

## **Maintain Stability, Make Compromise: Myanmar's Relations with China After the 2021 Coup d'État**

Yu *Szu-Tu*\*

Master Program of Culture Creativity Industry and Social Marketing,  
National Chi-Nan University

### **Abstract**

Departing from the perspectives of geostrategy and bilateral relations, and elaborating on Myanmar's geopolitical position within China's strategic context, this paper examines the reasons behind the tendency towards stabilization and compromise between the two countries following the 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar. Studies have found that from a geostrategic perspective, Myanmar's uniquely significant strategic position has led to China's reluctance to take a hardline stance when it comes to military coups in Myanmar. From the angle of bilateral relations, a strong sense of "relationalism" is observed in the exchanges between China and Myanmar. While China's primary expectation is for existing interests and tacit understanding to remain unaffected after the coup, the military regime has also chosen to deepen its ties with China in exchange for support as Myanmar's civil war continues to spiral out of control. Under this interest-oriented trade-off, China–Myanmar bilateral relations seem unshaken or undamaged after the 2021 coup.

**Keywords:** *China, Myanmar, Military Coup, Geostrategy, Bilateral Relations.*

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\* Adjunct Assistant Professor, Master Program of Culture Creativity Industry and Social Marketing, National Chi-Nan University. Email: [vincent118412@gmail.com](mailto:vincent118412@gmail.com).

## 1. Preface

On 1st February 2021, Myanmar's military launched a coup a few hours before the nation's newly elected parliament was scheduled to meet. President Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, government cabinet officers, and several senior National League for Democracy (NLD) members were detained, with the democratically re-elected NLD government deposed. The coup put a halt to Myanmar's 10 years of democratic experimentation seeking to achieve a civil-military balance of power and once again plunged the nation into chaos, with anti-junta groups rising to fight the military regime.

Within a day of the coup, the United States and many European countries released statements of strong condemnation and the need for immediate reviews of sanction laws, followed by appropriate action to defend democracy (*Rti*, 2021). In contrast to the economic sanctions imposed by Europe and the United States, during an informal online meeting on the political crisis in Myanmar, the ten foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) reaffirmed ASEAN's principle of "non-interference in the internal affairs of one another." As Myanmar's largest trading partner, China has long protected Myanmar from international scrutiny at the United Nations Security Council. Only stating that it was "highly concerned," China showed reluctance in expressing condemnation of the situation in Myanmar and even avoided using the word for "coup." This led to some outside speculation that China was in support of or tacitly approving of the coup by the Myanmar military (Sun, 2024). However, the detailed reasons behind why China, as a close neighbor of Myanmar, has maintained amicable relations with Myanmar after the 2021 coup and its unwillingness to condemn Myanmar are matters that should be carefully examined and analyzed.

The most discussed aspect of China–Myanmar relations before the 2021 coup is economic cooperation (for example, the Belt and Road Initiative) and its associated risks, while this paper will explore how China responded to Myanmar's near "state failure" following the 2021 coup. This paper departs from the perspectives of geostrategy and bilateral relations, and proposes the following two research hypotheses: 1. Myanmar is an important strategic partner for China's expansion into the Southwest region, which makes China reluctant to take a hardline stance when it comes to military coups in Myanmar. 2. A strong sense of "relationalism" is observed

in China–Myanmar bilateral relations. Consequently, after the coup, rather than echoing the hardline stance of the United States and European nations, China's primary expectation is for existing interests and tacit understandings to remain unaffected. In other words, the core thinking behind China's policy toward Myanmar after the coup is not simply aligned with the “authoritarian alliance” hypothesis in international relations theory—supporting the Myanmar military based on ideological preferences for a similar regime—but instead places emphasis on “strategic hedging” and “pragmatic diplomacy,” prioritizing stability and the ability to fulfill cooperation.

To support the aforementioned hypotheses, this paper is divided into the following sections: Section 1 provides a preface with a brief introduction to the research question and the hypotheses; Section 2 focuses on the theoretical perspective and implications for the approach of bilateral relations; Section 3 examines the details of the coup in Myanmar and the current situation; Section 4 delves into the geopolitical role of Myanmar under China's strategic thinking; Section 5 involves the collection of relevant information to organize the details in China–Myanmar bilateral relations after the military coup of 2021, summarizing further the objectives that China and Myanmar wish to ensure through their bilateral relations; and lastly, Section 6 concludes by consolidating and presenting the paper's findings.

## **2. Approach of Bilateral Relations**

Compared to the prolific studies on international relations focusing on multilateralism (such as research concentrations on balance of power, new institutionalism and constructivism, which are all based on the epistemology of multilateral relations), authoritative publications on bilateralism are far less significant, which is why the term has yet to be comprehensively defined.

Nevertheless, definitions for “bilateralism” have been provided by some scholars; for example, Liu and Pong (2007) have argued that bilateralism refers to how two countries coordinate their relations through interaction, negotiation, or they have even reached agreements or signed treaties, and there is an apparent exclusion of countries outside the two countries involved. On the other hand, according to Qiu and Gu (2007), bilateralism refers to a bilateral agreement between two actors with particular shared interests, and based on the principles of self-interest and flexibility, they proceed to determine each other's rights and obligations, intending to realize their own interests or to solve immediate dilemmas.

An induction and analysis of bilateralism proposed by scholars in Taiwan can be read in the paper, “Bilateral Approach to International Relations: Post WWII UK and Its Policies toward the US and the PRC,” co-authored by Huang and Shih (2015). For the induction portion, taking into consideration various academic proposals, the authors argue that bilateralism refers to the actors of two countries accepting a particular mode of engagement to realize their respective interests, with them establishing bilateral relations unique to those of other countries; this can be considered both a belief and an approach (Huang & Shih, 2015: 40). They further analyzed that bilateral relations may become a way to resolve deadlocks when multilateral relations are constrained or when bottlenecks arise, because bilateral relations are often less constrained by the principles or mechanisms of governance under multilateralism and can transcend the values and demands in multilateral relations (Huang & Shih, 2015: 41).

In other words, the actors involved in bilateral relations usually engage in discussions on mutual benefits and reciprocity based on a foundation of geography, ethnicity, religion, or ideology, and this is approached without considering differences in power between the two sides. Therefore, there is a strong sense of “relationalism” in bilateral relations, where consensual values are less emphasized than in multilateralism, and where both sides only cooperate according to their own needs, in which case, keeping commitments is integral to maintaining a stable relationship. Especially when a country undergoes a significant political change or even the rise of new leadership, whether the established tacit understanding behind the bilateral relations has been loosened or broken will be an essential factor that the state actors would wish to ensure. In other words, whether a single event (international or domestic) has affected or reinforced the original relations between the two sides is also important to consider when analyzing the two sides’ bilateral relations (Huang & Shih, 2015: 47).

Therefore, this paper argues that “relationalism” can explain why China is unwilling to adopt tough sanctions when facing the turmoil of the Myanmar coup. Instead, it treats its response to this major event as a form of relationship management, safeguarding its own interests by maintaining ties with all parties in Myanmar (the military government and ethnic armed groups), and cultivating social capital whereby “Myanmar cannot do without China, and China understands Myanmar,” rather than falling into a simplistic right-or-wrong debate that could easily lead to a rupture in bilateral relations.

This paper examines the development and changes in China and Myanmar's bilateral relations after the coup in 2021 and analyzes how China assesses and chooses between "safeguarding bilateral relations" and "condemning the Myanmar military junta" to see whether the tangible benefits of the bilateral relations outweigh the benefits of attacking Min Aung Hlaing's regime. After weighing and calculating the relative benefits, China has opted to condone and proceed with a model of stabilization for engaging with Myanmar. The following is a brief overview of the events leading up to the 2021 coup in Myanmar and the current situation.

### **3. 2021 Myanmar Coup and Current Situation**

On 8th November 2020, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), once again defeated other opposition parties in Myanmar's parliamentary election by winning an overwhelming number of seats, which once again gave the NLD a parliamentary majority and successfully extended the party's advantage of having ruling majority since the 2015 general election. Compared to the 2015 election, the NLD had won more seats in 2020, taking 83 per cent of the electable seats. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which represents the military regime, attempted to win back people's support before the election by demonstrating its strength in "economic" and "national security" issues, but the result was far from satisfactory. The USDP's election results were worse than those of 2015, which showed that the people of Myanmar have remained skeptical of the military, and the decade-long ongoing conflict between the military and the NLD was then on the verge of eruption.

As the newly elected members of parliament prepared to take office on 1st February 2021, the Myanmar military repeated the coup launched by General Ne Win in 1962 and overthrew the civilian government. Claiming that the 2020 election was a fraud that divided the country, the military junta then detained senior government officials, including President Win Myint, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, and other key NLD officials. Citing the 2008 constitution, which granted powers to the military, the junta took over the government and proclaimed a year-long state of emergency. Around 400 newly elected members of parliament were placed under house arrest, and governors in 14 provinces across the country were arrested, with opposition groups suppressed by the armed forces. During this time, power was seized by Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar Defence Services Min Aung

Hlaing, and Myint Swe, a military representative, became acting president. This disregard for democracy and forcible seizure of power led some in Myanmar, as well as some European countries and the United States, to issue statements within a day of the incident, calling what happened a “military coup” (Szu-Tu, 2021: 38).

Compared to Thailand and its “coup addiction” (it has had 21 military coups since 1932), there have only been three coups thus far in Myanmar’s history: The first coup took place in 1962 and was initiated by military strongman Ne Win, who overthrew the elected civilian government of U Nu, thereby putting Myanmar under military rule for over half a century. The second time was in 1990, when the NLD won by a landslide in the parliamentary election, winning more than 80 per cent of the seats; the military-backed National Unity Party (NUP) had only won about 2 per cent. However, refusing to recognize the election results, the junta did not hand over power and insisted that drafting a new constitution was needed before power could be transferred. The junta also insisted that the parliament would not convene until the new constitution was promulgated. The third coup was the one that unfolded in 2021.

Resistance against the 2021 coup is still ongoing, and the number of casualties continues to rise under the military crackdown. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), as of March 2025, 6,400 people have died as a result of the junta’s brutal crackdown, and 28,812 people have been arrested for taking part in protests (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2025). All these signs have led the world at large to adopt a pessimistic outlook on Myanmar’s political development, with the military’s seizure of power in 2021 not only imposing a catastrophic blow to the country’s path of reform and opening up, which had shown signs of stabilization since 2010, but also making it difficult for the country’s democratic development to return to the right track in a short period. Anti-military groups, including the National Unity Government (NUG), the People’s Defense Force (PDF), and other civil society organizations, are still in opposition to the military junta.

Amongst them, the NUG was established on 16th April 2021 according to the Federal Democracy Charter issued by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) on 31st March of the same year, with the committee members made up of NLD members of parliament who were elected in 2020 but were unable to take office due to the coup, as well

as some ethnic group leaders. Subsequently, on 5th May 2021, the NUG formally recognized the PDF as its armed wing, whose mission is to end the attacks and atrocities committed by the Myanmar military junta against the people. It became a precursor to the future Federal Union Army (FUA). The PDF has commands in Mandalay, Bago, Sagaing, Chin State, and Kayah State, and it has also established independent alliances with some ethnic armed groups (Karen National Liberation Army, Kachin Independence Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, Chin National Army, and Karenni Army). By 2023, the two sides began to carry out joint operations, and they formed a military encirclement in central Myanmar in 2024, extending control over major transportation hubs connecting to the borders of China, Thailand, India, and Bangladesh (Lin, 2024: 152).

Based on the above, the aftermath of the February 2021 coup has escalated Myanmar's previous "low-intensity regional civil war" to the scale of "high-intensity nationwide civil war" (Lin, 2024: 126). However, none has yet been able to break the standoff, and the resistance forces' advantage is limited only to specific regions, while still being unable to disrupt the core areas controlled by the junta. However, as the civil war escalates, the PDF has also started to work more closely with ethnic armed groups, while the junta is facing difficulties with soldier recruitment and low morale, thus resorting to expanding its armaments, such as purchasing bombers from China and Russia and rocket launchers from China. In 2022 alone, the junta's purchases of military equipment increased by 360 per cent (Abuza, 2023). Indisputably, China and Russia have continued to provide military, diplomatic, and political support to the junta in Myanmar, and China also has influence and control over some ethnic armed groups (especially the various groups in the Shan State that belong to different factions). By helping to relieve military pressure on the Min Aung Hlaing regime, China can use it as a bargaining chip for negotiating exchanges to benefit its own interests.

It is observed that since the beginning of the coup, different stances have been taken by the international community, which can be generally categorized into those with "strong condemnation" or those that have expressed "no condemnation": First, the US has taken a stance of "strong condemnation" and has stated it would necessitate reviews of sanction laws, followed by appropriate action to defend democracy. British and European Union leaders have also defined the incident as a military coup at the outset and strongly condemned the Myanmar military junta's illegal detention of

the country's leading figures. On the other hand, China represents the "no condemnation" side, and the statement released by China after the coup simply expressed its hope that all parties in Myanmar can adequately handle their differences within the framework of their constitution and laws and seek to maintain political and social stability. Other ASEAN countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines also considered the coup an internal affair of Myanmar and have no intention of intervening.

In 2011, Thein Sein, who came from a military background, became Myanmar's president and unexpectedly took various measures to implement reforms and open the nation. This led many organizations and experts to believe that Myanmar was gradually moving towards opening up. Then US President Barack Obama even visited Myanmar in 2012 to express his support for the country's democratic reforms. In 2016 (after the NLD assumed power in Myanmar), Obama announced the lifting of US sanctions on Myanmar. However, before 2011, the West, led by the United States, had virtually no exchanges with Myanmar, and Myanmar's most important diplomatic partner has always been China. The next section of this paper focuses on the geopolitical role of Myanmar under China's strategic thinking, which is followed by an analysis of the development of China and Myanmar's bilateral relations after the coup in 2021.

#### **4. Myanmar's Geopolitical Role Under China's Strategic Thinking**

In terms of regional location, scholar Ahkar Soe has asserted that Myanmar can act as a "land bridge" due to its strategic location at the hub of the tri-junction connecting Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia, which allows it to facilitate regional economic and industrial connectivity (Soe, 2019: 128; Lin, 2020: 134). Geographically, Myanmar is the only ASEAN country that is connected to the two major economies of China and India, and it also neighbors Thailand, Laos, and other countries in the Southeast Asian sub-region, so it can be seen as a key transportation route, regionally and even globally. Moreover, Myanmar can connect to the critical Greater Mekong and Bay of Bengal sub-regional economic blocks, which can overlap and form a multi-level sub-regional economic circle in Southeast, South, and East Asia. Additionally, the country is home to abundant energy and mineral resources, ample arable land, and a young labor force, making it capable of becoming an emerging production center and consumer market in Southeast Asia (Lin, 2020: 129).

Myanmar's importance as a "new crossroads of Asia" is also reflected in the competition between China and India for the country's transportation infrastructure, energy pipelines, and deep-water port development projects (Szu-Tu, 2021: 20). As Thant Myint-U, a prominent scholar of Myanmar, has argued, whichever of the two countries takes control of Myanmar will have a new and unprecedented niche to capitalize on its "two-ocean" advantage and become a world superpower (Thant Myint-U, 2012). For China, Myanmar is an important neighbor to the southwest; the two share a border of more than 2,100 kilometers, about one-tenth of China's land border. As Myanmar is of significant economic and strategic importance to China's southwestward outreach and development and can extend China's geopolitical influence on both land and sea, China has, therefore, always regarded Myanmar as a key partner in its regional development.

In the case of the Belt and Road Initiative, for example, although Myanmar was not on China's official route for the initiative, China still invited then State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi to participate in the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation on 14th and 15th May 2017, suggesting Myanmar's critical role in the initiative. The reason is that through Myanmar, China can bypass the uncertainties of the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca and reach the Indian Ocean from Yunnan Province. Under the same concept, China has also been actively seeking to obtain operating rights to the Kyaukphyu Port in Rakhine State in western Myanmar, which can serve as the starting point of the China–Myanmar oil and gas pipelines to Yunnan (Liang, 2017).

Subsequently, on 19th November 2017, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Myanmar and proposed to build the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a 1,700-kilometer inverted Y-shaped corridor that will start in Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan Province in the north, extending south to Mandalay, the second-largest city in central Myanmar, and then diverting further southward to Myanmar's economic center, Yangon, with the other side extending westward to Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State. The project will also include several significant developments, including the Kyaukphyu Deep-Sea Port, the Kunming–Kyaukphyu Railway, the Muse-Mandalay Railway, the New Yangon City development project, economic cooperation zones in Kachin State and Shan State, and the restarting of the Myitsone Dam project. Undeniably, the most crucial value of this economic corridor is that it will allow China to open up the 1,470

kilometer route from Kunming to Kyaukphyu to reach the Indian Ocean from the southwest, bypassing the US and Japan's encirclement in the South China Sea, and it would also eliminate the need for freight transport to pass through the long and unpredictable Strait of Malacca (Liang, 2019).

On 9th September 2018, Myanmar and China signed a memorandum of understanding to establish the economic corridor, with construction beginning in early 2019. However, some of the development projects proposed by the Chinese side were put on hold due to a lack of consent from the Myanmar side. During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Myanmar in early 2020, he met with Aung San Suu Kyi and specifically urged both sides to place higher priority on the role that the Kyaukphyu Port would have in driving the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor and to accelerate border economic cooperation and the construction of the New Yangon City, as the economic corridor could lead to a state of stabilization for the northern, eastern and western ends of the corridor (Lin & Miu, 2020).

Based on the aforementioned, China attaches great importance to the geographic role of Myanmar. From China's perspective, implementing the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor will give the country the strategic advantage of expanding economic and trade access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean and then alter China's development paradigm from southwest China to the western Indochina Peninsula. Therefore, despite the military junta's seizure of power in 2021 through launching a coup, Beijing only cautiously expressed its "serious concern" immediately after the coup had taken place, and from China's point of view, ensuring that the subsequent military government (regardless of the kind of measures it had taken) would still cooperate with China's geostrategic plans in Myanmar, or even extend more goodwill in China's interests would be far more beneficial to China than echoing the international community's grave criticism of the military junta's approach.

## **5. Changes in China–Myanmar Bilateral Relations Development**

In 2016, Aung San Suu Kyi began governing Myanmar in ways that ruled above the president, and she visited China in her first year in office, hoping to work with Beijing to find a solution to the civil war in northern Myanmar. She also later supported the Belt and Road Initiative in hopes of gaining China's support of Myanmar's national reconciliation and even reached an agreement on the objective described as "China–Myanmar community with

shared future” with Xi Jinping in early 2020; however, China’s strategy with Myanmar has always been to engage with both sides and maintain similar relationships with the NLD and junta leaders, suggesting that it has never forgone close ties with the military (Ho, 2021).

When Min Aung Hlaing visited China in April 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission of the People’s Republic of China met him in person, where the two sides exchanged views on military and security issues such as strategic cooperation and the situation in northern Myanmar and also discussed the development of the Belt and Road Initiative and border trade between China and Myanmar. Subsequently, in July 2020, Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar, Chen Hai, also exchanged views with Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyidaw on implementing the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor, with positive support expressed by the military. When China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi visited Myanmar in mid-January 2021, he met not only with Win Myint and Aung San Suu Kyi, but also with Min Aung Hlaing. Based on the above discussion, it is clear that China attaches great importance to Min Aung Hlaing and is aware of the fact that the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services holds power and influence that extend above the military, which means that Min Aung Hlaing’s support would be crucial for any major development project to take place in Myanmar. This also explains why China has opted not to condemn the 2021 military coup, and similarly, when the international community rejected Myanmar over the Rohingya crisis in 2017, China also did not follow the responses made by the international community and continued to invest in Myanmar.

Nevertheless, it must be noted that the emphasis which China places on its dealings with the military junta of Myanmar is not sufficient to prove that it has supported or even secretly assisted the military in staging the coup. The unrest in Myanmar is not something that China wishes to see happen, and for Beijing, perhaps the best way to maintain political stability is to keep the two sides of the “civilian government” and the “junta” in a state of conflict, while preserving harmony amid differences (Chiang, 2021: 15). What China really cares about is securing its interests; hence, it must maintain amicable relations with all “possible” future leadership in Myanmar (whether democratically elected or under the military junta). As mentioned by Sun Yun, Senior Fellow and Co-Director of the East Asia Program and Director of the China Program at the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C.,

before the effort of reform and opening up in Myanmar in 2010, China had sacrificed a great deal to provide international support and protection to the military junta of Myanmar, and if it continues to engage with the military, it will inevitably be under tremendous international political and diplomatic pressure; in other words, the post-coup situation is not an easy feat for China to maneuver (CNA, 2021).

Since the coup broke out in Myanmar in 2021, more than twenty ethnic armed organizations have taken a stance against the junta. Among them, those who have taken “full” military actions to fight against the coup and to collaborate with the NUG include the Kachin Independence Army, the Karen National Union, and others. The Arakha Army, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army, and the Three Brotherhood Alliance led by the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (also called the Kokang army) have opted to take “limited” military action in response (with no intention to send their forces to other areas of conflict) (Lin, 2024: 156-157). In 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance launched Operation 1027 to attack military installations in northern Shan State. They swiftly took control of two major trade routes to China and several military posts, including the Northeastern Regional Military Command in Lashio, causing significant losses to the Tatmadaw, the national armed forces of Myanmar, while also boosting the morale of other armed groups. This resulted in the most serious military crisis faced by Myanmar’s junta in 30 years.

However, China’s influence over the situation in Myanmar has increased exponentially as the junta becomes mired in civil war. In April 2024, Min Aung Hlaing offered to revive the long-stalled Myitsone Dam project in Kachin State, which shows the military’s attempt to make economic concessions in exchange for China’s support in its military operations, whether it be in the form of arms supplies or the suppression of ethnic armed groups. Subsequently, in July and August 2024, Beijing urged the Three Brotherhood Alliance to cooperate with China’s proposal of suspending military operations to maintain peace and stability in northern Myanmar, and should they reject the proposal, they would face more deterrent and punitive measures. Amongst the alliance, the Ta’ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army agreed to a temporary ceasefire, while the Arakan Army refused to cooperate.

In September 2024, Myanmar Home Affairs Minister Yar Pyae was invited by Beijing to attend the Global Public Security Forum, and a

memorandum of understanding between China and Myanmar was signed on the establishment of a center for cooperation between the two countries' police forces, and China would provide Myanmar with police equipment and supplies worth about US\$700,000 (VOA, 2024). In October of the same year, China outright shut down all border crossings along the northern Myanmar border, causing engine oil prices and goods prices to soar in the territory controlled by the armed groups (Cheng, 2024).

These abovementioned actions suggest that China has considerable influence over Myanmar's armed groups in the north (especially in Shan State) and that it does not wish to see the civil war escalate or spread to other areas, or even lead to the downfall of the junta. It has even invited senior Myanmar military officials to participate in conferences, with the intention of easing international pressure. Min Aung Hlaing also officially visited China in November 2024, making it his first trip to China since he seized power in 2021. However, according to Zachary Abuza, a professor at the National War College in Washington, China has also reached out to former leadership figures, such as Thein Sein, suggesting that it may be concerned with Min Aung Hlaing's leadership, and it has also expressed support for the junta to carry out election plans, which would serve as a process of "democratic transition" to help the war-torn country return to the path of reform that began in 2010. Abuza explains that "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't" is how China considers the situation. However, the opposition forces in Myanmar have publicly challenged the junta's election plans, criticizing its lack of freedom and fairness because many of the opposition parties have been banned from standing for election (Ying, 2024; DW, 2024).

In other words, China's active push for Myanmar's military government to hold elections reflects its belief that Myanmar's political situation will thereby move toward a "stable" model favorable to Chinese strategic investments and border security, and may even create a slightly more flexible space for Myanmar's political diplomacy. Meanwhile, Min Aung Hlaing also seeks to use the election to "whitewash" the military regime and provide a one-sided explanation to the international community. On April 3, 2026, members of Myanmar's Union Parliament, who had just been elected in January, formed the presidential electoral college and voted on three presidential candidates. As expected, military leader Min Aung Hlaing was elected the new president by a large margin and will take on

the responsibility of forming a new government. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's inauguration as president marks Myanmar's entry into the most mature and hardest-to-shake form of authoritarianism: the legalization and institutionalization of authoritarian rule. It also clearly confirms that Myanmar's 2025 election was merely a tool for the military government to obtain a veneer of legitimacy, not the starting point of democratic transition, with China serving as a major accomplice in this political tragedy.

Based on the above, it is observed that after the 2021 coup, to realize their respective interests, China and Myanmar have adopted a mode of interaction based on "stabilization and compromise." First, China did not cut down on its close ties with the higher levels of the junta when the NLD government came to power in 2015, and by playing both sides, China sought to maintain an advantageous position over Myanmar in the event of a significant political change. Hence, China does not wish for the civil war to spiral out of control and give Western powers reasons to intervene. In the face of the repeated successful attacks launched by ethnic armed groups, China also opts to help the military junta by intervening and mediating ceasefires between the two sides. Thus far, China's influence in Myanmar has been significantly enhanced by its proactive approach. Furthermore, the Myanmar junta had not always been compliant with Beijing in the past, but the reality of the brutal civil war has made it necessary for the junta to make concessions on the country's primary economic interests and geostrategy in exchange for China's support in the civil war and international relations, which appears to be essential for the junta to maintain its hold on power.

## **6. Conclusion**

On 1st February 2021, the Myanmar military claimed there was fraud during the November 2020 general election and declared the results invalid. Going against public opinion, this seizure of power by the military junta indisputably constitutes another military coup d'état, following its refusal to recognize the results of the 1990 election. Many of the NLD's key members, such as Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint, and protesters were arrested by the military, subsequently plunging Myanmar society into a turbulent situation of resistance, civil war and polarization.

However, the international community is divided on how to engage with Myanmar after the military coup. China and some ASEAN countries have avoided using the terms "coup" and "condemnation," unlike European

nations and the US, which have responded with grave criticism and economic sanctions. From a geostrategic perspective, although the military junta has seized power without legitimacy and legality, Myanmar is an important neighboring nation to China's southwest and a key partner in its regional development. From China's point of view, it would be wiser to ensure that the military junta continues to cooperate with China's long-term geostrategic plans in Myanmar rather than to echo the international community's strong criticisms of the military.

Regarding the approach of bilateral relations, this study finds that a strong sense of "relationalism" is observed in the exchanges between China and Myanmar, with both sides cooperating to serve their respective interests. Rather than sympathizing with the people of Myanmar, who are caught amid military atrocities, what China expects is for its interest-based relationship and tacit cooperation with Myanmar to remain unaltered after the coup. After assessing the situation and calculating the gains and losses of its long-term relationship with Myanmar, the "practical benefits" of maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship outweigh the need to respond to the international community's hardline stance; therefore, China has opted for a mode of stabilization for its engagement with Myanmar. Myanmar's military junta, on the other hand, has chosen to forge closer ties with China in exchange for support in dealing with the increasingly spiraling out-of-control civil war. Under this kind of interest-driven trade-off, the bilateral relations between China and Myanmar have remained intact and undamaged after the 2021 coup.

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