



Myanmar's Political Turmoil and the complexities of India's Good Neighbor Policy



Figure 1: India's alignment with post-Coup Myanmar

Abstract

The ongoing political crisis in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup has seen little progress, especially with the world's focus on recent events such as the COVID-19 and Russian-Ukrainian war. The military has continued to use violence against protestors and the Rohingya minority. Responding to this, the paper argues that India's involvement in addressing the crisis is crucial, given the long border and maritime boundary with Myanmar and their growing economic and defense cooperation. However, India's reluctance to act is attributed to national interests, competition with China and Pakistan, and potential implications for its security and economy. To conclude, the essay discusses recommendations for India, as well as for the international community from a neighbor's perspective.

Introduction

Two years have passed since the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, overthrew the democratically elected government, the National Unity Government of Myanmar. There has been little progress given the global attention on COVID-19 recovery and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. The 2021 event caused over 1,500 deaths, while 13,000 people were under-arrested for protesting the regime. This reminds us of their atrocities towards ethnic Muslim minorities-the Rohingya-in 2017, where the military was responsible for the genocide, with a death toll of more than 24,000, displacing more than 550,000 Rohingya people.¹ Tragically, the violent conflict continues to this day.

Current Outlook on Myanmar Junta

The problem of military ruling in Myanmar has been ongoing for decades since 1960, with a complex historical background². Finally, after 16 years persisting on its agenda, the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) adopted a resolution on the deterioration within Myanmar, calling for an immediate halt to the violence in Myanmar and for the junta to release political prisoners, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi³. Such development paves the way for joint efforts among stakeholders in the international system.

Attempts made by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to address this issue failed miserably in mitigating Min Aung Hlaing's violent decisions⁴. Therefore, Sukma highlights the importance of ASEAN collaboration with non-ASEAN external powers in tackling this problem⁵. However, India, one of the major dialogue partners of ASEAN⁶ and a neighbor to Myanmar, along with China and Russia⁷, abstained from endorsing the UNSCR. India's decision not to endorse any censures against the coup was driven by its national interests and other potential implications. Despite this, it remains crucial for India and the rest of the international community to take action mitigating the crisis in Myanmar as it poses a direct threat to the Indo-Pacific region.

India as a Good Neighbor to Myanmar: Why Choose to Abstain?

As the two countries share a long border of over 1,600 kilometers and a maritime boundary⁸, Myanmar is crucial to India's national interests. Moreover, India considers Myanmar to be geopolitically important as it is located at the center of the India-Southeast Asia region⁹. Despite refusing to endorse the UNSCR, India intends to be a positive player and a good neighbor to Myanmar, hence choosing to invest in the country's development over sanctions¹⁰.

On Security

The instability in Myanmar has potential security implications for India with the risk of an inflow of refugees or illegal immigrants from Myanmar. The Indian government is highly concerned about the Rohingya Muslim minority, a target of the Tatmadaw fleeing to the country. In particular, Rohingya people, who are illegal immigrants, are suspected to have been recruited by terrorist groups, and their presence infringes the rights of Indian citizens and poses significant security challenges¹¹. Therefore, by strengthening its ties with Myanmar, India is working towards addressing these security challenges¹². For instance, the defense and security cooperation between the two countries has been strengthened over the years, through high-level visits, signing of an MoU on Border Cooperation, training programs, exchanges between the Army, Air Force, and Naval Staff¹³.

On Economy

India regards Myanmar as essential for achieving its goal of becoming a \$5 trillion economy by 2024. Despite having a total bilateral trade of only \$2 billion, which lags China, Modi's government aims to increase economic engagement with Myanmar¹⁴. Trade between both countries has also been increasing steadily and reached over 2 billion USD in 2016-17, with agriculture dominating the sector. Indian companies have demonstrated a keen interest to

invest in Myanmar and have secured major contracts in the country. Not to mention, Myanmar's membership in regional and sub-regional organizations-ASEAN, BIMSTEC, and Mekong Ganga Cooperation-adds significance to India's "Act East" policy, where Myanmar has been mainly supportive of India's stance in international schemes¹⁵. Additionally, the India's desire of friendly relations with Myanmar's military is to gain access to natural resources for its high-tech industry¹⁶. Thus, any disruption to trade routes and economic ties, as the condemnation of the coup, could also harm India's economy¹⁷.

On Rivalry with China and Pakistan

India's approach to the situation in Myanmar is also influenced by its patent competition with China and Pakistan. China, as Myanmar's largest investor and trading partner, has been investing significantly in several projects in Myanmar, including high-speed railway lines, dams, and a 2.5 billion USD gas-fired power plant. Furthermore, three Chinese companies own over 80% of the project, and the rest is coordinated by Myanmar's Supreme Group of Companies¹⁸. Therefore, with the Myanmar economy under financial strain and foreign currencies declining, the junta will become even more dependent on Chinese support¹⁹. Meanwhile, Pakistan delivered six fighter jets to Myanmar in 2018, with another batch of 10 aircraft in the following years²⁰. India's concern about China's and Pakistan's increasing involvement in Myanmar adds an additional layer to the complex situation, enhancing India's motivation to continue financing Myanmar.

These concerns for security, economy, and geopolitical rivalry have led India to oppose pro-democracy elements within Myanmar, the UNSCR on Myanmar, and ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus²¹. Nevertheless, India remains committed to prioritizing the welfare of the people of Myanmar and prefers a quiet and constructive diplomacy to seek lasting solutions²². The options available for India to deal with the recent developments in Myanmar are, therefore, limited.

Recommendations through the lens of a neighbor

While India's interest in stabilizing Myanmar can be attributed to its strategic and economic interests, it is important to acknowledge that India's stance towards the Rohingya refugee crisis may also be a motivating factor. Despite the security concern of illegal immigrants coming from the Rohingya community, India's military and border guards have been accused of human rights violations²³ against Rohingya refugees and the plan for their deportation is also linked to “Islamophobic tendencies” in the government²⁴. Therefore, it is possible that India's interest in stabilizing Myanmar could also be motivated by a desire to keep the refugees in Myanmar instead of allowing them to seek asylum in India. Given that, India needs to address these human rights concerns and work towards a comprehensive solution for the crisis, while also ensuring its own national security interests.

Despite concerns about the situation in Myanmar, India has abstained from endorsing the resolution due to national interests, security challenges, economic ties, and rivalry with China and Pakistan. Nonetheless, India remains committed to supporting Myanmar's development and addressing issues. Considering the rough relationship with the Rohingyas, India is expected to tackle issues in Myanmar with a holistic approach, all while safeguarding its own national security concerns. Rather than imposing sanctions, investing in nation-building efforts while putting civil society as the main concern through negotiation can be a more effective way to resolve the crisis and avoid potential consequences for the Indo-Pacific Region.

Prospects on Indo-Pacific

It is equally important to examine the future possibilities of Myanmar's domestic issues in the wider regional context. The close ties between China and Myanmar are raising concerns with China potentially feeling excluded from collaborations such as ASEAN and QUAD that do not involve its dominance. This growing Chinese influence is a central concern for the US, leading to increased tensions in the region as China aims to reshape the international

order²⁵. This could potentially harm the region's economy by making it a less appealing investment option²⁶. Furthermore, the threat to human security in Myanmar has also spread to neighboring countries, with Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, being lured by fraudulent job offers and subsequently held captive in Myanmar²⁷. Failure to manage the crisis in Myanmar could result in instability in the Indo-Pacific Region.

Author Biography: Rachel Cecilia is a consortium member and a graduate student at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), Beppu, Japan.

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