



Indo-Myanmar relations amid ethnic strife and post-coup d'état in Myanmar

Srikant Rai¹, Bharti Das²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, University of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

² Professor, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, University of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Myanmar shares both land and maritime boundaries with India. Northeastern India shares a 1643 km-long land border (including the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram). India's strategic ability in the region has been affected because of its long border with Myanmar. India has had problems with internal security due to the influx of a large number of refugees, and the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar have spilled over into its territory. Additionally, the presence of armed ethnic groups along the border has complicated India's security efforts. The conflict has created a human rights and humanitarian crisis, with a significant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees coming to India and neighboring countries. i.e., Rohingyas. This paper discusses the various challenges faced by India arising due to ethnic strife, and the coup d'état of Feb 2021 in Myanmar has impacted its relation and its strategic interest. The present relationship between them is shaped by Myanmar's internal ethnic conflicts, having major implications for security, economics, diplomacy, and trade relations.

Keywords: Strategic importance, impact of instability, security concerns, diplomatic and economic approach, PDF (People's Defense Force), EAOs (Ethnic Armed Organizations). SAC (State Administrative Council), NUG (National Unity Govt), Ethnonationalist Movement,

Introduction

Ethnic conflict and the ongoing civil war in Myanmar have significantly impacted India-Myanmar relations, hindering trade, security, and diplomacy. India's strategic interest in Myanmar lies in its location in the Bay of Bengal and SE Asian region, bordering China, ASEAN, and Bangladesh. The 1643 km long land border with Myanmar and the northeastern state of India encompasses Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, which further accentuates India's concern.

The 2021 coup d'état by the Myanmar Junta has disrupted the democratic peace process, which it had embarked on since 2008, and led to a spiral of violence and instability. The military's attack on opposition forces has caused serious human rights violations of forced killings, torture, forced relocations of affected populations, mainly the bordering tribes, and forced recruitment of child soldiers. This ongoing civil war between the military-ruled junta and the people has resulted in a serious humanitarian crisis, with the forced mass displacement of people from their homes, who have become refugees. Unlike the previous military coup, the present crisis of democracy has forced opposition forces, the public, and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) to react strongly against the military takeover.

Myanmar's strategic importance to India lies in the fact that it shares a border with Northeast India and its proximity to the Golden Triangle, a major drug trafficking route to Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. Myanmar has ties with ethnic insurgent groups bordering Indian territory that operate from its territory for logistic support. The ongoing violence and internal unrest have forced the ethnic minorities, including political rivals, to leave their homes and search for safe havens in India, Bangladesh, and Thailand. The large influx of refugees has significantly put strain on local resources and competition for jobs in India and Bangladesh. The presence of armed ethnic groups along the Indian border has

complicated the security situation with demands from local and civil society to review the policy of FMR. Frequently conducted cross-border operations, encompassing drug smuggling, human trafficking, and armed incursions by these armed groups, directly threaten India's security. The civil unrest in Myanmar has also affected India's strategic interests in the region, as it tries to balance its strategic and diplomatic ties with Myanmar while also dealing with local security threats. 13

India-Myanmar relations are critically affected by its ties and support to insurgent groups operating and active within India. Several of these groups have found safe sanctuaries and refuge across the border in Myanmar, exploiting the difficult terrain, ethnic affinity, and porous borders. This has confounded the border management and security cooperation between the two nations. Recently India has introduced restrictions to seal its border and restrict FMR. The initial sympathy towards refugees is on the wane amidst growing concern among the locals in the border states of Manipur and Mizoram about increased competition for already scarce resources and jobs. They are also concerned about the smuggling of drugs and contraband and other illegal activities. There is increasing demand from civil society to fence the border and restrict free movement of refugees. These new restrictions on the border with Myanmar will further complicate the relations and India's effort to engage with the Junta and EAOs controlling the border. It is also going to impact our goal of improved connectivity with Southeast Asia as part of our "Act East policy." Border fencing and the ending of FMR will prove counterproductive and will aggravate the already deteriorating security situation along the border. 13,14

This paper aims to delve into the importance of Myanmar to India's "Act East" and "Neighbors First" policies. It explores issues of the ethnonationalist movement and civil unrest and how the military coup of 2021 has affected

India's relationship with the country and its strategic interests in the region. Myanmar's geographical location, shared cultural and religious history, economic interests, and India's strategic concerns in the region guide our foreign policy. Some key aspects of our relationship are discussed.

Political Relationship

Myanmar and India share long-standing diplomatic relations characterized by frequent visits and high-level exchanges and cooperation in both diplomatic and military spheres. Their embassies in each other's capitals facilitate easy communication and collaboration between diplomats.

Regional Cooperation/Alliances: Both countries are part of groups like BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation) and ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Both the nations have shared and common interests in the region and have jointly worked together on issues that affect the region, i.e., economic cooperation, trade, security, connectivity, regional peace, prioritizing peace and security, people empowerment, and the free movement of goods, services, skilled labor, and capital. 17

Economic relations

Trade and Investment: Myanmar and India have strong economic ties, with scope for them to grow even more. India is one of Myanmar's traditional primary trading partners. India's trade relations with Myanmar include improving connectivity, access to the growing market, streamlining financial transactions, reopening border trading posts, and promoting the rupee-kyat trade settlement mechanism. Potential areas of trade include sectors like textiles, agricultural goods, health, pharmaceuticals, machinery, consumer goods, and micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). India is also working on infrastructure projects in Myanmar, such as transport connectivity and customs and border management, to improve and yield sustained long-term gains and maintain close relations by strengthening the framework for mutual support and collaboration. Bilateral trade between the two countries stands at 2.15 billion USD in 2025. Both sides have agreed to scale the bilateral trade to USD 5 billion by 2030. 18

Military relations and security issues

Defence Cooperation: Myanmar and India have a defence and maritime cooperation agreement that focuses on military training, joint exercises, and working together in the defence industry. The goal of this cooperation is to improve maritime safety and fight terrorism.

Border Management: The two countries have historically been collaborating to manage and secure their borders through the Free Movement Regime (FMR). This allows citizens to travel up to 16 km into each other's territory visa-free. Post coup d'état, the influx of ethnic rebels fighting the junta in the states of Mizoram and Manipur has significantly raised India's security concerns. Insurgents have exploited FMR to launch attacks on Indian soil and engage in illegal activities like drug trafficking and gold smuggling. The rugged terrain and intertribal clashes have fostered the problem. To address these issues amidst growing unrest along the border states, India has recently restricted the FMR and started fencing the border. 16

Exchanges in Culture and Education.

Cultural diplomacy: India and Myanmar share close and strong cultural ties deeply rooted in India's age-old religious and Buddhist heritage spanning over two millennia. This shared heritage is reflected in some key initiatives taken by the Govt. of India to build upon our historical and cultural roots. I.e., funding and restoration of the Ananda Temple in Bagan and installation of a 16-foot replica of the Sarnath Buddha Statue at the premises of Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon. There are regular exchanges and performances by cultural troupes. i.e., performances by troupes and artists of Myanmar in ICCR's Ramayana performing workshop, Kullu Dusshera Festival, and International Craft Mela, Surajkund, during the year 2024-25. An exhibition on the Ramayana was also organized in Myanmar. These cultural connections have extended beyond economic and political spheres and have helped sustain goodwill despite political upheavals in Myanmar. The Indian diaspora in Myanmar, though diminished compared to pre-independence era levels, continues to contribute immensely towards this goal. 19

Educational Collaboration: India & Myanmar have established academic partnerships and scholarship programs to facilitate students studying abroad, enhancing our ties and cooperation. This has been an important step towards the development of their human resources. Cooperation in the field focuses on capacity building, STEM, and technical training, i.e., the establishment of the Myanmar Institute of Information Technology, Mandalay; the India-Myanmar Industrial Training Centres for IT skills; the Advanced Centre for Agricultural Research and Education (ACARE); and two industrial training centers (ITC). Key Areas of Educational Cooperation include

- Est. of Technical Education & Skills Centers
- Agricultural Research
- Capacity building by training programs for Myanmar scientists, technical personnel, and professionals
- Scholarships: Regular provision of scholarship opportunities for Myanmar students to pursue higher education in India. 19

Strategic partnership

Geostrategic Alignment: Myanmar and India have common strategic goals for the Indo-Pacific region, such as stability, economic growth, regional connectivity, and maritime security. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is one of many projects that the two countries work on together to improve trade routes and connectivity. Myanmar and India work together on international issues, such as in the United Nations, where they agree on how to deal with common global problems and promote their interests.

India's position on the coup in Myanmar represents a significant policy shift; some critics view India's stance as an endorsement of the coup. This may be attributed to the following reasons:

1. The visit of foreign secretaries to Myanmar after the coup.
2. Continued Military Cooperation: The Indian decision to give Myanmar radar technology, ammunition, and a remote-control weapon system through BEL drew criticism. India has supported Myanmar internationally against sanctions.

3. **India's ongoing economic ties:** India decided to open an Indian Center in Yangon to help with more economic cooperation during the Foreign Secretary's visit.

India has continued to work with Myanmar diplomatically and economically, even though these problems exist. India has helped Myanmar with humanitarian aid and has backed efforts to bring peace and stability to the area. However, ongoing ethnic conflict is still a big problem for fully realising Indo-Myanmar relations.

The current security situation in Myanmar is more complex and dangerous than the previous multiple crises of post-independence, and immediate resolution looks bleak. The ethnic violence has had big effects on the economies of both Myanmar and India. The economic effects of the crisis on Indo-Myanmar relations are complex. The instability in Myanmar has made it harder for the two countries to trade and work together economically. The large number of refugees coming to India has put a strain on local resources and made it harder to help people in need. The economic effects of the crisis on our relations are multifaceted. Violence and instability hinder trade and economic cooperation between the two nations. The presence of ethnic armed groups along the border has had an even bigger effect on economic activities and trade relations. India has kept engaging with the ruling junta diplomatically and economically, giving humanitarian aid and backing efforts to bring peace and stability to the area, but the ongoing ethnic conflict still remains a big problem for the full development of economic ties between India and Myanmar.^[13]

The ethnic conflict in Myanmar has affected the economic cooperation between the two countries with disruption in trade activities and delayed connectivity projects, which are of strategic importance to India. Even with these problems, India has kept talking to Myanmar about trade and diplomacy. Some important aspects of close cooperation and how they work together economically are as follows:

1. Trade Relations: India and Myanmar have kept up their trade relations, and India is one of Myanmar's most important trading partners. Traded goods include agricultural products, medicines, and machinery.

2. Infrastructure Development: India has worked on a number of infrastructure development projects in Myanmar. The goal of these projects is to improve the links between the two countries and boost trade between them.

3. Humanitarian Aid: India has given Myanmar humanitarian aid, especially after the ethnic conflicts and disasters. This aid has included food, medical supplies, shelter, and financial assistance to people who have fled their homes and have taken refuge in India. In addition, India has been the first responder to provide HADR assistance to Myanmar.

4. Investment: Indian businesses have made investments in a number of areas in Myanmar, such as telecommunications, energy, manufacturing, and HR development. The goal of these investments is to help Myanmar's economy grow and create skilled jobs.

5. Capacity building: India has helped Myanmar build its capacity by supporting training programs and educational exchanges. The goal of these programs is to improve the skills and knowledge of Myanmar's workers.

Infrastructure Projects in Myanmar

India remains committed to supporting Myanmar's economic growth and stability despite having serious security issues. Resolution of these conflicts is essential for achieving complete economic relations between India and Myanmar. India has worked on several infrastructure projects in Myanmar. These projects aim to facilitate communication and commerce between the two nations. India's infrastructure projects in Myanmar are very important to their relationship. India's infrastructure projects in Myanmar have focused on a few important areas. During the recent visit of the Foreign Secretary to Myanmar after the coup, India stated its continued support for the ruling junta in its work on these projects. India has been building and improving roads in Myanmar, which has made it easier for people and goods to move between the two countries. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway is one of these projects. Its goal is to connect India with Southeast Asia through Myanmar. India supports projects that will improve connectivity, such as the Kaldan Multi-Modal Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway Project^[14, 15, 16].

1. Energy and Power: India has helped Myanmar build its electricity grid, which has made it easier for people to get electricity. This kind of help has been crucial for raising living standards and supporting business.

2. India has helped Myanmar's cyber revolution by improving connectivity and access to information in the fields of telecommunications and IT. The growth has made it possible for many Burmese to work and make money online, which has helped the IT sector grow. 1. Myanmar/Malaysia/India Singapore Transit (MIST) Corridor: MIST is a global network of submarine cables that will connect Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Myanmar with India. The MIST cable is 8,100 kilometers long.

3. Health and Education: India has backed efforts to improve Myanmar's education and healthcare systems, which has helped the country grow as a whole. India's Vaccine Maitri Diplomacy sends Covid-19 vaccines made in India to help with Covid

4. India has given humanitarian aid to Myanmar, especially after ethnic conflicts. This includes food, medical supplies, and help for people who have fled their homes. India promised to give Myanmar 1 million dollars in aid and 10,000 tonnes of rice and wheat. India remains committed to assisting Myanmar in building its infrastructure and maintaining stability, despite the ongoing ethnic conflict. It is essential to settle these disagreements so that Indo-Myanmar's economic ties can fully develop.

The Strategic Importance of Myanmar

Geostrategic Alignment: Myanmar and India both want the Indo-Pacific region to be stable, economically strong, and safe at sea. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is one of the projects that both countries are working on to improve trade and connections.

International Diplomacy: Myanmar and India work together on international issues, such as in the United Nations and other forums, where they agree on common global problems and work to promote their interests. The importance of Myanmar comes from the fact that two policy ideas come together there:

"Act East" and "Neighbourhood First Policy"

Myanmar is close to Northeast India and serves as a bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. It is also a gateway to Southeast Asia. These are important for keeping the region stable and helping the economy grow, especially given the ongoing ethnic conflict. India's strategic goals for Myanmar include.

Security and Border Management: The ongoing internal crisis and civil unrest in Myanmar has led to a large influx of refugees coming to India. Local peace and security in the bordering states has been threatened by the presence of armed ethnic groups along the border. Illegal cross-border activities and armed attacks on security forces by these insurgents directly threaten India's security. Indian priorities should be border security, preventing violence, and safeguarding its strategic interests and its investment in infrastructure projects in Myanmar.

Economic Cooperation: The instability in Myanmar has made it harder for the two countries to trade and work together economically. India has continued to work with Myanmar diplomatically and economically, despite these problems. India has provided humanitarian aid and supported efforts to bring peace and stability to the region.

Diplomatic Engagement: India has kept its diplomatic ties with Myanmar to protect its strategic interests in the area while also dealing with security threats. For stability and growth, Myanmar and the other country must resolve their ethnic conflicts.

Humanitarian Assistance: Giving help and support to refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) from Myanmar is important for solving the humanitarian crisis and keeping the region stable.

Regional Stability: For India's national security, it is important to keep the peace and stability in the northeastern states of India, which are directly affected by the ethnic conflict in Myanmar.

Counter Terrorism: For India's safety, it is very important to address the threat posed by ethnic armed groups and militants who operate across borders. What India thinks about Myanmar. India has stressed that it plans to use a twin-track approach in dealing with Myanmar in response to critics of its policy spin/twin-track approach. India plans to keep talking to the ruling military junta and at the same time gently push the country to restore democracy. India's clear goal is to deal with Myanmar's specific security issues. The hidden goal is to balance out China's growing involvement in Myanmar, Southeast Asia, and the IOR. The aim of this approach was to help Myanmar restore democracy and bring peace and stability. This also includes goals like federalism and proportional elections in 2025. However, for some reason, the plan has been given up, and the state of emergency was extended. India wants the ruling

junta to adopt a political system that is acceptable to all parties involved in the conflict and also demands the immediate cessation of violence and release of political leaders^[13].

China as a Regional Power

China's presence in Myanmar, especially through infrastructure and mining projects like the Kyaukphyu Port, makes it harder for India to protect its strategic interests in the area. India's recent inverted approach, policy spin, or twin-track approach derives from the following facts and the politics of the situation:

1. The increasing power of China in Myanmar. After the coup, China kept its distance from the military junta at first to avoid backlash from the people of Myanmar and criticism from other countries. But lately, China has started working with the military junta and was responsible for the peace talks between the rebel EAOs and the military.
2. China has given Myanmar a used Ming-class submarine, and the Myanmar Navy is also getting training on submarines from China. China has also given Myanmar an 820 anti-ship missile and a plane it built itself.
3. China has been a part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) in Myanmar as part of the BRI. China has already turned Kyaukphyu Port into an important part of its String of Pearls strategy.
4. India's fears and threats to its security across the border. Myanmar is a key part of both our Act East Policy and our Neighbourhood First Policy.
5. India is putting a lot of money into projects that will connect people, like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Project and the IMT Trilateral Project, both of which include Myanmar.

QUAD

India, the United States, Japan, and Australia have an informal strategic dialogue called the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). Its goal is to make the Indo-Pacific region "free, open, and prosperous." Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first raised the idea in 2007. The 4th Quad foreign ministers met in February 2022, and India did not agree with the idea of punishing Myanmar with sanctions. India stated its concerns about the crisis because of specific issues. India is Myanmar's "immediate land-border neighbor," but it has "some specific" concerns about the country. India has stated clearly that it does not follow a policy of national sanctions. " India has pointed out three important issues in this regard.

1. Security concerns along the Indian border and Bay of Bengal
2. The world treats military rule better than other types of rule.
3. India supports the ASEAN five-point consensus that countries should not get involved in internal issues. India's stand is that sanctions can significantly harm the economy of the targeted country. Trade restrictions can make it harder for businesses to export and import goods, which will hurt industries and cost jobs. Inflation, currency devaluation, and less access to basic goods and services can lead to an unstable economy. Economic instability often has negative effects on society. Unemployment, low income, and a lack of resources can all lead to social unrest. People might protest because sanctions make things harder for the economy. This can lead to problems inside the country, like protests, strikes, or even bigger ones, which Myanmar is already facing.

4. Favorable treatment of military rulers by the Western nations: The West has a biased view of both of our neighbors, i.e., Pakistan and Myanmar. Russia and China are the key supporters of the junta, and their support is expected to sustain the SAC and the Tatmadaw. India, on the other hand, has maintained calls for negotiations between the warring factions to end the violence and resume talks.

Recent developments (Trade & Commerce)

In June 2023, India and Myanmar finished their talks about trading in rupees. This made it easier for payment systems to work despite US sanctions and gave a big boost to trade between the two countries. Once the system for settling trade in rupees is in place, trade between India and Myanmar could go up a lot from its current level of \$1.76 billion. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has already permitted payments in Indian rupees. The Myanmar government wants to make it possible for Indian rupees to be used in trade. With this settlement system, Myanmar will accept Indian rupees as payment for all of its exports to India. The same money can also be used to pay for goods and services that Myanmar buys from India. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has chosen and given PNB of India the power to open a special Rupee Vostro Account (SRVA) for trade with Myanmar^[16, 19, 20].

Cyclone Mocha got close to the coasts of Myanmar and Bangladesh in May 2023. India initiated "Operation Karuna" to aid the victims of Cyclone Mocha in Myanmar. India is dedicated to upholding Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and is the initial responder in offering assistance to neighboring countries during disasters. India started "Operation Brahma" after the terrible earthquake hit Myanmar on March 28, 2025. India sent more than 55 tons of aid supplies, i.e., tents, sleeping bags, blankets, ready-to-eat meals, water purifiers, solar lamps, generator sets, and important medicines. The Indian Army also dispatched two National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) teams and a medical team to assist with operations. The Indian Army also sent a specialized medical task force, which included a 118-person team to help people in need right away. It provided advanced medical and surgical care in disaster-stricken areas. The start of "Operation Brahma" shows that India is willing to be the first responder in times of crisis, which demonstrates its commitment to keeping everyone in the region safe and helping them grow^[18].

India's response to Myanmar's post-coup d'état is a delicate balancing act between working with the military junta and pushing for democracy, citing security and regional stability as reasons. India is delicately navigating its relationship with Myanmar. There are both a moral argument and a realist argument for focusing on India's pro-democracy stance, and there are also security issues and China's role in Myanmar. This present policy change seems to be a practical choice for India at the moment given the changing dynamic of our relations. India has two strategic goals: one is clearly defined, while the other is ambiguous. It calls for a careful approach that is both practical and cautious, meaning that we should not become involved in Myanmar's internal politics directly, but we should keep engaging with its military junta and other stakeholders and gently push them towards restoration of peace and democracy.

Conclusion

Myanmar's ongoing instability is still a major concern for the region's stability, economy, and India's long-term strategic goals. India's policy approach to Myanmar is a careful balancing act of diplomacy and cooperation. It engages in talks with the ruling junta to protect its security and economic interests. India also supports democratic processes and promotes regional connectivity through infrastructure development, thus helping Myanmar in continued growth, prosperity, and regional and global integration. India's stakes are high for peace and stability to return to Myanmar. It's in India's interest to consistently support and engage the ruling military junta for the return of democracy, which will strengthen Myanmar. India needs to closely engage with the ruling dispensation and support ASEAN's effort in finding a solution to the ongoing problem in Myanmar. The summary gives a full picture of the complicated relationship between India and Myanmar, focussing on the main areas of impact and the ongoing efforts deal with the problems that come up because of ethnic conflict and instability.

The ethnic violence in Myanmar has made India less safe because they share a border. The summary gives a full picture of the complicated relationship between India and Myanmar, focussing on the main areas of impact and the ongoing efforts deal with the problems that come up because of ethnic conflict and instability.

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