

INDIA'S TRICKY OPTIONS IN THE MYANMAR MUDDLE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

NEW DELHI : In October last year, India's foreign secretary [Harsh Vardhan Shringla](#) and Army chief Manoj [Mukund Naravane](#) teamed up for a visit to a crucial neighbour—Myanmar—that raised eyebrows due to its rarity.

The uncommonness of the visit underlined the state of politics in Myanmar—where the military and Nobel laureate [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) and her party, the [National League for Democracy](#) (NLD), co-existed in an uneasy space till the military retook power on 1 February.

The Shringla-Naravane visit—seen as prescient given the military takeover—also reflected India's strategy to deal with Myanmar: engage the military while being supportive of democratic forces. It's a policy that has worked for New Delhi since the early 1990s.

"India has been cognisant of the power centres in Myanmar—that power has been with the military and that the civilian institutions are gradually coming into their own," said Harsh V Pant, a professor of international relations at the London-based King's College. "Therefore, India has been balancing its outreach to both sides and it seems like a sensible idea given our interests in Myanmar," he said.

A resurgence of the insurgency in the northeast and an assertive China which has been making increasingly determined inroads into India's periphery are India's main concerns. In fact, some analysts have pointed out that Suu Kyi has been on more cordial terms with China than the Tatmadaw (the army) given the latter's suspicions about Beijing's tacit support for rebel groups such as the Arakan Army.

This puts a question mark on how close Beijing and the new regime will get to each other. But tightening global sanctions could potentially force a rethink. The military's takeover also comes at a time when New Delhi's efforts to get Indian industry to do business in Myanmar was just starting to pay off. There are currently over 100 private Indian companies in the country, with investments to the tune of \$1.2 billion.

Trouble in Myanmar

In the days since the military takeover, three pro-democracy protesters have died. There is no sign of a let up in protests. The crowds joining in only seems to be getting bigger and, among them, are members of the minority groups and the revered Buddhist monks—suggesting broad-based support across society.

According to the military and its head, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the November 2020 elections in which Suu Kyi's NLD won more than 80% of the vote was flawed. It said it was forced to step in because Suu Kyi's government had failed to investigate allegations of fraud. Analysts, however, hold the view that Min Aung Hlaing was more worried about the marginalization of the military since the army backed Union Solidarity and Development Party was trounced by the NLD for the second time in 2020. In the 2015 polls too, the NLD had won by a landslide.

Predictably, the developments have drawn global condemnation. The US, UK and Canada have called for an immediate restoration of democracy and swiftly backed it up with targeted

sanctions. The European Union is expected to follow suit.

China, which is heavily involved in infrastructure projects in Myanmar (as well as its 5G telecom network, according to the New York Times), has been largely silent, citing its policy of non-interference. Its state-backed media referred to the military takeover as a "cabinet reshuffle". Of the total foreign direct investment in Myanmar, China accounts for over 25%.

Analysts, however, are divided over whether the military takeover will mean the rekindling of "familial ties" between the Myanmar and China. For one, military leader Min Aung Hlaing is widely seen to be suspicious of Beijing's possible support to Kokang rebels, who are ethnically Chinese, as well as others. The Myanmar-Russia defence relationship has also been deepening in recent years—an effort by the army to swing away from Beijing. But biting sanctions can bring the Tatmadaw back into the Chinese orbit, analysts say, which will be worrisome for New Delhi.

"The generals would not like to turn to China for support in the first instance, but forced to a corner, (they) may have no choice," said Gautam Mukhopadhyaya, a former ambassador to Myanmar.

"The West has always been more aggressive in imposing sanctions on Myanmar," said former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal. "Their stakes in Myanmar cannot be compared with ours. For us, Myanmar is a direct neighbour," he said.

The stakes for India

"China's primary interest in Myanmar is to pursue its strategic and economic projects under the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) and the China-Myanmar economic corridor that includes the Kyaukphyu deep sea port," said Mukhopadhyaya. The port, seen as a key outcome of Chinese president [Xi Jinping](#)'s visit to Myanmar in January 2020, is of strategic significance as it will give Beijing a foothold in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.

Suu Kyi's government had greenlighted the port project. If built, it will be the third Chinese-built port in India's immediate neighbourhood—after Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka.

Myanmar's entry into the ASEAN in 1997 meant that the economically vibrant grouping is at India's doorstep. It's a linkage that Delhi values greatly, given its priority to develop the northeast with help from ASEAN. But for that, keeping a lid on insurgency is a prerequisite—for which Myanmar's generals hold the key.

In the late-1980s, India was firmly backed Aung San Suu Kyi. In 1993, Suu Kyi was awarded the Jawaharlal Nehru award for international understanding. But almost immediately after, New Delhi changed tack when the insurgency in its north-eastern region took a serious turn, coinciding with a blow-up of militancy in Kashmir. New Delhi concluded that it needed to befriend the Tatmadaw since insurgents from the north-east were using Myanmar as a base to launch attacks against India. Some groups also used Myanmar as an escape route to China. With the Myanmar military in its corner, New Delhi launched coordinated joint operations against the insurgents in the mid-1990s. And these have continued.

"Today, there is substantial military cooperation between the Myanmar and Indian armies to curb militancy," said G Parthasarathy, another former Indian ambassador to Myanmar.

A person familiar with the matter said Indian security personnel have handed back or even killed Arakan rebels crossing into India for shelter, just as the Myanmar Army has handed over or

eliminated Indian separatists hiding there.

The tricky act of cooperating with the Burmese military while simultaneously nudging the country towards a democratic transition has been a 30-year tightrope walk that India has indulged in. "There have been many conversations (about democracy) but they have always been quiet ones," said a person who did not want to be named. "As we have said in the past, we do not believe in 'megaphone' diplomacy," said the person, referring to the global condemnation of the generals. "We have always felt that these and (the) sanctions are counterproductive."

Economic links

India's use of "development projects as the main instrument of its diplomacy to engage the then military government began after the pro-democracy agitation of 1988," recalled the former ambassador Mukhopadhyaya. "This has expanded over time, especially over the last 10 years."

The Indian foreign ministry says that around \$1.7 billion has been spent in development partnership, which include connectivity and infrastructure projects like the Kaladan multi-modal transit transport project connecting Kolkata port to Sittwe port in Myanmar. Another major connectivity project is the India-Myanmar-Thailand trilateral highway, which is to be later extended to Vietnam.

Most of the big-ticket economic investments in Myanmar have been shepherded by India's state-backed firms, primarily in the area of energy. Private firms had, for long, been reluctant to get caught up in the crosshairs of international sanctions.

But this had just started to change. The India private sector's presence went up after 2016, when the last round of sanctions imposed by the US on Myanmar was lifted. Nearly all of the 100 Indian companies have a presence in Yangon, Myanmar's financial, commercial and logistics nerve centre. A decade of peace and democratic stability had begun to transform Yangon's skyline, with glitzy hotels and a newly established stock exchange vying for attention. Irrespective of which side comes on top in the street protests, stability is likely to go for a toss in the near term.

"I am not sure whether I should stay or plan to come back home," said an Indian consultant based in Yangon since 2018 who did not wish to be named. "Everything seemed to be going well. I don't know when the company I work for will re-open," he said by phone from Yangon.

For India, private sector involvement is crucial to supplement government investments as a counter to China's efforts to co-opt Myanmar into its multi-billion-dollar BRI. "We have been pushing Indian industry to look at the opportunities in Myanmar. Our embassy in Myanmar has hosted business delegations from India. This (turn of events) is unfortunate," one of the officials cited above said of the uncertainty.

Going forward, India's well-entrenched dual track approach won't sit well with new allies like the Quad, a grouping of US, Japan, Australia and India. The new Biden-led US administration has forcefully come out against the military takeover. Most notable has been the US reference to Myanmar as "Burma", the name the country was known by before 1990 when the military changed it.

"It's unfortunate that the first major crisis in Asia for the Biden administration and the (Yoshihide) Suga government (in Japan) is in Myanmar," said Michael Jonathan Green, an analyst on Asia and Japan at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think-tank. "Because Myanmar is the place where India, the US and Japan always fight like siblings—an old

sibling rivalry about who has the best approach to Myanmar. It's really unfortunate that the test of Quad's commitment to democratic principles is Myanmar because it brings out the worst in all four countries," Green said in a webinar on the Quad last week.

Parthasarathy is of the view that India's national interests should be paramount. "We are reaping the dividends now of befriending the military for decades. Even now, the task (of eliminating insurgencies) is not over," he said. New Delhi should not let considerations about the US stand in the way of Indian interests, he said.

For now, the protesters and the military seem to be exercising restraint. "The Myanmar military are very disciplined, guided by the ideology that they are the custodians of the state and the people are their children," Rajiv Bhatia, a former Indian ambassador to Myanmar, said. On the other side is a mostly young population, exposed to some level of democracy and new technology.

"There are three possible outcomes," Bhatia said. The military will prevail, the people will prevail or, the third, an impasse, he said. For anyone wanting to know how this will end—keep a close eye on the crowd size on Myanmar's streets.

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