

China, India tensions put Myanmar in the middle

India and Myanmar have built new strategic links as both seek to counter China's rising regional influence

By [BERTIL LINTNER](#) > MAY 29, 2020



Indian and Myanmar soldiers shake hands during the two sides' first ever joint military exercises in 2017. Photo: Facebook

CHIANG MAI – Flights out of Myanmar have been rare during the Covid-19 crisis, but there was a remarkable exception on May 14. A special plane provided by the Myanmar military flew from the small town of Hkamti in Northern Sagaing Region to Imphal in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur and then on to Guwahati in Assam. Onboard were 12 Manipuri insurgents and another ten from Assam.

The Myanmar military was handing them over to Indian authorities in an equally unusual gesture of goodwill. Seen in a broader perspective, it reflects the Myanmar military's policy of diversifying its foreign contacts and lessening its long-standing dependence on China for security and arms.

It now takes on added strategic significance as China and India mount troops along their contested northern border, bringing the long-time rivals closer to conflict than they have been in years. Myanmar could thus soon be pushed and pulled in countervailing directions as that big power tussle over territory plays out.

Myanmar is firmly stuck between the two Asian giants. Indian insurgents have maintained sanctuaries inside Myanmar since the late 1960s. From there, they have often launch raids into states like Nagaland, Manipur and Assam and then retreat back safely across the border beyond the reach of Indian forces.

Myanmar authorities, burdened with more pressing threats posed by ethnic insurgencies elsewhere in the country, had consistently looked the other way and even denied the existence of the remote insurgent camps.



A map depicting where northeast India meets Myanmar. Image: Facebook

The turning point came in February 2019, when the Myanmar army raided Taga in upper Sagaing Region where the Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K) shared its headquarters with rebels from India's northeast.

Shangwang Shangyung Khaplang, a Myanmar Naga, died in June 2017, but the organization still carries his name to distinguish it from NSCN-IM where "IM" stands for Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, the Nagas from Nagaland and Manipur respectively.

Isak passed in June 2016, and Muivah is alive in India, where he since 1997 has been involved with largely inconclusive peace talks with Indian authorities. The insurgents, who were repatriated to India this month, had been arrested on different occasions in the wake of the raid on Taga in January last year. At the same time, the Myanmar military also apprehended five high-ranking NSCN-K officials.

They were Nagas from Myanmar and therefore Myanmar citizens. In November last year, they were sentenced by a court in Hkamti to two years' imprisonment under Myanmar's draconian Unlawful Associations Act, a colonial era law dating back to 1908. The Indian insurgents were given two-year sentences under the same law and were also held in Hkamti jail.

Then came an amnesty in mid-April to mark Thingyan, the traditional New Year, at which almost 25,000 prisoners were released. It did not include human rights workers and political dissidents, but, in a response to an appeal from the local Naga Literature and Cultural Association, those five Nagas were released.

As the amnesty also did not cover foreign citizens, the Manipuris and those from Assam were not set free. But through backdoor diplomacy, India's security services managed to secure their release as well and subsequent repatriation to India. They came from three different Manipuri groups, an ethnic Bodo outfit in Assam, and a group that wants to carve out an independent entity of six districts in northern West Bengal and four contiguous areas in Assam.



A cadre of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) holds a Naga flag during the 73rd Naga Independence Day celebration at Camp Hebron, Northeast India. Photo: AFP Forum via NurPhoto/Caisii Mao

Last year's raid and the repatriation of rebels to India this year signals yet another important shift in Myanmar's foreign policy. Beijing's influence, which dates back to the late 1980s and 1990s, when the Chinese took advantage of Western sanctions and boycotts to move in earnest into the country with investment, loans, credits and arms sales.

But China's influence waned after the Myanmar government implemented various political reforms beginning in 2011, eventuating in democratic elections held in 2015. The West moved to re-engage the once pariah country, but that changed again with the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2017.

Western attitudes hardened again and China appeared to be back, this time promoting its trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the aim of establishing a strategic corridor connecting landlocked southwestern China with the Indian Ocean through Myanmar.

The Myanmar military now fears that could make the country more of a Chinese client state than it was under direct military rule before the 2011-2012 reforms. Myanmar's brass have recently turned more to Russia, another old ally, for military training and the supply of military hardware, including a US\$204 million contract to acquire six Sukhoi SU-30M fighter jets.

In January 2018, Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu travelled to Myanmar where he met the country's commander-in-chief, General Min Aung Hlaing. A number of agreements were reached on the supply of military equipment and allowances for Myanmar to send its military personnel for education in Russian schools.

Unlike the West, Russia has not condemned the Myanmar military and government for the persecution of the Rohingyas. Nor has India, which is eager to counter China's rising influence in its eastern neighbor. In 2017, when Britain announced that it would suspend its training of the Myanmar military, India and Myanmar "talked about

training Myanmar sailors on top of the courses taught...at India's elite defense institutions," Reuters reported in September 2017.

In November of that year, India and Myanmar held their first ever bilateral military exercises, officially focusing on "peacekeeping operations." In March 2018, the Indian and Myanmar navies conducted a maiden joint exercise in the Bay of Bengal, where India has recently reported numerous incursions by Chinese submarines.



Indian Chief of Army Staff General Bipin Rawat (R) and Myanmar Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing (L) in a 2018 file photo. Photo: Pool

The Myanmar military's move against Taga last year and the recent repatriation of Indian insurgents is thus best viewed through this wider geo-strategic lens.

India is also acutely aware of the presence of representatives for its northeastern insurgents in the southern Chinese province of Yunnan's town of Ruili near Myanmar's border with China. It also wants to make sure there is no trafficking in Chinese arms from the Myanmar-Chinese border areas to the insurgents' recently upended sanctuaries along the Myanmar-India border.

Among those groups are two to which the repatriated insurgents belonged: the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak and the People's Liberation Army, both Manipuri outfits. Paresh Baruah, the commander of the even stronger United Liberation front of Asom [Assam] (ULFA), is also believed to be holed up in Yunnan.

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On a number of occasions, he travelled from there through northern Myanmar to the erstwhile camp at Taga, where ULFA worked together with its Manipuri comrades-in-arms and the NSCK-K.

Beijing may not begrudge Myanmar's military links to Russia, but fast improving security cooperation between Myanmar and its rival India is another matter. It remains to be seen how Beijing will react. In a disruptive scenario, China could resume assistance to one or several of the motley crew of rebels in India's restive northeast.

That's what Beijing did from the 1960s until the 1980s, when those insurgents were trained, armed and equipped in secret military installations in Yunnan before being sent back to India's ethnic troublespots in states such as Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.

The ULFA never received such direct assistance, but the rebel group was allowed to stay freely in China while keeping lines open with their comrades back home. China is no longer the only big power game in Myanmar, but given the strategic importance of its BRI in the country it could yet seek ways to foil India's new advances.

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