



Security Nexus Perspectives

INDIA'S STRATEGIC MOMENT: NAVIGATING MYANMAR'S CRISIS AMIDST CHINA'S BACKING OF THE JUNTA

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Myanmar stands at a critical crossroads, grappling with a deepening internal crisis while being pulled between major regional powers. China's unwavering support for Myanmar's military junta has fueled national outrage,ⁱ further entrenching the regime while disregarding the voices of the Myanmar people. As Beijing appears to prioritize its economic and strategic interests at the expense of human rights and sovereignty, India now faces a crucial decision. Will New Delhi seize this moment to redefine its role in Myanmar and the region?

China's Tightening Grip on Myanmar's Junta

In recent weeks, Beijing's support for Myanmar's military regime has become even more overt.ⁱⁱ Despite mounting international condemnation of the junta's brutal rule, China has doubled down on its engagement—providing economic lifelines, military support, and political cover. The military junta is on the verge of collapse, facing mounting battlefield losses, a crumbling economy, and widespread resistance from both ethnic armed organizations and the broader pro-democracy movement.ⁱⁱⁱ

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Sensing this instability, China is stepping in to prop up the regime, fearing that its own strategic and economic interests will unravel if the junta falls. However, no matter how much help the junta receives from China, it is ultimately collapsing under the weight of its own endemic corruption and incompetence. The junta now controls less than a quarter of the country, with large swaths of territory effectively governed by the resistance coalition forces.^{iv} Meanwhile, the Myanmar military has escalated its attacks on civilians, targeting internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, schools, and busy marketplaces with ruthless precision.^v These atrocities have triggered a surge of anti-China sentiment among the Myanmar people, who increasingly view Beijing as an enabler of their suffering. For China, Myanmar is a critical piece in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) puzzle, and its investments—many secured through deals with the military—are now a flashpoint of resentment. Ethnic minority regions, particularly along Myanmar's northern borders, see China's economic activities as exploitative, reinforcing the junta's grip while extracting resources with little benefit to local communities. As China's presence in Myanmar becomes synonymous with oppression, anger against Beijing continues to boil over.

Rising Anti-China Sentiment

The growing discontent with China's involvement in Myanmar is palpable.^{vi} Beijing's decision to shut down northern border crossings—perceived as punishment against ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that have made significant military gains against the junta—has only added fuel to the fire. Groups like the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) are key forces in the resistance, and China's actions are widely viewed as efforts to prop up the military regime at their expense.^{vii}

By disrupting supply chains, China has exacerbated hardships for civilians in conflict zones, reinforcing the perception that its interests lie in economic and geopolitical dominance rather than in fostering peace or stability.^{viii} As a result, Myanmar's diverse ethnic communities—long marginalized by the central government—now see China as complicit in their oppression. This shift in public sentiment presents a unique strategic opening for India.

Historical Context of India's Myanmar Policy Since the 2021 Coup

India's response to the military coup in Myanmar on February 1, 2021, has been cautious, reflecting its complex strategic interests. Initially, New Delhi expressed deep concern over the situation but refrained from outrightly condemning the junta, in line with its traditional policy of non-interference.^{ix} India continued limited diplomatic engagement with the military regime while also

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maintaining informal links with Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG) and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) based in western Myanmar.^x

Despite its official stance of non-interference, India has faced mounting security and humanitarian challenges due to the ongoing conflict. Violence in Myanmar has triggered an influx of refugees into India's northeastern states, hardest hit in Mizoram, straining local resources and security dynamics. Insurgent groups operating along the Indo-Myanmar border, especially in Manipur,^{xi} have exploited the instability, complicating India's counterinsurgency efforts. Furthermore, China's deepening involvement in Myanmar's economic and strategic affairs has pressured India to recalibrate its approach.

India's Opportunity to Lead

While China's standing in Myanmar erodes, India has a rare chance to recalibrate its approach. Traditionally, New Delhi has balanced its engagement between Myanmar's civilian leadership and military elites, prioritizing security concerns and economic ties. However, as Myanmar spirals deeper into conflict, India's long-term interests demand a more proactive and principled stance.

A stable Myanmar is essential for India—not just for regional security, but also for trade, connectivity, and the well-being of its northeastern states. By distancing itself from the junta and engaging more robustly with pro-democracy forces and ethnic resistance groups, India can redefine its role as a responsible and responsive regional power.

A Roadmap for India's Engagement

India's approach should be multidimensional, balancing humanitarian, economic, and diplomatic initiatives:

- **Humanitarian Support:** India could establish a humanitarian corridor to provide aid to displaced communities, demonstrating its commitment to the well-being of the Myanmar people.
- **Strategic Partnerships:** Strengthening ties with democratic resistance groups and ethnic minority organizations could foster goodwill and regional stability.
- **Economic Engagement:** Expanding cross-border trade and infrastructure projects with local actors—not the military—could reinforce India's commitment to inclusive development.

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- **Diplomatic Advocacy:** By championing democracy and human rights in regional forums, India could differentiate itself from China's exploitative approach and position itself as a leader in Southeast Asia.

Seizing the Moment

China's deepening entanglement with Myanmar's junta has created a growing rift between Beijing and the Myanmar people. This presents India with an opportunity to step in—not just as a counterweight to China, but as a true partner for peace and progress in Myanmar. A principled, forward-thinking strategy that prioritizes democracy, human development, and regional stability could enhance India's influence and reaffirm its leadership role in Southeast Asia.

At this critical juncture, India's choices will shape the future of its engagement with Myanmar and the broader region. By aligning itself with the aspirations of the Myanmar people, India can pave the way for a more stable and prosperous neighborhood—one that resists authoritarian influence and embraces a more just and equitable future.



The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.

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END NOTES:

- ⁱ <https://www.voanews.com/a/anti-china-sentiment-said-to-be-growing-in-myanmar/7846794.html>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-s-support-for-myanmar-regime-backfires-scam-syndicates-thrive/7950028.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-civil-war-militia-1027-offensive-60c0edaed37153fde75b1b838670c441>
- ^{iv} <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c390ndrny17o>
- ^v <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jan/31/myanmar-military-coup-anniversary>
- ^{vi} <https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-anti-military-factions-need-to-be-strategic-with-china-experts-say/7933047.html>
- ^{vii} <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/12/myanmars-resistance-manages-defy-chinese-pressure-now>
- ^{viii} <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/why-anti-chinese-sentiment-is-growing-in-myanmar.html>
- ^{ix} <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/06/time-running-out-indias-balancing-act-myanmar-border>
- ^x <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/india-extends-unprecedented-invite-myanmars-anti-junta-forces-sources-say-2024-09-23/>
- ^{xi} <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/fighters-myanmar-civil-war-aggravate-bitter-ethnic-conflict-india-2024-12-20/>

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