

Guest Column

New Delhi Is Backing the Wrong Horse in Myanmar

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While calling for all groups to work towards a peaceful solution and support democratic reforms in Myanmar, India has since the Myanmar military's 2021 coup steadily moved closer to the junta, ensuring its representatives are visible at many of the regime's official functions and providing relief materials to the regime in a show of humanitarian assistance, while also providing it with military hardware.

A recent UN report also pointed out that since February 2021, around 22 India-based entities have shipped arms, raw materials and other military supplies directly or indirectly to Myanmar's military to the tune of about US\$51 million.

One can understand—and even in Myanmar, many do understand—that India's strategic interests in Myanmar are very much tied up with and related to border security, as well as cross-border economic and commercial interests, and increasing its own sphere of engagement while countering China. Yet, one of the biggest problems is the current lack of enthusiasm by the Indian establishment and its various agencies for expanding partnerships beyond the military junta. Indian policy makers and their advisers have seemingly put all their bets on Myanmar's military and only the military as the entity which can secure Indian interests.

Indian policy makers and strategic advisers are overlooking and ignoring the reality on the ground, that Myanmar's military under Min Aung Hlaing has become a rogue element, which is seen as less and less capable as a reliable strategic partner that can be trusted to keep stability in the country.

To start with, the junta's State Administration Council (SAC) is simply unable to ensure the stability of the India-Myanmar border areas. The junta continues to support anti-Indian elements, and allows many separatist outfits active in the Northeast with camps in Myanmar's Sagaing Region to actively operate from there. The arrest of Khundongbam Pambei, a United National Liberation Front (UNLF) leader, as reported by Indian media, may provide the military junta with a good excuse to showcase their concerns for Indian security issues, yet this is far from the reality on the ground. The SAC continues to support anti-India elements and illicit actors for its own vested interests while expressing concerns for Indian interests.

The junta's systematic attacks on civilian populations have been continuing for over two years now, and will continue in India-Myanmar border areas, especially in Sagaing and Chin. The junta's air attacks on its own civilians are only increasing the flow of refugees to the Indian border, as they seek safety and security. As a result of the increased crossings, hosting of refugees by local communities sharing common ethnic affinities on humanitarian grounds could be turned into apprehensions and misgivings by those with bad intent, creating a Manipur-like situation and possibly causing even more violence in the northeastern border states of India. This creates

instability and makes India's Act East Policy (AEP) and all the projects involving Myanmar untenable in the near future, causing strategic problems for India.

The SAC continues to back the Border Guard Force (BGF), which is running the Shwe Kokko scam city, which has trafficked and abused hundreds of young Indians, including torturing them into forced labor and running IT scams from inside the controlled city.

India needs to change gears and, as a first step, start supporting the National Unity Government (NUG) and affiliated actors in the democratic and federal camp as an inclusive step, while it continues to engage with the military junta. India can very much signal to the military junta that it is capable of doing its own independent calculus and making decisions when it comes to engaging diverse representatives from Myanmar, irrespective of the junta throwing tantrums.

Second, Indian development projects cannot flourish under the SAC because of its inability to control territory and ensure stability. To secure its mid-term and long term development and economic interests tied to its AEP, India needs to let the people of Myanmar know that it is backing the democratically and legitimately elected representatives, and willing to provide support to the pro-democracy movement and its representatives within its borders, and will not tolerate the junta trying to dictate the terms of its foreign policy linked to domestic affairs associated with Myanmar.

Third, with China's exclusive and preferential engagement with the SAC, India will never manage to outdo China in this regard anytime in the near future. It should rather focus on developing its own people-to-people support via engagement with the NUG and other affiliated actors.

Fourth, which should and could be done very quickly, as it would have a major positive impact for India, is to scale up cross-border aid from Mizoram into Chin State. While India was quick to deliver aid after Cyclone Mocha, such high-visibility engagement with the SAC is counterproductive for India and Indian interests within Myanmar and among its people. The advantage of the PR blitz went to the SAC, which made a lot of propaganda out of the aid provided, though it was not delivered on the ground to the impacted communities.

Fifth, allow Refugee Status Determination (RSD) to be expedited by the UNHCR India (New Delhi) office; consider providing some form of documentation for Myanmar asylum-seekers in India to avoid their arbitrary detention and being labeled as "illegal migrants"; and allow the UNHCR to have representation/an office in Mizoram in order to carry out RSD and expedite the process.

Sixth, consider expediting Exit Permits to the Myanmar refugees who have been recognized for resettlement to a third country. This will only facilitate developing good relations with the Myanmar community and build goodwill. Many are in New Delhi waiting to get these permits and it is a wasted opportunity for Indian policymakers to signal to the military junta that its decisions are independent and not subject to the will of the Myanmar military junta.

Seventh, as long as the SAC's control continues to shrink and China maintains its long-standing relationships with many other actors controlling significant swaths of territory and strategic assets, India will not be able to counter such influence without having the NUG and pro-democratic forces on its side. The most effective way to counter the military junta and China's authoritarian influence is to support pro-democracy groups and build an alliance with federalist stakeholders. This will provide India with a much more balanced, multi-vector, and robust foreign policy.

India can therefore broaden its portfolio of effective partners in Myanmar by supporting emerging local governance initiatives in coordination and collaboration with NUG representatives and EROs. This will not only enhance India's public profile with the people of Myanmar, but also strengthen its

contacts at the people-to-people level, which is a more promising investment in the long term for relationship development than providing full support to the military junta, which has been compromised, discredited and is failing within the country.

Indian policy-makers and its advisers should by now be aware that India's image not just in Myanmar but within its diverse diaspora is also deteriorating, and there is a need to stop and reverse this immediately. India, while competing with China in expanding its sphere of influence, cannot be seen as a "second China in Myanmar" by the people of Myanmar.

Policy-makers and analysts in India should understand that Myanmar is a profoundly different country now than it was in the past. Myanmar society has woken up despite the limited level of freedom it enjoyed in the 10 years before the coup. The results of the last two elections are a clear example of Myanmar society's willingness to engage in strong democratic participation and acting decisively to discard the predatory and repressive kleptocratic thugs in uniform.

Myanmar's civil society has developed into a vibrant, vigilant, active, resilient and agile community. With skill and determination they have been mobilizing and agitating in various ways which the SAC has yet to counter, suppress and silence; and it never will manage to do so. They see India as no different from China and Russia, who are engaging, assisting and legitimizing the military junta and suppressing its people. India's statements are full of words stating that it wants to act in the best interest of the Myanmar people, but its actions benefit the regime.

There is noticeable frustration and anger bubbling not just within Myanmar's civil society, but also its vast diaspora. So far this has been below the radar, but it could easily erupt at any moment, triggered by events like the last meeting of the BIMSTEC regional group. Inviting Min Aung Hlaing to top-level meetings as "Honorable Chairman of the State Administration Council of Myanmar" only adds to the insults and could fuel an explosion of popular anger against India that would significantly damage its image and goodwill with the people of Myanmar.

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