



THE MYANMAR COUP, RESISTANCE AND INDIA'S RESPONSE: FRACTURED BETWEEN WORDS AND DEEDS



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The Myanmar Coup, Resistance and India's Response:
Fractured between Words and Deeds
Special Report

Authored by Jasnea Sarma and Roshni Kapur
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Abstract

This special report provides updates on the military coup that took place in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, with special emphasis on the actions of Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw) and the subsequent resistance by the people that prompted a nationwide civil disobedience movement (အာဏာဖီဆန်ရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု or CDM) and other anti-coup protests. It also led to the creation of a parallel government and the exodus of hundreds of protestors to the borderlands.

Equally importantly, the report analyses the degree to which, and why, Myanmar's eastern neighbour, India, has (or has not) responded to the coup and the subsequent events.

Equally importantly, the report analyses the degree to which, and why, Myanmar's eastern neighbour, India, has (or has not) responded to the coup and the subsequent events. It explores the reasons for India's position on the current coup which is fractured between words and deeds, where upholding democracy is encouraged in diplomatic statements issued by India's foreign ministry, but the strength of the language is tempered by links with the military forged over the past decade persist in managing geopolitical, *realpolitik* and national interests. These include, among others, balancing China and securing India's Northeast borders as well as economic interests in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Military Coup, Tatmadaw, Civil Disobedience Movement, Myanmar, India.

Introduction

In the last few days of January 2021, rumours of a military coup had been circulating in Naypyidaw, the capital of Myanmar, but no one had quite anticipated the scale (and timing) of the coup. On the night of 1 February 2021, one of the authors (Jasnea Sarma) struggled to connect on WhatsApp with a friend calling in from Myanmar's Kachin state capital, Myitkyina. Every minute, the connection blacked out, disrupting updates on the shocking events of the military's coup that morning. All phones, cellular, telecommunication and data services were blocked, causing a complete Internet blackout.¹ Media channels were blocked as well. Just before the call blanked out completely, Sarma caught a glimpse of exasperation and fear as her face froze on WhatsApp's 'Reconnecting' signal. 'Reconnecting' has now been the story of the nation that has since struggled to connect and communicate the extent of political dire straits at home.

In the last few days of January 2021, rumours of a military coup had been circulating in Naypyidaw, the capital of Myanmar, but no one had quite anticipated the scale (and timing) of the coup.

On that February night, little did Sarma know that three months on, her friend, an anthropologist and educator who struggled to connect over video chat, would be called on to become profoundly entangled with Myanmar's post-coup politics. On 16 April 2021, this friend was appointed as one of the deputy ministers for one of the country's most important ministries for the National Unity Government (NUG). Sarma has since posed this question to her friend: what policy responses are expected from regional powers like India to the post-coup scenario in Myanmar? This question was subsequently posed to others in the new NUG government, members of civil society, as well as ethnic groups, labour rights groups and interlocutors from all walks of life in Myanmar who have been impacted by the coup and have become part of the country-wide CDM in various capacities.

Their answers have been varied. Some have sought direct and strong intervention from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), states like India and the United Nations (UN) [through protocols like the responsibility to protect], while others have been

¹ Andrew Nachemson, "Why is Myanmar's military blocking the internet?", *Al Jazeera*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/4/myanmar-internet-blackouts>. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

Some have either called for targeted sanctions while others have argued the contrary, saying it was the old sanctions that enabled rather than inhibited the military to rule with impunity, and made it more reliant on arms, drugs and the sale of Myanmar's precious resources to China.

more reticent and critical of external interventions. Some have either called for targeted sanctions while others have argued the contrary, saying it was the old sanctions that enabled rather than inhibited the military to rule with impunity, and made it more reliant on arms, drugs and the sale of Myanmar's precious resources to China. Mindful of Myanmar's image, some have called for a full and final need to acknowledge the Rohingya crisis and reintegrate the Rohingyas² back into Myanmar, and others have been more hesitant, calling for a step-by-step approach to inclusion, starting with the estranged ethnic minority groups.³ Beyond these vibrant discussions, a unified sentiment has by and large been persistently discernible, that is, the need to tackle the military and cut financial, military and political support to the military junta, currently in its latest iteration as the State Administration Council (SAC).

To unpack the above, this special report provides an analysis of the Tatmadaw's incentives and actions for the coup, briefly tracing it, first and foremost, with an introduction to dynamics that have been shaping over Myanmar's borderlands – which hold the key to understanding the junta's political psychology and territorial strategies country-wide. The report then explores the subsequent anti-coup resistance by the people, and the creation of a parallel NUG consisting of elected representatives from the 2020 elections for the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH).⁴ Thereafter, it analyses the blocks and challenges that India faces, as well as the degree to which it has (or has not) responded to the coup and the subsequent events. The report concludes with some policy considerations in India's approach to the political crisis in Myanmar.⁵

2 See Nick Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, 2017: pp. 461-83.

3 Khin Khin Mra, "Myanmar's coup from the eyes of ethnic minorities", *New Mandala*, 22 February 2021, <https://www.newmandala.org/myanmars-coup-from-the-eyes-of-ethnic-minorities/>. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

4 This literally translates to 'Assembly of the Union', meaning Myanmar's bicameral parliament.

5 This report can be read in conjunction with Roshni Kapur and Jasnea Sarma, "Myanmar Coup and the Rohingya Crisis: Responses Across South Asia", *ISAS insights* 673, 8 June 2021, which assesses the responses of the other key South Asian countries. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/myanmar-coup-and-the-rohingya-crisis-responses-across-south-asia/>.

Understanding the Military's Actions

Prior to the coup, the military linked Union Solidarity and Development Party had alleged irregularities and fraud in the elections conducted in November 2020.⁶ This is in stark contrast to the views of international and local observers who had said that the elections went smoothly and without major irregularities.⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won 83 per cent of the elected seats in the national assembly, and a majority in 12 of the 14 state and regional parliaments. The military demanded that the NLD disband Myanmar's election body, the Union Election Commission, and to recount all of the November votes with the military's assistance. These demands were conclusively rejected by the NLD at a meeting on 28 January 2021, two days before the coup.⁸ The acting president signed off on the coup under Section 417 of the Myanmar constitution which allows for the declaration of a one-year state of emergency if the country faces a threat that "may disintegrate the Union or disintegrate national solidarity or that may cause the loss of sovereignty."

The military demanded that the NLD disband Myanmar's election body, the Union Election Commission, and to recount all of the November votes with the military's assistance.

In the early hours of 1 February 2021, the military rolled into Naypyidaw with armoured vehicles and detained dozens of senior NLD officials, including Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as replacing the president, Win Myint, with his junta nominated vice president, Myint Swe, as acting president.⁹ By then, raids and detention of the NLD's political leadership had already been carried out in Naypyidaw.¹⁰ By the end of the day, 400 parliamentarians¹¹ were isolated in house arrest, and tens of arrest warrants against activists had been issued.

6 Shoon Naing, "Myanmar opposition demands vote re-run as Suu Kyi's NLD heads for victory", *Reuters*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-election/myanmar-opposition-demands-vote-re-run-as-suu-kyis-nld-heads-for-victory-idUSKBN27R0UO>. Accessed on 8 May 2021.

7 Reuters Staff, "Explainer: Crisis in Myanmar after army alleges election fraud", *Reuters*, 31 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-explainer/explainer-crisis-in-myanmar-after-army-alleges-election-fraud-idUSKBN2A113H>.

8 "Meeting Between Myanmar Govt, Military Fails to Resolve Crisis Over Election", *The Irrawaddy*, 29 January 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/meeting-myanmar-govt-military-fails-resolve-crisis-election.html>. Accessed on 8 May 2021.

9 Helen Regan et al, "Myanmar's military seizes power in coup after detaining leader Aung San Suu Kyi and ruling party politicians", *CNN*, 2 February 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/31/world/myanmar-aung-san-suu-kyi-detained-intl/index.html>. Accessed on 15 March 2021.

10 "Myanmar coup: Aung San Suu Kyi detained as military seizes control", *BBC*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55882489>. Accessed on 14 March 2021.

Aung San Suu Kyi, in particular, faced several charges with more being added in the time following the coup, which if found guilty, will likely put her in prison for life.

Aung San Suu Kyi, in particular, faced several charges with more being added in the time following the coup, which if found guilty, will likely put her in prison for life. The initial arrest was ostensibly justified by her having handheld radios that were imported illegally. The penalty, if found guilty, is two years in prison. The ousted president, Win Myint, faces the charge of breaking COVID-19 restrictions while campaigning. In March 2021, the junta added charges of bribery to Aung San Suu Kyi's alleged crimes. The newest of these charges could result in Aung San Suu Kyi facing up to 15 years of jail if found guilty under Section 55 of the Anti-Corruption Law over allegations of taking the bribe of reduced rent-price for the Daw Khin Kyi Foundation, a charity organisation dedicated to her mother. Naypidaw council chairman Myo Aung, deputy Ye Min Oo and Min Thu could face the same sentence for abetment under the same section.

When Sarma and her friend were reconnected a few days later, the latter was back on the Internet through a virtual private network, complaining of sleepless nights as night raids targeted activists and protestors participating in an emerging non-violent CDM.¹² A few days later, she heard gunshots in her immediate neighbourhood; not in Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar, but Myitkyina,¹³ the heart of northwestern Myanmar's ethnic minority populated borderlands. In Myitkyina, a few years ago, mass-scale protests by the ethnic Kachins led to the halt of the Chinese hydropower investment, the Myitsone Dam.¹⁴

The brutality of the military crackdown has by now been evidenced by hundreds of documented social media archives and videos.¹⁵ The past

11 "MPs told to leave but Aung San Suu Kyi, Win Myint remain in custody", *Frontier Myanmar*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/mps-told-to-leave-but-aung-san-suu-kyi-win-myint-remain-in-custody/>. Accessed on 16 March 2021.

12 Angshuman Choudhary, "How Myanmar security forces are using night raids to suppress protests against the coup", *Scroll.in*, 22 February 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/987545/how-myanmar-security-forces-are-using-night-raids-to-suppress-protests-against-the-coup>. Accessed on 20 March 2021.

13 "Shots Fired in Northern Myanmar City Amid Signs of Deeper Crackdown on Protests", *Radio Free Asia*, 14 March 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/protests-gunfire-02142021142745.html>. Accessed on 15 March 2021.

14 L Kiik, "Inter-National Conspiracy? Speculating on the Myitsone Dam Controversy in China, Burma, Kachin, and a Displaced Village", *Geopolitics*, 2021, pp. 1-27.

15 We will not link to any sources here because of the disturbing nature of these reports. Interested readers will be able to freely access them on a simple google search.

few months have left at least 800 protestors dead, 4,000 detained without proper recourse to trial that include activists, protestors and elected representatives. They have been arrested, tortured and dismissed from public jobs for taking part in protests. As a last resort, there has been a mass exodus of desperate youngsters into the ethnic borderlands in Kachin and Karen state to train with Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). The coup has left deep mental and emotional strains on the majority of the country. The UN has issued statement after statement condemning the military's actions as 'crimes against humanity', imploring the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to bring the military to trial.¹⁶

The coup has left deep mental and emotional strains on the majority of the country.

To fully understand the unfolding crisis and clashes between the protestors and the military in urban areas like Yangon and Mandalay, it is important to start the analysis at Myanmar's borderlands. In many of the country's ethnic borderlands, the Tatmadaw's war against the EAOs as well as their complicated liaison with militias did not vapour down, even after the 2015 elections when the pro-democracy NLD came to power. Thus, it is in the borderlands where the resistance against a complicated web of military actions has been sustained, both in discourse and actions.¹⁷

Counterintuitive to what is expected of 'transitional' and 'democratisation', the Aung San Suu Kyi-led NLD's policies towards ethnic minorities in fact heightened rather than abated the conflict following the 2015 elections. Despite promising to give protection to ethnic minorities, the NLD worked towards strengthening its own position as the legitimate authority of the nation, thus playing conciliatory politics with the military.¹⁸ This was in simultaneity to her gaining a reputation as an authoritarian and cult-like figure in Burmese politics. This was exacerbated when, in December 2019, she shocked

16 Thomas H Andrews, "Statement by Thomas H. Andrews, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, United Nations Human Rights Council", UNHCR, 11 March 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26884&LangID=E>. Accessed 8 May 2021.

17 David Brenner, *Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar's Borderlands* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019).

18 Elliott Prasse-Freeman and Tani Sebros, "The View of the Coup from the Camp: Myanmar's Emergent Trans-Ethnic Solidarity", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, <https://gjiia.georgetown.edu/2021/03/17/https-twitter-com-natrani-status-1360993418445524999-photo-1/>. Accessed on 20 March 2021.

The NLD leader's defence was arguably in hopes of keeping electoral victory for the NLD in the 2020 elections – a vision that has proved to backfire after the coup.

and disappointed many international observers while standing before the ICJ; she appeared to deflect accusations of 'genocide'¹⁹ against the Rohingyas and expressed faith in the military justice system to punish any abuses.²⁰ The ICJ issued an order on Gambia's request for provisional measures to "prevent genocidal acts against the Rohingya Muslims during the pendency of the case, and to report regularly on its implementation of the order." The NLD leader's defence was arguably in hopes of keeping electoral victory for the NLD in the 2020 elections – a vision that has proved to backfire after the coup. In the NLD's defence, critics have pointed out that with the 2020 win, the NLD did seek more concessions than were previously afforded in the 2008 constitution, including threatening to undermine the junta's crony capitalism system.²¹

Notwithstanding, the NLD's pre-election concessionary politics kept ample national space open for the Tatmadaw to dominate and dictate domestic affairs, most of all, in the management of the ethnic conflict in the borders.²² As the veteran journalist Bertil Lintner writes, "the Tatmadaw sees itself as the true defender of the nation's independence and the only force that can hold the ethnically diverse and politically divided country together" whose power is derived from "a business empire that in many ways endures today."²³ Military-linked resource extraction, frontier capitalism, displacement, land grabs and infighting with the EAOs mobilised various groups in the borderlands to speak out against what they felt was out-of-sight violence²⁴ that they have endured both before and after the 2010 political reforms from military to civilian rule, as well as the 2015 elections which brought

19 Used in single quotes since it is an ongoing case at the ICJ.

20 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/world/asia/aung-san-suu-kyi-rohingya-myanmar-genocide-hague.html>.

21 Htwe Htwe Thein, "Taking care of business: the coup in Myanmar is partly about protecting the economic interests of the military elite", *The Conversation*, 15 February 2021, <https://theconversation.com/taking-care-of-business-the-coup-in-myanmar-is-partly-about-protecting-the-economic-interests-of-the-military-elite-154727>. Accessed on 17 March 2021. See also Gerard McCarthy, "Military Capitalism in Myanmar: Examining the Origins, Continuities, and Evolution of 'Khaki Capital'", *Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 6, ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TRS6_19.pdf. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

22 Lee Jones, "Explaining Myanmar's Regime Transition: The Periphery Is Central", *Democratization*, 2014: pp. 780-802.

23 Bertil Lintner, "Why the Tatmadaw won't crack in Myanmar", *Asia Times*, 20 April 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/why-the-tatmadaw-wont-crack-in-myanmar/>. Accessed on 21 May 2021.

24 The terms 'out-of-sight' or 'invisible' military action is something described in various iterations during field interviews with Sarma between 2016 and 2018 on the China-Myanmar border.

Aung San Suu Kyi to power.²⁵ 'Democracy' has long been perceived on Myanmar's borderlands as a veneer or a military experiment, the rule of which was pre-written by the generals.²⁶

More critically, these rules were accepted far too quickly by international actors, who proceeded to send donor and investment money into the country post its civilian turn. The swiftness with which international actors bought into this veneer of democracy is tied to how Myanmar seen as a nation that has 'transitioned' from a so-called 'failed state',²⁷ a 'frontier economy' in Southeast Asia, full of potential as an lucrative emerging economy rich in natural and strategic resources.²⁸ As Anne Decobert recently argued, much of this aforementioned cash has not percolated down to the many conflict-displaced and impacted people of Myanmar who seek refuge in the borderlands under the control of EAOs.²⁹ Most essential and social services – electricity, water, health, education and basic governance services (to name a new) – are provided by the EAOs and their allied ethnic organisations themselves.³⁰ These services, although choked of international funding, have sustained generations of people and are often considered of higher quality than those provided by the Burmese state. Some parts of these very borderlands were deemed entirely unfit and disqualified from voting in the 2020 election that brought the NLD such a huge mandate and left the military politically weaker.

'Democracy' has long been perceived on Myanmar's borderlands as a veneer or a military experiment, the rule of which was pre-written by the generals.

25 See Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); and Tom Kramer, "'Neither War nor Peace': Failed Ceasefires and Dispossession in Myanmar's Ethnic Borderlands", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2021: pp. 476–96.

26 Charles M Sennott, "Myanmar's failed experiment with democracy", *The Groundtruth Project*, 5 February 2021, <https://thegroundtruthproject.org/myanmars-failed-experiment-with-democracy/>. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

27 This is a much contested and highly problematic appellation. See Carlos Sardiña Galache, "A New Myanmar?", *New Left Review*, 15 April 2021, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/74>. Accessed on 27 May 2021.

28 Jasnea Sarma and J D Sidaway, "Securing Urban Frontiers: A View from Yangon, Myanmar", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2020, pp. 447-468.

29 Anne Décobert, "'The Struggle Isn't over': Shifting Aid Paradigms and Redefining 'Development' in Eastern Myanmar", *World Development* 127: 104768, 2020.

30 Shona Loong, "Centre-Periphery Relations in Myanmar – Leverage and Solidarity after the 1 February Coup", ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, 2021, https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/2499?fbclid=IwAR0wbKdG7MTLK0gMPXJlcEvGHd_HpD6cCYtOu83frChde3IJ8BXMzUP5j-0. Accessed on 10 June, 2021.

Critics have long pointed out that it is the borderlands question that state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi decided to ignore, playing safe politics in a bid to secure the 'Bamar' vote for her own political advantage.

Thus, it is from the borderlands that sustained calls for a genuine inter-ethnic/class/region federal polity and a need to attack the 2008 constitution found sustenance. In Rakhine state, this extends to the resolution of the citizenship question for the Rohingya, who have been brutally and systematically ethnically cleansed from their communities – enough for many to name this as quintessentially a 'genocide'.³¹ In Kachin, Shan and Karen states, groups like the Kachin Independence Army, Arakan Army (AA) and Ta'ang National Liberation Army, among others, have borne the brunt of the junta and, subsequently, the NLD's majoritarian policies.³² Critics have long pointed out that it is the borderlands question that state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi decided to ignore, playing safe politics in a bid to secure the 'Bamar' vote for her own political advantage.

Now, in 2021, the central cities of Myanmar are getting the same treatment, reawakening the nightmares of the pre-2010s junta rule, particularly the crackdowns in 1988.

Raids, death and murders in the core urban areas like Mandalay and Yangon followed in the weeks after the coup, perpetrated by the army infantry and individual members of the Myanmar police. On 14 March 2021, machine guns were fired towards protestors chanting, "We are not afraid" in Yangon's Hlaing Tharyar area, killing dozens. Friends and interlocutors from Yangon commented on how they have seen their city changed, which now resembles a 'war zone' reminiscent of the brutal military crackdowns on students in 1988, if not worse. These scenes were, until recently, unimaginable in large cities like Yangon and Mandalay where residents are used to spaces abuzz with colourful fresh markets, tea-house chatter, golden pagodas and wandering monks and novices in saffron and light pink robes. Now, they are confronted by tear gas, tanks and live rounds from automatic machine guns fired directly at civilians.

The military has responded with heavy-handed atrocities on common people using rubber bullets, water cannons and tear gas,³³ treating

31 Kofi Annan Foundation, "Advisory Commission on Rakhine State: Lessons Learned", 2018, p. 26.

32 T Kramer, "'Neither war nor peace': failed ceasefires and dispossession in Myanmar's ethnic borderlands", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2021, pp. 1-21.

ordinary citizens as criminals,³⁴ and even using 'war tactics', repressive actions lifted piecemeal from the 2008 constitution. The Tatmadaw politicised the 2008 constitution which the generals drafted, and which groups in the borderlands have long called into question, especially in the wake of the 2021 coup. A range of legal instruments has been weaponised from that document such as Section 17 of the Unlawful Association Act (a vestige of the colonial era law) and Section 144 (curfews, restrictions on unlawful gatherings and freedom of movement), as well as invoking other sections to call the coup by the constitution and drafting a brand-new cyber law to justify Internet outages.³⁵ These legal instruments have also been misused to call for emergency and martial law along with the right to shoot (to kill) unarmed citizens by night.

These legal instruments have also been misused to call for emergency and martial law along with the right to shoot (to kill) unarmed citizens by night.

On 17 March 2021, the military declared martial law in some of the townships of Yangon, invoking Section 143 of the 2008 constitution³⁶ and continuing securitisation in the country following the ongoing 1 February 2021 coup. Legal scholars immediately disputed the Tatmadaw's reliance on legality as a tool for repression, arguing that the military has abused and violated certain sections of the constitution to impose martial law.³⁷

33 Tan Hui Yee, "Doctors, nurses, firefighters and teachers in Myanmar boycott work in protest against coup", *The Straits Times*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/doctors-boycott-in-myanmar-upends-health-system-but-some-patients-happy-to-wait>. Accessed on 16 March 2021.

34 Hannah Beech, "Inside Myanmar's Army: 'They See Protesters as Criminals'", *The New York Times*, 4 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/28/world/asia/myanmar-army-protests.html/>. Accessed on 6 April 2021.

35 Sebastian Strangio, "Myanmar junta readies draconian cyber-security legislation", *The Diplomat*, 12 February 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/myanmar-junta-readies-draconian-cyber-security-legislation/>. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

36 "Myanmar military junta declares martial law in six areas of Yangon", *Alarabiya News*, 15 March 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/03/15/Protests-Myanmar-military-junta-declares-martial-law-in-six-areas-of-Yangon>. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

37 Melissa Crouch, "What is martial law in Myanmar?", *Melissa Crouch*, 15 March 2021, <https://melissacrouch.com/2021/03/15/what-is-martial-law-in-myanmar/>. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

People's Resistance

Defiant protestors came out, with telephone numbers and blood groups marked on their arms, a bold declaration that they were prepared for arrest, injury and death, and yet still willing to march.

The anti-coup resistance began with the CDM in February 2021 through non-violent protests. Many citizens and public servants deliberately refused to cooperate with the military as an institution. Defiant protestors came out, with telephone numbers and blood groups marked on their arms,³⁸ a bold declaration that they were prepared for arrest, injury and death, and yet still willing to march. In addition to the youth who rose to the forefront in this struggle (Gen Z),³⁹ many professionals, including civil servants, doctors, bus drivers, teachers and bank clerks, boycotted work to join their counterparts on the streets.⁴⁰ Several celebrities joined as well. Street vendors provided support to the protestors with free fruits, water or whatever wares they sold. A strong labour movement, long mobilised and active in Burmese politics, has been working in full force alongside others against the coup. The labour movement has argued for the need to recognise the fact that the military often targets working class people, viewing them as easy and disposable targets (such as the shipyard workers shot in Mandalay) who might not be as visible as urban and middle-class protestors. So far, violence by the military has been matched within the CDM by dozens of creative modes of protest emanating from homes and streets across the country, such as even more mobilisation, and a stronger resolve towards organised protests and non-violent defiance, singing old pro-democracy protest songs like U Niang's 'ကမ္ဘာတမကၢ်ဇြာ်' (*Kabar Ma Kyay Bu: Until the End of the World*), banging pots and pans,⁴¹ blocking roads and defiantly stretching hands up in the by-now iconic three-finger-salute of the CDM.

38 "Myanmar coup: 'Everything will be OK' teenage protester mourned", *BBC*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56277165>. Accessed on 15 March 2021.

39 See Jordt, Ingrid, Tharapi Than and Sue Ye Lin, "How Generation Z Galvanised a Revolutionary Movement against Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup", ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021, <https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/2494> <https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/2494>. Accessed on 10 June 2021.

40 Tan Hui Yee, "Doctors, nurses, firefighters and teachers in Myanmar boycott work in protest against coup", *The Straits Times*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/doctors-boycott-in-myanmar-upends-health-system-but-some-patients-happy-to-wait>. Accessed on 16 March 2021.

41 Phyu Phyu Oo, "The importance of Myanmar's pots and pans protests", The Lowy Institute, 11 February 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/importance-myanmar-s-pots-and-pans-protests>. Accessed on 16 March 2021.

However, hopes from the CDM started to wane after violent crackdowns on non-violent protestors. Those who join the protests face dismissals from their jobs. Documented evidences of the killing of teenagers, workers and even pregnant women who stood to protect young protestors have broken the will of many, especially the young protestors' resolve for non-violence. "Even a seven-year-old child was brutally shot dead in her family home in Mandalay, what hope do we have to survive", said one of the protestors when Sarma phoned for an interview. That immediate vulnerability and danger have caused some hundreds of people within the movement to abscond to the borderlands, and seek armed revolution and be part of a federal army, with the support of the EAOs at the borderlands. Full-scale conflict has subsequently erupted in the Karen and Kachin hills. Villagers in Sagaing, armed with homemade guns to fight off the military, made the most headlines, signalling to many that an armed revolution is imminent if external diplomacy fails.

Villagers in Sagaing, armed with homemade guns to fight off the military, made the most headlines, signalling to many that an armed revolution is imminent if external diplomacy fails.

Currently, three strategies co-exist in the people's mode of resistance – continuing with the CDM, supporting the NUD and fleeing to the borders to be trained to confront the military and be part of a purported 'federal army'. To be sure, some fractions of the population have not joined the resistance for fear of persecution, or have taken part in more indirect ways. Families that Sarma spoke to via phone expressed anxieties and mental strain, even guilt if they were not directly part of the protests. Certain elite classes, as Jangai Jap reflects, have decided to watch as 'bystanders' as the common people protest so as to decide later which section to place their bets on.⁴² Others have outrightly supported the military. There are also some reports of defections from the military and police.

A large fraction of the anti coup protestors put their faith in the CRPH, which in turn announced a parallel and interim government in exile in April 2021 – the NUG, comprising elected representatives from the 2020 elections, members of the ethnic groups and key figures from the protest movement. The NUG now competes with the junta

42 Jangai Jap, "Protesters and Bystanders: Ethnic Minorities in the Pro-Democracy Revolution", *Tea Circle*, 22 March 2021, <https://teacircleoxford.com/2021/03/22/protesters-and-bystanders-ethnic-minorities-in-the-pro-democracy-revolution/>. Accessed on 21 May 2021.

to seek international recognition, as well as consolidate inter-ethnic solidarity.

The country's fight to protect democracy is also a fight to end the junta's corrupted system of crony capitalism.

Among other demands, the protestors have called for the restoration of the elected NLD government and the release of all political prisoners.⁴³ Some have even labelled the Tatmadaw and the Myanmar police as “terrorist organisations”.⁴⁴ Others have stressed the need to rewrite/demolish the 2008 constitution, a document which was initially written by the generals to calibrate their roadmap to a prosperous political future, and which is now abused to justify the ‘legitimacy’ of the coup and for calling out ‘election fraud’ against the victorious NLD. The country’s fight to protect democracy is also a fight to end the junta’s corrupted system of crony capitalism.⁴⁵ Crucially, all the mechanisms for resistance – the CDM, NUD and armed self-defence – have generated a rare, but unified, public opinion across a polarised and divided nation long strained by ethnic, communal and class conflict.⁴⁶

Regional, communal, religious, class and, most importantly, ethnic fissures have been put aside, at least momentarily, to cry in a unified voice to oust the perpetually powerful military out of Myanmar’s political-economic arena. These voices, emerging from the rural to the urban, from the majority Bamar to the ethnic minorities, are now universally calling for all peoples and international communities to recognise that in Myanmar, the military has a state and not the other way around.⁴⁷ There is wide recognition now of what scholars have long argued – violence is the military’s second nature, a habit previously successful in suppression in the 1990s, consequently allowing the military to amass a political and crony-business empire

43 “Tens of thousands protest Myanmar coup after night of fear, security patrols”, *CNBC*, 14 February 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/14/tens-of-thousands-protest-myanmar-coup-after-night-of-fear-security-patrols.html>. Accessed on 19 March 2021.

44 “Myanmar terrorist”, Twitter, https://twitter.com/search?q=myanmar%20terrorist&src=typed_query. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

45 Htwe Htwe Thein, “Taking care of business: the coup in Myanmar is partly about protecting the economic interests of the military elite”, *The Conversation*, 15 February 2021, <https://theconversation.com/taking-care-of-business-the-coup-in-myanmar-is-partly-about-protecting-the-economic-interests-of-the-military-elite-154727>. Accessed on 17 March 2021.

46 Ronan Lee, “Myanmar’s protests have unified a disparate country, but including the Rohingya can help defeat the coup”, *ABC*, 22 February 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/myanmar-the-rohingya-can-help-defeat-the-coup/13155924>. Accessed on 16 March 2021.

47 *Ibid.*

power-shared with militias and narco lords empowered in that era of ceasefire.⁴⁸

As a first step, the people of Myanmar have called on international actors to stop recognising the Tatmadaw as a legitimate political authority in an effort to stop it from further violating civil and democratic liberties. A large section of the people, which has supported the CDM, has called for the international community to recognise the CRPH's decision to appoint the NUD. Many have also sought targetted sanctions against the Tatmadaw and their allies. As such, two strands of deeper and long-term demands have also united voices against the coup.

First, the anti-coup protestors have argued that the military must be rooted out through identifying and eliminating its economic cronyism, which has penetrated every aspect of Myanmar society. For decades, the Tatmadaw accumulated wealth by monopolising many key sectors and controlling state enterprises. While the economic reforms in the last 10 years enabled the private sector to play a bigger role and incentivise international investors to place their stakes in key industries, the junta continued to maintain its economic clout by controlling businesses and investments in sectors such as mines, tourism, beer, mills, telecommunications and so on.⁴⁹

For decades, the Tatmadaw accumulated wealth by monopolising many key sectors and controlling state enterprises.

Second, and more importantly, there must be a federal democratic structure to accommodate ethnic minorities (some even going so far as to apologise to and include the Rohingyas)⁵⁰ so that not only the Bamar but all the people of Myanmar can work together in federal politics, turning the wheel of government together in solidarity rather than in opposition, and in appreciation of human rights (including that of the Rohingyas).

48 See Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003).

49 Ibid.

50 Verena Holzi, "Rohingya Genocide", *VICE*, 21 February 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7m898/myanmar-coup-protesters-regret-silence-over-rohingya-genocide>. Accessed on 15 March 2021.

Although such voices of reform have been perhaps over-analysed by critics in the West, this may overestimate their actual political prevalence and relevance within the Myanmar protest movement.

Although such voices of reform have been perhaps over-analysed by critics in the West, this may overestimate their actual political prevalence and relevance within the Myanmar protest movement. The NUD's recent call to include the Rohingyas as citizens, for example, has already been opposed by certain fractions in Rakhine state who were otherwise participants of the anti-coup resistance. Nonetheless, the protest has opened much needed space for people to mend deep fissures and have conversations about the apathy and ignorance among many of the Delta-based Bamar majority towards ethnic minorities and the Rohingyas. There is increasing consciousness that the Tatmadaw's current visible oppression of the common Myanmar national on the streets of Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyidaw since the coup has been a constant state of affairs for many ethnic minority communities living on the edges of the Kachin, Karen, Rakhine, Chin and Rohingya ethnic borderlands.

These are positive and welcome discourses but still very nascent in their direction. The current resistance in Myanmar is fortunate to have a single issue (the restoration of democracy and ousting of the Tatmadaw) that people have been able to unite around. However, if the NLD were to emerge out of this struggle and return to its original form thereafter, the next steps of accomplishing inclusive federal politics will continue to be an obstacle. However, the longevity of the sustained democratic struggle and the question of "whose democracy" will become increasingly important. These will depend on the reforms to emerge out of a toxic political diarchy between the NLD and the USDA that took hold after the 2015 elections, and the possibilities to include new institutions like the NUD, as well as ripping of the powers bestowed to the military in 2008.

So how has India, Myanmar's immediate neighbour to the East, responded to this unfolding crisis in neighboring Myanmar? The next section unpacks this.

India's Responses and Challenges

Following the coup on 1 February 2021, India's Ministry of External Affairs issued the following statement:

"We have noted the developments in Myanmar with deep concern. India has always been steadfast in its support to the process of democratic transition in Myanmar. We believe that the rule of law and the democratic process must be upheld. We are monitoring the situation closely."⁵¹

The statement by India's UN Ambassador, T S Tirumurti, on 26 February 2021 at the UN General Assembly read:

"Restoring democratic order should be the priority of all stakeholders in Myanmar. The international community must lend its constructive support to the people of Myanmar at this critical juncture."⁵²

India's statements have been supportive of democracy, without advocating any change in policy towards Myanmar. As such, it is in an awkward position, struggling between diplomatic words cautioning for a need to defend democracy versus matching those words with actual deeds (where the reliance on the Tatmadaw to cooperate on *realpolitik* matters of national security, strategic and business interests have taken precedence). Among others, India's relationship with the generals has helped to balance China, and secure its Northeast borders as well as economic interests in Southeast Asia. The Tatmadaw's interests have aligned, for example, with India's own interest in keeping their borders defended and secured from insurgents and displaced refugees; as well as New Delhi's interest in investing in Southeast Asia's frontier economy, rich in resources and strategic locales for ports and transboundary infrastructure.

Among others, India's relationship with the generals has helped to balance China, and secure its Northeast borders as well as economic interests in Southeast Asia.

51 "Press Statement on developments in Myanmar", Ministry of External Affairs, 1 February 2021, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/33434/press+statement+on+developments+in+myanmar>. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

52 "Restoring peace must be priority of stakeholders in Myanmar: India at UNGA", *Business Standard*, 27 February 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/restoring-peace-must-be-priority-of-stakeholders-in-myanmar-india-at-unga-121022700061_1.html. Accessed on 19 March 2021.

Aung San Suu Kyi's family has had an association with India for many decades.

Regional powers like India and Bangladesh are expected to take strong official stands to defend 'democracy' and protect against Chinese influence in the region. India and Bangladesh were once part of the same British empire, as was Myanmar (until 1937). India shares 1,468 kilometres of borders and Bangladesh shares 270 kilometres of borders with Myanmar. These countries are connected by a millennium of longer shared histories spanning from ancient influences (through religion and trade) to shared (and fraught) histories in the colonial and post-colonial era. Each country has had a unique and long history of relationships of post-independent solidarity as aspiring democracies and non-aligned nations. Burma's invasion of Northeast India led to both being invaded by the Raj. Downtown Yangon was designed and is still reminiscent of Kolkata. Ancient Indian influence is captured in the spirit of Bagan's architecture, and Buddhism in the pages of the Sanskrit derived Pali script. Buddhist monks, Muslim traders, tea, Indian civil servants, escapee Shan princes, thousands of world war soldiers, exiled Indians and independence leaders become imbricated into the historical fabric of connections between South Asia and Myanmar, to only name a few. Aung San Suu Kyi's family has had an association with India for many decades. Her late father, General Aung San, had close relations with former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and her late mother, Khin Kyi, was once the country's ambassador to India. Aung San Suu Kyi herself studied political science and graduated from the reputable Lady Shri Ram College in Delhi in 1964.⁵³ Even the Chin leader, Dr Sasa, who is now a CRPH envoy to the UN, studied in Shillong (Northeast India).

Given these and other historical links, there were some expectations to draw democratic support from India. South Asia, and India especially, looms large in the imagination of the protest movement. Artists and scholars have written poetry harking to the shared history of oppression under the colonial regime. Aung Soe Myint, an artist from Yangon, implores India in the present struggle to "wake up" and "stand" in solidarity with the Burmese people as equals in the post-colonial world. "Oh India", he writes:

⁵³ Sinderpal Singh, "Something of a Homecoming": Aung San Suu Kyi's Visit to India", *ISAS Brief No. 257*, 26 November 2012, pp. 1-2.

When we were enslaved in one colony,
 We carried the same burden,
 We strode the same road to independence.
 Your land was famous for passion for freedom,
 Open-air for free thinking.
 Now we are dazed, In between the world's largest dictatorship,
 And the world's largest democracy. (Myint 2021)

India has often been seen in Myanmar as a model of democracy. The Indian model of federalism is frequently woven into the discourse of Burmese borderland ethnic minority communities and demands for genuine autonomy within the Myanmar state. This coincides with a rejection of the model present in authoritarian China, which many Myanmar nationals believe has been enabling the Tatmadaw generals for decades. China is seen as the military's biggest backer and the most notorious extractive force, perceived as financing dispossession, labour exploitation, land grabs and extractive businesses.⁵⁴ India, on the other hand, is not viewed as an exploitative neighbour by the people of Myanmar, nor are Indian investment sites much in the spotlight for internal activism (with some exceptions).

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In early March 2021, many in Myanmar changed their social media cover pages to cute portrayals of the online group, 'The milk tea alliance'⁵⁵ (Figure 1), demonstrating the power of cross-border activism. They were hoping that activists from India (involved in domestic social movements) could be incorporated in pan-Asian solidarity with pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand. Despite these calls, there is little public solidarity in India with the people of Myanmar (with exceptions in Northeast India, in states like Mizoram which share an intricately linked but complex history with Myanmar), and there is even less official government

54 Kevin Woods, "Ceasefire capitalism: military-private partnerships, resource concessions and military-state building in the Burma-China borderlands", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2011, pp. 747–70; Kevin Woods, "Rubber out of the ashes: locating Chinese agribusiness investments in 'armed sovereignties' in the Myanmar-China borderlands", *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 2019, pp. 79–95; Karin Dean, "Spaces and territorialities on the Sino–Burmese boundary: China, Burma and the Kachin", *Political Geography*, 2005, pp. 808–30; and Karin Dean, "Assembling the Sino-Myanmar borderworld", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2020, pp. 34–54.

55 Fanny Potkin and Patpicha Tanakasempipat, "'Milk Tea Alliance' activists across Asia hold rallies against Myanmar coup", *Reuters*, 1 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-protests-asia-idUSKCN2AS0HP>. Accessed on 19 March 2021.

action. The series of demonstrations organised by student groups and non-government organisations (NGOs) in Aizawl demonstrate the coup has been somewhat emotional and personal for the Mizos. Their support and empathy for the democracy movement can be attributed to their historic kinship connections with their Chinese counterparts in Myanmar that go back to the pre-colonial era.⁵⁶

Figure 1: Milk Tea Alliance official Facebook logo



Source: Milk Tea Alliance's Public FB cover image.

In the past, the Indian state explicitly supported democracy movements in Myanmar (then Burma).

In the past, the Indian state explicitly supported democracy movements in Myanmar (then Burma). In 1989, then Minister of External Affairs, Narasimha Rao, offered to provide financial assistance to the democracy movement and said that India would host Burmese refugees.⁵⁷ In 1988, there was a lot of public pressure on India to take a strong stand against the military and support Aung San Suu Kyi's democracy movement, including street demonstrations and speeches in the parliament urging then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to do so.⁵⁸

India's purely verbal response to the current moment is commensurate to the fact that, since the mid-1990s, India's policy towards Myanmar

⁵⁶ C V Lalmalsawmi, "Why Mizos have come out to support protesters against Myanmar coup", *Scroll.in*, 11 March 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/989166/why-mizo-groups-are-organising-events-to-show-solidarity-for-coup-protestors-in-myanmar>. Accessed on 20 March 2021.

⁵⁷ Suhasini Haidar, "With Myanmar's military coup, the tightrope between idealism and realpolitik returns for New Delhi", *The Hindu*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/news-analysis-with-myanmars-military-coup-the-tightrope-between-idealism-and-realpolitik-returns-for-new-delhi/article33720952.ece>. Accessed on 20 March 2021.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

gradually shifted to make more space for the Tatmadaw, particularly because the Indian government's pro-Myanmar democracy stance was bringing no particular dividends for its national interests. This was when India first turned to the 'Look-East' policy as a way to open its roads and paths into a Southeast Asian market that it had long ignored.⁵⁹

When Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 2015, the NLD contested the general elections. Following a landslide victory, it was allowed to form the government in the same year. India hedged and balanced its relations by engaging both the new civilian NLD and the old military establishment in Myanmar. India's overall policy in the last decade has been to balance good diplomatic relations with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD while cooperating with the military (and its crony allies) for the sake of India's strategic interests (including securing the Northeast and containing insurgency) and business prerogatives in Myanmar, and Southeast Asia more generally. All this has been a quid-pro-quo relationship.

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Since Thein Sein's civilian government took power in 2010, India has been cultivating a deeper relationship with the Tatmadaw. From 2010 to the present, the first quarter of 2021, India has been Myanmar's fourth-largest supplier of military equipment and weapons, the transfer of which amounts to approximately US\$484 million (S\$644.2 million). India donated a submarine to the Tatmadaw in 2020,⁶⁰ talks for which started in the middle of the Rohingya genocide in 2017. In 2017, it pointedly did not criticise the junta's involvement in the Rohingya crisis, saying, "India remains deeply concerned about the situation in Rakhine State in Myanmar and the outflow of refugees from that region."⁶¹ The rest of the Ministry of External Affairs' 166-word note focused on strongly condemning the "terrorist attacks on

59 Thongkholal Haokip, "India's Look East Policy: Its Evolution and Approach", *South Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, Issue. 2, 2011.

60 Anjana Pasricha, "India Gives Submarine to Myanmar Amid Growing Chinese Footprint in Indian Ocean Countries", *VOA*, 25 October 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/india-gives-submarine-myanmar-amid-growing-chinese-footprint-indian-ocean#:~:text=NEW%20DELHI%20%2D%20India%20has%20given,growing%20influence%20in%20Southeast%20Asia>. Accessed on 20 March 2021.

61 "Situation in Rakhine State of Myanmar", Ministry of External Affairs, 26 August 2017, https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/28892/Situation_in_Rakhine_State_of_Myanmar. Accessed on 15 March 2021.

Myanmar security forces” and urged a stop to the killing of military personnel. Most recently, in the Quad meetings with Japan, Australia and the United States (US) in March 2021, the joint statement stated, “As long-standing supporters of Myanmar and its people, we emphasize the urgent need to restore democracy and the priority of strengthening democratic resilience.” However, that relatively non-committal language was reportedly drafted at the request of India and Japan.⁶²

There are three main sticking points and challenges for India’s posture – the Northeast, the market and China, as analysed in the succeeding sections.

62 Abhijnan Rej, “In ‘Historic’ Summit Quad Commits to Meeting Key Indo-Pacific Challenges”, *The Diplomat*, 13 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/in-historic-summit-quad-commits-to-meeting-key-indo-pacific-challenges/>. Accessed on 8 May 2021.

The Northeast

For New Delhi, a secure Northeast is one of the two prime reasons for India's 'Look-East' policy and subsequently 'Act-East' policy mired in the panoply of trade and connectivity. Keeping the generals happy and collaborative lets the Indian state manage the volatile borders, insurgencies and (unwanted) crossings and migrations. In May 2019, the Indian army held phase two of Operation Sunrise with the junta to target both Indian and Burmese militant groups – Indian militant groups such as Kamtapur Liberation Organisation, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang), the United Liberation Front of Assam and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland and Burmese insurgents such as the AA.⁶³ India has collaborated with the Tatmadaw on several joint operations in the northeast borderlands.

The junta has helped India in the past to crack down on insurgent groups that have set up their bases across the borders. This keeps refugees from Myanmar (Chin, Rakhine and Rohingya) from crossing the border into India. It particularly helps to keep the 'Rohingya situation' handled, keeping the refugees where they can be safely repatriated. This is in line with the Indian state's Citizenship Amendment Act, which excludes Muslim refugees from becoming citizens and being registered into the National Registry of Citizens. It is extremely important to see affairs in Myanmar from the vision of Northeast India instead of Delhi.

The loudest voices against the military actions in Myanmar have emerged not from human rights activist groups in India or university campuses but from the border states (like Mizoram and Nagaland) that share religious, kinship and historical affinities with Myanmar.⁶⁴ Mizoram, for example, with its high literacy rates, a strong force of Assam Rifles and Border Security Force protecting both its Myanmar and Bangladesh borders, and a previously belligerent Mizo-led Mizo

The junta has helped India in the past to crack down on insurgent groups that have set up their bases across the borders.

63 "Operation Sunrise 2: India, Myanmar armies target Northeast-based militants", *India Today*, 16 June 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/operation-sunrise-india-myanmar-armies-target-northeast-based-militants-1549912-2019-06-16>. Accessed on 10 March 2021.

64 C V Lalmalsawmi, "Why Mizos have come out to support protesters against Myanmar coup", *Scroll.in*, 11 March 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/989166/why-mizo-groups-are-organising-events-to-show-solidarity-for-coup-protestors-in-myanmar>. Accessed on 8 May 2021.

The support from the Mizo public, post-coup, is vastly different from the way in which Chin refugees have been traditionally treated in the state.

National Front successfully brought into state politics, is a success story as far as New Delhi is concerned. But from Mizoram, it looks different. More than 15,000 Burmese have taken shelter here. The support from the Mizo public, post-coup, is vastly different from the way in which Chin refugees have been traditionally treated in the state.⁶⁵ Citizens, ethnic and indigenous people in Northeast India are extremely self-aware and critical of India's stance on the region, which is largely that of maintaining strict militarisation at the borderlands, and the region in general. Historically, many communities (such as the Naga, the Zo, Chin, Lai, Mara and Kuki, among many others) are well aware that their communities were divided by artificial borders inherited by the post-colonial state, thereby fracturing their lived realities. These voices and histories should be given prime space in assessing how India should approach the crisis in Myanmar, not only because their voices are often unrepresented in the national discourse, but also because the Northeastern region is where India's touted 'Act East' projects are taking shape.

⁶⁵ Bianca Son and N William Singh, "The Chin-Mizoram Border: Institutionalized Xenophobia For State Control" in Su-Aan Oh eds, *Myanmar's Mountain and Maritime Borderscapes: Local Practices, Boundary-Making and Figured Worlds* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016).

'Act East' and the Market

In recent years, India's 'Look East' and subsequent 'Act East' policies have prompted it to engage more with Southeast Asia, and important Indian economic and strategic projects are now running through Myanmar. There too, the Northeast plays a strategic role.

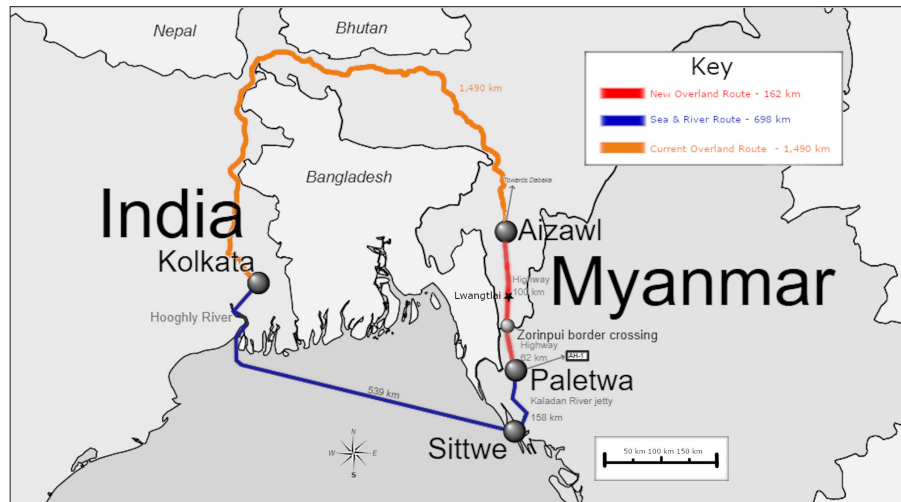
For the past 10 years, India has been trying to push through a network of roads and river routes to reach the coast, from Kolkata or Mizoram to the sea. The Kaladan multimodal transport system is one such important project. Since 1947, Northeast India has been landlocked and is only connected to the rest of India by a 26-kilometre strip of land that threads between Bangladesh and Bhutan. This has long been seen as an obstacle to development and a strategic vulnerability by New Delhi. That said, the southern tip of Mizoram is only 218 kilometres from the Bay of Bengal. If Mizoram could be connected to the coast, then the distance that resources, goods and oil would have to travel to get from the rest of India to the Northeast would be reduced by half, with the added benefit of being able to complete two-thirds of the journey by sea. The only problem is that those 218 kilometres are in the sensitive conflict borders of Myanmar, for which India needs the Tatmadaw's explicit cooperation and protection, particularly to guard against ethnic armed groups that operate in this area, such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, a Rohingya insurgent group.

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Reports show how India has assisted Myanmar to crack down on the AA to protect its economic interests in Myanmar, such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport System to the Northeast through Myanmar,⁶⁶ the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and a prospective plan for a Special Economic Zone at the Sittwe deep-water ports.

66 Ibid.

Figure 2: Proposed transport routes from Kolkata to Sittwe and Aizawl



Note: The map reflects the Indian state's geopolitical and economic imagination of a transport project of this scale and geography and the goal of replacing the long, expensive existing overland route. The reliance on securing the border with Myanmar is key.
 Source: Adapted by Jasnea Sarma from Wikimedia Commons.

It is important to note that India's investments in Myanmar's borders also lead it into working headlong with the Tatmadaw.

It is important to note that India's investments in Myanmar's borders also lead it into working headlong with the Tatmadaw. Myanmar's western sea-borderlands in Ahlone and Sittwe were transferred by the Myanmar port authority to the Myanmar Economic Council (MEC) and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited, both crony conglomerates, at least two of which, as discussed, have Indian private companies as investors. The latest is the proposed Adani port which will be situated in the Ahlone shores linked to Myanmar's military-held crony conglomerate, the MEC. Canberra, by virtue of investments by Australia's sovereign wealth body, the Future Fund, has also placed economic stakes in the Adani port and the Special Economic Zones (parent company of the port developer).⁶⁷ The Tatmadaw's Commander in Chief and recently self-appointed Chairman of the SAC, Min Aung Hlaing, is said to personally hold the largest number of shares of this development.

⁶⁷ Geoff Law, "Adani Group under scrutiny for links with brutal Myanmar military", Adani Watch, 11 January 2021, https://www.adaniwatch.org/adani_group_under_scrutiny_for_links_with_brutal_myanmar_military. Accessed on 18 March 2021.

Balancing China

China looms large in New Delhi's geopolitical fears, with good reason, given its aggressive stance towards India and hyperbuilding of infrastructure on India's borderlands that keep the Indian strategic community on its toes. In the past, when the US and the West imposed sanctions on Myanmar, it pushed the nation closer towards China. Thus, India fears that condemning the Tatmadaw publicly would result in alienating Myanmar and pushing it to China. This fear was formulated after the coup when the democratic opposition was in house arrest and not in parliament. Much has changed since then, with the onset of the CRPH and NUG as alternatives to the junta.

In Myanmar, China is being perceived as being an accessory to the coup, both for blocking resolutions in the UN and for its previous support to the Tatmadaw. The recent coup fits seamlessly into the narrative of an ongoing political struggle in Myanmar against Chinese investments and business backed by the military and its allies. For example, on 15 March 2021, the Chinese embassy in Myanmar told the Chinese publication, *Global Times*, that 32 Chinese invested factories in Myanmar have been vandalised with property losses valued at US\$37 million (S\$49 million).⁶⁸ That same report quotes a Chinese academic as stating, “[B]ehind the growing anti-China sentiment in Myanmar was the anti-China forces in the West, which have been creating obstacles for exchanges between China and other countries for a long time.” It further reported that the Chinese embassy has “urged authorities in Myanmar to take effective measures to stop the violence and punish the perpetrators.”⁶⁹ Thus, the official Chinese organs are going back to the perennial western agitation to explain popular antipathy rather than examine Chinese engagement with Myanmar's government. This sets up a real opportunity for India to show democratic leadership.

The recent coup fits seamlessly into the narrative of an ongoing political struggle in Myanmar against Chinese investments and business backed by the military and its allies.

China's interest in Myanmar is business-related, as seen in its instructions to the Burmese military to protect Chinese factories.

68 “Myanmar locals urged not to be incited by West as 32 Chinese factories in Yangon suffer from attacks”, *Global Times*, 15 March 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1218466.shtml>.

69 Ibid.

It is unlikely that China will engage with popular sentiment instead of backing the military in the near future.

China understands the military's hand in the country's business sector, hence, it is unlikely that China will engage with popular sentiment instead of backing the military in the near future. In a recent meeting between the junta leader, Min Aung Hlaing, and his foreign minister, Wunna Maung Lwin, with the Chinese ambassador, Chen Hai, these business interests were once again reiterated with talks of 'pauk phaw' (brotherly) relations in implementing bilateral projects, the latest of which are the 22 projects worth US\$8 million (\$\$10.61 million) discussed during the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation meeting.

India has an opportunity here. It is already seen as a successful democracy with reservoirs of goodwill with much of the Burmese public. Burmese citizens, by contrast, see China as an enabler of the junta, while India has gained security cooperation from Myanmar and has had some success in opening up Myanmar economically. But if the NUG and the current government in exile prevail, a distinct probability given the Burmese public's support, India's lack of a strong pushback against the junta may represent a missed opportunity.

Conclusion and Policy Considerations

It is very likely that Myanmar will be heading towards a full-scale armed revolt in the remaining months of 2021, instead of a restoration of the old government or new elections. This would have spillover effects on South Asia, and as an immediate neighbour, the region will face the ethical dilemma on how to manage relations with Myanmar. It will thus become important for India, and South Asia in general, to keep an informed and historically situated sight on the Tatmadaw's ongoing and long-standing actions against the citizens of Myanmar. With such unprecedented mobilisation (even bigger than the 1988 revolution), it is very unlikely that Myanmar's political future will have the same space for military preponderance in politics or business. India's policy responses are best advised to take these changes into account.

The US, New Zealand and other strategic partners for India have refused to recognise the junta leaders as legitimate forces of authority in Myanmar. However, India's strategic choices are challenged by the fact that the junta is still in power and the NUD struggles to find legitimacy. China's close links with the military is also a concern. It is difficult for India to engage in a binary style condemnation or support for the junta. However, more studied and nuanced approaches can be tried out. Some recommendations follow.

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To reiterate, elections fraud, which was the military's official reason for the coup, has been delegitimised by independent election monitoring bodies. India should set up an independent committee to probe the junta's allegations of electoral fraud. If the committee's reports match multiple other independent inquiries bodies that have found these claims to be illegitimate, then a stronger condemnation of the military can be justified.

The people's mandate and the CDM movement have asked for official recognition of the CRPH and the NUD, but there are still different voices and fractions in the country not fully represented by either the junta or the NUD. In stark contrast to the NLD, the NUD is already

facing backlash in Rakhine state in its attempt to recognise the Rohingyas.⁷⁰ However, it remains unflinching in its resolve.⁷¹ Such a progressive stand should be supported by democracies like India, with informed knowledge that apart from the NLD or even the NUD, there are other groups of opposition to the coup in Myanmar. These include ethnic political parties, labour unions, civil society organisations, international NGOs, EAOs and various youth groups, all of which are well-organised fragments of the political spheres, and are not concentrated on just the NLD as a party. India could form a committee consisting of relevant academics, journalists and civil society members to determine a legitimate government partner in Myanmar.

A temporary ban in providing military equipment (both in the form of donation and purchase) to the junta should be urgently considered.

There is an urgent need to recognise the military's hold on the economy and business. Myanmar's military controls the Ministry of Defense's budget and therefore can control leasing arrangements for military-owned land across the country. India should form inquiry committees to research land lease agreements with the junta for Indian investments for projects like the Adani port and the Kaladan road. Among other solutions, targeted sanctions against military-held assets, non-issuance of passports to military members and businesses, and a stop to channelling humanitarian aid through the junta have been suggested. Others have initiated similar moves by using various new and evolving databases that monitor the links of military businesses. A temporary ban in providing military equipment (both in the form of donation and purchase) to the junta should be urgently considered.

New Delhi should be prepared to accommodate refugees as the situation worsens in Myanmar, in particular, refugees/defectors from the borderlands that have close cultural, ethnic and religious ties with their counterparts in India. New Delhi should coordinate with the UN Human Rights Council, state governments and NGOs involved

70 RFA Staff, "NUG အစိုးရရဲ့ ရှိဟင်္ဂျာမူဝါဒကို ALP ကန့်ကွက်", *Radio Free Asia*, 9 June 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/alp-opposes-nug-government-rohingya-policy-myanmar-military-coup-06062021104253.html>. Accessed on 9 June 2021.

71 Staff, "ရှိဟင်္ဂျာအရမ်း ရခိုင်တိုင်းရင်းသားများ မစိုးရိမ်ရန် NUG ပြော", *Myanmar Now*, 5 June 2021, <https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/7008>. Accessed on 9 June 2021.

in refugee-related issues on how it can provide humanitarian support to asylum seekers.

Indirect diplomacy or collaboration with ASEAN can be productive. In its current state, however, the larger Burmese public does not accept ASEAN's approach of working with the Tatmadaw. An engagement on those terms is likely to prove ineffective. Hence, India, as a democracy, has the opportunity to collaborate in ASEAN's role in this crisis, particularly as an alternate force against the Chinese insistence of ASEAN maintaining its role as a mitigating force so long as 'non-interference' is maintained. For the Burmese public, ASEAN's traditional non-interference approach looks like non-action to curb the violence.

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Lastly, there is little academic work being done on Myanmar and Southeast Asia in India, thereby leading to a problem in knowledge production. With some exceptions, many Indian commentators write from a distance with little understanding of the situated histories, languages or aspirations of Burmese people. The strategic writing is dominated by diplomats. National interests have led the current Indian government to view Northeast India's insurgent ties to Myanmar as a security problem; hence, warranting only a security solution with the military. Within this decision, there is selective amnesia of the aforementioned histories, and the fact that there are still almost a million Burmese of South Asian origin who are Myanmar citizens. Thus, given these links, India's rhetoric of "human rights" and a "defence of democracy" may prove insufficient.

Appendix About the Authors

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