



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on February 2, 2023

## Western Nations Give Billions in Military Support to Ukraine While Ignoring Myanmar

SINGAPORE — Despite February 1 marking the second anniversary of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the country's large and growing resistance forces have received almost no attention outside the country.

The democratic opposition, led by the National Unity Government (NUG) but made up of various groups, armies, militias, and individuals, has grappled with asserting prominence despite its considerable successes in battles.

Also, the inconvenient reality remains that the NUG's requests for weapons from Western nations to combat an escalating suppression by the Myanmar junta have been largely ignored.

It is easy to juxtapose Western nations' responses to the crisis in Myanmar with the Ukraine-Russia crisis. Although the conflicts are by no means identical, it is remarkable how Myanmar has been put on the back burner while Ukraine has risen to the forefront of global concerns.

Perhaps the lack of a charismatic and emblematic leader in Myanmar has contributed to the current attention the country is facing vis-a-vis Ukraine. After all, prominent pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other public figures have been detained and thus have faded into the shadows of Myanmar's jails. Although the NUG has an acting president, Duwa Lashi La, who features himself on YouTube and social media at times, few on the global stage acknowledge or even know of his presence.

On the other hand, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's metamorphosis into a battlefield commander and eminent figure on social media has catapulted his rise to global fame, hence displaying Ukraine in the global arena. Besides articulating rousing speeches to foreign parliaments and emotional addresses to Ukrainians, Zelensky has undoubtedly been much more effective in lobbying for Ukraine's cause as compared to the pro-democracy forces in Myanmar.

Undeniably, public-relations skills have also played an important part in empowering Ukraine to spearhead its narrative of the conflict with Russia. By vilifying Russia and simplifying the wartime narrative, Ukraine has been largely successful in galvanizing many countries to provide both moral and military support.

In contrast, the different ethnic, linguistic, geographic, ideological, and historical narratives in Myanmar have hindered efforts to garner support against the junta domestically, let alone



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internationally.

Further complicating matters was the brutal genocide of Myanmar's Rohingya population in 2017 under the Suu Kyi-led government. The Rohingya controversy stood out like a sore thumb and blemished the track record of Suu Kyi's legacy as a freedom advocate. Additionally, Suu Kyi's decision to provide a dogged defense of the military's actions at the International Court of Justice in 2019 drastically turned the tide of international opinion against her.

As the dust has not yet settled regarding Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya, Western sympathy and support for Suu Kyi and her pro-democracy allies may be more muted than before.

Myanmar has not been ranked high in the West in terms of strategic military and geopolitical priorities, whereas Ukraine has been a hotbed for power rivalry for years, particularly functioning as a platform between Moscow and the West.

In wake of these facts, the U.S. alone pledged about \$50 billion in total assistance to Ukraine in 2022, about half of which was military aid.

With Myanmar a far less crucial arena of conflict, most of the international community (including the regional body of Southeast Asian states, ASEAN) have been lackluster in offering military help to the resistance fighters.

Although Thailand and India have historically been the conduits for weapons smuggled into Myanmar to back anti-government armies, both countries have been dealing with their own domestic problems, thus explaining their hesitancy in getting involved with the pro-democracy fighters in Myanmar.

Without a coordinated Western government effort offering the resistance with weapons, the fighters rely on crowdfunding to purchase weapons and piece scrap metal together to make explosives. The military junta has accumulated a wide range of weapons from Russia and China, or made locally with supplies from global companies.

When the military deposed Suu Kyi in 2021, it arrested her and top members of her governing National League for Democracy (NLD) party on the shaky pretext of massive electoral fraud. Suu Kyi, 77, is currently serving prison sentences totaling 33 years after being convicted and accused by the military.

In response, the NUG, which enjoys a wide popular mandate to set up a federal democracy in Myanmar, took up arms against the junta. As of now however, no foreign governments formally recognize it, although some like the U.S. are stepping up interactions with them.

Moreover, thousands of Myanmar's youth went to remote rural areas to become guerilla fighters in the form of decentralized "People's Defense Forces," or PDFs. Their efforts were boosted not by global aid, but instead from training provided by some of the country's ethnic minority rebels — Ethnic Armed Organizations, or EAOs — who have been contesting the military army for years.

"That's not only a very brave thing to do. It's a very difficult thing to do," Richard Horsey, an independent analyst and adviser to the International Crisis Group, told the Associated Press. "It's a very challenging thing to do, to take on, you know, a military that's been fighting counterinsurgency warfare (for) basically its whole existence."

David Mathieson, an independent analyst with over two decades' worth of experience in Myanmar, remarked that the anti-junta combat capabilities are "a mixed picture in terms of battlefield performance, organization and unity amongst them."



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Based on the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a watchdog group that monitors killings and arrests, 2,940 civilians have been killed by the authorities since the coup, and another 17,572 have been arrested — 13,763 of whom remain detained. The actual death toll is likely to be much higher since the group typically excludes deaths on the side of the military government and cannot readily authenticate cases in remote areas.

“The level of violence involving both armed combatants and civilians is alarming and unexpected,” said Min Zaw Oo, a veteran political activist in exile who set up the Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security. “The scale of the killing and harm inflicted on civilians has been devastating, and unlike anything we have seen in the country in recent memory.”

The U.S. and the European Union (EU) have enforced sanctions on top junta leaders and family members, crony corporations of the military, and conglomerates. For instance, the EU sanctioned the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, a major revenue source for the junta. In a similar move, the U.S. government froze some \$1 billion in Myanmar’s foreign reserves that was parked in the Federal Reserve.

The Western response to Myanmar has been in stark contrast to global responses to Russia in the wake of its actions in Ukraine. Actions from countries worldwide in the light of Russian actions in Ukraine have rendered over 40 percent of the former’s \$630 billion inaccessible, crippling its economy.

However, in Myanmar’s case, despite its closer proximity than Ukraine, non-Western countries like Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have not enforced any sanctions. Communist China, which has huge geostrategic interests in Burma and which holds considerable influence over a wide array of powerful ethnic armed organizations controlling significant territories along the China-Myanmar borderlands, has more clout over the development of the conflict than other countries.

In the months following the 2021 coup, China was one of the staunchest advocates of the junta regime, inking a series of new business deals and partnering with the junta to broaden regional partnerships such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Forum (LMC), which seeks to bolster Chinese influence in mainland Southeast Asia.

Still, just like their Ukrainian counterparts fending off Russian efforts, Myanmar’s domestic population has continued their dogged resistance against the junta. Without much global fanfare for its situation, the onus would remain mainly on war-torn Myanmar to rebuild from the devastation of the past two years, to seek accountability for current and past government abuses, and to heal deep-seated ethnic and religious divisions in that country of around 54 million.



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