

## **A Civil War in Myanmar, a Regional Threat to South Asia**

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### **Synopsis:**

The outbreak of a civil war is quite inevitable in Myanmar with the recent development of the political situation and the military is going to the highest extent to limit the protest. The presence of a country turmoiled into civil war will pose a menacing threat to the region from all perspectives of security, strategy, economy, and politics. This commentary will be evaluating the aggregation of convulsing situation in Myanmar and its adversarial effects on South Asia.

### **Commentary:**

The coup d'état conducted by the Myanmar military—also known as “Tatmadaw”, was on the ground that the election held under the National League of Democracy of Aung San Suu Kyi was “deceptive” and “embroidered”. They took over the government on the first of February and put all the prime leaders, including Suu Kyi, into exile. The general public heavily protested against this illegal overthrow which was met through rigorous resistance from the army, resulting in more than 800 deaths (Idrus, 2021). Both parties are stout on their “no-compromise” premises and with the increasing rage and formation of violent groups with extreme abomination, the country is certain to land into a civil war. A country in civil war does not only pull down itself but also the whole region—which denotes that its effects will be extremely detrimental for the South Asian region.

### **Inside Myanmar:**

Though the protest started in a peaceful way, the indiscriminate attack on the young activists and students soon blazed up the situation and led to the formation of organized mob parties. There is an uprising threat that this anti-military protest might get aligned with the scattered separatist insurgencies, formulating guerilla-like tactics to sustain the movement against Tatmadaw. Already there have been attacks against the military, projecting assault on military vehicles,

barricading army entry points, and massive circulation of small weapons. It is predicted that small insurgency groups are conducting their training along the hilly and forestall border areas where they are getting easy access to weapons and assistance from neighboring countries' separatist groups. The internal situation in Myanmar has deteriorated with scarce media coverage from inside, discontinuance of most state activities, paralyzed societal functioning, and no supportive indication from the military. The National Unity Government, a shadow government formed under the presidency of Win Myint is asking for international recognition and is apprehended to establish a coalition with the protesting public along with the separatist groups to create a federal body to go against the army (Gravers, 2021). With almost 50 militant groups<sup>1</sup> inside the country, most of them being against Tatmadaw, the outbreak of civil war will mean a complete breakdown of the state system with utmost violence and outrage. Most ironically, if the civil war has already started in the country, it will not be known due to the lack of communication apparatus.

### **South Asia into the Civil war:**

Though Myanmar is not a South Asian country as per documents, a shared border spares none— as it did not Pakistan in the case of Afghanistan and Turkey in the Syrian Civil war. Myanmar shares borders with India, Bangladesh, China, Thailand, Laos, and the effect of the civil war, needless to say, will be different for each of them. Considering the neighbors in South Asia, India and Bangladesh will be the biggest victims of this civil war. India already knows the eventualities of a civil war from its experience in Sri Lanka. Besides, the Northern region of India, more specifically Mizoram has a shared border with the Chin State of Myanmar, which is already turning into a transboundary insurgency hub because the militia groups there are cooperating with each other. Indian army associated with Tatmadaw had to launch joint operations to resist their propagation (Roche, 2021). The breakout of civil war in Myanmar will rejuvenate this route for increased weapon smuggling, training assistance, and guerrilla warfare support. The Indian government has yet not shown any stout commination against the recent military debacle and atrocities, as a matter of fact, has closed its border to restrict the entrance of protestors who are seeking refuge. Instead of showing humanitarian condolences for the justice-

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<sup>1</sup> SHARMA, S. (2014). Ethnicity And Insurgency In Myanmar: PROFILING OF NON-STATE INSURGENT GROUPS. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 18(3), 150-168. Retrieved July 9, 2021, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48505114>

seekers it has supposedly voted “abstain” along with China and Russia over the UNGA resolution to ‘halt supply of arms to Myanmar military and urge them to respect the November election’<sup>2</sup>. Though this reluctant attitude towards this political alteration in the neighboring state might devalue the credibility of India, it is predicted that they are planning to play more of a strategically diplomatic role in this scenario with the furtherance of time.



Myanmar shares borders with five countries including India, China, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Laos

South Asia already has seen the consequences of civil wars before, but this one will be totally different due to the probable engagement of multiple foreign stakeholders in the situation. There have been opposing repercussions from the West and East. China is predicted of providing subtle support to the Myanmar military by following their ‘non-intervention’ policy, whereas the US has expressed strict condemnation against the attacks and even imposed sanctions on particular military personnel. China has already scratched out economic strategic plans in cooperation with Myanmar, and itself being a non-democratic state hardly considers what system prevails in the partnering state, as long as their interests are met. It has already closed its border emphasizing internal security and will take every necessary step to ensure its own safety. On the other hand, the US is presaged to continue its legacy of “humanitarian intervention” here, either with the motive to inherit the abundant natural resources in Myanmar or resist the dissemination of Chinese power or extend influence in the Indo-pacific region. Though the possibilities of their direct presence through troops are negligible, they will try to stir the situation using regional allies and proxy militia groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Nichols, M. (2021). United Nations calls for halt of weapons to Myanmar. Reuters. Retrieved 4 July 2021, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-chief-urges-general-assembly-act-myanmar-2021-06-18/>.

In addition to the political and security imminence, the economic projects that have been launched across the region, including BRI, BCIM, and many other projects under World Bank will come to a halt. Most of the countries in this region are developing states with recent economic progression and infrastructural development initiatives. A civil war will bring them back into grueling poverty, increasing terrorism, deteriorating health care system, and overall economic destruction. The Covid-19 pandemic has already drained out these countries economically and socially, stroke by a civil war in the region will further pull them back to square one with fewer scopes to overcome. The refugee upsurge will increase, cross-border human, weapon, and drug trafficking will proliferate, military ascendance might affect the democracies, and collective social parity will deplete.

### **Effects on Bangladesh:**

Bangladesh is already into an anomaly with Myanmar regarding the Rohingya refugee issue, and with a military government in power, it becomes more difficult to bargain. If enough pressure can be exerted through the 76<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly in September, Myanmar might agree to repatriate a fraction of the refugees to maintain its credibility, but the possibility is scarce. Bangladesh has also decided to “abstain” from the last UNGA resolution stating that its interest has not been mentioned properly in the draft<sup>3</sup>. This might come out as a bold stance on our behalf but seems hardly appropriate in this situation. The border areas in Bandarban and Khagrachari are already at high risk of drug trafficking, human smuggling, and illegal weapon transfer. Civil war will worsen the situation by multiplying the amplitude, and the effect will be outrageous for Bangladesh. Each weapon cartel will inevitably allow the entrance of a number of arms inside the country, thus devastating human security here. The existence of Rohingya in the country is already breeding a sense of communal and religious aggrievances among the communities. With a civil war, there is a possibility of another influx through the border and this time other persecuted groups will be assisted with more Rohingya. The Chittagong Hill Tracts might return to its conflict phase with the reactivation of the terrorist and separatist groups who will be helping the insurgents in Myanmar to form a stronger coalition. Soon a coup d'état in Myanmar will work as a butterfly effect for Bangladesh and the government might have to take

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<sup>3</sup> Bangladesh abstains from voting against Myanmar. Prothomalo. (2021). Retrieved 6 July 2021, from <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/government/bangladesh-abstains-from-voting-against-myanmar>.

stern steps to maintain internal security. Alongside the security aspects, Bangladesh will also face major economic setbacks. Our ports will be highly threatened with the risk of maritime theft and will be turned into an important route for smuggling. The vision Bangladesh is carrying on to establish economic connectivity will be in danger if these ports are terrified by the presence of terrorist groups who will use these for conflict proliferation. We are heading towards a fast-growing economy with our “blue economy” proposition, which will be in peril if our strategic interests are hindered by the presence of foreign dominion along our shores.

### **Recommendations:**

In case of any threat to peace and security, regional and international organizations are expected to play the foremost role since their formation is based on this mandate. Unfortunately, any regional organization in South Asia, SAARC or BIMSTEC, has been inactive for long in any purpose and organization in South East Asia, link ASEAN is not showing any attempt to interfere into this problem. United Nations has condemned the turn of events in Myanmar and passed a resolution to embargo arm supply, but that is non-binding. ASEAN tried to manage the situation by presenting a five points consensus but Myanmar Generals hardly paid any heed to it. UN special envoy to Myanmar has warned about the possibility of a civil war in early March but that was also not considered by countries with grave importance (UN News, 2021). The organizations need to create a setup to bring about all the relevant stakeholders to the same table to proceed towards a viable solution. Separate arrangements with the Myanmar military should be organized under INGO surveillance to comprehend their future planning. The military has declared to organize national elections soon to hand over power to democratic government. A rigid timeline with proper assurance should be asked for and strict initiative, like sanction should be imposed in case it is violated. Any organization does not have the capability to intervene in the internal issues of a country, so proper channels of mediation and conciliation need to be prepared to bring Myanmar to the table with consent with complete win-win possibility. Countries surrounding Myanmar need to play a very important role in these circumstances. They have to consider their



safety as well as come up with methods to contain further eruption. China needs to consider that if a full range civil war breaks out and the US intervenes here, many of its projects focusing towards enhancing Chinese ascendance in this region will be hampered. Continuing any development projects will also be against their “Avoid Conflict Zones” policy. Besides that, a full swing civil war might leverage the rise of insurgency groups inside the country, engender ethnic conflicts with the Uighurs, and reduce the plausibility of the government. Keeping all these into consideration, China should encourage a sustainable solution between the concerned parties and put auspicious effort to realize the discussions. On the other hand, Joe Biden has come to power with special agenda to ensure democracy and human rights protection all over the world. To attain these promises he should give manifesting efforts to ensure the rights and security of these people by pressurizing the military government to come into compromise. All these are expected to happen in utmost nonviolent procedure with no further destruction.

As important stakeholders, India and Bangladesh also need to make their positions clear. India has economic and strategic benefits with Myanmar, but they need to realize that none will be served if the country goes into war. Being a proactive democracy, they should promote assurance of balance and guide Myanmar towards a proper solution. Bangladesh on the other hand should start enlisting the lashes she will face due to this conflict. We do not have the capability to host another clutch of refugees or take the security implications of a civil war in a bordering state. The government needs to start observing the change of events in Myanmar very closely and form expert panels at a high confidential level to map out future necessities. Our close maritime proximity with Myanmar will amplify the threats for us and following the situation we might have to take rigid measures in border security. The international organizations need to be informed about the threats Bangladesh is apprehending from this disaccord and ask for early preventive measures. In short, every country that will be a stakeholder in this civil war need to approach it very diplomatically by maintaining a proper strategic course to limit the conflict, because South Asia cannot afford the pushback of an annihilating war at this time of ascending development.

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