

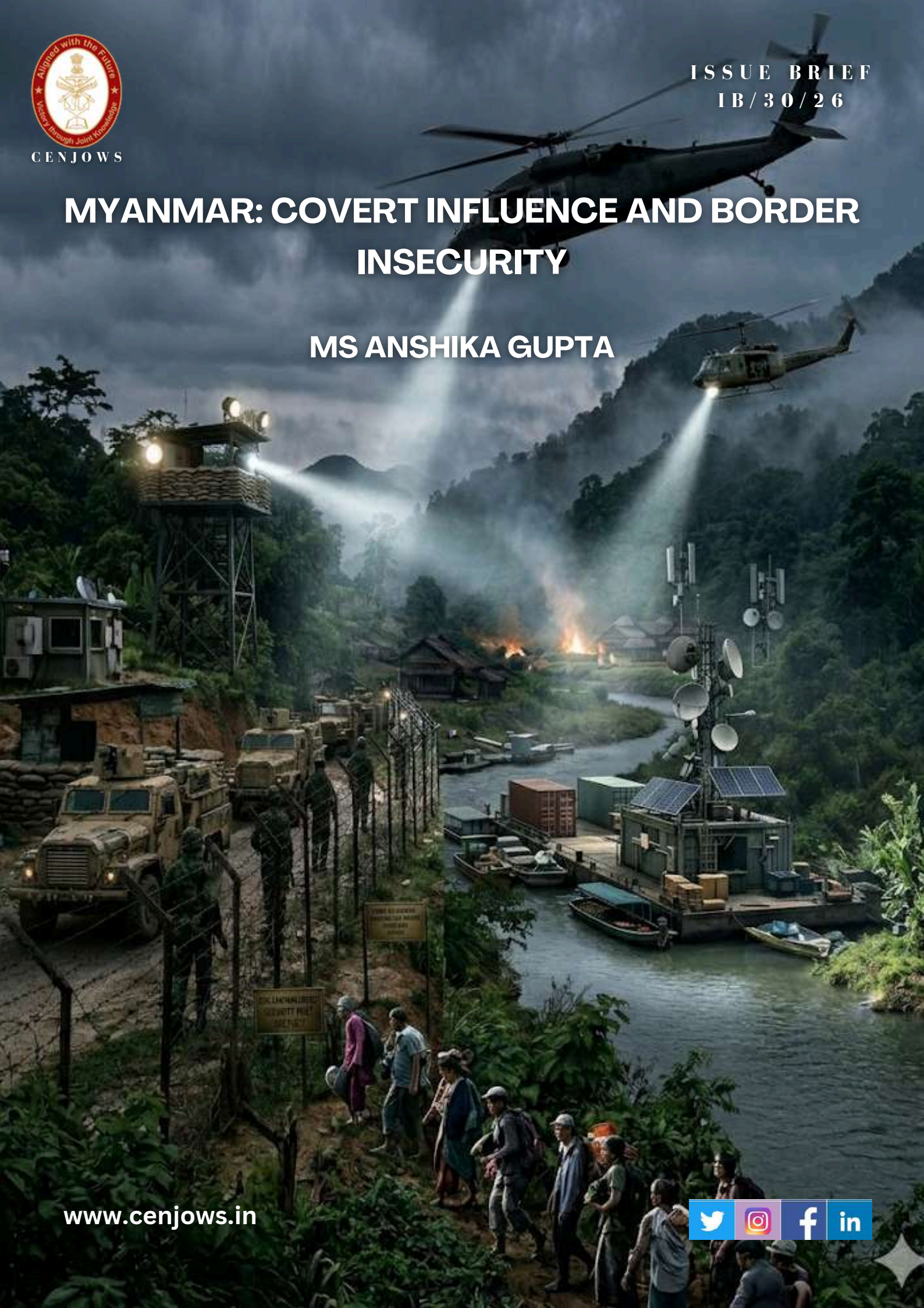


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MYANMAR: COVERT INFLUENCE AND BORDER INSECURITY

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Myanmar: Covert Influence and Border Instability



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Abstract.

The paper looks at how the competition for power between external forces, especially the strategic rivalry between China and the United States, has increased the division of Myanmar's political landscape after the military coup in February 2021. It discusses how Beijing's approach, which involves engaging multiple parties, has strengthened and changed Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) in Myanmar's border regions, which has led to security issues spilling over into India's Northeastern states. The paper focuses on three main concerns for India: first, the rise of safe havens for insurgents in ungoverned border areas; second, the problems with border management due to the collapse of the Free Movement Regime, the influx of refugees, and narcotics trafficking; and third, the threat to India's Act East connectivity plans. It argues that India's security calculus in the Northeast cannot be divorced from the macro-level geopolitical competition playing out in Myanmar and that a coherent response must combine enhanced border infrastructure with sophisticated engagement of non-state actors.

Keywords: Myanmar; India; India's Act East; USA; China; Covert Influence

Myanmar as a Contested Strategic Theatre

Myanmar, sharing a 1,643 kilometres land border with four of India's most strategically sensitive Northeastern states, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, that have historically constituted both a buffer and a bridge in India's eastern strategic outlook. The country's chronic internal conflicts, rooted in more than seven decades of ethnic insurgency since independence in 1948, had long been a peripheral concern for New Delhi. The military coup of 1 February 2021, however, fundamentally altered this calculus. What was once a relatively predictable frontier has become, in the words of one strategic analyst, a "de facto buffer zone, one that is neither sovereign Indian territory nor reliably governed Myanmar land".¹

The coup, launched by Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing against the elected government of the National League for Democracy (NLD), triggered a cascade of consequences with direct implications for South and Southeast Asian security. The formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in exile and its armed wing, the People's Defence Forces (PDF), alongside the intensification of pre-existing EAO campaigns, produced a resistance coalition of formidable scope. The Council on Foreign Relations' Global Conflict Tracker estimates that four years after the coup, the military junta controls only 21 percent of Myanmar's territory, while rebel forces and ethnic armies hold 42 percent.²

Into this fractured landscape stepped external powers with competing interests. China pursued what analysts at War on the Rocks characterised as a "hedging strategy", maintaining simultaneous ties with the junta, select EAOs, and indirectly with the broader resistance.³ The United States, meanwhile, responded to the coup through a sustained campaign of targeted financial and military sanctions that progressively isolated the junta while inadvertently complicating India's policy space.⁴

The paper argues that Myanmar has become a proxy theatre, not in the classic Cold War sense of direct superpower confrontation but in the subtler contemporary sense of external powers manipulating, weaponising, and sustaining conflicting actors to advance strategic interests. The consequent instability ripples directly into India's northeastern security architecture, threatening Act East connectivity ambitions, enabling insurgent sanctuaries, and generating refugee and narcotics flows that destabilise border communities. Understanding these dynamics is essential for crafting a coherent Indian strategic response.

The Architecture of Myanmar's Civil War: Ethnic Conflict and State Fragmentation

- **Historical Roots and Contemporary Fragmentation**

Myanmar's civil war is among the world's most protracted internal armed conflicts, with insurgencies against the central government persisting almost without interruption since independence in 1948. The insurgencies of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Shan State Army (SSA), the Arakan Army (AA), and dozens of other ethnic armed organisations reflect deep-seated grievances over autonomy, cultural recognition, and resource control. These conflicts were never fully suppressed; successive military governments managed them through a combination of ceasefires, counterinsurgency, and selective co-optation. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Myanmar Conflict Map documents how this protracted fragmentation created the structural conditions that made the post-2021 resistance explosion possible.⁵

The 2021 coup shattered this fragile equilibrium. By allying with the People's Defence Forces formed by civilian protesters and Tatmadaw defectors, the pre-existing EAOs acquired a new partner and broader revolutionary legitimacy. Operation 1027, launched on 27 October 2023 by the Three Brotherhood Alliance comprising the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang

National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Arakan Army, numbering some 15,000 fighters, marked a decisive turning point.⁶ Prepared over several years, the offensive quickly seized major towns and key highways connecting Myanmar to China, while the IISS noted that the Brotherhood Alliance demonstrated “the ability to dismantle core elements of the regime’s power base” through its capture of Lashio in August 2024, overrunning the Tatmadaw’s Northeastern Command.⁷

The territorial implications have been severe for the junta. The CFR’s Global Conflict Tracker, drawing on BBC investigative data, assessed that the military controls only 21 percent of Myanmar’s territory, while in Rakhine State, the Arakan Army has consolidated control over the vast majority of townships, including the territory through which India’s flagship Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) must pass.⁸

- **The Collapse of the State’s Border Writ**

The progressive territorial losses suffered by the Tatmadaw have produced a profound structural consequence for India: the Myanmar military, which had been India’s primary partner in counter-insurgency along the shared border, has effectively ceased to function as a reliable frontier management actor. The International Crisis Group’s April 2025 assessment concluded that “ethnic armed group control of Myanmar’s periphery meant that India’s key interests in the country-border security, competition with China, and the Kaladan project, were now all dependent on building good relations with such groups, while the regime’s frailty implied that this new reality was likely to be durable”.⁹

This governance vacuum has created ungoverned spaces in which multiple armed actors like Indian insurgent groups, drug trafficking networks, arms smugglers, and EAO factions operate with considerable freedom. The National Strategy Foundation has argued that India’s military doctrines must now account for scenarios in which insurgent back channels are nourished from across an international border by actors who are neither agents of a recognisable state nor susceptible to conventional bilateral diplomacy.¹⁰

China's Multi-Stakeholder Strategy: The Architecture of Covert Influence

- **The Hedging Calculus**

China's engagement with Myanmar defies simple categorisation. Beijing has simultaneously provided diplomatic support and arms to the junta, channelled weapons through the United Wa State Army (UWSA) to EAOs fighting that same junta, and positioned itself as a mediating broker between the two sides. Analysts at War on the Rocks described this as "a hedging strategy wherein authorities in Beijing and Yunnan Province foster ties and leverage with actors throughout Myanmar's complex political environment", ensuring Chinese interests are protected regardless of which side prevails.¹¹ The IISS's Myanmar Conflict Map similarly noted that Beijing's contradictory behaviour could reflect its tolerance for activities carried out by Yunnan-based authorities pursuing their immediate localised interests, distinct from central government directives.¹²

Since the coup, China has become the junta's primary external patron. Beijing did not condemn the military takeover. It partnered with Russia to supply arms to the Tatmadaw, including six fighter jets delivered to the regime in late 2024. In November 2024, junta leader Min Aung Hlaing visited China for the first time since the coup. He met with Premier Li Qiang, who promised diplomatic support for the junta's election plans. Reportedly, Chinese authorities offered about US\$3 billion in financial aid to support Myanmar's collapsing currency in late 2024.¹³

At the same time, China provided covert support to certain EAOs. The Observer Research Foundation reported that Beijing continued to support the UWSA, the strongest EAO in Myanmar, with arms, ammunition, and military training. These weapons were also given to the MNDAA, the TNLA, the Arakan Army, and others to fight against the Junta".¹⁴

- **Operation 1027 and Beijing's Recalibration**

China's patience with EAO attacks was not unconditional. After Operation 1027 turned out to be more successful than Beijing expected, threatening

the junta's survival and disrupting China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) projects, Beijing shifted its focus to keeping the regime in power. The IISS Myanmar Conflict Map showed that right after the MNDAA shelled Lashio in July 2024, Chinese officials in Yunnan cut power to Laukkaing and then suspended water, internet, and border trade. This showed their control over the Brotherhood Alliance.¹⁵ By early 2025, Beijing had secured a ceasefire between the regime and the MNDAA.

A leaked document from a meeting between China's Special Envoy to Myanmar, Deng Xijun, and the UWSA revealed a "four cuts" strategy, depriving resistant EAOs of food, funds, information, and recruits to compel them to halt offensives against the junta.¹⁶ The Geopolitical Monitor noted that "China's originally intended calibrated destabilisation had evolved into active regime rescue, precisely because the resistance had overperformed Beijing's strategic calculations".¹⁷ War on the Rocks further contextualised this as China's commitment to "managing an untenable status quo by supporting a rump junta's survival in Myanmar's centre".¹⁸

- **The CMEC and Indian Ocean Ambitions**

Underlying all of Beijing's manoeuvring in Myanmar is a strategic objective with profound implications for India: China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), a flagship Belt and Road Initiative project, seeks to link China's landlocked Yunnan Province with the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port on Myanmar's Rakhine coast via road, rail, and pipeline. This corridor would provide the People's Liberation Army's Navy with a viable Indian Ocean access point, circumventing the Malacca Strait, a strategic chokepoint that Chinese planners have termed the "Malacca dilemma".¹⁹ A Chinese naval presence in the Bay of Bengal anchored at Kyaukphyu would substantially alter the balance of maritime power in India's eastern littoral, placing PLA-N assets in proximity to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and threatening India's sea lines of communication.

Compounding this, Foreign Affairs reported that Myanmar became China's largest external supplier of heavy rare earth minerals in 2023,

providing over 90 percent of China's dysprosium and terbium elements critical to electric vehicles, advanced electronics, and weapons systems, with the richest deposits located in Kachin and Shan States under EAO jurisdiction.²⁰ Beijing's cultivation of these EAOs thus simultaneously serves strategic, commercial, and mineral supply security imperatives, creating a layered dependency that makes Chinese disengagement from Myanmar structurally improbable.

The United States' Sanctions Architecture and Its Consequences for India

- **The Biden-Era Sanctions Framework**

The United States responded to the February 2021 coup with a progressively escalating sanctions regime. Coordinated with the United Kingdom, European Union, Canada, and Australia, the sanctions targeted Myanmar's Ministry of Defence, two state-owned banks, Myanma Foreign Trade Bank and Myanma Investment and Commercial Bank, the Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), and successive rounds of arms brokers, jet fuel suppliers, and military-affiliated businesses.²¹ The cumulative impact was measurable: the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that military equipment imports to Myanmar declined by more than 30 percent between 2023 and 2024, attributing this in significant part to the coordinated sanctions pressure applied by the United States and allied nations.²²

The broader legislative architecture, including the BURMA Act, authorised diplomatic and material engagement with the NUG and resistance forces, signalling de facto American sympathies with the anti-junta coalition. The East Asia Forum assessed that the targeted sanctions, while insufficient to alter the junta's strategic calculus, "raised the reputational costs of doing business with the military and prompted modest policy shifts by third-party states to isolate the generals".²³ This posture placed Washington and Beijing in a state of open strategic competition over Myanmar's political future with India caught between the two frameworks.

- **India's Strategic Dilemma**

India's position in this competitive environment is structurally awkward. As a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) member and increasingly close security partner of the United States, New Delhi shares Washington's broad concern about China's expanding footprint in Myanmar. However, India's border security imperatives have historically required engagement with the Tatmadaw. India imposed no targeted sanctions on Myanmar post-coup, and Indian firms, including some with state connections, continued commercial and military equipment transactions with the junta, drawing criticism from accountability groups.²⁴ The Sentry and Justice for Myanmar jointly called on the United States to urge India to fully suspend military equipment sales to the junta.²⁵

This posture reflects deliberate calculation rather than ambivalence. The International Crisis Group observed that "if New Delhi was seen engaging with armed outfits in neighbouring countries, giving them de facto recognition, difficult questions might arise about why it was not doing the same with domestic insurgents, for example, in Jammu and Kashmir".²⁶ This sovereignty dilemma has constrained India's adaptive capacity at precisely the moment when flexibility is most needed to navigate a rapidly fragmenting frontier.

The Trump administration's July 2025 decision to lift sanctions against Myanmar arms dealers and junta cronies added a further complication. The U.S. withdrawal from the sanctions framework materially reduced Western pressure on the junta and indirectly improved the regime's room for manoeuvre, including in counter-insurgency operations adjacent to India's border. The OHCHR's Special Rapporteur noted with alarm that U.S. sanctions had contributed to a measurable decline in arms imports to the junta and that the rollback risked reversing these gains.²⁷ For New Delhi, which had quietly sought to balance Quad commitments with practical Myanmar engagement, the U.S. policy reversal signalled Western disengagement from Southeast Asia at a critical juncture.

Insurgent Safe Havens and the Cross-Border Security Nexus

- **Northeast Indian Insurgencies and the Myanmar Sanctuary**

The porous 1,643-kilometre frontier has long served as a sanctuary for Indian insurgent groups. The United Liberation Front of Asom-Independent (ULFA-I), factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the People's Liberation Army of Manipur, and allied groups have historically maintained bases, training camps, and logistics networks in Myanmar's Sagaing, Kachin, and Chin regions, areas now largely beyond the Tatmadaw's reach.²⁸ The collapse of the junta's frontier control has simultaneously complicated and expanded the operational freedom of these groups. Coordinated operations to flush out Indian militant bases, previously conducted under bilateral frameworks, are now largely inoperative, while the empowerment of EAOs in Myanmar's border regions has created new and unpredictable local power dynamics.

The gravity of this situation was underscored by the July 2025 drone strike on ULFA-I camps in Myanmar's Sagaing region. In the pre-dawn hours of 13 July 2025, over 150-armed drones described by ULFA-I as being of "Israeli and Western origin" struck its mobile camps, killing three senior leaders, including Nayan Medhi Asom, and wounding nineteen others.²⁹ The episode, allegedly conducted by Myanmar's junta, demonstrated how instability in Myanmar can directly intersect with India's internal security, while raising uncomfortable questions about weapons sourcing and the coordination, if any, with Indian security agencies.

- **Arm Flows, Narcotics, and Transnational Criminal Networks**

The security spillovers from Myanmar's civil war extend beyond organised insurgency into transnational crime. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC's) Myanmar Opium Survey 2024, Myanmar remains the world's leading source of opium, with approximately 45,200 hectares under poppy cultivation, cementing its status following Afghanistan's production ban. The UNODC's Regional Representative warned that "the amount of opium produced in Myanmar remains close to

the highest levels we have seen since we first measured it more than 20 years ago" and identified significant risk of further expansion as global supply chains adjust to reduced Afghan production.³⁰ The country's Golden Triangle region has simultaneously seen dramatic expansion in methamphetamine production: ORF's research documented that from February 2021 to January 2024 alone, Indian authorities seized 6.05 tonnes of heroin and over 629 million stimulant tablets, with trafficking networks concentrated in Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh.³¹

The August 2024 attacks in Manipur's Moirang and Koutruk in which insurgent groups employed drones, rockets, and improvised explosive devices demonstrated the growing sophistication of cross-border arms acquisition. India's National Investigation Agency linked multiple weapons caches seized in Manipur to sources across the Indo-Myanmar border, with some materiel suspected to have originated from the conflict zone.³² The collapse of governance structures on the Myanmar side has thus created an ungoverned commercial corridor for illicit goods, weapons, and people that India's security apparatus must manage without reliable bilateral partner cooperation.

Border Management: From Free Movement to Strategic Fencing

- **The Free Movement Regime and Its Suspension**

India's border management along the Myanmar frontier had historically been governed by the Free Movement Regime (FMR), a bilateral arrangement that permitted communities residing within 16 kilometres of the border to cross without a visa, recognising the deep ethnic and familial ties spanning the frontier. The Naga, Kuki, Chin, and Mizo communities in particular have transborder cultural identities that predate post-colonial frontier demarcation. The FMR had thus been understood as a confidence-building and humanitarian accommodation, albeit one that simultaneously created surveillance challenges for security agencies.

The escalating security situation following the 2021 coup fundamentally altered the political calculus around the FMR. In February 2024, Union Home Minister Amit Shah announced the suspension of the FMR and the construction of a comprehensive physical fence along the entire 1,643-kilometre border. In September 2024, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) granted in principle approval for the project estimated at Rs. 31,000 crores, encompassing fencing, road construction, and a Hybrid Surveillance System incorporating night-vision cameras, motion sensors, and integrated monitoring infrastructure.³³ As of that date, only approximately 30+ kilometres of fencing had been completed.

- **The Fencing Debate: Security versus Connectivity**

The border fencing decision has generated significant debate, exposing a structural tension at the heart of India's eastern frontier policy between the Ministry of Home Affairs' securitisation approach and the Ministry of External Affairs' Act East connectivity agenda. The Diplomatist characterised the contradiction thus: "Fencing and revoking the FMR contradict the spirit of regional integration and weaken India's soft power in ASEAN compared to China's seamless Belt and Road Initiative investments. Over-securitisation may alienate the very communities that could serve as local partners in advancing India's strategic objectives".³⁴

The practical challenges of fencing are formidable. The terrain characterised by dense forests, river crossings, and steep mountain ridges makes continuous physical barrier construction technically demanding and costly. Since the junta's writ does not extend to far-flung border areas, the cooperation of EAOs, some of which have demonstrated hostility to Indian border projects, will be essential. In December 2024, New Delhi partially modified its approach, introducing a regulated cross-border movement arrangement through 43 designated border crossing points staffed by Assam Rifles personnel issuing border passes, a pragmatic concession to ethnic realities.³⁵

- **The Refugee Crisis and Ethnic Spillover**

Myanmar's Sagaing, Chin, and Rakhine regions, bordering Manipur, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh, have witnessed some of the civil war's most intense violence, generating substantial refugee flows. Mizoram absorbed tens of thousands of Chin refugees, aided by deep ethnic solidarity between the Mizo and Chin communities, both predominantly Christian Tibeto-Burman peoples with strong transborder kinship networks.³⁶ The Mizoram state government, civil society organisations, and the Mizo National Front facilitated this reception, sometimes in tension with New Delhi's official policy of non-admission.

In Manipur, the refugee question has been explosively politicised, intersecting with the pre-existing Meitei-Kuki ethnic conflict that erupted in May 2023. The state government's attribution of some ethnic violence to refugee-linked instability reflects the political volatility of the cross-border humanitarian dimension.³⁷ The imposition of President's Rule in Manipur in February 2025, following the resignation of its Chief Minister, signaled the severity of political breakdown in this strategically vital border state and highlighted the cascading domestic consequences of Myanmar's civil war for India's internal governance.

The Act East Security Dimension: Connectivity at Risk

- **The Kaladan Project and the Arakan Army**

India's Act East Policy identifies Myanmar as the indispensable land bridge to Southeast Asia. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP), designed to link Kolkata with Sittwe in Rakhine State by sea and then connect Sittwe to Mizoram via river and road through Paletwa in Chin State, was conceived as a transformative trade corridor for India's landlocked northeast. The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, linking Manipur to Thailand via Myanmar, constitutes the second flagship of this connectivity architecture.

The Arakan Army's capture of Paletwa township in early 2024, the most operationally critical segment of the KMTTP, effectively placed the project under the de facto jurisdiction of a non-state armed actor with no formal treaty relationship with India. India evacuated staff from its consulate in Sittwe in April 2024, citing security conditions.³⁸ The East Asia Forum assessed that by December 2024, 23 of 34 Chinese projects in Myanmar had fallen under anti-junta control, reflecting the broader displacement of state authority from frontier zones.³⁹ The KMTTP's completion date remains indefinitely deferred, Myanmar having turned from "a land bridge into a strategic cul-de-sac" for India's Act East ambitions.

New Delhi's response involved careful, low-profile engagement with the Arakan Army. By mid-2024, the deputy commissioner of Mizoram's Lawngtlai district crossed into Paletwa to inspect KMTTP progress, and senior Indian foreign ministry officials met Arakan Army representatives in New Delhi, engagements deliberately kept out of the public domain.⁴⁰ The Rajya Sabha member from Mizoram, K. Vanlalvena, had earlier led a delegation across the border in February 2024 to inspect the project, illustrating how local political figures may serve as track-1.5 interlocutors.⁴¹

- **The Bangladesh Factor and Northeastern Isolation**

The August 2024 political transition in Bangladesh, following the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government, compounded India's Act East vulnerabilities. The previously available transit route through Chattogram port to India's northeast, operationalised in April 2023, became diplomatically uncertain as the interim Bangladeshi government adopted a cooler posture toward New Delhi.⁴² The convergence of an unstable Myanmar corridor and a diplomatically strained Bangladesh transit route simultaneously threatened to isolate India's northeastern states from external connectivity, a structural vulnerability that adversarial actors could exploit.

This dual disruption underscored the fragility of India's Act East connectivity architecture. "India's reliance on Bangladesh for transit to bypass the Siliguri Corridor is now vulnerable to political hostility, potentially isolating the Northeast again".⁴³ The compounding of the Myanmar and Bangladesh

shocks has thus created a moment of maximum strategic exposure for India's northeastern connectivity strategy, one requiring urgent and creative diplomatic responses.

- **The BRI Competitive Disadvantage**

While India's connectivity projects stall, China's CMEC has been sustained by Beijing's direct relationships with relevant EAOs and its economic leverage over the junta. The planned railway from Yunnan to Kyaukphyu, Chinese-operated deep-sea port development, and oil and gas pipeline infrastructure represent a comprehensive connectivity ecosystem that, if realised, would fundamentally alter the regional economic and strategic geography in China's favour. Foreign Affairs assessed that China has "cultivated direct ties to both the military junta and the most capable armed organisations around the country", with the explicit goal of securing overland access to the Indian Ocean and Myanmar's critical mineral deposits.⁴⁴ India's inability to complete the KMTTP has yielded a first-mover advantage to China in the Myanmar connectivity domain with long-term strategic consequences.

India's Strategic Response: Balancing Acts and Policy Imperatives

- **Diplomatic Engagement: Navigating the Junta-EAO Duality**

India's evolving policy toward Myanmar increasingly reflects a pragmatic recognition that the junta cannot deliver on border security, connectivity, or counter-insurgency cooperation in the areas that matter most to New Delhi. The National Security Advisor's engagement with his Myanmar counterpart in Naypyidaw in July 2024 within the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) security chiefs' framework represented the continuation of formal junta engagement.⁴⁵ The simultaneous, discreet outreach to the Arakan Army and other EAOs signals an emerging parallel-track diplomacy that India has been reluctant to formally acknowledge.

This dual-track approach carries inherent risks. Formal engagement with the junta limits India's credibility with resistance forces that may constitute tomorrow's governing authorities. Conversely, open engagement with EAOs could trigger junta backlash and raise domestic political questions. The International Crisis Group cautioned that India's engagement with non-state entities in Myanmar "needed to remain quiet" for precisely these reasons.⁴⁶ Navigating this contradiction demands diplomatic agility and strategic patience that extends well beyond conventional South Asian bilateral paradigms.

- **Military and Intelligence Posture**

India's military response to Myanmar-related border threats has centred on the Assam Rifles, the border-guarding paramilitary force responsible for the 1,643-kilometre frontier, and army elements deployed in northeastern India. The Assam Rifles' operational challenges are formidable: the terrain is among the most difficult in Asia, dense jungle cover provides natural concealment for insurgent logistics, and ethnic kinship ties of border communities complicate intelligence collection.

The National Strategy Foundation has argued that India's military doctrines must pivot toward "contested buffer operations", a concept blending conventional force posturing with specialised cross-border counter-insurgency capabilities adapted to the reality of an ungoverned frontier zone.⁴⁷ The July 2025 drone strike on ULFA-I camps in Sagaing demonstrated the operational imperative of disrupting insurgent sanctuaries before they translate into attacks on Indian soil. The increase in rapid-reaction units trained in jungle warfare, along with investment in drone interdiction abilities, shows early changes in approach to this environment.

- **The BIMSTEC and Quad Dimensions**

India has aimed to internationalize its security issues regarding Myanmar through BIMSTEC, which establishes frameworks for sharing intelligence, collaborating on counter-terrorism efforts, and ensuring joint maritime security. Nonetheless, the internal divisions within Myanmar restrict the

effectiveness of state-to-state cooperation relying on partnerships among functional states.

The Quad framework, which includes India, the United States, Australia, and Japan, provides a complementary yet more geopolitically sensitive avenue. The Quad's common apprehension about China's growing military presence in the Indian Ocean region fosters a shared interest in curbing Beijing's strengthening influence in Myanmar. However, the inconsistency in Washington's policies, ranging from sanctions during the Biden administration to partial rollbacks in the Trump era, makes the Quad an unreliable vehicle for sustained Myanmar engagement. India should focus on building its own strategic capabilities in this area, relying on American co-leadership but not being solely dependent on it.

Conclusion: Structural Imperatives and Strategic Recommendations

Myanmar's breakdown following the coup has created a security landscape of notable complexity along India's eastern border. The intersection of China's discreet influence strategy involving multiple stakeholders, the persistent ineffectiveness of Western sanctions as a corrective mechanism, and the disintegration of the Tatmadaw's ability to govern its frontiers have resulted in a strategic void that poses a direct threat to India's border security, connectivity goals, and broader positioning in the Indo-Pacific region. The subsequent strategic conclusions emerge from the analysis above.

First, India must make its relationship with EAOs that exercise de facto border control, especially the Arakan Army and the Chin National Front, official. This is because these non-state actors are the functional sovereigns of the areas from where India's connectivity projects must pass. This engagement should be measured, kept private when necessary, and based on EAO promises to get rid of Indian insurgent groups from their areas. Gateway House documented that "local communities who know the Northeast best must play a key part" in this kind of diplomacy, suggesting that northeastern state government intermediaries act as track 1.5 interlocutors.⁴⁸

Second, border management must be adjusted to meet security goals without losing the goodwill of the community, which is necessary for gathering intelligence and denying insurgents room to operate. A regulated, biometrically managed border passage system would be better for both security and humanitarian goals than a binary choice between open borders and physical exclusion. It would also help India preserve its soft power with ethnic groups that live across borders. The December 2024 border-pass system through Assam Rifles-staffed crossing points is a good example that should be expanded and made digital.

Third, India's Act East connectivity architecture needs to be fireproofed immediately. Depending heavily on the Myanmar land corridor is an unacceptable single point of failure. Investing in sea-based connectivity options, speeding up the use of the Agartala-Akhaura rail link with Bangladesh, and actively managing diplomacy with the post-Hasina Dhaka government are ways through which India can diversify its eastern connectivity portfolio.

Fourth, India needs to come up with a clear counter-narrative to China's CMEC in the areas of Myanmar where the government has collapsed. This necessitates the engagement of EAOs through the provision of developmental assistance and infrastructure investment linked to conflict resolution, serving as viable alternatives to the extractive economic models typically enforced by Chinese entities. India's cultural, historical, and ethnic connections with Myanmar's Chin, Naga, and Arakanese communities constitute a significant yet underutilized soft power resource.

Finally, a dedicated India-U.S. bilateral intelligence-sharing track on Chinese arms flows to EAOs, set within the Quad's broader Indo-Pacific framework, could help align interests while still giving India strategic freedom. Myanmar is not a peripheral security problem for India; it is a strategic theatre in which the contest for Indo-Pacific primacy is playing out with direct and immediate consequences for the security of India's northeastern frontier. Recognising this and responding with the sophistication the situation demands is among the most consequential tasks facing India's security establishment in the years ahead.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is the author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS, the Defence forces, or the Government of India. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished, and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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