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By Juliette Beau

SYNOPSIS

Global energy insecurity should have been especially disabling for military regimes already strained by sanctions. However, the situation in Myanmar shows that even when the country is under economic strain, the military rule endures, raising questions about the actual effects of international sanctions and the role of alternative energy suppliers.

COMMENTARY

The US-Israel war on Iran has led to the weaponisation of the Strait of Hormuz, affecting energy supplies to much of the world's population. For Myanmar, which has been under [sanctions](#) from many nations and entities since the military coup in February 2021, the potential halt to energy deliveries from the Persian Gulf should be a significant blow to its economy.

Since the coup, Myanmar has relied on aviation fuel imports from countries such as Iran to circumvent sanctions. This has enabled the Myanmar army to continue fighting rebel groups. Despite severe economic contraction and widespread rationing, the junta has maintained its air power and continued its air attacks on civilian targets.

This incongruity prompts a reassessment of the real effects of energy sanctions and the forms of adaptation they elicit. The evolving situation in Myanmar suggests that shortages can coexist with, or even accompany, an intensification of military coercion, directly contradicting the assumption that sanctions would compel targeted states to cease their violence. In Myanmar, shortages do not necessarily reduce

coercion; rather, they reconfigure distribution in favour of its most strategic instruments, potentially increasing the value of alternative supply channels.

Administered Scarcity and the Prioritisation of Coercion

Since the coup, the economic situation in Myanmar has become increasingly difficult for the civilian population. However, the junta's military capabilities, particularly its air power, remain robust. Last month, a [series of significant airstrikes](#) were carried out in the Sagaing region, targeting civilian sites, including monasteries.

This paradox reveals an administered scarcity, which, in an authoritarian context, shows that energy resources can be politically prioritised to facilitate control over the population. The costs of this scarcity are borne primarily by the population, and the coercive functions persist and remain protected.

As traffic through the Strait of Hormuz has been largely blocked since 28 February 2026, the Myanmar military has implemented a [series of measures](#) to mitigate the effects of the resulting energy scarcity, all geared towards controlling the population's consumption of the critical resource. This has strengthened the government's ability to coerce the population.

Sanctions Evasion and the Rise of Parallel Energy Networks

The Myanmar military's energy capacity, despite sanctions, highlights the dynamics underpinning its resilience, particularly when analysed through the lens of supply-chain reconfiguration.

Recent [investigations](#) have revealed an increase in the regime's energy acquisition through intermediaries in opaque jurisdictions, and the use of maritime diversionary tactics, such as transshipment at sea, to obscure the origin of cargoes transported by shadow fleets. Such practices are evident in countries under economic and energy sanctions, such as [Russia](#) since its war on Ukraine.

These practices cannot be viewed solely as opportunistic but rather as the establishment of a parallel system. Although less efficient than conventional channels, they are robust enough to provide access to critical suppliers. Economic and geopolitical constraints indirectly strengthen these alternative markets.

Transactional Alliances Over Ideological Solidarity

It is within this context of forced convergence that the rapprochement between Iran and Myanmar has its roots. Long critical of the treatment of the Rohingya, Iran has gradually shifted its stance towards the Myanmar military since the 2021 coup.

As investigations by [Reuters](#) and [Amnesty International](#) revealed, Iran allegedly supplied Myanmar with aviation fuel in 2024 and 2025, and likely also transferred dual-use technologies, particularly in the field of drones. These deliveries were facilitated by utilising practices and channels already used to circumvent sanctions.

Although visits and meetings have taken place between Iran and Myanmar, the evolution of their relationship reflects forced interoperability rather than genuine alignment or ideological convergence. One might be tempted to see this as solidarity among countries under sanctions, a willingness to support one another to ensure the survival of their respective regimes.

After all, countries that impose [sanctions](#) plurilaterally act collectively to enhance their coercive capabilities based on shared political values. By contrast, cooperation among sanctioned states tends to be more pragmatic and driven by particular interests. This form of cooperation is transactional, limited in scope, driven by mutual interest, and open to reorientation if better opportunities arise. The instability created by the energy crisis reinforces this flexibility, enabling states to reorient their partnerships in the event of supply chain disruptions.

Conclusion

In the context of the global energy crisis, Myanmar's case demonstrates that sanctioned regimes adapt by prioritising uses, shifting costs onto the civilian population, strengthening coercion, and deepening ties with alternative economic ecosystems. Thus, sanctions do not necessarily deprive regimes of resources but rather empower those in a position to decide how they are allocated. Nevertheless, the inability to implement an alternative system that can be mobilised in strategic contexts reveals the junta's limitations in its desire for self-sufficiency.

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