

Commentary

Can China Prevent Further Bloodshed in Myanmar?

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As chaos and crackdown continue across Myanmar, there is a significant risk that the country could descend into civil war or become a “failed state.”

Instability in Myanmar would create a major headache for the region and for China and India in particular. It would be a nightmare for the country’s two giant neighbors. The question now is, how can anyone prevent this?

Last week, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that all parties in Myanmar should keep calm and exercise restraint, address their differences through dialogue and consultation within the constitutional and legal framework, and continue to advance the democratic transition.

“China will not change the course of promoting friendship and cooperation, no matter how the situation evolves,” Wang Yi said in his annual press conference. Instead, Beijing will try to bring about reconciliation by engaging with all relevant parties, he said.

China has faced strong condemnation from the people of Myanmar following its failure to condemn those responsible for the coup. Amid ongoing, nationwide, mass anti-coup demonstrations, many protesters gathered daily in front of the Chinese Embassy in Yangon last month, demanding that China refuse to support the military regime.

Young people across the country have also launched campaigns to boycott Chinese products and called on Myanmar employees of large Chinese projects to participate in the civil disobedience movement (CDM), to show their opposition to the military regime. There has also been anger over allegations that China was sending technicians to help the military build an Internet firewall.

Faced with growing anger toward Beijing, Chen Hai, China’s ambassador to Myanmar, told local media that the current situation in the country is “absolutely not what China wants to see.”

Chen Hai also said Beijing was not informed in advance of the military takeover, adding that China hoped all parties in Myanmar “could handle the current problem through dialogue and consultation properly and lead the country back on track as soon as possible.”

China has characterized the Myanmar military’s takeover—internationally condemned as a coup—as a “major cabinet reshuffle.” Along with Russia, China blocked a recent effort by the UN Security Council (UNSC) to condemn the military’s actions.

Beijing and Moscow continued to defend the military regime at a recent special session of the UN Human Rights Council, insisting that the seizure of power from the democratically elected government was an internal affair.

But Myanmar citizens responded by stepping up their criticism of China and its economic interests, including gas pipelines, in Myanmar.

According to a leaked document, Beijing held an emergency meeting with Myanmar officials from the Home Affairs and Foreign ministries. The document revealed that Bai Tian, the director-general of the Department of External Security Affairs under the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asked the military regime to assure the security of oil and natural gas pipelines, following the emergence of anti-Chinese sentiment across the country because to its stance on the coup.

That drew a sharp response from the people of Myanmar on social media, suggesting that whether or not the pipelines are blown up is an “internal affair.”

Now China’s geopolitical interest and economic interest in Myanmar are under stress. Beijing will lose the most if Myanmar descends into civil war. (China supplies arms and ammunition to ethnic rebels in the north, a policy that also upsets the generals.)

China’s key strategic interests include an economic corridor between southern China and Kyaukpyu port on the Indian Ocean, part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and gas pipelines. China also has several other projects including new city projects in Yangon and Mandalay.

Western nations and the international community at large have called on the junta to return the elected government under the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi leadership to power. That is not likely to happen at this stage.

Ethnic armed groups in the south and north are watching the situation closely. Ethnic armed groups in the north do not oppose the coup. (They will follow China’s lead.)

In the south, Myanmar’s oldest ethnic armed groups—ethnic Karen, Mon and Shan rebel armies—have expressed concern over the military coup and the detention of government leaders. They also see that China could play a crucial role in preventing further bloodshed. China’s oil and gas pipelines run through Shan State and several other impending projects will also go through Shan State.

It is clear that China’s geostrategic interests are under threat, if Myanmar descends into civil war. If the risks are higher, China will intervene diplomatically.

If Myanmar becomes increasingly unstable, China will most likely intervene to persuade the junta to refrain from its crackdown and free elected leaders. But it is still uncertain how China can ask both parties to negotiate.

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Myanmar Foreign Ministry Staff Detained Over China Meeting Leak

At least two officials from Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Naypyitaw have

reportedly been detained over a leaked document about an emergency meeting with the Chinese government representatives.

Staff said a ministerial assistant director, U Chan Aye, was taken from the building by six plainclothes officers on Tuesday morning.

“When he got into a car, they put a hood on his head,” a witness said.

Another assistant director, U Soe Thu Ra, was also reportedly detained in the evening. He allegedly recorded the minutes during a meeting with Chinese representatives.

The two men’s families said they were being treated well and were still under interrogation.

A leaked document spread on social media at the weekend revealing that a Chinese delegation held an emergency meeting with home affairs and foreign ministry staff in late February.

The Chinese delegation reportedly asked the military regime to boost security for its pipeline projects amid rising anti-Chinese sentiment across the country due to its defense of the regime, the document said. Moreover, China asked the military regime to pressure the media to help reduce skepticism towards China, according to the document.

In response, protesters said they would intensify efforts against China’s interests in Myanmar. They also threatened to blow up the oil and gas pipeline and oppose all Chinese projects across the country if China continues to block United Nations Security Council action against the regime.

Since the coup on Feb. 1, nearly 30 percent of foreign ministry staff have joined the civil disobedience movement against the regime, refusing to work until democracy is restored.

In late February, nine ministerial staff were sued by the military regime. Nearly 20 diplomats based in the US, UK, Japan, Germany, Switzerland and Norway have participated in the civil disobedience movement after the junta intensified its crackdown on protesters.

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