



A TIME FOR DIFFICULT CHOICES ON MYANMAR

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The recent [executions](#) of four anti-regime activists, including former lawmaker Phyo Zeya Thaw and civil society leader Kyaw Min Yu, known as Ko Jimmy, by the Burmese junta have caused global uproar. After being knocked from international news coverage by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, inflation, and food insecurity, Myanmar's civil war is back in the headlines. But the United States and other foreign governments remain hesitant to fully embrace the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) or take riskier steps to help push the military from power. Instead, they issue condemnations, tinker with sanctions, and pass the buck to the "[five-point consensus](#)" that Myanmar's neighbors in ASEAN negotiated with the junta more than a year ago. But the five-point consensus was dead on arrival, and assumptions about how the opposing forces would fare on the battlefield have been decisively proven wrong. It is time to make some difficult choices about Myanmar policy.

Since the Feb. 1, 2021, [coup](#) in which the Burmese military overthrew Aung San Suu Kyi's government, the United States and other partners have condemned and withheld recognition from the junta. Even countries such as China and India, which went easy on the condemnation and maintained official ties with

the military, were initially ambiguous about the junta's legitimacy. Beijing has since [acknowledged](#) the government of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, but Delhi and many others remain circumspect. Things have gone no better for the generals on the international stage. ASEAN has [refused](#) to accept Min Aung Hlaing's participation in leader-level summits, though it has [allowed](#) junta appointees to represent Myanmar at the ministerial level in some cases. At the United Nations, China and the United States agreed to [defer](#) any decision on credentialing a new Burmese ambassador, leaving the former National League for Democracy's emissary—a fierce critic of the junta—to represent the country for the time being.

Faulty assumptions

US officials have had frequent public and private engagements with NUG officials. So have leaders from Europe, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and some ASEAN members. Washington has directed much of its humanitarian assistance for Myanmar to civil society organizations with close connections to the NUG. But Washington has not recognized the NUG as the legitimate government of Myanmar, nor has it allowed the NUG access to \$1 billion in frozen Burmese government assets held in the United States. And the US government has not extended security assistance to anti-junta forces in Myanmar, despite increasing [calls](#) to do so in the wake of the Ukraine invasion. A small fraction of the assistance delivered to Kyiv could decisively turn the tide of battle in Myanmar. So why hasn't any of this happened?

Following the coup, most foreign governments believed that the junta would brutally and efficiently consolidate a new military regime. The scope and resilience of the opposition, both civil and armed, surprised the international community at least as much as it did the junta's generals. Those faulty early assumptions help explain why the United States and others were slow to embrace the NUG—supporting a doomed resistance would only cause more bloodshed and economic pain for average Burmese citizens. But after a year and a half, grassroots People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and older ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), continue to effectively resist the junta. On

their best days, the regime's forces might control half of the country. Two dry seasons have now come and gone—the periods when the junta is at its strongest due to advantages in air and artillery power—and the military has made no appreciable gains. Despite [killing](#) over 2,000 civilians, arresting almost 15,000, and [burning](#) more than 28,000 homes to terrorize the population into compliance, large swaths of the Bamar (Burman) heartland in Magwe and Sagaing Regions remain outside regime control. The Karen National Union, Karenni National Progressive Party, Kachin Independence Organization, Chin National Front, and Arakan Army have expanded the frontier territories under their control, with the latter seizing most of Rakhine State. Given battlefield conditions, it is hard to see how the junta can win by force of arms. The choices, then, are either victory for the opposition or a protracted civil war that leads to state collapse in the center and de facto independent fiefdoms on the margins.

Being resigned to a junta victory might explain why the United States and others withheld support for the NUG in the beginning, but it has been clear for many months that the armed resistance is holding its own. Several other factors explain why that still has not been enough to garner recognition or military assistance. It is unclear how much command and control the NUG exerts over the PDFs, many of which remain wholly independent. And the NUG can make no claim to either control or effectively represent the EAOs, which are the most effective resistance to the junta. The Karen National Union, Karenni National Progressive Party, Kachin Independence Organization, and Chin National Front are providing support and limited coordination against their shared enemy. But they do not yet trust the Bamar-dominated NUG. After decades of civil war and the disappointment most EAOs felt with Aung San Suu Kyi's government, which they viewed as betraying her earlier promises of federalism and inclusivity, it will take more than vague promises to bring them into a confederacy. Most other EAOs, including the powerful Arakan Army and the myriad narco-armies in Shan State, remain content to sit on the sidelines and watch the Bamar have it out.

Toward a new confederation

The NUG does seem more sincere in its goal of a future federal system than any previous Burmese regime. It has [established](#) a National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) with representatives from across the spectrum of ethnic organizations, including the Rohingya, who, after a particularly intense wave of violence in 2016 and 2017, were formally declared by the United States to be victims of genocide following decades of state-sponsored persecution. The NUCC is seeking to establish a new federal charter that can garner support from a wide array of EAOs and ethnic civil society organizations. In the absence of such a charter, it is easy to see why many EAOs would believe they are better off carving out their own autonomous piece of the uplands and letting the center collapse. History has taught them that any Bamar-dominated government will inevitably turn its guns in their direction. For the same reason, it would be irresponsible for outside parties like the United States to provide military support to the NUG in the absence of a political roadmap with substantial buy-in from a critical mass of EAOs. Otherwise, it seems all too likely that this civil war will just transition into the next, when a victorious Bamar government seeks to reimpose control over territories in Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Karenni (Kayah), and especially Arakan (Rakhine) states that have been lost since the coup.

But if the NUCC process does succeed and the NUG transitions into a truly inclusive federal opposition government with support from most of the EAOs, then the United States should quickly extend it diplomatic recognition as the legitimate representative of the peoples of Myanmar. Washington should be prepared to allow such a government to tap the Burmese state funds currently held in the United States, champion its participation in regional and international forums, and be prepared to deliver military equipment and training to the EAOs and PDFs under that government's control.

In the meantime, Washington should ensure that the both the NUG and EAOs understand what could be unlocked by the expansion and success of the NUCC process. The United States has no say in what a future

Myanmar looks like—a strong federal state, a weak confederacy, or even independence for areas like Arakan—but it should make clear that it will put diplomatic and economic resources behind the survival of whatever system the NUG and EAOs negotiate. Those resources could be powerful incentives for hesitant parties like the Arakan Army or many of the armed organizations in Shan State to throw in their lot with the NUG. This could also offer Washington leverage in ensuring the rights of Rohingya in northern Arakan State. The NUG has already [promised](#) them the right of safe return and citizenship, but it has no power to enforce that. Either the military or the Arakan Army will decide the fate of Rohingya in Myanmar. Washington should make resources for the latter conditional on the guarantee of Rohingya rights as part of a political roadmap through the NUCC.

What is happening in Myanmar is a revolutionary war against a brutal, intractable regime that has no interest in compromise. Sanctions and diplomacy will not appreciably affect the outcome. Either the junta will lose on the battlefield or the state will fracture. As soon as the NUG and its compatriots have a viable roadmap to avoid state collapse, the United States and its allies should help it achieve victory.

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