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**MYANMAR'S INTERNAL TURMOIL AND SECURITY
CHALLENGES FOR INDIA
BY
BRIG GAURAV SHARMA (RETD)**

**ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
13 AUG 2026**

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The guest lecture on “Myanmar’s Internal Turmoil and Security Challenges for India” was delivered by Brigadier Gaurav Sharma (Retd) on 13 August 2026. Brigadier Sharma structured his talk around his long personal association with Myanmar, dating back to a 2004 posting in the Military Intelligence Foreign Division, well before a formal defence cooperation framework existed between the two countries. He served as Defence Attaché in Yangon during the political transition when the military ceded power to Aung San Suu Kyi’s government, an experience that afforded him considerable freedom of movement across the country. He recalled accompanying a Chief of Army Staff delegation that met the then junta chief, later interacting with the successor leadership, and subsequently accompanying Myanmar’s senior general now its President on a ten-day visit to India. He had also travelled the length of the Ledo Road, visited the China, Thailand, and India border areas, and served as an election observer during Myanmar’s 2015 general elections, including in the remote Sagaing region.

He identified three structural drivers underlying Myanmar’s persistent internal instability. First, a deep-seated geographical, social, and economic divide between the majority Bamar population and the country’s numerous ethnic nationalities, a fault line sharpened by decades of conflict, displacement, and the involvement of external players, particularly China. Second, unlike India, Myanmar possesses effectively only one functioning instrument of national power – the military, or Tatmadaw – which views the state predominantly through a security lens rather than a people-centric one, and has correspondingly neglected the development of civilian national institutions. Third, this institutional weakness perpetuates a cycle in which the military’s self-assigned role as guardian of national unity and sovereignty forecloses the emergence of alternative, more representative structures of governance.

The speaker elaborated on the ethnic and religious dimensions of this divide. Myanmar is home to two broad racial groupings, the Indo-Aryan-linked Bamar and Chin, and Sino-Tibetan or Himalayan-origin communities such as the Shan and Kachin, a

distinction he likened to fault lines that have historically fractured nations elsewhere. Theravada Buddhism, transmitted via Sri Lanka, has produced a strong and, in his assessment, often hardline religious identity among the majority population, while Christianity introduced during British rule took particular hold among the Kachin and other border communities, paralleling missionary influence in India's own Northeast and reinforcing cross-border affinities with groups such as the NSCN.

On territorial control, he noted that Myanmar shares unsettled or contested borders with China, India, Thailand, and, to a lesser extent, Bangladesh and Laos, and that large stretches of these frontiers lie beyond the effective reach of the Tatmadaw. He cited the Wa-administered region bordering China, which operates its own currency, uses Chinese telecommunications infrastructure, and remains inaccessible even to Myanmar's own army, as an extreme illustration of this phenomenon. Similarly, the Arakan Army's control over Kyaukphyu and adjoining areas, through which China's oil and gas pipelines to Kunming pass, underscored how non-state control over strategically vital infrastructure has become entrenched. He assessed that the military's effective control has shrunk from roughly 60 per cent of national territory a decade ago to somewhere between 25 and 30 per cent today, with a further 30 to 40 per cent under the control of various ethnic armed organisations.

Brigadier Sharma also spoke to the paradox of Myanmar's resource endowment set against its underdevelopment: vast fertile land, water, sunshine, a long coastline, and abundant natural gas and rare-earth reserves, held by a comparatively small population. India, he noted, remains dependent on Myanmar for commodities such as rice and pulses, even as the overall trade balance favours Myanmar. He described the hardships faced by ordinary citizens and by junior military personnel, whose pay and living standards lag well behind the cost of living, in contrast to the relative comfort of the senior military hierarchy.

A substantial part of the lecture addressed the China factor. Chinese support shifted from the Communist Party of Burma to the Tatmadaw around 1985, driven by Beijing's interest in securing access to the Indian Ocean via the Bay of Bengal and bypassing the Malacca Strait. This culminated in the China-Myanmar oil and gas pipeline, completed in 2014 but not made operational until 2017 owing to protracted disputes over transit payments. Despite this dependence, he noted recurring popular

resentment in Myanmar over the exploitation of natural resources by Chinese interests, describing the relationship as one of love, hate, and compulsion rather than one of genuine alignment, and contrasting it with the comparatively high level of trust and goodwill that ordinary Myanmar citizens and their armed forces continue to extend to India.

On the military's institutional grip, he explained that Myanmar's civil administration, from the aviation regulator to district administration and the police, is substantially staffed by retired military officers, since the country possesses only three service academies (the National Defence Academy, the National Technical Defence Academy, and the Medical Academy) and no separate civil services structure. The constitution reserves twenty-five per cent of seats in both houses of parliament for military nominees and gives the armed forces a decisive role in the election of the Vice-President and, ultimately, the President. The military also maintains extensive commercial interests through conglomerates controlling ports, telecommunications, and other sectors. At the tactical level, however, command and control is comparatively loose, with resource-starved units often left to sustain themselves through local means, which he suggested has, in some cases, drawn field commanders into illegal activity and undermined the intent of the central leadership.

Concluding, Brigadier Sharma argued that Myanmar's instability carries direct consequences for India's Northeast through insurgency, porous borders, and narcotics and human trafficking, while the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, paralleling the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, presents India with a strategic squeeze from both flanks. He recommended that India treat connectivity with Myanmar as essential rather than conditional, move beyond a transactional, loan-based approach towards genuine stakeholdership involving technology transfer and capacity building, invest in people-to-people ties, and support the development of Myanmar's civil institutions. He underlined the importance of engaging collaboratively with all stakeholders, including ethnic armed organisations, citing the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project as an example of an initiative that cannot succeed without addressing the interests of the Arakan Army and other local actors alongside those of the central government.

The subsequent discussion touched on the practical challenges facing the Kaladan project, India's own infrastructure constraints on its side of the border, and the extent to which China's Belt and Road-linked corridor through Myanmar threatens India from the east in tandem with developments on its western flank. In his closing remarks, the session chair offered first-hand observations from a recent visit, noting that urban Myanmar, particularly Yangon, compared favourably in infrastructure and facilities with regional cities such as Bangkok, and that negative external perceptions of the country were often disproportionate to conditions on the ground outside the conflict-affected north. He reiterated that the goodwill Myanmar continues to hold for India presents an opportunity for more proactive engagement, extending beyond the military domain into civil and political spheres, in the interest of both the Northeast and India's broader connectivity objectives eastward.