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## India's Myanmar Dilemma: Policy Challenges and Choices

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### SYNOPSIS

*India has two key interests in relation to Myanmar. The first is the ongoing insurgency in its northeast and the second is the growing influence of China within Myanmar. The February 2021 military takeover in Myanmar potentially impacts both these interests and presents Indian policymakers with certain tough policy choices.*

### COMMENTARY

The Myanmar military's takeover of power in February 2021 has posed challenging choices for countries in the region. India's dilemma is particularly acute: given that it shares a porous and restive land border with Myanmar, India's core security concerns within its own borderlands are entangled in domestic developments within Myanmar. Beyond anxieties over its borderlands, broader concerns about China's presence in Myanmar also contribute to India's dilemma in responding to the events of February 2021 in Myanmar. This paper will outline these two key considerations driving Indian policy choices towards Myanmar presently.

### India's Northeast and Insurgency: Border Crossings

There has been a long history of insurgency in India's northeast since Indian independence. Four Indian states — Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh — border Myanmar and presently the only active insurgency along this border is in Manipur. The Indian government is in ongoing talks with several insurgent groups representing various Naga tribes to agree on a peace deal, with both sides having agreed to a ceasefire while talks are under way. However, certain splinter factions as

well as outfits such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (Independent) and the Peoples Liberation Army of Manipur continue to carry out attacks on Indian soil and attempt to escape reprisals by seeking refuge across the border in Myanmar.

India's growing cooperation with the Myanmar military before the February 2021 takeover of power had resulted in the latter limiting refuge to these Indian insurgent groups within Myanmar. There were also reports of Indian security forces conducting "hot pursuit" across the border against these insurgents with the sanction of the Myanmar military. The military takeover in Myanmar, however, presents India with a dilemma in this matter.

On the one hand, India wants to continue these joint efforts with the Myanmar military against Indian insurgents seeking refuge in Myanmar and therefore there is a huge incentive to not publicly criticise the military takeover or even pressure the regime into taking concrete steps towards a return to democracy in the country. India has publicly expressed its interest in seeing Myanmar's return to democracy and has endorsed ASEAN's initiative on Myanmar but has not pushed either of these two public declarations too strongly. India's dependence on Myanmar's military to deny refuge to Indian insurgent groups is a strong driving force for India's current approach towards the ruling regime in Myanmar and distinguishes it from the relatively more assertive ASEAN approach towards the Myanmar military.

On the other hand, several analysts, both within and outside India, increasingly have pointed out the potentially decreasing effectiveness of this approach for Indian interests. They point to the Tatmadaw's decreasing capacity to exercise effective control in the border areas, especially as armed groups in the country, such as the Chin National Front, have allied with the ousted National League for Democracy (NLD) in resisting Myanmar's military government. In the short term, India might be getting very little in exchange for not pushing the military regime harder to work towards restoring democracy. For some observers, India should revisit its visible support for the Myanmar military if Indian insurgent groups continue to seek refuge in as well as use Myanmar as a staging post to carry out attacks against security forces within India. In the longer term, they argue, India should hedge its options in Myanmar by reaching out to the National Unity Government (NUG), comprised mainly of the NLD and various ethnic insurgent groups, and pushing harder for a return to democracy. This more balanced approach would allow India more strategic space to deal with either the NUG returning to power in Myanmar or a long-drawn-out confrontation between the military and the NUG. In this analysis, the key is to find the right amount of leverage within Myanmar to prevent Indian insurgent groups from using border areas as refuge or even obtaining arms from groups within Myanmar.

### **The Irrawaddy Imperative: China's Influence**

China's growing presence and influence in Myanmar has been a perennial source of concern for Indian policymakers. The recent military takeover and strong international condemnation that followed has increasingly isolated the current regime in Myanmar. ASEAN, which has traditionally not pushed too strongly on domestic developments within its member states, has expressed its displeasure at the lack of progress within Myanmar towards cessation of conflict and the absence of a dialogue process with the NUG. This increasing isolation, viewed from New Delhi, increases the regime's

dependence on China, which, while not publicly backing the military's attacks against protesters, is still viewed as the Tatmadaw's main benefactor.



Difficult transport infrastructure in India's northeast has traditionally been a strategic handicap for India's geostrategic interests along its border with Myanmar. *Photo by Mayur More on Unsplash.*(<https://unsplash.com/photos/Qw63qYaSoSQ>)

India is in fact attempting to pursue a path similar to China's in Myanmar. Like China, India has maintained cordial relations with the military regime while trying to ensure that the NUG's possible return to power at some point will not affect New Delhi's interests too significantly. Indian requests to meet Daw Aung San Suu Kyi have been rebuffed by the Tatmadaw but India's foreign secretary apparently was allowed to meet some members of the NLD on his recent visit to Myanmar in December 2021. Indian policymakers are aware of the support that China provides to various ethnic insurgency groups in Myanmar and the resulting influence that China gains within Myanmar, particularly, in terms of leverage vis-à-vis the Tatmadaw.

In this context, many analysts view recent developments in Myanmar as an opportunity for India to secure its interests by cultivating ethnic insurgent groups in Myanmar that operate between the India-Myanmar border (IMB) and the Irrawaddy River. This area, from the IMB to the Irrawaddy, is viewed by some Indian strategic analysts as a key space for India to push back against increasing Chinese influence to secure Indian interests in Myanmar. India's key infrastructural connectivity projects within Myanmar such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway are both located predominantly between the IMB and the Irrawaddy. Increasingly, securing Indian interests within this space may require cultivating insurgent groups in Myanmar east of the Irrawaddy, while at the same time remaining one of a dwindling number of countries still engaged with the Tatmadaw.

### **Adjusting the "Twin-Track" Approach**

Indian policymakers decided to continue their prior close engagement with the Tatmadaw even in the aftermath of the military takeover in February 2021 as they perceived that such an approach would continue to further New Delhi's interests, both

in terms of managing the insurgency in India's northeast as well as offering an alternative to growing Chinese influence in Myanmar. More recently, however, there are signs that India is looking to balance this approach by trying to reach out to members of the NLD. There have been calls for Indian policymakers to go even further by cultivating and possibly leveraging on ethnic insurgent groups operating between the IMB and the Irrawaddy to safeguard Indian interests in this space. India's leverage in Myanmar, in such an eventuality, would be much improved as it seeks to construct a more effective twin-track approach towards its neighbour.

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