

An aerial photograph showing a vast, hazy landscape of a city in Myanmar, with numerous small buildings and a large stadium visible in the distance.

MYANMAR

A STRUGGLE FOR STABILITY



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Introduction

Myanmar has long experienced conflict. Even when it seemed to have transitioned into democracy, the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi faced opposition from various ethnic groups. The core issue in Myanmar originates from a history of colonial legacy. The “British colonial rule institutionalised ethnic divisions by administratively separating the predominantly Bamar “Ministerial Burma” from the “Frontier Areas”—home to minorities such as the Kachin, Shan, Chin, Karen, and Mon. These policies entrenched resentment and hierarchy among ethnic groups, which was further deepened during World War II, when Bamar nationalists fought with the Japanese and ethnic minorities with the British.¹

Soon after gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) entered a civil war, during which the ethnic minorities, making up about one-third of the national population, formed powerful insurgencies seeking autonomy and independence. This led to an inevitable confrontation with the Burman-led central government.

Today, the contours of chaos in Myanmar may have changed over time, but the underlying factors have remained mainly the same. Ethnic fragmentation, opposition to military involvement in politics, Myanmar’s strategic location, and control of its rich natural resources have all contributed to the country’s instability. External expansionist interests of foreign nations have only heightened the situation.

Once again, Myanmar remains destitute and embroiled in conflict since the military coup of February 2021, when the armed forces of Tatmadaw seized power from Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD). The country has entered a period of civil war, with the military junta facing opposition from various groups, including armed ethnic organisations and the civilian-led People’s Defence Force (PDF), which was formed under the National Unity Government (NUG) in response to the military takeover.

What was once seen as a military effort to restore the integrity of the Constitution and uphold the rule of law has come full circle. The Tatmadaw, which views itself as the protector of national unity, is now confronting the potential division of the country, with Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) launching attacks on military assets and democratic forces fighting to displace the military junta.

The junta², on the other hand, has recently assured elections in December 2025 with the caveat of Myanmar achieving a state of relative peace and stability. The census carried out last year in preparation for the polls was also opposed by the EAOs and was not conducted in the areas controlled by them. Initial reports indicate that if elections were to be held, they would take place in 110 out of the 330 townships in the country, as the rest are mainly under EAO control. While the resistance has pledged to oppose the election results, the junta remains firm in affirming the unity of Myanmar.

¹ *History of Armed Opposition*. (2014, October 10). Retrieved from Burma Link: <https://www.burmalink.org/background/burma/dynamics-of-ethnic-conflict/history-of-armed-opposition/>

² The Tatmadaw is referred to the armed forces and the military junta to the governing power held by a council from the Tatmadaw.

Finally, the increasing internal complexity in Myanmar has significantly impacted India, as it shares over 1643 km of porous land borders with the northeast region and has transnational ethnic ties. Additionally, countries such as China, Russia, and the United States have expanded their influence- either through the EAOs or the junta, and in China's case, through both. There are signs of intense competition over critical earth minerals and other natural resources. Therefore, the effects of the civil war-like situation go well beyond a refugee crisis for India, leading to lasting consequences for the northeastern region.

Present Situation in Myanmar

There has been much debate about territorial control in Myanmar, with the main question being 'who controls more territory in the ongoing conflict?' This assessment aims to determine the 'winning side'. While some argue that the EAOs have gained more territory, others have suggested it is a 50:50 split, but when judged by population, it is clear that the junta controls a greater population. Although definitive statistics are lacking, most people I met during my fieldwork estimated that between two and four million individuals had migrated from EAO-controlled areas to Yangon.

The junta contemplates conducting elections in Myanmar by December 2025 to restore democracy; however, it is important to note that the polls can only be undertaken in the military-controlled areas, i.e., 110 townships out of a total of 330 in the region³. This has subsequently led the EAOs and the NUG to boycott the elections, vowing to continue their fight for liberation against the Tatmadaw regime. The NUG is an umbrella organisation formed after the coup in February 2021. It has brought together, albeit loosely, most of the EAOs, except for some like the Arakan Army from Rakhine State, among others. The EAOs allied with the NUG are demanding the complete separation of the Tatmadaw from politics in Myanmar, which would require amending the 2008 Constitution, as it reserves 25% of the seats in national and local parliaments for the Tatmadaw.

The other question that arises is about governance and administration. While most Tatmadaw-controlled areas function in terms of basic needs and relative peace, the EAO-controlled areas have been cut off. Without essential services like electricity, petrol, or functioning schools, the future appears difficult to sustain, affecting ordinary people and forcing them to migrate. While I could travel relatively easily through Tatmadaw-controlled areas, accessing EAO-controlled regions was much more challenging.

On the geographical front, Myanmar shares borders with India and Bangladesh to the west, with China to the north and northeast, and with Laos and Thailand to the east and southeast. Additionally, it has coastlines along the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal in the south and southwest. India shares a 1643 km porous border with Myanmar, mainly comprising large EAO-controlled areas such as Chin State, Sagaing Region, and Kachin State. Southern Chin State also borders India and is controlled by the Arakan Army from Rakhine State.

³ *Regime plans to hold elections in 110 out of 330 townships; India to end illegal border trade with Myanmar.* (2025, February 27). Retrieved from dvb: <https://english.dvb.no/regime-plans-to-hold-elections-in-110-out-of-330-townships-india-to-end-illegal-border-trade-with-myanmar/>

Consequently, India must remain vigilant regarding security concerns in the near future. Amid increased migration due to conflict and shortages of necessities, which have led to a surge in illicit activities across the border, India needs to develop a strategic response to these inevitable threats. There is also an added risk of Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs) re-emerging in Myanmar, alongside international vested interests exploiting these fault-lines to escalate geo-strategic rivalries.

Recently, a humanitarian corridor was proposed from Bangladesh to Rakhine State in Myanmar, but it appears to be on hold following opposition from the Bangladesh Army, political parties, the Tatmadaw, and the Arakan Army. Most stakeholders I have interacted with feared the corridor would be exploited by Western powers, particularly the United States, to establish influence in both Bangladesh and Myanmar through Rakhine State.⁴ It is therefore justified and essential to assert that such concerns are likely to arise when analysing the statement in relation to the regime change in Bangladesh. The now ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a controversial statement suggesting that some countries aimed to establish a Christian State across Bangladesh, Myanmar, and a third country, without explicitly mentioning India.⁵ Furthermore, India shares borders with Myanmar and Bangladesh, and there are transnational ethnic ties along with religious demography that remain a vital yet common concern for the three countries on their respective borders. This perhaps draws attention to regional international aspirations, potentially complicating the situation in Myanmar and significantly impacting its external relations with India.

In Myanmar, Western interest has primarily been driven by the rhetoric of “restoring democracy,” resulting in implicit support for organisations operating under the NUG until recently. The change in U.S. policy during President Donald Trump's administration has slightly shifted the dynamics, with the relationship gradually warming between Senior Gen Hlaing and President Trump.⁶

Meanwhile, China has been safeguarding its assets in Myanmar, such as the Kyaukphyu port, not only through its influence on key EAOs but also by utilising Myanmar's Joint Security Venture Company initiative, which allows countries to deploy their own security measures to protect assets.⁷

⁴ Desai, R. N. (2025, May 18). *Ramification | How Rohingya 'humanitarian corridor' in Bangladesh can be a new headache for India*. Retrieved from Firstpost: <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/ramification-how-rohingya-humanitarian-corridor-in-bangladesh-can-be-a-new-headache-for-india-13889433.html>

⁵ NDTV. (2024, May 27). *Sheikh Hasina Alleges Plot To Carve Out Christian Country From Bangladesh: Report*. Retrieved from NDTV: <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/sheikh-hasina-alleges-plot-to-carve-out-christian-country-from-bangladesh-report-5756329>

⁶ Irrawaddy. (2025, July 25). *US Drops Sanctions on Myanmar Junta Allies After Trump Praise*. Retrieved from Irrawaddy: https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/us-drops-sanctions-on-myanmar-junta-allies-after-trump-praise.html#google_vignette

⁷ Bhaumik, S. (2025, June 6). *Chinese Security Guards Join Burmese Army To Defend Kyaukphyu Port*. Retrieved from Eurasia review: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/06062025-chinese-security-guards-join-burmese-army-to-defend-kyaukphyu-port-oped/>

For India, a disintegrated Myanmar would spell disaster, with multiple EAOs controlling territory, highways, and key trade routes, making negotiations with these groups and the State Administration Council (SAC) very difficult and a diplomatic nightmare. Disintegration would also lead to more migration and spillover of conflict into its northeastern borders. China has been advocating for the restoration of democracy, mainly to limit Western influence. Additionally, the Chinese realise that by pushing for early elections, the current regime's legitimacy will increase internationally, leading to 'political stability' and strengthening their influence through trade and infrastructure in a 'heavily stable Myanmar'⁸.

Although the interests of the international community in Myanmar may differ, a common aspect of the chaos is the importance of elections and the restoration of democracy. Even for the Tatmadaw, elections will not only secure international legitimacy but also provide a way to bring more EAOs on board while minimising the risk of disintegration.

To assess the various actors on the ground and evaluate the evolving situation in Myanmar, I undertook an extensive field trip that lasted over four months, from February to June 2025. In the first phase, I arrived in Yangon. I travelled across Mandalay to Pyin Oo Lwin, Zayawaddy to Naypyitaw, and other villages en route by road, conducting over 64 meetings in a month. During these meetings, I engaged with political stakeholders as well as distinguished members of the Tatmadaw. I also delivered a lecture to 40 Myanmar participants, including members of the National Solidarity and Peace-making Negotiation Committee (NSPNC), 12 political parties, 5 EAOs, former MPs, and CSOs on the Constitution of India and Federalism, with a particular focus on India's northeast region, involving participants from Ethnic Armed Organisations that had joined the democratisation process.



⁸ Paing, T. A. (2024, August 26). *China in Myanmar: How the Game-Changing Neighbor Would Continue to Maintain Its Influence*. Retrieved from Stimson: <https://www.stimson.org/2024/china-in-myanmar-how-the-game-changing-neighbor-would-continue-to-maintain-its-influence/>



In Pic: Workshop on Constitutionalism and Federalism hosted by the Embassy of India, Yangon, Myanmar and the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation (CPR). Session lectures were delivered by Justice Ravindra Bhat, Prof. R Sudarshan and Rami Desai for 40 Myanmar participants, including the National Solidarity and Peace-making Negotiation Committee (NSPNC), 12 political parties, 5 EAOs and former MPs and CSOs.

During the second phase of my field trip, I visited Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, located on the border between Thailand and Myanmar, where I interviewed exiled media personnel as well as other members of the resistance movement, such as defected Tatmadaw members and those advocating for the release of “Prisoners of War”. I also had the opportunity to interview three Indians who had been held against their will in the Cyberscam compounds of Myawaddy — a town in Myanmar notorious for its cyberscam activities.



Image ©Rami N. Desai

In Pic: Moei river; From Mae Sot(Thailand) to Myawaddy(Myanmar)

The third phase of my fieldwork took me to the Indian border. I visited the state of Mizoram in the northeast of India, which is important due to its largely Chin population. I visited Champhai, Farkwan & Zokhawthar and Rihkhawdar on the side of Myanmar, among some other locations.⁹

I also engaged with various factions of the Chin groups, including some of the senior-most members, the Arakan Army, and local stakeholders. I examined the realities on the ground at the border on both sides, with the opportunity to interact with and analyse the Myanmar refugee areas in Mizoram and assess their relationships with local communities.

In the fourth phase of my fieldwork, I visited the Sagaing Region to assess the Stilwell Road in Myanmar, as well as the Pangsau Pass in Arunachal Pradesh. I also engaged with the locals and took stock of the current administrative situation and basic governance issues. Additionally, I visited Lungwa, a Konyak Naga village situated in India, which straddles both sides—specifically in the Mon District of Nagaland and the Naga Self-Administered Zone of the Sagaing Region in Myanmar.

⁹ Some locations, names of those I met and interviewed, as well as other details have been reserved for close door discussions due to safety and privacy concerns



Image ©Rami N. Desai

In Pic: Stilwell Road, also known as Ledo Road.

Finally, I had the opportunity to attend the launch of Myanmar Narrative, the official think-tank under the State Administration Council (SAC), Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in Naypyidaw. The launch included representation from non-governmental organisations from five countries: India, Russia, Thailand, China, and Japan, alongside senior officials from the SAC, Tatmadaw, and distinguished guests. The most anticipated part of the event was Senior General Hlaing's inaugural address.

This issue brief is the result of my fieldwork observation and analysis, grounded in the outcomes of interviews with multiple stakeholders in the region. Myanmar is a complex country, and in the current conflict, due to the presence of various stakeholders and the debate on democracy versus the rule of the Tatmadaw, it is crucial to understand both the historical context of the country's democratic transition and the fall of the Aung San Suu Kyi-led popular government. Equally important is understanding the history of Myanmar's relationship with China, especially how, through the settlement of the gambling and cyberscam units in northern Shan State, China has established a foothold in Myanmar. Finally, it is wise to assess the subtle Western influence and the emerging interests in natural resources.

This Issue Brief not only examines the situation leading to the coup but also the current situation through empirical methods, including interviews, observations, and engagements made during field trips.

History of India-Myanmar Strategic Relationship

Myanmar, India's immediate eastern neighbour, occupies a vital position in the strategic considerations of post-colonial India. Geographically, Myanmar and India share a 1643 km border along the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. It is generally recognised that India and Myanmar are close geographically, culturally, and historically.¹⁰

Myanmar, formerly Burma, was a province of the British Indian Empire until 1935 under British colonial rule. There was already a historical and cultural connection through Buddhism, and trade also played a crucial role, leading to a significant Indian community in Myanmar. It is noteworthy that leaders of the freedom movements of Myanmar and India maintained close contacts, which was reflected in the personal relationships shared between Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Colonel Aung San, and Thakin Nu.¹¹

Strategically, there is an inextricable link between India's security, peace, progress, and stability in Myanmar. The following statement by Sardar K.M. Panikkar, one of India's pioneering strategists, best captures this connection. "The defence of Burma is, in fact, the defence of India, and it is India's primary concern no less than Burma's to see that its frontiers remain inviolate. No responsibility can be considered too great for India when it comes to defending India". V.K. Krishna Menon, the then Defence Minister of India, also highlighted the strategic unity between India and Myanmar. Speaking at the UN General Assembly on 17 April 1953, he stated, "What hurt Burma would hurt India because of links of friendship, geography and history between the two countries."¹²

Recently, China's influence on Myanmar, insurgency in India's northeast, porous borders, and transnational ethnic ties have led India to view Myanmar as a strategic priority. New Delhi's goal to expand relations with ASEAN amid the shifting geopolitical landscape of the post-Cold War

¹⁰ Desai, R. N. (2024, November 4). *From Shared Past to Uncertain Future: India's Strategic Calculus in a Coup-Stricken Myanmar*. Retrieved from India Foundation: https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/from-shared-past-to-uncertain-future-indias-strategic-calculus-in-a-coup-stricken-myanmar/#_ednref1

¹¹ Desai, R. N. (2024, November 4). *From Shared Past to Uncertain Future: India's Strategic Calculus in a Coup-Stricken Myanmar*. Retrieved from India Foundation: https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/from-shared-past-to-uncertain-future-indias-strategic-calculus-in-a-coup-stricken-myanmar/#_ednref1

¹² Desai, R. N. (2024, November 4). *From Shared Past to Uncertain Future: India's Strategic Calculus in a Coup-Stricken Myanmar*. Retrieved from India Foundation: https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/from-shared-past-to-uncertain-future-indias-strategic-calculus-in-a-coup-stricken-myanmar/#_ednref1

era, along with India's aim to establish a presence in Myanmar's vital geostrategic region, are key factors driving its changed approach towards Myanmar's military regime. However, while maintaining diplomatic channels with the army authorities, India has also fostered goodwill locally. The most recent example was the devastating 7.7-7.9 magnitude earthquake that struck Myanmar, especially the Sagaing region. India was the first to respond, and within 24 hours, it delivered essential humanitarian aid and sent relief workers for rescue missions and medical assistance. "Operation Brahma" was praised not only by the military regime but also by the general public.



Image ©Rami N. Desai

In Pic: Mandalay city just before the earthquake in March 2025

The Influence of the Tatmadaw

To understand Myanmar and its internal dynamics, it is essential to comprehend the influence of the Tatmadaw on Burmese society. It is equally important to consider their history, political involvement, and their concept of Myanmar as a united entity. Unlike the Indian armed forces, which are regarded as the forces of the people, the Tatmadaw is perceived as the forces that "own" the country or, at the very least, are the most significant stakeholders in Myanmar's past, present, and future.

General Aung San, the founder and father of modern Burma, led a group called the Thirty Comrades during World War II and established the Tatmadaw. They formed the Burma Independence Army (BIA) in 1941 with the aim of ending colonial rule. The BIA later became the Burma Defence Army (BDA) and eventually the Burma National Army (BNA). The Japanese trained Aung San's Patriots. They sought a greater role in the governance of Burma, firmly believing in themselves as a unifying force in their ethnically diverse country. He

demonstrated the Tatmadaw's nationalistic vision and focus on sovereignty by switching allegiances with the Japanese when the BNA in 1945 allied with the British against the Japanese to liberate Burma. He wished to show the entire country that he upheld the nation and sovereignty above ideology. Aung San and the Thirty Comrades held high offices in independent Burma and regarded themselves as the custodians of national unity.¹³

The Thirty Comrades imposed strict authoritarian discipline and used anti-Western sentiment as a catalyst for national unity. The armed forces positioned themselves as immune to foreign influence and internal divisions within the state.

Gen Ne Win led a successful military coup in 1962. His regime introduced the **“Three Main National Causes” doctrine**, namely:

- Non-disintegration of the Union,
- Non-disintegration of national solidarity
- Perpetuation of national sovereignty

The Tatmadaw has total control over the economy, education, and administration. They exercise guardianship over all matters of state and punish any form of dissent. They maintain central control over democracy or pluralism, framing dissent as a threat to the nation. They have effectively become a state within a state.¹⁴

Tatmadaw's Political Entry

The civil unrest in the 1950s, including the communist rebellion and armed ethnic insurgencies such as the Karen and Kachin, created a climate of fear and insecurity. The armed forces exploited the situation to position themselves at the centre of national governance under a military-backed single party, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). The Tatmadaw believed that it alone had the authority and moral right to govern the country.¹⁵

In 1988, the Army no longer governed directly but used a proxy in the form of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which was later renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). In the 2008 Constitution, the Tatmadaw had 25% of the seats reserved in Parliament and direct control over the ministries of Defence, Border Affairs, and Home Affairs.¹⁶

¹³ Edstorm, B. (2009). *Japan and the Myanmar Conundrum*. Sweden: Institute for Security and Development Policy.

¹⁴ Johari, Z. b. (2000). *THE ROLE OF THE TATMADAW IN MODERN DAY BURMA: AN ANALYSIS*. California: United States Navy

¹⁵ Myoe, M. A. (2009). In *Building the Tatmadaw* (pp. 1-33). Singapore: Institute of southeast asian studies.

¹⁶ Tyler Giannini, J. C. (2022, February 1). *From '8888' to '2121': A New Generation of Resistance in Myanmar*. Retrieved from Just Security: <https://www.justsecurity.org/80039/from-8888-to-2121-a-new-generation-of-resistance-in-myanmar/>

Consolidation of Economic Power

The Tatmadaw utilised state institutions such as mining, banking, telecommunications, and manufacturing to achieve economic self-sufficiency. They aimed to accomplish this by controlling entities like the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd. (UMEHL) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC).¹⁷

By the 1980s and 1990s, the Tatmadaw had become one of South East Asia's largest standing multidisciplinary armies with modern capabilities, supported by military aid from China and Russia in the form of aircraft, naval vessels, and artillery guns. In 2008, the Army was virtually granted complete impunity from civil legislation and the judiciary by the constitution. After the 2021 coup, the Tatmadaw remains economically self-sufficient due to its control over all core instruments. They govern through military strength and sustain themselves through profit. Tatmadaw is aligned with major Buddhist monastery networks such as MaBaTha.¹⁸

Morten Pedersen captured Tatmadaw's ideology as cultural engineering aimed at fostering deep mistrust of democratic institutions and elected politicians, branding democracy a recipe for chaos and disintegration.¹⁹

Democracy in Myanmar

The currency demonetisation carried out by Ne Win in September 1987, without any public warning, resulted in widespread poverty, bankruptcy, and the loss of savings for ordinary people. This caused widespread outrage, with students being the most severely affected.²⁰ Although Ne Win stepped down in 1981, he remained chairman of the BSPP. Rampant corruption within the

¹⁷ Myoe, M. A. (2009). In *Building the Tatmadaw* (pp. 129-176). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

¹⁸ Foxeus, N. (2022, April 29). *Buddhist Nationalist Sermons in Myanmar: Anti-Muslim Moral Panic, Conspiracy Theories, and Socio-Cultural Legacies*. Retrieved from Taylor and Francis: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00472336.2022.2032801#abstract>

¹⁹ Pedersen, M. B. (2024). Outrage is not a policy: Coming to terms with Myanmar's fragmented state. *Lowy Institute*.

²⁰ Meixler, E. (2018, August 8). How a Failed Democracy Uprising Set the Stage for Myanmar's Future. *Time*. URL = <https://time.com/5360637/myanmar-8888-uprising-30-anniversary-democracy/>

BSPP and a total economic meltdown led to widespread dissent and frustration among the people.²¹

Myanmar had applied for the UN-supported status of Least Developed Country (LDC) to manage the increasing debts the country had accumulated. This was seen as a national insult and a failure of the state.²²

However, protests began in June 1988. They were initially peaceful, but with the Tatmadaw suppressing them and over 100 students dead or missing, the protests developed into a movement. On 26 July 1988, General Sein Lwin took over from Ne Win. He declared martial law and carried out mass arrests, aptly earning his nickname as the “Butcher of Rangoon.”²³

As a reaction to the mass arrests, Buddhist monks also joined the movement. The *ba ka ta* – the Burmese abbreviation for All Burma Students’ Union, an underground students’ organisation – was at the forefront. On 8 August 1988 (8888)—chosen both for its numerological significance and its symbolism—the first nationwide general strike and protest took place. Tens of thousands of students, citizens, monks, lawyers, civil servants and even some disaffected soldiers marched through Rangoon, Mandalay, Pegu, Sagaing, and Shwebo against the BSPP regime.²⁴ They demanded the end of military rule, restoration of democracy, and respect for human rights.²⁵

Nevertheless, to suppress the escalating protests, the Tatmadaw continued to use force, targeting ABSU students. It was during these protests that Aung San Suu Kyi delivered her famous speech, establishing herself as a symbol of democracy and gaining international legitimacy.

²¹ (2014). Retrieved from FACTS AND DETAILS: https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Myanmar/sub5_5b/entry-3011.html

²² Lintner, B. (1989). *OUTRAGE Burma's Struggle for Democracy*. In B. Lintner, *OUTRAGE Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (pp. 94-96). Review Publishing Company Limited.

²³ Meixler, E. (2018, August 8). How a Failed Democracy Uprising Set the Stage for Myanmar’s Future. *Time*. URL = <https://time.com/5360637/myanmar-8888-uprising-30-anniversary-democracy/>

²⁴ Lintner, B. (1989). In *OUTRAGE Burma's Struggle for Democracy* (pp. 128-134). Review Publishing Company Limited.

²⁵ Meixler, E. (2018, August 8). How a Failed Democracy Uprising Set the Stage for Myanmar’s Future. *Time*.



Image © Rami N. Desai

In Pic: Sule Pagoda became a symbol of resistance during the 8888 protests. It became a gathering point for demonstrators and pro-democracy voices.

Reasons for the Fall of NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi

On 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw accused the NLD of election rigging. Just before the NLD leadership was sworn in, the Tatmadaw declared a state of emergency and detained Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, among others. The State Administration Council (SAC) was formed by General Min Aung Hlaing, who became the acting President. Aung San Suu Kyi had secured 396 of the 476 seats in the combined houses of Parliament (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw). However, many from the opposition claimed that more votes had been cast than the number of registered voters. Her supporters cried foul and accused the Tatmadaw of feeling insecure about the growing strength of democracy in Myanmar, which included not just the NLD but also other ethnic political parties.

It is important to note that while the 2021 Coup was unprecedented, Aung San Suu Kyi's reign was also riddled with controversies. First, it was said that the original members of the 8888

revolution were overlooked and not given any positions of authority in the government. The mishandling of the Rohingya issue was also regarded as a failure and brought her administration under international scrutiny and criticism. The NLD government was criticised by the International Crisis Group (ICG) in 2018 for undermining civil liberties and adopting an authoritarian stance in both speech and action.²⁶ Many promises of federalism were not fulfilled, and they were accused of continued Burmanisation.

However, it was with the alienation following the Rohingya crisis that Aung San Suu Kyi started to gain support from China, which offered diplomatic protection to Myanmar at the United Nations. They also negotiated between Myanmar and Bangladesh to become stakeholders in the crisis alongside the West. Economically, too, the GDP under her government did not grow beyond 7%, falling well short of targets. Eradication of widespread poverty should have been her sole aim and would have been key to her success.

Pauk Phaw (fraternal brotherhood) post the 2021 Coup.

Three years after the military coup in Myanmar, Operation 1027²⁷ was launched against the military junta by The Three Brotherhood Alliance²⁸ members comprising the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) from the Kokang Region of Shan State, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) also from the Shan State and the Arakan Army (AA) based in the Rakhine State.

On 27th October 2023, the Alliance simultaneously attacked military outposts, police stations and took control over key cities and highways in the northern part of Shan state. The rebellion quickly spread across Myanmar, and by 07th November, many other insurgent groups across the country joined hands in support of Operation 1027. This was perhaps one of the rare occasions in the history of Myanmar where EAOs from a variety of ethnic groups had come together in a meticulously coordinated attack against the junta. AA's operation in Rakhine state was a largely unexpected entry in this alliance, but MNDAA had been a long-standing player in the region. Subsequently, many Myanmar observers debated the pushback by the rebel groups as a victory for democracy, with some reports stating only 30-40 per cent of Myanmar²⁹ was under the control of the junta.

²⁶ Group, I. C. (2018, August 28). *Myanmar's Stalled Transition*. Retrieved from International Crisis Group: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b151-myanmars-stalled-transition>

²⁷ Firstpost. (2023, December 15). *Inside 'Operation 1027', the anti-junta offensive in Myanmar*. Retrieved from Firstpost: <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/inside-operation-1027-the-anti-junta-offensive-in-myanmar-13507682.html>

²⁸ The Three Brotherhood Alliance was formed in 2019 but Operation 1027 was launched in 2023

²⁹ These are assessments. Other reports suggest 50 percent

However, in the debates that raged with every town that fell to the rebels, what was forgotten was the importance of MNDAA in this offensive. In fact, it was the first blow by MNDAA to the military junta in Laukkaing that propelled the far-reaching consequences of Operation 1027. The fallout of this rebel victory in Shan state resulted in three brigadier generals of the military junta being sentenced to death and three to life imprisonment.³⁰ They were accused of surrendering with their soldiers to MNDAA in Laukkaing, the capital of the Kokang Self-Administered Zone in northern Shan state, making it possibly the largest surrender in the history of the military junta.

Following the launch of Operation 1027 in mid-November 2023, reports began emerging from Myanmar that Ming Xuechang had taken his own life. The warlord and cybercrime mafia boss of Laukkaing was known to be a henchman and trusted aide of Bai Suocheng, who leads one of the “four main families” of Laukkaing. The other three families were headed by Wei Chaoren, Liu Zhengxiang, and Liu Guoxi (who died in 2020). These “four main families” of Laukkaing were not traditional old-money elites of Shan State but rather the four men who helped transform the dusty town into a haven for scammers. This change drew many gamblers from neighbouring countries, especially China, where gambling remains illegal. The “four main families” expanded their operations to include trafficking, money laundering, and telecom scam centres, among other illicit pursuits. Such activities would not have been possible without the backing of the local police and the Tatmadaw. With online scams not only attracting Chinese citizens but also drawing gangs that offer high-paying jobs in controlled environments, often described as “cyber slavery,” China, bearing the brunt of the scams, began pressuring the Tatmadaw to crack down on these families. However, with billions of dollars at stake, the Ming and others resisted.

With China’s frustration with the Tatmadaw remaining unchanged and its concerns still unaddressed, China chose to activate the Three Brotherhood Alliance in October 2023 through the highly successful Operation 1027. This was straightforward because the leader of MNDAA was Peng Jiasheng, the original warlord of Laukkaing, also known as the “King of Kokang”. Peng had been ousted by none other than Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. He had used Bai Suocheng, who was Peng’s deputy at the time, to overthrow Peng Jiasheng. Once they managed to expel Peng, who took refuge in China in 2009, Bai Suocheng rose as one of the “four families” of Kokang. Peng’s contentious relationship with the military junta was worsened by his close ties to China and his Chinese ancestry. He had negotiated the deal that established Kokang as a special administrative zone, with the yuan as its currency and Mandarin as the language.

Earlier in 2015, MNDAA tried to regain Kokang under the leadership of Peng’s son, Peng Daxun. They fought extensively with Senior General Hlaing’s military forces but managed to seek refuge, waiting for another opportunity. This demonstrates Peng’s ability to build deep trust and connections with other EAOs. When Peng died in 2022 at the age of 94 in Mongla, south of Kokang, his funeral was attended by leaders of all major EAOs, crime syndicates, and community leaders. Condolence messages were also reportedly received from Chinese

³⁰ Desai, R. N. (2024, March 8). *Ramification | Fall of The House of Ming: Money, militia and Myanmar*. Retrieved from Firstpost:

<https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/ramification-fall-of-the-house-of-ming-money-militia-and-myanmar-13744265.html>

politicians, NUG, and Senior General Hlaing. Incidentally, Mongla is controlled by the National Democratic Alliance Army, whose chairman is Peng's son-in-law, Lin Mingxian.

While many observers may think that China has a single policy towards the Tatmadaw, the reality, like the serpentine history of the Kokang region and its warlords, may be far more complex. China, on the one hand, may want to control any cybercrime, cyber scam, and cyber slavery issues affecting its citizens. But on the other hand, the Chinese can leverage their transnational ethnic ancestry as a strength to influence Myanmar, regardless of who is in power in Naypyidaw.

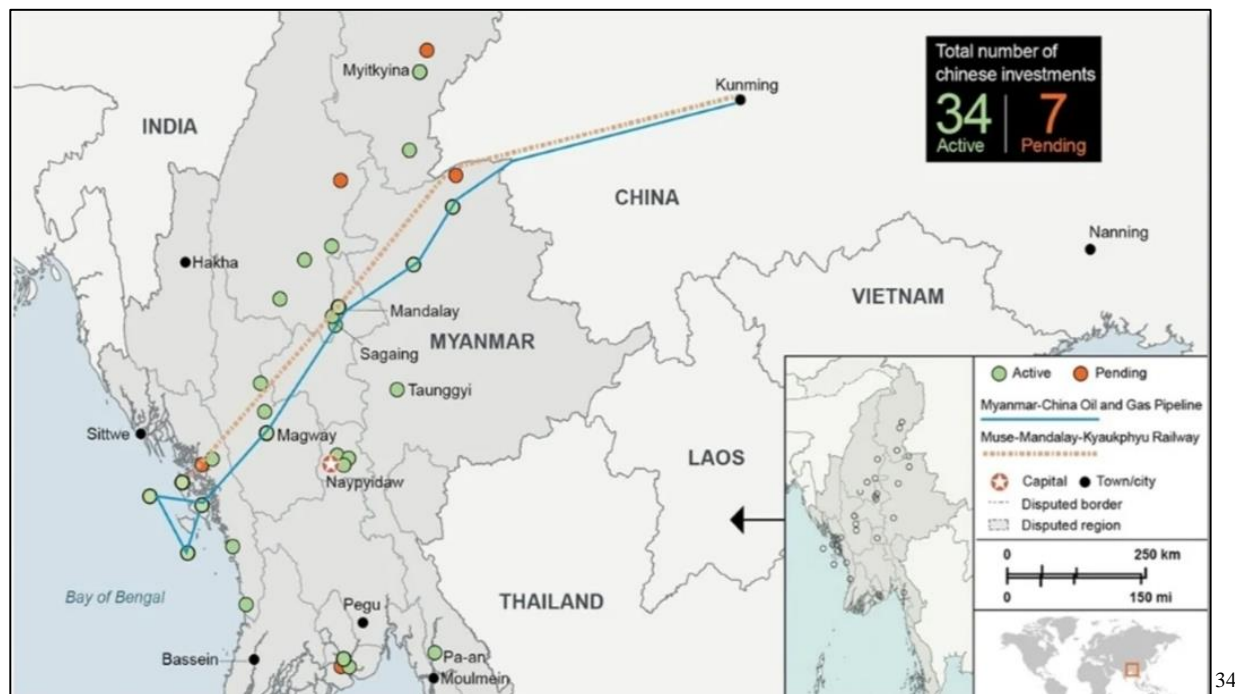
It is important to note that Peng was one of the major traffickers of opium, heroin, and later methamphetamine. Reportedly, at China's behest, Peng ceased opium production but expanded into gambling, illegal mining, and synthetic drug manufacturing. Bai Suocheng, Wei Chaoren, and Liu Zhengxiang, leaders of three out of the four families, were taken to China, where Ming's son, daughter, granddaughter, and son-in-law are already under arrest. While China may be keen to curb cyber scam syndicates along its border in Myanmar, resolving this issue is complex, as the networks extend deep and far.

Additionally, China's concern with the Tatmadaw goes beyond just the cybercrime and gambling rackets operating from Myanmar. The issue for China is that the Tatmadaw has failed to stabilise Myanmar or effectively consolidate its power. This threatens China's infrastructure investments. Whether it is the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), its oil and gas pipelines, or the Kyaukphyu deep seaport, without political stability and control over EAOs, China's alternative to its "Achilles heel", the Strait of Malacca, will remain at risk. China's natural gas and oil pipeline, which begins in Kyaukphyu city in Myanmar's Rakhine State, passes through the Magway Region, Mandalay Region, and Shan State before reaching China's Yunnan region, which serves as China's springboard to ASEAN, just as the northeast region acts as a springboard to ASEAN for India. Importantly, Gwadar port, part of CPEC, and Kyaukphyu port provide China with strategic advantages in containing India and restricting our access to the West and the East.

Although China has resumed some projects through its influence on EAOs, Myanmar's balancing act has once again caused anxiety. The Tatmadaw has selected Russia to develop its Dawei deep seaport in the Tanintharyi region along the east coast, transforming it into a gateway for the Greater Mekong area. China views this as benefiting India while also undermining its Kyaukphyu deep seaport. Russia's involvement in Myanmar has introduced a third player into infrastructure projects, aligning with India's efforts to contain China's expanding influence and paving the way for a secure Indian Ocean. However, many critics question Russia's ability to complete projects on time.

Additionally, Western policies have, over the years, almost coercively pushed Myanmar to seek support from China and Russia. Washington even accused Myanmar's defence ministry of

importing nearly USD 1 billion worth of materials and raw materials for arms manufacturing.³¹ China continues to be Myanmar's primary source of foreign investment, with 40% of its foreign debt owed to China.³² Furthermore, there is a risk that sanctions could naturally deepen China's debt trap strategy. Considering China's projects in Myanmar that have progressed under the junta, including the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India has every reason to be concerned about China's interest in gaining 'back door' access to the Indian Ocean. Moreover, Myanmar's abundant oil and natural gas reserves, combined with its fragile geographical location, have made it a focal point in China's plans.³³

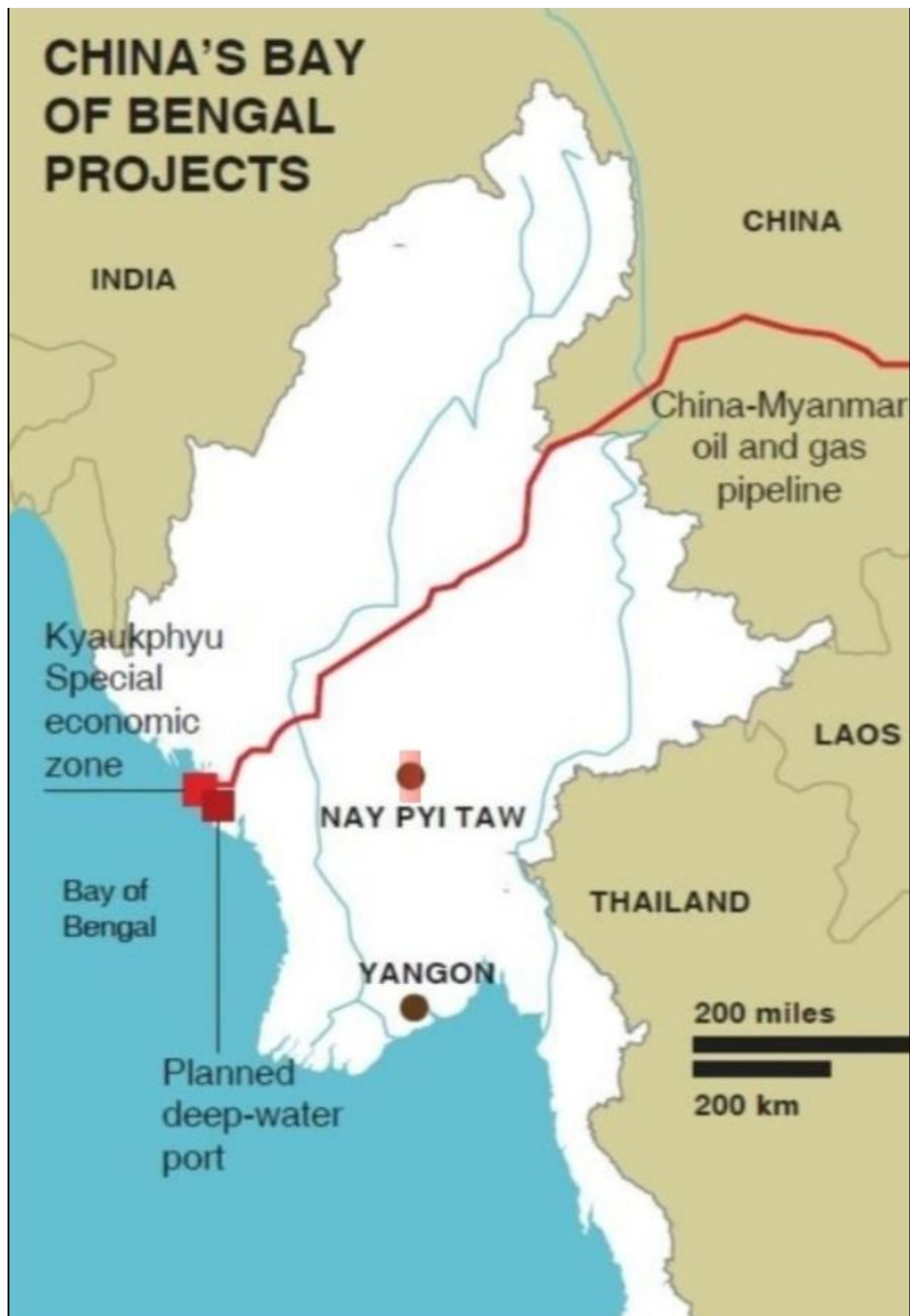


³¹ *The Billion Dollar Death Trade: The International Arms Networks*. (2023). Retrieved from Human Rights Council: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/myanmar/crp-sr-myanmar-2023-05-17.pdf>

³² Thein, H. H. (2022, November 22). *China is pouring money into junta-ruled Myanmar to secure a 'back door' to the Indian Ocean*. Retrieved from Scroll: <https://scroll.in/article/1037882/china-is-pouring-money-into-junta-ruled-myanmar-to-secure-a-back-door-to-the-indian-ocean>

³³ Desai, R. N. (2024, November 4). *From Shared Past to Uncertain Future: India's Strategic Calculus in a Coup-Stricken Myanmar*. Retrieved from India Foundation: https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/from-shared-past-to-uncertain-future-indias-strategic-calculus-in-a-coup-stricken-myanmar/#_ednref1

³⁴ OSINT. (2025, June 5). *China takes a multipronged approach to secure its investments in Myanmar*. Retrieved from Janes: <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-and-national-security-analysis/post/china-takes-a-multipronged-approach-to-secure-its-investments-in-myanmar>



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³⁵ Hughes, L. (2018, November 18). *China's string of pearls should concern India*. Retrieved from Australia Naval Institute: <https://navalinstitute.com.au/chinas-string-of-pearls-should-concern-india/>

On the 15th of August 2024, Wang Yi, China's foreign minister, met Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing and discussed border security and Chinese investments in Myanmar.³⁶ There was a time when officials from both countries called their growing relationship *pauk phaw*, meaning a fraternal brotherhood, but relationships have their limits. In this case, China was concerned and frustrated with Hlaing's failure to control the worsening situation with EAOs. It was also well known to them that Hlaing is particularly suspicious of China.

On the other hand, Hlaing has also made statements accusing foreign countries of providing weapons to EAOS rather than humanitarian aid. In all likelihood, he was referring to China. In an interview³⁷ given to Associated Press, Richard Horsey of the International Crisis Group said, *"There is a deep well of anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar, particularly in the military, and Min Aung Hlaing is known to harbour particularly strong anti-Chinese views. I don't think China really cares whether it is a military regime or some other type of government in Myanmar. The main issue with the regime, in Beijing's view, is that it is headed by someone they distrust and dislike, and who they see as fundamentally incompetent."*

China will undoubtedly continue to protect its geostrategic investments in Myanmar. Ideally, China would like a Tatmadaw that can control Myanmar while also accommodating Beijing's involvement in the country, for example, tacitly endorsing Operation 1027 and brokering a ceasefire for it.

While India should monitor developments in Myanmar closely, it must also recognise that China does not easily influence Myanmar. India may share more goodwill with the military junta, the NUG, and some EAOs than China ever will. Public sentiment is also more likely to favour India over China. The chaos in Myanmar is likely to persist; there are no guarantees that elections will resolve the conflict. Therefore, India's best strategy is to engage with stakeholders, safeguard its interests, provide humanitarian aid, and foster the existing goodwill across the spectrum.

³⁶ Strangio, S. (2024, August 15). *Chinese FM Meets Myanmar's Junta Chief Amid Resistance Offensives*. Retrieved from The Diplomat: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/chinese-fm-meets-myanmars-junta-chief-amid-resistance-offensives/>

³⁷ Peck, G. (2024, August 14). *China's foreign minister meets with Myanmar's military boss as civil war strains their relations*. Retrieved from APnews: <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-china-foreign-minister-civil-war-277613b65eae72e7e1dbd442232b6481>

China's projects in Myanmar Post-Coup: (BRI)

Name of the project	Total Investment	Location	Status	Development under the regime
Mee Lin Gyaing LNG	US \$2.5 billion	Ayeyarwady region	On Going	Approved by Myanmar Investment Commission
Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (KPSEZ)	US \$1.5 billion	Kyaukphyu Township, Rakhine State	On Going	Reorganised the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone management committee with further planning to construct.
New Yangon City project	US \$1.5-billion	Yangon	Planning	The land acquisition process is being finalised
Chinshwehaw CBECZ	-	Northern Shan State	Planning	Officials to expedite work on new land border crossing
Kanpiketi CBECZ	US \$22.4 million	Northern Kachin State's Special Region 1	On Going	Approved by Myanmar Investment Commission
Kyaukphyu Power Plant	US \$180 million	Kyaukphyu Township, Rakhine State	On Going	Completed Phase I
Kyaukphyu deep sea port	US \$1.3 billion	Kyaukpyu Township	On Going	Joint venture between the Chinese consortium CITIC Myanmar Port Investment Limited and the KPSEZ management committee.

Source: Sreeparna Banerjee and Tarushi Rajaura, 2021. “Growing Chinese Investments in Myanmar post-coup”. Observer Research Foundation (ORF).³⁸

The launch of Myanmar Narrative, Senior Gen Hlaing’s inaugural speech, and the promise of an election.

The launch of Myanmar Narrative, the official think-tank under the State Administration Council (SAC) and the Ministry of Information, saw non-governmental representatives from five countries—India, Russia, Thailand, China, and Japan—alongside top officials from the SAC, Tatmadaw, and distinguished guests. The quiet city of Naypyidaw came alive with a grand dinner featuring performances representing Myanmar's ethnic diversity, followed by a full day of panel discussions on the topic 'Challenges and Opportunities for Myanmar, 2025.' With talks of elections scheduled for December 2025 (as recently announced), even while EAOs control large territories, the most anticipated part of the event was Senior General Hlaing’s inaugural address.

³⁸ Banerjee, S. (2021, November 9). *Growing Chinese investments in Myanmar post-coup*. Retrieved from ORF: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/growing-chinese-investments-in-myanmar-post-coup>

During my field trip, I met with all stakeholders, including those aligned with the SAC and the Tatmadaw, as well as those opposing them. A common theme was that no side believed the outside world understood the situation in Myanmar. Although it is worth noting that the EAOs and other resistance groups have “media in exile” like the Irrawaddy in English, the SAC has barely any information that is disseminated to a wider audience. The launch of Myanmar Narrative provided a special insight into Myanmar's future aspirations, the politics between the EAOs and the SAC, and the much-anticipated elections.

Even though there is no consensus on the proposed elections, with the EAOs ready to boycott them, the military junta appears to have a direction. Senior General Hlaing, at the launch of Myanmar Narrative, spoke extensively on his proposed plan for the country. Abandoning his written speech, he spoke extempore, emphasising repeatedly over more than forty minutes the importance of elections for Myanmar. He highlighted increased contact with the global community and the opportunities this would bring to Myanmar, improving the country's image. However, he also stressed the ongoing conflict within the country. He reiterated that “without unity, we cannot have a peaceful nation,” and that external interference has made achieving an ideal situation particularly difficult. While he stated that he accepts a multi-party democratic system based on democracy and federalism would be best for Myanmar, he clarified that it would not be possible without peace.

In his speech, he envisioned an independent foreign policy within an emerging new world order. He proposed that countries such as India, Russia, and China were challenging the dominance of superblocks. In the future, regional blocs would be significant for Myanmar. Senior Gen Hlaing discussed his plans for the economy, technology, and education, emphasising that only 30% of students pass examinations. He also highlighted the importance of industrialised agriculture among other areas, but stressed that stability was crucial for future achievements. The recurring theme throughout the speech was “peace”. For the SAC and the Tatmadaw, the Myanmar Narrative represents a significant step forward.

The elections, scheduled for December 2025, will most likely proceed despite protests by EAOs and the NUG. They are expected to give limited legitimacy to the SAC and provide an honourable exit for Senior General Hlaing, amidst increasing international pressure and a growing push for democracy. Furthermore, the nationalist, Tatmadaw-backed United Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) is likely to come to power. The USDP was founded by former Prime Minister Thein Sein to contest the 2010 general elections and has become one of Myanmar's two main political parties, alongside Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD. However, the NLD refused to comply with the party registration laws. Tun Myint, secretary of the Yangon Region executive committee, stated that the NLD would not register with any election authorities, which they regard as established by the “illegitimate military council”. As a result, the NLD will be absent from the upcoming elections.

Myanmar is currently experiencing a major upheaval. The elections are set to be a pivotal moment. This approach brings some stakeholders closer together while pushing others further away. Although Senior General Hlaing hopes for stability and peace, he will likely proceed with the elections regardless of the circumstances. Having met various EAOs on my field trip, it is evident that they are committed to continuing the fight and will not give up until the 2008 constitution is dissolved. Achieving stability and peace will be difficult under these conditions; chaos is expected to persist. In a conflict where both sides claim to fight for the people, civilians will suffer continuously, and as with most conflicts today, there will be no clear winners.

The Cyber Scam Industry in Myawaddy and the Joint Security Venture Company



Image ©Rami N. Desai

In pic: Shallow crossing over Moei River, from Mae Sot, Thailand to Myawaddy, Myanmar

The Border Guard Force (BGF) last year issued a warning stating, “All foreigners engaged in online business around Kayin State, Myawaddy Township must leave between 1-5-2024 and 31-10-2024. Foreigners who illegally cross the border must depart the country by the same route they entered. If found after 31-10-2024, effective action will be taken.” This warning targeted online scammers and gambling operations that have established a presence in Shwe Kokko Myaing, the so-called “new city” located a short distance from Myawaddy, which is funded by Chinese money and the BGF partnership. The notice was issued in Burmese, Chinese, and English. The statement echoes the earlier mention of the fate of the “four families” of Laukkaing in Shan State, who were involved in cybercrime, cyber slavery, and gambling activities.

Similarly, in the case of Myawaddy, it might be relevant to note that the warning by the BGF came after the visit of Lt Gen Yar Pyae, Union Minister for Home Affairs, to China.³⁹

Lt Gen Yar Pyae met with Minister of Public Security Wang Xiahong and Xu Datong, Vice Minister of Public Security of China. They signed agreements providing assistance worth RMB 5 million to the Myanmar Police Force. The Chinese side also emphasised that they view the China-Myanmar relationship from a strategic perspective. At the same time, it has been reported that 500 Chinese nationals have arrived in Kyaukphyu Township in the troubled Rakhine State. Kyaukphyu, which hosts Chinese investments in various projects, especially Myanmar's long-delayed deep-water port project supported by the CITIC Group, China's largest state-owned transnational conglomerate, also has the twin oil and gas pipeline extending to Yunnan province. Notably, the EAOs, particularly the AA active in Rakhine, have offered a guarantee of protection for these projects. The billions of dollars invested will also bolster the junta's resources. The Joint Venture Security Company (JSVC) is Tatmadaw's initiative to invite international investors in Myanmar to deploy security measures to safeguard their assets.



Image ©Rami N. Desai

In Pic: Crossing from Mae Sot-Myawaddy; area near cyber scam centres

³⁹ Center, K. I. (2024, May 7). *BGF Militia leader Instructs Foreign Scammers to Leave their Myawaddy Shwe Kokko Crime Hub*. Retrieved from BNI: <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/bgf-militia-leader-instructs-foreign-scammers-leave-their-myawaddy-shwe-kokko-crime-hub>

The three Indian victims of the cyber scam industry I interviewed came from different parts of India. All of them were contacted via Telegram with the promise of high-paying jobs. They did not see the face of their interviewer, as the solicitors said it was company policy to keep identities hidden. The boys came from lower-middle-class families with no prior experience. One boy admitted that he knew he had to scam people before he decided to accept the job offer. He also knew it would involve “love scams”, where he would target women online to extract money—the others, however, feigned innocence.

They claimed to have changed vehicles more than 17 times to reach Myawaddy, where they were well fed and accommodated in hostels within the cyber scam compounds. They received orientation training similar to any call centre, but due to their limited English skills, their handlers had to try different cyberscam compounds to get them employed. With no success, they were left to fend for themselves. They provided insights into the lives of other employees at the cyber scam compounds. Many were there voluntarily because the pay was good and the lifestyle was appealing. Some had even signed two-year contracts during which they could save money to send home. Men and women from various nationalities worked there, including people from as far as Africa, but the workforce was mainly composed of Indians and Chinese.

The compounds were heavily guarded but self-sufficient with supermarkets, shopping centres, and entertainment. It is important to note that not everyone employed at these compounds is a victim of trafficking; some had come willingly. There is a real risk that they might become recruiters upon returning to their home country.

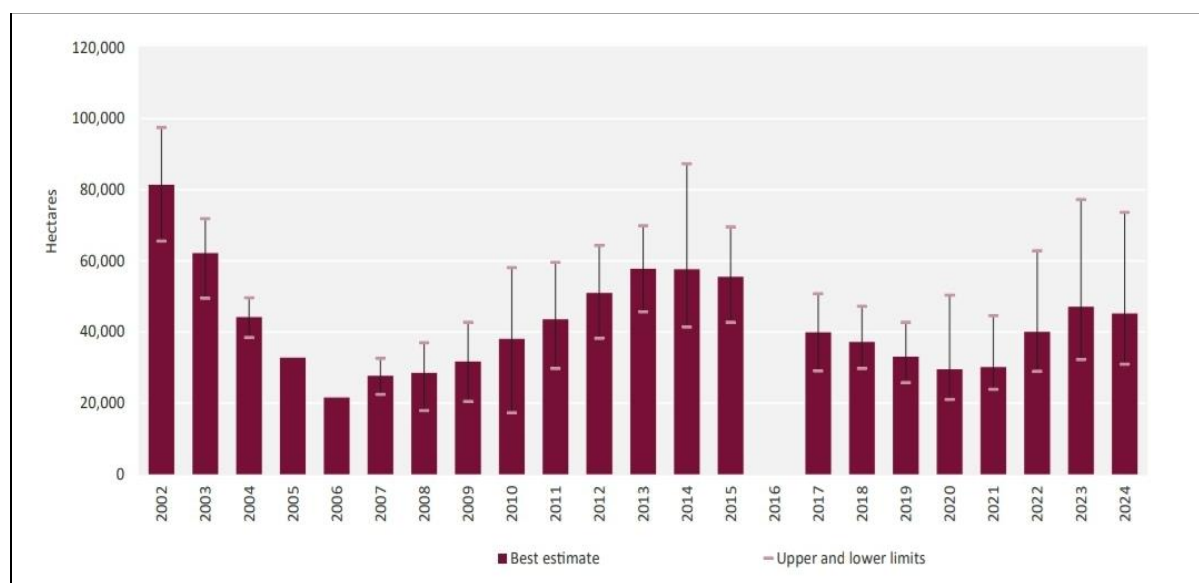
Drug Trade - Opium to Methamphetamines

Historically, the drug trade and militias have been closely linked to this region, regardless of changes in power centres in Myanmar. In the late 1940s, the nationalist Chinese Kuomintang Army established laboratories on the border of Thailand and Shan State. During the 1960s, as China increased support for the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), many militias aligned with it. Notable warlords such as Lo Hsing-Han from Kokang, dubbed the “Godfather of Heroin” by the U.S., and Khun Sa, who is said to have controlled up to 70% of the global heroin supply in the 1970s,⁴⁰ exemplified this influence. By the 1980s, following the disintegration of the CPB, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the MNDA emerged from its remnants. Militia leaders and Hsing-Han brokered ceasefires and negotiated special regions for the state, demonstrating the significant power held by local warlords in Shan State.

Opium cultivation and drug processing have long been an integral part of the history of the Shan state. When UWSA emerged as a major player, it challenged Khun Sa’s dominance of the heroin market. Following Operation Tiger Trap in 1994, many of the accused were extradited to the U.S., and figures like Khun Sa surrendered to the Myanmar government, leaving a power vacuum that allowed other groups to enter the illicit trade. This transformation turned the region into not only a hub of heroin production but also a centre for methamphetamines. With legal

⁴⁰ Fuller, T. (2007, November 5). *Khun Sa, Golden Triangle Drug King, Dies at 73*. Retrieved from NewYork Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/05/world/asia/05khunsa.html>

precursor materials arriving from China and established infrastructure in place, the area now has barely any legitimate economy left. It has also permanently linked the drug trade with armed conflict and territorial control—for instance, UWSA occupied the town of Mong Yawn (previously controlled by Khun Sa) and turned it into a production hub for *Yaba* pills, which means “crazy pills” in Thai. These colourful pills, stamped with the letters “R” or “WY,” contain a mix of methamphetamine and caffeine and have become popular party drugs costing just US \$1-\$5. In addition to heroin and *Yaba*, the production of crystal meth—pure crystalline methamphetamine—has become dominant. In 2008, the U.S Treasury Department described the UWSA as the most powerful drug trafficking organisation in the world, claiming they were even manufacturing their own precursors.



In Pic: Opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar, 1996-2024 (ha)⁴¹

An estimated 154 tonnes of heroin were produced and exported from Myanmar in 2023, valued at approximately US \$2.2 billion. Opium production increased by 36% to 1080 tonnes.⁴² According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Report for 2021,⁴³ between mid-February and early April 2020, Myanmar authorities conducted a series of operations in northern Shan State. These operations led to the seizure of 193 million methamphetamine tablets (equivalent to 17.4 tonnes) and 500 kg of crystalline methamphetamine. Record-high methamphetamine seizures during the pandemic highlight the vast trafficking networks, easy access to precursors, and high demand. An oversupply has kept prices low, making synthetic drugs in the region easily obtainable. In 2020 alone, over 867

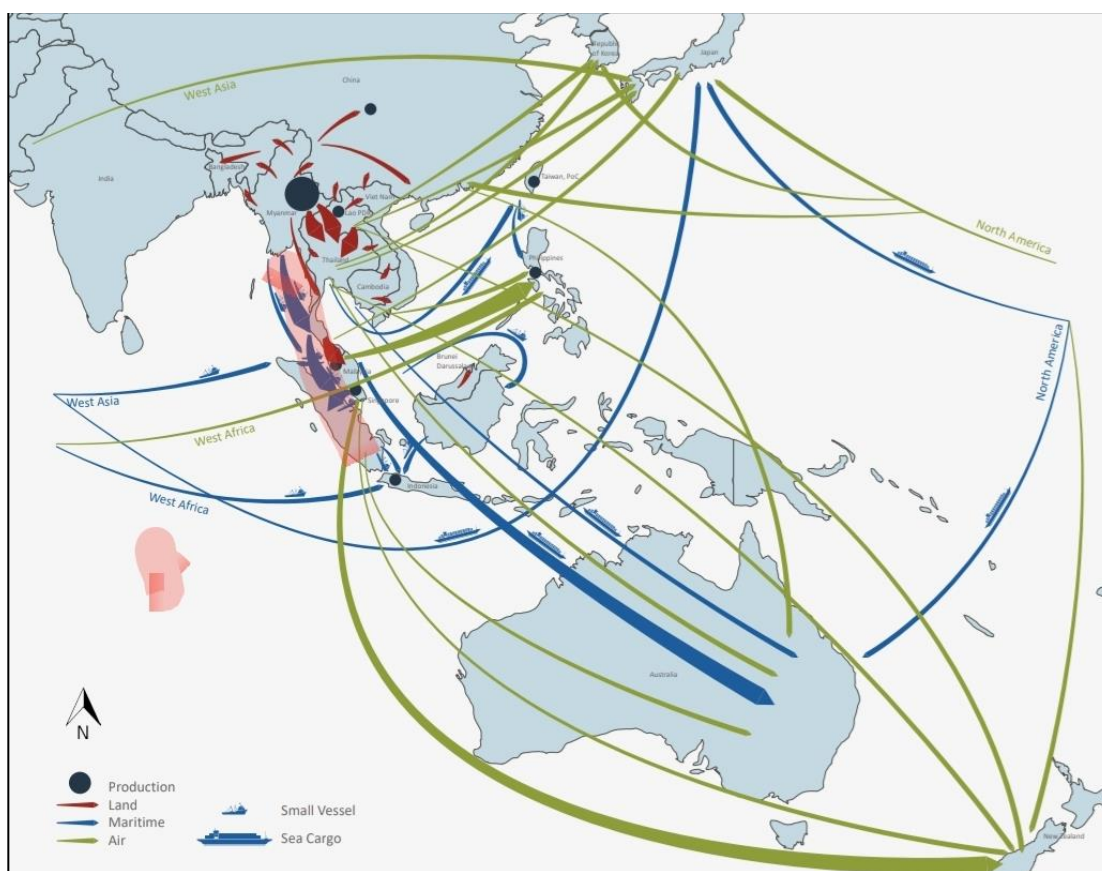
⁴¹ UNODC. (2024). *Myanmar Opium Survey 2024: Cultivation, Production and Implications*. Bangkok: UNODC.

⁴² Yong, N. (2023, December 12). *Myanmar overtakes Afghanistan as top opium producer*. Retrieved from BBC News: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67688413>

⁴³ UNODC. (2021). *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges*. UNODC SMART Program.

million tablets were seized. UNODC applies the 10% rule, based on the assumption that authorities only intercept 10% of trafficked narcotics. If that is true, it is surprising to note that in 2010, it was estimated that 1 billion *Yaba* tablets were trafficked to Thailand from Myanmar alone. The International Crisis Group estimates the total value of the Mekong drug trade exceeds \$40 billion annually and continues to grow.⁴⁴

However, it is not only countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Laos PDR, or Vietnam that are affected by drug trafficking. *Yaba* pills have been seized as far afield as Japan, New Zealand, and Australia. Nearly 1.2 tonnes of methamphetamine were confiscated in 2017 in Melbourne.⁴⁵



In pic: Methamphetamine trafficking routes in Asia, South Asia region 2022-23⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*. (2019, January 8). Retrieved from International Crisis Group: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/my/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/299-fire-and-ice-conflict-and-drugs-myanmars-shan-state?>

⁴⁵ Commission, A. C. (2017, October 22). *Taskforce makes largest meth seizure in Australia's history*. Retrieved from Australia Criminal Intelligence Commission: <https://www.acic.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases-and-statements/taskforce-makes-largest-meth-seizure-australias-history>

With Myanmar in a state of conflict and drug production and trafficking reaching record levels, India also has much to be concerned about. Arakan Army (AA), which was a vital part of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, has also been involved in drug transit, particularly to Bangladesh, where demand for *Yaba* is high. In 2016, over 300 traffickers from Myanmar were arrested in Bangladesh on smuggling charges, with US\$29 million worth of *Yaba* seized.⁴⁷ As trafficking and addiction to *Yaba* increase, the Bangladesh government in 2018 enacted the Narcotics Control Act of 2018, making the production and distribution of methamphetamine pills/*Yaba* punishable by death.⁴⁸ It has also been reported that the AA have been using the Rohingyas to traffic drugs to the borders of Bangladesh and India's northeast.⁴⁹

In India, in 2023, Assam Rifles and Special Narcotics Cell officials seized 1 lakh tablets of methamphetamines worth Rs 33.33 crore in Mizoram's capital, Aizawl.⁵⁰ Drugs worth Rs 7,887.76 crore were seized in Manipur over the past seven years. In September 2023, the Director General of Assam Rifles stated that in the last four years, drugs valued at Rs 4200 crore had been seized.⁵¹ This year alone, Mizoram recorded seizures of 3.380 kg of heroin worth Rs 1,01,40,000, 15.152 kg of methamphetamine worth Rs 1,96,97,600, and 10.385 kg of crystal meth worth Rs 31,15,50,000. Nagaland seized 32 kg of opium and 26.63 kg of heroin. Meghalaya recovered nearly 19,000 *Yaba* pills in 2022, 60,000 in 2023, and 2,000 tablets in 2024. A recent Border Security Force report indicates that Tripura has the highest drug seizures, including increasing seizures of meth tablets and *Yaba*.⁵²

⁴⁶ Source: UNODC. (2024). *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest Developments and Challenges*. Bangkok: UNODC.

⁴⁷ Thompson, N. A. (2017, August 6). *Yaba addiction: The dark side of Bangladesh's increasing affluence*. Retrieved from CNN: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/05/asia/methamphetamine-yaba-bangladesh>

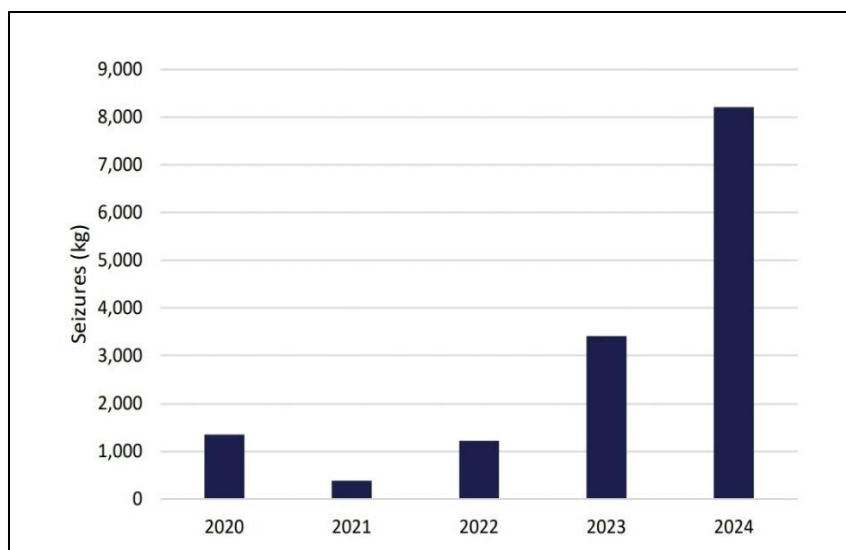
⁴⁸ Star, T. D. (2018, October 9). *Death penalty for yaba offenders*. Retrieved from The Daily Star: <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/drug-control-act-2018-bangladesh-death-penalty-for-yaba-trading-1644190>

⁴⁹ Ginkel, M. V. (2020, May 25). *Rohingya Refugees Smuggle Drugs for Insurgents in Myanmar*. Retrieved from New Security Beat: <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2020/05/rohingya-refugees-smuggle-drugs-insurgents-myanmar/>

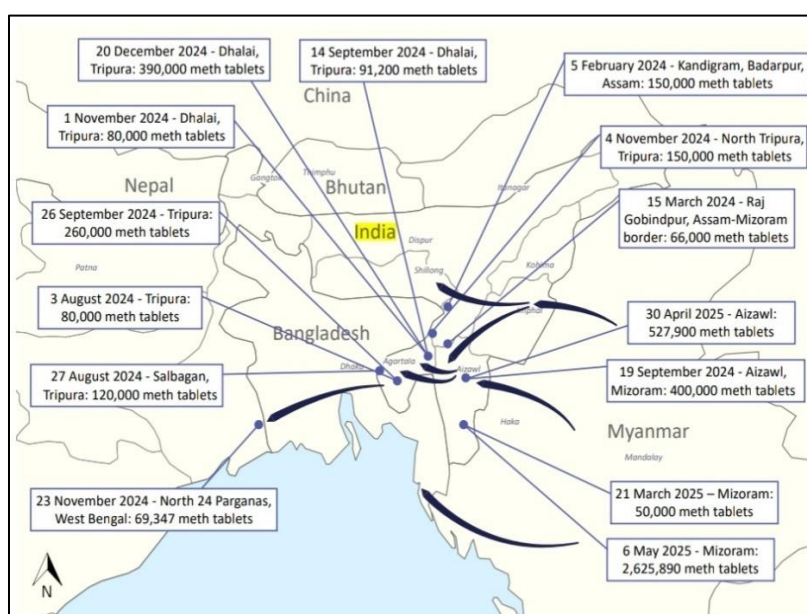
⁵⁰ Vanlalruata, H. (2023, May 24). *Rs 33-crore crystal meth seized in Aizawl, 1 held*. Retrieved from Times of India: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/rs-33-crore-crystal-meth-seized-in-aizawl-1-held/articleshow/100459550.cms>

⁵¹ IndiaTodayNE. (2023, September 2). *Assam Rifles seized drugs worth Rs 4,200 crore in last four years: DG PC Nair*. Retrieved from IndiaTodayNE: <https://www.indiatodayne.in/assam/story/assam-rifles-seized-drugs-worth-rs-4200-crore-in-last-four-years-dg-pc-nair-671427-2023-09-02>

⁵² Desai, R. N. (2024, September 1). *Ramification | How instability in Myanmar fosters drug trade, affects India's security*. Retrieved from Firstpost: <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/how-instability-in-myanmar-fosters-drug-trade-affects-indias-security-13810413.html>



In Pic: Seizures of amphetamine-type stimulants in India, 2020-24⁵³



In Pic: Major Methamphetamine seizures and trafficking flows in North East India, 2024 & 2025(May)⁵⁴

⁵³ UNODC. (2025). *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest Development and Challenges*. Bangkok: UNODC.

⁵⁴ UNODC. (2025). *Synthetic Drugs in East and Southeast Asia: Latest Development and Challenges*. Bangkok: UNODC.

Ironically, as Shan State remains fractured with semi-autonomous groups and profiteering militias, the only drugs that cut through the ethnic and political divides are heroin and methamphetamine. The market is flooded with fake pills made entirely of caffeine. With the retreat of the real warlords in Kokang, there are now many brands of drugs, but no single dominant controller of the illegal trade. This disperses the illicit cash used to fund militias among all producers and traffickers, making the situation far more complicated than before. Leading investigative journalist Patrick Winn wrote in his book *Narcotopia*, “With more than fifty billion pills produced so far this century, a conservative estimate—Yaba is among the most popular illegal products ever created. It’s probably the most consequential narcotic innovation in modern times”.⁵⁵ So when the United Nations suggests growing alternative crops such as coffee beans, there is much left to be said.

It is also reported that after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, opium cultivation shifted to Myanmar. In Myanmar, following the coup, the collapse of law and order has led to a significant surge in drug production. UNODC notes that opium cultivation has increased by 100,000 acres (~88 % growth), yielding 790 t of potential refined opium.⁵⁶

Critical Earth Minerals – The New Blood Diamonds

In an investigation by the Associated Press, Myanmar was termed the “Sacrifice Zone” due to the price it is paying for the world’s shift to green energy. Amongst other findings, the investigation revealed that although the US Congress required companies to disclose conflict minerals with the assurance that they do not benefit armed groups, the law did not include rare earth minerals. Rare earth elements were also found to be excluded from the European Union’s 2021 regulation on conflict minerals. Recently, Myanmar has become one of the top four countries worldwide producing rare earth elements. Unregulated mining, coupled with political instability, has fostered an environment of clandestine deals and profits shared by militias and insurgent groups. Chin and Rakhine States, as well as the Sagaing Region, alongside Kachin State, are also rich in resources such as aluminium, nickel, iron, chromite, oil, and gas. Most importantly, they are abundant in heavy rare earth elements (HREE), such as dysprosium and terbium, which are classified as the most critical elements among rare earths.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Desai, R. N. (2024, September 1). *Ramification / How instability in Myanmar fosters drug trade, affects India’s security*. Retrieved from Firstpost: <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/how-instability-in-myanmar-fosters-drug-trade-affects-indias-security-13810413.html>

⁵⁶ UNODC. (2023, January 26). *UNODC Report – major opium economy expansion is underway in Myanmar*. Retrieved from UNODC: <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/myanmar/2023/01/myanmar-opium-survey-report/story.html>

⁵⁷ <https://openthemagazine.com/columns/the-new-great-game/>

During my closed-door discussions with many stakeholders on the critical earth and heavy rare earth mining industry in Myanmar, there was considerable interest in engaging with India. Currently, China is the largest purchaser of Critical Earth Minerals and HREEs from Myanmar. It was noted that over 880 trucks transit the border from one mine. However, India faces challenges in the critical earth mining sector due to a lack of processing laboratories within the country, making it unlikely for India to become a second market for Myanmar anytime soon. Nonetheless, the US appears to have an interest in this market. In early August 2025, following the lifting of sanctions, reports emerged that some junta leaders indicated that the Trump administration had been approached with proposals to access Myanmar's critical earth minerals and HREE.⁵⁸ If the US becomes involved and shifts policy towards the military junta, India can expect increased competition between China and the US in its backyard.

Prospects and Perspectives

Myanmar is a country of importance to India, particularly for India's northeastern region. With ongoing instability and no immediate signs of conflict resolution, India must recognise not only the volatility of the situation but also the different levels of influence held by various stakeholders. Not all EAOs possess the same degree of influence or negotiating power. For instance, AA in Rakhine State or KIA remain largely intact, but this cannot be said for the Chin groups. The Chins are highly divided. The Chinland Council (CC) consists of various groups:

1. CDF-KKG
2. TCC/ CDF-Thangtlang (Thantlang Central Council)
3. ZC/ CDF-Zophei (Zophei Council)
4. LPAC/ CDF-Lautu (Lautu People's Affairs Council)
5. ZFV/ CDF-Zotung (Zotung Federal Council)
6. IMC/ CDF-Mara (Interim Maraland Council)
7. MTC/ CDF-Matupi Brigade-2 (Matupi Township Council)
8. MTC/ CDF-Mindat (Mindat Township Council)
9. KTC/ CDF-Kanpetlet (Kanpetlet Township Council)
10. PTC/ CDF-Paletwa (Paletwa Township Council)
11. HPO/ CDF-Hualngoram (Hualngoram Peoples Organisation)
12. ZPO/ CDF-Zanniatram (Zanniatram Peoples Organisation)
13. CDF/ CDM-Siyin
14. TTC/ PDA-Tedim (Tedim Township Council)
15. TTC/ CDF-Tonzang (Tonzang Township Council)
16. TC/ CDF-Thado (Thado Council)
17. HCC/ CDF-Hakha (Hakha Central Council)
18. SCC/ CDF-Senthang (Senthang Central Council)
19. CNF/ A

⁵⁸ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/dangerous-allure-myanmars-rare-earths>

And, the Interim Chin National Consultative Council (ICNCC)/ Chin Brotherhood (CB) comprises various groups, including:

1. ZFU/ PDF-Zoland (Zomi Federal Union)
2. CNO/ CNDF (Chin National Organisation)
3. CNC/ CDF-Mindat (Chin National Council)
4. MTC/ MDF (Maraland Territorial Council)
5. CDF-Kanpetlet
6. CDF-Matupi
7. Arakan Army (with an understanding)

*Zomi Revolutionary Army (Eastern Command): It is a separate, stand-alone group and has no alliance with the CC or ICNCC. However, they also have no hostility towards CB, but they have issues with the CNF/A group.

These divisions can lead to territorial disputes and internal conflicts. The different factions have varying aspirations and plans for the future. For example, in the case of CDF, they are unhappy with CB's loose partnership with AA, which enables AA to reach Paletwa in Chin state.

There is also the question of differing end goals for each organisation. Some aim for federalism, some for independence, and others for confederation. AA, which is not part of the NUG, has used all three terms in their speeches, suggesting they may negotiate for any of them, while KIA is not averse to independence. Therefore, there may be a shared opposition, but not a common end goal. This makes the combined resistance vulnerable.

NUG, on the other hand, serves as a loose umbrella organisation for some of the EAOs under the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), the advisory body for NUG. There have also been reports of corruption. If NUG cannot reform itself and rebuild its credibility, it will probably lose the support of EAOs who currently back them. Additionally, as the US is likely to change its stance on Myanmar, the NUG has much to think about. A key reason why the NUG has not achieved the same impact as the 8888 revolution is the absence of a unifying leadership, such as Aung San Su Kyi. Despite the criticism aimed at her, she became the symbol of democracy. Today, the post-coup Myanmar is a faceless revolution. Another factor undermining this revolution is the absence of a shared goal, as each group has different ambitions.

India must engage on multiple fronts. Although India's soft power remains strong, especially through its Buddhist connections, relying solely on it is unwise. Myanmar is likely to attract many international interests vying for influence. Moreover, the US and China may compete through Myanmar, potentially affecting India as well. Therefore, India should begin strategically building strong relationships with local populations along its northeastern borders. The local people need medical aid, higher education, and other essentials. India can contribute by fostering a generation of Myanmarese who feel a connection to India. This involves providing basic medical support and equipment to states like Chin and Rakhine. Additionally, India can make special provisions for conflict-affected students to study there.



Image ©Rami N. Desai

In Pic: Pangsau Pass at the India-Myanmar Border

For border security, it is imperative to disseminate correct information to locals on both sides. There is intense anxiety due to rumours that the borders will be entirely shut down on both ends. The Indian government's policy must be clarified and should reassure those who legitimately trade through border *haats* or have family ties across the border.

The mesh wire fencing in the “Hybrid Fencing” pilot project, as observed in some areas near Pangsau Pass in the northeast, might not be sufficient. There are risks of misuse. Nevertheless, the electronic surveillance system is a welcome development. It is vital that tracking and biometrics of all individuals entering are made compulsory to prevent any illegal infiltration. Refugees seeking temporary shelter must be registered.

The government must also continue its crackdown on drugs, monitoring new variations. Besides heroin, Opium, and Yaba pills, new drugs are emerging every year. Recently, “Happy Water”, a drug that resembles water and is tasteless and odourless, has been reported.

The scam centres run from Myanmar have repercussions not only for the victims of the scams but also for those being trafficked to these centres. India must collaborate with Thailand and intensify efforts to crack down on recruiters. They should also raise awareness within India about such recruitment practices. These recruiters earn a 20% commission for each person they recruit. NGOs like Global Advance Projects and Acts of Mercy in Mae Sot, Thailand, which have rescued and rehabilitated thousands of victims from cyberscam compounds, suggest this might be the largest transnational human trafficking event in history. Considering that these custom-built compounds were constructed only in 2020 specifically for cyberscam operations, it is estimated that the industry now forms a \$3 trillion economy. It is also supported by the world's largest organised crime syndicate. Over 100,00 people are believed to be held in these compounds.

The highly discussed Critical Earth Mining and Heavy Rare Earth Elements in Myanmar are likely to attract international interest. Besides Kachin State, many other groups are keen on exploring minerals within their territories. Inspired by KIA, they see such exploration as a way to generate revenue and have identified areas with potential. They are actively seeking to lease out exploration rights, which will draw many interested parties from abroad. India must assess the risks and consider how close these actors are to the northeastern borders. Sagaing, Chin, and Rakhine States all hold potential, particularly along the banks of the Chindwin River.

Finally, India must deepen its engagement with Myanmar at all levels. The more farsighted India is at this point, the more secure its northeastern borders will be in the future. Policymakers, civilians, NGOs, scholars, religious groups, and the military must collaborate systematically. Myanmar is vital for regional stability, and if India wants to maintain stability in its vicinity, it must act as a stakeholder. While India has demonstrated a mature diplomatic approach towards Myanmar thus far, the unpredictable nature of the conflict there means that even elections might not resolve the issues. Therefore, India should adopt a long-term strategic plan and engage accordingly.

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