

Prospects & Perspectives



In the aftermath of Myanmar's February coup d'état, citizens across the nation took to the streets on multiple occasions to demonstrate for democracy and voice their protests.

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International Responses and Sanctions of Major Powers in the Aftermath of the February Coup in Myanmar

By Alan Hao Yang

In a swiftly executed coup on February 2, 2021, the Myanmar military took into custody the country's President, Win Myint, State Counsellor, Aung San Suu



Kyi, and a large number of Parliament members. Political power was simultaneously taken over directly from the democratically elected government by way of the immediate formation of a National Administration Committee with army general Min Aung Hlaing at its head. The coup has been generally seen as a counterstrike arising out of the military's dissatisfaction with the results of the previous year's election, as well as being a devastating set-back for the country's 10-year old fledgling democracy.

Since the February coup, Myanmar citizens have taken to the streets many times to protest and demonstrate for democracy in the nation's major cities, including Mandalay, Yangon, and their nearby special economic zones. Many outraged protestors in mass demonstrations have gathered in front of the Chinese embassy as well as Chinese enterprises and factories. Regardless, the military, firmly in control of the reins of power, has turned a deaf ear to citizen demands, and even responded in brutally repressive ways. Recently, this included violent crackdowns on the country's Armed Forces Day that claimed the lives of 50 demonstrators. In fact, since February, suppression of demonstrations has resulted in more than 700 fatalities, and led to more than 2000 arrests.

The military coup and subsequent violent suppression of citizen protestors has garnered a high level of concern in the international community, which has taken three forms of expression. The first has been a comparatively more direct and severe line by way of bans and economic sanctions aimed at the military and other specified entities. In this regard, the US has been the most conspicuous, wielding export restrictions and economic sanctions as a tool that goes beyond just prohibitions directed at the government (including specific military goods) to include restrictions on exports destined to certain specified enterprises. Moreover, the US has directly sanctioned high-ranking military officers, including the backers of the February coup and the current head of the National Administration Committee, Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing. These sanctions have included the freezing of US based assets as well as restrictions on travel to the US and exchanges with US citizens. Of particular note were the early US refusals to honor repeated requests by Myanmar's central bank for the transfer of US\$1 billion at the very beginning of the coup, as it seems to signal apparent foreknowledge of something amiss. Europe has also imposed sanctions in the form of asset freezes and EU entry restrictions on Myanmar's military leaders, chief of whom being Gen. Min Aung Hlaing.



The second reaction did not take the form of direct economic sanctions, but, instead, relied on other restrictive measures such as placing aid and cooperative programs on hold. For example, Japan, a long-time supporter of the Myanmar government and provider of foreign aid, has not yet invoked a sanctions policy, but has halted new assistance programs (current programs remain in force). Additionally, the Japan-Myanmar cooperative satellite development project has been halted amid concerns from the Japanese side that new satellites could be redirected for surveillance use by the military junta. In the same vein as Japan, Korea has also temporarily ceased national security exchanges with Myanmar, restricting arms sales while also reconsidering aid projects. Australia too has taken near identical steps by limiting military exchanges in non-critical areas, such as English language training. Moreover, Australia has decided to retreat to its second line of support via the promotion of NGO cooperation in its on-going long-term commitment to human care and assistance for Myanmar's minority populations, including the Rohingya.

The third form of expression has come from the international community at large. This includes methods adopted by India along with a majority of other countries, which has been namely the issuance of statements expressing deep concern about the Myanmar situation and demands for its military to value the human rights and dignity of its citizens, while also calling on authorities swiftly restore democracy.

Whether or not the sanctions adopted by the international community in response to the Myanmar coup have been severe enough might still be debatable, however, at minimum, there has been no retreat with respect to the bottom line of safe-guarding human rights and human dignity. The impact of these forms of reaction, however, have their limits; thus, the world's major countries must seek out even more constructively meaningful ways to influence Myanmar's current authorities and to voice support for those citizens that have taken the struggle for democracy to the streets. Since Myanmar's military controls most of the state's major enterprises, the world's major powers have been gradually augmenting their economic sanctions, and stopping aid and cooperation, as a way to pressure Myanmar's military. At this juncture, it is worth noting that public opinion has registered a heightened level of sensitivity with respect to the supporters of Myanmar's military, and particularly those foreign entities perceived to have



wielded influence in the bold launching of the coup and subsequent slaughter of protestors. This has been especially true in relation to the country's northern neighbor, China, a country that had often heralded its special *paukphaw* (Myanmar word for sibling, indicating a close bond) status. Public opinion indicates that Myanmar's people have come to see China as a major backroom influencer in the February coup and cause of the country's present instability, highlighting the potential for this geopolitical issue to become the next battleground in the response of the world's major countries to the volatile Myanmar situation.

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The Chinese version of this article was presented on the website, Facebook, and Twitter of Prospect Foundation, April 29, 2021)

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