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and
Implications for India

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The enemy, however strong he may be, becomes vulnerable to harassment and destruction when he is squeezed between the conqueror and his allies.Kautilya

Abstract

*India and Myanmar share 1643 km long open and porous border. Myanmar also shares 2204 km border with China. Due to Myanmar's geostrategic location in the North East, it is strategically important for India. Bangladesh's location is also very strategic considering close proximity to **Siliguri Corridor** and **access to Bay of Bengal**. Current situation in Myanmar and Bangladesh has definite Chinese linkages to it, which needs to be comprehended well in order to see the overall situation and possible security implications for India.*

Keywords: Refugee Influx, Insurgency, Siliguri Corridor, Security Interests, Chinese Imprints

Introduction

Myanmar has witnessed numerous armed conflicts since gaining independence in 1948. The country is strategically situated flanked by India and China. The India- Myanmar border has been in news whether it is Tatmadaw's counter insurgency operations against Indian insurgent groups or the move of Myanmar Nationals post-coup in Feb 2021. It has been more than three years since Tatmadaw took control of power in Myanmar by overthrowing the Aung Sang Suu Kyi government and the state of turmoil continues with ever increasing clashes and violence. Bangladesh has also gone into turmoil recently and the situation of unrest continues. The ongoing crisis escalated dramatically post resignation of Sheikh Hasina and has destabilised the situation in Bangladesh. The most important questions that arise are, can these situations develop overnight

without external support??? Are these incidents spontaneous or they are well planned and timed??

There are numerous questions that are arising with these developments in Indian neighbourhood and all point out towards increasing role of China in meddling with internal situation of these countries and overthrowing the elected government when Chinese National interests are at stake. What's happening around the world is fluid and fast changing geopolitics and even more complex and fragile is what is happening around India. We need to connect the dots in order to understand the larger picture.

Myanmar's Present Situation

Myanmar faces a very volatile situation with increasing clashes between resistance forces and junta. Approximately 5400 people have lost their life as a result of fighting in Myanmar and around 3 million people have been displaced due to continued violence with numbers increasing every day. Since March 2021 approximately 36,000 refugees have crossed over to Mizoram and few incidents of even Clashing armed group moving close to Indian borders. PLA had conducted live fire exercise in South West Yunnan province along Myanmar border in April 2024 as a response to Operation 1027 launched in October 2023 by Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs) against military junta. China has been supporting EAGs but now it is impacting its trade and geopolitical infrastructure. Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) captured Military Regional Command at Lashio in Northern Shan State on 03 August 2024 (Ye Myo Hein, 2024). Clashes between Myanmar National Democratic Forces (MNDF) and Tatmadaw have intensified and there have been gains by MNDF. On 14 August 2024, Foreign Ministr of China, Wang Yi visited Myanmar and met Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing. China is playing here ***Dvaidhibhava*** (*Dual Policy: Arthashastra*) by supporting EAGs as well as holding talks with Tatmadaw.

Bangladesh's Present Situation

Bangladesh has gone into a spiral of tumult with events leading to eventually fall of an elected government. The coup has led to establishment of interim government with military backing, leading to the erosion of democratic process. Is this situation really for the reservation in Government Jobs or is there something more to it?? Can these situations develop overnight without external support??? These were the first few questions that crossed many minds interested in international affairs or following security developments in Indian neighbourhood. With India securing safe escape of Sheikh Hasina as she takes the **Hindon Flight**, Bangladesh has gone under Military rule and under Chaos. The violence and unrest continue pushing Bangladesh on the edge.

With Myanmar already in turmoil the situation has become very tense around India and Indian borders remain under immense pressure.

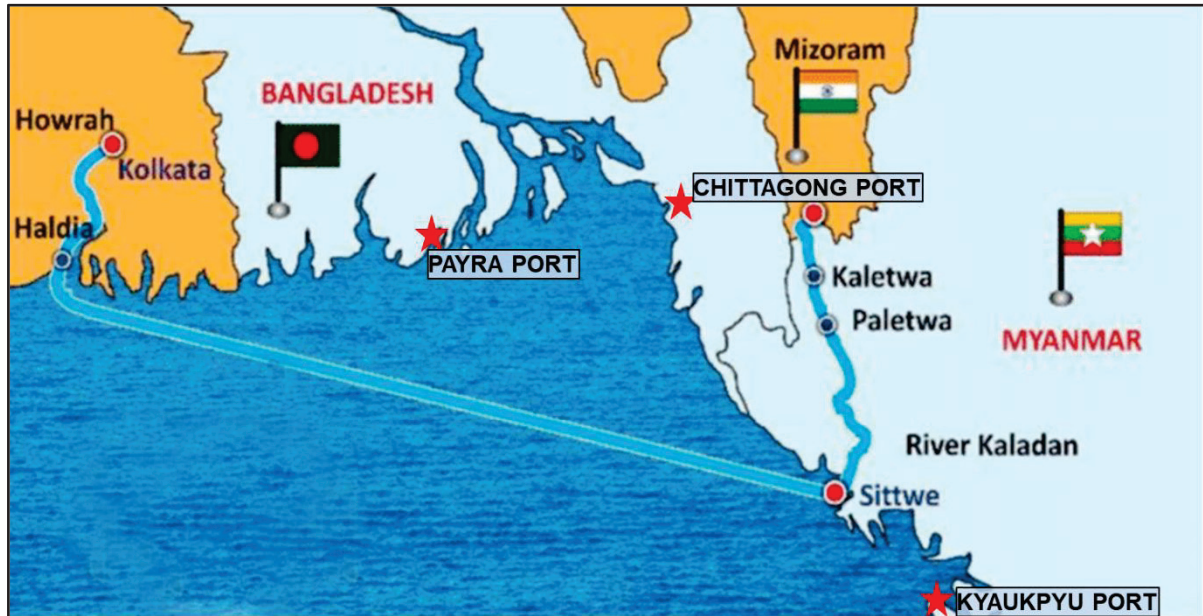
Chinese Footprints

Since 1988, China is the largest supplier of military equipment to Myanmar. The Chinese plans to connect Yunnan province to Myanmar via road and rail network from Kunming to Kyaukpyu is worrying for India owing to the likelihood of China bringing troops in close proximity to Indian borders (Sumanth Samsani, 2021). The deep seaport at Kyaukpyu is the most strategic significant project for China out of all other initiatives.

China maintains a strong strategic foothold in Bangladesh. In 2017, Chinese firms took control of three key natural gas fields previously operated by Chevron, accounting for over half of the country's total gas production. Among China's most critical ventures is its involvement in Bangladeshi port infrastructure. The Payra Deep Sea Port, being developed by China is estimated to cost between USD 11 billion and USD 15 billion. Additionally, from 2010 to 2019, nearly 3/4th of Bangladesh's defence imports originated from China. Beijing is also playing a crucial role in the development of Bangladesh's first submarine base, designed to host Chinese-

manufactured submarines and equipped with essential support infrastructure including barracks, ammunition storage, docking and maintenance facilities (Joyeeta Bhattacharjee, 2021).

Map 1: Chinese Ports in Myanmar and Bangladesh



Source: <https://images.app.goo.gl/VtmCKAhj8ega1vUn7>

Present Situation: Understanding Chinese Imprints

To understand the Chinese imprints in Bangladesh's present situation, let's just join few dots.... Sheikh Hasina government comes to power on 11 January 2024, she visits India from 21 to 22 June 2024, she visits China from 8 to 10 July 2024 and cut shorts her visit by one day. On 14 July Sheikh Hasina says "China is ready but she wants India to undertake USD 1 Billion Teesta River project". On 16 July protest in Bangladesh turns violent. Interestingly these so-called protests against reservation start from Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) where China is involved in developing Chittagong Port. If these protests were only for reservations, then why kill 29 leaders of Awami League and their family members (Business Standard, 2024). So, these are incidents intertwined with each other and are more complex than they are appearing.

In October 2020, India gifted a Kilo- class submarine to Myanmar, coinciding with election win of National League for Democracy (NLD). She was arrested by military and charges on her were of corruption and violation of COVID norms. Were these charges so serious that it amounted to arrest of elected prime minister or was there something else....and even if the charges were so serious was military coup the only option. Situation has not stabilised post-coup, in fact it has worsened with intensified clashes between MNDF and Tatmadaw.

There is one more interesting fact which we must look at. So is it a mere co incidence when Pakistan's Imran Khan Government started questioning China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects and their viability and started going away from China ... Imran Khan was jailed and military takes over.... Myanmar starts drifting towards India and Tatmadaw takes over.... Bangladesh starts getting closer to India and Bangladesh army takes over.... It is more than co incidence or a very interesting co incidence happening to Chinese Interest. Is there a trend in it which we need to understand or is it a mere co incidence?

There is something more to these situations then we see. Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh are fragile economies, where China has huge investments and more interestingly Army is on board on these projects. China conveniently used Jamat - e - Islami in Bangladesh for the desired end state in Bangladesh. In wake of resignation by Sheikh Hasina, General Waker-uz-Zaman comes out and informs about interim government without any discussion and assumes control. Can military do it on their own or they have external backing? Are these incidents spontaneous or they are well planned and timed?? There are numerous questions that are arising with these developments in Asia and all points out towards increasing role of china in meddling with internal situation of these countries and overthrowing the elected government when Chinese national interests are at stake.

Arthashastra Perspective

In Arthashastra Kautilya said that the worst of enemy is enemy within wherein he refers to internal security of state. He says that if a state has to look outwards firstly it should have stability and peace within and stable borders. In present context North East has long suffered insurgency problems which may be revived by vested interests. Porous borders and unstable Bangladesh pose severe security threats from insurgent groups and refugees moving towards own side as well as Chinese supported acts of destabilising North East using these insurgent groups. Refugee influx is also a serious threat to internal security since these refugees are mostly unemployed and are prone to pick up small crimes, indulge in smuggling activities and in worst case can be employed as spies by Chinese. Continued fighting along Indian borders and refugees' influx poses numerous challenges for Indian security. Kautilya, in 320 B.C., emphasised that even the most formidable enemy can be weakened and ultimately defeated when caught between conqueror and its supporting allies. Is this what China is trying to achieve by having increased influence in Myanmar and Bangladesh, with Pakistan already a steadfast ally of China.

Implications for India

The underlying cause of India's concerns towards China's increasing political, economic and military presence in the Indian Subcontinent originates from multiple genuine factors. Present situation in Myanmar and Bangladesh poses numerous challenges for India. Few implications of current situation are enumerated below: -

- **Demographic Alteration** Owing to continued conflict in Myanmar and Bangladesh, it has led to a refugee influx into India, putting a strain on resources and social cohesion. Continued refugee influx has the potential to alter demography of North East.
- **Siliguri Corridor Strategic Vulnerability** Unstable Bangladesh with Chinese influence and increasing Jamat- e- Islami presence poses a grave threat to Siliguri corridor. If Bangladesh drifts towards China, it has the potential to create a strategic vulnerability for India.

- **Illegal Weapons Movement** Porous borders allow movement of EAGs and weapons from Myanmar into India. Weapons are also smuggled from Bangladesh, fueling insurgencies and criminal activities in North East India.
- **Insurgency Spill Overs** After several decades and long drawn insurgencies, North East is stabilising with many insurgent groups entering into SOO (Suspension of Operations) agreement. China is actively involved in supplying arms and supporting EAGs in Myanmar. Volatile situation in Myanmar and Bangladesh has the potential to cause spill over effects in North East India and may lead to revival of insurgency.
- **Drug Trafficking** The Golden Triangle, where Myanmar meets Laos and Thailand, is a hub for drug production and trafficking. Drugs are often smuggled into India through the porous Indo-Myanmar border. Drug trafficking provides a significant source of financing insurgent activities and is also used for money laundering which have direct bearing on economy.
- **Smuggling Activities** Porous and unstable borders are perfect for thriving smuggling activities including illegal movement of goods like teak, areca nuts, gold, jade and other precious stones. These smuggled goods across the border, threatens India's economy and environmental sustainability. These activities are also source for funds for insurgent groups and illegal weapon dealings.

India should carefully assess Chinese activities and its growing imprints in the neighbourhood from a security perspective. Alliances, Modernisation, Capability Enhancement, *Aatmanirbhar Bharat* initiative and Infrastructure Development in Border areas should all be co-terminus with National Security requirements, aimed to counter Chinese futuristic plans, which today evidently points out to Chinese increasing presence in Neighbourhood.

Way Ahead for India

India faces a complex situation with Myanmar and Bangladesh both on the edge. India cannot quietly watch the situation deteriorate beyond control and it needs to take some steps and initiative to stabilise the situation. Indian Army & Tatmadaw have carried out two joint military operation, Sunrise 1 and 2, targeting insurgent groups operating along the frontier of Myanmar's Rakhine region, which shares its boundary with the northeastern India states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipour and Mizoram. Recognising that Myanmar is vital to its national security interests, India offers military training and conducts joint military exercises with Tatmadaw. India has not strongly condemned the actions by Tatmadaw and at the same time Chin Nationals were given shelter in Mizoram. India's stance on Myanmar's current situation remains neutral and it has to be understood from the perspective of increasing Chinese presence in Myanmar. This also underscores the strategic importance of Myanmar for India. It is time India also takes initiative to broker talks between MNDF and Tatmadaw to stabilise the present situation and bring back normalcy and eventually democracy. In case of Bangladesh, India needs to engage with the interim government in Bangladesh to stabilise the present situation. India cannot afford to let Bangladesh go into turmoil and grip in chaos as it has both security as well as geopolitical ramifications.

Conclusion

Events in Myanmar and Bangladesh are not spontaneous but well-orchestrated to destabilise the ruling dispensation in order to facilitate Chinese national interests. Geopolitical importance of Myanmar and Bangladesh cannot be overemphasised for India. Increasing Chinese imprints in Bangladesh and Myanmar could seriously threaten India's interests and have strategic implications for India. Unstable Myanmar and Bangladesh poses numerous challenges for India. Strategic Calculus is a big mosaic where we need to put these pieces of security development

together to understand the holistic situation and see the picture clearer. How India will navigate the present situation, it remains to be seen in coming days.

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