



SASAKAWA USA
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

Crisis in Myanmar: Pathways for U.S.-Japan Cooperation

Abstract

On Thursday, February 18, 2021, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) welcomed Dr. David I. Steinberg, Distinguished Professor of Asian Studies Emeritus at Georgetown University, Min. Shinichi Iida, Minister of Political Affairs at the Japanese Embassy in Washington, D.C., and Amb. Derek Mitchell, President of the National Democratic Institute, for a discussion of current events in Myanmar following the military coup on February 1, 2021.

This talk was presented through Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series and held virtually via Zoom. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community, academia, think tanks, and former and current members of the military and government. Dr. Satohiro Akimoto, Chairman and President of Sasakawa USA, moderated the panel and facilitated the Q&A.

Remarks by Dr. David I. Steinberg

Dr. Steinberg began by discussing the background of the political situation in Myanmar with a focus on the role of the military. He explained that the military in Myanmar has maintained immense influence through three means: rule by decree, controlling and founding its political parties, and constitutional means. For rule by decree, the military politically set the stage in Myanmar from 1958 to 1960, 1962 to 1974, 1988 to 2010, and again in 2021. In addition, control of political parties such as the Burma Socialist Programme Party or the Union Solidarity and Development Party has given the military a strong foothold in Burmese politics. Finally, they have created through referendum a constitution that gives them control of the central elements of society in Myanmar.

Next, Dr. Steinberg elaborated on what he views as the political goals of the Burmese military. First, he highlighted the importance in continuation of national security, unity, and sovereignty to the military. Also, control over minority affairs and the coercive power of the state, especially the police and national intelligence bureaus, are critical to the continuation of military hegemony. Secondly, maintaining a majority hold of the government is critical, as it prevents the opposition from amending any laws and acts as a “get-out-of-jail-free card” for avoiding prosecution on past offenses. Lastly, preserving the current constitution, which mandates the military’s leading role in national politics, is important to military leaders. Dr. Steinberg added that democracy has never been a core value of the military.

Dr. Steinberg followed this point by addressing the coup on February 1. In short, he asked why would the military conduct a coup if they had been so successful in controlling and stifling the opposition? The military was concerned about the outcome of the 2020 election, as highlighted by Dr. Steinberg, where the National League for Democracy (NLD) performed quite well. Personal power was more important than institutional power in Myanmar, and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the head of the NLD, and General Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the military, were antithetical to each other. Additionally, Dr. Steinberg noted that the army was humiliated by the margin of the NLD’s victory and felt it needed to respond.

Looking ahead, Dr. Steinberg identified two main issues. First, he doubts that the military will be willing to potentially cede power by holding elections in a year, despite promises made by military leaders, given its significant gains in bolstering control of key institutions and coercive forces. Instead, he expects them to find a “face-saving” way of conducting elections, such as establishing a proportional voting system that favors the military and military-favored parties.

Second, due to the control and influence of the military, Dr. Steinberg stated that the concept of “transition to democracy” is fundamentally different in Myanmar, where the military has described its goal as “discipline-flourish democracy.” The military’s expectation of Myanmar’s political future is fundamentally different from that of NLD leaders, and that limits how much the military can compromise with democracy advocates.

Dr. Steinberg closed by quoting an old friend of his who was on the Burmese Revolutionary Council in 1958 and later became a spokesman for Aung San Suu Kyi. He said, “The play is over, but the audience is supposed to remain in their seats, and the actors refuse to leave the stage.” Dr. Steinberg thinks that this metaphor, while a bit pessimistic, sums up the situation in Myanmar.

Remarks by Minister Shinichi Iida

Minister Iida began his remarks by reflecting on the country of Myanmar. It shares borders with China, India, and Thailand, and it is often called a “geopolitical fulcrum” because it is where East Asia meets South Asia and Southeast Asia. This makes it the confluence of three critical regions. Thus, in Minister Iida’s view, peace and prosperity in Myanmar are central to peace and prosperity in the Indo-China peninsula as a whole. In addition, the democratic transition in Myanmar is important from the viewpoint of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy. For this reason, the current situation in Myanmar needs to be addressed through diplomatic and other outlets. One potential outlet identified by Minister Iida was Japan and the United States. They must side with the people of Myanmar, encouraging stakeholders to take steps back towards democracy, a value shared by both Tokyo and Washington.

Next, Minister Iida gave a historical perspective on Myanmar in U.S.-Japan relations. Earlier in his career as an interpreter for the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, Minister Iida had the privilege of attending many summits and meetings. Through these events, he witnessed high-level discussions on Myanmar between the United States and Japan. While the two sides had occasional disagreements on policy, Myanmar still began the democratization process in 2010. Cooperation with other partners, particularly the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), was also crucial. He recalled a particular episode where the international community criticized Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government for their actions in the Rakhine State in western Myanmar. Japan instead focused on supporting Myanmar’s independent commission of inquiry and encouraged Myanmar to take its own initiative. Minister Iida stated that

democracy has been taking root in Myanmar, and the trend is irreversible, even if the process takes time.

Turning to the recent coup, Minister Iida noted that Japan quickly condemned it and has continued to be vocal in calling on the military to cease violence towards civilians, release detainees, including Aung San Suu Kyi, and restore the democratic regime. In a meeting on February 10, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed that Japan and the United States agree that the Burmese military needs to take these important steps. Furthermore, Minister Iida added that the statements put out by Tokyo and Washington following the coup were almost identical, indicating a shared view of what needs to be done. He assured that the two countries are in frequent, close communication regarding this issue.

Remarks by Ambassador Derek Mitchell

Amb. Mitchell started his presentation by pointing out that Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, Honorary Chairman of Sasakawa Peace Foundation, has been very involved in Japan-Myanmar affairs as the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for Reconciliation for Myanmar since 2013. His involvement reflects Japan's history of thorough engagement with the people and government of Myanmar.

Next, Amb. Mitchell addressed the current situation in Myanmar. He stated that there have been continual worries about the military in Myanmar since the 2015 elections, but the coup still came as a surprise to many outside observers of the country. U.S. involvement in Myanmar began because it saw an opportunity for meaningful change, and there was progress towards democratization, but Amb. Mitchell stated that the U.S. was never under any illusions that progress was irreversible, as the coup demonstrates. The deep-seated problems in Myanmar—a long-running civil war, degraded institutions, a constitution that provides privileges to the military—did not go away just because of the NLD's electoral victories; they simply became the NLD's responsibility. Amb. Mitchell added that the elections were a necessary but not sufficient component of Myanmar's continued development, and all stakeholders, domestic and international, knew that the process would be difficult.

Amb. Mitchell then turned to U.S. policy on Myanmar, which has largely focused on Aung San Suu Kyi and the democratic movement. He stated that Aung San Suu Kyi is still important as the democratic choice of the people, and that her arrest by the military has been taken by Myanmar's citizens as an attack on themselves. Amb. Mitchell remarked that in a way the military has achieved its

longstanding stated goal of national unity in recent weeks through the universal opposition it has drawn from the populace since the coup. Because the military's actions are unacceptable to the people of Myanmar, Amb. Mitchell argued that the United States and Japan must stand behind the people to show solidarity.

Amb. Mitchell highlighted Myanmar's geopolitical importance: that it is critical to engaging ASEAN, stands at the crossroads of the Indo-Pacific linking the dynamism of South and East Asia, and factors into the growth of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. He noted that the Burmese military has little fondness for China, so it is unclear whether U.S. pressure on military leadership would necessarily push Myanmar further into Beijing's orbit. As for how Myanmar should factor into FOIP, Amb. Mitchell offered that Japan's version of FOIP has traditionally prioritized "free trade and open sea lanes" - security and economic interests - rather than "free speech and open societies" - democracy and human rights - and that the latter need to take priority in this case.

Amb. Mitchell asserted that a nascent "Biden Doctrine" was emerging with three pillars - American leadership, values-centered foreign policy, and working with allies. Myanmar, Amb. Mitchell continued, will be the first major test of this doctrine. As a result, Amb. Mitchell emphasized that the United States cannot sit idly by as the situation in Myanmar deteriorates, and needs its allies to step up. The United States and its allies may not be the determining factor in Myanmar, but they can take steps targeted at military leadership that impose costs and demonstrate resolve. Amb. Mitchell added that since the United States lacks the same depth of relations, particularly with Myanmar's military, that Japan has, U.S.-Japan cooperation on this issue is a vital requirement and opportunity.

Amb. Mitchell concluded that while Myanmar's fate is ultimately up to its people, they will be taking notice of which countries stand with them, and which ones do not, during their time of need. He hopes the United States and Japan can help the people of Myanmar get back on a democratic track they worked so hard to achieve over decades.

Moderated Q&A with Attendees

The Q&A began with a question from Dr. Akimoto. He asked Minister Iida to respond to Amb. Mitchell's remarks, specifically on his interpretation of FOIP. Minister Iida stated that Japan views the "Free and Open" portion as critical to their strategy, and he hopes that the Quad continues to develop as an important institution in the region. He added that Foreign Minister Motegi specifically brought up Myanmar at the recent Quad Ministerial and he strongly emphasized

the need for an end to violence against civilians, the release of detainees, and the re-establishment of the democratic regime. The foreign ministers in attendance agreed with this view. Thus, Minister Iida saw democracy as important to FOIP and the Quad.

The Q&A then opened for audience questions, the first of which came from Dr. Robert Dohner, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council. He asked about the internal unity of Myanmar's military and that unity would hold if ordered to commit violence against citizens. Dr. Steinberg responded by stating that there have been issues with military cohesion in the past, but the military's control at this point depends on their unity. Currently, the military seems united, but it is a very delicate situation, and it is unknown if it will last.

The next question came from Dr. Satu Limaye, Vice President and Director of the East-West Center, who asked whether the United States and Japan would curtail their relationship with ASEAN if it does not take action in response to the coup. Minister Iida responded by noting Myanmar's entry into ASEAN in the late nineties was a critical step for its democratization, and ASEAN's role in the current crisis is similarly crucial. Foreign Minister Motegi has been in conversation with his counterparts in ASEAN about Myanmar, and Japan will continue to urge ASEAN countries to work on the issue alongside partners such as the United States. Amb. Mitchell added that ASEAN's reaction is evolving, as more countries are willing to accept that the coup is an issue of interest to the region. Given that ASEAN as a unit is unlikely to take a strong stance, he recommended the United States and Japan to continue encouraging individual ASEAN countries to act. Overall, a healthy relationship with ASEAN remains a strong U.S. interest, which developments in Myanmar could affect.

Next, Dr. Patrick Cronin, Asia-Pacific Security Chair at the Hudson Institute, asked what steps of democratization Japan and the United States would like Myanmar to take. Dr. Steinberg answered that the expectations from the United States are complex. Congress has been very supportive of Aung San Suu Kyi, the media has long promulgated the narrative of democratization in Myanmar, and the Biden administration has been very careful so far in its decisions on sanctions. Given this range of views, some modest reforms to the regime would be a step in the right direction. Amb. Mitchell added that a return to the pre-coup status quo is now virtually impossible as it seems unlikely the Myanmar people will accept a return to a constitutional system that allows the military to retain so much power. He noted it is similarly unclear how negotiations between the current military regime and the popular opposition/NLD would proceed at this point given alienation between the two sides that have only deepened as a result of the coup and subsequent violence. Minister Iida

supplemented these answers by adding that Japan has continuously communicated the importance of democracy to maintaining sustainable and resilient development to Myanmar officials, and he would want to reiterate its importance to military leaders today.

Dr. Akimoto next introduced a question from Dr. Thomas Cynkin, Director of Development and External Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service. He asked how the United States can influence the situation in Myanmar without pushing the country into China's orbit. Dr. Steinberg responded the question is difficult because the United States has very little leverage. He added that Myanmar's leaders understand it needs a positive relationship with China, but historically they have wanted to remain neutral. The U.S. response to Myanmar has to be careful while still exerting pressure through means such as targeted sanctions and banning arms sales. However, the military needs to feel like it has a face-saving way out that still benefits the people. Amb. Mitchell added that Japan's connections to Myanmar could be a key factor in determining what the military wants and where there might be an opportunity to induce the military to step back and consider compromise. The key is finding a way to engage the Commander-in-Chief directly to encourage him to recognize that the path he is on will be destructive to his personal and the military's institutional interests, and to begin a conversation on a way out. Concluding, he stated that the military leadership does not want to be in China's orbit, and concerns about "pushing Myanmar towards China" are more a troubling issue for the military than for us, providing us leverage. In the end, as a relatively small country Myanmar has traditionally wanted a balanced foreign policy in order to retain its sovereign independence amidst competition on its soil among larger powers.

Sasakawa USA is grateful to Dr. Steinberg, Min. Iida, Amb. Mitchell, the Q&A participants, and attendees for the thoughtful discussion on Myanmar.

The summarized views of the speakers expressed herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.

For more information about Sasakawa USA's Policy Briefing Series, click [here](#).
