US Regime Change Creeps Forward in Myanmar

Within a much wider, global campaign to impede the rise of China, the United States has paid particular attention to fuelling unrest in Southeast Asia, sabotaging ties between the region and China - the region’s largest and most important trade partner and investor, as well as a key partner in driving infrastructure and the modernization of regional militaries.

Of the nations in Southeast Asia, Myanmar has suffered the most. Over decades the US has invested millions of dollars a year in bringing a client regime to power, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) political party.

In February of this year, that government was finally removed from power by the nation’s military.

Since then, US-backed opposition groups have formed a parallel government called the “National Unity Government” (NUG), assembled armed groups called “People’s Defense Forces” (PDF) who are now terrorizing the country’s towns, cities, and streets, and are increasingly calling for Western intervention.

An August 5, 2021 Mother Jones article titled, “Myanmar Opposition Leader: We Need More Help From Biden to Defeat the Military Junta,” would lay out the intentions of the NUG in attracting support from the US in calls to US President Joe Biden himself.

The article would quote the NUG’s “Minister of International Cooperation,” Sasa, detailing the opposition’s desire to receive full backing from the United States:
Sasa notes that the NUG appreciates Washington’s moves so far, but he says Biden can go further to help beat back the coup: “There’s lots of more leverage that needs to be done to put more pressure on the military junta.” He cited several specific measures the Biden administration could adopt, such as recognizing the NUG as the sole legitimate government of Myanmar. That would signal a total rejection of the junta and an American commitment to democracy and freedom around the world, Sasa contends, and boost the morale of the Myanmar citizens battling for democracy. This action would also have concrete consequences: It would pave the way for the NUG to gain access to about $1 billion in Myanmar government funds frozen in the United States since the military took power. And recognition from Washington would make it easier for the NUG to obtain support from international finance and humanitarian organizations, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Health Organization. The NUG could use these funds to keep itself afloat and develop anti-COVID measures.

Meanwhile, from the US side, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman spoke directly to NUG’s “Minister of Foreign Affairs” Zin Mar Aung. A public Tweet from Sherman’s official account would claim:

I spoke with [Zin Mar Aung] today to discuss efforts by the NUG and others to return Burma [Myanmar] to the path of democracy and to combat the pandemic. We salute the courage and conviction of the people of Burma [Myanmar] as they seek to build an inclusive, democratic future.

The move symbolizes the desire of Washington to indeed recognize the NUG as the “legitimate” government of Myanmar, thus escalating the political crisis further, just as the US has done in Venezuela through the recognition of Juan Guaidó - or how the US pushed Libya deeper into conflict in 2011 when recognizing armed extremists in Benghazi as the “legitimate” rulers of the country instead of the government in Tripoli.

Not only would a US move to recognize the NUG as the “official” government of Myanmar further escalate the crisis within the country, it would create further tensions between the West and the rest of Southeast Asia’s ASEAN members who otherwise adhere to a strict noninterference policy.

It is also worth mentioning the deep ties between the US government and the NUG’s current “Minister of Foreign Affairs” Zin Mar Aung - just to illustrate the theatrical nature of these “negotiations” and “talks” the US is pretending to have before “deciding” whether or not to recognize an opposition it created entirely and seeks to once again install into power.

NUG “Minister of Foreign Affairs” Zin Mar Aung has her own page on the US government’s National Endowment for Democracy (NED) website - the regime change funding arm of the US government. Zin Mar Aung is a “fellow” of the US NED. Her mini-biography notes that she is also the recipient of the US State Department’s “International Women of Courage Award,” awarded to her in 2012 by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then First Lady Michelle Obama.

In 2015 she attended a Washington DC-based NED event titled, “Burma 2015: The Make or Break Moment for Democratization.”

She also founded and headed the “Yangon School of Political Science” with US NED money (page 40, 2016 NED Annual Report). The “school” would regularly host NED directors and other Western interventionists. It would also host people like Australian economist Sean Turnell who served as Aung San Suu Kyi’s “economic adviser” until they were both arrested in February 2021.

In other words, the NUG’s “Minister of Foreign Affairs,” is not a representative of Myanmar and the nation’s interests, Zin Mar Aung and other NUG members are in fact representatives of US interests regarding Myanmar.

Dr. Sasa’s appeal to the US for backing and recognition along with the US State Department’s theatrical “talks” with NUG members as if it is still considering whether or not to further back them - when in reality the NUG is a creation of the US government - should decisively settle questions regarding the motives behind the February 2021 decision by Myanmar’s military to oust Aung San Suu Kyi’s government and whether or not “China” was behind the move.

At this point, the only obstacle between the US recognizing and offering wider support for the NUG is the question of whether or not it is a viable option.
In many ways, the US’ recognition of Juan Guaidó in Venezuela became more of a liability than a move forward for US foreign policy objectives. The same may happen with the NUG in Myanmar. Attempts by the US to destabilize and overthrow the governments of neighboring nations like Thailand and now Malaysia are ongoing but increasingly anemic. The desire to create regional “synergies” is greatly overshadowed by Washington’s inability to actually do so.

ASEAN solidarity against foreign interference will be a necessity to prevent Myanmar (and the rest of the region) from transforming into another Libya, Syria, or Ukraine.

In a much wider, global context, US attempts to destabilize Myanmar by backing the incompetent NUG and triggering protracted armed conflict is aimed at denying the nation as a key partner in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has been a key partner in developing Myanmar’s infrastructure including the building of essential bridges and dams, as well as the construction of a now operational pipeline carrying hydrocarbons from ports in Myanmar’s southwest Rakhine state to Yunnan province in China.

Myanmar is one of several pressure points the US has picked to “counter” the BRI - not through competition - but rather through simply burning down Chinese projects and destroying governments willing to do business with Beijing.

While Myanmar’s appearance in international headlines ebbs and flows, it is important to keep the context of its ongoing crisis in mind when and if the US decides to escalate the crisis further.

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