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Military Diplomacy Vs Public Diplomacy: India's Dilemma in Myanmar Amidst China's Rise



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Introduction

Since the coup in February 2020, instability in Myanmar has continued to persist and even increased many folds. The crackdown by Tatmadaw on pro-democratic forces has claimed many lives leading to the emergence of the People's Defence Forces (PDF) which is an armed wing of the National Unity Government (NUG), colluding with various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). The shadow government—the NUG, has been banned and designated as a terrorist by the military junta for its involvement in varied killings, bombings, and arson, causing instability in the country.¹ The various EAOs like Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and Karen National Union (KNU),

following the coup, backed out from the 2015 nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA), that was signed with the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD), and thereby declared the agreement as 'null and void'.² There are also reports that various

Key Points

- The current geo-political scenario demands 'astute diplomacy' as India aspires to be a regional power. Therefore, India should not just 'wait and watch' but must proactively balance China's growing aspirations in the region.
- Engaging through a multi-sectoral platform is key in bringing normalcy in Myanmar.
- India's vision to the east starts from Myanmar and therefore it must engage with the Tatmadaw while keeping the door open for democracy.



armed groups are emerging and forging an alliance to fight against the military.³ Moreover, with various existing ethnic militia like Arakan Army (AA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army inflicting heavy damage to the military, the country is heading towards an unprecedented and different crisis from earlier junta rule.

India's dilemma to approach the prevailing situation is conditioned by four different factors⁴— *first*, India shares a 1643 km long porous boundary with Myanmar; prevailing instability in the country has seen an increase in number of insurgency incidents, a surge in drug trafficking, and an increase in the migration to India's Northeast Region (NER). *Second*, India does not have the liberty to isolate the country due to its dependency on 'Tatmadaw' for checking insurgency in NER. *Third*, India's ambition to reach the South Asian Nations, through land, under the ambit of its Act East Policy (AEP), solely depends on how clear the passage is through Myanmar. *Fourth* and most important is China's increasing presence in the country. With this context, the paper will try to analyse India's approach to Myanmar, its dilemma and what can be the possible way forward.

India's Dilemma and Approach

India is not only the largest democracy in the region but also a bordering nation of Myanmar and is monitoring the crisis with constant neutrality and trying to deal with its 'twin-track approach'.⁵ Being a vibrant democracy, India is constantly advocating for restoring democracy. However, advocating democracy will upset the military, and the military is crucial for maintaining stability in NER. Many Nagaland and Manipur Based insurgent groups have their camps along the border on the Myanmar side. They use rough and hostile terrain to escape from/ and operate against the Indian Armed Forces. The November 2021 ambush on an Assam Rifles convoy that killed a commanding officer, his wife, his seven-year-old son, and four personnel in S Sehken village that falls under the Behiang Police Station in Churachandpur district of Manipur is believed to have been carried out by an insurgent group operating from Myanmar.⁶ The responsibility for the same was claimed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) — an insurgent group of Manipur, and the Manipur Naga People's Front. This has been extensively highlighted and remained on the top agenda during India's Foreign Secretary's visit to Myanmar in December 2021.⁷



With the help of the junta, India has carried out a joint operation (Operation Sunrise, 2015) to flush out terrorist camps hiding inside Myanmar. The Chin State and Sagaing Region of Myanmar is a safe haven for Naga and Manipur based insurgent groups and is used by insurgents to train, equip and launch offensive action against the Indian Security Forces. The increased cooperation between two armies has dwindled the motive of insurgent groups, leading to a steady decline of insurgency in NER. However, the prevailing situation in Myanmar and growing pressure on the junta from different fronts, has provided a favourable environment for the insurgent groups to gain their lost ground. This wary New Delhi's interests as it has invested a lot in the region *first*, in dosing down insurgency in the NER, and has achieved tremendous success in the last few decades. Therefore, recent news of the Military junta coming in support of PLA, does not augur well to the Indian interest.⁸ The PLA is among few insurgent groups in NER that are not under any ceasefire with the government nor have any intention to do so. They are believed to be hardcore radicals and even found support from China.

Second, to integrate the region through various connectivity initiatives that is connectivity by road, rail, air, and water, and enhancing people-to-people contact. However, prevailing instability in Myanmar is hindering the connectivity prospect of the NER. China's constant support to insurgent groups keeps afloat the issues like corruption, extortion, and drug trafficking in the NER.

Third, to achieve the greater goal of improving its relationships and trade with the Southeast Asian Nations and beyond through its Act East Policy. India has many projects lined up through Myanmar, like Kaladan Multi- Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) and the Trilateral Highway- India-Myanmar-Thailand. The success of these projects depends on the political and economic stability of Myanmar along with the NER— a stable Myanmar means a stable NER, which sinks in India's interest in the region.

In contrast, closer ties with the military might imply India's recognition of military rule, and therefore infuse negative perception among the Burmese people,⁹ and defuse India's credibility as a country advocating for democracy. The people-to-people contact between India and Myanmar is historical and cannot be neglected when people suffer from oppression. Not as a democratic country but as a responsible neighbour, India must stand by the Myanmar people. While providing medical support and Covid-19 vaccines is a



step in the right direction, New Delhi must still press for more innovative and creative initiatives to support the government in exile.¹⁰ The initiative might start with initiating small projects and providing financial assistance to the local start-ups in Myanmar. Such a step will keep India's interest in the region in check on one hand, and on the other, New Delhi will penetrate deep into the 'hearts and minds of the people'. In his book *Irrawaddy Imperatives: Reviewing India's Myanmar Strategy*, Jaideep Chanda advocates the same approach to deal with China's growing ambition in Myanmar. India cannot match China's economic presence in Myanmar, but surely it can outperform China's presence in the region through its 'public diplomacy' initiative at the ground level. Therefore, India must not shy away from taking such an initiative as it will pay New Delhi a long-term dividend that is crucial for stability in NER.

Although the dilemma remains, the fact of the matter is that India cannot/ and must not advocate a 'black and white approach' for Myanmar, as argued by Harsh V Pant.¹¹ India must have a 'realistic approach' towards an unstable neighbour and must not follow an 'idealist approach', as many scholars argue when they push for a more democratic solution. As a democratic country, it is India's prerogative to push for democracy in the region, but it is not in New Delhi's interest to boycott or sanction the military junta.

China's Growing Footprint: A Concern for India

Chinese presence in and around the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a crucial concern for New Delhi because of Beijing's economic leverage over smaller nations around India. Myanmar's geographic position suits Beijing's ambition to reach the Indian Ocean that is by providing access to its Yunnan province and avoiding dependence on the Malacca Strait for oil and gas. China shares a nearly 2200 km long land boundary with Myanmar and over the years, it has built gas and oil pipelines from the Kyaukphyu Port in the Bay of Bengal to its Yunnan province to secure its energy supply. China is Myanmar's biggest trading partner, investor and aid giver.¹² Also, the US and western countries' sanctions on Myanmar, following the coup, only pushes it more towards China.¹³ Further, when the world is busy dealing with and analysing the Russia-Ukraine crisis, China is revamping its support to the military junta.¹⁴ Recently, the Chinese have agreed to enhance their cooperation with Myanmar on —cross-border cooperation, increasing investment, and providing grants to boost the Myanmar economy besides materialising the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC).¹⁵ The objective of the corridor is to secure China's energy



supply by bypassing the Malacca Strait, enhancing internal development and projecting itself as a dominant player in the region.¹⁶ China has been Myanmar's most significant Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) source (USD 21 billion as of March 2020) and is also one of the major arms suppliers since 1988.¹⁷ A student uprising in August 1988 set the motion for China's entry into Myanmar affairs.¹⁸ Since then, China has been involved heavily, both politically and economically. However, China's increasing investment and interest in Myanmar is generally seen as the “strategy of opportunism”¹⁹ — to leverage its interest when the latter is facing international pressure and isolation for human rights violations and oppression.

China's growing footprint and interest in Myanmar is a matter of concern to New Delhi for various reasons. *First*, Myanmar shares a 1643 km long border with India's four northeastern states—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. Increasing Chinese presence in Myanmar creates a national and internal security challenge for India in the region. If reports are to be believed, China provides training and weapons to insurgent groups in northeast India especially to Manipur based People PLA.²⁰ In the words of veteran journalist-writer Bertil Lintner “China's role in northeastern India is not to create instability but to maintain instability”.²¹ The motive is to keep India out of Myanmar and reach the Indian Ocean through Myanmar.

Second, China's presence in Myanmar poses a serious challenge to India's Act East Policy (AEP), a New Delhi initiative to reach Southeast Asian Nations. India's AEP is crucial to leverage India's interest in the region for two reasons— **(a)** it helps India utilise the market and natural resources of ASEAN nations via Myanmar, which provides land connectivity to these nations; **(b)** it allows the harnessing of India's shared cultural ties with ASEAN nations, thus enhancing its soft power. Here, Buddhist connection is the key to fostering relations between the nation and beyond. Therefore, a good, viable relationship with Myanmar is key for the success of India's AEP.

Third, with its BRI project, CMEC being its sub-project, Beijing is trying to close both the Indian flanks —Eastern and Western. On the western side of India, in Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has increased Beijing's presence drastically. It threatens India's interest with central and west Asian countries. Therefore, India cannot afford to be blocked by China on the eastern side.



Nevertheless, it is not an easy go for China in Myanmar, though its stakes are increasing day by day. Myanmar is also aware that too much dependence on China can be counter-productive, but lack of options and sanctions from western countries makes China an important partner. China's projects and investments have somehow not found much favour from the people of Myanmar and there is sustained criticism of the exploitation of natural resources and lack of transparency in investment.²² Also, lessons learned from China's investments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives cautioned the senior general of the military junta.²³ Though, India can prove to be a viable partner, its 'foreign policy dilemma' and 'lack of economic strength' places New Delhi in the zone of least favourite. However, by changing its approach, India can be a viable partner for the country in crisis and can be an 'initiator for peace and security' in the region.

The Way Forward

The current geo-political scenario demands astute diplomacy as India aspires to be a regional power. China's economic and political interest in India's neighbouring countries will increase many folds. Because of its strategic location and geo-political importance, Myanmar holds an important place but is not paid much attention to when it comes to India's strategic sphere. Therefore, India cannot just 'wait and watch' but must proactively balance China's growing aspirations in the region. The policy initiative that New Delhi could adopt, first and foremost, is to mediate between the Tatmadaw and the West²⁴ especially after India's increasing importance to the west for countering China. The Myanmar Economy is already on a downslide and the pandemic has further hit the country under the military regime. The cooperation between the west and Tatmadaw can lift India's pressure and push Myanmar toward a democratic process.

Second, engaging the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), countries along with ASEAN in dealing with the crisis in Myanmar, can prove to be a viable option. Countries of both groups share cultural and historical ties and are facing the common challenge of China's growing expansionist posture at borders or at the South China Sea. Therefore, engaging through a multi-sectoral platform is key in bringing normalcy in Myanmar.

Third, India must not shy away from dealing with Tatmadaw just to be the 'champion of democracy' in the region. The reason being, India's prospect in northeast India and China's growing interest in the region. The military is going to be the key stakeholder in Myanmar politics even if it returns to democratic process. Therefore, India instead of reorienting its diplomatic effort should push for more engagement through multi-sectoral channels. India's vision to the east starts from Myanmar and therefore it must engage with the Tatmadaw while keeping the door open for democracy.

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