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Outrage is not a policy: Coming to terms with Myanmar's fragmented state

ANALYSIS

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Contents

Key findings	4
Executive summary	5
Introduction	7
The state of the battlefield	10
The underlying balance of power	15
Emerging local governance structures	20
Future war scenarios	24
Future post-war scenarios	29
International policy options	32
Conclusion	38
Notes	39

Key findings

- Myanmar’s civil war has entered a crucial phase. While the junta remains firmly ensconced in the centre, a series of stunning victories by its opponents has severely diminished the reach of the military regime into the borderlands.
- With the military state retreating, anti-junta forces have started building state-like structures and delivering public services in “liberated areas” where they are in effect governing millions of people.
- After struggling for the past three years to respond effectively to the conflict, Western governments now have a chance to restore their relevance to Myanmar’s future development by supporting this parallel state-building. This will require increased non-military engagement with a broad tapestry of resistance groups and local community organisations, not just the National Unity Government.

Executive summary

This paper analyses the evolution of Myanmar’s civil war with a view to identifying optimal international policy responses.

The sharp escalation of armed resistance since late 2023 holds out the tantalising prospect that the once seemingly invincible military regime could be defeated. Yet it remains an open question whether anti-junta forces will be able to carry the momentum from their recent victories in the forest-covered, mountainous borderlands across the open plains of central Myanmar to take the capital or other major cities. Even if resistance forces ultimately emerge victorious, the goal of building a genuine federal democracy will likely take years of highly complex and politically fraught negotiations.

While the outcome of the civil war remains uncertain, new resistance groups have started building state-like structures and delivering public services in “liberated areas”, much like the older ethnic armed organisations have been doing since the 1960s. The longer Myanmar remains mired in warfare, the more crucial these plural governance systems will become to the welfare of millions of people, with lasting implications for the nature of state-building in the country.

To more effectively support the Myanmar people, Western governments and likeminded actors will need to come to terms with the reality of an increasingly – and quite possibly, permanently – fragmented state. The paper thus calls for greater investments in “parallel state-building”, focused on strengthening the collective capabilities of a wide range of emerging political authorities and community-based organisations to carry out traditional state functions and serve vulnerable populations.

Myanmar



Introduction

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar ended a decade of liberal political and economic reforms but sparked a revolution that many hope will ultimately produce much needed, more radical change.

The Myanmar people are no strangers to military rule. However, the latest coup hit the country like an earthquake, shattering the hopes of millions of people who, after a decade of growing civil, political, and economic freedoms, had finally come to believe that tomorrow would be better than today. What the coup leaders had seemingly envisioned as a relatively simple “course correction” instead sparked a popular uprising, which soon evolved into an armed mass insurrection and civil war.

A note on terminology

This paper refers to the anti-coup movement as “the resistance” and to the new militias that have been established since the coup to fight the junta as “people’s militias”. The resistance also includes some long-standing ethnic insurgent groups that have openly aligned with the revolutionary goals of the anti-coup movement and engage in joint combat operations with the people’s militias. However, the term “ethnic armed organisations” (EAOs) is maintained as the collective term for all armed groups that pre-date the coup and primarily fight for local autonomy and ethnic rights. When individual EAOs have different names for their political and armed wings, the name most commonly used in the English-language literature is used for simplicity and familiarity. The junta’s armed forces are referred to simply as “the military”.

Three years after the coup, the new junta — the State Administration Council — is fighting a battle for survival against scores of new people’s militias and more established ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) demanding an end to the military’s role in politics and the establishment of a “genuine federal democracy”. Fresh elections originally scheduled for August 2023 have been repeatedly postponed, seemingly squashing any hope the coup-makers had of sneaking a new iteration of more tightly controlled “disciplined democracy” in through the backdoor.

The coup has been a failure. However, the revolution has not yet succeeded either. The civil war rages on; mass atrocities have become tragically commonplace as the military seeks to terrorise the population into submission; and Myanmar's already weak state and economy are collapsing. According to the United Nations, more than 2.5 million people have been displaced, and nearly a third of the country's total population of 56.6 million needs humanitarian assistance.¹ Mediation of the escalating conflict appears next to impossible as both sides believe they can annihilate the other and see the rising humanitarian toll as a bearable burden.

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The National Unity Government (NUG), founded by elected members of parliament who escaped arrest after the coup, aspires to lead the resistance forces and govern newly "liberated areas". However, its influence is tenuous on the ground, where day-to-day leadership is in the hands of a bewildering array of local armed groups and administrative bodies. In the border areas, several long-standing EAOs have taken advantage of the splintering of the centre to expand and consolidate control of their traditional homelands. While fears of "balkanisation" may be overblown (if only because neighbouring countries will not recognise any new independent states), it is increasingly uncertain whether Myanmar can come together as anything resembling a functional union, even a federated one.

Western governments have expressed outrage over the military's power grab and brutal suppression of the resistance, and have imposed targeted sanctions against the junta leaders as well as their main supporters and economic interests. Yet they have left it to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to do the thankless job of trying to mediate the crisis. Similarly, while many donors have stepped up humanitarian aid, political timidity and bureaucratic rigidity have hampered effective delivery in a highly politicised and often dangerous aid environment that is confounding many traditional humanitarian agencies. Few international actors (other than perhaps China) appear to have a coherent strategy for dealing with Myanmar's increasingly fragmented state.

This paper analyses the evolving situation in Myanmar with a view to identifying optimal international policy responses. The first part examines two intersecting elements of the current upheaval: the trajectory of the civil war (including the current state of the battlefield and the underlying balance of power) and the emergence of new local governance structures in "liberated areas". The primary focus is on developments to date. However, separate sections consider likely scenarios in the medium term (3–5 years), which are key to developing a more strategic international approach to Myanmar, notwithstanding the uncertainties inherent to all scenario planning.

The second, shorter part of the paper critically reflects on current Western policy on Myanmar and offers some broad recommendations. It argues that Western governments and likeminded actors who aim, first and foremost, to support the Myanmar people need to come to terms with the reality of an increasingly — and quite possibly, permanently — fragmented state. This will require less normative posturing and more pragmatic engagement with the multiple political authorities who are now governing populations across Myanmar’s complex physical and political geography. The paper thus calls for greater investments in “parallel state-building”, focused on strengthening the collective capabilities of the NUG, EAOs, and other non-state governance actors to carry out traditional state functions and serve vulnerable populations.

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The state of the battlefield

Three years after the first major armed clashes in April 2021, the momentum is with the resistance forces. The new military regime has not only failed to subdue the population and consolidate power but has also lost control of large swathes of the countryside. The mushrooming of new people’s militias, coupled with a resurgence of several long-running ethnic insurgencies, has forced the military on the retreat across much of the country and inflicted large-scale casualties and material losses, leaving this once all-dominant institution in its weakest position since the immediate post-independence period in the early 1950s.

Phase 1: Establishing a foothold

In the initial phase (roughly the first 3–6 months, depending on the specific area), the new people’s militias were mostly “conquering” territory that had never really been governed by the central government. The large majority of this latest generation of freedom fighters were young people with no prior military training or combat experience. They also had very few weapons, other than traditional hunting rifles and homemade explosive devices. Yet the military was thin on the ground in many of the initial hotspots of armed resistance — especially in the Dry Zone, which had seen little armed conflict since the 1950s — and therefore never managed to effectively clamp down on the burgeoning insurrection. In many rural villages, local administrators either joined the uprising or were killed or chased out, thus leaving day-to-day control in the hands of the resistance forces.

Phase 2: Attacking the military

Over time, the resistance was increasingly able to take the fight to the military by launching offensives against military targets. Gradually improving cooperation among better armed resistance forces — often involving joint operations with established EAOs — saw ever-growing numbers of successful attacks on security outposts, as well as military supply convoys, especially in remote areas with mountainous terrain. The result was to gradually reduce the footprint of the military regime across much of the hinterland, where it soon found itself fighting a rearguard action to maintain control of the main towns and highways.

By mid-2023, there were near-daily skirmishes across an ever-changing battlefield in Sagaing Region, as well as neighbouring townships in Magway and Mandalay regions; resistance forces were in control of most of rural Chin

and Kayah states; and joint Karen National Union/people's militia forces had crossed the Sittaung River in eastern Bago Region and were threatening the old highway and railway line between Yangon and Mandalay. The only areas outside of the centre that were not experiencing widespread armed clashes between resistance and regime forces were Rakhine State in the west and Shan State in the east, where key EAOs were largely respecting pre-coup ceasefires with the military and had made it clear that new militias were not welcome. In Shan State, the Shan State Progress Party and the Restoration Council of Shan State were instead preoccupied with an intra-ethnic struggle for control of central parts of the state.

Phase 3: Taking control of strategic nodes

To this point, resistance advances were largely confined to areas of limited strategic significance. Yet that changed dramatically in late 2023 when the Brotherhood Alliance, supported by allied people's militias, launched a surprise *blitzkrieg* across northern Shan State, aptly named "Operation 1027" after the date the first attacks were launched. The three "brothers" — the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and Arakan Army — have been working closely together for more than a decade and are among the strongest EAOs in the country, both in terms of manpower and firepower. Their entry into the war thus not only opened a whole new front against the military, which was ill-equipped to deal with further, large-scale attacks, but also fundamentally changed the tenor of the civil war. For the first time since the heyday of the Burma Communist Party in the 1960s, non-state armed forces overran major military bases and took control of significant regional towns and administrative centres, as well as several key border crossings and vital trade routes.

At the time of writing in early April 2024, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and Ta'ang National Liberation Army have consolidated control of the traditional, respectively, Kokang and Palaung homelands in northern Shan State, helped (or held back, depending on one's perspective) by a China-brokered ceasefire with the junta. Moreover, the Arakan Army is edging closer and closer to achieving the same thing on the other side of the country where it has largely expelled the military from eight townships in northern and central Rakhine State, as well as southern Chin State.

Having punctured the long-standing myth of the military's invincibility, the unprecedented success of these three EAOs has also inspired a wave of unusually bold offensives elsewhere in the country.

Having punctured the long-standing myth of the military's invincibility, the unprecedented success of these three EAOs has also inspired a wave of unusually bold offensives elsewhere in the country, where other anti-junta forces seek to exploit the regime's troubles. The launch of a series of attacks by

the Kachin Independence Organisation on key military positions in southern Kachin State in mid-March 2024 may be particularly consequential as it threatens to deny the regime access to some of the richest mineral deposits in the country.

Some caveats

While the anti-junta forces seem to be going from strength to strength, they have not had it all their own way. The military maintains firm control of the main cities and surrounding areas — including the capital Naypyitaw, as well as the major commercial centres of Yangon and Mandalay — where an air of tense calm prevails, and many pre-coup social and economic activities have resumed. Although one would not want to use the word “normal” about the situation anywhere in Myanmar today, public protests have largely died out, and armed underground cells have been decimated with many members either killed, in jail, or having fled to resistance strongholds in rural areas. Persistent efforts by the NUG and people’s militias to launch new urban resistance fronts have failed to make much of an impact.

Crucially, while Operation 1027 has led to major, seemingly sustainable territorial gains for the three members of the Brotherhood Alliance in northern Shan and Rakhine states, resistance progress elsewhere in the country has generally been slower and more costly. Attempts by resistance forces to take strategic towns such as Tigyain in Sagaing Region, Loikaw in Kayah State, and Kawkareik in Kayin State have stalled. Elsewhere, resistance victories have been achieved only at the expense of the near-destruction and depopulation of supposedly “liberated” towns. As Morgan Michaels observed in a conflict update for the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in late December 2023, “Though Myanmar’s anti-junta forces have made notable progress, they have captured only a fraction of their enemy’s territory at a cost that is probably unsustainable in the long term.”² Michaels particularly highlighted the high casualty rates of resistance forces (a topic often played down in the broader literature), which he attributed to the use of human-wave attacks on heavily fortified military positions.

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Since then, the Arakan Army has continued its advances in Rakhine State and is threatening the state capital of Sittwe, as well as the nearby Kyaukphyu deep-water port, which is being developed by China as a key maritime hub of its Belt and Road Initiative. However, the military has hit back in Sagaing Region, where it has retaken Kawlin town and is putting resistance forces in several other areas under pressure. Kawlin, which was liberated by joint Kachin Independence Organisation/people’s militia forces in early November 2023, had been widely celebrated as the first town to come

under NUG administration. As such, its fall three months later was a significant symbolic setback for the resistance.

The realities of territorial control

Since the start of the armed insurrection, resistance leaders and analysts alike have tended to track the trajectory of the conflict in terms of the size of the territory supposedly controlled by the different parties. In a much-quoted report from September 2022, the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, an independent group of former UN human rights experts, estimated that “the NUG and resistance organisations have *effective control* over 52 per cent of the territory of Myanmar [italics added]”.³ More recently, the NUG has claimed that “the federal democratic forces” control 60–70 per cent of the country.⁴ This scoreboard approach, however, hides as much as it reveals.

For one thing, the strategic significance of each territory differs greatly. Population density is much higher in urban and lowland areas, which are mostly under the control of the military regime, than in the hills where the people’s militias and EAOs hold sway. The entire area occupied by the Ta’ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army in northern Shan State, for example, has a population of fewer than a million. In total, well over half of the country’s population of 56.6 million still live under military rule.⁵

The difference in the economic value of these areas is even more pronounced. The military controls nearly all the country’s industry and key revenue-generating infrastructure, such as gas fields, pipelines, and dams, as well as most of the main highways, railways, ports, and airports. Although recent advances by anti-junta forces have given them control of several important border crossings (more are likely to follow), pressure from neighbouring countries to keep border trade flowing is likely to see the establishment of informal profit-sharing arrangements between the junta and the relevant EAOs rather than a total loss of military control of this revenue stream.

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Second, while the resistance forces are contesting — and gradually diminishing — the military’s control across much of the country, their own control is still perilous in many places. The cruel paradox of the civil war to date is that many areas considered resistance strongholds are also among the most violent in the country. As former Human Rights Watch analyst David Mathieson has pointed out, the “maps of victory” match closely with the “spaces of suffering”, measured by the number of air strikes, arson attacks, and civilian landmine casualties.⁶ This is testament to the continuing destructive power of the military and presents a major structural problem for the resistance, for whom

stable territorial control is essential to further developing its governance structures (see section on emerging local governance structures, below), expanding its revenue base, and having any hope of attracting stronger international support.

For anyone concerned with the strategic implications of “territorial control”, the most relevant numbers from the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar report are perhaps those that count the area under the full control of, respectively, the junta (17%), EAOs (14%), and the NUG (<1%).⁷

Crucially, even as the resistance continues to build momentum in the horseshoe of forest-covered mountains that surrounds the Ayeyarwady River basin, it remains an open question whether it will be sufficient to carry it across the open plains of central Myanmar to take the capital or other major cities. Security analyst Anthony Davis has warned that any attempt by resistance forces to launch larger frontal attacks in the centre could be disastrous.⁸ Yet they must eventually do so, or risk becoming just another rural insurgency in a country already rife with them and fail to realise their revolutionary aspirations.

The underlying balance of power

The spectacular successes of the Brotherhood Alliance have been widely perceived to constitute the writing on the wall for the military regime. Yet northern Shan State is not Myanmar, and the people's militias are not the Brotherhood Alliance. Closer attention to the underlying balance of power in different conflict theatres paints a more complex and ambiguous picture. While necessarily a simplification, it may be helpful to think of the battlefield in terms of three concentric circles, radiating from the capital in Naypyitaw, each of which presents different challenges and opportunities for resistance forces.

1st circle: The centre

Inside the first circle, which includes the capital territory of Naypyitaw, as well as (most of) Yangon, Ayeyarwady, western Bago, southern Magway, and southern Mandalay regions, the military regime has successfully used its ubiquitous repressive apparatus, including intelligence agencies, the police, and an extensive network of electronic surveillance and human informers, to snuff out post-coup resistance. While small, underground cells continue to operate and have notched up some headline-grabbing assassinations of regime officials, they are extremely vulnerable. The dominant — and infinitely darker — reality in this part of the country includes daily late-night raids by special police, and teenagers dragged out of their beds to be taken away to interrogation centres where many are subjected to torture or simply locked up without due process or formal sentencing. While popular opposition to the military regime remains both deep and widespread also in the centre, sustained resistance is simply not possible under these conditions.

2nd circle: The new conflict zones

Outside of the inner circle, regime control has splintered as new people's militias have launched an effective guerilla war across much of Sagaing, northern Magway, northern Mandalay, eastern Bago, and Tanintharyi regions, as well as Chin and Kayah states. Here, the contest is no longer between a repressive state and civil society but rather between armed combatants. However, the balance of power is still unequal. While the sheer number of people's militias, which count in the hundreds, has allowed them to take control of large rural areas, they are under-resourced and effectively defenceless against the military's superior firepower, and therefore unable to undertake more conventional campaigns against major fortified regime positions.

The junta may have one of the largest armies in Southeast Asia, but it is evidently insufficient to control a near-nationwide revolt. Indeed, in many of these new conflict zones, resistance combatants outnumber their opponents. While the military is still able to conduct devastating punitive raids across much of this territory, it does not have sufficient manpower to hold it. Resistance forces learned early on to simply withdraw when they come under attack, wait the security forces out, and return after they leave (although they must still contend with the death and destruction left behind).

The military, however, has a massive advantage in firepower. Most people's militias are still unable to fully equip their soldiers with modern arms or supply sufficient ammunition to sustain them in extended battles. Like insurgent forces elsewhere in the world, they have made effective use of cheap, readily available technology, including makeshift explosives and commercial drones. However, they are up against a modern military with tanks, long-range artillery, attack helicopters, and jet fighters, which has shown no compunction about using extreme violence against resistance forces and civilians alike. The fate of towns such as Thantlang in Sagaing Region and Mindat in Chin State, which were effectively destroyed after emerging as hotspots of resistance early in the war and remain largely empty of people today, speaks volumes of the enormity of the challenge the resistance forces face in their efforts to wrest control of key population centres. Sensibly, until Operation 1027, they had largely stopped trying.

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The resistance in these new conflict zones is hampered also by weaknesses in communication as well as command and control, which prevent it from mobilising already limited resources behind a concerted strategy. The NUG's Ministry of Defence has sought to coordinate the new people's militias and integrate them into a centralised chain of command. It has also

set up joint command and control structures with four EAOs that are openly supporting the resistance — the Kachin Independence Organisation, Karenni National Progressive Party, Chin National Front, and Karen National Union. The NUG, however, faces major challenges in asserting its authority across the conflict landscape, including limited resources, a weak presence on the ground, and a strong independent streak among many of the new resistance fighters. Despite growing cooperation among the various resistance forces, much of it is still highly localised, and most major operations are led by allied EAOs.

Ultimately, much of this is about finances. While the junta controls much of the US\$68 billion national economy,⁹ the NUG and people's militias depend largely on crowdfunding from local communities and the Myanmar diaspora, as well as limited in-kind support from allied EAOs.¹⁰ Although the NUG has shown significant creativity in fundraising, its annual baseline defence budget (US\$60 million) amounts to only two per cent of the junta's official defence budget

(US\$2.7 billion).¹¹ The shortage of finance not only prevents the NUG from acquiring the kind of arms needed to defeat the military, but also weakens its authority over the numerous people's militias that are mostly required to raise their own funds and therefore have less incentive to follow orders from above. Although the majority are nominally under the command of the NUG's Ministry of Defence, many operate quite independently or are closely aligned with EAOs in their area.

Allied EAOs have taken up some of the slack from the NUG, providing both leadership and material support for the people's militias in key conflict theatres. However, such support has mostly served the regional priorities of the EAOs rather than the broader national goal of the NUG to unseat the junta and remove the military from politics. The NUG's reliance on the EAOs thus presents a strategic bind for the resistance as much as a strategic opportunity.

The military has been haemorrhaging personnel since the coup through a combination of combat casualties, defections, and desertions, and is struggling to attract new recruits from a population that overwhelmingly backs the resistance.

The situation is particularly challenging in the Bamar-majority regions, which had no recent experience of armed resistance before the coup and are, mostly, far from Myanmar's international borders. By contrast, resistance forces in Kayah and Chin states have benefited from the prior existence of several (small) EAOs, as well as easier cross-border access and simpler supply lines, thus sharing some of the characteristics of the 3rd circle below.

Many in the resistance are hoping that the junta will eventually have to abandon the fight. The military has been haemorrhaging personnel since the coup through a combination of combat casualties, defections, and desertions, and is struggling to attract new recruits from a population that overwhelmingly backs the resistance. In response, the junta in February 2024 activated a long-dormant conscription law, seeking to force young men and women to join the military. However, the new scheme has been roundly rejected by the population and has little chance of solving the junta's manpower shortages. It is possible, therefore, that the military will eventually bleed out from the accumulative losses of personnel that cannot be replaced. Certainly, it will be increasingly hard pressed to maintain many of its remaining forward positions and keep up the current tempo of operations.

The resistance, however, will face significant challenges of its own in sustaining momentum in an extended war of attrition. The large majority of the new resistance fighters are not soldiers by profession or upbringing, and many have left their homes and careers in the cities of central Myanmar to fight in distant parts of the country where conditions are more favourable to guerrilla warfare. This imposes strains that are more psychological than material in nature, including homesickness and potentially a growing feeling of wasting their lives.

Should hopes for an early victory wane, many may eventually choose a different path. More critically, the resistance risks simply running out of money. The financial burden on local communities from supporting resistance fighters amid a collapsing economy where many households struggle to even put food on the table is overwhelming, and donations are declining.¹² If history is any guide, the combination of economic hardship and indiscriminate retaliatory military attacks on local communities is likely to see growing popular demands for peace.

3rd circle: The borderlands

In the outer circle, along Myanmar's borders, long-established EAOs have exploited the weakening of the centre and large influx of new recruits since the coup to further expand their areas of control and establish de facto mini-states. The strongest of these groups have increasingly secure base areas with easy access to neighbouring countries, thousands of well-trained and well-armed troops with extensive fighting experience, and sufficient, stable revenue streams to sustain extended combat operations. Although not immune to military counter-offensives, they are relatively sheltered in the current environment since the junta seeks to avoid fighting on too many fronts. Moreover, the new conflict zones in the 2nd circle provide a useful buffer, making it all but impossible for the military to launch major ground offensives against EAO strongholds in the borderlands, even if they want to.

The position is particularly advantageous for the northern groups, including the Brotherhood Alliance, the Kachin Independence Organisation, and the United Wa State Army, which enjoy either direct or indirect Chinese support in the form of arms sales, cross-border trade and investment, and at least a degree of political protection from Beijing. By contrast, the Karen National Union in the south-east — much like the people's militias in the new conflict zones — has been hampered by a shortage of arms, as well as internal divisions.

Some key take-aways

As long as the junta controls the centre, it will likely not only have the resources to survive, but also remain critical to how external actors engage with the state of Myanmar. As one of the premier international authorities on the Myanmar defence force, Andrew Selth, has observed, for the military to remain in power, "it does not need to win the war; it only has to avoid losing it".¹³

The NUG, by contrast, is greatly disadvantaged by lacking a safe base area inside the country. This is not just an obstacle to building a more cohesive resistance force with a common national strategy and effective command and

control, it also restricts its ability to build governance legitimacy and maintain the support of the population, EAOs, and foreign governments alike.

With no immediate prospect of either regime or resistance forces being able to overcome critical resource constraints, any decisive push to end the war will likely have to come from the major EAOs. The stronger northern groups, in particular, will play a vital role, thus giving China an outsized role in shaping developments. Crucially, Beijing has made it clear that it does not want these EAOs to join the resistance and has pushed them instead to agree to ceasefires with the military regime in order to reduce fighting near the China–Myanmar border and protect China’s broader strategic and economic interests.

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Emerging local governance structures

While most of the international attention paid to Myanmar is naturally focused on the trajectory of the civil war, some crucial, interrelated developments are underway in the governance space as new — and some older — anti-junta groups work to replace the failing state.

With the military state retreating, the new resistance groups have started building parallel state structures and delivering public services in “liberated areas”, much like the larger EAOs have been doing since the 1960s. Thus, the resistance is no longer just defending local communities but increasingly also governing millions of people. This expansion of “rebel governance” — as scholars of civil war are wont to call it — has been made possible by advances on the battlefield. However, it is, in turn, crucial for sustaining the resistance, as well as protecting local communities and preparing for the future.

This emerging governance landscape varies greatly from location to location and is both crowded and complex with numerous, often overlapping and sometimes competing structures at different levels (regional, township, village). However, for the sake of the overarching argument made here, it will suffice to highlight the key roles played by two broad types of actors: political authorities and community-based organisations.

Political authorities

Myanmar’s new “political authorities” claim jurisdiction to govern significant territories and populations.¹⁴ They are establishing parallel legislative, executive, and judicial structures; pronouncing new laws and policies; and seeking to establish centralised public administration systems in their core areas. While much of this is rudimentary, they are effectively building — or at least aspire to build — mini-states (or “federal units”).

The most well-known of these political authorities internationally is undoubtedly the NUG, which is often described as “the” parallel government. Yet while the NUG plays a critical role internationally in challenging the legitimacy of the junta and has taken some important steps to develop alternative national policy frameworks and support various education and other programs, its authority on the ground is limited in reach and often contested. In practice, Myanmar today

has several parallel governments, depending on what part of the country we look at:

- The NUG is widely considered to be the primary political authority in resistance strongholds in the Bamar-majority regions. In practice, this means mainly parts of Sagaing and Magwe regions since resistance progress on the battlefield in the remaining regions is still too new or too limited for significant “state” building to have taken place. However, across these core areas, the NUG has been establishing a fairly systematic public administration system. State-like functions are most advanced in the areas of health and education, but efforts are also underway to develop elements of a justice system.
- In Kayin, Kachin, and Rakhine states, the primary parallel political authorities are the political wings of the state’s dominant EAO, i.e., the Karen National Union, Kachin Independence Organisation, and Arakan Army. The same applies in Shan State, but here several EAOs exercise control in different areas, including the United Wa State Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, Ta’ang National Liberation Army, and Shan State Progress Party. Several of these EAOs have been governing their areas for decades but have been able to expand and deepen their activities since the coup, sometimes simply by default as the central state has contracted or local people have migrated to escape it. Their governance systems are typically more developed than those under NUG authority, with up to a dozen specialised departments and centralised structures reaching down to the village level. They also generally have more systematic tax systems and thus larger, more consistent revenue streams.
- In Kayah and Chin states, a wide cross-section of both armed and civilian local resistance groups has joined together to form new regional councils — respectively, the Karenni State Interim Executive Council and Chinland Council — which explicitly aim to serve as interim state governments. These councils are broadly representative of a wide range of interests in their respective states and have closer cooperation with the NUG than the EAO-led administrations in other states. Like the NUG, some of their administrative structures are still more aspirational than real. However, with their uniquely inclusive structures, they represent promising models of future federal units. The Karenni State Interim Executive Council, in particular, enjoys strong, near state-wide support. The authority of the Chinland Council is contested by the rival Chin National Consultative Council, which is smaller but counts some key groups mainly from the southern part of the state.¹⁵
- In a more tentative development, the establishment of the Sagaing Forum in Sagaing Region in May 2023 is illustrative of stirrings of demands for regional autonomy also in Bamar-majority regions. So far, the activities of the

new Forum appear to be mainly complementary to those of the NUG, focused on the coordination of humanitarian aid. However, members of the Forum have rejected key elements of the NUG's political platform and, as such, it has the potential over time to develop into an interim regional government similar to the Karenni and Chin councils. Similar dynamics are evident, though less developed, in Magway Region.

This patchwork of political authorities may seem confusing to outsiders but is emblematic of the new Myanmar that is emerging from the disruption of the coup and may well turn out to be a blessing in disguise. While many Westerners in particular are looking to the NUG to provide a familiar model of centralised, democratic governance, over-centralisation has been the bane of Myanmar since independence. Importantly, while few of these other political authorities have the formal democratic legitimacy that the NUG arguably does, most of them enjoy widespread popular support due to their inclusiveness and/or long-standing efforts to protect and support local communities. As such, they are prime examples of a phenomenon that Ashley South has called “emergent federalism”, where federalism grows organically from the bottom up in the absence of a national/constitutional settlement.¹⁶

Community-based organisations

Below these political authorities — and often working wholly independent of them — is a second and arguably equally important level of truly local governance. Village-level administration is mostly in the hands of thousands of armed, civil society, and community-based organisations that frequently operate with little central guidance or financial support.

This kind of “subsistence governance” was already common in many areas before the coup but has become even more widespread with the splintering of the central state and the emergence of new, still relatively weak political authorities.¹⁷ In the chaos of war, local people are stepping into the void and taking responsibility for governing themselves. The critical role played by community-based organisations in delivering humanitarian assistance in conflict-affected areas is well known by now. However, across war-torn Myanmar, local communities are also building their own roads and schools, and hiring their own teachers and nurses. In many villages, they even have their own informal, customary justice systems. This is a sign of the strength of Myanmar society as much as it is a sign of the weakness of the state. Self-governance is vital to people's welfare in the absence of the state; and it will undoubtedly remain a crucial element of the broader map of formal and informal governance structures even in a more stable future.

The longer Myanmar remains mired in warfare, the more crucial these plural governance systems will become to the welfare of millions of people, and the further they are likely to crystallise and institutionalise with lasting implications for the nature of state-building in the country.

Future war scenarios

The escalation of armed resistance in recent months holds out the tantalising prospect that the once seemingly invincible military regime could be defeated. Yet media headlines announcing the impending fall of Naypyitaw may be getting ahead of reality. While a resistance victory has become a real possibility, it is not guaranteed and perhaps not even the most likely outcome.

To be clear, the coup has been a failure. The generals will not be able to turn the clock back and restore a new version of “disciplined democracy”, as the coup-makers originally intended and many pro-military figures are still hoping for. They may be able to sustain a highly repressive regime in parts of the country (see scenario 3). However, the geographical reach of the central government into the periphery will be greatly reduced (i.e., more like the 1960s than the 2010s) — and even in the centre, the junta will continue to struggle to govern in the face of regime illegitimacy, political instability, and a failing economy.

Yet even if we discount a regime victory, there are at least three plausible scenarios for the trajectory of the civil war in the medium term (3–5 years), only one of which sees a quick end to it.

War scenario 1: The regime collapses

The dramatic defeats suffered by the military since the launch of Operation 1027, coupled with an ever-deepening financial crisis, have significantly increased the chances that the regime could simply cease to function. The end might take the form of a negotiated surrender by the military leadership, an abrupt and chaotic implosion brought about by large-scale defections by key combat battalions, or a more slow-moving collapse as the army simply bleeds out. Either way, this is by far the best-case scenario since it is the only ending that might deliver revolutionary change without destroying the country — especially if it happens sooner rather than later.

Signs of regime instability are everywhere. The recent advances by resistance forces have forced several unprecedented, highly visible, and for the generals deeply embarrassing surrenders by entire battalions. They have also prompted the defection of former pro-military militias to the resistance, as well as the splintering of ceasefire groups, with some factions returning to war. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing — who many in the military appear to hold personally responsible for this miserable state of affairs — has increasingly become subject to both public and private criticism from within his own circle, and

rumours are rife in Naypyitaw that “big changes” are coming, although no one seems to know what they might entail.

According to Matthew Arnold, who has been closely mapping the trajectory of the war since the start and was one of the first to predict the wave of resistance victories that have been seen since late 2023, “The junta will lose, it is just a matter of time”.¹⁸ The question is whether the military leadership shares this assessment. While recent junta policies, ranging from the decision to abandon the fixed foreign exchange rate regime to activating the conscription law, are all indicative of a regime that is scrambling to get through the next month rather than pursuing a long-term strategy, there are no obvious signs of panic in Naypyitaw yet.

It is hard to imagine that the generals will simply surrender to a resistance that is demanding their heads on a plate and the uprooting of everything they have built over the past 75 years, including their personal economic empires. Even if Min Aung Hlaing steps aside — or, less likely, is forcefully removed by disaffected officers — chances are that he will be replaced by a hardliner. Although the Senior General, by all accounts, is not a popular man in Naypyitaw these days, the criticisms directed at him by regime supporters take aim at his failure to defeat the resistance, not his human rights abuses or unwillingness to concede.

Even if the generals wanted to negotiate a surrender, the resistance lacks a unified leadership that can credibly commit to a “deal” on behalf of its diverse membership.

In any case, even if the generals wanted to negotiate a surrender, the resistance lacks a unified leadership that can credibly commit to a “deal” on behalf of its diverse membership.

An implosion — or more slow-moving collapse — is more likely. The commitment to the regime among its troops and allies is wearing thin, and each resistance victory increases the chances that critical battalions will simply desert and leave the top generals with little choice but to flee the sinking ship. Still, to set off a chain reaction, this scenario almost certainly hinges on further dramatic military losses closer to the centre. Like the generals, lower-level officers and even much of the rank-and-file will be asking themselves if there is a life for them after the army. Few will cherish the prospect of returning to hometowns where they are now widely hated, and where their former neighbours may well dispense summary justice.

An internal collapse, by its very nature, is hard to predict since it hinges as much on psychological as material factors. For that reason, it is perhaps also particularly susceptible to wishful thinking. While both possible and desirable, collapse is not as likely as it may seem.

War scenario 2: The resistance advances on Naypyitaw

In the absence of regime collapse, resistance forces will undoubtedly keep pushing to defeat the military on the battlefield and seize the capital and other cities in central Myanmar. This would most likely take the form of a phased approach, initially focused on squeezing major transport arteries and effecting a siege of key cities. But it would eventually require major combat operations in densely populated areas.

Many in the resistance will fancy their chances of carrying the momentum of the past three years all the way to Naypyitaw.

Many in the resistance will fancy their chances of carrying the momentum of the past three years all the way to Naypyitaw. There is widespread hope that the enormous hauls of weapons and ammunition seized by the Brotherhood Alliance from vanquished military bases will be funnelled to groups elsewhere in the country and help tip the balance in some of the new conflict zones. If the resistance were able to take out the main air and artillery bases, a frontal attack on one or more cities might become feasible.

Yet if the regime holds together, this remains a relatively distant prospect and would carry enormous risk. Defeating the centre is a very different proposition from taking even major regional cities, for three key reasons.

First, geography. The Ayeyarwady River basin, where the capital and major cities are located, is largely flat with open fields. It is impossible to sneak up on the enemy or hide from air attacks. The military will be well prepared and able to make full use of its superior weapons systems. Second, the military balance of power is very different in the centre. This is where the military has its strongest defences: its largest bases, its best soldiers, its weapons factories and airfields. By the time the resistance is ready for an attack, the junta will likely have pulled its most loyal and effective forces back to defend the “king”. It will have a major advantage also in short supply lines, while those of the resistance forces, by contrast, will be dangerously stretched. Third, and crucially, psychology. The centre is the regime’s “last stand”. There is nowhere else for them to go (other than to flee the country). So, they can be expected to throw everything they have got left into a final fight.

This is not simply a matter for the resistance of building up sufficient strength to overrun the junta’s defences around Naypyitaw or other cities. As previous attempts to take provincial towns have shown, unless the military surrenders or a settlement can be reached, even major resistance victories risk simply setting them up for devastating counterattacks. The nightmare scenario would be a final standoff in a major city with millions of people held hostage.

Realistically, the prospect of a successful future assault on the centre depends on close cooperation between the NUG/people's militias and several major EAOs. For all their successes so far, the people's militias do not have the material capabilities required to take on the military in major conventional campaigns on their own. This, then, ultimately becomes a political issue as much as a military one. The key EAOs have already achieved much of what they have traditionally fought for in terms of territorial control and political autonomy. Moreover, having taken control of new territories, they now face the twin challenge of governing larger populations and — at least in some cases — defending those territories against neighbouring EAOs with overlapping claims. So, the question is whether they will be willing to expend the necessary blood and treasure to take the centre. Do they even have an interest in establishing a strong central government? While most of the EAOs have made general statements of support for the revolution, their objective interests differ significantly from those of the NUG, and distrust of Bamar-majority groups remains a perennial issue. Moreover, the northern groups will need to consider the wishes of China and any backlash they might face for acting against the interests of their generous patron.

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War scenario 3: Low intensity conflict continues in a fragmented country

A third possibility is that the ongoing resistance offensives lose momentum, pushing any hope for success of the revolution into an indeterminate future. In this scenario, the junta will no doubt keep pushing for ceasefires with more EAOs but will refuse to negotiate with the NUG/people's militias (not that those groups would be interested anyway). It might also go ahead with organising some sort of "national" election to try to put a civilian cloak on the regime. However, none of this would resolve anything. Rather, the country would settle into an extended phase of low-intensity warfare across many of the new conflict zones, with strategic gains by either side likely to be few and far between.

The resistance forces will do everything in their power to avoid this scenario. However, it may eventuate anyway if the major EAOs decide to pull back and focus on consolidating their recent gains. The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and Ta'ang National Liberation Army have already agreed to a ceasefire with the junta, and the historical record of the Arakan Army suggests that it might eventually do the same if it serves its primary interests in Rakhine State. The Kachin Independence Organisation and Karen National Union are less likely to agree to a formal ceasefire but might reduce hostilities as long as they are not being attacked by the military.

The outcome would be relative peace across much of the borderlands. There could be significant benefits for local communities as EAOs would be free to work on strengthening their governance structures and further expanding public services (although with the ever-present risk of having to return to war someday). However, it would put the NUG in a very difficult position. As Ye Myo Hein and Lucas Myers from the Wilson Center have warned, governments in exile elsewhere in the world have tended to lose support over time and simply fade into irrelevance.¹⁹ Even if the NUG avoided such a worst-case scenario, it would struggle to maintain broad opposition to the military regime, which would risk becoming secondary to more local concerns. Many of the people's militias on the ground would likely face renewed counter-offensives by the military, making it harder for them to consolidate governance. Some areas might soon come to feel less and less "liberated" for people living there.

While this scenario may seem overly pessimistic against the backdrop of recent successes by anti-junta forces, it might be perceived as "good enough" by the most powerful players on the board, notably the northern EAOs and their great power patron to the east. As in any war, interests may ultimately overrule ideals.

Future post-war scenarios

If the military regime is dismantled — whether by negotiation or force — Myanmar’s diverse peoples will have an unprecedented opportunity to rectify seven decades of failed, coercive state-building under military tutelage. However, the path to realising the kind of federal democracy to which key resistance actors aspire is narrow and strewn with challenges. Here, too, several scenarios are plausible.

Post-war scenario 1: A strong, federal democratic state

There is an implicit assumption in much of the literature that once the repressive and corrupt military regime is removed, it will be replaced by a “genuine federal democracy”. This is clearly what Myanmar needs. However, it will require a lot of creativity and goodwill, and a fair bit of luck.

There are sound reasons to be optimistic. Over the past three years, Myanmar’s diverse ethnic groups have been brought together in unprecedented ways by shared experiences of violence and suffering at the military’s hands. While major differences of views and interests persist, vital new relationships based on familiarity and growing mutual respect have developed among leaders across the political spectrum who have, quite literally, been in the trenches together. Many of the emerging governance structures discussed earlier are both inherently federating and fundamentally democratic. Moreover, any new government in Naypyitaw will simply not have the capability to push aside greatly empowered local societies and impose another centralised system.

Yet successful nation-building will require a lot of give-and-take, to which Myanmar’s political culture is generally hostile. Empowered local societies will demand influence and privileges that many traditional Bamar leaders will balk at. Moreover, the different political authorities represent very different political cultures and systems. While the Karen National Union and Karenni State Interim Executive Council, for example, share strong democratic traditions with the NUG, the Kachin Independence Organisation, Ta’ang National Liberation Army, and Arakan Army are much more autocratic, and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and United Wa State Army are steeped in outright feudal traditions.

The physical realities of each region are also a significant factor in this equation. While ethnic leaders in the smaller and poorer Chin and Kayah states are unlikely to see any future separate from a strong federal Union, the Rakhine, the

Kachin, and the Wa, among others, have made it clear that they aspire to very high levels of local autonomy. They will be looking, among other things, to maintain their own armies and keep the lion's share of revenue from the natural resources in their areas.

To bring these diverse interests, worldviews, and cultures together in a well-functioning national system with just the right balance between central direction and local autonomy will be a long-term project. Crucially, it will require a fundamental rethinking of many existing assumptions and expectations, for example, regarding the make-up of the federal government and the geographical boundaries of the federal units.

Post-war scenario 2: A feeble and highly militarised confederation

The starting point for a “new” Myanmar — and quite possibly the end point if negotiations fail to bring the compromises and new thinking required — is something far less appealing: a feeble and highly militarised *confederation* where the pursuit of local autonomy and control is prioritised over national development, and power in many parts of the country continues to flow from the barrels of guns. This scenario would see persistent tensions between the centre and (some) regions/states, especially over the allocation of resources and efforts to enforce the rule of law and end deep-rooted illicit economies in the borderlands.

Post-war scenario 3: Resurgent ethnic nationalism and new armed conflicts

A worst-case scenario would see resurgent ethnic nationalism, new armed conflicts, and, potentially, systematic ethnic cleansing or discrimination. The danger here is not so much another round of armed conflict between the centre and ethnic groups — because the centre will be too weak to assert itself militarily — but rather new conflicts among competing claimants to overlapping ethnic “homelands”. Having emerged strengthened from the civil war, many EAOs will be pushing to finally realise their long-standing aspiration to rule their own areas. Yet ethnic and geographic boundaries do not align neatly in Myanmar. None of the members of the Brotherhood Alliance, for example, who have celebrated such triumphs in northern Shan State in recent months and are now in control of large parts of the state, are actually ethnically Shan. In fact, both the Kokang and Palaung have long-standing grievances against the majority Shan — and vice versa. On the other side of the country, the Arakan Army has established a vital base area in Paletwa, which historically was part of Rakhine (then Arakan) kingdoms but is now part of Chin State. And in the

southeast, the Karen National Union lays claim not only to Kayin State but also to parts of Mon State, as well as Bago and Tanintharyi regions.

These examples underscore the complexities and dangers inherent in any attempt to establish an ethnic-based federal structure in Myanmar. Yet to date, little meaningful discussion has taken place about alternatives.

These scenarios are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the most likely outcome of the fall of the military regime would be some combination of all three in different parts of the country.

To be clear, the ongoing fragmentation of power is not a bad thing *per se*. In fact, it may well be necessary to give the country a chance to come together in some new, not yet visible or even imagined configuration. However, nor can it be assumed that a defeat of the military will usher in a genuine federal democracy, or even lead to peace. The dismantling of the military regime would present an unprecedented opportunity to rethink and rebuild the Myanmar state. What the disparate anti-junta forces can make of such an opportunity remains to be seen.

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International policy options

Western governments have struggled to respond adequately to the 2021 military coup and resultant civil war, relying too heavily on a few traditional tools that simply do not match the dynamics or significance of these epochal events. While the combination of sanctions on the regime and humanitarian aid to the people used by most capitals is not an unreasonable starting point, neither tool holds any real prospect of significantly influencing the course of the conflict.

The main reason for this tepid response is no doubt the general state of global affairs. Myanmar is caught up in the broader geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, which hampers the ability of Washington to pursue a more idealist foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Moreover, most governments are preoccupied with crises elsewhere, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

It is understandable that governments are reluctant to provide military assistance to the resistance, which would risk drawing the West and China into a proxy war in Myanmar.

Still, it is hard not to conclude that there is also a lack of imagination in some policy circles, or at least insufficient will to try new things. It is understandable that governments are reluctant to provide military assistance to the resistance, which would risk drawing the West and China into a proxy war in Myanmar. However, they could do much more to support emerging local governance structures in areas outside of junta control, which hold the key both to the outcome of the civil war and the longer-term prospect of building a federal democracy once the war is over.

This second part of the paper highlights some of the limitations of current Western policy and makes the case for a new core strategy of greater support for parallel state-building in the liberated areas. The issues raised by each of these policy tools are too complex to be covered in detail here. However, the following sections seek to outline some basic principles and dispense with some stubborn myths.

Sanctions

The normative case for sanctions is clear. Sanctions signal support for international law and lend weight to the broader policy of ostracising the military regime, which is deeply illegitimate and guilty of mass atrocities. They also provide a measure of symbolic support for the resistance, which has called for sanctions to support their cause.

The strategic case is weaker. No Myanmar general is going to be shamed by Western criticism into changing their behaviour or induced by a visa ban to surrender their power and privileges as the resistance demands. Still, by targeting the flows of arms and finance to the regime, sanctions may weaken their military capabilities and help tip the balance of power on the battlefield a little.

Proponents of sanctions, however, need to come to terms with several uncomfortable truths about the sanctions regime. First, trying to block market access for specific companies or products in a globalised economy in the absence of an effective universal sanctions regime is a bit like playing “Whack-a-Mole” — as some business opportunities close, others invariably open. Targeting financial transactions, as the United States has started doing, is more effective given the dollar’s status as the world’s reserve currency. However, it is just a matter of time before the military regime restructures its banking practices or moves to trading in other currencies. Several of the military’s key trading partners are already experienced in dodging American efforts to use the outsized role of the dollar in the global economy for coercive purposes. Indeed, this has become a new frontline in the growing pushback against Western power by non-Western states.

Second, the main sources of military revenue are simply out of reach. As the *de facto* government of the rump state of Myanmar, the junta has inherited the state’s money printing press, as well as its sovereign borrowing rights, and the ability to set foreign exchange rates. It controls a vast network

of state economic enterprises and military-owned companies, which dominate the most lucrative sectors of the economy. Moreover, it is likely skimming hundreds of millions of dollars annually off the drugs trade and other illicit economic activity through a combination of protection payments and official “whitewashing” of private profits of unknown origin. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Myanmar’s foreign trade and investment comes from neighbouring countries that do not and will not support Western sanctions (although some individual banks or other companies may respect them to protect their access to Western markets). Similar challenges pertain to the Western arms embargo. The junta produces most of its small arms and ammunition itself and procures its larger weapons systems from countries that reject sanctions, notably Russia and China.

The vast majority of Myanmar’s foreign trade and investment comes from neighbouring countries that do not and will not support Western sanctions.

Third, and most problematically, any pain the military regime suffers from sanctions is invariably transferred to other groups. Indeed, given the military’s control of key levers of the economy, the term “targeted sanctions” is really a misnomer. Whatever the generals lose in one area, they can take somewhere else. Indeed, many of the seemingly “irrational” economic measures introduced by the junta over the past few years — such as import restrictions, fixed exchange rates, and their penchant for running the money presses — are in fact

deliberate efforts to do exactly that. This is bad for the overall economy but perfectly rational from a regime survival perspective — and it seems to be working. While the population is suffering from run-amok inflation and shortages of vital goods such as medicine, there are no indications that the junta has had to reduce its arms spending. On the contrary, the number of air strikes (as well as, mainly, civilian casualties) continues to rise month by month.²⁰

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While research by organisations such as Justice for Myanmar has greatly improved our ability to identify companies linked to the military, there is still very scant knowledge about the impact on the broader economy of shutting down military revenue streams. What we do know is that millions of people are living on the precipice and even relatively minor disruptions to livelihoods can be catastrophic. Any responsible use of sanctions will therefore require much greater efforts to understand their impact on the wider society.

Without a proper accounting of these limitations and perverse effects, sanctions risk becoming an end in themselves rather than means to an end — or worse, simply an excuse for not doing the harder work that is so sorely needed.

Traditional humanitarian aid

Humanitarian aid is undoubtedly helping save lives. It is commendable that many governments have stepped up to help the Myanmar people despite pressure to reduce aid globally. Yet far too much of this aid is channelled through traditional humanitarian structures in the centre that are unable to reach people in the main conflict-affected areas.

To be clear, humanitarian needs are extreme in many urban areas, too. Indeed, large numbers of internally displaced people from the new conflict zones are sheltering in the cities. So, stopping all aid through the centre is not an option. Nor should donors be deterred by arguments that signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Health or even giving the generals a few photo ops will somehow legitimise and empower the military regime. This is a regime so deeply reviled by its own population, as well as large parts of the international community, that any benefit it might derive from such engagement is trivial.

Rather, it is an issue of priorities. Given the scale of the humanitarian crisis and the limited aid available, hard choices need to be made to ensure that every dollar is well spent. This is not the time to be funding 20 UN agencies in Myanmar, the majority of which have little experience of working in the midst of a civil war. It is also not the time to insist on laborious grant applications and accountability processes when local aid staff and volunteers are working around the clock to try to save lives, often at the risk of their own. This is an emergency situation, although a protracted one, and standard procedures simply do not cut it. Importantly, there is no shortage of ideas or knowledge about how to work differently, and better.²¹ What seems to be lacking is donor will to act on it.

Given the scale of the humanitarian crisis and the limited aid available, hard choices need to be made to ensure that every dollar is well spent.

Military assistance

The case for arming the resistance is compelling, on the face of it. An outright defeat of the junta would greatly improve the chances of achieving the goals of the revolution. Moreover, the assistance required to help get the resistance forces over the top is likely well within the means of key Western countries — or even the United States on its own. The Myanmar military may be more resilient than many observers are willing to admit, but faced with a properly armed resistance supported by Western countries and able to take out the junta's air force, it would surely fold.

The risks associated with going down this road are immense, however. China has long viewed Western support for pro-democracy groups in Myanmar through the lens of its rivalry with the United States. As such, there is little doubt that it would consider any provision of military assistance to the resistance by Western countries — whether lethal or non-lethal — as a hostile act and respond accordingly. No Western government wants to get involved in a proxy war in Myanmar, and no one in the country should wish for that either, as it would likely drag the conflict out further while increasing the level of violence. If major Chinese strategic interests, including economic ones, were threatened, it might even prompt direct intervention by the People's Liberation Army, something Beijing could effect in a matter of hours while Washington would neither want nor be able to respond.

But taking military assistance off the table does not exhaust the opportunities for supporting the resistance or providing more effective and sustainable aid to the wider population.

Parallel state-building

While discussions about international assistance to the resistance have perhaps naturally focused on supporting the armed struggle, there are ample, largely unexplored opportunities for supporting rebel governance — and fewer risks involved. International assistance to “parallel state-building” in areas outside military control offers a bridge between military aid (which is too risky) and traditional humanitarian aid (which is too apolitical). Ideally, it would involve work in four conceptually distinct, but practically interrelated, areas.

1. **Supporting social services delivery anywhere that resistance actors can access.** This would include basic humanitarian assistance: food, water, and shelter. But when conditions allow, it should also include more development-oriented activities in education, health, and livelihoods, as is normally done in protracted conflicts. The majority of this work would be carried out by community-based organisations. However, there is a case for funnelling some of the funding through responsible, emerging and existing local political authorities to help them strengthen their relationships with local communities and build legitimacy by serving local needs. Either way, providing humanitarian aid through local organisations should be part of a longer-term strategy to build local governance structures, not simply viewed as a technical solution to the lack of humanitarian space. It should therefore include core funding, as well as training, to help these organisations build capacity.
2. **Assisting parallel political authorities in establishing formal government institutions and building effective systems across key areas, such as policing, justice, and natural resource management, as well as health and education.** Like conventional governance programs, this might involve everything from supporting policy development to helping strengthen administrative structures and funding social services. It is important to ensure that these political authorities do not suck the energy out of the grassroots level by seeking to control or take over things that are already working. However, it must also be understood that there are limits to self-governance. Indeed, many community-based organisations regularly seek advice, direction, and funding from local political authorities.
3. **Supporting dialogues among resistance groups, EAOs, and other anti-junta political actors.** While these groups share a common enemy, there are serious tensions among them over the distribution of authority, resources, and territory, and these are only going to increase once negotiations begin in earnest to agree on more fundamental constitutional issues. It is vital therefore to help build further trust among key actors and develop common ground on key policy issues, both nationally and regionally.

4. **Promoting certain basic values, or standards, among resistance actors and structures.** This is not a call for returning to the old ways of mindlessly seeking to replicate Western institutions in a context where they are at best irrelevant and may do more harm than good. On the contrary, the core principle of all support for parallel state-building should be to help facilitate structures that are already developing organically. It is important, however, given the potential of international aid to affect the power balance between different groups, that all such aid is used to support “positive” models of governance. Thus, the priority should be to support emerging local efforts to build *inclusive, civilian-led* structures that *respect basic human rights and international humanitarian law*.

International support for parallel state-building presents significant challenges for many donors whose *default* position is to work through the central state. Working with non-state armed groups is a particularly sensitive issue for most. However, the agenda laid out here is fully in line with the growing demand globally for “localised aid”, as well as the revolutionary realities in Myanmar today. Crucially, parallel state-building has the potential not only to help protect local communities, but also to strengthen the resistance forces by helping them build stronger links among themselves, as well as more resilient relationships with local communities. In other words, it might help both to end the war earlier and build peace sooner and better.

Conclusion

The overall trajectory of Myanmar's civil war clearly favours the resistance, yet fighting is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. And even if the anti-junta forces ultimately emerge victorious, the ultimate goal of building a genuine federal democracy will take years of highly complex and politically fraught negotiations among a multitude of armed and civilian actors who share little but a loathing for the military and a vague commitment to staying together within the sovereign state of Myanmar.

The most influential external actor is without doubt China. However, Western governments and likeminded actors could maximise their influence by committing to a new core strategy of parallel state-building in areas under the control of resistance forces and allied EAOs. This will require creativity, as well as a willingness to take some political and fiduciary risks. It will also necessitate deft diplomacy and dialogue with Myanmar's neighbours, including China, to manage regional sensitivities around external intervention. However, it would add a much more constructive and forward-looking element to Western policy — one guaranteed to pay dividends whatever the trajectory of the civil war and subsequent efforts to build a new and better Myanmar. In short, it would help the West remain relevant to Myanmar's future development in a way that currently it is not.

Notes

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