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The Coup in Myanmar: Strategic Implications& Breaking the Impasse

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Introduction

It is now eight months since the Tatmadaw (the official name of the armed forces of Myanmar) usurped power in Myanmar. More than eight hundred people have lost their lives while a huge number have also been arrested. Civil disobedience has become the order of the day and the country has reached a stage where even the possibility of a civil war is being talked about. The recent events in Afghanistan have overshadowed the military coup in Myanmar. However, when the dust settles, Myanmar with its equally strategic position in the Indian Ocean, will be back in strategic discourse. The Tatmadaw had blamed election fraud by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (nicknamed as 'democratic dictator),' as the reason for seizing control of the country. The opposing parties comprising of ethnic minorities which had also fought the general elections of November 2020, and the NLD, have been quick to set up a government in exile which they have rightly termed as the National Unity Government (NUG). Calling it the 'Spring Revolution' and with its three-finger salute meant for pro democracy movements, the NUG has sought international recognition as the legally constituted government of Myanmar and has demanded to be part of any initiative by the ASEAN or any other regional body or country to restore the situation to normalcy[1].

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How the Tatmadaw Handled the Coup

In the past eight months, the Tatmadaw has dug in its heels and is well entrenched. It has formed the State Administrative Council (SAC) to rule the country, shut the internet, fixed the electronic media by firewalls and banned all anti coup newspapers, media houses and media personnel. A complete blackout has been imposed on all information going out of the country. Most pro-democracy leaders have been locked up and the streets are quiet now with only the presence of military personnel. The country is back to where it started from prior to 2011.

The SAC along with the military backed Union Election Commission (UEC) has declared its intent to dissolve the NLD due to its linkages with the banned NUG and the Committee of Representatives of Pyindangshu Hluttaw (CRPH) set up by opposing political parties[2]. A People Defence Force (PDF) was created on 05 May 2021[3] which alongside the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and the NUG would act as the countering force to the Tatmadaw. The first batch of PDF troops are known to have graduated on 28 May 2021 meant to serve the interests of their respective ethnic groups[4].

The situation in Afghanistan has drawn away global attention from Southeast Asia and allowed the Tatmadaw a grace period to stabilise itself and decide the next best course of action. Imposition of sanctions has made it withdraw into its shell and turn to its time-tested friend China, albeit a bit cautiously this time.

Background to Present Dispensation

It was in 1990 when after almost three decades of military rule general elections were held to the parliament in Myanmar and a similar situation had arisen. For the 492 seats being contested then, to the Pyithu Hluttaw, the lower house, there were 93 political parties including the Suu Kyi led NLD. With a voter turnout of roughly 73 percent, the NLD emerged the clear winner steamrolling 392 of the 492 seats. The remaining seats were taken by the ethnic parties of which the military backed National Unity Party (NUP) could win only ten seats. The message then was loud and clear – the people wanted the military out and back in the barracks.

Not accepting the mandate of the 1990 elections, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) of the military then ruling the country, placed Suu Kyi under house arrest citing election fraud. For the entire period of Suu Kyi's incarceration, the man in charge in Myanmar was Senior General Than Shwe who by then had renamed the SLORC as State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

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Than Shwe was 'in charge' when the new Constitution was formulated in 2008. The Tatmadaw were obviously given sweeping power. Than Shwe stepped down in November 2010 handing over power to Thein Sein, his Adjutant General, as the country's first democratically elected President. Suu Kyi's NLD had boycotted the elections. Than Shwe known to be a devout Buddhist, relied a lot on astrology. In the early 2000s he had chosen the fifty-year old Major General Thura Shwe Maan as his possible successor elevating him to the newly created appointment of Chief of General Staff. Thura Shwe Maan fell out with the military hierarchy and was replaced by the relatively young General Min Aung Hlaing (MAH) who was also selected through Buddhist astrology superseding several officers senior to him. MAH was at that time one of the Chief Bureau of Special Operations (CBSO), an appointment like an Army Group Commander.

In 2010, the year Than Shwe handed over power to Thein Sein, he also handed over his Commander-in-Chief Defence Services portfolio to the present incumbent Senior General MAH and retreated into the background. MAH has been the Senior General now for over ten years and has learnt well from his predecessor who ruled the country with an iron hand for close to twenty years. Having reached the age of sixty-five years, MAH was meant to retire in July 2021. Before that could happen, he triggered the coup seizing complete power.

Faultlines in the Structure of the Myanmar Tatmadaw

The Tatmadaw presently comprises of most Burman officers as also in the rank and file[5]. This structure goes against the very basis of federalism, an endeavour revived by Aung San Suu Kyi through the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference held over four sessions from 2016 to 2019. In one session of the conference MAH is known to have remarked that only the armed forces were a true representation of the demographic profile of the country[6]. This may not be wholly true seeing the existence of ethnic armed groups (EAG) or private armies in the country created from a fear of Burman domination.

If the Tatmadaw is serious about integrating ethnic groups in its rank and file to encourage a federalist approach, it must give adequate thought to integrating them correctly with regard to their career profiling and management. The logic of 'Burma is for Burmans only' will have to be cast aside if any progress is to be made on this front. The EAGs have sizeable armies of their own which have troubled and harassed the military in the past and are doing so even now. Therefore, integration of these groups into the armed forces has to be a well-planned process catering to their aspirations as well. Confidence building measures have to be in place to win over the groups and take control of their vast armouries. Minority ethnic regiments have existed in the past in Myanmar with even the senior most officer at the time of independence being an ethnic Karen[7].

A start was made in 2016 with the military inviting applications for the Officers Training Schools at Bahtoo

(for boys) and Yangon (for girls) from individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups to join the armed forces[8]. At the prestigious Defence Services Academy (DSA), Pyin Oo Lwin, there already exists a mixed lot of officer instructors implying that cadets are also likely to be from different ethnic groups. Integration must be encouraged by the Tatmadaw to kick start the unification process in the country.

Possible Reasons for the Coup

The reason given by the Tatmadaw for staging the coup is election fraud committed by the NLD in the general elections of November 2020. The military claims to have found close to eleven million instances of irregularities with people having voted twice in different polling stations[9]. Instances of the national registration number being repeated in different places under a different name have also been reported. While election fraud should not warrant execution of a coup, this may only be the tip of the iceberg and the reasons could be many more. However, there are some other reasons as well.

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Firstly, Suu Kyi systematically went about reducing representation of the military in parliament. The military presently has 25 percent seats reserved for its uniformed personnel in parliament. The constitution lays down that for any decision to be passed by parliament, minimum 75 percent majority is required[10]. Besides its 25 percent, the military has its political party the USDP, also represented in parliament which gives it the powers to block decisions which do not go in its favour. Furthermore, of the two Vice Presidents one is always a military man and the Defence Minister, Interior Minister and Border Affairs Minister are also uniformed personnel. Suu Kyi had proposed to reduce the reserved 25 percent gradually. By not convening even a single meeting of the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) during her term as State Councillor, Suu Kyi once again reinforced her views on a reduced role for the military in government affairs. The NDSC is the country's most authoritative security organisation and is like the Cabinet Committee of Security (CCS) in India. It has a disproportionate membership of the Tatmadaw as compared to civilians. Of the eleven members, six are from the military[11].

Secondly, the Tatmadaw earns a huge income from secret business deals. Military leaders past and present have large financial investments in ventures across the country and abroad and can ill afford to lose these. Two military run conglomerates were created in the 1990s – the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL)[12]. Both these have become a source of income for the Tatmadaw with interests and investments ranging from banking, mining, gems business, tourism, timber trade to even drug peddling in some areas. Suu Kyi was taking action to reduce this income towards improving the country's economy. This was not taken well by the Tatmadaw.

Thirdly, a plausible reason attributed for the coup was MAH's employment post retirement. The Senior General was due to retire in July this year on attaining the age of 65 and was hoping to become President. This obviously fell through once the election results were declared. The selection process for the President is clearly defined in the constitution. The choice would have fallen on the largest party in parliament which in this case was to be the NLD. Executing a coup was MAH's only answer.

Finally, it was Suu Kyi's growing closeness to China. Arming of the rebel groups by China with arms more sophisticated than the Tatmadaw has been a sore issue with the latter for ages. China is also suspected of using this as leverage to further its interests in Myanmar. Suu Kyi's acceptance of Chinese projects which are a part of the China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) is one such example. With Suu Kyi, China showed a willingness to stabilise the political situation in Myanmar which would be against the interests of the Tatmadaw. The Chinese had proposed CMEC in 2017[13] a year after Suu Kyi came to power in April 2016. No such proposal was received in the first term when Thein Sein, a retired Army General, was President even though China had announced the One Belt One Road initiative as early as 2013. With Suu Kyi's acceptance of CMEC the fears of a debt trap

mounted. The Kyaukphyu deep seaport which earlier pegged at USD 7.3 billion involving construction of ten piers was watered down to USD 1.3 billion with only two piers being constructed initially[14]. For the New Yangon City project following pressure from local lobbyists the tender process was thrown open in the form of the Swiss Challenge[15]. Similarly social and environment impact assessments were made mandatory for any project to be accepted following complaints of land grabbing. The Shwe Ko Ko city project in Myawaddy near the Thailand border is an example of land grabbing by the Chinese. Suu Kyi therefore cannot also be devoid of blame for 'cosying' up to the Chinese.

Involvement of EAGs with the PDF

Presently in Myanmar around seventeen ethnic rebel groups are known to exist. Ten of these are signatories of the National Ceasefire Act (NCA) of October 2015. Of the remaining seven which did not sign the NCA, four, namely the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Tang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Arakan Army (AA) formed a loose grouping in 2016 known as the Northern Alliance. The KIA was the main group in this alliance responsible for imparting training and equipping the other three.

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In April 2017, the Northern Alliance along with the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N), announced the formation of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC). By allying with the UWSA, the largest EAG in Myanmar, the Northern Alliance moved from being primarily a military to a political alliance. These seven groups have not signed the NCA but have agreed to join the political process and have even participated in all but the last session of the 21st Panglong Peace Conference.

The FPNCC did not attend the last session citing Covid related problems when the actual reason was that the government refusing to invite the AA which till then was labelled a terrorist organisation. To overcome this hurdle and to prevent the groups in the FPNCC from joining the PDF, the Tatmadaw has withdrawn the terrorist tag from the AA. The Tatmadaw has also called for an undeclared truce with the EAGs.

The ethnic groups, 135 of them, account for roughly one third of the country. The existing arrangement for controlling the EAGs was a unique one where each of them was given a special region or division to practice partial autonomy. Defence, health and education were the three areas under central government oversight. Given this freedom most of these groups openly resorted to illicit drug trafficking that assisted them in building their local armies.

A fear exists now of the EAGs getting sucked into forming an anti-coup federal army to combat the Tatmadaw. However, there are several hurdles that deny this possibility. Among the EAGs varying interests and mutual relationships with each other exist. The countries and leanings these groups have and are affiliated to, also matter. The KIA and KNLA both have western leanings which makes them different in their outlook when compared to other rebel groups. Among the Chinese sponsored EAGs, the UWSA and NDAA, two of the heaviest armed groups have maintained silence not expressing any view or support.

The size, strength and equipment profile of each group varies with some even possessing artillery, helicopters, and drones while some have only the basic weapons designed to protect their ethnic communities. Moreover, each is confined to its own area therefore conducting operations in other parts of the country would be problematic.

Unity among the pan ethnic EAGs is another major weakness and so is lack of air power. Without these an anti-coup federal army will find it difficult to engage with the Tatmadaw especially in the plains of central Myanmar. Recent operations by the Tatmadaw against the Chinland Defence Forces in Southern Chin state have proved[16] that EAGs are also not

capable enough to capture and hold ground. At best they would be good at carrying out sporadic raids to demoralise and harass the Tatmadaw. Therefore, with limited capability it would not be wise to get involved in a full scale engagement against a modern and well equipped Tatmadaw.

EAGs are not trained to fight wars. A guerrilla kind of warfare is what would be more suited to them, but tactical operations fought by the armed forces of a country would not be their cup of tea. The sourcing and funding of these groups would also be another problem area. So far drug trafficking being the main source, adequate funds to start offensive operations would be available, but after a while when the source dries up, sustenance would become a problem especially against a well-trained, well equipped and highly motivated Tatmadaw.

The only groups to get involved in operations against the Tatmadaw post the coup have been the KIA, KNLA and the MNDAA primarily to retake their lost territories. The Brotherhood Alliance comprising the MNDAA, TNLA and the AA condemned the coup but have not been involved in intense hostilities against the military apart from a few skirmishes.

No combined operations between EAGs and PDFs are known to have taken place so far. There are indications of some 'jointness' in Kachin and Kayah states between the KIA and KNLA with their PDFs. EAGs are also known to be providing training to their area PDFs mainly for protection of the civil population. In some cases, rudimentary arms and equipment have been shared but no major joint offensive actions against military units has been observed.

Legitimacy of the NUG

Since its creation on 16 April 2021 the NUG has been on an overdrive to get itself international recognition and legitimacy. The NUG comprises of NLD leaders ousted in the military coup, politicians, law makers, and representatives of ethnic communities. Though the NUG has recently shown a sympathetic move towards the Rohingyas[17] accepting them as being part of its indigenous ethnic composition, it is yet to include a representative from this community in its structure. Globally apprehensions have been conveyed about the treatment being meted out to the Rohingyas as it was their leader Aung San Suu Kyi who had defended the military offensives of 2016-2018 against this community at the International Court of Justice, Hague.

ASEAN, the major regional forum, has already given its tacit acceptance of the military government inviting the Senior General to participate in its Summit on 24 April 2021. Non-interference in each other's internal affairs and constructive engagement has always been the line followed by ASEAN in the past as well. The NUG was relying on the UNGA session on 14 September 2021 for acceptance of its legitimacy globally. This has been placed before the Credentials Committee and deferred till November 2021. Myanmar's Special Representative Kyaw Moe Tun of the NLD government has been allowed to continue in the seat till a final decision is taken.

The NUG has gone ahead to create the PDF which it plans to convert into a federal army incorporating the EAGs. Of the seventeen acknowledged EAGs, ten, which are signatories to the NCA, have vowed support for the endeavours of the NUG. Of the remaining seven it has been only the KIA besides the KNLA which is a signatory-to engage against the military in operations.

Western countries including the USA have still not indicated their acceptance of the military junta or the NUG as the legitimate government. In the face of increasing Chinese and Russian presence in Myanmar, the USA stands to lose whatever leverage it has gained so far in Myanmar if it were to support the NUG. International bodies like the WHO and UN Human Rights Council have also chosen to remain silent and have temporarily dropped Myanmar from their summits. China, after having fallen out with the Tatmadaw, should ideally choose the NUG as the will of the people would have to ultimately prevail for all its CMEC and other projects to fructify. Russia on the other hand would opt for the military given its interests in expanding its arms business with Myanmar to enable a foothold in Southeast Asia. Sebastian Strangio writes in *The Diplomat* of 14 September 2021 that in a diplomatic pact between China and the USA it has been decided to keep the military junta out of the UN for now till a decision is reached in November. Past precedence indicates the UN's ability to overrule military governments that had overthrown the democratically elected government. Haiti (1992) and Sierra Leone (1997) being two such examples.

The UN follows a set of rules while recognising a lawful government. These are the claimant's effective control of the territory, its democratic standing, and its adherence to international law and human rights[18]. While the military junta fails on all three counts, the NUG partially fulfils them. Choosing between the military junta and the NUG comes with its share of pros and cons. A military government would mean sacrificing democracy. On the other hand, by putting the NUG in the driver's seat, democracy could blossom in the form of a federal union, India's Act East Policy would be benefitted tremendously, India's Northeastern Region could witness a reformation, the issue of the EAGs could become a closed chapter, and the Rohingya problem could be solved permanently.

Post-Coup Developments in Myanmar Vis a Vis China

The military coup has changed the situation dramatically in so far as China is concerned. With most western countries having clamped sanctions against the military regime, the only source now left to turn to for the Tatmadaw is China. Furthermore, with the developing situation in Afghanistan, China could find itself in a bind with respect to its BRI through Pakistan and the Central Asian States. Thus, China will be forced to push through its CMEC for which it will leave no stone unturned.

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Taking full advantage of the position China is in for its energy requirements, the Tatmadaw is now attempting to turn defeat into victory for itself. The stumbling block however is the decline in support China has among the pro-democracy section of the population. China's support for the military regime in the United Nations Security Council has been viewed by the pro-democracy group in Myanmar as being the main reason for the coup having occurred in the first place.

Post the coup, the Cross Border Cooperation Economic Zones (CBCEZ) which are the pillars on which the CMEC was to originate are the first to witness a revamp in their implementation. In May 2021 the regime-controlled investment commission has given the green light for the construction of the Kanipeti CBCEZ in Kachin state to commence[19]. The USD 22.4 million Kanpiketi Business Park will cover nearly 70 acres in northern Kachin State's Special Region 1, which is controlled by the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K) militia allied with the Myanmar military. Work to start construction of the second of the three CBCEZ in Chinshwehaw of Shan state has also commenced. This economic zone will act as the gateway for China to enter Myanmar as it is the shortest route to the deep seaport of Kyaukpyu in Rakhine state.

Similar progressive activity has been reported from the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (KSEZ)[20]. The management committee was revamped in May 2021 and the first phase of the KSEZ a USD 180 million power plant has already been completed.

For the New Yangon City, which is one of the three mega projects that forms the CMEC, land acquisition for the 20,000 acres required for the project has been given a push. The contract to construct the project had been initially given to the Beijing based China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) which was challenged following complaints of land flooding, corruption and bribery against the company. This had to be put on hold and through a "Swiss Challenge" tendering process nine more companies including some from India had applied. However, following the coup most foreign companies were now hesitant to come forward to invest forcing the military regime to have a rethink on the process and offer the deal to any company keen on investing[21]. From this it appears that ultimately the contract may go once again to the CCCC. Whether this will be acceptable to the pro-democracy group in Myanmar is to be seen.

Possible Futuristic Political Scenario in Myanmar

Following the coup MAH has declared that elections would be held within a year with possibility of it being delayed further. Two years would allow the Tatmadaw to plan its strategy against the NLD, bring the anti-coup demonstrations and public outrage

within controllable limits, manage the international media, and build bridges once again with ethnic parties.

Six charges of election fraud have been levelled against Suu Kyi. The Union Election Commission (UEC) during her time has been dissolved as it was an NLD appointed body. In its place a new UEC headed by a Major General has been instituted. The Tatmadaw claims to have concrete evidence of the election fraud committed by the NLD.

The UEC has now sought to ban the NLD from electoral polls in the future. The next elections can be expected not before end 2023. By then if the NLD is not banned it is likely that Aung San Suu Kyi would be prohibited from participating in the elections because of the numerous allegations against her. Moreover, Suu Kyi is already 75 years old and the NLD does not have a second tier leadership to lead it in her absence. The elections are thus likely to be contested by a strong military backed USDP opposed by a weak NLD. The outcome would be the obvious, fulfilling MAH's aspirations of becoming the country's President.

Given the importance of CMEC and the huge investments it has made in Myanmar, it is unlikely that the Chinese would hedge away from establishing cordial relations once again with the Tatmadaw. The existing diplomatic silence is likely to alter to a more amiable stance the Chinese would now adopt towards the Tatmadaw.

Strategic Implications of the Coup

For China. China has invested very heavily in Myanmar. The country is extremely important for its national and strategic interests. China had hoped to end the energy crisis in Yunnan province by the year 2022 by its ambitious CMEC project. This would have also taken care of its Malacca Dilemma partially. The CMEC comprises of three major projects – three Border Economic Zones along the China-Myanmar border, the New Yangon City project and the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone which includes the deep sea port.

China faced a rough patch in its relations with Myanmar during the first five years of democratic rule. The Tatmadaw having had enough of China kept it at bay. The Myanmar people too began voicing their apprehensions about Chinese excesses in terms of land grabbing and pollution of the environment. The arrival of Suu Kyi on the political scene in Myanmar saw a high in relations. The headway China made with the Suu Kyi regime especially in terms of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) does not support the suspicion of its involvement in the coup. After sidelining the military during Suu Kyi's rule, China will not be too comfortable in dealing with the Tatmadaw now. That notwithstanding, to take care of its strategic interests it will have to play along. China has already made its first move by not condemning the coup and protecting Myanmar in the UN from sanctions being imposed. China's increased interaction with the Suu Kyi government was a calculated move on the assumption that full-fledged democracy had arrived in Myanmar. In diplomacy, relations are maintained with the government in power. China will have to play along with the Tatmadaw to see its urgent strategic interests materialise. Following the coup MAH has given an assurance that all pending projects would be completed, and all possible cooperation extended. The mega projects comprising CMEC have now been on the drawing board for the last two years and all social and environment impact assessment reports were to have been completed by the end of 2020. Given the importance of CMEC and the huge investments it has made in Myanmar, it is unlikely that the Chinese would hedge away from establishing cordial relations once again with the Tatmadaw. The existing diplomatic silence is likely to alter to a more amiable stance the Chinese would now adopt towards the Tatmadaw. A message in this regard has already been conveyed by China wherein along with Russia and India it has blocked sanctions by the UN.

For Russia. The other game player in the region is Russia which along with China has not condemned the coup. Russia has stated that it hopes the situation would get resolved through political dialogue. Russia is also on record stating that it feels it is only the Tatmadaw that can unify the country[22]. The importance of Russian support for Myanmar was seen when Russia's Deputy Minister of Defence Alexander Fomin attended the Myanmar Armed Forces Day Parade on 27 March 2021 as Chief Guest[23]. During the discussions Fomin had with the Senior General, the latter described Myanmar as Russia's reliable ally

and strategic partner in Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific.

Defence relations between Myanmar and Russia have received a boost during MAH's tenure as Senior General. Russia accounts for roughly sixteen percent of Myanmar's weaponry coming second to China's 49 percent. India follows at 14 percent. Myanmar is known to have contracted for six Su 30 aircraft, the Pantsir S1 surface to air missile system and surveillance drones[24]. It already has two squadrons of Mig 29 aircraft procured from Russia in the early 2000s. Given the manner in which defence ties with Russia are progressing, it is only a matter of time once the logistics and support structures are in place, that a steady flow of defence equipment into Myanmar can be expected. This would be in tune with what Myanmar has been seeking in its bid to diversify in this field.

Russia's relations with Southeast Asia are presently not too intense. It needs to develop this on a multi dimensional approach if it has to make a dent in this geo-politically sensitive region. A presence in Myanmar would prove to be strategically advantageous to Russia as it would get an access to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Indo Pacific. With no influence on local issues, Russia's involvement in Myanmar is purely defence related and differs from Chinese interests. However, the presence of its defence minister and main interlocutor Sergey Shoigu in Myanmar just days before the coup also may not be accidental and leaves a lot of room for speculation.

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This newfound strategic relationship with Russia gives Myanmar the support of another major nation with veto powers in the UN. Russia has never been anxious of the West when it comes to developing relations with countries which are of strategic interest to it. Thailand for Russia is a typical example of US hegemony in a partially military run government. For Russia, Myanmar is its launch pad into the IOR and the Indo-Pacific. It is also an opening it gets to develop relations with ASEAN and Southeast Asia and that is all that matters.

Non-involvement in Myanmar's internal affairs has made Russia a neutral partner. It has also overtaken China in the trust factor. Both China and Russia have differing interests and 'agendas' to fulfil in Myanmar and any kind of collaboration or collusion between the two cannot be visualised for the moment.

For India. Myanmar is the land bridge that connects India to Southeast Asia and the Greater Mekong region. For its Act East policy and affiliated initiatives like Neighbourhood First and SAGAR, Myanmar is the doorstep. For its Northeastern region (NER) to prosper and for a bypass to come up for the sensitive Siliguri Corridor, once again Myanmar is important. In short India cannot do without Myanmar.

India has undertaken two mega projects through Myanmar. These are the Kaladan Multi Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) and the India, Myanmar, Thailand Trilateral highway (IMT) that will connect it to the Greater Mekong Economic Corridors and beyond to the Indo Pacific. The KMMTTP is designed to connect Kolkata to Mizoram via a sea route to the port of Sittwe on the Rakhine coast and from thereon along the Kaladan river up to the river port of Paletwa and beyond by road to the Mizoram border. The project has been designed as a bypass to the sensitive Siliguri Corridor which connects the Indian mainland to the NER.

This USD 400 million project was due to be completed by 2019 but because of the Covid pandemic in 2020 it was to become operational by April 2021. This year too with the pandemic still raging, the road stretch (109 kms) from Paletwa to Zorinpui on the Mizoram border is still lying unfinished delaying the project's operationalisation further. With the Tatmadaw now observing a truce with the AA, operations too have ceased in Rakhine state. This has given an opportunity for India and Myanmar to speed up the KMMTTP and operationalise it earliest.

The IMT highway is presently stalled because of the land crossing agreement to be signed by the countries involved to enable seamless travel across each other's boundaries. India had already done its bit but the delay is from Myanmar. Moreover due to the ongoing

operations between the Tatmadaw and No 5 Brigade of the KNLA in Thaton and Papun districts near the Thai border, the terminal area of the IMT highway would be seriously affected at the moment.

Japan. Japan is a major player in Myanmar. Japan has poured in huge sums as war reparations and official development assistance into the country. Though this aid had dropped significantly during military rule and was restricted to only humanitarian assistance, it picked up pace again after 2011. Japan has also contributed enormously to Myanmar's economy through the Thilawa Economic Zone located on the outskirts of Yangon. With an investment close to USD 2 billion in Myanmar, roughly USD 12 million has been spent on this economic zone alone. Having brokered the peace between the Tatmadaw and AA in Rakhine State, Japan has shown that it has the ability to act a mediator when called upon. Even though Japan has shown some indications of disengagement with the Tatmadaw, it is unlikely to close shop completely in Myanmar.

Japan and India are two countries of the QUAD who being favourably inclined to Myanmar, provide a foothold for the other two members, US and Australia. While the QUAD may show an aggressive stance towards the coup, it is not likely to unduly impose itself on India and Japan to break ties with Myanmar.

Other Actors. In the recently held QUAD virtual summit on 12 March 2021, China's debt trap diplomacy to dominate the Indo Pacific was discussed. Even though QUAD has issued a statement regarding its concern at the coup, calling for an early return to democracy, it is aware that shutting off assistance completely to Myanmar would only isolate the country further making it go closer to China. Moreover with Russia's entry into Myanmar in a big way, QUAD will be watching for signs of any collusive efforts between Russia and China to dominate the IOR. Myanmar is also a member of ASEAN. Centrality of this ten bloc forum forms the bedrock and is an imperative for QUAD's success in the region. So far only Indonesia and Malaysia have conveyed their dismay in strong words, while the others have maintained a dignified silence stressing on non interference in the country's internal affairs.

Breaking the Impasse

Dual power centres have always existed in Myanmar with a powerful Tatmadaw in the background. History has proved that coups happen in countries that have a little of both – civil and military. South East Asia leads in this with Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines and now Myanmar. International sanctions have been imposed against selective Generals by almost all western countries with the US and the UK leading. South Korea has even cancelled a deal it had signed with MEHL while Australia which had opened up defence relations with Myanmar has now withheld it. Pressure is now being built by civil organisations to stop the selling of gas by Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) to US multinational Chevron and France's Total which brings in roughly USD 500 million every year.

A 'Home Grown' Solution. The solution to the impasse must be a home grown one. Compromises must be made by both parties and the idea of 'tiring' the other side should not prevail. Sending the Tatmadaw back to the barracks may not be possible at this juncture. This will have to be done gradually. For the Tatmadaw to retract at this stage would only project it as a weak force damaging its image and standing in the future.Engagement of the EAGs and their inclusion in government activities has to be given impetus if a shift to federalism is envisaged. The Tatmadaw must examine the options and manner to integrate the existing private armies of the EAGs into its rank and file that would support an army at national level. Models available in various armies of the world must be studied to arrive at the best possible solution. The manner in which various communities of India's Northeast have been merged into the Indian Army is one such way.

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Similarly as the government level, the feeling that 'Burma is for Burmans only' must be cast aside. Adequate opportunities must be given to all communities across the board to compete and participate. Concessions and privileges for backward classes must be extended as part of a wholesome package.

ASEAN. Myanmar became a member of this ten nation bloc in 1997 and relies very heavily on it for its sustenance and image. It was ASEAN which put pressure on Myanmar in the early 2000s pushing it towards democracy and drafting of its constitution. This time again it is ASEAN that has come forward as the only international bloc to attempt breaking the impasse. In the Special ASEAN Summit on Myanmar held in Jakarta on 24 April 2021, a general consensus was reached for a five point action plan. This includes the cessation of violence; "constructive dialogue" between the various parties; the appointment of an ASEAN Special Envoy; the facilitation of humanitarian aid; and the deployment of the special envoy to Myanmar to meet with the various contending parties.

In early August 2021 Erywan Yusof, Brunei's second foreign minister, was appointed the ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar. Through a video conference with Myanmar's military Foreign Minister Wunna Maung Lwin, the ASEAN envoy has announced a four month ceasefire to enable movement of workers to distribute aid safely to the people. No progress of this is visible so far on ground. Visit of the UN Envoy to Myanmar has already been turned down by the Tatmadaw and unless the envoy is acceptable to all involved factions this too will stall.

The ASEAN must impose itself on Myanmar for any meaningful outcome. Sanctions only tend to hurt the poor and needy. Folding up operations with Myanmar and expelling it from the ten nation bloc would be an extreme step and is unlikely to happen. Presently not too many of the ten nation bloc are willing to come forward to condemn the coup having experienced military rule themselves. ASEAN will have to consider the ramifications of the coup affecting its relations with other economic and security forums in the region and globally and act accordingly.

BIMSTEC. The BIMST-EC has been quiet over its reactions to the Myanmar coup. The fifth Summit is planned later this year and Sri Lanka who is the Chair is now facing the dilemma of whether to invite MAH or not. BIMST-EC is presently involved in planning its ambitious USD 50 billion Master Plan for Transport Connectivity across the IOR from which India's NER and Myanmar stand to benefit tremendously.

Global Level. The ASEAN's five point proposal on Myanmar has been accepted globally as the best option to move forward. However, this is not enough. The world community must apply pressure in whatever way possible on the Myanmar Tatmadaw without aggravating the situation, for a return to democracy. At the UN level giving legitimacy to either the military of the NUG must be studied and deliberated upon in detail before a decision is taken. Both options have their pros and cons. Recognition of either party will have its ramifications on regional security for which the UN must be prepared.

India. For India, Myanmar is important. They share a 1600 kilometer long land border and a 750 kilometer maritime one. Linked historically, both stand to gain from each other. India needs to make sure its Act East initiatives fructify and the NER develops. Myanmar on the other hand needs India's support in all regional and international fora. One cannot do without the other. India's reaction to the coup was 'deep concern' and a statement which said "India has always been steadfast in its support to the process of democratic transition in Myanmar. We believe that the rule of law and the democratic process must be upheld."India shares a good relationship with both the Tatmadaw and Aung San Suu Kyi. Rather than 'run with the hare and hunt with the hounds,' India is well aware that a peaceful environment in the neighbourhood must prevail for its strategic interests. Being an important neighbour, an offer to mediate must be made by India to ensure its relevance in the politics of Myanmar and the region.

Conclusion

China, Russia and Japan must pitch in as well being major stakeholders. Sanctions imposed will only make the Tatmadaw more defiant and non negotiable. Resolving the impasse has to be the prime aim and constructive engagement with Myanmar must begin. These are testing times not only for Myanmar but for its neighbours and region as well. Steady diplomatic activism by India is what is required. Both sides in Myanmar must introspect to see where they have gone wrong. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has already given himself and the SAC one to two years to conduct elections again on a model he feels would be right. The NLD/NUG must make use of this time to garner peace in the country. Unless peace prevails the process of reconciliation will not move forward. Creating a federal army to fight the Tatmadaw would

only make the country fall further into a bottom less abyss. Both sides must call for restraint and talks must begin. Before regional and international organisations step in, the effort must first be a home grown one. While the ASEAN must assume the role of major player in the mediation, India, China, Russia and Japan must also chip in. Dignified silence may not help and mentoring and guiding the peace talks perhaps is now the way out.

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