

POLITICAL REFLECTION MAGAZINE

July • August • September • 2022

ISSN: 2042-888X

Vol. VIII • No. II

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Ensure A Better Post-
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Cause* adhered to in the
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VOL. 8 - NO. 3

POLITICAL REFLECTION

JULY
AUGUST
SEPTEMBER
2022

e-ISSN: 2042-888X

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An Examination of India-Myanmar Security Cooperation following Military Coup in Myanmar

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On the morning of 1st February 2021, when the world was still grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar military declared a state of emergency, deposed the elected members of the country's ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and transferred power to the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar Defence Services, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. It declared the results of the general elections invalid and intended to hold a new election at the end of the state of emergency. In the event of such an announcement, it created a stalemate between the pro-democracy forces and the military junta, with increasing communities taking up arms to protect themselves from the relentless campaign of military violence. Similarly, resistance forces like the Peoples' Defence Forces (PDF) began to emerge to oppose the junta, with battles occurring in areas that were peaceful in the past.

Amid the ongoing domestic political situation in Myanmar, India finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place regarding the Tatmadaw's actions. Myanmar occupies a pivotal position in New Delhi's geostrategic calculation in building an array of linkages via its Act-East policy towards Southeast Asia and beyond. Similarly, the location of Myanmar at the cusp of South Asia and Southeast Asia gives New Delhi a strategic asset in keeping China and its increasing influence in Southeast Asia and beyond at bay. Because of the multi-facet significance of Myanmar in India's geostrategic calculation, India has used the platform to raise issues of mutual importance for the all-round development of the bilateral relationship. One such significant issue between the two nations is the (in)security situation along the India-Myanmar border that has somehow hampered the process of developing a cognitive relationship between the two nations to date. The strategic landscape bordering India and Myanmar constitutes an arc of troubled states characterised by indigenous uprisings with terrorism as their defining feature (Chellaney, 2010: 158). The region almost entirely runs along with militancy-affected areas, with cross-border links. It uses violence and terror threats, radicalisation, spillover phenomena, and arms smuggling as available advantages to supplementing its growth and terror intensification. Many of the armed militant groups in the region exploit inextricable factors like cross-border linkages and ethnic ties to their advantage in pushing the threat threshold to a new height. Although New Delhi has handled the security situation on a fair note by adopting a multi-

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pronged strategy, however, with the evolving transformation of world politics in every sector, including politics and security, it has made hard for one state to counter the threats, particularly when the threats have widened in scope, content and direction (Lutz & Lutz, 2013: 3, Wilkinson, 2007: 61). India and Myanmar are no exception. In this regard, India has many times raised the common challenges of combating (in) security in the region with Myanmar to remain sensitive to each other's strategic interests and concerns and prevent instability in contagious areas for the all-around development of bilateral relations. Operation Golden Bird of 1995 and the Hot Pursuit operation of 2015 depict a case of successful security cooperation between the two nations in bringing stability and peace to the region. Similarly, the brief stint of the democratically led government of Aung Sang Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy further cemented the cooperation opportunities between the two nations in the realm of the overall development of the bilateral relationship. However, the recent military coup in Myanmar has brought a major fillip in cooperation opportunities between the two nations. The coup posed a challenge to the biggest democracy in the region, India, to devise a new policy toward Myanmar. This is for the simple reason that, unlike western countries, which have initiated various economic and travel sanctions on the military junta and its financial institutions, India cannot adopt such a policy. The reason is very simple. For starters, Myanmar serves as a gateway for India and its Act East programme to connect with Southeast Asia and beyond. Second, with Myanmar as its ally, India can offset Chinese dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. Thirdly, the economic investment that New Delhi has put into Myanmar, like the Kaladan Multimodal Project, the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, and the development of Myanmar's Sittwe port, enables India to engage with the junta. And lastly, the security relationship with Myanmar forms a key part of India's counter-terror strategy against the militants in the border region of Northeast India. The various joint security actions between India and Myanmar in the last ten years saw a major decrease in militant activity along the border. Operations like Sunshine 1 and 2 have further increased the level of trust between the two nations in their fight against militants and to secure their national security interests (Bhalla, 2019). However, with the military coup in place and subsequent insecurity in the restive states bordering Northeast India, both the refugee influx and active militant groups may take their chances in deteriorating the region's security environment. The recent attack on 46 Asam Rifles, which caused seven deaths, including the Commandant, brings evidence to India's growing security apprehensions as the group behind the attack used Myanmar as its hideout sanctuary. As such, with the security interests at play, New Delhi cannot back the sanctions and tough rhetoric of the West.

Such reasons, therefore, give New Delhi no easy choice but to recognise the need for a trade-off vis-a-vis military rule in Myanmar and to continue with its policy of non-interference without taking any steps to condemn or undermine the military while continuing to push for a return to democracy through its actions. Indeed, New Delhi is following a twin track approach to

engage with Myanmar's military while at the same time pushing for the country's return to democracy. Such action helps to inculcate India's larger strategic ambitions in Southeast Asia, keeps Chinese influence at bay, asserts its 'Neighbourhood First' policy in the region, and further deepens its security cooperation with Myanmar. In this limelight, India defended Myanmar's participation in the virtual BIMSTEC summit, stating that the country's geographical location can determine the success of the regional grouping. Similarly, India's absention at the United Nations General Assembly vote condemning the military actions and the joint visit of the Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, and the Army Chief, General M.M. Naravane, to Myanmar amidst the domestic tensions also speaks volumes about its strategic calculus. Such actions, therefore, might deepen the cooperation policy between the two nations and help to pursue and promote their bilateral strategic ambitions in the region and beyond.

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