

Commentary

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) Movement Unmasks China's Meddling in Myanmar

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China is feeling defensive. Facing daily protests in front of the Chinese Embassy in Yangon, Ambassador Chen Hai insisted to local media on Monday that the current situation in Myanmar is “absolutely not what China wants to see”. With public anger growing in Myanmar toward Beijing over its perceived support for the military regime, he asserted that “Both the National League for Democracy and the Tatmadaw [Myanmar's military] maintain friendly relations with China.”

Since the military staged a coup overthrowing the elected government, Beijing has closely monitored the unfolding situation in Myanmar. Beijing is in constant contact with both Chinese diplomats in Yangon and regime officials in Naypyitaw.

Meanwhile, the protests in front of the Chinese Embassy continue to grow. Why? The initial trigger was China's move—made jointly with Russia—to block a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the coup.

Rubbing salt in the wound, soon after the military takeover, Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece the Global Times downplayed the coup as an adjustment of the power structure, describing it as a “major cabinet reshuffle”. The move seemed to address the generals' complaint to visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi weeks before the coup that Myanmar's Nov. 8 general election was tainted by voter fraud.

Since then, China has endorsed a watered-down UNSC statement expressing “deep concern” over the coup d'état and voicing support for the country's “democratic transition.” But 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.



A sit-in protest against China's support for the military regime at the Chinese Embassy in Yangon on Feb.15. /Nan Lwin / The Irrawaddy

Now, the Chinese are accused of sending information technology experts to help the regime build an internet firewall; the allegations have been fueled by the arrival in Yangon of suspicious Chinese flights.

Chen dismissed the claims, saying, "These are completely nonsense and even ridiculous accusations." However, on the ground, protesters say that without Chinese and Russian assistance, Myanmar's military would not have the capability to disrupt internet connections, build a firewall and conduct digital surveillance.

Long memories

Old, bad memories have come back to haunt many Myanmar citizens. A year after the military brutally crushed the nationwide uprising in 1988, Myanmar's leaders found allies in the region, as China and several other neighboring countries made known their desire to see the regime succeed.

In fact, Myanmar's leaders were the first to express solidarity with Beijing after it cracked down on demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in 1989.

The remarks of then-Brigadier General Khin Nyunt, who was at the time Myanmar's intelligence chief and Secretary 1 of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, were quite significant. "We sympathize with the People's Republic of China, as disturbances similar to those in Myanmar last year [recently also] broke out in the People's Republic," he said in 1989.

Two years later, in 1991, China became the first country to sell arms, jet fighters, frigates and other major military hardware to Myanmar since the junta took power, cementing the cozy relations between the two governments.

CDM's challenge to Xi

Neither the coup makers nor Myanmar's ousted government leaders (now in custody) dared to challenge the Chinese president, but the growing civil disobedience movement (CDM) has unmasked China's longstanding greed, exploitation of resources and political interference in Myanmar.

A few months before Myanmar held its general election in 2015, President Xi Jinping made a bold decision to invite then opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to Beijing and received her in the Great Hall of the People. The US and many Western leaders also welcomed her to their capitals.

In 2020, Xi visited Myanmar to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, with the Chinese leader making his country's southern neighbor the first stop on his well-

choreographed diplomatic itinerary for the year.



Chinese President Xi Jinping (right) and Myanmar State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (left) at the launch ceremony for events to mark the 70th anniversary of China-Myanmar diplomatic relations in Naypyitaw in January 2020. / Myanmar State Counselor's Office / Facebook

In a signed opinion piece published in state-run newspapers in Myanmar, Xi said China wanted to “write a new chapter” in the two countries’ long friendship.

At the time, visiting Chinese officials confided that they respected Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her political stance. They also said that compared to the notoriously corrupt generals that ran the previous regime, the Chinese found the State Counselor pragmatic and believed she would keep her promises on Chinese-funded projects in Myanmar. At the same time, the Chinese also complained that several Chinese-funded projects under Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s government were non-starters and worried about growing Western influence on her government and in Myanmar.

Indeed, China’s geopolitical, economic and strategic interests in Myanmar are currently the subject of much debate, with critics saying Myanmar is moving back into China’s orbit—or even that Myanmar is struggling to maintain its neutrality and independence.

One thing is certain: many Myanmar citizens—some military generals among them—have developed a deep-seated fear of China.

In any case, China’s backing of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi displeased the generals, though the Chinese did their best to maintain steady relations with the men in uniform.

However, the military suspects that through the Daw Khin Kyi Foundation—a charitable organization established by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and named for her mother—the Chinese and some Western-based international organizations, including billionaire George Soros’ Open Society Foundation, funded the 2020 election campaign of the National League for Democracy.

The military is now investigating the finances of the foundation in connection with foreign funding; it is expected that this will lead to more charges being brought against Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Arming rebels

Tracing back military chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s public comments and interviews over the past two years, we can see that he targeted China with implicit criticism on occasion. Speaking to the media in Russia in July, he called for international cooperation in the fight against terrorism and claimed that terrorist groups exist because of the strong forces that support them. So who, exactly, are these strong forces he is referring to?



UWSA prepares for a military parade to celebrate the armed group's 30th anniversary parade in Panghsang, the capital of the Wa Self-Administered Region, in 2019. / The Irrawaddy

Many believe his comment was aimed at China, which the Myanmar military suspects is continuing to provide arms to ethnic rebel groups along the Myanmar-China border. (These ethnic rebel groups are in China's pocket; proof of that could be seen in the numerous statements they issued when Xi's plane landed in Myanmar in 2020.)

Indeed, Myanmar's generals are wary of China's influence over the ethnic rebels. In fact, Chinese officials held a meeting with leaders of some ethnic insurgent groups in the north just days before the coup in Myanmar. This shows that both the Chinese and the ethnic insurgents had knowledge of the coup in advance.

It is easy to imagine that in the coming months Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing will approach Beijing to nudge northern rebel forces to come to the negotiating table, where the coup leaders want to demonstrate they can achieve something that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's government could not: Peace. The ethnic groups have been quiet since the coup; the Kachin Independence Organization issued a vague statement calling for calm, but the armed groups' wait-and-see approach has caused some anger among the public as the CDM movement spreads.

The fact is, China will side with the regime in Naypyitaw.

Read Chen's statement. He said, "The National League for Democracy, chaired by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, maintains good relations with China, and commits to jointly promoting building a China-Myanmar community with a shared future, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and other practical cooperation with the Chinese side. We keep an eye on the situation of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and others. The UN Security Council's press statement reflects the common position of the international community, including China."

It is all about Chinese projects in Myanmar.

We know from history that China is not to be trusted. But Myanmar's people—including the youth and those who are out on the streets as part of the CDM—want Beijing to take their side.

The CDM has put China in the spotlight. In so doing, it has caused damage, once again, to China's image on the local and global stages. The sad fact is, no matter who is on the throne in Myanmar, Xi wants his Belt and Road Initiative projects to go forward; this is China's priority.

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P.S.

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