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Myanmar's February Coup – Implications for India and China

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Hours before the newly elected Parliament was to convene on February 1, 2021, the Burmese Military, the Tatmadaw, declared a state of emergency for a year and detained State Counsellor Aung Sang Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint, senior leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD), and other critics of the military. On February 2, the leader of the coup, General Min Aung Hlaing formed the State Administration Council to govern Myanmar. Announcing the coup through the military-owned Myawaddy TV station, the Tatmadaw justified the coup by stating the November elections had huge discrepancies including those of inconsistencies in the voter list which the Election Commission failed to settle. Myanmar, which had begun its transition to democracy only a decade ago, was back to being ruled by its generals.

Implications for India

The coup has forced New Delhi to choose between democracy and the realities on the ground of the military junta. While India could previously build and earn the trust of both the democratically elected government and the Tatmadaw, the coup puts New Delhi in an uncomfortable position and could also delay progress on India's developmental projects in the country. Subsequently, due to the Burmese system where all the security apparatus in Myanmar is under the Tatmadaw, there is little choice but to engage with them. This is exacerbated by the strategic and economic importance Myanmar holds for India that requires continuous engagement with whoever is in charge in Naypyidaw. These include making sure the more than 2 million people of Indian origin in Myanmar do not feel abandoned, the importance of Myanmar to the insurgencies in the Northeast of India, and the developmental projects that bring about mutual benefits.

There are also apprehensions arising out of the coup leading to an intensification of Myanmar's ethnic armed conflict that could undermine security in India's Northeast. However, this is unlikely to have a direct impact on and worsen India's domestic security calculus in the region due to India's active political and security posturing in the Northeast.¹ Nevertheless, two and a half months after the coup, over 2,200 Burmese nationals have fled to India including 14 elected members of parliament from the NLD.² It is, therefore, important to be prepared for the influx of more refugees and their safeguarding as the unrests continue. Furthermore, India's response to the coup should not be to keep only China in check, but also to secure "its own long-term interest in nurturing ties with the people and economy of Myanmar."³ New Delhi's response, therefore, has been comparatively muted when compared to the 1988 Burmese coup. Ultimately, New Delhi will have to engage with the Tatmadaw to secure India's national interests while at the same time advocate for the restoration of the elected government.

Implications for China

For Beijing, the coup is a quagmire. On one hand, China can strategically benefit from the coup and Myanmar's international alienation. Similar to the previous 1988 coup which led to closer ties with Beijing out of necessity, the generals in Naypyidaw may be forced to conciliate with their northern neighbour to ensure survivability, which could lead to a growing Chinese influence in the country.

On the other hand, two main reasons account for Beijing's concern over the developments in Myanmar. First, China had invested a lot to cultivate strong relationships with the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, which included aiding the country's economic development and providing diplomatic protection when required. Chinese officials also confided they respected Suu Kyi and her political stance, when compared to the "notoriously corrupt generals."⁴ They found her pragmatic and believed she would keep her promises on the Chinese-funded projects in Myanmar, indicating a preference for working with the NLD than the Tatmadaw. Subsequently, with the Tatmadaw back in power, "China now has to deal with the institution in Myanmar that historically is the most suspicious of China's intentions."⁵ Exacerbating this point, in August 2004, a classified dossier titled 'A Study of Myanmar-U.S. Relations' was compiled and circulated amongst the Tatmadaw which stated that the country's reliance on China as a diplomatic ally and economic patron had created a national emergency that threatened the country's independence – leading to the Tatmadaw reassessing their relations with China.⁶ Incidentally, General Min Aung Hlaing's first foreign trip as the commander in chief of the Tatmadaw in 2011 was to Vietnam, China's traditional adversary.

Second, due to Myanmar's importance in Beijing's wider strategic ambitions, stability in the country is paramount for China. This aspect can be further subdivided into three parts, although they are all interconnected to a certain degree. First, the coup has had destabilising effects on China's BRI in the country. Anti-Chinese sentiments have swept the population because of Beijing's tepid response to the coup and prioritising the safety of their projects and investments rather than condemning the Tatmadaw and military coup – stating the developments were a change of the political situation which were an internal affair. Beijing only later expressed concern for the situation in the country. These sentiments led to Chinese-financed factories being torched and threats to blow up the China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines. China's loss in the coup, therefore, is "more significant when public opinion is taken into consideration," and will not be in Beijing's favour as it tries to push forward with the implementation of the BRI.⁷ Second is the issue of Rohingya repatriation in the Rakhine State which is China's outlet to the Bay of Bengal, and where China has invested significant amounts in BRI projects. Considering it was the Tatmadaw that perpetrated atrocities against the Rohingya community in 2017, their future and repatriation do not bode well with the military back in power. Thus, unrest in

the Rakhine State and possible crackdowns on the Rohingya's could further jeopardise Chinese interests in the region. Third, Beijing is worried about the inflow of the resources it imports from Myanmar, whose supply could also be impacted by the coup. Therefore, the coup has left Beijing in a position where it would be impossible not to engage with the Tatmadaw to secure China's strategic interests.

Looking ahead, the February 2021 coup has further complicated an already complex web of relations and dynamics both within Myanmar and externally, relating to the Indian and Chinese engagements with the country. Within the country, there seems to be no sign of the pro-democracy protests abating nor of the Tatmadaw reducing their brutal crackdowns or showing any willingness to compromise. Thus, while Beijing, undoubtedly, will use all the means accessible to safeguard its strategic interests, New Delhi will also have to maintain a reasonable level of engagement with all parties to ensure the same. Only time will tell to what extent these implications will become realities and effect Indian and Chinese interests.

Notes

¹ Avinash Paliwal, "India's Interests in Myanmar," in *Darkness at Dawn The Myanmar Coup and Its Aftermath*, Diplomat Risk Intelligent Report No. 2, February 2021.

² The Wire Staff, "Fourteen Lawmakers from Suu Kyi's Party Fled to India from Myanmar, Says Mizoram Police," *The Wire*, April 13, 2021, <https://thewire.in/south-asia/fourteen-lawmakers-from-suu-kyis-party-fled-to-india-from-myanmar-says-mizoram-police>. Accessed 19 April 2021.

³ Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, "India's Myanmar Tightrope," *India Today*, February 13, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/up-front/story/20210222-india-s-myanmar-tightrope-1768880-2021-02-13>. Accessed 19 April 2021.

⁴ Aung Zaw, "China Grows More Assertive Ahead of Myanmar's Election," *The Irrawaddy*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/china-grows-assertive-ahead-myanmars-election.html>. Accessed 19 April 2021.

⁵ "Myanmar coup: China blocks UN condemnation as protest grows," *BBC*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55913947>. Accessed 19 April 2021.

⁶ Bertil Lintner, *The Wa of Myanmar and China's Quest for Global Dominance*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2021, p. 193.

⁷ Yun Sun, "Strategic Implications of the Myanmar Coup for China," in *Darkness at Dawn The Myanmar Coup and Its Aftermath*, Diplomat Risk Intelligent Report No. 2, February 2021.