

India's G20 Presidency and the Death of Democracy in Myanmar

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges India faces in upholding its aspiration of becoming a democratic world leader while holding the G20 presidency, given its nonchalant approach toward the erosion of democracy in Myanmar. Despite claiming to be the “mother of democracy,” India’s indifference toward the ongoing civil war in Myanmar and the increasing proximity of its military leaders with China contradicts its aspirations of becoming a world leader. As India marches toward fulfilling its role as a democratic global power, persistent violent attacks on democracy and rule of law in its eastern neighborhood pose a direct threat to its strategic and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. The article sheds light on the implications of the military rule in Myanmar for India during its G20 presidency.

Since India’s assumption of the presidency of G20 in December 2022, there has been a growing conversation about India’s ambition of becoming a “leading power” and its role in shaping global outcomes. New Delhi’s new role comes at one of the most critical times in contemporary history and presents an opportunity for India to showcase its capabilities in addressing global challenges. It also raises questions about India’s response to critical issues beyond its borders, such as the ongoing political and civil unrest in Myanmar. Thus, the presidency offers India a chance to prove its leadership caliber. While solving the world’s problems are all well and good, this critical issue just beyond India’s eastern frontier requires serious attention from New Delhi. The military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, which overthrew the democratically elected government of National League for Democracy (NLD), has resulted in violent suppression of protests and widespread human rights abuses. Being a major neighboring country, India’s response to the crisis in Myanmar is crucial, as the military rule not only has consequences for the people of Myanmar but also for other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

China’s stance on the issue has been widely discussed, with allegations of its involvement in the coup. In contrast, India’s response has been relatively muted, with condemnation of the violence but no explicit criticism of the military leaders. This approach raises questions about New Delhi’s commitment to India’s demo-

cratic values and its aspiration to become a democratic world leader.¹ This article explores India's approach to the crisis in Myanmar in light of its G20 presidency and its global ambitions, analyzing the implications of its nonchalant and contradictory approach toward the ongoing crisis.

India's Myanmar Challenge

As global geopolitical power dynamics shift from unipolar to multipolar, emerging powers like India and China are becoming more assertive in shaping the world order. India's ambition to become a leader for the Global South is a notable example. Despite this, India's lack of action regarding the systemic killings of Rohingya Muslims by Myanmar's military leaders has been glaring.² Additionally, it is worth noting that many articles, opinion pieces, and research papers have excluded the crisis in Myanmar from the list of global challenges facing India, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, US–China rivalry, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, global recession, and climate change, among others.

The crisis in Myanmar may seem slightly insignificant when compared to other global challenges, but it has far-reaching consequences for India. First, Beijing's influence in Myanmar following the coup is a cause for concern for India. The leaders of the Tatmadaw are becoming increasingly dependent on China for financial and political support, which could jeopardize New Delhi's relations with Myanmar. Such influence is evident from the statement issued by Tatmadaw leaders in 2021 that, "Myanmar will start accepting Renminbi as an official settlement currency next year for trade with China."³ Second, the civil war and insurgency in Myanmar are detrimental for peace in northeast India. The influx of refugees from Myanmar is causing tension between the central government of India and the state governments of Mizoram and Manipur. Third, the ongoing conflict in Myanmar undermines India's Act East Policy and the geostrategic economic projects that form its core. These projects include the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway Project (IMT Highway) and the Kaladan Multi-

¹ Ministry of Education, Government of India, "Shri Dharmendra Pradhan launches the book 'India: The Mother of Democracy' prepared and published by ICHR," *PIB Delhi*, 24 November 2022, <https://www.pib.gov.in/>; and Saket Ambarkhane and Sanjay Valentine Gathia, "Over a Year Later, Myanmar's Military Coup Threatens India's National Security," *United States Institute of Peace*, 10 May 2022, <https://www.usip.org/>.

² Suhasini Haidar, "Should India Change Its Policy on the Rohingya?," *The Hindu*, 26 August 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/>; and Shriansh Jaiswal and Ananya Kumar, "India's Response to Rohingyas: A Gross Misuse of Defense of National Security and Turning Away from Its International and Constitutional Obligations," *Jurist*, 2 July 2021, <https://www.jurist.org/>.

³ John Geddie, "Myanmar Seeks closer China Ties with Renminbi Trade Project," *Reuters*, 22 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTT). Besides these challenges, New Delhi's engagement with the Tatmadaw and India's tepid response to the democratic and human rights crisis in Myanmar are at odds with its aspirations of being a democratic world leader.

The Chinese Dynamic

The Tatmadaw leaders have allowed several multibillion-dollar Chinese projects under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to proceed, despite these projects having been stalled by the previous NLD-led government for environmental and socioeconomic assessment. Among these projects is the USD 2.5 billion Mee Lin Gyaing liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant that will provide power to one of the major economic zones in the Ayeyarwady region.⁴ The military junta has also announced plans to move ahead with the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port in the Bay of Bengal and other special economic zones that will give China easier access to the Indian Ocean.⁵ This is of particular concern to New Delhi, as the Kyaukphyu port is not far from India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Maritime affairs analyst Abhijit Singh warns that "India must be aware that a consolidation of Chinese maritime power in Southeast Asia has a direct bearing on the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) power projection plans in the Indian Ocean."⁶ Additionally, the lack of socioeconomic and environmental assessments of the BRI projects in Myanmar, combined with the imprisonment of officials involved in such assessments, may lead to instability domestically and international condemnation.⁷ The long-term ecological damage resulting from these projects is also a significant concern for the region.

India's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region are closely linked to the peace and stability of its eastern neighborhood, especially Myanmar. Therefore, India needs to pay close attention to the ongoing political turmoil there. While it is crucial to engage with the military generals to prevent Myanmar from falling completely into China's arms, India must also be careful not to compromise its democratic values and human rights principles. Moreover, the continuing insurgency and civil unrest in Myanmar could undermine India's strategic projects in

⁴ "Junta Approves \$2.5bn Power Plant Project Backed by Chinese Companies," *Myanmar Now*, 14 May 2021, <https://myanmar-now.org/>.

⁵ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Myanmar Junta Expedites Work on China funded Kyaukphyu Port," *Economic Times*, 9 August 2021, <https://m.economictimes.com/>.

⁶ Abhijit Singh, "Why India Is Right about Its South China Sea Stand," *ORF*, 26 July 2016, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

⁷ Jason Tower and Priscilla A. Clapp, "Myanmar: China, the Coup and the Future," *United States Institute of Peace*, 8 June 2021, <https://www.usip.org/>.

the region, such as the IMT Highway and the KMTT. As Praveen Swami of *The Print* notes, “The intensified insurgency in Myanmar, though, could leave the military in no position to keep delivering on its commitments to India. Should China gain greater influence, the Generals might also have little incentive to do so.”⁸ Therefore, India must adopt a nuanced and proactive approach to the situation in Myanmar to safeguard its interests and regional stability.

The view that China sponsored the coup in Myanmar and is behind the ongoing political turmoil is widely held by the people of Myanmar. By engaging with Myanmar’s military leaders, India risks damaging its goodwill among the Burmese people, as noted by analysts at the United States Institute of Peace.⁹ Moreover, the Tatmadaw’s dependence on China is much deeper than its relations with India, particularly in terms of financial and economic support. This dependence has only increased after the coup and amid international isolation, particularly from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As a result, New Delhi needs to adopt a more nuanced approach toward Myanmar that balances India’s strategic interests and its commitment to democratic values.

Dangers of Civil War in Myanmar for India

Long-term instability and violence in Myanmar pose significant threats to India’s geostrategic and economic interests. New Delhi has made substantial investments in Myanmar, including the USD 6 billion petroleum refinery near Yangon, in addition to the KMTT Project and the IMT Highway. Cross-border trade with Myanmar has been a crucial driver of employment and income generation in northeast India.¹⁰ However, all such economic ventures are bound to suffer due to the ongoing civil unrest. Although the Tatmadaw in Myanmar shares a strong relationship with the Indian government, according to Dr. Amit Singh, a professor of political science at the University of Delhi, “instability in the region would threaten India’s near \$780 million worth of investments in Myanmar and hinder the completion of vital infrastructure projects.”¹¹ Political analyst Radha Kumar notes that given India’s “land and sea borders with Myanmar, and the troubled

⁸ Praveen Swami, “Why White Elephant Democracy Will Fuel Civil War in Myanmar, Instability in India’s Northeast,” *The Print*, 8 January 2023, <https://theprint.in/>.

⁹ Ambarkhane and Gathia, “Over a Year Later, Myanmar’s Military Coup.”

¹⁰ Mira Patel, “A Complex History and Layered Present: What Determines India’s Response to Military Rule in Myanmar,” *Indian Express*, 20 May 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/>.

¹¹ Cited in Patel, “A Complex History and Layered Present.”

history of cross-border insurgencies between our two countries, the Modi administration's inertia is alarming, though not entirely surprising."¹²

The ongoing civil war in Myanmar poses several challenges for India, including the risk of violence and infiltration along the Indo-Myanmar border. Such incidents could harm New Delhi's image and prove detrimental to India's economic interests and infrastructure projects in Myanmar. In January 2023, bombings by Myanmar's armed forces targeting ethnic armed organizations (EAO) fighting against the Tatmadaw—dangerously close to the border in Mizoram—highlighted the potential dangers.¹³ The influx of refugees from Myanmar—many of whom share deep socio-cultural ties with the ethnic populations of northeast India¹⁴—also presents several challenges, including security risks, burden on resources, spread of communicable diseases, and a possible increase in smuggling of narcotics.¹⁵ The ongoing civil war could also lead to insurgency spreading along the border, putting pressure on the Indian Army to control it. Therefore, as Radha Kumar argues, India has “a direct security interest in the restoration of our neighbour's democracy.”¹⁶ Such interest may prove reciprocal, as the Indian Army has been successful in reducing insurgency in northeast India to a great extent—it might be stated that the Tatmadaw needs the Indian Army far more than India needs the Tatmadaw.

New Delhi has justified its relations with the Tatmadaw junta based on the belief that the assistance of Myanmar's military is essential for curbing insurgency in northeast India. However, various analysts have claimed “this assumption was never fully correct and has completely fallen apart since the coup.”¹⁷ The Tatmadaw has failed to manage insurgency within its own country, with several EAOs intensifying rebellion against the military junta after the coup. Therefore, it is uncertain—perhaps even unlikely—the Tatmadaw will be of much use for managing insurgency in India. Furthermore, insurgency in northeast India has decreased significantly, with recent revocation of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in many parts of the region. The Indian Army has undertaken various initiatives to engage the youth of the northeast and keep them from

¹² Radha Kumar, “Radha Kumar Writes: India's Response to Sri Lanka and Myanmar Crises Is a Study in Contrast. It Shouldn't Be,” *Indian Express*, 2 August 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/>.

¹³ Rahul Karmakar, “Myanmar's Civil War Gets Too Close to India's Border for Comfort,” *The Hindu*, 7 February 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

¹⁴ Ninglun Hanghal and Makepeace Sithou, “Manipuris Help Myanmar Refugees, Ignoring BJP Order to ‘Politely’ Turn Them Away,” *Article 14*, 11 May 2021, <https://article-14.com/>.

¹⁵ Ambarkhane and Gathia, “Over a Year Later, Myanmar's Military Coup”; and Patel, “A Complex History and Layered Present.”

¹⁶ Kumar, “Radha Kumar Writes.”

¹⁷ Ambarkhane and Gathia, “Over a Year Later, Myanmar's Military Coup.”

joining insurgent groups, and recruitment by the armed factions has dramatically declined, with most of the cadres surrendering and joining mainstream society.¹⁸ Among these initiatives, the most popular ones include efforts to provide soccer training and coaching and instruction for students to appear for the national-level entrance examinations for medicine and engineering.¹⁹ Thus, India's relationship with the Tatmadaw may no longer be necessary or advantageous for curbing insurgency, as internal efforts to address this issue have been successful in decreasing violence and promoting stability in northeast India.

India has a complex history with Myanmar, having previously supported the democratic movement in the country. However, in 1998, the Indian government changed its approach and began engaging with the Tatmadaw, recognizing the need to strengthen connections with Southeast Asia and improve the situation in the northeast.²⁰ This policy of aligning with "whoever worked in India's interests" may no longer be effective, as the Tatmadaw has proven ineffective in containing the civil war and addressing the economic crisis in Myanmar. Additionally, ongoing protests, insurgency, and serious human rights abuses in Myanmar make it increasingly questionable for India to maintain ties with the Tatmadaw.

India's policy of noninterference and reluctance to condemn the Tatmadaw's actions in Myanmar is at odds with its global democratic aspirations. The ASEAN has taken a collective stance in condemning Myanmar's armed forces and has excluded them from important ASEAN meetings. However, India recently held a meeting with the military leaders of Myanmar to discuss border management issues.²¹ Without coordination from the remaining ASEAN countries, India's plan of connecting with the ASEAN through Myanmar may not be successful. Therefore, it is imperative for India to carefully reassess its relationship with Myanmar and consider the broader implications of its engagement with the Tatmadaw in light of the ongoing violence and instability in Myanmar.

Conclusion

Recalling India's close ties with the former dictator of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf the editors of *The Indian Express* caution that "the Mumbai attacks . . . should

¹⁸ Snehes Alex Philip, "Peace in Northeast after Decades Allows Army to Finally Pull Out of Counter-insurgency Ops," *The Print*, 22 September 2022, <https://theprint.in/>.

¹⁹ Dinakar Peri, "Insurgency Down in Northeast, Army Shifts to LAC," *The Hindu*, 18 September 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

²⁰ Patel, "A Complex History and Layered Present."

²¹ Suhasini Haidar, "Foreign Secretary Meets Myanmar Military Leaders, Discusses Border Management," *The Hindu*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

be a reminder to India that talking to a military dictator or an Army Chief alone, hoping that other 'stakeholders' will fall in line, is not a promising path to normalising relations with Pakistan."²² India's present approach toward Myanmar is quite similar. The Indian government has chosen to engage with the military leaders of Myanmar while sidelining the other stakeholders in Myanmar completely. Complacent interaction with the military junta may not prove fruitful in the long run. Additionally, the EAOs' insurgency in Myanmar had decreased under the rule of the NLD, while political instability has only grown since the military coup. Rather than finding a stable solution, the military junta has tried to suppress opposition with force. It is therefore imperative for New Delhi to reassess its approach to Myanmar and consider the long-term implications of India's engagement with the military junta.

The people of Myanmar have shown their desire for a functional democracy in their country through their election of the NLD in the general elections of 2020. However, the power-hungry and superstitious leaders of the Tatmadaw are unlikely to relinquish their positions easily. However, their tactics are ultimately unsustainable, as they cannot rule over a population for long without their support. New Delhi must consider the democratic aspirations of the people of Myanmar and the outcome of the 2020 elections when crafting India's policy toward its troubled eastern neighbor. Ignoring the violence against Rohingya Muslims or the suppression of democratic protests is incompatible with India's aspiration to be a democratic global leader.

In his recent book, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar warns that "indifference to global developments is no longer affordable; In fact, it is downright dangerous."²³ New Delhi's apparent indifference to the dictatorial developments in Myanmar contradicts India's aspiration to become a democratic world leader and could prove dangerous in near future. As India assumes its G20 presidency, it should follow its External Affairs Minister's call to "ensure that it emerges as a voice for societies and countries that would otherwise get left behind and not have somebody else to speak for them."²⁴ Indian policy makers must accept their responsibility to promote peace and democracy in their neighborhood, while avoiding *imposing* their values on the Tatmadaw. New Delhi should push for a peaceful settlement between the Tatmadaw and the people of Myanmar, with the

²² "Hares and Hounds," *Indian Express*, 6 February 2023, 12.

²³ S. Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Gurugram, India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020), xi.

²⁴ Press Trust of India, "India's G20 Presidency 'Very Big Deal': EAM Jaishankar to Critics," *The Hindu*, 2 January 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

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goal of ending the turmoil in Myanmar as soon as possible. A stable democratic government in Myanmar would ultimately benefit Indian interests in the long run, and India should not shy away from pursuing that goal. ✪

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