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MYANMAR'S CIVIL WAR

**India and China's Pursuit for a Peaceful
Neighborhood**

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In 2021, citing allegations of voter fraud during the general election of November 2020, the military, known as Tatmadaw staged a coup. In a democratic nation, practising a fraudulent election is a sin and if the allegations against Aung San Suu Kyi's party were substantiated, the coup would have been celebrated. However, it brought with itself widespread condemnation both domestically and internationally. The coup was preceded by the Rohingya refugee crisis. In both cases, Myanmar faced several humanitarian crises. Myanmar is not unfamiliar with dictatorial military rule. Ever since its independence, various minority ethnic communities have sought self-determination which has resulted in a prolonged and continued struggle between the ethnic minorities and the military. However, this confrontation has never been able to produce successful outcomes for the communities until now. The biggest potential threat to the reigning junta is these ethnic rebels, lying low in the trickiest terrain of the country.

A fresh struggle against the military junta saw the formation of an alliance between the three-armed ethnic minority bodies, including the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, which goes by the name of Three Brotherhood Alliance. News and various scholarly articles highlight the weakening position of the junta since the coup at the hands of these rebels, especially this Alliance. These changing winds have brought with them a unique set of security challenges for Myanmar and its neighbours, especially India and China. Many of the rebellious ethnic minorities reside in the bordering areas of Myanmar, including the northern Shan state that borders China, Chin state, and Sagaing region, both bordering India. This paper aspires to track the growing security challenges for Myanmar's two greatest neighbours – India and China and their quest to gain stability in the neighbourhood.

Stable Myanmar is Essential for a Stable Northeast

India

The importance of Myanmar to India is extremely transparent and obvious. India shares both land and maritime boundary with Myanmar. Four of India's major northeastern states share

their land boundary with Myanmar. If one looks at the political map of India and its neighbourhood, the 7 sisters or the 7 northeastern states are closer to India's eastern neighbours such as Myanmar than they are to the rest of India. Only 2 per cent of the entire northeastern landmass is connected to the rest of India through the Siliguri corridor (also known as the Chicken Neck) whereas 98 per cent of the Northeastern land mass shares its borders with Bangladesh, China, and Myanmar.

Myanmar is also an essential partner of India in the implementation of its Act East Policy which focuses on India's extended neighbourhood in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN as its core. Myanmar is the gateway to India's Act East Policy wherein the two countries already have strong socio-cultural ties with a consistent political and economic engagement. India and Myanmar's relations are multilayered with various complexities. Both the nations have suffered under the colonial regime of the British and henceforth, have developed strong relations during the anti-colonial struggles against them. This colonial connection provided the national leaders from both sides to formulate a natural bonhomie and hence, during the first decade of their independence, the two countries embarked on the path of "everlasting peace and unalterable friendship" by signing the Treaty of Friendship in 1951. The two were also members of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Most importantly, the northeastern region has been plagued with various security challenges such as militancy and insurgencies ever since the countries' independence. There are cross-border ethnic and cultural linkages in the border region between the two sides which facilitate the insurgents in carrying out their insurgency movements in the region. The most prominent insurgent group is the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang (NSCN-K) which propagates for the separation of Nagaland from India. It also partakes in minor activities in northwest Myanmar. Weapon smuggling and drug trafficking are also a rampant security concern at the Indo-Myanmar border. United Wa State Army (UWSA) is the de facto ruling party of Wa state in Myanmar. It has helped the northeastern insurgents procure arms from the black southeast Asian market. Chinese arms are also smuggled into Myanmar from Ruili, Lashio, Monywa, and Mandalay to India through Phek, Chandel, Churachandpur, and Champhai. Clearly, the Indo-Myanmar security challenges are extremely complex and

multilayered. Therefore, with Myanmar having a history of military dictatorship, it would not be out of character for India, a democratic country to establish ties with Myanmar's military regime. The two armies had previously held cooperative operations against these militant groups, but after the coup, Myanmar's military priorities have changed. On numerous occasions, the Indian and Burmese militaries have conducted military operations to weed out such hostile movements and a lot of them have also reaped success. For instance, Operation Sunrise was a joint operation carried out by Indian and Myanmar armies against the Arakan Army who were planning to hit the Indian workers at the Kaladan Transit project. The Indian army was provided with surveillance equipment and additional troops on the Indian side. With such an intertwined political and social fabric, a stable Myanmar is key to a secure and prosperous northeast.

A civil war between the Myanmarese communities and the military junta is an internal matter of the state, however, with an influx of refugees pouring into the bordering states and the increase in cross-border crimes, it has gained external eyes. Many of the troubled regions like Rihkhawdar, Khawmawi, and Khampat are located very close to the northeastern states of India, namely Mizoram and Manipur. One of the two official land border crossing sites between India and Myanmar is in Rihkhawdar, which is a short distance from Zokhawthar town in Mizoram. Khampat is also a strategically located region lying close to the second official border crossing point between Tamu in Myanmar and Moreh in Manipur. The armed struggle between the two parties in Myanmar echoes in the neighbouring regions of Mizoram and Manipur. According to the news, the fighting in Rihkhawdar resulted in civilians and even some Myanmarese soldiers seeking shelter in Mizoram. This has indefinitely raised concerns about more people from Myanmar escaping via porous borders and seeking safe havens in northeastern India. Following the airstrikes in the Chin state by the military junta, around 5,000 Myanmar nationals fled to the Indian side on November 13th 2023.

More importantly, military operations like Operation 1023, Operation 1111 in Karenni state, and Operation 1113 in Rakhine, upper Sagaing, and Chin by the rebels present a transformed picture wherein the rebels have moved from a defensive phase to a counteroffensive with an aim to occupy key areas. Toe Kyaw Hlaing, a member of the National Unity Consultative

Council (NUCC), an advisory council to the government of Myanmar in exile, asserted that the resistance forces are making progress in places like the Sagaing region and currently hold control over 70% of Chin state. A crucial commercial station between Chin state and India – Rihkhawdar was taken over by the fighters.

For the Indian side, the conflict becomes even more worrisome due to its implications for the Meitei-Kuki clashes in Manipur. In May 2023, the whole nation witnessed the extent of rivalry between the two clans. Kukis and the Chin ethnic group in Myanmar are closely related, and in recent months, there have been rumours of Chin insurgents supporting Kukis. Similarly, several Meitei militant groups are speculated to have the support of Myanmar’s military as the group has a considerable presence in the Sagaing region of Myanmar. Manipur has been boiling with inter-community rivalry and despite various domestic factors, an unfenced border and unregulated migration from Myanmar are being held accountable for this ethnic violence in Manipur.

New Order of Business

Installation of an advanced smart fence system along 100 km of the Indo-Myanmar border was announced by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to bolster the current surveillance system. The Union Home Minister Amit Shah said in August that an influx of Kuki migrants from Myanmar flared up insecurities among Meities. He acknowledged that the situation in Myanmar has become even more complicated and complex after the military coup of 2021. (Alam 2023). All borders along the Indo-Myanmar border were sealed prior to the General Election to MLA, 2023 in order to ensure a calm and orderly and to avert any unfortunate incidents. The Border Guarding Force and the State Police Force were requested to maintain stringent surveillance of people's movements within and around the border areas. Strict vigilance and thorough inspection of all vehicle types were maintained to prevent infiltration of weapons or ammunition brought into the district from the outside (Government of Mizoram 2023).

Union Minister Amit Shah has also announced the government's plan to formally end the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in early January of 2024. The Regime had been suspended since September of 2022. The Regime allowed tribal communities across the border to move inside each other's territories for up to 16 km without a visa. This was done with the intention to preserve and retain the age-old ties between the tribal communities. Insurgent groups from both sides have misused this regime and have consistently entered the bordering territories establishing safe havens for themselves. Under FMR, the communities can carry head loads of luggage which is exempted from any standard custom procedures – insurgents, and criminals, smuggle illegal weapons, drugs, and narcotics across the border through this.

Indo-Myanmar border falls under the government's comprehensive integrated border management (CIBMS). Using advanced devices, including cameras, sensors, lasers, and radar systems, even the slightest movement can be picked and sent to the control centre (Alam 2023). The Narendra Modi government aims to completely seal India's border with Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. These borders are notorious for cross-border crimes like human and drug trafficking, arms smuggling, illegal infiltration, and terrorism. This CIBMS project will aid and enhance the Border Security Forces' ability to detect and investigate such crimes. Less than 10% of Manipur's 400 km international border with Myanmar is now walled, leaving the area vulnerable to unlawful cross-border activity. Fencing the entire border is difficult, among other reasons, because of the region's hard geography.

Is China Troubled?

Something similar is the case with regions bordering China. An intense struggle has persisted since October 2023 in the northern state of Shan, which also borders Yunnan province in southwest China. It was reported in November 2023, that the alliance of armed ethnic minority groups claimed to have occupied a major commercial post – the Kyin-San-Kyawt border gate along the Myanmar-China border in northern Shan state. However, it has not been confirmed yet. The China-Myanmar border situation is also marred with cross-border activities like telecom scams, gambling, fraud, and human trafficking are massively prevalent here as well. The rebels have also claimed to have acquired control of some of the essential stations and

towns along the Chinese border. Chinese police have even issued a most-wanted list naming 10 suspected ringleaders from three families in Shan state.

The Three Brotherhood Alliance launched a coordinated offensive on October 27, 2023. At least three towns have been declared lost by the government, and nearly all cross-border trade with China appears to have been halted by the fighting, severely disrupting Myanmar's economy.

China announced the beginning of its military exercises on the same day that the Kyin-San-Kyawt border gate was reportedly taken. Kokang Self-Administered Zone in the Shan state has deep ties with China as the Kokang minority of Myanmar are ethnically Chinese. One of the three groups in the Three Brotherhood Alliance – The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army is an armed Kokang group. This group shares various common causes with Beijing one of them the being elimination of cyber scam operations. Nonetheless, the Chinese embassy in Myanmar issued an advisory for Chinese nationals to evacuate from the Laukkai area in the Kokang region, citing growing security risks. This provides China with great leverage on its hands. China has also increased its border vigilance as the combat escalates in Myanmar. The PLA Daily has highlighted that their troops are prepared for any emergency which may come due to a complicated security situation.

Wolf Warrior Diplomacy in Action

Myanmar's biggest neighbours have found themselves feeling insecure about its internal instability. However, China has gotten the first mover's advantage as it mediated a ceasefire in northern Myanmar between the ruling junta and an alliance of rebels. Representatives from the military government and the alliance met in China to reach an agreement on a temporary ceasefire. They also agreed to maintain a dialogue.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Mao Ning highlighted Beijing's key role in materialising the peace talks and added that such a development has significantly eased the conflict and was in the interest of all parties in Myanmar while also maintaining tranquillity along the China-Myanmar border. (Zhen 2023). However, the legitimacy and validity of this mediation have been in question ever since the talks. This is so because while the Chinese and

Myanmarese governments issued statements about the peace talks, no such publicity was done by the Alliance. Instead, they posted on social media regarding their reaffirmed commitment to end dictatorship (Zhao 2023).

Nonetheless, during the third round of dialogue on the 10th and 11th of January, China was able to finalise a truce in talks held in China's south-western city of Kunming. The Three Brotherhood Alliance and the representatives of Myanmar's State Administrative Council (SAC) agreed to a temporary ceasefire limited to Myanmar's Shan state which borders China. However, the brokered ceasefire will have no impact on other regions including Rakhine state and Sagaing region located close to the Indian border.

Both India and China share deep socio-cultural ties with Myanmar with various Myanmarese ethnic communities having roots in either China or India. Yet, China was able to leverage those ties and connections better in terms of problem solutions even if the result might be temporary. The peace talks between the junta and the Three Brotherhood Alliance mediated by Beijing is a proof of the great diplomatic influence China exerts in the region. However, China's active diplomacy has reaped some enemies. Myanmar as many anti-junta and pro-junta groups have accused China of lending support to the Brotherhood Alliance. In November 2023, a protest was organised by the nationalists backed by the Myanmar regime denouncing Chinese governed for feeding and supplying armaments to ethnic armed organisations located near the Chinese border in northern Myanmar (The Irrawaddy 2023). It is said to be the first time that China has been openly named in a junta-approved rally, suggesting profound discontentment among the junta with China for its failure to assert its influence on the alliance in favour of the junta.

Way Forward

As the Civil War in Myanmar rages on, it will become imperative for the neighbours, especially India to strike a balanced relation with both the junta and the pro-democracy movement. As the junta is reaping benefits from the strategic competition between India and China, India too needs to strategically compose its relations with both sides of the civil war.

Fencing the borders with advanced technology is a superficial answer to the problems of cross-border crimes. Various ethnic minority communities living in the bordering areas of India have felt alienated from the rest of India due to their demands and needs going unheard resulting in rebellion or militant movements. The Indian government need to actively engage with these communities by opening an effective line of communication with the authorities in such regions so that the socio-economic, political, and ecological demands can be heard and met. When this region of India gets employed in the hustle of developing India, the instances of rebellion or militancy will seize, eventually.

Nonetheless, with the news of anti-junta groups claiming bordering territories in Myanmar, an increased influx of refugees and insurgents is likely. Apart from sealing the borders and surging vigilance, the Indian government needs to establish a cordial relationship with the anti-junta forces as well. This is so because, for domestic peace and security, Delhi needs these rebellious groups on its side. It is also likely that China's greater proximity to the Kokang group (one of the three groups in the Three Brotherhood Alliance) may become problematic in the near future.

Conclusion

Myanmar is an asset for both India and China, a key neighbour. Hence, it is imperative for both countries to see an end to the instability in Myanmar which is gradually seeping in one form or the other in its neighbourhood. China has utilized its cultural and social connection extremely well and attempted to broker a peace settlement between the struggling parties. It is a feat for Chinese diplomacy that after three rounds of dialogue, it has finally been able to broker a temporary ceasefire in areas along the Sino-Myanmar border negating other parts of Myanmar. It is highly likely that if not all, some of the Chinese concerns and disapprovals will be taken into account by both sides and China may also use its influence on the junta and the rebels in its favour and against India.

However, the same cannot be said about India as, despite an amicable relationship with the junta, it has not established a connection with the rebels. Since the Indo-Myanmar boundary is a colonial creation, the region houses members of the same communities, living on different

sides of the border. Therefore, the Indian government needs to do more than just erecting fences and shutting down borders. It needs to proactively engage with the local governments, and the civil society in these areas and make an effort to manage the situation through sensitisation of locals and even the migrants fleeing Myanmar. The last thing these communities would want is another authority oppressing or alienating them or their members.

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