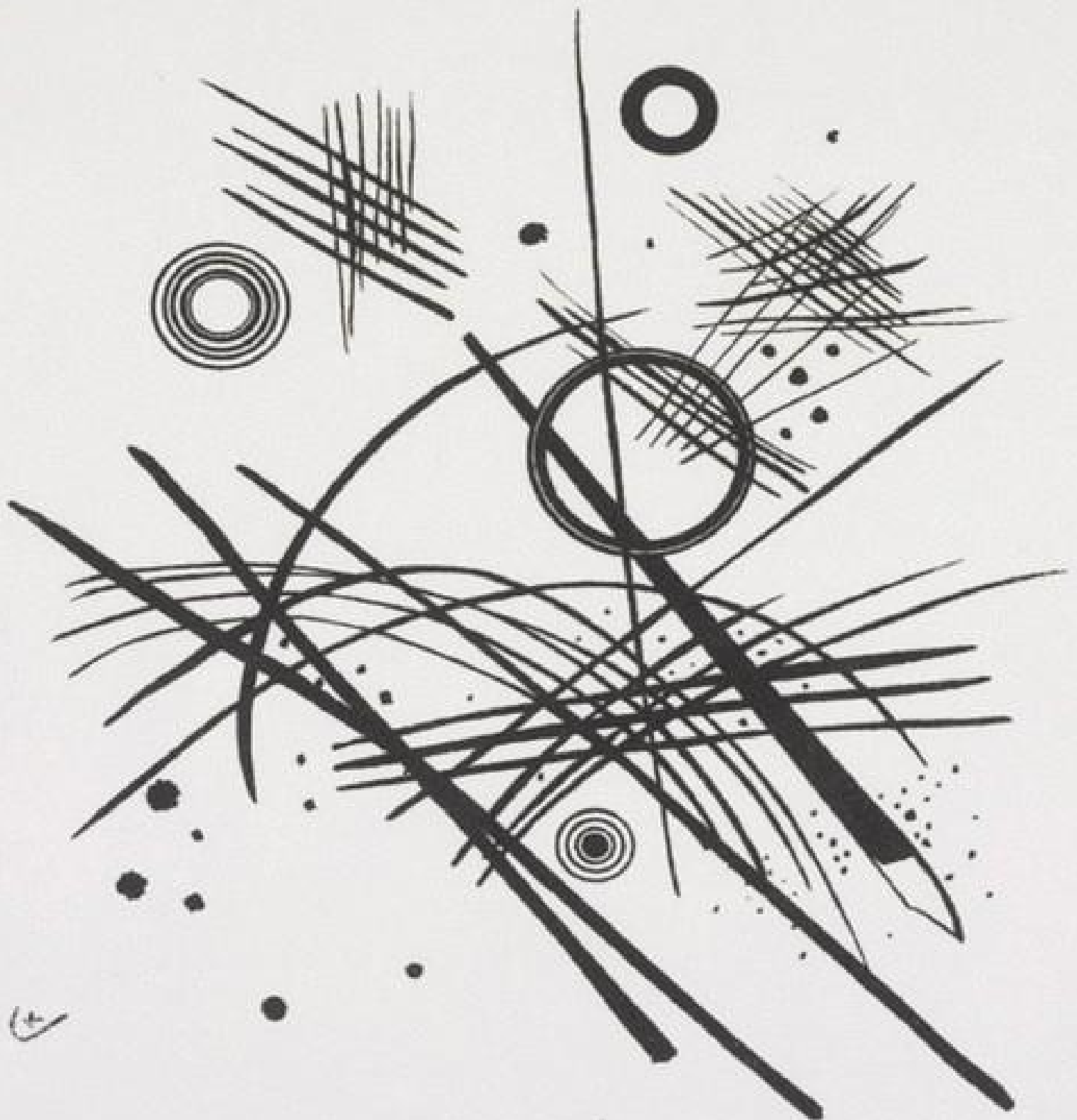


DEMOCRACY IN THE SHADOW OF COUP: China-India conundrum in Myanmar

By: Pooran Chandra Pandey



Global TechnoPolitics Forum

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FOREWORD

The world watched last year's military coup in Myanmar mostly in silence, but that silence has become more and more uncomfortable as violence has increased and the country seemed to be sliding to civil war. Pooran Pandrey's assessment, done for the Global TechnoPolitics Forum is thus especially timely. He focuses on Myanmar's immediate neighbors, especially China, and his own country, India, observing that while the United States, Britain, and the European Union have imposed sanctions on the military junta, those neighbors have not, instead condemning the violence but not explicitly criticizing the military or underscoring the legitimacy of the parliamentary elections.

For India, the geopolitics of the conflict are especially tricky: Myanmar is not only an important trading partner but also an ally in combating extremism and insurgency in India's northeastern states. India's rivalry with China – which has impelled India to join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, Australia, and the United States. As the Forum probes the implications for democracy of the intersection of technology and geopolitics, Myanmar is a continuing test case of whether the digital world confers advantages on opposition for through enabling organizing, or on authoritarian regimes through improving surveillance techniques. It is a test the world will watch.

Gregory Treverton

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President

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar (formerly Burma) witnessed a silent coup when its military junta toppled the democratically elected government in the wee hours of the intervening night of January 31 and February 01, last year, and the nation of 55-million strong populations in India's neighborhood has since been under military rule.

In the aftermath of the coup, the country has been witnessing continued violent uprisings, perhaps the worst recorded since the Saffron Revolution, 2007. The coup, after 10 years of democratic rule in Myanmar, has taken a heavy physical and mental toll on its people with an unconfirmed number of protestors either killed or detained while many facing death sentences including foreign journalists having either been deported or held back in prisons on sedition charges for abetting ongoing uprising and provocative reporting.

The situation in Myanmar continues to be grim and fragile, overall, which if not brought under control soon, may likely slip into a civil war kind of a situation, which ought to be avoided at all costs with a policy of incentive, coercion, economic sanctions, and trade embargos while keeping overall humanitarian interests of country's people at front and center.

Despite United Nations (UN) Secretary-General and other world leaders condemning the coup, and the US, UK, and EU imposing sanctions on the junta, regional powers like India, China, and Russia have taken a measured approach to the unraveling situation in Myanmar. While condemning the violence that ensued following the coup, none of the nations have explicitly criticized Tatmadaw (the armed forces in Myanmar) or reinforced the legitimacy of the parliamentary elections. Indian government ostensibly looks

unlikely to deviate from its policy of non-interference in other nations' internal affairs and is likely to continue to call for the restoration of peace without taking sides and/or initiating steps to condemn or undermine the Tatmadaw.

There is a considered view over New Delhi's nuanced position as Myanmar is the gateway to Southeast Asia and also a vital trade partner for India and the only neighbor with which India shares both land and sea borders. It is also an important ally in combating extremism and insurgency on its border areas with the North-Eastern states. Crucially, India's approach to the situation in Myanmar also needs to be reviewed and understood through the lens of its competition and rivalry with China in the region, given Beijing's past and ongoing aggressive foreign policy stands and military approaches to peace and security, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific and formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), a grouping shaped by Australia, India, Japan, and the US to secure and establish a free and open Indo Pacific with the convergence of interests and coherence of policies capable of establishing rules-based international order.

INDIA & MYANMAR RELATIONS SINCE 1948

India and Myanmar with a shared legacy dating back to the British Era in the region have a long and complicated history. Historically, Myanmar has been under near absolute military control since gaining independence in 1948, and even in the wake of the 2008 democratic reforms, the Tatmadaw remained a driving force in the nation's domestic politics. India and Burma were close allies in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) during the 1950s but following Myanmar's silence during the Indo-Chinese conflict of 1962, the two nations maintained a relationship that was largely characterized by 'stagnancy bordering on the margins of cordiality' for the next two decades that followed.¹

The Congress governments (an Indian political party, now in opposition) viewed military rule in Myanmar as a threat to global democratic values and in 1988, following a crackdown by the Tatmadaw, India aligned itself firmly with pro-democracy camps. In 1989, India granted fleeing Burmese activists' safe haven, and in 1990 pushed for two controversial student activists to be given political asylum. In 1992, India also signed a UN resolution condemning Myanmar's military for committing gross human rights violations. New Delhi back then had chosen 'policy of idealism' and under that reality, could not be silent on matters of human dignity.

Subsequently, the wheels of politics and political configurations in India significantly changed in the late 1990s with the BJP (the then and current ruling political party in India) coming to the power and its approach to diplomacy, especially, in relation to Myanmar, turned out to be a markedly different one from its predecessors. The BJP back then in 1998 served as the country's architect of realism, attributing warming of

¹ India-Myanmar Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/myanmar-july-2012.pdf>

relations between India and Myanmar to the BJP's openness to engage with the Tatmadaw in order to pursue and promote India's strategic foreign policy objectives in Southeast Asia. New Delhi with some hard lessons learned also realized that the military in Myanmar would continue to remain a significant power and consequently shifted its approach to align with 'whoever' worked in the overall interest of India through the political establishment in Myanmar.

Over the last three decades, India and Myanmar have cooperated on a number of key policy strands including but not limited to anti-insurgency initiatives, trade deals, and infrastructure projects. India also hosted several members of the Burmese military and political establishments and was also a strong advocate for Myanmar's inclusion into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) back in 1997. Whether Myanmar fell under military or civilian rule, New Delhi showed its willingness to work with whichever faction was part of the political dispensation and in power in Myanmar at the given point in time.²

² India-ASEAN Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, <https://mea.gov.in/aseanindia/20-years.htm>

INDIA'S POROUS BORDERS WITH MYANMAR

Almost uniformly over the years, the first and the foremost concern and consideration for India in its relations with Myanmar has been its border security issues largely emanating through a long and porous land and sea borders with Myanmar. The Indo-Myanmar border is not only characterized by insurgencies, but also by delicate national sentiment. After Independence, the British carved out a series of arbitrary boundaries between India and Myanmar, relegating several communities on either side of the border to ethnic minority status and dividing the population with a common heritage and cultural history. These historical vestiges continue to surface and thus form an important part of relations between India and Myanmar and crucial political decisions on either side of the isles are hard to be pursued without taking the overall sentiments of the people on both sides of the borders invariably. People-to-people contacts have continued to serve as a cornerstone of state relations between the two nations and India has particularly invested heavily in its goodwill generation with the people in Myanmar.

Given the context and background, groups like the Chins of Myanmar and the Mizos of Mizoram on the Indian side of the border share strong ethnic ties, as do the Nagas living on both sides of the border. Villages such as Longwa are situated in both Indian and Burmese territories. The North East is thus intrinsically bound to the people of Myanmar by a myriad of shared connections- familial, ethnic, and marital ties. And, thus, the four states in India's North-east and people inhabiting there are emotionally heavily invested in what goes on in Myanmar affecting the people there and continue to maintain their relations with people across the Myanmar border through regular visits, movement of goods and services, and trade and commerce amid overarching security concerns of New Delhi.

Recognizing the close, emotional and familial ties between and among the people of both the sides across borders, India and Myanmar established a unique mechanism – the Free Movement Regime (currently under suspension due to Covid-19 pandemic), allowing residents to go up to 16km on the other side of the border and stay there for 14 days without a visa. People from Myanmar regularly visit India for work and medical care, with children across the border unimpeded to attend the school. Unlike India's border with Pakistan, the Indo-Burmese border is largely unfenced and extremely porous and the border regulation is overall determined by trade and security considerations but is also heavily influenced by the sentiments of the North-Eastern states on the Indian side of the border towards their kith and kin in Myanmar.³

³ Sujan Dutta, India and Myanmar quietly open up their border for villagers and trade, The Print, October 25, 2018, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-and-myanmar-quietly-open-up-their-border-for-villagers-and-trade/139877/>

WILL OF PEOPLE - SOFT POWER

People of Indian Origin (PIO) in Myanmar constitute about 4 percent of the total population of the country. In the absence of a credible census in that country since 1989, this number could be more. The Singhvi Committee Report (2004) had estimated that there are about 2.9 million PIOs in Myanmar, of which 2,500,000 are PIO, 2,000 are Indian citizens, and 400,000 are stateless. This number as in 2004 must have changed at least by about 20 percent of the total over the last 17 years on an average of 1 percent increase year-on-year basis overall, and the Indian population in Myanmar as of now may safely be put in the range of anywhere between 3.3 to 3.5 million or even more across the categories.⁴

The four North Eastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland sharing a 1,643 kilometers-long border with Myanmar are emotionally invested in the coup including its unraveling costs and consequences on people, a fact that New Delhi has to keep in mind while dealing with Burmese citizens fleeing the country. Currently, the international border along North East with Myanmar has been sealed to check the illegal influx into India.

This approach of the central government in New Delhi has stirred a bit of resentment and protest in the North East, with Mr. Zoramthanga, the chief minister (CM) of Mizoram, particularly expressing his dissatisfaction with the central government's position located in New Delhi. In March this year, the CM wrote to the central government stating that 'Mizoram cannot just remain indifferent to the suffering of the

⁴ Indian Migrants in Myanmar: Emerging Trends and Challenges, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India,
<https://mea.gov.in/images/pdf/Indian-Migrants-Myanmar.pdf>

Burmese people and ‘cannot turn a blind eye to this humanitarian crisis unfolding right in front of us in our own backyard’.

Despite New Delhi’s reluctance to embrace people crossing the border, Mizoram has seen a steady influx of people from Myanmar entering its territory in aftermath of the coup. Amongst the civilians fleeing the violence, there are also a number of policemen who defied the junta’s orders to shoot protesting activists. The Tatmadaw has asked the Indian government to repatriate the policemen, but the Indian government has yet to heed their request. India’s overall approach thus has been to respect the sentiments of the North-Eastern states in a moderated manner without fully giving in to their sentiments in a balancing act of policy measures in dealing with Myanmar. The same is also in line with Myanmar’s people’s overall support to India both over the issues of cross-border insurgencies and India’s goodwill invested with the people of Myanmar. India has this vital asset of goodwill as a soft power that it can further invest in and lead on. This fact is an open secret in policy corridors and is appreciated as regards the bilateral relations between India and Myanmar.

On the other hand, though, Myanmar is facing severe economic challenges and public opinion is overwhelmingly opposed to military rule as evidenced through ongoing violent protests and opposition to the prevalent rule of law. Myanmar also has a considerable population of ethnic minorities, who have long felt ignored and suppressed by the government. With the country close on the brink of civil war, vulnerable groups are likely to flee to neighboring countries including India, especially given the lack of secure border controls and porous and unfenced land and sea routes between the two nations, making matters worse and difficult to effectively monitor the situation on a real-time basis.

In the past, India saw a refugees influx from Myanmar, including thousands of Rohingya Muslims, seeking asylum within its borders. Following a green light from India's Supreme Court, the country's highest judicial seat, most of them were subsequently deported. However, following the coup, citizens in the North East have shown willingness to shield fleeing individuals from Myanmar's central authorities. If the central government maintains its current policy on migration and asylum, going forward, it will have to accept that its directives may likely be overlooked in the North East.⁵

⁵ Deeptiman Tiwary, MHA cautions Northeast states on taking Myanmar refugees, The Indian Express, March 12, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/mha-cautions-north-east-states-on-taking-myanmar-refugees-7225768/>

RECIPROCITY OF INDIA - MYANMAR COOPERATION

The North-Eastern states in India have been conflict-ridden since Independence, escalating periodically and only to be exacerbated by the presence of insurgent groups along the Indo-Bangladeshi and Indo-Myanmar borders. Several extremist and separatist groups operate out of Myanmar, crossing into India via the porous land and sea borders. Additionally, large quantities of narcotics are also smuggled into India through Indian borders in the northeast shared with Myanmar, with the latter being the second-largest producer of opium in the world. The Indian army and Myanmar military have continued to engage in a policy of 'constructive engagement', conducting joint military operations to combat the spread of extremism and smuggling of narcotics into the North East.

General Hlaing, who sphere headed the recent coup in Myanmar visited India on two earlier occasions including in 2019 when India and Myanmar signed an MoU on defense cooperation. In a show of cooperation and solidarity, in 2020, the Myanmar military handed over a group of 22 insurgents active in Assam to the Indian law enforcement authorities. The operation, a first of its kind, not only signaled strong ties between the two military establishments but also sent a strong message that insurgents acting and operating against Indian interests would not be allowed to operate from the soil of Myanmar.

Reciprocally, India has also provided all necessary logistical support and operational assistance to the Tatmadaw in its fight against the Arakan army in the states of Rakhine and Chin, as a result of which, insurgency in these regions in Myanmar has markedly subsided and declined. However, the prevalent strife in Myanmar has the potential to

'flame the underlying tensions, a likely outcome that the Indian government will, by all means, want to avoid'.⁶

The constant threat of increasing violence from the insurgent groups looms large at current times of fluid situation on India-Myanmar borders in the aftermath of the coup and destabilizing regional security situations. A number of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) operating out of Myanmar are active, well-funded, armed, and also adept in carrying out attacks both inside and outside of Myanmar's borders. Currently, many of the EAOs have opposed the coup orchestrated by the Myanmar military with some even providing support to pro-democracy protesters including training them in the art of guerrilla warfare in the country's hinterland.

These organizations' preferred method of resistance is typical to stage attacks across borderlands that they occupy, thus diverting military resources across multiple fronts. They are also known to provide training to civilians and protection to those fleeing the junta. Empowered EAOs present security threats for both New Delhi and the Tatmadaw, with neither side to benefit from the rise of these insurgent groups at the long last. It may perhaps be argued about which country is more reliant on the other one in this case, but one thing that remains static seems that permitting the spread of armed and active EAOs would turn out to be a zero-sum game for both India and Myanmar warranting the current fluid situation in the shadow of the coup not to be allowed to be

⁶ Nidhi Varma, India and Myanmar: The role of domestic calculations in the boundary agreement of 1967 (Archived), The Brookings India (Archived), April 13, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/04/13/sambandh-blog-india-and-myanmar-the-role-of-domestic-calculations-in-the-boundary-agreement-of-1967/>

slipped from border management and military operations in case needed against these insurgent groups.⁷

Learning from the past experiences and in aftermath of the coup, India will be hesitant to alienate the Tatmadaw in the likely event of insurgent groups gaining prominence. Myanmar has, in the past, also shown its willingness to pull out of joint anti-insurgency campaigns following perceived slights from India. Crucially, in 1995, the Myanmar military allowed some 200 insurgents belonging to separatist groups in Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur to escape detention, notably in response to India's decision to award Suu Kyi, the Jawaharlal Nehru Peace Prize in 1993.

⁷ Lucas Myers, Myanmar is on the precipice of civil war, Foreign Policy, April 08, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/08/myanmar-military-coup-ethnic-armed-organizations-civil-war/>

INDIA'S 'ACT EAST POLICY' & KEY CONNECTIVITY PROJECTS

Myanmar is strategically considered to be an enabler to the success of India's Act East Policy, particularly in regard to trade and commerce, by the virtue of being its gateway to Southeast Asia. Myanmar also provides India with increased connectivity to its North-Eastern states, facilitating a faster route of transit as compared to going through Bangladesh alongside a more efficient route than crossing the narrow Siliguri corridor in Assam. India also currently has a number of infrastructure and connectivity projects in Myanmar, including a trilateral highway to Thailand and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTT).

The latter is thus vital for India as it aims to connect south-western Myanmar to north-eastern India by creating a multi-modal trifecta of sea, river, and road transport corridors. Under the KMMTT and as part of the Indian Ocean Security Policy, India has developed the Sittwe port in Myanmar's Rakhine state. This port is part of a larger connectivity mission to create a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the state of Rakhine to boost India's presence in the strategically vital Bay of Bengal. The policy aims to create an enabling environment so as to end the landlocked situation and isolation of the North-eastern region by opening up its borders and integrating the region's economy through improved trade and connectivity with Southeast Asian countries.⁸

Cross-border trade with Myanmar is also a key driver and source of employment and income generation for households in India's northeast, and the impending transportation linkages with other Asian countries through Myanmar will further fuel

⁸ Pooran Chandra Pandey, *Visioning North-Eastern India as a Regional Economic Development Model: Potential and Prospects*, Bloomsbury India, 2020.

their economic growth and stability. As a strategic part of India's Act East Policy, Myanmar has also been a beneficiary of Indian investment, foreign aid, and humanitarian assistance projects. Not long ago, India provided Myanmar with \$1 billion in aid to strengthen its electoral processes and more recently, gifted a kilo-class submarine to the Burmese military forces. New Delhi also has a deeply integrated energy partnership with Myanmar and has invested in various oil and gas partnerships including a \$6 billion petroleum refinery near Yangon with the involvement of large Indian companies. In a major turn of events shaping bilateral relations between India and Myanmar in 2019 when India sold a whopping \$ 100 million worth of military equipment to Myanmar, more than double of what China sold during the same period in the designated year.⁹

The junta in Myanmar is estimated not to be detrimental to India's Act East Policy, as the Tatmadaw shares a robust relationship with the Indian government. However, instability in the region would threaten India's near \$780 million worth of investments in Myanmar and potentially hinder the completion of vital infrastructure and connectivity projects currently underway.

Act East Policy is as much about curbing Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, as it is about maintaining strong economic relations with other nations in Asia. However, despite India's willingness to work with the Tatmadaw, and its increasing levels of investment in the region, China is still by far the most important foreign player in Myanmar. If Western nations were to impose additional sanctions on Myanmar, given its already devastated economy, it is anticipated that the country could tilt towards Beijing whose wolf warrior diplomacy has further been aggravated in the region in wake of the Covid pandemic. Given the Sino- Indian rivalry in the region and the ongoing border

⁹ Ibid

military standoff, India would like to maintain good relations with whoever is in power in Myanmar in order to both protect both its investments and to continue to develop its economic linkages with Southeast Asia besides continuing to invest its goodwill in the people of Myanmar through religion, films, art, culture, and age-old familial ties that have only deepened among people over time.¹⁰

¹⁰ Dhruva Jaishankar, Acting East: India in the Indo-Pacific, Report, Brookings India (Archived), October 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/acting-east-india-in-the-indo-pacific/>

CHINA, INDIA, & MYANMAR: TOO CLOSE TO COMFORT

Traditionally, China continues to be an important partner for Myanmar. When Western nations imposed sanctions on the junta in the 2000s, China gave Myanmar a much-needed lifeline by expanding cross-border trade, providing its military with weapons, and sanctioning loans while offering technical assistance. Between 1988 and 2013, China accounted for an enormous 42 percent of total foreign investments flowing into Myanmar, contributing to about 60 percent of its arms imports. While Myanmar does under \$2 billion of trade with India, it does over \$12 billion with China.

Over the last two decades, Chinese investments in Myanmar have increased rapidly, making Beijing the largest investor in the country. Along the course, Myanmar features prominently in China's trade calculus, providing impoverished provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou with a ready market for their commodities and a key source of timber and gems for China. Additionally, Myanmar also falls under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a \$100 billion planned economic corridor connecting Yunnan province with oil and gas fields in the state of Rakhine.¹¹

Besides, Myanmar plays a crucial role in China's security calculus too. Chinese pipeline passing through Myanmar is expected to decrease Beijing's dependence on the Straits of Malacca, which could be compromised in a likely event of maritime terrorism or dominance of the Straits by another rival power. Chinese ports in Myanmar would also

¹¹ Salkiran Kannan, The Myanmar Tangle: China set to expand ties in coup shadow, Indian can only wait and watch, India Today, February 12, 2021, Singapore, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/the-myanmar-tangle-china-set-to-expand-ties-in-coup-shadow-india-can-only-wait-and-watch-1768398-2021-02-12>

provide a buffer for China against India's presence in the Bay of Bengal while further helping strengthen its much-touted string of pearls strategy to strategically corner and confine India in the region with overarching implications on latter's a trade and commerce activities that may likely have consequences for regional peace and security.

China has also been accused of supporting militancy across the Indo-Burmese border for decades, notably involving an incident in November 2020, in which a large cache of weapons was seized in the state of Shan by the Tatmadaw. The investigations that followed revealed that the weapons were smuggled from across China, with intention of reaching terror factories operating on soil and territories of Myanmar with the aim to destabilize domestic and regional peace and order situations. Intelligence reports further found that insurgent leaders in Myanmar also trained on Chinese soil, met with their leaders, procured arms from Chinese markets, and gathered intelligence for China in India.¹²

¹²Mira Patel, A Complex history and a layered present: What determines India's response to military rule in Myanmar, Indian Express, May 20, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/a-complex-history-and-layered-present-what-determines-indias-response-to-military-rule-in-myanmar-7321626/>

GEOPOLITICS AROUND INDIA-MYANMAR

COOPERATION

Given such a muddled context and set of convoluted circumstances in the past, India would have to contend with Chinese threats along its Northern frontier along with a Chinese-backed and abetted Pakistani threat from the Western frontier. And to effectively secure its security interests in the region, New Delhi is reliant on cooperation with the Myanmar army to ensure that its Eastern front avoids succumbing to destabilizing influence of China. Moreover, deepening Chinese presence in Myanmar is of growing concern to India and several other Asian nations- Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia that collectively fear a likely heightened Chinese naval presence near the Straits of Malacca and in the Indian Ocean. India's approach towards the coup with respect to China may not be as simple as it may seem on the surface and it is also well aware of this potential complex dimension to its relations with Myanmar, going ahead.

Historically, the Tatmadaw has enjoyed a relatively strong relationship with New Delhi, while Beijing, in turn, found a far more receptive partner in Suu Kyi. Even during the early 2000s, when China had a dominant foreign presence in Myanmar, the Tatmadaw was suspicious of Chinese intentions. It understood that China was willing to support communist factions in the country while having provided covert assistance to several EAO groups. It may be recalled that China had also agreed to a dam project on the River Irrawaddy with the Tatmadaw, only to back out in 2011.

Historically, the Tatmadaw has been suspicious of foreign powers, a sentiment that prohibited it from considering even one country that it was as reliant on as China, as a true partner. Whereas, China has had a strong record of engagement with the Suu Kyi

government while supporting the National League for Democracy (NLD) in aftermath of the Rohingya crisis, signing China-Myanmar Economic Corridor Agreement while Myanmar was under Suu Kyi's rule. In a clear sign of Myanmar's tilt towards China and the latter's inherent foreign policy objectives in the region.¹³

This has raised serious concerns in the neighborhood of China's intentions in the conduct of its international relations with regional actors, emboldening it further in wake of Covid pandemic, reflected adequately through Beijing's more prominently ongoing military aggression in the South China Sea, continuing border maneuvers with India for over a year, power competition with US and EU, sharpened wolf warrior diplomacy and its overall conduct with regional powers in as far off as in Indo-Pacific, including Australia and Japan, among others in utter disregard to rules-based regional order.

¹³ Ibid

DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Digital technologies shape all aspects of life, including activities, functioning, and decision-making of public institutions and their relations with citizens and society. Democracy and governance may thus be at stake in a variety of ways and areas. Digital transformation also touches all aspects of life and is accelerating at great speed, fuelled by progress in computing power, connectivity, and the increased availability of data and capacities to process it.¹⁴

The process of digital transformation also promises to improve efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and openness of governance, promote sustainability, and increase accountability, reassurance, and civic participation. At the same time, digital technologies could pose risks to democracy and governance, in particular with regards to privacy, data protection, and undue surveillance to name just a few areas. Some of the key characteristics of democratic structures and systems include (but are not limited to) multi-party systems, universal suffrage, independent media and judiciary, and periodic elections with free and fair participation of the people. Many democracies currently find themselves caught between the dilemmas of digital transformation that is getting increasingly embedded into the process and conduct of elections at a scale not seen before. On the one hand, governments of the day justify that digitalization of election processes make the electoral systems more open and transparent and can avoid undue delays in counting of ballots and announcement of the electoral results in lead up to timely formations of the governments to avoid any unforeseeable delays, hiatus, and disruptions.

¹⁴ Democracy and Technology, Council of Europe, 2022,
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/good-governance/democracy-and-technology>

Opposition parties and the critics, however, have a different take, rationale, and logic stating that the incumbent governments in democracies more often than not end up manipulating electoral systems by leveraging technologies and digital transformations thereby controlling the outcomes of the election results. The debate continues on how much technology is potentially needed and what could be the precautions needed to be exercised with respect to its governance in ensuring free and fair play during the elections with a targeted focus on issues related to data, privacy, and administration of the technologies including effective oversights over any likely interference in elections potentially posed by adversaries and enemy states for taking undue advantages and pose risks to democratic institutions. These issues over a period of time have gained firm grounds and may cut either which ways in either strengthening democracies or further weakening them?

The world's oldest and largest democracies are currently caught in a frantic debate and contestations about the good and evil of the technology and its application during elections in the lead up to electing governments of the choice by the people. A survey by Pew (2020) amply demonstrates the trajectory of these debates and issues unlikely to settle anytime soon.¹⁵

The debate around technology and digitalization in the process of elections in democracies will gain further momentum, going forward around issues of civic participation, control of data, administration of technology and who could potentially profit from these and how best to attempt averting negative side effects of technology

¹⁵ Concerns about democracy in the digital age, Pew Research Centre Report, February 21, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/concerns-about-democracy-in-the-digital-age/>

and digitalization in democracies across its varied formats, manifestations and its ability to deliver the goods that could potentially strengthen values and virtues of democracies.

About a decade and a half back, the society, people, economy, and political system there was not developed enough to the extent that their currency, banking system, and trade and commerce were largely physical, and as consequence transparency and reassurance were deeply compromised. As people were not connected with the world at large, the military regime continued to carry on while giving people a distorted worldview. With the spread of technology, the internet, and relatively efficient banking systems, more empowerment followed and the spread of democratic ideas and values began to deepen across and within the society manifesting in the choices of people, especially with respect to electing the government that was democratic and pursued welfare and development. With the world coming closer to people in the country with more openness, advantages and benefits of democratic institutions began to grow and needed reforms were initiated by the democratically elected government with power-sharing arrangements with the military regime. Over time, transparency in administration, improving governance structures, more and better interface with democracies, and free use of the internet did not go well within a section of the government in the country and regional players combined the forces with the military regime there in lead up to the coup.

The current episode of the Myanmar coup and its ongoing societal, economic and geopolitical consequences and fall-outs on its people, neighbors, and regional geopolitics has its roots in technology and digitalization too. These issues deeply embedded into connectivity are also closely connected with linked to 5G and enlargement of its usage for vested political end games by the military regime there in

concert with leading technology players for political ends with the aim to disrupt democracies in transition and expose vulnerabilities of democratic systems. What however is overlooked is that democracies are premised on values, liberal ideas, rule of law, and free and fair elections to mention a few deepens its roots in the civic institutions through the will of the people and gets harder for anyone to play around. The evidence also suggests that democracies in transition are more vulnerable to relapse but people once taste the virtues of democracies find a way out to emerge back and the cost for military regimes can be very high. This is precisely what authoritarians and autocrats fear the most and the technologies and digitalization processes continue to empower people and connect them with the world at large in pursuit of their aspirations and democratic values.

FUTURE OF INDIA-MYANMAR RELATIONS

Reading into India-Myanmar relations through military rulers and democratically elected leaders over time, observers have tended to argue that given the current circumstances and future trends in the region, India might benefit from military rule in Myanmar, especially if curbing Chinese influence remains New Delhi's main foreign policy objective. With no definitive way of proving the hypothesis, for now, though it is widely believed in diplomatic and military establishments that instability in Myanmar serves no one's purpose and only is detrimental to India, China, and the region as a whole.

With Beijing coming under increasingly intense scrutiny by regional actors for its ongoing military pursuits and perceived threats across the region, countries such as the US, India, Australia, and Japan, warranting a collective call for a robust collective action on emerging regional threats, have come together to form the QUAD grouping, set to expand further with Germany, UK, France, and the Netherlands set to follow the suit formally to secure freedom of navigation, a free and open Indo-Pacific in pursuit of securing regional peace and stability collectively to lead on and advance forward a rules-based international order, above all.¹⁶

The coup in Myanmar has demonstrated its varied dimensions- not just domestic in nature, invariably going beyond the regional geopolitics and touching upon Sino-Indian relations too, in a reflection of a reset in regional order premised on a need for freedom, openness, and rules-based order. Crucially, what however remains to be seen is how the region shapes up over time but one thing that remains overwhelmingly clear is the fact that the region would likely be a place for great power competition. More particularly, in

¹⁶ Jeff Smith, How to keep India All-In on the Quad, Foreign Policy, June 25, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/25/india-quadrilateral-security-dialogue-us-australia-japan-china-russia/>

relations between India and Myanmar that ensue as it would no longer be affordable to be seen, evaluated, and monitored by the international community and actors in isolation from the Beijing axis and its wider interplay in shaping regional geopolitics both now and beyond.

The premise about international order being multipolar would, to a large extent, depends on Asia being the one (and not without it) as the European Union's Strategic Policy on 'Future of Asia' postulates with India was seen playing a pivotal role in shaping an emerging rules-based international architecture. And, Myanmar being India's close neighbor with shared borders, history and legacy will potentially be an integral part of that ambit.

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