

Associate Paper

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Myanmar's Latest Coup: What is to be Done?

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Key Points

- Predictably, the international community cannot agree on a concerted response to the military coup d'état which took place in Myanmar on 1 February.
- Past policy approaches towards Myanmar can be divided into three broad schools, led by idealists, realists and pragmatists.
- None of these schools have answers to the problem of how to respond in a principled way to a regime that rejects international norms and is protected by powerful friends.
- It is imperative that foreign governments fully take into account Myanmar's unique circumstances and the intensely nationalistic mindset of its military leadership.
- Whatever international responses are made to the coup, they are bound to be imperfect and will not result in any improvements in Myanmar's situation over the short term.

Summary

The international community has never been able to agree on the best approach towards Myanmar, with policies ranging over the years from tough sanctions to uncritical engagement. Successive Myanmar governments have exploited these differences to their advantage. The 1 February coup has highlighted this lack of consensus and the inability of the international community to exert any real pressure on Myanmar's military leaders. Safe within the country's borders and supported by powerful friends, they are determined to pursue their own nationalistic agenda. In formulating their responses, governments and

international organisations will need to weigh the different arguments put forward by idealists, realists and pragmatists. Even so, there are no quick or easy answers to the complex questions surrounding modern Myanmar. Whatever policies are adopted by the international community over the short term, they are unlikely to reduce the many difficult challenges faced by the Myanmar people. They may even increase them.

Analysis

Myanmar has always had the capacity to surprise. This is usually due to a dearth of reliable information about internal developments, and a tendency on the part of outsiders to misread the tea leaves. It is also a highly personalised society, in which a few individuals can change the course of history with one decision. That has not stopped a flood of articles by observers and popular pundits trying to explain why no-one saw the coup coming and asking what could have been done to prevent it. As Simon Tisdall has stated, however, ‘recriminations over the coup in Myanmar are beside the point. The issue is what is the international community going to do about it? The quick answer is, not a lot.’¹

International Reactions

The coup in Myanmar came as a shock to most people. There had been signs that the armed forces (known as the *Tatmadaw*), had run out of patience with Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD), and were contemplating drastic action. This rattled many in Myanmar, and even prompted a warning from several of the [Western embassies](#) there. However, few foreign observers believed that the generals would overturn the constitution they had taken such pains to produce in 2008, and which had served them well over the past ten years. In so many ways, and for so many sectors of Myanmar society, a coup seemed to be completely counter-productive.

Yet, as had occurred in 1958, 1962 and again in 1988, the generals had their own perceptions, their own priorities and, as history has proved yet again, their own plans. On 1 February, they declared a one-year state of emergency, transferred all executive powers to the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and began detaining politicians, activists and others, including an Australian economic advisor to State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. These actions provoked a growing level of popular unrest, which to date has been met with a minimum of force. How long that situation lasts, however, remains to be seen. Indeed, much about the coup is [still unknown](#).

The international reaction has followed predictable lines. The Western democracies immediately condemned the coup, called for the Tatmadaw to recognise the results of the November 2020 election (which resulted in a landslide for the NLD), and to turn power over to Aung San Suu Kyi’s government. Most also announced that they were either considering or implementing punitive measures against the new military regime. These ranged from the suspension of training programmes and development assistance to arms embargoes and travel bans. The US announced that it had frozen Myanmar’s assets and would be imposing

¹ Tisdall, S., ‘Analysis: Myanmar. Impunity Reigns’, *Guardian Weekly*, 12 February 2021, p. 19.

targeted sanctions against senior military officers and military enterprises. The EU is still deliberating, but may yet do the same.

Most other countries responded in a more cautious fashion. China [dismissed the coup](#) as a “major cabinet reshuffle” and effectively called for an immediate return to business as usual. Japan and South Korea, both of which have significant economic interests in Myanmar, including with military-backed enterprises, urged all parties to reconcile their differences. Brunei, as Chair of ASEAN, stated its concern, as did Malaysia and Indonesia. No doubt all three still had in mind the brutal “area clearance operations” conducted against Myanmar’s Muslim Rohingyas in 2016-17. Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, none of which could claim any credible democratic credentials, described the coup in Myanmar as ‘[an internal matter](#)’.

The UN Secretary-General [stated that](#) the ‘unacceptable’ coup ‘must fail’, but did not elaborate on how this aim might be achieved, except through public pressure. Britain’s UN representative took a resolution to an emergency session of the Security Council, but a number of countries, including China, Russia, India and Vietnam, expressed reservations about its strong wording. A joint statement was eventually issued, calling on all parties to the dispute to resolve their differences peacefully. However, the statement [did not condemn](#) the Tatmadaw’s actions. It did not even mention the word “coup”. With China and others protecting the new military regime, it is unlikely that the UN will be able to take more effective measures.

So, with these initial responses on the public record, what is to be done? History can offer some useful lessons, although few encourage optimism. Myanmar has been the focus of international attention for the past 30 years or so, during which time most policy options have been explored, albeit with mixed results. For heuristic purposes, they can be divided into three broad schools of thought. These might be described as the idealist, the realist and the pragmatist schools. It is also important to consider the mindset of the Tatmadaw’s leadership, for that above all will determine how effective any of the responses will be.

The Idealists

It has long been the mantra of the Western democracies, and the professed belief of many other countries, that the world is best served by the universal observance of international laws, expressed through governments chosen by free peoples and conducted according to ethical standards. Such principles have been cited in countless speeches, announcements and policies made in the wake of coups and human rights violations in Myanmar. They followed the abortive pro-democracy uprising in 1988, for example, and underpinned the proceedings of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2019 when Myanmar was charged with conducting a campaign of genocide against the Rohingyas.

Myanmar’s consistent failure to observe international laws and abide by such principles has resulted in numerous calls for successive governments to be held to account. They have usually been accompanied by demands that Myanmar’s generals (and more recently Aung San Suu Kyi herself) be punished for their actions (or inaction). Over the years, pressure has been applied through economic sanctions, travel bans, assets freezes and arms embargoes. The aim has not only been to punish those responsible for abuses, but also to demonstrate

that there is a price to pay for a failure to observe what are generally accepted as international norms.²

There have also been efforts to boost the morale of, and provide practical assistance to, the democratic movement in Myanmar. This has included international support for the once-revered opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who, over the course of her 15 years under house arrest received numerous awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize. These efforts have also included a range of measures designed to assist activist and exile groups based outside the country. Financial support has been given to non-violent protesters, democratic ideals have been encouraged through publications and radio broadcasts, and the Tatmadaw's repeated violations of humanitarian law have been widely exposed.

Many of these measures have been more symbolic than practical. Yet, in one sense, their effectiveness (or otherwise) is not the point. Democratic governments and organisations like the UN need to demonstrate, both to their own constituents and to the international community as a whole that the rule of law is important, and that the principles on which these laws are based are being observed and supported. Such gestures are also important for the statement they make about international values and norms of behaviour. They also deny to successive military regimes in Myanmar the recognition they have craved, by emphasising their lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the world.

The Realists

While such policies are widely supported in principle, there is a strong belief in some quarters that their proponents are being naïve if they think that public calls for change and symbolic gestures will make any real difference. They may satisfy at one level, but simply bounce off the generals, who are safe in Myanmar and cannot be held to account, either by their own people or the international community. Their offshore funds (both official and private) are likely to be in places like Singapore or Hong Kong where access is difficult. Such "realists" are accused of cynicism, but they claim that they are simply hard-headed observers prepared to face the harsh realities of the situation in Myanmar.

There are some, for example, who believe that the military leadership has [never intended](#) to permit a genuine democracy to develop in Myanmar, and that the carefully crafted constitution which has provided the basis for a "disciplined democracy" since 2011 has always been part of an elaborate ruse. The members of this school believe that the generals have only ever been interested in providing the outward appearance of a transition to democracy in order to gull the international community into lifting sanctions, investing in Myanmar's struggling economy and enabling the armed forces to strengthen their position, both domestically and internationally.

One of the most outspoken members of this school, David Mathieson, has [decried the way](#) in which the democracies have fallen for this ploy and 'engaged' the regime. He has lambasted the 'pathology of ingratiation' that he believes has defined the West's attitude towards Myanmar. He also claims that 'the West's at first tentative, then gushing embrace

² Much less thought has been given to how sanctions might eventually be removed.

of the military was less about Tatmadaw deception and more about self-delusion'. To him, and others like him, the efforts made by foreign governments over the past ten years to encourage the transition to a genuinely democratic political system and to boost Myanmar's economy have been prompted by hope and greed.

According to the realists, a massive amount of money has been wasted on projects that are not likely to produce results. They point to the "peace-industrial complex", consisting of foreign "experts" and "consultants" who have flooded into Myanmar in recent years.³ Despite a [lack of familiarity with Myanmar](#), these advisors aim to help the ethnic armed groups, Tatmadaw and central government find solutions to conflicts that stretch back decades. There seems to be an [underlying assumption](#) on the part of their foreign sponsors that, without the advice of outsiders, those groups directly involved in these extraordinarily complex problems would not be able to find a satisfactory outcome.

Yet, as Bertil Lintner has pointed out, decades of peacemaking have resulted in failure primarily because the core demands of the ethnic communities have never been seriously addressed, as they run counter to the idea of a unitary state dominated by the Tatmadaw and ethnic Burman Buddhists. The armed forces and other central authorities 'have always demanded that the rebels surrender but never offered them more than rehabilitation and business opportunities'.⁴ In these circumstances, it is little wonder that the role of "foreign do-gooders" has been questioned. It has even been claimed that they have given respectability to the armed forces and its spoiling role.

The Pragmatists

Idealism and realism, while understandable in the circumstances, offer few returns to those governments looking to make a genuine contribution to the problem. The members of a third school have argued that a clear-eyed, open-minded, patient and pragmatic approach would pay higher dividends over the longer term.

Diplomacy, it is said, is the art of the possible. It recognises that the world is a complex and volatile arena for many competing ideas and interests. Faced with seemingly intractable problems, the most viable outcomes usually demand compromises, and an understanding that pure ideals sometimes need to be sacrificed and short term goals set aside. Often, the most effective policies are those that deliver the greatest good to the greatest number (to cite one approach), or which hold out the promise of gradual improvements over time. At times, such approaches can offer the best hope of change in the face of entrenched thinking and a refusal by others to shift their positions.

To take one example, Australia has long been conducting a small military-military programme with the Tatmadaw. This has been condemned by human rights campaigners as

³ For example, between 2011 and 2016, more than US\$100 million was poured into peace programmes, with little result. See: Saw Yan Naing, 'Where has Burma's Peace Money Gone?', *The Irrawaddy*, 1 April 2016. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/where-has-burmas-peace-money-gone.html>

⁴ Lintner, B., *Why Burma's Peace Efforts Have Failed to End Its Internal Wars*, Peaceworks № 169, (October 2020), United States Institute of Peace: Washington DC, p. 24.

giving legitimacy to Myanmar's armed forces, an organisation that over the past 60 years has acquired an appalling human rights record, including accusations of genocide against the Rohingyas and other ethnic minorities. Activists and others have even accused the Australian Government, in the name of increasing the Tatmadaw's professionalism, of helping it to improve its capabilities, and thus its ability to repress the people of Myanmar.

The Australian authorities are not blind to the Tatmadaw's true nature, but they feel that it is important to [keep open](#) lines of communication. After all, even before the coup it was the most powerful institution in Myanmar. Also, while no-one expects that short courses on human rights and English language lessons are going to convert Myanmar officers into Jeffersonian democrats, it is hoped that greater exposure to the established norms of international conduct might at least moderate their political thinking.⁵ Those attending such classes can also provide an avenue for future contacts in a closed society.

The atrocities perpetrated by Myanmar's security forces against the Rohingyas in 2016-17 seem to make a mockery of such hopes. However, governments that want to help ameliorate conditions in Myanmar are often left with little option but to aim for gradual and long-term improvements. Since 2012, for example, the EU has provided training to the Myanmar Police in crowd control, a policy now being [criticised](#) by human rights campaigners. Yet, the rubber bullets and water cannon employed against demonstrators since 1 February have to be seen as better options than the firing of live rounds, as was customary in the past. Pragmatists take what gains they can, where they find them.

The Tatmadaw's Mindset

All these calculations must be considered against the mindset of the Myanmar armed forces leadership. For, not to do so leaves policies hanging in a vacuum, and risks major miscalculations and misguided actions. Indeed, the international community's almost complete failure significantly to influence developments in Myanmar over the past 30 years can be sheeted home in part at least to the failure of politicians and officials to heed expert advice and seriously consider what drives the generals, what influences their thinking and actions, and what, if anything, might be able to change their collective mind.

For more than half a century, Myanmar's armed forces leadership has demonstrated an intense nationalism that is informed by a deep insecurity about the centrifugal social forces within Myanmar and the predatory strategies of foreign countries. Military recruits are taught that the armed forces have held the country together in the face of repeated challenges to its unity, stability and sovereignty. They are encouraged to be suspicious of civilian politicians, given their apparent tendency to argue among themselves and favour personal interests over national ones. They are also told that the Tatmadaw has earned itself a central place in national politics and has a duty to hold the country together.

In this regard, it is important to consider the "three national causes" that were at the heart of the former military regime's thinking, so much so that they were written into the 2008 constitution. These were "non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national

⁵ Kinley, D. and Wilson, T., *Engaging a Pariah: Human Rights Training in Burma/Myanmar*, Legal Studies Research Paper No 06/26, (October 2006), Sydney Law School, University of Sydney.

solidarity and consolidation of sovereignty”. They were often mocked by foreigners, especially when they constantly appeared in daily newspapers, in books and on billboards around the country, but they were not just propaganda slogans. They represented the core values of the armed forces and formed the basis for many of their actions. They still do.

The three “causes” are framed within an equally deep conviction that foreigners cannot really understand Myanmar. Only those born there, who have been raised there and have imbibed its cultural and social norms, can truly know what is best for the country and what should be done to manage its many complex challenges. This belief is not only found in the armed forces. In 2019, for example, when Aung San Suu Kyi spoke at the ICJ, [she said that](#) ‘the situation in Rakhine (state) is complex and not easy to fathom’. The clear implication was that foreigners could not understand the situation and should keep out of Myanmar’s internal affairs.

It is also relevant that for decades Myanmar pursued policies of economic autarky and strict neutrality in foreign affairs. This not only reflected, but also encouraged, a sense of self-reliance, a feeling that Myanmar could make up its own rules, go its own way, and interact with the international community on its own terms. That mindset changed to a certain extent after the 1988 uprising, and the advent of a more open-minded and pragmatic military leadership. However, there remains a deep suspicion of foreigners and a conviction that Myanmar must be prepared to pay a high price if that is required for its continued independence and sovereignty.

Reflections

These are all very broad generalisations that many would challenge, and it is easy to find exceptions to every rule. Even so, the broad principles behind them need to be taken into account by members of the international community if they hope to change the generals’ thinking, and thus their policies. This has not always been the case. For example, after 1988, the US and several other countries imposed sanctions against Myanmar that were even harsher than those against North Korea. Yet, it was later acknowledged by the same governments that sanctions had not changed the thinking of Myanmar’s military regime, nor persuaded its leadership to change any of its core policies.

Indeed, a strong argument can be mounted that the political rhetoric levelled at the military regime between 1988 and 2011, the economic sanctions imposed and other measures taken to undermine the military regime and replace it with a democratic government under Aung San Suu Kyi proved to be counterproductive. They not only failed to shift the generals’ thinking but strengthened their determination to resist foreign pressures. The punitive measures arguably contributed to a bunker mentality that encouraged a major military expansion, the consolidation of the police state and a greater resistance to any measures (including aid) that exposed the country to foreign influences.

The Obama Administration accepted that [economic sanctions](#) hurt the general population of Myanmar most, and had only a minor impact on the generals. Some politicians and activist groups are still reluctant to accept that fact. However, they have been forced to admit that, despite all the tough measures imposed, during this period Myanmar became strategically,

militarily, politically and economically stronger than it had been at any time since the country regained its independence in 1948. Despite some claims to the contrary, the Tatmadaw's decision to permit the transition to a disciplined democracy in 2011 was made from a position of strength, not weakness.

Conclusion

If these arguments are accepted, then it is easier to understand the dilemma faced by countries like Australia in responding to the latest coup in Myanmar. Their domestic constituencies, not to mention their commitment to international law and universal values, demand that they strongly condemn recent events. They need to be seen to be upholding widely accepted principles, and supporting the people of Myanmar, who have demonstrated time and again (most recently in last November's elections) that they wish to be governed by their own representatives, under a genuine democracy.

Policymakers also need to take into account the fact that, throughout modern history, Myanmar has successfully resisted external pressures, a position now made much easier by the support it receives from its immediate neighbours, notably China, regional countries and great powers like Russia. Strong rhetoric and symbolic gestures may satisfy Western democracies at one level, but a more sophisticated and long-term approach will be needed to have any real impact. For only in that way, will concerned countries and international organisations have any hope of helping the people of Myanmar.

Yet the harsh reality is that the international community is very limited in what it can do to respond to such developments. Bear in mind too that democratic regimes around the world are in retreat. Authoritarian regimes are becoming more common, and more brazen. According to *The Economist's* [latest survey](#), only 8.4% of the world's population live in a fully functioning democracy, while more than one-third live under authoritarian rule. The tide of peoples' revolutions in North Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia seen after the Cold War is going out. Sadly Myanmar, once seen as a beacon of hope in a troubled world, must now be counted among the many countries going backwards.

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