

Geopolitical Risk in the Myanmar Crisis



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Opening Pandora's Box

On Feb. 1, 2021, a coup d'état occurred in Myanmar. After detaining State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, other senior executives, and party leaders, the military declared a state of emergency and assumed power.

If this had been all there was to the coup, the news would have been gone from global headlines in a matter of days. But that was not how it turned out. The coup sparked resistance by citizens. The streets filled with demonstrations; a civil disobedience movement (CDM) drew in civil servants, bank employees, and general workers. The state momentarily ceased to function. The military had failed to anticipate this resistance.

Having stood by watching for a month or so, the military assumed a hardline stance by the end of February. The authorities in Thailand (2014) and Hong Kong (2019) had put down massive anti-government protests before. But the military crackdown on civil resistance in Myanmar was far more brutal and lethal compared to the actions of the Thai and Hong Kong governments. As of Sept. 11, the military crackdown had resulted in 1,080 deaths while 6,398 people remained in detention, according to the non-government organization Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).

On the surface, normalcy has returned as the result of the brutal clampdown. But the suppression is also radicalizing the opposition and fermenting dissatisfaction among the general public. This can be seen in the large number of government officials in the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, and other ministries leaving their workplace and refusing to work for the military regime. The CDM in Myanmar has more than 400,000 participants according to pro-democracy forces. The Myanmar people are not the obedient vassals of the state of the past. Ironically, the coup d'état against a democratic system has demonstrated the growth of a civil society after the transition to civilian rule in 2011.

The chaos caused by the coup is likely to significantly alter what had been a bright outlook for Myanmar's future. Not only has the progress in democratization since the transition to civilian rule suffered a setback; the economy, which had been growing steadily, will also slow down as foreign investors pull back. On the diplomatic front, the suppression and human rights violations by the military will invite sanctions from Western countries and prosecution in international courts with the result that Myanmar reverts to the pariah state status under the previous military regime.

In this article, I will examine the current situation in Myanmar and the response from the international community and explore Japan's new Myanmar policy, the key perspective being the balance between "values-oriented diplomacy" and geopolitical risk.

Legitimacy & Effective Rule

What is occurring now in Myanmar? Separation between legitimacy and effective control. In principle, a nation state is effectively controlled by the state as a governing body whose legitimacy is recognized by the nation as a political community. One of the key mechanisms to secure this legitimacy is an election. Free and fair election of delegates and senior administrative officials confers procedural and political legitimacy on those in charge of the government.

The Myanmar military seized power in a coup d'état, claiming election fraud by Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). The judicial authorities subsequently indicted senior NLD officials for a wide range of allegations including election law violations and corruption; the trials are ongoing. The Union Election Commission declared the 2020 general election void; it appears to be a matter of time before the NLD is dissolved. The understanding of the Myanmar military appears to be that the legitimacy of the constitution has been recovered through these actions, but the opposite has occurred. The coup has seriously undermined the legitimacy of the state.

Holding the upper hand in terms of legitimacy are the pro-democracy forces, the NLD first and foremost. With Suu Kyi and other leaders in detention, the NLD swiftly moved to set up the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) on Feb. 5 and established the National Unity Government (NUG) in opposition to the junta in April.

The NUG has three features. First, while it was formed around the NLD, it also brings together minority ethnic groups and non-NLD forces, with Duwa Lashi La, a Kachin, as vice president. Second, its senior members are staying undercover and appealing online to the international community to recognize the NUG. Third, it has organized the People's Defence Force (PDF) in collaboration with the youths engaged in armed struggle within Myanmar. This is a break from the NLD's longstanding policy of nonviolence. The pro-democracy forces are evolving away from Suu Kyi's leadership.

The outcome is the perpetuation of a situation where the military has effective rule and the pro-democracy forces prevail on

legitimacy. Each side has its weaknesses. The military's effective rule is unstable. A nationwide civil war is unlikely, but the activities of the PDF and other resistance movements to obstruct the military's efforts to exercise control will continue for a while. Conflict continues in the northwest, as the resistance launches offensives in Chin State, Sagaing Region, and Magway Region, attacking military facilities. On Sept. 7, the NUG declared a "people's defensive war" against the military and called on Myanmar citizens to revolt. Although many people remained on the sidelines, armed youths and some armed ethnic minority groups responded, and fighting intensified (*Table*). The Kachin Independence Organization, the Karen National Union and the China National Front had been cooperating with these youths by training them and providing arms.

The NUG's weakness lies in its ability to govern. The NUG has ministers and vice ministers and issues decrees on Facebook, but it does not have the means to implement them in Myanmar. The NUG is proposing plans and policies that go much further in recognizing

TABLE

Number of battles, explosions & demonstrations by region & state from Sept. 7 (declaration of "people's defensive war") to 17, 2021

	Number of Battles	Number of Explosions	Number of Demonstrations
Sagaing Region	28	39	145
Magway Region	20	31	18
Kayar State	12	1	0
Chin State	9	2	1
Kachin State	8	2	9
Mon State	8	6	1
Yangon Region	6	101	14
Shan State	5	6	5
Mandalay Region	4	34	90
Tanintharyi	4	0	49
Kayin State	3	1	5
Bago Region	1	4	1
Nay Pyi Taw	1	1	2
Irrawaddy Region	0	3	3
Rakhine State	0	0	0
Total	109	231	343

Source: National Unity Government of Myanmar Announcement (<https://www.facebook.com/NUGmyanmar/posts/192547799632526>)

ethnic and religious diversity than the government under Suu Kyi ever did, but they all ring hollow as of now. Thus, despite international support, other governments are reluctant to work with it. So far, no country has officially recognized the NUG as the legitimate government.

The Myanmar military and the NUG have designated each other as terrorist organizations. The confrontation only grows sharper as time goes on with the two sides unable to even talk to each other. General Min Aung Hlaing, as commander-in-chief of Defence Services, announced in an Aug. 1 speech that an election would be held under the aegis of the military by August 2023. But the NUG is certainly not part of any plans for the election.

The Gap Between the West & China/Russia

How did the international community respond to the crisis in Myanmar, given the political deadlock there and the growing gap between legitimacy and effective rule? The coup exposed the powerlessness of the international community.

Cooperation among the great powers quickly broke down. The United States and European nations exerted diplomatic pressure on Myanmar, placing sanctions on military leaders and their families, businesses connected to the military, and some state-owned companies. China and Russia took a more accommodating approach. Immediately after the coup, China demanded that the United Nations secretary-general maintain noninterference in domestic affairs and subsequently criticized diplomatic pressure from the US and European nations as interference. Russia has likewise refused to align itself with international pressure. As a result, any hopes of sanctions under the UN Security Council had to be quickly abandoned and attempts immediately after the coup to issue a resolution there condemning the takeover also failed. The gap between the US and European nations on the one hand and China and Russia on the other widened over time.

Interestingly, there is a difference between China and Russia. China shares a 2,129-kilometer border with Myanmar. There are many Chinese citizens as well as ethnic Chinese in Myanmar. China has been providing large sums of economic cooperation in Myanmar and investing in natural resource development there since during the previous military regime. The relationship between the two governments cooled somewhat after the 2011 transition to civilian rule, but investments from China's private sector increased. Two out of five of the rapidly spreading smartphones in Myanmar are supplied by three Chinese companies, Xiaomi, Huawei, and Oppo. The government under Suu Kyi also welcomed China's Belt and Road

Initiative. The bilateral relationship had continued to grow despite the democratization process.

But China must also be mindful of the strong anti-China sentiment in Myanmar society. Supporting the military that executed the coup could do irreparable damage to the feelings of the Myanmar people towards China, putting China's national interests at risk. Thus China, while drawing a line between its approach and that of the US and European nations, is still maintaining a cautious attitude towards the Myanmar military. It has not recognized the military takeover and has encouraged the ASEAN attempt to engage with the military; it appears to be seeking a resolution through dialogue,

Meanwhile, Russia, sharing no borders with Myanmar, has more specific interests on its agenda. It saw the coup strictly from a military perspective and has used the opportunity to strengthen its relations with the Myanmar military. Hlaing, commander-in-chief of Defence Services, reportedly made a weeklong visit in June to Russia, where he met with Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, and concluded several weapons procurement agreements. In September, the Russian military invited deputy commander-in-chief Soe Win to the closing ceremony of the International Army Games-2021.

As the political deadlock continues, more countries may come to regard effective rule as crucial and recognize the State Administration Council (SAC), the military junta. If that happens, China and Russia are likely to be leading the way. The US and European countries cannot recognize military rule here, in which case the diplomatic rift between them on the one hand and China and Russia on the other will only widen.

In the Middle: Japan, India, Australia & ASEAN

As great powers diverge in their responses, in the middle are Japan, India, Australia, and ASEAN. None of them is resorting to aggressive diplomacy, yet unlike China and Russia they are not hostile to the approach that the US and European countries have adopted. Here, active engagement by ASEAN stands out.

Indonesia moved to mediate under the initiative of President Joko Widodo and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi immediately after the coup. But acting alone had its limits, so ASEAN member countries got together to engage with the Myanmar military. This resulted in the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting convened in Jakarta on April 24. Hlaing joined the meeting, where agreement was reached on a "Five-Point Consensus" which included the immediate cessation of violence against civilians and the appointment of a special envoy. Although reception was mixed, it was the only progress achieved through the

diplomatic process, given the powerlessness of the international community to influence the situation. Many countries including the US and China are looking to the ASEAN initiative, in a strange turn of events.

However, ASEAN's efforts appear to be stalling. The Myanmar military has refused the immediate implementation of the Five-Point Consensus, to be tabled until political stability is restored. Coordination within ASEAN is also taking time, as it took four months just to appoint the special envoy to handle negotiations with the Myanmar military. Brunei's Second Minister of Foreign Affairs Erywan bin Pehin Yusof, who wound up with the assignment, struggled to negotiate with the Myanmar military. In September, he called on all sides to agree to a four-month truce to provide humanitarian aid. However, with insufficient behind-the-scenes preparation, the Myanmar military did not consent, while the NUG declared the "people's defensive war". It has been a complete failure.

Balancing "Values-Oriented Diplomacy" & Geopolitical Risk

How about Japan? Japan had been the largest donor country for Myanmar after its transition to civilian rule. Between 2012 and June 2020, Japan financed 32 ODA projects consisting of ¥696.8 billion in loans, ¥126.0 billion in grants, and ¥53.6 billion in technical cooperation. The development of the Thilawa Special Economic Zone in the Yangon suburbs and the East-West Economic Corridor Improvement Project, the latter aimed at improving logistics between Myanmar and Thailand, are two prominent examples. In both cases, aid was extended with a view to the economic potential of Myanmar.

This support was not extended merely to benefit the Myanmar economy or Japan's overseas investments. Since the middle of the last decade, the Japanese government has undertaken "values-oriented diplomacy", which emphasizes liberty, democracy, basic human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy, as one of the pillars of its diplomatic policy. Meanwhile, with the growing conflict between the US and China, Southeast Asia has become the stage for geopolitical competition. Japan, as a member of the liberal world together with the US, Australia, and India, has had a strong interest in the stability and prosperity of the region.

Japanese support for Myanmar has been viewed as in accordance with this policy. In short, the assistance supported democratization and the protection of human rights in Myanmar in competition with Chinese influence. But the ground has shifted with the coup; Myanmar has become a challenge for Japanese diplomacy.

"Values-oriented diplomacy" means that Japan cannot tolerate the

seizure of power and subsequent oppression by the Myanmar military. Indeed, the Japanese government has repeatedly made three demands of the Myanmar military: stop using force on civilians, release detainees, and return to civilian rule. These three demands are self-evident as a matter of principle. However, the Japanese government has not taken more forceful measures, such as suspending ODA or imposing sanctions. The biggest reason for this is that suspending ODA would never be enough to make the Myanmar military change its ways. It may send a message of sorts, but if it is ineffective this will put an end to the influence over the Myanmar military that it has developed, making it harder to protect Japanese nationals and businesses under its effective rule, not to mention making it more difficult to help the Myanmar people going forward.

Japan also faces a geopolitical dilemma. It is common knowledge that Myanmar is China's gateway to the Indian Ocean. It is important for China's maritime security. The liberal world does not want it to fall under China's influence. It is of critical importance to security in the region. If the Myanmar military is isolated, Chinese influence will inevitably grow. It is widely believed that the Myanmar military is wary of China; that it will seek a balance by bolstering relations with India and Russia. However, given China's overwhelming economic influence, it is inevitable that the Myanmar economy will sooner or later fall under China's influence. That means an end to any hope of achieving human rights, democracy, and other "universal values", while benefiting China into the bargain.

Japan's Responsibility & Options Available

Japan must set forth new principles for its Myanmar policy. This will require a search for the optimal answer while considering both "values-oriented diplomacy" and geopolitical risk.

First of all, it is necessary to recognize that no country by itself, Japan included, has the power to determine the outcome of the power struggle in Myanmar. Japan alone cannot bring the military to the negotiating table or enable the pro-democracy forces to prevail in their struggle. Indeed, that is surely a task beyond the capacity of any other country. The confrontation between the two forces is likely to continue for a long time. There is no hope that the democratization, liberalization, economic growth, and the improvement in diplomatic relations that began with the 2011 transition to civilian rule and the synergy generated by simultaneous progress on all these fronts will be recovered in the foreseeable future. Instead, we are likely to increasingly see authoritarianism, control, economic stagnation, and diminished diplomatic options.

What Japan must work to avoid is the entrenchment of the political struggle within Myanmar. The ineffective pressure from the US and European nations on the military regime in Myanmar, which continued from 1988 to 2011, only resulted in hardship in the lives of its people, while its natural resources ended up being exploited by its neighbors. This history must not be repeated.

The guiding principle should be strategic ambiguity. Do not give explicit support to the military or the pro-democracy forces. Continue to hold the military to the abovementioned three principles, and refuse to normalize diplomatic relations until they are met. At the same time, it is necessary to call on the NUG to exercise maximum restraint in armed resistance, including violence against civilians. Japan's role and mission is to prevent the nation from collapsing as a result of the confrontation between the two sides.

Therefore, it is desirable for the Japanese government to put a hold on any new projects and suspend ongoing large-scale projects such as the construction of the Hanthawaddy International Airport until the political confrontation is stabilized, while resuming ongoing projects that are essential to people's daily lives as the situation allows. It should expand humanitarian aid as much as possible and urge the Myanmar military to enable international organizations to handle its execution.

The coup in Myanmar has been the subject of much attention in Japan. Unfortunately, there is not much discussion regarding the balance between universal justice and geopolitical strategy. As human rights organizations in Japan and abroad point out, Japan's human rights diplomacy is weak. At the same time, the Japanese government has not done a good job of forming and communicating a coherent geopolitical strategy grounded in the national interest. Specifically, it has not been able to conceptualize an optimal order for Asia in which the promotion of democratization and human rights are promoted in coordination with Japan's allies. The response to the crisis in Myanmar is where universal values and geopolitical strategy collide. There is an urgent need for a debate on the balance between the two imperatives. **JS**

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