition to democracy opened the eyes of Myanmar women. They were exposed to new ideas about gender equality, feminism, and human rights as the world reengaged the country. Most of the international aid packages had women's empowerment and capacity-building components. Women had opportunities to question and challenge the prevailing cultural beliefs, practices, and power structures that kept women in subordinate positions.¹⁰ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, Women's Peace and Security, offered additional capacities and capabilities for the Myanmar women to take part in the nontraditional peace and security sectors. As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi led the National League for Democracy to power, the women's traditional understanding of leadership—such as deeply held beliefs that leadership belongs to men—was dispelled. In addition to her charisma

and popularity, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's gender has been one of the key factors that endangered the existing misogynistic power structure. The process of democratization of the country's political system allowed women's voices and perspectives to enter the political arena. They are now refusing to go back. Daw Zin Mar Aung,¹¹ minister of foreign affairs of Myanmar's National Unity Government, said "this battle is the last battle for us and for the country" during her interview with ABC Australia on 29 July 2021.¹²

Women Formed the Backbone of the Revolution

Women are taking this current political crisis as an opportunity to reshape the narrative of women's role in society in addition to opposing the military takeover. They have become the backbone of the revolution. Women's labor unions, garment workers, health care providers, and teachers were the first to protest. "Women activists and politicians have also helped mobilize crowds to join the protests. Daw Ei Thinzar Maung, one of the country's youngest candidates for MP in the last election, nominated by the Democratic Party for a New Society, has been using her social media accounts where she has more than 360,000 followers to rally support for the demonstrations."¹³ The most influential critic of the regime, Daw Ei Pencilo, with 1.6 million followers, is on the regime's most-wanted list for her ability to lead public opinion against the military.¹⁴ The women have been able to improve their capacity for social mobilization and networking.¹⁵ There is also unprecedented cooperation between different ethnic women's groups in response to the coup. They have been able to leverage social media platforms such as Facebook to socialize their ideas and mobilize the people for action. Myanmar women are feeling empowered to lead the rebellion this time around. They now have the capacity and capabilities to lead the effort. One of the women passionately said with conviction that "we as the future mothers of the country, we have the responsibility to lead the restoration of democracy."¹⁶ They are now associating motherhood with leadership. Again, this is a departure from the traditional mindset of leadership being a masculine domain. The local NGO Gender Equality Network estimated that 70–80 percent of movement's leaders are women.¹⁷ According to Daw Khin Ohmar, an 88-Generation¹⁸ political activist: "In 1988, the leaders were men. This time, they're women. It's exciting."¹⁹

Innovative Methods of Protests

The women are utilizing feminine qualities and newly acquired capabilities gained since the opening to counter the military junta. The capabilities are bringing innovative tactics to the fight. Women protesters hoisted traditional women's

sarongs and undergarments over the streets to stop the advancing troops. They are creatively utilizing the deep-rooted belief that men's masculine superiority, *hpone*, will vanish if the women's sarongs and undergarments soar directly above the men's heads. This tactic stopped the advancing armed troops in their tracks. They did not dare to cross the clotheslines, and the women were able to save lives that day. Since then, the regime has made such tactics illegal and brutally raided homes of the women who had engineered them. Still, women continue with their resistance. They also led the nightly campaign of banging pots and pans, the traditional way to ward off evil, to clearly send a message to the regime of their dissent.²⁰ Now, it is illegal to do so and again, the security forces raided homes for such activities and arrested the residents, of which many were women. The youngest victim so far has been a seven-year-old girl, Khin Myo Chit, who was shot during a home raid in Mandalay.²¹

The women also played a leading role in organizing and sustaining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The CDM was primarily responsible for preventing the military regime to consolidate its control of the population and country so far. The CDM delivered a crippling blow to the military regime as majority of civil servants joined the strike. Nearly 20,000 university faculty and administrators joined the CDM, and at least three-quarters of the university faculty is female. More than a quarter of teachers in basic education joined the CDM. Again, nearly 90 percent of the teachers are women. Despite constant fear of arrest and financial loss, the participants of CDM remained committed to the strike. They refuse to return to work until democracy is restored in Myanmar.

Myanmar Democracy in the Context of Strategic Competition and China

According to the 2021 Freedom House report, 75 percent of the population around the world experienced 15 years of consecutive decline of freedom and continuous recession of democracy.²² Myanmar, situated on the doorstep of China in mainland Southeast Asia, now joins the ranks of those who are in the front line in the fight for democracy. This puts Myanmar square in the middle of the major powers competition and the contest between democratic systems and authoritarian regimes. China does not wish to see Myanmar be a democratic country. Safeguarding and controlling the Myanmar corridor was of vital importance to Beijing's foreign policy. Myanmar provides a strategic alternative to China's "Malacca Dilemma." China's dependency on the narrow Strait of Malacca, where a majority of its shipping and energy supplies must traverse through, created a significant

vulnerability in its strategic competition with the United States. Beijing sees unfettered access to the Myanmar corridor as a key to remedy this strategic vulnerability. Furthermore, having access to over 2,000 kilometers of Myanmar coastline (strategically located at the western entrance to the Malacca Strait) with direct access to the Indian Ocean would give China an enormous commercial advantage over its major competitors. If this comes to fruition, China will be able to control both the eastern part of Malacca Strait via the artificial islands in the South China Sea and the western part via Myanmar.

Additionally, China has viewed Myanmar as a land bridge to the Indian Ocean. This recognition and ambition date back to the early Chinese explorers who searched for a route from the landlocked provinces of China (such as the modern-day Yunan area) via Myanmar to the sea. Therefore, it has always been a great concern for China to limit Western influence in Myanmar. Flourishing democracy in Myanmar is not in the best interest of China. Since the coup, China has refused to condemn the military junta and vetoed many of the resolutions against the junta at the United Nations.²³ There has been allegation of China's assistance with establishing Cyber Firewall to restrict and track the protesters' online activities.²⁴

Russia's Assistance to the Military Junta

Amid the coup, Russia strengthened its ties with the military regime. Russia's deputy defense minister attended the Armed Forces Day celebration on 27 March 2021, the same day the junta's security forces killed nearly 100 unarmed protesters, including children, in 40 towns and cities throughout Myanmar.²⁵ In June, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu hosted General Min Aung Hlaing's visit to Moscow with pomp and circumstance. The defense minister affirmed Russia's continuing support to Myanmar military with training and arms sales. Myanmar has been one of the traditional export markets for Russian weapons. Russia sees the rising instability within Myanmar as a lucrative opportunity to increase its sales of weapons.²⁶ Myanmar military has purchased \$807 million in Russian weapons since 2011. Recently, Russia is set to deliver six Su-30 fighter jets and has agreed to supply the Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile system, Orlan-10E surveillance drones, and radar equipment.²⁷ Myanmar's military has been increasingly relying on airstrikes in the border areas to crack down on ethnic armed groups, which are also assisting and training protesters and Peoples Defense Forces²⁸. The indiscriminate nature of the airstrikes has killed many unarmed villagers, including children, and displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians.²⁹ Such conditions are likely to intensify as the military obtains new and advanced airpower with the help from Russia.

COVID-19 Surge Exacerbates Political Crisis

To make things worse, COVID-19 infection is spreading rapidly in Myanmar. The UN special rapporteur for Myanmar has warned that the country is at risk of becoming a “super spreader” COVID state for the region.³⁰ On 30 July 2021, “the United Kingdom has warned the United Nations Security Council that half of coup-wracked Myanmar’s population of 54 million could become infected with COVID-19 within the next two weeks.”³¹ In the midst of COVID spread, the security forces have been targeting the health care workers and physicians who participated in the CDM. According to the United Nations, the security forces had conducted 260 attacks against health care workers, killed 18, and detained 157 so far.³² Many of them were shot in the head. Myanmar is now considered one of the most dangerous places on earth for health care workers.³³ Again, most Myanmar health care workers are women. The head of the country’s vaccination program, Dr. Htar Htar Lin, was arrested and charged with high treason in June 2021.³⁴ Many women health care workers and physicians are working in underground clinics to provide health care to the desperate population. These underground health care clinics are constantly in threat of raids.

Women at the Front Line of the Fight for Democracy

As the country continues to descend into deeper turmoil with assistance from China, Russia, and COVID-19, women are holding the front line with nothing but their courage, commitment, and creativity. Intervention or substantive support from the United Nations, ASEAN, the United States, or the European Union is unlikely.

It is now up to women leaders such as Daw Zin Mar Aung, Daw Ei Thinzar Mung, Daw Thinzar Shunlei Yi and Daw Ester Ze Naw; women lawyers Daw Zar Li, Daw May Zin Oo, Daw Myint Myat, Daw Khin Hlaing, Daw Khin Myo;³⁵ women journalists Daw Naw Betty Han and Daw Nyein Lay; women organizers Daw Tin Wei and Daw Moe Sandar Myint—working day and night risking arrests and their lives—to ensure that the fight continues against the brutal military regime. The National Unity Government, made up of ousted lawmakers in hiding, has also appointed several women ministers.³⁶

As the battle for democracy in Myanmar rages on at the doorstep of China, Myanmar’s women will continue to stand on the front lines to prevent the triumph of authoritarianism. It is a tall order for them to reach a tipping point against the heavily armed military—which enjoys the support from authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia—without some substantive international assistance beyond encouragements and statements. The battle for democracy in

Myanmar has become a symbolic contest between democracy and authoritarianism at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region. It will be in the best interest of the most prominent exemplars of democracy to assist Myanmar's women achieve the tipping point to defeat the military regime. The failure to restore democracy in Myanmar will have reverberations throughout the Indo-Pacific. "The international community must recognize the courage of the women of Myanmar and stand with them in their fight for democracy."³⁷ 🌟

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Myanmar in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

Why Is China Winning and What to Do about It?

PAWAN AMIN

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The Tatmadaw—Myanmar’s military—under the leadership of Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing, began a coup on the morning of 1 February 2021, deposing the democratically elected members of Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) and declaring a year-long state of emergency. This decision by the Tatmadaw came after its repeated assertions regarding irregularities in the November 2020 elections—a claim Myanmar’s Union Election Commission dismissed, citing lack of evidence. As things stand currently, Beijing is best positioned to play the role of a mediator to impress upon the new military regime to honor its commitment to re-establishing democratic governance. However, the question is, would Beijing want to do so? Since the coup, China has insisted that the international community should not interfere in Myanmar’s internal affairs and has encouraged engagement with the Tatmadaw. On the other hand, Washington has voiced support for member countries facing China’s aggression and urged the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to act to end violence and restore democracy in Myanmar. What do these divergent approaches toward Myanmar indicate about the extent of Washington’s leverage vis-à-vis Beijing’s clout? Does Washington’s reliance on ASEAN to bring about a change of course in Myanmar, amid China’s multifaceted influence there, reflect a viable strategy? Moreover, where does Myanmar, situated at the confluence of South and Southeast Asia, feature in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, and can Washington’s rhetorical flourish of ASEAN Centrality in its Indo-Pacific strategy realistically help the United States navigate Myanmar’s quagmire?

Keeping these fundamental questions in context, the article will probe Washington’s relative lack of attention to Myanmar in its Asia rebalancing and Indo-Pacific strategies and its failure to reap the benefits of Myanmar’s reform and opening. The article will also assess the extent of the leverage of China’s power in Myanmar and its implications for Myanmar’s own ability to hedge its bets, and that of other major players to promote their interests in Myanmar. Lastly, the ar-

ticle will analyze the emerging trajectory of China's role in Myanmar post the military coup and argue that Washington needs to soberly assess the value of Myanmar in its strategic calculus for the Indo-Pacific. Based on such an assessment, Washington needs to clarify the objectives of its approach to Myanmar and then arrive at its strategy to achieve those objectives, which might include recalibrating its reliance on ASEAN, its dynamics with China vis-à-vis Myanmar, and engagement with like-minded partners of the Indo-Pacific region.

Washington's Myopic Vision for Myanmar and China's Gain

The trajectory of the US approach to Myanmar can best be described as misguided oscillation. Not only does Washington keep reverting to an approach that has met with repeated failure but also the distance between the US objectives and means have been so wide that their implementation has only resulted in shifting the goal posts further away every time. So far, the United States has employed the entire range of its diplomatic temper to get the military dispensation in Myanmar to acquiesce to US demands, ranging from avoidance to ostracization and punishment (sanctions and introducing UN Security Council resolutions to censure the regime on its human rights records), while also periodically shifting from limited to pragmatic engagement.

Ever since the 1988 uprising that brought the military junta to power, US foreign policy in Myanmar has been aimed to restore the democratically elected NLD government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and ending the military regime—this despite the fact that General Saw Maung-led State Law and Order Restoration Council had merely replaced an equally brutal military government, to which Washington had been providing assistance periodically.¹ The zeal with which Washington has attempted to end military rule and establish electoral democracy in Myanmar has been exceptional when compared to other authoritarian and military regimes in the neighborhood that are arguably of greater strategic and economic import to the United States.² Perhaps that is the reason why Washington is more willing to test the limits of the Tatmadaw's political flexibility and commitment to peaceful transition to democracy.

According to Prof. David Steinberg of Georgetown University, Myanmar is a “boutique issue” in US foreign policy—.³ He asserts that Myanmar was not a major crisis relative to the other issues, which US needed to address in its foreign policy. However, owing to the lobbying capacity of expatriates from the country, it had gained some currency with administrations and in the US Congress. Prior to Obama administration, America's Myanmar policy was steered by the legislature. Democracy promotion in Myanmar was a bipartisan issue and congressmen from both sides of the aisle have introduced legislations sanctioning the members

of Junta since the early 90's.⁴ Such a bipartisan attitude against an antidemocratic military ruled Myanmar translates to legislative pressures on the executive.⁵

For instance, following is the statement from the executive order sanctioning Myanmar by Pres. Joe Biden in February 2021, "... rejecting the will of the people of Burma as expressed in elections held in November 2020 and undermining the country's democratic transition and rule of law, constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States."⁶ This next statement is from the executive order signed by Pres. Barack Obama in 2009, also imposing sanctions on Myanmar, "... the actions and policies of the Government of Burma continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States."⁷ In both statements, given more than a decade apart, the situation in Myanmar is categorized as an unusual and extraordinary threat to US national security and foreign policy. The only likely challenge that could emanate is the precedent that is set from the executive having to deploy sanctions in pursuance of democracy promotion abroad. Moreover, considering the relative lack of Myanmar's importance in the plethora of US foreign policy issues and its low cost-benefit ratio, American presidents are less likely to challenge the legislature on its decisions pertaining to Myanmar.

One major regional ramifications of this approach has been an increase in China's influence in the region and in ASEAN. Following the group's decision to induct Myanmar in 1997 over objections from the United States, Washington did not sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation for more than a decade. The United States also reduced its participation in the ASEAN summit and refused to host ASEAN meetings to avoid meeting officials of Myanmar's State Peace and Development Council regime.⁸ During the tenure of Pres. George W. Bush, the United States also became preoccupied with Afghanistan and Iraq to the detriment of its ties with ASEAN.⁹ This affected the United States' broader strategic objective, as the void created by America's absence provided space for China to emerge as one of the biggest trading partners and investment destinations for Myanmar and the region.¹⁰ This would had a direct bearing on the structure of US-China competition thereon, as ASEAN emerged as the platform for addressing regional security issues, and China leveraged its deep economic linkages with a few Southeast Asian neighbors to prevent the grouping from arriving at a consensus against China's territorial intransigencies in the South China Sea. This made the grouping ineffective in coordinating a regional response.

Change in US approach to the region and to Myanmar did not happen until the Obama administration called for a review of Myanmar policy in September 2009.¹¹ This change in approach was premised on how sanctions and constructive

engagement had failed to meet US objectives in Myanmar.¹² Rather, a multilateral initiative led by the United States, including ASEAN, India, Japan, and China—which was envisioned as encouraging reform and reconciliation in Myanmar—was deemed the way forward.¹³ Then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton laid down Washington's new approach to the region during her visit to the ASEAN secretariat in Jakarta in 2009. The same year, Clinton attended the ASEAN Regional Forum and signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Secretary Clinton decoupled Myanmar from the US–ASEAN relationship and announced that Washington's Myanmar policy was under review and that the new administration did not believe sanctions to be an effective strategy in Myanmar. Thereon, the Obama administration's strategy was to deepen ties with ASEAN, while at the same time continuously engaging Myanmar for reforms and maintaining a flexible policy approach to address any number of possible outcomes during Myanmar's transition process.

Despite some resistance to this approach in the US Congress, Senator Jim Webb (D-VA), Chairman of Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Southeast Asia, argued the need for the United States to balance between its concerns for democracy and human rights on one hand and its strategic interests in the region on the other.¹⁴ He also went on to assert that China was able to expand its influence in Myanmar because of US sanctions.¹⁵ While this opportunity could have proven to be an ideal reset strategy—and in many ways, it was—the American beltway's overt support for Suu Kyi and the NLD, coupled with reluctance to engage important domestic political actors in Myanmar, hindered a more realist strategy. The United States was following what one analyst calls a “tit-for-tat” diplomacy in Myanmar, where every step the ruling junta took toward democratic reforms was reciprocated with greater political and diplomatic outreach by the Obama administration.¹⁶ To that end, Pres. Thein Sein of the Tatmadaw-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) undertook some genuine reform measures, including conducting free and fair by-elections in April 2012, which the NLD won comfortably. Thereafter, the United States lifted investment sanctions later that year and suspended a ban on importing goods from Myanmar.¹⁷ However, Derek Mitchell's (who was confirmed as the US ambassador to Myanmar) direct involvement in Suu Kyi's campaign made it appear as if the United States was interfering in the 2015 elections.¹⁸

America's support for Suu Kyi led the junta to accuse her of being an “axe--handle of the West.”¹⁹ Apart from wasting away America's goodwill through such explicit support, Washington's approach was extremely shortsighted. Neither the NLD nor Suu Kyi were in any way representative of the many ethnic organizations in the country.²⁰ Moreover, without the support of the Tatmadaw, neither

Suu Kyi nor any other civilian administration can govern Myanmar. Apart from being the most important political actor in the country, the Tatmadaw's role in ensuring political stability is vital. Myanmar is and will continue to be a conflict zone for some time to come. Much of the peripheral regions are under de-facto control of the ethnic armed organizations, which sustain themselves through a thriving parallel economy financed by drug, arms, and human trafficking. By supporting the NLD and Suu Kyi, the United States, for all its intents and purposes, backed the strongest civilian candidate who would guarantee a victory in general elections. However, Washington lost the plot in having a sustainable political transition by antagonizing all other important players.

During the Trump administration, both houses of the Congress had Republican majorities, and if there was indeed a vision to resurrect America's deficient role in Myanmar's treacherous politico-economic transition, a more effective model for engaging multiple actors in Myanmar could have been built. The Trump presidency however, with its "America first" rhetoric and focus on cutting down America's international commitments, did not seem to have any purposeful vision for Myanmar in its broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Thus, during the recent increase in political tensions, America's withering points of engagement with political players in Myanmar stood exposed. The United States has been deficient, perhaps intentionally, in its outreach to the Tatmadaw.²¹ While this approach can be explained by placing it in context of Washington's priority in ensuring the NLD's electoral success, it was incredibly myopic. By sidelining the most powerful domestic political actor, which had retained the constitutional authority to snap--back the democratic reforms at any given time, the United States, in effect, limited its own ability to help sustain the NLD government.

In the previous three decades, US foreign policy toward Myanmar was consistent in that any action of the Tatmadaw deemed detrimental to the goal of democracy promotion or preserving human rights has been swiftly met with US sanctions. However, by now, it is evident that such measures do not get Washington anywhere closer to its goal. What is worse is the lack of international reciprocity to Myanmar's reform process has made it less likely that the Tatmadaw will see any benefits from investing in political reforms moving forward.

According to Bertil Lintner, the Tatmadaw was keen to reduce its dependence on China.²² However, the US legislative and executive branches would not settle for anything less than allowing Suu Kyi and the NLD free and unconditional participation in the elections. In this phase, Washington had little to lose from the Tatmadaw's refusal and hence was more willing to use coercive diplomacy. The Tatmadaw had a lot to lose if the United States and the international community did not accept the reform measures, which made it more willing to acquiesce to

international demand for deeper reforms. After the 2012 by-elections and 2015 general elections, the Tatmadaw had seemingly come through on its commitment. Now, the ball was in the US court, whereby Washington had to reciprocate by providing alternate sources of investments—thereby reducing Naypyidaw's economic dependence on Beijing. However, as discussed earlier, Myanmar has always been a boutique issue in US foreign policy. Therefore, the consequences of failure of agreement were not too severe in Washington's strategic calculus. Thus, the United States was less willing to put its weight behind American businesses to ensure reciprocity.

Currently, the situation is much different. The Tatmadaw has seen that it can no longer count on the West to substitute or at least reduce its economic dependence on China. Moreover, unlike during the reform phase, the junta does not have to consider domestic public opinion any longer, as its actions are not bound by electoral outcomes for the time being. In the 2008 constitution, the junta reserved for itself the right to declare a state of emergency if it perceived a threat to Myanmar's sovereignty. In such a circumstance, the legislative, executive, and judicial authority is transferred to the Commander in Chief of Myanmar's Defence services.

Moving forward, the Tatmadaw will be less willing now to make concessions as it had before. On the other hand, while the Trump administration had little to no interest in pursuing democratic reforms in Myanmar, the Biden administration is yet to formulate its priorities in the region. If Biden's response to the coup earlier this year is anything to go by, then it was a clear indication that promoting democracy and human rights abroad are once again going to become an important pillar of US foreign policy.²³ Does this necessarily mean that the United States would be more willing to offer rewards in exchange for the junta restoring democracy? While an articulation of US foreign policy priorities in the region is still awaited, moving forward it seems unlikely that the Biden administration would be more successful or willing than the Obama administration in getting US businesses to invest in Myanmar.

To meet US objectives in Myanmar, Washington has exhausted both the carrot (promise of investment, trade, political assistance in reconciliation process) and the stick (sanctions, UNSC resolutions) toward this end. Both approaches have antagonized powerful domestic actors in Myanmar. One possible alternative could be to expend more energy in reducing China's influence in Myanmar by making Myanmar an integral component of US Indo-Pacific strategy.

Situating Myanmar in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

From Obama administration's Pivot to Asia to Trump's *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, certain commonalities in America's approach continue to persist. At the core,

both strategies signal a realignment of US resources to counter China's growing capability and a willingness to change the status quo in the region. This has taken the form of economic leverages that make the aid and investment recipients in the littoral regions less inclined to use multilateral forums like ASEAN to counter China's belligerence. The Obama administration sought to dilute China's coercive capability by integrating the ASEAN and ASEAN Regional Forum into the security architecture of the region. However, in return, China has been successful in using its economic leverage in nonlittoral states like Cambodia to dilute the collective bargaining capacity of the ASEAN by blocking any attempt at censuring Beijing for China's intransigence.²⁴

In this broader strategic framework, Myanmar's relevance to the US Indo-Pacific strategy has been limited to ending Naypyidaw's weapons purchases from North Korea. Back in 2011, while seeking to improve ties with the United States, Naypyidaw had to give assurances and end its weapons purchases as part of its reform process.²⁵ However, since 2018, reports of Myanmar purchasing weapons from North Korea, including ballistic missiles, have begun to surface in the media.²⁶ It is likely that once again the United States will link Myanmar's reform process with its military ties with North Korea. The declassified *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* identifies two regional countries as strategic threats to US national interest—North Korea and China. Myanmar has traditionally maintained deep ties with both regimes. While Washington insisted on Naypyidaw severing military ties with the former, during the beginning of the Pragmatic Engagement back in 2009, Secretary Clinton saw China as a partner when it came to assisting in Myanmar's reform process.

Despite the junta's overtures, the fact that Naypyidaw was actually trying to move closer to Washington and pivot away from Beijing did not matter as much to successive US administrations. As long as the democratic reforms went forward in a steady pace, the Obama administration was willing to incrementally concede political recognition to the USDP. However, judging by the administration's support to Suu Kyi and the NLD in winning the election, it is apparent that Washington cared more about the political transition rather than checking Chinese influence. On the other hand, the Tatmadaw itself had adopted a very cautious approach to the reform process, including installing constitutional safeguards to protect its interests in a democratic Myanmar. Through its support to the NLD, the United States might have inadvertently democratized Myanmar at a faster pace than the Tatmadaw was ready to accept, thereby creating further distrust among the Tatmadaw's leadership regarding America's long-term intentions.

Washington's limited goal in Myanmar cost it a partner who was willing to make difficult political concessions to reduce China's influence in the region, a

primary objective of the US *Indo-Pacific Strategy*. While Myanmar falls geographically in the region that the United States defines as the Indo-Pacific, it is not of strategic import to Washington given its limited role in addressing the flashpoints that have been the focus of US Indo-Pacific strategy so far: the South China and the East China Seas. While Washington has sought to bring together all regional countries that may perceive shared interest with the United States given their own contentions with Beijing, America's objective has been limited to amplifying opposition to China's belligerence in the high seas and seeking commitments to deter any eventuality that may arise from China's misadventures in these zones. The United States has never promised to reciprocate such commitments with a promise to come to aid of nonlittoral countries in their own conflict with China. This understanding of expectations also limits the extent of cooperation in the region. However, there are certain low-intensity issue areas where a shared Indo-Pacific objective can be met with limited costs, and Myanmar is the lowest hanging fruit.

Low levels of economic development due to economic mismanagement and decades of sanctions have pushed Myanmar deep into China's embrace. Reducing this dependence was one of the reasons Myanmar sought development partners in the West. While China has invested in infrastructure development, most of it is built to connect resources to Chinese businesses in Yunnan or Chinese businesses to markets and ports. Infrastructure connectivity within different parts of Myanmar itself is still wanting. The 2019 US document, *Free and open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, acknowledged the infrastructure deficit in the region, which China has been leveraging for influence using the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The document reflected on infrastructure programs that could provide an alternative to the BRI to countries in the region.

Transitioning to democracy is difficult in the absence of peace. For peace to sustain in a fractured political environment like Myanmar, there needs to be certain peace dividends. Even if establishing a democratic system with Suu Kyi at its helm continues to be the guiding objective of Biden's Myanmar strategy, it will not sustain merely by helping the NLD win elections. For democracy to survive, all political parties must feel assured that their political and economic interests are protected. This means that moving forward, the Tatmadaw and regional ethnic political groups and armed organizations need to be included in the crafting of Myanmar's political future. This will not be easy given China's insecurities and proxy actors like the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)—aka Kokang Army and Arakan Army (AA)—which could incite violence to scuttle any process of reconciliation.

Unless a long-term picture of Myanmar's role in US regional strategy is articulate and established, the US–Myanmar relationship will continue to oscillate with every change in presidency or more often, if the frequency of coups increases. While countering China's influence is the broader strategic objective, the task might be easier said than done. Given the favorable position it enjoys, trying to rout Chinese influence can lead to backlash from the Myanmar military, which is presently counting on China to insulate it from international censures. However, there is a limit to how much Beijing can leverage China's current position. It can only build so many miles of highways and railways. Similarly, it cannot perpetuate the conflict for eternity just to keep itself politically relevant.

By partnering with like-minded countries like India and Thailand, which have stakes in a peaceful Myanmar, the United States can leverage political capital of regional countries that have been engaging with Myanmar and its domestic actors since independence. More importantly, if Washington were to maintain consistency in the US approach to Myanmar, the United States will need to accept that its broader strategic objective will always take precedence over its limited regional goals. By prioritizing democracy promotion and relying solely on Suu Kyi to deliver it, Washington risks losing its political capital and pushing Myanmar further into China's embrace, thereby scuttling even the broader objective. Navigating such complexities will require a more sophisticated foreign policy, which does not rely solely on one person or party. To that end, assessing China's foreign policy approach to Myanmar might have some lessons for the United States.

China's Multilayered Engagement with Myanmar

China's engagement with Myanmar is one of the most sophisticated bilateral relationships that Beijing operates. As a neighboring country, China, like India, has inherited a restive borderland along the China–Myanmar border. The political reach of the central government in Myanmar, and to some extent the Bamar--dominated Tatmadaw, is restricted to the center of the country, while along the country's borders, non-Bamar ethnic communities maintain their semi-sovereign enclaves with their own ethnic armed organizations (EAO). Most of these EAOs finance their operations through illegal farming and trafficking of opium, illegal manufacturing and trading of firearms and weapons, and illicit logging, mining, and trafficking in precious minerals.

Given this neighborhood, Beijing has been exceptionally successful in navigating a complex political landscape and extracting maximum benefits for China. In the initial decades after coming to power, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) focused on supporting the Burmese Communist Party—comprised of non-Bamar ethnic groups—to defeat the Kuomintang forces that had taken shelter in the

southern neighbor following their defeat in China's civil war. Following a period of economic reforms, China's policy became increasingly federated and operated from Kunming for a brief while. It was focused on finding markets for local businesses that could not compete with big businesses along China's eastern coast. Thus, Myanmar became a conduit for developing China's landlocked Yunnan province. Myanmar provided the easiest means for shipping and exports to Yunnan. Consequently, Myanmar is home to a large Chinese business community. As per one account, 700–800 Chinese enterprises are operating in Myanmar.²⁷

China's top foreign policy objectives in Myanmar are threefold. First is ensuring stability along its border. EAOs operating along the China–Myanmar border are nonsignatories to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). This means frequent clashes between these EAOs and the Tatmadaw are commonplace. Chief among these EAOs are the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the United Wa State Army (UWSA), and the aforementioned MNDAA.

China's proactive involvement in Myanmar's National Reconciliation Process started due to frequent eruption of clashes on the Chinese side of the border. In 2009, fighting between the MNDAA and Tatmadaw drove nearly 30,000 refugees into Yunnan.²⁸ In 2015, while targeting MNDAA strongholds, Tatmadaw aircraft dropped bombs on the Chinese side of the border, killing five Chinese citizens.²⁹ In 2017, two Chinese died inside Myanmar during similar clashes.³⁰ These clashes threaten Chinese business interests, as the bulk of trade between Myanmar and Yunnan passes through border towns like Muse. Major economic projects like the China–Myanmar oil and gas pipeline, Ruili–Mandalay Railways, and Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone are in conflict areas. Protecting these economic interests forms a second objective of China's diplomacy.

Third, and one of the most strategic aspects of China's interests in Myanmar is gaining access to the Indian Ocean. Shipping costs for transporting goods to inland Chinese provinces reduces greatly when imported through Myanmar's Kyaukphyu port. The China–Myanmar oil and gas pipeline, which reduces China's dependence on the narrow Straits of Malacca, makes Naypyidaw an important partner in China's energy security. This necessitates China to maintain a healthy relationship with any central government.

The economic and strategic stakes for China to protect these investments in Myanmar are high, thereby necessitating a multilayered approach to diplomacy. This requires Beijing to build multiple leverages with different political actors in a manner that China's role in Myanmar's domestic affairs becomes indispensable. Beijing does not see this as interference, claiming it is the domestic actors in Myanmar who request Chinese assistance and that China does not do anything of its own volition. However, it would be naïve to believe that Beijing is merely a

passive participant, when the whole purpose of China's engagement is to protect its interests in Myanmar at all costs. Moreover, the fact that China has traditionally held close ties to EAOs that are not signatories to the NCA has also led to speculations that China is providing economic and military assistance to these groups to perpetuate the conflict and maintain its political leverage with the Tatmadaw. Despite the distrust, the Tatmadaw has little room for maneuvering given its economic and military dependence on Beijing.

The leverages that China seeks to create are threefold: political, economic, and military. China has cultivated tremendous political capital for itself by becoming an active mediator of conflicts in Myanmar, often hosting meetings between factions to resume peace. China has displayed its ability to bring EAOs to the negotiating table—for example the 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference, organized by Special Envoy Sun Guoxiang—making it an important partner for all political actors in Myanmar. Weeks prior to this conference the , KIA, MNDAA, AA, Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Shan State Army-North (SSA-N) formed the Federal Political Negotiation and Coordination Committee (FPNCC) to renegotiate the terms of the NCA. This threatened to derail the negotiations, as these groups were among the most powerful EAOs and had the most frequent clashes with the Tatmadaw. Sun Guoxiang used his influence to convince the FPNCC to attend the second session of the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference.³¹ In 2018 Sun Guoxiang also arranged for individual EAOs of the FPNCC to meet with the Tatmadaw in Yunnan to negotiate terms for signing the NCA, once with the KIA in Dali and later that year with the Northern Alliance (TNLA, MNDA, AA, UWSA, and KIA) in Kunming.³² In August 2019, when clashes broke out between the Northern Alliance and the Tatmadaw at the Mandalay–Muse highway at Northern Shan State, the special envoy met the representatives of the Northern Alliance in Kunming and arranged a meeting between the alliance and Tatmadaw to end the fighting.³³

China maintains ties with political actors in Myanmar at all levels. Some scholars have said that it was the cancellation of the multibillion-dollar Myitsone dam and Letpadaung Copper mine due to local unrest that caused China to develop a horizontal foreign policy approach, seeking to establish political ties with all major political actors. However, Beijing has always maintained political ties with all major political players, including the opposition groups and EAOs. Chen Ruishen, China's ambassador to Myanmar between 1987 and 1991, met Suu Kyi several times during his tenure, even after the junta placed her under house arrest. Talking about China's approach to powerful political actors abroad, he said, "Our stance at the time was to not interfere in the disputes in Myanmar's politics and to take a neutral stance. After recognizing the military government, we still kept

contact with the opposition because it was an important political force in the country. . . . As long as the party is a legitimate one, there is no reason for us to avoid a meeting.”³⁴ Adding to this, another scholar from the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations notes, “aside from keeping diplomatic relations with foreign governments, China often holds exchanges with foreign parties both in and out of power. . . . With the principle of not intervening in the internal affairs of others, China develops interparty relations only for further improving bilateral ties. It is just a method to expand the channels for communication.”³⁵

Following international ostracization on the heels of the Rohingya crisis of 2017, China’s importance to shelter the civilian regime and the Tatmadaw against any UNSC resolutions became even more pronounced. Moreover, this assistance increased Myanmar’s economic reliance and the Tatmadaw’s military dependence on China. While the Myanmar economy was witnessing a steady growth rate with moderately increased foreign investment following the 2015 elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, sanctions following the Rohingya crisis of 2017, and the domestic political turmoil following the coup served to bring the economy to a grinding halt. The World Bank has contracted Myanmar’s growth forecast for 2021 by 10 percent.³⁶ On the other hand, according to the UN Development Program, the series of crises that have impacted Myanmar’s economy could result in half the population of Myanmar living below the national poverty line by 2022.³⁷

As per one estimate, out of the approximately 26 billion USD worth of Myanmar’s total global trade, nearly 9 billion USD, or one-third, was conducted with China in 2019.³⁸ In 2020, 96 percent of China’s demand for tin concentrate and nearly half its heavy rare earth concentrates came from Myanmar.³⁹ Beijing invested USD 20 billion in Myanmar in 2020, making China the highest source of foreign investment in country.⁴⁰ At present, the debt owed by Myanmar to China is 28 percent of Myanmar’s GDP and 40 percent of its total debt.⁴¹ Myanmar’s Auditor General cautioned that at a 4.5-percent interest rate, the interest on Chinese loans is higher than that from any other country or lending agency, including the World Bank or International Monetary Fund.⁴² Naypyidaw pays USD 500 million to China annually toward loan repayment.⁴³ It is opined that the reason for the high interest rate is so that China can take controlling stakes of strategic projects like the deep-water port in Kyaukphyu.⁴⁴ Despite the optimism surrounding the bonhomie between the West and Myanmar in the beginning of the previous decade, the outcome that Myanmar was hoping for did not come to fruition. Other than China remaining Myanmar’s most important trade and investment partner, Beijing’s economic compulsion of Myanmar, coupled with the

scope and value of upcoming Chinese projects, render China so indispensable to Myanmar's economy, despite the concerns surrounding the debt burden that Myanmar would be taking on itself.

For a military embroiled in continuous conflict, access to arms and ammunition becomes vital for regime survival. As per the SIPRI database, Myanmar spent USD 1.3 billion on arms imports from China. Fifty percent of Myanmar's major arms imports between 2014–2019, including radars, warships, combat and trainer aircrafts and 90 percent of its military transport came from China.⁴⁵ To be able to sell weapons to the Tatmadaw and yet to maintain the trust of the EAOs that are fighting the Tatmadaw requires some measure of skilled balancing. Beijing's diplomacy in Myanmar benefits from the fact that it is not impinged on the success of a particular individual/party or a particular outcome. This allows a certain amount of maneuverability to China's diplomacy to work with multiple players who are at odds with each other to achieve Beijing's long-term strategic goals.

Conclusion—Is It Worth Winning Myanmar Back?

Before assessing the differences in the two approaches, it would be fair to acknowledge the structural factors that influence bilateral relationships with Myanmar. By virtue of being a proximate power, China has had many more reasons to develop a deeper relationship with Myanmar. The CCP has had a long history with the Burmese Communist Party, which eventually dissolved into ethnic organizations along Myanmar's periphery. In the 1990s, China's Western Development Strategy—which intended to develop the western provinces of China—identified Myanmar as an ideal market to help grow the businesses of Yunnan province and as a footbridge to connect Yunnan to the Indian Ocean, thereby facilitating exports to global markets. More recently, with higher stakes in preserving China's expanded economic and strategic portfolio in Myanmar, Beijing has started playing an active role in conflict mediation. Some have opined that China's participation in the Myanmar's reconciliation process is merely a means to bring Naypyidaw closer into Beijing's sphere of influence. While that might be true, that does not diminish the fact that there was a strategic compulsion behind this approach. Needless to say, the potential fallout of a misstep is also equally great and will endanger China's investments, most of which are in conflict-prone regions.

While China has reaped rewards from its political investment—not only in the reconciliation process but also by protecting the central government against collective action in international forums—the risk exposure to Chinese economic and political investments are also equally high. Given China's increasing global portfolio of investments in other conflict regions, China has also had to walk a

tightrope between protecting its investment without conceding too much, lest it sets an expensive precedent that other investment recipients from China can use to their advantage.

There are two foreign policy strategies of China that are at interplay in Myanmar: Western Development strategy and the Malacca Dilemma. The latter is China's attempt to reduce the risk to its energy supply—the majority of which traverses the narrow Straits of Malacca. Given the friction in Beijing's ties with India and the United States, both of which have significant naval presence in the Indian Ocean, China has concerns that if a conflict were to break out, its crucial energy supplies could be disrupted. To prevent that, China has been setting up alternative routes for energy supply. This makes the the Kyaukphyu–Kunming oil and gas pipeline vital to China's energy security. These broader strategic objectives guide China's diplomacy in Myanmar.

On the other hand, while Washington has a well-articulated strategy for ensuring US primacy in the region, and Myanmar is in the geographical area covered by the Indo-Pacific, US strategy toward Myanmar has been a continuation of its priorities articulated in the 1990s. It continues to lobby for Suu Kyi and the NLD to be restored to power. This is purely an emotive and value-laden issue for the Congress and is devoid of any realpolitik considerations, since no military regime in recent history has challenged or threatened US interests in the region.

The USDP government implemented real political change and took Naypyidaw on the path to democracy in hopes of reducing economic and political dependence on China. This was an opportunity presented on a platter by a country enmeshed in China's sphere of influence, which was risking its most crucial relationship and implementing political reforms, in hopes of providing more political space to its rival to reduce China's influence. This was ostensibly a key objective of the US *Indo-Pacific Strategy*. However, for its part, Washington was only interested in the reforms undertaken by USDP so long as such measures ensured a transition of power to the NLD through an electoral victory. This has damaged America's political capital in Myanmar, as the Tatmadaw will be wary of implementing any change that dilutes its power without any reciprocal material benefits to Myanmar in return. While the Tatmadaw today is reliant on China for reviving Myanmar's economy, protecting the regime in multilateral forums, bringing a peaceful settlement to the decades-long civil war, the junta still has enough reasons to not trust China entirely. This provides a space for Washington to maneuver and not just bring the process of democratic transition back on track but also integrate Myanmar into the US *Indo-Pacific Strategy*.

Before Washington does that, however, the Biden administration must make an honest assessment of whether it wants to expend political capital in the Con-

gress to pursue a strategy that promotes democracy in Myanmar. The administration must also be prepared to expend economic resources to provide a viable alternative to Naypyidaw. There is a high chance that the pace of democratic transition will be slower than before or might not succeed. Considering the myriad of other foreign policy issues that require the Biden administration's attention, including its recent blunders in Afghanistan, the government must decide if Myanmar deserves the requisite attention. The primary objective of the US *Indo-Pacific Strategy* is to reduce China's influence in the region. If the Tatmadaw, as seen during Myanmar's phase of reform and opening, intends to reduce the nations overdependence on neighboring China, US policy toward Myanmar in itself and as a component of its broader *Indo-Pacific Strategy* requires a more realist turn. Such a strategy must be premised on effectively engaging multiple players of Myanmar's quagmire and doing so in concert with other like-minded partners of the Indo-Pacific region. 🌟

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The Myanmar Coup as an ASEAN Inflection Point

CHARLES DUNST

Early on the morning of 2 February 2021, soldiers and police officers marched through the streets of Naypyidaw, Myanmar's capital, accompanied by an insentient but no less imposing cadre of tanks and helicopters. Within hours, the military—the Tatmadaw—had seized control of the government, cut off Internet networks, shut down the stock market, and placed under arrest numerous activists and politicians, including, most notably, Aung San Suu Kyi, the civilian government's de facto leader. The Tatmadaw then declared a “state of emergency” in which Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the military's commander in chief, would govern for a year. His security forces have since responded viciously to nationwide anti-coup protests, killing upwards of 800 people, including young children in their own homes.¹

But this coup nonetheless remains incomplete: Many Burmese officials—diplomats, police, and even soldiers—have pushed back against or defected from the military.² The most prominent example is U Kyaw Moe Tun, Myanmar's ambassador to the United Nations, who continues to side with his country's pro-democracy demonstrators and has raised the famous three-finger salute—a pan-Asian demand for freedom borrowed from *The Hunger Games* film franchise—at the United Nations (UN) in New York. The junta demanded the ambassador's resignation and charged him with high treason, but he refuses to stand down.³ (The UN General Assembly's credentials committee will not meet until September; it remains unclear if the UN would accept a junta-appointed ambassador.)

ASEAN's Response

ASEAN's response, however, has been anything but brave. Its member states are far from united: Thailand has promised not to interfere, saying that the coup is none of its business; Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines have essentially said the same; Brunei has called for a return to Myanmar's previous semidemocratic system; while Malaysia and Indonesia have expressed “disgust at the continuing deadly violence against unarmed civilians,” per the former's prime minister, and called for the restoration of democracy.⁴ But, on the whole, none are willing to truly stand up to the Tatmadaw or stand up for the Suu Kyi government. Instead, ASEAN member states are allowing Myanmar's incomplete coup to drag

on, all while offering the Tatmadaw undeserved legitimacy by allowed junta leader Min Aung Hlaing and other representatives of his government to join and speak at official virtual meetings. Malaysian diplomats have also met with junta officials (although Malaysia's foreign ministry later denied any recognition of the Tatmadaw regime),⁵ while the bloc watered down a UN resolution calling for an arms embargo on Myanmar.⁶ Min Aung Hlaing even attended the ASEAN summit in Indonesia—his first foreign trip since seizing power.⁷

By accepting the Tatmadaw regime on the grounds of non-interference in other members' domestic affairs—a firm ASEAN commitment—the bloc is undermining both Southeast Asia's stability (what happens as more refugees continue to flood out of Myanmar and when the country becomes a hotbed for illicit activity?⁸) and the region's geopolitical ambitions more broadly. Indeed, with ASEAN allowing the junta to take Myanmar's seat, the body will struggle to bring the human rights-wary United States to the table. This will leave Southeast Asian countries to engage the Americans on a bilateral basis—one that disadvantages the smaller and less powerful countries of Southeast Asia who intend to shape their collective future without relying on China or the United States. To avoid becoming a vassal for the former, Southeast Asians know that they need the Americans to be both present and engaged. But if ASEAN further legitimizes the Tatmadaw, the bloc risks driving away the United States; the agony, then, will not just be Myanmar's but also ASEAN's. And perhaps the only beneficiary, at least strategically, will be China.⁹

Intra-ASEAN relations are based on the principle of noninterference: member states should neither meddle in one another's domestic affairs nor support political movements in neighboring states. The 1967 Bangkok Declaration, ASEAN's foundational document, states plainly that member states must prevent external interference to ensure domestic and regional stability.¹⁰

But ASEAN has hardly always followed this principle. In December 2005, for example, its ministers castigated Myanmar, urging the previous Tatmadaw junta (which ruled from 1962 to 2011) to democratize and release political prisoners, including Suu Kyi, who spent some 15 years under house arrest after returning to the country in 1988.¹¹

Yet ASEAN members are nonetheless still clinging to the principle of noninterference today, in no small part because the region has experienced deep democratic backsliding since 2005 and because none of these illiberal leaders want the limelight of criticism shined *on them*. In recent years, the military seized control of Thailand in its own coup; Cambodia's Hun Sen further consolidated his deeply autocratic personalist regime; and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, a vocal sup-

porter of the extrajudicial killing of drug users and other criminals, won elections and has since governed semiautocratically.

ASEAN has also for years ignored Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya Muslims, natives of Myanmar's Rakhine State who are nonetheless stateless because the state denies them citizenship under a 1982 law based on the presumption that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, even though many have lived in Myanmar for generations. The bloc continued looking away in 2017, when the Tatmadaw ramped up its long-running campaign against the Rohingya, torching their villages, raping their women, and massacring their infants.¹² During this campaign, the Tatmadaw killed somewhere around 24,000 Rohingya and drove more than 730,000 to seek refuge in Bangladesh.¹³

ASEAN's promised noninterference protects these and other bloc members from the human rights criticisms more likely to stem from the West. ASEAN members simply avoid these headaches by agreeing to collectively look the other way.

But the bloc's commitment to noninterference has undermined its geopolitical influence before. Former US president George W. Bush, during his administration, held ASEAN at arm's length because it included Myanmar's previous junta in its hosted events. At an ASEAN event, President Bush once even refused to sit at the same table as Tatmadaw leaders.¹⁴ Throughout the 2000s, meanwhile, his administration routinely sent lower-level officials to ASEAN meetings—such as the deputy to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who herself skipped at least one meeting in protest—at least partially because junta members were taking part in ASEAN pageantry.¹⁵ In 2006, the United States and European Union skipped ASEAN meetings to protest Myanmar's potential chairmanship of the bloc.¹⁶ That year, the West demanded that Myanmar release Suu Kyi from house arrest or move toward democratization before chairing the organization; Myanmar did neither and instead gave up the chairmanship.¹⁷

The situation is arguably much trickier today, though, with at least *two groups* claiming to represent Myanmar—one of which, the junta government, both the Joseph Biden administration and leading European powers deem illegitimate. The other is a National Unity Government (NUG) comprising elected members of parliament, protest leaders, and ethnic minorities; the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a shadow cabinet behind the NUG, has already confirmed Suu Kyi as its de facto leader.¹⁸ The NUG now hopes to win international recognition and aid before ousting the military and bringing back some form of democracy to Myanmar.¹⁹

The View from Washington

But Washington will likely not recognize the NUG, despite the fact that top officials from the US State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs have spoken with members of the CRPH.²⁰ Recognizing an unelected but democratically minded shadow government would be extremely out of character for the United States.

It is also worth considering that Suu Kyi's inclusion in the NUG may not actually help as much as the group's leaders intend. No longer the icon revered by the world for standing up to a brutal junta, she is despised in many Western circles because she was so impassive in the face of the military's anti-Rohingya violence (and later even defended it).

Too many Western elites never truly understood Myanmar and Suu Kyi's political calculations—that she would not, for all her supposed liberal ideals, stand up for a community as domestically despised as the Muslim Rohingya are in Myanmar.²¹ Her National League for Democracy (NLD) party's rank-and-file supporters, like a significant share of the Buddhist majority, believe that the Rohingya—called “Bengalis” by many Burmese—are not truly from Myanmar and simply do not deserve to live in the country.²² In 2016, Suu Kyi reflected this position by asking the US ambassador in Myanmar not to refer to the group as “Rohingya.”²³ Indeed, she herself has long refused to use the term, instead suggesting that they are not actually from Myanmar.²⁴ A decade ago, an NLD spokesman made the party's views (and seemingly those of Suu Kyi) plain: “The Rohingya are not our citizens.”²⁵

Western elites nevertheless for years projected their hopes for Myanmar onto Suu Kyi, making her a global human rights icon despite her outright hostility to criticism of human rights issues within her own country.²⁶ They expected her to stand up for minorities, even though her and her party's anti-Rohingya attitudes were obvious. Her foreign backers responded with little less than disgust when she backed the Tatmadaw after the 2017 violence in what was a plainly pragmatic effort to “be good with Min Aung Hlaing,” as one veteran Myanmar politician put it.²⁷ When the Tatmadaw faced charges of genocide at The Hague, she horrified her international admirers by showing up to defend it; she once again failed to even call the Rohingya by their name.²⁸

But Myanmar's former quasidemocratic political system gave the military 25 percent of the seats in parliament by default; positive terms with the Tatmadaw were therefore necessary for Suu Kyi. Yet even defending the Tatmadaw at The Hague could not win her the generals' trust. Standing up for them, and losing her international reputation in the process, could not keep the Tatmadaw at bay.

The situation, then, is as follows: Not only are there at least two groups claiming to represent Myanmar but also a deeply tarnished Suu Kyi remains attached to the “good” one—some of whose members have little democratic legitimacy (despite all their good intentions). So, while Washington refuses to negotiate with the junta even if doing so might be strategically wise,²⁹ and remains committed, on paper at least, to reinstalling the Suu Kyi government,³⁰ it is hard to see the United States spending the necessary geopolitical capital to do so. Myanmar is too far way, too much of a headache, and nowhere near the top of the Biden administration’s list of priorities, particularly given recent events in Afghanistan. Most likely we’ll see limited symbolic opposition, aggressive statements, and some sanctions (as we’ve seen so far), but little meaningful action. The Biden White House will not risk too much on behalf of a former peace icon turned pariah.

Yet Biden entered office with hopes of forming some kind of anti-China or at least China-skeptical bloc in Asia—a daunting task to begin with, for various economic, cultural, and political reasons. But Myanmar’s incomplete coup, ASEAN’s toleration of it, and Washington’s halfhearted commitment to Suu Kyi are throwing a wrench in these plans. Biden may want to repivot from the Middle East to Asia, but if Myanmar junta leaders are invited to events such as the ASEAN Regional Forum or East Asia Summit, he will find it difficult to attend.

Biden’s secretaries of state and defense, Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin, respectively, have taken part in virtual ASEAN events at which Tatmadaw officials represented Myanmar, but they did so begrudgingly, and they used their platforms to denounce the junta and demand ASEAN action on the coup.³¹ President Biden, however, has not allowed himself to be in the Tatmadaw’s presence; it’s hard to imagine that he will change this position moving forward. Indeed, one expects that he will continue avoiding any in-person (or even Zoom) photo-ops with Min Aung Hlaing or other junta leaders. If Min Aung Hlaing or any Tatmadaw representatives are at the ASEAN Regional Forum or East Asia Summit—which they probably will be—one should wager that Biden will not be there and that he will send a lower-level official to signal his displeasure with ASEAN.

Biden will certainly not want to appear softer on human rights compared to George W. Bush. Blinken, for his part, has in his nascent tenure moved human rights increasingly into the State Department’s forefront; it is unlikely that Biden would undo this by agreeing to pal around with the junta. One instead expects that Biden will stick to his principles by refusing to recognize the Tatmadaw or engage with Myanmar’s generals in person or even through Zoom, all while pushing in a somewhat limited manner—likely sanctions, but certainly no support for military intervention—to bring back Suu Kyi’s government.

Biden and Blinken have made and will continue to make clear their opposition to the junta and ASEAN's toleration of it, but the administration will nonetheless try to cooperate with Southeast Asia on development, trade, and pushing back against Chinese aggressiveness. Biden's goal of forming some China-skeptical bloc in the Indo-Pacific is too important to be sidelined by Myanmar's domestic difficulties.

But Washington's unwillingness to either negotiate with the junta or truly go out on a limb for Suu Kyi risks extending the incompleteness of Myanmar's coup—which would be disastrous for ASEAN. The grouping has so far shown an unwillingness to act. Its leaders will not invite members of the NUG to meetings and push the junta out of its official workings, as anticoup activists hope.³² But ASEAN's inaction will make relations with Biden difficult: he has made human rights enough of a priority that he cannot turn a blind eye to the bloc's toleration of the Tatmadaw in the name of grander strategic goals. By failing to act, then, ASEAN will rob itself of an audience with the president of the United States, which remains the only meaningful counterweight to China and on which most member states do not want to be reliant.

ASEAN's Choices

Nearly every country in region (with the exceptions of Cambodia, Laos, and now post-coup Myanmar) understands the necessity of and yearns for positive ties with both great powers. However, it does not appear that Southeast Asian leaders understand how seriously Biden is committed to his antijunta position and how limited his support for Suu Kyi remains. Southeast Asian leaders seem not to understand that their underwhelming response to the Myanmar crisis could prevent ASEAN from bringing America back on board following the chaotic years under President Donald Trump. ASEAN's lenience toward the Tatmadaw will come at the bloc's own peril.

Myanmar's incomplete coup therefore poses a serious threat not only to regional security but also to Southeast Asia's geopolitical influence at large. If ASEAN, because of its promised noninterference, cannot handle the Tatmadaw and bring the president of the United States to the proverbial (and literal) table, how can it effectively be central to regional affairs, as it has long claimed to be? How can ASEAN hope to craft any alternative to Beijing's Sinocentric plans for the region if the bloc cannot get the president of United States, the man in charge of the only other great power, to even show up?

The answer is that it cannot. If ASEAN continues to legitimize the Tatmadaw, Biden will refuse to attend events at which junta officials are present, thereby forcing members states to relate with the United States on bilateral terms—a

haphazard situation for the United States, which would prefer to work through the bloc, and a similarly unideal one for the smaller Southeast Asian countries, which will feel America's weight more when negotiating alone.

ASEAN's toleration of the Tatmadaw thus risks squandering America's renewed focus on Southeast Asia at a moment—marked by the pandemic, from which the whole region is reeling, and China's increasing military and diplomatic aggressiveness—when the region's leaders cannot afford to do just that.

For ASEAN to remain relevant, its leaders must recognize that leaving Myanmar's coup incomplete is fundamentally untenable. If the bloc hopes to engage the United States on areas of mutual concern—such as securing more American-made COVID-19 vaccines or countering China in the South China Sea—it will have to address the Myanmar crisis.

ASEAN leaders would be wise to work creatively around the principle of non-interference to prevent figures such as Min Aung Hlaing from further installing themselves in the organization's halls of power. They need to do so not on behalf of the often absent forces of good that claim to bend the arc of history toward progress, or even for liberal values, but for their own self-interest. It does not matter *why* they do the right thing, only that they actually do it. If selfishness forces ASEAN to act, the region and the United States will be better for it.

Ultimately, though, if ASEAN wants to shape Southeast Asia's future in Southeast Asians' interests by working with both the United States and China, rather than simply relying on the latter, the bloc's leaders need to wake up to Biden's reality and promptly display political bravery—a characteristic that its leaders have lacked thus far. ♀

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Myanmar's Military Coup

Security Trouble in Southeast Asia

DR. INDU SAXENA

Abstract

Myanmar's military junta overturned the 2020 general election result and seized power by a military coup on 1 February 2021. An estimated 800 people have already died in the lethal response by security forces. The Myanmar coup has had great repercussions in the effort to establish democracy in Myanmar and to maintain security in the Indo-Pacific region.

This article highlights the tyranny of the military junta and the backsliding of democracy in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), contending that Russia and China's unwavering support of Myanmar's military makes it difficult to restore the democratic process and reestablish peace and stability. It also proposes that the triangular nexus of China–Myanmar–Russia propels apprehensions for the rise of autocracy and its impact on South Asia and Southeast Asian security architecture and regional stability.

Introduction

It has been many months since the military coup in Myanmar, and people are still protesting in the streets. The military junta has imposed many restrictions to prevent the flow of communications, including disrupting internet access and phone lines. There is no arguing about Myanmar's long history of repressing peaceful protest, infringing fundamental rights, and arbitrary arrest. In a recent move, the state election commission has shown its intention to dissolve democratic leader Aung San Suu Ki's political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), for its alleged involvement in the 2020 general election, citing election fraud, and could charge its leaders with treason. On 24 May 2021, Aung San Suu Kyi appeared before the court for the first time after her detention in the coup. She seemed determined to stand by the democracy supporters and avowed that her party exists as long as the people exist.

Myanmar has witnessed ruthless military rule since its independence from Britain in 1948.¹ On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military detained many political leaders, activists, and senior leaders of NLD in Naypyidaw and other parts of the country. The popular leader Aung San Suu Kyi was detained in her

house. It is assumed that the coup took place due to the defeat of the military-supported candidates and the NLD's landslide victory in the general election, which was held in November 2020.² The NLD won 346 seats in parliament, more than the 322 seats required to form a new government.³ The election results favoring Aung San Suu Kyi, a democratic icon, startled the military regime.

The army is trying to reverse the election, alleging unfair and biased processes. Aung San Suu Kyi remains detained by the military, which has filed several charges against her. On this constitutional crisis of Myanmar, UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that the election turnover is "unacceptable" and urged the international community "to make sure" the military takeover and coup fail.⁴ Ironically, Myanmar had a short-lived experience of a quasidemocratic system after 2011 when the powerful military, named "Tatmadaw," started parliamentary elections. Despite the military reserving 25 percent of all the seats in parliament for itself and putting other safeguards in the constitution for its own benefit in the 2015 general election, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won big in both houses.⁵ It was highly expected that the NLD's victory would begin a new chapter in Myanmar's democracy transition process and would limit the power of the military. On the contrary, Tatmadaw remained all-powerful, with control over legislating and the power to choose the president; Aung San Suu Kyi was barred from holding any executive power under the constitution.⁶ She held a "state counselor" position and was a *de facto* leader. She had personally witnessed the military atrocities against ethnic minorities, yet she also rejected the international criticism of "ethnic cleansing" of the Rohingya and even defended the military-influenced government against alleged human right violations in the International Court of Justice on 10 December 2019.⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi's support of the Myanmar government, which was held responsible for the "genocidal intent" against ethnic minority Rohingya by the United Nations International Fact-Finding Mission Report, maligned her image as a democratic icon, resulting in a loss of international credibility.

The worst phase came after the February 2021 military coup in which the military took control over the country and the military leaders (working as the State Administrative Council) launched brutal crackdowns against pro-democracy demonstrators. This article holds that the military coup has killed the hope of democracy in Myanmar and fostered growing concerns over a civil war in Myanmar. It contends that this represents alarm bells over the rise of autocracy in the region and the potentially catastrophic impact on the region's security and stability.

Ruthless Military Rule since the Dawn of Burma's Independence

The tyranny of the military has a long-standing history in Myanmar, dating to when it was known as Burma. The assassination of General Aung San in 1947, a national hero of Burma's independence and the founder of the Burma National Army, started Burma down the path of becoming a military-dominated state. However, it remained a type of parliamentary democracy with heavy military influence, until a military coup led by General Ne Win in 1962. Ne Win imposed a harsh authoritarian regime, including suspension of the 1947 constitution, suppression of demonstrations, arrest of political opponents, and heavy crackdowns on "ethnic armed groups."

The resentment against Ne Win's regime exploded into a mass protest in 1988, predominantly led by students demanding a multiparty system, resulting in the replacement of the old military regime with a new one and the formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The new military regime was established at the expense of democracy, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of protesters.⁸

At the same time, pro-democracy voices grew stronger, and the SLORC relented and allowed the registration of political parties. It was during this major development that Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Major General Aung San, founded the NLD and raised her voice against abuses of power by the military and led pressure on the military regime to hold elections. This show of power threatened the military junta, which placed her under house arrest.⁹

Under domestic and international pressure, the military regime held an election in 1990. The NLD won the elections, but the junta refused to accept the election results, maintaining tight control over the government, arresting elected leaders and activists, and keeping Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest, a condition of isolation in which she remained intermittently for two decades.¹⁰

In 2008, the military regime adopted a new constitution in a controversial referendum, ensuring its control over the government by reserving 25 percent of parliamentary seats for military officials. The new constitution also disqualified the spouses and parents of foreign nationals from serving as the president of Myanmar, which excluded Aung San Suu Kyi. The generals called these constitutional changes "disciplined democracy."¹¹ Nonetheless, Aung San Suu Kyi sought popularity at the national and international levels, and her party kept winning elections in 2015 and 2020.

Military Regime and Genocide

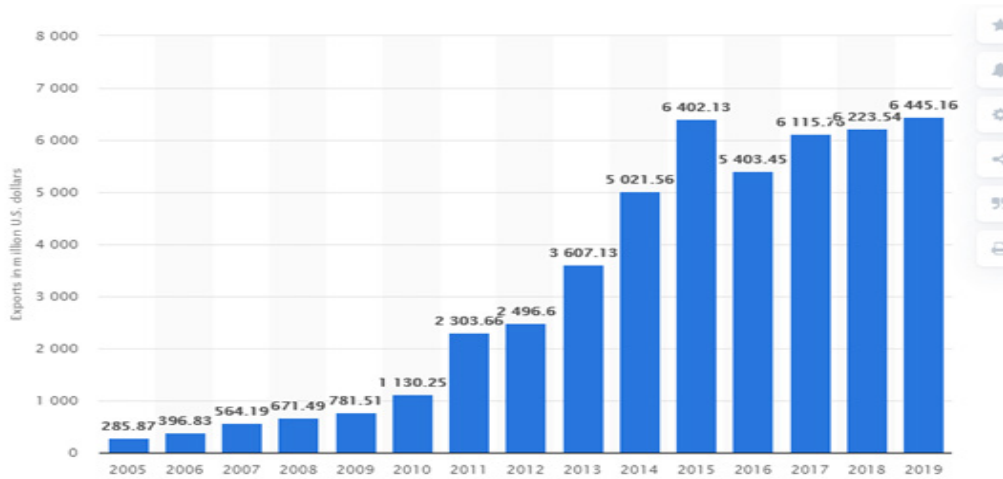
The brutal side of the military regime showed itself in 2017, when it started “clearance operations” to wipe out ethnic minorities, mainly Muslim Rohingya. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Since then, an estimated 745,000 Rohingya—including more than 400,000 children—have fled into the Cox’s Bazar.”¹² The former High UN High Commissioner for Human Rights described the military’s “clearance operations” as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing” and stated that its actions seemed to be “a cynical ploy to forcibly transfer large numbers of people without possibility of return.”¹³

In 2019, an independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar, established by the United Nations Human Rights Council, submitted its report of the military regime’s “genocidal intent” against ethnic minorities in Myanmar. Marzuki Darusman, chair of the fact-finding mission, said: “The international community must hold the Myanmar military to account for the tremendous pain and suffering it has inflicted on persons of all genders across the country.”¹⁴ Despite such severe opprobrium at the international level, the Myanmar security forces’ unrelenting clearance operations continue to demonize the ethnic Rohingya, furthering the humanitarian crisis.

Unworthy Role of Russia and China

Myanmar relies heavily on China and Russia for diplomatic support, arms and weapons, and trade and commerce. There are several reasons behind Russia’s and China’s support for the military regime. The first is *ideological*: to discredit and disregard any democratic process in the neighborhood and thereby promote authoritarianism. Second is *geopolitical*: to maintain an ally in Southeast Asia to rally with and oppose Western countries. And the third is *economics and arms trade*: Myanmar is largely dependent on Russian and Chinese arms and is an attractive market for Chinese investment and infrastructure projects.

China used its veto power in the UN Security Council to stave off any action against Myanmar’s military regime, and Chinese media called the coup a “cabinet reshuffle.”¹⁵ China has been diplomatically supporting Myanmar and shielded the military regime in the United Nations for crime against humanity as well. China has cemented its bilateral relations with Myanmar by investing heavily in infrastructure, pipelines, special economic zones, and a deep-sea port under its massive development project known as the Belt and Road Initiative. The statistic shows that China’s export to Myanmar has risen exponentially, from 285,000 USD in 2005 to 6.445 million USD in 2019.¹⁶



(Source: Statista)

Figure 1 Value of goods exported from China to Myanmar from 2005 to 2019.

Notably, Myanmar's geographical location in the Indian Ocean is of strategic significance; it provides easy access to sea lanes for Chinese oil imports from the Middle East. The overland route of the Kunming–Kyaukpyu gas pipeline between Myanmar and China has already started. In addition, China is the main supplier of arms, constituting 48 percent of total arms imports to Myanmar.¹⁷

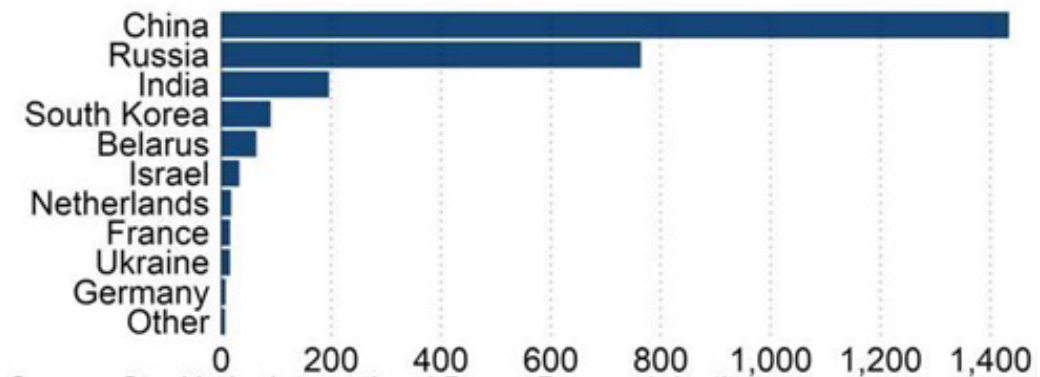
Russia has also supported Myanmar's military regime by blocking, with China, a joint UNSC statement condemning the February 2021 coup.¹⁸ After that, in March, Russian deputy minister of defense Colonel General Alexander Fomin attended Myanmar's Armed Forces Day event at Naypyidaw and expressed its desire to bolster Russia–Myanmar relations and enhance military-technical cooperation.¹⁹ In response to his visit, Myanmar's General Min Aung Hlaing thanked Russia for its support in the UNSC.

Russia's desire to intensify relations with Myanmar's military regime is driven by arms exports to Myanmar. Russia is the second largest arms supplier to Myanmar, constituting 15 percent of arms imports.²⁰

Myanmar has been a long time buyer of Russian arms and has received 30 MiG-29 jet fighters, 12 Yak-130 jet trainers, 10 Mi-24 and Mi-35P helicopters, and eight Pechora-2M antiaircraft missile systems from Russia since the 2000s.²¹ In addition, Russia will supply Myanmar with Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile systems, Orlan-10E surveillance drones, and radar equipment, and it intends to be a major partner in Myanmar's military modernization, a long-term plan of General Min Aung Hlaing. The bilateral ties between Russia and Myanmar have

Myanmar's major arms suppliers in 2011-2020

(In millions of dollars)



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

(Source: SIPRI Fact Sheet, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020")

Figure 2 Myanmar's major arms suppliers in 2011–2020.

grown in recent years, with Russia providing army training and university scholarships in addition to selling arms to the military. Due to such bilateral activities, Russia has been held responsible by the United Nations and several Western countries for alleged atrocities against ethnic minorities. Russia's official visit to Myanmar is an attempt to legitimize the military junta and the coup. Russia is complicit in the military's campaign of crushing people's voices and the decay of democracy in Myanmar; likewise, President Vladimir Putin allegedly tried to assassinate, and then imprisoned, a domestic political opponent, Alexei Navalny.

Russia sees long-term profit potential by ramping up its ties to the military junta, a customer of Russia's arms and a strategic partner in Southeast Asia that can possibly provide a foothold to Russia to benefit its Indo-Pacific interests. Russia's pragmatic foreign policy serves its own best interests by providing support to Myanmar's military regime.

It seems certain that Russia and China, the two autocratic global powers, have no sympathy with pro-democracy movements in Myanmar. Both those countries have strategic, geopolitical, and economic interests in Myanmar, and both want to retain and expand links given that Myanmar is so significant, strategically speaking, in East Asia. Therefore, Russia and China have no intention of condemning the coup at any point, and Moscow's and Beijing's support for a military dictatorship in Myanmar has hampered the pro-democracy movement.

Notably, Myanmar's internal politics and decision-making process is imbued by the China–Russia convergence. However, both China and Russia, being “revi-

sionist powers” with their own authoritarian systems, are best aligned with Myanmar’s military junta to impede Myanmar’s democratic process. Therefore, the burgeoning relationship with China and Russia affects domestic politics—and raises a growing concern for regional security.

However, the White House under President Joseph Biden strongly condemned the military coup and the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, calling it an “assault on democracy and rule of law.”²² The international community has been largely condemning the coup d’état, with the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and the European Union imposing sanctions and Japan suspending Myanmar’s financial aid.²³ The West as a promoter and guarantor of democracy and human rights, has minimal influence on the military junta.

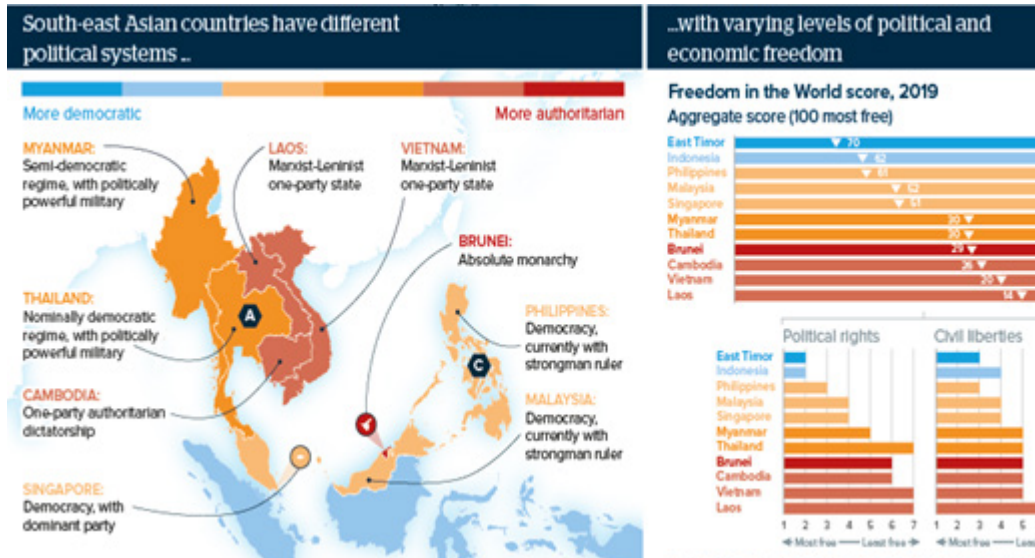
Alarms for the Rise of Autocracy in the Region

The current unrest in Myanmar seems to represent an artifact of the past in Southeast Asian nations, when people’s resistance took place against Suharto in Indonesia and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. If the turbulence in Myanmar were to continue for a longer period or deteriorate, the effect could spill into neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, where many countries maintain illiberal democracies and strongmen in power. These populist strongman leaders do not have any desire to uphold democratic values. Pluralism, electoral politics, and civil liberties have eroded, in fact, from one-party states such as Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam to democratic states with strongmen rulers such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia.

Additionally, it is highly likely that the outflow of new refugees (after Rohingya) from Myanmar to neighboring countries may destabilize the region. And concern over civil war erupting in Myanmar has only grown. The UN special envoy for Myanmar, Schraner Burgener, warned in a 24 May 2021 virtual conference of the possibility of civil war given the perpetual violent attacks on civilians by the military force, compelling them to use offensive actions. She called the situation in Myanmar “very bad,” and since then more than 800 people have been killed, more than 5,300 arrested, and more than 1,800 arrest warrants issued by the military. These are the figures reported in the media, but there may be many more going unreported.²⁴

The 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed on a five-point action plan at a summit on Myanmar in April 2021, which was attended by the mastermind of the coup himself, General Min Aung Hlaing. The five points include: the immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogue between the military and its opponents, facilitation of mediation, allowing humanitarian assistance, and permitting a visit by a special ASEAN envoy.²⁵ How-

ever, in an interview with Chinese television, General Hlang said that he “doesn’t see those five points can be implemented” and refused the visit from the Southeast Asian envoy until security and stability are established.²⁶



(Source: Freedom House; The Heritage Foundation; Oxford Analytica)

Figure 3 Southeast Asia's political system.

Options

There are several options. The regime has no intention to work with civil society or any international human rights group. The military wants to maintain tight control over the country. First, the UNSC should take stringent steps immediately, either constituting a special commission or sending a special envoy to Myanmar to assess the situation and consolidate support with the Burmese. The role of regional actors, notably ASEAN and others with a regional outreach, is significant in condemning the military coup, alerting regional leaders to its repercussions, and warning the military of a state failure in Burma.

Second, the UNSC unanimously voted against the use of coercive power by the military on protesters and minorities. The UNSC members should vote for a complete arms embargo for Myanmar. Third, like-minded countries should protect the protesters' rights and maintain safeguards for a safe solution that brings back normal domestic relations. Finally, civil society should come together and evaluate options to solidify human rights protection in the region.

Conclusion

The vision for democracy in Myanmar became complicated when conflict was reignited between military forces and ethnic minority insurgent groups. The civilians who have been protesting and marching on the streets for so long started using more aggressive means to protest, as they are unwilling to accept military rule. Until now, it was well understood that Tatmadaw is very powerful, and it is likely impossible for the military to accept election results and cede power to people's representatives. It is widely believed that major Western countries and the UNSC could not do much to resolve the Rohingya crisis, as China and Russia continue to support the Myanmar military and its oppressive actions in the UNSC.

It is worth pondering that mere condemnation and limited sanctions by the United States and other members of the international community would not subdue military rulers to bring normalcy back and transfer power to elected leaders as long as the military enjoys the support of China and Russia. ☛

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Between Political Violence and COVID-19

Many Citizens in Myanmar Pushed to Armed Resistance

TOM CONNOLLY

The Myanmar military coup led by Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing occurred on 1 February 2021, and since then the junta has consistently demonstrated its propensity for violence and repression toward Myanmar's citizens protesting the new regime.¹ In self-defense, many citizens established civilian-led militias or joined the ranks of established ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). From Naypyitaw, the battlefield view is convoluted: the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's armed forces) must deal with civilian protests in its major cities while battling multiple ethnic insurgent groups on different fronts. That being said, counterinsurgency is an area in which the Tatmadaw has excelled since its inception decades ago, and Myanmar's civilians are paying the overwhelming price of dissent. Further, the State Administrative Council (SAC) has used the COVID-19 pandemic to its advantage, amassing critical oxygen and vaccine supplies for use in its security forces while denying lifesaving care to those outside its ranks.

Since initiating the bloody coup on 1 February, the SAC has officially nullified the results of Myanmar's 2020 general elections and arrested senior national leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi.² It is responsible for the deaths of more than 900 protesters and bystanders, the enforced disappearances of more than 100 persons, and the torture and rape of an unknown number in custody.³ Protesters took to the streets in the hundreds of thousands during the early days of the coup, but many have moved to flash mob-style protests lasting less than ten minutes to avoid violent repercussions from the Tatmadaw.⁴ In April, a group of ousted politicians, activists, and representatives from several ethnic minority groups formed the National Unity Government (NUG), with the stated goal of ending military rule and restoring democracy.⁵ The NUG first endorsed self-defense on 14 March and then announced the creation of People's Defense Forces on 5 May to oppose the SAC.⁶

In addition to killing civilians, the SAC has also imposed restrictions on the transportation of food, fuel, and other critical commodities into Kayah State since 28 May, starving residents of basic necessities.⁷ Tom Andrews, the UN special rapporteur for Myanmar, recently warned of "mass deaths from starvation, disease, and exposure in Myanmar" resulting from the Tatmadaw's restriction of

critical resources.⁸ The military has also been implicated in prosecuting and killing workers delivering humanitarian aid to affected areas. On 26 May, security forces gunned down two youths in Demoso Township, Kayah State, who were delivering food to displaced people and arrested three volunteers on their way back from assisting civilians.⁹ Reportedly, the Tatmadaw has undertaken an extensive online disinformation campaign, prolifically uploading Facebook posts designed to sow distrust among insurgent groups.¹⁰

As the regime continues to employ deadly tactics to subdue protesters, many citizens turned to violent resistance, which has extended to forming civilian militias and joining established EAOs.¹¹ In Myanmar's cities, residents took measures for self-protection in response to increasingly violent crackdowns from the Tatmadaw, including barricading roads, appointing night watches to monitor security forces, and creating defense groups armed with makeshift weapons and shields.¹² At one point, Frontier Myanmar magazine reported at least 10 urban rebel cells, while Radio Free Asia recorded at least 300 explosions since the February coup, which mainly targeted police and administrative offices, as well as other facilities connected to the regime.¹³ The antiregime movement is a diverse mix of Myanmar's citizens; its membership ranges from professional groups—including engineers and teachers—to preexisting civil society networks and labor unions.¹⁴

In the countryside, civilian self-defense militias evolved differently. Given the military's preoccupation with protests in major cities, rural citizens found themselves able to demonstrate free from heavy-handed crackdowns for much longer.¹⁵ Locally organized militias have fought the Tatmadaw in many areas, with notable battles occurring in parts of Chin State, Kayah State, as well as the Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay regions.¹⁶ Tamu Township, in the Sagaing region on the India border, was the site of one of the earliest clashes. After the killing of a protester by security forces on 25 March, locals formed the Tamu Security Group (TSG) and began stockpiling rifles, purchasing grenades, and creating improvised explosive devices.¹⁷ After a number of battles and utilizing their intimate knowledge of the terrain to carry out guerrilla-style warfare, the TSG claims to have killed 15 members of the armed forces.¹⁸ The Tatmadaw reportedly enlisted the help of a militia composed of Meitei fighters from the Indian state of Manipur to help combat TSG, and the security situation in the area remains tense.¹⁹ Civilian-created militia groups have tended to be most effective in regions with existing militias or ethnic armed groups or with strong traditions of hunting.²⁰ Many civilian militias have also proven adept in regions that have not been subject to armed conflict for some time where the Tatmadaw's infrastructure, weaponry, and intelligence capacity are underdeveloped.

Citizens have also turned to established ethnic armed groups (EAO) for protection and war-fighting skills. Dissidents and activists have received military training and combat experience from established EAOs, such as the Kachin Independence Army, Karenni Army, and Karen National Liberation Army.²¹ Members of the NUG have also sought refuge from the SAC in border regions controlled by ethnic insurgents.²² Especially in the early days of the coup, while the Tatmadaw was focused on Myanmar's major cities, armed ethnic groups were able to launch coordinated attacks in the countryside, killing numerous Tatmadaw soldiers and raiding outposts.²³ The Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State has also played a complicated role in postcoup Myanmar. As the military wing of the United League of Arakan, the AA was removed from the Tatmadaw's list of "terrorist" groups in March, reportedly so that the military could end the distraction of fighting on its northern frontier.²⁴ However, this has not prevented AA troops from engaging the Tatmadaw in combat, and in June the AA released a number of captured soldiers to the security forces.²⁵ In all likelihood, the AA sees Myanmar's evolving security situation as a means to extract concessions from the military while it fights on multiple fronts, as well as an opportunity to more strongly assert its political interests in Rakhine State.²⁶

At times, civilian-organized militias have combined forces with established militant groups and created entirely new organizations. The Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) is one such example, which formed on 31 May as a merger of factions from the People's Defense Forces and EAOs throughout Kayah and Shan States.²⁷ The KNDF has claimed it has killed nearly 200 members of the security forces since 21 May, and it has been known to target alleged Tatmadaw informants.²⁸ In June, the KNDF was involved in heavy fighting in Kayah State, bordering Thailand, with the confrontation peaking in Demoso Township, where the group reportedly killed about 80 members of the security forces.²⁹ In response to KNDF resistance in Demoso, the Tatmadaw employed overwhelming force, utilizing artillery barrages, airstrikes, and helicopter gunships, which led to the displacement of more than 100,000 civilians.³⁰ The huge impact on civilians brought the KNDF to the negotiating table on 15 June in talks facilitated by local church leaders. Both sides reached a temporary cease-fire agreement, which tentatively remains in place.³¹

The emergence of civilian militias and growth of established EAOs following the February coup carry wide-ranging implications for Myanmar. Some observers have suggested that opposition to the military junta presents an opportunity for different ethnic groups to work together against a common enemy.³² In an interview with the *New York Times*, Col. Mai Aik Kyaw, of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, seems to echo this sentiment, noting that cooperation among

EAOs will lead to better outcomes for resistance groups.³³ However, not every ethnic armed group has been able to overcome the divide-and-rule strategy of the Tatmadaw, which has come to define its approach to counterinsurgency.³⁴ In Shan State, for example, a recent proposal for unity between the Restoration Council of Shan State and the Shan State Progressive Party under the proposed Shan State for Federal is yet to occur.³⁵ The sheer number of ethnic groups further obscures clear communication among EAOs, and many of the major ethnic groups have more than one armed organization claiming to represent their interests.³⁶

Additionally, the NUG will struggle to achieve its stated goal of bringing established or civilian militias under a single command. Many of the ethnic armed groups remain wary of the NUG, which was initially formed by a Bamar political party that, prior to the coup, was widely criticized for ignoring the rights and grievances of Myanmar's ethnic minorities.³⁷ The Chin National Front remains the only ethnic militia formally allied with the NUG, and its vice chairman and NUG minister of federal affairs, Salai Lian Hmung Sakhong, has expressed his concern of a Bamar-dominated coalition.³⁸ Although many of these militias express support for the parallel government, the majority have had minimal contact with the NUG and have not stated their express intention to come under its command.³⁹ Civilian militias have, thus far, declined to enter a formal military alliance with NUG and seem more likely to form alliances under the authority of EAOs, as the Kayah militia has done and as the Kachin Independence Organisation has stipulated that any militia in Kachin State must do.⁴⁰ That being said, there remains the possibility that the NUG will be more appealing to EAOs given that it has openly endorsed federalism rather than a centralized authority; it also boasts significantly more ethnic minorities than the cabinet formed by the National League for Democracy.⁴¹ Nevertheless, with the privileged access to lucrative resources and economic rents that armed actors usually enjoy, new militias are unlikely to dissipate quickly. In fact, as the economic fallout of the February coup becomes increasingly acute, this could create an incentive for groups to secure existing sources of revenue.⁴² The International Crisis Group suggests that the emergence of new, sustained militia groups is likely, which is consistent with the patterns of insurgency seen throughout Myanmar's history.⁴³

The rise of so many new militias and expansion of established EAOs complicate the combat landscape for the Tatmadaw. It must now battle insurgents that are widely dispersed throughout the country, including many areas where it has not fought before and has little military infrastructure.⁴⁴ Confronting these groups and dealing with escalated fighting with armed groups in Kachin, Shan, and Kayin States, while simultaneously maintaining a strong troop presence in the nation's cities to suppress dissent, will likely stretch the Tatmadaw's capacity.⁴⁵

However, the security services have been accustomed to fighting insurgencies since Myanmar's independence in 1948, and it has been fiercely battling the Arakan Army in Rakhine State. Counterinsurgency is a particular skill of the Tatmadaw, and the armed forces have shown a proclivity to implement its so-called four-cuts counterinsurgency strategy.⁴⁶ Designed to restrict access to food, funds, intelligence, and recruits, the four-cuts strategy seeks to starve the support base of armed resistance and turn civilians against insurgent groups.⁴⁷ The Tatmadaw is also known to employ sexual violence and the deliberate targeting of civilians to terrorize and displace populations, as it has already done in Mindat (May) and Demoso (June).⁴⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic, although problematic for the military junta, has proven to be another tool the Tatmadaw has exploited to privilege its own security forces to the detriment of those opposing the SAC. According to official numbers, more than 14,000 people have died from the disease, which per capita is the worst rate in Southeast Asia.⁴⁹ However, few citizens are officially tested and even fewer are treated in public hospitals, which suggests that the actual numbers are likely to be higher.⁵⁰ The Tatmadaw has deliberately obstructed lifesaving care to COVID-19 patients, targeted medical workers, and banned sales of oxygen to civilians not supported by the SAC, leading many to accuse the Tatmadaw of weaponizing the pandemic.⁵¹ In parts of the country, insurgent groups are fulfilling the role of public health authorities. In Rakhine State, for example, the Arakan Army has enacted lockdown measures in the state's 17 townships and has threatened punitive action against those not abiding by health instructions.⁵² Some observers have expressed hope that COVID-19 could deal a serious blow to the stability of the SAC, however, given that the junta has consistently reserved vaccinations for its soldiers, hoarded oxygen supplies, and controlled access to lifesaving care, this appears to be unlikely.⁵³

The February military coup and ensuing violence have pushed many citizens toward armed resistance. Civilian militias have emerged in the cities and countryside as a means for citizens to protect themselves from the SAC's harsh crackdown on protests. Established ethnic insurgent groups have also offered sanctuary to political dissidents, as well as combat training to activists looking to oppose the military junta. In a grim turn, the SAC and security forces have also utilized the COVID-19 pandemic to their advantage as best they can. By restricting critical oxygen supplies and reserving vaccinations for its rank-and-file members, the Tatmadaw has found yet another means of rewarding those loyal to the SAC and controlling those expressing resistance. ❀

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Soumyadeep Deb
Member

2nd Lt Brendan Donnelly, USAF
Member

Andrew Erskine
Member

Joseph Hammond
Member

Col Jeffry Hollman, USAF
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Prakash Jangid
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Sumnima Karki
Member

Sunaina Karki
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Aakriti Kumar
Member

Dr. John Lash
Member

Capt Neil Law, USA
Member

Eleanor Lewis
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Maj Christopher Little, USAF
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Leo Lin
Member

Capt Peter Loftus, USAF
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Dr. Adam Lowther
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Jack Moore
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Asst. Prof. Rubaiyat Rahman
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Atandra Ray
Member

Rushali Saha
Member

Mrittika Guha Sarkar
Member

Arushi Singh
Member

Mahika Sri Krishna
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CDR Michael Tomsik, USN
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Fabio van Loon
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Ankush Wagle
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