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Motives Behind the Soft-Line Approaches to the Myanmar Coup d'État

Analysing the Stance of China, India, and Russia

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Following the military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, Western countries were quick to express their condemnation and discuss sanctions against the junta. However, countries in the region reacted more moderately, calling for dialogue with the regime. This article will seek to explain some of the reasons behind such a stance.

On 1 February 2021, a military coup took place in Myanmar, ten years after the country had started its democratic transition and opened to the international community. On the day that the new government's first parliamentary session was to take place, the army, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing (General Hlaing), laid siege to the parliament in the capital Nay Pyi Taw (NPT) and detained parliamentarians, MPs and Aung San Suu Kyi (Daw Suu), the State Counsellor and *de facto* head of government who had been re-elected three months earlier.

During a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting on 9 April 2021, Myanmar's ambassador to the UN, Kyaw Moe Tun, loyal to the ousted National League of Democracy (NLD) government, called for an international arms embargo on Myanmar; the freezing of foreign bank accounts belonging to the military and their families; the suspension of foreign direct investment in the country; and the creation of no-fly zones to prevent junta air strikes.

A few countries have already adopted some of these measures. The US sanctioned five companies connected with the military, while the EU has sanctioned 29 people linked to the coup. These officers join a list of six other individuals sanctioned for their involvement in the humanitarian crisis suffered by the Rohingyas in 2017. In addition, the US, the UK, Canada, and the EU have each frozen the junta's overseas assets.

The resolution adopted on 18 June 2021 by the UN General Assembly (passed with 119 votes in favour and one vote against) regarding the crisis in Myanmar, strongly condemns violence committed by the junta against the civilian population.

This violence led to over 1,000 deaths. The resolution also demands the release of political prisoners and peaceful demonstrators detained after the coup. Furthermore, it calls on all countries to not sell arms to the junta. Although the resolution is non-binding, it could still be considered a severe blow to the junta, which was hoping to secure international legitimization.

The international reaction led by the US broadly condemned and criticised the coup, and generally called for imposing severe sanctions against the junta. However, not all countries have committed to the same degree of restrictions or heavily criticised the junta's actions. This article seeks to explain the motives behind the soft-line position of China, India, and Russia regarding the Burmese coup.

China: Myanmar's 'Big Brother'

On the day of the coup, China refrained from condemning the Burmese Army (Tatmadaw) and retained a policy of neutrality towards the country. Chinese state media called the coup a "cabinet reshuffle" and the Chinese government expressed hopes that the various parties involved in the political crisis would be able to resolve their differences. In keeping with its special "pauk phaw" (meaning "brotherly") relationship with Myanmar, Beijing reiterated that China was its "friendly neighbor"¹. That is why it advocated resolving the crisis through diplomatic efforts, internal dialogue among Myanmar's relevant political parties, and not through sanctions as proposed by the US and other Western nations.

After the ASEAN summit on 24 April 2021, China publicly expressed its approval of ASEAN's

consensus on Myanmar, which called for constructive dialogue among parties but did not place responsibility for the coup's ensuing violence on the Tatmadaw. A lack of strong measures from ASEAN presents the perfect opportunity for China to develop further bilateral cooperation with Myanmar. In May 2021, China exploited the opportunity to use the tribune of the UNSC, where it held the month-long rotating presidency, to downplay the role of the military by stating that the Myanmar crisis was primarily "an issue relating to the difference on the election"², and that a solution should be sought within the country's legal framework.

China repeatedly acts as a protective shield for Myanmar on the international scene as

1. it fears increased instability in the Sino-Burmese border area,
2. Myanmar is a geostrategic part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The Chinese Myanmar Border: An Area Rife with Ethnic Conflicts

Myanmar's northern and eastern borders are home to ethnic groups sharing cultural affinities with China, e.g., the Jingphos, the Wa and the Kokang. Since the independence of Myanmar, ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) have formed and demanded autonomy from the Burmese government through decades of conflict. To safeguard its national security, China is focused on maintaining influence over the 2,129 kilometres-long frontier. It does not want an escalation of violence by the military against ethnic minorities – potentially worsened by the coup – that could spill over to China. Yet over the years, China has been supplying combat aircraft, naval weapons, armoured vehicles, and surveillance drones to the Tatmadaw. Some of these weapons and armoured vehicles have been deployed to combat the EAOs.

China has also allegedly financed and armed some of the EAOs against the Tatmadaw. Allegations of fund or weapons transfers come at a time when Beijing's bilateral relations with the Tatmadaw are undergoing strain (e.g., Beijing

ascertains that NPT develops ties that are all too close with Washington). Therefore, China plays the role of peacemaker between local antagonists in Myanmar while also calling the shots depending on the circumstances, using ethnic insurgents as leverage against the NPT authorities.

China's Regional Ambitions

China wishes to pursue its infrastructure and extraction plans, such as the development of the strategic China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). The CMEC, which links China to the Indian Ocean, is part of China's BRI to connect China's Yunnan Province to Myanmar's Rakhine state. The 1,700 kilometres-long network affords China the geostrategic advantage of bypassing the Strait of Malacca that currently channels 80 per cent of China's oil imports. To succeed, China must ensure that domestic crises in Myanmar are neither subject to Western nor regional interference. A disruption to the development of its billion-dollar mega projects would spell catastrophe for China.

Close economic relationships with Myanmar also present an opportunity for China to address economic disparity within China between affluent coastal provinces, and its landlocked south-western provinces. In May 2021, Myanmar authorities approved a 2.5 billion US dollars liquid natural gas power plant as part of China's BRI. It is the first significant investment since the coup, thus testifying to the willingness of both countries to continue cooperation. Therefore, Beijing can bolster its trade with the junta in exchange for China pledging to give Myanmar diplomatic protection when facing international condemnation.

China's refusal to condemn the junta can be explained by its priority to keep its economic interests safe, more than by a particular political closeness with the junta. In fact, China has taken pains to develop relations with Myanmar regardless of the government in place in NPT.

Downsides of the Military Coup for China

Although China is thought to be a close ally of the military, its position towards Myanmar has always

remained pragmatic regardless of the regime in place. After Daw Suu's election, China's President Xi stated that friendly relations between China and the NLD had contributed towards strengthening China's relation with Myanmar. Indeed, it was Daw Suu's democratic government that approved, owing to economic pragmatism, controversial Chinese-backed projects such as the Myitsone dam project. These projects had previously been cancelled under the semi-civilian government of former General U Thein Sein, as they were considered exploitative towards local communities and harmful to the environment.

Moreover, a Chinese alliance was needed following the 2017 Rohingya crisis when Myanmar faced international condemnation over the brutal armed crackdown against the Rohingyas – leading to the exodus of 700,000 people to Bangladesh. The Tatmadaw as well as Daw Suu's government were able to count on China's support at the UNSC. Following the NLD's re-election, Xi Jinping also stated that China was ready to continue its mutual efforts towards developing the CMEC, as well as towards peacekeeping at the border.

The coup halted all of China's recent diplomatic efforts to establish good relations with the NLD, as China must now deal directly with General Hlaing. In 2020, the General insinuated that China was supplying arms to EAOs in conflict with the Tatmadaw. In addition, China is attracting intensified anti-Chinese sentiment among the Burmese population, which it had tried to improve in recent years. Indeed, China and Russia blocking the UNSC's condemnation of the coup and imposing sanctions against the junta has further angered the Burmese population, who accuse China of being complacent. Since then, Myanmar protestors burnt dozens of Chinese factories in March, while others threatened to attack Chinese pipelines across the country.

China finds itself trying to engage in a balancing act between good relations with the Tatmadaw and appeasing the Burmese population to maintain its BRI investments. Moving away from its usual stance of neutrality at the UNSC, in March

China signed a statement condemning violence against the protestors. In April, a counselor from the Chinese embassy in Myanmar contacted the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a committee formed by the ousted NLD MPs. Here, the CRPH urged China to support them in reinstating democracy whilst the Chinese counselor expressed concerns over violence ensuing from the coup, the security of his compatriots in Myanmar, and China's NLD approved investments.

The CRPH formed the National Unity Government (NUG) in defiance of the junta and declared that they represent the legitimate government in Myanmar. Despite numerous diplomats at the UN accusing China of impeding punitive measures against the junta, it is interesting to note that no other country has yet officially recognised the NUG as of 10 September 2021.

India: A Symbiotic Neighbour

In the aftermath of the 1988 Tatmadaw coup, India had supported Myanmar's pro-democracy movement. After this year's coup, India's Ministry of External Affairs expressed "deep concern"³ over the situation in Myanmar. However, it failed to voice any outright condemnation of the Tatmadaw. India's silence, alongside China's and Russia's passive stance towards the Tatmadaw, has curtailed the effect of a UNSC resolution proposed by the UK that criticises the junta. India believes in giving dialogue with the regime a chance. The presence of India's military attaché at the Armed Forces Day parade on 27 March 2021 in NPT confirmed the willingness to maintain good relations with the military junta. India was the only major democracy among the eight countries to send representatives to the event (other countries included China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Russia).

It was said that New Delhi faced pressure from the US or other allies to shift position on 1 April 2021 at a UNSC meeting when India's Permanent Representative to the UN, T.S Tirumurti, condemned the violence in Myanmar, urged maximum restraint and called for detained leaders to

be released. Yet, India also called for continued engagement with Myanmar, which lies in conflict with the West's policy of sanctions.

India's wish to continue engaging with the junta can be explained by:

1. its worry about an influx of Myanmar refugees to its northeastern states,
2. a reluctance to provoke the Tatmadaw's inertia towards anti-Indian insurgencies operating from Myanmar,
3. concern over increasing Tatmadaw favour for the Chinese and thus expanding China's influence in the Indian Ocean.

An Influx of Refugees Facilitated by a Feeling of Kinship at the Indo-Burmese Border

Upon Independence from the British, arbitrary borders were drawn between India and Myanmar, partitioning communities on both sides and binding them with a shared heritage and connections. Among these communities are the Chins, the Mizos, and the Nagas. Given the significance of these shared communities across the border, India and Myanmar formed the "Free Movement Regime" which permitted residents on either side to cross the border for 16 kilometres for a visa-free period of 14 days. The border between the two nations remained largely unfenced and porous.

Following the coup, the Indian Government sealed the border and instructed its northeastern states to "check illegal influx from Myanmar to India."⁴ In direct contravention to the central Indian Government of New Delhi's hardline approach, the Chief Minister of Mizoram has stated that "Mizoram cannot just remain indifferent" to the suffering of the people from Myanmar and "cannot turn a blind eye to this humanitarian crisis unfolding right in front of us in our own backyard".⁵

According to Human Rights Watch, more than 16,000 Myanmar nationals have fled to India since 1 February 2021. This exodus includes members of the Myanmar police force who refused to obey the junta's order to shoot activists

during demonstrations that swept the country. Thus, although New Delhi adopted a tough stance regarding the refugees, its directive has been ignored in the northeast and puts it in a precarious situation vis-à-vis the Tatmadaw, which has demanded the return of the runaway police officers.

Reliance on Military Cooperation with the Tatmadaw in the Border Areas

Since 1993, India and Myanmar have collaborated to neutralise anti-Indian insurgents located across the northeastern border of India (in Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur). Accordingly, New Delhi relies on the Tatmadaw to drive out India's Northeast rebels operating from Myanmar's bordering states with India. Between April and May 2020, 22 Indian rebels were arrested and handed over to India by the Tatmadaw. New Delhi worries that the pro-democracy Myanmar refugees seeking shelter in India's northeastern states, some of whom want to procure weapons from India and use them against the junta, may encourage Naga and Manipur insurgents in their own fight.

Furthermore, key infrastructure projects cut across various conflict zones between the junta and Myanmar EAOs:

1. the 500 million US dollars Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport (KMMTT) project, aimed at connecting the Eastern Indian seaport of Kolkata with the Sittwe deep-water port in Myanmar's Rakhine state,
2. the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway.

Besides the ethnic conflict in Myanmar, Indian insurgents from Nagaland have further delayed the KMMTT project. Since it is a priority for India to complete its own funded infrastructure projects, India's army and the Tatmadaw have conducted two joint military operations to fight militants along the borders of Myanmar's Rakhine State and India's Northeastern states. India's infrastructural stakes in Myanmar and national security at the border are too important for it to abandon all cooperation with the Tatmadaw.

There is a broader strategy for these infrastructure projects. India's long-term strategic goal is to create a Special Economic Zone in the Sittwe Port as a reaction to the Chinese-fronted Kyaukpyu port, which serves as a geostrategic footprint in Rakhine via the CMEC and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Beijing's close ties with Myanmar are also aimed at containing India by keeping the border nation preoccupied with the rising military capability of its neighbours, thus limiting its influence beyond South Asia.

On 3 April 2021, Harsh Pant, Head of the Strategic Studies Program at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi, explained that although India wants Myanmar's democratic process to be restored, it is important to be open to dialogue with all of Myanmar's stakeholders, including the Tatmadaw: "We don't want a situation where China is the only country talking to them and see another country in India's neighborhood go into the Chinese orbit. If the objective of the United States in particular and Western powers in general is to manage China's rise, then you have to look at countries through a more complex prism," Pant said. "Wherever the West has isolated countries, China has filled the void."⁶

Russia: A Rising Defence Partner

Due to burgeoning ties between Russia and Myanmar, on 6 April 2021 Russia made it clear that it opposed sanctions against the military in Myanmar. It explained that such punitive measures could erupt into a full-blown civil war in the country. The news agency Interfax quoted a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson stating that: "A course towards threats and pressure including the use of sanctions against the current Myanmar authorities has no future and is extremely dangerous."⁷ Hence, on the question of introducing sanctions against Myanmar's generals, the EU has accused Russia of hampering a united international response to Myanmar's military coup.

Regarding internal conflict in an independent nation which has no impact on its ability to profit from military rule, Russia's stance towards Myanmar has been similar to its stance on Myanmar's repression against the Rohingyas. Moscow attempted to protect Myanmar from the UN's criticism concerning repression against the Muslim minority when a total of 130 countries voted against Myanmar's government during the 48th meeting of the 7th United Nations General Assembly Session on 31 December 2020. Russia, China, Belarus, Cambodia, Laos, Philippines, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe voted in favour of Myanmar. Russia's representative stated that human rights were being transformed into a political issue against Myanmar and should be left as an internal matter for the country. Russia adopted a similar approach when classifying the 2021 coup as "purely a domestic affair of a sovereign state."⁸

Nevertheless, in the wake of an escalation of violence by the military regime against protestors in March, the spokesman for the Russian government, Dmitry Peskov, stated that although his country was maintaining constructive ties with Myanmar, Russia was "very concerned" by the growing numbers of civilian casualties.⁹ With no investment in Myanmar and minimum trading activity, Russia is aware that it is unrealistic to challenge China from an economic perspective. Having said that, the Kremlin's strategy is to ascertain its presence and exert influence in other sectors such as military cooperation.

A Profitable Military Relationship

The relationship between Russia and Myanmar has primarily focused on the defence sector, culminating in a defence cooperation agreement signed between the countries in June 2016. According to the 2019 study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia is a major arms supplier to Myanmar, having accounted for 16 per cent of the weaponry procured by Myanmar between 2014 and 2019.

General Hlaing had visited Russia more than five times prior to the coup. A few days before the junta took power, Russian Defence Minister General Sergey Shoigu visited Myanmar to finalise the supply of Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile systems, Orlan-10E surveillance drones, and radar equipment. The Moscow Times informed that Russia had sold radar equipment to Myanmar in February 2021 at the amount of 14.7 million US dollars, and that according to trade data, Russia exported 96 million US dollars worth of goods classified as “hidden” in December 2020.

Since the 2021 coup, Russia is perceived as being one of the most prominent public supporters of Myanmar’s ruling junta. Not only has the Kremlin expressed opposition to the US-led Western nations’ outrage against the junta but has also vowed to enhance its defence cooperation with Myanmar’s military.

The continuation of Russia’s bilateral ties with Myanmar after the coup was corroborated by the visit of Deputy Minister of Defence Alexander Fomin on 27 March 2021. This marked the first high-profile visit to Myanmar by a foreign official since the junta seized power. Sending the Russian Deputy Defence Minister to the Myanmar’s Armed Forces Day was a clear demonstration from Moscow about the importance they place on having an influence in the region. Fomin expressed that Myanmar was a “reliable ally and strategic partner”¹⁰ in Asia. Following his visit, Russia’s Defence Ministry stated that Moscow wanted to deepen “military and military-technical cooperation in the spirit of strategic partnership.”¹¹ Myanmar is eager to develop its bilateral cooperation with Russia to fill the void left by Western countries.

On 20 June 2021, General Hlaing travelled to Russia to attend the ninth Moscow Conference on International Security. Myanmar and Russian officials discussed enhancing their military cooperation once again, showing disregard for the resolution passed by the UN General Assembly a few days earlier, which called for a halt on the supply of weapons to Myanmar.

Thus, for Russia, the regime change in Myanmar represents an opportunity to gain a foothold in the region. Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu reiterated that Myanmar was “a time-trusted strategic partner and a reliable ally in the Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific Region”¹². The cards held by Russia are the diplomatic shield it can offer, and the military equipment it can sell. The junta will favour this relationship considering that it makes it possible to counterbalance its neighbours’ influence, China’s in particular.

Conclusion

As in any crisis undergoing multilateral discussion at the negotiating table, some countries adopt a more neutral position towards the government that is condemned by most of the international community led by the US and the EU. This is demonstrated by the 36 abstentions in the vote on the 18 June non-binding resolution, which called for the release of political prisoners and an arms embargo on Myanmar. The junta has the great advantage that two of these countries, China and Russia, have veto power at the UNSC.

Countries maintaining a neutral or pro-regime position do so for various reasons: to preserve their financial, commercial, and geopolitical interests, or to defend themselves against those who precisely seek to increase their sphere of influence in these areas. Hence, they use Myanmar to develop their ambitions in lieu of raising human rights concerns. Indeed, India feels the need to maintain a relationship with the current regime to counter Chinese influence over Myanmar. The weight of China in the region, felt less by Western nations, partly explains neighbouring countries’ more restrained response to the Myanmar coup.

Thus, official reactions of governments in the region to the Myanmar coup only depend to a minor extent on whether they have any actual political affinity with the junta. Their stance results more from various national and strategic interests with Myanmar that are not always known to the general public. Regardless of this, it is unfortunate that in their quest to restore

democracy in the country and to have the NUG recognised, Myanmar's civilian population not only has to fight against a violent and oppressive regime, but also to defend itself against certain foreign interests, which, although intangible, influence their fate.

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