

Myanmar: China's Decisive Intervention, India Marginalised

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Abstract

Myanmar's ongoing civil conflict has emerged as a key arena for geopolitical competition, particularly between India and China. China has significantly enhanced its influence in the country through assertive and strategic interventions, notably in the context of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By mediating ceasefire agreements and engaging actively with Myanmar's ethnic armed groups, China has consolidated its position as the primary external player in the conflict, ensuring the stability of critical infrastructure routes and safeguarding its investments. In contrast, India's approach has been more reactive, primarily relying on ASEAN-led mediation efforts that have yielded limited results. India's failure to capitalize on historical ties with Myanmar's ethnic groups and its cautious diplomatic stance have sidelined it in the region, undermining its aspirations under the 'Act East' policy. As China continues to assert its influence, India risks further marginalization, with implications for its connectivity projects and broader strategic goals in Southeast Asia. This paper explores the contrasting approaches of India and China in Myanmar, analyzing the implications for India's regional ambitions and suggesting that a more proactive strategy is essential for India to secure its geopolitical and economic interests in the face of China's expanding dominance.

1. Introduction

Myanmar, a strategically important country in Southeast Asia, has long been a site of intense conflict. The ongoing civil strife between Myanmar's military junta and various ethnic armed groups has created a complicated geopolitical landscape. For regional powers like India and China, Myanmar is a critical battleground for influence, with both countries vying for control of key economic and strategic assets. However, China has managed to exert far more influence over the situation through decisive intervention, while India has been marginalized due to its cautious and reactive approach. This dynamic is reshaping the balance of power in Southeast Asia and threatens to undermine India's ambitions for greater influence in the region through its 'Act East' policy.

2. China's Assertive Role in Myanmar's Conflict

China's involvement in Myanmar's internal conflict is not just a matter of diplomacy but a strategic maneuver aimed at securing economic and geopolitical advantages. The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), part of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a cornerstone of China's engagement in Myanmar. The CMEC is designed to connect China to the Indian Ocean, facilitating trade and bolstering China's access to energy resources and trade routes. To ensure the success of this project, stability

in Myanmar's conflict zones, particularly along critical infrastructure routes, is essential.

China's approach has been marked by direct intervention and active mediation between Myanmar's military junta and the country's ethnic armed groups. Notably, China has been instrumental in facilitating ceasefire agreements and initiating negotiations between the Myanmar military and groups such as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), which represents the ethnic Kokangs, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). These ethnic rebel groups control large parts of Myanmar's northern regions, areas that are strategically significant for China's economic projects.

In October of the previous year, Chinese diplomacy achieved a significant breakthrough by pressuring the MNDAA and TNLA to halt their offensive against the Myanmar military. The offensive, known as the '1027 offensive,' had escalated tensions in northern Myanmar and threatened to derail China's BRI projects. By brokering a ceasefire between these armed groups and the military junta, China effectively stabilized a volatile region crucial to the success of the CMEC. The outcome of this intervention was seen as a significant diplomatic victory for China, reinforcing its role as a dominant player in Myanmar's geopolitical landscape.

In addition to the ceasefire agreements, China has also facilitated ongoing negotiations between Myanmar's military

and various ethnic groups. This diplomatic engagement, coupled with China's strategic interests in Myanmar, has helped stabilize the country to a degree that supports China's long-term economic and political goals. China's ability to influence armed groups and force them to the negotiating table demonstrates its assertiveness in the region, positioning it as the primary external mediator in Myanmar's internal conflict.

3. The Arakan Army and Threats to Chinese Investments

One of the key challenges to China's efforts in Myanmar has been the resistance from the Arakan Army, which controls significant portions of Rakhine State, located on Myanmar's western border with Bangladesh. The Arakan Army has managed to liberate large swathes of territory from the military junta, and its operations have become a significant thorn in China's side. The group has been particularly active in the Maungdaw district, which borders Bangladesh and is a crucial location for China's deep-sea port project in Kyaukphyu, a key component of the CMEC.

Despite China's ongoing diplomatic efforts, the Arakan Army has refused to cease hostilities and continues to make strategic gains in the region. In late 2023, the group captured a key border outpost in Maungdaw district, further complicating China's efforts to secure its investments in Myanmar. The conflict between the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military not only threatens China's strategic interests in Rakhine state but also risks disrupting the flow of goods and resources essential to China's infrastructure projects along the CMEC.

This ongoing instability in Rakhine state is a reminder of the challenges China faces in Myanmar. While Beijing has been successful in mediating between some of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups and the military, other groups like the Arakan Army remain resolutely opposed to any ceasefire agreements and continue to challenge the junta's control. The failure to resolve this conflict could have serious implications for China's long-term investments in Myanmar, particularly its deep-sea port project in Kyaukphyu, which is crucial for China's access to the Indian Ocean.

4. India's Reactive and Hesitant Approach

In contrast to China's assertive and proactive strategy, India has maintained a more reactive and cautious approach to the situation in Myanmar. India's engagement in Myanmar has largely relied on supporting the efforts of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to mediate the conflict through its Five-Point Consensus. This consensus, which calls for a cessation of violence, the release of political prisoners, and the initiation of inclusive dialogue between the military and political opposition, has been the cornerstone of India's diplomatic strategy.

However, ASEAN's mediation efforts have proven to be largely ineffective, and the consensus itself has failed to gain traction with Myanmar's military junta or its ethnic armed groups. The National Unity Government (NUG), a shadow government formed by political leaders and opposition groups, has explicitly called for United Nations

intervention, signaling a lack of confidence in ASEAN's ability to mediate the conflict. Ethnic armed groups, such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Arakan Army, have also expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of ASEAN's efforts, further complicating India's diplomatic position.

India's reliance on ASEAN's mediation efforts and its "wait-and-watch" policy have hindered its ability to engage directly with the key stakeholders in Myanmar's conflict. Despite India's historical ties with many of the country's ethnic armed groups, such as the KIA, it has refrained from using these relationships to push for a peace process. Instead, India has continued to rely on ASEAN and its multilateral approach, which has yielded minimal results.

India's cautious stance has been particularly evident in its engagement with armed ethnic groups. While India has expressed interest in mediating peace talks, it has yet to take the necessary steps to engage directly with non-state actors like the KIA and the Arakan Army. This lack of proactive engagement has allowed China to fill the vacuum and establish itself as the dominant external actor in Myanmar.

5. India's Missed Opportunities

India's failure to capitalize on its historical relationships with Myanmar's ethnic armed groups is one of the key reasons for its marginalization in the ongoing conflict. During the 1980s and 1990s, India maintained close ties with the KIA and other ethnic groups as part of its strategy to counter insurgencies in its Northeast. These relationships provided India with valuable leverage in Myanmar, yet India has failed to utilize these connections in the current context.

China, on the other hand, has been far more aggressive in leveraging its relationships with Myanmar's ethnic armed groups. By hosting talks with Myanmar's military leadership and actively mediating ceasefires, China has established itself as the primary external player in the conflict. This proactive approach has allowed China to secure its strategic and economic interests, particularly with regard to the CMEC and its broader Belt and Road Initiative.

India's hesitancy to engage directly with Myanmar's non-state actors has allowed China to take the lead in shaping the conflict's outcome. This passive approach is in stark contrast to China's assertiveness and diplomatic dexterity. While India has expressed support for ASEAN's mediation efforts, it has failed to take the necessary steps to engage directly with Myanmar's armed groups or push for a more active role in the peace process.

6. The Strategic Implications for India

The ongoing conflict in Myanmar has significant strategic implications for India, particularly in terms of its 'Act East' policy. India has long sought to strengthen its ties with Southeast Asia and Myanmar is a critical component of this strategy. The Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project and the Trilateral Highway, both of which are key connectivity projects funded by India, are vital for India's access to the Southeast Asian market and its broader regional ambitions. However, the ongoing conflict in Myanmar has severely disrupted these projects, and India's inability to assert itself in the peace process has hindered their progress.

As China continues to expand its influence in Myanmar, India risks being sidelined in a region that is increasingly central to its strategic and economic goals. The failure to resolve the Myanmar conflict and to secure its connectivity projects could undermine India's broader regional ambitions and diminish its influence in Southeast Asia.

7. Conclusion

Myanmar's internal conflict has become a focal point for geopolitical competition between India and China. While China has demonstrated a decisive and proactive approach to shaping the conflict in its favor, India's cautious and reactive stance has led to its marginalization in the region. China's mediation efforts, coupled with its strategic investments in Myanmar, have positioned it as the dominant external actor, while India's reliance on ASEAN's mediation has yielded minimal results.

To safeguard its strategic interests and strengthen its position in Southeast Asia, India must adopt a more dynamic and proactive approach to Myanmar. This includes engaging directly with Myanmar's non-state actors, leveraging historical ties with ethnic armed groups, and playing a more active role in mediating peace talks. Only by taking a more assertive stance can India hope to secure its geopolitical and economic interests in Myanmar and prevent further marginalization in the region.