



Risks and Opportunities: Bangladesh's Strategic Choices in a Post- Coup Myanmar

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Addressing the complex issues surrounding Bangladesh's policy options in Myanmar is crucial given the latter's ongoing political crisis. This includes the historical roots of authoritarian rule in the country, which has only intensified since the 2021 coup led by the *Tatmadaw*. Additionally, policy constraints in Myanmar for Bangladesh include the vested interests of regional powers like China and India, whose support has enabled the junta to maintain its hold on power. The weak international response by global and Asia-specific organizations such as the UN and ASEAN has further diminished the chances of any robust multilateral interventions.

Moreover, the passing of the BURMA Act last year has caused concern due to the potential addition of American military aid in the conflict, which may destabilize the region further. In view of these challenges, it is recommended that Bangladesh pursue a dual diplomatic strategy, maintaining official dialogue and cooperation with Myanmar's military junta while employing compellence-based tactics to pressure the *Tatmadaw* to accommodate Bangladesh's security concerns. Additionally, it is recommended that Bangladesh proactively engage with the BURMA Act to identify potential avenues of cooperation and minimize the risks of propagating regional instability.

Myanmar's Political History

Since its inception, Myanmar has been plagued by a democratic deficit that has undermined the country's economy, security and social fabric. Upon independence from Britain in 1948, the country briefly experimented with parliamentary democracy but was marred with ethnic insurgencies from its frontier regions, who demanded greater autonomy in their states. This issue was further exacerbated by the government's push towards institutionalizing Bamar culture and language at the national level, which betrayed their initial rhetoric of championing diversity. In conjunction with ethnic conflicts, the administration also suffered from inadequate resources, incompetency and poor communication with the general public, which left the civilian government led by Prime Minister U Nu (1960-62) in a vulnerable state.

By 1962, the government's mismanagement of these issues threatened national integration, and Myanmar's armed forces staged a coup to establish military rule, which lasted for the next twenty-six years. During this time, the military government introduced an isolationist constitution that caused widespread corruption, economic deterioration, and food shortages. In 1988, the situation worsened as people took to the street in protests, which resulted in severe government crackdowns. General Ne Win stepped down only to be replaced by another

military dictator, who ruled till 2011 when a civilian government headed by the National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi came to power. However, the 2008 constitution allowed the military junta to retain significant political control over the state, giving them one-quarter of the seats in the country's parliament and entitling them to ministerial seats in the departments of defence, home affairs and border affairs.

In light of these historical developments, it becomes clear that Myanmar has never been a democratic nation. Even when the military junta introduced pluralistic reforms, they maintained significant political control, such as in the transitionary period between 2011 and 2021. Still, whenever democratically elected governments have come to power, they have done little to protect Myanmar's various ethnic minorities. In fact, Aung San Suu Kyi's so-called democratic government has also been complicit in the military's atrocities. Once in power, she "created a party in which she wielded enormous power, disdained important institutions like a free media, and continually defended the military's... abuses against the Rohingya" (Kurlantzick, 2021).

On February 1, 2023, the Myanmar military government staged yet another coup under General Min Aung Hliang. This move was in response to the poor electoral performance of the military-supported Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which conceded 46 seats to the opposition

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parties it won in the previous election. In comparison, Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won an additional 61 parliamentary seats in Myanmar, which gave them a total of 920 seats of the 1,117 contested ones. The junta perceived NLD's landslide victory as a threat to their control over the government, and declared the election null, arresting Suu Kyi and other lawmakers from her party as well as many activists in the process.

It has been two years since the coup took place, and the situation in Myanmar has only worsened. In trying to suppress the nationwide protests that erupted after their coup, the junta, has killed thousands and detained millions. In response, opposition political forces have launched a new political party called the National Unity Government (NUG) which represents a mix of NLD members, protest leaders, and representatives from various ethnic minority groups. The NUG aims to depose the junta and introduce federal democracy into the country. In Rakhine, the Arakan Army (AA) seeks greater autonomy for the ethnic Arakan and Rohingya communities of the state. Although initially hostile to their presence in Rakhine, the Arakan Army has recently been more conciliatory toward the Rohingyas, recognizing their rights to the land and has even incorporated them into the AA's operational activities. The Arakan Army now controls two-thirds of the Rakhine state and has agreed to an informal ceasefire with the junta, though the arrangement seems tenuous at best, with a high probability of renewed violence breaking out in the future.

Bangladesh shares a 271 kilometers border with Myanmar, where the former's Chattogram division meets the latter's Rakhine state (previously called Arakan province). Historically, this has been a fiercely contested area, changing hands between various South Asian empires. Since independence, it has also been a major security theatre for Bangladesh, home to one of the country's most enduring insurgencies in the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well as periodic influxes of Rohingya refugees.

The refugee crisis reached its peak in late 2017, when hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas poured over the border of southern Bangladesh, fleeing the junta's atrocities in the Rakhine state. Currently, nearly a million Rohingyas reside in Bangladesh, living in the largest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, a southeastern district of the country. This has been a tremendous drain on the country's resources, and despite international humanitarian aid, the repatriation of the Rohingyas seems to be a distant reality. Further complicating matters is the passing of the BURMA Act by the United States, which allows for non-lethal military aid to groups fighting the junta in Myanmar. Security experts fear that this act may further militarize the ongoing conflict and have negative spillover effects on Bangladesh.

These issues pose both traditional and non-traditional security threats to Bangladesh, and is further compounded by the latter's strategic constraints, which includes both India and China's presence in Myanmar. Additionally, the fragmented response from regional and international bodies limits Bangladesh's non-military options in resolving these issues.

The forced displacement of the Rohingya people in Bangladesh has produced an array of non-traditional security concerns for the latter, and have negatively affected the host communities in the country's south and southeastern region. Reports indicate that the prolonged presence of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh has led to rising clashes between them and the locals, and has put a heavy burden on local supply chains, reducing the availability of food, water, medicine and other necessities. The instability along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border has also made it a hotspot for transnational criminal activity, including smuggling, drug trafficking and prostitution.

The ongoing civil-war in Myanmar also poses challenges to Bangladesh's territorial integrity in its southeastern region. This area, known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts, has been a hotbed of separatist movements, led by local indigenous tribes in the country. Although a peace accord was signed in 1997, there have been occasional flare-ups since then, with the most recent one happening late last year. A

new insurgent group, the Kuki-Chin National Front (KCNF), also known as the Bom Party, has claimed responsibility for these attacks. The KCNF, which surfaced in 2022, has ties with other insurgent groups in Myanmar, which provided financing, arms and training, and transported its trained fighters from the Kachin state through the porous borders in Bandarban, a part of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. They have also aided in the growing Islamist terror outfits in the country, training and arming the Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya, which security analysts currently consider to be the biggest threat to the state. Devoting resources to address these security issues is a difficult task for Bangladesh, a country rapidly moving up the development ladder. Diverting assets away from the country's economic and social sectors not only impedes progress, but risks it further destabilizing the state's internal and external security environment.

Taking a more assertive approach to Myanmar has its own constraints, chiefly those imposed by Chinese and Indian presence, both of which have vested interests in that country. China's concerns are linked to the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which aims to connect the former's landlocked Yunnan province to the Indian Ocean through the Rakhine state in Myanmar. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, China has already completed construction of the Kyaukphyu port on the Bay of Bengal as well as a gas

transmission pipeline from Rakhine to Yunan, and has plans to build more roads and railways in the country. Rakhine is also China's gateway to the Indian Ocean, where it is seeking to increase its naval presence to both strategically constrain India and counter the US's new Indo-Pacific Strategy. On the Indian front, its infrastructure projects in Rakhine, most notably the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, which involves a new port in Sittwe, connects the country's isolated northeastern region to the Bay of Bengal. Due to these economic entanglements, both India and China maintain close ties with the military junta, limiting options for multilateral actions.

The support from regional and international bodies have also not been inspiring. ASEAN, the regional body with the most influence on this issue and of which Myanmar is a member-state, has been largely ineffective in handling the Rohingya crisis and the civil-war. This is partly due to its organizational mandate to avoid interference in the internal affairs of members, which limits its range of policy responses. Still, it has announced a five-point consensus in hopes of halting the conflict and establishing dialogue, but it has had little impact so far. Further complicating issues have been ASEAN member-states' diverging interests in Myanmar. While Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei have been vocal about the Rohingyas, Thailand has been comparatively muted due to the close relationship it has traditionally enjoyed

with Myanmar and currently with the Junta. At the international level, the responses have also been mixed. The UN Security Council came out with a resolution that condemned the February coup, but the renouncement only highlighted the junta's growing international isolation, rather than reducing its operationality. The passing of the BURMA Act by the US is also a point of concern. The law imposes targeted sanctions on both the Junta as well its revenue sources and aims to utilize the UN for new resolutions that undermine the military's control over the country. It also includes a provision for providing non-lethal military assistance to the various Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAO) that are fighting the *Tatmadaw*.

In previous engagements like Syria and Ukraine, this allowed America to supply its supported groups with military equipment such as armored vehicles and radar instruments. The EAOs receiving similar levels of support is a concern for Bangladesh, as some of these groups have ties to insurgent factions inside the country. The Kuki-Chin National Front (KCNF) specifically has ties to the Myanmar-based Kachin Independence Army (KIA), from which it received military training in guerilla warfare. Any arms or training provided to the KIA by the US may potentially find its way back to the KCNF, further undermining Bangladesh's internal security.

Bangladesh's Policy Options in Myanmar

The situation in Myanmar is an ongoing and dynamic armed struggle with multiple stakeholders. For Bangladesh, addressing the challenges arising from this conflict requires developing policy responses that not only account for its own interests, but those of surrounding countries and different actors in the bordering Rakhine state. Furthermore, the country's foreign policy decisions must be made with the goal of stabilizing the region, so that its principal interests - repatriation of the Rohingya and peace in the Chattogram Hill Tracts - are secured. With these considerations in mind, it is recommended that Bangladesh: (1) maintains dialogue with the *Tatmadaw*, (2) pursues multimodal diplomatic strategies and (3) carefully monitors the US-led BURMA Act.

Maintain Dialogue with the *Tatmadaw*

Despite reduced operational capabilities since the coup, Myanmar's military junta still remains a formidable force in the country, with control over most urban centers. Moreover, it has maintained strong bilateral relations with some of Bangladesh's key cooperation partners, including India, China, Japan, and Russia. India views the Rakhine state as a key geo-economic location for the development of its northeast frontier, which it hopes to connect to the Bay of Bengal through the Kaladan project. As a result, it has helped the *Tatmadaw* "...with intelligence, satellite

images, and defense equipment." (Shivamurthy, 2021). Russia, too, remains a key supporter of the military junta, providing the latter with military equipment as well as advocating for them on the international stage. Russia has repeatedly blocked UNSC resolutions condemning the *Tatmadaw*'s coup and has supplied them with radar equipment, surveillance drones, helicopters, fighter jets and anti-aircraft missiles. In contrast, Japan has simultaneously condemned the junta's actions since the coup while also allowing *Tatmadaw* officers to train at Japanese military academies. Despite their growing international isolation, the *Tatmadaw* remains a formidable force in Myanmar with a strong base of international support from key Asian powers. Since Bangladesh enjoys close partnerships with these countries as well, it cannot afford to take any unilateral action that upsets these relationships and must continue to engage with this government as it has in the past.

Supporting the junta's "one-Myanmar government policy" does not mean that Dhaka has to ignore the realities on the ground in Rakhine or the rest of the country. While the *Tatmadaw* remains the official government, new actors have emerged on the scene. The National Unity Government, comprising ousted lawmakers from the 2021 coup, as well as various EAOs, has posed considerable challenge to the *Tatmadaw*'s rule. The NUG enjoys widespread support from Myanmar's public and fields its own armed

forces, consisting of 65,000 soldiers (Aung, 2022). Currently, it controls over 50% of the country's territory; in these areas, they have introduced local administrations, governance structures, and judicial systems. The Arakan Army (AA), an EAO based out of the Rakhine state, is another actor that has emerged as a major power in the region. Though not explicitly separatist in nature, the AA wants the right to self-determination and sovereignty for Rakhine, be it under a federal Myanmar union or as a new state. The Arakan Army is also backed by China, which provides it with military support, and reports suggest that it has effective control over 75% of the state's townships (Assum and Hliang, 2021).

Most importantly, both the NUG and the AA leadership has said that they recognize the human rights and citizenship rights of the Rohingya, and hope to see their peaceful repatriation back to Myanmar. Maintaining informal dialogue with both of these groups would help Bangladesh diversify its cooperation partners in Myanmar, leaving it less reliant on the junta; these relationships can also be leveraged to pressure them to take Bangladesh's security concerns regarding the Rohingyas into account. This "twin-track" diplomatic approach – whereby states maintain links with both official and unofficial actors – already has precedent in Myanmar, where India and Japan have

eschewed Western sanctions, and instead, engaged with both military and pro-democracy forces. In a post-conflict hypothetical where the Tatmadaw shares political space with either of these groups, these prior relationships would help Bangladesh in repatriating the Rohingyas back to Myanmar.

Pursue Multimodal Diplomacy

Diplomatic strategies constitute a wide range of mechanisms to advance a state's interests as well as to preserve its independence, security and territorial integrity. Peaceful diplomacy is often the state's first choice when managing international relations, whereas military force is considered the last resort.

The current Bangladesh-Myanmar dynamic presents an opportunity for the former to pursue a military-backed diplomatic model in which the Bangladeshi armed forces can be used to great effect. Specifically, the threat of limited military engagement in the Rakhine state, coupled with messaging that effectively communicates the operation's defensive posture and highlights Bangladesh's security interests, may render such actions internationally acceptable and push the junta towards stabilizing the border region. Calls for military-backed diplomacy has already been voiced within different academic circles in the country. This recommendation is also not without precedence, as Bangladesh pursued a similar strategy in the 1970s when it faced an earlier influx of

Rohingyas in the country. In February, 1978, the Tatmadaw carried out a military operation in northern Rakhine that evicted some 200,000 Rohingyas and pushed them into Bangladesh. In response, Bangladesh leadership threatened to arm the displaced Myanmar nationals, and both governments promptly reached an agreement for Myanmar to repatriate them in July, a mere five months later. Declassified diplomatic texts from that time indicate that this was motivated by the Tatmadaw's fears of opening another conflict theatre on its Western borders, as it had already been stretched thin with military engagements in the North and East.

Of course, the military firepower gap between the Bangladesh armed forces and *Tatmadaw* has only widened since the 1970s, as Bangladesh focused on development while Myanmar's forces continued to acquire new armaments. As it stands, the junta's military force, especially their air-power, gives them a comfortable lead over the Bangladeshi army. Moreover, the country has a significant indigenous defense industry, which makes the junta less reliant on the outside world for military procurement. Yet on absolute terms, Bangladesh has generally spent more on their military than Myanmar; in the 2022-2023 fiscal year alone, it allocated \$4.3 billion on defense compared to the latter's \$1.8 billion, marking a two-fold difference (IISS, 2023). Thus, focusing on closing this capabilities gap would yield quick results, especially in light of the Forces 2030 initiative, which seeks to modernize the Bangladesh armed

forces through procuring advanced military equipment. Of course, any additional resources devoted to defense expenditure will come at the cost of reducing spending in economic and social sectors, which may not be immediately politically feasible for Bangladesh, given its population burden and higher exposure to climate disasters. Thus, to justify increased military spending to the general population, the government has to effectively communicate the risks that the unstable border poses to Bangladesh's sovereignty, and emphasize the defensive nature of remilitarization efforts.

Engage the BURMA Act

The passing of the BURMA Act, passed last December, has been widely praised by Myanmar's democratic forces as an indication of the U.S.'s commitment to reestablishing democracy in the country. The Act has several provisions that seek to limit the junta's military capabilities while simultaneously reducing their sources of income. However, it has been criticized for certain allowances, such as giving the US the ability to provide non-lethal assistance to the various EAOs in the country. Security experts in Bangladesh fear that this provision may be interpreted rather liberally, like it has been in Ukraine or Syria, where American supported groups received armored vehicles, radar equipment and other military apparel. This can potentially undermine Bangladesh's internal security as some of these EAOs have ties to separatist forces

like the Kuki-Chin National Front in the country.

U.S. officials have assured Dhaka that the BURMA Act would not contribute to regional instability and violence, but the veracity of such statements remains questionable given previous American engagements. In Syria for example, fighting between the government forces and American-supported groups caused large-scale emigration from the country, as refugees fled to surrounding states like Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, putting considerable strain on these nations' resources. A US-backed NUG or EAO may be emboldened to carry out more aggressive attacks against the junta, pushing the *Tatmadaw* towards taking on more drastic measures. This could disrupt the fragile peace in Rakhine, which would not only extend the duration of the Rohingya repatriation process but also potentially place Bangladesh in a position where it has to handle an increased influx of migrants fleeing the conflict in Myanmar. Recognizing the potential for further destabilization, Bangladesh should develop robust contingency plans to address the possible spillover effects resulting from this conflict.

The BURMA Act also gives Bangladesh the opportunity to assume a more proactive role in addressing the conflict. With nearly 1.2 million Rohingya refugees hosted, Bangladesh possesses significant diplomatic cache, which can be leveraged to establish itself as a key player in shaping Myanmar's post-conflict future. In doing

so, Bangladesh can work with the US in ensuring that the non-lethal aid provided to forces combatting the *Tatmadaw* is delivered responsibly, taking into account the potential ramifications of such support. This might involve employing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to gauge the impact of the assistance and making necessary strategic adjustments.

Conclusion

With the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar and the emergence of new actors challenging the junta's authority, Bangladesh's foreign policy approach towards its eastern neighbor requires extensive nuance and strategic considerations. This includes careful management of the country's southeastern security theater, where it houses over 1.2 million displaced Rohingya in Cox's Bazaar and Bhasan Char. New insurgent groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts with close ties to ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar's frontier region pose additional security concerns for the country. The country's policy decisions are further complicated by the influence of regional powers, such as India and China, and the relatively weak international response from the UN and ASEAN.

Considering these factors, Bangladesh requires a three-pronged approach to navigate the crisis effectively. First, Bangladesh should maintain dialogue with the *Tatmadaw*, as they are recognized as the official government of Myanmar and receive considerable support from key regional players. Simultaneously,

engaging with unofficial political forces such as the NUG and EAOS will allow Bangladesh to diversify its cooperation partners in Myanmar, which can be leveraged in its dealings with the junta. Second, the pursuit of multimodal diplomacy is essential, which employs compellence tactics backed by Bangladesh's military power. Despite its current limitations compared to Myanmar, Bangladesh can capitalize on its larger military budget and the overextension of the Tatmadaw's forces to close the capabilities gap and push the junta towards securitizing the border region.

Lastly, proactive engagement with the BURMA Act is crucial to mitigate potential regional destabilization caused by the provision of non-lethal military assistance to forces fighting the junta. Bangladesh should create contingency plans for possible spillover effects, and collaborate with the US to ensure responsible distribution of support. Employing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms will enable Bangladesh to assess the impact of assistance on the ground and make strategic adjustments as needed. By adopting this three-pronged approach, Bangladesh can navigate the challenges posed by the political crisis in Myanmar and protect its national interests, while also contributing to regional stability and fostering an environment that encourages long-term resolution.

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