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# CHINA-MYANMAR RELATIONS: WHY BEIJING PREFERS SUU KYI OVER TATMADAW

**ANUBHAV S. GOSWAMI**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The February 1 coup of 2021 in Myanmar has put China in a fix. Although PRC has extended its absolute support for the beleaguered Junta against international sanctions and condemnation, Beijing hardly has any faith in the Army's ability to govern, and the absence of governance right now in Myanmar is palpable. This article argues that Beijing's need for efficient governance in Myanmar for its own regional connectivity interests to military interests has made Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD far more integral to China's long-term regional interests than the Junta in Myanmar.

Throughout the rule of the Junta, Myanmar saw itself diplomatically isolated and beleaguered by sanctions. However, its neighbour to the north, the People's Republic of China (PRC) emerged as a strong defender of the Tatmadaw (Burmese military) on the world stage. Their bilateral relations in this phase were never without hiccups as the Junta (henceforth, Junta and Tatmadaw will be used interchangeably) felt frequently irked by PRC's support to

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the communist guerrillas in Myanmar. Yet, geopolitical expediency kept the Junta tethered to Beijing for regime survival.

Post-2010 when democratic changes began in Myanmar, PRC was initially apprehensive about Aung San Suu Kyi. Contrary to expectation, Suu Kyi showed remarkable pragmatism to Beijing's outreach and soon forged a vibrant economic partnership with PRC by welcoming Chinese projects like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), much to Beijing's delight. Clearly, Beijing's regional interests were not hamstrung under a quasi-democratic Myanmar. So, when the Tatmadaw swept the rug off National League for Democracy (NLD) government on February 1, 2021, PRC was not pleased.

This article argues that in Beijing's calculations, NLD in Naypyidaw is far more integral to its long-term regional interests than the Tatmadaw in Myanmar. The argument is drawn by making a comparative study of Beijing's relationship with the Tatmadaw vis-à-vis NLD.

### **TATMADAW AND PRC—A RELATIONSHIP FORGED BY MUTUAL NECESSITIES**

Since its independence in 1948, Myanmar has had only brief moments of democracy. Its popularly-elected government was overthrown by the military in 1962. Since then, Myanmar has been ruled by the Military Junta in some form or the other with a brief interlude from 2011 to 2021. The Tatmadaw, during the 1962-1988 period of military rule, adopted an *isolationist policy of equidistance* between the big powers due to weariness of foreigners.<sup>1</sup> Myanmar had been a colony for a long time and, after independence, the generals were hard-pressed about the nation's newfound sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> However, 1988 turned out to be a consequential year for Myanmar's history, changing Tatmadaw's nature of rule in Myanmar forever, including its isolationist streak on the international stage.

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1. Zoltan Barany, "Armed Forces and Democratization in Myanmar: Why the US Military Should Engage the Tatmadaw", Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2016, p. 2, available at [https://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/160913\\_Report\\_Barany\\_Myanmar\\_Military\\_Army.pdf](https://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/160913_Report_Barany_Myanmar_Military_Army.pdf). Accessed on February 5, 2022.

2. Ibid., p. 2.

In 1988, a local quarrel in a nondescript teashop in Yangon city triggered off a nationwide popular pro-democracy movement in 1988 that spread throughout the country, cutting across all social classes of Burmese society. Popularly called the 8888 Uprising, the whole of Myanmar rose in unison, calling for a swift end to military dictatorship. Such was the spread and magnitude of the movement that the Junta had to use extreme force to violently crackdown on the protesting pro-democracy masses.<sup>3</sup> The repression horrified the world and drew sharp rebuttal. The West quickly imposed sanctions on Myanmar, and Japan suspended aid due to pressure from its major ally, the United States.<sup>4</sup> Myanmar's already weak economy collapsed. With the survival of the regime in peril, the Junta grudgingly abandoned its cherished isolationism and turned to PRC.<sup>5</sup> Beijing saw an opportunity in the Junta's desperation and offered an economic lifeline to the regime.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, PRC used its veto power to shield Myanmar from international condemnation at the United Nations.<sup>7</sup>

In the years that followed, Beijing supported the Junta with much-needed arms sales to stabilise the internal security of the nation. Several big-ticket arms deals were signed. Notable among them were the purchase of arms worth US\$1 billion by the Junta from PRC in 1989 and another defence deal worth US\$400 million that followed in 1994.<sup>8</sup> The security relationship between the two nations saw newer heights, as between 1990 and 1999, almost two-thirds of the Myanmar army, navy, and air force personnel sent

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3. Maher Chasib Hatem Al-Fahad, "Popular Protests and the Outbreak of the 8888 Uprising in Burma (March-October 1988)", *Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology* 17, no. 7, October 2020, pp. 17012-17015.

4. Donald M. Seekins, "Japan's Development Ambitions for Myanmar: The Problem of 'Economics before Politics'", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 34, no. 2, 2015: 113-38.

5. Olga Volosyuk and Wai Yan Phyo Naing, "The Expansion of Chinese Business in Myanmar and Sino-Myanmar Relations (1988-1990)", *RUDN Journal of World History* 11, no. 4, 2019: 305-14, pp. 307-8.

6. Sudha Ramachandran, "China-South Asia Strategic Engagements—3 Sino-Myanmar Relationship: Past Imperfect, Future Tense", ISAS Working Paper No. 158, August 23, 2012, p. 5, available at [https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/media/isas\\_papers/ISAS%20Working%20Paper%20158%20-%20Sino%20Myanmar.pdf](https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/media/isas_papers/ISAS%20Working%20Paper%20158%20-%20Sino%20Myanmar.pdf). Accessed on February 16, 2022.

7. Ibid., p. 6.

8. Ibid., p. 7.

abroad for training were hosted by PRC alone.<sup>9</sup> Arms were followed by easy loans and technical expertise from PRC which led to the rebuilding and modernisation of several commercial harbours and naval facilities in Myanmar.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, official Chinese figures reveal that between 1988 and 2010, bilateral trade grew from US\$9.51 million to US\$4.4 billion.<sup>11</sup> In return, the Tatmadaw offered PRC access to natural resources in Myanmar's remote areas, especially in the resource-rich Kachin State.<sup>12</sup> From the Chinese perspective, easy access to natural resources in Myanmar was necessary to fuel the economic development of its landlocked South-Western provinces, particularly Yunnan.<sup>13</sup> The mutually beneficial relationship that began in the early 1990s, enabled the military Junta to regain its iron grip on the Burmese people. Powerful once again under the protective shield that Beijing extended to Myanmar, the Junta clanged to absolute power for two more decades.

### **A RELATIONSHIP THAT LACKS MUTUAL TRUST**

Despite the warming up of the relationship between Yangon (then capital of Myanmar) and Beijing, neither country trusted the other's national governments. A bilateral relationship was, at best, built around convergences of interests and lacked any serious congruence. A United States Institute of Peace report includes excerpts from the memoirs of several former Burmese generals, reading which one can flatly conclude that the Junta had little trust in Beijing. The memoirs describe the experiences of several Tatmadaw generals' hard-fought battles against the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, which received the bulk of their support from

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9. Maung Aung Myoe, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), p. 139.

10. Ramachandran, n. 6, p. 7.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

12. Yun Sun, "China's role in Myanmar's internal conflicts", US Institute of Peace—USIP Senior Study Group Report, no. 1, 2018, p. 12, available at <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/ssg-report-Chinas-role-in-myanmars-internal-conflicts.pdf>. Accessed on February 16, 2022.

13. Poon Kim Shee, "The Political Economy of China-Myanmar Relations: Strategic and Economic Dimensions", *Ritsumeikan Annual Review of International Studies* 1, 2002: 33-53, p. 35.

the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Throwing more light on the CCP-CPB relationship of those times, the USIP report writes:

The expulsion of Chinese communities from Burma in the early 1960s under General Ne Win and the anti-Chinese riots in 1967 during the early stage of Mao's Cultural Revolution generated hostility in both countries. In the aftermath of the riots, Beijing severed bilateral ties and began overtly supporting the armed struggle of the Burma Communist Party (BCP) against the Burma government; it viewed party-to-party relations as different from state-to-state relations. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) provided financial, military, and personnel support for the BCP to help it establish a "liberated area" of more than twenty thousand square kilometers along the shared border in Shan State.<sup>14</sup>

Talking about the extent of Chinese support, Brig. Gen. Than Tin who was the mastermind of Burma's notorious 'Four Cuts Counter-insurgency Policy', writes in his memoirs: "[b]y having their back being covered by the neighbouring country, the insurgents we are facing receive whatever they want including manpower, weapons and ammunitions, and other administrative guidance."<sup>15</sup>

General, Gen. Chit Swe, another top Tatmadaw general of the post-1988 era similarly blamed Beijing for the CPB's foreign accessibility in his memoirs: "[t]he advantages of CPB Communists are possession of new weaponry. Another obvious advantage is they have secured backing. They receive strong military and logistic supports."<sup>16</sup>

After the events of 1988, however, PRC saw a greater dividend in supporting the Junta—a desperate national government—than in providing assistance to a group of rag-tag communist guerrillas, which led to the CPB's collapse, among other reasons.<sup>17</sup> But that

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14. Sun, n. 12, p. 12.

15. Min Zin, "Burmese Attitude toward Chinese: Portrayal of the Chinese in Contemporary Cultural and Media Works", *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 31, no. 1, 2012: 115-31.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

17. Toshihiro Kudo, "China's policy toward Myanmar: Challenges and prospects", *The Institute of Developing Economies Working Paper*, 2012, p. 8, available at [https://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Research/Region/Asia/pdf/201209\\_kudo.pdf](https://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Research/Region/Asia/pdf/201209_kudo.pdf). Accessed on February 19, 2022.

didn't alleviate the perennial suspicion that the Junta had for Beijing. This was because PRC had quickly established relationships with former CPB splinter groups which broke away along ethnic lines.<sup>18</sup> These groups are clubbed together under the nomenclature of *Ethnic Armed Organization* or EAO. PRC supported the EAOs to create continued friction between the Tatmadaw and border populations to retain major influence over the fledgling Junta.<sup>19</sup> That leverage over the Junta may be used, among other things, to prevent the "unwelcome" influence of the United States in the country, and thus the region.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Beijing was never fully confident about the Junta's capability to run the entire state effectively. In order to protect Chinese investments, arrangements with ethnic militias controlling parts of Myanmar became necessary.<sup>21</sup>

In a nutshell, despite PRC's absolute support for the beleaguered regime, the Tatmadaw could hardly repose trust on Beijing with its history of aiding various insurgent groups throughout Myanmar. As recently as January 2020, Tatmadaw leaders were complaining to President Xi Jinping about PRC's financing of rebel armies like the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and United Wa State Army.<sup>22</sup> In April 2020, there were also reports of Chinese state-owned ordnance manufacturer Norinco arming the Arakan Army of Myanmar's Rakhine state to secure guarantees from the insurgent group of not harming the PRC-funded Kyaukpyu port that is likely

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18. Ibid., p. 8.

19. Sun, n. 12, p. 7.

20. Ibid., p. 7.

21. K. Yhome, "Understanding China's Response to Ethnic Conflicts in Myanmar", ORF Occasional Paper No. 188, April 2019, at [https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ORF\\_Occasional\\_Paper\\_188\\_China\\_Myanmar.pdf](https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ORF_Occasional_Paper_188_China_Myanmar.pdf). Accessed on March 1, 2022.

22. Steven Lee Myers and Hannah Beech, "In Geopolitical Struggle Over Myanmar, China Has an Edge", *The New York Times*, February 16, 2021, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/world/asia/myanmar-coup-China-united-states.html>. Accessed on February 5, 2022; Charles Dunst, "Myanmar's Coup: A blow to democracy, a headache for China", *LSE Blogs*, February 16, 2021, at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/cff/2021/02/16/myanmars-coup-a-blow-to-democracy-a-headache-for-China/>. Accessed on February 15, 2022; Aung Zaw, "Myanmar's Generals Make a Show of Displeasure at China's Arming of Rebels", *The Irrawaddy*, November 26, 2019, at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/myanmars-generals-make-show-displeasure-Chinas-arming-rebels.html>. Accessed on February 5, 2022.

to serve Beijing's military interests.<sup>23</sup> This is in sync with Chinese policymakers trying to diversify PRC's engagement with different actors in Myanmar in order to "play ball with *whoever* controls Myanmar, or even parts of the country, as long as these governments and militias keep the pipelines pumping oil and gas, the roads and ports open to Chinese ships and exports."<sup>24</sup> This remarkable juggling act between Tatmadaw and EAOs shows that PRC has no permanent friends but only permanent interests in Myanmar.

### **TATMADAW IN SEARCH OF NEW BENEFACTORS**

It is no surprise that the Tatmadaw in recent years has looked to other options, besides PRC, to offset Beijing's overburdening shadow and to shore up international support. Since 2010, the Tatmadaw has built strong defence ties with India and Russia. While Chinese ordnance comprise 49 per cent of Myanmar's total weapons inventory, between 2015 and 2019 Russia and India provided 16 per cent and 14 per cent respectively of Myanmar's foreign arms purchases.<sup>25</sup>

Relationship with Russia, in particular, goes beyond arms deals. In recent times, Moscow had shielded Myanmar twice at the UN by using its veto power in the Security Council in 2007 and 2017.<sup>26</sup> It has also recently signalled its support for General Min Aung Hlaing, calling his coup of 2021 "a purely domestic affair".<sup>27</sup> General Min Aung Hlaing seems comfortable with Russian support, as immediately after the coup of February 1, the Junta welcomed Russian arms specifically to *counterbalance* PRC's influence.<sup>28</sup> The deepening relationship with Moscow also comes with less baggage, as, unlike PRC, Russia is a distant power and therefore elicits less scepticism of any Russian perfidy. Yet, the Russia-Myanmar relationship has

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23. Dunst, n. 22.

24. Ibid.

25. Nivedita Kapoor, "Russia's search for influence in Myanmar", Observer Research Foundation, March 2, 2021, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/russias-search-for-influence-in-myanmar/>. Accessed on March 1, 2022.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Marwaan Macan-Markar, "Myanmar embraces Russian arms to offset China's influence", *Nikkei Asia*, February 9, 2021, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Myanmar-embraces-Russian-arms-to-offset-China-s-influence>. Accessed on March 3, 2022.



a long way to go before maturing as overall engagement is still limited. A case in point, Russian investments in Myanmar are still marginal compared to PRC's, as Moscow does not even figure among the top ten investors in Myanmar.<sup>29</sup> However, the coveted Russian support at the UN Security Council underscores the importance of Moscow to Tatmadaw in its attempt to reduce the need for PRC's veto power. A confirmed Russian shield at the UN will strengthen the hands of the Junta to withstand Chinese pressures to concede to BRI demands.

Despite international condemnation and sanctions, the Junta today sits in a far more comfortable position than in 1988. Today, the Tatmadaw is no longer fully dependent on PRC for precious life oxygen as it was three decades ago. The Tatmadaw's active cultivation of other state powers like Russia and India in recent decades has enabled it to access diplomatic and economic support as well as defence hardware. And unlike in the past, Japan today is much more open to working with Tatmadaw, as it has refused to follow up on American sanctions this time.<sup>30</sup> Such a change of heart is due to the Japanese acknowledgement of the growing Chinese influence in Myanmar. Geopolitical considerations have informed the Japanese policymakers that abandoning Myanmar now will only give PRC further space to grow there.

Thus, even as PRC is standing behind the Tatmadaw since the February 1 coup, it is no longer the only country that is doing so. And, given its continued suspicion of the PRC, it is likely that the Junta will seek to keep its dependence on Beijing to a minimum.

## **NLD AND PRC: RELUCTANT PARTNERS TO ENTHUSIASTIC FRIENDS**

PRC has both economic as well as strategic interests in Myanmar. Myanmar is abundantly rich in natural resources like timber, jade, and natural gas. Geographically, Myanmar is saddled between PRC's

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29. Kapoor, n. 25.

30. Philip Heijmans and Kwan Wei Kevin Tan, "Japan refuses to sanction Myanmar over China factor, undermines US strategy", *Business Standard*, June 20, 2021, at [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/japan-s-refusal-to-sanction-myanmar-undermines-joe-biden-s-strategy-121062000147\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/japan-s-refusal-to-sanction-myanmar-undermines-joe-biden-s-strategy-121062000147_1.html). Accessed on March 5, 2022.

southwestern province of Yunnan to the north and the Bay of Bengal to its south, thereby offering Beijing a linkage to the Indian ocean. PRC understands the strategic importance of Myanmar's geography and has sought to link the Yunnan province in PRC to the Bay of Bengal by developing the CMEC.<sup>31</sup>

Underscoring Beijing's need for efficient governance in Myanmar for its own regional connectivity interests to military interests, Brian Y. S. Wong comments:

Political stability, presence of competent technocrats and administrators (indeed, the army had recently purged even some of the more moderate and West-friendly, finance-savvy administrators from the Central Bank, precipitating a substantial spike in concern amongst foreign investors) are vital for the maintenance of these projects. As a fledgling yet increasingly important piece in the Belt and Road jigsaw, Myanmar's stability is of paramount importance to PRC's regional game plans.<sup>32</sup>

When the military dictatorship made way for a quasi-democratic set-up in 2011, PRC was initially worried. However, it soon realised that it will have to embrace new realities and slowly started courting the civilian government of the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi. Beijing's outreach to NLD was also exacerbated by the Junta's decision to suspend the construction of the Beijing-financed Myitsone Dam project in Kachin State in September 2011, following protests by local residents and others across the country.<sup>33</sup> With the Myitsone suspension and a few more protests against Chinese-backed mines and factories later, PRC learned an important lesson: *solely relying on one set of actors in Myanmar—in this case, the Junta—was fraught with risk.*<sup>34</sup> Accordingly,

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31. Jaideep Chanda, "The China Myanmar Economic Corridor: A Reality Check", *National Security* 4, no. 3, July-September 2021: 272-305.

32. Brian Y. S. Wong, "In Myanmar, China should support the NLD and ditch the army", *Ejinsight*, February 16, 2021, at <https://www.ejinsight.com/eji/article/id/2712969/20210216-In-Myanmar,-China-should-support-the-NLD-and-ditch-the-army>. Accessed on March 10, 2022.

33. Laur Kiik, "Nationalism and anti-ethno-politics: why 'Chinese Development' failed at Myanmar's Myitsone Dam", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2016: p. 1.

34. Sun, n. 12, p. 14.

Chinese policymakers sought to diversify Beijing's engagement and embarked on a multilayered engagement strategy to improve relations with the NLD and its public image in Myanmar, including outreach to other opposition parties, and the various EAOs.<sup>35</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi for her part showed remarkable pragmatism in welcoming Beijing's outreach. Her pro-democratic stance didn't stop her from forging an economic relationship with an authoritarian PRC. Despite the strong anti-Chinese sentiments prevalent in Burmese society, Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD were convinced about the benefits of engaging in close economic cooperation with Beijing and welcomed Chinese investments.<sup>36</sup> She attended two Belt and Road Forums in Beijing, held in 2017 and 2019, as a high-profile guest. Over the past decade, Myanmar's trade relations with PRC have matured significantly with the Chinese market comprising 31 per cent of the country's total exports in 2019, an impressive jump from the meagre 6.24 per cent in 2010.<sup>37</sup> It was during the League era that some of the big-ticket Chinese projects in Myanmar came about. Of those, the signing of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor dominated the headlines in which PRC proposed to build a deep-water port and Special Economic Zone at Kyaukpyu as part of the mega-investment project.

After a decade of close relationship with Naypyidaw under the NLD rule, PRC is now the largest trading partner and second-largest FDI source for Myanmar.<sup>38</sup> Myanmar also joined the PRC-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which could benefit the nation by way of further relaxation of trade

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35. Ibid.

36. Thomas Bernhardt, "Myanmar's unsteady exit from China's orbit", *East Asia Forum*, May 27, 2020, at <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/27/myanmars-unsteady-exit-from-chinas-orbit/>. Accessed on March 10, 2022.

37. Wong, n. 32.

38. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Myanmar-China trade ties come to grinding halt despite pol bonhomie", *The Economic Times*, November 9, 2021, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/myanmar-china-trade-ties-come-to-grinding-halt-despite-pol-bonhomie/articleshow/87604766.cms>. Accessed on March 10, 2022; Nan Lwin, "China Leads Investment in Yangon", *The Irrawaddy*, July 26, 2019, at <https://www.irrawaddy.com/business/China-leads-investment-yangon.html#:~:text=Currently%2C%20China%20is%20Myanmar's%20second,country%2C%20according%20to%20the%20MIC>. Accessed on March 10, 2022.

restrictions among its major trading partners.<sup>39</sup> The technocrats inside the NLD-led government were optimistic that “participating in RCEP will help Myanmar gain access to a large market for its exports, and that there will also be opportunities for responsible, high-quality investment inflows.”<sup>40</sup> After the coup, however, Myanmar is facing a snub from member states who are opposed to its inclusion on grounds of non-legitimising a coup. Both New Zealand and the Philippines have not accepted Myanmar’s “instrument of ratification” of the RCEP.<sup>41</sup>

The pragmatic embrace of PRC by the NLD was also fuelled indirectly by the Rohingya crisis. Commenting on the whole affair, Shannon Tiezzi writes:

The military crackdown—and ASSK’s refusal to denounce a campaign bordering on genocide—undermined any hope of renewed ties with the West. Liberal democracies abroad denounced the violence; the United States enacted sanctions on Myanmar’s commander-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing. The hoped-for wave of Western investment never materialized amid the looming threat of sanctions. Once again, PRC was Myanmar’s main partner by default.<sup>42</sup>

While NLD got the lion’s share of Beijing’s attention, rapid deepening of ties between Beijing and the NLD government didn’t blind the CCP leadership from engaging with another set of civilian actors in Myanmar. Just as in their dealings with the Tatmadaw, Beijing went beyond NLD to build contacts with the military-aligned

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39. Myat Myat Mon and Bernard Minn, “RCEP trade deal: Will Myanmar really benefit?”, *Frontier Myanmar*, December 3, 2020, at <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/rcep-trade-deal-how-will-myanmar-really-benefit/>. Accessed on March 21, 2022.

40. Enze Han, “Is post-election Myanmar moving closer to China?”, *East Asia Forum*, January 23, 2021, at [https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/01/23/is-post-election-myanmar-moving-closer-to-china/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=newsletter2021-01-24](https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/01/23/is-post-election-myanmar-moving-closer-to-china/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter2021-01-24). Accessed on March 21, 2022.

41. PTI, “Philippines, like New Zealand, rejects Myanmar in trade pact”, *The Week*, February 18, 2020, at <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2022/02/18/philippines-like-new-zealand-rejects-myanmar-in-trade-pact.html>. Accessed on March 27, 2022.

42. Shannon Tiezzi, “What the Myanmar Coup Means for China”, *The Diplomat*, February 3, 2021, at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/what-the-myanmar-coup-means-for-china/>. Accessed on March 29, 2022.

opposition and other parties, as well as the civil society and the media to stay above all actors in Myanmar.<sup>43</sup>

### **THE COUP: BOON OR BANE FOR PRC?**

An analysis of the two relationships suggests that the League has proven to be a much more reliable and competent partner for PRC. Particularly, the growing distance between the NLD and the West due to the sharp criticism of their stand on the Rohingya crisis had made Beijing more secure about the League's cooperation with them. Despite the hot and cold but largely workable past with the Tatmadaw, it is the League that had expanded the scope of cooperation between the two nations and had boosted PRC's economic prospects in Myanmar due to its popularity and command of respect from the domestic populace. Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership had both "lent legitimacy to Chinese forays in the country", as well as in "Southeast Asia at large—through its offering substantial political capital and regional backing (in form of allies) to Chinese ventures in Cambodia and Laos."<sup>44</sup> Prominent Chinese experts like Yun Sun, Director of the PRC Program at Stimson Centre, unequivocally acknowledge that Beijing had a better relationship with the NLD than the kleptocratic rule of the Generals.<sup>45</sup>

With PRC gaining so much from NLD's first term, it had good reasons to welcome NLD's massive victory as it looked to capitalise on Suu Kyi's popularity to further entrench its extensive involvement in the country. Lucas Myers aptly describes China's equation with the NLD after the latter's massive victory in the 2020 national election: "Governed by its need to secure access to the Indian Ocean and Middle Eastern oil through the overland Yunnan-Myanmar route ... Beijing hopes(d) to balance anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar with the NLD's need for international cover in the Rakhine and economic development."<sup>46</sup>

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43. Yhome, n. 21, pp. 15-16; See also K. Yhome, "The Suu Kyi factor in China's Myanmar policy", *Observer Research Foundation*, June 12, 2015, at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-suu-kyi-factor-in-chinas-myanmar-policy/>. Accessed on March 29, 2022.

44. Wong, n. 32.

45. Tiezzy, n. 42.

46. Lucas Myers, "What Myanmar's 2020 Election Tells Us About U.S.-China Competition", *Wilson Center*, January 12, 2021, at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/what->

For the NLD, this Chinese cover had become even more important to them in their second term since mounting criticism and concern from the West and its investors had piled on rather uncomfortably over the Rohingya issue. Suu Kyi's need for allies had all the telltale signs of PRC exploiting her weak position in her second term by boldly pushing through "CMEC with the ultimate goal of enshrining an overland route from Yunnan to the Bay of Bengal."<sup>47</sup>

However, just when Beijing was looking to newer heights in its relationship with Myanmar after the re-election of Suu Kyi, the army moved in to take back the reins of the country. PRC had banked on the relative stability and the normalcy that the League brought to the country, which was critical for Beijing to execute its international connectivity projects in the region. The coup turned the clock backward on Myanmar and now it has found itself in a situation of pre-civil war.

Public anger has grown manifold after the Junta failed to curb the sharp rise in Covid-related deaths in the second wave in mid-2021. Since late 2021, this pent-up anger has led to increasing intensity of conflict between the armed forces and the people. Already some pro-democracy activists have grown radical in their resistance to the military regime, using violent methods of resistance like the targeted assassination of people who had cooperated with the military.<sup>48</sup> Many armed militias have cropped up across Myanmar in small towns and rural areas, including the formation of a newly formed guerrilla group (People's Defence Force) in Mandalay—the second biggest city in Myanmar.<sup>49</sup>

The absence of governance right now in Myanmar is palpable and PRC hardly has any faith in the Army's ability to govern.<sup>50</sup> In conclusion, it could be postulated that PRC will keep shielding the

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myanmars-2020-election-tells-us-about-us-China-competition. Accessed on April 2, 2022.

47. Ibid.

48. Nikkei Asia, "Myanmar's anger simmers, six months after military takeover", August 1, 2021, at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/Myanmar-s-anger-simmers-six-months-after-military-takeover>. Accessed on April 2, 2022.

49. Reuters, "Myanmar militias vow to take on army after city firefight", June 22, 2021, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmar-army-clashes-with-anti-junta-militia-mandalay-city-2021-06-22/>. Accessed on April 2, 2022.

50. Dunst, n. 22.

Tatmadaw from collapsing under increasing international pressure and sanctions, even as it tries to boost its relations with local EAOs, NLD, and other stakeholders. In simpler terms, Beijing's priority is to maintain fruitful collaboration with everyone so that it can stay in the good books of whoever eventually emerges in control of Myanmar, or part of it, whether that be the Tatmadaw or NLD at the national level or EAOs in parts of the strife-torn nation. Ideally, however, Xi Jinping would prefer to turn the clock backward to pre-February 1 days with NLD at the helm of affairs in Myanmar!

### **STAKES FOR INDIA**

As long as there is a schism between PRC and the Tatmadaw, the latter will continue to try and diversify its bilateral relations to avoid becoming totally dependent on China. It is in India's interest that Myanmar does not fully embrace PRC. India must proactively engage with the Tatmadaw not just in defence cooperation but also in economic relations by finding ways to finish the stalled, or delayed, projects in Myanmar. At the same time, New Delhi should privately nudge the Tatmadaw to protect the human rights of Burmese citizens.

To India's relief, its strategic partner and fellow Quad member, Japan, has also taken a similar approach to engage with the Tatmadaw rather than joining Western sanctions. Geopolitical exigency has influenced both India and Japan to not entirely shun the doors on Naypyidaw, only for PRC to have an open field to extend its influence in the strategically located nation.

But much to the frustration of both New Delhi and Tokyo, the US and the West have doubled down on sanctions against Myanmar. A flawed belief in the effectiveness of sanctions has determined their policy vis-à-vis the Tatmadaw. But sanctions the world over have failed to bring down authoritarian regimes. Under pressure, Dictators often tighten their grip on power to save the regime. They also seek the help of powerful fellow authoritarian regimes to stabilise their wobbly authority in their nation. In the past, a desperate Assad regime seeking Russia's protection for regime survival is there for all to see. Recently, even a traditionally fiercely independent Ayatollah regime in Iran has entered into a lopsided comprehensive agreement

with the PRC for political and economic cover from crippling US-led sanctions.

Continued sanctions on the Junta will force the Tatmadaw to embrace PRC entirely which will not only be a national security threat for Myanmar in the long term but also imperil the security of the Indo-Pacific Region. India and Japan, henceforth, must use their influence on Washington both at the bilateral level, and at the level of Quad to reorient American policy toward Tatmadaw based on interests than values.