

Beyond Borders: Unpacking the Myanmar Crisis's Influence on India

Ms Diya Shankar¹, Dr Mohammad Yusuf²

"There has been no end to the violence... What will it take to cease hostilities in Myanmar so that we can begin a journey to peace and reconciliation? For if there is no end to the violence, Myanmar is on a path to self-destruction".

ABSTRACT

The country of Myanmar, upon its independence has been known to remain within a constant state of turmoil, plagued with vicious civil wars as well as several, brutal military coups. The country has recently entered another bloody era of dispute between the Myanmar military rule and the ethnic: three brotherhood alliance. The violent dispute has further plunged the country's civil health in a dire state. The clashes may also have potential impacts on the national security of India. The disputes also threaten to spill over the eastern borders of India which may further result in increased insurgent incidents within the country. Furthermore, the escalating situation may negatively impact the ongoing refugee crisis within the countries of India and Bangladesh. India's response to the crisis also poses questions regarding its geopolitical stand as an emerging democratic world leader. In this paper, we shall discuss the impacts of the crisis on India. Further, we shall be expanding upon the ramifications on the other neighbouring countries and its implications on India.

Keywords: Myanmar Crisis, Tatmadaw, Indo-Myanmar relations, Myanmar military regime, 3 Brotherhood alliance

INTRODUCTION

Since its independence in the year of 1948, Myanmar, formerly known as Burma has foreseen several brutal skirmishes amongst the civilian population and the Myanmar military junta. The clashes date back to the year 1962, instigated the seizing of power by general Ne win which converted the country into a single-party military dictatorship. Today, Myanmar sees its prolonged crisis take a brutal turn as the country finds itself facing another clash led by the ethnic, three brotherhood alliance against the military junta. Almost 50 townships across the states of Yangon, Mandalay, Sagaing, and Magwe regions, as well as Chin and Kayah have witnessed intensifying conflicts amongst the alliance and the military junta resulting in the imposition of martial law in the townships. The ongoing clashes also pose severe challenges towards India as the neighbouring country to Myanmar. Specifically, the northeastern states of India have viewed a greater influx of refugees which has resulted in the displacement of several civilians.



The influx has also caused strain on the resources within the state, alongside adding on to the national security challenges of the country's northeastern borders. Increased insurgency incidents alongside addition to transnational crimes are some of the security threats currently faced by India. Further, with the global attention turned towards the crisis, India also faces scrutiny for its geopolitical stand towards the clashes as a close neighbour and as the new emerging leader within the Indo-Pacific region.

Other neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh and China also face the brunt of the crisis as Bangladesh finds itself amidst a critical refugee crisis with a mass amount of civil and military population of Myanmar finding itself displaced. The ramifications faced by the neighbouring countries also poses several implications on India.

1. Ms Diya Shanker, BSc, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, FSH, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, (TN) and 2. Dr Mohammad Yusuf, School of Internal Security Defence and Strategic Studies, Rashtriya Raksha University, Gandhinagar, (GUJ)

The Ongoing Crisis and its Potential Implications:The prolonged tug-of-war for power amongst the military junta and the Myanmar ethnic associations alongside a parallel government to the junta (known as the National Unity Government) has seen new light as the uprising of the 3-brotherhood alliance showcased greater success in challenging the military's hold over the country.

The alliance of armed ethnic associations, consisting of Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Arakan Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army saw one of its most successful operations against the junta on 27th October 2023. The operation was dubbed "Operation 1027" which led to massive territorial loss of the junta's footing in the north of eastern Myanmar's Shan state.

The success of the operation also propelled several smaller armed ethnic alliances towards launching coordinated offensives across the country, further pushing the military back. The launch of such offensives particularly pushed the military back in the bordering regions of Myanmar including Sagging, Kachin, Chin, Rakhine and Kayah. These developments coupled with long standing issues such as the Rohingya crisis in the Rakhine state which involved brutal crackdown upon the Rohingya muslim population of Myanmar by the military junta and the displacement of the ethnic minority to the bordering countries of Bangladesh and India, Myanmar finds itself in an intensely precarious situation with the downfall of the country's military regime seeming imminent.

"Lacs of people were: killed arbitrary detained experience torture and ill-treatment forcibly conscripted into army forced to flee their homes convicted by military-controlled courts"

With these developments in mind, alongside the threat of its potential downfall, the military regime of Myanmar forewarned that its waning control over the country may lead to its fragmentation. This hypothesis has also been theorised by several other sources. The current alliance amongst the country's several armed ethnic groups aim to fight a singular enemy, that is: the Myanmar military Junta and can be described as the unification of the ethnic resistance against a single opponent. Should the fall of the military junta become a reality, the resistance will no longer stand against one opponent and hence they may not be left with an enemy to defeat. This development may potentially turn the country's attention towards its underlying inter-ethnic issues which may pose a significant threat to the unification of Myanmar's diverse ethnic composition. This hypothesis, thus also proves a threat to the ultimate proposed goal of the alliance which aims towards establishing a democratically elected government within the country alongside forming Myanmar as a nation of harmonised ethnic diversities.

Another hypothesis which also expands upon the country's fragmentation proposes the failure of the allied resistance against the military regime of Myanmar. In this event, it may become likely for the alliance in itself to fragment and focus upon intensifying their control over the states of the country that they may have already seized. The implication of such may result in the formation of several "Quasi sovereign states" which collectively may still be considered under name: Myanmar but internally may consist of an entirely separate governance system. This concept has already been seen within the country's north-eastern state of Wa. The current developments of Myanmar's civil war alongside its proposed future may hold several implications over its bordering nations, including the countries of India, China and Bangladesh.

Implications of the Crisis on India (National Security):The countries of India and Myanmar share a massive land border, spanning approximately 1643 kilometres and are also known to share maritime borders. Due to its proximity to Myanmar, alongside its importance to the country, India finds itself facing several challenges with the ongoing clashes in its neighbouring nation.

Refugee influx:The ongoing crisis has significantly impacted India's north-eastern region as the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland have found themselves providing refuge to over 54,100 Myanmar nationals. This increased influx of refugees within the states has resulted in a strain upon the region's resources. The north-eastern Indian state of Mizoram, particularly, has seen a great influx in the number of Myanmar nationals fleeing to the country of India. Such large migration of refugees poses large national security threats to India as well, including increased accounts of insurgent events, increased intensity of cross-border crimes as well as the additional challenges to be faced by India through the illegal migration of the Rohingya refugees.

Drug Trade:Myanmar stands within the infamous "Golden Triangle" region which is notoriously known to stand as a hub for drug trafficking and a thriving region for drug trade. The added instability in the region has allowed for the trade to flourish greatly which poses a grave security threat to India's north-eastern states which are known to have rather porous borders due to the naturally challenging terrain within the region as well as a FMV or 'Free Movement Regime' in between the Indian and Myanmar which allows for the tribes living along the border on either side to travel up to 16 km inland the other country without the need of a visa.

Insurgency:An increased number of insurgent operations along its northeastern borders may also remain a challenge to be faced by India as the civil war in Myanmar foresees intensification. The northeastern state of Mizoram in India, a state within the country that has seen a particularly large influx of refugees since the intensification of the clashes is also known to host the kins to the Myanmar ‘Chin’ ethnic population which invokes sympathies amongst local residents of the north-eastern Indian state. The presence of such brotherhood amongst the bordering states may pose a threat of armed ethnic alliance spilling over Myanmar borders, which may then cause the conflict to spread into the Indian Northeastern states.

Disruption of Connectivity Projects: India's "Act East Policy" heavily relies on connectivity projects through Myanmar to enhance trade and strategic ties with Southeast Asia. Key projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway have faced significant delays and disruptions due to the ongoing conflict and instability. The military's control over key routes and the presence of armed groups make progress on these critical infrastructure initiatives extremely challenging

Addition to the accounts of drug trafficking incidents across borders of both the countries also threatens to intensify the insurgency events. This is because a large portion of the insurgent group's revenue is known to be generated through illegal activities including drug trade and trafficking.

Geopolitical Implications of the Myanmar Crisis on India:Both the countries of India and Myanmar share a rich cultural exchange and history. Alliance amongst both the countries remains of great geopolitical importance to India due to several reasons:

Geographical significance:India shares a massive land border with Myanmar through its north-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland. It also shares a maritime border with Myanmar through the Bay of Bengal. Not only that but it stands as the only ASEAN country adjoining the country of India and thus it may be described as the gateway to southeast Asia.

Commercial aspect:India stands as Myanmar's fifth largest trading partner with its bilateral trade standing at 1.03 billion US dollars in the year 2021-2022. 34 Indian enterprises have also invested 773.038 million USD as of 31st Jan, 2022. The Indo-Myanmar alliance also stands of great importance to India due to Myanmar's potential as a great partner within the energy sector as well as the providing of connectivity of the northeastern Indian states through the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project. Due to India's need for Myanmar's cooperation, the country finds itself walking a diplomatic tightrope. The country finds itself in a challenging position due to its need for maintaining its diplomatic relations with the military junta as the current leading force in Myanmar while it also finds itself unable to isolate itself from the armed ethnic resistance due to their persisting and steadily growing presence within Myanmar. India has thus found itself largely unable to provide for a strong stand against the Tatmadaw's brutalities. For its lacking response towards the ongoing crisis as well as its muted response to the previous issue of the systematic killings of the Rohingya Muslims, India continues to face scrutiny amongst global players with several questioning its stand as the emerging democratic leader within the Indo-Pacific region. The increasing influence on Beijing upon Myanmar as well as the Tatmadaw's dependence on China for financial and political support also stands as a growing concern for India. Myanmar's military Junta has also allowed for several multibillion-dollar projects under the Chinese Belt and Road initiative to proceed despite their stallment by the NLD-led government's environmental and socioeconomic assessment. Not only that, but the junta has also allowed for proceeding with the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port in the Bay of Bengal and other special economic zones which promise to give China easier access to the Indian Ocean region. Such revelations within the region stand as great concern to India and thus make it crucial for India to take substantial steps towards ensuring its own influence within Myanmar.

“The crisis in Myanmar continues to sink into any abyss of human suffering”

The looming potential of the fragmentation of Myanmar also concerns India greatly. The fall of the Military Junta in Myanmar also potentially threatens to break apart the country due to the resurfacing of inter-ethnic disputes amongst the many diverse ethnicities constituting the country. This fragmentation of Myanmar may lead to Chinese intervention and increased Chinese influence in the area. This also poses a potential to bring China closer to not only the Indian Ocean Region but also it may bring the country even closer to the Indian northeastern borders. On another hand, the failure of the Ethnic alliances against the Tatmadaw may again potentially lead to the creation of several smaller ‘Quasi Sovereign states’ that are held under the control of the ethnic alliances while the Junta stays in control of the rest of the region. In the occurrence of such an event, China may potentially hold higher control over the independent states. A small-scale example of such may be seen within the Wa state of northeastern Myanmar. The state, while still considered a province under Myanmar, exhibits self-governance and recognizes the Chinese currency of Yuan over the Burmese

Kyat. Within either of the situations described, India faces the threat of losing its neighbouring and statistical geopolitical advantage to China, making stability within Myanmar of increasing importance to the Indian subcontinent. The division of Myanmar may also lead to the disruption of connectivity of India to its surrounding southeast Asian neighbours. The connectivity may also deteriorate further should China gain larger influence over Myanmar. This occurrence of such a situation has the potential of greatly harming the Indian economy through disruption and blockade of trade routes. The ongoing conflict also severely undermines India's Act East policy and the geostrategic economic policies which form its core. The projects include the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project (IMT highway) and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project.

IMPACTS OF THE CRISIS ON OTHER COUNTRIES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON INDIA

Bangladesh: One of the most well-known implications of the long-standing Myanmar civil war on the country of Bangladesh remained the massive exodus of over 700,000 Rohingya Muslims to neighbouring countries which resulted in the sharp increase in the Rohingya population within Bangladesh to approximately 885,000 in 2017. From February 4-5, over a 100 Myanmar Border Guard Police (BGP) personnels had illegally crossed the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and were disarmed and interned by the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB). The southeastern regions of Bangladesh have also reported facing persisting attacks including gunfire, mortar strikes, gunship strikes from the Myanmar forces. Additionally, the intensified fighting amongst the Myanmar military Junta and the Arakan Army in the Rakhine and Chin states has greatly increased the security threats for the country of Bangladesh. These developments have significantly added to the instability and volatility of the region, further increasing tensions for the country of India as the rising democratic leader within the Indo-Pacific region.



China: The launch of "Operation 1027" by the armed ethnic Three Brotherhood alliance led to the capture of a large portion of the Shan within Myanmar. The tone implications of the operations have remained divided for China. Since the launch of the operation, the armed ethnic resistance has taken over border gate towns that has, in turn, greatly harmed both Myanmar and China's trade and developmental interest. The Shan state stands crucial to the China-Myanmar corridor economic Corridor (CMEC), which is a part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The ethnic minorities within the region resented the violation of the land rights caused by the Junta's collaboration with China for the projects constituting the Initiative. The commencement of Operation 1027 thus gravely endangered the 13 million USD China had invested for the BRI. The insurgent alliance has also taken over the border towns. The 770 km oil pipeline network which begins at the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port in Rakhine has faced several attacks as well. The pipeline remains crucial for the transportation of the Russian oil to China's Yunnan. The success of Operation 1027 has hence led to crucial loss of territory which facilitated 40% of the China-Myanmar border trade.

"The conflict in Myanmar is having devastating humanitarian consequences for the people of the country"

Despite the above-mentioned losses portraying the impact of the operation 1027 to be detrimental to the neighbouring country of China, it still doesn't account for the complete picture. This is because of the fact that China wields significant influence over Myanmar's insurgent groups that are operating across the bordering states. The initial stages of Operation 1027 did also serve the Chinese interest by dislodging the BGF and the scammer gangs that were supported by the Hlaing's loyal BGF members. China has also been actively participating as a mediator in between the two warring parties and has evidently held significant influence over both the Myanmar military regime and the insurgent alliance within the country.

Despite the geopolitical alliance of the armed ethnic resistance within Myanmar remaining unclear, the prevailing influence of China over the insurgent groups cannot be dismissed by India as a potential threat within the near future. Speculations of the insurgent groups gaining revenue and weapons for the rebellion through Chinese intervention further adds to the dependence of the armed resistance on China. Review of the larger picture showcases the political instability within Myanmar as potentially enabling China to gain a larger influence over the country which may result in increased Chinese control over the Indian ocean region and creation of China-friendly economic zones. All of the above-mentioned revelations stand to threaten India's power position within the region.

CONCLUSION

While the final result of the clashes remains largely unclear, India must work diligently towards diffusion and de-escalation of the ongoing conflict in Myanmar as it remains within India's national interest to reinstate political stability in the region. This because the ongoing crisis in Myanmar poses several challenges which India that challenges the in several areas including facing global scrutiny to the country's geopolitical stand against the humanitarian crisis being faced by its neighbours to threats posed to its national security due to the intensification of turmoil along its northeastern borders. China's increasing influence over the area also proves as a potential threat to India's status quo as the emerging democratic leader and major power within not only the Indo-Pacific region. The potential fragmentation of Myanmar also threatens the region's political stability which in turn threatens to harm not only India's national security and its global image as an emerging major power but it also threatens to significantly hurt the country's economic and financial health. With Myanmar acting as it's gateway to southeast asia, the potential collapse of the country may lead to India suffering the loss of its geographical connection to the southeast Asian countries, further hurting its economic health as well as hurting its connectivity and infrastructure across the region. Thus, the implications of the ongoing civil dispute within Myanmar remain heavy and threatening towards the national Interest of the country of India with the speedy resolution of the situation remaining the country's most ideal solution for safeguarding itself and its geopolitical position in the future.

*"Myanmar
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