

US Funds Opposition in Myanmar, Pouring Gasoline on Fire in Another Conflict with China?

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Washington has been deepening its ties with the so-called pro-democracy forces in Myanmar, and, amid today's New Cold War, this has prompted Beijing to warn against "external interference" in the country. China has been leading mediation efforts in the neighboring country, including talks between the ruling military junta and armed groups related to ethnic factions. Amid this delicate situation, the United States intentions in the nation are seen with suspicion.

The average Western person may have never heard of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, also known as Burma, but it is the largest country (by area) in Mainland Southeast Asia, with a population of about 55 million. It is a Dialogue Partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, and ASEAN, but is not a Commonwealth of Nations member, even though it used to be part of the British Empire. Although very rich in natural resources, (including oil, natural gas, and minerals), it is one of the least developed countries in the region. It is bordered by India and Bangladesh to its northwest, and by China to its northeast, while also sharing borders with Thailand and Laos.

Due to geography, the nation has historical links to China and India, and it also has a history of colonial exploitation and ethnic tensions, which helps explain why it faces today one of the planet's longest-running civil wars, with the corruption, instability and poor infrastructure one can expect amid such a scenario. The military is involved in major sectors of the economy, including oil production, transportation, and even tourism.

The main ethnic group, the Bamars (about 68% of the population) is a Sino-Tibetan speaking group, their native language Burmese being the official language. It is also spoken in China, in parts of the Yunnan province (Dehong), which borders Myanmar.

Some history here might be pertinent. The country was once the largest Southeast Asia empire for a while, in the 16th century (under the Taungoo dynasty), but it was taken over by the British East India Company, after the three Anglo-Burmese wars, thus becoming a British colony in the 19th century. It was also later occupied by the Japanese, and then reconquered by the Allies, to become independent in 1948 - its post-independence history has also been marked by conflict, with a Burma Socialist Programme Party military dictatorship, then a 1988 transition to a multi-party system in name only (with a military council refusing it and governing the nation to this day). There was a controversial 2010 general election after which the military junta was officially dissolved in 2011, with a (nominally) civilian government taking power. In 2020 however the military once again seized power in what has been described by a coup d'état, followed by demonstrations.

One needs to remember that under Western (British) rule, the Burmese were placed at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, with White Europeans at the very top and some Christian minorities in the middle. Moreover, under the spirit of laissez-faire free-market, the British rules had the country open up to massive migration to the point of making Rangoon (now called Yangon, the country's largest city and its former capital) the world's greatest immigration port in the 1920, even exceeding New York City.

Indian immigrants suddenly became a majority of the population in largest cities, such as Rangoon itself, Moulmein, Bassein, and Akyab. According to historian Thant Myint-U: "This was out of a total population of only 13 million; it was equivalent to the United Kingdom today taking 2 million people a year". In that context part of the oppressed Burmese population predictably reacted with a "racism that combined feelings of superiority and fear", writes Thant Myint-U, in his 2006 classic "The River of Lost Footsteps" (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

With such a history, it is no wonder then that Myanmar is plagued with ethnic conflicts to this very day, which account for most human rights problems. Historically, the United States and the European Union have imposed sanctions on the country (over the issue of human rights violations), while foreign investment comes mainly from China, India, Thailand, and Singapore. It is not hard to see how any further engagement with the US-led West has the potential to further polarize the country.

One may recall Washington passed the 2022 BURMA Act, which authorized nonlethal aid to pro-democracy rebel groups plus sanctions against the ruling junta. It even allowed Myanmar's opposition, the so-called National Unity Government (NUG) to set up a liaison office in Washington, even though it has not even been formally recognized as the country's legitimate government by the US itself. In April, Michael Haack (an expert in Myanmar who has conducted research on its politics for the Yale University MacMillan Center) [wrote](#) that the American "nonlethal" aid to Myanmar ethnic rebels could backfire: "the terms on which Washington is offering nonlethal aid in Myanmar risk creating the outcome it has been seeking to avoid."

In a rather underreported development, the US Congress earlier this year amazingly passed a [\\$1.2 trillion](#) funding package. According to Haack: "Washington has been here before. The language used in the appropriation was taken from a previous funding authorization relating to Syria, where nonlethal aid included body armor and intelligence about enemy troop positions. That appropriation led eventually to the covert deployment of lethal equipment. The immediate impact of the U.S. move will be to irritate Myanmar's neighbors, who will see it as an intensification of American involvement in the conflict."

China certainly has stakes in the neighboring country, which it has made large economic investments in – it is also seen as a pathway for the Indian Ocean. The US is largely seen as an "outside" player, which does not have a full grasp of the complexities of the region. One might thus see yet another focal point for tensions unfolding in a global situation which already has plenty.

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