

“Love- Hate” Relationship Between Myanmar Military Council and China

As a follow-up visit of Chinese special envoy to Myanmar, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi came to Nay Pyi Taw on 14 August 2024. On August 8, the Chinese special envoy, Deng Xijun “visited Nay Pyi Taw for discussions with the military leader. Tensions arose during this meeting as the military chief urged the Chinese envoy to prevent the flow of raw materials used for military weapon production into Myanmar. He also questioned China's stance on the presence of factories along the Myanmar-China border that manufacture arms, ammunition, and drones.

Deng Xijun arrived in Myanmar just three days after the military chief delivered an emergency address to his supporters. In his speech, he accused an unnamed foreign power—widely and easily understood to be China—of providing assistance to the Brotherhood Alliance, suggesting that this was a key factor in the fall of the Northeastern Regional Military Command (RMC). This address followed a report from the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) that included photos showing the capture of leading RMC commanders as prisoners of war.

Upon his arrival, Deng Xijun found Min Aung Hlaing, the military chief, grappling with feelings of desperation and shock in the wake of the RMC's fall. His emotional turmoil, marked by anxiety, anger, and fear, likely led to erratic behavior during their meeting, which contributed to some tensions and complications in their discussions.

In light of the situation, it appears that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made an impromptu visit to meet with Min Aung Hlaing. The purpose of Wang Yi's trip appeared to be to ease the military leader's anxieties and concerns. Wang Yi did reassure Min Aung Hlaing, who feared that China was supporting the Brotherhood Alliance and perceived this as detrimental. Wang Yi said to Min Aung Hlaing that “China opposes chaos and war in Myanmar, interference in Myanmar’s internal affairs by extra-territorial forces and any attempts to drive a wedge between China and Myanmar and smear China”, as reported by Chinese state media. Furthermore, Wang Yi emphasized that China “firmly supports Myanmar in safeguarding its independence, sovereignty, national unity, and territorial integrity,”

Wang Yi’s Statement Contradicts the Reality

The statements made by the Chinese Foreign Minister clearly contradict China's actions, considering its substantial involvement in Myanmar's political landscape. Its interference became particularly apparent in July, especially during the second wave of Operation 1027.

In June 2024, China invited former President Thein Sein to China to attend an event in Beijing commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Declaration of Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, and in early July, it extended an invitation to Soe Win, the Vice Chairman of the Military Council to China to attend a forum in Qingdao in Shandong province. After these two invitations,

reports have emerged suggesting that China is seeking Min Aung Hlaing's removal from power. While these claims regarding China's intentions have not been fully substantiated, it is believed that China's discontent with the current leader of the Military Council may be linked to the Council's violations of the Haigen Agreement and the subsequent resurgence of hostilities in northern Shan State.

China expressed its displeasure over the renewed fighting in northern Shan State and pressured the MNDAA to stop its offensive. In response to this pressure, the MNDAA announced a temporary suspension of its offensive from July 14 to 18 to coincide with a meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. However, on July 19, the MNDAA resumed its offensive but was later compelled to declare a unilateral ceasefire from July 19 to July 31 at China's request. The second phase of Operation 1027 followed due to the Military Council's violations of the Haigen agreements, resulting in military expansion and territorial incursions. As a result, fighting continued, and by the end of July, the MNDAA successfully captured the Northeastern Regional Military Command and the city of Lashio.

On July 9, shortly after fighting resumed in Lashio, China closed border trade in areas controlled by the Brotherhood Alliance. This trade shutdown aimed to pressure the Brotherhood Alliance based in Myanmar's enclaves along the China border; however, the Alliance was well-prepared, and the closure did not impact the battle's outcomes. Additionally, China cut off telephone lines and electricity supplies to Lauk Kai, the capital of the Kokang region. While border gates in areas controlled by the Brotherhood Alliance were closed, the Muse Gate—the only border gate controlled by the Military Council in northern Shan State—remained open.

In the second week of July, leaders of the Brotherhood Alliance were summoned to China for a meeting, during which concerns were raised about the involvement of the People's Defense Force (PDF) in the fighting, as reported by Myanmar Now. Given that the NUG and PDF are perceived by China as influenced by the U.S., China advised the Brotherhood Alliance to refrain from cooperating with them.

In the first week of August, the MNDAA announced its takeover of the Northeast Regional Military Command and the arrest of its commanders. Shocked and enraged, coup leader Min Aung Hlaing delivered a speech implying that the Brotherhood Alliance was receiving support from China. Concurrently, the Military Council's social media propaganda portrayed the situation as a foreign invasion, framing the MNDAA's actions as part of China's encroachment.

The day following the military chief's speech, nationalist extremists who supported the military coup organized protests against the MNDAA's control of the Northeast Military Command, characterizing it as a Chinese-led invasion, an event that appeared to be orchestrated by the Military Council.

On August 8, Deng Xijun visited Nay Pyi Taw, and this was followed by Wang Yi's visit on August 14, **highlighting China's increasing prioritization of Myanmar**. However, China's involvement in the country remains ambiguous, with uncertainty surrounding its support for either the Military Council or the Brotherhood Alliance. The Military Council's accusations suggest some level of Chinese involvement in the 1027 operation, a claim that is bolstered by a March 2024 report from the International Crisis Group (ICG). Nevertheless, it would be misleading to state that China fully backs the Brotherhood Alliance, as evidenced by its unilateral decisions to cut power and phone lines, and to close border trade points in areas controlled by the alliance. Clearly, China is exerting pressure on both sides.

China's Plan for Dialogue

The Chinese government does not want the United States and European countries to get involved in Myanmar's affairs, assuming that only it has the right to influence the country's future. It is believed that China's mediation plan involves facilitating a meeting between the Military Council and Aung San Suu Kyi to establish an interim government, organize elections, and transfer power.

Since the coup, China has been urging the Military Council to meet and dialogue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. While the China has made significant efforts to engage with her, the Military Council has consistently refused to allow such a meeting. Although China has attempted to mediate Myanmar's conflicts, progress has been hindered by the short-sightedness and stubbornness of coup leader Min Aung Hlaing. Furthermore, the Military Council's violations of the Haigen Agreement and their subsequent losses in battles have contributed to a growing sense of discontent with Min Aung Hlaing's leadership from China's perspective.

China's approach to negotiations centers around Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the military, operating within the framework of the 2008 Constitution. The National Unity Government (NUG) and key organizations involved in the current Spring Revolution, such as the CRPH and NUCC, are largely excluded from China's considerations. Similar to its separate dealings with Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs), China has facilitated distinct negotiations between the Military Council and these EROs. Additionally, China has accused the NUG of being influenced by the United States and has pressured the EROs to refrain from cooperating with them. Given these factors, China's intervention strategies appear unrealistic and unlikely to succeed.

Things went out of Chinese Control

China is primarily concerned about its interests in Myanmar, particularly regarding its Belt and Road Initiative, and seeks to resolve the ongoing conflict swiftly.

Acknowledging the unlikelihood of successful negotiations and dialogue through its mediation strategy, China seems have finally opted to prioritize the Military Council's promised elections.

According to available information, China approved the actions of the Brotherhood Alliance, and it is believed that when the Alliance secured a significant victory, China facilitated the signing of the Haigan ceasefire agreement. This maneuver was intended to bolster its image as a promoter of international peace and expand its influence over key players in Myanmar.

However, the situation seems to have ultimately slipped from China's control. By the end of July, the Northeast Regional Military Command, the third most important RMC of the Military Council, fell into the hands of the MNDAA, which also captured Lashio, the capital of Northern Shan State.

Min Aung Hlaing was pleased with Wang Yi's Visit

All the incidents indicate that China has been intervening in Myanmar's internal affairs. Thus, it can be concluded that the assertions made by the Chinese Foreign Minister are inaccurate or misleading. However, military leader Min Aung Hlaing appeared particularly pleased with Wang Yi's visit and his statements. Not only was he satisfied, but he also made a false claim, stating that China disapproved of the MNDAA's actions, including their offensives and the capture of Lashio.

The Chinese Foreign Minister's reassuring remark that "China opposes chaos and war in Myanmar" was altered in the Military Council's media to read "China opposes the attacks on towns and villages by Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs) in northern Shan State."

Such changes in description were believed to boost the morale of all ranks within the Military Council, including the generals. The news that China no longer supported the Military Council and was backing the Northern Brotherhood Alliance left many officers and soldiers feeling a profound sense of helplessness and without options. Already demoralized by public disdain, a lack of trust in their leaders, and a series of defeats, there are more possibility that the officers and soldiers of the Military Council desert or surrendered more readily. Thus, these false narratives were crafted to reassure these soldiers that China was still on their side and did not acknowledge the revolutionary forces.

Min Aung Hlaing's Desperation to Please China

Min Aung Hlaing, who has appointed himself as both head of state and head of government, treated Wang Yi as an equal by placing him directly in front of the royal throne, a gesture that is emblematic of the sovereign authority of a nation. This positioning is notable, as it is a privilege that former NLD president Win Myint had only extended to President Xi Jinping four years ago. In contrast, earlier NLD presidents Htin Kyaw and Win Myint had adhered to traditional diplomatic protocol, seating Wang Yi in a manner proper for a foreign minister rather than in such a prominent position. Additionally, Min Aung Hlaing appeared visibly nervous and anxious during his conversation with Wang Yi, highlighting his desperation to win favor with the Chinese foreign minister and, by extension, with China itself.

The way Min Aung Hlaing engaged with Wang Yi, along with the distorted information propagated by the Military Council's media, reflects the current state of the Military Council. The Myanmar military, from the lowest-ranking soldier to the commander-in-chief, is demoralized and lacking in confidence. They are experiencing a significant decline in morale.

Love- Hate Relationship

Min Aung Hlaing and other generals within the Military Council hold strong anti-Chinese sentiments. "There is a deep well of anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar, particularly in the military, and Min Aung Hlaing is known to harbor particularly strong anti-Chinese views." stated Richard Horsey, a senior adviser for Myanmar at the International Crisis Group. However, given the circumstances, it appears that the Military Council is suppressing these sentiments and attempting to placate China.

China is also disenchanted with the leaders of the Military Council. The current military leaders' lack of vision, stubbornness, failure to heed advice, and a string of military defeats have led to China's disappointment with them. As a result, China is no longer optimistic about the situation in Myanmar. At the ninth Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Foreign Ministers' Meeting where he continued after his visit to Myanmar, Wang Yi expressed his concerns, stating, "The situation in Myanmar is worrying."

During his meeting in Nay Pyi Taw, Wang Yi warned Min Aung Hlaing not to smear China, Wang Yi said that to Min Aung Hlaing in his statement reassuring Chinese support for Myanmar’s stability, independence, sovereignty, national unity and territorial integrity”. News report in the Irrawaddy on the visit of Wang Yi, was titled “Chinese Foreign Minister Delivers Thinly Veiled Rebuke to Myanmar Junta Boss “and said “Beijing apparently thought it should deliver an in-person warning to the junta boss after Min Aung Hlaing repeatedly implied that China is behind the anti-regime military operations in northern Shan State.”

All in all, Chinese Foreign minister’s visit to Military Council’s chief really reflects their “love - hate relationship”

This is an analysis of Wang Yi's visit to Myanmar and the dynamics of the relationship between China and the Military Council in July and August 2024

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