



In attempting to answer this question, we argue that the difference in responses stems from the lack of a genuine national interest in democracy promotion amongst most states and that this finding challenges the wider “democracy versus authoritarianism” framing. Additionally, challenging the democracy framing in favor of exploring respective interests also exposes some exploitable gaps between Russia and China, namely differing risk tolerances. However, challenging the “democracy versus authoritarianism” framing does not mean there is not a compelling interest to act in Myanmar, nor that it is a separate issue from the broader Russia-China challenge to global order and regional stability. Instead, effectively countering the coup in Myanmar in the name of global order will require a defter approach that moves beyond the unpersuasive “democracy versus autocracy” framing and takes advantage of distinctions between Russian and Chinese interests.

## The Limited Appeal of the “Democracy versus Authoritarianism” Framing

Russian and Chinese weapons, economic support, and diplomatic cover contribute to the junta’s growing ability to offset its morale and tactical shortcomings through firepower. In recent months, the Tatmadaw has pummeled anti-junta guerillas with [heavy artillery](#) and [air power](#), while the NUG’s People’s Defense Forces are largely unable to respond. Beijing may have initially been frustrated with the instability of the coup, but it now views the junta as the best chance for its interests to advance in Myanmar. It is now fully backing the junta “[no matter how the situation changes](#).”



[Laos abstained](#) from the vote. Yet on Myanmar, ASEAN has done little to advance the largely dead-in-the-water Five Point Consensus, and Hun Sen's visit to Myanmar in January 2022 did little but legitimize the junta. He has now [passed the crisis](#) off to the next Chair, Indonesia. Even the relatively more democratic actors within ASEAN, such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia, have refrained from strong action. Contrary to its approach to the Myanmar junta, [Singapore took the unprecedented step of imposing sanctions on Russia](#) despite the likely negative [economic impact on Southeast Asia](#) as a result of rising energy prices.

Fundamentally, the contrast in the responses to Ukraine and Myanmar point to the unattractiveness of the "democracy versus authoritarianism" framing for most states in the Indo-Pacific. Regional states view their interest as in supporting the norm of state sovereignty, not liberal values. Thus, the immediate threat of a nuclear-armed revisionist power invading a sovereign neighbor ala the war in Ukraine is a more compelling argument for action than the war in Myanmar. The immediate threat of a nuclear-armed revisionist power invading a sovereign neighbor ala the war in Ukraine is a more compelling argument for action than the war in Myanmar.

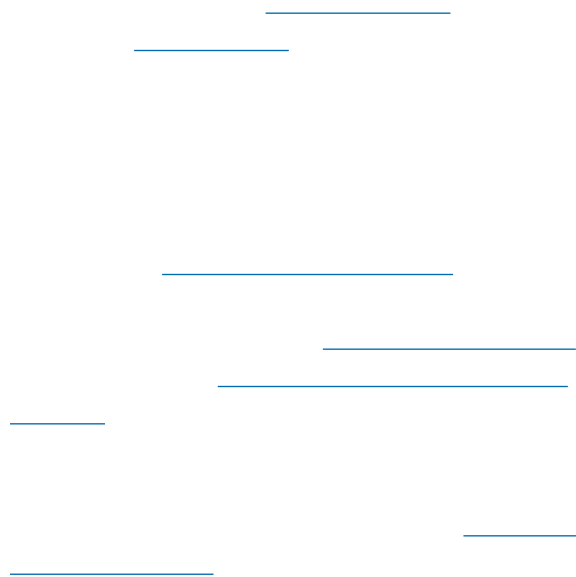


Reflective of its more reckless approach, Russian support for the Myanmar junta fundamentally operates within its wider mission of dismantling the American-led international order. Moscow seemingly cares little for a long-term sustainable solution to the conflict in Myanmar so long as its preferred partners and interests are served. It would likely be happy to see the war simmer indefinitely, as in [Syria](#) or the [Central African Republic](#). The main return on its investment appears to be the junta's [enthusiastic endorsement](#) of Russia's invasion of Ukraine: "[Moscow's action is justified for the sustainability of its sovereignty](#)." The junta, had it attained Myanmar's UN seat, likely would have joined the likes of Belarus and North Korea as a "no" vote in the General Assembly resolution on Ukraine in contrast to China's awkward abstention.

Beijing, on the other hand, desires a long-term resolution that restores stability to Myanmar (but not necessarily unitary government in Naypyidaw). It does not want to see Myanmar devolve into an uncontrollable failed or rogue state acting contrary to Chinese interest. By virtue of its pragmatic streak [towards aspects of the international order it favors](#) and an overarching goal of ensuring stability in Myanmar, China [historically hedges](#) with ties to most actors—generals, ethnic armed organizations, and the ousted National League for Democracy included. [China may have steadily warmed up to the military](#), but it does so largely out of concern for the Tatmadaw's poor tactical performance and a calculation that an NUG victory remains out of reach. It views Myanmar's alternatives as territorial fragmentation or the Tatmadaw. Thus, it is not wed to the military "no matter how the situation changes," but to an outcome: stability that is conducive to its other interests. Right now, the Tatmadaw appears the likely winner from Zhongnanhai. Indeed, in return for China's support, the junta is a willing partner in

advancing the [China-Myanmar Economic Corridor](#) and serving as a firm pro-China voice within ASEAN on issues like the [South China Sea](#).

For their part, Myanmar's generals are aware of differences between Russia and China, including on threat level. It is no coincidence that



States, Beijing and Moscow have different risk tolerances and thus pose distinct near- and long-term challenges to global order.

Yet, this does not mean the United States and its allies and partners should ignore the civil war in Myanmar or that the crisis is not a threat to global order and regional stability. Even if many regional actors have no interest in promoting democratic norms, instability in Myanmar and a Russia- and China-friendly junta undermines the wider global order and stability beyond liberal values. Indeed, the junta is the source of instability and violence in Myanmar. Furthermore, U.S. allies and partners may refrain from punishing the junta to keep channels open, but the Myanmar military has decisively thrown in its lot with Beijing and Moscow and it will work to advance their interests.

With these findings in mind, U.S. policy could be retailored to better frame the issue to regional allies and partners. Instead of characterizing the conflict in Myanmar as fundamentally about democracy, Washington could argue to its allies and partners that the junta in Naypyidaw is a rogue actor that will undermine stability in Myanmar and order in the wider region, as well as serve as a firmly pro-revisionist spoiler within ASEAN. Crucially, the United States could also argue that the NUG and other pro-democracy actors, such as the National Unity Consultative Council, are the [best hope for a stable and peaceful Myanmar](#).

Specifically for Southeast Asia, Washington could make the argument that the junta fundamentally weakens ASEAN's effectiveness as a multilateral organization designed to advance the interests of smaller states against those of much larger neighbors, notably China. Indeed, barring an NUG victory, the junta's return to ASEAN as a pro-revisionist spoiler appears likely in the future. This

would seriously undermine the bloc. The military regime in Myanmar is working for the interests of the revisionist powers and remains unlikely to concern itself with ASEAN's wider interests should it be allowed back into the fold.

Beyond allies and partners, deft U.S. policy and support could work to exploit the differences between Russia and China on Myanmar. By providing international support, the United States can help the NUG provide the services and stability necessary to garner China's acceptance and defeat the junta. Indeed, China is never going away, and any government in Myanmar will always need to deal with Beijing due to the weight of its influence. Alienating China or making it an enemy only courts disaster.

If the NUG can take and govern territory, unite the disparate factions fighting the junta, and avoid angering Beijing through attacks—centrally directed or not—on Chinese assets, it stands a chance of persuading China to accept it as a potential government in Naypyidaw or, at a minimum, pull back from its increasingly pro-junta stance. The key is for the NUG to balance its outreach to both the West and China. The NUG could remind China that alignment with the junta is not reliable insurance for a stable Myanmar, as anti-junta sentiment is so prevalent and the Tatmadaw's military performance so poor, that the war seems likely to extend into the future. Indeed, there is precedent for this as China [maintained close and friendly ties](#) to Aung San Suu Kyi's ousted National League for Democracy and found it preferable to a distrustful and chaotic junta. An NUG that can take and govern territory might just be able to persuade China to quietly shift away from the chaotic and dysfunctional military. The core of this argument is that an inclusive and democratic Myanmar is the only force that can guarantee China's interests and stability.



In sum, “democracy” may not be enough to motivate most states, especially in the Indo-Pacific. Great power competition has an ideological component that cannot be ignored, but to characterize its drivers as solely grounded in ideology obscures complexities on the ground. Many U.S. allies and partners are authoritarian regimes, while others remain uncomfortable with alignment in an anti-China coalition. A deft foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific focused on threats to global order from revisionist states but also cognizant of differences between Russia and China is likely more persuasive to U.S. allies and partners. Such a foreign policy [does not preclude democracy promotion](#) or ignore the ideological element of competition. It instead identifies the nuance within the region and works to meet U.S. allies and partners where they are in service to a broader goal of protecting the post-war global order from revisionist threats, both short- and long-term.

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