



TIME TO BROKER A PEACE DEAL IN MYANMAR

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WITH media attention focused on Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in the Red Sea, Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza, news of recent developments in Myanmar's Civil War have not generated the interest they deserve outside the immediate region. Yet Operation 1027, named after the date on which it began, is the largest challenge to the junta's rule since it seized power in a 2021 coup. Characterised by a greater ability for anti-regime forces to cooperate and coordinate, recent defeats imposed on the junta have resulted in it losing control of economically and strategically significant territory on its border with China. Indeed, so serious was the threat posed to the military junta in early November 2023 that Acting

President Myint Swe was forced to concede that the country was at risk of breaking apart under the pressure of the conflict.¹

Over two months on from the start of this new offensive, however, and with China applying greater pressure for a ceasefire in Shan State, hopes expressed by many commentators that military rule in Myanmar was about to collapse now appear overly optimistic. Though anti-regime forces have succeeded in highlighting the military's deficiencies in the face of large-scale offensives conducted simultaneously in multiple parts of the country, their lack of heavy military hardware means that a decisive victory remains beyond their reach at this point.

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whilst bringing an end to the present humanitarian crisis. Going beyond maintaining Association of Southeast Asian Nations centrality and providing continued support for the moribund five-point consensus, the time is now ripe for the US to take the lead in brokering a return to a civilian-led government and a resumption of the status quo as it existed before the 2017 Rohingya crisis derailed the US-Myanmar bilateral relationship and, in turn, helped put in place the necessary conditions for the coup of 2021.

OPERATION 1027

On 27th October 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance consisting of the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and

¹Kanupriya Kapoor, 'Myanmar president: country at risk of breaking apart due to clashes', *Reuters*, 9 November 2023.

the Ta'ang National Liberation Army launched Operation 1027. Initially consisting of ambitious and coordinated assaults against targets in northern Shan State, the coalition succeeded in taking control of the vital trading town of Chinshwehwa on the country's border with China, before severing major trading routes serving other important border towns over the following weeks. Overrunning hundreds of military outposts across northern Shan State, the attacks overwhelmed the military, which was ill prepared for such a widespread assault with reports that many units surrendered en masse or else were forced to abandon invaluable but cumbersome military hardware and make a hurried and disorderly retreat in the face of advancing forces.²

The unprecedented collapse of the Tatmadaw, as the military is known, in parts of northern Shan State exposed its hitherto concealed deficiencies to anti-regime forces in other parts of the country and inspired them to seize upon the momentum

generated by these victories and escalate their own operations against the Tatmadaw. With ethnic armed organisations and pro-democracy People's Defence Forces launching attacks in other parts of the country including Kachin State, Kayah State, and Sagaing Region in the weeks which followed, Myanmar's military found itself stretched thin and frequently unable to send much needed reinforcements to bolster positions under attack, much less launch a major counter-offensive in any one part of the country without leaving itself desperately exposed elsewhere.³ This shortage of manpower was further emphasised on 4th December 2023 by an official plea asking troops who had deserted or else gone absent without official leave to return to their barracks under an apparent unprecedented temporary amnesty.⁴ Buoyed by these developments, Zin Mar Aung, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the National Unity Government, Myanmar's parallel government composed mainly of democratically elected representatives deposed in the 2021 coup, claimed in late November 2023 that the military was 'ready to collapse'.⁵



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Over two months on from the start of Operation 1027, however, and despite anti-regime victories exposing significant weaknesses within the military, the conflict has also highlighted the Tatmadaw's air and artillery superiority as well as its ability to utilise naval power to strike opposition forces from distance and with devastating effects. Given the asymmetrical nature of the conflict and the fact that the Tatmadaw have abandoned hundreds of outposts to consolidate its forces in areas vital to its survival, the ability for anti-regime forces to win a decisive victory at this point now looks extremely doubtful. At the same time, the military's decision to concentrate its forces has enabled anti-regime forces to continue winning victories away from these centres. Indeed, it has now been confirmed that the Three Brotherhood Alliance has succeeded in taking control of Laukkai, the capital of Kokang Self-Administered Zone, and the former headquarters of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army.

This victory, representing as it does a key objective of the Three

Brotherhood Alliance when it launched Operation 1027, may very possibly herald the start of an imminent ceasefire in northern Shan State. Beijing, which maintains close relations with the Tatmadaw and the ethnic armed organisations that operate along its borders, has repeatedly called for an end to hostilities, and has already brokered unsuccessful peace talks between the belligerents.⁶ With the Myanmar National

²Grant Peck, 'An Ethnic Resistance Group in Northern Myanmar says an Entire Army Battalion has Surrendered to it', *The Associated Press*, 15 November 2023.

³Anthony Davis, 'No Good Options for Myanmar's Mortally Wounded Regime', *Asia Times*, 15 November 2023.

⁴Aung Zay, 'Beleaguered junta will pardon deserters who return to barracks', *Myanmar Now*, 5 December 2023; Anon, 'Depleted Myanmar Military Urges Deserters to Return to Barracks', *The Irrawaddy*, 4 December 2023.

⁵Andrew Sharp, 'Myanmar's Shadow Government says "military ready to collapse"', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 November 2023.

⁶Grant Peck, 'Myanmar's military government says China brokered peace talks to de-escalate fighting in northeast', *Associated Press*, 11 December 2023; Anon, 'China is happy to see parties in Myanmar conflict to hold peace talks – Chinese Foreign Ministry', *Reuters*, 12 December 2023.



Picture: Gayatri Malhotra/unsplash

Democratic Alliance Army now holding a very strong hand in Kokang, it is very likely that China will use its existing leverage to apply greater pressure on both parties to reach an accommodation over coming weeks which will likely see the junta make considerable concessions in order to end the offensive in northern Shan State.

Though a ceasefire in northern Shan State would seriously reduce the chances of anti-regime forces winning further victories elsewhere, it would bring much needed respite to the civilian population. Indeed, fighting since the 2021 coup has left more than two million people displaced internally or else seeking refuge in neighbouring countries, and Operation 1027 has only further contributed to this human suffering. With the conflict spreading to new areas and with the military junta continuing to respond with indiscriminate violence that primarily relies on air and artillery superiority to often target whole villages, civilians in Myanmar have been the main victims of the war.⁷ Indeed, 200,000 additional civilians were displaced in the 22 days that followed the start of the operation, rising to more than 600,000 by mid-December.⁸

US FOREIGN POLICY OPTIONS IN MYANMAR

Now is the time for the US and its allies to consider how best they can support democratic aspirations within Myanmar whilst bringing an end to the present humanitarian crisis which began with the 2021 coup. It may be argued that the US should stay the course on its current trajectory and insist upon Association of Southeast Asian Nations centrality alongside continued support for its failed five-point consensus. Outsourcing responsibility through further adherence to this policy would, however, do nothing more than continue to give the impression



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of a coherent US strategy in Myanmar without its reality.

Washington could, and no doubt is, considering deploying additional targeted sanctions against entities and individuals deemed responsible for the junta’s continued grip on power but there is no reason to think that further use of this instrument would have a significant effect on either the junta’s ability to survive or its willingness to return to pre-coup conditions.

Bowing to increasing pressure for the US to recognise the National Unity Government would, on the other hand, generate positive headlines and column inches written by well-meaning journalists celebrating the nation’s commitment to a values-driven foreign policy but would achieve little more than further isolating the junta and pushing them yet deeper into China’s orbit.

An entirely more injudicious approach could see the US arm pro-democratic forces and ethnic armed organisations to help them overcome the current imbalance in military hardware. Indeed, the inclusion of the Burma Act in the 2023 National

Defence Authorization Act provides a basis on which such a policy could start if the US adopted a similarly expansive working definition of ‘non-lethal assistance’ to that utilised in conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. In reality, however, such a course of action would be logistically complicated, politically impossible and strategically unwise. Even if relationships with India, Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations could be protected in this scenario, and a precipitous escalation of US-China rivalry alongside a possible proxy war avoided, arming anti-regime forces would undoubtedly increase the price paid by ordinary civilians but it would not guarantee victory for the rebels. It certainly would not ensure that a vibrant federal democracy would rise from the ashes of decades of military rule rather than an unstable and deadly power vacuum. Indeed, a sober and judicious assessment of what a sudden and total collapse of the Tatmadaw would mean for Myanmar must recognise the very real possibility, verging on probability, that it would plunge the country into a new and yet more vicious chapter of the civil war fought by loose and ever

evolving coalitions of belligerents drawn from old and new ethnic and political organisations.

If the above options are therefore taken off the table, then an alternative approach is required. The formulation of such a policy requires, however, a full appreciation of why the military amended the constitution in 2008 and held elections in 2010, alongside a better understanding of why this fragile democratic experiment was brought to an end in 2021.

UNDERSTANDING WHY DEMOCRATISATION BEGAN IN MYANMAR IN 2010

The 2010 general election was an attempt by Myanmar’s military to re-open the country and help rebalance its relationship with China following decades of isolation from the international community as a result of the Tatmadaw’s brutal suppression of the 1988 pro-democracy 8888 Uprising and the annulment of elections in 1990 which had been won by Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. Sanctioned and isolated over the course of the following two decades, Myanmar depended upon Chinese diplomatic, economic and military support while their neighbour benefited from access to the country’s markets and natural resources. Most significantly, China was able to increase energy security by reducing its dependence on

⁷Though international attention has mainly been focused on human rights abuses committed by the junta, the actions of ethnic armed organisations often contribute to the acute humanitarian crisis. See for example Myanmar: Armed Group Abuses in Shan State – Abductions, Forced Recruitment Violate Laws of War’, Human Rights Watch, 21 December 2023. See also Yaolong Xian, ‘Good Rebels or Good Timing?: Myanmar’s MNDAA and Operation 1027’, The Diplomat, 5 January 2024.

⁸Jeremy Lawrence, ‘Myanmar: Alarm at Renewed fighting’, United Nations Press Briefing Notes, 17 November 2023; Myanmar: Intensification of clashes, Flash Update #10’, OCHA, 15 December 2023.

the Malacca Straits thanks to the construction of natural gas and crude oil pipelines running from Kyaukphyu in the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan province in southwest China.

Despite the relationship proving fruitful for both parties, 20 years of isolation from the international community had resulted in Myanmar developing a clear over-dependence on China, causing elements within the administration to fear that they were in the process of becoming a Chinese client state – an eventuality that would put the country’s very sovereignty in jeopardy. The deeply flawed elections which took place in 2010 were therefore an attempt to re-open the country and help rebalance its relationship with its neighbour. However, the relationship between the US and Myanmar improved at a remarkable speed and blossomed following the electoral success of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy in 2015. Throughout this period, international investment, aid and development funding from the US and its partners rose steeply and Myanmar began to adroitly extricate itself from its powerful

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neighbour’s suffocating embrace.

Of the various enduring symbols representing this period of international optimism for the future of Myanmar and the country’s renewed relationship with the US, it is the photographs captured by the world’s press of President Barack Obama and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi together at the White House which most poignantly and evocatively capture the mood. Meeting in the Oval Office on 14th September 2016, the occasion was marked by several announcements, including the declaration that the US was prepared to lift sanctions against Myanmar in light of the country’s political transformation over the course of the previous few years.

UNDERSTANDING WHY DEMOCRATISATION ENDED IN MYANMAR IN 2021

The second key to developing policy on Myanmar is an appreciation of why a coup occurred in 2021 – or rather why the coup occurred in the wake of the 2020 general election and not as a consequence of the 2015 election. Arguments that the Tatmadaw were wary of the remarkable popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy following their landslide victory in 2020 are clearly insufficient, as there was no substantive difference between the election results in 2020 and those of 2015. In any case, the carefully constructed 2008 constitution reserved autonomy and considerable power for the military regardless of what happened at the ballot

box in 2015 or in 2020. Contrary to such arguments, the true roots of the 2021 coup should be found in the rapid unravelling of US-Myanmar bilateral relations after the Rohingya crisis generated worldwide attention from August 2017.

A long-persecuted minority primarily living in one of the most deprived, impoverished and underdeveloped regions of Myanmar, the Rohingya began fleeing the country in enormous numbers as a result of the military’s brutal and indiscriminate retaliation to attacks against police posts committed by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. With unimaginable reports of human rights abuses against civilians appearing in the world’s media, western powers once again began reconsidering their posture towards Myanmar and became increasingly critical of Aung San Suu Kyi and her attempts to justify or else diminish reports of the military’s actions in Rakhine State.

Faced by the imposition of new sanctions, alongside a reduction in international investment, aid and development funding, Aung



A Rohingya refugee camp in southern Bangladesh

San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy were forced to turn to China in an attempt to justify the confidence which had resulted in their landslide victory at the ballot box a few years earlier. Accordingly, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor was announced in 2018 as one of the principal elements of China's Belt and Road Initiative, followed by a visit to the country two years later by President Xi Jinping, during which he and Aung San Suu Kyi oversaw the signing of memorandums-of-understanding on a battery of projects within the scheme comprising roads, railways and ports designed to link Yunnan province in the southwest of China with ports at Yangon and Kyaukphyu in Myanmar. Alongside the similar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor designed to link Kashgar in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of Northwest China to Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor represents one of the most strategically significant components of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Once courted by two suitors, the National League for Democracy had been left with little choice but to attend the dance with China after their relationship with the US broke down following the Rohingya crisis gaining international attention. No longer able to balance Beijing and Washington and so forced to re-enter China's orbit, Myanmar found itself in precisely the same position that persuaded the military to hold elections in 2010. This time, however, the same predicament led predictably to the opposite result. With the National League for Democracy's popularity in comparison to that of the military starkly demonstrated once again by the former's landslide victory in the 2020 general election and with little apparently to be gained from



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Washington by allowing them to take office, the military decided to bring an end to the country's experiment with democracy. This allowed the military to ensure that there would be no further erosion of their power through proposed amendments to the constitution, while directly retaking the national reigns from a civilian government which it believed was aligning itself too much with Chinese interests. Rather than rely on unpredictable democratic dictates to govern the country's necessary relationship with China, the Tatmadaw would now retake responsibility for this delicate process whilst staunchly safeguarding national integrity and sovereignty – much as it had before 2010.

THE BASIS FOR US-LED TALKS

With a fuller appreciation for why democratisation began in 2010, and why it ended in 2021, it is clear why demands made by the international community for a resumption of the status quo as it existed immediately before the coup in 2021 are fruitless. What

the Tatmadaw desire, and what is the only basis for a return to a fragile semi-democracy, is the resumption of the situation that existed before the 2017 Rohingya crisis. With this presented as the basis for talks, and given current exigencies connected to 1027, the US would not only find enthusiastic interlocutors in General Min Aung Hlaing and members of his military administration, but could provide pro-democratic forces with the opportunity of negotiating from a greater position of strength than at any point since 2021. Though the National Unity Government has stated that it is their avowed policy to fight on until the military have suffered total defeat, it is very likely that a shrewd assessment of the current balance of power would also bring them willingly to the table. Indeed, in a recent interview Duwa Lashi La, acting president of the National Unity Government, stated unequivocally that “the door to dialogue is not closed” adding that if General Min Aung Hlaing “truly wants peace talks, then he needs to show the people

that he is earnest in his desire for change”.⁹

The only grounds which exist for a resumption of semi-democratic rule and a civilian-led administration in Myanmar is, therefore, the country's renewed long-term engagement with the US and the international community. Such a result would not only be in the interests of the National Unity Government's aspirations for democratic reform and represent the only realistic path that exists for the ultimate realisation of a decentralised federal democracy, but it would also be in the interests of the people of Myanmar who are currently in an acute humanitarian crisis. Finally, limiting Beijing's influence in Myanmar by re-engaging with its strategically located neighbour would be immensely beneficial to Washington in the shadow of a new cold war with China.

⁹Ingyin Naing, ‘Exclusive Q&A: Myanmar's Opposition Chief Says Battle Against Junta Has Turned’, *Voice of America*, 12 December 2023.