



***WILL CHINA INTERVENE IN
MYANMAR TO SAVE THE JUNTA?***

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The Burmese civil war that erupted following the 2021 military coup now sees the regime's fate hang in the balance. After a string of defeats, the State Administration Council (SAC) appears on its back feet against the People's Defense Force and other ethnic armed organizations. Although regime forces still hold major cities, they have lost the country's border areas and peripheries to the rebels.

The embattled SAC, isolated on the international stage, has had little choice but rely on China. Indeed, Beijing has a vested interest in securing influence over Myanmar. It is bigger than France or Ukraine and shares a long border with the provinces of Yunnan and Tibet. China already must focus on numerous neighboring hotspots and rivals such as Taiwan, the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea, Vietnam, and India. It has little bandwidth to spare and needs a friendly Myanmar to cover its southern soft underbelly.

Furthermore, dominating Myanmar allows Beijing to access the Indian Ocean and project power toward Thailand, a major Southeast Asian country China has no direct border with. While Beijing engages in an intensifying security rivalry with India, a friendly Myanmar helps flank Indian territory and threaten its easternmost border. Also, Myanmar is home to more than 55 million inhabitants and possesses significant

natural resources. A unified and wealthy Myanmar could weigh heavily on regional dynamics, either for or against Chinese interests. Finally, Myanmar connects Thailand, a US treaty ally, with India, the US' fellow member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"). Therefore, a US-sympathetic Naypyidaw would give more geographic coherence to containment efforts against China and open the land route from India to Southeast Asia.

It is therefore unsurprising that Beijing closely [monitors](#) the current civil war and supports the regime. It has offered diplomatic covers and weapons to the SAC. It has also tried to broker ceasefires between some of the warring factions and the regime to drive a wedge in the rebel unity. Indeed, Chinese leaders believe that the People's Defense Force is an American proxy force and made clear that a US-aligned Myanmar hostile to Chinese influence was a [red line](#).

Therefore, should the SAC come close to defeat, Chinese planners would probably consider military intervention. Reestablishing control over Myanmar after the regime falls would be a challenging task, because the country is massive, and the border with China mainly consists of high mountains. It is not easily accessible flatland like Ukraine, making any invasion inherently complex. In addition, its large population offers a considerable number of potential fighters, making it extremely hard to pacify.

The Chinese witnessed Russia playing the long game in Ukraine following the fall of the Viktor Yanukovich regime in 2014. Moscow tried to reestablish control over Kyiv through indirect political, diplomatic, and economic means to no avail. With the benefit of hindsight, Moscow would have been better off invading Ukraine as soon as Yanukovich lost control instead of giving the Ukrainians eight years to build up a formidable military. Hence, if the SAC appeared on the verge of falling—for instance, if Naypyidaw and Yangon were besieged—Beijing would be tempted to preemptively salvage the regime's rule.

What forms could a Chinese intervention take? Despite its increasing military capabilities, China's

resources remain finite and it must prioritize among theaters. It needs to keep significant forces ready for a Taiwan contingency. It also must husband large land forces in Tibet to maintain pressure over India. Defending the Korean border and the nearby capital area further occupies a chunk of the army. In terms of ground forces, the Southern Theater Command, which would be in charge of a Myanmar contingency, is one of the weakest, if not the weakest, of the five Chinese [Theater Commands](#). China will likely therefore be unwilling to deplete other more pressing fronts to mount a massive intervention force. To compare with Russia again: Myanmar is far less of an existential interest for Beijing than Ukraine is for Moscow. Chinese intervention may thus be more akin to the Russian intervention in Syria.

Syria represented for Moscow a foothold on the Mediterranean Sea, a base to threaten NATO's southern flank, Turkey, and the Suez Canal, and a historical Middle Eastern client. However, it remained a distant interest, and Moscow could only afford a limited action. In 2015, the regime of Bashar al-Assad risked defeat at the hands of rebel forces and the Islamic State. That September, Russia launched a limited military intervention. The Kremlin primarily [relied](#) on air strikes and occasional special forces and mercenary operations to tip the battlefield scales. It dispatched fighter and bomber planes and special forces units but no large ground forces. Furthermore, Russian support to regime forces in intelligence, military advisors, and supplies was instrumental in allowing al-Assad to retake the initiative. The Syrian intervention also became a testing ground for the post-reform Russian military's new structure and weaponry.

Similarly, Myanmar is too important to leave the regime to fall but not enough to justify a full-scale effort. A Syrian scenario might thus be the most attractive for China. Chinese planners may prefer relying on air and missile strikes, special forces, and increased support to regime forces. This would bolster the SAC while limiting costs for Beijing and avoiding depleting other areas. Considering the rebel forces' limited air defense capabilities, there would be little danger for Chinese aircraft to suffer significant casualties. Hence, an intervention could

see relatively low human and equipment losses, at least initially. In addition to that, it would represent an opportunity to battle-harden the People's Liberation Army and test the effectiveness of its extensive reforms over the past 30 years. Still, a full-scale intervention would remain possible if the SAC continued losing ground, or if Beijing perceived a high likelihood of foreign intervention.

How should interested parties react to such a Chinese intervention? Indo-Pacific powers and the United States would need to navigate between denying China a decisive victory and preventing a wider conflict. Indeed, full Chinese domination over Myanmar would increase the threat level toward India and Southeast Asia. Smuggling weapons into Myanmar to rebel forces would be relatively easy. The regime has already lost control of most of its borders, and a China-SAC coalition would likely struggle to reestablish complete control on them. Anti-aircraft weapons would be especially crucial since China would rely heavily on airpower to win. In addition, any aircraft lost in Myanmar would be an aircraft absent for a Taiwan or an India contingency. American and Indo-Pacific policymakers would thus want to take the occasion to erode China's military capabilities. They should also seize all opportunities to gain data about Chinese forces' strengths and weaknesses.

Specifically, the United States may want to supply the rebels with infantry weapons, such as Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. However, many of such weapons have already been [sent](#) to Ukraine. Creating a stock of weapons earmarked for quick delivery to Burmese rebels in case of Chinese intervention is thus urgent. Furthermore, contingency planning with the most important neighbors, India and Thailand, could speed up the reaction time.

Still, the United States and others should be careful not to put boots on the ground. More direct involvement would risk a larger clash, and victory so close to the heart of Chinese power would be improbable. The safest course of action might consist of avoiding a Chinese intervention in the first place. This would entail freezing the conflict along the current lines and maintaining the status quo.

Southeast Asian states that have connections with both the SAC and the rebels could help broker a ceasefire and discourage large offensives. The United States already [supports](#) rebel forces financially, hence offering some leverage. Washington should thus advise them against trying to knock out the regime and assault major cities. It may also want to avoid repeating the Syrian scenario by keeping communication channels with Naypyidaw open to reduce the regime's stress level. The more pressure for regime change, the more likely the SAC is to ask for Chinese direct intervention.

Maintaining the status quo with such a cruel regime might be an unsavory option, but it could be the key to avoiding a wider conflict.

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