

SECURING INTERESTS IN THE EAST

India's Myanmar Policy in the
Post-Coup Era (2021-2024)



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report examines India's strategic response to Myanmar's evolving political landscape following the February 2021 military coup. Through detailed analysis of political ties, economic engagement, and security cooperation, it explores how India has navigated its relationship with Myanmar during a period of unprecedented change. The study reveals how India, departing from its strong criticism of Myanmar's military regime in 1990, has maintained engagement with the current military government while expressing only measured concerns about democratic backsliding.

The report evaluates key challenges confronting India's policy approach, including security concerns along its northeastern border, threats to strategic projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Initiative, and the complex task of balancing relationships with multiple actors in an increasingly fragmented Myanmar. Special attention is given to China's influence with both the military regime and ethnic armed groups, and how this shapes India's strategic calculations.

Drawing on extensive research and expert interviews, this report argues that while India's fundamental approach to Myanmar may not change dramatically, evolving ground realities necessitate a more nuanced and flexible policy. It suggests that India might need to expand its traditional two-track diplomacy to include more active engagement with resistance forces while maintaining its historical ties with the military. The report concludes with specific policy recommendations, including the potential appointment of a special envoy to facilitate broader diplomatic engagement.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA – Arakan Army
AFPFL – Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI – Belt and Road Initiative
CNF – Chin National Front
EAOs – Ethnic Armed Organizations
EAM – External Affairs Minister
FMR – Free Movement Regime
IPGL – India Ports Global Limited
KMMTTP – Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project
MEA – Ministry of External Affairs (India)
MNDAA – Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
NDFB – National Democratic Front of Bodoland
NLD – National League for Democracy
NSCN-K – National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang
NSCN-IM – National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah
NUG – National Unity Government
PDF – People's Defense Force
PLA – People's Liberation Army (China)
PLAM – People's Liberation Army Manipur
PRC – People's Republic of China
SAC – State Administration Council
SEA – Southeast Asia
SLORC – State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC – State Peace and Development Council
Tatmadaw – Myanmar Armed Forces
TNLA – Ta'ang National Liberation Army
ULFA – United Liberation Front of Asom
UN – United Nations
UNODC – United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USDP – Union Solidarity and Development Party
WTO – World Trade Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This report examines India's evolving policy response to Myanmar's political crisis following the February 2021 military coup, which displaced the democratically elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. In contrast to its strong criticism of Myanmar's military takeover in 1990, India maintained diplomatic engagement with the new military regime (State Administration Council) while expressing only mild concerns about democratic backsliding. This shift reflects India's pragmatic acceptance of the Tatmadaw's role in Myanmar's politics over the past three decades.
- The period between 2021 and 2024 has witnessed unprecedented developments in Myanmar. The Tatmadaw has lost effective control of 40-50% of Myanmar's territory to resistance forces, including ethnic armed organizations and the People's Defense Forces, marking its worst territorial losses since independence. This has created significant challenges for India along its northeastern border, including refugee flows, resurgent anti-India insurgent groups, and increased cross-border criminal activity.
- In response to these challenges, India has implemented major policy changes in border management, including the termination of the Free Movement Regime that allowed visa-free movement within 16km of the border, and announced plans to fence the India-Myanmar border - though experts question the feasibility and effectiveness of these measures. While maintaining high-level diplomatic contact with the military regime, India has limited its engagement with opposition forces, choosing instead to participate in regional dialogue initiatives.
- The situation is further complicated by China's significant influence with both the military regime and various ethnic armed groups, including the provision of arms and diplomatic support. Key infrastructure initiatives face uncertainty, with the Kaladan project at risk due to the Arakan Army's control of crucial areas, and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway remaining incomplete. While alternative routes through Bangladesh are being explored, these face their own political uncertainties.
- The report recommends several policy adjustments to address these challenges. On the diplomatic front, India should consider appointing a special envoy for Myanmar to facilitate broader engagement, develop communication channels with key resistance groups while maintaining ties with the military, and enhance participation in regional dialogue initiatives. Border security measures should focus on developing sustainable alternatives to complete border fencing, strengthening intelligence sharing and coordination mechanisms, and addressing humanitarian concerns while maintaining security.
- Looking ahead, the report concludes that India needs to develop a more flexible approach that acknowledges Myanmar's changing power dynamics. This involves balancing traditional ties with the military while establishing necessary communication with ascendant resistance groups, preparing for various post-conflict scenarios (including the possibility of a more federalized or fragmented Myanmar), and addressing immediate security concerns while maintaining long-term strategic interests in the region.
- The success of India's Myanmar policy will depend on its ability to adapt to rapidly changing ground realities while maintaining its strategic interests in the region. This requires a delicate balance between security imperatives, economic interests, and regional stability considerations. The report emphasizes that while India's fundamental approach to Myanmar may not change dramatically, evolving circumstances necessitate a more nuanced and flexible policy framework that can respond effectively to new challenges while preserving long-term strategic objectives.

1. Introduction

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar witnessed a seismic shift in its political landscape as the Myanmar Army (Tatmadaw), led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, executed a coup that displaced the democratically elected government formed by the National League for Democracy (NLD) under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership. This drastic action effectively nullified the results of the 2020 general elections, which had seen the NLD secure a comfortable majority with 258 seats in the lower house of Parliament, relegating the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to a mere 30 seats. In the wake of this upheaval, the military junta established the State Administration Council (SAC), adding another chapter to Myanmar's long history of military-led 'administration councils'.

As the West voiced its condemnation and China observed with cautious interest, the response from India, Myanmar's second-largest neighbor, foreshadowed the nuanced approach that would characterize its engagement with the Myanmar state in the following years. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) issued a statement expressing "deep concern" over the developments in Myanmar, reaffirming that "India has always been steadfast in its support for democratic transition in Myanmar."^[1] However, India's actions spoke louder than its words. Not only did New Delhi refrain from outright

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condemnation of the coup, but it also maintained bilateral engagement with the new SAC, effectively continuing full diplomatic relations under the principle of governance continuity, albeit without formal recognition.^[2] This approach manifested in diplomatic visits at the Foreign Secretary level and beyond and formal participation in SAC events in the weeks and months following the coup.^[3]

A studied distance from resistance groups characterized India's stance, occasionally mentioning the need for a return to democracy in public statements but refraining from exerting overt pressure on the junta during bilateral meetings.^[4] This cautious approach raised questions about India's potential engagement with the opposition, especially given the steadily deteriorating situation along the border. However, the landscape in Myanmar began to shift dramatically again in October 2023, as opposing military forces made critical gains against the Tatmadaw. By mid-2024, reports such as one by The Economist in May 2024 suggested that the SAC's territorial losses had reached 40% - 50% of Myanmar's territory.^[5]

In this context, this report comprehensively analyzes India's perspective on the tumultuous developments in Myanmar through three critical lenses: political, economic, and operational (security). It explores the evolution of India-Myanmar relations across three distinct stages: the period preceding the 2021 coup, the immediate aftermath, and the extended post-coup period from 2021 to 2024. The analysis reveals that India's Look East policy prompted a broader acceptance of the Tatmadaw's role in Myanmar's politics. This shift led to normalized relations with military figures, complementing India's historically strong ties with Myanmar's civilian leaders, from U Nu to Aung San Suu Kyi. This strategic balancing act allowed India to engage across Myanmar's complex power structures, adapting to its multifaceted political landscape while maintaining its traditional alliances.

The normalization of relations with the military eventually became entrenched in Indian policy, justified by the Tatmadaw's continued dominance within Myanmar, even throughout the 2010s, which saw a rocky but steady transition to partial democracy. However, the 2021 coup brought about an unprecedented displacement of Myanmar's civilian leaders, accompanied by an intensity of popular armed resistance never seen before. While this has meant a gradual weakening of the Tatmadaw (though not its displacement), New Delhi's continued backing of the military junta has not been matched by parallel outreach to the opposition, which has been making steady gains against the junta.



Demonstrators protest the military coup and demand the release of elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, in Yangon, Myanmar, in February. (Reuters)

This complex situation raises a fundamental question: Will New Delhi recalibrate its Myanmar policy in response to the evolving events on the ground? Given that India's policy shift in the 1990s was driven by an internal desire to 'Look East', what are the current incentives and challenges that New Delhi faces in Myanmar? This report seeks to explore these questions and provide a comprehensive understanding of India's engagement with Myanmar in this critical period of change.

2. India's engagement with Myanmar

Three key variables—political, operational, and economic—shape India's multifaceted relationship with Myanmar and form the core of its engagement strategy. These dimensions influence the scope and nature of the bilateral relationship, reflecting India's complex interests in the region.

2.1 Political ties

The political relationship between New Delhi and Naypyidaw is of paramount importance for both states, shaped by historical forces that have gradually drawn them closer. This closeness has been forged out of geo-strategic needs and the geographical necessities of a shared border checkered with armed insurgent activity. Geopolitically, India's compulsions vis-à-vis China have driven it to carve out a new relationship with the Myanmar government for at least the last two decades – a pragmatic engagement characterized by cooperation, communication, and coordination. Delhi has demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with whichever regime holds power in Naypyidaw, communicating its concerns by leveraging shared interests, and coordinating mitigation measures with the Tatmadaw whenever possible.

By the time Myanmar adopted its 2008 constitution, marking the end of a tumultuous period of armed insurgency and civil activism, India's approach to Myanmar had evolved to reconcile two seemingly contradictory imperatives. On one hand, India sought to stand by its democratic partners in the state, especially Aung San Suu Kyi, with whom New Delhi shared a time-tested, personal, and deep relationship. On the other hand, India had come to accept the Tatmadaw's dominant role on the ground in Myanmar, notwithstanding the semi-autonomous positions of several Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs).[6] Indeed, under Senior General Than Shwe, who had seized power through a 'palace coup' in 1992, the Tatmadaw had already established itself as the most coherent organization in Myanmar, with its centrality in the Myanmar polity only further entrenched by 2008.[7]

From Myanmar's perspective, a strong desire to diversify its economic and strategic relationships emerged by the end of the late 1990s. This was driven by a need to avoid single-source dependence on China and to secure good ties with all its neighbors. This strategic shift allowed Myanmar to meet India halfway, ensuring a stable relationship despite internal turmoil.[8] The increasing influence of the Tatmadaw was evident in the regular visits of Indian Army delegations to Mandalay twice a year in the late 2000s, with each visit underscoring the growing power and fear that the Tatmadaw commanded on the ground. This understanding was supplemented by India's aim to counter China's influence in Myanmar, with India's Border Roads Organisation constructing roads on both sides of the border and New Delhi reportedly transferring some arms.[9] In turn, Myanmar's leaders have long shown keen interest in visiting India's Northeastern states, particularly for access to hospitals in Imphal and religious tourism sites like Bodh Gaya in Bihar.[10]



Myanmar Foreign Minister and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi meets with PM Narendra Modi during her 4-day visit to attend the BRICS-BIMSTEC Outreach Summit in Goa in October 2016. (Reuters)

Therefore, in its political relationship with Myanmar, India has prioritized border stability, countering China's expanding influence and securing vital connectivity projects over Myanmar's democratic health despite being the region's largest democracy. This pragmatic approach reflects India's regional strategic interests, balancing ideological preferences with geopolitical necessities and economic goals.

2.2 Economic ties

A dual focus on trade opportunities and geopolitical considerations drives India's economic relationship with Myanmar. This two-pronged approach aims to improve bilateral trade between India and Myanmar while providing developmental assistance and leveraging Myanmar's strategic geographical position as a bridge to Southeast Asia. Myanmar holds particular significance as the only ASEAN state sharing both land and maritime borders with India. Both these aspects of India's economic engagement with Myanmar are designed, in effect as much as

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The scale of India's economic engagement with Myanmar is substantial. In fiscal 2022-2023, bilateral trade between India and Myanmar stood at USD 1.76 billion. Furthermore, India's developmental assistance portfolio in Myanmar had surpassed USD 1.75 billion by the end of 2022, with most of this assistance being grant-funded, according to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs.[11] Myanmar also prominently features in India's Lines of Credit to its neighbors, with USD 500 million available for various projects.[12]

Beyond bilateral trade, Myanmar is crucial in India's Act East policy. It forms an integral part of India's strategy to better connect its Northeastern states with the mainland and establish a corridor deep into Southeast Asia. This strategy is embodied in two key projects: the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP), signed in 2008, and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. The latter is envisioned to extend into the East-West Economic Corridor, reaching as far as Vietnam.[13] The Trilateral Highway project, announced in 2002 with construction beginning in 2012, is approximately 70% complete, according to Indian government officials.[14] However, progress has been hampered by delays since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, further exacerbated by the Myanmar coup in 2021 and the subsequent fighting. As of July 2023, India's external affairs minister acknowledged that the Trilateral Highway had proven to be a "very difficult project" due to the situation in Myanmar but asserted that completing it remained a priority for the government.[15] Initially, the project was slated for operationalization by 2019.[16]



Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport project (KMMTTP)
Graphic: Soham Sen | ThePrint

It's worth noting that connectivity projects have increasingly figured in New Delhi's foreign policy toolkit as instruments to influence the contemporary global order.[17] In Myanmar, Indian projects run parallel to China's interests, which are defined by initiatives such as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and Beijing's construction of the Kyaukhphyu deep-sea port, located about 65 miles from Sittwe, where India is now set to take over operations for the entire port. The economic ties between China and Myanmar have also been growing rapidly. In the first half of FY2023-2024, China-Myanmar trade grew to over USD 2 billion, nearly doubling the figure from the corresponding period in 2022-2023.[18] Most significantly, the Myanmar military, across all its services, heavily relies on China for its advanced platforms, spare parts, ordnance, and other equipment.[19]

Lastly, the development of connectivity between India and Myanmar has also been influenced by India's relationship with Bangladesh. The opportunities and challenges presented by this bilateral relationship have shaped India's eastward push, adding another layer of complexity to the regional economic dynamics.

2.3 Operational ties (Security)

Complex challenges and delicate balancing acts characterize the security dimension of India-Myanmar relations. The two countries share a border approximately 1,643 km long, which is exceedingly porous (partially by design) and historically unstable. This border arrangement reflects centuries-old cultural and tribal connections between communities on either side, connections that were cartographically divided by British lines of partition in 1937. Both sides have historically recognized the need to maintain a degree of openness at the border to respect these cross-border social relations, particularly between India's states of Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, and Myanmar's Kachin, Sagaing, and Chin states. [20]

However, the presence of several separatist insurgent groups on the Indian side of the border and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) on the Myanmar side has significantly complicated the operational relationship between the two militaries. On the Indian side, while the state has successfully negotiated ceasefires and suspension of operations agreements with multiple groups, some continue to present a low-intensity but credible threat by leveraging their positions in Myanmar. These include, but are not limited to:

- The People's Liberation Army Manipur (PLAM, a Meitei outfit), which has benefited from support from Myanmar groups in Kachin and Sagaing for the last four decades.[21]
- The National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K), which commands influence over the Hemei and Pangmei settlements in Myanmar.[22]
- The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which operates out of Northern Myanmar.

On the Myanmar side, the key EAOs in the border region include the Arakan Army, the Kachin Independence Army, and the Chin National Front.

In Myanmar, these Ethnic Armed Organizations maintain varying degrees of autonomy within their respective states. The relationship between the state and armed groups can be categorized, as per Staniland's framework, into suppression, containment, collusion, or incorporation.[23] The Tatmadaw's approach to border EAOs typically involves containment, collusion, or a combination of both. The chosen engagement strategy influences the space allowed to anti-India groups, which the Tatmadaw can leverage against powerful EAOs. This dynamic creates a duality in Indian-Myanmar security relations, characterized by strategic convergence and tactical divergence, particularly from the Tatmadaw's side. This has produced a pattern of interaction that features both unilateral and joint operations by both forces.

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2.3.1 Tactical divergence

India has had to reconcile itself to dealing with a military-heavy polity in Myanmar. The Indian Army has long held the belief that the Tatmadaw has historically provided support and assistance to anti-India armed groups at the border, primarily if these groups aid the Tatmadaw in fighting any EAOs that challenge the central government's political legitimacy. [24] For instance, an Indian intelligence report from November 2021 revealed how the PLA Manipur directly benefited from the support of the Tatmadaw after the coup.[25] This belief has often led the Indian Army to conduct unilateral counter-insurgency operations across the border – actions that draw little attention from the Tatmadaw, which allows India these operations without offering its support but publicly denies them to save face. According to experts, in the 1970s and 80s, the Indian Army used to conduct full-fledged operations in Myanmar at the battalion level, involving 700-800 troops, accompanied by strikes on rebel positions. Thus, the Tatmadaw's tactical choices on the ground often result in expanded operational space for anti-India groups, which then necessitates Indian cross-border counter-insurgency operations.

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2.3.2 Strategic convergence

Given that the Tatmadaw has historically alternated between various forms of engagement with Myanmar's EAOs, there have been several instances where the Myanmar military has felt comfortable enough to subordinate its tactical needs to the strategic relationship with India. In these instances, the Tatmadaw has coordinated with the Indian Army for several joint operations in the borderlands to eliminate rebel camps and bases. The Indian army has also, in turn, assisted the Tatmadaw in combating the most potent EAOs in the border areas, such as the Arakan Army. Examples of such joint operations include Operation Golden Bird in 1995 and Operations Sunrise I and II in 2019. [26]

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Lastly, a crucial aspect of the India-Myanmar border relationship is the Free Movement Regime (FMR), which has existed between the two countries since 1948. Initially allowing for 40 km of visa-free travel in either direction (later reduced to 25 km), the FMR has fluctuated in terms of how 'free' it was over the decades but remained a constant feature despite the intensity of insurgency on either side. The FMR was formally recognized in 2018 by the Indian Union Home Minister, who described it as "an enabling arrangement for

movement of people across the India-Myanmar border." [27] The Assam Rifles, a paramilitary force operationally under the Indian Army but administratively under the Ministry of Home Affairs, is responsible for guarding the border and overseeing the FMR. [28]

3. Changes in Myanmar's polity before 2021

Myanmar's political landscape has undergone considerable transformation since its independence in 1948. In the early years, Prime Minister U Nu led a steady, albeit troubled, civilian administration until 1958, when a split in the ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) party allowed General Ne Win, then Tatmadaw Chief, to exert greater influence in political decision-making. [29]

Ne Win's consolidation of power in 1962 marked the beginning of a prolonged period of military dominance in Myanmar's politics. His rule was characterized by the use of forced constitutional instruments to marginalize political opponents and feign legitimacy, including the 1982 law that effectively barred "non-indigenous" individuals from public office by diluting their citizenship status. [30] The military's brutal suppression of resistance movements, particularly the crackdown in 1988 that resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, led to the formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), a more overt form of military rule.

This period saw the rise and subsequent arrest of democratic figures like Aung San Suu Kyi, and a pattern of dismissing election results that rejected the Tatmadaw's role in politics. The SLORC's refusal to honor the results of the 1990 elections, overwhelmingly won by the National League for Democracy (NLD), presaged the similar actions of the State Administration Council (SAC) thirty years later, following the NLD's victory in the 2020 elections. [31]



*Protestors moving into downtown Rangoon during the nationwide democracy uprising of Aug. 8, 1988
Courtesy of Gaye Paterson*

Throughout the 1990s, the SLORC gradually allowed more space for opposition forces while carefully maintaining its grip on power. In 1997, it reconstituted itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The military regime faced increasing pressure from various factors, including Suu Kyi's growing international standing, natural disasters like Cyclone Nargis in 2008, shifting support bases, and a re-emerging democratic movement.

The regime introduced the 2008 constitution, which was crafted to secure the military's position while making limited concessions to democratic forces. It reserved seats for the military in Parliament and effectively barred Suu Kyi from becoming head of government.[32] This constrained transition was partly motivated by geopolitical considerations, particularly the desire to reduce Myanmar's dependence on China and improve relations with the West, for whom some degree of democratic restoration was a prerequisite for engagement. The 2010 elections, the first in 20 years, were won by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party amid allegations of fraud. It wasn't until 2012 that the NLD took its place in Parliament following by-elections, and only in 2016 did Suu Kyi assume power as State Counsellor, albeit still barred from the premiership.[33] This brief period of partial democracy, however, would be abruptly terminated by the Tatmadaw's coup in February 2021, bringing Myanmar full circle to direct military rule.



Suu Kyi addresses a crowd of supporters in Yangon in July 1989. About two weeks later, she was placed under house arrest and charged with trying to divide the military. Source: Jonathan Karp/Reuters

3.1. Effects of these changes on crucial areas of India-Myanmar engagement

India's engagement with Myanmar evolved significantly during these political shifts. It was initially influenced by shared non-alignment goals between Prime Minister Nehru and Premier U Nu, as evidenced by the 1951 Treaty of Friendship.[34] Since General Ne Win's 1962 coup, however, India's engagement with Myanmar has been prone to being influenced by events on the ground, mixed with its appetite (or lack of it) for dealing with undemocratic regimes in its neighborhood.

The two-track policy: The changes in Myanmar's polity between 1962 and 2012 featured parallel shifts in India's engagement. While Indira Gandhi's government found ways to coexist with Ne Win's regime, Rajiv Gandhi's administration (1984-89) built closer ties with the Tatmadaw until relations soured following the 1988 coup. There was significant public and parliamentary pressure on Gandhi's government to take a firm stance against the junta.[35]

Under P.V. Narasimha Rao, India adopted a two-track policy, engaging both the military and civilian stakeholders while seeking international support to end military rule. A key breakthrough came with the Indian Foreign Secretary's visit to Myanmar in 1993, driven by India's new Look East policy.[36] This marked a significant shift, considering that just a year earlier, in 1992, India had co-sponsored a UN General

Assembly resolution calling on the SLORC to allow free political participation.[37]

This dual-track approach persisted for three decades until the 2021 coup. As one Indian expert observed, "In the 1990s, India's Myanmar dilemma was whether to engage with the military and how much because we had been civilian-focused. Today (in 2024), the dilemma is the opposite." Bilateral visits continued throughout this period, including Myanmar's Senior General Than Shwe's visits to India in 2004 and 2010, and reciprocal visits by Indian leaders such as President Abdul Kalam in 2006, PM Manmohan Singh in 2012, and PM Narendra Modi in 2017.[38][39]

Security impact: The two-track policy allowed the Indian Army to maintain a strong operational relationship with the Tatmadaw, facilitating joint operations like Operation Golden Bird in 1995. [40] However, while this operation focused on ULFA and NDFB bases and infrastructure in Myanmar, the real testament to the Indian Army's willingness to act against Myanmar rebel EAOs (itself a function of improved relations with the Tatmadaw)[41] was in 1998 when the Indian military acted against the Arakan Army in Operation Leech – arresting key AA commanders such as Khaing Raza.[42] The Arakans saw this as India's betrayal since it abruptly checked the first coherent attempt at a Rakhine-nationalist resistance against the junta, and it ended a long relationship between Indian intelligence officers who had helped the AA in its nascence after its formation in 1991.[43] That New Delhi turned on the AA, sanctioned an operation against them by labeling them "gunrunners," and broke the back of the Arakan resistance furthered the betrayal narrative.[44]

The AA would only reconvene in a new form after the constitutional movement of 2008 and subsequent resistance activity. Between then and 2023, the AA grew into one of the most potent of Myanmar's EAOs, with an estimated 30,000 strong force. While India initially believed that the AA's resurgence in the late 2000s was temporary and would be checked by the Tatmadaw, the force stood strong even at the end of the 2018-2020 operations by the Myanmar military.[45]

Moreover, the brutality unleashed by the Tatmadaw across the 2010s (especially its infamous 'area clearance operations' in 2016 and 2017) drove waves of Rohingya refugees from Rakhine into border states, triggering a large-scale regional humanitarian crisis that has only been worsened by the 2021 coup.[46] In the bilateral visits to Myanmar that continued in this period, Indian officials avoided using the term 'Rohingya' to respect the Tatmadaw's (and even the Suu Kyi-led civilian administration's) symbolic sensitivities – reflecting the degree to which New Delhi had accepted the military's centrality to the Myanmar polity. The Indian government avoids using the term publicly, even in domestic statements, preferring the term 'illegal immigrants' instead.

Limited economic effects: While India and Myanmar signed a Border Trade Agreement in 1993, border trade remained low due to restrictive policies allowing only barter trade of locally produced items. This changed in 2015 with India's Foreign Trade Policy, which aimed to shift from border/barter trade to normal trade, making India a party to the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement.[47] The National Trade Facilitation Action Plan (2017-2020) prioritized increasing connectivity in India's immediate and extended neighborhoods.

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4. The February 2021 coup and its impact

As the February 2021 coup unfolded, New Delhi maintained a studied silence, even months after the SAC's takeover. By the end of that year, the adverse effects of instability in Myanmar were evident, with anti-India groups that the Indian Army and Tatmadaw had jointly worked to clear out in Myanmar, seeking to re-establish their camps close to the India-Myanmar border.[49] Experts believe this to be a recurring phenomenon due to the Tatmadaw's tacit support to these groups, a dynamic exacerbated by the unprecedented intensity of armed resistance to the coup.

The increased capabilities and confidence of anti-India armed groups were demonstrated in November 2021 when the PLAM, in coordination with the Manipur Naga People's Front, ambushed an Assam Rifles convoy, killing seven Indian soldiers, including the unit's Commanding Officer. The Assam Rifles' subsequent operations in Nagaland, viewed by some as reprisal and by others as an intelligence failure, resulted in at least 15 civilian deaths, sparking political and civil protests against central troops.[50] Intelligence reports in November showed how the PLA Manipur benefited from the coup in Myanmar, gaining assistance from the Tatmadaw.[51]

The brutality of the junta's response to civil and armed resistance made it comparable to the 1988-90 uprising and the then administration's clampdown and setting aside of the 1990 election results.[52] However, two crucial differences exist between the developments of 1990 and 2021:

- **India's response:** While in 1990, India openly criticized the violence in Myanmar and led multilateral action against the Tatmadaw, in 2021, it refrained from such action, limiting its reaction to expressions of concern. New Delhi not only continued bilateral engagement with high-level official visits to SAC events in Myanmar but also joined Russia and China in voting against select UN resolutions that sought to condemn or criticize the SAC for its violations within Myanmar.[53][54]
- **Sustained armed opposition:** Unlike previous instances of the Tatmadaw sidelining election results, the 2021 coup triggered a sustained armed opposition movement that effectively challenges the SAC's post-coup control of Myanmar territory. By January 2022, violence had engulfed every part of Myanmar, with more than 12,000 killed in what was by then being termed a civil war.[55]
- Crucially, the National Unity Government's People's Defense Force increasingly began coordinating with EAOs across states to mount operations against the SAC.

4.1 On-ground dynamics in Myanmar: 2021-2024

The period between 2021 and 2024 has witnessed unprecedented developments in Myanmar, necessitating a rethink by all regional actors on how to engage with Naypyidaw.

First, the armed opposition that began consolidating in 2021 has comprised a range of groups, including Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), several of whom felt betrayed by the Tatmadaw, with successive groups ending their respective ceasefires and joining the fight against the SAC. With the political opposition

in exile, the National Unity Government (NUG) formed its forces, the People's Defense Forces (PDFs), operating independently and in tandem with EAOs against the junta. By the end of 2023, groups such as the Arakan Army (AA) had announced de-facto control of two-thirds of Rakhine state.[56] By June 2024, Myanmar analysts asserted that the AA now had enough territory under its effective control to declare secession, should they choose to do so.

Second, in the 2021-2024 period, the Tatmadaw suffered its worst losses in history. While much of the dry zone (including Sagaing and Magwe) remains fiercely contested, significant portions of North/Northwestern (including the border with India) and Southeast Myanmar (including the border with Thailand) are under EAO/PDF control.[57] This complex battleground landscape makes any traditional notions of control tenuous at best. As of June 2024, three main categories of armed actors control various parts of Myanmar: the SAC and the Tatmadaw, the EAOs, and the NUG's PDFs. From India's perspective, the Tatmadaw is losing more territory than ever with each passing week in 2024. A May 2024 report by the Lowy Institute assessed that while the SAC remains in control of Naypyidaw and the center, its reach into the borderlands has been severely diminished. In place of the state, EAOs and PDFs have begun delivering public goods and services in "liberated areas", effectively "governing millions of people." [58] By August 2024, the SAC had suffered even greater losses, especially in the Shan state, which included the fall of the Tatmadaw's Northeast regional command center at Lashio – a first since the 2021 coup.[59] The pace of the resistance's advance towards SAC positions in the Mandalay heartland means these losses will likely be further compounded.

Third, since October 2023, three key EAOs – the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army – launched a fresh offensive against the Tatmadaw (Operation 1027), based on their 'Three Brotherhood Alliance' established in June 2019. While the latter two groups have historically depended more on China for arms and funds, the AA has maintained a relatively balanced position. Nonetheless, the AA has benefited from Chinese arms and advanced platforms, which it used to attack the Myanmar Navy in 2019.[60] As of June 2024, the AA is arguably the most crucial factor for India, given that it controls most of the regions around Sittwe and routes part of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP).[61]

In early 2024, an Indian Member of Parliament (while not representing the government and admittedly motivated by local interests) visited sites part of the Project and affirmed the AA's firm control, the Tatmadaw's complete and total absence, and the severely underdeveloped nature of the road corridor from Sittwe to Mizoram. Notably, security for the MP was provided by the AA, with junta soldiers "nowhere in sight".[62] It must also be noted that the AA has posed a risk to Kaladan even before the coup – with the group physically attacking Kaladan assets in 2019-2020 and demanding a "protection tax." [63]

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Additionally, several experts interviewed believe intense leadership issues plague the Tatmadaw. As is also evident in analytical media commentary, there is now a strong belief that there is disgruntlement across the rank and file of the Tatmadaw – with the force bleeding troops to the resistance, further lowering morale.

While the force brought back mandatory conscription, the quality of recruits has been low, with most recruits being SAC loyalists and USDP foot soldiers (also evident in the SAC's announcements). A key issue here is officer-level shortages, with General Soe Win (long-time deputy SAC chairman) commanding operations in Myawaddy, a town that the SAC recaptured from the resistance in April 2024.[64] Notably, the disgruntlement within the Tatmadaw is more likely to stem from a desire for a change in leadership for better operational effectiveness rather than a desire for policy change (or to end the SAC's control). While General Hlaing has long held the reins, differences between Hlaing and General Soe Win have only been presented as having grown larger by Myanmar media.[65]

While Hlaing's writ was dented after critical losses to the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, he has thus far managed to tighten the leash on the junta's leadership by purging several USDP ministers. However, developments such as the Tatmadaw's worst losses of border crossing points since the 1940s and PDF attacks on crucial military establishments (such as the Mandalay PDF's attacks on the Defense Service Academy) have only fueled further internal resentment.

4.2 Political Impact

In the initial year following the coup, India leveraged the goodwill generated by its long-standing two-track policy and maintained its bilateral relationship with the SAC, albeit without formal recognition. India avoided overt criticism beyond symbolic mentions of the need for a return to democracy, which the Tatmadaw weathered easily, having publicly committed to such a transition anyway. However, it became increasingly apparent that between 2021 and 2023, India did not experience the adverse political effects of the absence of the second actor that its two-track policy is designed to engage – the elected civilian government now in exile. India persisted with its bilateral engagements through multiple high-level visits from top bureaucrats.

For instance, while the Defense Secretary met with the SAC's top leadership in Naypyidaw in July 2023, successive Foreign Secretaries made multiple trips to Myanmar in 2021 and 2022, engaging with the SAC Chairman and other senior officials. The statements released after each meeting were variations of the statement following the November 2022 visit, which noted that the two sides "held discussions on important bilateral issues relating to border management, security and ongoing bilateral cooperation projects and India's support to democratic transition in Myanmar".[66]

During this period, India's engagement with the resistance – whether the National Unity Government (NUG) in exile or the key Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) in the border region – has been minimal, if not entirely absent. As late as early 2023, the NUG special representative for India asserted in closed-door discussions that sustained engagement from India had been lacking. It is widely acknowledged that the junta maintains control over the Myanmar Embassy in New Delhi. Beyond India's ongoing high-level relationship with the SAC, India's lack of engagement with the opposition has long been a point of domestic criticism – primarily due to China's longstanding influence over the Tatmadaw and

“ It is widely acknowledged that the junta maintains control over the Myanmar Embassy in New Delhi. Beyond India's ongoing high-level relationship with the SAC, India's lack of engagement with the opposition has long been a point of domestic criticism – primarily due to China's longstanding influence over the Tatmadaw and EAOs along the Sino-Myanmar border.

EAOs along the Sino-Myanmar border. It appears that only after developments such as the successes of Operation 1027, repeated reports of the Tatmadaw's losses, and the visible effect of junta troops even being pushed into Indian borders (necessitating Indian Army/Assam Rifles assistance in relocating them) did New Delhi become more concerned.[67]

4.3 Security Impact

Almost concurrent with the shifting tide in Myanmar, ethnic strife erupted in India's Manipur state in May 2023, particularly between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo tribes. This conflict resulted in at least 221 fatalities (including security personnel) by May 2024.[68]

While this conflict persists, an emerging feature of the multiple lines of division among the tribal communities in Manipur has been the impact of the destabilization in Myanmar, which has pushed thousands of refugees into multiple states of Northeast India. While other states have responded differently to this influx (with Mizoram welcoming an estimated 30-40,000 Chin people who had fled the violence),[69] in Manipur, it has served as fresh fuel for conflict due to a dangerous mix of legitimate issues, disinformation, the propensity for inter-tribal armed conflict, and a hyper-sensitive social fabric. Notwithstanding the complexities of the ongoing crisis in Manipur, the sitting Chief Minister (Biren Singh) has faced criticism for allegedly blaming collusion between the refugees and the Kuki people for furthering instability and deflecting from internal administrative and political failures.[70] What is undeniable, however, is that the crisis in Myanmar has become a significant domestic security concern for India for over a year, and India's steadfast support of the junta has become a point of much domestic criticism.

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India's response to the destabilizing security situation in the border hinterlands has been to sharpen its focus on physical infrastructure and kinetic measures. Two aspects have defined this approach: ending the Free Movement Regime and fencing the India-Myanmar border.

4.3.1 FMR

Both civilian and military experts consulted for this report assessed that there has long been concern about inadequate control of movement at the border. This has led to severe issues such as gunrunning between insurgent groups and the smuggling of narcotics and human trafficking, both historically and currently. The 2023 report on Myanmar's drug cultivation by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime stated that Myanmar's opium fields grew by 18% in 2023 alone, with a year-on-year increase of 20% - propelling Myanmar above Afghanistan as the world's largest producer of opium.[71] With the FMR also becoming a political football in India's troubled Northeast, India announced the termination of the FMR at the India-Myanmar border in February 2024.[72] While this decision too garnered much criticism from experts and analysts, one expert asserted that there has long been a view that the Assam Rifles is not managing the FMR effectively. In any case, there have been simmering differences between the Indian Army and the Ministry of Home Affairs over the question of control over the force.[73] Moreover, the lack of infrastructure at the border to ensure security has troubled security forces in general. While asserting that ending the FMR undermines India's Act East policy through Myanmar, experts also acknowledge that it presents security vulnerabilities along the border.

4.3.2 Fencing

Unlike the FMR, the decision to erect a physical fence at the India-Myanmar border is more contentious. It has met significant opposition from key Northeastern states such as Mizoram (whose Assembly has passed a resolution criticizing the central government's decision),^[74] and experts, including former Chief of Army Staff General MM Naravane, have publicly written against the decision to fence the border.^[75] Apart from the hardships it will cause to local residents, the risks that have been highlighted include:

- Opposition from Kuki-Zo and Mizo peoples who share ties with the Chin people of Myanmar
- The risk of groups such as NSCN-IM breaking their ceasefire with the government due to their vehement opposition
- The exorbitant cost of erecting the fence (at least INR 3,200 crore)
- The inaccessible terrain along several sections of the border (with mountainous and forested areas)

Other experts believe that government insiders maintain that fencing will take a long time and that the current efforts are temporary. On the other hand, apart from the political opposition to the fence, there is the issue of viability. The actual sanctioning of an effort to fence about 10 kilometers of the India-Myanmar border dates back to 2003.^[76] That section was announced as completed only in April 2024 – 21 years later.^[77] This has led analysts to believe that the fresh commitment to fencing, such as the Home Minister's (Amit Shah)

announcement at a political rally, was borne out of electoral politics rather than indicative of any actual operational need. Moreover, while requesting complete anonymity, another expert asserted that commanders within the Assam Rifles are displeased with fencing the border, especially in the face of political resistance from India's Northeastern states.

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4.4 Economic impact

As violence escalated in Myanmar between 2021 and 2024, the primary disruptions to trade occurred at the local level in the border areas. However, since more than 90% of India-Myanmar trade has traditionally taken place through sea and air routes, these disruptions have not significantly affected the overall economic relationship. Nevertheless, border trade has been disrupted at key hubs of local economic activity, such as the Moreh-Tamu border market.^[78]

The most significant concern for India regarding risks from the violence is its connectivity projects – with the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) being substantially affected. When New Delhi approved the project in 2008, it was motivated by the need to improve connectivity to India's Northeast through Myanmar and circumvent Bangladesh, whose ports India could not access despite strong ties with Dhaka. While the infrastructure at the Sittwe port, connection to power grids, dredging of the Kaladan river, and the Paletwa jetty have mainly been completed, the crucial road corridor from Myanmar's Paletwa to India's Zorinpuri in Mizoram state remains unfinished.^[79]

Over the past decade, however, the India-Bangladesh relationship had reached new heights (before Sheikh Hasina's departure from Dhaka in August 2024).[80] While both states resolved a range of political obstacles and disputes during Hasina's visit in 2022 and committed to fresh partnerships in 2024, India's resolute defense of the Awami League and the integrity of the Bangladeshi electoral process during multiple elections, which Western states have criticized, bequeathed more political capital and goodwill for New Delhi in Dhaka. The fact that Hasina became the first foreign leader to visit New Delhi after PM Modi took office for the third time as Prime Minister reflects these enhanced ties.[81] A key effect of this has been opening Bangladeshi ports of Chattogram and Mongla to India for trade to India's Northeast. The state-owned India Ports Global Limited is negotiating a deal to operate a terminal at Mongla and an Indian company, Elgis Engineers, is already undertaking construction efforts at the same port to upgrade it to the level of Chattogram.[82]

This has allowed India to balance China's significant presence at the Chittagong port and undercut the traditional rationale driving the Kaladan project. While this marginally dilutes the pressures created by the Arakan Army's control of Sittwe and key towns such as Paletwa, which offer access to inland river ports,[83] it also gives India more room to maneuver when assessing Kaladan's future.[84] Moreover, India is now also looking to rejuvenate a gas pipeline[85] that it was considering in the late 2000s to supply gas from oil blocks off the coast of Rakhine to India's Bihar through its Northeastern and Eastern states.[86] This rejuvenation, 16 years later, sought to reroute through Bangladesh instead of going around.



Union Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal and Myanmar Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Communications Admiral Tin Aung San received the maiden cargo ITT LION bringing construction material to Sittwe, Myanmar, on May 9, 2023 | Photo Credit: ANI

Undoubtedly, India's new Bangladesh calculus has been violently disturbed by Hasina's ouster on the one hand and the assertive resurgence of anti-India political forces in Bangladesh on the other. As India engages the interim government and the principal opposition to Hasina – the Bangladesh Nationalist Party – it faces a new dilemma. In the decade before August 2024, India went from attempting to circumvent Bangladesh to reach Myanmar to trying to supplement its key economic projects with Bangladeshi involvement. Like with other sectors of cooperation, the future of this calculus will now depend not only on India's ability to navigate challenges with any future post-Hasina government but also on that government's reciprocity towards Indian overtures, especially as India continues to host Sheikh Hasina despite Bangladeshi calls for extradition. For perspective, when Hasina had first teased opening up Bangladeshi ports to India in 2010, the Khaleda Zia-led BNP had launched demonstrations against such agreements with India, claiming a "surrender of national interests to India" by the Hasina-led government.[87] Presently, BNP leaders tout a desire for strong ties with India. However, their fresh outreaches to China and Pakistan, expressions of complaints about India's

support to Hasina thus far, support for viscerally anti-India parties such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, and loud calls for Hasina's extradition – all point to more hurdles than opportunities for New Delhi.

5. Incentives and Challenges in India's Engagement with Myanmar 2021-2024

The foremost challenge facing India is the potential fragmentation of Myanmar, which seems highly likely, if not inevitable. While some reports have suggested that the current political entity of Myanmar will give way to several smaller states, experts assert that the state is more likely to transform into a confederation of (semi) autonomous statelets with a weak center, “a weak center is exactly what Myanmar needs.”

However, the degree of autonomy is unlikely to be equal for all states – with the Arakan Army being in a strong position to assert as much autonomy as the United Wa State Army. Evidently, across the last 12 months, the Indian state has been more willing to acknowledge the instability in Myanmar publicly (with EAM Jaishankar doing it as recently as June 2024), [88] given the inescapable reports of the Tatmadaw's unenviable military position. [89]

“**In March 2024, India's EAM also hinted at a readjusting of India's Myanmar policy, given India's concerns with the military's losses on the ground while responding to queries about increasing instability in the neighboring state.**

In March 2024, the Minister also hinted at a readjusting of India's Myanmar policy, given India's concerns with the military's losses on the ground while responding to queries about increasing instability in the neighboring state. Moreover, despite Dhaka's political changes, other determining variables affect India's choices vis-à-vis Kaladan.

First, regarding the alternative route to India's Northeast through Bangladesh, one traditional obstacle has been unresolved resource-sharing disputes, such as the Teesta River dispute, which remains even if both states have managed to resolve a range of other legacy disputes. More importantly, however, there are concerns about the modalities of trade, especially domestic protectionism at the local level. For instance, at the Bangladeshi border with Tripura, only 42 items are allowed for trade from India to Bangladesh, restricting the potential of transit movement. Similarly, in Mizoram (which the KMMTTP's road corridor is also supposed to connect), there are gaps over the Theka River to connect Thekamukh (Bangladesh) from Kawrpuichhuah (India) through the Rangamati border area. This is important as the Kawrpuichhuah-Rangamati-Matarbari route is an important transport corridor that connects Mizoram in India to the Matarbari deep seaport in Bangladesh, passing through the border checkpoint at Kawrpuichhuah and the hill district of Rangamati in Bangladesh, providing an alternative trade corridor. Additionally, there are issues at the border checkpoints, such as security, lack of adequate infrastructure, and high dwell time, which will take time and effort to mitigate and improve trade facilitation.

Second, Northern Rakhine remains a war zone, lowering corridor security. A bigger question, even if security is assured, is whether India has the goods to scale – there needs to be enough economic pull for goods to move from Haldia to Sittwe, especially with Northern Rakhine being sparsely populated. However, while the Kaladan project may be at risk, India's geopolitical (over economic) incentives to continue developing the Sittwe port continue even outside the Kaladan framework. The continued Chinese development of the port in

Kyaukhphyu drives this. [90] Additionally, the need for better connectivity to India's northeast is only one aspect of India's connectivity projects in Myanmar. Conceptualized in 2002, the India-Myanmar-Thailand highway remains crucial for India's Act East strategy – with about 30% of construction work remaining to be completed by India in Myanmar (held up due to the war).[91] Interestingly, here too, India had asked Bangladesh (when Hasina was in power) to join the corridor [92] – deepening Dhaka's stakes even further – like with the pipeline to Myanmar and the sea-land corridor to the Northeast. [93]

6. India's incentive structures for engagement with Myanmar

6.1 Preparing for the day after

India's engagement with Myanmar is driven by the need to prepare for various post-conflict scenarios. Unlike earlier periods of intense violence in Myanmar following military action against civilian regimes, the current fighting also stems from increasingly divergent positions between the SAC and resistance groups, significantly shrinking the space for immediate reconciliation or communication. Indian observers have noted this divergence, whether over the status of the 2008 constitution (with the SAC seeking to retain it and the resistance looking to dismantle it) or the conduct of elections (the SAC wants controlled elections and 'limited' democracy, while the resistance demands wholly free and fair polls).[94] The widening gap in political objectives supplements the increasing imbalance on the battlefield. Until mid-2023, the battlefield in Myanmar was relatively balanced, with the junta taking losses but not losing enough effective control to have its overall capabilities questioned. By June 2024, however, with the SAC losing even more territory, a greater imbalance emerged between both actors, disincentivizing any immediate negotiated settlement that might lead to balanced outcomes for both sides to save face.

This situation means that India needs to continue its two-track policy by engaging key EAOs such as the AA and CNF or the NUG to avoid being blind-sided in any final settlement in the long run, especially one that is imbalanced. Indeed, the Tatmadaw remains the most organized and coherent actor on the ground. However, sustained communication can only effectively secure Indian interests if there are avenues to communicate such interests to the other side.

Additionally, the main challenge facing the resistance groups (that of representation) increases the need for India to engage with specific actors among the resistance groups identified as being the most amenable. This necessity is only boosted by the fact that Beijing maintains communication links and influential ties across battle lines. China brokered a ceasefire between the Three Brothers Alliance and the SAC in January 2024.[95] The fact that the truce eventually broke[96] is more a function of polarized positions and resistance's confidence combined with the SAC's intransigence rather than the effectiveness of Chinese influence. For its part, New Delhi is now looking to add a third facet to its two-track policy by articulating its willingness to hold dialogue with all relevant stakeholders in Myanmar and by pushing for a constructive dialogue within Myanmar to resolve its abject political crisis.

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6.2 China

The relationship between the Tatmadaw and the People's Republic of China is historic, yielding Beijing a formidable bank of influence in Naypyidaw. A UN expert in 2023 estimated that "41 private and state-owned companies registered in China and Hong Kong that supplied the Myanmar military with an extensive array of arms, equipment, and raw materials between October 2021 and December 2022, including advanced trainer jets, light attack aircraft, tank upgrades and repairs for Chinese fighter jets, which make up the Myanmar Air Force fleet".[97] However, the PRC itself has become increasingly weary of the violence in Myanmar (especially at the Sino-Myanmar border), as well as an increasing number of "crime gangs operating global online scams on Myanmar's territory that have disproportionately targeted Chinese citizens, as well as trafficking many into slavery", as reported by The Telegraph in November 2023 – which also asserted that China gave its tacit blessing to the resistance for its offensive against the SAC.[98] While this causal relationship is debatable, China's increasing discomfort with the instability in Myanmar is well evident – in April 2024, it conducted two live-fire drills at the Sino-Myanmar border that were spread across days and involved advanced weapons platforms.[99]

However, China's influence over resistance groups is becoming increasingly evident. One expert interviewed by the author in early June predicted that Beijing could induce other groups in the northern Shan state to break the ceasefire in the Shan state. Indeed, by the 20th of June, the TNLA launched fresh attacks against the junta while accusing it of breaking the ceasefire in the northern Shan state.[100] However, there is still no evidence to suggest that Beijing will rescind its support to the SAC. Some experts have asserted that China is not giving up on the Tatmadaw; it has consistently invited SAC officials to Beijing and has accepted the new SAC-appointed Ambassador. Hence, despite China's disillusion with current affairs, its ideal way out is a cessation of hostilities and a fresh election – even a "half-baked" one rather than no election, as Yun Sun asserts.[101]

It is helpful to remember that even a NUG victory does not necessarily trouble China, given that Beijing shared good ties with the Suu Kyi-led administration (a fact that led to some grouses in New Delhi).

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The internal developments within Myanmar and a critical geopolitical rival's lines of influence on these developments should incentivize New Delhi to expand its lines of communication. Thus far, India's approach has been restricted to participating in and facilitating a regional dialogue at the Track 1.5 level (led by Thailand, China and critical ASEAN states) with the SAC – in Bangkok and then in New Delhi.[102] However, experts who participated in the dialogue assert that the process was at the government-to-government level, with no representation from the opposition; and "it did not go far". With the Track 1.5 now being halted, a new Track 2 process has been initiated by CSIS Indonesia and Thailand's Surin Pitsuwan Foundation. However, a fundamental difficulty remains the lack of willingness on the SAC's part to engage the opposition and vice versa holistically. Collectively, this only enhances the case for government-level contact with the opposition, given that the other side (SAC) has only responded to this mode of engagement.

6.3 Dealing with the Future

The critical question about the future of India-Myanmar relations is whether and when India will consider substantial engagement with non-SAC political actors in Myanmar. In the context of New Delhi's potential engagement with resistance groups (EAOs or PDFs), another question has been raised about the mode of engagement. The Indian Ambassador has limited space to do so, given political compulsions, diplomatic etiquette, and the SAC's sensitivities. In this light, India maybe considering appointing a Special Envoy to Myanmar to aid in engagement across political lines. According to experts, the proposal for an envoy has long been on the table (post-February 2021) within India's security establishment.

However, the interest of the political leadership in New Delhi is only evident now, given the growing churn on the ground in Myanmar and the near-total loss of control by the SAC of the areas bordering India. Notably, other critical actors in Myanmar, such as China, ASEAN, as well as the UN, all rely on their special envoys for across-the-border engagement in Myanmar, meaning that India will only be following regional and global precedent and not undertaking anything novel or unique that might alarm the SAC. While the Arakan Army is likely to be among the top actors for India to engage with, the Chin National Front and other PDFs in control of border areas are also a priority. The imperative for engagement increases in light of the rejuvenation of armed anti-India groups at the border.

The Indian Army continues its localized intelligence-based operations, such as drone strikes on ULFA camps in Myanmar in January 2024, as a result of the Tatmadaw's tactical divergence.[103] However, a sustainable long-term solution that prevents the incubation of these groups at the border and disincentivizes other groups from providing support is necessary.

However, the appointment of an envoy and his/her engagement with other groups will happen only by keeping the SAC informed, with India looking to press home its overwhelming compulsions. For New Delhi, the military remains the most cohesive organization in Myanmar despite the SAC's substantial losses on the ground. Indeed, this belief has some objective value given that the SAC remains in firm control of the hinterland and the center; as a Brookings report from January 2024 put it, the "junta doesn't have to win; it just has to wait." [104]

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Hence, the fundamental underpinnings of India's engagement with Myanmar are unlikely to change. The change will likely be affected through the actors India is now willing to engage, along (not without) the Tatmadaw. According to experts, South Block has already crafted a Myanmar 2.0 policy to be implemented when the government feels comfortable domestically. However, experts suggest that any new policy must be implemented after consulting with internal stakeholders (in Myanmar) and key external partners (other neighbors), especially before things worsen in India's Northeast. Engagement with regional actors, including China and Thailand, is imperative, given their strong influence on EAOs at their respective borders (an aspect conspicuously missing in India's case). However, the internal actions India has begun to take concerning the India-Myanmar border can be expected to continue, at least in the short term. Experts across the board believe that the ending of the FMR can only be a stop-gap solution, with the ultimate goal being the easy movement of people and goods.[105]

7. Conclusion

The key contemporary characteristics of India's Myanmar policy can be characterized as follows:

- There is a long-standing belief in the Tatmadaw's centrality to Myanmar. This belief is borne out of historical institutional engagement, especially since the mid-1990s. It was reinforced in the late 2000s with Myanmar's move into a hybrid/partial democracy in which the Tatmadaw entrenched itself constitutionally in the new Myanmar polity.
- While India is considering appointing a special envoy to engage other non-SAC political actors in Myanmar, the Tatmadaw will arguably remain its most trusted partner, no matter how weakened. Opposition figures in Myanmar also distinguish between the Tatmadaw that will stay and the SAC that has to go.
- India's mitigation measures for its Northeast security issues are focused principally on physical measures, including new border security infrastructure, which the Army has long requested. This approach has been largely unilateral, not contingent on any substantial engagement with the Arakan Army.
- India remains committed to the Sittwe port for economic and geopolitical reasons. Under Hasina's government, the option of developing alternate routes through Bangladesh to circumvent the 'chicken's neck' in Siliguri for trade to its Northeastern parts has been evident in recent years. While this dilutes (but does not eliminate) the rationale for the Kaladan project -- key sites of which are now under AA control -- the viability of this option is also vulnerable to the new uncertainty in Bangladesh.
- India's connectivity aspirations with other SEA states and Myanmar's crucial role in them remain. Hence, while Kaladan might be undercut by alternative routes in Bangladesh (notwithstanding Dhaka's political crisis), other corridors for trade to Thailand until Vietnam offer strong incentives for an enhanced Indian role in Myanmar's stability. This has added to India's rationale for engaging in region-led solutions to Myanmar's problems, such as with Track 1.5.
- India's primary style of engagement with Myanmar, however, remains reactive. While its historical reconciliation with the martial dominance of Myanmar too was a product of proactiveness in foreign policy (Look East) with the end of the Cold War and the liberalization of the Indian economy, the Act East policy was an increase in scale, not the nature of engagement. Given the institutional memory of a quarter-century that took the Tatmadaw's overbearing influence (rightly) to be the default, any alternative style of engagement takes a long time to implement. However, the pace and intensity of events in Myanmar impose an unnatural urgency on the need for a coherent strategy to secure India's interests.

Risks:

- The People's Republic of China has long been an influential security and economic partner, enhanced with connectivity projects such as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor as part of the BRI. However, China's simultaneously strong influence on other EAOs in Myanmar offers it an additional point of leverage in the South along with its Northern points of friction with India. Notwithstanding Beijing's challenges and the largely independent character of groups such as the AA, operational imperatives often lead to marriages of convenience or the transfer of arms and equipment based on contingencies among groups -- increasing the net risk posed both to Indian assets in Myanmar as well as the border.
- The risk of the potential fragmentation of the Myanmar state is arguably the highest it has ever been in independent Myanmar's history. This implies multiple centers of authority instead of a single federalized state. Should this pass, India will deal with a palette of actors, several of whom have strong ties to Beijing and the PLA.

- India's Kaladan project continues to be vital. The need for Kaladan has shifted because of the now-available access to the Bangladeshi ports of Chittogram and Mongla. However, trade modalities continue within Bangladesh despite economic incentives, and the new government's position on Indian access to Bangladeshi ports remains untested.
- In April 2024, the Indian MEA cleared the IPGL's proposal to take over complete control of Sittwe port. This means that Sittwe is the first overseas port that the IPGL will handle like any other domestic port, unlike in Chabahar and Mongla, where it is operating (and negotiating for) a limited number of terminals. This enhances the need for a secure environment, especially given the different actor now in control of the region around the port, with whom India's relations have been awry.
- India's insouciance regarding Kaladan as the situation rapidly deteriorates sets a bad precedent for its other connectivity projects with other states. While pursuing regional solutions is the right approach, it needs to be substantiated by India's own points of leverage with the other groups emerging as key to Myanmar's future. In any case, the long border between India and Myanmar creates problems that India alone must resolve.
- The hard security approach to the border issue is unviable. Both the construction as well as the watertight maintenance of a border fence where the FMR once existed is extremely difficult, owing especially to the geography of the borderlands. However, rugged terrain has not prevented border fencing -- as evident at India's Line of Control with Pakistan. However, the adverse impact on cross-border movement for local populations creates additional grievances against the state. Moreover, while the LoC has existed in some form for more than 50 years, the India-Myanmar border has historically witnessed only openness for at least 74 years. The effects of a hard shut, then, are hard to predict and anticipate.

India's Myanmar policy will, therefore have to reconcile with the risks presented by its current approach of primarily engaging the junta with limited/negligible ties with other political actors.

Endnotes

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