



# ASIA MAIOR

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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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**viella**

A large, intricate mandala graphic in a light orange color, partially overlapping the right edge of the cover. It features complex, repeating geometric and floral patterns, similar in style to the logo above.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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MYANMAR 2022: FRAGMENTED SOVEREIGNTIES AND THE ESCALATION OF  
VIOLENCE IN MULTIPLE WARSCAPES

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*The events that followed the military coup of February 2021, and the violence that ensued throughout 2022 serve as stark reminders that any notion that Myanmar is and operates as a single polity are a fiction, and one that neither captures the complex reality on the ground nor serves to guide policy to contain violence and assist the population on the ground.*

*Instead, Myanmar is currently home to a variety of constantly evolving geographies of war ('warscapes'), each distinctive in terms of actors involved and outcomes. An analysis of the political dynamics in these warscapes, the economic situation therein, and the degree of transnational ties and involvement suggests the emergence of a condition of fragmented sovereignty across the territory of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.*

*Just like in the pre-2011 period, when the prevailing narrative was one of Myanmar's international isolation, the regime actually entertains a wide range of relations with countries both close and afar. Russia, in particular, has emerged as the junta's strongest backer. The military regime is among the staunchest supporters of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.*

*The economy and the livelihoods of millions have been devastated by the violence. Western investors have mostly retreated. The economy barely functions. Aid supply has become difficult to provide due to increasing regulation and restrictions.*

*No side was able to prevail in 2022, with multiple conflicts protracted, when not intractable, and violence escalating.*

KEYWORDS – warscapes; fragmented sovereignties; Russia; aid; sanctions.

## 1. Introduction

Armed conflicts escalated in 2022. Myanmar's military continued to be at war with the population, escalating its brutality across a variety of arenas (the battlefield, the digital world, finance, international fora) and deploying diverse tools of repression, from artillery shelling, to arson, rapes and executions [Gabusi & Neironi 2022; Kaung Sett Wai 2022; Min Thang 2022]. Stability and retaining any form of control have remained largely out of reach for the armed forces. At the same time, the opposition did not coalesce around a single agenda or leadership, limiting its impact, despite the damage it can inflict locally on the military and its affiliates.

The events that followed the military coup of February 2021, and the violence that ensued throughout 2022, serve as stark reminders that any notion that Myanmar is and operates as a single polity is a fiction, and a dangerously useless one, as it neither captures the complex reality on the ground nor serves to guide policy to contain violence and assist the population. In fact, this article – as it builds on and expands the argument made elsewhere about the multi-cornered nature of the Myanmar conflict [Fumagalli 2022a], argues that it is incorrect to refer to the events and violence unfolding in the country (and at times beyond it, across its borders) as being part of a single conflict. Instead, Myanmar is currently home to a variety of constantly evolving geographies of war, or warscapes, a notion applied to Myanmar's conflicts by Shona Loong in a series of recent publications<sup>1</sup>. Warscapes, Nordstrom contends, are «sites of a complex and multidimensional agenda of social struggles and life projects» [Nordstrom 1997]. To be clear, the condition of such political landscapes is neither one of «chaos in all places at all times» [Korf, Engeler & Hagman 2010, p. 385] nor one of «chaos in all places at all times» [Lund 2011, p. 888]. Rather, warscapes are «not per se socially unstable places, but differentiated arenas, networks and connections of relational spaces in which distinct human trajectories exist» [Korf, Engeler & Hagman 2010, p. 386], but with rather contingent efforts unfolding to make disparate fragments cohere [Lund 2011]. As Loong contends, these warscapes are «largely different from each other in terms of actors involved, local alliances, agendas and outcomes» [Loong 2022b]. Taken together, all these environments do not constitute a single indistinguishable violent chaos, but different, complex sets of orders and diverse hybrid governance arrangements. The concept of fragmented sovereignty is thus relevant here, as this «reflects the power struggles that involve a range of competing institutions, endowed with different resources» [Su 2021, p. 23]. In other words, fragmented sovereignty is conceived of as «multiple localised autonomous cores of power» instead of an all-encompassing structural and centralised modality of control [Lund 2011, p. 887]. This condition is clearly applicable to the case of Myanmar.

The military does not control people and territory, but the extent to which this is the case and the kind of alternative governance arrangements in its lieu instead vary considerably across the territory of the administrative unit. It is only the statist bias of the current international system that obstinately reinforces the fiction of a united polity. This is no longer the case, and in fact it never was. The 2021 coup and the violence that followed have redrawn the contours of old conflict dynamics while drawing new ones, for example in the areas around the Sagaing

1. Loong's assessment of the six distinct warscapes is available here: <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis>.



and Magway regions, Chin State and the Dry Zone along the Ayeyarwady river, previously relatively unaffected by the cycles of wars that persisted in the borderlands for decades.

Before proceeding further, a few notes on the terminology used in this article are in order. In these pages I refrain from referring to the Myanmar military as «Tatmadaw» (တပ်မတော်), responding to the call by the resistance movement to deprive the institution of the honorifics that accompany its self-appellation in the Burmese language (the suffix and royal particle ‘-taw/-daw’/ တေ) [Aung Kaung Myat 2022]. The People’s Defence Force (PDF) fighting the State Administration Council (SAC, as the junta calls itself) is called *pyithu kakweyay tatmataw* (ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်သူကာကွယ်ရေးတပ်မတော်), adding to the confusion. This inevitably raised the question of what to call this institution, with the expression «sit-tat» (စစ်တပ်) seemingly finding growing favour both inside and outside the country [Aung Kaung Myat, 2022; Buscemi 2022]. The issue I have with this proposition, though, is that «sit-tat» simply means military, not a specific institution, thus making the entity perpetrating crimes against its own people indistinguishable from other armed forces. For these reasons, I prefer to use the expression «Myanmar Armed Forces» (MAF). I also acknowledge that the anti-military resistance consists of both anti-coup forces and anti-military organisations whose existence predates the 2021 coup and whose agenda does not necessarily dovetail with that of the anti-coup movement. Hence, although I tend to use the term «Spring Revolution» (*Nway Oo Tawhlanyay*, နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေး) to refer to the broad social and political opposition to the military coup, I neither imply or suggest that all these forces coalesced in a coherent movement. While many may share the goal of dismantling the current structures and hegemonic control of the MAF, and this in itself is a ‘revolutionary’ goal, the actions, agenda, interests and alliances vary extensively on the ground. Overall, what was new in 2022 compared to the previous year was an intensification of the armed conflicts and a more prominent role of Russia through extensive economic and military linkages with the junta in Myanmar.

The article is structured as follows. In the section below, I review the condition of the fragmented sovereignties that have emerged across Myanmar’s different warscapes. Drawing on the work of Shona Loong [Loong 2022b], I sketch out the different coalitions that constitute the main conflicting parties (the military; the anti-coup resistance; the ethnic armed organisations, EAOs) in each of the main settings. Next, the article details how the economy and the livelihoods of millions have been devastated by the violence. Western investors have mostly retreated. The economy barely functions. Aid supply has become difficult to provide due to increasing regulation and restrictions. Lastly, while the anti-military resistance groups cannot rely on international support, the armed forces have been able to count on Russia’s active political, economic and security

support, and China's more muted, even ambivalent, position. Just like in the pre-2011 period, while the prevailing narrative is one of Myanmar's international isolation, the regime actually entertains a wide range of relations with countries close and less proximate. Russia has emerged as the junta's strongest backer. The junta in Nay Pyi Taw, in turn, is among the staunchest supporters of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## 2. *Domestic policy*

Armed conflicts escalated throughout the whole year. Neither the junta-affiliated forces nor the opposing sides were able to assert control over either people or territory.<sup>2</sup> Instead, different areas – and the peoples inhabiting them – remained subject to a variety of complex and evolving governance arrangements, with perhaps the single common thread being that in no instance the junta (State Administration Council, or SAC, as the military regime has renamed itself) and the National Unity Government (NUG)<sup>3</sup> forces co-existed. Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing's persistence in ensuring that his nemesis Aung San Suu Kyi would never again pose a threat to his political ambition translated into more sentences in the sham trials that followed her forced removal from office on 1 February 2021. The military court delivered more sentences from April through December. Eventually, former de facto leader Suu Kyi was jailed for a total of 26 years [Nikkei Asia 2022b, 7 April; Peck 2022, 12 October; Ratcliffe 2022; Reuters 2022b, 2 September; Root 2022]. The military also carried out its first executions in decades, killing four democracy activists in July 2022 [Nikkei Asia 2022i, 25 July]. Yet, the regime's terror campaign was far from an intra-elite affair. Neither was it targeted at dissidents only.

As Loong notes, almost all of Myanmar's 330 townships were affected by war [Loong 2022b]. Yet, war affected the country and its population unevenly. The conflict dynamics differed as the specificities of each conflict were «layered over struggles that predated the coup» [Loong 2022b].

2. The Assistance Associations for Political Prisoners (Burma) estimated that around 3,000 people were killed by the military regime and that around 20,000 are detained as political prisoners as of February 2023 (<https://aappb.org>).

3. To be clear the NUG and the ethnic armed organisations do not always share the same goals or have the same stance towards the junta, as shown later in this article. Further, and following from this, the forces that identify with the NUG and the broader anti-coup and anti-military groups are not the same. For a broader discussion of the NUG and the multi-cornered nature of Myanmar's conflicts see Fumagalli, 2022a.

Myanmar's geographies of war tended to involve three different set of actors:

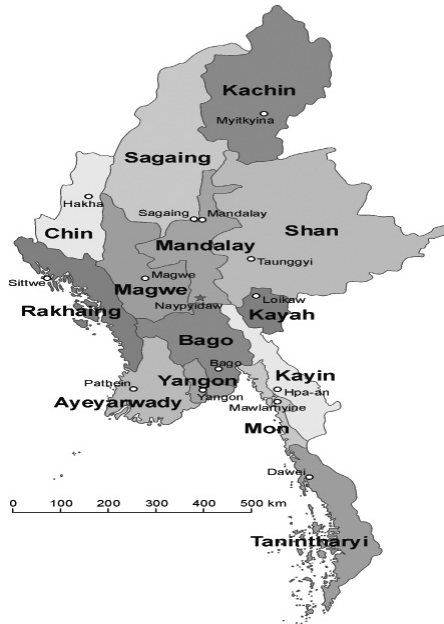
- The State Administration Council (SAC, the junta) and its affiliates. These include the MAF proper, as well as its de facto political wing, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, some hardline Buddhist nationalist organisations, the Border Guard Forces, and the «pyusawhti», the loosely connected village-level networks of pro-junta civilians who receive weapons from the military [International Crisis Group 2022b]. Because the central areas of Myanmar have experienced little armed conflict for decades, the MAF lacks bases, intelligence and supply networks there, hence the value of informers and the pyusawhti.
- The anti-SAC forces. The shared goals of these various groups lie in toppling the military regime. These include the National Unity Government, the People's Defence Forces (PDF) and the Local Defence Forces, as well as some defectors [Charney 2022; Kyed 2022]. Primarily based in the Bamar-majority areas, these groupings tend to cooperate with each other, although the extent to which this is done varies locally.
- The ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). Claiming to represent the ethnic minority groups especially in the borderlands, the EAOs have in many cases been fighting for decades, in a long struggle against Myanmar's central government. The response of the EAOs varied [International Crisis Group, 2022a]. Some were vocal and well organised opponents of the coup, such as the Kachin Independence Organisation and the Karen National Union. Others such as the Wa State Army appeared to acquiesce to the coup; others equivocated, keeping distance from the NUG without openly condemning the coup, before taking up arms again against the MAF, such as the Arakan Army.

Although wordcount constraints do not allow a further unpacking of each of the conflicting parties, it suffices here to say that considerable heterogeneity marks each of them and that all are, effectively, moving targets in terms of how their agenda and compositions evolved over time.<sup>4</sup>

4. All actors experienced splits and defections. The defections from the MAF received greater attention [Ye Myo Hein 2022; Charney 2022; Frontier Myanmar 202c, 3 December; Kyed 2022; Thinzar Sunheli Yi 2022], although in reality the Armed Forces have a long history of factionalism (as well as purges, factional and ideological divisions), questioning the myth of the MAF's alleged monolithic nature [Moeller 2022; Selth 2022]. There were also attempts by the military to foment defections from the NLD [The Irrawaddy 202e, 26 December] and there were splits within the Karen movement too [Loong 2022a; Gray 2022].

Based on a fine-grained examination of the conflict<sup>5</sup>, Loong identifies six warscapes in the Dry zone, Rakhine State, the Northwest, the Southwest, the Northeast and lower Myanmar.

Map 1. Myanmar Political Map



Source: *Myanmar Divisions and States*, available at [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/bc/Burma\\_en.png/800px-Burma\\_en.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/bc/Burma_en.png/800px-Burma_en.png)

Conflicts in the *Dry Zone* of central Myanmar show how the coup and anti-military opposition managed to mobilise people previously untouched by the armed insurgencies. In this warscape, the key actors are the SAC-allied pyusawhti militia and the anti-SAC PDFs, both of which comprise Bamar-Buddhist civilians without prior combat experience. The forces were unevenly matched in 2022, as the MAF reinforced the pyusawhti with heavy weaponry and small arms. Just like the Dry Zone, the *Northwest* had been spared much of the post-independence and pre-coup violence. The main ethnic organization there, the Chin National Front (CNF), commanded considerable support among the local population, but no armed conflict

5. See the conflict map and databases on the IISS website (<https://myanmar.iiss.org>).

had taken place in the region. After the coup, the CNF has emerged as an important force and the local PDFs have been organised under the new military player, the Chinland Defense Force. *Lower Myanmar*, around the Aye-yarwady delta and Yangon, had similarly experienced little violence before, but this is where urban warfare was concentrated over the past year. In the *Southeast*, the conflict opposed some old EAOs such as the Karen National Union and the Karenni National Progressive Party, and some NUG-aligned PDFs, to the MAF. Home to so much violence and destruction in recent years [Fumagalli, 2018], *Rakhine State* has thus far been an outlier to the violence engulfing so much of the country. This was the result of an informal ceasefire between the Arakan Army (AA, which has emerged as one of the strongest and better organised EAOs in recent years, operating well beyond the administrative boundaries of Rakhine State [Mizzima 2022b, July 21]) and the MAF in November 2020, after two years of harsh fighting. This led to a lull in violence, though clashes reignited in summer 2022 [Kyaw Hsan Hlaing 2022; Yuzana 2022], until a new temporary ceasefire was agreed in the autumn. Although it advocates an anti-military agenda («sovereignty for Arakan», the old name for Rakhine, [Kyaw Lynn 2022; Aung Tun 2022]), the AA has resisted aligning itself with the NUG. Overall, the conflict is at its most complex in the *Northeast*, where the opposition is not just between the MAF and the main EAOs (the Kachin Independence Organisation, the Restoration Council of Shan State, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Shan State Progress Party), but also among the EAOs themselves.

Taken together, these six warscapes show how the structure of the conflict varies significantly across Myanmar, which is now made of moving maps of new actors, tenuous coalitions and new frontlines [Ye Myo Hein 2022]. In sum, Loong argues, Myanmar's war «cannot be reduced to a binary contest between those supporting the coup and those opposing it» [Loong 2022b]. The country is indeed the sum of many moving parts.

### 2.1. *Digital authoritarianism*

Beyond the bloody repression in the form of killings, arson, shelling through artillery, arrests, beatings and rape, the military regime deployed other tools in its efforts to coerce the population into submission. The most notable one is the resort to digital authoritarianism. This refers to the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations.<sup>6</sup> In practice, this includes attempts to seal the internet in a given country from the rest of the world through – among others – IP address blocking, the filtering of words and banning the use of VPNs, the reliance on CCTV across the country

6. Of course such tools can be and are used by democratic regimes against their societies too.

(e.g. smart city and crime-controlling technology), government crowd control and dispersion, facial recognition software, and geolocation tracking, overall amounting to a complex surveillance ecosystem.

Over the short span of a decade, Myanmar has rapidly morphed from being one of Southeast Asia's most isolated countries in terms of Information and Communication Technology development and connectivity to one where both the authorities and the population rely on a variety of digital technologies for both preserving power and challenging it. Myanmar was a latecomer to cyberspace. Its Telecommunications industry in the 1990s and 2000s was extremely limited and highly regulated. Only a narrow circle of senior army officers were given preferential rates for purchasing mobile phones and SIM cards in the 2000s, with business people having to buy them for around US \$ 7,500 [Simpson 2022]. Only one per cent of the population had internet access in the 2000s, and Facebook was largely unknown till the mid-2010s. Gmail was blocked. The liberalisation and privatisation of the TLC sector from 2021 onwards significantly reduced the price of SIM cards down to US \$ 1.50 in 2014, with mobile subscription skyrocketing from 2% in 2011 to 113% in 2018. Internet penetration went from 0.024% in 2003 to 4% in 2012, 8% in 2013 and 30% in 2017 [Simpson 2022a]. While the time when the NLD tenure was in office was far from unproblematic, it was after the coup that the authorities unleashed the full potential of surveillance technology. In a short span of time, Myanmar has emerged, as McDermott aptly puts it, as «the leading edge of digital authoritarianism in Southeast Asia» [McDermott 2022]. In the immediate aftermath of its takeover, the junta banned Whatsapp and Facebook, which were used to organise anti-coup demonstrations. The Facebook app was removed from use in the country. The junta also blocked over 200 websites under section 77 of the TLC law as part of the campaign against «misinformation». Censorship intensified. Internet shutdowns were deployed regularly. At the same time, and consistently with the fragmented sovereignties framework adopted in this article, Myanmar's territory is not evenly subject to the same policies. For example, Chin and Rakhine States, as well as Sagaing and Magway Regions are more extensively targeted through internet restrictions.<sup>7</sup>

In its efforts to place the entire TLC sector under its control, the junta relied on a set of state and non-state partners in repression. In the years preceding the coup, the authorities (then the NLD government) employed two rather well-known private surveillance firms to monitor regime opponents (also during the pandemic), namely the German firm Finfisher and Israel's Cellebrite [Simpson 2022a]. In recent years, China sent experts to the country to create a new firewall to deliver sophisticated surveillance equipment to suppress online dissent and control the narrative surrounding the coup [McDermott 2022]. Russia helped out too, as it exported its digital surveil-

7. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for emphasizing this point.

lance and filtering technology through its state agency Roskonnadzor. In the months following the coup the junta exerted pressure on the companies (mostly foreign), such as Norway's Telenor and Qatar's Ooredoo, who were ordered to hand over their customer data to the junta. This ultimately led these companies to withdraw from the country. Telenor sold its operations to the Lebanese M1 group, which in turn sold it to military-linked firm Shwe Byain Phyu.

### 2.1.1. *Legislative initiatives: The draft cyber security law*

Soon after the 1 February 2021 takeover, the junta introduced a draft bill of a cyber security law [Myanmar Now, 2022a, 25 January]. The discussions have dragged on, with a first draft produced in February 2021 and another one in January 2022, facing significant opposition from business and banks. The drafts circulated have widely illustrated the wide-ranging intentions of the military regime and its interference in the digital realm.<sup>8</sup> The overarching aim of the proposed law is to introduce a digital firewall similar to China's. If approved, the law would allow SAC to access user data, block websites, make ad hoc decisions and penalties, and prosecute critics with little legal recourse. It would also criminalise the use of VPNs, abolish the need for objective proof during trials and require online service providers to block or remove criticism of SAC members [Access Now 2022; Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business 2022].

## 3. *Economic policy*

The coup caused unspeakable damage to the country's economy and the livelihoods of millions. The SAC struggled to keep the economy afloat, and resorted to extreme measures to that end. In the spring of 2022, as many (predominantly western) companies exited the country and foreign investment dried up [Nikkei Asia 2022h, 24 July], the junta abruptly introduced foreign currency restrictions, according to which all foreign earnings would need to be converted to the official exchange rate set by the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) and cash earned in foreign currency would also need to be deposited into the CBM at the same fixed exchange rate. Initially foreign

8. At the same time a new cyber security law has been in development under the NLD government which was itself not really committed to media freedom and users' digital rights [Brooten, McElhone & Venkiteswaran 2019]. The 2013 Telecommunications law was one of the NLD's preferred tools to stifle dissent by criminalising defamation, particularly through its Article 66(d), as well as Art 505b of the Penal Code, but also colonial-era legislation such as the Official Secrets Act. Subsequently, Covid provided the state with a new opportunity for collecting mass data concerning citizens and their movements. The application, Saw Saw Shar, acquired data such as GPS location, photos, videos, files and other data.

companies investing in the country were exempt from these new regulations [Nikkei Asia 2022e, 8 June], although a few weeks later the regime reversed the move [Nikkei Asia 2022f, 15 July]. The SAC also tried to block the import of foreign cars and luxury imports as it struggled with a shortage of dollars [Nikkei Asia 2022d, 23 June and Nikkei Asia 2022m, 8 September].

The regime focused primarily on survival, not reviving the economy. As it did so, it also sought to reduce its import dependence and rebalance the trade deficit, in a move that was reminiscent of earlier military administrations [Frontier Myanmar 2022b, 23 November]. While junta leader Min Aung Hlaing «trumpeted» the US\$ 600 million trade surplus in the 2020-21 fiscal year, this was actually due to the collapse of imports and not a surge in exports. Strict capital controls were introduced. While these notes reflect country-wide assessment as provided by the country's authorities and international organisations, the reality on the ground varied considerably, consistently with the flourishing of war economies (for example around rare earths, jade, and gold) in the borderlands.

### 3.1. *Sanctions and financial blacklisting*

The country was the target of additional rounds of western sanctions. The EU imposed several rounds of sanctions – the latest in November 2022 [Council of the EU 2022] – on the junta leader, the MAF leadership, and the military-controlled conglomerates which provide the military with revenues it needs to maintain itself and carry out its crimes. The UK and the US also announced further rounds of sanctions [Strangio 2022f, 7 October]. Towards the end of 2022, the US Congress approved its latest signature policy on Myanmar, the BURMA Act (2022), where BURMA stands for «Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act» [US Senate 2022].

While it stops short of providing lethal aid support to Myanmar's opposition forces, the document lays out the US policy approach to the country, opening up the prospect of direct negotiations with groups opposing the junta. The BURMA Act also makes a call to «impose targeted restrictions aimed at military, military-owned or controlled enterprises, empower and provide assistance to the NUG, the Civil Disobedience Movement and deny legitimacy to the junta» [US Congress 2022].

Further to this, in October 2022 Myanmar was blacklisted again by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the Paris-based inter-governmental body that sets global standards for curbing terrorist financing and money laundering [Chau and Oo 2022b, 7 September and Chau and Oo 2022c, 25 September; Kucik 2022]. For investors and aid organisations willing to operate legally and in the interests of the population, the FATF's decision to blacklist Myanmar increased the cost of doing business due to enhanced due diligence, raising questions about the feasibility of those organisations retaining their support and funding.



### 3.2. *Investors go for the exit?*

Yet, many foreign investors exited the country as they sought to avoid the reputational damage and sanctions that would have come had they stayed in the country. However, doing so was far from straightforward, as demonstrated by the challenges faced by Norway's Telenor and Qatar's Ooredoo, the two leading telecoms investors and providers, which only managed to exit the Myanmar market after incurring considerable losses and writing off the investment [Nikkei Asia 2022l, 3 September]. The situation was somewhat different for non-western investors. The considerable ambivalence (and diversity in responses) shown by Japanese companies illustrates such dilemmas and hesitations well. Kirin's beer-making company, previously partnered with Myanmar military-owned Myanmar Beer holding [Fumagalli 2022b; Taguchi and Henmi 2022; Nikkei Asia 2022n, 21 September], ended its joint venture after an acrimonious year in which both sides sued each other, and eventually exited the country. Similarly, Suzuki halted its car assembly factory operations [Nikkei Asia 2022e, 8 July]. By contrast, Toyota, very controversially opted for staying the course [Nikkei Asia 2022o, 11 October and Nikkei Asia 2022p, 23 November 23] and so did garment company Honeys [Oguchi 2022].

Similarly the energy sector faced similar ambivalence and even unintended consequences. Pressure from the opposition within the country (and advocacy groups outside) led French company TotalEnergies to quickly withdraw from its investment in the Yadana gas field. This backfired spectacularly, as the junta found itself with a large revenue-generating project essentially for free, in light of Total's poorly planned and conceived exit plan [Chau 2022; Strangio 2022e, 26 August].

Attracting new investment proved challenging to some degree, but investors from China, India, Thailand and Russia did not appear to be put off by the very challenging business environment. Russian companies were especially active, building on existing ties with the military over the previous two decades, and keen on capitalising on the mutual support between the two countries after the invasion of Ukraine and the 2021 coup [International Crisis Group, 2022c]. Russian companies were especially active in the oil and nuclear energy sectors [Reuters 2022a, 18 August; Hein Htoo Zan 2022], with deals signed by Rosatom (Russia's Atomic Energy Agency) [The Irrawaddy 2022d, 13 December], and additional pledges of a feasibility study on building small modular nuclear reactors. Representatives from Russian company Tyazhpromexports (the country's overseas trade organization) met with junta leaders to discuss Russian technical assistance for developing iron and steel production in Myanmar.

### 3.3. *Humanitarian catastrophe*

The scale of the humanitarian catastrophe was enormous. According to OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), Myan-

mar is home to over 1.5 million internally displaced people, 1.1 million of these since the coup, with some areas such as Magway, Sagaing disproportionately more affected than others.<sup>9</sup> This is double the number compared to the previous year [OCHA 2022a and 2022b]. The IDPs are living in desperate conditions, in hard-to-reach locations, crippling economic crisis, and amid hostilities. The UN agency reported that of the estimated US\$ 826 million needed for humanitarian relief, only 35% had been funded (US\$ 290 million) [OCHA 2022b].

The aid sector was a clear victim of the junta's actions. Most aid-funded infrastructure projects were suspended. Earlier patterns were reversed in what emerged as a series of paradigm shifts in aid provision: out was development assistance, channeled by the government setting its own priorities, and in (or back) was humanitarian aid, especially in the borderlands, and deployed in cooperation with local NGOs and civil society organisations [Fumagalli 2022b; Fumagalli & Kemmerling 2022]. While doing so, both international and local organisations could rely on pre-existing and tested channels and modes of operations, but the regime repeatedly resorted to aid blockages by restricting access and the distribution of humanitarian aid. As has been the case for decades, the Thai border remained critical to the provision of aid in border regions (particularly around the city of Mae Sot in Thailand, historically one to a large number of refugees from Myanmar).

In late October the SAC introduced a «Registration of Associations law».<sup>10</sup> The legislation banned any «direct or indirect» contact between aid providers and groups listed by the junta, including organisations that act as gatekeepers to the needy in some areas [Stoakes 2022]. As the law requires international and domestic organisations to have a government-issued registration certificate to work legally with communities in need, this confronted both local aid organisations and international partners with a significant dilemma [Frontier Myanmar 2022d, 14 December], facing them with a stark choice between complying and de facto recognising the junta or exposing themselves to sanctions and punishment by the regime.

According to the new law, failure to register is punishable with up to five years imprisonment and a fine of up to EUR 2,500 [Hutt 2022]. Aid organisations were given sixty days to comply with the new law.

The new piece of legislation is expected to have an impact on how aid is delivered across the country and limits how local associations can work with international partners, forcing repurposing and leading some to withdraw from Myanmar in favour of other areas in need, such as Ukraine [Shine Aung 2022; Salai Za Uk Ling 2022; Sain Wansai 2022].

9. Other areas affected by the post-coup violence include Chin State in the western part of Myanmar, and Shan South, Kayin, Mon, Bago (East), and Thanintharyi in the eastern regions of the country.

10. The law replaces the identically named 2014 bill which was widely praised for fostering the growth of Myanmar civil society and facilitating international cooperation and development assistance and aid provision.

#### 4. *Foreign policy*

In the wake of the 2021 coup, the military's prior hedging in foreign ties and the war in Ukraine (including Myanmar's unequivocal support for Russia's invasion in return for Moscow's support for the coup) shows that, once again, Myanmar does not find itself in a condition of international isolation. China and especially Russia stand out as the regime's key international backers, but the list is actually longer and includes countries the west has been courting in its China containment efforts, such as India.

##### 4.1. *Friends in need*

There is a long-established tendency, in western policy, media and even academic circles, to equate a country's isolation from and frosty relations with the west with that country's international isolation *tout court*. Myanmar's diversified foreign and economic ties challenge this claim. While Nay Pyi Taw's ties with an over-enthusiastic and uncritical west are now back to their pre-2011 lows made of sanctions and divestment, the junta's relations with other partners are not facing similar headwinds [Jibiki 2022]. Adjustments to its official policy of non-alignment, and some hedging [Passeri and Marston 2022] are nothing new in Nay Pyi Taw's foreign policy posture.

The junta has taken delivery of fighter jets from China, from whom it has also received facial recognition systems [The Irrawaddy 2022b, 5 December; Strangio 2022; 5 July and 12 July]. Myanmar managed to hedge its relations with China as a diplomatic ally and arms supplier by forging closer ties with Russia [International Crisis Group 2022c, p. 2; Storey 2022, 5 May; Zeeshan 2022; Mizzima 2022a, 16 July; Strangio 2022d, 5 August]. The Ukraine war and the coup in Myanmar brought these two already close countries even closer together. Moscow threw the MAF a lifeline as this struggled to quash domestic resistance and secure international legitimacy [International Crisis Group 2022c; Storey and Choong 2022; AFP 2022]. Russia's support is diverse and multi-dimensional, with key areas of support including diplomatic protection in international fora such as the United Nations, arms supplies, new sources of foreign investment, the provision of technology to boost import substitution, and support for the oil industry (including additional exploration). As a veto-wielding power in the UN Security Council, Russia's support is truly invaluable for the generals [International Crisis Group 2022c, p. 12]. Myanmar reciprocated the strong support received after the coup by becoming among Russia's staunchest allies in Asia, perhaps beyond only North Korea [International Crisis Group 2022c, p. 14].

Beyond China and Russia, the generals were able to rely on the support of sympathetic governments within ASEAN (Laos, Vietnam), and elsewhere [Mizzima 2022c, 14 December]. Crucially, Modi's India has condemned the violence without explicitly criticising the military regime [Myo

Min 2022; The Irrawaddy 2022b, 5 December]. Just like in the northern regions (e.g. Kachin and Shan States), where China's presence and influence has been strong over the decades, in a stark reminder of how heterogeneity regularly manifests itself across Myanmar's territory, even in the foreign policy domain and cross-border issues. Myanmar's other neighbour to its west, Bangladesh, entered talks with the SAC to manage drugs trafficking and 'terrorism' across the shared border [Rashid 2022], although the repatriation of the Rohingya refugees was not something that resulted from their talks.

#### 4.2. *Selective support from western institutions and ASEAN*

Symbolically the most important international action of the year was the Resolution by the United Nations, noteworthy for being the first resolution passed on the country since the international body voted to approve Burma's membership in the late 1940s [Reuters 2022c, 22 December]. In this document [UNSC 2022], the UN demanded «an end to all forms of violence, urged the Myanmar military to immediately release arbitrarily detained prisoners including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, and acknowledges ASEAN's central role in helping finding a peaceful solution, while also reiterating the necessity of full humanitarian access». Resolution 2669 was drafted by the UK, which acts as the pen-holder for Myanmar-related acts in the UNSC. It was approved with twelve votes in favour and the abstention of Russia, China and India.

The UN Security Council has long been split over how to deal with Myanmar (just like ASEAN, see below).<sup>11</sup> Until 2022, the UNSC members had only been able to agree on «formal statements», which are not binding.

China had wanted, again, a formal statement, not a resolution, whilst Russia does not regard the situation in Myanmar as a threat to international peace and security.

Myanmar's problematic relationship with ASEAN continued for the whole year. ASEAN was seemingly unwilling to budge from its April 2021 5-point consensus. Yet, on the whole, the impression was toothlessness by the regional organisation. Its special envoys to the country in 2022 included Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen (himself not a champion of democracy and human rights), who ended up exasperated by the junta's unwillingness to engage and at least cease the indiscriminate violence. Throughout the year, the usual cracks resurfaced, between members more vocal in their criticism of Myanmar such as Indonesia and Malaysia, and those more pro-junta such as Vietnam, or silent ones (Thailand and Singapore).

Unable to trigger a breakthrough, fraught with internal divisions, ASEAN appeared to treat Myanmar as a «headache» to pass on from one

11. Incidentally, the SAC has thus far been unable to unseat the country's UN Ambassador, who has defected to the NUG [Chau and Oo 2022d, December 14].

special envoy to another [Naw 2022]. The main concrete act entailed ASEAN's refusal to invite the junta leader to the ASEAN summits, thus denying de facto recognition yet failing to translate this into either an expulsion or a temporary suspension.

## 5. Conclusion

The post-coup repression has displayed a level and intensity of violence not seen in decades. Likewise, even the anti-military resistance has displayed an unprecedented determination. The junta is effectively at war with its own people. Just as in 2021, throughout 2022 too, a violent impasse remains, as no side was able to prevail [Ye Myo Hein 2022].

The events summarised in the pages above make the case for rethinking the Myanmar state, both as a category of practice (a polity which may not have existed as a single post-colonial political formation) and a category of analysis (does our understanding of the dynamics on the ground benefit from continuing to refer to this as a single unit?). Myanmar never really functioned as a united and coherent polity, as various regions have remained outside the control of the centre since the very day of independence in 1948. Though certainly incomplete thus far, the NUG's efforts to challenge and overcome military rule, may be read as a step in that direction (the unification of territory).

Despite some offers of «peace talks» to the EAOs by the junta [Mathieson 2022; Myanmar Now 2022b; Strangio 2022; The Irrawaddy 2022a, 25 April], neither side has shown any willingness to compromise, or even to negotiate in 2022. Violence was unleashed and wars continued unabated, with no desire on any one side to return to the status quo ante.

Although the significance of resolutions and sanctions, the divestment from investors and global advocacy campaigns should not be downplayed, international support for the people of Myanmar and the anti-coup resistance pales in comparison to western support for Ukraine. Despite the large outcry against the junta's crimes and brutality, the military take-over has prompted none of the mobilisation of funding, arms supplies or even diplomatic engagement that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered. While the NUG has been effective in crowdfunding [International Crisis Group 2022d], the lack of practical and financial support raises the question of how long the opposition can sustain itself [Simpson 2022; Bayoumi 2022; Maung Zarni 2022].

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