

U.S. Will Attempt to Push India and Japan to Take Action Against Myanmar

By [Paul Antonopoulos](#)

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The United Nations Security Council expressed concern in a February 4 statement about the state of emergency in Myanmar, as well as the arrest of political leaders. The statement called for the immediate release of all detainees and the safe and unobstructed access of humanitarian aid to those in need, whilst at the same time reaffirming Myanmar's sovereignty, political independence, territorial integrity and unity.

The statement was agreed relatively quickly among all Security Council participants after a private discussion regarding the February 2 coup. As noted by diplomatic sources, the wording of the statement was softer than the original draft proposed by the United Kingdom. The document did not mention or condemn the military coup in Myanmar. China and Russia assert that they cannot accept the politicization of the joint statement concerning intervention in Myanmar affairs. This is supported by a statement made by the Chinese Foreign Ministry which called on the international community to create a favorable external environment for Myanmar to properly resolve their internal differences and help achieve political and social stability.

On Thursday, in his first foreign policy speech at the State Department as U.S. President, Joe Biden said he discussed the situation in Myanmar with his partners and allies. Among the most important of these were India and Japan.

U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan also discussed the Myanmar situation with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) ambassadors in Washington. He described the events in Myanmar as a coup and noted the importance of regional support for the immediate restoration of democracy. It is unclear if Washington specifically seeks support from ASEAN countries over their position towards Myanmar. Judging by Sullivan's statement, Washington is considering different options to punish the country. Meanwhile, ASEAN, based on its main principles, shunned any ideas of interfering in Myanmar's affairs and urged the opposing parties to resolve their conflict legally and peacefully.

Individual ASEAN countries have extremely restrained positions towards Myanmar partly due to the presence of hundreds of thousands of Myanmar immigrants in their territory. As an example, 80% of all migrant workers in Thailand come from Myanmar, accounting for about 2.6 million registered migrant workers. This is in addition to the 3-4 million unregistered Myanmar in Thailand. About 340,000 Myanmar nationals live in

Malaysia, with more than 154,000 registered for asylum. There are about 200,000 Myanmar people in Singapore. Among these Myanmar people in ASEAN countries are military supporters and those who fled the country due to military rule. Hence, these countries take a cautious approach towards events in Myanmar.

With ASEAN unwilling to serve U.S. interests in Myanmar through the imposition of sanctions and other methods, Washington must look towards its other partners in the Indo-Pacific region, namely India and Japan. India is unlikely to be able to comply with U.S. sanctions against Myanmar, while Japan could do so but with care so as not to harm its companies operating in the Southeast Asian country. India and Japan are moving closer militarily, economically and politically with each other and the U.S. They are building their own infrastructure projects in the region, including in Myanmar, which the U.S. encourages as a means to keep China from expanding its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative.

However, there are many doubts that India will follow in the footsteps of the U.S. with economic sanctions. It is more likely that Japan could impose some kind of economic sanctions on Myanmar only if Washington does. Tokyo will not make this decision unilaterally due to their huge economic interests in Myanmar. Japan, unlike the U.S., will not cut ties with Myanmar because of a military regime as any deterioration in relations will ultimately lead to an increase in Chinese influence in the country.

Senior Japanese and Indian officials always meet with the heads of the civilian government along with representatives of the military elite. This is due to the close ties the Japanese and Indian militaries have with the Myanmar people.

The Japanese Defense Ministry trains Myanmar people officers in military medicine, aviation, disaster relief, and even the Japanese language. The two sides support academic exchanges and Myanmar people officers even train at the Japanese Defense Academy.

For its part, India relies on Myanmar people military support to fight separatists in the northeastern states bordering Myanmar, who often seek asylum in the country. In addition, separatist operations undermine the security and stability of several economic corridors that India is building through Myanmar to reach Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. This economic corridor also challenges Chinese economic dominance in these countries. It is for this reason that India can tolerate military rule and authoritarianism in Myanmar as it ensures the preservation of the state rather than seeing it disintegrate into several smaller countries which will complicate economic advances, as well as embolden separatist movements in northeast India.

Although Washington will likely want to draw on Indian and Japanese support to pressure the Myanmar people military, New Delhi and Tokyo have significant vested interests in the Southeast Asian country, which also includes attempts in limiting Chinese influence. Therefore, Washington will only receive limited support from India and Japan despite these two countries becoming key U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

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Paul Antonopoulos is an independent geopolitical analyst.

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