

Opinion – Beijing’s Position on the Myanmar Coup

Written by Debby S.W. Chan

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DEBBY S.W. CHAN, MAR 6 2021

On 1 February 2021, the military coup abruptly ended a decade-long democratic process in Myanmar under the pretext of electoral fraud in the 2020 elections startled people in the country and the international community. In response to the coup in the neighbouring, the Chinese Foreign Ministry (2021) urged all parties in Myanmar to “properly handle their differences under the constitutional and legal framework and maintain political and social stability.” While calling the parties to resolve the crisis through the constitutional framework, Beijing disregards the fact that the state of emergency declared by the military was unconstitutional as only the President has the authority to do so under the military crafted 2008 Constitution (Chapter 11). On the second day of the coup, Beijing blocked the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to pass a joint statement condemning the Myanmar military (BBC News, 2021). It also refused to characterise the military’s seizure of power as a coup (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021a).

Beijing’s position on the coup in Myanmar is consistent with its long-established “non-interference principle” in foreign policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, n.d.). In the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, Beijing has faced intense international opprobrium for its human rights violation records. These also make Beijing firmly uphold the principle to defend its sovereignty from foreign interference (Chen, 2016, Holliday, 2009). Beijing’s reluctance to condemn the military coup reignites the debate about who holds the sovereignty. The government or the people?

Following a series of humanitarian catastrophes in the 1990s, then United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan (1999) introduced the concept of individual sovereignty, which is rooted in the fundamental freedom of individuals, in addition to the traditional state sovereignty. He pinpointed that the United Nations Charter aims to protect the people, not those who abuse them. Annan’s advocacy gave rise to the discussion about sovereignty as a responsibility, rather than a right (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001).

Beijing has lots of stake in Myanmar. Since Chinese President Xi Jinping embarked on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), that aims at constructing a China-centric international order by increasing connectivity between China and Eurasia (Yan, 2014, Pu, 2016), in 2013, Myanmar has been a staunch supporter of Beijing’s grand strategy. The Aung San Suu Kyi-led government was keen to develop the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (Nan Lwin, 2018). A number of BRI projects, including the New Yangon City Project and the China-Myanmar border economic cooperation zones, were signed after the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the 2015 election. This eased Beijing’s worry that a more democratic Myanmar would balance against China. After Xi’s visit to Myanmar in January 2020, more BRI projects, including the strategic Kunming-Kyaukphyu high-speed railway that serves as China’s shortcut to the Indian Ocean, are under negotiation (Nan Lwin, 2020).

After a five-decade of military dictatorship, the democratic transition began in 2011 in Myanmar. Domestic actors and international observers did not foresee that there would be genuine reform in the country’s political system. Beijing also assumed that the transitional government led by Thein Sein, the former prime minister in the military regime, would run the business as usual (see Sun, 2012). The unilateral suspension of the Myitsone hydropower dam due to social opposition in 2011 became a wakeup call for Beijing. The disruption to the Letpadaung copper mine in 2012 further affirmed the influence of societal actors in BRI cooperation.

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Economic setbacks made Beijing concede that societal actors could influence the stability of Chinese investment projects in Myanmar. Since then, Beijing has been stepping up its public diplomacy in the host country alongside cultivating state-to-state relations (Transnational Institute, 2016). Hundreds, or maybe thousands, of politicians, journalists, ethnic leaders, activists have been invited to China from 2013 onwards. Meetings with Chinese investors that involved in current and prospective BRI projects have always been part of the programmes to persuade Myanmar political and social elites to support Chinese investments. Invitees have generally appropriated these engagement opportunities. To them, regardless of China’s foreign policy intention, Myanmar must work with its giant neighbour (Chan, 2020). Apparently, Beijing seeks to nurture a more conducive investment environment for BRI’s advancement.

The coup appears to bring more uncertainties to BRI projects. First, it could delay the implementation of the BRI projects. Even though the former director-general of the Office of the Union Investment and Foreign Economic Relations Aung Naing Oo is now appointed as the Minister, economic co-operation with China is unlikely to be the military government’s priority. Secondly, it could invite more people’s distrust of China. Opposition to BRI projects could emerge if people have political space to voice their discontent.

Chinese foreign policy pundits argue that the coup does not serve Beijing’s interests. A stable political environment in Myanmar for BRI projects to thrive. To them, Chinese leaders would prefer to work with the Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor and de facto leader of Myanmar, rather than the military junta (Han, 2021, Sun, 2021). Nevertheless, several protests were staged in front of the Chinese embassy. Protesters demanded Beijing stand with the people, not the dictators. Some even accused Beijing of backing the junta (Lam, 2021). Following the protests, the Chinese ambassador to Myanmar Chen Hai claimed that “Both the National League for Democracy and the Tatmadaw maintain friendly relations with China. The current development in Myanmar is absolutely not what China wants to see.” (Chinese Embassy in Myanmar, 2021). The Chinese foreign ministry also reiterated that it was a good neighbour to Myanmar and would play a constructive role to de-escalate the crisis (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021b).

Courageous protesters across Myanmar are risking their lives to bring their elected government back. More importantly, they strive to make military dictatorship history. The public opinion in Myanmar is crystal clear. More protesters are calling on the United Nations to invoke responsibility to protect (R2P) principle in the face of the rise of casualties in the military crackdown on the anti-coup movement (Tan, 2021). To make it happen, there must be consensus among the United Nations Security Council members, including China.

At the time of writing, Beijing shows no sign of relaxing its long-standing principle of non-interference (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021b). But, research finds that Beijing has rendered some flexibility in its principle of non-intervention in some cases, e.g. in humanitarian crises in Sudan and Libya (Fung, 2019, Davis, 2011). Beijing may not overtly join Western democracies to pressure the military junta. It could, however, persuade the military government to put the democratic process back to track. Even though Beijing may not act due to an alignment of values with people in Myanmar, it may need to consider its long-term interests in the country. Myanmar people are looking forward to Beijing playing a constructive role in the country’s political turmoil as promised by it.

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