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Role of China in the Myanmar Crisis and its Domino Effect on Manipur

Laishram Nikhil Singh

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, better known as Sam “Bahadur”, was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw’s contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier’s soldier and a General’s General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India’s best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



**Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC
1914-2008**

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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Role of China in the Myanmar Crisis and its Domino Effect on Manipur

“When your neighbour’s house is on fire, you are going to feel the heat”

— **Bertil Lintner,**

Renowned Myanmar Expert at Manipur Press Club

on 14 Feb, 2024

Abstract

Myanmar lies at the crossroads of two Asian giants’ ambitions: India’s Act East Policy and China’s CMEC. The crisis in Myanmar since the 2021 coup, with the alleged important role of China in aiding state and non-state actors, further complicates the issue. There is a lack of clarity in the Chinese overt/ covert role in Myanmar and whether its repercussions in Manipur are a Chinese long game or not. This paper aims to result in understanding the larger Chinese game plan in Myanmar and chart a suggested course for India to navigate the turbulent tides to ensure crystallisation of the Act East Policy. The research references interviews by the author with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) on the subject, documentary evidence, empirical data cited from Rajya Sabha Sessions, UNHCR, Official X Accounts, apart from print media. The temporal scope of the paper covers February 2021 (Myanmar coup) till 2026. However, it intentionally does not cover the Myanmar elections and their results, being outside the scope of the title of the paper. The analyses/ inferences drawn by the author at various sections in the paper suggest Chinese involvement in the Myanmar

and Manipur crises; however, the intent of it being a long game could not be proved concretely. The paper also suggests a course for India to resolve the Myanmar issue which aids in the Act East Policy and estimates a positive effect on Manipur. It concludes with some food for thought and suggests scope for further study.

Introduction

India has progressed a long way from the 'Look East Policy' of the 90s to the 'Act East Policy' two decades down the line. The gateway of this policy passes through our Eastern neighbour, Myanmar, which links it to South East Asia. Unfortunately, since 2021, Myanmar hasn't seen the level of stability under which this Indian dream of 'Act East' can flourish. Another challenging perspective is the fact that Myanmar lies at the crossroads of India's 'Act East Policy' and China's 'China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)'. Further complications arise due to the historically complicated nexus between the Chinese and Myanmar's Tatmadaw and various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs).

On the Indian side of the 1643 km Indo-Myanmar Border, whose origins lie in the inherited fault line of the Treaty of Yandaboo is the state of Manipur, which has experienced ethnic clashes and turmoil since May 2023. A major factor of this so-called 'internal' issue has alleged roots in the turmoil brewing across the border in Myanmar. This paper will attempt to connect and study the issues at hand: the Chinese role in Myanmar's crisis and its further domino effect on Manipur. It will further bring forth suggestions to clear the rubble, to make way for India's 'Act East Policy' to actually be able to 'act'.

China's Core Interests in Myanmar

Outlet to the Indian Ocean. China is a civilisational power with an export-based economy, especially since the 1980s under Deng

Xiaoping. However, its geography restricts the export-oriented economy that it strives to be, primarily due to a comparatively short and rugged coastline onto its East. The Chinese ambitions of a 'Two Oceans' outlet can only be fulfilled by successful access to the Indian Ocean, which has been attempted via the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to the West of India and the China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) to the East of India. A major challenge that China has to deal with is the so-called 'Malacca Dilemma', whose potential solution lies in leveraging the CMEC and the access it gives to the Indian Ocean bypassing the Malacca Strait.

This idea is not a novel one but one that germinated decades ago in a 1985 article written by the Chinese Deputy Minister of Transport Pan Qi titled 'Opening to the Southwest: An Expert Opinion' (Qi, 1985) in the 'Beijing Review' (a weekly magazine published by the Chinese authorities). The underpinning conclusion of the article was the importance of Myanmar as the most convenient access to the Indian Ocean, which gave rise to the present-day CMEC. Another article appeared in December 1994, a cover story by Mr Bertil Lintner in the Far East Economic Review titled 'Burma: China's New Gateway' (Lintner, 1994) wherein these routes have been identified.

Inlet to China. Bertil Lintner, during his talk at the Manipur Press Club at Imphal in February 2024, highlights an anecdote of an interaction with a high-ranking Chinese Government Official, wherein the said official mentioned Myanmar also as an inlet for fossil fuels, oil and natural gas. (Lintner, 2024) The oil and gas pipelines and the development of Kyaukphyu port in Rakhine State are all part of Beijing's larger Belt and Road Initiative.

Economic Aspects. China paid very little attention to energy security until 1993 since it was oil self-sufficient. Growing economic

ties with Myanmar are thought to help China's landlocked southwest region expand economically and close the income gap with the more affluent coastal provinces. (Lee. P, 2009) The Chinese Yunnan province capital Kunming and Myanmar's Rakhine state, which is located off the coast of the Bay of Bengal, are connected by oil and gas pipelines that transfer imported energy from the Bay of Bengal, West Asia, and Africa to the Chinese hinterlands. More than half of the \$11 billion bilateral trade between China and Myanmar is conducted overland. For Yunnan province, cross-border trade with Myanmar is essential. (Yhome, 2019)

Natural Resources. Equally importantly, Myanmar has been very enticing to China due to its vast natural resources. Myanmar is rich in rare earth minerals. Without either the technology or the capability to be utilised by Myanmar, China finds a strategic opportunity in encashing the same and has been very proactive to materialise this opportunity.

Border Stability in Yunnan Province. Myanmar and the Tibet Autonomous Region and Yunnan province of China have a 2204 km land boundary. Yunnan is a key factor in China's Myanmar policy because it shares 1997 km of this. 'Border stability' is one of China's frequently mentioned policy goals in Myanmar. From a geopolitical, security and economic standpoint, stability along China's common border with Myanmar is essential. Ethnic groups with similar cultural backgrounds live in the borderlands: the Wa are present on both sides of the border, the Kokang are ethnic Han Chinese who speak Mandarin, and the Kachin in Myanmar and the Jinphos in China are of the same ethnic stock. Given these ethnic linkages, a critical concern for China is the potential of conflicts spilling over to its side of the border. (Yhome, 2019) A case in point is the heavy presence of cyber scam syndicates along the Sino-Myanmar border opposite Yunnan Province. As the paper unfolds, China's insistence on the removal of these syndicates and,

accordingly, the side it chooses in the ensuing conflict will turn out as a key pivot on which China's support to either the ethnic armed groups or the Tatmadaw rests.

In summary, China has a wide range of interests in Myanmar, including border security, access to the Indian Ocean, energy security through alternate routes for the delivery of gas and oil, and the country's wealth of natural resources. Due to these aims, Myanmar has been incorporated into several of China's internal development plans, including the 'Going Out Strategy' and 'The Great Western Development Project,' two important initiatives that were introduced in 1999. (Mariani. B, 2022)

Inferences

- It can be inferred from the above core interests that it is these issues which drive the overall Chinese game plan in Myanmar. Each of these aspects links up with how China has dealt with Myanmar and can serve as a reflection of how China will act in the future.
- As an example, the aspect of border stability and the crackdowns by China on the cyber scams opposite Yunnan province is a case in point to highlight how China acts to safeguard its interests. Likewise, China indirectly empowering both the EAOs, Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw through its proxies like UWSA to safeguard the CMEC is another example.
- These projects have brought development opportunities for Myanmar but have also created a heavy dependence on Chinese financing and expertise, limiting the country's ability to act independently.

Complex Jigsaw Puzzle: Actors at Play

Myanmar is a highly complex and intricately woven state. Before progressing onto how Chinese actions have panned out since the 2021 coup, it would be prudent to cover the various actors involved to have a clear understanding of the overall game in Myanmar.

UWSA. According to Myanmar Peace Monitor, the UWSA is currently the biggest and best-equipped ethnic military group in Myanmar, with an estimated 30,000 soldiers and 10,000 support personnel. The UWSA and the Tatmadaw have not engaged in combat since the 1989 ceasefire agreement. This deal 'allowed the UWSA to develop the biggest drug empire' with China's open help. More than 30 years after agreeing to a ceasefire with the government, the UWSA inaugurated a new military academy in Yaung Tein, Panghsang, in the area governed by the armed group, on 11 September 2019. Wa essentially dominate the entire region by running their own Government and administration. The UWSA demands complete autonomy, like other ethnic armed groups in Myanmar.

KIA. The KIA (Kachin Independence Army) is the strongest ethnic army in the country after the Wa. The difference is they are fighting against the Burmese Army. They had a cease-fire agreement which lasted from 1994 to 2011, which then broke down. The KIA also has good relations with China, but their relationship with China is of a different nature. They depend on China for petrol, food, and medical supplies. They also export cane and timber to China to get an income. They cannot buy guns from China, but they are made in their own gun factories. (Lintner, 2024)

Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). Ta'ang is just another name for Palaung. It is an ethnic minority, at least in northern Shan State, closely related to the Wa ethnic group, and

they have a good relationship with KIA. They get their Chinese weapons, but they do not get them from China directly. All the weapons have to go through the Wa so that the Chinese can keep an eye on and control them. (Lintner, 2024)

Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). This is a Kokang group, and they are all ethnic Chinese, some of the most efficient and toughest fighters in the country. They have been very active in the so-called 'Operation 1027' launched on 27 October 2023. (Lintner, 2024)

Arakan Army (AA). The primary insurgent organisation in Rakhine State at the moment is the Arakan Army, which was created in 2009 and is claimed to have Chinese assistance. The AA was founded in 2009 in Laiza, Kachin State and declared in 2014 that its long-term goal was to return to its ancestral home of Rakhine (Arakan) State, where it would allegedly elect its own government. (Yadav, 2021)

Three Brotherhood Alliance. The alliance between the MNDAA, TNLA and the AA is called the Three Brotherhood Alliance, which launched the Operation 1027 against the ruling military Junta.

Northern Alliance. There are more than 28 EAOs (16 active groups and 12 ceasefire groups) presently operational in Myanmar, but the 'Northern Alliance' is the most powerful and is actively fighting against the Tatmadaw. The military coalition known as the Northern Alliance is composed of the Arakan Army (AA), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) (Yadav, 2021). So, in effect it is the Three Brotherhood Alliance plus the KIA.

NUG and PDF. National Unity Government is the pseudo government formed by the democratic forces that were ousted since February 2021, and the People's Defence Forces (PDF) is their armed wing.

Myanmar Crisis and China's Handling of Situation Post 2021

Due to its close ties to both the Myanmar government and insurgent groups operating along the China-Myanmar border, the People's Republic of China has long been accused of playing a multidimensional role in the conflict. China is reported to have provided logistical support to the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) during their insurgency in Myanmar, aiding their Maoist philosophy. China was charged by Myanmar with continuing to fund rebel groups who were active along its border after the CPB's armed branch decided to disband in 1988. These groups included the MNDAA and the UWSA, the latter of which has stronger ties to China because of their shared Han Chinese background.

Mutual mistrust has plagued China-Myanmar relations, with Beijing viewing Myanmar as an untrustworthy ally and Naypyitaw concerned about the motives of its massive neighbour. President Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi were among those detained when the Myanmar military overthrew the government in a coup on 01 February 2021 and declared a state of emergency. Beijing was taken aback by the coup. Beijing unexpectedly had to deal with the return to direct control of a military that had long harboured misgivings about China, led by a commander-in-chief whose mistrust was especially strong, after making substantial investments in its relationship with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her administration and expecting an acceleration of its Belt and Road projects in the nation. These views came from his personal experience of commanding ground operations against

the Chinese-backed Kokang ethnic armed group in 2009, as well as the Myanmar military's history of battling the CPB (International Crisis Group, 2024). Post 01 February 2021, the Northern Alliance, except the AA, has openly criticised the Tatmadaw and its SAC government. KIA, TNLA and MNDAA are continuously fighting the Tatmadaw post military coup and even supporting the protesters and the civil defence fighters.

Immediate Response.

Behind the scenes, Chinese authorities pressed the dictatorship to start a conversation with Aung San Suu Kyi and restore the constitutional order, but China's initial reaction was muted, with state media characterising the coup as a 'major cabinet reshuffle.' (ISEAS, 2022). Seven months after the coup, in September 2021, Chinese state media continued to refer to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy as 'the legitimate party in Myanmar.' Beijing was careful, however, to keep its engagement with the regime somewhat detached. It did not accord Senior General Min Aung Hlaing the status of head of state or government, at first referring to him only as military chief and later as chairman of the State Administration Council, as the junta calls itself. It also limited high-level engagement (International Crisis Group, 2024). It has since expanded high-level engagement with the military regime on issues of concern.

Gradual Re-engagement: Till October 2023

As the Myanmar regime repeatedly extended the state of emergency that it used to justify its rule and delay holding elections, China increased the tempo of its engagement with the generals, particularly from early 2023. It had not decided to give overt support to the regime, but it was moved by other considerations. China likely felt that it could not afford to wait until a new government was in place to re-engage. It wished to discuss

important issues, including the impact of armed conflict in Myanmar on China's borders and the growing threat from transnational organised crime, and was loath to leave diplomatic space that its geopolitical rivals, such as India and Japan, might exploit. (International Crisis Group, 2024)

China's diplomatic surge began in early April 2023 with a visit by Yunnan provincial party chief Wang Ning, who met with Min Aung Hlaing and ministers and signed a series of economic agreements. It was further supplemented by the visit of Wang Xiaohong, China's State Councillor and Minister of Public Security. (Global Times, 2023)

In May 2023, the then Foreign Minister Qin Gang visited Naypyitaw, (Global Times, 2023) meeting with Min Aung Hlaing and separately with former military leader Than Shwe. Qin was the highest-ranking Chinese official to see the junta leader following the coup. He reportedly urged the general to do more to tackle online scam centres, stating to this effect following the meeting.

Further in May 2023, Myanmar state media said Chinese military intelligence chief Major General Yang had met Deputy Commander-in-Chief Soe Win in Naypyitaw, but then quickly deleted the articles, apparently because they violated confidentiality protocols to which both sides had agreed. (International Crisis Group, 2024) It was the first publicly reported visit to Myanmar of a Chinese military officer since the coup, confirming Beijing's shift toward re-engagement.

China's special envoy to Myanmar, Deng Xijun, was also very active over this period. After his appointment to the role in November 2022, he held several rounds of meetings with the leaders of ethnic armed groups in Shan State, as well as with the regime. The result was Chinese-brokered peace talks in the Myanmar border enclave of Mongla from 01-02 June 2023, between

regime officials and the Three Brotherhood Alliance (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Uneasy Peace/Re-engagement with the Tatmadaw. Though the interactions as listed above indicate China's willingness to engage constructively with Myanmar's regime, few other incidents reflect the cautious path China took and that a full re-engagement was still a distant dream. Abstinence on a UNSC resolution against Myanmar (not using its veto) (International Crisis Group, 2024) in December 2022, no objections on Myanmar's permanent representative in the UN, Kyaw Moe Tun (appointed by the erstwhile NLD administration and openly siding with the NUG), ahead of the UN General Assembly session in September 2023, Beijing refraining from inviting Senior General Min Aung Hlaing for an official visit to China are some instances which support this argument.

Cyber Scam Syndicates and Chinese Crackdown

The reason China allowed the 2023 offensive almost certainly relates to the proliferation of online scam centres in Myanmar in recent years and the regime's failure to crack down on them. The UN has reported that as many as 120,000 people, most of them Chinese or other foreign nationals and many of them trafficked and held against their will, may be involved in these scams. In Myanmar, the Kokang zone, on the Chinese border, had become a particular hotspot.

China spent over half of 2023 pleading with the then Myanmar's Junta Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and other members of his State Administrative Council (SAC) to crack down on cross-border scam operations that use trafficked Chinese nationals as forced labour. Having received no response by September, China began to look at other ways of tackling the problem, including arresting and detaining militia leaders and

deploying Chinese police to some of the border areas hosting scam centers. Three weeks into the operation, over 7,000 people had managed to escape the criminal compounds and flee to China, while many more were delivered to the Thai border.

Fast forward to September 2025, a Chinese court sentenced to death 11 members of the Ming family criminal syndicate, based in Kokang (northern part of Shan State), for multiple crimes including establishing scam centres and killing Chinese nationals. The family's patriarch, Ming Xuechang, reportedly killed himself in custody in Myanmar before he could be handed over to China. Those sentenced to death include his son Ming Xiaoping (also known as Ming Guoping) and his granddaughter Ming Zhenzhen. (The Irrawady, 2025)

Late October 2025 raids roiled Myanmar fraud factory KK Park at Myawady Township (Kayin State), sending more than 1,500 people fleeing over the border to Thailand via the Moei River, but many stayed behind to pursue new opportunities in the black market. According to provincial Thai authorities, it caused 1,500 people of 28 different nationalities to flee to Thailand. About 200 Filipinos and 500 Indian citizens were among them. (Myanmar Now, 2025)

A former Myanmar Kokang commander and member of the military proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), Bai Suocheng, his son Bai Yingcang, and three others were given death sentences by another Chinese court in November 2025 for their long-term involvement in fraud activities in northern Myanmar. According to Chinese media, they constructed 41 scam compounds in the Kokang region and engaged in 'telecom fraud, operating gambling dens, intentional homicide, organising and coercing prostitution and organising illegal crossing of national borders by others.' Separately, Bai Yingcang was convicted of

conspiring to traffic and manufacture approximately 11 tons of methamphetamine, according to the reports. (The Irrawady, 2025) (Global Times, 2025)

Analysis

- Significant Chinese legal actions indicate the deep-rooted intent of China to ensure stability of its southwestern border in Yunnan Province. It further corroborates the covert Chinese support to the Three Brotherhood Alliance for the launch of Operation 1027 in October 2023 (when it realised the inaction of the Myanmar Junta regime against the cyber scam syndicates).
- For the Myanmar Junta, it's a good situation, as indirectly, the clearance of the cyber scam syndicates coupled with the return of townships by the ethnic armed groups stabilises its stronghold in the states on its Eastern border (Kachin, Shan and Kayin primarily). Its significance further increases in view of the upcoming elections.

Effects on Yunnan Border and Operation 1027

When the MNDAA launched attacks on 27 October 2023 aiming to take control of the Kokang zone, Beijing was ready to accept short-term instability on its border in return for the ouster of the Kokang border guard and the closure of the enclave's many scam centres. (International Crisis Group, 2024) The Three Brotherhood Alliance explicitly pledged to do these things in its statement upon launching Operation 1027 (Development Media Group, 2024), almost certainly as a sweetener for Beijing.

On 27 October 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance launched a coordinated offensive against regime forces in northern Shan

State, on China's border. Several post-coup resistance forces also participated in the operation. The groups seized numerous towns, overran hundreds of Myanmar military outposts and bases, and severed overland trade routes to China. Dubbed Operation 1027 after the date, the assault rolled on into 2024, causing mounting losses for the regime, which proved incapable of staging an effective counteroffensive. Sensing the military's weakness, resistance forces in other parts of the country also went on the attack, although not always with the rapid success of the Three Brotherhood Alliance.

Operation 1027 would not have been feasible without Beijing's acquiescence. Much of the combat took place adjacent to the border, something China has long been keen to tamp down given its aversion to spillover into Chinese territory and to refugee flows. It has advanced China's quest to eradicate forced labour scam compounds on its border. However, it has also disrupted the lucrative China-Myanmar border trade and triggered a countrywide attack by resistance forces that has dealt the junta unprecedented battlefield losses. Beijing worries that the loss of border trade will cause economic hardship for its southwestern provinces and that ongoing hostilities may have an impact on the energy security of these areas. China is likely more concerned that the Myanmar army may be in danger of defeat as a result of the army's frantic appeal for Chinese assistance in handling the consequences of Operation 1027. (Clap, 2023) It covertly supported the rebel attack in North Eastern Myanmar, which ultimately resulted in the military's biggest defeats since independence.

On 12 November, 2023, the Chinese government issued an arrest warrant for Ming Xuechang, the leader of the Myanmar army border guard force (BGF), who was responsible for the 20 October 2023 massacre of Chinese citizens in Kokang, as well as three of his relatives who were involved in running their scam compound. In

an unusual step, the Myanmar army sent out a sizeable troop detachment to track down Ming Xuechang and, according to the MNDAA, execute him. Within four days, his three relatives were turned over to Chinese authorities. When Min Aung Hlaing led Myanmar army troops to conquer Kokang in 2009, he was successfully forced by Chinese pressure to start demolishing the BGF that he had founded himself, thereby ruining his own legacy in Kokang.

Since then, China has responded favourably to the Myanmar army's calls for assistance, exerting modest pressure on the Three Brotherhood Alliance to start talks with the junta. However, Chinese aid comes at a steep cost. Chinese police issued new arrest warrants for ten more Kokang BGF elites immediately after the junta's foreign minister left China. These individuals included the remaining leaders of the Myanmar army's BGF as well as the heads of scam syndicates involved in fraud, murder and trafficking. (Clap, 2023)

The Myanmar Army turned to a conventional defence strategy, fomenting popular hostility, in this case against China, when unit morale reached an all-time low. The Army organized a protest group to march on the Chinese Embassy in Yangon in the middle of November, denouncing China's backing of the Three Brotherhood Alliance and charging China with meddling in its domestic affairs. Strangely, this only served to strengthen the MNDAA's own support in China, as it swiftly used its propaganda apparatus to highlight the Myanmar military's escalating anti-China sentiments on WeChat and intensified its demands to end the 'military dictatorship.'

China realised more and more that Operation 1027 was about far more than just eliminating scams, and that it would probably become uncontrollable. China swiftly responded with two military

operations: a naval visit to Yangon and a People's Liberation Army live-fire drill on the border in Yunnan. These actions were intended to send a clear message of Chinese security influence and determination to achieve stability to protect its strategic interests in the nation, particularly a border trade worth almost \$4 billion annually.

Series of Ceasefire Attempts: Albeit Failed Ones

In remarks on state television, a regime spokesperson disclosed the hitherto confidential negotiations, stating simply that they had moved forward with China's assistance and that more talks were anticipated later in the month. A spokesperson for China's foreign ministry said the next day that the negotiations had produced 'positive results' and that China was prepared to 'continue to provide support.' The Chinese spokesperson went further, stating that 'with China's mediation effort, Myanmar's military recently held peace talks with the MNDAA, TNLA and AA in China and reached agreement on many arrangements, including the temporary ceasefire in Kokang and maintaining the momentum of dialogue'. (Global Times, 2023) This was the Haigeng Agreement. The Three Brotherhood Alliance made no official statement.

China only invited the parties together to discuss a truce after the MNDAA had taken over most of the Kokang zone and besieged Laukkaing, the main town. Few specifics of these discussions have been made public, but a copy of the draft agreement obtained by Crisis Group indicates that the first meeting was held in Kunming, China. It was mediated by Deng Xijun, China's special envoy to Myanmar, and brought together senior representatives of the MNDAA, TNLA and Arakan Army as well as Lieutenant General Min Naing, secretary of the regime peace team. (International Crisis Group, 2024) While the negotiations did not conclude and further talks subsequently took place, the MNDAA agreed not to attack

Laukkaing and to cooperate in providing safe conduct for Chinese citizens rescued from the city's scam centres.

China hosted a second round of negotiations, which apparently failed. According to one member of an armed group, a spokesman of the regime warned that towns taken over by ethnic armed groups would never experience peace because regime forces would attack them from the air. By this point, the precarious Kokang truce appeared to be collapsing: Beijing issued a 'serious protest' after government bombings near Laukkaing on the day of the negotiations killed civilians, including Chinese citizens. (International Crisis Group, 2024)

A week later, the MNDAA attacked an infantry battalion base north of Laukkaing town, allegedly taking it the next day. China expressed 'strong dissatisfaction' over a military stray artillery shell that had landed on its territory the day before and injured multiple people. (South China Morning Post, 2025) Almost 2,400 soldiers and their families, including six brigadier generals, were negotiating to leave the Myanmar military's last surviving base in Laukkaing on the same day. In addition to the fact that the MNDAA now controlled the whole Kokang zone, the regime had also been severely humiliated by the biggest surrender in the history of the Myanmar military.

Operation 0307 (March 2024) and Aftermath

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) launched Operation 0307 (for 7th March) in March, which swiftly took control of junta outposts throughout Kachin State, especially along the China border, giving the Three Brotherhood Alliance more confidence. The KIA strikes created the perfect environment for the 3BHA to progress to a new stage of its own offensive by compelling the military to reallocate its already dispersed soldiers. (Clap, 2023)

The junta started major attacks on the TNLA ahead of the May talks mediated by China, flagrantly breaking the Haigeng Agreement in an attempt to increase its negotiating power. However, the TNLA reacted violently. TNLA-controlled region would no longer allow junta representatives. That essentially ensured that the negotiations would fail because the presence of the regime in the 3BHA area to assist in managing the border trade was a crucial issue that needed to be resolved in China.

The action was a major source of Chinese influence over the MNDAA, which required the utilities to promote economic growth in its recently reclaimed territory, and it occurred eight months after China had shut off these services. The restoration of services also infuriated the junta, which had anticipated more Chinese pressure on the 3BHA to completely stop its revolutionary activities, even though China's goal may have been to persuade the MNDAA to put an end to confrontations with the army. 'Phase two' of Operation 1027 was initiated in June 2024, taking advantage of a ceasefire. (Ministry of Information Myanmar, 2024) The Haigeng Agreement was a failure. Two weeks after the discussions broke down, China made a significant concession to the MNDAA by restoring water, internet, and electricity to the Kokang area on 01 June, demonstrating the Chinese belief that the junta was primarily to fault for the negotiations' failure.

Tatmadaw seeks Chinese Assistance.

The increasingly desperate Myanmar army turned to China for support as the Three Brotherhood Alliance quickly closed in on Lashio, the second-largest city in Shan State. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the head of the coup regime, began a charm campaign against the Chinese as early as April 2024. First, he proposed to revive a significant dam project, the Myitsone Dam, where a significant Chinese state-owned company has been trying

to go back to work for more than ten years. After that, he proclaimed Chinese New Year a public holiday in Myanmar, garnering favourable publicity in Chinese state media. Lastly, he sent former President Thein Sein to attend the PRC's 70th anniversary celebration of its dedication to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, which was held in Beijing in early July 2024, in support of China's regional propaganda efforts.

Using Thein Sein's visit as leverage, Min Aung Hlaing asked China for assistance in pressing the 3BHA to halt Operation 1027's second phase. Beijing made it apparent that it had no desire to take any drastic measures to end hostilities, even though it did rely on the MNDAA in particular to demand a unilateral cease-fire. As a result, the MNDAA announced a 'peaceful strategy' for seizing Lashio, offering cash prizes and rewards for deserters and defectors from the regime army, even though it also declared and then prolonged the PRC-mandated cease-fire until 31 July. In response, the junta launched a series of airstrikes against MNDAA positions near the China border in Laukkaing. According to the conditions of the MNDAA cease-fire, this justifies the junta's ongoing advance on positions a few kilometres from Lashio.

The Myanmar Army's attempts to fight an attrition battle with the MNDAA by demolishing Laukkaing are likely to backfire, especially if Chinese interests are damaged in the crossfire, even though China has patiently watched these bombings destroy civilian targets just kilometres from its border. What Thein Sein's visit revealed to the junta about China's ambitions made it noteworthy as well.

The trip came after a frenzy of Chinese diplomacy about the elections in Myanmar, including offers to political parties to come to China. Elections, according to China, are one way to stabilise the situation and move toward a restoration of normalcy. Beijing sent

a clear message that it hopes Myanmar will return to the path of reform that the military began in 2008 by inviting Thein Sein, the reformist president who signed agreements with the UWSA and brought the National League for Democracy party back into the parliament, even though this is a questionable prospect on many levels.

One of China's more audacious measures to date with the military dictatorship was to invite the second in charge of the armed forces to China in early July to attend the first Shanghai Cooperation Organization Forum on Green Development, which began in 2008, as the Three Brotherhood Alliance was closing in on Lashio. (Strait Times, 2025) There were two reasons why this invitation was important. First, it gave the regime legitimacy in a major international organisation that China hopes would get more involved in matters of regional security. One of the highest-level individuals present during the meeting was Soe Win, the deputy commander, who stood next to Iran's vice president. Second, Soe Win had the chance to meet with the chair of the SCO's Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation Commission. This suggests that China may involve the SCO in Myanmar affairs more thoroughly, replacing the role of ASEAN, which has declined to include the military in meetings at the ministerial level and above. Notably, however, unlike Thein Sein, Soe Win was not afforded any meeting with senior Chinese leaders.

Arms Assistance to Tatmadaw and EAOs.

British military intelligence publisher Janes International Defence Review, based on social media posts showing low-flying drones over Mandalay in March 2021, the Myanmar Air Force reportedly used Chinese-made UAVs to monitor protesters opposing the SAC. Images showed a CH-3A (CAI Hong-3A, or Rainbow-3A) tactical UAV hovering above Mandalay, the scene of

widespread public protests and crackdowns. According to reports, the UAVs are being built by China's state-owned China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC). It was the first time specialist military equipment had been used against demonstrators.

The Chinese military modernisation led to the phasing out of all small arms, including the AK series. These are refurbished and pumped inside Myanmar and North East India. Weapons from Indonesia (Aceh Rebels) are also pushed towards the region. The Chinese NORINCO arms manufacturing company has developed weapons and are pushing it through the KIA (Desai, 2025). The input of the NORINCO factory in Ruili has been covered in print media as found by the author. (IMR, 2025)

A CENJOWS Monograph by Brig Anshuman Narang (Retd) titled 'Myanmar's Technologically Asymmetric Civil War: Chinese Drones Fleet with Ukrainian Characteristics' brings out the complicit role of the Chinese in equipping the Myanmar Junta in detail. While the military junta has procured both Chinese and Russian drones, Chinese drones have stolen the limelight because of the much larger numbers, comparatively easier accessibility, and geographical proximity of Chinese drones components providers (Narang, 2025). While the MAF started focused modernisation since 2014-15 with a steep rise in budget, they imported nearly 1 billion USD worth of equipment from Russia and China mainly between the coup in 2021 and May 2023. (Hudson, 2025)

Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) report claims that 'In November 2023, the military junta leader visited Chinese drone manufacturers and reportedly ordered thousands of drone parts'. (Narang, 2025) Out of these drones received, about 300 drones were sent to Rakhine State, about 400 drones were sent to the Tatmadaw's Northeast Military Command in Lashio

responsible for Northern Shan State, and the balance were delivered to other states and regions. Aung Thura highlights that 'Beijing has provided training in arms manufacturing to Myanmar military engineers and senior non-commissioned officers after they graduated from technical schools...Regime soldiers (Tatmadaw) began attending drone training courses in Tianjin in early 2024'. (Narang, 2025)

The KIA's drone attack on Naypyidaw, Myanmar's capital, triggered an immediate mobilisation of PLAAF J10C and PLAGF elements ex PLA's Southern Theatre Command (STC) to conduct a Live-fire Deterrence Exercise along the Myanmar-China border in April 2024. Many Chinese netizens have claimed that STC had conducted drone strikes on various locations, with rumours of even three KIA battalions being wiped out. However, the Chinese official media has kept quiet on the issue. (Narang, 2025)

Shri M Rajkumar Singh, IAS, Deputy Commissioner, Imphal West, has also confirmed these inputs through a response to one of the questions posed to him by the author. Excerpt from the response is reproduced. 'Chinese reconnaissance drones such as the CH-3A and locally assembled Sky-02 have been documented in Myanmar's counterinsurgency operations, and several instances of their crash or capture by resistance forces have been reported. Between 2021 and 2024, Myanmar's resistance forces captured multiple Chinese-manufactured drones used by the Tatmadaw, confirming Beijing's ongoing arms support despite official neutrality claims. Indian security agencies have also seized significant caches of weapons bearing Chinese markings from militant groups in Manipur, including both Meitei and Kuki factions.' (Rajkumar, 2025)

Analysis: A Case of Lost Opportunities for India

27

MANEKSHAW PAPER NO. 144, 2026

After an introspective analysis of the China-Myanmar interactions during the entire episode since the February 2021 coup by the author, it is assessed that the entire journey for India has been one of a case of lost opportunities. Although there are other inferences too from the Sino-Myanmar angle, the analysis has been restricted to the implications (lost opportunities) for India as under:-.

- The lost opportunities primarily pertain to slow engagement with the Tatmadaw. It is agreed that an immediate acceptance of the ruling Tatmadaw regime would have raised questions on India's orientation in the diplomatic circles. But, in 'realpolitik' as they say, national interest stays above all, and thus, the author believes that India reacted rather than being proactive in most of the situations that unfolded.
- Immediately post the 2021 coup, when China was partly surprised and not comfortable with the developments in Myanmar, it is felt that India did not do much to engage deeply with the Tatmadaw. It would have tilted the Tatmadaw cognitively on the Indian side, which China ultimately did cash in on after the Tatmadaw approached China (after repeated success of ethnic armed groups post Operation 0307).
- One of the articles referred to in this paper speaks of China being loath to leave diplomatic space that its geopolitical rivals, such as India and Japan, might exploit. This clearly indicates that China appreciated that India might exploit this opportunity post the coup to strengthen ties with the Junta regime.

- Post Operation 1027, it would have been prudent on India's part to proactively engage with both sides to mediate a ceasefire. Rather, the opportunity was cashed on by China in early 2024 with the Haigeng Agreement. Although the agreement was short-lived and the ceasefire failed very soon, China's active diplomatic engagements like posting a special envoy to mediate the ceasefire and further diplomatic meets as covered earlier in the paper must serve as a lesson for India. An India mediated cease fire would have given Indo-Myanmar ties a boost for years to come.
- China's support to the Tatmadaw was not a full-throttle one as can be seen from a few instances covered earlier, like the abstinence from a UNSC resolution against Myanmar, no objection on Myanmar's Permanent Representative being a close NLD confidante and lack of engagement with Senior General Hlaing in the initial years post the coup. This could have been cashed on by India to build and spread the narrative of China's agreement on the Myanmar regime as not being a healthy one for regional and global stability. Although this point is contrary to the ideas in the other cases, it needs to be agreed that diplomacy is all about 'walking the tightrope well', something which India has done so well in other scenarios.
- Another pertinent issue is of the Indian citizens found (either voluntarily/ under coercion) amongst those caught in the cyber scam syndicates. Despite the involvement of Indian citizens, actions by India to voice opinion against the illegal syndicates were found lacking.

Domino Effect on Manipur Crisis

29

MANEKSHAW PAPER NO. 144, 2026

Demographic Changes

Due to lack of an official census post 2011 (since the 2021 census was not conducted due to COVID) and further official Government of India demographic surveys post May 2023 (when the Manipur crisis began), it is difficult to fully ascertain the impact of demographic changes. However, as per UNHCR, as at 2023, India was hosting over 74,600 refugees from Myanmar, more than an estimated 54,100 of whom arrived since the coup in February 2021. (UNHCR, 2025)

Trans Border Ethnic Linkages. The key reason for the abovementioned refugee crisis points to the historical fault line of the Indo-Myanmar Border (IMB) itself, with multiple iterations – commencing with the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826, the Government of Burma Act 1935 and the formalisation in its present form in the Indo Burma Boundary Agreement of 1967. Amongst the many communities divided by the IMB, the Zo community is the primary actor in question for the demographic changes in Manipur, as also in Mizoram.

The term ‘Zo’ is an umbrella term that encompasses the Kuki, Chin, Mizos; a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group spread throughout North East India, the Chin and Sagaing Divisions of present-day Myanmar, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. (Doungel, Two day National Conference on Rethinking Our Identity: Past and Present, 2025) They were first heard of as Kukis in Manipur, between 1830 and 1840; though tribes of the same race had long been subject to the Rajah of Manipur. The new immigrants began to cause anxiety about the year 1845, and soon poured into the hill tracts of Manipur in such numbers as to drive away many of the older inhabitants (Johnston, 1896). This very basic understanding of its origins is essential to appreciate the fraternal linkages that exist

beyond the state or the international boundaries that exist in the modern day. Few statistics accessed from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) appended below highlight how Sagaing Division (Myanmar) and neighbouring Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram have been affected.

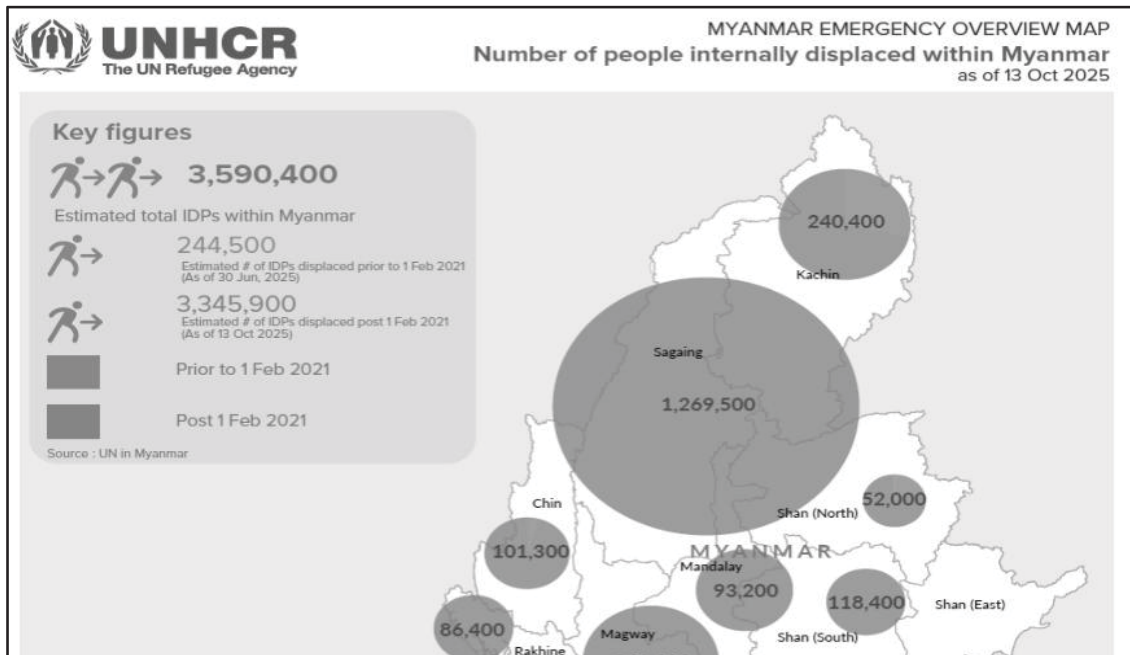


Figure 1: UNHCR Data on Internally Displaced People (IDPs) within Myanmar (UNHCR, 2025)

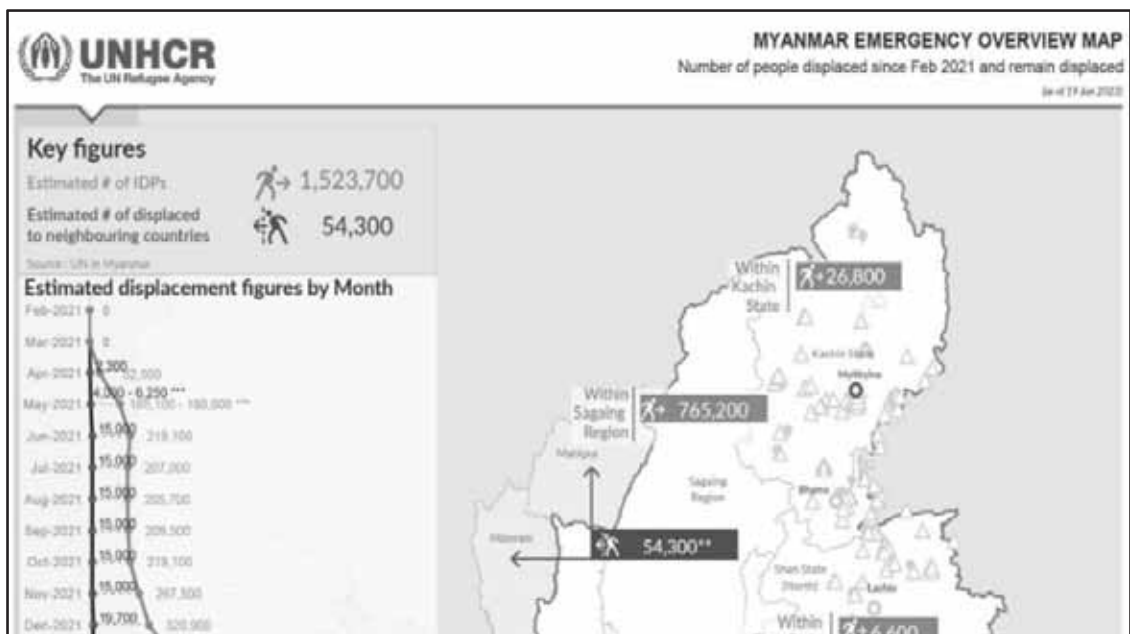


Figure 2: Displaced People to Neighbouring Countries (UNHCR, 2025)

Analysis/ Inferences

- A few images accessed from the UNHCR Website bring out certain inferences. As can be seen in Figure 1, the Sagaing and Chin States, neighbouring Manipur and Mizoram, have seen nearly 100 % displacement of population (though internally) post the February 2021 coup and with maximum IDPs in the Sagaing region opposite Manipur. The next figure (Figure 2) shows approximately 54,300 people displaced into Manipur and Mizoram as per the UN Data.
- Another inference leads from the historical fault line and colonial baggage that ultimately led to the IMB. Fraternal linkages are a major cause, and a direct byproduct has resulted in the statistics flagged in Figure 2. The 'Zo' (encompassing Kuki, Chin, Mizos as highlighted earlier) inhabit both India (Manipur and Mizoram) and Myanmar (Chin State), thus their displacement West of the IMB owing to the instability in Myanmar is a natural outcome.

Drug Trafficking

Myanmar is the second largest producer of Opium. Although the area under cultivation has not returned to historic peaks of nearly 58,000 ha cultivated in 2013, Poppy cultivation in Myanmar is expanding and becoming more productive. It is mainly trafficked into India through land borders along North Eastern states. (Narcotics Control Bureau, 2023) The US Drug Enforcement Administration claims that 60% of the world's drug supply comes from Myanmar, which also produces 80% of the drugs in Southeast Asia. As a result, the Northeast States, especially Manipur, serve as a transit route between raw material suppliers and manufacturers of completed pharmaceuticals. (Singh, 2022)

In North America and Southeast Asia, synthetic drugs such as Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS) are now the drug of choice. There have already been multiple attempts to establish covert manufacturing operations in India. Along the North Eastern Border States, ATS trafficking from Myanmar to India is common. (Narcotics Control Bureau, 2023)

The traditional drug routes from SE Asia to India are as marked in Figure 3. According to Manipuri journalist Phanjaobam Tarapot, some of the critical trafficking routes in Northeast India, passing through Manipur are as follows:- (Singh, 2022)

- Behiang-Singhat-Churachandpur-Imphal or Tipaimukh-Silchar.
- Tamu-Moreh-Imphal or Homalin-Kamjong-Shangshak Khullen-Ukhrul.
- Homalin-Ukhrul-Jessami-Kohima.
- Kheinan-Behiang-Churachandpur-Imphal-Kohima-Dimapur.

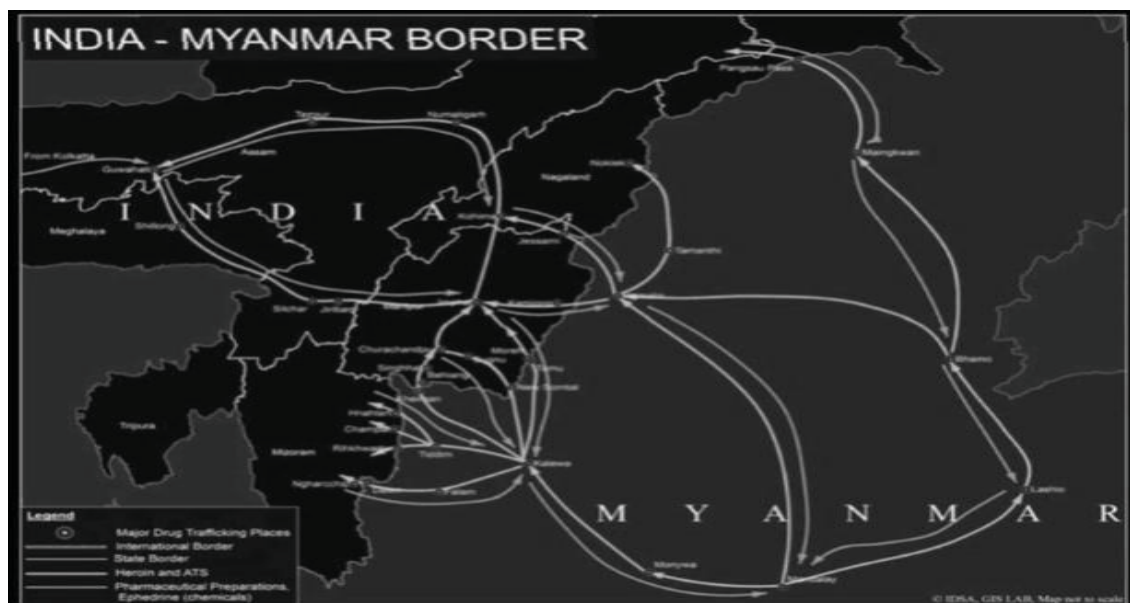


Figure 3: Drug Trade Routes from SE Asia to India (Das, 2012)

The same has been corroborated from the PhD Thesis of Col (Dr) Abhishek Yadav. 'These drugs are transported to India via Bhamo, Lashio, and Mandalay. The primary trafficking route runs from Tamu in Manipur to Moreh and then down National Highway 39 to Imphal and Kohima. Two Chinese immigrants were arrested by Myanmar security authorities for possessing drugs and firearms valued at more than 18,000 lakhs of kyat in Muse, Shan State. The same method is used for the reverse trafficking of codeine-based pharmaceutical products from India to Myanmar as well as precursor chemicals like ephedrine and pseudo-ephedrine. Although the larger rebel groups/ EAGs do not engage in drug trafficking directly to raise money, they do so inadvertently by asking the drug mafia for protection money in exchange for granting safe passage for the drug consignments through their region. Warlords in Myanmar's NE Shan State produce drugs with the help of international organised criminal syndicates to fund their forces.' (Yadav, 2021)

The seizure of a Myanmar fishing vessel named 'Soe Wai Yan Htoo' in the Andaman Sea on 25 November, 2024, by the Indian Coast Guard (ICG), which contained about 5,500 kg of the illegal substance methamphetamine and one portable Inmarsat satellite phone, is significant to note. (Press Information Bureau, 2024) The six crew members onboard the boat were identified as Myanmar nationals. As per an article by an intern at the think tank, Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), the boat was headed for Thailand. (ICWA, 2024)

Drug Seizure and Arrests Data. The author accessed the Rajya Sabha website to ascertain any relevant discussion on the subject. Accordingly, an unstarred question dated 02 August 2023 was found. Details as obtained from the response to the question have been converted into two graphs (Figures 4 and 5) for easier visualisation and assimilation. The data is for the period covering

2020 to May 2023 (i.e., the onset of the Manipur crisis in May 2023). Brief details as obtained are represented in two graphs as per figures on the following page.

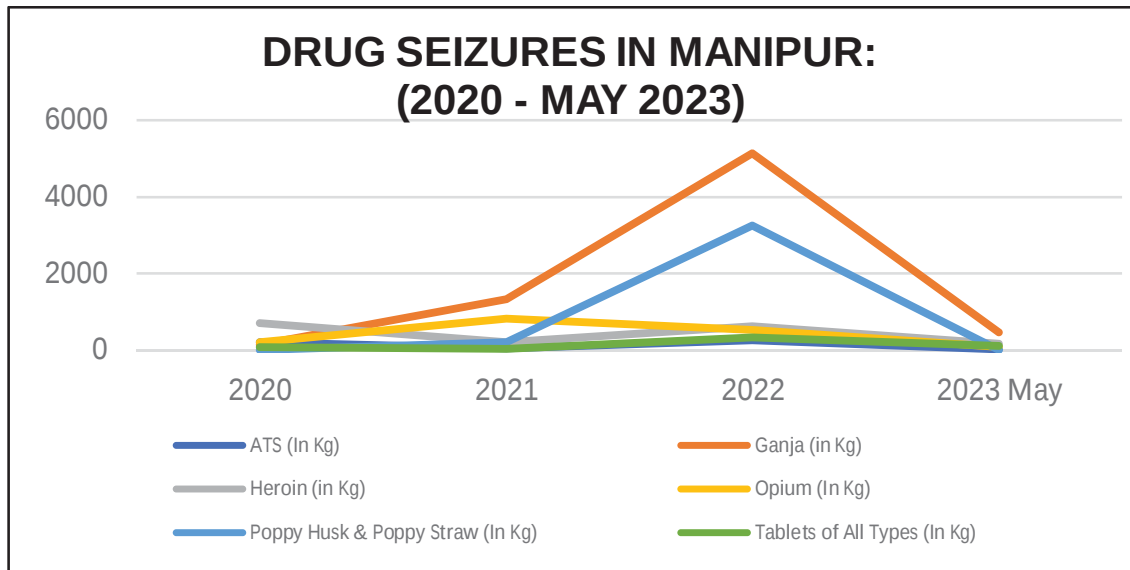


Figure 4: Drug Seizures & Drug Cases in Manipur (Rajya Sabha Session, 2023)

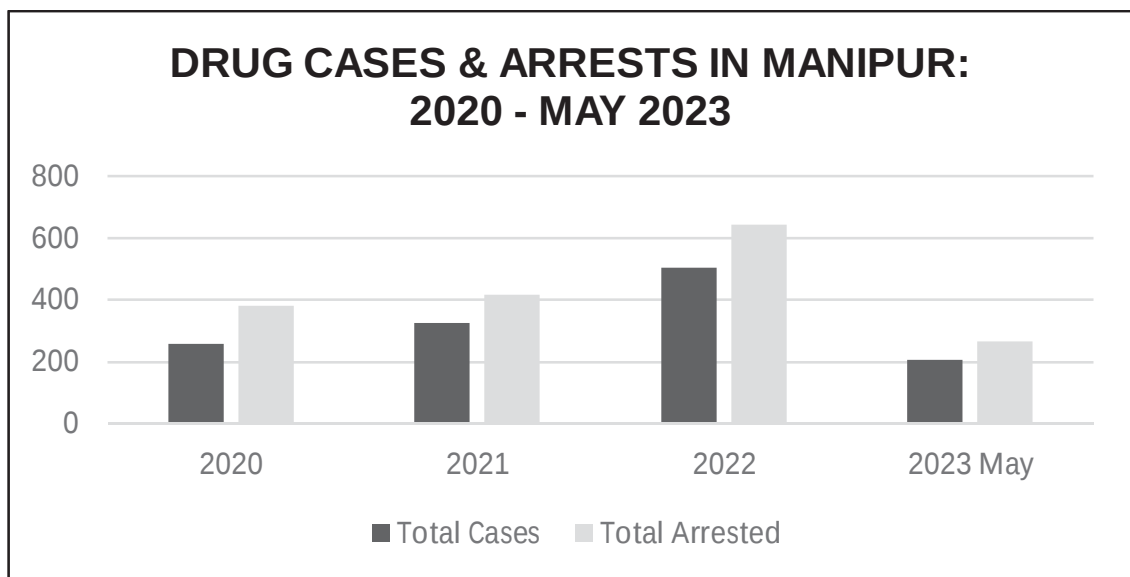


Figure 5: Drug Seizures & Drug Cases in Manipur (Rajya Sabha Session, 2023)

Statistics: Post May 2023 Drug Seizures. Continuing from the above graph, the author accessed a Press Information Bureau

Release dated 29 Jul 2026, which gives out the drug seizure data as answered by the Minister of State in the Ministry of Home Affairs during a Rajya Sabha Session in 2026. The data given is till 2024, which indicates a sharp decline from the previous years. The same has been tabulated below:-

Serial No	Year	Drugs Seized		
		Kgs	Nos	Ltrs
1	2022	18,454	8,34,967	3461
2	2023	4135.7	2,23,559	1181.3
3	2024	161.2	1,21,357	7.2

Table 1: Drug Seizure Data in Manipur: 2022 to 2024 (Rajya Sabha Session, 2026)

While the compiled authenticated data for 2025 and 2026 is not available in open source as pursued by the author, certain instances of drug seizures in these two years in Manipur have been flagged. Acting on a tip-off, security forces launched a joint operation (Assam Rifles, Manipur Police and CRPF) on 20 July 25 in Jiribam District (Manipur) and seized heroin (concealed in 616 soap cases) and 50,000 banned methamphetamine tablets worth Rs 76 Crores (The Hindu, 2025). During a joint operation conducted on 24 December 2025, in Jiribam (Manipur), 1,60,000 Yaba tablets amounting to Rs 40 crores were seized and one person apprehended (The Hindu, 2025).

During a joint operation in Jiribam District again, a total of 4,00,000 Yaba tablets, amounting to approximately Rs 47 crores, were recovered from a vehicle on 04 June 2026 (North East Today, 2026). On 30 July 2026, a heroin packet of 1.12 Kg worth Rs 2.28 Crores was seized by security forces from Senapati District in Manipur, (North East Live, 2026).

Analysis/ Inferences

- As evident from the above two figures 4 and 5, there has been a spike in both drug seizures as well as in total cases / arrested in Manipur in the year 2022. The Myanmar coup in February 2021 and the fallout of instability between the Junta and the ethnic armed groups could be attributed as one of the factors. Though a direct relation cannot be established (due to lack of more concrete evidence), the inference of a likely correlation cannot and should not be ruled out.
- The spike in ATS seizures also needs to be correlated to the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) Report, which also confirms that drugs like ATS are sourced from South East Asia.
- The meth seizure by the ICG also highlights the rampant drug trade in the region emanating from Myanmar. Though the consignment was headed for Thailand, similar or multiple small consignments, through Indian shores or India's North East during the period (which were not intercepted by law enforcement agencies) cannot be ruled out.
- Though Table 1 indicates a comparative decline, the specific incidents of 2025 and 2026 as flagged above do imply the incessant drug smuggling that is continuing.
- Yaba tablets (methamphetamine laced with caffeine) as mentioned in two separate incidents in 2025 and 2026, are also known as W-Y or World is Yours, and are produced in areas controlled by the UWSA (the Chinese proxy in Myanmar) in Wa State (Lintner, 2025). Hence, the China-

Myanmar linkages in the drug menace in Manipur and further to other states stand clearly established.

Arms Smuggling

In November 2019, a huge cache of Chinese weapons was seized in Shan State by the Burmese Army, including surface-to-air missiles. Among the weapons seized were 39 M-22 assault rifles, 29 medium machine guns, 69 M-21 assault rifles, nine M-16 assault rifles, 21 RPGs, and one FN-6-man portable air defence system which is the shoulder-fired surface to air missile. During the investigation, it was revealed that all the weapons were to be delivered to terror groups and were smuggled through China. Indian and Myanmar's insurgent groups mostly purchase arms from NORINCO, a Chinese government-owned arms factory in Yunnan. Some corrupt officials of NORINCO reportedly have also set up an illegal arms manufacturing facility at the Myanmar-China border to produce 'fakes' of their original products. (IMR, 2025)

Chinese Arms Recoveries. Reports of a few Chinese-origin arms being recovered in Manipur, among a mix of arms, are prevalent in the context of broader arms smuggling through the porous borders with Myanmar. Although detailed data of year-wise recoveries could not be found (unlike the drug seizure data), open-source analysis of the past few years reveals a few cases which have been highlighted in the subsequent sub-paragraphs.

As per a 2010 Hindustan Times article, Chinese weapons in large numbers are finding their way to the north-eastern states through five major routes, most of which pass through Myanmar territory, a senior intelligence official said in Moreh. 'Around 80 per cent of the weapons seized or recovered from the militants in recent years have a 'star' mark on them, which means they were manufactured in China,' he said. Most of the weapons are brought from southwestern China's Yunnan province, which borders

Myanmar, the official said. (Hindustan Times, 2010) Few photos are as in Figure 6.

Norinco 9 mm Pistols		
	CF-98 Variant-1 Capacity: 16-rnd Trigger: double-action (DA/SA) Safety: frame mounted decock/safety lever	B: 4.37-in Frame: bla Sights: 3-d Note: ...
	M-201C Variant-1 Capacity: 9-rnd Trigger: single-action (SA) Safety: frame mounted safety	B: 4.57-in Frame: blu Sights: Note: impro
	M-213A Variant-1 Capacity: 15-rnd Trigger: single-action (SA) Safety: frame mounted decocking lever	B: 4.57-in Frame: blu Sights: U-r Note: impro
	M-77B Variant-1 Capacity: 10-rnd Trigger: single-action (SA) Safety: frame mounted safety	B: 4.75-in Frame: blu Sights: Note: Chin
	NP-17 Variant-1 Capacity: 9-rnd Trigger: single-action (SA) Safety: frame mounted safety	B: 4.57-in Frame: chr Sights: Note: Two-

Figure 6: NORINCO Pistols with ‘Star’ mark (Genitron, 2023)

June 2023. According to sources who spoke to India Today in June 2023, weapons used to fuel turmoil and bloodshed in Manipur were smuggled through Myanmar. Sources claim that Manipur received a sizable shipment of firearms this month via the Myanmar route. Additionally, sources disclosed that three trucks were used by active insurgent organisations in Manipur to obtain a sizeable cache of weaponry. These weapons were allegedly carried to Manipur from the illicit market, which is located close to the border between China and Myanmar. (India Today, 2023)

June 23 – Sep 24 Inputs. To bridge this information gap, India Today examined dozens of videos from the conflict areas and

reviewed arms and ammunition seized by the Manipur Police between 01 June 2023 and 12 September 2024. Armed organizations associated with the hill-dwelling Kuki and valley-based Meitei populations have been found to possess British-made Mk-5 rifles, Chinese-made AK-56 rifles (a variation of the AK-47), and Myanmar's MA1 MK-3. Members of the Kuki National Front-Military Council, also known as the Kuki Army, were seen carrying shoulder-fired rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) rounds with diameters of 80 and 85 mm during their raising day ceremony, which took place at Thangjing Hills in Churachandpur district in May of this year, according to a vlog uploaded by a local content creator. These RPGs, most likely PG-7 (85mm) and PF-89 (80mm) variants, are identified by the UK-based Collective Awareness to Unexploded Ordnance (CAT-UXO) as coming from China and Russia. Videos verified by India Today show the militant outfits fly commercial drones made by popular Chinese drone maker DJI. (India Today, 2024)

December 24. Among other arms, a Type 81 Chinese Assault Rifle with three magazines was recovered by security forces in Chandel District in December 2024. (Matrubhumi, 2024)

January 2025. A 7.62 mm AK-56 weapon (the Chinese equivalent of an AK-47), a .303 rifle, a 9 mm handgun, a single-barrel rifle, three 12 mm single-barrel rifles, and grenades were found during another raid on 11 January 2025, in the Old Gelmol Village of Churachandpur district. (Swarajya Magazine, 2025)

July 25. Security forces recovered over 200 weapons, including firearms, and war-like stores in operations lasting only a few hours in four hill districts of Manipur, a senior police officer said on 04 July 2025. The recovered weapons included 21 INSAS rifles, 11 AK series, 26 SLR, two snipers, three carbines, 17 .303 rifles, two MA assault rifles, three M 79 grenade launchers, 11 single-barrel bolt

action, nine pistols, 18 single-shot breech-loaded rifles and 38 Pumpis. (The Hindu, 2025) A photograph of the arms recovery has been attached on the following page in Figure 7.



Figure 7: Arms Recovery in July 2025 (Manipur Police Tweet, 2025)

October 25. The security authorities also found an MA-4 assault rifle, which is made in Myanmar and frequently used by the Myanmar army, according to an article in the Hindustan Times. Since they have been discovering various weapons and equipment made in Myanmar from militants and their hideouts in Manipur for the past five to six months, officials on the ground say they are not shocked. The troops also found military fatigues and bulletproof vests made in Myanmar that had been transported across the border. The forces have found at least seven ‘Made in Burma’ handguns, five Army MA4 rifles made in Myanmar, and one AK-47 in the past week alone. (Hindustan Times, 2025) ‘The country-made pistols recovered by the forces here are not manufactured in India. A civilian may not be able to differentiate it, but because we are used to recovering the Myanmar-manufactured ones, we can make out the difference. The pistol grip of the country-made Myanmar pistols is shaped differently. Some pistols also have the

marking of 'Made in Burma'. There is no abundance of weapons here,' a senior officer from the central armed police force said. 'Though AK-47 rifles were looted from armouries and many of them have been recovered too, our forces have been recovering the Myanmar ones. We can differentiate the Myanmar-manufactured ones based on the series of the rifles. The ones used by security forces or police in India mostly have serial numbers starting with IA, but the ones smuggled from Myanmar have a different series. The ammunition is the same, so they think it is better to get an AK series rifle or even a country-made pistol from Myanmar,' the official added. (Hindustan Times, 2025) Photo as affixed in Figure 8.



Figure 8: Arms Recovery in October 2025 (Hindustan Times, 2025)

The Indian insurgent groups have been purchasing weaponry from both the illicit marketplaces of Southeast Asia as well as from rebel groups with bases in Myanmar, such as the UWSA. While the majority of the weapons from Thailand and Cambodia are imported via the sea, some are also imported via the border between India and Myanmar. Additionally, weapons made in

China are transported through Ruili, Myanmar, and then through Lashio, Mandalay, and Monywa, entering India via Phek, Chandel, Churachandpur, and Champai. The Indian government has made allegations that some members of the Myanmar military had connections to Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs) that involve the shipment of weapons, lodging, and assistance with administrative requirements inside Myanmar. (Yadav, 2021)

At the Mae La refugee camp, which is about 65 km from the Myawady Mae Sot (Thailand) border of Myanmar, Thai military and police detained a sizable cache of Chinese-made firearms on 25 June 2020. It was valued at 30 million Thai baht (1.35 billion kyats). In Mae Sot, an illicit market for firearms has developed to satisfy the needs of armed groups in Myanmar and India. A machine gun costs about 300,000 baht and an AK-47 costs about 100,000 baht (4.5 million kyats) (13.5 million kyats). The AA and IIGs operating in India's northeast, such as the Meitei PLA and NSCN (K), receive weapons through smuggling. (Yadav, 2021)

Arms Recovery Data. As per figures below:-

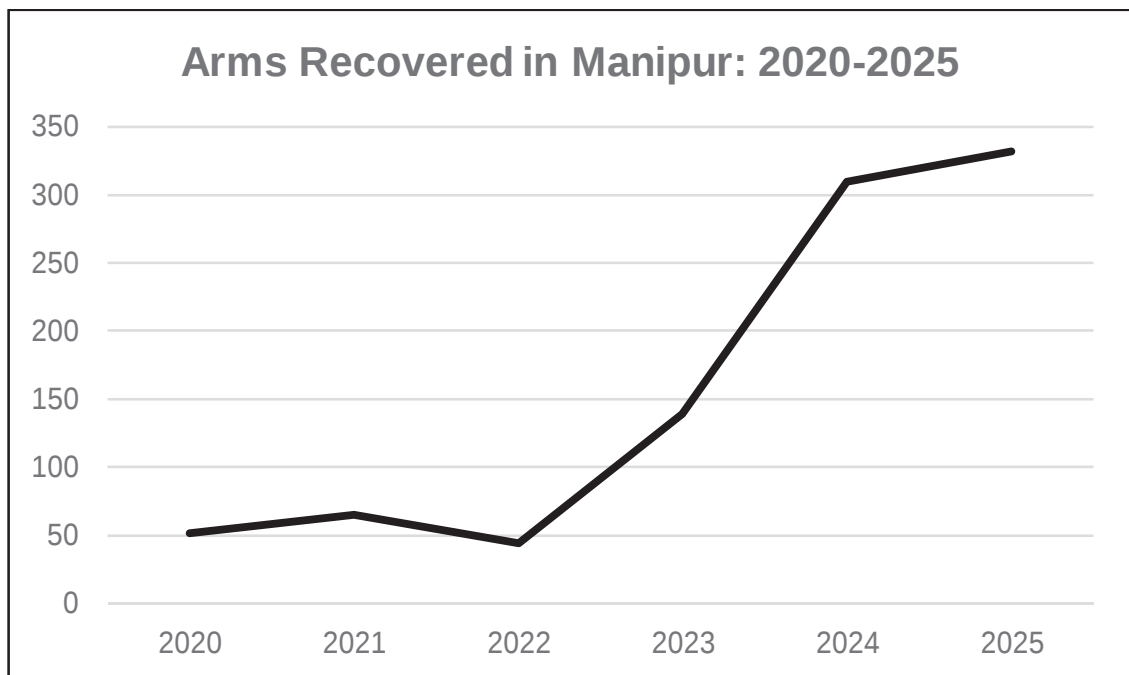
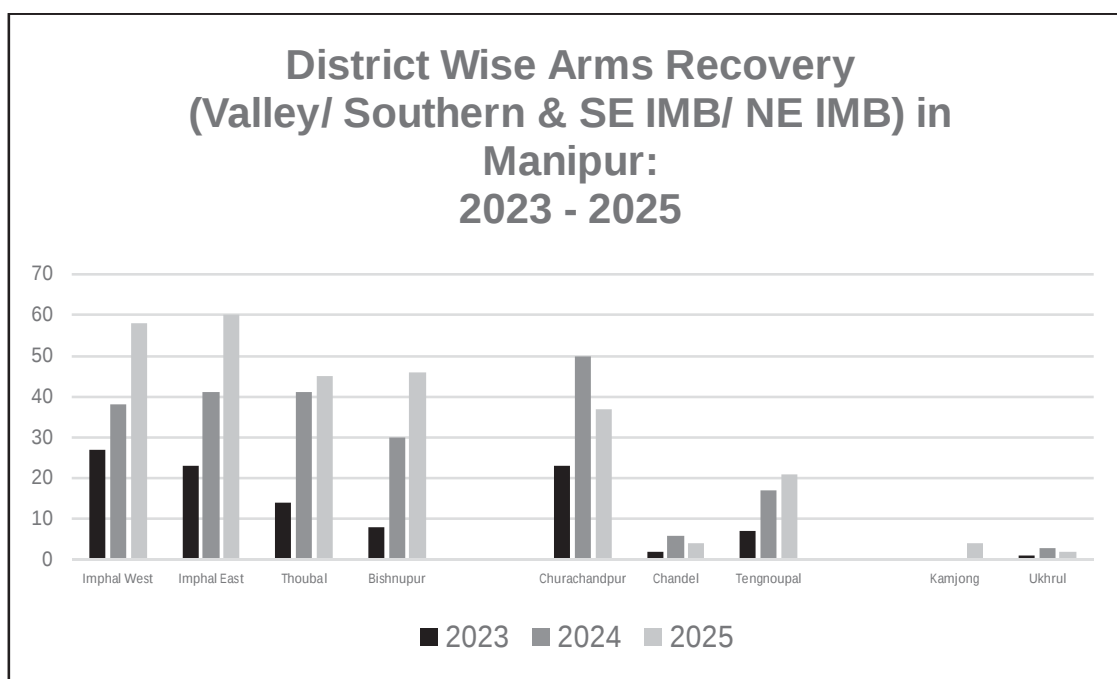


Figure 9: Arms Recovery (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2025)



**Figure 10: Arms Recovery District Wise
(South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2025)**

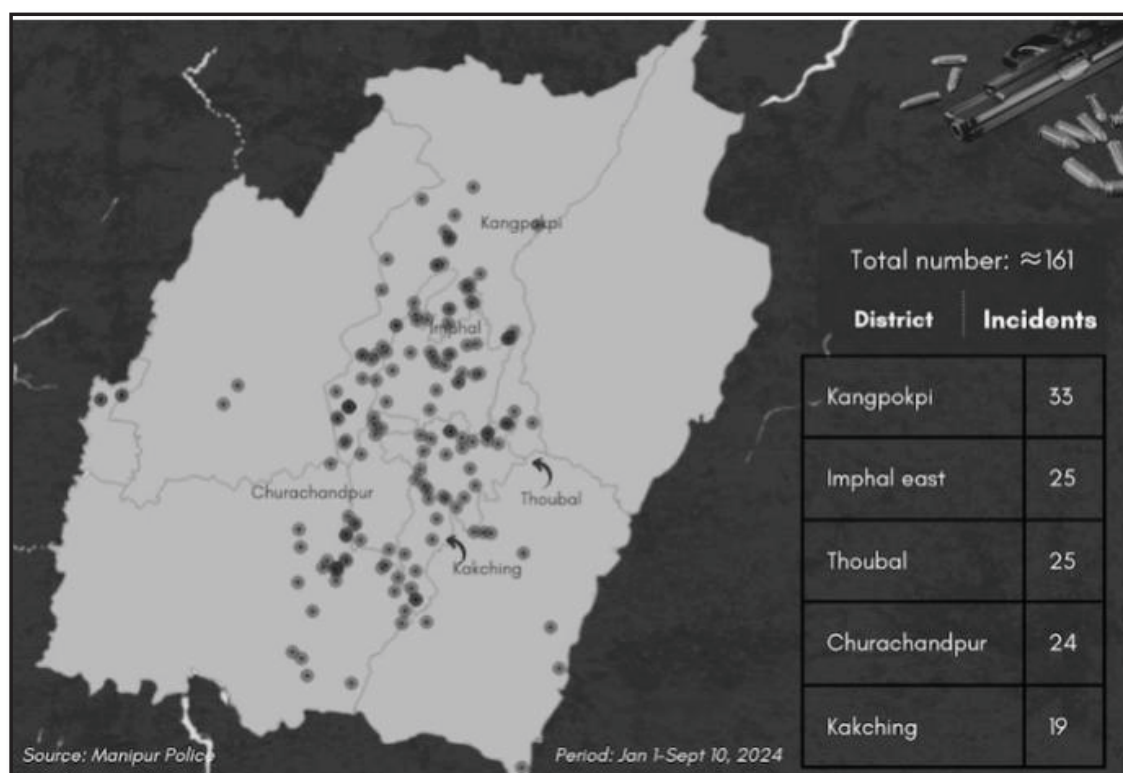


Figure 11: Arms Recovery: Jan – Sep 2024 (India Today, 2024)

Looted Police Armoury and Recovery. Before moving to present the inferences of this section of the paper, it is worthwhile to briefly discuss this key incident. As per The New Indian Express, during the early days of the Kuki-Meitei ethnic conflict which erupted on 03 May 2023, mobs had looted over 4000 weapons from police armouries and outposts in the Imphal valley (The New Indian Express, 2026). However, Manipur Police, vide a tweet dated 05 August 2023 (Manipur Police X Account, 2023) states that arms and ammunition were looted from different Police Stations and armouries of both hill and valley districts. As on the date of the tweet, Manipur Police stated that 1057 arms and 14201 ammunition have been recovered in the valley districts while 138 arms and 121 ammunition have been recovered in the hill districts (Manipur Police X Account, 2023).

Analysis/ Inferences

- As evident from Figure 9, there has been a spike in arms recoveries in 2023 and 2024 in Manipur. It cannot be correlated to the recovery of looted Police armoury, as an article in 'The Hindu' informs that the majority recovery was made in 2025 and that it was 'a significant jump from the 1200 weapons recovered till September 2024'. (The Hindu, 2025) Hence, this spike in recovery cases can be attributed to the spillover effect of the instability brewing across the IMB in Chin State and Sagaing region.
- The second data is from Figure 10, which gives the district-wise arms recovery cases over the period of the past few years. The first inference that can be drawn is the spike in recoveries in all major valley and hill districts (in South and South East Manipur). The second inference is that more recoveries have been made in the valley districts, which highlights the nexus of arms smugglers in the hill regions

(along the IMB) and those in the valley. The third inference from Figure 10 and Figure 11 is that the Naga-dominated hill districts in the North East Manipur has been relatively much quieter vis-à-vis the Meitei-dominated valley or the Kuki-dominated Southern regions.

- Besides, the entire section on Chinese evidence found in all the recoveries clearly establishes the Chinese hand directly or indirectly in the arms smuggled from Myanmar into Manipur. The same trend as in all the newspaper articles quoted in the section has been corroborated by the author in his interviews with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) on the subject. The 'star' mark in the weapons indicating NORINCO-made weapons in Ruili (Yunnan Province) has been opined by most of the SMEs during the interviews, which have also found a mention in the newspaper articles.

Way Ahead For Myanmar

Utopian coexistence?

Civil wars can end with the military victory of either side (government or the rebels), a negotiated settlement (peace agreement or ceasefire), or a fizzling out of the fighting into low activity. (Oxford International Studies, 2019) The civil wars that do successfully conclude in negotiated settlements typically share two characteristics: first, they tend to distribute political power among the combatants according to their positions on the battlefield; and second, they all benefit from the assistance of a third party willing to mediate.

Specific to the case of Myanmar, a utopian theory of co-existence also exists between the Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Organisations, which aligns with the idea of a negotiated settlement. Though sounding ambitious, this option seems to be the

best-case scenario for Myanmar in terms of overall peace and creating a situation conducive to an improved human development index. However, to achieve this, either side (Tatmadaw or the EAOs) needs to understand this and be content with the control of whatever territory they have got. In addition, to satisfy the fight of the EAOs of removal of the Junta from power, the elections have a role to play to sort of legitimise the power. For this, equal representation of all the groups is a necessity to give the picture of an official ousting of the Junta from power (irrespective of the actual control it may exercise behind the scenes).

Exercise True Sovereignty: Managing China

Myanmar also realises and is not very comfortable with the kind of control that China exercises within its soil. Be it the EAOs on its Eastern border or the AA in Rakhine State, Myanmar (the present Union Solidarity and Development Party - USDP-led Government) needs to exercise true sovereignty by engaging positively with these sides, to reduce (if not totally remove, which in any case is near impossible) the Chinese grip.

Another aspect of managing China is for Myanmar to diversify options. It is the over-dependence on China, be it economically, militarily or for diplomatic shieldings, that is making things more difficult for Naypitaw. To reduce this, Myanmar needs to engage with ASEAN and India to start with and further with powers outside Asia. This connects to the next way ahead for Myanmar to leverage India.

Leveraging India

The positivity of India in terms of the Gujral Doctrine of the 90s (non-reciprocal assistance to the neighbourhood) is in stark contrast with the profit-based dynamics with China. Myanmar has perhaps realised this way back but has not been bold enough to engage and

leverage this intent of India. It needs to be bold and act now. By diversifying and leveraging India, it is a win-win situation for both India and Myanmar. India's possible assistance extends in all disciplines; socio-cultural, people-to-people ties, economic, and military.

Land Ports and Regularisation of Trade. A formal regularisation of land ports at traditional trading towns like Moreh in Manipur is the need of the hour. Instituting such measures with the will of the Governments of both the nations will go a long way in integrating the micro economies of the two nations in a formal way as well as establish a formal local connect to further enhance the people-to-people ties and the socio economic conditions in the areas bordering the two nations. At such trading towns, measures can also be dovetailed to ensure security in terms of having a check on the vices like narco-trafficking.

Way Ahead For India: National/Military Strategic Level

Dual Engagement

- India needs to have a dual engagement with both the Tatmadaw and the EAOs. Back channel talks with the EAOs and the NUG may already be in progress. Such talks will ensure India's national interests are taken care of. Stability in the Sagaing and Chin states with mediated talks with both the Tatmadaw and the Chin Brotherhood groups is likely to stem the volatility specific to these two regions, which would assist in repatriation of Myanmar nationals on the Indian side of the IMB.
- Similarly, strong communication with the AA in the Rakhine State is a must to ensure Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) is secured and that China does not use the AA against Indian assets in Rakhine,

to include KMTTP and Sittwe Port. In the long term, such dual engagement will only assist in crystallisation of the Act East Policy in the truest form.

Handling Myanmar's Western Front.

- **Sagaing and Chin.** Open back-channel talks (may already be in place as covered in earlier) with ethnic groups operating in this region, to ensure the sanctity of the IMB with respect to arms, drugs and immigration is maintained.
- **Rakhine State.** India must ensure all-domain surveillance on activities of ARSA linked with the alleged Bangladeshi and Pakistani support to ensure South Mizoram and Tripura do not become the 'Manipur of tomorrow'. Meanwhile, engagement with the AA should see an exponential curve to ensure that the 2027 timelines of KMTTP are met. To address the potential conflict as stated earlier between India and China, it becomes all the more important to keep the AA on the Indian side, giving assurance of development in Rakhine and Chin State, soft loans and overall socio-economic development. In short, assist in strengthening the legitimacy that AA wants to have in the region it controls.

Tackling Drugs and Arms Smuggling

- This process starts inwards and moves across the borders. Simply stated, the first step would be to nip the 'demands within the country' at the bud. It would therefore involve the entire state machinery in terms of the legislative, executive and judiciary to act in consonance. Socio-economic aspects and education at the grassroots level need to be ensured by all stakeholders. This is a study in itself and calls for deeper research. A few insights on loopholes

in the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act in a paper were studied by the author, which can serve as food for thought for further research. (IJIRL, 2022)

- Once these are tackled and internally we are secure, the next/ simultaneous step would be to engage with ASEAN as a whole and South East Asian nations individually to institute mechanisms to identify and curb the sources/ origins of the illicit drugs and arms. Therein lie novel ideas like communication with the UWSA, India's proactive stand on cyber scam syndicates (maybe even a joint stand with China on this), engagement with the Chin Brotherhood groups and joint crackdown on IIG safe havens in Myanmar with the Tatmadaw.
- Further actions as listed under Operational level category of Way Ahead, in terms of management of IMB will also contribute towards this.

Multi-pronged 'Whole of Nation Approach'.

In addition to the Government in power (at the State and the Centre level) and the Security forces, the following also have a key role to play to ensure a holistic approach/ solution from India:-

- **Academicians/Think Tanks.** They can shape understanding and policy direction through deep, evidence-based research. Myanmar's crisis is not just political but also ethnic, social and historical. Academicians can help India understand these nuances better and design realistic, humane responses. Their studies and analyses can guide policymakers in New Delhi and the north-eastern states on how to handle refugee inflows, manage ethnic sensitivities, and strengthen cross-border cooperation. By organising dialogues and academic exchanges, they can also keep

channels of communication open with Myanmar's civil society and universities, contributing quietly to peacebuilding. (Rajkumar, 2025)

- **Media.** The media can influence public perception more directly than any policy paper. Through **accurate and balanced reporting**, journalists can ensure that India's citizens understand the crisis not only as a security threat but also as a human tragedy affecting real people across the border. By highlighting both the suffering and the resilience of communities on both sides, the media can encourage empathy and discourage hate or misinformation. At the same time, **responsible journalism** can hold governments accountable both in India and Myanmar, pushing for humane and lawful responses to refugees and displaced persons. (Rajkumar, 2025)
- **Soft Power/ People to People Ties.** India also needs to further exploit its soft power in terms of a Buddhist trail, both in India and Myanmar. The cultural affinities on either side of the IMB can be used as a bridge rather than a barrier, in the form of more regulated trading hubs, food and cultural fests.

Way Ahead For India: Operational/ Functional Level

Border Management of IMB

The border between India and Myanmar apparently has not received enough political attention from the Indian administration. Some of the Assam Rifles' battalions are sent out expressly for border security while the other battalions are engaged in counterinsurgency operations.

- **Border Fencing and Infrastructure.** Smart fence, AI-based facial detection systems and surveillance measures also

need to be boosted. Overall infra and road connectivity along the IMB will go a long way in improving the security dynamics of the region.

- **Assam Rifles (AR).** The dual role of border guarding of IMB and counter-insurgency by AR also needs to be reconsidered so that a focused approach can be charted to achieve tangible results on the ground. Specific details of the present employment of AR as well as AR-specific recommendations have been intentionally avoided by the author to avoid divulging classified content and the higher merit of it being instead discussed at an in-house Indian Army (MoD)/ DGAR (MHA) framework.
- **Territorial Army (TA) Battalions.** Employment and leveraging local potential can be achieved through raising of new TA Battalions. These will also assist in relieving Assam Rifles (AR) from hinterland duties in conjunction with regular Indian Army units.

Coverage and Research on Myanmar

- As an academic community, the focus on research on Myanmar is very minimal compared to other countries in the immediate neighbourhood of India. India only has a handful of scholars and experts on Myanmar, with only a few seminars and discussions taking place. In addition, media coverage (be it print or electronic, national or regional) is again very limited.
- Overall, the academicians and media need to play this important role to undertake deeper research on Myanmar, so that the awareness levels of the netizens can improve as well as policymakers can be assisted with deeper analytical and critical viewpoints on Myanmar. On the lighter side,

Myanmar and North East India have, of late, found decent coverage in famous OTT Web series like 'Paatal Lok Season 2' and 'The Family Man Season 3'. Perhaps, the same needs to be replicated from fiction to fact by our academic and media community.

'External Dimension' to Manipur Crisis. Though the direct cause of the Manipur crisis is the clashes between the Kukis and the Meiteis due to a host of issues (which have not been discussed in detail, being beyond the scope of the paper), it is imperative from the entire paper that the 'external dimension' to the issue cannot be left as an oversight. Though acknowledged in bits and pieces amongst the academicians and in the media circle, the narrative and the actions on tackling the 'external factors' need to be given due weightage by all stakeholders. This will ensure long-term stability in the state by tackling all the causal factors for the still brewing issues in Manipur.

Double Edged Issues: Some Ponderables

'Coexistence Theory' in Myanmar with China. Why counter China in Myanmar at all? How about a coexistence and a symbiotic relationship theory? Can we trust China in a coexistence relationship in Myanmar, which is a win-win situation for all three countries? Myanmar's military government considered friendly ties with Beijing as essential, despite its resentment of China for equipping its adversaries. However, they also contributed to anxiety. Myanmar has traditionally embraced non-alignment to protect its sovereignty because it is acutely aware of its location between the Asian superpowers China and India. It became more concerned that it was getting too close to China's sphere of influence. (International Crisis Group, 2024)

Is the Act East Policy a double-edged sword? he illegal drug traffic along the Golden Triangle has detrimental effects for the

development of India's North-East and the application of the 'Act-East Policy.' The policy seems to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it ensures progress and money, but on the other, it embraces the danger of the quick distribution of illegal weapons and drugs. The detrimental effects of illegal narcotics on North-East individuals may have long-lasting negative effects on the control mechanisms that guarantee that illegal traffic is maintained to a minimum, and institutional measures to combat unlawful trafficking with China, Thailand, and Myanmar. However, considering the current Sino Indian relationship, it appears to be an unrealistic notion; hence, the risk continues. Linking the Northeast with its eastern neighbours makes it simple to traffic massive amounts of illegal drugs, exacerbating already-existing problems with societal wealth and human well-being.

Need for Reassessment by China

As regards China's bilateral strategy, it should move beyond establishing fragile truces on its border with Myanmar in favour of a broader approach. It should try to foster licit economies in the enclaves along its border controlled by ethnic armed groups, over which it wields significant influence, and push to end organised criminal activity across the board in these areas, not merely those that have the greatest impact on Chinese citizens. While such an approach would require a bigger investment on Beijing's part, it also promises a greater return; a more durable peace for China, Myanmar and the wider region.

A strategy of this kind is unlikely to be sustainable over the longer term because it is a recipe for even greater levels of instability across Myanmar. First, it fails to recognise that the Tatmadaw has become completely illegitimate in the eyes of the Myanmar people. By pushing EAOs to sign deals with the Tatmadaw, China risks provoking serious and sustained anti-

China sentiment, which could imperil the security of Chinese strategic investments in Myanmar. Second, making EAOs partner with the Tatmadaw would threaten their legitimacy with the public, causing them to lose the popular mandate essential to stable governance. In the end, such a strategy could prove self-defeating. (Clap, 2023)

Recommendations for Further Study

A few ideas have been covered earlier in the paper, which may be taken up for further research in the future. This paper addresses the aspect of the complex intersections between India, Myanmar and China; and the effects thereof. It can be taken as a base for further research in the following arenas: -

- Management of AA in the Rakhine State amidst Indian and Chinese economic assets.
- Growth of ARSA in Rakhine State: Decoding the Allegations of Pakistani and Bangladeshi connections.
- Socio-Cultural and Demographic Analysis of the Zo Community: Ethnic Linkages that traverse the IMB.
- An Independent Foreign Policy for Myanmar amidst Regional and Extra-Regional Actors.
- Analysis of how Chinese long game and socio-geographic realities have reinforced each other and shaped the dynamics of India's Eastern frontier. (Idea developed from a response by one of the SMEs).

Conclusion.

India has progressed a long way from the 'Look East Policy' of the 90s to the 'Act East Policy' two decades down the line. The gateway of this policy passes through our Eastern neighbour,

Myanmar, which links it to South East Asia. Unfortunately, since 2021, Myanmar hasn't seen the level of stability under which this Indian dream of 'Act East' can flourish. Another challenging perspective is the fact that Myanmar lies at the crossroads of India's 'Act East Policy' and China's 'China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)'. Further complications arise due to the historically complicated nexus between the Chinese and Myanmar's Tatmadaw and various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). This independent analysis on the situation existing in Myanmar is a candid assessment of an often-neglected country and a frontier in the overall Indian strategic discourse. With China's influence in Myanmar established in the overall research, it is all the more important to study Myanmar in depth. With India flanked by China's CPEC on the West and CMEC on the East, it calls for deeper research on the subject to arrive at tangible policy decisions (politically, diplomatically, economically and militarily) for India.

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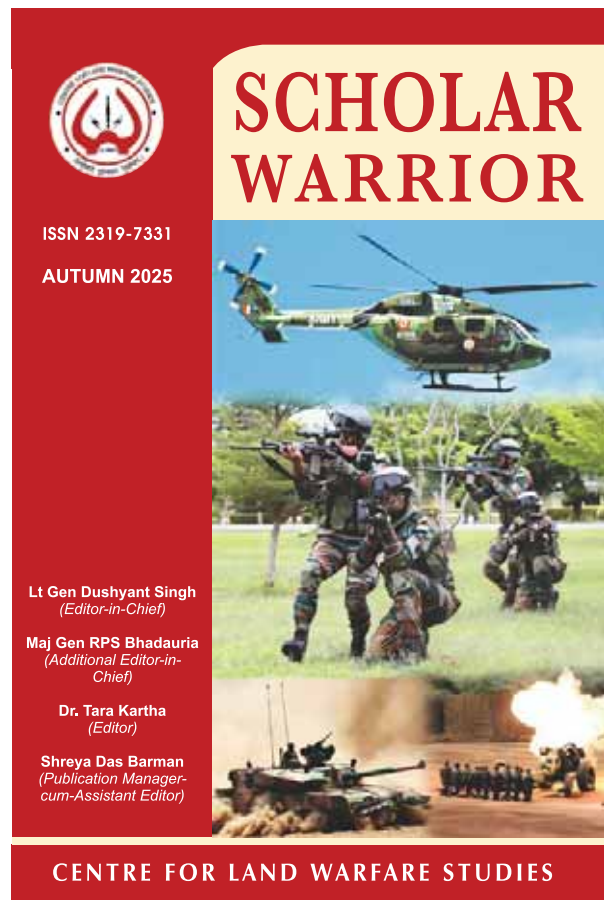
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Myanmar lies at the crossroads of two Asian giants' ambitions; India's Act East Policy and China's CMEC. The crisis in Myanmar since the 2021 coup, with the alleged important role of China in aiding state and non-state actors, further complicates the issue. There is a lack of clarity in the Chinese overt/ covert role in Myanmar and whether its repercussions in Manipur are a Chinese long game or not. This paper aims to result in understanding the larger Chinese game plan in Myanmar and chart a suggested course for India to navigate the turbulent tides to ensure crystallisation of the Act East Policy. The research references interviews by the author with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) on the subject, documentary evidence, empirical data cited from Rajya Sabha Sessions, UNHCR, Official X Accounts, apart from print media. The temporal scope of the paper covers February 2021 (Myanmar coup) till 2026. However, it intentionally does not cover the Myanmar elections and its results, being outside the scope of the title of the paper. The analyses/ inferences drawn by the author at various sections in the paper suggest Chinese involvement in the Myanmar and Manipur crises; however, the intent of it being a long game could not be proved concretely. The paper also suggests a course for India to resolve the Myanmar issue, which aids in the Act East Policy and is estimated to have a positive effect on Manipur. It concludes with some food for thought and suggests scope for further study.

...



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