

PEOPLE'S PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF FOREIGN POWER IN MYANMAR: A CASE STUDY OF THE 2021 MILITARY COUP

Hnin Mya Thida

<https://doi.org/10.47706/KKIFPR.2021.3.127-140>

Abstract: The study explores people's perception of foreign external actors in Myanmar's domestic conflict through a case study of the recent military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021. Both Myanmar and China firmly hold a non-interference policy in other's internal affairs stemming from the 'Five Principles of Co-existence. However, the traditionally strong relationship between China and the Myanmar army, the Chinese response to the military coup, and its attitude to the army leaders have become controversial among people in Myanmar, leading to a growing anti-Chinese sentiment. By conducting a survey with the Myanmar diaspora, the paper analyses how people in Myanmar perceive China's role in Myanmar's internal affairs. The study concludes that, given China's growing international role, Beijing should pay particular attention to how its foreign policy actions are perceived by the populations of other states.

Keywords: China, military coup, Myanmar, people's perception, public opinion

Introduction

In recent times, China has been evolving as a regional and global power on the international stage. Small countries in the Southeast Asia (SEA) region view China as a regional great power. From the perspective of these countries, China is a capable and responsible actor in the region and a possible regional hegemon in the post-Covid world. In terms of economy, China's role is unquestionable. It is also undeniable that China's military power has been growing together with its economic development. In post-Covid Asia, this will be a very important indication of the regional order.

Whether small countries in the region dislike China's behaviour or not, there is no possibility to alienate China, and China remains an influential actor in regional stability. Despite China's growing strength, a key issue for Beijing is how the other SEA players see China. Although China has traditionally focused on state-level politics, it cannot ignore the fact that China's image in the eyes of the domestic audience of other states will sooner or later have an impact on government policies in those countries. Therefore, it is essential to know how regional countries perceive China's role for future cooperation between Beijing and these countries.

From China's point of view, the most important characteristic of China's foreign policy is its non-interference policy. China always stands on the non-interference policy of other countries' affairs, not only in the region but also at the international level. China preserves and defends the 'non-interference' or 'non-intervention' principle, not only in terms of its relations with other countries but also resisting Western involvement in its own domestic politics. Furthermore, China has repeatedly insisted on its non-interference principle in both bilateral relations and multilateral relations, especially in its relations with neighbouring countries (Pang, 2009). However, due to China's growing international footprint, it is an interesting question whether China is really avoiding interfering with other countries' domestic affairs at the expense of its own interests. On the other hand, do small actors consider China's non-interference policy as just a narrative or a real political guideline of China?

Listening to how other countries perceive China could help Beijing recalibrate its long-term policy and think about adjusting it. Moreover, the small actors would be more willing to cooperate with China if it played a responsible role. By doing so, other countries would see China as a predictable power, which would help them see China as a trusted power in the international arena. Thus, China should consider the perception of other actors to preserve its unique role.

The present research will examine how other countries in the region see the changing role of China in the post-Covid era. To investigate this, the 1 February 2021 military coup in Myanmar was chosen as a case study to explore people's perception of China in Myanmar.

Myanmar and China's relationship as neighbours goes back centuries. The relationship has been typically asymmetrical, with China playing the leading role. This was the case before the arrival of the Western powers, during the era of the China-centred tributary systems, as well as since the late 1970s, when Myanmar and China re-established closer ties. A major point in the deepening of bilateral relations was the international community's sanctioning of the military government for its suppression of the 1988 uprising in Myanmar (Holliday, 2005), which led to the country's increasing dependence on the Chinese economy (Clapp, 2010). A quasi-civilian government took office in April 2011, formally ending five decades of military rule in Myanmar. Although China has remained Myanmar's dominant partner, its ability to influence the country's development has diminished significantly. Although the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar is seen by many experts as an opportunity for China to restore its former influence, Myanmar and China cannot simply return to the pre-2011 period. Due to democratic reform, the society of Myanmar is used to having a more open voice in public affairs, and the information revolution that has taken place provides new channels of communication. All this has led to a strengthening of the role of public opinion in Myanmar, which has become an important factor in the military coup and has the potential to influence bilateral relations.

The article first briefly explains the role of perception in international relations. The second section presents the hypothesis and the methodological description of the research. The third section describes the military coup that took place on 1 February 2021, and the relationship between Beijing and the coup regime in Myanmar. The results and discussion sections are followed by a conclusion.

The Role of Perception in International Relations

People's perception is of crucial importance in democratic countries because it can greatly influence political decision-making. In an authoritarian state, the role of people's perception is insignificant, and there is no room for debate in domestic politics. Perception plays a significant role in a country because it will have consequences in domestic politics, as well as influence international relations. Herrmann (2013) underlines the fact that people's perception is

important because “the decision making in a political process is shaped by both the perceptions people have of the situation they face and the understanding people have regarding what sort of action produce what sorts of outcome” (Herrmann, 2013, p.334). As decisions in domestic politics reflect a country’s external relations, people’s perception of a country is worth considering for other countries.

Moreover, people’s perception influences the image of actors, which can be defined as a product of perception (Ametbek, 2017). From the perspective of small countries, it is very important to identify great powers’ behaviour based on their perception. People’s perception can also result in a huge outcome and losses in bilateral relations. In the Myanmar-China economic relations, the two countries have seen the failure of the important Myitsone hydropower dam project as a result of its unilateral suspension by the Myanmar government, which was prompted by people’s strong opposition. This shows how people’s perception can influence bilateral relations even if there are asymmetrical relations between small and great powers. As a result of this type of incident, China not only lost economic power, but its image was also damaged in the international community, as the root cause was a lack of confidence in Beijing’s political and economic behaviour.

In the case of the recent military coup in Myanmar, it is fair to assume that the people of Myanmar considered it impossible for China, as an emerging power and supporter of former military regimes, not to play a role despite Beijing’s firmly stance on its non-interference policy in Myanmar’s internal affairs. According to Gareth Price, Beijing’s “laissez-faire” approach toward Myanmar’s military coup could damage its own strategic and economic interests in the countries of Southeast Asia (Lee, 2021).

Based on the domestic perception in other countries, the question is whether China’s non-intervention policy is relevant in a post-Covid world in order to maintain its status as a global actor. However, other actors, particularly small actors, see that China’s involvement in domestic conflicts differs from China’s foreign policy. Other countries’ perception of China may push China towards more engagement and involvement in international affairs, thus it is important to know how people’s perception influences China’s behaviour in the post-Covid era.

Hypothesis and Methodology

In Myanmar, it is impossible to ignore China's role in its domestic politics. Most people believe that China is an important factor behind the military coup and that China was involved in Myanmar's domestic conflict to protect its interests in the country and to preserve its strong ties with the military junta. This research will test the hypothesis that people think China is an active and relevant actor in the region and is responsible for regional order. The case study focuses on the recent military coup that occurred on 1 February 2021. A survey was conducted among people from Myanmar who live abroad, as interviews could not be conducted with people inside Myanmar due to the military coup and the Covid-19 pandemic. Over 100 participants have answered the questions, who live in different countries – Australia, China, the Czech Republic, Dubai, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Serbia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Five questions were designed to find out how people from Myanmar perceive the role of foreign powers (especially that of China) in the military coup.

Military Coup on 1 February, 2021

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar army took power through a coup d'état, claiming that election fraud had been committed during the elections held in November 2020. During the elections, the National League for Democracy Party (NLD) won a landslide victory. The NLD won 83 percent of the available seats in the parliament, while the Union Solidarity and Development Party, backed by the military, won only 33 out of 476 seats (Tham, 2021). The army detained State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and several dozen other senior officials in early morning raids in Naypyidaw, the capital of Myanmar, when the elected members for the Pyithu Hluttaw (Lower House of Parliament) were in the capital to convene after the November 2020 national elections. The military accused Aung San Suu Kyi of illegally accepting USD 600,000 and 11 kg of gold, as well as other charges including “fear and alarm”, illegal possession of radio equipment, and breaking Covid-19 restrictions (BBC News, 2021b). The military declared a one-year state of emergency, justified by the electoral fraud and the need to protect democracy in

the country. Vice-President Myint Swe, member of the military-backed opposition party (Union Solidarity and Development Party-USDP), replaced President Win Myint. He also signed the authorization for the declaration of a state of emergency, in which national power was handed over to Commander-in-Chief Sr. Gen Min Aung Hlaing, and pledged to hold new elections in a year's time.

Without any reliable evidence, the military has repeatedly alleged election fraud and voter irregularities during the elections, claiming that the Union Elections Commission (UEC) and the NLD failed to address the concerns of the opposition, ethnic groups, and the military (Human Right Watch, 2021). Moreover, it also claimed that both UEC and NLD failed to "properly perform their duties but also ignored to conduct a free, fair and transparent election" (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2021a). Despite the accusations put forward by the military, independent international observers have disputed the allegations of a fraudulent election, stating that no irregularities were observed (BBC News, 2021b).

The military junta organized a new election commission. The junta continuously committed unlawful acts by declaring that the results of the November elections were invalid as well as coercing election officials into signing affidavits to confirm electoral fraud was happening. These actions taken by the military were completely contrary to international standards for the resolution of election disputes (ANFREL, 2021). Regarding the election result, independent observers have rejected the military's accusation of voter fraud during the 2020 general election (BBC, 2021c). In its report, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) states that "it is ANFREL's informed opinion that the results of the 2020 general elections were, by and large, representative of the will of the people of Myanmar" (BBC, 2021c). Before the coup, a dozen domestic election observer groups released a joint statement calling on the military and all political parties to recognize the results of the election (Myanmar Now, 2021).

When the coup was staged by the army, the people of Myanmar first showed signs of popular opposition by banging on pots and pans, as well as honking car horns in protest. To show their willingness to reject and not support the military, the Civil Disobedience Movement was begun as an online campaign by Myanmar professionals, for example, medical and health care workers (Walker, 2021). Not too soon, the CDM could

attract other people across the country. Many joined the CDM and refused to return to work. They unanimously demanded that the military relinquish power and give power back to the democratically elected NLD government, respecting their votes. Government employees from various ministries and company staff joined the Civil Disobedience Movement. Tens of thousands of government employees, including doctors, nurses, teachers from primary education and higher education departments, and staff from other ministries were fired from their job, and some were arrested by the military council. Beside government employees and company staff, ordinary people have also cooperated with CDM in terms of boycotting products and services from military-owned businesses, avoiding the state lottery, stopping placing advertisements in state-run newspapers, as well as not buying the state-owned newspapers in which the military advertises their policies and prints fake news for people in Myanmar and the international community. These actions are intended to cut off the military regime's flow of income (The Irrawaddy, 2021a).

China as a New Important Actor in Myanmar's Domestic Affairs?

During the State Administration Council (SAC) meeting in February, coup maker Min Aung Hlaing announced that the stalled hydropower projects would be resumed (Currie, 2021). At the meeting, he also mentioned that renewable energy production and hydropower projects should be prioritized in the country (Tun, 2021). This announcement prompted great concern among the people of Myanmar, who are worried about the Myitsonne dam project, which had been suspended in 2011 under the USDP government. The Ayeyarwady Myitsonne Hydropower dam project was a joint venture project between the Myanmar Ministry of Electric Power (1) (MOEP-1) and the China Power Investment Corporation. Due to public protest against the project for social and environmental concerns, President Thein Sein announced the unilateral suspension of the project on 30 September, 2011 (New light of Myanmar, 2011). Amidst the political turmoil, the military junta is stealthily continuing China's strategic infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. Under the NLD government, these projects were under review for their social and environmental impact as well as their commercial viability, although China was pushing to move them forward. One month after the seizure of power, the junta reorganized

the leading committees responsible for implementing BRI projects. Just five months into the military takeover, the junta's moves reveal that they have put China-backed projects at the top of their economic agenda, regardless of people's resentment towards China (The Irrawaddy, 2021b). While most international companies, for example, Telenor is gradually withdrawing its investments, China's economic leverage is still improving, in contrast with other international investors. Behind Beijing's non-interference policy, China is continuing its cooperation with the military council. Although China had good relations with the democratic NLD government, it is undeniable that it was solely focusing on its economic opportunities.

Results and Discussion

Five questions were formulated to answer the research question: Do you think that the military accepted any foreign support to carry out the coup?; Which country is the politically closest foreign power to the military junta during the military coup?; Do you think China is following its non-interference principle in Sino-Myanmar relations?; Which is the most influential country in Myanmar's domestic politics?; and What should China do to establish strong relations with Myanmar and become a good neighbouring country?

Regarding the military takeover, 91% of respondents answered that they suspected the Myanmar military had received secret support from a foreign power. Thus, people imagine that foreign powers were involved in Myanmar's domestic issue. 86% of respondents assume that China has had the closest ties with Myanmar during the coup. People had already perceived a close relationship between the Chinese government and the successive military junta in previous decades. Moreover, the Chinese government often protects the Myanmar government in the international arena through its diplomatic shield, and the military government has also relied on China's diplomatic assistance as well as political and military assistance for the survival of its regime.

Since 1988, the relations between Myanmar and China have improved dramatically, and because of the sanctions imposed by the Western countries, the military junta has been largely dependent on China both politically and economically. When the semi-civilian government led

by President Thein took power in 2011, the Myanmar government could counterbalance China to some extent by its new foreign policy goal of reintegration into the international community, and the Myanmar-US relations improved as a result of the government's reforms. The Myanmar government even announced the unilateral suspension of the controversial Myitsone hydropower dam project, which was signed by Myanmar and China in 2009. The Myitsone dam project is China's largest hydropower project abroad, and it will be the 15th largest dam in the world when it is constructed. In 2015, the NLD government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, could extend its relations with the West, after which the government was able to renegotiate some important economic projects with China to ensure a fair stake for Myanmar. Despite these facts, people strongly believe that China still has a great influence on Myanmar's domestic conflicts.

Furthermore, 87% of respondents think that China is interfering in the internal affairs of Myanmar, particularly in the military coup, although China says that it firmly keeps to its non-interference principle. However, China's involvement does not meet with Myanmar people's perceptions. Compared to the Western countries, China has avoided using the term 'military coup', and its stance on the military coup differs from that of the international community. In addition, China's response has been moderate to both the coup and the violent crackdown of the military on the civilians, which has made people in Myanmar suspicious of China's involvement in the military coup.

Standing on its firm perspective, that the coup and the civil war belongs to Myanmar's internal affairs, it seems Beijing is ready to deal with anyone who wields power in Naypyidaw, but China should be aware that this demeanour can also threaten its interests in Myanmar. In contrast, within hours of the coup, the United States and its allies issued a condemnation and expressed concern (Smith, 2021). The leaders of the United Nations also called for the release of all persons who were arrested by the military and for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar (ALJAZEERA, 2021). European leaders condemned the military's illegal seizure of power and demanded the immediate release of all detainees arrested in the raids (REUTERS, 2021a). The Secretary-General of the United Nations also urged the military to respect the will of the Myanmar people and adhere to democratic norms (ALJAZEERA,

2021), and UN special rapporteur Thomas Andrews on Myanmar said that it is important for the international community to condemn the military coup in “the strongest terms” (ALJAZEERA, 2021). The G7 leaders also released a statement calling upon the military to immediately stop the state of emergency, restore power to a democratically elected government, release all unjustly detained persons, and respect human rights and the rule of law (BBC News, 2021a).

While other international communities denounced the military coup, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said that China noted the military coup in Myanmar and called on all sides to properly handle their differences under the constitution and legal framework and to safeguard political and social stability (REUTERS, 2021b). China’s state-run news agency Xinhua described the coup as a “major cabinet reshuffle” (XINHUANET, 2021). China’s refusal to denounce the military leaders might be assumed to have been Beijing’s protection for the junta, deflecting some of the international condemnation and shoring up the junta’s grip of power. In addition, the ambassador affirmed that the change of the political situation in Myanmar is undoubtedly an internal affair that will have spillover effects on Myanmar’s relations with its neighbouring countries (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, 2021). China’s top diplomat, State Councillor Wang Yi said in March 2021 that “no matter how the situation in Myanmar changes, China’s determination to promote China-Myanmar relations will not waver, and China’s direction of promoting China-Myanmar friendly cooperation will not change” (REUTERS, 2021c).

Majority in Myanmar expect China to take positive engagement in the country’s domestic affairs by recognizing the National Unity Government (NUG), which has opposed the coup, and return power to the democratically elected NLD party. People also hope that China takes action or condemns the junta, as they believe that China has a great influence on the military leaders. Due to Beijing’s failure as a great power, people show their lack of trust in Beijing by arguing that Beijing should act as a good neighbour of Myanmar, displaying growing discontent towards Beijing. People’s lack of approval could be a huge challenge for Chinese businesses in Myanmar, which Beijing has experienced before, when the Myitsone hydropower dam project was put on hold in 2011. The results of the questionnaire showed Myanmar

people are dissatisfied with China because they thought that the Chinese non-interference policy was not reasonable. China uses this policy in Myanmar to achieve its own interest. At the same time, people want China to play a major role in helping Myanmar in a positive way, since 93% of the respondents answered that China is the most influential country in Myanmar's domestic politics. In this case, people might be assuming that Beijing's non-interference policy is a cover for its 'sitting on the fence' status.

The last and most critical result was that 98% of respondents want China to play an important role in the current domestic crisis in Myanmar. People want to see China reduce its close ties with the military junta and engage with the National Unity Government (NUG), the people's government fighting against the coup leaders and the junta. Instead of using the non-intervention principle, the people in Myanmar wish China was actively involved in Myanmar. Even if Beijing chose the military junta as its ally, people might welcome it, as Beijing is seen as a predictable actor. Consequently, this behaviour could improve Beijing's image as a trusted actor in the international arena. Whether Beijing admits it or not, its behaviours indicate that it indirectly supports the junta.

Conclusion

As to the question how other countries see the changing role of China, it has been found that China's non-interference policy makes it controversial among people in Myanmar, whether or not China really stands for this policy. Nevertheless, it is clear that people in Myanmar want China to play a key role in dealing with the military coup and they think that Beijing should be responsible for its great actor role for regional order. In Myanmar, the protest against the military coup has been led by the new generation (Generation Z). For the people who oppose the military rule, their ultimate goal is to eradicate the authoritarian regime in Myanmar. They are fighting against the military rule and strongly condemn any country that supports the military leaders or accepts or ignores the coup. People demand that the international community and organizations condemn the military coup and help people in Myanmar in resisting the junta. In practice, this young generation will be the future leaders of the country, and Beijing's ignorance of the will of these young people might seriously impact the future of Sino-Myanmar relations. According to

the results of the research, the hypothesis is confirmed that China is an active and relevant actor in the region in the post-Covid world, and it is expected to take responsibility for regional order. The research highlights that people demand more active engagement from China as a great power in Myanmar's affairs because they assume Beijing is a great power in the region. Moreover, political stability in Myanmar is also essential for Beijing to secure important economic projects such as the Kyaukphyu deep seaport, and the oil and gas pipeline projects that are crucial parts of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Not only to maintain its great power position but also to protect its interests in Myanmar, Beijing should consider recognizing and regarding others' perception of it, especially that of its strategic neighbour.

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