

The United States' Foreign Policies Towards the Post-Coup Myanmar: Challenges and Opportunities

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Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	1
Literature Review	2
Evolution of U.S. Sanctions Policy	4
Burma Act.....	5
India, part of the problem or solution?	6
The Role of ASEAN	7
Humanitarian Assistance	9
Education Assistance	10
Conscription Law Enforcement	12
Conclusion.....	13
Bibliography.....	13

Abstract

Following the military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, the United States (US) has responded with various measures from issuing statements of condemnation, and imposing trade sanctions to pressuring its regional allies to sideline coup leaders from diplomatic engagements. This paper studies the effectiveness of such actions and explores alternative strategies that have received less attention but could be equally significant to US foreign policy toward Myanmar. The paper utilizes a qualitative research method based on analysis of research articles, papers, newspapers, news media, and reports from NGOs and INGOs. The key findings suggest that while the US's policy remains effective in certain sectors such as education and sanctions against banking, there needs to be tougher sanctions in the oil and gas sector. The paper also underscores that Myanmar affairs present opportunities for the US for the increased engagement with ASEAN member states which are not only central to its policies towards Myanmar but will also benefit its Indo-Pacific strategy as a whole, and highlights the need to pay more attention to relatively less focused areas such as conscription and humanitarian aid deliveries.

Introduction

The military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 brought about domestic political and humanitarian crises, and with its complex underlying political issues, serves as a foreign policy puzzle for the international community. It also poses an additional foreign policy challenge to the United States, which since the Obama Administration, has increasingly focused on the Indo Pacific Region. The US's foreign policy towards Myanmar has broader regional implications as well, especially shaping power dynamics within ASEAN and countering China's influence in Southeast Asia. Depending on how it approaches the situation, the issue of Myanmar could further or stall the US's influence and image in the region. So far, within the past three years, in response to the coup, the US has taken various measures, including imposing sanctions and issuing condemnations against the coup leaders and their affiliations, passing legislation to support anti-coup movements, and collaborating with Western and Eastern allies to address armed conflicts which have been escalated in the aftermath of the coup. As the US deepens its involvement in Myanmar affairs, it will also inevitably have to leverage its ties with ASEAN members and other key regional players like India, Japan, and Thailand, who have long-standing ties with Myanmar, in order to realize its policy goals.

This paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of these U.S. foreign policy responses to the Myanmar crisis, with emphasis on sanction implications, impact on the people's resistance against the military junta, and humanitarian settings. It will also compare the US's current foreign policy approach towards Myanmar with that of previous administrations while exploring differences and developments in the foreign policy area. Furthermore, it will explore strategies the US could adopt

to provide more effective support to the resistance, through collaboration with its allies in Southeast Asia and East Asia, such as Thailand and India. Finally, the paper aims to identify areas where U.S. policies towards Myanmar could be improved and offer potential solutions.

Literature Review

The history of the United States - Myanmar relations is a complex narrative marked by shifting agendas, geopolitical considerations, and the interplay of diplomatic strategies. The US's relations with Myanmar began as early as February 1857 when the then King Mindon, after losing two wars with the British colonizers, sought diplomatic relations with the United States by sending a letter to President James Buchanan, the fifteenth U.S. president (Thuzar, 2021). However, it did not translate into a formal alliance (Thuzar, 2021). The US, however, came to be involved in Myanmar's struggle for independence during World War II. Ethnic minorities, such as Kachin and Kayin, joined forces with Allied Forces including the US (Murphy, 2022). Following the country's independence in 1947, the US continued to engage with the Southeast Asian country as part of its broad agenda to counter Communism in the region (Thuzar, 2021). It established its embassy in Rangoon with the first ambassador appointed in the same year and provided economic aid (ISEAS Yusof, 2010). In the 1950s, relations between Myanmar and the US strained due to the latter's support toward the Kuomintang (KMT) forces, which entered Myanmar's Shan State after being driven away from mainland China by communist forces (Clymer, 2015). Murphy (2022) noted that such intervention by the US fueled suspicions of Burma's military generals and successive regimes towards outside interference. However, the US maintained ties with the then-junta Ne Win to some extent, especially for counter-narcotic campaigns, providing helicopters to spray chemicals on poppy fields in Northern and Eastern Shan States (Murphy, 2022). Some observers suggested that those helicopters were not used for counternarcotics efforts by the military regime, but to fight against ethnic rebels (Litner, 2023).

Then in 1988, following the military's suppression of protestors during the 88 uprising, the United States imposed an aid blockade under President Reagan, and sanctions under President Clinton (Murphy, 2022). However, such broad sanctions were met with criticisms with many observers arguing that the sanctions have limited impact on changing regime behavior while adversely affecting the civilian populace (Hadar, 1998). A long-time Myanmar analyst, Lintner (2014), also claimed that the sanctions imposed at the time were not effective as Myanmar still managed to maintain trade and defense relations with its neighbors, especially Thailand, Singapore, China, and Russia.

Tough measures on Myanmar and broad sanctions continued throughout President Bush's term up until 2009 (Murphy, 2022). A significant change in US foreign policy was present under the Obama administration, which targeted "regime modification" rather than "regime change" (Rogers et al., 2023). Lintner (2014) argued that Myanmar's growing ties with China and North Korea

prompted this policy shift. This recalibration of foreign policies reflected broader geopolitical considerations and a departure from previous administrations' emphasis on democratic values. In 2011, following ambitious reforms by the then-military-backed Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government, including the termination of the controversial China-funded Myit-Sone Dam project, the US sent the then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to Myanmar, marking the first-ever US State Secretary visit to the Southeast Asia country in fifty-six years, and followed by the President Obama's visit in the following year (Marciel, 2023).

The US at the time adopted an "action for action" approach, making easing of trade bans and targeted sanctions conditional upon actions taken by the Myanmar government on reforms (Marciel, 2023). Following economic and political liberalization to a certain extent and achieving ceasefire agreements with some of the major Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), the US relaxed sanctions, and American businesses began to invest in the country. From the opening up of the country until 2020, the US provided 1.5 billion USD worth of aid to Myanmar (Murphy, 2022). It also took part in peace efforts by funding the Joint Peace Fund (JPF), established by international donors from Australia, Canada, Denmark, the EU, Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, and the UK (Murphy, 2022). However, there have been criticisms over Western governments, including the US's, policies in peace and development areas in the country. Bo (2022) noted that the "neoliberal model of development" with political leverage given to the military at the expense of civilians' rights did more harm than good.

The progress in terms of democratic governance, albeit flawed, and economic developments, achieved during the past decade was stalled after the military coup on 1 February 2021. Following the coup, the United States government blocked the foreign account of the Myanmar government at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, which prevented the military from accessing and withdrawing 1 billion USD (Lonas, 2021). Targeted sanctions were also reimposed on individuals and entities associated with the Myanmar military. In addition, some policies towards Myanmar were revised and introduced, such as the Burma Act included in the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) signed by US President Biden in December 2022 (Martin, 2022). In a shift away from previous policies, which skewed towards humanitarian aid, the act includes the US's planned provision of "non-lethal" assistance to resistance forces (Tucker & Thang, 2023). Initially, the act seemed to have fallen short of achieving its promises with no sight of US government assistance to resistance forces since then (Tucker & Thang, 2023), however, this was before the budget under the Burma Act was passed, which will be discussed further in the paper.

While existing literature offers insights into U.S. foreign policy towards Myanmar post-coup, there remains a gap in comprehensive analysis and timely evaluation of ongoing and latest developments. Moreover, literature on US - Myanmar relations post-coup tends to portray it within the context limited to the former's competition with China, leaving less space for comprehensive analysis of US foreign policy. This paper aims to bridge this gap by providing a deeper analysis

of U.S. policy dynamics and challenges in various sectors since the coup, ranging from economic sanctions, humanitarian aid, and assistance to the resistance, and education programs, while contextualizing them within broader regional frameworks, namely engagements with ASEAN and India.

Evolution of U.S. Sanctions Policy

One of the major implications the Biden Administration faced with sanctioning the military regime in post-coup Myanmar lies in the oil and gas sector. Since the beginning of the coup, the US government has imposed a series of sanctions against the regime-affiliated businesses and individuals while pressuring regional allies such as Singapore to be compliant with sanctions measures. Such restrictions did manage to constrain the regime's financial coffers to a certain extent. However, one of the regime's major sources of revenue: the oil and gas sector remained mostly intact. Following the military coup, the MoGE has been under the control of the regime which uses its revenue to purchase arms. For over two years since the coup up until recently, the US government had consistently avoided targeting the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MoGE) under its sanctions umbrella despite calls by activists and international organizations to impose sanctions on the institution. That was mainly due to the involvement of Chevron in the Yadana oil and gas project jointly operated by the Thailand state-owned firm, PTTEP and MoGE. In January 2022, Chevron announced its plan to exit Myanmar and sell its stakes in the Yadana project (Gardner, 2024).

The MoGE reportedly generates around 1.5 billion USD per year through on-shore and off-shore oil and gas projects (Peter, 2022). It also holds a mandatory stake in all 17 of Myanmar's oil and gas fields, which produces approximately 1.2 trillion cubic meters of natural gas or 0.5% of global reserves (Reuters, 2021). Imports from Myanmar account for 14% of Thailand's total gas demand (EarthRights International, 2021).

In October 2023, the US government made a significant stride, imposing first-ever sanctions on the MoGE as the institution (there have been previous instances of targeted sanctions against the individual officials of the MOGE) (US Department of State, 2023). However, the US government left some major loopholes in its sanctions, allowing financial transactions with MoGE to continue as long as it is done in foreign currencies other than the USD. There are some explanations for these loopholes. First of all, despite its intention to exit, Chevron at the time was struggling to sell its shares from the gas project, and remained the major shareholder (Gardner and Valle, 2023). For this reason, sanctions did not apply to any existing U.S. companies and persons operating in this space as long as there were no explicit financial transactions with or for the benefit of MoGE involved. For instance, provision of in-kind gas is still allowed and so are tax payments, which are collected under the Department of Revenue of the Ministry of Planning and Finance (not a sanctioned entity) for the time being. Second, and more importantly, PTTEP exports gas extracted

from the project to Thailand, which is used to generate a significant amount of electricity in Myanmar's neighboring country. Thailand, being a treaty ally of the United States, and which positions itself as the strategic ally to counter China's influence in Southeast Asia, one could see why the US does not want to upset Thailand.

In April 2024, Chevron announced its complete exit from the country, after selling its stakes to MoGE and PTTEP (Gardner, 2024). While some observers speculated that this would open a window of opportunity for the US to fully sanction the MoGE, the continued existence of PTTEP in the project would still tie the US's hands. In light of this, the US should support and invest in Thailand's local alternative domestic energy projects in order to reduce its reliance on Myanmar for energy security. One potential area is Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG). In fact, local initiatives under Thailand have already come into realization with Nong Fab LNG producing even higher electricity than the PTTEP's two project sites in Myanmar's Zawtika and Yadana gas fields combined (Earth Rights International, 2023).

In the banking sector, the US took relatively tougher actions. In June 2023, the United States Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions against Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank (MFTB) and Myanmar Investment And Commercial Bank (MICB) (the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), 2023). According to the announcement, these sanctions entail the blocking of all property in the United States owned by the sanctioned entities and the prohibition of financial transactions to and from the United States involving the targeted entities. This is a significant blow to the junta given that most of the INGOs operating in the country use MFTB for financial transactions, and it will significantly deplete its foreign currency reserves. This is evident by the fact that following the sanctions, the junta's SAC announced the directive limiting the foreign currency exchange between banks and businesses (Central Bank of Myanmar, 2023). The US government also pressured Bangladesh and Singapore to follow suit, both of which complied. In August 2023, Sonali Bank, a Bangladesh state-owned bank, froze the accounts of the MFTB and MICB (Hossain, 2023). Singapore, which acts as the major financial transactions hub for the Myanmar military regime, and where military personnel and affiliated business people opened most of their business accounts, joined the sanctions game in September of the same year. Singapore's United Overseas Bank (UOB), which is mainly used by engine oil and edible oil businesses in Myanmar and which had previously closed accounts of regime-affiliated Myanmar Airways International (MAI), temporarily suspended business transactions from Myanmar (Robinson, 2023).

Burma Act

Up until recently, the US's support towards Myanmar had mostly been limited to humanitarian settings. Despite issuing diplomatic statements and applying pressure on the junta through

sanctions, there had been a lack of tangible material support for the resistance. However, this approach shifted in March 2024 with the approval of the Burma Act budget by the Senate (Naing, 2024). This legislation allocated \$121 million for Myanmar, a significant increase from the initial \$50 million proposed by Republicans (Naing, 2024). Under the approved budget, 75 million USD is allocated to transborder humanitarian assistance, and most notably, 25 million is allocated to “non-lethal” assistance to the resistance (Naing, 2024). As of this writing, it remains unknown what kind of support the US government would provide under the non-lethal aid. Even though 25 million USD is considered insignificant, especially given how much the US spends on aid to Myanmar’s fellow ASEAN members (Philippines for example, is set to receive 500 million USD in military financing per year for the 2025 - 2029 period (Brunnstrom, 2024)), it could tip the scale towards the resistance if the aids are allocated in an efficient and strategic manner. For example, the US could provide satellite technology, which would allow the resistance to target high-level targets with much higher precision.

Another strategic use would be transferring drone-related technologies. Since the early days of the conflict, drone attacks by the resistance groups proved to be highly effective against junta targets, and have caught the attention of the junta leadership (CINCDs Myanmar, 2023). Over time, PDF groups have developed various types of drones, including fixed-wing types which are reported to be more effective against jammers, with sophisticated technology and higher capabilities (Berry, 2023). The Three Brotherhood Alliance which launched the historic Operation 1027 in October last year (Sun, 2024) invested a lot in and made use of modern drone technology to bypass the junta’s jamming system, leading to successful captures of the junta’s outposts and many towns in Northern Shan State. Drones are proven to be useful against key infrastructures such as junta’s airbase and weapons factories. By transferring drone technologies mainly designed to bypass the jamming system and target the infrastructures, the US could shape the conflict dynamics in favor of the resistance. Moreover, if in any case, drone technologies support are put under the “lethal” category, the US should focus on delivering jamming systems to the resistance since the junta has also learned from the resistance and made use of drones in their operations during the past 2 years (Federal Wings, 2024).

India, part of the problem or solution?

One of the major foreign players in Myanmar's post-coup scenario is India, which has maintained a somewhat "neutral" stance since the coup, refraining from either recognizing or condemning the military regime. However, India's continued arms exports to Myanmar remain problematic. According to the latest UN report, organizations based in India have sold military weapons and associated equipment worth 51 million USD since the coup in February 2021 (Andrews, 2023). Given the common rival, China, and its status as one of the US's key allies in East Asia, India holds strategic importance and serves as an opportunity for the US for its Myanmar policies.

First of all, the US should exert pressure on India to adopt a tougher stance against the military junta and to be more open to engagement with non-state armed actors. This approach not only aligns with US interests in countering China's influence in Myanmar but also presents an opportunity to persuade India to embrace non-traditional policies toward Myanmar. Engaging with non-state actors such as Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) active in border regions, like the Arakan Army (AA), could be beneficial for India, especially for its strategic projects in Myanmar. The AA's operational area also overlaps with India's Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, strategically vital to its "Look East" Policy. By encouraging India to take a more assertive stance and explore non-traditional approaches centered around engaging with the EAOs, the US can also advance its Indo-Pacific strategy while addressing the ongoing crisis in Myanmar.

In order to draw India further away from the military junta, the US should focus more on supporting India within the context of its rivalry with China. To date, the AA, a member of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, remains heavily influenced by China. India's formal engagement with the AA would grant the EAO more legitimacy and help it reduce reliance on China. Moreover, the US should ensure that India understands it is in its interest to engage with a Rakhine EAO that controls more territories in Rakhine State than the Myanmar military regimes. First, by maintaining good relations with the AA, India will enjoy the uninterrupted construction and operation of the Kaladan project while countering China's plan to reach the Indian Ocean through the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port located west of Rakhine State. Otherwise, China's access to the Kyaukphyu port through concessions from the AA, could complicate India's security by granting China access to the Indian Ocean and facilitating military intelligence gathering.

Furthermore, to strengthen relations with its East Asia ally, the US should back India in its border dispute with China. A statement released by a US State Department official over India and China's border crisis, expressing support to India, in March of this year, was a good initiative on the US's side (Sharma, 2024). At the same time, the US should remain firm on areas that could not be compromised such as India's arms transfer to the military regime, and pressure its ally to investigate India-based firms providing military technology to the junta and stop the arms flow into Myanmar.

The Role of ASEAN

Following the military coup, ASEAN released a "Five-Point Consensus," which outlines a roadmap to resolve the conflict (ASEAN Secretariat, April 2021). The five points include a demand for a cessation of violence in the country and a call for a resolution through dialogue, and for the appointment of an ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar to facilitate dialogue between the junta and opposition groups, as well as for ASEAN to provide humanitarian assistance through the

ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) (ASEAN Secretariat, April 2021). However, three years since the coup, there has been no sign that the military junta has taken any measures to follow the consensus. Daily clashes persist, and airstrikes targeting civilian-populated areas continue to this day. Despite its lack of success, ASEAN maintains its commitment to the Five-Point Consensus, and so does the US. In September 2023, Vice President Kamala Harris said at the US-ASEAN summit that the US remains supportive of the ASEAN Five Point Consensus (Widakuswara, 2023).

ASEAN itself is also divided at individual members' country levels, with nations like Cambodia and Thailand maintaining strong ties with the junta and avoiding formal engagement with the resistance figures, while Malaysia and Indonesia are more open to engaging with the civilian National Unity Government (NUG). Given this division, the US should lend support to the latter group for bilateral and informal engagement with Myanmar's resistance forces. Over the past two years, Malaysia has actively demonstrated its willingness to engage with anti-junta groups. Malaysian officials, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saifuddin Abdullah, have held discussions with high-ranking NUG officials such as Foreign Minister Zin Mar Aung and Communication Minister Htin Linn Aung (Abdullah, 2022). Additionally, they have engaged with Myanmar's Permanent Representative to the UN, U Kyaw Moe Tun, who has aligned himself with the resistance following the coup (Abdullah, 2022).

With Malaysia set to take the chairmanship of ASEAN position in 2025, it will wield more authority to shape engagements with Myanmar. The US could seize this opportunity to support Malaysia in establishing both bilateral and multilateral engagements, leveraging ASEAN channels, with the NUG and Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs). At the same time, the US could leverage its recent growing security and economic ties with ASEAN member states like the Philippines. By rallying like-minded member states into a unified bloc, the US could apply increased pressure on the regime and engage more actively with the opposition. The recent ASEAN establishment of the "troika", composed of the current and previous two chairs of ASEAN, for Myanmar affairs, also presents an opportunity to facilitate this approach (Shofa, 2023). This structure could ensure that no single entity with a conciliatory stance toward the military regime, such as Cambodia, dominates ASEAN's future policies. Finally, the United States should reconsider its ongoing support for the Five-Point Consensus, which has not gained traction in addressing the ongoing crisis. Through its alliance with ASEAN, the US should exert influence to encourage the development of an alternative roadmap to the Five-Point Consensus. This roadmap should be developed in consultation with various stakeholders in the conflict, including the NUG, Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) which have been left out in the previous formulation of the Five-Point Consensus.

Humanitarian Assistance

Since the coup, over 2.8 million people have been internally displaced, of which 2.5 million people have been displaced due to clashes and conflicts since the 2021 coup (UNOCHA, 2024). The report also highlights the significant lack of funding, stating that only 4 percent of the total amount of 994 million USD proposed under the Myanmar Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, has so far been funded (UNOCHA, 2024). In light of this, the United States could play a more prominent role in providing more funding to humanitarian agencies, for example allocating more funds to the USAID. In the post-coup environment, UN aid organizations remained engaged with either the junta or third parties in delivering humanitarian aid and consistently avoided directly engaging with the EROs and the NUG-backed People's Administration Groups, which is problematic especially given that significant numbers of displaced people are currently sheltered in resistance-controlled territories, and by only targeting areas where they have a pass from the military regime, the humanitarian organizations are missing out on a significant share of needed communities (SAC-M, 2023).

While the UN organizations may have diverted their attention from taking appropriate actions, the US has the opportunity to adopt a proactive approach. The recently enacted Burma Act which also covers humanitarian assistance, has paved the way for the US to explore avenues for its aid organizations, such as USAID, to collaborate with resistance groups in providing humanitarian assistance. Balancing this engagement is crucial to avoid direct confrontation with China, which closely monitors US involvement with the resistance while safeguarding its influence over non-state actors in Myanmar. There are established channels through which the US can implement aid programs in collaboration with resistance actors with minimal risk. One approach is leveraging Thailand as an intermediary for delivering humanitarian aid to territories held by resistance groups. Thailand has recently established a humanitarian corridor along its southeastern border with Myanmar and has already initiated aid delivery under this program (Saksorchai, 2024). However, it faces criticism for coordinating with the Myanmar Red Cross, which operates under the military junta's directives (Saksorchai, 2024). To address this concern, the US could exert pressure on its treaty ally to explore alternative strategies for engaging with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EROs) along the Thai-Myanmar border, particularly the Karen National Union (KNU).

Another potential channel is the "Inclusive Humanitarian Forum (IHF)," jointly proposed by the NUG's Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management and three Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), namely KNU, KNPP, and CNF, which if established, will enable the delivery of aids through coordination with resistance actors (Worley, 2024). Despite initial endorsement by the UN Special Envoy to Myanmar, Noleen Hezer, the IHF failed to materialize reportedly due to opposition from certain UN agency authorities (Worley, 2024). This presents an opportunity for the US to step in and advocate for the IHF's actual realization, working in tandem with its ASEAN allies, particularly Thailand and the Philippines.

There are already some encouraging signs from the US's side in engaging with multiple stakeholders for humanitarian aid delivery. On 11 April, Counselor Derek Chollet and USAID Assistant Administrator Michael Schiffer had a first-ever formal meeting with the NUG Acting President, Duwa Lashi La, Foreign Affairs Minister, Daw Zin Min Aung (US Department of State, 2024). In addition to the NUG meeting, the Counselor also met with the K3C, which are the Kachin Independence Organization, Karen National Union, Karenni National Progressive Party, and Chin National Front, the Ethnic Armed Organizations mainly aligned with the resistance against the military regime, in late March and discussed humanitarian aid matters (Burma News International, 2024). The actual establishment of the IHF will open up a formal and legitimate channel for the US to effectively deliver aid to IDPs in resistance strongholds through coordination with EROs and civilian government.

The US should also find ways to facilitate better coordination and effective engagement between US-based aid organizations operating in Myanmar, especially, the USAID and local CSOs. It should also ensure that the development agencies can transfer the funds to CSOs through informal channels such as the Hundi system, since many CSOs do not have formal bank accounts inside the country due to security concerns (the University of Melbourne, 2024). Compliance measures such as keeping records of procurements and a need for CSOs to collect identities of beneficiaries should also be relaxed in order to not pose beneficiaries such as Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) at risk ((the University of Melbourne, 2024). Finally, the US should also plan to support USAID more in its localization efforts – which is to facilitate local organizations to take leading roles in development projects – in order to finance and collaborate more with CSOs that have better access to beneficiaries and have stronger knowledge on local context.

Education Assistance

The United States has long supported education programs in Myanmar as part of its effort to maintain good relationships with the Southeast Asia country. Through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Myanmar, the United States has focused on scholarships and exchange programs for Myanmar youths and professionals since the mission reopened in 2012 (USAID). The goal is to increase U.S. influence and help develop a new generation of leaders in Myanmar who support American values and interests in the Indo-Pacific region (USAID, 2018).

During Myanmar's transition to democracy from 2015 to early 2021, the U.S. government provided study opportunities for young people in Myanmar through various academic and professional exchange programs and scholarships. The Fulbright Program, for example, provided full funding for students from Myanmar to pursue graduate degrees at universities in the United States. Moreover, the "Billion Futures" initiative expanded the number of Fulbright scholarships

designated for Myanmar students (Murphy, 2022). The Lincoln Scholarship, initiated by USAID in 2019, was considered the largest graduate scholarship program for Myanmar students. This program has supported 135 scholars from diverse backgrounds, organized into five cohorts from 2020 to 2024 (USAID, n.d). Beyond the academic programs, the U.S. has facilitated professional exchanges such as the Hubert Humphrey Fellowship and the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) (Murphy, 2022). These initiatives offer participants exposure to American academia and culture and promote American policies and values.

Even in the post-coup period, the United States remained committed to funding education programs at both basic and higher levels. Furthermore, the US government authorized support for displaced children affected by conflicts, targeted toward gaining access to primary, secondary, and tertiary education (Congress, 2022). This support also extended to children sheltered at refugee camps in Bangladesh and Thailand, aiming to enable them to pursue higher education under the Burma Act (Congress, 2022). While established programs like the Fulbright program and other short-term exchange initiatives persisted, the Lincoln Scholarship program was recently discontinued. In its place, the U.S. introduced a new program called the Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship Program (DISP) (USAID, 2023). The DISP offers scholarships for both undergraduate and graduate students to study in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines (USAID, 2023).

While many undergraduate students welcomed this new program, there are some criticisms regarding the study destinations under the program. Graduate students who hope to study in the United States especially do not like this change, since the scholarship is limited to only a few universities in Southeast Asian countries. While there has been no official announcement regarding a change in strategy, the shift from the Lincoln Scholarship to the DISP seems to reflect two key motivations. First, diversifying the scholarships to include not just master's degrees, but also undergraduate and online programs. Previously, opportunities for Burmese undergraduates were limited to short-term semester exchange programs like the Global Undergraduate Exchange Program (US Embassy in Myanmar, n.d). DISP now allows them to pursue full undergraduate degrees abroad. This is an important initiative by the US to support undergraduate students in Myanmar who faced challenges continuing their education after quitting their university courses in participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement following the 2021 coup to complete their first university degree. Additionally, due to the lower tuition fees and living expenses in Southeast Asian countries compared to the US, scholarship grants and awards can be offered to larger numbers of students. So while the previous Lincoln program catered only to graduate students, DISP expands access to a wider range of academic levels, modes of study, and greater numbers of students. Second, it appears the U.S. is changing its approach because the Lincoln Scholars did not fulfill the scholarship's objective of returning to Myanmar after completing their programs to participate in the country's development. The scholars had pledged to come back home, but due to the political situation, less than a handful returned to neighboring Thailand while the majority remained in the U.S.

Conscription Law Enforcement

On February 10, the State Administration Council (SAC) enforced the "People's Military Service Law" which stipulates that male citizens aged 18 to 35 and female citizens aged 18 to 27 are deemed "eligible" for military service (AP, 2024). Under normal circumstances, those meeting the criteria may be summoned to serve for a maximum of 24 months, with variations for military technician and expert roles (AP, 2024). However, the law allows for the extension of service duration for up to five years during a state of emergency, as currently declared by the SAC. Additionally, individuals attempting to evade military service may face imprisonment, fines, or both, for up to five years (AP, 2024).

This led to panic among populations, especially those who are eligible for the service and since the enforcement, more than 1,000 working-age people have been moving to Thailand through formal and informal channels to escape conscription (Peck, 2024).

On the other hand, those who are already in foreign countries for work or study purposes, including the US, face precarious conditions. There is a significant risk of being conscripted into the military upon their return to Myanmar. The military administration has announced that individuals currently based in foreign countries will be required to return and fulfill their military obligations upon the completion of their commitments. Furthermore, the State Administration Council (SAC) has convened meetings with Myanmar ambassadors in foreign countries (Myanmar News Agency, 2024), which raised concerns over Myanmar individuals in foreign countries being denied passport renewals and compelled to return to Myanmar to serve in the military.

In response to these challenges, the US government should implement effective policies and measures to support those who do not wish to return to Myanmar and be forced into complicity in human rights violations. Specifically, the US government should continue extending the temporary protected status (TPS) program - which grants certain nationals including those from Myanmar since the 2021 coup- for individuals currently residing in the US until the enforcement of conscription in Myanmar has been terminated. Additionally, eligibility requirements for TPS should be relaxed to accommodate Myanmar nationals who are fleeing military conscription and who arrived in the US after the specified registration timeline. There have been individuals who fled conscription but missed the deadline upon their arrival in the US and were in a difficult situation as they will have to wait until the next registration window opens if the TPS is ever extended to another year. The US government should also expedite the processing of TPS applications and work permits to facilitate the integration of Myanmar nationals into the US's workforce and economy. At the same time, the US should collaborate with its ASEAN ally, Thailand to support the settlement of individuals fleeing conscription and seeking refuge in Thailand. While the Burma Act allocates 75 million USD to humanitarian assistance to refugees based in countries including Thailand (Naing, 2024), there should also be a separate budget category added to the legislation in the future for funding assistance programs specifically targeted to those fleeing

military conscription. Moreover, the US should work with ASEAN both at a bloc level and at the individual member level, especially with Thailand which has suffered more from increasing refugees and undocumented migrant flows from Myanmar since the conscription enforcement, to pressure the military regime to terminate its military draft program.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Myanmar's ongoing crisis, while presenting numerous challenges across various sectors, also presents opportunities for the United States to underscore its commitment to Southeast Asia which is at the center of the US's Indo-Pacific strategy. By demonstrating continued engagement in Myanmar affairs, the US can signal its dedication to its Indo-Pacific and Southeast Asia allies and reassure neutral actors who may be skeptical of its commitments in the region. This is also the right moment to reassure the people of Myanmar, who have shown increasing warmth sentiments towards the West amidst China's deepening ties with the junta, of the US's support for Myanmar's journey towards genuine democracy even in this challenging time. Such support will not only strengthen the bond between the two nations but also benefit the US in its Indo-Pacific strategy, considering Myanmar's integral role within ASEAN and its strategic importance to major powers like China, which the US aims to counterbalance in the region.

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