A Special Report by

Factum and Mizzima

A RUPTURING STATE

The Shape of Myanmar in Two Years

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Published by
Factum and **Mizzima**

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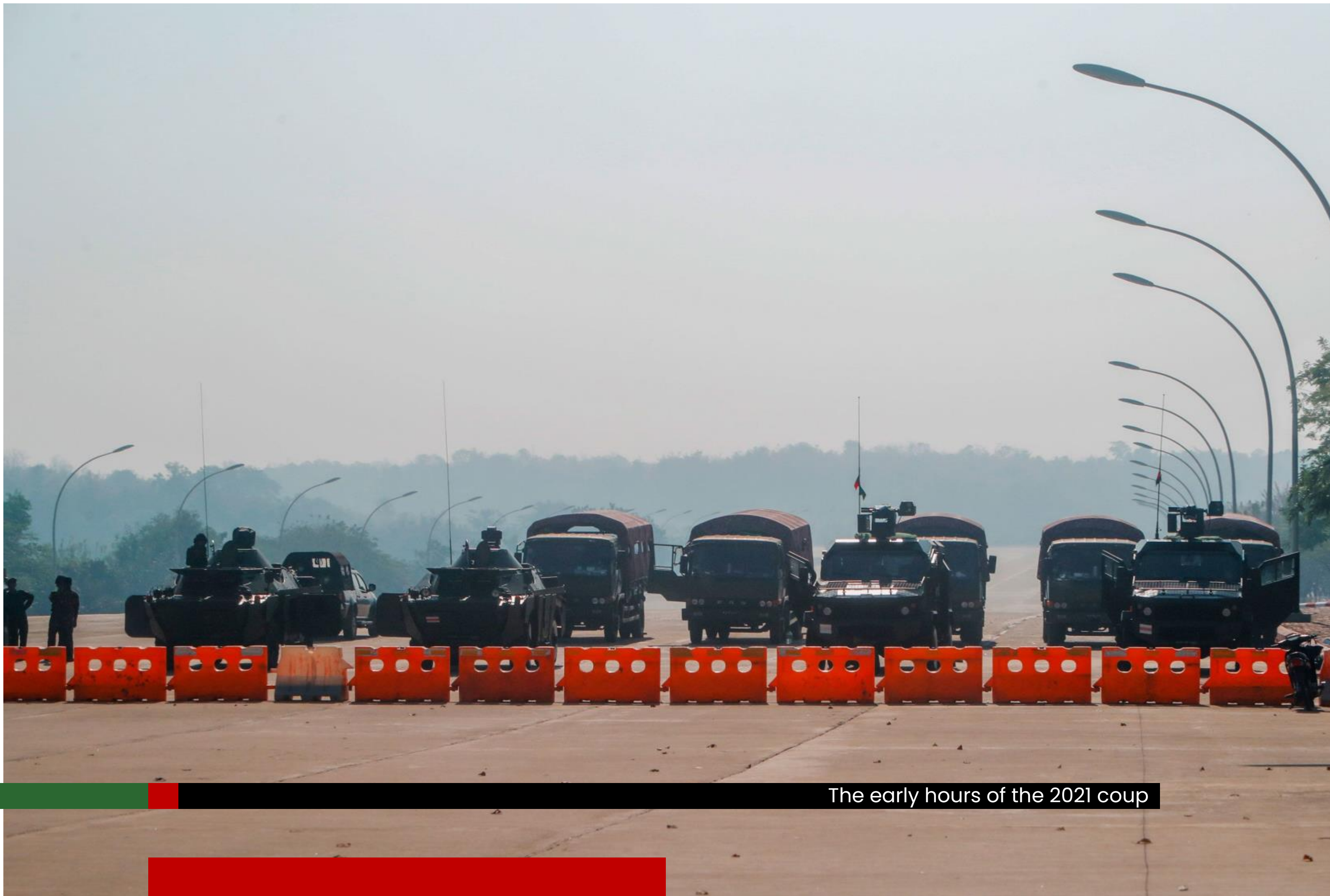

The early hours of the 2021 coup

INTRODUCTION

On October 27, 2023, an outfit calling itself the Three Brotherhood Alliance carried out a series of targeted attacks in Myanmar's northern Shan State. The Alliance, composed of three Ethnic Armed Organisations, declared an all-out war against the State Administration Council (SAC), the junta that has been in power since 2021, when it carried out a coup which ended a democratically elected rule in the country that came into effect after more than five decades of military and quasi military regimes.

The attacks came as a surprise for the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's army. They have since been followed by strikes on other parts and regions, all coordinated by various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). Their aim is to get rid of the junta that overthrew the Aung San Suu Kyi government in February 2021 in a surprise coup.

In this they have been joined by People's Defence Forces (PDF), outfits which are allied with the National Unity Government (NUG), the government-in-exile operating from Thailand and elsewhere dedicated to overthrowing the junta. The PDFs have been launching attacks as well; on April 4, 2024, it launched a drone strike in the capital.

The NUG is headed by Win Myint, the president of Myanmar who is currently

under house arrest. Acting for him in the government-in-exile is Duwa Lashi La. Under him is a Prime Minister, Mahn Winn Khaing Thann. The NUG has several Ministries to its name, including Defence; Planning, Finance, and Investment; Education; Federal Union Affairs; Human Rights; Labour; Justice; Commerce; and of course, Foreign Affairs.

For the Ethnic Armed Organisations, defeating the military junta has become part of a wider strategy of rupturing and redrawing the Myanmar State. This has made it more imperative than ever for the exiled NLD regime to challenge the SAC on the international stage. The NUG, under a new Federal Charter, is now represented at the UN through its Ambassador, Kyaw Moe Tun. It has been afforded international recognition. However, the absence of a coordinated leadership among ethic armed groups and non-recognition of NUG by many armed groups have become a major impediment in the search for a solution.

Today, Myanmar is home to 135 ethnic groups, in addition to others that have yet to be officially recognised. It is also home to more than 500 ethnic armed groups. In the pre-colonial era, the Myanmar (or Burma) of today never existed as one country. When the country gained independence from Britain in 1948, nationalist forces attempted to reach an agreement with these groups to consolidate Myanmar (Burma) within a unitary framework. While these negotiations led to such an agreement, subsequent developments, including long periods of military rule, upended it.

Post-independence, Myanmar has suffered from two protracted but interrelated crises: one of democracy and one of representation. These have unleashed two kinds of conflict: the first between the military and civilian forces, the second between the State and Ethnic Armed Organisations. Engagements between these entities have not been infrequent, but they have never been sustained. The country does accommodate ethnic parties, and this has secured for minorities some representation. Yet that has not helped pacify separatist sentiments or resolve the complex relationships between these groups.

At present there are five distinct political entities operating in the country.

1. The State Administrative Council and its allies
2. The National Unity Government (NUG) and its allied EAOs
3. EAOs not allied with the NUG
4. EAOs advocating confederation in the country
5. EAOs that are signatories to the 2018 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

The February 2021 coup, in that sense, demonstrated two things about the character of the Myanmar State and the complexities of ethnicity in the country. The first was the fragility of civilian democracy in Myanmar. Despite the lurch into democratic rule in 2015, the military managed to wield power and influence behind-the-scenes.

This had two effects on the ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). One, it made the democratically elected government dependent on the military's approval. Two, it compelled the State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, to

defend the army, especially during the 2016-2017 Rohingya crisis.
The second was the growing unpopularity of the civilian government among the country's ethnic minorities, particularly the as-yet unrecognised Rohingyas. The NLD government did, to be sure, attempt a truce with these groups: in 2017, in the backdrop of the Rohingya crisis, for instance, it began an ambitious peace process in an attempt to end hostilities. While a number of EAGs took part in these proceedings, many chose not to, partly because of the government's response to the refugee crisis.

Following the coup, the National Unity Government has tried to take this process forward by bringing together activists and ethnic leaders and forging a consensus between them. This has seemingly been received well. A recent survey, for instance, indicates support for the NUG from numerous ethnic groups. But such surveys are based on small samples. To what extent do they bear out one analyst's view of the NUG being "well placed to initiate a rebuilding of Myanmar as a peaceful, multiethnic nation-state"?

Moreover, Myanmar is a powder keg of ethnic tension, with conflicts between different groups. Does the NUG have what it takes to bring them all to one table? These are the million-dollar questions that demand clear answers.

Western commentators are optimistic about the NUG, though most Western countries have yet to fully recognise it. Countries like China are trying out different strategies, as is India. These countries have been wary of engaging directly with ethnic armed groups, even as analysts have urged a change of approach.

Moreover, the NUG's efforts appear to be directed at transforming Myanmar into a federal democracy. This, too, has been received well by critics of the junta. But are Ethnic Armed Organisations ready to embrace such an arrangement?

Making matters more complicated, not all Ethnic Armed Organisations are going along with the NUG. These stem from their suspicions of the Aung San Suu Kyi government and its intentions regarding the way forward for Myanmar.

Certainly, the military is in a weaker state than it was prior to 2011, when the country began transitioning to civilian rule. Beset with Western sanctions and international pressure, it has few friends abroad. Even China, once an ally, has become wary. Beijing has several interests in the country, including a series of oil and gas pipelines that fall within its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Not long ago, the stability the military was able to bring about in Myanmar endeared it to China. The situation has changed considerably since.

Today, Beijing is talking to Ethnic Armed Organisations, not the SAC, to ensure safety for its infrastructure projects. It has also tried to broker a ceasefire with the obvious intention of safeguarding its investments. The situation is the same with two of the other countries that share a border with Myanmar: Thailand and India.

Every other day, the military junta registers defeat in some region or State. Control of these regions is now falling into the hands of ethnic groups and

leaders. While no government has accorded recognition to these outfits, the reality is that they have no choice but to talk to their representatives. In India in particular, the situation has become so complex that the government has sought to fence off its border with Myanmar. Last February, India suspended its Free Movement Regime (FMR) VISA arrangement with the country.

More problematically, there is a fear that secessionist tendencies in Myanmar will reinforce secessionist tendencies in regions of other countries that border it. Arguably the most pressing example of this is the concept of a "Greater Mizoram", encompassing the Mizo and Kuki-Zo people of northeast India and the Chi people of Myanmar.

Analysts in such countries tend to dismiss these possibilities. They believe in the ability of the Myanmar State to withstand such pressures. This is the official line of the government as well. Yet, on the ground, Members of Parliament are meeting with representatives of ethnic organisations, inadvertently conferring legitimacy on them.

Not surprisingly, these outfits see themselves as the official voices of their regions: on March 25, for instance, the Arakan Army (AA), in Rakhine State, stated it would welcome foreign investments in its territories and that it would protect these investments. Such statements show that these outfits are willing to engage with the international community, in return for recognition of their control over their territories.

All these portend a downfall of the State machinery, and not just the military government. The NUG appears to have recognised this reality, but it has rationalised it in terms of a move towards a federal arrangement. The question is whether the Ethnic Armed Organisations in Myanmar's border areas are prepared to accept this or whether we will see a breakup of the country on lines similar to the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

On top of all these arguments, the junta has announced that it will hold elections in the country next year. It remains to be seen whether the junta has the domestic and geopolitical strength and will to go ahead with this.

The impact of the current conscription law should also be carefully calculated. Many Myanmar youths have migrated to Thailand and other countries while the junta has been able to forcibly recruit more than 5,000 young men for its first batch. There is much speculation that the law will target young women as well. How far this mass exodus will impact the country's socioeconomic dynamics is yet to be studied.

This paper thus seeks to go beyond official narratives of the situation in Myanmar by talking to certain experts on the ground to get a better understanding of what is happening there, and more importantly, what will happen over the next 15 months. In the interests of their safety, we have decided not to disclose their names.

The authors do not completely dismiss the optimism surrounding the prospect of civilian rule in Myanmar. But they do not believe that the resistance against the junta can be explained in terms of

the rift between civilian democracy and military autocracy. The resumption of military administration from 2021 has strengthened centrifugal forces. These seem unlikely to be pacified by a simple return to civilian democracy. Unlike previous transitions from military to civilian rule or vice-versa, a transition in the present context will not work without a radically different political arrangement.

In other words, what we will see is not a new Myanmar, but a new conception of Myanmar, a far cry from the unitary structure it operates within today.

Chapter 1 of this paper looks at the broad historical outline of the conflict. Chapter 2 looks at the protean character of the Myanmar State. Chapters 3 to 7 assess the wider geopolitical ramifications of the conflict, with reference to Thailand, China, India, and Bangladesh. Chapters 8 and 9 evaluate the conflict in four States. In our conclusion we try to predict the future trajectory of the conflict, and the country, over the next 15 months.

Protesters, 1988 Uprising (Courtesy of Gaye Paterson / NPR)

THE HISTORY OF A CONFLICT

The roots of the conflict in Myanmar go back decades. Until its colonisation by the British in 1865, the country was overseen by a succession of kingdoms. Precolonial conceptions of nationality are notoriously fluid and shaped by markers like ethnicity. As a composite of several ethnic and religious groups, precolonial Myanmar could thus hardly be described as a State: a point equally applicable to India, even Sri Lanka.

British colonisation did, to some extent, consolidate such a State in the country. But as in India and Africa, the administration failed to bring about an all-encompassing Burmese nationalism. Unlike in India, where the colonial State survived even after independence, however, in Myanmar it threatened to give way from early on. By the mid-20th century, contestations between the country's ethnic groups had become a fact of life. By the 1940s, these were threatening to swamp and overwhelm the colonial State.

What could have paved the way to a confederation of States, however, was frozen, if for a brief period, by Burmese nationalist forces. Led by Aung San, these forces negotiated independence from Britain and organised a summit with several of the country's ethnic and

religious groups. That summit, the Panglong Conference, took place in 1947. It brought together Aung San and representatives of three communities, the Shan, Kachin, and Chin. Aung San had invited other groups as well, but they chose to boycott. One of these, the Karenni, had by then formed an armed group, the Karen National Union (KNU), which goes down as one of the oldest armed groups in Asia.

The Panglong Conference resulted in the Panglong Agreement, which laid the foundation for the Union of Burma. Essentially, the agreement was between Myanmar's first postcolonial government and the Frontier States: regions occupied by ethnic minorities, including the Shan and Chin people. Panglong amounted, in effect, to a Social Contract between these units, between the centre and the periphery: an arrangement unique in Asian history and quite different to the Indian and Sri Lankan experience.

However, almost immediately after the signing of the Panglong Agreement, the political situation grew restless. Aung San was assassinated by a member of the Burmese armed forces. His death had two implications for the future of Myanmar: it deprived the country of a unifying figure, and it ruptured what little stability he had brought about. Barely a decade after independence, the country was thus thrown into turbulence and chaos.

In 1958 a split in Aung San's party, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, led to a takeover by a caretaker administration. Four years later the military staged a coup. The new government suspended the 1947 Constitution, which had been drafted in consultation with ethnic minority groups. Its suspension had a predictably negative impact on relations between the government and the Frontier States, and stoked tensions. The government's authoritarian-socialist bent only worsened those tensions.

Yet it could not quite ignore calls for democratisation. In 1974 the military government, led by General Ne Win, promulgated a new Constitution. Though the new document tried to address minority grievances – which had grown and been amplified in the face of the government's land, nationalisation, and distribution policies – it did little to resolve them. The enactment of the Constitution indicated, however, that political elites were thinking more concretely about the problems of national unity and of minorities.

By now the country had faced several ethnic insurgencies. In the 1950s and 1960s Shan and Kachin States witnessed a number of armed uprisings. Not surprisingly, these led to the formation of several groups, including the Shan State Army in 1968. They were followed by other groups: prominently, the Chin National Army in 1988.

The 1974 Constitution paved the way for a period of modest or limited democratisation. That year the country held its first elections in over a decade, though still under military control, to both the People's Assembly and People's Councils, and General Ne Win emerged as President. These political reforms were followed by a reversal of the country's socialist policies: the government removed controls on foreign investment and began engaging with institutions like the Asian Development Bank. This

signalled a turnaround in Myanmar's history, even as ethnic tensions remained intact.

Sadly, these trysts with quasi-democracy did not last for long.

In August 1988, following a period of stagnation and pressure, several thousands of protestors took to the streets. The armed forces stepped in and met them with heavy resistance. Led by General Saw Maung, the military killed thousands of demonstrators. It dismantled the People's Assembly and, in its place, established a State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The protest movement itself became historic with its own branding, called the 8888 Movement. The military also changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar, claiming the name to be more inclusive – which it was, since "Burma" is derived from "Bamar", the country's ethnic majority.

Though it held elections in 1990 – at which the National League for Democracy (NLD), headed by Aung San's daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, recorded a landslide win – the military government did not permit a transition to civilian administration. Suu Kyi was held in detention and house arrest, while the SLORC consolidated its position in the face of Western sanctions and much international condemnation. Several developments in the 2000s – including Western sanctions – however, compelled the military government to change course. Accordingly, in 2008, it enacted a new Constitution.

Myanmar began a transition into civilian government in 2011. That year the country's newly constituted legislature convened to put the new constitution into effect. The new President, Thein Sein, implemented several political and economic reforms. The military stayed back in all this, but its relationship with the government never really ended: though it relinquished control, it wielded influence behind the scenes.

However, this quasi-military regime paved the way for drastic democratic reforms, engaged with the international community, ended a five-decade long media censorship, commenced robust negotiations with ethnic groups for a lasting solution, and opened up the country for a long-term transition in its governance.

The country witnessed its first completely free elections in over five decades in 2015. As in 1990, the National League for Democracy recorded a resounding victory. Unlike then, the NLD's leader Aung San Suu Kyi was permitted to take control. Yet Suu Kyi failed to make drastic changes to the country's military-dominated constitution. As a result, the military did not relinquish its power; it stayed on the sidelines.
Moreover, she could not be the Head of the State due to constitutional barricades, specifically her marriage to a British national. This in effect turned her into the powerhouse of the country minus proper status and experience.

Showered by international accolades and prestige, the new administration held the promise of a turnaround in Myanmar's long, troubled history. This proved to be yet another mirage. Many of her critics are of the view that she failed in governance inspite of her iconic status and that led the military to overrun her decisions. Even EAOs, who were her

supporters at 2015 elections, became frustrated with her by the end of her tenure. Nevertheless, people still had to gather around her against the military led main opposition political party, the USDP, given their deep-rooted animosity against the military.

The turmoil that followed – including the Rohingya crisis – indicated two fundamental weaknesses in Suu Kyi's government. Paradoxically, her resounding victory in 2015 had made her suspect in the eyes of the military. This bound her tightly to the military – to the extent that she spoke on its behalf, and in its defence, at the UN Human Rights Council in 2019 over allegations of genocide against the Rohingyas. At the same time, the extent of her party's victory – the NLD won 134 of 225 and 255 of 440 seats in the country's Lower and Upper Houses respectively – precluded the possibility of an alliance with ethnic-based parties that had contested elections. The party had won big, and in securing such a wide victory margin it did not see the need to secure pacts with ethnic outfits.

The failure of the Suu Kyi government to address minority grievances, particularly the Rohingya refugee crisis, and its accommodation of ultranationalist elements, including hardline Buddhist monks, crippled it and won it little favour globally. Suu Kyi's detention in the aftermath of the February 2021 coup did little to improve her reputation, though as some have argued, she remains relevant.

In any case, what her brief period in power seemed to demonstrate, at least for minority groups, was the failure of even civilian government to ensure their safety. This was despite Suu Kyi's attempts at reviving the Panglong Agreement. In 2017, the NLD government took forward a peace process started in 2011, aimed at bringing together the country's ethnic armed groups. Though these efforts culminated in several summits, and a number of ethnic armed groups added their signatures to a pact, nothing came of it.

Arguably the biggest takeaway from Myanmar's post-independence history would be that while military regimes have failed to defuse ethnic tensions, civilian regimes have not fared any better. What the country is witnessing at present is a crisis of confidence and credibility. If the NLD's failures reinforced ethnic tensions, the return to military rule after 2021 has reinforced them even more. Against that backdrop, we are confronted with a question: if both civilian and military governments have, in 76 years of independence, failed to resolve Myanmar's ethnic conflict, what would constitute a feasible solution?

General Min Aung Hlaing

DECONSTRUCTING THE MYANMAR STATE

Myanmar is presently headed by a State Administrative Council (SAC), which serves as a spiritual successor, of sorts, to the State Law and Order Council (SLOC), which was in operation from 1988 to 1997, and the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which was in operation from 1997 to 2011. All these were military run and military dominated, and all of them were widely opposed and resisted, locally and internationally.

The armed forces, the Tatmadaw, has historically seen itself as a political institution unto itself, often within the State but sometimes in adjunct to it. During the 2015-2021 National League for Democracy (NLD) period, for instance, it played a behind-the-scenes-role that affected every facet of that regime. Its relationship with successive civilian governments - and there haven't been many of them - is slightly analogous to the Pakistani army's relations with the Pakistani State, or to Thailand, where military interventions take place regardless of people's wishes whenever the military deems them necessary.

What Myanmar constitutes politically is a matter of debate. It is usually described as a dictatorship, with complete oversight by the military. Two months

before the coup, however, one analyst noted that the country had transitioned into a "quasi-democratic administration." Given that the aim of the coup was to preempt elections that had been mandated by the Constitution, of course, this hardly seems appropriate.

Yet analyses that totalise the country as a military-run fiefdom are also, at one level, inadequate. A more helpful way of making sense of the Myanmar State would be to refer to the three Constitutions that have been enacted since independence. All three attempted to mediate the relationship between the centre and the periphery. All three attempted, within a unitary framework, to facilitate transfers from the central government to local authorities and confer constitutional equality on all parts of the country.

At present, Myanmar contains 330 townships and 74 districts. Local government activity, and most central government activity, takes place at the township level. This underlies the importance of regional administration. It sits upon a complex network of ethnic based political parties that have been jostling for power at the national level for over 75 years. Unlike in Sri Lanka and, to a lesser extent, India, however, these parties have not gained a reputation as kingmakers and deal-clinchers vis-a-vis mainstream parties.

Nevertheless, their importance cannot be overstated. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the NLD's landslide win in 2015 turned it away from these parties. Simply put, the NLD did not need smaller parties or coalitions to consolidate its position. Ethnic based parties were seen, in this scheme of things, as dispensable; the winning party did not need to negotiate with them. However, the NLD's post-2015 trajectory, especially during the Rohingya crisis, would have differed if it had entered alliances with these parties. In the least, these would have aided its efforts at a ceasefire in 2017 and 2018.

More than anything, it could have helped pacify some of the more violent separatist outfits fighting across the Frontier States today. To say this, of course, is not to conflate *political parties* with *militant groups*. As the Sri Lankan experience illustrates well, the relationship between these two groups can be and often is complex: at the height of the 30-year civil war, for instance, the LTTE, the main separatist outfit, grew hostile towards Tamil parties that engaged with the Sri Lankan government, going so far as to assassinate their leaders and cast aspersions on the Tamil political mainstream. But in Myanmar, linkages between ethnic armed groups and political parties are stronger and more durable.

In India, much more so than Sri Lanka separatist tendencies have been blunted by a sense of pan-Indian national consciousness. The absence of such a consciousness, by contrast, has accentuated these tendencies in Myanmar, more so than in Sri Lanka. While even the 1974 and 2008 Myanmar Constitutions, both of which were drafted under military rule, have tried to address ethnic grievances, the military has pushed towards centralisation. This has led to minority groups losing their faith in the political process.

Moreover, despite its trysts with civilian rule, Myanmar society has been

permeated in every aspect by the military. This is again in contrast to India and Sri Lanka, electoral democracies where protest movements, even insurgencies, have been fended off by the ballot. In such societies, the political system retains some credibility and continuity. In Myanmar, by contrast, there is neither credibility nor continuity.

Historically, the military has tried to appease or pacify insurgent movements, especially in states like Karen, Shan, Chin, and Rakhine, by resorting to a combination of authoritarian measures and economic incentives. For instance, the 1974-1988 regime attempted to bank on predictions of an economic revival, following its opening up of the country to foreign aid and investment. Such approaches have two dangers: one, the predicted revival does not materialise - as indeed it did not in the 1980s - and two, ethnic groups themselves have no interest in economic incentives.

On the other hand, as has been argued in the previous chapter, a return to civilian rule is not a guarantee of peace and conflict resolution either. This is because elections are about numbers, numbers are about votes, and votes in countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and India are reducible to ethno-religious constituencies. Western societies are no different in this regard, as the rise of alt-right populist movements makes clear. But where clan, kinship, and tribal affiliations are strong, elections tend to be won by the party that commands the highest votes from majority communities. This has the effect of disenchanting other groups, of turning them away from the political process.

In that sense, resistance to the military junta in Myanmar has played itself out along two axes: the *democratic-authoritarian axis* and the *unitary-confederation axis*. The first has been fought between within the political centre, between Opposition political parties and the regime; the second has been and continues to be fought between the political centre and the ethnic periphery. At present, the first of these battles have been played out between the military junta and the NLD-dominated National Unity Government, the second between the many ethnic-based outfits and the armed forces.

Neither the NUG nor the ethnic-based groups recognise the State Administrative Council. Both have resorted to arms: in the most recent such attacks, NUG allied People's Defence Forces launched strikes across several “important locations” in Naypyitaw, the country’s capital. The attack marked a turning point of sorts in the conflict, since the military considers Naypyitaw as a fortress.

These attacks have one objective: to bring the military junta down. But what analysts and commentators have not appreciated enough is that there is no overarching unity regarding the road ahead between the NUG and ethnic armed groups.

On the surface, some form of unity exists. In January this year, for instance, the NUG and three armed groups - the Chin National Front, Karenni National Progressive Party, and Karen National Union - issued a joint statement and an ultimatum against the junta. Among its aims were the overturning of the junta and the abrogation of the 2008

Constitution - and most importantly, the enactment of a “federal democratic constitution.”

Such gestures are remarkable, if laudable. But they underlie certain complexities. The NLD’s less than effective response to the Rohingya crisis, for instance, has not won it any favours from that community: even if Karen and Chin States have signed off on a pact with the NUG. Moreover, though given asylum in Thailand and received well in the West, the NUG has yet to be accorded official recognition by the international community. They also depend on support from ethnic armed groups. Without the latter, they would simply not be able to exist and operate. As the following chapters will make clear, even India and China are now talking to the armed groups on their own interests.

Domestically, the conflict has become an opportunity for these groups to gain a legitimacy that has been denied to them for decades. To reiterate an earlier point, unlike in Sri Lanka and India, minority groups in Myanmar were never absorbed into the mainstream political theatre. While civilian and even military governments pandered to the idea of an alliance with these outfits, they were never fully incorporated into Myanmar’s body politic.

Against such a backdrop, ethnic outfits have lost confidence in the political process. The conflict has now given them a chance to achieve what they see as their historical task: of reconstituting the State in line with their ethnic aspirations. Whether this is in line with the NUG’s proposed federal constitution is, frankly, questionable.

A federal Myanmar may appear more amenable to minorities. Yet, upon closer inspection, it is as problematic as the idea of a unitary Myanmar. This is because the Myanmar State has been seen as a front for majoritarian nationalist interests. As historians have pointed out, successive governments tended to depict minority nationalisms as a foreign conspiracy, as something to be suppressed or in the least discouraged.

In this regard, the government’s advocacy of a united Myanmar has been derided as paternalistic at best and imperialist at worst. Today, ironically, the NUG’s advocacy of federalism is seen a little too late, if disingenuous.

The Myanmar State’s attitude to Ethnic Armed Organisations over the years has been no less problematic. While pursuing a mix of authoritarian measures and economic incentives, as noted earlier, it has also tried to absorb them into the larger, national political framework, mostly by force. This has been the basis of many of the cease-fire agreements successive governments entered with these outfits. This was clearly visible even during the high profile peace process of the 2010 quasi-military regime. Needless to say, all these CFAs have come to nothing: one of them, struck with the Kachin Independence Organisation in 1994, ended months after the resumption of civilian rule in 2011.

Thus, while the NUG wages its battles along both constitutional and military lines, making its case at the highest levels abroad, armed groups seem more concerned with preserving their identities and ensuring some form of autonomy for their people.

Popular anti-government movements tend to see a congruence of different streams of dissent. They gradually come together, leading to a transition of power. It is debatable whether such a transition will materialise in Myanmar soon - or even in the distant future - given the rifts and differences that characterise these groups, both between themselves and the State and also within themselves.

NUG Leaders at the State Department, 2023

THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

As yet, no major power has taken sides in the ongoing conflict in Myanmar. The US has urged a return to democracy, while Russia has invited junta leaders for talks and visits many times. While the National Unity Government (NUG) has built a network across Asia and the West, it has still not been accorded diplomatic recognition. Even the US, which has imposed several sanctions on the junta, has not endorsed the NUG as a legitimate government. Nor are such countries engaging fully with the ethnic groups. Washington's policy on Myanmar seems to be guided by Thailand's policy. In this regard, the US probably sees Bangkok along the same lines as it sees India in the Indian Ocean and South Asia.

Several reasons may explain this. The US, for instance, is involved with a war in Ukraine and Gaza. It may not be in a mood to get involved with a war in another region, especially one involving an organisation like ASEAN. Its response to the conflict has so far been to impose economic sanctions and issue condemnations. In 2022 it passed the Burma Act to facilitate transfers of non-lethal weapons to Ethnic Armed Organisations. This, however, appears to be as far as it will go in engaging with such outfits.

The European Union, too, has been ambivalent in its response. It continues to lay down sanctions against individuals connected to the junta. Like the US, however, it lacks a clear and concrete policy on anti-junta forces, though unlike the US it has thrown its support behind the NUG: in a resolution passed in

October 2021, the EU recognised the NUG as the "only legitimate representatives of the democratic wishes of the people of Myanmar," becoming the first international legislative body to do so. Washington, by contrast, has been content sending senior officials to meet NUG heads.

Resistance groups are, naturally enough, urging more action. In a letter to the EU and US last October - two days after Operation 1027 - a group of anti-junta forces, including the NUG, requested Western governments to expand sanctions, ensure humanitarian aid, and pressure the junta not to go ahead with "sham elections."

Crucially, the letter asked the EU and the US to recognise not just the NUG but also "evolving state governments" as Myanmar's "legitimate government", though it footnoted "other revolutionary forces" as just "democratic institutions." This underlies the NUG's complex relationship with other anti-junta outfits and how those complexities come out in its press releases. The letter also calls for a "federal democratic transition": a call which has yet to be fully endorsed by Western governments.

The US would want to do all it can to prevent a complete collapse in Myanmar. This is because, in their view, such a collapse can put the country directly under China's influence. But the ongoing conflict is so complex that it is difficult to tell just what the anti-junta forces feel about Beijing. As will be pointed out in the next few chapters, some of them have been working with China's tacit support. For Western analysts, this seems to be reason enough to do a U-turn on current US policy on Myanmar.

China has been engaging with both the military and resistance since the coup, and the military and resistance have responded to them. The NUG, in particular, has underlined China's importance for their country, though Beijing's relations with the military have obviously not endeared it to the opposition. In that scheme of things, China's strategy has been to wait and weigh it out, to see which side is winning against which.

If Myanmar collapses, that would disrupt China's infrastructure projects and undermine the BRI in the region. This would be in the US's and India's interest. To prevent such scenarios, however, Beijing is likely to do all it can to balance the junta and resistance, so that it can negotiate these projects with whoever succeeds the present government. In other words, the prospect of collapse has forced China to up its game in the country.

Here it must be noted that the Tatmdaw has seemingly split into two camps, one pro-Beijing and the other pro-Moscow. It is the pro-Russia group that seems to be steering the ship. This may explain Russia's willingness to support and deepen engagements with the military since the October 2023 attacks. This has been a two-way street: in early 2023, the Russian government reportedly requested military supplies from several countries, including Myanmar, in its ongoing campaign in Ukraine. At least one analyst has pointed out that even if its other allies abandon it, Moscow's support for Myanmar will remain.

This has been aggravated by several other developments, none more colourful than China's response to ongoing scam operations in Myanmar. These operations involved human trafficking, and more seriously for China, were endangering Chinese citizens. Its role in the October 27 attacks - more covert than overt, and yet also something of an open secret - facilitated the closure of various "scam factories" in the border region. Last March, for instance, China organised evacuation flights for many Chinese nationals who had been lured to these factories on false promises.

The resistance's actions so far, including allowing China to mediate in the conflict and even broker ceasefires, indicate that they acknowledge Beijing's importance in the region. This has given China a headstart over both the US and India, neither of which has reached out as fully as China has to resistance forces, including EAOs.

ASEAN has been even less proactive than Western governments. Immediately after the 2021 coup, the organisation debarred the junta from taking part in discussions and summits. Earlier this year, however, the junta sent a senior foreign ministry official, Marlar Than Htike, to a gathering of ASEAN foreign ministers in Laos. The meeting took place three years after ASEAN agreed on a five-point peace plan, which the military junta has failed to implement and, in light of the conflict, will not be implemented anytime soon.

Earlier this year, the organisation publicly called for a "Myanmar-owned and led solution" to the crisis. What it meant by this remains unclear. Saleumxay Kommasith, Laos's Foreign Minister, stated that it welcomed the country's attendance at its summits. But member states differ as to how the organisation should engage with the junta, with some advocating a stronger, firmer line. Geography doubtless accounts for such differences: countries like Thailand and Laos, which border on Myanmar, have been more flexible in their dealings with the military, to the consternation of the other members. Indonesia and the Philippines, the two democratic icons of the region, have so far been tough on the junta.

For humanitarian agencies, the situation in Myanmar has become too fluid to take sides or to directly engage with ethnic outfits. Organisations like Human Rights Watch, for instance, have accused the government of human rights violations, even genocide, but they have also accused anti-government forces of similar violations. While the UN Security Council has not taken a proper stand, one resolution has condemned the violence. Perhaps not surprisingly, China, Russia, and India chose to abstain from the vote there.

This is natural, and is to be expected in any conflict zone. Aid agencies, however, are faced with a trilemma here. On the one hand, they have been compelled to deal with Ethnic Armed Organisations, since in many areas it is these outfits that can offer them access to communities which are in need of food, water, medicine, and other necessities.

On the other hand, these outfits themselves stand accused of human rights violations and atrocities, including forcibly enlisting women into their militias and, in some cases, even murdering and raping villagers suspected as military informants. At the same time, the leaders

of these organisations have become de facto leaders of their localities. These communities no longer recognise the junta; for them it no longer exists, and if it does, it exists only to be systematically erased from their villages and homes.

The government has, all in all, become hostile to these agencies, blocking aid and sometimes threatening their staff and clamping down on them. But such reprisals have only empowered these organisations, in particular local humanitarian agencies.

These uncertainties explain why countries like the US are not engaging with the conflict, despite their history of intervening in the politics of South-East and South Asia. While Western analysts continue to urge a different approach, including reaching out to ethnic outfits, this is not going to happen anytime soon. South-East Asian countries have been less forthcoming in their response. For these countries, the military has not yet weakened to a point where it can be dispensed with. Yet the military has become hopelessly out of tune with ground realities, operating within an archaic mindset that ethnic organisations, in their mobilisation of mass discontent, have been easily able to undermine.

From all this, we can point at three geopolitical factors underlying the conflict.

1. **The humanitarian crisis.** Since the coup, more than 625,000 people have fled Myanmar and flooded into countries like Thailand, China, India, and Bangladesh. These countries have been accommodating them, but some of them are now turning refugees away. This has been fuelled by various factors. India, for instance, has begun deporting Rohingya refugees, an act its critics argue has been motivated by the BJP's pandering to Hindu nationalists. While countries like Thailand are signatories to refugee conventions, others like India are not. This has raised concerns about how these refugees are being treated. It goes without saying that the uptick in border crossings has impacted the politics of these countries.

2. **The strategic dimension.** Myanmar lies between the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. For its neighbours, it holds much strategic value. China, in particular, sees the country as a key outpost in its Belt and Road Initiative. It has invested USD 25 billion in infrastructure projects, including the Kyaukphyu deep sea port bordering Yunnan Province. With the State Administrative Council losing legitimacy and rebel groups proclaiming themselves as official representatives of these areas, though, these projects face an uncertain future. The typical strategy of these countries has been to talk to both the junta and the rebel groups.

3. **The ethnic factor.** Myanmar's frontier states are populated by minority groups who share ties with people living on the other side of the border. The Kokang people of Shan State, for instance,

are ethnically Chinese, while the Chin people of Chin and Rakhine States are close to the Kuki and Mizo people of northeast India. These ethnic arrangements have complicated matters for both sides. The concept of a Greater Mizoram, covering Chin State and parts of northeast India, is an interesting case in point. This will be covered in the following chapters.

These three points should not be assessed in isolation. Each snowballs into the other, and one reinforces all others. They have internal and external dimensions. India's treatment of Rohingya refugees, for instance, has a bearing on the politics of both India and Myanmar, and of course of Bangladesh, while the Chinese government's response to military activities in Chin State has been driven by its concerns for Chinese citizens living near the border.

For a clearer picture, the paper will look at three countries that have a stake in the conflict: Thailand, China, and India. It will assess how the conflict has impacted their ties with Myanmar and, more importantly, what these ties tell us about how they view the future of Myanmar in light of the junta's weakening position.

Myanmar-Thai Border

THAILAND AND MYANMAR

In the months following the 2021 coup, Thailand recorded a dramatic uptick in the number of Myanmar refugees entering the country, ballooning to 4,000 a month between March and May before stabilising at 2,000. Since the mid-1980s close to 100,000 Myanmar refugees have made their way to Thailand. This is one of several factors that have shaped its response to the ongoing conflict. Yet, as its critics note, Thailand's Myanmar policy has been neither consistent nor concrete. Economics and geopolitics continue to be key determinants of that policy, but they have often been overshadowed by other priorities.

At the outset, and as in India and China, Thailand's concerns are driven by its border with Myanmar. Regarding immigration, the country faces a quandary between its obligations to international refugee conventions and its crackdowns on illegal border crossings. A case in point here is the as yet undefined status of migrant born children.

In the eyes of its critics, the Thai government has not taken adequate steps to absorb these children, or their parents, into its society. Yet the Thai government would claim that it has done all it can do to adhere to its international obligations.

Despite these controversies, Thailand is seen as a potential mediator in the ongoing conflict. Its response to the junta, however, has been to accord the regime recognition while working behind the scenes to kickstart and fast-track a truce with rebel groups. It has persisted with this policy despite a backlash from ASEAN, which censured and blacklisted the junta after the coup, and despite a change of government in 2022, which saw the power pass over to business-turned-politician who, in the leadup to elections, denounced the then incumbent for cosying up to the military regime.

Since taking office, however, the new Prime Minister, Srettha Thavisin, has shifted to his predecessor's policy of engaging with the military. At the same time his government has ramped up efforts to provide more humanitarian aid. It has also been busy facilitating dialogues between ASEAN and the junta. To his critics, however, these efforts seem directed towards making the military look "more presentable."

But Thailand faces a cul-de-sac, more problematic than in India or China. Like China, it has crucial investments in Myanmar; the country itself is one huge market for Thai goods. Yet since clashes erupted after the coup, Thai companies have been suspending projects or moving out of the country. More worryingly, clashes along the border have disrupted trade, forcing both countries to explore ways of ensuring the flow of goods.

In all this, Bangkok has been compelled to strike a balance between a junta that is becoming unpopular by the day and anti-junta groups and alliances that are gaining ground but have yet to win support and recognition abroad. Prime Minister Thavisin's recent statement, that rebel groups are winning but the military has the weapons, more or less illustrates its Janus-faced attitude to the conflict. Recent developments, like the People's Defence Force (PDF) drone strike on Naypyitaw, the battle along the Thai border at Myawaddy have only complicated these issues.

Thailand faces a sticky dilemma here, and it has come to the fore with the resistance takeover of Myawaddy, the site of one of Myanmar's major border crossings. Located in Karen State, the region saw some of the worst clashes since Operation 1027. Its takeover by resistance forces comprising both NUG and EAOs forced the junta to request the Thai government permission to land an emergency flight. The government agreed, but later clarified that the flight in question did not carry military personnel. However, junta over powered the resistance forces and recaptured the area by late April.

The situation has since spiralled out of control. Thailand sent Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara to review the situation. An estimated 4,000 refugees are were until recently crossing the border from Myawaddy to the city of Mae Sot in Thailand each day, imposing more pressure on Bangkok to take drastic steps on migrants. The government still

insists on maintaining neutrality in the conflict. But the fall of such a key border region is bound to bring about a change of approach.

Myawaddy, in that sense, represents a turning point in relations between the two countries. It would be unrealistic to expect a 360-degree shift in Thailand's approach to the conflict. The government will maintain links with the army. But there has been a perceptible shift in the balance of power in the country. If Prime Minister Thavisin's remarks about rebel forces are anything to go by, even Bangkok has lost hope, so to speak, in the military's prospects, though not to the extent of relinquishing its ties with the junta.

Moreover, Thailand has not actively involved its military in the conflict. Yet border clashes have compelled it to expand its role. This has impacted its relations with the junta. Earlier, the Thai government could justify its engagements with the State Administrative Council on national security lines. However, the junta today appears to have become a liability and headache for Bangkok, analysts would argue. With rebel groups expanding their real estate each day, it is left to be seen whether Thailand will revisit its approach to the military, and whether, like Beijing, it will seek dialogue with resistance forces. Officially, it has yet to deal with these groups. That may change in the coming weeks and months.

Moreover, Bangkok seems to have turned a blind eye on illegal immigrants from Myanmar. On the other hand many relief and development agencies engaged with Myanmar are now operating from Chiang Mai or Mae Sot, some operating under cover, illegally. The Thai government has gone silent on these issues, as the country perceives the necessity of such operations due to its own humanitarian engagements with refugees. In the face of tragedy and chaos, Bangkok has thus not abandoned its humanitarian commitments.

China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang in Naypyitaw, May 2,2023

CHINA AND MYANMAR

Like Thailand, China has numerous economic interests in Myanmar. More so than Thailand, these interests dovetail with China's wider geopolitical ambitions in the region. The China Myanmar Corridor, part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to give one example, will provide Beijing with an alternative maritime route bypassing the Strait of Malacca, helping it reduce transit time for vessels, but more importantly address fears of being swamped by China's rivals, the US and India in particular, in the Indo-Pacific.

Completing such projects is crucial to Beijing's future in the Indo-Pacific, particularly at a time when tensions with India and the US are rising. In other words, for China, an unstable Myanmar is not an option. Yet while the junta has been dangling the carrot of stability in front of China for years, if not decades, thereby securing its support, its recent fallout has soured ties between the two countries. As with Thailand, the military has become a liability to China as well. This has had an indelible impact on China's role in the conflict.

Initially, after the 2021 coup, China chose to remain silent on Myanmar. It was only after the State Administration Council ramped up its campaign against protesters that it pivoted to the junta, vetoing UN resolutions and securing some legitimacy for the regime.

The situation changed dramatically after a series of financial scams and cybercrimes erupted along China's 2,200 km border with Myanmar, in particular along Shan State. These scams targeted Chinese citizens, with several of them

becoming ensnared in human trafficking schemes. It did not help that some of these scams had the backing of groups attached to the junta, including the country's Border Guard Force (BGF).

Ordinarily, China's rapprochement with the junta would have made it easy to resolve such issues. Yet for much of 2023, Beijing's pleas went unheeded by the SAC. So did an outcry over the alleged assassination of Chinese secret officers in Shan State by junta allied forces.

With the government's patience wearing thin, China responded swiftly. It leveraged the October 27 Three Brotherhood Alliance attacks in such a way as to reposition itself between the military junta and the ethnic organisations operating along the China-Myanmar border. In other words, Beijing intervened in the attacks - Operation 1027 - without actively taking part in it. Outraged, the junta responded by organising a protest in front of the Chinese Embassy. Beijing immediately issued a stern response to the junta.

Left powerless on every front, it duly retracted and retreated. Today, China is talking to both the EAOs and the junta, while trying to ramp up its image among the organisations in line with its broader strategy of negotiating security for its projects. In December it brokered a ceasefire which has since all but completely collapsed.

Despite China's ties with the military, the National Unity Government issued a statement emphasising China's importance for Myanmar. This is standard diplomatic posturing. It's a different matter with the ethnic armed groups. Since last October, Beijing has been treading on thin ice, engaging with the army and militia groups. What the latter are demanding is recognition and endorsement. This China has, cautiously, been willing to grant, in return for continuing negotiations with the junta.

Yet as one analyst has observed, this is a tricky strategy, filled with several minefields. For one thing, while China's overtures may entice insurgent groups, the latter are unlikely to come into an arrangement involving the junta. For another, its engagements with these groups have conferred some form of recognition and legitimacy on them, making it harder for the military to regain itself.

What will happen to these regions after the junta collapses is left to be seen. Some of the armed groups have been eager to tout themselves as "open for business" to the world, so to speak. But what sort of political arrangement will emerge in the country after the collapse of the junta - if it does collapse? More importantly, how will that impact Chinese projects in these states and regions? Should the country turn into a federal democracy, there will still be some form of a political centre for Beijing to negotiate with. But this will not be the case if Myanmar fragments into different states.

Mindful of these possibilities, Beijing has been busy holding negotiations between the junta and the Three Brotherhood Alliance. The latest round took place in March in Kunming. Though it failed to end on a conclusive note, it did reach a consensus on several issues, including extending recognition to the Shan State Special Region, administered by the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance

Army. The next round of talks were held on May 13, and they were focused on the withdrawal of troops. Meanwhile, on June 15, the two countries signed an agreement further enhancing economic ties.

These negotiations have been guided by the need to secure Beijing's economic interests. For their critics, they have enabled the army to concentrate its offensive in territories apart from those bordering China. At the same time, the talks have forced the junta to confront and, in a way, accept the reality of ethnic outfits dominating the border regions.

China's strategy, in that sense, is threefold. First, it is fundamentally allied with the military. The fact that it worked against the junta last year only strengthens this relationship: the Myanmar government knows it cannot play with Beijing, and it knows it has no other major power to turn to. China has gained the upper hand here: it has made it clear to the junta that not even the military is indispensable for them. This works as a safety valve for Beijing, granting it an almost superhuman hold over the junta which no other country, not even Thailand, still less the US or the rest of ASEAN, possess.

Second, it will talk to insurgent groups, even if mainly only to those that have a direct bearing on its economic interests. While its present engagements appear to be limited to the Three Brotherhood Alliance, even before the 2021 coup it was interacting with other minority communities in the hopes of stoking pro-Chinese sentiment. In 2017, for instance, Beijing extended invitations to around 20 leaders from five parties representing minority interests, including the Arakan National Party. It will continue with such gestures to woo these communities and groups. Many of these outfits see themselves as future leaders of their territories. They are likely to want to maintain ties with Beijing.

Third, China will do all it can to keep an upper hand over India and the US. It doesn't have to do much here. Neither New Delhi and Washington has been concrete in their policy on Myanmar. Their response has been, if not kneejerk, then sporadic: a case in point would be the Indian government's decision to fence off its border. Washington's policy of cautious engagement with the NUG and EAOs contrasts with Beijing's more proactive approach. From the narrow perspective of geopolitics, this should worry the US. Yet nothing it has done so far - not even the passing of the Burma Act in 2022 - suggests that it wants to equal China's efforts in the region, still less intervene in such a way that Washington can continue dealing with Myanmar long after the military regime collapses.

Furthermore, one can argue the fact that a divided Myanmar would be in China's political and economic interests. For example, most Shan State citizens speak Chinese, while many border towns use Yuan as a currency. This has turned Shan into a virtual Chinese state, though whether local citizens welcome that is debatable.

Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra with Myanmar's Deputy Foreign Minister U. Lwin Oo

INDIA AND MYANMAR

At 1,643 kilometres, India's border with Myanmar is shorter than China's or Thailand's. But its ties with Myanmar have been no less complex. Broadly, they have been determined by three factors: the ethnic composition of northeastern India, which directly crosses into Myanmar; the political dynamics in the face of recent elections; and its worries about a growing China. Of these the first is the most crucial.

India is a potpourri of ethnic, caste, and tribal groups. Many of these are spread across and concentrated in the northeastern states, including four that directly border on Myanmar, Arunachalam Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland. As in China and Thailand, these areas have become hotbeds and havens for refugees and illegal immigrants. In India's case, it has been complicated by ethnic and tribal affiliations: more so than in other countries in the region, in India these affiliations can, at the slightest provocation, snowball into tensions and hostilities. This has been the case particularly in Manipur and Mizoram.

Manipur has for years been the site of clashes between two ethnic groups, the Meiti and the Kuki. The Meiti people are mostly Hindu, the Kuki mostly Christian. In recent years, hostilities have been fanned by an influx of Kuki refugees from Chin and Sagaing regions States of Myanmar. While Hindu nationalists claim that the

Kukis are no more than illegal immigrants, critics argue that many have been living in Manipur for centuries.

Not surprisingly, these hostilities have fed into separatist sentiments among the Kuki people, compelling them to form their own outfits in their bid for autonomy. The most prominent of these groups, the Kuki National Army (KNA) - the armed wing of the Kuki National Organisation - envisions a state administered by their people in both India and Myanmar. This has naturally complicated relations between the two countries.

In 2008 the Indian government signed a ceasefire pact with the KNA. Following a surge in clashes with military forces, however, it rescinded the pact late last year and declared an all out war against the group. Around the same time, in October 2023, the KNU's Myanmar wing joined the Kachin Independence Army, following Operation 1027, capturing several military bases in Shan and Kachin States. In December it, together with the People's Defence Force (PDF), managed to capture another base, in Sagaing.

While hostilities in Manipur have led to demands for a separate state outside of India and Myanmar, ethnic dynamics in Mizoram have fuelled separatist demands of another sort. While Mizoram is considered one of the more peaceful states in India, recent years have seen demands for an autonomous region incorporating three groups residing in India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar: the Mizo, Chin, and Kuki people. Indeed, Mizoram has been the preferred refuge for Kuki people escaping clashes in Manipur. The proposed state would include parts of three Indian states apart from Mizoram (Tripura, Assam, and Manipur) and two other countries (Bangladesh and Myanmar).

Ironically, such calls have been made within the framework of a united India by moderate Indian leaders. For instance, the newly elected Chief Minister of Mizoram, Lalduhoma, met the Indian Prime Minister last January to discuss the idea for a separate State, called "Greater Mizoram."

Lalduhoma contends that such a "Greater Mizoram" would be in line with the concept of "Akhand Bharat" or Greater India, which sees countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, the Maldives - in short, the rest of South Asia - as part of India: a prospect which appeals to Hindu nationalists. To this end, he has asked the government to reconsider its decision to fence the border with Myanmar, pointing out it would sever ethnic ties and reinforce colonial era divisions. Taken to its logical conclusion, what is being contemplated here is the annexation of foreign territories, including parts of Myanmar.

These developments have obvious implications for Indian politics and India's relations with Myanmar and other countries in the region such as Bangladesh. For one, while Hindu nationalists have managed to ostracise the Kuki community in Manipur, in Mizoram the Kukis have formed themselves into an important constituency. Manipur's main pro-Kuki party, the Kuki People's Alliance, has gone so far as to withdraw support from the BJP candidate, though this may not tip the scales against the ruling party. Nevertheless, the Modi government will

be compelled to balance these ethnic interests. This is bound to impact its ties with Myanmar as well.

For the most, Indian analysts tend to be sceptical of proposals for a Greater Mizoram or a Mizo State. This is because of two reasons: India's relative apathy towards the northeast, which it does not see as important enough, and fears that such moves will push Myanmar towards China. While calls for separate states are rampant in regions like Mizoram and Manipur, these are simply not significant enough, in terms of political arithmetic, for New Delhi to take them seriously to the extent of considering expanding into territories in other countries. Strategically, hence, it would be against India's interests to implement these proposals, especially since they would lead to fractured relations with an important bulwark against China's influence in the region.

India's actions since the 2021 coup seem to bear this out. It is one of the few countries that are directly supplying arms to the military. Following Operation 1027 last October, the Indian government allowed almost 50 Myanmar soldiers to enter Mizoram, an act that one analyst and journalist describes as "perhaps the first time that India has rescued soldiers of another country's army fleeing the fighting on their own soil." The request to facilitate entry to these soldiers had come through diplomatic channels, signalling the junta's desperation and also its dependence on the countries bordering it.

New Delhi's decision to pivot towards the military, more so than even Thailand and China, may be due to three factors. First, showing support for any ethnic armed organisation is certain to have an impact on northeast India. Second, although India is working to seal off its border with Myanmar, analysts argue that the harsh, mountainous terrain on which the border lies makes maintaining a fence difficult, if not impossible. To this end the government suspended a free movement of persons agreement. It is keen not to let ethnic tensions in Myanmar seep into its border states.

Third, and perhaps most important, India also has economic interests in Myanmar, including a trilateral highway with Thailand and an ambitious Multi-Modal Transit Transport project set to connect Kolkata with Rakhine State. Delhi doubtless sees these as vital to its vision of greater influence and connectivity in the region, vis-a-vis China. Myanmar's stability and the stability of areas like Rakhine State are indispensable. The recent fall of Paletwa, in Chin State, to the Arakan Army can disrupt these projects – especially since EAOs tend to control logistics and transport in the territories they claim.

India faces a dilemma here. Unlike China, it does not seem capable of positioning itself between the government and the rebel groups, partly because it lacks the clout that Beijing possesses but more so because ethnic tensions in Myanmar had snowballed into Indian states, unlike in Thailand and China. Against such a backdrop, it has no other entity to talk to than the junta, even if the latter is losing territory day by day.

Based on these points, experts argue that India will continue to engage with the military and it will continue to prop up the junta. More crucially, they suggest that its continuing engagement with the military

suggests that it prefers Myanmar to remain as it is, largely because it would be easier for New Delhi to deal with the country.

Recent events, however, do not entirely validate this view. Last December, Indian Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra held a Foreign Office Consultation with a delegation from Myanmar that was led by the country's Deputy Foreign Minister. The official press release from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs emphasised its support for the country - and, interestingly enough, for its "transition towards a federal democracy."

The Ministry has been repeatedly echoing these sentiments. In a recent press release, it stated that it wanted "inclusive federal democracy to be established through dialogue and constructive engagement." The use of "inclusive" could indicate that between December and now, events in Myanmar have warranted a reappraisal from Delhi - though perhaps not to the extent of shifting sides. Now as then, Delhi is supportive of the military. But other concerns, including the situation in regions like Rakhine, where it has economic interests, have entered the equation. These are unlikely to leave it.

India's federal-rhetoric may have been motivated by two considerations. One, as a political arrangement, a federal structure is something both the National Unity Government and Ethnic Armed Organisations can negotiate on with the junta. It is also a settlement which suits India and which India, a federal State itself, can relate to.

Two, by invoking such rhetoric, India may be trying to signal to the junta that while it is willing to dole out arms and aid, the status quo can no longer hold. This can signal to the NUG and the EAOs that Delhi is willing to listen to them. Given the scale of hostilities which are raging across its border areas, India has been dealing with militias and outfits resisting the junta. A negotiated settlement based on a federal framework, in that sense, might just be the solution India wanted and ordered.

What analysts have failed to appreciate, moreover, is that the very factors supposedly deterring India from taking drastic steps in Myanmar can compel it to change its course. While it is highly unlikely that Delhi will contemplate annexing territory, it is bound to listen to regional parties, including those which are advocating for the formation of autonomous regions. What the results of recent elections, which signal a return to the era of coalition politics for the BJP, mean for this is left to be seen.

As Narendra Modi's remarks on Kachchativu in Sri Lanka make clear, not even legal or historical realities can deter the BJP's nationalist agenda - including its rhetoric on Akhand Bharat. Against this backdrop, it is difficult to discount the possibility of India taking up ethnic issues in Myanmar that have a direct bearing on Indian politics.

Do these presage a radical change of policy from India's side? Probably. But even if that is the case, the government will not declare a shift in its position - at least not anytime soon. Now as then, India's policy on Myanmar will be directed by India's strategic and economic interests. It has two main objectives there: defusing tensions in the

northeast, and keeping Myanmar from moving closer to China.

Such approaches can work both ways for the military. In the short-term, India will prefer talking to the junta. In the long to medium term, with the string of defeats and territorial losses it has encountered, the Myanmar military may become to Delhi what it has become for Thailand and China: a liability. India will not let off talking to the junta even then. But it will find it difficult not to respond to domestic pressures, especially to those political groups that have already reimagined a different Myanmar - and India - in their minds.

Rohingya refugees (Courtesy Oxfam)

BANGLADESH AND MYANMAR

When Bangladesh was formed or carved out of East Pakistan in 1971, Myanmar became the sixth country to recognise it. This may have been necessitated by geopolitical imperatives: currently, the two countries share a 271 kilometre border.

Today relations between these countries are seen through the prism of the Rohingya issue, which this paper will address in the next few chapters. But the Rohingya issue or crisis is only one factor, although a crucial one, in these ties.

Bangladesh's response to the crisis in Myanmar has been tempered, or conditioned, by the fact of it being the sole Muslim country bordering the country. While bilateral relations got off to an amiable start in 1972 - when Myanmar decided to accord diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh - things began souring a decade later when the Myanmar government passed a Citizenship Act which rendered Rohingyas stateless. This piece of legislation, which can be compared to the Indian and Pakistani Residents Citizenship Act No 3 in Sri Lanka, served to drive a wedge between these countries, particularly since chauvinist elements in Myanmar consider Rohingyas as a community imported from Bangladesh.

When Rohingyas began swarming *en masse* to Bangladesh in the 1970s and

1980s - following large-scale military campaigns against them in Myanmar - Dhaka insisted on repatriating them to Myanmar. The return of civilian administration in 2011 stoked hopes of a peaceable settlement to the dispute. But this was not meant to be: despite discussions in 2018 and 2019, the two parties failed to reach an agreement. The Rohingyas in all this remain a people without a country. Meanwhile, Dhaka has been criticising its neighbour at the highest levels internationally, including the UN General Assembly.

These have not stemmed the tide of Rohingya immigration to Bangladesh. As of December 2023, more than a million Rohingyas have found their way to the country. They have spread themselves across Cox's Bazaar, a tourist hub that has now doubled down as a refugee camp. Unlike Thailand, Bangladesh is not a signatory to international refugee conventions and laws, and is not obliged to take them in or treat them properly.

Yet the scale of the migration - 730,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar in 2017 alone, at the height of what many deem as a junta-sponsored genocide against them - means that Dhaka can't ignore or be blind to them. At the same time, these communities have been victimised by criminal groups and gang leaders.

The situation has become more complicated since the 2021 coup. According to Human Rights Watch more than 40 refugees were killed by criminal elements in 2022, and almost 50 in the first half of 2023 alone. These are official statistics and are disputed by the refugees themselves, who claim much higher figures. Local gangs continue to extort money from them, to abuse and sexually molest them, and in some cases to forcibly take their women and children in marriage. International aid agencies claim the government, led by Sheikh Hasina, is not doing enough to safeguard their rights. Instead much of its rhetoric has been to criticise Myanmar even as both countries engage with each other over transport and land connectivity initiatives, none of which has got off the ground.

Unlike India, China, and Thailand, Bangladesh does not have any major infrastructure investments in Myanmar. Trade has been growing for some time, surging at USD 112 million in 2020. In the absence of robust economic ties, analysts point to Bangladesh's Buddhist history as one of several potential areas for bilateral cooperation. Yet lack of infrastructure, and land connectivity problems, means that Myanmar-Bangladesh ties remain, for the lack of a better way of putting it, at a rudimentary level.

If at all the present crisis has exacerbated these issues. Bangladesh shares its border with Rakhine and Chin States. In February this year, over a hundred Myanmar Border Police Guard members illegally crossed the border. This followed a spate of attacks on rebel groups in Rakhine State. Areas like the Naikhongchhari subdistrict have borne the brunt of these attacks, in Bangladesh. Last May, for instance, an airstrike launched by the junta killed a Bangladesh civilian and injured 11 others. The strike had been launched in response to the Arakan Army's attacks on the Border Guard Force.

The Arakan Army has today emerged as one of the fiercest Ethnic Armed

Organisations in Myanmar. This has compelled the junta to enforce what one analyst calls a "four cuts" strategy, with the aim of eradicating them from the frontier regions. This has lead, and will continue to lead, to more incursions into Bangladeshi territory.

As fighting intensifies across Rakhine, moreover, it will also swell the numbers of Rohingyas flooding into Cox's Bazaar. The junta has responded to these developments by forcibly conscripting Rohingya people. But that will only swell refugee numbers more, as these people seek escape from a conflict they see as not concerning them or their community. On the other hand, reports have emerged of Rohingya joining the Arakan Army, despite the latter being overwhelmingly Buddhist. Whether this means there will be a congruence or understanding between these groups is debatable.

Bangladesh has so far been content in condemning these incursions and escalations. This probably indicates their fundamental belief in the survival of the junta. Unlike India and China, which are taking some steps in talking to insurgent groups, Dhaka has not engaged EAOs or given any indication that they prioritise them in their relations with Myanmar. According to some analysts, this may backfire in the event of an AA victory in Rakhine. Yet that is not a situation which officials are pondering at the moment. Their objective is to resolve the refugee crisis, and in their eyes it is the junta which, despite its brutal treatment of the Rohingyas, should be dealt with in relation to such issues.

However, in our assessment, the Bangladeshi government's dual strategy, of criticising the military junta while refusing to consider alternative solutions for the refugee crisis, seems counterintuitive at best and disingenuous at worst.

Since the 1970s, specifically 1978, Dhaka has had to face a backlash over its response to the Rohingya issue. Decades later, it is still receiving flak from humanitarian organisations for not doing enough for these people. How it hopes to resolve a drawn-out problem of this nature with the tried-tested-and-failed strategies of the past is debatable.

So far, despite warnings by analysts and strategists in Bangladesh, a full-scale war between the two countries looks unlikely. Yet as the junta weakens, Bangladesh will have to wake up to a new Myanmar. It is of course likely that, if the Arakan Army secures control of Rakhine State, Rohingyas will be able to return to their home country. But the future looks uncertain for these people, mainly on account of the years and decades of persecution they have suffered under both military and civilian administrations. They are unwanted back home and unsafe abroad. Against this backdrop, any future Arakan-led government will have to revisit legislation that has made them stateless citizens. For that to happen, however, the Bangladeshi government may have to start dealing with the group now.

Three Brotherhood Alliance forces

THE NORTHERN BATTLEGROUND

Myanmar's complex geography has always been a challenge for the junta. Comprising seven states, seven regions, and one Union territory, Naypyidaw, its administrative structure underlies a complex network of different ethnic groups and interests. In orchestrating its coup, the junta essentially unified pro-democracy forces and Ethnic Armed Organisations. As things stand, the Ethnic Armed Organisations are more acquainted with the terrain of the regions they occupy than the military or the People's Defence Forces.

With widespread censorship and social media shutdowns, it is difficult to ascertain what is happening in these regions, in particular the border areas. We do know that since October 2023, rebel groups, especially EAOs, have captured 300 military bases, including in several strategic areas. In the captured regions, these outfits are in control: they are running their own governments, their own judiciaries, and of course their own militaries. And by and large, local communities seem to have accepted this state of affairs.

This chapter looks at two states located towards the north of the country, Chin and Shan. These have recorded some of the worst hostilities since February 2021. Crucially, they lie along some of the most strategic border regions in Myanmar: Chin borders Bangladesh and India, while Shan borders China, Laos, and Thailand.

Chin State

Located in northeast Myanmar, Chin State directly crosses over to India. The main anti-junta group in operation there, the Chinland Council, a breakaway faction from the Chin Interim Council, dominates the region's political life. Since clashes erupted last year, rebel forces have reportedly taken over nine townships. Another outfit, the Chin National Guard, have made it their mission to control 70 percent of the region. Meanwhile, the Chinland Council has stated that it will work with the National Unity Government.

The Chinland Council is one of two main revolutionary camps operating in Chin State, the other being the Chin National Front/Army. The latter emerged in the aftermath of an uprising in 1988. Historically it has taken pre-emptive steps to achieve its objectives. For instance, it was among the first EAOs to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015. Dominated by the Hakha and Thantlang ethnic groups, it helped initiate the Chinland Joint Defence Committee (CJDC), from which it withdrew later.

Last year alone, rebel forces reportedly captured 12 military bases and 'liberated' five towns. The junta has retaliated, launching surgical airstrikes and displacing tens of thousands of civilians. UN estimates indicate that more than 60,000 have fled to Manipur and Mizoram in India. Aid agencies contend the figures are much higher. India, particularly Mizoram, has been forthcoming in their response: the Mizoram administration, and the Mizo people, have absorbed more than 35,000 refugees since 2023.

In the backdrop of these developments, the establishment of the Chinland Council late last year signalled a turnaround in the ongoing conflict. The first Chinland Conference, which unfolded last December, ratified a new constitution and vowed to set up a government, inclusive of a legislature and judiciary, within 60 days. The Council now has 112 seats, 27 of which are held by the Chin National Front (CNF). In establishing its own administration, one analyst argues that the Council has finally forged unity among the Chin people, who have for long been divided along ethnic and linguistic lines.

All this bear clear implications for the present situation. According to one report, the Chinland Council, drawn largely from five ethnic groups (Falam, Tedim, Mindat, Matupi, and Mara) has rallied support from over 80 percent of armed groups.

In ratifying its own Constitution and setting up its own government, the Council has rejected not just the junta, but also the unitary framework on which the country has rested for decades. At the same time, as a formal power-sharing body, it has gained a credibility that the junta lacks, making it a viable alternative for other parties. For India in particular, which has grown weary of the junta's involvement in the cross-border drug trade and criminal activities, the

Council would be a better, more "trustworthy" partner to talk to.

These developments have not been lost on the rebel forces. In a recent interview, Chairman of the Chin National Front Dr Sui Khar thanked the Indian government for helping displaced people seek refuge in Mizoram and for providing "access to education and to health." He also underscored India's growing importance in the region and highlighted the assistance that the Mizo people have been generously giving since hostilities began. When asked what brought the Chin people together, Khar replied, "We may have different tribe names, but… we share a common identity", adding they lack an opportunity to assert that identity. Clearly, this would require a completely different political arrangement.

The drug trade, the recent upsurge in criminal activities, and domestic political compulsions will compel New Delhi to reconsider its strategy in the region. As the previous chapters have noted, of course, it is already shifting its strategy. While earlier it viewed engagement with the junta as crucial to its objective of countering China's influence, the establishment of as well-planned and well-oiled political outfit as the Chinland Council will convince Delhi that it can achieve such objectives through other groups. This is an advantage which the Council is uniquely endowed with – and which most other States do not have.

At the same time, it must be noted that the Chinland Council is not recognised by many stakeholders. Political and armed groups in Tedim, Falam, Mindat, and Mara, for instance, have been more or less opposed to it. In response they formed an alliance named the Chin Brotherhood. Recently, the Brotherhood captured Matupi, a town in the Southern Chin State, with members of the Council fighting with the Brotherhood. This shows that the unity which has been imposed on the EAOs remains as complicated as ever.

Moreover, the Chin National Front and the Brotherhood do not see eye to eye on many issues. The conflicts between them are not only political, but also military. The Brotherhood has warned the Front not to start operations in their controlled areas.

At the end of May 2024, the Front started their operation in the two of Chikha, and Tonzang, which lead to another turnaround in the inter-ethnic conflicts that have gripped the region. These areas are presently under the control of the military and the Zomi Revolutionary Army Eastern Command. The taking of these two towns sparked tensions between the Zomi ethnic group and Chin. The towns are under the administration of the Front and their alliance. Controversially, the Chinland Defence Force Tonzang (CDF Tonzang) is led by another sub-ethnic or clan, the Zo people.

These larger dynamics underscore even deeper complexities. In Southern Chin State, for instance, the Mara sub-ethnic groups remain divided. While one group is backed by the Chin National Front, the other group is supported by the Chin Brotherhood. The two groups been fighting each other since February 2024. On June 18, 2024, the Brotherhood declared that the Front ambushed them while they were fighting the military and went on to seize an Infantry Battalion

(140) in the Matupi township. Such disputes and conflicts indicate that for all their opposition to the junta, internal dissensions remain.

Shan State

The centre of the Operation 1027 attacks last year, Shan State is the largest and the fourth most populous State in Myanmar. Bordering Thailand, Laos, and China, the territory contains no fewer than 10 ethnic groups, including the Shan people, who share ties with Thai and Lao people. While Chin State is largely Christian, Shan State is mostly Theravada Buddhist. Until recently the more conservative sections of the Buddhists clergy, in the territory, stood by the junta. Yet even these groups are now drifting away.

The clergy's defection, if nothing else, reveals the depths to which the military junta has fallen in perhaps its most important and strategic border territory. The regime has faced its biggest clashes in areas like Chinshwehaw, Hseni, Lashio, Laukkaing, and Namhkan. Of these Laukkaing directly crosses over to China. The Three Brotherhood Alliance – which has been operating in and more or less dominating Shan State since Operation 1027 – managed to capture it last January. Until then, the city had racked up a dubious reputation as the centre of financial scams and cybercrimes in Myanmar. The Alliance's victory, with the tacit backing of Beijing, more or less put a stop to such operations.

Beyond China's influence, however, Shan State has always been a severely troubled spot in Myanmar. Despite being the site of the Panglong Agreement – the pact that established the Union of Burma – demands for secession picked up almost immediately after independence. Acknowledging these calls, the then government pledged to hold a referendum in 10 years. This, however, never came to be. Rocked by numerous tensions and hostilities – including an invasion by Taiwanese forces in 1949 – Shan State recorded an upsurge in armed resistance in the 1960s and 1970s. The junta did manage to broker several ceasefire pacts from time to time, but, predictably, these did not last for long.

As has been pointed out in previous chapters, China has intervened in the latest attempts at a truce between the government and rebel outfits in the territory. Prospects for a ceasefire, however, are less than promising. In January, the Three Brotherhood Alliance reached an agreement with the junta. The military agreed to halt airstrikes in return for rebel groups refraining from offensive attacks. Clashes, however, resumed just days later, with the alliance accusing the military of firing grenades. Analysts argued this may have been because the troops – remnants of whom are now scattered across the region – had not heard of the ceasefire. Whatever the reason may be, it led Beijing to try its hand again: in early March, it brokered another agreement. As of now, this seems to be in operation.

Given these developments, how does the future hold for Shan State? As a former political prisoner based in Myanmar told the authors of this paper, the northern states of Myanmar are more or less succumbing to Chinese pressure and Chinese influence. The linkages between this tilt to China and growing calls for autonomy – which, as one analyst points out, is most pronounced in Shan State –

cannot be denied. If a federal political arrangement, with constituent ethnic states or administrative units, offers more stability for Beijing, Beijing will hedge its bets there. As pointed out already, in this scheme of things China has the upper hand. It is likely to retain that hold.

At present, a number of EAO alliances are holding the cards in the State, in particular along its northern areas. These include not just the Three Brotherhood Alliance, but also the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee. The multiethnic character of the territory, and China's presence, are perhaps factors that have precluded these outfits from forming a body along the lines of the Chinland Council. However, they remain just as strident in their commitment to autonomy. At the same time, unlike in Chin State, there doesn't seem to be any substantive rapprochement with the National Unity Government (NUG). This underlies a sense of distrust with the Myanmar State.

Sagaing Region

One region shared by Chin and Shan States, which will prove vital in the unfolding of the current conflict, is Sagaing. This is because the area has become a site of contestations between EAOs. Local groups remain divided on ethnic and sub-ethnic lines. The region is also home to half of the two million or so people displaced by the conflict across Myanmar. In addition to facing some of the country's "most acute food insecurity", it has "borne the brunt of the military's violence." In January this year, for instance, military forces bombed a church. The region's proximity to India has become another concern. These developments indicate that the Sagaing Region will turn into an epicentre of the conflict.

Arakan Army

THE SOUTHERN BATTLEGROUND

Myanmar's southern states mostly jut into Bangladesh, Thailand, and the Bay of Bengal. Unlike Chin, Shan, and Kachin States, these do not have direct geopolitical implications for India and China. Nevertheless, they are significant, strategic outposts. Rakhine, for instance, provides a direct opening to the Bay of Bengal, an entry point that China has eagerly seized upon as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This is an obvious threat for India. At the same time, Myanmar's southern states have more proximity to the wider South Asia, beyond the subcontinent. This includes countries like Sri Lanka as well.

For Thailand specifically, it is these states which matter. It neighbours no fewer than four of them: Shan State to the north, and Kayah, Kayin, and Tanintharyi to the south. This is a situation none of the other countries neighbouring Myanmar – India, China, Laos – face. It has only been complicated by recent developments. Myawaddy, the border town that fell to rebel forces in March and was recaptured by the junta in April, is in Karen. It recorded imports and exports worth USD 1 billion last year. The battle of Myawaddy has compelled Thailand to grapple with the issue of who to talk to and to engage with.

As with the northern states, Myanmar's southern states have turned into constituent federal units – at least in the eyes of the EAOs. This is not a reality the junta will accept, but it is one which neighbouring countries are edging towards. The EAOs operating in these parts have been able to reinforce their

authority mostly through control of secondary roads and their familiarity with these territories. More than anything, however, they have been able to crisscross into other areas, eluding the junta. To give one example, it was the Arakan Army, based in Rakhine, that liberated Paletwa, in Chin, last January.

This chapter looks at two states lying on the frontlines of the battle in southern Myanmar: Kayah in the southwest, and Rakhine in the southeast.

Kayah State

Despite being the smallest state in Myanmar, in terms of size and population, Kayah has recorded some of the longest running hostilities in the country's history. This is because even before independence it saw itself as a separate state, administered by its own government. Indeed, at one point the British government guaranteed independence for the territory. The 1947 Constitution, by contrast, sought to absorb it into a wider union.

The Karenni, who form the ethnic majority in Kayah, refused to accept this imposition on them. With the Rohingya community, they boycotted the Panglong Conference. As a result, hostilities erupted right after independence. In 1957, the Karenni National Progressive Party was formed. It marked the beginning of a protracted civil war against the military, Headed by the party's armed wing, the Karenni Army, the war ended on an unresolved note in 2012, when the government entered a ceasefire with the KNPP. However, this broke down six years later. Not surprisingly, clashes have escalated since 2021.

The coup led to the formation of the Karenni National Defence Forces (KNDF). Following the Operation 1027 in Shan State, the KNDF launched its own campaign, Operation 1111. Within weeks the Karenni resistance managed to gain control of half of the state capital Loikaw. In February, the KNDF and the Karenni Army jointly won control of Shadaw, a strategic hilltop outpost that looms over Thailand. Mese, Ywar Thit, and Mawchi followed suit. Myawaddy, in that sense, is the latest in a series of dominoes.

Needless to say, these operations have resulted in a mass wave of surrenders by the army. The junta's strategy so far has been to launch airstrikes, and in some cases direct attacks on locals. But these have only pushed civilians into supporting the resistance. In their minds, the junta has all but completely vanished: as one local put it, "I feel like we are already living in a federal democracy." Such perceptions bear out the reality: in every respect, the army has been replaced by militias. No less than the Thai government has acknowledged this: in its recent despatches, it has urged the junta to refrain from retaliating.

A rugged, mountainous terrain, Kayah's geography has so far been to the advantage of anti-junta forces. The military's focus has been on the main roads and the highways. While anti-junta groups have avoided these, they have managed to control several secondary roads, giving them a unique advantage, plus the ability to "constantly disrupt transport." As these outfits move from one town to another, such tactics are likely to help them retain control over their territories. And as Thailand faces a fresh wave of refugees from Kayah, Bangkok will have to accept the

inevitability of engaging with these outfits.

As mentioned before, Thailand is not likely to disengage from the military in the short term. But so far, it has been playing the role of a humanitarian corridor, doling out aid and providing shelter to Kayah refugees. This has run into its own share of problems, however. While the Thai Foreign Minister, in his recent visit to Mae Sot, near Myawaddy, stated that the Thai government was "considering alternative trade routes" in case of road closures, this does not seem to be a viable long-term solution. The Tachileik-Mae Sai border has since witnessed an influx of Thai migrants returning from Myanmar

Kayah State, in that sense, presents two distinct challenges to Bangkok: disruption of trade and a continuing influx of refugees. While it may be able to resolve one or the other in isolation, as things stand it will find it hard, if not impossible, to resolve both at the same time. Moreover, Thailand has been accused of cosying up to the military junta and, as stated earlier, of making the military look "more presentable." Such allegations are hardly going to endear Bangkok to the resistance – which, since it controls several key towns, has the capability of overrunning the border. Thailand will do all it can to prevent such a situation. The question remains, however, as to when it will revise its strategies.

Rakhine State

Rakhine, also known as Arakan, is one of Myanmar's poorest states. Its per capita GDP, according to one World Bank report, lies 25 percent below the national average, while almost 80 percent of its population live below the poverty line. This has been compounded by some of the worst instances of ethnic unrest in Myanmar history. At the heart of this conflict is the state, or the statelessness, of the Rohingyas. Described as one of the most persecuted ethnic minorities in the world, Myanmar's Rohingyas, who are Muslims, have never been officially recognised by the government.

What this means is that unlike other ethnic minorities, the Rohingyas simply do not exist for the government. The military, most of whom hail from the Bamar majority, have been accused of perpetrating genocide against them. Relations with other groups in Rakhine have not been good either: clashes with the largely Buddhist Arakanese erupted in 2012, and again five years later. As a result, they have been forced to flee to Bangladesh, especially to Cox's Bazar, a tourist site located some 400 kilometres from Dhaka.

The Rohingya crisis is important when surveying Rakhine State because it has implications for ongoing clashes between EAOs and the junta. By all accounts, Rakhine is a strategically important area. Last year, five months before Operation 1027, for instance, Indian officials travelled to the state for the opening of the Sittwe Port. The Port has been planned as part of a wider connectivity project, and will be supplemented by the Kaladan Road, which will connect Sittwe to Kolkata. Touted as a counter to China's construction projects, however, these have since fallen into uncertain waters. While an Indian company acquired control of the port, ongoing clashes are bound to disrupt operations.

Beijing, too, has a vital interest in the territory: its natural gas pipeline, constructed in 2014, begins in Kyaukpyu in Rakhine and crosses through the interior and Shan State to China's Yunnan Province. Mindful of ongoing developments – and unlike New Delhi – it has engaged proactively with rebel outfits, prominently the Arakan Army, which forms one of the three members of the Three Brotherhood Alliance. The Arakan Army, for its part, have stated that they welcome foreign investments and will do all they can to protect them in the territories they control. This is, in effect, a message to the world that they are ready to do business with Myanmar's economic partners, in particular China.

As stated previously, Rakhine State, more so than other territories, has become a fulcrum of Sino-Indian rivalry in the country. When Sittwe was attacked last April, for instance, some experts insinuated that the attacks were part of a wider strategy by Beijing to sabotage the Sittwe Port, and by extension India's geopolitical goals in Myanmar. The Arakan Army has made some impressive gains in recent months: since clashes escalated last November, the military has lost several townships, including the Paletwa, which one analyst describes as "a vital cog in India's Look/Act East Policy." Presently, the AA is focused on the southern parts of Rakhine, including the Thandwe township.

For the Rohingyas, of course, these recent clashes are peripheral to the ethnic clashes that have dominated Rakhine's history – far more so than in, say, Shan or Chin. This has not diminished the intensity of the anti-junta resistance – most of whom happen to be drawn from non-Rohingya communities – but rather intertwined with it. That has thrown up some rather interesting paradoxes. The junta, for instance, has escalated attacks on Rohingya camps. At the same time, it has enacted a conscription law, through which, if local sources are to be believed, it has drafted more than 2,000 Rohingyas.

Historically, the Rohingyas have seen themselves as an unwanted people. Their response to the present conflict has been, at best, mixed: while they are opposed to the junta, most of them have not become part of anti-junta alliances in the region. The military is, in an ironic reversal of fortune, seeking their help, drafting them against their will even as it bombs their homes. Some of the anti-junta groups have been accused of forcibly recruiting them as well. In response to their recruitment by the military, moreover, rebel groups are accusing them of capitulating to "the enemy." Speaking to Human Rights Watch, a villager summed up their situation: "We Rohingya are dying, caught between the two parties."

By and large, the National Unity Government reimagines Myanmar as a federal democracy. Some Ethnic Armed Organisations agree with this; others want to go beyond. In that scheme of things, the Rohingyas are likely to carve their own path.

This is because they feel let down by both military and civilian administrations. In its five years in power, even the NLD failed to recognise them. When ethnic clashes broke out in Rakhine, they did very little to defy the military, going so far as to defend them against genocide charges in Geneva. The Rohingyas are highly unlikely to trust them, even though

at least one Rohingya outfit has joined them. But does this mean that they will not engage with other resistance groups? Over the last few years, relations between Rohingyas and Rakhine people have significantly improved, mainly against a common enemy – the Junta.

While the junta appears to be playing a race card, pitting them against one another, this has failed to disrupt those relations.

But questions remain, and as long as they do, Rakhine will remain the complex, multifaceted ethnic powder keg it has always been. The 2021 coup did much to reinforce unity in other regions, with resistance groups crisscrossing states and capturing and liberating one town after another from the junta. It has reinforced unity in Rakhine too. When considering how even interests once sympathetic to the military, including the conservative Buddhist clergy , have turned the other way, there appears to be a real prospect for peace in Rakhine, an end to the Rohingya crisis. Yet the verdict is still out there.

Operation 1027

THE FUTURE SHAPE OF MYANMAR

In hindsight, the National League for Democracy's sweeping victory in 2015 should have led to another chapter in Myanmar's history. At the 2020 national election, just three months before the military coup, the party scored another big win. This indicates that despite testy, stormy relations between the government and the military, a majority still reposed trust in the NLD. Its inability to bring about meaningful change and reform signals not merely a lost opportunity but an irreversible defeat.

Today, a combination of NLD-allied National Unity Government (NUG) forces and Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) are calling the shots across the country. A recent **New York Times** report graphically represents what has been the case for the last three or four months: more than half of Myanmar's territory is now in the hands of the resistance. This territory will only grow and expand in the coming months. The military's recent actions, including its decision to move Aung San Suu Kyi to house arrest, indicate that they are wary but cognizant of this reality, and are coming to terms with it.

Three factors, in particular, have accelerated this trend.

First, the military's loss of prestige at home has been compounded by its loss of influence abroad. Not long ago the military paraded itself as a symbol of stability. This image has since come down. It has been particularly pronounced in the border regions: India and China are both talking to ethnic insurgents, and India has even sent a

deputation of MPs to meet them. As for China, its behind-the-scenes manoeuvring in Shan State laid the foundation for Operation 1027, indicating that, for Myanmar's partners, maintaining stability no longer means siding with the military. If the latter can be dispensed with, it will.

Second, although not much love has been lost between the NLD and the ethnic armed groups, the NLD's less than stellar democratic record, while in power, has not distanced Ethnic Armed Organisations from the NUG either. These organisations are working with each other and have reconciled themselves to each other's visions for the country: in essence, a federal democracy which may or may not incorporate constituent ethnic units. Certainly, these groups totally agree that the 2008 Constitution, which extended power to a civilian administration while retaining the privileges of the military, no longer holds.

Third, the ethnic dynamics in Myanmar are as complex as ever, but they have undergone a seismic shift over the last couple of years. Earlier, the military could mobilise nationalist sentiment, aimed particularly against the Rohingya community, to drive a wedge between the country's ethnic minorities, particularly using divisive figures such as Ashin Wirathu. Yet even Rakhine people, who had earlier taken part in and even instigated riots against Rohingya people, have refused to take part in what they see as the government's attempts to stoke anti-Rohingya chauvinism. The conscription of Rohingya people only underlies the military's weakening state: in effect, they have lost the support of those ethnic groups and political interests, including conservative sections of the Buddhist clergy, which once could be trusted to support them almost unconditionally.

From these developments, we can make six points about where Myanmar is headed and, crucially, what it may become in the next 15 months.

1. **The military will continue losing territory. And fast.** The fall of Myawaddy and later recaptured, and the drone strikes on Naypyidaw are strategic defeats. They are bound to be followed by other offensives. In Myawaddy, clashes continue to erupt, with the Karen National Union (KNU) capturing the last outposts in the region. Once these have been captured, the military is unlikely to take them back. Unlike before, in the 1980s and 1990s, when it was propped up by external players and military and economic aid, the army is now as good as crunched by sanctions and loss of prestige. That said, India and China, and Russia, will continue to engage with them.

2. **The Ethnic Armed Organisations have built strong networks in their territories. These are bound to grow.** It's not just on the frontlines that EAOs and the NUG-allied PDF have triumphed over the military. These outfits have countered almost everything the junta has thrown their way. Not only have they formed their own administrations – which enjoy much more legitimacy in their territories than the junta – they have also launched their own news and social media platforms, using a number of channels, including Facebook, to give updates on the situation in their areas. They have

been emboldened so much that some of them have issued guidelines for media outlets and journalists who want to report from their areas.

3. **These organisations are providing shelter to and working with the NUG allied People's Defence Forces. This has added a democratic veneer to the insurgency.** Without the support and guidance of the EAOs, which are thoroughly familiar with their terrain, the PDF would find it difficult to launch their offensive. That unity will remain in place, and grow with the regime's decline. It is doubtful whether it will survive the fall of the junta, but as far as the ongoing conflict is concerned, the NUG's inclusion signals that EAOs look up to them, if not as equals, then worthy allies.

4. **The West has imposed sanctions on the military. Myanmar's partners are growing tired of it.** Of the countries examined in this research – Thailand, China, Bangladesh and India – Thailand is the only one which has refrained from directly engaging with militias. Yet clashes are growing fiercer by the day in Myawaddy. Bangkok can no longer use the usual, traditional approaches it has been resorting to until now, namely acting out the role of neutral umpire and mediator in the war. This is so not least because thousands of migrants are making their way across the border, adding to an already sensitive refugee crisis in the country. As for India and China, especially the latter, they have signalled their dissatisfaction with the military's handling of the conflict.

5. **The military was seen as indispensable by the country's neighbours. Not anymore.** Both China and India want to reduce each other's influence in the region, and to secure their economic interests. Earlier, they could rely on the stability imposed by the junta. But that stability no longer holds. They have had no choice but to talk with armed groups, particularly as sections of the junta itself has indulged in illegal activities along the border which have had repercussions for these countries. For China in particular, its newfound role as a mediator between the regime and the militias has served it well, especially since the US has failed to match its efforts. India and China, to an extent even Thailand, have already reimagined Myanmar, and are engaging with the military and/or the Ethnic Armed Organisations with that in mind.

6. **Beyond the politics lies the humanitarian dimension to the conflict.** The human cost has been tragic. The military's response to anti-coup protests, which has claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians apart from the fighting in the states, has not just been disproportionate, it has also escalated conflicts along the frontier states. Moreover, the military has so far been operating with the mindset that has guided its actions over the last few decades. This no longer applies, and it no longer holds.

In line with these points, we predict the following scenario for the next 15 months.

- **India, China, and Thailand will still hedge their bets on a ceasefire, but they will also**

pacify anti-junta forces with increasingly vocal calls for a federal-democratic arrangement. For them, it is these ethnic based outfits that have proved useful in combating those forces that are working against their national interests within Myanmar: in particular, scammers and human traffickers in Shan State. This will add pressure on the junta to capitulate or compromise.

- **While the asymmetric nature of the conflict worked in the military's favour in the past, it will work against it now.** The military controls the main roads and highways. Deep down along the frontier villages, forests, mountains, and secondary roads, however, it is the ethnic groups, and NUG-allied forces working with them, that are in control. The situation has spiralled out of control so much that the military's sole response has been to launch surgical strikes on civilians, while conscripting an ethnic group which it ironically persecuted for decades.

- **In Myanmar, historically, the restoration of civilian rule, however fragile, took place within a unitary political framework. The framework that is worked on after the defeat of the junta will depart from this setup.** Both the NUG and the EAOs are agreed on some form of federal democracy, with EAOs demanding the formation of constituent ethnic units. Whether there is a congruence of objectives between these groups, of course, remains to be seen. But having achieved their aim of the junta's defeat, it seems unlikely that they will allow bickering and sectarianism to seep in and inadvertently strengthen the military again.

The most definite thing which can be said about the resistance in Myanmar is that it is far from the monolithic body that the Western commentariat ordinarily associates with anti-government forces, even in the Global South. In a way, this explains the West's bewildering response to Myanmar – a response that, at one level, is no response at all. Apart from imposing sanctions and issuing condemnations, it has yet to match the interest it showed in Myanmar at the time of the Saffron Revolution in 2007.

This underlies an important point about the unfolding situation in the country, one that has been mentioned before in our paper. Myanmar's future cannot be understood in terms of West-centric notions of democracy and representative government. The ethnic outfits, and the People's Defence Force, are fighting this war on a more fundamental line. As much as the two axes of this conflict we highlighted at the beginning – the *democratic-authoritarian axis* and the *unitary-confederation axis* – complement each other, we believe that the latter has prevailed over the former, and will continue to do so. **In other words, governance and accountability issues are important, but they have more or less been swamped by debates over the geographic, and geopolitical, structure of the country.**

In Myanmar, as in Ukraine and Gaza, we are seeing history unfold in real time. This has not received the attention it deserves. Yet while the world has given up on it, its people have not. Ultimately, it is those people who will decide on its future. Whether or not it will turn into Asia's Yugoslavia is in that sense an open-ended question - perhaps as open-ended as the fate of the Soviet Union after its collapse 35 years ago.

A RUPTURING STATE

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