

CHAPTER 7



MYANMAR ON THE EDGE

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The edge of chaos is a dangerous place to dwell.

— Niall Ferguson, adapted from
Civilization: The West and the Rest (2010)

Introduction

Amid Indo-Pacific power shifts and intensifying global rivalries, Myanmar is unraveling.¹ Since the 2021 military coup, the country has descended into civil war, mass displacement, and criminal exploitation, transforming from a fragile democracy into a highly contested battleground. Yet,

the international response remains muted. This silence risks becoming a strategic failure.

Myanmar's crisis is not an isolated tragedy. It is a live demonstration of how authoritarian regimes entrench power, how external actors like China exploit instability, and how strategic neglect invites dangerous vacuums. With more than 3.5 million people displaced,² a junta sustained by repression and illicit finance, and a growing resistance alliance that has seized 80% of the territory,³ Myanmar is a nation on the edge—and a region at risk.

China, meanwhile, has quietly deepened its economic and security foothold. It has secured vital corridors to the Indian Ocean, extracted natural wealth, and leveraged Myanmar's instability to circumvent maritime chokepoints and extend its strategic reach—all while much of the world looks elsewhere.

This chapter contends that Myanmar is no longer a peripheral concern—it is a geopolitical fault line. Understanding the conflict through both realist and constructivist lenses reveals a deeper contest over influence, norms, and order in the Indo-Pacific. What happens in Myanmar will shape not only the future of Southeast Asia but also the credibility of global efforts to support democratic resistance and counter authoritarian expansion across the region.

China's Myanmar Strategy

China's deepening presence in Myanmar is no accident—it is the product of a deliberate strategy to secure access to the

Indian Ocean, extract critical resources, and expand its geopolitical leverage in Southeast Asia. Since the 2021 military coup, Beijing has capitalized on Myanmar's isolation, embedding itself economically, diplomatically, and strategically while others remain distracted or hesitant.

Geostrategic Leverage: Bypassing the Malacca Dilemma

Myanmar's coastline offers China a unique strategic alternative to the vulnerable chokepoint of the Malacca Strait. Through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)—a centerpiece of the Belt and Road Initiative—Beijing has built dual-use infrastructure that includes the deep-water port at Kyauk Phyu, overland oil and gas pipelines to Yunnan, and rail and road links to facilitate direct maritime access.

These corridors reduce China's dependence on contested maritime routes and enhance its logistical agility. For China's western provinces, particularly landlocked Yunnan, Myanmar serves as a critical gateway to the Indian Ocean—expanding trade, enabling forward naval deployment, and supporting broader ambitions of regional encirclement and access denial.

Crucially, China's options in a Taiwan contingency increasingly hinge on securing this land-sea corridor. By bypassing chokepoints like the Malacca Strait, Beijing gains operational depth and resilience. Meanwhile, the reported expansion of dual-use infrastructure on Myanmar's Great Coco Islands—within striking distance of India's Andaman and Nicobar outposts—raises alarms in New Delhi. While hard evidence remains limited, the perception of Chinese

surveillance or military presence underscores Myanmar's growing weight in the Indo-Pacific strategic calculation.

A Maritime Fulcrum for Power Projection

From a defense posture perspective, Myanmar enables Beijing to extend its maritime influence deep into the Indian Ocean. While China does not yet operate a formal naval base on Myanmar's soil, the prospect remains both plausible and problematic. Even without full basing rights, China's growing logistical foothold could support People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy operations for power projection, protection of sea lines, or coercive signaling in future contingencies.

Notably, the presence of Chinese Private Security Company (PSC) personnel at the Kyauk Phyu port signals Beijing's willingness to deploy state-adjacent forces to secure its strategic interests on foreign soil. Though not officially military, these deployments represent a gray-zone presence that could normalize and precondition future military access.

This approach reflects a classically indirect strategy, reminiscent of Sun Tzu's principles: securing advantage without open confrontation. Through incremental infrastructure investment, diplomatic cultivation of the junta, and restrained yet persistent engagement, Beijing has drawn Myanmar deeper into its orbit. By exploiting the country's political disarray—from brokering ceasefires to expanding commercial control—China is steadily entrenching itself. As global attention remains focused on the South China Sea,

Beijing's quiet advance toward the Indian Ocean continues largely unchecked.

Resource Security as Strategic Insurance

Myanmar's vast natural resources provide Beijing with more than economic gain—they offer strategic insulation. Most notably, Myanmar has become China's single largest external source of rare earth minerals, which are critical for green technologies, advanced electronics, and next-generation military systems. Between 2017 and 2021, China imported over 140,000 tons of rare earths from Myanmar, accounting for approximately 38% of its total rare earth imports during that period, valued at more than \$1 billion.⁴

In a future defined by resource nationalism, fragmented supply chains, and intensifying great power rivalry, upstream control of critical minerals—especially outside the First Island Chain—offers China a critical advantage. Beijing extractive posture in Myanmar is not opportunistic; it is strategic. By embedding itself in Myanmar's mining sector, China is securing future leverage over critical inputs in both commercial and defense domains.

Calculated Consolidation amid Chaos

China is no longer hedging. Its posture has shifted decisively in favor of the Myanmar military junta. This pivot was underscored by Beijing's recent pressure on the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) to relinquish control of Lashio, despite the group's battlefield gains, and by

the deployment of Chinese personnel to monitor a junta-imposed ceasefire. Rather than balancing ethnic groups against the central military, China is now actively working to preserve the junta's hold over key strategic corridors. Regime stability, not ethnic equilibrium, has become Beijing's priority because stability safeguards its own geopolitical and economic interests.

As Western engagement wanes and ASEAN struggles to respond effectively, China has emerged as the dominant external actor shaping Myanmar's trajectory. Its approach reflects strategic patience, positional leverage, and a deliberate belief that influence built through embedded presence—rather than overt intervention—is more durable and less likely to provoke backlash.

Criminal Havens and Strategic Spillover

The breakdown of state authority in Myanmar has transformed the country into a breeding ground for transnational crime, with destabilizing effects rippling across the Indo-Pacific. In the vacuum left by an embattled junta, either unable or unwilling to assert control, criminal syndicates have seized lawless zones to expand human trafficking rings, cyber scams hubs, and narcotics production. These illicit enterprises now do more than enrich crime lords: they finance armed groups, prop up the junta's war chest, and erode the internal security of neighboring countries. What was once seen as Myanmar's internal disorder has become one of the region's most under-recognized and corrosive security threats.

Human Trafficking and Refugee Exploitation

Myanmar now ranks among the world's worst countries for human trafficking.⁵ With displacement exceeding 3.5 million,⁶ organized criminal networks prey on vulnerable individuals, particularly women and children, using false promises of safety, employment, or transportation. Victims are trafficked into forced labor, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude, fueling a shadow economy rooted in coercion and despair.

These trafficking operations increasingly cross borders, enabled by porous frontiers and complicit officials. Neighboring countries such as Thailand, India, and Bangladesh are grappling with rising inflows of trafficked individuals, straining social services, public health systems, and border security. If left unchecked, this expanding criminal ecosystem will further erode regional governance, undermine state legitimacy, and exacerbate the Indo-Pacific's already fragile humanitarian landscape.

Cyber Scam Enclaves: A Profitable Protection Racket

Since the 2021 coup, the Myanmar military has permitted, and in some cases protected, a vast network of scam compounds along its borders with China and Thailand. These enclaves host sophisticated criminal operations,⁷ including notorious “pig-butcher” scams, where trafficked individuals are forced to defraud victims worldwide under coercive conditions.

In 2023 alone, such scams generated an estimated \$15.3 billion in illicit revenue.⁸ Intelligence reports identified 30 scam hubs near the Thai border and nearly 100 along the Chinese frontier.⁹ Many are shielded by junta-aligned forces, most notably the Karen National Army (KNA, formerly the Border Guard Force), exposing a collusive nexus between state actors and transnational crime.¹⁰

China's mounting concerns, particularly over its nationals being targeted, spurred an unusual tactical shift. In late 2023, Beijing tacitly backed resistance forces during Operation 1027, which dismantled a major scam hub in Kokang and triggered mass surrenders.¹¹ But the crackdown proved temporary. Scam networks simply migrated southeast,¹² reestablishing under junta protection in areas like Shwe Kokko—ironically part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure.

This convergence of BRI projects, criminal syndicates, and junta forces is no coincidence—it is a survival strategy. As legitimate revenues collapse, the junta increasingly relies on organized crime to finance its military operations, effectively weaponizing illicit enterprise as an instrument of authoritarian resilience.¹³

Opium Resurgence and Drug Proliferation

Myanmar has reemerged as the world's leading opium producer, overtaking Afghanistan in the wake of Taliban crackdowns. Exploiting vast ungoverned territories ideal for cultivation and trafficking, narcotics production has surged,¹⁴

fueling violence, corruption, and cross-border instability. Profits flow to both the junta and select ethnic armed groups, including the KNA, deepening cycles of conflict and entrenching illicit economies.

The proliferation of methamphetamines and synthetic opioids from Myanmar's lawless frontiers has overwhelmed law enforcement across Southeast Asia, strained public health systems, and triggered diplomatic tensions, particularly among the countries of the Golden Triangle: Thailand, Laos, and China. The narcotics trade, once a regional affliction, now constitutes a transnational crisis with escalating strategic consequences.

Strategic Implications

Myanmar's descent into a criminal sanctuary poses a multidimensional threat to regional stability and global order.¹⁵ First, illicit economies now provide the junta with critical financial lifelines, allowing it to circumvent sanctions and sustain military operations despite widespread internal collapse. Second, these networks actively destabilize neighboring states through trafficking, corruption, and economic predation, undermining governance and weakening regional institutions. Third, they create a new form of coercive leverage for external actors, particularly China, which can selectively suppress or tolerate these networks to influence outcomes on the ground.

For the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners, confronting this convergence of crime and authoritarianism is

no longer just a humanitarian concern—it is a strategic necessity. Failure to respond risks entrenching state-criminal collusion as a model of authoritarian resilience, weakening democratic norms, and eroding the credibility of regional security architecture.

Myanmar Military: A Regime on the Brink

Despite lifelines from illicit revenue and foreign military backing, primarily from China and Russia, the Myanmar junta is steadily losing control. Beset by armed resistance, battlefield setbacks, and a crumbling chain of command, the regime increasingly resembles a brittle autocracy in terminal decline.

Four years after the coup, the military faces cascading operational failures. Recruitment has faltered, training is haphazard, and morale has collapsed. In desperation, the junta has deployed police forces to frontlines, imposed nationwide conscription,¹⁶ and restricted foreign travel to stem defections¹⁷—moves that signal exhaustion, not resolve.

Reliant on airpower to compensate for ground losses, the military has unleashed indiscriminate bombings that have failed to break civilian resistance. If anything, they have intensified defiance. In 2024, nearly 90% of Myanmar townships experienced active conflict, mirroring the scale of violence seen in 2023, when 94% were affected.¹⁸ This sustained insurgency reflects both the breadth of resistance and the population's refusal to submit.

Amid a deepening crisis, the junta exploited the 7.7-magnitude earthquake in March 2025 as a political opportunity. It welcomed humanitarian assistance not as relief but as leverage, diverting aid from the hardest-hit areas to reconstruction in Naypyidaw and military provisions. What could have been a moment of national healing became a cynical bid to reframe the regime as a functioning authority.

Corruption and dysfunction within the military compound its decline. Breakdown in command-and-control, mistrust between officers and enlisted ranks, and widespread desertion have paralyzed entire units. Field reports reveal battalions operating at a fraction of their strength, with some commanders abandoning posts altogether.

Increasingly isolated and driven by self-preservation, the junta's senior leadership has rejected compromise in favor of coercion. Yet this repression has backfired, galvanizing a more unified and legitimate opposition that continues to gain momentum.

Given the regime's intransigence and the scale of human suffering, restoring stability will require a calibrated mix of diplomatic, non-lethal, and—when necessary—lethal support to resistance forces. Time is not neutral. The longer the junta clings to power, the greater the humanitarian toll—and the higher the cost of eventual recovery.

Catalysts of the Resistance: How Myanmar's Opposition is Winning

Against formidable odds, Myanmar's resistance movement

has shown extraordinary cohesion, adaptability, and resilience. Despite limited international backing and the junta's overwhelming firepower, opposition forces have steadily expanded territorial control, eroded military authority, and laid the groundwork for a post-junta transition. Five key factors explain the durability and growing momentum of this movement.

Unified Front: From Fragmentation to Coordinated Force

A historic alliance has formed between the newly established People's Defense Forces and long-standing Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO). Groups once divided by mistrust and ethnic lines now fight under a common goal: to dismantle military rule and build a federal democratic union.

This coalition, spanning Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Chin, and other regions, has fused battlefield experience with strategic coordination, forging unprecedented operational trust. A key tipping point came in October 2023, when the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) launched a major offensive in northern Shan State, delivering a decisive blow to junta forces and signaling the resistance's growing territorial and tactical strength.

This unity undermines the junta's long-practiced divide-and-conquer strategy and lays critical groundwork for an inclusive political order rooted in Myanmar's multiethnic identity and federal aspirations.

Defections from Within: The Military's Crumbling Core

Since the 2021 coup, a growing wave of defections has eroded the Myanmar military from within. What began as a civilian-led Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) has evolved into a broader exodus, encompassing military officers, frontline troops, and civil servants alike.

These defections offer more than manpower—they provide critical intelligence. Insights into logistical failures, command breakdowns, and collapsing morale have enabled the resistance to exploit vulnerabilities and launch increasingly effective operations. By 2022, some battalions operated at less than 20% strength; by 2023, entire units had surrendered or switched sides.¹⁹

Each defection weakens the junta's control and credibility, while reinforcing the resistance's legitimacy and momentum. It is not just a loss of personnel—it is a public unraveling of regime authority.

Popular Will: A Nation that Refuses to Yield

Despite relentless violence and economic collapse, public support for the resistance remains unshaken. Polling and field reports indicate that the overwhelming majority of Myanmar's population continues to reject military rule.²⁰ This collective defiance sustains the resistance—providing manpower, logistics, and morale.

The junta's coercive tactics—forced conscription, indiscriminate airstrikes, and movement restrictions—have

largely backfired. Communities sabotage military logistics, block supply routes, and shelter resistance forces. The military's failure to reinforce contested zones during key operations, such as Operation 1027, highlights the strategic impact of civilian non-cooperation.

Popular will is not a backdrop to this conflict—it is the engine of in the Myanmar revolution. The regime fights not just an armed resistance, but a nation that refuses to yield.

*Diaspora Networks:
Transnational Support, Real-Time Impact*

Myanmar's global diaspora has emerged as a strategic force multiplier. Across continents and generations, exiles and emigrants have mobilized financial support, technical expertise, and political advocacy to sustain the resistance.

Digital platforms forged during the COVID-19 pandemic—Zoom, Signal, WhatsApp, social media—now serve as the movement's operational backbone. This virtual infrastructure enables real-time intelligence sharing, training, and coordination across borders.

A generational division of labor has taken shape: Gen Z fights on the frontlines, Gen X leads in tech and logistics, and older generations sustain funding streams and diplomatic outreach. Together, they form a multigenerational, globally networked movement with adaptive capacity and strategic reach.

The diaspora's role is not symbolic—it is operational, indispensable, and evolving.

China's Calculated Interference

China has approached Myanmar's civil war not as a crisis to end, but as a dynamic to exploit. While Beijing officially calls for stability, its behavior reveals a more strategic objective: to prevent the rise of a democratic, pluralistic neighbor and ensure that any governing authority in Myanmar remains tethered to Chinese influence.

Beijing's engagement—selectively transactional and opaque—aims less at conflict resolution than at geopolitical insulation. For China, instability is tolerable. Independence is not.

From Passive Bet to Tactical Recalibration

In the aftermath of the 2021 coup, Beijing wagered on a quick military consolidation. It extended diplomatic cover to the junta and pressured northern EAOs to remain neutral, seeking to preserve border stability and safeguard its infrastructure investments.

But as Myanmar's crisis deepened, so did China's recalculations. The junta's failure to contain cyber scam syndicates, many of which preyed on Chinese citizens, exposed Beijing to reputational risk and domestic criticism. In response, China loosened its grip on the northern EAOs, tacitly enabling them to launch Operation 1027. This major offensive,

led by the 3BHA, dismantled key scam enclaves and demonstrated the junta's eroding control.

Yet Beijing's alignment with the resistance was short-lived. Once its immediate interests were met, it reversed course, pressuring the 3BHA into a ceasefire and reverting to its broader balancing strategy. China's posture remains transactional, not transformational: it seeks leverage over all sides, not resolution on any.

China's Strategic Hypocrisy

China is no longer hedging—it is actively enabling Myanmar's military junta while maintaining a veneer of neutrality. This is strategic hypocrisy. Beijing's recent moves—including compelling the MNDAA to surrender Lashio and stationing private security forces at Kyauk Phyu—reveal a calculated alignment with the junta. While publicly calling for peace and non-interference, China is in fact shaping the conflict to secure its own interests in access, influence, and control.

To justify its deepening involvement, Beijing outlines three non-negotiables—what it calls its “Three Bottom Lines”—during a 2024 statement by the Chinese Foreign Minister:²¹

1. Avoiding Civil Strife

China seeks to prevent total collapse in Myanmar, which could threaten Chinese investments and border stability.

2. Remaining within ASEAN

Beijing wants Myanmar to remain inside ASEAN to prevent international isolation and maintain regional mechanisms it can influence.

3. Preventing External Interference

China opposes any Western or multilateral intervention that could erode its primacy or embolden democratic actors.

To enforce these bottom lines, China has employed a suite of coercive instruments—subtle in appearance, strategic in effect:

- **Disinformation Operations**

Chinese-aligned networks sow mistrust among resistance factions through covert messaging and narrative manipulation, aiming to fracture unity and legitimacy.

- **Diplomatic Pressure**

Beijing uses its weight to discourage Thailand, Bangladesh, and other neighbors from supporting the resistance or offering sanctuary to fleeing civilians and dissidents.

- **Economic Leverage**

China weaponizes interdependence by selectively halting trade, power, telecom, or cross-border flows to punish defiance, forcing actors like the MNDAA into submission.

- **Military and Security Deployments**

Joint exercises along the border and the insertion of private security personnel signal readiness to protect core assets and intimidate rivals, without overt troop commitments.

China's role in Myanmar is not a matter of cautious engagement. It is a pattern of coercion masked by diplomacy. Beijing's actions betray its rhetoric—prioritizing influence over peace, control over self-determination, and regime preservation over regional stability.

Backlash for China and Opportunity for the United States

China's support for Myanmar's brutal, illegitimate junta has triggered widespread resentment. Beijing's decision to shut down northern border crossings—punishing EAOs like the MNDA and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, which have made battlefield gains—has been perceived as siding with repression over reform.

This move disrupted vital supply chains, worsening civilian suffering in conflict zones. For many, Beijing is no longer a neutral broker but a complicit actor in their oppression. Ethnic communities that have long distrusted the central government now view China as aligned with the junta's brutal tactics—militarily, economically, and diplomatically.

China's behavior in Myanmar mirrors a broader regional pattern: support for fractured, authoritarian-aligned regimes that can be economically integrated and politically controlled.

In Myanmar, this translates into a strategy of controlled disorder—tolerating instability so long as it preserves Beijing’s long-term influence and legitimacy, particularly if the junta collapses or transitions.

For the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners, this discontent presents a unique strategic opening. China’s influence is dominant but brittle—conditional, transactional, and increasingly resented. A calibrated policy response—combining—political recognition, non-lethal support to resistance forces, humanitarian aid, and strategic messaging—could: (1) undermine China’s narrative of neutrality and non-interference; (2) demonstrate credible alternatives rooted in local legitimacy and international norms; and (3) amplify regional voices calling for democratic transition and human security.

In a region defined by asymmetric influence and contested narratives, Myanmar is where strategic values and strategic advantage align.

Charting a Path Forward

Myanmar’s crisis is no longer peripheral—it is a strategic fault line in the Indo-Pacific. Pro-democracy resistance has defied expectations with adaptability, popular support, and territorial expansion. Yet, absent coordinated international support, its momentum may stall, while the junta endures through foreign backing, illicit finance, and brute repression.

The United States and its partners must adopt a calibrated strategy that balances pressure, support, and restraint to shift

the conflict's trajectory and uphold regional stability.

Strategic Recommendations

1. Strengthen Strategic Communications

Support a unified messaging campaign—led by the National Unified Government, diaspora, and civil society—that:

- Exposes China's complicity, junta atrocities, and criminal collusion;
- Elevates the resistance's unity, legitimacy, and inclusive democratic vision; and
- Mobilizes regional and international support via diplomatic outreach, media engagement, and public advocacy.

2. Build Resistance Capacity and Diplomatic Support

Invest in the institutional development of the resistance, including:

- Civil governance, humanitarian aid, and public services in liberated zones;
- Cybersecurity, secure communications, and nonviolent resistance training; and
- Quiet diplomacy with India, Thailand, and Bangladesh to open humanitarian corridors.

3. Apply Targeted Sanctions and Diplomatic Pressure

Expand economic and political pressure on the junta by:

- Targeting junta-linked entities, including financial institutions and foreign enablers;
- Enforcing export controls on surveillance tech, dual-use goods, and jet fuel; and
- Pressuring ASEAN neighbors to restrict diplomatic engagement and limit material support.

4. Consider Calibrated Lethal Assistance

Non-lethal aid should remain the foundation. However, if the junta continues to receive arms and fund its repression through illicit revenue, carefully controlled lethal assistance may be warranted:

- Supply vetted units with tactical gear, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) capabilities, and defensive systems;
- Provide training and logistical support conditioned on compliance with humanitarian law; and
- Maintain rigorous monitoring to avoid escalation or misuse.

Such support must be carefully limited and monitored to avoid unintended escalation.

Strategic Risks and Considerations

These steps carry real risks that must be managed through prudence and foresight:

1. Escalation of Violence

Lethal aid could trigger intensified junta reprisals

against civilians.

2. Regional Spillover

Prolonged conflict risks refugee flows and security crises for India, Thailand, and Bangladesh.

3. Chinese Retaliation

Beijing may escalate support to the junta or intensify pressure on resistance-linked actors.

The Cost of Inaction

The risks of engagement are serious, but the consequences of inaction are greater. Passive observation will entrench criminal governance, embolden authoritarian strategies, and abandon a people fighting for agency, dignity, and democracy. The time to act—with care, clarity, and coalition—is now.

Conclusion: Holding the Line at Myanmar's Edge

Myanmar stands at a critical juncture. Its descent into civil war, state collapse, and criminal capture is no longer a local tragedy—it is a live threat to regional stability and democratic resilience across the Indo-Pacific. The junta, though weakened, clings to power through repression, foreign backing, and transnational illicit finance. Meanwhile, the resistance, diverse and increasingly coordinated, continues to expand its reach.

The stakes are regional. China's calculated interference, the spread of cybercrime and narcotics, and the displacement of millions are straining neighboring states and emboldening

authoritarian governance models. How the international community responds—especially the United States and its allies—will signal whether it can meet the moment when democracy is contested under fire.

Strategic engagement carries risks. But the cost of inaction is far greater: a failed state at the heart of Southeast Asia, a breeding ground for malign influence, and a blow to the credibility of the rules-based order. The time for passive observation has passed. Myanmar is not just on the edge of collapse—it is on the edge of redefining what regional security, sovereignty, and solidarity look like in the Indo-Pacific.

The choices made today will echo far beyond Naypyidaw.

Endnotes

- ¹ This chapter, originally titled “Myanmar: The Strategic Blind Spot Undermining U.S. Interests in the Indo-Pacific,” was first published in *The Indo-Pacific Mosaic: Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, edited by James M. Minnich (2025), <https://doi.org/10.71236/LCMU3002>. The current version has been updated and retitled for this volume, the first in the *Strategic Edge Series*.
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- ⁹ USIP, *Transnational Crime in Southeast Asia*, 28.
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