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# Looking Ahead, Southeast Asia After the Coup d'État in Myanmar

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## *The Coup d'État in Myanmar*

On the 1st of February, 2021, the day before Burma/Myanmar's<sup>1</sup> newly elected parliament was intended to convene, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi along with President Win Myint and other senior members of the National League of Democracy (NLD) party were detained by order of the Commander-in-Chief Aung Hlaing of the Myanmar Armed Forces (Tatmadaw). In his 10th year as Tatmadaw leader, Aung Hlaing selected retired General Myint Swe – the vice president of Myanmar and former chief minister of Yangon's powerful regional military command for many years – the new president and declared a one-year state of emergency. As of the 5th of February, 2021, over one-hundred and thirty officials, leaders and lawmakers from the NLD party along with political activists, monks and writers have been detained.

A whole wide variety of causes for the coup d'état – correctly or erroneously – have been put forward by pundits, academics and government forces alike: the generals felt humiliated after a crushing defeat of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in the general election; the civilian elements systematically circumvented the Tatmadaw's political role as prescribed in the constitution; the election highlighted too apparently the armed forces' unpopularity; the military believed the election manifested a loss of bargaining power in the parliament; the coup sought to preserve Tatmadaw's economic prowess; the military leadership held personal animosity towards Aung San Suu Kyi; the military wanted to continue courting China via debt to Chinese holdings and grew concerned by Aung San Suu Kyi's efforts to reduce said debt; Aung Hlaing sought to augment his personal political power; and, drawing a lesson from Donal Trump in the United States, the military wanted to restore democracy and eternal peace to the country by rectifying the supposed voter fraud that transpired.

The most promising explanation for the source of the coup, though, may have been articulated by Gwen Robinson. She posits that the coup was launched because the original script written by Than Shwe, former Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) from 1992 to 2011, went off course when his successor U Then Sein unintentionally liberalised or reformed the country too expansively allowing for Aung San Suu Kyi to undermine their intended ends: overt military power but covert state control. Simply put, “this was a ‘get even’ or ‘put back in the box’ coup” in order to preserve the Tatmadaw's power to enforce its “three national causes.” non-disintegration of the union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, and perpetuation of sovereignty.

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<sup>1</sup> As the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) explained: “The White House, including under President Joe Biden, refers to the country as Burma. The State Department uses both Burma and Myanmar. Most of the analytic community has coalesced around use of “Myanmar,” which is the standard in regional and international forums.” In this article, Asia Centre elected to utilise Myanmar over Burma, excepting for the references to the Tatmadaw's national-ethnic supercilious posing to highlight its ideological separation with the wider multi-ethnic civil society.



At this juncture in the early post-coup environment some close observers believe that the Tatmadaw's position is actually far-weaker than initially suspected considering that, in part due to Aung San Suu Kyi's concerted efforts while in government to raise their monthly salary prior to the general election, most civil servants favour the NLD party.

However, current discussions on the Tatmadaw's weak post-coup position may be more or less misplaced. Often forgotten is that the Tatmadaw inherently holds an advantage to competing forces by being the most cohesive organisation in the country through internal mobilisation by a war ethos. In seventy years of constant civil war, there has never been a major mutiny from below and only once, in the 1970s, did mid-ranking officers challenge the top leadership.

In the forthcoming weeks and months ahead, moreover, the military will work ardently to improve its overall position by graduating from undermining to weaponising the democratic process through the elimination of the first past the post voting system, creation of a party list system, and allocation of seats, and also likely to implement a cyber-security crime bill that gives it authority to ban online content it dislikes effectively restricting civil society's range of responses to the weaponisation process.

### *Thailand's Disingenuous Response to the Coup*

Despite the open questions that persist regarding the cause(s) that propelled the coup forwards and the current position the Tatmadaw occupies in the early post-coup environment, the Royal Thai Government through the Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon is steadfast in its supposed disinterest regarding the events. He publically stated that the coup is Myanmar's "internal matter" or "domestic issue." In turn, in an attempt to soften the international criticism to the response, Prime Minister Chan-o-Cha stated shortly thereafter his "support [for] the democratic process in Myanmar..."

One might be tempted not to fault the Thai government for adopting a "wait and see" approach as they hope to avoid another round of international backlash. This is especially so following the announcement that the leading government party in the parliament quietly derailed certain proposed constitutional reforms, and, given that, the Tatmadaw basically co-opted the Thai military's coup playbook to effect its coup and moderate its behaviour in the post-coup environment.

Yet the disingenuousness behind the statements makes acceptance of this argument all the more arduous. Case in point, rather than unofficially sanctioning the protest movement led by refugees and foreign workers outside of the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok, the Royal Thai (Riot) Police cracked down on the protesters. Furthermore, while a few private firms and individuals have decided on their own accord to sever relations with the Tatmadaw due to



the coup (i.e. Amata), the overall lack of response by most Thai firms in Myanmar – along with others from Japan and Singapore –, who are not likely to renege in full measure on their stated investments in the country, shows that it is not wholly sincere about its stated support towards the Myanmar democratic process.

In lieu of democratic support the Thai government is more focused on guaranteeing general stability across Myanmar. As reminds Tony Davis, security analyst at Janes Defense, in being a direct neighbour to Myanmar, Thailand's main priority amid mounting tensions over the next weeks is assuring that the seventeen to twenty-one conflicts raging across the country do not suddenly manifest an imploding state with the effects traversing over the border into Thailand (i.e. arrival of new Covid-19 cases via war refugees, or increased drug trafficking through porous borders, etc.). In other words, an attack by the Tatmadaw on democracy in Myanmar is preferable to an attack by separatist groups on the central government's authority in the far-reaches of Myanmar, which, accordingly, captures the imagination of those separatist groups in Southern Thailand. All this to say that Thailand's quasi-democratic regime recognises to some degree that the events next door not only partly affects its democratic legitimacy in the eyes of a wavering domestic base but potentially the physical security at home, too.

More critically, though, the Thai government's lack of support toward these processes re-affirms two trendlines moving across the Southeast Asia (SEA) sub-region for the medium-term risk horizon (three to five years: 2024-26).

### *Mainland Southeast Asia vs. Archipelagic Southeast Asia*

The first trendline is the concretisation of the distinguishing features between the mainland Southeast Asia (CMTV) and archipelagic Southeast Asia (BIMPS) poles, such as: poverty vs. prosperity, authoritarianism vs. democracy, and proximity vs. non-proximity to China, respectively. As it were, the responses to the coup followed this same geographic divide. While Thailand's aforesaid statements aligned neatly with Hun Sen's regime, the other two mainland countries – Laos and Vietnam – initially refrained altogether from making official comments days into the Myanmar crisis, ultimately, only going as far as to suggest that the country should seek to “soon stabilize its situation.” In contrast, the archipelagic constellation (e.g. Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines) articulated, albeit in an uneven sequence, a “deep concern” towards the military coup.

This division also comes into sharper contrast following the increased number of recent crackdowns that have occurred over the last few days, notably all in mainland Southeast Asia. As the renowned journalist, Sebastian Strangio, penned days ago, “...since international attention is finite, and outside perceptions are generally relative, the coup in Myanmar looms as a welcome distraction for the region's autocrats and generals.” In the months to years ahead, this division between the mainland and the archipelagos will likely be continuously



highlighted by visible autocratic repression. As Charles Dunst, a visiting scholar with the East-West Center, reminded, “the coup will only worsen the multitude of crises that Myanmar faces, including that of its multiple civil wars.” An example amongst many others, after the Tatmadaw feels ready to undertake such moves, it may finally complete its stated “unfinished business.” stopping repatriation of the Rohingya and, then, igniting another Rohingya crisis in the Rakhine State. For let’s remember, the three most significant players in the operational charge during the Rohingya campaign are now the leading figures in the military’s new cabinet following the emergency decree.

### *Asean Divided = China Politically Co-Opts Mainland Southeast Asia*

For its part China response to the military coup may be described as tepid. Some argue the tepidness results from having been burned by the Tatmadaw before. Hence, “China does not [actually] like the coup in Myanmar.” As evidence, “China has come around to offer its tacit agreement [to the international community through a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) press statement] that the coup [was] not the right thing.” This assessment may well be true considering that the Chinese leadership preferred the NLD to win re-election after military-aligned USDP members vocally adopted anti-China rhetoric on the campaign trail, and private Chinese firms operating in country, who, in lieu of conducting proper political risk assessments like many Japanese firms, found themselves incredibly vulnerable and exposed to the dramatic power changes.

And yet, as Bruno Phillip at Le Monde suggested, China is really the last serious game in town.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, whether it actually likes the coup or not, China stands as the geopolitical winner by deriving the most strategic benefits from it. An early sign of this win can be found with the (re)appointment of former Myanmar Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin, who, in a previous administration, showed to be staunchly pro-Chinese in private and public dealings.

Above all else though, in reducing the pressures to maintain democratic principles and further entrenching the historical penchant for authoritarianism across the sub-region, this coup indirectly weakens the cohesiveness of the sub-regional institution, which, similar to the United States strategic preference for a divided Europe, helps China in its own strategic quest to divide Southeast Asia on important strategic questions, like the South China Sea dispute. Through this division, China, in turn, facilitates the political co-option of mainland Southeast Asia.

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<sup>2</sup> This article posits that the Russian-Tatmadaw defense ties warming through military equipment sales will only beget overall effect on the region years from now and, thus, should not be contrasted to the present potency of the Sino-Tatmadaw relationship.



This process is especially made easier now by the fact that the Biden Administration publically announced sanctions, strong export controls and political reprisals for military leaders, their families and business empires. All of which will incite the Tatmadaw to reconsider its selective opposition vis-à-vis China.

### *The « ASEAN [down]Fall » Scenario Starts to Come Alive*

As a consequence of the reflective split between the already noted growing division between mainland and archipelagic Southeast Asia and China's possible political co-option of the former, the second trendline starts to come alive: "ASEAN downfall scenario."

Some optimistic observers do not believe that the coup solely represents a "third reverse wave" in a regional trend of retreat from democratic freedoms, but rather represents the first steps towards engenderment of positive democratic reforms across the sub-region (so-called, "ASEAN Spring" scenario). This view is supposedly affirmed by the incorporation of Myanmar netizens on social media into the pan-Asian "Milk-Tea alliance" movement – Taiwan, Thailand, and Hong Kong – along with the latest return of Thai pro-democracy protesters onto the streets after a two months hiatus, revived by the Myanmar-led protests, and seen to borrow the tactics from the mass rallies held in the neighbouring country.

In contrast, this article rather postulates that the coup increases the likelihood for an "ASEAN [down]Fall" scenario. As another observer noted, "the impact of the coup will not be confined to Myanmar. Not only is it casting an enormous shadow over the future of democracy in Southeast Asia, but it represents yet another challenge to the existing international order, in which democracy and human rights had been gaining legitimacy." Here, the downfall should not be conflated with the collapse or removal of the sub-regional institution but rather to the inability of that said institution to operate with strategic autonomy following the erosion of one of the core principles in the "ASEAN way" – "promotion of regional autonomy and collective self-reliance." The language in the sub-regional institution's response to the coup reveals not only the weakness of its commitment to human rights and democracy, but its fundamental failure. In its blatant and self-serving violation of rule of law, the military coup in Myanmar exposed the void at the core of ASEAN's rhetoric on democracy. In truth, "ASEAN's commitment to caring communities and to being people-centred was designed primarily to shield the organisation from criticism, not to be effective" especially in moments of retreat from democratic reforms.

As a consequence of anti-democratic forces dividing the sub-regional space along geographic lines and inviting an external power to offer political cover, autocratic behaviour thereon undermines the core principle of collective self-reliance to a point where now the essence behind the institution itself is rendered null and void.

While the previous calls to remove Laos and Cambodia were deemed less than reasonable for a host of reasons, a similar call to remove Myanmar in a last ditch effort to save the regional





bloc by returning it a relative degree of strategic autonomy – this proposal finding coherence amongst certain observers, is far from enough to recover from the damage already done by the last coup.

### *Quad's Response to Chinese Co-Option Sobers Expectations*

In response to China's resulting strategic benefits from the coup and possible political co-option, there are mentions about a Biden administration strengthening the United States' position in the region through the formal institutionalisation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the "Quad").

However, as Lukas Myers at the Wilson Centre penned, "[although] going forward, the Biden administration will likely work to coordinate a response with U.S. allies and partners... garnering buy-in from some allies and partners who remain reticent of imposing sanctions on Myanmar will likely prove a difficult task." Others agree with this assessment, whereas it is "extremely unlikely that the Quad will be able to coordinate policy responses to the Tatmadaw's actions... The grouping is yet to issue a joint statement." The most inhibiting issue it seems is that India's realpolitik will undermine the Quad's, and especially Biden's, push to promote, defend and draw political lines on a country's adherence to democratic norms and values. If correct, this is concerning given that at present "the lack of a common position on Myanmar runs counter to the hyped expectation that a new security architecture for the Indo-Pacific could be built around that grouping." This inability to institutionalise the Quad will effectively hamstring the United States' hand in effectively responding to the strategic gains made by China as a result of this coup and possible future co-option that may follow in the years to come.

### *Conclusion*

The post-coup environment in Myanmar is still in its early days and, albeit many suggestions are presented above, the real cause still more or less remains elusive at this time. Although the strength of the Tatmadaw's position may possibly be overestimated at this juncture, it is almost certain that in the forthcoming weeks to months ahead the military will work to strengthen its hand by weaponising the democratic process as other states in the Southeast Asia sub-region have done, too. For its part, Thailand disingenuously pretends that the events are not of its concern, when in actuality the quasi-democratic regime recognises to some degree that the events next door partly effects its own legitimacy and security at home.

More critically, though, the disingenuousness also reflects the presence of two trends moving across the Southeast Asia (SEA) sub-region for the medium-term risk horizon (three to five



years: 2024-26). First, the growing gap between mainland and archipelagic Southeast Asia is breaking ASEAN from the inside-out. While most analysts are contemporaneously concerned with the events in Myanmar, the real concern that follows in the coming years ahead, unless the trend is upturned by some other event, is China's possible political co-option of mainland Southeast Asia. The last supposed remaining trench of defense – the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – showed at this juncture that it is simply not up to the task to thwart such a political move. It is arduous at this time, nevertheless, to discern whether in the months to years ahead the Biden administration will be able to systematically convince its partners and allies that the only way to thwart this process is by moving forwards on the institutionalisation of the informal, multi-lateral organisation.



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