

Myanmar's escalating civil war : Implications for India's 'Act East' policy

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Abstract

Since the February 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar, the nation has descended into a relentless cycle of armed conflict, insurgency, and anarchy, diminishing hopes for an immediate cessation of hostilities or a return to democracy. Despite calls from regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the United Nations to halt violence and respect democratic processes, the Burmese military junta has shown no willingness for political concessions or negotiations with the resistance movement. This situation raises concerns about Myanmar becoming a potential flashpoint in Asia, as Western and Chinese involvement supporting rival stakeholders intensifies. While China and Russia seem committed to sustaining the military junta, Western powers advocate for an end to military rule, emphasizing a return to democracy and restructuring Myanmar's federal system to grant autonomy to minority-dominated provinces. The unfolding scenario aligns with Bertil Lintner's concept of the "Great Game East," signifying an increased geopolitical struggle in the region.

1. Introduction

Since the February 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar, the country that links South to Southeast Asia have relentlessly nosedived into an intense cycle of armed conflict, insurgency, chaos, and anarchy with no immediate prospect of cessation of hostilities and much lesser hope of a return to democracy. "Despite the repeated calls by regional organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and by the United Nations to stop the violence, protect human rights, and respect the democratic process, the Burmese military junta has demonstrated no appetite for political concessions or negotiation with the resistance movement." (Yun Sun, 2023)

The increasing prospect of Western and Chinese involvement backing rival stakeholders threatens to turn Myanmar into the next big flashpoint in Asia. China and Russia appear determined to ensure the survival of the ruling military junta, which calls itself the State Administrative Council, while the Western powers are clearly seeking an end to military rule and a return to democracy as a precursor to a complete restructuring of Myanmar's federal structure to provide greater autonomy to minority-dominated provinces, mostly located on the country's borders with India, China and ASEAN nations. Myanmar seems to have been increasingly drawn into what Bertil Lintner describes as the "Great Game East," (Bertil Lintner, 2012)

India's role appears ambivalent and so far, has been limited to one of 'wait and watch', while the ASEAN has tried to mediate between the rival stakeholders to find a way out of the conflict, a process that appears to hold little prospect

of an immediate breakthrough. I have long argued for a more proactive Indian policy to end the crisis in Myanmar because if it worsens, it would have (a) serious implications for the security of India's sensitive Northeastern region (b) severe delaying effect on India's connectivity projects in Myanmar without which Delhi's "Act East" thrust by land to connect to the Tiger economies of Southeast Asia will never take off (c) adverse impact on India's image as an important Asian power capable of influencing events in its volatile neighborhood. (Subir Bhaumik, 2023)

In this article, I would again strongly argue for (a) complete review of Indian policy to vote with China and Russia against Western-sponsored UN resolutions seeking to rein in the Burmese military junta (b) a bold stand-alone peace initiative by connecting to all important stakeholders in Myanmar, ranging from the military to the political parties including Aung Saan Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy to Ethnic Armed Organisations to the parallel National Unity Government (c) a determined Indian attempt to implement a roadmap for restoration of democracy with holding of fair elections under international supervision and release of all political prisoners including Daw Suu Kyi and (d) stop supply of military hardware and training/exchange programmes until the Tatmadaw has returned to the barracks by handing over power to an elected government. Such an initiative not only befits India's image as a rising but benign power that carries forward ideals of Mahatma Gandhi but also befits India's aspirations for a place in the global high table. Strategic inaction does not befit an aspiring power like India –

expression of intent to be one rings hollow unless backed by a positive and proactive role in regional affairs particularly in crisis management and mediation in the region.

2. Myanmar's Long Civil War

The unending ethnic conflicts in post-colonial Myanmar has been described as one of the world's least covered civil war. (Bertil Linter, 1990) But after the return of limited democracy in 2010 and the assumption of power by the National League for Democracy (NLD) , attempts to start a comprehensive dialogue with the many ethnic rebel armies saw some progress. The NLD led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the country's slain independence war hero Marshal Aung San, did display its intent for ethnic reconciliation by starting what Daw Suu Kyi preferred to call Panglong process – after her father's unsuccessful attempt to work out a federation through dialogue with the battling ethnicities at Panglong in 1947 just before the British left Burma (now Myanmar). (Angshuman Choudhury 2023)

The first jolt to the peace process , that was being taken forward through comprehensive ceasefires across Myanmar's conflict zones, came in 2017 when the Tatmadaw (Burmese military) unleashed a brutal ethnic cleansing in northern Rakhine province against Muslim Rohingyas after serial attacks by insurgents of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) . The military crackdown led to thousands of deaths, and more than half a million refugees fled into neighbouring Bangladesh, adding to the another 700,000 Rohingyas who had fled and melted away since the first military-driven pogrom against them in 1978-79. (Myanmar's Rohingyas, 2023) The Rohingya crisis brought the spotlight on the limitations imposed on the well-intended peace process by the military which controlled three ministries (Home, Defence, Border Affairs) and accounted for one-fourth of the seats in the Parliament. Aung San Suu Kyi lost much of her global credibility because she fell in line with the military on the Rohingya question instead of trying to restrain the army.

But since the Feb 2021 military takeover, the situation has taken a turn for the worse. The peace process with the ethnic rebel groups has collapsed and the conflicts have intensified in all the insurgency theatres. The Arakan Army arrived at a ceasefire after the military takeover to regroup and rearm but resumed fighting in July 2022 . The brutal suppression of what initially was a peaceful protest movement for democracy, armed resistance groups have proliferated in the ethnic Bamar (Burman) regions seen as the heartland of Myanmar. These groups have linked up for tactical reasons with the longstanding ethnic rebel movements like those of the Kachins, Karens and the Shans, the Was and the Kokangs, stretching the Tatmadaw and straining its resources more than ever in the recent past. (Subir Bhaumik, 2023)

With the loosely grouped People's Defense Forces organising regular attacks on the Tatmadaw in the Sagaing region bordering India's Northeast, the states of Manipur and Mizoram are faced with a rising flow of refugees. Already more than thirty thousand refugees from Myanmar are believed to have entered these two tiny states , among them at least fifty lawmakers of the Myanmar parliament , mostly belonging to Aung Saan Suu Kyi's National League

for Democracy (NLD) which had swept the 2019 national elections and was all set to form government a second time.

The PDF insurgents owe allegiance to the National Unity Government (NUG) which claims to be the “real government of the Myanmar people”. Since the NUG has not only representatives from leading parties like NLD but also from powerful civil society groups and ethnic organisations, it has come to be seen as a broad-based national movement for change, with most looking up to it for leadership as Suu Kyi is in prison and her jail term has been extended by six years.

About the PDF, a recent study has observed : “ When the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) first coalesced in Myanmar in 2021, many viewed them as hastily organized groups of young vigilantes who would be quickly overrun by the junta's military force, known as the Sit-Tat. Instead, the PDFs have grown in size, organization and capability over the last year and half, and now pose a major threat to the junta's viability. Though they lack heavy equipment, an advanced command structure and international support, the proliferating PDFs have demonstrated remarkable tactical ingenuity and resilience. If they improve their command structure and weaponry, they could help expand territory under resistance control and hasten the junta's demise. Given their fragmented nature and rapid development, the PDFs remain a mystery to most analysts and international policymakers. Benefiting from strong public support, these rebel groups, which have become battle-hardened and more coordinated, now play a crucial, and perhaps decisive, role in the future security landscape of Myanmar.” (Ye Myo Hein, 2023)

While discussing the NUG's agenda, its foreign minister Zin Mar Aung recently told this writer that “our struggle now is to oust the military from politics and take the country towards democracy.” (Zin Mar Aung, 2023) Madame Aung has been strongly lobbying with Western democracies as well as India and ASEAN to facilitate a dialogue to restore the parliament and send the army back to the barracks. Since there has been little progress in that direction and the ASEAN's Five Point Consensus has failed to achieve a breakthrough, young Burmese have taken to arms in a desperate effort to fight the military and force it out of power. The Tatmadaw is badly stretched, morale in the lower echelons is dropping as evident from rising defections but it still has enough firepower to pound the PDF and other ethnic rebel armies. With strong support from China and Russia , the military junta feels it can just about hang on.

3. The Western Response

This is where the Western powers, especially the US, seem to be planning to step in to make a difference. US and UK took its first step to set the stage for a more effective intervention on Myanmar in December 2022 by tabling an UN Security Council resolution severely criticizing Myanmar's military regime and demanding an end to violence in Myanmar and the release of political prisoners, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. The vote marked the first Security Council resolution on the situation in Myanmar in decades, and in particular since the military overthrew the elected government in February 2021, The resolution (S/RES/2669 (2022)) proposed by the UK, which was passed by 12 votes, made several references to the importance of the “ASEAN” process, referring to the “five-point consensus” passed by the 10-nation Association of

Southeast Asian Nations last year.

India joined China and Russia in abstaining from voting on the resolution because Delhi still seems to prefer “constructive engagement” with the Myanmar junta rather than military action. But China’s lack of comfort with the Myanmar junta’s failure to hold its ground against multiple rebel forces, including a newly thriving Bamar (ethnic Burman) insurgency, was evident in its refusal to veto the resolution.

While there are reports that the US is considering imposing a no-fly zone over Myanmar, like the one NATO (mainly US) imposed over Bosnia, which would re-balance the fighting to the advantage of the civil and ethnic armed groups, possibly leading to the defeat of the Myanmar military in the Rakhine, Chin, Sagaing and Kachin provinces, where the separatist groups like the Arakan Army and Kachin Independence Army has increased effective control over much of their provinces.

So far, the Myanmar military has somehow maintained a foothold in these provinces by resorting to large-scale use of airpower. The bombing of a musical event organised by the Kachin Independence Army in October 2022, that led to nearly 60 deaths, have been followed by similar bombings in Rakhine and more recently in the Chin state. When bombs fell on Camp Victoria, a camp run by Chin National Front and the Bamar PDF jointly, on the border with Mizoram, Delhi woke up to the challenging prospect of a major refugee influx into Mizoram which already houses thousands of refugees from Myanmar.

A no-fly zone leading to huge reverses suffered by Myanmar military may effectively thwart the operation of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) that connects the China funded Kyaukphyu deep seaport with China’s Yunnan province (with the oil-gas pipeline). By toppling the junta and severely weakening the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military), the US and its allies may thus block China’s land-to-sea access through Myanmar into the Indian ocean —surely a key US strategic goal to contain China.

One of the main challenges for the US proposal to create a Bosnia-style no-fly zone over Myanmar would be establishing and maintaining the logistical support to sustain it. An aircraft carrier off the coast of Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal could be sufficient to provide the air coverage, but some form of land-based supply system would also be necessary, especially if the no-fly zone became a sustained effort.

The US, therefore, may want access to Bangladesh ports and adjoining land regions to maintain logistics so that the no-fly zone over Myanmar is effective. The US may impress Bangladesh that strong backing for the Arakan Army may lead to the independence of the Rakhine province and the final solution of the Rohingya problem — an attractive proposition for Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina, who will face elections amid considerable anti-incumbency later in 2023. The Arakan Army has promised to take back Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh. (Subir Bhaumik, 2023)

But Hasina is a conservative leader who may shy away from decisive action in support of the Western powers for fear of angering China, its leading source of development assistance and its leading trade partner. In that case, the US and its allies has two options – topple Hasina and back a

military-backed “national government” that would agree to provide logistical support for a no-fly zone or some more decisive form of military intervention or settle for some steady regular supply of critical portable anti-aircraft missiles like Stinger or Starstreak (very successfully used by Ukrainian forces against Russian aircrafts). Availability of such portable anti-aircraft missiles will neutralize Burmese combat airpower and may pave the way for ultimate defeat of the Tatmadaw in strategic provinces like Rakhine and Kachin. Not only will it help the US and its allies block China’s land-to-sea access through Myanmar but also pave the way for restoration of democracy and the creation of a federal union of Myanmar, where minority provinces will enjoy much greater constitutional powers. But such Western moves may turn Myanmar into another Afghanistan if China responds decisively with direct military support to the Tatmadaw.

Chinese leaders have already signalled Hasina not to play ball with the US and its allies and foreign minister Qin Gang’s sudden stopover at Dhaka airport on way to a five-nation Africa tour in January around the time Bangladesh was visited by two top US officials (Rear-Admiral Eileen Labaucher and Donald Lu) pointed to Bangladesh becoming a big power play theatre with both the West and China limbering up to push its way in Myanmar. (Shannon Tiezzi, 2023)

4. Fragile Economy

What adds to a huge crisis in the making is that Myanmar’s economy is on the verge of collapse, though the military junta is not forthcoming with data about foreign exchange reserves . But panic has gripped Myanmar over the growing likelihood of a Sri Lanka type economic collapse after the country’s central bank calling on all citizens this month to convert their foreign currency holdings and remittances received from abroad into the local currency kyat .

Myanmar’s foreign reserves are believed to have dwindled sharply and foreign debt has escalated as Western sanctions following the Feb 2021 coup and the raging Covid pandemic has impacted adversely the nation’s economy. (Myanmar Economy, 2023)

But the country’s military rulers continue to sign up for more and more Chinese funded infrastructure projects and allow Chinese companies to takeover mines and other profitable businesses. That in the hope that the Chinese will bail them out in the event of a Sri Lanka or Pakistan type crisis. Burmese fighters opposing the military rule are increasingly targeting Chinese business interests even other foreign investors are pulling out of the country. It is not yet clear whether the Myanmar central bank directive in April 2022 asking all citizens to change their foreign currency holdings and remittances into Burmese kyat has helped the military government rake in much needed foreign exchange.

Two months before the Feb 2021 military coup, Myanmar’s forex reserves stood at \$ 7.8 billion (as on Dec 2020). The military rulers have provided no current data on the country’s forex reserves , but banking and business sources in the country say they have sharply dwindled because of the impact of Covid pandemic and the Western sanctions.

Myanmar's foreign debt now stands at between \$ 10 to 11 billion – with some estimates suggesting that Myanmar does not even have half that much amount to pay back debt. That explains the strange directive to mop up all foreign exchange available within the country – a move described by leading Myanmar analyst Bertil Lintner as “financial suicide”.

Economists following Myanmar developments say the country is headed for payment defaults and shortage of essentials unless the Chinese bail them out, as they have done with their other friends like Pakistan but not quite with Sri Lanka.

The military junta's directive not only aims to shore up depleted foreign exchange reserves but also deny anti junta activists and civil society groups within the country from receiving funds from foreign donors and exiled Burmese groups. Public anger over the move was evident when a senior central bank official was shot within three days of the bank issuing the forex mop-up directive. The Central Bank's Deputy Governor, Than Tha Swe, appointed to the position after the Feb 2021 military coup by the generals, survived the attack. What must have upset all Burmese holdings foreign currency was the directive just gave them one day to change all their forex holdings into kyats, whose value has steadily fallen. The official exchange rate of 1,850 kyats per dollar is far below the black-market rate that has climbed steadily past the 2000 kyat for a dollar mark. What adds fuel to fire is the existing military junta rule that holders of kyat accounts may withdraw only 500,000, or the equivalent of less than US\$250, per week. That raises a more worrisome question as to whether the central bank actually has enough kyat reserves to cover the conversion of all foreign holdings into local currency. So, for the Burmese, it is double whammy. They get less for a dollar when they exchange it at the bank, which means they are left with less money to handle the sharply escalating price line. Agricultural output has dropped due to civil war conditions in many parts of the country with the military using airpower and heavy weapons to quell the popular uprising in areas dominated by the ethnic Burmans, in addition to the ongoing insurgencies in areas dominated by ethnic minorities.

Public anger over worsening economic situation and brutal military repression is increasingly focused not merely on the military rulers but also against China, which has been supporting the junta that calls itself the State Administrative Council (SAC). The SAC has cleared more than fifteen new Chinese projects worth \$ 4.8 billion since the Feb 2021 coup, even as other foreign investors like the Japanese are beginning to pull out. Nearly twenty of the 180 Japanese companies operating in Myanmar have already pulled out. The decision to mop up all forex holdings by the central bank has further unnerved the foreign investors. So the junta's claims that it hopes for nearly six billion US dollars in foreign investments in 2022 entirely depends on the Chinese investments.

The foreign investment community, except the Chinese, are up in arms over the central bank's directive to mop up forex holdings. The Japanese Embassy has already sent a letter to the SAC military junta which said: “Japanese companies operating in Myanmar will face serious

challenges in following the new regulation, which will cause difficulties in continuing their businesses in the country. It will also be detrimental to the function of the Embassy of Japan and other official organizations.” The Singaporean Embassy issued an almost identical statement that merely changed. Both embassies requested exemptions for companies from their respective countries, which are among Myanmar's top providers of foreign investment. Japan and Singapore are the biggest foreign investors in Myanmar after China. Already a dozen business groups — among them the French Myanmar Chamber of Commerce, AustCham Myanmar, EuroCham Myanmar, the British Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar, and the German Myanmar Business Chamber — issued a joint statement saying that the new foreign currency rule “needlessly lowers the living standards of the Myanmar people, halts foreign business activity, stops the flow of foreign direct investment (FDI), and creates trade tensions with other countries. Restriction on the use of foreign currencies, the statement noted, “disconnects Myanmar from the global economy and global financial system.”

In January 2022 a report by the International Labor Organisation (ILO) said Myanmar is on the “brink of economic collapse.” It said the country has suffered an eight percent employment shrinkage, amounting to 1.6 million job losses since the Feb 2021 coup. The country's construction, readymade garment and tourism sectors have been the hardest hit, leading to a sharp drop in foreign exchange reserves. A month ago, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) issued a statement in December 2021 that estimated “by early 2022, nearly half of Myanmar's 55 million population — some 25 million people — will be living below the national poverty line. There now appears little doubt that the country's poverty headcount is likely to return to levels not seen since 2005, effectively erasing 15 years of pre-pandemic economic growth.” Myanmar's economy had contracted eighteen percent for the year ending September 2021 and now these projections to the situation getting worse because of the move to mop up foreign exchange reserves. The UN may soon reverse its projections for a one percent growth for the current financial year when it calculates the impact of the latest directive on the country's economy. (Zubeda Chowdhury, 2023)

But the Burmese generals don't appear bothered, hoping Beijing will bail them out in the event of a Sri Lanka type crisis. Says Bertil Lintner. (Bertil Lintner, 2023) “The junta's lurch towards de-dollarization might thus give rise to a new yuan-based financial order – and even greater dependence on Beijing.”xiv That is precisely upsetting Myanmar's pro-democracy groups who are fighting to bring down the military junta. The People Defence Forces (PDF), the military arm of the parallel National Unity Government (NUG), recently threatened to attack Chinese-backed mines in the country's northwest if the projects are not shut down, saying the profits were lining the pockets of the junta.

The focus of this latest threat was believed to be China's Wanbao Mining, which has a partnership with Myanmar military-owned conglomerate Myanma Economic Holdings to run the controversial Letpadaung and Sapetaung-Kyesintaung copper mines near Salingyi in the Sagaing region. Sixteen Myanmar rebel groups issued a joint statement recently saying income from mining would line the pockets of senior

Myanmar military officials and cronies. A PDF spokesman warned that if these projects are not closed down, they will be attacked. More than 30 Chinese run factories were attacked in the months after the coup by demonstrators. Later, the PDF attacked an offtake station on the oil and gas pipeline that connects a Chinese funded port in Myanmar's Rakhine coast with the Chinese province of Yunnan. Then a Chinese run nickel processing plant was attacked.

A worried Chinese embassy in Myanmar have tried to contact the NUG in a desperate attempt to prevent armed attacks on Chinese interests. So far, the covert outreach has not worked. All groups opposing the military junta in Myanmar see China as the prime villain in propping up the brutal generals, holding Beijing responsible for the crackdown that has led to 1700 official deaths so far. (Irrawaddy, 2023)

5. Implications for India

While China and the US with its western allies flexing muscles over Myanmar, it is becoming difficult for India to avoid sucked into the conflict. The deteriorating situation in Myanmar has three immediate impacts for India.

One, Indian connectivity projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Corridor are not likely to be completed anytime soon. Already behind schedule, the escalating conflict across the country has now made it impossible for Delhi to complete these projects. India's much vaunted 'Act East' policy cannot be taken forward without these projects and unless the situation stabilizes in Myanmar. The country's return to democracy in the last decade has raised hopes for India using it as the land bridge to the rest of Southeast Asia, but the 2021 coup and the severe breakdown of law and order has torpedoed that hope. "Act East" through Northeast will never be possible without a peaceful Myanmar.

Second, the escalating refugee problem will have adverse impact on the Northeastern states, taxing their limited resources. It will also complicate bilateral relations as PDF and ethnic rebel will seek to use the Indian states to launch attacks or procure weapons. Locals in Mizoram and Manipur may tend to support them, but Delhi does not want to upset the Burmese military junta because it fears that will drive it further into the Chinese embrace. That may cause friction between the Centre and the Northeastern states.

Third, as the Burmese military junta wilts under growing global pressure, collapsing economy and the mounting insurgencies, it will draw closer to China which is strongly backing the junta. The military regime has already cleared fifteen mega infrastructure projects funded by China since the Feb 2021 coup, drawing Myanmar into a huge Chinese debt trap. The Burmese generals are now totally dependent on Chinese support to protect its back at the UN and in other global forums. With the Chinese entrenching themselves firmly in Myanmar's economy and defence sectors, Indian worries over the security implications for its sensitive Northeast will grow.

The Mexican president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador recently called for greater Indian role in global peace diplomacy alongside the UN and the Pope. If there

is one area where Delhi could try that out, it is Myanmar. It has so far backed the ASEAN peace efforts by supporting its Five Point Consensus and adopted a wait and watch approach. Since that has not cut much ice, India could try out a Gandhi Peace Mission in Myanmar to explore possibilities of starting a comprehensive dialogue involving all stakeholders. So far, the consensus in Delhi is avoid getting dragged into the Myanmar conflict and leave it to the ASEAN to mediate a settlement between rival stakeholders. But the military junta is not yet keen to return to a Panglong 2 type comprehensive peace process and appears geared for a fight to finish. The situation can only get worse with more bloodbath. Myanmar is clearly not just a failed state like Pakistan but seems precariously close to bursting at the seams. The only sensible solution is not merely a push to return to democracy but to work out a workable federation for Myanmar, but at the moment, that seems easier said than done. For India, Bangladesh, and the ASEAN, it is important to move decisively to avoid allowing Myanmar to fall apart and become a playground for Big Power play between China and the West. (Times of India, 2023)

6. Options for India

It is time for India to give up its strategic inaction on Myanmar because it cannot afford it anymore as too much is at stake. If Delhi aspires to play a peace maker role in the Ukraine crisis by leveraging its links to both Russia, Ukraine and the Western powers, it is time it started off with a similar effort in Myanmar. "This is not the era of war," Prime Minister Narendra Modi reminded Russian president Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the 2022 SCO Summit. His government may consider establishment of a Gandhi Peace Mission in the Prime Minister's Office backed by both the National Security Council (NSC) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) as an institutionalized peace-making platform. The Mission might start off with a Myanmar outreach by sending a delegation that might include Manipuri politician R K Ranjan Singh, minister of state for external affairs, Mizoram chief minister Pu Zoramthanga, Abhijit Haldar, Director General, International Buddhist Confederation, Deputy National Security Adviser Vikram Misri (former ambassador to Myanmar) and at least two prominent global Buddhist leaders who are often based in Bodh Gaya and other Buddhist sites in India. While Singh and Zoramthanga have substantial understanding of Myanmar (especially the latter who has operated out of Burmese bases during his days in the Mizo underground), Haldar is a veteran intelligence officer with known expertise on Buddhist countries and Misri for his understanding of both Myanmar and China, where he served in succession as ambassador before retirement and taking over as Deputy NSA. At least two top Buddhist religious personalities should be included in the delegation – Venerable Chalinda Bhante (hails from Assam and is Head Monk of Maha Bodhi temple at Bodh Gaya) and Venerable Thay Huyen Dieu (popular as Dr Lam), the legendary Vietnamese Buddhist monk who heads a global multicultural project and is extremely popular in the Buddhist world.

While Chalinda Bhante's presence will be more symbolic, Dr Lam has substantial negotiating skills which he displayed during his lead role in the Nepal peace process

that culminated in the return to political mainstream by the Maoists led by current Prime Minister Pushp Kumar Dahal alias Prachanda. (Asiatische, 2023)

During a detailed conversation with me on 24th April at my Kolkata residence, Dr Lam spelt out his roadmap for Myanmar peace process where he insisted a strong proactive Indian role with support from top global Buddhist religious personalities, who, according to him, “desperately peace and tranquility to return to Myanmar”. (Lam, 2023)

Dr Lam’s envisaged roadmap contains a strong religious elements like involving key Burmese Buddhist monks (revered by both military and other parties and nonstate actors) and starting off with mass prayers and extensive reconciliation exercises in a very Buddhist mold of forgiveness. This would clearly provide the Tatmadaw an honorable exit with no worry over retaliation and open the path for democratic restoration with structural change towards an authentic federation that could satisfy aspirations of the battling ethnicities.

Dr Lam insists a major Indian role and suggested the process should be overseen by NSA Ajit Doval and MEA minister S Jaishankar, both of whom are known for no-nonsense proactive stance on global and regional issues. He said PM Modi should be the “face and moving spirit of this new era Indian peace diplomacy.” (Apnews, 2023)

China has already shown it is determined to augment its influence in critical conflict-ridden regions like Middle East by undertaking to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran on the one hand and Israel and Palestine on the other. If India does not want to be diplomatically outplayed in Asia and elsewhere by an assertive China, it needs to play similar peacemaking role in countries like Myanmar and in the Ukraine-Russia conflict where China is seen as strongly backing one stakeholder (the army in Myanmar, Russia in the Ukraine conflict) and therefore, lack the credibility needed for peace diplomacy.

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