

Final Report | February 2022

Myanmar Study Group

Anatomy of the Military Coup and
Recommendations for the US Response



UNITED STATES
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Myanmar Study Group (MSG) members express their support for the general findings and recommendations reached by the group, but do not necessarily endorse every statement or judgment in the report. They participate in the study group in their personal capacities, and the views expressed are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of their institutions or employers.

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Executive Summary

Today's crisis in Myanmar directly challenges interests and values that are foundations of US foreign policy: democracy, human rights, rule of law, prosperity, and security.¹ It would be an abrogation of those foundations were the United States to ignore or neglect the tragedy unfolding in Myanmar today. The crisis in Myanmar also presents an opportunity for the United States to demonstrate its commitment to diplomatic engagement that promotes a rules-based international order.

The United States and its major Asian and European allies share many geostrategic interests in Myanmar, the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia. For the United States, which is a leading source of foreign development assistance in Southeast Asia and key trade partner to the region, the possibilities offered by a free and prosperous Myanmar—given its strategic location, wealth of resources, and educated and widely pro-American population—are of vital interest.

Under the current circumstances, Myanmar is highly vulnerable to powerful external and internal forces seeking to dominate its territory given the instability, dire poverty, and lack of effective governance and rule of law brought on by the February 1, 2021 military coup. Among the most immediate of these threats—in addition to the Myanmar military and its supporters—are China, Russia, and international criminal networks.

In particular, the United States risks ceding important geostrategic influence to China and others in the region if it fails to take a more active role in the current conflict. Myanmar could also become a haven for criminal groups to operate from unregulated spaces, protected by the corrupt junta, elevating US concerns about the rise of international organized crime in Asia that also targets the United States. Myanmar's military has already demonstrated a wanton disregard for regional stability by causing serial mass migrations into neighboring countries. A chaotic Myanmar also risks becoming a petri dish for new COVID variants and other deadly diseases in ungoverned or unreachable areas of the country.

The United States is deeply committed to promoting human rights, pursuing accountability and justice for the military's abuses, and supporting survivors of human rights violations. The United States has allocated more than \$1.3 billion for assisting Rohingya refugees who were displaced across the region after the military's atrocities in 2016 and 2017. These investments have been undermined by the coup, rendering the prospects for the safe return of Rohingya and other refugees impossible in the near future.

The United States cannot afford to treat the grave setback in Myanmar as a distant distraction of little consequence to its larger interests in Asia.

Key Assessments and Findings

The following assessments and findings are based on the deliberations of the Myanmar Study Group over the course of discussions between April and September 2021. The study group's expertise was supplemented by consultations with key stakeholders in Myanmar and throughout the region to ensure that the perspectives of those most directly affected were taken into account.

1. **Myanmar's February 1, 2021 coup, staged by military leaders to topple the democratically elected government, has reversed ten years of progress and reform**, returning governance to autocratic military rule.
2. **Perpetrators of the coup seriously misjudged the determination of the majority of the civilian population to refuse to return to military dictatorship and relinquish the freedoms gained under elected government.** Led by youth groups and civil servants in the newly formed Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), people took to the streets in mass peaceful protest, later forming several political coalitions to challenge the legitimacy of the coup regime.
3. Soon after the coup, the CDM was joined by a faction of the deposed elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government, which formed the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, to serve as the interim elected legislature. In turn, the National Unity Government (NUG), including several ethnic minority leaders, was formed to serve as the executive branch. While the NUG has strong public support, especially among the Bamar ethnic majority, **the diverse anti-coup movement, which includes a range of ethnic and religious minority organizations and armed groups, has failed to fully unify because of residual distrust between the NLD, civil society, and ethnic minority communities.** The NUG, civil society, and some ethnic minority representatives, including key political parties, established a negotiation platform, the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), to discuss a political roadmap for a future Myanmar. Through the NUCC, the anti-coup movement has achieved agreement on a range of topics, including the abolition of the 2008 constitution, but negotiations on interethnic power sharing and a future federal democratic governance structure remain fraught.



Protesters take part in an anti-coup demonstration in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, on February 7, 2021, six days after the military deposed the democratically elected National League for Democracy government. The protesters in Yangon were joined by hundreds of thousands of others who marched in cities and towns across the country. (Photo by New York Times)

4. **The violence of the military response led some protesters to flee to remote areas under the control of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs),** where they received refuge and military training to protect their communities from the marauding army. Fanning out across the country, they organized into a multitude of local People's Defense Forces (PDFs) in villages, towns, and cities in the center of the country to challenge military and police forces, local administrators, and civilians connected with the junta. By October, PDFs were operating in most of the country's townships but remained highly atomized in their struggle against military rule, lacking unified leadership or common longer-term objectives.

5. **Several EAOs, such as the Arakan, Kachin, Karen, Shan, and Wa forces, have used the situation to expand their territorial control in defiance of military domination,** gaining significantly greater autonomy over their own administration. PDF fighters have gained battle experience by joining EAOs in fighting the military. All EAOs hold in common a bottom line that the military's actions have deeply damaged their security and economic prospects but are far from a shared vision of Myanmar's future.

6. **Twelve months on, the violence has descended into full-scale civil war.** This fighting has resulted in significant casualties, and hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced internally and across borders as the army deploys heavy weapons and air assaults, wiping out entire villages in attempts to dislodge EAOs and PDFs. Yet EAOs are still gaining territory and the PDFs continue to expand in size, capability, and coordination, inflicting significant damage to military forces and local administration.
7. **A collapse in governance has sparked a multidimensional crisis.** The economy is in free-fall; the COVID-19 pandemic is raging virtually unchecked in the absence of a viable health system; food is scarce to nonexistent in many areas; local administrative and service infrastructure is deteriorating under attack by warring forces; lawlessness has emerged in communities as the army orders the police to take repressive actions, negating their law enforcement role; public education has been decimated; and the telecommunications system is collapsing.
8. **The relative freedom and improving quality of life that Myanmar enjoyed for a decade is now a thing of the past.** Draconian new laws have been introduced to jail and prosecute senior NLD government officials and punish political protesters, striking civil servants, and civil society activists. Ethnic activists and faith leaders, especially in Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, and northern Shan States, have also been targeted. Journalists have been jailed, and the majority of free media outlets have been banned, even as coup authorities use government media and social media platforms liberally to spread falsehoods about their achievements and to promote hate speech.
9. **The international community has reacted to the coup with alarm, but largely failed to mount an effective response:**
 - The five-point strategy for restoring elected government in Myanmar, put forward by the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**, has been ignored by the coup leaders despite their having agreed to it. ASEAN's decision to exclude the head of the military regime, Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, from the October ASEAN leaders' summit and the November ASEAN-China dialogue demonstrated a willingness to apply pressure. The bloc remains deeply divided over next steps. With Cambodia assuming the ASEAN presidency in 2022 and Prime Minister Hun Sen's controversial January visit to Naypyitaw to meet with General Min Aung Hlaing, it remains to be seen how ASEAN will proceed to deal with the junta.
 - **China** has blocked UN efforts to address the crisis, instead pushing for the international response to be managed by ASEAN. Simultaneously, China is trying to hedge its bets on the coup regime by supporting efforts of the most powerful actors, including both the junta and the EAOs, to consolidate power in their areas so that it may eventually rescue its infrastructure investments. China has initiated engagement with the coup regime and met with senior coup figures. It has shunned the NUG and PDFs yet maintains limited ties with the

NLD, pressing the coup regime not to dissolve the party. Overall, the junta's dependence on China's political and economic support presents Beijing with a golden opportunity to secure one-sided agreements that will harness Myanmar to its southwestern provinces. China may soon discover, however, that the junta lacks all capacity to deliver on any such agreements.

- **Russia** has stepped in to serve as a key security partner to the junta, sending senior military officials to join key events in Naypyitaw, supporting the junta's establishment of a new coast guard in October, selling the junta an unspecified number of weapons systems and components since the coup, and even making a port call in Myanmar as the military was launching a scorched-earth campaign in the northwestern part of the country.² Russia's posture has strengthened China's strategic interests by ensuring that China is not the only major country supporting the junta.
- **India's** response to events in Myanmar has been deeply conflicted. On the one hand, India fears the coup offers China an opportunity to gain advantage with the military, leading New Delhi to avoid offending the military leadership by continuing to supply lethal military equipment. On the other, India is a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—along with Australia, Japan, and the United States—and its northeastern states have strong cross-border ethnic ties and a deep affinity for Myanmar's pro-democracy actors. The Indian Defense Ministry has begun to enhance relations with the opposition National Unity Government as PDF strength and activity grows.
- The community of **Western democracies**, led by the United States, has condemned the coup; lodged a variety of sanctions against military and coup leaders, their supporters, and businesses; provided technical and other forms of nonmilitary support to the NUG and the CDM; and provided humanitarian assistance through nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies. It has also sustained high-level engagement with Asian allies Japan and Korea as well as key Southeast Asian states, including Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand, on the response to the crisis.
- The **United Nations** has persisted—against junta obstruction—in developing a response to the COVID-19 emergency in Myanmar through the Global Fund, COVAX, and the GAVI Alliance to ensure that the regime allows vaccines and anti-COVID assistance to reach all needy communities. When the UN General Assembly reconvened in September, an agreement between the United States and China made it possible for Myanmar's Permanent Representative appointed by the NLD government to remain in place; this deal was renewed in early December, with further action to come only later in 2022. This dealt a blow to the junta's attempt to seat its own representative, but the agreement stipulated that the Permanent Representative would limit public engagements.

What Comes Next?

The prospects are extremely low that the military, having lost the support of the majority of the population, can regain enough control of the country to govern it. Any elections staged by the junta regime will be rejected by the population and international community as illegitimate. The course of events since the coup has ruled out the eventuality of returning Myanmar's governance to the status quo ante with an NLD government under the 2008 constitution.

Possible outcomes are boundless and unpredictable but include

- continuation over the short to medium term of chaotic and increasingly bloody civil war that could become internecine,
- partial or complete secession from the union by some of the ethnic minority groups as their armies gain ground against the military,
- consolidation of harsh military control over some parts of the country,
- failure of the opposition movement to unite effectively around an agreed future for the country, or
- emergence of an empowered opposition government conceived as an inclusive federal democracy with security forces reconfigured along federal lines, some early signs of which are already emerging in conflict areas where opposition forces and EAOs are increasingly taking over local administration, health services, and security control.

Key Recommendations for US Policy

Because of the persistent domestic anti-coup movement, the Myanmar military is perhaps as weak and vulnerable as it has ever been. Although the United States has few options for influencing Myanmar's current military leadership to abandon its campaign of violence and oppression against Myanmar's people, it could support five lines of effort that, in combination with ongoing resistance strategies in Myanmar, might alter the generals' calculations:

1. **Strengthen trust and unity within the opposition.**

The opposition movement comprises diverse actors, many of whom were competitors before the coup and remain deeply divided over interests and historical grievances. Although united around a shared revulsion toward the military and a common strategy to make the country ungovernable under the junta, the movement will need to build greater trust and unity if it is to succeed in defeating the military and—more important—in rebuilding a war-torn country. The United States should support dialogue and reconciliation efforts, from the community level to the national level, that help achieve this objective. If successful, these efforts would not only increase the likelihood of the movement prevailing in the near term but could be a first step toward long-term sustainable peace in Myanmar. The United States should also emphasize the need to incorporate civilian protection in opposition strategies to guard against extrajudicial killing and avoid an endless cycle of retribution.

2. Strain the military's resources and legitimacy with international pressure.

The Myanmar military is severely depleted and, due to popular resentment, faces mounting difficulty recruiting troops and administrative staff for the State Administrative Council (SAC), the caretaker government formed by the junta. The country's economic deterioration further constrains the resources available to the military to consolidate control. Negotiated efforts to squeeze the generals with an expanded international arms embargo and coordinated sanctions would go a step further. The military's domestic legitimacy—including among its soldiers—is at an all-time low. Continuing efforts to exclude the coup regime from international forums, such as ASEAN and the United Nations, would weaken its remaining domestic legitimacy as a governing institution and increase the incentives for defections, desertions, and noncompliance.

The US government has already placed a wide range of targeted sanctions on military leaders, senior members of the coup government, military industries, and crony businesses, but the impact of these sanctions is unclear. Targeted unilateral sanctions are unlikely to have a decisive effect, but a coordinated and targeted sanctions regime among US allies and regional partners could deliver a powerful blow to the military, given its diminished circumstances. Conversely, if general sanctions were imposed, the impact would likely fall most heavily on the civilian population.

More broadly, the United States should intensify diplomatic interaction with key neighboring countries, especially India and Thailand; work closely with ASEAN; and explore ways for the Quad to apply pressure and support efforts that marginalize the coup regime and encourage restoration of civilian democratic governance. To avoid misunderstandings and ensure active channels of communication, the United States should stay open to consultations with China, to the extent that China is willing to engage. Sustained high-level engagements, including the possible appointment of a senior US envoy or coordinator, would send a strong signal of US intentions to both the United States' partners and competitors in the region.

3. Lead an international effort to get humanitarian assistance to civilian populations under siege in Myanmar.

The chaotic conditions in the country and the hostility of the coup regime to foreign "interference" make it difficult, though not impossible, for the United States to channel humanitarian and other forms of assistance through civil society organizations. Given the various constraints and the need to remain adaptive in a highly volatile environment, the US Agency for International Development and the State Department should evaluate their procurement and assistance requirements and procedures to ensure adequate flexibility to support local civil society organizations (which know best how to deliver assistance in conflict areas) and to prioritize partner security. It is also incumbent on the United States in the near term to act in concert with regional allies and international organizations, such as the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, as they respond. Coordinated international action could help remove obstacles to getting material assistance to the country's beleaguered civilian population, help ensure that the coup regime remains internationally isolated, provide material and moral support to the democratic opposition, and ultimately lay a viable foundation for the country's stabilization and reconstruction under an elected civilian government.

4. Expand relations with the civilian nonstate authorities that govern significant parts of the country, especially those democratically elected by ethnic minorities.

This would recognize the nascent rapport and practical collaboration that has developed between the minority and majority populations opposing the coup. Several of these authorities and the EAOs with whom they affiliate are collaborating closely with other resistance groups and gaining ground against the Myanmar military. In addition to providing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable minority populations through nonstate authorities, the United States should help the authorities think through how they can best collaborate to achieve an inclusive union for all the country's residents. The United States should further explore enhanced dialogue with nonstate authorities and encourage them to embrace democracy, respect human rights, and deploy their resources toward ending the coup regime.

5. Develop a transition plan resistant to another military power grab or the explosion of other forms of violence.

The United States should supply technical and other nonmilitary assistance to opposition actors involved in transition planning, including but not limited to the NUG and the NUCC.

To promote democratic values, sustain the development of Myanmar's leaders, and deepen US relationships with Myanmar's future leaders, the United States should not only provide protection and support through educational grants and fellowships to preserve Myanmar's wealth of intellectual talent that has emerged within the younger generation, it should also support civil society organizations in Myanmar and outside the country. This would encourage the emergence of a strong cadre of civilian leaders who can formulate viable future plans for a democratic federal Myanmar and build a prosperous economy. The United States should leverage this moment of relative unity against a shared enemy—the junta—to build interreligious and interethnic trust and pursue reconciliation.

To support transitional justice, the United States should provide robust assistance to local initiatives to document the ongoing atrocities and war crimes being committed by the junta. This support should aim to complement international accountability measures, including by the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, while exploring ways to use documentation to build international pressure on the regime.



The military's ill-considered coup has triggered a revolution in Myanmar that promises a successful conclusion to decades of effort by the United States and its international partners to nourish the seeds of democracy and bring an end to one of the world's oldest military dictatorships. These seeds have clearly taken root in the younger generation willing to pay with their lives to keep democratic progress alive. The United States' support for them must not fail at this critical moment.

A Look Back

The coup d'état that crushed ten years of economic, political, and social liberalization in Myanmar was effectively a return to the country's past rather than any radical break from its history and development. To understand the state of the country today and how its course might be altered, a look back is essential.

A xenophobic military dictatorship has ruled Myanmar—with the notable exception of the 2011 to 2021 period—since 1962, including an interval of military-dominated one-party rule from 1974 to 1988. The generals used extreme measures to control the population and wall off the country from external influences as they enforced the dominant position of the ethnic Bamar Buddhist majority. Resistance by ethnic and religious minority populations on the country's periphery was met with brutal repression that included scorched-earth destruction of communities and assaults displacing hundreds of thousands of people internally and forcing millions to seek refuge beyond Myanmar's borders. Despite their privileged status, Bamar who protested the military's conduct either disappeared into its grim, labyrinthine prison system or fled into exile.

To round out its repression, the dictatorship strictly controlled social interaction, mobility, and information. It vigorously enforced British colonial-era laws prohibiting public meetings of more than five people without official permission and barring overnight visitors—a measure policed by community wardens doing bed checks. The generals obstructed the flow of information outside official propaganda channels, ensuring that the majority population would remain unaware of both the brutality inflicted on the minorities and events in the outside world.³

In 1988, in the aftermath of a popular uprising against the dictatorship triggered by deteriorating economic conditions, the military relaxed its totalitarian grip. Parliamentary elections were held in 1990 and nearly a hundred political parties were allowed to contest for seats. The key development, however, was agreement among several groups to form the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of future Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, whose father,

MAP 1.

Myanmar and Surrounding Nations



Source: Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

Despite the aftermath of the 1990 elections, the NLD's victory at the ballot box gave rise to a resilient pro-democracy movement that sustained decades of harsh repression.

General Aung San, was the founder of the Burmese army. The balloting brought the NLD a landslide victory that eclipsed parties favored by the military. In the wake of their loss, military leaders argued that a parliament could not be seated without a new constitution, a move that diverted political activity into a seemingly endless National Convention to write a new charter. Most NLD leaders were jailed, detained, or otherwise silenced for the next twenty years, as were leaders of successive student protests crushed by the military.

Despite the aftermath of the 1990 elections, the NLD's victory at the ballot box gave rise to a resilient pro-democracy movement that sustained decades of harsh repression. Aung San Suu Kyi, who endured years of detention and abuse by security forces, kept the NLD alive and the fires of democratic passion burning within the majority population while drawing greater international attention to the brutal military regime.

At the same time, the economic straitjacket that the military imposed on Myanmar loosened somewhat in the late 1980s—though hardly to the benefit of the people—when military leaders opened a small window of free enterprise in the centralized economy. Through it, senior officers proceeded to enrich themselves, their families, and their colleagues by courting foreign investment, particularly in the extraction of the country's vast reserves of minerals, teak, and energy resources. A wealthy class of officers and cronies emerged, adding greed to the perceived imperative for continued military domination of the government and the economy. (See box 1 on page 15 for more on the military's financial interests and its role in governing.)

The military also conferred economic benefits to tamp down the country's internal conflicts. During the 1990s, a series of ceasefire agreements was reached with major ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), rewarding them with access to local resources and limited administrative control over their areas of operation. The intent was to redirect the energies of their leaders from fighting the army into economic pursuits. Even so, the military continued battling ethnic minority communities as it sought to extend control over the natural resource-rich peripheral areas of the country.

As Myanmar entered the next millennium, its enforced isolation began to weaken with broadening economic activity and the global revolution in information technology. As the country's neighbors grew richer in the globalizing economy, the new information sources made it painfully clear that the generals and the country they ruled had been left far behind. The changing communications environment and intensifying post-Cold War focus on human rights turned the generals into international pariahs.

Eventually, Myanmar's military regime came under increasing pressure from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which, along with China, had functioned as a shield against UN sanctions and pressure for political reform. After ASEAN began to signal concern that the generals were failing even to make progress on their long-standing pledge to introduce an elected

government, the National Convention was finally brought to a conclusion in 2007. By then, Myanmar was in the midst of another uprising, this one dubbed the Saffron Revolution for the saffron-colored robes of the Buddhist monks who led it. In early 2008, the government released the text of the new constitution and scheduled elections for 2010—exactly twenty years after the results of the 1990 vote had been effectively nullified.

Using coercive tactics against voters and leveraging outright fraud, the military regime helped ensure that the 2010 elections resulted in a landslide for the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which was led by retired generals who would form the new government's leadership in parliament and in the executive branch. In addition, the regime's maneuvers sparked a widespread boycott of the process; the NLD declined to participate because Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD political prisoners remained in custody. The USDP further benefited from the wide array of minority parties splitting the remaining vote.

The new military constitution gave the generals control over critical parts of the executive branch and effective veto power in the parliament to protect their interests—all from behind the veneer of elected government. When top figures from the previous military regime were chosen for senior roles in the new government, most observers concluded that the so-called transition to elected government would simply put civilian clothes on yet another repressive military regime.

It therefore came as a welcome surprise, particularly to the international community, when the new government set itself on a course of real change. After retired General Thein Sein was sworn in as the new president on March 30, 2011, he immediately signaled the need for substantial economic and political reforms to help the country catch up with its regional neighbors. Four months later, he sat down with Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been freed immediately after the election, and discussed changes to the election rules that would ease the way for the NLD to join the parliament by contesting in the 2012 by-elections to fill vacant parliamentary seats. The NLD agreed to compete and won all but one of the forty-four seats it contested, making it the second-largest party in the legislature.

That was just the start of reforms President Thein Sein ushered in during the USDP government's five-year term. Long-held political prisoners were released; a relatively free press was unleashed; affordable mobile phones and an eruption of cell towers around the country yielded widespread internet access in just a year's time; civil society was allowed to develop; and former generals initiated a peace process with their counterparts in the EAOs—against whom they had been waging war for decades (while simultaneously enriching them). International investors began flocking to Myanmar in search of opportunities, and economic exchanges with neighbors increased. These political and economic measures quickly drew a positive response from major Western powers, which had shunned Myanmar for decades.

From her parliamentary seat in the powerful lower house, Aung San Suu Kyi soon formed an unexpectedly cordial alliance with the lower house speaker, former General Shwe Mann, who had held the number three position in the military regime that kept her in detention for years and who had expected to be named president of the new government. Even as the Thein Sein government

made progress with reforms, rifts began to appear between Shwe Mann in the parliament and the former generals surrounding President Thein Sein, drawing Aung San Suu Kyi into the intramilitary competition by virtue of her friendship with Shwe Mann.

Ironically, the elections of 2015 were probably the most free and well-managed general election the country has seen. The Union Election Commission, run by a former three-star general and retired head of the country's largest military holding company, worked actively with international election organizations and took pains to follow their advice. USDP leaders were hoping that their record of reform over the previous four years would make them more competitive with the NLD, which had no experience yet with actual governing. They were sorely disappointed, however, as the NLD swept to an overwhelming victory: voters proved determined to deny control of the government to any party associated with the military.

Although the 2008 constitution barred Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming president, she was determined to serve as head of the NLD government "above the president," as she put it.⁴ In a measure aimed squarely at Aung San Suu Kyi, the constitution denied the nation's top office to anyone who had close relatives holding foreign citizenship. Undaunted, her legal advisers exploited some language in the constitution to craft a powerful executive position for her to be approved by the NLD majority in parliament.⁵ When the new government was seated in 2016, MP Aung San Suu Kyi quickly assumed the role of state counselor, which she viewed as superior to other senior levels of the executive. She proceeded to lead the new NLD administration, setting up new ministries and combining existing ministries to constrain military corruption.

Meanwhile, Commander-in-Chief General Min Aung Hlaing, who had been appointed at the outset of the Thein Sein administration, remained in his position under the NLD government. There is little doubt that he, like other officers around him, thought that creating the state counselor position blatantly defied the constitution. Aung San Suu Kyi's refusal to allow the National Defense and Security Council to meet for the entire term of the NLD government was a continuing aggravation to him.⁶ Over four years, against the background of intensifying military campaigns targeting ethnic minorities that refused to join the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (which replaced the earlier bilateral ceasefires), their relationship became increasingly strained.

Faced with retirement upon reaching the age of sixty-five in July 2021, General Min Aung Hlaing is said to have begun maneuvering shortly after the November 2020 elections to secure a position of continuing power in the second NLD term. As February 1, 2021, approached, the date when the new parliament would be seated, exchanges between the commander-in-chief and the state counselor's close circle became intensely hostile in response to his insistence that the elections had involved widespread fraud.

Min Aung Hlaing apparently decided that a coup, using as much force as necessary, was his only option.

BOX 1.

Myanmar's Military: Ruling from the Center

Historically, the Myanmar military, which some also call the Tatmadaw, has performed not only as a security force but more broadly as a socioeconomic system and a governing class.^a During most of Myanmar's postcolonial decades, the country's administrative and economic structures have been centralized directly or indirectly under military control, and its legal and regulatory architecture has prioritized order and stability over human rights, service delivery, and poverty alleviation. Concerns about maintaining state security have always been paramount, even during the ten years of parliamentary government that ended with the February 1, 2021 coup.

The military's financial interests are wide ranging and varied in both nature and profitability. The 2008 constitution allows the military (and not the elected government) to determine its share of the national budget. It also profits from a variety of state-owned enterprises and two large military holding companies, which held a total monopoly over the most lucrative economic and trading sectors until 2012. During the Thein Sein government, these monopolies were dismantled and the holding companies were forced to compete with both domestic and foreign investors. The military also practices widespread land confiscation and rent-seeking across the country, allowing local garrisons to undertake commercial, agricultural, and trading activities, which often remain in the hands of senior commanders or are passed to their families.

Because the inner workings of the military are opaque and its leadership is prone to spreading public misinformation, any analysis of its current and future structure and operations is speculative at best. The military has clearly been experiencing a change in generational makeup, however. The senior flag officers represent a generation groomed via the counterinsurgencies of the Cold War era but elevated to senior ranks during direct military rule after the Cold War. Rising senior officers earned early promotions as army- and state-builders or administrators. Combat experience is the main channel up the ranks, however.

The transition to an elected government in 2010 left both the officer corps and the rank and file in limbo as they moved out of the state-building role and adjusted to the push for force modernization and preparation for combat in the country's internal conflicts with new airpower purchased from Russia and India. Junior and mid-career officers had only a few years of recent experience with a regulatory or governance system independent of the military and probably were put off by NLD criticisms of the military. Amid a glut of mid-career officers with limited opportunities for promotion, the military's response to the 2021 outbreak of nationwide resistance created precisely the situation that company and battalion commanders needed to demonstrate the prowess essential to advancement. It appears that whatever intramilitary changes might have occurred during the previous decade only deepened the military's belief that it alone stands as the guardian of the country.

Note

a. In the Burmese language, the word *tatmadaw* means "royal army," a term the opposition movement considers inappropriate for today's military forces.

Impact of the Military Coup

During the Thein Sein government, the 2008 constitution was interpreted as having separated national security from national affairs for the first time in at least three decades. This allowed greater political space for unexpected reforms such as the release of political prisoners, more press and civil society freedom, and free and fair elections that transferred political leadership to the opposition.

The military's vision of Myanmar's political future foresaw "disciplined democracy," which the generals expected would continue to evolve after the 2015 elections. They and USDP leaders anticipated that the USDP would make a strong enough showing in the race to force the NLD into a coalition government. Instead, the NLD landslide delivered a deeply uncomfortable partnership between the NLD and the military, marked by increasingly acrimonious relations between the military's commander-in-chief and the civilian state counselor.

Even as civilian control over political and economic governance continued to expand during the NLD government, the acrimony over the disputed elections of November 2020 resulted in Min Aung Hlaing's February 1 putsch, abruptly reversing the erosion of the military's de jure and de facto authority and erasing a decade of political, economic, and social progress. It returned the country to predatory military rule amid a global pandemic, brought the economy to the brink of collapse, and destroyed social infrastructure across the nation with violent assaults on local communities. The effects are now starkly visible across several key indicators of a government's viability: governance and political tension, military-civilian conflict, economic performance, health and social services, education, and civil society and freedom of information.



General Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of Myanmar's military and leader of the February 1, 2021 coup, speaks at the IX Moscow Conference on International Security in Moscow on June 23, 2021. Russia, along with China, is one of the few sources of international support for the junta. (Photo by Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP)

Governance and Political Tension

Despite heavy pressure from Min Aung Hlaing and his allies, the NLD government managed to build on the previous administration's reform process. The parliament repealed a few of the more draconian colonial laws that the military had applied for decades to subjugate the population—though many believe the NLD could have used its majority to go even further. Although NLD-appointed officials in the executive branch had the same deficit of government experience as their military predecessors, they compensated by appointing technocrats as ministers and developing plans to serve the needs of the civilian population. They continued to build civil service competence, transferring control of local administration from the military to the civilian government, and attempted to develop state- and region-level governments capable of local administration.

Military rolls back reforms. From the outset of the coup regime, it was clear that Min Aung Hlaing intended to wipe out every achievement of elected government over the previous ten years, whether initiated by the NLD or by the military-dominated Thein Sein administration. Ministries that had been combined or eliminated were reestablished in their prior form, no doubt to continue the military tradition of senior officials lining their pockets ahead of retirement. Laws and regulations to

Min Aung Hlaing sought to justify his power grab with allegations that the NLD's landslide had been the result of massive electoral fraud.

streamline governance and administration were replaced with the onerous procedures of the past to direct illicit revenue to officials and to military family businesses. Harsh controls and censorship of the media were reintroduced, and electronic media was severely curtailed. Elected ward and village-tract leaders not willing to serve the regime were removed and military loyalists appointed in their place. The movements of community residents were once again monitored by the ward and village-tract system, and control of local administration by the General Administration Department was returned to the military.

Min Aung Hlaing sought to justify his power grab with allegations that the NLD's landslide had been the result of massive electoral fraud, claiming that a regime audit of election rolls had uncovered clear evidence of as many as eleven million fraudulent ballots. To be sure, the management of the 2020 elections by the NLD-appointed Union Election Commission compared unfavorably with the well-run 2015 vote.⁷ Mismanagement, however, did not amount to malfeasance or a stolen election, as Min Aung Hlaing claimed.

After jailing the senior leadership of the NLD and threatening to deregister the party, the commander-in-chief announced that he would hold elections within two years for a new parliament, presumably without the NLD. In early August 2021, he announced a decision to reconstitute the junta's State Administrative Council (SAC) as a caretaker government and appointed himself prime minister. Elections were set for 2023. Local observers saw this move as reminiscent of then military chief General Ne Win's seizure of power in 1962, which ushered in five decades of military rule.

Civil service strikes cripple junta governance. The coup sparked an immediate, massive exodus of outraged civil servants, who joined protesters from political parties and civil society to form the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The coup-makers, consequently, soon found themselves without enough personnel to manage the basic tasks of governance. With doctors, nurses, teachers, and railway workers in the lead, the strike gutted staffing in government health facilities and other institutions and slowed rail transport. The military reacted harshly, hunting down and imprisoning the strikers, especially health professionals and transport workers, but to little effect. Most refused to return to work.

Elected politicians seize mantle of government. The junta detained the NLD's top elected officials on February 1 and then picked up many more party leaders in the days that followed. In response, a group of NLD parliamentarians formed the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament), or CRPH, which the military quickly designated a terrorist organization. It then issued warrants for the lawmakers' arrest.

Among the first acts of the CRPH was to nullify the 2008 constitution, a move greeted favorably by both ethnic minorities and the majority population.⁸ Finding refuge in areas controlled by ethnic

armed organizations, the CRPH joined forces with several well-respected ethnic minority political leaders and on April 16 formed a National Unity Government (NUG), which declared itself the legitimate government of Myanmar. The NUG was conceived as the executive of the deposed government with the CRPH as its legislature.

The opposition forces also struggled for some months to set up a forum for national dialogue on the country's future, the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC). More heavily represented by ethnic minorities than the NUG, the NUCC was designed to work in concert with the NUG to define a form of federalism that would ensure equal political rights for minorities, allowing them greater autonomy, and to replace the Myanmar Army with a new federal army. The operations and mandate of the NUCC are not clear, however, and its membership appears to be fluid, incorporating various entities from civil society, EAOs, and political parties.⁹ Some critics (especially among ethnic political parties) consider it a rubber stamp for the NUG and the NLD. While recent developments in the NUCC suggest it is becoming more representative and consequential, some key EAOs and political parties have yet to join. The Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, which won the third-largest number of seats in the November 2020 elections, has withdrawn from the NUCC on the basis of concern that ethnic minorities would not receive equal rights and representation. The Shan group played a critical role in writing a federal charter that outlines a new constitution—a clear signal that it rejects not only the coup regime but also any return to the status quo ante. A second part of the charter—which addresses the future structure of a federal democracy—is central to the controversy between the NLD and other actors seeking to end military rule.

The NUG, meanwhile, established its own defense ministry. It declared on May 5 the establishment of a People's Defense Force (PDF) under its command and issued guidelines to be followed by scores community-based, self-constituted People's Defense Forces, at least in part to stanch the rise of summary executions of *dalans* (informers), local administrators, and USDP leaders and followers.

A political revolution was now in the making.

Although they were charged with terrorism and treason and actively sought by the military, the NUG leadership largely evaded capture. They positioned themselves strategically inside and outside the country and initiated a vigorous international campaign to win recognition from foreign governments as the sole legitimate political authority for Myanmar. At the United Nations, the Myanmar Permanent Representative appointed by the NLD government, who declared himself on the side of the resistance, has been allowed to continue indefinitely as the official representative of Myanmar.¹⁰ Although the NUG failed to gain formal recognition from foreign governments (with the notable exception of the European Parliament), many began to support it indirectly, meeting quietly and at times openly with NUG representatives. The junta government, in the meantime, had largely failed to gain any international legitimacy beyond Russia and China. In October, Min Aung Hlaing was disinvited from the ASEAN leaders' summit. Acting again, in November, ASEAN had him disinvited from the ASEAN-China Summit.¹¹

Military-Civilian Conflict

The reform period preceding the coup empowered Myanmar's younger generation. Its members witnessed the rapid expansion of civil society and its growing role in delivering social services and fostering human rights, social justice, and political freedom. They experienced improvements in higher education and broadening employment opportunities in an expanding and modernizing economy. Especially in the majority Bamar parts of the country, younger people who matured during the ten years of reform enjoyed a remarkably different life than their elders had. Postmillennial Bamar's personal memories of military rule may have been limited, but they were informed by their elders' experience; they were determined not to allow an oppressive military to seize the reins of government once again.

Many young people in Myanmar's ethnically diverse states did not fully share the reform experience, but they did share the anti-military sentiments of the Bamar youth. In Bago, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, southern Chin, and other upland areas dominated by ethnic minority groups, military oppression continued, and the NLD government was perceived simply as a less objectionable form of persisting Bamar dominance.¹² The failure of elected national leaders to strive for an inclusive Myanmar national identity was perhaps the most regrettable lost opportunity of the democratic reform period.

Mass urban protest turns to civil war. The youth-led national backlash to the coup began with mass peaceful protests in urban centers. As the military intensified its crackdown against protesters with deadly force, youth responded with nonviolent tactics. While these tactics built solidarity against the regime, they eventually gave way to battles with riot police and light infantry, with protesters using whatever weapons they could lay their hands on. This put them even more directly in the line of deadly assault by troops hardened by combat with the EAOs.¹³

Enterprising urban youth fleeing the military onslaught sought and received refuge in several remote areas controlled by the EAOs, especially in Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Karenni States, where they also received rudimentary training in guerrilla warfare and in some cases gained access to weapons and explosives. SAC troops responded harshly to every encounter with the opposition. They raided neighborhoods they thought home to members of the nascent People's Defense Forces, looted entire apartment blocks, and arrested relatives of accused PDF members when they could not find the wanted individual. They tortured community elders in front of their neighbors for failing to hand over suspects and killed those suspected of carrying out violence.¹⁴ This, of course, only led to greater anger within communities and the growth of local PDFs.

People's Defense Forces emerge. On March 14, the CRPH declared that the civilian population had the right to "self-defense" in response to the military's campaign of random violence and terrorization, adding momentum to the rise of a plethora of PDFs (see page 21). These groups emerged across the country but especially in the central regions, where the military had not faced open conflict in at least three decades. On May 5, the NUG formally announced a "people's defensive war" against the junta, signaling strong support for revolution. Recognizing the possible implications of this move for local communities, the NUG also issued a detailed code of conduct to enforce discipline and humanitarian norms among the ranks

TABLE 1.

Myanmar’s Revolutionary Actors: The People’s Defense Forces

People’s Defense Forces began to emerge in March 2021 as the level of military brutality increased. While initial PDFs lacked training and arms, their ability to confront junta forces has increased rapidly. Nearly 150 known PDFs are listed below.

KACHIN STATE

Bhamo PDF	Put-a-o PDF
Kachin PDF	ShweGu PDF

SAGAING REGION

Ayadaw PDF	Kawlin PDF	Pinlebu PDF
CDF Kale	KhinU PDF	ShweBo PDF
ChaugU PDF	KyunHla PDF	Tamu PDF
Indaw PDF	Mingin PDF	Taze PDF
Kalewa PDF	Monywa PDF	Tigyaing PDF
Kanbalu PDF	Myaung PDF	Wuntho PDF
Kani PDF	Pale PDF	Yaw PDF
Katha PDF	PDF Galon Tabayin	Yinmarbin PDF

CHIN STATE

Ash Chin Defense Force-MSDF	CDF KKG	CDF Tedim
	CDF Lautu	CDF Thantlang
CDF Dai	CDF Mara	CDF Tozang
CDF Falam	CDF Matupi	CDF Zophei
CDF Hakha	CDF Mindat	Chinland Defense Force
CDF Kanpetlet	CDF Paletwa	

MANDALAY REGION

Kyaukpadaung PDF	Myinmu PDF	TaungTha PDF
Kyaukse PDF	Myinthta PDF	Thabeikkyin PDF
Mandalay PDF	NyaungU PDF	Thazi PDF
Mogoke PDF	PyinOoLwin PDF	Yamethin PDF
Myay Lat PDF	Sintgaing PDF	
MyinGyan PDF	Tada-U PDF	

SHAN STATE

Ayethaya PDF-ATY PDF	Pekon PDF	Tachileik PDF
Kalaw PDF	Pinglong PDF	Tai PDF
Laikha PDF	Shwe Nyaung PDF	Theinni PDF
Loilem PDF	South Shan Youth Groups PDF	TPDF-Taunggyi PDF
Namsang PDF		Ywangan PDF

MAGWE REGION

Bekthano PDF	Natmuak PDF	Seikphyu-Kyunchaung PDF
Gangaw PDF	Pakoku PDF	
Kamma PDF	PDF Magwe	Thayet PDF
Kani PDF	Pwintbyu PDF	Tilin PDF
Minbu PDF	Salin PDF	Yasagyo PDF
Minhla PDF	Saw PDF	Yenangyaung PDF
Myaing PDF		

NAYPYITAW UNION TERRITORY

Naypyitaw PDF	Tatkon PDF
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KARENNI STATE

Demoso PDF	Karenni Nationalities Defense Force	Loikaw PDF
Hpruso PDF		Moepye PDF

IRRAWADDY REGION

Bogale PDF	Kyonpyaw PDF	Myanaung PDF
De-daye PDF	Labutta PDF	Pathein PDF
Hinthada PDF	Maubin PDF	Pyapon PDF

BAGO REGION

Daik Oo PDF	MoeNyo PDF	Shwedaung PDF
Gyobingauk PDF	Nattalin PDF	Taungoo PDF
Htantabin PDF	Paungde PDF	Yedashe PDF
Kawa PDF	PDF Bago	Zigon PDF
Minla PDF	Pyay PDF	

KAREN STATE

Kawkareike PDF	Kayan PDF	Myawaddy PDF
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MON STATE

Bilin PDF	People’s Defense Organization	Thanbyuzayat PDF
Kyaukto PDF	Mawlamyine	Theinzayat PDF
Mon SDF	Special Force Paung	Ye PDF

YANGON REGION

Area-21 Revolution Network	Kayan PDF	Yangon PDF
Baham PDF	Myothit Dagon PDF	Yangon Revolutionary Front
Hlegu PDF	Thongwa PDF	
Kawhmu PDF	Yangon North Okkalapa PDF	Yangon Urban Guerrillas

TANINTHARYI REGION

Dawei PDF	Myeik PDF
LaungLon PDF	Palaw PDF

of the defense forces. Many PDFs trained in EAO areas returned to the cities to attack a range of regime assets, including police, military units, local administrative officials and buildings, members of the military's party, and others suspected of siding with the junta. Other PDFs remained with their EAO protectors and fought alongside them against junta forces in battles aimed at expanding EAO-controlled territory.

By June, anti-regime violence—from guerrilla attacks with improvised weapons to conventional warfare between the army and EAOs—had metastasized across most of the central Bamar areas and a substantial portion of outlying ethnic minority areas. The security forces, stretched thin by the scope and scale of the activity, faced growing desertion and demoralization among frontline troops—a weakness exacerbated by an informal hold on new recruitment in April. In response to local PDF violence, the USDP, retired military personnel, and village-tract and ward officials formed Pyu Saw Hti militias to protect their communities. Violent conflict and vigilante attacks soon became endemic in the country's central and northwest regions.

During June and July, armed resistance by combined EAO and PDF forces matured rapidly in sophistication and competence. Tactical collaboration between EAOs and PDFs allowed anti-regime forces to field battle groups with fighters numbering in the hundreds against the military in ethnic areas. In major urban areas, offensives by a few sizable PDF coalitions kept the military from deploying troops to more remote hot spots. For the first time in its history, the Myanmar military began to face a countrywide insurgency, including across the Burman heartland. Its built-in rigidity has left its officers unable to adjust quickly to new circumstances and ill-prepared to counter asymmetric warfare waged by an underground resistance. Forced to focus on the country's center, the military has been gradually losing ground to ethnic armies in the outer minority areas.¹⁵

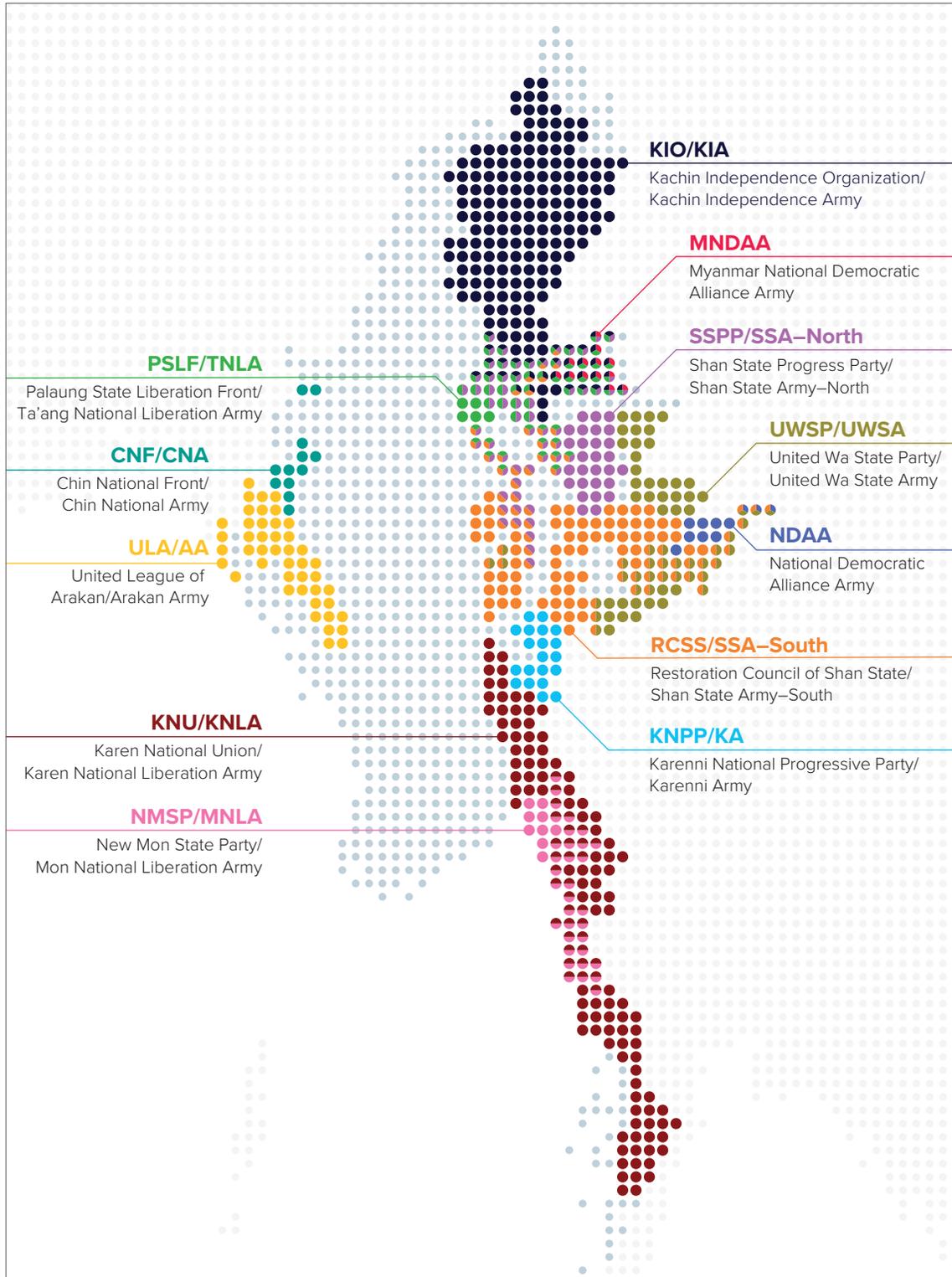
The military's troubles mounted during September. Now facing well over a hundred PDF groups across the country, attacks continued to grow in volume, intensity, and complexity. Fighting in Chin and Karenni States was particularly extensive, with PDFs gaining experience and firepower as they fought alongside ethnic armies. Some engagements went on for weeks. Military raids on villages also increased during this period. In October, the military launched a massive assault on northwestern Chin State, using the full range of heavy weapons and air power available to the military.¹⁶ All fourteen states and regions in the country, as well as the union territory of Naypyitaw, have now become embroiled in the fighting. In mid-October, the NUG's Ministry of Defense announced the formation of a central committee to coordinate military operations countrywide under a single chain of command.

Ethnic armies seek advantage. Since before the country's independence, Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations have maintained control over significant parts of the country, and particularly in the ethnic states many are seen by minority ethnic populations as far more legitimate than the central Burmese authorities. (See appendix 1 on page 52 for a description of the major EAOs. A map of their approximate territories is on page 23.) Many of the EAOs have strong political wings, and in Kachin and Karen States ethnic nonstate authorities closely affiliated with key EAOs maintain well-developed bureaucratic structures that provide all of the normal public goods and services expected of a government. Some of these nonstate authorities democratically elect their leaders and have engaged in democratic practices for longer than any central Burmese authority.

MAP 2.

Ethnic Armed Organizations

Through its history, Myanmar has lacked an inclusive national identity. Many of the country's ethnic armed organizations have fought the Myanmar military since the country's independence. EAOs now maintain control and influence across the country's borderlands.



Note: This map, based on analysis of various sources by USIP, shows the approximate areas of influence of Myanmar's major EAOs. The map was created by USIP, based on artwork by goleiro35/Shutterstock. Note that this includes areas that are controlled or administered by EAOs, areas where they operate, or where they have significant influence.

The chaos spawned by the coup, along with the nationwide challenges that the military now faces, have created new opportunities for EAOs to advance their interests.

The chaos spawned by the coup, along with the nationwide challenges that the military now faces, have created new opportunities for EAOs to advance their interests. Four of them—the Chin National Army (CNA), the Karenni Army, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)—have joined forces with local PDFs and civilian opposition seeking refuge in their areas. The KIA and KNLA have managed to retake strategic positions the army once held. In Kachin State, the KIA has defeated the army repeatedly on the battlefield, recapturing about a half dozen strategic posts it lost over the past decade. The KIA now operates in the Kachin capital of Myitkyina more freely than was possible over the previous two decades. Supporting PDFs have also allowed the KIA to maintain control of the front lines south of its positions along the China border and to protect its relations with China by preventing the PDFs from targeting Chinese assets in upland Myanmar. In Karen State, the KNLA has pushed against junta forces in several areas, regaining strategic posts lost over the past fifteen years. All four EAOs have also made gains in political influence through involvement in the NUG and their popularity with the broader anti-coup movement.

Meanwhile, three other EAOs—the Arakan Army (AA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), and the United Wa State Army (UWSA)—have maintained a largely neutral stance vis-à-vis the SAC and anti-coup movement, taking advantage of the disarray to enhance their own strength and administrative control. In Rakhine State, the AA has consolidated battlefield gains by supporting efforts of its political wing to expand administrative control over local health authorities, courts, and police stations. It now holds sway in more than two-thirds of the state's townships, including the strategic port city of Kyaukphyu, while maintaining a tense truce with the military in Rakhine to buy the time to consolidate its gains. Tensions built in mid-July, however, when the AA began asserting administrative control of towns in northern Rakhine State. In response, the military redeployed troops to the area, but stopped short of initiating hostilities. In the Wa Special Administrative Division, the UWSA and its political wing have remained largely aloof from what they consider Burman politics, engaging cautiously with the junta and largely avoiding interaction with the NUG. At the same time, the UWSA has advanced a proxy war (discussed below) against its key nemesis, the Shan State Army—South (SSA—South), through its allies in northern Shan State. This has driven the SSA—South out of key territories in Shan State close to the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor.

Two EAOs, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), also known as the Kokang, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), have dramatically scaled up their campaigns against the military. Both of these EAOs have voiced sympathy with the PDFs, and the TNLA has engaged in the NUCC process through its political body.

Two other EAOs—the Shan State Armies—have responded by trying to enhance their respective positions within Shan State. The Shan State Army—North has received significant support from its

allies in northern Myanmar, who also seek to prevent the Shan State Army–South from gaining control or influence in the north.

Government militias. The military maintains a number of allies among the ethnic militias that have been granted the status of Border Guard Forces (BGFs). These were created as part of a scheme first advanced in 2009, when the military required EAOs to give up the autonomy they had acquired through bilateral ceasefires and come under the administrative control of the military government’s Ministry of Border Affairs as BGFs. In exchange, the participating groups would continue to enjoy the concessions conferred with the ceasefires to engage in economic activity—including illicit activity—in their areas. Those that rejected the proposal faced extreme military pressure to sign on. The strategy succeeded in splintering key EAOs and coopting smaller ones along the borders.

Significant BGFs are now found in Kachin, Karen, and Shan States. They all control territory and maintain major criminal business empires. In exchange, they provide military and political support to the coup regime. Two key BGFs—the Karen and the Kokang—actively support the coup regime in exchange for the opportunity to continue expanding illicit business activity tied to regional criminal networks.¹⁷

Beginning in 2017, the Karen BGF welcomed Chinese transnational criminal actors into its territory and partnered with them to build a special zone in Karen State for illegal online and in-person casino and fraud operations. The goal was to appeal to internet gamblers inside China, where gaming is banned, and the scheme indeed drew tens of thousands of Chinese workers for the business. The NLD government pressed China to help end the illegal activity from its side; and in December 2020 the military moved to assert greater control over the BGF forces—especially the Karen BGF, whose activities had significantly damaged China-Myanmar relations.

These efforts prompted a mass departure of Chinese criminals from the zone in late 2020. The tables turned quickly after the coup, however. The military, surprised by the ferocity of popular resistance, needed tactical support and bases from the BGF to fight the KNLA, which was attempting to expand territorial control and harboring NUG and other opposition forces. By the end of February 2021, illegal gambling, money laundering, and drug trafficking had resumed with a vengeance under the tacit approval of the military.

Similar dynamics have unfolded in the Kokang BGF areas, where the Kokang have opened new casino operations and, in the months after the coup, enhanced recruitment for industrial-sized complexes designed to host online casino workers. The Kokang BGF is providing similar support to the military’s campaigns against the northern EAOs, especially the KIA, MNDAA, and TNLA.

It is not difficult to see that the longer the standoff between the military and the country’s population continues, the more likely it is that ethnic armed groups will strengthen in relation to the coup regime’s security forces. The EAOs are likely to have a stronger voice in the country’s future governance, and some may even contemplate independence—a stark reminder of the military’s abject failure either to prevail in nearly seven decades of war against ethnic minorities or to negotiate a peaceful resolution to those conflicts.

Economy

Economic reform and reorganization have arguably had the biggest impact on the lives of ordinary Burmese over the past ten years. The changes began almost immediately after the Thein Sein administration took office in 2011. The government took clear steps to improve the capability of the civil service. Later fundamental reforms included insulating the Central Bank from government manipulation; streamlining trade and investment rules to improve the business climate; joining the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, a multistakeholder, Norway-based monitoring coalition; and introducing a modern communications system that offered universal cell phone and internet service—connections to information largely barred by the xenophobic, totalitarian military dictatorship.

Another transformative feature of the Thein Sein administration was welcoming the help of skilled civilian economic advisers in designing economic reforms. The president encouraged the return of exiles who had fled military repression after 1988 and gained advanced economic and political skills abroad. To support their research, he urged the creation of the Center for Economic and Social Development, a Yangon think tank, and then, with assistance from South Korea, formed the Myanmar Development Institute in the capital, Naypyitaw, to assist the Finance and Planning Ministries. The NLD, for its part, founded an economic research organization, the Renaissance Institute, that also incorporated returning economists and academics.

When the NLD gained executive power in the 2015 election, it built on the progress made by the previous administration, starting with a further reduction in the number of ministries and the appointment of civilian ministers and deputy ministers. The NLD government's economic measures included

- continuing Myanmar's integration into the global economy;
- implementing the 2018 Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan, a roadmap to speed the pace of reform in economic and social development and to achieve peace and reconciliation;
- strengthening the institutional capacity of civil servants within the ministries;
- starting to modify the budget process;
- establishing new institutions and policies to harmonize foreign investment with Myanmar's national development requirements;¹⁸
- reorganizing tax administration;
- creating the National Economic Coordinating Committee to make government decisions on financial reform, revision of oil and gas contracts, proposed infrastructure projects, fiscal policies, and poverty reduction; and
- eliminating the Ministry of Industry by bringing its responsibilities under the Ministry of Finance and restructuring, modernizing, and partially privatizing its forty-plus state-owned enterprises, many of which operated under military control.

In general, the economy remained strong, with real economic growth and relatively moderate inflation, substantial foreign direct investment, continuing diversification of the economy, real increases in income, and a measurable reduction in the rate of poverty. A major accomplishment of the NLD government was the decision to move the General Administration Department (that is, all local



People line up to withdraw cash from a bank in Yangon on March 22, 2021. Since the military seized power on February 1, 2021, Myanmar's economy has been in a state of free fall. (Photo by New York Times)

administrative structures) from military control in the Ministry of Home Affairs to civilian control in a new ministry under the President's Office. Even greater progress was achieved by the Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Industry, under the second minister appointed by the NLD.

Despite the progress in introducing reform measures, most of the NLD's economic efforts during its first term struggled with implementation. This was due partly to resistance and inexperience within the civil service and partly to cumbersome processes and decision structures created by the leadership. For example, cross-ministerial committees proliferated by the dozens, channeling most major decisions to the state counselor.

Before the end of the NLD's first term, a plan was drawn up for major economic reforms to be implemented in its second term, assuming the party would prevail in the 2020 elections. Among other things, this plan called for

- reviewing and reorganizing the oil and gas sector to include a plan to provide corporate management of the state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise and to make the Ministry of Electricity and Energy a strictly regulatory body;

- corporatizing other mining and natural resource entities and their separation from regulatory bodies to eliminate conflicts of interest;
- codifying a new income tax law with modern tax administration concepts and undertaking tax audits of state-owned enterprises;
- completing unification of all revenue streams into a central Treasury account to eliminate thousands of “other accounts” in separate ministries that diverted funds from the central budget and their expenditure to the discretion of ministries;
- restructuring banking and finance to allow some banks to fail, increase access to credit, and ease exchange rate flexibility;
- streamlining trade procedures to speed the legitimate import process; and
- privatizing various construction companies involved in infrastructure development.

Military leadership was kept abreast of these confidential plans for reform by veterans who worked in various departments, including the Ministry of Finance. Many observers believe that along with political motivations, economic interests were a key driver for the coup. Senior officers were concerned, they argue, that the military was about to be pushed more rapidly out of lucrative economic activity. The evidence for that conclusion, they say, is that coup leaders immediately moved to jail all the senior economic officials and advisers and to reverse the full gamut of economic reforms instituted over the previous ten years.

Other analysts, not discounting the personal economic concerns of military leaders, still see nationalist motives as more compelling because top officers expected that continuing poor implementation would render the reforms fairly harmless. What senior military officials most abhorred was the influence of foreign economic advisers and their impact on Myanmar’s economic policy. That hostility is apparent in some of the legal charges being brought against the senior NLD leadership. The generals may also have been troubled by the evidence of high-level military corruption that senior economic officials had amassed. In any case, the impact of the coup on economic structures in Naypyitaw speaks for itself: the ministries set up under previous military governments have been restored, the Ministry of Industry has been reinstated along with its many enterprises, and the General Administration Department has been returned to the Ministry of Home Affairs.

The economic effect of these reversals was felt almost immediately and was compounded by the civil service strike, the strike of bank employees, and the general mayhem in the wake of large popular protests in major cities. While the country teeters today on the verge of economic collapse, the warring parties continue to intensify their battle, only deepening the massive impoverishment brought on by the coup.

Health and Social Services

The fighting and disruption occasioned by the military coup have caused health and social services to deteriorate rapidly, leaving large segments of the population, particularly in the many conflict zones, deprived of these essential services altogether.

While the country teeters today on the verge of economic collapse, the warring parties continue to intensify their battle, only deepening the massive impoverishment brought on by the coup.

Electricity and infrastructure. Opposition forces have disrupted the SAC's already limited capacity to govern by undermining the country's energy sector. A campaign to protest the coup regime by refusing to pay electricity bills has deprived the SAC's Ministry of Electricity and Energy of 100 billion kyat per month (approximately \$57.2 million) in uncollected bills. The scale of the protest is startling: 98 percent of customers in Yangon 97 percent in Mandalay, and 80 percent in the remaining regions have refused to make payments.¹⁹ In addition to potential losses of up to 10 percent of fiscal revenue for the SAC, disruptions caused by the lack of revenue have led to frequent blackouts nationwide.²⁰ The blackouts further disrupt communications for the people of Myanmar, who have already faced internet shutdowns under the junta.

In addition, ministry staff and offices have been targeted for attacks, as have local electricity bill collectors and meter readers. On July 7, the Yangon Revolutionary Front, an urban PDF, bombed ministry offices across Yangon to deter the Department of Electricity from forcing people to pay their bills. On July 16, a blast in Mandalay killed an employee of the Electric Power Corporation and a passerby and injured at least seven people.²¹ As of this writing, bombs have hit numerous electricity offices across Yangon, Mandalay, Bago, and Magwe, among other locations.

Health care. Since the early days of the coup, health-care workers and medical students have refused to work in state hospitals as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement.²² In November, nine months after the military's power grab, about fifty thousand government health-care employees were still participating in the walkout. As of September 2021, the military had conducted 296 attacks against health-care workers and 87 raids on hospitals, arresting more than 210 health-care workers, and killing at least 29.²³ The regime has also brought criminal charges against striking government doctors and threatened to suspend the licenses of private hospitals and clinics to discourage them from hiring medical staff who refuse to serve at public institutions. The result is that doctors report working fewer days out of concern for their personal safety, and already scarce health-care resources for low-income communities are becoming even less available.²⁴ Health-care workers have tried to fill the gap with house calls and free treatment at private hospitals or charity clinics, but the military has interfered in these efforts as well, often with violent attacks.

Although the devastating effects of COVID-19 are not unique to Myanmar, the effects of the coup have further mired access to health care, making prevention and treatment of the disease another victim of the spreading violence. The military's obstructionist responses to the pandemic include confiscation of medical supplies.²⁵ In one case, soldiers pretended to be COVID-19 patients in order to arrest doctors participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement, then seized their oxygen canisters, medications, and personal protective equipment.²⁶ The military's continued efforts to inhibit provision of medical care, by both domestic professionals and international humanitarian organizations, is devastating for the population.²⁷



Health-care workers watch protesters demonstrating against the military junta in Yangon on February 28, 2021. Since the February 1, 2021 coup, many physicians and health-care workers have refused to work in government-run hospitals. (Photo by New York Times)

The junta's inept management of the COVID-19 pandemic does not end there. According to a study published in January 2022, regime officials deliberately undercounted the number of deaths and infections caused by the third wave of the pandemic between July and September 2021. Based on months of interviews with families, health-care providers, and funeral service organizations, the researchers found that the junta's COVID-19 data were based solely on cases treated in government-run hospitals and deliberately excluded cases and deaths that occurred outside the public health system. Although the junta reported 14,401 deaths during this period, interviews with funeral service groups suggested that the number of COVID-19–related deaths exceeded one hundred thousand.²⁸ With the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus arriving in Myanmar in January 2022, the number of infections and deaths can be expected to rise substantially over the coming year.

Funeral services. As COVID-19 and conflict casualties push up Myanmar's death toll, performing rituals of grieving for the dead becomes a growing challenge. Funeral service providers are strained beyond capacity and regularly obstructed by the junta. Particularly during the third wave of the pandemic, major cemeteries reported an overwhelming influx of bodies.²⁹ Volunteer-based organizations, such as the Metta Thingaha Free Funeral Aid Association, a Yangon charity providing

free transportation of bodies to local cemeteries, have been under pressure from the military. The junta has cracked down on these organizations and even sued the Free Funeral Service Society in Yangon for allegedly supporting the CDM.³⁰ In April, the junta ordered that a mausoleum for fourteen civilians killed by the regime be dismantled.³¹ Security forces often even refuse to return the bodies of people they have killed, moving them directly to crematoriums or mass graves. Violent conflict has disrupted not only all aspects of normal life, but also the opportunity to grieve the dead.

Education

Critics have pointed out numerous gaps in NLD education reform, but without question access to schooling expanded considerably across the country throughout the reform period, and the inclusion of ethnic minorities improved notably. At the secondary and higher education levels, schools had already emerged as incubators for broader political and social reforms, particularly as access to information increased rapidly after 2011. The NLD government had plans to accelerate an ambitious reform initiative launched during the Thein Sein years, dramatically increasing the budget for public schools, revitalizing the curriculum for primary, secondary, and higher education, and beginning to modernize the government's outdated approach to education. This trend has now been interrupted, first by the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, which forced students into distance learning, and then by the consequences of the military takeover, which devastated the teacher corps in public education.³²

Almost immediately after the coup, as many as 125,000 teachers joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, prompting the military regime to suspend or terminate more than a hundred thousand teacher contracts. Many of these educators were forced to vacate homes provided by their schools and to seek refuge in areas under the control of ethnic armed organizations to avoid arrest or death. Moreover, popular demand for state education has completely collapsed in the wake of the coup because most parents refuse to enroll their children. When schools reopened in June 2021, after months of closures due to COVID-19, fewer than 10 percent of students returned to the classroom. Most teaching positions were filled with USDP women or military wives and daughters, none with any training or experience in education. The military has responded by issuing threats and attempting to force parents to enroll their students. This, though, has largely been met with defiance and has failed to increase registration.

By November more teachers had returned to the classroom, but at great personal risk. Local PDFs have threatened, harmed, and killed a handful of teachers or their family members for returning to the junta's classrooms. Many of these teachers boycotted in June but then, over the next two months, spent their entire savings trying to save family members from COVID-19. Lacking any other livelihood, they are in an impossible situation, facing threats from the military if they do not return to teach and threats from local anti-coup forces if they do. Enrollments of children, especially in urban areas, continue to be very low, as the quality of education has deteriorated.³³

Parents instead have turned to three possible options: using underground or online educational platforms, such as those established under the National Unity Government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); enrolling children living close to territories controlled by the EAOs in schools

As a result of media collapse, internet shutdowns, and the rising price of internet service paired with economic devastation, many communities live in information black holes.

administered by those groups' civilian authorities; or sending children, if families have the means to do so, to new low-cost private classes in the homes of striking teachers.

Most urban families, afraid of getting caught using an NUG online education program, prefer the third option. Students who do attend state schools under the SAC will be subjected to increasing control and censorship because the junta clamps down on academic freedoms to maintain control and create ideological support among youth. Those seeking alternatives may find wider educational freedom, but they could also encounter regular interruptions in access to online resources as the junta, determined to dominate education, blocks sites or imposes internet blackouts. In any event, the formal education sector is certain to lag under the SAC, taking a toll on literacy and overall levels of education that could have devastating consequences for yet another generation of Myanmar students.

Civil Society and Freedom of Information

Civil society writ large is the backbone of the resistance, along with the civil servants who participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Both are under relentless attack by the junta yet survive by operating underground and anonymously. They lead sporadic street protests, collect and share information with domestic and international stakeholders, attend to people engaged in fighting against the regime, and support communities in need, to name just a few contributions. Myanmar has a plethora of civil society and self-help community groups.³⁴ Although many of the more visible organizations have been forced to dissolve in response to immense pressure from the regime, those that remain make up the community-level wing of the resistance movement, many sympathetic to the NUG or other members of the national-level wing of the movement.

With a few exceptions, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, international NGOs have moved international staff offshore or terminated operations altogether. Those operating offshore face immense challenges to basic operations, such as moving money into the country and communicating safely. Some international organizations have had local staff detained or arrested; others have had their bank accounts frozen or offices raided. UN organizations remain in the country, but their activities are severely restricted. The country has been without a UN resident coordinator for about eighteen months.

The Burmese-language press has been decimated since the coup, with at least 115 journalists detained between February 1 and January 2022.³⁵ Almost all other international media organizations have left the country. Most independent local media outlets were banned or forced to close officially registered publications by mid-March, including virtually all national-level outlets such as *Mizzima*, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, *Khit Thit*, *Myanmar Now*, *The Voice*, *7Daily*, and the *Myanmar Times*. The regime has also shut down or raided the offices of important media outlets that report

on ethnic minority areas, notably the *Hakha Post*, *Myitkyina News Journal*, and the Thanlwin Thway Chin News Agency. Nonetheless, public support for independent media has grown considerably since the coup. Facebook followers of the *Democratic Voice of Burma*, for example, have grown from thirteen million before the coup to nineteen million as of late October. Similarly, important local outlets have also grown. Followers of the *Myitkyina News Journal* and the Tachileik News Agency, for example, have grown from 720,000 before the coup to 1.3 million in late October. Despite this increased demand, local media struggle to remain financially viable as paid subscribers and ad purchases have plummeted.

In contrast to previous uprisings in Myanmar, citizen journalists have played an increasingly important role as they share on-the-ground information using social media. However, as more content comes through informal channels, questions multiply about the quality and independence of the journalism and data verification, as well as the potential for military-backed disinformation to be spread under the name of a media outlet on social media. Social media, including Facebook, is being used in complex ways to spread falsehoods and unreliable information. Moreover, the NUG and activist networks have set up their own media platforms since the coup. At least twenty-three activist-supported newsletters, such as *Molotov* and *River Gazette*, have been created. Civil society networks also manage domestic radio broadcasts, such as *Federal FM*, and large-scale text-messaging groups to share information when the internet has been shut down or is inaccessible.

As a result of media collapse, internet shutdowns, and the rising price of internet service paired with economic devastation, many communities live in information black holes.

International Response

The chaos in Myanmar has rattled the country's neighborhood, but little has been done to change the military's calculation or behavior. The current trajectory of conflict and the junta's incompetence likely mean that conflict, disease, and displacement will spread beyond Myanmar's borders, inevitably threatening regional security and stability. The reaction of Myanmar's neighbors, both collectively and individually, has varied substantially. The divergence has been particularly notable within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, making it unlikely that the organization, to which Myanmar belongs, could serve as a broker to resolve the country's internal conflict.

Several major **ASEAN** countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, have called for restoration of the elected government and the release of detained political leaders. Others, including Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos, were initially reluctant to take a firm stand against the junta, but later joined an ASEAN consensus to exclude Min Aung Hlaing and political-level SAC representatives from the ASEAN leaders' summit in October and the ASEAN-China dialogue in November. Thailand, whose military has maintained a close relationship with Min Aung Hlaing, is on the fence. On the one hand, the military-led Thai government is reluctant to condemn the coup; on the other, it has quietly taken measures to protect Thailand from the coup's potentially destructive effects. Thailand is the ASEAN member most directly affected by the chaos on its border, faced with both the flow of refugees and the accelerating resurgence of COVID-19. Thailand is also the most direct route for providing badly needed humanitarian assistance to the beleaguered opposition and refuge for displaced communities.

With Brunei chairing the organization in 2021, ASEAN was slow to organize an effective response to the Myanmar crisis. After months of Byzantine internal deliberations, ASEAN appointed a Bruneian official as its special envoy for Myanmar in early August. The official made no discernible progress and, with Cambodia now holding the ASEAN chairmanship, Prime Minister Hun Sen has replaced him with Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn.³⁶ During a visit in January to Naypyitaw to meet with Min

Aung Hlaing, Hun Sen tried to cast ASEAN's relations with the junta in a more positive light, despite his denial that the visit constituted official recognition.³⁷ The visit drew angry responses from key ASEAN capitals and is likely to further exacerbate divisions within ASEAN about relations with the junta.

China, which initially approached the coup regime with caution, had granted it de facto recognition by August 2021. Beijing seems to be outsourcing to ASEAN responsibility for bringing about a negotiated solution to the crisis, but also influencing ASEAN states quietly from behind the scenes (as Beijing appears to have done with Hun Sen's visit to Naypyitaw). The goals that frame China's posture toward Myanmar are expanding its economic interests, forestalling other international involvement in Myanmar, maintaining stability along China's border, and preventing the spread of COVID-19 into its territory.

China's leading long-term goal in Myanmar is the development of modern transportation and port facilities that will offer strategic access to the Indian Ocean and facilitate exploitation of the country's rich natural resources and agricultural wealth. The coup and its resultant chaos have interrupted those plans, and for China the sooner order is restored—however it is—the better.

COVID-19, meanwhile, has created an even more urgent interruption. By July, it became clear that China's most immediate concern was the spread of the highly infectious Delta variant. To create a measure of cross-border protection, China constructed an electrified fence on the China-Myanmar border from the north of Kachin State southward, now traversing more than seven hundred kilometers of the two-thousand-kilometer shared frontier. In addition to the protection of the physical barrier, Chinese mobile health units are working in northern ethnic areas of Myanmar, vaccinating residents and providing COVID-19–related materiel. By early August, the Chinese Embassy designated Kachin and Shan States “COVID buffer zones,” and local authorities in the border areas of China's Yunnan Province began ramping up support for testing, oxygen, and critical supplies.

With these steps in place, Yunnan had a green light from Beijing to begin renewing economic cooperation with the SAC. Chinese businesses have followed suit, talking with the coup regime about proceeding with planned projects for the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and exploring new opportunities. In late August, more than two hundred Chinese companies joined the China-Myanmar Border Trade Expo organized by the Lincang city government and the SAC's Ministry of Commerce. Government authorities are announcing fresh deals, such as the opening of a new rail and truck corridor linking Yangon to the Chinese city of Chengdu. This new route was successfully tested by the two sides in late August. Some Chinese political analysts claim that the military has already consolidated control over the country; others are skeptical that the military will ever be able to restore order. Chinese companies demonstrate the same split in outlook. Many remain cautious about investing in light of Myanmar's current violence, health situation, and general ungovernability.

Since the coup, criminal activity has intensified in certain militia-controlled areas of the country, particularly in areas controlled by the military's Border Guard Forces. Much of this activity—gambling, money laundering, drug and human trafficking—affects China and Myanmar's Southeast Asian neighbors, including Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Thailand. Before the coup, the civilian

Collective international action against the coup seems unlikely given the positions of Russia and China, but the issue will undoubtedly remain on the United Nations' radar.

government, assisted by the Myanmar military, had begun a crack-down on Chinese-linked organized crime. China has now imposed unilateral measures, among them forcing thousands of Chinese nationals working in northern Myanmar to return to China or have their families at home face retribution.

In sum, the coup's impact on China has been mixed. Current Chinese hedging appears to be guided by the premise that if the negative effects of crime, disease, and violence can be brought under control, Myanmar's instability and the junta's inevitable dependence on Chinese political and economic support could allow Beijing to cement its influence on a strategic neighbor.

On Myanmar's western border, **Bangladesh and India** have also been adversely affected by Myanmar's chaos and violence. For Bangladesh, the coup has closed the door on the possibility of a safe, organized, and dignified repatriation of Rohingya refugees. For India, it has spurred a surge of at least fifteen thousand refugees into the country's remote northeastern areas and interrupted its commercial and political ties with Myanmar.³⁸ India is undoubtedly feeling strategically challenged by the prospect of mounting civil war in Myanmar to its east and disorder in Afghanistan—and its relation to the greater strategic challenge from Pakistan—to the west. Alarm bells are likely sounding in New Delhi as it contemplates the opportunities both situations present for China's hegemonistic ambitions, which increasingly appear aimed at containing India.

Russia has used the reassertion of military control in Myanmar to reinforce its partnership with the military, in June hosting a delegation headed by Min Aung Hlaing to purchase Russian weapons and COVID-19 vaccines. Exercising its growing strategic alliance with China, Russia has also collaborated in joint efforts to block punitive UN Security Council actions against the coup regime. Russia's promise to provide technical assistance to build vaccine factories in Myanmar was trumped in late October by a larger offer of similar aid from China.

Japan and South Korea, both US allies, have major investments in Myanmar, which they have largely maintained since the coup, though they have not formally recognized the new regime. They stand generally in solidarity with the elected government and the people of Myanmar, insisting that the democratic government be reinstated and that political prisoners be released.

Western governments have seen all progress toward their objectives of a developed civil society, democratic institutions, a diversified economy, and a modern education system in Myanmar reversed. They have issued repeated statements expressing horror at the military's violence and sanctioned key individuals within and affiliated with the regime. No Western government has recognized the coup regime as the legitimate government of Myanmar. Many Western countries are coordinating—bilaterally

and through the United Nations—to support the NUG and nonviolent opposition as much as possible, including with financial, in-kind, and technical support. Although these actions have helped sustain the opposition movement, they have had little effect on the military’s behavior. Western actors have limited leverage given that the regime has forfeited its relationship with the West and turned for support from Russia, China, and some Southeast Asian regional actors instead.

As the humanitarian and health crisis has escalated, Western governments have sought methods to deploy assistance without enriching the military regime. Most Western governments have supported the World Health Organization’s COVAX program to get vaccines and COVID-19 relief supplies into Myanmar. Despite numerous efforts to negotiate expanded humanitarian access, the military has refused. US-led efforts to encourage Thailand and India to allow for cross-border aid have progressed slowly.

Collective international action against the coup seems unlikely given the positions of Russia and China, but the issue will undoubtedly remain on the United Nations’ radar. Fortunately, the UN Credentialing Committee has decided to postpone making a determination on whether to accept a new Myanmar representative to the UN appointed by the junta, instead leaving the ambassador who was appointed by the elected government in place. He will continue to represent Myanmar at the United Nations, but he is not allowed to speak for the NUG in the General Assembly under a deal agreed to by China and the United States.

In late October, Noeleen Heyzer replaced Christine Schraner Burgener as the UN special envoy for Myanmar.³⁹ Schraner Burgener made very little progress during her tenure for a variety of reasons that may also limit Heyzer’s influence. These challenges include deep distrust between the United Nations and the Myanmar military as well as China’s persistent effort to block international involvement in Myanmar, including by the United Nations. The mandate for the new special envoy needs strong political support from member states to allow for international backing to address the crisis, particularly given the lack of resources and tools that ASEAN can bring to the table to find a solution.

Support from international financial institutions—namely, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank—has been suspended under the coup regime. Donor governments are unlikely to approve new aid or loans until the return of a democratically elected government. In the meantime, the junta will remain beholden to China, Russia, and its minor supporters among ASEAN governments for foreign assistance. Wealthy countries of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia are likely to shun a military regime in Myanmar because of its record of criminal violence against Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslim population.

End-State Projections

One year after the junta seized power, it is clear that the military's vision of national domination is a fantasy. To begin with, the military has never fully controlled the country. The central government always struggled to impose its rule in one rebellious place or another. Since the coup, the junta's grip on administrative functions has eroded in urban centers such as Mandalay and Yangon and EAOs continue to extend their power and influence in parts of Chin, Kachin, Rakhine, and Shan States. Complete chaos has erupted in Chin, Karen, and Karenni States; Magwe Region; the southwestern area of the Mandalay Region; and parts of Sagaing Region. Rapid resolution of the turmoil—through either a quick victory for the military or an early return to elected government—is now off the table.

The following discussion of end states, therefore, begins with the current situation and extends over the medium and longer term. Rather than attempting to predict specific outcomes—an exercise inherently dependent on unknowns and analysts' preconceptions—this report identifies the key elements and directions likely to influence the eventual results of Myanmar's dynamic and unstable condition. Interaction among any of these forces might produce a surprising result. The elements in play include

- the strength and resilience of the civilian opposition and the People's Defense Forces;
- the capacity of ethnic armed groups to achieve their political objectives against a relatively weak but determined military regime;
- the extent to which opposition elements can build unity and maintain popular support;
- the ability of the military to respond to—or even gain advantage from—deteriorating economic, social, and health conditions;
- the interests and actions of neighboring states and the wider international community; and
- the possibility of an unforeseen transformative event—such as the emergence of a new and more virulent strain of COVID-19, natural disasters, or sudden shifts in the senior military leadership in Naypyitaw.

The relative potency of these factors should become more clear over the next few years. Even now, though, some basic trend lines are discernible. They point to one major conclusion: it is highly unlikely the military can resurrect the state of managed conflict that prevailed over many decades.

The study group believes the coup regime will have a very difficult time gaining control over enough of the country to govern effectively and will be forced to rule without majority civilian support. By brazenly overthrowing an elected government just reelected in a landslide and seeking to return the country to harsh military dictatorship after ten years of liberalization, the coup plotters face a generation that came of age amid expanding freedoms, governance reform, and growing prosperity. A large portion of the populace, both the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities, will almost certainly remain defiant and uncooperative with military rule, particularly in its extremely violent, postcoup form. The study group believes the military is too rigid to adapt to this changed society and to the resulting challenges to its legitimacy. The military has irretrievably squandered what support it had outside its ultranationalist base.

On the economic front, the coup regime's reversal of the past ten years of reforms—including attacks on the individuals who enabled the changes—seems to guarantee a shrinking economy for the foreseeable future. The banking system is collapsing, foreign investment (other than Chinese) could all but disappear, and the manufacturing sector is unlikely to recover. Trade has already diminished dramatically, much of the country's transport and administrative infrastructure is deteriorating due to neglect and attacks by opposition forces, and urban infrastructure is bound to erode as tenants in buildings erected during the boom before the coup can no longer afford the rents needed just to support maintenance.

Medium-Term Prospects

The military leadership seems determined to cling to its plan for holding new elections in 2023, likely without the NLD or Aung San Suu Kyi in the picture, but the date may recede as the junta struggles for enough political control to organize a vote.⁴⁰ The deteriorating administrative structures, social welfare, and other conditions in the country, let alone the widespread local conflict, will make it almost impossible to hold elections of national significance in that time frame.

Looming health crisis and continued downward spiral. Ultimately, the most serious challenges to the power of the military may be a dual health and food crisis. The newest variants of COVID-19 continue to spread, stressing the health-care system and adding to the disruption caused by health-care staff strikes against the coup government.⁴¹ Food shortages are increasingly serious as agriculture is interrupted by aerial attacks, violence in rural areas, restrictions on external and internal trade, and shortages of seed, fertilizer, and agricultural workers. The number of internally displaced people and refugees continues to climb.

Even if the COVID-19 pandemic becomes manageable, poverty will continue to spread dangerously over the medium term, plunging most of the population below the poverty line; and the junta, beset by continuing chaos, does not have the resources to stem this trend. The violence, disease, and starvation, compounded by a sinking economy, are likely to devastate rank-and-file soldiers and

Current trends point to an increasingly divided country falling victim to widespread illegal plunder of natural resources, with criminal organizations deepening ties with both the military and EAOs.

their families as well as the general population. The country is in the grip of a humanitarian disaster well beyond the will or capability of the military to address effectively. Instead, the army actively prevents the delivery of international aid to the needy population and interrupts the work of internal aid agencies.

In ethnic minority areas where powerful EAOs control significant territory, the army's ability to give orders to administrative officials is noticeably eroding as EAOs expand their control over administrative functions. This development is already clear in Kachin and Rakhine States, where the military has limited capacity to enforce its will with the overwhelming force it employed in the past. Similarly, in Shan State, the military is challenged by a bloody civil war between the United Wa State Army's proxy forces, the Shan State Army–North and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and the Shan State Army–South.

In parallel, opposition forces are struggling to build unity. The National Unity Government is torn between the NLD and ethnic minority demands for an elusive brand of federalism—an approach that the NLD government sadly failed to cultivate during its administration. General chaotic conditions, a predatory military, EAO distrust (the legacy of decades of Bamar majority domination), and internal leadership challenges frustrate NUG attempts to project responsible governance and gain political credibility. The NUG also faces the dilemma of appearing to preside over the campaign of violence by the People's Defense Forces that radically diverges from the thirty-year creed of nonviolence promoted by Aung San Suu Kyi. It seems a dim prospect that the disparate opposition forces can forge effective unity of purpose and operations in less than two years. The legacy of distrust and competing interests runs deep; even within the NUG, death threats have reportedly been leveled against advocates for peace and democracy. The longer the violence continues, the harder it will be for a post-military government to rebuild the country.

Still, some combination of interested parties could find enough common ground for rudimentary confidence-building discussions with parts of the SAC or military—officials who might be more inclined than the current hard-liners to seek a negotiated exit strategy. It is unlikely such parties would be tied to the core opposition structure in the NUG, NUCC, or PDFs. They could, however, be connected to ethnic minority leaders who maintain communication with the military. Nonetheless, an unpredictable shift in current trends would have to occur to create the opening for this kind of engagement.

Internationally, the United Nations, ASEAN, and neighboring countries have so far failed to secure any concessions from the military junta that might open pathways to addressing the crisis. Pressure from Western nations continues to grow, but deep divisions within ASEAN have exposed its limitations with respect to addressing a security crisis prompted by one of its member states. Meanwhile, Russia and China—which have also blocked meaningful action in the UN Security Council—are providing the junta with a lifeline by supplying it with arms, legitimacy, and international protection

while generating further turmoil within ASEAN by pressing Cambodia to offer recognition to the junta leadership.

Growing anarchy adds to a grim future. Current trends point to an increasingly divided country falling victim to widespread illegal plunder of natural resources, with criminal organizations deepening ties with both the military and EAOs whose territory lies beyond reach of any legal constraints. If current chaotic conditions continue for another year or more, many parts of the country will fall completely under the control of PDFs, EAOs, or coalitions of these forces.

As a result of extended fighting to expel the military, however, regions other than the Wa area are likely to suffer from severe poverty, food shortages, physical damage, and inadequate administration. Under these circumstances, and in the absence of any legitimate centralized authority, Myanmar would enlarge its position as a regional center for drug production and trafficking, human trafficking, money laundering, and other criminal activities. Already, aspects of the illicit economy, particularly methamphetamine trafficking, are spilling over Myanmar's borders and affecting the region, according to the Southeast Asia regional office of UN Office on Drugs and Crime.⁴²

Longer-Term Prospects

In time, the current variables that contribute to an extended stalemate will inevitably mutate in ways that could unpredictably change the entire equation. Many outcomes for the country's longer-term future are possible.

It cannot be ruled out, for example, that the military, by sheer force and superior strength, will regain control over large parts of the country. Despite the economic weakness and growing poverty brought on by the coup, the generals still have considerable wealth to draw on. As during the previous decades of military rule, all land in Myanmar belongs to the state, and despite rampant extraction of natural resources over the past thirty years, the country retains enormously valuable mineral reserves not found anywhere else. The world's third-largest deposits of rare earth minerals are in Myanmar, and the country has a near global monopoly on some rare earth elements critical to high-tech products. Shan State is home to the largest tin and silver mines in the world, and the country still harbors significant gemstone and natural gas deposits. The junta will ultimately use its military assets to protect this wealth and support itself. Whether these resources will benefit the nation at large is doubtful in the absence of adequate governance, sound economic management, and the support of the civilian population.

Unexpected events might even lead toward a dialogue that could produce a general ceasefire. That does not mean there is much hope of arriving at a new political consensus—although such a possibility cannot be written off entirely either. Nascent discussions and efforts at coalition building already underway among the NUG, EAOs, PDFs, and other opposition elements might mature into a more advanced consensus on federal governance and security. This would require that sheer existential necessity overcome the historical divisions and lack of trust within Myanmar society, yet that does appear to be happening within some of the self-defense forces.

Unfortunately, but understandably, the question of how to engage with the military and its supporters is fraught. Under current circumstances, the anti-coup camp has no tolerance for engagement even if it were initiated by EAOs, who, despite their support for the resistance, have kept open channels of communication with the military. Any movement would probably require a substantial shift in current alignments within the military itself. For example, the devastating consequences of the coup on national security and sovereignty could cause strains among the top officers and lead to an internal realignment in the leadership, elevating those more amenable to constructive engagement with opposition elements. The possibility remains a long shot, but ultimately not out of the question. Conversely, a new generation of senior officers could be even more hard-line, continuing hostilities with the civilian population for the foreseeable future.

Whatever happens, the coup has made a return to Myanmar's previous governing arrangements virtually impossible. Political power and alignments are shifting popular expectations toward a federal system in which minority ethnic groups will demand a greater role in national governance and control of their territories and resources, if not outright independence. Ultimately, this would require a new constitution that also addressed the highly charged task of negotiating a federal army—a force that could help salvage the country from disintegration, chaos, and fragmentation. (See box 2 for an outline of a potential national reconciliation and reconstruction process.)

Arriving at negotiations will require brave leadership and ingenuity from the young civilians at the forefront of the resistance, a generation that came of age amid reform and economic growth. The younger generation of military officers, by contrast, has been trained in a bubble of propaganda about the dangers of civilian rule. The views of Aung San Suu Kyi would also hover over the process, assuming she regained her freedom in time to play a role.

Finally, the longer term holds the potential for Myanmar to become hostage to powerful external forces as the junta reaches for an economic lifeline to retain its power. With Western sanctions choking the junta's access to foreign capital, the regime's reliance on China and Russia—its principal backers—is likely to grow. The longer the current standoff with the resistance continues, the more likely it is that the military leadership—wittingly or unwittingly—could deliver Myanmar into full membership in a putative Chinese commonwealth, subjecting the country to China's ambitions and undoubtedly making Chinese assets in Myanmar targets for violent sabotage by underground opposition forces.

BOX 2.

An Outline for Political and Economic Reconstruction

Sadly, Myanmar's civil war is still widening, and any negotiated settlement lies far beyond the horizon. Still, it is useful to consider the form that a process for achieving national reconciliation and reconstruction might take.

Some elements of political reconstruction are already in motion through the National Unity Consultative Council, which could become one of the most inclusive political dialogue platforms in Myanmar's history. Rebuilding the country, however, will require both political and economic reconstruction, which are separate, if closely related, tasks that can run simultaneously on separate yet reinforcing tracks.

Political reconstruction would aim to achieve a new consensus on a plan for democratic federalism, underpinned by a system of government based on free and fair elections at both the national and state levels. Central to such a consensus would be a formula for a federal security system, inclusive of the country's various organized armed forces. It would require a clear separation among the forces responsible for national security and those dedicated to internal security and law enforcement. Consensus could be the most difficult and elusive element of a new arrangement because the many armed forces in the country have multiple demands that have proven irreconcilable for decades.

Because political reconstruction could take years, a concurrent process of economic reconstruction would be essential to rebuild the country's economy and maintain interim administrative structures at the national level. This effort would rely on the architects of previous economic reforms, most of whom are now jailed by the military, and technocrats skilled in administration, who might be drawn from the civil service, civil society, and the business community. It would begin by reinstating economic structures and policies developed during the reform decade and building on them to quickly get people back to work, support development, make the trains run, and revive and improve services including electricity and water. These moves, accompanied by work on a justice system appropriate to all ethnicities that ensures fair law enforcement, would help restore optimism and energy after a long period of debilitating civil conflict.

Finally, efforts toward political resolution should also be designed to account for the deep trauma the Myanmar public has experienced and should aim to promote intercommunal reconciliation and cohesion. Without a process of reconciliation and healing that runs from the grass roots to the national leadership, resumption of conflict is more likely.

Why Myanmar Matters to the United States

The crisis in Myanmar directly challenges interests and values that are foundations of US foreign policy—democracy, human rights, rule of law, prosperity, and security—and it presents an opportunity for the United States to demonstrate its commitment to diplomatic engagement that promotes a rules-based international order. It would be an abrogation of those foundations were the United States to neglect the tragedy unfolding in Myanmar today. Conflict in Myanmar also jeopardizes past US investments and trade interests in Myanmar and poses grave political, economic, and humanitarian threats to the Southeast Asian region.

Instability and conflict in Myanmar threaten the entire Southeast Asian region. Surrounded by Bangladesh, India, China, Laos, and Thailand, Myanmar—a nation of about fifty-two million people—is the most ethnically diverse country in mainland Southeast Asia. Reaching from the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal in the south to the foothills of the Himalayas in the north, Myanmar is endowed with vast reserves of mineral, forest, agricultural, riverine, and oceanic resources, and includes perhaps the greatest number of threatened biodiversity-rich zones of any country in the world. For decades, a variety of internal and external forces have waged fierce competition for control of its resources, often igniting armed conflict. Such competition is only growing more intense with global demands for increasingly scarce resources, such as rare earth minerals.

Southeast Asia is a major US trading partner. As one of the largest sources of foreign investment for ASEAN countries, the United States has a strong interest in the region's prosperity. ASEAN is one of the United States' most significant trading blocs. A substantial portion of US manufacturing supply lines trace to ASEAN, whether directly or through China. Myanmar, the region's largest mainland country, is a key member and potential economic powerhouse of ASEAN. Its political and economic failure could have a negative effect on the region that could extend to the United States.



Anti-coup protesters hold signs showing deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi at a march in Mandalay, Myanmar's second-largest city, on February 15, 2021. Aung San Suu Kyi and other senior members of the National League for Democracy government have been jailed by the military junta. (Photo by AP)

The coup has contributed to a regional and global health crisis. Myanmar's current unraveling has left the country unable to resist the rampant spread of COVID-19, adding to the pandemic's global health threat. In fact, the military regime is actively obstructing remedial assistance to most of the civilian population and even to a significant portion of the military. It is strongly in the United States' interests to assist regional institutions in coping with this threat, if only to arrest the spread of the disease throughout the world.

The coup has brought on expanding humanitarian and displacement crises. Looming behind the health emergency is a severe shortage of food caused by population displacement, extreme poverty, crime, and economic collapse. Local administrative structures, law enforcement, and social services have been devastated by the conflict. Effects of this chaos are certain to spill into the region, potentially triggering the kind of conflict that followed the forced exodus of nearly a million Rohingya into Bangladesh in the past decade (see box 3 on the following page). The United States has already allocated more than \$1.3 billion to address the Rohingya crisis.⁴³

BOX 3.

Rohingya Crackdown

In 2017, the Myanmar military conducted a violent crackdown on Rohingya Muslims in western Myanmar, forcing more than 745,000 to flee into Bangladesh.^a The Rohingya faced similar spates of violence in 1978 and 1992 that led to a mass exodus from Myanmar. They also experienced decades of structural discrimination and dehumanization. These factors, paired with the brutal nature of the 2017 crackdown—namely, the evidence of sexual violence and the destruction of hundreds of Rohingya villages—prompted a UN investigation into possible genocide.^b In its report, the United Nations called the military’s atrocities, which were characterized by torture, maiming and brutalizing civilians, mass killings, and sexual violence, “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”^c

The prospect for safe and dignified repatriation of displaced Rohingya has been delayed indefinitely by the coup. Conditions for Rohingya in Bangladesh have become even more challenging in recent months with crime

increasing in the refugee camps and basic services difficult to access. In November 2021, Bangladesh authorities began moving Rohingya refugees to a flood-prone island against their will.^d In a sign of their desperation, Rohingya continue to pay smugglers and board boats bound for Malaysia or Thailand in hopes of a better life. Hundreds have died attempting this dangerous journey.

Despite widespread public antipathy toward the Rohingya before the coup, the anti-coup activist movement has shown greater openness to Rohingya grievances, going so far as to apologize for past insensitivity. In another notable sign of progress, the National Unity Government appointed a Rohingya adviser to its Human Rights Ministry and issued a policy that acknowledges atrocities against the Rohingya and promises human rights protections, including citizenship.

Notes

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The coup jeopardizes past US investments in a free and democratic Myanmar. The United States has invested \$1.5 billion in development assistance to Myanmar since 2012.⁴⁴ These efforts, both directly and in concert with international institutions, began to show remarkable progress over the past ten years and have even paid dividends in the postcoup period. Leaders of the nationwide opposition to the coup include many young people who received training and support from the United States and see it as an ally. They are the core of an opposition movement that is the most inclusive in Myanmar's recent history. In the years before the coup, the United States had supported 235 democracy organizations, 258 peacebuilding organizations, and 255 independent media outlets in Myanmar.⁴⁵ No other country enjoys similar connections with the future leaders of Myanmar. Notably, China's posture since the coup has only deepened the Myanmar public's enmity and distrust.

The crisis in Myanmar offers the United States an opportunity to demonstrate recommitment to its alliances and values-based diplomacy. Washington can assert its leadership in this critical region by mobilizing its partnerships with its ASEAN allies (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore), its treaty partners (Thailand and the Philippines), and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad (Japan, Australia, and India). Failure to do so would further weaken already threatened international institutions and alliances. It would also undermine the credibility of the United States' values-based rhetoric and cede geostrategic territory to China.

Instability in Myanmar allows transnational crime to flourish. Myanmar is likely the world's largest producer of methamphetamines and a leading source of opium.⁴⁶ It is a critical link in the global supply chain of illicit businesses, including narcotics, human trafficking, wildlife trade, mining and logging, weapons trafficking, and gambling. The absence of law enforcement and the reduced costs to organized crime groups stemming from Myanmar's economic plunge make the country an attractive base for international criminal networks. The country's chaos has already generated a windfall for the booming drug trade and is destabilizing states bordering Myanmar.⁴⁷

Given so many critical issues at stake for the United States in Myanmar, it would be derelict to abandon the country's opposition movement and accept the increasingly problematic and destructive rule of the generals.

US Policy Recommendations

The United States has few immediate bargaining chips to press the Myanmar military for a cease-fire, release of political prisoners, and restoration of the elected government. To deal with the limitations imposed by geographic distance and the current political and security obstacles to direct access, the United States will need to enlist the international community, its alliances, and Myanmar's domestic and exiled civil society to deliver aid and support to Myanmar's civilians and to seek an end to the multidimensional crisis.

Provide Humanitarian Assistance

The most immediate imperative for the United States is to address the urgent need for humanitarian and medical assistance for Myanmar's beleaguered civilians. Because access to the country is hampered by internal conditions and the regime's extreme hostility to foreign "interference," the United States needs to seek every conceivable alternative avenue for providing aid. This would likely involve acting in concert with other countries in the region, especially allies such as Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand, and enlisting other regional and international organizations, particularly the United Nations, to mount effective responses.

In working with others, however, the United States needs to ensure that delivery and action are designed to avoid conferring legitimacy on the State Administrative Council, the military, and other illegitimate bodies established by the junta. The best way to do so is to strengthen US partnerships with Myanmar's neighbors in Southeast Asia to leverage the access that the country's porous borders present (many of which are already outside the Myanmar military's scope of influence and control).

The most urgent humanitarian needs at present are as follows:

- **Vaccinations and other ways of combating COVID-19 for communities denied such assistance by the military and coup regime.** The best options for delivery are through Thailand and India, which

would facilitate access to vaccines in the southeast states and in the India-Myanmar border area, and through UN agencies and programs already under negotiation with the regime. Vaccination through India and Thailand will require negotiation with the Thai and Indian governments. However, China has already set a related precedent by vaccinating groups in northern Shan and Kachin States without any agreement from the regime. EAOs in both areas have already made plans to vaccinate their populations should the United States and its allies succeed in making vaccines available. Meanwhile, the United Nations has been aiming to deliver at least nine million doses from COVAX via NGOs but has yet to receive approval from the junta. The United States should continue to encourage the UN Secretary General to use his good offices to ensure that these vaccines can be received in-country and administered by entities outside the military's control.

- **Food assistance to communities being ravaged by military attacks**, again with the help of UN agencies and NGOs. Some assistance is being channeled through India, Thailand, or China on a small scale, but it needs to be scaled up dramatically.
- **Safe zones and materials for shelter for internally displaced communities**, which can be delivered by international organizations and local humanitarian groups operating in conflict areas.
- **Alternative methods of communication**, particularly for displaced populations and those living in areas where the internet is inaccessible or unaffordable.

Intensify International Coordination

In the near term, it is incumbent on the United States to work with its partners on solutions to the deadlock in Myanmar. Collaborative international efforts can produce options to help clear roadblocks to providing aid, ensure the coup regime's international isolation, and offer material and moral support to the opposition movement. Cooperation may also help identify viable plans for stabilization and reconstruction under an elected civilian government. In particular, the United States needs to intensify diplomatic engagement with Myanmar's immediate neighbors, especially Bangladesh, India, and Thailand, to develop common positions and encourage their interventions with—and isolation of—the junta regime. It should continue to urge a stronger role for ASEAN while exploring more systematically the potential of emerging platforms such as the Quad and AUKUS (the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to identify possible ways of restoring democratic government. Washington should also stay open to consultations with China, to the extent Beijing is willing to engage, to identify areas of mutual concern where collaboration might be possible.

With India, in particular, the United States can stress that the restoration of democracy in Myanmar is a high priority issue. The Quad could potentially play a more central role in humanitarian efforts and, as the situation deteriorates in the western part of the country, might provide critical logistics support.

Strengthen Visible Support to the Opposition

US support to the National Unity Government, the self-declared interim elected government, has been generally discreet so far. Washington should begin interacting more visibly and substantively with the NUG and its resistance counterparts to include not just the Civil Disobedience Movement and the National Unity Consultative Council but also dozens of smaller and more local opposition groups. It could, for example, provide advice, aimed especially at encouraging the fragmented

opposition to find unity of purpose and action. Reconciliation and dialogue among opposition elements should be facilitated, and if possible fostered, to check SAC efforts to divide them.

US support to the NUG itself might include measures to facilitate its direct engagement with the disparate opposition—something the NUG has already begun.

To the extent possible, the United States should also assist in the development of safe havens for those threatened with detention or violent attack by junta forces.

In addition, it is critical that the United States deepen its support for the NLD and other pro-democracy political parties, such as the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD). Both continue to operate for now as registered and active political parties. US political parties and organizations such as the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute might consider expanding dialogues with NLD or SNLD parliamentarians through online platforms and possibly also look to meet other material or technical needs.

US government–supported programs among US Agency for International Development partners in Myanmar should be carefully coordinated to ensure that they are cohesive, practical, nonduplicative, effective, and responsible. This effort might be advanced by exploring more flexible program support models, such as working through *parahita* religious charities and unregistered organizations, simplifying financial accounting requirements, and increasing emergency financial assistance. However, any kind of aid harmonization and coordination should be managed discreetly to avoid putting local partners at risk.

Finally, the Biden administration might consider appointing a senior envoy tasked to engage with pro-democracy actors in the country. The envoy could be a prominent former senior official, who might also take the lead in coordinating efforts with US allies. This would send a strong signal of the US determination to restore democracy in the country.

Expand Relations with Civilian Nonstate Authorities Linked to Ethnic Nationality Groups

US relations with the political representatives of ethnic nationality groups, particularly those collaborating most closely with the resistance and gaining the most ground against the military, should be expanded to include enhanced dialogue, engagement, and humanitarian assistance both directly and through local ethnic civil society organizations. Wider US channels of communication with key ethnic nationality organizations, buttressed by humanitarian aid to their civilian communities, would bolster the US role in promoting a future democratic federal government as well as more immediately encouraging unity among the regime’s opponents. This outreach should prioritize ethnic political organizations that have already demonstrated commitment to democracy in their own areas of influence, but should also be strategic in encouraging rising ethnic nationality actors such as the United League of Arakan to collaborate with the anti-coup movement. Given India’s economic interests in Rakhine State, this engagement might also involve the Quad partners. Another Quad partner, Japan, has also worked actively with EAOs and ethnic minority organizations in the past and appears to maintain these channels of communication.

Intensify Actions against the Military

The US government has already imposed targeted sanctions on military leaders, senior members of the coup government, military industries, and crony businesses, but so far with limited effect. The impact of general sanctions on the country would likely fall most heavily on the civilian population. Unilateral sanctions tend to be a tactic employed in the absence of more effective measures, but additional responses that could enhance the punishing effect may still be possible, such as

- moving to block proceeds from extractive industries held in dollar accounts;
- pushing for US partners to immediately cease all involvement of their government or nationals in arms deals with the junta, especially including India, Israel, and Thailand;
- encouraging neighbors to impose no-fly zones on Myanmar's borders or, if not possible, using defense technologies such as scramblers to save civilians from junta air strikes;
- sanctioning companies involved in cross-border criminal activities or controlled by the Karen and Kokang Border Guard Forces under the military;
- considering sanctions on international companies that initiate new business ties with the junta;
- working with civil society and the international community to lay the groundwork for military accountability; and
- working with opposition representatives on designs for a federal army and other federal security structures.

Prepare for Future Rebuilding

Essential to longer-term solutions will be the emergence of a strong cadre of civilian leaders who can formulate viable plans for a democratic, federal Myanmar and a prosperous economy. To raise up those leaders, the United States will need to support the talented cohort that emerged within the younger generation over the past ten years and that gained valuable experience in building a civil society and democratic institutions.

Elements of this strategy could include

- protecting and preserving intellectual talent both inside and outside the country using asylum and refugee programs, expanding education and fellowship programs, and assisting displaced populations inside Myanmar and in neighboring countries;
- working with opposition entities on planning for future governance structures and policies; and
- collecting and preserving evidence of rights abuses for future transitional or restorative justice and accountability.



The military's ill-considered coup has triggered a revolution in Myanmar that promises a successful conclusion to decades of effort by the United States and its international partners to nourish the seeds of democracy and bring an end to one of the world's oldest military dictatorships. These seeds have clearly taken root in the younger generation willing to pay with their lives to keep democratic progress alive. The United States' support for them must not fail at this critical moment.

APPENDIX 1:

Myanmar's Ethnic Armed Organizations

Ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) are concentrated primarily in Myanmar's borderlands. These groups, led by nonstate authorities, administer significant territory that they have gained through decades of battles and ceasefire agreements with the Myanmar Army.⁴⁸ Some of these territories are codified in the country's state structures and in subdivisions specified in the 2008 constitution.

Several of the largest EAOs operate near the China-Myanmar border.

The **Kachin Independence Organization** (KIO) and its military wing, the **Kachin Independence Army** (KIA), were founded in 1960. The KIA maintains more than twelve thousand troops and a headquarters on the border with China at Laiza. After a lengthy ceasefire, it has fought with the Burmese army since 2011 and has refused to sign the National Ceasefire Agreement. The KIO has an elected leadership and, though it does not formally seek independence, has long sought autonomy for the Kachin communities. Following the coup, the KIO/A began providing cautious support to the anti-coup movement, which prompted a major increase in fighting in Kachin State.

The **United Wa State Army** (UWSA), with an armed strength estimated at some forty thousand, and its political wing, the **United Wa State Party** (UWSP), were founded in 1989 following the collapse of the Burmese Communist Party. The UWSP controls two enclaves—one on the China border and one on the Thai border—which collectively are about the size of the state of Massachusetts. The UWSP maintains complete autonomy over these areas, having borrowed their political system and economic institutions from China. Although Wa territory is more integrated into China than Myanmar, it has deep business ties with other EAOs and with the junta.

The **National Democratic Alliance Army** (NDAA), or Mongla, has a standing force of more than four thousand troops and controls yet another enclave on the China-Myanmar border, which borders Laos to the east. With a political wing known as the Peace and Solidarity Committee, Mongla was

established following the fall of the Burmese Communist Party in 1989. Its territory is about the size of Delaware and has a population of eighty-five thousand people, who are largely Han Chinese. Like the Wa, the Mongla is deeply integrated with China and follows Chinese models of authoritarian governance. The NDAA maintains a ceasefire with the Burmese army, but was not a part of the formal peace process that ended after the coup.

The Brotherhood Alliance consists of three EAOs that seek to recover historical territories. First is the **Myanmar Democratic Alliance Army** (MNDA), also known as the Kokang, founded in 1989. It formerly controlled territory the size of Rhode Island, also on the Chinese border, until it was defeated by the Burmese army in 2009. What remains of it is based in a small camp and positions along the China border to the west of the Thanlwin River in the town of Monekoe. Its goal is to recover the territory it administered from 1989 to 2009. Next is the **Ta'ang National Liberation Army**, whose political wing is known as the **Palaung State Liberation Front**. The army maintains more than six thousand troops and has been based in northern Shan State since its founding in 2005. It has ambitions to advance the cause of the Ta'ang minority group, which is spread across northern Shan State, but concentrated in a Special Administrative Region on the China border west of Kokang. Third is the **Arakan Army** (AA), whose political wing is the **United League of Arakan**. The AA went from being a small EAO without its own territory, hosted in the north by the KIA until 2017, to one of the most powerful by 2020 after a successful military campaign in Rakhine State enabled it to take significant territory along the border with Bangladesh. The AA seeks to establish an autonomous region modeled on Wa State in the area that was historically part of the Arakan Empire, including parts of Southern Chin and contemporary Rakhine State. Together, these three armies have fought the military in the north of Myanmar since 2017. All three have a common ambition of regaining historical territories, albeit in different parts of the country. None has a formal ceasefire with the military, although the AA seems to have negotiated an informal ceasefire with the Burmese army in late 2020 in Rakhine State.

Two rival forces—the Shan State Armies (SSA)—claim to represent the cause of the ethnic Shan people, who share ancestry with their counterparts in Thailand, Laos, and the Dai areas of China's Yunnan Province. The **Shan State Army—North** dates to 1971 and maintains a base at Wanhai, which is to the north of Shan State not far from the Wa territories. Its political wing is known as the **Shan State Progress Party**. The SSA—North is a close ally of all of the EAOs described above. To its south is the **Shan State Army—South**, which has bases across Shan State but controls territory near the Thai border at Loi Tai Leng. The SSA—South, whose political wing is known as the **Restoration Council of Shan State**, was founded in 1996 following the defeat of drug lord and Shan revolutionary leader Khun Sa. The SSA—North and its allies were once sworn enemies of Khun Sa. This rivalry now extends to the SSA—South, which is seen as encroaching on the territories of the northern EAOs. The SSA—South is a signatory to the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), but its relations with other key signatories remain contentious.

Several other key EAOs, in addition to the Shan State Army—South, are located along the border with Thailand.

The **Karen National Liberation Army** (KNLA), one of the longest-standing of Myanmar's EAOs, was founded in 1949. It has around fifteen thousand troops, signed the NCA accord, and controls territory along the Thai border. Its political wing is the **Karen National Union** (KNU), which is one of the EAOs most open to collaborating with other resistance groups and is considered one of the more democratic of the EAOs, maintaining a KNU Congress that elects the group's leaders. Following the coup, the KNLA pulled out of the peace process and aligned closely with the National Unity Government (NUG). Fighting in Karen State has been heavy since then.

The **Karenni Army** is based in Nya Moe, Karenni State. It has a small force of fewer than two thousand troops and a history that dates to 1948. The army signed the NCA in 2012 but has since pulled out of that process and provided robust support to the NUG. The leaders of the **Karenni National Progressive Party**, the civilian wing of the Karenni Army, have taken on leadership roles within the NUG.

Founded in 1958, the **Mon National Liberation Army** is active across Mon State and in the southern Karen areas but maintains only a small army of mostly reserves (estimated at four thousand). The Mon were a signatory to the NCA but have also clashed with both the army and the KNLA since then. The civilian wing of the Mon army is known as the **New Mon State Party**.

Along the border with India, the main nonstate group is the **Chin National Front** (CNF), which was founded in 1988 with the goal of a federal union based on equality and democracy. The CNF's armed wing, the **Chin National Army** (CNA), is one of Myanmar's smaller EAOs, with fewer than two hundred troops before the coup. The CNA was a signatory to the peace process and is a close ally of the KNLA and the Karenni Army. Following the coup, it regrouped to provide strong support to the NUG. One of its leaders occupies a ministerial position in the NUG cabinet. The CNF has also worked closely with the Chin People's Defense Force, which calls itself the Chinland Defense Force, in fighting the military in Chin State over the past several months.

APPENDIX 2:

List of Acronyms

AA	Arakan Army	NDAA	National Democratic Alliance Army
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	NLD	National League for Democracy
BGF	Border Guard Force	NMSP	New Mon State Party
CDF	Chinland Defense Force	NUCC	National Unity Consultative Council
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement	NUG	National Unity Government
CNA	Chin National Army	PDF	People's Defence Force
CNF	Chin National Front	PSLF	Palaung State Liberation Front
CRPH	Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw	RCSS	Restoration Council of Shan State
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization	SAC	State Administration Council
KA	Karenni Army	SNLD	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy
KIA	Kachin Independent Army	SSA–North	Shan State Army–North
KIO	Kachin Independent Organization	SSA–South	Shan State Army–South
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army	SSPP	Shan State Progress Party
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party	TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union	UEC	Union Election Commission
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army	USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
MNLA	Mon National Liberation Army	UWSA	United Wa State Army
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement	UWSP	United Wa State Party

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While every member of the Myanmar Study Group made critical contributions to its product, the views therein do not necessarily represent those of every team member. Nor should they be attributed to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Rather, the report is a consensual reflection of the study group's deliberations as translated into print by co-facilitators Priscilla Clapp and Jason Tower with the tireless assistance of developmental editor Fred Strasser, who participated in MSG meetings and honed the report into a comprehensive and readable document. Other members of USIP's Burma team, Billy Ford and Gabriela Sagun, provided invaluable support.

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Myanmar Study Group members express their support for the general findings and recommendations reached by the group, but do not necessarily endorse every statement or judgment in the report. They participate in the study group in their personal capacities, and the views expressed are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of their institutions or employers.

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About the Myanmar Study Group

In March 2021, the Myanmar Study Group was organized by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in response to the evolving conflict in Myanmar following the military coup of February 1, 2021. To support US policy toward Myanmar, the Institute convened a study group of nine prominent experts on Myanmar and Asian affairs from April through September 2021. The study group held five discussions on topics of critical relevance to the crisis in Myanmar, supplemented by consultations with key stakeholders in the country and the region. Although convened by USIP, the views and recommendations contained in the report are solely those of the Myanmar Study Group, not USIP.



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