

Myanmar Beijing in a fix

Uwe Hoering, March 2021

The Chinese government has probably not been in a position like it is at present. After the ouster of the elected government in Myanmar, it finds itself sitting on the fence: Between the army (*Tatmadaw*), the Civil Disobedience Movement CDM, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD and her elected government, and the international opinion. For this reason, it also seems unlikely that it should have encouraged the coup plotters. On the contrary, for Asia correspondent Timothy McLaughlin, Peking is "the biggest loser"¹, for others, it is "not happy with the coup"², to say the least.

Chinese reflexes

Initial responses from Beijing and in Chinese media were characteristic and not very surprising: the imposition of a state of emergency, the suspension of parliament and the arrest of leading civilian members of the government were all treated as an "adjustment facing Myanmar's imbalanced power structure" and a "change of government". At least China supported a resolution in the UN Security Council, but only after the word "coup" was deleted. As usual, the reluctance was justified by the doctrine of non-interference in internal affairs. So far, so 'business as usual'.

Meanwhile, the situation is becoming increasingly uncomfortable, as this behaviour is being understood as supporting the military coup. There have been rumours that *Huawei* and ZTE equipment and Chinese experts have been airlifted in to help setting up surveillance systems.

As a result, China is increasingly the focus of protesters. Factories belonging to Chinese owners are being demolished and set on fire, there are calls for a boycott of Chinese goods, and noisy demonstrations are taking place in front of the embassy. Most disturbing for Beijing: There are threats against the pipelines that supply the south-western Chinese province of Yunnan with oil and natural gas.

So far, China's reactions to this also follow familiar patterns. If the military fails to protect China's interests, property and citizens, and especially the pipelines, it threatens its own "more drastic actions." The media should be checked. And speculations are being circulated that the U.S. is using Myanmar to put pressure on Beijing and is fomenting a "colour revolution", the spectre for authoritarian regimes from Belarus to Moscow to Beijing.

PR disaster

Beijing's policies have been under pressure before. In Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Vietnam, there have been protests, some of them violent, and in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, governments were elected that intended to restrict Chinese

influence. But the situation created by the military coup is nothing compared to that.

There is the unexpected strength of the civil disobedience protest movement and the determination of the democratic forces. There is the discredited, corrupt, nationalist Military, whose aversion to China's influence is well-known. And whose growing brutality would turn any overt attempt to collaborate with it into a public relations disaster and reinforce deep-seated popular rejection of China. An arrangement with another authoritarian, repressive regime would also be water on the mills of international criticism of the Chinese government, in addition to Hong Kong, Corona, Xinjiang, and military showdowns in Southeast Asia's waters.

BRI Cornerstone Myanmar

At stake are also significant economic and political investments.³ China has just succeeded in shedding the memories of its close alliance and good business dealings with the earlier military government⁴, which lasted until 2011. Good relations were knitted with Aung San Suu Kyi and the *National League for Democracy*. This has been honored by the NLD government⁵ with, among other things, support for China's actions in Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan and Hong Kong and the prospect of resuming construction of the *Myitstone* Dam, which was halted a decade ago after widespread protests.

China is still not only the largest investor, but the most important trading partner and arms supplier. Myanmar is also a central element in the New Silk Roads, which no longer just include China's supply infrastructure such as pipelines and access to the Indian Ocean. Under BRI 2.0, the neighbouring countries are growing in importance for China's new concept of "double circulation", the close linkage between national and regional development in all areas of the economy.

So there is an urgent need for action. "Non-action is going against Beijing's own interests", say Myanmar activists Sarah M. Brooks and Debbie Stothard, for example.⁶ More than anything else, what is needed is stability.

At present, however, it looks like more instability. The army is escalating the repression. The positions are hardening, and the conflicts are getting more and more out of control. There is a growing risk that Beijing believes it will have to resort to "drastic action" as announced. At the same time, international actors' options for exerting influence are limited.

International actors

In Southeast Asia's regional organization ASEAN, which like Beijing upholds the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member countries, critics of the coup such as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia are making cautious first attempts to work out a common policy.⁷ The explosive developments in Myanmar are viewed as a test of ASEAN's credibility and relevance.

But an informal meeting in early March failed to agree on a demand to end the coup.

Private companies from Japan, Singapore, and Thailand are distancing themselves from the crackdown and have announced that they will withdraw from joint ventures with the military-economic holdings⁸ MEHL and MEC. International corporations such as *Coca-Cola*, *Heineken*, *Metro* and *H&M* signed a statement announcing their concerns. And Western governments impose first sanctions.

But previous military governments have shown that they will ride out international isolation, even at the expense of the population. And the Japanese defence minister points out that this would drive the military regime into dependence on China.

Leaving aside whether the military will even be able to provide the kind of stability necessary for China's interests in the foreseeable future, Beijing needs the countries of the region in its standoff with the United States. It has just put its relations with ASEAN on a broader economic footing through the RCEP⁹ economic agreement. Yet Beijing is not popular in the region. A further reputational loss as a result of cooperation with the discredited military would be a bad deal.

Breaking free

Given the complicated, and escalating, situation, Myanmar is becoming a minefield where Beijing's notion of international relations, which values national sovereignty and non-interference over fundamental rights, freedom and accountability, is being severely tested.

Sitting on the fence, however, can be convenient if one has good contacts with other the stakeholders - the *Tatmadaw* from the old days, the NLD from the past decade. And Beijing has a trump card, a potential mediating role in the already decades-old conflicts with ethnic minorities.¹⁰ Karen, Shan, and Kachin militias have already made a stand against the coup plotters. The most powerful organizations, however, are still waiting to see how the situation develops, similar to Beijing. Such a peace between these "armies," the military caucus and the civilian NLD government could contribute significantly to stability and Beijing's prestige.

The catch: To get out of its tricky situation, Beijing would have to jump over its shadow and recognize the government that emerged from last November's elections, and thus democratic conditions. Illusory? Probably. "But now is the time for China to prove it is a truly good neighbor", *The Atlantic* quotes Sandar Min, NLD member of the government forced underground¹¹.

Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version)

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/02/what-myanmars-coup-means-china/618101/>

² <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Coup/China-treads-lightly-on-Myanmar-coup-with-billions-at-stake>

³ <https://beltandroad.blog/2021/01/23/myanmar-baustellen-abseits-der-seidenstrassen/>

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/295260135_Economic_Relations_Between_Myanmar_and_China

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/02/what-myanmars-coup-means-china/618101/>

⁶ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/chinas-myanmar-mess/>

⁷ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/indonesia-malaysia-call-for-urgent-asean-summit-on-myanmar/>

⁸ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFM-Myanmar/EconomicInterestsMyanmarMilitary/A_HRC_42_CRP_3.pdf

⁹ <https://beltandroad.blog/2020/11/16/1310/>

¹⁰ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Coup/Myanmar-s-ethnic-rebels-isolate-junta-ahead-of-Armed-Forces-Day>

¹¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/02/what-myanmars-coup-means-china/618101/>