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China and Myanmar's coup d'état

Abstract

In the beginning of February 2021 Myanmar's military made coup d'état. As a result democratically elected members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), were removed by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military). Army thus declared a year-long state of emergency and declared power had been assigned to Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Min Aung Hlaing. The coup d'état occurred just the day before the Parliament of Myanmar was due to swear in the members elected at the November 2020 general election, thereby preventing this from occurring. In these elections the NLD candidates were winning over 80% of the government's seats.

The Chinese government did not directly condemn the coup. This was not surprise as they have never criticised regime changes in other countries. Formally, non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries has long been a core principle of China's foreign policy. At the same time, China has tightened its politico-economic grip with Myanmar. Only in 2020 China and Myanmar signed over 30 Memorandums of Understanding. Thus, Myanmar is actively participating *China–Myanmar Economic Corridor* -project as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative and moreover, Myanmar has also signed free trade agreements that have interested China.

China's investment in the country is dependent on whether Myanmar has a stable, internationally accepted government. It would not be logical for China to support a military government that is economically restrained by the rest of international community. But as Myanmar has become sanctioned with again its economy declines, and thus, China might lose a market for its products. In the end, China does not seem to benefit from a military coup in Myanmar. In my presentation I will delve into China-Myanmar's current relations and discuss on strategies and politics behind their activities.

Keywords: *China, Myanmar, coup d'état, Tatmadaw*

China and Myanmar's coup d'état

In the beginning of February 2021 Myanmar's military forces seized power and made coup d'état. In that democratically elected members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), were removed and imprisoned by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military). Army thus declared a year-long state of emergency and declared that power had been assigned to Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Min Aung Hlaing and the military forces. The Tatmadaw claimed that there was massive voting fraud in the country's November 2020 general elections, in which the NLD won a majority of seats in both Houses of Parliament. The coup d'état occurred just a day before the Parliament of Myanmar was due to swear in the members elected at the general election, thereby preventing this from occurring. In these elections the NLD candidates were winning over 80% of the government's seats. Aside from the political unrest that has followed the military seizure of power, a multitude of subnational conflicts still dominate Myanmar's political landscape, with areas often controlled by the Tatmadaw, paramilitary groups, or ethnic armed organizations, as well as with zones of 'mixed authority'.

The Chinese government did not directly condemn the coup. This was not surprise as they have never criticised regime changes in other countries. Formally, non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries has long been a core principle of China's foreign policy. Here also, China has taken a 'wait and see' stance towards the coup, emphasising that its priority is stability and that local politics is Myanmar's internal affair. For Beijing, it does not matter who rules Myanmar, as long as those in power are not anti-China.

In this paper I will discuss on China 's reactions towards Myanmar's "administrative reshuffle" as the Chinese described it. I will delve into China-Myanmar's relations and discuss on China's strategies and politics behind its activities. Also some themes related Myanmar's responses to China and Chinese are discussed. I propose that China seems to have various motives in Myanmar and in the region: to support its (geo)strategic, (geo)political, economic and energy-security interests and social instability fears.

Paukphaw -friendship¹ and strategic partnership

Strategic partnership has been introduced to China's diplomacy in the post-Cold War era, it has the characteristics of being non-aligned and non-confrontational. China pursues its partnerships with Myanmar and other states to create a stable and harmonious surrounding environment. Already in 2013, China and Myanmar developed comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, as the Chinese explained "on the basis of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit and deepened exchanges and cooperation in political, economic, trade, cultural, people-to-people and military fields". Indeed, China has invested in all areas, including military, natural resources, industry, agriculture and infrastructure development in Myanmar. (Li, 2012)

Recently China has tightened its politico-economic grip with Myanmar. Only in 2020 China and Myanmar signed over 30 *Memorandums of Understanding* that were signed by Aung San Suu Kyi and Xi Jinping. Thus, Myanmar is actively participating *China–Myanmar Economic Corridor* -project signed in 2017 (CMEC) as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite delays in project implementation, the CMEC has promoted a number of infrastructure projects that strategically connect the oil trade from the Indian Ocean to China's Yunnan province via Myanmar. As Myanmar has become sanctioned with again its economy deteriorate, and thus, China might lose a market for its products. China's investment in the country is dependent on whether Myanmar has a stable, internationally accepted government. In the end, China does not seem to benefit from a military coup in Myanmar. (Han, 2021)

Is it then rational for China to support Myanmar's junta government that is economically restrained by the rest of international community? Zhang Jun, China's permanent representative to the United Nations, articulated China's concerns as a neighbour and as an active participant, a concerned observer of Myanmar's situation as follows:

"As a close neighbour, China follows the situation in Myanmar very closely. China has been working on all parties in Myanmar and actively engaged in Security Council consensus-building. China emphasizes that all parties in Myanmar should take up the responsibility of maintaining national stability and development, act in the fundamental interests of the people, strive to find a solution to the crisis within the constitutional and legal framework through dialogue and consultation, maintain political and social stability, and continue to advance the democratic

¹ Before his state visit to Myanmar in 2020, Xi Jinping mentioned that two countries have fraternal (in Burmese *paukphaw*) friendship. Fraternal ties emphasised countries' symbolic historical connection and cultural co-operation.

transition in Myanmar.” (Zhang Jun, China’s permanent representative to the UN, UN Security Council consultations, *Xinhua* 31.3.2021)

Myanmar's geopolitical and geostrategic position is very important for China and they share a long border (over 2000km). On Myanmar’s side border area’s security has been threatened by the Kachin conflict in where the Kachin Independence Army has been fighting against government’s soldiers since 1960’s. Another conflict side is the Shan State where Shan State Armies (North and South) have been fighting against each other and against the Myanmar’s military. China build oil pipeline has been constructed through the Shan State. On Chinese side Yunnan province which is one of the poorest regions in China and it has 20-25 ethnic minorities. In Chinese political context poverty and ethnic minorities might pose a threat for the area’s stability and border security.

Myanmar is the main connecting centre for South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, and it is also connected with the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Since 1988 and after Myanmar students’ uprising in 1988 and military’s subsequent military coup China has expanded its ties with Myanmar for strategic reasons. Chinese ships have to navigate at the Malacca Strait and especially in the case of fuel oil imports and exports, which are both time consuming and strategically risky. If China is able to use the Rakhine state's Kyaukpyu port it will reduce China's dependence on the Malacca Strait and expand trade. Thus, Myanmar is one of the means to realize China's geostrategic and geo-economic interests in the region. By investing to Myanmar’s railways and ports in the Rakhine state it will allow China to continue importing and exporting fuel oil without the influence of India, and the United States, avoiding the use of the Malacca Strait. Business also requires stability in the Rohingya populated state of Rakhine. (Akkas, 2021, 321-343)

Zhang Jun articulated China’s concerns like an investor that does not want international community to interfere its activities as follows:

“Maintaining peace and stability in Myanmar is in the common interests of the international community. Should Myanmar slide into protracted turbulence, it will be a disaster for Myanmar and the region as a whole. The international community should, on the basis of respecting Myanmar's sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity and national unity, step up diplomatic efforts and encourage the parties to narrow differences so as to find a way out. One-sided pressure and calling for sanctions or other coercive measures will only aggravate tension and confrontation and further complicate the situation, which is by no means

constructive.(Zhang Jun, China's permanent representative to the UN, UN Security Council consultations, *Xinhua* 31.3.2021)

Myanmar's response

Since the military coup in February 2021 we have seen growing of anti-China sentiment in Myanmar. There has been reports of Chinese-financed factories being set ablaze prompting strong condemnation from the Chinese government. The Tatmadaw and demonstrators were blaming each other for setting up fires. The arson attacks come amid rising anti-China attitudes in Myanmar, which has intensified due to China's failure to publicly condemn the coup. Chinese state media alleged that it was actually Western countries' incitement that was resulted in Chinese-financed factories being targeted. In another incident happened also in the Chinese-owned factory where security forces shot and killed at least six workers during a salary dispute between Burmese workers and the employer. (Myanmar Now,17 March 2021)

The Myanmar public has long been wary of controversial Chinese engagement in Myanmar, from predatory resource extraction to ethnic minority issues and surveillance technology exports. It has been estimated that China's CMEC projects have the potential to negatively affect up to 24 million people in Myanmar as river-related infrastructure development, deforestation, and changing land use could lead to sedimentation, water pollution and the devastation of livelihoods. (Abb & al, 13-18)

Myanmar's military government has also attempted to reduce Chinese influence. There are reports indicating that the junta has sent third party lobbyists to repair its relationship with the West as a way to distance itself from China. Indeed, the Aung San Suu Kyi's administration was also wary of becoming too dependent on China and tried to neutralise Chinese influence by reaching out to India for strategic cooperation and scrutinising inward Chinese investment. It has been pointed out that Myanmar is likely to continue to be cautious with Chinese megaproject investments in an effort to minimize financial dependency. (Yu, 2021)

Conclusions

China anticipates that its vast investments in Myanmar will contribute to its energy security, trade and stability in its neighbourhood. Moreover, Beijing suspects that an economic

slowdown in its neighbourhood will result in social instability. Myanmar's political upheaval might also pose security threats, which would in turn threaten the political stability of Chinese border provinces such as Yunnan. Although China has not hidden its support for an authoritarian government in Myanmar, it tends to prioritise stability above all else. The 2021 Myanmar coup has placed Chinese projects directly at risk and threatens economic interests in the country. It remains unclear if the Tatmadaw will honour or re-negotiate the Chinese projects and agreements previously approved by Aung San Suu Kyi's administration.

The ongoing civil unrest in Myanmar promoted by social media is further worsening the fear of China's rise in the region. As a result the growing anti-China sentiment will likely become turning point the Myanmar-China relationship. For example, the recent factory attacks have further placed Chinese investment in the centre of the Myanmar's domestic political dispute. It has damaged further Beijing's relationship with the military government. While political instability has led to business disruption, Myanmar will remain a long-term destination for Chinese investment, particularly in the energy, mining and infrastructure sectors.

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