

Research Article

Strategic Responses to Myanmar's Political Crisis: A Comparative Analysis of India and China's Approaches

Muhammad Indrawan Jatmika

Department of International Relations, Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur – Indonesia

Corresponding Email: m.indrawan.hi@upnjatim.ac.id

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Abstract

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar's military staged a coup, abruptly halting the country's political transition and triggering widespread violence, humanitarian distress, and regional instability. This article examines how India and China, with distinct political systems, foreign policy and strategic interests have responded to the crisis and shaped regional engagement in post-coup Myanmar. Adopting a qualitative approach, this study utilizes official government statements, news reports, and scholarly publications. The findings indicate that China has maintained close ties with the junta to secure its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments, while also engaging with ethnic armed groups to ensure border stability and protect its economic assets. India, by contrast, follows a "dual-track" strategy—publicly supporting democratic norms but also maintaining relations with the military regime to safeguard its security and strategic interests. However, India's limited support for pro-democracy forces and restrictive refugee policies have weakened its regional credibility, while China's pragmatic diplomacy allows it to preserve its influence and project strategic dominance in Myanmar. This comparative analysis highlights shifting China and India power dynamics in Southeast Asia and suggests that a more flexible and inclusive policy from both actors is crucial for contributing to Myanmar's long-term stability and advancing their regional interests.

Keywords: Myanmar, Military Coup, China, India, Political, Crises

INTRODUCTION

Following decades of military rule, Myanmar began a political transition in 2011 that introduced limited democratic reforms, greater media freedom, and economic development (Crouch, 2017). This transition gained momentum with the 2015 general election, in which the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, secured a landslide victory (Barany, 2018). However, the 2008 Constitution ensured the military's continued power, reserving 25% of parliamentary seats and key ministerial posts for the Tatmadaw (Hakiki, 2023). These structural constraints amplify the fragility of Myanmar's democratic progress.

Tensions escalated after the NLD's second major win in the November 2020 elections, as the military disputed the results, despite validation by the Union Election Commission and international observers (Seekins, 2023). On February 1, 2021, Tatmadaw launched a coup, detaining key political figures and declaring a

state of emergency. This coup abruptly ended a decade of reform, triggering mass protests and the rise of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a broad-based resistance that included students, civil servants, healthcare workers, and religious leaders (Karinda & Rijal, 2023). According to the Assistance Association for Political, the Myanmar's military regime response was brutal: as of mid-2023, over 4,100 civilians had been killed, 25,000 arrested, and more than 19,000 still detained, (2024).

The political crisis resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe. By mid-2023, over 1.9 million people had been internally displaced, and 17.6 million required humanitarian assistance (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2023). The military's violent crackdowns and control over major urban centers forced thousands to flee across borders, especially into India, Thailand, and Bangladesh. Myanmar's economy also suffered dramatically: the World Bank reported a GDP contraction of 18% in 2021, and recovery remains slow due to ongoing instability, reduced foreign investment, and sanctions (World Bank, 2022).

In the takeover, the military established a one-year state of emergency; subsequently, it prolonged it indefinitely. As people yearned for the return of civilian government, this choice set off extensive demonstrations and civil disobedience across Myanmar. Joining the movement under the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), people from all occupations, including students, workers, and government officials, organized street marches, work strikes, and internet campaigns (Karinda and Rijal, 2023). The Tatmadaw, military junta of Myanmar, responded by suppressing the demonstrations with great violence. Against nonviolent protestors, security personnel used tear gas, rubber bullets, and live armory. Along with hundreds of deaths, including women and children, thousands of activists were detained.

Along with silencing numerous voices, this rigorous crackdown intensified the catastrophe facing the nation. Humanitarian situations deteriorated as the military tightened control over power; shortages of food, medication, and essential services resulted (Agence France-Presse, 2021). Many individuals were uprooted from their homes; some sought refuge from violence by traveling to surrounding nations. Concurrently with this, armed opposition developed as newly established civilian militias—known as People's Defense Forces (PDF)—along with ethnic armed groups started opposing the military government. Rising unemployment, company closures, and more poverty resulting from the continuous fighting severely hurt Myanmar's economy. Political unrest, violations of human rights, and economic downturn taken together have put Myanmar in a protracted crisis with no obvious road forward (Maizland, 2022).

This turmoil has raised alarm among Myanmar's neighbors, particularly China and India, both of which share long borders and hold significant economic and strategic interests in the country. China, for instance, has invested more than US\$21 billion in Myanmar since 1988, including critical infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), such as the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) (Chan, 2022). India, meanwhile, considers Myanmar a vital part of its “Act East”

policy, investing in cross-border infrastructure like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway (Pulipaka, 2025). Both of Myanmar's near neighbors have great strategic interests in the area, hence they are quite worried about the turmoil since the military takeover in 2021. China and India notably should be concerned about the likelihood of Myanmar's collapse as their shared borders would directly affect them from the instability (Sharma, 2023; Tan and Yoo, 2022; Chan, 2022). These issues are well-founded. Myanmar had humanitarian concerns even prior to the coup; since 2021, the situation has only become worse. Mass displacement resulting from the conflict has seen thousands of individuals evacuate their homes to avoid persecution and bloodshed. Particularly Bangladesh and, to a lesser degree India, refugees have travelled into nearby nations (Sharma, 2023).

The instability has also increased transnational challenges. The porous 1,643-kilometer India–Myanmar border, particularly in Mizoram and Manipur, has seen rising flows of refugees—over 40,000 people had entered India by late 2022 (UNHCR, 2023). At the same time, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and the narcotics trade have surged, affecting both India and China. Yunnan province in China has seen a rise in illegal trade and organized crime linked to the crisis (Clapp & Tower, 2023). These challenges underscore the fact that Myanmar's crisis is not merely a domestic matter but a regional emergency with profound implications for peace and security in Southeast Asia.

India and China cannot remain quiet viewers given this urgent reality. Strategic actions must be included into their foreign policy agendas to handle, solve, or at least slow down the continuous situation in Myanmar. Both countries, being regional heavyweights with direct borders and major stakes in Myanmar's stability, are driven to employ different strategies in line with their larger geopolitical goals and internal agendas. This research aims to compare India's and China's strategic responses to the Myanmar crisis. "How do China and India's approaches to the Myanmar crisis differ, and what are the implications of these differences for regional stability?" asks the core research question driving this study. This article attempts to find how the activities of these two major countries affect not only the settlement of the Myanmar conflict but also the larger geopolitical balance in Southeast Asia. It underscores the fact that Myanmar's crisis is not merely a domestic matter but a regional emergency with profound implications for peace and security order in Southeast Asia.

Despite the growing body of literature on China's and India's foreign policies toward Myanmar, there remains a lack of comparative research that specifically addresses their strategic responses following the 2021 Myanmar's military coup. Most existing studies (Khashimwo, 2024; Tang, 2025) tend to focus on one country or take a broader geopolitical lens without detailing how each power's approach—rooted in differing political ideologies, economic priorities, and regional ambitions—shapes the trajectory of regional stability. Little attention has been paid to how these responses reflect contrasting foreign policy models: China's pragmatic, authoritarian-aligned diplomacy versus India's more value-driven but cautious

engagement. This study aims to fill that scholarly gap by providing comparative analysis of China's and India's strategies in response to Myanmar's post-coup crisis in Myanmar. It explores the underlying motivations behind the policies, the practical implications of their actions, and the consequences for regional order in Southeast Asia. In addition, the research examines the practical implications and tangible outcomes of the actions undertaken by both states, including how these measures affect bilateral relations with Myanmar, influence on-the-ground developments, and interact with broader geopolitical and regional dynamics. It asks: How do China and India differ in their strategic responses to Myanmar's post-coup crisis, and what are the implications of these differences for regional stability in Southeast Asia?

METHOD

This study investigates the foreign policy responses both of China and India to Myanmar's military coup between 2021 and 2024, employing a qualitative research approach and comparative method. The primary objective is to identify, examine, and compare the strategic interests, foreign policy behaviors, and diplomatic instruments utilized by the two countries in responding to the unfolding political crisis in Myanmar. The analysis is structured around three key dimensions: (1) policy objectives; (2) strategic actions; and (3) diplomatic behavior. This structure enables a systematic side-by-side analysis of how China and India, with distinction in global power status, pursue their national interest in a shared regional context.

Research materials are collected from secondary sources, including official government documents such as policy statements, press releases, speeches delivered by key political leaders. In addition, academic publications, peer-reviewed journal articles, reputable think tank reports and analyses from credible news platforms are also employed. Reports and data published by international organizations such as the World Bank and regional bodies are incorporated to provide more comparative data. To ensure balanced coverage and minimize bias, media sources from multiple countries are considered. The analysis combined both thematic and content analysis. Thematic analyses are used to identify and interpret recurring patterns, discourse, and themes in foreign policy behavior, while content analysis systematically categorizes specific elements within textual data to uncover strategic priorities, rhetorical devices and narrative framing techniques employed by policymakers.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this article is grounded in realism, which emphasizes the pursuit of national interest, state survival, and power maximization in an anarchic international system. It provides a suitable lens to explain both China and India foreign policy behavior, particularly in their pragmatic engagement with Myanmar's military regime. China's prioritization of border security and BRI infrastructure and India's balancing act between regional security concerns and normative commitments, are best understood through the realist lens by focusing on material interest, security calculations, and geopolitical positioning.

The turbulent political landscape of post-coup Myanmar provides a compelling case study of how major powers navigate regional crises. As Myanmar's military

tightened its grip in February 2021, the international community witnessed not just a local power struggle, but a microcosm of great-power competition in Southeast Asia. Realism's foundational premise, that states operate in an anarchic international system where survival trumps ideology proves particularly illuminating here. The theory's emphasis on power maximization and relative gains (Waltz, 1979) helps explain why both Asian giants, despite their rhetorical differences, prioritized concrete interests over democratic principles. This becomes evident when examining their policy trajectories through three realist dimensions: security imperatives, economic stakes, and regional influence.

This realist analysis challenges conventional narratives that frame foreign policy choices as binary decisions between principles and interests. Instead, it reveals how major powers navigate complex crises through multilayered strategies that account for both immediate security concerns and long-term positional advantages. The Myanmar case thus offers valuable insights into how emerging powers operationalize realist principles in contemporary geopolitics, particularly in the strategically vital Indo-Pacific theater. The study illuminates the structural forces shaping regional dynamics, moving beyond surface-level policy differences to reveal the enduring relevance of power politics in 21st century international relations. The findings suggest that in contexts of political upheaval, the gravitational pull of realist logic remains strong, even for powers that publicly endorse liberal international norms.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

China's Response to Myanmar Coup

From a realist perspective, China's response to the 2021 military coup in Myanmar is best understood through the lens of strategic interest and power projection. Myanmar occupies a critical geopolitical and geoeconomic position as a land bridge between South and Southeast Asia, and as China's key access point to the Indian Ocean, enabling a reduction of reliance on the Malacca Strait (Malik, 2020; Tritto and Huang, 2023). Historically embedded in the broader context of Sino-Myanmar exchanges, China's relationship with Myanmar has evolved from ideological support during the Cold War (Hongwei, 2012) to a pragmatic alliance with the military regime from the 1980s onward (Hnin, 2013).

Economically, Myanmar plays a pivotal role in China's regional strategy, offering access to critical resources and serving as a gateway to the Indian Ocean (Malik, 2020). China has extensively committed in Myanmar through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sponsoring major infrastructure projects like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, oil, and gas pipelines, and Kyaukphyu deep-sea port. These initiatives not only help Myanmar's economic growth but also give China substitute channels for imported energy, hence lessening its dependency on the sensitive Malacca Strait (Tritto and Huang, 2023). Moreover, China's industrial development depends on Myanmar's abundance of natural resources, including lumber, minerals, and gemstones, which makes the nation a crucial friend on China's path of consistent economic development (Findlay, Park, and Verbiest, 2016).

Geopolitically, Myanmar serves as a buffer state that enables China to push back against Western influence, particularly that of the United States (Shee, 1997). The 2021 coup posed a dilemma for Beijing—while regime change threatened domestic instability and anti-China sentiment (Khaing, 2021), a complete disengagement risked endangering China's multi-billion-dollar investments and regional posture. In line with realist principles, China adopted a cautious approach: it refrained from condemning the military and instead referred to the power seizure as a "major cabinet reshuffle" (Easley and Chow, 2024), while urging for constitutional dialogue (Skidmore and Ware, 2023).

The official address from China highlighted its strategic position even more. Notwithstanding the military's egregious abuses of the democratic framework, the Chinese Foreign Ministry stressed the need for political stability and advised all parties in Myanmar to resolve their problems through constitutional means (Skidmore and Ware, 2023). By keeping this posture, China was able to safeguard its interests—including its large Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments—while avoiding uniting with Western nations' severe censure. Projects like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), which Beijing's plan depends on to guarantee access to the Indian Ocean, make Myanmar a key player in China's more general regional aspirations. Any instability in Myanmar endangers these commercial projects, which forces China to tackle the problem pragmatically rather than ideologically.

Over time, China's interactions with the military government in Myanmar have evolved to reflect fresh ground-based conditions. Beijing's early reluctance was driven by worries about the junta's capacity to keep control, but it finally began working more closely with the government emphasizing regional stability and economic cooperation (Skidmore and Ware, 2023). China was under pressure at the same time to deal with rising anti-Chinese feeling among the people of Myanmar, who saw Beijing as supporting the repressive activities of the military (Khaing, 2021). China has taken a twin approach to control this delicate equilibrium: keeping ties to the junta to safeguard its strategic interests while engaging with regional and international parties to lower reputational hazards. This sophisticated approach best captures China's more pragmatic foreign policy posture, in which ideological concerns usually yield to economic ones.

Using its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to confirm its strategic presence in Myanmar, China has notably been more deeply engaged in the country after the 2021 coup. Particularly in Rakhine State and along the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), key infrastructure projects have been sped forward to guarantee vital trade routes and improve access to the Indian Ocean. Offering a necessary link to world markets, these projects are fundamental to China's long-term geopolitical and economic plan (Kobayashi and King, 2022). However, the continuous political upheaval in Myanmar has presented security concerns for Chinese investors, leading to claims Beijing would think about sending security guards to protect her infrastructure projects. This emphasizes the twin goals of increasing economic

impact and controlling the hazards related to the erratic political environment of Myanmar (Adam, 2024).

China has also tried to use its influence throughout the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to validate Myanmar's military government on the regional level. Beijing wants to offset Western dominance in the area by pushing ASEAN members to interact with the junta, therefore strengthening the conditions for its strategic objectives. This strategy fits China's more general foreign policy goal of encouraging stability in its neighbors. Emphasizing respect for sovereignty and non-interference, China has actively backed ASEAN-led projects such the Five-Point Consensus to help to solve the Myanmar problem (Skidmore and Ware, 2023). Beijing's support of regional interaction with the junta has, however, met difficulties as ASEAN countries remain split on how to address Myanmar's political crisis and its consequences for regional stability.

China's dependence on ASEAN to handle the problem in Myanmar exposes major diplomatic weakness in its approach. Beijing has considerable influence inside ASEAN, but it cannot control the reactions of specific member nations or their contacts with pro-democracy forces in Myanmar. A cohesive response to the situation is complicated by this fracturing inside ASEAN as member nations regard military junta participation differently and the opposition groups differently. Critics contend that any elections run by the junta are fragile and neglect the fundamental reasons of the political unrest, therefore compromising the validity of any political process started by the military (Saha, 2024).

Following Myanmar's February 2021 coup, China first adopted a mixed posture, neither entirely backing the military administration nor the shadow government. Concerns about its political and economic impact as well as security threats mostly motivated this neutrality. While denouncing the takeover may have upset China's strategic interests, openly supporting the military could have tarnished its reputation and brought international penalties. But China progressively turned toward acknowledging and backing the military government as global interest in Myanmar faded. Emphasizing Myanmar's importance for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and two-ocean strategy, the 13th National People's Congress reaffirmed China's commitment to strengthening bilateral ties, highlighting Myanmar's significance for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and two-ocean strategy (Skidmore and Ware, 2023).

China's post-coup engagement reflects a dual-track strategy—maintaining strong ties with the military leadership while also managing reputational risks by engaging with regional actors and presenting itself as a stabilizing power (Mosyakov, Shpakovskaya and Ponka, 2024). Despite initial hesitation, China eventually shifted toward a more assertive position, with the 13th National People's Congress reaffirming Myanmar's strategic importance for China's two-ocean strategy (Skidmore and Ware, 2023). Beijing's increasing readiness to defend contentious regimes, as seen in its hardened posture toward the West, was also mirrored in its deeper alignment with the junta.

India's Response to the Myanmar Coup

Viewed through the lens of realism, India's approach to Myanmar post-2021 coup reflects a strategic recalibration shaped by security imperatives, geoeconomic interests, and regional competition with China. Myanmar occupies a vital geopolitical position for India—as a land bridge to Southeast Asia, a buffer against Chinese expansion, and a sensitive neighbor sharing over 1,600 kilometers of porous border with insurgency-prone northeastern states (Maini, 2014; Kipgen, 2016). Its geoeconomic value is also significant: Myanmar facilitates regional connectivity via projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, core to India's "Act East" strategy (Sang, 2021).

As India embraced its "Look East" strategy, a strategic change meant to build political and economic relationships with Southeast Asia among the increasing regional dominance of China, the relationship started to improve in the 1990s. Concerns over China's growing presence in Myanmar and its support of rebel groups running along the Indo-Myanmar border led in part to realistic recalibration of India's foreign policy (Maini, 2014). This pragmatic recalibration of India's foreign policy was partly driven by concerns over China's increasing foothold in Myanmar and its support for insurgent groups operating along the Indo-Myanmar border (Kipgen, 2016). Understanding the geopolitical relevance of Myanmar, India started interacting with its military administration to solve common security issues and improve economic relations. Targeting rebel camps along the border, combined military operations formed pillar of this approach, meant to stabilize India's northeastern states (Pande, 2023). India simultaneously started important economic projects to improve regional connectivity and commerce by means of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. These initiatives represented a new phase of pragmatic diplomacy in which strategic and financial concerns dominated ideological divides (Sang, 2021).

In the aftermath of the 2021 coup, India adopted a dual-track foreign policy—continuing diplomatic engagement with the military junta while rhetorically supporting a return to democracy (Krishnan, 2022). This reflects a realist trade-off: maintaining ties with the junta ensures operational continuity for India's infrastructure projects and counter-insurgency cooperation, especially crucial along its northeastern frontier (Pande, 2023). High-level meetings with military leaders' post-coup, despite international backlash, illustrate India's prioritization of stability over normative alignment (Ranjan, 2024; Ganapathy, 2023).

While India has publicly expressed support for democratic reforms in Myanmar, its actions—such as maintaining military ties and continuing arms sales to the junta—have raised questions about the consistency of its democratic stance. Along with foreign observers, civil society groups within Myanmar have pushed India to turn its attention toward assisting pro-democracy movements instead than interacting directly with the military government. Critics contend that India's posture, which combines military support with diplomatic outreach, sends conflicting signals and may undermine the larger effort at democratic restoration in

Myanmar (Krishnan, 2022). As India tries to negotiate the thin line between practicality and principle in its foreign policy, the seeming discrepancy between its words and conduct has also generated conflict among both its national and international circles.

At the same time, India has pursued unofficial “Track 1.5” initiatives to preserve its regional relevance and appear as a neutral facilitator, though such efforts remain symbolic given the junta’s intransigence (Abuza, 2023). In the humanitarian dimension, India’s central government has emphasized border control and deportations, positioning refugee inflows as a security threat—despite criticism from civil society and tensions with more sympathetic local governments in northeastern states (Bhattacharyya, 2024; Singh and Lakshman, 2024). These contradictions highlight the tension between India’s democratic image and strategic behavior, a common dilemma in realist statecraft.

India's approach to the humanitarian crisis resulting from mounting violence in Myanmar has been distinguished by state policies against grassroots movements. Particularly for policies like border fencing and the deportation of Myanmar citizens back to military-occupied areas (Bhattacharyya, 2024), actions that many see as contradictory to India’s democratic values and historical commitment to providing refuge. Civil society organizations and human rights groups have responded negatively to these practices, demanding greater humanitarian actions include opening borders to displaced people and stopping forceful deportations (Bhattacharyya, 2024). Though it has also stoked tensions among local people who have historically shared cultural and ethnic links with populations in Myanmar, the austere posture is considered as a practical response motivated by security concerns in India's northeastern regions.

At the local level, however, local administrations and civil society organizations in India's northeastern regions have embraced a more sympathetic attitude toward refugees (Bhattacharyya, 2022). These regions, which share historical and familial connections with Myanmar’s Chin, Kachin, and other ethnic communities, have witnessed local efforts to provide shelter, food, and medical aid to those fleeing the violence (Singh and Lakshman, 2024). These initiatives draw attention to the clear discrepancy between the more humanitarian activities of local communities and the securitized policies of the central government, but they also illustrate the difficulties of putting a coherent national strategy that strikes security against human rights into effect. Expanding relief programs and promoting regional collaboration to responsibly manage the refugee crisis has helped advocacy organizations encourage the Indian government to match its humanitarian reaction with its democratic values. India's answer shows the way in which its moral obligations as a regional leader clash with its geopolitical concerns (Khair, 2024).

India's handling of the Myanmar situation has shown both clear limits in addressing the larger humanitarian and political aspects of the conflict and efficiency in furthering its strategic goals. On the one hand, India has kept vital influence in Myanmar by using its dual-track approach of interacting with the military government while promoting democratic values. Diplomatic interaction

including high-level talks with military leaders of Myanmar has assisted India's national security to be collaboratively improved by counter-insurgency operations along the Indo-Myanmar border. India's "Act East" approach also fits its economic initiatives, which include the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, so enhancing regional connectivity and so countering China's growing influence in Myanmar. Negotiations and other unofficial diplomatic projects underlining India's significance as a significant regional power attempting to mediate the conflict and reduce bloodshed have come from "Track 1.5".

Still, numerous major restrictions impede the success of India's plan. India has tried but has not been able to significantly change the political course of Myanmar or help to resolve the humanitarian problem. Civil society organizations and international observers have criticized its ongoing interaction with the junta, including arms sales and military cooperation, claiming that these activities compromise India's commitment to democratic values and damage its reputation as a worldwide democratizer (Peace Rep, 2022). Regarding humanitarian matters, the central government's tight refugee policies—including deportations and border fencing—have drawn criticism for their lack of empathy and consistency with India's democratic values. These policies, together with little success in informal diplomacy, point to India's strategy lacking the consistency and moral authority required to produce permanent and inclusive results in Myanmar, even if it is pragmatic in resolving urgent security and economic issues.

The Myanmar crisis has thus presented India with both constraints and opportunities. While India's continued presence safeguards its strategic foothold and deters Chinese dominance, its limited engagement with opposition groups and ethnic actors' risks undermining long-term influence should Myanmar's political balance shift. In contrast to China's flexible, multi-actor strategy, India's junta-centric approach may limit its room for maneuver in a future post-conflict order.

China and India Shared Strategic Interests and Diverging Implications for Myanmar

Myanmar's geopolitical and geoeconomic position—bridging South and Southeast Asia and providing maritime access to the Indian Ocean—makes it a critical node in the regional strategies of both China and India. From a realist perspective, both powers seek to secure strategic depth, stabilize border regions, and ensure uninterrupted access to trade and energy routes (Mosyakov, Shpakovskaya and Ponka, 2024; Mannan, 2020). However, while their interests align in form, their implications diverge significantly in substance and effect.

China views Myanmar as a cornerstone in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) architecture. Projects like the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and Kyaukphyu deep-sea port are not only logistical upgrades but also strategic assets enabling Beijing to bypass the Malacca Strait and project influence into the Indian Ocean (Aung, 2020). These investments reflect China's broader ambition to integrate neighbouring economies into its orbit through infrastructure diplomacy (Tritto and

Huang, 2023). The implication of this interest is a deepening asymmetrical dependence, where Myanmar's regime stability becomes essential for China's uninterrupted regional expansion.

India, on the other hand, views Myanmar as a bridge to Southeast Asia as well as a barrier against Chinese influence. The goal of infrastructure projects like the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is to link the northeastern region of India with ASEAN markets (Yumlembam, 2024; Sang, 2021). In contrast to China, India's investments are more constrained in scope and scale. This highlights a strategic imbalance: although India acknowledges Myanmar's worth, it does not have the same clout, which lessens its sway in the long-term struggle for regional dominance.

Both countries have adopted pragmatic postures toward the Myanmar junta, prioritizing engagement over isolation. China's decision to avoid labelling the 2021 military takeover as a coup (Easley and Chow, 2024), and its sustained outreach to multiple actors—including ethnic armed groups—demonstrate a flexible strategy focused on strategic insurance and risk hedging. India has maintained formal ties with the junta while expressing rhetorical support for democratic norms (Krishnan, 2022), a dual-track approach reflecting its need to protect border security and project normative legitimacy. However, India's relative neglect of opposition actors like the National Unity Government (NUG) and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) has reduced its credibility among Myanmar's non-state stakeholders—limiting its future diplomatic capital if political transitions occur.

Economic and Strategic Engagement: Implications of China and India's Interests in Myanmar

Both China and India have pursued infrastructure and security cooperation with Myanmar, but their interests differ in scale, intensity, and long-term strategic consequence. These differences reveal how each state approaches Myanmar as a site of regional power consolidation. China's economic investments in Myanmar—particularly the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and Kyaukphyu deep-sea port—serve dual functions: economic integration and geopolitical leverage. By embedding Myanmar into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China reduces its reliance on vulnerable maritime chokepoints like the Malacca Strait and secures access to the Indian Ocean. This positions China to project influence beyond East Asia, reinforcing its two-ocean strategy and long-term goal of regional dominance. The implication is clear: economic dependency gives China long-term strategic leverage, making Myanmar an extension of Beijing's economic and security architecture.

The CMEC, a flagship component of China's BRI, encompasses a network of infrastructure projects designed to enhance connectivity between China's Yunnan province and Myanmar's western coast. A central element is the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port, with an estimated cost of \$7.3 billion, complemented by a \$1.3 billion Special Economic Zone (SEZ). These developments are strategically significant, providing China with direct access to the Indian Ocean and reducing dependence on

the congested Malacca Strait. By embedding Myanmar into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is transforming the country into a logistical and strategic node within its broader economic architecture. This deepening economic dependency grants China long-term strategic leverage, effectively positioning Myanmar as an extension of Beijing's regional influence apparatus. However, the political instability following the 2021 coup has exposed these projects to security risks and local opposition. For instance, the Kyaukphyu port agreement had to be renegotiated to address debt sustainability concerns, scaling down China's stake and adjusting financial terms (Mizzima, 2023). Despite such setbacks, China's sustained investment indicates a calculated commitment to anchoring Myanmar within its Indo-Pacific grand strategy.

India, in contrast, uses its infrastructure projects—such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) and the India–Myanmar–Thailand (IMT) Trilateral Highway—to assert connectivity and influence in its immediate neighborhood (Sang, 2021; Yumlembam, 2024). The KMTTP, valued at approximately US\$484 million, is designed to link the port of Kolkata to Sittwe in Myanmar via a 539 km sea route, followed by a 158 km inland waterway on the Kaladan River up to Paletwa, and finally a 110 km road to the India–Myanmar border at Zorinpui (Thakuria, 2018). Meanwhile, the IMT Trilateral Highway spans about 1,360 km and aims to connect Moreh in India's Manipur state with Mae Sot in Thailand via Myanmar. India is responsible for constructing the 120.74 km Kalewa–Yagyi road section and rehabilitating 69 bridges along the 149.70 km Tamu–Kyigone–Kalewa (TKK) road, with costs estimated at ₹1,459.29 crore (approximately US\$176 million) and ₹371.58 crore (approximately US\$45 million), respectively (The New Indian Express, 2023).

These projects have, however, advanced slowly. Due to challenging terrain, insurgency threats, and bureaucratic bottlenecks, the KMTTP, which was initially scheduled to be finished by 2014, has repeatedly been delayed (Thakuria, 2018). Implementation issues with the IMT Highway have also limited the wider regional impact of India's connectivity initiatives. These setbacks highlight India's comparatively limited capacity in comparison to China's quick project execution under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The balance of power has not changed significantly, even though India's approach reflects a cautious, security-focused strategy catered to regional sensitivities. India's economic involvement in Myanmar appears to be limited in scope and progressing slowly, indicating that it is still a reactive actor rather than actively influencing the strategic environment.

Diplomatic Engagement and Strategic Flexibility

China's ability to engage with a broad spectrum of stakeholders in Myanmar—including the military junta, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and key regional and international actors—highlights its strategic agility and long-term realist calculations. This multi-track diplomacy is not simply a reflection of opportunism, but a deliberate and layered strategy to hedge against political uncertainty while safeguarding its geo-economic interests. Rather than tying its policy exclusively to

the ruling regime, China cultivates relationships across various factions, allowing it to maintain leverage regardless of changes in political power. This approach reduces its exposure to regime instability or popular unrest, both of which are common in Myanmar's volatile political environment (Tower, 2022).

By engaging EAOs, for instance, China positions itself as a mediator in domestic conflicts that threaten its investments, particularly those near the Sino-Myanmar border. This helps secure cross-border trade routes, reduce spillover violence, and protect major infrastructure projects like the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). At the same time, China's interactions with ASEAN and limited overtures to civilian actors enable it to maintain a regional image of non-interference and neutrality—narratives that bolster its legitimacy even as it supports an authoritarian regime. Such a balancing act allows China to project itself as a stabilizing power, which aligns with its broader foreign policy goal of being seen as a responsible regional leader while still advancing national interests.

The implication of this flexible and multi-layered diplomacy is significant. In contrast to actors that may find their influence diminished by a regime change, China's diversified engagement allows it to remain influential regardless of political realignments. This resilience strengthens Beijing's long-term strategic foothold in Myanmar, ensuring continued access to infrastructure corridors, energy routes, and maritime gateways—critical assets for its Indo-Pacific ambitions and the success of its Belt and Road Initiative.

In contrast to China's multi-layered diplomacy, India's engagement with Myanmar remains narrow and state-centric, focusing primarily on official interactions with the ruling military junta. This limited diplomatic bandwidth constrains India's strategic flexibility and reduces its ability to navigate Myanmar's complex and shifting political terrain. While maintaining state-to-state ties offers India short-term advantages—such as border stability, continuity of infrastructure projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, and military cooperation in counter-insurgency operations—this approach comes with significant long-term liabilities (Yumlembam, 2024).

By not cultivating parallel relationships with other influential actors, such as the National Unity Government (NUG), ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), or grassroots civil society, India risks being sidelined in any potential post-junta political realignment. Should Myanmar transition toward a more democratic or decentralized governance structure, India's current alignment may be viewed unfavorably by new political forces. In realist terms, this limits India's hedging capacity in an inherently volatile and fragmented environment. It also diminishes India's ability to shape outcomes or participate meaningfully in future peace-building processes or regional mediation efforts.

Moreover, India's minimal engagement with non-state actors stands in contrast to its broader regional ambitions as articulated in the “Act East” policy. While India seeks to deepen economic integration with ASEAN and counterbalance China's influence, its insular approach in Myanmar undermines that objective. Without building a more inclusive diplomatic strategy, India risks reducing its

relevance in Southeast Asia's evolving security architecture. While China is positioning itself to remain influential regardless of who governs Myanmar, India's diplomacy is overly dependent on a single power structure. This not only restricts India's influence in the short term but also exposes it to strategic marginalization should the regional balance shift.

Military and Humanitarian Engagement: Strategic Messaging

China's robust military assistance—reportedly worth \$267 million—signifies more than support for stability (Abuza and Aung, 2025). It reflects a willingness to underwrite regimes that secure China's regional ambitions, even at reputational cost. This military diplomacy reinforces China's role as a security guarantor in authoritarian contexts, solidifying its influence in critical border regions. India's more cautious military assistance—limited to about \$51 million—signals its desire to maintain a strategic presence without overtly endorsing repression (Krishnan, 2022). The implication is that India's minimalist approach preserves its normative image but diminishes its strategic weight. Its ambivalence weakens its bargaining power with the junta and reduces its leverage in shaping future outcomes.

Humanitarian engagement further exposes strategic intent. China uses humanitarian diplomacy to mitigate reputational risks and frame itself as a regional stabilizer—particularly through its involvement in Rohingya repatriation efforts (UNHCR, 2023). India, however, has faced criticism for securitizing refugee issues and enforcing strict deportation policies (DVB, 2024). The implication is that while China reaps diplomatic capital, India loses moral credibility and risks alienating communities it seeks to influence.

Contrasting Approaches and Strategic Implications of China and India in Myanmar

China treats Myanmar as a complex strategic space, much like a multidimensional chessboard where influence must be carefully placed across various actors. Its diplomatic approach reflects a long-term, calculated strategy aimed at securing its interests under any political condition. Rather than focusing solely on the ruling military junta, China engages with a wide range of stakeholders, including ethnic armed groups (EAOs) and, selectively, civilian and opposition actors (Tower, 2022). This approach, known as multi-track diplomacy, serves as a form of strategic risk management. By diversifying its relationships, China reduces its vulnerability to political instability and ensures continued access to infrastructure corridors, border security zones, and key investment areas critical to its broader regional ambitions.

India's engagement, in contrast, remains confined to formal state-to-state interactions, primarily with the ruling military junta. While this approach helps India address immediate concerns—such as securing its northeastern borders and ensuring the progress of infrastructure projects like the Kaladan corridor—it creates significant strategic blind spots. India has not built meaningful relationships with other key political actors in Myanmar, such as ethnic armed organizations or pro-democracy groups. This narrow engagement limits India's flexibility and weakens

its ability to respond if the political situation shifts away from military control. As a result, India's influence is heavily tied to the survival of a single regime, which is a considerable risk in Myanmar's volatile and uncertain political environment (Yumlembam, 2024). Unlike China, which diversifies its engagement to ensure long-term leverage, India's approach lacks the depth and adaptability needed to maintain lasting strategic relevance.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that China's pragmatic and multi-layered approach to the Myanmar crisis has enabled it to secure long-term strategic advantages in the region. By combining diplomatic engagement, economic investment, and selective security cooperation, China maintains influence across a spectrum of state and non-state actors. Through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), China reinforces its economic interests while ensuring political resilience in the face of shifting domestic dynamics within Myanmar. Its policy of non-interference and multi-track diplomacy—engaging both the ruling military junta and various ethnic armed groups—illustrates an adaptive foreign policy capable of responding to regional complexity and uncertainty.

In contrast, India's approach remains security-centric, with engagement concentrated on formal interactions with the military regime. This strategy serves to address India's immediate national concerns—such as border stability and the continuity of strategic infrastructure projects like the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project. However, this rigid, state-focused model limits India's ability to navigate the broader socio-political landscape of Myanmar. India's limited interaction with civil society, ethnic minority groups, and democratic movements constrains its capacity for soft power projection and undermines its long-term influence in the region.

The comparative analysis reveals distinct divergences between the two approaches. China emphasizes economic integration and long-term influence through adaptable engagement mechanisms, whereas India prioritizes stability and security through state-to-state diplomacy. Diplomatically, China upholds a consistent policy of non-interference while engaging with a broad spectrum of stakeholders. India, on the other hand, adopts a dual-track approach—seeking to balance its engagement with the junta alongside rhetorical support for democratic values. In humanitarian terms, India shows greater regional empathy through limited aid efforts, whereas China remains state-centric with minimal outreach to affected civilian populations. Strategically, China's flexible posture allows it to maintain relevance across multiple political configurations, whereas India's rigid alignment with the junta limits its maneuverability.

The findings of this study suggest that both China and India would benefit from adopting a more inclusive and flexible policy framework that extends beyond the state apparatus. Strategic engagement with civil society organizations, ethnic minorities, and pro-democracy actors would enhance both countries' legitimacy and

effectiveness as regional partners. Incorporating people-to-people diplomacy, development-oriented partnerships, and support for local governance systems can foster deeper connections with Myanmar's population and contribute to a more stable regional order.

Future research should explore how inclusive and adaptive foreign policy models have been applied in other geopolitically complex regions. Comparative case studies could offer insights into the broader applicability of engagement-based diplomacy and its role in shaping regional stability. By embracing such approaches, both China and India stand to advance not only their national interests but also the creation of a more balanced, cooperative, and resilient regional order.

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