



Occasional Paper



India And Myanmar: Two Years After The Coup

Alok Deb



ISSUE NO. 005
MAY 2023

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in association with


KW Publishers Pvt Ltd
New Delhi



Issue No. 005
May 2023

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The Peninsula Foundation,
New No. 17, Crescent Road, Shenoy Nagar,
Chennai - 600 030, India.
Email: thepeninsulafoundation@gmail.com
Website: www.thepeninsula.org.in

ISBN 978-81-978433-1-0

Published in India by Kalpana Shukla



KW Publishers Pvt Ltd
4676/21, First Floor, Ansari Road
Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002
Phone: +91 11 43528107
Marketing: kw@kwpub.in
Editorial: production@kwpub.in
Website: www.kwpub.in

Cover Photo:

Pixbay

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Major General **Alok Deb** is an Indian Army veteran with close to four decades of service and tenures in diverse operational areas. He holds an MA in Defence Studies from DSSC Wellington and has two M Phil degrees in Defence and Strategic Studies, after qualifying on the Higher Command and National Defence College courses. He has wide expertise in handling operations, logistics and managing human resources. As Commanding Officer of an artillery regiment in the Kargil War, he was decorated for gallantry and his unit awarded the COAS Unit Citation and Honour Title Kargil.

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India and Myanmar

Two Years after the Coup

Alok Deb

Relegated to the sidelines with the ongoing Ukraine war and other crises like Taiwan, Myanmar has resurfaced in world headlines. In a recent dispatch, Associated Press (AP) reported that on 11 April 2023 'a fighter jet dropped bombs directly onto a crowd of people who were gathering at 8 am for the opening of a local office of the country's opposition movement outside Pazigy village in Sagaing region's Kanbalu township....'¹ Subsequent information indicates that the number of dead including women and children is over 170. If so, this is the deadliest aerial attack carried out by the Myanmar military on its own people in the bloody aftermath of the military coup two years ago.

With various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) and Peoples' Defence Forces (PDFs) battling the Tatmadaw, martial law has been declared in 47 townships in Myanmar, cutting across states and regions.² More than 154,000 people have been displaced in the first two months of 2023, with total numbers of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) since the military takeover now at 1.3 million. Heavy fighting rages in Kachin State, the South East and North West of the country,³ and overall 3000 civilian deaths since February 2021 are estimated.⁴ Targeted assassination of military appointed government officials continues, the latest victim being the deputy director-general of the Union Election Commission who was shot dead on 22 April this



year.⁵ In 2022, upto 30,000 civilian infrastructures, including schools are reported to have been destroyed during military operations.⁶ This situation has compelled the Tatmadaw to again postpone elections earlier scheduled for August 2023. The state of emergency has been extended.

Important Developments Post February 2021

The above statistics provide a telling perspective of the current violence in Myanmar. Yet there are other noteworthy developments in the country post the February 2021 coup. First of these is the increasing relevance of the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) around which civilian support appears to have coalesced. As per an independent observer with International IDEA (an intergovernmental organization) it has evolved substantially and today ‘controls significant territory, commands the loyalty of the overwhelming majority of its people, and provides security and justice in the areas under its control’.⁷ The same observer finds that it ‘conducts effective central coordination, manages public resources, and conducts foreign policy’⁸ to finally conclude that the ‘NUG can govern, if it maintains its unity and coherence and receives more support from outside’.⁹ Similarly the summary of the paper dated 31 January 2023 by the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, presented at the UN Human Rights Council in its 52nd meeting notes that ‘...The NUG provides the international community with a credible alternative to the SAC (Myanmar Junta’s State Administrative Council). Applying the same international standards of legitimacy used to examine the legitimacy claims of the SAC, this paper finds that the NUG has a far stronger claim to legitimacy...’.¹⁰

Secondly and most importantly, there appears to be a shift in the mindset of civil society and anti-government forces on the issue of ethnic minorities. The Bamar majority seems to have realised that Myanmar’s survival as a nation is contingent on following an inclusive policy where rights of minorities are recognized and respected. This is best exemplified in the position taken on one of the most contentious issues facing the country, i.e. the Rohingyas; the NUG Policy Position on the Rohingya in Rakhine State dated 3 June 2021 states ‘..we will actively seek justice and accountability for all crimes committed by the military against the Rohingyas and all other people of Myanmar throughout our history. We intend if necessary to initiate processes to grant International Criminal Court jurisdiction over crimes committed

within Myanmar against the Rohingyas and other communities...’¹¹ It is the most powerful statement of intent on this topic to have come out of Myanmar in years. Though how it will finally translate on the ground remains uncertain, statements by think tanks rooted in civil society echo such sentiments.¹²

Thirdly, diplomatic, legal and economic measures have circumscribed activities of the military junta to some extent. Sanctions by the West, imposed in the immediate aftermath of the coup¹³ against members of the Tatmadaw and various government officials continue. The European Union (EU) has in February 2023 imposed its sixth round of sanctions.¹⁴ The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has denied the military regime additional time to file its reply to The Gambia’s application to that Court in November 2019 wherein it alleged that Myanmar’s military and other security forces perpetrated genocide by systemically destroying—through mass murder, rape, and other kinds of sexual violence—villages of the Rohingya in Rakhine province of Myanmar.¹⁵

ASEAN’s Role

ASEAN has been smarting from Myanmar’s refusal to follow its Five Point Peace Consensus arrived at in April 2021 in consultation with Tatmadaw head Gen Min Aung Hlaing. It has banned Myanmar’s generals from attending further meetings unless there is progress on implementation of the Consensus. After the aerial bombing referred to above, ASEAN issued a strong statement whereby it ‘... strongly condemns the reported recent air strikes carried out by the Myanmar Armed Forces in Pa Zi Gyi Village, Kanbalu Township, Sagaing Region of Myanmar, that claimed the lives of at least dozens of civilians...’¹⁶ Subsequently on May 10 2023 at their 42nd Summit in Indonesia, ASEAN leaders called for ‘immediate cessation of all forms of violence and the use of force’ and creation of ‘a conducive environment for the safe and timely delivery of humanitarian assistance and inclusive national dialogues’ in Myanmar. Within a charter where decisions are taken by consensus, ASEAN is exerting what little pressure it can.

State of the Armed Resistance

In 24 months, the NUG has successfully cobbled together the Peoples' Defence Force (PDF), into a functional army. The NUG website clearly spells out the objective, mission, duties, values and 'culture' of the PDF. It emphasises that the PDF is a part of the government mechanism and remains under the administration of the Ministry of Defense. The policy on collaboration with the numerous EAOs is also laid out, whereby '... PDF will collaborate with the EAOs to establish the Federal Alliance in order to fight against the dictators, and will integrate in the formation of the forthcoming Federal Union Force (or Federal Union Military)..'¹⁷

By one estimate, the PDF today has over 250 units with more than 65,000 troops.¹⁸ Another source claims that 63 additional units are 'awaiting NUG recognition'.¹⁹ In addition, there are Local Defence Forces (LDFs) i.e. local militias, operating independently at the local level and smaller Peoples' Defence Teams (PDTs) used for urban guerrilla warfare, logistics and mobilising support.²⁰ PDF and EAO collaboration is ongoing, as evidenced by joint PDF and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) attacks against the Tatmadaw in Kachin State and Sagaing Region.²¹ Today the PDFs claim to hold between 40 to 50% of territory. However their Achilles heel is finance and resources. PDFs rely on weapons purchased through public donations (claimed to have reached a figure of \$55 million including through crowdfunding over the internet) or supplied by sympathetic EAOs. Some rudimentary weapons are obtained through local manufacture.²² Arms obtained in this manner enable PDFs to continue their struggle.

Economy

Economically the Myanmar government's record is mixed. It (along with North Korea and Iran) continues to be on the black list of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)²³ and subject to numerous sanctions. As per one UN agency report, Myanmar's economy has collapsed with nearly half of the population now living below the poverty line.²⁴ As per government claims, oil and gas are the two exports whose revenues remain robust, with earnings of up to \$800 million in gas exports to

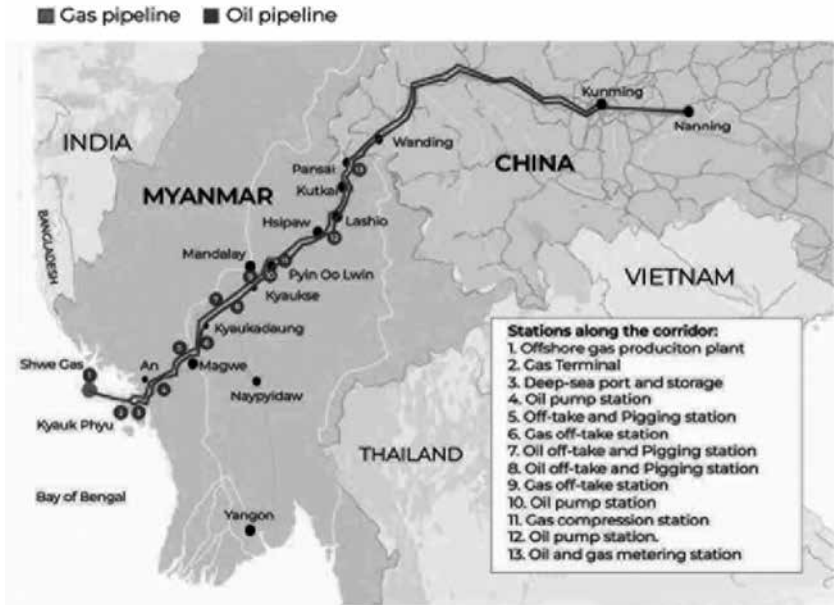
China and Thailand in April-July 2022.²⁵ Overall, the World Bank Myanmar Economic Monitor estimates a GDP growth of 3 per cent for the period ending September 2023.²⁶ Most new investment is coming from Singapore which has provided approximately 80 per cent of total investment in 2022. Other investors are Japan, South Korea, and Thailand, though certain Japanese and Korean business have withdrawn or scaled down operations now.²⁷ Given the highly volatile domestic environment, GDP growth will most likely remain well below the 6-7 per cent seen in the 2010s at least in the short to medium term. Overall the Junta will continue to maintain its advantage over the NUG because of control over Myanmar's Central Bank and other state assets as well as coercive power over the private sector.²⁸

China and Myanmar

Any external power dealing with Myanmar has to factor in all the above issues. Despite its current international status, Myanmar is a key link in the policy calculus of many nations. For China, whose Yunnan province shares a 2129 km long border with Myanmar's Kachin and Shan states (see map above), Myanmar's reserves of minerals, oil and gas deposits and burgeoning rare earths export industry (which contributes more than half of China's domestic supplies²⁹) are lucrative resources for further exploitation. With Myanmar joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), infrastructure development plans are gradually unfolding; in August 2021, Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan was linked by rail to Lincang, a smaller town in Yunnan province opposite Chinshwehaw in Myanmar's Shan State (Chinshwehaw being one of five border trade posts with China). Of the ongoing BRI projects, the flagship China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan to Mandalay and onwards to Kyaukphyu is of special significance (see map below). The Corridor ends at the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone in Rakhine State (KP SEZ, one of the three SEZs under development in Myanmar). Kyaukphyu port in Rakhine State, already under lease to China, provides direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Straits of Malacca through which 80% of China's

oil imports transit. A functional pipeline currently links this port to Kunming.³⁰ News reports of April 2023 confirmed that this pipeline is being used also to transport oil imported from Russia to Yunnan via Kyaukphu.³¹

China's 'back door' to the Indian Ocean



Credit: Vivekananda International Foundation.

China's development of Kyaukphu meshes well with the 'String of Pearls' strategy, should it manage to develop three ports where it has a foothold—kyaukphu in the Bay of Bengal, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in the Arabian Sea—as maritime bases for projecting power in the Indian Ocean. With many BRI/CMEC projects on the anvil and holding 40 per cent of Myanmar's total debt, China has high stakes in the stability of the current Myanmarese dispensation. As per government figures, Myanmar China trade for a three week period (01 April-21 April 2023) as compared to a similar period for 2022 has almost doubled.³² It is a major arms supplier to the Tatmadaw. Currently it is

attempting to broker peace with the main EAOs, including the Arakan Army of Rakhine state³³ whose cooperation towards the development of Kyaukphyu is crucial. Cooperation of the Tatmadaw is also essential if China wishes to use the facilities under construction at the Great Coco island, one of five of the Cocos group of Myanmar, located just 55 Km North of the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Maxar Technologies' OSINT (open source intelligence) reveals lengthening of an existing runway to 2300m, construction of hangars, a causeway and an accommodation block next to an existing radar station.³⁴ While the existence of a Chinese surveillance unit here has always been rumoured, stationing of Chinese military aircraft here is a possibility now. Finally, the possibility of China using its leverages with various EAOs to India's disadvantage in the border regions cannot be discounted.

Bangladesh and Myanmar

Bangladesh faces problems of a more immediate nature. Currently it is hosting one million Rohingya refugees in camps around Cox's Bazar alone, with a few thousand more on the island of Bhashan Char. This has strained both Bangladesh's resources and social fabric. There is overcrowding and shortage of drinking water in areas around the refugee camps, poor sanitation, deforestation, lack of adequate healthcare, income reduction (as Rohingyas work for lesser wages) and increased crime including gender based violence. All this despite efforts of local and federal government, civil society, NGOs and international agencies.³⁵ Though the Junta had arranged for some refugees to visit Rakhine and witness preparations for their return as part of a China backed effort, the Rohingya are unwilling to return unless granted full citizenship with land ownership rights.³⁶ Rohingyas provide fertile ground for extremist forces within Bangladesh to stir discontent on many issues. Concurrently, the Rakhine based terrorist Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) is making inroads into the refugee population. In the latest incident the Bangladesh Armed Police caught four ARSA operatives with arms and ammunition in Cox's Bazar in April 2023.³⁷ Additionally, border tensions are ever ready to flare up

with the Tatmadaw shelling fighters of the Arakan Army (AA), a major EAO in Rakhine, as they attempt to get across the border causing collateral damage inside Bangladesh.³⁸ Most importantly, two essential partners in the Act East policy being at loggerheads with each other is thoroughly detrimental to India's plans for the region.

India and Myanmar

Where do India's interests lie? Myanmar is a valuable neighbour of strategic significance, the pivot of India's Act East Policy and the bridge between South and South East Asia. Sharing a 1643 Km long border with four Indian states, it becomes a crucial player in India's internal and external security matrices. Be it in the elimination of insurgency in the North East or ensuring that Chinese inroads into Myanmar do not negatively impact India's developmental efforts (or in the extreme case even pose a physical threat on India's borders), the cooperation of Naypyidaw is essential. For these reasons India has reached out to every government in Myanmar, democratic or otherwise. This policy continues today despite the international opprobrium that the Tatmadaw attracts.

Though moving at a slower pace, trade and infrastructure development between both countries continues. One example is operationalisation of the Sittwe Port in Rakhine, where the first cargo ship from Kolkata docked on 9 May 2023; it was received by respective Union Ministers of both nations³⁹ (a symbol of the importance that the Government of India attaches to relations with Myanmar). This is the first leg of transportation via the long delayed Kaladan Multi Modal Transport Transit Project (KMTTP), India's first cross border venture for the North East whose framework agreement was signed in 2008. Operationalisation of the remaining legs – the Kaladan waterway from Sittwe to Paletwa (in Chin State) and the road from Paletwa to Zorinpui in Mizoram can happen only once peace returns to Rakhine and Chin states (both adjoining India), and safety of labour, operators, transients and goods is assured. This is possible only through cooperation between the Tatmadaw and EAOs – in this case the AA and Chin National Front

(CNF). Connectivity to the North East today through Bangladesh, a later development, is both simpler and faster. Nevertheless the earlier conceptualised KMTTP symbolises India's commitment to Myanmar's development and fulfilling its obligations. Post-coup, a major private sector investment inaugurated in August 2022 is the Ahlone Port Terminal set up by the Adani group at a cost of \$290 million.⁴⁰ While defence cooperation is ongoing, there has been no significant increase since the coup, for obvious reasons.

India is conscious of Chinese influence in Myanmar, and the requirement to play to its strengths without getting into competition with China. Accordingly it has strived to maintain a balance in government to government relations, which is noticeable in its neutral reaction to the 11 April bombing as enunciated by the MEA spokesperson who stated ... 'as a neighbor and friend of the people of Myanmar, we have repeatedly called for cessation of violence by all sides and peaceful resolution of all issues. India reiterates its call for return of peace, stability and democracy in Myanmar...'⁴¹ However, the impact of the Tatmadaw's violent suppression of all forms of dissent, coupled with India's ongoing and newer security concerns, could well require India to search for additional room for manoeuvre and more creative ways to deal with Myanmar.

India is today faced with a number of internal security issues with Myanmar. The first is about the Rohingya itself. There are about 16,000 UNHCR certified Rohingya refugees in India, though government estimates put the figure at 'beyond 40,000 with maximum concentration in and around Jammu'.⁴² This has national security implications for India, given Myanmar's obduracy towards finding an inclusive solution to this subject. Another is the fallout of the civil war into India across the 1643 Km long border, and its implications for India's internal security, a snapshot of which is provided below.

Spillover of Military Operations

Though the Free Movement Regime (FMR), that permits movement of citizens of either nation ... into the other for a distance of upto 16 km

with certain conditions⁴³ remains suspended, reports of unofficial movements continue to trickle in. Post the 2021 coup, Chin refugees started crossing into Mizoram; today they number close to 40,000, spread across various relief camps⁴⁴ with the attendant humanitarian, societal and security fallouts. During its bombing of the CNF headquarters at Camp Victoria on the Indo Myanmar border in January this year, there were reports (later denied by the Assam Rifles) that Myanmar jets had intruded into Indian air space and even destroyed a vehicle with Mizoram licence plates⁴⁵, indicating the probability of a spillover of military operations across the border.



Source: A camp of the Myanmar ethnic rebel group Chin National Front is seen near the border with India in March 2021. © Reuters

Impact on Internal Security of Manipur

In Manipur, there is resistance to fencing the border with Myanmar, resulting in a stalemate with the state government.⁴⁶ The violence in the state in the first week of May 2023 also has a Myanmar ‘connect’ with allegations that Kukis in Manipur are illegal migrants⁴⁷, as has the reported move of 300 Meities from Moreh, on India’s border into

Myanmar for safety reasons.⁴⁸ Earlier, on 13 November 2021, an Assam Rifles convoy in Churachandpur district was ambushed by Indian insurgents, who are believed to have been based across the border in Myanmar.⁴⁹

Alliances with the Tatmadaw

Lastly, there are unconfirmed reports⁵⁰ of Indian Insurgent Groups (IGs) having entered into a tacit understanding with the Tatmadaw to jointly fight the PDFs and other EAOs.⁵¹ If true, this adds another dimension altogether to this conflict, enhancing India's stakes in the matter. Ensuring stability on the border becomes vital for India – for internal security and furthering the Act East policy. However this can happen only if the Tatmadaw changes its mindset and looks beyond its immediate concerns.

Prognosis

India's Foreign Secretary, Vijay Kwatra visited Myanmar in November 2022. Discussions centred on maintenance of security and stability in the border areas as also developmental issues like the KMTTP and projects in the Rakhine amongst others.⁵² Currently Government to Government contact has been the norm; however with the situation in Myanmar unlikely to turn peaceful anytime soon, further depredations by the Tatmadaw or fallout of their actions on India's security metrics might force India to take a more proactive approach from the present one in this fast evolving situation.

The first step in a more inclusive approach could begin with greater focus on rehabilitation in areas immediately across the border. Though such schemes, especially in Rakhine have always been a priority, more such projects in Rakhine and Chin states could be taken up. After sounding the Tatmadaw, informal contacts between ethnic communities on either side could be exploited to obtain guarantees from EAOs and PDFs that the peace necessary for such efforts is brokered. This approach would help in a number of ways- whether in completing the KMTTP, resettling refugees, making insurgent groups

now default stakeholders in the rehabilitation process, building goodwill with Myanmarese citizenry, bolstering India's bona fides with the PDFs as also vis a vis China. It would provide India with more leverage with the Tatmadaw than it has now while providing a breather to the latter. The success or otherwise of such an initiative (avowedly a departure from the 'safe' option followed at present) would be the harbinger of a more realistic Myanmar policy later. As a neighbour, Myanmar is too important for India. Assisting it without creating turbulence will help India as well.

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ISBN 978-81-978433-1-0

