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ONGOING MYANMAR CIVIL WAR:

Implications for India & the People's Republic of China (PRC)

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Abbreviations:

1. **PRC:** People's Republic of China
2. **NLD:** National League for Democracy
3. **AA:** Arakan Army
4. **USDP:** Union Solidarity & Development Party
5. **NUG:** National Unity Government
6. **PDF:** People's Defence Force
7. **PaKhaPha/PDT:** People's Defense Teams
8. **TNLA:** Ta'ang National Liberation Army
9. **MNDAA:** Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
10. **KIA:** Kachin Independence Army
11. **UWSA:** United Wa State Army
12. **CAN:** Chin National Army
13. **CNF:** Chin National Front
14. **CDF:** Chinland Defence Force
15. **KNPP:** Karenni National Progressive Party
16. **KPDF:** Karenni People's Defence Force
17. **KNDF:** Karenni National Defence Force
18. **BRI:** Belt and Road Initiative
19. **EAO:** Ethnic Armed Organisation
20. **ULFA:** United Liberation Front of Asom
21. **NSCN:** National Socialist Council of Nagaland
22. **PLA-M:** People's Liberation Army of Manipur
23. **ASEAN:** Association of Southeast Asian Nations
24. **NSCN-K:** National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang

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INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is bordered by India to the Northwest, Tibet (occupied by the People's Republic of China) in the north and the PRC in the northeast, Laos to the east, Thailand to the Southeast, and the Bay of Bengal to the South and Bangladesh to the West. It shares land borders with five key Asian countries making it a significant player in Asian regional geopolitics especially in Southeast Asia. It also has access to vital maritime trade routes, which makes its location interesting for global geo-economics. This advantageous position has the potential to influence regional trade dynamics and international economic strategies. Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Myanmar has faced substantial political and economic challenges. The country experienced extended periods of instability, marked by military coups and authoritarian rule, which have hindered its development. This turbulence is particularly evident in the ongoing civil war, which has caused significant human suffering and disrupted progress.

Demographically, the majority of the people in Myanmar speak Burmese and are known for diverse ethnicities in the region.



Officially there are 135 ethnic groups in Myanmar, the major seven groups are the Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen (Kayin), Karenni (Kayah), Mon and Shan.¹ The majority group is called the Barmars, while the others are the minority groups.²

Notably, over time, the objectives of these ethnic groups have also evolved from being an independent state to self-government, limited autonomy, equal rights, fair distribution of the state's natural resource income, peace and growth of their state, preservation of their language, culture and religion, among other aspects. Myanmar has experienced various ethnic tensions since its independence. The Rohingya Crisis and the fight between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw (military of Myanmar) have dominated the last few decades of internal conflict in Myanmar, with the focus being on the Rakhine State. But the worldwide focus on the "ethnic cleansing" and forced relocation of the Rohingya has overtaken the latter. These diverse ethnic groups have a long-standing troubled history with the military junta of Myanmar.

Considering its strategic location in Southeast Asia, Myanmar is vulnerable to greater international political dynamics. Myanmar's relevance in the region is further crucial for its rich oil, gas and mineral resources. In recent years, it has invested and tapped on the cross-border trade aspects and strengthened its exports and policies to an extent which in turn helped the economy and Burmese before the replacement of the democratic government with the coup in 2021. The geographical location acts as a gateway to the Indian Ocean through its coastal borders in the Bay of Bengal. There has also been a growing foreign actor's influence in Myanmar due to its importance and crucial access to the Indian Ocean. This report sheds light on the aspects of the ongoing civil war with the latest updates on the ethnic groups, junta and the PRC influence in the conflict and the critical situation that Indian foreign policy faces in the civil war.

Overview of the Coup

Throughout its decades of independence, Myanmar has been marred by various uprisings and insurgencies which resulted in slow growth in political and economic reforms. Every civil war of today has a series of long-standing issues and discontent and Myanmar is no exception, the military coup in 2021 was the final trigger that led to the unrest.

Officially known as the State Administration Council or SAC, the military junta in Myanmar engaged in a coup d'état and ultimately seized power from the democratic government, the National League for Democracy (NLD) on 1 February 2021. The NLD had won a sweeping victory just a few months before the coup in the 2020 General Elections. The military leaders of Tatmadaw, the local name of the military, were closely associated with the Union Solidarity & Development Party (USDP) in Myanmar which lost widespread electoral support compared to the NLD. Hence, there was chaos in most of the constituencies where they raised issues on rigging of votes and electoral fraud in the elections. These claims were made by the Tatmadaw and were widely discredited by the international community. Hence, in February 2021, the Military accused the NLD leaders and declared a state emergency for a year which is still going on.³

The power that the military in Myanmar has goes back to the 2008 constitution where the state operated under a power-sharing system between civilian authorities and the military. This arrangement guaranteed the military a significant influence, with reserved parliamentary seats amounting to 25%, control over key ministerial roles such as defence, interior, and border security, as well as one of the vice-president positions.⁴

Currently, headed by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the Junta had assumed power with the promise of conducting fresh elections and re-establishing order. The Junta's ideology is based on the premise of the military being the sole and ultimate guardian of national unity and stability. It champions a form of nationalistic and militarist ideology that places the army's supremacy a space above civilian governance. The stated goals of the Tatmadaw for carrying out the coup included the elimination of election fraud, restoring stability, and upholding national sovereignty.



Image: Senior General Min Aung Hlaing

Fresh elections in Myanmar were avoided by the Tatmadaw not just for personal but several institutional reasons as well.⁵ At the institutional level, the military did exercise much power via the 2008 constitution. Democratic reforms took time to come out of this control. In regards to personal interests, the popularity of NLD in both the 2015 and 2020 elections adversely affected both - the political and economic interests of the military.⁶ This twin aim of power consolidation and domination of the Tatmadaw is best represented by the brutal clearance operation against Rohingya Muslims in 2017.⁷ The constitutional changes in 2008 also added to the structural issues, contributing to an undercurrent for the crystallization of military control through its monopoly on legal and administrative control over Myanmar.⁸



It is these intertwined factors that have collectively underscored the military's reluctance to fulfil its promise of fresh elections.

Seeing the atrocities committed by the coup, the National Unity Government (NUG) formed under coalition consisting of former members of the NLD government along with members from various ethnic minority parties who serve as the opposition for Tatwada. The junta called the NUG a terrorist group in 2021 as they were opposing the military stance.⁹ The NUG's armed wing is called as People's Defence Force (PDF) which includes Local Defense Forces (LDFs) and People's Defense Teams (PaKhaPha/PDTs) who are often referred to as anti-regime groups.¹⁰ The aim of NUG is to seek to restore democracy and it has also gained recognition from the global community and organisations for its cause.

The crackdown carried out by the military has been aimed at eliminating dissent and suppressing the opposition to maintain its dominance. The suppression follows the trend of increasing violence and repression. In the initial phases of the civil war, protests were dealt with non-lethal force.

However, as the demonstrations increased, so did the Junta's aggressive tactics. Apart from the protestors, journalists and other people suspected of supporting the opposition have also been targeted by the security forces. Forced disappearances, detentions, and night-time raids are a common occurrence under the military rule of Tatmadaw. Rubber bullets, short live ammunition, and tear gas were just some of the weapons used against the demonstrators.¹¹

The Tatmadaw possess a wide range of weapons including small arms to more advanced equipment. The Junta has managed to secure arms despite international sanctions. The primary supply lines include the regional allies and black-market transactions. Russia and the PRC are also significant arms providers to the Junta.¹² These states act as a shield against the sanctions, allowing the Junta to continue its atrocities while securing essential resources.¹³ In March 2021, in the aftermath of the coup, the PRC joined Russia in blocking the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) statement criticizing the military takeover in Myanmar. The PRC turned to its veto power every time to stop any strong resolution condemning Junta actions and sanctions against Myanmar, effectively shielding the Junta from international pressure.¹⁴

The Junta poses a significant threat to the civilian population, especially after dragging the country to a civil war. The aggressive tactics used by the soldiers have led to several deaths and injuries since the beginning of the conflict. The most notable incident was the Bago town massacre in April 2021, marking the death of 80 protestors in a single day.¹⁵ The members of the Junta have also been accused of ethnic cleansing through the use of airstrikes and aerial bombardments against these groups. Their operations have led to mass displacement, exacerbating the ongoing humanitarian crisis.¹⁶

REBEL FACTIONS & THEIR OPERATIONS

Several rebel factions continue to fight against the junta. Collectively, they are referred to as Ethnic Armed Organisations or EAOs. The factions have distinct leadership, capacity, and varying degrees of support. The one thing all these groups have in common is to rule out the junta rule and address the various grievances of human rights, political representation, etc.¹⁷ However, post 2021, major ethnic groups are fighting for their causes and at times have aligned together to fight against the common enemy, Tatwada.

Overview of Prominent Factions in the On-going Civil War

1. Arakan Army (AA), Armed Wing of the United League of Arakan



- **Established:** 2009
- **Core Ideology:** Restore the sovereignty of the multi-ethnic Arakanese but after the 2021 Coup, it became a part of the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BTA) which shared a common goal to fight against the military junta and restoration of democracy.¹⁸
- **Prominent Territories:** Rakhine State¹⁹
- **Army Size:** Approximately 30,000 fighters.²⁰
- **Backing/Financing:** Prominently supported by the PRC as it operates near the PRC's border.²¹

2. *Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)*

- **Established:**

- in 1963 as the Palaung National Army,
- in 1976 as the Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLA),
- in 1992 as the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) and,
- in 2009 as the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)



- **Core Ideology:** Autonomy for the Ta'ang (Palaung) people, but after the 2021 Coup, it became a part of 3BA and shared a common goal to fight against the military junta and restoration of democracy.
- **Prominent Territories:** Self-administered zone - Pa Laung,
- **Army Size:** Around 15,000 fighters.²²
- **Backing/Financing:** Allegedly supported by China and local taxation.
- **Provides Training:** Along with the AA and the MNDA, the TNLA provides military training and support to the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA), the Student Armed Force (SAF), and the People's Defense Forces – Local Defense Forces (PDFs-LDFs).²³



3. Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)

Han Speaking Ethnic Group

- **Established:** 1989²⁴
- **Core Ideology:** Autonomy for Kokang region but after the 2021 Coup it became a part of 3BA which shared a common goal to fight against the military junta and restoration of democracy.
- **Prominent territories:** controls the small territory of Kokang in northern Shan State.²⁵ It controlled Shan for about 20 years as a special region of Myanmar.²⁶
- **Army Size:** Approximately 6,000 fighters.²⁷
- **Backing/Financing:** Allegedly supported by China.



The above three make up the “Three Brotherhood Alliance” which launched an offensive called ‘Operation 1027’ in 2023. Operation 1027 is a prominent action by the PDFs and EAOs aligned with the coordinated cause to fight against military oppression which is covered in the subsequent section of the report. Further details are mentioned in the next sections.

4. *Kachin Independence Army (KIA),* *the armed wing of the Kachin Independence Organisation*

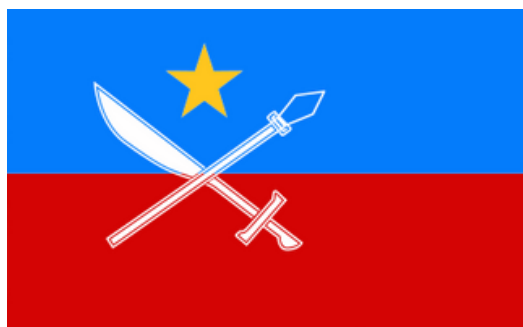


- **Established:** 1962²⁸
- **Core Ideology:** to defend the Kachin ethnic homeland from the Burmese, but after the 2021 Coup it shared a common goal to fight against the military junta and restoration of democracy.
- **Prominent territories:** operates in Kachin State and northern Shan State.
- **Army Size:** Approximately 15,000 fighters.²⁹
- **Backing/Financing:** Primarily via the cross-border trade with China in jade, timber, and gold. Additionally, funds are raised through taxes imposed by the KIA on locals.³⁰



5. *United Wa State Army (UWSA),*

the armed wing of the United Wa State Party



- **Established:** 1989, formed from a merger of the Burma National United Party and the non-communist Wa National Council.³¹
- **Core Ideology:** Unlike many other armed groups, the UWSA does not seek independence or secession. Instead, it focuses on extensive business and trade partnerships with China, generating revenue from drug and weapon manufacturing.
- **Prominent Locations:** Governs the Wa Self-Administered Division (Wa State). Operates in Shan State
- **Army Size:** Approximately 20,000 fighters.³²
- **Backing/Financing:** Strong support from China and funding from various business enterprises.

6. *People's Defense Force (PDF),*

the military wing of the National Unity Government

- **Core Ideology:** Pro-democracy and anti-junta.
- **Prominent Territories:** Various locations across Myanmar.
- **Army Size:** Around 65,000 fighters.
- **Backing/Financing:** Support from the National Unity Government (NUG) and public donations.





Due to the size, strength and equipment of the other ethnic armed organisations like the Chin National Army (CAN) of the Chin National Front (CNF) found assistance under the Chinland Defence Force (CDF),³³ Karenni Army (KA) of the Karenni National Progressive Party found assistance under the Karenni National Defence Force's (KNDF) initial stages.³⁴ Many other parties usually cooperate with the above parties PDF bears ethnic or regional names such as Chinland Defence Force, People's Defence Force (Kalay), and Karenni People's Defence Force (KPDF).³⁵

The CNA, which fights for the rights of the Chin people, closely collaborates with the CDF, a grassroots militia that provides local knowledge and manpower. Similarly, the KA, representing the Karenni ethnic group, works alongside the KNDF, a militia formed to support the KA's efforts. These EAOs and local militias also cooperate with PDF bearing ethnic or regional names such as the CDF, PDF (Kalay), and KPDF. These PDFs are local militias formed in response to the military coup and subsequent crackdowns, aiming to protect their communities and support the larger resistance movement. This collaboration enhances operational capabilities, increases territorial control, strengthens community defence and unifies the resistance against the Myanmar military. By integrating local defence initiatives with larger armed groups, these coalitions create a more cohesive and formidable resistance, crucial in their struggle for autonomy, rights and protection of their communities.

Operation 1027

It is an operation against the Junta launched by the major faction, the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BTA), a coalition of three prominent EAOs: the AA, the TNLA and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). Though the core ideologies of these long-established groups were different, they planned to fight against Tatwadaw who detained and killed thousands of people, committed several human rights abuses and launched airstrikes against the demonstrators. When the offensive was launched, 3BTA mentioned in a statement, “driven by our collective desire to safeguard the lives of civilians, assert our right of self-defence, maintain control of our territory, and respond resolutely to ongoing artillery attacks.

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It was also “dedicated to eradicating the oppressive military dictatorship”, and committed to combating online gambling scam centres on the Myanmar-China border, which involve thousands of foreign workers, many against their will.

This offensive was called as Operation 1027 as it was launched on the 27 of the tenth month in 2023 against military and strategic targets in northern Shan State. This not only ruptured the supply lines of the Myanmar military but also proved their control over critical areas. These attacks hit police outposts, military bases, and infrastructure.

The Tatmadaw faced significant challenges as its operations in the region led to major disruptions. It became patently clear that an alliance had the capacity to complicate large-scale military actions and draw attention to demands for autonomy and ethnic rights. The primary objective was to disrupt the Myanmar military’s supply lines and assert control over critical areas. The operation involved a series of coordinated attacks on police outposts, military bases, and infrastructure, causing significant disruptions to the Tatmadaw’s operations in the region.³⁷ The operation took the junta army by surprise and resulted in a brutal and massive crackdown on these factions.

Moreover, there have been several instances of the PRC’s support to the 3BHA, with some analysts claiming that the operation would not have been a success without the neighbour’s help. China’s role is nuanced. While it officially maintains a narrative of non-interference, China has provided support to these groups indirectly in economic and logistical terms. For instance, This stems from China’s strategy to safeguard its interests in the region which manifests itself as the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Thus, the Three Brotherhood Alliance poses not only a significant military challenge for the junta but also a complex geopolitical dance with regional actors getting involved.

THE PRC'S INVOLVEMENT & INVESTMENTS

The PRC's engagement with Myanmar spans decades, characterized by strategic geopolitical interests, economic cooperation, and military ties. With a shared border spanning over 2,000 km, the PRC's initial interests were predominantly focused on advancing its strategic ambitions through economic investments and fostering diplomatic relations with Myanmar's military Junta.³⁸ This relationship, dating back to the 1960s provided the PRC with an understanding of Myanmar's position in the world, which eventually led to its crucial diplomatic support and military aid during Myanmar's periods of international isolation. The actual transition of the PRC to support not just the military in Myanmar but also the government emerged in 2011 as the country transitioned to an elected civilian government.³⁹ The PRC's involvement in Myanmar is multifaceted, encompassing economic investments and strategic alliances. Beijing's primary interests lie in advancing stability along its border and protecting its significant investments in Myanmar, including infrastructure projects under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which eventually turned up as a debt-trap play where significant ports and investments came under the guise of PRC's changing business rules and investment strategies.⁴⁰ However, the PRC supported both the military junta and the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) indirectly and sometimes directly in negotiations to protect its investments and borders.

Economic interests of the PRC in Myanmar

The PRC has become Myanmar's largest trading partner and investor, significantly influencing its economic landscape. According to WITS data (2023), the PRC secures the first spot in Myanmar's largest exports and imports in trade which is estimated to be 29-30%.⁴¹ The PRC's BRI has led to several major infrastructure projects in Myanmar which were aimed at enhancing connectivity and promoting economic development.

However, it led to a massive debt trap before the coup i.e. around 40% of total Myanmar's debt and this would have grown further with more BRI-led and non-BRI projects.⁴²

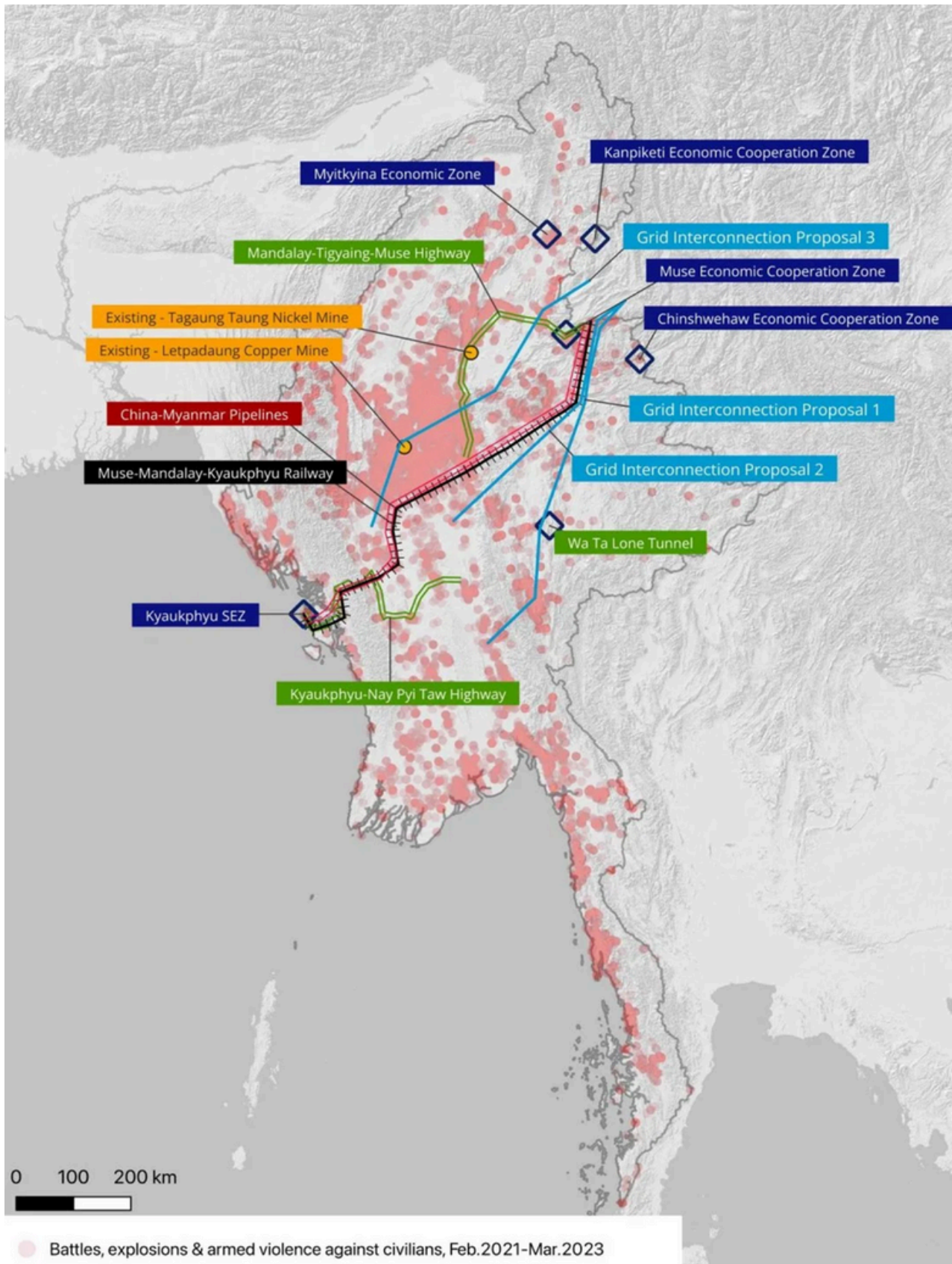
It is clear that with Myanmar's proximity to the Indian Ocean, the PRC wanted to protect its interests and claim stakes over various infrastructure and areas once developed. For instance, the deep-water port in Kyaukphyu, which is part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor was in a trap. Due to criticisms that the PRC planned to take an 85% stake in the port, Myanmar's stake was revised to 30% and the rest with the PRC's share which was said to be a jointly developed initiative by the PRC.⁴³ Even the PRC's aggressive interests in the Coco Islands are quite concerning as it would be a security issue for India as it has upgraded radar or naval facilities.⁴⁴

Check out the map of the PRC's projects in Myanmar in the next page

This illustrative map shows that the PRC has extensively invested in Myanmar's economic zones or infrastructural projects despite the ethnic tensions or issues with Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar even before the 2021 coup. Hence, Beijing does not want to harm the investments so it developed a dual strategy i.e. supporting both – the Junta by backing up Myanmar in the United Nations Security Council when Myanmar question is raised and supporting the EAOs with arms, ammunition, uniforms etc.

Myanmar's abundant natural resources are also targeted by the PRC, not just its infrastructure. The PRC takes particular interest in jade, timber, oil and minerals. However, projects like the Letpadaung copper mine have drawn criticism for environmental and social impacts but highlight the PRC's economic interests in Myanmar's resource-rich regions. The Letpadaung project, operated by Chinese state-owned enterprises, has faced local resistance due to land acquisition issues and environmental degradation concerns, showcasing the complex dynamics of the Chinese investments in Myanmar's natural resource sectors.

Fig. 1 Chinese undertaken projects in Myanmar



Source: Inclusive Development.

The PRC's Dual Interests

The PRC has a significant influence in Myanmar, particularly in key economic areas and regions controlled by EAOs. The PRC's investments often seem to be strategically located in areas held by EAOs, such as the northern regions of Myanmar near the PRC border. It appears that the PRC is aiming to support the EAOs, which have a strong presence in this region compared to the military, in order to secure its borders. Therefore, the PRC supports the UWSA and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), controlling the northern borders of Myanmar and the southern borders of the PRC. This assistance includes economic aid, military equipment, and political backing, enhancing their operational capacities and territorial control. This dual strategy aims to ensure that China retains influence regardless of which side prevails. This can be simplified as, the PRC support-

a.) Support for the Junta



The PRC has provided diplomatic backing to the junta in international forums, often blocking or softening resolutions critical of the military regime at the United Nations. Additionally, there have been reports of Chinese arms sales to the Tatmadaw, although Beijing officially denies direct military support. ⁴⁵

B.) Engagement with EAOs

The PRC has longstanding ties with several EAOs operating along its border, such as the UWSA and the KIA. These groups control significant territory in northern Myanmar and have received various forms of support from the PRC, including economic aid and political backing. Examples of Support:

- **United WA State Army (UWSA)**: The PRC has historically supported the UWSA with military training, equipment, and economic assistance, contributing to their ability to control territory along the Myanmar-China Border.⁴⁶
- **Kachin Independence Army (KIA)**: Similarly, the KIA has received political support and occasional military assistance from the PRC, impacting their operational capabilities in northern Myanmar. Not just aftermath of the 2021 coup, but even in 2018, the Chinese-made drones for reconnaissance was sold to KIA. They are commercial drones re-engineered for military operations, denoting the continuous transfer of Chinese weaponry to the KIA and bettering operational capability. The group maintains a wary relationship with the PRC, leveraging their geographical proximity for restricted support, but not completely aligning with the state politically.⁴⁷

This dual engagement allows the PRC to play a pivotal role in mediation efforts and power dynamics within Myanmar. For instance, Beijing has engaged in mediation efforts with EAOs and facilitated dialogues and negotiations between Myanmar's government and EAOs such as the UWSA and the KIA. These efforts have aimed at reducing tensions, promoting ceasefires, and maintaining stability along the Myanmar-China border. The Western countries criticized Myanmar's system and the support it received from the PRC. In response, the PRC openly backed Myanmar's right to determine its own path and urged the international community to respect Myanmar's sovereignty. Additionally, Beijing holds significant influence over Myanmar's decision-making processes.⁴⁸

Military & Diplomatic Support

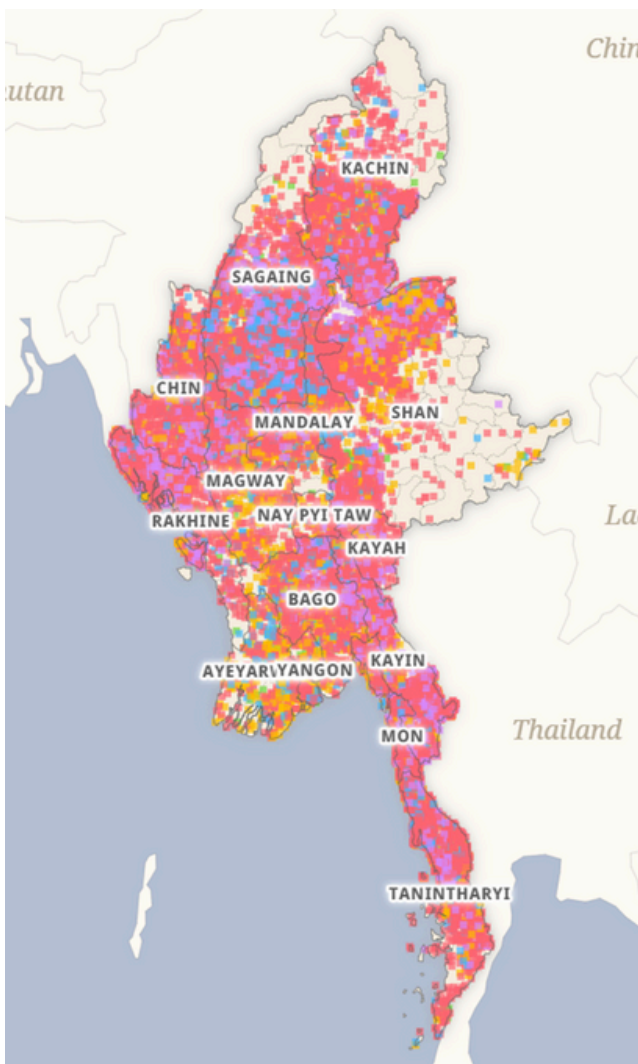
The PRC remains a significant supplier of military equipment to Myanmar, encompassing small arms, armoured vehicles and aircraft. This military support bolsters Myanmar's defence capabilities amidst internal conflicts and enhances bilateral security cooperation. The PRC's military aid to Myanmar has included training programs for Tatmadaw personnel and joint military exercises, reinforcing strategic ties between the two countries. Recent joint military exercises have further strengthened bilateral security cooperation. For example, joint military exercises between China and Myanmar have been conducted periodically, enhancing tactical coordination and interoperability. In May 2017, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted its inaugural joint exercises with the Myanmar Navy, encompassing communications and search and rescue operations.⁴⁹ This marked a significant milestone as Chinese naval vessels visited Myanmar, signalling an important step in PRC's strategic naval presence extending into the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean.

Furthermore, training programs for Tatmadaw personnel have also been provided, contributing to Myanmar's military preparedness and capabilities. Chinese military training programs for Tatmadaw personnel often involve tactical training, equipment operation, and strategic planning, conducted in various military facilities within Myanmar.⁵⁰ The PRC's engagement with Myanmar includes joint border security initiatives to counter cross-border threats, manage illicit activities, and maintain stability along the shared frontier. This cooperation helps safeguard trade routes and ensures stability in border regions crucial to both countries' security interests. Moreover, the India-Myanmar-China tri-junction, known as the Diphu Pass on the McMahon Line holds another significant strategic importance for regional security.⁵¹

CURRENT SITUATION IN MYANMAR

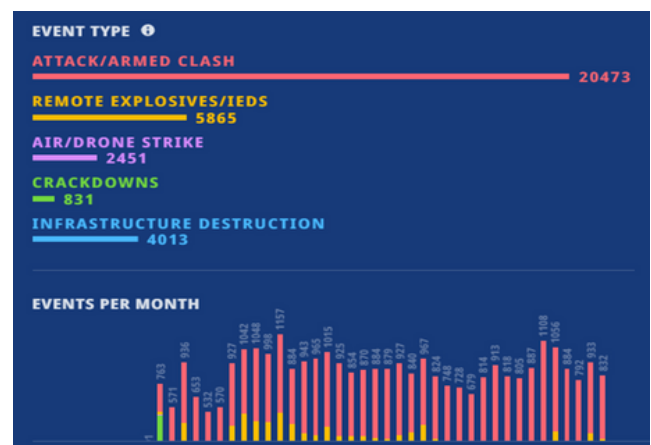
The Myanmar Civil War has fragmented the country into zones controlled by the Tatmadaw, ethnic armed groups, and civilian resistance forces. The territorial control map illustrates the complex dynamics of the conflict, highlighting areas of control and contested zones:

Fig. 2: Current Situation of civil unrest in Myanmar



Source: IISS.

Fig. 3: Events per month from March 2021 to April 2024



Source: IISS.

The map indicates shifting territorial dynamics and the influence of various actors in Myanmar’s evolving conflict landscape, providing a visual representation of control zones and conflict intensities.

Comparing the current situation to the pre-coup period reveals several key changes as:

- **Increased EAO Control:** Ethnic armed groups have expanded significantly even in those territories where the major EAOs did not have significant hold. The operations, protests and guerrilla warfare tactics are adopted to weaken Tatmadaw.⁵²
- **Urban Resistance:** Unlike previous conflicts, urban areas have become significant battlegrounds, with resistance groups conducting guerrilla warfare and targeting key military installations.⁵³
- **International Dynamics:** The role of international actors, particularly the PRC's presence influencing both military strategies and diplomatic efforts.⁵⁴

Thus, the PRC has positioned itself as a significant factor influencing Myanmar's internal dynamics. The control map illustrates the fragmented nature of the conflict, with various factions vying for territorial control amidst ongoing violence and humanitarian crises.

Understanding the PRC's role requires continuous monitoring of its interactions with Myanmar's military junta, ethnic armed organisations, and regional stakeholders.

THE PRC'S INFLUENCE IN MYANMAR AFFECTING INDIAN INTERESTS

The PRC's involvement and responses are another complicating factor in the ongoing civil war. Beijing has long been accused of providing support to insurgent groups in Northeast India as a way of maintaining India strategically off-balance.⁵⁵ The PRC has strategically exploited the insecurity among tribal communities along the India-Myanmar border by leveraging the region's instability and the grievances of ethnic groups; by employing a multifaceted strategy involving support for insurgent groups, fostering narcoterrorism, economic exploitation, creating dependency and diplomatic manoeuvring. These actions collectively contribute to sustaining the instability in the region, which serves the PRC's strategic interests by keeping its regional rivals preoccupied and ensuring its influence over critical border areas.

There have been various instances where the PRC have been providing support to various insurgent groups operating in the region. By backing these groups, the PRC aims to create and sustain instability along the border, which serves to distract and tie down Indian and Myanmar military resources. This support can manifest in the form of weapons, training, or logistical aid, thereby empowering these insurgent groups to sustain their activities and prolong the conflict.⁵⁶

Furthermore, the region is notorious for poppy cultivation and the drug trade, with significant involvement from cross-border drug cartels and insurgent groups. China, through its historical connections and influence in the Golden Triangle (a region overlapping Myanmar, Laos and Thailand), may have indirect roles in facilitating the narcotics trade. This trade funds insurgent activities and further destabilizes the region, creating a cycle of violence and economic dependence on illicit activities.⁵⁷



Also, as mentioned before, PRC has been aggressively expanding its economic footprint in Myanmar through projects related to BRI. These projects often involve infrastructure development in border regions, which can be perceived as efforts to gain strategic footholds. By offering economic incentives and development projects, China attempts to gain the loyalty and cooperation of local communities and insurgent groups, further embedding its influence in the region.



By providing support to insurgent groups and fostering illicit economies, China ensures that these groups remain dependent on external support for their operations. This dependency can be used as leverage to influence the actions and decisions of these groups, steering them in directions favourable to Chinese interests. This manipulation ensures that China maintains a degree of control over the instability in the region. ⁵⁸

Examples of Chinese Support to Insurgent Groups and Resulting Instability:

- **Support to United Wa State Army (UWSA):** The UWSA, one of the largest EAOs in Myanmar, has been receiving tremendous support from the PRC. This support encompasses the provision of weapons and equipment, training, and financial assistance. Similarly, the UWSA has been offering shelter and support for Indian rebel groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in Myanmar. These Indian insurgents have used bases in UWSA controlled territories to launch attacks against Indian security forces, thereby exacerbating instability along the Indo-Myanmar border.⁵⁹
- **Collaboration with Arakan Army (AA):** Another major insurgent force in Myanmar that has been accused of receiving PRC's support is the AA. Reports indicate that the AA has supplied Chinese weapons to Indian insurgent groups such as the People's Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA-M). Such weapons have been employed in numerous attacks on Indian Territory and have escalated violence and turbulence in the north-eastern region of India. For instance, in October 2023, Indian security forces intercepted a large cache of weapons intended for these insurgent groups, highlighting the ongoing arms trafficking network supported by the PRC's interests.⁶⁰

In the midst of the persistent turmoil in Myanmar, there is a growing concern that Beijing may intensify its support for certain groups to exert influence on New Delhi. This has the potential to exacerbate the instability along the Indo-Myanmar border, prompting India to escalate its military deployments and enhance intelligence capabilities in the region.

INDIA'S STRATEGIC OPTIONS

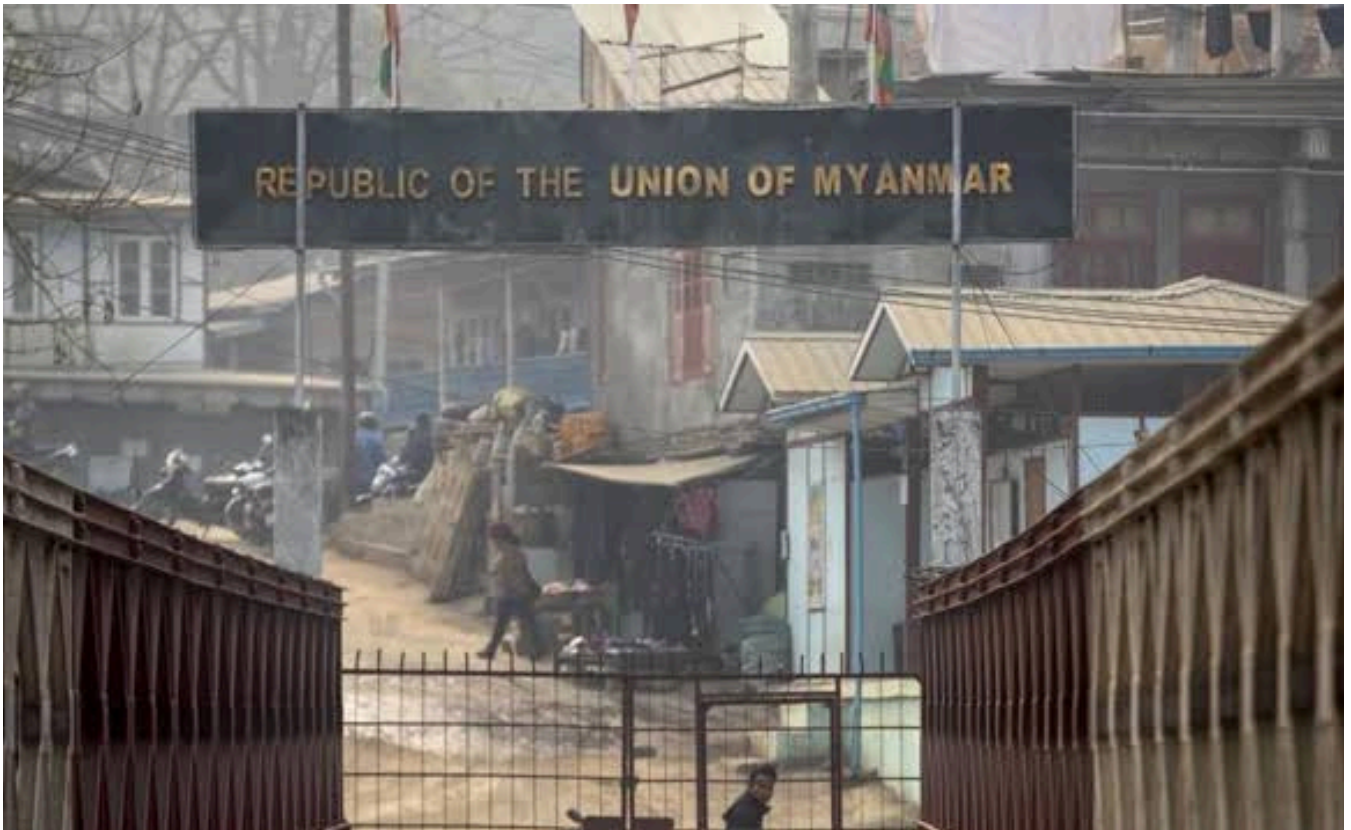
In response to the above concerns, India needs to enhance diplomacy by engaging effectively with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members to have a coordinated approach to the Myanmar crisis. Through ASEAN, India can exert diplomatic pressure to politically resolve the Myanmar conflict by agreeing to a ceasefire and peace talks among all the stakeholders. This diplomatic approach could help in making Myanmar more stable which is in the interest of India's security.

India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has highlighted India's security concerns and the stability of the region following the ongoing civil war in Myanmar. He highlighted the government's commitment to ensure security in the frontier areas, especially the Indo-Myanmar border region. He further underlined that it is crucial to build a fence along the Indo-Myanmar border, to prevent illegal crossings and safeguard Indian territory from potential spillover effects of the conflict, which could include insurgent movements and illicit activities that endanger the security of India's northeastern states.⁶¹

Moreover, during a meeting with Myanmar's Junta leader Than Swe in Bangkok in July 2023, Jaishankar expressed India's concerns regarding recent tensions on the borders and the necessity of peace and stability. India's internal security and its strategic interest in the region are threatened by the situation in Myanmar to which he underlined that both nations should find ways to address these problems.⁶²

Furthermore, in March this year, Jaishankar's interaction with the ASEAN special envoy on Myanmar also conveyed India's stand for ASEAN activities on the peaceful resolution of the situation in Myanmar. He reaffirmed the need for a peaceful resolution and the restoration of democracy in Myanmar, which places India's position in tandem with the larger regional and global response to the crisis. This approach reflects India's strategy of balancing immediate security needs with long-term regional stability.⁶³

Enhancing Military & Humanitarian Efforts



In terms of military strategy, setting up an effective surveillance network and integrating better intelligence cooperation with the Myanmar government and all the neighbouring countries would be critical. Such measures would aid in tracking the activities of the insurgents and discouraging any cross-border threats. The establishment of rapid response groups on the border with the latest equipment and mobility would significantly strengthen Indian defence security.

Furthermore, India along with other friendly nations can increase its assistance in humanitarian aid to Myanmar, especially to the areas that are most affected by conflicts. Providing medical aid, food supplies, and other essential services could help win the goodwill of local populations and counteract the influence of insurgent groups. This would not only help the people of the regions affected by conflict but would also create a positive sentiment towards the government and other stakeholders in the long run.

What lies in the Future?

Over the next two to three months Myanmar is likely to plunge into a crucial phase of the civil war which has unmistakable bearing on the stability of the South Asian region, particularly regarding India's geopolitical concerns. Despite some comprehensible advances in the recent operations by anti-Junta forces composed of the EAOs, and the NUG, a complete triumph is yet to be achieved. If the Junta loses more ground to the various ethnic armed groups and the pro-democracy forces, the country may turn into a chaotic battleground dominated by multiple warring factions. This scenario directly threatens Indian investments and borders, which cannot be disregarded.

Threat to Indian Investments

The instability in Myanmar poses a risk to the strategic multi-billion-dollar Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project funded by India, which would involve the construction of a deep sea port at Sittwe. Such projects are significant for India's Act East Policy and for bolstering connectivity to the northeastern region of India. An unstable Myanmar where there is no central government could pose problems to the construction and operations, thus leading to heavy losses and strategic setbacks for India.⁶⁴

India has been engaged in various developmental projects in Myanmar seeking to improve connection, transport and socioeconomic investment opportunities in both nations. These efforts became apparent in the strategic interests of India in the region, especially with the ongoing civil unrest. Pointed out specifically below are; some projects and aids indicative of Indian commitment towards nurturing mutualism and stability within the regional countries as well as a more rounded development policy.

Projects undertaken by India in Myanmar

Check out the Projects undertaken by India in Myanmar in the next page

So, these investments could be threatened and economic cooperation could be hampered due to delays and the other rising tensions in India with Myanmar's civil war in terms of insurgencies and the abrogation of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) with Myanmar to maintain the internal security of India.⁶⁵ FMR was first launched in 2018 for the ease of movement in both countries.⁶⁶

The escalating insurgent activities in Myanmar may well expand its effects on India's north-eastern states – a region where separatist factions have found support and sanctuary. The PRC has been reported to support different insurgent groups in Northeast India; a perspective that might be bolstered given the situation in Myanmar today. This would create a new front on the Indo-Myanmar border which would pose a security issue to India.⁶⁷ The border region could turn into a focal area of insurgent activities and can endanger both civilian populations and military personnel deterring not only Indian infrastructure investments but also other forms of economic activities throughout the region.⁶⁸

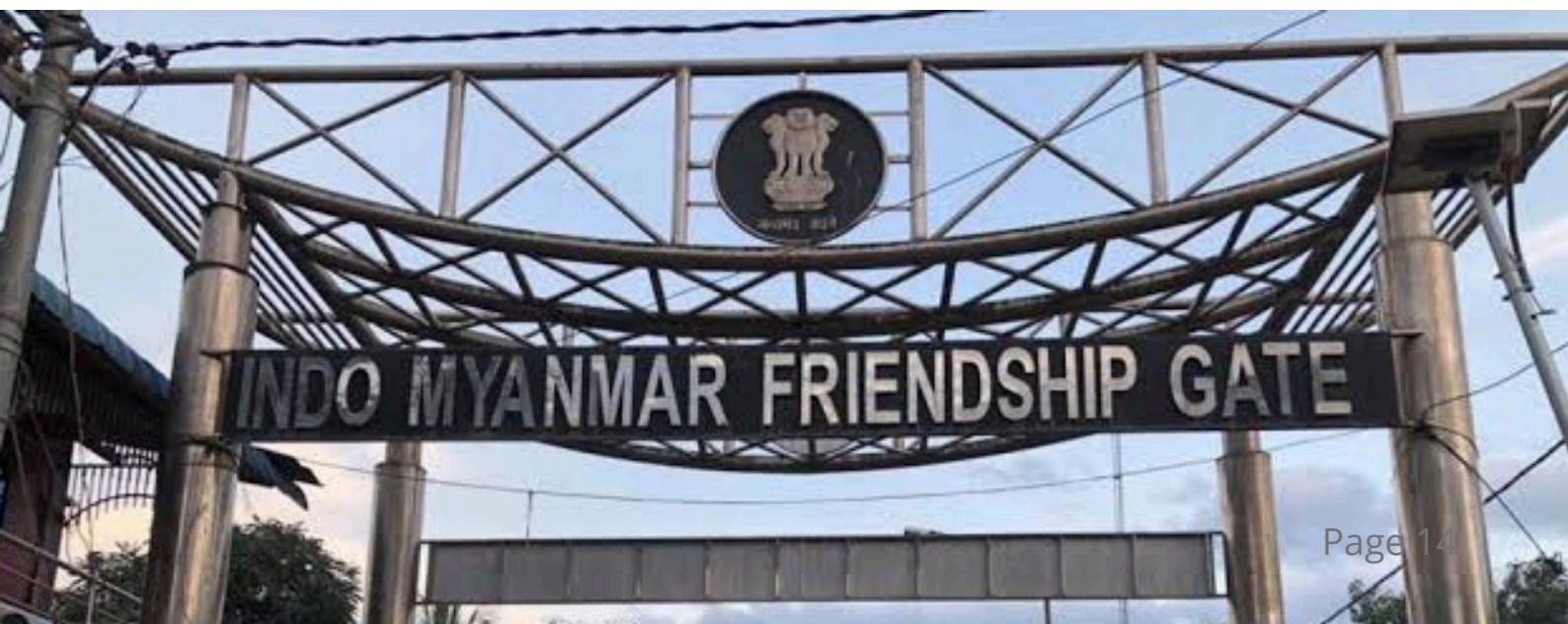


Table 1: Projects undertaken by India in Myanmar

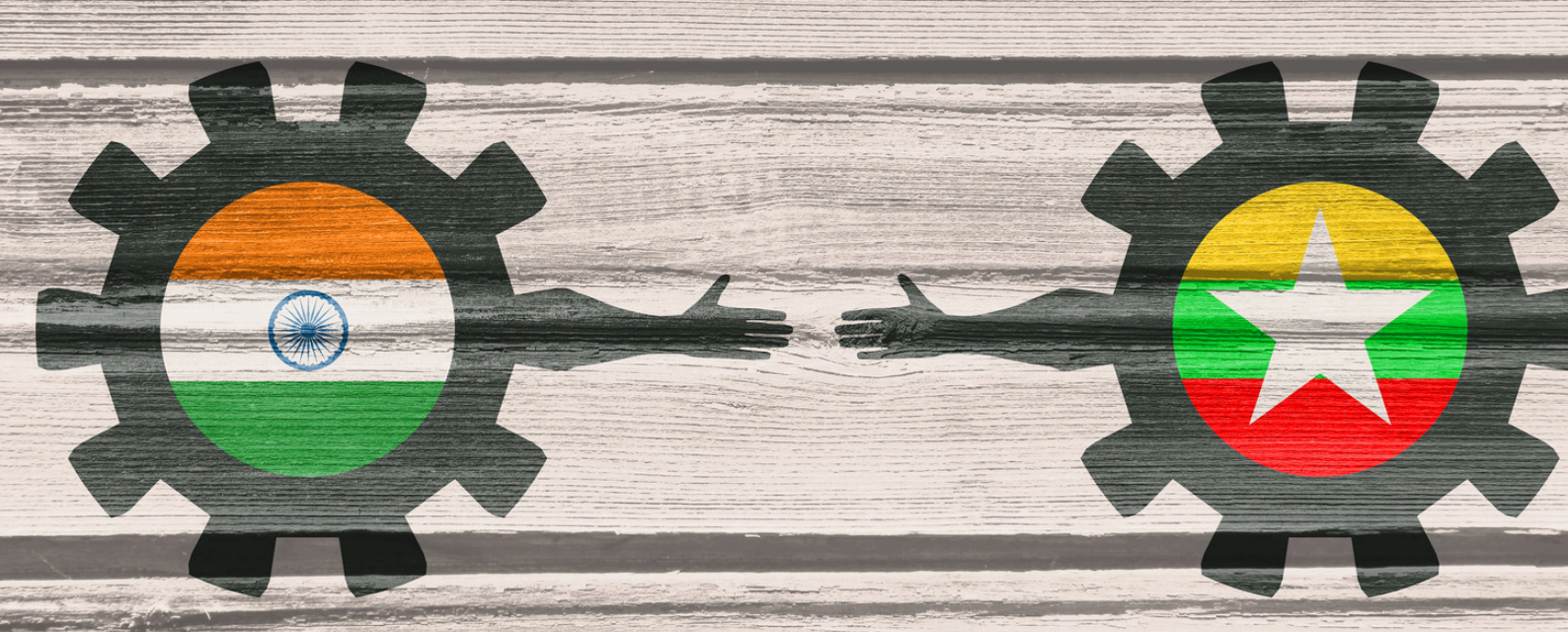
Project/Aid	Description of the Project	Status
Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project	Seeks to establish a multi-modal transport transit in Myanmar with a deep-sea port at Sittwe.	Ongoing
India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway	The project consisted of constructing a 1,360-km highway that sought to improve land route access between India, Myanmar and Thailand.	Ongoing
Border Area Development Programme (BADP)	Engaged in the provision of infrastructure facilities and welfare services to the border regions of Myanmar.	Ongoing
Rhi-Tiddim Road	A road project that enhances connectivity in Myanmar's Chin state, improving access to remote areas.	Ongoing
Advanced Center for Agricultural Research and Education (ACARE)	A partnership project that seeks to promote improvement in agricultural research and education in Myanmar.	Completed
Upgradation of the Yangon Children's Hospital and Sittwe General Hospital	Infrastructure and medical equipment improvements to these key healthcare facilities.	Completed

Source: ORF.

Potential Strategic & Diplomatic Responses

India requires a blend of strategies to offset these threats. An immediate measure that could be taken would be to expedite the construction of the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. Adopted in a ministerial-level meeting in 2002, the project aims at developing a road corridor of 1,400 km connecting Moreh in India, through Myanmar, to Mae Sot in Thailand. India has invested approximately USD 1.4 billion in this project. It was reported that the construction progress is estimated to be at 70% by mid-2023.⁶⁹ This highway plays a significant role in improving regional integration, economic intercourse, and coordination; however, its construction has been limited due to conflict and political unrest in Myanmar. So, the Junta's hold in a few regions is declining due to the increasing hold of the EAOs especially under the Three Brotherhood Alliance in a few regions. Especially, the reports show that the Arakan Army's dominant presence in Rakhine and the Chin States is jeopardizing the Indian Investment.⁷⁰





Infrastructural development transcends into the economic interconnectivity in the region which can aid in stabilizing the border areas by fostering economic development and cooperation.⁷¹ Moreover, it is necessary to strengthen diplomatic activities for cooperation with all stakeholders in Myanmar. India could try to find a balance between the two groups in order to establish some fragment of stability that would ensure the protection of its economic stakes.⁷²

The northeastern states of India, particularly those bordering Myanmar – a region with a porous and mountainous border – may be prone to cross-border violence and insurgent activity. Historically, groups like the ULFA and the NSCN have found refuge in Myanmar.⁷³ These groups may intensify their operations in India's northeast if renewed conflict ensues in Myanmar.

For instance, in August 2015, the NSCN- Khaplang (NSCN-K) attacked an Indian army tender in Manipur, which left 18 soldiers dead, it was one of the deadliest incidents of attacks on the Indian forces by the insurgents.⁷⁴ Likewise, ULFA and NSCN-K militants targeted Indian Army camps in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland in early August 2022 before the 75th Independence Day, further escalating the insecurity in the region.⁷⁵ Also, in February 2024, 10 coal miners were kidnapped by militants belonging to both ULFA (Independent) and NSCN in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh indicating that these groups remain an active menace to stability in the area.⁷⁶

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INDIA'S DIPLOMATIC OUTREACH (FEB-MAY)

2024

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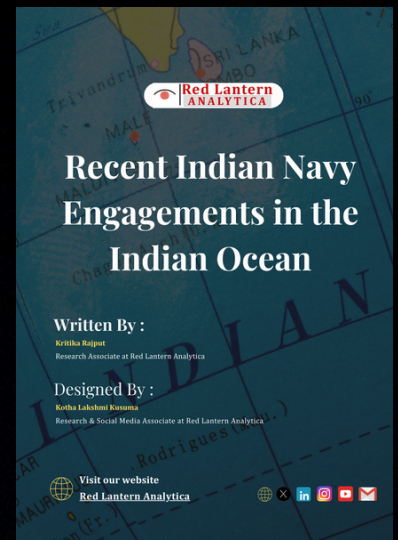
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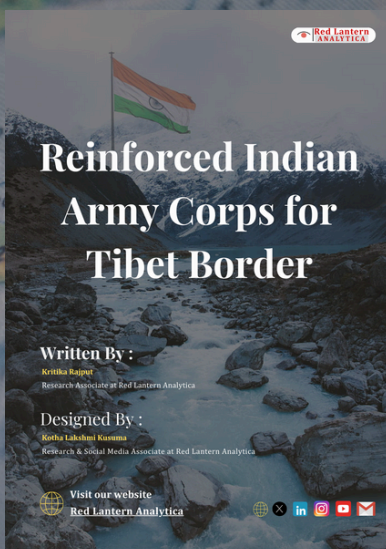
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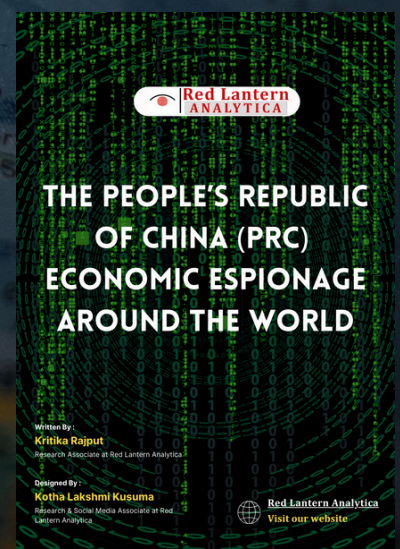
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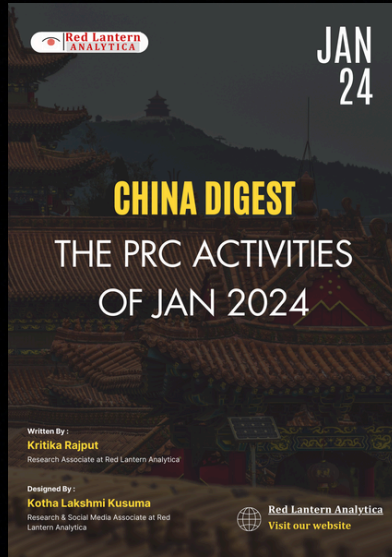
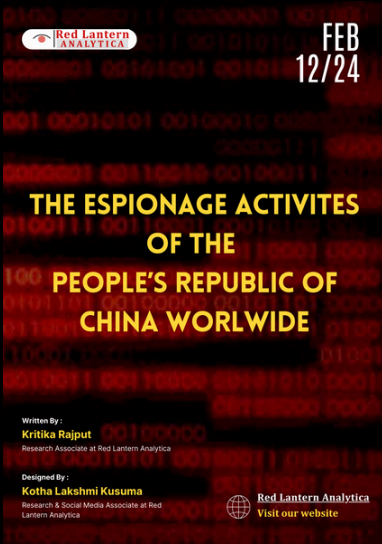
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