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Subject: **International Relations**

Title: **Navigating Diplomatic Complexity: Myanmar's Strategic Foreign Policy Adaptation in the Post-Coup Era**

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Abstract: Myanmar's bifurcated post-coup foreign policy exemplifies sophisticated diplomatic strategies under extreme international pressure. Following the 2017 Rohingya crisis and the 2021 military coup, Myanmar has demonstrated remarkable resilience in navigating diplomatic isolation through strategic recalibration. The military-led State Administration Council (SAC) since 2021 has adeptly pursued a multifaceted foreign policy approach, counterbalancing the regional dominance of China by cultivating nuanced relationships with key states, including Russia, Japan, India, and Thailand. Concurrently, the exiled National Unity Government (NUG) has secured incremental international recognition, particularly among Western nations. This diplomatic duality challenges conventional theoretical paradigms of state behaviour during conflict, transcending traditional power negotiation models. Instead of adopting predictable alignment or direct confrontation strategies, both agencies in Myanmar have implemented complex hedging mechanisms to preserve agency through sophisticated, multi-dimensional engagement. The nation's bifurcated diplomatic response represents an innovative framework wherein politically marginalised and internally fragmented states can maintain strategic autonomy by deploying adaptive, context-responsive diplomatic strategies. This approach underscores the potential for peripheral states in the international order to negotiate complex geopolitical landscapes.

Keywords: Myanmar, agency of small states, dual-track foreign policy

Introduction

The contemporary global political landscape has been marked by complex democratic transitions representing systematic shifts, where nations move from authoritarian or non-democratic governance structures towards more participatory forms of governance. These often result in "quasi-democracies" — political systems that adopt some democratic attributes while retaining significant non-democratic characteristics. These hybrid political systems create unique challenges for traditional diplomatic engagement, requiring sophisticated approaches that acknowledge the intricate realities of transitioning states. One such unique case is the transformation in Myanmar since 2011.

For decades, Myanmar had successive praetorian regimes marked by military dominance, widespread civil conflict, and a failure of nation-building. The *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar military) had long held a tight grip on power, suppressing political dissent and perpetuating a cycle of violence and instability. However, a significant shift occurred with the coming of the Thein Sein-led Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) in 2011 and the establishment of a transitioning government with the enforcement of the 2008 Constitution. This period marked a tentative move towards democratic governance, with the release of political prisoners, the easing of media restrictions, and the holding of general elections. The international community initially hailed these changes as a positive step towards democratisation. However, the transition was far from smooth. The military retained significant power under the 2008 Constitution, which reserved key ministerial positions and a quarter of parliamentary seats for the *Tatmadaw*, creating a hybrid political system where democratic elements coexisted with entrenched military influence. This development was more

visible during the quasi-democratic period when Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) came to power in 2015.

While there were clear signs of progress, the underlying power dynamics remained heavily skewed in favour of the *Tatmadaw*. Power-sharing in the quasi-democratic system posed significant challenges for foreign policymaking. On one hand, there was a desire to support the nascent democratic processes and encourage further reforms. On the other hand, there was the reality of dealing with the *Tatmadaw*, which still exhibited administrative tendencies, particularly in its handling of key ministries and a sizable portion of the legislature. Countries and international organisations sought to engage with the transitioning government, supporting democratic institutions and civil society while applying pressure to address ongoing human rights concerns. This approach required a nuanced understanding of the political landscape, recognising the hybrid nature of Myanmar's political system and the need to work within its constraints.

Within this framework, this research intends to study Myanmar's foreign policy, highlighting its evolution in the post-2021 *coup* period. Tentative steps towards democratic governance marked the transition period between 2011 and 2020. However, Myanmar's foreign policy continued to reflect self-reliance and intolerance to foreign interference. Differing levels of legitimacy enjoyed by the military and the civilian governments had shaped their strategic culture and *Weltanschauung* (world view). The NLD's foreign policy approach reflected "negative neutrality for group survival," a feature reckoned with the previous praetorian regimes.

The 2021 military *coup d'état*, which plunged the country back into authoritarian rule under the SAC, sparked nationwide protests and civil war on multiple fronts. This upheaval has severely constrained Myanmar's diplomatic manoeuvrability within an increasingly hostile international environment. The 2021 military coup and the ensuing civil war have had profound implications for Myanmar's foreign policy. Additionally, the country faces a fragmented foreign policy landscape, with the *Tatmadaw* and the exiled NUG pursuing divergent diplomatic strategies. Sanctions from the U.S. and its Western allies, along with those from China along the China-Myanmar borders, have severely constrained the country's strategic options. Myanmar's renewed "pariah" status since the 2017 atrocities on the Rohingya have further isolated it on the international stage. However, despite these challenges, the post-*coup* diplomatic engagements of the *Tatmadaw* and the NUG reflect a surprisingly sophisticated dual-track approach.

This research explores the dynamics of Myanmar's post-coup foreign policy, focusing on the fragmented policies of the Tatmadaw and the NUG. By examining the diplomatic strategies employed by both actors, this study seeks to understand how Myanmar's fragmented foreign policy landscape has evolved in response to the coup and the ensuing civil war. The research will also investigate the implications of this bifurcated approach for Myanmar's strategic autonomy and international standing.

Trajectory

Myanmar's foreign policy since the 2021 military coup has evolved into a dual-track approach characterised by the coexistence of two competing entities: the *Tatmadaw*'s SAC and the exiled NUG. This bifurcated diplomatic landscape presents a complex and multifaceted set of issues that challenge traditional assumptions about weak states' behaviour in the international system. These are:

Dual-Track Diplomacy and Competing Claims to Legitimacy

The *Tatmadaw* exercises control over Myanmar's foreign policy through the SAC, while the NUG,

composed of elected parliamentarians, seeks diplomatic recognition and legitimacy. This dual-track approach has created a fragmented foreign policy landscape, complicating international engagement with Myanmar. The NUG has successfully cultivated international legitimacy, particularly with Western democracies, while the SAC has pursued a sophisticated engagement strategy to maintain strategic flexibility and autonomy.

The SAC has demonstrated a sophisticated diplomatic strategy that transcends mere alignment with dominant global powers, opting instead for a nuanced approach to strategic hedging. By engaging with alternative powers such as India, Thailand, Japan, and Russia, the SAC has crafted a diplomatic buffer to navigate its intricate relationship with China. This "nuanced alignment blueprint" affords the SAC greater autonomy in trade, energy partnerships, and strategic manoeuvring, challenging traditional assumptions about politically isolated regimes, allowing Myanmar to retain flexibility in itsagency, enhancing its leverage and autonomy within the regional and global power structure.

The NUG has increasingly garnered international legitimacy, particularly from the United States and its Western allies, contributing to a bifurcated diplomatic landscape that complicates international engagement with Myanmar. The NUG's strategic pursuit of recognition and support, coupled with its agenda to control humanitarian aid intended for the country, has established parallel diplomatic channels. Rather than bridging political divides, these efforts reinforce the fragmentation, hindering the prospects for cohesive, multilateral solutions to Myanmar's ongoing crisis. This dual approach has deepened the political polarisation, making consensus and effective intervention more challenging.

Humanitarian Crisis and Impact on the Rohingya Crisis

The international community's response to Myanmar's dual-track diplomacy has been sharply divided. Western nations, led by the United States and European Union, have imposed sanctions and denounced the military coup leaders, advocating for democratic restoration. In contrast, regional powers such as China, India, and ASEAN members have taken more cautious stances, prioritising engagement and diplomatic dialogue. This polarisation has complicated efforts to formulate a cohesive international strategy to address Myanmar's ongoing crises, especially in providing adequate humanitarian assistance to the estimated 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Such divisions hinder effective aid delivery and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis.

The diplomatic complexity surrounding Myanmar's political crisis can be traced to the transition that began in 2011, culminating in the 2017 Rohingya refugee crisis, which exposed the limits of the country's democratisation under the quasi-civilian government. The 2021 military coup exacerbated these challenges, triggering widespread civil unrest, counter-insurgency violence, and increasing international concerns over war crimes and human rights abuses. The global response has since been polarised, with Western nations generally supporting the NUG while regional powers, such as China and ASEAN members, maintain more pragmatic stances, complicating efforts to formulate a unified global response to Myanmar's multifaceted crises.

The presence of two competing agencies asserting legitimate authority complicates efforts to resolve Myanmar's internal conflicts. Achieving a comprehensive solution hinge on reconciling the increasingly fragmented diplomatic efforts and promoting dialogue among all relevant stakeholders. A change in Myanmar requires a nuanced understanding of Myanmar's intricate political dynamics, including the balance between partial democratic advancements and the necessity for sustained pressure toward further reforms. International initiatives must be tailored to address the immediate political realities and the long-term goal of fostering a

stable, inclusive governance framework that respects the aspirations of all Myanmar's diverse communities.

Conclusion

Democratic transitions are inherently complex and multidimensional processes that resist simplistic political categorisations. Quasi-democracies, such as Myanmar, exemplify sophisticated political configurations that demand nuanced theoretical and practical approaches. These transitions require foreign policy strategies that adapt to the intricate political realities of such states, embracing complexity while maintaining strategic flexibility. Hedging theories, which offer frameworks for navigating diplomatic challenges, must be refined to account for various stakeholders' diverse foreign policy goals and interests, particularly in the context of small states in conflict. The evolving nature of international relations calls for developing contextually sensitive approaches to political transitions, recognising both the challenges and limitations inherent in democratic development. By acknowledging the intricacies of these transitions, policymakers can more effectively support genuine democratic progress.

Myanmar's transition from 2011 is a compelling case study of the challenges associated with quasi-democracies in the contemporary global order. The country's diplomatic landscape has been marked by a contrasting dual-track approach, wherein the SAC and the NUG struggle to represent Myanmar while navigating competing political realities. The SAC's diplomatic efforts face significant sustainability challenges due to its tenuous territorial control, while the NUG grapples with legitimacy issues, particularly concerning influential ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and neighbouring states. These competing diplomatic efforts, coupled with ongoing civil unrest and mounting international scrutiny over human rights violations and war crimes, have polarised the global response. Western nations typically align with the NUG, while regional powers maintain pragmatic engagement with the SAC, further complicating efforts to formulate a unified international response. As the situation in Myanmar continues to evolve, diplomats and policymakers must navigate the complexities of hybrid political systems, balancing support for democratic development with the pragmatic realities of engaging with governments that retain authoritarian tendencies.

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