Background

The most recent military coup is an attempted bold reset by the military after a sense that a transition to civilian rule had not worked in its favor. The concern is how the military will deal with civilian protests. Historically, the military has resorted to widespread violence to simmer civilian protests.

Structural problems exacerbate the gravity of the most recent coup, including the lack of progress on agricultural reform and civil-military ties, and the persecution of Rohingya and ethnic conflict.

Myanmar Within the Region

CHINA

China aims to advance the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which is a part of the Belt and Road Initiative. China hopes to connect Yunnan Province to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar, a long-term strategic goal. This has caused concern in the United States and India.

ASEAN

Singapore is the largest Foreign Direct Investor in Myanmar and is unlikely to impose sanctions. The ASEAN chair in 2021 is Brunei and next year is Cambodia. Neither will likely take strong action against Myanmar and ASEAN operates by consensus, which makes agreement difficult.

JAPAN

Japan is a major economic player with links to personalities within the new military-led government. Japan is “concerned about pushing Myanmar into China’s orbit” like Cambodia.
Myanmar’s Military Rule Returns

U.S. Policy

Look for how the military sticks to one-year timeline or cements longer-term rule, how it impacts the economy and peace process, and the fate of Suu Kyi and the NLD. The U.S. can’t let Myanmar policy contaminate broader regional U.S. policy towards ASEAN: it needs to engage grouping on wider issues including economics, climate, geopolitics, etc.

Coordination among “coalitions of the willing” is important but should also appreciate and leverage differentiation (e.g. Japan’s economic role). The U.S. needs to support new civil society groups with like-minded partners beyond Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD to act as a check against military rule for the future.

There’s a need to get voices out of the country to combat the military’s decent disinformation campaign leveraging U.S. networks such as Radio Free Asia. There is also a need to ensure that Myanmar remains a relevant issue to the Biden administration if military repression drags on for months. The U.S. should showcase the full extent of its engagement and punitive actions beyond sanctions – including preventing repatriation of funds by the military and coordinating diplomatic messaging with its partners.

Go Deeper! More Resources

Need To Know Podcast
Military Rule Returns To Myanmar

Read the Asia Program’s Analysis
Democracy in Southeast Asia: Between Discontent and Hope