

Action on Ukraine, Quiescence on Myanmar: The Limitations of a “Democracy versus Authoritarianism” Framing

By Ye Myo Hein and Lucas Myers

From a thirty-thousand foot view, Myanmar and Ukraine lend themselves to comparison. Each war is escalating, and Russia and the Myanmar junta both [employ similarly brutal methods](#) against their opponents. [Reports of war crimes](#) in Bucha, Ukraine mirror those from Magwe, Sagaing, and Kayah in [Myanmar](#). Meanwhile in Washington, the Biden administration has reaffirmed its [pledge](#) to respond forcefully while framing both conflicts within a “democracy versus authoritarianism” narrative. Encouraging these comparisons, the competing governments in Myanmar have taken opposite sides in the Russia-Ukraine war, with the junta [firmly backing Russia](#)

and the pro-democracy National Unity Government (NUG) supporting Ukraine.

Yet, the differences are the most revealing. While many U.S. allies and partners have lined up to punish Russia and support Ukraine, little action has been taken on Myanmar, particularly amongst Indo-Pacific countries. U.S. allies and partners Australia, Japan, and Singapore all quickly sanctioned Russia but adopted tepid policies towards the Myanmar junta. Washington itself has thus far ruled out providing lethal arms to the pro-democracy forces. These disparities beg the question: why is Myanmar different from Ukraine?

In attempting to answer this question, we argue that the difference in responses stems from the lack of a genuine national interest in democracy promotion amongst most states and that this finding challenges the wider “democracy versus authoritarianism” framing. Additionally, challenging the democracy framing in favor of exploring respective interests also exposes some exploitable gaps between Russia and China, namely differing risk tolerances. However, challenging the “democracy versus authoritarianism” framing does not mean there is not a compelling interest to act in Myanmar, nor that it is a separate issue from the broader Russia-China challenge to global order and regional stability. Instead, effectively countering the coup in Myanmar in the name of global order will require a defter approach that moves beyond the unpersuasive “democracy versus autocracy” framing and takes advantage of distinctions between Russian and Chinese interests.

The Limited Appeal of the “Democracy versus Authoritarianism” Framing

Russian and Chinese weapons, economic support, and diplomatic cover contribute to the junta’s growing ability to offset its morale and tactical shortcomings through firepower. In recent months, the Tatmadaw has pummeled anti-junta guerillas with [heavy artillery](#) and [air power](#), while the NUG’s People’s Defense Forces are largely unable to respond. Beijing may have initially been frustrated with the instability of the coup, but it now views the junta as the best chance for its interests to advance in Myanmar. It is now fully backing the junta “[no matter how the situation changes](#).”

Yet, in stark contrast to the Russian-Chinese support for the junta—and unlike the democratic world’s united and strong response to Ukraine—the United States and its allies and partners have done little to act to support the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar. Despite issuing strong statements and targeted sanctions, [U.S. efforts to counter the coup in Myanmar remain limited](#). In the absence of a concrete strategic policy, Myanmar has moved further down Washington’s priority list amidst the war in Ukraine.

Indeed, stronger action on Myanmar is unlikely, and lethal aid or a no-fly zone are out of the question. This can be seen in the quantitative and qualitative differences in spending within the [latest U.S. appropriations bill](#). It allocates more than \$136 million dollars in support for Myanmar, which, while impactful in terms of signaling and its provision of non-lethal assistance to the NUG, pales in comparison to the [\\$13.6 billion](#) in emergency funding for Ukraine to “defend global democracy.”

This lack of action can be seen even more widely amongst U.S. allies and partners, often in contrast to their otherwise [firm responses on Ukraine](#). Although India increasingly embraces the junta and its response on Ukraine is similarly out of step with the United States, Australia and Japan, U.S. treaty allies and members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, have [vacillated](#) and failed to punish the junta with sanctions. Their reticence is born out of concern that the Tatmadaw will further embrace China if it feels pressure from other regional actors.

Southeast Asia’s response to Myanmar also pales in comparison to its still-limited actions on Ukraine. Current ASEAN Chair and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen co-sponsored [the UN resolution on Ukraine](#) and [only Vietnam and](#)



[Laos abstained](#) from the vote. Yet on Myanmar, ASEAN has done little to advance the largely dead-in-the-water Five Point Consensus, and Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar in January 2022 did little but legitimize the junta. He has now [passed the crisis](#) off to the next Chair, Indonesia. Even the relatively more democratic actors within ASEAN, such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia, have refrained from strong action. Contrary to its approach to the Myanmar junta, [Singapore took the unprecedented step of imposing sanctions on Russia](#) despite the likely negative [economic impact on Southeast Asia](#) as a result of rising energy prices.

Fundamentally, the contrast in the responses to Ukraine and Myanmar point to the unattractiveness of the "democracy versus authoritarianism" framing for most states in the Indo-Pacific. Regional states view their interest as in supporting the norm of state sovereignty, not liberal values. Thus, the immediate threat of a nuclear-armed revisionist power invading a sovereign neighbor ala the war in Ukraine is viewed as a greater short- and long-term security threat than the coup d'état in Myanmar. The precedent Russia's invasion sets is particularly pertinent for smaller states in regions like Southeast Asia. Indeed, the regional view of the China threat is not so much driven by a concern for liberal values than the threat of Chinese dominance and coercion in the Indo-Pacific. And China is not currently invading Myanmar.

Even the United States is unwilling to promote democracy if it contradicts other policy priorities or calculations of national interest. This is perhaps best exemplified in Southeast Asia by U.S. policy towards [Cambodia and Vietnam](#). The warmth of Washington-Hanoi relations and the coldness with Phnom Penh lies in strategic interest rather than the level of democracy in either country. Indeed, the [Trump administration declined to rule](#) the

systematic violence against the Rohingya in 2017 a "genocide" in hopes that it could align Myanmar against China.

Differences in Russian and Chinese Support for the Junta

The other side of the coin, however, is that differences in interest and a lack of enthusiasm for ideology also exist within the so-called "authoritarian axis." While aligned against the United States' preferred version of global order and in support of Myanmar's junta, Russian and Chinese risk tolerances are somewhat divergent, as [can be seen in Ukraine](#). Indeed, [research points towards](#) modern authoritarians as being motivated predominantly by political interests rather than an autocratic crusade. For China, this political interest leads it to desire stability in Myanmar regardless of the regime type. As [Julia Bader, Jorn Gravingholt, and Antje Kastner argue that it is important to recall](#), "all else equal, autocratic regional powers have strong incentives to favor similar political systems in nearby states, but that this interest must be weighted against an overarching interest in political stability."

Thus, Russia is [more revisionist towards global order than China](#) and far more willing to play a spoiler role, while China appears more prudent in its efforts to capture international institutions and modify norms to suit its purposes. Short-term, Russia is a far more risk-tolerant agent of chaos than China, and Beijing's long-term ambitions likely include a continued form of stable global order gradually stripped of liberal democratic and human rights norms. While unlikely to be separated in the manner of China and the Soviet Union during the later Cold War, Beijing and Moscow do harbor distinct differences in risk tolerance and goals for order.



Reflective of its more reckless approach, Russian support for the Myanmar junta fundamentally operates within its wider mission of dismantling the American-led international order. Moscow seemingly cares little for a long-term sustainable solution to the conflict in Myanmar so long as its preferred partners and interests are served. It would likely be happy to see the war simmer indefinitely, as in [Syria](#) or the [Central African Republic](#). The main return on its investment appears to be the junta's [enthusiastic endorsement](#) of Russia's invasion of Ukraine: "[Moscow's action is justified for the sustainability of its sovereignty](#)." The junta, had it attained Myanmar's UN seat, likely would have joined the likes of Belarus and North Korea as a "no" vote in the General Assembly resolution on Ukraine in contrast to China's awkward abstention.

Beijing, on the other hand, desires a long-term resolution that restores stability to Myanmar (but not necessarily unitary government in Naypyidaw). It does not want to see Myanmar devolve into an uncontrollable failed or rogue state acting contrary to Chinese interest. By virtue of its pragmatic streak [towards aspects of the international order it favors](#) and an overarching goal of ensuring stability in Myanmar, China [historically hedges](#) with ties to most actors—generals, ethnic armed organizations, and the ousted National League for Democracy included. [China may have steadily warmed up to the military](#), but it does so largely out of concern for the Tatmadaw's poor tactical performance and a calculation that an NUG victory remains out of reach. It views Myanmar's alternatives as territorial fragmentation or the Tatmadaw. Thus, it is not wed to the military "no matter how the situation changes," but to an outcome: stability that is conducive to its other interests. Right now, the Tatmadaw appears the likely winner from Zhongnanhai. Indeed, in return for China's support, the junta is a willing partner in

advancing the [China-Myanmar Economic Corridor](#) and serving as a firm pro-China voice within ASEAN on issues like the [South China Sea](#).

For their part, Myanmar's generals are aware of differences between Russia and China, including on threat level. It is no coincidence that Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's first foreign visit as a new dictator [was to Moscow](#) and not Beijing, as [Russian arms](#) offset dependence on Chinese weapons shipments and provide some psychological distance from China. While Russia is too far away to be a threat, the Tatmadaw has an uncomfortable relationship with Beijing due to China's reluctance to grant a blank check, its traditional [double game in Myanmar](#), and Chinese support for closely aligned ethnic armed organizations, primarily the [United Wa State Army](#). Notably, the junta [reportedly held an emergency meeting](#) where some raised concerns that the precedent set by Russia's invasion could be used by China to support military action in a collapsing Myanmar. Naturally, the junta anxiously [assuages any Chinese fears](#) of damage to its interests.

Moving Beyond the "Democracy Versus Authoritarianism" Framing

Comparing the crises in Ukraine and Myanmar exposes the differences in international responses to Russia and China and challenges the "democracy versus authoritarianism" framing. The war in Ukraine arouses immediate concern as a threat to the norm of territorial integrity, while the crisis in Myanmar is fundamentally an endogenous anti-democratic coup d'état that outside autocratic actors exploited after the fact. On the other hand, complicating the narrative also points to the fact that, although aligned in opposition to the United



States, Beijing and Moscow have different risk tolerances and thus pose distinct near- and long-term challenges to global order.

Yet, this does not mean the United States and its allies and partners should ignore the civil war in Myanmar or that the crisis is not a threat to global order and regional stability. Even if many regional actors have no interest in promoting democratic norms, instability in Myanmar and a Russia- and China-friendly junta undermines the wider global order and stability beyond liberal values. Indeed, the junta is the source of instability and violence in Myanmar. Furthermore, U.S. allies and partners may refrain from punishing the junta to keep channels open, but the Myanmar military has decisively thrown in its lot with Beijing and Moscow and it will work to advance their interests.

With these findings in mind, U.S. policy could be retailored to better frame the issue to regional allies and partners. Instead of characterizing the conflict in Myanmar as fundamentally about democracy, Washington could argue to its allies and partners that the junta in Naypyidaw is a rogue actor that will undermine stability in Myanmar and order in the wider region, as well as serve as a firmly pro-revisionist spoiler within ASEAN. Crucially, the United States could also argue that the NUG and other pro-democracy actors, such as the National Unity Consultative Council, are the [best hope for a stable and peaceful Myanmar](#).

Specifically for Southeast Asia, Washington could make the argument that the junta fundamentally weakens ASEAN's effectiveness as a multilateral organization designed to advance the interests of smaller states against those of much larger neighbors, notably China. Indeed, barring an NUG victory, the junta's return to ASEAN as a pro-revisionist spoiler appears likely in the future. This

would seriously undermine the bloc. The military regime in Myanmar is working for the interests of the revisionist powers and remains unlikely to concern itself with ASEAN's wider interests should it be allowed back into the fold.

Beyond allies and partners, deft U.S. policy and support could work to exploit the differences between Russia and China on Myanmar. By providing international support, the United States can help the NUG provide the services and stability necessary to garner China's acceptance and defeat the junta. Indeed, China is never going away, and any government in Myanmar will always need to deal with Beijing due to the weight of its influence. Alienating China or making it an enemy only courts disaster.

If the NUG can take and govern territory, unite the disparate factions fighting the junta, and avoid angering Beijing through attacks—centrally directed or not—on Chinese assets, it stands a chance of persuading China to accept it as a potential government in Naypyidaw or, at a minimum, pull back from its increasingly pro-junta stance. The key is for the NUG to balance its outreach to both the West and China. The NUG could remind China that alignment with the junta is not reliable insurance for a stable Myanmar, as anti-junta sentiment is so prevalent and the Tatmadaw's military performance so poor, that the war seems likely to extend into the future. Indeed, there is precedent for this as China [maintained close and friendly ties](#) to Aung San Suu Kyi's ousted National League for Democracy and found it preferable to a distrustful and chaotic junta. An NUG that can take and govern territory might just be able to persuade China to quietly shift away from the chaotic and dysfunctional military. The core of this argument is that an inclusive and democratic Myanmar is the only force that can guarantee China's interests and stability.



In sum, “democracy” may not be enough to motivate most states, especially in the Indo-Pacific. Great power competition has an ideological component that cannot be ignored, but to characterize its drivers as solely grounded in ideology obscures complexities on the ground. Many U.S. allies and partners are authoritarian regimes, while others remain uncomfortable with alignment in an anti-China coalition. A deft foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific focused on threats to global order from revisionist states but also cognizant of differences between Russia and China is likely more persuasive to U.S. allies and partners. Such a foreign policy [does not preclude democracy promotion](#) or ignore the ideological element of competition. It instead identifies the nuance within the region and works to meet U.S. allies and partners where they are in service to a broader goal of protecting the post-war global order from revisionist threats, both short- and long-term.

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