

Burma

Deadly Attack on Pipeline Station Spotlights China's High Stakes in Myanmar

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Since Myanmar's military staged a coup on Feb. 1, no country seems more concerned than China over the unfolding chaos in the Southeast Asian nation. Given its investments in major infrastructure and other projects in the country, as well as its roughly US\$16-million per day border trade with Myanmar, Beijing has good reason to be worried.

Among its many investments in its southern neighbor, the 800-kilometer-long oil and natural gas twin pipelines that run from Myanmar's western region to China are seen as having strategic importance. The crude oil pipeline transports 22 million tons annually, while the natural gas pipeline carries 12 billion cubic meters of gas.

The importance of the project was highlighted in February when Chinese officials held an emergency meeting with Myanmar officials, at which they urged the military regime to tighten security measures for the pipelines. They said the project is a crucial part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Myanmar and insisted that "any damage to the pipelines would cause huge losses for both countries." The request came amid growing anti-China sentiment in Myanmar, where protesters—angered by Beijing's blocking of the UN Security Council (UNSC)'s efforts to take action against the coup leaders—have threatened to blow up the pipelines.

Now, following Wednesday's deadly attack on a group of security personnel who were standing guard at the pipelines' off-take station in Mandalay, China's concerns will only have intensified. Military-owned Myawaddy TV hastily reported on the incident on the same day that three guards at the "oil and natural gas station"—as they put it—in Singtaing Township were slashed to death by unidentified attackers. Everyone in the neighborhood knows that "the station" refers to the Chinese-owned pipeline station. The sword and machete attack on the policemen was undoubtedly part of Myanmar's growing popular armed resistance against the regime.

Despite the deaths of the guards, the twin pipelines are so far relatively safe. Down in Yangon, in March, 32 China-backed factories in the Hlaingtharyar Industrial Zone were torched amid the regime's deadly crackdowns on protesters. China accused protesters of setting the factories alight, but protesters denied the allegations, saying the attacks were a plot by the military to justify harsher crackdowns.

It's true that Myanmar has never seen such large-scale arson attacks against Chinese properties before. With the killings of the guards at the substation, Beijing should be worried about the safety of the pipelines, as anti-regime activism and anti-China sentiment are now running high.

Bertil Lintner, a Swedish journalist who has covered Myanmar and Asia for several decades, said it is understandable that many people in Myanmar are upset with the Chinese authorities, given their efforts over many decades to block any move by the UNSC to condemn atrocities committed by

military governments in Myanmar or to introduce arms embargos against them. It would come as no surprise if attacks were carried out against, for instance, the pipelines, he said. "And attitudes will not change unless the Chinese government stops its support for the Myanmar military. That should be a real concern."

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