



CHAPTER NINE

MYANMAR: THE STRATEGIC BLIND SPOT

UNDERMINING U.S. INTERESTS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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There are none so blind as those who will not see.

— John Heywood, 1546

Abstract

Overlooked by the international community, the crisis in Myanmar, sparked by the 2021 military coup, has significant regional and global consequences. This chapter examines Myanmar's critical role in the Indo-Pacific and the broader geopolitical impact of the coup. It explores the devastating effects on Myanmar's population, including the rise of organized crime, human trafficking, and widespread displacement, while also highlighting the emergence of a resilient pro-democracy resistance. The chapter analyzes China's opportunistic actions in the conflict and provides policy recommendations for the United States and its partners to address this strategic blind spot, counter authoritarianism, and support the restoration of democracy and stability in Myanmar.

Introduction

In the heart of the Indo-Pacific, the escalating crisis in Myanmar, overshadowed by conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, poses a grave threat to regional stability and democratic values. The 2021 military coup shattered the nation's nascent democracy, plunging it into violence and chaos. This turmoil has become a strategic blind spot for the international community, especially the United States. The lack of decisive action has emboldened the military junta and allowed China to consolidate its influence, further destabilizing the region.

This chapter argues that the crisis in Myanmar is a regional and global emergency with far-reaching consequences. Analyzing the interplay of power politics, strategic interests, norms, and international pressure through a realist and constructivist lens offers a framework for understanding the crisis's complexities and implications for the region and the world. The escalating violence, displacement of nearly 4 million people both internally and across borders,¹ and the spread of organized crime not only threaten the stability of neighboring countries but also weaken democratic values in the Indo-Pacific.

The United States and its partners must recognize the urgency of this situation and act decisively to support the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar, leveraging the Burma Act of 2023 and providing meaningful assistance to restore stability and democratic governance. This is not merely a moral imperative but a strategic necessity to counter authoritarianism, protect human rights, and maintain geopolitical balance in the region.

China's Strategic Imperative: Myanmar as a Linchpin in the Indo-Pacific

China's unwavering interest in Myanmar stems from its pivotal geographic location, direct access to the Indian Ocean, and abundance of natural resources. These three pillars bolster China's economic and military aspirations and serve as crucial leverage in its geopolitical maneuvering, particularly vis-à-vis the United States.

Myanmar:

A Geostrategic Alternative and Gateway to the Indian Ocean

Myanmar's extensive coastline along the Indian Ocean and proximity to the Malacca Strait make it a linchpin in China's strategic calculus. This unique geography provides China a vital alternative route to bypass the Malacca Strait, a chokepoint for its

energy and trade lifelines. By investing heavily in infrastructure projects like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which includes the Kyauk Phyu Special Economic Zone and oil/gas pipelines, China aims to secure a more direct and reliable passage for its resources, mitigating its vulnerability and expanding its influence in the Indian Ocean region. This strategic maneuvering aligns with the principles of Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese strategist who emphasized the importance of strategic positioning and understanding the terrain to gain an advantage.

Furthermore, Myanmar offers China a backdoor to the Indian Ocean, granting landlocked provinces like Yunnan direct maritime access. This enhances China's trade capabilities and allows for quicker deployment of naval assets, strengthening its geopolitical influence in the region.

Myanmar's growing geostrategic importance has intensified amid escalating strategic rivalries in the Indo-Pacific. China's deepening influence in Myanmar, especially following the 2021 military coup, has alarmed regional powers like India, which are closely monitoring developments such as China's reported infrastructure expansion on Myanmar's Great Coco Islands. These islands, strategically located near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, have raised concerns over potential Chinese military activity, including constructing airstrips and surveillance posts. While concrete evidence of such activities remains elusive, Myanmar's alignment with Beijing, particularly on the Taiwan issue, has heightened regional anxieties. It is plausible that China's strategic calculations regarding Taiwan may be influenced by its ability to secure alternative routes through Myanmar, further underscoring the critical role this nation plays in the broader geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific.

Myanmar:

A Strategic Maritime Fulcrum for China's Naval Ambitions

From a military perspective, Myanmar's access to the Indian Ocean presents a significant strategic advantage for China. It enables the swift and effective deployment of naval assets, bolstering China's maritime presence and power projection capabilities. This enhanced access allows the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to operate more flexibly, responding promptly to regional contingencies, whether protecting trade routes, conducting anti-piracy operations, or asserting influence in territorial disputes. The potential establishment of naval bases or logistical support facilities in Myanmar would further amplify China's naval operations, providing crucial support for sustained maritime activities far from its mainland.

China's recognition of Myanmar as a crucial gateway to the Indian Ocean is deeply rooted in history. For centuries, landlocked Chinese provinces sought sea access through overland routes via Myanmar, fostering trade, cultural, and diplomatic exchanges. In modern geopolitics, this historical connection has evolved into a strategic imperative, amplified by China's economic growth and global ambitions.

China's active diplomatic engagement and investment in Myanmar, mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), underscores its commitment to safeguarding the Myanmar corridor. By controlling this vital passage, China aims to enhance its economic resilience, expand its naval power projection capabilities, and bolster its regional geopolitical influence.

Myanmar's Abundant Resources:

Fueling China's Ambition

Myanmar's vast reserves of natural resources, including rare earth minerals, oil, natural gas, and timber, are a critical asset for China. These resources are essential for driving China's economic growth,

fueling its technological advancement, and supporting its military modernization efforts.

Rare earth minerals, vital components in high-tech electronics, green technologies, and military applications, are particularly abundant in Myanmar. Between May 2017 and October 2021, Myanmar exported over 140,000 tons of rare earth deposits to China, worth over \$1 billion, according to an official statement from Beijing.² This significant volume solidifies Myanmar's position as China's largest supplier of these essential minerals.

As China continues to pursue its ambitious goals of technological innovation, green energy transition, and military expansion, securing a reliable supply of rare earth minerals from Myanmar becomes increasingly crucial. Myanmar's natural wealth, therefore, not only provides economic benefits to China but also serves as a strategic resource that strengthens its position in the global arena.

*China's Strategic Playbook:
Sun Tzu in Myanmar*

China's approach to Myanmar, while seemingly opportunistic, aligns closely with the principles of Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese military strategist. Sun Tzu's timeless wisdom, as outlined in "*The Art of War*,"³ offers valuable insights into China's strategic maneuvering in the region.

First, Sun Tzu emphasized the importance of knowing oneself and the enemy. China's deep understanding of Myanmar's strategic importance and its assessment of the United States and its partners' preoccupation with other global conflicts has allowed it to exploit and outmaneuver other powers.

Second, Sun Tzu advocated for "winning without fighting." China has skillfully applied this principle by investing heavily in Myanmar's infrastructure and deepening economic ties, solidifying

its influence without confrontation. This strategy has effectively drawn Myanmar into China's sphere of influence, securing its regional strategic interests.

Third, Sun Tzu stressed the importance of deception and diversionary tactics. China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea can be interpreted as a strategic maneuver to divert international attention away from its quiet but systematic consolidation of power in Myanmar. While the world focuses on the South China Sea disputes, China steadily advances its infrastructure projects, such as CMEC and oil/gas pipelines, with minimal international scrutiny.

In essence, China is playing a long game in Myanmar that leverages its economic and military might while employing subtle strategies to outmaneuver rivals. The United States and its partners must recognize the sophistication of China's approach and adopt a more proactive strategy to counter its growing influence in Myanmar. This requires addressing the strategic blind spot that has allowed China to solidify its dominance and take decisive action to support the pro-democracy movement and restore stability in the region. The stakes are high, as the future of Myanmar and potentially the entire Indo-Pacific hangs in the balance.

2021 Military Coup:

Descent into Chaos and the Rise of Armed Resistance

The military coup of February 2021 shattered Myanmar's nascent democracy, plunging the nation into a state of widespread chaos and violence. The junta's blatant disregard for the overwhelming electoral victory of the civilian-led National League for Democracy (NLD) and its subsequent brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters triggered a deepening humanitarian crisis. The junta's oppressive response fueled widespread dissent and, ironically, weakened its own governance, as a mass strike of civil servants involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) severely disrupted its administrative operations.

In response to the escalating violence and the junta's illegitimacy, members of the ousted parliament and representatives from various ethnic minority groups formed the National Unity Government (NUG) just two months after the coup. Initially aiming to restore democracy through peaceful means, the NUG's goals shifted toward armed resistance as military and police forces intensified their brutality, burning villages, conducting airstrikes on civilian infrastructure, and forcing thousands of security personnel to defect.

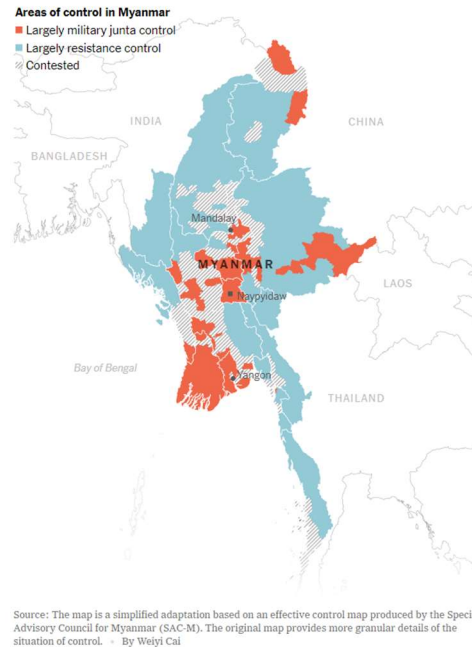


FIGURE 9.1: MAP SHOWING AREAS OF CONTROL IN MYANMAR, WITH THE JUNTA CONTROLLING ONLY 30% OF THE COUNTRY

Source: Hannah Beech, "An Overlooked War,"
The New York Times, May 8, 2024

Six months into the crisis, the NUG established the People's Defense Force (PDF) under its Ministry of Defense. This marked a turning point in the conflict, transitioning from peaceful protests to

armed resistance with the ultimate goal of removing the military junta and establishing a federal democratic system. The PDF, mentored by military defectors and trained and equipped by seasoned Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO),⁴ quickly became a formidable force against the junta troops.

Despite the military's superior firepower, after three years of intense conflict, the junta has lost control of vast swaths of the country, its authority eroding in the heartland, particularly in the Sagaing and Magway regions, where the PDF have expelled most of the junta's administrators. The junta has also lost significant ground in the border areas to the EAOs. As illustrated in Figure 9.1, the military currently controls a mere 30% of Myanmar, a stark testament to the resilience and determination of the resistance forces and the widespread rejection of military rule by the populace.

Spillover Effects:

The Destabilization of Myanmar and the Region

The ongoing crisis in Myanmar, while largely overlooked by the West, has unleashed a wave of transnational security threats that destabilize the entire region. The collapse of governance and law enforcement under the military junta has transformed Myanmar into a fertile ground for organized criminal organizations, fueling a surge in human trafficking, cybercrime, and drug production. The junta's relentless airstrikes on civilian populations have displaced over 2.6 million people,⁵ exacerbating these criminal activities and straining the resources of neighboring countries like Thailand and India, which are grappling with an influx of refugees and the spillover of illicit activities.

Human Trafficking:

Prey on the Displaced

The most tragic consequence of this crisis has been the explosion of human trafficking. Myanmar now holds the grim distinction of

being the world's leading country for human trafficking, as documented in the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index.⁶ Criminal networks, encouraged by the lack of law enforcement, prey upon vulnerable refugees, particularly women and children, luring them with false promises of employment and safety. These victims often end up trapped in forced labor, sexual exploitation, or servitude, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and creating a cycle of trauma and abuse.

This pervasive exploitation of displaced populations has not only worsened the human rights situation in Myanmar but has also created significant security challenges for neighboring countries. As trafficking networks expand across borders, facilitated by corrupt officials, countries like Thailand and India are grappling with the influx of trafficked individuals and the associated social and economic problems. This highlights the urgent need for coordinated regional and international efforts to dismantle these criminal networks, protect vulnerable populations, and address the root causes of this crisis.

*Cyber Scam Epicenters:
A Lucrative Criminal Enterprise*

Over the past decade, the Myanmar military has actively fostered the development of sprawling criminal zones along its borders with China and Thailand. These zones have become hotbeds of illicit activity, with cyber scam operations emerging as a lucrative enterprise. Since the 2021 coup, these criminal enterprises have operated with virtual impunity, expanding their reach across Southeast Asia and beyond.⁷

One particularly insidious scheme, known as “pig-butchering,” involves luring victims with promises of lucrative tech jobs, only to entrap them in forced labor within these scam hubs. It is estimated that between 100,000 to 300,000 individuals have been trafficked

into these operations, generating a staggering \$15.3 billion in illicit revenue in 2023 alone.⁸

By mid-2023, the scale of these operations had reached alarming proportions, with over 30 scam enclaves identified along the Thai border and nearly 100 along the Chinese border.⁹ These enclaves, often protected by the military junta's security forces, have become entrenched centers of cybercrime and human trafficking.

Chinese authorities, alarmed by the targeting of their citizens in these scams, pressured the Myanmar junta to intervene. However, the junta's inaction led China to recalibrate its approach, easing pressure on northern armed resistance groups and tacitly allowing them to challenge the junta's authority. This shift in policy culminated in Operation 1027, a significant offensive led by the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) that successfully dismantled a major scam compound in Kokang, a region near the Myanmar-China border. This operation resulted in the surrender of thousands of suspects to Chinese authorities,¹⁰ highlighting the complex interplay of geopolitical interests and the fight against transnational crime in the region.

However, this temporary disruption merely caused the scam operations to relocate, primarily to the eastern Myanmar-Thai border,¹¹ with the assistance of the junta. Shwe Kokko, a part of China's BRI development complex, has now emerged as the largest hub for these sophisticated online scams, employing thousands of forced skilled laborers under the protection of the junta-linked Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), which recently renamed itself the Karen National Army (KNA).¹²

The junta's continued protection of these operations underscores the symbiotic relationship between the military and organized crime. The illicit revenue generated by these scam hubs plays a critical role in sustaining the military regime, highlighting the complex nexus between conflict, crime, and corruption in Myanmar.¹³

*Drug Trafficking:
Fueling Conflict and Instability*

The conflict in Myanmar has also led to a dramatic surge in drug production and trafficking. The country has overtaken Afghanistan as the world's leading opium producer, with the opiate economy estimated to be worth billions of dollars annually.¹⁴ This illicit trade not only enriches drug lords and funds armed groups but also exacerbates regional instability as neighboring countries struggle with the influx of narcotics and associated social problems.

The transnational security implications of the crisis in Myanmar demand urgent attention and concerted action from the international community. The combination of flourishing organized crime, mass displacement, cross-border trafficking, and regional instability poses a grave threat to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific. The United States and its partners must recognize the urgency of this situation and work collaboratively to address these challenges, stem the tide of illicit activities, and support the people of Myanmar in their quest for a stable and democratic future.

**Myanmar Military:
A Regime on the Brink**

Despite financial support from illicit activities and military aid from China and Russia, the Myanmar junta is steadily losing ground to the pro-democracy resistance coalition. The military has suffered significant losses on multiple fronts, plagued by recruitment challenges, inadequate training, and plummeting morale. Desperate measures, like deploying police to the frontlines, enacting conscription policies,¹⁵ and restricting overseas travel, underscore the junta's weakening grip on power.¹⁶

The junta's reliance on air power, a consequence of consistent ground setbacks, has further alienated the populace. While intended to instill fear and suppress dissent, the 'indiscriminate airstrikes on civilian targets have only fueled resistance and solidified the people's resolve to overthrow military rule. Conflict data consistently reveals widespread clashes between the junta and resistance forces, with nearly 90% of the country's townships affected by the ongoing conflict in 2024 alone, as shown in Figure 9.2. This represents a continuation of the widespread conflict that engulfed 94% of townships in 2023, highlighting the persistent and pervasive nature of the resistance.

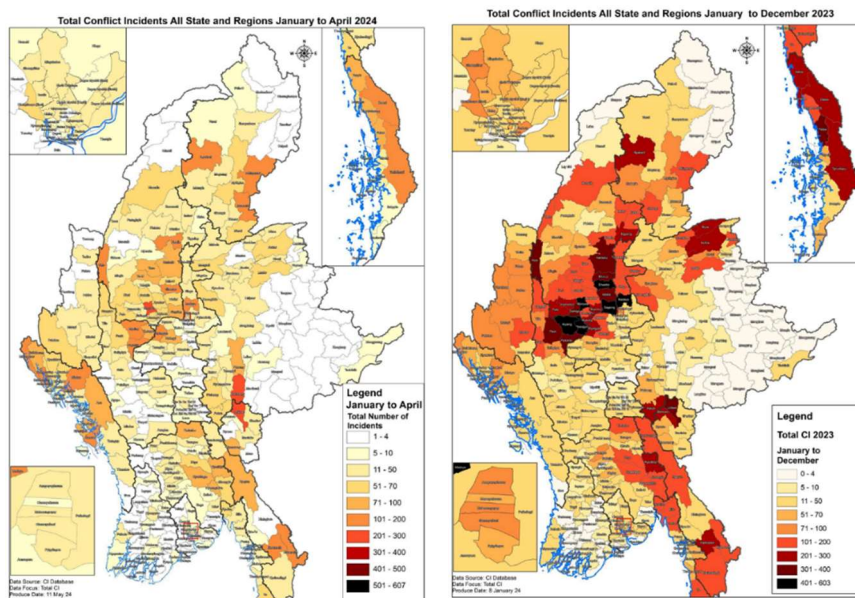


FIGURE 9.2: CONFLICT DATA FOR MYANMAR SHOWS THE TOTAL NUMBER OF CONFLICT INCIDENTS PER TOWNSHIP FOR JANUARY-APRIL 2024 (LEFT) AND JANUARY-DECEMBER 2023 (RIGHT)

Source: Matthew B. Arnold, "National Situation Update: April 2024 (left) December 2023 (right) Conflict & Atrocity Data," (Research Study: Yangon, Myanmar), maps used with permission from the author

The junta's internal dysfunction further compounds its woes. Endemic corruption has eroded the military's effectiveness, leading to a breakdown in the chain of command and a loss of confidence among the rank and file. Reports of mass defections, desertions, and surrenders paint a picture of a military on the verge of collapse. The junta's top leadership, isolated and consumed by self-preservation, clings to the misguided belief that control can only be maintained through mass suffering.

Given the junta's intransigence and the escalating humanitarian crisis, a combination of strategic, nonlethal, and lethal tactics may be necessary to pressure the regime toward negotiation and ultimately restore democratic governance in Myanmar.

Key Catalysts of the Resistance's Successes

The resistance movement in Myanmar has defied expectations, demonstrating remarkable resilience and achieving significant victories against the military junta despite its superior firepower and brutal tactics. These unexpected successes can be attributed to several key factors, each crucial in undermining the junta's power and advancing the cause of democracy.

Unprecedented Collaboration: Forging a Unified Front against Tyranny

The resistance movement in Myanmar has achieved a historic milestone: the unprecedented alliance between the newly formed People's Defense Force (PDF) and established Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO). This collaboration, a watershed moment in the country's struggle for democracy, has unified diverse groups across ethnic and religious lines, pooling their vast combat experience, resources, and strategic insight to form a formidable opposition against the military junta.

The alliance emerged from dialogues between major EAOs from Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Chin (K3C) regions and the National

Unity Government (NUG), focusing on building trust and understanding. Recognizing the need to transcend historical divisions and mistrust, these groups acknowledged that only through unity could they effectively counter the junta's overwhelming firepower and brutal tactics.

This newfound cooperation has been a game-changer for the resistance. By sharing intelligence, coordinating strategies, and conducting joint operations, the coalition has significantly enhanced its effectiveness on the battlefield, inflicting substantial losses on the junta's forces. A pivotal moment came in October 2023, when the 3BHA, a coalition of resistance forces, achieved a significant victory in northern Shan State, showcasing the alliance's military capabilities and marking a turning point in the conflict.

Beyond its military significance, this collaboration represents a profound shift in Myanmar's political landscape. The junta's longstanding strategy of divide and conquer, which exploited ethnic and religious divisions to maintain its grip on power, is being actively dismantled by this united front. The resistance movement's diversity, forged through shared struggle and dialogue, lays the groundwork for a more inclusive, federal, and democratic Myanmar in the post-conflict era. This historic alliance is a testament to the resilience and determination of the Myanmar people, who are willing to overcome deep-seated divisions to forge a new path toward a brighter, more democratic future.

Mass Defections:

A Crumbling Military and Growing Resistance

An unprecedented wave of defections from the Myanmar military's ranks has significantly weakened the junta's grip on power. This exodus of personnel, initially sparked by the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) among civil servants, has escalated to include many security forces personnel. These defections have deprived the junta of a vital workforce and armed the resistance with invaluable

insider knowledge about the military's operations, vulnerabilities, and internal struggles.

This intelligence has proven crucial in the resistance's strategic efforts, exposing critical weaknesses such as severe personnel shortages, logistical breakdowns, and disconnects between senior leaders and operational realities. This information has aided in tactical planning and served as a potent psychological weapon, eroding morale within the military and fueling further defections.

Interviews with defected battalion commanders in December 2022 revealed that many battalions were operating at less than 20% capacity. Since then, the military's situation has continued to deteriorate, with escalating casualties, mass surrenders, and even entire units defecting. The junta's desperate attempts to replenish its ranks through conscription and travel restrictions have largely failed, highlighting the deep-seated disillusionment and discontent within its forces.

The mass defections are not simply a numerical disadvantage for the military; they represent a fundamental erosion of its legitimacy and operational effectiveness. The loss of personnel and the invaluable intelligence provided by defectors have become pivotal factors in the resistance's ongoing successes. This internal unraveling, driven by the courage and conviction of those who have chosen to abandon the junta, is a testament to the power of individual agency and collective resistance in the face of tyranny. It also signals a potential turning point in the conflict, as the military's once seemingly unassailable grip on power continues to weaken from within.

*Unwavering Popular Resistance:
A Nation Defiant*

Survey results consistently reveal that nearly 90% of the Myanmar population opposes the military junta.¹⁷ This unwavering popular support for the resistance movements, even after three years of

immense hardship, demonstrates the remarkable resilience and determination of the Myanmar people. Their steadfast backing has been a cornerstone of the resistance's success, providing critical resources, logistical support, and a constant influx of recruits.

The junta's heavy-handed tactics, intended to instill fear and quell dissent, have paradoxically fueled the flames of resistance. The military's indiscriminate violence, including the burning of villages and bombing of civilian areas, has only intensified the public's resolve to overthrow the regime. Instead of submission, the junta has reaped a whirlwind of anger and defiance, uniting the population in their shared struggle for freedom.

Recent desperate measures by the junta, such as imposing conscription and restricting overseas travel, have further alienated the populace and inadvertently strengthened the resistance. These actions have driven a surge in recruitment for People's Defense Force (PDF) and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) as more citizens are driven to take up arms against the regime.

The lack of popular support has also severely hampered the military's logistical operations. Once able to rely on local communities for supplies and intelligence, the military now faces frequent ambushes and supply disruption, leaving its forces isolated and vulnerable. This was evident during Operations 1027 when the army struggled to deploy reinforcements due to widespread public resistance.

The Myanmar people's unwavering opposition to the junta, fueled by its brutality and desperation, has become a powerful force in its own right. It is a testament to the indomitable spirit of a nation that refuses to be silenced or subjugated and serves as a stark reminder that the junta's days are numbered.

*The Diaspora's Digital Frontline:
A Global Network for Resistance*

The Myanmar diaspora, a vast network of individuals scattered across the globe, has emerged as a formidable force in the fight against the military junta. Leveraging digital tools and networks honed during the COVID-19 pandemic and Myanmar's decade-long transition to democracy, they have become a lifeline for the resistance movement, providing vital funding, technical assistance, and international advocacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its forced shift to virtual communication, unexpectedly accelerated the diaspora's mobilization efforts. As the world embraced remote work and online collaboration, diaspora members seized the opportunity to connect, strategize, and mobilize effectively across borders. Virtual platforms like Zoom, WhatsApp, and Facebook became indispensable tools for sharing information, organizing fundraising campaigns, and coordinating advocacy efforts, effectively bridging the geographical divide.

Myanmar's earlier strides toward democracy, which resulted in increased internet access and smartphone usage, further empowered the diaspora. This digital infrastructure allowed them to establish robust transnational networks, providing real-time advice, technical training, and intelligence sharing to those on the ground. This collaborative digital ecosystem has amplified the voices of those within Myanmar and applied significant pressure on the military regime through coordinated campaigns targeting policymakers, international organizations, and the global public.

The diaspora's impact extends beyond the digital realm, with the resistance movement evolving into a multi-generational struggle for Myanmar's future. Gen Z activists are taking to the streets and even the frontlines, while Gen X leverages their technical skills to provide crucial support in areas like cybersecurity and communication. Meanwhile, Baby Boomers contribute financial resources and

unwavering moral support, ensuring the movement's sustainability and longevity. The intergenerational unity, combined with the significant participation of women in prominent roles across all generations, showcases the diaspora's diverse strengths and unwavering commitment to a free and democratic Myanmar.

The mobilization of the Myanmar diaspora serves as a powerful testament to the enduring power of collective action and the unwavering determination to reclaim their nation's democratic future. It highlights the critical role that transnational networks can play in challenging authoritarian regimes, amplifying the voices of the oppressed, and fostering global solidarity in the fight for freedom and human rights.

*Women at the Forefront:
A Revolution Redefining Gender Roles*

In a remarkable departure from traditional gender norms, women have emerged as a driving force in the resistance against Myanmar's military coup. They have become indispensable to the struggle, actively participating in every facet of the movement, from frontline combat to civilian protests, fundraising, and online activism.

The junta's brutal crackdown, which disproportionately targeted women, has not deterred them but instead fueled their defiance. The tragic death of Mya Thwet Thwet Khine, the first protester killed, became a rallying cry for women who continue to make up the majority of those protesting the regime.¹⁸ Their fearless resistance not only challenges the military's authority but also actively dismantles the patriarchal structures the coup seeks to reimpose.

Their contributions extend far beyond the streets. Women have spearheaded innovative resistance tactics, such as the "sarong revolution," which cleverly leveraged cultural superstitions to undermine soldier morale. They have been a vital force in sustaining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), particularly in the

education sector, significantly hindering the junta's administrative capacity.

Women have also harnessed the power of social media, becoming influential voices in the digital sphere. Prominent activists like Ei Thinzar Maung, Pencilo, and Ma Shwe Moe have galvanized global solidarity through online campaigns, while grassroots women's organizations have fostered unprecedented unity among diverse ethnic groups.

Furthermore, women have taken up arms in the fight for freedom, forming all-female combat units like the Myaung Women Warriors and Tiger Women Drone Force. Their active participation in armed resistance, employing diverse tactics from landmine warfare to drone operations, underscores their courage, resilience, and multifaceted contributions to the struggle.¹⁹

Beyond the frontlines, women are critical in fundraising, providing humanitarian aid, and countering the junta's misinformation campaigns. Their unwavering dedication, strategic insight, and resilience in the face of immense adversity have made them an undeniable force for change.

The women of Myanmar are not merely resisting the military takeover; they are revolutionizing their societal roles. Their leadership and active participation are challenging the junta's authority and reshaping gender dynamics in Myanmar, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future.

China's Calculated Interference: Evolving Strategies in a Shifting Landscape

Driven by its vested interests in Myanmar, China has consistently sought to shape the trajectory of the conflict, exploiting the chaos and instability to further its agenda. While China ostensibly prefers stability, its aversion to a thriving democracy on its doorstep has led it to engage in a complex balancing act.

Initially, China, like many others, anticipated a swift victory for the Myanmar military, given its overwhelming firepower and history of suppressing dissent. Beijing actively engaged with the military junta, exerting pressure on northern Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) to refrain from joining the resistance. This approach aligned with China's preference for a pliant authoritarian regime that could be easily influenced to serve its interests.

However, the rapid proliferation of cyber scam hubs within Myanmar after the coup, many of which targeted Chinese nationals, forced Beijing to reassess its strategy. The junta's failure to address these criminal enterprises, despite China's concerns, led Beijing to ease pressure on northern EAOs, tacitly allowing them to challenge the military regime. This calculated shift culminated in Operation 1027, a successful offensive led by the 3BHA, which dealt a significant blow to the junta and demonstrated the growing strength of the resistance.

However, China's apparent support for the resistance was short-lived and self-serving. Once its immediate concerns regarding cybercrime were addressed, Beijing reverted to its preference for stability, pressuring the 3BHA into a ceasefire with the junta. This move, prioritizing China's economic interests over Myanmar's democratic aspirations, further solidified the perception of Beijing as an unreliable partner and deepened distrust among the Myanmar people.

China now faces a dilemma with the military junta's grip on power increasingly tenuous. Unwilling to fully back the pro-democracy movement, Beijing's current strategy seems aimed at preventing the resistance from coalescing into a united front, which would threaten both the junta and China's interests. To achieve this, China has employed a range of tactics, including:

- *MISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS*: Spreading disinformation and propaganda to sow discord among the various resistance groups, undermining their unity and effectiveness.

- *DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE*: Leveraging its economic and political clout to pressure regional actors to refrain from supporting the resistance movement.
- *ECONOMIC COERCION*: Using a combination of economic incentives and penalties to pressure EAOs and other groups into cooperating with the junta or remaining neutral in the conflict.
- *THREAT OF INTERVENTION*: Signaling its willingness to intervene directly in the conflict should its interests be threatened, as evidenced by reports of Chinese troops conducting drills near the border and the presence of Chinese security personnel within Myanmar.

China's calculated interference in Myanmar's conflict demonstrates its willingness to exploit the ongoing chaos to advance its own strategic goals. Whether through supporting or undermining different factions, China's actions are guided by a pragmatic and self-interested approach that prioritizes stability and control, even if it comes at the expense of the Myanmar people's democratic aspirations and regional security.

Charting a Path Forward:

Policy Recommendations for the United States and its Partners

The ongoing crisis in Myanmar not only presents a complex challenge but also an opportunity for the United States and its partners. The courageous people of Myanmar have made remarkable strides in their fight against the military junta, demonstrating resilience and resourcefulness despite limited international assistance. However, a shift in strategy is required to achieve a decisive victory for democracy and regional stability.

Historical analyses of successful revolutions consistently highlight three key factors: defections from the ruling regime, international pressure, and unwavering popular support. In

Myanmar, women have already demonstrated the effectiveness of non-lethal strategies in undermining the military's authority. At the same time, the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) and People's Defense Force (PDF) have proven their capabilities in armed resistance. A coordinated approach, combining both lethal and non-lethal resistance and armed struggle, is crucial to tip the balance in favor of the pro-democracy movement.

To support the pro-democracy movement and achieve a lasting resolution to the conflict, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- *IMPLEMENT A ROBUST STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN:* The United States and its partners should work with the National Unity Government (NUG) and civil society organizations to develop and execute a comprehensive communication strategy. This campaign should utilize various platforms, including social media, international news outlets, and diplomatic channels, to expose the junta's human rights abuses, corruption, and illegitimacy. By amplifying the voices of the resistance and highlighting the atrocities committed by the military, international pressure can be intensified, potentially leading to further sanctions, arms embargoes, and diplomatic isolation of the junta.
- *OPTIMIZE HUMAN RESOURCES AND TALENTS:* The resistance movement, with support from international partners, should invest in training and capacity-building programs to enhance its organizational, leadership, and technical skills. This includes training on non-violent resistance tactics, cybersecurity, and media relations and fostering inclusive leadership that empowers women, youth, and ethnic minorities. Additionally, the international community can offer expertise in humanitarian aid, medical care, and legal support to strengthen the resistance's capacity to provide essential services to the population.

- *PRIORITIZE TARGETED SANCTIONS AND DIPLOMATIC PRESSURE:* The United States and its partners should expand targeted sanctions against the junta, its business interests, and its foreign enablers. These sanctions should aim to disrupt the junta's financial flows, restrict its access to weapons and technology, and isolate it from the international community. Simultaneously, diplomatic efforts should be intensified to garner support for the pro-democracy movement from regional and global actors. This could include lobbying for a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the coup and imposing an arms embargo, as well as building coalitions with like-minded countries and Myanmar neighbors (Thailand, India, and Bangladesh) to coordinate pressure on the junta.
- *PROVIDE DIRECT SUPPORT TO THE RESISTANCE:* While non-lethal assistance remains a priority, the United States and its partners should also consider providing carefully calibrated and targeted lethal aid to resistance forces, particularly the EAO and PDF. This could include providing military equipment, training, and intelligence support to enhance their capabilities and effectiveness on the battlefield. However, such assistance should be contingent upon the resistance's adherence to international humanitarian law and human rights standards. It should be carefully monitored to ensure that it is used to enhance the effectiveness of the resistance without leading to unintended escalations.

Potential drawbacks and considerations:

While these recommendations offer a pathway to support Myanmar's pro-democracy movement, there are potential risks that must be carefully weighed. The complexities of the situation necessitate a strategic, measured approach to avoid unintended consequences, including:

- *ESCALATION OF VIOLENCE*: Increased international support, especially lethal aid, could trigger a more brutal response from the junta, leading to further suffering of the Myanmar people.
- *REGIONAL INSTABILITY*: The conflict could spill over into neighboring countries, creating a regional security crisis and potentially drawing in other actors.
- *CHINESE INTERVENTION*: China may escalate its involvement to protect its interests, potentially leading to a proxy or direct confrontation.

Despite these risks, the urgency of the situation in Myanmar necessitates a bold and proactive response. By addressing this strategic blind spot and supporting the pro-democracy movement, the United States and its partners can alleviate the suffering of the Myanmar people, protect their interests, and promote democratic values in the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

The Crisis in Myanmar, though largely obscured from global attention, is a pressing issue with significant regional and international implications. The military junta's brutal crackdown on democracy and human rights, coupled with China's opportunistic interference, has plunged the nation into chaos and fueled a wave of transnational security threats.

The resistance movement, bolstered by unprecedented collaboration, mass defections, unwavering popular support, global diaspora mobilization, and women's active participation, offers hope. However, its struggle is far from over. The junta's resilience, fueled by illicit revenues and external support, poses a significant challenge.

The United States and its partners must recognize Myanmar as a strategic blind spot that, if left unaddressed, could undermine their

interests and empower authoritarian regimes in the Indo-Pacific. It is imperative to act decisively, leveraging the Burma Act and providing meaningful assistance to the resistance. This includes non-lethal support and carefully calibrated and targeted lethal aid, contingent upon the resistance's adherence to international humanitarian law and human rights standards.

While such intervention carries risks, the cost of inaction is far greater. Failure to support the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar would not only betray the aspirations of the Myanmar people but also jeopardize regional stability and democratic values. The time for complacency is over. The future of Myanmar and the broader Indo-Pacific region depends on a coordinated and resolute response from the international community. A successful pro-democracy movement in Myanmar would not only restore freedom and human rights to its people but also serve as a powerful beacon of hope for other nations struggling under authoritarian rule.

Endnotes

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