



ON THE PATH TO CIVIL WAR

BEIJING NAVIGATES POST-COUP MYANMAR

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Protests against the military's February 1 coup d'état continue in Myanmar. On March 27, the bloodiest day yet, over 114 civilians, including many children, were shot by regime forces. The heavy-handed repression has since persisted, and while the killings have drawn widespread international condemnation and unilateral sanctions, there is still no joint United Nations Security Council (UNSC) action. China, alongside Russia and several of Myanmar's neighbors, continues to insist on non-interference in Myanmar's internal affairs, supporting ASEAN's mediation efforts while expressing concern over the escalating violence.

As Naypyidaw's main trade partner and arms supplier, Beijing holds a prominent position in Myanmar. On January 11, 20 days ahead of the coup, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with now-deposed State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and Commander-turned-junta-leader Min Aung Hlaing, both of whom pledged continued support for projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the evolving post-coup environment, the Chinese leadership is unwilling to jeopardize its position by potentially betting on the wrong horse, having cultivated ties with both sides of the power struggle. Nevertheless, the developing instability is on the verge of turning Myanmar into a failed state, with ethnic separatist groups siding with protestors against the coup regime. Beijing's position of non-interference is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, both internationally and within Myanmar.

The February 1 Coup

In the November 2020 elections, the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory, securing a majority of seats in both houses of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, Myanmar's legislature. The country's semi-democratic hybrid political system guarantees 25 percent of seats for military officials. However, the NLD won 83 percent of the seats up

for grabs, to the detriment of the military's political wing, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which only received five percent.¹ In the immediate aftermath, the USDP alleged voter irregularities and outright vote-rigging, refusing to accept the outcome and demanding a re-run of the election in cooperation with the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces.

Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing had thrown doubts on the political process even before the elections began,² citing violations of the law and voting irregularities.³ There are undoubtedly longstanding concerns over Myanmar's flawed electoral system; the ruling government has an unfair advantage through its control of state media, opposition parties face censorship, and residents without citizenship documents are deprived of voting rights.⁴ However, the Union Election Commission (UEC) and international observers rejected allegations of procedural election fraud.⁵ Many were quick to highlight the irony that the Tatmadaw, which led the country under a military dictatorship for many decades, still guaranteed influence under its own constitution, conveniently complained about unfair elections when it lost.

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Following the elections, State Counselor Suu Kyi pledged to create a national unity government,⁶ inviting 48 ethnic minority parties for talks on Myanmar's federalization.⁷ Against the backdrop of the 2018 by-elections, which saw substantial losses in minority areas, the NLD was hesitant to again alienate minority groups by relying solely on its sizeable majority in the Burmese heartlands. However, talks stalled as minority leaders charged the NLD leadership with high-handedness.⁸ In response to the USDP's electoral fraud claims, the NLD levied its own election fraud complaints against 17 USDP legislators in December but rebuffed claims of election rigging.⁹ Throughout, the UEC remained consistent in its rejection of fraud allegations.¹⁰

On January 11, 203 legislators, mainly consisting of the unelected military appointees, submitted a proposal to resolve standing voter fraud concerns before the new parliament took over on February

1.¹¹ The Tatmadaw claimed to have secured proof of voter fraud, citing a 7.6 million vote discrepancy, and threatened to trigger a constitutional clause allowing it to temporarily take power when the UEC remained unresponsive.¹² Ominously, military leaders also reached out to ethnic armed groups, signaling that the military would continue working with them to preserve peace should “any unprecedented incident take place”.¹³

On February 1, the Tatmadaw detained Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, declaring a year-long state of emergency and appointing Snr-Gen. Hlaing as Interim President. A long-standing force in Myanmar politics, Hlaing had been an army leader since 2011 – the year democratization reforms first began – and had been set to retire in June 2021.¹⁴ The National Defense and Security Council cited Section 417 of the constitution (prohibiting fraudulent gaining of power) to invoke Section 418 (a), allowing the commander-in-chief to take over legislative, executive, and judicial powers. The newly formed State Administrative Council (SAC) promised new elections after appointing a new Union Election Commission (UEC) to oversee a do-over vote for the 2020 elections and recommend electoral reform.¹⁵ This new UEC soon proposed the existing first-past-the-post system be replaced with a proportional system, guaranteed to benefit smaller parties like the USDP.¹⁶ The SAC also amended the High Treason and Sedition laws to ensure impunity for coup leaders, legalize “constitutional use of force”, criminalize acts causing “disaffection toward the military”, and suspend legal provisions prohibiting warrantless arrests, searches, and various surveillance practices.¹⁷

The coup can be seen as a power grab – an eleventh-hour attempt to guarantee the Tatmadaw's continued role in a gradually democratizing political system where its presence is increasingly questioned. The Tatmadaw, which beyond the 25 percent of assembly seats has control of three key ministries of government and de facto veto power on constitutional changes,¹⁸ has increasingly been at odds with civilian politicians in parity with the USDP's evaporating popular support. In March

2020, the NLD unsuccessfully suggested revisions to limit and revoke the military's special powers under the 2008 constitution, including the very emergency powers invoked for the coup. At that time, the Tatmadaw rejected the proposal, saying it hampered national reconciliation in a transitional time of instability, which required military guidance under "disciplined, multiparty democracy".¹⁹

Crackdown and Resistance

Immediately prior to her arrest, Suu Kyi called on the people to "boldly stand against the coup", encouraging a budding Civil-Disobedience Movement with tens of thousands marching in the streets.²⁰ It was soon obvious that the Tatmadaw had severely underestimated the speed of mass public mobilization. A lot has changed since the late 1980s when the military crushed pro-democracy demonstrations. Political organizations, like the NLD, can today draw on grassroots activism outside of the state system that can be quickly mobilized. It bears keeping in mind that Myanmar's democracy movement goes back at least eight decades. Protestors have three generations of shared experience to draw upon.

Within days of being ousted, former NLD lawmakers set up the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) to act on behalf of the dissolved parliament, reappointing Suu Kyi as Myanmar's leader supported by a provisional underground cabinet.²¹ The CRPH soon nominated representatives to the UN and set up an International Relations Office in the U.S.²² Using social media to communicate with supporters, the CRPH has repealed the Police Disciplinary Act to encourage desertions, commanded all civil servants to leave their posts, and ordered tax officials to stop collecting taxes. Those failing to uphold amendment orders would face "actions [...] in accordance with the existing laws."²³

The Civil-Disobedience Movement effectively paralyzed government functions and vast sections of society, leaving hospitals, banks, and businesses essentially deserted, with blocked intersections and striking railway workers impeding the remaining

employees' commute. In its first press conference, the Tatmadaw's SAC declared protesting officials would be given some time to return to work, albeit vowing legal action should they disobey.²⁴ Soon, the SAC outlawed the CPRH,²⁵ introduced crowd-control measures, and ordered Telecoms to block social media platforms, although protestors quickly found alternatives, making extensive use of VPNs.²⁶ The SAC further instructed the media to stop using terms like "Regime",²⁷ later banning non-compliant media groups.²⁸ Suu Kyi was ultimately charged with a growing list of infractions, including the possession of illegally imported walkie-talkies, the breach of COVID restrictions, treason, and graft.²⁹

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The death of 19-year-old Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing on February 19 marked a turning point in the protests. The state-owned MRTV warned protestors that they were "now inciting the people [...] to a confrontation path where they will suffer loss of life".³⁰ Repression and violence have since escalated dramatically. Several former lawmakers have died in detention, and there are widespread reports of torture and attacks on NLD offices. The Tatmadaw has fired at protestors indiscriminately, deploying light infantry divisions responsible for mass atrocities against the Rohingya.³¹ In late March, state media warned young people they could be in danger of "getting shot in the head and back", indicating a shoot-to-kill policy.³² So far, at least 827 civilians have been killed, including over 50 children.³³

To avoid fighting a two-front war against protestors and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), the Tatmadaw has tried to exploit tensions between the NLD and ethnic minorities. Extending an olive branch early on, the SAC announced a month-long ceasefire with all EAOs, offering ethnic party

leaders government positions.³⁴ Although often hostile to the Tatmadaw, minority parties stand to gain from a proportional voting system. Moreover, since Suu Kyi has either backed or remained silent on the Tatmadaw's hardline campaigns in minority regions, some groups argue there is little difference between the two. For example, Rohingya leaders condemned the coup but did not "feel sorry" for Suu Kyi.³⁵ Nonetheless, there has been pushback. Taking input from civil society and ethnic groups, the CPRH has announced an interim constitution that outlines a Federal Democracy Union, a long-sought goal of autonomy-seeking minorities,³⁶ and formed a National Unity Government on April 16.

Some ethnic leaders have stressed the lack of recognition for their previous participation in Myanmar's long democracy struggle, seeing collaboration with the SAC as a potential path to getting their rights recognized.³⁷ Others have expressed disapproval or condemnation of the coup, supporting the protestors' aims albeit without getting involved militarily.³⁸ However, once the killings of civilians spread into minority-controlled regions, the tone hardened among many previously hesitant armed groups. Several of the largest EAOs and non-signatories of the 2015 National Ceasefire Agreement, including the Three Brotherhood Alliance, the Kachin Independence Army, and the Karen National Liberation Army, have clashed with the Tatmadaw since February 20.³⁹ Meanwhile, the 10 signatories of the ceasefire have reached out to all remaining EAOs, seeking to coordinate their joint resistance against the coup.⁴⁰ Seeing the writing on the wall, the Tatmadaw has sent envoys to shore up relations with the United Wa State Army, the largest and most heavily armed EAO.⁴¹

Reignited conflicts have already resulted in the internal displacement of tens of thousands of people, with thousands more fleeing towards the Thai and Indian borders. After weekly reports of youths traveling to join EAOs and pro-democracy activists resorting to openly armed resistance,⁴² the CPRH announced the creation of the People's Defense Forces in early May, which since has seized military outposts and ambushed convoys.⁴³ Under mounting

pressure on several fronts, the Tatmadaw becomes increasingly likely to intensify the use of violence. A military memo leaked in April reads, "You must annihilate them when you face them" because "rioters have gone from peaceful demonstration to the level of armed conflict".⁴⁴ The UN Special Envoy to Myanmar has warned of an imminent bloodbath and outright civil war.⁴⁵

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International Dimensions

International reactions to the coup have varied across the board. While many Western countries were quick to condemn the coup, several of Myanmar's neighbors, including China, India, and ASEAN, took more neutral positions, urging dialogue and stability without explicitly criticizing the Tatmadaw. The Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed hopes that Myanmar's various actors would "properly handle differences under the constitutional and legal framework and safeguard political and social stability."⁴⁶ The Chinese *Global Times* even called the event a "major cabinet reshuffle."⁴⁷

Endorsing the principle of non-interference, Beijing, alongside Moscow, subsequently blocked a UNSC resolution from condemning the coup outright⁴⁸ and has continuously watered down successive Security Council Statements. Adopted unanimously, these communiqués call for the democratic transition to be respected and detained politicians to be released and have progressively emphasized opposition to the violence against civilian protestors. Still, they refrain from attributing blame to the Tatmadaw or calling the events a coup.⁴⁹ When a majority of UN Human Rights Council members decried the Tatmadaw's actions in early February, Beijing distanced itself from the statement, underlining its respect for "Myanmar's internal affairs."⁵⁰

The CPRH has called on international institutions

to sanction Tatmadaw leaders and the large conglomerates that control key sectors of the economy. While accounting for a rather small percentage of Myanmar's foreign investments and trade,⁵¹ the U.S., EU, UK, and Canada have issued unilateral sanctions, suspending agreements previously granted to encourage Myanmar's democratization.⁵² In a bid to further cut off Tatmadaw revenue streams, the CPRH has demanded that foreign-owned mineral, oil, and gas companies halt their operations.⁵³ The World Bank and Asian Development Bank have suspended development project funding, and several transnational corporations have cut ties with the military.⁵⁴

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Beijing has continuously voiced support for the backchannel mediation efforts of ASEAN, which also places great importance on non-interference and stability.⁵⁵ The ten-nation bloc, whose membership ranges from communist Vietnam to absolutist monarchy Brunei and democratic Indonesia, has a diverse set of views on the situation in Myanmar. Several of them share legacies of military coups and have faced criticisms from the international community in the past. Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines have all joined China in emphasizing non-interference.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, the lattermost being Myanmar's largest source of investments, have been more critical and vocal in pushing the organization to take action, noting how failure to do so would undermine ASEAN's "credibility and relevance as an organization".⁵⁷ Nevertheless, ASEAN is wary of criticizing Myanmar too much, as that could burn diplomatic bridges with the

Tatmadaw and push the member state further into Beijing's orbit. That would run counter to one of the key motivations behind Myanmar's admission into ASEAN in 1997, the ambition to decrease the interference of India and China.⁵⁸

The conflict between the military and civilian protestors is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. As violence peaked on March 27, with 114 civilian deaths, representatives from all Myanmar's neighbors, Pakistan, and Russia attended Myanmar's Armed Forces Day in what ultimately became a diplomatic gaffe. This came at a time when the CPRH was already exploring whether the International Criminal Court could investigate post-coup crimes against humanity.⁵⁹ However, some have warned that the threat of prosecution could push military leaders to double down on violence, killing any chances of non-violent compromise,⁶⁰ which already appears increasingly diminutive.

In response to ASEAN's April 24 emergency summit, the first to include Tatmadaw representatives, though notably not the CPRH or even all ASEAN leaders, Snr-Gen. Hlaing said he would consider de-escalation recommendations only "when the situation returns to stability".⁶¹ Meanwhile, the National Unity Government instead called on ASEAN to hear the will of Myanmar's people, rejecting the bloc's repeated calls for mediated talks with the regime.⁶² With Russian officials announcing deepening military ties with the Tatmadaw and China keeping economic sanctions and weapon embargoes off the table, an international response appears yet unlikely.⁶³

Sino-Myanmar Relations

Myanmar, the first non-communist country to recognize the People's Republic of China, has historically had tense relations with its northern neighbor. Beijing actively supported a Communist Insurgency from the late sixties until 1989, when China and Myanmar entered a period of more cordial relations after settling their standing border disputes. The Tatmadaw, which fought Chinese-backed rebels for most of its existence, remains suspicious of Beijing's ties to separatist groups.

Nevertheless, Beijing and Naypyidaw have common interests, in part because they share a long porous border subject to illicit drug, weapon, and mineral flows, but also due to China's utility as a provider of investments and political support. In 2007, Beijing and Moscow shielded Myanmar against a UNSC resolution condemning state violence against civilians in minority regions.⁶⁴ A year earlier, China and Myanmar had signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to build the \$3.6 billion Myitsone dam in Northeastern Myanmar. The dam, located on the Irrawaddy river, would have delivered power to both sides of the border and was one of several planned infrastructure projects. Myanmar has pondered the construction of an east-west corridor since the late 1990s and found a willing investor in Beijing, eager to stimulate economic activity near its impoverished inner provinces.⁶⁵

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Relations peaked with the establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership in early 2011 before beginning to cool off.⁶⁶ Following Myanmar's 2012 by-elections, many joint projects fizzled out or were suspended under popular protests. In a push to end its international isolation and entrenched reliance on Beijing, the USDP government had initiated a series of political reforms. This was encouraged by the Obama administration, which rewarded the reform efforts with two unprecedented Presidential visits in 2012 and 2014.⁶⁷ Unable to keep up with Myanmar's changing political orientation and caught off guard by project cancellations, Chinese policymakers were humiliated, increasingly turning their attention to opposition leader Suu Kyi.

Ahead of the 2015 elections, Suu Kyi was invited to meet President Xi Jinping in Beijing. At the time, a Chinese *Global Times* editorial stressed that closer ties with the U.S. would not best serve Myanmar's interests, praising Suu Kyi's positive remarks and “pragmatic attitude” towards Chinese investments.⁶⁸ Earlier, during a parliamentary investigation into the Chinese-backed Letpadaung mine extension, she had defended the project's continuation, citing risks to Myanmar's investment climate and then-frail Sino-Myanmar relations.⁶⁹ The NLD's ascent to power and the emerging Rohingya crackdown provided Beijing a path back into Naypyidaw. Suu Kyi's unwillingness to intervene in the treatment of the Rohingya Muslims, ruled genocidal by the International Court of Justice, tarnished her image abroad. Additionally, the persistent persecution of journalists and unchanged repressive laws contributed to the end of her honeymoon with Western countries.⁷⁰ As a result, Chinese investments and diplomatic support again became increasingly important.

Marking a turning point in relations, Beijing became an official peace broker between the Tatmadaw and the Three Brotherhood Alliance in mid-2017, proposing a three-phase solution to end the violence.⁷¹ Throughout 2018, China stressed the great complexity of the Rohingya issue, dismissing external pressure on the Myanmar government as unhelpful, boycotting UNSC talks, and criticizing the UN's Fact-finding Commission.⁷² While the Chinese government has its own reasons for precluding human rights issues from the UNSC agenda, this diplomatic support also strengthened Beijing's hand in Naypyidaw, which, in return, has continuously expressed support for the One-China policy and China's territorial integrity.⁷³ Coinciding with Beijing's involvement in Myanmar's peace process in 2017, Naypyidaw endorsed the BRI and subsequently announced the 1,700 km China-Myanmar Economic Corridor project (CMEC). In late 2018, the two sides signed a 15-point MoU to initiate the CMEC, set to link China's Yunnan province with a deep-sea port in Kyaukphyu.⁷⁴ The infrastructure project, consisting of special economic zones, pipelines, the linking of power grids, and rail-

and motorways, would boost economic activity in both countries and decrease Beijing's reliance on the Strait of Malacca chokepoint for trade and energy imports.

Cognizant of past public backlash toward Chinese investment projects, Suu Kyi has emphasized the need for projects to be “socially and environmentally responsible.”⁷⁵ This comparatively cautious approach has led to a slow start. By April 2019, only nine of 40 proposed early harvest projects had even started, and several were significantly reduced in scale. It undoubtedly caused some unease in Beijing when Myanmar turned to the U.S. for technical assistance on downsizing the Kyaukphyu port, in the end, cut down by 80 percent. While the slow pace and project reductions have been a source of concern, Suu Kyi's deft maneuvering ensured the projects were anchored in public opinion. Coercive pressures could moreover stoke public anger. Thus, the cutbacks indicate a mutual consultation process where Chinese investors willingly or reluctantly adjust to avoid creating friction.⁷⁶

Beijing is nevertheless eager to hurry the project along. In January 2020, President Xi visited Myanmar in the first official visit in 20 years, calling CMEC a “priority among priorities.”⁷⁷ Throughout 2020, Xi published articles in Myanmar newspapers, sent COVID-19 aid, promised resources for refugee resettlement, and sent high-level officials to meet with both NLD leaders and the Tatmadaw. Aware of past pitfalls, Beijing had been cultivating ties with both sides to diversify its points of contact. The last visit was just three weeks before the coup when Foreign Minister Wang held separate high-level talks with Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint, and Snr-Gen. Hlaing, all agreeing to accelerate BRI construction.⁷⁸

Beijing's Interests and Challenges

The coup was detrimental to Chinese interests in Myanmar. Not only does it disturb Beijing's balancing act between the military and the various civilian factions, but the ensuing instability also disrupts critical imports, like rare earth minerals, while undermining the viability of investment

projects.⁷⁹ The CMEC and Beijing's “Two-Ocean strategy” – the plan to expand China's naval presence into the Indian Ocean – ultimately depend on a stable partnership.⁸⁰ Moreover, escalation risks creating a geopolitical hotbed on China's doorstep, attracting unwanted international attention in the process.

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Nevertheless, Beijing remains reluctant to get involved in Myanmar's internal affairs for several reasons. Having learned the perils of putting all its eggs in one basket after the USDP's abandonment in the early 2010s, Beijing is unwilling to take sides. Additionally, there is a reluctance within the Chinese foreign policy establishment to be seen as violating the non-interference principle in other's internal affairs, which, for a long time, has given Beijing an edge over competitors in regions where loan conditionality is commonly perceived as condescension. China has occasionally relaxed its adherence to non-interference, as it did with the UNAMID peacekeeping mission in Darfur and the 2018 Commission of Inquiry in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.⁸¹ Yet, Myanmar's proximity and the national interests at stake deny Beijing such leeway. Taking sides would inevitably alienate other BRI partners, raising concerns about Chinese investments.

Snr-Gen. Hlaing has expressed support for the BRI as the centralizing effect of infrastructure undermines rebel groups. However, he does not trust Beijing.⁸² In 2019, FN-6 portable missiles were discovered in rebel hands in Northern Shan State.⁸³ Though Chinese-made arms have circulated in the region for decades, the presence of heavy weaponry is noteworthy. In a veiled statement ahead of Xi's 2020 visit, the Tatmadaw expressed hopes that “neighbors” would

not support EAOs.⁸⁴ Ostensibly, frail relations are conditional on Beijing's usefulness in providing silent diplomatic support and much-needed investment flows. Ben-Menashe, the Tatmadaw's post-coup PR consultant, echoed the USDP's old charm offensive in March, stating Suu Kyi had "grown too close to China for the general's liking" and that there is a "real push to move towards the West".⁸⁵ However, seeing as the SAC includes several key ministers with long-running ties to China,⁸⁶ such a calculation seems overly simplistic. In May, regime authorities approved a Chinese-backed \$2.5 billion LNG power project,⁸⁷ and, in interviews with Chinese media, Snr-Gen. Hlaing renewed his vow to protect foreign enterprises.⁸⁸ As such, given the Tatmadaw's history and sometimes contradictory goals, its long-term reliability as a partner for China remains ambiguous.

"The central challenge for Beijing lies in the backlash from protestors who view the tacit support in the face of international pressure as de facto complicity."

The central challenge for Beijing lies in the backlash from protestors who view the tacit support in the face of international pressure as de facto complicity. Popular anger has produced massive protests outside the Chinese embassy, threats against CMEC projects, and attacks on Chinese-owned factories in mid-March. Chinese state media coverage has demonstrated limited understanding of the indignation, stressing how Beijing's position differs little from Myanmar's other neighbors, charging critics with holding China to a higher standard for geopolitical reasons.⁸⁹ There is also a tendency to frame events in Myanmar through narratives familiar to the Chinese political establishment, linking criticisms of China with hostile forces. For example, following the factory attacks, nationalist tabloid *Global Times* wrote the suspected arsonists

were possibly "anti-China locals [...] provoked by Western anti-China forces, NGOs and Hong Kong secessionists".⁹⁰ There is undoubtedly a wariness of the protestors' use of the anti-authoritarian #MilkTeaAlliance hashtag and the solidarity shown by activists in Taiwan, Thailand, and Hong Kong.⁹¹

These suspicions of foreign anti-China forces at work in Myanmar first gained traction with the deepening U.S. diplomatic engagement in the early 2010s, which went hand in hand with the Obama administration's pivot to Asia, viewed with some distrust in Beijing as the prelude to a possible containment and encirclement strategy.⁹² Refusing to run the risk of history repeating itself a decade later, Beijing seeks to keep geopolitical adversaries out of Myanmar and preserve the favorable status quo. Less than 24 hours after the coup, the *Global Times* interviewed scholars speculating that the U.S. may seize on the moment to repair ties with Myanmar and put pressure on China with a "color revolution" approach – an effort to destabilize or overthrow a government.⁹³ More recently, ahead of the April ASEAN summit on Myanmar, Foreign Minister Wang cautioned ASEAN leaders to fend off "external interference", which would only "deteriorate the situation".⁹⁴

The CPRH has sent several unreciprocated letters to Beijing, demanding recognition as Myanmar's interim government. Amid escalating violence, the Chinese embassy finally established direct contact in early April.⁹⁵ Wang had previously stressed how China would engage with all relevant parties, albeit without changing the overall course in Myanmar. Yet while Beijing is not in a position to openly take sides, as the situation deteriorates, non-action becomes increasingly untenable. In March, leaked documents revealed that the Director-General of the China National Petroleum Company had asked Tatmadaw authorities for heightened security for the CMEC pipelines, requesting Myanmar's media be pressured "to only write about China in a positive way".⁹⁶ After violence peaked at the end of the month, rumours of Chinese troops gathering at the border began to circulate.⁹⁷ An editorial in the *CGTN* warned that

“China might be forced into taking more drastic action to protect its interests” should Myanmar authorities fail to do so, suggesting there could be limits to the non-interference principle.⁹⁸

Nevertheless, Snr-Gen. Hlaing’s pledge to protect foreign investments and to continue of major projects appear to have placated Beijing for now. On the sidelines of the Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers’ Meeting on June 8, Foreign Minister Wang reassured Hlaing that China’s policy would not be “affected by changes to Myanmar’s domestic and external situation,” adding that China is encouraging all parties to “conduct political dialogue under the constitution and legal framework.”⁹⁹

An Unsustainable Status Quo

After months of unrelenting protests in Myanmar, there are no signs of de-escalation. In many ways, the developments since April can be seen as the realization of all the military’s worst-case scenarios. In the face of an uncompromising Tatmadaw, the National Unity Government’s formation, the creation of a People’s Defense Force, and the resurgence of armed conflicts with EAOs all point towards potential civil war.

Chinese policymakers are increasingly aware of the high stakes in Myanmar, observing the evolving situation closely. The staying power of the coalescing resistance has ruled out a quick resolution to the conflict. Widespread violence would ultimately jeopardize all investment projects, making the environment even more unpredictable. Furthermore, protestors may become increasingly enraged by China’s unwillingness to comment on Tatmadaw culpability.

At the risk of angering Snr-Gen. Hlaing, Beijing can only afford to ignore the consolidated opposition for so long. Any long-term presence in Myanmar must be able to outlive the temporary marriage of convenience with the otherwise distrustful generals. Nevertheless, given the multifaceted national security interests at stake, any significant pressure from Beijing appears unlikely without the blessing of Myanmar’s other neighbors. ■

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